



Michael D. Smith

**The
Damage
Patrol
Quartet**

The Damage Patrol Quartet

Four Stories

Michael D. Smith

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For my wife Nancy

Introduction

The Twilight Zone was one of my two great childhood inspirations, the other being nineteen-fifties Grade B science fiction movies. Dreams and their illogic have always been a notable source for story ideas, and my writing, whether science fiction or literary, usually has uncanny twists, distorted perceptions, and bizarre underpinnings. All four stories in *The Damage Patrol Quartet* have that dreamlike, unsettling quality, with “Damage Patrol” ending on a somewhat more optimistic note.

Two of the stories have been previously published: “Roadblock” (Ethernet, 2013) and “Perpetual Starlit Night” in *Twisted Tails VII* (Double Dragon Publishing, 2013). Two, “Roadblock” and “Randy and Laura,” were originally part of longer novel drafts.

These are probably my top four stories. They’re strong and in the right order, and a quartet of items similar in tone seems a reasonable, compact number. I’d been hesitant about this project until I got into it, but this endeavor has turned out to be much more rewarding than I’d first envisioned. All four stories have been open to new edits and improvements, even the two already published elsewhere. As far as I can see there are no other stories to add, and no other story collections I want to do. I’m primarily a novelist, and think of stories as idea test beds or practice for novels. So I don’t have that many stories since my college experiments.

Roadblock

A feckless architectural school graduate falls in with a sixteen-year-old’s dubious trucking venture that takes them to the rural south in deep night. There they encounter a massive roadblock, and construction strikers with the power to eradicate all light.

“Roadblock” was originally a chapter in *Zarreich*, a sprawling, unpublishable rough draft novel that incorporated dozens of my most bewildering dreams, and which led an army of confused characters across endless psychic minefields. In “Roadblock,” it’s pretty obvious that Oceanmouth is the perfect psychological dream companion.

Randy and Laura

Randy lives in the drug-addled delusion that he’s a slave employee at New Fascist Australia Toll Road Number One. Laura, who also works at the urban American gas station generating this fantasy, hopes to save enough cash at the menial job to escape both Randy and her tyrannical father, whom Randy worships as the NFA Gasoline Minister.

“Randy and Laura,” which also sprang from a dream, would still work as a flashback to Randy Perrine’s bizarre past in my novel *Sortmind*, from which this story originated, but it would’ve merely been a long detour if I’d kept it in the novel.

Perpetual Starlit Night

Archeologist Sairjin ShiriKor arrives on a tiny artificial gravity platform in deep space to give a scholarly lecture. But the barbarian colonists scoff at her evident delusion that she’s anything but

a criminal sent to be incarcerated on the changeless and apparently motionless platform.

A big plus to including this story in *The Damage Patrol Quartet* is leaving “Perpetual Starlit Night” as is, the perfect surreal story, no further explanations needed. Recently I’d had the idea of turning this previously published work into the first four chapters of a novel, and I came up with a fairly detailed plot for what would happen as Sairjin slowly accepted her inexplicable new life. But I’m not sure I ever deeply wanted to expand the story; it seems more fitting to have closure on it and put it out the way it is. In any case, having it here as a story doesn’t preclude later making it into a novel. I have to admit that something about the Shi Idnin character does beckon.

Damage Patrol

The Conscious Reach Corporation sets out to cure an entire city’s mental illness, one tormented soul at a time. IT technician Lucy earns a promotion to head the Damage Patrol unit, but her uncanny ability to reach inside the wounded and burn out their traumas leads her to the evil at the root of the corporation.

What can you say about a story that unfolded in half a second as you walked to lunch in downtown Dallas? What if you really had to update thousands and thousands of psychological messes? Who gave you that authority?

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Roadblock

Oceanmouth's shop was dull red corrugated tin. Three open garage doors flung light into the cool evening as Jim walked up the oil-stained driveway pulling out two hundred dollars in cash.

