



# FOCUS

AN S.F. WRITERS' MAGAZINE

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# Focal Point

I have to admit that there almost wasn't any FOCUS this time.

My first child, Ezra, died on January 26th. He was exactly five weeks old, very healthy and spirited, and took his leave via the uncomplicated process known as "Cot Death". You might assume that my life reached its nadir at that point - and in some ways that's true, but on the other hand the joy of having had him around and the certainty that this particular material world isn't all or even much of what there is, is sustaining. Re-assessment of one's life and commitments becomes, however, unavoidable and necessary. What's known in the common parlance as kicking out the shit.

Which brings me to the specific matter of FOCUS. The response to the re-launching of the magazine was slight, to say the least. I received hardly any submissions in the wake of issue 12, and as the deadline for the February mailing drew nearer, I realised that it would be impossible to put together a decent follow-up with what was in hand. And so I postponed the next issue. This was while Ezra was still alive; after he died, and the appeal for submissions appeared in MATRIX, still very little material came in. By this time I was well into the aforementioned Major Re-assessment, and considering dropping the magazine on the grounds that nobody particularly wanted it and it wasn't worth doing just as a kind of hobby to amuse myself. Finally, I decided to give it a further go, but this was by no means due to new material pouring in; in fact, you hold FOCUS 13 in your hands now only because the story SHIFT, WORKING was sufficiently long to complete the issue.

So what's in prospect, right now, is another two issues of FOCUS: 14 in the June mailing, and 15 in October. After that, we'll see. The question I want you to consider is, do you want FOCUS? If so - and especially if you want to write for it - let me know. What I said in my last editorial still stands, and I do believe that, if the membership has the willingness and intention to make it happen, this can become a publication of some significance. And not just something to make the envelopes fatter every other mailing.



# Writing Can Seriously Damage Your Health

by Stan Nicholls

An Author's Handbook by David Bolt (Piatkus, 1986, 170pp, £3.95 pbk)

This is a straightforward, no-nonsense guide to the practical aspects of becoming a professional author, and David Bolt — having spent thirty years as bookseller, publisher's reader, author and agent — is well qualified to write it. An Author's Handbook will not tell you how to produce a bestseller, what to write, or how to make money at it. It will, however, steer the aspiring author around many of the pitfalls along the way to publication.

It starts at the basic level, with Planning, which outlines the equipment, physical and mental, the writer should arm him/ herself with. This ranges from a good dictionary and a waste-paper basket (large), to some sage advice about attitudes (e.g., Bolt repeats the familiar aphorism that a writer needs two things: inspiration, and the ability to work without it). Nor does he underestimate the part played by blind luck in capturing the fickle attention of the reading public and turning it toward one author, as opposed to another equally gifted.

In a chapter entitled Getting it right, Bolt runs through the more common errors of grammar and usage, frequently found in mss. from both new and seasoned writers. This brief but apposite section covers many of those persistent mistakes we all make every day through ignorance or confusion. Talking of apostrophes, he says, "If you leave them out carelessly you end up with phrases like 'babies rattle' (they don't)." He delves into the differences between compare to and compare with, infer and imply, masterful and masterly, and the perennial contortions of lay and lie. To say "'The man whom I saw going into the shop' is correct — 'The woman whom I thought loved me was unfaithful' is not" is a very succinct

way of expressing the point. Some good advice on punctuation is offered, also.

In discussing The Novel, Bolt looks at the various categories fiction is apt to fall into - general, "literary", adventure, romance, etc. Of science fiction he says, "This is the genre most susceptible to getting the balance wrong between character and story, or more probably background: in this case gadgets. New writers of SF run the risk of being carried away by their own ingenuity... it's not much use... having a terrific backcloth with no real actors in front." - Which is fine as far as it goes, but arguably such a criticism is less valid now than in the past. Elsewhere he assures us that science fiction readers are renowned for their lack of humour, and that they dislike parody; which ignores Sheekley, Vonnegut, Farmer, Pohl, Laumer, Kuttner, Fredric Brown and Douglas Adams to name but a few obvious examples. But these momentary lapses are forgivable in the face of the wealth of otherwise sensible advice on offer.

There are useful chapters on presenting work, on editorial, legal and financial aspects, and an excellent examination of the respective merits of employing an agent as against dealing direct with publishers. This last includes a list of do's and don'ts designed to "smooth the path to a succesful and amicable working relationship" - do include return postage with your ms., don't offer your book to more than one publisher at a time without making this clear, don't submit untidy, scruffy mss., and so on. Many are seemingly obvious points, but ones often overlooked by a surprisingly high proportion of hopefuls.

Writing is a constant learning process, or should be, and a perusal of An Author's Handbook would be of benefit to the amateur and professional alike. This book is in itself an object lesson in clear and precise communication. And plenty of wry observations and pertinent anecdotes sweeten the pill. I liked the story about a young writer, slaving away at a first novel, who meets a publisher at a party. "Tell me," asks the writer, "What is the length of the average novel?"

The publisher replies offhand, "Oh, about seventy thousand words."

"Thank God!" cries the writer, "I've finished!"



# THE RIBBON FOR MARGARET'S DOLL

by  
Dragan Filipović



A powerfully-built man with grey hair sat at his neat brown desk, twisting his moustache and reading a newspaper with mounting agitation. Suddenly he blew up and stabbed at the intercom.

"Blish! Come quickly!" He switched it off immediately, not expecting any answer, and got back to the article.

The door opened rather bravely.

"Hello, PM. You called me?"

"If your name is Blish — and I know it is — then I called you," PM Colby remarked ironically. "Now: is an article in the press the first I should have heard about the craziest of all idiotic devices?"

"What are you talking about, PM? I haven't had any time to read the papers today — I've been reading the Report of the Himalayas Ski lift Project."

PM's eyes looped a three-fold loop with a six-and-a-half-fold swift turn. He spread his immense newspaper across his immense, highly polished desk, and pointed to the gross bold face letters that read, MADMEN PLAY WITH ENERGY.

Blish sat down on the arm rest of PM's favourite armchair, and read the huge text calmly.

An hour later they stood in front of the big metal door of a sprawling stone building, on which a brass plate bore the inscription, HIGH IQ PATIENTS DEVELOPMENT AND CONTROL CENTRE.

"A madhouse for geniuses," translated PM, disdaining the buzzer and knocking on the heavy door.

