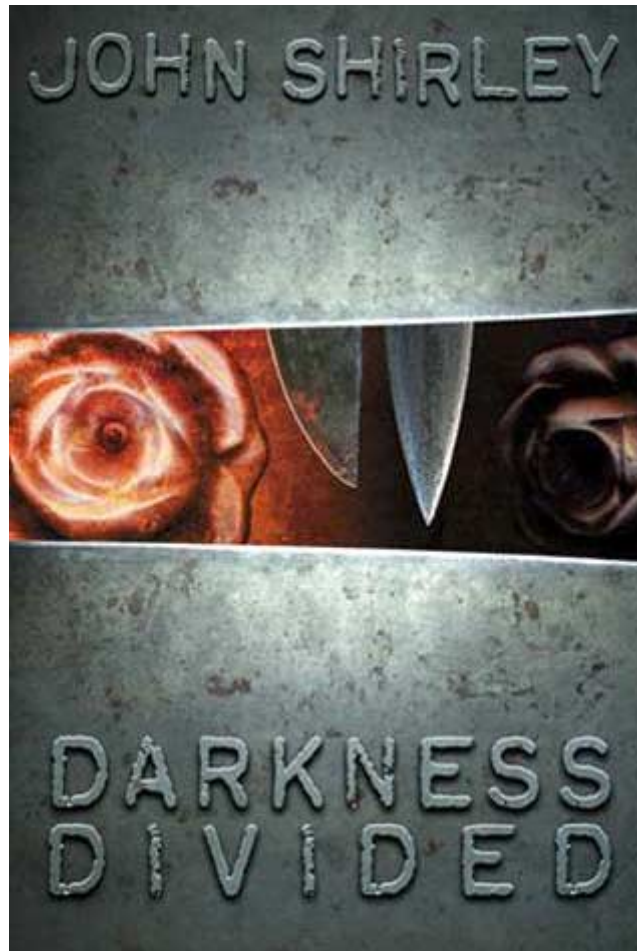


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“MY VICTIM”
By John Shirley



A special short story from the new John Shirley collection, [DARKNESS DIVIDED](#), with an introduction by **Poppy Z. Brite**.



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"A writer whose daring and originality continue to astonish." --
Publishers Weekly

About John Shirley and *Darkness Divided*



DARKNESS DIVIDED by John Shirley
(with an introduction by Poppy Z. Brite)

ISBN: 158881016X

Hardcover 352 pages - 6.25" X 9.5"

Direct Price \$29.95, (free shipping on USA web orders)

Darkness can be divided--it can be split like an atom, and in it can be found a destructive fire--or light. Light, too, can be folded into darkness. The stories brought to light in John Shirley's stunning new collection *Darkness Divided* are presented in two sections: one featuring stories set in the present, or the past, the other set in myriad futures. These dark tales of new noir, science fiction, fantasy, and crime, demonstrate humankind's evolution from where we were and where we are, to where we have yet to be. Shadows are a current--a continuity--streaming from *'Til Now* into *And Soon*.

John Shirley incisively explores human nature and the pitch-black streak within the soul that each of us fears. The twenty-two excursions collected here divide the darkness with scalpel-like precision, daring you to peek inside. In these divided shadows, in the shift of diffuse light and occlusion, things move--things that aren't there. There you will find your own id, the dark side of your own imagination.

JOHN SHIRLEY is the author of a great many novels and collections of short stories, and was one of two screenwriters of *The Crow*.

Shirley's novels include *Wetbones*, *City Come A-Walkin'*, *Eclipse*, *Eclipse Penumbra*, *Eclipse Corona*, *Silicon Embrace*, *The View From Hell*, and *Demons*. He is the winner of the Bram Stoker Award for best story collection, *Black Butterflies*, which was chosen by *Publishers Weekly* for its annual list of "best books of the year." ([John Shirley authorized site](#))

John Shirley's collection *Darkness Divided* could be be subtitled "Tales of Mystery and the Imagination" and, in fact, author John Shirley has been called "the postmodern Poe." Like Poe, Shirley peers into the shadows where -- in the shift of diffuse light and occlusion -- you find your own id, the dark side of your own imagination.

