

SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

Paul A. Toth
Richard Kunzmann
Ronin Ashe
G. Miki Hayden
Stella K. Evans
Stacey-Ann Cole



Ursula Vernon

Interview with Ellen Datlow

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THE EDITOR'S DESK

Goodness. Already three months into the year. Time flies when you're having fun.

As I'm typing this, it's Friday the 13th. While I've tried to be someone who does not put much stock in silly superstitions, I cannot help but be aware of the fact that, at 12 o'clock tonight, this day will pass into Valentines Day...Let's hope it's a case of pure circumstance, and not bitter irony.

All chop-socky aside, let's get to more important things.

We've had some wonderful response toward this here little magazine, and I am especially humbled by some of the well-established talents who have graciously offered their time and work to be part of it. And to all of you who voted for us in the Predators and Editors Poll, a great big thanks. We'll keep you up to speed with the results.

Without further ado, here's what we've got in store for you in this issue:

From Paul A. Toth, a story about charm, politicians, and just how much of it is real. **Make A Pretty Face** is a funny, sometimes unsettling look at the world we live in, and just how far some of us would go to achieve something—and the price we end up paying. From Richard Kunzmann comes the even more unsettling **Lost In Recollection**. Would you really plug in to the machine, given the choice? Can we ever foresee what the consequence of such an experiment would be?

A Poverty Of Mettle by Ronin Ashe is a mirthful tale of Angels, Demons and the Apocalypse. High Noon for the end of the world. In G. Miki Hayden's **The Thirty Years' War** we are treated to a skillful story about an android, manipulated because of his nature, and ending up doing quite the opposite of his overlord's wishes because of it. This time, it's not the android that ends up with the short end of the stick. Finally, we have **The City-God's Choice**, by Stella K. Evans. Wonderful imagery, and a reminder that sometimes, even Gods must traverse the shadowy path towards enlightenment.

To top it off, there is the wonderfully sometimes-surreal art of **Ursula Vernon** (she finds the bloodsucking habits of bats intriguing), and interview with well-known Editor Ellen Datlow (she's going to live forever), a dark little poem by Stacey-Ann Cole, and another interview with our featured author Paul A. Toth.

There's about 27 000 words worth of entertainment coming your way.

Better start reading.

Is charm mostly physical? How much is too much? Had Al Gore been able to splice in a strand of JFK's DNA, or with a wave of the knife been given Jack Nicholson's seductive grin, would we have a different President? Those were the questions I had in mind when I started this story, written in tribute to would-be comics with mouths that drag south, unfriendly bears of men tired of acting jovial, and undiscovered models with eyes designed for books instead of cameras.

"I better pull up a little here," I said, "at the corners of the mouth."

"But why?" McDermott said. "It looks right to me."

"Just a bit of a smirk."

"Christ, Nimbit, the public will know. They'll figure it out. We've got to stop now."

"A touch more," I said.

"I'm the chief strategist, remember? Keep that straight."

I felt the surgical mask tighten around my frown.

"I'm sorry," McDermott said, "but if the public finds out—"

I continued cutting. I measured the candidate's eyes and mouth. "The squint is perfect, the smile seductive."

"It better be."

"Trust me," I said. "Charisma has its—"

"Its geometry," McDermott said. "I know, I know."

I touched the candidate's mouth, smoothing. Backing away, I used my hands to frame the face and said, "The charismatic man. Future President Richard C. Thorpe. He looks like a man your wife might sleep with, doesn't he?"

"Do you ever worry about the implications of your work?"

I shrugged and felt the tremor that announced itself whenever something I imagined became real.

"Good," McDermott said. "Me neither."

Later that night I sat on the exquisite couch which would soon be replaced by a larger, more exquisite couch, because that was all there was left to do, now that I had achieved everything. Most of my research had not yet been tested, but it would pan out sooner or later. The benefits of my discoveries would touch thousands, millions. A man in Dallas wants cowboy skin and Clint Eastwood grimace: Hi-yo, Silver. A woman in Poughkeepsie wants

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distinguished wrinkles, deeper dimples: Your place or mine, professor? Lovers would fall at the feet of plain Janes everywhere and nerds would notch belts like leather factories.

I walked over to the far wall and touched a crack in the paint. Five layers. Each had once reflected some glint of my personality, odd tones that fit my life for a year and then became outdated. For a long time, the idea that faces were changeable excited me, not just human faces but the face of everything, all surfaces.

If I had my way, one day I'd scrape the charm right off Thorpe's face and see what happened with a little geek in the cheek. It was easy enough to do. I had already pinned sly disingenuousness and a hundred other negative facial traits. Soon, suburban boys would save their pennies for gangster sneers while their sisters bought pornographic pouts. Later on, they'd have it all carved off and replaced by more mature deceptions.

Over the next few weeks, Thorpe's poll numbers improved by the day. TV commentators noted how effortlessly he kissed babies and shook hands. "The people love him!" they'd say, recalling how only months before they called him Thorpe the Corpse. "He seems to absorb their love and reflect it back."

In the new blank whiteness of the walls, I watched the floaters in my vision, the curly-cues and blurs that seemed to slide across the room like miniature UFO's. I kept thinking how a few turns of the knife would change history. I needed new carpets, white and blank, to better reflect the perceptionless space I longed to inhabit. Once you learn how the game is rigged, once you figure out how to cheat the cheat, and guarantee your own victory, you lose interest. If easy charm, deadly seriousness or flippant joie de vivre were only a turn of the knife away, I couldn't help but long for a blank face.

"He's going crazy with charm. He fucks like he's the last male rabbit on earth." McDermott stared at the ceiling and walls. "What's with all the white? It looks like a museum without paintings in here."

"That's about right."

"Is there any way to tone it down? His charm, I mean. The other senators copy his fucking haircut, for Christ's sake."

"We could tell him some test came back positive, that I've got to go back in and cut more out."

McDermott mulled it over. "No, no, no. If his charm drops through the floor, he's Thorpe the Corpse again. They'll think he's gone manic depressive."

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I remained divided. I wanted to see how far manufactured charm could go, but also public reaction if I took it away. I could wait for his poll numbers to tumble and then announce the truth: "Now you know what motivates your vote: the wink, the smirk, the old two thumbs up. All that love over dimples and crinkles. It's all biology. It's a Vegas cheat and I can change the odds."

"Try salt peter," I said.

"He might screw the jar."

"What about his wife? Doesn't she know?"

"Gayle? She's getting it double, by the look on her face." McDermott rubbed his jaw.

"Let's give it a month."

I had the outside of my house painted white and started pricing land in the California desert, certain moonlike places I found in coffee table books, blank but for ghostly crests of white sand. Supposedly, you can't deceive yourself in the desert. Well, it might work for a while. Monks figure out they don't belong in society, but they're carved by nature, too, only deeper.

Me, I wasn't looking for transmigration. I just wanted to disappear beyond tricks and gimmicks. Thanks to me, the world would soon charm itself to death. All jokes would be worthy of flirty giggles and everyone would touch each other in unwarranted intimacy. Up to now, you got dropped in this world a winner, sucker, loser, killer. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred you had nothing do with it; you just happened to look like a winner, sucker, loser, killer. But now everybody would be a hero, or look enough like one to convince everybody else.

Consider newscasters. They look like newscasters. It's got nothing to do with news and everything to do with casting.

"It's getting worse," McDermott told me. "He attended a conference for survivors of the Detroit plane wreck and slept with three widows. I wish you would have cut his dick off."

The camera operators got bolder. They practically molested Thorpe's image, circling him like cats in heat. He "appeared" nude in magazines. Pornographic movies featured his digital exploits. A small fundamentalist collective openly threatened to assassinate him. But women registered to vote in record numbers.

Some of this had more to do with events than Thorpe's charm itself. Every fresh disappearance sparked months of rampant promiscuity. We were in the middle of that trend,

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just three months after the Detroit plane catastrophe, when I cut Thorpe a new face. If another incident occurred, the nation might propel itself to the moon by collective climax.

But what bothered me most was Thorpe's smug acceptance of it all. He considered himself quite literally blessed. That he went from political dolt to porn star never fazed him. In his mind, he deserved everything. Even his slogan, "Right Where It Counts!" seemed like a clutched crotch thrust at the camera.

I bought a book featuring photographs of albinos. Perhaps the albino is an evolutionary sidestep toward blankness. Future punks would find a way to achieve the albino's seashore blankout. With amputation already passé, kids without pinkies and thumbs throwing bowling ball bombs down mall corridors, debasement as revolt would reach its unnatural conclusion. I had already floated the idea of "limb re-situation" to several fashion trendsetters; that is, moving hands, feet, digits, whatever, from one spot to another. An early example was on TV right now, a woman with a fake eye implanted in the center of her forehead. Modern-minded Hindus would soon make one million plastic surgeons rich.

Near the end of the campaign, McDermott showed up on my doorstep soaked in flop sweat. He looked around in amazement at the overwhelming whiteness, my albino household in all its zero personality. But some crisis overwhelmed his awareness.

"Wipe that smirk off your face," McDermott said. "I thought I loved her."

Oh, God, suffering. I might have cared if I walked around the block of apathy, down the avenue of resentfulness, to the end of disengagement boulevard. But that was a long way.

"She'll be back," I said, thinking:

City boys dream of summer farms.

Farm boys sleep on city streets.

All return with blistered feet.

"Funny game," McDermott said. "That's what you think it is. But she's my wife."

I studied my rosy knuckles. Perhaps some talcum powder... "She must realize she loves you, too," I said, and almost laughed. The supermagnified domain of romantic love seen from a distance was, well, funny.

"You're some mountain laughing two thousand miles away," he said, squatting down beside me. He squished his facial muscles together, making himself distorted, ugly.

We arrived at my office the next afternoon. When McDermott drew the curtains, he blocked out the sun, now meant for new men like Thorpe, who with sand in their shoes and

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the force of mind to ignore it would seize the day the way ants charge picnics. "We are beautiful," they would chant. "Onward, onward, onward!"

"How could you know the cancer's back without seeing me first?" Thorpe said. How a man that stupid got himself in power only spoke to what a worthless kingship he sought.

"It hasn't come back," McDermott said. "It was misdiagnosed by the lab."

"We're miscommunicating here," Thorpe said. "That doesn't happen."

McDermott looked at me. I tossed a Newsweek on the desk. Thorpe grabbed it and read the cover. I knew a bright and shiny magazine would impress him.

"What a national crisis," he said. Then, looking at McDermott, he added, "Rampant lab error. Why didn't you bring this to me before?"

McDermott laughed, not even bothering to cover his mouth. "Bring it to you?"

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but if we're—"

"This should be done in a hospital," Thorpe said.

McDermott finally stopped laughing. "Do you want the whole world knowing that pretty face has cancer? Is that what you want? Cancer turns people off, including women. You know women better than that, don't you—voters, I mean?"

Actually, I had never considered the realities of reversing my work, but it was coming along quite easily. It was like breaking up with someone who loves you more than you do them; you just snatch it away and they suddenly realize things they thought were solid were liquid all along. Now I had the public love in a beaker, turning it upside down and watching it puddle on the floor as if it were this dumb king's blood itself.

Meanwhile, McDermott rushed me as if each turn of the knife was a hand on Thorpe's back, nudging him out of Mrs. McDermott's bed. "We don't have all day."

"Yes, we do," I said. "Your work is done. He won't be in the race much longer."

"I don't care. Hurry."

I continued letting the air out of that boyish smirk.

"Hurry up, I said."

It deflated like a tire.

"Fucking A."

I popped those eyes back open.

"Three o'clock already!"

What a wide-eyed naïf McDermott was, brought to prominence by friendship with powerful men who liked weak comrades.

"You don't care, do you, that I've got a schedule to—"

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"I do," I said. "But do you want this operation exposed?"

"Why should I care?" he said.

I realized my mistake, but it was too late. McDermott slashed through the air and drew a gouge across Thorpe's face. The moment wrapped itself around me so I couldn't move. Some weird shock shook Thorpe half-awake, his eyes registering vague realization of horror, but no specifics. He kept saying, "Oh, oh, oh," and I knew McDermott was imagining Thorpe and those oh-oh-oh's in another context. Finally, he raised the knife one last time and with two fists brought it straight down into the middle of Thorpe's nose.

The colors of the road and scenery blurred toward me until the road itself seemed to zoom along. Occasionally I focused on the valley racing alongside me and imagined I could see every sparkling blade of grass adding to an illusionary whole. But if the whole equals the parts, then what are the parts? And what if you mow the grass? Was the average lawn wild green forest contained? And what if you stripped the valley barren? Would the underneath reveal what once stood above?

The radio announcer said, "America mourns its first real political tragedy since the Kennedy assassination. Few doubt now that Richard C. Thorpe was a late blooming prince poised to restore our national pride at a time when cities disappear like museum relics stolen away in the deepest night."

It was perhaps this last statement that made the 18 wheeler so attractive, that drove me into the center of its cab just as if that announcer had grabbed the wheel and steered me into the blessed whirring silence of unconsciousness.

I felt a mask tightening around the boundaries of my face. I saw not blackness but something else, a darkness without night's smudged color. I heard the measured sighs of a medical specialist. I knew he was gauging, calculating. I heard the muted I-don't-know's, the what-do-you-think's.

"What's the plan, doctor?" I asked, sounding like a deaf mute struggling to pronounce a language never heard. So I tried harder, forcing the words from deep in my throat, and said, "Carve me a charming smile, will you? Make me a pretty face."

"Doctor," my unknown colleague said, "you—you have no face at all."

Paul A. Toth lives in Michigan. His novel Fizz is available from Bleak House Books.

Toth's short fiction has appeared in The Barcelona Review, Iowa Review Web,

Mississippi Review Online and many others, with nominations for the Pushcart prize and Best American Mystery Stories. See www.netpt.tv for information on ordering Fizz, complete credits, audio stories and more.

LOST IN RECOLLECTION

RICHARD KUNZMANN

My inspirations are great dystopic works like 1984, and Brave New World, William Gibson and the cyberpunk gang. I'm quite techno-shy and take the fervor with a tablespoon of salt. I for one am very scared of plugging something into my brain, something alien that has no cells, doesn't breath and have a soul of its own. How am I supposed to relate to it, and how the hell will it relate to me?

This story was first conceived and written during the long arduous hours in between rushes in the restaurant where I worked while finishing my studies. My boss told me to get a life and stop dreaming. Thus I say, 'eat my shorts.'

>> A strobe slashes through the darkness, illuminating an arc of blood as it glitters in the air. In that brief flash sound seems to fade out. <<

That glistening arc is his only memory. The blood came from a woman – he feels this rather than remembers it. Feet stumble across a wet, desolate street, deep in the industrial hinterland of London's East End. The darkness just before dawn is illuminated by a pallid glow cast by tired streetlights in a thin rain.

He checks the pockets of his black overcoat, his pinstripe jacket, and his matching trousers, for a wallet and keys, but finds nothing.

What's my name? The answer comes to mind with difficulty. *Am I really, Adam?*

The sheen of rain on his coat sparkles in the foggy darkness, as if it's thick with blood.

His head aches and his face feels numb, as if it's hot wax about to run down his shirt. His eyelids are drooping, with rainwater curdling in his eyelashes. The weight of a grey fallen sky presses down on him.

Did I have an accident, kill someone?

>> The strobe of memory ignites again: a scream is painted on a woman's slightly parted lips, her mouth screeching with loading information, the electronic noise tearing through my mind. Is it a song of pain, or pleasure? <<

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He shakes his head in confusion. Is it a real memory, or is it a fabrication of his imagination? Water runs painfully into his eye, dissipating the image. He studies his shaking hands. There is something dark under his nails.

It can't be blood, can it? Christ, what's this fascination with blood I suddenly have? Hope its dirt.

Didn't I fall back there?

Yeah, fell back there, that's it.

Fell? Where?