Five minutes later the door opened, creaking appropriately, and there appeared a tall, slim man, pale-faced and bright-eyed. "You're interested in our buggy inventors?"

PM and Blish nodded.

"My name's Robert. I receive guests. Follow me, please." They followed, and he continued, "Our Centre was founded ten months ago, and since then mentally disturbed persons with high IQs have been gathered here. But their intelligence hasn't been the only criterion — we've taken only those who have some idea in which they deeply believe."

Robert, PM and Blish walked past some tidy pavilions.

"About 'Plorex' — " PM began.

"That Plorex," said Robert, "the substance which produces electric power — it was made by one of the boys in our Z Department."

The three men passes through the main building, and approached a green-painted outhouse across a boggy yard. PM was mourning his lack of rubber boots.

Several patients were standing at the far end of the yard. "Hello, madmen!" Robert suddenly shouted merrily.

The madmen replied to his greeting indifferently and continued to discuss the possibilities of a pink roof for the outhouse.

"You're not terribly tactful, doctor," PM rebuked him carefully.

"Doctor? Ha ha ha..." Robert roared with laughter. "— I'm a patient like any one of them!"

Blish looked to the ground imploringly, wishing he were a thousand feet beneath it.

"But — you look more normal than a thousand people I meet every day," hissed PM.

"Yes, I know," said Robert in a dangerously cheerless voice. We got to live here only because we're in the minority." He went over to a table at which two young men were sitting.

"Hi, daddy!" a merry duet greeted him.

"Hello youth! Let me introduce you to PM Colby and Blish." They say they're scientists..." He pointed at the visitors solemnly, then turned to them and introduced the youths. "And they are Dennis and Joey."

PM could not resist saying, "Really? A burgeoning colony you have here — and you're quite the patriarch, hmm?"

"Daddy," laughed Dennis, "tell them we're filled to capacity already!"

"We've had a very fruitful year," Joey added.

Robert continued to grin. "I'm just passing by," he said to the youths, "driving melons to Hawaii! I've dropped in to see your latest invention — the ribbon-binder for Margaret's dolls."

"It's a great idea," enthused Joey. "I'm crazy about silk. I'll go get some."

His eyes following Joey, running full of joy to fetch silk, PM nevertheless noticed the Florex on the table in front of Dennis. It was a small, almost transparent parent tile resembling an epoxy key-ring, with two wires from it leading to a lightbulb. PM at once realized that this was the only source of illumination in the large, well-lighted room. He pointed this fact out to Blish.

"I'll check it," said Blish, opening his black leather bag. "It could be a simple trick."

PM glanced at Robert's overbearing face, and was suddenly sure that there was no legerdemain, sleight-of-hand, deceit, chicanery or monkey business involved.

Blish rapped and scratched at the tile, his face glowing red with embarrassment at the madmen's derisive commentary above his head.

"I see Tarzan's building an atomic power station with no trouble at all," commented Joey, returned with red ribbons.

"No, your sweetheart isn't there, and neither is your heart," crooned Dennis, as Blish's efforts to penetrate their beloved device's secret grew increasingly violent.

Ever more nervous, Blish unscrewed the bulb and presented his gauge to the socket. He stared at the display for longer than was necessary then, astounded and confused, turned to his

superior. "One hundred and ten volts, sixty hertz, one hundred watts."

"Just enough for the bulb!" PM was enraptured. He turned again to Robert. "Who is the inventor?"

"It's a collective work," Robert answered, his face beaming with pride.

"Will you please make a piece of Florex in front of us?"

"With pleasure - but you'd have to provide the materials we need for it." So saying, Robert produced an already-prepared list from his top pocket.

PM took the list, disappeared it into a crease of his voluminous grey coat, shook hands with everyone and headed for the door. Blish trailed along in his wake. Robert, Dennis and Joey followed in Blish's wake.

They processed across the yard and back through the main building. There, beyond a door left ajar, at a lonely table sat a large, thin man wearing small spectacles. A few drawings lay before him.

"He's really mad," whispered Joey.

"He got some crazy ideas," Dennis breathed, "- how to improve cars, make some new aeroplanes, build a lunar station... Nonsense, pure nonsense."

"Yes," said PM, hardly hearing them. "Of course. I'll talk to him."

"My name is Michael," the man wearing glasses said as PM approached. "I go the way which science has always been going."

"Do you think the others are insane, Michael?" PM said, with barely a hint of a patronising tone in his voice.

"No, they are quite right."

Robert appeared annoyed. Blish recognized the dangerous smile and took a step away from him.

"You say they're right," PM continued, "but you go your own way. Why don't you join them?"

"Because the Earth cannot wend their way until it has exhausted its own," replied the weak-sounding voice.

PM studied Michael's calm, serious face.

Blish approached them. "May I see your drawings?" The request sounded almost like begging.

Michael nodded and went back to work, paying no further attention to any of them.

"Michael is probably right," murmured PM in his office, later. "We can't get rid of the thing which hasn't reached its limits yet, because only then can a new thing be in tune with the moment." He leaned back in his chair, his mind running over the strange visit. He looked vaguely across the room towards Blish. "Those boys ride too fast. Where will they stop?"

"Seems to me they've stopped already," Blish said firmly. "At the madhouse."

"I wonder who is really mad? If doctors would strictly observe their criteria for mental health, I doubt whether anyone at all could prove themselves right in the head."

"Yet the fact is they're incarcerated."

PM rose to his feet and tossed a batch of papers onto his desk. "Here are data showing the Intelligence Quotients of some of the men living in that place, and some of those who are still allowed loose. Do you remember the man who often spends the whole day standing in front of our building, staring at passers-by, longing for the sight of a discarded cigarette butt or an unfinished hamburger? Yes? Well — the difference in IQ's between him and you is identical to the difference between you and Joey."

Blish stood motionless, mouth pursed with disbelief.

PM continued. "How could that beggar understand things that you do? As for him, this stupid tie of yours with the golden 'PM' is quite an abnormal thing, for he doesn't know it's telling everybody I have so-much and so-much thousands a year." He looked at his speechless assistant's eyes. "What do Joey's silk ribbons say?" he asked, then. The question was apparently rhetorical, for he immediately stood, picked up the papers and left the office, his back bent with tiredness.

For a moment Blish thought that it would be wise to countermand the order of he of the golden monograms.

Nobody slept that night in Z Department. Nervous and flustered, the hosts behaved more foolishly than ever before, embarrassing and frightening the camera crew that PM and Blish had brought with them when they returned.

