

Science Fictions and Fantasy

Corridors

By Barry N. Malzberg



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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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RUTHVEN USED TO have plans. Big plans: turn the category around, arrest the decline of science fiction into stereotype and cant, open up the category to new vistas and so on. So forth. Now, however, he is, at fifty-four, merely trying to hold on; he takes this retraction of ambition, understanding of his condition as the only significant change in his inner life over two decades. The rest of it—inner and outer too—has been replication, disaster, pain, recrimination, self-pity and the like: Ruthven thinks of these old partners of the law firm of his life as brothers. At least, thanks to Replication & Disaster, he has a brief for the game. He knows what he is and what has to be

done, and most of the time he can sleep through the night, unlike that period during his forties when 4 A.M. more often than not would see him awake and drinking whiskey, stating at his out-of-print editions in many languages.

The series has helped. Ruthven has at last achieved a modicum of fame in science fiction and for the first time—he would not have believed this ever possible—some financial security. Based originally upon a short novel written for *Astounding* in late 1963, which he padded for quick paperback the next year, *The Sorcerer* has proven the capstone of his career. Five or six novels written subsequently at low advances for the same firm went nowhere, but: the editor was fired, the firm collapsed, releasing all rights, the editor got divorced, married a subsidiary rights director, got a consultant job with her firm, divorced her, went to a major paperback house as

science fiction chief and through a continuing series of coincidences known to those who (unlike Ruthven) always seemed to come out a little ahead commissioned three new Sorcerers from Ruthven on fast deadline to build up cachet with the salesmen. They all had hung out at the Hydra Club together, anyway. Contracts were signed, the first of the three new Sorcerers (written, all of them in ten weeks) sold 150,000 copies, the second was picked up as an alternate by a demented Literary Guild and the third was leased to hardcover. Ruthven's new, high-priced agent negotiated a contract for five more Sorcerers for \$100,000.

Within the recent half decade, Ruthven has at last made money from science fiction. One of the novels was, a Hugo finalist, another was finned. He has been twice final balloted for a *Gandalf*. Some of his older novels have been reprinted.

Ruthven is now one of the ten most successful science fiction writers: he paid taxes on \$79,000 last year. In his first two decades in this field, writing frantically and passing through a succession of dead-end jobs, Ruthven did not make \$79,000.

It would be easier for him, he thinks, if he could take his success seriously or at least obtain some peace, but of this he has none. Part of it has to do with his recent insight that he is merely hanging on, that the ultimate outcome of ultimate struggle for any writer in America not hopelessly self-deluded is to hang on; another part has to do with what Ruthven likes to think of as the accumulated damages and injuries sustained by the writing of seventy-three novels. Like a fighter long gone from the ring, the forgotten left hooks taken under the lights in all of the quick-money bouts have caught up with him and stunned his brain. Ruthven hears the music of combat as he

never did when it was going on. He has lost the contents of most of these books and even some of their titles but the pain fingers. This is self-dramatization, of course, and Ruthven has enough ironic distance to know it. No writer was ever killed by a book.

Nonetheless, he hears the music, feels the dull knives in his kidneys and occipital regions at night; Ruthven also knows that he has done nothing of worth in a long time. The Sorcerer is a fraud; he is far below the aspirations and intent of his earlier work, no matter how flawed that was. Most of these new books have been written reflexively under the purposeful influence of Scotch and none of them possesses real quality. Even literacy. He has never been interested in these books. Ruthven is too far beyond self-delusion to think that the decline of his artistic gifts, the collapse of his promise, means anything *either*. Nothing

means anything except holding on as he now knows. Nonetheless, he *used* to feel that the quality of work made some difference. Didn't he? Like the old damages of the forgotten books he feels the pain at odd hours.

He is not disgraced, of this he is fairly sure, but he is disappointed. If he had known that it would end this way, perhaps he would not have expended quite so much on those earlier books. *The Sorcerer* might have had a little more energy; at least he could have put some color in the backgrounds.

