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Editorial

This issue, it must be admitted, is a little late. But as some of you know – as is depicted on the cover – I’ve been struggling with a rather awkward bunyip.

I’ve just spent seven weeks in hospital – the first twelve days of that in the Intensive Care Unit – and at the end of that period there is still no clear diagnosis of what went wrong. Although it did initially look like a stroke, this is now seen as extremely unlikely given the later course of events. All that is clearly known is that pouring enough intravenous antibiotics into my body seems to be

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effective. What is not known is what happens next: currently I am on a four-week course of oral antibiotics.

The difficulties I have to manage at the moment are mostly what can probably be called “collateral damage”: i.e. the result of what had to be done to keep me alive in the first couple of weeks. However, after twelve days at home life seems to be settling down – yesterday I started work on a new project with some clients who seem to be satisfied with my approach, which is much better than seven days earlier when I had to go back to the hospital for some emergency treatment and was greeted by the triage nurse (who had nursed me previously) with “What? You’re not dead yet?”

More than you want to know about this little adventure will appear in the next issue – which follows this one rather closely! (This issue was almost completely compiled when I dropped out.)

Elizabeth Darling not only drew the cover for this issue; she is also responsible for this month’s supplement. This is a bit of an insider’s joke, and I suspect that few non-Australian readers will pick up more than a handful of the references. But it is all a true story!

28 November 2001

KL Diary

(January 2001)

John Foyster

Cities change very rapidly. Although I have not been in Kuala Lumpur for about 14 months, I was surprised at how few changes there had been, and about the nature of those changes. The various half-constructed buildings have remained half-constructed, at least in the parts of the city I have seen in the first week. And in the case of the long-ago-started (and then put on hold) monorail system, although work has recommenced it has obviously proceeded very slowly. The limo driver who collected me at the KL airport had worked in Australia for three and a half years (Sydney and Melbourne, while on a visitor's visa) and gave me some idea of what to expect: the bank won't loan

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the money to continue half-finished buildings until they are more certain of the financial climate. (The limo driver didn't have to worry about loans – with the money he saved during his “working holiday” in Australia he bought – for cash – a house in Kuala Lumpur that is now worth about half a million ringgit [he paid RM38,000].)

But in a city in which eating and restaurants are very important, my first surprise was discovering that one block of restaurants in the (at least formerly) popular Jalan Sultan Ismail area was now half in darkness – and that included a Korean restaurant I had only been to once and had planned on exploring further. The hotel, in most ways, had not changed from the last time I stayed there (November 1999) but it has now had three owners in three and a half years, and each change of ownership seems to have produced a very slight downgrading of service. It is only minor things – like the number of staff in the restaurants – but they are noticeable. (Another tit-bit from the limo driver was that Radisson has pulled out of the hotel business in Malaysia completely. “The Radisson at Shah Alam is now the Blue Wave” he said. Shah Alam is the capital of the state surrounding Kuala Lumpur, and I have occasionally stayed at the Radisson there: the

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social pages of a newspaper this week confirmed the name change, and in one of the photos of the “Blue Wave” staff I recognised a “former” member of the Radisson staff there. Similarly, changes in ownership of my hotel here in Kuala Lumpur seems not to affect junior staff positions.)

As usual I arrived in the middle of the evening. For the first time in years it took ages to get through Immigration (where I was given the three month visa I needed), but when a jumbo full of tourists from the Peoples’ Republic of China on their first visit to Malaysia arrives just before you I suspect there’s not much that can be done. Even so, I had to wait for my baggage (but not very long). It had been raining, so it wasn’t really hot out in the night air. It is, after all, the wet season. Nowadays changes in weather patterns make the wet/dry season distinction a little less clear than it might once have been. When people ask me when the wet season is in Kuala Lumpur I usually say “about 4 o’clock”. This is fairly accurate.

I’m due to work here for three months on an education project, looking at the linkages between public and private education in the technical/vocational area. There are at least four government ministries involved, ensuring complexity. My report is meant to feed into a long

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term master plan for the development of the polytechnic system here. To make life more interesting, the consultants to do the long term master plan are meant to start here before I leave – in March in fact – but the contract for the job hasn’t yet been let. I know this because the company that got me to do this job is one of those invited to tender, and tenders don’t close for another week and a half. Originally the tenders were to have closed last week, and the company asked for an extension but this was refused – and now exactly that extension has been offered to all the invited companies. That’s one of the two barriers to our bidding, the other being price. I suggested back in January that the appropriate response was “you’re kidding”, but apparently the maximum price for the tender is firm. My advice to the company was not to bid at that price. I suspect they won’t. But all this negotiating, and a current bidding deadline of mid-February makes me pretty sure that the successful tenderers won’t be in place in March.

