

# on spec

the canadian magazine of the fantastic

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Lisa Carreiro

Kevin Cockle

Desi Di Nardo

Brent Knowles

Daniel LeMoal

Michael Meyerhofer

Liz Shannon Miller

Gary Pierluigi

Steve Sneyd

Hayden Trenholm

Saint James Harris Wood

cover art by James Birkbeck



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## cover

Hive © James Birkbeck, 2008.

*(No actual babies were harmed in the making of this cover.)*

## Welcome... and Errata...

*On Spec* welcomes Edmonton author and educator Ann Marston to the editorial collective. Ann brings us a wealth of experience and we look forward to working with her. More info coming in the Fall issue!

*On Spec* offers a hearty apology to author Tony Pi for the (repeated) typo in the title of his story *Aesop's Last Fable*, from the Spring 2008 issue. (Sorry Tony, and thanks for being so gracious!)

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# Because We Hear Voices

Diane L. Walton, Managing Editor

As I sit here, I am listening to the sounds of Elley Wilson's evocative work, *The Recovery of RD109* on the *On Spec* website's new Gallery page. A lot of what we do here at *On Spec* is about collaboration. We collaborate with our various funding bodies when they provide us with operating money to produce this magazine. We collaborate with the content providers—the authors and artists—so that their intellectual property is given the respect and the showcase it so richly deserves. Within the *On Spec* family, we collaborate as a team of editors, writers, administrators, business managers, and production designers. The result of all this collaboration is a pretty fine bit of work that we can all be proud to say we have a part in bringing to the readers. Your role in the whole collaborative process is to simply buy a copy of *On Spec*, read and enjoy it, and then tell everyone you know about it. Did you hear that? EVERYONE!

We don't ask for much, do we?

Last year we collaborated with Rattenfanger Radio by putting producer David Chapman in contact with some of our writers, so that he could obtain permission to adapt their works into radio dramas. David has since adapted two of our stories, *Androids and You* by Bill Stuart (Summer 2006), and *Testing Edon* by Robert J. Santa (Summer 2005), which are now available for your listening pleasure on the Rattenfanger website at <http://members.shaw.ca/ratten/home.html>. We're also very pleased to announce that *Androids and You* is this year's winner of the Silver Mark Time award, presented by the American Society for Science Fiction Audio at this year's CONvergence SF Convention in Minneapolis, MN. To further wave the flag, a prior winner of this same prize (2005) was Joe Mahoney of Toronto, for his *Steve The Second* radio series on CBC. For more details see [www.greatnorthernaudio.com/MarkTime/MarkTime-winners.html](http://www.greatnorthernaudio.com/MarkTime/MarkTime-winners.html).

In May, Susan and I were guest speakers for the Alberta branch of the Canadian Authors Association. We spoke about clichés in SF and Fantasy literature and about how a gifted writer can often make use of a cliché without being made a slave to it. We read passages from some of the more memorable stories published in *On Spec*—stories that could have been a cliché, but weren't. Several themes were discussed: Alien Abduction (*All a Woman Needs* by Catherine MacLeod, Winter 2001), Time Travel (*Kissing Hitler* by Erik Jon Spigel, Spring 1993) and Werewolves (*Boys' Night Out* by Rob Hunter, Summer 2005) were but a few. The stories are so much fun for us to revisit for these workshops, and we hope the audience found the session entertaining. Over the May Victoria Day weekend, I was also at the 25th KeyCon in Winnipeg, where I presented an abbreviated version of this reading, as well as a discussion of Susan's book, *The ABCs of How Not to Write Speculative Fiction*.

By the time this issue is in your hands, we will be involved in a collaboration of a whole new kind. *Because We Hear Voices: The On Spec Music Anthology* is a compilation of electronic music composed by a number of brilliant artists, including Elley Wilson (Edmonton), Jon Richards (UK), Sequent 7 (Chicago), WJ Plecha (Ohio), Rhonda Rosalee (New Orleans), and Mike De Filette (Belgium). The cover art is by one of our favourite cover artists, and a former Art Director of *On Spec*, James Beveridge of Edmonton. The title is borrowed with the kind permission of the author, from an *On Spec* story by John Bowker of Ottawa (Spring, 2005). Produced by our own web designer, Colin Lynch of RCat Records, this unique collection will send the name of *On Spec* out into a whole new universe—where the images are made from sound rather than the printed word. We are all very excited about the upcoming launch of this product. See the *On Spec* Multimedia page at [www.onspec.ca](http://www.onspec.ca) for more information, and see more info about the project producers at [www.rcatrecords.com](http://www.rcatrecords.com).

2008 is the year for a World Fantasy Convention right here in Canada! Calgary is holding the convention October 30 to November 2 at Calgary's Hyatt Regency hotel. Guests of Honour include writers David Morrell and Barbara Hambly, editor Tom Doherty, artist Todd Lockwood, with Tad Williams performing duties as Toastmaster. We'll be there with a table in the Dealer Room, and we also hope to get in to see some of the amazing programming. The convention's theme for 2008 is *Mystery in Fantasy and Horror*. See [www.worldfantasy2008.org](http://www.worldfantasy2008.org) for more info.

Not to be missed in Edmonton, is *PureSpeculation 2008: Attack of the 50-*

*Foot Spec!* We'll be there, October 18-19, along with Special Guest, Robert J. Sawyer (see the PureSpec ad in this issue for more info).

Congratulations to Hayden Trenholm, winner of the Aurora Award for best short form work in English, for his story *Like Water in the Desert*, published in *Challenging Destiny*. Hayden's new story, *Love in its Season* appears in this issue of *On Spec*, and perhaps it will be a winner next year.



As we go to press with this issue, we've received some disturbing news from Magazines Canada, the national organization for magazines and journals. They have informed us that Canada Post has decided to change their pricing policies for mailing magazines within Canada. Rather than a single rate for all Canadian mailing destinations, they propose a "Distance-related Pricing" (DRP) on all magazine rate levels. As with mailing first class letters, it is a long-standing practice to mail magazines to all parts of Canada at the same cost. This ensures that rural residents have the same access to Canadian news, information and entertainment as readers in larger urban centres. It helps support a common knowledge and understanding of Canadian issues and unifies the country. Canada Post's policies aim to *unilaterally* change this approach. Essentially it means that we'll pay more to get *On Spec* mailed to some *Canadian* subscribers than to others. How fair is THIS?

While this may not make a huge difference to *On Spec's* overall mailing costs, DRP runs counter to Canada's cultural policy which seeks to provide access for all Canadians (no matter where they live) to Canadian magazine content. **Please write to your Member of Parliament along with the two names listed below this editorial**, and protest this Canada Post proposal! All Canadian Magazines will be affected by their action. And all Canadian readers deserve *equal access* to Canadian perspectives, issues and content.

If that isn't bad enough, a new article on [rabble.ca](http://rabble.ca) entitled *High-stakes secret review of Canada Post*, by Denis Lemelin, President of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, reports that the Conservative government's "secret review" will also re-determine who will be *providing* our postal services in the future, including whether or not Canada Post should continue to have an "exclusive privilege" to handle addressed letters, or if the letter market should instead be "open to competition". Canada Post's exclusive privilege to handle letters allows it to generate enough money to provide

affordable postal service to everyone, no matter where they live, and Lemelin warns, "If the government decides to eliminate our post office's exclusive privilege as a result of its review... private sector competitors would focus on profitable areas and services, leaving unprofitable parts to our public post office. With fewer profits, Canada Post would find it increasingly difficult—and eventually impossible—to provide uniform and affordable service, especially in rural and remote parts of the country... The fact that the government is not holding public hearings and is proceeding at a breakneck pace with its review suggests that it is not really interested in hearing from the real owners and stakeholders of our post office—the public." Lemelin further goes on to state, "the few countries that have fully removed their post office's exclusive privilege or monopoly on letters have suffered. They now have fewer jobs, less service and higher postal rates for people and small businesses." In his conclusion, Lemelin reminds us that the last time the Conservatives were in office, they closed about 1,500 rural post offices before being stopped by public outrage and an election defeat.

**If you like secure, affordable and universal postal service, and think the federal government's apparent attempt at privatizing our postal system is a mistake, please take the following actions by September 2, 2008:**

Find your MP at <http://webinfo.parl.gc.ca> and also write to:

The Honourable Lawrence Cannon  
Minister Responsible for Canada Post Corporation  
Tower C, 330 Sparks St.  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0N5 Canada

The Honourable Josée Verner  
Minister of Canadian Heritage  
House of Commons,  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6 Canada

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**Thank You in advance for your support! •**



Jess was minutes away from drawing her first breath when the Hand of God touched Maradona. But after ten years worth of football conversations, an Englishman's daughter is bound to learn a few things.

## Hand of God

Liz Shannon Miller

So it's ta for now, ta until the all-clear at the end of the second half (barring overtime), and she walks down the street towards nowhere in particular, just trying to find a way to kill the hours until that god-damned all-clear, Andy's relieved voice over the phone at the end of the game.

Jess figured out what Anglophile meant at the age of ten, knew it was the only word out of millions that fit her. But she hadn't known that being American-bred would make London living so lonely.

Cheers come from the pub on the corner, and she tries not to hear them, tries not to imagine herself there in the thick of her friends and Andy and the game, the spectacle, a roomful of people inhaling in unison, cheering as one.

So she decides to go to the lab.

The day is too fast approaching, anyway.

• • •

The underground lab, the humming machine, the time-resistant quantum heat-suit—all of it comes from her father. It was why he went to the US for a brief time, trading his beloved grey skies for sunny Palo

Alto, California. Traded the security of British academia for Stanford University, and a few wild ideas.

His skin turned bright pink when he stepped outside, his ginger hair fading quickly to approximately the same color, and after a few weeks of blisters and peeling he stuck to daily migrations between the particle accelerator and his shabby room. The few times he ventured out, during long processing lulls or enforced time off, he went to the quaint revival theater that had survived the de-quaint-ification of downtown, thanks to the money of a computer billionaire's misfit son.

Palo Alto stood on the cusp of the past and the future. Given David's work, it was all so appropriate.

He saw classic movies at the theater, 1940s romantic comedies. It was almost like dating, because of the woman with the straight dark hair. She also sat alone with a book before the picture started, but it took several weeks and the doomed love of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman for him to approach her. They went for a late coffee. Tears still drying on her face.

Through one of fate's awkward quirks, both Abby and David were twenty-six, virgins, and tired of waiting for "it". True love had nothing to do with why Jess's father fell in with her mother; their courtship was an impatient rush to the finish line. Which was why it never really managed to stick.

Abby was at the same university but on the other side of campus, far away from the mad scientists. She was a scholar of popular cinema, and she finished her dissertation on post-Lucas iconography just when the test came up positive. Had been too busy to notice the missed periods and morning sickness until very close to the end of the first trimester, and had she figured it out a week earlier, abortion would have been just another item on her to-do list.

But without the stress that comes with analyzing Harrison Ford films, and tenure a viable blip on the horizon... Well, Abby had some time to spare, and thus Jess was born.

David was gone home already by then, particle research complete and visa expired. Little question of marriage between the two of them, and the arrangement they struck suited them both.

Without satellites and phones and Beckham's right foot, Jess might have grown up totally without a father; as it was, the one she got was long-distance and focused on two things—temporal mechanics

and football. She surprised her father by drinking them down. Parched as she was for him.

It was her father who made time into a thing that she could understand. First, because of patient explanations as to why Daddy went to bed eight hours before she did, even though Daddy was so much older. Then, because of dropped clues that helped her slowly untangle her high school physics homework, the increasing complexity only driving her further.

Ultimately, though, Jess fled home, fled to a foreign land, because of the Hand of God.

• • •

"See, Mum—"

"Mum again? Not Mommy?"

"Mommy, see, Maradona, he's up front, just him, because Shilton's moved up to knock the ball out of the box, but the ball hits Maradona's hand instead and just GOES IN, and the referee, he's at a bad angle, see, he thinks it's a header, but it's not, Maradona used his HAND."

Her mother turns away from the stacks of papers, looks at her daughter. "That's not supposed to happen, right? Only the goalie can touch the ball."

"Keeper, Mommy."

"So does the goal end up counting?"

"YES. Because Maradona, he rushes to his teammates and he says, start celebrating, because if you don't they'll catch on, and so they start jumping up and down and Argentina wins, they win, because Maradona cheated!"

When Abby's eyes meet hers, they contain patience and love. When Jess is older, she understands that her mother is a professor of late twentieth-century film; Abby is fond of the ranting of nerds.

Jess keeps on talking. "When reporters asked Maradona if he'd hit the ball in, he said no, he said it was the Hand of God! But it was a lie, see? Argentina won because of LIES. Isn't it just awful?"

Abby takes off her glasses. Rubs her brow. She looks tired. "How long ago was this game, Jess?"

"Um." Jess is fast at math, but poor at history; dates will always be

a weakness. Except for this one, when she realizes. "I'm ten, and it was the same year. Ten years, then."

"Did your father tell you the date, when he told you this story?"

"No."

Jess's mother nods. "That's for the best."

Diego Maradona, Argentina's legendary striker, lead his team to victory over England in the 1986 World Cup. One of the two goals he scored in that game is considered one of the great goals of football history, a dazzling display of grace and footwork. But the other goal, the first goal he scored, came courtesy of a clenched fist and unobservant eyes. The referees thought it was off his head, and England lost 2 to 1, lost to brilliant play and bad luck.

On June 22, 1986, the English fans screamed in fury while half a world away Abigail Wood screamed in pain. Screamed for a goddamn motherfucking epidural.

Jess was minutes away from drawing her first breath when the Hand of God touched Maradona. But after ten years worth of football conversations, an Englishman's daughter is bound to learn a few things.



In the first flush of their romance, the hazy Sunday afterglows, Andy and Jess would curl up together and flick the telly on to watch Arsenal matches. But after a few months, Andy couldn't help notice that the team's fortunes waxed and waned with Jess's attention. If she was focused on the action, Youatt would be down in the mud within moments. But if she looked away from the screen to flick through a magazine, Walcott would push through and score. He decided then that it's her bastard heritage that dooms Arsenal, time after time. Which is why she's not allowed to watch the games live.

All Andy's mates would be thrilled to date a gal who pulled for their team and didn't mind when the talk over pints turned to Beckham's new coaching spot and Lennon's pending retirement. To Andy, though, she's a threat, and it's a good thing they love each other so much, he says, because not everyone would put up with this.

Jess agrees, that it's good they love each other so much. Because not everyone would put up with this.

Jess likes Arsenal, but knows better than to get attached. Her losing streak is a too-familiar inside joke between her and the universe, one that's been going on a long time. Her track record is abysmal. She rooted for Blackburn Rovers in the late nineties, Everton all through her twenties. She's used to crap wins, bad calls, player injury, the bits of bad luck that keep sports interesting. The karmic payment for the sparkle of magic that can make a game great.

She's used to fortune's sense of humor. So she doesn't fault Andy's superstitions, even when they reach the point of voodoo dolls and cleansing spells, and actually lies about her birthday, rounding it down to June 20th. He never remembers the birthday she told him, but no matter. She'd rather he forget than remember Maradona every time she blows out the candles.

Most of the scientists she works with have a rather bleak, logical view on issues of religion and faith. Not her. She believes in a god, a trickster god, one who plays with fate and destiny and enjoys any opportunity to pull the rug out. Because it's falling that makes life interesting.

Maradona, fifteen years later, takes it back about the Hand of God being the one to touch the ball, admits to winning a decisive match with an illegal move. He confesses all in a biographical bestseller, without ever quite apologizing. The hand of Man, in the end. Human error.

Despite this, Jess still believes Maradona's first claim, the deity's touch. But she also believes in science. Temporal mechanics, relativity, the grand unified theory of particles and waves. All the bedtime stories her daddy ever told her.

She believes in the Hand of God. She thinks she knows how to slap it back.



Her father is in the lab when she gets there, only half-watching the Arsenal game on one screen while formulas render out in another. David pulls for Man U, lifelong. He and Andy circle each other uneasily at the rare family dinners.

He barely looks up when she arrives; her arrival, after all, is only one of the eight things he's processing in his giant brain. She's used to

it; she calls out for his attention.

"Hi, Dad. How's Edith doing?"

They named the machine Edith Keeler, because Ravi, a long time Star Trek nerd, had no shame. Jess doesn't get the reference, just knows it's Star Trek. She's never really felt the urge to investigate further. Growing up around her mother's students exhausted her ability to care about film and television.

"Good, good. Processing. Nearly there." He looks at her. "Just a few more days."

She smiles. "I know. Are you ready?"

He looks at her, and she can sense the jump in the queue, the extra degrees of attention being paid to her. Like the sun, coming out from behind the clouds.

He smiles back. "Yes."



Jess always resented those stories about the daughters of famous men, the girls who only explored the world or made great scientific discoveries or solved dastardly crimes because of the path laid out by the footsteps of their fathers. As if that was all there was for them. Jess knows the profundity of her father's influence on her, but likes to think that somewhere in the mess of her childhood, there was some self-determination involved.

It was certainly self-determination, not her father's influence, that got her into the increasingly advanced research programs, earned her degrees. She arrived in Oxford a double-doctorate, well-published, well-reviewed, twenty-nine years old. And she had to wait until she was thirty for an opening in the temporal mechanics program that had evolved, over the years, from her father's tinkering with the universe. She waited for the opening, applied for it. And until the letter came, she did not know if the answer would be yes.

Now here she is, wearing a shiny silver suit, the helmet foggy already with her deep exhales. She is only supposed to be testing the suit, making sure it fits, that all the controls are in place and easy to reach in case of emergency. But part of her itches to press the buttons. It's a stupid impulse, one that Jess would normally consider beneath her. Especially since nothing's been calibrated, the final calculations

will be completed tomorrow, and so one touch would most certainly send her skyrocketing through the void, adrift forever.

Wearing the suit feels like standing on the edge of a cliff, and her exhales get deeper when she processes that thought thoroughly.

Through the glare of the helmet, she can see her father, half-watching her, half-watching the game. The whole team has been trying to live their lives normally, take weekends off, maintain other interests. For sanity's sake. Really thinking about the things they are trying to do is a dangerous train of thought.

But David sets the perfect example, focused as he is on the whole timeline, stretched out. The first test, the second, the third. Increasing levels of complexity, checks and double-checks. He's failed utterly to get caught up in the drama. He remains the pure scientist.

Jess has always loved her father, for his flaws and brilliance both. But it wasn't until the first doctorate, the first glimpse of possibility, that she came to respect him. She respects her father more than she loves him, now, because he never made it easy for her, and thus when she came to join him in his world, she was able to truly stand beside him. She values that more than all of Andy's sweet words and passion.

Only a few of their colleagues even know that they're related. Ravi has no clue. No one gives it much thought, because every one of them considers David the father they never really had. A half-dozen ethnicities scattered among the ten of them, and yet they all seem joined by blood. Something about the squint of their eyes, the hunch of their shoulders. Members of the same species.

Jess had always wanted siblings, anyway.



Andy is patient in all the ways Jess needs, but in his heart of hearts, he doesn't really think they'll change anything. So when Jess pulls his clasped hands apart, placing the newspaper on his now-outstretched palms, it doesn't have much impact on him.

1986, England loses in the quarterfinal, the news of yesterday splashed across the front page of the Guardian. He looks down at it, shrugging.

"Won't it just fade into whatever the new headline is?" he asks. "Like in the movies?"

Jess knows what movies he's talking about, but pretends not to. "The universe doesn't work like that."

"But if you really do this, this newspaper shouldn't exist at all."

Jess reaches inside the plastic bag, rubs her fingers along the edge of the paper. Shows him the gold dust that dislodges. "We've thought of that. Don't worry. We've thought of everything."

"Except what'll really happen. How will you even know? Will you all cover yourselves in that dust stuff, to keep from forgetting? Will you cover the whole world in it?"

Jess kisses him, once. "We've thought of everything."

"Promise?" he asks. She doesn't.



The truth is, they haven't thought of everything, and they know it. Hence the terms: experiment; trial. No way to know for sure until you try, Jess thinks, but she knows that's not the party line. The party line is much longer, much wordier, with references to the many safeguards and backups that have been done. She had little to do with the documentation, though. She's been focused on making the thing actually happen.

They didn't choose this one event randomly. Oh, no. Maradona's first goal of the quarterfinal wasn't just a lucky break in a football game. It spoke to prevailing sentiments regarding England in the 1980s, and had wide-ranging political implications. Some considered it karmic retribution for England's allegedly unfair win in the 1966 quarterfinal, an unfair win compounded by the English coach's profoundly racist attitude towards the Argentinians. Some considered it due penance for Thatcher's aggressive foreign policy, an end result of the underlying tension between England and Argentina as a result of the Falklands War... All of it amounting to a daisy chain of resentment and fear.

That's the real experiment, Jess knows. What will happen to the world, when they change this one small event? And what will happen if they change even more? That's why the gold dust, ionized and absorbent and pharmaceutically balanced. Jess and the newspaper will retain the previous past within them. The rest of the world will remember... Will remember what happened. Will remember what



Jess has done to the universe.

Inside the vacuum chamber, Jess tries not to think too much about any of this. "For King and Country," she mutters to herself as she puts on the suit, this time for real, this time an early Monday morning in late June. Despite her joint citizenship, it's not truly her king or her country. But she finds comfort in the phrase, so she says it anyway.

Andy is there, sitting in the control booth. He's holding the newspaper sealed in plastic, along with an identical, unsealed one. He watches her carefully. But in that moment, she has nothing to say to him.

She looks at her father, who stands behind the glass. He's looking at his screens, nine of them right now, nine different cauldrons simmering. She remembers the bedtime stories.

She takes a risk, speaking into the intercom. "Dr. Tyler?"

"Yes, Dr. Wood?"

"When did you find out? About me being born."

