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Rare Bird in Parts: The State of the SF Serial

By Rich Horton

8/5/02

Once upon a time, almost all new SF novels, at least those published within the genre, were published in magazines. Usually this meant serialization: the novel would appear in several parts (usually two to four) over a period of some months. (On occasion, a shortish novel might be published complete in one issue of certain of the thicker pulps.) Only later, sometimes years later, sometimes never, would a novel be published in book form.

After World War II, when specialty SF publishers appeared, and paperback books became a major market category, many more SF books began to appear. The market was soon big enough for more novels than could be accommodated in the genre magazines, and many SF novels began to appear first as books. This process accelerated over time, and by the 1980s there were hundreds of SF books published per year, only a few of which were reprints of serializations. Still, when I was first reading SF magazines, in the 1970s, most magazines ran serials fairly often, even if they represented only a small fraction of the total novels published.

Nowadays, though, just after the turn of the millennium, serials have become quite rare birds. Unusual enough that the publication of a serial in *Asimov's* was worthy of special comment. Unusual enough that one way for the new Scottish magazine *Spectrum SF* to distinguish itself is to publish

serials. Unusual enough that I doubt many people notice very much that they are almost gone.

Why the Decline?

Why the decline of serials? There are a number of fairly sensible reasons. Readers evidently are resistant to waiting too long to assemble all the parts of a complete serial: even monthly magazines don't like to make the readers wait more than three months (four issues) from the first installment to the last. For publications that publish less frequently, as for example *Absolute Magnitude,* the reader must wait even longer.

The increased length of contemporary SF novels is another important factor. A three-part serial is typically 60,000 or 70,000 words, and at most a little over 90,000. A four-part serial might range up to 110,000 words. Thirty years ago, most SF novels were only 70,000 words long or so—these days it is rare to see a novel of less than 100,000 words, and novels of 150,000 to 200,000 words or more are quite common. Thus, most recent *Analog* serials have been four-parters, and even at that length, they are often expanded when published in book form. (For example, last year's *Analog* serial, Ben Bova's “The Precipice,” was about 105,000 words. The book was some 130,000 words. To be sure, it was not uncommon in the past for the book version of a story to be expanded from the serial version, but not usually so drastically.)

Which is to say that when a magazine is offering a serial, they are often offering the reader a shorter version of the

novel. They are also often asking the reader to wait up to three months or more to assemble the complete novel. They risk turning off the casual newsstand buyer, who might encounter Part 2 without having seen Part 1 or expecting to see Part 3. They risk turning off subscribers who plan to buy certain books anyway, and who may feel that the serial is taking up space that would better have been dedicated to additional stories. In contrast to the early days of the genre, SF novels are routinely published as books, so readers are used to getting their long stories from outside the magazines. And, finally, the magazines are in the position of having no chance to publish many significant novels, those which would be impractical to cut to a serializable length. It's no wonder that serials are becoming uncommon.

F&SF editor Gordon van Gelder, asked about his position on serials, confirmed that he has no plans to publish any, though he doesn't call that a hard and fast rule. But he argues that a good serial will likely see book publication anyway: why take up space that could be used to publish more good short fiction? *Asimov's* editor Gardner Dozois expressed the same idea, mentioning in particular his fondness for novellas, and noting that the space taken up by serial parts is exactly that space most readily occupied by novellas. Novellas have a hard enough time finding homes—should we cut their slots even further? And Paul Fraser, editor of the serial-friendly new magazine *Spectrum SF,* cautions that book publishers often control serial rights, instead of authors, which can make it more difficult for magazines to acquire serials.

Why Have Them at All, Then?

But of course there are positives to serials. Readers like novels, after all—evidence suggests that they like them more than they like short stories. (After all, novels generally sell much better than short story collections.) So why not offer them the occasional novel? Even for a reader who buys plenty of novels, a serial can be an inexpensive way to get a novel they wouldn't otherwise buy—and sometimes well in advance of book publication. (One reader even told me that he sometimes reads the first parts of serials to evaluate the entire novel. If he likes it, he will either look for the next issues of the magazine, or just buy the book. If he doesn't like it, he is happy to have only wasted the time and money for one part.)

In particular, a serial might represent a good way to try out an unfamiliar writer. This may be especially important for those writers whose forte is novels—many writers simply aren't as effective at shorter lengths, and trying to evaluate them based on short stories might be unfair to them, and might not accurately reflect the strengths of their novels. And from the magazine publishers' financial viewpoint, the word rate for serials is often less than that for shorter fiction, so they can fill the same number of pages of fiction at a lower cost.

And the writers? Indeed, writers can benefit quite powerfully from serialization in a popular magazine. Look at the dramatic results for a number of recent *Analog* serials. Going back to 1988, Lois McMaster Bujold's *Falling Free* was a

surprise winner of the Nebula Award for Best Novel. Surely the exposure, and the many extra readers, gained from the *Analog* publication, were a major factor in the novel's favor. Asked about this, Bujold said “It's unlikely that more than a fraction of the same 60,000 SF readers ... would have picked up my little original paperback in the bookstores.” Note that even though sales of original paperbacks at that time were probably roughly comparable to *Analog*'s circulation, the magazine's readers represented a largely *different* swath of the overall SF readership—hopefully gaining the author a new set of readers who would look for her books in the bookstore in the future. (I myself was one of those *Analog* readers who didn't try Bujold until she appeared in the magazine.)

Bujold went on to win a Hugo for another *Analog* serial, *Barrayar.* She doesn't rule out placing further novels with *Analog,* though she confirms some of the difficulties with doing this. She points out that many of her later novels have been too long for serialization, and that it can be hard to coordinate magazine publishing schedules with book publishing schedules. She also points out an interesting new wrinkle: her publisher, Baen Books, releases new novels in online versions called “webscriptions.” Often this involves sort of a partial serialization, whereby the first several chapters will be posted piecemeal over some months prior to publication. This too might complicate the scheduling of a magazine serial.

Another somewhat unexpected Nebula winner was Robert J. Sawyer's *The Terminal Experiment,* serialized in *Analog* in 1994/1995 as “Hobson's Choice.” And very recently,

Catherine Asaro received her first major SF award, the Nebula, for *The Quantum Rose,* about half of which was serialized in *Analog* in 1999. For a writer, having a novel serialized pretty much guarantees exposure to quite a few new readers, likely including readers who would otherwise have skipped the book. It may also be true that the readership of the magazines is more closely aligned with the subset of SF readers (and, in the case of the Nebula, writers) who vote for the major awards.

There is one other useful aspect of serialization: it provides a niche for publishing stories in the awkward range of 30,000 to 60,000 words. Stories of this length, these days, are mostly considered too short for books, but too long to fit in single issues of magazines. An answer is the serial, particularly the two-part serial. *Interzone,* which only has room for about 40,000 words of fiction per issue, often uses this format for longer novellas. *Analog* also often features short novels of about 40,000 words as two-part serials—likely a novel such as P. J. Plauger's “Wergild” (1994), or Edward M. Lerner's forthcoming *Analog* serial “Survival Instinct,” would never have seen print in any other form. (Although Lerner notes that his serial was originally two novellas, which worked better combined into one story. One wonders if writers aiming at publishable lengths tend to avoid the 45,000 word slot—even when it's the right length for a given piece.)

On the other hand, Gardner Dozois believes that novellas are best read as a unit, and he doesn't feel they are well served by publication in parts. Novels, on the other hand, generally a bit more episodic and more leisurely paced, may

be more amenable to reading in increments, he suggests. (This highlights a difference between my reading habits and those, apparently, of many other readers. I always wait until I have all the parts of a serial at hand before reading any of it. Evidently many readers read each piece as they get it.)

Early History

Let's look in some detail at the past of the SF magazine serial. As mentioned before, for some decades almost all genre SF appeared in magazine form. Which naturally meant most of it was short stories and novelettes. But from the beginning readers have craved longer stories, and novels have always been popular. So it became standard for some SF magazines to regularly carry serials. Indeed, the very first issues of the first American SF magazine, *Amazing Stories,* in 1926, serialized Jules Verne's novel *Off on a Comet* (a reprint, of course).

The classic genre novels of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, such as E. E. “Doc” Smith's *Lensman* and *Skylark* series, were all serialized in the pulps of the day. Typical serials, then as now, were in three or four parts. In those days, however, longer serials were somewhat common. Smith's *The Skylark of Valeron,* for example, appeared in 7 parts in *Astounding Stories* between August of 1934 and February of 1935. Such fairly well remembered novels as Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Space* and John W. Campbell's *The Mightiest Machine* appeared in 5 parts. But as the 1930s gave way to the 1940s, the standard SF novel was fairly well established as a three-part serial of perhaps 60,000 to 70,000 words.

The SF book market, as I have noted, appeared as a category following World War II. The initial source of novels for this category was reprints of serials. Of course the magazines continued to publish new serials. Also, many novels were published complete (or slightly cut) in single issues of pulps like *Thrilling Wonder Stories, Startling Stories,* and *Fantastic Adventures,* which were thick magazines with room for stories up to about 60,000 words. Examples include Theodore Sturgeon's “The Dreaming Jewels,” published in a 47,000 word version in *Fantastic Adventures* for February 1950, and Leigh Brackett's 43,000 word “The Big Jump,” in *Space Stories,* February 1953.

The standard length for a novel remained roughly constant, at 60,000 to 70,000 words, which fit tidily into three parts and into a trim 190 page paperback. Two-part serials were also common, and there were book markets, such as the Ace Doubles, for those 40,000 word stories. Longer novels were fairly rare, though *Astounding,* at least, was not averse to the occasional four-part serial. But throughout the 1950s, the market for original, never-serialized, novels increased.

A standard publishing history for a novel would involve serialization in one year, followed by book publication the year after. In many cases the serial would have a different title from the book, rather unfortunately for the inattentive buyer. (For instance, Sturgeon's *The Dreaming Jewels* appeared in paperback as *The Synthetic Man.*) In many cases, also, the serial would be a slightly different version. The most common difference from serial to book would be

that the former version would be cut, though not by any means necessarily. This could result either from a longer novel being cut, either by the author or by the editor of the magazine, to fit the magazine's length restrictions; or from a shorter magazine version being later expanded by the author.

On rare occasions both versions survive independently. One of the most interesting such cases is Fritz Leiber's excellent novel *The Sinful Ones.* The story was originally aimed at the classic fantasy magazine *Unknown* in the early 40s, but abandoned when *Unknown* went out of business due to wartime paper shortages. Around 1950, Leiber finally turned his original story idea into a full-length novel. Unable to sell that, he placed a much shorter version (40,000 words) as “You're All Alone” with *Fantastic Adventures.* A few years later a low-end paperback publisher finally bought his 75,000 word version, but the publisher added some spicy scenes to fit his market, and chose the title *The Sinful Ones.* Finally, in 1980, Leiber was able to reissue the novel in a form closer to his original intent (with the spicy scenes either eliminated or rewritten to Leiber's taste). In the mean time, “You're All Alone” has been reprinted as well. Both versions are well worth reading.

Signs of Decline

By the 1960s longer novels were increasingly common. And in the nature of things these were often more ambitious. The serial remained a standard feature of many magazines, but magazines were rarely able to attract the newer, bigger novels. One striking exception involves the publishing history

of Frank Herbert's *Dune: Analog* published it as two separate serials, a three-parter called “Dune World” in 1964, and a five-parter called “The Prophet of Dune” in 1965, the same year that Chilton published the complete novel in hardcover.

Why were longer novels more common? One reason may be an increasing tendency at the time towards hardcover publication. It also seems that book marketing people decided that the reading public wanted fatter books—more bang for their buck. And in more recent years, many have suggested that the ubiquity of word processing has made it easier for writers to produce longer books. At any rate, as novels became longer, fewer were potentially serializable.

I began reading the magazines in 1974. Serials were still standard features of most magazines at that time. (Oddly, the first issue of *Galaxy* I ever bought featured two different serials, the conclusion to Bob Shaw's “Orbitsville” and the opening to Edgar Pangborn's “The Company of Glory.” Having parts of two serials in the same issue of a magazine was pretty rare, however.) The habit of changing titles remained: one of the first *Analog* serials I read was Alfred Bester's “The Indian Giver,” which became a book called *The Computer Connection,* or *Extro!* in the UK. I was to some extent a test case for the problem I mentioned earlier—buyer resistance to magazine issues with only the last part of a serial. Not only did the first issue of *Galaxy* I saw have a serial's conclusion, so did the first issue of *Analog.* But I was so besotted with the idea of having an actual science fiction magazine in my hands that I didn't care! Interestingly, that first *Analog* serial, “Star Gate,” by Tak Hallus, when published in book form, instead of

featuring a title change, featured an author change. By 1976 when the book came out Stephen Robinett had abandoned his unusual pseudonym. ("Tak Hallus" means "pseudonym" in Farsi, or so Robinett claimed.)

Shortly after this, the frequency of serials diminished. *Galaxy* slowly died, and its last five issues (before an unsuccessful mid-90s revival) featured a drip-by-drop serialization of Frederik Pohl's brilliant novel *JEM.* This took nearly two years (from the November/December 1978 issue to the Summer 1980 issue)—the book was out in both hard covers and paperback before the final issue of the magazine reached newsstands. *Galaxy's* "slot" among the "big three" U. S. magazines was taken by *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* which has almost never published a serial. (There have been only five in the magazine's history, not counting "stealth" serializations, as with Frederik Pohl's novel, *The Cool War,* which was chopped into three long novellas for publication in separate issues of *Asimov's.* (Though one of these novellas was actually a two-part serial!)) *F&SF* ceased publishing serials entirely: and even *Analog,* as the 1990s went on, reduced the frequency of their serials, to roughly two a year.

One other SF magazine, new to the 1990s, has published a few serials. This is *Absolute Magnitude,* which has featured serializations of novels by Barry B. Longyear, Hal Clement, Daniel Hatch, and Shariann Lewitt. Finally, Algis Budrys' *Tomorrow,* now sadly defunct, ran a few serials during its run in the 1990s. More idiosyncratically, the Dean Wesley Smith/Kristine Kathryn Rusch project *Pulphouse* made an

effort to go to weekly publication in the early 1990s. They never succeeded in publishing even close to weekly, but one of their innovations, intended to dovetail with such a rapid publication schedule, was to publish serials of very many very short installments. Thus, 15 parts of S. P. Somtow's novel *Jasmine Nights* appeared in *Pulphouse* between 1991 and 1993. This could conceivably have been successful with a truly weekly publication, but spread over a much longer time, I don't think such a program is workable.

The Present, and Prospects for the Future

Thus the present day, with serials rare enough to be remarked upon. And as we've seen, they are plenty of sound reasons for their lack of frequency. But, despite their shortcomings and inconveniences, I like serials, and I like seeing them in magazines. So I'm happy that *Spectrum SF* has run part of a serial in every issue so far. They have printed two novels by British SF veterans: “Drek Yarman,” by the late Keith Roberts, and “Bad Dream” by John Christopher; as well as the first novel by hot newer British writer Charles Stross, “The Atrocity Archive.”

These serials show another benefit of serialization: an opportunity to rescue worthy but commercially uncertain projects from oblivion. For example, “Drek Yarman” was apparently written in the mid-80s, but as Roberts’ career (and health) foundered he was unable to place it with a publisher. It is undoubtedly a dark story, and its bleakness may negatively affect its commercial prospects. It is also fairly short. Thus it was perhaps understandable that no publisher

would take it on. But it's a fine, different, work that I'm happy to have read. With John Christopher in semi-retirement, “Bad Dream” also may not be a novel a publisher can get behind enthusiastically.

As for “The Atrocity Archive,” Charles Stross has pointed out that it is an untypical novel, not easily put in a genre. For career reasons, as Stross suggests, it might even be unwise for a new author to place such a novel with a major publisher in these days of the midlist death spiral. This is because such an idiosyncratic novel probably has limited commercial potential, which may reduce the book buyers’ orders for future novels. In addition, its uncertain genre (spy novel? comedy? Lovecraftian horror?) may result in confusion among the chains’ book buyers, who are alleged to prefer readily describable books, with certain expected sales and categorization. But as a serial, it's available for readers to find, without risking pigeonholing the author's name in booksellers’ computers.

I suspect that the serial will remain, relatively speaking, a rarity in the magazines in the near future. But it will live on to some extent. *Analog* still publishes at least one per year (they have just finished running Robert J. Sawyer's “Hominids"). *Asimov's* recently ran their first serial in over a decade, with Silverberg's “The Longest Way Home,” though Dozois states that he has no express intention of publishing any further serials. *Spectrum SF* bravely continues to run them, I hope they will for a long time. I particularly like editor Paul Fraser's philosophy—he regards the serial as a home for otherwise orphaned novels, that may be too quirky, too short, or for

whatever reason of suspect commercial appeal. (As Fraser notes, this is to some extent making a virtue of necessity: those are also the novels a new magazine is more likely to be offered. As well, Gardner Dozois suggests that if he were to publish future serials, he would prefer to use the space for good novels that won't otherwise be published.) And even some online magazines run serials—in *Strange Horizons*'s case only two-part novelettes, but *SCI FICTION* often serializes novellas (even up to 40,000 words) in four parts throughout a month.

The serialized novel has an honorable place in the history of this magazine-dominated genre. As the importance of magazines to the genre has diminished, it is no surprise that the importance of serials has likewise diminished. But there is still a place for them, and I for one will not regret the opportunity to read these words again—TO BE CONTINUED.

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Interview: Jon Courtenay Grimwood

By Cheryl Morgan

8/12/02

Jon Courtenay Grimwood is one of the hottest of the new breed of British SF writers. His blend of fast, stylish action with acute social awareness is winning him praise around the world. His last-but-one novel, *Pashazade,* was short-listed for the British Science Fiction Association Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. The sequel, *Effendi,* is a hot favorite to receive similar acclaim.

This interview took place at the British National Science Fiction Convention (Eastercon) at the Hotel de France on St. Helier, Jersey, in April 2002.

Cheryl Morgan: You seem to have a rather more traveled history than many people.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood: Undoubtedly. I was born in Malta, in Valletta, several weeks early as my mother had a water-skiing accident. Nuns looked after me for the first few days of my life as it was thought I might not live. A year or so later I went to England for a bit, but returned to Malta when I was about four. We lived there for a couple of years and I had a Maltese nanny called Carmen who spoke Malti, a form of Arabic. She used to take me through the back streets to visit her family. Carmen was the first major influence on my life. After another spell in England, my family moved to the Far East and I would fly back and forth to England for boarding

school. While in Jahore I was looked after by an *amah* called Zinab, who was the second great influence.

We led a very privileged life, which I suspect has now gone. This was also in living memory of what the British called the Malay Emergency [a nationalist uprising]. And also a time of simmering racial problems between Chinese and Malay communities, leading to rioting and killings. Appalling levels of poverty contrasted with staggering wealth. Within one summer holiday it was possible to see dogs being strangled by collars made from wire coat-hangers, opium addicts, people living in battered shanty towns, wide-eyed children being betrothed in marriage at a very early age, and princely families so rich that they quite literally ate off gold plates.

Much later we moved to Scandinavia and lived on an island off the coast near Oslo for a couple of years. I wanted to go to university in Norway, but the authorities rightly pointed out that they could give one of their foreign student places to a refugee, which would be infinitely fairer than giving it to someone from an affluent, Western background.

Until recently I had a tiny house in the mountains of Spain. It was in an area that was once Moorish and therefore Islamic. From where I lived you could see ancient towers on the coast, and these were the towers of the Moors who were trying to defend their lands from the Reconquest.

CM: And your life has continued to be somewhat unconventional; you are a single parent.

JCG: Yes, and in fact my career as a writer is probably a direct result of that. My marriage came apart when my son

was about four. When the time came for Jamie to go to school it became obvious I'd have to field him for quite a bit of the holidays. (He was still living with his mother at this point but she needed to work full time.) As a journalist/editor I had an option to go freelance, and though I tried part time work to begin with, that proved impossible, so I went completely freelance when Jamie was about nine, and he came to live with me full time when he was eleven. He's eighteen now.

CM: What sort of journalism have you done?

JCG: All sorts. I was one of the freelance writers who worked on *Maxim* when it first started in the UK. I've written for *Esquire,* quite a lot of women's glossies, and for three broadsheet newspapers, the *Independent,* the *Guardian,* and the *Telegraph.* At the start I needed to keep body and soul together, so I'd write pretty much anything. I did a lot of "men's point of view" stuff for women's magazines in the early-to-mid nineties, because that was what was wanted. And I wrote a lot about the Internet for the broadsheets when it first started because there were few journalists who knew much about it then. These days I mostly review for the *Guardian* and write novels.

CM: Was getting into novels something that you had always wanted to do?

JCG: Oh yes, but it took me a long while to do it. When I was a teenager I wrote a very bad road novel but it was so terrible I threw it away. I wrote another two books in my mid-twenties and sent them to a reasonably famous editor. He wrote back and said he'd liked the story in the first but the characters weren't up to much, and the characters in the

second were good but there wasn't any story. So what I needed to do, according to him, was to go away and write something that combined good story with good characters. I was so traumatized I didn't actually try again for about ten years!

JCG: In the meantime I became a journalist and got used to getting stuff in print. So when I was made redundant from a freelance job sometime around the spring of '93 while knowing I had work to go to in the autumn, so I took the summer off and wrote *neoAddix.*

CM: This is one of your cyberpunk vampire novels.

JCG: Yes, set in Paris. It is the book in which I introduced my post-Napoleonic cyberpunk 22nd Century. It came out of an image that I had of a woman standing at the top of some stairs waiting to walk down to the Seine where she knew there'd be a body, and that a pathologist she hated would be there too. That was where *neoAddix* came from, but it was basically just me writing about all the places that I knew and liked in Paris. If there was a café I liked, then in it went. I'd also been having a series of brain scans, MRIs and stuff following some blackouts and a lot of that disquiet about being wired up to machines found its way into the novel. That said, it's a pretty bad novel.

CM: Let's put this Tarantino thing to bed, shall we?

