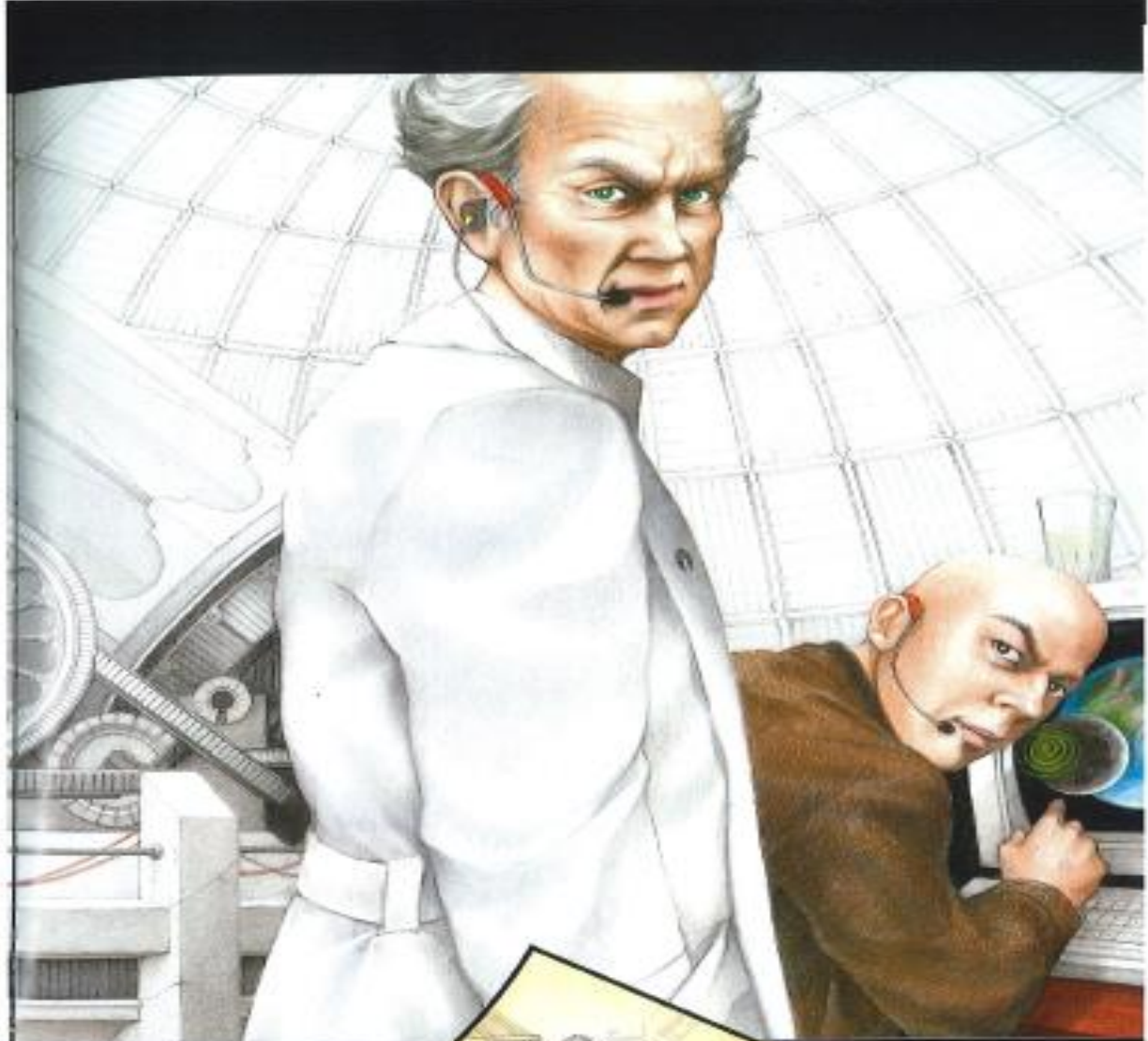


He got up early next morning and slipped away. No sooner had he entered the street than he saw that the desk clerk had been right. True, the main street seemed the same — the hotel, the service station, the shop fronts — but there was something different about the place. Now a thick and chilling mist loitered at every corner. Hung in every doorway. Dripped from every sign.

Spike couldn't remember any mist. That was not part of his childhood. Besides, how could there be, in this dust bowl? And the scientist in him stopped to make a note.