But in terms of settling in to Kuala Lumpur the only urgent matter was buying an umbrella/parasol. We have a couple at home in Adelaide, but the folding one was beginning to resist both the folding and unfolding aspects of its

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existence, and I didn't want to bring the other "good" one, so I planned to buy one or two as soon as possible after arriving (the other advance-planned purchases: some shirts from Globe Silk Store, and probably a couple of pairs of trousers from Romeo Tailors). So Sunday around lunch I took the subway up to Ampang Park where I knew a good store for buying cheap umbrellas: it was still there, but some of the surrounding stores had vanished. I spent the rest of the day trying to catch up on current affairs in Malaysia – but this is, of course, a full-time job; too much is going on at any one time.

This week some of the key issues seem to have been: relationships with Singapore, some possible hanky-panky in the treatment of a female prisoner (former TV newsreader), the end of Chinese New Year, the fact that Thaipusam is coming up next week, some serious questions about the meaning of contempt of court in the Malaysian legal system, relocation of a Chinese primary school, the question of foreign influence on the local press. And of these items it was the relocation of the Chinese primary school that affected me directly.

On Monday morning I had my first meeting with the recently-appointed deputy director of

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research who is to be my regular contact. He has an almost entirely new staff who are not too familiar with recent past activities in the research area, but we managed to battle through to some mutual understanding, one part of which was, due to an interruption from a deputy director of another division, that I would spend some time on Tuesday morning discussing with the curriculum division some of my recommendations from a previous project. (My present project to some extent builds on two previous projects I completed up here.)

We didn't finish our meeting until just before 2 o'clock, so then Cynthia (the local chief of the company I am working for) and I started walking toward her car, wondering whether or not to grab something to eat. There was a huge crowd on the other side of the road (something you don't normally see in that part of town) and Cynthia asked one of the bystanders what it was all about. He said it was a protest about the relocation of the Chinese primary school. Cynthia and I decided we were going to avoid that one, and slipped into a café for a quick lunch.

The problem with the Chinese school is of a type common all over the world. So far as I can make out, there has been somewhat of a

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population shift, and now the population density of school-age Chinese children near the old school location is much lower than it used to be. The relocation is to another Chinese school where the appropriate population density is much higher. There are a few “but”s, however. The changing location of the Chinese population means that there is a divide between the parents of the children from the old school, some of whom live nearer the relocation site and not surprisingly are in favour of the shift, and some of whom remain in the old (low-density) area and therefore don’t want to move their children to a more distant school. Then there’s the question of the land on which the old school stands. It appears to have prime re-development potential. Is it the case that there’s a businessman who wants to buy the land and redevelop it? Is this businessman a close associate of a local politician who might have some influence in the education ministry?

And so the questions go on. I should imagine the demonstrations (by what is apparently a minority of parents of the affected children) will continue for some time. Perhaps some of the unresolved questions will turn out to have answers after all.

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It is probably the same with the other issues of the day. The love-hate relationship between Singapore and Malaysia (and the word “love-hate” is much too strong) has been in place ever since they were more or less separated at birth. The latest tiff arises from a political remark made in Singapore in the context of an argument about the status of Malays in Singapore.

And then I got busy...



Gardens at a hotel I stayed in in 1998

Foyster Against JUNK

(or, The Return of Akbar del Piombo)

John Foyster

I didn't mind going to the Ministry of Education for a meeting and discussions on Saturday morning: it just hadn't been planned. So after I finished I decided to visit Kuala Lumpur's best secondhand bookstore. Getting away from the Ministry was not simple, though, because of roadworks and the time of day, but when I eventually got a taxi the driver was one of those talkative fellows who cheers you up.

After a quick snack at a restaurant near the Petronas Twin Towers I set off for JUNK. It is in the old part of Kuala Lumpur, where the original miners had their shacks, and although Jalan Tun H. S. Lee is now a street that is a step or two up from miners' shacks, there probably haven't been

any new buildings in that part of the street for a century.