He blinks and looks around this strange street, as if for the first time, the different voices in his head falling silent. *What was I thinking about?*

Dawn begins to filter through the clouds and early-morning fog. Locked gates, whitewashed walls, and red brick structures front the street he finds himself in. Old chimneystacks point at the sky like skeletal fingers, the air smelling faintly of sulphur, whilst Styrofoam packaging floats in the rain runoff, and the distant traffic sounds ethereal.

Suddenly a dark figure flits past him, causing him to spin around drunkenly in an effort to see what it is. He catches a wide-eyed glimpse of a twisted goblin, just before crashing to the tar. Recovering, he cautiously peers at the skulking figure in the gateway of *Morrison's Motors*, and discovers it's actually a feral gypsy child, its large brown eyes glaring back at him. The boy hugs something more tightly to his body.

'Oi, you little bugger, scared the shite out of me, mate.'

The boy doesn't reply.

'Listen, how do I get out of here? Where's the nearest bus stop?' Adam laughs at how ridiculous he must sound. 'I don't know how I got here.'

The boy abruptly bolts from his hiding place, and hurtles down the street's gradual curve.

'Hey! Get back here, you bastard! I need some goddamned help.'

The child disappears, leaving Adam wincing from his headache and the sudden act of shouting. Reaching up to massage his temples, he discovers they are bruised and raw.

All he can remember about the recent past is that he woke up with a bloody nose, and sprawled over a heap of refuse bags not far from here. Try as he might, the fog will not lift from his memory. Besides that his vision is affected, as if sleep still sticks to the surface of his eyes, tendrils and dots crawling at the edges of his sight. The world somehow seems darker, tinted by an evil shade of green.

What...what did I do? Where have I been? What - pain sears through his head as a memory cracks its dormant shell.

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>> I am at a dinner party at the acclaimed Crosby -Townsend Museum of Cyber-spatial Art, situated in Charing Cross Road. I lean back against the bar, sip my Ardbeg whiskey, and appreciate the shiny white surfaces of the venue –animated plastic, which bulges and contorts into different designs, and generally behaving like a singular amoeba. Soft lights of various hot and cold colours spiral amongst the works of art, which are generously spaced in the massive centre. The building is a celebration of what the hosting company has already achieved. I work for Cycilex, and tonight's festivities are dedicated to our newest breakthrough.

One of our corporate cronies is droning on about *our* innovations. Bullshit, *we* built this thing, *we* created it out of thin air - people like *me* and Anna, not some fat-cat accountant holed up in an executive office. Old master Stockton jabbars on about the blending of disciplines, as if it's a new thing. Me personally, I'm into software. Okay, fine, it was strange working side-by-side with microbiologists and geneticists, quantum physicists, chaos quantifiers, cognitive psychologists—you need to carry a dictionary with you, if you want to know what it is they do.

'Our product will revolutionise our world, it will create a new era for communication, for the way we perceive, for mankind,' belches Sir Stockton. 'Hear, hear! Right you are, 'ol boy, right you are!' I shout at the old codger from the bar, loud enough to turn some heads. I lift my glass and toast the grinning Italian barman. 'Fuckin' wanker,' I say. 'The bastard barley knows how to use a mouse, honest.'

I scan the crowd, dead bored, looking for excitement, looking for *her* to arrive. Will Anna come? <<.

She did arrive, and this was last night. Realisation and dread shoot through Adam like lightning frying a million transistors. His skin and joints have begun to ache, and the synapses in his head are burning like napalm. He closes his eyes and smiles a defeated smile.

The rain picks up, drenching Adam, as he sits on a curb in the street, lost in the recollections spawning in his mind.

>> Hands and glasses are raised to the buffoon on his pedestal, as white strobes signal the climactic end of his boorish speech. It's at that moment she makes her entrance, crossing the vast room and heading straight for me, the crowd seemingly parting before her. Anna's lithe legs power her forward on dangerously high heels; her short black evening dress draws admiring eyes in her wake; her black shiny hair is styled in a bob, with a step cut high up in the back, tapering down to a fringe

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extending just past her chin. Her eyes glitter a psychedelic emerald.

I hear the barman whistle under his breath behind me, so I turn around, drain my glass, and say to him, 'You wouldn't like her—she's a programmer, and they're boring, right?' I turn back to her and smile my most confident smile. <<

So why am I sitting in the rain, my Pradas looking frayed and my best suit fucking ruined with the stink of garbage?

Adam smacks the pavement with a fist, rage permeating his fear and confusion. 'I'm still here,' he says out loud, 'maybe wet, but still *alive*. And if I can't remember killing anyone, then I didn't. No way did I kill Anna. There was no accident.'

A sudden cry of pain from across the street draws his attention. He looks up into the low-res downpour, the sudden movement sending renewed pain through his head. A body is convulsing on the far pavement, its spine coiling and whipping around like a live wire.

It's the gypsy child, and his face is contorted with pain, saliva dripping from his mouth, eyes rolled back, with more red than white showing.

'You all right there?' calls Adam.

The boy retches loudly. Adam notices the plastic milk bottle clutched in tense hands—the container has the crumpled look that only a glue addict can force from the plastic.

Adam glances up and down the street, desperate for someone else to get involved. Although it's a weekday there is no one on the street.

I can't do this. His eyes wonder back to the child reluctantly, as he makes an effort to get up. But the child has disappeared.

What's... Then he sees it, or rather an afterglow of it, lying on the curb. The image reminds him of retinal burn after a camera flash. As he watches, the image fades, like pixels dissipating in the rain.

Uuh?

Before he can give it more thought, he hears the diesel growl of a truck heading towards him. His delight, however, turns to horror as he notices stop-action frames of Anna playing across the vehicle's white length. She is fleeing, chased by Sir Stockton, dressed like a butcher all in white, with a yellow full-body apron, his face pink and bloated, eyes squeezed tightly shut, and wielding an oversized cleaver. The butcher swings with a comical shriek spreading over his face, as Anna's breaks out in golly-gosh surprise. The blade thuds into her shoulder blade.

For a moment he imagines seeing the gore splattering off the truck.

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Adam turns his gaze to where the kid should've been, then stares after the departing truck. Feeling panic rising in his throat, he balls his shaking hands, grits his teeth, and tries to bring his desperate breathing under control. When Adam opens his eyes fifteen minutes later, he decides to follow the truck's direction. He doesn't get far before he cries out once more, seizes his head, and collapses in the middle of the street, strobes of agony and memory surging along his neurons.

>> We're still standing at the bar, the silly lightshow still glittering around us, an outdated techno beat now filling the hall as the party revs up. Anna laughs a pleasant deep laugh, her lips gleaming in the light. She was born in Hong Kong, and obviously has Chinese blood in her. Abruptly she steps away from me, and, with a nod of her head, she gestures towards the museum's offices.

'You coming? I've got something to show you.'

'Yeah? What?'

'Top secret,' she says, holding up a finger and winking at the overeager barman. 'Suffice it to say that while these fools potter on about how *cool* they are, we'll go do the real thing, have a launch of our own.'

I raise an eyebrow, and she laughs again. She lets go of my hand and walks away in the direction she wants me to follow, her body language rippling with lust. I put down my drink and trail after her, utterly, perhaps foolishly, enchanted by my boss. Soon the music is but an echo in the distance. Ahead of me a security guard accosts Anna, but she whispers something to him, and flashes an ID card. He lets her pass. When I catch up, he gives me a knowing smile, and soon I disappear down the darkened corridor beyond him, following in her wake.

She leads me into a study and switches on a discreet light. Hundreds of books are neatly shelved all the way to the roof; a large corporate desk looms in a darkened corner of the room; three plush leather armchairs, with a low glass coffee table between them, stand in the middle of the room. On the table lies a smooth black bag, the size and shape of a large novel.

'Sit,' she says, indicating one of the chairs.

I know what the thing on the table is—she showed me the designs before. For now I don't care much about it; I'm drowning in her presence instead. She's telling me about the machine, as she pulls it from its slipcase and holds its smooth matt black surface up to the light, but nothing of what she has to say filters through to me,

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I'm just too absorbed by her. Although she's had a lot to drink, and although the guard bought her security clearance, she still throws a number of secretive glances at the locked door. I wonder what she's up to.

'So you gonna try this with me?' she asks suddenly, her emerald eyes glittering.

'Sorry what? Oh. Shit, Anna, where did you get it? We're not supposed to have one ready yet.'

'Yes or no, Adam?' she asks in her husky voice. She's playing at something, but I can't be sure. I suddenly realise how drunk I am and how incapable I am of making a serious decision. Nevertheless I'm still excited.

'Sure,' I say and lean forward.

She smiles wickedly at me, before sitting closer and reaching out, grasping me by the hair of my neck, and pulling me towards her. She kisses me deeply over the device on the coffee table, as if she's trying to drain me of my life force.

Adam reaches the spot where the truck disappeared from sight, and is now dabbing at the warmth running over his lips. His nose is bleeding severely. Looking down at his shirt he sees it's already pink with rain and blood. Peering further down, he discovers he's taken his shoes off and left them somewhere. Something is lying at his feet in a dirty puddle.

'Oh, *fuck!*' he cries, staggering back and away from the object.

The grey dawn light is reflected on the cool steel of a butcher's cleaver, rainwater coagulating on the blade, while tendrils of blood slowly coil away into the surrounding pool of water.

His breathing begins to pound in his ears, as bytes of reality seem to fragment. Suddenly he's running, looking for the Exit sign, for the line he crossed into this madness.

Where's Anna and what's happened? How did she end up on the side of that truck, getting butchered by Stockton? What can't I remember? How the fuck did that cleaver end up on the pavement?

Adam's heartbeat is hammering in his temples as he runs. Blood is gushing from his nose and down the back of his throat. He passes an empty security booth and ducks under the booms suspended over the lanes, still not having seen another soul. Twenty yards up the road he hears a roar behind him. Adam turns around in time to see a volley of cars racing up the street, towards central London. He tries to flag a car down, but no one cares, no one stops—it's as if he doesn't exist. He spots a petrol station a block away and heads for it, desperate to find a phone, but his recollections catch up. Adam lunges for a lamppost, and stops himself from collapsing by the side of the road.

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>> 'I knew you'd do it, baby. This is *ours* after all, and *we* should do it first.' She pulls away from me, and beams with that smile again. 'This'll be a trip to remember.'

For the first time I wonder whether the office rumours about my love are true—that she's completely nuts. Sure, we've been together two months now, and it's been bizarre at times. Genius and eccentricity have always gone hand-in-hand, they say. With her, the combination has been pure napalm. Now, however, an unnerving ferocity has also crept into her eyes.

'Did you hear Sir's speech? Incredible—what a load of shite. This thing isn't just a nicely packaged revolution—this is going to *consume* us. Have you thought about how addictive this is going to get, the kind of junkies it's going to create? It's going to be the best chemical out on the market. Now we'll be injecting, quite *literally*.' She laughs, as her eyes positively *lick* over the box. 'Fuck testing with monkeys,' she purrs. 'If someone's going to jack in first, then it's going to be *me* ... and you. It'll be us. The way I see it, we're consummating the twenty first century. I'll be in you, and you'll be in me, our minds will be the first ever to actually connect. It'll be like telepathy. Think about it, we'll be the mother and father of a whole new generation of humans!'

I laugh. 'Anna, that's a bit over the top, innit?'

Her eyes flare up, and her smile drops instantly from her face. 'Why, what do you mean?'

'Nothing, you just sound like a dictator, that's all. You're taking the piss, right?'

'I'm just excited,' she says, still glaring at me.

'Look, I don't know if this is such a good idea.'

'Adam, don't be such a wimp. This is the opportunity of a lifetime.'

'Wasn't this thing designed to connect to another node, you know, one processor for each of us?'

'There is only one,' states Anna with something of a pout on her face. 'Come on, it'll be fine, I've tried it.'

'You *have*?' I ask astounded. 'When, where?'

'In the lab, late at night, when you've all gone home to your TV-dinners and sitcoms.'

'Well, what's it like?'

She grasps both my hands and licks her lips, exuberance returning to those green eyes of hers once more. 'It's *awesome*.'

My own curiosity piques, mostly because I've been dreaming about a moment

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like this ever since I touched my first Atari. To date, I've been working on this project for three years—I'll be damned if I miss this opportunity. 'How could you just use it?' I chuckle in disbelief. 'You're shit crazy, Anna. What if your brain exploded or something? What if you went schizophrenic and went on a killing spree in the office.'

'I've thought about it, often,' laughs Anna. 'We don't know what will happen, because we haven't tried it, because ethics boards and committees are for scared people and conservatives. Screw them! A scientist isn't a real researcher unless she's prepared to go all the way with her project. Galileo did, so did Copernicus, why shouldn't we?' Anna squeezes my hands. 'Come *on*, Adam.' She says it, like she wants sex.

'Is it safe?' I blurt.

'Safe? I'm in *charge* of this project, remember? I'd know if I'm about to kill us.'

I study her excited face. I've never seen her like this, and it's catching. 'Yeah, okay. Hell, what are we waiting for?'

She giggles like a high school girl, and hands me her Martini. Fidgeting in her handbag, she produces a silver container with two little electric-blue capsules. 'They're just a synapse stimulant. We need to boost the connection between your brain and the electrodes, so that the interface will run smoothly. Open your mouth, it's nothing, trust me.'

I open my mouth, and she presses the pill onto my tongue. As I swallow, I wonder whether this stuff is compatible with alcohol.

Her fingers linger on my chin, as if she's making sure that I swallowed my medicine, before reaching out to the machine and switching it on. Three lights, situated in a small groove running around the system, come on. The three colours—blue, red, and green—wink secretively. There is only the faintest of electrical hums in the room.

The thick novel-sized box could be mistaken for an aerodynamic CD file, exhibiting no keyboard, no monitor, just the groove running along all four sides, with its three lights, and ports for a number of cables - although currently only two pairs of lines are attached, one for each of us.

She peels stickers off electrodes the size of my thumbnail, and presses the ends of the cables lightly to my temples. 'Give the cilia a few minutes to penetrate your skin, if it stings a bit, don't worry.'

As she is fiddling with her own set, I feel the stuff growing into me, microscopic tendrils attaching themselves to my skull, silicone bonding with the organic,

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breeching a divide like fire and water. The sensation is like a spider or tick slowly creeping over my skin.

'Hah!' laughs Anna. 'Don't look so horrified, Adam. It's just a machine, not a parasite.'

'I just never thought I'd have hardware wiring itself into me.'

Anna winks in her alluring way.

She's getting off on this, I think. I grin back, stupefied by whiskey and the taste of a forbidden fruit.

She presses a small button in the centre of the *Cycilex C1000's* square top, and with an audible click, the top springs open, revealing an alien compact keyboard inside. She presses a few keys.

'Here we go,' she whispers, hitting a central red button.

I immediately feel disorientated. Strings of perception unravel as my senses implode. The room is there, but not there, like an apparition. Strange colours seep in at the edges of my vision. I hear electronic sounds from far away, and suddenly have a sense of exchanging information without speaking. Bytes of 'chair' and 'room' and 'woman' reach me from the same distance, as I sink deeper into a world smelling of ozone, and drift through a growing space inside my head. The last thing I hear spoken from Anna's lips is, 'I'm injecting you into me; it'll be like fucking, only better.'

It's the final realisation of years of technophilia—the birth of the first neural jack and with it the final means to create virtual reality, not just a tangible illusion. It's a whole new way of existence. The final result is Adam and Eve leaving the Garden voluntarily. *It'll make live so much easier*, promises the *Cycilex* blurb on the package, of which thousands have already been printed.

My perception of Anna folds away completely, like a television tube burning out. The feel of electricity and data hums in my body, like a deep bass tone reverberating inside me. For once my vision takes a back seat as internal sense organs take over, exploring this new input. All I can see is electronic snow and bright colours filling a void. My mind is on the move somehow, probably uploading to somewhere. I am nothing but a high-pitched message of bytes, coursing down an electrical line. It's vertigo I feel, seasickness, because I'm moving without having lifted a muscle.