"Look," says Shirley, "you wake up on this planet and you're told you're a human being who lives on a globe circling a gigantic ball of fire in an infinite universe containing billions of such balls of fire (and maybe there are other thinking beings out there and maybe not, maybe we're alone, who knows); unless your parents are embarrassingly ignorant, you're told you're descended from tree dwelling primates; and you're told you're here to go to school, work at mostly-meaningless tasks for much of your life, have some 'fun' and 'pleasure', accumulate artifacts and symbolic trading currency, get married, bring more human beings to this globe circling the big ball of fire, age, give your own human sprouts some advice on how to do all those things, and then quietly deteriorate without complaints or whining in, if you're lucky, a storage box called an 'old folks home'; and die. Now you can buy into that, and die wondering, WHAT WAS THAT? or you can try to see what else is there; you can open up to something else; you can turn your eyes from the mesmerizing strings of lightbulbs circling the signs...and

look into the darkness. When you first look into the darkness, you can't see much -- but pretty soon, as you keep looking, your eyes get adjusted. Then you start to see things moving out there...and you begin to realize..."

He leaves it there. It's up to each of us to determine what's moving in the darkness. Shirley's only the guide, the opener of the doors of perception.

The INTRODUCTION to DARKNESS DIVIDED

A few words from bestselling writer, Poppy Z. Brite

INTRODUCTION

With few exceptions, every writer in every field would like to be considered *sui generis*, unclassifiable, reinventing his own eponymous genre every time he puts pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. Very few are actually capable of this. John Shirley seems to achieve it with every story he writes.

When you think of John Shirley, you may think gonzo, cyberpunk, Subgenius. Probably you don't think first of his vivid, expertly drawn characters, and that's a shame. Sometimes a writer's flashy or controversial reputation can obscure his truer skills. Philip K. Dick is one example that comes readily to mind. John Shirley is another. Both these writers' work is populated by unforgettable characters trapped (often trapping themselves) in inescapable circumstances, which is pretty much the essence of a great story. From the young predator-in-training (and his equally well-delineated victim) of "My Victim" to the broken children of "Tricentennial," all of these characters have not just obvious back stories but entire *lives*, of which these tales are clean-cut but still bleeding slices.

Shirley's work asks brutal questions about things like addiction and responsibility. Once a thing has its hooks in us, are we ever able to get free of those hooks entirely? How much flesh do we leave on them? And didn't we willingly swallow the shiny, baited hooks in the first place?

There are two collaborations here. In my opinion, collaboration is one true test of a writer's stylistic strength. Does his voice come through clearly, without seams but also without drowning out that of his collaborator? In both cases, Shirley's voice does—and these collaborations with William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, either of whom might easily overshadow a lesser writer.

I first encountered John Shirley's work in one of the *Hot Blood* erotic horror anthologies. I always felt that these anthologies were wildly uneven, but that there was invariably at least one story that was worth the whole price of admission. In this case it was Shirley's "Pearldoll." There were other good stories in the volume, but "Pearldoll" was the one that made me say, "OK, I'm glad I spent the money on this book." You now hold in your hands an entire collection of Shirley's stories, any one of which is well worth the whole price of admission. I hope you enjoy them as much as I have.

Poppy Z. Brite
New Orleans, November 2000

From John Shirley's newest collection of short stories, DARKNESS DIVIDED, available now from Stealth Press. Get the book now – [click here](#)

“MY VICTIM”

By John Shirley

I'm watching my victim set up a shot, in the crooked, crosshatch shadow of the Santa Monica beach boardwalk. My victim is Corey Hart, early thirties, lean, with nervous movements that suddenly vanish when he says “Action!” Then, during the shooting he becomes still as a lizard relying on its camouflage; he wears a white short-sleeved shirt, khaki pants, Converse high tops that don't quite go with the pants, glasses that would be horn-rim but for transparent frames; there's a clipboard under his arm as he talks to the cameraman.

On this waning September day there are only four people in his crew, a chubby, earnest black cameraman in an alligator shirt; two acned, long-necked college interns, boy and girl, as production assistants, and a bored-looking middle-aged white guy carrying the sound-recording gear, microphone boom in his hand.

A group of, sickly teenagers, the runaways this documentary is about, stand in the shadows of the pylons under the boardwalk, waiting to be called for camera interviews. The word is, this guy will pay them \$20 each to talk for a few minutes. Other kids are sitting with their back to us on the yellow sand, looking out to sea as they pass a joint, the wavelets sticking dirty foam to their feet.

I'm sitting with my arms around my knees, about twenty yards behind my victim; I'm basking in the late afternoon sun, watching him openly sometimes, other times appearing to let my attention wander; my mouth slack, eyes unfocused, so that I'm just another gawker with nothing else to do. I'm sitting on a faded Universal Studios towel, barefoot, wearing grimy, shapeless clothes I'd never ordinarily wear; got a jug of the cheapest Gallo, half empty. Like I'd ever drink Gallo: I poured half of it out before I came. Normally I'm tailored; normally I drink mostly imported cabernets. Even as an undergrad, last year in the frat, I drank only the best. The frat brothers gave me a lot of crap about it.