"Epoxy cocktail, two dead scorpions, some cammomile, thyme, yarrow, turtle shell shavings, a flask of whisky..." Dennis and Joey controlled the list. "It's all right, Daddy — let's start!"

"Switch on the lights," called Robert.

"Switched on!"

"Camera?" boomed Blish.

"Ready!" the head of the camera team called out, a little shakily.

In the centre of the room was a large pan, almost a cauldron, warmed by one of the less important unusual devices.

"I'll blend this with the resin, Dennis," Joey said, producing from his left sleeve a pouch filled with some mysterious spices.

Robert, meanwhile, put the thyme and yarrow into the melting mass.

Dennis waited for a moment, then added the cammomile and whisky.

Joey turned towards the outsiders and, looking at their nervous but curious faces, poured the secret spices over his shoulder into the pan.

Attentively observing a lamp he had lit previously, another

madman — Frederick the Tously by name — took some substance with a sooty ladle and walked over to a mould into which two wires had already been placed.

"He's just measured out the needed power," Joey explained with a hint of derision in his voice, making Blish wince.

"Wait," said Robert, " — what about the scorpions?"

"Oh, yes!" Dennis slapped a palm against his forehead in consternation, then grinned again. "I know — we'll set them into the tile to decorate it!" So saying, he dropped the creatures into the mould and Frederick continued to pour in the sticky liquid, engulfing them entirely.

Blish was invited — forced, he felt — to set the lightbulb. The impatient and in-patient saints and sinners alike then sat down all around it, and waited for the miracle to present itself. The mass in the mould hardened slowly.

When the first dim light appeared, Blish and the head of the camera crew both grumbled that it was simply reflection from the crew's lights. PM told them to shut up.

Within two minutes the light had grown brighter, strong and irrefutable. Sweating with the heat of the light and the destruction of all his rational knowledge, PM approached the mad team with a microphone. "Would you, would you, please, explain to us plainly how this, how this invention works?"

"It's very important to add whisky in the nick of time," Joey said slyly, winking and raising the still half-full bottle to his lips. Robert looked on approvingly, but one of the real doctors raised an admonishing forefinger, and Joey put down the whisky without protest.

PM continued his attempt to glean answers. "But science tells us no-one can get out more energy than has been invested..."

"Yes, of course," said Dennis. "We, therefore, invest nothing."

Michael was the only one of the madmen who failed to burst into immediate laughter.

"Energy's everywhere around us," Blish blurted, " — they just transform it into electr —"

Robert interrupted him. "That's its problem. Oh, you know, Florex gets to be such a bore. The wires are so ugly. It would be nice if the tiles themselves emitted light."

"But then we couldn't see the scorpions, silly," protested Joey.

PM remembered the beggar, and a group of idiot clerks who used to tease the poor fool. He gave a signal to switch off all the equipment, laid down the microphone, and left without another word.

"Well, boys," murmured Robert, "As my old father used to say, we've gone a little bit too far this time. That old man doesn't see the joke."

Joey rushed towards the door, forestalling PM's exit.

"What do you want?"

Joey raised his head towards the sky. "Up. We want to go up there. I don't know whether we belong to the stars, but we're certainly surplus to requirements down here. That's why we've been clowning around with that stupid Florex, making fools of ourselves. Bigger fools than we've ever really been."

"How did you invent 'that stupid Florex'?"

"I'll tell you; but I doubt whether it can be useful to the Earth. And you'll bring us, in return, the things we need for our departure?"

"Why don't you believe the Earth can use it? There are some clever people in the outside world, too."

"Yes," Joey sighed. "There are many of them. But there's less and less of free intelligence. God knows how many years will pass until somebody — perhaps a madman again — finds the way which leads to the stars, to this shit that produces energy, or to anything. So you see, we can't teach you anything."

He started to turn away from PM, but then added, "Allow some child's thoughts to go non-standard ways!"

"But wait — Florex is a fact..."

"The fact is a mere border of the mind. Come to a fact from inside, or from above, or from behind — then maybe it won't look so strong and strict. It's a fact that no one can travel to and through space without thrust — and we're leaving tomorrow. Of course, only if you provide..."

They said their goodbyes and went to different dawns.

The next day's sunset made the sight mysterious. Red light flooded a small plastic dome crammed with the travellers.

PM felt as if he were coming to the outer edge of a long, languid trance. He viewed everything around him as though he was watching a film. A good film, but hardly naturalistic. He moved from foot to foot as if to test the solidity of the earth, and watched as Dennis and Robert painted the crowded cupola with some pink aromatic liquid, and Joey and a team of other crazies continued loading what was needed for the journey.

Blish was sitting with one of the camera crews — there were many of them, tonight — laughing and getting drunk. PM didn't feel like laughing, and he wasn't thirsty for alcohol.

Soon night had fallen, and the preparations were finished. All the madmen were in the bubble except Joey, who strode over to PM and handed over a very full plastic carrier bag. "In here you'll find some instructions, some preparations for several trifles."

PM took the bag filled with its wealth of insane knowledge, and put it on the ground beside him. "Where are you heading for?"

Joey pointed upwards, very precisely. "You see that star?"

"Why that one?"

"It shines so nicely," said Joey. "It must have a good planet!" He continued to gaze upwards as his words trailed off, enthralled with the beauty of their target.

PM was gazing upwards also. "Yes. Yes, you're right. It shines so nicely." Then he quickly looked down again. "I'm leaving with you."

"You're not afraid of making a fool of yourself in front of all these cameras?"

PM shook his head.

And that, as they say, was that. They entered the bubble and left with the other madmen. Forever.

Michael remained behind, watching the green wall instead of the take-off.

Blish and the media men felt a void open within them.

And many well-read heads have been studying the pages from the madhouse for many months and years, looking for some way to bypass, to avoid, to cheat the facts.

All instructions were missing.