JCG: Oh God! That was a line used by a glossy magazine to describe, I think, *Lucifer's Dragon.*

CM: "William Gibson meets Quentin Tarantino."

JCG: Yeah. It was perfect marketing speak so, understandably, Simon and Schuster stuck it on the first

novel I did for them, *reMix.* And because the line was on the cover a lot of people used it. Some mag even stole it as a headline for a review, probably for *redRobe.* I think, it is gone now.

CM: Well, it certainly put me off reading your work for quite a while. But then I have to say that in *redRobe* Axl Borja kills an awful lot of people.

JCG: It's his job. He's an assassin. I should also mention that *redRobe* is loosely based on *Under the Red Robe,* a high Victorian novel by British writer Stanley Weyman. What Weyman did was encompass all of the Victorian values, and what I wanted to do was glance off the same story but encompass our values and show how different they are. So there's the name check in the title, the name of the village in the book, Cocheforet, is the same. There's a basic plot similarity between the stories. But concepts you can guarantee apply in the Victorian book: “heroic, upright if flawed killer gets the girl, repents, lives happily ever after,” those don't appear. I make damn sure that Axl doesn't get the girl. (A girl gets the girl.) *redRobe* is about taking a story and looking at it with a different set of eyes.

CM: I really liked the gun as a character. It was good to have a major character who is an AI in a gun who is smarter than most of the other people in the book.

JCG: Oh, he's infinitely smarter than Axl. The whole thing is that he's the dominant intellectual part of that relationship. Axl is just this rather flawed guy who happens to have a much smarter friend who just happens to be his gun.

CM: And he finds much more interesting things to do with his life than being a gun, which I thought was a nice touch.

JCG: Well, I thought that if we can have reincarnation for human beings, why can't we have reincarnation for machines?

CM: And of course the main thing that comes across with *redRobe* is the sheer rage at the state of the world. Clearly, here is something that you have enormously strong feelings about.

JCG: *redRobe* was written at the height of the problems in the Balkans. The West, in its wisdom, had decided to disarm one side but leave the other side armed, and somebody used the phrase “a level playing field” to describe this situation. It was a time in which premeditated rape was just beginning to be used widely as an act of war and an act of torture. You can say that rape has always been a part of war, but I think what happened in Bosnia was a systematic attempt to destroy a society by attacking the women within that society. And the West just stood there, was shocked and appalled, and did virtually nothing.

We were meant to be helping these people. We were meant to be the United Nations. We were meant to be on the side of good, and this was just not happening. We were promising people that they would be defended. We were promising people that if they laid down their weapons we would guarantee their safety. We set up safe havens for civilians, and then pulled our troops out and wondered why thousands of men, women and children were slaughtered.

If this had been done in the days of Communist Russia, or by an Islamic country or by China, we would have been outraged and would have been passing UN resolutions demanding that something was done about it. It took a long time for what had happened in the Balkans to filter through to Western consciousness—much longer than it should have done—and I think there was a real attempt to make sure it didn't filter through.

CM: It still is fairly unknown. Certainly I didn't know as much about it as you have just described. But I notice that you said in your Kaffeklatsch that you read all of the papers every day.

JCG: Not quite all of them: I regularly read the *Times,* the *Telegraph,* the *Independent,* and the *Guardian*. And then sometimes the *Mail* and the *Mirror.*

CM: And this is a serious attempt to keep up with what is going on in the world?

JCG: Yes. It comes out of being a journalist. For a lot of my life the first thing I've done each day is read the papers and cut anything that was relevant to my work.

CM: How do you read so fast?

JCG: Well, you don't need to. Often the same story appears in a different form in each paper, so I read one version quite thoroughly and I can then skim the others looking for the points of difference.

CM: A common feature of your work is what has been described as “alternate future.” The traditional alternate history is set in a past where something has happened to make history develop differently. You write books that are set

in the future, but where something happened differently in the past so it is not our future.

JCG: That was a conscious decision. What I wanted to do was write alternate history without writing about the point of change. I wanted to talk about the point of change, probably obliquely, but have its impact felt further down the line. For my first four books, *neoAddix* through *redRobe,* the point of change is the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. In my version France under Napoleon III defeats the Prussians. Because of this, the German Empire never forms and the second Napoleonic Empire doesn't collapse. Those four books are set in the 22nd Century.

Within the Arabesque series (*Pashazade, Effendi,* and *Felaheen*) the turning point is 1915 with the American President brokering a peace between London and Berlin and what we think of as the First World War remaining the Third Balkan Conflict. But again the books are set about 40 years from now. What I have tried to do is have, not just alternate history, but alternate society and alternate politics. Obviously it is about our world and what we do. It is a way to stepping outside ourselves and saying, “if that hadn't happened, how would we feel about this...”

CM: It is a different approach to history, isn't it? The classic alternate history book is very much about the major events, the important players. It is history focused on kings and generals. What you are doing is much broader.

JCG: I'm talking about how society changes, and what happens when society changes. What happens if Christianity and Islam aren't automatically at each other's throats? What

happens if the big conflicts in the world are not between East and West but still between France and Germany, if America remains semi-isolationist? If Russia was split in two, the way Germany used to be? Read the newspapers from the time and you can see that few in 1914 believed that within a few years monarchy would fail as the default form of government in Europe. There is a real sense in those papers that the status quo will last. And that makes me think about us, because we have the same sense of our world's permanence. That whole paper-thin Capitalism triumphant, end-of-history kick.

CM: Moving on to the Arabesque series, this is an interesting time to be a writer focusing on North African/Arabic society.

JCG: Yes, and at least one friend of mine has pointed out this may not be the best time to have novels out with Arabic lettering all over their covers. But I disagree because I think it is very important.

The Ashraf Bey books, which are crime novels set in a 21st Century liberal Islamic Ottoman North Africa are an attempt to look at what happens when Western values and a liberal Islamic society cross, and what takes place in the gaps. What happens with the politics, what happens with society, what happens with civil rights, sexual rights, children's rights? There is still a hard-line Islam within my world, but it is south of the Sahara. It is a problem for the essentially Westernized communities of El Iskandryia, Tunis, and Libya. In the same way there are fundamentalist Christian societies, liberal Christian societies and pretty much agnostic, Christian-influenced societies in our world.

CM: Do you see yourself as presenting the Arabic world to the West?

JCG: No, I wouldn't be that arrogant. What I'm trying to do with my detective, Ashraf Bey, is take a Western character into the North African world and make him understand it through the process of solving individual crimes. I didn't want him coming in and analyzing society coldly, looking at how they did this or how they did that. I want him to be part of El Iskandryia, which is why he's part Berber and part English, and grew up in New York. I wanted to put him in a situation where he is trapped between the two worlds and has to deal with it.

CM: The reader follows the same journey as the character. You start from a Western viewpoint and gradually learn more about the Arabic world.

JCG: Yes, as you go through the books, Raf learns more. He also has to take on more responsibility. A lot of the point of the series is that it is about someone coming to terms with taking responsibility rather than just watching.

CM: Raf was a gangster in Seattle, and by the end of *Pashazade,* the first book, he's a single parent with an adopted niece.

JCG: Yes, it is an attempt to say, “you can do all the stuff you like, but when it comes down to it and you have someone to look after, you are going to have to compromise your life to do this.”

CM: Hani is a little bit of a cliché, of course: the computer genius kid.

JCG: She's representative of how I felt about having a child I needed to take responsibility for. But the business with the computers is based on a nephew of mine who I saw, at about the age of 3, toddle across a sitting room to a computer, clamber up onto a chair and hit F9 and Return. At that time I didn't even have a laptop, and I thought to myself, “you have got to get to grips with new technology, that child has just used the computer as if it were a fridge.” What I am trying to do with Hani is show someone who is so familiar with technology that using it is not really an issue. The other point, more importantly, is that Hani's skill with computers is a sign of dysfunction. As a child she has had no human friends at all, she's never been allowed outside the house. Her sole connection with the outside world has been a cold, emotionally sterile aunt. Everything she knows about the world has been learnt through a screen. So Hani's ability signifies the damage in her life.

CM: So far the books have largely been about secular issues within Islamic society. Are you going to address Islam itself?

JCG: Yes, I am. What I am trying to do at the moment with the third book, *Felaheen,* is to look at how the puritan thread in Islam affects government. The West prefers secular Arabic governments because they are easier to understand and don't require one to understand the theocratic background to decisions. One of the reasons why putting the Taliban and Saddam Hussein in the same box is absurd is because the first is a puritan, theocratic organization and operation, while the second fears fundamentalist Islam

probably as much as any Western government and has spent a lot of time keeping fundamentalist Islam down. They may both, in their way, be corrupt and corrosive—but they are not interchangeable.

It is quite possible that if Egypt were to have a completely free vote tomorrow it might, just, become an Islamicist state, but it has governments with a very strong interest in making sure that never happens. From the Western point of view this is good. Where it becomes a real problem is in somewhere like Algeria where the government wants to stay resolutely secular and a very large proportion of the people support the Islamicists. There has been a civil war going on in Algeria for years, in which the victims have often been women and children, but it has been largely unreported.

The problem we have in the West is to understand why what we call “fundamentalist Islam” is increasing in popularity. Because I don't believe that Islam is necessarily hard line, any more than Christianity is necessarily fundamentalist. Fundamentalism has influence within both, but it is not the default position.

CM: It is possible, of course, that some areas of America would vote for a fundamentalist Christian government if they were given the choice.

JCG: Yes, and that creates a problem in European understanding of American culture. There seems to be a strong strand in America of Creationism, the idea that Darwinian theory is one faith among others. From a European point of view that's difficult for people to accept.

CM: I have only just bought the second arabesque, *Effendi,* and haven't had time to read it. Perhaps you could tell me a little bit about it.

JCG: The first third of *Effendi* is the last third of *Pashazade* seen from a different angle and through a different character's eyes, because I wanted to subvert what Raf took for granted.

Basically Hamzah has been charged with murder and Raf has to investigate the crime. Obviously enough, this does nasty things to Raf's relationship with Zara.

(Hamzah is a smuggler and criminal made good who is now trying to launder his money and become respectable. Zara is his daughter, the girl who Raf was going to marry in *Pashazade* and didn't. Zara had spent two years at college in New York and came home to find that her parents had arranged a marriage for her. She didn't want to marry Raf, so he refused to marry her, not understanding, being new to El Iskandryia and being Western himself and therefore not very clued up, exactly what this would do to the reputations of Zara and her family.)

The back history is set during the Little Wars, which are based around North Sudan. These were fought over water and the moving of borders to take in water supplies. I've interleaved a crime novel with flashbacks about the use of children as soldiers.

So we have the Little Wars running all the way through *Effendi.* And that strand is based around a child's idea that it might be possible to turn off the Nile, and if one succeeded in that there would be no water so the war in which he is

fighting would have to cease. It is the idea of an eight-year-old. But that childish logic is tied into crimes being committed years later, and we see how the two stories interact and connect.

CM: The third Ashraf Bey novel is also the food book, as I recall you telling me.

JCG: A substantial amount of the third book is set in a kitchen. Where Raf is investigating the death of a pastry chef, while simultaneously trying to stop the fall from power of the Emir of Tunis, the man who may or may not be his father.

CM: And you did an awful lot of serious research for it.

JCG: I research each book fairly heavily. I made a trip to Tunis. And I used to work in a kitchen. If a meal is mentioned then I've cooked that meal. Gone out, bought the ingredients and actually made it. Because otherwise how can I describe how it is made or what it tastes like? Another thing I do when setting a book in a particular society is go out and buy lots of music from that culture. So I have a lot of North African dance, a lot of Sufi, and a lot of Berber music, to get a sense of it.

I also read a fair amount of the poetry, and hunt down restaurants and bars and go and eat there and ask people for recommendations of traditional dishes. I think you get a lot of sense about a country through its food.

One of the things I love about North African cookery is that the armies of Islam took their cookery to Spain, where there were was a richness to the ingredients not found in North Africa. So North African cookery exploded under the new Spanish influence. When Isabella of Castille threw the Moors

out of Spain, their cookery went back to North Africa, but it came back with all of the additional Spanish richness. So what you have in modern North African cookery is ancient North African cookery, filtered through Andalusia, and then re-adapted to North Africa. You have an entire history of conquest, re-conquest and exile, perhaps just in one dish.

CM: There are strong moral themes running all through your books.

JCG: I've had reviews of *redRobe* that claimed Axl was too moral, that he was immoral, and that he was amoral. Somebody actually asked me once why I write morality-free characters. I don't think that any of my characters are morality free. I think they have very strong moralities, but maybe not those of the society around them. Axl has a very strong morality created by his childhood and by his relationship with the Cardinal. It has a strong internal logic.

I think the duty of a writer is to get inside the heads of every character in the book, and not just the hero. I think if you have one character with whom you sympathize and who reflects the society from which you come that is a limitation. Even your villains should be understood. They can still be evil, they can still be bad, but it is the writer's duty to make the reader understand, at some point, why they are like that.

CM: The Cardinal, for example, thinks he is doing the best thing for the world. He thinks that the world needs him in charge of it, and that sacrifices must be made to maintain his position. That's a very easy trap for a political leader to fall into.

JCG: He sees himself as indispensable and everyone else as naïve, and therefore he has to take all of the hard decisions for them.

CM: I can see that people would look at Raf and say, “this guy is completely amoral, he was a gangster in Seattle, so how come he's suddenly looking after a nine-year-old kid?”

JCG: He doesn't come to it willingly but Hani is the first person with whom Raf has a relationship where he gets nothing material back. She is his first brush with humanity. Up until then Raf has been institutionalized: in boarding school, which is a sort of prison, in the Triads and in an actual prison. The first time he stops being institutionalized is when he refuses to accept what El Iskandryia has planned for him. He refuses to marry Zara, and in doing that he steps outside himself and can start to take responsibility for his actions.

CM: So his character evolves.

JCG: Well morality is learned, just like identity. I believe very strongly that identity is created and learned. It is very easy for me to sit here comfortably, in a lovely hotel on a very rich island talking about morality. But the same me without water will react to need very differently, and will become someone else. There may be an intrinsic, unbreakable core that is Jon Courtenay Grimwood, but I'm not sure I even believe that. I may have some basic core beliefs, but these can be influenced and changed. Otherwise it would not be possible to create soldiers.

CM: Where do you go from here?

JCG: Well I have just been taken on by Mic Cheetham, and given that she agents for people like Iain Banks and China

Mieville I'm hoping good things are going to happen sales-wise. I am about six weeks away from finishing *Felaheen,* my third book in the Arabesque series. And then I am going to do something different. I'm not quite sure what. Maybe something a bit bigger. And when I have done that, I'll probably come back to Ashraf Bey and El Iskandryia, because I have a whole series of stories I want to tell. Raf won't even be the main character in the next three. The books will be set five years in the future, so Raf and Hani will be five years older. Things will have moved on, society will be different, and there will be whole new opportunities and pressures.

CM: When you say “something a bit bigger,” do you mean a longer book, or a broader canvas, or what? Most of what you have written to date has been very tightly focused.

JCG: I think a bit of both. I don't want to lose the focus, but I want to spread. I want to be tightly focused in three places instead of just one. Maybe make a time slice across centuries rather than decades. Perhaps alternate universe rather than alternate world.

CM: We are not talking space opera here.

JCG: No, I don't think I could do that. I suspect that if I tried to write space opera I'd end up with a tightly-knit, angry society within a generation ship. I'll stick to what I'm good at.

CM: Jon Courtenay Grimwood, thank you for talking to *Strange Horizons.*

* * * *

Cheryl Morgan's native habitat is the UK, but the species has also been found in Australia and is currently infesting California. Government officials say that there is nothing to

fear, save for the possibility of the Bay Area sinking under the weight of Ms. Morgan's book collection. She is also the editor of the online science fiction and fantasy book review magazine Emerald City.

Visit Jon Courtenay Grimwood's Web site.

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Perpetual Nonsense

By Charles Mirho

8/19/02

I recently spent time in the outer office of a hypnotherapist. On the reading table were several issues of a New Age periodical called *New Connexion.* A front-page article entitled “Scalar Energy Device Patented—Production Starts Next Year” caught my eye. As a patent attorney I was naturally curious.

United States Patent 6,362,718 was issued in March 2002. One of the inventors was Thomas Bearden, a well known free-energy proponent. According to the article, the Bearden patent covered what would soon become “the first commercially-available free-energy device in history.” I thought, “Uh-oh, here we go again.”

It was Sir Isaac Newton who said, “The seekers after perpetual motion are trying to get something from nothing.” Newton may not have been the nicest man, but he was no slouch when it came to physics. His words ring true today.

The more I read of the article, the farther my eyebrows rose. By the time I finished, I think they were up around my hairline. The device is essentially an electromagnetic generator, with a twist. It extracts energy from the time domain, which is actually “compressed energy” in the same proportion as matter, the speed of light squared. The device draws from “the longitudinal electromagnetic waves that fill the ocean of space-time.” There are no moving parts. It will

output 2.5 kW of electricity, indefinitely, without drawing input power. Jump start it, and it goes. Forever.

I thought that if Einstein were in his grave (he was cremated), he would surely turn over upon hearing this.

Things that are patented must work as described. This principle acts as a form of “honesty cop” on outrageous invention claims. This wasn't always the case, but like an often-jilted lover, the patent office has become jaded and skeptical of inventions that claim to get something for nothing. The United States patent office didn't open its door until 1790, but the first English patent on a perpetual motion (PM) machine was granted long before that—as early as 1635. Even the esteemed Leonardo da Vinci made a number of drawings of things he hoped would make energy for free. The Jesuit priest Johanes Taisnerius worked on a magnetic-based perpetual motion machine. By 1903, some have estimated that as many as 600 patents on PM devices had been granted in England alone. By the end of the Civil War, PM machines had made their way into the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO). Although the USPTO now enforces a strict policy of declining patents on PM devices, as late as 1973 a man named Howard R. Johnson filed and received a patent on a Permanent Magnetic Motor. Not surprisingly, the device was never commercialized with any success.

Types of “Perpetual” Motion

Modern PM designs usually fall into one of a few well-known categories. All claim some technique for using a small

impulse of startup energy to release a large and inexhaustible supply of sustained energy. First you have your so-called “radiant-energy” machines. Radiant energy is like electricity and is gathered directly from the environment by a method called “fractionation.” Don't call it “static electricity"—this upsets its proponents greatly. Radiant energy can perform the same wonders as ordinary electricity, at less than 1% of the cost.

Another class of device is the “mechanical heater.” In one such machine, one cylinder is rotated within another cylinder with a slight gap of clearance between them. The space between the cylinders is filled with a liquid such as water or oil, which heats up as the inner cylinder spins. Another such machine uses magnets mounted on a wheel to produce large eddy currents in a plate of aluminum, causing the aluminum to heat up rapidly. In both cases, the heat generated is said to exceed the mechanical energy applied.

Another free-energy technique involves electrolysis, whereby water is broken down into hydrogen and oxygen using electricity. Standard chemistry books claim that this process requires more energy than can be recovered from the individual gases, but of course this is true only under the worst-case scenario. When water is electrified at its molecular resonant frequency, it collapses into hydrogen and oxygen gas with very little electrical input. Also, adding chemicals that make the water conduct electricity better improves the efficiency dramatically. Even more amazing, a special metal alloy patented in 1957 can spontaneously break water into

hydrogen and oxygen with no outside electrical input at all, and without causing any chemical changes in the metal itself.

Then you have your implosion/vortex engines, which use cooling to produce suction, which in turn produces work. This is the opposite of the technique employed in combustion engines, which rely on primitive chemical explosions to get things moving. And don't forget cold fusion, made famous (or infamous) in 1989 by two chemists, Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons of Brigham Young University.

Finally, you have your permanent magnet powered motors. Browsing a copy of the Bearden patent, it quickly became apparent that his invention fell into this category. I located the obligatory disclaimer of perpetual motion on page three (remember, the patent office has finally wised up to any devices that claim to provide free energy and will decline them out of hand). However, I discovered something else that surprised me. The thing might actually be useful, though not to provide free energy.

The Bearden Patent

The invention consists of one or more fixed-position permanent magnets and electromagnets (coils). An initial electrical impulse, repeatedly switched to the coils in precise timing, produces an ongoing output current. The output current persists without decay long after the initial impulse is over, and the device is self-powering. The performance ratio of the prototype is 3.4. Thus, for every watt of input power, 3.4 watts of output power are produced. At first glance it does appear to be a source of free energy.

What is going on? Is conservation of energy no longer a respected law of the universe? The patent provides the answer. If the device is not capturing and converting energy from its environment, it must be consuming itself. More accurately, the device must be disorganizing, e.g. increasing its entropy, like a battery. This breakdown of order is harnessed and transduced into electricity.

A conventional battery transduces chemical potential into electricity. This new device transduces magnetic potential into electricity. The device's permanent magnet is depleted in a controlled fashion. Eventually the magnet goes dead and the current stops flowing. What we have, then, is a magnetic battery. The permanent magnet may be constructed of samarium cobalt, which resists demagnetization.

One advantage of magnetic batteries is environmental. Isn't it preferable to litter our planet with demagnetized chunks of iron, cobalt, and boron, instead of fermenting battery acid? Forget about free energy, though. Commercially-practical magnets are not born, they are made. Making them takes energy. I suspect that when the energy of manufacturing samarium cobalt is factored into the equation, the performance ratio of the new device falls well below one. Another limitation is the output current. The experimental device produced current by the milliamps. Unless something improves, you won't be using magnetic batteries to start your car or heat your range top.

The White Paper

After filing the patent, Bearden and the other inventors posted a white paper claiming to have overcome the depletion problem. Surprise, surprise: they disclaim perpetual motion to win the patent, then quickly explain away the disclaimer. They now claim a theoretical foundation for operating magnetic batteries (or any batteries for that matter) indefinitely, without depletion. Several of the inventors have or claim to have scientific doctorate degrees and have been active in electromagnetic R&D for decades. Thus, their claims warrant at least some serious attention. Unfortunately, the first thing one notices about the white paper is the lack of scientific rigor. Equations are few and far between. The authors present only basic Maxwellian equalities, without enhancement. Virtually the entire sixty-nine page document is a rambling qualitative discourse. The pages are sprinkled with references to space-time, general relativity, and gauge field theory, in a fashion that can only be described as techno-babble.

