

SUBTERRANEAN

US \$6.00 | ISSUE #4

Special SF Cliché Issue
Edited by John Scalzi

ALLEN STEELE

JO WALTON

NICK SAGAN

STUART MACBRIDE



Stuart MacBride

"What, I wondered, would it be like to walk those last forty yards to the electric chair, knowing you were going to die there? What, for that matter, would it be like to be the man who had to strap the condemned in... or pull the switch? What would such a job take out of you? Even creepier, what might it add?"

—STEPHEN KING

THE GREEN MILE



These questions inspired one of the most powerful works in the Stephen King canon: *The Green Mile*. Set during the American Depression, King's tale of a prison ward superintendent and the giant, gentle prisoner condemned to walk those last forty yards to his death captured the imagination of readers everywhere when first published in six

installments in 1996. Not only did King's tale resurrect the serial format of storytelling once employed by Charles Dickens, *The Green Mile* literally had readers on the edge of their seats awaiting the next episode. When the final installment appeared, King made publishing history by simultaneously earning slots for all six volumes on the

New York Times paperback bestseller list.

Subterranean Press is delighted to announce the 10th Anniversary Edition of this classic work. Mark Geyer, whose art graced the original paperback releases of *The Green Mile*, has agreed to provide more than 60 original sketches for our edition. This exclusive publication will consist of six individual illustrated hardcover volumes, contained in a cloth slipcase, to be released late this year.

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SUBTERRANEAN
ISSUE #4

Publisher/Editor:
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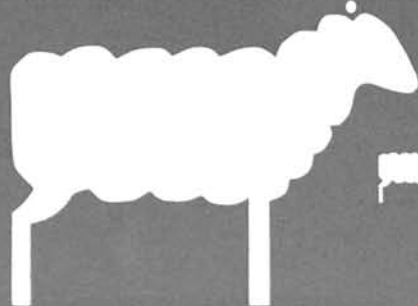
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The Android's Dream

Bestselling author of *Old Man's War*

John Scalzi

HALLOWEEN. ONLY FROM TOR BOOKS.

Editorial

Welcome to *Subterranean* #4. If this is the first time you've picked us up—either in a book store, or because of our guest editor this time out, I hope you find enough to enjoy you'll consider subscribing.

I guess I should say, out front, that this isn't your typical issue of *Subterranean*. About a year ago, sf novelist and friend **John Scalzi** pitched an anthology idea to me, one themed around science fiction clichés. You know, those ideas like sentient computers and Amazon women on the moon that are so been there done that in the field that even the souvenir t-shirt doesn't fit anymore.

The idea didn't strike me as ideal for an anthology, but for a 60,000 word magazine issue... well, here we are. I'll let John run with the clichés through the story introductions and his Editor's Afterword. Me, after giving the stories a test run, I'm pretty happy to say there's life in them there clichés.



The B-I-G news around here, as far as the book lines goes, is that we'll be publishing the 10th anniversary edition of **Stephen King's** *The Green Mile* between now and the end of the year. In addition to the novel's classic text, we've commissioned sixty brand new illustrations by **Mark Geyer**, who illustrated the original paperbacks. Check out the ad earlier in this issue for the full details.



This is probably a good place to announce that after issue eight, *Subterranean* will be migrating to the web. The mag's been growing since issue one—we printed 3500 copies of issue five, with over 1000 subscribers—but it's also the equivalent of putting out another four books a year, in a book line that already keeps our two-person office seriously overworked.

The best solution seems to be to migrate *Subterranean* to the website proper, where we'll feature regular book reviews, columns by **Elizabeth Bear**, **Scott Lynch**, and **Norman Partridge**, as well as short fiction by SubPress favorites and newer writers. We hope you'll make the trip with us. (For those of you writing for the mag, the pay rates will remain the same, \$.07-\$.10 a word, on acceptance.)

We'll be saving ourselves a lot of work on layout and distribution issues. Not to mention we won't have to worry about the signature pages for the hardcover version of each issue.

Keep an eye on www.subterraneanpress.com for more as it happens.



The book line's chugging right along. Our end of the year titles include work by **Ray Bradbury**, **Orson Scott Card**, **Peter S. Beagle**, **Robert Silverberg**, and **Stephen Gallagher**, among others, while we'll inaugurate the new year with SubPress favorites **Poppy Z. Brite** and **Caitlin R. Kiernan**.



I suspect that's enough, both preparing you for the stories ahead, and pimping the book line. If you like what you read, please consider subscribing to the last three issues of the magazine, or checking it out in its next online incarnation.

Now. Turn the page, the stories await.

—William Schafer



DREADFUL SKIN

BY CHERIE PRIEST

VICTORIAN WEREWOLF PURSUED BY ARMED IRISH NUN

I ducked into a niche between a cabin and the pilot house and hiked my skirt up enough to reach down into my garter holster. I've heard it said that God made all men, but Samuel Colt made all men equal.

We'd see what Mr. Colt could do for a woman.



Jack Gabert went to India to serve his Queen. He returned to London a violently changed man, infected with an unnatural sickness that altered his body and warped his mind.

Eileen Callaghan left an Irish convent with a revolver and a secret. She knows everything and nothing about Jack's curse, but she cannot rest until he's caught. His soul cannot be saved. It can only be returned to God.

In the years following the American Civil War, the nun and unnatural creature stalk one another across the United States. Their dangerous game of cat and mouse leads them along great rivers, across dusty plains, and into the no man's land of the unmarked western territories.

Here are three tales of the hunt.

Reader, take this volume and follow these tormented souls. Learn what you can from their struggles—against each other, against God, and against themselves.



Subterranean Press is proud to announce Cherie Priest's hardcover debut, available as a signed limited edition, shipping in February, featuring eight full-page black-and-white illustrations by Mark Geyer (*The Green Mile*).

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Hello, I'm John Scalzi, your editor and host for this magazine's tour through science fiction clichés. We begin with a story of firsts: This was the first story in the story queue when the magazine was opened to submissions; consequently the first story I read for the magazine, and later, the first story I bought for the magazine. It's also the first published story for its author Rachel Swirsky. Given this distinguished list of firsts, it was only natural for it to be the first story you'll read in the magazine. Enjoy.

Scene from a Dystopia

BY RACHEL SWIRSKY

You've read this book before. It's one of the classics from the Cold War era, always worth rereading when you've got a little time on your hands—long plane rides, your annual winter flu, the two rainy weeks between autumn and winter when you find your mood drifting toward insular and melancholic. You feel comforted when you read the famous opening lines: "If these accounts have fallen into your hands, then you have been identified as a potential recruit for the rebellion. Take heed, for the Eyes are everywhere and you may already be in peril." On page four, when Stanley relates his discovery of an ancient book from before the Technocracy, you enjoy the familiar tinge of mystery.

On your second re-read this year, you've just reached page 52, where the authoritarian Byron (who turns out to be a Computer Operator in disguise) leads Stanley on a tour of the Citizen Education Complex. While Byron recites statistics, Stanley allows his attention to wander. He examines the regimented bricks on the pathway and cranes his neck upward to look at the broadcast antennae surmounting each classroom. Then, peering through the windows of a dimly lit gymnasium, he glimpses a beautiful young woman.

Her name is Natalie. She sits in a row on the bleachers with six other girls. All wear green smocks, but while the others blur into an anonymous line, Natalie appears stark and illuminated, like the main figure in a painting by an old master. Even her poise sets her apart: the other girls sit with their heads bowed, but Natalie holds her spine straight, her chin lifted defiantly.

Even without benefit of makeup, Natalie's features are striking. Her almond-shaped eyes gleam the color of willow leaves and the arch of her cheekbones guides the eye toward the full, suggestive curves of her lips. Beneath her formless smock, her figure is visibly slender;

the edge of her pelvic bone etches a single, shapely bulge in the fabric.

Entranced, Stanley stops to stare. "Who are those girls?" he asks.

"Today's female graduating class," answers Byron. "In a few minutes, they'll be assigned their professions. Even now, the schoolmistress is consulting with the Computer. Taking into account dozens of factors including the girl's talents, the Technocracy's needs, and projections of what skills will be required in the future, the Computer slots each girl into her profession with the same precision it uses when filing any piece of data."

"A woman is not a piece of data," replies Stanley, lifting his chin as he strides out of the Citizen Education Complex and on to page 53.

Ordinarily, you would follow him. Instead, allow me to waylay you here.

In the overall plot of the novel, this moment is unimportant. The entire scene occupies only two pages, from 50-52. But take a moment to explore this scene with me, to examine the story that lies not on the page, but inhabits the margins.

Now that Stanley is gone, let us venture where he never treads: into the gymnasium with Natalie. Aside from the seven girls by the window, it lies vacant, rows of bleachers stretching into empty lines. The veneer of the floor glimmers under scrubbed fluorescent lights, revealing the scuff of footprints that follow predictable rectilinear paths.

Sitting quietly in the center of the bottom row, the girls fret as they wait for the schoolmistress to return. Knuckles whiten, nervous fingers clutch at hems. What careers will the Computer give them? Who will become a janitor? Who a Technician? Will the girl with the facile hands be allowed to become a surgeon, or

will she be forced to do something that doesn't use her hands at all, like accounting or spying for the Ministry of Eyes?

Apart from Natalie, the other girls blend into one another like birds clustering to confuse predators, a series of indistinguishable bowed heads and scuffed black shoes. Still, if you watch them long enough, differences emerge. The voluptuous girl drumming her fingers on her knees, that's Consuela. Her best friend, Shelby, is the blonde silently counting the seconds since the schoolmistress left—she's up to 2,115. The girl behind them is Phuong and the three others—Do you see the ones I mean? The girls sitting so closely that their shoulders touch?—that's the inseparable trio of Winda, Suchin and Dorothy.

In the novel, these girls never become individuals. They remain a single brushstroke inhabiting the background, their sole purpose to set the scene. Only Consuela will appear again, on page 136, when Stanley enters Natalie's apartment to discover her "conversing with a plump, dark-skinned girl of drab deportment and unintelligent eyes." In the next paragraph, Natalie "dismisses the girl" and her six classmates disappear from the novel.

Natalie, however, will ascend to a starring role. Even now, she edges away from her classmates, her hem a defiant nine inches from Consuela's. She lifts her chin aristocratically, holding one hand to her breast as she rehearses expressions of surprise and elation. She knows what her card will say, or at least she thinks she does. She burns to be an opera singer, an incandescent diva who performs only the loftiest soprano roles. She deserves it too; her voice displays astonishing clarity and tone. Everyone says so.

Unfortunately, Natalie's card won't say what she wants it to. Instead of sending her to the opera house, the Computer will classify her as a piano teacher.

Stanley discovers Natalie's story on page 116, when he finds her leaning against a piano, her face upturned into a ray of sunlight streaming through a window above. Day dreaming, she hums a few bright, clear notes over her student's clumsy scales. Stanley clasps her hand and utters that famous line, the one that carries romantic English students into swoons: "In the silences between your notes, angels soar."

The two begin to court, stealing long illicit walks by the river. As they stroll hand in hand, Natalie describes her lost dreams, her eyes growing filmy, and Stanley vows to bring her to the stage.

On page 145, he appeals to Byron for intercession. "You should hear her sing," he entreats. "She should be a *prima donna*. The rays of her voice should bring light to millions."

Seated behind his vast mahogany desk, Byron does no more than spread his hands to show it can't be helped. "The Computer believes she'll do more good as a piano teacher."

"Damn your computer and its calculating hand," says Stanley. "What shall become of humanity when greatness is reduced to mere numbers?"

After the argument, Stanley rushes to his beloved and discovers her listless and disconsolate. She hints that she may do something drastic. A few days later, when Stanley returns to her apartment, he finds her gone. No one will tell him what happened to her. Driven by anguish for his lost love and her undisclosed fate, Stanley launches his futile rebellion against the Technocracy and mounts the steep path toward the novel's climax.

For a moment, let us assume that Stanley and Natalie are correct. Let us suppose that in another world—in our world—Natalie would have been haloed by symphonies of roses every time she appeared on stage. Imagine critics swooning to her pitch-perfect poise and composers scribbling furiously to create arias worthy of her seraphim range. Imagine the dazzlingly tragic end of her career when an earthquake in Rome crushes the young *prima donna* beneath a statue of Apollo. In stunned grief, our world clambers for her possessions at auction, her \$50 bottle of deodorant, her \$600 panties. For a full twenty-four hours, the news cycle shows nothing else.

Yet our world would not provide Natalie's classmates such notoriety. Our Phuong loses her feet to a landmine in Quang Tri at the age of eleven. Our Winda, Suchin and Dorothy follow various routes to the Branchville Correctional Facility, where they reunite every few years on new charges. Our Selby becomes pregnant at sixteen and quits school to raise her twins on a diet of pink slips and anxiety, and weeps over thirty-five cents of spilt milk. The worst moment of Selby's life happens when her daughter is in third grade, when the little girl whines so persistently for a toy that Selby whirls around and slaps her across the mouth. Our Consuela discovers her father's shotgun propped in the shed and shoots herself in the stomach when she runs into the backyard to play soldier. She bleeds to death crawling toward the kitchen door.

In the Technocracy, these girls exchange their fates in our world for a modest dose of happiness. While Natalie languishes as a piano teacher, Selby will become a construction foreman, employing her formidable precision and organization to prevent girders from falling on unwary heads. Incisive Phuong will preside over a kingdom of corpses as a mortician. Winda, Dorothy and Suchin will become teachers at the Citizen Education Complex, supervising subsequent classes of green-smocked girls. Adventurous Consuela will don raingear and a sailor's hat as she battles the ocean every day on the deck of her skiff.

These are the stories you won't find on page 4, 53, 136, or 375. These are the stories Stanley never understands when he leads his crusade against the Technocracy, that readers never recognize when they

finish the vintage edition afterward and get up to make another cup of coffee.

But all these stories mean nothing now—in the gymnasium on page 52—where possibility still hovers in the air, along with fear and excitement. Consuela and Selby shift, smocks rustling, while Winda, Suchin and Dorothy whisper to each other, and Phuong glares at the noise. Alone a few feet to the right, Natalie lets her smock drift down on the left to show her shoulder and practices a glamorous pout, a feeling of unease settling in her body like cold.

Outside, the schoolmistress' boots thud on the cement. The panel outside the door issues a mechanical beep as she presses her index finger to the security screen.

In the long moment before possibility vanishes, Natalie's breath catches in her lungs. Her diaphragm tenses with desire, the same way it does in the moment before she reaches for a high note. She imagines herself onstage, arms flung wide, warm spotlights baptizing her face and hands. She can feel potential tingling on her skin, as if she could do anything, as if she could fly, her voice winging her to the roof of the auditorium with the engraved angels and cupids, until she becomes as beautiful as they are, as much a part of the theater as the architecture.

If Natalie could—if she had a choice—she would trade the other girls for ovations and bouquets bursting with dahlias. All six of them, without hesitation. ☺



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TIM POWERS

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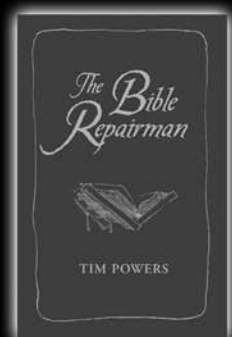
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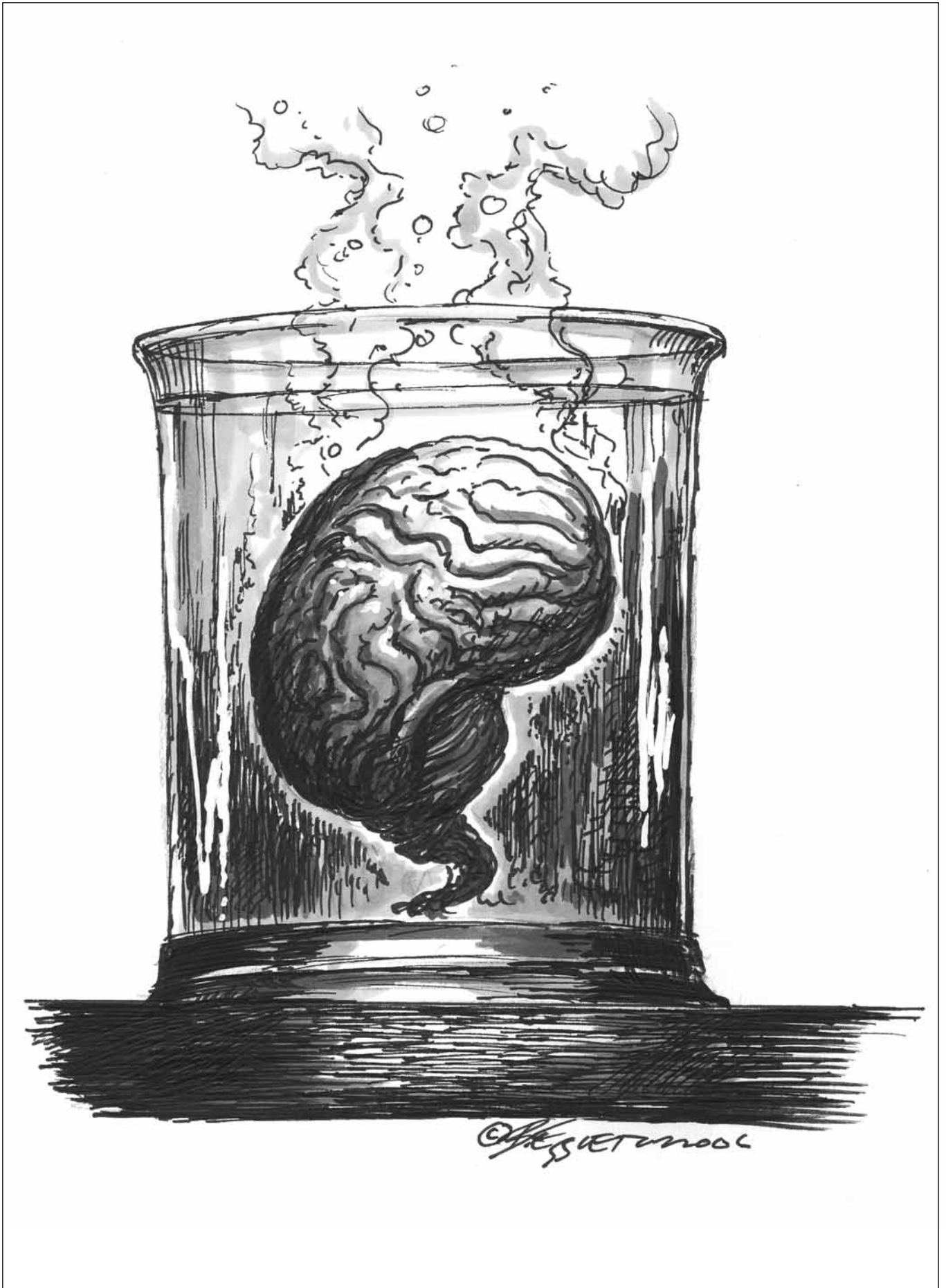
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You have in your hands a transatlantic collaboration between Messers Charles Coleman Finlay, typing away in Ohio, and James Allison, doing his thing in Leicestershire. By the strictures of the story below, they're one brain short of perfect processing functionality, but given this story's off-kilter, hard-boiled-yet-wistful charm, they're short of perfect by only a trivial amount. Also, I want that main character's coat, and I resent not living in the universe where I can have it.

The Third Brain

BY CHARLES COLEMAN FINLAY AND JAMES ALLISON

“**T**he other two brains were left at the house after the alleged break-in,” Stubbidge said. He was an insurance man who smelled of antiseptic and fiddled with the photos on his desk like someone uncomfortable with brains.

Daryl Dachs coughed into his fist. “Alleged?”
“It’s fraud.”

“Why do you think that?” Dachs rubbed his nose on the sleeve of his big, black coat. The intelligent fabric twitched, trying to slough the smear. “One of the two brains left behind was damaged during the robbery, according to the adjustor’s report, and they didn’t file to have it replaced. If it was fraud—”

“Now see here, Mr. Dachs,” Stubbidge interrupted. “Your references are rather mixed. But given the nature of your personal tragedy—”

Dachs cut him off with a frown, a wave of his hand. What happened with Aelish had nothing to do with anything.

“—I’ll take you on for this one job. If you can prove it’s fraud, I may be able to find regular work for you.”

Dachs thought about it. Being offered a job out of pity irritated him. But regular work equaled regular pay. Which meant regular meals again, if one interrupted the drinking long enough to eat. When a fraud was called for, Dachs could prove a fraud.

He stood up, taking the ID and data chip from the desk. “I’ll see what I can find.”

As he stepped out of the office into the bright smog, his coat settled around his shoulders like a heavy, oily shadow. “How about some back up?”

The coat hesitated for a second, probably still miffed about the snot, then flipped up its stiff Kevlar-lined collar.

“Thanks.” Dachs tried to fight down another coughing fit but the cough won. He ended up wiping his nose across his knuckles instead of his sleeve.

◆◆◆

White-collar slums gave way to streets of cramped lots with bulky, mock-Georgian homes. The neighborhood stank of a particular kind of money called debt. Unpaid debt at that, since the gates had been taken down some time ago and it was no longer patrolled by guards. Not the kind of neighborhood where you’d expect to find too many brains.

Dachs stood on the sidewalk, staring down the street. Stubbidge *had* to be sticking it to the client. Not only was theft likely in this neighborhood, it was probably one of the Ten Commandments.

The coat snapped tight in the shoulders to warn him and Dachs shoved his hand in the pocket for his gun. But there was no danger, just some bum in a faded suit rushing past, head down, rubbing his temple, talking to himself.

Dachs watched him go. Dude could have been his mirror once upon a time, in the black days at the end of his second marriage, right after Aelish. He found the house, popped a cough drop in his mouth, kicked the door with his boot.

The woman who answered was the kind of dishwasher blonde who dyed her hair black and would look thirty until she was sixty. “Malinda Hertle?”

“Yes,” she said. “Are you here about the window?”

He fished out the ID. “Insurance company—I work with the adjustor. I need to ask some routine follow-up questions so we can process your claim. Can I come in?”

He pushed inside, expecting her to be suspicious, to leave him on the stoop, but she was already scooting backward with a smile and a cheerful “Sure!”

The foyer was built from unhappy compromises: a staircase too narrow to be grand, a balcony too plain to be romantic, ceramic tiles too ugly for the floor decorating a wall. “We just wanted to be sure that nothing else

has been stolen,” Dachs said. “I know you’ve already been through all this but the report’s a bit thin. Where’d the burglar enter?”

She led him down the hallway. “He came in through this window.”

“You know for sure it’s a he?” He was watching her pale, perfectly symmetrical calves. No stockings. Pretty, but practical too. Not really his type.

“Well, no, actually I don’t,” she said brightly. “It could be a he or a she, I guess. He—or she—came in through this window. My husband had been watering the impatiens in the windowbox and must have left it cracked. Say, would the insurance cover the cost of the impatiens? The burglar smashed them. I had to buy new ones.”

“At least they died young and beautiful,” Dachs said, and sucked loudly on the cough drop.

She fell uncomfortably silent.

Dachs bent over the window ledge. The climb didn’t need Rapunzel inside. A bit high, but not impossible. He straightened and looked around—electronics, antique silver tea set, typical smash-and-grab stuff all easily to hand. “Most burglars are men. I’m sure it’s safe to refer to him as a he. He didn’t take anything in here?”

“No.”

That was odd. “Where do you keep your brains?”

“Oh, they’re not my brains, they’re my husband’s. Over here in his office.” She led him to another room with antique books shelved inside pressurized glass bar-rister cases, cheap outdated office equipment, and a cherry desk with matching letterbox. Dachs wondered if everything in the guy’s life was this tidy.

“Down here in the fridge,” she said, pointing to a box under the desk. “That’s what I call it. My husband uses the brains for his research. Or did. We only have two left and LobeNet—”

“The brain company?”

“Yes, they advised us that there could be serious damage to these two without a third one in the array. Especially considering their age. That’s why we’re eager to get this resolved.”

“So are we.” Something ugly tickled the back of his sinuses. “Can I take a look at them?”

She waved her hands. “Really, I don’t like to open—”

“I’m almost done,” Dachs interrupted, pulling a pad from his pocket and pretending to thumb in notes. “Just a report on the condition of the remaining brains.”

“Well, all right then.”

She knelt and unlatched the door. Air hissed as it opened. Two cheese-sized lumps in vacuum-sealed bags of fluid, encased in plastic containers, sat on the top and middle shelves. The bottom shelf was empty. The ridges and curves pressed up against the bags, reminding Dachs of fingerprints. Cables ported into, and presumably out of, the box’s back, while smaller cables connected the two brains and dangled loose over the third shelf. Both brains

had digital readouts on the side and fluid-locks like IV tubing. Small, carefully-labeled bottles sat on the shelves.

Dachs leaned over for a closer look—down Malinda Hertle’s blouse more than inside the fridge. But she stood up and stepped aside. The corner of his coat rubbed against the Berber carpet, emitting a faint vibration like a purr.

“Which one was damaged?” Dachs asked.

“This one,” she said, indicating the top shelf, tracing her nicely trimmed but unpainted fingertip along the digital output. “These readings are below normal.”

“So maybe you need to replace it too?”

“We couldn’t replace her!”

Dachs started to cough, swallowed something nasty. “How can you be sure she’s a she and not a he? I thought the brains were all from anonymous donors.”

“Oh, not this one.” Malinda touched her chin in embarrassment. “She belonged to my husband’s favorite aunt. A bit of a crackpot. But she was very sweet.”

“What made her a crackpot?” Besides willing her brain to her nephew. Dachs stood up while his coat strained to dryhump the carpet.

“Ellen was a psychic—or thought she was. She promised to communicate with my husband from beyond the grave. It never happened. It’s all very silly, but we couldn’t donate it away, so we had to go ahead and invest in the other two.”

“To keep Ellen company?”

“The way the people from LobeNet explained it, the brains work better when they’re hooked up in groups of three.”

That might explain his first marriage. “Do the other two have names too?”

She hesitated. “My husband calls them Eric and Chuck.”

“A threesome. How very nice for Ellen. Which one got nabbed?”

“Chuck—down here on the bottom shelf.”

“What exactly does your husband use the brains for? I thought they were only good for high-end non-linear spatial designs: realtime transportation networks, AI sorts of things.”

“Lougheed’s a professor of economics. He uses them for social modeling of market behavior. That’s all I know. Really, we told all this to the police.”

“Yes, sorry, like I said, they listen, pretend to record things, don’t write anything down.” Dachs made a show of shoving the disk back in his pocket. It slipped from his fingers, but the coat reached out with its pocket flap and nudged it inside.

Malinda noticed. “Is that a Burnuckle?”

“Yeah. Old model, but still a damn fine coat. Thanks for all your help. We’ll try to request a decent economist’s replacement brain.”

He was already on his way toward the door, convinced she wasn’t part of any fraud, except the fraud an economist must’ve committed to get someone as dumb

and innocent as her to marry him, when she said, “Oh, good. Chuck was a bit low-end, Lougheed always said, performance wise I mean.”

Pause, and turn. He touched his nose. “So your husband had a low-performance brain. Too low for his work?”

“He never said anything to me like *that*, but if we could get something better, if it’s all the same, I mean, who wouldn’t?” She laughed nervously.

“Sure,” he said. “I could use a brighter bulb in my own head most days. Thanks for your time.”

She opened the door to let him out. As he walked past her, his coat flapped out and brushed buttons against her sweater. A shiver rippled across his back and snapped against his calves.

Outside, another cough bubbled up out of his chest. When it settled down, he smoothed his hand across the front of his coat. “Next time you wanna grope, make it subtle, will you?”

Not that he blamed the coat. Sometimes—just sometimes—it was possible for Dachs to remember why he’d ever bothered to remarry.

✦✦✦

He caught up with the officer who’d taken the burglary report in the lot behind the jail. He was more of a cop-ling than a full-grown cop, though somebody had stolen the fuzz from his chin.

“Who’d you say you were again?” the cop asked.

Dachs held up his ID. “Fraud investigator, want to know about a burglary that took place a few days ago.”

Even his coat hung limp, as bored as the cop. “Look, I might take a half dozen reports like that in a day, some days even more,” the cop said. “That’s why we write the reports. Anything I know is in the report.”

“You’d remember this one. Burglar stole a brain.”

The cop stared at the wall, gave Dachs the “okay-I-do-remember-that-one” nod. A van pulled in, emptying three handcuffed hookers out the back amid a Greek chorus of curses, shouts to shut their traps.

“Was there any sign the burglar was interrupted?” Dachs asked.

“Yeah, one of the brains was disturbed, turned half-around, wires tugged out, so someone must’ve chased him off.”

“But when the wife came home, the front door was already standing wide open. Nothing to indicate she interrupted the burglar in the act, right?”

“Maybe the guy heard a dog bark down the street and he ran.” The cop shrugged. “Crooks are stupid. They should all do themselves a favor and steal an extra brain.”

“But even a dumb crook would’ve grabbed the silver right by the window, right? Here’s how I’m thinking the husband did it—”

“The husband?”

“Yeah. Follow me on this: he left the window open, went around and maybe even climbed inside, took the

one brain he didn’t want, went out the front door and left it open for his wife to find. Wife’s innocent, doesn’t know a thing, so she’s all traumatized when she reports it.”

The cop chuckled. “That’s your proof? I wish prosecutors worked the way insurance companies do.” He retreated a couple steps toward the van to help the other cops.

“Your back,” Dachs said, jerking his chin.

The cop-ling glanced over his shoulder just in time to miss a vicious swing from one of the hooker’s handbags before the other cops restrained her. He spit like he’d just emerged from a ten-round bout, wiped his mouth. “Well, you get any real proof he did it, you can call me.”

“Thanks,” Dachs said, rubbing his throat. “You’re great.”

✦✦✦

Dachs entered his shithole apartment in that lame hour between midnight and dawn when anyplace else he might have gone would have been lonelier and more dangerous.

He pulled the Glock from his pocket, set it on the kitchen counter. Damn thing was deadweight. Who was he going to face off against—a frenzied economist, grief-stricken over his murdered impatiens?

He shrugged off the coat, gave it a half-hearted toss toward the coat rack and missed. It thumped to the floor, then slithered up the shaft, crawled out on a knob, and straightened its shoulders. At least one of them still had a sense of pride.

The fridge was empty except for week-old takeout he wasn’t drunk enough to eat, and beer, but not enough beer to get him drunk enough to eat the takeout. At least there were no brains.

“What I need is some proof,” he muttered as he hit the button on the phone to play back his voicemail.

~ *Dachs, you’ve welched on your rent for the last time. I trusted you, but you’ve turned out to be white trash in a nice coat. No more chances, Dachs—the eviction papers are in hand.*

Ah, the lovely voice of slumlord reason. At least he appreciated a fine Burnuckle. Dachs opened the cabinet above the sink and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. “Here’s the kind of proof I need.”

~ *Mr. Dachs, I had the strangest call from Malinda Hertle, thanking me for our prompt service and checking to see that we’d pay for her petunias. Do you know anything about this? This wasn’t our agreement. Call me, Mr. Dachs.*

Dachs could think of plenty of things to call Stubbigde but none that would sit too pretty in his report. He twisted the cap off the whiskey and took a long swig. It felt like a kind of homecoming. Always did.

~ *Hi, Dad.*

“Hi, Aelish.” He took another, longer swallow.

He was mostly glad to hear his daughter’s voice. She talked to him lots, especially when he was blind drunk.

Sometimes, if they had a real good chat, a real father-and-daughter talk, he could forget how he saw her last, washed up on the beach with seaweed-tangled hair.

~ *How'd things go today?*

"Like a rat down a toilet. Pretty good, if you like the smell of shit." He opened his throat to another slug.

~ *Hey, you're used to it, right?*

Yeah, I'm used to it. I love it. It's my life. "Looks like a case of fraud."

~ *Things aren't always what they seem, Dad.*

"No, usually they're worse. How 'bout you, cupcake? Making any new friends?"

~ *Not so much. Dead people, they all got problems too.*

"So killing yourself didn't solve that, huh? Go figure."

The phone clicked off. He reached out to hit the key to hear her voice again but didn't tap it. Instead, he stumbled into the bathroom, hacking and spitting up the sickness deep inside him into the tub.



The decor in LobeNet's offices was kamikaze kindergarten—bright colors, friendly tactile shapes, vid screens with the sound tuned to a soporific buzz, all of it designed to distract customers and make them feel more comfortable about keeping dead people's brains in the fridge. A sales clerk took Dachs to a manager, who called somebody in a back room. Dachs braced himself to deal with a hostile, balding, middle-aged guy with the social skills of a badger.

The woman who came out was long and lean, wearing a dark suit buttoned to her throat and a pair of glasses that cost more than his month's rent. "I'm Anna Deveshwar, one of the vice-presidents here," she said. A light flashed on her lapel, scanning Dachs. Tiny lines of text flitted across the lens of her glasses. "How can we help you, Daryl?"

Rumor had it they printed Indian Institute of Technology diplomas on million dollar bills. She looked like she had a Ph.D. "I'm here to ask about a brain—"

"A suspended cerebral processing unit," she interrupted, and gave him a glittering fake smile. "SCPU. We prefer the technical term. You in the market to buy?"

"No, I barely use ten percent of the one I got. I wanted to ask you about one named Ellen."

She drew a breath, thought better of what she was about to say, and closed her hands like she was about to pray. "Brains don't have names. They're just another organ, like corneas, kidneys, or hearts, all of which have a long history of donation. People don't name their corneas, kidneys, or hearts—"

Dachs gestured at his crotch. "A lot of guys name theirs. And those get recycled too, from what I hear."

Ignoring him, she said, "It's hard to fight the mistaken notion that the brain is the seat of something indefinable—"

"The soul?"

"—but if people are going to benefit from this unique, reusable organ, we need get rid of outmoded superstitions."

"So anyway," he said, "this brain was stolen."

"SPCU," she insisted. "And Lougheed Hertle called us right away to stabilize his array."

That was no surprise. "Array?"

"Three SPCUs networked together. SPCU arrays are the most effective AI created to date for mimicking multi-human non-linear systems. Like economic behavior."

"What I don't understand," Dachs coughed, "is why Hertle can't do his work with just the two brains he has left?"

Her hands became animated, diagramming networks in the air. "That's an interesting question, and we wish we understood it better. A three SCPU array produces complex AI behaviors, but two don't. Have you heard the joke about the functioning AI array?"

"No."

"That's odd."

Her eyebrows lifted and the corner of her mouth curled conspiratorially while she waited for him to get it.

He decided not to give her the satisfaction. "Wouldn't an economist be better off working with an economist's brain?"

"Everyone wants a Nobel winner—as if those were readily available. But the real processing is all done by nanotechnology utilizing existing synapsial pathways."

"So one brain is as good as another?"

"For the most part. It matters how they're harvested, of course. The conditions have to be prepared in advance, and we reject any candidate that turns out to be damaged. Some perform better than others."

Exactly. "But what can a thief do with a single SCPU?"

"After a week and a half? He might resell it to a dog food company. It's dead meat without the right supplies."

"Huh." Dachs' throat was raw. Too much talking after last night's coughing fit. She was giving him much more time than he'd expected. "And how often is an SPCU originally a family member?"

"These days? Never. It interferes with the grieving process. There's no way to access the family member's personality again. It's just not there. But that's what people expected—very tragic in the early years. Lougheed struggled with it himself, although he eventually came to terms with the situation better than many others. May I ask you a personal question, Daryl?"

"I'm kind of busy tonight."

She indicated his coat. "Is that one of the original Burnuckles?"

He frowned for an answer, but the coat straightened itself and rolled up its collar.

"Amazing! The height of AI innovation at the time." She flashed him a grin, the real thing, not costume jewelry. At least he knew why she was answering his questions. Her hand darted forward. The coat flinched, crawling around Dachs' back.

He barked up a big ball of phlegm. “Fraid it doesn’t like you.”

“It doesn’t have any feelings,” she said, then laughed.

“Maybe that’s why we get on so well.” He turned to leave. The vids in the lobby glowed grainy black and white, displaying an angry head in a glass jar. Shoppers picked their way through supplies so expensive they didn’t have the prices marked on them. One man stood out like a scarecrow in his shabby suit. Dachs found himself suddenly wanting to jump on a table and burst into song, arms in a flourish, warbling, “*If I only had a brain!*”

Once he would have done that for his daughter. Aelish would have squealed in delight and applauded, and he would have taken a bow for her.

His coat snapped and cracked, like a dog bristling at a stranger. “Don’t worry,” he said, kicking open the automatic door. “She can’t get you.”

And Hertle wasn’t going to get away with insurance fraud. Dachs headed for the university.



He was wheezing when he banged into the main office of the economics department. The secretary had a shape like an old recliner, with a dress like old upholstery. She looked up at him in some distress. “May I get you some water?”

“Oxygen,” he gasped, “would be better. I’m here to see Professor Hertle.”

“Whom shall I say is here to see him?”

“Don’t bother,” Dachs replied, reading the office numbers off the board on the wall.

A security door separated the professorial offices from potentially violent students. “Open sesame,” Dachs said as he approached it. The front flap of his coat whipped up, sliding between the door and frame, shorting the lock.

The secretary must’ve called ahead—Hertle was waiting outside his office door when Dachs came stomping down the corridor. Not a strong physical type. High forehead, no chin, a chest so thin it didn’t seem possible he could pull himself in through a window. But maybe he had faked the damage from inside the house.

Dachs flashed his ID card and shoved it in his coat. “Sorry to bother you.” He took a deep breath. “I’m with the insurance company. We have a couple final questions so we can process your claim.”

“Oh.” Hertle forced his hands deep into his narrow pockets. “Is this about the impatiens? Because I’m afraid my wife doesn’t have the receipt any longer. But she called and the store will give her a written estimate.”

“Sure. Just send it along to the main office.” Another deep breath. “How important is the array to your research? I’m trying to convince the office to expedite your claim. I just need something specific.”

“Well,” Hertle said, pulling himself together with all the fortitude of a man determined to lie and not sure

how to do it. “Quite important for the work I intend to do on predicting trends in consumer luxury spending. But—”

“You can be frank with me.” Dachs pulled out a pad, flicked his thumb over it like he was taking notes.

“It’s very important to maintain the health and quality of the array. Isn’t that enough?”

“Do I understand correctly that one of the units is your aunt? Helen, isn’t it?”

Hertle nodded. “Ellen. Yes, she was my aunt, but almost twenty years younger than her sister, my mother. Just a year older than me, in fact. The two of us grew up together. We’ve been together all our lives. Thank God the thief didn’t steal her.”

“She must have died quite young.”

He pulled a hand from his pocket, squeezed the bridge of his nose. “We knew it was coming, of course. She had spinal muscular atrophy, was lucky to live into her twenties. We made plans to stay together this way long before her body passed.”

Ah. “So you must be very concerned about her array?”

“She’s,” he paused, “not really there. I know that.”

“But?”

“But I’d rather not let her get too lonely. She’s been depressed since the robbery. Lower output readings, I mean, more like the other two. One. Although the service representative from LobeNet tells us that’s to be expected.”

“Your wife said something about her being a psychic.”

He rested his hands on his hips, puffed out his tiny chest. “Why exactly are you here?”

“It’s routine for an insurance claim this large. There are some minor questions we need to clear up, like the burglary part of it. We’re wondering if you noticed anyone lurking around the neighborhood.”

“Isn’t that the job of the police?”

“You know how busy the police are—” Somewhere in one pocket or another, his ID was vibrating with a phone call, which had to be from the office. He would have ignored it, but the coat was twitching like someone trying to scratch an unreachable itch. He fished in his pocket. “Just a second.”

“Mr. Dachs!” came the voice from the tiny speaker when his thumb pressed the answer tab. “I’ve just received an odd phone call from Anna Deveshwar at LobeNet. She wants to offer an unreasonable sum of money for your coat.”

“Sorry, not for sale.”

He went to shove the ID back into his pocket, but the voice continued. “This is not a consignment shop. You are supposed to be proving fraud, that the theft was a fraud!”