[translation by Mire Adžić]



# MARKET

publication	editor/address	length required	
BEYOND...	Shirley Winston Other World Books, Box 1124, Fair Lawn, NEW JERSEY 07410-1124	500-8,000 words (optimum 4,000-5,000)	
ELDRITCH TALES	Crispin Burnham Yith Press, 1051 Wellington Rd, Lawrence, KANSAS 66044	500-10,000 words	
HAUNTS	Joseph K. Cherkas Nightshade Pub., Box 3342, Providence, RHODE ISLAND 02906	1,500- 10,000 words	
THE HORROR SHOW	David B. Silva Phantasm Press, 14848 Misty Springs Lane, Oak Run, CALIFORNIA 96069-9801	4,000 words max.	
INFINITUM	William H. Doyle 5737 Louetta Road, Spring, TEXAS 77379	300-6,000 words	
PANDORA	Jean Lorrain & Lois Wickstrom Empire Books, Box 625, Murray, KENTUCKY 42071	1,000-5,000 words (occasionally up to 10,000 words)	
PULPSMITH MAGAZINE	Nancy Hallinan The Smith, 5 Beekman Street, NEW YORK, NY 10038	500-5,000 words	
SPACE & TIME	Gordon Linzner 138 West 70th Street NEW YORK, NY 10023	15,000 words max.	
THRESHOLD OF FANTASY	Randall D. Larson F.U. Enterprises, Box 70868 Sunnyvale, CALIFORNIA 94086	500-8,000 words	

**THIS TIME:** more off-the-beaten track US outlets. Small circulation, low rates - but all particularly interested in working with new writers, of course.

**LAST TIME:** ADDENDUM - NIGHT CRY submissions should be addressed to Alan Rodgers, and their maximum length is about 15,000 words (i.e., novelette length). TWILIGHT

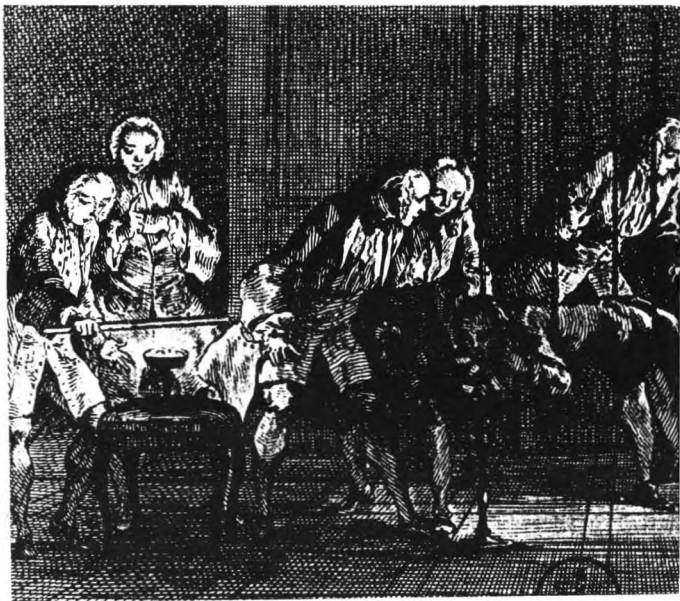
# SPACE



payment	circulation/frequency	comments
\$1.25-\$20 +1 copy	300 3 times a year	Likes stories "with a humorous aspect"; no horror or excessive sex/violence; nothing degrading to women; no pessimistic stories
¼c-1c per word	500 semiannual	Horror, suspense & supernatural. Stories, novel excerpts & serials; no mad slashers, s & s or hard sf.
\$5-\$33	1,000 quarterly	Literary magazine geared to fans of 1930s-50s 'pulp' magazines; horror, supernatural & bizarre.
¼c per word +1 copy	2,500 quarterly	Contemporary horror stories with well-developed characters; "do not over-indulge in sex or violence". No hard sf or s & s.
¼c per word	400 semiannual	Sf, fantasy or horror; can be adventure, experimental, or humour-oriented.
1c per word	600 semiannual	Experimental, fantasy & sf. "No pun stories. Nothing X-rated. No innaccurate science."
\$25-\$100	6,000 quarterly	Literary magazine of fantasy, sf, horror, science fiction, humour, mainstream, mystery & suspense.
¼c per word + copies	500 biannual	F, sf & horror with strong plot & characters. No UFOs, space gods, etc, unless drastically new slant
¼c per word	1,000 irregular (once or twice a year)	F & sf, horror, humour, mystery; no pastiches, no abstract or "new wave" writing, no verbosity.

ZONE is bimonthly, PENTHOUSE is monthly (and not to be confused with the British edition, which - in common with men's magazines in the UK generally - is rather more down-market, and doesn't carry "real" stories).

NEXT TIME: US book publishers (and whether you have any chance with them).



# Doing the Business

by Alex Stewart



You're reading this thanks to Maggie Thatcher. No, no, don't throw it away, listen. You don't need to wear gloves to turn the page, either, and you may really want to know this. Honest.

The Enterprise Allowance Scheme works. And so do I now, and I still find it hard to believe. I'd heard all the horror stories too, you see, the same ones you've heard; how the rules were all written by Joseph Heller clones, so if you really stood a chance of making a living at something creative you were automatically rendered ineligible. But forty quid a week's worth pursuing, and after coping with the DHSS for three years nothing seems impossible. So I wandered into the Job Centre for a form.

The initial application took half a day, most of it a seminar. They usually begin with a talk by a local businessman, who knows how to avoid all the pitfalls. Things like planning permission ("Sad

planning permission — the council can't be bothered processing it anyway"), the Inland Revenue ("Schedule D — think of a number come April") and being overly truthful in filling out the application form. Then it's the turn of the people who run the scheme, who drop heavy hints about what they want to be told so they can give you the money. This was where I started getting tangled in semantics. There are special requirements for certain occupations, you see, among them "Authors and Artists".

"But I'm not an author," I insisted. "I'm a freelance writer. Authors write novels and textbooks."

"So what are you going to write, then?" they asked.

"I don't know yet," I said. "I'll be hustling for hack work. It depends on the market."

The interviewers looked at one another. "Aren't you going to talk about Art?" they said, pronouncing the capital tentatively. "Like you're wildly talented, you've won a short story competition in something with an Arts Council grant nobody reads, and if we give you forty quid you're bound to stroll off with the Booker Prize?"

"Sod Art," I said. "I've got the rent to pay."

"The money's yours," they said in unison.

Okay, so I exaggerate a little. The point is I'm trying to make is that it's a business enterprise allowance and, unless you can convince them you know the market well enough to make a living, it's pointless even approaching them with something creative. Waffling about novels and Art is a waste of their time and yours; they know you can earn more from a couple of articles in the right magazines than a first novel in hardback, and if they don't they want you to tell them. It's better to seem overly cynical than a daydreaming dilettante.

Even so, you're still only halfway home. You're about to have a close encounter with the eligibility requirements. Of which nothing needs to be said except that they were written by civil servants.

