## The Force That Through the Circuit Drives the Current

Roger Zelazny

*I don’t like this story. It’s short, though, and it’s here for a special reason. A few times in my life I have written something before I should have; that is, it was on the back burner and I pulled it and dished it up before it was fully cooked. In this case, I was playing with a number of ideas involving artificial intelligence, trauma and control for what I hoped would be a neatly realized, well-developed story of some length. I was living in Baltimore at the time, and that year Fred Pohl was to be guest of honor at Balticon, a local science fiction convention. I was invited to interview him as a part of the program. I did this thing, and afterward he graciously took Judy and me and a friend to dinner at Miller’s, one of my favorite local restaurant& During the course of things he asked me for a story for a collection he was assembling. I agreed readily, but my mind was filled with the notions recited above. So I decided to use them, and I wrote this story. As I said, I was not totally pleased with its bare-bones displaying of some of these thought& But a curious thing happened. The real story began to crystallize while I was doing this one—a story much too long, I could see, for me to knock off in time for Fred’s deadline. The real story was to be* Home Is the Hangman, *one of my better novellas. This story, then, is yet another variation: It was a finger exercise, a story the writing of which served to produce something better than itself If it hadn’t been for Balticon and the Chateaubriand at Miller’s, the following tale would never have existed, and I don’t know what would have become of...* Hangman.

... And I had been overridden by a force greater than my own. Impression of a submarine canyon: a giant old riverbed; a starless, moonless night; fog; a stretch of quicksand; a bright lantern held high in its midst.

I had been moving along the Hudson Canyon, probing the sediment, reaching down through the muck and the sludge, ramming in a corer and yanking it back again. I analyzed and recorded the nature, the density, the distribution of the several layers within my tube; then I would flush it, move to the next likely spot and repeat the performance; if the situation warranted, I would commence digging a hole—the hard way—and when it was done, I would stand on its bottom and take another core; generally, the situation did not warrant it: there were plenty of ready-made fissures, crevasses, sinkholes. Every now and then I would toss a piece of anything handy into the chopper in my middle, where the fusion kiln would burn it to power; every now and then I would stand still and feed the fire and feel the weight of 1,500 fathoms of Atlantic pressing lightly about me; and I would splay brightness, running through the visible spectrum and past, bounce sounds, receive echoes.

Momentarily, I lost my footing. I adjusted and recovered it. Then something struggled within me, and for the thinnest slice of an instant I seemed to split, to be of two minds. I reached out with sensory powers I had never before exercised—a matter of reflex rather than intent—and simultaneous with the arrival of its effects, I pinpointed the disturbance.

As I was swept from the canyon’s bed and slammed against the wall of stone that had towered to my left, was shaken and tossed end over end, was carried down and along by the irresistible pressure of muddy water, I located the epicenter of the earthquake as fifty-three miles to the south-southeast. Addenda to the impression of a submarine canyon: one heavy dust storm; extinguish the lantern.

I could scarcely believe my good fortune. It was fascinating. I was being swept along at well over fifty miles an hour, buried in mud, uncovered, bounced, tossed, spun, reburied, pressed, turned, torn free and borne along once again, on down into the abyssal depths. I recorded everything.

For a long time, submarine canyons were believed to represent the remains of dry-land canyons, formed back in the ice ages, covered over when the seas rose again. But they simply cut too far. Impossible quantities of water would have to have been bound as ice to account for the depths to which they extend. It was Heezen and Ewing of Lamont who really made the first strong case for turbidity currents as the causative agent, though others such as Daly had suggested it before them; and I believe it was Heezen who once said that no one would ever see a turbidity current and survive. Of course, he had had in mind the state of the art at that time, several decades back. Still, I felt extremely fortunate that I had been in a position to take full advantage of the shock in this fashion, to register the forces with which the canyon walls were being hammered and abraded, the density and the velocity of the particles, the temperature shifts... I clucked with excitement.

Then, somewhere, plunging, that split again, a troubled dual consciousness, as though everything were slightly out of focus, to each thought itself and a running shadow. This slippage increased, the off thoughts merged into something entire, something which moved apart from me, dimmed, was gone. With its passing, I too felt somehow more entire, a sufficiency within an aloneness which granted me a measure of control I had never realized I possessed. I extended my awareness along wavelengths I had not essayed before, exploring far, farther yet...

Carefully, I strove for stability, realizing that even I could be destroyed if I did not achieve it. How clumsy I had been! It should not be that difficult to ride the current all the way down to the abyssal plains. I continued to test my awareness as I went, clucking over each new discovery.

“Ease up, Dan! It’s running the show now. Let it!”

“I guess you’re right, Tom.”