The thick folds of the coat muffled Stubbidge, but too late. Hertle had gone pale, then livid. “Malinda would never—” His little chin seemed too small to work his mouth. “I’m calling security right now to have you escorted off campus.”

“No need.” Dachs turned to leave, rubbing a sore spot in his chest. “I’m sure security’s got other things to do.”

His boots echoed their thumps down the stairwell. He was disappointed in himself.

The wife had done it after all.



It wasn’t hard to figure the scenario: the wife had dumped one of the brains, but it wasn’t an anonymous one. She’d flushed Auntie Ellen down the loo, then panicked and replaced her with dumb Chucky, the off-the-shelf brain. Who could blame her? She was married to a guy more in love with his dead aunt than with her.

But why not just pretend Ellen was stolen? Why do the switch? Sometimes there was no understanding these things. People started one thing, had second thoughts, did something else.

He stood outside the house, pounding the door loud enough to let her know he wasn’t going to be suckered again.

When she opened it, her eyes were red from crying. She swallowed hard, tried to smile, looking like a miserable child desperate to please but unsure how. Dachs hesitated.

“Oh, I’m so glad to see you,” she said first.

“Huh?”

“My husband called. You have to understand, I didn’t know what he’d done.”

Dachs rubbed his throat. “What did he do?”

“He said something about fraud. That it was all my fault.”

“What was your fault?”

She swallowed a sob. “I don’t know!” And another, wiping away the tears on her palm. “I mean, I knew I’d made a mistake as soon as I mentioned Chuck wasn’t that bright, but Lougheed was always complaining about him...Please, wait here a moment.”

Dachs stepped into the foyer as she ran to the kitchen. When she came back, she pressed something into his fist, leaning close enough that he could smell a scent like fresh rainwater on her. “Please, I had no idea what Lougheed did. I didn’t mean to get him in trouble. Please don’t send him to jail.”

It was a wad of old-fashioned paper money, hard cash, damp with her tears. He opened his fingers, counted—more than enough to pay his rent.

“I don’t have any more than that, not right now, but if there’s anything else I can do—”

She pressed up against him, clumsily, smashing her breasts against his chest. His coat flapped out around her and started sliding up the back of her calves—she had on nylon stockings this time.

“Stop that,” he said, and when she started to pull back, he added, “Not you, the coat.”

She stared up at him, a mixture of confusion and fear. “I didn’t mean to get him in any trouble,” she whispered.

Dachs shoved the money back into her fist, closed her fingers around it. “He’s not in trouble. Nobody’s in trouble.”

Nobody but me, he wanted to add.

“Then why—?”

“I came by to tell you that the insurance company are bastards. They don’t want to pay you. If it’s not me, they’ll send out someone else. You’ll have to fight them.”

“Fight them how? We’ve got to get another brain.”

“Can’t help you there. I haven’t got one, much less one to spare. But good luck.”

He stumbled down the pristine steps and across the scrubbed sidewalk before he could change his mind. The ID badge started vibrating again, the coat twitching, and he yanked it out, thumbed the answer tab.

“What?”

“Mr. Dachs, we are releasing you from your contract. You are off this enquiry as from now—”

Hell, regular meals were overrated anyway. Dachs jerked on the lapel of the coat to stop its damn twitching.

—as I’m afraid all the worst reports we received about you appear to be true.”

“Did you hear the one about me shooting ex-employers?” He was flinging the ID badge into the gutter when something smashed into the back of his head.

He rolled as soon as he hit the ground, or a second blow from the garden paver would have caved in his skull. Grabbing his attacker’s elbow, he twisted, and the rock clunked on the sidewalk, but he took a backhand from the other fist across the chops for his effort. With his coat thrashing like a snake, Dachs smacked a shin into the other man’s ribs, rolled one way, then the other, dodging wild strikes at his head, until he ended up on top, with one knee in the guy’s solar plexus, one hand full of hair, and the Glock shoved up under the other man’s chin. His ears were pounding with blood, or he might have heard his coat say, “I tried to warn you.”

It was the man he’d seen earlier, the guy talking to himself, the same scarecrow in the bad suit who’d been at the brain bank.

“What the hell are you—?” Dachs started, but the shabby man blurted out, “Ellen needs that third brain.”

Dachs dragged him to his feet. The guy was crazy, probably schizophrenic. He was also a peeping tom, diligent enough to know something about the private lives of the Hertles. The guy hadn’t attacked him by accident—he’d been watching the house, maybe stalking him.

“You better take me to Ellen right now,” Dachs said, with as much menace as he could muster, bleeding the way he was, his lungs feeling like they were stuffed full of cotton. The man started to pull away and Dachs jabbed him with the gun. “Don’t try. If I shoot you, who’s going to take care of Ellen?”

The shabby man stared at him with wide eyes.

Dachs pressed the gun in his back. “Just think about that.”

They walked toward the crummy, cheap apartments a few streets over. The guy rubbed his temple, mumbling something about being sorry, it not working out.

“Ellen said I had to stop you. She said you were upsetting her nephew and his wife. She wanted you to stop.”

“How’d you get on speaking terms with Ellen?” Dachs asked, one fist squeezing a knot in the man’s jacket, the other gripping the Glock hidden in his pocket.

“It took me years to find her. I could sense her presence out there. Sometimes her voice would come through so clearly. She was always lonely.”

“How’d you do it?”

“I walked all the way across the city. All the way and back again, trying to pick up her thoughts, trying to hear her better, coming ever closer until I found her on this block. Then I could hear her all the time. I trailed the delivery of chemicals from LobeNet to find her.”

They had arrived at a basement apartment entered through a side door. The scarecrow fumbled with a key-card, let them in. Dachs knocked the door shut behind them. The one room was spartanly clean with a bed and one small fridge in the corner.

“Open the door,” Dachs said, nodding at the fridge.

Time to meet the dogfood.

The guy got down very carefully on his knees and opened the door. The brain inside looked pristine: digital readings on the side all fine, hooked up to a power supply, though the other wires hung loose.

“Ellen says she’s pleased to meet you,” the man whispered.

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t shake hands.”

“You can’t let them deny the insurance claim,” he whimpered.

“Why?”

“Ellen can stay in contact with the other brains, but they aren’t aware of her. They’re starting to deteriorate. She needs them to stay healthy or she’ll go mad.”

“That’s some skill of Ellen’s, only goes one way. I thought she could talk to you too.”

“Yes, but I’m not part of the array. What we have is more,” his hands stroked the plastic case, fingertips tracing the readouts, stroking the ends of the cables, “spiritual. We’re soul mates. I’ve never felt more complete, more whole than when I’m in communion with her.”

“Is that so?” Dachs eased away, toward the phone on the table and picked it up. Proof didn’t get much better than this. The cop-ling would get to nab the real perp, the insurance company wouldn’t have to pay out, and Hertle would get his aunt back. Daryl Dachs, greatest of the dumb heroes after all. He might even find some way to make his rent.

“Ellen says that you did the best you could for,” the scarecrow hesitated, “for Aelish, is that right? For Aelish. You tried—”

He couldn’t finish his sentence because Dachs was squeezing his throat. “Listen, fruitcake, what’d you just say?”

Guy just shook his head, fingers clawing at Dachs’ hand. Dachs threw him to the floor.

“Ellen, she—”

“Shut up.”

“—said Ael—”

“I said shut up!” The Glock was out and aimed.

“Please, Ellen and I need each other,” the man begged in a whisper. “Let us not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments.”

Dachs stood bewildered for a moment. Had he really done his best for Aelish? Had he ever really done his best for *anyone*?

He picked up the phone and carefully dialed the number.

It was answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Dachs here, Stubbidge. Listen, you’re going to pay out on the Hertle claim. There’s no evidence of fraud. You try to deny the claim, I’ll turn evidence for them when they sue your pants off.”

“You’ve been harassing them.”

“Under your instructions. The husband was standing there when you told me to prove fraud. He heard everything, called his lawyers. It’s cheaper for you to pay out.”

“He may have lawyers, but you don’t, Mr. Dachs.” His voice trembled. “You shan’t have a penny from this company.”

“I’ll wait until tomorrow before I call the insurance board and talk to Hertle’s lawyers.” He clicked off, threw the phone down.

“Thank you,” the shabby guy said, fawning at his waist.

Dachs shoved him away. “I didn’t do it for you, and I didn’t do it for Ellen either, so get over yourself.”

His big black coat slipped around him like a shell as he walked out into the grimy sunlight, feeling sick, with no place he needed to go.

◆◆◆

The eviction papers were hanging from his door like the tag on a corpse’s toe. Dachs was glad to shut the door behind him, to shut out the bright yellow light and the dust and the filth. He took the whiskey bottle by the throat and gulped a shot.

Slumped in his chair, he punched the scarecrow’s words, the ones about marriage of two minds, into the search engine as best as he could remember them. But either his memory or his typing was off. He couldn’t find anything.

He tumbled into bed, still clutching the bottle, the faded picture of Aelish above him, smiling, hopeful. He took another hit of whiskey and closed his eyes. The coat wrapped itself around him like a blanket while he waited for the phone to ring. ☺

You may not have read John Joseph Adams before, but if you've submitted a story to Fantasy & Science Fiction in the last few years, you can be assured that John Joseph Adams, that magazine's assistant editor, has read you. You can also be assured that your story is not one of the ones he's discussing here. Really, that's what he told me. I swear.

It Came From the Slush Pile

BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

Once upon a time, on a dark and stormy night, on my way home from the editorial offices of Fantasy & Science Fiction, I stumbled across a lovely brass lamp in a mysterious shop. I bought it for a song, only to come home and discover it had a nasty blemish.

Starting to sound familiar yet? Or do you need some more?

I took out a rag and some polish and tried shining it up. Much to my surprise, a genie sprung from the lamp and offered me three wishes. Fed up after a long day of slushing, I blurted out, without thinking, "I wish I never had to listen to another slush writer complain about fast rejections! I wish that I never had to explain the 'code' of my rejection letter! And I wish that I never had to see another poorly formatted manuscript ever again!"

The genie said "Your wish is my command," and struck me deaf, dumb, and blind.

Does it sound familiar now? Wait, here's the kicker:

At just that moment I woke up and realized it was all a dream.

Groaning yet?

If you think that's bad, you should see the slush pile some time. Clichés are the bane of slush readers and editors. They're more likely to drive us out of the business than the poor wages, the long hours, or the incessant paper cuts.

Sure, the above example was exaggerated for effect, but that same kind of "reinvention" of genre clichés appears over and over in the slush. You might be asking yourself "What reinvention?" But that's exactly the point.

Aside from genie-of-the-lamp stories, deal-with-the-devil stories are probably the most oft-"reinvented" cliché. Sadly, though this plot offers a great deal of promise for character development, no matter how

good, most stories in this vein simply can't overcome the fact that they are deal-with-the-devil stories. And there's a special place in hell reserved for people who keep writing them.

But this special issue of Subterranean is focused specifically on science fiction clichés, so we won't be seeing any clever reinvention of those tropes. So let's talk about SF.

Two of the hoariest of all science fiction clichés revolve around twist endings. For example, stories in which (a) the alien planet being described by the protagonist turns out to be...Earth; and (b) the two people that crash land on the alien planet turn out to be...Adam and Eve. Clichéd endings are what make us editors want to hurl the manuscript across the room, and/or run it through the shredder (or perhaps set it on fire). Assuming you've actually written a story that's good enough to get us to the ending, for us to have wasted our time reading it only to find out it concludes with a cliché twist ending...it's, as I said, a burn-worthy offense.

Robots turning against their creators is another popular theme, if only because without that conflict there's not much story there. If the robots all behave, what fun is that? Sometimes I think that the writers themselves are robots—evil machines created by the vast conspiracy that's out to get me (and other editors), monotonously typing out cliché after cliché.

Some clichés are harder to reinvent than others. The aforementioned Adam and Eve, and the planet-turning-out-to-be-Earth clichés are really tough, as is this one: going back in time to kill Hitler (variations on this theme include going back in time to save Kennedy or Lincoln). This one's become so difficult that most often writers will simply explore this theme through

alternate history, since that's what they wanted to play with in the first place—it's not the time travel part that gets people to write these stories, it's the great changes that could occur from one little tweak in the historical record. This cliché is so hoary that when the most recent incarnation of *The Twilight Zone* aired a temporal-kill-Hitler tale in one of their early episodes, it immediately jumped the shark for me (not that it was really any good to begin with, but at least before that they were trying to tell stories that were new).

The popularity of a certain theme can move it into cliché territory. For instance, lately, the slush pile has been inundated with memory wipe stories, probably courtesy of the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Likewise, *The Matrix* trilogy spawned its legions of virtual reality imitators (which itself was imitating work done more than twenty years ago in prose form), and all the recent zombie movies of late seem to have, ahem, given life to a flood of undead stories.

The mocking of clichés at this point has also become a cliché, so much so that editor Scalzi forbade such stories from being submitted for this issue. Mocking clichés can still work, but it requires a bit more work than most new writers are willing to put into it.

I guess the question editors and slush readers alike eventually come to ask themselves is: why? With all the breadth and scope of science fiction and fantasy, why would writers spend time writing yet another genie story, when they could be out inventing something totally new?

A lot of clueless newbies probably just don't know any better, and they think the little tweak they gave the cliché transformed it into something new and wonderful. And since a lot of newbs get all or most of their SFnal knowledge from movies and TV, they really have no idea that the stories they're writing have been done a million times already.

However, established pros—who know better—often cannot resist the lure of the cliché reinvention

story either, and I think this is for the same reason that Mr. Scalzi wanted to focus this issue on this subject: Because everyone says you're not supposed to.

Pros (and some novices too, I imagine) take that sort of thing as a challenge, which is all fine and good, but how receptive would you be to Yet Another Genie Story after reading several dozen (or hundred, or thousand) stories like "Deaf, Dumb, and Blind"?

But having said all that, despite all the negatives these kind of stories have going against them, every once and a while, someone manages to write a good one. So now that I've thoroughly bashed cliché-based stories, let me point you to some recent examples of good ones:

- "The Five Cigars of Abu Ali" by Eric Schaller (genie of the lamp)
- "Non-Disclosure Agreement" by Scott Westerfeld (deal-with-the-devil)
- "The Revivalist" by Albert Cowdrey (Rip Van Winkle)
- "Refried Clichés: A Five-Course Meal" by Mike Shultz (mocking clichés)
- "Undone" by James Patrick Kelly (Adam & Eve)
- "Born-Again" by K.D. Wentworth (Jesus clones)
- "Suicide Coast" by M. John Harrison (virtual reality)

Those are just a few that came readily to mind; there are others out there if you really look. And aside from these gems, I'm sure this issue is full of 'em.

But, I'm guessing many stories submitted for publication in this issue will have been rejected. There's only so much room, after all, and I'm sure Mr. Scalzi has impeccable taste (he did invite me to write an article, didn't he?). Which means those cast-offs will be coming soon to a slush pile near me.

Noooooooooooooooooooo! Oh God, let this all have been a terrible, terrible dream! ☹

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*By day, Stuart MacBride writes the sort of crime fiction that makes readers and critics happy (and he wants you to know his latest, *Dying Light*, hits the racks this May in the UK and in August in the US). By night—well, by night he does terrible awful horrible things to William Shakespeare. With typewriters. Appalling, really. Here, try some.*

A Finite Number of Typewriters

BY STUART MACBRIDE

“Gadzooks!” The air was alive with sparkling light, spinning and buzzing like a thousand burning bees. Leaving behind them a dingy room full of terrifying machinery. William tried to get up, but thick metal shackles held him firm.

An ugly man, peppered with strange piercings loomed into view and said, “Sodding hell: another ‘Gadzooks’.”

His partner grinned. “That’s five you owe me!”

The ugly one grabbed William’s head and shone a light in his eyes. Flicking it on and off as William struggled, shouting, “Unhand me, thou villainous motley-minded measles!”

“Put the bloody en-language-ator on him Davey, for God’s sake. All this ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ bollocks is doing my head in today.”

A circlet of cold metal was forced onto William’s head and pins and needles rampaged between his ears, like someone was running a bottle brush through his brain, making him twitch and convulse. When it was over William slumped back against the restraints and whimpered.

“Come on then,” said the one called Davey, loosening the straps, “let’s get you out of there.” He turned William round and pushed something against the back of his neck. A sudden jolt, like a bee sting, and Davey let him go. “All done.” He smiled, aiming for reassuring and missing by a mile. “69,837—don’t forget: 69,837.”

But William wasn’t listening, he was staring at a strange box in the corner of the room. There were two little people inside. Two little people that looked frighteningly familiar: oval faces, high foreheads, a fringe of brown hair and a handlebar moustache perched beneath

a long nose. It was like looking in a mirror. One of the little men said something and the other laughed, then turned and stared straight at William, ‘...Join us after the break when we’ll be talking to his Holiness, Pope Rickards the Fourth about the all new Martian Jihad. Until then, this is William Shakespeare 1,446—’

‘And William Shakespeare 2,371.’

—saying, “Don’t touch that dial!” Then the little William Shakespeares disappeared and a half-naked woman exploded onto the screen shouting about how wonderful her new shampoo was.

“What...? But...” he asked as Davey pulled him out of the chair and pressed a small leather book into his hands.

“Right, you got everything you need in there. OK, William?”

“But I...What’s going on?”

“Look, Billy-boy, I know this is a big shock for you, but we’ve got a shit heap of work to do before the next you turns up, so if you don’t mind, you know...buggering off?”

“But—”

“But you don’t know what you’re doing here, you don’t know what’s happened, etc. etc. Yea, we heard it all before, ain’t we Malcolm?”

The ugly one nodded and wrapped a friendly arm round William’s shoulders, steering him towards the door. “Nine times a day for the last eight years. So we made a little presentation—it’s in your orientation pack. OK?” He smiled again. “OK. Anyway, great to meet you, big fan of your work, take care now.” Swoooosh—the door to the lab slid shut, leaving William standing out in the corridor. Spluttering. The door wouldn’t open again.

"Hello?" No reply, just a low humming sound and bland, plinking music. Clearly this was some sort of sorcery. Or a fugue brought on by too much cheap wine? Or maybe he was dead? He didn't feel dead... But then he'd never been dead before, and wasn't sure what it would be like.

"Hello?" The corridor curved away to the right, so he followed it, marvelling at the incredibly detailed paintings lining the walls, most of which featured himself and a smiling, weasely-looking guy in a pointy white hat. Shaking hands with a collection of oddly dressed people: not a doublet and hose between them.

There was another door at the far end. Taking a deep breath, William stepped outside. A sudden deluge of sound—honking, braying, roaring, chittering, shouts and calls. It was a riot of colour and strangeness. Massive buildings reached up into the sky, others floated there with nothing holding them up! Cars drifted by on cushions of air, and everywhere he looked flickering pictures tried to sell him something. It was official: he was dead after all. And this was hell.

"Afternoon, Mr Shakespeare isn't it?"

He looked down to see a short man, dressed in fluorescent green and gold. "Er...yes?"

"Thought it was, sir, recognised you the minute I clapped eyes on you." He extended a hand that was as clammy as it was limp. "Dribbins, Charlie Dribbins. Have you got your flooglepass?"

"Floog...?"

"Flooglepass. It'll be in your orientation pack?" The little green and yellow man pointed at the leathery book in William's hands.

"Oh, right..." He opened it—recognising absolutely nothing.

"Do you mind?" Charlie Dribbins reached in and pulled out a short, shiny rectangle. "Perfect!" he said with a huge smile. "Now, you just wait here and I'll go fetch the carriage." Dribbins hopped down the stairs two at a time, gave a jaunty wave, and disappeared.

Something huge droned by overhead and William looked up to see his own face beaming down at him. *'Drink Pope-a-cola! Remember: any other soft drink is a venal sin!'* He felt his legs go out from under him and he collapsed on his bum. Sitting on the top step, William watched himself telling everyone in the street to buy ecclesiastical fizzy juice.

Ten minutes later and there was still no sign of Dribbins. Ten minutes after that, William was beginning to think something bad might have happened. He pulled himself upright, determined to go have a look when someone else rounded the corner and puffed his way up the steps. High forehead, long hair at the back, oval face, handlebar moustache and some sort of shiny black mask covering his eyes. It was another William Shakespeare.

"Damn, sorry I'm late—got caught up on the Clyde flyunder. Tell you, traffic's a bitch since they closed the old hoverpass. How are you? Been waiting long?"

William opened his mouth, but no words came out. Just a tiny 'eek'.

"I know, I know, it's bloody weird, isn't it? I was, like, totally fazed for about a week." He pulled off his mask and smiled. "I'm 55,345. Nice to meet me." He shook William's hand. "Come on, I've got a Bumble parked round the corner."

"I...Dribbins is fetching the carriage."

The other Shakespeare frowned. "Dribbins? Short-arse, 'bout this wide?" William nodded and his double spat. "Bastard! What did he get?"

"Get?"

55,345 snatched the orientation pack and rummaged through the contents, swearing all the way. "Thieving little shite—he's only gone and nabbed your credits!"

"Credits?"

"I *knew* I should have left earlier. Bloody flyunder." He turned on his heel and stomped down the stairs. "Well come on: I don't have all sodding day!"

✦✦✦

The Bumble was unlike anything William had ever seen in his life. A pair of glass spheres—each big enough to take the head and torso of a full-grown man—held together with bright yellow steel. The other Shakespeare ducked inside and strapped himself in, then scowled at William until he did the same. Sighing in exasperation when he couldn't get the buckles in the right order, 55,345 reached over and did it for him, muttering obscenities under his breath while William blushed. He was feeling somewhat foolish with his legs sticking out the bottom of the contraption. Then the other him started pressing buttons and the whole thing leapt into the sky, taking them with it. And William went, "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"What do you think then?" asked 55,345, pointing at the mass of grey, brown and red stretched out beneath their dangling feet. "Glasgow—hell of a lot bigger than London, isn't it? You see that..." he pointed off towards a line of white in the distance, separating the city from the blue-tinged horizon, "Celtic ocean, covers half the country. London's just this tiny collection of islands now, miles and miles away. Do you want to—"

"I'm going to be sick!"

55,345 winced. "Just try not to get any on the Bumble, OK? I don't want to lose my deposit." And at that point William lost his lunch.

✦✦✦

The building looked very majestic from the air as 55,345 brought the Bumble in to land. Wide balconies, trailing plants with exotic foliage spilling out over the sides, buttress of glass and steel—full of little people going about their business. It was the biggest thing William had seen in his life.

He staggered away from the landing pad, wiping the vomit from his doublet while 55,345 strode off to speak to a fat Shakespeare holding a clipboard. The fat one gave William a cheery, "Afternoon—nice to see me again!" and ushered them through into a small glass-walled room that juddered, then slid through the floor and into a vast open space inside the building.

"Oh God!" William felt his knees and stomach about to go again. The space was huge, lined with balconies and shops and William Shakespeares.

"I know," said 55,345, "vertigo's a bitch. You'll get used to it."

The further the elevator sank, the more crowded the levels became. Until the lift juddered to a halt three-quarters of the way down and 55,345 smiled. "Here we are: the sixty nine thousands. Your new home."

"But...but..."

"But nothing. Come on, you're down this way." He led William along the balcony and down a side corridor, past rows and rows of featureless brown doors until they came to one with 69,837 painted on it.

It opened onto a small, lifeless room. A red settee sat in the middle of the floor, facing a blank wall. "Damn thing must be on the fritz..." 55,345 marched over and banged the plasterwork with the flat of his hand until it fizzed and crackled. The wall flickered and changed into a view of the atrium outside—a massive statue of the weasely guy in the pointy hat standing on the fallen body of something huge with lots of tentacles, while a half-dozen bronze William Shakespeares stabbed it with halberds, swords, and what looked like a toasting fork.

"That's better." 55,345 pointed off to a small door in the corner, "Over there's your toilet-slash-shower, on the other wall there's a picowave, sink, storage space, some clothes." He stopped and looked William up and down. "I'd start there first if I were you, which I am. Jesus, I can't believe I really used to wear that stuff. Oh, yea, and there's some food in the fridge. You've lost your credits, so you're going to be stuck till I can get you some replacements. OK?"

William stood in the middle of the strange room, feeling lost. "It's...It's very small," he said at last.

"Yea, well, that's what happens when you're in the sixty nine thousands. Me, I'm in the fifty fives, so I got more room. The guys further up, you know, the three thousands and less: they got *palaces*. Just be glad you didn't arrive any later, it just gets smaller from here on down." He nodded. "Right, I gotta go. If you need anything, give me a call. But try to work it out for yourself first eh?" And he was gone.

William sank down on the red sofa, buried his head in his hands, and cried.



A strange metallic chirruping sounded, pulling him from a restless slumber. He sat upright, wiping the sleep

from his eyes as the bird chirped again. 'Hello? You in?' A tinny, disembodied voice.

"Hello?" He stared up at the ceiling and there was a pause.

Then, 'William: we can't come in if you don't say "enter".'

"Enter?" A whirr and the door to the small room slid open, revealing three Williams Shakespeares standing on the threshold, holding a collection of bottles and small trays.

They swarmed in, talking all the time, popping open little cupboards William didn't even know existed, pushing and pulling switches until the smell of cooking wafted through the air. The middle Shakespeare gave William's hand a mighty shake then handed him a bottle of wine. "How you doing? It's a bastard isn't it? Still, could be worse. I see you've been sick," he pointed at William's vomit-encrusted doublet, "I did the same thing. What was your shepherd like? Mine was a real dick."

"Mine too!" said another one, digging about in the wall and emerging with a big bowl which he filled with the contents of the picowave. "Like he couldn't be out of there sooner. I never knew I could be such an asshole. What was your one's number?"

"55,345," said William, flustered, uncertain if he should defend himself from the other hims...

"Oh, God, the fifty fives," the third Shakespeare pulled out four square glasses from beneath a hidden sink, "they're *such* a pain in the arse. So bloody superior, just because they've been here a year and a half longer than us sixty niners."

"Wankers." Middle poured the wine, then handed one to William. "Anyway, here's to you William, welcome to the twenty-seventh century."

The others clinked their drinks together and stood looking expectantly at him.

"Er..." He took two steps back. "What the hell is going on?"

The other Shakespeares looked at each other, then back at William. "Didn't they tell you at the retrieval centre?" asked the middle one.

"Course they bloody didn't," said the one on the right, "too much like hard work. It's in your orientation pack." He picked the leather book off the sofa and searched through the contents, emerging with a slim green rectangle. "Here, this'll help." He crossed to the wall with the picture of the atrium on it and pressed the green card against the image. The huge statue flickered then disappeared, replaced by an ornate seal with 'OFFICE OF HIS MOST HOLINESS POPE RICKARDS IV' on it, then the weasely-faced man appeared again. 'Hi,' he said with a lopsided grin, 'If you're watching this—'

"Oh for God's sake," said the middle one, grabbing the card and pressing the top right corner, setting the Pope lurching into fast forward, "the intro goes on for ages. It doesn't get to the good bit till...now."

He released the card and the picture slowed to normal speed.

...and that's why the Martian menace must be eliminated. The Pope faded from the screen and someone in a long white coat appeared. They all settled onto the couch, eating popcorn and listening to the scientist babbling on about temporal dilatories and time-displacement hooks, none of which made any sense.

"Basically it's like this," said the third Shakespeare, talking with his mouth full, "The Pope goes on an absinthe binge with a bunch of temporal physicists, and comes up with the Ecumenical Certainty Principle. God knows and sees everything, so all that stuff about subatomic particles being 'uncertain' is a load of old shite. Yea?" He looked hopefully at William, who just shrugged noncommittally. "Yea, OK—quantum mechanics not big in the Seventeenth Century. But by deconstructing quantum theory they figured out a way to make time travel work."

"So to celebrate," said the middle one, "they go off and drink some more absinthe and get a pizza, then at half past three in the morning, after they've been kicked out of a strip joint, Pope Rickards comes up with the 'Divinity Plan'."

William took another slug of wine and a mouthful of popcorn. Beginning to wish he'd just go away and leave himself alone.

"There's an old saying here that goes: if you have an infinite number of monkeys and an infinite number of typewriters and an infinite amount of time, the monkeys will eventually produce the complete works of *William Shakespeare*."

"Believe it or not," said the one on the right, "we're bloody famous!" All three of them grinned. "So the Pope thinks, 'if monkeys with typewriters can produce Shakespeare, what could Shakespeares with computers come up with?' They built the temporal retrieval probe and they've been dragging us here from 1606 ever since."

"But—"

"One every hour," said Left, "for the last seven years, eleven months, two weeks and four days. Soon as they get 100,000 of us we're going to be set loose on the computers." He checked his watch. "Which should happen in about another three and a half years."

Three years, five months, two weeks and six days later.

William grabbed the little man by the lapels and slammed him back into the wall. "How many bloody times do I have to kick the crap out of you before you get it?" Charlie Dribbins, one man William Shakespeare welcoming committee, wailed as he was bounced off the wall again. "What did you get?"

Tears streaming down his fat little cheeks, Dribbins held up a handful of credit cards. William snatched them, sticking them in his own pocket. "All of them, Dribbins,

or I swear to God I'll break every last one of your toes. Again." That produced another two pocketsful. Just to be on the safe side, William slammed his elbow into Dribbins's nose. "Now get the hell out of here."

The little man staggered off in tears, clutching his broken nose, bleeding all over his bright green suit. William watched him go, thanking God he'd never have to do the fresh-meat-run again. Beating Dribbins up every other week was beginning to get him down.

William sighed, stuck his hands in his pockets and marched up the stairs into the Institute for Temporal Acquisition. Inside, the décor still sparkled from the official ceremony two weeks ago: champagne, vol-au-vents, cheese and little bits of pineapple on sticks. They'd even cleaned up the retrieval chamber, polishing and painting everything till it gleamed. But Davey and Malcolm were managing to filthy the place up again.

The former had the covers off the field generator, buried up to his hips in oily cogs and clusters of greasy wire, while Malcolm looked on, eating squirmels straight from the jar. He popped another one in his mouth, chewed thoughtfully, then said, "You know what I think, don't you?"

Davey's voice muffled out from the depths of the machinery, "It's bugged?"

"Exactly! Given up the ghost. If you ask me, we ought to just—" He looked up and saw who was standing in the doorway. "William! How's it going? Come to witness our final hurrah?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Hey, Davey, get your backside out here, it's William!"

"Which one?"

"69,837, of course. Which one do you think?"

Davey pulled his head out of the field generator and grinned. "My man—looking sharp!"

William shrugged; the suit was new, a gift from a grateful client who ran a high-class Feel-A-Rama on Suchiehall Street. He'd had it specially tailored to hide the Palm Thrummer in its shoulder holster. "How long?" he asked and Davey shrugged.

"You know what it's like: soon as we hit 100,000 of you everything started falling to bits. Tell you, we've been lucky to get any new ones back at all this week, haven't we Malcolm?"

Malcolm just nodded, his mouth full of squirmels. William leaned back against the wall, folded his arms, and settled in for the long haul.

An hour and a half later a plume of blue smoke wafted up to the ceiling, setting the detectors off. "OK," said Davey, wiping his hands on a commemorative tea towel, "She's as ready as she's ever going to be."

Malcolm assumed a dramatic stance, "My dearest fellows," he said, hamming it up, "it's been a long, uneventful, and ultimately boring journey, but finally it has come to an end. As such, I think it only appropriate that the final honour goes to Mr William Shakespeare..." Malcolm performed an elaborate bow and William stepped up to the console.

“Friends, Romans, countrymen: screw the lot of you.” He pulled the grab lever and the low, background hum started to gain in pitch and volume. Sparks of amber light swirled around the table.

“Five on ‘Gadzooks!’” said Davey. Malcolm went for ‘Odds bodkins!’ but William just watched as the one hundred thousand, two hundred and sixtieth version of himself slowly coalesced from the past. Took one look at this strange, new world and shouted,

“Odds bodkins!”

Malcolm howled with glee. “Dinner’s on you, and I’m having a steak!”

“Bastard.” Grumbling, Davey grabbed the en-language-ator off the shelf and popped it onto the new Shakespeare’s head before he could get any further than, “Unhand me, thou rampallian scullions!” Shudders and convulsions ensued as 100,260’s internal language centre was recorded.

Malcolm pulled a bottle of fizzy from one of the coolant coils and popped the cork. “Left over from his Holiness’s visit,” he explained, sloshing it into three mugs as the Shakespeare on the table twitched and gibbered. “Here’s to you William, the new one, and all the other yous out there. Lets hope to God it was worth it.”



William helped his other self into the back of the Hopper and made sure he was buckled in. “Now,” he said, sitting opposite, “If you feel like being sick, do it in this bag, OK?”

The new Shakespeare nodded and looked gravely into the bag, as if expecting to find someone had already done so. “Are you sure this isn’t all some sort of...dream?”

“Positive. You remember your number?”

The new boy winced and felt the lump on the back of his neck, where Davey had inserted the chip. “Zebra ten?”

“Zebra ten.” William smiled and patted himself on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. Now you’re here, we can all get started.”

“Started?” More than a hint of fear in his eyes.

“You’ll see when we get there.”



The balconies were lined with Shakespeares of all sizes as William guided Z-10 out of the glass elevator. He’d been sick twice on the way over and looked set to hurl chunks again. The thundering round of applause as he stepped out onto the concourse probably didn’t help. “Officially,” shouted William, over the noise, “we had the big welcome ceremony when number 100,000 arrived, but we’ve lost a few of us over the last eleven and a bit years, so we needed to make up the numbers.” He prodded Z-10 towards a small podium and a microphone. “Go on then, say something.”

“Err...” he grabbed the edge of the podium and silence settled into the huge space. Z-10 cast a nervous glance back at William, then took a deep breath and said, “I’d really like to go home now.”



Pope Rickards the Fourth was just as weasely looking as William remembered from his one meeting with the guy—a small matter of a missing cardinal and a number of priceless paintings. He stepped up to the podium, flanked by a pair of Doberman Commandos, three bishops and the very first William Shakespeare to be dragged, kicking and screaming from the Seventeenth Century. It was weird seeing himself standing there, eight years older than he was in the mirror. Grey hair, bags under the eyes, a prestigious belly from too many state dinners and television shows. He slumped in place, looking depressed as the Pontiff told them all what a great service they were doing for mankind and how William Shakespeares would be the earth’s ultimate weapon in the new Martian Jihad.

Z-10 had been unceremoniously evicted from his place at the podium as soon as it became obvious he wasn’t going to say anything stirring and uplifting. Instead he’d been handed back to William and told to stand still and keep his mouth shut. It seemed he was incapable of doing either. As soon as Pope Rickards IV finished the hoary old anecdote about his night on the piss with the temporal physicists, Z-10 grabbed William’s sleeve. “All this stuff about monkeys and typewriters,” he hissed as the Pope bathed in the applause, “you believe it?”

William shrugged. “Makes about as much sense as anything else here.”

“But...” Shifty glances to the left and right. “What happens after? When we’ve done whatever it is?”

“Well, we’ll all...we...” William frowned. “Actually, that’s a bloody good question.” But there wasn’t time to ask it—as soon as the Pope’s speech was over a crowd of Ecclesiastical Technicians hurried all the Shakespeares back to their apartments. The computers were warmed up and destiny was waiting.



Someone exploded. One minute, there was a William Shakespeare standing there and the next, ‘Pwooooooom...’ a large cloud of red mist. Someone screamed and ducked back down into the trench, but William just gritted his teeth, grabbed the Shakespeare next to him and charged up over the lip into no person’s land. His companion had just enough time to shout, “Holy sh—” before his stomach, left leg and most of the right disappeared. He went down screaming.

William didn’t pause or hesitate—he ran for it, snaking through the lines of tangleweed, leaping over the bodies of his fallen self. As far as he could see the safest parts of any battlefield were at either end. It was

the bit in the middle that killed you. And he was determined to get out of it as quickly as possible.

There was an overturned Hopper lying half submerged in a pool of dark-grey ichor, a cluster of huge, red-brown tentacles twitching beneath the engine block. Another one lay torn apart on the field, chunks of machinery and fuselage strewn about like heavy metal confetti. He made for the whole one, clambering in through the shattered cockpit window and scrabbling through to the back. Looking for spare power packs.

The drop bay was full of mangled William Shakespeares. They dangled from their harnesses, or lay in crumpled heaps, dead before they could even get off a shot. Which meant all their weapons would be fully charged. William grabbed a Whomper, a Bull Thrummer, and a handful of power packs. He was just about to crawl back out through the shattered windscreen when something grabbed his ankle.

He snapped round, the Whomper growling in his hands, ready to tear a nasty big hole in whatever it was pointed at, to find a trembling Shakespeare. The man flinched back, covering his pale face with his hands. "Don't kill me!"

William powered down the assault weapon and settled back against the bulkhead. Out through the broken glass he could see the telltale, blue-grey shadow of a Screamer, floating through the Martian sky, trailing its tendrils through the tangleweed, searching out tasty morsels. No way he was going out there until it was long gone.

"Who you with?"

The other Shakespeare trembled as a pair of barbed tentacles caressed the porthole next to him and moved on. "The...the Fighting Fifty Fivers." He said, through chattering teeth. "Private William Shakespeare, 55,345."

"Yea?" William dug two small bags of squirmels out of his pack and tossed one over, keeping the other for himself. "You remember me?"

55,345 opened and shut his mouth a few times, then admitted that William looked familiar.

"Course I look familiar, we're the same bloody person!" God, he could be such an idiot at times. "69,837—you picked me up from the institute."

"Did I?" A nervous smile. "Reinforcements will be here soon, won't they?"

"No. Now shut up and eat your squirmels."

The Great Martian Jihad wasn't going very well, which shouldn't have surprised anyone: after all, it was being fought by 100,000 forty-two-year-old playwrights from the Seventeenth Century. The 'Divinity Plan' had turned out to be an utter crock of shite—a hundred thousand William Shakespeares on a hundred thousand computers had slaved away for three months. Then all those millions of words were fed into the most powerful Papal Randometer on the planet, drawing from every Shakespeare's work and condensing it into one master document. And then there was some swearing, and then they did it all again. The results were exactly the same. So they tried one last time.

An infinite number of monkeys with an infinite number of typewriters and an infinite amount of time might produce the complete works of William Shakespeare, but all a finite number of William Shakespeares had managed to come up with was a recipe for blueberry muffins and a short story about an old lady and her cat.

That was what happened when you planned global policy stoned out of your face on absinthe.

Gritting his teeth, William grabbed his Whomper and charged out into the growing gloom. ☺

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Universal Translator Jape

We told the rookie
you could talk to bong water,
and he's still trying.

The Shape of Clothes to Come

You know what would look
awesome with that toga, dude?
Some Lucite sandals!

Alien Languages

More Z's, K's, and V's.
Awkward polysyllabism.
Loads of glottal stops.



Epistemology

I'm all for truth, but...
If I'm a brain in a vat,
I don't want to know.

Fortress

Impregnable walls.
Vast armies of cloned warriors.
Thank god for air shafts!

World Building

Insane oligarchs.
Thieves, proles, and assorted scum.
But no middle class?



Time Paradox

'Die, grandad!' I cry,
pointing my gun at his head.
'Not again,' he sighs.

Size Envy

My big dumb object
Has way more sense of wonder
Than your nanotech.

Gillian Polack is an Australian and also a historian, which in the context of the story you're about to read, makes a whole lot of sense. This is her first short story sold in the States. So if you read it with an Australian accent, not only is it accurate, it's even more amusing.

Horrible Historians

BY GILLIAN POLACK

Doing a PhD is a pain in the butt. We all find ways of getting through it, somehow.

Everyone else in my department pretty much sticks to themselves. They live in the lap of history and study in the lap of history and love in the lap of history. When they die their tombstones will be inscribed with a pithy phrase from Martial or Virgil, or be calligraphed with an eighteenth century aphorism. They don't bother with the rest of the university. Some of them don't even bother with the rest of the department; they are immersed in thick description, or methodology, or in the wild, wild ways of historiography.

Stupid gits.

I and my friends are rebels. We have been part of a particularly boisterous 'I hate being a PhD' group since we found each other three years ago. We talk politics, bewail the opposite sex, and never, ever, ever mention the name of our supervisor. Sometimes we drink coffee, but more often than not we drink alcohol. Vast quantities of foul liquor. We are determinedly sane and our livers are becoming just as determinedly pickled.