Luckily, you have allies. The Enterprise Office staff find the regulations as irksome as you do; more so, probably — they have to put up with them all the time, and their own jobs depend on handing out allowances to as many people as possible. So they'll go out of their way to find ambiguities in the rules and interpret them in your favour. It's a classic example of evolution in action; a mutant strain of bureaucrat, adept at slipping between the lines of the small print and burrowing through loopholes invisible to the naked eye.

So the only real trouble you're likely to have in asking support for a writing career is the one-year rule. Since the allowance is supposed to help you start a business from scratch, the rules say you can't have been self-employed in the occupation you're claiming for at any time in the previous year. A bit of a problem, that; no one would seriously consider going freelance without some sort of track record, and without some evidence of previous sales they're unlikely to consider you for a grant, anyway. Heller lives.

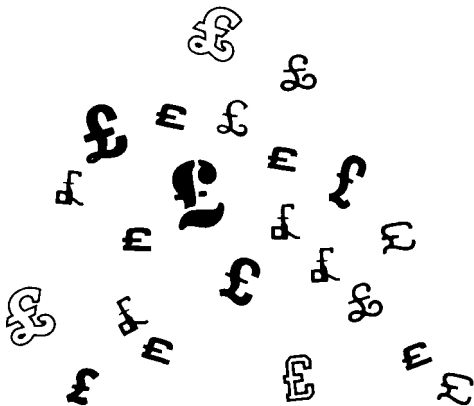
Or maybe not. The key phrases are self-employed and previous year. Any sales made "as a hobby" while you held down a regular job may not count (this one depends on how sympathetic the interviewer is). In which case, all you have to worry about is racking up the three months on the dole you need before you can apply. Either stockpile submissions or do your market research while you're

waiting - just be careful how you word it at the interview. And then, of course, there's the crucial difference between the acceptance and appearance of your work. The Enterprise agency will happily date your earnings from the acceptance of a piece, so long as you don't remind them that most markets pay on publication.

Most of all, listen; not just to what they're saying, but to what they're implying. They can't tell you outright what answers they want, but they'll drop you as many hints as they can.

After this, there's just one more formality: a signed declaration, in tones of the utmost sincerity, that you won't write pornography, religious tracts or political pamphlets while receiving the grant. If you consider this an intolerable assault on your creative freedom, I suppose you can always turn the money down; and I'll look out for NYMPHO NUNS OF THE KREMLIN on the Booker shortlist.

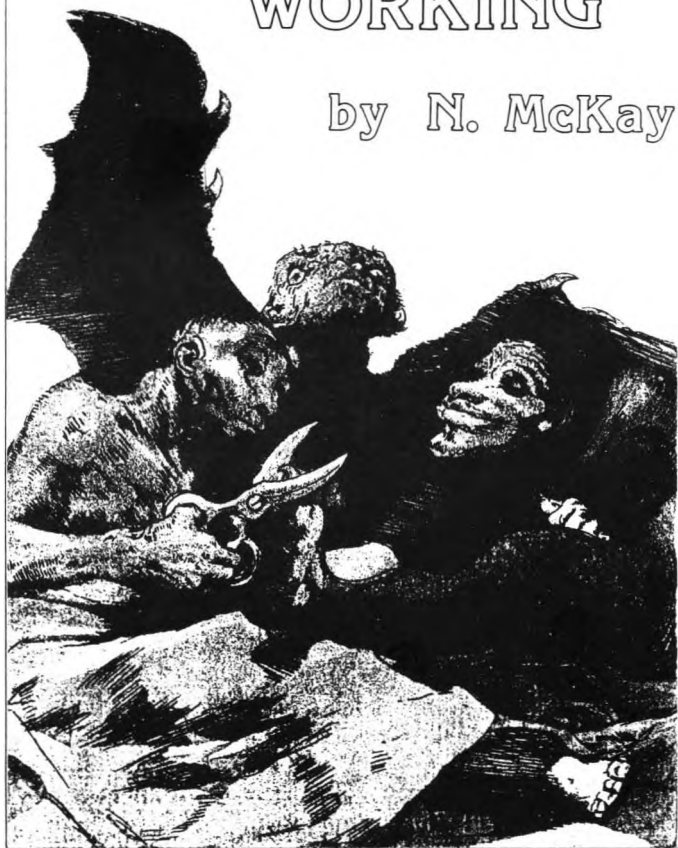
Because when you win you won't need the Enterprise Allowance, will you?



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# SHIFT, WORKING

by N. McKay



# 1

A single shimmer of light surging through recalcitrant darkness.

Riel could sense — on whatever level these feelings occurred — corporeality returning, and homed fast on the closest gather-place, the nearest something-like-a-city, which sight denied him but ingrafted sensors granted.

The terror-rush caught him as his matter slammed, expanded into worldstate again. The terror-rush never got any easier to stomach, and he vomited once he was fully solid.

His vomit escaped, he noticed, through a vertical mouth, valved to prevent the foulness rushing back in and choking him in the cloying, liquidthick atmosphere of Verona 8. So, he thought, another surprise. "The universe is not only queerer..." etcetera. His thoughts were still cast cynically so far — the usual civil serviceman's stance. They would soon mutate, he knew; begin the Shift and be coloured by the sentience processes of the life form he was, for now.

That was always the way with AMTransing, and he hated it.

He wished AMTran had never been invented — or should that be 'discovered'? Standard — he felt his strange mouth twitch to another shape, an approximate bitter smile, because Standard had come to be thought of as primitive — Mass Transference had been bad enough. The Advanced MassTranser was becoming a nightmare; again the mouth twitched, as this form found amusement with the concept nightmare. Riel could hear noises now, and looked up, his several eyes opening, startled to find the darkness tinted mosaically in colours his human retina could never have registered. Shit. I hate this.

Then the greetings — the goddamned endlessly jolly greetings that these outworlders always seemed to so easily trip out. Riel was as surly and insulting as his Shift allowed — which at this early stage was fairly extreme. The people didn't seem to mind. They began telling him about their world, their history, their culture. They began presenting him with food.

The food looked good to him, given the form he was in, and as he pushed it through his valved mouth he waved some arms to tell them to shut up. "<Where're the newcomers?>" he slooshed at them, bubbles and bits of food bursting into the viscous air with his words. They looked — he interpreted — puzzled. Perhaps it was just his not-yet-accustomed speech pattern which confused them, Riel thought; but this was his fortieth world, he really knew better than that. He had to keep up some hope, though. After all, he couldn't very well do his job without some.

