About the Editors

kepi@halcyon.com **Jeff Carlson, Series Editor**

is a writer, editor, and graphic designer living in Seattle, Washington. He received his B.A. in English Writing from Whitworth College (in Spokane, not Walla Walla), and promptly put it to good use working for a translation agency formatting documents in foreign languages. As of June 26, however, he's reclaimed his English department heritage by quitting that job and becoming the Managing Editor for Open House, a book publisher that frequently creates titles for Peachpit Press.

He drinks double-tall, light-vanilla, light-chocolate mochas from Starbucks or Diva (yes, that's what he orders, and yes, he gets strange looks from people); spend time with his beautiful wife Kim; and write on his PowerBook 100 (write *with*, of course; not actually marking-up the case—that would be silly).

contact via kepi@halcyon.com **Shannon Christenot, Assistant Editor**

"The amount of writer's block afflicting me in this attempt to write a bio increases my respect for all writers with guts enough to submit work for publication. I enjoy being an editor (okay, okay, assistant editor); the process through which a piece is crafted is frustrating, painful ("You cut WHAT?"), and thoroughly fascinating.

"I started editing short works for friends (I think we're still friends) during my years at Whitworth College. I'm currently editing a book on 'how to get something other than a grunt job directly after college' while supporting myself working a grunt job in the telecommunications industry; herding my beloved Ford Festiva through Seattle traffic (imagine steering a large egg); and fighting off the affectionate arachnids invading my basement apartment."

I wonder how that happened.

No matter. Here is my answer to his question: When he makes this pilgrimage he must remember the folk stories of the Auvergne.

You think that is no answer? I would have thought that you, a clever official of the Vatican, would have enjoyed my indirect response! Allow me to elaborate.

Like a folk hero of the Auvergne, when the Holy Father returns from Paschal he will be changed, and subtly wounded. Now do you understand?

What will this do to the world? Well, I have good reason to be certain that Aquinas was completely wrong. (You are right in your suspicion—before my trip to Paschal my obedience was not always perfect.) The Holy Father will return from Paschal with a radiant union of faith and reason which will wound the world.

Now do you understand?

Good. Why don't you sit here in the quiet darkness, in this arbor at the very end of this path of worn gray stones, and think about what I have said?

I must excuse myself and go to bed. Today was the last day of the summer and in the morning I must rise early to my work. In the new season I will be very busy pruning, cutting away dead growth, and tearing out old unwanted vegetation by the roots. Later I will be planting deep in the earth so that new flowers will flourish in the spring. After all, this is a big garden and the Holy Father might like to know that, quite recently, I have become the gardener.

jcowan@ns.fast.net **Jim Cowan**

has been an electrical engineer, high-school physics teacher, physician and health-care executive and is convinced that the right job for him is out there somewhere. He is amazed and delighted that many wonderful things in the world can be completely described by mathematics, and he is equally amazed and delighted that many wonderful things, including mathematics, cannot. While struggling with this paradox he lives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

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slow-moving current.

On one of the many evenings that we lay on our backs, drifting downstream under the stars, Angstrom said, "If the aliens had a purpose, then what is the purpose of Paschal?"

"It is a beacon," I said.

"Marking a vast store of knowledge?"

"Yes, a font of knowledge. But there is more. Paschal is an evolutionary incubator, a machine for arresting the material evolution of matter and accelerating its evolution into spirit. What we have seen is the evolution of evolution."

"But why the AMF?"

"To strip away the objects and the thoughts that we have made that make us what we are. Only when we have shed our manufactured burdens may we pass through the single narrow gate in our own garden wall and wander into other gardens."

Angstrom stayed behind at the temple where the knowledge of an ancient race was stored in a drop of water. He was eager to squeeze his frame through the narrow gate.

On my way back to the glider's crash site I thought of a Van Gogh painting called "The Drinkers." A copy hangs on the wall of my whitewashed room. By the way, Van Gogh was said to be mad, but I doubt that. Four figures, a child, a youth, a middle-aged man and an old man, stand around a table and drink from a single pitcher. The child drinks milk, the youth water, the middle-aged man coffee and the old man wine, all from that single magical pitcher. Van Gogh's figures crackle with energy in their desperate attempts to slake their various thirsts. As I said, I doubt that Van Gogh was mad.

I returned to the crash site of the glider, slid the remote control from its pocket in the bulkhead and summoned the shuttlecraft down from the belly of the empty Chardin. Rome was surprised at my return. After all, the arrival in Earth orbit of a naked priest, bearded, long-haired, tanned and seemingly incoherent, is not a common event.

No one believed my story, of course. I half hoped they might see me as a prophet coming out of the wilderness, but they sent me back to this seminary and gave me easy work to do, as if I were an old nun. Obediently, I have done as my order wished. I have kept my peace and worked here quietly, thinking, making dreams. Twenty summers and three popes have come and gone and I am still working on the tasks assigned to me. All of them.

But the evening grows chill around us, the wooden bench you sit on is quite hard, and we must conclude our business. You have listened to my story and now I must answer your question.

Ah, do not speak yet. Did I not tell you I know what you came to ask?

There can be only one reason that the Holy Father has sent you here to question me in this peaceful garden. Something has happened, something quite unexpected. The Holy Father has received a message and he thinks it came from Paschal II.

I have kept my peace and worked here quietly, thinking, making dreams.

Perhaps a passing freighter picked up a signal and relayed it to Rome, or perhaps a subspace message from the planet was received directly by a Vatican antenna at Castel Gandolfo, high in the Apennines. Not so. I know the message came in a dream. Yes, the Holy Father dreamed so vividly that he could not ignore his dream.

What is so surprising about the idea of the pope receiving a dream? After all, the Bible says that God spoke to many men through their dreams.

Have you ever noticed that dreams are much more powerful at the turning of the seasons? We religious have time to take note of subtle things like that.

So who sent the message? You probably think it was sent by the hules, or by their children who must have developed in unimaginable ways while they were growing up on Paschal? Or was the message from Angstrom, offering alien truth in place of human knowledge? Let me assure you that neither Angstrom, nor the hules—nor the aliens, if that is what you are wondering—have any interest in talking to the Holy Father.

He does not know who sent the message.

But I do, even though the dream he received was an unsigned invitation. The Holy Father has been asked to visit Paschal II. He feels he has been summoned. He wonders if he should think of the journey as a pilgrimage. He worries that the message may not be an invitation, but a false temptation sent by Satan.

The Holy Father wants to know if he should go. He is young and accustomed to dealing with facts, not dreams. After all, he is a scientist, a biologist of some renown, I hear. Weren't you surprised that a scientist, a biologist, a student of evolution, should be elected pope?

lies behind the dichotomy of quantum mechanics. The single truths we seek might be the same truth."

He was right. As soon as he spoke, the idea seemed quite obvious. "Alien tech blends physics and metaphysics, spirit and matter," I said. "Behind the apparent dual nature of matter, behind the apparent dual nature of thought, there is a single fundamental truth. Alien tech is built on that truth. That truth is the secret the aliens hid here on Paschal and why they set their beacon to mark the hiding place."

The river had become much narrower. Inexplicably, the hules began to make fewer forays into the woods. One afternoon we came to the source of the river. A spring flowed from the base of a large rock into a pool. The water was quite clear and there was nothing at the bottom but a jumble of stones.

I knelt at the edge and dipped my hands into the water. Ripples spread across its still surface. I cupped my hands and lifted them. The water ran between my fingers and splashed and tinkled back into the pool.

The hules were watching carefully, waiting to see what we would do.

"You drink first," said Angstrom.

Once again I dipped my cupped hands into the pool and this time I lifted the water to my lips. The water was cold and refreshing.

I felt unchanged, at first.

Angstrom was looking at me, taut with curiosity.

"Drink," I said. "See for yourself."

He knelt beside me, bowed his head to the surface of the water and lapped at the water like an animal. When he straightened up he did not wipe the water from his lips and chin and it fell to the ground in shining droplets.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "I see."

Like me, he did not say what it was he saw. But I think he saw logics that were not human, ways of reasoning that were surprising and completely alien, hinting at larger truths than we had known before.

We sat in the shade of a small copse close to the pool.

"The temple is a library," I said.

We sat in silence for several minutes, inspecting the contents of our minds. Do not think we had experienced a transformation. Nothing was that simple. The best I can do is to tell you that we had been granted the potential for transforming ourselves, but the complete task assigned to us would require great effort and take many years.

The idea of transformation captivates me. I have come to realize that a man who truly transforms himself acquires the mysterious ability to help others transform themselves. Would you agree? I think any student of religion must.

We did know some new things that suddenly seemed quite obvious. "We can turn off the AMF any time we want," said Angstrom.

"I know."

Like all alien tech, the trigger was intent. To turn it off, all we had to do was not to want to turn it off. I thought about this for a moment and rose to my feet, picked up a dead tree limb lying on the ground, put one end under a rock and levered the boulder from its resting place. Dozens of dull black insects scuttled away in the sudden sunlight, leaving behind hundreds of glistening eggs. I examined the stick. There was no frost on the branch, no brittle cracking of the gnarled wood, and my hands were still warm. I looked back at Angstrom and saw, behind him, the hules kneeling side by side and drinking from the pool, lapping noisily.

They raised their heads and looked back at us. The water was running from their snouts and their faces were impassive. They turned back to the water and drank again. M. Jules stood up and stared at us boldly, curiously. Mlle. Marie dipped her finger in the pool, walked to me and stood before me, her hand held before me, finger pointing down. A shining droplet hung from the end of her finger.

"Kneel down. Open your mouth," said Angstrom, hoarsely.

I opened my mouth. She held her wet fingertip over my waiting tongue. A single drop fell into my mouth. I swallowed.

The hules turned away and walked into the darkening woods. In a moment they had vanished between the trees.

Agnus Dei

The next morning Angstrom and I began our journey downstream to the falls.

The time after a climactic event is like the period of slack water after a high tide; all the work is done, there is no place for purposeful motion. During the days we traveled back to the falls Angstrom and I found it was thought, not motion, that was redundant.

At the top of the falls I untied the rope from the tree and wrapped it around my shoulder. After we climbed down beside the torrent we built a raft of driftwood bound with rope and we floated away on the

strom.

"I can't do that for a hule. He had no soul."

"The other two might feel better if you did. Who's going to know? It's 50 light years from here to Rome."

But Canon Law applies wherever there are Catholics so I read some comforting words in a ceremonial way, a pseudo-service of no deeper significance.

We ate cold rations and settled down for a miserable night in the woods, shivering in our damp clothing.

I will always be grateful to Angstrom for saying nothing that night about my carelessness with the knot. I walked away from our camp to pray for forgiveness for my carelessness. Only those familiar with the confessional will understand the anguish this burden caused because I had no confessor.

M. Alain fell away from the cliff with the loose rope twisting through the air around him like a black snake falling with him into the whiteness.

I woke early and lay quietly in that stillness that comes at the end of the night. Here above the falls the forest canopy was lower and less dense and there were scattered grassy clearings. The raucous monkey birds were absent, but there were many new varieties of flying creatures, parabutterflies flapping their iridescent blue-green wings, warbling songs that were pleasing to my ears.

I dressed quietly but my laces would not stay tied. After the third attempt Angstrom, who was lying on his side watching me through half-closed eyes, said, "I think you're wasting your time. Above the falls we are closer to the AMF's source. We must have entered a region where mechanical friction is neutralized. Your lace relies on friction. Above the falls, knots are machines."

He was right. For days, M. Alain's truculent mind must have been more sensitive to the AMF. I was still responsible for his death, not through carelessness, but through blind stupidity, which was worse.

I set my boots aside. The friction buckles on our packs were useless and we could not tie the straps in place. The buttons on our torn clothes were also useless. We were forced to leave our packs behind, with all our supplies and food. I wrapped my books carefully, hoping to recover them on the return journey.

Our pace was slow because our soles were sensitive. A mile or two later, while we were climbing over some boulders, Angstrom's magnifying glass fell from his pocket and was smashed to pieces on a rock. The bottom seam of his pocket had unraveled.

"Sewing, weaving—they both rely on friction."

As we walked upstream all our seams were unraveling. The hules' coveralls hung in tatters and by lunchtime our clothing had literally fallen off our backs. Angstrom's white flesh wobbled on his body but the hules moved with a certain muscular grace I hadn't noticed before. Without the magnifying glass we could not light a fire that night and so we slept on beds of dry leaves that were still warm from the afternoon sun.

In this manner, naked, we wandered for days through this idyllic landscape, always staying close to the river. We ate fruits from the trees and I could see the fat was shrinking on Angstrom's flaccid body. At first I felt a certain shame about our nakedness. After all, I was a celibate priest. But as time passed I became comfortable with our situation.

At one time we walked for several days through grassy glades filled with wildflowers. Sometimes the stream (for that was what the river had become) widened and we would bathe our brown bodies in a warm pool. On other days the rain would wash the sweat and the dirt from our skins.

M. Jules and Mlle. Marie would wander off for hours and when they returned there was a certain glow about them. You might think they were sneaking off, but that is not the case. They just wandered off as if, like animals, they could do exactly as they pleased. Of course, now that we had no packs, there was no work for them to do. We were still their masters but we had no commands to give them. They spent more and more time by themselves. I suppose when they wanted to come back to us they could track us by our scent.

Angstrom and I, naked, with our hair uncombed and beards long, looked much like the hules. We wandered together through the dappled woods, eating when we were hungry, and resting when we were tired. We walked quietly, each with our own thoughts. Like the hules, we no longer had any tasks.

Above the falls our thought was clearer. "You are looking for a single truth that lies behind the dichotomy of careful reason and dogmatic faith," said Angstrom. "I am looking for a single truth that

and started to reply but his words were lost on the scientists all jostling for the exits.

After this, the sweating, malodorous, iconoclastic Angstrom became as welcome at scientific gatherings as Martin Luther at the Vatican. His papers, unwanted in the editorial offices of the journals of our field, were sent to his harshest critics for peer review.

When my book was rejected by the Curia, Angstrom still had his tenured position—in Quebec, I think it was. But by the time of the discovery of Paschal II his whole department had been eliminated. A purely financial decision, he was told, and nothing to do with the fact that this was the only way to fire a tenured full professor. At 50 years of age, with no family, friends or professional future, Paschal II was as good a destination for Angstrom as it was for me.

"Is professional vindication so important? I asked.

"No, but truth is," he said, and rolled over to sleep. The way he pulled his blanket over his shoulder made me think he was comforted by the discovery that we were following paths more similar than we had thought.

I was less certain. I lay in the dark, thinking of the Tower of Echo. The Roman poet Virgil wrote that bees were killed by echoes. (Those of us with time on our hands acquire arcane information. It is an occupational hazard of the priesthood.) Eighteen hundred years later Gilbert White, an English curate who was well-versed in Virgil and an excellent diarist, wrote that he spent a summer afternoon bending over his hives, shouting into a speaking trumpet to see if his bees would die.

Have I have already mentioned my love of metaphor?

Sanctus

The next day we came to the falls. The river poured over the escarpment, which was a steep, rocky cliff 200 meters high. We chose to climb close to the edge of the falls where winter floods had torn slabs of rock from the wall, affording an array of ledges and handholds. I said a brief prayer and started to climb. I planned to throw down a rope for the hules to climb. Angstrom would come last. Although he had lost weight steadily on Paschal, I thought I might have to use the hules to pull him up the cliff.

The rock was wet with spray and slippery with the green slime of algal life. I climbed for an hour, soaked, with my hair plastered to my head. I rested every few minutes by jamming my boots with their serrated soles onto some narrow ledge. Irritatingly, my laces became untied while I was climbing and no sooner had I retied one than the other came loose. When I looked down—which out of fear I did not do very often—I could see the four figures growing smaller far below, until they were tiny foreshortened dolls standing beside the churning whiteness at the bottom of the falls. The roar of the water drowned my shouted attempts to reassure them. My arms and shoulders, thighs and calves began to tremble until I scrambled over the top, dropped my pack to the ground and flopped down on the wet rocks like a landed fish.

When I got my breath I carefully knotted two lengths of rope together, tied one end to a tree that was firmly rooted between the flat rocks beside the river, and threw the other end over the edge. It was a black thing, snaking as it fell through the mist. Angstrom ran to it and I felt his tug. He handed the rope to one of the hules.

The hule climbed slowly, sensing the great danger. After 50 meters or so the hule's pack came loose. The pack swung by one strap. "Lord," I muttered. "Why didn't Angstrom check the knots?"

The pack swung away from the hule's shoulder, the second strap came loose and the pack fell away, tumbling through the spray down into the surging foam. Angstrom waved his arms at me as if to warn me.

The hule continued to climb. I watched his swinging movement, arm-over-arm, very ape-like, and when he was almost halfway up the cliff, just below the knot, I saw that the hule was M. Alain. As he reached for the knot, he fell.

At first I thought the rope had broken but then I realized that my elaborate knot had come undone. M. Alain fell away from the cliff with the loose rope twisting through the air around him like a black snake falling with him into the whiteness. He tumbled into the heart of the maelstrom at the bottom of the falls. I saw his head briefly bobbing in the surge and he was gone.

Angstrom and the other two hules waited for a long time, searching for M. Alain's body along the bank. In the late afternoon they all climbed up the falls, the hules following what was left of my scent on the wet rocks while Angstrom, who turned out to be an agile climber, urged them on from behind. It was evening when they reached the top and the sun was too low to light a fire. M. Jules kept looking down over the falls. Mlle. Marie crawled under a bush and curled up like a fetus.

"Maybe you should say a short requiem for him," said Ang-

pack. I never caught him at it but several times a day his pack would fall from his shoulders. I was sure he was trying to quietly lose his burden so I tied the straps in place. Somehow he learned to untie the knots and would let the pack fall from his shoulders when I was least expecting it. Angrily, I would retie the straps and, with luck, he would leave them alone for a few more hours.

One evening I caught the hules eating the communion wafers from my pack. M. Alain had the sack in his hands and was munching the last wafer. The other two had crumbs on their shaggy faces. I snatched the empty bag from his hands. "Get out of here," I yelled, shaking the bag at them as if I were exorcising devils. They slunk away like chastised dogs. After a few moments I felt calmer. I had remembered that hules could be guilty of an action, but were always innocent of motive.

Credo

What was the journey like? What did we feel? Did I miss Earth, my Jesuit brethren and my scholarly friends? Yes, I did miss their companionship. Did I worry that we might not find the source of the AMF, or be unable to extinguish the field? Yes, but strangely, I did not worry much. For the most part I was simply content.

Angstrom was good company. At the end of the day's journey he would light our fire with his magnifying glass and when darkness fell we would talk by the fire, lying under the strange stars of that alien sky.

"What is your thesis?" he asked me one night. "By thesis, I mean what is the central idea from which all your thought stems?"

Thoughtfully, I replied, "When I was five I sat by the fire the first time my mother cut my hair. She cut off a lock and threw it into the flames. It curled and burned and was gone. I saw how fragile I was and how easily the stuff of my body could disappear. The next day I buried a heavy old key in the garden, seeking to prove to myself that at least some things were permanent. Later I dug and I dug but I could never find it. These two events bothered me greatly and, in some sense, helped me decide to become a priest. I desperately wanted to enter the world of the spirit, you see, for the tenuous insubstantial world of the spirit is the world that endures."

"And your journey to Paschal?" asked Angstrom.

"We humans explore the material world using reason as our tool," I said. "We observe, experiment, question, hypothesize, refute and refine our ideas. But in the spiritual world our tool is faith. Experimentation is expressly forbidden and, by definition, dogma cannot be refuted by reason. In defiance of this separation, my thesis is that the material world of reason and the spiritual world of faith are frail human interpretations of a single deep reality."

Trained in theology, you know that this dichotomy between reason and faith pervades our Christian thought, and all our science too. But the aliens did not think in terms of reason or faith. Their machines used both physics and metaphysics. Did I mention the Tower of Echo? Yes, I remember that I did. But I can see you look shocked. I told you I was a heretic, sometimes subtle, but sometimes more brash. Sit back on your bench while I finish my story. You can always say your prayers later, when I am done.

As for Angstrom, he had his own thesis. He said, "Like you, I came to Paschal to answer a question. Like you, I work with an impossible dichotomy, but mine is one of waves and particles, momentum and position, the EPR paradox. Yet this quantum dichotomy works. Quantum gravitational engines lifted the battered Chardin across 50 light-years but quantum theory makes no sense. Behind the impossibilities must be a better, more complete, truth. Perhaps alien minds have different logics that resolve these problems."

"A truth you will find here on Paschal?" I asked.

"I hope I will. Alien machines manipulate time and space in clever ways. Human minds scarcely know what is happening, let alone how it happens."

Much of Angstrom's career was spent in advancing his thesis of alternate logics which was, of course, ridiculed by his peers. I remember Angstrom standing at the podium before an audience of five hundred skeptics at a meeting of the American Academy of Xeno-Technoarcheology in New York. The lights were bright for the video cameras and the sweat shone on his bald head. After he had finished his presentation, the first question from the audience was, "Are you really proposing the existence of a logic which is illogical to human minds, yet logical to other minds, and though illogical, yields conclusions that are correct?" The questioner was a confident young man who smelled blood and was eager to impress his professors. He was from what they call in America an Ivy League school. There was some laughter which the questioner allowed the audience time to enjoy before he added, "Perhaps you used this new logic to write your paper. That would explain a great deal."

Angstrom seized the edges of the podium in his gigantic hands

one evening.

"We are. But is Paschal protecting or ignoring us?" I wondered.

Did I mention earlier that metaphor is the poetry of reason? I did? Good. Well, I told Angstrom a story from the life of a Jesuit priest whose biography I had read. He was a missionary in 21st century Africa who spent his life at the intersection of Christianity, Islam, and Animism. Ministering to the wounded during one of the cruel and petty wars of those times, he witnessed a young woman leading a ragtag army dressed in tattered fatigues. They were following her down a dirt road toward the enemy. The woman was naked and walked backward. She held a mirror before her face to look over her shoulder and study the road as she walked.

A young mercenary, toying with the safety catch of his automatic weapon, told the priest, "Because she is naked and does not look at the enemy with her own eyes, they cannot see her. She is invisible." The woman stepped on a land mine and there was nothing left but bloodstains in the dust.

We religious see things few others see.

For example, I have seen the Tower of Echo, a windy tower in the wall of an alien city. At the top of the tower, accessible only by a winding stair, is an open space looking over the ruined city and the lonely desert that surrounds it. There was an inconsistent echo in that windy openness where there should have been no echo.

Inconsistent? Yes. The strength of the echo varied with... well, it varied with the truth of what was said. Mathematical theorems echoed well, but some better than others, which is strange. Echoes of Mozart's music were very strong while Brahms' echoes were much quieter—I discovered that myself. Deliberate misstatement—two and two are three—would generate no returning sound at all.

We were very careful. Alien tech is dangerous. We assume that a mistake by one of the XTAs investigating Pius III collapsed the whole asteroid into a pinhole-sized black hole. The entire team was lost. For all we knew, the wrong statement in the windy Tower of Echo might turn off the tech, or worse. As always, everything we did received prior clearance from the Vatican.

I suggested to my superior that we might ask some more complex statements including some which Rome felt were untrue. I suggested, for example, that we say, "Matter slowly evolves into spirit." Unfortunately, further investigation was suspended, perhaps on orders from the Holy Father himself, and we were ordered home because, "We do not understand the workings of alien tech and have no assurance that the tower is a machine for determining the truth. Its purpose is unknown and may be only to deceive."