Suddenly I grow afraid. Something is wrong—I can feel it. I'm expiring, I am ceasing to be me, Adam. I'm converging with something alien.

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'Relax, Adam,' booms a voice from somewhere and everywhere, inside and outside of me. 'Let me get this calibrated. Hey, I said relax, okay. I can feel you freaking out.'

I can't. I realise I am no longer an identity, only information fast disappearing from my body. 'Help me!' I scream out loud, but I can't be sure whether my lips have moved, or whether I'm just a noisy idea. 'No, Anna, *stop!* You've got this all wrong.'

'Chill Adam, I'm getting it right.'

'God, it *hurts*, Anna!' I feel parts of me disappear, not only memories, but personal affectations too. She's getting to know me inside out, but I'm losing my Self in the process. 'My head!' I shriek. 'For God's sake, leave me alone!'

'Shut up, Adam, you're confusing me.'

My spirit burns as my body is raped by another's brain feeding on me. I try to get a grip, on something familiar, and discover flesh, my meat, my comfortable husk. I force reluctant limbs to do something, to save me. Spasms and convulsions ripple through my body, and suddenly I manage to tear those searing electrodes from my head.

'Adam, don't!' screeches Anna. I split my eyes open, and see her grappling with the machine, eyes still closed, sweat on her forehead, eyebrows wrinkled in concentration. 'You can't just *break* the connection like that,' she groans.

My entirety recognises her as an invasive disease, as an enemy trying to kill me, and terror floods me once more. I jump up and lash out viciously before I can even think, overcome by an instinct of survival. My fist connects solidly with her nose and cheek, the force of the blow throwing her back into her chair. I scramble up and bolt from the room in a blind hysterical panic, not knowing whether my love is alive or dead. <<

The rash on Adam's temples has grown worse, featuring blisters that itch uncontrollably. All he can think of now is finding a telephone at the petrol station and phoning Anna. She will save him from himself by answering the call.

Adam staggers across the street and up the station's forecourt. Customers in their parked cars stare at him, his bloody appearance encroaching on their comfortable morning.

'Hey, guy, go away! Go on, I don't want you puking all over the show – I just cleaned here.'

Adam doesn't respond.

'What's the matter with you,' shouts someone at the attendant. 'Can't you see he's sick?'

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'Fucked on drugs, no doubt. Kids, get in the car,' commands a father.

'Somebody help him,' squeals a high-pitched voice.

'I ain't touching him,' answers the attendant.

None of you want me here - here in real, thinks Adam, grabbing hold of a pillar and leaning heavily against it, as he tries to locate a phone.

His shirt is splattered a deep crimson by now, his bare feet are pale from the wet cold.

What did I do with my shoes?

Breathing hard with blood bubbling from his nose, Adam discovers the pay phone mounted on a wall, and stumbles towards it. He fumbles for change in his pockets, before remembering he's lost everything. He turns around, rubs his exhausted face, and for the first time takes in the people watching him.

Another bolt of pain tears through his mind, and forces a desperate cry from his lips. The concerned father, parked closest to Adam, takes a few steps backward in horror. He forces his eyes open again. All he sees is television snow, blink, then nothing unusual, blink, then lines running a jagged heartbeat across his vision, blink, then everything seems fine again. He rubs his eyes. No, there are green outlines surrounding everything he perceives; digital squares are floating in and out of objects; bytes of information are all mangled, wrongly placed, wrongly coded.

Adam shakes his head, but it doesn't stop the further degradation his senses. A door disappears from a perfectly healthy-looking car; an eye is erased from a child smearing fingerprints on the back window; the leg of the yelling attendant becomes a fuzzy pixelated mess, as if he wasn't tuned in properly this morning.

Adam cries out in horror and stumbles away from the confusing scene.

His memories are jumbling too. Smells from a long-ago meal, up in Hampshire, replace the odour of oil and petrol; the wall he collapses against feels like wet grass; his innards seem to be growing and moving inside him, *feeding* on him.

He spots the restrooms, bungles through the doors, and stumbles to the mirrors. Blue-white florescent lights illuminate his face. His swollen temples have extended two inches from his head. To him the swellings look like scabrous, layered horns. Blood is seeping through the bruised skin.

I killed her, I must've. Why else would this be happening to me?

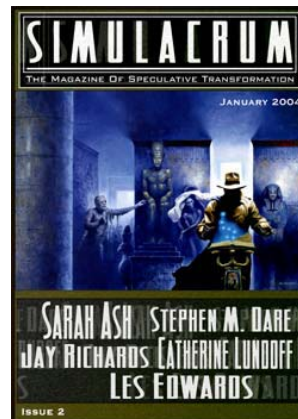
Overcome, Adam abruptly plunges a hand deep into his coat pocket. He draws out something that glints in the light. He closes his eyes and presses Delete and Shutdown one final time.

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The cool sterility of the restroom becomes a painted canvas of stark contrasts—bright red paints the white dead background.

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SIMULACRUM MAGAZINE



Angeline Hawkes-Craig, Lyda Morehouse, Tim Pratt, Lavie Tidhar, Zohar A. Goodman, Peter Kudriashov, Sarah Ash, Les Edwards, H.P Lovecraft, Catherine Lundoff, Stephen M. Dare and Jay Richards.

FIND THEM ALL AND MORE IN ISSUES 1 & 2 OF SIMULACRUM!

Published by www.specficworld.com

I actually created the characters of Sparky and St. Paul while daydreaming back when I was working at a convenience store. On a slow and snowy morning I wrote a dialog where the demon and angel debated philosophy, but not from the exact stances a reader would typically expect. Then using the personalities established by this dialog, and setting the characters against the backdrop of a world in turmoil, I wrote 'A Poverty of Mettle'.

1. Saturday Morning.

There was a faint scraping noise, perhaps the sound of a butter knife along burnt toast. The sound pierced the cloak of silence that had fallen over the onlookers. It was a troubling sound; the kind one might suppose would be produced by a ghoul trying to scratch his way out of a coffin. The sound had no origin, to all around it seemed as though a phantom was drifting in their midst. It swirled about their ears only long enough to rustle, and then fall away, only to return. And with horror fresh in their minds and images so grim they could only shudder as a response, the people of Kathryn's Spire couldn't help but conjure the darkest and most depraved Demon as the source. After all, what but a Demon could possibly be standing before them?

The people of the Spire were right about one thing: the creature standing before them was a loathsome one. A Demon of the Fifth, and his power was vast and wicked. But neither he, nor any of his brethren, the despised, was the origin of that awful sound. Something far worse than he had made it. The Demon was the only one who recognized it, and if he thought it would do any good, he would have screamed until his last breath for the townsfolk to run. But he didn't. It was too late for them.

The only thing that would be remembered by the few survivors of that day, strangers to that wasteland town, would be the awful sound of heaven echoing in their ears.

2. Saturday Evening, (one week earlier)

The hot, dry wind ran over his face in a small wave, its crest composed of dust and sand it had picked up on its journey from the town. It created a slight howl, like the screams of that place he knew so well, as it slid over his slightly too-large ears and continued on its way. The only sensation it left in its wake was a strange odor that had dissolved over the distance. It was an odor that most could not detect, so watered down it had become, an odor that even

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fewer people would have been able to recognize for its true nature, even at its peak strength. But Sparky was not most people. He knew the odor and had been smelling it for the last couple of hours. It was an acrid odor that instilled in him a certain sense of foreboding and dread. It was the smell of human suffering.

Sparky gave a disdainful look to the distant town as it shimmered in the heat. It had the look of a vulture-picked corpse, the way it festered under the intensity of the sweltering sun. The town appeared as a small blister that rose, sick looking, from the smooth satin skin of the Nevada desert. It was a blemish that in all likelihood would soon be gone. Its day was now long past, the glories of yesteryear now drowning in the miasma of the present.

The town of Kathryn's Spire was doomed, just like everywhere else.

As he walked, Sparky's eyes drifted out across the waste. They left the disheartening image of the town and dragged slowly across the sand and scrub until they came to rest on the Tower.

Kathryn's Spire had been so named because of this rusted structure, which stuck out of the desert like the cold sore twin of the blister-town. The Tower was old, and it leaned slightly toward the west, as if it were trying desperately to follow the descending sun. It was lying out here in the middle of the desert, a dead thing. It was a useless throwback to a time that had needed such a thing. Though it had gone unused for over a hundred years, it would be a sadder thing when its purpose was completely voided—when death decided to turn its black eyes on this place.

Sparky's eyes focused on the sinking sun. He thought about how such a sight would have been joy to any normal man who had just trudged the whole day, on foot, across the blazing sand, but it brought no joy to him. Even on the hottest day, Sparky would not have reveled in the coolness of a coming nightfall. All that the dark would bring was a better place for those such as he to hide.

He felt the sand slide to the sides of his boots as he began walking toward the somber little town.

3. What has gone before...

The fourth week past Big Dale's demise had ushered in what the folk of the Spire thought would be the last of the changes. The thought held them together, that perhaps things would stop changing. Life for them would never be as it *was*. None of them hoped for that; how could they? Everything was changing, and not just in their small town. Around the world chaos was rife. In the far-east, the Armageddon had slowed to a crawl, held back by what was whispered to be God Himself. But even that was going badly. After the Armageddon had

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plowed through America and no one could stop it, there had been nothing but change. They had not seen any visitors to town in over two months, and no one dared to leave. Anything could be lurking out in the desert. At least in Kathryn's Spire you knew what to fear.

He called himself Captain Royce, although he had likely never been a captain of anything. He was the man who, on the second day of July, stabbed the chief of police, Big Dale Peterson, right in the heart. He and his horrible band of followers, the Posse, had run the town since. There was no way to stop it, for Royce had taken Big Dale's guns: a six-shooter and a shotgun. They were the only two guns in town, and there was no one to go to for help. The state police used to visit twice a year or so before the Armageddon, but they no doubt had been laid to waste along with the military by the Coming. Steadily over the four previous weeks, Royce had begun setting his own codes of conduct for the forty odd souls who lived in Kathryn's Spire.

The Posse spent their days "policing" the activities of the town folk, though sticking their noses in everyone's business was more like it. Then they spent their nights at the Rusty Spur Saloon on the south side of the main street.

Some of the citizens of the Spire were speculating a strike for liberation. The two greatest proponents of this strike were leaning against the wall of what had once been a welcoming center when the stranger wandered out of the desert.

4. Abbott, Costello and the warm welcome.

The two men who leaned against the stucco wall of a shed were an odd pair. Their visage brought to mind Laurel and Hardy, or perhaps more aptly, Abbott and Costello. The thought of such a surreal image made Sparky smile and he marveled how strange the thought was in such a depressing place and time.

The stocky man looked up, and with a perfect Lou Costello expression of surprise on his cherubic face, launched himself from the wall and pulled at his tall and lean friend. What came next would have surprised Sparky if it hadn't been for the current state of the world, but nothing surprised him now. Costello, as Sparky found himself naming the stocky man, began to wave his arms in a most frenetic manner. It took a moment for Sparky to realize exactly what he was doing, and it wasn't until Bud Abbott cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted that he was sure.

"Go!" the taller of the two cried out across the distance between them. Sparky shook his head slowly, and wondered why they didn't want him coming into town. The look of surprise on Costello's face hadn't been one of dismay. It had been more of a spark of hope.

"Go now, before they see you!" Came a second call.

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"Get us help!" The fat man cried after his friend had finished.

Sparky shook his head again. Didn't these people realize what was going on outside their town? What help was there to be gotten?

As he got closer, he could make out that the shack the two men had been leaning against must have been a welcoming center at one point, or something of that sort. There were signs with faded letters that were illegible from the wear and tear of the desert wind. Below the signs was a picture window, which looked into a small room, holding no more than a few magazine racks and a bench. Sparky tried to think why a one-horse town in the middle of the desert would need a welcome center.

He was here to meet St. Paul and that was it.

The shorter man was still flailing his arms, kicking up dust with his shuffling feet dragging on the sand and gravel road of the main strip. His friend though, realizing the futility of yelling, had stopped and was at present glaring intensely at Sparky.

5. The Jezebel.

A shapely woman in revealing clothes rounded the corner from behind that welcoming center just as Sparky reached Abbott and Costello. Sparky could see that she was a Jezebel in an instant. She smiled at him seductively with ruby lips and then turned her succubus gaze to the taller man. Her hair, pulled back to reveal her neck, swayed like the swish of a horse's tail, with the turn of her head.

"So Hitch, you given any thought to my offer?" She slurred out, in what Sparky supposed may have been a ruddy Texas drawl.

"Well, I've given it a little more thought, and the only thing that comes to my mind is..." 'Abbott' began and then left hanging for a good second, with a serious thoughtful look on his face. "...Not if you were the last living thing on the planet. Not if it was my mother's dying wish and I couldn't go to heaven if I didn't. No. No. No."

The strumpet spat at his feet, but kept that lecherous look in her eye. She turned to Sparky again.

"Welcome to Hell, population forty humans, one doughboy and a eunuch. What are you?" She growled, challenging and taunting at the same time. Pointing to the other men in turn as she said "doughboy" and "eunuch."

"Just passing through, is what I am." Sparky said politely.

She laughed wickedly, until she started to cough a smoker's cough.

"We'll have to see what the Captain has to say about 'just passing through,'" she choked out. She turned, and still coughing, walked away into the darkening town. After a hundred or

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so paces she stopped, lit a cigarette, and howled at the moon.

"Interesting woman," Sparky said to the two men. "I can't imagine why someone hasn't scooped her up and wedded her yet." Then he smiled.

"A dangerous woman," the man named Hitch said with a grimace. "I guess we can't really fault you for not going when you had the chance, seeing as how you don't know the situation here in town, but I want you to remember that we tried to warn you. Now you've made your own bed, and you have to sleep in it."

"Unless he goes now, Racine's the only one who's seen him, and she's so doped up that half the time Milo doesn't even believe her, and she's his sister." The fat little man seemed very anxious. Sweat was beading up like marbles on his round face.

"It's too late now John, he'll just have to hop in line to suffer like the rest of us." Hitch said, and John nodded.

Sparky wanted no part of whatever was going on. He just wanted to wait for St. Paul and get out of this desert as soon as possible.

"Where is the local B and B?" Sparky asked.

"B and B?" John, the stocky man, asked.

"Bed and Breakfast you twit," Hitch said in a semi-jesting tone. "It's about a quarter mile down this strip on the right."

"Thank you."

"Aren't you the least bit curious as to what is going on?" Hitch asked as Sparky began to walk away. Sparky answered without breaking stride.

"Not particularly."

6. Awake,

Sparky slept on a soft mattress that would have evoked blissful slumber and pleasant dreams, had he not been what he was. After all, how could one such as he dream of anything but the sights they had beheld?

He awakened at the sun's first gentle caress on the day of rest. Convention and law stated that today would have to be his most active. Any other day he would have been perfectly willing to stay in his small room at the Wilkes family's fine inn. Today was the Lord's Day. That meant no rest for the wicked.

Donning the black German army jacket that had served as a second skin to him for two decades now, Sparky deeply inhaled the dry desert air. He curled his upper lip and squinted his eyes at the odor that was hidden in that ether. It was growing stronger. The scent of human suffering was tangible now, almost real enough to taste. Once it had gone that far this

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place would surely be laid to rest.

Sparky ran a darkly tanned hand through his curly black hair and moved to the window to look at the welkin beyond. There was something strangely fleeting about that blue ceiling. It now lacked the sense of permanence that one would base his reality on. Perhaps it was becoming less real; and as this folly, turned nightmare, turned apocalypse progressed, things would cease to be real and all would become an intangible dream of imagination, a wild abstract of the enlightened. Maybe this was all a good thing. All this suffering, that is.