He stayed on Verona 8 for several something-like-weeks. Long enough for sufficient Shifting to no longer think of it as Verona 8. He hauled his mind back time and again to his job, with increasing difficulty. He something-like-feared the worst.

Eventually he got close enough to an other-gender prospect to propose reproduction. She refused him with an icy stare which ended their relationship, and that confirmed his suspicions.

"<How long not you fuck-reproduce now?>" he asked the prospective mate's something-like-guardian, who came angrily to his cubicles to give him a talking-to.

"<Fuck-reproduce, yukk,>" replied the parent, valve twisting with amusement (this one was obviously not so over-sensitive to the subject as the prospect had been). "<On-moved have we since days those. Petty body stuff no need for now. Transcended, say (something-like-)priests — agree I, and remember I gone-by days.>"

"<Transcended, huh?>" gluffed Riel, feeling something-like-sick.

"<That — yes — word, right. We now —>"

Riel finished the sentence for the guardian. "— Appear you, yee?>"

"<Yee — appear we, just. Baby, you did.>"

"<Did,>" assented Riel, something-like-gloomily.

He knew what he would have to do, then. But it was a massive task, and he was too Shifted after so many something-like-weeks to even consider the action a possibility on this world, this time. "<Have go I, now,>" he slur-sighed to his friends when they came to see him and invite him out for recreation the next something-like-day.

They looked sad. He wished he couldn't discern that they looked sad. Hate I this. Yee. Shit.

He switched the sodden AMTran control with slickened finger-ends, and was brightly and immediately gone.

The Veronans cried — or something like. It was as if death had come back after all this time. They were a long while forgetting him.

## 2

Riel traced soft fingers down Ismay's back, and leaned over to kiss lightly along her spine. She purred, turned over and grasped him with her little hands, coaxing tumescence again.

But despite the automatic bloodsurge, his heart wasn't in

their lovemaking, and she knew it when she met his eyes.

"Oh, Riel, love, what is it? Can't you leave the job behind? You have another three weeks leave ahead, yet."

"I'm sorry," he sighed. "Feeling a bit clogged up with it all, you know. Forty worlds..."

"Look," she said, sitting up in bed, "why not have a real good scream? Mmm? After all, we have the whole apartment building to ourselves now. Nobody will —" Her words snapped off when she realized just how far from helpful they were. Remembering the emptiness of the building, the incipient emptiness of the whole city, the country, only increased Riel's depression.

"Have go I... I mean, I have to go back to work," he said, rising. He hoped, as he pulled on his rumpled sportsuit, that she would manage understanding of what he was going through. Something like understanding. She smiled as he left.

His trip to GovComp was a protracted one. Somewhere inside he wanted to resist the urge to go back so soon. He'd have a lot of talking to do to persuade the chiefs to let him resume, apart from anything else. He walked the whole way, pausing, window-shopping at the few places that weren't boarded up, even taking in a little porn in the Pleasure Quarter, where depressingly few pleasure-seekers or pleasers remained. But it was hopeless, and he finally trudged through the doors of GovComp at twenty after four, just as the light was dying.

"Good afternoon, Mister Gabicz," smiled the doorman, the new man Riel had just met the other day. "Thought you'd want to get away from it all."

Riel attempted a smile, but it came out so tight that it looked like a grimace. The doorman didn't say anything else, just buzzed him through to the elevator.

The elevator car was big enough to jog around. It was empty. Riel pressed for floor seventy, and was up there in a minute. Floor seventy, at least, would be busy. Full of people. Seventy to the top, full up with dedicated govern- and service- and science-men. Floor sixty-nine down, near empty. One or two tax clerks, inspectors, a few cops maybe; it was a wonder the building didn't crash over, it was so top-heavy.

"Riel!" called a big, mustachioed man smiling through the glass of the nearest office as Riel emerged from the elevator. "What's up?"

No prevarication, Riel stepped into the office and simply said, "I want to go back on duty, Osk."

"Already? Come on, Riel — get serious. You must be still feeling like shit from that last outing."

"It doesn't matter what I feel like," said Riel, ignoring the other man's gesture to him to sit down. "The job matters, not my emotional state."

Osk Emmelmann took a chewstick from the antique cigar box on his desk and popped it in his mouth. "But you have to carry your

emotional state with you on the job, Riel. It's not healthy to —"  
"Look, Osk, I know exactly what's necessary on the next world. Whether I'm laughing or depressed or elated or weepy or whatever won't make a damn bit of difference. Just let me get on with it."

Emmelmann chewed and frowned. "You know, you sometimes talk like you're the only man in the field."

Riel made a sound that was supposed to be a derisory laugh. "That could be the case if I take three weeks off at this stage. How many came back last month?"

"Two hundred."

"Barely fifty percent. And this month's percentage is running at —?"

The sub-chief shifted uneasily in his chair. "Thirty-five, maybe forty."

"Not too good."

"No. But that doesn't mean —"

"Oh fuck it, Osk, are we going to bat this around the rest of the afternoon, all evening, all day tomorrow, or what?"

"I have too much work to do."

"So just let's go see Luce, all right?"

"Luce is up to her neck in it, Riel. Look, just go have your holiday, will you? You're a good serviceman, and I don't intend to waste you by —"

"It's Luce's decision," Riel snapped. "Come on." And he turned away from the desk, left the office and stepped back in the still waiting, still empty elevator. The sub-chief hopped in just before the button flattened and the doors shooshed closed.

Luce Filigri's office was on the top floor. From her desk she could look out through a wall of glass at the not-so-lively city, capital of the depopulating nation that she was supposed to be president of. These days the title was starting to have a hollow ring to her; she had even begun to consider MassTransing herself. Maybe just Standard. Maybe abroad things would be better.

Riel knocked and entered with Osk still tagging behind. "Ms President," he said, with a formality sounding almost like sarcasm under the circumstances.

Filigri swivelled in her chair and hunched over her desk, belatedly trying to look busy before looking up and saying, "Gabcz. Good to see you back. Sorry I wasn't down the other day. I hear you did a fine —"

"Please, Ms President — I didn't come up to hear a stream of standard platitudes about what a great job I'm doing. I just want to get on with that job."

Filigri's face fell, and Emmelmann coughed aggitatedly.

