
The Cardboard Universe

A Guide to the World of Phoebus K. Dank

Christopher Miller

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“It’s a cardboard universe...and if you lean too hard against it, you fall through.”

—PHILIP K. DICK

“Wherever the corpse is, there will the vultures gather.”

—PHILIP K. DICK (quoting *Matthew 24:2*)

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About the Authors

WILLIAM (“BILL”) BOSWELL’s books include *Fastest Pen in the Galaxy: The Fiction of Phoebus K. Dank* (1994), *Pass the Brains: The Table Talk of Phoebus Dank* (1999), and *Dank!* (2006). Boswell has lectured on Dank at conferences throughout the nation, and is widely recognized as the nation’s leading Dankian. He lives in Hemlock, California, where he heads the Dank Studies department at Hemlock College and edits *What Next?: The Journal of Dank Studies*. Boswell is also a notable novelist in his own right and a winner of the Melville Prize for neglected writers.

OWEN HIRT, the poet, was a friend of Dank’s and a firsthand witness to his career.

PREFACE

From his humble beginnings as a scribbler of generic science fiction to the night of his horrifying death, Phoebus Kinsman Dank was probably the only real genius of our time, and certainly the most prolific. His fifty-seven books present a daunting challenge to prospective readers. Not even his most ardent fans are likely to have read more than a few of those books, since most are out of print. One reason for this guide is to provide the basic knowledge of Dank's life and work that his ideal reader should bring to any particular book.

At first blush, Dank's life was not a happy one. To the shame of our illiterate age, none of his novels ever really made him famous or (notwithstanding four ill-fated marriages) won him the enduring love of any woman he loved back. He ended his days in bachelorhood and neglect. Some of his novels sold well enough, but none of them sold faster than poor Dank could spend the money. The world saw him, insofar as it saw him at all, as a fat, badly-dressed, and mild-mannered nobody.

His neighbors, to be sure, knew him all too capable of floridly silly behavior. At one time or another, he built a time machine and convinced himself it worked, got himself arrested for public urination and then four years later for public *defecation*, decided that he was a robot and asked the police to arrest him again, decided that the man next door was beaming a death ray at him and took to wearing a suit of aluminum foil while working in the yard, formed a short-lived punk-rock band called Idle Threat, was questioned in connection with the murder of a critic, wore his wristwatch on his ankle ("to give my wrist a rest"), adjusted his refrigerator so the little light would stay on when the door was shut, called the vet at home in the middle of the night because he'd accidentally fed his cat a can of dog food (which for all he knew might just prove fatal to a cat), exploded a coconut in his microwave oven, took so many vitamins his tongue turned black, and mowed his lawn every day for a month and a half with his new ride-on mower, till the neighborhood association made him stop. Not even his neighbors, though, seemed to credit Dank with any inner life to speak of, much less to recognize a genius in their midst.

But if his life was sad and often ludicrous, his art is immortal. And the two are connected, of course, even when his novels question the reality of "real life," even when the so-called real world is revealed as a sham, or a mass hallucination. (Dank's favorite pick-up line—though I'm afraid it never worked—was "What if we're just disembodied brains suspended in a vat of nutrients, and this bar is our hallucination?") But even when he wondered if his memories were implants or worried that his senses had been tampered with (one of his early stories is set in a dismal near-future where everybody is fitted at birth with a pair of permanent rose-colored contact lenses), Dank's fiction was a lifelong effort to make sense of his own life. And you need a knowledge of his life to make sense of his fiction since even at its most lurid (bug-eyed monsters, two-fisted space cadets, three-breasted alien babes),

his fiction was always heartfelt, and even the tales he set in other galaxies were usually provoked by doings in his own backyard.

This guide is a complete Encyclopedia of Dank. Except where otherwise stated, titles in italics are novels and those in quotation marks are stories. The rest of the headings refer to that colossal work of artlessness that was Dank's day-to-day existence. Entries are in alphabetical order, so the book can be consulted like the reference work it is, or read from cover to cover, or browsed at whim. The cross-references (in SMALL CAPITALS) suggest all sorts of forking paths—paths that correspond, I like to think, to likely bifurcations of the reader's curiosity.

