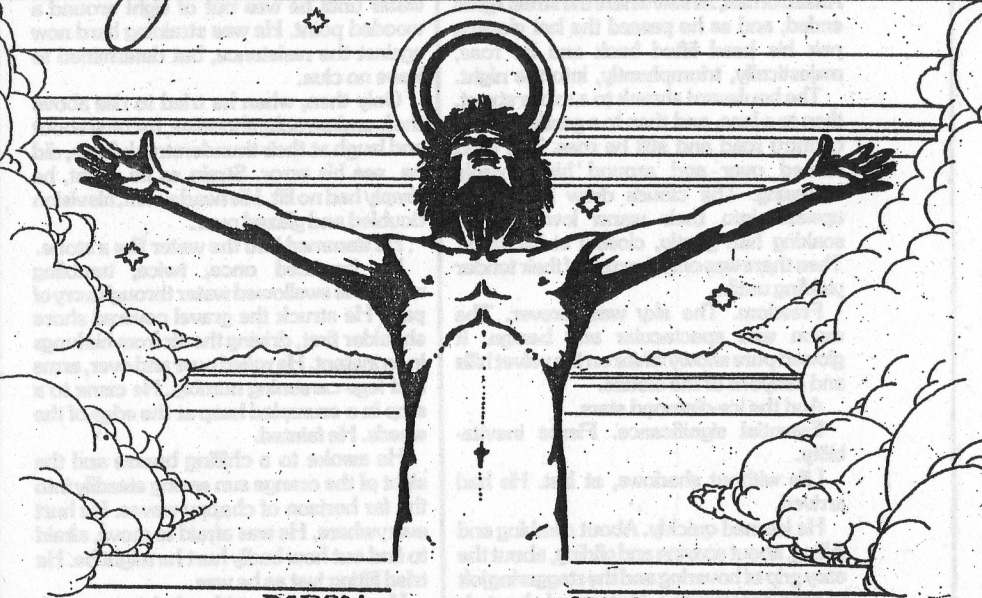


# John Steakley

## FLYER

*So Dave,*



*God bless  
John Steakley*

Illustration by Deb Dedon

hang from my spine. The lift is centered there, some four to six inches on either side of the vertebrae, from upper neck to lower back. The support in my legs is comparatively minor (stiffness, essentially, from upper thigh to mid-calf) and I must actually be aloft and at speed before its effects are felt.

My arms hang loosely beneath me, to be pushed back to my sides by the rushing winds. I do not hold them out before me in a childish manner. I am not Superanybody. If you think you have seen something else, you have not seen me. It was only in your mind...

Felix first mentioned the dreams to his aunt while helping her break green beans into a brown paper sack. She laughed at his story, delighted with the extent of his seven-year-old imagination. The next morning he tried telling her more, but she wasn't having any. The third time he tried, she lectured him about fibs and told her husband, who boxed his ears and graphically described future punishments for "nasty lying little boys".

There was no fourth time. Not ever.

Seven years later, fourteen and dreaming still, he went to the library. Having heard such things were done, he expected to read all about himself. About the real Felix. Yet no Felix, real or otherwise, was to be found in any of the dream books he read. No psychiatric theory, however intellectual or sexy, and no psychic vision, however cosmic, had anything to do with him. All were equally irrelevant to the case of a young man who dreamed, not just occasionally of flying, but always and only of flying. For Felix had spent every night, nap, and daydream—since the day he was born—aloft.

As he grew, so did the dreams. They became more sharply focused, crystal clear, and always recalled. They were his best friends, the dreams. He was enthralled by their realism, enraptured by their beauty.

And addicted to their comforting hope.

Sally found him a delightful contrast to her fellow students. She found his tragic plight—that of a poor intellectual who must work in a record shop—extremely romantic. Her last three years at school were spent echoing his amused disdain for the rabid intensity of her fellow child-executives and hiding a growing conviction that she was just as ambitious as they.

Good grades got her a good job with a growing firm. Nights were spent with Felix still, who viewed her daily hustle as a quaint, but temporary phase before the inevitable implementation of his stirring (and quite undetailed) Master Plan. Sally responded dutifully with self-disparaging "selling out" jokes while wondering just when the hell this big move was going to be made.

One night she saw they no longer spoke. The next night, with her urging, they had one of those great deep philosophical discussions she had loved so much when she had first met him. It wasn't until the next day when this very act of reliving the past, of actually having become the same person she had been three years before, appalled her.

Her next lunch hour was spent watching him at his counter and sighing. This tall brown haired, brown eyed, sexy young man she loved had changed not one inch in three years.

A week later, she spent a long weekend trying to be objective. By Sunday night she was forced to admit two truths. One: he was still, by God, the only one who could make her happen; but, Two: he had nothing further to offer than that.

"I'm leaving," she said in a quiet voice.

Felix knew enough to panic. This was not fight-talk. This was the boom.

"I love you, Felix," she said, interrupting his protests. "And I like you, too. Even when you don't move I like you, because you do sort of carry it well.

"But I'm still leaving you."

Felix, hating himself for not hiding his shining eyes, realized suddenly, belatedly, that he would do anything to keep this girl.

"Dammit," he choked, "what's wrong? Tell me that. What do you want me to change?"

"Nothing," she replied firmly. "I wouldn't...I couldn't improve on you."

Then what do you want?"

"More. More you, if that were possible. Not different. More."

"Huh?"

"You're only half there. Half-caring, half-interested, half-ass. You don't do anything."

"I will when I find it," he replied doggedly through his tears.

"Felix, how can you find what you don't bother to look for?"

"I'm looking. In my own way."

A week later, he tried to see her, but when she answered his knock at her door and he saw a man in her living room, he realized it was really over.

Dazed, stunned, he felt completely vulnerable to everything and everyone. There was no place to hide. No thought was safe, no fantasy immune.

So he slept. Constantly. Eighteen hours a night, all during lunch, he slept. And, of course, flew. But that got tougher and tougher until he simply could not dream anymore, and he awoke on a Sunday afternoon with a moan of wretched self-pity and an incredibly erotic image of Sally on the arm of her Bright Young Man.

He wouldn't give in to it. He wouldn't be reduced to *that* fantasy. It would mean that he really was beneath her. He lay, sweating, staring at the ceiling for hours, refusing to give in. It was his first-ever display of real willpower.

At last, exhausted, he slept. But not safely, not deeply. Sally appeared even here, drifting through pale clouds and baby blue sky. She was naked.