But because it is in that part of the city, so close to the centre of KL, it is easy to reach. If KL has a centre, it is where the two rivers, the Klang and the Gombak, meet, and the popular explanation of KL's name is that it is from the "muddy confluence" of the two rivers. The historian J. M. Gullick, whose advice I would tend to follow, is that this explanation doesn't stand up in strict grammatical terms, but that explanation remains the one you will find in all the popular guides.

At the "muddy confluence" stands an early mosque, the Masjid Jamek, and now that mosque lends its name to the stations that are at the confluence of the two new light rail lines in Kuala Lumpur, the STAR line and the PUTRA line. I use the PUTRA line much more often than the STAR, and I use it almost exclusively in the section that is underground.

(The PUTRA line has a web page that allows you to take a virtual trip with their service, but the underground component has to be admitted to be pretty boring.) There's a station right at the Twin Towers and it is a thirty-cent (US currency) ride to Masjid Jamek. Normally if I get off at Masjid

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Jamek I turn right and walk into the Indian quarter, but JUNK is off to the left, so I turned in that direction, and hoped that my recollection that there was a money changer on the route was correct. It was – a part of a small chain called Haniff's – and the exchange rate against the Australian dollar was still at the same awful rate it had been the previous week (the Malaysian Ringgit is pegged at 3.80 to the US dollar). So I staggered through the heat to JUNK with a little less money than I had hoped to have.

JUNK is just over two blocks from the Masjid Jamek station so I wasn't completely soaked with sweat by the time I got there. But I thought to would probably spend more time looking at books that were stacked next to fans.

JUNK is a narrow and deep store, with the bookshelves supplemented by piles of magazines (and occasionally books) on the floor in front of the shelves. It is organised more or less by subject, but it is more "less" than "more" when it comes to prominent authors, whose works are stacked together but might collectively be found in an entirely inappropriate category. This means you have to look at least cursorily at most categories.

This is not the same as finding isolated books "out of category". This affects the science

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fiction collection particularly because the "science fiction" category seems to apply to paperbacks only while hardcovers (e.g. a copy of Ward Moore/Avram Davidson's JOYLEG) appear to be somewhere in a generic fiction category.

The ground floor of JUNK has their best stuff, if you can find it. Their prices are relatively high, and quite consistent (but see the end for some actual details). After what I thought of as an efficient scan of the ground floor I climbed the narrow stairs to the second floor, avoiding the stacks of magazines against the wall of the stairs and emerging on the second floor to confront what appeared to be a slight overstock situation – some of the spaces between the bookshelves were occupied by plastic bags that appeared to be filled with unsorted books. I negotiated my way around as best I could, but as usual didn't pick up much on the second floor. There is also a third floor at JUNK, but I have never ventured up there.

So I came away with five paperback books for about US\$20. Sri Delima's AS I WAS PASSING Vol II is a collection of pseudonymous articles from Malaysian newspapers of the 1970s and I bought it because the first couple seemed quite funny.

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Then I bought another Harry Kemelman (ONE FINE DAY THE RABBI BOUGHT A CROSS) so that our Rabbi Small moves ever closer to completion.

Then there was Malcolm Bradbury's ALL DRESSED UP AND NOWHERE TO GO. I regret that there'll be no more MB, and this must include just about the earliest Bradbury writing. Some of it is his earliest trans-Atlantic university writing, and if he seems unkind to write about his American experience "I taught them the simple things of life: how to use human language, how to write on pieces of paper from left to right, how to open books without splitting the spine, how to put in verbs to give a sentence the completeness of a sentence" then he was far more unpleasant about the English – and he also followed the previous quote with "I taught a lot, but I learned more."

John Masters's THE LOTUS AND THE WIND was another purchase. Almost everyone who began buying second-hand books in the 1950s and 1960s would have had to dodge around what seemed like FEET of John Masters novels. I always avoided them. And then last year for some reason I picked up and read BHOWANI JUNCTION. And now I have to seek out "relatively scarce" John Masters titles!

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Finally I bought, eventually, a copy of Mahathir bin Mohamad's THE MALAY DILEMMA. When he wrote this book, in 1970, Dr Mahathir had been writing about politics for 25 years – and he had at the time been thrown out of the ruling party in Malaysia. I had wanted to buy a copy printed at a time when he was NOT Malaysia's Prime Minister, and this copy from 1981 just makes the cut. It is a book that clearly emerges from the 1960s, and its central point (and chapter) is the matter of racial equality. Dr Mahathir quickly moves beyond the notion of legal quality, which he rejects as being inadequate, to insist that social and economic quality have to be part of the deal, drawing on examples from the USA as well as from Malaysia. I haven't yet read it carefully, but Dr Mahathir's political struggle up until the present day is based upon those same notions (with some development, of course).