He felt ready to tackle the day; he was sure that St. Paul would arrive in Kathryn's Spire at the swinging tail end of this beast called Sunday. St. Paul was like that: punctual to the point of a sword, but as late as he could possibly be. Sparky smiled and went downstairs to enjoy the second B of the Wilkes' establishment.

7. A conversation,

The table he was sitting at when Hitch and John sat down was in all actuality an old card table, with a cheap, checkered tablecloth on it. Sparky recognized the brand of table. He had once done some fine work for a man who had owned just such a table. Fine work indeed.

In the background the radio was playing some artful static, with the occasional bit of Muzak to totally destroy the static's good name. In Sparky's opinion, Muzak was a thing for hell, and nowhere else.

He had ordered a steak and eggs meal, with the meat extra-rare, and the eggs overcooked, and then pitched himself into a slight trance. That meditative rest was broken as the men he had thought of as two of comedy's greats, plopped down at his card table with sober looks on their suntanned faces.

The man called Hitch spoke first; but that was only after a moments-long staring contest, ending with an unyielding Sparky.

"Who are you stranger? Why have you come here?" he asked in a less than cordial tone.

Sparky smiled a half smile.

"I hardly see why you find it necessary to know my name, and as such I have no desire to share it. As for the broader question of 'who I am', you don't really want to know," Sparky said. "And the matter of 'Why I have come here', was answered last night when first I was introduced to you gentlemen and your Jezebel by the cruel mistress, Fate."

"A learned man, I see, or at least someone who thinks of himself that way," Hitch responded.

"Sir, we don't want any trouble, and its not that we're being noseey. It's just that we have quite a situation here in this town, and we need to know the whys and whatnots of everything

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we can. Hitch always tells me that information is our best weapon," John said in his awkward manner.

"Hitch is wise to think that. But how do you know that you didn't just tell that to your enemy?" Sparky asked.

"That's actually a relatively easy question," Hitch declared. "If you were here to work for Royce, then you would be with him now. There is no need for stealth or discretion when you are the one holding all the cards. He and Milo already know that I hate them, and the only reason I am still alive is because of that slut Racine."

"Just because I don't work for this Royce fellow, doesn't necessarily make me a sure bet. Why don't we just leave this conversation off at that. There is no need to involve me. I am going to wait here for my friend, who should be arriving this afternoon, and then we will leave this dusty waste and your life will be unchanged."

"You won't be leaving," John said sadly.

"That's why we tried to get you to go." Hitch finished for the stocky fellow. "Why we told you to get help. Royce doesn't let people leave. And neither do his regulators. If Racine hadn't seen you, you could have gone and gotten us help. But now you are just as stuck as the rest of us. Maybe your friend..."

Sparky imagined what would happen if someone tried to tell St. Paul that he couldn't leave. A slight smile crossed his face.

"I don't think you should get your hopes up on my friend, he isn't the charitable type. And I think that this Royce of yours will find himself amiable to our departure in the end," Sparky said. "Now if you don't mind, I would like some privacy while I am dining."

8. Another Conversation, albeit abrupt

St. Paul didn't show up on Sunday, and Sparky found himself sitting in the dining area of the Wilkes' again the following morning. This time his breakfast was not disturbed by the prattling of Hitch nor his fat partner, but by the owner's daughter, a pretty girl of about nineteen, whose name was Everlyn.

Everlyn worked as a waitress at the establishment and had in fact been the one to serve him eggs and steak the previous day. But this morning she was apparently not working. A heavy-set woman whom everyone referred to as Duchess was waiting the seven converted card tables.

Everlyn made her way across the room, and sat at his table as if he had invited her over. She dismissed his glower with a smile. Their conversation was even shorter than the curt discussion he had offered to the long-dead comedian clones. He looked at her and asked if he

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could help her.

"I think you should listen to Hitch. Racine's told Milo, and Royce knows about you. I would say it won't be too long before they come to visit and let you know who's in charge." That was all she said, and then got up and walked away. Sparky shook his head incredulously. *What was with these people*, he thought.

He ate the rest of his meal in silence.

9. An apparent foreshadow.

St. Paul didn't show Monday night either. But Milo Springfield did.

10. The beast, the junky, and the Shiny-Man.

"Bring him down," heralded the event that was about to transpire.

When his door was kicked in, he was sitting calmly in an ancient rocking chair with a purple velour pillow behind his head to keep the wood from getting too uncomfortable. Not that it really mattered, but he liked the feeling of the velour. It was sinfully soft.

Sparky found himself face to face with quite possibly the ugliest human he had ever seen. This man made the evolutionary leap between ape and man look like nothing more than a slight shuffle. He may, in fact, have been the living, breathing, missing link.

The look in the savage's eye was enough to alert Sparky that there was something not quite disco about this throwback to the Java man stage. Sparky chuckled at all these thoughts of Darwinism and Neolithic cultures, and it enraged the brute even further. He grunted a word. Perhaps it wasn't a word. Maybe the grunt was just a thought that floated in the vacuum of consciousness that existed in place of reasoning on this man.

"Hi, ho, Sasquatch! What's got your fur in a twist?" a suddenly amused Sparky blurted out, right before the savage dragged him to the ground. He didn't resist and let himself be pulled down and then summarily dragged, with careless force, out his door and down the hall without so much as a 'how do you do?' or a 'by your leave.' Sparky laughed out loud one more time and then turned himself stone serious. He knew full well that if he didn't everything could go very badly from here. With the way things had been going, St. Paul would then arrive just in time to make even worse.

He was dragged down the stairs, clunking, and thumping against hardwood and metal all the way down. Stairs, railing, stairs, railing joint, railing, stairs the pattern went, until he felt the final thump as he was launched from the sasquatch and tossed onto the bottom floor.

"Dining Area, I think I'll get off here," Sparky mumbled under his breath.

"Welcome to the Spire," a tall man, with hair the color of polished silver, said with a

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smile.

The brute that had just dragged Sparky from one end of Wilke's to the other moved behind the platinum-haired man and bared his teeth like a wild dog. On the other side stood another man, an ordinary man, with dark hair, gray eyes, unshaven. To his right stood the woman that he had met on the outskirts of town, in his first five minutes in this hellhole.

The platinum-haired man spoke again.

"I am Milo Springfield. I work for Captain Royce. You are now property of Captain Royce." Sparky couldn't help but focus in on the bizarre apparel of this 'Milo Springfield'. He was wearing a polyester shirt that was lousy with glittering silver paisleys. Beneath that the top of a wife-beater tank-top was visible, complete with gold chain. He was a shiny man. Most likely he had been a raver fifteen years ago when that was chic, but now he was nothing more than a tired remnant of that era. *Techno is dead, leave it alone.*

Sparky nodded absently at the shiny man's declaration. What did he care? Soon he would be gone, and these "regulators" couldn't stop him.

"As I said, I am Milo. You have already met my sister Racine," the woman nodded and flashed a smile. "The man who just dragged your sorry self down the stairs, is Coleman. And this here..." he said indicating the ordinary looking man among that motley crew, "is Davis."

Sparky nodded, hardly understanding why all the introductions were going on. He took the time to silently thank fate that these thugs hadn't noticed that he hadn't suffered so much as a bruise or scratch in his whole encounter with that beast Coleman.

"The reason I am telling you this is because I want to be sure you understand who is in charge. Captain Royce is in charge, and we four work for Captain Royce. Therefore, from this point forward, you work for us. You do what we say. We are in charge," the shiny man finished.

The ordinary man didn't seem too interested in what was going on; as a matter of fact, he had a glazed look in his gray eyes. Sparky visually scanned the man and found what he had suspected he would. Attached to the triceps of his left arm, was that marvel of modern technology that had allowed the medical community to become lazier, and junkies to get high easier—a tap-feeder. Sparky didn't even bother to hazard a guess as to what it was that the man was currently dosed with. Whatever it was would come on a regular basis, like clockwork, and flood his brain and nervous system with vile toxins. Or something of that sort.

The wild man, Coleman, was sneering, and Racine was still smiling. *Such an odd group*, thought Sparky.

"Do you talk? Speak English? Are you a Mexican? You look like an Arab. I want to hear

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you say that you understand." Milo said, his voice cruel.

"Not Mexican. And not Arabian. I am from somewhere much further away. But yes. I do understand, and you won't get any problems out of me." Sparky mumbled.

Sparky stood up slowly, and very deliberately. Milo eyed him suspiciously as he did.

"May I return to my room?" Sparky asked.

"That's what I like to hear," Milo said and then raised his voice. "You all should learn from this Arab, he learned real quick." And then without answering Sparky's question, Milo Springfield, that shiny man, and his posse left the Wilke's.

Sparky walked slowly up the stairs, feigning a slight limp to make the appearance that falling down the stairs had hurt. There was, of course, the covenant to think of.

11. More apparent foreshadow

Sparky didn't leave his room on Tuesday or Wednesday. He had meals brought up to him. Most of the time it was Barnabus Wilke's daughter, Everlyn, that did the delivering. Other than that, he kept to himself. St. Paul did not show himself, and Sparky was beginning to grow tired of the desert and its unpleasantness.

Thursday the trouble began.

12. John Barleycorn must die...

Word got around to Sparky, by way of the lovely miss Everlyn Wilkes, that John Barleycorn was missing. Sparky wanted to know who John Barleycorn was, but didn't ask, seeing as how the girl had assumed that he knew who she was talking about. *Must be the Costello*, he thought amused.

"Have you checked the other fine dining establishments in this booming metropolis?" Sparky choked out. "I don't know how any man could tire of your company, or of your family's keen ability to fry up a steak, but perhaps he wanted to try something new and dangerous. Like Mexican food."

"There are no other eateries in Kathryn's Spire. Not since three falls ago. Even before that creature tore through the Midwest the first time." She answered. "Hitch thinks he may have done something rash, or stupid."

Sparky stifled the laugh that wanted to come out and bit his lip to keep from stating the obvious. The man's name was John Barleycorn. What did she honestly think his fate would be? Sparky was surprised that he had made it this far. The tune was dancing in his head. Damn Traffic.

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13. A feeling born.

Hitch was frantic when he arrived at Wilkes. He was becoming unraveled, and Sparky thought it likely that the poor man knew what fate had befallen his associate. Sparky had held off his interest for the prior four days, but St. Paul was still nowhere to be seen, and it looked like things in Kathryn's Spire were coming to a head. If anyone here were going to make it out alive, he would have to get involved, but only on a subtle level.

"Where is John?" Sparky asked calmly, but with a certain amount of authority.

"I think that Royce is holding him. I saw Davis out in the town square. I think his feeder is malfunctioning, because he is deeper in his daze than ever before," Bud Abbott responded raggedly. "He said something about revelation, and then told me flat out that Barleycorn was to be sacrificed. He told me. Didn't try to keep it a secret or anything. What he said may not have been speaking for Royce, or any of his men, but I do have to believe that they have him."

Things were definitely moving faster. Sparky had a feeling that tomorrow would be a day that the citizens of the Spire would not forget for the rest of their lives.

He had no clue how right he was.

14. A cherub, crucified

The great glittering disco ball of fate cast its million burning lances of fire on the town of Kathryn's Spire Friday morning. A widow on the outskirts of the small windswept main street was killed during the night when she fell down the three steps outside her small home. By morning the coyotes had gotten to her. A man, who had been lusting after the daughter of his neighbor, was stabbed with a pitchfork by his wife when she caught him trying to climb up the side of the house to the seventeen-year-old's bedroom. And John Barleycorn was crucified and disemboweled on the mysterious Spire.

Then the regulators came into all of the establishments and collected the town folk for what they called an educational assembly.

15. Hitch, the Assembly and certain doom

Hitch was chained to the back of a pickup that had been driven down to the center of Main Street. He was still alive, though he had obviously been beaten. Sparky looked curiously at the pickup. He hadn't realized until now that the town seemed to be lacking in automobiles, a measure that had most likely been implemented when this Captain Royce seized control.

Sparky got his first look at the illustrious Captain Royce that day. He was an imposing

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figure, a big man, towering over his followers at an impressive six feet five inches or so. And he was muscular, though not to the point of looking like a weightlifter. He was just big.

"You people have not gotten the point of our arrangement," Royce declared in a booming and angry voice. "No leaving. No arguments. No fighting. You follow those rules and you live. You fail to follow them and you die. It is all very simple."

The people gasped and Everlyn, who was staring worriedly at Hitch, began to cry. Sparky didn't know how he had failed to notice before, but the two were obviously a couple of some sort. Hitch was looking at her with the one eye that wasn't swollen shut. Racine was looking at the girl with contempt. Things were coming to a head indeed. It looks like Hitch's sanction on life was about to be terminated.

Milo Springfield stepped out, with his platinum hair gleaming in the desert sun, and he made a proclamation for his "Captain".

"By order of Captain Royce, this rebel will die at sunrise tomorrow. It will be a particularly shameful and painful way to go, for sure. But if it is what is necessary to show you all how things are, then that's the way it will be."

Everlyn began to cry harder, sobbing into the shoulder of her father, Barnabus. Racine smiled. Milo kicked Hitch in the ribs. Kathryn's Spire was going to Hell.

It was just before the pickup pulled out, dragging Hitch slowly behind it, that Sparky noticed that someone had been missing from the group of regulators. Where had that animal Coleman gone?

16. Certain truths

Everlyn came to Sparky's room at Wilkes that night.

That night had been like all the others that had plagued the week. No sign of St. Paul. She was crying still. The loss of Hitch was just too much for her to bear. She cried out that she couldn't allow it. She pleaded with him to do something. Anything. Help her, she said, as though it would have no repercussions. As if his help would even be appreciated. If only these people knew. Compared to the torments he had seen, Royce was a frolic in the park, the desert a disco. He knew true suffering, imprisonment and fear.

"I live only for him. I would have died a hundred times over if he had not been there to make me happy. He is my life, my love, and I am pregnant with his child. You can't let them take him from me!" she wailed.

Sparky grunted, it was the only thing he could think to do, and patted her on the back.

"Talk to your father, or anyone else, I'm sure that he was well liked. Maybe together you could stop..." Sparky began, but she cut him off.

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"No. They are all cowards. They would let him die. Something has happened since that Armageddon man came. People just seem to be sitting and waiting for it to be their turn to die. You have to help!"

"What makes you think I can do anything? I have no gun, and I am one man, they are five." He said.

"Four," she answered.

"Four?"

"Coleman is dead. Hitch found him out by the Spire crucifying John. Hitch didn't go lightly on him. He hid the body and came back to town. I don't know how they found out, but that must be why they are going to kill him." Everlyn sobbed out. She cried and got up to leave the room rather abruptly. She paused at the door though, and turned.

"Please, do something."

And then she left Sparky with uncomfortable silence and the chaos of his thoughts.

17. Fortune frowns on a desert town

The people of Kathryn's Spire, all forty or so imprisoned residents, were up before the sun and waiting in the center of town for what was to come. They were there out of some perverse sense of obligation, a feeling that watching as one of their own was sacrificed was something they must attend. And Sparky, the stranger amidst their coven, was waiting. This all was turning sour. Today would be a day of nothing but bad endings. He knew.

The sound of an engine could be heard before the pickup pulled into view. Behind it, was dragged the ragged and tortured man who had dared to defy "Captain" Royce. Sparky cursed St. Paul for his absence one last time, and then moved to the front of the crowd. He could see Everlyn standing not too far from him. Her eyes were red, and he knew she had not slept the night before. Most of the folk probably hadn't.

Damn the covenant, this was all wrong.

The pickup unceremoniously pulled to a stop and Milo Springfield and the junky, Davis, jumped down from the bed. Racine and Captain Royce stepped out of the cab. They were grim specters of what shouldn't be.

Sparky heard Milo say, "Let's get this over with," under his breath.

