

## **"Body's Earth": H. E. Francis's "Ballad of the Engineer Carl Feldmann"**

Not only does technological man want to make his own babies, but he wants to do so without the hormones and flesh, without lust and arousal, and his most heroic representatives, the astronauts, embody this distrust of women, of the biological, and of the irrational dependencies of the flesh.

Vivian Sobchack, "The Virginity of Astronauts"

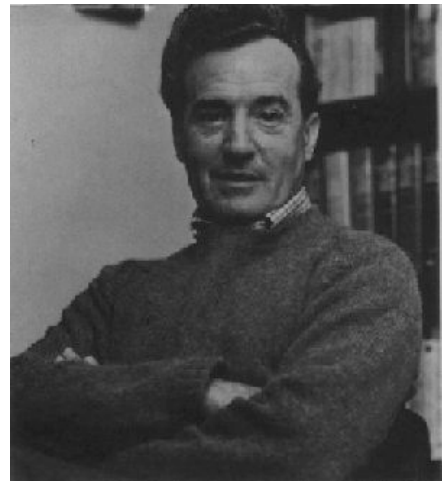
If the sea was a symbol of the unconscious, was space perhaps an image of unfettered time, and the inability to penetrate it a tragic exile to one of the limbos of eternity, a symbolic death in life?

J.G. Ballard, "A Question of Re-Entry"

In "Ballad of the Engineer Carl Feldmann," a disturbing short story, part prose and part poetry, H. E. Francis dissects the life and dreams of a NASA space engineer and in so doing offers a telling portrait of infinite presumption. Though not science fiction, it could stand, like "A Letter to God" and "Surface Tension," as a foundational tale of the Space Age.

At the story's inception, Feldmann, we learn, is unemployed, laid off by the space agency because of cut-backs in the aftermath of the Apollo missions. Unable any longer to bear the frustrations of his dead-ended career and the suffering of a marriage that even in its better days had played second fiddle to his all-consuming work ("a three-shift life leaves you no time not a minute for sitting and talking and touching and maybe even a nap in each other's arms or the girls sitting on your lap and all of us eating ice cream together somewhere and watching ducks, swimming" [246]), his wife Clara has deserted him. Her departure has left him with the responsibility of caring for their two daughters, Elaine and Gretta. As Feldmann, poverty-ridden and in despair, makes his daily rounds from home to school and the unemployment office, Francis gradually discloses, in stream-of-consciousness style and largely through the use of flashbacks, his thoughts, fears, memories, and growing insanity.

In the prose portions of the story we are plunged into his past and present struggle with the quotidian, a struggle, eventually tragic, which his otherworldliness has made him incapable of enduring. And in interwoven poetic interludes, we learn of his recruitment by Wernher von Braun and his conversion to NASA True



Believing. Prior to joining the space agency, seems Feldmann had been a man without vision, without direction, but von Braun—"The heart in that great presence in the Hilton tower" (during his initial job interview)—changed all that by demanding allegiance to his extraterrestrial values.



Von Braun said stars. a city in the sky, man lifted up and up.  
—Carl Feldmann, I want your head.

He infuses his vision of the extraterrestrial imperative into his recruits. They become, in fact, extensions of the "Great Man," a human demiurge, and the mission he offers them is more than scientific.

His gaze,  
galactic, multiplied the suns, universe on universe,  
made every man his astronaut.—Join us, he said.  
We're a family here.

—I never had a family.

High in the Hilton tower, Carl bowed before  
that August head. When he left, he carried stars. (247)

Working with joy ("He wanted—when a check came—to tear it up" [254]) at his own particular task, the development of "new electronic sensitive feelers on the fingers, detectors that would revolutionize the process of collection and transmission of data," he comes to routinely think of his individual mind as at the service of the species-mind. Inspired by von Braun, Feldmann recognizes his place in a great human project:

one life to live, take up the gauntlet,  
each for all future life. . . .

.....

The mind must make  
a perfect part that fit the perfect part  
the minds of others made—or no deeds come.  
—Between Earth and moon a city must grow  
visible.

