

Orient Latin

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SCIENCE-FICTION
STARS OF TIMISOARA



Painting by TRAIAN ABRUDA

"H.G. WELLS" WAS THE BEGINNING

In 1970 the simultaneous apparition of the first literary circles ("H.G. Wells" in Timisoara, "Solaris" in Bucharest and "H. Coanda" in Craiova) turned out to be a great event. Little by little Timisoara started to thrust itself upon the other circles, getting its singleness (together with another important literary circle "Helion") in drawing up a new literary status. This was not easy, but the endeavour to reach a professional condition, to make the SF literature gain its deserved place among the great literary works, the victorious participation in many competitions of this kind, the apparition of the first SF magazines in difficult conditions (ideological, before the Revolution and financial, after the Revolution), all these brought consideration and renown to the literary circles of Timisoara.

"H.G. Wells" appeared in 1969, its first officials being Laurentiu Cernet as president, Ovidiu Surianu from "The Writers' Association of Timisoara", Valeriu Rapeanu as the coordinating instructor of "The Students' Cultural House". Three years later, in 1972, Cornel Secu and Marcel Luca published "Paradox", the first Romanian SF magazine; in 1973 Ovidiu Surianu and Sandu Florea published "Galbar", the first Romanian cartooned-book; in 1976 Mihai Corneliu Donici and Lucian Ionica presented "The Muting", the first Romanian SF cartoons.

All their efforts were rewarded: three National Prizes (1980, 1982, 1985), the Prize of the SF European Society (Montpellier-France, 1987), and a special diploma for Sergiu Nicola as one of the best painter and drawer (Stressa - Italy, 1980).

It is well known that the successful activity of "H.G. Wells" members would haven't been possible without their abnegation and generosity in widening their sphere of cultural interests over a large number of people, especially students. Ovidiu Surianu ("The Writers' Association of Timisoara"), Mircea Serbanescu

("The Students' Cultural House"), Valeriu Panasiu (today manager of "The Students' Cultural House"), Gheorghe Balta, Cornel Secu (today manager of "The University House"), Viorel Marineasa are some of those who gathered their efforts in making "H.G. Wells" get a competitive condition.

In a short period of time "H.G. Wells" included among its members all the students who were interested in this new kind of literature-science-fiction. A literary circle set up by students is always subject to the risk of having an uncertain status: there is always a possibility of members giving up when they are most needed. So we should appreciate the efforts of those who, being as patient as Sisif, tried and succeeded in maintaining a worthy focus.

Even if a part of the members (especially the graduating ones) moved to "Helion" (the SF circle of "The University House") to give the coming students the chance to enter "H.G. Wells" circle, the main role of this SF debating society

remains that of value promotion.

What is very important is the co-operation between "Helion" and "H.G. Wells" members, as an ad-hoc and sincere relation in the name of the SF circle's traditions.

The existence of "H.G. Wells" can be noticed in the latest published volumes: Hrose of Lucian Ionica's and Dusan Baiszki's, the collective volumes "Alpha" (edited by "Scrisul Romanesc"), "Warning of the Peace of Our Planet" (edited by "Albatros"), "A Planet Called <<The Anticipation>>" (edited by Junimea). About the innovations of the "Third Millennium", and also the critical magazine "Biblioteca Nova" (edited with the help of "Helion").

There can be said much more interesting things about "H.G. Wells" and if there have been omitted other events or names it is because of the writing space and not because of lack of talent.

*Adapted after the almanac
"Anticipatia" 1990*

Translated by SIMONA VINTILA

...THEN RISES THE "HELION"

DEBATING SOCIETY

The appearance of this literary circle represented an element of steadiness in the constellation of the SF circles (after "H.G. Wells"). The "older brother", "H.G. Wells", had become an important focus for all the students, but some of them dispersed throughout the country; that is why only those who settled down in Timisoara, after graduating, maintained the relationship between generations of students.

In these circumstances they founded a new literary circle, "Helion" (1980, the 18th of March) directed by Cornel Secu. Its first premises was "The Youth's House" and later "The University House" where all the professors who were interested in this new debating society came and contributed to the recognition of the literary circle: Tudor Besuan, Stefan Buzanescu, Pia Branzu etc.

Their activity was rewarded the professional status it reached in time: one of

the best publication specialized in literary critics "Biblioteca Nova", enumerates some of the prizes got by the mentioned members: the First Prize at "The National Conference of SF Circles" (1986), the Third Prize in 1981, the Second Prize in 1982, the First Prize in 1983 and in 1987, "The International Prize of Eurocon" for the "Helion's" magazine (Brighton - 1984 and San Marino - 1988).

In 1980 and 1989, together with the members of "H.G. Wells", "Helion" organized "The National Convention of Science-Fiction", "Helion" is also the organizer of "The Helion Days", later on "The Helion Session" (14 editions), all its activity being possible with the help of its members: Lucian Ionica, Marcel Luca, Augustin Corneliu Geagim, Silviu Genescu etc. Their presence in all the SF publications together with other well-known writers and journalists like: Dusan Baiszki, Costel Babos, Mandics Gyorgy, Gyorgy Gyorgy, Cotizo Draia, Szasz Geza, Lucia Robitu, Florin Danila stands for the renown of the SF circle and its publications.

Fine artists like Sergiu Nicola, Traian Abruda, Lazar Croitor, Mihai Corneliu Donici, Dan Ursachi, Eugenia Banciu, Jonel Nistor, helped to picture all the SF publications and books, their efforts being successfully crowned (many national and international prizes).

A group of translators tried to complete the "Firepower" of the circle: Tudor Besuan, Elena Ghita, Silviu and Antuza Genescu, Dorin Davideanu, Constantin Cozmiuc, Florin Teodor Danila, Daniela Poenaru.

After the Revolution, "Helion" became the initiator of "The Romanian Association of Science-Fiction".

Translated by SIMONA VINTILA

S.F. - LINES ...

In 1969, the Romanian science-fiction established its first "headbridge" in Timisoara - the "H.G. Wells Science-Fiction Club". In a pretty short time after this event, the "H.G. Wells SF Club" printed the first Romanian fanzine, in 1972, named: PARADOX. The club members, mostly young people, many of them still teenagers, refused this way the subtle cultural brain-washing started at that time by the communist regime. The new worlds displayed by the club members were designed with the help of the authors and SF artists who decided to join the same side of the "barricade". The young SF artist joined the club in impressive manners. Among them one could mention SANDU FLOREA and MIHAI - CORNELIU DONICI. The first of these two authors signed the first issue of Romanian SF comics, titled "Galbar". He is also a well known illustrator. The latter, Mihai Corneliu Donici together with the young writer, Lucian Ionica, is the author of a short SF cartoon, "The Meeting". Donici then chose to let his skills evolve in various directions: from car designer and architect, to conceptual art and fight against "the emptiness of the spoken word". The following artist who dedicated his talents to Science-Fiction is SERGIU NICOLA. Actually, he is the artist who cut a possible link between literature and visual arts. His works are always depicting unknown worlds, explored by the imagination of the artist. He is a "collector" of a large number of awards, and in 1980, during the EUROCON held in Stressa, Italy, he won the EUROCON Award for the best artwork. A real good fellow, often missed by his friends at H.G. Wells SF Club, he is living now in Germany where he works, is no wonder, as a designer. From time to time, he could be spotted in Timisoara surrounded by his friends and everybody is happy to enjoy a drink again with Sergiu. Usually, the ale, whisked and vodka have their part of late night speech.

We also like to pay a tribute to the artist GHEORGHE VALEANU, deceased at the end of '80's, who had a single connection with SF: his notoriously surrealism. He signed the art-work for the fanzine "Helion" in 1987. A real lack of artist in these late '80's made him available. But his works, difficult to be qualified as being SF art, were of such a quality that since then gave no room for something less value.

TRAIAN ABRUDA is another newcomer in the field of SF art. He had won the award for graphics at the Romanian National SF Convention in 1989, and Eurocon Award at San Marino. A painter and professional artist, Traian Abruda is a new voice in Romanian SF art world.

He also organized a group exhibition that was joined by artists like DANIEL URSACHI, DAN CHENDI, FLORIN HATEGAN, IOANA SALAGEAN, LAZAR CROITOR, all of them impressing with the force of their ideas and talents. The first of the above mentioned artists will deserve an extended commentary. He is deeply involved in the European contemporary art.

DAN HODIN



COSTEL BABOS

Those who had never believed in his creative nature or in his literary products, have recently been shocked at reading his first book "A Man of Wayfalua", edited by MARINEASA (Timisoara). His inner temptation to reach a higher zone, that of the Wordervard, is in fact the "cocoon", in which the phrase he writes, is developing itself. Costel Babos, the human being searching for liberty and trying to escape the imposed system, was imprisoned by communists.

He lives now in London, maybe creating a spiritual tunnel. I don't know if the English can understand his way of speaking, of expressing himself (the way he was tutated by his "ranguage" brothers make me feel uncertain of his being appreciated there).

Maybe he will give up living in a material world and will fly to a better one on the edge of THE KNOWN UNIVERSE.

Last Thursday the soldier stopped in front of Furcoi's house. He stopped and peeped through the rotten laths of the fence as if he had noticed something wrong.

I knew why was peeping and I also knew what was going to happen. That's why my heart was throbbing. I toyched it with my hand and felt it beating like a drum.

Furcoi's house is opposite ours and first I thought that the soldier would stop near our fence. I'd like to go with him but I am such a coward that a fear paralyses me behind the door.

My window is covered with blue paper. I have cut a hole in it and I call it my "observation point". From here I can see whatever happens outside. Sometimes I write some of my observations in a notebook, the way I'm doing it now. What I've written about the observation point is my secret. I don't know how it happened, but people in the village have found out about it and now they call it "the devil's eye". The only explanation is that they spy on me too so they are no way better than me.

The soldier left the fence and stood waiting in the middle of the road.

THE SOLDIER

He didn't wait for long: the door at Furcoi's house opened suddenly and his son, Gratian ran like a ghost, screaming with all his might and main, his face transfigured and his hair standing on end. His mother and father tried to grab at him hands or legs, his hair or clothes, begging him to stop. Gratian tried to rid himself of them and follow the soldier. He thren them down in the thick dust of the yard.

His mother saw he couldn't be stopped. She almost lost her mind and shouted in despair: "Don't go, Gratian! Don't go, don't go!" His father, Furcoi, picked a rope and went straigh to the pear-tree in the end of the garden. If nobody stopped him he would hang himself, as he had already tried once, when the soldier took Victor, his other son.

Eventually, breaking two laths, Gratian managed to pass through the fence and disappear with the soldier on the way to Razoare. Nobody ever saw him again and the following night, as uzual, father Carlig celebrated a service for his eternal memory.

Sometimes I think that is a punishment. Sometimes I think it is a curse. Sometimes I think it's just fate, everybody's fate.

Who knows?

Next time it may be Ilarie's turn, or Simino's or, dear me, maybe mine.

The old women tell fortunes with beans, for they wath to find out who the soldier is, where he comes from, where he disappears, what he does with the young men he takes from the village. But nothing is shown to them. The beans are not good or they are lying and say nothing precise. All that the old women can say is that the soldier comes from nowhere, from the sky or from under the earth, but nothing precise, nothing. Thus I could only write down in my notebook that he simply appears, that's all.

The old hag, the witch beyond the hill, thinks that the soldier is neither from our world nor from the other and that's why her servants, her goblins are powerless against him. And then, good Lord, how can you stop being afraid? As if there were another world, except this and the other.

Generally, the soldier appears in the village on the Bregeasca lane or on the Polhoci lane. As far as I remember, it was only once that he came a different way. It happened one winter, many years ago, when

he took Craciun, Toma's son. He was the only young man the soldier could take from the Cionchi's lane. The others were either too old or too young. Craciun was very handsome, all the girls liked him dreamt about him, and wanted to marry him.

Finally, Carlig's daughter won him and, if it hadn't been for the soldier, they would have married in a week. The whole village cried and mourned for Craciun. The soldier had better take me than him.

Old people say that the young men are taken to the war, but what war? Everybody knows they are all over. And even if there was a war, who can imagine such a long one?

Old people also say that the soldier first came to the village a very long time ago. They speak about a war fought by the cross against the pagans, about the soldier beng God's messenger. One may think that old people are mad, they have always been like that.

Because they say that they know all there from their parents and grandparents.

As for me, I don't know what to believe. I only hope that one day the soldier will take me, too and then I'll find out the truth. What I'd like to find out most is what he does with those flasks; he carries them on his back and they seem so heavy what does the tube on them going towards his mouth serve for? Why does he wear that thing on his head? And his clothes - they are white and buttonless, no zippers, as if they were his own skin.

Last Sunday the soldier came again. I don't remember him returning after such a short time before. He took Gligor. Another chance I didn't take. I wanted to follow them, but the fear paralysed me again and I wasn't able to move a finger.

Good Lord, I still have to wait.

I'm sure that the soldier will come especially for me one day. I shall know when, for I know all the signs. First he will stop in front of our fence and watch the door or my "observation point" carefully. Then a thin arm will come from his chest and he will move it here and there. And suddenly a thunder dashing from the arm's end will strike me right in the heart. My fear will vanish and a supernatural courage will replace it. I shall break the chain and the locks. I shall run faster than a ghost. Nothing and nobody will ever stop me. I shall go with the soldier.

Oh God, oh, God, oh God.



Drawing by FLORIN HATEGANU

Translated by ANTUZA GENESCU

TACTICS

AND

MARCEL
LUCA

He was born in 1946. He is chemical laboratory assistant, living in Timisoara, where for two decades he has been one of the most devoted SF fans in the two SF circles: *H.G. Wells* and *Helion*. In 1972, together with Mr. Cornel Secu, he published *PARADOX* - the first Romanian SF magazine. He has published numerous, well appreciated, SF stories in fanzines, almanacs and collective anthologies, but he has not been given the opportunity to bring these together in a volume of his own. Even with a quick reading one can find distinctive features such as the vigour of the epical movement, a light hand with narrative technique, a good approach to the SF topics and a clear and coherent "message" incorporated in consistent and captivating plots.

*Intergalactic Force
for Discouragement Number One*
Time (conventional) : 0

Commander Dym, chief of one of the most reputable fighting units of the Federation, was in the dilemma; he had foreseen from the very moment when he had received the order to supervise closely the potential enemy's activity.

The latter, conventionally called the "Q" Target, was threateningly displaying its rhombohedral frame on thousands of monitors of the federal vessel with a clarity that demonstrated the incredibly short distance of only 1.500 million kilometers from where it was situated.

In the operation room, standing around the oval table, Dym's general staff officers were listening to their commander attentively. He was expositing the conclusions drawn out from the analysis he had just finished.

"Gentlemen, from an academic and theoretical point of view, our fate, as our enemy's, has already been sealed! Without any further details I shall remind you that the premises which, according to the national military doctrine, are the basis of a direct conflict between

our task force and the Empire's force, have been regrettably fulfilled... In accordance with our political and military precepts - our analysts hold that they have been completely adopted by our enemies too - such powerful war machines, like the one in which we are now, have an eminently defensive purpose. Their presence behind the recognized frontiers is an unbearable challenge for the adversary. The Imperial's displacement towards the planetary system of the *Hecube* star, whether at random or not, was interpreted by the Federations's decision agents as an intention to confront us with a "fait accompli" by capturing this outlying territory. In this situation and on the basis of reciprocity principle, we have been forced to take similar action..."

Imperial Task Force "Alpha"
Time - 0 : 6

His Excellency Baron General Pancratius, member of the Imperial Military House, kept irritating old commander Knapp, chief of the *Imperial Task Force "Alfa"*. He was sipping his alcoholic liquor.

"You, commander, are a mercenary. Good! You're the captain of the vessel. That's clear! But I, I am sort of a never-do-well who, on the Emperor's behalf, must agree with your orders..."

"General!" retorted Knapp angrily.

"No more General! I know very well that you all treat me as half a general. O.K., maybe that's what I am! But goodness knows why I, though older than you, don't feel like dying at the order of some damn ordinators, even if they were more intelligent than His Majesty..."

The commander raised half of his lean body from the armchair and nodded respectfully.

"Baron", he said, "I am very sorry, but the modern principles of military science, of the strategy adopted by His Majesty's Government do not give us a better solution in the present circumstances."

"May I please know why?" asked the baron with false naivety, sipping the last drop in his glass. "Why should we not retreat slowly? Actually we did not plan to arrive here."

The commander snapped his thin fingers and glanced at the pyramidal image of the federal "W" Target. It was floating threateningly in the middle of the screen. He tried to make himself understood.

"Neither we, nor they, can retreat, Your Excellency! Each of us knows that the one who remains

will win an outpost. If fortified using the local raw materials, this outpost could become a new impregnable frontier, a hypothetical battlefield far from the national territory. It could thus stir up interest for an unexpected attack".

*From the President's message to
the Federal Nation*
Time : 0 : 11

"The escalation which the Empire is consistently pursuing has brought our states to the brink of an imminent confrontation. At present two commandos are much too close to one another to avoid fighting.

I am aware of the serious situation in which the peace of the civilised Universe finds itself. Therefore I used the *Hyperspatial Red Telephone* and spoke directly with the Prime Minister of the Imperial Government..."

*From the Prime Minister's message
to the peoples of the Empire*
Time : 0:18

I have informed the President that, in the given circumstances, we find it impossible to retreat. Such kind of action would mean the recognition of a nonexistent wild beast..."

*Intergalactic Force
of Discouragement Number One*
Time : 0:20

Surrounded by his well-built and silent officers, commander Dym was introducing to the war game simulator a programme that included the latest information brought by the reconnaissance units.

"Gentlemen, let's try and analyse together the new elements that could change tactical options in the operation field..."

Hecuba's planetary system was lying modestly on the holographic map. Two middle-sized planets, *Deiphobus* and *Creusa*, were spinning around the star. Behind them there was a feeble belt of asteroids among which only one, *Antiphus*, a barren rock about 800 kilometers in diameter, had any significance. The two independent arsenals, moving and intelligent, were floating at the extremities, the treasures of some fantastic energetic resources, huge space casemates, the fruit of the genius, of the efforts and pride of two galactic superpowers...

Imperial Task Force "Alpha"
Time : 0 : 24

Moving his aquiline nose above the glass lest he should miss the smell of the greenish drink Baron General Pancratius watched with a critical eye commander's Knapp manoeuvres at the simulator.

"Oh, these *kriegspiels*", he muttered. "I used to hate them even back at the War Academy..."

