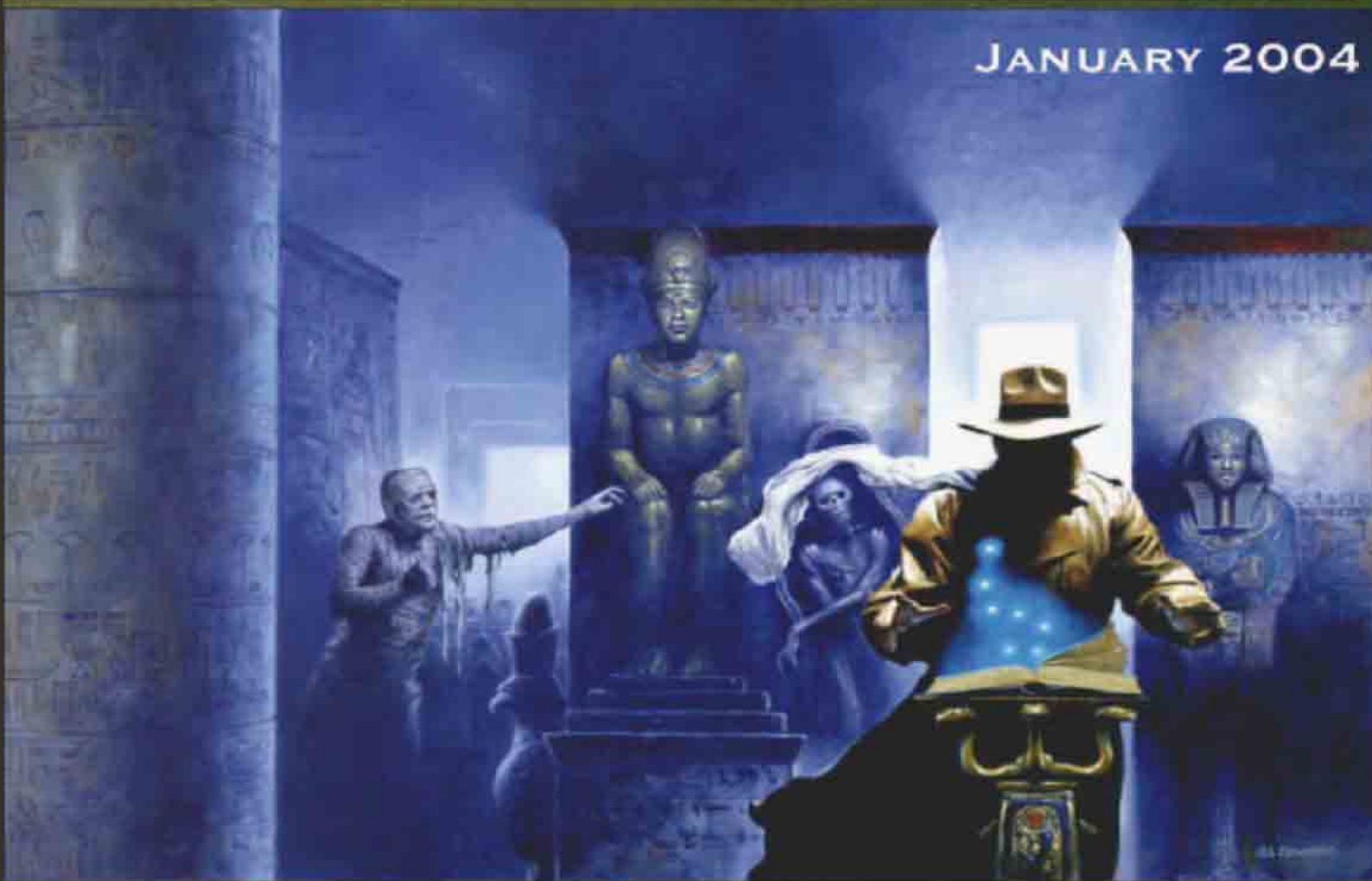


SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

JANUARY 2004



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LES EDWARDS

ISSUE 2

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The Editor's Desk

Simulacrum: `simyu'leykrum **Synonyms:** effigy, image

An image or representation of something.

Something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities.

Well, now that we have that out of the way—and you can believe me, it's been a pertinent question! Those of you familiar with French social theorist Jean Baudrillard's work will recognize this typographically striking word immediately. Others may be familiar with it on the count that the entire cast of a certain recent film trilogy was made to read Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations*. (Something about being plugged-in and the Real World. And cool shades. You tell me. I don't think it's very well known.)

But enough talk of poncy things. Let's get to the nitty-gritty, which is, face it, what you're all here for.

Our fiction line-up is sure to hook you from the get-go: **Sarah Ash** gives us a retelling of her very first short story ever published, appearing here under a different title than the original *Ninufar's Kiss*. **Catherine Lundoff's** *Red Scare* is a treat for fans of Noir, and a special treat for those who enjoy SF Noir, a combination of styles too rarely seen in print.

The Shadow Men is a haunting tale of yearning and accepting the implications of fate from **Stephen M. Dare** that is sure to stay with you long after you've read its final words. And then, **Jay Richards** takes us into another futuristic journey in **Robots Have Feelings Too**, a tale reminiscent of a Wild West renegade hunt.

Feast your eyes on the award-winning artwork of Les Edwards, our cover and inside artist for this issue. And not to forget that little something for all you H.P Lovecraft fans who can never get enough of this iconic writer's work.

Now don't forget: we'd love to hear from you. If you have suggestions for the magazine, or of course, unadulterated praise and kudos, let us know! Our Letters page is in the making, and we'd like to include the first in the next issue. Your support, dear reader, is what we thrive on.

'The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.'

- Ecclesiastes

as quoted by Jean Baudrillard in **Simulations**

On with the show.

*Lynne Jamneck is a writer, photographer and artist from Cape Town, South Africa. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including **City Slab**, **Best Lesbian Erotica 2003**, **Curve**, and **Strange Horizons**. Forthcoming work will appear in **H.P Lovecraft's Magazine Of Horror**, **Raging Hormones**, **Darkways Of The Wizard** and **Naughty Tales From A-Z 4**. Her artwork can be seen at www.epilogue.net*

I wrote **Scent of Lilies** after I had been listening to the stirring singing of the Trio Bulgarka. Many of the songs told of betrayed love, and the Eastern European legend of the rusalka—the spirits of drowned girls who appear to entice young men to their deaths in rivers and lakes – had always intrigued me. How had these tales arisen? Were they a way a community could explain unexpected disappearances, just as the Noonday Witch who steals the children of neglectful mothers was a way of coming to terms with early childhood mortality? Or was there another deeper layer, a link to an earlier pre-Christian age, when each lake and spring had its own presiding spirit, often female, who had to be placated with offerings? All these merged to produce **Scent of Lilies**, my first published story (then called **Ninufar's Kiss**). My writing has altered since then, but my love of legend and music has not diminished.

"IOAN!"

The murky waters froth and bubble about my face, filling my mouth, ears, eyes. Sweet Jesu, so cold, so deathcold, help me, help me, I am drowning! I claw upwards, fighting the strong arms pushing me down, scrabbling to keep a hold on Ioan. My lover. My betrayer. My murderer.

White waterlilies are rising to the surface of the Lake. Ninufars.

"Ioan, don't do this - "

But my sodden clothes, leadheavy, are dragging me down beneath the grey lake, down to oblivion. Coughing, retching up the filthy water, spewing it out, shuddering out the rank mudfilth chilling my throat, my lungs, hearing my voice bubbling faint as the waters close over my head, as he forces me down again.

"Ioan - save me, please save me!"

The fine dark cloak he has placed about my shoulders as a gift, fixing it with a silver brooch, is waterlogged already. Kick against its wet shroudfolds, kick loose, kick free—

Yes!

Head breaks surface again, gasp in air, the damp night air, air that burns, the water bubbling in my aching throat.

White ninufar lilies, curled petals like the delicate hands of drowned girls.

Fight! Fight him! Grab the side of the boat, tip him in too. Ah, why am I so weak, why are my grasping fingers so cold and numb?

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"Help me! *Help!*" Floundering, screaming into the empty night, but only owls and herons will hear me, he planned this so well and I never doubted him, not till the instant he pushed me over the side.

White ninufars open their frail petalfingers to the moon.

"Damn you. Go under."

That inexorable hand, with all the supple strength of his twenty years, forcing me down, his amberstone signet ring caught in my hair, my tawny hair that he once loved to stroke, pressing my face under the water, holding it there.

"Io...an..."

The waters close over my head. All sounds muffled but for the roar of waters. I cannot breathe. Water-roar. Bubbles rising. I cannot breathe. Bubbles, frothing bubbles. Murk. I cannot see. The clouded mud from the lake floor is engulfing me, it is black, murky black and it tastes of death. My death. My eyes are open but I cannot see, I am drifting down, down, down and there is no—

Drifting, I am drifting in the chill waters like a feathered frond of lakeweed, only anchored to sensation by the slight ebb and flow of movement high above on the surface. Liquid silver spills across the black mirror. A sudden shaft pierces the mud-stirred darkness in which I drift to and fro, pierces me through, pierces the dull sediment of my numbed consciousness.

Awake. I am awake, I see, I hear, I *feel*.

Coldsilver light goes scintillating through every vein, every pore, animating, revivifying. Limbs glimmer eerily in the moonsilvered waters, fingers long and thin, so translucent the light seems to radiate from them.

Strands of hair eddying in the sluggish current, swirling about this shimmering translucence, this incorporeal sentience, rising upwards, slowly upwards, drawn to the light.

But who am I, what am I, how long I have I been aimlessly drifting here?

The moonglimmer on the surface dazzles. Such cold, chaste purity. I am so frail I rise effortlessly, borne on a froth of bubbles to shatter the black mirrorglass of the lake's meniscus.

Moon. White moon. Whitelight sears my lids with coldsilver.

Let me drown again, let me drift back down, down to the numbcold mud, the oblivion beneath the lake's sediment, let me not remember, let me forget, forget, *forget...*

Voices. Shouting. Fuzzy, at first, faint, as though heard through chokefog, then clearer.

"Tekla! Te - kla!"

"Over this way! In the rushes!"

Torchlight, bobbing flares of flame over on the far shore amongst the reeds. And a name. My name. I think it is my name. Men moving on the bank, running, calling to each other. So far, far away, so distant—

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"Tekla!"

'I'm here!'

Moving through the water towards them, easily now, no heavy folds to weigh me down, drifting like mist across the still surface...

'Here I am!'

Why don't they hear me? I am crying out to them as loud as I can, I have almost reached the bank, close enough to recognize voices, faces.

And he is there, helping them, my Ioan, tall Ioan, his face scarred with grief. What are they pulling in through the rushes, using sticks, rakes, ropes, what is it that lies so heavily in the water?

"Dear God." Ioan turns away, covering his face with his hands, shoulders heaving. The others are silent now, staring down at the waterlogged bundle of clothing, the weed-tarnished hair, once fair, tawny-fair like mine.

Ioan speaks at last.

"I—I had no idea the news would affect her so. At first she wept. But then she became calm. 'I wish you both joy, Ioan,' she said. 'I always knew it was not to be.' I never imagined it would drive her to—to this." He breaks down again, sobbing.

'Ioan, don't weep, my darling, I'm here!'

Why does he not hear my voice? Why do none of them hear me? Why do they shake their heads? Whose is the bloated body from which they all avert their eyes, crossing themselves as they turn away?

"A suicide. Crazy for love."

Suicide? Who is dead?

'Ioan! Wait, love, wait, don't go, don't walk away from me!'

They are bringing a cart down the bank. Old Diko the gravedigger in his mildewed robes, spits on his stained palms, rubbing them together before he sets to dragging the body into the cart. Poppy-red skirts, darkened with muddy lakewater. Just like mine...and I was so proud of those poppy-red skirts. And as he grabs hold of the watersodden skirts and tugs, the corpse flops over and I see, I see, I see—myself. My body. Livid skin puffed almost beyond recognition, discoloured with decay, mouth gaping slack, staring green eyes dulled to the mouldy crust of verdigris. My body. Putrefying. Loathsome.

Lifeless. Dumped in Diko's filthy cart.

A suicide. Crazy for love.

And Ioan, walking away from it alone into the night, Ioan, my lover, my betrayer, my—
Ai, let me forget...

It was not suicide. You killed me, Ioan. You pushed me into the lake and when I screamed for mercy, you held me under, you used your strength to force my head beneath the chill water until I drowned, I, your lover, your mistress, bearer of your unborn child.

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And now you walk away a free man whilst they hurriedly bury my corpse in unconsecrated ground. Without ceremony. Without the blessing of the priest. Without flowers or headstone.

Without hope of salvation.

I fling back my head and a cry of utter desolation comes tearing from deep within me, wailing on and on across the barren waters.

'Ai, Ioan, Ioan, aiiiiiiii...'

Old Diko looks up from his task. He shivers, his gap-toothed mouth works a little, muttering prayers under his breath. Did he hear me? Or did he just feel a chill gust of wind wailing through the reeds?

What am I? Why am I not extinguished, why do I still see, hear, feel? What is this translucent form, so like to my mortal body which now lies dripping waterweed in the gravedigger's cart?

The starry sky blurs, the lake grows dim. The moonlight is fading.

So weak now, so faint I am sinking beneath the waters, drowning again. No pain this time, no burn of air-starved lungs, yet I am drawn slowly downwards as inevitably as the moonlight drew me to the surface.

'Sister.'

Who is calling me?

Slivers of whiteness writhe in the murky waters: slender fingers wreath before my face, hollow eyes, stare into mine, then drift past.

'Sister, it is time to sleep.'

Who are you, you water-wraiths with your trailing hair, your staring, hungry eyes?

'It is moonset. You must sleep.'