I'm no quantum physicist, but statements from the paper such as the following do nothing to increase the authors' credibility:

> In short, the mutual iterative interaction of each coil wound on the flux path of the special nanocrystalline material, with and between the two energy flows, results in special kinds of regenerative energy feedback and energy feedforward, and regauging of the energy of the system and the energy of the system

> process. This excess energy in the system and in the system process is thus a form of free and asymmetrical self-regauging, permitted by the well known gauge freedom of quantum field theory. Further, the excess energy from the permanent magnet dipole is continually replenished from the active vacuum by the stated giant negentropy process associated with the permanent magnet's magnetic dipole due to its broken 3-symmetry in its energetic exchange with the vacuum.

The thrust of the argument is that any energy potential—a chemical battery, a magnetic dipole, even a rock balanced on a hill—is a limitless well of free energy, if properly tapped.

In effect, the authors are saying, “We can cause electricity to flow forever from a battery by breaking the loop between the plus terminal and the minus terminal.” They dangle the seductive fruit of limitless electricity, but omit the circuit diagram. I, and many others I am sure, would very much like to see how current can flow from a battery without closing the loop between plus and minus.

Qualitative dissertations packed with jargon but short on rigor have long been the refuge of quacks and marketeers. Such packaging gives legs to marginal theories, turning them into greased pigs not easily dispatched by experts in the field. The invention described in the patent is unambiguously a depleting magnetic potential battery. It could be useful, but it's no energy revolution. If the inventors ever receive a

patent on a non-depleting version of their machine, the world will pay serious attention. Until then, free energy will remain in the realm of fiction, and no amount of hype will turn a battery into a bombshell.

There is an even deeper lesson here than the folly of chasing free energy. The proponents of such schemes generally fall into two categories: greedy con men, and "hermit scientists." This latter category of person is often highly intelligent, and is glamorized by such Hollywood movies as *Back to the Future.* Nonetheless, their isolation, ego, and mistrust of other scientists leads them to abandon rigor in the name of aggrandizement. All of science is interdependent, relying on the critique and revisions of others to correct errors in judgement and practice. The hard lesson here is that when a scientist, even a highly intelligent one, becomes detached from the scientific community, the result can be tragic.

* * * *

Charles Mirho is a patent attorney and freelance author. Prior to becoming a lawyer, Charles was a software programmer specializing in communications and multimedia. Charles has a JD from Santa Clara University and an MSEE from Rutgers. He has published two books and numerous fiction and nonfiction articles. Learn more about him and his work at his web site.

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Figure-Eight in the Sky

A new perspective on an old fascination

By Brian Tung

8/26/02

> *To see a world in a grain of sand,*
> *And a heaven in a wild flower,*
> *Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,*
> *And eternity in an hour.*

—William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

One of my favorite things to look at when I was a kid was my dad's globe. This was a *National Geographic* affair; it was not mounted, but instead sat freely in a clear plastic stand. It was also a quality item, and my dad made it clear to me that I was only to look and touch gently, not throw it about like a ball.

I formed all sorts of weird ideas about the globe. It was one of my first exposures to the idea that we were not on top of the world. (I grew up in the Bay Area in California.) Instead, we were at a latitude of 40 degrees, and it occurred to me that we therefore did not stand up straight when we thought we were standing up straight. Instead, we stood at an angle of 50 degrees to the vertical. If we had really wanted to stand up straight, we should have leaned over by an angle of 50 degrees toward the north. As I said, I formed all sorts of weird ideas about the globe.

The clear plastic stand, incidentally, had a number of fascinating symbols and etchings on it. There was a grid of squares, each covering 100 square miles on the globe. There were latitude and longitude markings, so one could see at an instant how far two different cities were displaced in those coordinates.

The thing that fascinated me most about the globe, however, was an unexplained, elongated figure-8 that was unceremoniously placed in the sparse expanse of the southeast Pacific. What was it, I wondered? It had the names of the months marked at various points around the curve, so it clearly had something to do with the year, but what was the significance? Why was it in the shape of a figure-8? What was it doing down there in the south Pacific? And couldn't people remember the months of the year without being reminded by a strange marking on a globe?

I'm sure you're dying to know the answers to those questions (well, maybe not the last one), so I'll give them to you, but let me start with something that seems unrelated at first blush.

* * * *

In his *Republic,* Plato (427-347 B.C.) describes—among a whole host of other things—his curriculum for the ideal schooling in the Republic. One of the subjects to be studied, as a science, is that of astronomy.

We must keep in mind, however, that Plato's conception of astronomy was not what we moderns are used to. The image that most people today have of an astronomer is that of a solitary observer, dwarfed by a tremendous telescope, staring

up at the sky in search of goodness only knows what. (As a matter of fact, most professional astronomers today rarely if ever look through the telescopes they use to do their research, but that's a development of the last century or so.) The job of the astronomer is to make observations of the heavens, and from those observations, enhance our knowledge of the cosmos.

That was most certainly not Plato's ideal. His curriculum was designed in order to form rigorous thinkers, and to that end, the “real” astronomy was not what was up in the sky. The stars and the planets showed inconsistencies that were a result of being sensible objects in the physical world. It would be no more appropriate to study the “real” astronomy by looking up at the sky than it would be to study geometry by looking at the imperfect straight lines and round circles that humans could draw out in the sand. Astronomy was a set of abstract concepts that could only be approached by logical thought. (He would surely have been distressed by Hipparchus's attempt to keep track of the changing heavens by mapping the stars.)

Accordingly, when Plato and his followers sought solutions to astronomical conundrums, the first criterion by which the solutions were measured was not how well they matched observations (although it was something of a consideration of Plato's), but by how elegant those solutions were. For example, Plato and his contemporaries felt that the most perfect shape was the circle. It is as perfectly symmetrical as any shape can be; it is, in a sense, the figure that all regular polygons aspire vainly to be. So, they concluded, the ideal

astronomical theory for any problem must consist of circles or combinations of circles.

One such problem was the motions of the planets in the sky. The planets do not stay in place as the stars do, but instead move through the constellations. Mostly, they move slowly from west to east ("prograde" or "direct" motion) as the months pass, but occasionally, they move east to west ("retrograde" motion). Even such an idealist as Plato could not ignore that blatant a variation in motion. After all, the Sun and the Moon *don't* exhibit retrograde motion, so there was a clear basis for comparison. But Plato was no mathematician—he was an idea man, not an analytical genius. So he was forced to pose this question to others: What theory, consisting of circles, either in isolation or in combination, could explain the apparent motion of the planets?

Eventually, a workable solution was arrived at, centuries after Plato's death, by the Greek astronomer Ptolemy (c. 85-165), in his geocentric theory of the solar system. But long before Ptolemy, other Greeks tried their hand at solving Plato's poser. One such person was Eudoxus of Cnidus (c. 400-347 B.C.), a Greek mathematician and a contemporary of Plato.

Eudoxus's idea can be imagined as follows. Suppose that you have, resting on a tabletop, a globe that spins on a tilted axis (unlike my dad's free-standing globe). Imagine that there's an ant walking along the equator. Obviously, the ant retraces its path periodically, and we might call each time around the path one *orbit.*

Because the globe is tilted, the ant does not stay at the same height above the table throughout each orbit, but rather rises and falls. If at one point during its travels, the ant is at its lowest point, then half an orbit later (and half an orbit earlier as well), it is at its highest point. Midway between these extremes, the ant is at its average height.

Now, suppose that instead of putting the globe on a table, you put it on a turntable, and you set the turntable spinning at exactly the same rate as the ant's walking, but in the opposite direction. For example, if we assume that the ant is walking west to east along the equator—that is, counterclockwise, as seen from above the north pole—then the turntable is spinning clockwise. Then, because the two motions roughly cancel each other out, the ant appears to remain more or less in place (relative to an outside observer).

But not *precisely* in place. The ant would stay exactly in place if the globe weren't tilted, for then both the ant and the turntable would be moving horizontally, and their equal but opposite rotations would cancel each other out completely. But because the globe *is* tilted, the rotations don't cancel out perfectly, and the ant must at least be sometimes high, sometimes low. After all, without the turntable, the ant's height goes up and down, and the turntable can't affect the ant's height; it can only move the ant side to side.

Is that all? Does the ant *only* move up and down, or does it trace out a more complex figure? Now, to make that more precise, suppose you start the globe with the ant on the equator exactly at its average height, and you shine a laser pointer on the ant. (It's a weak pointer that doesn't hurt the

ant.) As the turntable rotates clockwise, both the ant and the laser dot move west to east across the globe, but whereas the ant stays at the same latitude (0 degrees, on the equator), the laser dot appears to change latitude throughout its orbit. In fact, since the globe is tilted by 23.4 degrees—the tilt of the Earth's axis—the laser dot's latitude fluctuates between 23.4 degrees north and 23.4 degrees south. Now, the crucial question: Relative to the laser dot, what is the motion of the ant—or just as significantly, from the point of view of the ant, what is the motion of the laser dot?

Eudoxus had sufficient genius for visualization that he arrived at the surprising but right answer. Here's how he might have reasoned. If the Earth were flat, you could walk forever in a straight line without retracing any part of your path. But the Earth is not flat; instead, as Eudoxus probably suspected, it's a sphere. And since the sphere is curved, you can't walk a literally straight line. The curvature of the Earth forces your path to be curved one way or another. The straightest path you can walk is to go around the Earth in as wide a circle as possible. One such path is the equator; you can easily see that by walking along the equator, you are neither turning north nor south. Another way to walk as straight as possible is to start at the north pole, walk due south along some particular line of longitude until you get to the south pole, and then return to the north pole along the “opposite” line of longitude.

Each of these straightest paths is called a *great circle.* There are an infinite number of them on the Earth, or on the globe, or indeed on any sphere. Each of them has the same

diameter as the sphere, and the center of any great circle is the same as the center of the sphere. The ant on the globe traces out a great circle—namely, the equator. The laser dot traces out another great circle, but one that is horizontal and therefore *not* the equator. Since the globe is tilted by 23.4 degrees, the laser dot's great circle is tilted to the equator by 23.4 degrees as well. These two circles intersect at two opposite points, which must obviously be along the equator, 180 degrees apart. This is the key to Eudoxus's idea.

Suppose we start with the ant and the laser dot at the same spot again. The ant proceeds directly eastward along the equator. The laser dot follows a great circle that is inclined to the equator, by 23.4 degrees, either to the northeast, or the southeast. For the sake of discussion, let's suppose that the laser dot is moving to the northeast of the original starting point.

At first, the ant and the laser dot are still close together, and we can for all practical purposes ignore the spherical shape of the globe, just as, in real life, we can ignore the spherical shape of the Earth when navigating inside our home. Since the ant and the laser dot are moving at the same speed, they appear to be carried along at the edge of an ever-expanding compass dial, as in Figure 1.

Initially, the laser dot seems to be moving mostly northward, relative to the ant. But because the ant puts all of its motion into the eastward direction, and the laser dot only puts most of it there, the laser dot must also appear to be moving slightly westward, from the standpoint of the ant. (See Figure 2.)

If the globe were actually flat, the ant and laser dot would spread out forever, with the dot always moving to the north-northwest of the ant. But the globe isn't flat, and if the ant and laser dot continue far enough, the globe's curvature will come into play.

For example, after a quarter of an orbit, the ant is 90 degrees (1/4 of 360) away from its starting point, along the equator. The laser dot, travelling at the same rate, is also 90 degrees from its starting point, but north of the ant. You might expect that it would also be somewhat to the west of the ant, as before, but it's not. Instead, it's exactly due north of the ant. (See Figure 3.)

What has happened? The new factor is that the laser dot's path is taking it to higher latitudes on the globe, where the lines of longitude are closer together. As they both approach the 1/4-orbit point in their travels, therefore, the laser dot is gaining on the ant in longitude. This makes up perfectly for the start of their voyages, where the ant moved out ahead of the dot in longitude, so by the time that they have gone through a quarter orbit, both the laser dot and the ant have moved through exactly 90 degrees of longitude.

If we follow their motion further, into the second quarter of the orbits, the laser dot now races ahead of the ant in longitude. But we know that they must meet again after both have travelled through a half orbit; at that time, they must both be on the opposite side of the globe from their original starting point. As seen in Figure 4, from the point of view of the ant, the laser dot must have travelled in a wide looping

path, starting toward the north-northwest, then curving eastward, then returning from the north-northeast.

In the second half of their orbits, the exact same thing happens, except inverted. Again, the laser dot, with some of its motion toward the south, falls behind the ant in longitude, and it appears to the ant to be moving to the south-southwest. Then, as it moves to more southern latitudes, where the lines of longitude are closer together, it catches up with and overtakes the ant in longitude. Finally, as its path takes it back toward the equator, the ant and the laser dot meet once more at the starting point, one orbit later for each. (See Figure 5.)

This figure-8 shape is the path that the laser dot appears to take from the perspective of the ant. The amazing thing is that Eudoxus was able to figure this all out without the benefit of actual globes or laser pointers. To him, incidentally, the looping path, retracing itself over and over again, resembled the loops placed around a horse's feet to fetter it, so he called the path a “horsefetter.” Naturally, he spoke Greek, so the word he used was *hippopede,* pronounced “hip-POP-puh-dee,” from the Greek words for “horse” and “feet.”

Eudoxus thought that by superimposing this figure-8 loop on a third, underlying west-to-east motion, he could simulate the retrograde motion of the planets. Half the time, the hippopede would also be moving west to east, so the combined motion would be west to east as well—this would be prograde, or direct, motion. Even much of the rest of the time, the hippopede would not be moving enough in the opposite direction to counteract the general west-to-east

translation. Only when the hippopede was moving nearly as fast as possible, east to west, would there be a resulting backward slide, and this backward slide Eudoxus identified as retrograde motion.

It was a clever bit of explanation, but there were a number of problems with it. First of all, if it were correct, then all of the retrograde loops should have been symmetrical, and that wasn't so. Secondly, and more seriously, all the planets should remain at the same brightness throughout their orbits, and they certainly did not. Mars, in particular, is dozens of times brighter at some times than at others. For these reasons, Eudoxus's hippopede was eventually replaced, first by Ptolemy's theory of deferents and epicycles, equants and eccentrics, and 1,400 years thereafter by Copernicus and the heliocentric theory.

* * * *

The hippopede re-entered science, though, in a completely unexpected way—a way that was only opened up by the advent of accurate timekeeping.

For millennia, humans kept track of time by noting the general location of the Sun. One might speak of leaving for town at sunrise, or of returning when the Sun was a hand's breadth above the horizon, and so forth. The Sun's motion was sufficiently constant to provide a convenient basis for telling time.

At some point, it became expedient to divide both the day and the night into portions, and the Babylonians chose to divide them both into 12 equal parts called “hours,” from an ancient Greek word meaning “time of day.” Twelve was a

useful number, in that a quarter, or a third, or a half of a day or night all came out to a whole number of hours. These hours could be labelled on a sundial, so the moving shadow of a stylus, or gnomon, would mark out the advancing hours—at least, during the daytime.

Unfortunately, all of the daytime hours were equal to each other, and all of the nighttime hours were also equal, but the daytime hours were not the same length as the nighttime hours. Instead, they were longer in summer (naturally) and shorter in winter. The explanation for this was in the changing height of the Sun. It rose higher in the sky in summer, and more of its circular path was then above the horizon, so naturally the 12 daytime hours took longer to pass. In the winter, exactly the opposite was true: the Sun did not get very high at all in the sky, even at its peak. Less of its circular path was above the horizon, so the 12 daytime hours took less time to pass.

Eventually, other devices for telling time were developed that did not depend on the slightly variable nature of the Sun's path: for instance, hourglasses, or burning candles. With the introduction of these timekeepers, the variations in the daytime and nighttime hours became quite troublesome. It was tedious to have to change candles or hourglasses with each month. How much easier it would be to replace the inconstant hours with 24 equal ones. The only inconvenience was that sunrise and sunset would take place at slightly different hours throughout the year, but that could easily be accounted for.

Then, in 1656, the Dutch astronomer and physicist Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695) developed the first pendulum clock. Galileo had had the idea previously, while watching a chandelier sway back and forth in a cathedral, but had never followed through on a design. Huygens was the first to overcome the physical obstacles to building a clock based on the principle of the pendulum, and he ushered in the era of precision timekeeping.

Huygens's clock was also the first to be accurate to minutes a day, and the clock face gained another hand. Later clocks were even accurate to seconds, and now was discovered an interesting discrepancy. The moment that the Sun crosses the meridian—an imaginary north-south line in the sky—is called local noon, after an old word meaning the ninth (daytime) hour of the day. (This was midafternoon, but later was moved back earlier, to midday.) By all rights, the time between local noon on two successive days should be exactly 24 hours. But as measured by these accurate clocks, the interval between two consecutive local noons was sometimes a few seconds long; at others, a few seconds short. If we set a clock exactly to noon when the Sun was at local noon on one day, then the next day, the Sun would reach local noon, not at 12:00 exactly, but perhaps at 11:59:58, or at 12:00:10. These discrepancies added up, so that at various times of the year, the Sun was as much as a quarter of an hour “early” or “late.” The errors repeated in a cycle of length one year, year after year.

Either the clocks were wrong, or the Sun's apparent motion across the sky was not as constant as previously

thought (or both). We now know that it's the latter, and this repeating cycle is called “the equation of time” by astronomers. The Sun does not go at the same rate in right ascension (the astronomical version of longitude) all year long, but instead moves through lines of right ascension faster at some times, slower at others. At no point does it actually go the “wrong” way—it doesn't exhibit retrograde motion, in other words—but this variation is what causes the Sun to cross the meridian early or late. And if we plot the “location” of the Sun, with its northern and southern advances drawn along the vertical axis, and its earliness or lateness drawn along the horizontal axis, we get the figure drawn on my dad's globe, which is called an “analemma.” (See Figure 6.)

The word “analemma” is Greek for the pedestal of a sundial, and itself comes from the Greek verb *analambanein,* meaning “to take up, to resume, to repair,” so that the pedestal is something that supports the sundial upon it. Early on, “analemma” seems to have been extended to refer to a particular kind of sundial, in which only the height of the Sun was indicated, by measuring the size of the shadow cast by the sundial. Later, it was used for a number of meanings related to the height of the Sun; its latest meaning, and that with which we are interested here, is some kind of representation of the Sun's gradually changing path in the sky at the same time (noon by the clocks) each day.

It surely hasn't escaped your attention that the analemma and Eudoxus's hippopede share a certain resemblance, a resemblance that, as it turns out, is more than accidental.

The hippopede results from the conjunction of two circular motions, and so does the analemma.

The apparent motion of the Sun is really due to two motions of the Earth. One is the Earth's orbit around the Sun. The Earth completes one revolution about the Sun in one year, and if that were the only motion that the Earth had, then we on the Earth would see the Sun appear to go around the Earth just once a year.

However, the Earth has a second motion: its rotation on its axis. It does so approximately once a day, and it is for that reason, mostly, that the Sun appears to revolve around the Earth once each day. Since these two motions have periods in approximately the ratio 365.25:1 (the number of days in a year), while the hippopede results from two motions with equal periods, you might think that the hippopede doesn't have much relevance to the analemma.

But you'd be wrong. As I mentioned, the Earth rotates on its axis only *approximately* once a day, and the Sun's apparent motion across the sky is only *mostly* due to this rotation. A tiny component is due to the first motion of the Earth, its orbital revolution. Since this revolution takes 365.25 times longer than the rotation, it contributes 1/365.25 as much to the Sun's apparent motion across the sky as does the Earth's rotation. Now, the Earth's rotation makes the Sun seem to move east to west, from dawn to dusk, but its orbital revolution appears to add a second component, from west to east. This second component very slightly counteracts the first, so that the 24-hour day is longer than you might expect based solely on rotation. In fact, the Earth actually rotates on

its axis, with respect to the stars, every 23 hours, 56 minutes, and 3.5 seconds. This slightly shorter day is called the “sidereal day,” after a Latin word meaning “star,” since this is the time it takes for the Earth to rotate once relative to the stars. The extra four minutes each day is due to the Earth's orbit around the Sun, and is 1/365.25 of the 24-hour day.

In other words, if the Earth didn't revolve around the Sun, but only rotated in place, in defiance of the law of gravity, the Sun would appear to go once around the Earth in 23 hours, 56 minutes, and 3.5 seconds, instead of the customary 24 hours. And if we were to take a snapshot of the Sun every day at the same time by the clock, it would be 3 minutes and 56.5 seconds further along each day. After two days, it would be ahead (that is, further west) by 7 minutes and 53 seconds; after three days, by 11 minutes and 49.5 seconds; after four days, by 15 minutes and 46 seconds, and so forth.

How long would it take for this margin to extend to 24 hours, so that the Sun would once again be “on time,” on the meridian at noon? Why, as many times as 3 minutes and 56.5 seconds goes into 24 hours—and as we noted above, this interval is 1/365.25 of 24 hours, so it would take 365.25 days for the Sun to “lap” the 24-hour clock. A year, in other words. In short, if the Earth only rotated, and didn't revolve around the Sun, the Sun would appear to revolve around us every 23 hours, 56 minutes, and 3.5 seconds, but by taking snapshots of the Sun every 24 hours, which is just about four minutes longer, this motion would appear to be slowed down to just one revolution per year.

In case that sounds confusing, it's like watching a car drive by you on the road. In reality, the car's wheels may be rotating very rapidly—let's say, 25 times a second. (That'd be one fast car, by the way—probably around 150 to 200 kilometers an hour!) But if you watch a film of the car, where the camera takes 24 frames per second, each frame catches the wheel when it has gone through 1 1/24 of a rotation. Since the eye can't tell the difference between 1 1/24 of a rotation and just 1/24 of a rotation, it appears as though the wheel is actually rotating at only 1/24 rotation per frame. That works out to one rotation every 24 frames—or once a second.