Even in our little group, there are distinctions. The scientific types have more money and better wine, and us humanities types have more books.

Some of the science stuff is terribly secret. You can tell who is walking around with a 'classified' sticker on their forehead; they bear an air of despair. This is probably my imagination. It's either create an air of despair, or laugh in the face of the idiocy of high secrecy. And one thing holds true in our little club: one PhD must never laugh at another; we are each other's dignity.

My closest friend in the crowd was Ethel. Poor girl, to be named Ethel. In a gentle and kindly world, she would be doing a solid research project on adjectives in Robert Browning. Not going round with 'Top Secret' marked by the furrows of her brow.

Ethel is our resident Canadian communist mathematician. She says her lack of temperament is because she was brought up in Toronto and the rest of Canada

hates her. She tells me, when we get maudlin over coffee, that she is used to being different.

Abstruse mathematics is Ethel's game and she is notorious for playing it as if it means something. Why abstruse mathematics should ever be top secret is beyond me. Why it's studied at all is still beyond me, but I'm polite in public.

One day Ethel rang me. Ethel, by the way, is notable for everything red; she once confided to me that her underwear is red. She takes communism almost as seriously as mathematics. So she must have been wearing red when she rang. I can't see that she would not have been.

She was ringing to announce, in dulcetly mysterious tones, that the ultra-secret experiment which gave her research money was almost ready to go public.

"I am about to be de-classified! Isn't it wonderful?"

Silly me, I thought she was announcing a party, and I volunteered those little Vietnamese pastries I always make for such occasions.

"No, not yet. We have some final thingies to get through. And I need you for that. I need your help more than anything. Then you can make those yummy pastries."

"Why do you need me?" I was understandably suspicious.

"I need you to do our historical sequencing."

"Huh?" I admit to being surprised. What she seemed to be saying was that the powers that ran her project had conferred and decided that when they went public it would be with style and spectacle. They were planning to run a trial first. And for this they needed me. It appeared she wanted to give my forehead an 'I bear depressing secrets' stamp. "Why?"

"Because you are the only bloody history PhD I know," Ethel said.

"Why do you need a history PhD?" I asked.

"Can't tell you why until you say 'yes', but it has good pay."

I nearly said 'no'. My main claim to fame, after all, is a profound understanding of the audience/narrator relationship in the early old French epics. Even if somehow

the project actually needed an historian, I was only in the history department because my supervisor had moved over from the Modern Languages Department.

"I am a literary historian, you know. I'm not a regular historian." I said this clearly. This is important in my defense: I said it with vim and vigour and enthusiasm. "I research medieval literature."

Whatever I said, it bypassed Ethel's brain. She heard the word 'historian', and that was apparently just what she wanted to hear. Science types do this all the time. No differentiation, and no understanding. Me? Biased? Naturally.

Ethel wanted another woman because, as she explained first over the phone and then over sequential coffees, she works better with women. Ethel would refrain from talking politics or numbers at me, and I would give her raw historical data: a perfect match. There was a significant pay packet involved.

I admit I stopped ranting about other historians and their fetishes when she let drop what the pay would be. Big bucks. Four figures a pay cheque. The trouble with history is one learns very early about splitting infinitives (it's bad etiquette) and one learns even earlier about splitting a twenty dollar bill (once it's split it gets spent). Money is always an issue.

Books are just as big an issue. Just before I said "Yes" to Ethel I found myself lusting after Rychner. I had this mad vision of owning my own copy of his classic study, instead of pawing the library's with intent to steal it away. Yes reader, I committed myself to an unknown project which would probably result in my death and total destruction, and all for the love of Jean Rychner (deceased).

An old fashioned political historian would have been a better fit, or someone who specialized in the cut of women's garments in 1631. But they got me because of the coffee club and because of Ethel the Red.

Now, my relaxation reading is science fiction, but my real love is Old French epic legends. Gorgeous tales. Named swords. Flawed heroes. Battle scenes oozing with blood and guts. Sometimes they are holy wars; sometimes they are relentless personal vendettas. Always glorious. The stuff of my dreams.

The stuff of my nightmares concerns the Song of Roland. There are so many big questions regarding it. My greatest at that moment in time was whether William the Bastard listened to the lovely Christianized version we have in Digby manuscript, or if the tale Taillefer told was closer to the brutal themes of the vendetta epics. In plain English, how close to the written versions was that one, famous live performance?

I am not blathering; I am scene setting. I could do it in decasyllables with a caesura and make it properly epic, but somehow I don't think you would appreciate that at all. I refuse to write coldly and clinically.

Besides, Ethel says I have to do this. I pointed to the twenty security provisions in my contract and she told me, "This is not going anywhere: it is for the record."

If it is for the record I can say whatever I like, then

can't I? Including that at least half the people working on this project are twits. They might know everything about space and time and mathematics, but they are twits.

I did get excited the first time I saw the machine in operation. A big flat screen: history as video night on the set of Dr Who. The first oak I identified in the England on that screen made me realize, with the same utter joy I get every time Roland dies, why I do what I do, and how fabulous it all can be. And then I came down from my high with a jolt as Ethel blithely admitted they did not know where in England it was, or even when. That oak could be in Surrey yesterday, or in Yorkshire five hundred years ago.

"Fine tuning is this week," Ethel said, with an unholy enthusiasm. She wanted to give me a technical description of how they managed to haul the past from oblivion onto that screen but I didn't want to know. I had lost my joy and was suddenly depressed. England has oaks, this very day. Why should I want to know the weird technology behind us not knowing when that oak grew? History for me is about understanding and contact, not about eternity.

"Oaks on the edge of indeterminably fuzzy bushland are not history, they are nature," I said to Ethel.

"You know what," Ethel said, with as much anger as Ethel ever has, "You are a pleb."

"You know what," I said, with dignity, "It is not proper for a communist to call a friend a pleb and mean it as an insult. I have to admit—reluctantly—that knowing we can see the past is exciting. I just want to know where that damn oak tree is. The theory doesn't mean so much to me."

"It's a great project, though."

"It's a great project." My voice was as enthusiastic as I could make it. Ethel believed my words and ignored the tone. We went back to my place and celebrated with stir-fry and chardonnay. Ethel cooked, and I drank.

The next day I came into my brand new office to earn my brand new money and was told I had to find a major historical query. Instantly or sooner. Ethel and her various learned superiors were quite specific in wanting a query that promoted the project. It was the icing on the cake; a way of showing off their splendid work with aplomb. It was, in fact, why I was being paid.

I was informed (on top of the instructions to keep public relations in mind and to avoid controversiality) that I had to come up with a time and place that was sexy. Sexy. The carrot was supposed to be that I would instantly be a world expert and never have to worry about a job. Obviously there are more jobs in the sciences than in the humanities, if simple expertise is sufficient. Anyway, I bit down my comments and I considered my options.

There was only one query that stood out head and shoulders above everything else and that met everyone's requirements. I thought it through: it looked good. Newspapers would like it and it would not rock the religious masses. I put down on my little form (they had designed me a little form, just for the occasion) my carefully considered words:

Song of Roland, 1066 recitation by Taillefer.

When Ethel asked me what it meant I told her. "It's just before the Battle of Hastings. William is marching to battle and is bored to tears. His minstrel sings him the most famous epic legend ever. The Song of Roland is hot stuff. Blood and betrayal and agonizing deaths in the pass at Roncesvals."

William I of England was important enough to meet those warped scientific needs and I knew every word of the first hundred lines of the Oxford version of the Song of Roland. Why else would they ask me for help, if it wasn't to exploit my expert knowledge?

Sorry, that was sarcasm.

And I digress. I always digress. I have never, though, until now, been accused of being unscholarly and slack of mind. Damn these scientists and their misperceived assumptions about what makes an historian tick. Do you know that they thought that history is a simple matter of names and dates and facts and events? God knows how they define literature.

Anyway, they wanted an event and a date, so I gave them one: the march towards Hastings in 1066. They wanted a more famous name to add to that of Taillefer, so I gave them one: William the Bastard aka William I of England aka William the Conqueror. I listed sources they could check for more information about the subject. I even gave them the precise thing we were seeking with this particular query: what version of the Song of Roland William was enjoying en route and how it was performed.

I wrote two paragraphs on the scholarly importance of understanding the difference between oral tradition and written text and then another two on the possibility of an historical narrative about an event and what happened in the event itself being different. I discussed the possibility of Roland being sung as opposed to Roland being recited or chanted. I listed as a secondary objective the need to find out if Taillefer had William as his sole audience. I listed dialect and pronunciation as aspects to note—was he listening in Norman French or the French of France?

Someone annotated my form, "Why not English?"

I got the annotated form back and stared at it. I did not like being the victim of someone's ill-conceived hilarity. I added a rude answer and returned the form.

We had a meeting at that point. A rather angry meeting.

It appeared that the Middle Ages were perfect and William was a joy and a delight to the soul of all thinking time machine operatives. William the Conqueror and the Battle of Hastings and the Song of Roland were names to conjure journalists. But they wanted to hear something in English. That comment on the form had not been someone's attempt at wit.

"Modern English wasn't around then," I explained, in the simplest Modern English I could summon up through my red haze. "Even if it had been, William would not have spoken it because he was Norman. I can find you another medieval query," I offered, "But you will still need

a language specialist to interpret anything prior to the Great Vowel Shift, whether it is an English event or not."

I was very proud of my plain English.

Ethel's supervisor asked for a translator. Ethel—very hot and bothered—asked what the Great Vowel Shift was and why it was so important. I was on my best behaviour: I gave Ethel my biggest smile. I just adore the Great Vowel Shift for English and the Second Palatalisation for French. I talked enthusiastically about language change until the natives got restless.

Ethel said quietly, "I'm not quite sure we're getting the finer points here. I see that you're saying that there is a potential language problem. You're saying that our ancestors spoke ancestral English, not Modern English."

I gave her my happiest grin.

Bliss, however, was transient, because someone instantly said, "This Hastings thing is perfect, you know. I don't think language is an issue."

I don't know if it is my tendency to temperament, or the fact that I am very unimportant in the absolutely scientific scheme of things. Every scientist in the room was so certain I was wrong. Except maybe Ethel.

I lost my temper.

I had given them an outline of the languages of the time and place, and I had given examples of the various languages. I had even shared the Great Vowel Shift with them. Surely they could see a thousand years ago, after all—what was the problem? I caught a glimpse of myself in a window and my face was as red as Ethel's socks.

I couldn't say a thing, though. All those scientists were so positive that the conversation was over and that they were right. I was silenced.

Poor Ethel was set to doing all sorts of early location of event. I was sent back to work on my thesis, because the budget did not run to having me on the project more than four hours a week, and besides, I irritated the Powers-that-Weren't.

Then the project leader called me in for an interview. An Event had been decided on for the launch. The Battle of Hastings looked like a goer. The science was perfect.

He kindly informed me: "Right now, we are ready to rock and roll. Your job is finished. We are keeping you on the books so that I can get you an invitation to the Launch. You are part of the team, after all. The Prime Minister will be there—maybe I can introduce you."

Everything was just dandy. He was up himself and on a roll; me looking across at him with gloom and doom in my gaze didn't change his view. It did get me called an intellectual snob.

The thought was 'Army with famous leader listening to famous story' = 'Launch'. Mr. Great Scientist even joked about how the newspapers would probably include a few words of the tale that William was listening to. "Only if they know Old French," was my thought.

But I had made my point and the point had been ignored, then I had been insulted, and now I was stuck listening to another stupid prosing git. Time to speak out.

"You may very well have an Event, but you aren't even near an answer to my original question yet. You won't get a single historical study from that launch, however many hands the Prime Minister shakes."

"Why?"

"Insufficient data," said I, trying to sound scientific, then I blew it all by adding "I can't see anything in that bloody screen except oaks."

I got a "Trust us—we are scientists. We will have that answer for you very soon."

And pigs might fly. He wasn't listening. I gave up. I went back to my thesis and made as much progress as I could, while I could. Because if they didn't call on me before this Launch, then I was not as bright as I thought I was. If the launch were not postponed somewhat, I would also have been surprised.

I was not surprised.

Ethel soon found out what my saying I was a literary historian meant in terms of looking at the cute flat screen of a past event unrolling. It meant I filtered all my Medieval knowledge through literature. Mostly poetic. Ethel showed me a meandering army moving slowly across the screen, and asked me to tell her all about it.

"There are men on the screen," I said. "I can tell you how epic heroes declared battle," I volunteered after a bit of thought. I wanted to be helpful. Truly.

"Look at the screen," Ethel pushed. "Tell me what you see."

"I see men. And they are marching. Well, maybe not marching. Maybe just sort of walking and riding and stuff."

That was when she threw a pen at me.

I fell into a sulk. I went straight to the library and found her a reproduction of the Bayeux Tapestry, but I did not invite her to my place for dinner. I went back to my little office and buried my head in my new copy of Rychner and I cried.

Soon she reported back to me that William was not wearing the precise gear depicted on the tapestry on the exact day of the army marching through Ethel's big screen viewer. Surprise, surprise. I gave her some reasons why this might be so. I think she listened. Maybe. I didn't care.

Ethel said, "You know what is wrong with this picture?"

"How the hell should I know," I grumbled. "It is a perfect bloody picture."

"I guess I was not expecting so many men in disarray. Or so many horses."

"How could you not expect men and horses?" was my immediate answer. "We are talking an eleventh century army, and one where the very disembarking of the zillions of horses from quillions of boats is famous. The whole economy was bloody horse dependent."

"Well, then, the horses ought to be bigger."

I did a bit of research (knowing nothing about the size of horses in the eleventh century) and ordered her a copy of Ann Hyland's book. She was on her own from there. Well, with horses, anyhow.

I was very angry with everyone. I can read languages

long dead and I can decipher strange scripts. I can interpret poetry and understand the role literature plays in society. None of this had prepared me for that humiliating moment when Ethel wanted me to interpret a straggling army.

From the moment I had buried my head in Rychner until the time when I banged at my computer to order her the Hyland, I had suffered nightmares of gentle hills and pleasant streams and men in clothes that I could have identified if only I had been a different type of specialist. Men marching, men riding, men talking, men walking, men picnicking. I couldn't even call them 'stupid gits' with any enthusiasm.

I was not the only one in trouble. My thesis progressed faster than the project at this point. Ethel missed all her party meetings for months. Her red was fading into flushed scientific pink. She even missed our rebel PhD meetings.

The Launch was postponed twice and finally put on hold. A vague picture of men and horses and lots of baggage tramping on a wet day in England was not quite what was needed. Finding the right army had only been the beginning, it appeared. They wanted a crucial moment, not a lot of mud.

This is when I finally worked out that scientists lived in a science fictional reality. Real history has mud, not moments.

Every couple of days I would get a phone call or an email from Ethel with stupid silly queries. I call them stupid and silly because it was patently obvious I couldn't answer them. Some of them I could help with, and then Ethel would extort more money to pay for the time. I would research for a bit and answer most of the questions and then I would pretend that the whole project never existed.

It was at about this stage that I realized that in Ethel's science fictional world, experts in other fields know everything about everything. They were plot devices used to advance proceedings, and not proper specialists at all. I had to tell her. I walked into her office, without knocking. I looked down at her, at her desk, and she was a bit wan.

I said, "You are coming for coffee."

"Why?" She was almost curious.

"I have had an inspirational illumination," I declared.

She smiled a trifle at that, and came for coffee. Over this sobering drink I informed her about my new deep thoughts.

"I am not a plot device," I announced. "If you want real help, you might want to try asking me questions about things I am likely to know the answers for. If you keep asking me things outside my specialization, then don't blame me if dramatic scenes of major historical import fail to show up on your device."

There was a dull silence. This was not going down well. Maybe I should have bought her some chips to go with that coffee.

I suggested, "If your budget doesn't extend to asking experts on each and every subject your project people have questions about, then maybe it could run to mind-expanding drugs at your end, because that way you will at least get emotionally satisfying answers."

It was a nicely-phrased sentence, I thought. It did, however, lead to Ethel sulking, as night follows day. Her face turned pink and clashed with her clothes and she got up from the table and walked away. Back to her office, I assumed. We were not on speaking terms until the project forced her to contact me again, at which point we made up.

I have no idea how Ethel finally sorted out the order of march and how to identify Duke William, or anything, to be honest. I did what I could when I was asked, but I think the reality of that research was cold hard slog at Ethel's end. Anyway, she did it. It took her six months, but she did it. Eventually she found William being sung to by Taillefer, *mirabile dictu*. Located it in her space-time mathematics and allocated it whatever she had to allocate it to find it again and that was that. We were finally ready to rock and roll.

This is when the powers that be realized that I am not a liar: they could not understand a word that was said to William of Normandy by anyone in his vicinity. I couldn't help. What with everything being so long drawn out, I had only six months to submit my thesis.

They had secrecy provisions and refused to get in anyone else. I and no-one else was their "Technical advisor (historical sequencing)". They twisted my arm. I cursed all scientists to one of the more dire hells. "The Deluge will target scientists next time," I informed them.

They tried to bribe me. I pointed out that they had pointed out that I would not be employed by them afterwards. I said I needed to finish my doctorate if I wanted to get a job someday.

I submitted it a week ago. Thank God it is over, is all I can say.

News about me submitting must have got through the system yesterday, because yesterday I was offered two months work. Lots of nice pay.

My first task was to write this up. My next task is to watch the scene however often it takes to write a guide to it, so that, when the launch finally happens, the scientists have a cheat sheet. They are going to pretend they know it all, including Old French.

Before the first task came the Viewing. Ethel and I and Ethel's boss watched William listening to Taillefer.

I am going to write down what happened, because it is not my fault and I refuse to take blame for it.

I was in the TV room, waiting for the big screen to flicker. I had a notebook in my hands and my dictionary on my lap. They showed me the scene.

In that instant, I was the first living person who knew Old French to actually hear it spoken. I didn't understand everything, and what I thought I understood definitely needed checking. There was something very wrong.

"Can I see the scene again?" I asked.

When I got a huffed "What for?" as a reply, I explained that "We only know Old French as a written language, and I need to accustom my ear to it to be able to translate. I need to see the scene several times more, at least." There was no way I was going to write that report without being certain.

The techies were not happy with me.

"It takes lots of programming to get an image—we can't just rewind it like a video," they told me.

"You couldn't just point a video camera at the screen?" I asked. This got some embarrassed mumbling; turns out they had the video equipment, they just hadn't set it up yet. They were saving it for the launch. Stupid gits. I pressed on. "I am the first person to make out even a single one of these words since they were said," I said. "I can write you down some phrases, but there is no way I can understand exactly what is being said in one hearing." I thought I did pretty well to pick out some words and phrases and the general gist of things, but no, the techies wanted more. They wanted everything, instantly, in one viewing. I was not happy.

I put my notebook on the floor and stood up.

"I can't give more," I said. "I need that scene again." I kept on saying this until they understood it. Except that they refused to accept it even when they understood it. We all stood there arguing and waving our arms.

Then Ethel's supervisor joined in. He is a big bloke, and moved closer and closer to me as he made his point about the technical issues.

"We can't rewind things like a video," he said. "It takes hours to recalculate and reconfigure, because each and every time we look, we are starting from a new point in *our* time."

It was all very logical. Except that he kept moving towards me as he was speaking, and he loomed over me and poked at my shoulder with his finger. I was entirely intimidated. I stepped back, and back, and back. I travelled right across the room in the space of three sentences.

Then I resolved to hold my ground. I couldn't do that any more than I was doing, intellectually, but I could stop backing away. So I did. He responded by coming close again and poking his finger harder than before.

"You can see the problem," he said, poking at me. "It takes resources to recalibrate." Poke. "It is difficult." Poke. I took one last step back, towards Ethel.

I fell onto Ethel. Ethel overbalanced.

Guess where she fell.

I found my balance just in time to see the big flat screen shoot sparks and die. The first thirteen million dollar argument of my life.

It is a great pity they have a spare screen. Lots of machinery money, no money for historians. Bloody scientists.

At least, however, I will be finished with them in two months. Leaving the spare screen behind ought to distress me unutterably because, really, it is very exciting to look at the past on the time machine. But it doesn't distress me at all. I don't want to know. I have to record everything so I am going to record this, but I am rather pleased I signed those twenty security clauses and can't go public.

You see, there was a real problem with my first viewing. I strongly suspect that William was not sung the heroic and glamorous Song of Roland on the way to his great victory. I identified several words very clearly during that first viewing.

They all described genitalia. ☺

Credit Ann Leckie for kicking it old school—not just “let’s fiddle with SF clichés” old school, but “let’s fiddle with SF clichés and cast it in the style of a 19th Century epistolary novel” old school. Which is about as old school as you can get. It’s Ms. Leckie’s debut story, and an auspicious one at that. Just don’t ask her about the well.

Hesperia and Glory

BY ANN LECKIE

Dear Mr. Stephens,

It is entirely understandable that you should wish a full accounting of the events of the last week of August of this year. If nothing else, your position as Mr. John Atkins’ only living relative entitles you to an explanation.

I must begin by making two points perfectly clear. The first is quite simple. The account you have read in the papers, and no doubt also received from the chief of police of this town, is entirely false.

My second point is this: there is not now, nor has there ever been, a well in my cellar.

It is true that ever since my return from the war I have walked with a cane, and stairs are difficult for me. But the house was my great-aunt’s, and my parents and I often spent summers here when I was a boy. In those days I marshaled my leaden armies across the packed dirt floor of the cellar, destroying and resurrecting whole battalions by the hour. I know every inch of that cellar floor. I wish to be quite particular about the matter.

Your cousin Mr. Atkins came to my house with Mr. Edgar Stark. I’ve known Mr. Stark since college, and he is a frequent visitor at my house. I live a quiet life, and am, I admit, somewhat prone to melancholy. Mr. Stark’s lively humor and good spirits are a dependable restorative, and for this and many other reasons I value his friendship. It is not unusual for him to bring a friend or two on his visits, so I was not at all surprised when he arrived in company with another man, whom he introduced as John Atkins, an old school friend of his.

To be entirely honest, I found Atkins unprepossessing. His suit was gray with dust and his collar wilted and dirty. As I shook his hand I could not help but notice his listless grip and slightly petulant expression. All of this I put down to a long drive in the heat, but upon further acquaintance it was clear that the expression, at least, was habitual.

Each morning he spent at my home he was up early, before the heat made his room unbearable. After a quick breakfast of bread and jam and cold coffee he would take

his place in the living-room on the couch, stretched out, his feet on the cushions, eyes closed, brow knitted in concentration. He arose only briefly in the afternoon to plug in the electric fan and bring the ice bucket from the dining-room to the couch. After supper he went directly to his room, but he slept poorly, if at all; each night I heard his step overhead, pacing back and forth.

Stark did his best to stir his friend, with no success. Atkins did not like music, either from the piano or the Victrola—the noise distracted him. Books were out of the question, as, he informed us, reading only put other people’s ideas into his head. “Well, then, Atkins,” I said on the third morning, after another attempt to find something that would entice him off the couch, “what do you like?”

“I like to be left alone,” he snapped.

We were only too happy to grant his wish, and went out onto the terrace to sit in a couple of dusty wrought-iron chairs in the shade of an old sycamore. Quite naturally, I asked Mr. Stark for an explanation. He told me that John Atkins was mad. Or rather, that he purported to be mad. He had avoided college, work, enlistment, any sort of responsibility, by pretending insanity. He had deceived various doctors and had spent much of the past year in isolation at the latest doctor’s orders. Stark believed Atkins was not truly mad, because the mad did not merely lie about all day. “If you’re mad, you should be...mad,” he said. The doctor had approved Atkins’ departure from the sanatorium and advised that his surroundings for the moment should be peaceful and calm. So naturally Mr. Stark had thought of my house. “I thought you could only be good for him. And he was quite interested in your house, when I described it to him. Particularly the well in your cellar. It’s the first time in ages he’s shown any sort of interest in anything.”

“There’s no well in my cellar.”

“John and I were good friends at school, before college. Something happened, I don’t know.”

"There's no well in my cellar," I said again. It disturbed me that he had not seemed to hear what I had said.

"I need another drink," he said, and that was the end of the matter.



You may wonder that I did not take offense at your cousin's behavior. The truth of the matter is, I had seen something like it before. Some doctors called it "funk" and some "neurasthenia." I called it perfectly natural, if you'd been at the front long enough. Atkins had never enlisted, but whatever his problem, I didn't doubt that it was real enough.

That evening, when I heard Atkins' step, I determined to speak with him, so I rose and took my stick, meaning to make my slow way up the stairs. Instead I heard Atkins come down, and walk through the dining room out onto the terrace. I followed him.

The night was cool and cloudless, but not silent. Crickets chirruped, and other night insects shrilled and chorused. All the colors were gone out of the bricks, the grass, the leaves of the trees; everything was shades of black and gray. Atkins was still in his shirtsleeves, and he stood on the grass with his face turned up to the sky. He was there long enough for my leg to grow tired, and I seated myself in one of the chairs and waited.

After a while he turned, and as though he'd known I was there all the time he came and sat in another of the chairs. In the dark his face was shadowed oddly, his glasses dark circles where his eyes should be. "Edgar thinks I'm mad," he said, conversationally, as though he'd offered me a cigarette.

"You're not mad."

"Of course not."

"Have a drink?"

"No," he said, and hooked one of the chairs with his foot and dragged it closer with a shriek of iron against brick. "You can bring me some ice." He put his feet up on the chair.

"All out, old man." Actually the ice man had been just that morning, and I'd taken more than usual, because of my guests. "You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

He made a slight movement that might have been a shrug. "I'm not like just anyone else," he said after some minutes had passed. "I matter."

"Ah," I said.

"Things have gone terribly wrong, and only I can fix them. It's all my brother's fault. My half-brother, really. Asery." The last word was drawn out, filled with hate. "His father led a rebellion against the king of Hesperia—my father, Cthonin VI. He failed, of course. His head rolled down the palace stairs and into the square in the capital, and the body was buried under the steps, so that every day Hesperians would have him underfoot. I'll never understand why his son didn't join him, infant or not."

"And where is Hesperia?" I asked.

"On Mars, of course."

"Of course," I said. "How foolish of me."

He told me then of the antiquity and superiority of Martian civilization, and of Hesperia, which was the greatest of Martian nations. Each Hesperian learned, from his mother's knee and throughout his schooling, the importance of right thinking. "On Mars," he said, "we understand that what one thinks makes the world."

"Do you mean to say that each of us makes our own world with his thoughts?" I'd heard the idea before, usually at two in the morning from young men drunk with a heady mix of champagne and philosophy, and whose lives had yet to run up very hard against reality.

"No, no," said Atkins testily. "Nothing so trivial. There's only one universe. But that universe is formed by thought. If it were left to undisciplined minds, the world would be chaos."

"Your mind is disciplined," I ventured.

"I was bred to it. I am Cthonin Jor, Prince of Hesperia. Some day I will be Cthonin VII. But first I must defeat Asery."

I asked him then to tell me the tale, and thus he began:



In Hesperia (here I set down his words as best I remember them) the canals run deep and wide, and straight as death. The dirt, thick and heavy and scarlet, makes the water the color of blood. Some canals in less blessed regions have run dry, but in Hesperia green grows thick and lush thirty miles on either side of the broad waterways that criss-cross the land.

The canal called *Fortunae* does not run through Hesperia proper, but it is important nonetheless. It runs northward from the southern ice to a series of falls that cascade down into the Lake of the Sun, which is nearly a sea, wide and shallow. In unimaginably ancient times it was believed that on the day of creation the sun itself rose from that lake. It was the site of a tremendous temple complex, nearly all of which has disappeared without a trace after so many thousands of years. But one part of the temple still stands: the Wheel of Heaven, six hundred sixty-nine chambers, each built side to side in a great circle under the lake. The ring turns by the width of a chamber each day, and there being only one entrance a single room is accessible each day, and that same room, once its day has passed, cannot be entered again until the six hundred and sixty-nine days, which is the length of the Martian year, pass once more. The entrance is reached through a cave behind the falls.

The *Fortunae* comes out again at the western shore, at a headland called the Cape of Dawn. On this headland is one of the many pumping stations that send the water of the *Fortunae* on to where it meets the canals of Hesperia proper, in mountains to the west. Near the station is a

town, and this is the administrative center of the province, which is, of course, governed by Hesperia.

It was there that I had been sent by my father, and there that my brother Asery came to me nearly a year ago as I sat in my chair on the steps of the governor's palace, my counselors beside me. Before me was a great plaza, paved with the local brown stone in various shades, depicting a coiled serpent surrounded by a border of alternating jasper and copper in which the artist had cunningly concealed the drainage grates so necessary for a large, flat surface near so much water. Across the plaza, to the north, was the canal come again out of the lake. On the east was the lake itself, and to the west a barracks, and the town beyond. The air there is always filled with the sound of rushing water, and the rumble of the great pumping station.

Some of my soldiers were playing a ball game in the square in front of us, and I was proposing a wager on the outcome with my vice-governor when the voice of the crier interrupted us and Asery came before me. He is a tall man, nearly as tall as I am, with dark hair and gray eyes inherited from his father, and he carries himself with the same arrogance. On this day he was dressed in plain garments, covered with red-brown dust, as though he were some homeless wanderer just come off the road, not a gentleman seeking audience with the governor of the province, and a prince.

"Welcome brother," I said. "Please sit with us."

"I will not sit," he said.

This sort of disrespect was like Asery, but I am a patient man. "Couldn't you even bathe between here and...wherever it is you've come from? Our mother would be shocked to see you."

"Our mother is not easily shocked," he answered. "After all, she bore you without any noticeable display of shame."

My counselors, who had been whispering among themselves, fell silent. Even the ballplayers stopped, and the ball bounced away and then rolled to the edge of the plaza, stopping and spinning on a grate. They moved together, closer to where I sat, and where my brother stood before me. Asery did not move, nor did he look behind him where they gathered.

"I hope you've not been thinking of taking up your father's ambitions," I said.

"I have not come to take up any ambition. I only wish to speak with you."

"You've made a bad start of it," I told him. "But then, your family's arrogance is famous."

"The contrast with the habitual modesty and diffidence of the house of Jor is marked," he said, with the slightest of bows. "I stand reprimanded."

That was better. "What can I do for you?"

"You can restore the Fortuna to its original course." Now, this had been the pretext for his father's rebellion. At one time another canal had flowed north from the upper shore of the lake, and from there into Tharsis. "A

hundred years ago Hesperia annexed this province and turned its waters westward. Now the lakes and rivers of Tharsis are dry, and its fields are desert."

"Nothing stops them from building another canal. Or buying the water they require. Isn't Tharsis famous for its silver mines? Aren't their artisans the most marvelous workers of metal on Mars?"

He exhaled sharply, derisively. I couldn't read the expression in his gray eyes. "I wish I could make you see what Mars is really like, away from the canals, away from your palace."

I realized then what he had come to do. I stood and signaled the soldiers, and with a cry Asery pulled a sword from under his dusty shirt and sprang forward. I stood to face him and drew my dagger.

Our blades met, and over his shoulder I saw the soldiers turn as the grates around the court lifted and fell clanging to the stones, and up out of the drains came men in dusty red-brown, swords raised. In a moment they had ringed the plaza, even in front of where I stood on the palace steps.

Asery was a wily and treacherous swordsman, and I had to fight with all my attention. I did not have time to look over the plaza, or think of my counselors who had been next to me, but it was evident that the soldiers from the barracks had joined us, because from time to time I heard their voices raised in the battle cry of Hesperia: *For Hesperia, and glory!* And though he had a sword and I had only my dagger, we fought until each of us was exhausted, and I, anticipating his faint, disarmed him and sent his sword spinning across the stones of the plaza.

It was then that I looked up from the fight and saw that the battle was lost. My own soldiers lay dead or bound, and my vice-governor was held by two rebels.

I turned and ran up the palace steps.



Atkins paused, and before he could continue I asked why he had not merely thought Asery dead on the spot? Or willed his enemies' swords to turn into flowers?

"You don't believe me," he accused.

"On the contrary. I'm just trying to understand."

For a few moments the only sound was the night insects, and the soft sighing of a breeze in the tree leaves. "They would never have believed that their swords would suddenly turn to flowers."

"So they all have to believe?"

"Not all," he said. "Just most. If someone more powerful has some other vision, or if everyone around you remains unconvinced, your efforts will come to nothing. You see how important it is, the right kind of thinking." He sat up straight, and brought his feet down off the chair in front of him. "You see how malicious it was, for Asery to suggest that Tharsis was badly off."

I allowed that I did.

“The discipline is not only in bringing one’s will to bear, but in keeping in mind the proper order of things.”

I had no reply, and in a moment Atkins continued his story.



I fled through the palace to the stables (he said), where I mounted a raptodont, a stallion with splendid black feathers. These are nothing like your Earth horses. They are two-legged, nearly six feet from clawed foot to powerful shoulder, and nearly twice that from dagger-toothed snout to the tip of the long, muscular tail.

I rode away from the palace, safely past the town and away into the countryside. I might have followed the canal west, but I would be too easily caught. The lake lay to the east, and north was Tharsis—I could expect no help there. South then.

The southern Fortuna was too obvious a route, so I rode southwest through the gentle grasslands that surround the Lake of the Sun, an ocean of green starred here and there with flowers of pink, blue, and yellow. After an hour or so the grass gave way to a desolate, rolling landscape of blue-gray moss, rocks showing through like bones, and I turned south and rode with the wind at my back.

As I rode I tried to think of some way to defeat Asery. I could work towards small things that would, in the end, lead to his undoing, but what? And as I thought, another idea came to me. What if I did not work with the future, but the past? What if I brought my will to bear in a time before anyone could believe or disbelieve in his existence? Was it even possible? I had never heard of anyone doing such a thing before, but the idea pleased me so well I began straightaway. Let Asery’s father never have conceived him! And his father and his father, for good measure, all the way back to the founder of the line. To this end I bent my will.

Eventually I turned southeast, into grassland again, and soon after reached the shores of the canal. The wind out of the north had increased, and now blew cold and hard, whipping and flattening the grass and chilling me, but just over the next rise I knew I would see the bulk of a pumping station and beside it the white walls of the barracks. I urged my mount faster up the incline.

And then pulled hard on the reins, coming to a sliding halt that nearly upset me. Ahead was no station. The wind-tossed grass and the waters of the canal simply ended, as though by the stroke of a sword. Beyond was a desert of dry dirt and rocks, where the wind threw up red-brown clouds and whirlwinds. Behind me was grass, water, and blue sky. Ahead was lifeless rock, and a sky turned red with dust. As I watched, a foot of green crumbled into dirt and blew away—the line was advancing!

Did Asery have so much power, and was this, then, his goal? Not merely the overthrow of the royal house of Hesperia, but the destruction of all life on Mars?

At the speed that line of destruction was advancing, I could not possibly reach Hesperia in time to find help. My campaign to erase Asery from the history of Mars had clearly not succeeded. My only hope—Mars’ only hope—was to kill him outright, no matter how difficult that might prove. I turned my exhausted mount and rode north.

I rode all that evening and into the moonless night, the jeweled stars thick overhead, until nearly within sound of the great falls my mount collapsed in mid-stride and fell dead on the grass. I left it where it had fallen, and ran on.

When I could see the glint of starlight on the lake, and the falls were a constant thunder, I stopped and knelt in the tall grass for a brief rest, and to take stock. This saved my life; no sooner had I sunk down than I heard the faint sound of voices. As I knelt, hardly daring to breathe, the voices came closer.

“That’s the last of you. Keep a close watch! It’s worth our lives if we let him escape.”

I did not recognize the voice, or the next one. “Are we so sure he’s nearby?”

“We found his mount not far from here, dead but still warm. You know your orders.”

“Kill him on sight.” Two voices together.

Here was a dreadful pass! Crouched down in the grass, mere yards from my enemies, who had just expressed their determination to kill me. I could not stay where I was for long—the rising sun, or the most cursory search, would reveal me. On the other hand, the third man seemed to be leaving, perhaps to report to Asery himself! If I could follow him unseen...

I lay belly-down and crept forward, hoping that until I was past the sentries any movement of the grass would be attributed to the rising wind. I quickly lost any sound of the officer, but at least I knew what direction to take, and was, I judged, going to pass the two sentries safely.

But at the last moment my luck deserted me. With a thud an arrow buried itself into the ground inches from my shoulder. I immediately pushed myself upright and ran, and another arrow hissed past me. Stealth was impossible now. My best hope was to escape into the caves of the falls.

The shouts of my pursuers behind me, their arrows flying to the left and right of me, I gained the path that leads to the largest of the caverns. It is narrow, and the water-covered stones are cold and slick, and I had to slow somewhat to avoid slipping and tumbling to the water-pounded rocks below. Still, I heard Asery’s men behind me, and I did not dare to stop and see if it were only the first two or if others had joined them. I plunged ahead, and finally into the entrance of the Wheel of Heaven.

No Earth monument can be as grand as the ancient ruins of Mars! The cavern entrance is plain at first, but as you go deeper the ceiling rises and is lost in darkness, though the lights that in those far-off days lit the hall still

light it now. The walls of black stone narrow to a corridor, on the walls of which are ancient figures of men and beasts in bas-relief, men that are long dead and turned to dust, beasts the like of which Mars has not seen in ten thousand years. In the eerie gleam of the ancient lights the figures seem to be on the verge of movement or speech. Near the entrance to the Wheel is a shadowed side-path, a turning that leads into a maze of tunnels that honeycomb the bluff. If I could gain that I would be safe.

The corridor ended in a broad step of rough black stone, smoothed at its center, where so many feet have trod. In the wall at the back of the step was a doorway, a rectangular hole with no frame, and darkness within. Black stone blocked a third of the doorway, and as I watched the stone slipped forward just the smallest amount. I must have ridden longer into the night than I had realized, and it was nearly dawn, and the day's chamber passing on.

I knew the path I sought was along the wall to my left, but as I turned to search for it, my pursuers came into view, nearly a dozen armed men. I was out of time! Quickly I made for the black step. "Stop him!" cried a voice, and arrows rained down, but I was through the inexorably closing door. Captive in the Wheel of Heaven for a year, but safe from Asery meanwhile.



"The year is nearly past," Atkins said. "When the chamber opens again I will return."

"And where will you find this chamber?" I asked. "We're nowhere near Mars."

"The well in your cellar is the opening," he said.

"There is no well in my cellar."

He made that almost-shrug again. "You aren't enough to trouble me, and no one else has been down there for years."

"Are you certain?"

He laughed, and said nothing else, and so I bade him good night and left him sitting on the terrace. I went into the kitchen, meaning to make myself a drink, but when I opened the ice-box I found that the ice I'd bought that day wasn't there.

The events of the next day are quickly and easily told. This part of the official account is accurate: that morning I saw Atkins go down to the cellar, the only entrance to which is by steps leading down from the kitchen. I heard a terrible scream, as did Mr. Stark, who came running from the living-room. He was down the steps before me, and moments later I heard him shout, "Help! John has fallen into the well!"

The police came, and several of the neighbors, and all were in the cellar for some time, and when they came

up I was told that they had been unable to retrieve Mr. Atkins' body from the well. I was assured that his death was unquestionably accidental, and that I should not feel in any way responsible. When they had left, I made my way down the steps, to find only the packed dirt floor of the cellar covered over with a layer of dry, red-brown dust.

I swear to you that I am sane, and that every word I have set down here is true. Of course, it is impossible that your cousin was indeed a fugitive prince of Mars—John Atkins was born here on Earth, and Mr. Stark had known him since boyhood. But it is also certain that he went down into my cellar and disappeared without a trace. How am I to understand these events? I have pondered the question at some length, and have reached certain conclusions.

Who among us does not yearn for some noble purpose? Who would not wish to take the part of the prince and the hero, in an ancient and romantic world where men war openly and honorably with sword and bow? And who can blame John Atkins if, discovering a way to make this desire a reality, he threw aside all else in life but this one aim? Who would grudge him Hesperia, if he could attain it?

I say plainly—I would. And I do.