Ruthven is married to Sandra, his first and only wife. The marriage has lasted through thirty-one years and two daughters, one divorced, one divorced and remarried, both far from his home in the Southeast. At times Ruthven considers his marriage with astonishment: he does not quite know how he has been able to stay married so long granted the damages of his

career, the distractions, the deadening, the slow and terrible resentment which has built within him over almost three decades of commercial writing. At other times, however, he feels that his marriage is the only aspect of his life (aside from science fiction itself) which has a unifying consistency. And only death will end it.

He accepts that now. Ruthven is aware of the lives of all his colleagues: the divorces, multiple marriages, disastrous affairs, two- and three-timing, bed-hopping at conventions; the few continuing marriages seem to be cover or mausoleum ... but after considering his few alternatives Ruthven has nonetheless stayed married and the more active outrage of the earlier decades has receded. It all comes back to his insight: nothing matters. Hang on. If nothing makes any difference then it is easier to stay with Sandra by far. Also, she has a position of her

own; it cannot have been marriage to a science fiction writer which enticed her when they met so long ago. She has taken that and its outcome with moderate good cheer and has given him less trouble, he supposes, than she might. He has not shoved the adulteries and recrimination in her face but surely she knows of them; she is not stupid. And she is now married to \$79,000 a year, which is not inconsiderable. At least this is all Ruthven's way of rationalizing the fact that he has had (he knows now) so much less from this marriage than he might have, the fact that being a writer has done irreparable damage to both of them. And the children. He dwells on this less than previously. His marriage, Ruthven thinks, is like science fiction writing itself: if there was a time to get out that time is past and now he would be worse off anywhere else. Who would read him? Where would he sell? What else could he do?

Unlike many of his colleagues, Ruthven had never had ambitions outside the field. Most of them had had literary pretensions, at least had wanted to reach wider audiences, but Ruthven had never wanted anything else. To reproduce, first for his own pleasure and then for money, the stories of the forties *Astounding* which moved him seemed to be a sensible ambition. Later of course he; did get serious about the category, wanting to make it anew and etc but that was later. Much later. It seemed a noble thing in the fifties to want to be a science fiction writer and his career has given him all that he could have hoped for at fourteen. Or twenty-four.

He has seen what their larger hopes have done to so many of his peers who started out with him in the fifties, men of large gifts who in many cases had been blocked in every way in their attempts to leave science fiction, some becoming quite

embittered, even dying for grief or spite, others accepting their condition at last only at the cost of self-hatred. Ruthven knows their despair, their self-loathing. The effects of his own seventy-three novels have set in, and of course there was a time when he took science fiction almost as seriously as the most serious ... but that was later, he keeps on reminding himself, after breaking in, after publication in the better magazines, after dealing with the audience directly and learning (as he should have always known) that they were mostly a bunch of kids. His problems had come later but his colleagues, so many of them, had been ambitious from the start, which made matters more difficult for them.

But then, of course, others had come in without any designs at all and had stayed that way. And they too—those who were still checking into *Analog* or the Westercon—were just as

miserable and filled with self-hatred as the ambitious, or as Ruthven himself had been a few years back. So perhaps it was the medium of science fiction itself that did this to you. He is not sure.

He thinks about things like this still ... the manner in which the field seems to break down almost all of its writers. At one time he had started a book about this, called it *The Lies of Science Fiction*, and in that bad period around his fiftieth birthday had done three or four chapters, but he was more than enough of a professional to know that he could not sell it, was more than ready to put it away when *The Sorcerer* was revived. That had been a bad time to be sure; ten thousand words on *The Lies of Science Fiction* had been his out put for almost two full years. If it had not been for a little residual income on his novels, a few anthology sales, the free-lance work he had picked

up at the correspondence school and Sandra's occasional substitute teaching, things might have bottomed. At that it was a near thing, and his daughters' lives, although they were already out of the house, gave Sandra anguish.