Riel was about to speak again when the president cut him off. "All right, serviceman, I'll cut the crap. You want to fuck off to another world, fine. You want to risk what Shifting too often might do to you, okay. Frankly, you people may as well do just

as you damnwell please. Everything's shot to hell anyhow."

Emmelmann slumped down in a chair. "You're just tired, Ms President," he said.

"Oh, shut the fuck up, Osk. I'm sixty-three years old, I've been in charge of this shitty shrinking pisshole of a country for two decades since people stopped bothering to vote, and I am sick to death of asslickers like you always saying that everything can work out just fine."

"It can," said Riel firmly, standing right in front of her.

She met his eyes. What she saw there made her say, "All right. You tell me about it."

He told her. Told her what he'd come up with on Verona 8 — what he'd really come up with, not just the fact that he'd had to return empty-handed again. Told her soloing wouldn't work, that he'd need the largest squad they could pull together for the next world. Told her how he could work things out, and give her back a country to govern.

When he'd finished, she sat silently for a moment, letting the scheme sink in. It was operable. It was the first real chance she'd seen in all the years since they'd realized that hardly any of the people who were taking the Advanced Mass Transference trip were coming back. Three and a half hundred million people down to forty million in not much more than half a dozen years. You could almost have fitted them all into one city, by now. "Maybe we get some people back, they'll vote me out," she said eventually. "That'd be great."

Riel smiled.

### 3

A cluster of light surging through the blistering sky of a binary-sun world.

Seventy streaks of radiation, muddying the atmosphere, following their sensors to a colossal city, a gatherplace packed with millions fashioned in forms that the seventy instantly became.

They brushed aside the native welcomes, assembled together within a day of arrival, hardly Shifted, and Riel set about organizing the roundup. They would have to persuade, cajole — bully, if necessary. Most of the men and women of the squad were dubious, some of them had been recalled from leave and their nerves were still shot from previous trips.

Having picked a bright world helped. "<Like being in California,>" said one of them, craning his massive head back to

catch the sunlight. "<Only with four arms,>" added another, flapping hers around like a mutant turkey.

"<So relax for a day or two, catch a tan,>" said Riel, lifting his rubbery trunk. "<I'll start the ball rolling, all right?>" He picked out eleven career servicemen he knew well — five of them women — and they split into four groups, each to approach the government of one of the four major nations of this world. Transportation was a problem, but one bogdriver craft was given them as a gift by the locals, two more were borrowed, and a fourth was stolen.

Riel made an appointment for his prime group to see the government council on the largest nation — where they had arrived — for the afternoon of the fifth day. The council, they discovered, was a shambles, even by the deteriorating standards they'd left back home. Nobody seemed to keep a record of newcomers; no statistics were available. But their education system was thorough and prolonged, and Riel and his group asked them for the addresses of all the schools.

"<All them?>" asked an elderly councillor.

"<Please, all.>" said Riel, secretly itching to be harsher with the inefficient old idiots.

"<Take time, tell you. Look, maybe one two three month, who know?>"

"<List today, addresses,>" said Riel firmly.

"<Come back few weeks, list.>"

That was when Riel told them about the satellite. The satellite that didn't exist, except as a sensor-tricking chunk of machines plurite the size of a golfball. He told them it was vast — their sensors confirmed that within a few minutes — and had the capacity to destroy their nation — even their world — unless his wishes were satisfied. "<Addresses, schools, morning tomorrow latest,>" he concluded.

The councillors had paled under their suntans. This wasn't one of those silly bliss-worlds, where the natives had never heard of violence or intimidation or deliberate destruction — Riel had never visited such a world, and doubted their existence — but nevertheless, this was the biggest shock to their system these old govern-men had ever had. Some of them started to sway their trunks in what was obviously nervous agony. A whole forest of arms twitched.

But they still insisted, "<Do cannot.>" If a bureaucracy's inefficient, then it's inefficient. Riel cursed inside.

"<General announcement,>" suggested one of Riel's aides. "<Ent channels all, transportation all...>"

"<Yes,>" Riel took up gratefully, turning back to the council. "<General announcement.>"

"<Possible.>" they said.

"<Definite,>" said Riel. "<This night.>" And he left with his companions — followed, of course, by the ineffectual Secret

Police.

The general announcement went out that night, ordering congregation of all newcomers at Big Plain — Riel's makeshift base — within the week. Next day the second group returned with the news that the country they had approached kept immaculate records, and was now in process of making individual contact with all their newcomers.

The third group had found a worse shambles than Riel's; in the nation they visited, schools were as non-existent as records and statistics. And the comm-system there was hardly geared for massive general announcements. But they were scared as hell by the fake satellite, and were pressing their army into the task of rounding up "the youngsters" as they called them. It would take at least a week.

The final group didn't return. Riel tried communicating with them every day — every few hours, after the first two days they were late — but got no answer. He'd expected to lose some men on the job, but it hurt him that it had actually happened; and what hurt him even more was the possibility that the fourth nation's resistance would blow a hole through the satellite story. But the fourth nation communicated so little with the other three that he knew they would at least have some time before word of its stand got out.

Riel hid the loss from most of his remaining sixty-six men, and busied them with preparation of a vast receiving station, covering Big Plain for miles. Already while they were constructing the enclosure, the first of the puzzled newcomers were starting to arrive there.

By the end of the week a flood of bogdriver craft of all shapes and sizes were pouring into Plain Port, and the newcomers were becoming cramped. One month from arrival day, just as it was getting more difficult to stave off Shifting, Riel's group had three million people in their care.

And then the army came.

The fourth nation had been monitoring the situation, and not taking kindly to it. They declared the offensive action to be altruistic — setting themselves up as saviours of their three weaker brothers — but Riel knew their motive was pure opportunism. It became clear, from the weakness of their attack, that they were more interested in establishing a military presence on the biggest continent than they were in stopping the plans of Riel's group.

So, thirty-five something-like-days after their arrival, under conditions of siege, Riel and his men set their modified control gear and AMTrans out — three million, one hundred thousand, seven hundred and sixty seven bursting, blinding streaks of radiant light corruscating through the thin, hot air, half-blinding the natives who turned up their trunked heads to watch them go.

It felt something like death for the older ones left behind. But there would be more newcomers; they had faith. And for now there would be the busy-ness of a war to occupy them in their grief.

## 4

"I got the chalet," the president said to Riel, who lounged in a chair by the glass wall of her office in GovComp. "Great place, even if it did bust a lot of cred. I figure I'll soon get the hang of skiing again. All I need's a nice young man, now, and I'll be set up pretty fucking good for my 'declining years', eh?" She let out a girlish laugh.

