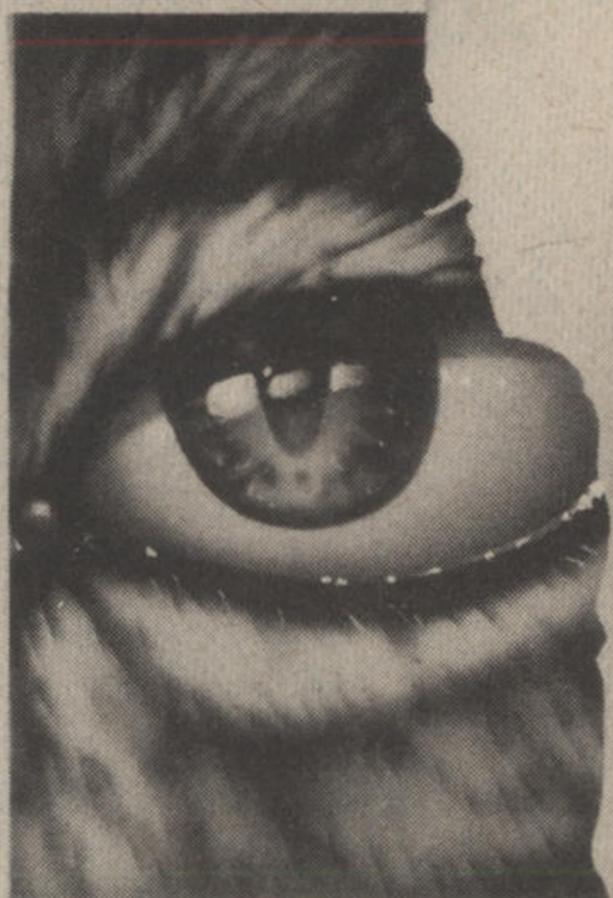


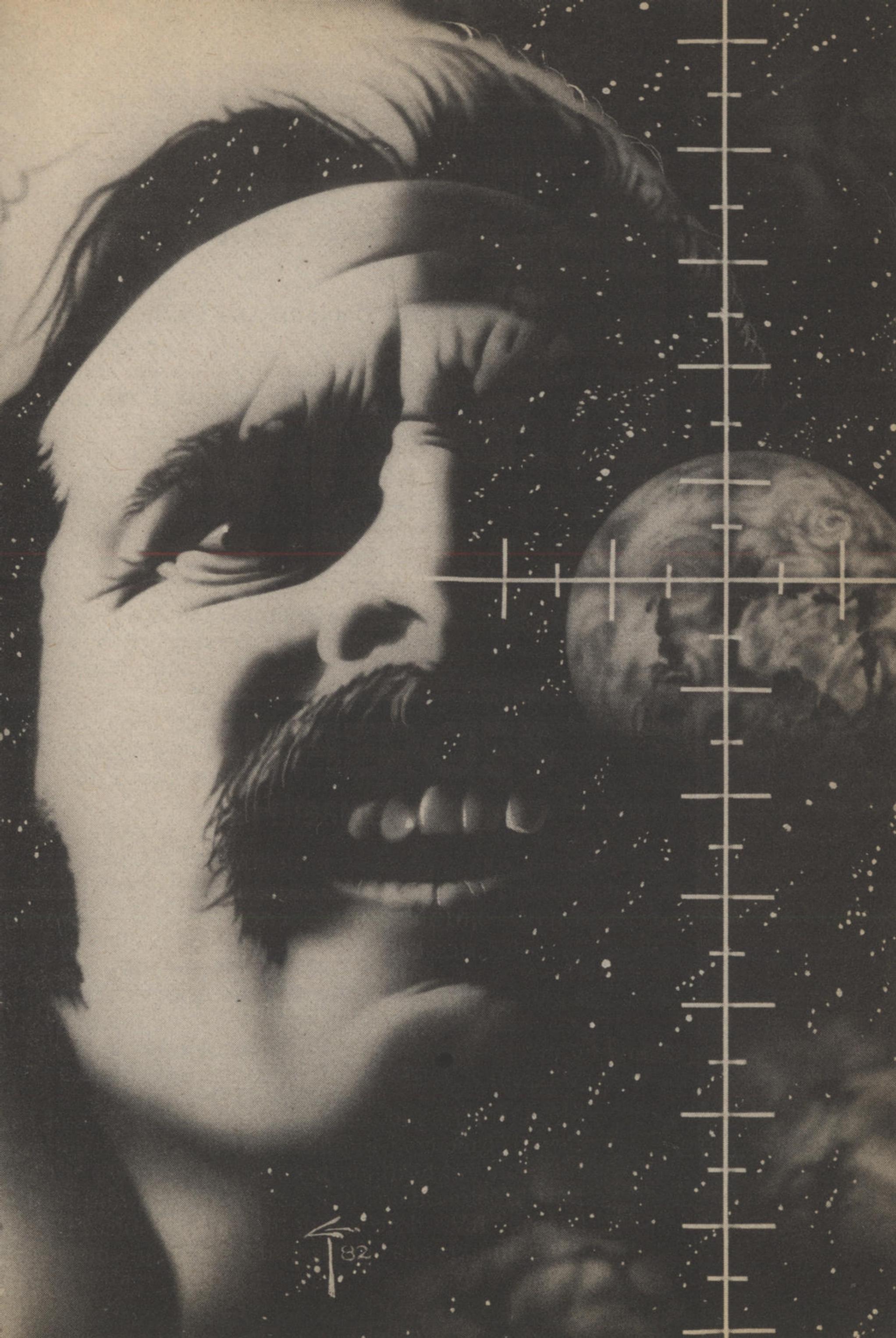
BLACK

O by Jack McDevitt F MOVE

art: Gary Freeman



The author lives in Pembina, North Carolina, of which he notes: "It's been my impression that towns get friendlier as climate deteriorates. Pembina is the friendliest place I've ever seen." This is his second sale to us. His first, "The Far Shore," appeared in the June 1982 issue.



Maybe it's just my imagination, but I'm worried.

The roast beef has no taste, and I'm guzzling my coffee. I'm sitting here watching Turner and Pappas working on the little brick house across the avenue with their handpicks. Jenson and McCarthy are standing over near the lander talking and waving their arms. And Julie Bremmer is about a block away approaching with another artifact of some sort in her arms. Everything is exactly as it was yesterday.

Except me.

In about two hours, I will talk to the Captain. And I will try to warn him.

Odd, but this is the only place in the City where people seem able to speak in normal tones. Elsewhere, voices are hushed. It's like being in City Hall at midnight.

I guess it's the fountain, with its silver spray mushrooming into the late afternoon sun and drifting down, windblown, splattering into the pool. The park glades are a refuge against the wide, still avenues and the empty windows. Through the branches, the glass towers are blue and delicate.

There is perhaps no sound quite so soothing as the slap of water on stone. (Coulter got the fountain working yesterday, using a generator from the lander.) Listening, seated on one of the slab benches at the fountain's perimeter, I can feel how close we are, the builders of this colossal city and I. And that thought is no comfort.

It's been a long, dusty, rockbound road from Earth to this park. The old hunt for extraterrestrial intelligence has taken us across a thousand sandy worlds in a quest that became, in time, a search for a blade of grass.