The commander didn't seem to hear. He was concentrating on the map that visualised the trajectories of the vectors carrying annihilating energy, in the predictable dynamics of an unexpected attack against the "W" Target. Eventually he sighed discouraged and turned his bald head to the baron.

"We haven't any chance, Your Excellency! Maybe we could have the satisfaction of watching them pulverized, but we could not enjoy it for more than 90 or 100 seconds before we ourselves were destroyed..."

The baron drank the last drop and, with the glass in his hand, he approached the map which seemed to have a life of its own in the slow and apparently contradictory movement of the celestial bodies on it.

"So we are fighting and dying not for this rudimentary planetary system, but to satisfy and fulfil the axioms established by our armchair strategists and grafted on the computers at the War Ministry!"

"There's no other way, General! even our enemies think the same..."

The baron did not answer. He put his glass on a side console and took the delicate activating stick from the commander's hand, fixing its end on the ephemeral silhouette of *Deiphobus*. The information about the planet's basic characteristics started to appear on the main monitor: equatorial diameter, spinning duration, volume, density, mass, gravity acceleration at the surface...

Baron General Pancratius moved the stick on the next blue planet, *Creusa*. The screen quickly displayed more and more information stored in the circuits of the investigating computers: equatorial diameter, spinning duration, magnitude, albedo, basic components of the atmosphere and, eventually, the mention *INTENSE radio trafic (artificial origin)*...

"What do you say, commander? What can this mean?"

The commander examined the values which expressed the new situation. He checked whether the multi-channel spectral analysers were working perfectly and then answered:

"*Creusa* is inhabited! But, obviously, the natives are primitive at

STRATEGY

the beginning of the technological era..."

From the SOLEMN STATEMENT of the Imperial Government
Time : 0 : 31

"The Empire is aware of its responsibilities as a civilising power and takes under its high protection the population of *Creusa*, assuming from the very first all the obligations and rights that follow from this act, according to the recognized standards of the Intergalactic Law..."

From the President's broadcast Statement to the Federal Nation
Time : 0 : 35

"In full agreement with the democratic principles which, according to the Constitution, form the basis of our intergalactic policy, we declare null and void the imperials' unilateral, abusive act of taking possession of the planet *Creusa*."

In order to demonstrate our firm decision to take an active attitude against hegemonist tendencies and our capacity to oppose force with force, we have ordered the demonstrative destruction of the asteroid *Antiphus* !..."

Intergalactic Force of Discouragement Number One
Time : 0 : 38.

Sitting in the fighting armchair, commander Dym, assisted by his main collabotators, was waiting for the result of the ordered volley, without showing the slightest emotion. In front of him, the lonely planet seemed caught in the red and green map squares that framed it in the sights of the hyperspatial launcher.

"Temporal and material reconversion of the vector at the expected point !" came the artillery commander's whistling voice from the loudspeakers.

At the same time with the countdown appearing quickly on the screen, the computer's sweet, womanlike voice could be heard :

"Nine, eight, seven... zero. Target hit !"

A momentary flash and then a milky glow whose luminiscence was diminishing as the cloud of rock fragments, gas and ice crystals dissipated in space.

Antiphus was no longer there.

Imperial Task Force "Alpha"
Time : 0 : 43

"Your Excellency will be so kind to notice that, using the language of chess, our enemy has made the first move, adopting the tactics called *burnt land*".

"Am I to understand, commander, that we are to capture the next chessman ?"

"You are right, baron! *Deiphobus*!..."

Intergalactic Force of Discouragement Number One
Time : 0 : 51

In the didactic tone he used in moments of stress, commander Dym addressed his officers :

"Gentlemen, it should be clear to everybody that the discovery of this outlying planetary system has seriously affected the initial strategic equilibrium. To re-establish it, a small number of solutions are available to bring succes by maintaining the tactical initiative. The analysis of the situation which follows from the destruction of *Deiphobus* by the Imperials was made in accordance with above-mentioned exigencies and shows the target on wich we shall concentrate our attention : the planet *Creusa*! At your positions, gentlemen !"

Imperial Task Force "Alpha"
Time : 0 : 59

While watching *Creusa* disintegrating, with his glass almost empty in his slightly trembling hand, Baron Pancratius told commander Knapp in an nondissimulated sad tone :

"You see, commander... One would say that an onomastic predestination is also possible ! There's a legend in the Greek mythology that tells about the night when Troy was on fire, a night when *Antiphus*, *Deiphobus* and *Creusa* died. They were the children of *Hecuba*, Priam's wife... Doesn't the resemblance to the present events seem strange to you ?"

Commander Knapp turned to the baron in surprise and answered a little embarrassed :

"I'm soldier by profession, Your Excellency. I have never had time for cultural, humanitarian preoccupations... But, if I am allowed, I should like to ask you something. What happened to *Hecuba* ?"

"She fell into *Odysseus*'s hands as a captured war victim. Later she found her death in the seawaves..."

Commander Knapp mused on for several moments and then he seemed to have found his usual equilibrium, for he exclaimed triumphantly :

"The evolution of the military operations now in progress require tactical solutions that will change the end of your legend. This time *Hecuba* will die together with her children !"

"Do you mean that the destruction of the star is to follow ?"

"Perfectly right, baron ! As a matter of fact, there is nobody for whom

Hecuba can shine any longer and thus the very essence of the conflict could be eliminated. The strategic equilibrium would be re-established by returning to what is called *statu quo ante bellum*..."

The baron drank at a draught the contents of the always-at-hand glass and shouted in an irritated voice :

"Oh, this tactics and strategy !"

"Your Excellency !" exclaimed commander Knapp worried.

"O.K., O.K... Let's admire then how a star is dying, if this is what the rules of the game say !"

From the speech given a year later, at the opening of courses at the Federal War Academy, by General Dym, now dean and Chief Commander of Spatial Armada :

"... At the same time, gentlemen, you will adopt the new concepts that are the basis of our military doctrine, in the light of the latest conquests of the contemporary military art. Among these prevails, of course, the concept according to which the main strategic goal is the intact preservation of our offensive potential. Gentlemen cadets, among the tactical means which will help us to reach our goal we can distinguish the tactics of avoiding direct confrontation with our enemy on the one hand and the tactics of total destruction of the significant material bodies in the given battlefield on the other hand..."

In the light of these conquests of military science, for the future we must take into account the preventive destruction of all the outlying stellar systems so that we can create between us and our enemy a deserted space for manoeuvres, known as *nobody's land* since ancient times..."

News broadcast by Intergalpress Agency

"Sources close to the Imperial Military House tell that Baron General Pancratius, His Majesty's representative for general Knapp - who was the commander of *Imperial Task Force "Alpha"* during the incident in the *Hecuba* area - has been secretly released from all his responsibilities. Forced domicile has also been imposed on the baron.

It is believed that these measures have been taken as a result of the irritation caused at Court by the obstinacy with which Baron Pancratius added to his nobiliary titles a new, that of *THE LAST SURVIVOR OF THE PLANET CREUSA*..."

Translated by ANTUZA GENESCU



FATHERLY CARE



LUCIAN IONICA

Lucian Ionica was born in 1952, in Timisoara and has published two books: *Ziua confuza*, Ed. Albatros, Bucuresti, 1983 (*The Confused Day* - SF short stories) and *Tarcu*, Ed. Facla, Timisoara, 1989 (a documentary novel about a mountain named "Tarcu" and the men who are living there). He also contributed to five SF short stories anthologies published in Romania. He has also directed a number of documentary films. Now, he is teaching *visual communication* in the Department of Journalism at the University of Timisoara.

old man with common looks, white, rich hair, moustache, not too manifest wrinkles, and worn out, but neat, clothes, of which he was probably fond. He looked like a merry man, in full health, eager to live more than a hundred years. If he hadn't been a little stupefied with sleep, looking now like a grandfather caught unprepared for some trick of his grandsons, probably he would have seemed less sober, perhaps even brisk, perhaps even cheerful. How odd. If he hadn't have had the most weighty assurances, if he hadn't been told about events which made undeniable proofs, he wouldn't have believed that this man, so common, who wouldn't have been noticed by anything in the street, had an outstanding, strange gift: knowledge of the near or further future of mankind and of a single and anonymous person. He had heard Acateu didn't use a tea cup, playing cards or a crystal ball. He speaks to you, looks at you, you put to him your questions and he, simply and solely, answers you as though reading from a book, without disclosing the least effort.

But there was a reason why some of the people who were persuaded about the power of the old man, didn't resort to his help. His prophecies, without being false, referred only to unpleasant events. He had a depressing reputation. People avoided him, not wanting to live with the dread of waiting for unhappy incidents, if you still can call them incidents. The old man said it was the "tribute" to pay for being out from the natural state of affairs. There were some who believed that in fact it was nothing but a question of a subjective bias for sad events or for the sad side of the events and another mental pattern would be able to disclose the happier side of the future. Others maintained that the tragic is easier to grasp and this propensity was nothing but the result of indolence. Anyway, these were only assumptions. What was left was that a man, happy in his everyday life, after prophesied sad events.

Perea felt something cold sliding down his backbone, making him shudder.

He began:

- I think the name Perea isn't unknown to you. You probably remember Monica Perea and Maria Perea, my wife and daughter.

- Of course, it was an interesting case.

- It's precisely this "case" about which I want talk. It's a rather knotty matter, perhaps very knotty, but it needs a solution. And you're the only person who can settle it, because of your contribution in bring it into being.

- Please carry on, I'm listening, said Acateu, without showing either interest or boredom.

- Not so long ago, began Perea, about a month in fact, you had the kindness both, to receive my daughter Monica, recommended to you by our common friend, Mr. L., and to answer a few questions concerning her future. I believe this wish of hers was mere a childish freak, taken too seriously by Mr. L. who resorted to you. I don't blame her curiosity, nor the fact you helped her find out what she cared to know, although she, too, could have lived the way we, the older generation, lived, without knowing the future events of our lives and their succession. What is unfortunate is that we, her parents, didn't know anything about her visit before finding out only much later, when things took an... let's say, unpleasant, turn. Happily nothing irretrievable occurred.

Acateu was beginning to guess the reason of the call, and to impress the girl's father, he decided to give him full details. He chimed in, breaking in upon his word:

- I think it would be suitable if I tell you the way the appointment with your daughter took place. I told her that, although appearances are against me, that is, although "serious" scientists won't consider precognition as a real fact, and in some dictionaries the word doesn't even appear, I do know what will happen to some individual or to another, or what will happen to an object, a phenomenon or how a certain situation will develop. Everything beyond "this" instant, standing in the future, comes into my mind like a novel or a newspaper article recently read.

Being such an important matter, most people think I'm an impostor. Even those to whom I prove, in some way or other, my precognitive gifts, prefer to label me in any way possible rather than granting that there is a "something", yet unexplained by science, that surpasses their understanding. Therefore they reject an inconvenient truth.

"Allow me" said your girl," to suggest to you, a very simple method by which you could substantiate, in a matter-of-fact way, to the whole world, the gift you own: enter the lottery, not only the national one, but all the lotteries in the world. Let's suppose you win for a whole year all the money called into play. Then you would turn rich. People are very sensitive to wealth, especially to wealth won over night. You couldn't find a better argument as this one. You'll be able as to buy the whole world. What would it then matter to you if someone would or wouldn't believe in your remarkable gift?"

I told her, "You have a rich fancy.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, I simply can't do what you tell me to do. I have to confess, I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what, of the law, of thieves? Knowing everything which happens, you can escape any kind of danger. You have nothing to be afraid of! You're an extraordinary man. Probably you already know the scientific inventions of the future. Tought you the future enters the present. It's magnificent! I don't understand why don't you take action!"

"I'm afraid. It is not a question of some material threat, I'm not afraid of something particular, it's a metaphysical awe, without object. If I'm trying to see the future of some things I feel "forbidden", taboo; before me gapes a deep, black chasm I stagger, everything whirls around my head, I'm sick, helpless and worn out, I have no more energy, I feel like losing my way. I once tried to fight, to defy myself, or, who knows, somebody else... and all energy flowed from my body, I was even left without any will so much so that I kept to my bed for several days. In these instances I felt I am infringing a rule... and I give up. There is probably a little mysticism in what I've told you, but who can be certain to be left "normal" if he suddenly finds himself with such a gift, or power or however you call it?"

In brief, she then asked me to tell her when she will get married, with whom and how they will live together - a natural desire for a girl of her age. I only described to her what I saw very distinctly before mind's eye, in that incomprehensible for me, and so far for anyone else, space: she'll marry in her second year of college with a fellow-student from a higher year, she'll have a baby, a girl, but six years later they'll separate because of her parents, especially because of her mother, who makes life a burden for the young ones. She didn't allow me to look further in the future, but she asked for further details about the period of time I had already told her of. At first she didn't believe me or didn't want to believe me and tried to take everything as a joke. Or perhaps, simply, she didn't grasp that her own life was at stake and it wasn't only a story. Step by step, the preposterous inevitability of the future pushed in on her and she went away dismayed. Don't believe her case didn't affect me, even though people generally leave here defeated and I have had to become indifferent to their sufferings. I'm sorry for them, but what can I do? I have wondered many a time if it is a good thing to disclose to them the future, if I shouldn't remain silent? But I haven't the nerve nor the

The bell whirled once and then again. Acateu didn't wake up. His legs were stretched out, one hand hung over the arm of the easy chair while the other was about to fall from his chest. His head was thrown back, the mouth half-open.

The caller rang again, this time pressing the bell a long time. He seemed unruffled and determined to wait, knowing that somebody must be home, perhaps the very person he sought.

At the fourth ringing, Acateu leapt to his feet, stupefied with sleep, and stood so, without moving. He listened for a few moments. He heard only the blood throbbing in his ears. Step by step, the objects surrounding him regained their outlines, sizes and colours.

He half-opened the door and saw a well-dressed, even fashionable man, of about forty-five years of age. He said:

- I want to speak, please, to Mr. Acateu.

- That's me, what can I do for you?

- My name is Eugen Perea, I don't know if this name means anything to you...

Acateu opened wide the door and asked the stranger in.

He moved cautiously into the living-room where his host had been sleeping till two minutes before he entered. He made a careful detour round the newspaper left on the floor and sat ill-at-ease on the edge of the sofa. The tips of his fingers seemed to secrete slight fidgets. He considered curiously Acateu. An

strength of mind. I don't send for them, they come to me. To remain silent when they inquire about their future means to interfere with their lives, to alter their subsequent development, against their will. I don't have the right to do it, the more so as I don't know if the result will be positive or negative. I have resigned myself. Now I don't wonder any more. If anybody asks me, I gratify his curiosity. The responsibility is upon those who ask, not upon me.

- Well, but sir, what you told the girl is abhorrent! How can you fancy that we, her parents, having only her on earth, would wish her ill or would try to ruin her happiness? It's awful! Your actions are unspeakable! Because of what you've said, a family has been set at variance with itself!

- I'm sorry if this has happened, but I don't "fancy", I tell the truth, that is only what I see. Perhaps you'd have wished me not to tell her the truth, but to deceive her, "dear girl, you'll get married to Prince Charming and you'll live happily a thousand years, having children and countless grandchildren?" Unfortunately I can't do such a thing, or perhaps it's not allowed to me, somebody who has the guts to wish to know his own future has to have the guts to go all the way and find out even unexpected things. If you're persuaded I can see into the future as you can into the past, you'll have to recognise I'm right.

For a while, they kept silent. Acateu seemed to be passing final sentence. Perea went on fussing about. It was clear he hadn't yet said everything he had to say. The next assault had to be final and win victory; therefore he prepared it with more care:

- O.K., but it isn't the most important matter and it isn't the reason for my visit. Should I go on? After this conversation, Monica didn't say anything at home, she only shrank more into herself. We noticed at once that something happened, but to our questions her answer was always that everything was O.K., that nothing had happened and that we had no reason to worry.

Then, by God knows what strange combination of ideas, or perhaps it was entirely coincidental, my wife felt like finding out the future of the girl, by going to a fortune teller. Neither me, nor the girl knew anything about this. She didn't reach a fortune teller, but you, and found out what she wished to know. Nothing wrong as far, if the fate you prophesied now for my daughter hadn't differed so very much from that prophesied the first time. You alleged the second time that Monica will marry a fellow-servant two years after taking her B.A. degree, she'll lose the child owing to a miscarriage, and her husband will die in a car-crash caused by himself.

The contradiction is obvious. If

you really can see the future, which can't be but just one, how could you prophesy for one and the same person two different futures?

Acateu felt very lonely. He was accustomed to such kind of scenes. He looked at the man before him having as if he was watching a movie or a play on P.V. and with the idea that he could at any time change the channel or turn the set off. How about freezing the frame in a instant? He uplifted gently his hand and Perea halted, waiting for an answer.

- You're not the first who fining out that unpleasant or even tragic events are to be expected for him, protests by charging me with lies and quackery. Like so many others, you're giving proof of cowardice; you haven't the guts to live with the knowledge of what will happen. People don't have very different kinds of response when they find out their own future. Most of them try to cheat, believing they'll succeed in averting what they don't like. Futile hope. If such a thing would be possible, that would mean I make false prophecies. Or the future I see takes into account just the fact that the subjects know their future and will act as such. If they wouldn't come to ask me, they would have another thread of life.

If your daughter had never met me and hadn't asked me the questions she asked and therefore hadn't heard the answers, surely she would have had another life. Perhaps hap-

pier or perhaps less happy, I have no means of finding out. The first variant was true, but it is no longer so. By your wife's intercession the future of the girl changed.

Perea attempted a last opposition, being sure he'd detected a contradiction in the old man's words.

- Finding out what you prophesied for her, Monica had two possibilities: to tell us or not to tell us. The question arising is following: would her future be the same in both cases? But going further: the variant of the girl's future you apprized my wife of has been told to me. By the fact I took notice of it, is it changed or isn't it?