So that was \$20 worth. Back through the heat to Masjid Jamek, and eventually to my hotel (there's a PUTRA line station nearby that must be one of the most attractive in the world: you ride up an escalator to emerge facing a jungle-like park) where I worry about how to fit all those books into my luggage. Looks like I'll have to mail them back.

Strange Tales

from Austin

Juliette Woods

A DAY IN THE LIFE (a story with pictures)

So I get up around half-eight, strips of bright sunlight searing through the blinds, and it's already getting rather hot. Our bedroom is sunny but still spartan: we have a lamp (courtesy of the Simpsons of San Antonio, relatives of Julie and Jim) and a futon[1] but not much more, just some

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books and magazines[2] strewn about. I get ready for work, have a bit of breakfast, pull on my boots and my hat, and I'm away.

We live just a few blocks north of the University of Texas, in an area called Hyde Park[3], so it only takes me twenty minutes or so to walk down through its leafy streets and past apartment blocks and wooden houses. By the time I reach the campus boundary I can smell the place: baking tarmac, breakfast taco and car exhaust.

The UT campus is so huge that I've still only seen a little more than half of it---the half between my office and the main shopping street, Guadalupe. Every time I walk to and from work I try to take a new route through the campus. Every time I do so I discover something new---a greenhouse full of unrecognisable plants, a pond full of turtles, or a laboratory building topped with Spanish crenellations. There are also unexpected vistas, of the distant dome of the State Capitol[4] or the UT Tower[5].

The bells of the tower ring out the time as I reach my office. It's about 18 degrees C inside, maybe 20 degrees cooler than outdoors, so I suddenly stop sweating and start feeling cold. This is in the new ACES (Applied Computational

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Engineering and Sciences) building[6], on the corner of 24th Street and Speedway[7]. It's quite grand-looking on the outside, but more impressive within: wide white corridors, blond wood doors, and high ceilings[8]. The ground floor includes a nifty visualisation lab, where such luminaries as Michael Teubner[9] (my PhD supervisor) and George W. Bush (US president) have been treated to whirling 3D graphics of hummingbird skulls and visible humans[10]. There's an OKish cafe[11] on this floor too, so I might pick up a coffee before heading up to my office three floors above.

The two upper floors are linked by a showy spiral staircase (also of blond wood) under a huge skylight. The Centre for Subsurface Modelling is on the lower of these two floors, and I may eventually work with Mary Wheeler[12] there. My office is on the top floor.

My office makes me feel like a proper grownup at last, with a big sweeping desk and a giant whiteboard, gliding black cupboards and precision lighting. The only drawback is that I have no window, so instead I have blu-tacked fine art postcards[13] next my computer (just as I did at CSIRO).

The topmost floor is also home to my boss, Graham Carey[14], and his admin assistant, the

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very lovely Pat Bozeman[15]. Tinsley Odin also lives up here, and Ivo Babuska can be seen wandering the corridors on weekends.

Graham is actually a professor of aerospace engineering. TICAM has many such staff, brought together from various departments interested in computer simulation. There are also research staff, such as myself, who are affiliated only with TICAM and not with any of UT's other departments. Then there are the postgrads.

Graham's postgrads live in the CFD Laboratory in the Woolrich building[16], which is reassuringly decrepit after the STNG shininess of ACES. This is also a good place for me to work, if I need to discuss things with other people.

Mostly I work with the three Bs: Bob, Bill and Ben[15]. Bob McLay is a software engineer; Bill and Ben are graduate students. I suspect that Bill and Ben do not realise how amusing their names are to British and Australian folk, and I have not yet told them. I have managed to keep a remarkably straight face and have practised saying "Ben and Bill" instead (for those who don't know, there is an old, beloved and largely nonsensical children's BBC TV programme called "Bill and Ben the Flowerpot Men"[17] in which string puppets

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dance around talking gobbledegook next to a plant which shouts “weeeeeed!”).

The three Bs form a triumvirate of system administrators, managing a couple of Beowulf clusters, some Suns and many PCs. When I arrived they asked if I knew (in this order) Linux, emacs, LaTeX, CVS and noweb. (For the uninitiated: this means that they worship a righteous god and that god's name is Linux[18].)

