

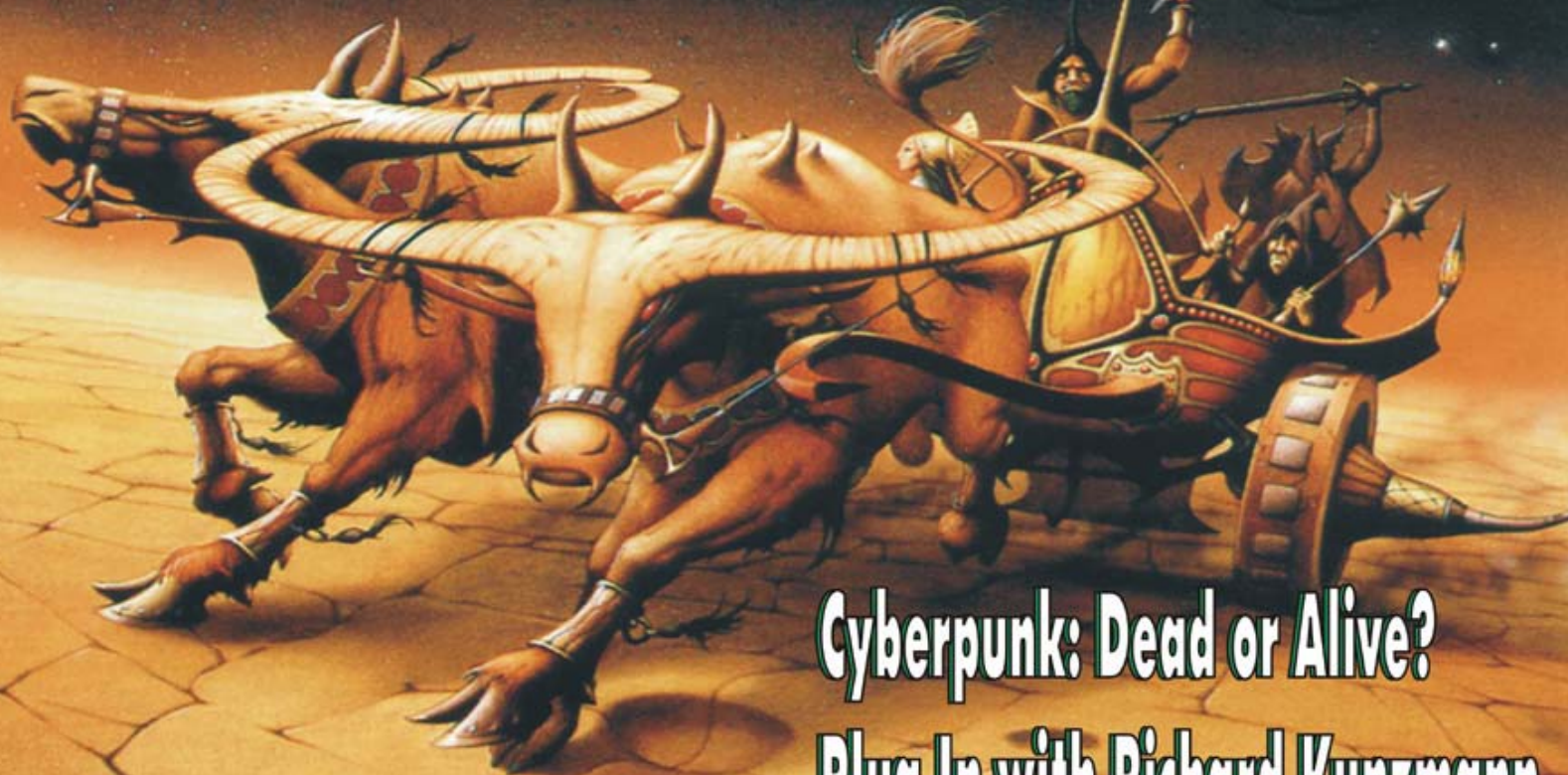
# SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

**Kelly Link**

**Rodney Matthews**

**Gordon Van Gelder**



**Cyberpunk: Dead or Alive?**  
**Plug In with Richard Kunzmann**

**Also Featuring**

**Neil Ayres, Charles Tuomi, Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr,  
L.J Bothell & Susan Franzblau**

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Editorial Notes:

Editor & Magazine Layout: [Lynne Jamneck](#)  
Publisher and Web Layout: [Doyle Eldon Wilmoth Jr](#)



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### The Editor's Desk

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Why hello there, curious reader. Say—have I not seen your face here before? Mmm. Perhaps you are new to our family of readers then, yes? In that case, let me bid you a hearty welcome. You know what we say: there's always room for more. We're busy building a brand new reading room anyway. Things are expanding. People want to join. What else can we do?