He rose from beneath her. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. Now naked too, and filled with that strident, bursting, need, he flew as never before. He did not float or glide as in the past. He drove upward, punching through the air until...

Their shattering impact was a flash of white and flesh and erupting...pain!

He awoke instantly, his forehead seared through with agony, and saw that he had fallen out of bed and banged his forehead bloody on the white rough-textured paint of the...

His floor was carpeted.

His ceiling was white.

He was flying.

"Oh, God," he whispered and fell, faithless and unworthy, back onto the bed.

He could neither move nor think. He could do nothing but lie there spread-eagled, his eyes riveted on the bloody smear caused by the impact of his forehead against...the ceiling!

When at last he slept again, it was a deeper sleep than ever before. There were no dreams.

When he awoke this time, it had become dark and the ceiling was in shadows. He stood up to turn on a light but froze when his hand neared the switch.

What if it had been a dream? What if the stain wasn't there?

He sat back down, in darkness, and worried. Then he tried to do it again.

He became rock-taut with concentration and nothing happened. He tried concentrating harder, straining until her trembled, and still nothing happened. He fought back the tears and panic. He forced himself to grow calm. He tried again. He didn't move.

So it had been just another damn dream, after all, he thought bitterly. And then the tears couldn't be helped.

"It's so unfair!" he whispered hoarsely to the shadows. "It was so real!"

He started to turn on the lights again, to just end it all right there, but stopped himself once again. It had been a great dream. The greatest of them all. He had felt so strong and so real. He closed his eyes, permitting himself a final fantasy. He saw the clouds again and the sky. And Sally floating and himself driving upwards. Reliving it touched, once more, that special nerve.

When he opened his eyes, suddenly, he was four feet in the air.

When he lifted off from his balcony, he banged his shins against the iron railing.

It was ugly. It was incredibly awkward. He lurched and fell several feet and slid sideways. He had neither style nor grace nor any but the merest pitiful excuse for control. And he didn't know what to do with

his arms.

He blundered against his apartment building, scraping his face on the bricks. He jounced obscenely about in a tangle of power lines for so long it was an absolute miracle that he wasn't electrocuted. He was helpless to control his insane fear of heights.

Yet he was aloft. And finally, after putting aside his childish fears, he let loose and soared. The lights of an intersection sparkled beneath him. The street lamps flowed past on either side, looking like a runway in the sky. Instinctively, he accelerated down their length.

It was hardly smooth, of course. But it was, at least, firm. Faster and faster he drove, tears fluttering, until the lumbering autoc seemed frozen in place below him. Ahead of him, he saw where the street lights ended, and as he passed the last glowing pair his head lifted back and he rose, majestically, triumphantly, into the night.

The boulevard shrank to a minor street, then to a lane, and then to a gently curving country road and still he rose. The wind rushed over and around him, crisply caressing. The clouds drew him firmly upward into their warm lower mists, soaking him gently, closing at his back. Then there was only the rush of their tender yielding until...

Freedom. The sky was forever. The moon was spectacular and benign. It glowed pure snowy white on the velvet hills and canyons of the clouds.

And the ice-diamond stars.

Essential significance. Fierce inevitability.

Life without shadows, at last. He had arrived.

He learned quickly. About climbing and falling, about soaring and gliding, about the easy grip of hovering and the staggering jolt of blind acceleration. He learned about air currents and thermals and how to recognize objects on the ground. Too dangerously, he learned about the limits imposed by his near-constant need for food.

He was always hungry, it seemed. The twenty-eight dollars in his wallet lasted him only three days. Trembling still after spending his last dime at a small lakeside cafe, he was reluctantly forced to admit that

he was very near complete exhaustion.

But still he rose and flashed away into the early morning air, rocketing scant inches above the still surface of the lake.

Trailing his fingers in the water threw up misty rainbows into the dawn sunshine. He laughed aloud at the beauty of this, light-headed, dizzily unconscious of the danger. A white cabin cruiser appeared around a curve of the shoreline, riding easily on the gentle morning swells. Two middle-aged fishermen stood in the stern, ignoring their rods for steaming mugs of coffee. On impulse, he veered towards them. Giggling hysterically, he drove his hands into the water up to his wrists and accelerated. He laughed out loud as he flashed across their stern, a rocketing mystery sprouting a thirty-foot-high roostertail. He stayed in the water until he was out of sight around a wooded point. He was straining hard now against the resistance, but determined to leave no clue.

Only then, when he tried to rise above the looming rocky shoreline, to come about and laugh at their thunderstruck faces, did he see his error. Strain as he might, he simply had no lift. His head swam, his vision doubled and glazed over.

He slammed into the water like a stone.

He bounced once, twice, tumbling wildly. He swallowed water through a cry of pain. He struck the gravel covered shore shoulder first, driving the air from his lungs in an instant. He rolled over and over, arms and legs careening numbly. He came to a stop in a crumpled heap at the edge of the weeds. He fainted.

He awoke to a chilling breeze and the sight of the orange sun easing steadily into the far horizon of choppy waves. He hurt everywhere. He was afraid to move, afraid to find out how badly hurt he might be. He tried lifting just as he was.

He rose, sighing with relief, into a weak but steady climb. It was over four hours later before he collapsed, heaving and shaking, onto his balcony—a mere two hundred miles away.

But he had learned, by God, to fly.

OCT. 14 Thurs. 11:45—Boy, am I weird!  
Ate a bunch of food waiting for the pizza man to show up with two Giant Specials.  
Then I eat about three guys' worth just like

that and the only reason I stop at all is because my stomach was hurting. It stopped hurting in a couple minutes though. But when I got up to put the rest of it away I ended up eating it all instead and scaring the hell out of myself. Wonder what I am now?

OCT. 15 Fri 6:15PM—George called from store. Am I alright and such. I guessed, said I was. He wanted to know was I sure and I said yeah and he said: "Well, alright," and got quiet. I just sat there on the phone listening to the music and the cash register in the background and then all of a sudden George starts shouting at me to get down there right away. Said it was already after six. He said he didn't give a blue damn and didn't of course and I felt real bad and said I'd hurry. But then I saw me in the mirror and can't believe how bad I look!

Oct. 16 Sat. 2:15 AM—God, I thought it'd never be over! Going out. And up!  
4:30 AM—Felt real good. Did GREAT dive into downtown, coming out of it between the skyscrapers like a big canyon. And some dumb highway patrol guy was sitting out past the loop with his radar on! At three in the damn morning! Peed on his hood and windshield. He got mad as hell, out of that car and shouting around in circles and sniffing. Funny as hell.