The three Bs are constantly tinkering with the system, so it is not unlikely that, while I'm sitting working in the CFDLab, that some other research staff member will gingerly descend from TICAM to ask why his code, which worked yesterday, isn't working today. Then, depending on who is asked, Bill will blink rapidly or Bob will frown or Ben will lean back and swivel in his chair, until someone works out what is was that another B did which might have broken all the research member's library paths. They fix it quickly.

At lunchtime Damien and I might join the Bs and their undergrad follower out to a nearby pub. It's a proper American pub, just like in the films, dark and grimy and filled with pool tables. Most of the inside light comes from illuminated signs for imported beers. You can eat anything you want, so long as you want hamburgers or tacos.

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Everything comes with chips, i.e. tortilla chips and salsa. Importantly for South Australians, they carry Coopers' beer.

If Damien and I lunch by ourselves, we're more likely to go to our favourite place nearby, The Little City Cafe [19], which is full of seventies vinyl chairs and fresh bagels.

I might spend the rest of the afternoon back in my TICAM office. Someone might drop by to talk about problems they're working on, where their NASA money went or their nanotech grant application. Sometimes it all feels decidedly surreal.

Early in the evening I go for a swim; there's vast gym a block south of my office. Then I might pop into the Perry Castaneda Library for some fiction to read. Naturally, this library is also vast. It has six floors. And there are so many other libraries on campus that you are issued a map to find them [20].

Then I catch up with Damien and we head home for dinner, stopping by at our local co-op[21] for supplies. There are heat-stunned squirrels under the trees and giant crickets leap about the sidewalks.

So what am I actually working on? Well, Graham's group here is very, very good at what

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they do. This involves software engineering, parallel programming and the development of accurate algorithms for solving equations. In short, they can simulate anything. They've spent the past few years developing (amongst many other things) a sophisticated fluid dynamics code called MGFLO which runs very quickly on Beowulf clusters.

This expertise is what made me keen to work with them. However, when I originally arrived here, I thought that I would be doing more of the same sorts of things that they already do well. I was expecting a very steep learning curve as I hauled myself up by my bootstraps into cutting-edge computational mathematics. But then, to my relief, I discovered that I had been hired to do something I already knew how to do.

Basically, they've developed this code, and now they want to use it. Few people in Graham's group have had much to do with real-world applications, so this is what I've been brought in for, to act as a bridge again between comp maths and the rest of the world.

I cannot easily describe how much fun I'm having. I pick the equations I want solved (at this stage, these are my old variable-density flow and transport equations in saturated porous media)

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and Bill and Bob go and program them into MGFLO while Ben tries out the equations in his own code. I develop ways of testing the code, and choose problems for us to work on. I go and chat with Jack Sharp in the geology department about obtaining mutually convenient field data sets. I am constantly discussing things with the 3Bs, explaining the physics to them while they tutor me in advanced finite element methods. Later on, we'll progress to other applications, maybe some stuff to do with reactive transport or interactions between porous media and Navier-Stokes flow. It's just too cool!

In fact, I often get a bit carried away. I sometimes don't sleep terribly well, because I'm thrashing about thinking, "Must re-read Ruan et al!" Or I become worried because I find myself swaying from side to side in my lab chair, singing "happy happy joy joy" under my breath.

The atmosphere here is, unsurprisingly, much more cheerful than Adelaide's maths department. There is also a lot more collaboration, with specialists in different areas working together on a common problem. This teamwork ethic is something I've enjoyed before, particularly at Australian Water Environments (and the library too; it was more problematic at CSIRO and

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Adelaide only because my thesis had to be all my own work). I find this constant to-and-froing of ideas exciting and energising. There also seems to be lots of money for equipment, and there's already a basement full of high-powered computer clusters for us to use.

How long can my enthusiasm last? I don't know. It's got to stop some time, if only out of exhaustion.

So work here is lovely, the weather is fine, but as yet we have no friends (getting there, though). So emails from Adelaide and around the world are much appreciated. And if you're ever in Austin...