The night before we left I wondered if I should go back to the tower one last time and make statements from my own work, and perhaps other statements such as, "God made man in his own image." I also thought about saying, "Jesus Christ was the Son of God," just to see what happened.

Alien tech is dangerous. We assume that a mistake by one of the XTAs investigating Pius III collapsed the whole asteroid into a pinhole-sized black hole.

The Tower of Echo—a machine that knew beauty and material truth, and perhaps spiritual truth as well—is the best example of how alien tech blends the principles of physics and metaphysics, bringing together the worlds of matter and of spirit. I must admit I was very tempted to test the dogma of Aquinas.

We walked upstream six days a week and rested on Sundays when I said Mass for Angstrom, opening the little sack of communion wafers I had brought from Earth. For wine I blessed water from the river. Canon Law requires at least one worshipper at Mass. You might wonder if Canon Law applies 50 light-years away from Earth, but the answer to that is simple. Canon Law applies wherever there are Catholics. The hules watched us idly, scratching and sniffing at one another while we prayed. Their animal behavior distracted me. Dogs sniffing at each other would not have offended me but I realized that I wanted the hules to pay attention. I found it hard to believe that matter would ever evolve into spirit when the hules licked their genitals while I was saying Mass. I told Angstrom while I was putting away the wafers, "I know this is wrong, but sometimes the hules disgust me."

"Perhaps you should teach them to pray," he replied. I don't think he was serious.

They started sleeping on the other side of the fire from Angstrom and me. I wondered if they had understood my remark, but that was impossible.

The hules did start to give us more serious trouble. M. Alain developed a nasty habit of loosening the buckles on the straps of his

ments than Angstrom or I.

The moon had risen and we settled down for sleep, the hules huddling close to us like dogs at a hunters' camp. I was tired after the exertion of the day and was already half-asleep when I heard one of the hules get up. It was M. Jules. He padded down to the edge of the river, to drink I thought. The moon was shining across the smooth water. He looked up at the moon and threw his head back so that the tendons in his neck stood out in taut relief. He howled. It was a mournful, lonely sound that faded away across the water, rising through the air towards the moon. There was no answer.

I had never heard a hule make a noise like this before. Picking their way quietly across the grass and rocks, Mlle. Marie and M. Alain joined him at the water's edge. Mlle. Marie threw back her head and howled with him. Their bestial song was a poignant duet, raw yet beautiful. M. Alain added his bass. The cool night wind carried their bestial fugue across the water. Were they homesick? Did they know that their quiet seminary garden was 50 light-years away, orbiting a faint star in the night sky overhead? When they had spent their crude emotions they shambled back to camp and lay down again.

Unsettled, I felt a need for solitude and prayer. I walked to the eastern edge of the terrace and leaned over the balustrade to look down on the estuary and the dark ocean. Waves crashed against the foot of the cliff and once again I tasted the salty ocean spray.

I stood there for a long time while Paschal's unfamiliar constellations rose from the eastern ocean and climbed into the sky. Filled with a sense of peace I turned to look back at the temple where the rising stars were reflected on the surface of the sphere. I was surprised to discover that I simply knew, without the slow steps of reason, that the sphere was a lens and the temple was a lighthouse that swept its invisible beam across the miles of ocean and the light-years of the starry void beyond. Thrilled, I understood that this beam had found and lured Rome's missing probe to Paschal.

Do you remember? I told you I would tell you how the probe found Paschal. Are you still comfortable? Good. Look down there on the flagstones at our feet—do you see how the sun shines through what hair I have, making a halo of light around the shadow of my head. Did you now that the word "halo" comes from the Greek? Halo means threshing floor, where the wheat is garnered and the chaff rejected. Strange, how we religious acquire useless knowledge. The evening air is not too chill? Good.

Suddenly and without any effort on my part, I knew that the temple lens was made of water because, on Paschal II, the alien tech was in the water of the world, hidden in the rivers and the rains and the salty ocean spray that caked my lips.

The next morning Angstrom asked, "If the sphere is a lighthouse, does it mark a safe harbor for travelers across the light-years or does it mark a hidden danger that will destroy us all?"

"It marks the river," I said. "Safe or dangerous, the end of our quest lies at the source of the river."

The river was wide, brown and slow. A few miles upstream we entered a densely canopied climax forest. Raucous creatures with bulbous eyes and more than four legs shrieked at us from the treetops. Thick suckers descended from the canopy and, where they touched the ground, grew roots and bark until they were indistinguishable from upthrusting trunks. The light that reached us was filtered through many translucent leafy layers 50 meters above our heads. When the gentle winds of Paschal II tousled the treetops the dappled shadows ebbed and flowed at our feet. Walking through these green shadows was like walking underwater and we walked for many days like this, with the brown river on our right and the green jungle on our left.

Building a boat was always an idea but proved impossible without tools. Even a raft of logs lashed together with the rope from our packs was beyond us. We had no way to cut down trees or trim them to size. Besides, the AMF would have destroyed the oars or poles we would need to navigate.

One morning I found the hules eating fruit from the trees. I was too late to stop them. I watched them anxiously for the rest of the day. If they sickened we could not continue upriver because Angstrom and I could carry only enough food for a few days. As the day wore on it seemed that the fruit had done them no harm.

Each day we rose at dawn, walked until mid-afternoon, and camped. On a good day we walked 20 kilometers. After a month our clothes were torn and ragged, our hair shaggy and our beards unkempt, but we were tanned and fit and Angstrom had lost perhaps 20 kilograms.

The insects, of which there were innumerable species, were more like flying reptiles than chitinous beetles. They did not bother us, nor did the larger animals that stalked their prey in that jungle. At night we sometimes heard some victim scream.

"It's as if we are invisible," said Angstrom as we lay by the fire

saw a horned, striped predator bring down a bounding herbivore and tear its belly open. The hules sniffed anxiously. I suppose the scent of blood was borne to them on the wind. Angstrom stopped to watch. "Do you think we count as prey?

I picked up a stone and hefted it in my hand, thinking about the hules and how to defend them if a para-tiger should attack. The rock suddenly became as cold as ice—no, much colder—in my hand. I dropped it before my skin froze and said, "Not much we can do about if we are."

We approached the temple in mid-afternoon and faced a long climb up a curving stairway to the clifftop terrace. The height and width of each step was different, typical of alien architecture. Some scholars said the aliens valued diversity above all else but, I asked myself, how could anyone know what the aliens valued? Even the concept of value might be too human.

… my father took me to hear country folk tell tales of mystical quests in which the hero returned with his Holy Grail. When I was older I realized that the hero was always subtly wounded by his quest.

Cautiously Angstrom put his foot on the first step. He waited and the sweat soaked slowly through the back of his safari jacket. Nothing else seemed to happen. We pressed on and reached the top, panting, 15 minutes later. Once again we waited on the last step, monitoring ourselves for change. A worn balustrade which marked the edge of the terrace curved away in the distance at the very edge of the cliff. The wind that ruffled our hair smelled of ozone and tasted slightly salty.

We stepped onto the terrace. The first few white flagstones were tilted, cracked and worn with age, but after a few more steps the stones under our feet met perfectly. This was as we had expected; the temple was protected by a preservation field. These fields, using some mysterious stored energy, collapsed slowly—a few inches every century—and peripheral decay like this was found at many otherwise perfectly-preserved alien sites.

We headed toward the temple. The white dome shone in the sunshine, its ellipsoidal surface resting on columns that had the thin strength of wineglass stems. Most alien structures are based on this pseudo-conic geometry—ellipsoidal or parabolic surfaces, often with negative curvature—that defy conventional mathematical analysis. Angstrom and I approached slowly. The hules lagged behind, sniffing the sea breeze.

Inside the temple there was a shimmering translucent sphere, perhaps 20 meters in diameter floating two meters off the ground. The surface of the sphere trembled in the breeze as if it were alive.

We circled the sphere once but learned nothing. Angstrom put his finger out and touched it. He pulled his finger back, looked at me, and said "Try it."

I touched the sphere. The surface was cool—but there was no surface! My finger sank into the substance of the sphere and was surrounded by coolness. Ripples spread across the curvature above my head. I pulled my finger out. My finger was unharmed.

"Amazing," said Angstrom. "If only we knew... if only we knew what it was for, how it floats, had even a glimpse of how it works." But another hour spent in the temple taught us nothing. It was another alien enigma, wonderful, yet completely frustrating. We withdrew to think about what we had seen. At least we had not triggered any untoward effects.

The hules had wandered away to the balustrade looking over the ocean. I called to them. At the western edge of the terrace, away from the ocean, we found shelter from the sea breeze in a clump of trees.

Living in the Vatican, you have probably never realized that you must have tools to start a fire. In the AMF there would be no camp fires to cook our food or warm us in the night. I was not looking forward to eating our rations cold and sleeping, wrapped in our blankets, in the open, but to my surprise Angstrom gathered dry grass, leaves and twigs and piled them in a small pyramid.

"An experiment," he said. From the pocket of his safari jacket he pulled a magnifying glass. There was still some warmth in the sunlight and in two minutes he had created a tiny flame that licked at the tendrils of dry vegetation. "Passive, like the drop of dew that focuses the morning sun to start a forest fire," he said. The hules eyed the fire from a distance. They were wary, uneasy. In their secluded lives in the seminary garden I don't think they had ever seen a naked flame.

I brought water from the river for us to drink. We men ate with our hands while the hules set their bowls on the ground and lapped noisily. They seemed more comfortable with their dining arrange-

us beneath the Chardin.There was a muffled thud and we dropped down below the ship. Above us we saw the Chardin's shuttlecraft hanging in its bay.

Strapped in, we sat in the darkness, listening to the rush of air and the creaking of the prestressed airframe, feeling nothing but nausea and fear. We were waiting for the sudden cold of the AMF or the crack of a fractured strut, followed by the rush of air as we fell from the shattered glider and plunged to our deaths. Behind us the hules, whom we had wakened earlier so they could stumble to their seats inside the glider, were whining piteously. A sudden stench of vomit told us that one of them had thrown up. For hours we lived with the sound of their retching and with our own fear and swooping vertigo.

It was night when we hit the ground a few miles west of the temple. As Angstrom had planned, the force of the crash tore open the fuselage. A hatch would have been useless. Hinges and latches would freeze the moment we tried to use them in the anti-machine field. The glider skidded and tumbled to a halt. Clouds of dust swirled through the torn fuselage and settled on our lips and in our noses. The dust tasted dry and somehow clean.

I clambered out and my boots crunched on sand and gravel. We were on high ground, although alarmingly close to a ravine. I could see the moonlit temple far to the east, beside the dark ocean. A black lake filled a crater down the slope below me; ill-formed mountains rose behind us. The whole landscape was elusively evocative. I breathed in the cool night air and remembered my boyhood in the Auvergne. Perhaps Paschal's spectral landscape reminded me of those gaunt hills where my father took me to hear country folk tell tales of mystical quests in which the hero returned with his Holy Grail. When I was older I realized that the hero was always subtly wounded by his quest.

The cooling glider ticked and creaked. Angstrom squeezed his bulk through the hole in the fuselage. He was wearing his old safari jacket with its many pockets for tools and gadgets. I wondered what he planned to put in his pockets here on Paschal. Always the scientist, he walked around the glider examining its mono-wing to see how his design had withstood its single swooping flight. He touched the wing's leading edge but quickly drew back his finger and sucked its tip.

He grabbed a crowbar from the darkness inside the fuselage and jammed one end underneath a rock. Putting his shoulder to the crowbar he heaved for a second. The bar snapped abruptly and Angstrom staggered into the rock. At his feet the two halves of the bar were already covered with hoar frost and the metal crumbled to an icy dust.

"So much for the lever," he said. He pulled a threaded bolt from his pocket. "Let's try the screw." He spun a nut onto the bolt but after a turn or two the nut froze to the bolt and he dropped the combination onto the sand and sucked the ice from his fingertips. "Screw's out. That means the inclined plane and the wedge won't work. This AMF's the same as all the others. Even Archimedes' simple machines malfunction, let alone anything more complicated."

Our own bodies were full of mechanical devices, muscles, tendon, joints but alien tech was not triggered by the device itself. The tech was triggered by the mind's intent to move inanimate matter and use it as a tool. A tool, you see, is a marriage of matter and spirit—the motion of the material substance of the tool and the mind's purposeful intent.

We clambered back inside the pungent darkness of the fuselage to help the hules stagger onto the sand. They mewled and chittered to one another. Were they afraid, or surprised? Who could tell? They were restless, sniffing the air and peering at their strange new surroundings. I said that as long as they were occupied they would be fine.

When our food and other supplies—clothing, ropes, my Bible and other priestly apparatus—had been stuffed into the packs, I showed the hules how to adjust the friction buckles on the shoulder-straps. I mention the buckles to show you how we had planned our expedition. Experience had shown that other AMF's had no effect on static friction. We rejected the usual buckles with its little tongue poking through a hole in the strap and chose only buckles with no moving parts.

The hules staggered off into the gray half-light. Angstrom led them and M. Jules followed. The other two shambled along behind in single file. Their shapeless coveralls made them look aimless.

I went over to the broken glider and checked to see that the remote control that would bring the shuttlecraft down from orbit was still stuffed in its pocket on the cockpit bulkhead. Satisfied, I followed the others towards the temple. By the time I caught up with them the sun was rising over the eastern ocean.

In mid-morning we were crossing a broad savanna. Herds of winged para-deer were grazing on the dry grass. (XTA's aren't interested in naming species—we just add the prefix para- to the name of whatever Earth animal fits best.) Once, in the distance, we

you know that the planning for the second, fully-equipped expedition—the one that would be sent when ours unfortunately disappeared—was already underway.

Before we left Earth we had our universal antibody boosters, so that we could drink the water on Paschal II, so to speak. Like us, the three hules had their antibody booster together with a shot of a long-acting antigonadotropin to continue the suppression of their self-replicating behavior. When breeding mammalian intelligence in a vat there are some behaviors that apparently cannot be eliminated. In lieu of pharmaceuticals I had my vow of chastity and for Angstrom, well, as far as I know he was functionally asexual.

Why did we take the hules? The hules would be our porters, our bearers. Without machines we would be forced to explore Paschal like 17th century adventurers from Europe's Age of Discovery—those glorious days when scarcely a cape was rounded or a river explored without a Jesuit on board.

Without machines we would be forced to explore Paschal like 17th century adventurers from Europe's Age of Discovery—those glorious days when scarecely a cape was rounded or a river explored without a Jesuit on board.

For two days we coasted away from Earth's gravitational field. To pass the time I took out the battered brass reflecting telescope given to me by one of my teachers when I was a young man. The stars shown as they do only when seen from space, myriad suns wheeling through the void. In time each sun would die in a brief nova or rarer supernova, spewing forth gassy clouds of star stuff. Eons later this dust would cool and condense into new suns and planets. On a tiny fraction of these planets liquid water would be squeezed from rock and the long procession of life would begin. Half-alive slime at first, then bacteria refining their cell walls and nuclei for a billion years, then another billion years of microscopic multicellular beings whose progeny, in another billion years or so, would be fish and birds and mammals and creatures like men, with souls.

Be careful. You are listening to dangerous ideas, my young friend.

Did I mention that the three hules were Rome's gift to our expedition? Another example of Rome's threadbare generosity. They were spare agricultural hules from this seminary. Spare hules are a problem: junking them is a difficult moral question. Industry quietly euthanizes them, but the Church is more principled—or more squeamish—and assigns its surplus hules, like aging nuns, to ever lighter duties. These three hules, however, were assigned to our mission to live or die, as God saw fit, marooned with me and Angstrom.

Sedated, the three slept through our five-day journey across the light-years. Sometimes I would check on them as they lay in the narrow bunks on the cargo bay. M. Jules was strong and willing while Mlle. Marie was a delicate creature often found in the company of M. Jules. M. Alain had a truculent air as if he blamed all men not only for being a manufactured mutation but also for being born a slave. Although they had no souls we always addressed them as Monsieur or Mademoiselle. They were more than animals and these honorifics eased the quiet discomfort we felt in their presence.

Asleep in the Chardin's cargo bay their shaggy faces were impassive. There was no flicker under their eyelids, no twitching, no soft moaning while they slept. Minutes before our trip through hyperspace Angstrom, hunched over a subunit of the quantum drive in the Chardin's engine-room, churlishly snapped at me, "Hules are like other animals; they only seem to dream."

Did I describe Paschal II? I think I told you that this planet was more Earthlike than others found at the time. Like Earth, Paschal even had a single airless moon. From orbit we looked down on the estuary and the clifftop temple. The river's source seemed to lie in lush upland forests which stretched to the edge of a long escarpment. The river plunged over this scarp into lowland jungles where it was a broad brown thing that wound for miles and miles until it reached the sea.

Our descent to the surface was frightful. Angstrom, figuring that a passive airfoil would not trigger the AMF, had built a glider—a mono-wing without moving control surfaces or other mechanical devices—that was designed to swoop erratically, like a leaf falling from orbit, never flying faster than 200 kilometers per hour.

"No turning back. Let's hope we can turn the damned thing off when we get there," he said. He meant the AMF of course, not the glider. He pulled the red switch to fire the explosive bolts that held

official publication.

During this time I continued my work as a xeno-technoarcheologist. My scientific writing was of no interest to the Church, but, unknown to Rome (and even to myself at first) my scientific work slowly merged with my religious beliefs. In my mid-forties I collected my ideas in a book that was to encompass all my beliefs: *The Spiritual Evolution of Matter: Dust, Man and Beyond*.

A few weeks after my manuscript arrived in Rome, the Congregation of the Faith leveled the specific and serious charge of Unsound Doctrine. *The Spiritual Evolution of Matter* contradicted fundamental Catholic dogma first set forth by Aquinas over a thousand years ago. Saint Thomas said that matter was merely matter and doomed to pass away, while spirit was eternal spirit. Unlike mass and energy—which are equivalent—ephemeral matter can never become eternal spirit. You do have some scientific training, enough to know that matter can be transformed into energy? Good.

This time there were no difficult passages, no suggested sections for revision, no authority was assigned me to help me clarify my thoughts. They simply told me that *The Spiritual Evolution of Matter: Dust, Man and Beyond* was profoundly heretical and could never be published.

If I may digress for a moment, you might be interested to know that I find heresy intriguing. It is a state of grace to which one is summoned. Once appointed a heretic, one's unauthorized thoughts are formally authorized. Unauthorized Thoughts. It is a validation, and like garden weeds, they can never be completely eradicated.

I believe that metaphor is the poetry of reason. Did I mention that before? Well, the human mind is a garden of thought. There are the flowers of human thought: the annuals of art and science, and the perennials of faith. There are weeds, too. But what lies outside the garden wall? Is there only desert, stretching to a hazy horizon, or are there other gardens, alien gardens of thought where we might wander if only we could find the narrow gate in the wall of our small garden? Perhaps weeds in our garden might be flowers in other, alien gardens? But, in our human garden, my heretical weeds were intolerable and Rome said I must not write.

I am a Jesuit who is sworn to a life of obedience. We who have sworn to obey know that, while God frowns on those who use authority irrationally, He smiles on those of us who irrationally obey. I felt He was smiling on me when, two years later, Rome's lost probe discovered Paschal II.

There was nothing for me here on Earth. I asked to be sent to the new planet. I knew there must be a great secret on a planet protected by an AMF. Unlike other XTA's I had nothing to lose by going to Paschal II. Even if I did not return I would be serving God. If I did discover how to defeat the AMF then I could not only return to Earth, but return in triumph.

And my friend Angstrom, why did he go with me? In my report I don't think I mentioned that Angstrom was the son of a Paris chef. Angstrom had inherited his father's love of food. Through all the years I worked with him he never weighed less than 150 kilos. Arcs of sweat stained the armpits of his shirts and those who worked beside him always breathed the faint smell of stale sweat.

Although his professional peers were disgusted by his obesity they were forced to respect his intellect. At the end of his career his hunger for truth, not food, led to his professional disgrace and ostracism. But more of that later. All you need to know about Angstrom at this time is that he was a kind man and that the chance of an uncertain quest on Paschal II offered him more than the miserable certainty of his lonely life on Earth.

And what was the purpose of our trip? I think you understand that it was to turn off the AMF and discover the secret that was hidden on Paschal II.

Gloria

I have never enjoyed space travel. Like many things that seem exciting, space travel is quite boring.

We journeyed to Paschal II on a ship I renamed the Teilhard de Chardin, after a predecessor of mine. She was an ancient, unsafe faster-than-light freighter owned by one of the Vatican's labyrinthine holding companies. Rome said we could use her because the Chardin was on her way to the scrap yard. Do you understand why an unspaceworthy ship was ideal? You don't? Surely you see that I was a certified heretic, forbidden to speak but still capable of thought. I was a constant threat here on Earth. My unfortunate death in space would be a tragic loss that would be quickly forgotten. And if the Chardin did not break up in hyperspace, Rome would be pleased to see me marooned on Paschal II behind the impenetrable veil of the AMF. Ah, I can see from the slight inclination of your head that you are no neophyte in the ways of the Vatican. Perhaps

gait that they wear their coveralls with pride. They think they are more than animals.

But back to my tale. The probe had wandered light-years off its programmed course. I will offer an explanation for this later. Fifty light-years from here it had found an Earthlike planet with a single alien ruin. From low orbit around this blue-white globe the probe— which was equipped with a whimsical database of minor figures from the history of Catholicism—named the planet Paschal II. Even though we religious have time on our hands and can learn many unimportant things, you may not know that Paschal II was Pope from 1099 to 1118, anno Domini.

The orbiting probe reported on its survey of Paschal II. There were cloud-streaked oceans and snow-capped mountains sweeping down to gloomy forests. Lush jungles hid the bulk of the biomass and dry savannas teemed with animals. On a clifftop beside a broad estuary stood a white building, a massive dome resting on slender pillars. This was the only sign of ancient alien visitation. The temple, as we came to call it, stood at the center of a wide terrace that looked over the eastern ocean.

The probe launched several pods of scientific instruments into Paschal's atmosphere. They all failed during their descent, reporting in their last seconds temperatures approaching absolute zero. If that were true, Paschal II should have been a wasteland of frozen gas. Right away the small community of Catholic xeno-technoarcheologists suspected that the entire planet was protected by an AMF—an anti-machine field. A few other AMF's, small ones, were known at that time, but experience with them was very limited.

Have you read my report of our expedition? Did you blow the dust from its cover and read it in some corner of the Vatican Library? Then you already know how Angstrom and I made the descent from orbit, even though in an AMF all machines freeze and fail when, and only when, you try to use them. Intent to use is the mark of the alien technology.

What I admire most about alien tech is its elegance. There is no structure, no obvious device, no clever machine—only an elegant location where an effect is triggered by a certain state of mind. My first encounter with alien tech was as a graduate student on the planet Passion. The tech was a simple staircase. Some people, some of the time they climbed it, arrived at the top with memories of things that never could have happened. They would talk as if their new memories were real, even write them down, but if they walked down the stairs they forgot those memories. We never understood what triggered these effects, or discovered the purpose of this machine, if I can use that word. We've never understood the workings of any alien tech.

…in an AMF [anti-machine field] all machines freeze and fail when, and only when, you try to use them. Intent to use is the mark of the alien technology.

AMF's are a rare form of alien tech. Only a few have been found, and only on three or four planets. Each protects a small area of space and—since on two occasions AMF's have appeared and later disappeared—perhaps they protect small areas of time as well.