In much the same way, when we take our figurative snapshots of the Sun every 24 hours, the Earth's rotation, alone, makes the Sun appear to revolve around the Earth, once a year, from east to west, along a path called the *celestial equator.* Meanwhile, as described above, the Earth's orbital revolution, alone, makes the Sun appear to revolve around the Earth, once a year in the opposite direction, from west to east, along another path called the *ecliptic.* Both the celestial equator and the ecliptic are great circles. What's more, these two great circles are not the same, but because of the Earth's axial tilt, are instead inclined to one another by an angle of 23.4 degrees.

We therefore have an exact analogue of Eudoxus's hippopede, but this time applied to the apparent motion of the Sun throughout the year. These two motions combine to create the figure-8 shape of the analemma. Eudoxus could not possibly have known about this application of his theory,

which was originally designed to account for the retrograde motion of the planets. As an explanation of *that* behavior, the hippopede was basically dead on arrival. Too bad that accurate clocks were not available in his day; otherwise, he might have found the right use for his geometric intuition.

* * * *

But one last objection remains: The analemma on the globe is not a symmetric figure-8 at all! Rather, it's smaller on the northern end, and larger on the southern end. Why is that?

That asymmetry is due to one further property of the Earth's orbit around the Sun: its eccentricity. The Earth's orbit is nearly circular, but not precisely so. It is actually an ellipse, and the Earth moves along that ellipse in accordance to Kepler's laws of planetary motion. (See “Music of the Ellipses.") As such, the Earth moves faster when it is closer to the Sun, and slower when it is further from the Sun, and this translates to a corresponding variation in the Sun's apparent west-to-east motion due to the Earth's revolution. Just *how* elliptical the orbit is, and the angle between the long axis of the orbit and the axis of the Earth, determine the contour of the analemma.

Incidentally, I'm not certain just why the analemma is specifically in the southern Pacific—perhaps because that's the least crowded part of the planet, cartographically speaking—or why it's needed on a globe at all. It does have some significance to sundial builders, since it can be used to correct for the equation of time, if the months of the year are marked out (as they are on my dad's globe) and one rotates

the dial of the sundial according to the analemma. But it doesn't seem to need to be on a globe, and indeed, more modern globes now eschew the analemma in favor of a more extensive legend.

Here is a C program to compute and plot the analemma for various different orbital parameters. It's not tremendously user friendly, and can probably use some additional documentation. (It also uses the “system” call, which probably should be replaced with something in the “exec” family, if that means anything to you.) However, it uses the ideas presented in this essay, with the additional amendment that the eastward march due to the Earth's orbital revolution varies in speed because that orbit is elliptical. This approach is more accurate than programs where the effects on the equation of time of the two motions is added linearly (such as this one). That's reasonably accurate for small eccentricities and axial inclinations, but becomes noticeably inaccurate for extreme orbits.

Adapted from Astronomical Games, August 2002.

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Mr. Muerte and the Eyeball Kid

By Sean Klein, illustration by Alain Valet

8/5/02

Lunchtime, Jimmy finds an eyeball in his stew. “Cool,” he says, balancing it on his spoon.

“Eat it,” Frankie says.

“Yeah, eat it,” Denny says. He always agrees with what Frankie says. If Frankie jumped off a cliff, Denny would follow.

Only Peter remains silent.

The boys sit at a plastic table in the cafeteria's corner. The other kids leave them alone. The cafeteria lady stands amongst the tables like a sentinel, ready to avert disaster, or at least a food fight.

“Miracle Man would eat it,” Frankie says.

“No he wouldn't,” Jimmy says.

“Would so.”

“Would not. Miracle Man is a wuss.”

“Mr. Muerte,” Denny says, “would eat an eyeball.”

Mr. Muerte is Jimmy's favorite superhero. Mr. Muerte wears black and is rarely seen in tights and a cape. He fights the Midnight Stranger and sometimes Zeus ex Machina, and never anyone lame like the Sandbagger or Al K. Traz. Mr. Muerte is supernatural. Mr. Muerte is immortal. Mr. Muerte is cool.

Jimmy moves the spoon and makes the eyeball rock in its brown bed of sauce.

“I dare you to eat it,” Frankie says.

“Double dare,” Denny says.

Frankie peers across the table, leaning forward over his forgotten lunch. “Double dog dare.”

Jimmy studies the eyeball. It stares back at him. It's green if you ask Frankie, but blue if you ask Jimmy. Denny would say it's green because of how he feels about Frankie. Peter's eyes are brown and today they have a shadowy, haunted look like he hasn't been sleeping.

Peter likes Mr. Muerte too. He's the one who told Jimmy that Mr. Muerte is cool. Peter told Jimmy a lot of things. He told him that Miracle Man is lame. He told him to watch *The Six Million Dollar Man* on television long before all the other kids started running in slow motion. He told him about Fizzies and the Doberman that ate that guy's fingers. He told him about real rock and roll and they listened to the Beach Boys together, Elton John and Pink Floyd, records they borrowed from Peter's older brother when he wasn't home. Frankie and Denny like Elton John and the Beach Boys, but they think Pink Floyd is lame.

Peter doesn't tell Jimmy to eat the eyeball. But Jimmy can't deny Frankie's double dog dare. If he does, then Frankie and Denny will tell everyone that he's a wuss. Jimmy looks to Peter, but Peter only stares.

Jimmy doesn't want to be a wuss.

He chews the eyeball like he'd chew a small round potato. It's not rubbery, and nothing squirts in his mouth—and it doesn't taste too bad. It's actually a bit mushy, like a

vegetable that's been cooked too long. No worse than anything else served at the school cafeteria.

Frankie's scream cuts through the cafeteria noise: “Eeeewww!” Two girls at the next table over stop talking. They look at the boys as if they are lepers escaped from the colony. Kids at the other tables turn to look. Denny joins the yelling: “Grooosss!” Frankie announces, “Jimmy ate an eyeball!” Denny has his hands clasped at his throat, his eyes crossed, and his tongue hanging out. He's wobbling like a punching bag clown that just took one in the kisser. The girls wrinkle their noses and go back to eating. “Eyeball! Eyeball!” Denny yells. The other kids return to their lunches and interrupted conversations. Frankie quiets down and Denny follows.

“From now on,” Frankie says, “your superhero name is ‘The Eyeball Kid.'”

* * * *

The boys have secret identities. Jimmy was Captain Justice, but now he's the Eyeball Kid. Frankie is the Crimson Streak because he runs fast. Everyone always wants him on their team for capture the flag. Denny is the Phantom Avenger. Last week he was the Mysterious Avenger. And the week before he was Captain Mystery, but he had to change it because Jimmy was Captain Justice. Peter was Matter Master until he got sick. Then he was the Radioactive Kid. Now he's the Silver Specter. He's been the Silver Specter for a while now.

* * * *

In school, Jimmy and Peter sit next to one another. When Peter got sick, his parents came to class and emptied his desk. He did his work at home: spelling lists, book reports, the math book full of multiplication and division problems. Peter was good at spelling, but not as good at math. Jimmy helped him with the fractions last year.

Peter is back, but his illness has affected his memory—he always leaves his books at home. He sits at his desk mostly quiet and listening. Jimmy doesn't like that his best friend has no school supplies so he slips pencil and paper into Peter's desk. Half an hour later, Peter is drawing Mr. Muerte. The teacher never calls on Peter anymore.

When Peter became the Radioactive Kid, he lost his hair. Jimmy didn't care, but the other kids teased him. The teacher let him wear a baseball cap in class, even though it was against the rules.

This year, Jimmy's math scores are slipping. The numbers jumble and don't make sense. If you have four apples and take away one quarter, you should have three but now the numbers swim in front of his eyes and he can't see the proper solution. One plus one isn't two anymore. This troubles Jimmy's parents, who have conferences with his teacher. He's not paying attention, she says, acting out, causing trouble. She wants them to talk to him about Peter's illness, to help him understand.

“It's hard on a boy,” his mother says.

The teacher nods. She leans on her desk and clasps her hands in front of her like she's praying. “It is hard on a boy.”

Jimmy's father only nods.

* * * *

After school, the boys ride their bikes to Fenniman's Five and Dime. Fifty cents earned from cutting lawns buys a comic book and a candy bar with two nickels change. Thursday is the best day because that's when Nancy, who's in high school and wants to be a nurse, puts out the new comics. Whenever a new *Mr. Muerte* arrives, she always holds two copies behind the counter: one for Jimmy and one for Peter. She's nice in ways that Jimmy's sister isn't. He wishes he had Nancy for a sister, which would be second-best to having no sister at all. Jimmy's sister doesn't appreciate things like *Creature Features, Speed Racer,* or how cool Mr. Muerte is.

The boys leave their bikes on the sidewalk, leaning against the building. They feel no need to lock them up.

Jimmy waits for Peter at the door. Peter hasn't quite recovered from being sick and doesn't have the strength he once had. At least now he can ride. For a long time, Peter did nothing, and then he was in the hospital. Even now, he doesn't play capture the flag or dodgeball much. Mostly he sits on the bench by the fence, watching the games.

Frankie and Denny run right in. They go straight for the comics. Jimmy walks in with Peter. Nancy is at the counter, pricing lipsticks. She smiles—it makes her look just like that girl in the shampoo commercial—and waves Jimmy to the counter. “I have the new *Mr. Muerte* for you.”

Jimmy asks, “What about Peter's?”

Nancy puts down the pricing gun. Her smile fades. She moves a strand of hair from her face to behind her ear. “Jimmy ... ,” she says. At the spinner, Frankie and Denny

make excited announcements about the new titles: "*G-Force,* cool!" *"Catman!"* "*The Incredible Arachnoid,* excellent!"

Nancy bites her lip. She looks sad to Jimmy. Not sad like his sister looked when her boyfriend on the football team broke up with her, but sad like his mother looked when she told him Peter was going to the hospital. "I only saved one copy," she says.

Jimmy looks at Peter. He's standing to Jimmy's right, a step or two behind him. Peter's hands are in his pockets. He shrugs slowly, just moving his shoulders. "It's okay," Jimmy says. This makes Nancy smile, which Jimmy likes, but not like she smiled before, which Jimmy liked better. "We can share."

"Oh, Jimmy," she says and her smile is gone.

The new *Mr. Muerte* is shiny and flat and still smells of printer's ink. On the cover he is facing off against a dark woman. He is small in the foreground and his cloak waves in the wind. The woman towers over our hero. She has ten arms, each wielding a wavy sword. She is wearing a necklace of skulls. "Cool," Jimmy mutters. The cover copy reads: "In this issue, Mr. Muerte battles Kali, Goddess of Destruction!"

"Hey, Eyeball!" Frankie cries. "What you getting?" They've dropped the "Kid" part now, shortening Jimmy's superhero name to "Eyeball." Not even something mysterious and neat like "The Eyeball," which sounds like something you'd find in a Mr. Muerte story; just "Eyeball," that round thing you keep in your head.

Frankie buys *G-Force* and a Mars Bar. Denny also buys the new *G-Force* and a Mars Bar, but he buys *The Incredible Arachnoid,* too. Jimmy buys *Mr. Muerte* and a Snickers. Peter

gets a copy of *Intergalactic Tales* and an Abba-Zaba. He'll read Jimmy's *Mr. Muerte.* Abba-Zaba is a strange choice. It doesn't have chocolate covering like a Mars Bar or a Snickers. It comes out of the wrapper pale and white like a ghost.

* * * *

Kali normally fights the Karma Crew. But now, she is stalking the fog-shrouded streets of Bay City, leaving a trail of terror and bloody corpses. The story opens with her walking at night through the city's dangerous warehouse district. A leather and denim-clad biker gang accosts her. What were they thinking? She's six feet tall, blue-skinned, wearing a necklace of skulls. The first guy attacks her with a chain. It wraps around her left forearm. A sword appears in her right hand and she dispatches the first attacker.

Jimmy is sitting in the clubhouse—a converted storage shed in Denny's backyard—reading *Mr. Muerte.* He read Peter's *Intergalactic Tales* first. The Snickers is long gone. Pepsi cans and stacks of magazines litter the floor—comics, *Ranger Rick*s, some car magazines and old editions of *Boys' Life* left there by Denny's brother. The air smells of dust and paper.

The biker gang attacks Kali en masse. They have clubs and long bowie knives. She sprouts four more arms, each holding a sword. The next scene is Kali, two-armed again, standing amongst the prostrate bodies of the bikers. “Fools!” she says. “They should know better than to challenge the Goddess of Destruction! Now where is that museum?”

Cut to Mr. Muerte's secret hideout, a Victorian mansion at 13 Elysian Lane. Mr. Muerte is studying in his library, reading

a tome thicker than a dictionary. Chang, his servant, comes to him. “Sir, there is a disturbance in the aether.”

Mr. Muerte flies into action.

The museum is holding a charity event. Gowned and tuxedoed patrons fill the halls to get a preview of the new “Riches of India” exhibit. Among them are the mayor, wealthy industrialists, a famous surgeon, and a popular movie star. The exhibit's center: the Star of the Rajah, a flawless, 200-carat, oval-cut ruby.

Kali enters through a tall window. Glass flies, falling onto the crowd. A security guard goes for his gun. The goddess knocks him aside as though he were a kitten. “Where is the Star?” she asks. Another security guard fires his pistol. The bullets bounce off Kali. “Fool!” she says. “Your meager weapons cannot harm the Goddess of Destruction!”

“But,” Mr. Muerte says, “my powers can!” He hovers in the window through which Kali arrived. His cloak billows behind him. His right hand is clenched in a fist; his left points at the evil goddess.

Not even an atomic bomb could move Jimmy from his seat right now.

Mr. Muerte is at a disadvantage in this battle. Kali cares nothing about the museum guests. Mr. Muerte must protect them. Kali cares nothing about the museum either—not its walls, not its furnishings, not the priceless antiquities—only about the Star of the Rajah.

She topples a statue of Ganesh over the mayor, the famous surgeon, and a blonde wearing a little black dress. Mr. Muerte becomes distracted. He cannot let Kali kill innocent

people. He shatters the statue, saving the guests, but Kali exploits the distraction. In the next panel, she holds the ruby. “Now that I have the Star of the Rajah,” she says, “its power is mine!” A red beam like a laser shoots from the stone, striking Mr. Muerte. He crumples to the floor. Kali laughs, “Foolish mortal!” and makes her escape.

The mayor kneels next to Mr. Muerte. The blonde holds her hand over her mouth. The famous surgeon touches his hand to Mr. Muerte's throat.

Jimmy turns the page. Sweat from his fingertips soaks into the comic's cover.

The surgeon says, “He's dead!” Underneath, it says, “Continued in Karma Crew #57, on sale next week!” Jimmy's hands tremble. He lowers the comic book to his lap. Mr. Muerte is dead. He can't believe it. Mr. Muerte is immortal. How can he die?

* * * *

The week passes like the dark hours of Christmas morning, when the gifts are laid out but the parents are not yet awake. Thursday afternoon, the three o'clock bell rings and Jimmy is the first one out the door. He doesn't wait for Frankie or Denny, and he pedals hard all the way to Fenniman's.

He bursts through the door, nearly breathless. Nancy is kneeling in front of the wire spinner, stuffing comic books into the slots. She smiles when she sees him, but he doesn't give her time to speak. “*Karma Crew* #57,” he says, all at once, like a starving man asking for food. She points to the comic books next to her. There's two stacks: one with bent spines and dull covers, the other with straight spines and shiny

perfect covers. “We got some,” she tells him. “I'll have it up in a second.”

Jimmy falls to his hands and kneels next to her. “Can I get one now?”

Nancy opens her mouth to say something, but doesn't speak. He's starting to catch his breath now. She gives the spinner a quarter turn, to where there's a column of empty slots. Jimmy says, “I won't mess up your stack.”

Nancy says okay.

He finds the latest *Karma Crew* in the middle of the pile. Kali is on the cover, facing the Karma Crew this time. Mr. Muerte's supine body floats between them on a bed of red light that emanates from the Star of the Rajah. Jimmy scrambles to lean against the magazine rack and starts reading.

Karma Crew is not a title that Jimmy reads often, but Peter bought it every once in a while. Frankie and Denny sneered at him whenever he did, because they prefer *G-Force,* which has better superheroes, many of whom are popular enough to star in their own titles. Jimmy, too, prefers G-Force to the Karma Crew, but whenever Peter bought *Karma Crew,* he read it.

Shiva is the Karma Crew's leader. He has three eyes and blue skin, and can build up superhuman reserves of strength just by staying still.

Ganesh is the strong man—elephant-headed and a world-renowned poet. In #23, he threw an armored car at the Thuggee Master and his assassin horde, preventing them from killing President Nixon.

Hanuman is the monkey king. He can make himself big or small, human or ape. Most of the time he looks like the apes in *Planet of the Apes,* which Jimmy thinks is really cool, and even Frankie and Denny admit is pretty neat.

The last member of the Karma Crew is Durga, who is a woman because superhero teams always need at least one. Durga is cool, though, unlike Wallflower, who's in the G-Force. Durga is a warrior goddess who rides a tiger. In #40, she fought Captain Calcutta single-handedly and won after he imprisoned the rest of the Karma Crew in the Black Hole, from which no one ever escapes alive and the only way out is in a coffin. No way Wallflower could do that. The G-Force would have been dead.

Karma Crew #57 opens in the group's secret hideout. Ganesh is reading Shakespeare. Hanuman exercises on a jungle gym. Durga watches Hanuman. Shiva enters and calls his team to attention. “The cosmos is unbalanced!” he announces. “Kali is behind it and we must stop her!” The Karma Crew scrambles into action.

First, they travel to the astral plane, a place full of swirly lines, drippy clocks, and paths that lead nowhere. “Take care here,” Ganesh says, “if we lose our way, we may be lost forever!” But being lost isn't their worst problem; Kali's minions lie in wait. Demons stream out from behind purple trees and leap from Cheshire mouths. But the battle is short and the Karma Crew is on their way again.

Jimmy skips to the end.

In Kali's fortress, the team confronts the goddess. Mr. Muerte's spirit form is being held by one of Kali's demon

minions, a multiheaded creature that drools poison from its sharpened teeth. More demon minions stand between our heroes and Mr. Muerte.

The Karma Crew attacks. Durga leads the way, followed by Ganesh. Durga's tiger claws at one of the demons while Durga herself slashes at another with her sword. Three demons pile on Ganesh. He bucks, and the demons fly across the room. There is now a clear path to Kali. Ganesh lunges at her. “I am more powerful now than you can imagine!” the goddess says. A bolt of red light shoots from the ruby and knocks Ganesh to the ground.

Shiva yells, “Hanuman! The ruby!”

The monkey king goes into action. In full ape form, he jumps and somersaults across the room, bouncing off the walls and the heads of the grasping demons.

“Get him, you fools!” Kali orders her minions, but too late. Hanuman delivers Kali a flying kick, and she drops the ruby. He catches it with his feet before it hits the ground.

Without the ruby, Kali's power is reduced. Mr. Muerte breaks free from his demon captor. Shiva steps in. The battle with Kali bursts from the fortress and through the planes of existence. In the end, Shiva and Mr. Muerte prevail and send Kali down to the lowest level of hell to suffer for eternity.

Jimmy doesn't bother reading the last page. He sighs as he closes the comic. Mr. Muerte is back; that's what is important.

* * * *

The boys play in the meadow between the new subdivision and the cement aqueduct. There's enough space to run around and enough trees to use as cover. Last year, the city

put a chain-link fence along the aqueduct and sometimes the boys use the No Trespassing sign as a home base. They used to play Cowboys and Indians, and recently War, but they stopped that for a while after Denny's big brother didn't come home from Vietnam. Today they play Galactic Rangers. Frankie and Denny are the Earth Patrol; Jimmy and Peter, the Federation Forces. Frankie's laser blaster is a plastic rifle he got for Christmas last year. Denny uses a long stick, but his blaster is more powerful than Frankie's. Jimmy prefers his cap guns, which he keeps tucked in his waistband. The guns are better when he has caps, although for Galactic Rangers he doesn't need anything that bangs.

Galactic Rangers is harder than Cowboys and Indians or War. In Cowboys and Indians, if you get shot, it could be only a flesh wound. Maybe you can't walk or use your left arm, but you aren't dead. War is harder because Marines have machine guns. Galactic Rangers is the hardest. One shot from a blaster and you're dead. Galactic Rangers involves a lot of running and hiding.

The game lasts for hours, until Frankie and Denny ambush Jimmy and Peter near the edge of the field. Peter is incinerated by Denny's radiation blaster. Jimmy can't save him. He blasts Frankie with his laser pistols, but Denny gets Jimmy, too. They fall into the dry grass, dead. The game is over.

Jimmy stands and brushes dirt from his jeans.

“Let's go home,” Frankie says. His face is flushed and a droplet of sweat slides down his temple.

Denny says, “Yeah.” Jimmy looks behind him at the meadow. Red sky creeps over the aqueduct, making the water look dark. Peter is still lying in the grass. His hat came off when he fell, which makes Jimmy feel bad because Peter's hair hasn't started growing back yet.

Frankie and Denny start walking.

“Wait,” Jimmy says. “Peter.”

Frankie stops walking. He turns to face Jimmy. “He's dead, you wuss.”

“No,” Jimmy says. “He's not dead. Not anymore.” The game is over.

Frankie slings his rifle over his shoulder. He heads for the subdivision. Denny tags behind him.

Jimmy scans the field. “Wait,” he says. “Wait up, you guys.” He wants to follow, but he can't leave Peter behind. He runs to find him.

* * * *

Sean Klein lives in California with his wife and two cats. He is a graduate of Clarion West 2001. He is still searching for a near mint copy of *Mr. Muerte* #7. Contact him if you have one for sale.

The original illustration for “Mr. Muerte and the Eyeball Kid” is by Alain Valet.

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Feel of Heaven, Texture of Hell

By Kenneth Brady

8/12/02

"I talk to you through this gauze of lying, 'cause there is no death, only dying." Feast's third album blared from the living room speakers and Richard listened to Lauren's voice belt out the lyrics.

Only dying.