The garage smelled of oily cylinder heads, crankshafts, and lifting rods. Jim took in hundreds of shapes hanging from the walls and ceiling--hoses, tires, wires, and wrenches. A boy pulled himself from under the brightly lit hood of Jim's Mato 455 GLX and pointed at the dark green semi-truck parked in the alley.

"Hey, Jim, I've already got our first job lined up," Oceanmouth said. "That is, if you're still up for it. There's this TV shop that's moving to South Zarreich. We're gonna load up the whole thing and drive it down there for six hundred bucks. Think that'll be enough?"

"Well, whatever you think. I guess we have to find out the mileage that thing gets and make sure we're getting a profit and all."

"For sure, man. We definitely want to make some bucks outa this." Oceanmouth wore a blue mechanic's shirt and a blue baseball cap. His round face was smeared with grease, and under the bars of fluorescent light his skin looked green. His eyes were huge, dilated, and bloodshot.

"Course we hafta learn how to drive the damn thing first. But I'm sure we'll get some practice before the night's over. This TV shop guy says there's all sorts of shortages of truck transportation down in Drulgoorijk. We could head down there right after."

"Yeah, but that's what, four hundred miles?"

"It'll be a good long drive, but we really oughta be able to clean up. We could even set up shop there sometime."

Jim watched Oceanmouth make adjustments on the Mato, unhook the work light, and slam down the hood. How could Oceanmouth do all this? Own his own shop, buy a semi-truck, make all these plans? He was just a kid, after all, still in high school.

"Yeah, that oughta hold 'er for now," Oceanmouth said, patting Jim's glossy red car. "Till we get those new pistons in next week, anyway." He pulled out a set of keys. "Let's get going, Jim. Really, this is gonna be so much fun."

*

Jim wrenched another forty-pound box off a hand truck and slammed it onto the rows of boxes stacked five high. He'd long ago stopped caring whether he was breaking the damn TVs. Packing the van had taken past nine PM. Then they'd driven to South Zarreich and spent two more hours unloading.

The front of the store was a glass wall. Visible through a scrawl of interior reflections were low black buildings, lampposts sticking into the empty night, and the dark shape of their giant semi-truck, its diesel rattling against the asphalt.

Oceanmouth wheeled in their other hand truck. "This is the last one, man," he said, running his fingers through his sweaty red hair. "Thank God."

Jim yanked off a box and threw it atop the pile. His arms shook with fatigue and his back was about to snap. Oceanmouth dumped the others on the floor.

"Well, boys, that's just fine," said Garsniyyj, emerging from a tiny office in the rear. Tall and bearded, he spoke with a rough foreign accent and wore a white sport coat over a black

turtleneck sweater. What looked to Jim like a knife scar curved from his chin past his right nostril. His eyes were dark and cold. "Here's your six hundred."

"Hey, man, thanks," Oceanmouth said. "Anytime you need anything trucked in, just give us a call."

"For sure, boys," said Garsniyyj, surveying the rows of boxes. The rest of the shop was empty brown panels and pungent new green carpet. "You've done a great job."

Why did this jerk keep calling Jim *boy*? Oceanmouth he could understand, but couldn't this guy see Jim was twenty-three, a college graduate? Why had Garsniyyj picked this location anyway? Who in their right mind would drive to this cesspool?

Railroad tracks sliced across the broken street and made this intersection look like a freight yard. For square miles around there was nothing but unending urban blight. A few of the giant warehouses might still be doing business, but most had been abandoned and looked like the sort of places where contract killings were negotiated. An hour ago Garsniyyj had driven them in his minivan to a donut shop two miles away, but in the blackness all Jim had seen were deserted streets, sagging telephone wires, ancient factories, and hulking freeways that cut the area to pieces. The few streetlamps showed only circles of cratered asphalt and wet trash. In North Zarreich Garsniyyj's shop had been in a pleasant and accessible shopping center, and even at nine PM Jim had seen twenty customers poking around. He'd tentatively mentioned all this to Garsniyyj, saying: "Think you'll do any business down here?" And Garsniyyj had just shrugged and said: "Never can tell, can you?"