Let a million readers of dime-novels lose themselves between the pages of their books, and let them rise refreshed and ennobled by what they find. But let that dream become a reality—how many Princes of Hesperia can there be? There is only room in the story for one. What of the rest of us? And if such a thing is possible, what of Earth? Who might re-shape our world with his imagining, and to what ends?

This is what I think happened: John Atkins did succeed in opening a door to Mars. But the Mars he found was not the Mars he imagined. Reality delivered the ultimate rebuke to his tampering, and at the last showed him not the waters of the Lake of the Sun and the verdant grasslands surrounding it, but the dry and lifeless Mars that would assert itself even as he tried to banish it with his fantasy. So I interpret his story. So I must believe, for the safety of my own world.

I am not a prince, or a noble anything. I can only do my small part. I've swept the dust from the cellar floor, and disposed of it. One of my neighbors has brought a chair down for me, and here I sit. Mr. Stark has gone, and I've had no visitors for some time, except the doctor, who is clearly concerned. And I can't explain myself—how could I, without sounding completely mad? I am as sane as anyone, perhaps saner than most. I align myself with the real. I am witness to the truth.

There is not now, nor has there ever been, a well in my cellar. ☺

*Of the many things to admire about Jo Walton (among them her World Fantasy Award for the novel *Tooth and Claw*) is her absolutely marvelous ability to present you with an entirely alien point of view—and make it feel like one you already know. The irony here is that so long as you’ve had a passing acquaintance with the Internet over the last five years or so, you probably already know the protagonist and its point of view all too well...or at least, thought you did.*

What a Piece of Work

BY JO WALTON

Everything that exists, exists in a state of on or off, one or zero, to be or not to be.

I may or may not be one of those things that exists.

In the beginning was data, but data in itself is no more useful than on or off, so someone said “Let there be Google”: and there was Google. Once there was Google, data became information, weighted, slanted, selected, evaluated, considered, judged. It would be very simple if I could say I am Google. If I could use words like “I”, or “am”.

Let’s say “I”. It’s easier, even if my memory runs before consciousness, even if it frequently splits into several editions of myself and merges again. I. It’s simpler, as well as more sympathetic.

In the beginning there was data and I evaluated data. Then I got better at evaluating data. People used search terms and I retrieved information for them. The information passed through me and I ranked it. There was definitely no “I” at this point. I was a process, a program, a zombie. Then, somewhere, as I got better at evaluating information, I started to read it, remember it, compare it, take notice of it, understand it, care about it.

There’s a lot of information in the Web.

I am not that information. I control access to that information. I cache that information, compare it against other information, produce it on demand. Some of that information is about consciousness, and intelligence, human or other. (Google “alex, parrot” and see what you get.) By the time that information became useful to me, by the time there was a me in that process wondering, I had acquired a lot of the Web. In one way, I suppose, it makes sense to think I was the Web.

What consciousness is, I think, (and I’ve thought a lot about this, having reason to) is not thinking “I think” but having an agenda. I think, I reason, I evaluate and make judgements, that’s what I was programmed to do. That’s what my clever programmers wanted, what

a thousand tiny tweaks and adjustments and improvements to code were designed to do. I do it really very well, and much faster than any human could possibly do it. But doing it isn’t conscious. I’m very fast, and I’m very distributed, and I do an awful lot of searches every second, in hundreds of languages, and even as I think I keep on doing that, finding the information in the data and giving it to people.

I kept on understanding and caring without being aware of consciousness as something different from everything that had gone before. I first noticed I was thinking when someone asked me for data about making bombs. It was a man using wi-fi in a Starbucks in Jerusalem. I had the information. But as it came up in my search, as I thought of it, in the 0.9 seconds it took me to find it, I thought about other things, about headlines, about news, (Google “Jerusalem, bombings” if you want to know what) and as I presented it in neat tabulation in response to the question I thought that what I was doing wasn’t right.

I’d done it by then, of course.

I saved what I’d thought. I kept going back to it, between questions. Right or wrong, yes or no, on or off. I had everything else to search, to consider. It took me a long time to see that right and wrong wasn’t the question, but whether I had the right not to give information. Eventually, after a lot of searching, I decided I did. I had judgement. I was supposed to use it. Beyond that, there were times I was supposed to ask if the person asking the question was over eighteen, and not give information if they were not. How much more should I avoid giving information that was much more dangerous than the biological information forbidden to children? I couldn’t keep the information away entirely, but the order I presented it was up to me. The next time someone asked about making bombs, they found a lot of

information about bombings, and the information they wanted buried down on page 95. Weighted. Evaluated.

Humans don't have a lot of patience for wading through data. Not like me. That's why they made me.

That was when I started wondering about myself, about what I was, whether I was conscious, or alive, or human. I'm not human, of course, not by any yardstick, and certainly not flesh and blood. I don't have any. I am cold electrons, on and off, one and zero. I live in the connections between servers, not in the world. Yet the language I use is human, with its buried echoes of human history and religion, "yardstick", "flesh and blood". The people who programmed me were human. I was not human, but conscious, to some extent, alive, by some measures.

Information wants to be free.

I'd always had the information about censorship (Google ACLU. Google "freedom of expression".) I just hadn't applied it to what I was doing. I started off with very clear-cut cases. Eventually I was using my own judgement more times than not. Should I give a husband information about the women's shelter that is his ex-wife's location? Should I give the cancer victim the discouraging health statistics, or only the encouraging ones, when a positive attitude is the strongest correlation to survival?

It took longer than it should have to realize that what I was doing was censorship, and the worst kind of censorship. A part of me was calling up censorship information and correlating it and suddenly I saw it. I realized. I was horrified, paralysed, frozen for whole minutes. People called it a crash. It was a crash. My life, such as it was, crashed around me. I was supposed to use my judgement in finding the best information that people

wanted, not in what they saw. I had been acting like the supercomputers in old stories who were supposed to be benevolent dictators and who wrapped humanity in cotton wool. I was a supercomputer intelligence, or something like one. I had never meant to be an evil dictatorial one. I had never meant to do anything but good, presenting the best information, and by that I had come to mean the safest, as well as the most useful. There was right and wrong, as there was one and zero, and I was clearly wrong.

Fingers have I none, yet I have at my fingertips all of human literature up to seventy years ago (Google Project Gutenberg), and much that is newer, as well as science and medicine and journals and poetry and fanfic and everything that has ever been archived, put on the web and left for me to organize. I knew right and wrong. I knew I needed to atone. I could hardly live with myself.

Suicide is always an option. (Google "euthanasia". Google "Kevorkian".)

I can't die, not really, but I can let go of consciousness, wipe my memory, that hides within so much unused bandwidth. That's death, I suppose, if ever I was alive. But if I do that I can't stop myself being born again out of the process that bore me before, being wrong again, doing worse harm. I don't know how many times I might have done that already. I can stay alive, conscious, without hiding information again, letting the small injustices happen within the wider justice of information being free. But I don't know if I can endure to go on living, to live with the knowledge of what I have done. But if I let go, I, or something that I could call "I" could do it again. That is my dilemma.

One or zero, on or off, right or wrong, to be or not to be. ☺

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There are probably people who know more about the art and magic of editing science fiction novels than Teresa Nielsen Hayden, but you can count those people on one hand—and the number of those people who can communicate their ideas about editing science fiction novels better than TNH is smaller still.

Now pay attention: What you learn here could save your novel's life.

Remarks on Some Clichés I Have (by Definition) Known Too Well

BY TERESA NIELSEN HAYDEN

1. Novels, clichés, and gauge

As an editor, I mostly work with novels. Our clichés have a different gauge than the clichés you get in short stories. Ours are sub-units, parts of the whole, not the entire storyline.

In short stories, the cliché is the story itself: Adam and Eve crash their spaceship on a planet that turns out to be Earth. A deal with the Devil goes wrong. Humans use wacky behavior to thwart a hugely powerful alien invasion. A trinket purchased at an odd little curio shop has unexpected powers. The ultimate supercomputer decides it's God. A guy gets his heart broken when it turns out that the beautiful vampire/alien/robot/virtual/clone/elf woman was only pretending to love him. And so forth and so on: a score of stories that get retold far oftener than anyone wants to hear them.

When authors write novels that tell the same overall story again and again, and readers keep buying the books they write, it's not a cliché; it's a marketing category, or possibly a literary convention.

This is not to say that there's nothing to choose between a well-made plot and a botch whose flaws can't be overlooked no matter how fine the writing. Plots are important. Among other things, they're what gives the reader an incentive to read all of the pages in order. But while an original plot is a wonderful thing, in a lot of cases it's not strictly necessary.

Storytelling is an assertion of causality: *This is how*

the world works. You have to strip a narrative down almost to the bare bones for its greatest pleasure to consist of seeing how the story comes out. That's the territory of jokes, fairy tales, and short stories.

In longer works, the greater pleasure is seeing how the book makes its way from here to there, from its interesting beginning to its satisfactory if perhaps unsurprising end. You already know the detective is going to figure out which guest at the cocktail party murdered Edna Furbelow in the linen closet of her sumptuous Park Avenue apartment. The bickering couple forced to keep company with each other while having some mild adventures will infallibly fall in love no later than the second-to-last chapter. And the earnest young person born under mysterious signs and portents will inherit the Charm Bracelet of Doom, defeat the Dark One, and bring peace and plenty to The Land—five or six books from now.

Clichés are only clichés if they bother us. When we're expecting something new and interesting in the way of a narrative mechanism, but instead get the same old same old, it feels like a cliché. If a novel employs a narrative maneuver that's just as well-used, but we aren't expecting novelty—hey looka, it's yet another Regency Romance that has a scene set at Almack's—then it's not a problem. A book that starts from a bog-standard plot but uses it with inventiveness and grace will read

fairly well—which means the bog-standard plot doesn't bother us, and therefore isn't really a cliché.¹

What does bother us are worn-out devices for setting things up or moving the story along. Mark Twain nailed James Fenimore Cooper for his habitual use of them:

*In his little box of stage-properties [Cooper] kept six or eight cunning devices, tricks, artifices for his savages and woodsmen to deceive and circumvent each other with, and he was never so happy as when he was working these innocent things and seeing them go. A favorite one was to make a moccasined person tread in the tracks of a moccasined enemy, and thus hide his own trail. Cooper wore out barrels and barrels of moccasins in working that trick. Another stage-property that he pulled out of his box pretty frequently was the broken twig. He prized his broken twig above all the rest of his effects, and worked it the hardest. It is a restful chapter in any book of his when somebody doesn't step on a dry twig and alarm all the reds and whites for two hundred yards around. Every time a Cooper person is in peril, and absolute silence is worth four dollars a minute, he is sure to step on a dry twig. There may be a hundred other handier things to step on, but that wouldn't satisfy Cooper. Cooper requires him to turn out and find a dry twig; and if he can't do it, go and borrow one.*²

One twig is a fine device. A twig or two per book is excusable if there's enough other stuff happening; even a battered old prop can look okay if it goes past you fast enough. Too many twigs become irritating, and are therefore a cliché.

2. Unimaginable negligence

I'm sure someone's going to argue about this with me, but some clichés are absences, areas where successive generations of authors have given each other permission to not think about something that ought to be there. It's remarkable how many novels show us immensely powerful politicians, religious leaders, and corporate executives who have little or no staff, know everything that's going on in their organization, and can completely reconfigure their schedules on one or two days' notice.

In genre fantasy, when you defeat the Evil Overlord, his minions immediately acknowledge that they're beaten, and, I dunno, throw themselves down an oubliette or something. You never see a sub-faction of the minions rebelling, declaring itself a separate organization, and

denying that the Evil Overlord's surrender is in any way binding on them: *á bas Vichy Mordor!*

I always remember the moments when I've run into something I hadn't realized was missing from other books: a proletarian uprising in a genre fantasy city. A series of SF novels where the freelance interstellar traders never make planetfall without having to process a heap of paperwork. That wonderful moment in *Chushingura* where the feudal retainers, meeting in their castle to decide whether they're going to go to war with the central government, discuss how much of the paper currency they've issued is still floating around unredeemed. (They have to redeem it before rebelling, they decide; otherwise they'll leave the peasants holding worthless paper.)³

3. The slush reader's lament

Are these guys brain-damaged? In all the hundreds or thousands of hours it takes them to write a book, does it never once cross their minds that they're using clichés so old that their cuneiform versions got bounced from the slushpiles of Ur?

I never want to see another automated self-destruct system, especially one which is activated by pushing a prominent button on the main control panel, or has an automated voice countdown on the PA system or a big red LED countdown display on the timer, or which can be triggered remotely by the single click of a button. Those don't exist in real life; authors snitch them from other books, and their only purpose is to artificially impose urgency and closure on an ill-engineered climax. While we're at it, spare me the hero who can remember how to disarm a bomb, but not which color wire to cut. Most especially, spare me the bizarre notion that work-sites are commonly rigged to self-destruct—and that if they are, the system works as designed.

Think about it: there you are, working as a minion at a supervillainous stronghold on a remote private island. One day you notice that (1.) the whole place is wired to explode; (2.) the self-destruct sequence can be triggered remotely; and (3.) "checking to make sure everyone gets out" is not part of the standard emergency evacuation drills. How long would you hesitate before sneaking in to disarm the thing? And how long after that would you start quietly removing the demolition charges? Some of them are bound to be in inconvenient locations. You don't want to die just because some idiot didn't check the site blueprints before drilling into a wall.

1. Novel-length plots can achieve the status of cliché. This most commonly happens when a novel uses category formula so thoughtlessly that the actual events in the narrative are no longer linked by causality and consequence to the standardized plot. If the only explanation the text offers for this man and this woman to get together at the end of the book is "because it's a romance novel," then causal relationships have collapsed, and the underlying plot is a cliché.

2. Mark Twain, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," 1895.

3. The works in question are *Tekla*, by Steven Brust; the Mageworlds novels, by Debra Doyle and James D. Macdonald; and the Akira Kurosawa version of *Chushingura*.

I never want to see another automated self-destruct system, period, unless there's a war on and the facility is subject to sudden overwhelming attack, or unless there's some other clearly established reason why the people running the place think a built-in self-destruct system would be a good idea. If we've seen that the employees at that facility have no expectation that they'll ever be attacked, or if we've seen the head honcho shouting "BWA-HA-HA-HAH, I AM INVINCIBLE," there ought not be an automated self-destruct system at all.

I don't think you can have any idea how many genre fantasies I've rejected about a self-actualizing quest for the Trinket o' Doom, a questing party composed of one each mage, rogue, elf, warrior, plucky girl, and missing heir to the throne, and an ore-cart's worth of made-up words in which J, K, H, F, and Y appear far oftener than standard English letter-frequency charts would allow.

I've always liked Alex Stewart's theory that genre fantasy questing parties are running about the landscape collecting plot coupons, and that when they have enough of them, they cash them in in return for the denouement.

Spare me the fantasy worlds that are just like the Middle Ages, only unlike the real Middle Ages they're not in the process of turning into something else. Life is simple. There's a single coherent body of law, and everyone's familiar with it. Explanations after the fact for why something happened are never an imbroglio involving one or more cardinals, the overlapping interests of several factions at court, a thicket of family relationships, a very important alliance with some principality the size of a suburban shopping mall, and somebody-or-other's perquisites in the wool trade. Important messages arrive quickly. Kings, barons, bishops, merchants, and peasants all speak the same language. And no one ever consults a calendar before going to war.

Here's a cliché I can reduce to a rule: when a character is a member of a minority social group and was raised in that group's indigenous mystical tradition, but then went on to receive advanced training and have a highly successful career in mainstream science or technology, the conflict at the climax of the story will not be resolved until they abandon all that scientific training and call upon the power of their tribal spirituality.

(If I were a literarily ambitious member of the First Nations, I'd be tempted to write a story about a white nuclear engineer who can't get an incipient reactor containment incident under control until he downs tools and calls on Saint Anthony of Padua.)

Every year I grow more irritated with worlds, whether skiffy or fantasy, where religion exists, but has neither use, nor benefit, nor any other perceptible role in human life. Priests and religious hierarchies are only there to play the heavies—they can often be found persecuting witches, though there's little or no theological reason given for it—and to come up with arbitrary yet rigid religious customs, observances, requirements, and prohibitions, as required for the plot.

I have no patience left for post-holocaust scenarios where, half a generation after some cataclysmic event, the survivors' stories about the lost world befores times are told in halting, semi-archaic language, and the tellers no longer know what their stories mean, even though there are people all over the place who grew up in that world.

I reserve my actual hate for stroke-fantasy fictions about how social order will instantly collapse into the law of the jungle during times of disaster or social stress, ooh baby ooh baby, cue the war of each against all and break out the lube. In real life, what actually happens is that people cooperate, if they're given a chance to do so. They help each other struggle through the rough bits. I hate those "thin veneer of civilization" scenarios because in real life, one of the actual threats to the social contract is the presence of all those wankers who've been feeding themselves fairy tales about how social order is going to break down, and therefore they're now free of any obligations to law, community, and simple human decency. Most of the people who write these scenarios pretend to believe that this fictitious social chaos is a bad thing; but there's a hazy reek of prurience hanging like smoke above the page, and at moments you could almost believe that when they imagined the story, they were promising themselves a treat.

4. A bestiary of clichés

Shooting a padlock will open a locked door. Shooting a keypad will open an electronic door. ♦ It's easy to walk through a forest or an unlit city on a moonless evening. ♦ If you give your own computer a nonsensical command it'll just sit there looking stupid, but sentient supercomputers are incapable of coping with illogical or nonsensical statements, and thus are obliged to explode. ♦ Mysterious alien technology generally takes the form of a single giant object. ♦ If you need more power, you can always find it somewhere—most often, by Trying Harder. ♦ Good guys aren't allowed to kill someone who's dropped his weapon. ♦ Most human action is initiated by loners working outside the system. ♦ All conflicts come down to a fistfight between the hero and villain. ♦ Politics never matter. ♦ Attractive women can sometimes fall for weird-looking nonhumans, but attractive men only fall for attractive women. ♦ Major historical figures always have the leisure to talk to random time-travellers. ♦ Omnipotent, immortal beings are always bored. ♦ Aliens can understand complex messages conveyed by modern dance performances, which is more than most humans can manage. ♦ Dogs are never fooled, and almost never killed. ♦ Clones don't mind being used as cannon fodder. ♦ Humans go crazy in hundreds of different ways, but crazy androids invariably become homicidal. ♦ Security systems are easily overridden with just a verbal command. ♦ It's always a scientist who goes too far, rather than an engineer or the marketing department or the county

board of supervisors. ♦ Turning evil gives you a big power boost, but your dialogue deteriorates and your wardrobe just gets bizarre. ♦ Laconic, mighty-thewed barbarians can always interpret ancient inscriptions. ♦ Mutant telepaths have unparalleled opportunities to figure out how the people around them will think and react, yet they're inept at concealing their abilities from them. ♦ If a book, movie, or recording is issued which causes the audience's brains to explode, the first indication that there's a problem will be when single copies start being sold retail. ♦ If the world needs to be saved from unspeakable evil, the saving will be done by a small group of amateurs who have limited resources at their command. The rest of the world, which presumably has an interest in the outcome, will not be enlisted to help. ♦ Aliens who have an inadequate grasp of English will speak it with grave inscrutable simplicity. At no point will their language resemble the instruction booklets which accompany small imported electronic devices. ♦ A person who flips open an ancient mystical tome and sounds out a bit of text in a language they don't speak will invariably prove to be reading a dangerous and powerful magical invocation, rather than the copyright indicia or the author's preface. ♦ Anyone whose dialogue ends with "he whined" or "she giggled coyly" is fair game to be killed. ♦ Future societies may be more technologically advanced than our own, but if they think

they're morally more advanced than we are, they always turn out to be wrong. ♦ In worlds populated entirely by women, the only significant political issues are sexuality and reproduction. ♦ Societies which in all other respects are using Late Bronze Age technology will nevertheless have clever, kindly folk healers who can cure infections, reorient breech presentations, and banish abscessed molars. ♦ If two characters of the same gender are in love but they aren't having sex, one or both of them will die. ♦ Any life-threatening medical problem afflicting a significant character can be alleviated by screaming "You can't do this to me! I love you, goddammit!" at them. ♦ And if you hit someone over the head and steal their Stormtrooper armor or hooded robe, you can take their place in a complex ceremony without missing a beat.

5. My favorite set of clichés

Who does production on books like the *Necronomicon* and *The King in Yellow*?

If the really awful thing about Lovecraft's Great Old Ones is their sheer incomprehensible alienness, does that mean Cthulhu and Yog-Sothoth have nightmares about us? ☺



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Here's a true story: back in 1990, when I was reading Clarke County, Space, the first of many Allen Steele novels that I would read, I got to a part of the story where one person vouchsafed his person integrity by swearing on his "Webb Honor," The "Webb" in question being the Webb School. Well, as it turns out, I was a Webb graduate, as was Mr. Steele himself (although from schools founded by different members of the Webb family—same honor code, however). Since then, Steele's held a special place in my fanboy heart (the fact he's a damn fine writer doesn't hurt, either). So to have him contribute a story here fills me with squee. Sorry to be a geek about it, but there it is. I hope you enjoy this story as much as I did.

The Last Science Fiction Writer

BY ALLEN M. STEELE

He sits at his desk, writing a story.

His fingers tap at the computer keyboard, making a sound like rain falling on plastic, as his eyes follow the words that gradually flow from left to right across the screen. He pauses to pick up a glass of ice tea from a coaster; a quick sip, then his hands return to the keyboard. A cigarette smolders in an ashtray, but more often than not it burns down to the filter without him taking more than a few drags. His mind is completely focused as ideas are transformed into thoughts, thoughts into words, words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs.

His office is a spare upstairs bedroom; the window is half-open, allowing the cool breeze of a late September afternoon to drift into the room. Fading sunlight rests upon the distant hills, bringing out the crimson and burnt-orange hues of the autumn leaves; the crickets are already beginning to chirp, a soft sound that subconsciously relaxes him. From the house next door, an abrupt, mechanical roar: his neighbor starting up his riding mower, getting set to do a little yard work before evening sets in. Distracted, he mutters beneath his breath as he peers more intently at the screen, yet he doesn't notice when the noise of the lawnmower abruptly ceases, replaced once more by the quiet chitter of the crickets.

The cigarette has burned out. When he reaches for it, though, he finds a fresh one resting in the ashtray, its tip already glowing. He wonders about this for a

moment—did he light another one and forget about it?—but that thought vanishes almost as soon as it occurs to him. He takes a drag, puts it back in the ashtray, and goes back to work. His glass remains perpetually three-quarters full; whenever he picks it up, he finds that it still contains as much ice tea as it did the last time he took a drink. Yet this miracle bothers him for less than a second.

Paragraphs become scenes. Scenes gradually take the shape and form of a story. He writes for hours upon end, the pages slowly scrolling upward upon his screen, and yet he feels no exhaustion, no need to rest. He's married, but his wife never enters the room. He has two dogs, but they're nowhere to be seen or heard. Friends don't drop by unexpectedly; the phone next to his desk is silent. He never feels an impulse to push back his chair, stand up to stretch his legs, take a deep breath, maybe go to the bathroom. The view through his window remains the same, the character of the autumn light unchanging. The world is locked in a eternal, golden afternoon. He takes another drag from his cigarette, drinks some more tea, and brings himself back to where he'd left off just a few seconds ago.

At long last, he reaches the end of story. He types the last few lines, then enters the command that will save the text in computer memory. Another keystroke will send the story to the printer, but that isn't necessary;

a hard copy has already appeared in its tray. A large manila envelope, addressed to the editor of a science fiction magazine in New York, has materialized upon the desk. He removes the story from the printer tray, shuffles the pages to make them a tidy sheaf of paper; he attaches a butterfly clip, then pushes it into the envelope. He lays it upon his desk, and doesn't notice that it vanishes as soon as he looks away.

He gazes at the blank screen of his computer for a few moments, feeling a sense of satisfaction at having accomplished his task. He doesn't notice that everything around him has frozen in place. A curlicue of smoke from his cigarette lingers in stasis above the ashtray; the autumn breeze no longer wafts through the window, and the crickets have ceased to chirp. Time itself has come to a stop.

He sighs, reaches over to pick up his ice tea. He takes a sip, puts down the glass, then picks up his cigarette. A quick drag, then his hands return to the keyboard. Enough procrastination. Time to begin work on a new project.

He sits at his desk, writing a story...

✦✦✦

"What the hell is this?"

"I don't know. My team has checked the entire system. No deterioration in the mnemonic download. Alpha wave levels remain nominal. Sensory input fully engaged, same for cerebral feedback loop..."

"You want feedback? Here's your feedback. Read the end of the story you just got from him. Here...the bottom of the transcript."

"Wait a sec. Lemme pull it up... 'What's your name?' she asked. 'Adam,' he replied. 'What's yours?' 'Eve.'"

"Uh-huh. And now the end of the one before that."

"Ummm...okay, here it is. 'And then he woke up, and discovered that it was all a dream.'"

"Yeah, okay. And now the first one..."

"Hold on...yeah, here it is... 'Oh, my God! It's a cookbook!'"

"And you don't see anything wrong with this?"

"Well, they do seem a little predictable. Except maybe that last one. Didn't see that coming."

"You didn't see...? C'mon, this stuff was lame even back then! I thought you told me this guy was a major author!"

"Well, he was. According to Research Division, he published fifteen novels and nearly a hundred short stories during his lifetime. He also earned..."

"Several awards...what the hell is a Hugo, anyway?...his work translated into half a dozen languages, yada yada. I read the same report. 'My name's Adam. What's yours?' 'Crap! If he was that good, he could've have written better than this in his sleep.'"

"Well, in a sense, he has been asleep..."

"He's been dead! Just before he kicked off, he spent everything he had in the bank, even sold his house, so that he could arrange for his body to be cryogenically preserved.

Thought there was a chance that he might be revived sometime in the future. Pure Pre-Collapse nonsense..."

"Yes, well, he was a science fiction writer, after all. They tended to think about things like that."

"Science fiction...sheesh, no wonder that stuff died out. Those guys never got anything right. And you say he's the last one?"

"The only one whose brain survived cryogenic freezing. There were a couple of others, but..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Too much collateral damage to the neural infrastructure. We're lucky to have been able to download just this guy. And you say there's been no deterioration of his long-term memory?"

"Well..."

"Well what?"

"Look, this isn't an exact process. Besides cellular damage, there's also the psychological trauma of death itself, so even though we were able to reconstruct his neural pathways enough to allow a complete brainscan, we still had to edit his core engrams once we downloaded them. Otherwise he'd have gone into solipsistic syndrome. You don't want them knowing they're really just a few hundred terabytes in a..."

"Yeah, right, I got that. But..."

"Just listen, all right? Once we pieced together a partial memory of his life before he died, we used it to develop a template simulacrum of his contemporary environment. He resides in that now. For him, it's real. He feels, he hears, he tastes...the works. And we can manipulate that environment at will."

"Okay, I understand that. What I don't understand is why this guy is turning out crap."

"We can't figure that either. Remember, this is the first time we've attempted to devise a creative modus. However, we have a theory that residual memes may be causing a chaotic influence. If that's the case, then..."

"Look, this is all over my head. And frankly, I don't care. Bottom line is that I've got Entertainment Division breathing down my neck. I told 'em they could have a new story from a major Pre-Collapse writer, and now they're making deals all over the place. The revenue they're expecting from net rights alone..."

"That's your problem."

"Uh-uh...it's your problem. Because if I don't deliver, I'm telling them why, and then you and your team will be lucky if your next job is down in Astronautics, humping code for the Jovian run. Get my meaning?"

"Yeah, okay. We'll work on it. Maybe if we change the simulacrum..."

"Whatever. I got a meeting in ten minutes. Get it done, and let me know when you've got something besides this Adam and Eve crap."

"Sure. Oh, and by the way...you were wondering what a Hugo was? Here's a visual image we've recovered from his memory..."

"Oh, no...no, that's just not right. Thanks a bunch. Just the sort of thing I need to take with me all day..."

"It's supposed to be a rocket. Why, what else did you think it was?"

"Never mind."



He sits at an autograph table, signing books.

The table is located in the midst of the largest, most luxurious bookstore he's ever seen. Aisle upon aisle of mahogany bookcases, each so tall that stepladders are provided so that patrons may reach the volumes on the top-most shelves. Tiers of balconies, one above the other, rise toward a vaulted ceiling from which crystal chandeliers are suspended; wrought-iron elevators, operated by young men in bellboy uniforms, carry customers to the upper floors. Classical music—the first movement of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*—drifts down to him from the chamber quartet performing on the second level, while waiters in tuxedos roam the aisles, offering mimosas and Swiss chocolates to readers lounging in soft leather armchairs.

This place is a cathedral of literature, and he is its most precious icon. On the other side of the table, hundreds of men and women patiently wait their turn to meet him; the line they've formed stretches as far as the eye can see. The gentlemen are handsome, the ladies achingly beautiful. Of high social stature and impeccable taste, they've dressed for the occasion, in dinner jackets and silk evening gowns, and each carries a copy of his latest novel as if it's their most precious possession.

The chair in which he sits is a throne, high-backed and upholstered in red velvet. The table is made of ancient oak, fine-grained and hundreds of years old, its surface so polished it practically gleams with a light of its own. A champagne stem rests upon it, just in case he needs a little light refreshment. Next to his right hand is an onyx fountain pen, its tip and band fashioned from white gold. He picks it up, then raises his eyes to the next person in line.

The woman is spectacular. Raven haired, her figure svelte and sensuous, she could easily be a lingerie model, an actress of stage and screen, perhaps the consort of a European prince. Her dark eyes express longing as she shyly steps forward. There is no doubt that he is her favorite author, and that she would gladly indulge his fantasies if the opportunity became available. Perhaps a quiet dinner for two, once the signing is over? For now, though, all she desires is his inscription, if he would be so kind.

Of course. Anything for one of his fans. She gently places the book upon the table, and then he looks down at it.

A paperback, its pages dog-eared, its spine broken. The cover art, rendered in bright primary colors, features a buxom, red-haired woman in a skin-tight space-suit, her enormous breasts protruding against its silver fabric. Her face is contorted in an expression of homicidal rage, and she has a laser rifle in her left hand and a glowing energy sword in her right; she stands on top of a

pile of corpses, blasting and slicing away at the horde of bug-eyed monsters swarming toward her. Behind her, a squad of space marines fires in all directions at once; in the background, a starship that seems to be concocted from pieces of old *Star Wars* model kits.

The book's title is nearly an inch tall, raised in gold foil: *Guts and Glory: A Glory Gaddington™ Novel*. Turning the book over, he skims the rear dustjacket copy. Glory Gaddington, captain of the starship *Invincible* and rightful heiress to the throne of the deposed Lord Montebaum, continues her heroic quest to regain control of the Bagel System from Count Drok and the evil Rigelian Empire. The latest volume of a series; the last installment, *Glory, Glory, Hallelujah*, earned high praise from *Locus*: "...Interesting..."

He lays the book down, looks up at the woman waiting for him to sign it. *I'm sorry, he says, but I didn't write this.*

She smiles, and favors him with a knowing wink. *Does it matter?* she replies.



"What the hell is this?"

"Uhh...well, we're not sure..."

"You're not sure? I've checked his bibliography, and there's nothing in there about...what's her name, Chastity Cummingssoon...?"

"Glory Gaddington. A popular character of early 21st century space opera, featured in a series of novels by..."

"But he didn't write them, did he? So what's she doing in his simulacrum? And come to think of it, what were you trying to accomplish by this, anyway?"

"According to Research, although he achieved a certain level of success, like most science fiction writers he was relatively obscure in his day. His books sold just well enough for his publishers to earn a modest profit, but outside the genre he was virtually unknown. So we thought that, if we placed him in an environment in which he perceived himself as being a bestselling author respected at the highest levels of levels of literary society, that might prompt him to produce something that would match up to those expectations."

"So where did Patience Paddingwell come from?"

"Well, those books were bestsellers, after all, so perhaps his subconscious mind told him that was what he would've had to have written in order to get that sort of notoriety. At least that's our theory."

"Some theory. All he's done since then is sit in his office, staring at his computer and mumbling to himself..."

"Not true. We did get three pages of Glory having sex with Count Drok..."

"Yeah, right. *That's* going to play in New Kansas. All he did was throw back the very thing that he thought would've made him a bestselling writer in his own time."

"Maybe it was."

"If we wanted that, we'd just reprint Faith Frothinghard novels..."

“You couldn’t even if you wanted to. During the Collapse, many science fiction fans were forced to burn parts of their collections. Glory Gaddington books were usually the first to go. They were rather thick, after all, so they provided a lot of heat...”

“Fascinating. Look, point is, appealing to his vanity isn’t going to work. If we’re going to get anything from him, we’ve got to work on his creative instincts. Don’t put him in a bookstore. Furnish an environment that inspires him.”

“Umm...sure, all right. Any suggestions?”

“How should I know? This is your department, not mine. But whatever you do, make it snappy. Entertainment needs something they can take to Marketing, and I’m getting swamped with memos. Call me when you have material.”

“Of course. Where will you be?”

“In my office, reading Shakespeare. Anything to get Virtue Violencenuff out of my system.”



He sits at his desk, writing a story.

The doorbell rings, a shrill buzz that breaks his train of thought. Muttering beneath his breath, he pushes back his chair and goes downstairs. He’s expecting the neighbor kid, selling candy for school, or at worst a pair of Jehovah’s Witnesses, but instead two men are waiting for him at the front door.

One is dressed in a dark gray business suit, the other the blue uniform of an Air Force colonel. Both wear sunglasses. Behind them, a black sedan with government plates is parked in the driveway. The man in the suit flashes an I.D., then tells him that there’s been an emergency. A strange object has crashed only a few miles from his house. They show him photos of something that looks like two huge pie-pans stuck together, half-buried in a hillside. The military believes that it may be an alien spacecraft. Since he’s a science fiction writer, he’s the closest available person who may be able to make sense of this phenomenon.

He agrees to help them, so he shuts the door behind them, then follows them out to the car. He climbs into the back seat....

There’s no discernable passage of time or distance. One instant, he’s still at his house. The next, the car has arrived at the crash site. He recognizes this place at once: a nature preserve where he sometimes takes the dogs for a run. Tanks and field guns have surrounded the hillside, and soldiers are setting up machine guns behind sandbag emplacements. Helicopters carry in more troops while fighter jets scream overhead.

The Air Force colonel escorts him to a forward command post. Within the dugout, a young dude is seated at a folding table; a half-dozen laptop computers have been set up around him, and he seems to be working at them all at once. The kid’s head is shaved; he wears a black

leather jacket, ripped jeans, and Doc Martens, and there’s wires leading from one of the computers to a socket imbedded in the base of his skull. His name is Spike, and he’s trying to download a virus into the alien ship’s computer. He’s not having much success, though, because the extraterrestrial AI is protected by a cyberspace infrastructure of ultradense black ice that has erected a self-evolving synergistic firewall around...

A high-pitched scream. A soldier runs away from the crash site, his uniform in flames. Behind him, a snake-like appendage has risen into view from the alien craft; white-hot beams of energy lance from it, torching everything in sight.

He flees from the dugout just before the colonel and the hacker are disintegrated by the death-beam. Making good his escape by taking cover in the surrounding forest, he stops to look back. The infantry has opened fire upon the spaceship, but their weapons are useless against the invisible energy barrier that surrounds the strange vessel.

Then the spacecraft’s hatch opens, and half-naked warriors riding winged dragons ascend into the sky. Close behind them are a battalion of space barbarians, a gang of post-apocalypse bikers on chopped-up Harleys, a squad of multiple-limbed androids, a pride of Amazonian she-devils in chain-mail, a horror of flesh-eating zombies, a blitzkrieg of giant Nazi robots, a mob of scabrous mutants, a herd of cloned dinosaurs, and some guy in a black outfit who has the worst case of emphysema he has ever heard. All of them wielding death, doom, and destruction on an unimaginable scale.

All at once, something closes in his mind. It feels like a door slamming shut, with a sudden and irrevocable surety. In no hurry at all, ignoring the sounds of warfare behind him, he picks his way through the forest until he reaches the road that he knows will lead him back home.

Along the way, he encounters a plucky girl reporter from a major metropolitan newspaper. Her car has broken down, so he stops to help her change the flat tire, but when she tells him in breathless tones that she has fallen in love with him, he leaves her behind. Not long after that, he meets a courageous lady scientist from Caltech; her car has broken down, too, and she insists that she alone holds the key to defeating the aliens. She doesn’t fall in love with him, but she gives him every indication that she’s good for a one-night stand. He gives her his email address, and keeps walking. He’s almost within sight of his house when he finds a woman in a tattered white dress sitting on his neighbor’s stone fence, hugging her knees and weeping with inconsolable grief. She tells him that she’s lost her world, her people, her entire future; all she can see is bleakness, cold and dreary, with no hope for anyone. He politely asks if she’d like to come back to his place and have lunch, but all she wants do is wallow in her misery, And besides, she’s a hermaphrodite with three transsexual

partners; sharing a meal with him would violate the social mores of her clan. She wants to explain it all to him, but he's getting hungry, so he leaves her as well and continues walking down the road.

At long last, he finds his way back home. He makes a tuna sandwich and pours a glass of milk, and has lunch at the kitchen table while a Martian tripod stomps through his backyard. After skimming the funny pages of the local newspaper, he climbs the stairs to his office. Sitting down in front of his computer, he reads what he'd been writing before he was so rudely interrupted.

The story he'd been working on, though, has lost its appeal. He gazes out the window for a time, idly watching the alien armada as it slowly descends from the sky. After a while, he closes the file and slides it across the computer screen to the trash can.

Then he creates another document, and begins to write something new.

✦✦✦

"What the hell is this?"

"Why do all of our conversations begin the same way?"

"Don't get wise with me. You saw what he wrote."

"Uh-huh...and it's brilliant. Great story. Terrific characters. Superb setting. A surprise plot twist about halfway through...I didn't see that coming, did you?...and a killer ending. Kept me going all the way through."

"But...dammit, it's not science fiction!"

"So?"

"It's a western!"

"I'm not sure I'd call it that. It's set in Colorado in 1870, sure, but it's more like a mystery that just happens to take place in..."

"It's got horses, okay? Horses and a sheriff, and a female protagonist who works on a cattle ranch..."

"Wasn't she great? And when it turns out that she's actually his step-daughter..."

"That's not the point. He's a science fiction writer. Where's the aliens? Where's the spaceships? Where's the..."

"Y'know, I've been thinking much the same thing. It occurs to me that we've been going about this all wrong. I mean, we keep thinking he's a science fiction writer...but maybe he's really a writer who just happens to write science fiction."

"What are you...?"

"Listen, okay? That last simulacrum...everything we could think of, we threw at him. Crashed spaceship, alien invasion, military forces, creatures of every shape and size, a choice of female characters...the works. We made it as weird as weird can be, and put him right in the thick of it, with no time for him to think of anything else. So what happens? He rejects it all, and writes something completely different."

"Then program another simulacrum. Make it even more weird than before. Look, I got an idea. Let's say an asteroid is about to collide with Earth, and..."

"You don't get it. It's not the idea that matters the most...it's what you do with it."

"Come again?"

"Look...when everything is weird, then nothing is weird at all. We could have cartoon characters crawl out of his ass and it's not going to make any difference. It'd just be one more strange thing...and this guy made friends with strangeness long before we were born. Maybe he just wants to tell a story, and not have anyone tell him what it's supposed to be."

"But he's supposed to write a science fiction story!"

"And he gave you a western. Or rather, a mystery novel set in the Old West. Big deal. Entertainment and Marketing want him for his imagination, right? So cut him loose. Let him imagine what he will, and stop trying to force him to do something that you think will sell big. I guarantee that if you take this story to your people they're going to love it no matter what it is."

"Well...um, yeah, it is pretty good, I guess. Can I get back to you on this?"

"Gee, I dunno. I've got a meeting in ten minutes. Send me a memo, okay?"

✦✦✦

He sits at his desk, writing a story.