Why must I sleep?

'You are one of us now. You are one of the Ninufarim.'

Ninufari. Moonwraith, destined to haunt the waters where the pale ninufars flower. When the moon rises, I rise from the world of shadows to taint the night. When the moon sets, I must sink back to muddy oblivion, to fitful sleep wracked by shards of nightmare, until the next moonrise.

I am no longer alone. There are others. They call me sister. Their wild-snarled hair is festooned with slimy weed, their sunken eyes glint in the moonlight, their long nails are talon-sharp. They are predators. They are hungry. But they do not feed. And they will not tell me what it is they hunger for.

Not yet.

Weak, so very weak... Drift with the current, float through the softly sussurating reeds. I am fading slowly away; soon I shall dissolve into the mist.

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Lanterns go bobbing along the shore, wild music skirls across the moonlit waters, music to scorch the blood to passionheat, wedding music.

Who is the bridegroom, who the bride? Who is the red-lipped girl with dog roses and eglantine in her hair?

"Go see," hiss my sisters, "while the moon is high, go see."

I do not want to go. But the mist swirls over the lake, envelopes me, bears me upwards, drifts across the sleeping village.

The casement of the bridal chamber is open wide.

I do not want to go in.

Mist seeps in through the casement. I am inside the chamber. Candles, wispily guttering, reveal clothes discarded, wedding finery torn off in the throes of passion, bridal garlands thrown down, crushed underfoot...

And in the bed, the lovers clinging together, naked flesh pressed hard into shuddering naked flesh, the man with hair dark as blackthorn sloes, dark as my faithless Ioan's hair—

I do not want to look, do not make me look. I am screaming aloud his name.

'Ioannnnnnn...'

Mist carries me away, my voice no more than a chill breath of marsh-breeze.

But she feels it. She shivers, sitting up in bed, clutching the embroidered covers to her bare breasts, her flesh all goose-pimpled.

"Ioan - did you not hear something?"

He listens awhile, shakes his head.

'Ioannnnnnn...!'

"There!"

"Nothing. A marsh bird croaking, an owl..."

"I'm cold. Close the shutters, Ioan. Please."

Grumbling he lumbers out of the warm bed.

'My curse on your house, Ioan Rodomir!'

The shutters slam shut and I am on the outside, a fast-dissolving mist of inconsolable tears, wafting far, far away...

My sisters cluster around me, bearing me back to the reedy beds of the lake, whispering in soft voices of revenge.

"There is a way," they tell me, hungrily licking shriveled lips.

No. Let me be, let me rot as my earthly body rots in its unhallowed grave, let me melt into the morning mist...

"A soul for a soul. Only another's soul will set you free."

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I can see their purpose now. A little child, toddling too close to the edge, a young man swimming too far from the shore, a village girl washing her long hair, entice them, take them, drown them—be free. A soul for a soul.

No. I will not do it. I cannot do it.

Let me dissolve into the lake bed, let me evaporate into the mist, let me be nothing.

Let me alone.

I have dwindled to a shadow...but each evening the moon's cold light floods my shadowform with silver, sends life spinning through my skeletal leaf-veins. And each evening, I must rise with the moon, whether I will or no, and each evening I must drift back to the leafmould sediment that clogs the lake bottom and dream drear, dead dreams until the moon rises again. This has no ending. This is forever. This is my eternity, an eternity of shadowlife, endless winters trapped beneath the thick crusted ice, endless summers drifting between my bed of lakesludge and the starbright surface where memories quicken, memories of sun...of warmth...of *love*.

Years must have passed, years without number. The moon wanes, the moon waxes full.

There is a man, a young man sitting on the shore. Overhead the harvest moon, a beaten disc of gilded silver, hangs over the village. They have brought the harvest home, they are rowdily chanting the old harvest songs and the night is bright with bonfires. But he has left the dancing, he is solitary, sad, trailing his hand in the waters.

A soul for a soul.

He is beautiful, a look of my faithless Ioan about him, sloe-dark hair, sloe-dark eyes.

And if it were true, what my sisters told me: a soul for a soul? They have become foul, weed-slimed, ill-kempt with the years. Am I as hideous as they have become. If I reveal my silvered shadowform to him, will he shrink away from me in revulsion?

I part the reeds.

His eyes. Widened. Mouth gaping.

"Wh—what are you?" His voice, a whisper. But deep, vibrant with the life pulsing within him.

"What do you want?"

"You."

I raise one hand, beckoning. My hair drips rivulets of silver drops over my naked body, I am more light than substance.

And he is mesmerized. He is slowly reaching out towards me. It would be so easy to catch hold of him, drag him into the deeps, hold him under until that vibrant life force gurgles out of him. So easy.

"Me? You want me?"

"Yes."

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But it is not his death I want, not yet, I want some of that vital force pulsing within him, some of that warmth I can feel even a hand's distance from him, as fingertips reach to touch my fingertips.

Desire makes me dizzy. His touch. It gives me strength, strength to slide out of the waters, into his arms. And oh, the warmth of him, the heat of his blood, I want it, I must have it all for myself. I pull his face towards mine, I kiss him, my pale lips, frail as moonshine, gaining substance, gaining life as his mouth opens beneath mine.

More, I want more than his kisses. His fumbling hands give substance to my shadowform, white shoulders, breasts, belly, thighs...

"You're so beautiful." Poor lovesick boy. He is staring mazedly into my eyes, he no longer knows or cares what he is doing.

He is in my power.

I see the ecstasy dulling in his glazing eyes as with every kiss I feel his life-force leeching into me. I am draining him, sucking him dry as an empty fruit-skin...

And the laughter comes bubbling up, from deep within me, I am laughing drunkenly aloud, head flung back... so easy and I never knew, so easy! The elixir of life, here, so close, so deliciously, wantonly close at hand. No need to take a soul for a soul.

He is lying on the bank, moaning faintly. His eyes have rolled up in his head, his sweat-cold skin is as pallid as the setting moon, judders shake his body.

"Was I too much for you, my fine hero?" I straddle his body, I thrash his face with my wet hair. I am still laughing, I cannot stop.

"God protect me." His voice so faint now. His hand rises, fluttering towards me—

The amberstone ring on his ring finger.

"Your ring. Your ring. Where did you get it? Where? Where?" I hiss into his face. His sloe-black eyes scarcely see me now.

"Help me..."

"Your ring!"

"No. My...father's ring... "

"Your father. Who is your father?"

"Ioannnnn..."

I cannot stop laughing. I am laughing until the tears stream like lakewater down my face. The tears will not stop. His fingers flutter once more, brushing my cheek, the wetness of the tears that keep flowing.

"Why...are you weeping?"

"Tell Ioan your father my name. Just that."

"Your...name?"

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"Tekla." His eyes are glazing over. I shake him. He must hear. He must remember. "Tekla. Tekla—"

"Hoi there, Arkadi! Your mother's fretting! You're late for supper!"

Voices, cheerful, ribald voices. Shouting, hot with wine and firelight. I slide into the water, into the reed beds. I wait.

"What's the betting he's got a girl with him, Ioan? Remember—you used to do your courting by the lake?"

"What, my Arkadi with a girl? He's too shy!"

"Ah but when the harvest wine flows, when the blood burns—"

The laughter, the jesting stops. Suddenly. I part the reedstrands, I peer through.

"Arkadi?" Ioan's voice, all banter, all vigour hushed. He is there, kneeling over his son and—he is old. Many years must have passed; my fine Ioan is a grey-haired old man, his limbs stiffly rheumatic, bending creakily to raise the boy's lolling dark head.

"Arkadi, what has happened to you?" Such grieving in his voice now, such a weight of love.

"Were you set upon? Were you robbed?"

"Te - kla..."

"*What!*"

His reaction so shocked, so vivid I can almost taste it.

"There are many girls called Tekla," says Ioan's companion uneasily.

"Arkadi, Arkadi!" Ioan is frantically calling his son's name, slapping the pale, slack face. No response.

Arkadi breathed out the last of his life on the syllables of my name.

I had not thought to be revenged in this manner. The sin was not the boy's, it was the father's...and Arkadi could have been *my* son.

White waterlilies float on the surface of the Lake.

Ioan slowly lays the limp body down on the damp grass. He staggers forwards, dropping to his knees at the water's edge. And he calls. At last he calls me. Too late.

"Tekla! Tekla! Why Arkadi?" His voice is old, broken with age. "Arkadi. My son!"

So close I could reach out and touch him through the reedcurtain.

White ninufar lilies, curled petals like the delicate hands of drowned girls.

"Tekla! Take me instead! Only give me back my son!"

My tears have dried. I do not think I shall ever weep again over any man.

"Take me, Tekla!"

No.

I will not take you, Ioan, I will not give you the swift, easy end to your suffering that you crave. The moon is setting and my sisters are calling me.

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White ninufars close their frail petalfingers to the moon.

"Te - kla!"

Live long, old man. Live long and remember Tekla. Grow senile, grow wrinkled, mumble by your fireside. No-one will believe you. The ninufars will bloom on the grey waters of the Lake and the Ninufarim will rise from the waters with the moon. We will be hungry.

And we will feed.

Sarah Ash trained as a musician at Cambridge and now divides her time between writing and running a primary school library in Kent. Married, with two grown-up sons, she is a Thursday's Child, and did not break into print until she was forty-two. Her advice to other would-be writers is 'Persevere!'

Simulacrum

Issue 1 – November 2003



Featuring Fiction from Angeline Hawkes-Craig, Lyda Morehouse,

Lavie Tidhar & Tim Pratt

Poetry from Zohar A Goodman

Cover & Inside Art by Peter Kudriashov

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Red Scare is my version of noir detective fiction in outer space. I am fascinated by gender shifts and changes, in particular the concept of women passing as men and vice versa, and that fascination is reflected in a lot of my fiction. In the typical 1940s noir setting, lesbian and gay characters are either invisible or part of a seamy underworld. Historically, lesbians and bi women created their own communities and subcultures where butch women often passed as men to avoid harassment as well as to express their gender preference. Once I pictured the noir detective, the kind immortalized by Bogart and Mitchum, as a passing woman, the rest fell into place.

The note said that the Fat Man knew about Greta and me. It was pinned to my desk with a slick little knife, just the kind scum like his muscle would use. Nice touch. I could take a hint. My desk couldn't take too many more, though. A few more calling cards like this one and I'd be sitting behind a pile of matchsticks.

Personally, I didn't give a rat's ass what he knew about me. A few of my friends knew I was really a dame. So did a few of my enemies. Didn't matter much unless I was in the running for Head Gumshoe, which I wasn't. To the world, I was Dash McDermott, private dick, and whether or not I actually had one didn't seem to matter to most of my clients. Of course, that was probably because they usually had other things to worry about.

Now Greta, she was another story. She was a vid star and well on her way to being the next Femme Fatale when Lana Dean retired. A word to the Committee and she'd never work again. The Committee exists primarily to protect us from the Buggies, the Kru'ush Magir, as any right-minded citizen could tell you. Protecting us from ourselves ran a close second.

Of course, nobody outside of the Defense Forces had seen one of the Buggies since the original colonists had landed on Falcon. But we all knew that they were out there somewhere, waiting to invade and wipe us all out. Though why they hadn't for the last hundred years or so, no one could say. But as the Committee prop goes, 'Preparedness is the key'.

At least if you believed in bug-eyed monsters. Not me. I believed in staying away from the Committee and going to the vids every Friday like a good Revivalist. Any doubts I had about the Old Earth history they showed, I kept to myself.

Don't get me wrong. There are some great things about living here. Greta, for instance. Thinking about her made me realize that I'd better meet the Fat Man so I clapped my homburg on my head, folded the knife and stuck it in my pocket. The office door slammed behind me as I went down the dim hallway out into the greenish-yellow sunlight.

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A Packard remake cruised by, cybercell motor barely purring as the horn blared and the driver waved at Johnny, the old shoeshine guy on the corner. He waved back, then blinded me with a gold-toothed grin. "How ya doin', Mr. McDermott?"

I grinned back at him as I headed for the streetcar stop. For the thousandth time, I wondered how he paid for that dental job. Authentication like that cost more than I made in a month. He gave me a slow wink but no answers before I turned the corner.

The streetcar that showed up was called *Desire* and it was packed. Pity I just can't resist knives stuck in my desk, not even during rush hour. When I got off, the Casablanca's awning loomed up ahead. I sauntered down the block, resisting the urge to smooth my lapels just cause Barney the Bruiser stood outside the door watching me. I could feel my fingers ache for the handle of my raygun.

He sneered down at me as I walked up. "Why don'cha try wearing a dress for a change, ya pervert?"

"Hi Barney. Sure, I'll wear a dress for you, honey buns. Why don't you put one on too, and we'll go out for a big night at Sally's. My friends would just die to meet you."

He spat on the asphalt and I bared my teeth at him. "The Fat Boy sent me a calling card. Be a good little toady and tell him I'm here."

"You carrying heat?" A meaty paw reached for me. I stepped back.

"What do you think, sugar? That a delicate flower of womanhood like myself walks the mean streets unprotected? Fatso knows I'm not going to waste him. It'd be bad for my rep. You, on the other hand..." I looked him over speculatively. Even with the raygun on full, he'd make a hell of a pile of ashes.

He stepped back a little, muttering a string of things that I chose not to hear. I watched the big ugly vein in his forehead beat time for a minute before I pushed my way past through the red velvet curtain behind him. The space between my shoulders twitched where his little eyes were burning a hole, but I made myself act casual. The Fat Man was sitting at his usual table by the bar, facing the door. He looked a little tired in the dim light. Kind of pasty. It cheered me up.

"What do you want, Fat Boy?" I liked messing with his title, especially since he wasn't that big, definitely not Greenstreet material. We just didn't turn out substantial rats like they did back on Earth.