Some of the entries are mine and some are Owen Hirt's. Cynthia, our editor, finds the difference in tone between our entries "positively jarring," and adds that Hirt's are often "murderously cruel." Indeed. Hirt, a onetime friend of Dank's and (like everyone these days) "an author in his own right," best known now not for his thirty years of inglorious toil at the foot of Parnassus but for his week of tabloid notoriety after the appalling bloodbath in Dank's bedroom, since Hirt was and is the prime suspect. (As to how exactly I wound up collaborating with my best friend's killer, see my entry for "The Collaboration.") You'd think that bashing in the head of a writer you envy and hate would make it easy, later, to discuss that writer's books without excessive rancor, but evidently not if you are Owen Hirt.

Even if Dank's books weren't so hard to find, there would still be reasons for providing summaries. One point on which his fans and foes agree is that what's best about his fiction is the premises—the astounding ideas that gave rise to his stories and novels. Good ideas are more common than good books, of course, and not even Dank always succeeded in erecting structures worthy of the plots on which they stand. I have devoted my life to the praise and exegesis of his novels, but I sometimes wish I could just hold one up to my forehead, like the megacephalic Martians in "Abbie's Babies," and extract its gist, its ever-thrilling "concept," without having to read two hundred pages of Dankian prose. This guide does its best to fulfill that wish: It presents the concentrated essence of Dank's genius, minus the impurities and the inert ingredients, providing an ideal starting point for readers who want to know what all the fuss is about.

—William ("Bill") Boswell,
October 31, 2007

A PHOEBUS K. DANK CHRONOLOGY

- 1952** Born in Chicago with twin sister Jane, on December 16, to Edmund and Dolores Dank
- 1952–1964** Boyhood: obesity, truancy, bullies
- 1958** Edmund and Dolores divorce; Dolores and the twins move to Berkeley, California
- 1959** Earliest surviving writings (see JUVENILIA)
- 1965** (William Boswell born in St. Louis, Missouri)
- 1965–1970** Adolescence: science fiction, masturbation, vertigo, first course of psychotherapy
- 1970** Meets Owen Hirt in senior English class at Golden Gate High; resumes psychotherapy
- 1971** Parents remarry and move to Los Angeles; Dank stays behind, enrolls at University of California–Berkeley: roommate troubles, Science Fiction Club, writes “Barrett’s Bargain”
- 1972** Drops out of college and moves into rented house in Oakland with Hirt and several other young writers; “Barrett’s Bargain” published in *Shocking Science Fiction*; * writes *Boost*
- 1974** *Boost* published by Trickster as paperback original
- 1975** Marries Jessica Teller; moves into basement apartment in Oakland
- 1976** *Appointment Book* published; stillbirth of son; divorces Jessica Teller
- 1978** Misdiagnoses self with terminal illness; marries Molly Jensen; moves to Eugene, Oregon
- 1979** Still not dead; divorces Molly Jensen; moves back to Oakland; writes “Wacko!”
- 1980** (Boswell, fifteen, reads “Wacko!”—first encounter with Dank’s fiction)
- 1981** Arrested for throwing a microwave oven out the window of his apartment (Hirt moves to Hemlock, California, to teach at Hemlock College)
- 1982** Follows Hirt to Hemlock; writes *Fastland*; turns thirty
- 1983** MacDougal praises *Fastland*; beginning of their friendship
- 1984** Quarrels with MacDougal
- 1988** (Boswell enters graduate school in Santa Cruz)
- 1991** (Boswell’s *Midnight of the Soul*)
Dank and Boswell meet at a science fiction conference
- 1992** Meets and marries Gabriella Febrero; turns forty
Exit Gabriella; heart attack, two suicide attempts, and four arrests; jailed briefly for drunk driving; resolves to “go legit”; fails Mensa entrance test; mental exercises; a divine (?)
- 1993** revelation; embarks on what will grow to a four-thousand-page exegesis or transcription of his revelation
- 1994** (Boswell earns his doctorate with thesis on Phoebus K. Dank, moves to Hemlock)
- 1995** *The Man in the Black Box*
- 1996** *The Selected Poem of Phoebus K. Dank*
Meets Pandora Landor; Punk Rock phase; assorted drugs; arrested for public urination; marries
- 1998** Pandora; evicts Boswell; marriage fails, Boswell returns; second heart attack; stage-diving accident; exit Pandora; *The Demolition of Phineas Duck*