Got lost again coming back. Damn, it's easy to do. Weird how city looks like thick forest when you come in low.

Supposed to be at store in four hours! Gotta sleep!

5:15 AM—Don't know how I'm gonna get through tomorrow. Hate it! So damn boring and I keep thinking about just taking off right out the door but I need money to fly!

5:30 AM—Don't guess I'll tell anybody yet.  
5:45 AM—No matter what, I can't just take off and go. Even if I got a million dollars for all my stuff, I can't just be a floater. No more! This is my NEW LIFE!

6:00 AM—With my car and stereo and clock radio, and hair dryer and dishes and records and the rest it comes out to about \$3,130. Plus I got about \$168.37 in savings. So \$3,298.37.

But I gotta sleep somewhere. Gotta sleep now! Got less than two hours!

12:30 PM—George said he wasn't gonna

bug me about it but he started, of course. I told him he promised and he got mad as hell.

Julie said he called cops and hospitals when I was gone. Said I should've called in. I said I couldn't and she said why not and when I didn't answer her she said I didn't have to tell her but I owed it to George.

Then she went over to George and they whispered a lot. She was putting me down, I bet. But if she thinks she's gonna get my job she's full of it! Gotta go!

8:30 PM—Damn George! Even acted like I should've stayed later! And he KNEW I should've left at five.

I've had enough almost.

9:30 PM—DAMN rain! Rain's okay. But lightning? Supposed to clear up by ten.

11:30 PM—Airport guy says planes get struck all the time. Damn. Nothing on television. Figures.

Oct. 17 Sun. 1:30 AM—Just thinking. What would I have done to get to fly? What wouldn't I have done? Some rich guy could kidnap me for the secret. If scientists can't find out how I do it, then I'd be a real target because some mafia guy or rich guy wouldn't believe I didn't know. Besides, I don't want doctors poking around in me anyway.

Secret identity, how 'bout? Get a cape too!

Rain stopped.

4:15 AM—Comic books are stupid when guy is always spotting crimes. Even warehouse district dead and dark except for cop cars. And nobody goes to our downtown at night.

Besides, what if some insane guy started shooting at me some place? Bullet-proof vest is too thick for a costume.

And the money! Who do they make out the checks to, Mr. Flynn? And the internal revenue would want to know who I was. And if one guy knew then all of 'em could find out. Probably would. Some crazy government guys could sneak into my mansion when I was sleeping. Or a bomb!

12:30 PM—Ate four bowls of cereal and all the bologna. I need to get vitamins!

4:30 PM—Drove out of town and snuck up. Great day but I had to stay up too high to see anything or everybody could see me. Took forever to drive back. Calling pizza

man!

7:15 PM—Different Ways:

Show business = too risky.

Show business with secret ID = too risky too.

But hate record store! Gotta be there until seven tomorrow night! Going up.

Oct. 18 Mon. 12:00 AM—Stayed with 747 easy. Just can't go as high. 700 mph?

12:15 AM—Ticket lady thought I was nuts because I didn't know the flight number. Said most 747s do about 500 mph though. Still pretty good.

2:45 PM—Told George I was sick. Got costume instead. Great looking black shirt with puffy sleeves like Errol Flynn and black pants. Both look like silk but aren't. Got money belt to carry money and this. Cutting up satin pillow case to make hood.

3:45 PM—Looks great with boots! Look better with black dancing slippers though, because after I tie the hood behind my neck the extra strips of satin hang down my back and if I had shiny black slippers I'd look like the Whirling Dervish. Still look like Ali Baba and Cat Burglar or maybe James Bond.

4:15 PM—SPY!!! Duh! I can go anywhere!

4:30 PM—Told George I was gonna be sick til Friday. Wants Doctor's excuse! Should've told him to shove it. I said I'd check in and all, but if I get to meet the President it won't matter.

Oct. 19 Tues. 1:15 AM—Five hours and thirty-two minutes! Could've gone faster but didn't want to push it. Kinda like I was in a spell or hypnotized after awhile. Felt good but scared me.

Plus: Could've gone even faster than that if I'd gone straighter.

2:00 AM—Bummer! White House all dark. Gonna put my initials on Washington Monument.

6:00 AM—Whoa! That ocean is BIG! Got turned around and couldn't remember what dipper to use. Lucky!!! Sleeping on beach.

6:30 AM—Beach stinks. Brown water! Staying in forest.

5:45 PM—White House cop says somebody is ALWAYS picketing. Mexican guy showed me oval office window and then tried to get me to carry his sign while he ate. He said I would if I cared about

justice and Puerto Rico being a state.

Should've brought more clothes.

8:30 PM—Oval office light is on! Here goes!  
9:15 PM—Must be some kind of radar! Bunch of guys came out holding guns like they had in Viet Nam. Two choppers, too. Slow as hell.

Gonna go in lower.

10:00 PM—No way!! Radar must be in kaun because I wasn't two feet above the ground. Those guys were all over, looking in the trees even. More choppers too. And searchlight winged me but they still didn't see me.

11:00 PM—Tin Foil! Of course! Like hot rod guys used to put in their grilles for the cop radar! Gonna make me a shield with it and a cardboard box I got in an alley.

Oct. Wed. 1:15 AM—Shield sure made a dandy target in those damn searchlights. Shredded the hell out of that cardboard like it was confetti. If I hadn't dropped it, they'd've shot me too! Lucky!!!

Maybe the Vice President or a Senator first. Then only two guys would know.

3:30 AM—Alright!!! Paper says President leaving for California in private Air Force One tomorrow. All I need to do is wait til he's alone in his private bedroom.

Buying laundry marker for sign.

5:00 AM—Made three signs so we can talk.

1. Don't tell anybody I'm out here.

2. Make your own sign.

3. Where can we meet?

Decided not to tell him who I am in case he ever writes it down. Tare out front of this.

11:30 AM—Chopper just got him. Gonna follow to Andrews— Air Force base!

It said: "The United States of America" and bore Presidential Seals. It was blue and silver, shining with a just polished sheen. It was huge. It was very fast.

It was ugly.

The engines were fiercely hot. They buffeted him with searing blasts. And it would not stop climbing.

Felix found them behind the rear-most window. She was unmistakable with her chiseled chin, hard teeth, and hair-helmet. She was sitting on the bed, pillows propped against the wall. Bent over at the foot of the bed was a man Felix had never seen. He

wore white boxer shorts stretched tight over a spherical gut bisected by a ridge of tufted black hair that stopped just below his chest. His face was dead slack, idiot-like. His hair was tousled. His tongue peaked out. He was a blob. And the President.