Ruthven still shudders, thinking of the images of flight which overcame him, images so palpable that often they would put him in his old Ford Galaxie, which he would drive sometimes almost a hundred miles to the state border before taking the U-turn and heading back. He had, after all, absolutely nowhere to go. He did not think that anyone who had ever known him except Sandra would put him up for more than two nights (Felicia and Carole lived with men in odd arrangements), and he had never lived alone in his life. His parents were dead.

Now, however, things are better. He is able to produce a steady two thousand words a day almost without alcohol, his

drinking is now a ritualized half a pint of scotch before dinner and there are rumors of a larger movie deal pending if the purchaser of the first movie can be bought off a clause stupidly left in his contract giving him series rights. Ruthven will be guest of honor at the Cincinnati convention three years hence if the committee putting together the bid is successful. That would be a nice crown to his career at fifty-seven, he thinks, and if there is some bitterness in this—Ruthven is hardly self-deluded—there is satisfaction as well. He has survived three decades as a writer in this country, and a science fiction writer at that, and when he thinks of his colleagues and the condition of so many with whom he started he can find at least a little self-respect. He is writing badly, *The Sorcerer* is hackwork, but he is still producing and making pretty big money and (the litany with which he gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night) nothing matters.

Nothing matters at all. Survival is the coin of the realm. Time is a river with banks.

Now and then, usually during the late afternoon naps which are his custom (to pass the time quicker before the drinking, which is the center of his day), Ruthven is assaulted by old possibilities, old ambitions, old dread, visions of what he wanted to be and what science fiction did to him, but these are, as he reminds himself when he takes his first heavy one at five, only characteristic of middle age. Everyone feels this way. Architects shake with regret, doctors flee the reservation, men's hearts could break with desire and the mockery of circumstance. What has happened is not symptomatic of science fiction but of his age, his country. His condition. Ruthven tells that to himself, and on six ounces of scotch he is convinced, convinced that it is so, but as Sandra comes into the room to tell him that dinner is

seven minutes away he thinks that someday he will have to get *The Lies of Science Fiction* out of his desk and look at it again. Maybe there was something in these pages beyond climacteric. Maybe he had better reconsider.

But for now the smells of roast fill the house, he must drink quickly to get down the half-pint in seven minutes, the fumes of scotch fill his breath, the scents and sounds of home fill all of the corridors and no introspection is worth it. None of it is worth the trouble. Because, Ruthven tells himself for the thirty-second time that day (although it is not he who is doing the counting) that nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing matters.

* * * *

Back in the period of his depression when he was attempting to write *The Lies of Science Fiction* but mostly trying to space out his days around alcohol, enraged (and unanswerable) letters

to his publishers about his out-of-print books and drives in his bald-tired Galaxie ... back in that gray period as he drove furiously from supermarket to the state border to the liquor store, Ruthven surmised that he had hit upon some of the central deceptions which, had wrecked him and reduced him and so many of his, colleagues to this condition. To surmise was not to conquer, of course; he was as helpless as ever but there was a dim liberation in seeing how he had been lied to, and he felt that at least he could take one thing from the terrible years through which he had come—he was free of self-delusion.

Ruthven thought often of the decay of his colleagues, of the psychic and emotional fraying which seemed to set in between their fifth and fifteenth years of professional writing and reduced their personal lives and minds to rubble. Most were drunks, many lived in chaos, all of them in their work and persona

seemed to show distress close to panic. One did not have to meet them at the conventions or hang out with them at the SFWA parties in New York to see that these were people whose lives were askew; the work showed it. Those who were not simply reconstructing or revising their old stories were working in new areas in which the old control had gone, the characters were merely filters for events or possessed of a central obsession, the plots lacked motivation or causality and seemed to deal with an ever more elaborate and less comprehended technology. Whether the ideas were old or new, they were half-baked, the novels were padded with irrelevant events and syntax, characters internalized purposelessly, false leads were pursued for thousands of words. The decay seemed to cut across all of the writers and their work; those that had been good seemed to suffer no less than the mediocre or worse, and

there was hardly a science fiction writer of experience who was not—at least to Ruthven's antennae—displaying signs of mental illness.

