

# THE AGE OF MOMENTUM

*The only way is up.*

BY T. F. DAVENPORT

Over the egg-shaped stones of the dry creek bed, I led the badger by a ring in his nose. Luisa, bobbing with each step, rode atop him and squinted into the morning sun.

"There," she said. "The bend in the river is a likely spot." I followed her pointing finger to a green-topped bluff sharply eroded on its nearest face, chipped angles of grey stone exposed. Away from the river, grass sloped down to the east and north, bubbling as it went into low, misshapen hills.

With a lot of cursing and slaps to the rear flank, we got the badger up there, and pretty soon after it started digging, we knew we had chosen well. Flakes of plaster turned up right away, followed by nodes of metal and blistered, still-acrid bits of burnt plastic. Soon, human remains.

It was from the plastic, not from the frame of the building we uncovered later, that we knew this was a site of the Right-Angle Culture.

Some time between one and two thousand years ago, a short-lived society arose during a lucky climactic lull. In just a few centuries they achieved more than all previous cultures put together. They dug up and burnt the stored energy of eons. There was a brief, bizarre moment in human history when it was quite mundane to smell fossil fuels exploding in engines, to blast away mountain caps and scrape out coal, to watch ugly, angular buildings rise from the ground in days. In this moment, perhaps five generations long, it was plain to everyone that the only movement possible was upwards, ever-accelerating, into a future filled densely with light. But the Anglers, as we now call them, fell short of escape velocity.

The badger mapped out the core of the site. With two strong trunks and a dozen little fan-shaped feelers, he cleaned off the rubble and sorted it by a system at which human minds could only guess. He grunted with obscure pleasure, excavating a trumpet-shaped lamp, a twisted rebar, a shoe.

As Angler towns tended to do, this one surely extended for miles, probably on both sides of the river. What we were standing on top of, judging by the contorted, skeletal chair-frames that the badger handled with special fondness, was a private home, an



interrogation chamber, a dental clinic or a barbershop.

I got a gourd of wine from the saddlebag, brought it over to Luisa, and told her as much.

She nodded. "Interrogation chamber, I think. Look." She held them up, one after the other: sharp metal implements unadapted to dining. Hooks, barbs and spikes, electric motors with little sockets in them — we didn't want to know what fit into those. She threw down the implements and shook her head in disgust.

I offered her the wine again. This time she took it.

We had lunch under an oak tree overlooking the creek bed. Afterwards, we shared a joint. As the smoke floated, like the skeleton of the long-dry river, we told each other stories about the Anglers. I talked of how the idea of the right angle — its perfection and its wrongness — had come to obsess them. How it had manifested at every level of their culture, from their architecture and the grids of their streets right down to the microscopic etchings on the tiny, silicon flakes that constituted the great mystery of their culture.

Luisa said that was all bullshit. The Anglers had been people, just like us. They lived according to their circumstances, and the right angle, like the unsolved binary code and the written-down laws and every other 'unnatural' aberration from which philosophers made so much hay, was nothing more than a tool. The Anglers

used it because it was useful. If we didn't know how to grow our houses we would probably be Anglers, too.

"Not me." I stubbed out the joint on the oak bark. "How much of their literature have you read?"

Luisa shook her head. "I've never been good at languages." "You're not missing much," I admitted. "But they had this phrase: *going somewhere*." I translated it for her. "And its opposite: *going nowhere*. It was the worst thing that could happen to you, to be *going nowhere*."

It had nothing to do with travel, but —" I gestured inadequately — progress. They never actually got anywhere, but they struggled lifelong to be going somewhere. Do you know what I mean?"

"No."

"Neither did they. But that's what it was like to be an Angler — to be trapped in this upward struggle, maybe thinking that someday you could rest, but then when you actually did rest you'd feel guilty about it. You weren't going anywhere."

Luisa stood, looking back towards the site, where the badger snored in the afternoon sun. "I've never seen what's so great about rest, myself."

I caught up with her as she started back. "You'd've fit in perfectly, then."

She smiled but said nothing. She roused the badger with a slap, squatted in its shadow, and began sifting through a pile of artefacts. I sat down to help her. We kept an eye out for plastic rectangles with rounded corners. More often than not, they proved to contain silicon flakes — potential clues to the binary code and the key to understanding, if not reproducing, the Anglers' power.

I held up a partial skull. "This," I said, "once held the confidence that someday the human race itself could rest. Up we'd go until we'd figured out everything. We'd spread through the stars, serenely conquering every obstacle, building right-angled houses on other planets, having right-angled children named Vera, Chuck and —"

"Albert, will you shut up? I'm busy!" ■

**T. F. Davenport** lives in California, studying for a doctorate in cognitive science. In his spare time, he would be writing more science-fiction stories, but he has no spare time, because he's studying for a doctorate in cognitive science.

JACEY