Did you know that it was I who discovered the Tower of Echo? No? You haven't heard of the Tower of Echo? Well, I'm not surprised. It promised to be truly dangerous... to Rome, I mean. But the Tower is another story, and I promised not to ramble.

Paschal II is still the only planet completely protected by an AMF, making it something of an instant Holy Grail.

Humor an old man for a moment. When you were in the library, reading my report, did you see my proscribed essays gathering dust in some corner alcove? Did you glance at any of my work? No? Perhaps you didn't know my writing was the reason I went to Paschal.

As a young man I would express my thoughts in small essays which I would show to my friends. My ideas were well-received by a widening circle of thoughtful readers and took on a life of their own—electronic samizdat. In time, my essays came to the attention of the Office of the Congregation of the Faith. What a benign name—The Office of the Congregation of the Faith—for what was once called the Inquisition. If I were not a Jesuit, I would say with some pride that I believe my work was read by the Holy Father himself.

Over 20 years I had several interviews with Curial officials. Each interview followed months or even years of preparatory examination of documents while I waited, mutely, for approval of perhaps a single essay. My only rewards were long lists of required revisions that might, in the future, make my work acceptable for

The Gardener

Kyrie

You, an emissary from the Holy Father himself, have come to question me? I am sure you understand my surprise. I am an old Jesuit sitting in the sun, dreaming away the afternoon in this quiet seminary garden. What could I know that is of such interest to Rome? Perhaps of interest to the entire world, you say? Surely you know that my order has suppressed my thoughts for 40 years. What has happened to arouse the Holy Father's sudden interest?

Say nothing—I know why you have sought me out. I will tell you the story you have come to hear and answer the question you have come to ask. Indulge me. I am an old man and I may seem to ramble, but I am no fool. I am a Jesuit and an ordained priest, and I am a graduate of the Sorbonne's school of xeno-techno-archeology, right here in Paris. You would do well to pay attention.

You want me to tell you the story of how the quantum engineer Angstrom and I went to the planet Paschal II. You want me to tell you about Paschal's alien technology. I must warn you that my story will answer the Holy Father's question, but I doubt that the Holy Father will like my answer.

Isn't this garden beautiful? Let's take this path that winds between these irises and lilies. Charming. Here we will sit in this small, secluded arbor. I'll sit where the sun will shine on my back and you may sit there, on that wooden bench, in the shade, so the brightness will not shine into your eyes.

My story begins 20 years and three popes ago. I was 50 (I must add that I was fit and muscular) when a signal was received from an interstellar probe that had been silent for years and given up for lost. The probe was one of our Catholic probes, one of many such automatons sent out to seek the heathen.

Seeking the heathen. All that happened before you were born, when ruins abandoned by an alien race were found in several local systems. Your teachers probably did not teach you about the period of theological anguish caused by these discoveries. Non-human intelligence was seen as a mortal threat to man's central role in God's vision of the unfolding universe. No, they wouldn't teach you all the anguish. Instead they taught Rome's charitable compromise: intelligent aliens became an untapped source of heathen, making conversion the Church's obvious interstellar task. Thus the Church, and through the Church all mankind, was restored to its rightful place at the center of God's plan.

These interesting ideas are worth examination. One must first assume that heathen alien have real souls to save, which gives rise to some absorbing theological disputes. One must also assume that any converting to be done would be done by us, not by the aliens. But I said I would not ramble. In the abandoned ruins those first explorers found alien technology that was functional yet quite inscrutable. These machines (the word machine is misleading but there is no other word) manipulated a mysterious relationship between thought and thing. Alien technology is like the scent of honeysuckle on a calm, moonless night. The scent reveals the presence of the flower, but not the flower itself.

Is it true that Rome has aborted these futile attempts to find the alien race? Does Rome finally believe they have not set foot on their abandoned planets for a hundred thousand years? Perhaps our young new pope has been convinced by a hundred years of evidence. After all, he is trained as a scientist. Are you surprised that a biologist could be elected pope? If I didn't know better I would think I had been dreaming.

No matter. The aliens vanished who knows where, leaving behind their dormant technology, and we xeno-technoarcheologists fumble with its mysterious blend of material physics and spiritual metaphysics.

Are you comfortable on that bench? Good. I like to rest here in the afternoons. The drone of insects masks the hum of the traffic outside the wall. Outside the garden wall. That phrase is important. To speak of alien ideas is very difficult and best done through metaphor. In my forbidden writings I have said that metaphor is the poetry of reason.

See there, beyond the linden tree—do you see the hule patiently weeding amongst the flowers? A young official like yourself who works inside the Vatican probably has no experience with hules. They are manufactured creatures, wordless, two-legged things, cobbled together in vats from assorted mammalian genes, slaves bred for lives of toil. We took three hules to Paschal II. They are part simian—see how he holds his hoe with his thumbs?—and part canine. They have the eagerness of a dog and the intelligence of a higher ape, which is why the path we took is so well-swept. Although their hairy faces lack expression, one can see from their

Jack gave the rope another wrap around the post, tied it off and relaxed his grip. The horse stood with its head stretched forward, unwilling to take another step up the ramp. Jack took off his gloves, stepped off the ramp and lit what was left of his cigarette. He asked again, in a quieter voice this time:

"Where's Kate, Earl?"

Earl looked past his brother at the house and small yard. Stacks of tires and old shipping pallets—the remains of last year's garden—leaned from the weight of a hard winter. Rusty baling wire, melting scraps of cardboard and rotting pieces of plywood littered the ground around the mobile home. Car parts—wheels and fenders and engine blocks—were piled under the living room window, next to the steps.

"I asked you a question, Earl," said Jack. "Why ain't you answerin' me?"

Earl finally looked Jack in the eyes. He swallowed, hard.

"Ain't here. Don't you get it, Jack? She ain't here." His mouth twitched on one side. He looked at the ground. "She's been gone more than a week."

"Shit," said Jack. "That figures." He dropped his cigarette butt into the mud and stepped back onto the ramp. "That just goddamn figures." He untied the rope and pulled, harder than before. The horse struggled against the rope but couldn't get a foothold on the slippery ramp. Jack dragged the horse up, jerking on the rope and taking up the slack around the pole. When the horse was at the top of the ramp and nearly in, it threw its head violently up, scraping the skin on its forehead on the rough metal of the trailer roof. Dark blood dripped down its cheek.

"Take it easy, Jack, huh?" said Earl, watching.

Jack wasn't listening. He alternated between pulling on the rope and hitting the horse. He started yelling: "Come on, you damn mule! Get in there!"

The halter broke with a loud snap. Jack fell back with the rope and stumbled down the ramp into the mud. The horse caught itself before falling and ran for the road. It got to the end of the driveway and turned right. It kept running, splashing water from potholes as it went — running until it was out of sight.

Earl sat on a wet stump and put his face into his hands. Jack found another cigarette in his shirt pocket and lit it. His hand shook as he held the lighter, and his back stiffened into a tense mass of pain. He clenched his teeth and leaned against the side of the trailer. He saw that Earl's shoulders were shaking, and he snorted with disgust.

"Christ, Earl," he said, "it's just a damn horse."

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level with his own, and spoke to it in a soft voice: "What's the matter with you, eh?"

The horse's ears twitched and stayed back. Jack pushed its head higher and held tight to the halter, then pushed sideways and back, throwing the horse off balance. It stumbled and stepped to the side, the mud making sucking noises as the hooves pulled free. Jack kept talking.

"Come on, girl, ain't you want to stretch them legs? Come on, mule, let's keep a movin', hear?" He pulled to the side again and the horse continued around, backing up and stepping sideways in a clumsy circle. Jack worked the horse, moving in larger circles until they were close to the opening in the fence. He stroked the horse's neck and talked, but when he tried to coax the horse forward it stopped at the line where the gate had been and wouldn't go through. Earl stood nearby and shook his head.

"Won't go through," he said. "She ain't been out of this field in years."

Jack stood next to the horse and looked at the gate, and at the field beyond and the trailer. He shook off his right glove and pulled the half-smoked cigarette and the lighter out of his pocket. He held them for a moment, considering.

"Does Jenkins know we're bringin' this horse?"

"He knows."

Jack flamed the lighter and the horse jerked its head and took a step backward. Jack took three pulls on the cigarette before snuffing it out and putting it back in his pocket. He took off his coat.

"Hold on to her," he said.

Earl held the halter while Jack draped his coat over the horse's head and covered its eyes and ears. Jack tied the arms of the coat together under the horse's jaw, and tucked the excess material into the straps of the halter. He talked to the horse again and walked it back into the pasture and around in a circle. He steered the horse through the mud, never in a straight line, until they were through the gate and into the front pasture. Earl pulled the barbed wire gate back into position and followed Jack and the horse across the field.

Jack was huffing from the effort of walking with the horse, and from the pain in his back. His chest hurt and he was wet from the rain and sweating in the cold air. Steam rose from his shirt. He paused to catch his breath, and spit at the ground and looked straight at Earl.

"Where's your wife, she ought to be doin' this. It's her damn horse."

Earl shrugged his shoulders and looked at the house. "Ain't here," he said. "Ain't here, and I got to move this horse today."

Jack looked at Earl for a long time.

"Hell of a day you picked."

Earl held the horse while Jack opened the back of the trailer. The rain had slackened to a light mist, and the air was quiet. Earl could hear the horse breathing under the coat. The coat had slipped down so the horse's ears were visible, and they twitched independently, uncertain.

Jack leaned over to put the ramp into position. He felt his back begin to spasm, and he dropped the ramp the last four inches to the ground. The noise startled the horse, and it crow-hopped to one side. Earl kept hold of the rope.

"Christ," said Jack. He straightened back up with a grimace. He took the halter rope from Earl and tied it to the post on the inside of the trailer.

"Better get that coat off her head so she can see what she's doin'," said Jack.

Earl untied the arms of the coat and slid it off the horse's head. He could smell the sweat from the horse in the fabric, and the smoke from Jack's cigarettes. He walked around the trailer to put the coat into the cab of the truck and noticed the same smell when he opened the door. There was also the smell of grease, and the smell of mildew. And maybe, thought Earl, the smell of perfume. He laid the coat across the seat and noticed that the newspapers and scraps of cardboard strewn on the floor of the passenger's side were damp and muddied with footprints. Small footprints; the footprints of a woman. Or a child. Another Mexican, thought Earl.

Jack tied a longer rope to the horse's halter and passed the free end through a metal ring inside the front end of the trailer, bringing the end of the rope back out and looping it twice around the support post to form a cleat. He untied the short rope from the halter. He stood next to the horse and pulled the long rope taut. The horse leaned back to resist the pull of the rope, but Jack pushed sideways with his shoulder to force it to take a step. The horse hesitated, confused about who was pulling the rope, then lost its balance and stepped forward onto the ramp, its hooves clanking and slipping on the wet metal. The horse put its ears back and strained against the rope. Jack pulled tighter and gave the horse another shove from the side.

Earl stood to the side and watched. "Take it slow," he said. "She'll get tired pretty soon."

Why They Run

EARL STOOD IN THE DOORWAY of the barn, out of the rain, and watched his brother's truck move up the long gravel road that came from town. He re-lit his damp cigarette and took one pull on it, then without finishing it he threw the remains into the mud in front of his feet. He wiped a fleck of tobacco from his lower lip, then zipped his jacket against the cold and waited.

Jack was driving his old Ford, a white three-quarter ton with a cattle rack, and he was pulling a livestock trailer. He swung it wide to avoid the ditch and turned into the driveway. There were potholes all the way to the barn, and the truck bumped and swayed, throwing arcs of brown water. The springs of the truck groaned as the wheels dipped and shuddered.

Earl stayed out of the rain and kept his hands warm in his pockets while his brother turned the truck around and lined the trailer up with the pasture gate. The driveway was slick with mud and the remains of the last snow and the rain was falling hard. There was hail mixed in. It was the middle of March, but it could have been late November or early February from the feel of it. It was cold, and gusts of wind sometimes blew the rain sideways into the barn and into Earl's face. He pulled his cap down over his ears, shoved his hands back into his pockets and walked out to help his brother.

Jack was having trouble looking out the back window and the mirrors were spotted and streaked with rain. He had to try three or four times before he got the truck and trailer lined up. He backed up until he heard Earl thump his hand on the trailer's fender, then shut off the engine and set the brake. The hail coming down on the roof of the cab made a noise like popcorn hitting the lid of a pan. Jack sat in the truck and listened to the sound. He rolled the window half way down and got a fresh cigarette out of his shirt pocket. He found a butane lighter mixed in with the old receipts and scraps of paper on the top of the dashboard. He looked out the window at Earl. "Goddamn downpour," he said.

Earl nodded. Rain came off the bill of his hunting cap and dripped onto the ground in front of his boots. He stood with his hands in his pockets and his collar up. He looked at his brother sideways. "I thought you was gettin' a horse trailer," he said. He looked back, behind the truck. "That ain't no horse trailer."

Jack looked at the cigarette between his fingers, and scratched at a patch of dry skin on the back of his hand. "Goddam Harking said he couldn't spare one," he finally said. "Bastard said a cattle trailer'd be good enough." He lit the cigarette and blew smoke out the corners of his mouth. "Hell," he said, "I can't even count how many times he's borrowed my goddamn flatbed." He took a second pull on the cigarette, then stubbed it out against the window glass and tucked what was left back into his pocket. He put on his hat and gloves and opened the truck door. His back was hurting, and he grunted loudly when he stood up. He steadied himself against the open door and bent his spine back to make it straight. He shut the truck door and walked past Earl, toward the pasture gate. "Where's this damn horse at?" he said.

Earl led Jack through the gate and across the front pasture to the cross fence. "She been back here all the time," he said. "Won't come out of the back pasture for nothin'. I been tryin' all morning, but she ain't moved." Earl took his hands out of his pockets and unhooked one end of a barbed wire gate. He pulled it out of the way and laid the tangle of wire against the main fence. He walked into the back pasture toward the horse. Jack followed, walking slower. He watched his brother from behind. Earl was tall, at least six inches taller than Jack, and wore a heavy wool coat that made his legs look thin and weak. He is weak, thought Jack. Always relying on someone. He looked back across the field toward Earl's house.

"Where's Kate today?" he said. "Ain't she helping?"

"She ain't here," said Earl.

The horse was standing in the mud with its head lowered and its front feet placed apart and rigid. It was thin and dark-headed with black spots on its chest. Rain splattered on its back and formed streams that flowed down between the lines of its ribs before separating into heavy drops that splashed into the mud. The horse didn't move, but its eyes followed Earl as he walked up and took hold of its halter. Earl clipped a rope onto the halter and tried to pull the horse forward. Jack saw its ears go back and the muscles of its neck and shoulders tense up and resist.

"She ain't movin' for you, that's for sure," he said. "You been fightin' her too much." He nudged Earl out of the way and put a hand under the horse's chin. He lifted it up until the horse's eyes were

about me. I can do this. I'll be back. We'll travel this world together."

"I hope that's true."

"Let's do it."

She sighs sadly. Unweave, weave, the new web, the hairs on your arms are feathers, your bones are light and hollow, your lips are hard beak curved to tear at prey. Your eyes tiny, sharp enough to see a mouse stirring the grass 150 feet below. Toes curled into talons. Fly, eagle, but don't fly from me. I don't think I'll be able to find you again, if I lose you now.

But to wings that have never felt the wind, the lift of air warmed by stone, the world so wide—

A deer on the edge of the wheat field. Five mice scurry by hooves. Looking up in terror at the combine billowing chaff and dust. Nostrils flare. The scent of diesel, the scent of man. Hesitant before running.

Sometimes a man.

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"Sometimes a Man" by Steve Conger. First published in *InterText*, volume 4, number 5.
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back. Sat and did not move.

Dreams pursued, as always when a man, but with her coming the dreams changed. Nights were filled with the presence of animals, the pad of a cat's feet, the whir of a wing, the pant of a dog, the gleaming eyes of a raccoon sorting through a glittering jewelry box, the rustle of mice on the closet floor. But always when the dreams grew so strong that sleep broke, there would be nothing but her, sitting on the bed, looking out the window at the stars shining through the branches of the tree. Don't you ever sleep? She would just look gently and then turn again to stare into the night.

When it happened.... Awoke one night, cold. The window was open as she preferred it, but she was not there. The bed was still warm beside. She must be in the bathroom or getting a drink of water. Closed the window. But awake, listening, heard nothing, no bare feet on the floor, no sound of water running. The low electric hum of the alarm by the bed.

Ten, 20, 30 minutes and she did not return. Sleepless, not daring to think, to open the gates, to let the night flood in—afraid she may have left as silently as she had come, afraid of infinite spaces, afraid of nameless things.

Driven out of bed by the ache of fear. Pacing the room, staring out the window at the dark branches of the tree. The sidewalks washed chalk white beneath the streetlamps. The empty streets. The blank windows of the other houses. Tried to read but the words swam on the page. Went down to the kitchen, walked through the dark living room and then came back upstairs to the bedroom. Pacing, empty, listless, finally settled into a chair neither asleep nor awake.

In the half-light before dawn a scratching sound at the window. Roused to look and saw two green eyes, a cat, balanced on a branch, tapping at the window with its paw. Feeling a cold deeper than the morning's, opened the window.

When a Canadian goose, would whirl up off the water in the pre-dawn when the sky was pale and empty of stars except for the morning star, before the sun flashed through the cattails and the day began. Others would honk beside and would bank into the wind and take a turn over the town and the houses outside of town. Searching the rooftops, smoke smearing from chimneys, hoping for a signature of something almost forgotten. Studying the layout of the streets trying to read the labyrinth, to trace the path that leads to some center. But then the sun would explode onto the water and light all the windows on fire. Swirl, bank, away.

"Teach me. Show me."

Desperately she—No. You want it too much. You should neither want it nor not want it. You are too eager. Change should be a fact uncolored by emotion, an inevitability, part of the process, to be other, to be elsewhere.

Door closed, the cracks sealed with clothing, plastic taped over, the windows shut, locked, the furnace vents closed, taped. She awakens. What are you doing? You cannot force me to— A moth fluttering against the window, soft tap of its wings, an ant slipping down the plastic sealing the doorjamb, a beetle scuttling across the vents, a wolf pacing in the corner of the room, a bear on its hind legs, a lion crouched, an eagle screeching and falling talons-forward but stopping short of scratching. Hours. A kaleidoscope of forms, but did not move, unmoved, stonefaced, stone hearted. At last in the dawn she came, herself, and sat at the end of the bed, hair wet and curled on her shoulders. You want too much.

"Help me."

"If I help you I lose you."

"Help me."

"You don't know what you ask."

"I won't let you go until you show me."

"Here," she sighed.

When a fish, would hide in the comfort of the bank's shadow, moving just enough to hold against the current, waiting to see what the stream would bring—a fly, a worm swept loose from the shore wiggling red, eggs, larvae. Quick to react to the play of light and shadow. Rising to a dimple in the surface tension, a tiny pattern of ripples. Once rising, startled by the image of a face broken on the facets of the water. Eyes that drew, but a flick of the tail, darting away.

Her eyes green, pupils not quite round. Flecks of phosphorescence, the one brown flaw.

"Why did you come to me if I am so unstable, if you believe my self is so unformed?"

"You were so lonely."

A stone falling down a long well into cold water. "Don't worry

Sometimes a Man

I AM FIVE MICE IN A WHEAT FIELD. From the distance, the great thunder of a combine. Dust billows and swirls. Scurrying over the shuddering earth to a clump of grass by an old fence. Watch without blinking ten eyes.

Yesterday a magpie, black-winged, tipped with white, trailing a long spear of a tail, hopping along the roadside picking at the pulped remains of squirrels.

Sometimes a man.

Began perhaps as a man. Born with two hands and feet, mouth open crying for air, squeezing it into reluctant lungs. Sponged off, carefully wiping the blood and amniotic fluid from the corners of the mouth, from between the small fingers, wrapped in a blanket and left alone in a crib beneath a burning light.

Once a bear—a lot like a man. Stood erect in a huckleberry patch, ripping leaf and berry from the branch, swatting at yellow jackets, rubbing my back against the crumbling bark of an old snag. Ambled through the darkness, sniffing at the slight breeze. Sometimes ripped a rotting log open and licked up the ants as they boiled loose. In winter, curled up in a hollow beneath a log, snorted and snored, and occasionally woke up listening, startled out of a dream like a man.

When a man, dreams came often. Sometimes sleepless for fear of dreams. Read late nights or watched TV or wandered alone to a bar and nursed a beer until it became as bitter and tepid as those nights. No memory of what the dreams were about—only that they opened on a great emptiness, like a winter sea at twilight, the endless gray swells fading into the grayer curve of the sky. Squalls, veils of black rain and a lone seabird poised silent in the dim light. Awake arms would curve around a hollow, a cold depression in the sheets, as if a form carved out of snow had lain there and then had blown away.

When a coyote, loped along the edges of snow-swept fields, stiff blond grasses poking through troughs of wind-crusted snow. Drank from the trickle of small streams beside red bramble brittle with ice, under the trunks of huge cottonwoods, their last few leaves rattling in a cold breeze. At the sound of cars on the road, slid into shadow and watch as they passed, testing the scents on the wind, filled with a strange disquiet.

Her words returned sometimes in the rattle of cattails by the pond in the long dead grass at summer's end. All things forming, reforming every instant. Leaf falls to ground, mold, bacteria, insects convert it to soil, roots reabsorb it, mix it with light, buds flower, swell into fruit, fruit eaten, seeds shit on the ground, new plants sprout.

Atoms dance—gnats in a shaft of sunlight. Her voice dancing.

We are all star stuff, cinders belched from the sour bellies of dying suns. Matter is a self-renewing matrix, a spider's web woven to catch passing energies and suck some use from them before they pass through. The initiated can change the matrix, respin the web, become other.

Easier, however, to change than to return. Home is the intuition of a pattern, a structure through which atoms pass and become you for an instant or less. The ego is not enough—made of words more than of cells and tissue, a pleasant or unpleasant fiction we narrate to connect across gaps of lost time. The intuition is deeper than I. Without it—

Her eyes were an odd shade of green, and in her left eye was a disturbing fleck of gold. Sometimes, making love, her pupils would widen and it would seem as if the whole world were lost in them—but then she would close them and hold tight and it wouldn't matter if the world were lost or if it were ever found again.

Don't remember the first meeting. Sense of a river bank, slow curling waters, sunlight and the shadow of aspen leaves. A flutter behind, as if a bird had landed, and she was there. Talk came easily and something about her smile began to thaw the winter loneliness.

She followed back to the apartment, curled catlike on the couch, and stayed. Never questioned it, never looked for a motive, afraid that if looked at too closely the magic would evaporate. Alone again in the cold morning, heating water to make a cup of instant coffee, listening to the radio for company. When she was there the dull rooms breathed an air of excitement, scents of warm fur and wild winds, feather, pine, huckleberry, wild rose.

Once, when an owl sitting on a dark branch that sighed and creaked in the night wind, looked into a window steamed with the moist evaporation of the breaths and teas within and sensed that air. A form moving behind the misted glass like the moon behind a thin cloud, shifting, dancing. Wind rustled the feathers on the head and

against the lumpy couch and laugh. Every good actor controls his exit.

Oscar Winner Jake Dooley Murdered
Film Star Shot to Death Outside The Bough
Suspect in Killing to be Arraigned Today

BIRTHS

Caitlin Marie Anscom, girl, to Harper and Paula Anscom.