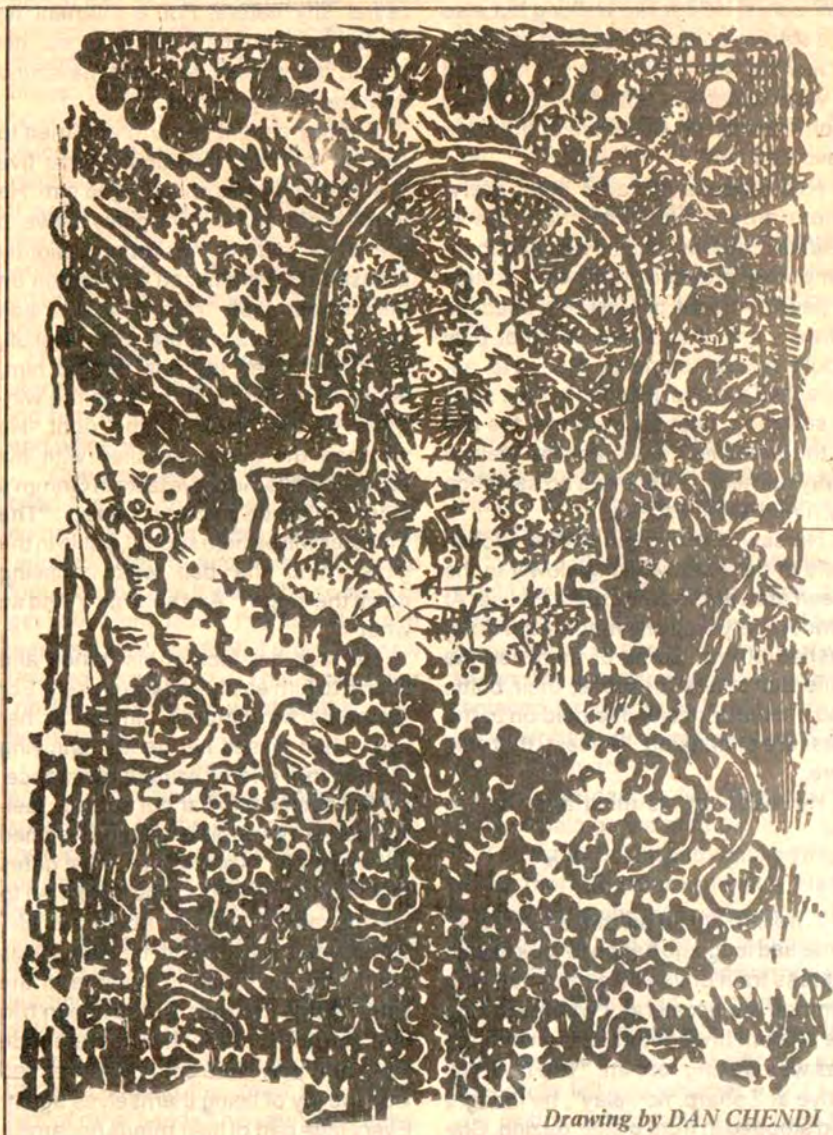
- The answer is obvious, by plain retelling events don't change, they will happen just so long as somebody else doesn't come to me for fathoming out the future of the person involved. Your mistake lies in believing I don't take into account the possibility for the subject to disclose to another person what he finds out here. You forget that I know from the beginning if the subject will do it or won't, and the picture I present of the future pays heed to that matter. If the mental structure of your daughter had stimulated her to confess herself, her resolution wouldn't have changed the subsequent accomplishment of the events, but in this case, my story would have been another, because it would come to a different woman. The gesture of somebody coming to inquire for the future of another per-

son is an accidental event. Therefore its bearing will raise modifications I can't forestall. The former explanation was of logical nature. There is an explanation of another nature: what matters is the immediate attendance just as the precognition takes place. Do you really think that to listen to the prophecy right there and then when it happens or to listen to it subsequently, suppose recorded on tape, is the same thing? No, my dear sir, you're deeply wrong! I can't explain to you more than that. Everything is very intricate. It would have been very well if I could master the laws of the knowledge of the future and if I could offer them to anybody's understanding. I resigned myself and now I'm satisfied with empirical obviousnesses, without striving any more to find out why this way and that way occurs. As I have come to realize in all these years, the future of a man or of all men isn't wholly predetermined; however it can be "guessed". It's a paradox like so many others we have got used to and we don't even notice any more. If you can't believe what I say, I won't be angry. The future will prove me right.

Perea had nothing more to say. He owned himself beaten. What else could he do?

The night was falling. The street was empty. A biting wind carried the dry leaves rolling them along the pavement. How strange everything now appeared to him: the absence of people, the lights of the headlights, the illuminated shop windows, the white of the traffic markings. A shudder made him shrink. Could he cause an improvement by asking Acateu to look once again into the future of the girl? It was more than likely. He looked for a public telephone and made for it. But what if things are going to get even worse? That equally likely. Still, something had to be done. Even the old man says his prophecies can be changed, and if that's so there must be a way for mastering the future. We can't allow ourselves to drift. I must take action as quickly as possible, before it is too late. Even if my intercession happens to cause changes for the worse, I could ask some relative or friend to go to the old man and inquire about what exactly the future has in store for Monica. And if even this one fails, I could ask another, and so on, until there is someone whose intercession brings an amelioration about. But should I be content with an improvement, shouldn't I wish then to get more? Shall I know when to cease?

He remained hesitating with the receiver in his hand. It was dark, silence broken only by the tone of the telephone was heard very heavily.



Drawing by DAN CHENDI



CONSTANTIN COZMIUC

He was born in 1952. He graduated the Chemical Engineering Institute and is now principal research-worker at the Chemical Centre of the Romanian Academy.

His passion for the SF literature and the sciences connected with it has naturally brought him among the SF writers. He has published short stories, novellettes, essays and articles in many magazines: PARADOX, HELION, ORIZONT and in the almanac ANTICIPATIA. Part of his works appeared in a number of anthologies, among which one, TIME IS OUR SHADOW, is entitled after one of his stories. In 1992, together with professor William Marin, he published the novel REVOLT IN COSMOS. Since 1991 he has been the editor of a weekly page dedicated to SF and the bound sciences, in RENASTEREA BANATEANA, page that appears in JURNAL DE TIMIS at present. In 1992 he edited the French anthology *The Deep Time Valley* (VALEA TIMPULUI PROFUND), that was offered to him by the French critics Stephan Nicot and Alain Grousset.

The period 1984-1989 meant for Constantin Cozmiuc many prizes at the yearly national conventions of SF. In 1987 he was awarded a prize for his whole activity in the field.

The critic Cornel Robu defines Cozmiuc the writer in the following way: "...first there is a realistic manner of presentation, but this level is doubled by the level of a perception in the nonpresentable... On the first level the author is natural and detached, but at the same time genuine (there is a stylish touch of a regional picturesque) and cosmopolite (with a touch of Western exotism) - one of Janus's faces worn either alternatively, from one story to another, or simultaneously...

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN is one of Cozmiuc's latest creations that illustrates his inclination for the character in such a manner that the reader does not know whether he is the character himself or whether the author is making a confession.

"The fifth signal will strike five to Z." The bips stirred horror shrieks in the square. The crowd stood stone-still while listening to the loudspeaker's announcement, but the sounds caused a strange reaction, as if all the fear - kept hidden in the peoples' hearts - had suddenly overflowed through their throats. Some of them knelt down, lifting their wet-with-tear faces to the huge moon, a Chinese lantern hanging, over their heads. A group of kids were drugging themselves with "Aurolac"; others, more enterprising, with ether drugs stolen from the hospitals where only dying people still lay.

THE FINAL

The streets thronged - a real human throng in which each was doing what crossed his mind, not caring about anybody around. On the steps of the Cathedral a group of young men and women were raping one another, backed by a band of supporters, too old to take part in the rape themselves. Standing in the light thrown by the flames of the burning City Hall, they encouraged the others while sucking from a bottle. At the open air cinema "Fear Is the Key", was on, the seats almost empty. The few watchers found the cinema an ideal place to do all that pornographic magazines had implanted in their conscience. The bodies of the drunkards overwhelmed with torpidity and not curious to watch the end of the world were lying near the kerbs. Some of them would be unlucky enough if they woke up a few minutes before it began.

He didn't give a damn about the people around him. Long before the clocks of the planet started the final countdown to Z Hour, an impenetrable wall had separated him and his world from the others and their own world's end. The throng pushed him to and from but he didn't care, he had no precise direction. Any house in the city could be his now; nobody waited for his end locked in a house, everybody wanted to share it with the others. Because of the fear, because they were curious to watch the last live performance and hoped to live a second longer than the man next to them. But he showed no interest in that either. He felt like walking but also like staying somewhere in the open air, to feel the warm breeze in his hair and to watch what was left of the sky till the moment it fell down on him or the stars absorbed him.

Red tongues of flame grew everywhere around him. The mob was in delirium, shrieks, cries. Here and there temporary preachers gathered groups of people - flocks of quiet and obedient lambs - and they surely felt that they would not go alone to God. He approached a group, listened to their song of salvation, until his eyes met the call in the preacher's eyes and he walked away hurriedly. There was no salvation for him. He felt listless.

He saw a young girl with a kitchen knife in her hand walking slowly in the green area around the Opera House. At almost every step she made a drunkard dashed at her. Some of them felt the knife but others looked at their bottle and presently decided to hold on to the pleasure of drinking. At least that was sure.

He made up his mind and went to her.

x x x

"The fifth signal will strike four to Z" Time had long ago began to look like an express train driven by a madman who jammed the accelerator when entering the station. Impenetrable, the concrete wall was waiting for him. "The train will arrive at Z sharp, no delay", he thought and stopped in front of her, gazing. She

saw him, but was incapable of reacting. She recoiled, then a thought obsessively overwhelmed her, like the sound of a ball rolling down the steps: "And so what? And so what?" The fifth signal died and the weepings of the crowd could be heard again. Her hand with the knife hesitated a little, then the blade went down.

"Leave it", he said, naturally, as if they had known each other since their childhood. "We won't need it, I've got a gun..."

The ball was rolling down the steps again: "And so what? And so what?" She gazed at him trying to examine him after the reflection of the flames in his eyes. A few metres from them a man jumped out of the window and pushed himself on the wrought iron fence. He was shuddering spasmodically now, his eyes peeping at the blood puddle growing under him. Another man had broken his back in a tree and was now shouting at the top of his voice, hanging on the branches. Behind the girl, the Opera House was burning, throwing huge flames up to the sky, flames trying to bite the moon. "She's not a beauty, but her look is terribly interesting," he noted harshly.

He caught her arm and tried to lead her through the maddened crowd, thinking that beauty had no importance at all as the world would end in less than four hours. He stopped to stroke her cheek tenderly, feeling a strange attraction which contradicted his isolated and rather shy nature. For a moment he waited for the sharp blade to cut his throat, but instead he heard the sound of metal hitting cement.

A gipsy caught her arm and tried to pull her, grinning mockingly; other five or six other gipsies encouraged him. He took the gun and shot the gipsy between the eyes without hesitation, slightly amused by the amazed expression on the blackish face. "Now or later, it's all the same..." Leaving the gipsy's skull, the bullet killed the one behind him, finally becoming lost towards the windows of the block on the right. He watched the gipsie satisfied with his efficiency, like the brave tailor in Grimm's story. An inside voice whispered: "The monster will be here soon!", while in the girl's mind the ball was bouncing down the steps: "And so what? And so what?"

He took her face in his hands and lifted it to him easily and wordlessly. For moments he mirrored himself in her eyes, then kissed her gently, enjoying the rich fruit offered without resistance. He felt such a familiar but strange feeling that he moved his cheek and watched her eye balls - black like tunnel gates that lead "to the other side". He tried to tell her about himself, about his life, about what he thought he had in his heart and then tried to breathe in the same things from her. But he needn't do that, the gates of their hearts were wide open and they were both overwhelmed with the joy of being themselves again. Every little part of their minds became a

sound, the sound combined and composed a hymn to which they listened in silence, getting their lips closer again, shy like teenagers.

"Will you come to me?" he asked directly, breaking the spell.

She watched him seriously, as if she were angry for the disappearing wonderful moment, but her eyes gleamed in approval. She smiled and said kindly:

"Why your place? Almost all town is ours!"

With a sweeping gesture she pointed to the square surrounded by high buildings, some new, some old, whose windows seemed cold and impassable glass eyes peeping at the coming disaster.

"I want it to be my place. You'll see why, you won't be sorry... There the time we have doesn't matter any longer..."

She watched him in surprise while he looked at the clock of the Cathedral. A few minutes passed, buried by the crowd's uproar. He looked at her and said:

"Come on, listen to me, this will be the first and the last time..."

x x x

"The fifth signal will strike three to Z" In the park near the Cathedral the catastrophe seemed to have already started. It was just like atmosphere in a Zoo when the animals start to fret, sensing an earthquake. The ground was vibrating easily as if afraid of Z hour. A guy passed them and shouted "Buy cyanide, buy cyanide!"; then he saw the gun and crept quickly along the bushes.

He held her with one hand, the other clenched on the gun butt. He still had three full magazines in his pockets, enough till they reached his place. On the bridge people were quietly tying stones to their necks and were waiting in silence to throw themselves into the water.

"Why are they so impatient? They still have three hours left", she asked, horrified.

"Because they are afraid", he answered coldly and didn't even look at them.

He bent and picked up an earring from the ground. Then he gave it to her wordlessly, took her hand and walked on. A man was reading a book in the moonlight in front of Saint Mary's statue. So absorbed was he by the book and so passionately was he reading that he gave up his intention to ask him for a match. A littler farther flames were rising from the hunters' shop so he could light it there. But he forgot about it and put his arms on the girl's waist, trying to catch her glance. It was calm and clear.

A gang of youngsters carrying clubs stopped in their way a few corners ahead. Their leader, a boney, beardless and clumpy-eared youth made for him, closely followed by his troupe. "Leave the whore and run!" he ordered, throwing short glances to those behind him. He took the gun and shred the whole maga-

COUNTDOWN

zine in him ; he shot upwards, the last bullet between the guy's eyes. He fired calmly and indifferently as if he were on the shooting stand. Yet he had no satisfaction that each shot killed two or three men at the same time. He didn't care, he was in a hurry. When the leader fell down, the others disappeared in the side streets.

The rest of the way was silent ; they kissed while walking. As they walked away from the square the mob became less dense as though attracted by an imaginary centre of disaster. But the explanation was different, the rich shops in the central area offered more possibilities for a plenteous banquet. The suburbanites had seldom had the opportunity to enter the luxurious restaurants. If they found nothing in them now, they could at least anticipate the catastrophe by breaking the Venetian mirrors or, if luckier, by tasting the whores who for the first time were doing their "job" so ardently as if for the last time.

Then arrived in front of his block. He stopped, came closer to her and kissed her more and more passionately.

"Don't you think we don't have enough time ?" she asked with a slightly ironical, sad smile. Her eyes showed joy, desire and resignation at the same time.

He smiled and shook his head, then invited her into the building with a sweeping gesture, the gesture of a nobleman who invites his lover to his castle. A man was hanging from the drain pipe on the rooflet. She shrank when she had to walk behind his legs, especially on seeing his tongue stuck out in mockery. "He did it because he was afraid, too. He had been afraid of death all his life and he committed suicide because he was afraid of another way to die." He repeated this idea not paying any attention to the hanged man. They took the elevator and stood embraced in it. When they arrived at his door, he didn't bother with the key, but kicked it with his foot. The building was empty, only from one flat came the sound of the radio announcing that the Power Station was ready to deliver light till the final moment.

x x x

"The fifth signal will strike two to Z" They started to undress feverishly, their hands moved by themselves, their eyes linked by an invisible thread. Stiffled peals were coming from outside, but they passed by them without affecting them, as though flying over another world. She stuck to him like a caressed cat, then she went to sit the armchair, covering her breasts with the hands. He looked surprised. She started to talk. Her voice resembled the purring of a cat.

"I don't want to excuse myself", she whispered, "but I'd like to talk before..."

She left the sentence unfinished, as if embarrassed or not knowing what words to use. He smiled in approval then he took her hand and they went to the window together. The city looked like an

évocation of Rome during Nero's last stage of delirium. Flames were biting buildings all over. The gas installations blew up one after another. On the outskirts the fuel tanks had become huge torches raised in honor of The End of the World. In her eyes the disaster was less terrifying and coming death stirred wonder instead of horror.

"Why is all this going on ?" she voiced her dilemma, sticking to him.

"Why not ? We would have arrived here anyhow, in a year or maybe in a million years... Fate has chosen us to be those to live out this event. We're unique, can't you see? Nothing remains after us, nobody to see that we've died."

She kept silent, trying to understand his passiveness.

"You may be right", she said eventually. Still, I'm glad we've met, at least now. I'm only sorry that our time together is so short... Who knows we might have lived happily, in light..."

He smiled sadly and caressed her hair. His words came with difficulty, but after the first had been said, the others came as if hurried to release themselves from a soul in which they had stood hidden :

"The light, yes. You know, Cathy was a nice little girl but she was born blind. She had never seen the light. Her mummy told her about colours and shapes, but she could only touch them and imagine how beautiful they were and what the shining meant. One day her mother came and told her that the doctor had given her an outment. If she salved her eyes with it, everything she dreamt could come true. Little Cathy began to salve her eyes full of hope. "Can you see ?" her mother asked, her voice trembling with impatience. "No, mother, I can't", the girl answered. "Try it again, you'll see how beautiful the world is, how the stars shine, what wonderful colours the flowers have. Try again. Can you see now ?" "No, mother", the girl said again.

He stopped, sorry to have begun the story. She watched him in wonder, urging him to continue. Finally he sighed and went on :

"Can you see now ?" "No, mother!" cried the girl, frightened that she was doing the wrong thing. And mother laughed heartily and said : "You little fool, you thought it would be so easy to get your sight back ? I've fooled you ! It was gasoline, you fool, if only you knew how you look now... That's what her mother said. That's what Mother Destiny told us..."

He kept silent and she looked down and sighed. Outside two gangs fought a knife battle for the last vodka bottle in the district. Three youngsters were writhing on the ground, keeping their bowels in with their hands and crying, their eyes wide open to the moon laughing at them. The tower of the Cathedral was burning like a torch in the distance. He didn't bother to take his binoculars as he could easily imagine the group of crazy people climbing the tower with canisters of oil in hands ; he saw them in his

mind, the ardent movements of their hands spilling the oil, then the flames and they howling with pain and indignation, their hands lifted up to the sky and their mouths wide open with anger and begging for compassion. Only the outskirts of the town seemed safe, but they were almost desolated.

"It is always better to stand a side, or, let's say almost always..." he said, pulling her closer to him. She took him in her arms passionately and looked in his eyes, calling them.

"Let me tell you why I've brought you here", he whispered. "A little before this... disorder I had my own little invention... a sort of a machine to connect minds. And it accelerates the thinking, de you understand ?"