He was clipping his toenails onto the floor with a gold clipper, ignoring a cascade of remarks from her small tight mouth. In disgust, she stood up and placed a small trash can at the foot of the bed. It bore his seal. But he ignored the can and her, clipping the ivory chips onto the dark blue carpet as before.

Felix needed him alone. The plane continued to climb.

She became incensed at his behavior. She railed against him, gestured sharply, even pounded a small tight fist into the soft cream bedspread. When he began to clip them onto the bed itself, she rose and stormed out.

His face warped wide with hysterical laughter, giving to himself what he would not give to her. Felix's first sign, covering the window, was ignored while the clippings were cheerfully gathered at last and carefully placed under the rumpled bedspread where she had sat.

He continued to laugh, not looking out, while the plane continued to rise. It was very cold now. Felix could hardly breathe. So he knocked hard.

The laughter subsided abruptly. The gut miraculously disappeared as he sat up and turned to the window. At first he saw without seeing. Then the eyes focused on Felix and his sign. They stared at one another from four feet away.

Then the eyes went wide and rolled to white. He clutched at his chest with the hands that held the gold clippers.

Felix plummeted violently, slicing sideways, toward warmth and distance. The signs scattered, separating lazily in the blue Virginia sky.

Some of the bargain hunters ceased their avid touching-questioning-arguing long enough to join Felix at the TV set for a view of the caissons and drooping flags. Some wept. Then the sale would resume with it's former urgency. Soon everything was

gone, even the set.

Felix, still in flying black, sat on the couch and re-read every word accompanying the bold headlines and black bordered inauguration photographs.

It was, he felt, as if he were reading about another country. Or another species. He didn't feel involved. There was no guilt. But he HAD done it, he kept reminding himself. He, Felix, had killed the President of the United States. He had scared him to death.

Felix gathered the cash together and put it in his belt. He stomped loudly through the rattling newspapers to the balcony. He took his hood from his back pocket and shook it out. He put it on and tied it tight.

He flew away. In broad daylight.

There was enough money for three months of clouds and stars. Of sailing, soaring, falling. Filing. His talent steadily grew. He honed in fervently with razor-sharp aerobatics amid skyscrapers and mountain peaks. More important was the purging he achieved by thundering non-stop from one sea to the next. He found that with ten solid hours at his absolute maximum velocity—entered and arrow-straight—he could hurtle the continent.

He did not stop until he had reached the Rockies.

Perched on the spur of a ridge, he found an ancient line-shack. The trail that had once served it had been long demolished by an avalanche of granite boulders and Colorado winters. Only a climber could reach it now.

He moved in eagerly to his waiting home.

*Jan. 1 12:00 AM—This is already a better year. This year I have not expected too much. This year I have not fought with George or wept for Sally or half-drowned in a lake. This year I have not killed an ugly powerful man. I haven't even seen a President, this year. And I don't intend to.*

*9:30 AM—My stores are very low. What little produce I steal from passing trucks won't do it. I cook badly, hating it.*

*But I need something. I fly now in a way unimaginable three months ago. And that means more food.*

*But where? How? If not as a spy or superstar and for damn sure not selling records—what's left?*

*Am considering crime, part-time.*

*But what crimes? Theft? Who hides money on top of buildings? And burglary means sneaking in past supposedly snoring, occasionally well-armed people. In the dark, yet.*

*Robbery? I'm perfect for getaways, but I'd still have to walk in through the front door. And I'd have to carry a gun. Would I shoot someone to stay alive? Yes. But could I really put them in that spot...*

*How about crooks, though? I could do that okay. But where do I look for rich crooks that the cops haven't already searched? Vegas? Mafia casinos? But I'd still have to walk through the front door.*

*What I need is a safe, semi-acceptable crime requiring air travel.*

*11:45 AM—Smuggling dope. I'd rather marijuana but cocaine is a lot lighter. No. No heroin, of course.*

*Coke, then. From South America to your door. Better arrange an advance sale with somebody—I can't picture myself pushing to strangers with my hood on. And I won't fly without it.*

*So. I'll head home tonight and go around the bars I used to hear rumors about.*

*10:30 PM—The Monday after New Year's. Not a soul in sight. Some good news. "High Times" magazine says there's enough money in this that I should only have to do it once or twice a year. Ready for home. Guess I'll try one more bar, though.*

*Jan. 2 Tues. 3:30 AM—It happened again. I don't understand why I don't feel worse this time than before. Especially since I meant to do it.*

Felix agreed to meet the two of them, Zack and his dark companion, behind the bar to discuss details. When he arrived they were already waiting, tense and violent, in the dead blackness of the alley. He tried to run but they were much too quick. The first blow slammed him to the ground. He tried crawling away from their hideous grasping and muttered vileness. But the alley was closed and the ground was covered with unknown reeking garbage that rattled and

rumbled beneath him. Something ran across his chest and he lifted instinctively.

His head smacked horribly against the rusting fire escape he couldn't see and he fell. Someone, Zack, grabbed him as he fell. He pounded Felix with fists and knees. Felix screamed and lifted again, with Zack clutched tightly to his legs.

Then Zack was screaming and screaming and cursing and holding on with every last ounce of strength. Felix felt teeth sink into his thigh. He accelerated, still climbing. He jerked violently to the left, then to the right, then spun and Zack was somersaulting lazily through the air, screaming and screaming.

His screaming stopped when his leg tore a gaping hole in the sharply tilted skylight. For a moment he hung there and Felix thought he was going to make it. But then the leg ripped free and he began to slide. Splattering blood and glass, Zack slid down the length of the skylight and off the roof. He fell fourteen stories.

"They must have thought I had it on me," muttered Felix. Then he barked and flew away to the faint sound of the other man's voice calling for Zack.

The deer was incapable of seeing danger in the skies. A bird, even one as big as Felix, couldn't harm him. Not a twelve point buck.

They began with impromptu races, spontaneous sprints across the grassy mountain glade from tree-line to tree-line. "Wrestling" amounted to little more than feinting up and back with flashing horns and waving arms and trying to get the other guy to back up a step.

Tag was best, their mutual favorite. Forever "It", Felix would dart after his friend through the maze of tangled undergrowth and low-hanging branches. Try as he may, he was never able to match the buck's elusive bounding rhythm. But he loved it anyway.