Notes

- [1] <http://texasfutonco.citysearch.com/1.html>
- [2] <http://www.giantrobot.com/issues/issuesindex.html>
- [3] <http://alllinked.com/hpht.html>
- [4] <http://www.cupola.com/html/bldgstru/statecap/slide/txcap1e.htm> [
- 5] <http://www.skymtn.com/News/tourAustin5-2000/images/5tower100.jpg>
- [6] http://www.ticam.utexas.edu/images/Ticam_web/aces/ACE5.jpg
- [7] <http://www.utexas.edu/maps/main/areas/eastmall.html>
- [8] <http://www.aces.utexas.edu/>

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- [9] <http://www.maths.adelaide.edu.au/Applied/NEW/staff/mteubner.html>
- [10] <http://www.ticam.utexas.edu/CCV/>
- [11] <http://www.aces.utexas.edu/ocafe/>
- [12] <http://www.ticam.utexas.edu/~mfw/>
(unfortunately, this pic makes her look uncharacteristically stern and dowdy)
- [13] <http://www.kunstforum.de/zeitmodelle/archiv/abbildungen/153/062/002hlo.jpg>
<http://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/circe.html>
- [14] <http://www.ticam.utexas.edu/People/Faculty/CAREY.html>
- [15] <http://www.cfdlab.ae.utexas.edu/> [choose "About Us" and then "Lab staff"]
- [16] <http://www.utexas.edu/maps/main/buildings/wrw.html>
- [17] <http://www.lineone.net/express/00/10/23/images/23n20flower.jpg> [
- [18] http://www.toledobiz.com/Linux_penguin_small.gif
- [19] <http://mather.ar.utexas.edu/students/cadlab/barrera/littlecity.html>
- [20] <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/about/librarymap/>
- [21] <http://www.austinwide.com/classifieds/graphics/wheatsvillenew2.htm>

THE TWO TOWERS

Well, it's been quite some time since I sent out one of my long emails. I originally planned to send something about a month ago but then Events intervened.

So I am now living in a different America to the one I moved to in July. Outwardly, it looks very similar to the old one. Work continues smoothly at TICAM, students are gearing up for the football season, the weather is showing the first signs of autumn. Nothing unusual there. But to read the papers, you'd think the country was at a standstill. Economic collapse, mental health worries, civil liberties threatened---an entire nation suffering from traumatic stress disorder. And yet the only sign of it, since the first few days, is an increase in the number of US flags pinned to store and apartment windows.

I'm appending to this email a series of snippets I wrote during the immediate aftermath; this seems somehow more honest than rewriting my experiences with the benefit of a few week's hindsight. My apologies to those who have read

most of this before or who find themselves paraphrased.

TUESDAY 11th SEPTEMBER

I checked my email just as I was about to leave the house this morning. One message was from my friend Eddie Tait in Scotland, someone I haven't seen in twelve years. I read the headline and thought it had to be a hoax, so I considered sending him an irritated note about passing on spam. But I thought I'd check the online newspapers just in case.

The Guardian's international section was down when I first tried it, but news.com.au had a brief report, in essence: "World Trade Center rubble, Pentagon smouldering, Howard moved to DC safe house."

I woke Damien with the news, and after watching the television for half an hour I finally made it out of the door. Here in TICAM it seems that half the staff are on the first floor, watching CNN on the huge screen in the shiny hi-tech auditorium. They have left little notes stuck to their doors to explain where they are. A little further down the corridor, the cafe has the sound turned up on its TV (normally they have it running on subtitles, so people can keep up with sports

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results as they eat). Every chair in the place is turned towards the screen.

When I first heard, it was shortly after the Pentagon was hit and it seemed the terrorists were striking once an hour. So the question was--- where next? This was when much of London and many historic sites in the US were shut down.

So I wondered about Austin. And I did remember that, a dozen years ago, a US/UK strike against Gadaffi failed to kill him but did succeed in killing his favourite daughter. So I thought---what if it's Gaddafi and he's after Jemma? She lives a few blocks from where I work, in a plush West Campus apartment. (Our apartment finder pointed it out to us).

But the probability seemed slim. So I went back to my office and tried to work. But every five minutes I hit the "reload" button on three different news websites and I just couldn't get anything done. So I took my work downstairs, past the CNN room, and then outside. I got a fair bit done and then went back in to stare at the news. Planes had been grounded, no-one knew why the fourth plane had crashed in Pennsylvania. They were beginning to mention Osama bin Laden.

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When I returned to my office, I found that the University of Texas had issued a special email bulletin. It said: the show will go on. UT will not be closed. There will be lectures. Security will be stepped up. As if a extra few security guards would help.