"Oh. Um. The day after. Your mother... She knew it was late here. So she called me the next morning, according to Greenwich Mean, that is."

She smiles. "She woke you up. You were hung-over."

"What? When did she tell you that?"

"When I was fifteen."

"Right. Yes."

"Were you happy?"

"That morning? Gods, no. I was wretched."

She laughs. She forgets he can be funny, because he so rarely is. "What about after the call?"

His attention darts back to the screens, and she can't resent him. She knows how important this all is, how crucial these last moments are. She's the one wearing the goddamned suit, after all. She doesn't want to scream.

"What about after the call? Were you happy?"

He looks at her like she's not very bright at all. "Of course. Why do you ask?"

It's the tension and the suit and everything else that makes her tear up, not that. That is what she believes. "I just wanted to know."

"You only ever had to ask."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Lousy last words, if that's what they're going to be. But she sees the look on her father's face, and can't think of anything else to say. So she taps the button.

She taps the button, and remembers the game, and steps forward to change the world.



It's a burn that hits so hot she doesn't even have time to sweat, just has time to feel the suit ROAST. And with that flash of heat so hot that it feels like a solar flare (might actually be a solar flare, she realizes, no way to know for certain where she is, when she is), time stretches out before her. She trained for this, actually jumped off a bridge with elastic around her waist in pursuit of theory, finding a metaphor for the sensation at the end of the bungee cord. She can feel time stretch around her, accommodating her—for the moment.

She does long division in her head. She holds her breath, even though the oxygen tank is still fully operational. She closes her eyes, closes them against the light until—

The air in her lungs flops flat out with the slam of ground beneath her feet.

She opens her eyes. There she is.



She only has moments, but she has only one objective. The calculations are perfect. Everything is perfect. There she is, in her shiny silver suit, a shiny silver suit designed to look like nothing more than lens flare to the camera, a mirage to the eye. She is standing on the sidelines, right behind the linesmen who missed everything, and she has only moments.

Because there the game is, and she's seeing it all happen, only yards away from her, the ball bouncing off Hodge's misaimed foot, the failed hook instead knocking it in a high shallow arc to Maradona—

She draws her sidearm, the wide-barreled cannon, from the holster. Aims with precision, the exact angle she's been practicing for weeks now, practicing for this one calculated blow.

She watches the ball touch Maradona's fist, and the world is

moving so fast but she can feel the heartbeat in that moment, see man and ball and no godly intervention. Exactly what she always expected, but not quite. Just a man and a ball and that long pause at the end of the bungee cord, that suspended moment at the peak of the curve.

The fingers of time start to yank her back. She exhales. She fires.

The gun goes WHOOMPH. The gun makes a noise like air out of a tire. It's because the gun is firing air. The gun fires a blast of air, she fires a blast of air right at the ball—

As she feels the heat rush back, pulling her away from the unfixed past, she watches the ball change course by the most minute of degrees, caught by the winds of fate. The ball bounces against the post. Out of bounds. Out on Maradona.

England's possession, now. England's turn to turn it back around.

She never sees the ball thrown in. It's because she once again closes her eyes, to fall back into her present.

• • •

With travel time, her trip to 1986 was to take approximately forty-five seconds, and that's how much time has elapsed since she left. They probably could have brought her back at the exact moment of her departure, but Jess figured that it'd be better to keep things as linear as possible. For the calculations and so forth.

She also maybe, just maybe, wanted to make people wait a little for her.

She looks through the glass of the control room. The helmet's intercom must have gotten shorted out by the heat, but she can see Andy and Ravi standing, applauding. Applauding her safe return. Her father sits there, eyes still on the screens, but there's relief on his face. He looks so pleased.

She walks up to the glass. Gestures for someone to come forward.

Andy rushes up to the window. Blowing her a kiss. His eyes wide with belief. He shows her the newspaper they sealed in plastic and gold, still telling the truth—

And then he shows her the second newspaper. The one left unsealed.

Jess stares unbelieving. DIEGO-ING HOME. PENALTIES LOSS TO ARGENTINA BREAKS ENGLISH HEARTS.

She'd left, and the score got tied 1-1, and England of the mid-80s was always a little rubbish at penalty kicks. Just like in 2006, and in 2022. Just like always.

She'd changed the past, but nothing had really changed.

She frowns, tapping on the glass, hoping to get her father's attention. This wasn't supposed to happen. Preventing the Hand of God was supposed to turn the tide, shift everything. Have wide-reaching global effects. Shift foreign policy, alter international relations. It should have done SOMETHING.

Her father is happy, she can tell, elbow deep in his equations, accumulating the massive amounts of data he's now acquired. Thinking about the second test, the third.

He knew, she realized. He knew that she might not really do anything at all.

She takes off her helmet, taps the wall intercom. She can hear Ravi laughing now, laughing with glee. Andy reading out loud the new newspaper. Celebrating England's big loss. Celebrating their new memories, this new time stream. Celebrating the victory of man over time.

"Dad?" she asks. And the room goes silent.

David looks at her. A little smile on his face. "Yes, Jessica."

"When Mom called you, to tell you I'd been born—were you happy?"

"Of course. Why are you asking this again?"

"I wanted to see... I wanted to know again."

He looks at her like she's not very bright at all. "You only ever had to ask."

"No," she says. The word is a surprise to them both, and for some reason she feels the need to clarify. "No, Dad. I shouldn't have had to."

She takes off the rest of the suit, leaves the chamber through a shower of gold dust. Her memories preserved.

Andy sweeps her up in a huge hug, and she hugs him back. Happy to see him. Really happy.

Over his shoulder, she looks at her father, from a distance, from far away.

From far away, she's always been his biggest fan. •

# The World's Oldest Vase

Michael Meyerhofer

I saw a white vase in the museum  
under pressurized glass, under guard.  
The plaque said it was Egyptian,  
pre-Christian, pre-Muslim, pre-Socrates.  
Older than the dawn of textbooks.  
Older than those petrified redwoods.  
Precisely shaped from just  
the curve of someone's olive palm,  
back when those tan jaws of desert  
still had their baby-teeth.  
This vessel dipping life from the Nile  
long before the first pharaoh  
demanded his share. This clay vase  
shaped by a woman, they think,  
whose brilliant genes are dust now,  
or floating with amnesia  
up the stalk of a desert rose.  
This vase they found intact, wiped off,  
then passed on loan to St. Louis  
where a pigtailed girl rises on tip-toes,  
peers into the display case, asks  
her mother what all the fuss is about.  
*It's just a vase, she says. Move along. •*

He glanced at the moon and gave a little yelp. It was a good ten minutes back to the forests outside Athens where Titania slept and Oberon lurked, waiting to ensorcel his wife into loving an ape or whatever else happened to wander by. Sometimes his boss had a curious sense of fun.

## Love in Its Season

Hayden Trenholm

Spring

I throw my arm across the empty place in our bed and think of all the places Erin could be. Could have been, I hear her correct my grammar. Just one of the things I find endearing.

She could have been in the pool or perched on a stationary bike, sweat dripping from her nose. She could have been at work, going in early for some special project. She could even have been at her mother's, where she retreated on those oh-so-rare occasions when we fought.

She could have been in any of those places, but Erin is in none of them. She is in the freezer in the kitchen.

I get out of bed and pad down the hall, my bare feet slapping on the hardwood floor we installed last summer, in a flurry of loving effort and reno recriminations. I lie across the white box that holds my wife. The metal is cold against my skin but I force myself to lie there, holding her.

It is cold against my body but it is colder inside for her.

I hate that perfect love always ends this way, with one lover in a box and the other just holding on. Holding on for dear life.

I killed the one that took her from me, tracked him down and killed him for despoiling my wife, for ruining my life. Then I put Erin in this box. She's been there since Christmas.

It's been hard these three months, knowing she's there, knowing no-one would understand how she got there. Hard but not impossible.

He made it easier. Her seducer. Made arrangements for their escape—left traces that in the end led nowhere. He was clever that way, but not clever enough for me.

I found them together in his bed. She lay perfectly still while I killed him. I burst through the door at noon, the sun blazing at my back. It must have surrounded me like the halo of an avenging angel.

He scurried back, quick but I was quicker. I pinned him against the wall, pinned him with two feet of sharpened ash. I cut off his head and stuffed his mouth with garlic. It lies buried in hallowed ground. I cut his body limb from limb and burned it there in his own fireplace.

But when I approached my wife with saw in hand, I could not do it. I wrapped her neck in his silk scarf and her body in the sheets from his bed and carried her home again.

Now she sleeps in the cold of our freezer. But spring is here. It is the season for planting and growing. It is the season for love. And my love for her knows no bounds.

So I will bury her in the warming ground and wait three nights for her to rise again. She could have been in heaven, but, no. So I will join with her in hell.

## Summer

It was hot. It was damn hot.

It was too damn hot. And the clock was ticking.

Puck sat on a rock outside the cave and considered his options. He'd been sitting there for fourteen minutes, not long in the life of a man, but nearly an eternity for one who could 'put a girdle about the earth in forty minutes.'

What had he been thinking? When Oberon asked if he remembered where "love-in-idleness" bloomed, he'd said yes. He sort of did remember. But he'd been drinking the night Oberon showed him (they'd all been drinking—Oberon more than most) and the details had escaped him.

Like the dragon.

He could fly back to Oberon and tell him, sorry boss, no can do, dragon's guarding the posy, you'll have to come up with another scheme to get Titania to hand over that changeling boy you fancy. Sure he could do that. If he wanted to spend a couple of hundred years as a meercat. Well, that's what you get for wanting to be his right-hand faery.

Puck looked in his pouch. He had sleep potions and transformation spells and a small vial of all-purpose faerie dust. They would work fine on a human, or a bear, or even, perhaps, a troll. But dragons are so damn big.

He glanced at the moon and gave a little yelp. It was a good ten minutes back to the forests outside Athens where Titania slept and Oberon lurked, waiting to ensorcel his wife into loving an ape or whatever else happened to wander by. Sometimes his boss had a curious sense of fun.

So he had five minutes to seek a solution. Puck looked into his pouch again. Of course, the ring I won playing dice with that elf. Sometimes, he thought, you'd forget your wings if they weren't attached to your feet.

He slipped the ring on his finger and disappeared from view. Puck took a deep breath and glided toward the dragon's lair.



He placed the flower in Oberon's hand with seconds to spare. Oberon glanced down at the crushed blossom and shot Puck a look of distaste.

"Thou'st done the deed, good Puck, but without style.

Speed's all well and good, but now, practice guile."

Puck nodded and smiled—what else could he do—and brushed the soot from his robes. It had been a close thing. He had practiced guile, slipping by the sleeping dragon, silent as fog. As soon as he grabbed the posy, the old wyrm had leapt to its feet and turned on him, nostrils streaming smoke. Who would have thought she could hear a flower being plucked?

But he had plucked it and, as they say, all's well that ends well. Titania would be humiliated, and Oberon would get his page. And it looked like these Athenians were bound to provide a night's entertainment.



Still, he wondered, what do you do with a dragon in love?

## Autumn

Pride goeth before the fall. And by late September, our pride was all but gone. Our boys had the bigger hearts and the better generals, but their boys had bigger numbers and better guns.

I had been with the Barksdale's Brigade at Gettysburg, come up from Mississippi to give those Yankees what for. It had all gone pretty well until we got to Gettysburg. Three days of the fiercest fighting I ever hope to see. Now I was fighting for the Army of Northern Virginia, defending Richmond. Not that we were doing much fighting.

Three years in, and the writing was on the wall, even if no-one was willing to read it. I wanted it to be over, so I could go home to Martha, and my farm. I wanted to see Joshua again. And little Charlotte, over two now, and I'd never seen her face.

Autumn is a good time to start again, a good season for love renewed.

They'd given me a field promotion to lieutenant, just for living that long, I joked. Never could get used to people saluting me.

I had taken my boys on a scouting mission up toward the river. We'd seen what we came to see, and it wasn't pretty. We were scurrying back to our lines when we were overtaken by darkness and rain.

I'm sitting here in the cold and the wet, waiting for dawn, and thinking of home.

There's someone whistling not far away—a steady tuneless sound that I wish would stop.

Something white moves through the bush. I draw my revolver and cock the hammer. I only have two rounds left, so I hold my fire.

It's a woman in a white dress. She seems to be holding something to her breast, but I can't tell what it is. She moves closer, walking purposely through the brush as if it weren't even there. She turns toward me, and I see her face.

It is Martha. Her mouth is moving and I strain to hear what she's saying; but that damn whistling is getting louder, and I can't make out her words.

I always thought that she was safe back at home. Safe with our children on our farm. I guess no-one is safe in this damn war.

She is moving past me now and I reach out. My hand passes through her, or she through it. I scream at the man whistling in the dark to stop and he does. But Martha has disappeared, and there is only darkness. Only darkness and the silent night.



Martha pauses in her pacing, a cold chill running down her spine. She soothes the child in her arms.

"There, there, darling," she says. "Everything's going to be fine. Fall is coming, and so is your daddy. He'll be home soon. I can feel it."

She feels the chill and holds her daughter closer. She looks north and starts to pace again.

### Winter

The Danaan first arose when their sun burnt hot, their quick, curious minds driving their nimble hands to reach higher and farther. They survived their childhood (so many don't), dodging tooth and claw to spread from jungle to plain to arctic waste. They planted crops and built cities and did all the things evolving minds are prone to do as time passes.

Adolescence came and with it, chemistry and physics, nuclear bombs, and designer germs. So close. Their own clock reached one second to midnight before they pulled back from the brink of hormone-driven politics and teenage excess. They learned to live in harmony with each other and with their world.

As young adults, they spread beyond their atmosphere to neighboring moons and planets until they had reached the outer limit of their solar system.

There they stopped, befuddled by the distances of interstellar space. Every promised trick of their teenage years—worm holes and warp drives and alien intervention—failed against that interstellar dark. Generation ships set out, but never reached haven—seeds scattered on barren soil.

Their youth long past, and even middle-age a bitter memory, the Danaan retired to quieter pursuits. Longevity replaced fertility. Philosophy replaced science. Outward looking gave way to inner

contemplation. One by one, their outposts fell to the ravages of time and entropy, or were abandoned through boredom or neglect.

Their sun grew old and hotter, and they waited on the edges of space. It grew older and cold, and they retreated to their home world to await the end. Ice covered the planet, and they burrowed beneath it, tapping the last warmth of the core. Generation followed long, slow generation; and the last few Danaan even gave up their bodies—all they once were, their still quick but no longer curious intellects encased in crystal and steel.

Sometimes a flame burns brightest just before it dies. A trick of childhood returns to haunt a senescent mind. A turn of the mind reveals the mechanism behind the curtain.

The barrier of space was breached. The galaxy was theirs for the taking.

But they had no hands to reach. No hearts to drive them on. No bodies to fuel their passion. It was the winter of their race—the season for quiet comfort and home fires and familiar loves.

A thousand, thousand years passed. The last heat of their planet's core died, and most of the Danaan chose to die with it.

Two alone make the journey. To a yellow sun and a blue white planet where quick brains and nimble hands struggle to reach adulthood. (Most don't.)

So young, one says, looking down. So old, says the other, looking in.  
Entropy always wins, says the first.

But, oh, the glorious struggle! the second replies.

They touch, warmed by the glow of reflected desire. Crystal hearts still beat, metal bodies yet yearn.

Yes, my love, the struggle is all there is, they say, and drift away. •

# Do You Know Mandika?

Gary Pierluigi

The look comes from the knowledge that misinforms.

Without expectation.

Without asking.

Without warmth.

It comes from the depths of sleep  
caught in eyes bewildered.

In long grass the restless nights  
turning prisms on the blood.

Pyramids of mirrored doors  
lips moving drinking from  
the floating cup.

Remember the scarlet colors caught

in stasis the species existence

the transparency of memory the

slow elasticity of time

black galaxies

lakes

skies

falling on their knees  
this never happens.  
Circular they spin a rim of fire cool  
to the touch.  
Eyes green and sober  
a baseball diamond  
no father's dry cough.  
More than drugs or peace or thoughts  
unoriginal  
dreaming  
realities  
our consciousness awash in tears of joy.  
Do you know Mandika?  
Did you freeze in innocence?  
Kill in love?  
Truth bears diseased fruit.  
The look comes from the knowledge that misinforms. •

"I'm telling you, illegal aliens are the only ones who would do such a thing," Rachel said, working herself into a righteous dither for the third time that day.

## Three Pillows

Saint James Harris Wood

Around midnight, while I was out clubbing, someone came into my house and stole three pillows off my bed. Ordinary pillows. I had been drinking and, by the time I discovered the theft, yes, prone to confusion. I took an accounting of my valuables—stereo, CDs, musical accouterments—only the pillows were gone. The thieves had been very particular. Even a sober person would have been baffled. After searching my bedroom about ten times, I sat in the living room and tried with all my might to think up a possible situation or scenario that ended with three pillows vanishing. My imagination couldn't get a good grip on the off-kilter facts or find an angle from which to view the curious violation of my home. A crime simultaneously ludicrous and mundane leaves its victim without any notion of how to feel. Alone in the house, the sheer oddness of what had happened gave the night an eerie, slightly supernatural cast.

The next day, while canvassing the neighborhood, I asked the old woman across the street if she had seen anyone with three pillows or had any pillow-related problems of her own. She made me explain what had happened several times and then asked me what I really wanted. The father of the Mexican family next door heard me out about halfway, then simply said no and shut the door in my face. My

neighbors' reactions brought home further the dearth of context and unlikely nature of the pillow episode.

I run with a chaotic crowd—punk rockers, new bohemians and outsider artists. Some have normal day jobs, a few are on welfare, there are perennial university students and a couple are even in the military. It's an eclectic group, creative in a troublesome way, drunk nightly, disenfranchised and gleeful about it. Their lives, and mine I suppose, are dedicated to twisting the fabric and producing the obscure; so, at first, I suspected one of them. They suspected everyone else.

We hold impromptu poetry readings, mainly to mock each other, and held one at my house the evening after the confounding burglary. Rachel, my sometimes woman friend, and I had already been arguing about the pillows all day. My stance said that the disappearance was impossible. She had to explain everything.

"Illegal aliens took your pillows," Rachel said. A social worker, she'd developed a bad attitude towards immigrants.

"Are you sure you didn't misplace them?" asked Tony Chuco, a mohawked ex-gangbanger.

"How do you misplace three pillows?" I asked.

My guests forgot about poetry and mulled the irrational theft. Besides Tony and Rachel, there was Jim Call, a lapsed Mormon, present day keyboard player and strip club DJ; Terry Marine, quite simply a punk rocker and a Marine; Lisa Astin a.k.a. Lisa Acid who wrote term papers for a living, mostly for Middle Easterners; and Tim Griswold, rockabilly guitarist and the main mocker of poetry.

"I'm telling you, illegal aliens are the only ones who would do such a thing," Rachel said, working herself into a righteous dither for the third time that day. We broke up a couple days later while still arguing over the affair. I couldn't care for a woman with her job who always suspected the downtrodden.

"I'm thinking aliens would steal food or shoes," Tim said.

"Yes," I said, "ruling out the poor immigrants."

"What about your neighbors? They're a surly crew," Tim said.

"My neighbors are mean, not pillow thieves." I knew they weren't really mean, just relatively normal people who didn't care much for self-styled anarchists with peculiar problems.

"Maybe my granny stole them," Tony Chuco said.

We all looked at him.

"Because...?" I asked.

"When we were little kids, my granny always used to say, 'Sleep faster, we need the pillows.' And then she would stare at us."

I considered it. Grandmas like pillows; that's for sure. However, I'd seen Tony's granny: she looked to be about a hundred and could barely make it from room to room, let alone across town to the non-sequitur of a crime scene.

"Is she an illegal?" asked Rachel.

"No, no, no," I said, willing to rule out nearly everything because nothing made sense. As a side note, a few years later Tony Chuco was reputed to have gone mad, no doubt in part because his grandmother filled his head with strange slogans.

"Maybe God did it," said Terry Marine.

"Don't say that," said Lisa. "Aren't you an atheist?"

"Yes. No. Yes," Terry said, obviously conflicted, "but if God did exist, he might have done it. He did all kinds of crazy things. He made the Jews march around in the desert for years and liked to turn people into salt. Why wouldn't he steal pillows, like a plague or somethin'. Maybe James has bad karma."

"That's a different god," I said.

"Whatever, God is God. He has avengement or some kind of come-uppance for wrongdoers. Maybe he took your pillows for sinning."

"I really doubt it," I said. An agnostic, my first step towards believing in God wasn't going to be set off by pillows dematerializing in the night.

"I've got it," said Jim Call.

"What? Who?" I asked.

"It's so simple," Jim said.

"Then please clue me in."

"Undoubtedly, surrealist performance artists did it in order to make us think about sleeping away our lives."

The idea caused us all to stop and linger over it. We'd seen a performance artist, Johanna Went, at a local club, do deeply senseless things on stage. And she was known for taking her performance art to the streets, throwing chicken heads at pedestrians and leading a harmonica army through the public library. Jim's idea made at least as much sense as Tony Chuco's grandma or God. Still...

"So, then, where are my pillows?"



“Well,” Jim Call mused, “they’ll probably turn up all over town glued to stop signs, or they’ll run for mayor.”

It didn’t work for me. None of it worked. My friends’ outlandish suggestions only made Rachel’s idea more reasonable, which made me resentful. We spent the whole evening deconstructing and reconstructing the events and minutia surrounding the night of the pillow theft. I eventually withdrew from the discussion and only listened, hearing the words, but not the ideas, knowing the pillow riddle to be unsolvable, the sort of thing even a confession wouldn’t satisfactorily settle in my mind.