Thus was spent the first spring fortnight. Mornings around nine, they would materialize on the glade. Felix used a watch to know when. The deer used something else.

When he found himself still alone one

morning at a quarter to ten, Felix assumed his watch was slow. By eleven he had astonished himself with the depth of his hurt feelings. It was some minutes later before he thought of hunters.

By noon he was circling for the last time before moving the search to the game paths. There were at least two dozen places that had to be visited in the forest maze.

Seeing the blaze of tan amidst the leafy gully floor, he thought of a fall and of perfect running tools horribly splintered. His approach was a too-loud racket of snapping twigs and urgency.

The deer was there. It was unhurt. Beside him, hooves tucked delicately beneath her, was the doe. The twelve points were dipped toward Felix, reluctantly perhaps, but firmly enough. Nice as Felix was, the couple did not need a bird here. Her soft and gentle gaze held neither apology nor malice. Felix searched her eyes briefly for approval, settling instead for a steady glowing warmth that rested easily upon him as he turned around and strode politely away.

Felix was halfway through his farewell walk across the glade when he saw the man coming toward him. He froze and looked around. He sighed. The nearest highway was eighteen miles away through stubborn terrain and here he was without even a canteen to explain how he had done it. Felix knew how the man had done it. He had seen the lodge from the air. He sighed again, cursing under his breath. He was caught.

The man was something over sixty and frail-looking. He had white hair, a red wool shirt, and a shaky grip. His green eyes virtually shone with the crisp clarity of both cunning and wisdom. Nevertheless, he chose to ignore the obvious mystery.

He knows, thought Felix. He's seen me.

"I'm Ryan," offered the man with a wry grin. "This is my mountain."

"Nice job," replied Felix in turn.

Ryan gestured downlope. "My lodge is in there about a half-mile. You're welcome to lunch if you don't mind the walk."

"I like to walk," answered Felix with a straight face and steady gaze. Ryan returned the gaze easily. He grinned, displaying awareness, genuine warmth, and perfect teeth, in that order.

Damn, thought Felix as they walked.

Damn.

They ate and Ryan spoke. He was sixty-two, a widower, and Big-time Rich. Felix had heard of several of his companies. When they had finished eating, they sat there in silence. Then Ryan stood up abruptly, and gestured for Felix to follow. They climbed three sets of stairs and stepped out through an attic door onto a broad sun deck ringed by the tips of Aspen trees. The roof of the forest was spread at their feet. Ryan took a canvas cover off a large bulky telescope—the largest Felix had ever seen.

Felix barely hesitated. He stepped past the older man and put an eye to the lens. His cabin, over four miles distant and a thousand feet above them, seemed close enough to touch. Felix lifted his head. He was trembling with... Anger? Or was it fear?

Ryan stood at the edge of the deck, his back to Felix, his hands in his pockets.

"Seen all kinds of beauty. The arts and the wild and all. I've seen everything." He turned back around slowly, facing Felix. "But there's not a sight under God that can match you shooting out of that cabin into the sky."

"What do you want," asked Felix coldly.

Ryan grimaced, thought a moment. "I want to know about it."

"What do you want to know? How it's done maybe?"

Ryan met the story gaze. "Okay. Yeah. And more... How it feels and what all you can do and... Damn it, Son, you know what you got here?"

Felix's voice was ice. "I'm the only one that knows."

"But look, Son... I can't go on just calling you Son..."

"Sure you can," growled Felix. Then he saw the hurt in the old man's eyes. He relented. "I can't give this to you, Ryan. I don't even know how it works myself."

The frail shoulders sagged visibly. The green eyes clouded briefly. Then the hurdle was passed.

"Thanks for saying that part right out, Son. I kept telling myself it couldn't be that easy. But still, I'm glad to have clean dead." He squared his shoulders, drew himself up. "Now, Son. You got a friend? You got a woman? Someone who knows?"

Felix shook his head.

"Thought so," said Ryan. "Nobody you want to trust and maybe no one you'd care to put through all that frustration."

"Well, I know now, have for awhile. There's no secret to save around here. So why not take advantage of it? Bend my ear. You never know. Sometimes things said out loud have a different spark. Could help a lot to talk to somebody."

Felix sighed, bending again to the telescope. Actually, the old man had a pretty good idea on the surface. But like a lot of good ideas, like a lot of things, this one had nothing to do with him.

A confidante? Couldn't the old man see how much trouble he was having just keeping up with human conversation?

Felix straightened. "I appreciate your offer. But I can't see it. I don't need to talk. Just the opposite. I can hardly stand still as it is."

Ryan, crestfallen, returned quickly. "What do you need?"

Felix thought for a moment. "Food. I need to eat a great deal."

"Food, is it? Yeah, I guess you do burn it some at that. Tell me, Son: How many questions could you sit still for if I put up a month's supply?"

"Two months," replied Felix quickly. "In advance. In cans."

"Okay, two months of food. But how many questions?"

"One."

"One!"

"One question," said Felix, grinning, "and a ride."

"Done!" snapped Ryan with wide eyes. They shook on it. "I can have the food here by tomorrow night. Enough for five or six gents."

"Okay," said Felix. "I'll be back tomorrow night." He half-turned away, paused, then smiled at the old man. "You ready?"

Ryan, face flushed with excitement, could only nod.

Felix nodded in return and lifted straight up. At around one hundred feet he did a slow roll and accelerated smoothly away.

Ryan, gasping, sat down on the deck with a thump. His eyes filled with tears. He gulped.

"Hot damn!" he whispered hoarsely.

The next night, payment made, they stood on the deck as before. "Shoot," said Felix nervously.

Ryan's mouth worked, obviously deciding between favorites. "Are you human?" he asked abruptly.

Felix blinked. "Uh? Uh... I never thought about it. Hmm. Maybe not." He shuddered, frowned at Ryan.

"You sure you can do it with two?" asked Ryan.

Felix smiled. "Easy. Come on." He picked up Ryan as though he were a child and held him to his chest. He couldn't believe how light the old man was. Big, once-sturdy bones held only the mearest possible flesh. Ryan, he noticed, was not looking at him: Okay, he thought.

"Okay," he said and lifted them smoothly upward toward a pale half-moon.

Ryan saw his mountain as only birds and a single human being had seen it. First, from a thousand feet, came the panorama. The wisps of cloud parted to show the rugged stone and forests and glittering waters all tinted with myriad tones and shades of deep, life-rich liner blue. Warm and shimmering. Moments later they were gliding along just above the sparkling surface of the river, banking lazily as it meandered through the trees. From the river they rose over the forest, skimming the topmost leaves. Next they circled the mountain itself, rising higher and higher in ever-tightening spirals to the summit. Ryan rested a weathered hand on the peak which had tapered to a size little larger than a doorknob.