"I was interested in cybernetics myself, but this idea has never crossed my mind. I might not have succeeded in finishing it... But tell me, have you put the machine to work... for people in our situation ? I mean..."

Her smile was malicious, but her look showed a silent call, indifferent to what has been before.

"No, I haven't, I know what you mean. I wanted to join two scientists' minds, to make them think faster. "It doesn't hurt, only two microprocessors on the temples, two adhesive disks..."

The vibration of the building stopped his words.

"Is it beginning ?" she whispered in fear. But he didn't read fear of death in her eyes.

"No", he encouraged her. "The Z Hour is the Z Hour. The Universe, however cruel it may be, is punctual. Don't be afraid, we have enough time. In a second we'll be one and the same person, for a thousand times. We couldn't have done this in a normal life. Let's have another cigarette..."

They sat both in the same armchair and lit a cigarette. The smoke enclosed them in the same cloud and they heard the voice :

x x x

"At the Z Hour it will be one to Z." A suicide could be seen in the burning window for a second. They both saw him but paid no attention.

"You're right", she said. "Maybe we would have parted in a year or two, if we had lived a normal life. We would have grown distanced from one another, who knows, the happiness would have been replaced by sorrow or indifference. At least our happiness will be eternal. But won't this machine..."

"No", he caught her idea. Ne, we shall remain as we are now."

They stood silent and watched themselves more and more intensely. He felt the desire rushing in his veins and trying to catch her kind look he thought. "Is there anything else behind hormones ? I shall never find out... It is as if you anointed your eyes with a salve that removes the fog but nobody has time enough to tell you whether it will help you or it is only gasoline. He took her

shoulders in his hands and his lips kissed her cheek. Then their mouths met and they kissed for long without hearing the jerky sound of the ball rolling down on the steps : "And so what ? And so what ?"

The slammed door made them part. A guy had seen the light and the open door. He entered, crossed the room without seeing them and threw himself down from the window. She tried to say something but he stopped her.

"He's got asthma, didn't you hear his breath ? It was too hard for him to climb up to the roof. It's the same goddamn thing..."

She smiled while he fixed the disks on her temples. Then they made for the bedroom, holding their hands like two children. She stopped in the kitchen, kissed him and pressed his lips with her fingers for fear he might interrupt her :

"I knew little Cathy's story, but differently. For me she a little pretty blind girl who wanted to sing very much. The fact that she might see had never crossed her mind, because she didn't know what that could mean. One day her father brought her a harmonica for her birthday. They had guests. She was very, very glad and started to play, urged by all those around. She played and enjoyed the sounds she made because, you know, blind people perceive them much more profoundly. It was late when she realised that everybody was laughing at her and asked them why. Her father told her, roaring with laughter, that it was a pity she couldn't see herself in the mirror... He had inserted a blade along the mouth of the harmonica..."

He caressed her, took her in his arms to the bedroom door as if she were a sleeping child. He whispered :

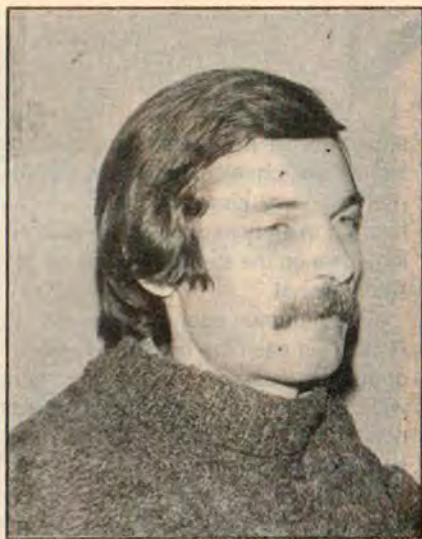
"Little Cathy lived in each of us. Some grown up and threw stones at and killed her, they became mothers and fathers and kept the gasoline and the harmonica at hand. Hence all this, maybe."

The bed received their bodies. They embraced one another wordlessly so that nobody could tell who he was, who she was. Their hands were running on their bodies feverishly to get as much information as possible, to offer more and more pleasure. Each offered and received pleasure for him self and for the other.

Their union was a fall in a newly born universe, each in his own universe and in the other's universe, two worlds which, when united, could threaten with immortality the end that was just about to come. When all the barriers between them were destroyed, when their souls interpenetrated in a last explosion, the clock struck Z.

x x x

"It's Z o'clock sharp : THE END OF THE WORLD HAS JUST BEGUN."



DUSAN BAISKI

Born on March 11, 1955, in Sinicolaul Mare, Timis County, Baiski's first book came out in 1984, when Facia Publishing House of Timisoara printed his volume of short stories "Averse izolate" (Isolated Downpours). In 1988, the same publishing house published another collection of his short stories, entitled "Radiografia unui caz banal" (Radiograph of a Common place Case). Two years later, in 1990, Kriterion Publishing House of Bucarest printed his volume of poems written in Serbian "Iubire intre umbre" (Love among Shadows). His next book, which came out under the aegis of Western Publishing House of Timisoara, is the Romanian version of "The First Book" of the Serb writer Milos Crnianski's novel "The Migrations", translated jointly with Octavia Nedelcu. His latest publication is "Luna si tramvaiul 5" (The Moon and Streetcar no.5), a collection of short stories printed by Marineasa Publishing House of Timisoara, which is now being prepared for publication "Piata cu paiate" (The Square with Jack Puddings), subtitled "Comedie balcanica in doua acte" (A Balkan Comedy in Two Acts).

Several of his short stories, poems, and translations have been published in Romanian and foreign journals and magazines. He has been a member of the Writers' Union of Romania since 1990. He is currently senior editor with the Timisoara - based general interest weekly "Agenda".

The waiting room on the other platform melted away and he looked at the sky through its roots: creosote soaked sleepers thinned and contorted reminding him of burned out matches; some birds, fallen asleep on a pile of sand, dreamed of autumn rains; reeds floated on the stinking odours of the bog; the banks of the Mures smouldered with greenish, pale flames whilst Morgan le Fay became entangled in the clouds on the far horizon.

In the cool of the office, stripped to the waist, a peaked cap on the back of his head, Station Master Pascu puzzled out crosswords.

Forgotten in the vaults of heaven, the July sun darted its rays at the back of Matei, the pointsman's neck pursuing him as he walked from sleeper to sleeper. Matei was coming from the watchman's hut. He had a five litre plastic container in his left hand and a wicker basket full of eggs in the other. His jacket was unbottened and, underneath, his chest was covered here and there with tufts of

RADIOGRAPH OF A COMMON PLACE CASE

reddish hair. Skinny like a horse, State property, he panted from the bottom of his belly at each and every step. He was full of drowsy, hazy thoughts which struck every nook and corner of his mind. He stopped. He put the wicker basket onto the gravel between two sleepers and raised his finger to his lips. It was only then that the handkerchief dressing his fingers could be seen. He warmed then with his breath, turned his head somehow out of fear, then, took the wicker basket and, off he went.

Life would have kept its own monotonous course if Matei had not left the watchman's hut all in a flutter. He entered the station master office, his jaw like a rag, and when he stretched out his hand to greet the other, his hand was trembling.

- What it is?
- Nothing, boss.
- I thought again...
- Not that. I gave it up. You know, the ulcer...

- You're shivering as if you'd seen the devil - remarked Pascu.

- I have... - chuckled Matei, the joke working as the other priggishly returned to his puzzle squares with the peakcap almost on the nape of his neck.

A smell of tobacco stained the air.
- Tomorrow I must carry an oil can - he managed to say, but, even this was mostly meant for himself, in case he should forget. The railway regulations were tough and the signal had to be lit up overnight.

- You could have slept at the watchman's hut. Who told you to come on such a scorcher? - said Pascu and he spat dry phlegm at the black floor.
- Yet, you smoked, boss.

Pascu was idly turning his head when his cap rolled off and into the middle of the office floor. Matei was standing still by the booking office, his eyes only betraying his heart beats.

- You could have put down the can and the wicker basket. I can see that the way up here has almost killed you. What made you do it, I wonder?

Matei didn't budge. He was just staring speechless. One more time Pascu sized him up and a few moments later, stood up, picked up his cap and puzzled, went out on the platform. A gust of wind, escaped from who knows where strained itself, tooting about the leaves of an aspen bush; at hen's clucking was heard; inexorably the heat rolled along the rails, choking the horizon in a transparent curtain of light; at the edge, two metal lines joined and rose to the sky in an infinite staircase. The sun was everywhere - an ill and forgotten sun.

He came back, cursing. The pointsman might have got a touch of sunstroke, he told himself. He resumed his weariness with passion. Several more minutes elapsed. In the office,

Matei's panting breath was in the air.

At long last, Matei put his baggage on the floor. Pascu idly turned to him.

- I say you've been drinking again!
- I didn't, boss.
- Then what's up with you?
- Nothing.
- The heat, ha...?, concluded Pascu and laughed nodding his head.

And yet, if something's gone wrong with him? - he asked himself. He looked again. Maybe, it was sunstroke, after all.

- The watchman's hut! - he winced as if whipped and flung himself out onto the platform again.

Shadowing his eyes with his hand, he gazed at the horizon to mark out the watchman's hut as usual. The hut, really a three quarters of a metre square room, was covered with red tiles. He squeezed his eyeballs until they ached and gazed at it once more.

- Blasted heat, he grumbled, and went back to the colness of his office.

For a moment, Matei was tempted to smile satisfied. But, Pascu's staring look cut out the impulse.

- It's hot, goddam' hot.
- It's hot, boss.

Silence had fallen asleep in a torpor on their shoulders when a sparrow began shrieking through the chestnut trees implanted in the platform. Pascu threw the puzzle magazine over a pile of tickets. Matei continued to lie flat on the floor, the same indefinite look in his eyes.

- It's hot, I say!
- It's hot, boss.
- I better fill your toy with gas - he said, and went down to the cellar. A rattling of metal cans was heard and silence flounced out, out of its wits.

It has cooled a little - said Pascu, moving outdoors. I feel like going for a ride. You told me your roof's leaking, I want to check it and make a report. You'll sign it, too. Maybe, I can also manage to get an oil stove. I think I need one. You know how it is, in summer you should provide for the winter.

- Right now? - exclaimed Matei in a dreadful tone, pointing his finger South to where the watchman's hut was supposed to be.

The station master put on his blue shirt with the Railway insignia marked upon it.

- Right now! - he said, determined and suddenly the hut with its red tiled roof loomed in his mind.

He went out on the platform. Still the hut was there. And it was smouldering in transparent flames. That meant he had seen nothing but an optical illusion before. He looked towards the village, tilted because of the heat. The tilted roofs didn't mean a thing to him. Not even the spires with their hanging leaves of the three churches in the centre of the

village. He was not a believer, but he wasn't an atheist, either.

- Come on, let me help you carry the oil can!

Matei made no reply, and stayed put. He didn't stir a foot. Pascu found him in the same position, slouching, his limbs stiff, and his look turned inward. He sized him, more irritated by himself who rejected all investigations; then, he seized him by his hand and dragged him out.

The heat also struck him on his hape and for a second he remained motionless, glaring at the sky. He locked the door, grabbed the oil can and, followed by the pointsman, he took the railroad towards the watchman's hut. Matei followed dutifully and subjected his hands in his pockets.

Aproximately ten minutes later, he started cursing his resolution. The shirt stuck to his back, his throat was parched, and Matei kept silent.

Only their footsteps could be heard kicking, now and then, the gravel between the sleepers. At times, a cabbage white butterfly ventured to take its flight in the sultry air and, after several flutterings, dropped, suffocated, among the blades of grass.

Pascu blinked several times. It seemed as if his sight became blurred. He turned to Matei. He was apparently walking, aimless, a dry look on his face and levitating somewhere in front of them. Matei stopped and bent towards the left rail. The iron was slightly dented and imprinted as if by huge teeth. He wanted to call for the other, but he was somehow afraid. Still, he took another dozen steps. Again, the same imprints. It also seemed as if the distance between the rails was not standard. The heat, he told himself, shouldn't make a mistake. Matei was waiting for just one mistake and he would tell the whole village that the station master has grown mad.

- It's hot.
- It's hot, boss, it's hot.

Then ran across a portion of distorted rail like spat out chewing gum. Pascu wanted to take it in his hand for closer examination but finally changed his mind. He was annoyed at Matei's lack of reactions. This one was stopping impassively forward as if he saw nothing around him.

Yet, maybe, he saw it too, but he is expecting me to say something and to make a fool of myself. He stepped forward.

- Surely, Matei, you haven't forgotten the reason why you get your wages, have you?

- I haven't, how can I forget it, boss? Ha, ha, ha!

- Rail gauge, well fixed rails, lots of sleepers...

- Sure, boss, that's what I dream of in

my sleep. Deformation profesionale, or whatever they call it, ha, ha, ha...

Matei stumbled over a portion of rail, but he immediately regained his equilibrium and quietly plodded on. Matei looked at the two metal lines which became lost on the horizon. Nothing was missing. And yet, every now and then, they were coming across large portions of iron rail. Matei stumbled again and this time ended up stretched out on the ground, his peak cap rolling downhill.

- But, what about this sleeper? - asked Pascu, putting down the oil can and trying to lift the sleeper.

- What sleeper, boss? - asked Matei, smiling.

- He would have liked to tell him that it was nothing, but he restrained himself. Anyway, he had an advantage over him. He felt Pascu completely at a loss and smiled again. Pascu jumped over the sleeper that was over the rails and helped Matei get to his feet.

- I thought you stumbled over the sleeper.

- The sleepers are properly set, boss.

- Yes, yes, they are well set. Now, come on!

They started to walk. Pascu quickly turned his head. He was in search of firm ground. But, there was no sleeper there. He turned again. The sleeper was there.

- Blasted heat!

- Did you say something, boss?

- It's quite hot!

- Surely, is!

He squinted at Pascu. His face was impenetrable. Drops of sweat oozed from under his cap. I must hold tight - said the pointsman to himself once more. Matei seemed to him to be growing with each step. He tried to spot his feet but saw a waving transparent screen instead, just like that on the skyline. He looked to where he knew his eyes should find them, but it got so dangerously close that it seemed it threatened to cave in upon them. He closed his eyes, cursing the heat.

The sleepers had grown, too. Am I melting myself, I wonder? - he shuddered. Matei was striding beside him with an air of indifference. He stretched out his hand to touch him.

- Where is your peak cap?

- Over there, answered the man, pointing somewhere ahead of them.

The peak cap was upside down, and Pascu thought it looked like a huge, blue mushroom, unexpectedly grown between the rails.

- Just mind your step, will you - he cried out imagining his companion tripping and falling down in the menacing valley stretching out in front of them. Pascu scowled at the sight of the valley that came out unexpectedly. Nothing in the straight and parallel lines would have let you guess its presence and still, there it was, the valley.

- I won't fall, 'cause I'm not drunk, grumbled Matei. You're hot, boss.

He took off his peak cap, wiped it on his jacket tail, dusted it off and then placed it back on his head. The valley started swelling and, a few steps further, became a hill, Matei perched on

the right rail, keeping his balance while stepping on it. Pascu stopped all of a sudden. He had run across some missing sleepers and an immense hole under the rails. He helplessly tried to catch sight of the pointsman, but, the fact that the other one has just decided to walk on the rails like a child, made him stop and consider the matter. He was deadly sure that what he saw, the pointsman also did, only that, ... only that it was all an illusion, a miserable optical illusion. No hole was to be seen anywhere, the rails were in their place, the gravel as well, the rails were meeting the sky-line, in the distance as usual.

Still, he got on the left rail. It was like "knocking on wood" against the evil eye or hexing. He started whistling a tune "Hey, tram..." A few seconds later, a raucous sound was heard in his throat. He gave it up and went down on the sleepers.

The boss is out of joint. Tank God, I didn't lose my balance right in front of the hole, otherwise he would have caught me thought the pointsman and he started whistling, too. Pascu was walking on pins and needles. His pretended high spirits vanished making place for his thoughts. The idea of a nervous breakdown began to torture him. He cocked his eyes to the horizon as if looking for help. His first thought was to stop, but with Matei by his side, he couldn't. Suddenly, the horizon turned white and approached rapidly. It was a huge mass of painfully dazzling white. He waited for the other to say something, to show his surprise as it was obvious he had seen

that, too, but he said nothing. He seemed not to care.

Pascu tried to whistle, several times. There was no trace of saliva in his mouth, and he was dying of thirst. He opened his eyes, wide, wheeling them round like a Yogi, but the horizon continued to float softly towards him, self-confident, knowing it would swallow everything in its way and that nobody could stand against it. Several times, he stepped off the rails, almost spraining his ankles.

Silken spiderthreads floated idly past him. In front, still more floated towards him just like horizontally falling snow. Three or four stuck to their blue-violet garments, leaving on them stains reminiscent of pigeon dirt. Pascu made an attempt at wiping them off, somehow disgusted, but the sticky strands of web stubbornly persisted becoming one with the thick fabric. He looked ahead of him at the cloud which was getting thicker and was on the point of swallowing him. It was as if millions of spiders were spinning on the horizon their endless flying cobwebs.

- What a summer, observed Pascu.

Matei breathed with difficulty. He used to gasp that way when his heart beats were uneven.

- What a summer, he said eventually, closing his eyes.

A strand of web caught in an eyelash and Matei hardly managed to get rid of it. Another one violently penetrated into his mouth, and nauseatedly he spat it out. Maybe, we should't have ventured on such a road. Had his boss really

wished to see the hut, he should have gone by himself. But regrets were now out of place. There was no turning back.

- Ow, exclaimed the station master.

He wished he hadn't uttered a sound, but the surprise rather than the pain, made him do it. He fingered his face just where he felt the sting. A few blood drops stained his fingers. Another bite could be felt on his ear. This time, Matei suppressed his laugh. He also felt a violent pain. In a flash he raised his hand to his face. There was nothing but a fragment of cobweb. They looked at each other.

- Hasn't it rained for a long time, now, said Matei.

He could surely do with some, answered Pascu.

A new sting this time on his hand, took him unawares; the pointsman started to grumble. His look followed his sleeve downwards. He opened his mouth, but was speechless. The fabric had cuts all over it. He looked again ahead and just in time raised his hands to protect his eyes. A few cobwebs hit the palms of his hands, scratching them. Pascu flung himself down, his face against the ground, squeezing himself between the sleepers. The other did the same, but a cobweb still managed to graze one of his eyelids.

For a while, they could hear nothing but their own breath. Then, the uproar began. It was a weak uproar. Dull blows on their clothes and caps. They buried their faces in the gravel hiding their hands beneath themselves.