As the evening came to a close (meaning the alcohol ran out), the popular viewpoint became, “Just forget about it.” Of course they didn’t have to live in a house where nearly worthless items disappeared—something you were reminded of all night long because you had no pillows. I suppose illegal immigrants or surrealists would have a use for them, but why my house? There had to be a reason, logical or otherwise. More and more I leaned towards magic or some other phenomena science or the police can’t explain. The government forms commissions and spends millions of dollars trying to unravel various conspiracies and gets absolutely nowhere. People spontaneously combust; fish fall from the sky; children disappear; and none of it is ever explained to anyone’s contentment.

I buy new pillows and spend sleepless nights.

Weeks later my friends come over for a poetry/spaghetti party. Although the pillows no longer haunt me every waking hour, they cross my mind throughout the day like spooky unmanned ships aimlessly sailing the ocean.

As Jim Call recites a poem and the rest of them mock it, I sit on the floor in the kitchen searching for a big pot to boil water in and open one of the deep lower cabinets. The three pillows are stuffed in the cabinet.

I pull them out one by one and place them on the floor around me. I look in the cabinet again for a clue or explanation. There is none. •

# A Kind of Witness

Steve Sneyd

she said "i was just going  
to sit on my counting house  
in a cosy vantage and watch  
the shared alliance hunt  
the natives down

knowing closer than frown's forehead twist  
how hard they'll be, how fierce, how  
eager to spill new life  
even without bonus payment convinced  
life is all about totality

of nothing no-thing left" her memoirs now  
released complain the ones  
who looked like red skulls atop ashtrays  
burnt most smellily the most: the sightless  
unsightable transparent  
entities known to all to be there

only when their faint-sweet music split  
half the beastmen in three kept almost  
forgetting to switch down to true  
harmlessness when they came to  
transit through her in their  
desperate escape and she

is fissured through or feels so as a  
depth-mined world but oh how so soft  
they were after and soothing after she had  
hid them from the cull to in gratitude  
rebind her wounds. The human element, liason  
officers and such, she left till last to board

paid extra to distract them till  
fleet left them behind, a white blast  
wiping them out the martyrs we needed  
revolving into WIN here this cause for  
rival times as to who died the most  
for this putatively empty place

she went all along with everything  
Up There With Them  
always believing  
strangeness is more fun  
though still not yet convinced  
any strange alien really truly

any stranger  
than us from who she sprung •

The ocean wind picked up suddenly, blowing more sand in my face. When I tried to raise my hands to shield my eyes, I found myself unable to move.

## Beach Head

Daniel LeMoal

“Are you still alive over there?”

Alvy’s voice sounded weak, but it retained the bong-huffing tonality that had been his hallmark since he hit puberty. It grated at me almost as badly as the grains of sand coating my teeth. In my darkness, I could hear the sound of approaching water.

“C’mon Jim,” he continued. “If you can’t talk, just open your eyes for me.”

I opened my eyes, and was immediately blinded by daylight. When my vision adjusted, I found myself staring at a stretch of deserted beach. The seemingly decapitated heads of Alvy and Mikey Burdy lay before me, propped up in the sand.

“What the fuck?” I croaked, as both of my crewmates blinked tiredly at me.

“It’s about time you woke up,” Alvy said. “We’ve been deep-sixed.”

The ocean wind picked up suddenly, blowing more sand in my face. When I tried to raise my hands to shield my eyes, I found myself unable to move. I finally realized that my arms and legs were frozen in place, packed in sand that felt as heavy as concrete. Of course, I panicked.

“Save your energy,” Alvy said, after watching me struggle for a

while. "They probably tied your hands too."

"Don't fucking tell me," I groaned, feeling a sickness rising in my stomach. "Don't tell me it was Rody."

"The good news is that they buried us too far from the water," Alvy said. "The tide already came and went—fucking idiots."

The "they" that Alvy was referring to was likely our former trawler crew. For the better part of three years, we'd been running drugs, guns and assorted unmarked parcels for Colin Rody. It paid well, but Rody was taking the lion's share with little contribution on his part. I was sick of it, and Alvy was too.

We'd purchased our own cigarette boat less than four months prior, and had only used it for two freelance runs up the coast. Just a bit of cash on the side, while we kept up appearances with Rody. Neither run was a major haul, but someone obviously tipped him off.

My first suspect would have been Mikey Burdy. He was Rody's chief enforcer, a vicious prick who kept people looking the other way. He also policed the crew, in case anyone got too greedy or turned Fed. But there was only one problem with that theory: Burdy was buried up to his neck less than five feet away from me.

"Mikey," I began, choosing my words carefully. "Do you have any idea what this is all about?"

"Quite a few," Mikey said, pausing to spit sand out of his mouth. "You two are either feeding the cops... or you decided to become greedy fuckers. All the same to me. You're as good as dead."

"Fuck you, Mikey!" Alvy snapped. "Then what are you doing here, huh? Please tell us."

"Rody's made a major mistake," Mikey fumed, closing his eyes to another gust of wind. "He may as well have cut off his right hand."

"Well, it looks like you weren't all that indispensable," Alvy said.

I felt an overwhelming urge to laugh. Given our circumstances, Alvy and Mikey's tough posturing seemed ridiculous. They looked like a pair of obscene lawn ornaments.

"Let it go, Alvy," I interrupted. "Let's concentrate on getting out of here."

"We're not getting out on our own," Alvy said, looking more downcast. "I don't know about you, but I can't even feel my arms and legs anymore."

There were still sharp pains in my arms, but my legs could have

been miles away. A friend of mine had once lain on his arm for an entire day in a heroin-induced stupor—he lost use of the limb entirely. Taking the moral of that story to heart, I made a mental note to try and flex my arm and leg muscles at regular intervals.

“Do you know where we are?” I said, scanning as much of the shoreline as I could. My forced line of sight only let me look in one direction down the beach; the other half of the shore lay hidden behind my head. The beach curved sharply towards the ocean, ending in a rocky point about a mile ahead; further inland, the white sand gave way to rocks, scrub brush and a wall of tall grass. “Were either of you awake when they dumped us here?”

“Nope. They must have put us under with something heavy-duty,” Alvy said; he was buried facing me, enabling him to view the other half of the shoreline. Mikey was buried slightly further inland, facing the ocean. “The sand doesn’t look anything like the mainland—too fine. Could be one of the Carrier Islands, maybe...”

“Wherever it is, it’s off the main drags,” Mikey Burdy said, barely audible over the waves. “I’ve been watching the water since I woke up, and I haven’t seen one boat.”

I tried to recall my last waking memory. Alvy, Mikey, Thornton, Swayne and I were readying Rody’s trawler—the *Angelcake*—for a midnight run up the coast. The cargo was a few boxes of pills, nothing huge. So when Rody showed up right before our launch, I was immediately suspicious. But with Mikey and Thornton on board for “security”, there was no chance of an easy exit.

I tried to stay on my toes during the run, but got distracted when Alvy came out of the hold with a large hypodermic needle sticking out of his neck. Before I could even react, Thornton’s fist hit me in the temple. I was out before I hit the deck.



As the sun climbed in the sky, we kept quiet. I was beyond thirsty, and didn’t want to waste a breath until I saw a boat. Then I would scream louder than ever.

For a few hours, Alvy occasionally hollered, hoping to catch the attention of someone further inland. Every time he shouted, the entire situation seemed increasingly hopeless. With the roar of the

water and the high wind, we were quickly out of earshot. Someone would have to trip over our heads to actually find us.

Meanwhile, Mikey appeared to be resting his eyes, or asleep. He was another worry. A shark's head is still capable of biting you, even after it's severed from the body; I half expected Mikey's ugly lid to roll across the sand and tear into me with its teeth. If Mikey found a way out before we did, Alvy and I were both in trouble.

And then there was another part of me that was actually afraid of being found—afraid of seeing Rody, Thornton and Swayne walking across that beach, ready to finish the job.

There was no point in getting emotional about it: we were fucked.



The sun had reached its full height, heating the sand to a torturous temperature. I felt the skin on my nose and forehead slowly burn, and tasted nothing but sand on my tongue. Several death scenarios ran through my head: dehydration; blood clots; exposure during the night; or perhaps a drowning death after all, at the peak of a mid-summer storm.

"Jim," Alvy finally said, as he surveyed his half of the beach. "I don't believe it... HERE! OVER HERE!"

Mikey Burdy broke from his sleep, his eyes widening immediately. Although I couldn't see what had grabbed their attention, I saw hope in their eyes.

"Alvy," I said. "Someone's there?"

"Yes, yes... walking up the beach... HEY! HEY!"

Mikey Burdy and I both joined in with Alvy, screaming our lungs out with joy.

"It's okay," Alvy said. "He's coming. He's seen us."

At last, a long shadow drifted over the sand, covering my head in its cooling shade.

"My God, buddy. You have no idea how glad we are to see you," Alvy said, close to tears.

To my surprise, our rescuer stepped right over my head—a hairless set of legs in worn-out running shoes. It turned out that our stranger was no more than a boy, probably not even a teenager yet. His skin was baked brown from the sun, partially covered by a red bathing suit and

a ratty old t-shirt. A mop of tangled brown hair obscured the top third of his face.

"Can you dig us out, little man?" I asked the boy. "Someone's played a nasty joke and left us out here."

"Dig me out first," Mikey suddenly jumped in. "My friends have sun stroke. I can help you dig faster."

"Don't listen to him kid—he's delirious," I snapped back. "Why don't you get one of us out? He needs medical attention."

"Christ you guys, be quiet," Alvy intervened, before trying a different tack. "My name's Alvy Fullerton. This is Jim Leach and Mike Burdy. What's your name?"

The boy didn't answer. Instead, he hovered over Alvy, staring down at him intently.

"Maybe he's French or something," I said.

"Kid, please, listen to me," Alvy said, ready to break down after an uncomfortable minute of silence. "We're close to dying here... dig us out."

The boy knelt in front of Alvy and picked up a handful of sand. Opening his fingers wide, he let the grains blow away in the ocean wind. Mikey Burdy had reached his limit.

"Are you fucking retarded?" he yelled, gnashing his teeth. "Stop fucking around and get me out of here. Now!"

The boy stood again, this time towering over Mikey's head. If the kid was scared or angry, I certainly couldn't tell. He was tough to read.

"I know you understand me, so I'll say this once," Mikey said, narrowing his eyes. "Use your hands, grab a stick or something. I don't care. Just know that if you don't start digging, I'm going to find you when I get out. I'll kill your family, and then I'll kill you. Very slowly."

Alvy and I were both dumbstruck by Mikey's stupidity. The boy casually walked away from us, disappearing in the tall grass behind the beach.

"Mikey, you fucking idiot!" Alvy shrieked, with an anger I'd never seen before. "If you've scared that kid off... HEY! COME BACK! WE'VE GOT MONEY... HEEEEEEEEEEYYYYY!!!"

While Mikey boiled in his own blood, Alvy and I desperately scanned the scrub brush, searching for the boy. We continued to call out for help, hoping to coax the boy back to us, but to no avail. Alvy lost it.



"I don't blame him for taking off," he cried. "He's probably never seen such a bunch of rat-fucking-scumbags in his whole life."

"Alvy, relax," I said. Further down the beach, I could see the boy, emerging from the brush. "He's coming back. It looks like he's carrying something."

"It'd better be a shovel or a shovel-shaped stick," Mikey exploded. "Or I'll snap that kid's neck right on this fucking beach."

"No, no... it looks like... golf clubs."

• • •

Mikey was still breathing, but in shallow gasps that were becoming less frequent. His head was an island, surrounded by a shallow pool of his own blood. Every once in a while, he would let another one of his teeth dribble down his misshapen jaw.

"Is he still here?" Alvy blurted, twisting his head several times in either direction. He seemed to be in deep shock, even though the boy hadn't laid a finger on either of us.

I hated Mikey Burdy. I'd seen him kill close to a dozen people, and had spent the last few months worrying that I would be next. But Alvy and I had both begged for Mikey's life, while a 12-year-old kid beat his head to a living pulp. Through the entire ordeal, not a glimmer of emotion crossed the boy's face. When the deed was finished, he tossed the rusty clubs into the ocean and slid back into the cover of the tall grass.

"I think he's gone away for a while," I whispered, as the sun disappeared from view. Mikey Burdy wasn't breathing anymore.

• • •

Whereas the sun was unbearably hot during the day, night on the beach was 100 times worse. A deep chill entered every cell of my body, even before the wind grew stronger. I was so drained that I could have closed my eyes and never woken up. But Alvy and I both kept our eyes open, waiting for Mikey's young killer to return.

Hours passed without incident. It appeared more and more likely that the beach would take us after all.

"I have to shut my eyes, Jim," Alvy said, speaking for the first time

in hours. "I just can't stay awake anymore."

"Go on then—I'll let you know if I see him," I said. Over the water, a full moon lit up a cloudless sky. A perfect evening for a midnight sail.

I stared at Alvy as he fell immediately into a deep sleep. I can't say I ever felt guilty very much in my life. But there it was, adding to every miserable second.

*"You're smart boys,"* my Dad told Alvy and me once. *"But you're rotten to the core. You can have all the brains in the world—but if you don't got a heart, you may as well be stupid."*

My Dad was only half right. Alvy was a good person. His only mistake was following me around for most of his life. I'd finally gone and pulled him into the toilet with me. All we had left to do was to wait for someone to flush.

"I'm sorry, Alvy," I said, as loud as I could manage. If Alvy heard me, he didn't answer back.



In what may have been several hours later, I woke to the thud of footsteps in the sand. All I could do was to react in the same way I would to a noise under my bed: I kept my eyes closed and tried to pass off the sound as imagination. Then I felt a wet towel engulf my face.

"Noooo!" I yelled, snapping my head backward. I opened my eyes and found myself staring into the face of a wide-eyed, runny-nosed little girl. She was wrapped in several beach towels, probably to insulate against the wind. My reaction had startled her.

"Don't go away... please," I rasped, as she took several steps back. "I need help."

My dehydrated voice cut out completely after that. I tried to speak, but no sound would come. To my relief, the girl came back to me. After all, I was only a foot tall and hardly much of a threat.

I watched the girl as she fumbled inside a small plastic cooler; she was probably only seven or so. A dark bob of hair topped her dirt-smearred face, while her legs were covered in scabs—the typical battle scars of summer.

The girl cleaned away the dried blood from my face with the damp towel before bottle-feeding me with a can of warm orange soda. As I guzzled the soda, I noticed she had already covered Mikey's head with

a beach bag.

Once I had completely drained the can, I pointed towards Alvy with my lips: "Could you see if my friend's all right? You'll have to dig him out first—he's really sick."

The girl was padding toward Alvy when a noise distracted her; it had come from further down the beach. In the moon's luminescence, I saw a familiar tangle of hair and gangly legs. She saw him too. Her sarong of beach towels dropped to the sand. The boy had started to run.

"Get out of here," I barked at the girl. "Run and get help. Now!"

The girl didn't need to be told twice. She sped off towards the cover of the brush, kicking sand as she ran. Within seconds, the boy ran past me as well, silent except for a few measured breaths.

"Keep your fucking hands off her," I screamed. "I'm back here! I'm right here, you sick little fuck!"

But neither the boy nor the girl came back. I raged and struggled in my shallow grave, still unable to break free.

• • •

The next time I woke up, I felt the heat of sunlight on my face. But the sun was screaming.

I opened my eyes and was nearly blinded by a bright ball of fire. It was as though the sun had dropped from the sky and landed on the beach in front of me. But it was night—and the screams were coming from Alvy. His head was rocking back and forth in a blanket of flames, his skin already blistered, black and hissing. A short distance behind Alvy, I saw the boy, illuminated by the fire. A small jerry can dangled from his fingers.

"No!" I tried to scream, but all that came out was a dry whisper. My lips continued moving in a silent, incoherent fit of obscenities.

As Alvy slowly died, I was overcome by the smoke and the stench of burning flesh. The boy stood and watched for some time. In the flickering light, I could detect his faint look of boredom—before that hateful face disappeared in a wall of black smoke.

• • •

I wasn't sure how long I had passed out for—but when I awoke, the first signs of dawn were in the sky. I realized that I was facing heavenward; half of the sand had been pulled away from my living grave—and my hands were untied. To my right lay the girl, exhausted and clutching the hull of a broken toy boat.

As soon as she noticed that I was awake, the girl ran out of the small crater. In seconds, she returned with her tiny cooler, crammed full of juice cans and battered sandwiches. I wasn't able to eat the food, but swallowed the drinks she offered me. After a third can of pineapple juice, most of what I had drank came right back up again.

Despite the desperate look on the girl's face, we had to wait. She was in for a disappointment if she was expecting me to finish the digging. I was incredibly weak, and barely able to push the sand away from my legs.

Using the toy as a makeshift shovel, the girl resumed digging until I was free. Then all I could do was fumble on the sand, trying to coax the feeling back into my limbs. If our 12-year-old sadist decided to return, I wouldn't have been able to defend either of us.

I tried to drink and eat a little more, as the girl and I stared out at the ocean. The sky above was overcast, but it glowed with a sickly yellow hue. Storm weather.

"Can you talk?" I eventually asked her. "Did he hurt you?"

I knew absolutely nothing about children. The girl could have been in shock or was simply unable to speak at all. The waves started to pick up, and she became agitated again, scanning the beach and the higher ground. When we finally locked eyes, I understood her immediately. *Let's move.*

Before we left the burial site, I armed myself with the jagged neck of a broken beer bottle and covered Alvy's head with a towel.

"I'll be back, Alvy," I told my oldest friend. "I won't leave you out here."



Even though I was exhausted, I felt almost high. Minutes earlier, death had seemed to be just around the corner. Now I had a fighting chance. I would have to go into hiding, without a doubt—Rody had connections far and wide: and he wouldn't take kindly to me showing

up alive somewhere.

Rather than risk being spotted on the beach, we walked under the cover of the tall grass, sticking to a well-worn path that snaked through the foliage. I let the girl lead, trying to keep up as best as I could. I was hesitant—and worried about being surprised along the trail.

Although the girl looked underfed, she had surprising energy, often running up the trail to make sure the coast was clear. When I lagged too far behind, she would run back to me and grab a firm hold of my index finger, pulling me up to speed.

At one point, while the girl was far ahead of me, the brush became more tangled. I ended up veering off the path, taking an artery from the main trail. Before I knew it, I was back on the beach. The unmistakable hum of countless flies filled the air. Closer to the water, there were three dark mounds, each obscured by a thick cloud of insects.

I only recognized one of the corpses; all of them were buried neck deep, in a far-too-familiar manner. Rody was immediately identifiable by his tattoo—an octopus on his neck. A bow saw was imbedded in the middle of his head—as though someone had given up halfway through the grisly task. The other bodies, I assumed, were Swayne and Thornton. Blood was everywhere, and I was immediately sick.

But I didn't say anything until I saw the wreck of the *Angelcake*. The main fragment of the ship was imbedded bow-first in the sand, like a jet that had taken a nosedive. Smaller pieces of the wreck were strewn across the beach—including our illicit cargo; red and white pills dotted the sand everywhere I looked.

Whatever had happened to us, Rody wasn't behind it. And I was getting the feeling that the competition wasn't involved either. There was no decent explanation for any of it.

"This isn't real," I told myself. But then I felt that small hand grabbing my pant leg; the girl's wide eyes pleaded to me once again, urging me to move onward.



Back in the cover of the brush, we followed the trail up a steep incline. The grass and bushes started to give away to rocky terrain, with boulders the size of automobiles. Out of breath, I stopped and turned for a look back. From the higher vantage point, I saw that the "coast"

was actually either the tail end of a narrow island, or perhaps a long strip of peninsula. The grassy ridge ran like a spine down the landmass, dividing two strips of beach. I had been a sailor for eight years along the East Coast, and none of this looked remotely familiar.

The girl's progress slowed considerably as she crept around the larger stones. The wind was stronger here, whirling between the boulders. As we came to the last cropping of rocks, I heard distant wailing; at first, I thought it was gulls. The girl immediately crouched down in a crevice of rock, motioning me to follow suit. The sound, on second thought, was too low-pitched to be birds.

"What is that?" I asked her, dropping to my knees. The girl put a filthy hand to my mouth; she was shaking, and wouldn't move an inch further. She pointed towards the opening at the end of the crevice. I crawled forward on my hands and knees, still unsure of what I was hiding from.

From this new vantage point, I could finally determine that we were on an island. The landscape declined sharply towards a rock-littered beach, much rougher terrain than where I had been imprisoned with Alvy and Mikey. The wailing had become much louder.

I looked more intently and realized I was staring at a crop of hundreds of human heads. It was the hair that confirmed everything; some of the people had longer locks that whipped in the ocean wind. Many of the prisoners kept their mouths open, in a constant wail; the others were either sleeping or dead.

"God," I exhaled, overwhelmed by the sight before me. Then I saw the boy.

He was at the edge of the island, walking between the rows of heads. His hands grasped a broken oar, which he used to absent-mindedly whack across the odd person who was in his path. Behind him, the waves were starting to roll in with greater force, submerging some of the screaming faces.

I climbed to my feet and balled my fingers into two weak fists. Immediately, the girl grabbed my arms and pulled me back into hiding. Far down along the shoreline, the boy had taken to the air.

At first, he floated several feet above the sand, discarding the broken oar and stretching his arms outward. As he climbed higher into the sky, seemingly invulnerable to the wind, the prisoners' moans grew louder. The waves became increasingly violent, and more of the

prisoners disappeared underwater.

The boy was far above us now, as though touching the clouds; but he didn't appear to have noticed us. Instead, he cast his eyes out to the ocean. There, almost lost in the rolling waves, was a fishing boat that was only slightly larger than the *Angelcake*. It bobbed and spiraled in the water, drifting closer to a jag of half-submerged rock.

"I can't look," I told the girl, but found myself unable to turn away. The boat's erratic course made it appear as though the entire crew were asleep—perhaps as the crew of the *Angelcake* had been. Even if anyone on board had seen the rocks, they weren't able to stop the sickening collision that followed.