He gave me an evil glare. "You like having a movie star, Mr. McDermott?" He kind of hissed the words, stopping for a long time on the "Mr." His Brit accent needed work.

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"I don't think you'll get to take my place if I take a fall, Fatso. Now whadda ya want?" I stepped forward, turning slightly so I could watch Barney coming in the door and the joker standing at the bar behind the Fat Man at the same time. He probably wasn't arranging any accidents for me or he wouldn't have bothered bringing me here, but hey, 'preparedness is the key.'

"Have a seat," he pointed to the chair across from him. I grabbed the one on his right instead and sat close enough that I could fry him before Barney got to me. No point in taking chances. He pulled a face, but held up his hand to stop Barney where he was, looming a few feet away.

"We found your cousin Fortune in an alley down by the Farmer's Market yesterday afternoon." He ran a descriptive finger along his wrinkled throat. That might have brought a tear to my eye if I didn't despise Fortune from the bottom of my heart. Aunt Mabel wouldn't be too happy, though. "Yeah? We weren't close. Whaddaya want me for?"

"Some of Fortune's friends think that I had something to do with it."

Fortune had friends? Who knew? "And?" I asked. There had to be something else. Fatso's problems were his own as far as I was concerned.

He followed up with a change of topic. "What do you know about the Kru'ush Magir, McDermott?"

"Not much. You?"

He looked like his fingers just begged to slap me. "This is big stuff. If I didn't have orders... All right. I heard that Fortune made some kind of contact with them. You know where that could lead." His voice dropped so he sounded like a vid villain.

Oh goody. I love listening to a bad Orson Welles' imitation, more than anything in the world. I hoped there was more than this. 'Orders' on Falcon only come from the Committee but why did they care? I tried to imagine Fortune as the mastermind behind an alien invasion. It sounded kinda ambitious. "No, I don't know. Where did that 'information' come from, Fatso?"

He leaned forward, looking me in the eye as hard as he could to place his nonexistent weight behind his words. "Reliable sources."

"Right. And I'm Bogart." I stood up. The Fat Man stuck a hand in his jacket. I stuck a hand in mine. Barney started moving, picking up speed as he headed in my direction, only to be stopped again by his boss' upheld hand. He glared at me as the Fat Man put a box on the table in front of me. I opened it to find a glossy goldtone pin, a big star-shaped one, the kind of shimmer that you'd get a femme if you were down on your luck but not flat broke.

"Not my style." I picked it up and flipped it over. The little red lights and the wires told me it wasn't your ordinary shimmer. But then, I never thought it was.

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"It's a transmitter, better than any we can make yet. We found it on him. Our sources say it came from off-planet." I looked up at the few beads of sweat lining the fringe of what little hair he had left, then down into his tiny brown eyes. They didn't shift much. Still, I wondered why his boys were close enough to be searching the body before the Defense Force boys showed up. That kind of work wasn't usually left up to the hoods, even the official ones like Fatso.

"So what do you want me to do about Fortune's taste in jewelry?"

"In light of your connections..." he steepled his little fingers together like he was thinking hard. I didn't buy it but he kept going anyway. "I would like to hire you on behalf of the Committee to investigate this matter. Find out if Fortune really made contact with the Buggies and what his plans were if he succeeded."

I sat back down and gave it some thought. The only thing that Fortune and the Fat Man had in common was a ten year old turf war over the scratch trade. Supposedly, my cousin was profiting from it and the Committee was out to shut it down but I had my doubts. Today's little game had to be connected to the scratch. I don't know how I knew it, but I did.

The scratch, that lovely liquid silver that you slipped straight into your blood through gashes in your skin, had cost me a couple of friends. And Leandra. I looked at the Fat Man and swallowed both the sudden lump in my throat and a long-buried desire to pull out my raygun and fry him. But Lee was long gone by now and shooting him wouldn't bring her back. Instead I decided I'd take him for everything he was worth.

"My tab's fifty credits a day. And I get my records changed," I said, almost as an afterthought. It wasn't. Femmes weren't supposed to be gumshoes, but I just wasn't Fatale material, ditto for Romantic Lead. Getting my records changed would transform me into a real gumshoe and keep the Committee off my back for the foreseeable future. Not to mention sparing me some permanent changes on a black market table that I had no desire to make.

He sputtered and jawed about the fate of our world resting in my hands and such for a few minutes. I got forty-five in the end and his agreement about the records. Better than I expected. I waited till he turned to say something to Barney and I palmed the shimmer. As I left, I passed him back the closed box with his own knife, the one he had so kindly left in my desk, inside it for weight. The shimmer could come in handy, I thought, though for what I didn't know yet. Insurance, maybe.

I wandered back down the street, one baby blue peeled over my shoulder on the lookout for company. No one yet. I hopped on the next streetcar then changed cars a couple of times on my way to the Farmer's Market just in case. For entertainment, I tried to wrap my brain around the idea that my cousin Fortune had contacted bug-eyed monsters from outer space. My right hand toyed with the shimmer in my pocket. What kind of game was the Fat Man playing this time?

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From what I knew of him, there was no good reason to think that he hadn't sliced Fortune himself. But I kept going anyway; it wasn't like I had anything better to do.

I got off at the Market intending to head for the alleys behind it, back where Fatso said they found Fortune. The legit farmers had their stands in the middle of the Market, piled high with the fruits of the land. I wandered over and got a porkstick. When I turned around, I caught a quick glimpse of a familiar back dodging down one of the alleys and froze. It couldn't be. Scratch junkies didn't last that long.

But I had to find out. My appetite took a quick powder, but I made myself swallow the dry meat anyway before I wound my way through the stands toward the alley. The someone I was chasing was down the other end of the alley, walking away from me.

I nearly lost my nerve when I got a clear eyeball on her feet. They were covered in scales, almost like claws. When I looked further up, I could see something bulging under the shoulders of the blue coat. Wings? For a minute, I wondered what a Buggy really looked like; I'd always had my doubts about the Committee sparktags. Then I started down the alley after it. That was when she turned around.

It had been four years since I'd seen her last but you don't forget a femme like that. She wore a thick black veil pulled over her face, hanging down from the wide brimmed hat like a storm cloud. From what little I could see of her face, I was grateful for what it spared me. "Hey, Leandra," I spoke softly, forcing the words out.

She cringed when she saw me. I tried not to do the same, tried not to remember how pretty she was back when she was my femme. Before she dumped me for Fortune and then him for the scratch. "Hello Dash." Her voice had gone all raspy, but at least she still knew me. How had she managed to change so much? Scratch junkies never made it past the dry skin and deeper voice part. After that they just disappeared. My gut said they got iced before they got this far, but I didn't know for sure. Hell, I'd never thought about it before.

Then I remembered Fortune. "Let's go talk, Lee. There's something I've got to tell you." Better she should hear it from me. I thought she loved Fortune before she got hooked. More than me anyway. I looked away, catching her nod from the corner of my eye. She didn't seem human any more, at least not the way I thought of us. My guts tied themselves in knots while I led the way back to the benches that ringed the outer edge of the Market.

I sat down, shaking all over. I couldn't look at her as she slithered down onto the far edge of the bench, couldn't stand listening to the sounds of things crunching and scraping together that weren't the femme I loved anymore. There was a long silence before I could get the words together. "Fortune's dead, Lee." I mumbled.

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Now, I just wanted to get away, get sick, then drunk, then sick again to wash it out of me.

There was little sob from the other end of the bench. I handed her my handkerchief, and she grabbed it so fast I couldn't see her fingers. The rasp of the scales made me pull away anyway, even without seeing them.

"I just saw him two nights ago. He said..." she trailed off, like she couldn't make herself go on.

I pushed, pretending that I wanted to hear more. "What?"

"That he was onto something that might make me better." That'd be pretty big if it was true. Scratch junkies didn't get cured. They cut more and more tiny holes in themselves and rode the wave until the day they died. For a minute, I wished Fortune was still alive so he could pay for this. Sure, he'd tried to stop her, tried to get her off the stuff, but once he failed, he went on sending his boys out with the stuff even after he knew what the scratch would do. My hands kept shaking.

She had a different memory of it. "He kept looking for ways to cure me. He didn't want to understand that it was too late. The changes are almost over now. I can feel it," she whispered, voice like scales over stones. I shuddered as she stood up but I kept looking at the ground. In my heart of hearts, I wished she had really died before I'd seen what she looked like now, and I wasn't very proud of that.

"Thanks for telling me. Goodbye, Dash." She took off so fast I wondered if the lumps on her shoulders really were wings, spreading out behind her through slits in the blue coat. I didn't look up to find out. There are some things you just don't want to see. For the first time, I stopped to wonder if Fortune was a little better than me. He'd stuck around, watching her change into a monster, maybe even trying to fix it. I couldn't even look at her without my guts churning.

I sat there another minute, shivering against the bench, then I dragged myself to my feet and headed for the alleys. There was an old sparktag flickering its broken-bulbed message at the second one I walked past. A Kru'ush Magir blinked crookedly down to light my way, most of the bulbs in its antenna and faceted eyes broken.

Based on what the Fat Man told me, they found Fortune in one of these. I guessed that it was the one with the electriline silhouette of a body on the brick. I figured that this was far as the D. Force boys would go. If it wasn't an alien menace or a dead Committee stooge, they didn't pay much attention. Good thing for my racket, anyway, as long as we didn't make enough noise to draw attention to ourselves. I walked carefully around the crime scene markers and started skirting the disposals that lined the walls. There was nobody else around. I wondered what it was like at night and what the hell Fortune was doing here without muscle.

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There was little shining spot under the corner of one disposal. I reached down to pick it up. It turned out to be a string of beads from an earring. More shimmers. Fortune was up to his neck in femmes from the look of it. I wondered for a minute if Leandra had iced him herself, then gave up that thought. It wasn't her. I'd seen her look at him before she'd changed. I kicked the disposal hard, then stuck the beads in my pocket with the other shimmer and poked around some more.

Nothing much turned up. A no-nic cig butt, Randall's Quality, "All of the kicks, none of the risks," like the tag says, showed up on the other side of the alley behind another disposal. Everybody from the Fat Man to Greta smoked them so I decided to leave it there. Damn clean alley. Just a little dried blood and an outline to show that it wasn't always this tidy.

I hunched my shoulders as the wind picked up and I headed out toward the streetcar stop. Time to meet Greta and get a drink. Even the little bushes that lined the street looked depressed. The car showed up and I sat and made Greta slowly push Leandra out of my head. It took awhile. Hell, it felt like years.

Greta'd be coming over from Studio Row. That was where they made the vids that they sold off planet, not the ones we went to every Friday. The off planet vids were in color and had more skin and blood in them. Big market for that kind of thing in the Leo II worlds. I'd been a walk-on in a few of them, something I did when business was slow. That was how I'd met her. After that, I just got lucky.

I got off the car near Sally's. The more I thought about Leandra, the more I needed a drink. Greta would check here for me when she got off the set anyway. The bug eyes and fuzzy antennae of Kru'ush Magir leered down at me from every corner. I wondered if they really looked like that and I flipped a pebble at one. It didn't help any.

The bar was a squat preconstruct wedged in between two warehouses. The plastocon bricks made it look like an Old Earth gas station, minus the windows. Nothing to tell what it was but the little golden lion on the wooden door. Those who needed to know what it meant found the place and the D. Forces left it alone most of the time. I hoped it was one of Sally's good nights. She paid plenty for them.

Vera the bouncer grinned down at me when I came in. "Howya doin', Dash?" I dodged a hearty backslap that would have staggered me and gave her my best fake grin. The one that said "my ex turned into a monster and I can't do anything about it." Her big eyes looked back, mournful now as she gave me her best shot at doggy sympathy. I headed toward the bar.

The place wasn't too crowded yet, and Sally, the queen of my dreams, was tending bar. The rainbow gleam of her dress flashed as the light from the open door caught it, almost blinding

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me. When I squinted against the glow, I could see from the makeup that we were Judy again tonight. Good. I wasn't up to Bette.

Her long face lit up with a grin until I got closer. "Hey handsome. Oops, deary, I know that look. Business not so good?" I nodded, not ready to talk about Lee. She silently poured me a gin and patted my hand while I downed the drink with the other. It had the acrid aftertaste of old zinc, like the tub out back where it was made.

Sally poured me another, then took off to wait on the boys at the end of the bar, barely wobbling on her new heels as she went. The dim lights danced over the silver glitter that coated them like they were sprinkled with pixie dust. I toasted her with my second glass and stuck a hand in my pocket for the shimmers.

There was something familiar about the earring, but right now I couldn't think what it was. I put it and the pin on the bar in front of me and just looked at them for awhile. Maybe the Fat Man iced Fortune. Maybe somebody else did. Maybe Fortune was onto a cure for the scratch. Hell, maybe he was just kidding around. I downed my drink and thought about the Fat Man and Fortune, Fortune and Leandra, Leandra and the scratch. A piece fell into place. It worked if the Buggies were real. Or if Fortune thought they were.

Now I wondered if my cousin had seen who he was doing business with. Were they real Buggies or just muscle in funny costumes courtesy of the Committee? I flipped the pin over and looked at the transmitter on the other side. How the hell did he contact them? Or why pick him, if it was the other way around? My thoughts chased their tails all over the bar but didn't catch them.

Instead I got depressed staring at my reflection in the mirror over the bar. After my third gin, I decided that I didn't look too bad for a guy. Big jaw and smallish blue eyes, solid shoulders, no hips to speak of and breasts tiny enough to bind down almost flat under my Dad's old suits.

I wondered sometimes if he had known what he was doing, bringing me up as a boy. Probably. Even soused, he had been pretty clear. Someone had to follow in his footsteps and it wasn't going to be my sisters. Mom died before she could object so that was that. Most of the time, I could take living this particular lie but every now and then it caught up with me.