- I should have told you, long ago, rumbled Matei, his face buried in his hands. But the other one couldn't hear. The uproar sucked in all other sounds.

"I could have at least untethered the dog", thought the pointsman. The image of the tethered dog was touching. He kept it chained to make it fierce. To be a good watcher at the hut. What if I die?, he asked himself and he made a cross with the tip of his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

Pascu's mind was blank. But his wasn't. The idea of having left the station unattended observed him. "Maybe Mat looks at me and laughs." A stray thought forced him to raise his head. His eyes filled with the tattered fragments of sticky flimsy cobwebs.

- It should have rained long ago, boss.

He jumped to his feet. Here and there fragments of cobweb were floating in the air.

- I'm so thirsty, I think I'll go mad, said Matei in jocular mood, feeling hot all over and yet having the creeps.

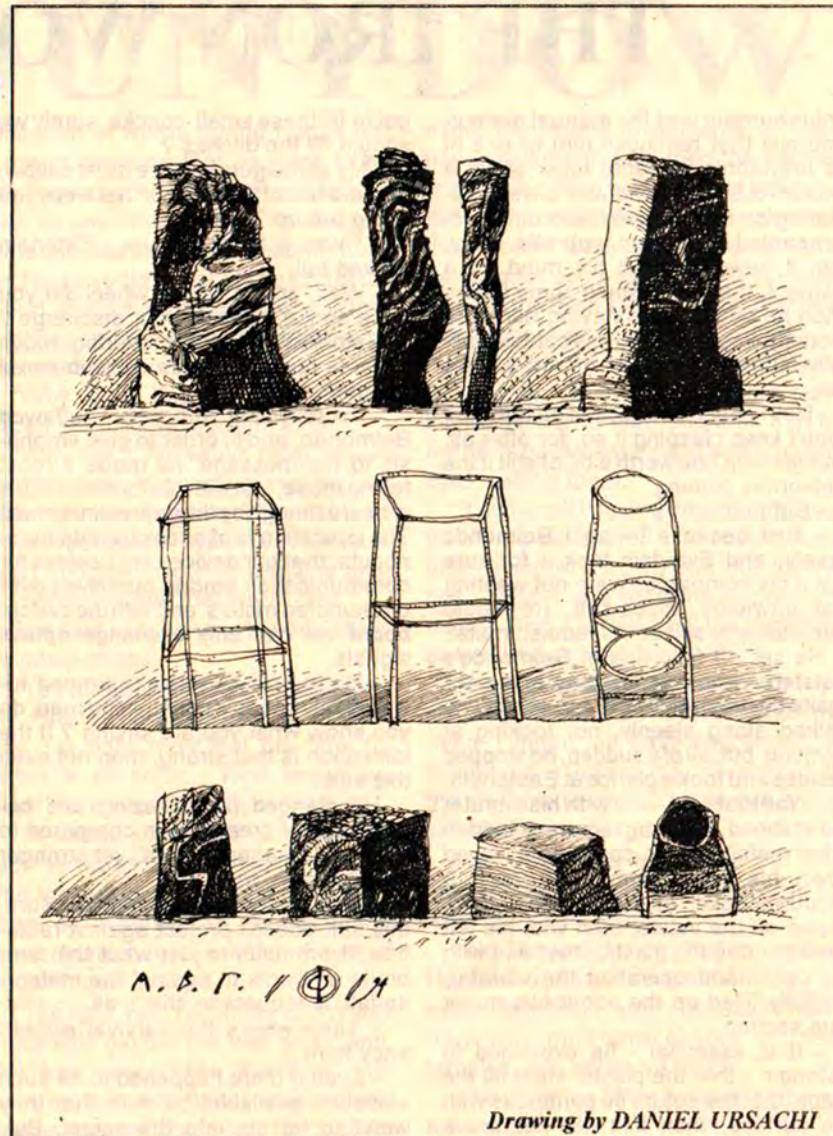
He had said it to please Pascu and was delighted at the way he'd done it.

They resumed their way in silence. Before that, nothing had happened. Or, it seemed as if nothing had happened. The horizon looked surprisingly clear and amazingly close.

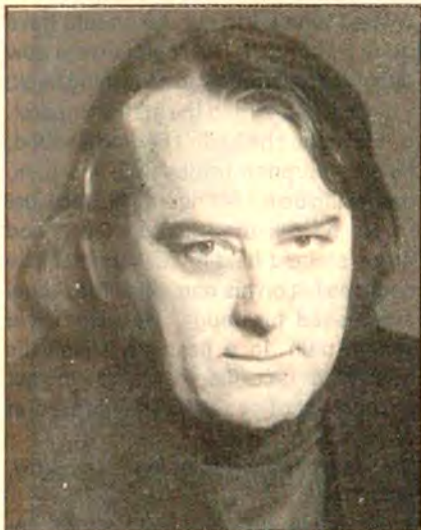
This chap mocks at me thinking I went mad cause of the sun, thought Pascu as he squinted at the pointsman.

"I got it, I wish to God he wouldn't", thought Matei, as he eyed the station master suspiciously.

Their eyes met.



THE IRON WORLDS*



GYÖRGY MANDICS

&

M. VERESS ZSUZSANA

György Mandics was born in Timisoara on 4th January 1943, he studied Mathematics and Theoretical Mechanics at the University of Timisoara, finishing the studies in 1965. From 1966 he spent seven years as a teacher in the high school in Jimbolia, and, after the foundation of first Editing Houses in Timisoara, became a reader of scientific books. From 1984 his profession has been as journalist on the Hungarian newspaper in Timisoara. At this moment he has written and published 21 books: poetry, literary theory, mathematical theory of modelling, semiotics, anthropology, history of civilisations and novels.

He is the winner of the Romanian Writer Union prize for the best book of literary study: An analysis of the semantic universe of Romanian mathematician and poet Ion Barbu (1977).

In the field of the S.F. he has published three books, all in tandem with his wife, now dead. Vasvilagok (Iron - Worlds), 1986 and 1987 (two editions) sold 100.000 copies. The book is winner of the Hungarian Union of S.F. clubs prize for the best book in Hungarian for the year 1987. Other books: Gubolakok (Cocoon - inhabitants) - 1988 and A dromos (The Dromos) - 1992.

for his humour was the manual meteor-umbrella that reminded him of one of his univision's favourite tales about a certain Robinson, who was always appearing on the obsolete recordings accompanied by such an umbrella. Truly, then it never crossed his mind for a moment, that there would come a time when he ought to be staying here and knottedly keep clasping this catastrophically ridiculous screen-off umbrella's bar.

- Hey! - Belmondo ticked off the chap - don't keep clasping it so, for after all, your life won't be worth a bit of shit if the meteorites coming.

- But then why?

- Just because! - said Belmondo tersely, and Esterlain took it for sure that if his companion were not wearing that unwieldy space-suit, he would unmistakably spit at the reddish metal.

He set off following in Belmondo's footsteps, who was trudging along opposite the cosmodrome. Apparently he walked along sleepily, not looking at anything, but, all of a sudden, he stopped besides and took a glance at Esterlain:

- Well that's it! - and with his vibrator rod stabbed at the zigzag crack hidden in the metal armour, comfortably layed down his bag, removed from it a vacuum-packet of plastic steel flamm, ripped off the velcro, then with his left hand pouring the plastic steef and with the right hand operating the vibrator, skillfully filled up the about two-meter long section.

- It is essential - he explained to Esterlain - that the plastic steel fill the crack; that the suture be continuous with the surface, then if it did not prove durable, the luckier for us, for the sooner we would be removed from the stasis.

Esterlain tried to imitate the experienced workman, but the meteorite-fall incessantly hindered his movement.

- Come on put it down next to you! Until you get accustomed to it, the best thing for you, is to wear this flower sticking into the felt - suggested Belmondo.

- If you wish to have a long life here at the plasterers, then only be attentive to the meteorite signals. That is, don't ever turn your back on the cosmodrome. And don't retract your neck in vain. But if the red lights are on, then get on your belly fast. For - he added in an explanatory vein - it is not the immediate danger so much as the Dirac-throws when they start operating. Then you are in for it! Fireworks. It pours with metal jet. Mostly it's then that the cracks occur. As you see, they are running radially.

Esterlain had an unceasing feeling that he was standing naked, unprotected in the drumfire of celestial bullete, so he moved along rather slowly, even though Belmondo visibly left behind only half sections which he himself filled up. All the same, they ultimately succeeded finishing the job.

Belmondo packed up the stuff, slipped the unused bags back into the portable, then assigned the next direction.

Here the roof was covered by larger brown patches, and Esterlain noticed reluctantly that he stumbled more and more on the roof's unevennesses, grooves, and roughnesses.

- Why doesn't anybody bother to repair this? asked Belmondo.

- What for? - replied the old man. - Not even a whole year's plastic steel allocation would be enough to fill up these ditches.

- But doesn't the floor grow weaker? Esterlain worried.

- Why should it?

- I just thought so, after all, if we've

got to fill these small coacks, surely we should fill the ditches?

- My colleague, you are most callow, You are not of this floor. What were you doing before?

- I was a federal buyer - Esterlain walked tall.

- Well, and in whose wheel did you put a spoke, causing your discharge?

Esterlain made a wavering move towards his spacesuit's cobweb-eared radioantennas.

- To recycling with you - guffawed Belmondo, and in order to give emphasis to his message, he made a most telling move, just with his forearm. - This is heard though by those precious ones! The ionization is of such strenght hereabouts, that our devices are useless for communication among ourselves over one hundred meters, and with the switch-board we can only exchange optical signals.

- Hang on! - Esterlain jumped towards Belmondo's cheat. - You man, do you know what you are saying? If the ionisation is that strong, then not even this suit...

He clanged by wheezing and became out of breath when compared to Belmondo's aged, bowed, yet stronger than his own, trunk.

- Stop it, don't get frightened. Sure, this suit doesn't protect against radiation. It amounts to just what that umbrella amounts to against the meteorite-fall. Masquerade, that's all.

- Then what's the survival expectancy here?

- Even if there happened to be such statistics available, be sure that they won't let me into the secret. But, according to colleagues' tales, you can't find one person who lasts out a year.

- A year? This means that...

Belmondo put his hand on Esterlain's shoulder - who had entirely sunk into himself - and asked him compassionately:

- What's the lot you received?

- One and a half years roof-plastering.

- And, of course, you were delighted, getting through easily.

- Certainly! I thought that physical work for one and a half years wouldn't be too long a deal.

- It isn't for the work, but the extra!

Belmondo walked around Esterlain, giving him the once-over, then stabbed at the cosmodrome with the vibrator rod.

- When you were a salesman you often saw such roof-plasterers, didn't you?

- Yes.

- And didn't you ever reflect on, why they won't have such opencast work done by machines?

- Of course I did. I have even asked a navigator, and he told me that it was because the robots frequently went down here.

- True, the guy wasn't lying. The robots go wrong, and crazy, escape from control, and human beings just die.

- Die of that - repeated Esterlain, with lips turned pale and with a withdraw gaze.

- None the less there is even something good amidst the bad - said Belmondo. Living here, you are free. Nobody digs into your brain, nor into your mouth. You may speak your pleasure, for every electrical bug and tape-recorder is useless. I more willingly plaster the roof here than lie night-and-day.

- Yes - Esterlain got a word in a moment comes when one can bear it no longer if you still are a human proper.

When one still feels that you can stand upright even without a spine-hold-fast.

- That's right! - added Belmondo, that's it! But then you soon realize that we can already straighten up with the aid of a spine-hold-fast.

- But who here wants to straighten up? Here everybody only wishes to bow!

- No, you're wrong. Many more want to straighten up, than want to bow. Just because one person's fearing the other, nobody confesses his true intentions. Everybody gets into a desperate situation, tries to lift alone, to overturn this iron plate, which is pressing him down to earth. Of course, you get crippled. And what is most awful, is that nobody will ever find out about how many went before him making the attempt.

For there is no death sentence in the Federation, no penal colony, there are no rebels, there were no spectacular trials. The rebel is sentenced under the greatest secrecy to tiny reformatory work. And what a misfortune, that the poor fellow couldn't live through to the moment of rehabilitation. It leaves only his friends to be informed that the poor man fell victim to an accident prior his term expiring. How could the regime be responsible for an accident?

- All the same, you've lasted somehow. You're already an old man.

- Old! That's not a glory. I didn't grow old here. My old-age only stands as a mark of shame. I endured longer to swallow much, I kowtowed more, and so I did grow older. Most of them are however young. Yet they did not endure so long. And that, in any case, is a good sign.

For the system has a lot of trouble with men: if during a given period, there too many of them occur to put their back into the system's pitiless press, if there is an increasing number of those who want to straighten up accidentally at once even the most perfect machinery of oppression, on is helpless in the face of chance coincidences; if the critical mass comes together not by secret organization but, instead, spontaneously, then, one fine day will come when all this blows up.

- Red! - shouted Esterlain, who stood facing the cosmodrome and caught sight of the triple signal. He hung on to Belmondo - whose eyes seemed inquisitive - and wanted to pull him down. But the huge body stood rigidly, resisted, then - faltering - plunged beside him.

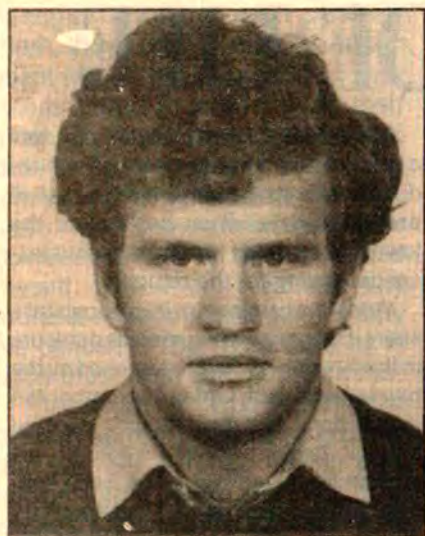
The violet blaze of the Dirac-throws flooded the cosmodrome with a ghostly light, it danced like St. Elmo's fire on the indented masts of the Moho-detectors; the meteorite debris showered down on the iron. Planet's coast like bundles of sparks on the antique stove's door. Now and then a bigger piece jumped about waddling, crackled, like a stone on the surface of water and then - as suddenly as the swarm came, so it ended. Here and there, the quickly darkening pieces of the pea-sized, tiny, shot-like glowing matter granules were visible, Esterlain didn't believe what happened before his eyes. He pushed his compassion's heavy body, but that did not react.

- Hey, old chap - said Esterlain terror-stricken - is some thing wrong?

Belmondo did not answer. Protruding from his back - like some nails - were three red icicles. Blood becomes quickly frozen in the outer space.

* Fragment

Translated by JENO MIKLOS



COTIZO DRAIA

Cotizo Draia was born in the 9th of December 1968, in Brad, a little town from Transilvania. He graduated in 1987 for chemistry - physics class of the Banat's College. Since 1988 he study general medicine and also from that year he begun to enter in the romanian science - fiction literature field. He became a science-fiction writer by joining Helion SF Club and soon after - in 1989 - he published in the club's fanzin a novel "The Hunter of Strawns". Because his first literary appearance was satisfactory he continued to write, even if the chances to be published in the communist regime was very poor. Now, Cotizo Draia publish in some of the most important SF Magazines like : ANTICIPATIA, NAUTILUS, PARADOX, JURNAL SF an so on.

I stopped for a moment to catch my breath; the strong gravitational field exhausted me. I watched the black dense sky thoughtfully. The news from "Sagittarius" had shocked me. We were not the first visitors to the 2-115 system. Another crew had arrived before us. They had the courage to pass through the dusty shell of the obscure nebula and discover the horrifying planetary graveyard on the collapsed star. Then something had happened to them. Or maybe they had come before the worlds of 2-115 fell into darkness. I felt frustrated.

The light spots of the space shuttle threw light on the strange and gloomy ruins like some cave animals, bringing them to a temporary life. I was trotting in their shadow fascinated by the frozen performance of a dead civilisation preserved by the eons in a fabulous box of darkness. What did they look like before? How did they live? I would have done anything to discover a skeleton or at least a part of it.

The pilot advised me to advance faster but I replied ironically that I did not to hurry the Fleet in its programme of destroying black holes. The commander on "Sagittarius" had given us two days for our research only after long talks. The Fleet did not care too much about disappeared civilisations: "the eyes through which the infinite is watching us", as a poet once named the

black holes, were a danger for hyperspatial voyages. Avoiding them would require time, and money.

I had to hide my satisfaction when I arrived in the orbit and spoke with Mehtar. He was angry each day of waiting for a new TESS ship meant some wasted millions. But Mehtar was forced to be economical, as this also meant a let to his promotion prospects in such a mercantile Fleet. The situation required a new delay. The silent and unusual space ship that orbited the collapse had to be examined. Mehtar was not satisfied with the results obtained by the automatic testing scanners and wanted me to examine the ship myself. I would have done that even without his urging.

x x x

The name of the ship was "Umbriel". It had come from a world colonized by the earthmen before the metaunified theories. I was watching a legendary fotonic space ship for long races. It was ten thousand metres long, full of reactors, tanks and stores, of plants specialized in terraforming: it must have arrived here after centuries of flying. I expected to find a romantic derelict, but Umbriel's systems were still functioning. The hanger opened right under the inscription containing the ship's name. I entered and managed a perfect docking. The insides were well-preserved; no sign of damage and there was enough fuel for more four accelerations. But the crew had disappeared without trace. Disappearance was the correct word, I told Mehtar. Such missions had long life psi mutants; they would live for thousands of years and would regenerate periodically. They communicated by telepathy with mediums on Terra or on colonies; they were absolutely necessary adaptations for relativist flights. In addition, Umbriel had a sophisticated cryopreservation system. It would have been a utopia to resort to its computers as to a "black box". "Umbriel"'s technology was thousands of years old, it was as if I had found a text in Sanskrit. I needed time. Mehtar asked me for a hypothesis. I kept thinking for an hour then I gave him a piece of advice: to delay the destruction of the black hole. You can't clear up a mystery the way you under the Gordian knot. But Mehtar was a philosopher.

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The operation itself was quite simple. The TESS ships were equipped with a sort of a "hyperspatial cannon", capable to set a gluconic reaction right in the centre of the frozen star. It seemed that the only law functioning as in ordinary physics was criodynamics. The total and spontaneous disintegration released a huge quantity of energy, the shock wave causing the

"crack" of the Schwarzschild horizon and the evaporation of the black hole. The Darkness destroyed in a second but there was nothing poetical in this.