- 1999** Leopold Lips moves in with Dank and Boswell, then moves out again
Quarrels with Hirt; fourth suicide attempt; enter Billy Ray Ruefle
- 2000** MacDougal publishes *Peter Pan in Outer Space*; death of MacDougal; beginning of La-Z-Boy phase and assembly-line approach to writing
- 2002** Wildcat strike by Dank's assistants; end of assembly line; turns fifty
- 2004** Death of Edmund Dank; Dank writes final novel, *Virtually Immortal*
- 2006** **January–March**—Boswell attempts to interview Hirt
March 3—Hirt and Boswell come to blows
May 10—Boswell moves out after twelve years under Dank's roof
June 14—Dank murdered (by Hirt) in his sleep; Boswell retreats to Portland, Oregon
June 15—Boswell starts work on this encyclopedia
June 22—Hirt contacts Boswell from whereabouts unknown; joins Boswell as co-author
December—Boswell moves back to Hemlock and back into what is now his house
- 2007** **January**—Boswell inaugurates Dank Studies program
June—Boswell fires Hirt and single-handedly completes encyclopedia
October—Boswell revises encyclopedia, writes preface and chronology

“Abbie’s Babies”: After the birth of her child and the simultaneous desertion or abduction of her husband—last seen gazing skyward from a local hilltop—Abbie gets to wondering. She wonders why her children are so puny, when her pregnancies all lasted upward of ten months. She wonders why none of the kids look like her, why they all bear such a striking resemblance to her short, slight, pop-

eyed, pointy-eared, bigheaded husband. She wonders why she was so irresistibly attracted to the man whose personality—cold, aloof, superior—was as unappealing as his physical appearance. She wonders why her seven children have inherited those traits, along with their father’s high, toneless, “unearthly” voice and cold, clammy “reptilian” flesh. Can it be (as her gynecologist suggests) that Abbie’s chromosomes are “just too wimpy to assert themselves”? No. It turns out her husband was actually a Martian, one of hundreds impersonating earthmen as part of a scheme to infiltrate humanity. (Martians, we are told, reproduce asexually but viviparously, the male of the species depositing an egg inside the female, whose job is just to incubate it.)

Things are not what they seem: If I had to reduce Dank’s metaphysics to a simple formula, that would be it. *And, I’d add, not everything that looks like a human actually is*, since that was the deception Dank found most disturbing. “It’s bad enough when some dumb bug impersonates a twig,” as the narrator of another story says, “but when you find out that your roommate is really a Venusian then you don’t know *who* to trust.” Dank’s fiction swarms with seeming humans who prove really to be androids, simulacra, clones, hallucinations, holograms, extraterrestrials, or worse. Usually extraterrestrials. Dank, I think, sometimes suspected that *everyone* but he was only posing as an earthling.

“Abruptophobia”: Jim is an audio repairman in a Dankian near-future. After his hot-tempered wife hits him on the head with a rolling pin, he develops a morbid sensitivity to everything *sudden*: a camera’s flash, a thunderclap, even a violent sneeze (and even when he is the sneezer). Jim also has a bad heart, so his new allergy to surprises endangers his life, and reduces him to a bedridden invalid in a soundproof room (a room that also functions as a refuge from his marriage). He is thrilled the day his doctor tells him of a wonder drug named Graduall. Originally developed for the drivers of the superfast and frequently colliding helibuses that are now the standard form of mass transportation, Graduall makes everything appear to happen in slow motion. Jim gets a prescription, and his abruptophobia clears up at once, since when you’re on Graduall, nothing *is* abrupt. Not even the explosion of a toy balloon:

One time Julia [Jim’s awful wife] tried to surprise him, *or maybe*, mused Jim with a cold chill, *to kill me by inducing a deadly heart attack*, by sneaking up behind him when he wasn’t looking with a red balloon and sticking a big pin in it, so it would pop. Except, on account of Jim’s altered perception of Time, due to the drug that he was on, it took so long for the balloon to pop, seemingly, that it sounded more like when you open a creaky door, slowly. Gruffly, Jim wheeled around and saw Julia wincing from the loudness of the noise even though it paradoxically didn’t bother *him* one bit, ironically. He derisively laughed at her so-called “prank.”