Thanks to all the wonderful submissions we've received, we have another very readable issue for your enjoyment. Ah yes—I see you are getting itchy already. Welcome back to those of you who have been with us from the very beginning, and WELL HI THERE! To everyone who've joined in the merriment since issue 3. Your company is like a fine wine. And some cheese crackers, if you won't take offence.

This time I will leave you to discovering the stories inside on your own. Nope, no tidbits for you this time. Stories, short oddities, specific artwork and the insights of a well-in-the-know Editor. And not forgetting a marvelous article by Richard Kunzmann about a subject that will either get your binaries in a twist or make your internal memory go haywire. Maybe both. Is Cyberpunk dead? Is it very much alive? Would you like to live in a world full of Keanu Reeves Spares? Troublesome indeed—or a digital paradise, depending on your personal point of view.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to ask you for your feedback on some ideas we've been contemplating for the magazine. For instance: would you like us to have themed issues in future, and if so, what themes would you—as reader or writer—be interested in exploring? Give us your thoughts, your highly opinionated opinions, your rants, your raves... We'd love to hear them!

Now see here: leave that remote control alone! Have you no idea how bad television is for you?! It sucks all the intelligent marrow from your head like a B-grade horror movie! (Don't you just love those, btw?) Put it down, gently, and step away from the volume knob. There you go, that's it. Now, page down. Come on, you can do it. There we go! See? Wasn't that difficult was it?

Hello?

You there buddy?

Ah. Shhhh. I'm leaving now. I see you're reading already.

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### ***The Cannon*** **Kelly Link**

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Q: And who will be fired out of the cannon?

A: My brother will be fired out of the cannon.

Q: And what is the name of the cannon?

A: Mons Meg. Dulle Greite. Malik-i-Mydan, Tzar Pooska, Dhool Dhanee, Zufr Bukh. Her nickname is Inevitable. She is also called Sweet Mouth and The Up, Up, And Away. She is known as The Widow for her coloring and because she has had congress with many men. She is also called The Mermaid by her husbands – the men who oil her parts and polish the O of her mouth, and harness her and pull her along from town to town – they say we should release her into the harbor, to see if she swims away. It is their little joke. She is called The Conversation, because she will speak courteously if you address her with a match. She is called The Only Answer, because she only ever gives the same answer, no matter your question.

Q: And what is your brother's name?

A: I have already forgotten it.

Q: How far will he travel?

A: He will travel so far he will never come home again. His feet will never touch the ground, not for the rest of his life. He will never see his family again. He will never see the cannon again, but for the rest of his life, he will dream of her round, fixed, roaring black mouth.

Q: Who are these women?

A: They are his wives. After my brother is fired from the cannon, his two youngest wives will take his place in the cannon. They are wearing his luggage on their backs, filled with his belongings, his books, his golf clubs, his correspondences, his record collection, his toiletries, his identification. His wives will climb into the cannon and leave the cannon in much the same way that my brother will leave it, but they won't go to the same place he is going. Men and women don't travel to the same place.



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Q: Why not?

A: No one knows why.

Q: Will he never come home again?

A: He will never come home again.

Q: Why must the cannon be fired?

A: The cannon must be fired because that is the reason for cannons. Ordinance must be placed in the cannon. Ordinance must be fired out of the cannon. The cannon serves no other purpose. A man may accidentally fall asleep in a cannon, or take shelter from a rainstorm, or hide from his enemies inside a cannon, but in the end, the cannon must be fired.

I once fornicated with a married woman inside the Sweet Mouth. She was agoraphobic. I said I was agnostic.

I said, "Yes, like that, don't wriggle so much, " and she said, "How do you like this? " and "Watch your head, " and while we were fucking, her husband came up and lit a match, and then we were flying. We sailed out like grappling shot. My lover yelled back at her husband, "Cock her up a bit, master gunner! " and we watched him get smaller and smaller.