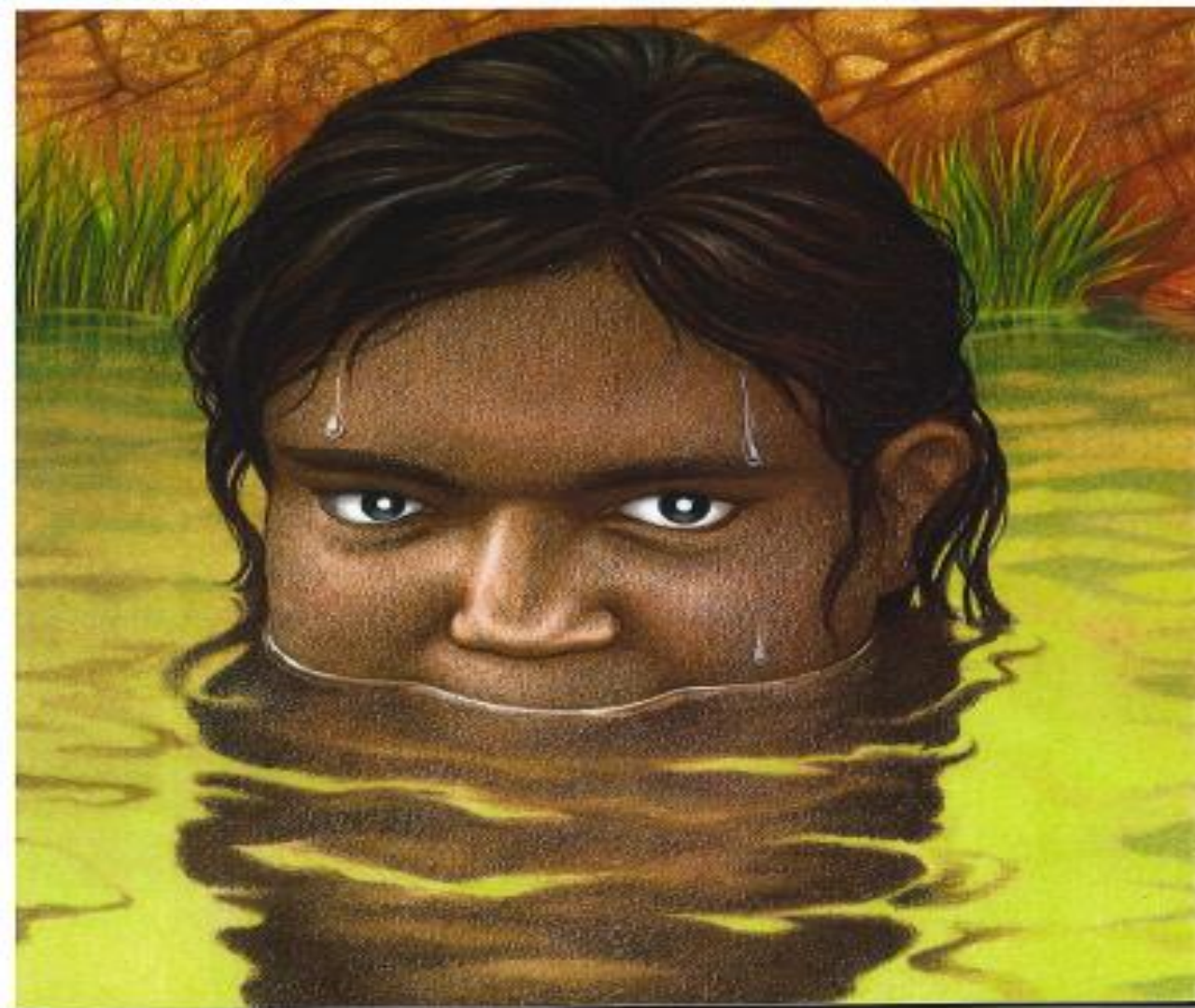


At the base of Sooter's Hill, he stopped again. The watertower had stood at the summit, he remembered. A rusty, egg-shaped monstrosity, its looming presence dominating the Preston of his childhood, and enduring still — if only in his dreams.

To see that tower again — to reaffirm its existence — and finally, to analyse its contents, was his mission.