Maybe—I hated it when this occurred to me—Lee wouldn't have dumped me if I was a real guy. Maybe I should reconsider the options. I weighed the black market operation against getting my records changed and being even somewhat indebted to the Fat Man. A couple of hours went by while I wallowed. No Greta. No answers to tonight's thousand credit questions, either. Sally switched me over to juice after my fourth gin. Said I'd just brood if she didn't. Not

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for the first time, I thought it was a pity she wasn't my type. I could do with someone taking care of me and Greta wasn't that girl. But then, Lee hadn't been either.

Every time Greta stood me up like this, I figured she'd had it and she was moving on for someone who could do more for her. Just like Lee had. I hated that feeling. Maybe she was just working late. That's what she'd tell me when she showed up, no matter what the real story was. So I ate greasy canned meat with Vera, and played some eight ball until I couldn't take it anymore. I blew a kiss to Sally and headed out for home. Damn Greta anyway.

The old dump was only a mile or so away so I decided to walk off my mood. I stuck my hands in my pockets and pulled my hat down against the night wind and snarled every time I thought about femmes, past and present. Even the goons outside the Rialto avoided me, so I knew the tough guy routine was working.

It worked so well, I didn't hear them coming. One good shove and I smacked up against the brick wall of the alleyway, hard. "Where's the Buggy, alien lover?" The fist that hit me in the eye made everything go black for a minute. I figured they weren't waiting for an answer. A few more slugs like the first and I hit the ground, curled up in a ball. I was trying to get my fingers inside my jacket for the raygun when the first kick caught me in the ribs.

Then the head. I went down for the count. When I woke up, I was still in the alley and it was a little before dawn. A cold rain drizzled down my nose and it hurt like hell. Probably broken. Goody. Just what I needed. I sat up slowly and the alley walls looped around in a big circle. I closed my eyes, then opened them again a few minutes later. Everything stopped moving.

So did I. I just leaned up against the wall and got wet for awhile. When I tried moving again, it all still hurt but nothing was spinning. I dragged myself up on the brick and staggered home, which luckily for me, wasn't that far away. I limped up the steps and into my apartment. Or at least as far as the open door. I stuck a hand in my jacket for my gun. It was gone. Damn. I drew a deep breath and slammed the door open with my foot.

It banged against the wall and Mrs. McCreedy on the other side banged back, but that was about it. I inched inside and hit the lights. They came on and showed the world that I wasn't much of a housekeeper. Even so, I could see the place had been tossed and pretty thoroughly at that. I checked out both rooms and the closet. Nothing and no one.

Every rib howled for a glass of Sally's gin. I needed some answers but I needed to be able to move my right arm without screaming first. The bath came first. It helped but not as much as I thought it should have. Neither did breakfast. Then I checked my pockets. My raygun wasn't the only thing missing, it turned out. The Fat Man's shimmer was gone, too. It didn't take an Einstein to figure out that it was what they were after. I had a dim memory of the goons yelling

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something about a 'Buggy.' What Buggy? And why did they think I was on speaking terms with one?

Somehow, they'd missed the earring. I pulled it out and looked at it. I realized that I was starting to believe in the Kru'ush Magir and that was a first. Up until now, I always thought a healthy skepticism was the best policy. But right now it sure seemed like other people believed in them, at least enough to beat the tar out of me.

I opened my desk drawer and took out some old photos of Lee, more to remind myself of what she looked like before the scratch than anything else. Okay, who am I kidding? I just liked looking at her the way she was. I couldn't help noticing that she didn't favor this kind of shimmer. I stared at them for a few more minutes, then I made myself put them away before I got too down. I tried not to wonder if she still had ears.

I glanced at the photo of Greta on my desk. It took a minute. I took the bag of ice off my nose for a better look. My brain couldn't wrap itself around what I was seeing. I kept looking anyway but it didn't get any better. Maybe every femme in town had shimmers like this and I just hadn't noticed. Maybe Fortune had an ear pierced since I saw him last.

Maybe I was just kidding myself. Maybe I had been for the last three months. I tried to remember if she'd met Fortune when I'd been around but I wasn't getting a picture on that. I thought about how bad she wanted to be Femme Fatale and about how fast she'd come up through the ranks. I'd thought it was talent and looks but now I was starting to wonder. Why would a vid star want to go out with me, anyway?

I took the ice off my nose again. The swelling had gone down, but I was going to have a lovely shiner. The part of my brain that wasn't weeping like a baby started planning. If nothing else, I needed to replace my gun so I called my regular guy. He was all out so he recommended someone else. Johnny the shoeshine guy would be glad to oblige me. At least now I knew how he paid for the dental job. By the time I had my piece, the sun was sinking low and the two little moons, Bogie and Lorre, were starting to rise over the horizon.

I wanted to walk but there was no way my ribs were going to let me get by with that. I hopped on a streetcar and headed for the right side of the tracks and Greta's big gray house. My wingtips clicked against the concrete as I walked up the driveway and opened the gate. Looking up at the place, I could see a light on in her room.

My new raygun made a comforting lump against the few ribs that didn't hurt. I wondered how I was going to ask her about Fortune. Then I wondered about the Fat Man. There was no way he wasn't in on this. Why else would he bring me into it? I knew Fortune, I knew about the scratch and I knew...Lee. Lee who'd changed more than any scratch junky I'd ever seen and lived longer.

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I decided I'd go ask. If I was right, Greta had to be working for the Fat Man. Nothing else made sense. I wondered if he was up there waiting for me, with Barney and some of his other thugs. I made myself head up the drive breathing in the stink of a setup every step of the way.

When I got to the front door, I had a little surprise. It was open. I was inside with my raygun out within two breaths. The hall was dark, and something crunched underfoot. My pulse started a quick dance tempo. I put my back to the wall and stepped lightly around the corner into the parlor. From here, I could see the bedroom light shining down the stairs.

I crept along watching the shadows. Nothing moved. Sidling up to the stairs, I started climbing, one foot after the other, not a thought in my head. Just fear, pure and simple. The bedroom was a wreck, drawers dumped, jewelry and facepaint everywhere, but that was it. The body I thought I'd see wasn't there but someone had sure packed in a hurry. My heartbeat went from a foxtrot to a waltz. All right, maybe a tango. But if she wasn't here, where was she?

I looked around some more. A gleam on the floor caught my eye. I shoved the blanket aside and found the Fat Man's shimmer, the one that the boys in the alley had taken off me. What the hell was it doing here?

All of a sudden, I wasn't sure I wanted to know. I stuck the pin in my pocket and listened to my gut. I decided to believe that Greta was safe with the Fat Man. Then I decided to leave by the fire escape and worry about it all from a few blocks away.

The beam that caught my hand on the railing wasn't set for low burn. My skin blistered as I yanked it back and rolled forward down the metal stairs, grabbed the railing at the bottom with my good hand, and jumped over it into the bushes. The shrubs were crisped behind me as I scrambled along the side of the house, aiming for the shadows and the trees out front.

I doubled around to the front of the house and the firepower got turned off. There was no good way to outrun them from here so I hunkered down to wait and listen to my hand scream. The handlights they carried flashed on the leaves in front of me so I stayed low. My good thumb found the high setting on my raygun, and clicked it on. A brief whisper told me that they were coming. I clutched the gun and tried not to think about much of anything.

Right about then, my new friends got to the front of the house. There were four of them, led by my old pal Barney. I almost expected one of the others to be Johnny the shoeshine guy. It was that kind of night. But no, the rest were just high class muscle.

If I got out of here, Fatso and I were going to chat. When I got out of here. Something twitched in my pocket and I pulled out the shimmer with my bad hand, gritting my teeth against the scrape of wool on burned skin. The little lights were flashing at me. I swallowed a curse and tried not to think about whether or not I'd signaled for backup and who might be receiving it.

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Barney, that clever boy, seemed to think I might have headed out into the trees, never mind that they would have seen me cutting across the lawn. He and two of the goons headed over to the gate. Number four stayed about ten steps in front of me. Time to make my move. I slipped the shimmer back into my pocket. Nothing I could do about it now. I angled around a bush for a clear shot and hit him on heavy stun. Me and my soft heart.

I made it as far as the backyard when I heard a kind of crackling sound off to my right, between me and the bad guys. The blast of scorching air hit me hard, and the yells from behind me told me I wasn't the only one. A blast of raygun fire hit the hot spot and the air fired back with a reddish gold flame, not blue-white like our guns. My backup had arrived.

I started shaking but I kept moving. If I stayed, either the thugs or whatever was in that hot spot were going to get me. Just then I didn't need to know for sure whether the Kru'ush Magir looked like a sparktag or not.

A doorway shot open in the air. Another red gold flame flashed out and I could hear a scream at the other end of the lawn. I stopped moving and held my hands up. That was when she walked out, big leathery wings flowing behind her like something out of an Old Earth hell. This time, she didn't bother with a veil and her feet looked the same as the ones on her pals standing behind her. She glided over the grass until she came closer than I liked.

"Hello, Dash." I could hear her hiss around the "s."

I looked up into those big brown eyes under the thick ridges of her new face. "Hi, Lee." She didn't look much like a sparktag. It made it all worse, somehow; it would have been easier if she looked more like a Buggy. Or more like an enemy, I suppose. I made myself ask the obvious question. "So, are you going to tell me what all this is about?"

"You already know, don't you Dash?"

"Humor me."

"The first Committee needed something to keep itself in power after the Plague hit and things were falling apart. They thought up the Kru'ush Magir. But after a while, an imaginary enemy wasn't good enough. People were starting to ask too many questions and our Founding Committee members couldn't have that."

"So they thought up the scratch and just rounded up the junkies when they started to change. That's why only the Defense boys ever saw one. And why they could never seem to shut down the trade." I added, lowering my arms. She didn't seem likely to shoot me just now.

"Yesss. Fortune figured it out and helped some of us hide until we got stronger and completed the change. He tried to distract the Fat Man while we broke into the D. Force's stock

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and stole what we needed to keep hiding. That's what got him killed." She looked almost weepy. "It's not over yet, Dash. Things have changed and we have you and your little Greta to thank for it. If she hadn't iced Fortune and you hadn't led them right to me at the market yesterday, we might have stayed in the shadows. But my friends had to come for me. No more hiding for us after that."

I must have looked surprised. Those cold brown eyes took me in for a minute. "Yes, honey. Greta. You always thought she'd do anything to be Femme Fatale and you were right."

"So where is she now?" I tried not to sound too anxious, or too used.

She made a movement that looked like a shrug. "She got what wanted, at least for now. She's probably back at Committee Headquarters making her report." It was like a blow to the gut. Why me? I wasn't a bad guy, not for a femme anyway.

Her raspy voice picked up again. "For the moment, I've got more important things to worry about. We'll take over distribution of the scratch ourselves and decide who joins us from now on. When this war is over, we'll run this world." She looked as if she was waiting to see if I wanted to join the winning side but my face must have spoken for itself. She extended a claw in my general vicinity.

I reached into my pocket without a word and handed over the shimmer, being careful not to touch her scales. She took it, then grabbed my burned hand and flipped it over. Without a word, she ran a long, slightly forked tongue over it. I jerked away, feeling sick, but my skin lost its angry red glow and the blisters disappeared.

She looked me over for a minute and I knew I'd been given up as a loss. Ouch. "Goodbye, Dash." She turned to walk back to her buddies. There were more of them than I had noticed at first. Not quite an army, but a definite start.

A sudden raygun blast broke up our little party and she knocked me flying out of its range. My head hit a rock in the grass. I'll never know if she looked back before she disappeared.

When I came to awhile later, my head hurt like hell and goon ashes were blowing across the grass. I knew had to get the hell away from here before anyone showed up to ask questions. The war would catch up with me sooner or later anyway whether I wanted it to or not. None of us would be able to stay out of it if we stayed on Falcon, not if I knew the Committee. Dragging myself to my feet, I wobbled toward the back gate that I had started for in the beginning.

Once outside on the street, I aimed for Sally's and just kept on walking. I looked at the ground so I didn't have to see the D. Force's version of the Buggies staring down at me. The Fat Man and Greta could wait until tomorrow; I knew where to find them.

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If I got lucky tonight, maybe I'd meet a new femme at the bar, a nice ordinary one. Maybe we could get together before the war came home. That'd be nice. A guy like me likes to have a femme to think about when she's at the front. I shivered and walked faster.

Catherine Lundoff lives in Minneapolis with her terrific girlfriend and a very small herd of cats. She's a computer geek by day and writer by night. Her writings have appeared in a number of anthologies, including *Such a Pretty Face*, *A Taste of Midnight*, *Cherished Blood*, *Erotic Travel Tales II*, *Shameless*, *Below the Belt*, *Zaftig*, *Best Lesbian Erotica 1999 and 2001*, *Electric and Electric 2* and *Looking Queer: GLBT Body Image and Identity*.

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THE TWICE A WEEK SERIAL E-ZINE

The Shadow Men

Stephen M. Dare

The first line of **The Shadow Men** actually happened to me and my wife one night we were out walking in our town. I saw the lone man heading out of town on the railroad tracks in the same way depicted in the story. I wondered then about a strange legend in a town—a warning about taking the tracks out of town at night. The next day I sat down to write with this image still burned into me. A story developed, and several revisions later I had it.

We saw the railroad tracks that night in early June, but it was my wife who saw him first. She tensed up, and I think I was in mid-sentence before she put the squeeze to my hand, enough for me to divert my attention from my ramblings and on to the man on the tracks. It was a little scary at first, and it startled me because I was not used to seeing anyone walking the tracks, especially after dark. I had never really questioned why the people I knew frowned on such an act, and I think that people were a lot like me in that they didn't know a whole lot about walking the tracks. It was just something that had been passed down through a few generations and probably something most high school kids thought they knew a lot about, what with the stories and legends that cycle around town. I had once entered into a conversation with some of the town's other businessmen on a night out at the Prairie Winds and they bluntly told me that you just don't ask about walking the tracks. They put it to me that the tracks on that end of town—heading past Hancock's fertilizer plant and Cal Carson's lumber company before descending the hill out of town, and walled in on either side by trees and the outlying country—were "no good"; talking about them was somehow even worse.