The various NASA cities in which he and his family must live—Huntsville, Alabama; Houston, Texas;

Sunnyvale, California; Cape Canaveral—are proto-New Jerusalems for humankind,

cities within cities created  
to execute the dream, hierarchies so communal  
no monastery dedicated to save God's world,  
no artisan raising their four-hundred-years  
Burgos stone by stone felt such a medieval urge  
to build cathedrals in the sky. (247)

And Cape Canaveral, he knows, is nothing less than this project's —this "invisible pyramid's"—launching  
pad:

All flesh  
gathered at the breeding point, Canaveral,  
where earth sallied into that mysterious dark  
to spawn worlds and press back medieval night. (247-48)

Though he recognizes the hazards of his—and humanity's—aspiration, he believes it absolutely  
essential to human destiny: without the goal of space, we will acquiesce to mortality, will accept death.  
Without extraterrestrial ambitions, there will be no life of the mind:

The way to it is dark, dark, perilous,  
the landscape infinite. Only mind and all man's heart  
can outreach this world's death. Or why  
mind? Why passions to execute the mind's say? (247)

Feldmann thus comes to possess a timeless understanding of NASA's accomplishments and his  
own contribution to them.

Carl watched Earth penetrate sky. Electronics  
carried mankind the beginning of the way—out, up.  
On screens flesh soared with theirs, landed, explored,  
nearly exhausting exhaustion, till lunar liftoff  
bolted into the current home. (252)

For Feldmann, the eyes of the astronauts, as they move "one planet closer to the edge of things," are really the eyes of the species. And in spite of all the technical and personnel difficulties NASA encounters, Feldmann is convinced that humankind cannot turn back:

Carl saw  
man had to purge the mind of all thought which turned  
him back to Earth, fix one pure unflinching  
gaze on that invisible end, black holes that might  
begin another universe. (252)

But in his heart of hearts, Feldmann's vision is driven by motives that are more mystical than scientific.

William Carlos Williams once insisted that behind all man's exploits stands a woman. Even in the powerful presence of Von Braun, Feldmann senses the even more powerful aura of

a woman in the room,  
deep-shadowed there  
in light  
beyond where sun  
burned a crown into the great man's hair.

A figure of light, this woman represents for Feldmann a

light so pure  
he could not turn his eyes. She beckoned. He rose  
and followed. She made a path of light through galaxies,  
voids, darks, chaos, all gravities, admonishing  
to keep the path straight in his eyes  
or die  
without her.

Her voice calls to him, draws him on in his work, summoning him to a city higher than the New Jerusalem, inspiring a longing greater than even von Braun had instilled:

—Listen. It is a word of love:  
there is a city beyond the city that you build

halfway to the moon, one after,  
one after that and one after that, until beyond beyond  
you'll find the city all blood dreams of, you'll find  
me there, fair for you to house in, and take  
me into you again,  
and dream no more, but be,  
both one. All rivers then will flow, all light  
burn, all earths take life from us. We will become  
the song we long to hear. (248)

But this cosmic Circe exacts a high price for her gift. She demands of Feldmann that he first journey into hell: "But one thing only, love:/You must, before you get to me, go darkest down" (248). Francis's story chronicles this descent.

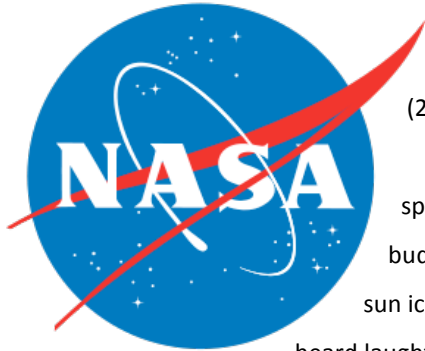
Feldmann finds himself increasingly incapable of dealing with his domestic life. With his wife gone, his immersion in the "ceaseless narrow round" (254) of household chores— shopping, cooking, cleaning, caring for his daughters, dressing them each morning, combing their hair—makes him "feel like a woman," and yet he knows—and his daughters know—that he does not possess the "special equipment . . . a sense which keeps a keel" of women. His mind is elsewhere. ("Know where I was? Out/so far I knew everything was possible. I had/a feeling infinite of stars" [256].) In her dramatic dialogue between the sexes "Duel," feminist Robin Morgan has her spokeswoman for the feminine insist that "it's not to see myself in everything I want, but to find everything at home in me." Feldmann demands the former.)

"Voids opened in the Earth. He staggered." Because they carry "the world's face," his daughters, despite his obvious love for them, come to oppress him.