So far so good. The following day Jim is feeling so perky that he tiptoes up behind his spouse, and she stands “making noises” at the kitchen sink (Dank was still unclear at that point as to just what women do there), and startles *her* for a change by pinching her rump, as he hasn’t dared to do since their honeymoon. Julia jumps, but Jim gets the bigger surprise: thanks to Graduall, he witnesses for the first time her transformation, *almost* instantaneous, from her real self into the ugly and shrewish but seemingly human woman he married. Her *real* self turns out to be “some kind of hideous Thing, the color of a rotten avocado, with fangs instead teeth and eyeballs dangling from long slimy stalks.”

Jim clutches his heart and drops to the linoleum, and “Julia,” with no further need for concealment, reverts to her fanged and avocado-colored self the better to gloat at his death agonies.

“Abruptophobia” was written in 1976, during Dank’s first marriage (to the ill-tempered Jessica TELLER). In the spring of ’76, when his AMPHETAMINE habit first got out of hand, Dank himself developed an abnormal and unhealthy sensitivity to the abrupt—to everything that rudely claimed his attention or rerouted his train of thought. All at once he was so sensitive to noises, even his own, that he glued a circle of felt to the bottom of his favorite coffee mug (SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS DO IT WITH A SENSE OF WONDER), to keep it from startling him each time he set it down. He also modified his toaster to eject his toast in slow motion rather than a spasm of mechanical panic. He had to give up his favorite pastry, those “poppin’ fresh” biscuits packaged in a special cardboard cylinder designed to burst open at the seams, with a never-quite-anticipated POP!, as you peel off the helically wrapped label. No, it was all too much for him—the POP!, the leap of the can, the instantaneous expansion of dough into daylight like an angry mollusk surging from its shell, at once thoroughly expected and utterly surprising.

After a few weeks, Dank reduced his daily ration of amphetamines and his abruptophobia vanished, but not before he had a chance to take down all the mirrors in his house in order to avoid the jolt of sudden confrontations with his image. He even squandered a day in the basement trying to invent a new kind of mirror in which it would take a minute for his image to materialize, as with a Polaroid snapshot. Though he never managed to patent his “gradual mirror,” a slowly-brightening-video-screen-and-camera combination, Dank convinced himself that his invention was destined one day to replace the old-fashioned unelectrified variety.

For some reason, Dank’s first wife took umbrage at “Abruptophobia.” It gave them one more thing to get divorced about. The disturbing thing for me about this early story, though, is its premonition, as if Dank foresaw, from a distance of three decades, his final year of hypochondriac withdrawal from the real world. If he did, he saw it darkly, saw it backward. In real life, his final bout of womblike isolation in a dim and soundproof room was not caused but rather crowned by a blow to the head, or succession of blows, the ones that ended poor Dank’s life last night, about twenty-four hours ago.*

Since moving up to Portland yesterday, I too have developed some abruptophobic tendencies: I jump every time a pedestrian walks by the front window of my rented house (impossibly small and impossibly close to the street—there’s no front yard!). If someone knocked, I’d have a heart attack. Though I don’t know what I’m afraid of. The worst that could happen happened already, happened last night. The carnage in Dank’s bedroom put an end to the happiest phase of my life, and this encyclopedia is all I have to live for now.* As E. M. Cioran said, “Every book is a postponed suicide.”

The Academician: A family rents out a room in their house to a quiet, inoffensive assistant professor at the local college. There ensue all kinds of minor mysteries: a bad smell in the basement, a new noise from the microwave oven, the dismemberment of a Barbie doll, evidence of tampering with a

box of tampons, neurotic misbehavior by the formerly good dog, etc. Gradually the wife becomes convinced that her new lodger is insane and maybe dangerous. Her brother thinks so too, and he’s a top psychiatrist. It turns out, however, that Professor Zaxon isn’t a lunatic after all, merely an extraterrestrial, and that none of his strange acts mean what they would if committed by an earthling. In the end his superhuman powers come in handy to fend off a pair of burglars (modeled, I believe, on the pair in *Home Alone*).