"Let's get out of this place," Jim said as Oceanmouth again climbed into the driver's seat.

"Yeah, I'm beat. Wanna learn to drive this thing now?"

"Uh, no, not now. Let's just get out of here. This place is getting *to* me."

Oceanmouth shrugged and began maneuvering through the dark warehouse streets. "Listen, you still wanna drive down to Drulgoorijk and check out the place?"

"You mean now? Tonight?"

"Sure, didn't we talk about going right after the TV run?" Oceanmouth had the engine flat out, the truck straining up a ramp marked "Zarreich Freeway--South."

"Well, yeah, but I didn't think you were *serious*."

Oceanmouth grinned. "C'mon, man, relax. It'll be fun. This is a great road, especially at night. You'll love it down south."

"I don't know, man. I'm pretty wiped out as it is."

"C'mon, man, we'll have a fantastic time, man. Just sit back and relax."

The truck entered a ten-lane freeway floating in blackness. Tiny lights drifted to the sides of the road. It was a relief just to be riding and not slinging boxes. Jim was wiped out. Yeah, maybe let Oceanmouth do whatever he thought best, while Jim sat back and grabbed some sleep.

A sign read "Leaving Zarreich. Entering Village of Hurgtzeit, Pop. 1,500." The elevated freeway finally lowered itself and became part of the ocean, rising and falling on the black waves. Ahead, the truck's headlights kept showing the next part of the path to hurtle through.

"I feel better now that we're out of that damn city," Jim said.

"You know, man, I think you're right. I've noticed you don't take to Zarreich very well. A lot of people just don't get along there, I guess."

"It's a goddamn *nightmare*. Gives me the creeps. Like one big ghetto. Like Garsniyyj's stupid TV store. What's with that guy anyway? That store's going *nowhere* in South Zarreich."

Oceanmouth shrugged. "Yeah, I know what you mean, man."

"Whole damn city's like that. Doesn't make any *sense*. Maybe I should just never set foot in

Zarreich again. Get it totally out of my system.”

“Wow. So where would you go?”

“Well, we’re going to this Drulgoorijk place. Aren’t we gonna set up shop there? You were telling me about the beer gardens, and the parks and the colleges and all that.”

Oceanmouth grinned. “Well, I really just planned to stay a couple weeks and make a bundle. Course, I suppose we *could* open a branch office there. If we make enough, we’ll just buy another truck and you work out of Drulgoorijk and I’ll work out of Zarreich.”

Jim froze. “You mean, you wouldn’t stay with me there?”

How could Oceanmouth be so casual about leaving Jim behind? Jim couldn’t be down there by himself, could he? He didn’t know anyone down there.

Of course, he didn’t know anyone in Zarreich either, except for Oceanmouth.

Then again, he didn’t know Oceanmouth either. God, what was he doing here?

“We’d just hafta stay in telepathic communication and all, man. Ya know?” Oceanmouth punched Jim’s shoulder. “C’mon, man, my home’s Zarreich. I’d never leave it.”

“I don’t know. I *hate* the place.”

Why couldn’t he admit it? His degree was worthless. Why had he listened to his stupid grandmother? Lots of jobs in Zarreich? What did she know? Zarreich wasn’t hiring architects or anyone else. There was no money to build anything. The whole place looked as if it had been built in the 1890s and left to rot.

There was a long silence. “C’mon, you’ve only been in Zarreich a week.” Oceanmouth said. “Besides, I’ve got my shop back there. And your car’s back there waiting for your pistons to come in.”

Jim nodded slowly. Was he really doing this just to cover the Mato overhaul? Oceanmouth would let him pay two hundred bucks a month for as long as it took. Why was Jim going into business with him? Jim didn’t even know the guy’s real name. What was all this Oceanmouth talk? A nickname some kid gave him on an acid trip? Was the guy really a druggie? How could he set up his own business with that name anyway? He was probably totally crazy. Why hadn’t Jim thought of that before?