Two creatures played on the lawn. It surprised:  
how they come and go—Elaine? Gretta?—  
whose faces sometimes rose abrupt as monsters  
in a lair and would not let him pass, bodies  
so suddenly transformed to innocence  
he'd not have dreamed he must cut at those faces  
turned Medusa heads. (257)

In everything he does for them, they find him wanting compared to their vanished mother. When Elaine becomes ill and must be taken to the hospital, she rebels: "She struck and kicked, cried Ma, Momma? I don't want you, I hate you, I want my mother" (259).

Encouraged by news of a new position at NASA for which he is qualified, Feldmann's hopes are temporarily restored, but the job goes to someone else, and Feldmann's world comes apart at the seams.



"In all directions waste, void infinite, forever,/No path leads off from it, no green grows, no man moves,/no lady beckons, no city stands" (261).

Everything earthly becomes repellent: "A thing happened in the spring: cold came into him: at strange times —at sight of a new rose budding, a crawling caterpillar dazzling with black and orange, even in the sun ice touched him, it ran up his leg, pierced his heart, he shivered when he heard laughter" (262). He is trapped in an alien world: "His head yearns after/unremembered memory. His feet can find no way./Dark fills with seething tides that throb his bones" 258).

And one spring day his madness, his unearthliness, reaches a fever pitch. All that is left of his world is negation.

He sat on the back steps staring at the earth. He had his garden spouting green. What is it—in the spring—breaks? It hurts the ground, and blood. You almost cannot hold the pain of wanting to break out of you. Blood wants to go. Flesh keeps it from space. Cells want to know time. What is it? is it out there? . . . The neighbors' cat preens on the fence, white with black spots, black suns. It meows at the girls. The sound hurts his head. Gretta laughs. Elaine does not. Not. (263; my emphasis)

His daughters, figures of Earth, become the focus of his hallucinations: "The girls' heads make two golden suns in the garden, moving and shimmering. Hairs quiver like a spider's web in the moonlight. Such beauty—where will it go? They dig and plant" (263). Like Virginia Woolf's Septimus Smith (in Mrs. Dalloway), he is overcome with a noumenal sense of the secret life inherent in things—a life he cannot identify with and must destroy. Something is throbbing in the ground, his feet beat with it, it moves and moves, the cold is going, his hands flex. Hands must do. Do. . . . He grips hard the post. It thumps with the moving dark. Air thumps with it, sky, his hands. (263) In his otherworldliness, Carl Feldmann takes this force as a manifestation of the vertical tendency that drives all living things: "What is it holds your eyes to Earth? Tear them loose—he wants—he can't— He stares: it breaks and breeds: all pushes up, up, to sun and after, against all down. So many million years in his blood drive up and still look down? Gravity hold down, legs want the Earth to suck you down, but not the head, not" (263-64).

His girls are of the Earth; to Feldmann they are Earth. "The girls' heads fall in gold. Little suns. But body's Earth. He stares at them: two earths. To breed" (264; my emphasis). This he cannot bear.

Their earthiness, their inextricable involvement in the worldly and the contingent, negate his values. "Work is dignity. Dream is dignity. The Earth is dark. His eyes go into it. No dignity's a hole. The hole's in me, suck me down into it like Earth's own gravity, a star's, the universe's. All eats itself. God eats his own body, eats time and space, hereafter" (264).

As he feels the Earth beat in him, he longs to be free of what has been called "the cosmic food chain" (Thompson, *Passages* 101). Plagued by the "old thing in the blood that wants and wants" (264), he looks into Elaine's eyes and feels her rejection, her need for her real mother. He strangles her and then, simply and methodically, her sister as well.

In the character of Carl Feldmann, in his vertical obsession, his distrust of the earthly, his puerile failure of accommodation to the everyday, his Space Age dream of a New Jerusalem, a city "beyond beyond," a city "all blood dreams of," his spaciness, we recognize the stigmata of the modern, New Gnostic. Such a mentality does not, of course, require the murder of one's children, but commitment to the extraterrestrial imperative, the aspiration to "purge the mind of all thought which turned/ . . . back to Earth," does exact unrivaled sacrifices from its infinitely presumptuous hosts, asking nothing less than abandonment of our place on Earth and the excarnation of the human.