Avery Kirby Dewey-Ingraham, girl, to William and Diana Dewey-Ingraham.

Jacob Dooley Townsend, boy, to Jennifer Townsend.

rwalker@awod.com **Rachel R. Walker**

was a lifelong Midwesterner until she moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where she lives and works. Her short fiction has been published in *Vision SF* and *Alternate Hilarities*. She has also published non-fiction articles on such varied subjects as the Native American tribes of the Southeast, carpal tunnel syndrome, and architecture.

"Fallen Star, Live-In God" by Rachel R. Walker. First published in *InterText*, volume 4, number 5.
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posters on the walls. All here—even *Smoke Test* and *A Name For Baby*, and *Dixie Wailing*—

I snatch the tape, frowning as I check the back. The studio seal gleams beside the copyright infringement warning. Not a bootleg. I check the picture on the front: There's me and Whit with our saxophones in the New Orleans cemetery, a smaller version of the poster hanging to my left. Gold letters celebrate my win from earlier tonight.

This isn't out yet.

My agent would know. She always gets me a piece of the back end.

I slide the tape back onto the shelf, not slamming the door for fear of waking Jenny, TZ or no. I investigate the other cabinet. These shelves are filled with home videotape dubs, carefully labeled in Jenny's tight compact script. My TV guest shots. Interviews and profiles, organized by show and date. I close the door, a niggling thought tickling the back corner of my mind. I cross to the bookshelf with the paperbacks. Top shelf: movie novelizations, complete with full color photos from the major motion picture starring Jake Dooley. All clearly read many times, a few held together by green rubber bands. I don't recognize the stuff on the bottom shelf.

I cross to the bookcase under the *Louisiana Air* poster with its cypress swamp and air-brushed faces. I give Lucas and my twenty-year-old self a sardonic grin, the one I used as the rowdy younger brother who had to be steadied by Lucas' character. Ha.

I pull out the first scrapbook. Newspaper clippings, sealed behind plastic, from my Chicago theater days. Even a review of that first University play.

She is dedicated.

Chronological order? Probably—

Dixie Wailing in the tape cabinet. The niggling thought leaps from the wings to center stage. The dates on the interview dubs.

Chronological order.

My hands are trembling worse than Lucas'. I take the scrapbook from the far right end of the shelf and flip through the plastic pages. Ticket stubs. Reviews. Glossy eight-by-tens. Profiles from fan magazines. Familiar headlines capturing slices of my life flick past, until I reach the biggest, blackest one of all:

Oscar Winner Jake Dooley Murdered
Film Star Shot to Death Outside Roxwell's
Police Hunt For Mystery Assailant

There's a three-column photo of a sidewalk chalk outline next to a studio portrait of me. My *Dixie Wailing* character. I look at the date above the headline.

```
   Welcome to the Jake Dooley fan discussion
group. This file will serve to answer some
questions users frequently ask in this area.
   Among the topics covered in this file:
   Conspiracy Theories Dooley Disciples
Fantasies Favorite Flicks Jake Sightings
```

Back to the other bookcase and the bottom shelf. I have to remove each book to see the titles—the spines are cracked white with over-reading.

The Jake Dooley Story. Fallen Star. The Comet Life of Jake Dooley. God of His Generation. Where Were You?: Remembering Jake Dooley. Death Comes Unexpectedly: Losing Hollywood's Brightest. Even a novel: not a novelization, but something unfamiliar with the strange title of *Jake Dooley's Doing Fine on Callisto*.

The copyright dates.

My hands are shaking. I check my watch; Jenny should stay under for another 15 minutes or so, if Lucas can be trusted. I carefully put the books back in place and leave the room, locking the door behind me. In the living room another bookcase stands near her desk. "Just stuff from school," Jenny had told me once on the way to her bedroom. "Nothing interesting."

Nothing interesting then. But I'm not 16 anymore. Time to see what Jenny's been studying at Cal Tech.

Space, Time and Gravitation, by Arthur Eddington. *A Quantum Mechanics Primer*, by Daniel Gillespie. *A Most Ingenious Paradox*, by Chandrapal Sarasvati Kumar. Other authors: Stephen Hawking. Rudy Rucker. Poul Anderson. Fritz Leiber. H. G. Wells.

I sink to her couch, ignoring the lumps and springs. The date above the headline. The dates on the books and the tapes. I'd believed Jenny to be about my current age. But if she's in her mid-twenties, and I'm here, I'm really old enough to be her father.

No.

The plot can change. I've demanded rewrites before—and I always wanted to direct.

I won't let the screen fade to black on me. All I have to do is wait for Jenny to take me back. She's built a shrine in there. She's worked hard for this opportunity—I'll take the offered chance. I settle back

map? You learn to drive the same way you learned to be a father?"

Together, maybe, they'll find... Points To View. *Starring Robert Harrigan. And Jake Dooley. Coming soon to a theater near you. Rated PG-13.*

I never liked The Bough: too noisy, with service worse than the music. Roxwell's is where I usually take my meetings, but the Roxwell's staff would pay too much attention to me. The Bough people see so many celebrities that I was almost anonymous. Exactly what I wanted for this meeting.

Lucas tossed his pale hair out of his bleary eyes. "Ya sure y'want this?" He glanced nervously about The Bough. Everybody was watching Hope Shelley (a brunette this season) dancing with her latest. "I mean, y'don't even drink." His hands were shaking worse than when we made *Louisiana Air*; their rhythm clashed with the pulse from the speakers. "Whatcha want with TZ? Not even a stellar trip. Just knock ya' assward. Gimme couple more days—I'm a great shopper." He snickered, then put on an ill-fitting sober expression. We still looked like brothers around the eyes, but his were now shadowed and gaunt. "Meet me here again Tuesday, and I'll have guaranteed DEA-pure anything. No extra charge." A wavering craftiness lit the silvered blue depths. "Maybe you could talk to Deni 'bout takin' me back. I c'n still work. Whaddya say? F'get the TZ. Lemme getcha somethin' better."

"I'm buying it for a friend."

"And the winner is... Jake Dooley, for *Dixie Wailing*!"

I knew she'd be looking for me. I stayed alert until I spotted her glittering in silver and blue, tall and blonde, as graceful and supple as when I was 16 and Hollywood was my new playground. Maybe I'd get her surgeon's name for future use.

It wasn't easy to cut through the worshipping surf of the crowd. If each touch had been a drop, I'd have been soaked by the time I reached Jenny. But she never minded waiting. I slid a hand through her silky hair and pulled her ear close to my mouth: "How would you like me to make you howl?"

All I hear is Jenny's breathing, now slow and steady. All I feel is the cool twisted sheet coiled about my ankles.

Slowly I slide off the mattress to the carpet, careful not to knock the two empty tumblers off the bedside table. Pants, Rolex—gotta watch the time. Her keys. I take the glasses and rinse them out in the kitchen sink, just like Ari did when he played crooked client to my idealistic defense attorney in *On Closer Inspection*. Though this isn't a murder story; no one will care about what made Jenny sleep.

We still looked like brothers around the eyes, but his were now shadowed and gaunt. "Meet me here again Tuesday, and I'll have guaranteed DEA-pure anything. No extra charge." A wavering craftiness lit the silvered blue depths.

8PM HBO MOVIE (CC)-Drama 2:15

"Blood and Oil" (R) Young intelligence agent (Jake Dooley) clashes with commanding officer (Ron Cliffords) in this absorbing look at the Gulf War.

Jenny must have bought this lock herself; it doesn't match the other doorknobs in her apartment. The fourth key I try clicks. I step inside and flip on the lights.

Three of the walls are covered with posters.

City of Lights. Walking Away. Louisiana Air. Silent Drums. Dixie Wailing.

And more: below the posters sit two low bookcases, each with two shelves apiece. One filled with paperbacks, the other with scrapbooks.

The fourth wall is covered by a giant screen TV, almost as big as the one I have at home. A VCR or laserdisc player underneath, and a tall cabinet on each side of the screen. Next to the right-hand cabinet, under a *Mad/Ave* poster, is a stereo and a filled CD rack. My bare feet are cold as I cross the well-varnished floor to check the titles. All soundtracks. My mouth twitches when I see the *'Blading* album. If only the movie had done as well. Maybe I should have done my own stunts.

Now the cabinet next to the TV. I pull open the doors and tilt my head to read the videotape spines, the titles on the shelf matching the

Fallen Star, Live-In God

ALL I HEAR is Jenny's breathing, now slow and steady. All I feel is the cool twisted sheet coiled about my ankles.

Peace.

I never used to mind that Jenny didn't keep newspapers or magazines around. After a while you get sick of reading about yourself. Same with her apparent lack of a television. You don't have to see those tabloids, either.

And I didn't care that we never left her apartment. At first I didn't even want to leave her bedroom. But now I'm starting to wonder.

"Jake, this way!"

"Jake, let's see that smile!"

"Jake, is it true what they say about you and Hope Shelley?"

Everybody thinks I lost my virginity at 19, when I starred with Hope Shelley in *Walking Away*. Hope believes it, too. But Jenny found me at 16.

"Jake, over here!"

"C'mon, give us those teeth!"

"Jake, how do ya feel?"

I grew up in Dundee, Illinois, near Chicago. When I was 14, my oldest sister Maggie got me a part in a college play she was in. I tell interviewers that I felt something special the second my foot touched the stage boards. It's a good line, but I've used it so often I can't remember if it's true.

I remember the audience cheering. Thunder filled the theater and echoed between my ears.

Chicago isn't New York, thank God, but it's true that you can do enough theater in Chicago to make even Hollywood take notice.

At 16 I landed my first big role. *City of Lights* wasn't supposed to be my picture, but after opening night everybody was talking about Jake Dooley, an astonishingly brilliant presence as flash addict Mickey Randall. And after the premiere party at Spago, there was Jenny, a surfer chick exalted by a teenager's imagination into a goddess. Goddesses probably don't wear Cal Tech T-shirts, though. And they sure don't lean close to sixteen-year-old boys and whisper, "How would you like me to make you howl?"

"Jake! Jake, I love you! I love you, Jake!"

"Jake please look this way Jake please c'mon pleeeez!"

"Jake! Omigawd! Didja see? He looked at me!"

Why does she keep the second bedroom locked?

After *City of Lights*, and after Jenny's apartment, I didn't see her until *A Name For Baby*—the second flick of my first three-film contract. The critics were kind to me. "A finer actor than this movie deserves." "With a better script, Dooley would've shone again." Dressed in flowing gray, Jenny found me at Roxwell's after the first week figures came out. Once more she ushered me into her Nissan and blindfolded me—and I didn't care. I felt I deserved a firing squad. Instead, when the blindfold was removed, I blinked the dust away and squinted in the candlelight that set Jenny's heavy-curtained bedroom aglow. "You deserve something special tonight," she whispered, pulling me to the yet-untangled sheets, guiding my hands to her. "Let me hear you howl."

"And the nominees for Best Actor are... Jake Dooley, for *Silent Drums ...*"

My next-oldest sister Eileen used to give herself screaming nightmares from reading scary bedtime stories. Mom finally had to throw out the book with the Bluebeard stories. Didn't help. Eileen kept opening all the doors to make sure there weren't any cast-off wives shut away in our creaky house.

What does Jenny keep behind her locked door?

A father.

"It's me, Sean. Remember your ol' dad?"

A son.

"Very pleased to meet you, sir. Sorry you have to leave so soon. I guess old habits are hard to break."

The open road.

"You force me to go on this crazy trip and you didn't bring a

it hits me—take care, eh?"

She turns away for just long enough to grab the cloth so she can clear the counter where he was sitting.

He's gone. She didn't hear the door—but then she wasn't particularly listening for it. At least he's gone. She can relax and read her magazine.

"It takes all kinds, eh, Ev?" It takes all kinds—Beverly says that a lot. No answer from the kitchen. Probably he just didn't hear.

"You want some coffee or something back there, Ev?" Still no answer. She isn't supposed to leave the front empty, but what if some-thing's happened to Ev?

"Hey, Ev, you okay back there? Ev?"

The kitchen is empty. Ev only works for the place, but from the pride he shows, always cleaning and polishing everything, you'd think he owned it. He hardly ever takes a break. Even if he did slip out for cigarettes or something, he'd never leave, even for a couple of minutes, without letting her know.

She checks the back door—the kitchen gets pretty hot with the fryers and the oven going full tilt. He could have stepped out back for a minute to cool off or have a smoke.

No sign of him. The parking lot is empty. The street is totally deserted.

Somewhere deep inside her something begins to boil over. Her skin goes all clammy. She's beginning to feel bees buzzing around inside her head, the way she did one time when she was little and she got lost, making a wrong turn on the way home from the library. Everything looked kind of familiar, but she didn't know how to get back to where she belonged. Lost. Abandoned.

She looks up and down the street. No one. Nothing. Absolutely nothing moves.

So what's so unusual about the street being empty at three in the morning? She squeezes the anxiety down into a little knot deep in her throat and forces herself to go back into the shop.

The fears, the stories her mother worries her with, always have to do with people—burglars, perverts, motorcycle gangs. Evil, sleazy, twisted people—never the lack of people—never emptiness—never loneliness. How can nobody hurt you? What can nothing do to you?

She waits. The time is marked by the sound of her breathing. Nothing—absolutely nothing else. One, two, five, ten minutes. No one comes. She moves to the big plate-glass window to stare out at the empty sidewalk. It might as well be a painting.

Nothing moves. After an eternity a little puff of wind stirs up an eddy of candy wrappers and dust, but after a few quick heartbeats it's gone. It never happened. The silence, the emptiness, seeps into the shop like a syrup. Breathing becomes difficult.

Movement of any sort is now nearly impossible. It's 3:38—the bus will be along in another three minutes. It's always on time this hour of the night. The next time through the route at 4:38, the driver will come inside just long enough to get his coffee—two creams, no sugar.

Or maybe he won't. Maybe she'll lose her job, but she has to do it. She has to do it while she can still move. She struggles against the suffocating entropy to pull on her sweater. She has to leave. It's not really her fault—she could at least lock up if they'd trust her with a key. She peeks into the back. Still no sign of Ev.

She waits across the street at the bus stop. Three, four, five minutes. Ten. She can see the big clock in the shop through the empty glass.

3:52—still no bus. Nothing. No one. She could go back inside and call a cab, but it won't do any good. Nobody will answer.

There won't be anyone. No one on the phone. No one on the street. No one to make real her fears of attack along the two interminable blocks from her own bus stop to her house. No one to offer comfort. No one to speak the words that might relieve the pressure building against her chest—her lungs, her heart.

aa353@freenet.carleton.ca **G.L. Eikenberry**

has, after more than 20 years and more than 30 published pieces of fiction and poetry, finally realized that he can't be in this for fame or fortune. The jobs that have paid the rent have ranged from underground mining with United Keno Hill Mines in the Yukon to being Vice President of Communications and Information Services for the Canadian College of Health Service Executives. He says it's hard to imagine writing without the fodder his strange mix of jobs and experiences have supplied.

"The Loneliness of the Late-Night Donut Shop" by G.L. Eikenberry. First published in *InterText*, volume 4, number 4.
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GARY L. EIKENBERRY

The Loneliness of the Late-Night Donut Shop

THE SOLITARY DRUNK tries the phone one more time. His thinning hair is plastered to his scalp in greasy random clumps. His suit looks like it hasn't seen a dry cleaner for the better part of a decade. The smell isn't all that great, either. Even over the incense of freshly-brewed coffee and the sweet fragrance of donuts and muffins, his aura abrades the inside of her nose. Nobody answers his call. Tanya's pretty sure she wouldn't answer either if she knew it was him calling.

She's working the counter alone. She's the only person in the shop other than the drunk and, of course, Ev back in the kitchen frying donuts. They wouldn't ordinarily put someone so young on the late shift alone, but she traded with Beverly so she could get last Saturday off, and then Nicole called in sick. Beverly wouldn't feel vulnerable in a situation like this. She's older and kind of overweight.

But for Tanya the same cute features and trim bounciness that make her popular with the boys and busy, if she wants to be, almost every Saturday night make her feel even more exposed here, now, in the creepy, hollow, formative hours of a Wednesday morning. She wants the drunk to leave. She knows he's harmless enough, but his sloppy attempts at conversation make her very uncomfortable. That's the thing about working in a donut shop—you can get pretty tired of people. Especially the kind of people that show up in the small, tense hours of the graveyard shift. Sure, Beverly says she likes the graveyard shift, but it's different for her.

He doesn't leave.

No one else comes in.

She doesn't offer to warm up his coffee. She usually feels more lonely when she has to be around people she doesn't know. She scrubs down the back counter one more time. Being really alone—with absolutely nobody else around—has never been hard for her.

The jerk just won't leave. Any other time of day, on the street or someplace else, with a shave and a shower, he'd probably be just a regular boring guy in a boring eraser-smudge gray business suit, but she rearranges the cups in the dishwasher one more time so that she doesn't have to turn to face him.

He's getting up. Maybe he'll finally leave.

She watches the drunk's reflection in the window as he tries the phone again. Someone has finally answered. Maybe he'll go home now.

"Yeah? Well—hey, where's Cheryl? Yeah, with that kind of attitude I can see why. I wouldn't want to live there either. Tell time? Of course I can tell time, you—yeah, well, whoever the hell put you in charge of etiquette for this planet made a hell of a big mistake—that's the guy that oughta lose his job. Disappeared, huh? Well I sure as hell didn't do anything with your wife. Yeah, well, she probably walked out on you, you asshole—who wouldn't? Yeah, well, you're so full of—" He smashes the receiver down and then darts his eyes over to Tanya. She has her back to him, scraping at a spot on her apron with her lilac fingernail. The polish is chipped already, which is okay since she's decided she doesn't like the color.

"So maybe I got a wrong number. I guess the guy was on drugs or crazy or something. I mean, he could've just said I had the wrong number, right? A real basket case, eh? First he gives me hell for calling so late, then he starts whimpering about how I gotta help him on account of his wife's disappeared or something. Er, hey, listen, sorry about the bad language—"

"I didn't hear any."

"Huh? What'dya say, there, cutie? What's it say on your badge there? Come on over here so I can read what it says. I like to know a person's name..." He just sort of trails off, looking down at his shoes.

"I said I didn't hear any bad language." She doesn't turn around. She wishes Ev would come out with another tray of donuts.

"Yeah, well, I guess I, uh, better get moving." He actually seems embarrassed. Maybe he really will leave. "You shoulda heard that creep on the phone—I mean, you talk about your wrong numbers—I must've got another planet or something."

"It takes all kinds, I guess."

"Huh? Hey, let me give you a little advice from someone who's been—well, was, anyway—in the business for a long time. If you're gonna make a career out of dealing with the public, you gotta learn to speak up. Aw hell, never mind. Guess I'd better hit the road before

pocket. I think of the teeth marks on his arm. If Albert says he'll go, he'll go. He'd never back out. Not even if he was dying on that very day. I know that, too.

Mom has these set rituals she goes through every night. She takes a shower, sets her hair—even though nobody sets their hair anymore that I know of, Mom does. I wait until I hear the water running. I know I will find Albert out by the TV still dressed, waiting for her to finish. He'll have spread some papers on the coffee table and be polishing his shoes.

I stand quietly in the doorway for a moment. Albert's not watching TV, although it's on. He's not polishing his shoes either. He's rolled up his sleeve again. He's looking at the bite, pushing at it with his fingers.

"Albert," I say, taking care to keep my voice soft.

He jumps like I've caught him doing something private and quickly rolls down his sleeve. "What is it, Princess?" he asks.

"What did the guy look like?" He knows right off what I mean.

"Like a professor. Wire rim glasses, a beard, his hand was white and very strong."

"He sounds like someone who was fired. I think he was just mad. You asked him for money and he flipped out. I'm sure he didn't have AIDS."

"Why thank you, Miranda," Albert says slowly.

For some reason I can't just drop it. "But maybe you should be tested...just to be sure."

"I'll do that," he says after a second. "Okay?" He doesn't tell me to stop worrying, but I know that's what he means. His face has turned into one giant question mark. Albert doesn't like anybody to worry.

"Okay," I answer. I think it's the first time I've ever answered Albert directly. But he doesn't seem to notice. All along he's pretended that I answer. He just expects what you've said or haven't said and responds. Kind of like saying, "Thank you," I guess, sometimes over 4,000 times a day, to everyone who hands him a dollar to cross the bridge.

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Marion de Booy Wentzien's short fiction has appeared in *Seventeen*, *The San Francisco Chronicle* and other publications. She was a recipient of the PEN Syndiated Fiction Project Award in 1986 and 1987, and the New Letters Literary Award in 1991. She lives in Saratoga, California.

"Taking Toll" by Marion de Booy Wentzien. First published in the September 1994 issue of *The Blue Penny Quarterly*, Volume 1, Issue 2. Copyright © 1994 by Marion de Booy Wentzien. Reprinted by permission of the author.

finished," he says, "and he spent his life scuttling sideways under water before he landed on our supper table."

I don't answer.

"Something bothering you, Princess?" The scowl is gone. He looks directly at me like he wants to help, blinks, and looks away.

"There's this Sports Fair the school's having Saturday," I blurt out. "With fathers." I don't know why I've told him. It was the last thing I planned to do. But there it is standing between us like a huge embarrassment.

He swivels his gaze at me. I expect him to offer to come with me. I expect him to fall all over himself wanting to please—I mean, I know he wants to win me over because of Mom. They've all wanted that—at first. The story changes as we go along. That's when their real behavior comes out. I squint at Albert willing him to say something. Anything. But he stays silent as if he's waiting.

He's got a bite on his arm, I remind myself. He could this very minute be dying of AIDS. You could be nice to him just once.

"You want to go with me?" I ask exasperated.

"Sure." His features seem to be melting into each other. Even his eyes are smiling.

"Not that you're my father… or anything like that," I add quickly.

"But close enough—for me, at least," he says. "I don't know about you. You see things different from me. You probably would have spotted that Volvo driver as a trouble maker right off." Albert's looking shyly proud that he's got my attention and he's jammed his right hand in his trouser pocket fiddling with the coins.

"Do you know how to do anything?" I ask him, feeling something fierce and wild rushing through me—some terrible kind of feeling I'm not sure of and which feels scary. I realize I sound mean, ungrateful, which isn't how I mean to sound but I can't stop. "Use a starting gun? A stop watch?"

Albert doesn't take offense. He's thoughtful. "I can barbecue good. Most parties I've been to someone needs to know how to barbecue. You could do the games with the other gals and their dads, and I could barbecue every-body's meat."

I don't say anything. I'm already regretting opening my mouth. I have a vivid, not fun, picture of Albert, wearing his toll takers uniform, standing beside a smoking barbecue flipping hot dogs and hamburgers. It's not even that kind of thing. There'll be people to cook. Although I suppose Albert could give them advice. Or he could stand near the finish line and cheer… for me.

"So are we on? Do we have a date?" he asks, looking so pleased I can't think of what to say.

He's got a bite on his arm, I remind myself. He could this very minute be dying of AIDS. You could be nice to him just once.

"It's Saturday from 11:30 to 3:00. But we don't have to stay more than a couple of hours."

"Unless we're having fun," he says. "Have you seen that bumper sticker, 'Are we having fun yet?'" He goes on to tell me that he's been keeping track of that one. He's counted five hundred and twenty-three. "I thought it might be fun sometime to run an ad and invite everybody who has that bumper sticker on his or her car," he says, "and see what kind of a party that turns out to be."