And I thought I was moving to a politically stable country.

Much later, relief. Damien had spent the entire day at home on the Net, trying to contact friends (including many science fiction fans) in New York and Washington. We had heard back from everyone except an Australian couple in Boston. We finally heard from them (safe and sound) when a friend in Australia found their number and rang them at 1am.

Except that by then I was beginning to worry about my Muslim friends in Australia. The press were already predicting a rash of racist violence.

FRIDAY 14th SEPTEMBER

The last couple of days here have been eerie. Everyone gets on with their work, more or less. But there are never any newspapers left in the vending machines and people still huddle around the food hall televisions as CNN debates whether

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Bush was right to have gone to Nebraska. The main TV channels still aren't back to normal. There was no episode of "The West Wing" this week and the music channels have continuous news and condolences scrolling across the bottom of the screen.

Today has been declared a national day of mourning. UT has cancelled all afternoon classes and events (I had three meetings on this afternoon) and people are assembling now for a memorial service which I will not attend. I went down to the cafe for an early lunch, in case it too closed at noon, and the place was filled with the sound of a mourning church organ. The cafe TV is like everything else in this building: hi-tech, new, large. It's a big, flat widescreen TV mounted from the ceiling. Today someone has taped a paper US flag under it. I'm trying to eat my rice casserole (yesterday's leftovers, anyone?) and the camera keeps panning over the dignitaries: Hilary, Bill, George Snr, President Muppet.

I still don't know what to expect from the US government. I watched Colin Powell brief the media yesterday, and I found him vaguely reassuring. They weren't bombing anyone yet.

Email from my friends overseas expresses the horror of what has happened and their

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sympathy, but I think they are more afraid of how the US will react than of being bombed in their offices. Some of my friends sound hopeful, that some good will come of this: American foreign policy will change for the better. But they are also fearful, they've spent hours online with US acquaintances and friends, trying to talk a few of them out of a bomb-every-Arab mentality. And at least one of my friends thinks the world's gone for good, the US will bomb Afghanistan, the Pakistanis will get involved, there'll be a little nuclear incident and hell, does anyone want a beer?

I doubt my friend will be proved right, but I still have this dull ache which is more than lack of sleep and vicarious grief. I think it's a memory of how Britain reacted (and presumably, continues to react) to yet another IRA bombing, such small fry compared to this. Or of the last time I was in Paris, when they had nailed all the bins shut and closed down all the left-luggage offices because of the Basque separatists, and there were three or four different kinds of armed police in the train station.

I think in the aftermath (unless you or someone you know is directly affected) it is the little things which depress you as they "step up security", everything made just that little bit more

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difficult. It's not so much the inconveniences themselves, as what they stand for, the constant reminders of the terrible things people can do to one another. When I was in Paris, people were still putting their rubbish on top of the nailed bins, until each one became a shrine, little pyramids of banana skin and chocolate wrapper turned into a memorial to the dead.

A newspaper reports that the nation has run out of flags and ammo.

SATURDAY 15th SEPTEMBER

I go swimming on Saturday afternoon, at the gym near my office. There are wooden cows on the stairs outside. One is inscribed with "Hearts of Texas", a fundraising group. One is kitted out with gold bells and a purple head scarf: "The Hindu Students Society of Austin." UT was supposed to be holding a welcome-back bash last night for the returning undergraduates; instead they had something like a wake. The University of Texas mascot is a longhorn steer, which explains why these offerings are in the shape of cows. On nearby tables, people have written messages of support for those in New York and Washington.

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Inside, the woman who inspects my gym membership card has added something to her ID badge: her name in Arabic and Hebrew. (The guy in front of me asks about this; I don't read either language).

An Austin mosque has already been fire-bombed, but on the whole I have been pleased by the press here. Perhaps on other channels people are baying for Arab blood, but not where I'm watching. MTV pauses every fifteen minutes to talk to Muslim Americans. The UT newspaper's frontcover photo is of Islamic students raising money for the Red Cross. The Austin American Statesman interviews Middle Eastern people and reports on interfaith initiatives between local Christian, Muslim and Jewish groups. There are numerous reports of white customers handing out their addresses to Arabic/Muslim/Middle Eastern shopkeepers, saying "You can stay with us if you have to." (I'm not sure that I'd find that reassuring.)

This all gives me hope that the US will do something rational and that war, as it is more commonly defined, will be avoided.