So I quit talking when I saw the man pass the Cedar Street crossing—the last crossing before the tracks left Nodden for good—and we just kept walking. I didn't say anything to my wife then, but I thought the guy looked like Eli Shanks. As I said, I didn't mention anything and neither did my wife, perhaps in fear of waking some hidden superstition about those tracks. But I remember hearing somewhere that Shanks had been kicked out of his house on McKinstry Street last year when his drinking became too much for his wife and kids to bear. And I had heard also that he had lost his job at Blazon's Welding over in Oak Grove in March. He had lived in the government subsidized apartments on Cherry Street when we saw him on the tracks. It was dark, but I could see that he was moving with the kind of light clumsiness that can only be the effect of drinking. He hadn't noticed us, or if he had, he didn't reveal it. He just kept going, and I hadn't thought much of it, except that a few of the townspeople and the men I drank with would have had a fit that I just let him go.

I kept pretty busy during the day, so I didn't give much thought to Eli Shanks the rest of that week or for much of the next. I ran a real estate business from my office across the street

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from the Methodist Church and next to Jack Davies's barbershop where a lot of old farmers do their gossiping. Business for me was modest, not good most of the time, but I did well enough to support my family and the family of my assistant, Ben Covers. I went to work at eight and came home at four-thirty, and when I went to lunch one afternoon with Ben at McCarson's Café, I heard the train come through as it always did, bringing in commerce out of ADM in Decatur. Working at my desk, I heard it again at three that afternoon, this time headed southwest, and again I didn't think of anything but normalcy and only the kind that is set according to the clock. That was the way I liked it, and in that way, I fit in quite well with my neighbors and clients.

But when I went to the grocery store one afternoon and was standing in line with a gallon of milk and a loaf of Sunbeam bread, I spotted on the bulletin board near the video section a five-by-seven purple flier with a picture of Eli Shanks on it. After buying the milk and bread I stopped at the board and studied the flier, my heart beginning to race. It was a missing persons notice, and as I studied it, I felt a weight wash over me. Eli Shanks, the flier reported, had last been seen at the Prairie Winds at a quarter to ten on June eighth when he had left in a stumble. There was a short description of him as well and a blurry black-and-white photo of him as he relaxed on a couch. I saw a phone number at the bottom of the sheet, but I didn't take it down - not there, not at the store in plain view of the very people I did business with.

I went back to the office and tried to get some work done, but the image of the man I thought was Eli Shanks on the tracks that night kept coming to me, and a couple of times I asked myself why I hadn't stopped him. But I think I was getting ahead of myself already. It could have been that he had just kept walking on through the night, maybe hoping to get through the expanse of fields and forests until he came to Eden, the next town over. Maybe he had just wanted to leave not just Nodden, but everything in it he had known: the people who saw him lose his marriage and kids and job and who saw him take to the bottle and the poor houses on Cherry Street. His married life could not have been easy either. I knew Teresa Shanks and knew how closed-mindedly absolute she could be. When she thought of something, she said it without regard to whom she said it. With her, there were laws and there were laws: things were simply the way they were and nothing would or could be changed. I knew I couldn't live with that kind of person. I would have turned to the bottle just as well, and if that hadn't worked I too would have probably headed out to the tracks.

But still that didn't do it for me. It seemed that Eli Shanks had known something I hadn't: that if he went out on those tracks that night, that he would never return—not because he didn't want to, but because he wouldn't be allowed. He may have known that whatever it was about those tracks was more than a superstition, perhaps something anchored in pure, black fear.

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Full of alcohol and believing he had nothing left to lose, he might have thought that it was time to search out that fear, to go face it, to call its bluff. And there might *have* been something out there because he never returned to our town. And my wife and I had seen him heading out that way and had done nothing to stop him, just as you would stop someone from committing suicide.

So it hit me that afternoon as I came back to the office and tried to work. It hit me like a festering regret that has had time to accumulate more and more pain and remorse, something that cannot ever leave you. I saw Ben come in and thought about asking him what he knew, but Ben, like my wife and everyone else, regarded the taboo as a second religion. You just didn't say anything. Besides, Eli Shanks had been a relation of his. Eli Shanks had been more than that to me—he had meant more to me as a memory than he had when I saw him around town.

I went home that afternoon disturbed and alert and quiet.

It rained that night, a cold, dark rain that came in heavy drifting sheets of water at first then dropped to a constant freezing drizzle, a strange effect for June. I didn't do anything more than sit in front of the TV watching the WB with our two teenage daughters while my wife paid bills and then went to cross-stitching a pattern she had been working on for the past six months.

When I'd had enough of TV, I went to bed and that was when I heard the wind come in droning and loud and cold, a late spring wind with winter still wrapped up in it. The wind came up against the windows in our bedroom, bringing patterings of rain and other meaningless debris. I lay in bed, the sheets pulled up to my chin and stared at the window nearest me, watched the shadows of the bushes on our property whip back and forth, creating shadows to play on the shades and the walls.

I dozed twice early in the night, the kind of sleep that is thin and veiled and worthless. The first time I dozed, I snapped awake, the feeling that I was falling coursing through my body, and I was relieved that nothing was wrong. The second time I dozed, I bolted awake, my heart in my throat, and I knew that something was wrong, not with me or with my wife sleeping beside me, but with everything else around me. The wind had picked up to an even greater speed and the rain, so far as I could tell, had quit its descent. There was still water blowing from the trees and bushes onto the windows in intervals as the wind gusted.

I lay in bed, watching the window by the bed quake in the sill with the night wind, the bushes whipping so forcefully that they slapped against the glass. I pulled the sheets away from me and got up, the darkness of the room swallowing me, my eyes seeing nothing but the illuminated window. Going to it, I pushed apart the shades and tried to look into the night, into

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the wrongness of everything, and it was there that I imagined something—*something*, like a person—standing in the tree line at the edge of our property. The trees waved in the wind and threw water and light over the yard and the thing was there and then not there in the silent lightning that scarred the skies. It looked like a man, but hidden in the shadows, standing and looking in that flashing light, up into the blowing trees. The wind took the leafy branches mercilessly, twisting them and forcing a shudder into them—it was nature, and it was violent and yet somehow beautiful and mesmerizing.

The shadow-man watched them in the wind.

The wind shifted after a few moments, taking the branches low and obscured the shadow-man, and when they came back up he was gone, but he had been there all the time, and there he would be for the rest of the night.

Suddenly cold and shivering, I went back to bed and could not sleep, the figure of Eli Shanks burned into me, refusing to die.

Going to work after that night was difficult. I got up and did my morning ritual, coming to breakfast and shaving and showering, but it was no longer easy for me. My mind kept returning to that shadow-man, alone and rigid in the night wind beneath the trees. While I was at breakfast, I would be eating at the kitchen table with my daughters, and then I would see the window to the backyard, and I would think about him. Or while I was before the mirror I would see myself and my shaving cream and razor and then the long descending tracks would come at me, sparkling like permanent white lightning in the moon. Even worse, I would look out the bedroom window, and the summer wind through the trees would recreate the shadow-man, not anywhere on the ground, but now up in the trees and never obviously visible, but camouflaged: a part of the trees, but nothing more. And when I was at work I would be stacking papers and reading and signing forms, and I would be at the tracks or at the window again, and I would never again get as much done as I wanted, which would draw the attention of Ben who only asked minimal questions. But there I would be: looking down the tracks where no one who had any sense dared to walk, especially after dark. And those tracks would shine back at me and move on and twist ever so slightly to the left, and, amid their diamond-like sparkles and odd straightness, they would vanish behind the angle of the trees around them, and I wouldn't think of anyone but Eli Shanks and where he was and then of where I was, and I would feel a pang of nervousness bounce through me. My heart would rise, and I would take a deep breath, and I would tell myself that everything was okay, that all things were the way they were meant to be and that I was where I was because it was "God's calling," like I had heard so many times at my wife's church. I would tell myself that everything, even the tracks, fit into that business.

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And I would relax, and everything in me would settle, and I would rest again and try to live the life I had, even if it was a life of middle-class, small town things-are-the-way-they-are-because-they-are boredom. And that should have been okay with me.

But I was kinked up. Just because some people say there is this "natural order" does not kill the curiosity or the unrest about whatever refuses to fit into that order. TV and dinner and working at my desk could not exist as a veil anymore because now something penetrated that veil, came through it like a clear, bright light and not fighting either, not saying anything aloud, but certainly not reassuring. Everything it had for me was enough to puncture and collapse the veil, to render it unable to function, and I soon became depressed, fighting myself and my habits, my paycheck and the taxes that came out of it, my children and their teenage MTV and WB fantasies. I fought work, and I fought boredom, and I fought everything that had been born of that order. My wife was not amused with this change in me, and I can't blame her. I became nearly impossible to live with.

It did not surprise me that the disappearance of Eli Shanks had been forgotten in our town. The missing persons sign at the grocery store came down in a couple of weeks, and the guys I saw at Rotary never said another thing about it, keeping their eyes forward at a guest speaker or away from one another and down. Even the fellows I saw at the Prairie Winds never said anything else, and if I mentioned it over a Jack and Coke, I was ignored. But that was nothing new for me by then. Nodden folks had had enough of Eli Shanks, and certainly the people at the Winds didn't mind his vanishing. But it was on one of the Jack and Coke occasions that Jeff Carls, an unusually unhappy guy who worked with investments at the Minier Bank by the laundromat, mentioned to me that if I wanted to know about those tracks and what happened to the drunkard Eli Shanks, I should take to the tracks myself and leave them alone about it. I asked him what was so special about those tracks and about what happened when they were walked at night, and he offered that I walk them in the daylight, as he had when he was in high school. I countered with something about a drug-induced stupor, and he waved that off with, "You'll see," and he said no more about it. When I pushed it, fueled by the Jack Daniel's, he merely repeated: "You'll see."

"What will I see?" I asked.

"You'll see more than you ever could imagine," was his reply, and that was all he offered.

After that, I was haunted. That haunting came through and touched everything in my life, draining me, and there was no more that I could do, not even drown myself in alcohol, to divert its strange mission to pull my attention from all else.

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I awoke in late June on a Saturday morning, the entire house still except for the singing and serenading of the birds in our foliage outside. The light crept in and was silent, not loud, direct sunlight, but the soft, silent light of the rising sun. I lay in bed, my wife at my shoulder, and after a few minutes, the light sound of the Illinois Central came through, its whistle a long, struggling distance away as the great machine made its way from Decatur and Lincoln, through Oak Grove and eventually through Nodden. There was nothing new to me about hearing this except that this time I felt a pull come up in me, a vague sense that seemed to throb from the tracks. It was a new feeling, a clear calling—a beckoning to rise and walk out of the house and onto Cedar and to the tracks and move through the daylight and into a kind of discovery. *A self-discovery*, I thought as I dressed, though I really didn't know anything about such a thing. I believed that there would be nothing for me out there but steel rails and heavy white railroad rock and ties and the occasional trestle. Logically, realistically, I knew there would be nothing more for me out there. But I felt that strange throbbing pull, and I *had* to go to see those tracks in the country as they coursed over the land under the summer sky. I wanted to smell the morning air of tar and field dew and to hear the moving water beneath the trestles. That would be there for me and I could see it, and I could see the last path of Eli Shanks and of however many others before him: "You'll see more than you could ever imagine."

I went out at seven without a word to my wife and without any coffee—the beckoning pull had me wide-awake, alert and ready. I did take along a white plastic bottle filled with iced water and was glad I did, for once I crossed the intersections of Dickey and Cedar, I was sweating, the smothering heat of summer crushing me. I kept moving though and crossed three more intersections and saw only two people—John Baird with his truck and construction trailer and a grain truck hauling corn to the elevator. I gave a short wave to both drivers, doing my best to appear a townsman out for a quick summer morning walk with his water bottle. I didn't want people to know I was headed to the tracks. I had only seen a few kids on them during my time in Nodden, and that had been in town where the tracks ran across a few open grassy lots through the center of town. Their cutting through the middle of town made it more convenient to get to certain houses and streets along the tracks. But the convenience they offered didn't erase the legend they carried. So I was a little worried at the appearance and intention I projected, though not enough to deter my progression, and when I got to the intersection of McKinstry and Cedar, their aroma of melting tar and wood and industry loomed up gradually and with a sinister quietness. I kept moving and got to the crossing, stepping over the rail and onto the tar-blackened wood, taking in the smell of the railroad, of nineteenth century bravery and progressive romanticism and, without hesitation or pondering, went right, the forbidden way. My feet settled onto the heavy ties and kicked rocks on occasion, and my

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ears picked up the chirping of the songbirds all around me in the trees along each side of the tracks. I kept my course for close to fifty feet and looked back at the crossing and was amazed at how close it still was, and already I felt winded somehow. It was like an illusion—I would turn to face forward and west and walk like I had been doing and continue like that for a good while, and then I would look back and the crossing would appear close, perhaps one hundred feet away when it felt like I'd gone a thousand. I came to shiver once and told myself to quit, that there was no reason to shiver, as if I shivered with fear. I didn't want to dramatize anything. But the spatial concern grew on me, became a part of the tracks and trees, and I kept looking back at the crossing where it appeared to only gradually seep away.