"This isn't exactly a party," I say. "These are just girls in the ninth grade and their fathers. It's not likely to be much fun. I'd just like to go."

"To be like everybody else," he says, nodding. "I know. I've been there."

Mom comes back, newspaper in hand, complaining that the garbage chute is broken—again. Albert gets to his feet and immediately offers to take the crab remains down to a dumpster he knows about near the liquor store at the corner.

"Isn't he something?" Mom asks when the door shuts behind him.

I don't answer. I can't. Something is lodged in my throat, hard and painful as a baseball. I wonder if I accidentally swallowed a piece of crab shell.

"I don't care what you think about Albert," Mom snaps. "I love him. And I don't want to hear one nasty word out of your mouth about him. I gave in about the others. But you're wrong about Albert. I love him," she repeats as if my silence means I've gotten deaf.

I shrug and leave the room afraid that I'll cry. The last time I cried in front of Mom was when I wanted Jase to go to the Sixth Grade Fair with me. He said he would. But he went to the races instead. He won. He even offered to split the $50 with me. But I just couldn't forgive him.

I look at the ceiling and think of Albert jingling the coins in his

can almost see your face in them.

"How's life treating you, Princess?" Albert asks late that afternoon when he comes in after work. He tosses his uniform jacket over the back of the couch where I am sitting watching TV. His shoes look just as shiny as they did this morning. He's carrying a paper bag. I can tell by the smell it's crab—crab and French bread, which is getting to be Wednesday night dinner.

Mom is thrilled by the fact that Albert brings in dinner half the nights of the week and she doesn't have to cook. Most of the guys she's hung around with aren't enthusiastic about women's lib. They think a woman should work and cook. They think a guy should lie around and be waited on.

I want him to stay in the kitchen but, of course, he comes in and sits down on the couch next to me. It's too much effort to get up, snap off the TV, and go into my room; otherwise I would if for no other reason than to show Albert C. once and for all we are not buddies or friends or whatever else he's hoping we'll be.

He settles into watching the game show I'm watching. Len used to make me change to sports whenever he plunked his fat fanny down. My sideways glances take in the fact that there are damp half-moons under Albert's arms—he's got his hands folded behind his head. According to him the booth is either too hot or too cold—nothing in between. Evidently today it was hot.

"A guy bit me today," he says in a low voice not looking at me, just watching the toothpaste commercial as if it were the most important thing in the world.

"Bit you?" I say, amazed in spite of myself.

"Yeah. I reach for his toll and all of a sudden he grabs my hand, bares my wrist and takes a bite."

Albert rolls back his tan sleeve and sure enough there's the shape of a human mouth on either side of his brown wrist. A couple of the teeth marks are deep and filled in with purple. Only the two front teeth seemed to have broken the skin and those narrow pockets have dried blood in them.

"I sure hope he don't have AIDS. I don't think I'll tell your mother. She'll get all upset. I probably shouldn't have told you. Don't you tell her, Princess. Okay?"

"Did you tell someone?" I ask, not answering his question. I can't believe he let someone bite him and then just stood there taking tolls and saying "Have a good day." I'm not sure that's what he says but it sounds like the kind of thing he would. He's very polite.

"Like who?" He seems confused by my question. His forehead has crumpled up like a plowed field. "He was out of there before I could do anything. He was driving a Volvo station wagon." Albert is shaking his head now, his eyes wide with disbelief. "I'd never think the driver of a Volvo would bite. I wasn't even prepared for anything bad. A VW bus, a black Caddy, a low rider, I brace myself, but a Volvo…" His voice trails off and I suddenly know that after this experience no car will ever just sail through his line again. That he thinks he's lost his ability to judge. And that's shaken him more than the thought of getting AIDS. Albert lowers his sleeve, buttons it. "Let's just keep this between you and me, Princess," he adds again.

I make no promises.

The game show is back on and he's watching. "I hope that blonde lady wins," he says. "She sure looks like she could use $10,000 dollars."

How can he even care about her? I wonder. If someone bit me, that's all I'd think about. But not Albert. I can see he really wants her to win.

If there hadn't been a toothpaste commercial would he have told me about the bite? I know the lady smiling all those white teeth made him remember. I run my tongue over my front teeth and feel the slight overlap. As we watch the woman guess, I find myself circling my thumb and first finger around my wrist which feels as if there isn't any spare skin covering the bone.

Or is he scared and just being brave? The idea of Albert being brave is a new one. It pulls at me all during dinner. He cracks all our crab legs for us, cuts the French bread and there isn't a trace of fear or self-pity. He just is. Asks Mom about her day and listens to her bitch about how two customers lit up in the no smoking area. Sympathized when she said her feet were just killing her. I just can't get the idea of those imprints on his arm out of my mind. I want to say more about the bite but I'm not sure what. I can't believe he can just sit there and eat and not talk about it.

When Mom goes out with the crab shells wrapped tightly in newspaper to the chute in the hall, Albert thunks both elbows on the table, juts his head forward and scowls at me. It's a pretend scowl—he's trying for my attention. Albert has been known to do anything for a laugh. Just crossing his eyes makes Mom giggle.

"You're looking at me crabbier than that old crab we just

"Diet," he answered. He'd reached over and helped himself to more mashed potatoes. "'Course I've never had a problem like that. As you can see food doesn't land on this frame for long."

He loves to tell of the emergencies he's handled—the sights he's seen. Naked people. Crazy people. One woman tried to give him her baby for the toll. Dangerous people. "The abuse I have to take," Albert says letting out a sigh. "It isn't like it used to be out there when people brought you the first apricots of the season."

Mom clucks and looks at him like he's some kind of hero. And he gets that shy proud tucked in smile as if every day in the toll booth is like going to the front line in a war.

When the bus rolls up to the booth, I let go of the pen I keep for this emergency. It plunks onto the floor and slides under the seat.

"How come you can't keep a hold of that thing?" Lureen asks. "You drop it every day."

Not answering, I fumble around her shoes for it. I keep my head low until I can tell we're on the bridge. Then I straighten up and breathe.

"You're getting weirder and weirder, Miranda," Lureen observes. "It's getting hard to be your friend you're getting so weird."

"So be somebody else's. You've got so many to choose from."

"Come on, guys, don't fight," Betty begs. Betty is the person who links us together. Lureen and I wouldn't be friends in a million years if it wasn't for Betty.

"You two going to the Freshman Sports Fair Saturday?" Betty asks. It's for fathers and daughters. She's asked Lureen and me every day for the last week. Much as I like Betty, she can be insensitive. I feel Lureen stiffen beside me. Neither Lureen or I have fathers. I mean, I, at least, had one once; I don't know if Lureen ever had one. I suspect by how prickly at the mention of fathers she gets she didn't. Both of us hate the idea of this annual event.

"No," Lureen says straight off.

I hunch my shoulders. "Actually I think the thing is kind of stupid. I mean, it was all right when I was seven or nine...."

"But now that you're almost fourteen, you're too old?" Lureen interrupts.

"Something like that," I lie. Sports are the one thing I'm really good at. I hold the school's record for the long jump and I'm second in the hundred meter hurdles. My mother's never seen me compete. Sports just aren't her thing. My athletic ability must have come from my dad.

A glance at Lureen tells me she isn't fooled. Betty is. She's already rattling on. I can only catch every few words. The bus has hit the worn patches on an upgrade in the highway. The gears grind. It shakes and roars. I try to imagine asking Albert to go with me. No way! I think.

Mom keeps a picture of my father, Russell Harvey, inside her dresser under her underwear. He was in the Navy and stationed here. Mom met him at a dance and dropped out of high school to marry him five days later. According to her they were married exactly sixteen months. He was sent somewhere, she seems unclear where, and she's never heard from him since. She never bothered to get divorced. I don't think she bothered to track him down either. Mom tends to procrastinate about things.

He loves to tell of the emergencies he's handled—the sights he's seen. Naked people. Crazy people. One woman tried to give him her baby for the toll.

Sometimes when I am feeling sorry for myself, which isn't as much as it used to be, I pull out his picture and look at it. He only looks about four years older than I am now. In the picture he has a far-away look in his eyes and a stubborn chin. I expect he found marriage, a baby, and debts more than any eighteen year old has a right to be buried under. Mom, when she talks about him, which is only after she's had three glasses of red wine, says he had big plans. For a long time I thought she meant like being an Olympic track star or one of the Blue Angels.

Then I made the mistake of asking her. "Yeah, Russell had big plans all right," she agreed darkly. "Like robbing a bank. Listen, you might as well get any fantasy you have about him straight out of your head. He was a big talker—that's what he was. And he liked big trouble. He's either in jail or dead. One or the other doesn't matter to me. Just don't go telling me he was some kind of wonderful because that he wasn't. I was just too young and ignorant to know it at the time. So here I am and here you are. And we've made the best of it. Albert's a nice guy. So quit comparing him to Russell. I want you to like him."

I just can't. He's too real—like you can see his bones and each breath he takes. Then there's the way he shines his shoes so that you

Taking Toll

ALBERT C. COOKSLEY is Mom's latest boyfriend. He's been on the scene for over a year now. He likes to think of himself as my dad. He's always saying, "Whatever you need, Princess, you come to me. I'll do my darndest to get it for you." His eyes, shy and toad colored, meet mine, blink, and look away. He jingles the loose change in his pocket.

What he has no idea of is that he can never be my father. He's a nice enough person. In fact he's too nice. It's hard to hate someone who's so nice. But I do my best.

"How can you hook up with someone like Albert?" I ask Mom when it sinks in from a conversation I've eavesdropped on that he's going to be a permanent fixture like the wall stain over the couch.

Mom, in her slip, is on her unmade bed getting ready to go to work. She has her panty hose in her hand, inspecting it for a run. "And what's wrong with Albert? He's a perfectly nice man." She pushes the gooseneck lamp away so she can see me better. "Why aren't you ready for school, Miranda? They don't like all those tardies, you know. That one...Sister whatever...."

"Immaculate," I fill in. That isn't really her name—it's what we call her. Her real name is Mary Claire.

"She calls me at work—a personal call—you know how Mr. Lawston hates personal phone calls—to tell me that you're always late and that sometimes you don't even show up at all." Mom holds me in the solemn beam of her hazel eyes and I feel trapped—as if one of those shopping center spotlights is holding me in place. "If you don't get educated you'll end up like me. You don't want that, do you?" There is a quick shine of tears, gone almost before I even register them.

"You didn't end up so bad." I swallow and reach out to touch her bare shoulder but she's already bent over and is struggling into her pantyhose. My hand flies stupidly through air.

Her big toe, the nail painted bright plum, rams through the end of the stocking. "Oh, shoot," she says. "Get me..."

I reach into the top drawer of her dresser and hand her another sealed package before she can finish her sentence.

"Thank you. Now go on. Get dressed."

I turn and am halfway to the door when she speaks again.

"Albert treats me like I'm the only woman in the world," she says. Her voice is soft.

"He's a toll taker, Mom."

"And I'm a restaurant hostess," she says. "Big deal. Since when have you gotten so snooty?"

"You're a singer, waiting for a break, not a hostess," I say fiercely, reminding her of the dream she's told me ever since I was big enough to hear a bedtime story. "Albert's..."

"Albert's not dumb," she says, guessing—correctly—at what I'm thinking, but she sounds unsure. I know I have planted the beginning of the end of Albert C. Cooksley. It won't be long before Albert is history like Len, Mitchell, and Jase. If it hadn't been for me, Mom wouldn't have realized that Len just pretended to be job hunting while he was living with us. He went to the cheap afternoon shows instead. Mitchell had another woman. It took me a long time to find something to unseat Jase. And even then I had to stretch. Sometimes I think getting rid of Jase was a mistake. Mom took it hard. She still hasn't gotten her fire back after dumping him.

Lureen and Betty are already at the bus stop when I get there. Riding the bus to school has turned into my biggest nightmare since Mom began dating Albert because we have to go over the bridge. So far as I know from the questions I've asked he's never manned the truck and bus entrance to the bridge. But there's always a first time. I just know he'd wave like he knew me.

Once the three of us are jammed in a seat Betty starts talking about where we'll go on our lunch break. Before Albert I never had money to eat out with Betty and Lureen. Albert's taken to leaving coins stacked up in two little neat piles next to my place at the table every morning.

The bus swings wide and suddenly we're at the top of the hill approaching the toll plaza. I can't see the people taking toll yet; the cars themselves are smaller than matchbox toys. Albert should be in the third booth from the right—that's what he's told me. He gets mildly annoyed when I call him a toll taker. He says he's a bridge officer.

I imagine him standing in a booth which is so small he can't bend to tie his shoe. The booths have been redone recently—made smaller to conserve space. Although he doesn't like this, Albert takes it in stride like he takes everything. Two of his old time buddies have quit over it, one because he was too fat.

"If you were too fat to fit what would you do?" I asked him.

get up and take the cordless phone out to the pool and sit there watching the rectangular blackness of it. I feel the cat rubbing against my leg, and then she's gone, and I hear a soft splash and then the rhythmic churning of Monica's feet as she swims. When it's light enough to see the buttons on the phone I dial Mandy's number at her mother's house, the house the three of us shared until a few months ago. When she comes on the line I say her name over and over, perhaps a dozen times until she's awake, and I say, "Mandy, thanks for being concerned about me. I'll be all right. Everything will be all right." She says something in return, and her voice sounds worried, though I can't make out the words exactly. I want to understand what it is she's saying, as if knowing this is the most important thing in my life, and I listen, trying to comprehend what is wrong with me.

lray@whale.st.usm.edu **Leland Ray**

is a Ph.D. dropout who was employed as an adjunct English instructor at the University of Southern Mississippi, where he once studied at the Center for Writers. He has published poetry, fiction, and non-fiction in "little" academic journals. When he hit forty, however, he stopped writing, lost his job, got another one, and generally spends his time surfing the Net when he could be doing other, more useful things. But hey, it's fun, so who's worrying?

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slides off into the water. It's the shallow end, and the water comes up to just above her navel. Her breasts are small, and her nipples are erect. "Put these with my things, please?" she says, and throws the panties. They land halfway between the pool and my chair. I go and pick them up and hold them, stand there watching her as she sinks into the water. Her hair trails off behind in a fluid mass, like a Portuguese man-o'-war. She reaches back and does something to it, and then her ponytail is gone and the hair spreads out across the water as she sinks deeper, until the water is at her lower lip. "I'm going to do some laps," she says. "Wait for me, huh?"

I sit down again and pick up my glass. It's empty, and I look into it for a moment, contemplating whether I want more. Monica's body cuts the water in smooth strokes, her hair flying straight out behind her. She makes three laps, then reaches the opposite end and stops, resting her arms on the edge. "Would you like for me to stay here tonight?" she says to the wooden fence in front of her. Her voice seems larger in the enclosed yard, as if it were a small room.

I sit down again and pick up my glass. It's empty, and I look into it for a moment, contemplating whether I want more.

"That wouldn't be a very good idea," I say, and I wonder whether she can hear me. My voice sounds small and tense.

"I like you, David. I wanted you to ask me out months ago."

"And I like you, too, Monica. But it wouldn't be right, you see. I'm a professor. You might take another of my classes sometime."

She turns and swims back, then hoists herself up to the edge. She sits and draws her legs up and puts her arms around them. "I won't. I don't need any more history." She begins to wring out her wet hair. "Could you bring me a towel? I'm getting cold."

I get a large bath towel from the bathroom cabinet and go back. She's lying back in the lounge chair, watching the cat as she stands poised at the edge of the pool, looking into the water. The cat dips a paw into the water, then takes it out and shakes the water off. She begins to lick at the paw and bathe her face. Monica is rubbing the rim of her wineglass with a finger, and the glass gives off a high-pitched sound. She dampens the finger and tries again, but nothing happens. I hand her the towel, and she turns, putting her legs over the side of the chair. She sits up and starts drying her hair, flattening the hair between layers of the towel and pulling it down to the end. "Sit down, David," she says. "I'll be dry in a minute. Then we can go inside."

I sit and watch her; the cat comes over and starts rubbing on my leg. I reach down to pet her, and she rubs her head against my hand. She's purring. She enjoys what I'm doing, but then she seems to get bored and goes off into the house. "This isn't a good idea at all, Monica," I say.

She stops drying her hair and holds the towel up by a corner in front of her. "Come dry my back, David?"

I begin to stand, but hesitate. In the light from the pool her skin is darker, and its dampness shines like polished marble. "I haven't been near a woman in months, Monica. I think I'm afraid of you."

"Are you worried that someone will accuse you of sleeping with a student to change a grade, David? Do you think this is about a silly grade?"

I don't want to admit my thoughts; Monica should have been an "A" student, but her attendance was spotty during the last two months of the semester. "No, of course not," I say. "I'm just nervous is all. You're a lot younger than I am." She holds the towel against her chest, patting herself dry, but the warm air has nearly done the job for her. "I'm just confused, is all," I say.

She stands and holds out her hand. "Don't be. Let's go inside." She leads me into the house, and inside the door I stop long enough to turn off the pool lights.

I'm nervous when we get to the bedroom; Monica turns off the lights and turns down the sheets I placed so carefully on the bed, and then I lie down while she undresses me. When she guides me into her I seem inept, like a frightened teenager, but Monica knows what to do. Afterwards, when Monica is asleep, I lie awake listening to her, and to the cat playing with the catnip mouse I bought after I got her from the shelter. Monica stirs, and I feel her looking at me in the darkness. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

I kiss her forehead in much the same way I would kiss my daughter. "It was nice," I say.

She puts her arms around me and draws me close. "You're a nice person, David. I like you a lot." She burrows her head into my chest and scratches my back lightly with her nails. I try to remember if they are polished or plain. "And don't worry about my grade in your class," she says. "If you want to change it that's okay."

We lie there until she goes to sleep, and in the early morning I

dangling her legs in the water. She looks up and says, "The steaks smell good. I'm starved." She stands, and I see that water runs down in droplets off her calves, to her ankles, to the tops of her feet. She sees me looking. "It was so warm, and the water felt so good. You don't mind, do you?"

She is truly a beautiful girl. In class she was always quiet, but when I asked questions she was quick with answers. "Not a bit. I mean, not at all. That's why the pool is here."

"Let's eat," she says.

There is a small picnic table under the awning by the back door, and we sit there to eat. I turn on the bug zapper and it glows blue, begins almost immediately to snap and pop with the tiny gnats and mites which fly into its grill. As we eat our salads I have a momentary fantasy about being a bug drawn into the machine, and I wonder whether they feel pain. While I think this I look up at Monica sitting there across from me, her jaws working gently on lettuce and tomato and radishes. "I'll get the steaks," I say.

The grill has been off during salad, but the meat is still hot, and I serve the small t-bones on paper plates. Monica cuts off a small piece and holds it on the fork in front of her lips, purses them, and blows on the meat, as if blowing a kiss, then puts the piece in her mouth and chews with her eyes closed. "It's perfect," she says. The expression on her face says this is so. She cuts more and eats, and we don't talk, we just eat and sip wine and look up at each other occasionally.

I finish my steak first. "Would you like something else? I could run down to the store and get some pie or ice cream." She is just finishing, dabbing at her lips with a paper napkin. "I'm not prepared so well. I'm not used to company."

She stands and begins stacking up the paper plates. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable," she says. "I'll go do the dishes." She giggles. "Pour us a glass of wine. Sit down and relax. I'm not running off."

I start to protest, but she touches my shoulder and nudges me in the direction of the lounge chairs. When she's gone I pour wine and leave her glass on the table. I sit down and watch the water. The outdoor lights have come on, and they glow softly. Insects flit in and out of the light like tracer bullets in a war movie. The lights are small, more for atmosphere than illumination, I suppose. They highlight the pebbles imbedded in the concrete around the pool, but then the lights go off, leaving only the glow of the pool's underwater lights. I start to rise, but Monica comes out and gets the glass of wine from the table. She sits in the lounge next to me. She tilts her glass back and takes a long sip. "I found the light switch," she says. "I always liked the way a pool shines at night."

"I sit out here sometimes and watch the water. It's very peaceful," I say. There are a few small, white clouds moving in from the east, and I wonder if it's going to rain. "I hoped my daughter Mandy and her friends would come out and use the pool."

"I know," she says. I look at her. "You mentioned that before, David."

"Yes." As I answer I have a momentary thought of Mandy and her friends from the high school splashing in the water of the pool, while her mother and I sit back and watch them, then we get up to serve sodas and sandwiches. "I'm not thinking too well lately," I say. "Or maybe it's just the wine."

She stretches, her arms extended fully like a cat's legs when it's getting up from a nap, and the cotton blouse rides back up over her shoulders, then goes back into position when her arms are down. "I feel . . . delicious," she says. "The water felt really good earlier. I'd love a swim."

I look at the water. The surface is calm, broken only by the slight breeze blowing over the wooden privacy fence. "It's too bad you don't have a suit," I say. "And besides, you should never swim on a full stomach."

"I wouldn't worry, David. You're here."

Before I can answer, she's standing up, and she walks to the edge of the pool. "You keep the pool really clean," she says. "It's a lot of work, isn't it?"

"I suppose," I say. "I keep it clean in case my daughter wants to come by and swim."

Her shoes, white docksiders, are already off and lying by her chair; she dips one foot into the water, swishing it back and forth, and hugs herself, as if she's cold. She looks back toward me. "It feels wonderful," she says. She turns around again and stands for a moment moving her foot back and forth in the water.

"You could come here and use the pool this summer," I say.

"Maybe I'll do that," she says. "If you think it's okay, that is." She at me again and smiles, then she reaches down and unbuttons her cutoffs and pushes them down and steps out of them. She throws them toward me, and they land on the far side of the chair she's been using. I sit and watch, unable to say anything as she pulls the blouse over her head and throws it at me. She sits on the edge of the pool with her legs in the water and pulls off her blue panties, then she

the corkscrew.

"Burgundy doesn't need to be too cool," I say. "But it's so warm outside it wouldn't hurt to put it on top of the ice."

"You've got beer, too," she says when she kneels down to put the wine away. Her legs are strong and well-shaped. She's a beautiful girl.

"Yeah. The beer. I didn't know what you'd like, and then I forgot it was here until I got the steaks out."

She stands up and looks at me. "You're not going to try getting me drunk, are you, David?" She must understand from my return look that this is not the case, because then she winks and says, "I was just kidding. You wouldn't do something like that, would you?"

"No," I say, but if the regents found out about Monica's visit, this would be the first thing on their minds. "I just figured you're used to beer at parties and things," I tell her. The steaks are beginning to sizzle, and this gives me the opportunity to check them with the long-tined fork.

She stands, and I see that water runs down in droplets off her calves, to her ankles, to the tops of her feet. She sees me looking.

"Yeah, beer's okay, but wine's sort of . . . more sophisticated, somehow."

"I like wine, but I don't drink much of it. It's for company." The two bottles have been here for over two months; I opened the Zinfandel two weeks ago and drank it with a microwave dinner. "The white's been opened for a while," I say. "How is it?"

She sits on the lounge chair again. "I wouldn't know if it's good or not, really. I don't drink it too often."

"The steaks will be ready in a little bit," I say. "If you'll watch them for just a minute I'll go get the salad. Unless you'd like to eat inside, that is."

"It's nice out here. Let's stay."