The boy had waited for the moment like a bird of prey. He rapidly descended to the surface of the water, where he retrieved a limp body in each hand.

Meanwhile, the storm was fading almost as fast as it had begun. As the waves subsided, the wreckage of several different boats rose to the water's surface. Amidst waterlogged boards, clothing and luggage, I saw the intact spine of an overturned lifeboat.

There wasn't much time. As the boy flew out for a second batch of victims, I scrambled down the rocky decline, pulling the girl's arm so hard that I thought it would come off in my hand. Thankfully, she followed without much protest, dragging her plastic cooler by its broken handle. I heard many voices as we ran across the beach. Some begged, some threatened, some wailed in defeat. I ignored them all.

With a minor struggle, I managed to upright the overturned lifeboat. Further down the beach, the boy had already accumulated a considerable pile of human beings. Some of the fishermen crawled weakly across the sand. The window of opportunity was closing.

I lost the girl for a moment; she was crouched beside the head of an elderly woman, who was miraculously still alive. The girl was digging madly with her bare hands. She may have been small, but that girl put up quite a struggle when I pulled her towards the lifeboat. I purposely avoided all eye contact with the old woman. The guilt nearly came back for a moment—but like so many other times in my life, I turned it off in seconds. Just like flicking a switch.

"There's no time, kid," I told the girl, who still flailed as I flipped her into the lifeboat with her cooler. "I'm sorry."

I pushed the boat until the water nearly reached my waist. As I

pulled myself on board, I cast another glance down the beach. One of the fishermen was fighting back. After a brief struggle, the boy took to the air once again, grasping the fisherman by his neck.

“Row,” I told the girl, as I removed one of the small oars from its clips and handed it to her. The boy was almost lost in the clouds before he dropped the fisherman to his death. I turned away before the body hit the beach and began to row as best as I could. The water was glass now, a photograph of a dead ocean. The effect was broken slightly by the wrecks accumulated along the rocks—several more fishing boats, and the barely submerged husk of a sizable yacht. Maybe the girl recognized one of the boats as her own.

I paused briefly to properly mount both oars, and then took over the rowing entirely. I never took my eyes off the boy after that. He likely saw us as well—but I think he had greater atrocities to commit that day. Even after the island disappeared from view, he still burned brightly in my mind.

• • •

We’ve been at sea for over a day now, moving where the current takes us. Micheline spoke this morning—long enough to tell me her name and pass along one other bit of information: “I’m hungry.”

I wish I could help her there. We should have taken more food. The little bit we did bring with us may have to last quite a while.

Neither of us has spoken since then; we should conserve every ounce of energy. So instead, I think about the beach, and try to decide what exactly I saw floating miles above the sand. But I won’t get too philosophical about it. Angels, devils, police, criminals, they all have it in for me.

But they’re going to have to wait. •



# From Talking Heads to Man-eating Ants: Daniel LeMoal Discusses His Passion for Writing

Roberta Laurie

Daniel LeMoal lives in Winnipeg with his wife Nora and their roommate Kato the Kat. During the day, he's a mild mannered Communications Assistant; but at night, he writes darker tales.

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*The rare times when I do sit down and attempt to write a more traditional Can-Lit story, it always goes to hell. Somehow, robots, riot-foam and man-eating ants get involved, and everything starts to degenerate...*

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**On Spec:** How would you describe your writing?

**Daniel:** I go for a journalistic style in my story writing. I try to keep it brief and interesting for the reader. In terms of ideas, I'm not bound to science fiction or horror. I like stuff that crosses genres or maybe doesn't fit into a genre at all. I like to push things as far as I can with whatever story I write. It's exciting to see where a story goes. Sometimes it ends up in a place I didn't expect.

**On Spec:** Do you find yourself pursuing similar themes in your stories?

**Daniel:** I often throw normal people into extraordinarily insane circumstances. I think that's an analogy for life. People have to deal with strange things happening to them all the time. Speculative fiction is just a safe environment to work out those stories. I like to put characters in a crucible, and see what they're made of.

**On Spec:** Is that why you enjoy writing speculative fiction?

**Daniel:** I think I've been drawn to speculative fiction because there aren't any limits. I can go off on any tangent, or imagine any world; but it's still human nature that draws people to these stories. They can imagine themselves and how they'd react to these circumstances. It has that grounding in humanity.

**On Spec:** Do you enjoy reading speculative fiction?

**Daniel:** I have a long list of writers I enjoy reading. Neil Gaiman. Stephen King. H.P. Lovecraft. Neil Stephenson. I read guys like that, and I'm in awe of what they put on the page.

• • •

#### **Daniel LeMoal's Top Ten Books:**

1. *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* – Susanna Clarke  
*Clarke has instilled in me a deep-seated fear of faeries that lingers to this day.*
2. *Lord of the Flies* – William Goulding  
*Standard equipment for any remote cabin.*
3. *A Clockwork Orange* – Anthony Burgess  
*Another sordid favourite of the high-school library.*
- 4 & 5. *Trainspotting* and *Porno* – Irvine Welsh  
*Divine comedies with scum-of-the-earth characters.*
- 6 & 7. *A Scanner Darkly* and *Ubik* – Philip K. Dick  
*Amphetamine-fuelled fiction.*
8. *A Confederacy of Dunces* – John Kennedy Toole  
*Chaucerian ribaldry of the highest order.*
9. *Cryptonomicon* – Neal Stephenson  
*One of those absolutely brilliant books that makes you insanely jealous as a writer.*
10. *High-Rise* – J.G. Ballard  
*Residents of an apartment barbecuing pets on their balconies. Fascinating stuff.*

*I've always been crazy over top tens.*

• • •

Daniel is humble and even self-deprecating when speaking about his writing. “*Beach Head* is only my third published short story,” he admits. But Daniel’s experience goes back to the day he received encouragement from a high school teacher, “You’ve got some talent. Keep at it,” his teacher told him. That’s when Daniel says, “A light went off and I thought, *I’m going to be a writer.*” Since then Daniel’s writing resume has expanded:

- Graduated from the University of Manitoba in 1992 with a Bachelor of Arts (major in English).
- Graduated from the Creative Communications/Journalism program at Red River College in 1996.
- Journalist for Portage la Prairie Daily Graphic (covering lots of Trans-Canada Highway car accidents and bake sales).
- Journalist for Winnipeg’s bi-weekly *Perimeter*.
- Moved on to twin Aboriginal papers: *The Drum* and *The First Perspective* after *Perimeter* folded.
- Wrote a failed novel, *Nerd Reich*
- Crossed over to “the dark side” a.k.a. public relations (Communications Assistant).

Daniel has paid his writing dues, but he draws a line between his non-fiction writing and the day in 2002 when he decided he was going to get back to writing fiction.

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**On Spec:** What made you return to writing fiction in 2002?

**Daniel:** I was frustrated with my journalism career at the time. I had just been laid off from an Aboriginal publication after they suffered some financial woes. While I was looking for a new full-time job and dealing with the usual freelance writing headaches—advertorials, etc—I dusted off an old idea and just let the story take me where it wanted to go. Fiction was what had attracted me to writing in the first place; journalism was just my attempt to earn a living.

**On Spec:** Has your experience as a journalist helped you write fiction?

**Daniel:** I have a lot of experience as a journalist, and that's a great way to build writing skills. But in journalism, there's never perfection on the page. It's always a rush to get stuff out. I had to become an expert on a subject in a day. I'd often have six stories due with three editors breathing down my neck. That part was frustrating. I never had time to properly research a topic and get all the angles. But in terms of improving grammar and learning persistence, journalism was a good exercise for me.

• • •

*It's never perfect on the first draft.*

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**On Spec:** What type of writing do you do as a Communications Assistant?

**Daniel:** I work with a school division, so I'm involved with everything from writing employee newsletters to editing and doing photography for bullying pamphlets. We also have a newspaper, so I go out and interview kids to learn about their thoughts and ideas. I never know what my day's going to be like. It depends on the people I talk to, and that's the neat part. The kids are always a real eye-opener. I listen to their stories, and it blows my mind what they're capable of.

**On Spec:** What advice would you give aspiring writers?

**Daniel:** Read like crazy and gather influences. You really need to get the nuance and rhythm of writing by immersing yourself in other people's work. Otherwise you're writing in a void, and you end up with stuff that doesn't relate to your readers.

• • •

*Not everyone will be part of your fan club.*

• • •

**On Spec:** How do you stay motivated to write?

**Daniel:** I like the process of starting with a story or world that only exists inside my head and watching it come to life on the page. That's the artistry in it. I guess if I weren't doing this, I'd be doing something like drawing or painting. I will always write whether I get published or not.

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### **Daniel's Top Five Graphic Novels:**

1. *From Hell* – Alan Moore

*Forget Johnny Depp. Moore gives us a thoroughly researched-take on Jack the Ripper.*

2. *The Poor Bastard* – Joe Matt

*Unflinching and autobiographical. Hilarious stuff.*

3. *Black Hole* – Charles Burns

*Hormone-crazy teens spread a mutating STD that causes grotesque deformities. Read it to your children. On second thought, maybe not.*

4. *The Sandman Series* – Neil Gaiman

*Gaiman is another author who is so ridiculously talented that his stuff makes me feel like committing hari-kari.*

5. *Akira* – Otomo Katsuhiro

*Mr. Otomo's sprawling epic features psionic teens battling in the ruins of Neo-Tokyo. Astounding artwork on every page.*

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**On Spec:** What inspires you?

**Daniel:** Music inspires me. Whether I'm in the car or at home writing, I always have something on. I have eclectic taste. Anything from Nine Inch Nails to The Beach Boys to old-school punk rock. But when I'm listening to music and writing, the music tends to impose a mood on

my work. I have to watch that.

**On Spec:** You've had a variety of jobs over the years. Have they also inspired your writing?

**Daniel:** Definitely. If I can say one thing about a terrible job, I hope it's, "At least it's given me a short story." I've been an overnight DJ at a radio station and a delivery driver. I've been everything from a K-Mart clerk to working on the kill floor of a slaughterhouse with lots of gigs in between.

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**Daniel's three worst jobs:**

1. Overnight radio newsreader/producer/tape-operator/satellite feed engineer: A solitary job that becomes all the more lonely when you realize you can't go to the bathroom for six hours.

2. Kill-floor/meat-packing plant worker: Blood, entrails, dismembered body parts, dangerous industrial equipment and lots of people doing drugs. A recipe for good times.

3. Chinese food delivery driver: Why do drunk people try to pay for their food with bottle caps?

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**On Spec:** *On Spec* was the first publication to accept one of your short stories. How did you feel when you found out *An Obtuse Argument Against Foreign Products* would be published in *On Spec*?

**Daniel:** I was over the moon. I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. It's a great memory. I'll never forget it. •

# These Are the Days I Know

Desi Di Nardo

the little floating particles swim like shrimp larvae  
away from my outstretched hands  
in this vacuum of liquid we coexist  
the bud green viscous entrails of this subsistence  
where there is little human harmony  
where pantomimic performances and  
the fantastic silence seem to emphasize this  
we are perched like big, black butterflies  
dormant and deceptive as bulls  
until the fall comes  
and we hit the floor like dead animals  
our strained tongues lolling in our heads  
the magic is made visible  
through the fantasy of space invaders  
trailing sparks in orange, volcanic suits  
topping the surface of Mercury with flowering seeds  
blushing and bruised by the dismal arrival of each sun •

"Before we leave, hear me out. It's Tilou's decision. Tilou's, not mine. If Tilou says she doesn't want to do this, well, then, we go directly home, we do. Do you understand?"

## Those Among Us

Lisa Carreiro

Olie the graveyard keeper did not like the dead. And as the sun reddened and lowered in the sky that evening, he liked them even less. He paced his apartment above the graveyard's storeroom, and peered out a window to scan the dimming street below. A dog trotting away and an old man with a stick were all that he saw.

"Oh, and here it is dusk. Time to be closing the gates, and they're not yet here, oh no."

His daughter Tilou brushed bread crumbs from the table and covered the cheese from their supper. Then she began to prepare a fire in the hearth.

Olie shook his head and turned to Tilou. "It's not as though it's winter and night has come on them suddenly. Surely there's enough daylight for them to arrive when the sun's still up. Even an hour before dusk would be enough time. Oh, do leave that hearth alone, dear child. The night will be mild enough we don't need to waste the wood. Course, last night we had rain and that chilly wind. Hmmmm. Thought it was autumn come early."

He paced to the back window that overlooked the graveyard. The orange flicker of a few flames dotted the darkening yard, and a light breeze gently tinkled delicate bells that hung beside some graves.



"Well, at least we've no one in the boneyard to shoo off before we shut the gates. Though why I'll bother to shut them, I don't know. That right gate's so rusted it's hard to close, and then I'll just be opening it again when they arrive. It's grown dark. Can't imagine they'll care to bury a soul now. Oooo and I'm wanting my bed, yes I am. And you ought to be preparing for bed, too. The busy day we've had! And three funerals tomorrow!"

He paced to the first window again and squinted. "Someone's coming. Too late to bury anyone. Though we had that fellow a few summers ago who got here after the bell tolled the final hour; but he was going to bury his old father by lamplight, he was."

Olie picked up a lantern and lit it, then stood holding the burning match. "'By lamplight,' I said. 'I'll be damned.' And he replied, 'If it suits you old man.' 'Old man,' he called me, and him with more white in his hair than I have in my beard."

Olie blew out the match. "Well, someone's here, Tilou. Leave the hearth alone."

Olie brushed dust from his faded trousers and ran his fingers through his brown hair before he set his cap on his head. He held the lantern up to regard Tilou.

She was small for a girl of fourteen, although her mother had also been a short woman, Olie reasoned. Tilou's sturdy plain brown boots, scratched but clean, peered out from beneath the hem of her late mother's trousers. The trousers were thinning in spots, but as yet unpatched. Only Tilou's blouse, deep blue with dark stitching, was relatively new.

"Look outside. How many are there?"

Tilou peered at the people who stood beside the open gates. One held a lantern by which she saw two others.

"Three, Fa."

"Any coffin?"

"No, Fa."

"No coffin." Olie scratched his chin. "That little boy who come by earlier, is he with them?"

"No, Fa."

Olie stared down the stone stairs. "I didn't think he would be. He seemed like a small fellow someone paid a halsou to, to deliver a message. Less than a halsou, I'd wager. A small fellow like that and his

trousers all patched, he'd deliver a message for perhaps a tinpiece maybe." Olie opened the heavy wooden door and held it for Tilou.

"And I should've shut the gates already. If I keep the gates open for one, next day someone else comes and says, 'But Olie, you kept the gates open for Fandac or Shim or... whomsoever. Why don't you keep the gates open for me?'" Olie held the lantern up to regard the trio. "Good evening."

The three nodded, and the tallest of them stepped forward. He was middle-aged, with a thin pinched face. His long black coat hung open and he held a silk top hat in his broad hands. Gold rings, two sparkling with gems, covered his fingers. A dark cravat of rich purple was neatly tied.

The other man was much younger, a youth actually, hatless, with fair hair worn long, and a blousy, pleated shirt open at the neck. His short, fashionable brown coat was also unbuttoned. The youth stood with his thumbs hooked into his trousers. Olie twitched, thinking how only a few years earlier a gentleman of that class would have worn a hat and proper tie. And he certainly wouldn't strut about with his thumbs jammed into his trousers like the youths who gambled with dice beside the tavern.

The youngest was just a boy, a lad of perhaps ten, Olie surmised. The lad regarded Olie with wide green eyes. He was also well-dressed, although his hair was unkempt, and he clutched a small cap in one hand and a lantern in the other.

"You haven't a body with you." Olie stepped back. "Course, it's after dark. But the grave's dug."

"We haven't come to bury a body," the tall man said, his raspy voice that of a man who drank too much whiskey.

"You haven't? But the grave's dug. Are you the ones who sent a little fellow earlier today? A small mite of a boy to deliver a message?" Olie scratched his nose. "The first moon's risen," he said to no one in particular.

"We sent the message, but we didn't ask to have a grave dug."

"You didn't?" Olie placed one hand on a rod in the iron gate and clutched it tightly.

"No. We said we required the services of the graveyard keeper."

"That's me."

"But we don't need a grave."

"Oh." Olie pulled a handkerchief from a pocket. "Oh. You're one of them. All right, then. You need my daughter, Tilou." He blew his nose loudly, then sniffed and stuck the handkerchief back in his pocket. "You need Tilou. I should have known when you weren't here before dark. Hnnnn, and I already dug a grave."

"Someone always needs a grave," the tall man said.

"Yes, that's true, that's true. Fine then. But Tilou's going to need her shawl if we're to be out at night. Not that it's likely to be cool or rain tonight. The first moon's up, see? Not a cloud to hide it. Tilou, get your shawl. Oh, and bring my coat, too. I might not need it, but then again, I might. While Tilou gets her shawl, I'll check the yard. Didn't see anyone back here earlier, but I always look again before I shut the gates. Sometimes a scoundrel comes in and hides. Children, usually. Sometimes adults. Just a lark. A dare. Go to the boneyard at night. Try not to be scared.

"But sometimes they're trouble, you know. Had a murderer hiding here one night. Tilou was a baby then. A murderer, imagine! I was walking through the yard with my lantern—this lantern, this very one—and I saw him. Could've killed my wife and child!" Olie blew his nose again. "But my wife, she died from the pox six years ago, and my daughter..." Olie drew in breath and clenched his hand tighter about the lantern's handle. "As you prob'ly know, she's never been the same. Ah, here's Tilou. I'll be back as soon as I've checked the yard. Tilou, pull that left gate shut."

Olie walked through the graveyard, waving his lantern slowly to and fro, peering behind tall headstones, and beneath broad-leafed bushes. On his return, he set the lantern at his feet. "Oh, you're still here. Fine, fine. I'll just pull this other gate shut," and he heaved the heavy wrought iron gate closed with a grunt. "I need some grease for that," Olie said as he picked up the lantern. "Tilou, are you all right? You don't have to do this you know."

"I know, Fa," she said. She held Olie's coat and her shawl. A few strands of her hair had come undone and lay across one cheek. The glow of the gaslight on the street revealed pox scars on her face. Tilou handed Olie his coat and draped her shawl over her shoulders.

"Fine, then," said Olie then turned to the tall man. "Before we leave, hear me out. It's Tilou's decision. Tilou's, not mine. If Tilou says she doesn't want to do this, well, then, we go directly home, we do. Do

you understand?"

The tall man nodded.

"Let's go then." Olie held his arm out to Tilou.

The tall man put his top hat on, adding to his great height. His companions flanked him on either side. They led the way toward the town, not glancing back to see if Olie and Tilou were following.

"We've four graves now. Three for tomorrow, and one more. Well, someone always needs a grave. Course, someone might not like where the grave's dug. Might want their Ma to be buried near a tree, or their brother buried beside his child or somesuch. And some don't want to be near another—'not near Moebi, he stole my potatoes,' or 'anyplace but beside one of the Argoth clan because their great uncle's dog bit my old grandfa's wooden leg.' Are you all right, Tilou?"

"Yes, Fa." Tilou's hair was coming undone.

The first moon's light brightened the narrow streets even where the buildings stood three stories high, and the gaslights were several paces apart. The second small moon became visible lower on the horizon as they rounded a corner. Olie chatted as they walked past stone buildings, inebriated revelers, and an old man walking beside a donkey.

The trio rounded another corner ahead, and walked down an unlit street. The brick paving gave way to dirt. The trio stopped in front of an empty building with boards over the windows.

Olie turned the lantern toward Tilou. Her complexion had grown wan. Blue shadows had set beneath her eyes. "Tilou, you can still refuse."

"I'm fine." She let go of Olie's arm.

The trio entered the narrow building. A stone relief above the rotting doorframe featured a motif of the two moons.

"Why that's Graveny signs." Olie stood on tiptoe to touch the relief with a calloused finger. "Large moon's a hunter's moon, small one's half darkened. Did you know, Tilou, both moons are made of rock? Even the greenish moon, they say. Rock, not jungles with people. Graveny signs, see Tilou?" Olie said pointing.

Tilou silently entered the building.

Olie took off his cap and slapped it against his thigh before he followed her in. Startled birds, which had been roosting on fallen beams, flapped overhead. The lantern's light revealed droppings, stones, and dried leaves on a dirt-covered floor.

"The old people used to say our ancestors live on the moons. Or the stars. Me, I don't care where the dead go, as long as they go. Some of them stay here after they're dead, right here among us." Olie peered around at the dilapidated house. "Among us in places like this."

The tall man scowled wordlessly, removed his hat and coat, and handed them to the boy. The youth took a thick candle from a rusted wall sconce and lit it from the boy's lantern before they descended a staircase. The wooden steps creaked beneath their feet. Olie pressed one hand against the cold stone wall. It was damp.

When they reached the cellar, the tall man shook his arms lightly. His head nearly touched the ceiling. He took the candle from the youth.

The cellar smelled like rotten potatoes and urine. Olie shook his head. "Even though we're here, you can go home," he said to Tilou. "You can still refuse." He looked at her in the flickering light. Shadows danced across her thin face, and the dimness heightened the dark circles beneath her eyes.

Tilou silently removed her shawl and folded it with great care before handing it to Olie. She rolled up her sleeves, and held her scarred, diminutive hands out in front of her.

Several minutes later the candle flickered, and the scent of cloves and oranges filled the dank cellar. A thin apparition, blue-white and wavering, appeared beside the tall man. Olie could vaguely discern a woman's face. Her mouth moved, but made no sound.

Tilou stepped unhesitatingly toward her. The apparition floated close to Tilou and reached to touch her with a diaphanous arm that passed through her. Tilou shivered, but stood her ground. "It's the Empress—the Empress Chidal," Tilou said.

"Why, she's been dead near ten years," Olie said. "Remember? Your mother held you up to see as her procession passed on the street."