The trees were odd too, and when I looked at them I saw how they crossed and became identical to one another in a way, and I saw how several started to appear bent as if by some obscure force of nature. Where the trunks were straight, the limbs and branches curved at god-awful angles, twisting and diving for the earth or clawing at the sky and other trees. And where the limbs seemed normal, the trunks were wry and angled, bent and hooked. They only gradually got like that, and soon such a feature became the norm, and the trees got so thick and disturbed that I could no longer see through them to the outlying fields and waterways. It was as if they all came together to join each other, to seal off the tracks and rocks from everything else in the world, to squeeze out everything but the train. And as I walked I felt oddly unwanted somehow, as if time and space had conjoined to force the idea to intruders that their presence was ugly and intolerable. If they were working together to create that message, was I being foolish by continuing my trek? Could the foliage squeeze in so tight at one long stretch so as to allow the intruder no escape from an oncoming train? Indeed that seemed ridiculous; the railroad had to have space on either side of the tracks, not for walkers as it is illegal to walk the tracks of course, but for storage of ties and a few scarcely placed rails and pins.

Certainly that purpose could not have been the case as the trees began to come apart from one another and to show the space of light and landscape through them. I had gone some distance by then, far enough to lose sight of the crossing as it disappeared behind the curve of the tracks. I was well into the country and could see the fields of beans and corn and a few scattered farmhouses. A breeze even started to grow and brushed through the spaced trees and rustled the country grass in my sight. I watched it come through the corn and the wheat, producing stunning patterns of disturbance, and I slowed my pace, coming to enjoy the experience, the morning and the railroad. And with that strange enjoyment I also sensed a familiar feeling of loneliness and abandonment, one that crept upon me with the breeze and the new country light. It continued, and then it arced up and up until it became too intense to push away. It made my heart skip, and I felt that new, quick nervousness rise through me, and I

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stopped walking altogether on the tracks, not once thinking of Eli Shanks and that he had come down this way too.

I stopped and breathed, suddenly wanting to cry. The nervousness did not settle, rather it kept at me, rolling in my stomach and lungs and heart, and I slowly came to understand that that loneliness or alienation or depression or whatever it was had nothing to do with it. No: it was more of what created that sadness, what produced it and held and maintained it, whipping it into a frothing and perhaps immortal beast. I shivered then, a great quaking shiver that rose into and through me, and this went into a shudder, and I stood there and thought back to my wife and daughters and the office and Ben Covers and the guys I drank with at the Prairie Winds. I thought of the TV I watched at night, of the girls' softball games, the parties, and church we attended, the car I drove and the lawn I mowed, and how through all of that I breathed and sweated and felt and thought and how that was being alive and that that was all I could expect. That was all I had been told to do by everyone I knew when I was growing up. It was all that was expected of me, and it was all that I was meant to ever do. I had to breathe and I had to rise and suck it all in, all of that resistance I had in me in the past month, all of it had to numb itself out for the sake of everything in my life. It had to go numb. *I* had to go numb. I had to die like I had been dying for so long, since I began to understand my life at adolescence and in college when I recognized that nothing could escape the iron machinery that gave life to the beast. I had to release that breath, and I had to close my eyes, and I had to turn off and die so that my family and I may live. That was life in what otherwise would be considered death.

I thought of Eli Shanks in that moment, but I didn't think of him anymore after that. I found nothing of him either, at least nothing of any physical sense. I found nothing I can reveal to anyone who knows me—my wife, friends, and neighbors. They cannot know what I found and they never will know; it is beyond their comprehension. But I do know that the life that was revealed to me on those tracks came at me in an honest rush of godless wind, no longer breeze or simple air, but wind that coursed over the tracks and through the trees, and it was in that wind that I understood I was not alone, that there is more than steel rails and rocks and ties out there. There is a bending of realization, of consciousness, revealing another side of something, and I know that when that side is visible, one does not want to fight it or resist it or even challenge and attempt to change it. It *can't* be changed. It is there in your face, and it won't move and neither can you, and I think some people could die that way as the trains come quite often in the night.

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Stephen M. Dare taught English at Illinois State University after earning his MA, until becoming a victim of the state's budget cuts. Instead of getting a job he decided to be a stay-at-home dad for his two-year-and-six-month-old, letting his wife Krista work full time as a teacher. In whatever spare time he can drum up, Stephen works on writing and revising his short stories. He is also between revising his first novel and working on a new one.

Robots Have Feelings Too

Jay Richards

Two movies visually inspired this story: **Blade Runner** and **Robocop**.

"Don't screw up again, Unit Thirty-nine!"

Mitchell stood at attention, a cautious lack of expression on his metallic features. Why was Kapitan Schultz using that ancient-Earth speech form?

Mitchell sighed, internally. The sigh could not be detected; he maintained the stolid set of his armored mouth. Twenty-fifth century life had undergone a drastic change since the Fifth Reich had conquered Terra.

Now the Allemands were everywhere in command. Schultz had never liked or trusted him, he knew. Mitchell was a Special Patrol robot, type SP, Mk. IX-E, the modified unit with extended arm span and an additional cooling gill assembly.

"Bring the fugitive in with all possible promptitude, Thirty-nine," said the Kapitan. "The humanoid Worrab and the loot from the Unicredit bank robbery. And make sure that he's alive and in one piece."

Those old similes again. The Kapitan was studying ancient-Earth history for his Spacefleet thesis. "In one piece," indeed! Just because Mitch had atomized those two Pacturans in last month's firefight didn't mean he was phaser-happy.

He swiveled his body, and Schultz inserted the Pursuit laserdisc into the robot's "G"-drive. Mitch gave the regulation Special Patrol salute, and spun an about-face to exit the Command Room. Mitch didn't need the laserdisc data. His Cere-B cells already held that information. He knew the fugitive. Worrab had done him an injury, a grave injury. *Grave* being the operative word.

Worrab was going to have a fatal "accident". Even if Mitch got court-martialed out of the Patrol.

He intuited how the assignment must be handled. Schultz would expect him to follow

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Standard Operating Procedure to apprehend Worrab—but that would be doomed to failure.

The fugitive was too clever.

Mitch stepped onto the moving sidewalk. He thought about Schultz's distrust. Newly assembled, Mitch had been hijacked by Clyde's gang of smugglers. He'd been reprogrammed by Clyde, a software guru, to pilot a Xelian hypercruiser. Humanoids like Clyde had to be tucked into webbed in-flight capsules; they couldn't tolerate the g-forces.

But Mitch could.

He flew missions for the smuggling gang, making Clyde obscenely wealthy in the process. In return, the crime boss further reprogrammed the robot, giving humanoid appetites to Mitch. The two became drinking buddies.

Clyde could ingest huge quantities of merzog. And liquor didn't affect Mitch's silicon-based nervous system. Clyde had even provided the robot with an appreciation of the fair sex, humanoid or otherwise.

Of course, lacking genitalia, Mitch could do little about it.

Unknown to the smugglers, he had the capability to reprogram himself. After he met Stella G., Mitch did just that. Restored his original coordinates. Quit the renegade life. And enlisted in the Special Patrol.

Schultz distrusted him. "Once a smuggler, always a smuggler," the Kapitan had said.

Mitch reached his destination at the spaceport. Leaving the moving sidewalk, he utilized his shoe-jets to levitate to an abandoned hangar in Cheapside, the spaceport's "Poverty Row". The robot used a decoder to actuate the hangar's magnetic locking device. The scanner slid the door open for the robot to quickly enter. He divested himself of his utilitipak and crossed to the digicomp. He fabricated a realistic-looking Special Patrol wanted poster for a fugitive robot, with an identikit picture that resembled himself. He dialed up his favorite snitch, a reptilian Venusian, named Macramé, and astrofaxed him a half-dozen copies of the bogus poster, with instructions on tacking them up. "And don't let anyone see you doing it," Mitch concluded.

The robot swallowed a superlube gelcap and uncapped a bottle of mescaline to wash the capsule down. He settled down to watch a homeparticip show on the videowall. Two mescalines later, Mitch was richer by eighty credits, having defeated an obese hexapod from Pluto.

The robot smiled ruefully. He'd narrowly missed winning the final prize, a thousand credits, on the jumboquestask. The emcee, a grinning humanoid with a leggy blonde as sidekick, had been sympathetic about his near miss.

Mitch clicked off the videowall. A thought struck him, a reminiscence from a shadowy yesterday. Ages past, Clyde grinning, late night in a smoky bar, saying, "Never eat at a place

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called Mom's or play cards with a man named Doc..." There was more to Clyde's advice, but the remainder had slipped Mitch's mind.

He stripped from his Special Patrol uniform and donned a disreputable ripped black outfit, complete with NatiRad cap. The rogue A-car was crouched, waiting, in a corner of the hangar. Mitch slid behind the controls and activated the ignition. The turboram purred into life. Clicking the decoder, he taxied the grimy vehicle through the open door and accelerated into the darkening night. He headed for Bagatelle, the criminal quarter.

That's where he'd told Macramé to place the wanted posters bearing Mitch's pseudo-likeness. By now, every small-time crook in Bagatelle would have seen the bogus Special Patrol notices.

He screeched the A-car to a halt at the first location, vaulted out of the vehicle to rip down the poster, and then sped away. He repeated the charade at the other five locations. Then he parked behind the Blutig Eimer, the seediest, most disreputable dive in Bagatelle.

The Bloody Bucket, dangerous, a real skull garden.

Mitch squeezed through the surly crowd, predominately male. Tall prospectors from Ganymede, burly squat Mercurians, a panorama of ugly sweating bodies. He elbowed his way into a narrow space along the crowded bar, the rolled-up posters protruding from his back pocket. Mitch hitched a foot up onto the brass rail and propped his elbows on the bar's scarred wooden surface.

"What'll it be, pal?" Buddy voice was bored.

The robot straightened up to let the bartender glimpse his face.

"Mitch! Get your head down; they're looking for you." News traveled fast in Bagatelle.

"What're you drinking?"

"Amiz, with a twist," said Mitch.

Buddy smirked. "That stuff will foul your electrodes!" He leaned forward, conspiratorially.

"Take that table in the back corner; it's darker there. I'll bring you the drink."

The robot trudged to the table and waited, head in his hands. He used the time gainfully, reviewing the laserdisc data: Worrab, C.; humanoid, class 2, height 2.05 meters, weight 100.6 kilos, complexion light, barbed wire tattoo on left bicep, approach with caution, considered armed and dangerous.

Buddy brought the drink, amber with evil bubbles popping into gray steam, slid into the seat beside him.

"What's happening, pal?"

Mitch swallowed half the amiz, grimaced as it clutched his throat. "They're after me."

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I've got to get off Terra."

"I heard you ripped off a million-credit payroll, right under the Patrol's nose." (Rumors traveled fast in Bagatelle, the more fantastic the better.)

Mitch's fingers rotated the glass on the dusty table. "Wish I had; I'm stony broke. I broke a chair over Schultz's thick skull."

Buddy clucked sympathetically. "You struck an Allemand? Worse yet."

"He bugged me," the robot growled. He took a cautious sip of amiz. "I've lined up an Altair cruiser at the spaceport. But the tanks are bone dry. I need ten thousand credits to fill them."

The bartender pondered the possibilities. There could be a finder's fee in this. He lit a Chesnik, exhaled smoke thoughtfully. "I might know a guy..."

Buddy sidled away, heading for the pay phone. He could be calling a fugitive who'd robbed a bank for two million credits, and needed to escape from Terra. A fugitive named Worrab. The humanoid who'd done the Unicredit bank heist—and shot Stella G. Her killing gripped Mitch's mind. Stella's dead eyes wakened him in the night, staring, demanding vengeance.

Buddy was back behind the bar, serving thirsty customers. When nobody was looking, he gave a quick thumbs-up signal. Mitch sipped amiz, and practiced his mind block. Worrab was a telepath.

Four jukebox numbers later, the room grew silent—like the deep ocean when a great white shark appears. Mitch sensed the pressure behind him, turned his head slightly, his peripheral vision detecting the gray shape behind his shoulder.

"Should have known the *Bucket* had a back door." Mitch's thumb indicated the vacant chair.

Worrab sat down. "Long time," he said.

The robot nodded, keeping his mind tight against the fugitive's powers. "You can buy the next round. Seeing as you're rich."

Worrab displayed a small grin. "Yeah, rich. But money isn't everything."

"But enough to kill for." Mitch fought to cover the bitterness.

The fugitive raised an eyebrow. "The Unicredit bank guard? Bad scene. I used a stunner, aimed for the fembot's shoulder, the soft muscle—it would have just knocked her down. But she moved; the blast struck her skull, shattered the hard bone. "Sorry."

Mitch stared, fighting to keep his mind blank.

The waitress stood at their table. "Another for my friend," said Worrab. "And I'll have a glass of the same poison."

The waitress having departed, Worrab reached into an inner pocket. Mitch tensed, expecting a weapon. "Relax," the fugitive said. He produced a dark cigarillo, lit it, and blew careful

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smoke to the ceiling. "You were sweet on her."

Love among the ashes. Mitch nodded.

Worrab shrugged. "Sorry again. Shit happens."

The waitress bent over to set down the drinks. Worrab slipped a hundred-credit bill between her breasts. She sashayed away, a boogie-woogie wiggle in her walk.

The fugitive said, "I heard about your cruiser. A space trip would be healthy for me."

"I need to fill the tanks. You have credits?"

Worrab's smile grew wider. Money was the least of his problems. He nodded. "In my car. All you'll need to fuel your ship. I'll settle up with Buddy." He drained his drink, moved to the bar. Green bills passed surreptitiously to the bartender.

Success, thought Mitch.

He'd made the fatal mistake of thinking.

The telepath darted for the rear door. Worrab must have surveilled him in the bar mirror.