I will remember all my life standing on a beach under a golden sun beyond Sirius, watching the waves come in. Sky and sea were crystal blue; no gull wheeled through the still air; no strand of green boiled in the surf. It was a beach without a shell.

But here, west of Centauri, after almost two centuries, we have a living world! We looked down, unbelieving, at forests and jungles and dipped our scoops into a crowded sea. The perpetual bridge game broke up. And on the second day we saw the City!

A glittering sundisc, it was set in the southern temperate zone, in a coastal mountain chain. With it came our first mystery: other than a few structures in the immediate area of the City, there was no other habitation that we could find, anywhere.

On the fourth day, Olszewski gave his opinion that the City was deserted.

We went down and looked. They had put their cars in their ga-

rages, locked their homes, and gone for a walk. It was eerie: a house awaiting its owner's return.

Mark Conover, riding overhead in the *Chicago* after a brief visit to the surface, speculated that the builders were not native to this world.

They were jointed bipeds, somewhat larger than we are. We can sit in their chairs and, when we figure out how to start them, drive their cars.

It's a city of domes and minarets. The homes are spacious, with courtyards and gardens, now run to weed. And they were fond of games. We found a stadium, equipment in private homes that could only have an athletic purpose, assorted puzzles using geometrical shapes, and exquisite inlaid 81-square checkerboards, complete with colored glass pieces.

They had apparently not discovered photography; nor, as far as we could determine, were they given to the plastic arts. There were no statues. Even the fountain lacked the usual boys on dolphins or winged women that are associated with such things. It was instead a study in wet geometry, a complex of leaning slabs, balanced spheres, and odd-angled pyramids.