My brother Jeremy's first victim is not really as interesting as mine. I'm in the studying phase, following my victim, never letting him know I'm watching him, and it's like studying a Frank Lloyd Wright building, with all its levels and spaces—whereas Jeremy's victim, hell, it's equivalent to studying a midwestern high school gym. I mean, Jeremy's victim has one big ambition: to be the owner of a video arcade. *My* victim? Mine is a guy who makes documentary movies about street poets and all kinds of other stuff. He even won an award for one of his films. Now, *there's* someone worth killing.

The film maker and his crew never even glanced at me, when I first came over and sat down with my towel and jug. It occurs to me now that the disguise might yet be a problem—I might seem colorful enough for them to want to film me, for a quick background shot of other people on the beach: part of the seamy atmosphere these beach-bum kids live in, or something. If they take any notice of me, like they might want to film me, I'll walk away.

It's one of the *Principles of Safe Victimization*. A PSV, my father calls it. He made us memorize the Principles—they aren't written down, that'd be bad security. The operating PSV in this case is pretty obvious: don't be seen stalking the victim. If you're going to

be visible, blend into the background. Be anonymous, but make that anonymity different every time.

You don't want a detective locating you through what Dad calls "the incremental use of collateral factors," for example non-connected witnesses, like somebody watching from the boardwalk, the detective nudging them into remembering "a kind of ordinary looking guy, except he was sort of grimy, with a bottle of wine, watching the documentary people the whole time ..." And maybe the detective noticing a guy about the same height and weight and race also reported in the vicinity of the victim some other time. From there, the detective starts to put together a picture of a possible stalker: me.

Being truly, really anonymous, Dad says, is a great art.

Dad taught me to take mental notes, never to write anything down, or record anything. Never to use videotape. All that stuff can be used as evidence against you. It happened to Granddad: he kept a written journal, and they found it. It was cryptic, but still, it connected him with the victim. His big money connections got him off, but it was a near thing.

So I'm noting everything mentally; taking mental snapshots. Click: My victim has assistants, but no bodyguards. No one is expecting trouble—My Victim was chosen, partly, for having no enemies.

"There's a trade-off," Dad told me. "If he had no enemies, then his being killed stands out, and that's bad, it makes them look for someone anomalous, like you. If he had enemies then there's a good chance those enemies would be blamed instead of you, should you fall under suspicion. That'd be good. But...the Principle that applies here is of never letting yourself be *known* to be in the victim's life—so you can't possibly fall under suspicion no matter what. As far as anyone knows, in the context of your victim, you don't exist. They can't suspect someone who doesn't exist. And a guy who has no

enemies is not looking around, he has no bodyguards looking around, no paranoid hirelings. And that's worth more than having somebody who can be blamed. It's worth way more, son."

Another mental snapshot. Click: my victim has an easy, comfortable way with strangers. He's now interviewing one of the teenagers, a slack-faced kid whose eyes keep wandering to anything but Corey.

Corey being comfortable with strangers means—if that comfort extends to all strangers and not just interviewees—that I might be able to talk my way into his house, say, on one pretext or another, if I'm sure he's alone. To murder him, of course. To murder him in his home, which is out in the country, in privacy.

Click: he's drinking a can of *Coors Lite* as he talks to the guy. Drinks *mildly* on the job, three cans a day: obvious poisoning applications. Drinking on the job and from a beer he's packed in a cooler, at home, too, gives me another arena for a possible poisoning.

Dad recommends poisoning. You don't get blood on you; you don't have to be there when your victim dies, which of course means less opportunity for some haphazard, unexpected witness (Fifth *Principle of Safe Victimization*: always expect an unexpected witness) to tie you into the Execution Zone.

Poison sounds good to me too. Jeremy, now, wants to kill his victim with a gun. Dad will allow it, but doesn't advise it. In fact I can see he finds it distasteful. I tried to tell this to Jeremy when we went horseback riding along the beach north of Malibu, the day after his birthday.

"Dude," I said to my brother, "it's not just that he doesn't like the mess and it doesn't matter how careful you are not to get blood on you or to use an untraceable gun or to take care with the fingerprints

or whatever. The whole point is not identifying with the killing. If you want to use a gun, it means you might like killing just for killing. And that's bullshit. It's not about liking or not liking."

"Oh come on," Jeremy said. He's a short, chunky, blue-eyed guy with Mom's curly shiny black hair. He carries himself like a pimp entering a pool-hall, Dad told me once, when he was pissed at Jeremy:

High-stepping arrogance. But that's how Jeremy moves through the world. Thinks he's way adult by now but he isn't. "We get all this training so we can destroy people, so we can kill—you're supposed to like what you're good at. Dad even said so. 'Love this art' he said."