But one part of the Press reports angers me deeply. They say that America is in a state of shock, that it has lost its faith in "Fortress

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America”, that people never thought this sort of violence could reach here. And I want to ask, where are these putative Americans, these people so stupid that they thought themselves immune to history?

SUNDAY 23rd SEPTEMBER

I managed to get much work done this week: I presented a talk to the Geology Faculty which was very well-received, and we got the first version of our new porous media model working. I go to work and, since those first few days, no-one mentions “The War” at all. It's a relief. And I still love my job.

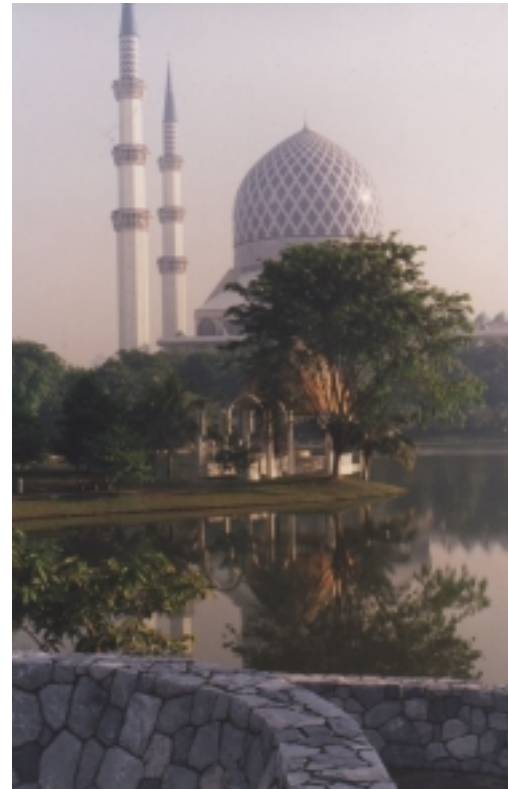
But then, on the weekend, I pick up the paper. In the main section of the *Austin-American Statesman* I count only two articles not directly related to the attack. Even the “Local News” supplement features “How to Make an American Flag” and “What would happen if they reintroduce the draft?”

A small snippet of the paper tells an anecdote about Jackie Chan. He was meant to be on top of the WTC towers that day, shooting some scenes for a new movie, but filming was delayed because of script problems.

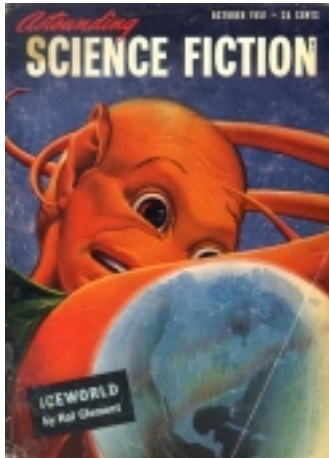
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But now I have this image in my head of Jackie, standing on a tower's roof, arms outstretched to the blue sky, with the sound of a plane approaching, and someone's voice insisting that “Only Jackie Chan can save us now.”

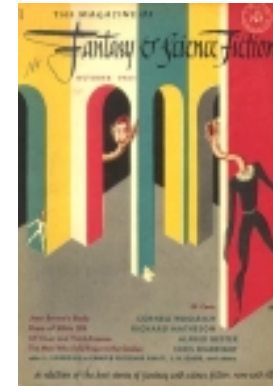
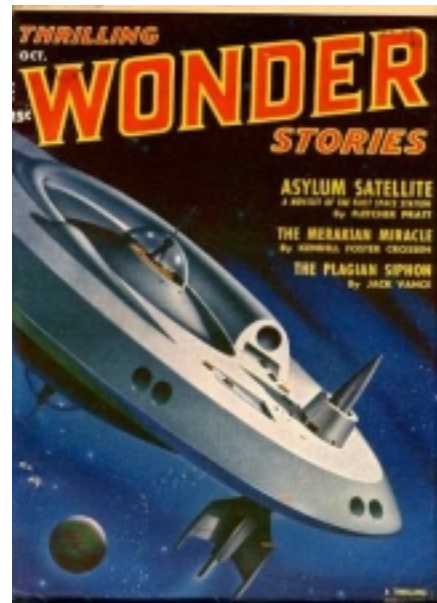
If only.



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Fifty Years Ago In Science Fiction: October 1951