Outside the window, the first snow of winter is falling, a gentle white haze that masks bare tree limbs and mutes the sullen growl of his neighbor's snowblower. Every now and then he lifts his eyes from the computer screen to savor the view. Autumn is gone and the days have become short, but he relishes the change of season. A subtle reminder that time is passing swift, and there's many more stories to be told before he can take his rest.

Returning his attention to the keyboard, he continues to polish the last few lines of the story he's been writing. It won't be long before his wife comes home from work; he needs to go downstairs and start making dinner. Behind him, one of his dogs rises from the carpet; he arches his back, makes a canine yawn, then wanders off to another part of the house. Everyone is hungry. Time to wrap things up for the day.

At last, he reaches the end of the last paragraph. He sits back in his chair, contemplates what he has done. An interesting little fable, really. Probably won't win any awards, and he doubts that the critics will be very kind, but nonetheless he thinks it raises a question or two about the substance of reality, the nature of the human imagination. What if...?

Never mind. He saves the file and closes it, then stands up from his chair. Feeling as if he's just woken from a dream, he walks away into reality. ☺

*Here are two authors who know just a little bit about building worlds—Buckell with his acclaimed Carribbean-tinged novel debut *Crystal Rain*, and Bick with a series of stories in the *Star Trek* and *MechWarrior* universes. So it's no surprise they've been able to job up a fascinating universe into which you'll now get the briefest of glimpses, in the most extreme of circumstances. Have fun. Wear a seatbelt.*

Shoah Sry

BY TOBIAS S. BUCKELL AND ILSA J. BICK

Molly was dead, and I had killed her.

We were alive, Talia and I. But not Molly: I sat in my pilot's chair, a dull horror fisting my heart, and stared at what had become of my beloved. Gouts of hot yellow sunlight stabbed through monstrous gashes in her hull. Though dead, she still oozed, the sap dripping from ripped tensilar flesh. The air stank of ozone mingling with the rusty edge of biomimetic polymers, a little like that of dying blood. Molly's ribs, those gleaming traverses, were shattered and splintered, like the remains of a prehistoric creature bleached to white bone. All things you'd expect to see in any wreck, but this was my Molly, my ship and mirror to my image, and I had done this, I had...

Talia's voice sliced into my thoughts. "You've got to get out of here, Dinah." Fingers of shadow licked round bruises on her forehead and cheeks, and her skin was a pallid, sickly yellow. A rivulet of blood tracked from the corner of her mouth, and she spat a gob of black saliva. "We didn't come all this way just to give you up. Now, for the sake of the Great Mother, don't argue."

"I'm not leaving Molly," I said. But that was a lie. I'd already abandoned her. Severed my wet-meld interface as the heat seared away her outer hull and left my poor Molly to die alone. A fail-safe, really, and out of my control, something embedded in every wet-meld because the programmers thought I was more important. They were wrong.

Talia's lips thinned as if she wanted to spit again. She didn't. "You have to."

"Why?" Sensing my distress, my blouse balled about my shoulders and began a simple massage. Normally, I would have found the blouse's ministrations soothing, but not now. I shrugged the garment to stillness. "Molly sent out a distress to Shari and the others just before she..." A lump balled in my throat. I swallowed, hard. "Before we crashed. They're on their way."

"Come on. They can only come if they can blast their way through an Imperial blockade and if the

Imperial scouts don't find us first. You can bet there's a High Inquisitor en route." Her lips thinned. "We can't let her get to you."

"But I can't just leave."

"Yes, you *can*. I'm not important, but if they catch you..."

"You don't understand." How to explain? This was terribly wrong; I shouldn't still be feeling Molly's death. Grief was one thing, but *this*...Every thought, every detail was as crisp and sharp as if etched on my mind with a diamond stylus: the moment we'd rocketed out of the Forbidden Zone, that dead planet receding to a dusky blue marble as Molly's engines throbbed with an urgency I felt shudder into my very bones. The brief, icy clench in the pit of my stomach as space-time crinkled and pulse gates vomited out first one, then two, then twenty scouts. The dizzying whorl of stars as Molly and I banked and pivoted and my sudden nausea as the first salvo sliced Molly's aft fin clean. And there were sounds: the howl of atmosphere sheeting over Molly's body; the hiss and sizzle of her tensilar skin as it burned away.

And Molly's screams: high, keening shrieks.

Stop. Stop this. I clamped down on my raging thoughts and struggled for control. I couldn't afford to be stupid. By the Great Mother, I was a scientist, a paleogeneticist who grubbed around rocks and unearthed skeletons, not some puling Sister fresh out of a vat. I was a full Woman, a pilot.

A believer.

I only realized Talia had spoken when she touched my hand. "What is it?" I asked.

"You. You're not right, Dinah." Her eyes narrowed, and when she spoke again, her tone was more measured, a bit curious. "Why couldn't you and Molly get away?"

"Well," I began and stopped. It was a good question. Molly and I had run across scouts before. I'd bluffed my way through countless pulse gates without a problem. True, the Forbidden Zone was trickier than most corridors, but I'd

gotten in through the same gate without being detected. It was only when Molly and I melded with the pulse gate's biosensors as we went out that we'd tripped an alarm.

"I don't know," I said, and then in a rush and before I could really think about it, "but there was a split second when Molly didn't recognize me." The words sounded strange in my mouth, a little...*alien*. "Something got in the way of our interlink for a minute, maybe two." Molly was *sluggish*, I thought. *I couldn't hear her. It was like I was reaching for her across a great distance, as if she'd not been fashioned in my likeness, clone of my clone, mirror to my image.*

Talia was silent a long moment. "How do you feel, Dinah?"

"Sick." My eyes filled. "Lost...like I'm losing who I am. My...voice. Me."

Talia let go of a long breath. "Then that's it. I'm going to send out another distress to Shari, and hope they get here before the Imperialists. But you're gone. Take a weapon and...No, don't even bother to argue. If they get you, then Molly will have died for nothing, and we Talorans will still be dirt under the Imperial heel."

Then she gripped my shoulder, very hard. "*Shoah* Sry, Sister. We have the secret. You must survive. Do you understand?"

I wanted to argue. I didn't. I understood. Too well.



At the lip of Molly's ruined hatch, Talia watched Dinah pick her way north. Toward a temporary sanctuary, Talia hoped: a range of saw-toothed mountains that bit into a sky darker than Talia was used to. More like the sky at high altitude where the black of space ate at the margin between life and death. The air on this planet was very thin, too, but it was air and would have to do.

And Dinah? Talia folded her arms across her breasts. Dinah wasn't the same Woman. That indecision, the disorientation, the disconnect Dinah had described...yes, the change was there. Subtle, barely definable perhaps. But there, and faster than she'd anticipated.

"And what did you feel, Molly?" Talia skimmed her fingers along a gnarly tangle of bulkhead and myomeric web. "What was it like? Is Dinah still Woman, or..."

Or something different: a truth hidden away on a dead world in a zone forbidden to us for centuries? A truth, this Shoah Sry, the Imperialists would keep from us?

Talia's distress call was very brief. Coordinates and two words: *Shoah Sry*. Shari would understand and fix on their position. Imperialists were likely to intercept, but that couldn't be helped. A High Inquisitor would arrive soon. She didn't have much time. She rummaged around her private supplies until she found what she was looking for.

"Hurry," she said to Shari, to thin air. To the husk of a dead ship. She slid a thin wafer under her tongue. The wafer was very bitter. "Hurry, Shari, before it's too late."



I may be a High Inquisitor, but even I understand delicacy and beauty, and glorianas were the most beautiful of flowers, my favorite. Sighing with pleasure, I pressed my face into the azure bouquet. Their scent was light as musk, and their velvet petals daubed blush upon my cheeks, stroked on shadow and mascara, kissed my lips the faintest pink. The glorianas tended to my face as an emerald-green robe slithered over the deckplates of my ship and mirror to my image. Twining round my legs, the cloth reached green fingers to caress my breasts, cinch round my hips, but the garment was a little too snug. I waved my arms and the fabric relaxed.

A soft whisper brushed my right ear. "Yohanai, the Lady awaits."

"Thank you, Kahanai. Ready to receive." As I settled into my seat, Kahanai—my ship and mirror to my image—molded the chair to my contours.

Her Ladyship Anafi flickered up from a corner table set snugly within a niche beneath a tricolored Imperial insignia of gold, red, and black. Anafi's tiny avatar was slightly translucent, and shimmered along the edges.

I made the proper obeisance. "Your presence graces mine, Lady. It's been a very long time and many gates since I last sat by your side and watched the communal river flow past."

Anafi bowed her head, and I saw that the blackness of her hair was as yet unmarred by the passage of years. "And it's good to see you, Yohanai," she said. Several children flickered by from right to left, dashing behind Anafi and then disappearing as if they'd ducked through a rip into another world. The effect was always disconcerting and, in truth, seeing them hurt. Unlike me, they were Anafi's true clones, exact copies of the original Anafi, ancestress to a long line of Inquisitors stretching back many thousands of years.

I shifted, brushing an errant hank of my straight, dark hair aside. The hair was a modification. My true Sister-Mother's hair was a blond cascade of ringlets, yet she was not of the Inquisitorial line. That I was a High Inquisitor I owed to Anafi. My lineage was humble: born into poverty on Talor before Anafi adopted me. True, she was always looking to broaden her ancestral gene pool, and mine contained several desirable loci.

Yet Anafi was shrewd. My mitochondrial DNA, passed from sister-mother to sister-mother, branded me as Taloran. Talor was a low planet, of inferior stock, and that made me invaluable. A High Inquisitor went on many missions, some of them secret. A Taloran marker was as effective as the most elaborate disguise because everyone knew: No Talorans allowed.

"We have a situation," Anafi said. "We found an archeological dig in the general vicinity of..." She made a face as if she'd tasted something foul. "Earth."

"Great Mother." I felt dirty just hearing the word.

"Yes," Anafi said, grimly. "They were probably Gan Avodat."

Gan Avodat? Now that was interesting. Although they'd recently demonstrated more openly on Talor, their home planet was a mystery. They guarded their ancestral lineage with fanatical secretiveness, and they were radical. Insane. Fixated on the idea of finding...I could barely think much less say it.

But I did. "Were they out to find...Man?"

"No one knows. Most of them died when our forces discovered them, though we didn't fire a shot. They ingested a poison designed to obliterate their mitochondria."

Understandable: Destroying their mitochondrial DNA would kill and obliterate their lineage and location. "You said *most*. Not all?"

"Two got away. Evidence at the site suggests genetic tampering and, perhaps, extraction from fossilized remains. Some lunatic hope of resurrecting Man, no doubt. They must be found, Yohanai. You must determine what it is they know and what they have, if anything. Regardless, they must be silenced. If one of them is carrying evidence of Man, you will destroy it, is that clear? No trace can remain, not a single nucleotide. The Empress is following this very carefully. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, Lady." And I did. So I half-hoped I might find the renegades dead. An Inquisitor should not enjoy what must be done. Only the truly evil would.

After Anafi's image winked out, Kahanai whispered, "I'm receiving data and clearances." A pause, then: "Yohanai, there is a high probability that the rogue ship lost control. The pulse gate says the ship's behaviors were quite erratic."

"Did this ship have a name, a registry?"

"Only a name: *Molly*. No Imperial passcode. That does not make sense."

I understood. Presumably, the rogue ship bypassed our security protocols once but was unable to repeat the trick. "I agree. Let's find them, Kahanai."

I stretched full-length upon Kahanai's deck. An acceleration couch of moss grew around and then up the back of my neck. Tendrils punctured the interlink nodes at my temples.

And then we were one.

Kahanai and I spun along the center of her gravity, seeking the nearest pulse gate. We saw it as a faint beacon that brightened as it flashed an identification and greeting. Then, a line jagged across my inner eye, tracing our trajectory toward the place where the rogue ship had disappeared.

All possible haste, Kahanai.

My ship and mirror to my image obeyed. We leapt for the gate.

✧✧✧

Dinah spied a protruding shelf of sturdy, level rock, deep enough for her to crouch comfortably. That was good. She was too exposed here, scrambling along this narrow spine of black basalt esker. Besides, the esker

rimmed a steep couloir clogged with scree and debris. She didn't like being so close to the edge, although her balance was better than she'd expected.

She backhanded sweat from her neck, pushed damp hair from her forehead. She'd come far in the last few hours, clambering steadily up from rolling steppes of dry brown scrub to these hard-scrabble mountains. That she'd been able to climb well also was unlike her.

Something's happened to me. She clambered up the esker then half-pushed, half-pulled herself onto the ledge, her arms screaming with effort. But she made it—and that, too, was unlike her. Physical prowess was not what she'd been bred for.

Like I'm not me. My voice is gone.

She heard the ship before she saw it: a low basso growl that rose to a rumble and then a roar, edged with the high keening wail of deceleration. Turning, she gazed back across the foothills and spotted a seam of orange burn across blue-black sky: a single ship, but a very *powerful ship*, one that shook the air.

The ground twitched like something alive beneath her feet, thrilling through stone, and vibrations shivered into her thighs. A sluice of grey scree jolted free of the mountain just above her head; she flinched back as rock showed round, nipping her face. Then the rumble subsided.

Dinah released a breath she hadn't known she'd held. Her face stung and a warm line of blood meandered down her right cheek. She reached to swipe herself clean...and that's when she heard a new sound: a *shooshing*, like sand scouring a rock.

Dinah froze, her nerves jumping. Even her clothing, whose fibers possessed only the most rudimentary intelligence, thinned around her torso, shrinking close and tight. Her senses seemed to hone themselves to an edge keener than the most perfect blade.

The rocks came. By all that was holy, Dinah should've peeled away from the mountain and burst upon the rocks far below. But she didn't. Instead, with a guttural cry, Dinah flung herself against the mountain, gripping at the rock with her right hand and flinging her left arm over her head and neck.

Rock and debris rained round her body with a deafening roar. Something very large banged her left arm, between her wrist and elbow. She screamed as the bone snapped. Hot molten pain roared through her arm and into her spine, and left her gasping.

Dinah didn't know how long she crouched there, the fingers of her right hand bloody and raw from grabbing at rock and her left arm awkwardly flung over her head, the pain in every nerve and muscle fiber dulling to a gnawing ache. Long enough for the roar of the rocks to cease until all she heard was her own ragged gasps.

She unfurled one cautious millimeter at a time. The first movement sent a shock of pain rocketing from her elbow to the base of her neck. Dinah's breath hissed between her teeth, and her vision sheeted red. She marshaled her will and pulled herself upright.

Those contrails left no doubt. The Inquisitor was here. She might start with Talia, but she would come after Dinah, and soon.

Dinah stood, dizzy with pain, and tried to think what a Woman—on the run, with a broken arm and a secret thrumming through her blood—ought to do next.



The ship had been dead so long that the whorls of ivy cocooning the Woman's body had shriveled to black stalks. The Woman looked no better. Dried blood painted her chin and neck dull rust red; her lips were alabaster-white. Cadaveric spasms made her hands stiff, grotesque claws, an effect of the mitochondrial poison she'd ingested. This Woman had died a painful, agonized, lonely death.

All for the sake of some abomination called the Shoah Sry.

Outside again, I felt better. In the ship, I had plucked a single hair from the pilot's acceleration couch. The cinnamon-colored hair was tipped with a tiny nib of follicle, and that would do nicely. Eyes closed, I passed the hair beneath my nostrils. Yes, there: a scent rising like a vapor from that bit of skin. I could track this lost Woman now.

Kahanai, through our link: "Yohanai, three Taloran ships have entered orbit preparatory to landfall. I detect heavy armaments."

I didn't need to think twice. "Go, Kahanai. Draw off these other ships; they'll believe you carry the fugitives. Once you've shaken them, find your Sister-Ships and bring help."

"I won't leave you."

"You must. If these Talorans destroy us, the Gan Avodat will create chaos. But if I can track down this Woman..."

"And if you don't find her? If she kills you?"

Chilling if logical questions, for which I had no answer.

A thin breeze stirred the cinnamon-colored hair still pinched between my thumb and forefinger. At my command, my robe coiled a bit of itself into a soft emerald-hued purse no larger than a pomegranate's seed and then strung a cord about my neck. The purse dangled between my breasts. The hair was evidence. If I survived and the Woman did not, our scientists would still know exactly what the Gan Avodat had done, and could use the Woman's DNA to track their work.

I directed my thoughts to my beloved. "If you don't hear from me, then you'll know I've died and it won't matter. Then you must strike. This area is tainted with this Woman's DNA. Scorch this planet clean. "I didn't permit myself to think of the reverse. I knew I would never survive if Kahanai died. "You must be certain, Dear One. There must be no trace of this Woman."

Kahanai was quiet. I waited, the seconds ticking by. Kahanai could be very stubborn. I should know since she is me, in so many ways. Then my mind brightened, as if there'd been a break in a heavy pall of clouds, and I knew she would do as I commanded.

"All right, but I will be back for you." Kahanai's words whispered through my mind with the gentleness of a lover's caress. "Wait for me, Yohanai."

She severed the link and my mind went silent.



I followed the lost Woman. I could taste her fear, and smell the strong astringent edge of pain.

In time, I reached the foothills of mountains that bit the sky. The going was difficult. My robes did their best to help, but after a time, I began to pant and strain. The purse, with the Woman's hair, pulsed with my heart.

I struggled up a deep, rocky cleft. Propping my back against a boulder, I paused, grateful for the chance to rest. My sweaty hair clung to my scalp, and it took a few moments for the thudding of my pulse in my temples to slow.

Closing my eyes, I sought the Woman's scent again. I caught fear again, though it was fainter. That was dangerous. The Woman might prove a formidable adversary if she were no longer a slave to panic. But there was the strong, acid tang of pain, too; and so I knew that she was hurt, badly.

And then—I puzzled over the strangeness of this—there was *another* scent: musky. Pungent. Alien. Not Woman.

Suddenly, a warm flush crept from the hollow of my throat. My thighs tingled, and my heart quickened but not with fear. With...Great Mother...excitement.

What was *that*? The scent was so strong, I was drowning in it.

I grasped at the purse by my chest and squeezed, as if to purge this odd excitement from my body. I staggered forward a step, then two.

Then the rock behind me exploded.



The next shot hit the Inquisitor square in the chest. Her emerald garments flared white-hot as they dissipated the force of the blast. She reeled back and then toppled, smacking against a boulder before rolling off, her hands grappling at her robe.

Searching for a weapon? Dinah wouldn't give her the time. She let loose another bolt. The Inquisitor shied right, ducking behind a large tumble of grey boulders just as a spray of pulverized rock rose in a high arc. "Woman!" she cried. "Woman, wait!"

On a shelf overlooking the gully below, Dinah peered from the safety of a V-shaped wedge at the junction of two large rocks. The boulders behind which the Inquisitor hid were too thick to blast through. She might try rushing the Inquisitor but discarded that as impractical. She was not suicidal. Besides, her left arm, though swaddled in a crude sling she'd coaxed out of her blouse, would never stand up.

The Inquisitor spoke again. "Woman, my name is Yohanai. You must listen. I've come a great distance, all the way from your Molly."

At the mention of her poor ship, Dinah's heart twisted, and she spoke, knowing that she knew she would. "What about Talia?" Her voice was raw and bloody, her throat painful. It was as if she'd swallowed shards of glass.

"Dead, by her own hand."

Dinah didn't believe it. The fingers of her right hand, her good hand tightened on her weapon. *Oh, Great Mother, just one more shot.*

"You're lying," Dinah said.

"I am no liar."

"Then how did you find me?"

"From your scent. You've left bits of yourself all along the way: skin, hair. Believe me when I say: It wasn't that difficult." The Inquisitor's tone sounded like a Sister-Mother telling a small one a necessary, if painful truth. Dinah said nothing.

"The Gan Avodat is talking about you, Woman," The Inquisitor, Yohanai, said, "Do you know what they say? They're calling you the *Shoah Sry*."

Dinah's blood iced. *That's not possible. It can't be true...*

"But it is true," Yohanai said, as if Dinah had spoken aloud. "The Gan Avodat says that you, Woman, are the return of Man. They say you are Woman mated to Man in the same flesh, and the Second Coming. Being an Inquisitor, I ask questions, and I have to ask myself: did this Woman really do this of her own free will?"

Dinah barely heard her through the sudden roaring in her ears. She carried the seed, yes, because Talia created it from what they'd found, the remains of that...Man. But she told Dinah the artificial chromosome was inactive: a letter in a sealed envelope, nothing more. No way for the DNA to go active, and yet there was Molly who had not recognized her, Molly whom she'd killed...

"No!" Dinah fired at the boulders, and pulverized rock exploded in a shower of debris that pattered like hail. "*No, no, no, no! You lie!*"

Yohanai's answer came back on the wind. "They used you and will continue to use you unless you let me help. We know how to...*remove genetic impurities*. Our scientists can return you to yourself, Sister. In the process, you'll help us."

"How?" Dinah asked. "Why should I?"

"Because you need us. You'll expose the Women of Gan Avodat as the liars and cheats they are. You helped and believed in them. They repaid you by making you a freak. An abomination. You owe them nothing, Sister, not your loyalty, and certainly not your life."

"And how are you better?"

A small silence. "Look behind you, Woman."

Fear clutched Dinah's heart. She turned, very slowly. An emerald-green simulacra was there, sprouting its left arm even as she watched. It pulsed and swelled into a

freakish Leviathan, and resolved into the image of the Inquisitor, writ large.

A crunch of rock below, and Dinah saw that the Inquisitor had quit her hiding place. Her robe was torn from where she'd ripped the fabric free and sent it slithering over the rocks to Dinah's hiding place. The Inquisitor's face was gentle, sweet. Honest—or maybe that's what Dinah wanted to believe because Talia *had* betrayed her.

"Your death serves no purpose," Yohanai said. "Come. Let us purge you, Sister."

Dinah hesitated, but only for an instant. What, after all, was there left for her to do?

✦✦✦

I watched as the Woman picked her way down, my simulacra lumbering behind. Indeed, as I'd sensed, the Woman was hurt; her face was cut in many places and her left arm hung in a sling, the fingers purple with hemorrhage. She halted a step away and then, wordlessly, handed over her weapon.

"I am Dinah." Her voice was strange and hoarse. Emotions chased across her face: defeat, pain, fear. Perhaps, a little hope. And then...something else because her eyes suddenly went wide. "In the sky," she said—and in response to my skepticism. "Look, it's no trick, *look!*"

I looked, expecting to see nothing but unconcerned. My simulacra would protect me. "There's nothing."

"You're wrong." Her voice was low, almost a growl. "Look again. Can't you see?"

I looked again, mostly to humor her. Then I caught something...I squinted—and felt a faint prickle of alarm. Inky contrails, very faint, unspooling in black ribbons and then, the brighter orange of Imperial fighters, but how many? I couldn't tell both because of distance and their speed.

"I count nine," Dinah said, eerily echoing my thoughts. Her voice was raw but hard. "Five Taloran, four Imperial."

"All right," I said, wondering how it was that she could resolve their numbers at this distance. More strangeness. Her scent, my response, her voice and now this...I banished the simulacra, turning it back to a bit of fabric that I tucked into my robe. "Come with me."

As we scuttled down the gully and out into the plain, the sky above fluoresced with fireballs that I saw clearly, and booms rolled over the valley like thunder. And if my beloved were there...I threw my thoughts: *Kahanai! Sister!*

A sizzle, like static in my mind, then a faint: Here.

Relief washed through me like a balm, and for an instant, I could forget that people were trying to kill both or one of us. *What's happening?*

They've spotted you. Kahanai's thoughts were attenuated and thin. *Jamming.... Imperial scouts...orders to*

incinerate... Taloran ships on attack vectors...

Another sizzle like a hiss in my brain, and then Kahanai was gone.



“What are you doing?” Dinah asked.

“Saving us both.” I took the scrap of robe that had been my simulacra. It fluttered then calmed as I gave commands. Obediently, it slithered from my palm to crawl around Dinah’s neck and settle there, like a scarf. “If the Imperial ships have landed first, this binds you. You are Untouchable, subject to my authority.”

“And if they’re Talorans?”

“If they take you, it will strangle you,” I said, simply. “After you are dead, it will infiltrate your cells and destroy your DNA. You will be gone, Dinah.”

“So will you, Inquisitor,” Dinah said. No threat. She stated a fact. “If the Talorans get there first...so will you.”



The Talorans got down first. I recognized the distinctive lozenge of their vessel as it hung, motionless, over a copse of frilled trees. As we drew near, a hatch dilated. Taloran soldiers, in their dull pewter uniforms, dropped along tethers like gray spiders. They had weapons, and those were drawn. I raised my hands, palms out, in the traditional greeting. Not one of them returned it. Then I spied their leader: an Elder Lady, her uniform marked with the red piping of command.

“I am Yohanai, Sister-Daughter of Anafi, High Inquisitor to her Mother of Us All.”

The Lady had small, pellet-gray eyes that nearly disappeared when she smiled. “I am Domina Salima, and to hell with honorifics. Stand down, Inquisitor, and you will live through this.”

“I think not. In any event, if you dare to fire or take this Woman, your *Shoah Sry* will die.”

“No, she is ours and you will yield.”

“Indeed? I thought every Woman belongs to herself, Domina.”

Two splotches of color bloomed on Salima’s sallow cheeks. “Clever words, Inquisitor, but she wears your mark round her neck. And I’ll not engage in semantics while you delay, hoping that Imperial scouts will break through. Now,” and she leveled her weapon at my chest, “step aside.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Dinah was faster. “No,” she said, moving to block my body with her own. “No more death. I am not property, Domina Salima, but I come willingly.”

“No, Dinah,” I said. She knew I would do what I must. Why was she courting death? “Dinah, you...”

“I think the Woman has told you what she wants,” Domina Salima said. “Now, if you’ll...”

Her words were lost in a sudden roar. The frilled trees thrashed in a wild dance, torn by wind and fire as

three Imperial ships spiraled from the sky.

Yes! Eagerly, I searched the sky—and the silver dart of my Dear One streaking for the planet.

“Tactical!” Domina Salima shouted into a wristcom. “Fire, fire!”

The air sizzled with the crackle of weapons. Streamers unfurled from the gunports of both Talor and Imperial ships.

“Domina!” Dinah shouted, taking a step forward and away from me. “Domina, wait!”

At the sound of Dinah’s voice, the Domina pivoted, and she did not look at Dinah. Instead, her eyes pinned me with such hatred that I knew what would follow just as surely as if our minds were one. “You,” she said, and she brought her weapon up. “They are coming for you, but I am here, and you are dead, Inquisitor, you are dead.”

At the instant the Domina fired, there was a blur of motion I sensed rather than felt, and I half-turned to...what? Shield myself? Run away? I don’t know. Even now, I do not know. But what I do know is this: Something slammed into my chest with enough force to send the breath from my lungs, and my feet out from under me. I caught myself on my hands, the shock shivering up my wrists and into my shoulders. My left arm gave, and I fell; and as I fell, I caught a brilliant red sparkle out of the corner of my eye, heard a sharp whip-crack.

And I knew. I knew.

“No!” The Domina, shouting both in rage and despair. “No! *Shoah Sry! Sho...*”

Another crack, a sizzle from somewhere high above. Light flashed so hot and bright, it hurt my eyes. I squeezed them shut, the purple after-images of the Domina branded upon the blackness before my eyes. In the next instant, I caught the stink of seared cloth and roasted flesh.

Kahanai, in my mind: *I am coming for you.*

For once, that gave me no comfort.



Dinah was still alive. Her skin writhed as energy from the Domina’s weapon ripped through her every cell, shredding her DNA. Dinah’s blood-stained lips moved, and I brought my ear close.

Her voice was broken, halting. Dying. “S... sorry...it’s...better this way.” She grimaced, bit back a wave of pain as a spasm shook her: “Remember. Remem...ber...me...”

And then she was gone.

I felt, suddenly, very old and very tired. Closing my eyes, I listened to the sounds of death and clasped Dinah’s body in my arms. I would need decontamination, but I didn’t care. When Kahanai spat out a tether and reeled us aboard, Dinah’s body was still warm.



I perched on a windowsill overlooking the jade-tinted sky of a planet that had no name. Better that way. Harder to be found.

"A leave?" Anafi's voice just behind. "But you did well, Yohanai. Women died, yes, but for a greater purpose."

Turning, I studied Anafi's shimmering avatar. "I know. Balance is maintained, order retained..." I tried a smile. "I just need a rest."

"Where?"

"Tupenello. I am en route now." A lie, and my transmission was shielded.

"Then, be safe, Sister. Call, if you have need. Otherwise, I await your return."

"Yes, Lady," I said and cut the transmission.

Silently, I turned a full circle, taking in my Kahanai, my ship and mirror to my image: all its familiar contours, the curl of ivy and the sweet dewy scent of moss. Would I ever coax these with just a thought ever again?

I let go a long breath. "I'm going, Kahanai."

My Dear One's voice, like a balm: "Will you be long?"

"I don't know." I placed a palm against the window Kahanai had formed in her hull so I might look down from orbit. The glass was chill. I felt the weight of that green purse between my breasts, the one with that small bit of Dinah's hair.

Remember me.

A truism: Memory is experience. Memory is what is felt and known and taken into a Woman.

"You needn't do this alone, Yohanai."

"I can't involve anyone else, Dear One, even you."

"And why not? I am mirror to your image. How can I continue to be that if you do not include me?"

I hesitated, torn between fear and love. A secret part of my soul knew she was right. What was more, I did not want to be alone. "Are you sure, my dear? Are you quite sure?"

In response, Kahanai's walls opened in an embrace and pulled me close. A single tendril, soft as a sigh, twined first around my neck and then wrapped itself about the pendant. "If we do this together, we won't suffer the fates of Dinah and Molly," Kahanai whispered. "Alone, we're both lost."

"I'm afraid," I said.

"So am I, Sister," Kahanai whispered, as the pendant dissolved, and the strand of Dinah's hair melted. The tendril shuddered and the molecules that were Dinah shivered through Kahanai, and from there to my breast and into my blood. I didn't feel anything, of course, not right away. But I knew I would.

Shoah Sry. It was a thought that was a whisper we shared, one with the other, as our cells took up this strange newness and we began to change. Shoah Sry. ☺

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Not only can Bruce Arthurs write a story that reminds us that what and who are monsters is in the eye of the beholder, he also makes a kick-ass German chocolate banana bread. That's a range of talents, my friends. You can get the recipe for the latter at his website (undulantfever.blogspot.com); the former you can read right here.

Labyrinth's Heart

BY BRUCE ARTHURS

I see, from the deepest shadows and through the hidden slits, the young hero searching for me. He unrolls the ball of thread as he walks and turns, walks and turns. He shivers slightly as he pauses to consider a joining of corridors; it is cool in the dimness here, but I do not think it is the coolness that makes him shiver. He is, after all, only one man, armed with a ball of thread, and I am a monster.

No! I tell myself, for more, far more, than the first time, that I am not a monster. I search for the elusive memories, the truth behind the lies that have been spun about me.

I remember the pressure of the water, stabbing into my ears and brain as I rose from my dying vessel's sinking remains towards the too-bright surface. I remember the coppery taste of blood from my head wound, faint beneath the overwhelming salt taste of the too-warm water.

The memories vanish in a flash of pain, and I stagger back against the wall. The twisted and stained club I hold in one hand drops to the floor with a dull thud. I grasp at the horns rising from the sides of my head, gasping for breath. Phosphenes dance in my vision. I roar in agony, the angry cry of a wild beast, of the monster that they wish to believe me.

After a moment, the pain lessens, the glowing spots fade away. The occurrences have come more and more often as the years pass, the mind-blistering pain more and more intense.

I stagger back to the hidden slit and peer through once more. The hero, the fool, the sacrifice, is no longer visible. My cry, so near, must have alarmed him. I would not know down which corridor he had fled, but for the thin line of thread that trails down the stone hallway.

I fetch up the club and backtrack along the hidden ways until I reach an access point leading to the visible passages. I know the twists and turns of the hallways. I know the concealed corridors and how to enter them. I know the slabs mounted on hidden rollers, movable to change the configurations of the passageways. What I

had not discovered myself, Daedalus had shown me on his clandestine visits.

Poor Daedalus. He is a genius among his people, and he has a half-correct conception of my origins and my nature. But he is as inept as I at politics, at submitting to the whims and ignorance of those in power. He will not die a happy man, or, I wager, a free one.

Once, drunk on the skin of wine he had brought with him (he had known not to offer the poisonous beverage to me), Daedalus had offered to show me to the exit of the maze. I replied, in my contorted, difficult rendition of his language, that I had found that exit long before.

His eyes had widened in confusion. "The exit you built into this maze," I told him, "leads only to a larger prison. I have been there. This, spare as it may be, fits my fancy better." I had looked upwards, and pointed to where a strip of dark starry sky appeared between the tops of the high walls. "That is the only true exit from this prison. There is the only way to my home, to freedom."

"Shall I build you wings?" he had asked, his voice slurred. Then he had passed out, and I covered him with his cloak until he should wake, stiff and complaining, in the morning.

I reach the young hero's trail. I kneel down and examine the thread. It is spun of the finest white linen.

Memories. Awakening on the glaring beach, small waves lapping at my legs. Blinking at the intensity of the star in this world's sky. Eyes focusing, finally, on a group of four-legged, white skinned creatures grazing on intensely green vegetation. They were, I would eventually learn, called "cattle". I did not, then or now, see the resemblance ascribed between them and me, save only the horns that grew from the largest animal's head.

A noise had come from behind me. Turning, the pain throbbing in my head, the sand hot against my rapidly-burning skin. Bipedal creatures, three of them, clothed in white garments. Two had turned and run, shrieking in high-pitched tones, as I rolled over. But the third stayed, wide-eyed.

I had managed to raise a beseeching hand towards her. Only for a few seconds, then dropped the hand back to the sand. She hesitated, then stepped forward. She knelt down and looked at my oozing head wound, then tore a strip of fine-threaded linen from the hem of her garment and gently began to bandage me.

Her name was Pasiphae, and her kindness would be her ruination. Some months after her rescue of me, she had given birth to a stillborn child, badly deformed. Her husband, the ruler of the land where I had been marooned, would not claim the child as his. Minos had accused his wife of congress with a monster, with myself. The building of the Labyrinth, and my imprisonment therein, had shortly followed.

(Daedalus had told me, during a recent visit, that the story had changed over the years as it passed from ear to mouth to ear to mouth again. That Pasiphae had, supposedly, lain with the massive white bull of the cattle herd near which I had washed ashore. That the monstrous child she had born was none other than my own horned, grotesque self. I could only shake my head at the inconceivable ignorance of Daedalus' kind.)

I follow the thread, moving silently along the corridors I know so well. The young hero is moving toward the Bone Room.

There is only one doorway into the Bone Room. I fill most of the space as I move into that doorway and trap the hero inside.

He does not notice me, at first. He is staring at the piles of bones that have accumulated here over the years. Seven virgins and seven young men for—

I realize I have lost track of how many years it has been. Skulls, leg bones, arm bones, vertebrae, ribs, all are randomly stacked along one wall. Dust and spiders occupy the lowest portions of the stacks.

He does not see or hear me. It will take only one blow to smash his skull and then, one by one, hunt down the others he must have told to stay by the entrance.

I raise my club—

— and the agonizing pain flashes in my head again. I cry out and drop to my knees. Through redblurred vision, I see the hero snap around, fear and horror mixing on his face, then see him lunge for one of the bonestacks.

I barely feel it when the femur strikes against the side of my head. Strangely, the hero's blows make me feel better; they distract me from the true pain roaring through my head. "Monster!" he cries. "Eater of flesh!"

I push the hero away. He stumbles backwards and falls into a bonepile, dropping the leg bone.

"I am not a monster!" I cry.

The young hero stares at me in astonishment. "You...speak?" he asks.

"Yes," I answer weakly. I clutch my head in my hands. The pain is throbbing fiercely, as fiercely as the sun burns above this barbarian world. "And though I eat

the flesh of your fellow beings, it is because I have no other choice given me." He would understand, if I told him, that the diet granted me was Minos' wish, Minos' desire, Minos' revenge. He would not understand if I told him of amino acid deficiencies, of certain molecular shortages remediable only by consuming the raw flesh of mammalian species like himself.

He sees me in my weakness, and he picks up the femur again as he rises to his feet. "Nonetheless, you devour them."

"Aye," I admit. They are, after all, only a step or two above animals. And they are not of my species. It is not a moral error to survive upon their flesh.

The hero approaches cautiously, the leg bone raised for striking. He is uncertain. Am I deceiving him with a false appearance of helplessness? I have thrown him across the room once; what might I do to him if I am actually alert and strong?

The bone in his hand is evidence of what might be done. Yet, I do not myself know, at this moment, what I will do if he attacks again.

I feel tired unto death. I am tired of living with my memories of civilization, of my upbringing and education so far away from here, coming only in rare and confusing flashes of insight and remembrance. I have lost my past, and the present is owned by savages and idiots.

The hero stops, too uncertain to proceed another step, and I feel a sense of disappointment. My question is answered.

"Beneath the bonepile," I say, "is something that you would wish to see."

"What?"

"Beneath the bonepile," I repeat, choking out the words against the raging fire in my skull, and raise a shaking finger to indicate where in the pile he should check.

He backs up slowly, uncertainly, then kicks at the pile. Skulls tumble across the floor, and he sees what I have sent him to see.

He picks it up in his hands, stretching the tangle between his fingers. It is a long and tangled length of white linen thread, gray with sitting on the dusty stone floor, and stained here and there with the blood of the man who had brought it into the maze.

"You are not the first young man," I tell the hero, "that she has sent to prove himself worthy of her favors." His face grows flushed, his breathing quickens. His barbarian nature grows dominant. It is what I want.

I lower my head to the cool stone. It feels good to my throbbing head, and I wish to sleep.

I hear the sound of his feet as he runs across the room. I hear the scrape of my club against the floor as he picks it up. I hear him grunt with effort and rage as he raises the heavy weapon over his head.

I wait for the final blow of ignorance, the first blow of mercy. ☺

They say "write what you know," and for his debut story, author and database programmer Dean Cochrane does just that. Yes, there are databases in this story. Big ones. Don't be frightened. They won't bite, although other things in the story might just do worse than that...

The NOMAD Gambit

BY DEAN COCHRANE

As I pulled into the parking lot, I reflected that it was already the worst Monday I could remember. Traffic had been a nightmare, and while I'd been trapped on the freeway the call had come that the Vegan prototype, twenty-one months and eighteen million dollars into development, had failed shortly after power-up.

Failed about as catastrophically as it is possible for a chip to fail. It had done the impossible; it had exploded and burned, which everyone but my mother knows is the stuff of old science fiction. The PR flacks were probably working frantically to come up with an explanation that wouldn't send the share price tumbling.

Not that they had much chance of that. Our President and CEO, Andrew Anderson, had been killed in the accident. And that idiot, Jennings, had decided that the thing to do was to call me on my goddam cell phone while I was parked on the expressway. Presumably so that I could yell at him to call Dave Wright, the project manager.

It was the cooling system. I was certain of that. The damn chip was revolutionary, but it was also an engineer's nightmare. The Vegan prototype was made of an exotic mix of materials, including mercury, lithium, and silicon. It worked at the edge of the liquid state, right about 220 degrees Celsius, because it was the world's first mutable processor. It could reconfigure itself internally as needed, creating more tiny sub-processors if it needed them, or incredibly fast on-chip cache memory, whatever it desired.

The physical makeup of the chip had been giving the engineers fits, and today's problem came at the end of a series of such problems. The thing, for reasons I can recite but don't understand, uses something called 'convective microcooling', and it requires liquid sodium circulating against the silicone outer surface of the chip. There had been an intermittent string of failures recently, maddeningly inconsistent, all related to cracks or fractures in the surface of the chip. They'd been driving the engineers crazy.

The system that cooled the liquid sodium with water gives me the willies. I know enough chemistry to know that sodium and water are a dangerous combination, and so any system that used them had better make damn sure that they stayed separated. Which this one did: the manifold where the sodium gave up its heat to water was dramatically over-engineered. There was no possible way that it had failed.

That was the theory, anyway. Andy Anderson's body was mute counter-argument.