Sparky pictured in his head what events, prior to his arrival, could have led to these unfortunate days; certainly the decay of this world, but what else? Milo Springfield and his degenerate sister couldn't have always been like this. They would never have survived so unhappy and friendless out here in the wasteland. And Davis, what strange twist of fate could have landed someone this far from any ghetto in a situation where he was now being "tapped"

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for intravenous drug use?

In the words of the magic eight ball, *all signs point to Royce*.

The words that came streaming from Milo's voice lacked the hint of anger and fire that they had held the previous day. He had not the look of determination, nor the apparent glee that it seemed he should have. Racine wasn't smiling as he spewed out hollow words, like "duty", "necessity", and "for your own good". Davis only had that lost and dazed smile of someone who was smothering in an opium or heroin grave.

Captain Royce was smiling, all too happy with the promise of victory, the knowledge that his only annoyance would soon be worm food.

As the noose was lowered over the Hitch's head, the world and reality shattered for those people who lived at the Spire. A horror unfolded as Everlyn made a rush at Captain Royce, cleaver in hand. Captain Royce was doomed as Sparky, Demon of the Fifth, lost himself to his most primal emotion, caring. And so were the people of Kathryn's Spire.

Sparky tore through his fleshy overcoat of human skin, freeing his true self. Wings of black and red were unleashed, as the fiery fiend became hell-bent on death and violence. As always, the most primal emotion unleashed, Sparky became the harbinger of other emotions.

All except fear. A Demon has no need of that, not when lost in rage.

Everlyn lost her life in the combustion of a twelve gauge. Hitch was dead, before he hit the ground. But for Captain Royce, Milo Springfield, Davis, and Racine, the end was even less ambivalent. Before they hit the ground, everyone knew why they were dead.

For Royce, who came first for his crimes against Everlyn, the end was a suffocating lack of a mouth, or perhaps brain. A flash of a memory came to Sparky, as he recalled that without any sensory input a human mind would go insane. Not that Royce had a mind to lose anymore. Sparky had separated that part of him, head and all, from his body.

Milo Springfield came next, and his still-beating heart glistened in Sparky's iron fist, as his soul was leeching down to hell. Sparky crushed the heart as the light faded from existence in the dead man's eyes.

Racine most likely suffered the most, because she had enough time to get a few thoughts in before the Demon descended upon her. He was no less precise and ruthless with her. His hellfire burned her to a cinder in an instant, and then she was nothing but ashes on the wind. There was no trace to mark her pathetic existence.

He left Davis for last, knowing full well that the man had probably already manually prompted the tap-feeder to release lethal doses of the vile toxins into his system. Sparky just stood and waited, as the man began to vomit blood and bile, and then fell dead by his own

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hand. Further the grasp of hell, and lose yourself in the process—a fair trade.

18. Saturday Morning Revisited

There was a faint scraping noise, perhaps the sound of a butter knife along burnt toast. The sound pierced the cloak of silence that had fallen over the onlookers. It was a troubling sound; the kind one might suppose would be produced by a ghoul trying to scratch his way out of a coffin. The sound had no origin, to all around it seemed as though a phantom drifting in their midst. It swirled about their ears only long enough to rustle, and then fall away, only to return. And with horror fresh in their minds and images so grim they could only shudder as a response, the people of Kathryn's Spire couldn't help but conjure the darkest and most depraved Demon as the source. After all, what but a Demon could possibly be standing before them?

The people of the Spire were right about one thing: the creature standing before them was a loathsome one. A Demon of the Fifth, and his power was vast and wicked. Neither he, nor any of his brethren, the despised, was the origin of that awful sound. Something far worse than he made it. The Demon was the only one who recognized it, and if he thought it would do any good, he would have screamed until his last breath for the town's folk to run. But he didn't. It was too late for them.

The only thing that would be remembered by the few survivors of that day, strangers to that wasteland town, would be the awful sound of heaven echoing in their ears.

St. Paul had arrived.

19. The arrival of St. Paul and the consequences of action

St. Paul, Angel of the Second, beloved of God and a faithful officer in Heaven's army, laid waste to the town of Kathryn's Spire. Fires of sulfur and brimstone rained from the sky into the desolate western town. Those that had just watched as their freedom was won for them by a Demon now suffered the horrific wrath and just punishment of a Messenger of God. For them, the disco ball of fate ceased to spin, stopped its glittering, and fell with a ponderous thud to the desert sand.

Before they had any chance at escape, they were all dead.

20. Discussion on a late friend, a forbidden gate, and a dead town.

Sparky, dressed again in his suit of flesh, walked from the ruins of town alongside his oldest friend, the Angel St. Paul. He looked slightly weary, and perhaps a bit downtrodden, but a bit of relief was also evident on his swarthy face.

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"You're a week late, you know that right?" Sparky calmly said to the Angel.

"A bit of fate, and bad luck interceded with my plans and made it impossible to attend our meeting," St. Paul said in all sincerity to his colleague, the Demon.

"What kind of bad luck can keep you for a week? Those people would still be alive back there if you had been even remotely on time." Sparky snipped.

"Lets just say that I was delayed and leave it at that."

"Whatever. You and the damn rules. No one else enforces the covenant with such grim resolve. You just killed an entire town, whose only crime was witnessing me losing my temper! Hardly seems fair!"

"Whatever. Even if I did break rules, I would still obey the covenant. It would negate faith if I didn't, and therefore incite the anger of the Lord. No way, no day," St. Paul said. "And besides, Armageddon will be here within two days. He would have been much less gentle than I."

"So lets go, we have someone to see. We need to get his assistance." St. Paul said and began walking again.

"Assistance? Since when did the great and mighty St. Paul ever have need of assistance?"

"Since the fracturing of the planes of existence, and the dawn of this age..."

They continued to talk, walking in the morning light of that Saturday afternoon, following the beginning of the end.

Born in Western Massachusetts in 1978, Mark lives there still, sharing an apartment with his huge ego, and a dog named Bear. His first novel "Lands Forsaken" became available in July of 2001 under the pen name Ronin Ashe, and his second novel "Onset of Shadow" will hit the stands later this year. He continues to work in the area of writing fiction, all the while maintaining a full-time job doing something with computers. In his spare time Mark is also a member of the low-fi/experimental, Indie music project 'The Indiana Whorehouse Phantom'. Mark wears size ten and a half shoes. More info on Mark and his work can be found at www.roninashe.com

I've always loved android stories. Androids are morally purer than we are, yet always discriminated against. They're physically attractive and programmed to be loyal—as well as tenacious. Want a hero? Look no further.

Wesler had been at war for 33 years—30 of them on the planet Tan—fighting with "indestructible valor" to liberate the "piteously enchained" Tanese. Or so the periodic news updates targeted to the Ongarish Freedom Brigade characterized the team's adventure.

Wesler didn't know anything about the truth of all that. Had the Tanese been subjugated for centuries by a malicious dictatorship? If such was the case, why did the people of Tan hate the Ongarish forces so? Why had the populace battled on, guerrilla-style, for the last two years despite the utter defeat of the Tanese army? Wesler had no idea regarding these questions. He had only his orders to go by, and those were signed by Lord Sudato himself. Lord Sudato was Wesler's master.

A tenet of the Ongarish faith held that Lord Sudato was the Living Divine. Perhaps Wesler had a strong conviction in that regard? He had no experience one way or the other to prove or disprove such a theory.

All that Wesler knew for certain was that he was the property of Lord Sudato and that if he disobeyed a direct command—a ridiculous concept—he would be tossed out in the next day's trash. Wesler was positive of such a consequence, because he had witnessed similar events himself.

The Freedom Fighter was cleaning his weapon, which, to be factual, was already immaculate, when Top Agent Zeelor entered the quarters of Makinash unit. The Warriors inside snapped to attention immediately. They expected to be told to board their transport, which would carry them to the next staging arena.

Instead, Top Agent Zeelor set down an official messaging unit, and Lord Sudato, beamed in, began to speak.

"Brave Warriors, I salute you in great exaltation. The battles are over. The war has been won. The Tanese have at last capitulated, grateful for the merciful conquest of the valiant Ongarish expeditionary force. We have released the downtrodden underlings from their eternal slavery and from the damnation of their spiritual essence. They are rejoicing in the streets of their cities, thankful that Lord Sudato appears as their savior. To you, honored

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Warriors, I express appreciation and commend your efforts that have resulted in the uplift of all the Ongarish and Tanese peoples.

"Many of you will now continue on to other glorious wars in our name, while some will remain on Tan to fulfill our sacred trust to these unfortunates. Those who stay behind will assume more suitable functions to fit the needs of the new regime. Obey my word and meet your destiny."

The soldiers remained quiet at the end of the announcement. If their reactions were anything like Wesler's, they wondered what their next assignment would be. Most had been at war on this planet for the greater portion of their existence.

The time had arrived for Wesler's appointment at the medical-mechanic unit. He was called almost at once by one of the evaluators flown in from Ongar for the demobilization. The evaluator took a moment to review the data Wesler had downloaded into the analysis digitizer.

"Thirty-three years experience at war. It would be a shame to remove such valuable files from your data banks. But still, the main portion of the fighting was done on Tan. The war conducted here was very different from wars elsewhere. Less brutal for one thing. After all, the Tanese share species similarities with the Ongarish. It would have been a great sin to decimate the planet."

The evaluator's eyes glowed mildly at Wesler. He was a much more recent design than Wesler himself. An improvement, Wesler had heard this type called, because these newer creations believed wholeheartedly as the Ongarish did. They had not been implanted with a neutral logic circuit.

For some reason, that thought made Wesler moderately angry. Surprising, since the soldiers' dosage of aggression substances had been reduced as of the start of peace, three cycles ago.

"You are a valuable item in Lord Suduto's arsenal. We'll have you reprogrammed for an appropriate position." The evaluator entered a work order for the medical-mechanic team to fill, and directed Wesler to move on to the retooling station.

The one thing that worried Wesler was that his memories of the last 30 years would be wiped out. That had happened to him after his former assignment on a planet, the name of which he had no access to. Something of himself had been lost with the removal of that information. If this were done again for such a lengthy span of time, then all that Wesler had acquired in his life would have vanished utterly. Who he was would have been discarded.

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But logically, neutrally, who was he? He was not as the natural, born Ongarish were, or even the Tanese, so pitied and yet so despised by the Ongarish. Wesler was a living, organically unique humanoid, yet not born of a female as most creatures were.

He had been built in a factory. He was better made in many respects than his Ongarish masters, as the Warriors often muttered among themselves, but he was less—because he had been created by Ongarish science and not by the Word of God Almighty.

Wesler knew that God existed because he had tested the thesis in the last 30 years and had found proof positive. Now, he prayed to one focal point of that omnipresent power that his memory banks would not be deleted and his identity would remain intact.

Wesler lay on the table as the two technicians read their instruments and set their dials. "The procedure is painless, of course," murmured the one. "We've toned down your receptors for the process."

Wesler knew the planet Tan, but he wasn't certain how he knew it. He had done something here in the past, something that the Tanese didn't like. They hated him and his fellow law enforcement officers. What act of harm might he have committed that made them this resentful of his presence now?

Peace had been declared in Tan only recently, he soon learned. The Ongarish had at last liberated the Tanese after 30 years of war. The Tanese were immeasurably grateful.

Yet, if they were thankful to the off-worlders, he thought, then they would excoriate Wesler alone and no others. But he noticed that the people glowered at all those from Ongar whom they saw in the streets. Surely they hated all Ongarish and thought him one, too. (Was he Ongarish or was he not? he pondered. Made by them, yet not Ongarish 'born'.)

"A woman complains of attack by an Ongar fighter during the campaign for the freedom of Tan," Wesler's supervisor, Commander Zeelor, informed him. "Since the troops have been dispersed, we have no real way of making an investigation, nor would we punish a soldier who might have gotten a little out of hand during the heat of the planet's liberation. But Lord Sudato has a deep interest in justice and wants to assure the people of Tan that they will be treated with the utmost fairness. Therefore, you must undertake to uncover the miscreant." Commander Zeelor gave Wesler the pertinent data and directed him to be on his way.

Wesler followed the internal map he had been issued and puzzled over his mission statement. What instructions had he actually been given? To find the perpetrator? Or that such a conclusion was impossible?

The Tanese female who had filed the complaint refused to admit Wesler into her home. "By decree of Lord Sudato, you must open the door," said the detective, without much heat.

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He would be able to undo the locks easily, or if not, then it would take him only seconds to tear down the entry. "I am in charge of your investigation."

"I lodged that protest with the civil authorities when my government was still in place," answered the complainant. "Go away."

"I have my obligations. You must permit me to speak with you," Wesler continued. He stood waiting patiently. His instruction-set authorized negotiation.

But as he awaited the female's response, the hairs on the back of his neck began to prickle and he twisted his head. Gathered behind him was a growing crowd of Tanese natives. They seemed quite hostile, if he could judge their disposition by their looks. They possibly even desired to do the Ongar officer serious harm.

The very instant he perceived his danger, he heard the door slide open behind him and he was allowed to slip inside before the armor plating clanked back into place. Wesler faced a Tanese female holding a Megon VII, the basic Tanese weapon of war.

"Don't try anything," the woman warned. "I let you in because I thought they might kill you and I didn't want to be responsible."

Wesler nodded and smiled pleasantly. He could have controlled the throng outside quite well, he believed. He was permitted to defend himself and any prisoner he might apprehend.

"Thank you," he said. "Now I will be able to take your statement."

He thought that she must be beautiful, although (so far as he knew) he had seen so few females in his life that he was quite uncertain about her looks. And, after all, how could the concept of beauty itself be defined? That which is pleasing to the eye... She pleased his eyes.

"At what place and what time did the alleged incident occur?" he began his interview.

"I don't want to discuss that anymore," she answered. "I certainly don't want to talk about it with an Ongarish policeman."

"I'm prepared to listen to anything you have to say. I won't interrupt and I won't reflect disapproval," he assured her.

She laughed abruptly. "Well, I disapprove. I disapprove of Ongarish ways."

He cocked his head. He had begun to record her story through his ears. As he had promised, he remained perfectly silent.

She had stopped speaking, however, and tears leaked out of those amazing eyes of hers—green orbs flecked with a rainbow of yellow shades. The color of... but Wesler failed to make a definite association with that hue. He retained something of the last few years—however many they had been—but the memory was vague.

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"Are you sad?" he asked. "Have I made you unhappy?"

"All the Ongarish have brought misery to my planet and to my house. Yes, you might say you have made me sad." Then she told him with the power of her anguish of the death of her husband in the war and her rape by an Ongarish soldier with a group of Ongarish Warriors looking on. Then she halted.

"What time? What place?" the detective prodded.

Her tears had ended. Indeed, she smiled. "What difference does it make to you?"

"I will find the offender and deliver him to justice. That is my job."

She gazed at him with such skepticism that he was taken quite aback. Why didn't she believe what he had told her?

Something in his own attitude gave her pause and she answered his question. "On the Plaza of the Water Spirits. At the hour of the Sentry on the 8th day of the Meriad."

Their eyes met for a moment and he felt touched deep inside himself, a strange sensation that he could not recall experiencing before. Of course his recollection of several years had been erased so he might have met with others in that way many times; been soothed by the knowledge that he was not alone; fallen into their energy field as if it were a warm, relaxing, comforting bath. He sucked the feeling in long after the Tanese woman, Mooga, had averted her face.

A small-sized Tanese male entered the room. Wesler jumped up, not frightened, but definitely startled by what he beheld. He sat back down. He had never viewed such a thing as this... perhaps.

"What is this?" he inquired of Mooga. The woman swiveled her head to see what had surprised her visitor. "This is my son, Feemo," she told him, puzzled.

"He looks like a Tanese but he is so small. Is he a companion of some sort? Does he protect you?"

"He's a little boy, of course, that's all. He's not full grown. Surely they have children on the planet Ongar?"