Tilou turned to the tall man. "She wants to talk to you, sir."

"As I thought," he said quietly.

The small boy trembled and leaned against the damp wall.

"Dead ten years, and still less than a league away from where she's buried. I should think the dead would wander farther away," Olie said. "The Empress is in Perdu Cemetery, not mine."

"The Empress wants to know where the key is," Tilou said, her voice rising in a childish timbre.

"Key?" The tall man glared at the apparition.

Olie shook his head. "Any ghost should be able to find a key, I would think. The dead ask about many things, but usually it's the living who ask the dead about keys and such. 'Where is my brooch?' 'Who stole my best saddle?' Though we had that one dead fellow, asked about his boots. Remember that one, Tilou?"

"Yes, Fa."

"Tell the Empress," the tall man said, "that I have no knowledge of any key. A key? She's waking me nights to ask about a key?"

Tilou turned and spoke to the apparition, her voice inaudible.

"Yes, the dead ask many things, but it's usually the living who ask after objects. Except the poor fellow searching for his boots."

"She says it opens her trunk," and Tilou paused while the apparition floated through her and then away. "The trunk in her bedchamber. Where you weren't s'posed to be."

"Oh dear. Tilou, perhaps we should leave now." Olie's lantern cast its light on the corner where he'd last seen the apparition.

"Trunk?" The tall man opened and closed his mouth a few times before he spoke again. "I was never near her bedchamber! Tell her she is mistaken!"

Tilou listened, then shook her head. "No, sir. You seduced one of her ladies..."

"Tilou! Sir, she is too young to have this conversation!"

"...seduced her so that you could get into the Empress's chamber."

"How dare you!" The tall man threw the candle on the dirt floor, snuffing out the flame. "You impudent little girl! You are making up tales!"

"My daughter does not make up tales! Tilou, that is enough. Tell the Empress you are leaving now."

"Lady." Tilou turned in a circle searching for the apparition. It reappeared in a corner. "Lady, my father says... yes, Lady. Yes, Lady. The Empress says to tell you, sir, that the lady is named Argaith, and that she later married, uh, Jeroche of Graveny."

The tall man slumped against the wall. The little boy began to whimper.

"Hush imbecile!" The tall man raised his hand to the boy but did

not strike him.

"And she says she forgives you being in her bedchamber, and she don't mind that you stole her jade ring..."

"The Empress would call her favorite nephew a thief?"

"Oh, you're the Duke of Graveny." Olie nodded at the tall man and stepped closer to Tilou. "My wife was from Graveny. That's why my daughter has a little magic in her blood."

"The Empress says you were little favored, sir," Tilou said quietly with a respectful nod of her head. "She's asking where you put the key."

"The key, the key, the damnable key! I do not know!"

"Sir, Duke or not, you must not speak that way in front of my daughter!"

"Tell her to talk to Argaith!" the Duke roared.

Tilou whispered to the apparition. Olie saw the apparition stroke the girl's cheek in a motherly gesture. Tilou laughed, and the apparition leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"Tilou!" Olie started toward her. "Enough!"

Tilou's tiny hands flew as she gestured and spoke, inaudible but earnest. She turned toward the wall where the tall Duke was slumped. In the faint light her face was childlike. The pox scars were inflamed. Her lips were parched, and beads of perspiration appeared on her white forehead. Her dark blue shirt was soaked.

"Tilou!" Olie grabbed her by the wrist. "Tell the Empress you're leaving now!"

"Tell her no such thing, child!" The Duke grabbed Olie's sleeve and tore it, pulling him away from Tilou.

Tilou stood giggling beside the apparition. "You sold that jade ring, the one from far Shino."

"Sold?"

"To a man to pay for—for the Empress's murder." Tilou looked to her father.

"Always murder, it seems. Enough, child. Duke, if you know any about this key, say it now. But we're to leave. My daughter cannot do this any longer."

"She forgives you for her murder," Tilou said, her voice tiny and weak.

"I did not..." the Duke pleaded with the apparition.

"She forgives you, but asks you to get the key."

"The damnable key again! I have no key! Perhaps you should ask dear Lady Argaith about the bloody key!"

"You kept the key so that no one else could open the trunk and find her ring missing." Tilou fell on her knees.

"No! Tilou!" Olie dropped the shawl and coat as he rushed forth through the wavering apparition. "No more!" With his free arm, he lifted Tilou and walked her to where the coat and shawl lay. "We are leaving now, Duke." He set his lantern on the floor, and pulled his coat over Tilou.

"She forgives you, sir." Tilou looked up at the Duke. Pox marks covered her face and hands. "She only wants for her granddaughter to be able to open the trunk."

"Tell her they can bloody break the lock."

"Oh no sir, no, they cannot. You know the lock is made of gold and the trunk is priceless."

Olie wrapped Tilou's shawl over the coat and hugged her. "You're done, Tilou. You've done enough."

The Duke ran to the apparition and battered at it while he howled wordlessly. The small boy dropped the hat, coat, and lantern on the dirt floor, clapped his hands over his ears, and ran up the stairs crying. His light footsteps could be heard above them racing out the door. The youth shivered, and drew his coat snugly about himself.

"Aunt!" the Duke cried at the wavering apparition, "I have not taken your damnable key! And if you were murdered, I certainly gained nothing from your death. Argaith..." His voice broke.

Tilou sat up hugging Olie's coat and her shawl closely about her. "She forgives you, sir." Her voice regained strength. "And the Empress says," she giggled, "she does not give a damn what your feelings were for Lady Argaith."

Olie mumbled and helped Tilou stand up.

"By my mother's bones," the Duke whispered. "By the hearts of my ancestors." He stared at the apparition. "Argaith. She..." The Duke's voice was a whisper. His face was white. "I am a fool. She stole your key."

The apparition slipped past Olie and Tilou. Olie felt a shock and brief chill. Tilou whimpered and reached for the apparition as it slipped by.



"No, Tilou," Olie said gently, and grasped her hand.

The apparition hovered near the Duke. "Aunt," he whispered hoarsely, "Jeroche of Graveny came into some wealth after your death. He said—he said a distant relation left him a small estate. Then he and Argaith... Aunt? Are you there?"

"Sir?" Tilou looked at the Duke. "Sir, she's gone to find Argaith."

"Argaith? Yes, yes, keep Argaith awake at night!" The Duke staggered like a drunken man. "Ask Argaith where... Argaith," he whispered. "Dear, sweet, horrible Argaith!" The Duke raced up the steps. His hat and coat still lay on the floor.

Olie led Tilou to the stairs. "It's seldom happy," Olie said. "Always there's trouble when the dead stay among us. How are you, Tilou?"

Tilou's face was still ashen, her eyes sunken. "I'm much better, Fa," she said in a stronger voice.

The youth stood looking bemused, staring at the spot where the Empress had last appeared. Then he blinked and buttoned his coat with shaking fingers. Like a somnambulist, he lifted the Duke's clothes from the floor, brushed them off, and folded the coat over his arm. He picked up the lantern the boy had dropped. He stared at Tilou. "I—I should see you home."

"Jade comes from Shino," Olie said to Tilou as though the young man hadn't spoken. They climbed the stairs slowly, Olie holding Tilou's elbow. "Wealthy people buy jade from merchants at the Graveny shipyard when the great ships arrive."

The youth peered discreetly at Tilou as they left the building and began to walk up the street. Her scars were still red and angry. "Miss?" he ventured. He reached out a hand as though to touch her.

"She ain't dead," Olie snapped. "She's as alive as you and me." He stared ahead, frowning. They walked in silence until they reached the lit, brick-covered street. Then Olie spoke in a soft voice. "I was a quiet man. I said only what needed saying, and no more. Then my wife died and Tilou—Tilou ready to leave me, too. I sat beside her bed, wiped her head with cool water, fed her sips of broth. And I talked. I talked of the spider over the mantle. Talked of her mother. Talked of the moons and stars. Outside, the dead—they piled up in front of the gates. At night I'd bury them all in a hole, my face covered with a kerchief soaked in vinegar. Then I'd rush back to Tilou, take the kerchief off, and start talkin' again. And I never stopped talkin'."

He was silent again briefly and their footsteps were all that could be heard on the street.

"Three funerals tomorrow and the sun will rise soon..." Olie's voice was soft but expressive. "Hmmm, those broken bricks in the street, I didn't notice them on the way here... Perdu Cemetery down that road. Two grave diggers and a keeper there. That's where they bury the rich. No paupers' grave there... Tilou, remind me to put grease on our gate... What a sculpture over that doorway. Looked like what you see over the old mansions in Graveny."

They stopped in front of the graveyard gate.

The youth fumbled with the coat, hat, and lantern, then looked down at the street.

"I—I've no money with me, sir."

"No money. The poor come to bury their dead and all but the poorest of 'em leave some turnips or firewood. Then you others come..." Olie opened the door. "Good night to you then."

Tilou preceded him, and stepped slowly up the stairs to their apartment.

"No, they never have a coin, not even a tinpiece. They need to talk to their dead, but after they've finished, well... Always trouble when the dead stay among us. Tilou, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Fa." She hung her shawl and Olie's coat on pegs at the top of the stairs. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes clear. She tucked errant strands of her hair behind her ears.

Olie set the lantern on the table, sat down, and regarded Tilou. He shook his head. "Tilou, no more of this. Your mother, she's gone. Six years gone. She won't be one of those you see."

"The Empress is ten years gone." Tilou sat across from Olie.

"But your Ma, she died from the pox. They always leave, those who die of sickness. Those among us who shouldn't still be here, well, they're trouble."

"The Empress, she was confused." Tilou pursed her lips.

"Been dead that long, they get confused."

"I told her how to find the doorway to the next world, but she wouldn't listen."

Olie tapped his calloused fingers on the table. "No more Tilou. You must stop helping these people."

"I must help them, Fa," Tilou whispered. "The dead, they need

someone to speak for them."

"No, Tilou!" Olie slapped his open palm on the table. "One day you might not come back. I don't want you leaving with those dead!"

"I always come back, Fa. I always hear your voice. And they need me, those dead." Tilou's eyes were wide. "They need me, Fa."

"Hnnn." Olie stood and peered out the back window. The graveyard was silent. The breeze had stilled. Olie grimaced when he spoke again. "Then I'll go with you. Every single time." He blew out the lantern. "It's nearly morning. Go to bed, Tilou. Pull the shutters tight so the sun don't wake you. I'll call at your door when I need you to rise."

Tilou stood on tiptoe to give Olie a peck on his cheek. She walked softly to her room and shut the door.

Olie waited until he heard her pull the shutters closed. Then he walked into his own room and sat on his bed. The springs creaked. He took off his cap and set it beside him. He untied his bootlaces, and then sat for a moment with them undone. He tugged at his torn sleeve. He stared at the wall for a few moments, opening and closing his mouth as though to speak, before he finally reached down and pulled his boots off. Then he buried his face in his hands, and wept silently. •

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He continued to climb; and reaching the upstairs hallway, he could see straight down the length of it into the main bedroom. Cautiously, he approached the threshold, and peered in from a foot away. She was near the balcony doors, looking out; but she turned to stare at him, arms crossed.

## The Devil's in the Details

Kevin Cockle

"Okay. That, Stanley," the occultist said, index finger pointing at the woman in the room, "THAT is not your wife."

Stanley stood beside the man at the threshold of the bedroom door. His eyes narrowed as he stared. He felt vertigo, felt as though he might actually faint. His right hand went reflexively to the wall for support.

"I don't know what it is," the occultist continued. He was almost speaking to himself now, fascinated by the thing in the room. His silver nose-ring looked out of place on a face that supported black horn-rims and close-cropped, office-appropriate hair. The rest of him was street, however: baggy leather jacket, camo pants and heavy work boots, black t-shirt. His right hand rubbed at his left cheek as he squinted and thought. "Look at the way she's stopped flickering. She's here, Stanley, I mean, she's here; she's flesh. Whatever it is, it's fully corporeal now."

"You're sure?" Stanley croaked, unable to look away.

"Yeah—that's flesh. She's got mass—look, she's even breathing..."

"No I mean... I mean you're sure that's not my wife?"

The occultist—Jim Grimes—pushed his glasses up with his pointing finger and looked hard at Stan. "It is most definitely not your wife, Stan. Don't worry—the wards are in place around the balcony windows

and this door. She can't get out as long as you refuse permission. And for Christ's sake—don't even think of giving her permission."

"Why now?" Stanley whispered. "She's been dead twenty years. Why now?"

"You got any coffee?" Jim asked.

A boiled kettle, a noisy grind of Viennese blend beans, and a four-cup filter-through later, Jim Grimes and Stanley Weatheral sat in Stan's kitchen. The view through the kitchen window-doors was pleasantly suburban. Across a substantial yard and a fence, a bike path cut through a wide lawn separating Stan's house from the houses across the way. A September wind whittled away at the yellow leaves of the poplars, and low-angle sunlight was beginning to cast the long shadows of autumn dusk. Stan fiddled with his gold wedding band; Jim picked up on it.

"How long did you say it's been again?" Grimes asked, raising his eyebrows and nodding at Stan's ring while taking a sip of hot coffee.

"Twenty... Twenty-two years," Stanley said. "I know. It's a long time to wear the ring... after."

"Yeah, well. Look, Stanley, I'll be honest with you: I'm not prepared for this. When you brought me in, I was thinking poltergeist all the way—but this? Poltergeists don't materialize. It's not a ghost, it's not a... I don't know what it is. But whatever—somehow, somehow, some spirit has latched onto your grief and used it to coalesce. That's freaky. Freaky dangerous. If you don't mind me asking—how did she..."

"Car accident," Stan winced, his left eye blinking involuntarily. "They called it an accident: the guy was drunk."

"Damn. Okay, well—that fits a bit. Violent, untimely death. You couldn't have been very old—what—twenty?"

"Twenty two. She was twenty four."

"So the way she—it—the way it looks upstairs..."

"That's the way she was, back then."

"Damn."

Floorboards creaked: she was moving upstairs, pacing. Stanley looked at the ceiling.

"Hey," Jim said, eyeing Stan with concern. "Listen to me. You don't want to be interacting with that thing, okay? It's using you—your feelings for—what was her name?"

"Lori,"

“Lori... it’s using your emotional energy to muscle-up here. Cut it off. Close the door up there and ignore it. Who knows, maybe that’ll be enough to make it go away.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah—not a chance. I’m gonna check into a few things—but the stuff I need to read isn’t exactly on the internet. I’ve got to do some traveling and check some original sources. I’ve got a friend at the University of Madrid who can hook me up. Spain’s definitely the place to start with this kind of thing: the Inquisition wasn’t all bullshit. Some of that stuff was gold.”

Here it comes, thought Stanley. “How much?” He asked.

“Five grand. Seven grand—make it seven.”

“Seven thousand dollars?”

“Hey, Stan—I’m gonna be taking a hit on this too: this is a little bigger than me making rent all of a sudden. But I need to leave the country, I’ve got to...”

“Fine. Just... just get rid of it.”

“I’ll do my best, man.”

Coffee finished, cheque in hand, Jim left with a reassuring wave, scuffing across the driveway to his ancient motorcycle. The bike wheezed, coughed, then thundered to life, rattling windows as the kid shot down the street. As the sound diminished, Stan realized that he was now alone, with his dead wife, or reasonable facsimile thereof, and he’d been given one clear instruction: *close the door*.

Swallowing, Stan went to the stairs and stood for a full minute at the base, listening.

He could hear her pacing.

His heart galloped, and his mouth felt sticky inside.

He climbed the carpeted stairs as quietly as he could; but as he reached the landing, he could hear the master bedroom go completely silent. He could hear her, and she could hear him.

He continued to climb; and reaching the upstairs hallway, he could see straight down the length of it into the main bedroom. Cautiously, he approached the threshold, and peered in from a foot away. She was near the balcony doors, looking out; but she turned to stare at him, arms crossed.

She was as he remembered: a slender girl, straight legged, straight backed. Her black hair was loose and shoulder-length, with bangs.

Long dark eyelashes; brown eyes the colour of black coffee. They had made an odd couple at first glance—he, bearish in comparison, lumbering almost. She'd liked his size, telling him "I like feeling small when we hold hands." She wasn't beautiful—neither was he—but the difference was that only he cared. When they went out—when she dragged him to some pub or nightclub—she moved about effortlessly in the place, unfazed by the crowd, un-intimidated. Stanley never felt as though he belonged in such places; Lori always assumed she did.

He had known her for six years, had been married for two, and then she was gone.

She wore the purple turtleneck t-shirt and dark slacks she had on the day of her final drive. Bare feet pink against beige carpet. Stan wondered what she'd done with her shoes.

He cleared his throat. "I'm... I'm just going to close the door," he mumbled. "Do you... I'm... just going to close the door."

"Stan," Lori said. Her voice was high, belling, reminding him suddenly of what it was like to hear her laugh. "If you close that door, it'll mean you're trying to kill me. Do you understand that?" Lori's eyes glittered; and for the first time, Stanley could sense clearly that this was not his wife. "If you try to kill me, Stan, then that means it'll be me or you. To the death. Do you really want those terms?"

Stan backed away from the door, left eye twitching.

And Lori pounced.

It was a large bedroom, and her way was partially impeded by the king-size bed between them—but she covered the space with what seemed like one fluid, hurtling motion. When Stan was a kid, he remembered a trip to the zoo wherein one of the veteran lion-keepers was training a new recruit. When the new guy had gotten too close to the bars, the lioness had bounded across the full expanse in a heartbeat, slamming face-first into the bars and paralyzing the rookie with fear. In the wild, there would have been no hope—no chance for a shot, no chance for a scream. The lethal efficiency of it had taken Stan's breath away back then; and now, he was having trouble breathing all over again.

Lori slammed into the invisible barrier of the warded threshold—hands up above her head, lips curled back from bared teeth. She made no noise, but the intensity of her sheer bloodlust was like a silent snarl. Her eyes blazed with alien rage—not hatred exactly, but a fierce longing

to get at Stan; to get at him, and kill him, for reasons only she could say. She struggled against the barrier until Stan could smell something like ozone—he remembered the odor from a trip to the science center as a kid—that goofball technician demonstrating a Tesla coil to the amazement of one and all. Lori grimaced, then pushed herself away, stalking back into the room, and hugging her ribcage.

Stan worried that she'd been hurt. His eyes were drawn to the curve of her modest backside in her black slacks as she stomped angrily around, perhaps shaking off pain. He opened his mouth guppy-like, but said nothing. He decided to leave the door open, but he'd go downstairs, do his best to ignore her from there. It seemed a prudent compromise. Or perhaps more accurately, a stalemate.

He backed slowly away; she turned in the room, still hugging her body, glaring at him with those dark, shining eyes. She watched him all the way to the stairs, maintaining eye contact until he was out of sight.

Stan stumbled into the living room and fell onto his couch. She had his clothes up there; she had the main bathroom. Like it or not, he had a roommate until Jim got back, whenever that would be. Stanley could sleep on the couch, could feed himself, and if he hurried, he could still make it to the mall and back, pick himself up some extra shirts and underwear. He had work tomorrow, like any other day, and planning to handle these little material setbacks was bracing for him. *I can do this*, Stan thought. To prove it, he picked up the phone, and called a cab to take him to WalMart.



Stan awoke the next morning to the sound of his upstairs shower running. Cringing up off the couch, he rubbed his thinning brown curls and arched his back. He ground coffee, made eggs, read the morning paper. He showered in the small bathroom in the basement, and selected one of the new white shirts he'd bought; he'd go with the same diagonal-striped tie and black pants he'd had last week. He was ready to go by 7:30 AM, early for the bus as usual, but he paused. Leaving the Lori-thing in his house unattended was easier contemplated than done.

He made his way cautiously, but resolutely, upstairs. For some reason, he thought of the bad root canal he'd had when he was fifteen. The



nerve had rotted, and they'd had to undo the crown, extract the tooth, scrape out the infection and hollow out the socket. A hole that big in his mouth—so raw and tender and empty—he just could not stop prodding it with his tongue. This room, with its open door, was going to be a lot like that damn tooth had been—he could see that now.

Arriving at the threshold, he watched as Lori crossed the bedroom floor, toweling her head. She wore his blue terrycloth bathrobe, dragging the hem along the carpet, her arms lost in the gigantic sleeves. She stopped when she noticed him, and fixed him with that flat gaze—like her eyes were dimes. Her hair glistened wet and black at her shoulders, down her back.

“What?” She said, after he had been staring for too long.

“You're not her,” Stanley said, as much for himself as anything else.

“So you keep saying. You know what Stanley? You're not exactly the man I remember, either. You ever think about that?”

Stanley swallowed, frowned. He had to admit, he hadn't.

The bus-ride in to work was uneventful, rapid for a Monday. He didn't need to be there until nine, but he always left early in the hope of getting a seat. Stanley didn't own a car—the deaths of his parents, and his wife, due to car accidents occurring within the span of just a few months had left him morbidly afraid of driving. He was fine with cars themselves; but deep down, he knew that to drive was to die. As long as he stayed a passenger, he was safe.

He was an hour early for work, turning on the lights to reveal dozens of empty cubicles. The Calgary office of Reconciliations and Audit for Rev Can, the IDA, Immigration, and a host of other governmental and NGOs: Stanley was a senior clerk.

He'd normally stay an hour or so after the workday ended.

To the rest of the people on the floor, most of whom were half Stanley's age, he appeared to be some sort of extension or feature of the office. Like a fax machine, or a ficus.

He set down to work, and gratefully disappeared into the fathomless depths of minutiae, distracting himself with the sheer volume of detail in front of him.

• • •

He brought home Chinese, enough for two, but when he went

upstairs, he found she'd turned the lights off.

The door to the bedroom yawned open, allowing in a broad swath of light from the hallway—but with the curtains drawn, the room was uncomfortably dark, and eerily silent.