Eighteen months had passed since the first reclamation. Riel had been decorated, promoted, and had led eight more missions since. He was watching the bustling city below now, only half listening to the president's words.

Luce Filigri was enjoying her last day in office. She'd been voted out and was being villified in the press. She was happy.

The Times and The Post were both lying on her desk, bellowing "presidential irresponsibility". Many of the inside stories had been dropped to make room for full-page birth control ads. That part of the economy was booming, anyway. Her eyes settled again on the column six story of The Post — the reason she'd called Riel in. "To get on to more serious matters," she said with difficulty, "— have you seen this?" She held up the paper.

Riel turned his head grudgingly away from the window. "That, and the Herald, and the English Chronicle, and El Telegrafo, and two or three magazines. Including Newsweek. What can I tell you?"

"They don't like you anymore," sighed Luce.

"You or me neither," he said, and looked out the window again.

"I have to retire you, Riel."

His attention snapped back. "Retire...? — I'm not even forty years old yet. That's ridiculous. There are more miss —"

"— No more missions," she interrupted. "Congress is ratifying that today."

"What?"

"I'm sorry — we kept it quiet. The press is going to be a lot happier by the time the evening editions hit the streets. Not with you, though. I'm told you're a —"

"— A fucking stoolpigeon."

"'Liability' was the expression I was going to use. It amounts to pretty much the same, though."

Riel got up and walked across the office towards the door. "Enjoy your skiing," he muttered.

"Hold it there, shitface," called the president, standing up as Riel reached the door. "Don't pull that snotty little boy act with me. You don't sulk in front of the president."

Filigri's outbursts had always amused Riel. Even now, he almost grinned. "Not even on her last day in office?" he asked.

"Especially not on her last goddamned day in office, you pussybrain. Now sit down."

Declining the chair in the center of the room, he went back to the window. She sat by him in the second lounge. "You know why I'm kicking you out?" she asked quietly.

"Because if the bastards that are taking over tomorrow kick me out, they'll do it worse. I'll get disgrace and no pension."

She turned to look at him, pursing her lips. "You do know. So why'd you act so nasty?"

"Overwrought, I guess."

"You need to relax."

"Well, I'll certainly have plenty of time for that. I don't imagine anybody out there's going to give me a job, do you?"

"You could come skiing." She put her hand on his. She'd always liked him, even if his dedication did make him a little cold sometimes. And he was probably the most successful and admired man in the country, until they'd started bringing out the hammers, and the boards, and the nails, these past few weeks. Too good a guy to crucify.

Riel moved his other hand over hers, gripped it lightly. "Thanks, Ms President," he said, attempting lightness.

Then they were silent for some time, watching the traffic, watching the people on the streets and through the shop- and office-windows.

"You like this?" said Riel eventually.

She knew exactly what he meant. "I love it," she said. "I love every one of those bastards down there."

"It doesn't worry you? You don't think they might be..."

She laughed very lightly. "Monsters from outer space, huh? God, that's one class of people I have difficulty liking - the Press."

"Mmm. They're setting up the streets to get mean again."

"You said it. Nobody trusting anybody. Suspicion. Prejudice. Jeez - old times. I'll be glad to get to the mountains."

"You don't think there's any" - he paused - "truth in it? You don't think I did wrong?"

She touched her hand to his face. "Wrong? Christ, no. You gave us the world back, Riel."

"I sometimes think all the Shifting drove me crazy."

"Don't be silly."

"I wish there was some way to know for sure. I mean, really

know they're our people. Shifting's such a bitch - somebody AMTransex and Shifts, you can't tell. Can't tell them from a native."

Slipping into stating the obvious, thought Filigri. He must be really upset. "Look, Riel, forget about all that. You brought our people home. That means a lot."

"Our people. The Press say I shipped in millions of - creatures, whatever."

She put her arms around him, kissed his hair. "Screw the press."

"Some way..."

There was a knock on the door and a bespectacled civil-serviceman popped his head into the room. "Ms President...?"

"Fuck off, asshole," Filigri snapped.

## 5

*Blue spattered orange light, cloudy sky today.*

*Tunnels and towers quiet, too few shufflealongs this morning. Shit. Hate this. Why don't they come back? The invention - discovery? - marvellous; gets us to stars. But is we us when we gets there? For how long? Oh people, my people, come back. Land here lonely grows. Wish you were here not out there spread across speckled heavens, Shifting consciousness same time as form, becoming others than who you are. Same different. Just as happy or sadder or happier. Same different except you leave us here lonely at homeworld. Shit. Please come back. Not so bad here. No worse than elsewhereworlds, can't be. Can't be.*

*Cloudy sky today. Rain later and we all stand feeling saddening. Get to work we must and return them. We love our people so much.*

## 6

Ismay had been holding forth to their guests about the freedom and rights of the individual, tangential to the discussion of the banning of AMTran.

Shifting was the problem, her friends reminded her forcefully, and it wasn't solvable. Everybody trapped into going native.

Stuck Shifted, that was the phrase. They'd had to do something about that.

A being has the right to just be, Ismay had said — several times, so she must have thought it sounded pretty impressive.

"You're just trying to sound impressive," said Riel eventually. He had hardly spoken all evening. "You don't know anything about AMTransing."

Ismay was surprised. She was expecting healthy argument from the others, but not from her own husband. When they were on their own, of course, they seldom talked about this sort of thing. The discussion fizzled off into silence quite soon after that, and the guests all left before midnight.

"A being can be, anywhere, any form," she insisted again as they went to bed, after the telechannels had shut down.

The late news broadcast had upset Riel. "I don't want to talk any more <philosophy>," he said.

"Talk what?" she said.

"Philosophy. <Want I> just to go to <now sleep>."

Ismay dropped her ideas about winning the argument. She sat up, looked closely at him. "Are you all right?"

"<I'm sure am I>, all right <just I> don't want..."

"Darling, what's happening? I can't understand —"

"<Upshut, talkno, upshut, no philosoph...>" he said irritably, before his voice trailed off. Then he just sat there, gazing towards the window and not at her.

"Riel, what is it? What is it?"

No answer.

She reached for the 'phone. "I'll call... Who shall I call? Who shall I call?"

"<Shit,>" he grunted eventually, barely aware of the agony in his tongue and vocal cords.

"Darling, who can I call?"

"<Hate this I.>"