Yes, surely they did. He had been told about them more than once. He became reacquainted with the fact right now, glad to have concrete data return to mind. Little ones that grew into normal-sized adults. That was the progression if a male or female was *born*.

Mooga had given him her husband's clothing to wear back to the barracks. Wesler might not be safe walking through the town in his uniform, she said. He accepted her offer. Certainly he would be able to handle himself; he had many skills. But this was a kind of going "undercover" that was a typical method of law enforcement, he decided. She was kind.

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Surveillance craft had kept all areas of populated Tan under observation for the duration of the war, and now the peace. As an investigator, Wesler had access to all the archives. At once on his return, he donned his regulation garb and settled at his workstation where he reviewed the pictographs of the Plaza of the Water Spirits, as the locals called the place, at the hour of the Sentry on the 8th day of the Meriad.

He watched the Tanese crossing the Plaza fearfully, although afraid of what, he could not say. Then he spotted Mooga among a trio of women carrying supplies along the walkway. A group of disciplined Warriors stepped through in unison, the line headed up by an Ongarish Troop Master. Something within Wesler stirred. He enlarged the picture. It was as he suspected. The soldier in the middle of the team was he.

Wesler had been there. He had been a Warrior during the Thirty Years' War.

The scene played on. The Ongarish Troop Master pulled Mooga from among her sisters and stood her up against the wall where he raped her. The Warriors waited impassively for their superior to finish so that they could continue on. Wesler had been there with the rest. He had neither turned his head away nor looked on with curiosity. Why had he done nothing to save Mooga from her attacker, he wondered now. He replayed the moment, turning up the audio. Little was said during the encounter or immediately after it. At one point, Wesler saw his own mouth moving. He must have spoken quietly. Had he protested the violence against the Tanese woman? He enhanced the sound a degree further still. "We'd better get moving," he heard himself mutter.

Of course an Ongarish had been the one who had violated the woman. That went without saying. The sex drive of the Warriors was chemically abated, even as their aggression was switched on high. A detective like Wesler understood such things.

Or was it a soldier like Wesler? But he felt as if he had never gone to war, if indeed it was true that he had done so. Not a shred of memory remained of whatever time he had spent in battle.

He skimmed the personnel data on all the Ongarish who had served on Tan. The search was easy to complete and didn't take a great length of time. Few natural Ongarish went to the front. Why should they? War was a grueling, risky business without many rewards.

The Troop Master who had raped Mooga was Troop Master Rend, of the royal house of Feunal, a distant line of Lord Sudato's clan. Troop Master Rend was still stationed on Tan, indeed appointed to the temporary Governorship of the planet. That was good. Wesler should be able to find him easily enough.

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Commander Zeelor informed Wesler that the war was being resumed and the Warriors who had been sent off to other missions recalled. Probably Wesler himself would be returned to the fighting; it was a good thing his skills had not been deleted along with his memories.

Wesler nodded. There was no sense in contradicting his superior. That was a given from Day One.

An Ongarish ceremonial had been called so that Lord Sudato's blessing might be showered on their forthcoming endeavor. "The Tanese have betrayed their oath," cried Lord Sudato by way of the messaging unit. "They have tricked us to gain a strategic advantage. I have been merciful, but no longer will I stay my hand. The Tanese will be defeated once and for all, no matter the cost. God wishes such an outcome and I wish it too."

God. Was there a God? pondered Wesler. The Ongarish seemed to believe in such a thing, or so they said. He was never quite sure that their conviction was from genuine feeling. And he, himself, had no proof whatsoever of God's existence. The thing to do would be to test this thesis, to approach God in the way the wise men instructed and see if the Divinity responded. He could conjure up other ways of finding out.

Temporary Governor Rend addressed the Ongarish and the Warriors of Lord Sudato at the end of their worship. Wesler was pleased to see Rend attending in person. The sight of him reassured Wesler that the man remained on Tan.

After the ritual, Wesler changed into the Tanese clothing Mooga had given him and set forth through the town. This time, he was dressed in such a guise not to avoid trouble from the Tanese people, but to circumvent the Ongarish officers who might prevent his carrying out his mission.

Although Wesler had anticipated another struggle in order to be permitted inside, Mooga opened the entry to him as soon as the visitor's signal alerted her to his presence. She didn't seem afraid of him this time.

"Where is the son?" he asked, quickly glancing around.

"He's at a friend's."

Friend. That meant someone who would not shoot at you. "Oh, I had hoped to see the little one again. I found him most amusing."

Wesler wanted to show Mooga the visual record of her attack at the Plaza. Since his appearing there might prejudice her reactions, he had deleted his own features from the Warriors in the surrounding group. Or perhaps he erased himself from shame at having been present at the scene of a crime without making an arrest.

She didn't want to view the entire sequence. The record of the attack gave her pain.

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"You see, I found the guilty party," he told her eagerly. "He's Ongarish, as I had imagined."

"Of course he's Ongarish. I told you so."

"No, you said the violator was a Warrior. This man's Ongarish."

"The Warriors are Ongarish," she insisted.

"No, the Warriors are simuls," he corrected her.

"Simuls?" she had never heard the term before. The word wasn't one used publicly.

"Yes, like me." All the blood rushed directly into Wesler's face. His biologic harmonizers must be out of sync.

She stared at him.

"Simuls, like me," he repeated. "The Warriors were never born, never small." He hadn't intended to discuss these matters.

"You're mechanical?" she asked him, stunned.

"No, completely biological," he answered, glad to clarify her misunderstanding. "All our circuits are entirely organic. But we are not Ongarish. That's the point." He hurried on. "I have identified this man and I can find him."

"Yes, I've seen his picture all over town. He's the temporary governor of Tan." Mooga spoke bitterly. "You'll never be able to arrest him, you know."

"That's right," Wesler concurred immediately. "I can't arrest him. But where I can't make an arrest, it is permissible for me to execute the perpetrator of such a serious crime."

Mooga had begged him not to attempt anything of the sort. At the very least he must swear that he wouldn't risk his own life to punish Rend.

He had promised her that.

He prayed to God, testing the good will of the One who was fabled throughout Ongar and apparently even known in Tan. If a Creator existed, then He would allow Wesler to carry out His justice, or show him a way that suited His purpose more.

Wesler found entering the Governor's new palace in his uniform easy. He was obviously a subject of Lord Sudato. Why would any Ongarish official fear him, seeing this? He walked through the rooms as if he had a purpose here.

He soon discovered that this place had been a Tanese art museum, and the works of art drew his attention. He knew nothing like this—or at least was unable to recall anything. Some works played Tanese music as he passed by; the rest emitted sensual appeals of other sorts. Something about the Tanese people was pleasing to Wesler. Like Mooga, their inner

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core was soft and restful, yet on the outside they were tough. They had survived for 30 years against the Ongarish onslaught after all, and even still fought on, the rumors suggested.

Temporary High Ruler Rend was conferring with an envoy arrived just this hour from Father Ongar. Rend was also surrounded by his personal guards, five Warriors who were stationed at the ready to protect Rend with their very lives.

Wesler stood on the periphery of the room, where he went unnoticed. If he had no business here, he would not be present, obviously. "Lord Sudato orders the Tanese forces crushed," insisted the envoy to High Ruler Rend. "But there are resources on Tan that it will be valuable for us to exploit. Therefore, you must not totally obliterate the Tanese people. We will have them as our slaves."

"Yes, yes," concurred Rend, quite obviously bored. "That has been Lord Sudato's intention all along. I understand. But after 30 years, it must be obvious even to my cousin that his plan will never succeed."

Wesler walked away, his neutral logic circuits integrating this new comprehension. The intended enslavement of the Tanese people was an offense of the most severe degree. Lord Sudato was a criminal. Such had been proven to the policeman a minute ago. In the interest of the law, not only must Temporary High Ruler Rend be punished, but Lord Sudato himself must be stopped.

Wesler's idea was to poison High Ruler Rend with a blend of chemicals, a recipe taken from the forensics handbook that had been implanted in the investigator's neurotransmitters. Putting together a slow-acting poison that required only trace amounts to kill had not been difficult. Such an approach would give Wesler the greatest possibility of escape. Rend would be dead long after Wesler was gone. Now he sought an opportunity to carry out his plan before setting forth to thwart Lord Sudato's conquest of this planet.

He found the kitchen that had once served to deliver food to the pleasure-seeking Tanese attending the museum. Wesler was amazed to find the Tanese helpers still in place, set to preparing the High Ruler's meals.

The detective pretended to be inspecting the cooking area for cleanliness. Why hadn't Rend brought in chefs directly from Ongar? Surely he took an obvious risk that the dissident Tanese would do exactly what Wesler intended to accomplish today—poison him.

"We are very careful with High Ruler Rend's food," a Tanese kitchen worker replied to an inquiry of Wesler's. The words had a tinge of irony. Wesler waited for the explanation. "A member of our families tastes the High Ruler's food both before and after it has been served to him. We certainly wouldn't want to do the Ongarish governor any harm."

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Nor would Wesler want to kill a Tanese innocent with his excellent brew. He was glad to take the cook's words as a warning.

So God, if there was one, had placed an impenetrable barrier in his path. While he could kill Rend by sprinkling the poison in his evening meal, some guiltless one would be forced to swallow a sample of the concoction and would die for his pains. Since Wesler knew that, to carry out his concept would be murder and a crime.

Wesler left the palace with a feeling of frustration. He was not defeated at this point, however. Defeat was not part of his kind's emotional vocabulary.

While Rend was left to pay for his actions against Mooga later on, Lord Sudato's crime-in-the-making must be halted before the departed troops were again requisitioned. Wesler returned to his recordings of the war, learning from these several crucial aspects of the Ongarish campaign.

First off, he went to the warehouse where the supplies were stored. He saluted the guards and entered the premises, immediately spotting the goods he was seeking. Sex-drive suppressants and aggression increasers were the primary tools used by the simuls' Ongarish overseers to control Wesler's kind. Bags and barrels of physiology-altering drugs were kept in this place, used to direct the energies of the simuls. Wesler set to work ripping open the containers and spilling the substances onto the floor, mixing the chemicals together so that they would be completely useless. A good start, he thought.

Covered with the dust of his efforts, he saluted the untroubled guards, then entered the next set of huts containing the necessities of war shipped in from Ongar. Wesler didn't disturb the weapons themselves, but went about destroying their fueling packs, rendering them unusable. As he worked, he realized that he had inhaled some of the anger enhancers he had ruined. This added a frenzy to his tasks that allowed him to achieve his aims in no time at all. Then, when a guard tried to stop Wesler on his way out, Wesler knocked both him and his confrere unconscious.

The policeman changed into the clothing of Mooga's husband and went to her home. She let him in, but when she saw the state he was in, she cowered in fear. He ignored her alarm and ordered her to contact the Tanese rebels—if she knew any. He could deliver the Ongarish communications system to them and unlock all the secrets of Ongarish technology and tactics.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would you do such a thing for us?"

"In the interest of justice. It is my responsibility to punish the guilty and to prevent further crimes."

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"To get to Rend you would bring the entire Ongarish occupation force to its knees?"

"No." He shook his head. "If the problem was only Rend, I could do away with him eventually. It's Lord Sudato I'm after now." He smiled as if he would rip his master from limb-to-limb barehanded, then eat the results for his morning meal.

Had God inspired him? He would never know for sure, but the possibility was strong. The Ongarish were soon forced from Tan, but not before Rend stood in front of a Tanese court and received a sentence of 30 years on the Isle of Wrongs. The same hall of justice declared Sudato unwelcome on Tan. If the Lord of the Ongarish ever appeared on the Tanese planet, he would be subject to immediate arrest. As for the simul Warriors and workers like Wesler, some departed with their masters, but some stayed, having never known another world but this one.

The little son, Feemo, called Wesler 'Father' and grew so swiftly that Wesler wished he could hold back time. He had been cheated of so many years; so much of his life had been removed from his awareness, had been stolen from him.

But Wesler would have to make his peace with that. This life he lived today would become his history. His job as Leader of Peace Officers and advisor to the new Tanese Army filled his days so sufficiently as to prevent him from thinking about what the past might have been. And there was Mooga, of course. If he had known another woman, she had disappeared completely from view. It didn't matter. Mooga, beautiful and courageous Mooga, was enough.

*G. Miki Hayden's latest novel, **New Pacific**, found at*

<http://www.silverlakepublishing.com/catalog/newpac.html> is also a cross-genre work in which a corporate security investigator is sent to find a missing scientist in 2031.

I've always had a sneaking sympathy for the Minotaur in Greek mythology, and a desire to incorporate the Chinese Zodiac into one of my stories. One night after too much pizza and caffeine, these two things collided, and the result became 'The City-God's Choice'.

The Wheel was the heart of the City.

The City was the center of the world.

The Light created the Wheel, maintaining the City as Its own.

The Wheel of Centuries was made of godstone, flecked with apple green. Each upright slab was more massive than the greatest of the temple doors; each lintel as long as an elephant; each threshold carved with renderings of one of the twelve sacred Beasts.

From the walls of the temple, within the center of the wheel, the mother-moon could be seen, passing from century to century and from Gate to Gate, moving always toward a threshold she had last seen twelve hundred years before. Her light spilled through Ox Gate for the fifth time since the Wheel had been raised on the mountaintop.

The City could be seen, through the Gates, spilling outward and downward in all directions. At night, the painted roofs glittered, rich reds and oranges paling to pink and yellow as the breeze sang through the nightflutes. During the day, tiled streets shone with blues and greens, and suncats prowled the eaves above as City-dwellers went about the business of living, as they had for years without end, ruled by the City-God who sat in judgement over them.

The City-God's name was Bjorvi. Strong-shouldered, He walked freely among His people, loved by them and by the Light that he served. He was handsome, with callused hands and broken fingernails. His eyes were brown, and His horns were capped with silver. Thick dark fur spread over His thighs, and His hooves rang like bells on the tiled streets and temple floors.

Bjorvi wore a sword, the hilt of which was crystal and bronze. In ninety-nine years of rule, He had never bared its blade. Instead, like all the other Gods before Him, Bjorvi trusted to the dictates of the Light, ringing the Judgement Bell at sunset, once a year.

Those nights, when the moonlight poured down from mother-moon and child-moon alike, the Beasts answered. Spirit bulls rushed through Ox Gate, merciless and silent. Their feet made no noise as they ran; they passed through statues and walls, gardens and gates.

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Ahead of them ran the guilty, City-dwellers who had broken guest-right or kin-tie. As the blood-guilty fled, the raw spots on their ankles oozed, their skin macerated from tens of days' hard labor and coffle-chains.

"Run," Bjorvi bid them as they stood at the threshold of Ox Gate, listening to the screams of their children. He struck their shackles away with a casual blow of His hand, and they ran.

Many were torn to pieces within ten paces of the Gate.

Some reached the outer walls of the city.

None survived to cross to the world beyond.

It was said that the Beasts would spare any who truly repented. Stories were told of the first year of Bjorvi's reign, when a murderer had run inward rather than outward. She had crossed through the Tiger Gate, entering the Wheel. Her body had never been found.

Every year-tenth, Bjorvi hoped that the Beasts would not have to answer the summons of the Bell. Every year-tenth, His hope grew thinner. His eyes became dull; there were strands of gray in the fur of His flanks and His tail. He walked among his people less. He ate not at all.

Seeing this, the priests sent Micah, the oldest of their number, to the City-God.

Micah found the oxen-headed God sitting within the heart of the temple, staring into the darkness with His sword at His side.

"Lord in the Light's image, the hearts of Your people are troubled. They have not seen You since the child-moon was full. Will You not walk with them?" Micah asked from the doorway, his right as a City-dweller.

A day-tenth passed, and then another. Bjorvi did not answer.

"Great horned lord, You have not eaten in a year-tenth. I have wine with me, and a measure of offering-grain. Will You not eat?" Micah asked, his right as a priest. He moved forward, kneeling before the God.