"The art is the preparation, the not-getting-caught, the chess game of it—like you're playing chess with all the cops in the world at once.

It's not the moment, the actual act of making the victim dead. That's why he doesn't let us kill girls, man. You might ..."

I broke off. I could tell he didn't like the way this was coming out.

"I might what?"

"Not you. I mean anyone. Anyone might get off on that—Dad says there's some kind of sexual thing when you kill any kind of female. It's all subconscious."

"Hey bro, Freud was discredited."

He's proud of getting a 3.8 majoring in psych his sophomore year: Psychology as a preparation for going into marketing later. Behaviorism.

We're both heading for the best MBAs we can get, of course. Dad and the family made that part of the Sworn Tradition, in the '80s. Given my choice I'd have been an American Lit major, but Sworn is Sworn.

"It's not Freud, its more like sociobiology or something. Or—I don't know, I just know there's automatically a sexual...asexual part to it."

I'd started to say "sexual component" but said "sexual part" instead because, with Jeremy, if you use a phrase like "sexual component" he'll scowl and come back at you with something like "the elasticity of post-structuralism," some string of ten dollar words that won't mean a whole lot. He's competitive like that. Especially in the context of talking about Dad. He's always worried more about impressing Dad.

"I don't give a goddamn about that," he said. "I kill who I'm assigned to kill. If it's going to be male, fine, whatever. But don't say I'm a fag if I happen to...to love the art of it."

"What? No, I wasn't going that way at all—I'm talking about identification with the killing. It's as important to not like the killing *particularly* as it is not to care about the victim."

"Oh come on. Nothing's more important than not identifying with the victim. That's primo, that's tops. Otherwise you blow everything. That's the whole point of doing it in the first place."

I decided to let it drop. He was stating the obvious; he wasn't getting the subtle, and the art of victimization is subtle. "Subtle understanding of setting and situation is what keeps a man from being caught," Dad had told me.

Dad killed three Random Personal Victims, chosen at twenty year intervals. Sometimes, see, you need more than one. He says you'll

know if you need another one; if you need to re-commit. It may be a man only needs one Random Personal Victim. I never asked Dad why he needed three, but I have my suspicions. I figure I'll only need the one—because I'll know I'm killing various other people, routinely, as part of the business, anyway. It's all about not hiding from that knowledge. Having the courage to do *anything* necessary. People use the phrase “moral courage”; there's also such a thing as amoral courage.

But that day, all I said to Jeremy was, “Race you back to the limo, bigshot.”

And we did, raced the horses back to the beach parking lot where the limo was waiting. I let him win. The groom put the horses in the trailer behind the truck, and we got in the limo, and played Nintendo 64 in the back, all the way home to the winter house.

Now, in Santa Monica. The edges of shapes around us grow dull; colors become less colorful: dusk is coming. The shadows are reaching out from the pylons. Another young boy is talking to Corey's camera about how he likes living on the sand under the boardwalk, it's usually warm enough, it's never *too* warm, “and it don't smell too bad, and there's always some shit happening, somebody's got something, or they can figure out where to get something”, and he doesn't mind “renting” himself to some of the guys on the Venice muscle beach strip, some-times, “because, I mean, people ask me, and I go: Who cares? I mean, shit, whatever.”

I wonder how many thousands of years prostitutes have been saying that, in a thousand different languages. I had a good history prof, Mr. Delany, he really gives you a perspective. He doesn't know about the Sworn Tradition, though. No outsider does. But he knows about P-2, and the Cosa Nostra—.

But no—Cosa Nostra—that’s so very, very different. We don’t involve ourselves in crime, as people understand the word, apart from the Victims. We shear the sheep legally. And, too, the Sworn Tradition is all in one extensive family, or intertwined families, which is never something that can be entered by anyone outside the family, not even by marriage; you have to be a descendent of the original bloodlines, which was Northern Italian and Austrian. And still is. *Only* Northern Italian, and Austrian. *Only*. It goes back to just before the Renaissance; to the great Italian conspirators, some of whose names became household words. “Machiavelli was a simpering weakling,” my father once said, chuckling.

Anyway, our family doesn’t interfere in the broader outline of history, unless it serves us financially. It’s all about accruing wealth, of course. “What for others is crass materialism is for us a sacred trust,” Uncle Tino once said, after his third Remy. “If we worshipped a god, it would be toothy old Mammon.” But of course we worship nothing but “pleasure in survival, survival in pleasure.”

I am careful to appear to go to sleep on the sand, with my back to my Victim; to be sure he’s gone before I leave. Sixth sub-PSV:
Movement calls attention.

Dad began eradicating my “non-familial empathy” early, very early. Three years old.