I held onto her hips and the tails of her hair and fucked her as we passed over the countryside, and she wrapped her legs around my waist and fucked me back. When we were finished, we flew along side-by-side, and she remarked that she was grateful to me and the cannon and her husband. The affair had cured her of her agoraphobia. We fucked some more, to celebrate, and then we came to a town and I grabbed on to the steeple of an Episcopal church. She kept on going along. She wasn't ready to go back down again. I had a long walk home. I haven't seen her since.

Q: Did your brother have a happy childhood?

A: Why don't you ask him? He used to sit on my head. Once he set off firecrackers in my closet. He substituted toothpaste and cucumber sandwiches for my lunch. He ripped out the last pages of his comics before he gave them to me to read. He saved up his allowance and paid Josepha Howley and her four sisters to chase me around the neighborhood. When they caught me, they took off my shorts and tied them to a tree branch.

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Q: Did the cannon have a happy childhood?

A: A long time ago, before all the wars were over and done with, when large artillery still had other uses, there was a master gunner who loved the cannon. Wherever he travelled he took her with him. She was his mascot, his victory, his confidante, his clock. For love of the master gunner she took Odruiik. She took Prague, Famagusta, Seringapatam, Bajadoz. She took Cairo, she took dancing lessons, she took Beethoven's hearing and Napoleon's arm. She took and took and the master gunner gave and gave. He tickled her with his *funis ignarii* and his wands and his wormers, he wooed her with Valturio's patented incendiary shells, with fireworks and grapeshot, lead, granite, and bronze; he anointed her with costly scents—saltpetre, serpentine, sulfur, charcoal, antimony. When the master gunner was old and rich and tired of going to war, he retired to the Riviera and built a castle. He married the cannon and he tied up her muzzle in a bonnet of white silk so that she would look like a lady. On Sundays the master gunner harnessed his wife to four ex-cavalry horses and rode her down the road to the chapel.

His wife was too stout to fit through the doors, though, and when the priest turned down the master gunner's offer to pay for a new set of doors, the gunner left her tied up next door in the cemetery. The horses cropped the grass and the gunner paid a small boy to watch and make sure that no one took his wife to melt down for scrap. After the service, the younger members of the congregation used to go pick through the cemetery for rocks and small bits of masonry, for the master gunner to fire off.

Inside his castle the master gunner built a ramp so that when he went up to bed, the cannon went with him, and when he came down in the mornings for his breakfast, the cannon went too. To their great sorrow, they never had children and when at last the master gunner died, the undertakers dressed him in his traveling clothes and placed him inside his wife, the cannon. This was consummation. But the charge was inadequate, and when the master gunner left his wife at last, he only got as far as the next town over. They found his boots in an irrigation ditch, his johnnie in a lemon tree, his body tumbled over a sheep wall, his head in the shepherd girl's lap.

His heirs sold his widow to a circus impresario.

Q: Is there such a thing as a happy marriage?

A: Let me answer that question. My name is Venus Shebby. When I am a young girl, they fire me from the cannon one day and when I come down, I am in a different place. A beautiful place, full of beautiful people! The people who live in that beautiful place are hairy in winter and in

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spring they shed that hair and go naked.

In winter, they catch fish by setting fires on the frozen lakes, but in summer they don't eat fish. In summer they eat fruit and grains which they ferment in bladders, and those people stay drunk the whole summer long. Summer is the time of ghosts. In winter, ghosts are easy to spot. There are stories about winter ghosts found tangled like lice in their lovers' hair. Dead people have no hair themselves, which is how they can be recognized in winter. But in summer, the living and dead may pass each other on the street, and no one knows the difference. There are epic comedies, famous tragedies about the misunderstandings that ensue.

Those beautiful people collect their hair as they shed it, and keep it in pouches which they wear around their waists. The people wash the hair and perfume it and comb it and card it. In summer, the living wear woven hair belts and their pouches of hair around their waist, to show they are living people. But there are always fashionable people, who pretend to be dead, and there are cunning dead people, who steal hair from living people. For this reason, it is a deadly insult to pick off a strand of someone else's hair and put it in your own pouch, unless you have been invited to do so.