The Academician was begun September 1, 1994, the day I moved in with Dank. I’d discovered h

books in my adolescence, at a point in my reading life when I was not only keenly appreciative of their many merits, but blissfully oblivious to their few faults. A decade later when I entered a graduate program in English at U. C. Santa Cruz, I was still a big Dank fan—big enough to make him the focus of my dissertation. In April 1991, I had just embarked on that project, and hadn't yet gotten around to contacting its subject, when I happened to meet Dank in person at a science fiction conference—not a convention, an academic conference. He'd shown up for a talk by some comic-book artist, but the conference was running behind schedule, so he had to sit through my talk on "The Greatest Living American Writer." Dank was at least as surprised to discover that he was the Greatest Living American Writer as I'd been, minutes later, to find out that the fat man in the second row, who'd unnerved me with his expression of slack-jawed incredulity (causing me to qualify my brazen claims on his behalf with some anxious last-minute *perhapses* and *arguablys*), was none other than the subject of my talk.

When the organizer introduced us afterward, Dank was touchingly flattered to learn that I was writing a book about him.

"A whole book!?" he exclaimed, with that same incredulous expression, causing me again, for just a moment, to wonder how wise it had been to hitch my wagon to his particular star.

"Well, for now it's just a dissertation, but I hope to publish it some day."

Dank looked disappointed, or maybe only puzzled. "So which is better, then—a dissertation or a book?"

The organizer laughed.

"Is a dissertation like an essay," Dank persisted, "like a column on the op-ed page or something. Is it short like that?"

I told Dank that dissertations can be just as long as books, that if anything they tend to be longer (mine would run to 1,111 pages, more than thrice the length of the book I pared it down to), since no one reads them or expects them to be readable.

The organizer added: "It's called a dissertation till it finds a publisher."

"Oh," said Dank. "Like a bill before they make it a law." (He was, I later learned, a longtime fan of *Schoolhouse Rock*.) After a pause, he added: "I think a book is better."

"Speaking of unpublished books—" I started, but before I had a chance to mention my own novels, we were interrupted by another fan, a severely palsied teenage boy in an electric wheelchair who said that Dank's most recent novel, *S.P.U.D.*, had changed his life.

Dank and I, though, kept in touch, and a few months later he invited me to visit him in Hemlock. I came to know his shady redbrick house so well that I forget what it was like to see it all for the first time—the giant conifers out front, the yard that looked more like a forest floor, the long redbrick veranda, the handwritten notice (DANGER: DO NOT PUSH!) above the doorbell, the vestibule crowded with boxes of books, the working water fountain in the living room, the stairway equipped with one of those motorized lifts that enable the crippled, enfeebled, or lazy to ride upstairs instead of climbing.

That first visit was such a success (notwithstanding my ill-boding first encounter with Hirt—see COFFEE TOWN) that I made two more in the next two years. In 1994, the year I became Dr. Boswell, a position opened in the English department at Hemlock College. Dank wrote a recommendation calling me "the nation's number one authority on Science Fiction," which of course I wasn't—as of course he knew, since the day before he'd scolded me for saying "sci-fi" instead of "SF." If I dwelled in the same town as Dank, though, I could at least secure my claim as the number one authority on *his* science fiction.

There was a housing shortage in Hemlock that fall, as in so many college towns at that time of year, and Dank offered me a room in his house while I got my bearings. I accepted the offer, though I

had some reservations the day I moved in and got my first glimpse of Dank's HYPOCHONDRIA. That day it took the form of a bad headache with a running commentary focusing on his particular pain ("like someone keeps on hitting me in the head with a stick") but sometimes broadening its scope to describe the genus of headaches in general, as if I might have reached the age of twenty-eight without firsthand experience of headaches.

By the end of my first semester, when I finally got around to house-hunting, Dank and I had formed such a cozy household that he seemed a little hurt by my talk of moving out: Any misgivings he'd felt the day I moved in were long gone. I should mention that Dank had completed just one semester of college, and it was no doubt his unfamiliarity with academia that suggested a *professor*, or all things, as the sinister figure of mystery in *The Academician*. The great "outsider" artist Henry Darger, a grade-school dropout, often painted mortarboards—"college professor hats," as he called them—on the heads of the sadistic child-killing soldiers in his pictures. Not that Dank and Darger were so wrong to fear professors. Professor MACDOUGAL—a sometime book reviewer, onetime friend of Dank, opponent of my hiring (and later of my tenuring), and head of my department from 1996 until his sudden gruesome death in the year 2000—was so hateful and so widely hated that even a man as peaceable as Dank was questioned in connection with that death.