That decay, Ruthven came to think, had to do with the very nature of the genre: the megalomaniacal, expansive visions being generated by writers who increasingly saw the disparity between Spaceways and their own hopeless condition. While the characters flourished and the science gleamed, the writers themselves were exposed to all of the abuses known to the litterateurs in America and intelligent, even the dumbest of them, to a fault—they were no longer able to reconcile their personal lives with their vision: the vision became pale or demented. At a particularly bleak time, Ruthven even came to speculate that science fiction writing was a form of illness which, like syphilis, might swim undetected in the blood for years but

would eventually, untreated, strike to kill. The only treatment would be retirement, but most science fiction writers were incapable of writing anything else after a while and the form itself was addictive: it was as if every potential sexual partner carried venereal disease. You could stop fucking but only at enormous psychic or emotional cost, and then what? Regardless, that virus killed.

Later, as he began to emerge from this, Ruthven felt a little more sanguine about the genre. It might not necessarily destroy you to write it if you could find a little personal dignity and, more importantly, satisfactions outside of the field. But the counsel of depression seemed to be the real truth: science fiction was aberrant and dangerous, seductive but particularly ill-suited to the maladjusted who were drawn to it, and if you stayed with it long enough, the warpage was permanent.

After all, wasn't science fiction for most of its audience an aspect of childhood they would outgrow?

This disparity between megalomania and anonymity had been one of the causes of the decay in his colleagues, he decided. Another was the factor of truncation. Science fiction dealt with the sweep of time and space, the enormity of technological consequence in all eras, but as a practical necessity and for the sake of their editors all science fiction writers had to limit the genre and themselves as they wrote it. True science fiction as the intelligent editors knew (and the rest followed the smart ones) would not only be dangerous and threatening, it would be incomprehensible. How could twenty-fourth century life in the Antares system be depicted? How could the readership for an escape genre be led to understand what a black hole would be?

The *writers* could not understand any of this, let alone a young and gullible readership interested in marvels that were to be made accessible. (Malzberg had been into aspects of this in his work but Ruthven felt that the man had missed the point: lurking behind Malzberg's schematics was the conviction that science fiction should be able to find a language for its design, but any penny-a-word stable hack for *Amazing* in the fifties knew better and Malzberg would have known better too if he had written science fiction before he went out to smash it.) So twenty-fourth century aliens in the Antares system would speak a colloquial Brooklynese, commanders of the Black Hole Explorer would long for their Ganymede Lady. The terrific would be made manageable, the awesome shaped by the exigencies of pulp fiction into the nearby. The universe would become Brooklyn

with remote dangerous sections out in Bushwick or Greenpoint but plenty of familiar stops and safer neighborhoods.

The writers, awash in the market and struggling to live by their skills, would follow the editors and map out a universe to scale ... but Ruthven speculated that the knowledge that they had drained their vision, grayed it for the sake of publication, had filled them first with disappointment and finally self-hatred: Re Ruthven they had been caught early by the idea of science fiction—transcendence and complexity—and however far they had gone from there, they still felt at the base that this was a wondrous and expensive genre. Deliberately setting themselves against all for which the field had once stood could not have been easy for them. Rationalization would take the form of self-abuse: drink, divorce, obesity, sadism, in extreme cases penury, drugs or the outright cultivation of death. (Only H. Beam Piper

had actually pulled the trigger on himself but that made him an honest man and a gun collector.) That was your science fiction writer, then, an ecclesiastic who had been first summoned from the high places and then dumped in the mud of Calvary to cast lots with the soldiers. All for a small advance.