I tried to justify myself to Mehtar. I told him that the planet had impressed me deeply at first sight. Billiards of beings suddenly awakened in the most terrifying night. I imagined them starving and freezing under a sky like a paradoxical hell, condemned by nature, paralysed by a frightening loneliness. They had never seen the stars, the nebula around isolated them from the rest of the galaxy. Why should they have built the ship for long flights? Their philosophy and religion must have excelled in pessimistic accents, affectively thinking.

2-115 resembled an apartment abandoned by the tenants more than a tomb. As with "Umbriel", this resemblance was obsessed me. Mehtar registered my speculations in the log; he might have liked to learn more, but he had strict orders. 2-115 had to be evaporated for strategic reasons. Tens of ships were waiting for the route to be freed from the gravitational trap.

When I left the commander I had the strange sensation that I had seen him for the last time.

x x x

I led my shuttle to an orbit closer than "Sagittarius" which was moving slowly, ready to shoot, I was alone. The other researchers, hored, were in the entertainment room. It was, in fact, a routine mission.

I adjusted the granimetres. Mehtar's experience could offer me at least some information about the relativist asymmetries within the Schwarzschild ray breaks.

I don't know exactly when "Sagittarius" shot. I only saw the explosion, the compact wave of fire covering the vacuum in a dense structure. The ship probably disintegrated itself within a second of it throwing the gluconic cloud beyond the collapse. But for me it was not just an explosion. "Sagittarius" entered a real space-time delirium, simultaneously existing in tens of states. I could see it vibrating, deforming, dashing upon my shuttle, surrounding it, flowing on its.

An enormous whirl came from the chaotic dance, an abyss in which I was absorbed without feeling any physical movement. I was floating in an anachronistic corridor with baroque decorations, bizarre paintings, and shadows mysteriously whispering in their thousands of years of expectation.

It happened too quickly for me to react. When the corridor was gone, the remnant nebula advanced towards the shuttle like a front of storm clouds. A hurricane of ionized hydrogen was blowing the

planets away; their orbits became rectilinear trajectories. The system was becoming disorganised, the perturbations very strong. The black hole disappeared; only some incandescent fragments remained from "Sagittarius". I was astonished.

2-115 had been more than a black hole of the Verr type. There had surely existed a protective mechanism in it which Mehtar violated. I found it hard to imagine a fantastic safe right in the heart of the singularity, but that was the only possible explanation. An entire world could have been hidden in the mechanism. They sought shelter there. I had seen and contemplated their agony, their shadows. It was a great tragedy: a civilisation twice destroyed. And besides, almost one thousand people were dead and I was to share their fate too if I didn't do something. The star took its posthumous vengeance.

x x x

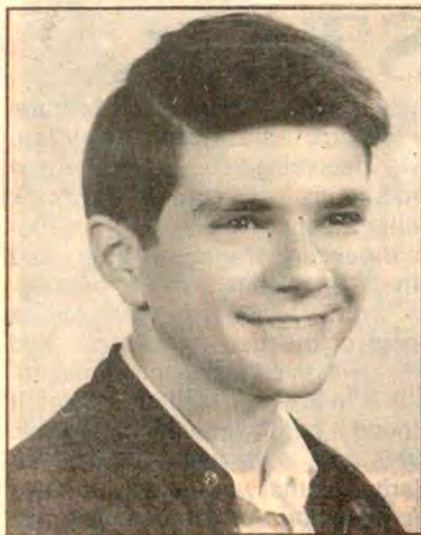
I decided to land on "Umbriel" for a second time. Although old, the ship had enough reserves and, with a little bit of luck, I could even start it and get out of the nebula. I found it drifting on the phosphorescent gas sheets; I made the necessary manoeuvres to get in the hangar but its trap door was shut. I didn't remember having left it shut. I had to leave my shuttle to enter "Umbriel" through a sluice and to operate the docking mechanism from the inside. While getting equipped for EVA I noticed a movement. I looked at the ship dumbfounded: the figure of an astronaut in an old space suit was standing in an opening. He waved to me, then the bright hull began to drift in the vacuum... "Umbriel" was leaving...

I grabbed the transmitter and shouted on all the frequencies, but nobody heard me. I tried to hang my shuttle on the fuselage that was passing above it, but the time was too short. "Umbriel" switched on its reactors and vanished like an illusion in the obscure nebula...

x x x

I was alone. I could advance thousands of hypotheses and explanations, but I felt my logic losing power. A hellish mixture between the psycho mutants and the demential physical secretion of a black hole... I was the victim of a disabled causality... or of a legend which I refused to believe. Before entering the cryogenic tub, I set my watch - an old reflex. Then I burst into laughter. An isotopic "Corona" worked for about ten years. But a hundred years could pass before they could find me drifting in the galaxy.

I too was becoming a Flying Dutchman...



DARIUS H. LUCA

He was born in Timisoara, on October 17th, 1968. In 1987 he graduated the "C.D. Loga" secondary school, the mathematics - physics class. For a year he worked at the Museum of old religious art, located in the Mitropolitan Cathedral of Timisoara. In 1989 he was admitted at the Medical School, the Stomatology Department.

He has been passionately fond of S.F. since his childhood and he is a member of both H.G.Wells - the club at the Students' House - and HELION - the club at the University House.

His literary beginning was with the short story "Iluzie" (Illusion), published in the fanzine "ANTICIPATIA". He has also published in Jurnal S.F. and in the supplement of the daily newspaper "RENAȘTEREA BANATEANĂ". He presents S.F. films on the local television station, under the title "Inroads in the Fantastic". He is an active member in the Romanian S.F. movement and he has taken part in S.F. conventions in the contry and abroad and he is also a member of the comitee that organizes the European Convention of Science Fiction - EUROCON '94.

An ordinary every day silence mastered the room; it was a silence moulded on the white walls, lengthened on the table, hidden under the bed. The space breathed white and quiet.

He lay down his limbs carefully, like his cat used to do at home (it had white fur spots, too), then he neatened his pillow, his blanket, he pushed the edge of the bed sheet under the mattress, comparing their whitenesses. He stared at his pyjama's sleeve. Blasphemy! In the empire of this room, breathing in a white air, as white as the silence necessary for his soul, these pyjamas displayed a...

...yellow ("I wonder why the yolk is just yellow?" Stupid question, he admitted). He crammed the lump of bread into the yolks of his fried eggs with a fork. He liked to overroll it, feeling the saliva flow into his mouth before the bite.

"You eat too much" the doctor said. "You know, the fat, the cholesterol. They lay down on arteries and veins. Man is as old as his arteries". He caught the lump of bread with his fork, then raised it above the plate. The yellow yolk drained from the bread like the fat molecules hanging on his arteries layer upon layer decreasing their diameter. "Damn it, I've always been a glutton."

COLOUR'S PLAY OF LIFE

He chewed reluctantly, watching the yellow spot on his plate; he felt the army of fat particles marchind through his body, leaving happily the belly's lard in order to lay down on his blood vessels. He stood up and moved away from the table, trying to escape from his obsessions, lit a cigarette and became enveloped in the smoke...

... blue was the apparatus that was ticking on his right side; he could hear its irregular peeping in the rythm of his heart, he could also feel how numb his left hand was, no ache in his heart, no chestpain, nothind but his numb hand and the rope pressing his neck, he couldn't see it yet he could still feel it, he couldn't breathe because of it.

"Heparine", the doctor yelled; the assistant held out a blue syringe that punctured his skin easily, touching the vessel, he felt the irritation as the liquid was pumped into his body... the doctor's hand, the doctor's smock which was also blue... the blue walls of the ambulance, the flashing blue light (why blue?) and his left hand's pain, the nausea coming from his stomach, everything...

...white, her skirt moulded over her hips, and her blouse tight on her body. Whenever he sees nurse Eve, he leaves those memories he loves so much in this room because the nurse, yes, he likes her silver curls, green eyes and thin legs: his eyes always follow her until the last moment when she shuts the door, smiling playfully with a bowlips uncovering a row of peals. She is as white as the whole hospital is, the floors, the window's case, the sink, all are white. Nurse Eve wears now and then a small, oval brooch, shining mysteriously in shapes of...

...yellow, the armchair's plush is yellow and nothing to be done about it, he feels like tearing it and throwing it in a corner, far away from his sight, the fat's yellow ("A man is as old as his arteries"), of the cholesterol metal plates binding the vessels of his heart ("Smoking, old man, will kill you, too"), making the blood thread thinner, preventing the oxygen from reaching the muscles of the heart and that means...

He felt a strong twinge in his chest, the air hardly reached his lungs, he felt choked, the fingers of his left hand became insensible, he felt pins and needles, tiredness, a sensation of exhaustion, he slid down a children slide. "It's clear", the doctor in a blue smock said in the ambulance, looking at the EKG, "coronary arrest, what do you expect, but he'll survive, don't worry, we shall reach the hospital soon."

SILENCE REST WHITE

He got out of the bed cautiously, with minimum effort, then he put his dressing gown over his pyjamas, his yellow pyjamas, the same white slippers on the white floor, looked out through the half-open door as if he wanted to escape, but he didn't know where... His foot steps idly carried him on the way he had walked so many times, the long narrow corridor, every time the doctor waiting for him with a smile: "How are you? Fine, aren't you?" and then, each

time, "Concentrate, when the red light is on, relax and try to slowly stop your heartbeats", the red of the light, of the blood, the blood that flows towards death, quietness, red, the heart beating more slowly, the pulse rate modifying on the screen, the damn doctor teasing him: "Concentrate!" "Fine, I'm concentrating"; red, the way I passed so many times to that examination room with a strange plate on its door: "Concentrate!", he always said this, especially when he tried to develop his reflex for green, the most difficult one, the leaves' green, the grass green, "Accelerate your heartbeats", cried the doctor desperately, "Concen..." "Leave me alone, doctor, I know what I am supposed to do". The doctor was scared then, but the number of his heartbeats increased, the figures grew on the screen, the doctor smiled: "Fine, you see you can do it" and patted him on his neck, as you pat a horse after a difficult race.

The long corridor, nurse Eve passing by him in a hurry, with a hidden smile. He knocked at the door lightly three times and entered. The doctor smiled as usual: "How are you? Fine, aren't you?" "Yes, this is the last session", Your test results are very good," the doctor said looking at some notes in his hand "You are leaving tomorrow," and suddenly raised up his eyes, staring at him.

"He wants to see how I shall react but I won't give him the opportunity" and answered indifferently, "You know better". He didn't set, as usual, the sensors on his chest. The doctor fixed a watch on his wrist, a watch with two small lights (red-green), and he told him, without reminding him of that damn word: "Concentrate": "I will switch on the red light" and the red light suddenly came on, the watch started working, showed him the pulse, the colour of the blood running in his veins, the Roman purple, his pulse which is rapidly decreasing from a reflex cultivated during the time spent with the doctor Concentrate and the heartbeats became less frequent. Concentrate - the doctor smiled pleasantly. "And now the green light", he said, of course the green of the fresh grass, the green of the exploding life, of the faster beating heart, the heart that is really beating faster, and the doctor who smiles happily, forgetting to pat him as a horse is patted after a difficult race. The doctor only catches his wrist covering the watch and telling him: "It's yours now, take care of it." That's what he wished to hear, it was his way of Concentrate to say "Good bye and I won't see you again!". He stood up suddenly from the chair, like an automaton, went to the cloak room as an automaton, dressed slowly, like an automaton does, kissed nurse Eve, taking the case notes from her left hand, kissed her again, profiting from the fact that automatons can't be accused of love. An automaton that easily changes its heartbeats by colours, yes, people's heart beats are getting faster and faster, near their beloved one, but he is only a simple automaton near nurse Eve.

He left the hospital with his soul discoloured, the temple of white, doctor's, Eve's, he left behind the ball of antiseptic days when he lived at the lowest level of his life. A dull convalescence waiting for the returning.

And now coming down the hospital's stairs, he found a world of diluted colours in the evening's twilight, retouched by the painter who didn't intend to bother the looker-on. "A happy event", he told himself, thinking about the colour's explosion on a summer's day. Such sudden change is not good. The same grey alleys, the way home, watching the tarmac, passing by the same unknown people, the same cars with idly revved engines, the same loneliness impregnated his clothes. The building painted with the same ordinary brown, the door creaking when you open it, the woman on the ground floor, greeting people with the same husky voice. "I'm glad to see you are fine". He answered her back monosyllabically and hurried to hide himself in the greasy elevator which would take him to the third floor. He entered the flat in a hurry, without looking at the door of the neighbour who lived opposite and used to peep through the eyehole whenever he heard a suspect movement. He leant against the wall, feeling exhausted. He had had a most exciting day, a top of the latest weeks activities. He needed rest. On the table in the dining room lay a huge bunch of red roses, his favourit flowers. It couldn't have been anyone else but his sister who had brought them. She loved roses, she had the key of his flat. He took note from the still wet petals and looked for his glasses. He was attracted by the bright appearance of the roses. Such a sanguine red he had never seen, the purple red of the Roman's purple, the red of the blood that flows to death, of the apparatus lights, mean words, Concentrate, the doctor in a fury: "Why don't you decrease your heartbeats?" the red light slower and slower, some flowers, roses, his heart contracting less and less, his breath reduced, suffocation, the rope pressing his neck and Eve smiling to him languidly. He fell on the floor. His watch was ticking desperately, it whistled hopelessly, trying to attract his attention. He watched the figure giving his pulse rate: Five. FIVE! And the green, saving light, the green of the grass, of the leaves, of the irrepressible, boiling life. "Accelerate!" the doctor shouted long ago, the green light, the heart beating more rapidly, the figure increasing, green, twenty, forty, sixty, green, it's all right. He stood up, leading on the table with both of his hands, after he had lain on the floor for a long time, too exhausted to make the slightest movement. Looking elsewhere, he grasped the roses from the vase, feeling the loving pain, several thorns having pierced his fingers. He ran to the kitchen, still clutching the flowers, firm stalks with his blood spotted hand, blood which refused to watch him. The waste-paper basket opened widely, it's lid, kindly showing its mouth to the living roses, red roses, flowers, red... He tightly

presedd together his eyelids, trying to forget the red co... and everything that colour meant, he wanted to forget even the word. He washed his hands watching an unshaved face that started to smile to him falsely, then cleaned his palm with alcohol till his wounds stopped bothering him. His legs knew but a single way he lay on the bed, moaning from the pain and pleasure, trying to dream of a world without colours which mastered life.

The bell rang stubbornly for a long time... He turned the bed-side table lamp on, he looked at the watch: 2:21-P53

The small lights were off.

"Coming!"

He opened the door, still confused. A man in a uniform greeted him touching his cap.

"I am from the Public Health Front". He showed identity card.

"Do you know the time ?!"

"Yes, sir, and I apologize for waking you up, but the situation can't be postponed."

"What situation ?" the confused man asked showing his surprise.

"Something unusual happened in your block of flats, sir. All the people who live on the first seven floors have just died of heartattacks. You appear to be the only survivor, sir..."

"Me ?..."

"How did you feel last night ? Let's say about 9 p.m. Did you feel dizzy or as if you couldn't breathe anymore ?"

"Well..."

"Can you tell me how you felt last night ?"

"No, I mean, yes. there were some cold shivers..."

"Cold shivers ?"

He simply couldn't explain red was immaterial to him, nobody told him : "Concentrate!", that damn doctor didn't know him. He only came from outside to ascertain the cause of death by, ...hm..., heartattck, and had a briefcase, he was without guilt, and the briefcase...

"Green", he said.

"Green ?" the man in uniform asked.

Yes, the green of the briefcase, of the

leaves, lights on the apparatus, dozens of families killed by him. he was without guilt, a colour, the doctor, telepathy maybe, green again, the quikening heartbeats.

He moved his look from the briefcase rapidly, staring at the ceiling's yellow. His breathing was normal, it was all right, only yellow. He made an effort to look down. There, the stranger writhed in agony. His eyes were bulging, his face was red and he continued to press his own neck. His pulse started to get slightly faster, little by little, as it had formerly stopped his neighbours heartbeats, dozen of them, a quick death, with shivers and doctors cursing, but he is without guilt, telepathy and the reflex, red-green. The young man lay motionless.

"Is this one going to die, too ? Is it better ?" No one will ever find out, he will go far away and they won't know why. Yet, they will be searching for him, if not for murder, at least for science's sake, they will hunt him down, a cornered automaton.

It would be better to save him. At least to try. The same score. But he would never become a dissected frog. It was easy. His heartbeats started to get slightly faster, stealing the energy and the rythm of the other, little by little, a kind of green-red light, green for him and red for... till the other's heart beats normally, but his, once having started, hardly could be stopped, for the green of the grass, of the leaves and the white of the bedsheet, the door smelling of bleach, Concentrate, Eve and her smile, her still hand towards him, like once, blue, "Heartattack!", shouted the doctor...

The young man opened his eyes. His energies were growing. He stood up, trying to recall his memories, the reason he lay there. The intruder lay down, that man, the only survivor, smiling over death. He knew it, he felt it, his dilated pupils showed him, his unusual blue eyes. Useless, he beat over the young man, a reflex. He had the satisfaction of a fulfilled duty.

"Hei, mister ?"

THE ALIENS



SZASZ GEZA

Born in the year 1935 in Timisoara. His first published works were poems and short stories in Hungarian, then he published translations into Romanian from Russian and Serbian in daily news and revues. He started to write short SF stories in mid '80 s.

He is the author of numerous cartoon scenarios published in Hominid. He is a member of HELION SF Club and founder member of ARSFAN.

"Our Forefather must have been an idiot when he settled in this valley", grumbled Maru getting Ule out of the new pit in wich she had fallen. Filled with magma, the pit was growing slowly. Here and there, flames gushing out of the cloude whirled around.

"I guess he had no choice.. It was only here that he managed to get rid of then... The Iries are afraid of aire..." said Ule conciliatory, while shaking out her legs to remove the hot lava which stuck to them like a boot.

Torrents of lava were flowing down on the right slope whereas somewhere

in the smoky heights the mouth of the volcano threw explosions of red hot balls. The two advanced in the fire rain and every now and then Maru raised his hand to protect himself against big stones. The left volcano bubbled in the depths without erupting. They approached the passage ; it could hardly be noticed in the thick smocky air and it was gurd by two huge rocks, almost perpendicular, with a narrow groove through which the lava was flowing down the valley.

Ule came closer to the man.

"What do you think it's... on the other side ?" she asked worried.