“Hey, man, you look a little bummed,” Oceanmouth said. “Just sit back and enjoy the ride. We’ll need about six or seven hours to get to Drulgoorijk, and we can just take turns driving and have a good time.”

The truck went deeper and deeper into the black land. No more lights shone from the side of the road. There were just the truck headlights carving out space. Jim had his window cracked and could smell the fields.

“Yeah, I need to think about ... a lot of things,” Jim said.

*

Diesels roared and giant trucks downshifted, brakes hissing. Jim inched the semi through the mess. He’d been driving for two hours and his head was shot. A highway patrolman snarled: “I said get those damn headlights *off*, mister!”

“What?” Jim rolled his window down. “You mean--*me*?”

Oceanmouth reached over and snapped the headlights off. Gone was the gray rear of the truck in front. Gone were the countless semi-trucks and cars milling over two lanes and two shoulders.

“Move it on over to the side of the road!” came the yell.

“What the hell?” Jim shouted back. “I can’t see a goddamn thing!”

Were they being arrested? All these trucks and cars being arrested? Was the penalty to drive without headlights? How could anyone see where they were going?

“Don’t talk back to me, mister! Move that pile of crap over *now!*”

“Do as he says, man,” Oceanmouth said. “This is damn serious.”

“But I can’t see--where that truck is--” Jim hauled the sluggish wheel over and somehow got the semi onto the shoulder. He couldn’t even see the steering wheel he held in his hands. God, had he gone crazy? Something wrong with his spinal cord? Epilepsy? Brain damage? Everything was solid black. Nothing to latch onto.

Jim sat with his heart hammering. He was cut off from everything except that cop voice: “Turn the engine off and stay put. Your life may depend on it.”

Jim felt the engine shut down, and realized Oceanmouth had done it. “What’s the problem, officer?” Oceanmouth called across him. “Got a strike going here?”

“Yeah, and this is the worst one I’ve ever seen. They’ve stopped all work on the interchange to Drulgoorijk. It’s a total mess. Might take all night to straighten this one out. You people stay put and don’t honk your horn like all these other idiots. Might attract some gunfire.” Behind them, a car approached with its lights on high beam, and Jim heard the cop scrunch into the gravel to deal with the newcomer.

“What’s going on?” Jim said. “Why are we stopped here?” But the oncoming car was splashing its glare down the middle of long lines of semi-trucks and cars parked to both sides of the road. Then Jim saw the barricade.

Chain link fencing, barbed wire, trash barrels, and pickup trucks were strewn across the roadway. The blockage looked a hundred feet deep to Jim, occupying the entirety of a bridge across the steep banks of a stream. “My God! What the hell?”

“Strikers,” Oceanmouth said. “You read about ’em in the papers every so often. I was caught in a road strike a few years ago. We just have to be patient.”

“Why? What’s going on?” The new car’s headlights went off, and Jim heard it crunch onto the shoulder and its engine shut down. Everything was solid black again.

“I’m not sure. Let’s check this out.” Jim heard the passenger door open and then Oceanmouth’s feet stamping on the gravel.

“Hey! Stay put, man. Or that cop--”

“Don’t worry about him. We’ll just sweet-talk him. C’mon, man, let’s see what’s going on.”

To open the door and jump took more courage than Jim thought he had. For all he knew the ground down there had ceased to exist. But his feet struck pavement and he felt his way to the front of the truck. Only now did he realize how chilly it was out in the country, and he found himself inching towards the hot engine.

What an idiot he was. He hadn’t even brought a coat for a four-hundred-mile trip. It had been freezing all night this week and he should’ve known.

“So it’s construction workers this time, huh?” he heard Oceanmouth saying.

“That’s right,” came the cop’s voice. “And that’s never happened before. We get a strike and a roadblock every few months, but it’s usually factory workers, or else a trucking company. We’ve *never* had road builders go on strike. We’re trying to get negotiators out there now to ’em, but they won’t talk.”

“Wow ...” said Oceanmouth. “Road workers. That *is* new. They’ve always been *against* anyone who went on strike on the roads.”