He raised his head, but could make out nothing. The hill was wreathed in mist. And when he hit a security fence, his memory reeled. *Something's wrong, he thought. The fence was at the top. I've hardly started climbing and already I've hit wire ... unless this fence is new, which makes sense after twenty years. Which means there's still something up there.*



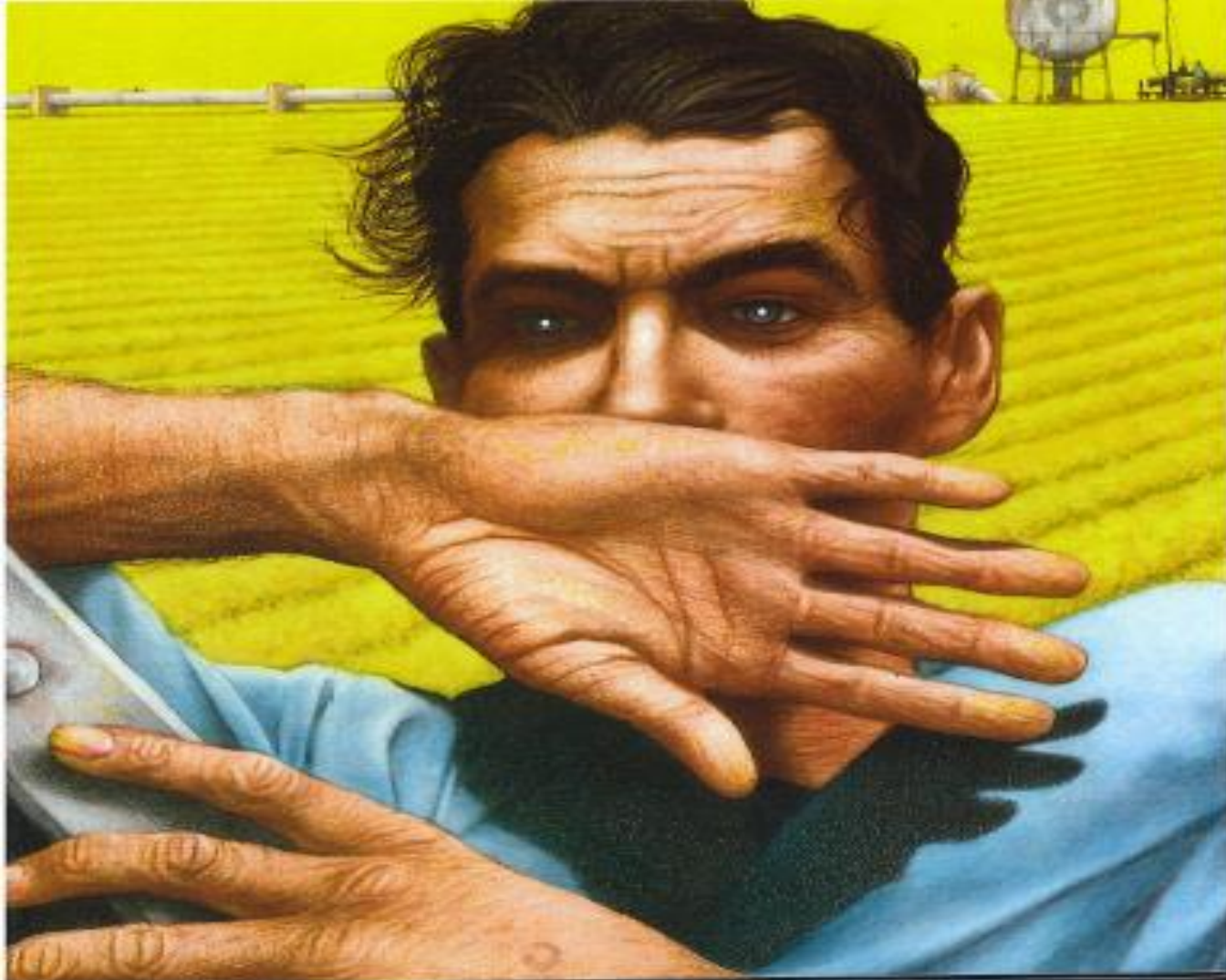
Reassured, he backtracked until he found a gate. His hands roved over it, seeking a latch. He found a lock. A touch pad with lettered keys.

'Hopeless,' he sighed, punching the pad with the flat of his hand. As he did, he heard the squeak of a hinge. The gate opened as if he were expected.