"The Iries' country... those who hunted our Forefather..."

"And if they catch us... what will they do to us ?"

"They won't catch us... But I want to see them... to ask them..."

"Ask them what ?"

"You know, Ule, I've been thinking... Why did they hate our Forefather ? Maybe he had his fault... so I want to ask them what they want from us, why they won't let us leave the valley..."

They reached the middle of the slime when they saw a dim light in the distance - the passage, "the escape gate" - as the Forefather used to call it. Astounded, they stopped. A vast plain stood in front of them. Nothing could be seen in the distance, not even a rock or other earth protuberation. Only the flat endless area of lava - still hot and viscous around them, but cold and hardened downwards. They leaned against the rock and looked around, hardly believing that such a world without mountains, volcanes, explosions and fire could really exist.

They went straight ahead.

After a while, they saw little grass tufts. Ule bent carefully and picked some leaves.

"Behold ! Here they are ! shouted Mary suddenly and took her arm.

In the middle of a green field there soldiers were sitting near a tent, their helmets gleaming in the diffused light penetrated through the clouds. One lifted his eyes and saw them. He gave a sharp cry and ran to the tent to grab a spear. The others did the same. They made a few steps ahead with the spears pointing downwards and then stopped, hesitatingly.

Maru made to them slowly, the girl following him.

The soldiers dashed ahead with wild shrieks. The three points of the spears hit Maru's chest at the same time and broke. The warriors fell down bewildered, then ran away crying with horror.

"Hey !" Maru shouted, "I want to ask you..."

But the soldiers were gone.

Ule, curious, entered the tent. She touched in wonder the smooth things, the blankets, the clothes and the leathers, all scattered around. Eventually she lay down on a bed.

"Maru, come and see me !"

He was concerned with a dusty cloud rising in whirls far ahead. A group of soldiers came on their horses. When they got closer to the tent, they made a semicircle and started shooting with their bows. The arrows hitting Maru either broke or bounced off him. Some of them, with burning pitch on the point hit the tent and it caught fire. Ule left it in anger.

"You could have let me look for a little while..." She stopped and looked around in surprise. Several arrows hit

her too and fell at her feet. "What do they want ?"

Maru made a step forward and raised his hand.

"Hey ! You Iries ! I want to talk to you..."

The whizing of the arrows ceased.

"We don't talk with our enemies ! We kill them !" the battle cry came from tens of chests and the soldiers dashed upon Maru and Ule throwing their spears at them. They didn't hurt them, only forced them to step back.

Maru tried again :

"Why ? Why do you hate us ?"

"You're different... you're aliens !"

"You don't even have weapons."

"And walk naked !"

"Kill them ! Slay the aliens !"

The soldiers dashed of them with their swords.

Maru took the girl in his arms and went back by leaps to the rock hear passage. For a while two warriors followed, but when they arrieved in the middle of the hot lava then stopped tand threath them with their weapons.

Hand in hand, the two walked in silence. Before going in the slime, they turned to see the plain again.

"Our Ferefather was not such an idiot", said Maru, more for himself. The girl caressed his forehead.

"You've tried... and our son will soon have to try himself... then his own son too... till we find out..."

"Maybe if they give up the weapons... and destroy them", he stopped a feerfull thought in his mind, "before the weapons destroy the..."

Translated by ANTUZA GENESCU



LAURENTIU NISTORESCU

Born in 22 -nd of May 1965, he graduated from the High School "C. Brediceanu" in Lugoj. He was a student at the Justice Department. He was founder of "Sirius" S.F. Club in his hometown, Lugoj, which existed between 1981 - 1989.

He was first published in "Helion" fanzine, Timisoara, in 1981. After this first publication, his works have been published in "Helion", "Paradox", "Nautilus". He earns his living working as journalist.

The town and the meadow and the people's thoughts and whatever else could be free was occupied by the soldiers. Once they arrived it seemed that every flight lost its courage and every movement stopped beyond the Lucus Valley.

It did not rain and it was dusk the first days and this happened because the people were expecting the clouds and the sun. But the light did not come from their expectation and then, one by one, the windows began to open. One of them opened at the Baroque House, too and the light of the new day fell on the Prime Citizen's cheeks.

"Call the Secretary. And send for the Master."

"The Master was here", came the answer. "He will be back - now he wanted to check again..."

So the town went on breathing through all the buildings. Even if the streets looked empty through the open windows. But the soldiers passed along the same streets, more and more often, and when the Prime Citizen remembered them, he gave in.

It appeared suddenly, after only one night. A trench crossing the park, the parking place and the court of the Bej Palace, going straight to the river. The people on the near streets and the several passers-by before daybreak became angry and went to the soldiers. But they did not know anything, when they woke up the trench was there and they were just talking about moving the camp. The people remembered that they hadn't seen the soldiers dig the trench or carry tools for that; however, they still looked annoyed when the Prime Citizen was ready to listen to them.

"It happened because of them, that's for sure!"

THE EPISTILE AB LUCUS

The soldiers shrugged their shoulders, it was not as they wanted, they had been told to wait for their Commander here. But nobody could tell when, why or where was he supposed to come from.

The Prime Citizen offered help to the soldiers:

"My good people, we should not worry because the soldiers are here", and he called the people together to show them how carefully the trench was dug and that the catacombs and the tree roots were not destroyed.

The people left, as if satisfied with what he said.

The next morning the square in front of the Baroque House, the back yard and the neighbouring streets looked like after a meteorite rain: deep, circular craters, large, and aligned along the roadway, were spread in the park among the tents. But the roots and the catacombs were still untouched. The townspeople asked the soldiers to guard the end of the trench near the river for fear that the water might flood the town during the night.

Although he sent for the Secretary, the Prime Citizen went downstairs without waiting for him. They met on the entrance steps, together with a group of clerks coming from their offices. They were all watching something down the street. An unspoken question and the Secretary came and whispered to the Prime Citizen what was going on. Then he went back near to the lookers-on.

Just because it had no connection with what now happening, the Doorkeeper started to tell about the herd of horses found in the Poplars' Meadow a few years ago. He said exactly how many years, but these around reminded him that it had been the same number of years last summer, too. He looked at them as if in agreement, and went on: "None of us all gathered down there on the riverbank near the Old Square dared go down to the hordes? We went only the next day and we could still see their traces, they had dug up the grass as if somebody had been swinging them all through the night."

"Maybe that 'somebody' had beaten them right under your eyes."

"I don't deny it, I thought they were grazing, but how can you know what the horses do if you don't see them for such a long time?"

"And the boat?" asked the Secretary. "What about the boat?"

"Well, it stood right where the water whirled, but it didn't move. And it was also capsized."

"And you couldn't see anybody near it?"

"No", and the Doorkeeper was determined that everybody understood he wouldn't have told it differently.

"Maybe nobody got drowned. Otherwise, where would those horses come from?" asked the Doorkeeper.

Hence the Prime Citizen realized that the Commander would not come by water.

"Look", somebody said, "the one at the corner of the Inn."

If that was the Master, it was not too well. The man could be seen clearly now and the Prime Citizen recognised him. The Master paid much attention to his foothall at every step. The way to the first window of the Inn got everybody tired. The Secretary thought that he wouldn't reach the last window and went upstairs for him binoculars. When he came back, only the Doorkeeper and the Prime Citizen sat on the steps.

"Had the others any work to do?" began the Secretary, holding out the binoculars.

The Prime Citizen took it and watched for a few moments and then said:

"The street is flowing."

They didn't need the binoculars to see it: with a prolonged rattle, the roadway liquefied and started flowing with its pits away from the town. The craters maintained their alignment. They kept on appearing out of the steps of the Baroque House, and they seemed the only really moving things in the fluid pitch mass.

Nothing happened on the pavement where the Master was; yet he arrived in front of the Gam Block after more than an hour. But from there to the entrance at the Baroque House he only needed a minute.

"Do you know what is there?" whispered the Master to the Prime Citizen and the Secretary understood that he wanted to leave them alone.

From the Tower to the Gam Block the pavement became transparent - said the Master - and a kind of marks could be seen moving continuously under it. The only possible pass through them - he had no courage to step on them - was a moving and black-spotted strip, broad as a palm.

"What about the checkings?" asked the Prime Citizen taking out his handkerchief. "Have you had time for them?"

"We haven't finished them yet. We are always hindered by the civilian defections - I mean defections that could have existed before. My men call them this. Only the Student discovered something: it occurred to him to dial his own number."

The Prime Citizen gave a "So what?" and the Master went on:

"The line should have been busy, but it wasn't. This could have also been a civilian defection and I remind you that the checkings are not over yet. The number was dialed exactly and the Student talked to somebody."

"To whom?"

"To himself. That's why I came."

Long before this story, the Driver stopped the Secretary on the Customs Bridge as he wanted to protest that the census hadn't been done correctly.

"But we registered everybody, the way they are, those who are", retorted the Secretary. What else could we have done?"

The Driver mentioned an intelligibly other people who might exist and had been emitted.

"Who else could be? We worked with the computer for fear we might make mistakes and leave anybody out."

The other leaned against the parapet of the bridge a little more calm, and he wondered: what do you mean, with the computer? His tone showed the Secretary that it wouldn't be worth trying to explain, but the Driver insisted and managed to find out.

"If it's like this, it might be better that you didn't register the others. Who knows when we'll need the 'insiders'?"

The Secretary agreed enthusiastically and the Driver was about to leave.

"But you won't pull down Bej Palace will you?", he added his late recollection, then he stepped on the roadway near the cars. The Secretary had no reason to suspect that the Driver was an "insider".

And he did right - we can add - as this supposition, although correct, as it will be proved, has no connection with the story.

The Secretary broke into the Prime Citizen's office, interrupting the conversation.

"I apologize, but have you thought of this: what if the soldiers are not from our army?"

The Master gave a short laugh and wanted to mention the uniforms but he saw that the Prime Citizen was worried and they both rose from their chairs.

"Where are they now?" "I've seen them around the Prefecture."

"Have they surrounded it? What are they going to do? There's nobody and nothing there."

The Secretary looked at the Master. "Not even at the Estimation Office?"

"Particularly not there. We sealed everything after you had finished the census."

"Is it so?" the Prime Citizen doubted, but that moment the door opened and the Doorkeeper approached him and whispered something at his ear. The Prime Citizen smiled.

Opposite the park, at the Library, another window was open: the one of the Vertical Room. The Student would see everything from there.

On the groundfloor in the Prefecture, the light went on and off rhythmically in the Estimation Office. The rhythm crept among the trees whose crowns breathed visibly in the soil penetrated by many circular pits. At first it was just a smooth earthquake. The soldiers had enough time to retire to their tents near the statue. The pits started to glide one towards the other, arranged in a line, crossed the trench and passed under the Baroque House. Behind them, other pits, born from the trepidations of the Prefecture, followed the same way.

Somebody inside the building tried to get out, opened the door and stepped outside, but one of the orifices in the

ground glided and the man disappeared. Because of this it seemed to the Student that the sun was very close. He jumped out of the window, took a round about the building and limbed the fire escape to the roof. On the opposite side the trees synchronised their pulsations and the whole park was moving. Above, at the height of raised hands, a solar disk was taking shape. The Student moved his palm under it several times, closer and closer, then he caught the rim and started to climb through the interior side of the disk.

Somewhere at the town's outskirts leaps of perforated paper were growing and growing. There the street had stopped flowing and the town seemed nothing other than it really was. Some farmers stopped at the barrier; they didn't enter the town as they had no reasons to do so. Otherwise, one of them had just returned from the town that morning and had nothing to tell.

Another farmer asked if it wasn't late, but he only looked for a reason to open his bag and take his pack of food. As the perforated strip of paper seemed clean, he took a pile of it, dropped it on the plough land and sat on it. The others followed him with no hurry. Bread and stuff to eat and a bottle of wine stood in front of them. Only a farmer leaned against the barrier; he had no food with him so they left him alone. They stood up later and tried to push the paper in the ditch but it was stuck in the furrows and they finally left it there.

If the man who had just returned from the town remembered well, there was much resemblance between the farmer leaning on the barrier and a student working at the post office.

The man who was getting out of the pit in front of the steps was the Student. His identification confused the people in the reception committee; even the Doorkeeper. As the Student didn't seem to recognise them, they started their game.

"I shall call you Aemiliu", answered the Commander to the Prime Citizen's welcome, "because I've been looking for him and my people are tired of following me."

The Prime Citizen thought his rebuff useless. Unfortunately, the Master reacted differently.

"Who might Aemiliu have been? The one on the phone?"

Although he didn't understand anything, the Commander answered:

"Aemiliu: you should know him because you have a river in your town."

That moment they all noticed that a lot of shadows were guarding the Commander. They were his protection, the people thought, so they asked him in.

If anybody had been born in Lucas that day, he could have been only Aemiliu, said the document found in the catacombs. The Student smiled, for he remembered that when the Bej Palace was renovated, that incunabulum was brought to the Library. He entered the Vertical Room with the document in his hand and started to explain to the soldier:

"The catacombs were probably built long before the first wooden fortress in Lucas - about which I know only the date

it was set on fire. I'm beginning to think that they sheltered the town during the invasions and not the fortress on the surface which was abandoned after the robbery that rummaged the ashes."

The soldier reminded him that he was allowed to stay at the Library only for two hours - but if his evocation solved the mystery, he should excuse him and keep on working. The Student was skeptical: if the text contained some other references to that Aemiliu, they could be written only on the first pages, which he knew had been torn by the Driver's grandfather after the last war.

Could that be all? The soldier grew sad, he said he had asked to meet him as he heard the Master speak about a certain phone call.

"Oh, no," said the Student, "it was a joke of the workers; they think that the checkings are a freak of the Baroque House. It was a coincidence that the author of the joke mentioned the name Aemiliu and it is only now that I think about this: he uttered it as it was written in the document."

The soldier thanked him. He had time to return to the camp, but he left supposing that either the Student or the person writing these words hid something. Maybe that's why next morning people said that he had made his way alone in the catacombs.

From the People's words the Commander understood that he was taken for somebody else and wanted to speak:

"But, Aemiliu, I am not the Commander. I don't know what to tell you about the soldiers. I've come by myself,

they accompany me very rarely". He pointed to the shadows scattered in the office.

"Then please admit that I am not Aemiliu either", said the Prime Citizen.

"This is impossible", he broke out, but the Master stopped the argument and the spoken words were already a decision.

"Do you admit that you answered the phone?"

"Don't get angry with me, I can't understand you," said the one whom they thought to be the Commander. And the others had to believe him because his hand touched the phone when he leaned on the table.

The soldiers received the Prime Citizen's request as an order and they arranged themselves in a line. They watched the man who was taken for the Commander with indifference - it was just the thing that the Prime Citizen wanted to check.

The shadows did not come at the meeting. Accidentally.

As the Prime Citizen himself hoped only in the perforated paper carried by the asphalt to the barrier, the Secretary had no other choice but to agree to unseal the Estimation Office. The disorder inside seemed to confirm their suppositions, but the Secretary thought that everything had been like that since the census was over. It was the Secretary again who had charge of re-forming the team of operators and he called back the people sent to almost all the factories in the town. Eventually he stayed and helped them.

At first, the Prime Citizen sent only the car from the Baroque House to fetch the paper at the barrier; then he had to ask for a truck every day. Pieces of perforated paper were also found in the streets leading to the avenue, in the eaves of the older houses, at the feet of the Customs Bridge or hanging on the trees in the alleys, in the sewerage system and in the school cellars. The people also collected it from wood stores and from the books in the Library where it was put as a book mark. A clerk found it in a retirement dossier and started to take it from the archives in the Baroque House and in the Prefecture. The soldiers brought it from the catacombs through which they had gone to find the lost one and Aemiliu and from where they never returned in all. Such a large amount of paper could not have come from the computer; it had taken root somewhere and now it was growing for all the crops it could give.

The day when no soldier returned, the paper stopped. The computer had been reading it for several tens of days and the operators wrote down the endless identity lists. Trying to find those on the list, the Student discovered that they contained pseudonyms, nicknames, conspiring names or names that parents could not give to their children. There were also names of characters in imaginary books, names of gods and spirits - and maybe all the names except those really carried by the people.

And every list began with Aemiliu.

Every night the shelves where the lists were put were taken to the trench that was about to close near the Bej Palace. The man who was taken for the Commander was staying there.

One night the shelves fell on him without touching him. When they stood the shelves back, they found only the shadows absorbed by the linoleum covering the floor. At the time, nobody doubted that his name was on the lists.

And about that Commander the people started to believe the same things although the Prime Citizen and the Secretary delayed the order to plug the pits in the roadway. The Master took regular checkings. People were going to talk about the Commander for a long time as they started to wait for him or for something else.

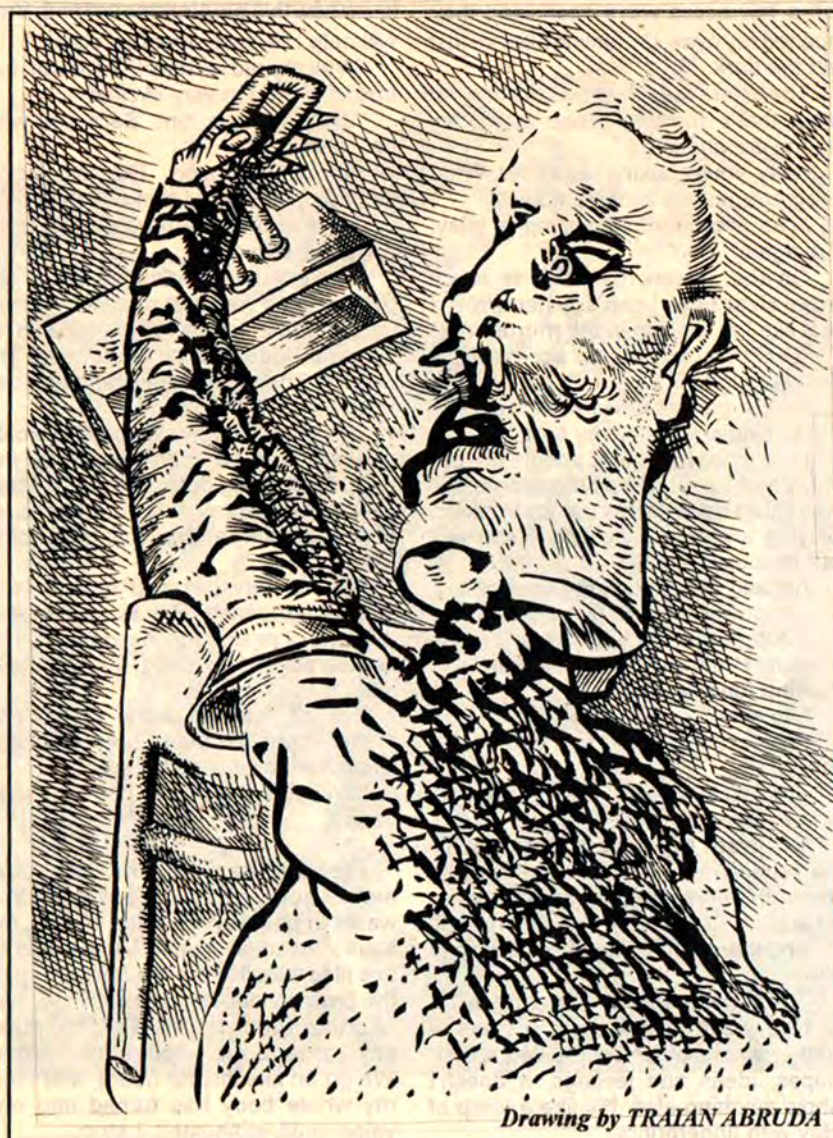
In spite of his neighbours' opposition, the Doorkeeper dug a circular pit in front of the block. The pit was as large as those in the park. He retired a day before, when the work at the Estimation Office was over. He did not go to see the destruction of the computer after some days as he caught a cold.