But then Carson's people walked into a small home a block from where the second lander had come down and found some etchings in charcoal. And we had our extraterrestrials.

Cats, someone said.

Maybe. The following day we came across an art museum and found several hundred watercolors, oils, tapestries, painted glass, and so on.

They *are* felines, without doubt, but the eyes look very human. And the beings in the paintings, bundled against storms, gazing across plowed fields at sunset, smiling benevolently (or pompously) out of portraits, are most assuredly familiar. In one particularly striking watercolor, four females cower beneath an angry sky. Between heaving clouds, a pair of full moons illuminate the scene.

This world has no satellite.

Virtually everyone crowded into the museum. It was a day of sighs and grunts and exclamations, but the day brought us no closer to the central question: where had they gone?

"Just as well they're not here," one of the crewmen remarked to Carson in front of the storm watercolor. "This is the only green world anyone has seen. It's one hell of a valuable piece of real estate. Nice of them to give it to us."

I was at the time standing across the gallery before a massive oil

on prominent display. It was done in impressionistic style, reminiscent of Degas: a group of men (I don't know what else to call them) were gathered about a game of chess. Two were seated at the table, hunched over the pieces in the classic pose of the dedicated player. Six more clustered about, half in shadow, intent on the play.

Their expressions were quite human. If one allowed for the ears, and the loose-fitting garments, the scene might easily have been a coffeehouse back in New York.

The table was set under a hanging lamp; its hazy illumination focused attention on the board rather than the participants.

The game was not actually chess, of course. It was the 81-square version we had seen in so many homes. There was no queen. Instead, the king was flanked by a pair of pieces similar, but not identical, to the rooks. I had no doubt that the stylized hemispheres at the extremes of the position *were* rooks, though none had moved. (Where else but on the flank would one reasonably place a rook?)

The other pieces, too, were familiar. The left-hand Black bishop had been fianchettoed: a one-square angular move onto the long diagonal, from where it exercises withering power. All four knights had been moved, and their twisted tracks betrayed their identity.

The game was still in its opening stages. White was two pawns up, temporarily. It appeared to be Black's move, and he would, I suspected, seize a White pawn which had strayed deep into what we would consider his queenside.

I stood before that painting, feeling the stirrings of kinship and affection for these people and wondering what immutable laws of psychology, mathematics, and aesthetics ordained the creation of chess in cultures so distant. I wondered whether the game might not prove a rite of passage of some sort.

I was about to leave when I detected a wrongness somewhere in the painting, as if a piece were misplaced, or an extra eye floated somewhere. Whatever it was, I became suddenly aware of my breathing.

There was nothing.

I backed away. Then I turned and hurried out of the building.

I'm a symbologist, with a specialty in linguistics. If we ever do actually find someone out here to talk to, I'm the one who will be expected to say hello. That's an honor, I suppose; but I keep thinking of Captain Cook.

By the end of the first week, we had not turned up any written material (and, in fact, still haven't) other than a few undecipherable inscriptions on the sides of buildings. They were much more com-

puterized than we are, and presumably everything went into the banks, which we have not yet found. I doubt that we will find them.

In fact, the computers themselves are wrecked, slagged. So, by the way, is the central power core for the City. Another mystery.

Anyhow, I had little to do, so yesterday I went for a walk in the twilight with Jennifer East, a navigator aboard the *Chicago* and the pilot of the other lander. She's lovely, with bright hazel eyes and a quick smile. Her long tawny hair was radiant in the setting sun. The atmosphere here has a moderately high oxygen content, which affects her the way some women are affected by two martinis. She clung to my arm, and I was breathlessly aware of her long-legged stride.

There was a sense of walking through the streets of an idealized, mystical Baghdad: the towers were gold and purple in the failing light. Flocks of brightly colored birds scattered before us. I half-expected to hear the somber cry of a ram's horn, calling the faithful to prayer.

The avenue is lined with delicate, graybarked trees. Their broad, filamented leaves sighed gently in a sudden gust of wind. Far-off thunder rumbled.

Behind the trees are the empty homes, no two alike, and other structures that we have not yet begun to analyze. Only the towers exceed three stories. All the buildings I have seen, large and small, are marked by graceful arcs and beveling; right angles do not exist. I wonder what the psychologists will make of that.

"How long have they been gone?" she asked. Her eyes were luminous with excitement, directed (I'm sorry to say) at the architecture.

"About ten years," I said. Here and there, the pavement on which we walked had cracked; the forest was beginning to push through.