The people form societies to weave enormous carpets from their shed hair, and these carpets are soft and warm and heavy. The people sleep under these carpets in winter, once they are married, and they marry as many wives and husbands as can sleep together comfortably under one carpet. There is one word, which means all three of these things: *marriage, carpet, society*. There is no word for *war* or for *travel*. The people do not have a word for *cannon*. There are no cannons. All of the people's artifacts are made of hair and bone and skin. (Can you imagine a cannon made out of hair?) Even their histories are told on tapestries woven out of hair. But there is nothing as beautiful as the marriage carpets.

I have a collection of photographs of married people, lying together, all piled together beneath their marriage carpets, red and brown and black and amber and grey, looking as if particularly thick and hairy circus tents have collapsed. Heads and feet poke out at the edges, and some of the people are sneaking looks out of the embroidered, unfastened holes which are for breathing. The fastening buttons are carved of bone. If you have money, I'll show you these photographs. Industrious people sometimes weave carpets so large that they can marry several hundred other people all at once.

Other carpets the beautiful people keep in houses which are only for this kind of carpet, and not for living in. The carpets kept in these houses are the carpets in which the people are buried.

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In summer, I might have been born in that place. The first winter, I was a novelty. I had my pick of husbands and wives. At the end of the second winter, when the ice was thawing, they sent me away. They said it was like sleeping with a dead person. I gave them bad dreams, and finally they couldn't sleep at all if I was near them. They use the same word for *dead* and for *summer* and for *hairless*, and after a while that word became my name. I left when they divorced me. They have no word for divorce.

I built a cannon out of ice, and wrapped myself in the funeral carpet which my husbands and wives had woven for me out of their own hair, and one of my wives was my gunner. I came back here, after many adventures, and once, when I'd been drinking, donated the funeral carpet to the national museum. When I was sober again, I asked for it back, but they claimed not to know what I was talking about, and threw me out. I live by myself and this old, balding, shabby thing I wear is a horse-hair throw I found in a thrift store.

When I wake up, sometimes, before I open my eyes, I imagine that I am still lying under a marriage carpet with my husbands and wives. My hands are full of their sweet, perfumed hair. My name is Venus Shebby and once I was very beautiful, as beautiful as a cannon carved out of ice.

Q: Who was that woman?

A: Venus Shebby.

Q: How is a cannon like a marriage?

A: I don't know.

Q: Who was the first person to be fired from a cannon? Was it a man or a woman?

A: The first person to be fired from a cannon was a young man dressed as a woman. His name was Lulu. Sometimes, when someone is fired from a cannon, they say they are demonstrating "the Lulu leap. "

Q: Do you love your brother?

A: I love my brother like a brother.

Q: Do you think I'm beautiful?



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A: You are beautiful, but not as beautiful as Venus Shebby was, when she was young. You're not as beautiful as the cannon.

Q: Thank you for being honest. Why does your brother have so many wives, when you have no wives at all?

A: I don't know.

Q: Will you say yes when I ask you to marry me?

A: I don't know.

Q: What noise will the cannon make? Why can't you love me, just for a little while? Why must the cannon be fired? How long will your brother be gone? Why won't your brother come back? Will he never come back? What are you putting in your ears? Is it time for the cannon to be fired? May I ask the cannon these questions? What will she say?

A: A noise as loud as God, but only my brother and his wives will hear it. Everyone else is putting beeswax in their ears. I don't know. I don't know. A long time. He won't come back again. No. Beeswax and cotton. Soon. I don't know. No. Not now. Be patient. Listen. Listen.

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*Kelly Link grew up on the East Coast and attended Columbia University in New York and the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. She sold her first story, "Water Off a Black Dog's Back ", just before attending Clarion in 1995. Later stories have won and been nominated for numerous prestigious awards. These include "Travels With the Snow Queen " (1997) which won the James Tiptree Jr. Award and was a World Fantasy Award nominee. Her novelette "Louise's Ghost " (2001) won a Nebula. Her stories have been gathered in chapbook 4 Stories (2000) and collection Stranger Things Happen (2001), both from Small Beer Press, which she owns with her husband, publisher Gavin Grant.*

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### ***Under The Influence of Meat Puppets*** **Neil Ayres**

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This is the story of a relationship that's not working, and instead of addressing the problem properly, the male half of the relationship does what men often do and treats the situation as if it's a broken thing in need of mending—in short, he looks for a quick-fix, where there was never likely to be one. His environment mirrors the situation. Perhaps the government, being mainly male, faced its own issues in a similar manner.