On the way down the far side Ryan spotted a mountain climber's piton shining dully in a crack above a two thousand foot gorge. Each used a free hand, rocking it back and forth to dislodge it and Ryan clutched it to his chest like a precious treasure.

Felix shifted his cargo slightly to keep his arms from cramping and brushed against buttocks which were quite literally skin and bones. Surrounded by his bounty, Ryan had the physique of a concentration camp victim. Felix started to ask, thought better of it. Ryan coughed nervously, unnecessarily, his only hint of a plea.

Felix decided then to give him all of it.

"Hang on, old man!" he shouted gaily, and turned it on.

They streaked out over the river valley, accelerating tremendously, climbing steadily at a thirty degree angle. At three thousand feet and two hundred miles per hour, Felix abruptly relaxed. They rolled slowly forward, as if atop the highest of rollercoasters, and fell straight down toward a fairy-tale pine grove.

"You're supposed to yell: 'Wheeeeel' when we go over the top," said Felix into Ryan's ear. Ryan looked at him, his face framed by a toothy ecstatic smile, and shook his head in awe. Felix waited a long time to start pulling them out of it. When they began to level off, they were higher than twenty feet above the needle-like treetops. "Wheeeeel!" they yelled simultaneously and then laughed hysterically at themselves. This burst of laughter set off another and still another. Ryan wiped tears of joy and wind from his eyes.

Felix thought he could do this forever.

At two AM they alit beside the telescope. They slumped to the deck, exhausted, but still giggling like two especially naughty schoolboys. They lay there for several moments, recovering their breath. Ryan poked Felix's side with his toe.

"That," he gasped, "was one hell of a ride."

"The only one of its kind," said Felix, "and you got it."

"Huh? You've carried people before, haven't you?"

"Not like that, I haven't."

"Yeah? How come?"

Felix paused slightly, decided. "Too dangerous," he said.

There was silence while Ryan considered this.

"Thank you, Son," he mumbled through a thickening throat.

"Nada," whispered Felix.

Ryan's shrunken face was a ghastly contrast to the striped hospital pillow case. His darting eyes scanned the ceiling while Felix looked at a spot of the floor between his boots. At last the nurse left. The door hissed slowly shut before either nurse spoke.

"Promise me," whispered Ryan

hoarsely. "Promise me you'll give something a try. Something. Anything."

Felix frowned elaborately but his eyes were smiling.

"Please promise me," Ryan continued. "You're a young man with a fat planet beneath you. Cut yourself a slice."

Felix sighed, shifted his feet. "I'm not sure the world has anything to do with me. I'm losing touch, Ryan. Maybe I've already lost it."

"Not Fight that. The world is people, Son. The sky is empty. Fight it."

"Why?"

"Because you're a man, damnit. A man, born of woman."

"You sure of that?"

Please, Son. One more chance. Promise me."

Felix counted the checkered floor tiles underneath the hospital bed. Eighteen and a third.

"Please, Son," croaked Ryan, desperation in his voice.

Felix looked at him. "You can call me Felix, Old Man."

Ryan's eyes widened. His chin quivered.

"Please, Felix," he added, almost inaudibly. "Alright, Ryan. Alright. One more time."

Ryan smiled thinly through translucent lips. He patted Felix's hand awkwardly. Then he sighed, relaxing to it. He closed his eyes and lay quite still except for his lips, which soundlessly formed his friend's name, over and over again.

*May 4, Thursday. 12:00 AM—There's simply no way to do this right. I hate the make-up, but neither am I eager to kill another President.*

*Fortunately, the wharf lighting is poor and Chatham will have no reason to remember my face at first.*

*I still don't know what I should say to him. Perhaps "Take me to your leader."*

*Oh well, here I go, Old Man.*

Chatham, the Chief Domestic Advisor, was right on time. He was also a pig. He came stumbling out through the casino doors onto the sidewalk wearing a custard yellow suit (sidepockets bulging with chips)

and a black satin shirt open to the waist. He had a sort of medallion-thing around his neck that swung loosely amid great black tufts of chest hair. In his left hand was a half-finished martini. Felix, watching from the shadows of the wharf, sighed. He turned and looked down the length of the wharf. Chatham's lake yacht was the last one in line. He figured he would have about a hundred yards in which to make his play.

He shrugged and stepped out of the darkness with his palm extended. Felix began a mumbled introduction, but Chatham cut him off with a "Sure, Kid," while reaching into his jacket pocket for a gold fountain pen. Felix stared quizzically. Chatham noted the look. "What's this?" he asked. "You want the autograph or not?"

Felix shook his head. "No, Str. I wanted to see if you could..."

"Oh, I get it," snapped Chatham. "You want a handout. Typical. Well, forget it. I got no—repeat: no—spare change. Hit the road."

Felix didn't move, not believing this. "Don't just stand there, Stupid," growled Chatham. "Get moving. Go peddle yourself somewhere else. I'm busy."

Felix started to say something about a misunderstanding, but Chatham cut him off, snorting loudly, and covering his ears with both hands.

"And don't whine about it, would you please? I can't stand it when you bumstart bawling all over me."

"Mr. Chatham!" snapped Felix, "I don't think you know..."

"For God's sake, you little punk. Face it. You struck out. Now hit the road or fll..."

"Shuddepl!" Felix howled. "Listen to me. I don't want your autograph and I don't want your damned money."

Chatham grimed coldly in the darkness, unbelieving. Felix felt his cheeks redden, heard his voice rising childishly.

"Damn it, I'm here to speak with you about an urgent matter..."

"Oh please..."

"concerning national security!"

Chatham froze and stared at him. Then he exploded into helpless laughter. If possible, Felix's face flushed even more.

"Alright, I give," cried Chatham through

tears. "You're great. Here," he reached into a pants pocket, "here's a buck. You deserve it." He thrust the bill into Felix's hand and staggered away towards his boat, still laughing.

Felix stood there shaking, clutching the bill. He had never known such anger.

The yacht, filled with party-goers and their laughter, pulled away from the wharf and headed out across the lake. Then the engines were cut and it drifted. Inside, men and women rammed at one another with voices and bodies. Later, Chatham pulled a silk robe together around his belly and stepped out onto the stern with a cigar.