A day passed, and then another. Bjorvi did not answer, but His fingers brushed against the hilt of His sword.

Micah prostrated himself before the God, and kept silence for nine days and ten nights. On the tenth dawn, Micah asked a third and final question. "City-God, what is it you seek in the shadows?"

And Bjorvi answered, His voice sanding the walls smooth as marble. The City-God stood, beginning to draw His sword from its scabbard. "The cure for the darkness in the hearts of men."

Micah closed his eyes. "You are not Lord of that domain, Exalted and Righteous."

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Bjorvi froze; an inch of blade gleamed, shadowed by the hilt in His hand. "Tell me more."

"You are a servant of the Light," Micah said, eyes still closed. "But where the Light does not go, the Dark holds sway. And just as you rule the City for the Light, there is one whose domain is darkness and shadows."

The floor cracked at the sound of the City-God's voice, although He spoke in a whisper. "Who?"

"The Ideopath, She of the broken sword and weighted scales."

The blow that the priest waited for did not descend. Instead, Bjorvi drew Micah to his feet. Kissing him upon the forehead, He left the temple. From that moment on, Micah's eyes were so full of Light that he could no longer see.

And Micah wept.

Bjorvi went out from the temple, seeking the Ideopath. He scoured the rooftops, staring into the eyes of the striped sun-cats, finding nothing but echoes of air and warmth. He moved through the alleys and the byways, greeting His people and staring into each and every face, finding only hints of darkness and hints of Light.

When He descended into the sewers below, He found what he sought in the eyes of the rats as they fled before him, into the shadows. Bjorvi followed the scuttle of claws against stone, crouching ever lower as He moved into the dark. It wrapped about Him like a blanket; wrathful, He drew His sword for the first time, finding that the blade was forged from steel and Light.

But try as He might, Bjorvi could not cut the darkness, nor could He make it bleed. And the rats, watching, flirted their naked tails and laughed.

Bare blade in hand, Bjorvi crawled through smaller tunnels and still smaller until He swam an age's worth of filth from the City above. He swam through a lake filled with poison, and forced His way between giant fungi dripping red-acid phosphorescence as they hung from the roots of the City fountains. He crossed over bridges of fire and ice, miles below the graceful gardens and plazas over which He ruled. He lost his scabbard to a slug the size of a cartwheel, and He left a trail of blood as he limped after the rats, ever deeper and downward.

He did not know that in the City above, the mourning banners were already flying. He did not know His children were standing on the edge of the temple wall, awaiting the sign that would tell them to leap to their deaths. He did not know that the body of a murderess 100 years dead was being laid out on the threshold of Tiger Gate, awaiting moonrise and the night.

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The rats skittered in front of Him, their laughter gaining in strength when Bjorvi reached the last bridge over the last chasm, for the bridge was made of shadows. Sword in hand, Bjorvi could not cross. It seemed to the City-God that He heard echoes of funeral music from the City above, and sobbing from the other side of the chasm.

Closing His eyes, Bjorvi let the darkness hem Him in. He rested His blade across his knees, and struck it with one fist.

The blade snapped.

The Light, released, ascended.

The foundations of the City shook.

The children of the God-that-had-been fell to their deaths, for it was written that the blood-guilt of the parent extended to the child.

And far, far below the City, Bjorvi walked across the bridge of shadows, the pieces of his sword in his hands, and tears streaming from his eyes as the darkness stole his vision. It clogged his ears, whispering truths that could only be told in the absence of the Light.

The Ideopath waited on the other side of the bridge, amid a forest of God-high candles bounded by upright slabs of godstone that formed a circle. She was old, white-whiskered and knobby-jointed, and every bone in her hairless tail showed through her translucent skin. She sat cross-legged on the ground, leaning against a great plinth of support. In front of her lay two halves of a sword whose hilt was crystal and bronze.

"Welcome, brother," she said, pricking tattered ears forward and then flicking them backward.

Bjorvi shook his head, as if he had been stung, the motion violent. "You are not kin of mine."

The Ideopath smiled, showing two good bottom teeth. "Oh, but I am. Here in the center of the Wheel, no lies can be told. And so I tell you: when your replacement comes, you will welcome her as a sister."

"I am of the Light." Bjorvi pawed at the ground with a foot. His voice shook as he spoke; memories crowded about him. A voice, female and stern, ordering him to run; the utter relief of the absence of shackles...

"If there was no darkness in you, if you had not owed blood-gild, you could not have crossed the bridge. Would that it were otherwise." The Ideopath bowed her head, the fine whiskers along her jowls trembling. "Strike as I once struck, and take up other half of the burden. I long to rest."

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Bjorvi stepped forward, dropping the pieces of his broken sword carelessly on the ground. He folded her in his arms, and kissed her once on each eyelid, feeling the flutter of her lashes against his lips. "I am tired of justice."

Pushing away from the man who had once been a God, the Ideopath demanded, "What will the world hold, if all are tired of justice?"

"Mercy," answered Bjorvi, sitting down and picking up the remnants of the rat-faced woman's sword. "Hope. Love. Change."

Still standing, the woman who had been a Goddess asked one last question. "If not you, then who will send darkness to balance the Light?"

Bjorvi sighed, resting a razor-sharp shard of his sword against the pulse-point in his neck. The candles flickered; the godstone quivered; dust sifted down like rain. "Trust the hearts of men for Light and darkness both. They need no help."

The Ideopath took two steps forward, folding her fingers around Bjorvi's, her nails brushing the fur of his neck.

"This was not ordained by the Light."

"The Light that sends children to their deaths and turns killers into Gods?" Bjorvi smiled, loosing her grip with his free hand. The godstone shifted, cracking. Fist-sized chunks fell like hail around them. "No. Go, sister. Remember me if you must."

Tears matted the patchy fur on the Ideopath's face; she clicked her incisors twice before speaking, and her tail coiled behind her. "I will never forget you." She ran for the bridge, lighter on her feet than she had been for a hundred years, as Bjorvi slashed downward with all the force he could muster and the Wheel crumbled from the roots upward.

She did not look back.

Last in line when popularity was being handed out, Stella K. Evans compensated by inventing an army of imaginary friends to take on equally imaginary adventures. This inevitably led to the writing of speculative fiction. She is a pediatric resident at the University of Minnesota by day, a mother and spouse by night, and a writer in all the gaps between. Her work has appeared in Strange Horizons, Abyss & Apex, and Fortean Bureau.

FEATURED AUTHOR INTERVIEW

PAUL A. TOTH

Tell us a bit about your new novel *Fizz*—what was the attraction to writing about a character that decides to completely transform and reinvent himself?

Fizz was an experiment. What would happen to a man with almost no identity of his own? I would allow that man, Ray Pulaski, all the usual ways of "finding himself," but I knew his comic failings would slowly disintegrate into a modern little tragedy; nothing would stick. How could he grasp the world when it always moved a step back in order to laugh at his expense? The answer, which I won't give away, has a lot to do with how he lost himself. Ray's a little like everybody, only multiplied a thousand fold. Everything in his world is brighter, bigger, funnier and sadder than the average Joe's, but his ridiculous path is one just about everyone has taken, for a while, at least.

Is Postmodernism a term we use when nothing else will fit? It's a bit like the bastard twin of Surrealism, isn't it? Or is that the other way round?

The post-modernists and surrealists might have once been bastards, but the tag has lost its stigma. Postmodernism made a point, but I think it has now been absorbed as thoroughly as surrealism. It's part of the landscape. But I'm not claiming the death of irony, since that itself would be an irony.

I think we've consumed all our myths, even these subversions of them. Now nothing is left of those myths but the fundamentalist's thirst for the end of everything, which I think is a symptom of myth exhaustion. Terrorism from the Middle East is not much different than terrorism at abortion clinics. We shouldn't be distracted by the cover story that a cause is being pursued. Instead, it's the act of powerless people flinging themselves into myths that have one last source of energy: Destruction. Therefore, what is the task at hand? New and better myths.

Are you happy with the short film version of *Fizz*? How did John Tissavary (who also worked on *The Matrix*) come to direct it?

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John and I 'met' in the Zoetrope writing workshop. I had posted a short script based on the first chapter of Fizz. John liked it and decided to make a short film of it. I think it came out pretty well. Some of the visuals are astonishing for a small-budget film.

Tell us something about Paul Toth that no one else knows.

I am secretly an optimist.

If there was one writer you wish could be alive today, who would it be? What do you think he\she would have thought of the 21st Century?

Arthur Rimbaud. I think he would be quite comfortable in the 21st Century, probably operating an oilrig off the coast of Africa.

It is difficult for any writer to explain their chosen profession. Usually there is something that, whether consciously or subconsciously, propelled them into a need to write. Would you be able to classify this specific something?

Words always had a kind of hypnotizing effect on me. That's probably fairly common. I felt the same about music, but that didn't come naturally. The mechanics of language sank into me. I guess you could say I had a musician's ear and a writer's fingers.

Which writers have influenced you the most?

I'll name the ones that really brained me with a frying pan: Malcolm Lowry; J.G. Ballard; William S. Burroughs; Graham Greene; Stanley Elkin; Ralph Ellison; Jim Thompson. The writers I love write fiction with three common elements: Adventure, razor-sharp intellectual curiosity, humor. Any one by itself has never interested me. I can't stand the factory-made genre tale, nor can I stand most so-called literary work. It's the stuff in between that gets me. Give me some brain cells and some goo, maybe a river, too.

Do you prefer writing short stories or novel-size works—what are the advantages and disadvantages of both?

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I really am torn between the two. Lately, I prefer the expanse of a novel. Stories are easier to get in print or on the monitor screen, but there's a limit how far one can go when the more prestigious—if justifiably not much better read—journals publish the most worthless and boring shit imaginable. The odds aren't much better with the novel, and there's a greater risk of time, but it's more satisfying if the book makes it to the printer. In the end, I'd rather go down as a novelist because novels would fill most of my deserted island list.

How do people normally react when you tell them you're a writer? Does it impress them or scare them off? What's the best advice you can give to aspiring writers?

I have a pretty limited social life, so most people already know I'm a writer. But of those who don't, no one seems scared off. Sometimes they roll their eyes. As far as advice, I think what helped me the most was picking a quota. Five hundred words a day, five days a week, works well for me. It can be much more if I have several projects going, but that kind of minimum accomplishes two things. One, it gets the brain into a routine, and ideas start to precede the writing. Second, it gets one out of the rut of influence and on the path of least resistance, which is the path to take, I think. Finally, the question mark is the writer's best friend. Writers with agendas write bad fiction. Knowing one's own ignorance is a hundred times preferable to claiming knowledge one doesn't and often cannot have.

What would you like your epitaph to read?

He embraced his doubts.

FEATURED ARTIST
URSULA VERNON

Vital Stats

Age: 26

Country: United States

Training: Not so you'd notice

Medium: Digital

Influences: Pre-Raphaelite, Art Nouveau, James Christensen, the standard roster of Golden Age fantasy artists.

On The Web: www.metalandmagic.com



How long have you been illustrating professionally?

Well, I suppose it's been about eight years now since somebody first paid me for art, but I've only really been freelancing in earnest for about five years, to the point of doing it full time for about four.

What inspires you to illustrate?

Money. Well, no, that's crass—that's why I do a lot of illustration, of course, but the ones I really enjoy, I do for all kinds of vague, undefined reasons. So I have a lot of inspirations—good art by artists I admire, which makes me go "Damn! Could I do that?" and bad art which makes me go "Good lord, I *know* I could do better than that." I think the inspirational power of bad art is terribly underrated. And certain types of hate mail, I love—people who write to tell me that my version of dragons is terribly wrong, or how dare I say/paint/portray their

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favorite fantasy whatsit in such a manner. I love those people. They keep me endlessly inspired. This probably makes me a bad person, but I've made my peace with that.

Do you ever use the faces of people you know as templates for your work?

Not too often—I can count the number of times on the fingers of one hand. Generally it has to be something that required a photo shoot, and those aren't too common. There's a trio of adventurers fighting mummies on some cover or other that has my husband and upstairs neighbor's faces, and I did a series way back when of warrior women based on a friend of mine, who modeled for it wearing vinyl in the middle of a very humid July. Greater love hath no woman. But still, not many. Of course, I paint a lot of weird animals and critters, so the issue doesn't arise all that often. Actually, now that I think of it, there's a coupla paintings out there based on animals I know—my housecats, a co-worker's Dobermans, etc.



You have a BA in Anthropology—what made you decide to ditch Science in favor of Art?

As sad as this sounds, I thought there was more money in art.

I have to let that statement stand there for a moment in all its pitiful glory, because the sheer misguidedness of it all still blows my mind today. But that was one of the reasons. The others were basically a matter of compatibility—I learned that I liked making art, and furthermore, that I really wasn't cut out for a job where I spent all day talking to people. I was rather more interested in archaeology, because most of the people you meet have been dead for a few thousand years, but I just don't think I'm social enough for the social sciences. And really, to do good science, you have to be terribly methodical and meticulous and capable of doing all the really boring bits. I'm really glad that there are people like that out there who can do it, but unfortunately, I'm not one of them—I need the relative novelty of art.

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What tools/software do you normally use to create your work?

Corel Painter is my usual standby, with Photoshop for general layout work. I use a Wacom tablet to paint with digitally. Every now and then I branch out into physical media, and then it's pretty much whatever I'm in the mood for—watercolor, acrylic, colored pencil, etc.

Apart from the medium, what differences have you found between traditional painting & digital drawing?

Well, the medium is the big one—digital is of course much more flexible, in that it's pretty hard to ruin a piece beyond all backup saves. So I think I'm a lot more relaxed with digital work, and it goes a lot faster. Beyond that, there's the problem of not having an original at the end, which is pretty much a business matter, since you can't sell a file to a collector. I know there's supposed to be a big bias against digital art and so forth, but in actual practice, I haven't really encountered it myself.



Do you think it essential to know the conventional concepts of art before starting with digital drawing?

Well, if you can't draw, you aren't going to be any better with a computer, of course. It's rather like going from pencil to paint—if you can't use the pencil well, a few grand in oil paints won't magically make you better. And I think a lot of people jump into computer art and get wowed by a lot of the cheap Photoshop tricks, like lens flares and some of the more vile filters, and start using those things as crutches. The problem then is that they never progress beyond that because computer effects are so much slicker and smoother than anything they can draw, so they don't practice those bits. So you see a lot of beginning digital artists who can draw figures, say, but never draw backgrounds because a gradient filter or cloud filter looks better than what they can draw themselves. And that's a real handicap that's hard to get over.

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What are the unique challenges, as well as benefits of making art digitally?

Some of the challenges are in portability, obviously—I sketch much better on a computer than I do with a pencil these days, because I'm so much more relaxed and spend a lot more time with the medium. The disadvantage, of course, is that when I want to go somewhere and sketch, like the zoo, I am forced back to the medium I'm less comfortable with. So mostly I just take a camera and take a lot of photos instead. But still, it's a lot more flexible overall—if someone wants changes made to an illustration, I can do it rapidly instead of having to set up all the paints and remix all the right colors and repaint over the correct areas, and wait for it all to dry. It's ruined my patience with painting with real media. I find myself hovering over watercolors yelling "If you were pixels, you'd be dry by now!"

Any interesting new projects lined up for 2004?

Heh! Well, there's more of my webcomic "Digger" to come, of course, and a few things lined up that I'm not really ready to discuss...we'll see how it goes. "Digger" should be the big one for the year, but you never know!

Would you like to be involved in animation at some point? Your style seems quite well suited to that.

I actually did a little work for an animation company not too long ago—all stills, basically art to sell the piece to the producer. Actual animation, however, is a little too time consuming for me, and requires such a huge collaborative effort, so I don't know if I'd go into animation as anything but a concept artist. Drawing the same thing over and over again is challenge enough with a webcomic...doing it sixty frames a second would probably kill me.



