

Monolith

With apologies to Arthur C. Clarke.

Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen

At my age, you get nervous. Most of your friends have already discovered their role in life — male, female, caretaker. If you are a late developer, though, you can't help worrying. So much depends on chance — you lie in your bed of oxy-hydride slush, wondering which role fate will select for you. Will you risk the danger of the skies to chance on an unencumbered female, arresting your development at malehood? Or will you wander your entire adolescence, alone and unloved, until you grow into a fat, gravid female? Or will you squander your heredity in the comfort of the slush-marshes, until one day you discover a clutch of eggs, settle down, and become a caretaker?

One part of me once wanted to fly free, to risk the terrors of the open skies — even to make the perilous ascent to the ceiling of warm rock that roofs the world, keeping it safe from the fires above. In past ages, belief in the overhead fires was little more than superstition, but modern science has shown that the fires really do exist. We have even observed molten rock dripping from cracks in the cosmic ceiling, to cool into grotesque stalactites as it encounters the fluid of the upper sky. Ours is an informed cosmology — the immense, finite-but-unbounded biolayer, sandwiched between the eternal fires of the rock ceiling and the indescribable cold of the undermarsh icefields. There are even savants who claim to know the total volume of the universe.

To fly, to become sexed — once, I thought to make the attempt. With tremulous strokes of my flukes I abandoned the slush-tower forest for the darkness of the liquid skies. I say 'dark', but that is a conventional exaggeration, for everywhere the skies are lit by the glow of living creatures in myriad colours — an ever-changing panorama of subtle communication in languages as yet not understood.

And that was my undoing. My confidence, I thought, was secure: somewhere in the distant heights was the rocky roof of the universe, and I would accept no lesser goal. Until I saw the gigantic, glowing mass of an engulfer hesitate, sniff the currents, and then — I still dissolve at the very recollection — turn towards me, and commence its hunting gyrations.

I was terrified. I fled. It followed. In a moment of unparalleled horror, I felt it engulf me — and pass by, suddenly revealed



as a sham. I had fled from nothing more fearsome than a shoal of nimmows, mimicking the bioluminescent spectrum of the most feared predator of our skies. Chastened, I recognized that the path of parenthood was for braver souls than I. Settling back into the homely contortions of slush-towers and polyolith-patches at the Bottom of the World, I knew myself doomed to become a caretaker. After that, my thoughts revolved solely around the size and proportions of the egg-clutch upon which I would eventually imprint. My greatest ambition was to assist in the hatching of the most numerous and most perfectly formed squablets that the universe has ever seen.

Although I continued to delude myself into the belief that I might yet regain the courage to become sexed, subconsciously I knew that my time was running out. Many times I passed the glowing lure of an egg-mass, until, one day — inevitably — I blundered upon one that smelt of my family. At once I was entranced, ensnared — lost. I tended my clutch with single-minded devotion. I flew endlessly around my eggs, fanning them with my dorsal fins to enhance the flow of nutrients. I chased off sundry predators, my fears now utterly subjugated to the hormonal imperatives of my caretaker role.

I was happy.

Then, tragedy struck. I still cannot understand it. I do not believe it can be of this universe, yet this universe, by definition, constitutes all that there is. The Monolith is a transcendent mystery, which would be wonderful had it involved anybody's brood but mine.

This is what happened. Over many cycles

I had assembled a most marvellous bed of decaying organics, ready for the implantation phase of my squablets' nurture. I painstakingly scraped away the patches of polyoliths that disfigured the serenity of the locale. Though I say it myself, it was the most perfect carrion-midden ever prepared by a doting caretaker. And then — barely a cycle before implantation was due — disaster struck.

I was rearranging fronds of putrescent geloids to bring my masterwork even closer to the pinnacle of protectiveness when — without warning, with a reality that was total and brutal — something indescribably awful caused the entire slush-marsh to shudder. Then some ghastly thing poked up from the marsh, right through the middle of my carrion-midden, ruining my life's work. At first, I thought it some rapidly-growing species of polyolith. But as the sediment settled and the sheer weirdness of the thing began to impress itself on my vision, I saw that it was all of one piece — not poly, but mono.

The Monolith is still there. Occasionally, parts of it move. What it is, I do not know. Perhaps its most inexplicable feature is its markings, which scholars braver than I have since delineated by the light of their own protuberances. I record them here for your enlightenment, in the hope that someone cleverer than I might decipher their meaning:

EXPE
NOTION
EUROPA
NASA

Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen's science fiction novel *Wheeler's* is published by Warner Aspect. It will appear in the UK in the auspicious year 2001.