Dank was more gregarious than the average novelist, and liked having me around. Or having *somebody* around. Later I learned I was part of a pattern: Whenever a wife left him (as number three had lately done), Dank invited a friend or quasi-friend to move in, to share his house and food and beer and help ward off the terrors. He was afraid of living alone, and fretted about burglars when I was out of town. I fretted too, since it was I who made the house look occupied. In 1997, on the eve of a trip to St. Louis, I bought some of those timers that crafty vacationers use to turn the lights on and off when they go back home. Though rudimentary in their programming capacity, the timers still created a more convincing illusion of life than Dank, who had once received a bad shock fresh out of the bathtub and was liable to go for days without touching a light switch, content to use the rooms that happened to be lit and forgetting about the rest.

And so I stayed put. For the next twelve years, the last twelve of his life, Dank and I shared the house, in a living situation that I still have trouble explaining to outsiders. Except that we never had sex, it was like a happy marriage, or so I imagine (I wouldn't know—and neither would Dank, I'm afraid). Generous to a fault, he refused year after year to let me give him rent, but I did my best to lend a hand around the house, especially during the various crises of his later years. It was the least I could do, considering the way he gave me the run of the house. *He* spent most of his waking hours holed up in his study, a stuffy little room adjacent to the kitchen and soundproofed by the shelves of science fiction paperbacks that lined its walls. He even had a chamber pot in there, so he wouldn't have to leave the room to use the toilet. Sometimes I pretended the house was *mine*, and Dank my eccentric but studious lodger.

Over the course of a dozen years in Hemlock, I grew very fond of the house, and even of my gloomy bedroom—the big guest bedroom on the third floor, at the southeast corner. That's a sunny corner in most houses, but due to the giant pine outside my window, it was always dusk indoors when it wasn't midnight black. When I arrived, the room hadn't seen a guest for a while, to judge by the fossil bar of soap I found in the adjoining bathroom, a brittle, dull-green oval, striped with grimy black fissures, that looked like it had been there longer than Dank—looked like a stone you'd find on the beach. The old two-faucet sink had what must have been its original white rubber stopper, also petrified by age, but still tethered to the site by a tarnished bead chain. The built-in toothbrush holder dated from an earlier and less expansive era of dental hygiene: Its slots were too narrow for my toothbrush.

My room came with a single bed, a desk, and an old wooden swivel-tilt chair that in its day—the

day of Dictaphones and mimeos—must have been the latest word in ergonomic comfort. I didn't get a chest of drawers, but there was a big closet, vacant except for a few ancient paper-clad hangers. Above the hanger dowel was a little shelf, just too high for me to see the top of. Wanting to make sure, before stacking my clean underpants up there, that the shelf was clear of dead bugs, mouse droppings, and such, I inspected the upper surface in a series of glimpses by hopping up and down. On my third hop I spotted a *Playboy* dating from the very month—April 1982—that Dank had moved into the house. Had my bedroom once been his? When I asked (not mentioning the magazine, of course), he said no, so I conclude that, just as he later zoned different bathrooms for urination and defecation, Dank must at one time have used different bedrooms for masturbation and for sleep. One reason he'd invited me to share his house, he told me once, was an uneasy sense that he wasn't making full use of it single-handedly. He even tended to forget that certain rooms existed.

But back to my window, with its close-up view of several giant pines. Thanks to the trees and the eternal shade beneath them, there wasn't a blade of grass in the yard, just needles, mushrooms, pinecones, twigs, and moss. Especially moss, of which our author seemed to have more than his share—and this in a town so gray and rainy that moss was routinely groused about in the same breath as mildew, and the supermarket sold big bags of “moss killer.” Dank's roof was striped with moss, which seemed to take root (if that's what moss does) where the shingles overlapped. The brown sisal doormat by his seldom-used side door was so overgrown that for months I mistook it for a moss-green carpet fragment. The crumbling concrete driveway that sloped down to Dank's built-in garage was carpeted in moss, as were the rising concrete walls that flanked the driveway. My pine's trunk was moss-padded, and so was my front window's rotting outer sill, where I used to rest my elbows as I gazed, when I wasn't resting my cheek on that cushion of moss, with its individual spore capsules rising on slender stalks above the main growth and reminding me of the alfalfa sprouts in the Organics section at Food Planet. Once while gazing at the moss like that, from inches away, my cheek on the sill, I saw Owen Hirt strutting up the street with his customary self-importance; from my odd perspective, he looked no taller than the moss-sprouts in the blurry foremost foreground of my field of vision. And that's how I like to picture him (though in fact he was the same height as I): a tiny, haughty, unsuccessful, envy-maddened poet.