Felix was there, in flying black, waiting. "Mr. Chatham..."

Chatham reeled back. He saw the black hood and thought of terrorists and torture. "Get away from me. I'll give you anything you want. I...I support your cause. Really."

Felix chuckled coldly in the darkness. "What cause is that?"

Chatham started to guess, thought better of it.

"I haven't come to hurt you, Chatham," Felix continued. "I'm here to offer you something. A bet."

"What kind of bet?"

"The best kind. The money kind. You interested?"

Eyeing the distance back inside to safety, Chatham nodded warily.

Felix nodded in turn. "Good. Now this is it: I bet you \$20,000 that I can do something that you don't think I can do. If I do it, you pay. If I don't, I pay. Deal?"

Right then, Chatham recognized the voice. "You're the damn punk from the wharf, aren't you? Oh, hell! Get out of here. What could you possibly do that could interest anybody for twenty grand?" He was furious, both at himself for having been so frightened, and at Felix, for having seen it. But all that flowed instantly from him when Felix answered:

"Fly."

There was something in the tone of that single word that made Chatham hesitate. He stared hard at Felix, but his voice was cautious.

"Anybody can fly, Kid. All you need is a ticket."

"I don't. I don't need a ticket or a plane or

a balloon or birds or anything else." Chatham couldn't seem to break away from their mutual gaze. "Just you?" he managed at last.

"Just me," replied Felix calmly.

"No tricks or...hang gliders or...?"

"Just me."

"You're insane."

"Then take my money."

"You're crazy!"

"Getting scared, Fat Boy?"

Chatham was instantly enraged. Embarrassed, hating, and more than a little afraid, he screamed:

"Alright! Deal, you little punk! Show me! Let's see you fly!"

But Felix was already aloft. He hovered briefly above the gunwhale, spun, then soared off across the lake. Chatham, frozen statue-like, moaned softly.

Chatham, speaking incessantly, began lifting stacks of new bills from his overcoat pockets and arranging them on the sun table. It had taken all of his chips. Felix sat on the arm of a deck chair, wondering where all of his emotion had fled. It was a great effort, suddenly, to even follow Chatham's continual flow of words.

"Where was I?" demanded Chatham.

"Oh, yeah. I'll have you in the White House by noon tomorrow. If I can just get two...that's right! You don't need a ticket, do you?"

Felix, thinking of the way the clouds formed over the cabin, shook his head.

"Anyway," Chatham continued, excitedly, "I'll get to the Man first. Set it up. Then you come in, I'll introduce you, and... Hey! You haven't told me your name yet!"

"No," said Felix firmly. "I haven't."

Chatham's eyes narrowed briefly. "Okay, then. Don't tell me. But you gotta tell the President."

"Do I?" asked Felix absently. He began stuffing bills into his belt.

"Course you do!" cried Chatham. "We gotta... Wait! Where are you going now? What about Washington? What about the Man? You can't just... You owe the nation to... Think what you could contribute! Damnitall, come back here!!!"

He told himself that he was only taking

time out to properly hone his skills. He told himself that he would return to Chatham the instant he reached his peak.

He flew constantly, over the mountains and deserts and twinkling cities. A year passed. He flew across Mexico and into South America. Another year.

He circumnavigated the globe—almost two years.

It was midnight. It was summer. He was in his hometown.

He walked slowly across the moon-lit fairways of a gently rolling golf course wondering what it was that he was feeling so strongly.

He could be of great value to them, to his country. Why didn't he just do it? But even with his money gone, he felt no desire to see Chatham, or anyone like him, ever again.

"Damnit," he said aloud, "why am I so lazy?"

He noticed idly that his walk had taken him to the clubhouse. There was a party, a huge dance, going on in the main ballroom.

He stood by the pool, watching the lights flicker through the half-open curtains. The pool was a mirror. But the tiny waves caused the lights to make sudden garish leaps. Still wondering...

A woman's voice echoed hollowly across the tiles from nearby in the darkness. He spun about, startled, and saw her there in a plastic lounge, talking to herself and waving a drink. She was oblivious of him.

And she was Sally.

He stared, incredulous, unbelieving. But it was her.

He slipped his hood off. He stuffed it behind his belt. He approached her, called to her.

"Sally? It's me. It's Felix."

"Fluh? Felix? Oh my God!"

And then she was up and they were hugging and laughing all at once and she was telling him of all the great things she had done. And it was only then, when she had finished with herself and asked about him, that he saw the terrible terrible mistake he had made.

What, after all that she had obviously been through, could he tell her?

She was now running that same first-job company. She had married, incredibly, that same young executive from that same company last night. She had made a great success with him, her partner in ambition. She was alone.

It was horribly unfair, he thought, seeing her weary bitter eyes. After having the wisdom to make that awesome decision and the courage to go through with it...to still be lonely. He ached for her, for the pain she bore. He would not, he told himself, add to the cruelty. And he wouldn't have, had he but seen her anger rising.

"If you're not a member here, Felix, then what are you doing here in the middle of the night? Walking where? What time do you have to be at work in the morning? Well, what ARE you doing then? How do you make a living? How do you eat? Traveling where? You mean you just... You must be kidding!"

Sally could not help hating him. He was too easily, too casually, happy. Worse, there was no sign of the strain or of the Struggle. Without having lifted a finger, he dared to stand unashamedly before her and glow with well-being.

It wasn't that she wanted him to suffer, exactly, just to know all that he had missed. To know that he hadn't been living at all, dammit, just watching the world go by!

And when, seeing her anger rising, he said: "Sally, would it help to talk about it?" It was the last straw. Her rage, her humiliation, possessed her.

You bastard! How DARE you pity me!"

"Sally, I wasn't. I was just..."

But she could not be reached. She spat her words at him, flinging tears and pain and mortal hatred.

"You were just being your usual insect self, Felix. You're pathetic. Tell me, Felix. Are you still waiting? Still waiting for your Big Move? Well, let me tell you, it'll never happen, Felix. And do you know why it'll never happen? Because you're a loser, Felix. And an insect. You always were."

Through a million clouds, ten million flights, from all the way around the world and back, her words crushed him still.

"...and you always will be a loser and an

insect. There's not a damn thing you can do to change it. You'll never be a part of anything. You'll never be involved, never contribute anything to anyone.

"So...so go away. Get away from me. I HAVE a life, dammit! I don't want an insect around me."

He could not move. He couldn't.

But she wouldn't stop.

"Go, damn you. Can't you hear me? Get out of my sight!" Her voice was almost unintelligible through her sobbing. But he heard her.