It's about other things too of course: curiosity; the lure of the unknown, etc. And each reader will bring something different to the tale. That's what fiction is all about - paradox: experience being tempered by what an individual brings to any given situation, i.e. his or her own experience.

It's interesting to look back on those difficult times, now the fuzzy lens of hindsight obscures things: memories, feelings, all that stuff.

I got the dog before Bea and me ended up together. I needed the physical contact; I guess I was really lonely. So I ended up with a dog.

Relationships are awkward things at the best of times; Easel - the dog – used to go to work with Bea. I eventually overcame my guilt by throwing myself into the future, thinking of my tiny tricky family instead of myself. I went and won some bread, so did Bea; Easel had good days and bad days.

It wasn't like when we were kids: we no longer had the luxury of open fields and lush woods. Every morning Easel and me would take our exercise together, me on the bike and him running beside, after the initial novelty of the machine wore off we both came to ignore the outdoors, the scents were repetitive, only about a score of them on a monotonous cycle. I could only recognise a few of them: cut grass, mint, a strange earthy odour that for some reason made me think of woodlice.

As the scents were to my dog, so the landscape was to me, like an old cartoon, the same motif over and over again as I pedaled and Easel trotted on the treadmill beside me.

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By the time the dog reached his sixth birthday Bea was distraught. She refused to feed him anymore, had little more to do with him other than preparing his meals and curling up on the sofa with him at night, his square head resting gently on her lap as she quietly watched the bland comm. channels. I couldn't stand it; I knew the place was driving a wedge between us. Instead of working I'd spend hours gazing out at the ocean, imagining the distant, invisible shores at the mouth of the river that viciously cut my city in half. The thought of those banks pulled at my soul, beckoning me. My tie to Easel and Bea waned day-by-day until I began to fear it might just snap.

One Saturday in summer, Bea had a conference to attend. I flicked calmly through the phone directory until my finger paused at the name I had been searching for. I checked the display carefully, satisfied that the details matched the ones in the article I'd found, I pressed enter. The connection was quick; the phone rang only twice before it was answered by a gravelly female voice.

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Easel was petrified and he stood shaking at the front door, his huge furry bulk immovable. I remembered the little poodle-cross my grandfather had kept when I was small. How bizarre the changes that had affected the world these last handful of decades. I tugged at my dog's halter but to no avail. Surrendering with a sigh, I slipped the harness from his muzzle and made my way out without him.

The streets were desolate in the grey afternoon. Workers scurried about above me in the tunnels that spanned from one office block to the next. Tramcars slid past on occasion, until eventually I found myself in an area where the glistening edifices thinned. Emerging from the glass and steel forest, the outer structures older and more outdated than their towering peers, like anti-saplings, I was shocked by the strength of the sun: it's rays like sheaths of yellow metal, visible through black cloud. I felt almost afraid to step out from their refuge, as if the dark shadows beneath the clouds could injure me in some way, though I knew that they could not. My irrational fear caused my pulse to race. I could hear the blood rushing about my temples. In the sun I was warmed, in the shade I shivered, until finally I cleared the city limits and came to a primitive dirt track.

An old road-sign guided my footsteps. I followed the sign into the wilderness. All around me scrubland swallowed up the outlook. I walked along the path as a shallow wall of heather and

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junipers flowed delicately in the light breeze.

I stepped across a trail of black army ants marching to some miniature unseen war; the only other wildlife—perhaps not the most of apt of terms considering the state—I encountered that afternoon were a dead field vole, on its side, its flanks bathed in the heat and light of the sun, and the agitated horseflies that circled and pirouetted about its head or else rested animatedly, in stop-motion repose, on the rodent's haunches.

Close to giving up on my quest, I eventually came to a dilapidated wooden hut. A notice hung from a rusty nail above the open door to the shack. In my mind's eye I pictured Easel running carefree through the wilderness I found myself in. I called out cautiously, not wishing to intrude.

The inside of the hovel was sparse. It was dark though the walls were whitewashed. A slab of yellow light stretched like a battered-down door at my feet. The interior was a chiaroscurist's paradise, but the stench of old food and acrid cooking spices spoiled the effect somewhat. There was a table-lamp in the centre of the shack. Espying it I recognised the loud humming as that of an aged generator. It must have been out the back of the cabin.

On the wall behind the lamp, directly opposite the entryway where I stood was a large portrait-scale poster: some old film or other I suspected: a man in winter clothes, standing in a snow-coated field, his footprints trailing behind. The text was in a foreign language though, and faded too.