He rested his chin in front of the pin box on the black bedroom dresser and watched the pins slide slowly, one at a time, toward his face. Lauren had picked up the toy at a Sears clearance sale. She'd brought the thing home, poked her fingers into it, then her tongue; she had even squished her breasts together and pushed her nipples into the pins to form images on the other side.

This time, it was her fingers.

It was just like her to use a toy to reach out to him. Every part of life—their marriage, her music, even fame—had always been a game to her, and she still treated it that way, even three months after her death.

Richard put his nose to the clear Lexan front of the pin box, and his breath fogged the plastic. His scalp prickled; static electricity pulled at the hair falling across his forehead. He smelled the plastic, oily and synthetic like a baby's chew-toy, and the metal pins beyond, sharp and tangy like blood. He held his breath for a few seconds until the fog cleared away.

Lauren's right-hand fingertips worked their way slowly toward Richard. The silvery pins made him think of the time she'd painted her nails chrome for one of a hundred Feast goth-rock concerts at the Palladium or the Whisky or some other Los Angeles club. That night the paint had completely worn off onto her guitar strings before the end of her set.

Just before the middle finger pins tapped against the Lexan, the tip of her thumb appeared, then pressed forward as she reached toward Richard.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked, breath fogging the plastic again. He touched it with the tip of his tongue, got a little electric shock. He jerked back. It didn't taste like her at all, but the pain was familiar. “You're the one who left me, remember?”

Her fingers clenched; the pins shifted, sliding back from the Lexan as if pulled by a magnet. But she couldn't move the metal pins sideways, couldn't bend them. She was reacting, pissed off. Or maybe she was trying to get a sound from the pins, like guitar strings, like fingernails on a chalkboard. Richard expected the fingers to withdraw—maybe all but the middle one—and for her to leave him alone again with just an expression of hate, pain, long-suffering angst preserved in metal.

But she didn't. All five fingers stretched further for Richard's face, and hit plastic instead. The static in the air brushed his hair up and away from his eyes.

Reaching went beyond anything she'd ever done in life. The feeling of a possible connection with Lauren offered more of a thrill than Richard remembered experiencing at any time

when she was alive. He was a step closer to what other people told him they got from love, that magical world where a smile conveyed more than an hour of talking, and the touch of one fingertip could write a novel upon the skin. It was what he knew heaven must be like. And it seemed appropriate that it would come from her now, after her death.

“I want to help,” Richard said. He hesitated. “And I want you back.”

He knew that wasn't possible. There was no coming back. What did she expect of him? Would she want him to pull her back from heaven? Not like he'd ever actually had her, not completely, or like she was someone who *could* be had, even in death. She'd always belonged to her music, to her guitar, to her band. Maybe heaven didn't even have her, in much the same way. Were there grimy, smoke-filled bars in heaven, places for souls to go, good souls who needed to see the darkness once in a while? People got tired of too much light.

The fingers twitched again, and the frame jumped on the dresser. For a fraction of a second, The pins appeared to narrow and elongate, distorting the fingers into pointed claws seen in a funhouse mirror. Richard moved back from the frame, blinked. And then the sense of her presence was gone. Just like that. That feeling of heaven, that bliss, had disappeared, leaving an almost tangible sense of absence. His hair dropped across his forehead and covered one eye. There was nothing left of her but the impression of her distorted fingers.

Richard tapped the Lexan, then reached his hand around and slowly pushed all the pins to their ends, up against the

plastic. He felt each one, as if they might go from cold metal to warm flesh at any moment. As if they might become Lauren, and allow him to touch her again. But they remained rough, solid, and dead. He lifted the frame and dropped the pins back into place. A clean slate.

But that, too, was just like Lauren. It was another new beginning, another promise in a string of promises never kept. It was an assurance she would do better next time. She was asking for another chance, in her way. It said *All right, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up.* Or, in Lauren's case, her music video or cum shot or fade-out or maybe just one more bullet to the temple.

* * * *

Lauren came again at three in the morning. The hair rose on Richard's neck and he woke as the bedroom boom box clicked on. The first track on Feast's second album blared. “Don't want to miss a thing, you said. Don't want to miss a thing, so you can sleep when you're dead.”

Richard had been dreaming of their time in Hawaii. It was a club tour masquerading as a vacation. Richard had wanted to lie on the beach, maybe try surfing. Lauren had insisted on getting plastered, stripping naked, and chasing mongrel dogs through Honolulu alleys. They'd gotten arrested for that. Vacation in jail.

“We're in hell,” Lauren had said through the bars.

“How can you tell?” Richard had replied.

She'd run her fingertips along the wall of her jail cell, then along the bars that separated her from Richard.

“I can feel it. It's in the texture of the suffering that's gone on here. We're part of it now. I feel like I'm being torn between heaven and hell.”

Then she was writing. In her head, she was already writing and composing the song.

In Richard's dream, she had smiled, and it was a smile that radiated warmth and genius and understanding of the human condition. But she'd never done that in real life. She might have understood it all, even let it out in her music, but she had never smiled.

Richard flipped on the bedside light and held the pin box in front of his face. She was there; he could feel her in the static that brushed his ears and caressed the back of his head. Her nose poked slowly through the pins, and slid toward him. There were Lauren's nostrils, the left one slightly smaller than the right. Then the curve of her upper lip, then her lower lip and her chin. Delicate features made rough and brutish in the metalscape.

“I miss you,” Richard said.

A whisper. An exhalation. Richard strained to hear. He was sure Lauren said, “Help me.”

“What?” Richard said. “Help you how?”

“Release.” It was a hiss of air through a car tire valve. It was the last of the whipped cream can. It was sharp, and quick, and compressed. Richard shivered.

“Hurry,” she said.

“What can I do?” he said. “Show me.”

Lauren's mouth opened in a distorted bending of pins, the pin box seeming to twist and warp as sharp teeth gnashed out toward the Lexan.

Richard cried out and flung the pin box to the bed. He backpedaled away from the face that twisted and roiled silently within the metal. The pins moved so quickly the face appeared almost liquid. It moved from Lauren's fine features to an elongated snout, sharp teeth, jutting chin. Then back to Lauren. It was her, yet it was something else, something darker than her. Something that wanted to stop her from communicating with the living.

For a moment, Richard hesitated, afraid the creature might return. Then he steeled his courage, grabbed the pin box and shook it vigorously, ignoring the shock it sent up his arm. When he stopped, the face was caught mid-change between Lauren and whatever else was trying to break through. He stared at it until he was sure it wasn't going to come alive again, then gingerly touched the backs of the pins and tried to push them in, but they wouldn't go. They were fused together, solid, and the plastic was melted around them. He shuddered at the texture of the creature locked in the box. It was like running his fingers along a squeaky clean glass fresh from the dishwasher, or touching a terry towel after spending too much time in the pool, skin waterlogged and clammy. He set the pin box on the bedside table, under a line of framed photos hanging on the wall.

Gathering his thoughts, Richard looked at the photos, most of them images Lauren had captured on film during their trip to Catalina Island ten years ago. He revisited that day with

each photo: the bright sunshine glimmering off Avalon Harbor, the old slow boat leaving port for Long Beach, the road to the Wrigley Memorial.

Only one photo was Richard's, showing Lauren sitting cross-legged on the scrubby grass near the old casino. She was playing an acoustic guitar and scrunching her face in a snarl. Someone else might have mistaken it for laughing, since that went along with the sort of music she'd played back then. It had been silly folk songs from the sixties, and Richard had laughed as he took the photo. Then he recorded her playing with his cheap Walkman. She'd finished playing and said, “I love you,” for the first and only time.

Then she'd gone beyond that kind of music and on to goth, on to fame and fortune.

And now she was dead and would never go beyond that.

This last visit had been too short. It seemed like Lauren left sooner each time, left Richard alone with the pain, the feeling of suffering, of angst, that was so familiar. Richard wondered if that was hell calling her. Maybe a clerical error had sent her to the wrong place. Maybe heaven and hell were timeshares. Each time she spent more and more time in hell, less and less in heaven. Hell sent its gatekeeper to find her and retrieve her, and eventually she'd be gone from his life completely. He'd be left with just the image of the creature, and he would lose her.

Or perhaps she just needed more surface area to communicate. He grabbed his jacket and went to the hardware store to buy nails.

* * * *

The basement had a puke-green garage-sale throw rug on the floor that looked better than the bloodstained concrete below. Richard hadn't come down here in months, though, so it hadn't mattered to him. Until now.

The basement had been Lauren's practice studio. Her guitars lined one wall, hung on hooks. Amps were scattered around under the single high window that looked out to the backyard. Cables were everywhere. A poster on one wall proclaimed, “Feast, opening for Type O Negative.” An old pine dresser Lauren had kept since her childhood sat in one corner. It was covered with rock band stickers.

The dresser scared him even more than what was under the rug. She'd had it longer than she'd had him, and—until her death—he had always feared it was filled with love notes from fans, or hate letters she'd never sent to him. Maybe a diary. Now he thought there might be a hidden compartment the cops hadn't found, something secret. Maybe more suicide notes.

Richard decided not to think about the desk, or about his urge to lift the rug and revisit what lay beneath.

Instead, he stood back and admired his handiwork. The frame was eight feet high and four feet wide, bolted to the floor and ceiling. The plywood board covering its surface was riddled with little holes, like fine pegboard. And in each hole was a shiny steel nail. The hardware store clerk had filled his cart with boxes of long small-head nails.

“Five-inch stainless brads oughtta do ya,” the clerk had said. “This is like one of those pin art toys, huh?”

“For my wife,” Richard said. “She's an artist.”

People kept telling him how weird it was for Lauren to shoot herself. Men shot themselves or drove their cars off cliffs, but women usually opted for things like pills, or razor blades, or maybe sometimes jumping off bridges. No, he hadn't known that, Richard always said. But Lauren certainly had. And she hated to copy other people. Every facet of her music had to have her stamp of originality. Even her death had to state that she was an individual woman, that she was as good as any man. That she could kill herself just as well. Richard would have thought she'd have used a completely original way of doing it, something novel, but no. She couldn't do what he expected her to do either.

Richard ran his hand along the nail heads, flattening them all against the board. He milled around the basement, running his fingers along guitars and amps. Then the dresser. He regarded it, then took a deep breath and opened the top drawer. Guitar cords, sheet music. The next was filled with effects pedals. The bottom was tapes, masters of Feast albums, some of Lauren's favorite felt marker pens, and a disposable camera. Nothing more than before, nothing different than when the police had gone through and tagged everything and given him a list. He picked up the disposable camera. It still had one shot left on it out of twelve; that meant eleven photos Lauren had taken that he'd never seen.

Richard dropped the camera back into the drawer and closed it. He didn't need anything new to hurt him, to add to his pain, yet part of him wanted to know what she'd found important enough to photograph, no matter whether it hurt

him. He'd been playing her music over and over so often in his mind that he'd begun to believe her words.

He sang, “Love is forever, or so I'm told, but pain is worth much more than gold.” Then he dug Lauren's dusty old Fender acoustic guitar out from behind the dresser and sat cross-legged on the floor, picking out the chords, one at a time.

And there she was, with the sliding of pins through plywood. First her nipples poked through, then breasts, nose, and chin. Richard watched in fascination as Lauren's naked body coalesced in front of him, a quarter-inch at a time. He recalled the way clothes had fit her, pants cut low enough to hang on her hips and show what kind of underwear she was wearing, or not wearing. The little black shirts that had accentuated her breasts.

Her torso appeared, complete with hips. Her thighs followed, then shoulders and legs. Her hands came into view, palms forward, just to the side of either breast, and pressed forward toward Richard.

Richard set the guitar down and stood, moving slowly toward Lauren's shape. The static blew his hair back on his head and pulled at his shirt. He moved his hands toward Lauren and touched the pins. The electric shock was intense, stronger than before, but Richard held fast. The pins resisted, and he touched his palms to hers.

Richard's eyes teared up; he fought to keep from crying.

Her entire face was there, smooth as possible in silver metal. She was every bit as beautiful as he remembered her.

“Help,” whispered Lauren.

“What can I do?” he said. “Anything, and I'll do it.”

“There,” she said.

Lauren's finger pointed toward the dresser. Richard looked, then went to it.

“Bottom,” she said, voice fading. “Quick. No time.”

Richard flung open the bottom drawer. Just tapes, like before. Digital audio recordings, compact discs, some older tapes. Then one of them caught his eye. It wasn't a Feast album. It was a low-grade cassette tape that said “Untitled.” He pulled the tape from the drawer and went toward Lauren.

“Yes,” she said. “Release.”

And then he understood. An unreleased album. This was her unfinished business on earth. And then she could move on. She could get out of whatever purgatory she was in. She could leave him. It was like a slap in the face, and Richard fought to breathe, to grasp what she was asking of him. She hadn't come back for him at all.

He walked shakily up to her.

“You bitch,” Richard said. “That's all you want from me? Even after you're dead, it's all about you?”

“Please,” Lauren said.

Richard held the tape in his hand, looked from it to her. Her eyes were solid metal, impassive. He couldn't tell whether she was pleading for him to help her or just to stop pitying himself. But she was there, and solid, and almost alive. He would do anything to keep her around longer.

“What's it called?” Richard said.

“Have to go,” she said.

He touched her pin body, then awkwardly hugged it the best he could. Despite his words, he did not want to let go. It was as close to heaven as he'd ever been.

“Don't go.” It was all Richard could think to say. It was all he could get through his lips.

“Have to,” she said. “Coming for me. Love you.”

And then the leaving, the absence of that euphoric feeling. Richard stepped back to regard the image of his lost wife. Perfect, peaceful, frozen in time. But how like her was that? Peaceful? Never. She had said she loved him. Maybe he shouldn't keep the image. It would not be Lauren.

Then hell caught up with the pin box. A demon twisted Lauren's form into a horned metal beast and lunged toward Richard. Richard jumped back and away from the pin box, but slipped on the rug and landed hard on the concrete floor. The beast went for him, but the nails weren't held in place, and they fell to the floor as the creature leapt, filling the basement with a cacophony of metal tinkling. The creature's shape coalesced in the mass of nails on the green carpet, fluid, half-formed. It roiled and struggled silently, then froze in place.

Richard jumped to his feet, then ran up the stairs, away from the silence of the basement.

* * * *

He sat cross-legged on the bed he had once shared with Lauren. His finger hovered over the play button on the boom box. It was what she'd want him to do, to play the tape, to hear yet another of her creations. To give in to her again. Or,

he could throw it away and let her stay on perpetual standby. Maybe she'd come back to visit him. Maybe.

He pressed *play.* Static and background noise washed over him. The first few notes made it clear that it was an old tape, recorded outdoors, not in a studio. Then he forgot all about the sound quality, forgot all about the pin box and the demon. Forgot everything but his love for Lauren as he let the music move through him, and envelop him, and remind him of what Lauren had been like on that sunny Catalina day, ten years past.

When she said, “I love you,” Richard began to sob.

* * * *

Richard sat in front of the pile of fused nails that littered the basement floor. He picked up Lauren's acoustic guitar and began to play. He sang softly, “And go to sleep forever, you won't die. You'll be sleeping when I join you, by and by.”

He pulled a marker from the open dresser drawer and neatly labeled the untitled cassette tape, “Feel of Heaven, Texture of Hell.” Then he used the disposable camera to snap a quick picture of the fused pile of nails. He'd go in and get the film developed tomorrow. Lauren would love it. It would make one hell of an album cover.

* * * *

Kenneth Brady's short stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies around the world. He also writes for stage and screen, and has produced an independent feature film that has received several awards. He lives in Eugene, Oregon,

and has an almost unnatural fascination with rubber chickens. For more about him, see his Web site.

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Talisman

By Tracina Jackson-Adams

8/19/02

Jack Dawson covets my horse.

It's written all over him. Talisman is big, dark, flashy, and expensive, and Jack craves all those things. So I have to wonder why Jack's made a career out of being a stablehand for the last nine years, instead of something more glamorous and better-paying.

We have the arena to ourselves. Nobody else is crazy enough to ride in this heat. Both Tal and I are dripping sweat by the time we're done practicing half-pass. I peel my T-shirt away from my chest and pat his shoulder, and he blows foam down his foreleg happily. Jack watches us from the corner of the arena, his hungry eyes following us around. It makes me feel strange and hungry for something myself, and very aware of how my shirt clings to my skin.

“Damn, it's hot,” he complains. “I don't know how you stand it in those boots.” His own shirt has wet half-circles under the neck and arms. “I've got to take this off. I can't stand it anymore,” he says, and strips off the limp white cotton.

I completely forget to finish the figure eight we're in the middle of. All I can see is Jack's bare, golden chest, the red of his sunburned shoulders, the fine hairs in a line down his stomach.

Then he wads the T-shirt into a ball and flings it at one of the chairs along the arena wall. Tal spooks at the flash of white, and in that vulnerable split second, when we're both distracted, that's when it happens.

It's like having my head shoved deep under water. When I manage to fight my way to the surface, Tal and I are twenty yards from Jack, headed towards him at a dead run. And Jack doesn't know anything's wrong. People gallop across the diagonal all the time.

I have a vision of fifteen hundred pounds of steel-shod horse crushing Jack's skull. I shut my eyes and sit back hard and close my fists on the reins.

Somehow Tal does the impossible, skidding to a halt just yards from the corner, flinching as the sand burns skin from his heels. Lather splatters onto Jack. My thighs scream from absorbing the forward momentum without flipping over Tal's head, and it takes a minute to catch my breath.

Oh my God. That was so close.

“Show-off.” Jack grins and wipes the froth from his hair. He looks at Tal admiringly. “He is *so* fine.”

“He knows it, too!” I laugh. It's only a little shaky; maybe not enough for Jack to notice. Jesus. We almost killed him.

He moves closer and rubs Tal's forehead. He traces the outline of the thin blaze, down the right side, across the muzzle, up the left, slowly, slowly. I swallow hard. He runs his hand down the dark neck like it's made of platinum, sweeping across Tal's chest and down one foreleg to the knee. “So fine, so fine,” he murmurs. He runs his fingertips over that wet

coat and looks up at me, still grinning. “Sure wish I had a horse like this.”

I grin back, but most of my attention is busy shoving down something that came leaping up again at the smell of sweat and the glide of Jack's hand across slick flesh. I am very, very careful not to let his hand brush across my leg. I don't dare, even though I'm on Tal. He is my shield and my protection, but he can help me only so much.

“I have to walk him, Jack. He's really hot.” And I pray to God he didn't just tear a ligament, stopping like that.

“I know, I know,” he says reluctantly, and steps back, trailing his hands down those big, dark shoulders. I move away from him as fast as I can.

When Grandad shows up at noon, I lead Tal to the south paddock and turn him out. He bounds off, racing Owl down the fence line, tail high, snorting loudly.

“Look at that,” Grandad says. “You'd think he was a stallion. Any problems today?”

I look down at my feet, biting my lip.

“How bad?” he asks.

“Almost ran somebody down.”

He looks out across the field for a long moment. “But she didn't get loose, right? Nobody got hurt? So maybe ... maybe it wasn't as bad as all that. Maybe you've got it licked now.”

I nod miserably. Neither of us believes that, but Grandad never quits hoping.

Jack is wheeling the hay cart in as Grandad and I head back through the stable. Grandad scowls and abruptly stops walking. “Is he working here now?” he asks me sharply.

Surprised, I nod. He glares for a few more moments, but Jack doesn't even seem to notice. “Dawsons.” Grandad grinds his teeth. “They're up to something.”

That's news to me. I thought we were friends with the Dawsons. They're the second-smallest of the old families around here; we're the smallest.

He looks hard at me and jerks his head towards Jack. “Callie, don't you ever let him near your horse, you hear me?” He strides off to the truck. I hurry after him, mouth open, wondering what's changed with the Dawsons, and why nobody told me.

* * * *

On the second day of school, I'm sitting on the retaining wall by the principal's office when Mom pulls up. I hop down, swing my backpack over one shoulder, and get in.

“Again?” she says, and sighs. “Oh, Callie.”

“It wasn't my *fault,*” I say.

“It never is.”

“I told her to stop. She came up behind me and kept pushing. I *told* her to stop and she wouldn't.”

“So you hit her.”

I don't bother to answer. I watch the trees go by outside.

“Callie, you have *got* to stop—”

“It's not my fault!” I yell.

The rest of the drive home is silent. That's Mom's acknowledgement that I'm right.

I lean my head against the window glass and fight back tears of frustration. It's getting worse and worse these days.

Nobody understands how hard it is to stop at just hitting. Nobody gives me any credit for that.

And nobody understands how damned good it feels to *touch* someone.

* * * *

We're back from a late fall dressage show with a score in the high 60s at Third Level, which is a very big deal. Grandad is so proud you'd think he sired the horse himself.

“Just you wait, Callie girl,” he tells me as I unwrap Tal's shipping bandages. “You wait and see. You'll go far on this fella. He's got what it takes.” He pats Tal's withers affectionately. “We'll put him in the little paddock for tonight. Let him walk around, stay loose.”

I nod, unclip the crossties, and lead Tal out. When I come back, Grandad says, “Come on, Callie girl. Let's go throw you a party.”

I am very glad to do just that. Nobody else needs to know I'm not just celebrating Tal's first win at Third Level. I'm also celebrating that I stayed in control under pressure today, even with so many people around, some of them brushing up against me. It was hard, but Tal got me through. Together, we can do it.

* * * *

The next morning, Tal is gone.

Grandad looks so bad that I'm afraid he's going to have a heart attack. I keep trying to get him to sit down, but he insists on checking all the stalls and paddocks himself even though I've already done it twice.

“Jesus, no,” he whispers when we get to the last paddock and stare out at the empty field. I rub my sleeve across my eyes and notice I'm shaking. We just stand there for a long minute.

“See if any of the other horses are missing.” He starts walking towards the south end of the stable. “I'll see if all the trailers are still here.”

I break the first stable rule I ever learned and run down the aisles. I look in the stalls, trying to remember which horses are away at shows. When I start to run out the west door to see which ones are outside, Jack is there, blocking the way with his body, arms out as if he's trying to catch a bolting horse.