“On ... strike?” Jim said.

“Who’s that?” said the cop.

“That’s my partner Jim. Don’t worry, he won’t crack.”

“Hello, Jim. I’ve just been telling people to stay in their cars or trucks so we don’t have people going insane out here from the darkness. But if you’re like your friend here and won’t crack, it’s okay to come on out and stretch your legs.”

“*What’s happening?*” Jim heard the hysteria in his voice as he launched his question into the unknown, still unable to see Oceanmouth and the cop who stood only a few feet away. He knew Oceanmouth was wrong. The total absence of light, of any means of judging space and distance, was about to make him scream.

“The workers on the interchange a couple miles up went on strike,” the cop said. “They’ve stopped all work and they’ve blocked this highway at the bridge here, and all the other roads leading in here.”

“But why are the lights out?”

“The lights always go out in a strike.” Here Jim felt a pat on his arm. He knew the cop was three feet away, so this had to be Oceanmouth reassuring him. Jim began to have a sense of himself, the cop, and Oceanmouth as volumes in this blackness. Though Jim couldn’t even see his own body, and the giddy feeling had been rising that his own voice had no real point of origin, Oceanmouth had just confirmed that his personal volume did exist.

“See, Jim,” Oceanmouth said, “strikers always make these roadblocks at night and demand the headlights be put out. If they strike near a town they’ll put out all the lights out in the town. And they want all the engines turned off, too.”

“But we *need* light!”

“Well, it’s usually a better idea to comply,” the cop said. “Some of these strikes have gone on for hours at night, and if you burn your lights you’ll just run down your battery. So we’ve got to conserve energy. We’re too far from the nearest town as it is, about a hundred miles.” Jim figured the cop himself was edgy and glad for a chance to shoot some bull with truckers.

“But can’t one truck put some lights on for a few minutes, then another one, then another one? That way you could see what you were doing.”

“There’s nothing to see. We’re not doing a damn thing here but waiting. How long it’ll be nobody knows. Highway construction workers, that’s new. Never been done before. They’ve always been the best paid of anyone. Might take weeks for all I know.”

“Besides,” Oceanmouth put in, “didn’t you see the strikers in the roadblock, Jim? The guys with rifles?”

“*Rifles?* They have *rifles?*” Jim fell back and stumbled into something monstrous. “Oh my God!”

“What the hell, man?” Oceanmouth said.

“Nothing--just the *truck*--I just banged up against the *truck*.” Jim felt the warm sheet metal around the engine. So another volume existed in this darkness, claiming a chunk of space as its own. Jim balanced on the ground, which was a plane upon which all these ongoing events rested. Yes, there were other trucks and people securely resting on the ground here as well.

They were *volumes*. All of them. Volumes in the blackness. Jim could feel them perfectly. Of course, he was still freezing. Why wasn’t Oceanmouth having any trouble? He didn’t have a coat either. But now none of that really mattered. Because now Jim understood the *volumes*.

But what about those strikers? What if they did have rifles? They had to know the volumes too. They had to know exactly where Jim and Oceanmouth stood. God, they could pick them off in the dark.

From far behind came another pinpoint of light. Headlights grew along with engine noise. Jim first saw the cop's legs in ghostly outline, then Oceanmouth's. Then, painfully, as his pupils contracted, he took in the shapes of trucks and cars and a few drivers. The cop left to take care of the new car. Its lights bored straight down the empty pavement between the jammed cars and trucks.

"Hey, man, *look!*" Oceanmouth cried.

Jim turned. So fresh and smarting was his vision that he was only getting the sharp outlines of objects. Everything looked two-dimensional. But he found he could feel with his body at the same time he looked. The snarl of the roadblock finally assembled in front of him again, this time in more detail: jagged wires and poles, skewed cars and pickups, oil drums, boards, plastic bags, and scrawled signs. "Keep Out." "Go to Hell." "On Strike." Jim made out men in leather jackets with caps and beards, in overalls and T-shirts, with beer bellies and bags under their eyes. Glowering at the light-flinging car, *shifting their rifles*.