That had been some of Ruthven's thinking, but then he had been very depressed. He had done a lot of reading and thinking about the male mid-life crisis. Sandra and he were barely dealing with one another; they lived within the form of marriage but not its substance (didn't everyone long married end that way?). His sexual panic, drinking, terror of death and sense of futility were more characteristic, perhaps, of the climacteric than of science fiction. The poor old field had taken a lot of blame over its lifetime (a lifetime, incidentally, exactly as long as Ruthven's: he had been born on April 12, 1926) for matters not

of its own making, and once again was being blamed for pain it had not created. Maybe.

It wasn't science fiction alone which had put him in the ditch at late mid-life, Ruthven thought, any more than science fiction had been responsible for Hiroshima, Sputnik, the collapse of Apollo or the rotten movies of the nineteen-fifties which had first enticed and then driven the public away. The field had been innocent witness to much of these and the target of some but it was unfair to blame the genre for what seemed (at least according to the books he read) an inevitability in middle class, middle aged, male America.

It was this ambivalence—the inability to fuse his more recondite perspective with the visceral, hateful feeling that science fiction had destroyed all of their lives—which stopped *The Lies of Science Fiction*. Ruthven does not kid himself even if

the contracts for *The Sorcerer* had not come in and his career turned around, he probably would have walked away from the book. Its unsaleability was a problem, but he knew that he might have sold it somewhere, an amateur press, and he had enough cachet in the field to place sections here and there in the fan magazines. It wouldn't have been much but it would have been more per them than what Sandra was making or he from the correspondence school.

But he had not wanted to go on. His commitment, if anything, had been to stop. Ruthven, from the modest perspective of almost four years, can now admit that he was afraid to continue. He could not bear to follow it through to the places it might have taken him. At the worst, it might have demonstrated that his life, that all of their lives in science fiction, had been as the title said: a lie ... a lie which would lead to nothing but its

replications by younger writers, who in turn would learn the truth. The book might have done more than that: it could have made his personal life impossible. Under no circumstance would he have been able to write that book and live with Sandra ... but the drives on the Interstate had made it coldly evident that he had nowhere else to go. If he were not a middle-aged, married science fiction writer, then what was he?

Oh, it was a good thing that *The Sorcerer* had come through and that he had gotten back to fiction. The novels were rotten but that was no problem: he didn't want to be good anymore, he just wanted to survive. Now and then Ruthven still drives the Interstate in his new Impala; now and then he is still driven from sleep to stare at the foreign editions ... but he no longer stares in anguish or drives in fury; everything seems to have bottomed out. Science fiction can still do many things to him but

it no longer has the capacity to deliver exquisite pain, and for this he is grateful.

Eventually someone else, perhaps one of the younger writers, *will do The Lies of Science Fiction* or something similar, but of this in his heart is Henry Martin Ruthven convinced: he will never read it. He may be dead. If not he will stay clear. Science fiction now is only that means by which he is trying to hang on in the pointless universe and that which asks that he make anything more of it (what is there to make of it?) will have to check the next bar because Henry Martin Ruthven is finished. He knows the lies of science fiction, all right. But above all and just in time, he knows the truths of it too.

* * * *

Ruthven attends the Cincinnati World Convention as guest of honor. At a party the first night in the aseptic and terrifying

hotel he is surrounded by fans and committee, editors and colleagues, and it occurs to him that most of the people in these crowded rooms were not born when he sold his first story, "The Hawker," to *Worlds of If* on August 18, 1952. This realization fills him with terror: it is one thing to apprehend in isolation how long he has been around in this field and how far the field in its mad branching and expansion has gone from all of them who started in the fifties, but it is quite another to be confronted in terms that he cannot evade. Because his career has turned around in the decade, most of these people have a good knowledge of his work, he is guest of honor, he is hardly ignored, but still—

Here and there in the packed three-room suite he sees people he knows, editors and writers and fans with whom he has been at conventions for years, but he cannot break out of his curious

sense of isolation, and his conversations are distracted. Gossip about the business, congratulations on having survived to be a guest of honor, that sort of thing. Ruthven would almost prefer to be alone in his room or drinking quietly at the bar but that is obviously impossible. How can a guest of honor be alone on the first night of his convention? It would be, among others things, a commentary on science fiction itself and no one, least of all he, wants to face it.