“Callie,” he says urgently, “Callie, I'm so sorry. It wasn't me, I swear. It wasn't me.” He reaches out to put a hand on my shoulder.

“Don't you touch her, Jack Dawson.” My grandfather's voice rings down the aisle. “Don't you lay one finger on her.” He stomps across the cement. His face is red and sweaty and I have never seen him look so fierce. “Callie, go call the police. And your mother.”

“I will if you promise to sit down.”

“I'll be fine.” He never takes his eyes off Jack. He doesn't sit down, either. I run to the truck for the phone.

* * * *

The police come. Tal is worth a lot of money, so they take this seriously. They ask everybody a lot of questions and look all over the farm and tell us they'll be working to solve this but it may take some time. Grandad looks terrible, and they

tell him, tactfully, that he should go home for now, they'll handle everything.

We are quiet on the way home. I drive. Grandad is upset about that, but I insist. The color of his face scares me.

Grandma meets us at the door and lifts her eyebrow when we come in. Grandad shakes his head. “Nothing,” he says.

“No, they won't find a thing,” she agrees, “but you had to call them anyhow. Come sit at the table. You've got to eat something.”

Mom is already there. She passes me a plate of garlic bread. She looks very calm, and I have a bad feeling I know why. This is confirmed when she says, “I suppose this means we'll have to take care of it ourselves. If the police can't find anything—”

“—then it must be one of the other old families,” Grandma says.

“Very well.” Faster than I can flinch away, Mom takes my chin in her hand and says, “Calpurnia, Talisman has been taken. What is our best course of action?”

I get that sickening pushed-under-water feeling again, and the voice that isn't mine washes out into the room. “For what reason was he taken?”

Murmuring, and then my mother's voice again, now hesitant. “We're not sure.”

“Then I am little able to advise you.”

Grandad's strong tones. “Worst-case scenario. Assume it was to make Callista vulnerable.”

“Protect Callista. Retrieve Talisman. Bind the thief to this household.”

That causes quite a stir. Loud voices, Grandad's rising above the rest. “—won't have that man in my house!”

“*Your* house?” Grandma's tartness brings everything to a halt.

“Thank you, Calpurnia. That will be all.” My mother takes her hand away.

I blink and pick up the garlic bread I dropped. I can still feel the ghost of her touch on my chin. It makes it hard to push my morrigan back.

Grandad clears his throat. “The thief.”

“Hmm. Yes.” Mom taps the table absently.

“Callie, did you ever let Jack ride your horse?” I choke on my garlic bread, spluttering indignantly, and Grandad apologizes. “No, no, never mind, of course not.”

“Did he ever *ask* to ride him? Or groom him? Feed him?” Mom has inherited Grandma's ability to lift one eyebrow.

“No. Just petted him a couple of times. Everybody wants to pet Tal.” I frown, remembering. “He said he didn't do it. Didn't take Tal.”

“Doesn't mean anything.” Mom dismisses it.

“Might,” Grandma objects.

Mom considers, then nods.

“You'd best have a word with Ben Dawson, all the same,” Grandma tells Grandad. “They've been getting ... ambitious lately. Trying to expand.” Which means they've started collecting assets. “*After* we eat, Edward. Scoot your chair back to the table and finish that plate first.”

* * * *

I help Grandad wash and wax the truck, and he puts on his best suit while Mom and Grandma figure out the exact wording of the message he's to take to Ben Dawson. I will never be herald, so I don't know just what it is that Grandad does, or what he can do. I do know that we shine the truck just as we once would have groomed a horse and polished the tack.

He comes back fuming. He stomps into the kitchen with his shoes still on—almost as big a sin as running through the stable—slams his wallet down onto the table, and starts yanking off his tie.

"'How sorry we are to hear of your unfortunate predicament, Mr. Aldwine. Very sorry indeed. Such a shame, a val-u-able horse like that.'" He mimics Ben Dawson's voice sarcastically. "And the whole time, that damned bastard's grinning at me like he's licking cream off his whiskers."

"What's his formal reply?"

Grandad closes his eyes for a moment. "'We recognize no thief among us. Bring your proof and make your challenge if you wish to claim one.'"

Mom's mouth drops open.

"'Bring proof'?!" Grandma erupts out of her chair. "'Bring proof'?!"

"They want a war." Mom's voice is angry and cold. "We couldn't ignore the insult, even if we still had any doubts."

I don't want a war. In a war, you destroy your enemy's household as fast as you can, so the first thing the Dawsons will do is kill Tal. That would be bad for more reasons than they know. Bad for everybody.

“What's Ben Dawson got?” Mom thinks aloud.

Grandma considers. “Ten in the family. Nothing special.” Not like us, she means.

Mom grabs her jacket and heads for the door. “They have a hostage; we need one, too. Jack's alone at the stable. I'll go fetch him before Ben calls him home.”

“No,” I say. “Jack is the only one of them who knows anything at all about horses. If you take him, nobody will take care of Tal even a little.”

“Callie,” says Mom, impatiently jingling a chain in her pocket, “you know they're going to kill Tal.”

I hurt just thinking about it. “Maybe so. But he doesn't have to suffer in the meantime.”

“Well, we need a hostage,” she says, and she walks out. I hear the truck start up. I go to the bathroom and rub water on my face with shaking hands. I'm careful not to look in the mirror.

* * * *

It's almost dark before I hear the crunch of gravel in the driveway. I skid down the stairs, hoping against hope that Mom is alone, but she pushes Jack into the kitchen ahead of her. I squeeze my eyes shut and ache for Tal.

“Hey, Callie,” Jack says. I open my eyes and nod back at him. There are fine silver chains around his wrists and—I gape and look again—one around his neck. He's not just hostage, then, to be ransomed back by his family when this is over. He's thrall, war booty. Property. And he doesn't have a mark on him.

I'd fight ’til I *died* rather than be taken as thrall.

“Washroom is down the hall and to the left,” Grandma tells him. “Supper will be ready in a few minutes.”

“No, thank you, ma'am,” he says softly.

“You're already thrall.” Grandad doesn't pause in setting another place at the table. “Won't make any difference now, so there's no sense going hungry.”

“All the same, no, thank you.”

Mom rolls her eyes and shoves him into a chair. I just stare at him. Not a mark.

My stomach hurts too much to eat. Jack sits with a bare and gleaming plate in front of him. He doesn't even touch his water glass. I am half crazy with worry for Tal, wondering if they've got him tied so he can't put his head down or if they've given him dirty water or—

“Jack,” I say, before I even know I'm going to say anything, “you told me you didn't take Tal.”

“I didn't, Callie. I swear, it wasn't me.”

I feel another kind of craziness start to rise in me. I am so wild with fear and hope that I can't even speak. I stare at Grandad, mouth working but nothing coming out. “Tal,” I manage to squeeze out, a strangled sound. I try again. “Tal! Don't you *see?*” I jump up and knock back my chair, fighting down Calpurnia and this terrifying wildness. “Don't you *see?!* Nobody else knows anything about horses!”

I am looking at Grandad, but Grandma is the one who gets it first. “Then how could they take Tal? You know he won't let just anybody handle him.”

Grandad sucks in his breath. “They would have had to bind him with salt and silver,” he says. Jack flinches and rubs his wrists.

My mother swears fiercely. “We've been thinking about this all wrong. They don't know what he is. They didn't take him as a hostage, or to make Callie vulnerable. They're not planning to kill him. They stole him as an *object,* because he's valuable.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to push back Calpurnia. Without Tal, I don't know if I can do it. “If they're not going to kill him, then I know where they've got him,” I say. “I know where he has to be.”

* * * *

We take the truck. Mom shoves Jack in ahead of her. I drive, because my morrigan is riding me hard and no one wants to face her down.

I drive as far as there is a road. When there isn't one anymore, I heave open the door and grab Tal's spare halter and lead rope. I take the hatchet we keep in the back for emergencies, and I start striding over the scree. The others follow, well behind. The moon is up, but I don't need it to see now. I am deep into battle rage, and I know exactly where I am going.

On the other side of the hill, on Dawson land, there is a baby heartwood: a small, cold spring, and three young rowans just above it. Tal is pressed against two of them, the whites of his eyes showing clearly against his dark coat.

I start giggling, except the voice isn't mine, and I feel sick. Calpurnia's loose. I see my hands come up, and I can't stop

them from running the blade of the hatchet across my lower lip. I hear leaves crunching and look up to see four of Jack's kin on the ridge, coming down towards us fast. I giggle, blow little blood bubbles, and let the hatchet fly towards Tal. Towards the rowans.

Later, I know, I will be very, very sick at what Calpurnia is doing now. I want to vomit when the blade bites into living wood. Blood and iron poison a rowan. Later, I tell myself. Later.

All the others freeze, aghast. Calpurnia has me rocketing forward in that still moment, taking advantage of their shock. It works. I throw down the halter and grab the hatchet before anyone realizes I mean to do more. One of Jack's cousins, a young man with bright gold hair, is screaming. None of them can reach me before I chop the blade into the second rowan.

Tal gives a great shiver and leaps away from the trees. His coat is crusted with dried salt. Calpurnia wants a taste, and I can't stop her. I only hope it will be enough, that she won't decide to cut him to taste his bloodsalt. The moment my face is pressed to his body, though, she ebbs a little. Touching him is sweet starlight, fresh snow, the scent of autumn leaves.

"Callie!" I have never heard my grandfather's herald voice before, but there is no mistaking it. Calpurnia swings me around to see that my mother has one of the guards; my grandmother, another. The blond man is writhing on the ground. I ignore him. The threat is a thin, quick woman a few running strides from me. I let her tackle me, and then bring my knees up as we fall to kick her hard in the stomach.

Oh, God, I can feel her skin. I clutch at her, trying to pull her closer. She twists free somehow, and crawls to the rowans, putting herself between me and them. I admire her for that, but Calpurnia kicks her again, contemptuously, and giggles louder and faster.

"Is this *all?*" Calpurnia howls. "Four mewling infants to guard their treasure? Oh, nononononono." She shakes her head unhappily. "Well, this will bring more." And she casually slaps the woman's hand against the third rowan and brings the hatchet down on it. "There," she says, thoroughly satisfied, and takes the hatchet and sits down on a rock to wait.

I don't think about it. I don't look. Or listen.

"Callista." My grandfather is walking slowly towards me. "Callista." That herald voice. "Callista, go and stand with Talisman."

I find that I can open my fingers and let the hatchet slide out. I can walk over to Tal, who wants to run from the blood smell but doesn't. I press my cheek against his warm, sweet shoulder, and we stand and tremble together. I want to go home.

It doesn't take long for the rest of Jack's kin to show up. Killing an old family's heartwood gets their attention fast. Ben Dawson does not look like he's licking cream off his whiskers anymore. His four guards all have fine silver chains around their wrists, to mark them for ransom. The woman looks barely alive. Jack is thrall, the Dawson rowans are weeping sap and blood, and Tal is free. Ben's in a bad position to bargain.

“Mr. Benjamin Dawson,” Grandad says, with just the tiniest twist of spite in his voice. “We have found our val-u-able horse.”

Ben looks around, taking in the scene. His eyes flit over his people, the rowans, Tal, the blood on me, back to Grandad.

“The girl's got a morrigan, Ben,” says Jack, and I realize that Ben had been thinking about fighting. Calpurnia starts to giggle, and I press my face into Tal's shoulder. My lip stings.

There is a long, tight silence. I hear the wind, the trickling spring, feet shuffling, little whimpers, the *tink* of metal. Ben's voice comes slow and grim. “What is it gonna take to make peace between us, Aldwine?”

“Every damned thing you've got.” Mom means it. The Dawsons will be paupers at the end of this.

I close my eyes and lean on Tal and want to be home. Voices swirl around me but I'm not listening. If I'm not very careful, I keep remembering the rowans, and that woman's hand. I just want to be home. I want a shower and clean clothes.

There is a soft noise behind me. I turn only my head. It's Jack, holding the halter and lead rope out to me.

“Thanks,” I whisper, and take them from him. We're both careful not to let our fingertips touch. I slip the halter over Tal's head. He's trembling but he lets me do it, and I almost cry. I don't want him to trust me that much. I press my face into the hollow by his withers and breathe.

“Does he—” Jack licks his lips. “Does he send ... that other thing ... away?”

“No.” I push against the grain of Tal's coat so that the soft hairs poke my skin. “He's a talisman. He helps bring me forward.” As long as he's stronger than Calpurnia, I think, but I don't say that. I concentrate on the heartbeat under my cheek.

After a few minutes, I realize Jack hasn't gone. I don't move, but he seems to know he's got my attention. He comes closer, only a step away, so close I can feel the heat of his body. He does not touch me. Nobody but Tal will touch me, I think, and it's hard to swallow then.

“Callie,” he breathes. I don't turn. “Callie, please. You can make me thegn. Please.” I say nothing. There is a hurting edge to his voice. “*Please,* Callie.”

Face still pressed to Tal, I say, “My family is very small, and it's about to become rich. When you're small and rich, you have to fight to keep what you have. This is just the beginning.”

I put my cold hands on Tal's nose so I can feel his breath. “My family planned ahead. Here we are, in Quarter Horse country, and I have this huge Hanoverian as my talisman.” I laugh, and there is something in my laugh that scares me at how close it is to not being mine. “Do you know what the airs above the ground are, Jack? There's this one, the capriole, where the horse jumps up and snaps his hind legs out—”

He says flatly, “You're training a warhorse.”

That something is in my laugh again. “*That's* the kind of planning my family does. And you think—” I can barely get my breath past the laughing. “You think we'll make you one of us?”

“There's still time. I haven't touched food, not even water, and the sun's not up yet. *Please,* Callie.”

Like he has any right to ask for that honor, standing there without a mark on him. He makes me sick.

“The woman,” I say, eyes closed, feeling the crusty salt on Tal's coat. “What's her name?”

“Gillian.”

“Is she left-handed?”

Silence. Damn. I feel really bad about that.

“Take him.” I push myself away from Tal and hand the rope to Jack. “Wash the salt off in the spring. And any blood I got on him, too.” I walk away, towards the hostages.

“Callie, Callie, *please,*” Jack calls desperately, but I ignore him.

Gillian is very pale and her skin is damp. When I kneel in front of her, she opens her eyes and swallows hard but doesn't back away. She's braver than I am. I'd run from me.

“Gillian Dawson,” I tell her. “I have an offer for you. Your family's broken. They can't rescue you, and I doubt they can ransom you, either. I fought you. I respect you, and I don't want to see you end up as property.”

“Go on,” she says thickly. Pain makes it hard for her to speak.

“We can use someone like you in the family. Swear yourself to us.”

It's not a hard decision, under the circumstances. She nods and pulls herself upright. “I swear.”

I try not to look too long at her hand. Very carefully, I slip my forefingers through the chains on her wrists and pull,

cupping them in my palms as they fall. I link them together and clasp the makeshift necklace around her, keeping my fingers as far from her skin as I can.

“Gillian Aldwine, I give you my name, the protection of my house, and honorable standing in my family.” I kiss her mouth, and my lip hurts. Calpurnia's breath catches with the ecstasy of a blade sliding across flesh. I pull away quickly.

“Thank you.” Her voice is slow and weak, and her head drops to her chest when she's done. I have to lean close to hear her say, “I'll come to you when I can.”

“Yes. Good.” I rock back on my heels, ready to leave. I want, very much, to stay, to feel skin next to mine. I know better. Before I go, I say softly, “I'm sorry.” She doesn't respond.

I go to where my family stands with the remaining Dawsons. Everybody steps well aside to make room for me. “Benjamin Dawson,” I say, first thing. “I've taken the woman Gillian as thegn.” I don't have to tell him this. I don't have to announce it to anyone but Gillian and my family. I'm showing Ben courtesy, but from the look on his face, you'd think I just spat on him. My family looks pleased, though.

Now that I'm there, Grandad formally states the terms of the peaceprice. It's even steeper than I guessed. The Dawsons gambled and lost, and my family intends to make an example of them. Because of Calpurnia—what she is, what she is capable of—we can do that.

For the first time in my life, I really think about that. About how very advantageous that is.

What was it I told Jack? My family plans ahead.

Some things start falling into place for me.

I barely watch as Grandma nicks Ben inside the elbow and drops salt there to seal the terms. I see hate in his eyes, a helpless anger at this symbol of his family's ruin. The other Dawsons stare at me, and stand well back. I'm busy thinking.

Stupid, stupid, stupid not to have figured this out before.

My mother grants twenty-four hours for Ben's family to come up with the ransoms for the hostages. This is a polite fiction. There is no money left for ransoms, so they will be Aldwine thralls by tomorrow night. Ben has lost fully half his family in one day, and mine is stronger by five.

I turn and start walking. Behind me, I hear Ben's voice, so loud and clear that I know the words are really for me even though he's supposedly talking to Grandad. “Jesus Christ, Edward. A morrigan. Are you *crazy?* Why didn't you drown that girl at birth?”

When I get to Tal, I take the lead rope from Jack. “Go,” I tell him, and there is enough of Calpurnia in my voice that he doesn't argue.

Ben is shouting now. “She'll up and kill you one day, you know! They always do. They get so hungry to touch, they up and kill every—” His voice cuts off.

I wash myself in the spring as best I can. I run my hands over every inch of Tal, making sure he's fine. I'm finger-combing his tail when Mom and Grandma and Grandad come to get me.

“Everything's settled,” Mom says.

“Gillian?” I ask.

“Jack's taking her to the hospital. And the hostages are on their way to the house. We can go.”

I nod slowly.

“Pay no mind to Dawson's mouth,” says Grandma. “He's just trying to scare you, now that he has nothing else. I never heard of any such thing.”

“Me, neither,” says Mom.

I say nothing. We start back towards the truck. I'm mindful of Tal's footing.

“I was thinking,” says Grandma after a while, “of the west bedroom for Gillian. Thought she might like seeing the sun set over the hills.” When I don't reply, she adds, “It's just amazing what they can do at hospitals these days. Might be she'll use that hand again, even.”

Grandad nods. “Taver Rood, you remember, after his accident, he had a neurosurgeon—”

I do not listen. I am thinking about how many other old families will look at us—small, temptingly rich—and consider Calpurnia and the rowans and think again.

Grandma is talking about the boys who came back from the War and learned to write with their left hands. I am not listening. I am hearing the leaves rustling and sticks popping beneath our feet, and Tal's soft snorting. I close my eyes as I walk. I feel the wind on my face, like a soft sweep of fingers.

“Whose decision,” I say when there is a lull in all the other talking, “whose decision was it to put a morrigan in me?” My voice shakes. “Who did this to me?”

The wind plays over my eyelids, my cheeks, my forehead. I hear faltering steps in front of me. I was right. Guilty, guilty, guilty.

There is a long, uncomfortable silence. Tal's hooves click against stones. The breeze kisses my bangs. I lift my face to it.

“Let's get home,” my mother says uneasily. “It's not safe in these woods at night.”

That seems very funny. I start to giggle, louder and louder, and I can't stop.

The voice is not quite mine.

* * * *

Tracina Jackson-Adams lives in the Snow Belt and rides big horses. Her fiction also appears in *Speculon, Weird Tales,* and *Icarus Ascending,* and her poetry in *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry, Star*Line,* and *The Modern Art Cave.* She'd like to thank the Nobel Academy—oh, wait, that's something else.

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Other Cities #12 of 12: Stin
By Benjamin Rosenbaum

8/19/02

Last in a monthly series of excerpts from The Book of All Cities.

Stin is the city for those who are tired of other cities, of villages, of houses, tents, roads, trees, anything at all. Those for whom the desert monasteries offer no retreat, the teeming megalopolises no distraction, the ethereal balloon cities no solace, come to Stin.

If, sleeping on a train, you wake with a start, and for a moment, you do not know who you are; you look into the window at your left, and against the racing black night you see your half-reflection looking back; you recognize the face, the dark staring eyes, but the fact that this is you seems like a joke, an absurd curse; you recall that you are going to die, your heart pounds, and you are desperate to cling to your flesh, but more desperate still not to forget the fear, not to lapse back into the placid dullness of taking existence for granted, and you fight to keep this sudden, strange terror alive—if so, you might want to consider moving to Stin.

A glitter of blue; a geometric form too complex to understand, seen only for an instant; a stillness like the pause before some great and violent action; not death (which is no more interesting than dirt or mold), but the knowledge that you will die.... The travelers who truly yearn, who are dissatisfied with the blandishments of the fleshpots, the self-

important outrage of the barricades, the easy answers of ashrams and the dullness of kibbutzim, come to Stin.

Now accepting applications for residency. Please fill out the enclosed card; someone will contact you.

* * * *

Previous city (The Cities of Myrkhyr)

All published cities

* * * *

Benjamin Rosenbaum lives in Basel, Switzerland, with his wife and baby daughter, where in addition to scribbling fiction and poetry, he programs in Java (well) and plays rugby (not very well). He attended the Clarion West Writers' Workshop in 2001 (the Sarong-Wearing Clarion). His work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Vestal Review, Writer Online,* and *Quarterly West.* His previous appearances in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our Archive. For more about him, see his Web site.

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Looking Back

By Corie Ralston

8/26/02

I watched Kira sleep. Soft breathing had turned to light snoring over the years, black hair to gray. She slept deepest in the quiet hours of early morning. There are no secrets when you've lived together thirty years in a nine hundred square foot house.

Almost no secrets.

The sun would rise soon, and I hadn't slept at all. Already the muddy light of the pre-dawn sky was slipping through the bedroom blinds. I stared at Kira's tight gray curls against the ivory pillow and felt an unexpected tightening in my chest. I wanted to kiss her lightly on the forehead, like in the old romances. One last goodbye, violins wailing in the background. But she might wake up, and I couldn't chance it.

Russell followed when I left the bedroom, padding silently behind me. A quick splash of water on my face from the bathroom sink, and I looked up at the mirror, water dripping from my nose. Deep-set eyes beneath dark eyebrows beneath white, bristled hair. Pronounced lines at the corners of my eyes, the edges of my mouth. When had I become so old?