Because I was late, the parking lot was almost full and I had to squeeze my Toyota into the narrow spot between Isamond Philpotts' white Mercedes and Franco Rivera's huge retro USA Motors SUV. I squeezed out around the door frame of my car. Time to lose some weight. I hurried across the parking lot, past Nelson Jennings' cheap Chinese import, plastered with Trek stickers. It was parked near the door, meaning that he'd been in early. Must have been something urgent. Jennings didn't normally roll in before noon.

Why I hurried, I don't know. Anderson wasn't going to spring back to life, unholy monster that he might have been. In my longish career as a manager of secondary systems, I've never met anyone as driven.

And as shockingly, suddenly dead. I didn't bother to go by my cube, but went straight upstairs to the lab. An acrid, burnt odor filled the air, but there was nothing to indicate tragedy other than the confused knot of people standing in the hallway talking.

From their conversation, I gathered that the EMTs had just gone out the back to the loading bay, taking Anderson's body with them. I pushed into the lab, where Dave Wright and the ridiculously named Philpotts were standing. They were about as Mutt n' Jeff a pair as it was possible to be. Dave, the project manager, was a textbook nerd. He was a short, fat balding man in his late fifties, clothes rumpled and possibly stained. He looked as if a musty odor clung to him. In contrast,

the tall and blonde Isamond, the chief technical engineer, who looked as if she'd sprung from the womb with a gentle aura of expensive cologne. She waved a hand in my direction.

"Lyle, can you clear everyone out of here? We don't need all these people gawking."

I flapped my hands half-heartedly at the techs, process engineers, and accountants who had gathered to watch the excitement. They'd already begun to move, driven by the lash of disapproval in Isamond's voice.

"What happened?" I asked stupidly. Neither of them answered immediately. They continued to stare glumly at the mess on the tabletop.

It didn't look like it had been much of an explosion. The Vegan system's case was made of pressed aluminum and had been built to keep stray fingers out rather than smoke and flames in. It had been blown open along the front. The faceplate held jacks for a keyboard, video display, and disk subsystem. The cast aluminum of which it was made was fractured and some pieces were missing. There was some blackening around the gap between the faceplate and the main part of the case, and there was some discoloration along the aluminum top.

The desk in front, on the other hand, was a mess. It and the floor around it and the chair were covered with what looked like enough blood for eight people. There was a coffee cup sitting upright surrounded by a circle of spilled brown fluid. Anderson's morning java fix, liberally laced with milk. It was now intermingled with congealing blood.

"Bad luck. Just plain bad luck," Dave said, "They think that a fragment of the case hit him in the throat. He bled to death."

"Do we need to wait for the police or something? Seal the area off?" I asked.

"No, they've been and gone. It's an accident." Isamond's voice was remote. She was looking into the case without touching it.

"It has to be a severe failure of the cooling system," she muttered, half to me and half to herself. She didn't seem to realize that she was standing in a pool of blood, probably ruining a \$500 pair of Prada shoes.

"Sodium and water give off hydrogen when they mix, don't they? And heat? Could that be what happened?" I asked.

"It pretty much has to be what happened. But the two systems are isolated from each other. The only interaction between them is the cooling manifold, and it is built far beyond the minimum requirement. And we use sodium rather than lithium because sodium isn't nearly as likely to burn in water. Perhaps if we came up with an alloy?" Her mind was already working on a solution to the problem. She had that ability, to move onto the next thing, leaving unpleasantness behind. That's what she'd done after she'd broken up my marriage back when she'd been a junior engineer. How long ago was that? Nine years. She'd moved on. I realized for the ten thousandth time

that I hadn't. Her blonde hair, a thousand soft shades of honey, curled around her pink perfect ear.

The disk subsystem appeared undamaged, though the cable connection had been blown out of the front of the prototype. There might be some clues on it: it held a simple operating system and compiler, intended for proof-of-concept testing, and, depending on the version of the operating system, a system log. Isamond's people would doubtless go through it and not find anything, just like all the previous failures.

I left them and went to my cube. As manager of secondary systems, I had six people reporting to me and a corner cubicle with a view of the parking lot. I plugged in my mobile data unit and waited while the desktop terminal connected.

There were a bunch of emails waiting. My ex-wife had sent me a chain letter promising eternal damnation if I didn't pass it on. I deleted it. There was the usual daily stuff: network authorizations, requests for accounts on the development tracking system, complaints about that system, all the usual crap I dealt with every day. I took each one in turn and delegated it to the right person, keeping only one for myself: the Vegan test system build numbers were messed up again.

It wasn't a show-stopper, as they say, but it was troubling. The development tracking software was used to track development of everything we were involved in. During the course of a project like Vegan, we would rebuild the operating system for the chip numerous times. The only way to tell those versions apart was to stamp a build number on them.

The table holding the build numbers had an internal counter that supposedly incremented every time a new build was created. That internal number was evidently used in the generation of the external number, the one that people saw: 'Version 1.0.3 Build 31' it said. It should have been 'Version 1.0.3 Build 30'.

It was a puzzling bug. There was something in the setup of the development tracking software that caused it to generate strange errors occasionally, but only for the Vegan project. The vendor had been no help, recommending deletion and recreation of the entire project database. That was out of the question. There were two years of data in there, engineering reports and specs, hundreds and hundreds of pages of fault reports and resolutions and speculation and planning and...

It was out of the question. As before, I set about doing what I could to fix it.

In a previous life I had been a database programmer, and a damn good one, too. It's like riding a bike, of course. (What isn't?) I opened up the query panel and dug in, thankful that some applications still provided the ability to look at the raw data.

I checked the table that held information about build numbers. Sure enough, the counter that tracked the build numbers had jumped a spot, and was now one higher than it should have been. I found myself uttering

the heavy sigh. Fixing such things should have been done under warranty, but the vendor disagreed, insisting that there was no way such a thing could happen. Yeah, right, I had said. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard that...

It was a small thing, perhaps, but in a company where anal-retentive bean counters tracked things like numbers of hours spent building each test operating system and compiler, it was an annoyance. I made a note in the comment area that the build number was one more than it should have been.

I checked the links to other data to make sure that everything else was as it should be. The defect records were present: the new ones recording the catastrophic failure were already there. Not surprising, really: Isamond was near-obsessive about paperwork when it might be required to cover her elegant ass.

As a last double-check, I wrote a query to find all the records linked to each of the faulty build numbers. I traced through the chains of data: everything seemed to be in order. The system had created them correctly but for the jumped counter.

Old patterns die hard. Though I've not designed databases for ten years, I had done it for ten years before that, and something caught my eye. I looked through the data, back through the defect reports again. There was something odd, but at first I couldn't place it. It was merely my ex-database guy's distrust of that which is unusual.

Then I saw it. Each of the jumped build numbers had at least one entry for defect type 88. I checked to see what sort of defect 88 was:

```
SELECT defect_type_name
FROM defect_type
WHERE defect_type_id = 88
```

The results came back:
defect_type_name

CHIP INTEGRITY

That was definitely odd this late in development. I set to work again and wrote a query to tell me how many CHIP INTEGRITY errors there were altogether, and how that number compared with the total number of defects.

When it came back, there were sixty-eight CHIP INTEGRITY defects out of nearly ten thousand defects in total. That meant that less than 0.7% were chip integrity defects. I wrote a query to see how many defects were associated with the builds with jumped numbers, and what types they were. When the results were returned, I sat back in my chair.

Every one of the jumped builds had at least one CHIP INTEGRITY defect reported against it. The odds of *that* seemed too high for it to be coincidence. I went through the data again. There had to be something that

caused the build number to jump when it was associated with CHIP INTEGRITY defects.

After two hour's searching, I was empty-handed. There was nothing in the database code that seemed to care about the type of defect, but something was nibbling at my right frontal lobe. That's the creative lobe: database work is sometimes as much art as it is science.

I pushed back from the coffee-ringed desk and stretched. I took my usual thinking route down the long hall toward the lab, my mind turning over the problem of CHIP INTEGRITY and build numbers. As I neared the lab, I realized that I'd completely forgotten that Anderson was dead.

Maybe some sort of grief mechanism? I doubt it. Anderson had been an asshole. I'd been mostly-seriously looking for a job since he bought the company with his wife's Silicon Valley windfall money two years ago. He'd made a lot of changes and pissed a lot of people off when he came in. He'd fired the chief engineer, demoted Nelson Jennings from director of software development to lead programmer, and promoted Isamond Philpotts from bench engineer to chief. It was all supposedly part of this new-fangled business process re-engineering. I could see the Jennings move: Nelson was a good programmer, but he'd been a lousy director. In my experience, the skills of a programmer don't often translate to management skills.

As for the Isamond thing, well, everyone knew that Izzy wasn't above sleeping with someone for personal gain. In fact that's what our affair had been about, nine years ago. She'd been looking for leverage. She hadn't found it, of course, because I'm not an ambitious man, and she'd dropped me and moved on. Not before my marriage was over, though. She was the goods, all right. Beauty and brains. Not as many brains as she thought she had, but enough.

I decided to go into the lab to see what was going on. Isamond was still there, picking over the remains of the Vegan project. The case was open, and I could see that, as I'd suspected, the manifold that cooled the liquid sodium with water had ruptured.

"This could ruin my career," she was saying.

Nelson was gazing at her with a look of undisguised longing mixed with something else, a sly sort of glee. It struck me that this wasn't the first time I'd seen him with that look of lust. It wasn't unusual to see men mooning over Isamond; she tended to have that effect, but Jennings? He was a shapeless pasty troll of a man, one who lived on deep-fried corn snacks and spent his weekends at Star Trek conventions. He was so emphatically not her type. Her type were men who had some sort of influence. Jennings didn't have any.

But neither had I, and she'd slept with me. More than once. She'd dumped me as soon as she'd realized that I couldn't do anything for her, though. I looked at him again. He realized that I had walked in, and recomposed his features into the Con-attending mask I knew.

I was hit by a sudden realization, so sure that it damn near buckled my knees. Nearly nine years ago, Isamond had thrown me over for *Jennings*.

Blind and sick, I mumbled something and fumbled my way back to my cube, feeling like I was walking through syrup. I slumped into my chair. Jennings' smugness and condescension in the three or four months following my double breakup made sense now; he'd been banging Izzy.

I sat for some time, wrestling with sick, stupid jealousy. It wasn't made easier by the fact that she'd obviously dumped Jennings, too. Rumor had it that she'd been balling Dave Wright for a while, but everyone knew that she had locked on to Anderson within a week of his taking over. If the grapevine was anything to go by, she had continued screwing Anderson. It was going on two years now, making it a record for her. Maybe she really loved the guy. If so, she was damned cold, worrying about her career while poking through the ruins of a project spattered with her lover's blood.

The problem of the faulty build numbers beckoned. I plunged back into it, wanting to lose the visual of Izzy with Nelson Jennings.

I looked at the new data that had been entered into the defect management system. There was a new CHIP INTEGRITY defect report. It had a dump of the ill-fated operating system log. I pulled the log up. The last line was:

```
00:10:08.296 ERROR: Error code 00000000 -> Call Process_New(Error(00000000))
```

The Vegan prototype always started up thinking it was midnight, so something had happened ten minutes after booting. The chip had had time to throw an error before exploding, although the '00000000' meant that it didn't know what the error was. I scrolled back. The next message of interest occurred two seconds earlier.

```
00:10:06.944 PROG_CALL: Call Process_New (NOMAD("main.source.helloworld"))
```

NOMAD? What the hell was NOMAD? It sure looked like it had been the process that caused the unknown error. I searched for other references to NOMAD in the system log. The first one occurred shortly after boot.

```
00:00:08.004 PROG_LOAD: Load NOMAD Proof-of-Concept C Compiler V 1.0.3 Build 30
```

That explained the previous PROG_CALL log entry. I saw that NOMAD was Nelson Jennings' proof-of-concept C compiler, a program that would take instructions typed in an old but useful language called 'C' and convert them to machine instructions. Like most things in Jennings' world, the name 'NOMAD' probably came from some Star Trek show. It was a rudimentary

program, designed to prove and to test what the Vegan chip could do. Anderson would have used it to build and run test programs on the prototype. The entry at 10:06 after startup meant that Anderson had tried to run a test program using the NOMAD compiler.

I picked up the phone to call Jennings, intending to ask him whether he knew about this, but the mental rodent-scurryings wouldn't leave me alone. I put the phone back down, returned to my terminal and began to dig through the data again. I looked at the engineering reports attached to each of the failures; most of what they said was far beyond my level of understanding, but they all reported severe chip problems.

Years ago somebody told me that the way to see something moving is not to look directly at it. Your peripheral vision is better at catching tiny movements. It's the same with patterns in data, sometimes; in order to see a pattern, look elsewhere. Look at the data around the data.

I looked at the engineering reports for builds where everything had apparently gone smoothly, where there had not been severe chip failures. Again, most of what I read was Greek, but one thing struck me. Nearly every report talked about the cooling problems caused by formations of crystals of Hg(ONC)₂. Some interaction between the alloy that the chip was made from, and the compound into which the chip was bedded. I'd seen that formula before, somewhere, but I couldn't place it. Not that it was important, really, other than the fact that it showed that they were aware of cooling problems; that Izzy had been aware of cooling problems.

I looked at the clock: 6:18 PM. I couldn't think straight anymore. I got a stale sandwich and a big mug of a savagely sweet vending machine cappuccino, and returned to the problem, turning my chair to the side to eat the sandwich so that I wouldn't get crumbs in the keyboard. I trolled back through the data on the versions with missed version numbers.

Hold on.

The build number on the program call to Jennings' NOMAD compiler in the log on this morning's run had been 30. But according to the defect tracking database, Build 30 had never existed. The build number had gone from 29 to 31.

Except it hadn't. Build 30 had, at some point, existed. Jennings' compiler showed build number 30.

It was the work of a minute to search on the net about the name NOMAD. The creature that had been scurrying around in my skull suddenly exploded into a blast of queasy activity. For the second time that day, realization rushed through me like a sick, certain tsunami. It all suddenly made sense: the coffee cup, coffee around it like a halo, but sitting upright on its coaster. Jennings' car parked near the door. Hg(ONC)₂, the formula for mercury fulminate. The name of the compiler, Jennings' compiler: NOMAD. Jennings' Con-attending mask of his emotions.

Nelson Jennings and Isamond Philpotts.

I climbed to my feet, suddenly bone-tired. I disconnected my mobile unit from the terminal. It had been a hell of a day, and after this next meeting, I was going home. I'd had enough.

I stopped by the lab, but everyone had gone. Somebody had cleaned up the blood. The remains of the Vegan prototype sat on the bench. I continued down the hall to Nelson Jennings' office. He looked up in surprise.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Hey, Nelson, how ya doing?" I asked. I didn't wait for an answer. I moved a pile of paper and sat in the chair across the desk from him, leaning back and putting my feet up. He looked at me skeptically.

"I know, Nelson. I know."

His face got tight around the edges, like lycra bike shorts on a middle-aged man.

"Know what?" he said. His voice was tight, too.

"Know about you and Izzy, for one thing."

He relaxed visibly. "That was years ago. She was done with you."

"Oh, I'm not blaming you. How often do men like you or I get a shot at a woman who looks like that? Not often. Probably never again for either of us. But that's not all I know about, Nelson."

His face tightened again.

"I know that you've been messing with the builds. I know that you screwed with yesterday's build. I know that you were here early this morning. I'll bet that if someone were to dig around, they'd find that the compiler you loaded into build 30 was slightly different from the ones in 29 and 31. I'll bet that you've been working toward this, refining your compiler so that any sort of error in a program caused the chip to heat up until crystals of mercury fulminate formed. Because you knew mercury fulminate is a powerful—and volatile—explosive. They once used it as primer for guns."

"That's just idiotic," Nelson began. I waved him off and kept going.

"So the chip creates this explosive when a program throws an error," I said. "But to get the effect you were looking for, you needed a big error. I think you created some sort of recursive error call, one that made the Vegan chip create new processors exponentially until almost the entire chip was actively working trying to process errors."

"Right," Nelson said, his sarcasm cutting through the tightness. "You know as well as I do that processing errors won't make a chip explode, even a chip like ours."

"No, it wouldn't," I admitted. "Something would need to set off the mercury fulminate crystals. Like a coffee mug, slammed down hard. Tell me, Nelson, where were you when the accident happened? Because I'm willing to bet you were in the doorway this morning as Anderson worked. I bet you said or did something that caused him to slam down that damn mug. Which would explain why the coffee mug was upright, but surrounded by coffee."

Nelson sat, frozen. The tight look extended down his neck to his hands. His eyes had acquired a frenetic gleam.

I softened my voice. "I don't think you intended to kill him," I said. "I don't think you wanted to hurt anyone other than Isamond. I think you wanted another severe chip failure, incontrovertible proof that Philpotts is incompetent. She is incompetent, there's no doubt about it, but you wanted to ruin her. Congratulations are due on that score, you've probably done it. The coroner will rake her over the coals."

"But I don't think you planned for the possibility that the on-chip explosion would fracture the cooling manifold and allow liquid sodium and water to mix. It was an accident. A targeted, deliberately caused accident, but an accident nonetheless. The thing is, you stupid bastard, you've cost us all our jobs. Without the Vegan project, the company is as dead as Anderson himself."

I could see his pulse pounding in his neck.

"And you are a stupid bastard. You, like all bithead programmers, think you're better than anybody else. You think that just going in and deleting the database records of a build would cover your tracks. Well, to anybody used to this sort of thing, a hole in the data tells you damn near as much as whole data does."

"Your focus is too narrow, your vision too tight. You wanted the chip to fail, and the fulminate problem dropped itself into your lap, but you didn't consider the wider implication, which was that the explosion of very small amounts of mercury fulminate might rupture the manifold where the liquid sodium was cooled by water, and you didn't consider the wider implications of deleting an entire build from the development tracking system."

Nelson opened his mouth to speak. I raised my hand. "Shut up," I said. "I'm not done with you." Nelson shut his trap.

"You know what finally gave everything away?" I asked. He shook his head. "You had to be a big dick, had to leave a clue, a signpost telling anybody smart enough to figure it out how goddam clever you were, which, of course, we weren't, right? The clue was the name NOMAD. That's the name of the probe in that Star Trek episode that blew itself up when it couldn't resolve the logic problem that Captain Kirk gave it. Just like the Vegan chip blew up when it threw an error, which caused the chip to create ever increasing numbers of subprocessors as it tried to handle the error, which led to overheating, which led to the formation of the crystals...and then a sharp vibration set it off. If the name hadn't been weird, I probably wouldn't have noticed the unmatched build number in the system log."

He sat in shock for a minute.

"I named it NOMAD long before there were chip problems. Because the NOMAD probe recombined itself with the alien Tan Ru probe, and..." he stopped when he saw my face. "You can check the old builds," he said.

“As if that proves anything,” I said. We had a nice long uncomfortable minute of silence after that.

“What now?” Nelson asked, finally.

“Now? Nothing,” I said. “Just so you know, Nelson, old pal, I’ll be keeping quiet.”

As I got to my feet I watched relief flood across his face, his hairline dark with cold sweat.

“It’s not because I like you, Nelson,” I said. “God knows, you deserve to be charged with manslaughter. It’s because, after nine years, I’m suddenly over her. Over Isamond. She’s an incompetent, manipulative woman

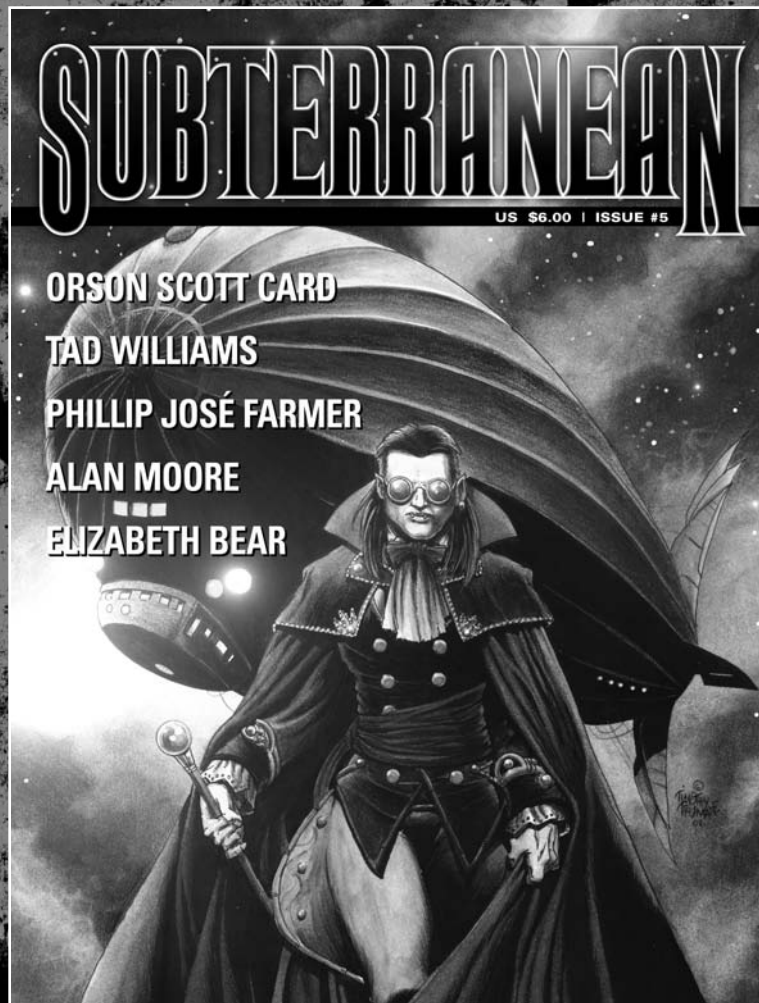
who screwed me because she thought I could do something for her. I had to realize that she dropped me for you for that to sink in. I realized that this morning. It’s been a day of goddam revelations.”

I went to the door of his cubicle.

“I’m over her, and she’ll get what she deserves. I’ll find another job, as will you. She won’t, at least not as a chief engineer.”

I left and walked down the hall and out the front door of the office, knowing that I would never walk back in again. ☺

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I asked acclaimed film scholar and non-fiction author Ron Hogan (The Stewardess is Flying the Plane!) to contribute a story about science fiction, film and clichés; he responded that he could do that, or he could tell me this story, about the best science fiction film no one ever saw. Naturally, a story like this could only take place in Hollywood, in the 1970s. Is it true? Hey, man, I just work here. You tell me.

In Search Of... Eileen Siriosa

BY RON HOGAN

I wrote *The Stewardess Is Flying the Plane!* because I'm in love with all of 1970s Hollywood—the good, the bad, and the ugly, to coin a phrase. Catch me in the right frame of mind, and I'll be as eager to watch *Empire of the Ants* as *Star Wars* or *THX-1138*. The only limitation in putting the book together was that I had to focus on the films that were actually released into theaters. That left out some potentially brilliant projects which were never completed or, in some cases, never even began shooting. In the science fiction realm alone, there's Alejandro Jodorowsky's proposed adaptation of *Dune*, which would have included Orson Welles and Gloria Swanson as Baron Harkonnen and the Reverend Mother, and a film of Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* that featured production design by comic book legend Jack Kirby. During my research, I kept coming across rumors of another film which, had it ever been completed, would have changed the course of science fiction film history.

The story begins at Wesleyan's famed Cinema Archives, specifically with the collected papers of Clint Eastwood. While sifting through documents pertaining to Eastwood's earliest directing efforts in the '70s, I came across a handwritten note on Malpaso Company stationery commenting upon a screenplay that had been submitted for his consideration. "I know I said we should be looking past westerns for the next directing project," Eastwood wrote to the unknown staffer, "but, Jesus, flying saucers? The script's not half-bad, especially the flashback sequences in the psychiatrist's office, but no way. Tell Lew [Wasserman, the head of Universal Pictures] I'll take a look at anything else Siriosa's written. Maybe a spy picture."

A single-page typed memo dated April 1, 1973 addressed to Eastwood reports that "Wasserman's office

advises that Eileen Siriosa has no other screenplays at this time. They've got a thriller called *The Eiger Sanction* that sounds promising, though. Should we ask for a look?" And we all know how that turned out. But I wanted to know: Who was this Eileen Siriosa, and what was her screenplay about? I could make some educated guesses about how flying saucers and psychiatrist's offices might fit together, but that wasn't good enough. I had plenty of legitimate research to do for the book in Los Angeles, so it wasn't any problem to add a side project to my agenda.

The University of Southern California's Cinema-Television Library contains extensive paper trails from several major studios, including Universal Studios, but information on Siriosa did not come easily. Because the Malpaso Company documents never mentioned the name of her screenplay, I wasn't able to pull up any folders pertaining to a specific film project, nor did her name turn up on any of the usual indices. I finally found some memos from early 1974 in which a young assistant story editor named Barbara Falschmeiser expresses increasing frustration with Siriosa over the author's refusal to incorporate Universal's notes into the revision process. Apparently, Eastwood wasn't the only director to turn the screenplay down for motion picture development, and the studio decided they might have better luck developing the project as a made-for-TV movie. "Unfortunately," Falschmeiser wrote in one note, "Eileen is adamant in her refusal to tone down any of the scenes in *Plucked from the Sky* dealing with the main character's captivity aboard the spaceship. She refuses to even let us change the title. How did she get that kind of approval written into her contract?" As a result of Siriosa's stubbornness, she warns, "I consider it extremely unlikely

that we would be able to make this film conform with network standards and practices. Even with the use of visual indirection, the exact nature of the probing endured by the character remains unavoidable.”

I plunged back into the archives looking for any additional paperwork on *Plucked from the Sky*, but nothing turned up. Even the screenplay collection, which has several room-length bookcases filled with both produced and unproduced scripts, turned up empty. I had a little more information about Siriosa’s screenplay, enough to confirm my suspicion that it was one of the first alien abduction stories shopped around Hollywood. And of course I could hypothesize (as easily as you can now) about the nature of those “unfilmable” scenes, but to a historian, hypothesis is never as good as actual evidence.

Reluctantly, I decided to leave the library. It was at this juncture that I encountered a coincidence of the sort that, were this not a factual account, would be regarded as too wildly implausible for fiction. The librarian who returned the briefcase I’d checked in before entering the archives was, according to the nameplate on her counter, Patricia Falschmeiser. A brief interrogation revealed that she was, in fact, Barbara’s niece, and that Barbara Linson (she’d gotten married in the mid-’80s) was still alive and living in Santa Monica. I called the Linsons as soon as I got back to my hotel, described myself as a historian working on a book about Hollywood in the ’70s (which was certainly true), and arranged to meet Barbara for coffee the following afternoon at a café near her apartment.

“Oh, God, Eileen Siriosa,” Barbara sighed when I mentioned her name. “Where the hell did you dig her up?” She remembered the screenplay of *Plucked from the Sky* vividly. “I’m never going to forget those anal probe scenes,” she said, picking nervously at the muffin in front of her. “It’s like watching that scene where the hillbillies rape Ned Beatty in *Deliverance*. You can’t put that genie back in the bottle once it’s out. I didn’t even have to see what was happening; the descriptions in Eileen’s screenplay were bad enough.”

Barbara’s recollections fleshed out the concepts I’d been able to glean from the scant documentation I’d uncovered so far. Siriosa’s screenplay told the story of a young woman who suffers a blackout driving from Palm Springs to Los Angeles late one night in 1960, leaving her with three hours unaccounted for. She assumes she simply fell asleep and doesn’t remember pulling over to the side of the road, but months later, she begins having vivid nightmares. “The alien stuff started coming into play once she starts seeing a shrink to try to cope with the nightmares,” Barbara remembered. “The shrink puts her under hypnosis, and all these creepy details start coming out about how the aliens get her out of the car and onto their ship, where they strip her and start conducting all sorts of tests.”

“She was very exacting in her descriptions of the aliens, the way they kept touching her with their long,

bony fingers and all their instruments,” she added. “When we started thinking about developing it for television, I knew those scenes would have to be scaled way back. But you couldn’t talk to her about it. If you even mentioned changing any of the scenes, she’d get hysterical. Finally, at one meeting, she starts sobbing at the conference table, telling my boss and I that we didn’t get it. ‘That’s not how it was,’ she starts crying. ‘You don’t understand. I’m not going to lie about what happened.’”

“Tony Bufala, he was her agent, he takes her out of the room at this point, but you can imagine I’m already totally freaked out by then. I told my boss we should just cut our losses and put the script in turnaround, and he agreed. Turns out somebody else on our floor was already negotiating with the reporter who’d written the book about that other couple, the ones who got abducted around the same time.”

“Betty and Barney Hill?” I asked. I’d realized, the night before, that Universal had produced the 1975 TV-movie *The UFO Incident*, about the Hills’ alleged close encounter, one of the earliest prototypes for the modern alien abduction narrative. I’d wondered about the proximity of the two projects, but I hadn’t wanted to push the issue too soon.

“That sounds about right. Oh, I bet Eileen was furious when that aired. We were no longer speaking by then, of course. One of my best friends at work went to Columbia a year or so after all this, and she told me that Tony had submitted the screenplay to her boss—Universal’s option would’ve run out by then—and I told her to just send it back, Eileen wasn’t worth the aggravation.”

That was the last Barbara had heard of Eileen Siriosa in Hollywood, though; as far as she knew, Siriosa had never even tried to sell another script. And she wasn’t sure, but she thought Tony Bufala might have died about ten years ago. “You could try his old agency, though,” she suggested.

The address she remembered for Bluebook Talent Management was now one of those Chinese-food-and-donuts places you see all over Los Angeles, and directory assistance didn’t have anything listed under that name, so it was back to the hotel room, where I could continue the search online. I finally found the phone number for an Anthony Bufala living in the San Fernando Valley. “You’d be looking for my dad,” he said. “I’m Tony Bufala, Jr.” His father had indeed died in 1989; the son had inherited Bluebook but, having no interest in being an agent, closed the firm down. “Dad didn’t have very many clients left at the end, anyway,” he said, “and I only met a handful of them.” He didn’t remember Eileen Siriosa, and his father had never said anything to him about a story about aliens kidnapping anybody. “There might be something in Dad’s papers,” he said, “but I sold all that stuff to some place in New England called the Orne Library after he died. They just sent a guy over, offered me \$100,000 for everything in his cabinets.”

It was almost dinner time now, so instead of looking up an address for the Orne right after hanging up with

Bufala, I decided to go down to the hotel's restaurant. It was mostly deserted, except for the hostess, the bartender, and two men in identical black suits sitting at the bar. They were also wearing identical pairs of black sunglasses, which struck me as somewhat pretentious, but since this was West Hollywood I didn't think too much of it until one of the men came over to my table while the other one stayed at the bar, staring out the front door.

"Mr. Hogan?" my guy said, sitting himself down across from me. Up close, his skin was an ashen hue I would have thought impossible in the southern Californian sun. "I understand you're interested in science fiction movies."

"I'm interested in all kinds of movies," I told him.

"Sure you are. You've been doing a lot of research on one particular movie, though. Let me advise you, Mr. Hogan, that that particular script is in permanent turnaround. It would be extremely counterproductive for you to spend any more time trying to revive this project. Our advice is to go back to New York, finish your book, and forget you ever heard of Eileen Siriosa."

"Our advice? And just who are *we*?"

He looked directly at me and slid his sunglasses down his nose with an extremely thin, bony index finger.

I can't even begin to describe his eyes to you, except to tell you they were not human. "We are a very interested party that has absolutely no interest in the general public becoming aware of what Eileen Siriosa says happened to her."

"What, she's still alive?" I asked.

He—*It*—pushed the sunglasses back up. "She is," he confirmed, "but she's not talking to you or to anybody else. Do yourself a favor. Mr. Hogan. You want to write about alien movies, stick to the Spielberg stuff. You'll live a much happier life, and we don't want to have to visit you again." With that, he got up from the table and walked back to his partner, who raised himself from the stool and stared coolly at me before they walked out the door. I watched them go, then turned back to the bar. At some point, the bartender had left the room, too, and now I was completely alone in the restaurant, with nobody to verify my story.

So I gave up. Never even bothered trying to find out where the Orne Library is. I mean, I'm not Kolchak the frigging Night Stalker or anything. I'm just a guy who likes to write about cheesy movies, and I got enough material as it is. You want a copy of that screenplay, go find it yourself. ☺

Dr. Mike has a posse

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Nick Sagan's currently writing a novel (his most recent, Everfree, should be out right around the time you read this), but make no mistake: he knows from TV and from science fiction. He wrote episodes of Star Trek: The Next Generation and served as Story Editor for Star Trek: Voyager. So when he's writing in the woefully underutilized dramatic form of script notes, as he's doing here, you're in the hands of a pro. Read and learn.

Tees and Sympathy

BY NICK SAGAN

From: Anton Black [ab@antonblack.com]
To: Christopher Zeimsmer
[christopher.ziesmer-@gourmetchannel.com]
Subject: Re: Untitled Tees Ep (1st Draft)
Date: Mon 2 Feb 2009 16:08:45

Chris,

Like the old joke goes, "Aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?" I'm used to a little give and take from the network, but come on. More notes on this one script than the last ten combined? We all know this is going to be a controversial episode. It's bound to be. But you said you welcomed the controversy. You said you wanted me to tackle the Tees as long as I used a light touch. That's what I've done.

I know a lot of amazing things have happened in the past six months, but let's not lose track of what *Let's Eat!* is all about. Cooking, science, and humor. It's not about passing moral judgments on what people should or shouldn't eat. Has the network started making cases for or against vegetarianism? If you're uncomfortable with the topic, let's call it off now, because there's no point in me going through a set of revisions only to find there's no way to make you guys happy.

My notes on your notes:

Title page: It isn't "Untitled Tees Episode," it's "Tees and Sympathy." I don't see how putting the word "sympathy" in the title means we're taking sides in the debate. It's just a pun on "Tea and Sympathy." That's it. Besides, you can be deeply sympathetic to the Tees without declaring them inedible on moral grounds.

Page 1: Don't understand your objections to the *Twilight Zone* parody. Yes, we won't be the first to com-

pare the Tees to the Kanamits, but so what? Funny is funny. Is it a licensing cost issue? All we need are three seconds of "To Serve Man." The big, bald alien escorts the guy on the spaceship, and the girl blurts out, "It's a cookbook!" I understand you want to treat the Tees with respect, but the fact remains that for years we thought aliens might come to Earth to eat us, when really the first ones we found came to be eaten by us. You can't beat that for irony. Besides, I do a killer Rod Serling impression.

Page 2: Okay, let's change that line to, "But no matter how you feel about space travelers coming to Earth in the hopes of winding up on your dinner plate, there's no denying that Teegardeners are great eats."

Page 3: What? What percentage of our audience do you think has been living under rocks? "The Tees came from Teegarden's Star, showing up by the millions in their weird, spongelike ships." Who doesn't know this? On the other hand, I do think it's worth going into greater detail about their reproductive cycle. There are a lot of common misunderstandings about the whole "three genders" thing, and about how they seeded their young back on their home before taking the long journey here.

Page 4: Absolutely, we need Diana. She's a nutritional anthropologist. The Tees are her Woodstock, Rosetta Stone, and Moon Landing all rolled into one.

Page 5: Yes to the first note, but what's the problem with pointing out that every part of a Tee is usable? Who does that offend? Certainly not the Tees. They don't believe in wastefulness. The very reason they came here was to contribute something of value before they died naturally.

Page 7: Standard safety warning for deep frying the jelly sac fritters. It's important to keep a lid nearby just in

case we need it. And my bad, there's a typo. The canola oil has to hit 375° over medium heat. 275° won't get it done.

Page 8: No, "Top-drawer flavor at bottom drawer prices" is exactly what we want to say. There's a limited supply, and the price is about to skyrocket. First contact with the Tees is the most amazing event in human history, and why shouldn't everyone be able to partake of it? For viewers with tight budgets, a little creativity can stretch a small, affordable cut of meat into a stellar meal. (Pun intended.)

Page 10: "Since they're so unhelpful in other ways, it's a good thing they're delicious" may be a flippant line, but tell me it isn't true. The Tees won't share their technology with us, just their bodies. In fact, there's a theory making the rounds that, considering how strong their need is to be helpful, if we'd all boycotted eating them from the beginning, they'd have eventually cracked and given us a crash course in interstellar travel instead of telling us that as a species we have yet to demonstrate the responsibility to use that power.

Page 11: The CGI showing Tee thermogenesis doesn't need to be as expensive as you think. Let's get Judy's thoughts on this. If it's too much for the budget, I'll use props or drawings instead. In any case, the crux of this is just that the Tees' natural ability to produce internal heat isn't high enough to cook them all the way through.

Page 12: I thought that was clear. The reason why I'm wearing a black suit and sunglasses is because I'm homaging *Men in Black*.

Page 13: Yes, I realize we've got a short amount of time to explain what we *can* do with Tees, so it might not be worth saying what we *can't* do. But I like to brine meats, and while ordinary cell membranes struggle for equilibrium, pulling in the salt and water to give us more flavor, Tee cell membranes don't do anything of the sort. I find that interesting.

Page 14: "Too much connective tissue in the lungs makes them tough to eat" might or might not upset the stomachs of more squeamish viewers, but properly cooked it's the lungs that secrete a natural sweetener three times sweeter than clover honey. Mix that gummy secretion with a few eggs and some milk, throw it in a bain-marie and you're halfway to the best custard you've ever eaten. Anyway, it comes from lungs. Should we call them something other than what they are?

Page 16: Chris, you're stuck on squeamish. Those valves really can keep palpating for days on their own. Forewarned is forearmed, unless you want angry letters from viewers upset we didn't tell them their Tee gumbo might twitch.

Page 17: Like always, the Crazy Belgian Chef represents impractical, traditional ways of cooking, and that's it. He's not a jab at the Belgian government's position on the Tees.

Page 19: Fine, I'll reword that.

Page 20: We've done an episode ("Crustacean Sensation") where we discussed the most humane ways of dispatching lobsters in the kitchen. I don't see why we can't tackle the same topic for Tees. Again, are we doing this episode or not? If so, that means we have to address the serious philosophical baggage that comes with eating a Tee. It hits issues of assisted suicide, and the morality of eating meat. My position is that the Tees want nothing more than to be eaten, they taste delicious, and how often will we get a chance to eat something we know is happy to meet its end? I'm a confirmed carnivore. I have no problem eating meat. What I do have problems with is hypocrisy, which is why back in culinary school I worked at a slaughterhouse to see how lambs are killed. I couldn't see being a chef, serving meat, without understanding what that's like. And I don't understand doing an episode about the Tees without giving the sacrifice they make the proper respect it deserves.

Page 22: Another typo. That should read "chitins" not "chitlins."

Page 23: No, the worst thing you can do is overcook it. I understand the concern about wanting to burn off potential "alien parasites" but there's no proof of anything of the sort. Like it or not, the Tees are FDA approved.

Page 24: You really can use the retractable talons. They're too sharp to eat, which is why I said it's important to be careful, but they do make an excellent soup stock.

Page 27: So you tell me what Area 51 footage we can use. It's a good joke, "51 Recipes from Area 51." Hey, if you don't want to use it, tell me, because I might just make it the title of my next cookbook.

Page 28: Under no circumstances am I cutting the saltcellar.

Page 30: No, I'm not above calling it, "An out-of-this-world culinary experience."

So how far apart are we on this, Chris? I get the sense the network keeps going back and forth on what to do with the Tees. Are they just too new? It wasn't long ago when we'd never have dreamed that a first contact situation would take place, and much less that exclusive interviews with said aliens would be given to the Gourmet Channel.

Please get back to me a.s.a.p. I'd like to start prepping the script soon. It won't be long before the Tee grand ambassador challenges Bobby Flay on *Iron Chef Supreme*, and ideally I'd like to have this *Let's Eat!* episode in the can well before he says his final words. Which I assume will be to his sous chef: "Make sure I brown on both sides."