The mist lifted the moment he stepped through. And there was the watertower at the summit. His watertower. The place where he had played as a child — laughing and hallooing; swimming and duck-diving in its dark waters.

This was what he had come for.

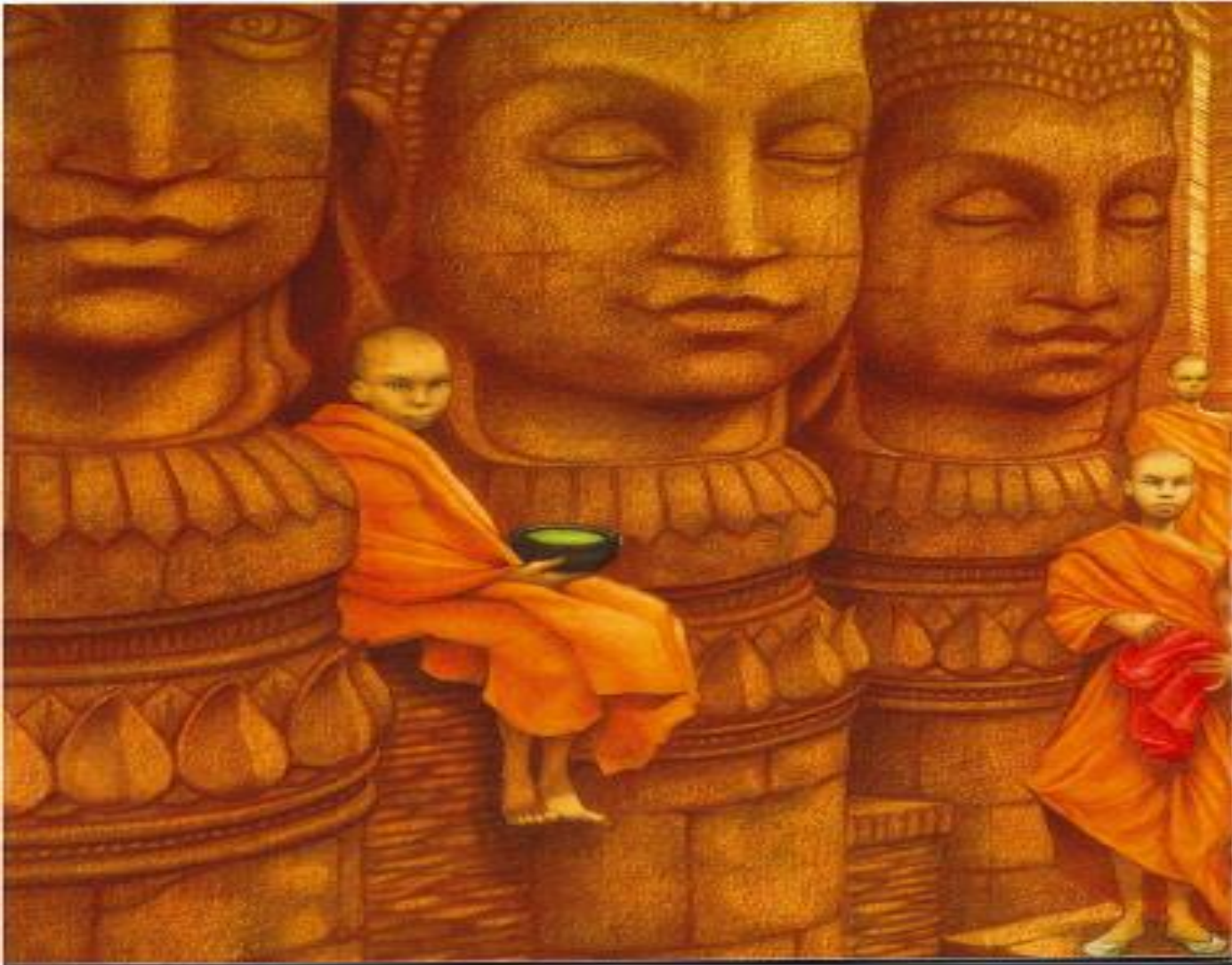


But as he drew closer, he realised that he was wrong. The tower of his childhood had been red with rust. Rotten almost. This tower was bright and gleaming, as if freshly polished.