My pack was hidden in the hall closet, behind the vacuum cleaner that Kira used on Tuesdays and the old twelve-string I never played anymore.

Russell watched expectantly while I changed into the clothes I had placed in the side pocket of the pack: thick

jeans, a thermal undershirt, the flannel overshirt with the rip in the elbow that Kira had mended for me twice already.

I eased the front door open, pausing each time the hinges protested, listening for sounds from the bedroom. Russell waited patiently through the slow process, head tilted, not making a sound. Smart, quiet, loyal Russell.

That *dog,* Kira always said, like it was a bad word. That *dog* is getting hair all over my couch. She had never appreciated Russell. She would be glad that he was gone.

I stroked Russell's velvet head and ushered him out into the icy air.

As I moved to close the door, my wedding band caught the light from the front porch. I pulled the ring from my finger and placed it on the table just inside the door. A small parting gift.

Short, squat houses lined the street. Mine was one in a long row of blank indistinguishable faces, windows like unblinking eyes.

Mine no longer. When the Tourists took me, I would be legally dead. The trust, the savings, my old truck, my cameras, everything would become hers. She would be well taken care of.

The maples planted in the grassy border along the street were growing too large for their confinement, their roots buckling the uniform gray slabs of the sidewalk.

The fog crept up from the river to lie across the road like a tired ghost.

I had never felt so alone. I had never felt so alive.

* * * *

The Tourists came in gigantic ships. Golden and bullet-shaped, but bristling with flexible antennae like fur, they orbited our sun between Earth and Mars. They sent images and words across the blackness between us.

The Tourists were human-sized, amorphous, soft-spoken. Their heads ballooned and shrank as they spoke; their many eyes wandered this way and that over their soft bodies.

They offered us a deal.

Come tour the universe with us, they said, in Chinese and then in every other human language. They laughed when the scientists asked how they knew our physiology, our languages. When you've toured a while, they said, you will see that there are far stranger beings than you. You are really quite ordinary.

We caught glimpses of those other aliens in the images they sent: beings with limbs like upside-down trees, or bodies like moss, or creatures that moved so fast they were a blur or colors. The Tourists took care of them all.

They sent smaller ships, empty shuttles, to the surface of the Earth. Shuttles to carry us to their touring ships, if we wanted.

What do we give up?

You give up your lives on Earth. While you Tour for fifty years, fifty thousand will pass on Earth. Everyone you know will be dead. Your descendants will have forgotten that you left.

What was in it for them? Nothing. They were Tourists. They wanted company for their journey.

A journey! When I was younger I had yearned to travel the world with just my camera and backpack. But that had never happened. Marriage had trapped me in one city, with a mortgage and a job, and social obligations piling up like the unwanted bills on my desk.

“Do you believe them?” Kira asked one night, glued to the TV like everyone else around the world, as footage of the golden ships played over and over.

“Yes,” I answered.

On the screen a golden bullet slid up through a purpling sky. Thousands of people setting out to explore, to watch the birth of stars, to sail the huge, open, waiting universe. I had seen pictures: nebulae and swirling galaxies in an astonishing spectrum of colors, hues I could never seem to capture in my own photography. To set foot on the surfaces of planets in distant galaxies, plateaus overlooking unfathomable depths, gaseous atmospheres as deep and thick as a family secret. Exploration, enlightenment.

My heart fluttered at the sight. Set me free.

Kira turned to me, as if she had heard.

“Why would anyone get on that ship and fly God knows where and leave everything they know behind?”

“Exploring is in our blood,” I said. “That's why people came to America. That's why we still cross the North Pole and dive the ocean.” The pictures on the screen defied the ordinariness of our living room: mushroom-brown furniture, throw rugs, framed crochet on the walls.

She used to understand. When we were young, we would plan trips together. Someday soon, we told each other, we'll

see the Tibetan plateau, the Great Barrier Reef, the Angel Falls of Venezuela. Like love, the dream had faded with time.

“The people who leave will be bored within a week,” she said. “And then they'll be stuck and unhappy and wishing they were home.”

“For some people, I'm sure that's true.”

She gave me an appraising look. I didn't dare say more. I watched the TV steadily.

* * * *

The houses petered out altogether on the edge of Flagstaff, a half mile from the launch site. The first hint of light at the horizon tinted the clouds a muted yellow, a promise of gold. Already I could see the tip of the shuttle, pointing skyward. It would launch just after sunrise.

More and more cars passed me on the road.

I hefted the pack higher on my back and quickened my pace. Russell padded beside me, claws clicking against asphalt, head low, tired already.

“Hang in there, old boy,” I said.

He wheezed a little now, and he couldn't bend low to the ground to sniff out a trail or wiggle sideways, as he had when he was a puppy.

We came to the perimeter of the launch site. A chain-link fence ran alongside the road, abandoned cars parked in the grass next to it. More cars were arriving every moment. Some people leapt out and strode toward the gate in the fence ahead. Others spoke in low, intense voices. Still others just watched.

I joined the line at the gate entrance.

In front of me was a solitary woman, stooped and gray-haired, carrying nothing. In front of her was a family of four, with ten suitcases on a cart, and a small black cat, mewling its displeasure. The two children were bright-eyed, curious, cranky. The cruise ship would be as big as the world they knew. Maybe bigger.

When I signed up for the journey, I told them what I would bring: my pack, my dog. The Tourists said there was plenty of food, that we would be comfortable. Still, some people wanted to bring their entire houses. Maybe they didn't really want to leave.

I took the little Pentax from my coat pocket: f-stop 22 for the glistening shuttle beyond the fence. I didn't know whether I would ever be able to develop the film, but some habits are hard to break.

I hadn't brought a watch, but the rumble in my stomach told me I had missed breakfast. Kira would be up. I thought of her searching the house, of slow realization transforming her face.

My throat tightened at the thought. She would be all right, I told myself. She had her friends, her sisters. They would help her find someone else. Someone settled, someone with no love of the stars, no sense of awe at the beauty of the universe, no unfulfilled need to explore and discover.

* * * *

The shuttles were scattered across the globe: Africa, South America, Australia, Asia. They would take us, the Tourists said, to the bigger ships, the cruise ships. There would be

room enough for farms and towns. We could organize governments and police forces if we wanted.

The world was split. Some said the Tourists wanted us for their own experiments, or maybe for food. Some said we would be pets, like the parrots the Spaniards took home from the Americas after spreading their diseases. We would be the talking birds in lonely cages on a conquistador's balcony. We would die of boredom.

Others pointed out the incredible opportunity offered by the Tourists. We, of all the generations before, had the chance to explore the universe. We would fulfill our true human potential, to reach the stars.

Only one in ten thousand said they would join the Tourists. I couldn't understand why more people didn't want to go. People lived in an invisible, entangling web: parents, children, lovers, jobs, houses. Most lacked the strength to extricate themselves from their own lives.

* * * *

The day of my decision, I had been in my darkroom. In the dim red light I watched the images emerge from their chemical depths, photos from the outskirts of Flagstaff. Indistinct shapes became small houses with smaller yards, paper bags and empty bottles against chain-link fences, flattened and dying lawns. Houses too weary to lift tilting shutters, to hold onto chipped paint.

No one would buy these pictures. I'd taken my previous photos to every gallery, every art show, every year. Kira said it was a waste of time. She was right.

From outside my small sanctuary, the sound of the television blared away as Kira got her nightly fix. What was the appeal? Eternally happy people with easily solvable problems. She had long ago stopped asking me to watch with her.

One month, the TV announcer droned. One month until the last ship left. *Make your decision now.*

It made my whole body shake, thinking about how I would feel when they left. I imagined living out the rest of my tired days trapped beneath the Earth's crushing atmosphere. A whole life spent grabbing a free minute here and there to practice my photography, while Kira numbed herself a room and a universe away.

I picked up a photograph using a pair of metal tongs, and there it was in the foreground: a single dandelion, poking impossibly through the tiniest of cracks in the sidewalk, the night's condensation wet and glistening on its hopeful leaves and bulbous head.

Suddenly, the decision to go was easy.

* * * *

A woman in an orange safety vest, skin red from exposure, checked my ID against her list. I set my pack on the ground and waited.

The wind rattled the chain-link fence. I could hear the murmuring of those in line behind me, the hushed, tense tones.

Finally, the guard smiled at me, blue eyes reflecting the first light of dawn, and nodded me through.

I walked onward.

Sparse grass crunched beneath my boots. The sun loitered just above the horizon, a simmering orange-red globe. The shuttle towered above.

I walked into its long shadow, and the air grew chilly.

At the base of the shuttle was a wide ramp leading up into its interior. I walked up, and found myself in a small circular room where a dozen others waited. An elevator. I held my pack tight against my chest with one hand, my other hand on Russell's collar. A door slid shut, and the elevator began to rise.

A moment later, the door opened onto a larger room filled with seats. The walls and floors were brushed copper, the seats wide and soft, better than first class. This would be our home for the journey to the cruise ship. One entire wall was a window. I walked over to it, Russell beside me.

To the left and right were other viewing rooms, other faces pressed against the hard transparent surfaces, curving out of sight around the ship.

Below I saw the ramp into the ship, and further on, the chain-link fence. A group of protesters huddled beyond the gate, mouths opening and closing in a silent chant.

Already I could feel a vibration through my feet, a rumbling promising a roar. The shuttle would launch on schedule.

* * * *

Once I had made the decision, the rest was easy.

I signed up in the police station in downtown Flagstaff one afternoon after work. Another man stood at the counter. I

tried to give him a friendly smile, but he wouldn't meet my eye. Going on the Tour was nothing to be ashamed of.

The officer behind the counter took my thumbprint, my picture. They made us register to keep track of who left, and to weed out the crazy people, the criminals. But the ones who truly wanted to Tour were the most sane of all.

When I pulled up at home later, Kira was in the front yard. She had spread a blanket on the dirt, and was tugging at the weeds surrounding the base of the small mandarin orange tree she had planted the previous spring.

Her shoulders tensed when I approached, though she didn't turn to look at me.

“It died,” she said.

I looked at its thin, peeling branches, at the dead gray buds. I had told her the tree wouldn't last through the winter, but Kira had insisted, saying that the mandarin is especially cold-tolerant.

Kira held a Kleenex to her nose. Was she actually crying over the death of a plant?

I gazed upwards, where the Tourists’ ship was visible as a single bright point of light in the sky. Even in midday it was easy to pick out. Soon, I would be up there.

“I'm sorry, Kira,” I said. I turned and went into the house to find my pack.

* * * *

We were lifting, as gentle as a balloon at sunrise. I set my pack at my feet so I could move closer to the window. Already the ground was five hundred feet below, the trees

like bits of steel wool scattered across the pale ground. Straight up, toward the quiet black of space.

It was silent within, the whisper of fabric against fabric, an occasional low cough. The young man to my left in fatigues and a thick wool coat pressed his nose to the window, his hands on either side.

The sun's rays streaked the ground in long red arrows. The Earth was so beautiful from above.

The girl next to me held onto her mother's hand and looked up at her with the sudden, desperate realization of a child. “We'll never see our house again?”

The mother placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her close. “I don't think so.”

We'll see much better things, I wanted to say. But there would be time to talk. There would be years and years to talk.

Russell whined.

I opened the top of the pack to take out his breakfast, and there, below the Tupperware container of kibble, was a brown paper bag.

I hadn't packed it.

I withdrew it carefully. The bag was lined and worn from reuse, just like the lunch bags Kira used to pack for me when I went on shoots.

Inside was a small container of applesauce and a plastic bag with a sandwich. Deviled egg, my favorite. I closed the bag again, pressed it to my chest. Thirty years and I thought I had known her. How could she have slept last night, knowing I was leaving? I closed my eyes. I imagined her slipping beneath the comforter, whispering a soft goodnight,

knowing her husband would be gone when she woke in the morning.

I felt a tugging on my coat and opened my eyes.

The little girl was pulling on my jacket hem.

“What will you miss the most?” she said. Her mother smiled apologetically at me.

The blues and greens and grays were blurring below, the houses merging into long rows of tan against the darker roads.

What would I miss?

Lightning in the plains, so bright the whole sky sizzles into white-hot life for an instant, and then goes absolutely black. Driving at night in the summer with the window rolled down all the way and the warm rain against my face and the wipers zwipp-zwipping in time to Nina Simone. The throaty warble of a red-winged blackbird in the cattails. The way the fog creeps through the pines by the Colorado River on a cold January morning. The hot, dry smell of the desert. A packed lunch.

How long had she known? The possibilities exploded outward, like the time-lapse film of a flowering orchid, petaled layers concealing velvety depths.

The little girl was staring up at me expectantly.

“Deviled egg,” I told her.

She nodded solemnly, satisfied with my answer.

Below, the cities and lakes shrank to silver-streaked pebbles. I placed a hand on the cold transparent surface before me, looking back.

* * * *

Corie Ralston is a scientist at Lawrence Berkeley National Lab, where she gets to use cool words like “synchrotron” and “anomalous diffraction.” When she's not writing, she's reading, playing piano, or attempting to telekinetically control dice in the game of craps. Someday she and her partner Kelly will take down all the Las Vegas casinos.

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Howling with Ginsberg

By Phil Wright

8/5/02

I read your “Howl” and cried and roared and howled back.
I read your “Howl” from a beat-up Anthology of American Literature.
I read your “Howl” simply because I had never read you before.
There you were, just sitting on the page.
It was late at night, couldn't sleep,
What other excuse did I need.
What the hell, I thought, I'll read this
Ginsberg guy, see just what he's all about.
After the opening lines I grokked you in
Seeing the best minds of my generation
Destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked.
After the first part my mouth fell agape,
While my newly opening head Moloched with yours,
And then I was with you both in the rocked-up walls of Rockland.
Tears—real, honest-to-God-tears—welled in my eyes,
Broke from their dam,

Dropped onto the already full pages.
Read you as though in a fever I did, and stood
Dumbfounded and muted on your final
punctuation point.

Finally finding my voice
I read you out loud to myself
Just to hear your words
Echo in real air and space-time.
I read you to the dust on the TV set.
I read you to the futon.
I read you to the wrinkles in the blanket
covering the futon.
I read you to the plain-cheapo, because it's
only a rental,
brown-apartment-carpet
And the newly Dover White painted walls that
hold dark smudges
From where I smashed spiders to their deaths.
And I read you to those smudges,
Now regretting my own
Intolerance, ignorance, blindness.
I read you, yelled you, shouted you,
Balled you, wailed you, bellowed you,
screamed you
Ejaculated you out loud
In my own ecstatic insatiate moment of total
Decadence and rapture and fulfillment of
Every last one of my raw, bleeding, throbbing,

Filled-up now with fucking life nerves,
Until my voice and throat cracked open wide
And out flew my pounding, bounding, lusting
Ginsberg filled heart.

Then I did it again.
I howled you to the world.
Crazed in your words
Drunk in your nouns and verbs.
I howled your words forth in a werewolf's cry
To the moon and the blood
And the eternal struggle for the human soul
—Oh God! let there be one for us to struggle for—
In space too tiny to hold them
My mind too tiny to hold them
No way could I hold them
All in.
They stomped and tore and wracked me
Ripping all the pathos, bathos, cathos right out of
All that I was, am, and will be.
They burst out of my mouth,
They burst out of my throat, lungs, belly, and soul.
They burst out holy,
Ready to fight injustice in the world,
Ready to kick some serious ass,
Ready to knock down the bullshit.

Making me deliverer of your words in a
blistering moment of
Dazzle and chaos orchestrated cacophony.
Spouter of your truths, our truths, human
truths
—so small that moment was the cosmos could
blink its eye
And entire eternities would pass me by—
Yet there I was ink transfixed, transformed
Into images only a mind reading God could
unfold.
One with your words.
All sound and fury,
Blood and muscle,
Human heart and human soul,
Dead poet's voice and dead poet's spirit.
Lightning through tear-blurred pages.
I spoke and stood your words made flesh.

* * * *

Currently Philip Wright teaches writing at a community college. Turn-on's (not necessarily in this order) include sushi, lean prose, deep dish poetry, pizza with extra cheese, coffee, classic rock, and dark haired women. Turn-off's include spam email and the “not un” combination in English.

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My Infatuation with Chaos

By Jonathan Price

8/12/02

Life promises only one sweet memory
A single, glimmering happiness
The rest is a sea of chaos
He strives to find interconnectedness
There is meaning, there is purpose
In the endless, fathomless patterns
To his pain he only finds
A gruesomely pretty girl
Named pandemonium
With all of her makeup shades
Of gray and red
And her Mandelbrot curls
He falls in love with
Those icy eyes of chaos
It's probably infatuation
It's probably not even a girl
He can't help it
The voice, the whirling turbulence
Of her sonnets and her woos
In the end, in his bed
In the morning
He finds an empty pool
Of calmness and of cold

He wanders about his day
His spirit a mirror of the pool
Quiet, cool, alone, and
Fighting the currents of providence
They are her tentacles
Once again drawing him in
To her bed of infinite recursion
Of equations that are deceivingly simple
But that have such complex
Curves....

* * * *

Jonathan James Price is a young working writer that lives in Northwest Indiana. He is an occasional poet, focusing mainly on writing science fiction. Currently, he is working his science fiction novel, *Dreams of the Crimson Kitsune.*

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It Wears You

By Ann K. Schwader

8/19/02
(to a wireless wearable computerite)

Born swimmer in the data stream, you wear
as effortlessly as a trout its gills
this latest means of never needing air.

No doubt the cyborg lifestyle has its thrills:
your spectacles with that eyecorner screen
keep you so well informed it's near obscene
to plebeians without. I must confess,
however, to a sudden Luddite chill
when contemplating your connectedness:
which part is host, & which the parasite?

By now, I fear, the two are so enmeshed
that neither exorcism nor the knife
could liberate such long-neglected flesh.

* * * *

Ann K. Schwader lives & writes in Westminster, Colorado. She is an active member of both SFWA and HWA. Her poetry collection, *The Worms Remember,* appeared last spring from Hive Press.

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chaos

By Jessica Langer

8/26/02

shiva dances
with fractal serpent arms
coiled around perfect circles
and golden rectangles

and dionysus prances
on wandering goat feet
stepping to the shimmering beat
of star-twinkle pulses

gods and muses
arc from sky to earth
and earth to sky
in thought-bodies

while through everything
a thin breeze blows
and also does not blow.

* * * *

Jessica is a second-year student of English at the University of Toronto. An avid reader of science fiction and

fantasy, she won her first poetry contest in kindergarten and finished her first as-yet-unpublished book at age 13. Even so, this is her first paid publication.

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Speculations on Sentience: Ian Watson's *The Great Escape*

Reviewed by Paul Schumacher

8/5/02

"From the depths of the heart, the mouth speaketh." How much control do we consciously exercise over what we do and say? Do we choose our words or do they make us who we are? In *The Great Escape,* Ian Watson explores the meaning of language and its relationship to consciousness and sentience.

This common theme runs through the volume's twenty stories. For Watson, the nature of consciousness is defined largely by how our minds perceive and interact with the outside world, though Watson is concerned not just with our human minds, of course. Several stories focus on machines gaining or dealing with awareness of self and the world apart from self, while others deal with intelligences alien to our own. Readers interested in the scientific underpinnings of the concepts Watson plays with in his stories will find them explained in detail in the author's foreword. Aptly titled "Do Stories Tell Themselves?" it covers topics ranging from experiments in language to current thought on artificial intelligence.

A related theme present in many of the stories is the blending of fantasy with reality, powered only by the beliefs or thoughts of the observer. In "The Amber Room," "What Really Happened in Docklands," and "The Last Beast out of

the Box," we see how easily the barrier between what is real and what is envisioned can be broken. How many times have you convinced yourself that something was true, based on your perceptions, only to cause it to be so by acting upon your belief? In "What Really Happened in Docklands," the main character's reactions to his perceptions of hostility may have caused the conflict he feared to occur. "Tulips from Amsterdam" takes a slightly stronger hypothesis, and considers how much our collective perceptions and obsessions influence the real world around us.

I found myself fascinated by Watson's speculations upon our past and future as sentient beings, upon the causes and effects of awareness, and upon the effect of aware beings upon the world around them. This book will especially appeal to those fascinated with the concepts of machine intelligence, the inner workings of the mind, or the mysteries of perception and language. In "Caucus Winter," the author explores some possibilities of quantum computers and what they could mean in a more fantastic world than our own. In "Nanculus," the implications of having machines that can make their own decisions are explored. "The China Cottage" looks at our motivations for our behavior, and how much control we have over them. "A Day Without Dad" explores the future of human sentience from a different perspective: the idea of immortality by personality graft. When a person is about to die, they take the personality, the core "self," and turn them into a rider within another person's mind. The concept is fully explored through the classic situation of a marriage under pressure,

which allows Watson to show us all the burdens and the benefits that such a sharing would impart.

As a whole, I recommend the volume, but there are a few stories that left me feeling unfulfilled, as if the story had been left incomplete, leaving me unable to draw my own conclusions about the outcome. This could, however, be a failure of my own mind, seeking to interpret these tales of the workings of another's. In “The Amber Room,” for example, we leave the protagonist held between dream and reality. He is unsure what is real and what is illusory, and so is the reader. Although this uncertainty was part of the feel of the story, it left me with a sense of incompleteness, like I'd missed the point. The vast majority of the stories achieve their goal, however, and construct a paradigm of reality that makes you stop and consider exactly how sentience works, and how little we understand about it.

In some stories, of course, the parts that are left untold are what make them work so memorably. The modern fantasy “What Really Happened in Docklands” uses the first person perspective to create uncertainty and to explore the nature of fantasy. The story both explicates and exemplifies a theory of generic fantasy: at first, there is a peaceful balance between groups, then the power shifts to the more sinister of the groups, and finally, the status quo is regained. It is left to the reader whether to accept the narrator's explanation of events, or to interpret the story as everyone else does in the aftermath. The reader is free because the author keeps uncertain both the story's outcome and his own view of the matter.