None of his family are here. Felicia is no surprise: she is starting her second year of law school in Virginia and could not possibly miss the important early classes; besides, they have had no relationship for years. Maybe never. Carole had said that she might be in from Oakland, would do what she could, but he has heard that kind of thing from Carole before and does not expect her. The second marriage is falling apart, he knows,

Sandra will tell him that much, and Carole is hanging on desperately (he surmises) much as Ruthven himself hung on years ago when, however bad it might be, there was nothing else. He wishes that he could share this with Carole but of course it would be the finish of him. There are hundreds of sentences which said to the wrong people would end his marriage on the spot and that is another of them.

Sandra did want to be here but she is not. She has been feeling weak all year and now at last they have a diagnosis: she will have a hysterectomy soon. Knowing what being guest of honor meant to him Sandra had offered to go regardless, stay in the room if she could not socialize, but Ruthven had told her not to. He knew that she did not want to come, was afraid of the crowds and the hysteric pulse and was for the first time in her

life truly afraid of dying. She is an innocent. She considers her own death only when she feels very ill.

Not so many years ago, being alone at a large convention, let alone as guest of honor, would have inflamed Ruthven. He would have manipulated his life desperately to get even a night away alone, a Labor Day weekend would have been redemption ... but now he feels depressed. He can take no pleasure from the situation and how it occurred. He is afraid for Sandra and misses her a little too, wishes that his daughters, who have never understood him or his work, could have seen him just this once celebrated. But he is alone and he is beginning to feel that it is simply too late for adultery. He has had his opportunities now and then, made his luck, but well past fifty and into what he thinks of as leveling out, Ruthven has become resigned to feeling that what he should have done can be done no more—

take the losses, the time is gone. There are women of all ages, appearance and potential here, many are alone, others in casual attachments, many—even more than he might imagine, he suspects—available. But he will probably sleep alone all the nights of this convention, either sleep alone or end up standing in the hotel bar past four with old friends drinking and remembering the fifties. The desperation and necessity are gone: Sandra is not much, he accepts this, but she has given him all of which she is capable, which makes her flaws in this marriage less serious than Ruthven's because he could have given more. His failure comes from the decision, consciously, to deny. Perhaps it was the science fiction that shut him down. He just does not know.

Ruthven stands in the center of the large welcoming party, sipping scotch and conversing. He feels detached from the

situation and from his own condition; he feels that if he were to close his eyes other voices would overwhelm him ... the voices of all the other conventions. Increasingly he finds that he has more to hear from—and more to say to—the dead than to the living. Now with his eyes closed, rocking, it is as if Mark Clifton, Edmond Hamilton, Kuttner and Kornbluth are standing by him glasses in hand, looking at one another in commiseration and silence. There is really no need for any of them to speak. For a while none of them do.

Finally, Ruthven says as he has before, "It hurts, doesn't it? It hurts." Kuttner nods, Kornbluth raises a sardonic eyebrow. Mark Clifton shrugs. "It hurts," Clifton says, "oh it hurts all right, Henry. Look at the record." There seems nothing more to say. A woman in red who looks vaguely like Felicia touches his arm. Her eyes are solemn and intense. She has always wanted to meet

him, she says; she loves his work. She tells Ruthven her name and that she is a high school English teacher in Boston.