He edged closer, peering in towards the sliding doors of the closet. They were open as well, revealing a deeper shade of black.

"Lori?" Stan said, his voice barely a notch above a whisper, but sounding loud to him all the same.

*She can't get out, Jim had said. As long as you refuse permission.*

Closer. His face was just inches from where he guessed the invisible membrane to be, close enough for him to get an angle on the bathroom door.

A pale hand and delicate wrist shot out from his right as Lori stood flat and still against the wall. Her fingers gouged at his chest as he reeled back, tripping and falling over his feet to land stunned on his back.

She'd torn his shirt, ripped him bloody beneath. Panting, he covered the wound with his hand, and felt the slippery wetness spreading. She stood above him, seething in the doorway, unable to pursue.

But her hand had come through. Her hand had come all the way through. If she'd caught him by the throat...

Stanley scrambled back, feeling sick with fear, getting to his feet and staggering down the stairs in blind panic. He looked around in the kitchen for something to wash the scratches with, all the while thinking: *She put her hand through the doorway!*

He called the occultist's cell phone three times: out of service range. Each time, he left the same message: "Jim, this is Stan Weatheral, please call when you get this. Lori reached PAST the ward. Part of her got out of the room. Is that supposed to happen? Please call, thanks."

He couldn't sleep at his traditional bedtime of 9:00 PM, so he turned on the television, flipping through to the History Channel. Something about Rommel was half over, but it was followed by a profile of the Focke-Wulf 190—the machine, the pilots, and the role both played in World War II. Stanley found it oddly comforting—the FW 190 was his favourite fighter-plane; and although he knew all the specs, the recitation of them had a soothing effect. Focusing on technical details, Stan could get back in control. He never stopped thinking

about Lori, but he was able to compartmentalize to some extent. His panic subsided.

At 11:00 PM, when the last Focke-Wulf had gone down in defense of the Reich, he knew what he had to do.

He didn't try to muffle his footsteps as he climbed the stairs—he was fine with her hearing him. When he reached the second floor, he could see that the light in the bedroom was on.

She was at the window, across the room. He knew how fast she could move, but he had the jump on her. She was still smiling when he reached into the room and grabbed the doorknob. Her expression changed to outraged shock; but before she could react, he slammed the door closed.

“STANLEYYYYY! OPEN THE GODDAMNED DOOR, RIGHT NOW! DO YOU HEAR ME? STANLEY!”

He stood for over a minute at the door, listening to her wail and threaten. When he became convinced that she wasn't coming through, he trudged back to the living room, knowing that he was in for the worst sleepless night of his life.

When he finally slipped into fitful, tossing, exhaustion-sleep, he dreamed of his parents. His mom was a history prof at the University, his dad a local commercial TV producer. In the dream, he and they were driving back from a Christmas party, with Stan in the backseat. He felt terrified for them up front—the whole dream was simply the crushing onslaught of dread he felt, even though nothing much was happening. And then, up ahead, he could see the building crest of a monster tidal wave surging towards them, blotting out the stars as it loomed ever higher and closer.

He awoke with tears in his eyes.

Tuesday, and Wednesday, he kept the bedroom door closed—didn't even venture upstairs. He'd bought more clothes, stocked up on toiletries; things were getting back on track. He did ironing in front of the television, and basically operated out of the living room. He watched his history shows, and was back on tempo for 9:00 PM shutdown. Lori was behaving herself; he didn't even hear her pacing around much anymore. By Thursday, when he got home, he was even optimistic that Jim would return soon with a spell or an artifact or whatever the hell he was looking for, and fix this mess. But that night, as he was eating an overcooked meatloaf and runny mashed potatoes, he heard her calling.

"Stan?" Her voice wasn't strident—not the vicious shriek she'd had the other night. "Stan? Are you there?"

Stan made his way to the base of the stairs, looked up.

"Stan?"

He cleared his throat. "Yeah. Yes, I'm here."

"Truce? Please?"

He climbed the stairs to the landing, frowning. "Are you... are you okay?"

"I'm fine Stan. I'm fine. This isn't easy for me either, you know."

That comment of hers about him not being the way she remembered had captured his imagination; he did find that intriguing. He advanced to the second floor hallway, looking down its length to the closed brown door.

"Can we talk, Stan?" Lori said, not raising her voice at all. She must have known he was in the hallway. "Just talk. I'll back away from the door if you like."

He took a firm grip on the handle, turned it, and opened the door an inch. He was ready to jump back if necessary; but he could see her across the room near the closet. He opened the door and stepped back. She was wearing the purple turtleneck t-shirt and dark slacks again. "I could use some new things," she smiled. "If you're going to keep me like this."

"I'm not keeping you," Stan scowled. She nodded, turned, headed slowly for the bed with her hands behind her back, and crawled onto it. Sitting cross-legged, she pursed her lips, considering him. She had dark circles under her eyes, and she looked frazzled, paler than she'd been. "Are you sure you're all right?" Stan asked, before he could take the question back.

"No, not exactly."

"Are you hungry? I've made some of the worst meatloaf known to man downstairs, but there's plenty of it."

"No. At least, I don't think I'm hungry. I don't really know."

"How can you not know?" Stan said, genuinely curious. He grunted as he lowered himself to a seat with his back to the wall, knees drawn up to his chest. The whole scene reminded him of when they had been teenagers, talking in her room at her parents' house. This had been his parents' house; she was in their room. The symmetry seemed clear.

"You brought me here. You tell me."

"I didn't bring you here. Jim says that you're... you're like a hijacker. You're not really Lori, you're just some spirit that's..."

"I hate that 'you're not Lori' crap. Who the hell else would I be?"

"You don't talk like her, you don't... well, you do look like her, but you don't carry yourself like her."

"You've had a memory inside your head for twenty years, Stan. You've pulled the strings on that memory, made me say what you wanted me to say, do what you wanted me to do. Don't you get it? It's not that I don't talk like her; it's that I don't talk like you anymore. Maybe if you'd let me breathe, you'd realize I'm still Lori. Your Lori."

"You're just tricking me," Stan said, looking at his big, clumsy hands; looking at his wedding ring. "Trying to anyway. I'm not even supposed to be doing this much with you."

"Why? Because Jim Grimes told you not to? Didn't he also tell you he had no idea what I am?"

Stan shrugged.

"Anyway," Lori continued. "Tell me about yourself. We've got catching up to do."

"Come on."

"I'm serious. I've been listening to you, you know. The only people who call are telemarketers. You never go out; you work almost all the time. After your parents and after me—you just crawled back into your shell, didn't you? Damn it Stan, that's true, isn't it?"

Stan looked at her hard, trying to see if she was on the attack, but he didn't think so. If anything, she looked concerned. Intense.

It had been twenty years since he'd talked with a woman about anything other than documentation or procedure or compliance issues. And the truth was he had only been getting to know Lori—really know her—when she was taken from him. How did he know what she'd sound like under these circumstances? Who was he to say?

"I'm not giving you permission to leave that room, is that clear?" Stan said. Lori nodded.

So they talked.



Friday after work, Stan made tolerable poached bluefish with rice, and brought home a bottle of wine. Instead of TV, he went upstairs to talk with Lori, pouring her a glass of Merlot and setting it inside the

door while she stood well back. She looked better than she had, more lively, and every once in a while, she barked with laughter at her own humour. The sound made Stan smile, such a happy, robust, carefree noise. He couldn't remember the last time he'd let loose with unrestrained laughter himself.

Around 11:00 PM, Lori said, "I'm sorry. For hurting you the other night."

Stan hadn't forgotten, as such; but he'd backburnered the memory. He could still feel the itch of those deep nail tracks.

"I was wondering when you were going to apologize," Stan said. Lori looked at him for three heartbeats, then burst out laughing.



"I'm back!" Stan shouted as he came in the front door. He'd put in a few hours on Saturday, just organizational hours, making sure he hadn't missed anything during the week, or made any mistakes with the cases he had completed.

"Lor?" He jogged up the steps to the second floor, saw the open bedroom door. "Lori?" The room seemed unusually still; Stan hoped that he hadn't woken her from a nap. When he approached, he noticed something wet congealing on the carpet and dripping low on the wall adjacent to the door. Kneeling to inspect it, he could see that it was a thin, fibrous sheet of some transparent material hanging inside the doorframe and splattered outwards onto the hallway carpet. He recalled a nature show he'd watched detailing the birth of a horse, showing the bag-like birth sack the foal came out in, and all of a sudden, he *knew*.

"Lori?" He stepped into the bedroom, head on a swivel. He slid open the closet doors, praying she was playing one of her pranks. He slammed open the bathroom door, slapped on the lights. Outside, the sun was low in the afternoon sky as he approached the balcony windows.

She was gone.

She had broken the wards.

His permission hadn't entered into it.

In a stunned fog of panic and an overwhelming sense of ignorance, Stanley retreated to the living room. He looked at the phone, but

Grimes hadn't returned any of his calls; there was no reason to suspect that he might respond to this one. More importantly, Stan had learned from twenty years of bureaucratic protocol, that when confronted with sudden confusion or potential error, the best thing to do was often nothing. Don't compound the problem with rash action. Wait, think, obtain more information. He sat back on the couch, letting his brain generate scenarios, letting himself wallow in the crashing surf of his rising anxiety.

In an hour and a half, the doorbell rang. Stan didn't react right away, but the second ring got him to his feet. He stepped mechanically to the door, feeling unfocused and detached. Swallowing, he opened the door, and there was Lori, standing in front of the screen door, waiting and smirking.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Lori said. Her purple turtle-neck t-shirt was torn on the right sleeve, and her hair was disheveled. On her left forearm, there was a smear of blood—not her own. The sun was setting, and it was chilly; Stan could see gooseflesh perking up on her bare arms.

He stepped back from the door, remembering some protocol pertaining to vampires: *don't give her permission.*

She laughed as if she could practically read his thoughts from his face. She opened the screen door and stepped in. Stan had run out of room; the foyer closet was at his back, and Lori was advancing on him.

She put her arms around his neck and pulled him down onto a hard, warm kiss. Her mouth tasted like pennies. Like the way his mouth had tasted, after that botched root canal had left that gaping hole in his gum.

She pulled away after what seemed like a twenty-year embrace, taking him by the hand and leading him slowly to the living room. "I'm going to need some new clothes," she said conversationally. "These are ruined."

At the couch, she turned and raised her arms, eyes come-hithering with a playful malice. He approached, lifted her shirt from her body, focusing his gaze over her left shoulder. She took his hands as she once had done, and gently guided them round her back, inviting him to work her bra clasp. His big, clumsy fingers fiddled with it, but she was patient, smiling up at him as that first, dimly remembered lesson finally paid off.

She took him to the couch, then to the floor.

She refused to go back to the bedroom. She was never going back to that room.

She clawed his back and drew blood.

He pulled her hair, like he had a wild mare by the mane—just hanging on during a headlong gallop. He was passenger, and driver both.

He screamed when he came: he had never screamed before. He'd always just shuddered and groaned quietly, as though fearful of being caught.

Lori wasn't fearful of anything.



They walked along the river after he got home from work one day—Stan couldn't immediately recall the date. The days had been like that recently: hazy, blurring, non-specific. He'd even called in sick once or twice—unheard of. Lori said they owed him.

The trees across the river, on the south-side cliff, were absolutely breathtaking. Golden poplar leaves gave way to patches of auburn mountain ash, veined by blue spruce in a wild impressionistic splash of autumnal colour. Lori curled her arms around his left arm as they strolled; she wore her new camelhair jacket, contrasting with and complementing her dark features. The path was busy, but not overly so. The odd jogger or brisk-walker passed them from time to time.

"Where do you go, during the day?" Stan asked. He didn't really expect an answer, but he felt the right thing to do would be to ask. He could do that much.

She squeezed his arm, bumped her head against his shoulder. "Stan. You don't want to know that. Or do you? Do you really want to know? You want to come-with sometime?" She chuckled; he winced. He had cancelled the paper and made a point of never watching local news. If he ever came across some report of mysterious carnage that had the cops stumped, he'd be sick, he knew it.

"I'm out of the room now Stan," she continued, her voice soft. "The rules are different. You shouldn't ask me—you know better." She paused, frowning her brow as she thought. "It doesn't have to be all about me though. Some stuff is for you, right? Like this, this is nice



right? Just keep it simple Stanley. You look after me, and I'll look after you. Doesn't get any simpler than that."

Two jogging girls were up ahead, closing fast; they'd pass by Stan's left flank in a matter of moments. Leaves clicked as they tumbled across asphalt, blown by a low ground-breeze. Damp piles of leaves in the first stages of decay gave off a rich, musty odor. Stan was convinced he never would have noticed these details before, as though Lori had awakened all his long-slumbering senses. He was worried in a vague, distracted way, about his lack of presence-of-mind concerning work, however. Those details he normally had at hand at all times: he needed such awareness to manage the complexity. *This must be what's meant by "living in the moment"*, Stan thought. *This must be what they mean.*

He realized he'd never been happier. Never.

And as soon as that realization struck, he was gripped by a profound terror, and sadness.

And when that settled, all that was left was the old familiar dread.



"Hey Stan, glad you could make it," Jim Grimes stood up from the booth to shake hands. He wore his long leather jacket over a black wool sweater, wore his jeans tucked into the tops of well-traveled work boots. Stanley gave the bakery/café a quick once-over: small; family-run; urban and arty. It was only a block and a half from work, but he'd never bothered to visit before. He took a seat in the booth opposite Jim, who had his back to a broad street-side window.

"How you doin', Stanley?" Jim said. His silver nose ring and big black horn-rim glasses just wouldn't reconcile in Stan's mind.

"Good. I'm good. I'm glad you called. Have you... what do you have for me?"

Jim exhaled through pursed lips and made a grimacing gesture with his face. "I didn't get much out of the trip, Stanley—not gonna kid you. Went to southern Spain, checked some Moorish translations of some really ancient shit, thought maybe we had a succubus or some sort of demon happening—but none of it fit what you had going on."

"That's it then?"

"No, not exactly," Jim took a sip of his latte. "Did you want to get a coffee or something?"

"No, I'm good."

"Alright, well... I got back S.O.L. but I wanted to see this guy down around Empress, near the Saskatchewan border."

"I know where Empress is."

"Right—anyway, this guy's a bit of a local guru for this stuff—figured it couldn't hurt. Turns out he didn't really have much to add, but he did suggest that instead of investigating the creature, I take a look at the environment, you know? See if your house is built on an ancient Indian burial ground, that kind of thing."

"Is my house built on an ancient Indian burial ground?"

"No. House is good. But I did do some other research, Stan." Jim pushed his glasses up on his nose. He was staring hard, lowering his voice. "Stan..." he began, then backed off.

"What is it?" Stanley was getting nervous. Jim was clearly struggling to find words, and Stan just wished he would put his cards on the table. Stan didn't know what he was hoping for exactly, but he knew he couldn't go on the way he was now. He just wanted Grimes to take the situation over, wave a magic wand, and have done.

"Stan, you realize... You were never married; there never was a Lori. You do know that, right?"

Stan blinked. His lips parted, but his brain was shutting down, and words eluded him.

"You bought that ring," Jim continued, like he was speaking to someone who had just come out of a coma. "You opened an RRSP in your twenties and you put your marital status as 'widowed'. You didn't have any photo ID for her, so you used W-8BEN forms where you could, and you sort of built her up as best you could out of paper. Your job kind of made it easy for you. It wasn't perfect—you were afraid to fake a SIN and some other things—but you weren't using her to commit fraud or steal benefits or anything, so there was no reason for anyone to notice the inconsistencies. Once it was on paper and in the system, it was easier to believe, right? I mean, once someone shows up in a database, they're 90% real. I get it. It's like you had some kind of intuitive grasp of sympathetic magic or something."

Stan swallowed, thought maybe he was seeing spots. Jim plunged on, "It wasn't twenty years of grief powering this thing, making her real: it was twenty years of wishing and believing, wasn't it? And that sucks, Stan, because there's no exorcism for that. There IS no ritual,

or spell, or anything else out there for us to find. It's on you Stanley. You've got to close that bedroom door—bricks and mortar might even be a good idea here. Wall that room off and don't ever open it again. And get rid of that goddamned ring—anything physical you've got that you've been using to focus your feeling for her. You gotta make a break Stan, right here, right now.”

Stan felt tears welling up. Jim was still talking, but Stanley wasn't processing it. Stan was unravelling: he felt threadbare, fragile; felt as though the cold October wind would blow right through him, scattering him like so many dead leaves. He hadn't cried in public since his parents' funeral, but now he felt the moisture tracking down his cheeks for all to see.

He had tears for Lori, Lord knows why, but he did. He had tears for himself, as pathetic as that felt; he would've made a pretty lousy fighter pilot.

But most of all he had tears for Jim Grimes. Because looking out the window behind Jim's back, Stan could see Lori sitting on Jim's motorcycle, working the handlebars and grinning hungrily, waiting for them to finish. •



## **Mind Babies: Interview with Cover Artist James Birkbeck**

Lyn X

### **Tell me a bit about your background and upbringing:**

I was born in 1969, in Manchester, England, and lived there until I was six. Then West Yorkshire, until I moved to North America in 1982. We spent almost a year in Los Angeles, then moved around Canada quite a bit. My dad was always getting laid off and having to find new jobs, thus, I got shuffled around a lot.

### **Where does your interest in art stem from?**

I have no formal training, but everyone in my family is artistically inclined. I was taken to art galleries and museums a lot as a child. My maternal grandfather paints, and he would give me tubes of oil paints or watercolours to play around with. I got my first camera when I was about seven. It was basically just a little box with a lens in it, but was fun to use.

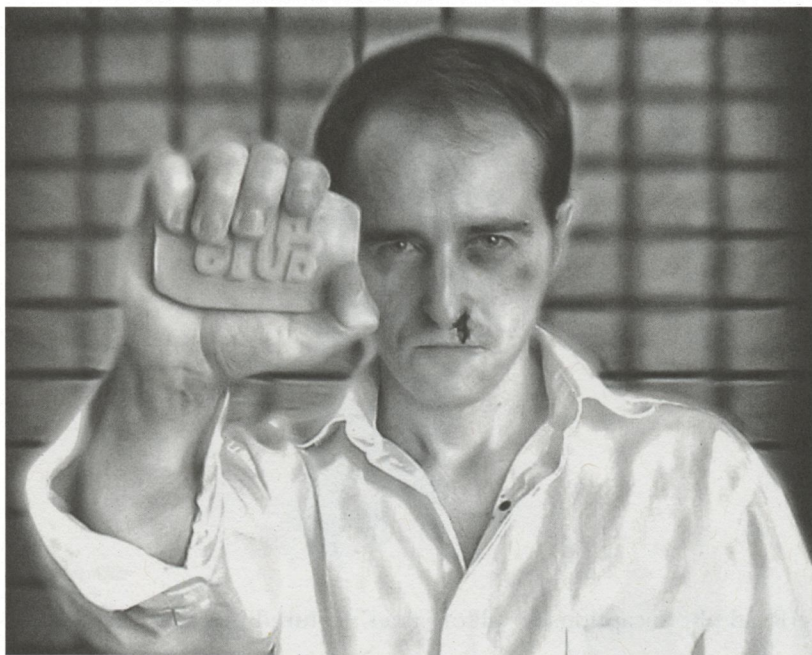
*"I have been influenced by a lot of artists over the years, but some more enduring ones are the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Caspar David Friedrich, and Fuselli. I actually tend to be more influenced and inspired by things like music, books, and films than paintings and photographs. David Lynch movies and the music of Lisa Gerrard, for example."*

**What media do you work in?**

I started out drawing and painting. I was of the mindset that photography was not really art, and that in order to be a good artist, one had to be a skilled painter. That opinion changed when I got my first SLR camera in 1993. I work in a variety of mediums, including acrylics, oils, polymer clay, etc., but my favourite medium is digital photography/manipulation, and I rarely paint these days.

**People familiar with your portfolio will see that you have a fondness for uncannily 'impersonating' pop culture icons in the form of self-portraits. You are transgendered. Do you think this has something to do with issues of self-identity?**

You're not the first one to ask the question, so I have had time to





(Read photo-captions for all of James' featured pieces on Page 89.)

think about if there is any correlation between my work and my being transgendered, but I have never been able to find a connection...

I have no idea why I do it, but it started when I was about four or five years old. Dressing up is actually a very English thing to do. The British love any excuse to don a costume. As a kid, I remember there was always some sort of Fancy Dress Party going on. They weren't just for kids. Everyone, of all ages, got involved. My little sister also likes to make costumes and take photos of herself wearing them. I guess it's just in our blood.

*"I started playing around with PhotoShop in 1994. I was attracted to the ability to work in layers, and the freedom to creatively experiment without the fear of making mistakes and having to throw everything away. If you do something you are not quite happy with, in digital art, you can simply take a step back and alter details to your heart's content. I especially like the fact that there is no waste with digital photography. I can snap away shot after shot, and immediately see the result—no waiting for film development, no nasty surprises. And best of all, no developing costs, chemicals or wasted paper. Having a laptop, I can take my photo studio with me wherever I go."*

**You've created some seriously twisted artwork too. Has your experience demonstrated resistance to this type of work, or has it been embraced?**

I don't really put my work out there very much, and the places where it is on display (online galleries such as DeviantArt and Flickr), are very categorically organized, so somebody would have to be actively searching out 'dark and macabre arts' in order to come across my stuff anyway. That said, I have still managed to offend one or two people along the way...