Inside I get the salad bowl and set it on the kitchen counter. The cat jumps up and puts her nose to the plastic wrap covering the top, and I say "No, kitty. No, Scarlett," and the cat looks at me and meows. I get her some dry food from the cabinet above the sink and pour some into her bowl. She jumps down and sniffs at the food, then looks up at me and opens her mouth as if she's going to say something, but she doesn't. The phone rings, and it startles me. I get the wall phone and answer, "Lear residence."

"Daddy? I just wanted to call and ask if everything was okay."

"Sure, baby. Things are fine. Why should you worry?" I feel good to think she's concerned about me, but her tone makes me feel like a child.

"I was just wondering," she says. There's another voice on her end, in the background, and she says something soft which I don't catch. "I met your friend when I was there a little while ago. She's kind of young, isn't she?"

"She's not a student, if that's what you're thinking," I say. I am not lying to her. Monica is an ex-student now. "We're just about to have dinner, in fact." I realize I'm not making much sense, but I don't want my daughter talking to me right now. "I thought you and Kevin had a date tonight. What happened?" I ask.

"We're here at the house. Mother offered to cook dinner, and then we're going to play Monopoly or something."

"That's good. In fact, if I don't get outside and check the steaks we'll have to go out to eat, so I'd better let you get back to what you were doing." The cat has wandered off somewhere, and I want to go ahead and get the salad outside.

"Be careful, Daddy."

"I will, baby. Tell your mother hello for me."

"She knows I called you. She doesn't hate you, you know?" There's a plaintive quality to her voice when she says this, and I am sorry all over for not being with them. I want to apologize somehow, but I do not know how. For the last two years of my marriage I had trouble communicating with my wife, and Mandy was trapped in the position of mediator and messenger, always having to translate for us.

"I'm glad you told her. I don't want you to have to feel guilty about being in touch with me." I think she's crying, but maybe it's just something in the line. "And if you want to come out here with your friends or anything," I say, "you can use the pool for a party or something."

"I'd like that, Daddy. Take care, huh? Please?"

"I will." I make a kissing noise into the receiver, only it comes out like a slurp. "Bye, honey," I say, and the line goes dead. I hang up before the dial tone starts and stack paper plates and salad dressing on a tray with the bowl of salad.

When I get outside, Monica is sitting on the edge of the pool

Zinfandel, which I remove and open. I take two glasses and return to the living room. Monica has found a piece of string and is trying to get the cat's attention. When I walk in Monica looks up at me and the cat strikes with a forepaw. Scarlett the cat catches the string and runs away to hide behind the couch. "Ouch," Monica says. A bright drop of blood grows on her forefinger. "She got me," Monica says and puts the finger in her mouth and sucks hard on it.

The girl is not seriously hurt, but while I search the bathroom for disinfectant and bandages I wonder whether the cut can get infected and worry about my homeowner's liability coverage. In the living room again with Band-Aids and peroxide and a tube of something which is advertised to speed healing of small wounds, I attempt to administer first aid, but do a poor job it; I ruin one bandage when the tape falls across the gauze pad and cannot be removed. "Let me do this," Monica says, "and you can get me a glass of wine." I pour the wine into glasses. "It'll kill the pain," she says, and smiles.

I give her a glass. Her finger shows a neat pink band of sterilized plastic. "I'm sorry about the cat. She hasn't gotten used to people yet." Monica sips her wine, the bandaged finger sticking out like a rebuke.

"Don't worry. We have six cats at home, and sometimes they do these things." She shifts the glass to her uninjured hand and holds the finger up to look at it. "They usually don't mean anything by it."

"Okay. If you're not worried, that is." I, of course, am worried. I worry about her getting an infection, about a lawsuit over the infection, about the regents discovering that a forty year-old professor has invited a nineteen-year-old female student to his home for dinner and wine. I worry about my daughter, who is just two years younger. Soon she will be living away from home, and the world is full of dangers which I can warn her about.

"So do I get a guided tour of the house?" Monica asks. She stands up and holds the wineglass close against her chest and begins to look around the room.

"There's not much to see. It's a small house." The house is a long-term lease from a friend in the English Department who has moved to Africa, where he is teaching Kenyan students about James Joyce and William Faulkner. He still makes payments on the house, and I reimburse him each month. People have asked why I do not go ahead and buy the house, but I cannot tell them the answer. Perhaps I am looking for something else, perhaps not. I do not know, but my problem may be that buying a house would be an admission of failure in my marriage. I do not know. "I thought we could barbecue some steaks for dinner," I say.

"Neat. Lead on."

We go out into the backyard, where I have already prepared the gas grill and have the steaks in an ice chest next to the grill. The steaks are marinating in teriyaki sauce and a little garlic. "I didn't tell you about the pool, did I?" I ask.

She seems impressed by the pool. She goes to a lounge chair and sits on the edge sipping her wine. "No, you didn't. If I'd known, I could have brought a suit." She is pretty, with long red hair tied at the back in a loose ponytail, and her eyes are green, much like the cat's.

"I thought my daughter could have friends over," I say. I turn away from her and open the grill. "How do you like your steak?"

"Medium-well, I guess. I'm not much into meat."

I turn back to her. "We could go out, if you like. Or there's salad. Lots of salad. A big bowl."

She laughs and shakes her head. "I live in the dorm, and the meat there is soybean. It's really gross. I love steak." She stands up. "Mind if I get another glass of wine?" She holds the glass out; it's nearly empty.

"Sure, it's in the refrigerator."

She starts toward the sliding door, then stops and turns. "Would you like something?" Her cutoffs are short, and in the late-afternoon light I can see very fine reddish-blond hairs on her thighs glowing like tiny fires.

"No." I hold up my glass, which I've barely touched. "There's a bottle of something in the cabinet under the sink." She stands there looking at me. "I think the corkscrew is in the silverware drawer," I say.

"Okay," she says, and leaves into the house.

The grill is easy to use. Turn on the gas and get the heavy cast-iron grill part hot, then put on the steaks. But for some reason tonight it won't start. I use up half a box of matches before I realize the gas is barely on, so I reach down and open the valve on the tank a little further. This cures the problem, and when Monica gets back the fire is started and I'm getting the steaks out of the plastic container in the ice chest. Below the ice are twelve cans of beer which I bought earlier in the day.

"Why don't I put this on ice and then we won't have to go inside until it's time to eat," she says. She's got a bottle of Burgundy and

through the student papers on the desk; the forms I must sign are under an essay by Monica Dodd, a sophomore in one of my just completed spring classes. I look at the paper, which is about George Washington's expense accounts. I sign the form which claims, certifies, declares, states that I love my daughter. I sign in triplicate for the academic advisement office, the business office, the dean's office, then fold the papers lengthwise and walk back to my daughter in the living room.

The cat is sitting in Mandy's lap when I return, and Mandy is scratching the cat's ears. "Nice kitty," Mandy says, though I am not sure whether she is addressing me or the cat. "How long have you had her?"

"A couple of weeks," I say. "She was an orphan, I think. I got her at the animal shelter." They have many cats there of all kinds, I want to tell my daughter, and she can have one if she wants. I will take her there to pick out a cat.

I worry … about the regents discovering that a forty-year-old professor has invited a nineteen-year-old female student to his home for dinner and wine.

"She's sweet," Mandy says. The cat looks up at her and smiles. "What's her name?"

"Name? I haven't given her a name yet," I say. "What do you think?"

"Scarlett. Like Scarlett O'Hara." She rubs the cat's head and makes kissing noises. "How do you like that for a name, Scarlett-kitty?"

The cat doesn't seem to care one way or another, so I say, "That's a good name. It fits her personality to a T. Yes, to a T." I hope the cat hasn't gotten used to Murphy yet, but it is my daughter's wish that the cat be called Scarlett.

I have the papers still; Mandy reaches over and takes them. "I've got to go, Daddy. Kevin's taking me to a movie tonight and I have to get ready." She stands up and the cat jumps down. Mandy brushes black cat hair off her white cotton dress. "I'll see you in a few days. Maybe at school, huh?"

"It's too late to start the summer session," I say. I want her to stay and talk to me, my only child who is growing up too fast for me to bear.

"I was going to be over there for the Earlybird orientation next week. And besides, I can drop in and see you at the office, can't I? Just because I want to?"

I hadn't thought of this, how she could just want to see me, and I am glad. "Sure," I say. She reaches out to give me a hug, then kisses me on the cheek. I ask, "Do you need any money? For clothes or anything?" It seems a silly gesture, superficial somehow, but it is all I can offer her except my love, and she has that.

"No, but thanks anyhow. Mom and I went out three times in the last couple of weeks and bought clothes. All I'm going to need is books, and Mom says I could ask you about those."

"Certainly," I say. Books. I want to be a daily part of her life again, but all I can do is buy books. "Well," I say.

"Well," she says, and then she is gone. The cat tries to follow her out, but I stop her by putting my foot out, and she shies away from the foot and goes back to her food dish in the kitchen. I hear the crunching of the hard dry food. She is a good cat; I should be better to her.

Just as I'm hearing the crunching from the kitchen and the whine of Mandy's car leaving, the little foreign sports car I bought for her last year, there is a knock at the door, and I am standing right there, so I open the door and there is Monica Dodd, sophomore. "Hello, Dr. Lear," she says. "I hope I'm not too early, but you said seven-ish."

She is a pretty girl, and while I am not in the habit of inviting students, especially pretty female students, into my home, I did invite her here for dinner. She did well in my class, except for missing classes on Fridays when the sun was bright and the weather warm. Younger students will go out and socialize on Fridays, beginning the weekend early. This was Monica's problem, her only one, scholastically speaking. I hold the door for her. "I'm glad you could make it," I say. "Did you have any trouble finding the house?"

"You gave good directions. No problem at all." She is wearing tight, very short cutoff blue jeans and a peasant-style cotton top much like the top of the dress which my daughter was wearing. "I met your daughter on my way in," Monica says. "Does she go to college?"

"Would you like something to drink?" I ask. "She's starting in the fall," I say.

"Do you have some white wine? I love white wine."

I go into the kitchen and open the refrigerator and push aside mayonnaise and the pot of soup I cooked a few days ago. Lying on its side against the back wall on the top shelf is part of a bottle of

Pool Night

IT'S LATE AFTERNOON, I'm waiting for the girl to arrive, and the cat is helping me make up the bed. The bed is too close to the wall and to the dresser at the foot, so when I need to go around it to stretch the fitted sheet up to the head I have to bend over the bed with my back to the dresser to avoid the windowsill next to the dresser. The cat watches until I'm balanced in this somewhat uncomfortable position, not quite leaning over enough to fall forward onto the bed, and then she jumps on near the foot, dead center, holding the sheet down to the mattress.

When I pull on the corner of the sheet she tries to catch the wrinkles as they float away from her like waves. This action of hers, this lying on the bed, will leave a wrinkled place on the sheet which will stay where she is now; I want the sheet to be completely, perfectly straight, flat, the Navaho pattern laid out as precisely as if it were a sand painting. I worry about the wrinkled spot even though another sheet and a comforter will go over the sheet.

I say "Shoo" to the cat, whose name is Murphy, and she looks up at me and meows. She's smiling, I think. I say it louder and make a shooing motion with the backs of my hands toward her, and she explodes off the bed and out of the room; I decide I was foolish to arrange the furniture like this, and of the two bedrooms this is the smaller, and why didn't I go ahead and set up the larger as a bedroom instead of as a combination library and office?

She doesn't bother me again, and I hear her in the hallway playing with her gray catnip mouse; the bell on its tail tinkles, and when the doorbell rings I stand there by the bed and wonder how she got the little round bell to sound so loudly and rapidly. The confusion passes, and I go to the door of the house which I rented when my wife and I divorced. As I walk to the door I imagine the house as it must look from an airplane: the small house with a pool in the back taking up the entire backyard and the tall wooden privacy fence around the pool; the front yard stretching out to the blacktop road in front; the driveway leading down to the road and the two large mimosa trees in the yard, one on either side of a cast-iron loveseat painted red.

At the door is my daughter Mandy. The afternoon sun frames her in the doorway, and when I stand back from the door to let her in I can see the outline of her body through the light cotton dress she wears. "Hi, Daddy," she says, and I stand for a second looking at her before answering.

"Hey, baby," I say, and she lets me hug her and kiss her on the crown of her head; her hair is long enough to reach her slender hips. "I didn't expect to see you today." When I say this she looks confused until I add, "But it's always good to have you visit," and then she smiles and goes over to the sofa to sit down. Her shoulders are tanned and lightly freckled. I worry about her, that she is too beautiful, that some man will hurt her, that she is sexually active already. Mandy is seventeen, almost eighteen, a young woman just graduated from high school and taking the summer off before college in the fall.

"Are you okay, Daddy? You look like you've got something on your mind."

"I was fixing up the house a little. I have company coming tonight." I sit down in the comfortable armchair which sits at an angle to the sofa.

She leans forward with her hands on her knees and the neckline of her dress falls open a bit, and I can see the upper swell of her breasts. "Hot date, huh?" she says, and I wonder if it's appropriate for me as her father to mention that I think she should be wearing a bra under such a sheer dress. Her mother takes care of her, I think, and then I feel better. No less protective, just less worried.

"Yes. A date," I say. "She'll be here in a little while."

"Good for you. I'm glad you're trying to have a social life." She looks at me and smiles. "Mom and I were afraid you'd lock yourself up out here and never do anything."

When she says this I think how much I love her and her mother and wish we could have stayed together. "What brings you all the way out here?" I ask. "Just want to see your dad?"

"Yeah, mostly. And to give you a message from Mom. She says you still need to sign those papers for me to get into school."

I am a history professor at a small university. It is an exclusive place, very expensive. They allow the children of tenured faculty to attend school for half tuition, and I have to sign a paper which states, among other things, that this is my daughter, and yes, that I love her, that I claim her as my own. "I haven't signed them, but I will, and you can take them with you," I say. I have forgotten about the papers, as if signing them is an avowal that I have wondered about the heritage of this beautiful young woman or ever doubted my love for her. "I'll get them for you," I say.

I go back to the larger of the two bedrooms and rummage

beard stubbling his chin, and rolled the window slowly down. His good hand was a contorted, tremulous claw.

"Don't look so grim," he said.

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Guess you can look how you like, anyway."

She turned her nose at the reek. "Are they taking you to jail?"

"Could be," he said, and his sallow eyes rolled in her father's direction. "Ask the lawyer. I guess some guys are born lucky and the others have to shut up and do their best. Your grandpa trusted me with his will, but maybe that wasn't so smart. He never trusted me with much else."

His face was flushed in a strange mix of elation and wonder and consuming sadness. It seemed suddenly that there was so much she didn't know about her own family, about the people she'd been seeing all her life, and she felt very small and bewildered as her grandpa must have felt in that final moment before spurring his horse on into oblivion.

The squad car began to back away slowly, crackling snow as it maneuvered the driveway.

"Honey," her father said from behind.

But she launched after the car in a mad sprint and called out to her uncle in a furious voice, "Uncle Bud, it's nowhere! It's nothing out there at all!" and Uncle Bud leaned his head out the window and grinned, blunt-toothed, in a look she would never forget all the days of her life. "So what did you expect?" he said. "That's buffalo country."

She watched the window go up and the cruiser make a U-turn in the road. The lights came on as it sped off toward town, growing smaller on the horizon, a single fleeting object drawing upon itself like the last coiling ember in her grandpa's fireplace.

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and thin like worn newspaper, her eyes clouded and squinting in the dizzying onslaught of the storm. The mare whinnied and lurched nervously beneath her. She held the reins tight and drove the cattle with frequent hollers, battling their instinct to stop and huddle. She felt the rim of her ears so brittle that a misplaced finger might crack them into slivers. Her breathing was shallow and asthmatic. All at once the old mare stopped, bowing her long head, and Nina kicked her hard about the flank. She was confused and suddenly afraid, feeling the spinning cloud of snow grow thick about her and the wind coming up hard and knowing there was still a good thirty minutes to familiar fences, and this fear made her gut rumble and her heart hammer and her eyes water, and the damn mare standing there like a dumb post shivering and steaming until she jerked the reins with all her might and aimed the edge of her bootsole savagely into an arched rib bone. The mare raised her head and lifted a scrawny leg in the air. A thunderous vibration was rising from somewhere, seemingly far off and dim, and the very earth trembled with its resonance. Was it thunder? Thunder in a blizzard? Had she ever heard of that before? And could she trust these half deaf ears which more often than not held remembered sound between their grizzled walls, fragments of echoed years? The mare's hoof crunched into deep snow and then Nina lifted her head, blinking into the whiteness, thinking she was hallucinating, because the light that suddenly enveloped her was too bright to be real, too holy, and she had no sooner begun to discredit it than she was lost in it, swimming in one breathless moment that would never end.

She opened her eyes. She felt the warm and brittle horse hair in her hands, the thick pulsing neck. To the east and west the oily tracks lay desolate and still like prehistoric bones, and it struck her in a moment of simplest horror that her grandpa was not to be found; that he had vanished altogether from the earth. She felt a chill run all through her. Looking out over the endless distance it occurred to her that this might be death. Her clenched lips drew into a bloodless slit. She bent and held the mare's neck tightly in her hands, listening for the heartbeat and the rushing blood, sucking in the heat and the musty horse-odor.

In a rush she thought of Uncle Bud. She wanted to confront him now, to ask where her grandpa was, where he had gone. She spun the old mare and kicked hard against her heavy flank, starting her to a dangerous trot, and looked off to where her grandpa's house lay pasted flat against the skyline. That was when she heard the police car rushing in from town and bleating like a lost calf.

The mare moved with a surreal slowness, stepping carefully in the snow until she became confident of her footing, while Nina stood in the saddle trying to see what was happening. As she drew nearer and could just make out the black top of Uncle Bud's cab, she heard a strange voice waft briefly in the thin air. Her breathing quickened and the heat rose in her face. The mare pressed forward into the wind.

Soon figures became visible around the front porch. Her father was standing alongside two officers dressed in brown slacks with wide oval hats on their heads. She could not see Uncle Bud.

"Hey!" she called out. She leapt off the horse's back and tumbled through the snow.

Her father turned and watched her approach, then looked away at the porch stairs where the two officers had knelt. When she broke into the open yard she saw the officers helping Uncle Bud to his feet, and he was laughing loudly while he clutched his right arm with a big meaty hand.

"Jesus," he was saying to one of the officers, his voice broken by convulsive guffaws. "You figure a guy would take care. You figure he ought to know better."

She caught sight of his gun, just a few feet away on the ice-slick steps.

"Just my friggin luck. Is my arm broke?" He looked over at her and stopped rigid all at once. His bibulous eyes throbbed. "Hey sweetheart, you missed the show."

The officers were leading him to the squad car, his arm splayed wide at the elbow. She wanted to rush over and tell him that she was afraid grandpa might be someplace awful, blind and alone, but suddenly he was in the back seat of the cruiser and the officers were busy babytalking him and giving first aid, so she shut up and didn't say anything at all.

Her father came over and put an arm over her shoulder. She let it lie there coldly.

"Honey," he said, "your uncle's had an accident. He isn't well. They're going to take him to the doctor's."

She broke from him and ran to the car. One of the officers, a young man with sharp white cheekbones, had slid around to the driver's side and was cranking the engine while he talked loudly on his radio. The other was settling in beside Uncle Bud looking miserable and worried. As she came abreast of the window, Uncle Bud bent over and vomited in his lap. Then he looked up, a pinkish

hardwood chair, stooping every now and then to sip at a stale smelling beer.

"Honest," Uncle Bud said. "He talked about you when I'd stop off between hauls. He said you had spirit in you and wouldn't be nothing but trouble for your folks. Said you were a regular smartass."

Uncle Bud walked to the coffee table and picked up a half empty bottle, leaning painfully as though his lower back were sore. He took a swig and held it out to her. She wrapped her hand around the sticky neck and stared into the shit-colored liquid as through the eye of a microscope. Then she raised the bottle and let a trickle of the rank stuff slide onto her tongue.

"Uugh," she squealed. "It burns."

Uncle Bud laughed and took the bottle back. "One day you'll like it," he said. "I bought my first bottle when I left home for good. That was a long time ago."

She looked up at him. "What are you going to do?"

He ran the tip of his boot against the floorboards as if he were rooting for something. "Hell, I don't know. Maybe I should run for it. What do you think?"

"Yeah!" Nina said. "I'll throw them in the wrong direction. You can be an outlaw."

Uncle Bud was looking at the floor. He seemed remote and very sad, very tired. "Anyway, I don't feel like it. Guess I deserve what I get. I just wanna sit here with you. Hell, it gets so lonely at times I think—well never mind what I think."

He came over and sat on the couch. The dark bottle balanced on a broad thigh and reflected the swirling pattern of the flames. The weight of his body sunk in the couch and she slid down the crater toward his lap.

She leaned her head against his arm and looked up at him.

"Do you think he's buried out there?" she said.

"Aw, I don't know."

She jumped up with her back to the fire and her eyes lit red and dancing. "I'm gonna go and see," she said.

Uncle Bud looked as if he would protest, but then he only shrugged and tossed his bottle into the crackling fire.

She ran to the barn and swung open the door. Inside it was cold and dank, smelling of sweat and dung, hay and rotten leather, and the three roans yet to be sold or shot stood huddled together in a pen, snorting steam into the light-pierced air. She opened the gate and coaxed the oldest, a spotted mare tame as a house cat, into the bridle, the huge awkward saddle, leading her slowly into the sharp wind and bright low-hanging sun. Once outside she had to climb an old stool to get on top of the mare. In mid-swing she realized he must have needed it as well, kept it apologetically alongside the splintered woodpile as though to be broken and burned, and she felt a confused sadness throb all through her bones. She landed crooked, clung tight with her legs and took the heavy neck in her gloved hands. She spurred the mare into a reluctant trot.

"Ask the lawyer. I guess some guys are born lucky and the others have to shut up and do their best."

The snow crunched and the mare complained and slowed to a staggering pace. In her impatience Nina kicked against the warm flank but the old mare would not be bullied. Nina sat back and let her legs go limp, remembering how she used to think she'd make a fine rodeo queen one day. That was before the boarding school, before unlearning what was unladylike, when riding carried no implications or incriminations. She looked back and saw the house falling away, the black cab sinking into the yard, and pulled her jacket tight around her neck. Against her legs the flesh pulsed and shuddered and ropes of coiled muscle swelled outwards. She rode south toward the train tracks, blinking in the sun's ice-white glare.

The hour seemed to freeze dead. The wind was kicking up waves of dusty snow that worked under her collar and inside her sleeves. Fragments lodged under her eyelid and burned. In some places the snow was too deep and she had to back the old mare out and cut a fresh angle, looking to the distant house for bearings, trying instinctively to follow the cow path's buried course. When she came finally upon the tracks—all black and slick with ice coating, concealed behind a long winding drift—she was startled to find them so close. All the way to the western horizon they slashed a field of unbroken whiteness like lines drawn in ink upon a fresh sheet of paper. There was no interruption in the pattern, nothing to separate one quarter-mile section from another. When she faced east it was the same: an endless monotony of black on white, unerringly straight, stabbing into the sprawling plains which were like a cloud-washed sky she rode over, a sky which extended forever and contained no sign of life or hope.

She shut her eyes and tried to imagine what it was like for him in those final moments. Her bones were old and bent, her skin pale

face against the cool window to watch it ramble across the snowy plain, already distant and dwindling smaller and smaller but never vanishing, never lost. Even when the churchtop rose up against the iceblue skyline she could see it far off drifting like a tuft of prairie smoke, like a cloud bearing thunder and hail.