“I wish to God my Father had started me early,” he said, when I asked him about it five, six years later. I was around nine. Asked him, with a sudden and uncharacteristic boldness, why he’d made me kill my Lhasa puppy with the piano wire when I was three. On one level I knew why—he’d explained it to me, he’d been training me all along—but then again I didn’t know; in some other way, some deeper way, I didn’t understand, not then.

I had expected the question to make him angry. But instead he

began, “I wish my Father ...” He broke off and shook his head. He got that odd sort of ghostly look in his eyes, at such moments. I’m only beginning to understand that look.

We were on the back lawn, between the topiaries and the main house of our summer place in Eddington, England; we were watching the trainer work with the hunting dog, in the early morning. The sun was pulling the dew into gossamer streamers. Father was standing there with his hands in his pockets. I had heard one of his hired wives screaming with almost convincing joy from the guest house the night before and thought I’d see him pleased this morning, but he looked almost in grief.

“You see, my father didn’t start me until I was twelve, son, and by then a man has too many opportunities to create the capacity for non-familial bonding. And it was hard when he made me kill my little brother.”

I looked at him in real shock: Silent and resonant, I can still feel it, more than a decade later.

He smiled wearily. “Yes. He was only four. Well, you understand: He had spina bifida. He could not have been allowed to reproduce. He...was a symbol of family decay—so long as he lived. But once dead, he was, you might say, transformed into a symbol of vitality: to cut away the sickly limb is to renew vitality. However ...” I remember his hand raised to express something inexpressable; a cryptic gesture, like signing for the deaf, but signing a non-word, something not found in any lexicon. “Somehow I had become identified with him, son...though I had been warned that his sickliness made him—we never told him this, of course—it made him non-family. And even within the family we permit only the Higher Bonding. The Higher Bonding is undertaken with a clear vision, and so it is provisional ...”

So in making me kill the puppy, my father was saving me from

what he'd suffered when he'd had to kill his brother by smothering him with a pillow, his father supervising. He was snuffing the candle of empathy for anything outside the Sworn, because that candle grew, over the years, unless you snuffed it early, snuffed it small. The pain was less, after that, and the forgetting, the annihilation of caring came easier.

Dad and I, that day, watched the trainer yank the dog up short on a choke chain. A sense of masculine communion with the trainer, with Dad.

That conversation on the lawn, more than a decade ago, is on my mind as I get out of a bus a few blocks west of downtown L.A. I can't drive myself here, or take a limo, of course, since I'm here to watch Corey. A cab driver would remember me.

Corey will be on the far side of the old, ragged park, near the reeking duck pond, interviewing runaways. Today I won't be close enough to be noticed. I'll watch through binoculars—

“Son?”

Dad is rolling down the window of his Porsche, at the curb just behind me. I'm surprised to see him so near a stalk-zone. He tilts his head, summoning me into the car. He's wearing a linen Armani sports jacket, collarless offwhite shirt, sunglasses. A classical music station plays on the car radio. He closes the windows of the car, as I sit beside him, turns on the air conditioning. “You're going to let him see you again, son?” he asks, looking across the park. Three cholo kids throw broken glass at plastic pop bottles bobbing in the pond.

“He won't see me. I'll use binoculars. Won't get within two hundred yards.”

“You might be noticed by someone in the park: a white guy, here, watching another white guy with binoculars.”

“Well, I have a way to do it, that ...”

“Whatever you’ve got in mind won’t work. Strikes me you’re taking a long time at this stage. Makes me wonder how serious you are.”

My mouth goes dry. “Um ...”

“We’ll talk about it another time. You know, your brother date-raped a girl, last night, at school. He might face charges.”

I look at him in real amazement. Why would Jeremy do that? He can have some of the finest women available. He gets laid all the time. And it’s so fundamental, not drawing attention to the family by breaking society’s laws.

He chuckles dourly. “I was just as surprised. Well, almost. He’s growing...undisciplined. It happens sometimes. It’s usually a genetic defect. We do have to struggle with inbreeding. When it happens, the unruliness has to be weeded out.”

I look at him. I made myself ask without a quaver, “Are you sure?”

“No, no I’m not. It could be an aberration. We can arrange for this thing to be smoothed over. A million, two million dollars spread out here and there. And if he reins himself in...It might not be necessary for you to prove yourself well and truly Sworn.”

I have felt it coming. I try to pretend that I was prepared. I want badly to swallow but I wouldn’t let myself. “But—it might be?”

Dad nods, looking at me. “You might have to kill your brother. Say it.”

I wet my lips so I could say it. “I might have to kill my brother.”