When I am creating stuff, I'm not thinking about other people seeing it. I just feel compelled to keep making something. Generally speaking, it's only when I have completed a piece that I think perhaps I should



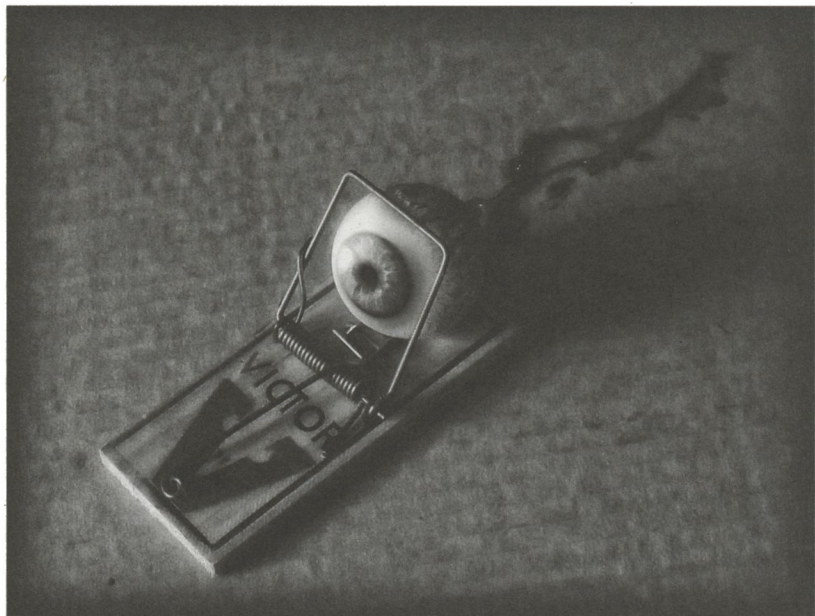
Violet never did get the hang of using the swing...

share it with others. There have been some exceptions where I have sat down with the goal of designing something specifically for others to see, but my chief motivation is a purely selfish one.

*"I'm on disability due to my social anxiety and other interpersonal difficulties, which are a byproduct of my Asperger's Syndrome, a form of high-functioning autism. Many people think I'm a bit slow because I have problems communicating, but in reality, I have a considerably higher than average IQ. But because my EQ (emotional quotient) is so low, I am not very compatible with most jobs. After years of trying desperately to hold down even the most menial jobs, resulting in extreme stress, conflicts with coworkers, and numerous meltdowns, a psychiatrist suggested that perhaps I should go on disability. That was two years ago. I still do the odd paying job here and there for some people—but only if it is something I know I can handle, and preferably with as little social interaction as possible."*

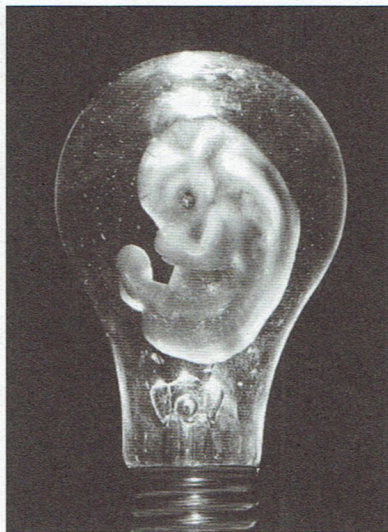
### **Babies also figure prominently in a lot of your work. Why?**

The babies thing came about inadvertently. When I first started taking artsy photos, I needed human models, but I was too socially stymied to go out and look for someone to pose. My roommate and





best friend is a longtime collector of toys, and she has a lot of dolls, so I started using her dolls as models for pictures. I soon realized that these pictures were pretty creepy and amusing all at the same time. Oddly enough, this is how I feel about babies in general. I am awestruck by the conception of new life, but the manner in which most mammals gestate and then come into the world horrifies me, quite frankly—it brings to mind the movie *Alien*... I just think it's creepy that a person is living inside another person,



kind of like a parasite (laughs). And the way babies are born is also somewhat disturbing... it doesn't seem right that it should cause so much pain. I wonder if insects get labour pains when they lay their eggs... Probably not. I bet they just fall right out of the ovipositor.

The piece *Mind Baby*, which depicts an embryo encased in a light bulb, is a metaphor for the conception of an idea. The light bulb has long been a symbol of a bright idea, and I just put that together with the term "brainchild", and came up with "mind baby".

Regarding the cover art for this issue, I went out for a solitary walk in the woods on Christmas Day, and came across a derelict wasps' nest on a tree. As I scrutinized all the little empty chambers, thinking about all the baby wasps that must have crawled out of them, I had a vision of tiny human babies crawling out instead...

*"I think I would like to have hatched in the same manner as a wasp. Seems so much more dignified and less invasive."*

### **What other projects are you working on right now?**

I usually have several different projects on the go, some going back years. I have been working on a story/screenplay called *Phospheratu*, a claymation film, since 1994. It is a darkly humorous children's story involving a glow-in-the-dark vampire, a lighthouse, a



thunderstorm, the sea, and a blind princess and her "all-seeing-eye-dog". It is quite a complex tale, and would involve lots and lots of work. I would love to do more claymation stuff, but I am a bit of a perfectionist, and the stuff I really want to do would be a great undertaking—I'm not sure I would ever be satisfied with the outcome. The story was finished in my head many moons ago, but I have had the hardest time trying to give birth to this particular "mind baby"!

I also like to play music (guitar, bass, percussion, computer synths and sequencers, anything that makes a noise really). I'm not very good at it though (laughs)... *Jimmy Pluto* is an electro-pop project I have going. I also work under the name *Lincoln Imp*, doing instrumental soundtrack type music, along the lines of Brian Eno's early ambient work, with elements of Erik Satie. I use heavily delayed guitars, loops, woodwind instruments, software synths, dulcimers and so on. It's quite relaxing stuff."

I also like exploring desolate places—either abandoned buildings or the great outdoors—armed with my camera. Unfortunately, however, I don't get to do things like that very often.

*James also enjoys digging in the garden and cooking, and has an impressive, if not obsessive-compulsively organized, spice rack to prove it.*

## James Birkbeck Photo Captions:

Page 82: *Broken Dreams*, 2007: I went for a bike ride and found this derelict acreage. I sat on the lawn for a while and stared at the house until I started envisioning the lives of the people who might have lived there... coming up with stories of broken dreams and heartache. I raced home and grabbed the suit and my camera and tripod and then went back to the old house to take a series of shots of me as the head of this doomed household. The following day, my friend Michelle and her son volunteered to pose as the rest of the family...

Page 83: *The Narrator (Fight Club)*, 1999: This was my Halloween costume in '99. I hadn't seen *Fight Club* at the time, but I had seen ads for it, and I figured I could use my resemblance to Edward Norton to my advantage. Shortly after Halloween, I saw the movie and I absolutely loved it—which is unusual because I normally do not care for Hollywood movies.

Page 84: *Mr. Tumnus (Chronicles of Narnia)*, 2006: This was my Halloween costume. I took my friends' son trick or treating dressed like this. The temperature was -15, so I was a bit chilly. (Credit my friend Michelle Incognito for making the furry legs for me.)

Page 85: *Violet on the Swing*, 2001: One of a series of little cartoons (*the Antic Witties*) that were inspired by the work of Edward Gorey.

Page 86: *An Eye-Catching Image*, 2006: I wanted to create something eye-catching. This was the result.

Page 87: *Mind Baby*, 2008: "A fertile imagination gives birth to mind babies". This idea came to me when I was thinking about the term "brainchild", and the little light bulb over someone's head when they have a bright idea. I just combined the two.

Page 88: *Wazzoek*, 2004: Still-shot from an animation project. (Search it and others of James' videos on YouTube!)

See more of James' work at [www.mindbabies.com/gallery](http://www.mindbabies.com/gallery) •

The aged man's face was old and not kindly looking; his almost rat-like features made him seem a man who enjoyed chewing on food, ideas, or if the occasion presented itself, people.

## A Ragman's Vow

Brent Knowles

*(Ragman, Issue #14) Below the slum known as the Labyrinth, Ragman sits atop an overturned crate, half submerged by sewage. Rats cover him.*

*"Stop with the puppy dog eyes," Ragman says to them, "you won't make me feel guilty about leaving the boy..."*

The cab stopped. Dan's fake-leather shoes stepped into dry snow, and he thought of how his own life seemed to parallel the city's seasons, in pattern, if not in fact. The hustle and bustle of a wonderful summer had given way to a melancholic fall, which in turn was now replaced by an impassive winter. He had forgotten his scarf again, and so he pulled his business jacket tight to ward the mild wind as he left the cab to plow through sterile streets towards the bank. Rumbling bass turned his head in the direction of a long black sedan that had stopped for a red light on the street parallel to Dan's sidewalk.

A curl of smoke drifted out of a half open window, and Dan stopped and stared at the smoker. His hands pawed at where his scarf ought to be. How many times had she rushed out the door of their little suburban house to hand-deliver it to him? The light changed before he could do more than stop and gawk, and soon the car disappeared around a corner. Three years since he had last seen Amanda, his wife.

He shook his head, desperate to dislodge the past.

Ahead was the gauntlet, the homeless sitting or kneeling on cardboard with hats, cups, and folded hands held out. Mark and Stacey were singing and Dan smiled, donating more than he could afford, all the while pretending not to know these people. They returned the favor, with understanding in their eyes.

"That only encourages them," Dan's boss, the bank manager, said with a frown of disappointment. Dan did not care. Amanda had not been the only one to hit rock bottom. Difference was, he supposed, that he had scrambled back to the surface.

Or so he liked to believe.



*Ragman rocks himself, his mind lost in the past. It had ended with violence and blood—the Ghoul's body never found. So Ragman had crawled down, down, down to where no one would find him. Not even the boy. Here, only the rats would blame him for what would happen next.*

Dan's apartment was a swirl of chaos, the focal point a drawing easel in the living room where a television ought to belong, paints and books of paper piled and scattered across the floor, and beer cases serving as support furniture around the easel. A worn stool sat in front of it. The only element of neatness was the stack of comics, piled straight and square, just like Carl had always insisted, on a second stool.

The boy's school photo was tacked onto the corner of the easel so Dan always saw it when he worked. He looked up now, his hand covered in dried ink, from working on Issue #14. The stack held thirteen comics. Though Carl would never read it, Dan still thought his son would have appreciated Dan's continuing the series. Memories warmed him: Dan had handled all stages of production for his home-brew comic, from writing to distribution. Dan's career had been in full swing.

*Before the dying.*

With a headshake, he knocked the dark thoughts back. Almost done this issue, his atonement.

*Ragman still listens to the city's gossip. The rats that run through sewers, live in cupboards, and climb across sleeping couple's beds, they all talk. A big, old-fashioned chat room. Ragman listens to the rats as they whisper of bodies and bits of bodies. Yes, Ragman listens; knows that Ghoul has returned.*

Police sirens stirred the night air, and Dan took advantage of the interruption to go to the window, draw back the simple canvas curtain, and look out at the night. He lived several blocks from the Labyrinth—a shantytown growing out, as if a malignant tumor, from the city proper. A clever journalist had lifted the label from Dan's comics. He supposed he ought be flattered. That meant of course, that there were two Labyrinths: a real one and an illusion. For Dan, his Labyrinth was the real one; for he had never visited the slum town that sat a half-dozen blocks from him.

His eyes flickered around, focused finally on the frozen mounds of snow that littered the street side. Already they browned, as if the dirt beneath them fed on the snow, and grew from that feeding, brown maggots erupting from a snow-white corpse. Much like how Dan imagined Ghoul returned in the Ragman series.

Was Amanda out there? His worry for her surprised him, and brought his gaze to the pile of clothing hidden behind the curtain. It still smelled of barrel fires, sweat, and street.

• • •

*Ragman crawls up and into a world of sirens, sky-clutching scrapers, and bright lights performing macabre dances with the lingering shadows of this never-night but always-dusk place. War has come. Again.*

*He wanders, keeping to those shadows, but staying free of their dance. Ragman does not dance. Not his thing, you see. He walks for some hours, the rats foraging ahead, whiskers busy.*

*"You there, stop!" A voice, familiar, causes Ragman to pause, to look up. A young officer stands at alley mouth, holding a nervous revolver. Recognition.*

*"The boy has become a man," Ragman says, his smile hidden by the cloth covering his face.*

*The cop smiles. "Rags! You're back. You're back!"*

*"So it would seem."*

*"No one believes, not anymore. They've forgotten. But here you are, flesh and well... "*

*Yes, the boy had always been Ragman's number-one fan.*

Dan waited outside for the Beggar-Priest, sweating beneath the layers of clothing—baggy red-checkered logger's jacket, a sweater, and two t-shirts, all of it filthy except for the scarf wrapped about his neck. He sat, sharing

a piece of sidewalk cardboard with Mark, his coworkers from his day-job at the bank walking past, not even recognizing him. Mostly Dan kept his head down while he waited, avoiding the eyes of strangers, not wanting to invite a mocking laugh, or worse: a pitying kneeler with ear ready to listen, dredging up hurt like a pick-wielding miner.

"Here he comes," Mark spoke softly before rising and walking away, obviously made uncomfortable by the man moving towards them, the Beggar-Priest. Dan looked up; and for a moment the dead winter sun was obscured. What light escaped, brushed against the back of the man, and created the illusion of an aura. Then the Beggar-Priest spoke and ended any angelic allusions.

"Welcome back, buddy." The Beggar-Priest's voice assumed an unwarranted familiarity with Dan—they had never met, though Dan had often watched this man push his way through a soup kitchen line or wander alone by the dead bridges near dusk. The aged man's face was old and not kindly looking; his almost rat-like features made him seem a man who enjoyed chewing on food, ideas, or if the occasion presented itself, people. The old-timers whispered dark rumors about him.

With a grunt worthy of his stature, the Beggar-Priest sat in the spot Mark had vacated.

"Nice. Still warm," he said, "I heard you were looking for me?"

Dan nodded, finding it uncomfortable to look the man in the eye. He said, "I started asking around this morning. Didn't expect—"

"I know all your problems Daniel. I've always known. This is why you're here, no?"

"My wife—"

"No," the Beggar-Priest interrupted again, "your troubles do not start with her. That she burns her own candle bare is not the reason you're sitting here. Again."

Dan sighed. Thoughts triggered tears but he kept both inside. Or tried to. "My son, he died."

"No Daniel. Not there either. It is in the middle. This is where you seek."

"I'm just looking for help."

"Here on the streets there's little enough of that," said the Beggar-Priest.

Frustrated, Dan braved a direct look, a direct challenge. To hell with piercing eyes. This man, this Beggar-Priest, knew everyone. All Dan wanted was to know where Amanda was. "I can pay you," he said,

"I just want to find Amanda."

"Sad lot of bums out here today, Daniel. They take to wisdom as moths to flame. A tiny fire and they make of you a god. I'm just a man. But I've seen much. I know where your wife is, but my point is simple. You won't get where you need to be until you understand what put you on this path."

"Is she... is she on the street?"

A nod. "Hendrickson."

"Jesus." That name they all knew; he owned the Labyrinth.

"She's fallen, Daniel; and Hendrickson, he's only burying her deeper. He uses your wife like a trophy. You try and mess that up, he'll have at you in a bad way."

"I need to talk to her," Dan said.

"That don't sound smart."

"But I—"

The Beggar-Priest said, "I was not finished. You get old, you talk a bit slower, takes a while for the tongue to keep pace with the mind. It don't sound smart Daniel. But it does sound right. You talking to her. It'll take some doing, but I think you'll make it. I feel it about you. Like you're finally seeing."

"Yeah," Dan said, nodding his head. He had been so damn sure that he had come to grips with it all when he had left the streets, but Amanda had disrupted his fragile stoicism. He confided, "I thought I could put my past behind me. Thought I should. But these last few months, they've just been a different type of hiding, haven't they? I wasted so much time."

"Time's not wasted, not if, in the end, you do what needs doing." The Beggar-Priest looked away, and Dan wondered if the old man was thinking of his own unfinished struggles. Old-timers said he had run afoul of Real Evil, sometime in his past, and that had pushed him to the street. Suddenly, he leaned towards Dan, his face too close, his eyes too wide, his lips trembling just a little much, as he continued, "There's some of us that are touched. You remember, at the end, when all matters, that there's more to this world than what our eyes show us. See, I'm too close to God, so close that no one else in the Church could bear it. Funny that I'm telling you; but I think it's all part of your path, and maybe a little part of mine."

Dan trembled beneath this deluge of crazy mouth. The Beggar-Priest



must have smelled the disbelief. He rose with surprising agility, a big grin on his face as he finished with, "You'll see. Just remember, when you do, what I said. You're touched, Daniel. Tonight, wait at the restaurant, the one beneath Hendrickson's Tower. You'll find your wife again."

"Where?" Dan asked.

The Beggar-Priest paused and pointed towards the Labyrinth before walking on, and disappearing into the gloomy morning.



*It stretches skyward like a malicious child's tottering block tower. A slum city, the kind that used to exist only in the poorest regions of the world—this is the Labyrinth. The wretches who make this place their home believe it to be the most dangerous place in all the world. They are right.*

*But still more move here every day.*

*The Labyrinth grows like a termite mound with one family building a clumsy house, and then selling their roof to another family, who then build another story on top of the first family's dwelling. This process repeats. Common wisdom suggests that five stories are as tall as a family ought to build. Most stand much taller.*

*Ragman has left the boy in the city, in safety, to hunt down the Ghoul who has made the Labyrinth his home.*

The Labyrinth terrified Dan, but he shuffled ever deeper inside it, keeping to the fringes. His feet had carried him across the slums all through the night in his search for the restaurant. At first he had assumed his quest a simple one; but the number of shops, food stalls, and even banks that littered this unofficial extension of the city surprised him.

He pushed deeper, avoiding any contact with roaming gangs, but twice saw screaming men dragged into alleys. Gunfire erupted sporadically, though always as a sound off in the distance. Frustrated as the hours dwindled, Dan wandered, head hung low, feet pushing him ever forward. And then he saw it.

The Tower rose above the other slum apartments, a massive black entity, unique in that it looked almost properly built. The two buildings beside the Tower showed signs of construction on their upper levels, but they still stood well short of their neighbor. And below them, nestled at the foot of the Tower, sat a small restaurant with a simple yet obvious sign that read "Food".

As he approached, a black sedan pulled in front of the restaurant; and he stopped, his breath caught in his throat. Wrapping himself in shadows, he stared as Amanda stepped out, wearing a trashy red top and a short skirt. Two men, dressed casually, but wearing guns strapped to their waists, followed her out of the car. As the sedan drove away, the bodyguards steered Amanda towards the tall building but she veered towards the restaurant; and after a short argument, they left her alone. They walked into the Tower while Amanda entered the restaurant.

*Ragman follows the trail of bodies deep into the Labyrinth, into the Ghoul's territory. Even the rats seem agitated. His gloved hand finds a bloody object. Ghoul often left notes for him this way, in the past. Now is no different. Ragman lets out a deep hiss as he realizes that it is the boy's badge.*

Dan followed her into the poorly-lit restaurant. As he entered, he paused. She sat in a booth at the far end of the restaurant, her matted blond hair dull, an old bruise highlighting her cheek. She stared out the window, sipping at her coffee, and did not even bother to look his way as he slid into the seat opposite her.

"I'm done for the night," she said.

"Hi Amanda."

She almost fumbled her coffee as she turned her head towards him. "If Hendrickson sees me talking to you... fuck Dan, what are you doing here?"

"I came to ask you the same question."

"As if you need to ask," Amanda replied, her voice edged with anger, "It's a new life, a clean start. The memories, they have trouble finding me here. Last I heard Dan, you were on the street too. You don't need me to explain."

"I cleaned up Amanda. I... was fine. Until I saw you, yesterday."

"Just leave me alone," Amanda said, "it doesn't matter. Not anymore."

"It matters. You matter. I still worry. I want to help."

"Help? Yeah, right. Have you forgotten why you left in the first place? What I did?"

Dan's face flushed red, remembering how she had spilled from man to man, not even bothering to hide her affairs. She had called him emotionally unavailable, and that became her excuse. Finally, Dan had drawn a line—and Amanda had jumped over it. He remembered the day he left her, how she had stood at their doorstep, her expression

almost victorious.

Dan said, "I understand my own part in that now. How I was never there for you after Carl died."

"My new life suits me Dan. I don't need you messing it up."

"You're being unfair. We had—"

"Fair?" Amanda asked. "What else did you expect? You killed our son, killed Carl!"

Dan recoiled. His tongue fumbled for words, but found no purchase. He never heard the footsteps, never noticed Amanda's rage cooling to concern as she looked up, behind him. They hit him. Hard.

• • •

*Gunfire fills the night. Ragman leans against the spiked fence that surrounds a large, peaked tower, whose innards are a mystery for no light emanates from any floor. As if vacant. Or waiting.*

*"I have found your Haunt," Ragman whispers, knowing full well that he has been guided here. The Ghoul has chosen their final battlefield. He leaps onto the fence and lifts his head to the smog-suffocated sky. He roars. The cry is meant for the scurrying dark things that live in the bowels of the city. The shitter's critters.*

The stench was so ripe and rotten that Dan was almost able to ignore the throbbing of his skull. A quick touch to the back of his head assured him it was still intact, though his hand came away covered with sticky blood. When he finally opened his eyes to a gray and murky darkness, he groaned in despair. Blood, rats, and filth disgusted him, as did sewers and violence. Truth was, Ragman's world scared Dan. But as he woke, he found himself on his back in it.

From the taste in his mouth, he suspected he had been lying in the filthy water for some time. His stomach churned as he crawled to a sitting position, and leaned his back against a rough cavern wall. The smell told his nostrils he sat in sewage; but all around him stretched corridors of natural cavern, not a man-made sewer. Light trickled in, dozens of tiny fissures in the cavern ceiling, sucking up whatever illumination spilled down from above. He suspected the Labyrinth lacked a proper sewer system and necessity forced the use of the caverns instead; but his musings ended when he remembered Amanda's last words to him, how she blamed him for Carl's death.

Was this why she had cheated on him? Was this her way of punishing

him without ever saying anything to him directly? One stupid fight, his stupid fight, had destroyed his family. The details escaped him; only the memory of his anger remained, and what happened afterward: Amanda running into the room, Carl crying, Dan shouting.