The cab of Uncle Bud's rig was sitting in front of the house at a crooked angle and all about the yard nothing scampered or crawled or slithered. There were no hawks in the sky. She saw her father's face go dark and his lips draw tight. He let up on the gas and they drove slowly into the yard, crunching snow beneath the worn radials. He pulled up next to the trailerless cab and cut the engine.

The storm door opened and Uncle Bud came out and stood on the porch. Her father got out of the car and she followed eagerly, sensing a taut wire of tension balanced in the air between them.

"What are you doing here?" her father said. He leaned against the steaming hood and made no move toward the house.

"I can see to the place if I have a mind."

"I guess there's no law against it."

"No there's not," Uncle Bud said. His hair was hanging loose about his shoulders and his cheeks looked red and swollen. "It's somebody needs to look after the place."

"I guess so," her father said.

There was a long silence and the two men eyed each other up and down. They didn't look like brothers. Not even distant cousins. It seemed as though they were strangers meeting for the very first time and not liking it one bit.

Her father took a few steps forward.

"Don't you think that maybe I ought to handle dad's affairs from now on?"

Uncle Bud growled. "I think you've done enough handling of things."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean you've been handling the old man so long it looks like he could scarcely stand on his own. Handled college out of him, the only one to do that. Handled a down payment on your mortgage when I was living in motels. Bet you would have liked to handle him some more though. Maybe have sweet talked him into splitting things sixty-forty."

"That's a damn common thing to say," her father said, his voice high like a schoolteacher's.

Uncle Bud smiled and his crooked teeth stood out like bits of frozen snow. He looked relaxed and drunk. He was not wearing a jacket and his belly hung impressively over his worn leather belt and faded jeans. His eyes spun with untellable feelings.

"I guess I'm common enough," he said slowly. "Common as salt. But I'm still executor of the will, and you're not taking that from me unless you want to shoot for it."

He was suddenly cradling a large Colt revolver loosely in his fat hand. Her father went all stiff. His face flushing red. The little muscles on the side of his face beginning to tick.

"I'm getting the sheriff," he said officially. He spun around and opened the driver door. "Get in the car, Nina."

Uncle Bud stepped forward and waved listlessly with the gun. "Let her stay and wait. I wanna have a couple words with her before you go and lock me up."

"Yes," Nina said. "Let me stay. I want to stay."

Her father's face turned from red to ash. He looked from Nina to Uncle Bud and back again. "Get in the car," he said.

"No," Nina shrilled. "I want to see the house again. I'm staying, anyway."

She walked briskly up the porch stairs and into the house. The sudden warmth of the front hall lit a fever all through her face and hands. Outside she heard Uncle Bud milling on the porch and the Pinto starting up with a violent wheeze. She heard the wheels spinning and the reverse gear rise to a shrill whine. Then she saw the door handle turn; it opened and Uncle Bud stepped inside.

In the living room a fire was burning. She walked in and sat on the flowered couch and let rhythmic tides of heat lap at her skinny legs. Uncle Bud came in and stood leaning against the mantle. The snow on his boots melted slowly into a dark puddle on the floor. He still had the Colt revolver in his hand but he held it curiously as if it were something he'd found in the brush and couldn't quite place.

"Well," he said. "Guess I'm a dumbfuck, acting to your father like that."

"I don't care," Nina said.

Uncle Bud looked out the window. "Cold out there."

"You think he minds?"

"He's used to it."

"I mean grandpa."

"Oh. I expect he don't much care anymore, cold or no cold, fire or no fire. Though he'd be glad to see you warming here. He loved you best of all, you know."

Nina stopped kicking her legs out at the fire. She realized all of a sudden that she didn't even know the man and hadn't cried for him and never would. He seemed altogether remote and unknowable, a fuzzy spot in her mind, a blank and faceless form silent in his

She sat nearby and drank hot chocolate and listened to an argument unfold. She didn't know what it was about, but when her father began yelling, really yelling up a storm so that his face was bright red and his words a shrill and chaotic slur, she felt her chest go tight and left the room. It had something to do with Uncle Bud being executor of the will because he was older, and he had already used some of the money to fix his truck and had been in jail one night after drinking himself senseless. She found it all hard to believe.

That evening a second storm buried them in their house and it took three days to dig out. It was a blizzard, the kind that would kill you if you weren't careful, the kind that carried with it stories of people freezing to death less than ten feet from home, lost in the blinding swirl, good as a hundred miles away. Nina sat trapped in her room feeling the hours stagnate. She read a picture book about Africa which seemed strange and impossible, filled with colorful animals and sun-withered trees and tribal women smiling and dancing in a circle, shaking hands at the cerulean sky. When her father came in and asked if she would go with him to see how the old farm was holding up, she was bored enough that she said yes.

They drove out of the city over the crusted blacktop. Out in the country the road turned a strange sunblasted color which was like the clay of ancient adobes. She sat in the front seat and played with the radio until her father grew annoyed and slapped at her hand. Then she sat still and watched the level snow-buried land whip by. She wondered how the Indians had survived out there with no sticky tar roofs or hot water or gas heaters. How they could fend off such a storm with only a patchwork of buffalo skin and prayers to the powers of the West.

"Your mother spoke to me last night," her father said suddenly.

There was a silence.

"That's nice," Nina said, and laughed morosely.

Her father took his eyes from the road and glared at her. "She's concerned about your attitude. Your grades came in. She's concerned, that's all."

"So how'd I do?"

"They are not adequate. They are substandard."

"Oh."

"Sister Federica says she doesn't understand. She says you sit in your seat making faces and won't say anything."

"She doesn't like me is all. She hates me. I made her look bad because I showed that Virginia doesn't border Georgia in front of the whole class. That's why."

Her father reached into the glove compartment and searched for his sunglasses. He pulled them out and covered his eyes in a mirrored glaze. As he set them crooked on the bridge of his nose a look of sudden confusion washed over his pinched face. Nina sighted the path of his eyes and saw what it was. A dark form stood far off in the center of the road like a brown tufted wall, a gate of hair shut against trespassers, and Nina squinted her eyes in the bright sun and raised her curled hand to shade them.

Nina lifted her head, blinking into the whiteness, thinking she was hallucinating, because the light that suddenly enveloped her was too bright to be real, too holy...

"A buffalo," she said.

Her father whispered a curse. It seemed impossible. Alone on that wide expanse of nowhere it stood with head bowed and blunt horns slanting, swishing its tail with calm deliberation against a motionless flank. As they drew close a single olive-like eye flared wide, swelling bigger and bigger until it was like a dark well in which they could fall forever and never reach bottom.

They stopped a good distance short of the buffalo and her father honked the horn. The buffalo turned its great head slowly and steam snaked upward from the long prow-like nose. It stamped its delicate hooves and let out a snarl.

"Stupid thing," her father said. "Where the hell did it come from?" He squeezed his palm against the horn and revved the engine. "Goddamn you! Get out of the road!"

The buffalo snapped its head in terror and for a dreadful moment Nina thought it would rush the car. She braced her feet against the floor and slid toward the space beneath the dashboard. Instead it stamped its hooves and turned one way and the next as if perplexed about where on that vast and uniform plain it ought to run; its eye seemed to swell to the size of a baseball and then all at once it bolted in a fury of snow and snarls and steam, heading toward distant cloud banks, a dark receding shadow on the land.

"Praise Jesus," her father said. He brought the Pinto slowly up to high gear and shook his head in disgust. The buffalo had made him forget all about her grades and Nina was relieved, pressing her

cardboard looked like so much spattered blood: LAST CHANCE SALE. DEAL NOW OR FOREVER HOLD YOUR PEACE.

Nina laughed.

"That's not funny," her mother said and looked at her sternly, which made Nina laugh again.

They parked in front of the church and got out of the car. Already a small group of relations were gathered inside the church and a single bundled man had shuffled out to wave a meaty hand in the air.

"Hi Uncle Bud," Nina called. She ran up and gave him a hug. He was the only relative she cared about—the rest could go to hell.

"My pretty girl," Uncle Bud smiled, his fleshy face red with cold and razor rash and uneasiness. "How've you been getting along?"

"Rotten," she said.

"Oh well," he shrugged, and said hello to her father. The usual stiffness passed between them. Uncle Bud was the older brother and he drove a meat truck. He talked about the countless states he'd been to as if it were all the same to him and he'd just as soon sit tight on the farm as in the cab of a steaming, hurtling rig. But she knew he only did that to make her feel better about being stuck in school all year long.

They went inside and all the adults passed around handshakes and secret looks. A few other kids were there but she thought they acted stupid and wouldn't talk to them. She also thought her mother talked too loud. She sat in a corner and waited for Uncle Bud to come and talk with her. Finally he did, ambling on stiff legs, toting a soup-pot belly beneath a striped dress shirt, smelling of hastily bought cologne and ancient whiskey.

He sat down beside her and sighed as if exhausted from a strenuous physical effort. "Well, how about it. All the family in one room. Guess that's one thing not to be sorry for."

Nina looked at him. "What's in the coffin?" she said.

He looked over at the blue-laced, dark wood box that lay gleaming on the tabletop, the window shut tight. His eyebrows wrinkled up and looked funny.

"Well that's your grandpa, honey."

"Can't be," she said.

"Why not?"

"There would have been too many pieces. I mean, they couldn't have stitched him back together. I'll bet they buried him where he was, out by the side of the tracks."

Uncle Bud's eyes were wide and horrified.

"I wonder whose job it is," she went on. "I mean who has to walk along and find the pieces and bury them—"

"Jesus," Uncle Bud said. "What are they feeding you back home?"

Nina didn't understand what food had to do with any of it. She eyed the coffin suspiciously, thinking that when the people all left she might open it and have a look, just to be sure.

In a few minutes the funeral started. She did not remember much of it. The usual priest was not there; instead a thin young man with cleanshaven cheeks and hair the color of spring pollen gave an earnest but boring talk full of ideas he must have learned recently in college. He kept using long words which no one seemed to understand. Nina thought it was strange that the only man in the room who didn't know her grandpa was the one yacking on about him. After a while she looked over and saw Uncle Bud with his eyes closed.

When it was over they went outside and watched the box get put into the earth. The gravesite was a long walk from the church and everybody was cold, standing with arms folded on the frozen plain and feet stamping off the deep snow. Nina was sure it was an empty box they were lowering into the dirt so she didn't pay any attention. The whole thing seemed silly to her and distant, maudlin actors on the television screen faking their tears by script.

The priest read some more words from the Bible but his voice was just a mutter beneath the wind. The sun glinted off his oval spectacles. Finally they all made the sign of the cross and turned back toward the church. Uncle Bud was coughing and blowing his nose into a silver handkerchief. They marched in a short twisting line, stiff and slow, a dark somber wire flickering over the white yard, and when Nina broke into a dead run not even her mother's angry shout could stop her.

When she got back home she was in trouble and had to stay in her room, but at night she snuck out and walked into open stores and bars just to see how people would look at her. Uncle Bud had kissed her and said he would be by soon. She waited, bored. Finally he called.

"Hey kiddo," he said, sounding as if his tongue were bloated.

"When are you coming by?" she asked.

"Soon, soon. Do me a favor, will you? Put your old man on the line."

Her father grunted something inaudible.

She moved closer to her door, cracked it and lay down with an ear in the open hallway.

"Well," the officer said thickly. "You won't have to identify him, anyhow. It wouldn't be practical. But you'll need to come down, sign a release. I know you'll be wanting to make arrangements soon as possible."

"Yes," her mother said. "Of course. Thank you very much."

She heard her mother escorting him to the door, the shrill and mournful sound of the wind as it opened, then the throb of it closing too hard against the frame. She lay flat and breathed slowly, precisely. The blood in her ears roiled like an open tap. She thought of nightmares she'd had in which her parents conspired to carve and cook her in the frying pan, unaware of her listening through the floor. In the dreams there were never any lights. The house was dark, inescapable, and the footsteps would come slowly up the stairs, in the deliberate rhythm of a march, hands stretching to feel for her, the scrape of their fingertips like rubber nipples against the walls.

She heard her father's sigh, long and heavy, ending in a kind of gurgle. "So it's finally happened. He had to go and finish it his way."

"It's not your fault," her mother said. "You tried. You were a good son. Now if he had been just a bit more cooperative..."

"Such an awful death."

"Yes," she said. "Horrible."

Nina drew back her head and shut the door quietly. She walked to the window and looked out into the swirling snow. All the city was lost in whiteness, silent and entombed, like static on the television with the volume down. Even the raking wind lay down and slept.

She read about it in the obituary. Roy Ewell, driving twenty head of scattered cattle through the storm, half blind and mostly deaf, following by heart the contours of his beloved land, had picked the wrong moment to spur his horse across the train tracks. An Amtrak conductor described seeing the man and horse emerge like twin phantoms at the rail's edge and calling out uselessly, unable to brake in time. Nina shut her eyes. She imagined the slow lifting of hoof onto the snowcovered tracks, her grandpa's gray Scandinavian eyes forward and slanted, unseeing, and the poor horse freezing at the sudden blare of the whistle while her grandpa may have felt something, a drawing back of some slight air current as he lifted his chin, wondering what on earth could possibly put the scare in his old horse. Then the unearthly slap of the train hitting him at full speed, dragging man and horse down together beneath the crunching iron, spreading them out over the half mile it took to come to rest, steaming and shuddering and whining as the door swung open and the conductor leapt out into a waist-high drift to stare back over the whitewashed distance.

An Amtrak conductor described seeing the man and horse emerge like twin phantoms at the rail's edge and calling out uselessly, unable to brake in time.

On the way to the funeral she kept quiet. The Pinto shuddered along in the slow lane and her father cursed it softly, kicking his foot down hard against the gas pedal. The snow had been plowed up against the roadside and lay in towering brown-streaked mounds, bleeding off into empty farmland. Bright sunlight glared back from the surrounding flats and they all had on sunglasses to protect their eyes. Her mother had rubbed suntan lotion on her cheeks.

"Why don't we sing a song?" her mother asked, smiling blandly in the rearview mirror.

"I don't sing," Nina said.

"Don't they make you sing at school?"

"Nobody can make me do anything I don't want to do."

"Nina! Such a thing to say. You sound like your grandpa."

Her father turned his head and frowned.

"Such a willful girl..." her mother said, letting the words trail off into a defeated sigh.

Nina sat still and looked out the window at the streaming plains, the vast and empty basin of soil and snow. In such moments she felt alone and distant, hating her mother and cursing God, although later, in fear, she would repent.

When the slanting roof of the country church became visible over miles of flat seamless land, she sat up and looked west toward her grandpa's farm. The church stood at the edge of a small crossroads town in which a low-lying grocery store, post office and restaurant squatted around the central attraction: a misshapen gravel lot dealing in used farm implements. Weekly specials were advertised in illegible red-inked signs flashing beneath yards of blinking Christmas lights. As they passed through the center Nina read the storm-battered scrawl aloud, which streaking into the wet

Buffalo Country

NINA THOUGHT OF HIM most during punishment, when she would have to sit alone at the back of the schoolroom and none of the other girls would dare look at her. Like stiffskirted puppets all in a row. That was when she saw him in the brumal shroud of a dream: he sat alone on his porch watching distant planes blink across the sky and smoking the cigars they all said would be the death of him. A cool plume encircled his hairless skull, illuminated by shafts of dim lamplight. His radio crackled uselessly from a windowsill. He would sit there reading until the moon reached its apex, rheumy eyes squinting through bifocals thick as hockey pucks and lips forming dry whispers from page to page. Sometimes he fell asleep right there on the porch and did not wake until sunrise.

Back home she heard all about him. Grandpa Ewell, the crazy man who had singlehandedly brought on a war within the family by refusing to come in where he could be cared for. All sides had tried and failed in their attempts to placate him, advise him, coerce him, bribe him. He sat obstinate and incommunicable, legally deaf and half blind, and waved at them with the same contemptuous gesture he would use for a swarm of summer flies. "Leave me alone," he would croak, his voice like a scratchy record plucked from an attic box. "I want to stay here with my wife." That was what he said. His false teeth clicked and settled with finality and his eyes strayed speculatively to where an old shotgun lay racked and rusting. They always backed off then and returned muttering curses and vague threats.

Nina saw him every now and then, mostly around holidays. The family would pack into their wood-paneled Pinto and drive the ninety miles out to his small Dakota farm where cattle stood shitting and flipping their tails, chickens squawked and fought in the yard, and hawks sailed overhead in dizzying arcs, their black serrated wings locked on invisible currents, eyes scouring for rodents. After arguing all the way about what they ought to do with the old man, her parents would sit with him and spin out the most awful bullshit she had ever heard, shouting at the top of their lungs into his half-cocked ear, and she would watch him as if he were some atrophic husk that might blow away with a wrong shift in the breeze. As the awkward silences grew longer and more uncomfortable her parents would begin wriggling their hands and drumming their feet on the floorboards while they shot secret, meaningful looks at each other, filling the air with their sighs. Her grandpa was never more than half there. He would talk a little in his raspy voice and then drift into a silence which would not break. She imagined that he kept another world imprinted on the backs of his gray eyelids and that all he had to do was shut them and he would be there. And this is how they would leave him, asleep, his chin perched delicately in the cave of his chest, his coffee table lined with open beer cans, his little house swimming in the evening's purple light.

Eight days shy of Christmas her mother arrived at school in a flurry of scarves and sun lotion.

"You're late," Nina said. She stood in an empty courtyard shadowed by gray brick walls. In the doorway an old nun waved mechanically. Her mother smiled and waved back.

"Thank you," she called, seemingly to the school itself. She took Nina's hand and they walked to the car. "Did you do well on your exams?"

Nina shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Oh well. You've had troubles, I hear."

"No I haven't."

"Yes. Well. Perhaps you'll try harder next term and make us all proud of you. It's simply a marvelous day, isn't it?"

That night a terrible storm blew in from the west. When her parents thought her asleep, Nina snuck out her window and ran among the empty neighborhood in a pair of thermal boots and heavy winter coat. She sat on the diner's crusted stoop and listened to the heater hum as an ocean of snow deluged into creaseless folds, burying parked cars in broad rolling mounds. The men inside the diner crouched flush-faced over steaming mugs. A striped cat yawned dreamily from the countertop.

She returned half frozen to find a police cruiser blinking in her driveway, a slow gray slush trickling from the tailpipe. Fear quivered in her gut. She slunk about the low black windows, waiting for something to happen, until the cold grew too intense and she was forced to climb the sticky drainage pipe and slide through her unlatched window. The moment her feet hit the carpeted floor she heard voices, far off and muffled, floating disembodied and unreal through the plaster walls. She felt her face go red in the sudden warmth.

She heard her name.

"She's sleeping," her mother said. "No reason to wake her."

Mr. McKenna is dying. In all truth, he has been dying ever since that collision. Now, however, he sets about it in earnest. At two o'clock, one of the surgeons says, "Okay, folks. You've done a good job. We did our best." Seven hours after his disagreement with that car, Mr. McKenna is 'pronounced.'

Later, when all us anesthesia-types are going over the case, writing up the mortality report and such, one comments, "Oh wow. I'm gonna have to figure out the Kevorkian points for this, and decide who gets 'em." Something snaps. The narrow threshold which divides weeping and laughter is crossed, and I start to giggle uncontrollably. Kevorkian points. I think it's hilarious.

He comes back after a while and starts assigning numbers to each of the folks in the room. Then to me. "You," he says, "score one for an assist. You are the first medical student ever to be so honored."

It sounds heartless, I guess. Maybe it is, to some extent. I still think it's incredibly funny though.

Just another day at work, I guess. There was a heart transplant going on across the corridor. Right after we finished the trauma, I helped start a kidney transplant down the hall. I'm exhausted. Though it was only eight hours, it felt like a lifetime. For Mr. McKenna, I suppose it was.

I ask one of the anesthesiologists, before I leave, if he thinks Mr. McKenna ever really had a chance.

"No," he says, "not really."

One of the others cracks, "I dunno, I figure his chances were real close to 100% before he got on that motorcycle this morning."

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is an angry young medical student who continues to be delighted with his consuming passion for medicine. He is currently anxiously engaged in the process of trying to persuade major university hospitals to let him continue his training in their Emergency Medicine residencies.

"Mr. McKenna Is Dying" by Marcus Eubanks. First published in *InterText*, volume 4, number 4.
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in one of the bags of blood that we intended to put into Mr. McKenna. That particular blood is now all over me as well. Oops. "You shouldn't do that," says the anesthesiologist who is more or less coordinating our part of the job. I agree with him. Folks just don't like to sit down to dine with someone who has blood all over himself. I can't imagine why.

"You," says one anesthesiologist to me, "are going to stand there and blow blood in through the pressure infuser. You are going to do this again and again, as quickly as you can." "Yes," I say, "I am."

This is called "massive volume resuscitation protocol." Mr. McKenna will, over the course of his surgery, have over fifty-five units of blood poured into him. That's fifty-five of those bags that you fill up while you lie on the table praying that the Red Cross nurses are not going to blow your vein with those godawful huge needles they stick into you. It is rather more blood than is in your entire body. Maybe five times as much. The rest of the blood on the floor, far in excess of the twenty or thirty cc's I spilled when I cleverly wasted that nice bag of the stuff, is coming from Mr. McKenna. I put it into him, and then it leaks out of various holes in his vasculature, and spills onto the floor. It will take housekeeping the better part of three hours to get all of the blood off the floor, the operating table, and various other pieces of medical paraphernalia. There is also blood tracked all through the hallway outside the O.R. This is because it sticks to my shoes, or rather to the little blue booties that cover them, when I go to fetch more drugs or run arterial blood gas studies. It sticks to other folks' shoes too, and I'm reassured by the knowledge that I'm not the sole culprit.

The surgeons have Mr. McKenna cross-clamped. That is to say that the whole bottom half of his body is getting no blood. Not that it really matters at this point, as it was running out through various holes before it could get too far anyhow. It was getting some, however. Now it has none. The cells down there wonder just what the hell is going on up there in headquarters and tough it out, doing their best to respire anaerobically. The cross clamp comes off, and it is discovered that there is also a hole in his aorta. Maybe it was there before, maybe not. We call injuries that result from therapy 'iatrogenic.' This is a nice way of saying that the damage was caused by the folks trying to fix the patient.

Sew sew sew. Staple. Crunch. Mr. McKenna has two incredibly big holes in him. A good-sized cat could easily cuddle up quite comfortably in either one.

Some time later, he has only one very big hole, and a 25 centimeter line of black sutures to mark where the other one was. The problem with the remaining opening is that every time the surgeons try to close it, Mr. McKenna's heart gets depressed at the thought that having seen the bright compelling lights of our O.R., it will soon be shrouded once again in claustrophobic darkness. It rebels at this notion, and goes on a work slow-down. Not exactly a strike, not yet, but this recalcitrance is enough to frustrate surgeons and anesthesiologists alike.

Sew sew sew. Staple. Crunch. Mr. McKenna has two incredibly big holes in him. A good-sized cat could easily cuddle up quite comfortably in either one.

About twenty minutes later, his heart does stop. Or rather, it doesn't stop exactly, but sits there in V-fib and quivers like an irate child. We give it a taste of our amps and volts again, and it reluctantly remembers why it started up after we did so the first time.

One of the surgeons suggests that perhaps this exercise is becoming futile. "Pretend he's your dad," says another, "and do your best. As long as the heart is going, he might pull out of it." Unfortunately, now both of Mr. McKenna's pupils are blown. The brain, apparently, is beginning to side with the heart, and is growing tired of the whole affair.