Jennifer's brow creased as she reached for the people of the City. At that moment, in that place, we touched a pulse. "Oh, Mark," she said, "they haven't really left."

There was nothing you could put in a report, but I knew that we were transients, that those streets had long rung to laughter and song, that they soon would again, and that it would not be ours.

She drew closer to me.

I envied her; this was her first flight. For most of us, there had been too many broken landscapes, too much desert; the mind had dulled, and the spirit trembled on the edge of an empty universe. "Olszewski thinks that the northern section of the City is almost two thousand years old. . . . They'd been here awhile."

"And they just packed up and left." She steered us out of the center

of the avenue, in among the trees, where I think we were both more comfortable.

"It's ironic," I said. "No one would have believed that first contact would come like this. They've been here since the time of Constantine, and we miss them by a decade."

Jenny's eyes remained thoughtful. She squeezed my hand. "Did you know it's the second time?" she asked. I must have looked blank. "Twenty-two years ago the *Leningrad* tracked something across the face of Algol and then lost it. Whatever it was, it threw a couple of sharp turns." We walked for some minutes in silence, crossed another broad avenue, and approached the art museum. "Algol," she said, "isn't all that far from here."

"UFO stories," I said. "They used to be common."

She shrugged. "It might be that the thing the *Leningrad* saw frightened these people off. Or worse."

The museum is wheel-shaped. Heavy, curving panels of tinted glass are ribbed by a polished black stone that is probably marble. The grounds have become a wild tangle of weed and shrub anchored by overgrown hedge. A few flowering bushes still survive.

I laughed. "You don't suppose the sun is about to nova, do you?"

She smiled and brushed my cheek with her lips. Jenny is 23 and a graduate of MIT, where all the variables are in the text or the program.

"It's going to rain," she said.

We walked through the shadow of a turret. The air was cool.

"They seem to have taken their time about leaving. There's no evidence of panic or violence. And most of their personal belongings apparently went with them. Whatever happened, they had time to go home and pack."

She looked uneasily at the sky. Gray clouds were gathering in the west. "Why did they melt the computers? And the power plant? Doesn't that sound like a retreat before an advancing enemy?"

We stood a few minutes on the rounded stone steps at the entrance, watching the coming storm. Near the horizon, a finger of lightning touched the ground; it too was delicate, like the trees.

And I knew what had disturbed me about the painting.

Jenny doesn't play chess. So when we stood again before that intense painted congregation and I explained, she listened dutifully, and then tried to reassure me. I couldn't blame her.

I have an appointment to meet the captain in the gallery after dinner. He doesn't play chess either. Like all good captains down through the ages, he is a man of courage and hard-headed common

sense, so he will also try to reassure me.

Maybe I'm wrong. I hope so.

But the position in that game: black is playing the Benko Gambit! It's different in detail, of course; the game is different. But Black is about to clear a lane for the queenside rook. One bishop, at the opposite end of the board, is astride the long diagonal, where its terrible power will combine with that of the rook. And White, after the next move or two, when that advanced pawn comes off, will be desperately exposed.

It's the most advanced of the gambits for Black, still feared after three hundred years. . . .

And I keep thinking: the City dwellers were surely aware of this world's value. More, they are competitors. They would assume that we would attempt to take it from them.

"But we wouldn't," Jenny had argued.

"Are you sure? Anyhow, it doesn't matter. The only thing that *does* matter is what they believe. And they would expect us to act as they would.

"Now, if they knew in advance that we were coming . . ."

"The *Leningrad* sighting . . ."

" . . . They might wish to avoid a state of tension. That would only serve to alert us. So they withdraw, and give us the world, and, with it, an enigma." Rain had begun sliding down the tinted glass. "They're playing the Benko."

"You mean they might come back here in force and attack us?" She was aghast, not so much at the possibility, which she dismissed, as at the direction my mind had taken. I guess she thought she knew me.

"No," I said. "Not us. The Benko isn't designed to recover a lost pawn, although that happens too." I could not take my eyes from the painting. Did I detect a gleam of arrogance in Black's eyes? "No. It doesn't fool around with pawns. The idea is to launch a strike into the heart of the enemy position."

"Earth?" She smiled indulgently. "They wouldn't even know where Earth is."

I didn't ask whether she thought the *Leningrad* had gone home alone.

One more thing about that painting: there's a shading of light, a chiaroscuro, in the eyes of the onlookers. It's the joy of battle.

I'm scared. ●