Mitch raced to the parking lot. A blood-red vehicle roared into life and accelerated away. His A-car was parked a few spaces away. He leapt into the driver's seat, gripping the control column. Firing up the turboram, he whipped the car onto the street. Worrab was already five hundred meters away, speeding without lights, a dull red shadow against the gray night. Mitch accelerated, running on full ram. Worrab sensed his nearness, the futility of running dark. Navlights flicked on. Abruptly, the red vehicle rotated upward, lancing into the night sky.

Mitch had expected that. Worrab's machine had looked like an A-car.

The robot went airborne, his A-car rolling forty-five degrees to follow Worrab's new course. Mitch clung to the fugitive as they accelerated past Mach Two, rocketing through the narrow streets, fifty feet above the ground, twisting between buildings. One minute of this deadly game of tag, two minutes—finally, Worrab's nerve broke and he nosed up into open sky.

Mitch caught the red machine in his radar sight and locked on. He activated the scanner -- it isolated Worrab's frequency and acquired his flight control system. Mitch thumbed the transmitter stick; now he was flying by wire.

Flying Worrab's craft!

On the fugitive's tail, Mitch forced the blood-red machine to decelerate, to descend. As they reached to roof top level, the robot spotted a building ahead.

The Villanuevo Apartments. They'd evicted him for playing his Vivaldi soundiscs too loudly. He grinned. What sport to run Worrab into the Villanuevo at Mach One! Just an unfortunate accident, he could claim. Two birds with one stone. The fugitive disposed of—

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and the Villanuevo left with a gaping hole in its side. He aimed Worrab directly at the building.

At the last moment, he reconsidered.

He decelerated Worrab's machine so the contact was only a not-too-gentle bump, the A-car bouncing back from the impact. It flopped roughly onto the empty lot adjoining the building. Mitch landed beside the damaged vehicle. He walked to the red car. He could see Worrab beneath the clear canopy, stunned and motionless, then starting to move, slowly. Mitch used a keytool to roll the canopy back.

The fugitive turned his head gingerly, met Mitch's gaze. A slow recognition dawned in Worrab's eyes.

"You, again!" he said, grinning through the pain.

Mitch extended his left hand to help the man out of the wrecked vehicle. He took no chances, his right hand on his phaser.

Worrab stood unsteadily on the ground. Mitch used his left hand to frisk him. He plucked a phaser from a shoulder holster. He found a flat handgun tucked in the small of the fugitive's back, a blaster. On an impulse, he ran his fingers around the inside of Worrab's boots and came up with a tiny pistol, a two-shot antique .41-caliber derringer.

"Is that all you're carrying?" the robot asked. He could do sarcastic.

Worrab nodded. "I feel undressed."

"Get the money," said Mitch.

The fugitive moved to his car, opened the rear compartment, and extracted duffle bags bulging with thousand-credit notes. He pointed at the bags.

"Split with you?"

Mitch shook his head, motioned Worrab to carry the loot to the Patrol vehicle. The fugitive shrugged, dragged the bags slowly to the gray A-car. He lifted the loot inside. Mitch pushed the compartment lid down and locked.

The fugitive looked tired. After the crash, the physical labor had exhausted him. Mitch felt a twinge of sympathy, a blast from the past. He held the rear door open, the entry into the barred compartment for prisoners. Mitch gently bent the humanoid's head so it wouldn't bump against the barrier bar.

"In you go, Clyde," he said

Jay Richards works as a technical writer. Years previously, Jay wrote a considerable amount of short fiction. His short stories were published in national magazines. These

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included Pulp magazines like *Mike Shayne's Magazine*, and Playboy knockoffs such as *Escapade*. Now nearing retirement, Jay is restarting his writing of short fiction. He is also working on a novel. Jay and his wife, Elizabeth, live in the San Francisco Bay Area. They are 'empty nesters', their grown children having moved out to pursue their own careers.

Featured Author Interview:

Sarah Ash

Interviewed by Lynne Jamneck

You recently finished the sequel to *The Lord of Snow And Shadows, Book One of The Tears of Artamon*. Is it a relief to have it finished, or is there a lingering sense of disconnectedness after having spent so much time working on it?

Definitely a relief! But because **Prisoner of Ironsea Tower** is the middle volume, I'm lucky that I don't need to feel disconnected from the characters for too long; that third volume is demanding to be written. It feels rather like an interval lull backstage before going on to play the final act.

There are definite Steampunk influences in your work—the combination of elements such as firearms and magic for instance. Whatever happened to this particular style of writing? It never seemed to make the impact it was destined for.

I'm aware of the appearance of Steampunk in fiction for young adults right now: the excellent *Mortal Engines* by Philip Reeve comes to mind, with its vision of London as a Traction City and Tunbridge Wheels, as does the sequence *The Edge Chronicles* by Paul Stewart. Philip Pullman's celebrated trilogy *His Dark Materials* could claim to be metaphysical Steampunk, maybe?

When did you know that you wanted to become a writer? Who have been some of your greatest influences?

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I was twelve when I decided I just had to write a fantasy novel (I'd just read *The Lord of the Rings*). So I just did it. In school exercise books. The idea of planning a story didn't really occur to me, I just let it flow; I wish I had such bravado now! My first attempts at writing were influenced by Alexandre Dumas, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis (apologies to Philip Pullman), E. Nesbit, Rosemary Sutcliff and Alan Garner. Oh, and Shakespeare. We were immersed in Shakespeare at school and I have been very grateful to my English teachers ever since.

Comparative mythology still fascinates me, so I have spent many happy hours delving into the legends and folk tales of the world. I always return to Ursula LeGuin, especially the *Earthsea* sequence (although I am not so happy with parts of 'Tehanu'). I admire Mary Renault for her gift in bringing the distant past so vividly to life—and for her quietly ruthless accuracy in depicting human relationships (the third of the Alexander trilogy *Funeral Games* is particularly chilling in this respect). And for wit, elegance of style and unerringly accurate observations on what makes us all tick, how could I leave out Jane Austen (even though she hated my home city, Bath)?

How do you think the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy will influence the future of Fantasy on film?

Oh, this is difficult to predict! Fantasy on film in the commercial cinema, before Peter Jackson came along, has tended to be regarded as a poor relation of Science Fiction. We've had Arthurian/medieval fantasy with *Excalibur* and *Ladyhawke*. We've had *Conan* and *Red Sonja*. Now it seems that (perhaps in the wake of the success of the *Harry Potter* films) *His Dark Materials* is to be brought to the big screen. CGI has made it possible to portray the 'otherness' of fantasy writing far more convincingly than ever before. There's no doubt in my mind that if you can see the wires or the pixels, the illusion collapses—and the fantasy becomes something debased, a cardboard sham that leaves the audience feeling cheated. But dazzling FX alone can never disguise a thin or weak script or cardboard characters; and fantasy films, like every other genre, will need strong stories, well-told in cinematic terms, to keep the audiences hooked.

Music is a definitive influence in your work. What to you personally is the relationship between sound and the written word?

I often use music to help evoke a mood, or even a specific incident in the story I'm constructing. *Scent of Lilies* was inspired by earthy, raw Bulgarian folk music. When completing *Prisoner of Ironsea Tower*, I was listening to *Sibelius* (a fascinating collection of

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early works called *Rondo of the Waves* put together by Osmo Vanska) and now the two are inextricably associated. At a deeper level though, I believe I strive to shape a story as if I were writing a piece of music. It's to do with form and pace.

And sometimes I play music when I'm writing just to try to block out other distracting sounds going on around me in the house!

Do you think the Internet is having an overall positive or negative effect on how people approach fiction?

Overall, I feel it is having a very positive effect, especially for short fiction. Through online magazines like *Simulacrum* and *Deep Magic* it's possible to reach new readers more directly than through traditional formats (even established fiction magazines like *Interzone* seem to be struggling). *The Alien Online* is an invaluable source of information, news and opinions. Best of all, it's wonderful to be able to communicate directly with like-minded writers and readers from all round the world.

What are you working on right now?

I'm juggling the copy-edit on Book 2 of *The Tears of Artamon* with writing Book 3. This is quite a challenge, but it helps to keep what has happened so far clear in my mind. The memory can play strange tricks! There are people from Book 1 who are demanding to return. I suspect that there's more material here than can be dealt with in one final volume, but the main story issues will be resolved. I promise!

What are your thoughts on the issue of Genre—should we be moving away from the tendency to classify fiction in specific categories?

Some of my favourite novels probably defy specific genre categories; I love Jasper Fforde's *Thursday Next* books, but bookshops are not sure whether to shelve them under general fiction or science fiction. And there seems to have been much discussion about Margaret Atwood's latest novel *Oryx and Crake* which the author strongly denies is science fiction (it was, after all, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize) but genre readers and reviewers have begged to disagree. I only dislike Genre when it is used as a stick to beat us (and Fantasy writers do come in for a great deal of stick!)

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What is it about fantasy that interested you enough to choose to write about it?

I think fantasy chose me! I've always been fascinated by folklore and legends (Alan Garner's influence?) and how we tell stories about ourselves both directly and indirectly through metaphor (as in, for example, the *Mabinogion*). The stories I wanted to write couldn't be told any other way. What intrigued me about *The Tears of Artamon* was contrasting the two rivals at the core of the story: Eugene, the rationalist, who has placed his trust in the power of his military strategy (and some scientifically advanced weaponry), is pitted against Gavril, who can turn into a dark dragon-creature from legends. Reason versus magic.

What would you like your epitaph to read?

I must confess I've never really thought about this—probably because by the time an epitaph would be needed, I wouldn't be around to care what it said!

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Interviewed by Lynne Jamneck

Vital Stats

Age: 53

Country: UK

Training: Hornsey College of Art London

Medium: Oils or Acrylics

Influences: Too many to list

On The Web: www.lesedwards.com

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How long have you been illustrating professionally?

I left Art School in 1972 so that makes it just over 30 years.

How do you explain people advising you (after your studies at Hornsey College of Art) never to become an illustrator?

It was something of an article of faith among the tutors at Hornsey that it was just too difficult to become an illustrator. They said the same thing to everyone. I think a couple of them were failed illustrators and assumed that everyone else would fail too. I was very trusting and assumed that they must be right, after all they were the experts and I knew nothing. It wasn't really until they started to tell me that I couldn't draw that I began to suspect something wasn't quite right. My drawing was about the only thing I had any confidence in. I don't

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mean to say that any of this was done maliciously, it's just that they felt it was easier to become a paste-up monkey or go into teaching.

How did your Horror work come to be described as your 'Red Period'?

It's a joke. Picasso had his Blue Period after all. I can't remember who made the joke first.

What are some of your personal favorite film posters you've designed? Are there any out there you wished you had been asked to do?

My favourite is probably the poster for Clive Barker's *Nightbreed*. I really enjoyed painting that. It would have been nice to have been involved with one of the major blockbusters of course. I always felt I could have done something good with the *Indiana Jones* stuff or a *Terminator* movie but those things tend to get done in the States. I did some roughs for *The Empire Strikes Back* but, obviously, nothing ever came of them. Very few movie posters use illustration now.



In your view, is digital media a threat to conventional illustrating or an asset to the field?

The danger from the digital world is not people using Painter or Photoshop to do illustration, but the easy availability of copyright free images for designers. They can just whip an image off a CD or the net, tweak it in Photoshop and say "Oh goodee! Look, a book jacket." Every time that happens it means an illustrator or photographer doesn't get commissioned. If you want to see the results of that approach just have a look at the Crime shelves in your local bookstore; all the same, indistinguishable and unexciting; generic in the worst sense. I like crime fiction but the covers put me to sleep. Another result of this approach to 'design' is that there is now a generation of designers in place who have never commissioned an illustration and wouldn't know how to go about it even if it occurred to them.

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How did you get involved in illustrating the *Rawhead Rex* and *Son of Celluloid* graphic novels?

I met Clive Barker at a World Fantasy Convention when he was a guest of honour. He was very much a part of the Fantasy 'scene' then, and he was very complimentary about my work, while I did my impression of a tongue-tied, idiot fanboy. Some months went by and I got a phone call from Steve Niles who was adapting *Son of Celluloid* into comic format and who told me that Clive was very keen

for me to illustrate it and had been showing my stuff to the publishers. My immediate reaction was to be a bit wary as I'd never done comic work before, but Steve was very enthusiastic and encouraging and kind of guided me along until I found my feet.



You're a very good friend of the artist Edward Miller, and your work has been influenced by his own, and vice versa. How is that both your styles are so complimentary to the other?

Ed's a very good chum. We've known each other a long time and are always swapping ideas back and forth. I was primarily responsible for his start in illustration; he's very retiring and doesn't get out much.

You've won the British Fantasy Award for Best Artist three times, and have been nominated for a World Fantasy Award. How important is this type of recognition for someone in your field?

I'm up to four BFS awards now. I've just spent nine months as a judge for the World Fantasy Awards and have some insight into just how difficult it is to get nominated, let alone

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win one. The awards are important because they come from the fans and the connoisseurs of the genre, just the people that you're trying to reach, so they're not only great for the ego, but they're an affirmation that you're getting something right. I have to say, though, that I've never known an art director be remotely impressed by the awards.

You're a very well known book-cover illustrator. Where can some of your most recent work be seen?

The thing I've enjoyed most in recent times is the painting I did for the 2004 Terry Pratchett calendar—in your shops now.

Otherwise a brief hunt through the bookshelves is bound to turn up something. I've also been doing some non-genre work which would probably be of less interest to your readers, but which has been good fun for me. Edward Miller has been doing some fine work for PS publishing and for Gollancz in the last year or so.