“Good. Sub Rosa, all this, of course. You don’t even know about the date-rape accusation.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“And son? I think, today, you will not follow your victim. It may be that your victim will not be this man Corey. It may be your brother instead. If it’s Corey—you won’t have to kill your brother. But for today—let the stalk-and-study go. Today doesn’t feel right for this...”

He taps the binocular case on its strap over my shoulder. I nod.

“I’ll give you a ride home.”

The crisis passes. My brother was truly penitent; but in a controlled way. Dad tells me I can go back to choosing The Moment with Corey. Picking the Execution Zone. Today, I’m watching my victim at the mall. And of course I’m looking very different from the way I looked on the beach. I come off young for my age: clean shaven and grunged out, I pass for a teenager who’s in the mall because there isn’t any other place to go.

My victim is in the sporting goods store, picking up a fresh supply of target arrows. Corey is one of these the Zen and the Art of Archery guys. I’ve been watching him for about two months—the limit of observation time, if you do it right—and I’ve seen him here twice before.

After he buys the arrows he goes to the tobacconist and gets some Balkan Sobranies; an expensive cigarette he only allows himself when he hits the target near enough the center. Never smokes except

during archery. He's a good archer, and I'm glad the *Principles* are totally opposed to giving the victim a square chance. He'd kill me sure.

At the range I have to be in complete concealment; there aren't enough people here for comfortable camouflage; he might well notice me. But concealment isn't hard, with lots of trees and brush around the range. The oak tree I'm squatting under still has most of its leaves, but the ones that have fallen crackle when I shift my weight from one hunkered leg to the other. Spiders squat in web tunnels, hundreds of webs like little fishing nets in the tangle of junipers that hides me. A bluejay screams like a British soccer fan overhead. It's getting on my nerves and I'd like to chuck a rock at it but I know better.

Soon I'm engrossed in watching Corey.

We're required to think of our victims by their first names. It's a deliberate invitation to empathy; a sort of test. *The victims are not to be thought of as 'it': think of them as three-dimensional, living breathing human beings, with parents and children and feelings. As former children. If this brings up a pang in you, then you're at the secondary stage in your Life-training.* And it's all the more reason you must kill the man.

I watch him choose an arrow from the quiver on the rack beside him; I watch him nock it, with the second-nature deftness of long practice; I watch him draw the bow and fire, and somehow it's all one movement even though there are two or three seconds between drawing and firing. The arrow flies to just outside the bullseye. He takes another arrow, nocks it, draws, seems to become very still, as still as the target, and lets fly. To either side of him other archers are cursing, chattering, laughing, muttering, squinting, tensing; in comparison Corey is a study in relaxed self-containment. This time his arrow strikes the bullseye, and he allows himself to light a

cigarette, to inhale once, deeply, before nocking, in a way, the cigarette, too, in the ashtray he's brought along.

After four more arrows, three striking the bullseye, the lady next to him—a big-assed, sourfaced woman with short clipped hair and a workshirt—asks him not to smoke anymore. His nod is almost a bow, and doesn't smoke any more. It doesn't interfere with his shooting, this abstention; it doesn't seem to make him tense, there's not even quiet irritation in his body language.

I let out a long, deep breath and shake my head in admiration. The guy really has something. Talent, skill, grace and imperturbability. Dignity.

I know, of course, that all the Victims have noticeable good qualities, or good people dependent on them. Sweet-looking children waiting at home, say. What's the point of trying to burn out empathy where none is likely to be generated? If you aren't instinctively reluctant to kill the victim, then he's probably not challenging enough. Of course, if you've got to the Fixity Point, the aim of our Lifetraining, where you can kill and *genuinely* feel nothing—feel nothing *and without repression*—then your killing is only a necessary ritual, an affirmation of the Sworn Tradition. And something more: it's the Tradition's hold over you, of course. Even if you become infected, diseased by “conscience”, you can't report the Tradition without reporting yourself. Not that you'd live long if you tried.

So I let myself feel the admiration for my victim. Repression makes a man “guilty”, and that makes him sick. He must kill randomly and consciously and this frees him from repercussions. So it is in theory. But sometimes I see that ghostliness around my father's eyes and wonder.

I think again that a guy like Corey, he's seriously worth killing: it

completes him, in a way. This guy, he really is like architecture: you can see the philosophy of the builder in the building's design. This guy blueprints his whole life according to some kind of philosophy. Zen, I think, or something like it. His documentaries are all about raising consciousness of the underprivileged and the lost. I tell myself that uncreation is an art form too.

I saw him with his girlfriend only once—a pretty Asian-American. She's studying film at NYU, back east, and they are being patient and faithful while they wait for her to get through it. They see each other when they can.