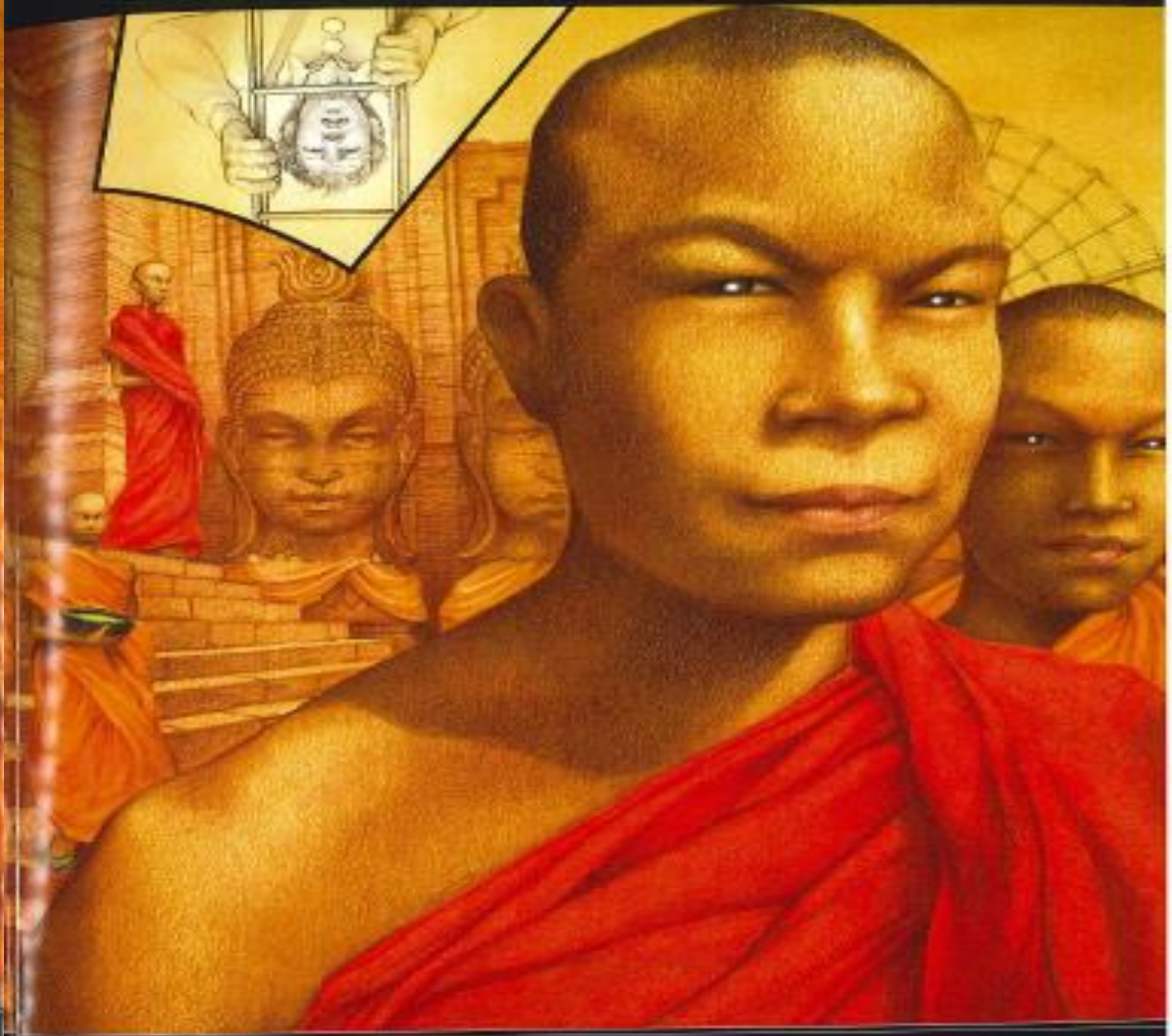


*Why would they do that?* he wondered. *Unless it's to keep the water cold inside, and he shivered, thinking of it. And the dark...*

*It's just a piece of metal, he told himself. Always was. Always will be. Now get up there and do what you came for.*



He made his way to the ladder and began to climb.  
But he did not remember it being so steep, nor so high.



And when he finally reached the top, the silvery surface looked  
so smooth, so slippery, that his courage almost failed him.

What was there to be afraid of? Falling? Being pushed?