



INVERTED WORLD
CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

AFTERWORD BY
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A uniquely powerful novel of a society in decay. On a planet whose very nature is a mystery a massive decrepit city is pulled along a massive railway track, laying the line down before it as it progresses into the wilderness.

The society within toils under an oppressive regime, its structures always on the point of collapse, the lives of its individuals lived in misery. No one knows where they are going, why they are going or what they will find when they get there. The ending of the novel provides one of the most profound twists in SF.

SHORTLY before they moved on, Rosario tried to speak to him. He had difficulty understanding her. Her accent was strong in any case, and now her voice was pitched high and she spoke too quickly.

After many attempts, he got the gist of what she was saying.

She and the other girls were afraid to return to their village. They were of the city now, and would be rejected by their own kind.

Helward said they must go on, as had been their choice, but Rosario said they would not move. She was married to a man in her village, and although at first she had wanted to return to him, she thought now he would kill her. Lucia too was married, and she shared the fear. The people of the villages hated the city, and for their involvement with it the girls would be punished.

Helward gave up trying to answer her. He was having as much difficulty making her understand as he was in comprehending her. He thought she had left it too late for this; after all they had entered the city willingly in the first place as part of the barter. He tried to say this, but she could not understand.

Even while they had been talking the process of change had continued. She was now a little more than twelve inches high, and her body—as the other girls’—was nearly five feet broad. It was impossible to recognize them as having once been human, even though he knew this to be so.

He said: "Wait here!"

He stood up, and fell again, rolling across the ground. The force on his body was now much greater, and he stopped himself with great difficulty. He crawled back against the force to his pack, and pulled it on. He found the rope, and slung it over his shoulder.

Bracing himself against the pressure, he walked southwards. It was no longer possible to make out any natural features other than the line of rising ground ahead. The surface on which he walked was now an indistinct blur, and although he stopped to examine it from time to time he could distinguish nothing on it that might once have been grass, or rocks, or soil.

The natural features of the world were distorting: they were spreading laterally to east and west, diminishing in height and depth.

A boulder here might be a strip of dark gray, one hundredth of an inch wide and two hundred yards long. The low, snow-capped ridge ahead might be mountains; the long strip of green a tree.

That narrow strip of off-white, a naked woman.

He reached the higher ground more quickly than he had anticipated. The pull towards the south was intensifying, and when Helward was less than fifty yards from the nearest hill he stumbled . . . and was rolling with an ever-increasing speed towards it.

The northern face was almost vertical, like the leeward side of a wind-blown dune, and he collided with it hard. Almost at once the southwards pressure was pulling him up the face, defying the pull of gravity. In desperation, for he knew if he reached the top the pressure on him could never be resisted, he scrambled for a hold somewhere on the rock-hard face. It came in the form of an outjutting spur. Helward grabbed it with both hands, desperately holding himself back against the relentless pressure. His body swung round, so that he was lying vertically against the wall, feet above his head, knowing that if he slipped now he would be taken backwards up the slope and on down towards the south.

He reached behind into his pack, and found the grapple. He lodged it firmly under the spur, attached the rope to it, and wound the other end around his wrist.

The southwards pressure was now so great upon him that the normal downwards pull of gravity was virtually negated.

The substance of the mountain was changing beneath him. The hard, almost vertical wall was slowly widening to east and west, slowly flattening, so that behind him the summit of the ridge appeared to be creeping down towards him. He saw a cleft in the rock beside him which was slowly closing, so he removed the grapple from under the spur and thrust it into the cleft. Moments later, the grapple was securely held.

The summit of the ridge had now distended and was beneath his body. The southward pressure took him, and he was swept over the ridge. The rope held and he was suspended horizontally.

What had been the mountain became a hard protuberance beneath his chest, his stomach lay in what had been the valley beyond, his feet scrambled for a hold against the diminishing ridge of what had once been another mountain.

He was flat along the surface of the world, a giant recumbent across an erstwhile mountain region.

He raised his body, trying to ease his position. Lifting his head, he suddenly found he was short of breath. A hard, icy wind blew from the north, but it was thin and short of oxygen. He lowered his head again, resting his chin on the ground. At this level his nose could take air that would sustain him.

It was bitterly cold.

There were clouds, and borne on the wind they skimmed a few inches above the ground like a white unbroken sheet. They surged around his face, flowing around his nose like foam at the bow of a ship.

His mouth was below them, his eyes were above.

Helward looked ahead of him through the thin, rarefied atmosphere above the clouds. He looked towards the north.

He was at the edge of the world; its major bulk lay before him.

He could see the whole world.

North of him the ground was level; flat as the top of a table. But at the centre, due north of him, the ground rose from that flatness in a perfectly symmetrical, rising and curving concave spire. It narrowed and narrowed, reaching up, growing ever more slender, rising so high that it was impossible to see where it ended.

He saw it in a multitude of colours. There were broad areas of brown and yellow, patched with green. Further north, there was a blueness: a pure, sapphire blue, bright on the eyes. Over it all, the white of clouds in long, tenuous whorls, in brilliant swarms, in flaky patterns.

The sun was setting. Red to the north-east, it glowed against the impossible horizon.

The shape of it was the same. A broad flat disk that might be an equator; at its centre and to north and south, its poles existed as rising, concave spires.

Helward had seen the sun so often that he no longer questioned its appearance. But now he knew: the world too was that shape.