"Thank you," he says, "I'm glad you like the books." Everybody nods. Hamilton smiles. "You might as well," Kombluth says with a shrug, "I can't anymore and there's really nothing else." Ruthven shrugs. He tells the woman that the next scotch is on him or more properly the committee. He walks her over to the bar. Her hand is in his. Quickly, oh so quickly, her hand is in his.

* * * *

At eight-fifteen the next evening Ruthven delivers his guest-of-honor speech. There are about three thousand in the large auditorium; convention attendance is just over ten thousand but 30 percent is not bad. Most attendees of modern world conventions are not serious readers now; they are movie fans or

television fans or looking for a good time. Ruthven has thought for months about this speech and has worked on it painfully.

Once he thought—this was, of course, years ago that if he were ever guest of honor at a major convention he would deliver a speech denunciatory of science fiction and what it did to its writers. Later, when he began to feel as implicated as anyone, the speech became less an attack than an elegy for the power and mystery that had been drained by bad writing and editing, debased by a juvenile audience. But after *The Lies of Science Fiction* had been put away and the edge of terror blunted, the very idea of the speech seemed childish. He was never going to be guest of honor and if he were, what right did he have to tell anyone anything? Science fiction was a private circumstance, individually perceived.

Nonetheless he had, when the time came to plan, considered the speech at length. What he decided to do, finally, was review his career in nostalgic terms, dropping in just enough humor to distract the audience from the thrust of his intention because after bringing his career up to date he wanted to share with them his conviction that it did not matter. Nothing mattered except that it had kept him around until the coincidence of *The Sorcerer*, and *The Sorcerer* meant nothing except that Ruthven would not worry about money until he was dead. "Can't you see the overwhelming futility of it?" he would ask. "The Lies of Science Fiction" seemed a good title except that it would be printed in the convention book and be taken as a slap at the committee and indeed the very field which was doing him honor. Better to memorialize his book through the speech itself.

Anyway, the title would have alerted the audience to the bitterness of his conclusion. He wanted to spring it on them.

So he had called it "Me and the Cosmos and Science Fiction," harmless enough, and Ruthven delivers the first thirty-two minutes of his thirty-five minute address from the text and pretty much as he had imagined. Laughter is frequent; his anecdotes of Campbell, Gold and Roger Elwood are much appreciated. There is applause when he speaks of the small triumph of the science fiction writer the day Apollo landed. "We did that" he remembers telling a friend, "at three cents a word." The audience applauds. They probably understand. This much, anyway.

Then, to his astonishment and disgust, Ruthven comes off the text and loses control. He has never hated himself so. Just as he is about to lift his head and explain coldly that none of it matters

his voice falters and breaks. It has happened in the terrible arguments with Sandra in the old days and in the dreams with Kombluth, Hamilton, Kuttner and Clifton, but never before in public, and Ruthven delivers the last paragraphs of his speech in a voice and from a mood he has never before known:

“We tried,” he says. “I want you to know that, that even the worst of us, the most debased hack, the one-shot writer, the fifty-book series, C the hundreds and thousands of us who ever wrote a line of this stuff for publication: we tried. We tried desperately to say something because we were the only ones who could, and however halting our language, tuneless the song, it was ours.

“We wanted to celebrate, don't you see? We wanted to celebrate the insistent, circumstantial fact of the spirit itself, that wherever and in whatever form the spirit could yet sing amidst

the engines of the night, that the engines could extinguish our lives but never our light, and that in the spaces between we could still thread our colors of substantiation. In childhood nights we felt it, later we lost it, but retrieval was always the goal, to get back there, to make it work, to justify ourselves to ourselves, to give the light against the light. We tried and failed; in a billion words we failed and faded again, but throughout was our prayer and somewhere in its center lived something else, the mystery and power of what might have been flickering.

“In these spaces, in all the partitions, hear out song. Let it be known that while given breath we sang until it drew the very breath from us and extinguished our light forever.”

And then, in hopeless and helpless fury, Ruthven pushes aside the microphone and cries.

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