When Dank was murdered a few nights ago, I found myself homeless, and somehow I wound up in the tiny rented house where I am writing these words—this uninhabitable hovel with its too-low ceilings and its windows that don't open and its decades of cigarette smoke exhaling night and day from the liver-colored carpet, in an ugly, almost treeless part of Portland whose only claim to fame is as the birthplace of a flamboyantly misbehaved Olympic figure skater. Quite a comedown from Dank Manor. Back there I wasn't paying rent at all, and it's been a rude awakening to realize just how much less spacious my life will be from now on, now that Dank is gone and I have to pay through the nose for the mixed blessing of being alive. Alive and extremely alone.

“Adam Able, Astronaut”: Not, despite its title, a picture book for boys, but a breathtakingly mindless and hagiographic short story about strong, silent, square-jawed Adam Able—unafraid of Martians, unimpressed by hyperspace, and irresistible to women—and his space adventures.

Dank's worst stories tend to telegraph their badness in the first sentence. No one who keeps reading after a sentence like *this* has any right to complain about the ordeal that follows:

If there was one thing Adam hated, a top astronaut and winner of the prestigious Armstrong Award, that they only awarded every decade, it was when Shaba, his space ship, started making funny noises

that they only awarded every decade, it was when Sueda, his spaceship, started making funny noises that drove him up the wall—literally, for there is no gravity in Space.

As Mencken said of Warren G. Harding’s inaugural address, “It is the style of a rhinoceros liberating himself by main strength from a lake of boiling molasses.” And that’s *after* copyediting. At one point the piece was even worse. Dank wrote it, originally, in the future tense, reasoning that since it was *set* in the future, the story should be worded like a prophecy—albeit an unusually elaborate and longwinded one—and not a chronicle:

Adam will enter the flight deck just as Quisix-9 is in the process of shape-shifting into the form of L. Zadar.

“What the hell is going on?” Adam will demand, striding purposefully toward the Venusian. Quisix-9 will pause in mid-transformation to draw his plasma gun...

It was his editor (at a magazine called *Flabbergasting Science Fiction*) who ordered Dank to return the rusty and sputtering time machine of his syntax to the present, thereby saving him, this once, from making an ass of himself. Or an even bigger ass. A few years later, though—in 1980, soon after the Pioneer space probes sent back their disappointing news about the odds of life on Venus—Dank (still proud enough of “Adam Able” to permit its reprinting in some fatuous anthology) re-verbbed the story *again*, this time in the subjunctive mood:

And then, if life were possible on Venus—that torrid ball of barren rock and deadly greenhouse gases—Adam would have encountered a native in the hold of his spaceship during his routine pre-launch systems check.

“Who the hell are you?” he would have demanded, drawing a bead on the stowaway with his matter annihilator.

“My name is Quisix-9,” the creature would have warbled in its unearthly voice—a voice that would have seemed to come not from its mouth but from its dozens of frantically waving green tentacles. “Think of me as an emissary from my people to yours.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call you guys ‘people,’” Adam would have retorted, stubbing out his cigarette. (OH)*

Agoraphobia: Dank and his twin sister, Jane, were born “six weeks too soon” (his words). All his life Dank blamed the trauma of his premature eviction for his fear of the outdoors. He didn’t like to leave his house because he hadn’t liked to leave the womb. Daylight, fresh air, freedom, wide-open spaces, sensory data—he’d been exposed to those good things too soon and had acquired lasting allergies to them, as other babies do to strawberries.

And so—unlike the manly action-craving heroes of his fiction, or the rugged outdoorsy persona he cultivated as his PUBLIC IMAGE—our author settled for the pleasures of the great indoors. Like so many writers, Dank was happiest in his imaginary worlds, and as much as possible he shunned the real one, though it often served as a setting for his daydreams. With his high-resolution, hyperreal imagination, and his frequent inability to cope with real events, Dank took for granted, at the prospect of a movie or a concert or a party, that he’d enjoy it more, and remember it more vividly, if, instead of

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