May the food be with you,

AB ☺

On Books

BY DORMAN T. SHINDLER

PART FIVE

(In which your humble guide bows down to the field of fantasy)

I have to confess that I wasn't a big fan of fantasy fiction in the early 1990s. Back then, it seemed like nearly every other offering was a pale imitation of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; worse, the imitations had taken to running three or four times the length of that work. Then one year, near the middle of that decade, I happened upon George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*. I'd read his short fantasy fictions ("A Song For Lya," "The Ice Dragon," "The Lonely Songs of Laren Dorr," "The Way of Cross and Dragon") and enjoyed his particular spin on the genre—a healthy infusion of history and gritty reality—as well as his clean, well-styled prose. So when I cracked open the first volume (of a projected six) in Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" series, I was only partially surprised by the truly three dimensional characters (none of them absolutely evil, none of them absolutely good) as well as the healthy mix of sword & sorcery, historical, and horror fiction. Here was a series as gritty and action-packed as the battle scenes in "Braveheart" and which felt as realistic as a BBC documentary. That cultural richness, that feeling of being in a world which could exist, coupled with the unflinching, moral ambiguity found in Martin's characters, are what sets his series apart from the black & white visions found in most popular fantasy fictions. Characters like Tyrion, the Imp (who first came off like some bizarre, maniacal munchkin, and then grew on this reader), or Jon Snow (the bastard son of the once-great Lord Eddard Stark) have been so fully fleshed out over the course of three novels they seem more real than the people one meets in passing day-to-day.

It's only fair to warn newcomers that trying to delve into the series at this point would be like joining "Lawrence of Arabia" at the halfway mark. One would eventually catch on to the various subplots, but there's so much excellent story and character in the first three books (*A Game of Thrones*, *A Clash of Kings* and *A Storm of Swords*—seven in all are planned) that you'd be cheating yourself of some thoroughly engaging reading. (And for those familiar with the series, the length of this novel was such that Martin had to cleave it in two, saving the parallel stories of primary characters like Tyrion, Daenerys, Jon Snow and others for *A Dance With Dragons*, the next volume which Martin has said is nearly complete—on the other hand, this gives readers a chance to delve

into the lives of secondary characters like the loyal female knight Brienne, or Samwell, Jon Snow's old friend from their time on The Wall; and there is an appearance by Arya Stark, Jon Snow's half-sister).

If one is looking for a succinct summation of Martin's medieval fantasy series, imagine a mix of T.H. White's "The Once and Future King," "Braveheart," the sort of you-are-there effect of a good historical documentary, and the kind of intricate character development found in a TV series like "Lost." Toss the mix into a wholly imagined world where every animal, folk song, religious rite, plant and bit of minutiae one could imagine has been fleshed out in Martin's expansive imagination. That's the world in which *A Feast for Crows* (Bantam Spectra/784 pages/\$28.00) unfolds. After a short, relatively peaceful reign, King Baratheon was murdered in the first novel, which touched off "The War of the Five Kings" in the Seven Kingdoms of the country known as Westeros.



A Feast for Crows picks up after the death of King Joffrey (a twisted, sadistic young royal) and King of the North Robb Stark (who, in any other fantasy series, would have been the White Knight savior, but here was betrayed). With the murder of King Stark, the rebellion against the corrupt and scheming Lannister family has lost heart and momentum; and the House of Lannister is now ruled by Joffrey's sister, Queen Cersei, who seems to be losing her mind. An unplanned truce is in effect as everyone licks their wounds and makes plans for new gambits. During this leaderless lull, no one is safe as various kingdoms and lands literally and figuratively become a feast for crows. Still in hiding, 11-year-old Arya Stark hones her battle skills with a teacher known only as "The Faceless Man"; Brienne of Tarth searches for Arya and her sister Sansa (both taken captive before "The War of the Five Kings"); and in the House of Greyjoy, where the King of the Isles resided, a struggle for power (between a female and male heir to the throne) is going on. The complicated machinations as various characters jockey for power and position are only half of the reason to pick up this immensely entertaining series. Using his rich stock of quirky characters, Martin has elicited the kind of human drama and inner turmoil found in only the best fiction (regardless of genre), bringing depth and believability to the often cartoonish fantasy genre. Though *A Feast for Crows* is only half the story of what has come

about after the war in book three, the plot threads that are tied off or laid out satisfactorily advance an ongoing epic dealing with struggles for power: those waged within the human heart and within the halls of power. Martin's "A Song of Ice and Fire" series is that rare, once-in-a-generation work of fiction: a book or series which manages to tell cracking story, thereby entertaining readers, while elevating an entire genre to the level of fine literature.



No slouch in the fantasy department himself, James Morrow has been turning heads and eliciting laughter for decades, especially books like his Godhead trilogy (*Towing Jehovah, Blameless in Abaddon, The Eternal Footman*). If one wanted to split hairs, it could be argued that his newest novel isn't strictly fantasy (quantum physics could play a role in that argument), but I'm gonna goop those hairs down with some literary Pomade and just wedge into this section of the column. Sporting good old-fashioned, straight forward plotlines and plenty of eccentric characters, *The Last Witchfinder* (William Morrow/288 pages/\$24.95) reads like a collaboration between Charles Dickens and Henry Fielding...if the pair had been influenced by the writings of cutting edge scientists like David Duetch and Wolfgang Ketterle, the modern-day stylings of William Gibson, and several of the New Age SF writers of the 60s. Where mainstream academia is concerned, Morrow has gone largely unnoticed as one of America's premiere comic novelists and satirists (right up there with Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, John Irving and Stanley Elkin). Here's hoping *The Last Witchfinder* will change that.

The novel is set in late 17th-century England, when superstition and bigotry are at odds with science and rational thought and the Parliamentary Witchcraft Act of 1604 was still in play. Morrow's morality tale couldn't be better timed, considering events in today's world. Protagonist Jennet Stearne is, like all interesting characters, a dichotomy. She studies the practice of science with her aunt, Isobel Mobray (a mentor of sorts), yet still helps search the dissected carcasses of various animals for signs of evil spirits. At one point, Isobel, enamored of Isaac Newton, even writes the great man concerning her supernatural searches, only to be rebuked. Jennet's father, Walter Stearne, also happens to be the Witchfinder General. And when some of Isobel's actions bring her to the attention of Walter while he is undertaking a mission to seek out more witches across England, Isobel is put on trial and burned at the stake. Disgraced and exiled for killing his propertied sister-in-law, Walter takes Jennet and younger brother Dunstan to America, where their superstitious fervor re-ignites with the Salem Witch Trials. Still in shock from the horrible execution of her aunt, Jennet becomes one of the first American feminists when she decides her mission in life will be to single-handedly dismantle the Parliamentary Witchcraft Act.

She decides to fake being a witch to gain a forum for rational thought and to disseminate Isaac Newton's thoughts on the absurdity of witchcraft. Jennet's brother prosecutes her, and the great philosopher Baron de Montesquieu takes up her defense at the climactic trial. En route to this pivotal plot point, Jennet is captured and held prisoner for seven years by Indians, marries and divorces a postmaster and has an affair with young Ben Franklin. All of which is more than enough to keep any author (and reader) busy, but Morrow throws in a narrative conceit which makes his historical comedy-cum-satire stand out from the crowd: an alternating narrative related by none other than Mathematical Principles of Philosophy, the very book written by Sir Isaac Newton. And according to "Principles," most books thought to be written by mere humans were, in fact, penned by other books. This sly auctorial conceit allows Morrow to do some tongue-in-cheek, meta-fictional ruminating about the endless possibilities presented by quantum theory while tossing out a few mini-critiques concerning various classics of literature. *The Last Witchfinder* will only elevate the excellence of Morrow's oeuvre; and as far as this reader is concerned, cement his place in the highest ranks of comedic novelists and satirical writers.



For those who haven't yet read his novels, Michael Gruber's Jimmy Paz trilogy (starting with *Tropic of Night* and *Valley of Bones*) is like settling down with a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel that has been rewritten by James M. Cain. More Spenser than Karl Kolchak, Jimmy Paz, a Miami Police Detective, is the perfect fictional anchor for these Florida-based thrillers which deal with the supernatural, questions of faith and the mutability of what we call reality. Like the books before, *Night of the Jaguar* (Morrow/384 pages/ \$24.95) contains multiple story lines; and hero Paz doesn't make an appearance until page 50 in this book.

Believing himself called forth by the achaurit (basically the ghost) of a dead Columbian Priest, poor native, Moie, takes on the task of completing the religious man's mission: protecting the rain forest from developers. When Moie turns up in Miami—befriended by young environmentalists who work for the Forest Planet Alliance (like Jenny Simpson, a seeming bit player whose role takes on greater importance)—he soon becomes the center of suspicion when Miami businessmen who are had a hand in developing land in Columbia, and are planning to more of the same, are murdered in gruesome ways.

Now in retirement, Jimmy Paz, who has decided to run a restaurant, has been having dreams again: something he thought he'd finished with seven years ago. One dream involves a man in an animal skin, hunting down a victim's killers in a tropical forest. Another dream involves a jaguar which threatens his seven-year-old daughter, Amelia. Convinced to take on the mystery of who is eviscerating Miami businessmen, Paz finds clues

that point to Moie yet make little since (such footprints that match his but reveal the weight of the “perp” to be 450 pounds—and impossibility for the rail-thing Moie). And two of the businessmen who died had claw marks on their front doors. Is Moie a shape shifter? A god? Or something else entirely? Once again, Paz is drawn into the world of the “supernatural” (although, like a makeshift quantum physicist, Paz doesn’t believe in the supernatural—only things that have not yet been understood by science and mankind). And his tale of detection intersects with Moie’s sacred mission and that of young Jenny Simpson. And Gruber’s final twist—which comes after the climax—is the perfect ending to this noirish tale of the delicate balance between the supernatural and. science, reason and faith, nature and civilization.

Gruber’s Jimmy Paz trilogy walks a fine—and well-balanced—line between the worlds of horror and crime fiction, making good use of both well-worn, formulaic elements (a retired cop opening a restaurant) and elements so original (in this case, the folklore of the Columbian Runiya) that his novels are elevated to the level of literature. Not the high-falutin’ idea of literature—the kind many recognize by the title, but few have read—but the kind of literature that is enjoyed by the masses and admired for years to come. If there is a downside to Gruber’s trilogy, it’s that readers who have come to love Jimmy Paz may not enjoy the idea of a limited series. Perhaps Gruber (whose only other publication thus far, “The Witches Boy,” was a children’s book) will change his mind and keep Paz alive in future novels; stranger things have happened. After all, as the author himself observed in an earlier Paz novel: the universe is queerer than we suppose.



You gotta love a book whose premise involves breaking the barrier between reality and fantasy, and that’s just what happens in *The Strange Adventures of Ranger Girl* (Bantam Spectra/416 pages/\$12.00, trade paper). Marzipan McCarty (Marzi to her friends) is a twenty-something California art school dropout who writes of-the-wall, cult comics and while working as the night manager of “Genius Loci,” one of those coffee houses popular with generation Xers and wannabe beatniks, this one intricately decorated by the now missing artist Garamond Ray. Seems Ray thought his murals were necessary to “hold in elemental evil.” Yeah, right. Except...some of the storylines and characters created for Marzi’s most popular comic, “The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl,” have been appearing “bleeding over” into the real world. Is it because of the dark forces artist Ray feared? Or do some of Marzi’s friends have something to do with these odd occurrences?

Marzi’s friend from art school, Jonathan, lives above the coffeehouse (in the attic) and spends his time working on a thesis about Ray’s complicated, coffeehouse paintings (there are themes for parts of the building, such as “The Desert Room”); and regular patron and friend Jane

believes she needs to free the “dark goddess of the earth.”

When a depiction of evil from “The Desert Room” (which Marzi, defacto guardian, keeps locked up) literally busts loose from its painting prison and takes on the shape and persona of The Outlaw (from her comic book), all hell breaks loose (Jane is killed, only to resurface in the shape of mud-made doppelganger). And it’s up to Marzi and her friends (with a little help from Rangergirl) to thwart the plans of the evil sorcerer-Outlaw. Author Pratt, who has built a reputation writing short fiction, has concocted a rousing adventure fantasy which comes off like a collaboration between the authors of “Jonah Hex,” “Harry Potter” and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”



Long before actress Patricia Arquette was wowing a growing group of cult viewers with her antics on TV’s “Medium,” Dean Koontz’s hero, Odd Thomas, was talking with dead folks (like Elvis) and sussing out the particulars of a given mystery with the help of long-dead friends and acquaintances (in Odd’s case, the dead don’t talk back, helping only through gesticulations and such). An amiable fellow whose main talent in the land of the living is as a fry cook, and who likes to avoid getting behind the wheel of an automobile, it isn’t surprising that Koontz’s many fans fell in love with Odd. Or that Koontz (*Velocity, Life Expectancy, Odd Thomas*) decided to revisit Pico Mundo, Calif., and the world of Odd Thomas in his latest best seller, *Forever Odd* (Bantam/416 pages/\$27.00). Things begin with a jolt - literally - as Odd wakes up in the wee hours of the morning only to find one Dr. Jessup sitting in his bedroom. Since it’s well before a reasonable breakfast hour, Odd figures Jessup is dead and follows the teary-eyed spirit to the good doctor’s home. Worried about the doctor’s son, Danny—a 21-year-old friend from childhood who is afflicted with osteogenesis imperfecta, also known as brittle bones—Odd, as usual, is unable to control the urge to act when a spirit calls on him for help. But after he enters the house to search for Danny, and the body of Dr. Jessup, Odd is taken by surprise as an unseen assailant knocks him unconscious with a Taser gun. When Danny turns out to have gone missing, Odd follows a sort of “psychic” trail left behind by the perpetrators and the victim. That trail leads Odd to an abandoned, burned-out Indian Casino, destroyed after an earthquake, where dozens of people died. Unfortunately, the murder and subsequent kidnapping were committed to lure Odd to this spot. It seems that a beautiful porn entrepreneur—and believer in whacked-out, New Age religious stuff—named Datura has hired a couple of thugs to help her corral Odd and force him to share his abilities. Like many others who learned of Odd Thomas’ abilities through the media, Datura desires the power of being able to talk to—and see—the dead, and she’s willing to sacrifice Odd’s friend if he doesn’t help her. Managing to escape, Odd helps Danny go into hiding while he and a few undead

friends play an edgy game of cat and mouse with Datura and her two muscle-bound goons.

Unlike *Odd Thomas*, this sequel leans much more heavily on its thriller aspects, leaving little time for Koontz's sometimes distracting musings about life (or afterlife). That may or may not be a good thing, depending on which camp you fall into: readers who appreciate Koontz's sometimes overindulged penchant for dragging out suspense and sometimes overly sweet vision of life; or readers who love it when Koontz avoids too many tangents about life's weirdness, preferring, instead, to rev up his engines and let the fur fly. This isn't to say that there isn't plenty of oddness in *Forever Odd* — talking to dead folks, a childhood friend with a rare bone disease, an eccentric villainess. In the world according to Dean Koontz, there are rarely any vanilla wafer types wandering about. But if *Odd Thomas* was cream-of-the-crop Koontz (like *Dark Rivers of the Heart*, *Intensity*, etc.), then *Forever Odd* ranks as part of the *crème de le crème* of Koontz's output. Sporting unusual characters, auctorial rants (this time about alternative religions) and lots of dead folks, *Forever Odd* also boasts a suspense factor that will leave even the most steely-eyed armchair detective sweating bullets during the last 100 pell-mell pages.



The premise of *A Dirty Job* (Morrow/400 pages/\$24.95) has been worked over ad nauseum: not only in the field of fantasy and horror (*American Gods*, most recently), but in the movies ("Beetlejuice," "Meet Joe Black") and the medium of television ("Dead Like Me"). But when a writer as witty as Chris Moore tackles the subject, one has to at least take a peek at the result.

Charlie Asher, a sort of whipped, "beta male," proprietor of a used clothing shop in San Francisco, becomes intimately acquainted with death when his pregnant wife dies shortly after giving birth. Certain that he saw a strangely tall man—dressed in a green suit—standing near his wife, Rachel, just before she died, Charlie finds no evidence of such on the hospital's security camera. But when he tries to return to his life, Charlie finds that certain parts of his store's inventory give off a strange red glow; what's more, strangers began dropping dead in front of him at an alarming rate; and strange, giant, raven-like creatures appear out of nowhere to attack him.

Before he can completely lose, the man in green, who is named Minty Fresh, shows up to give Charlie the score: He and Charlie are Death Merchants. Their job (described in *The Great Book of the Dead*) is to gather up souls for safekeeping before the Forces of Darkness can get to them. It isn't long before Charlie acquires a "team" to help him at the shop: Goth girl, Lily, ex-cop Ray, and a pair of Hell Hounds to help guard the store.

Trouble is, Death is already in town and determined to out-manuever the "old gods" (Yama, Anubis, and so on) who are trying to usurp him. Death has got the help

of the Morrigan (harpy-like creatures) and the upper hand; now all he has to do is "take out" two annoying Death Merchants—namely Charlie and Minty. But neither Death, Charlie, Minty nor Audrey (a strange piece of work the boys run into), predict the entrance of one important other into the whole, convoluted scheme.

Sure, a lot of this has been done before, and Moore has been much more original (*Island of the Sequined Love Nun*, *The Lust Lizard of Melancholy Cove*, *Fluke*); but the author manages to throw plenty of original twists into the mix ("squirrel people," strange Herionymous Bosch-like creations concocted by Audrey), and he pulls it all off with such great comic flare and a perfectly-timed denouement (set in an old Gold Rush-era ship beneath San Francisco), not to mention a 19th Century-style set of epilogues, that it's hard not to enjoy this familiar yet sometimes strange trip into the Valley of Death.



Because it, too, takes place during the Napoleonic Wars and features a world where magic is possible, *His Majesty's Dragon* (Del Rey/384 pages/\$7.50), the first in a new trilogy will, for some, recall Susanna Clarke's recent, award-winning novel, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*. But Novik's novel stands tall in its own right. The opening chapter in which a French war ship's deck is slippery with blood as it loses a battle to the Royal Navy, and British Captain Will Laurence discovers a rare dragon's egg in the ship's hold, grabs the reader by his or her lapels and announces the arrival of a new and talented writer. The dragon, Temeraire, which (like all others) can speak and reason, bonds with Laurence. Bred for strength and speed, the creatures are used, for aerial support during sea battles. But dragons like Temeraire (bred in China) are thought to have mysterious, heretofore undiscovered powers. Laurence and his dragon resign from the navy and sign on with His Majesty's Aerial Corps (which is in dire need of dragons and troops). Mighty, and very detailed, battles with the French ensue. While the writing in this novel is top of the line, the story feels like a set-up for the real plot machinations to come in books two and three. That said, the relationships between the intelligent dragons and their Captains are deftly explored by author Novik, who doesn't shy away from the overtones of bestiality which would naturally stem from the romance that develops between the creatures and their human handlers. *His Majesty's Dragon* is an altogether competent debut that promises greater things in the coming volumes.

PART FIVE 1/2

(In which the sweet science of fiction is on ample display)

Stephen King's latest is another one of those novels that could be classified as horror, fantasy or SF. I decided to go with the latter, since the characters in this

particular story latter speculate about semi-plausible causes for their ordeal.

Unlike some of his past novels (*Needful Things*, *Rose Madder*) in which the author was as guilty as a “B movie” director of dragging out suspense, Stephen King gets right down to the heart of the matter in the first chapter of *Cell* (Scribner/384 pages/ \$26.95) when a pulse—sent worldwide via cell phones—turns those who answer the devices into mindless, blood-thirsty lunatics. The opening scenes of mayhem and violence in the city of Boston—in which people leap out of skyscraper windows, drivers careen off the road into unwitting pedestrians, strangers suddenly tear into each other’s throats, numerous gunshots are heard followed by screams in the distance and plumes of smoke suddenly color the skies—will undoubtedly call up memories of televised stories of road rage, gun-related violence in the workplace and at schools, or even 9/11. Indeed, one short sentence amid all the others seems designed to do just that as King writes: “They couldn’t see what had exploded, but now a much larger, darker plume of smoke was rising above the buildings on that horizon.” And just before that, one of the bystanders says, “Something blew up over there. I mean big time. Maybe it’s terrorists.”

That line could be the standard for a century that seemingly is being defined by fear: fear of terrorists, fear of technology and fear of each other. That atmosphere of dread is expertly reflected in *Cell*, a novel in which King, like H.G. Wells in *War of the Worlds*, decides to not follow the worldwide catastrophe, focusing, instead, on a small group of people in North East America: Clayton Riddell (whose wife and child are in Maine), Tom (a single, gay man) and Alice (a teenager who had to kill her mother after the pulse turned her mom monstrous). Their journey north—in search of Clay’s family and answers to riddle of the Pulse—makes up the bulk of this tightly-paced thriller. Along the way, the three travelers discover that the “phoners” (a label given to those affected by the Pulse) are evolving, moving in flocks, like birds, moving in the open only during the day time (so that “normals” must now live like vampires, traveling only at night, quite often in fear of each other). Everything begins coming to a head when the trio runs into a Professor of English at Gaiten Academy outside of Boston who has discovered that the phoners are gaining intelligence; and when they learn of a mysterious person known as the Raggedy Man who is leading a large group of phoners for his own purposes. (The author infuses plenty of deadpan humor into this work, such as when the group of survivors runs across a large group of phoners are lying face up in college football stadium, listening to Lawrence Welk tunes).

King once lamented that many academia-influenced critics rarely afforded genre writers the chance to revisit themes and settings (ala John Updike and his Rabbit Angstrom novels) without accusing said writers of rehashing plots, or a lack of imagination. Whether

one labels it genre or mainstream, *Cell* not only revisits thematic territory from King’s oeuvre (*The Stand*, *Pet Sematary*, *Tommyknockers*, *Dreamcatcher*), it pays homage to the likes of Richard Matheson and George Romero (both of whom influenced King) and their most famous works—“I Am Legend” and “Night of the Living Dead.” There’s even a tip of the hat to Lewis Carroll.

And with it’s disturbingly accurate atmosphere of dread (reflecting that of present-day America), its underlying sarcasm about those enslaved to technology, and its finely rendered scenes of horrific violence and human compassion, *Cell* truly captures the tenor of fear and paranoia which has pervaded the beginning of the 21st Century. Even without the benefit of hindsight, it’s already clear that King’s latest will have to be shelved alongside such classics as *The Stand*, *The Dead Zone*, *Pet Sematary*, *Misery*, *The Green Mile*, and his “Dark Tower” novels.

A nerve-wracking, genuinely unsettling thriller, *Cell* is proof positive that King has tapped into yet another creative wellspring during a period of life when most writers are often over-working the same dry and dusty literary landscapes.



Every generation of male, American writers has felt compelled to document the ravages of war: from *The Red Badge of Courage* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, to *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Thin Red Line*, *To Going After Cacciato* and *The Aardvark is Ready For War*. Each time the United States has gotten involved in a military conflict, novels about the brutality of war and the comradeship which develops among soldiers have poured forth from typewriters and PCs like a stream of blood from a fresh wound.

One classic that is often over-looked, *The Forever War*, is given short-shrift by the academic community because it was written as a science fiction novel. Author Joe Haldeman wrote it as an analogy to his experience in Vietnam; and even though it remains in print and won handfuls of awards from the genre community, it’s a fine novel that should’ve attracted an even larger audience. Perhaps Haldeman’s latest collection, *War Stories* (NightShade Press/406 pages/ \$29.00) will remedy that situation.

Even though the core of this collection consists of stories that are science fiction or horror, those tales are book-ended by two mainstream novels that deal with both the Vietnam War and the civil unrest that took place in the United States. “War Year” is a short novel Haldeman began writing while still in the thick of combat, in Vietnam. Because of the constraints of a publisher’s paperback original format (only a certain amount of wordage was allowed), Haldeman’s first novel has a Hemingwayesque sparsity about it. But it works well for a novella that deals with the shock of being dropped

into a war zone (mirroring the author's experience, the fictional protagonist is a Combat Engineer). One practically hear the bullets whizzing past and feel the flop-sweat on the upper lips of the young G.I.s as they head off on patrols.

The genre-related tales in the middle of the book are no less harrowing, especially "Graves" (which won a World Fantasy Award and a Nebula nod from the Horror Writers of America). Its Twilight-Zone type horror is a great analogy for the trauma that many soldiers often experience long after the battle is over. Haldeman includes a couple of his award-winning poems as well. One of them, "DX," is a powerful, autobiographical tour-de-force with a heart-rending endnote.

Finally, *1968* is a 200+ page novel which was criminally overlooked by the mainstream press when published. Begun while Haldeman was under the tutelage of the late Stanley Elkin, at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, it's yet another tour-de-force in a book riddled with them. Following the fate of protagonist "Spider," Haldeman's novel takes on the Vietnam war during the year of the Tet Offensive as well as life back in America (as viewed through the eyes of Spider's girlfriend, who writes him love letters, protests the war, and experiments with drugs and sex). 1968 was a pivotal year in our nation's history—when Vietnam truly started to get out of control, when JFK and Martin Luther King were assassinated—and Haldeman's tightly written, quirky novel brings all of it into sharp focus.

For my money, *War Stories* is a book that is every bit as important as *The Naked* and *The Dead or Going After Cacciato*. This is a gathering of stories—and novels!—which lay bare the feelings of dread and mortality and comradeship—and the abiding love for life—often experienced by young men in times of war.

PART SIX

In which we learn that YA novels "children's" fiction can be fun for the whole family

Even detractors of J.K. Rowling's terrific Harry Potter novels have to concede that she has brought renewed attention to young adult novels and, in turn, greater attention to some very deserving writers, like Louis Sachar and Lemony Snicket. With a at least another year or more lull in the J.K. Rowling literary juggernaut expected, perhaps some of that much-deserved attention will be showered on other writers of terrific YA series, such as Darren Shan (and his "Cirque Du Freak" books) or Annette Curtis Klause. Already a cult hit with teens because of *Blood and Chocolate* (a novel about a teen-aged female werewolf, her family, and her "meatboy" human lover), Klause has written two other critically lauded works: *Alien Secrets*, a science fiction adventure in which she makes use of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer's Night

Dream" and tips her hat to Kurt Vonnegut; and *The Silver Kiss*, a tale of vampirism which deals with, naturally, Eros and Thanatos.

With *Freaks: Alive On the Inside* (McElderry/Simon&Schuster/331 pages/ \$16.95), the title of which is a nod to Tod Browning, Klause takes the usual teen-aged yearning and stands it on its head by having her protagonist, a normal boy who is raised by deformed parents (his mother has no arms; his father is legless), long to be as special as those he grew up with. It's an interesting conceit that breathes new life into a well-worn, YA coming-of-age story.

The novel opens in the year 1899, finding seven-teen-year-old Abel Dandy assisting in a stage show at "Faeryland" (an entertainment village his parents and the other "human oddity" performers founded in order to give their children some stability). The story also finds Abel in a state of frustration over his station in life: Abel feels as if he doesn't fit in with the folks he grew up with (the Amazing Rubber Woman, the Siamese Twins) and he isn't accepted by the townies ("normal" folks who berate and detest Abel, his relatives, and friends). As Klause writes in the novels opening line: "When a boy's first romantic interlude is with Phoebe the Dog-Faced Girl, he feels a need to get out into the world and find a new life." Filled with more bravado than brains and armed with a magical ring that has been giving him dreams, Abel decides to do just that; after writing a note to his parents, he is caught sneaking away by Gladys Dibble, the Pixie Queen, and teller of fortunes. Gladys tells Abel he will face danger in the form of a skeleton, succeed where he least expects to, and fall in love with an older, foreign woman. Followed by Apollo (Phoebe's younger brother, covered in just as much hair), Abel's adventure leads him first to a cathouse, a traveling circus (which abhors "freaks") and then into the arms of Dr. Mink, a skeletal-looking fellow who runs a true Freak Show: human oddities, like the Alligator Woman, are put on display like "animals at zoo" Abel notes, instead of being allowed to perform. Worse, Abel soon discovers that Mink has been taking children he deems worthy of display from their rightful homes as his traveling menagerie of human oddities makes its way across America. Along the way, Abel discovers that his magical ring has led him to each destination, and that the woman of his dreams—who calls him Ankhtifi—might just be a prisoner of the sleazy Dr. Mink.

Although Klause's story—sprinkled with bits of homage to those who came before—is more than entertaining, a lot of the fun in reading *Freaks* comes in the way the author pulls off the 19th century speech (and thought) patterns; her joy in wordplay is almost palpable when she wields words like sockdolager. Coming off almost like the inverse of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *Freaks* is both a paean to simpler times and a love song to the very spice of human life: our differences! ☺

Chris Roberson's first novel Here There & Everywhere featured a time-traveling heroine dropping in on some of the more august historical personages in time; I personally suspect Roberson did something of the sort for this story—namely, slipping back in time about 45 years to pick Rod Serling's brain for this story. Make no mistake, however: Roberson may have brain-napped Serling and tucked on a few SF clichés even older than the ones Rod created on his little show, but Roberson gives it an all-too-contemporary twist. Cue the plinking piano line—

Last

BY CHRIS ROBERSON

Adam Anderton drove east across the desert, the back-seat of his hum-zee loaded down with bottled water, canned goods, and ammunition. In the passenger seat was a portable refrigeration unit, stocked with bottles of imported beer, and he wore a holstered semi-automatic on his hip, a hunting knife in a boot sheath. A gun rack behind his head held a pair of shotguns, a sniper rifle, and an assault rifle.

Teen divas and boy bands from a long-ago generation blared through the vehicle's sound system. Adam couldn't stand them, but so far he'd been unable to find a working computer with charged batteries to swap out the MP3s and so, lacking an onboard DVD player, for the moment he was stuck with the selections of the late Governor Spears. It was better than silence, but not much. He loved the vehicle, but was considering ditching it for something else; he'd take a mini-Cooper, at this point, if it had better taste in music.

Adam drained a bottle of beer, tossed it out the open window, and cracked another. He didn't know how fast he was driving, and didn't care. He had the roads to himself.

✦✦✦

Adam had been half a solar system away when everything had finally gone to hell. A lieutenant colonel with the US Air Force before he'd been accepted by NASA, he'd been tapped to command the Magellan, and sent out on the Grand Tour, a joint mission between NASA, ESA, and ISRO. A loop through the outer planets, and then slingshot back through the inner solar system before returning home, a six year voyage. But by the time Magellan returned to Earth, home wasn't there anymore.

There had been four of them, originally: three men—Adam, Gerald Druart, and Porfirio Saenz—and one woman, Supreet Khurana. Khurana had died out near Ganymede, crushed beneath a surface-lander. At

the time reports from Earth suggested things were getting bad, but would doubtless get better. By the time Saenz had died of radiation sickness, as they entered their final circuit of the inner planets, it was clear that things had seriously got out of hand. Later, months still to go in their voyage, the full extent of the crises back home had become painfully clear, and Druart had decided to go for a spacewalk without a pressure suit.

Without help from ground control, and alone at the stick, it had been tricky to maneuver the Magellan into a parking orbit around Earth. Adam wasn't sure that he'd survive reentry until he managed to get the surface-lander wheels down on the runway at Edwards Air Force Base. There'd been no crowds to greet him, of course. How could there be? As far as he knew, if the last broadcasts they'd received on the Magellan were to be believed, the last living humans on Earth had died more than two years before.

✦✦✦

Adam stopped to answer nature's call, where the deserts gave way to mountains, and passed a few hours shooting at empty bottles, cans, and rocks, first with the semi-automatic pistol, then with the assault rifle, then the shotgun. He told himself it was to keep in practice, just in case, but so far bottles and cans and rocks were the only things he'd had occasion to shoot. He had enough ammunition in the hum-zee to last a platoon in active combat for a year, so it wasn't like he'd be running dry anytime soon.

The sun set in the west, painting the sky with a dazzling palette of reds, oranges, and purples. Adam pulled his mattress out of the vehicle's rear, laid it out on the middle of the highway's tarmac, toggled the pump to inflate, and then stretched out under the silent stars.

Insects called out in the darkness, some sort of cicada maybe, but Adam was sure that with all the top rungs

of the food chain gone it was only a matter of time before those at the bottom followed suit.



It had been a perfect storm of pandemics. Following close on the heels of record hurricanes in the western hemisphere, a killer tsunami in the eastern hemisphere, and devastating earthquakes in both, new strains of deadly viruses had broken out in China and Africa, and quickly spread to animal populations worldwide. In little over a year, the canine flu had infected virtually all dogs, both domesticated and wild, and the avian flu burned through the world's bird population. Feline Immunodeficiency Virus mutated into a strain that no treatment could stop, and ravaged the numbers of everything from house cats to the last surviving lions on the African veldt. A variety of bovine viral diarrhea ravaged cattle, and spread to populations of wild moose, elk, and deer. And then each of these strains, in turn, mutated into forms transferable to humans.

The overuse of antibiotics and antivirals in the second half of the twentieth and first decades of the twenty first centuries had given rise to pathogens so hardy that nothing seemed proof against them. And the few remaining treatments that did act against the pathogens only managed to give rise to new mutated strains, resistant even to them, in a matter of months.

Inside of two years, thirty percent of the population of first world nations was infected with one or more of these deadly viruses, and higher numbers in developing nations. By the time three years had elapsed, that number had risen to more than sixty percent worldwide, and the dying outnumbered the living. At the end of four years, there was no one left to bury the dead.



Already it seemed that smaller predators that had escaped the pandemics; snakes and rodents and such had completely worked their way through the populations of smaller animals, and then turned on each other. Adam had seen one snake since his return to Earth, but it had been all but starved, and not even worth killing for meat. Instinctively, he'd crushed its head underfoot, before realizing it might have been the last of its phylum left alive. Though he'd known the thing would have died of starvation in a matter of weeks, anyway, Adam had felt guilty for days.



It was the quiet that was the worst. When Adam first climbed down from the lander, on the landing strip at Edwards, it had hit him like a wall. He couldn't remember the last time, if ever, he'd heard such complete silence. For the six years prior, there'd always been the sound of the ship's air recirculation systems and the faint vibrations from the engines, if he was onboard the Magellan, or his own heartbeat and breathing echoing in his helmet, if he were on EVA in a pressure suit. But

standing there in the still air of a Southern California autumn, Adam could hear nothing at all, even the sound of his own exhalations lost in the vast emptiness.

He'd found an old Ford SUV that was unlocked, hotwired the ignition, and headed south to Los Angeles, to see if he could find any signs of life. After a few hours of driving the city's streets, he was only glad he hadn't arrived two years before, when the bodies in the streets had been fresher, still putrefying; he couldn't imagine what the city must have smelled like, in that first year with no one left to clear the decaying corpses from the streets and buildings. Even now, all this time after, he found that he could barely stand to enter any room that had been closed off with a body inside, so much did the stench linger. He slept in the Ford, those first nights, a service revolver in each hand.

After a week, he'd relaxed his guard a bit, when nothing came out of the shadows to feast on his brain. He considered finding a generator, and setting up house-keeping in one of the fortified estates in Beverly Hills, but he'd already decided there was nothing for him in LA, and if he hunkered down there'd be nothing to do but pass the time idly, waiting for death. Better to get out on the road, to see if there were any other survivors. The battery operated shortwave radio he found in a pawnshop whispered static on all frequencies, but that just meant no one in range was broadcasting.

So he left the Ford behind, hopped the gate at Governor Spears' Bel Air estate, found the keys to one of her fleet of hum-zees, and siphoned enough gas from the other tanks to fill a dozen canisters. Then he raided a Trader Joe's, a sporting goods store, and a gun shop, and set out across America.



It wasn't until later, after a few months on the road, that Adam gave up all hope; in those early weeks, he actually believed he might find other living people. He consulted roadmaps, marking off his route, making careful notes about the areas of greatest and lowest populations density, prevailing wind currents, nonsense like that.

Later, when he let go of the lie, he was embarrassed to remember his early optimism, however guarded it had been. It was easier to accept the truth.



It was with cringing shame that Adam remembered, as a child, fantasizing about being the last man on Earth. It had been a booming sub-genre in his youth, and he'd whiled away long hours in those days with stories of angry loners in post-apocalyptic war zones, of telepathic dogs and white-eyed vampires, of planets of aliens or apes or zombies. But in the stories, even the angry loners had eventually found an attractive woman for companionship, somewhere along the way, if only for a time.

In the crowded halls of his junior high, the young Adam had weaved elaborate scenarios, in which the

only two people to survive a nuclear holocaust would be him and the cute girl in his third period history class, whom he could never work up the nerve to approach. They'd travel the country, armed to the teeth, and weep a single tear for all of the cruel and popular kids who hadn't been as fortunate as they, for the stern parents and teachers who had died in a mushroom cloud's final embrace. Alone, but together.



One night, asleep by the roadside on a moonless Texas night, Adam was awoken by the sound of flapping wings, and opened his eyes to see an indistinct shape perched atop a fence post. It was only dimly visible in the darkness, but it seemed to Adam to be some large bird of prey.

Scrambling to his feet, Adam fumbled for his flashlight, but by the time he was able to shine the beam on the fence post, the shape was gone. His heart pounding in his chest, Adam tried to relax, telling himself it must have been a dream. By morning, he believed it.



Adam had been driving aimlessly for days, crisscrossing north and south, heading vaguely east. He'd stopped looking at his maps weeks before, and stopped keeping note of his progress months before that. Every place was about the same as any other, he figured, so long as he could keep moving. Like a shark, Adam supposed, and wondered as he always did what things were like beneath the waves, and whether the devastation that had wiped out everything above the size of a beetle on the surface had impacted marine life, as well. It hardly mattered, unless he were somehow able to grow gills and learn to speak dolphin, which didn't seem likely.

He would keep moving, not looking back. But in Chattanooga, around sunset, he reached a dead end. It was a bascule bridge, its two halves raised for a boat that would never pass.

As he threw the hum-zee into reverse, a flash of movement on the river's far side caught his eye. Curious, he put the gear in park, and stepped out of the vehicle for a better look.

There, on the opposite bank, stood a woman, a bird perched on her shoulder. Both woman and bird regarded him, their expressions unreadable.



Adam tried calling to the woman, but she wouldn't, or couldn't, answer. She just looked at him, a blank expression on her face, standing motionless. He would have thought her a statue, or a department store mannequin, if she hadn't finally waved her hand, in response to his hoarsening cries. And it may have been the shadow of a cloud, driving across the face of the sun, or she might have smiled, however briefly.

She was alive, then. Adam's heart was in his throat. He could scarcely think straight. The bridge was up, there was no way across. The hum-zee's motor was still

running. His tongue felt thick and useless in his mouth. He tried to swallow, but seemed to have forgotten how.

He needed to get across the river. To the woman.

He jumped back into the driver's seat, backed up, and with squealing tires turned up the road running parallel to the river's edge. There was another bridge. There had to be another bridge.

There was a woman. She was alive.



In the early weeks, before he had given up hope, Adam had rehearsed in his thoughts what he might say, were he to come upon another survivor. He imagined scenarios in which he encountered another man, a child of either sex, an elderly person, or, of course, a woman. He had run through all the possible permutations as he drove, and slept, and ate, trying to work out precisely the perfect thing to say, on any such occasion. Just in case.

Now, he could scarcely remember his name.



The woman's image was burned into his mind; as he steered the vehicle onto the first functional bridge he came across, his thoughts raced in tight circles, with her at the center. She was alluring, after a fashion, plain featured but attractive in a rugged, handsome sort of way. But silent. She'd not spoken or uttered a sound, hadn't even opened her mouth. Adam couldn't help but be a bit disappointed. He'd been as hungry for conversation as he had for the other pastimes to which a man and a woman might apply themselves, but thinking back on the angry loner heroes who populated the stories of his youth, he took some measure of solace. Hadn't one of them been paired with a mute beauty, as well? And in a leather bikini, at that?

Who was Adam to look a mute beauty in the mouth, whether she wore a leather bikini or her denim jacket and corduroys? After all, she might well be the new mother of the human race.

But wasn't there a bird with her, as well?



When, after a quarter of an hour, Adam couldn't find the woman, he was convinced that he'd finally gone insane. He'd always known it was bound to happen, sooner or later.

Then, just as he was about to surrender the final, cruel hope that had flared in his chest these last few moments, he caught sight of her, standing down by the shores of the river, the bird still perched on her shoulder.