Although I personally disagree with some of the author's views of the mind and machine intelligence, as speculative fiction they perform admirably, raising questions that broadened my consideration of the possibilities of the human mind. “Three-Legged Dog” was a great story, exploring the effects of our obsessions. However, it taps into popular superstitions about computers—that artificial intelligences are more than automatons—in ways that I find disturbing. It anthropomorphizes them and treats them as if they can have effects on the outside world that could best be described as magic. But isn't it the purpose of speculative fiction to jar our minds and egos, to prod us into probing new subjects, and to challenge our long-held assumptions?

I will extend a note of caution: While excellently written, this book is certainly not meant for children. Several of the stories contain explicit scenes or descriptions of a sexual nature. “Nanculus” contains a theme, with an accompanying description, that is not only inappropriate for younger readers, but which even some adult readers may wish to avoid.

Overall, the stories collected in *The Great Escape* are pleasantly varied, despite their shared theme, because they are written in a variety of styles and include multiple perspectives on the nature of thought and its interaction with perception and reality. Even individual stories offer varied perspectives. In “Tulips from Amsterdam,” we are taken as far as we can be with a first person narrative, and then the story is forced to go to a second narrator commenting about the first to complete the concept, and to, once again, leave us

wondering whether the narrator's account is true or delusional, in his particular version of our world.

* * * *

Paul Schumacher is a Copy Editor for *Strange Horizons.*

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Killing God: Alchemical Adventure and Pulp Metaphysics in Steve Aylett's *Shamanspace*

Reviewed by Nick Brownlow

8/12/02

> “An armchair was already dwindling into the corner as electrovistas opened up in front, the stream of cells blowing past. Bloodshot intervals of subterranean transport and the racket of magic."—Steve Aylett, *Shamanspace*

British writer Steve Aylett has been plying his narcotics-fuelled SF satire for nearly a decade now, fiercely lampooning society's hypocrisies and idiosyncrasies in the form of stylish and witty genre fiction. The dawn of the 21st Century saw him slip into high gear with the publication of four new full-length novels, a collection of short stories, and a short novel, all in the last two years. Published by Orion in the UK and Four Walls Eight Windows in the US, Aylett has garnered critical praise on both sides of the Atlantic, inside and outside traditional SF circles.

Writing in a style that resembles a bizarre blend of William Burroughs and Philip K. Dick (by way of Elmore Leonard), Aylett is best known for his sequence of books set in the iconic city of Beerlight: a crime-ridden urban-noir hell inhabited by a menagerie of grotesque, amoral characters and surreal, mind-bending technology. Characterised by their

gonzo humour and casual absurdity, it's entirely possible to miss the dark current of vitriol that runs through them, and thus miss the points Aylett seeks to make entirely.

Shamanspace—the short novel mentioned earlier—is a very different beast from the Beerlight books.

Owing more to Aylett's less obvious influences—great cynics and satirists such as Voltaire and Bierce—*Shamanspace* is a savagely uncompromising expression of disappointment and anger. Whilst Aylett could never be accused of over-writing, this slim (but dense) novella pares his sharp and incisive prose right down to the bone. Altogether more aggressive and direct than his usual fare, *Shamanspace* sees Aylett attacking his thematic quarry with viscous, laser-like precision—dispensing with it quickly and unceremoniously. Clearly fed up with people “not getting it,” Aylett doesn't bother to pull *any* punches.

Shamanspace postulates a secret society of Gnostic philosophers, who have discovered not only that God does exist, but also that it's possible to take revenge on him for the crimes he's inflicted upon creation. The decision is made that this end should be accomplished as soon as possible, no matter what the cost.

From this relatively uncontested starting point however, a theological schism quickly develops within the group. One faction—the Internecine—believes that God's death necessarily entails the end of the universe, whilst the other—the Prevail—maintain that the universe will survive the demise of its creator and go on completely as normal. In addition, a number of splinter groups have formed around the

fringes of the core debate; one such group believes that God should be tortured before he's killed, for instance.

Competing groups of Edgemen—suave, super-powered occult assassins—flit through etheric space on behalf of the various warring factions, searching for a weak point in the creator's defences—where to place the bullet that will either destroy or liberate eternity (or both). Foremost among them is Alik—the young and arrogant narrator of the text, charged with carrying out the hit by the Internecine faction.

Propelled along by sheer audacity, *Shamanspace* is a breathtaking, relentless roller-coaster ride; an action-packed metaphysical thriller that compresses over a thousand years of philosophical and theological argument into a narrative as dense as a neutron star. Aylett is well known for pushing the boundaries of language in an inventive fashion, and *Shamanspace* sees him characteristically employing an increasingly bizarre succession of neologisms and metaphors to evoke highly expressive, thought-provoking images. Rooms tumour; Volvos bleed gut lava. Aylett's writing is surreal in the proper sense of the word—super-real, or more real than real.

The most significant feature of *Shamanspace* however, is the way in which Aylett eschews his usual humorous approach, leaving his scathing cynicism raw and exposed for all to see. For Aylett, profound disappointment and resentment at our state of existence is an unquestioned given, and the desire for revenge a wholly natural and correct one that we go to great lengths to distract ourselves from. God can be taken to represent any suitably abstract and

impersonal authority—the government, the world economy, Western society.... The important aspect for Aylett is the fundamental sense in which these institutions are opposed to the individual, and the unwillingness of the individual to adopt the only logical stance (i.e. the antagonistic one) towards them.

An angry and incendiary (yet deliciously cool and clear-headed) work, *Shamanspace* is far from being Aylett's most accessible book. It is however, the clearest elucidation of the attitude and world-view that informs all his other work—and as such it deserves your immediate attention.

* * * *

Nick Brownlow is a web developer and writer living in south-east England.

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What You Didn't Learn in Civics: Alexander Irvine's *A Scattering of Jades*

Reviewed by Theodora Goss

8/19/02

The first time I read a story by Alexander Irvine, I thought, here is a writer with a devious and logical mind. The story was “Akhenaten,” in which the pharaoh with the spindly arms and elongated head turns out to be a visitor from the distant future, a temporal alien who wins the love of Amenhotep's wife Tiye, succeeds Amenhotep to the throne of Egypt, and imposes the worship of Aten, the sun-god, on his adopted land. As an explanation of Akhenaten's anomalous monotheistic reign, Irvine's version makes considerable sense. Why not, I found myself thinking. According to Akhenaten's supposedly realistic statues, he looked more like something from *Close Encounters* than your average Egyptian. Who knows, it could have happened that way.

In *A Scattering of Jades,* Irvine does again what he has done so well in his stories: rewrite history, or rather write the strange truth behind a history we think we know. This time the year is 1843, the place is New York City, and the history is as American as apple pie. But in Irvine's America, Aaron Burr conspires with his financial backer Harman Blennerhassett and an itinerant showman named Riley Steen to revive the Aztec god Tlaloc, whose return will bring about the time of the Sixth Sun, in which sacrificial fires will once again burn to the gods and the conspirators will rule an

American empire. According to Burr's research in the archives of the Tammany Society, to revive Tlaloc the conspirators must locate a *chacmool,* an ancient mummy concealed in the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky. They must also prepare an appropriate sacrifice. A child is ritually scarred in a New York fire and stolen away by Steen, to wait for the *chacmool*'s awakening. And all that happens before the first chapter.

Our hero, of sorts, is Archie Prescott, who believes that his wife Helen and daughter Jane died in the Great Fire of 1835. Archie doesn't know that the Great Fire was started by the ritual that scarred Jane, identifying her as Nanahuatzin, the sacrificial victim who must die so Tlaloc can return. He also doesn't know that the disfigured orphan who begs by his tenement every morning is his daughter, escaped from Steen and eager to be reunited with her father. Absorbed by grief for the wife and daughter he has lost, he attempts to become a newspaperman at James Gordon Bennet's *Herald.* While Archie tries to create a life for himself in New York, Steen is travelling around the country, assembling all the pieces for Tlaloc's revival. Burr and Blennerhassett have died, poor and dishonored, but Steen is determined to bring about the Sixth Sun and succeed where they have failed. The first step involves bringing the *chacmool* from Kentucky to New York, where it is placed in P.T. Barnum's American Museum. The second involves recapturing Jane. Predictably, Steen soon runs into trouble. Neither the *chacmool* nor Jane is easy to control. Most troubling of all, Bennet has asked Archie to investigate the activities of the Tammany Society, which brings Archie into continual conflict with Steen's plans. It

begins to look as though the Aztec gods have a purpose for Archie, a purpose that Archie himself must slowly discover.

Although Irvine wrote *A Scattering of Jades* before the stories for which he has become known, the novel displays the same precise, evocative prose. Nineteenth-century New York, with its omnibuses and ox carts, its abolitionists and newspaper boys, its pigs rooting through garbage, becomes a character in the novel. It is a quintessentially American city, where the privileged play political games and poor children beg in the streets, where crime is a spectacle and the criminals are on politicians' payrolls. Here we meet Royce McDougall of the Dead Rabbits, an Irish enforcer for Tammany Hall; the consummate showman Barnum; and even a reticent William Wilson, who is fascinated by live burial and whose real name seems to begin with Edgar Allan. *A Scattering of Jades* moves back and forth between New York and the Mammoth Cave. In a recent interview, Irvine mentions that he visited the Mammoth Cave several times while writing the novel. While reading it, I felt as though I were experiencing the cave as well: its absolute darkness, the weight of the rocks above pressing downward, and a silence so intense that the mulatto guide Stephen Bishop is convinced he can hear ghosts. I was sitting in a sunlit room, with the noise of city traffic outside, but Irvine's description made me feel claustrophobic. It also made me want to visit those ancient spaces.

These two locations structure Irvine's novel, both because characters travel between them and because they have a symbolic resonance. New York belongs to the America we

know, where Archie tries to find satisfying work and Tammany Hall carries on its political machinations: the America of political corruption and “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” The Mammoth Cave represents an America we don't know or would rather not acknowledge. In it we find the *chacmool* and Stephen, the Indian and the slave, members of populations conquered to make that other America possible. Although Irvine certainly delivers “one wild ride,” as Karen Joy Fowler promises on the jacket cover, he also presents us with a vision of America as fundamentally double, both the ancient America of the Indian and the modern America of the immigrant, both the land of economic opportunity and a land whose economic system is founded on oppression. As Archie travels south, he confronts the brutality of slavery; when the steamboat on which he is traveling sinks, the slaves working on her drown, dragged to the bottom by their shackles. Simultaneously, we experience slavery from inside Stephen's mind, sharing his dream of becoming a free man and moving to Monrovia. In the end, Stephen must make the most difficult decision of the novel, choosing between his own freedom and the freedom of the society that has enslaved him.

But no decision made by a character in this novel is easy. When Archie finally realizes that Jane is his daughter, he must decide whether to follow Steen back to Kentucky and participate in a conflict he never quite understands, between inscrutable gods whose messengers make shifting and unstable alliances. Royce, who is charged with transporting Jane, must decide whether he is ready to kill a child to

maintain his reputation as a New York tough. Steen, rapidly losing control of the entire enterprise, must decide if he still wants to bring on the apocalypse, even if he won't get to rule the world. And even Jane, affected by the magic of the *chacmool,* must decide which is stronger: her desire to escape the scarred body she has hated all her life, or her love for her father. As all of the characters converge on the Mammoth Cave, where Stephen is waiting, the novel moves inexorably to its ultimate decision: whether the *chacmool* will succeed in bringing about the return of Tlaloc, whether, that is, the hidden darkness of the American story will overwhelm the daylight world of work and family, of the fragile love between father and daughter. This is magical history at its finest, magical both because in Irvine's America the ancient gods are always ready to return if offered belief and blood sacrifice, and because Irvine's prose magically makes a forgotten era come fully and satisfyingly to life. Who knows, it could have happened that way.

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A Life Less Ordinary: Kate Bernheimer's *The Complete Tales of Ketzia Gold*

Reviewed by Christopher Barzak

8/26/02

"I want to tell you something, so listen." This note of urgency is sounded on the very first line of *The Complete Tales of Ketzia Gold,* by Kate Bernheimer. Urgency, though, is only one of the qualities this beautiful slim novel exhibits. By turns erotic, manic with intense emotion, tinseled with fairytales and folktales, the stories that make up Ketzia Gold's life, both real and imagined, create a kaleidoscopic vision for the reader, going from dark to light to dark.

Ketzia Gold is the middle child of three daughters growing up in a nameless American suburb. Her home is infused with a kind of magic that has lost its meaning. This is Disney World, not Narnia. Any wonder to be found here is detached and seemingly unconcerned with the reality in which it exists.

Ketzia inhabits a world of familial torture, erotic longing, and not-so-quiet desperation. Subjected to both physical and emotional abuse throughout childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, Ketzia Gold does her best to retain a sense of sanity in a world gone wrong, but her best attempts still show us that her world is a broken place, filled with dangerous psychological fissures that may open up beneath her feet at any moment. This is revealed through the many self-destructive episodes littered throughout the novel, as well as through Bernheimer's self-conscious narrative

structure, a series of episodic snapshots from Ketzia's life set alongside fairytales, photographs, and illustrations. The resulting collage of imagery and narrative follows no strict line of reasoning, nor the conventions of linear storytelling. It's a beautiful and seemingly effortless structure for a reader to follow, considering the complexity of its creation.

Throughout the novel, told alternately in first person and third person, we witness Ketzia Gold's heroic attempts to find meaning in a world that seems to offer her nothing but violence and cold indifference. She takes refuge in reimagining her life as the lives of heroines from Russian, Yiddish, and German folktales. Some of these stories are reprinted in their entirety alongside Bernheimer's retellings of them in contemporary detail, while others are simply alluded to: Ketzia owns a dog named Hansel; at one point, we find her wearing her grandmother's red woolen poncho. These tales, riddled with suffering and darkness themselves, serve to instruct Ketzia in how to escape her own narrative fate, while also freeing her from a sense of isolation—the old tales teach her that others have come before her, and that, in the senseless vacuum of her life, she is not alone.

Ketzia's life, or at least its surface pattern, will be recognizable to most readers, and it's easy to identify with her. She is considered by some to be the smartest girl in her class. She marries Adam, her high school sweetheart, who comes from a family with a good reputation. But no matter how closely Ketzia follows the plan to make the American dream come true, she finds that it is impossible to actually do so. Ketzia is smart, but she's also puzzled by life, and by the

feeling that there is a right way to live it. She is cursed with an inability to live life by the subtle and not so subtle rules with which our culture inundates us from our infancy onwards. Ketzia's husband is a musician, smart, from a “good” family; but he is also emotionally abusive and philandering. He cleverly disguises his emotional torture so that she is viewed by others as “the crazy one,” while he still retains his seeming normalcy. When Ketzia's husband reveals the existence of a secret closet and gives her a key, Bernheimer likens their relationship to the tale of Bluebeard. Like Bluebeard's bride, Ketzia is unable to contain her curiosity, her desire to know her husband's secrets. In the closet she finds a variety of objects. Some seem meaningless, while others are incriminating evidence. Ketzia's reflections on her findings illuminate the old tale's meaning with contemporary details from Ketzia's modern world:

> I wasn't surprised but I was sad. I didn't mind about the photographs, only that they were hidden—at the time, that seemed worse, though now I better understand. In any case I closed the closet door as quickly as I could, but every day until Adam got back, I reopened the door, sat on my knees until they were bruised and sore from the floor. I kept trying to arrange the photographs so he wouldn't know I had touched them. What if he had laid a hair across them, though? What if this was all a test?

> But I still continued to look! And each time I opened the door, and even when it was shut, I saw Adam's other women. Eventually it became an obsession for me, like my love for him had once been.

Ketzia's relationship with her husband—like her relationship with her family, especially her sisters—eventually disintegrates, and she finds herself wandering the desert. In fact, the novel opens with Ketzia living in a hotel in the desert where the manager allows her to stay at a cheaper rate because she allows him to watch her undress and shower through a one-way mirror. Other chapters reveal a Ketzia even further along in the timeline of her life where she has become a transcriber for a detective agency. In these episodes, we find that she has become an emotionally restrained, perhaps even deadened, character, burned out by the intensity of her own past.

Because Kate Bernheimer's knowledge of folk and fairy tales is so thorough, and so obviously close to her own bones (Bernheimer also edited the anthology *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*), with *The Complete Tales of Ketzia Gold* she has created a novel that is inclusive of both genre and mainstream audiences. If you enjoy fairy or folk tales, characters who become part of your own dreams, and prose that leaps from the mundane to the surreal to the mordant in the blink of an eye, then read

this book. It is literary, magical, full of delights and disturbances, and utterly unforgettable.

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WorldCon 2002: A Pre-Con Report

By Mary Anne Mohanraj

8/26/02

I'm writing this a few days before leaving to attend WorldCon. I arrive in San Jose Wednesday night; starting Thursday, I'll be in the midst of the massive swirl of panels, author readings, signings, costumes, gaming, filking, mass insanity, and just plain fun that's a world science fiction convention. If you've never been to a WorldCon, it's pretty tough to imagine what it's actually like. And if you're a professional in the field—an author, an editor, a publisher—then it gets even more complicated; every year there seems to be more stuff I'm supposed to do. I thought I'd give you a little tour of my upcoming WorldCon—in the process, though it may seem overwhelming and exhausting, I hope you can also see a little of how fun, diverse, and wonderfully interesting the speculative fiction world can be.

It all starts on Thursday, with registration, saying hello to old friends as they show up, and taking a look around to see what's up. Thursday evening I'm on a panel for Broad Universe, an organization we started not long ago to help promote the writing of women in spec fic. There are a lot of volunteer organizations in the field—you can sign up and join all sorts of groups that are organized around various interests. If you're interested in learning how to run a WorldCon, for example, you might start by signing up to volunteer as a gopher at the convention; conventions are

always looking for volunteers. This is also a terrific way to meet people if you're new to conventions—they can be isolating and alienating if you're attending by yourself. For your first convention, I really recommend you take a friend, or that you volunteer your time and make some friends. It's kind of fun working the registration desk, oddly enough.

A lot of the convention is readings, of course—WorldCon is stuffed to the gills with authors doing readings. Lots of my friends are doing individual readings, and I hear that the SFF.net suite is sponsoring additional readings. I have to admit, I have a bit of a tough time sitting through most readings myself; I get itchy being quiet for so long. But if you like the idea of hearing your favorite author read your favorite scene out loud ... well, this might be the perfect place for you. Thursday night, I'm doing a joint reading with several other people—one of them is the editor who first bought a story from me, Cecilia Tan. (It's always lovely re-encountering people who have given you money before ... you never know—they might want to give you money again.)

Friday morning, I'm planning on attending my first SFWA business meeting—SFWA is the professional organization of spec fic writers, and I'm very curious to see what sort of things they discuss when they meet at a WorldCon. Joining SFWA is something of a holy grail for young spec fic authors—you need three professional sales to qualify for membership; once you're a member, you get access to their member directory, you get to vote for the Nebula Awards, and I'm sure you get some other things that I'm less aware of. Editors can join as affiliate members—that's what I am right now. I'm

not strongly interested in joining as a full member myself, but since so many of our authors care about it, I need to care about it too. So it'll be interesting to see what they have to say.

Then some hours off, where I'll probably attend panels; I'm a panel-junkie, and tend to spend most conventions mostly in panels—if I'm not on the panel, I'm usually sitting up front and raising my hand a lot. I have plenty of opinions. Some people might say too many. In the late afternoon and evening, more panels (on how to flirt and on SF erotica), and maybe a dinner with some friends, if time can be squeezed out. There's so much going on at a WorldCon that it can be hard to find time to just socialize—and yet, it seems a shame not to, since often you see people at WorldCon that you haven't seen since last year's WorldCon.

Saturday, I have several meetings with various editors and publishers, to talk about anthology projects. If you're trying to make a living as a working writer, it's generally a good idea to keep in touch with what's happening with anthologies—and if you're a working editor, then you're probably going to spend some time trying to convince publishers to let you edit anthologies for them. (Yes, a *Strange Horizons* anthology will be under discussion. Stay tuned.)

Then in the afternoon, the *Strange Horizons* tea party from 3:00-5:00—if you're coming to WorldCon, please stop by and have some tea and cookies! We'll be celebrating our second anniversary—we launched the magazine at WorldCon 2000, and we're just so pleased that it's going so well, two years later. Sadly, I'll have to duck out partway through to go sit on

another panel, this one on racial and ethnic minorities in spec fic (at least it's a subject that really interests me). Susan Groppi, one of our fiction editors, will take over hosting the party—lots of our other editors will also be in attendance. In the evening, I'm on a panel about Clarion and its workshop style. Many writers attend workshops, and a good workshop can really shape a writer's writing (and career). I have some strong opinions about Clarion (a six-week writing workshop that I attended in 1997), and about that particular workshop style, so I'm looking forward to that discussion.

Sunday (tired yet?) I have an early morning reading; I'm not really expecting anyone to come at that hour, but if they do, I'll read whatever they like. Morning panels and readings are generally pretty empty at conventions—if you don't mind getting up early, it's a great chance to get some one-on-one time with your favorite writers. Sometime after that I'll stop by the Hugo hall and familiarize myself with the space—get prepared to give a speech, just in case we manage to win (fingers crossed) (toes crossed, too). At 2:30, there's a panel about online magazines. And then in the evening, the Hugo reception and then the award ceremony. I've got butterflies in my stomach just thinking about it. Oof!

That isn't everything. Of course, during the days, I'll be visiting the dealer's room and the art show. Buying books I won't have time to read until next year. Bidding on art I've fallen in love with and can't really afford. Checking back compulsively to see if anyone bids on my art. Maybe stopping in the movie room and watching part of a film. Maybe taking a few hours to play some Magic or Mafia or some other game.

Snagging snacks from the Con Suite and the Green Room when I don't have time to eat properly. During the evenings, partying with famous people. Trying not to drink too much. Falling asleep with my head on the bar.

WorldCon can be an endurance test, and even an experienced convention-goer may have trouble pacing herself. By the end of it, I'll probably have caught a cold, and I'll swear myself perfectly happy to never attend a panel again. Or so I'll claim—until it's time to go to World Fantasy in November....

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