He leaned back, removing the stereovisual helmet, detaching himself from the telefactor harness. Out of the gauntlets, where microminiaturized air-jet transducers had conveyed the tactile information; strap after sensitive strap undone, force and motion feedback disconnected. Tom moved to assist him. When they had finished, the teleoperator exoskel hung like a gutted crustacean within the U-shaped recess of the console. Dan dragged the back of his hand over his forehead, ran his fingers through his hair. Tom steered him across the cabin toward a chair facing the viewscreen.

“You’re sweating like a pig. Sit down. Can I get you something?”

“Any coffee left?”

“Yeah. Just a minute.”

Tom filled a mug and passed it to him. He seated himself in a nearby chair. Both men regarded the screen. It showed the same turbulence, the mud and rock passage Dan had regarded through the helmet’s eyepiece. But now these things were only objects. Away from the remote manipulator system, he was no longer a part of them. He sipped his coffee and studied the flow.

“... Really lucky,” he said, “to run into something like this first time out.”

Tom nodded. The boat rocked gently. The console hummed.

“Yes,” Tom said, glancing at the indicators, “it’s a bonus, all right. Look at that slop flow, will you! If the unit holds up through this, we’ve scored all the way around.”

“I think it will. It seems to have stabilized itself. That brain is actually functioning. I could almost feel those little tunnel junction neuristors working, forming their own interconnections as I operated it. Apparently, I fed it sufficient activity, it took in sufficient data... It formed its own paths. It did—learn. When the quake started, it took independent action. It almost doesn’t really need me now.”

“Except to teach it something new, for whatever we want it to do next.” Dan nodded, slowly.

“Yes... Still, you wonder what it’s teaching itself, now that it’s in control for a time. That was a peculiar feeling—when I realized it had finally come into its equivalent of awareness. When it made its own decision to adjust to that first tiny shock. Now, watching it control its own situation... It *knows* what it’s doing.”

“Look! You can actually see those damn eddies! It’s doing around fifty-five miles an hour, and that slop is still going faster. —Yeah, that must really have been something, feeling it take over that way.”

“It was quite strange. Just when it happened, I felt as if I were—touching another awareness, I guess that’s the best way to put it. It was as if a genuine consciousness had suddenly flickered into being beside my own, down there, and as if it were aware of me, just for a second. Then we went our own ways. I think the neuropsych boys and the cybemeticists were right. I think we’ve produced an artificial intelligence.”

“That’s really frosting on my turbidity cake,” Tom said, taking notes. “It was actually a Swiss guy, back in the nineteenth century, who first guessed at turbidity currents, to explain how mud from the Rhone got way out in Lake Geneva—did you see that!? Tore a hunk right off the side! Yeah, that’s a great little gimmick you’ve got. If it makes it down to the plains, I want some cores right away. We’ve got plenty of recent samples, so it ought to be able to give us the depth of sediment deposit from this slide. Then maybe you could send it back up to where it was, for some comparison cores with the ones it was just taking. I—”

“I wonder what it thinks about itself—and us?”

“How could it know about us? It only knows what you taught it, and whatever it’s learning now.”

“It felt me there, right at the end. I’m sure of it.”

Tom chuckled.

“Call that part of its religious upbringing, then. If it ever gets balky, you can thunder and lightning at it. —Must be doing close to sixty now!” Dan finished his coffee.

“I just had a bizarre thought,” he said, moments later. “What if something were doing the same thing to us—controlling us, watching the world through our senses—without our being aware of it?”

Tom shrugged.

“Why should they?”

“Why are we doing it with the unit? Maybe they’d be interested in turbidity currents on this sort of a planet—or of our experiments with devices of this sort. That’s the point. It could be anything. How could we tell?”

“Let me get you another cup of coffee, Dan.”

“All right, all right! Forgive the metaphysics. I was just so close to that feeling with the unit... I started picturing myself on the teleslave end of things. The feeling’s gone now, anyhow.”

“Voic, what is it?”

Voic released the querocube and lufted toward Doman.

“That one I was just fiding—it came closer than any of them ever did before to recognizing my presence!”

“Doubtless because of the analogous experience with its own fide. Interesting, though. Let it alone for a while.”

“Yes. A most peculiar cause-field, though. It gives me pause to wonder, could something be fiding us?”

Doman perigrated.

“Why would anything want to fide us?”

“I do not know. How could I?”

“Let me get you a B-charge.”

“All right.”

Voic took up the querocube once again.

“What are you doing?”

“Just a small adjustment I neglected. There.—Let’s have that B-charge.”

They settled back and began to feculate.

“What are you doing, Dan?”

“I forgot to turn it loose.”

“To what?”

“Give it total autonomy, to let it go. I had to overload the slave-circuits to burn them out.”

“You—You—Yes. Of course. Here’s your coffee.—Look at that mud slide, will you!”

“That’s really something, Tom.”

Clucking, I toss another chunk of anything handy into my chopper.