Mr. McKenna's heart is still piqued by the surgeons' attempts to deprive it of the rich light of day. "To hell with it," reckon the surgeons, and offer the heart a window instead. Yes, they actually slice open a one-liter saline bag, and commence to sewing it in place over the big hole.

For our part, we anesthesia types are trying to offer other incentives. We are infusing Mr. McKenna with mind-boggling quantities of epinephrine. His heart is not pleased with our offering, however. Where your heart or mine would be galloping like a derby thoroughbred which had just been shot in the ass by a malicious kid with a B.B. gun, this particular heart is creeping along at about 58 beats per minute. This would be a good pace for a young athlete at rest, but not for Mr. McKenna, who isn't terribly young and frankly, doesn't look like he was too athletic even before he drove his motorcycle into the parked car.

Mr. McKenna Is Dying

IT REALLY DOES have a smell all its own. You're not sure what it is at first, or even the second or third time. You don't even realize that it's there. Eventually though, it dawns on you that that particular crisp odor comes from one thing, and one thing only. It is the smell of blood.

Today it hit me before I even got inside the room. Slapped the wall switch outside the O.R. suite, strode through the doors even as they folded away before me, and there it was. Like charred orange-peels. Burnt. Or hot metal filings on the floor of a machine shop. Even the smell of the machine oil is there. It's not the same smell, but you'll recognize it if you ever chance across it. It will dawn on you then; but only after the scent has crept around your subconscious for a while, sneaking down into your hippocampus and setting off strange primitive reactions in your thalamus. You'll remember my words, and think, "Ah. Now I know exactly what he meant."

Mr. McKenna had been out for an early morning ride on his motorcycle. Or maybe it was a late, late night ride. Coming home from a party perhaps, or sneaking away from his girlfriend's place. Or maybe just out for a spin on the gray and drizzly streets, having gotten up early to have coffee with his wife and kids. You know, just to tool around the town a bit, get out on the road with the damp air wrapped around him, and marvel at the beginning of what would turn into an absolutely beautiful April day.

Then for some reason we are not privy to, Mr. McKenna drove his motorcycle right into a parked car. At high speed. This was not a good way for him to start his day. For that matter, it wasn't a terribly good way to start our's either, but I guess that wasn't really his fault.

The E.R. attending paged Neuro down for a consult. The Neuro resident was not terribly pleased by what he saw. One pupil refused to respond to light. Blown. A wide open portal to the soul. Or in this case more like a barn door flapping in the breeze, after the horse has already run off. I was starting to seriously reconsider the fantasies I'd been having about getting myself another motorcycle someday when I have a cash-flow.

He coded on us then, right there in the E.R. The ol' ticker just heaved once, massively, and gave up. "What's the point?" it figured, and decided to take a little breather. We zapped it, powie. Lots of nice clean DC volts. A big bunch of amps. The heart reconsidered, and must have figured that if this was the kind of treatment it was going to receive while on break, well fuck it, it would just go back to work where no one had bothered it.

Crunch. Pop. Yes kids, that's the sound of what amounts to a really nice set of stainless steel wire-cutters parting bone. Crunch. It's a visceral sound. You'll remember that sound too. I promise.

There they are folks, the stars of the show for the moment, Mr. Heart and his two body-guards, Mr. Two-Lobes and Mr. Three-Lobes. They're beautiful. There's the heart, excursing away in its warm little pericardial wrapper rather like a stuck pig. The lungs are pink and healthy, mottled with black. Your lungs are mottled with black too. You may think to yourself, with a bit of righteous pride, "Nay, not mine, for I have never breathed the sweet airs of the demon tobacco, nor have I partaken of the subtle Mary-J-Wana. I have taken Dr. Koop's earnest warnings to heart, and I have seen Reefer Madness. I am a believer." You are wrong. Your lungs look just like Mr. McKenna's. Just crap from this modern air we breath. Its okay though, 'cause it's harmless, more or less.

Actually, I'm a bit wrong. Your lungs don't really look like his, because his have holes in them. Blood bubbles out each time the diaphragm relaxes and Mr. McKenna exhales. There are also holes in his diaphragm. These are in addition to the expected ones that his aorta and other things pass through. As you might imagine, we are chagrined. They are not supposed to be there, these holes.

Mr. McKenna goes on a little elevator ride up to the O.R. We have made this gaping huge hole in his chest, you see, and that in itself is reason to take him there. There are other reasons too. We want to make another gaping hole in him, this time in his abdomen. Actually, it's not really 'we,' it's 'they.' Surgeons. They like to cut big holes in people. I'm anesthesia. We prefer to stand around and make significant little noises at each other, crack dark jokes, and make fun of surgeons. We think we are very funny. We are right to think that.

Now Mr. McKenna has two very big holes in him in addition to all of the little ones he made inside when he drove his motorcycle into that car. The floor of the O.R. is a mess. There is blood everywhere. Some of it is there because I accidentally poked a hole

A Quick (trust me) Overview of Online Publishing

I COULD PROBABLY SPEND days talking about this and still not get very far. Like the Internet itself, the scope and implications of online publishing continue to grow, both in size and complexity. Industry professionals and casual users alike are attempting to answer questions such as: What exactly is online publishing? Does email count as publishing? How (or if) does copyright apply? Will books soon be obsolete? And this is just the short-short list.

In its simplest incarnation, online publishing is the publication of material in an electronic format. This encompasses several forms: magazines ("zines" or "ezines"), novels, scholarly journals, Usenet (newsgroup) postings, and Frequently Asked Questions files (FAQs), to name a few.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that the state of online publishing remains in constant flux. The rules are literally being made up as we go along, especially in the areas of copyright, ownership, and distribution. If you're a writer, a good general rule is to assume that by posting your story, poem, essay, or whatever to any publicly-read area (such as a newsgroup or web page), you're "publishing" it, and therefore may not be able to offer certain rights (such as First North American, for example) if you try to sell it to a print magazine. More detailed information can be found at "The Internet Writer Resources" Page (http://bel.avonibp.co.uk/bricolage/resources/bureau/IWRG/index.html), or in the misc.writing FAQ (http://www.wimsey.com/~sdkwok/mwfaq.html).

A common misconception—and major hurdle to the idea of online publishing as a legitimate venue—is that publishing a piece online is somehow "lower" on the totem pole; that if you publish your story online, it means you can't hack it in the real world. After all, if you have a computer, modem, and Internet access, it's extraordinarily easy and inexpensive to make your story available to thousands of people. This is the idea behind rec.arts.prose, a newsgroup repository of uploaded writing that, in many cases, hasn't been edited or even proofread. (I won't get too deep into this, because, honestly, I haven't spent much time exploring what's available there. As with most everything related to the Net, I'm sure there are gems in that mineshaft, but you probably have to do quite a bit of digging to find them.) With the growth of online zines and work being done by the people involved with Project Gutenburg (volunteers who are creating libraries of electronically stored books that can be downloaded for free), however, online publishing is gaining credibility.

And momentum. Once word got out that thousands of people are reading online materials, many of the major print publications began scrambling to establish a presence on the Net. Although this bandwagon mentality has resulted in many hastily- and poorly-executed digital shadows of otherwise respectable print publications, it has also created a movement towards forming standards by which works can be protected, and authors paid for their efforts. These standards are still only flickers on the digital horizon, but unless the Net collapses or the Earth burns up, they will have to be defined to accommodate this movement.

So, should you cancel your subscription to the *New Yorker* or *Time*? Has the day finally arrived when bookstores will fold, and we'll do all of our reading on laptops and Newtons? Of course not. I think the people who have been predicting the end of the printed word are sitting too close to their monitors without proper shielding. People aren't going to want to buy a half-dozen batteries along with their copy of *The Newly Repainted Bridges of Madison County* or Newt's current bodice-ripper. Besides, you just can't put a cup of coffee on a well-worn electronic reading tablet without worrying about the warranty.

[For a more in-depth discussion of online publishing, see L. Detweiler's excellent "A Vision of the Future" (http://bel.avonibp.co.uk/bricolage/resources/bureau/IWRG/06.html) Or, feel free to wander the many Internet links to writing- and literature-related sources.]

Issues are also available for anonymous FTP from:

ftp.etext.org in the directory
/pub/Zines/Quanta.

The Morpo Review

is an electronic literary magazine which is available on the Internet and is read worldwide by people just like you.

Q: How do I submit my work to The Morpo Review, and what are you looking for?
How about Sonnets to Captain Kangaroo, free-verse ruminations comparing plastic lawn ornaments to The Love Boat, or nearly anything with cows in it? No, not cute, Smurfy little "ha ha" ditties—back reality into a corner and snarl! Some good examples are "Oatmeal" by Galway Kinnell, "A Supermarket In California" by Allen Ginsberg, or the 6th section of Wallace Stevens' "Six Significant Landscapes."

But, hey, if this makes little or no sense, just send us good stuff; if we like it, we'll print it, even if it's nothing close to the above description of what we want (life's like that at times). Just send us good stuff, get published, and impress your peers and neighbors. Email rfulk@creighton.edu for more information.

Twilight World

is a bi-monthly fiction-only magazine that started in April 1993. It concentrates mainly on fantasy, science fiction and humor. Email r.c.karsmakers@stud.let.ruu.nl for subscription information.

Whirlwind

is an electronic literary magazine striving for the very best in contemporary fiction, poetry, and essays. Back issues can be located via anonymous FTP/Gopher at:

ftp.etext.org under the directory
/pub/Zines/Whirlwind.

[Editor's note: At the time of this writing, Whirlwind has ceased publication.]

[Please note]

If you are the editor of a zine, or just know of a good one, please contact me (email kepi@halcyon.com), so that I can include the stories you're publishing in the consideration pool for next year's eSCENE.]

1995 Contributing Ezines

The Blue Penny Quarterly

is an electronic journal of fine literary work distributed internationally via the Internet, America Online, regional computer bulletin boards and the World Wide Web. Our goal is to bring high-quality literary writing into the electronic communities and to provide good writers greater exposure using the best of the technologies available to us in a creative, yet dignified manner. We are published quarterly as a service to readers, writers, and the online communities by a volunteer staff, and are available free of charge.

http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/olp;
ftp at ftp.etext.org in the directory
/pub/Zines/BluePennyQuarterly

Cyberkind

is the chronicle of a new society—the Networld. Not merely a collection of poetry, prose and art, Cyberkind catalogs the peculiar thoughts and emotions, the quirks and idiosyncracies, the culture of the Networld, the child of technology. The words on these virtual pages in one way or another were all born of the Internet.

Visit us at
http://sunsite.unc.edu/ckind/title.html

DargonZine

is an electronic magazine that prints original amateur fantasy fiction by Internet writers. It is the publication vehicle of the Dargon Project, described below. It only prints Dargon-related stories. DargonZine is the successor of FSFnet, which was the Dargon Project's original emag. Between FSFnet and DargonZine, it is the longest running electronic magazine on the Internet.

The Dargon Project is a "shared world" project, where many authors write in a common milieu, sharing settings and characters. The setting is a fantasy world that is predominantly human, at a late medieval technology level, and where magic is relatively rare.

The project was founded in 1985 as a way for amateur fantasy writers on the Internet to meet and become better writers through mutual contact and collaboration. See below for details if you are interested in joining the project as a contributing writer.

Free email subscriptions are available from <dargon@wonky.jjm.com>. "Notification only" subscriptions are also available. Issues are also posted to Usenet newsgroup rec.mag.dargon, and are available at the following URL:

gopher://gopher.etext.org:70/11/Zines/DargonZine.

FICTION-ONLINE

tries to present a sort of literary bouquet on-line. It features a long-running serialization of a novel about Mozart, plus a short story and maybe a short-short, a poem or two, and often a short one-act play. The play will be funny, the novel historical, the stories mainline or science fiction, the poems could be any sort of thing of beauty.

InterText

has been publishing issues online since its first issue was released in March 1991. It prints stories of all genres, and has printed 26 issues as of July 1995. It's available in ASCII, PostScript, Adobe Acrobat PDF, and HTML (World Wide Web) formats. Editors are Jason Snell, Geoff Duncan, and Susan Grossman. For more information, mail intertext@etext.org or go to:

http://www.etext.org/Zines/InterText/

Quanta

|quan*ta \ 'kwant-a\| 1. The increments or parcels into which many forms of energy | are subdivided. 2. The award-winning online fiction journal, specializing in Science Fiction and Fantasy.

Since 1989, Quanta has been publishing new, fresh fiction from amateur and professional writers from around the world and across the Net. Currently, Quanta goes out to over 3,000 subscribers world-wide. In 1992, Quanta garnered runner-up in the Digital Publishing Association's "Digital Quill Awards." This year, Quanta is even better, with a higher standard of fiction than ever before, not to mention artwork and design.

Quanta may be reached at the Internet address quanta@etext.org and is available on the World Wide Web at the URL:

http://www.etext.org/Zines/Quanta.

these problems become new instances of the problems themselves. To use merely the most salient example, the Web emerged as a hypertextual solution to several dilemmas inherent in the Net at the time: the available software was difficult to use, the available information widely scattered and disorganized, and so on— but the Web then became the new arena of overload. Further, as bandwidth widens, software becomes more powerful, and access to the Net cheaper and more readily available, the result will be still more overload.

So with the tools we have been given (thanks, generals, admirals, and CEOs), we are overwhelming ourselves. "Mere anarchy," in Yeats's phrase, has certainly been loosed upon the world.

The only solutions I see are human ones. Until the advent of intelligent machines—which may be never—we must sort among the information presented on the Net and choose for our fellow beings what we find interesting and important, and we must present what we find so that our fellow beings can learn from it and enjoy it. Doing all this is what publishing is really about. We all need editing, and every collection of writing should reflect the intelligence, taste, and judgment of the editor. And of course, as readers we need someone with the patience and persistence to sort through the wildly various fiction on the Net and find some of its more interesting examples.

Which is why efforts such as this are so important. Jeff Carlson has taken on the task of reading through the year's fiction on the Net and selecting from it those pieces he finds best. I'm not here to comment on the success of his efforts, or the quality of the work he's chosen. I'm here to congratulate him on choosing to do so and also to congratulate those whose work he's presenting.

Perhaps the writers see their efforts here as stepping stones toward conventional publication, perhaps not. There's typically not much money to be made from such efforts such as these (though some folks, e.g., the folks at Yahoo, end up getting paid for what began as altruistic labors), but I'd like to believe that this work is at the heart of the Net as Counterforce, to use Thomas Pynchon's term.

That is why I have made my novel, Halo, published by Tor Books available on the WELL Gopher (and done so with their permission, I should add); also why Bruce Sterling has made his Hacker Crackdown and Richard Kadrey his Metrophage available at the same place. We share a belief that these alternative distribution routes mean something positive.

So I'm here not to review these writers' efforts but to encourage you to read them and to come back for more if you like what you find. Congratulations to them for being chosen, and to Jeff Carlson for choosing them.

tmaddox@halcyon.com **Tom Maddox**

has published short fiction and criticism in the science fiction field and writes a monthly column titled "Reports from the Electronic Frontier" in *Locus* magazine (gopher: gopher.well.sf.caus/11/Publications/LOCUS).His first novel, *Halo*, was published in 1991 by Tor Books in the United States, and Century-Hutchinson in England; it has also been translated into German and Italian. His second novel, *Walls of Lights*, will be published by Tor Books. He is currently the writing coordinator at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. He plays blues guitar.

"Lines of Distribution" by Tom Maddox.
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Introduction

Lines of Distribution

Tom Maddox

WELCOME TO THE END of the second Millennium and the triumph of world capitalism. Heady times, these, especially for the global commodification machine, whose business might be summarized in the following principle: They will sell us everything we want, and we will want only what they sell us.

In the worldwide marketplace, the implementation of this principle has become ever more ruthless and efficient. Anyone who fails to observe the principle resolutely, or fails to devise the technically most efficient mechanisms for implementing it, falls and is eaten or has their flesh and bones ploughed under. The survivors celebrate their victories as metaphysical and ethical triumphs, proper outcomes of laudable processes: Social Darwinism (not natural selection but a vicious parody of it); or, more grandly, Election—God's tribute to their essential puissance and goodness.

As a consequence, in traditional publishing the means of production (to use a quaint term) have become centralized, while the means of distribution have become fewer and narrower. The publishers have become fewer in number and larger in size—all-absorbing blobs of capitalist protoplasm. The great marketing machines gear up to produce the new mega-seller by M. Crichton or S. King or J. Grisham or whoever else has shown that he or she can produce effective marketing templates, and the stacks of books arrive at Waldenbooks and B. Dalton and Borders and Barnes & Noble ... mega-seller from mega-publisher to mega-chain to eager consumer—step right this way, young and old, it's good for what ails you, and if this one doesn't quite do the job, we've got a bunch more very like it ...

It's all a bit of a nightmare, really, looked at this way, not a scenario to encourage the young writer—or the merely different one. In this version of reality, the consumer stands at the sliding glass door of the mall bookstore, waiting to snatch at that cardboard bin and put down 30% off the retail price on this week's bestseller. So we—the mega-publishers—don't have time to fuck around with you and your voice, your vision, your originality—give us a break: we need product, and we need it now.

However, in one of history's nice ironies, just at this moment of the global dream machine's triumph, it has delivered into our hands the tools with which to fight it. The military forged its networks to survive nuclear war and inadvertently engineered a great proving-ground for freedom, perhaps anarchy. Expensive, elite-produced and -owned technologies have devolved—economically speaking—into mere commodities, sold at cut-rate prices to the masses, and these include the tools of desktop publishing and distribution.

In short, it's not only the age of the publishing conglomerate but also the age of the zine and the ezine. A computer, some readily available software, an ink jet printer, some envelopes and stamps—a zine. Same setup, adding a modem and a bit more software and a net connection—an ftp site or gopher site, mailing list or Web page.

Power to the people, for better and for worse—that's the Net. It can be ugly, stupid, vulgar, venal, offensive; a font of misinformation, disinformation, straight lies, and rumors ...

The Net cannot be rationalized or made remotely sane, sanitary, and consistently "useful." As I reminded a friend of mine who was complaining about some recent enormity online, the Net is a medium for people, and whatever measured use it is intended for, someone will turn it to their own demented purposes: metaphorically speaking, from a route for intra-corporate memoranda into a medium for worshipping shoes. And no one is gatekeeping, censoring, or even bouncing drunks, lunatics, and assorted assholes.

And above and beyond this issue, there is the question of information overload, not the mere "information explosion" of the '60s, but a process more like a supernova. Any number of very bright and well-motivated people are trying to find technical solutions to this problem, and while I wish them joy, I don't believe they will succeed. Why? Because all technical means toward solving

Foreword

"It's a... What?"

Jeff Carlson, Series Editor

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, one of the most difficult aspects of creating eSCENE has been explaining it to people—not through email or Usenet postings, but talking face-to-face to folks who don't know much more about the Internet than what they read in the newspaper. When I tell them eSCENE is the "Internet's first online fiction anthology," their eyes glaze over, and I secretly believe they think I've spent too much time away from human contact. It takes a few minutes of explaining before they say something like, "Oh, so you're writing a book!"

Well, not exactly.

I created eSCENE because I wanted to bring together the year's best short stories published online; I wanted an electronic manuscript that wouldn't disappoint me after spending the time to download, decompress, and open; I wanted to be in the middle of the expansion of electronic publishing as a viable, legitimate, and professional avenue for publishing fiction; and I wanted to provide a showcase for the many talented writers out there who are looking for something more than the multi-layered catacombs of traditional print publishing.

However, even after I tell people this, most of them nod politely and ask, "Why you?"

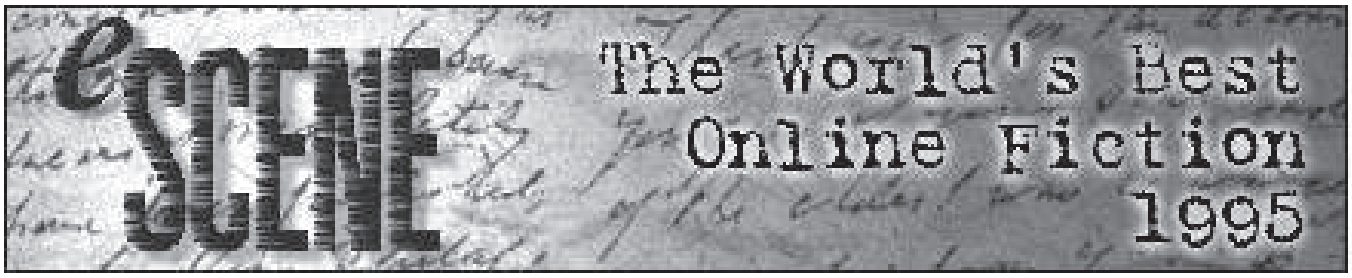
Good question. I could bore you with a résumé, or go on about my previous editing experience (or you could access my bio, if you're reading this on the World Wide Web), but it basically spins down to: it was my idea. I was reading the latest volume of "Best American Short Stories" and decided that something similar was needed on the Internet. And, since it was my idea, it only made sense that I should abandon my earlier plans of starting my own zine and create eSCENE.

The stories contained herein represent, in the eyes of myself, my assistant editor, and several zine editors who kindly sent me their material, the best short fiction published online in 1994. As I was rereading the final nine stories, it thrilled me that they sounded better than when I first read them during the selection process. It excited me even more when people started agreeing with me.

Coming to the end of this project (for this edition, anyway) I will admit that the scope of eSCENE is a bit limited. When I first began to query editors for their story recommendations, it was difficult to find a large number of zines concentrating primarily on fiction. Through recommendations and some Net-poking, I assembled a list of about 20 zines and sent email to the editors asking for their best stories. Although that doesn't sound like much, the limited scope was also partially self-imposed to ensure that I wasn't going to kill myself trying to get eSCENE completed. So, to the editors who published short fiction in '94 and did not get included, send me email (kepi@halcyon.com) and you'll definitely be on the list for the next edition.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to John Lebowitz, whose comprehensive ezine list provided the first main selection of zines, and to Geoff Duncan and Jason Snell for their recommendations and invaluable advice on getting started. And, of course, I want to thank Tom Maddox for accepting my request to contribute his introduction during the busy hell of year-end exams.

I'm surprisingly proud of eSCENE, more so than I first expected. And now, after a few delays, several late nights, and many espressos, I'm tremendously pleased to publish them worldwide. Browse as you like, or read them from beginning to end. I'm including the authors' email addresses (when applicable), and encourage you to take advantage of this direct link to the writer of your favorite (or least favorite) story. As always, feel free to contact me with your suggestions, critiques, or just plain talk about good fiction. Enjoy.



JEFF CARLSON,
Series Editor

SHANNON CHRISTENOT
Assistant Editor

eSCENE is a yearly electronic anthology dedicated to providing one-click access to the Internet's best short fiction and authors. The stories featured within are culled from a collection of electronic magazines ("ezines" or "zines") published on the Net from across the globe during 1994, and feature both established and previously unpublished authors.

eSCENE 1995
World Wide Web:
http://www.etext.org/Zines/eScene/

ASCII, PostScript, Adobe Acrobat PDF:
anon. ftp at ftp.etext.org/Zines/eScene/

Email:
kepi@halcyon.com (Jeff Carlson)

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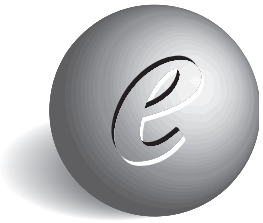

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