Behind him Jim heard the cop shouting: "C'mon, get those damn lights off!"

"Look, I'm not about to put up with any strike," the driver said. "I'm just going to turn around and drive back the way I came. I'll just detour over to--"

"Forget it, mister! Those strikers want the lights off and the engine stopped!"

"I will *not* turn my engine off! I will *not* turn my lights off!"

The headlights stretched into the distance. To the left and right the black fields glowed dully in the rays. Beyond the reach of the lights Jim had a sense of flat emptiness running for hundreds of miles.

But ahead rose something he couldn't explain. It defied everything about this land, it defied the flatness, it even defied the blackness. Jim felt its impossible mass in his gut. Finally he understood that he was grasping a freeway interchange that looked to be three miles wide and a quarter-mile high. It thrust itself out of the black earth in endless looping, impossibly crisscrossing ramps. Construction cranes struck into the black sky. Cement trucks and pickups squatted throughout what looked to be fifteen levels of concrete and steel. Jim could see gaps in the ramps and unfinished pillars sprouting rusted rebar. Red and brown girders lay tangled across the ramps amid pyramids of gravel and sand. The interchange was incomplete. The workers were abandoning it.

"That's ... *unbelievable*," Jim gasped. Could he ever build something like that? He remembered Walter saying last semester that they'd probably wind up designing storm sewers, when everyone in the class wanted skyscrapers and cathedrals. Sure, they'd all been naïve, but that idea sketched out in front of him in the darkness was more than Jim had ever dreamed possible.

"It's too bad," Oceanmouth whispered. "Now we'll never get to Drulgoorijk."

"*What?* There's no other way?"

Oceanmouth shrugged in the glare. Jim turned back to the interchange. That staggering structure would have tied so much together, would have synthesized so many forces. Highways would have merged, cities would have joined. Somehow Jim understood that this was the only road south and that the strikers would never return to work. The unfinished interchange would stand for centuries like a pharaoh's tomb. Jim had come as far south as he ever would.

"Listen, mister, you are under arrest, do you hear me?" yelled the cop.

"I don't recognize your authority!" the driver shouted from the glowing car. "You can't arrest me and you know it!"

"Hey! Get those damn headlights off!" came a cry from the barricade.

“Get the headlights off!”

“Get ’em off! *Now!*”

Jim looked into the chaos of the deep roadblock. The sullen bearded men shouldered rifles.

“*Get ’em off!*” came another shout. “We give you too much light as it is!”

The cop dove to the shoulder as shot after shot exploded from tiny stars down the road. Jim felt whining bullets cutting slender volumes past him. In a moment the headlights were out, and Jim reeled with afterimages of colors superimposed on the mass of the car he could still feel with his body. The engine faltered and died. The firing ceased. Jim heard the car door open, then running on the asphalt.

“They shot my car! They shot my goddamn car!”

Now Jim saw flames. The front of the car again came into visual existence. Shapes rushed about it. Hissing. Fire extinguishers. Darkness returned.

“And *keep* your damn lights out! We’ve got enough ammo to put *all* your lights out!”

The afterimages faded. All was again solid black. But Jim could still feel the volume of every object. “Man, why are these cops so cowed? They could get out their guns and wipe those strikers out in a couple minutes.”

“I don’t know,” Oceanmouth said. “Let’s find out. C’mon.”

Jim followed, then realized where Oceanmouth was headed. “Hey, are you *crazy?*” He put a hand out to steady himself. But of course the truck was right there. He knew the volumes of all the cars and trucks, all the people, every object out here. He knew how to negotiate the solid black. “Wait up, man!” he said, catching up. The two came up to the barricade.

“Strikers!” Oceanmouth called. “What’s going on?”

“Who’re you? Damn cops?”

“No, man, truckers. What’s happening?”

“We’re on strike, whatcha think? Got any cigarettes?”

“Hell, no. You couldn’t light one, anyway.”

“I suppose that’s right. Two of you there?”