She's a feminist but somehow Corey is almost chivalrous around her without seeming to put her down with it. I still haven't figured out how he does it.

I remember feeling a real ache when they kissed. Because you could see him communicating something to her in the kiss. It's something I can't do. I'm allowed to have sex with the best call-girls in the world; at those prices, they'll kiss you, and with passion. You can like them—the expensive ones are educated and pretty and charming—and they can like you. But I'm not allowed to feel *close*, of course. It's against the Sworn Tradition. And when, from the select families, a wife is chosen for me, I am free to feel a passion for her; but to actually fall in love would be foolish. Her life with us is provisional, in so many ways.

I break off surveillance, and trudge through the woods, climb over a barbed wire fence to cross a field where cattle graze. My limbs feel heavy, somehow, and I don't understand why. An old man in a plaid shirt and work-boots, a cranky old rancher, pulls up in his truck and shouts at me to approach with my hands up, he's sick of people wandering over his land, he's going to press charges. I approach him and give him seven one hundred dollar bills, without a word. His mouth hanging open with surprise, he lets me go, just as wordless.

I walk down the gravel road to where the limo is waiting. The driver, of course, is an Initiated Servant. They're all Sworn, on their own level; picked very carefully. They are paid well for their loyalty, and usually retire with at least a million dollars after taxes.

Dad gets out of the limo. He must have come in his own white stretch, and switched over, waited here for me.

We walk down the road together, talking, hands in pockets. The driver is an old man from Corsica; he waits. He'd wait for days if he had to, and not make a sound.

Dad deepens the chill already gathering in my belly when he asks, "Son, why follow him to archery, again, after two months? Are you thinking of arranging an accident there? That'd be tricky. You'd have to be in complicity with someone ..."

Having anyone help you with the kill is, of course, forbidden; a grievous violation of both the *Principles of Safe Victimization* and the *Basic Articles of Understanding*.

"No, it's just general surveillance."

He looks at me. It's never any use lying to him.

"Well," I add, with an apologetic smile, "I guess I'm feeling pangs, feeling empathy, and I figure I have to *really* feel it before I can 'let the rose wither' ...I mean, you said don't suppress ..."

"Yes. But—not at two months. At one month, yes. But son—how long have you been feeling this thing?"

Another lie springs to mind. I dismiss it. "You're right. At least a month."

“So it’s gone beyond ‘letting the rose wither’. It’s stalling, son. You don’t want to kill him ...because *you really like him.*”

I feel the tears coming. My father doesn’t chasten me for the tears. He knows they’re tears of shame.

Corey is drinking *Coors Lite* as he sits on his redwood deck, out behind his two bedroom place at the end of a long, lonely road East of Thousand Oaks. He’s sitting in a wooden deck chair, writing a letter to his girlfriend. He always writes to her in his own handwriting, on stationery: Long letters in flowing freehand. He hasn’t looked closely at the can; hasn’t seen the needlehole in it, and after he takes another sip of the beer, he begins to choke. He lurches to his feet and flails toward the back door, trying to get to the bathroom, or the phone, I’ll never know which, and then he staggers once more, and he falls.

He is convulsing face-down, the pen gripped in his fist stabbing the redwood planks, his legs jerking, as I climb over the wooden railing and come to stand over him. I flip him over with my foot, so I can look into his face as he dies, as my father has ordered me to do.

There’s yellow foam around his lips. His mouth opens and closes soundlessly but it is his eyes that ask the question.

“You’d never understand why I killed you. But I will say I’m not the stranger you think I am.”

His head shakes, or maybe it’s convulsion, and the ancient, untraceable, traditional poison, which in our family we call only Number 317, moves inexorably into its final stage, and he shivers once, decisively, and stops breathing.

After a moment, tentatively feeling my inner self, I realize the “rose” is withering. I am becoming Fixed. It is a profound relief.

Father comes out of his place of concealment, on the far side of the rocks. Smiling. “Congratulations, son. Now, and only now, are you fit to run the world’s biggest multinational.” He embraces me. I feel nothing as he embraces me, except pride of accomplishment. The rose is withered.

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Stealth Press hopes you've enjoyed this Special Edition eChapbook of "My Victim" by John Shirley.



To find out more about John Shirley and his hardcover collection, DARKNESS DIVIDED, be sure and visit our web site at www.stealthpress.com -- and thank you.

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ABOUT STEALTH

What is Stealth Press?

Stealth Press is a book publisher with a new approach, which we call Direct Publishing.

How does Direct Publishing work?

Stealth Press publishes out-of-print, backlist titles, and select new titles in high-quality hardcover editions. The books can be sold directly to readers using innovative marketing techniques and the Internet to target the potential audience, build a customer base, and process orders. The books are shipped directly from us to the customer.