Yesterday the first train arrived in the railway station.

As it can be seen in the appendix, all the mentioned places exist. The committee has said nothing about the characters of the story yet - but masters, doorkeepers, students, clerks, soldiers, citizens and especially people should exist. As for the Driver, things are clearer: in spring, when the traffic opened again, a car hit him on the pavement and killed him. And there is an end of it!

P.S. The appendix is lost.

Translated by ANTUZA GENESCU



Drawing by TRAIAN ABRUDA



LUCIA ROBITU

Lucia Robitu was born on 13th of December, 1966, in Timisoara.

Since 1981 she has been a member of the literary circle, later called "The Anticipation Club Helion" in Timisoara.

Her first published story is called "Lake". It was published in "Helion" magazine in 1982.

In the following years she published other stories in "Paradox" magazine, joined the literary circle and organised some important meetings in Timisoara.

After December 1989 she becomes a journalist in the newspaper "Timisoara" and, after a year, at "Renasterea banateana", both daily newspapers. For two years she has supported the editing of a weekly page in this newspaper, called "The Twilight Zone", which contains, among other things, some short-short-stories.

Lately, she has published a story every month in "Renasterea banateana" magazine.

I'm standing, I look around and I see disk units, magnetic tapes, and seven grey closets which contain the memory.

Roy, whose name is actually different is blinking his multicoloured little bulbs above the contact key. The ribbon of the printer is moving back and forth like a Moebius band. He's old fashioned.

Every time I start the program, I think I see him holding the tape.

- What are you doing with the tape ?, I asked him, apparently upset with him.

- I give it to you as a present. It's the programme you wanted, the one you asked when we were walking on the beach.

- Are you trying to tell me that I can create my own world ?

- You worth to try ?

- And what am I supposed to do ? Hope, circulating in my blood, is colouring my cheeks red.

- Are you ready to take this chance ? I feel like this whole story is a challenge and I feel embarrassed.

- Why not ? Thank you.

The beginning of the display is different every time I use the control-key. The strange sound would look at me very confused.

He's my control key. At least his name will not be taken away from me. I feel that the whole world I'm creating is dedicated to him : a world of poetry or a world of stories. I think this was what Roy was trying to say.

THE WORLD YOU CREATE YOURSELF

The only world in which you can live, with no risk, everything here you don't have the courage or the chance to live with in the real world.

The whole story is created by me : I created a female character who I try to make look like myself, closer to the ideal than the real.

I'm starting to write.

The printer is silent. It doesn't print except the dialog between myself and the system. My words go directly into the memory.

"Open work session ! beneficiary : memory element she".

And after that, "She wants to have a chat". Suddenly, the letters are gathering like beads.

Above them, lines which are trying to make a human profile.

I can see you're confused. I see that your astonishment is growing. I don't think that you expected my words.

Actually were face to face.

"I don't know what I would like to call you, so I won't make introductions."

"Roy, you're out of your minds. Let's take it from the beginning, this time for real. Otherwise I'll disconnect you."

I now my threats don't scare him, because we have a code-element we both use to warn the other it can not be followed.

"The person you're calling is busy. Try again".

The system-message disappeared. The letters appear on the screen one after another, like nothing has happened.

"All the time you are trying to tell me something about myself. I've analysed you many times: you think I'm like you. But you have made a mistake ; you've left a few access ways open, and they opened my eyes. I'm feeling like I've just left the dark..."

The letters are moving all the time, at least that's the way I see them. My hands are shaking.

"Roy, you're talking like a poet. What programmes are running now ?"

"The person you're calling is busy. Try again".

On the screen, her face is much more clear now. I can see her smile. I feel like I'm looking in the mirror.

"Don't you know what access ways I'm referring to ?"

All the games cross my mind, and I'm beginning to play my part.

I imagine what other people are doing. When I started the programme, the way I start it makes my friends think I'm playing a game, especially because I put in some traps.

Actually, until I test the control key, the programme looks like a game.

"Good answer!" appears on the screen. I feel as though someone is making fun of me."

"So what?"

"The game can't tell you many things."

"Do you think so ?" A smile appears on her face.

"Analyse : everyone is playing in his own style : he presents his personality through representative words. Key-answers."

And then all the people are talking to me.

The scheme memory is enough.

I have started like that : a sheet of paper, where other people wrote their hopes, ideas and feelings. It doesn't show anything else. It's like a lump of clay with fingerprints."

I try to stop her. I recognize myself in it.

"When I'm in front of somebody, I feel like I don't belong to me anymore. It's not me the one who's thinking, my words belong to the other spirit, entity, or however you like to call it, which modifies and recreates me. I'm trying not to hear every soul's worries, because they affect me."

But it seems like they surround me from everywhere. Talking to them, I feel like a flood is coming to me, carrying sensations from all over.

I never had them, they don't belong to me."

I try to pull myself together. I put the synthesizer voice on. I feel that the metallic voice of Roy will relax me. No result. I remember that something from the installation burned yesterday and wasn't replaced.

On the screen, the letters no longer appear. A sound warns me that the active sonorization is on. This voice seems familiar... I'm waiting...

"What do you want ?"

"I'd like to stop everything. Do you think he'll get used to me like that ?" I realised I get an answer. Suddenly shave a headache. I sincerely hope, from the bottom of my heart that this thing doesn't resemble me that much.

"Why not ?" says my unspoken thought.

"You created this character, with the same features you have yourself. It's natural to think in the same way."

- But you're not real ! Understand me, you're a shadow on the wall. You'll never manage to be more than you are now."

"Do you think so ? I feel that you don't know how this programme will end. You will help me pass over this stage."

- Why should I do that ? I answer, but inside of me I'm very excited.

"We both love him. Set's see who deserves it."

Her voice stopped. The installation stopped. The burned thing is still missing. The end of the programme is always the same:

A lonely beach. On the sand, an unknown hand draws some indiscrutable letters. And the sun is burning, huge, like an open heart. I'm waiting. Then the image starts to loose shape.

I'm walking throw my room, the only one who has an open window all the time. I'm looking outside and I feel that everyone has my face, hundreds of mirrors passing and reflecting the same image.

Several days passed and nothing special happened. Ray is all the time with me. I'm used to her too, even if sometimes I feel she's a computer's joke.

We all listen to some music and make impossible plans until one day, when her voice is heard again.

"Will you help me to get my shape back?"

Lessons, many lessons. The books are not sufficient for her anymore. She wants to get out, to see the streets, the stores, to meet people. She wants to see fields with flowers. So I'm carrying all the time a video-camera with me. And after that, the questions. They don't make any sense to me, seem stupid things. We go on like this for hours, and I feel my whole body has turned into one voice, until, exhausted, I stop.

She saw me ironing a shirt one day. The following day, when I came, on the floor, I found lots of clothes with black spots on them.

On another day she looked at me as I put my make-up on. When I came back the powder was all-over ; she had a red strip on one arm, inflamed eyes and all the colours of the rainbow on her face.

Ray was standing quiet in his corner, winking gladly whenever she did a stupid thing.

Sometimes, when I can't control myself I start to screen and tell them how I think of all the things that man buy for comfort, and I heat them badly. In these moments she goes and sits next to him, and both look at me quietly. I even get the impression that they ignore me, the arrogant look in her eyes playing until exhausting itself on the old little bulbs above the contact key.

Today, a big surprise. When I got there the table was ready, even the candles have lights.

- What's up ?

Surprised, she looks at me.

- It's an anniversary. Don't you remember ? Try !

It seems she's going to get a Christmas present. I start to select my memories. Nothing. I give up.

- The programme, she said with a big smile on her face.

She's right. A year ago I got the programme. The World You Create Yourself. Also, it's a year since the Stranger didn't contact me. I know now I miss him.

My heart is beating quickly. I feel exhausted, so I'm sitting down.

I think I'll burst in tears, but I can't lose control now, especially when she sees me. She lights the candles. The cold wine tastes like blood. It seems we are at a pagan ritual. In the dark. I can see some tears in her eyes, and then on her cheeks.

My cheeks are already wet. She's smiling. I can feel her hand on my shoulder, her lips are kissing my hair.

- I want to ask you something. Tell me, is there anything I can do for you ?

Her voice seems to come from another world. The magic is gone. I don't want to think what if...

- Just consider you've done your best.

I think I could tell her that all was in vain. But I don't say anything. The words won't make any sense. We're managed better without them.

- I'll try to do it, in my own way. For both of us.

Everything is part of the programme. On the screen, a lonely shore, without an end. On the sand, a hand drew some letters. From where I stay, I can't understand the words. And the sun, huge, like an open heart waiting.

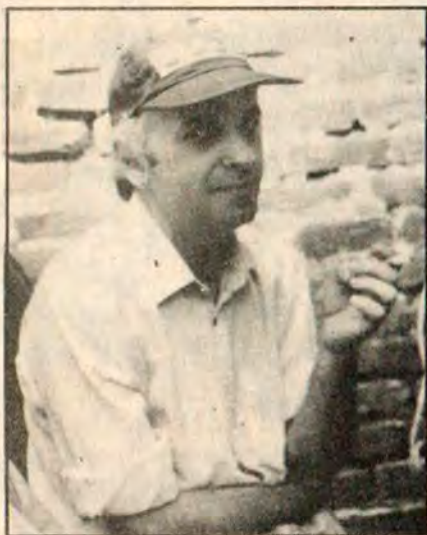
A point is growing near the horizon. Under the blue sky, the Stranger shakes his hand. He smiles. I stand hypnotized. I'm walking towards. After a few paces, the waves and the wet sand seem to kiss my feet.

The strange sound tells me something. But the words split all over, and I can't understand them.

I start to run towards the open arms which are waiting for me.

The sun stops us and shines with golden beams the traces of my paces which are disappearing slowly, washed by the waves, leaving behind smooth sand.

THE ROCK OF GOOD HOPE



SILVIU GENESCU

Born in 1958 in Timisoara. At the age of 14 he became an active member of the *H.G. Wells* SF Club in the same town. Later, in the early 80's he joined the other SF Club in Timisoara, *Helion*, continuing to attend both clubs sessions and activities. He has published numerous SF stories in the fanzines *Paradox* and *Helion* of the SF clubs in Timisoara and also in other magazines and almanacs. His works have won many awards in national contests of SF literature. His first collection of short stories was published this year under the title "D for the END" by "Marineasa Publishing House" and another one is coming on the shelves under the title "Slow breaking away" published by "Sedona Publishing House", both in Timisoara. He is a journalist working for a daily newspaper in his hometown.

cast an evil glance to the rock outside.

"What's small, black and eats rocks?" he asked turning to Browden. There was no trace of a smile on his chapped lips.

"Sorry sir?"

"Oh, forget it!" the passenger said raising from the chair. "Damn it!" he added. "I didn't pay to see this". He gestured contemptuously toward the rock and the dull sky fallen over the dusty desert. The man let his eyes roam the desolate scenery. "The Rock of Good Hope" he croaked. "What the hell am I supposed to do in the next hundred and fifty hours?" he shouted shaking Browden's shoulder.

Browden felt his anger rising and almost overriding his professional amability. He fought heavily to control it. The customer was always right.

"I'm deeply sorry sir, but this is not a luxury line and there are no entertainment facilities in board. If it weren't for this unhappy accident, you would have already been at your destination", he said with one of his what-can-I-do-for-you smiles. "Our fast travel policy..." he started again. Anger and the navigation lights of the console reflected on the passenger's face made him resemble the mad scientist fighting a Golem in the burning laboratory.

"Do you dare to talk about fast travel policy?" burst out the man, "We've already spent almost five hours here and I've lost an important business opportunity because of you". He pointed his finger at Browden's face. "You dare to call yourselves 'The Space Waggoners'? You should be called 'The Space Swindlers' and I'll take care to drive you out of business as soon as possible", he promised casting a wild look at Browden's frozen smile. The man was perspiring heavily being obviously uncomfortable in the tight space of the control room.

"I'm looking forward to get your company in Court for this", he sneered heading for the door. He touched the access keys and with a soft hum, the door opened letting him out. He leaned his back against the smooth surface of the door.

"With our Hyper-space technology we'll take you around the Universe in a minute" he said, mockingly repeating the Waggoners' advertising slogan. "Never take a cheap ride. Good advice for anyone." He thought of the vast desert outside, untouched by the slightest movement for billions of years. It was a killing quietness he could feel beyond the airlock.

"Call me a taxi" he whispered. A sudden thud made him open his eyes. In the middle of the strongly lighted corridor there was a Yellow Cab. Its windshield shone in the light but he could perceive a slight movement inside the car. Its registration plate told him the cab was from New York, USA. "Earth" he thought shivering. It was an ancient vehicle equipped with one of

those polluting gas engines.

"I'm surely dreaming" he said wiping his eyes. "Wake up, boy" he mumbled. The driver had stepped out of the car slamming the door closed.

"What the fuck is going on?" he asked pushing his cap at the top of the head. One curl of hair was hanging over his forehead giving him a negligent look. The dark circles around his eyes told of his many nights on duty. He looked frightened. "Listen", he said approaching the door of the control room after cast a gaze around. "I didn't broke no rule, I even never got fined for speeding. I'm not guilty, for God's sake!" he shouted as if he were pleading in a trial.

"Nobody here gives a damn about what you did", explained the equally frightened passenger. "I've just called a taxi, and here you are." He bursted in a nervous laugh. "Here you are, boy".

The control room door opened making his back skid, almost turning him around. Browden heard their voices. He threw a long, unbelieving glance at the car, then to the scared to death driver who thought that Judgement Day had come, then back to the passenger.

"That's crazy" announced Browden. "How did you do it?" The man almost jumped from his place by the door. He gripped the driver's shoulder, hurling him inside the car.

"Let's get out of here!" the man said.

"I want to be back on bloody 45th Street!" yelled the cabbie. Browden contemplated the episode. He could hear their muffled voices arguing where to go first. Then the car disappeared. The last sequence of events had overridden his capacity to be astonished. He didn't react at all. After a while, seeing the drops of oil left on the floor by the proud exhibit of any antiques dealer, he simply smiled turning to the control room. He sat in front of the main monitor showing the telemetric digits covered scenery. He looked speculatively at the rock.

"Don't trust the Greeks even when they're bearing gifts" he whispered pressing one key on the console. A list of instructions designed for "special circumstances" started to run on a display. He flicked his fingers.

"Just like that", he said. "The Rock of Good Hope" he continued magnifying the image of the rock. Its sharp sides were themselves anomalies in a flat, eroded land. It emphasized the emptiness of the scenery. Browden found it now almost arrogant. The Landlord here was a rock. He was unable to move his gaze from it. It was beyond the situations envisaged in the long list displayed on the auxiliary monitor.

"Do you really make any wish come true?" he asked, evaluating the magnitude of the rock with the speculative look of a gambler screening the partners' reaction to a decisive hand.

"Any wish you want" the rock answered his question printing its reply on the monitor, right on the dull sky. The letters flashed like an serial advertising.

"But only threetimes" it added. "Three is universal constant that must be obeyed." Browden nodded, making himself comfortable by lowering the back of the chair. He felt like travelling in the Executive Class, ready to order a cold drink.

"Where are the two guys now?" he asked.

"Back in New York, in the year 1976, as was the main request", the rock flashed back and Browden noted its linguistic problems had vanished. The lad was constantly approaching a decent dialogue.

"I've answered your question, so there are only two more wishes left for you".

Cute bastard, thought Browden frowning. He had just cut and thrown away a part of his share of luck. He speculated for a short moment the possibility to make a fortune by getting people here and asking them to make a wish for him. Paying the travel fares and a wish. But he abandoned quickly this sort of idea. He would have been without any defence in front of someone's wish to see him sent straight to Hell. The human mind could be deeply vicious, Browden decided. His own was running fast. A whirling kaleidoscope of marvelous possibilities to earn a bright, solid future invaded his thoughts. Then he smiled. He leaned to the monitor.

"I want to be a famous, rich and respected person", he started. "I want to get back in my hometown."

He had left Earth ten years ago hunting his luck in the distant colonies scattered in the Galaxy. He had always been a Mr. Nobody. It was time to teach others a strong lesson.

"And the third wish?" the rock said after apologizing for intruding in his burning thoughts of choosing his final desires.

Browden grinned.

"Bring my passenger back here. And thanks for your cooperation. Bye, bye" ended Browden.

He was breathing deeply. He was a little bit amazed to discover he was dressed in suite and tie a business-like suite. His fingers followed the sharp contour of his stiff white shirt. Browden was seated in front of a sumptuous desk with three telephones on it. He tried to get accustomed to so many details. A little flag was there too, and to touched thoughtfully the silk. Definitely, he was in a plane. He heard the low hum of the engines. Then he saw the emblem embroidered on a paper folder. He shuddered. He started to rise from the leathered arm-chair.

"No, oh, no..." he moaned. "Not this!" he yelled.

He had started to the door of the lounge when he heard the click of the intercom.

"Mr. President", he heard a low baritone voice. "This is colonel Swindale speaking. "We shall land in Dallas within five minute. There is a pleasant outside temperature..."



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