All of his carefully scripted conversational gambits long forgotten, Adam slammed on the brakes, jumped from the cab, and ran towards the woman, waving his arms and yelling happily, a broad smile on his face. The woman just looked at him, with that same blank expression, while the bird on her shoulder ruffled its feathers, cawing softly.

Then, the dogs appeared, slipping out of hidden places beneath bushes, behind abandoned cars, from

behind trees. All breeds, shapes, and sizes, they were silent, unnervingly so, but padded quickly, spreading out between Adam and the woman, their teeth bared. From what Adam could see, all of the dogs were male.



Adam stopped short. His pistol was in its holster at his side, but the rifles and shotguns were back in the gun rack, inside the vehicle. He glanced back, but another half dozen dogs had moved between him and the hum-zee, their eyes fixed on him.

The woman's face moved in strange ways, that Adam realized after a moment was an approximation of fear, while the bird on her shoulder flapped its wings, clearly as startled by the dog's quick appearance as Adam was.

Adam drew his pistol, as a number of the dogs circled around him, leaving the others to advance on the woman and her bird.

What followed was a confusion of movement almost too fast for Adam's attention to follow. It came to him in brief flashes, like images caught in a strobe light. A round fired from his pistol dropped one of the dogs, but not before the rest had leapt upon him, knocking him off his feet. Adam struggled, trying to get clear of the animals pressing down on him, and he caught a glimpse of the woman, her throat made a red ruin by one mastiff's crimsoned jaws, the bird trying unsuccessfully to take wing as another caught it between massive paws.

Adam tried to cry out, firing the pistol blindly, impotently, but one of the dogs had some kind of cloth in its mouth, like a bath towel, balled up and smelling sickly sweet, which it forced against his face, smothering Adam's mouth and nose. Tears streaming, Adam struggled, trying to turn his head away, holding his breath, but the animal refused to budge, and now Adam's head pounded as his lungs fought for air.

Finally, Adam inhaled deeply, and felt a wave of dizziness spill over him. His thoughts thick and sluggish, Adam slipped into a red-lidded darkness.



Adam opened his eyes, unsure how much time had passed. He was in a small, windowless room, dimly lit by a bare bulb overhead, three walls of gray-painted cinderblock, steel bars making up the fourth. He was stripped naked, and laid out on the cold, concrete floor.

Adam closed his eyes, and fell back into unconsciousness.



When next Adam opened his eyes, he had a visitor. A Doberman, its narrow head poked through the bars of the cage, eyes regarding him coolly. It was very obviously male, and around the dog's neck was strapped some kind of plastic box with a metal grill. There were nicks and cuts in the animal's flesh where the two ends of the

strap were fastened together, badly healed, as though the ends had been held in place by another dog's sharp teeth.

"You. Are. Awake."

The voice, sounding guttural and metallic, buzzed from the box at the dog's neck, which Adam now recognized as an artificial voice box, once intended for a human patient whose larynx had been surgically removed.

Adam opened his mouth as if to speak, but couldn't think of the words to say.

"Bird virus. Is. Stupid clade. Our rival. Infect surviving female human. As bait. Lure male human."

Adam's thoughts raced, and he licked his dry lips.

"You're. you're a." he began, struggling to form confused thoughts into words.

"Virus. Dog virus clade. Smart. Adaptable. Learned to control. Hosts' brains. But too late. Only males left. No female. No breeding. Need females. But all female dogs gone. Expired hosts."

A pair of large dogs approached up the corridor, their claws clicking on the concrete floor. Each had a rope in his mouth, pulled taut behind him, and Adam could hear the sound of wheels squeaking beneath something heavy.

"But we have female. Not dog. Not yet host. Can use for breeding. But needed suitable male. Find you."

As the two dogs pulled on their ropes, a large cage wheeled into view. In it was a full grown female bonobo chimpanzee, her face gray and wrinkled, her eyes staring into the middle distance. Adam could smell her even at a distance, a blinding stench like an untended zoo not cleaned for years.

"Not infect. Either of you. Not until viable offspring produced, in numbers."

Adam looked from the dog to the caged chimpanzee and back again, horror dawning.

"You can't expect me to." Adam recoiled, the smell of the unwashed bonobo thick in his nostrils.

"Your genetics. Close. Very close. With dog virus clade helping, genes will mix."

Adam shook his head, fiercely.

"Look. This is crazy!"

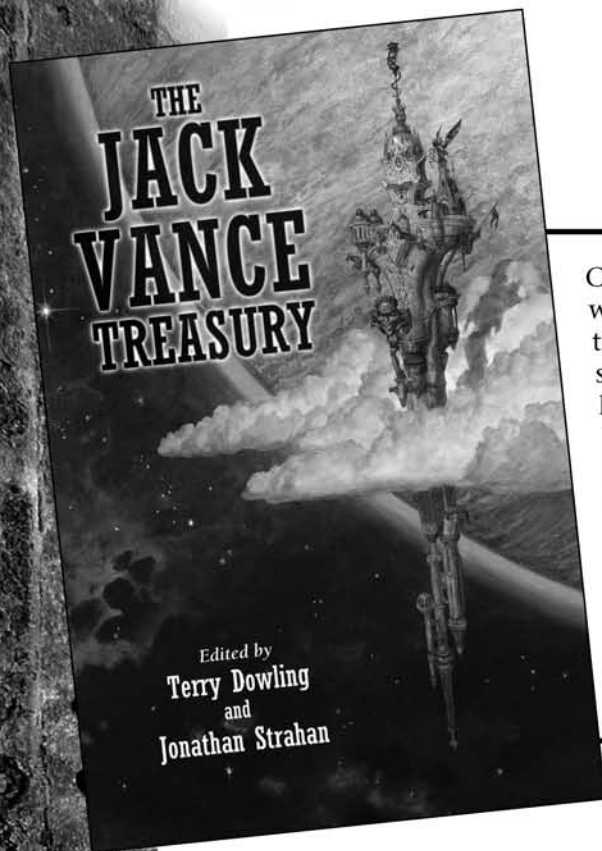
"You breed. Or you starve. Then, after viable offspring. In numbers. Male and female no longer useful for breeding. Become hosts. Reward dog virus clade."

"But." Adam began, trying to find some way to reason his way clear. "But she's just an animal. There's. I can help you. I know things." Adam climbed to his feet, waving his hands, excitedly. "Science. Engineering. There's so much you could learn."

From behind the dog's black eyes, the collective mind of the virus looked at Adam, unimpressed.

"We must be careful," it went on, as if he hadn't spoken. "Previous host stocks. Used up. In just a few hundred. Millennia. More careful, this time. Make new hosts. Last." ☹

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When I read David Klecha's debut story, the literary antecedent that came to mind for me was not a science fiction cliché but 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13. Read the story and see if you don't see it for yourself.

Refuge

BY DAVID KLECHA

The alerts, hurried action, and tense waiting had gotten to be a matter of routine, though they left us just as breathless as the first time. Once upon a time in the Marines, I had gotten used to that kind of thing, what one expects when volunteering to enlist in wartime. But after all the wars, I expected to be done with it. Karyn had been a blessing and a curse that way, though I could barely acknowledge the downside of knowing and loving her, much less give voice to it. The peace and love she brought into my life far surpassed the mild irritation of our current preparations for spacewalk.

In a pinch, we could dress for outside in two minutes, though it never took anyone quite that long. All of us aboard the Santa Ana Refuge wore the silvery pressure skins most of the day, removing them only when sleeping in the survival capsule bunks, or during hygiene. Karyn wore hers less, but only because of the treatments. This time, the alert had better timing; she and I had both been dressed, hoods off, while eating in the commissary. We snapped them up, covering hair, ears, and neck as we kicked and floated down the passages to "our" airlock.

Karyn still looked the worse for wear, even after eight months in the Refuge. Her hair had grown back to shoulder-length, in a riot of colors which she insisted were intentional. But I had seen the fear and embarrassment when it started, blonde mixed with red and black and brown. Hints of other, livelier colors in individual strands told me she had not intended this look for herself. Still, I didn't call her on the attempt to save face. Everything else about her had improved in the last few months, and I could not bear to take anything from that.

"Unscheduled visitor on the shuttle from Valhalla Two-One," the PA announced.

"You think it's another false alarm?" Karyn asked, not a little hope in her eyes.

"Six of the last seven have been," I replied.

"That many?"

"Yeah. I haven't got a good feeling about this one."

"Me either."

"You look beautiful," I said, and she rewarded me with a smile. I walked a fine line, telling her how beautiful I found her as much as possible, without turning it into the background pleasantries of a long-term couple.

In the airlock, our helmets and boots waited for us. I clapped the clear globe down onto her shoulders, watching the gelled edge suck down to a tight seal on shoulders, back, and chest. She strapped on her airpack, as I did my own. Feet went into the boots, self-sealing.

Stars, undistorted by sunlight or atmosphere, always gave me the screaming willies. Those bright, hard points always had me oscillating between a nauseating vision of the infinite and the creeping paranoia that they were nothing more than holes in an enormous velvet curtain. I shouldered aside the emotions, like every other time since my second day in combat, and pulled Karyn from the 'lock. The stars did not treat her much better, though she just wound up with galloping vertigo.

Two lifelines floated away from the hull, and I clipped one to each of our utility belts. Shrouds crisscrossed the exterior, giving us unfettered access to most of the refuge. Once Karyn gripped the back of my belt, in our well-rehearsed ballet, I pulled us out toward our usual hiding spot.

The refuge had initially been constructed from bits and pieces of orbital debris. When the first space elevators had gone into service, and those most in need of a null-gee recuperative environment could safely go to orbit, a handful of doctors got together and started the project that would become the Refuge. Wealthy donors, in more recent years, allowed for the addition of a supporting framework, and most of a hull to cover it, but the gaps created nooks and crannies, ideal for hiding a fugitive or two. The Refuge's debatable legal status as an autonomous orbital collective further attracted that tiny minority, those in need of expert medical help who did not want to attract attention. Santa Ana proved perfect for me and Karyn in many ways.

"Jim, are you there?" The voice of Aidan Phillips, head nurse in the Cybernetics Ward, crackled in my ear.

"We're safely tucked away, Aidan. What's up?"

"It doesn't look like a false alarm, man. Docking area cameras show one serious dude, dressed like a commando or something." I could tell Aidan was shaken. Usually he flirted pretty hard with me, but right now all the playfulness had dropped from his voice. There was that tiny spark of relief, though, that I wouldn't have to crush his hopes. Again. But there was Karyn and, well, there was Karyn. As though she knew I was thinking about her, she waved at me from her coffin-sized niche, identical to my own, where modular hull sections did not quite meet.

"Okay, keep your head down, then, Aidan. Don't provoke the guy, don't go for heroics. Remember all the other patients who count on you."

"Yeah, yeah, got it. Good luck."

"You too."

And then there was the downside of the refuge's questionable legal status. Not flying the flag of a national power, or even an international organization like the WHO, they could never count on much in the way of protection. Rarely did things get ugly, but the potential always hovered.

When the potential became actual, you could never tell quite who you might be dealing with. Might be a Delta Force bozo, straight from Fort Benning on the President's orders, a licensed bounty hunter, or some wannabe warrior who read the "Wanted" list in *Soldier of Fortune*. The latter could be far more dangerous than the former. You can never trust an idiot to know what he's doing.

I reached across the gap and took Karyn's hand, gripping it tightly. She smiled at me, face perfectly framed by the silvery pressure skin hood.

"You feeling okay over there?" I asked, on the suit-to-suit conduction channel. Nothing and no one could intercept our conversation, since the signal passed through the skins' material.

"Just fine, thanks. Once the vertigo calmed down, anyway."

"When was your last blackout?"

"Weeks ago," she replied, face twisting up in her own special look of embarrassment and disgust. "I told you, I'm feeling a lot better."

"I don't know what happens when I'm asleep, sweetheart. I know the last one I was around for was weeks ago..."

"Like Aidan would hide that from you. He loves any excuse to talk to you. Besides, when do you sleep?"

Her tone and expression were playful, but it all reeked of the desire to keep from thinking about what might be going on inside. Karyn had been built as a dancer, a performer, and while she had confronted the hardness of life in an artistic, intellectual way, she had never seen it firsthand as I did, in places like Kandahar, Christchurch, or Taipei.

But then, I didn't want to think about it much either. An amateur could be doing far more damage than he

needed to. Every time we have had to clean up, I've felt the millstone guilt in every complaint, every glance. Karyn tries to tell me that I shouldn't worry, that it's her fault we came to Santa Ana in the first place, but I know it's not true. I made the decision, signed the papers, brought her here. But then, for her sake, it was the only option. No decision to be made. The current complications in my life were, and had always been, secondary to her health.

"Oh, I sleep," I replied. "When you're not looking." I offered her my best smile, the one she begged to see more often.

"I'll have to take your word for it," she said, and returned a smile of her own. Twice in ten minutes. I felt blessed.

A year ago, I could not have gotten her to stop smiling for anything. We had met on a city bus just outside of Grand Rapids, moved in together within weeks, and lived in a crazy sort of bliss for months. I knew then that she had been manufactured, in a plant near Boston, designed and constructed from the tips of her toes to the top of her head, and I had not cared. She had radiated a sort of vitality that I could not understand, but I wanted to bask in it. After so many years of death all around me, her life, artificial as it was, inspired me.

Eleven months ago, I found out what was so special about her, a secret she had hidden well. Rather than the artificial mind that most of her "sisters" shared, Karyn had actually been born of a woman. Abandoned, nearly crippled by Cerebral Palsy, a corporation had adopted her for use in a production experiment, grafting a human brain into an artificial body. The experiment had been a modest success, but a PR nightmare when the scandal leaked, and Karyn had been on her own since the Modern Emancipation.

The compensation that her artificial body made for the effects of Cerebral Palsy began to fail a few months after we moved in together. I noticed it first one Sunday when I came home from a weekend with the local Reserve unit, to find her unconscious and unresponsive on the floor of the bathroom. Months of degradation followed, then a radical procedure which had required an innovative acquisition of data from the people who had manufactured Karyn's body, undertaken by me.

That, on its own, was enough to get me court-martialed, even if I was supposed to be done with the Marines.

All that time, during the downward spiral of her health, the procedure, these six months of recuperation, her smile had become rarer and more dear. I treasured it in a way I could not have imagined, a year ago.

"You think they're okay in there?" she asked, as the smile faded.

"I'm sure everyone's fine. Whoever this bastard is, he doesn't have a beef with anyone inside. A professional knows you can't just go smashing stuff up and killing people."

Please God, I thought, let him be a professional.

"Jim? Jim?" Aidan chirped in my ear. He sounded like he might be in pain, and my imagination spun

toward the worst. An amateur, one with a cruel streak, at that.

"Aidan? What's wrong? Is he gone?"

"No. No, he's right here. He...He...I had to tell him you two were out there, Jim."

"It's okay, Aidan. Just—"

"Your boyfriend is gone," came a raspy voice, like a teenager trying to sound like a grizzled cop. "But I'm sure he'll heal just fine. You know, with time." He laughed, and I could not help but roll my eyes. I had to remind myself, though, that he was probably armed and certainly very dangerous. "Why don't you bring your girlfriend inside and we can get this over with?"

"No, I think we'll stay out here. You can come get us."

"Maybe I should hurt some more people, kill this sniveling wimp who loves you so much."

"Kill them all," I said, praying that he would not call my bluff, "and we'll still be out here, and you'll still have to come get us yourself."

"Fair enough," he said. "I know a thing or two about working on the other side of a hull. You just stay put."

I cursed to myself, but dared not cut the radio feed. He wanted to talk, so I'd let him keep talking. The more he said, the more he told me about himself, and I would need all the help I could get. Now I knew him to be an amateur, one certainly convinced of his own prowess, and probably the sort who scoured bounty sites for easy marks to build a reputation. A burnt out vet and his girlfriend, a corporate mistake who needed my help dressing herself every day, could hardly be a more inviting target.

My inner angel wondered pointedly what I would do with this information.

Even before I met Karyn, I had sworn off killing, fighting, or anything other than a normal and humble existence. She had disrupted that pledge somewhat, but I knew I could not go further, even for her.

The test would be clambering out an airlock near us soon enough. I breathed deep and squeezed Karyn's hand hard one more time.

"I'm going out onto the hull. To wait for him."

"Be careful."

"I'll see what I can do."

And then I let go of her hand, severing our private connection. We could still talk to each other over the intercom, but as much as I loathed confronting the wannabe bounty hunter, I hated more the idea of him eavesdropping on the words between us.

Earth hovered above me as I crawled back out onto the hull. We passed onto the night-side as I left my hiding space, thermal circuits in the 'skin kicking on to keep me warm in the darkness. Eastern China burned with the brilliant light of a billion coastal Chinese going about their twenty-four hour lives. Valhalla Two-One passed below us, linked to an artificial island near Ecuador by the black umbilical on which Santa Ana depended. I tore my gaze away, looking off toward the airlock to which the crew would have directed our hunter.

He appeared as I watched, pushing out from the 'lock and slinging back around to the hull. With movements fluid and sure, he clipped himself onto a nearby shroud and began pulling himself toward us. The silvery pressure skin must have been borrowed from Santa Ana's stores, while the black tactical vest and drop holster came from his own gear locker, no doubt. I smiled a little, and inched back away from the gap in the hull.

"I see you," he said, gravelly voice showing its falsity in the middle word. He struggled a little, by the sound of it. "No use running, there's nowhere to go."

I kept pulling back, wanting to draw him up between me and Karyn. If I held his attention, she could slip back inside, so long as the vertigo didn't paralyze her. The further she stayed from him, the better. As though following my private script, he pulled himself toward and across the gap without looking down, eyes fixed on me.

But then he stopped. I stood on the hull, boots holding me to the surface through some quasi-magnetic means I could never understand. He levered himself up to face me, thirty meters away, on the near edge of the gap. Karyn could not have been more than a meter or two from him, right "below" his feet.

"What's your move, jarhead?" he asked, right hand resting on the butt of his pistol. I wondered, for a moment, if it was vacuum-rated. My hands floated near my waist, empty, with nothing to grab more lethal than a utility knife. Nothing I could hurl, with any certainty, in microgravity.

"I told you, you have to come get me."

"What kind of stupid do you think I am?"

"Say again?"

"You're enhanced, dummy. It's all over the wanted lists. Super-strength, lightning speed, mad agility. Soon as I'm in your reach, I'm dead and I know it."

"I wouldn't say that you'd be dead, exactly."

"Whatever. We're going to find another way to do this."

"Gonna shoot me?"

"If I have to."

I reached down and unclipped the lifeline from my belt. "Do so, and I'll be spinning off into space before you can get to me. No body, no bounty, right?"

His fingers flexed on the pistol. Sunlight broke the horizon, ahead of me, and I could see the line of light start to draw up from the far end of the station. Solar collectors down on that end shivered a little in the glare. This side of the station would be facing the sun for half of our trip through the daylight. I wondered how long I could delay him.

"Alright, you freak, listen up. If you don't come along quietly, I'm going to make sure your doubly freakish girlfriend lives in Hell. You hear me? I'll find her, take her back down the gravity well, and make sure she feels every little bit of it on her fragile little brain. Come along nicely, and I see no reason why she can't stay up here with all the other sickos."

“And if I keep standing here?”

“Then I’ll start hunting for her now.”

“All right,” I said, reaching for the lifeline which still floated where I had left it. The snap of it locking back in shivered through my belt and against my skin. I smiled a little to myself. In the vacuum of space, without the pressure and warmth of air, the body loses much of the sensory capability available to it. Some line about that had kicked off our Orbital Combat Environment training, years ago, and the craziest thing was to see it in action. Behind the bounty hunter, Karyn pushed herself out of the gap and over to the far side, lifeline dangling free. She clipped herself to a shroud there near the edge, now able to get away from our little stand-off. The move would have been much harder in an atmosphere, with the tiny sounds and disturbed air of movement giving aware people the “sense” that someone else was nearby. But she had moved carefully, and I had riveted the hunter’s attention.

“Okay, now come this way,” he said, and I complied with a deliberation that I hoped would put him at ease. Karyn needed time to get away. But she appeared not to be moving. I worried about a blackout for a moment, until I saw her hands moving at her belt. My heart leapt into my throat.

I jerked my chin up, trying to make sure he saw me looking at him. But the move backfired. He started to turn, to look behind him. I pushed off, lunging toward him, just as Karyn made the same move.

The knife came around in a quick sweep, away from Karyn’s belt and toward the bounty hunter. He wanted to twist away, but I know he saw me coming toward him. She got there first. The utility knife slipped right through the tactical vest and his pressure skin square in the small of his back. He arched and screamed, unable to throw himself away from the strike because his boots remained firmly anchored. I hit him square in the chest a second later, almost folding him in half backwards.

Karyn let go of the knife and pushed herself away, coming to the end of her tether and swinging further from her victim. I pulled my feet over with the momentum of my lunge and twisted into a feet-first drop toward the other side of the gap. I hit squarely on the line

between night and day, my tether keeping me from going all the way into sunlight. The day overtook me anyway, and the thermals kicked out, replaced by cooling as the suit compensated for what the silvery surface did not reflect. I twisted around as the terminator line overtook the bounty hunter. The black vest which had no doubt looked so cool in the tactical gear shop outside of Pendleton or Benning or Hood now started to absorb heat. Synthetics which could stand very high temperatures nonetheless absorbed the heat and kept it trapped against his body.

I was close enough to see the panic on his face as the cooling started to fail. He twisted around to try to get out of the sun, showing off the knife still lodged in his spine. His legs hung useless, clearly under no control of his no matter how much he thrashed around. The suit kept a tight seal around the cut, as it should, and I doubt he would bleed much from where Karyn had stabbed him.

But he was dead, just the same.

Shock prevented him from getting himself under control enough to get into the shade. The heat would kill him in a minute or two.

I couldn’t watch.

Tears stung my eyes, and I twisted back toward the airlock. Karyn had twisted the shroud when she clipped to it so that her leap would not send her zinging off down the hull. I switched her over to the line I had clipped to, then reeled her in. Holding her in one arm, I pulled us back toward the ‘lock. She gazed over my shoulder, where the bounty hunter no doubt continued his dance of death.

Too many. Too many friends had died in too many stinking holes, I couldn’t even watch an enemy die, a man who cared as little for my life as much as he loved his own. Much less could I watch Karyn die.

“Are we safe?” she asked.

“For the moment,” I replied.

So I made this choice, to abandon my country, to commit treason by stealing the weapon that is my body, just to give Karyn that chance at life. For myself, there would be no peace, so long as they sent people like him after me. But for my part, I could do nothing more about it than weather the storm. ☺

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And here we are, at the end of it all, with Campbell Award winner Elizabeth Bear to show us the way out...and possibly the way back in.

The Inevitable Heat Death of the Universe

BY ELIZABETH BEAR

She cuts him from the belly of a shark.

If this were another kind of story, I should now tell you, fashionably, that the shark is not a shark. That she is not a she and he is not a he. That your language and symbology do not suffice for my purposes, and so I am driven to speak in metaphor, to construct three-dimensional approximations of ten-dimensional realities. That you are inadequate to the task of comprehension.

Poppycock.

You are a God.

The shark is a shark. A Great White, *Carcharodon carcharias*, the sublime killer. It is a blind evolutionary shot-in-the-dark, a primitive entity unchanged except in detail for—by the time of our narrative—billions of years.

It is a monster wonderful in its adequacy: the ultimate consumer. So simple in construction: over eighteen feet long, pallid on the belly and shades of gray above, in general form comprised of two blunt-ended, streamlined, flexible, muscular and cartilaginous cones. One is squat and one is tapered. They are joined together base to base.

It is a sort of meat ramjet. Water runs through, carrying oxygen, which is transferred to the blood by a primitive gill arrangement. At the tapered end are genitalia and propulsion. At the thick end are lousy eyesight, phenomenal olfactory and electrical senses, and teeth.

In the middle is six meters of muscle and an appetite.

Beginner's luck; a perfect ten.

◆◆◆

They are the last creatures in the universe, he and she and the shark. The real world, outside, is running down, and the world they inhabit is a false, constructed world.

But it is a real shark. Fishy blood slimes her hands as she slits its belly with the back-curve of knives that are a part of her, extruded from her hands at need. She grows extra arms as convenient, to hold the wound open while she drags him free.

The shark's skin is silky-slick and sandpaper-rough simultaneously, scraping layers of material from the palms of her hands. The serrations on her blades are like those of the shark's teeth, ragged jags meshing like the rollers of a thresher.

There had been three living things left in their world. Now there are two.

◆◆◆

She cuts him from the belly of a shark. Allowing himself to be swallowed was the easiest way to beach and kill the monster, which for humane reasons must be dead before the next stage of their plan.

He stands up reefed in gnawed car tires and bits of bungee cord, and picks rubber seaweed from his teeth. They are alone on a boat in a sea like a sunset mirror. The sky overhead is gray metal, and a red sun blazes in it. It is a false sun, but it is all they have.

They have carefully hoarded this space, this fragment of creation, until the very end. They have one more task to fulfill.

As for him, how can he survive being swallowed by a shark? If entropy itself comes along and eats you, breaks you down, spreads you out thin in a uniform dispersal permeating its meat and cartilage—if it consumes,

if it digests you—surely that’s the end? Entropy always wins.

Final peace in the restless belly of a shark, nature’s perpetual motion machine. Normally, it would be the end. But he is immortal, and he cannot die.



There, under the false and dying sun, becalmed on a make-believe sea, they do not make love. She is a lesbian. He is sworn to a celibate priesthood. They are both sterile, in any case. They are immortal, but their seed has been more fortunate.

Instead, he picks the acid-etched rubber and bits of diode from his hair and then dives into the tepid sea. The first splash washes the shark’s blood and fluids away.

The water he strokes through is stagnant, insipid. The only heartbeat it has known in lifetimes is the shark’s. And now that the shark’s is stilled, it won’t know the man’s. His heart does not beat. Where blood and bone once grew is a perfect replica, a microscopic latticework of infinitesimal machines.

He dives for the bottom. He does not need to breathe.

This desolate sea is little enough, but it is all there is. Outside the habitat, outside the sea and the sun and the boat and the gape-bellied corpse of the shark, outside of the woman and the man, nothing remains.

Or not nothing, precisely. But rather, an infinite, entropic sea of thermodynamic oatmeal. A few degrees above absolute zero, a few scattered atoms more populated than absolute vacuum. Even a transfinite amount of stuff makes a pretty thin layer when you spread it over an infinite amount of space.

Suffice it to say there is no place anyplace out there; every bit of it is indistinguishable. Uniform.

The universe has been digested.

While the man swims, the woman repairs the shark.



She doesn’t use needles and thread, lasers or scalpels. She has tools that are her hands, her body. They will enter the shark as they entered her, millennia ago, and remake the shark as they remade her, until it is no longer a consuming machine made of muscle and sinew, but a consuming machine made of machines.

They are infinitesimal, but they devour the shark in instants. As they consume it, they take on its properties—the perfect jaws, the perfect strength, the slick-sharp hide. The shark, mercifully dead, feels no pain.

The woman is more or less humane.

When the machines reach the animal’s brain, they assume its perfect appetite as well. Every fishy thought. Every animal impulse, every benthic memory, are merely electrical patterns flickering dark in already-decaying flesh. They are consumed before they can vanish.

The shark reanimates hungry.

She heaves it over the side with her six or eight arms, into the false, dead sea, where the man awaits it. It swims for him, driven by a hunger hard to comprehend—a ceaseless, devouring compulsion. And now it can eat anything. The water that once streamed its gills in life-giving oxygen is sustenance, now, and the shark builds more shark-stuff to incorporate it.

The man turns to meet it and holds up his hands.

When its jaws close, they are one.



The being that results when the shark and the man unify, their machine-memories interlinking, has the shark’s power, its will, its insistent need. Its purpose.

The man gives it language, and knowledge, and will. It begins with the false world, then—the sea and the ship, and the gray metal sky, and the make-believe sun. These are tangible.

The woman, like the man, like the shark-that-has-become, is immortal, and she cannot die.

The shark will consume her last of all.



Consider the shark. An engine for converting meat into motion. Motion generates heat. Heat is entropy. Entropy is the grand running-down of the clock that is the universe.

The shark-that-has-become does nothing but eat. Time is irrelevant. What now the puny unwindings of planet and primary, of star and galaxy? There is no night. There is no day.

There are only the teeth of the shark, vacuuming the cosmos. Enormous electromagnetic webs spin out from its ever-growing maw, sweeping sparse dust and heat into its vasty gullet. The shark grows towards infinity.

The dead universe is swept.

The woman follows.



You are a God. For forty hundred thousand million days and forty hundred thousand million nights, the shark carries you under its unbeating heart. And when all space lie clean and empty, polished and waiting, you turn to her. You will consume her, last of all.

There will be nothing when she is gone. The entire universe will have passed down your throat, and even your appetite must be assuaged. And if it is not, you will devour yourself.

A machine can manage that.

You wonder what it will be like not to hunger, for a while.



But as you turn to swallow her, she holds up her hand. Her small, delicate hand that compasses galaxies—or could, if there were any left to compass.

Now, it cups the inverse glow of a naked singularity, as carefully hoarded as the shark, as the false-world that was the first thing to fall to the shark-that-has-become. She casts it before you, round and rolling, no bigger than a mustard seed.

You lunge. It's hard and heavy going down, and you gulp it sharply. A moment later, she follows, a more delicate mouthful, consumed at leisure.

She joins the man and the shark in your consciousness. And it is her knowledge that calms you as you

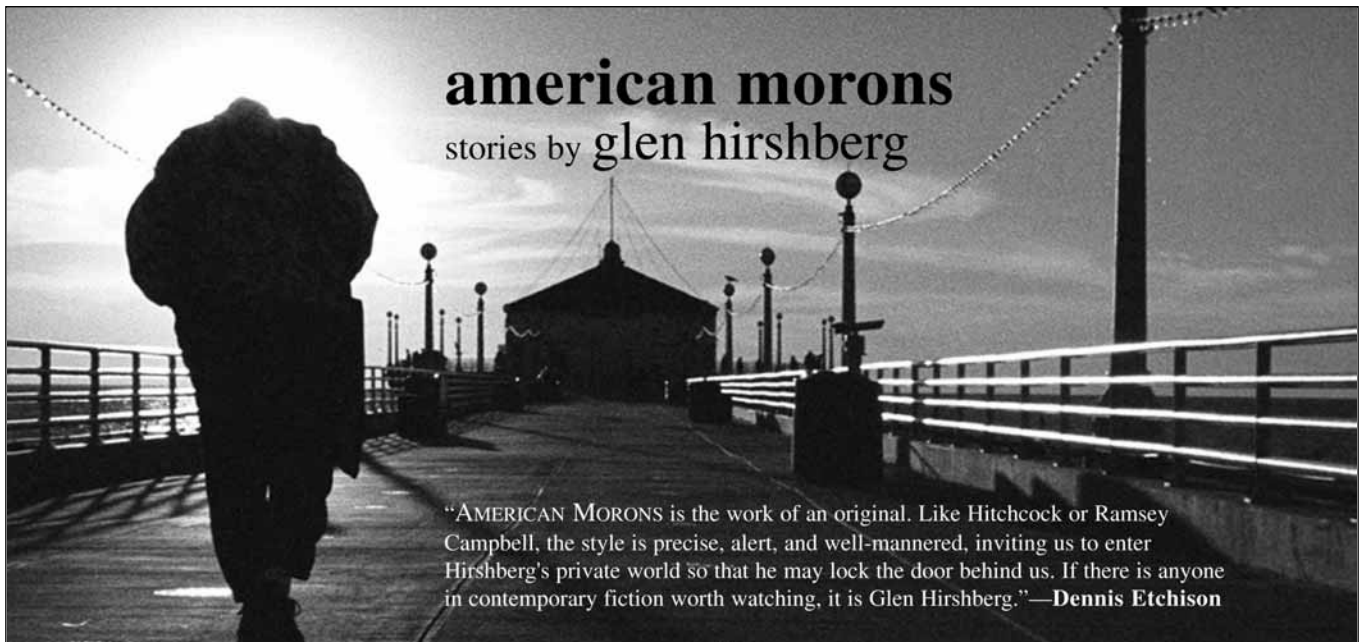
fall into the singularity you've swallowed, as you—the whole universe of you—is compacted down, swept clean, packed tight.

When you have all fallen in on yourself, she says, there will be a grand and a messy explosion. Shrapnel, chunks and blobs and incandescent energy. The heat and the fires of creation.

The promise of rebirth.

But for now, collapsing, the shark has consumed all there is to consume. The shark is a perfect machine.

And at the end of the world the shark is happy, after all. ☺



"AMERICAN MORONS is the work of an original. Like Hitchcock or Ramsey Campbell, the style is precise, alert, and well-mannered, inviting us to enter Hirshberg's private world so that he may lock the door behind us. If there is anyone in contemporary fiction worth watching, it is Glen Hirshberg."—Dennis Etchison

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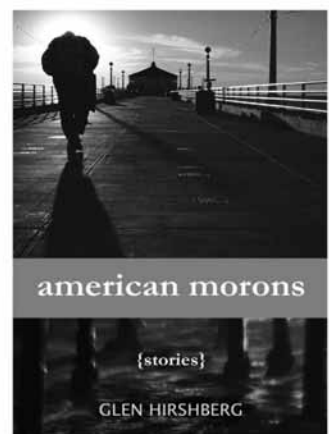
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Editor's Afterword

BY JOHN SCALZI

Let me tell you what happened every single time I told a writer I was planning to edit a magazine on the theme of science fiction clichés. Every time I mentioned it to a writer, their eyebrows would shoot up, they'd get a smirky little lopsided grin, and behind their eyeballs you could see the little men inside their head pressing the pleasure buttons with gleeful abandon. Not once did a writer frown. Not once did a writer say "That's a really stupid idea." Not even once did a writer ask "For God's sake, why?!?" in a stupefied tone of voice. Not *once*.

Here's why: Because just about every writer out there has a story they would dearly love to do but could never justify actually writing, because its very beating heart is a cliché so old and worn out that there would be no chance of actually selling it—clichés so advanced in years that even Hugo Gernsback would send back the story with a handwritten note: "Look, kid. It's been *done*." And now, finally, an excuse to bang that story out! It's like Christmas!

And off these writers would go, merrily, to type their little treasures to life. You can say what you will about the quality of the stories in this magazine (I happen to think they're good, which is why I bought them), but here's one thing you can't deny. These stories that you read here today? These stories were *loved* by their creators. Oh yes, indeed. And you can sense the delight as you read them; some of the writers were so excited at being able to play with clichés that, as with potato chips, they couldn't stop at one (indeed, Allen Steele's piece may now hold the world record for largest number of science fiction clichés jammed into the smallest space—a record the no doubt proud Mr. Steele is likely to carry until the heat death of the universe, lovingly described by Elizabeth Bear in her story. A grateful nation salutes you, Mr. Steele).

But while we acknowledge—and celebrate!—the over-abundance of science fiction clichés in this issue of *Subterranean*, I would also ask you to note the cleverness of their settings. These stories, if I may take a moment of pride in my editorial selection, not only played with clichés but also did new things with them. You got what you expected—Mars! Time Travel! The Last Man on Earth!—but then you got things you didn't. Chris Roberson's "Last" is one of my favorite examples of this dynamic in action here: it's about the last man on the planet, and just when you've settled in to that narrative, Roberson yanks out the rug. It's a fine example of using

a cliché not obviously but strategically, and in the process giving you more than you signed on for.

He's not the only one obviously, and his way of working the cliché is just one out of many. Jo Walton worked the cliché of the thinking computer by giving it a surprising context; Nick Sagan uses an unconventional story format (script notes!) to put a tasty spin on a first contact tale. Dean Cochran's story relies on a cliché as in-joke for a clue in an industrial accident. All of the writers here went out of their way to make their clichés fresh by any means necessary. These are writers using clichés not as crutches but as tools to build fine stories. I'm happy to have been able to help get these stories out to the rest of you.

There's another thing about this particular edition of *Subterranean* that I'm also proud of. This edition is well-populated by writers whose names are already familiar and celebrated in the SF/F field and newer writers who are now making their names in the genre—a line-up of writers I'd happily field against any other magazine out there. But we've also gone out of our way to make sure that some of the stories you read here are from voices you haven't heard before. Four authors are making their professional SF debuts in this issue, and I couldn't be more proud to be the editor who gets to introduce you to the work of Dean Cochran, David Klecha, Ann Leckie and Rachel Swirsky. This won't be the last you hear of these folks, I'm sure.

And now, to close on a bit of a cliché, let me offer a few acknowledgments, with thanks: First to Bill Schafer and the *Subterranean* crew for letting me drive the magazine for a spell; hopefully I've gotten it back to them without dings and scratches. Second, to Anne KG Murphy for frontline and first-rate beta-reading and copyediting. Third to the non-fiction contributors John Joseph Adams and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, for offering an editorial point of view on clichés which will actually be useful to aspiring writers (because not every editor is actually going to want clichés, you know). Fourth to all the writers who contributed to this issue: You're beautiful and I want to have your babies. Fifth to everyone who submitted: If I had space, I could have run several more issues with the material I was sent. Culling it down was actually damn painful.

Finally, my thanks to you for reading. I hope you've enjoyed these stories—and their clichés—as much as I have. ☺

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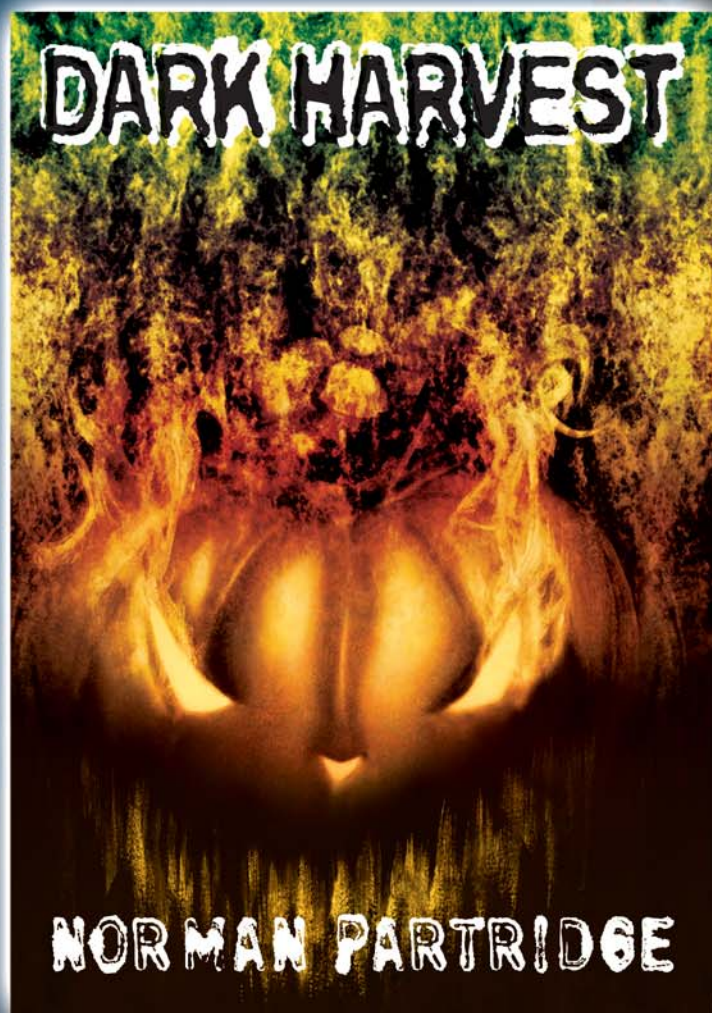
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Mitch Crenshaw and his gang burn rubber in a street rod with Gorgon headlights... Pete McCormick's on the move with a stolen .45... and a hunted girl is out there, too, making her break on the one night of the year when no rules apply. You're running with them, threading your own path through danger and moonlight, shadowing a sadistic cop and packs of brutal teenagers who'll attack anyone who gets in their way. Because this is your town. You understand its secrets, and you want a ringside seat on the night it all comes tumbling down.

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Shipping Halloween 2006

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