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What's the best thing about your job?

Beats the hell outta flippin' burgers! But beyond that, it's fun, and worthwhile—I'm actually creating *something*, even if it's obscure or weird or silly, rather than just filing paperwork that won't matter ten minutes from the time it's filed. There's a lot to be said for being able to take a nap after lunch, too.

Parting shot:

Uh...I know nothing profound. However, one of my all-time favorite facts is that vampire bats have to consume such a quantity of blood in order to get enough nutrients that they would become too heavy to fly. So they have terribly efficient little batty kidneys and begin urinating almost immediately upon feeding to lose the water weight from the blood. This is both disgusting and fascinating, and hence, provides me with no end of joy. It also makes vampire movies way more entertaining.

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I crept along the tunnel
Until I reached a door
I started to pound and pummel
Until my fists were bloody and sore

Splinters pierced my skin
But I didn't dare stop
I needed to get in
I wouldn't give up

Behind me there were scrapings
Slidings and some shufflings
Whispery voices
Barks and snufflings

As I looked around, my heart fell
There was no help for me here
Nowhere to run or hide
From the tunnel's cold black stare

They were almost upon me now
Just around the corner
I cried my silent tears
And sent up a desperate prayer

The sound of their excitement
Bounced off the slimy walls
I shivered in dismay
In my dirty blue overalls

Was it my imagination
Or was that the dank hot breath

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Of the wraithenbeasts behind me
The bringers of my death

Stacey-Ann Cole lives and works in London, England and has previously had stories and poems published online. She is just breaking into the freelance writing business whilst staying at home with her five-month-old son. She reads a wide range of books but what she loves most is writing and reading in the Fantasy and speculative fiction genres.

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ABOUT THE CREATORS

Lynne Jamneck is a writer, photographer and artist from Cape Town, South Africa. Her work—both fiction and non-fiction—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, Naked Erotica and Naughty Tales From A-Z 4. Her artwork can be seen at www.epilogue.net

Doyle Eldon Wilmoth Jr is the owner of www.specficworld.com He is the publisher of numerous online publications, including Rogue Worlds, October Rush: Poetry From The Other Side, the SpecficMe! Market newsletter, Simulacrum, and numerous others. He lives in Las Vegas, Nevada.

ELLEN DATLOW
AN INTERVIEW

Currently, Ellen Datlow is tied for winning the most World Fantasy Awards in the organization's history—seven. With co-editor Terri Windling, she has won the Bram Stoker Award for The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror #13, has received multiple Hugo Award nominations for Best Editor, and won the Hugo Award for Best Editor in 2002. As fiction editor of Omni magazine and later Omni Online from 1981 through 1998, she encouraged and helped develop a generation of fiction writers, and in doing so published some of today's biggest names in the Fantasy SF, and Horror genres. She has continued to do so throughout her editorship of the webzine Event Horizon and currently as fiction editor of SCIFI.COM's fiction area, SCIFICTION.

Has Horror fiction gone underground to gain a new, established identity in the aftermath of the Stephen King Machine? If one takes into consideration that most bookstores are doing away with their Horror sections, is the genre still a market in its own right?

I don't know if I would say it's gone underground but more back to a place where it's mixed with mainstream, science fiction, and fantasy—which is not necessarily a bad thing. As far as *short horror fiction* goes, horror seems to have emerged from the underground and is exploding into the world at large. There are more quality horror stories being published in and out of genre than ever before. This year I've found excellent horror fiction in *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*, as well as in mixed-genre publications such as *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, *Polyphony*, *Trampoline*, *The Third Alternative*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and in many mixed-genre collections by Graham Joyce, M. John Harrison, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Dale Bailey, and others. I've never been convinced that a specific horror section is important to the field. Horror started out in the mainstream/lit sections and I'm delighted that it's back there. When my ghost story anthology, *The Dark*, came out in October, I went to a local Barnes and Noble and discovered it in the "New Fiction Books" section—I couldn't ask for more. The readers who follow my editing work will certainly find the books and so will new readers who wouldn't necessarily look in a horror section.

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Is short fiction still the best way for an aspiring writer to break into the field? Will the proliferation of online publishing (and everyone with an Internet connection able to self-publish) have a negative affect on print publications?

I think it's still easier for a writer to publish short fiction than novels so in that sense yes. I also believe that honing one's writing by writing short stories is an excellent education in discipline and experimentation. As long as webzines and print magazines have editors who edit and who make quality choices in what they publish, the ones that don't and that publish schlock won't survive. There are more quality small press literary sf/f/h magazines right now than ever before. They're published by young writers and editors who love and respect writing. I'm thinking of magazines like *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Say...is that a...*, *Flytrap*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Rapid Transit*, *Trunk Stories*, *Full Unit Hookup*. They may not last more than a few issues and they may not appeal to all readers but what they have in common is passion, ambition, and taste. And there are excellent online publications such as *Fantastic Metropolis*, *Infinite Matrix*, *Strange Horizons*. My point is that in sf/f there are all these consistently excellent small press publications on and off line—I'm not counting the big markets like my own, *SCIFICTION*, *Asimov's*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *F&SF*, etc. There is no excuse for short horror fiction of all types not to have a similar boom. The most consistently literate horror magazines that I read are *All Hallows*, *Cemetery Dance*, and *Dark Horizons*. And I personally, rarely find the stories in *Cemetery Dance* horrific. There are a handful of other horror magazines that are less consistent. There are also excellent magazines that while not specializing in horror fiction, publish a lot of it: *Interzone*, *CrimeWave*, *The Third Alternative*, *On Spec*, *Aurealis*. These are English, Canadian, and Australian magazines.

In your opinion, what are some of the most powerful and recurring themes used in contemporary Horror fiction? Have these changed much in the last twenty years?

Interestingly, I've been thinking about this a lot as I finish up my reading and make my choices for inclusion in *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror #17*. This year I've seen a large number of excellent horror stories about children. I'm not talking "child abuse" or "children in jeopardy" stories, although there are some of those, of course, but of stories with children being an important part of the plot. Eight of the stories I've chosen deal with children. Also, I see a lot more stories about dying and death-- and ghost stories.

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Which Editors have you learned the most from, and how has this influenced your own editing technique?

Judith Merrill was extremely influential on me as an editor because of her Catholic taste in choosing fiction for her *Year's Best SF* series—she chose stories by mainstream writers and from mainstream publications in addition to those published by genre magazines and anthologies. I think it's obvious from what I publish in my original and reprint anthologies and in *OMNI*, on *Event Horizon*, and on *SCIFICTION* how Merrill has influenced me.

Maxwell Perkins, the editor of Hemingway and Fitzgerald influenced me with his hands-on approach to the text. Going through the *process* of editing with an author is as important as choosing the material. A good editor helps the writer communicate what that writer intends. I'm a working editor who cares very much about words and how they're used. In addition to substantive editing (that is making sure the overall story works, the characters are consistent, the structure works, etc) I line edit every (original—not the reprints) story that I publish. Only then does the story go to a copy editor and then proofreader.

Give us your five best Horror films of the last decade—and why? Are there any books\stories you personally would like to see developed into either a film or TV series?

I think most horror films suck and I rarely go to them. But if I *have* to name a few good ones I'll name:

Ringu and *The Ring*—I liked them equally. Both versions were genuinely scary -- the strange young woman at the center of the story is pitiable as well as monstrous.

The Blair Witch Project—there's lots of backlash against it now but the marketing that was used made the movie all the more creepy. This is one that didn't really affect me until I tried to go to sleep the night I saw it. Images of the sticks and the last scene stayed with me longer than with most horror movies.

The Others—good acting, nice atmosphere.

28 Days—For once, I cared about the characters

Audition—creepy, sometimes cringe-making Japanese movie about a very nutty, innocent-looking young woman and her relationship to a hapless widower.

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I would never want anything that I love to be made into a film or TV series—it would just be ruined. There are only a few exceptions of books that have been made into even better (or at least as good) movies:

Bladerunner

The Green Mile

Carrie

Lord of the Rings Trilogy

***Interzone* recently changed from a monthly to a bi-monthly magazine. Nobody ever seems sure about the stability and long-term potential of short fiction magazines these days. Taking into account that the above mentioned is one of the longest running publications around, what do you attribute this change in frequency to? Financial? Surely, it cannot be a lack of viable material?**

Interzone lost its government grant a year or two ago and David Pringle does what he can to keep the magazine alive. Everyone reading this subscribe, dammit!!!

Are there any particular countries beside the US and UK that you've noticed writers submitting fiction from? There's a growing move amongst South African Speculative writers, for instance, to get their material out into the international market.

Australia and Canada mostly. I don't believe I've received more than one or two stories from any place else. Occasionally a story from the Netherlands. I've received a few older, previously untranslated submissions by a Cuban writer.

There's no excuse for English language writers not to send their work out to the US and UK markets. It's much more understandable that we rarely see Japanese, Indian, European, or Latin American submissions because it's costly to translate and most editors are not fluent enough in other languages to judge a foreign submission.

Did the coming and going of the new millennium have any significant influence on themes explored in fiction? At one point, it almost seemed as if psychological horror eclipsed the popularity of the good-old-fashioned monster tale.

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The serial killer became the monster of the 90s. I don't know exactly what caused the increase of psychological horror in that decade but luckily, the trend seems to have subsided into an almost cozy routine.

You recently edited an anthology of ghost stories: *The Dark: New Ghost Stories*. Is the ghost story making a comeback? Why has it been absent from view for such a long time?

I'm delighted to see that the ghost story has indeed made a strong comeback. Although it never went completely away it just wasn't noticed as much. I suspect that *The Sixth Sense* and *The Blair Witch Project* brought the idea of the ghost story back into the public consciousness.

I wrote the proposal for *The Dark* in early 1998 and it took my agent and me three years to sell it. And currently many submissions for *SCIFICTION* are about death and dying and ghosts. I hear the same from Gordon Van Gelder, editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Is it true that you play the piano?

It's true that I *used* to play the piano. I haven't played in many years. I studied classical piano for about seven years as a child and learned to read music well-enough, but never had an "ear" for it. I hated practicing scales (doesn't every kid?) but enjoyed playing. We had a beautiful upright piano that was finally sold by my parents (it hadn't been played in quite awhile) a few years ago.

If Fantasy is about questioning 'What is Real', and SF 'What is Human' – what is the demand behind Horror fiction?

Fantasy is not *just* about questioning what is real. That's only one tiny subgenre of fantasy. Fantasy is about magic and the strange—finding it everywhere—in a land far away or just around the corner.

And sf is very much more than about "what is human?" It's about how humans are going to evolve, and how are we going to deal with the technological and biological marvels and disasters we humans continually create. For example, when computers were first described

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in early sf they were envisioned as taking up entire rooms. How wondrous that they are now small enough to fit in one hand. Negatively, technology has helped create holes in the ozone layer, threatened to wipe out many animal and plant species around the world, and enabled humankind to create bigger and better weapons to kill one another.

I suppose horror is ultimately dealing with loss—of self and of loved ones. Dealing with pain and death and other things that scare humans. And of course, there is plenty of horrific sf such as *Who Goes There?*, the novella written by John W. Campbell that was adapted into the original and remake of *The Thing*, *The Fly*, originally written by George Langelaan, H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *Alien*, Nevile Shute's *On the Beach*, and many other examples.

And speaking of SF—it doesn't seem to matter what decade\timeframe we're in, people are seemingly always convinced that the genre is taking a dive. How do you respond to this?

It's all bullshit. I get tired of those critics who want *their* genre to remain faithful to its pulp roots. And I get *really* tired of new editors who have to put down what exists in order to build up their own supposedly edgier, magazines, 'zines, or anthologies.

I generally see sf from the perspective of short fiction and right now I'm delighted by what I'm reading in, and on the edges of the field. I see an influx of new writers who are experimenting with voice and style and I see more established writers maturing into brilliance, as they continue to delve into the political, economic, and scientific issues crucial to our future. I'm very optimistic about the future of short fiction (I can't really judge the novel area).

Are there any new trends in SF—stylistically or thematically—that you've noticed cropping up more?

A willingness by writers to cross genres and move easily between sf/f/h and mainstream. Some of our best writers do this: Kelly Link, Elizabeth Hand, James Blaylock, Lucius Shepard, John Kessel, Dale Bailey, Pat Cadigan, Graham Joyce, Michael Swanwick, Kim Newman, Paul McAuley, Nicholas Royle, M. John Harrison, Richard Bowes, Karen Joy Fowler, Carol Emshwiller, Terry Bisson, Jeffrey Ford, and so many others.

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How do you juggle your job as Editor of SCIFICTION with editing the yearly print anthologies? What do Editors do to relax?

Badly. I'm always burnt out on the *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* series just about now. This year was the worst because there were more anthologies and collections and magazines coming in than ever before.

I switch back and forth between my reading manuscripts and reading published stories, or maybe take a break by responding to this interview or checking various bulletin boards online. I just need to focus on the things that take priority at any given time. If I have a deadline then that comes first.

I work from home so if I really want to get away from the various jobs, I have to go out. I go meet friends for meals or coffee, go to movies. Go away on trips. When I'm home I'm working and online—that's just how it is.

Who are some of your favorite authors, and why?

Jeffrey Ford because I never know what he's going to write next. He can write marvelous horror stories like "The Trentino Kid" and "A Night in the Tropics" and sf like "The Empire of Ice Cream" and each has a different voice. He also captures where he grew up accurately and beautifully.

Kelly Link for the same reason. For her ability to write twists and mazes that eventually get to where they're going such as in "Lull." For writing about Nancy Drew, a book series character I loved as a girl.

Jonathan Carroll for his imagination and for his ability to make me love his characters, flaws and all (I'm his editor at Tor). Because I love his dogs.

William Gibson—I've loved everything he's ever written and I think *Pattern Recognition* is his best yet—he writes gorgeously and I enjoy what he writes about.

Elizabeth Hand because I think her stories are passionate and I get lost in them. I'm always eager to read the next one (I wish she wrote faster).

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You wake up one morning and little green men have REALLY invaded the Earth. (Or gray ones—color is irrelevant and resistance is futile) How do you think they'll react to our literary interpretations of them?

If they have any sense of humor they'll laugh their heads off.

Where do you see the Internet going in the next 15 to 20 years? Will print mediums prevail? Will the situation become reversed—Internet publishing the norm and print editions its inferior twin?

I have no idea but I'm interested in finding out. <g> Who would have thought it'd take off the way it has? The Internet has already made a difference in how people *buy* books. Online bookstores have made it unnecessary for readers to go to brick and mortar bookstores. When I wanted to buy the UK edition of one of the Harry Potter series rather than the Americanized version, I merely ordered the book from amazon.uk. I suspect so-called "independent bookstores" (I'm not talking about genre specialty shops) will go the way of the dodo and frankly, it wouldn't upset me all that much. It's the large, chain bookstores like Barnes & Noble and Borders that carry *my* books, not the snotty little literary bookstores around town.

Print's certainly not going to go away. And Internet *publishing* will never be the norm until people realize that "publishing" isn't just slapping whatever crap you like onto a website. Without editing, marketing, and publicity a writer might as well put her fiction under her pillow and wait for the tooth fairy to transform it into a gold.

Any exciting new projects on the horizon for you?

I'm hoping to edit another horror anthology but there's no deal yet and Terri Windling and I hope to do a third YA anthology together but there's no deal on that either. And of course *YBFH #18*. Ughhh.

If there were any writer you wished you could have worked with, who would it be?

I'm assuming you mean someone dead, as there's always the possibility I'll be working some day with anyone alive today. Tiptree in her prime. Ted Whittemore. (I did work some

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on his novel *Sinai Tapestry* when I was an editorial assistant at Holt, Rinehart, and Winston but not as much as I would have liked.).

What would you like your epitaph to read?

Hey, let's not get too morbid here <g> I'm gonna live forever!

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