His head screamed in protest as he stood; but he was done with sitting in filth, in his past. Yes, he had failed his son; but in the end, it had been an accident. Amanda had made her point: it was time for Dan to go home. Nothing could—

With a shriek, he flung a rat from his leg. He heard it land with a sloppy splash, but almost immediately its dark form was scuttling out of the gloom towards him again. And then another rat dropped onto his arm. And another scrambled up the back of his head, its little grey legs tangling in his hair. Rats covered him, as they spewed forth from the filth of the sewage.

He staggered forward, his heart thundering in his chest as more climbed onto him. He flung them, as many as his grasping hands could find, and then he began to run. They made little noise as they chased him. Each intersection he passed found another horde of rats joining in the chase, as if they were corralling him, keeping him from the side branches of the cavern system.

He ran for almost half an hour, finally doubling over, catching his breath with ragged, deep, gasps. His body itched from his many scratches. Looking up, he realized he was in a smallish cavern; and the rats surrounded him on three sides, a wall of the filthy, crawling creatures thoroughly trapping him. The only light in this chamber came from a single fissure in the roof against the rat-free wall. This fissure was larger than the ones in other parts of the sewer. Much larger. The beating hearts of a hundred rats reverberated in the narrow cavern, and seemed to him akin to the pounding of war drums. Urged to action, he scrambled up the side of the cavern and extended his arm towards the fissure.

His fingers curled over the opening lip; and driven by the fear of the rats, he swung free of the wall and hung from the opening with both hands. Several grunts and groans later, Dan crawled through the fissure and found a proper room carved from the cavern. A single bare light bulb dangled above, and shelves of canned goods lined the walls. A narrow staircase escaped to the surface.

The rats swarmed below the fissure, a living sea of beady, yellow eyes,

fur, and tiny, sharp claws. Never in any of his sketches had he captured the true terror that rats could inflict. Yet they seemed neither malicious nor benevolent. Why corral him like this unless they intended to devour him? But that seemed a silly thought under the safety of a man-made light. Rats did not hunt in packs, or corral men.

One rat broke rank, and climbed into the room with him, its nose wrinkling as it sniffed the air. Dan watched in amazement as it scurried past him, crawling up the stairs. Feeling foolish he followed, trespassing through a home, then out into the street. A crude staircase led up the side of a building, switching back and forth as it made its way to the top. The rat climbed.

In childhood, magical moments are plentiful; but adulthood tends to provide them few and far between. The closest Dan ever got to magic now was when he drew a particularly vivid scene, or uncovered a secret about his own characters. Now he lived such a moment, or so he hoped, the alternative being that he was just a fool following a rat.

But follow he did.



*Ragman sniffs the air; it reeks of the monster. The building shakes from the rats pouring through between outer wall and drywall—light fixtures pop out of the walls and the baseboards crack. Ragman races them to the top, knowing full well he has been led into a trap. The Ghoul is always prepared, the consummate boy scout; but Ragman will fight today, fight like he never has before. For the boy.*

Dan stepped onto the roof, feeling the cool breeze, and breathing city-fresh air. Choking back a sawdust sneeze, he walked through the bones of a place to be, through rooms in waiting. Wind ruffled his rags as he stopped at the opposite edge of the building, where the rat waited.

His world reeled when he saw Amanda standing on a small balcony, across a narrow alley from him. The Tower.

"The rats," he whispered, "they've brought me back. To you." The red glow of her cigarette was the only color in the scene as if he were looking at a black and white painting, a dab of red dropped with intent.

He whispered her name; and whether the wind caught his small voice and carried it across the chasm, or by simple coincidence, she looked up. Their eyes met and her lips opened in surprise, the cigarette tumbling to freedom. The rat brushed past his ankle on its way back

into the building.

Dan knew he had to jump. The thought sprang to his mind, unwanted, undesired. He marched back to the middle of the building. Ragman's rats had led Dan here for a reason. The Beggar-Priest had said that some people were touched. Was this what he had meant? That somehow part of Ragman had bled into the real world, into Dan?

He spun until he faced Amanda again, and then began his run. His legs hammered the rooftop, his legs shook the building, his legs pushed him fast... faster. The rags trembled with the motion, a thousand insect wings preparing for launch. He made the edge, certain he would stop this foolishness. Following rats, and leaping off buildings—this was the stuff of lunatics and Beggar-Priests.

"Or a ragman," he whispered and was airborne.

Amanda gasped loudly, watched him, wide eyed in amazement as he hurtled towards her, his arms outstretched. Dan groaned. In those final moments, he knew he would not make it. Black iron rails defended the balcony, and he feared he would impale himself on their pointed tips. Panicking, his arms pumped wildly and the scarf caught one of the spikes just as he began to fall past. An abrupt jerk brought him to a stop, suspended above the alley. He hung there a quiet moment, dangling like a pendulum. Dan struggled for breath as the scarf tightened around his neck. Grasping it with both hands, he lifted himself enough to draw in a deep mouthful of air, and then climbed up his lifeline before his bravado or the scarf unravelled. The moment his feet touched balcony, he breathed a sigh of relief; and with a final burst of energy, he clambered over the railing to stand in front of Amanda.

"You crazy bastard, how could you do that?" Amanda asked, shock still splashed across her face.

He shrugged her question away; and when breath allowed, said, "Carl was our little man, and when he died, I... ended. But it was never fair to you when I disappeared into myself, the way I did. "

Amanda said, "You were so cold. I thought you didn't care, not the way I cared, about him being... being... He was gone and in many ways so were you. I wanted to punish you, I think. Blame you, instead of... I still think of him. Every day."

He drew her into his arms. She let him.

"And every day I wish I had been a better father; I wish I could have explained how scared I was of being part of a family. I thought,

to do it right, we all had to be perfect. I criticized everything you and he did. Till I die, I'll always remember that my son thought I didn't love him." Dan wiped at the tears streaming down his face before continuing, "Amanda, forgive me. Amanda, come home."

She turned and looked back into the building, a sliding glass door separating her from her present. The man whose arms held her promised a future, but also the past, and all the bittersweet memories therein.

"Look at me. Don't think about whether it is possible. Tell me what you want. Tonight, I've learned, is full of possibilities."

"There's something I need to tell you, Dan. About Carl—"

"Later. We have forever, if you just say yes."

"How can you forget, how can you forgive, this life I've been living?"

Dan sighed, stared out at the blanket of smog above him, and said, "I just care about the happy moments. I remember one night, you and me dancing to a song, to our song, while our son ran around us, clapping his hands. Those are the only memories I bring with me."

Amanda sobbed heavily. "I'll go. J-just promise me one thing."

"Anything."

She looked up at him and a small smile spread across her face, the kind he thought he would never see again. She said, "You're going to take a fucking shower. You reek."

He laughed, and that was when Hendrickson shot him.



*The boy he sees first, kneeling with his arms tied behind his back, gun still in holster. He bleeds, a lot, but Ragman also hears breath being drawn.*

*"The hero returns," Ghoul says, standing beside the boy and kicking him hard in the head. With long strides he approaches Ragman. "Too late for the dead and dying, I think." Ghoul is a hideous green thing, his boil-encrusted skin covered with a meticulously cared-for suit... giving him the look of an old fashioned lawyer.*

*Ragman replied, "This city birthed us. For reason right or not, we exist. We are the city. We are the beating of its heart. You exist, so I must."*

*"Enough. Yak. Yak. Yak. It's all you do, is talk." The tall and gangly man-creature says, spit dripping from its mouth, burning the roof away wherever it hits. Ragman is already moving as Ghoul spews a bright jet of green flame. It catches the fringes of Ragman's clothing nonetheless, and sends him to his knees*

*and rolling to smother the painfully hot fire. He sheds his outer layers, the burning rolls of cloth scattering everywhere and igniting small pockets of flame. As he scrambles to his feet, his knee smashes into the top of a metal post—one of the support pillars for the building has pushed its way through the roof. Is the roof sinking?*

*Thoughts are pushed out of his mind as he leaps and slams into Ghoul, throwing heavy fists into the monster's face and body. The two roll in a tangle amidst the burning roof, Ghoul laughing the entire time. They fight for almost an hour before the poorly-constructed roof finally collapses beneath their weight, weakened by fire.*

*As they begin to plummet, Ragman pulls free and rushes to the boy, cradling the young officer in his arms, trying to protect him, as they ride the roof seven stories down, crushing floor after floor. In minutes, the entire building has become rubble.*

The three bullets slammed into Dan and tossed him hard against the balcony's rail. Amanda's scream rang loudly in his ear. Hendrickson stepped out.

"Twice in one night you bitch? Get your ass inside." Hendrickson's bodyguards appeared behind him, two burly figures moving towards Dan and lifting him up, obviously intent on tossing him over.

"No," Amanda said. Everyone stopped, stared. Hendrickson pointed the gun at her face.

"Tonight is just full of all kinds of stupid," he said, his gray-blue eyes showing little sympathy, his lip curled up in an aggravated sneer beneath his thin strip of moustache.

*Ghoul drags Ragman off the boy's body, the two of them alone, save for the thousands of glowing rat eyes that watch the contest.*

*"You're not looking so good," the villain says, laughing. His own clothing is ruined, but Ragman seems somehow diminished as he steps out of another layer of rags. Only torn jeans, a t-shirt and the rags around his face remain. They join combat, Ragman wincing with each blow that slams into him. The layers of clothing Ragman had accumulated over long years of existence had been the source of his power, as if he had drawn from the souls of those who had worn them before him. All that sustains him now is the knowledge that the boy yet lives, that Ragman felt his breath on his cheek, after the fall.*

*Ghoul drops him with a particularly vicious uppercut. Ragman pulls the bloody t-shirt over his head. Ghoul laughs, delighted.*

*"Giving up, my precious hero? Good fun!" He claws Ragman's chest and*



kicks the hero in the head, toppling Ragman backwards. He leaps, lands on Ragman's chest.

*"So easy, so very easy after all this time."*

*"We exist only because of the other," Ragman reminds Ghoul. Five shots fill the air, and the monster jerks, as if electrocuted. The boy rises to his feet, shaky and bloody, gun held in trembling hands.*

*"Why'd you do it?" the boy whispers as he moves to Ragman, drops to his knees. "Why'd you stop fighting?"*

*"It was no longer my war to win."*

None of the bullets had injured Dan. He had bullet holes in his clothes, but no wounds. Even as the men lifted him towards the railing, his mind churned with that fact. Uninjured! Images of the rats, of the Beggar-Priest, of Ragman flowed through his mind.

Shrugging out of his overcoat, he fell to his knees, the sudden change in momentum throwing both bodyguards off balance. Dan pushed out at the men, hoping to topple both; but they were strong and resisted. With a savage push, Dan directed all his panic at just one of them, and that was sufficient to send the man over the railing with a loud shriek.

The other goon produced a knife and thrust it; but Dan side-stepped, and his heavy sweater caught the blade. Then Dan threw the first punch of his life, and watched in astonishment as it knocked the man to his knees. A second later, the gun fired again and the goon toppled as the bullet caught him in the chest. Dan turned and saw Amanda wrestling with Hendrickson for control of the weapon. Hendrickson was stronger. Now her eyes widened in terror.

"No," he whispered, his legs moving far too slowly in that long second before Hendrickson shot Amanda. Dan's helplessness mirrored the night when Carl died. The boy was running away from him, Dan following, more angry than concerned at first. But concern had manifested when the black sedan appeared around the corner. The engine had roared loudly. Carl never heeded Dan's shouted warning—just screamed once as the car hit him, and drove away.

A black sedan.

One final surge and Dan was there, a half second too late. The gun fired. Amanda fell.

*The boy pulled the cloth from Ragman's face and recoiled, not in horror but simple shock as he said, "You're normal!"*

*Smiling, the last of the sustaining magic fading, Ragman said, "You expected a deformed beast? A tale of torment, of cruel circumstances? No, I have always been just this, a man."*

*"No, you're more. A hero!"*

*"As are we all. As are you."*

*Ragman shouts out one last summons. The boy tenses as the rats leave their shadows and spill across the ruins of Ghoul's hideout.*

*"They'll feast," Ragman explains, "and it will end. For now. Leave me boy. This you can't watch."*

*The boy nods sadly and walks away as rats swarm over hero and villain.*

Blood poured from Amanda's chest as Hendrickson turned the gun towards Dan. But the villain was not quick enough. Dan wrapped his fingers around the man's neck and smashed his head against the concrete wall. Again and again—until nothing remained of the man. And then Dan tossed him.

He bent to cradle Amanda in his arms and she whispered, "My fault."

"Just relax, I'll—"

"Drugs Dan. The accident. It was the fucking drugs. I'm sorry. He wasn't supposed to come out, not where we lived. But I owed him—"

"No," Dan said, holding his dying wife as he realized what she said. "It was never your fault, or mine, or Carl's." He had a hundred questions he needed to ask her, but knew he would not have the time. Her last breaths were better spent. He forgave her; he kissed her.

Dan stayed there, lips pressed against hers until Amanda cooled. Finally, he rose, and climbed atop the rail. He screamed out his anger, his horror, his grief. He had vowed to protect the woman he loved, but had failed in that.

Was Dan touched, had a miracle occurred, had an illusion become real? Or had he survived through simple luck, everything else the working of his own deceived mind? Regardless, Amanda was dead; the gift, if it were such, a cruel jest.

Dan looked down at the city below him. Cruel gift or failed luck?

"Let us decide," he whispered.

He leapt. •

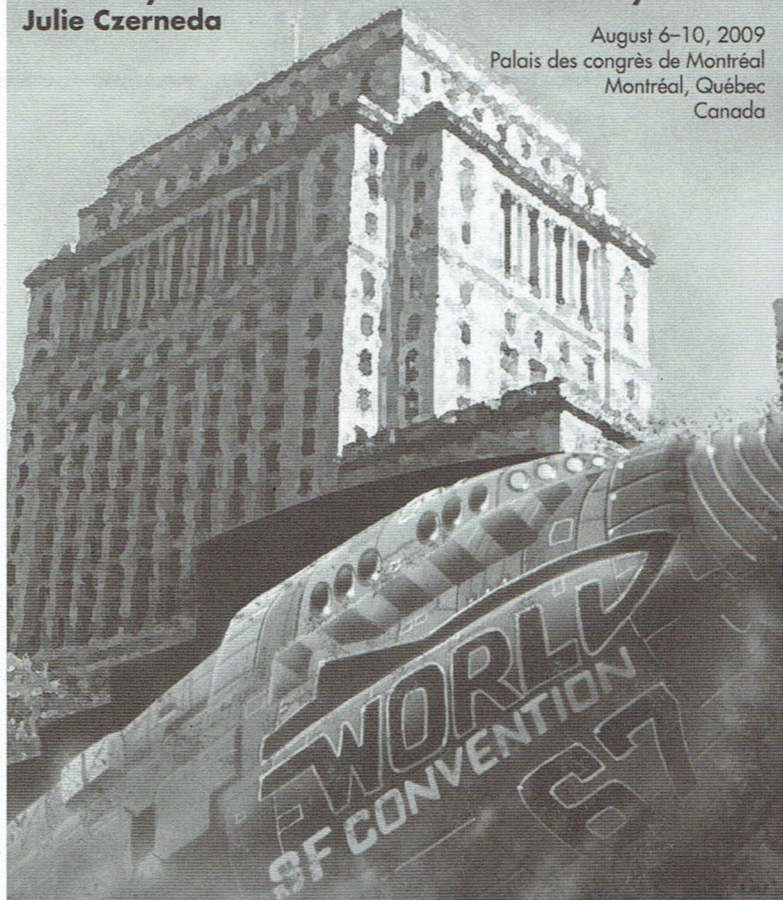
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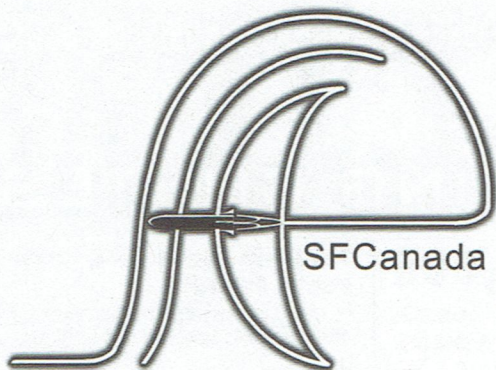
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## about our contributors

**James Birkbeck** is better at communicating through pictures than with words. See more of his artwork at [www.mindbabies.com/gallery](http://www.mindbabies.com/gallery)

**Lisa Carreiro's** fiction has appeared in *On Spec*, *Tesseract Eleven*, and *Strange Horizons*. She lives in Toronto with her partner and their small menagerie.

**Kevin Cockle** lives in Alberta, where he toils for the man, begs for extra lumps of coal, scrounges for extra bowls of cold porridge, and scratches out tales of the fantastic under flickering candlelight.

**Desi Di Nardo** is a writer in Toronto whose work has been published in numerous North American journals including *The Literary Review of Canada*, *Descant*, *the Globe and Mail*, *Grain*, *National Post*, *Canadian Woman Studies*, *13th Moon*, and *Rampike*. Desi's poetry has been performed at the National Arts Centre for International Women's Day, featured in *Poetry on the Way* on the Toronto Transit Commission, selected by Canada's Parliamentary Poet Laureate for *Poems of the Week*, and displayed in the Official Residences of Canada. Desi has previously worked as an on-air host/writer and English professor. For more see: [www.desidinardo.com](http://www.desidinardo.com).

**Brent Knowles** is a game designer, programmer and writer. He has been previously published in *Dragon* and *Not One of Us*. He lives in Edmonton with his wife, two sons, and a cat. There used to be two cats, but that's another story. Find him online at [www.yourothermind.com](http://www.yourothermind.com).

**Roberta Laurie** won her first writing competition when she was 17, and she's been writing ever since. She has been published in three anthologies and is co-editing a fourth, *Snapshots of Stony Plain: A Writers' Landscape*, due to be released this year. Roberta has written for several magazines including *WestWord* and *Yoga Bridge* and volunteers for the literary magazine *Other Voices*. Currently she is writing and researching a book about the challenges facing the women of Malawi and other African countries. You can learn more about Roberta by visiting her website at [www.creativewhispers.ca](http://www.creativewhispers.ca).



**Daniel LeMoal** is a Winnipeg-based writer whose work has appeared previously in the pages of *On Spec* and *Apex Science Fiction & Horror Digest*. Despite several failed attempts at building a “sand igloo” he is still convinced the concept has architectural merit.

**Michael Meyerhofer's** first full-length collection, *Leaving Iowa*, won the Liam Rector First Book Award from Briery Creek Press. He is also the author of three chapbooks: *Cardboard Urn*, *The Right Madness of Beggars*, and *Real Courage*. He was recently the recipient of the James Wright Poetry Award, the Annie Finch Prize and the Laureate Prize. His work has appeared in *Arts & Letters*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Fugue*, *North American Review*, *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and others.

**Liz Shannon Miller** is a mild-mannered freelancer living in Los Angeles, where she works as a filmmaker and writer of various different media. A graduate of the USC Cinema Program, she has completed several screenplays and short films, and her reviews and essays have appeared in the publications *Bookslut*, *The Daily Reel*, and *Ostrich Ink*. She also designs for the web, knits her own iPod cozies, and enjoys a nice vodka tonic. At night, she fights crime!

**Gary Pierluigi** was an ex-journalist and Social Services Worker who, in 1996, became a quadriplegic. He has been published in numerous Literary Journals, including *Queen's Quarterly*, *CV2*, and *Quills*. He was short listed for the 2006 CBC Literary Awards, and received an honourable mention in the Ontario Poetry Society's *Open Heart* Contest. He currently has a poetry collection under review for possible publication, and is completing a book of short stories. He now writes full time.

**Hayden Trenholm's** short fiction has appeared in *On Spec*, *TransVersions*, *Tesseract6*, *Neo-Opis*, *Challenging Destiny*, *Talebones*, and on CBC Radio. His short stories, *The Luck of Willie Lumen*, *Like Monsters of the Deep* and *Lumen Essence* were nominated for an Aurora Award (Canada's SF Awards) in 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively. In 1992, his novel, *A Circle of Birds*, was published by *Anvil Press*. His new novel,

*Defining Diana*, was released by *Bundoran Press* in March, 2008. He lives with his wife and fellow writer, Elizabeth, in Ottawa where he does research for the Senator for the Northwest Territories.

**Steve Sneyd's** work has appeared in over 1,000 magazines and anthologies worldwide, in 40 books, chapbooks and online, been broadcast including on BBC Radio 4's *Stanza*, and read at many SF and literary events. He has many published articles and books about SF poetry. Steve lives in Yorkshire, England.

**Saint James Harris Wood** currently resides in a California coastal penal colony thanks to a heroin-smoking habit he picked up in Thailand while on the road with his gothic blues band. He has reinvented himself as a poet and writer of the darkly absurd. He invites correspondence from other artists:

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**Lyn X** started out at *On Spec* five years ago as an office grunt, and became Production Editor just over three years ago. She is also the Artistic Director of the Edmonton Small Press Association (ESPA), an independent media and activist-arts organization that annoys the 'arts establishment', advocates for Fair Trade and social justice, and produces the North of Nowhere Expo, a multidisciplinary festival of independent media and underground art. She is also the Managing Editor of the recently-revived *Our Voice* Street Newspaper, an active citizenship project that offers low-income and homeless people an opportunity to build their skills, supplement their meagre incomes and share their stories. She apologizes in advance for typos.

**in upcoming issues...** Great new fiction by Marissa Gritter, Jack Skillingstead, Hannah Strom-Martin, Jared Young and Elise C. Tobler. New poetry by Randy Schroeder, Evan Hazenberg and more. Thanks for reading!

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## behind the scenes support

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