As my eyes adjusted to the dark interior I began to recognise other objects: there was a bookcase and in the gloom. I noted with interest it was stocked with actual books – the older type, no doubt yellowed and musty from the touch of time and the damp atmosphere.

Of course I owned books myself, but it was the first time I had seen more than ten or so collected in the same room.

There was a copper pot suspended on a branch above a makeshift fire. A tree! There was a tree *inside* of the peculiar residence, growing up from a square of earth cut neatly into the floorboards, though over time—as the tree had strengthened and grown—roots had pushed at the boards, leaving the floor uneven, the room dense with the smell of earth.

The leaves at the top of the tree kissed the roof, a single branch obscuring the mouth of a half-finished chimneystack.

-A purple maple, a familiar voice, from the telephone conversation earlier, they don't grow much larger than that. They're from Iceland originally, a gift from a Finnish friend of mine.

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-They do well in shade. I stated.

Half of the woman's home was illuminated suddenly as she clicked on the lamp, spearing the plastic neck with a use-worn rectangular switch. The centre of the room was washed in a cold, sterile light.

-Door. Said she, distractedly, walking purposefully across the fractured floorboards in my direction. The door dutifully closed and I was sealed inside the shack with a woman I couldn't see, a bookcase loaded with antiquities, an Icelandic tree, a shade-less lamp and a... a crow? Or at least that is what I took it for, initially.

The bird hopped down to a lower bough of the tree, awoken by the arrival of light.

-Door! It croaked in a pronouncement much like the woman's.

She reached me and turned to the bird, exasperated. I saw a glint of white across its throat as it puffed up its feathery chest. The door slid back to expose stilted daylight. The bird flew out with a single beat of broad wings.

-He'll be back in good time. My hostess assured me. I saw her face then, clearly for the first time; the intrusive light from outside illuminated her.

-Door. I offered. The portal was sealed once more. She backed away from me, stretching out a shadowed hand, long finely manicured nails adorning aged fingers; the veins in her upturned wrist glinted green in the semi-lit room.

I had locked my gaze with her as the door glided closed for the second time. Her irises were violet, flashing as the radiance altered. As she retreated into the dark, towards a low sofa I assumed the hue of her eyes the product of contact lenses.

-Please, sit. She instructed me. I followed her across the room and perched tentatively on the edge of the rickety couch, the third space vacant between us. My shoulder brushed against gauze curtain, the only division between living quarters and bedroom.

She studied me, violet eyes subdued in the gloom, her slender frame a dark silhouette against the cracked grey of the wall. From the arm of the settee she collected a small mirror, grasped it between her two gnarled hands.

-Do you want the...? My sentence was interrupted:

-Not yet. First we should eat. She stood, put the mirror into the pocket of her jeans. Stay there, I've made a stew. I did as told, leant back on the dusty seat, revelling at her unhurried pace and also at the state of the place. Perhaps she cleaned once a fortnight at most. It was a refreshing change to the constant gleam of the city, of my apartment and of the breakneck speed at which I

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ordinarily seemed to exist during working hours.

She moved across the centre of the room, illumined for a moment in the lamplight, lithe shoulders rolled as she crossed the floor. From the copper pot over the fire she removed a ladle, long handled and deep-spooned. She served the broth from the pot into two bowls on a shelf beside the chimneybreast. The scent of ginger and meat mingled with the earth at the roots of the tree and the acerbic odour of smoke from the fire.

-So you're having problems with your dog. She announced. I nodded and supped at a spoonful of hot soup, burning my lower lip. She enquired if it was to my liking with a raised eyebrow, her face close to mine, and thin lips in a narrow line, neither smiling nor frowning. I blew on a fresh puddle of soup, a futile endeavour.

-Bisk, she informed me, pigeon bone, with neck of lamb and ginger. She sips solemnly at her own watery casserole. There was little flavour to the oily stew, save the trace of ginger stem.

She placed her bowl half-finished on the floor at her feet. Tapering fingers stretched from her knees to a third of the way up sloping thighs. I noticed the trace of a scar circumventing her right wrist, as if the hand had been severed and replaced. Gold glimmered: the zip of her trousers. She turned to me, fixed me once more with unnatural eyes.

-What should I do? I asked her, spoon suspended below my chin, my arm twisted at an awkward angle.