How is Stealth different from all the other new publishing companies?

There are a lot of other new models out there right now, so it is easiest to point out what Stealth Press is **NOT**. Because we publish "real books" in high-quality hardcover editions with new artwork, we are not a print-on-demand company (Lightning Source). Because we publish books from critically acclaimed authors with successful track records, we are not a vanity press (iUniverse, Xlibris). Because we publish physical books, we are not an e-book publisher (RocketBooks, eMatter, BiblioBytes).

Then Stealth is a small press focusing on producing a few titles each year or a specialty press issuing only a limited press run?

No, not at all. Stealth will be issuing a minimum of 40 titles by the end of 2001. Those titles will not be printed in a limited number. (Stealth, in some cases, will issue special signed limited editions as well, but there will always be a trade edition.) Nor will Stealth concentrate on only one genre or interest group.

What type of books will Stealth Press publish?

Our initial concentration has been on worthy out-of-print titles from all genres. Our editor-in-chief, Pat LoBrutto has thirty years experience in various editorial positions with major publishers. LoBrutto and our editorial board began obtaining titles over a year before our launch. Among our first releases are literary works, horror, thrillers, historical fiction, science fiction, and more: Morningstar by Peter Atkins, Under

Venus by Peter Straub, Jim Mundy by Robert Fowler, The Valkyrie Mandate by Robert Vaughn, Healer by F. Paul Wilson, Hotel Transylvania by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Orphans of the Sky by Robert Heinlein, and Flowers for Berlin by Noel Hynd.

Who founded Stealth and why?

Stealth was founded by Craig Spector, a bestselling author, in conjunction with WellspringFV corporation, a venture catalyst company, as a response to several trends in the industry. These include:

- Mergers and acquisitions by global conglomerates have resulted in previously independent major and minor publishers being absorbed into larger "parent" companies, with a resulting emphasis on immediate profit performance.
- Due to this focus on quick results, book publishing has become an "instant hits only" business where publishers are more concerned with immediate bestseller status than with building author audience share and long-term success.
- The emphasis on volume bestsellers and higher profit margins leads publishers to rotate midlist books out of print despite continuing sales.
- The relationship between author and publisher has sadly deteriorated to the point that each considers the other as little more than a necessity.
- For the first time, an author can interact and communicate with his readers cheaply and efficiently, using the Internet.

Give me some comparisons of Direct Publishing vs. Big Publishing?

Each year, thousands of titles are rotated out of print by major publishers. Many of these titles are selling, but are not selling *well enough* to be considered worthwhile by the "hits"-based publishing industry. Stealth's direct publishing model allows it to profitably sell these titles in quantities as low as 2500.

When an author's book is accepted by big publishing, s/he receives an advance against royalties from future book sales. The royalty scale will typically increase from 10% to 15% with ongoing book sales. The author receives an accounting of sales every six months, the royalties are reduced by reserves against bookstore returns, book club sales,

and promotional copies. In many cases, the only money an author will see from a book is the advance because it is taken out of print before the advance is recouped. Viewed another way, the advance royalty payment can be considered a high-interest-rate loan from the publisher to the author.

In direct publishing, a smaller advance is paid upon signing, but the author's royalties are paid monthly and s/he can even monitor book sales on the Stealth Web site. The author is encouraged to participate in the building of his fan base via events at the Stealth web site, which provides a means of furthering his career, increasing sales and a direct method of gauging success (a monthly check). Stealth has no sales reserves because it does not use the "consignment sales" model. Stealth Press pays its authors royalties at the high end of the royalty spectrum and includes authors in an innovative profit sharing plan designed to make them a part of Stealth's long term success.

Why would anyone care about another new Internet publishing venture?

The practices of the modern publishing industry have been built up over 200 years. Many of these practices are advantageous to publishers and retailers at the expense of authors and readers. Stealth's founders seized the opportunities afforded by the Internet and industry consolidation to change this equation. That is interesting to anyone who cares about the new economy and how it is changing most commercial enterprises, including publishing.

So is Stealth Press revolutionizing the publishing industry?

Although we'd love to claim that, we believe that technology and circumstance are revolutionizing the industry—with or without Stealth Press. We've developed a business model that thrives in the new economy, yet works with the time-tested publishing industry for the benefit of authors, readers, and, of course, books.

Check out our web site: <http://www.stealthpress.com/> with books from some of your favorites, including John Shirley, Peter Straub, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, F. Paul Wilson, Craig Spector, Peter Atkins, Dennis Etchison, and many more.

And please make sure to [join our mail list](#) so we can keep you posted about the latest from Stealth Press.