"Fly away, insect," she said.

And, of course, he did.

He flashed directly away from her, zipping across the pool. Ten feet from the ballroom window, he drove through a one hundred eighty degree back flip and accelerated back toward her. Exactly toward her. Right at her, his eyes swelling toward her...

The sheer dynamics of his awesome approach seemed to drive his very being through hers. He closed the distance from one hundred feet to fifty, forty, twenty... His features swelling, growing, feeding...

At what seemed less than an arm's length away, he pulled up in a near-perfect ninety degree angle and, still accelerating, shot out of sight into the night summer sky.

For a long, long, time she stood there—head back, eyes wide and red, still as a statue. Afraid the mere act of breathing might shatter the crystalline scene, she managed to hold her breath a full minute and a half.

But it didn't work. He never returned.

Five hundred feet above her, silently hovering, Felix watched her tiny form give up at last and return to the party.

He was confused.

Why hadn't he gone? What was holding him here?

"Because," he said aloud, "that stunt was cheap. It was cruel. And...it was a lie, because Sally was right. I was waiting and not looking. And I really DIDN'T have faith in finding my spot.

"I really was too lazy to search for it..."

He saw himself then, as the shallow half-person she had accused him of being. He talked a good fight about eventual involvement and contributing and he promised Ryan easily enough but he had gone around the world instead. Just because he had been having fun.

Maybe it was time he faced up to the fact that...

He got it, then. At last, it was all there. He wasn't lazy. He was happy.

It was time to stop being ashamed of it.

He streaked off, up and away. Sally could go back to being another happy memory.

The gamblers, Ginelli and Roth, began by waving their hands underneath him. When that didn't work, they each took off their belts and buckled them together. Then they swung the leather up and over him rapidly, like it was some bizarre form of \$250,000 jump-rope. Only Felix wasn't jumping. He merely sat there, in thin air, and contemplated the distant lights of Las Vegas. At last, huffing and puffing, they gave up. Roth loosened his sweat-stained white collar and white silk tie and said: "Holy shit! He can really do it!" Ginelli, mopping his red face with a hankie, nodded miserably.

Stanley, the shill, laughed so hard he fell off the rock he was using for a stool. "Those bastards," he thought, remembering all the trouble they had put him through to set this up. "They'll never call ME penny-ante again."

But the gamblers weren't thinking of that. They weren't even thinking about the enormous sum of money they had just lost. They were thinking about this incredible man who could fly.

No cynicism. No anger. No snide remarks or tough-guy talk.

Awe, instead. Awe.

He could fly!

As part of the deal, Felix gave them a brief ride above the nighttime desert. He would have flown them longer, knowing how much it meant to them, but Ginelli's excited gasping worried him a little. He wanted no more heart attacks. He put them back down in the clearing next to Stanley and began to gather the bills into

his black canvas bag. They stared while he did this.

He reminded them that each could ask one question—also part of the original deal. Ginelli asked the biggie.

"No," replied Felix gently. "I can't teach you..." He pointed to a commercial jet just taking off in the distance. "Could you catch him?"

Felix turned and regarded the receding lights. "Yes," he said.

"Wow," whispered Roth.

Felix smiled behind his black hood. "I would appreciate it, gentlemen, if you would keep this to yourselves. I have to make a living, you know."

Both gamblers loudly assured him that they would. Felix believed them. Why would dirty characters like these trade a greedy little secret for public scorn?

Felix bid them goodbye then, and turned to Stanley. The shill was smiling warmly at him with outright adoration. Felix smiled again. He had some idea of what Stanley had gone through, the humiliation and cruelty. More than just money could make up for. So he said: "Let's split, old Buddy!" and snatched Stanley into the air like a long-lost brother. Below them, the gamblers cringed with envy.

Stanley's ride back was as spectacular as Felix could make it, culminating with a breathtaking strafing run from one end of the Strip to the next. Felix lowered them gently to the balcony outside the penthouse Stanley had rented for the night (which he could normally never afford). He took out a wad of bills from his black bag and handed it to the other man. Stanley's eyes widened as he counted it. It was three or four times more than he had been promised.

"Hey, this is enough for a couple more jobs at least. You want me to get some more guys?"

"No thanks," said Felix.

"Hey, I don't mind. Really. I'll throw it in. Scratch. Whenever you say."

Reluctantly, Felix told him about never using the same shill twice. Stanley's face fell, but he muttered quickly about understanding how a guy had to be careful.

And then he found that he couldn't stop

talking. He was jabbering away like crazy about nothing really but he just couldn't let this moment, this miracle, end. Felix seemed to listen, he saw. He was polite about it. But Stanley knew he wanted to be up there somewhere and knowing he was keeping him from it made Stanley feel worse than he ever wanted to feel.

So he shut up and let the Flyer say goodbye.

"Wait!" shouted Stanley, just as Felix was lifting. "Don't I get the one question?"

Felix laughed, all. "Sure you do."

"Well, what I want to know is: What do you do with all the money?"

"Well, Stanley," replied Felix, his voice seeming warmer than it had ever been before, "what would you do if you were me?"

"Huh? If I was you? Well...Shit. I guess I'd pay the rent or maybe I'd get me a place that never had no rent, yeah! Someplace away and high! And then I'd fill it full of food and all and then I'd...Hell, I'd fly, is all.

#### John Steakley

After a two-year screen writing career, Steakley turned to a career of science fiction writing. His first published story ("The Bluesose Limit", March, 1961 Amazing ) was rejected by 12 editors before finding its home and such recognition that his first novel, *Armor*, was accepted upon completion for representa-

tion by the Scott Meredith Literary Agency and is now in the process of being placed.

Steakley exhibits a rich, unfettered imagination with a clear, spare and direct literary style. A new writer to watch with very special interest.—EM

Unless I just absolutely had to, I'd never set foot on the goddam ground!"

Felix placed a hand fondly on his shoulder.

"I never do," he said and rocketed into the stars.

...only in your mind.

My flight is all. I fly and eat and fly and eat and when I have no food I bet and win. There is nothing beyond this.

Except no function. Assume no kinship. Do not pray. I am not a part. I am not involved. I do not contribute. I love you, but I do not owe you.

I only fly, hanging from my spine....

#### METHODICAL MADNESS

Mentally bently

Albert's Einsteinian

Views of the Universe

On which he harped

Ended up proving that,

Relativisticly,

He wasn't crazy, the

World was all warped!

—John D. Seate