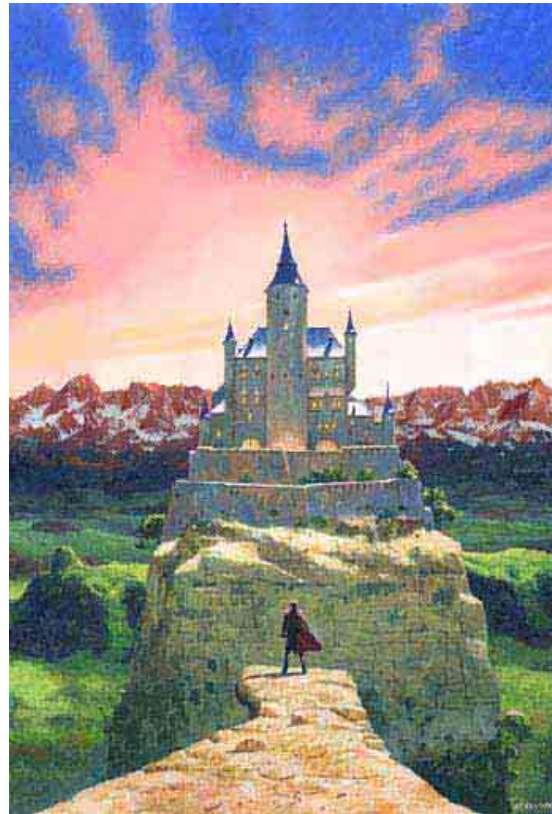
What advice would you give to artists who want to become full-time illustrators?

Be as thoroughly professional as you can.

Be realistic. It can take time to get established. Perhaps give yourself a time limit, say 6 months or a year, and see where you are at the end of that time. Is it worth carrying on, or do you feel you're flogging a dead horse? Be realistic. Can you really compete with the Jim Burns and the Chris Moores of the world or are you kidding yourself?

Parting shot:

The airbrush is the work of the Devil.



H.P Lovecraft

Here's a treat for fans of the ever-popular writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Whilst many of his short fiction titles will be easily recognizable (*At The Mountains of Madness*, *The Dunwich Horror*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, *Under The Pyramids*), his poetry is less well known and appreciated.

Lovecraft created, in theme and content, what is today commonly referred to as 'cosmic horror'. His monsters are of the most primal variety, beyond any common, human sense of understanding, without so much as a speck of care as to what happens to puny Earthfolk.

Interestingly enough—Lovecraft never referred to his creation of works featuring his own personal pantheon of gods by the now famous **Cthulhu Mythos** moniker. Instead, he referred to these works as the 'Arkham Cycle'—probably because Arkham House was the first to publish Lovecraft's work after his death.

His work continues to influence and inspire a multitude of contemporary and new writers. Lovecraft died in 1937 at the age of forty-seven, the words 'I Am Providence' etched on his tombstone.

"The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far."

H.P Lovecraft – 'The Call of Cthulhu'

1928

Editor's Note: My grateful thanks to S.T Joshi and David E. Schultz who graciously supplied the corrected text for *Astrophobos*. Look up S.T Joshi's recent collection of Lovecraft's complete poems *The Ancient Track: Complete Poetical Works* (Night Shade Books 2001)

Astrophobos first appeared in the *United Amateur* 17, Nr. 3 (January 1918)

Astrophobos

H.P Lovecraft

In the midnight heavens burning
 Thro' ethereal deeps afar,
Once I watch'd with restless yearning
 An alluring, aureate star;
Ev'ry eye aloft returning,
 Gleaming nigh the Arctic car.

Mystic waves of beauty blended
 With the gorgeous golden rays;
Phantasies of bliss descended
 In a myrrh'd Elysian haze;
And in lyre-born chords extended
 Harmonies of Lydian lays.

There (thought I) lie scenes of pleasure,
 Where the free and blessed dwell,
And each moment bears a treasure
 Freighted with a lotus-spell,
And there floats a liquid measure
 From the lute of Israfel.

There (I told myself) were shining
 Worlds of happiness unknown,
Peace and Innocence entwining
 By the Crowned Virtue's throne;
Men of light, their thoughts refining
 Purer, fairer, than our own.

Thus I mus'd, when o'er the vision
 Crept a red delirious change;
Hope dissolving to derision,
 Beauty to distortion strange;
Hymnic chords in weird collision,
 Spectral sights in endless range.

Crimson burn'd the star of sadness
 As behind the beams I peer'd;
All was woe that seem'd but gladness
 Ere my gaze with truth was sear'd;
Cacodaemons, mir'd with madness,
 Thro' the fever'd flick'ring leer'd.

Now I know the fiendish fable
 That the golden glitter bore;
Now I shun the spangled sable
 That I watch'd and lov'd before;
But the horror, set and stable,
 Haunts my soul for evermore.

It's Healthy To Scare Yourself!

A look at the psychology behind some of our most treasured fears

By Lynne Jamneck

It's hard to really define what the word 'Horror' means these days, especially when it comes to the written word. With all manner of categories and terms like Slipstream, Dark Fiction and Speculative Fiction (to name but a few) being bandied around, it is no wonder that the genre seems to suffer from a nasty bout of personality disorder.

These days, Horror seems to be much like a Typhoid Mary unto its own, rejected by mainstream readers as non-literary, presumably written by hacks that use the genre as a quick way to get their names into print.

Boy, if only they knew...

For the sake of tradition, let's stick to calling it Horror, and avoid making it feel more ashamed of itself than it already is. Any serious writer of the genre will tell you that it's probably easier to convert the Pope to liberalism than it is to break into the above market. Conventional publishers seem to rebuff the genre, contending that it doesn't sell. They do however still publish it, under various other categories as those mentioned above.

Psychological thriller, supernatural suspense, dark fantasy and even SF have all become substitute children to the genre—a sort of palatable disguise in which horror seems to have found some semblance of respectability.

But what exactly defines Horror?

As Paula Guran stated in an issue of DarkEcho:

'Despite individual preferences and a certain stigma, horror is still a handy inclusive noun that encompasses the basic dark emotions—fear, abhorrence, aversion, antipathy, disgust, dread, terror, alarm, dismay, shock, disquietude, consternation, panic.'

This fits well into a comment Douglas E. Winter made in his introduction to *Prime Evil*:

'Horror is not a genre...horror is an emotion.'

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Fear is one of the oldest, most basic human emotions.

The most successful of books and films that play on society's collective anxieties always appear to convey and play upon fears that exist across a wide spectrum of people, whether these fears be economic, psychological or political, rather than supernatural.

Why do we like to scare ourselves? Some have made the supposition that human beings know they have to die, maybe too much of a frightening reality to deal with directly. Thus we portray it quite unrealistically in our entertainment – vampires, insane killings, maniacal mass murderers, and the walking dead—they all become thrillingly exciting, but at the end of the day, safe. Horror critic Walter Kendrick wrote in *The Thrill of Fear*:

'Horror films and stories are fiction and admit it; they revel in being made articles, presenting themselves to an audience that knows the fact well and is ready to play the game on those terms. In this way, the horror of death and dying is rendered safe; it is turned into a celebration of being permanently alive, forever immune to decay.'

But what exactly is it that we fear?

In his essay (1926-27, Revised 1933) *Supernatural Horror In Literature*, H.P Lovecraft states: *'...the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.'*

He goes on to say that few psychologists will dispute this fact, and that their admitted truth must ascertain for all time *'...the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tale as a literary form.'*

The history of the horror tale goes back centuries. Cosmic dread appears as an ingredient of the most primitive myths of all races, and is found in the most ancient chronicles, ballads, and sacred writings. A prominent aspect of the ancients' intricate ceremonial magic, with its rituals for the evocation of the supernatural, which flourished from prehistoric times, finally reaching its zenith in Egypt and the Semitic nations.

Fragments of texts such as the *Claviculae of Solomon* and *Book of Enoch* well illustrate the power of the mysterious over the ancient Eastern mind. The Middle Ages steered towards a more imaginary, anthropomorphic type of darkness. The West came to characterize the dark legacy of werewolves, witches and vampires. In the Orient, the weird tale came to assume a vividness that bordered on the fantastic.

In modern times though, many readers identify the horror genre with a combination of unsophisticated shock appeal, the supernatural circumvention of logic, and a host of absolute evils, and altogether shun the genre like the undead would, well, shun a cross.

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Unfortunately, these are mostly the same people who've never read anything by Edgar Allan Poe, Peter Straub or H.P Lovecraft, and base their knowledge of horror solely on schlock movies like *Friday The Thirteenth*, or *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (and their sequels, ad nauseam). While not all horror novels are great literature, many are an observant treatment of the relationship between natural and moral order, the nature of reality and the human mind, the shadow side of the human soul, the development of character, and how 'good' and 'evil' are judged.

'Everybody is a book of blood; wherever we're opened, we're red.'

- Clive Barker

Blood, and likewise the symbolism of the color red, has become an ingrained theme of stories both weird and horrific in nature. Whether it repels or attracts, the fascination with the life force of humankind is a strong one—understandable when taken into account that just as it can give life, so it can take away. The Bible mentions blood over four hundred times. Men and women faint at the sight of it, the letting of it. Through their respective bites, vampires and werewolves use our blood to turn us into vicious bloodsuckers and frenzied lycanthropes. And then there's Phlebotomy—the taking or letting of blood for medical purposes, which originated in ancient times and practiced right through to the second Industrial Revolution. More recently, blood-borne diseases like HIV has further managed to make us even more leery of that dark, red force of life—or in this particular case, a most unpleasant death.

Ever read a scary book during the daytime that magically becomes scarier when the Earth's light has gone out?

Nighttime. Darkness. When the moon comes out, wolves howl, and bats come out to play. Or is that prey? How many times have we told ourselves: *Don't be ridiculous, it's only a story?* Or, instead of placing our book of grizzly happenings on the bedside table, we hide them in bookcases, turn them face down so as not to see the vividly descriptive covers, and even place other books on top of them before turning out the light. Watching a horror movie during the daytime doesn't quite pack the same punch as watching it on the wrong side of twelve o' clock at night. It's simple, really. The dark make things scarier. It hides the unknown, making it tenfold as threatening. Not only are you afraid of the goblins and ghosties, but also at night, you can't see them coming. They hide in the shadows, underneath your bed, in closets with open

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doors like gaping maws, waiting to pounce on your unsuspecting soul once you close your eyes. We still equate the dark with evil and the exclusion of light. It is an ingrained fear in our collective psychological make-up, borne from when we still sat around fires. At some point, that fire would go out. Likewise, at some point in our current day-to-day lives, we're going to have to flick the switch and put out that light. Set an example for the kids. *Don't be ridiculous* – the dark cannot hurt you. Yeah, right. And if you happened to be home alone... Well, you're just a right old scaredy-cat if you leave the light on right through the night. Think about it: As Stephen King rightly noted in *Danse Macabre*, even movie theatres have lights on during the showing of a film. Maybe a quaint little nod to our psychological fears is the fact that the EXIT light is pertinent amongst these. Imagine watching *Night Of The Living Dead* in a completely darkened theatre, the only illumination coming from the monstrous happenings onscreen...

'The fear of blood is far less important, and far less significant in my life, than the fear of being insane, or the fear of losing control of one's sanity.'

- *Clive Barker, The Dark Fantastic*

Are we afraid that we're nothing more than thinly socialized versions of the monsters we read about, or the ones presented to us on celluloid? Jekyll is Hyde, and vice versa. Bruce Banner turns into the Hulk when he's angry, and admittedly, likes it when he in turn inhabits the green body of his own personal demons. Vampires display the ultimate in primal behavior – all they want to do is feed and have sex. They may not procreate in the old-fashioned way, but once you've been bitten, you never want to go back. In fact, you can't—unless of course there's someone after you with a stake and some holy water, as so many popular Hollywood movies have shown us.

Is our love-hate relationship with the fanged ones a dark yearning back to our roots?

Other theories suggest that, like possession by evil forces, the vampiric threat is that of loss of control. Once bitten, victims are turned into a night stalker themselves, forced against will to feed on the blood of innocents until finally put out of their misery by a wooden stake through the heart. Yet, at the same time it allows the vampire to feed vicariously and without guilt... Being the Beast conveniently allows a removal of any human moral ambiguities.

If we enjoy the exploits of Dracula and the Wolfman, do we have aberrant minds? The attraction of horror fiction in this instance is surely that, within the pages (or film frames) we can nurture our shadow side—excite the dark half in each of us.

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Do violence demonstrate the 'real' nature of man? A nature that has been suppressed by the moralities and socialization of Western culture? Does horror fiction confront us with our true selves, the fundamental malice of mankind? If so, how do we reconcile our modern-day behavior with our deep-rooted primal psyches? Across the globe, we have a fascination with violence, and particularly death—and the more violent the better. At the same instant, we go to the utmost extremes to defeat death, to live forever, whether it be through actual biological means or genetics. Two opposing obsessions? Or opposing psyches vying for control?

The aim of horror fiction is to question the nature of reality and the human mind. It challenges our rationality and our understanding of natural order, threatening our moral, physical and philosophical sensibilities. How much can we control reality anyway? How much can we really understand it? Until we have come up with satisfactory answers to these and a host of other questions, we will in all probability keep lining cinema seats like the mindless zombies we fear, prepared to be scared over and over again... Waiting for that moment when the monster lunges from behind the screen, making our blood freeze and the collective hair stand up on the back of our necks.

Recommended Reading:

Prime Evil: New Stories by the Masters of Modern Horror

Edited by Douglas E. Winter

Published by New American Library; Reprint Edition (April 1989)

The Dark Fantastic: Clive Barker: The Authorized Biography

Douglas E. Winter

Published by HarperCollins 2001

Danse Macabre

Stephen King

Published by Berkley Pub Group; Reissue Edition (August 1997)

The Best of H.P Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre

H.P Lovecraft, Robert Bloch (Introduction)

Published by Del Rey; Reissue Edition (May 12, 1987)

Contribute: Simulacrum Submission Guidelines

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Needs: Fiction\Poetry\Artwork – most speculative genres (H/F/SF/MR). (Quiet, gothic horror as opposed to gore and violence.)

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