“That’s right. I’m Oceanmouth. This is Jim here.”

“Hi,” Jim said.

“What’s happening?” said the striker.

“I don’t know, really. We were just driving to Drulgoorijk to set up business there.”

“You’ll never get there. Road’s closed forever.”

Jim began to see that getting to Drulgoorijk was not the main issue. That unfinished interchange beyond meant that this conversation, this present moment, was all that mattered. “So why are you people on strike?”

“C’mon,” said the striker. “Under that wire there.” Oceanmouth lifted the barbed wire and he and Jim scooted under. They followed the striker past a pile of cardboard boxes. Jim couldn’t see the boxes but felt he could count every one of them. He could feel other men here, could feel their rifles and their anger.

They came up to a huge cube in the middle of the road. Jim didn’t remember seeing it in the car’s headlights. He felt aluminum siding. “It’s a *shack*,” he whispered. “A shack in the middle of this roadblock ...”

“In here,” said the striker. Jim felt the door open, felt the space within. The man left. Jim felt three more volumes inside. Three more strikers. Jim and Oceanmouth entered and the door shut behind them.

A red cone of light shone on cement, revealing a glossy white stripe of the roadway. The

flashlight rose to a bearded face surmounted by frizzy hair.

“*Garsniyyj* ...” Jim said. “You use *light* here ...”

“Of course.” Garsniyyj played the light across a man and a woman sitting cross-legged. The light hurt Jim’s eyes. Oceanmouth made himself comfortable on the concrete. Jim finally sat too. “We use light in construction,” Garsniyyj said. “We normally keep the interchange *blazing* with light.”

“But not now,” the woman said.

“Why not?” Oceanmouth said.

“We’re through with light.”

“Except for this flashlight here,” Garsniyyj said. “We still need it for finishing up our business here.”

“What sort of business?” Oceanmouth asked.

“You mean you don’t *know*?” Jim gasped.

“No. Do you?”

“No! I thought *you* did! I thought you knew *everything*!”

“Well, I don’t. Not really. It’s all a mystery to me.”

“*God* ...” Jim said. He turned to Garsniyyj. “Oceanmouth doesn’t *know*.”

Garsniyyj smiled. “Well, he can’t be expected to know everything. He can only know himself.”

“That’s right, man!” Oceanmouth grinned.

“I--I’ve got to get *out* of here!” Jim cried, standing. “This is all *crazy*! I don’t *belong* here!”

“You got it!” Oceanmouth laughed, also getting up. “Jim and I don’t belong here!”

“Yes, you boys had best be heading back to Zarreich,” Garsniyyj said. “There’s really no other place for you. We’ll have one of our men help you get your truck turned around and get you out of here.”

“And then we’re going to kill everyone else here and confiscate all their vehicles,” the woman said. The other man was thin, dry, and remote, with deep expressionless eyes. Jim found himself thinking of him as a jazz musician or a heroin addict. Now he understood that this man would be their guide out of the roadblock. He would negotiate with the police and free just one truck. He certainly didn’t seem to be a construction worker. Then again, neither did the woman or Garsniyyj.

“*Garsniyyj, you murdered your TV shop, you know that?*” Jim screamed.

Garsniyyj smiled. “It’s time for you boys to escape.” He turned off the flashlight and Jim again felt the volumes in his body. “Now, Jim, I want you to understand what we’re doing down here in the south. I’m sure you’ve seen what happens on a dark and cloudless night in the country. I’m sure you’ve seen that before.”

“Seen what?”

“The stars. Countless stars. In the city, in Zarreich, you can only see five or six, but out here you should be able to see tens of thousands. The entire sky should be ablaze with *stars*.”

Garsniyyj flung the door open and Jim stepped out of the shack.

There was nothing but black. Up, down, sideways, the same black. But high up there Jim could feel billions of speck-sized, massive volumes.

“Goddamn, what have you people *done*?” Jim moaned.

“Run along home, boys,” Garsniyyj said, and Jim reeled with the dark volume of the rebel leader’s smile.