-What do you want to do? She retorted. I thought for a moment, tempted to respond, 'I don't know, that's why I'm here,' but I held my tongue. My sense of perspective seemed unbalanced.

-It's okay, she assured me, it's just the drug from the soup beginning to take effect.

-Drug? I was astonished, angered, but the lightest of contacts from her wise touch instantly put me at ease.

-What do you want to do? She repeated. The walls seemed further away; my co-ordination was affected. I dropped the emptied spoon to the ground.

I awoke slowly, if such a thing is possible, my sense or reality returning unhurried: first my hearing. I listened to a voice singing, far from melodic, a deep growling: something definitely feminine in the gruff intonation. Next came my senses of smell and of taste, though I barely noticed them. The scent of smoke and the tang of ginger had long departed my system. Penultimate to return was my sight. I saw my hostess leaning on the mock-wooden doorframe of the shack. It took a moment for me to register she was visible due only to the insipid light



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pouring liquid-like from the table-lamp, which had been moved from the centre of the room to rest on the shelf above the hearth. So where was the daylight?

-What time is it? I gasped. Regaining full consciousness, a tactile awareness flooded my body. I was lounging on the couch, hot but shivering, shirtless. My coat was draped over the arm where the woman's mirror had been before. It was early summer and did not get dark until at least half past seven - or at least it didn't in the city.

-It's almost midnight. She stated, not moving, continuing to stare into the night. I was shaken by that revelation.

-Bea'll murder me! And Easel's been left for so long! Had I not finished speaking and begun to collect my clothes my guess is she would have cut me off, maybe insisted that I stay awhile longer. But I had said all I intended to and my outburst was not specifically directed at her. I gathered my coat from the arm of the grubby sofa, then put it down again as I remembered my shirt. Perhaps guessing at my thoughts she turned and pointed to the fire, little more than flickering embers by that point.

-Gone? I asked, fearing it incinerated. She shook her head, no.

-There... I followed the line of her finger. My shirt hung on a rusty nail wedged in between the grouting of the chimneybreast. I had to squint to see it. Reaching across I hurried to put it on, still buttoned, over my head. The cloth felt damp against my chest. I patted it with a nervous hand that I then held up to the light. Maroon under the nightlight, almost violet like her eyes. I licked at the ball of my palm, a salty trace on my tongue.

-Blood? She nodded. I studied her properly for the first time since waking: she had changed clothes. She wore a simple pale shift that reached her ankles and around her shoulders hung a fur shawl. An image formed unbidden in my mind's eye, prompted by the sight of her exotic cloak: a wolf in a cage. No, no wolf but a cat, pacing around a glowing object. The thing shined, like the blood on her hand, like the colour of her eyes. The cat drew close; still indistinct the object was nonetheless definitely on fire, I felt the heat in my head. I strained my eyes.

-A flaming heart! It beat still. Then I noticed the marks on the floor: tracks! My shirt was sullied just off-centre of my sternum, to the left. My heart?

-The mynah took it. She said, coldly.

-So why am I here? She misunderstood my question.

-The drugs. The effects take time to wear off. Your body didn't register the absence of its heart. Maybe eventually it'll reject the new one, during the procedure at least, you were too high

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to die.

I exited without sparing her a further glance. Halfway along the trail away from the shack I turned. Her door was sealed tight, barring out the mundane. I stripped off my bloodstained shirt, left it hanging from a squat conifer. Junipers groped menacingly from the edges of the trail. I kept to the centre as well I could. Nearing home, the starlight was smothered by the resident ceiling of smog that blanketed the city. What had I done? I had turned the idea over in my mind so many times. That morning it had seemed the only solution. Bea would not agree to rehoming Easel but she could no longer tolerate his presence. And to keep him cooped all day in that apartment was unfair. I had thought that at least with my considered alternative he would have more independence, but at what cost? Perhaps he was the only thing keeping us together.

My reverie was ended with the appearance of our building. I took the lift deep underground until I arrived at our floor. As usual it took several swipes before my rickety ID card was recognised. The mood of trepidation caused me to imagine that Bea had changed the locks. Finally the door retracted upwards, my arrival announced with a low-key beep.

Bea sat in front of the television, hypnotised by another unnamed glamour comm. about the rich and the beautiful. She turned to me as soon as I stepped in, but left the TV on.

-Where have you been, I've been worried sick? On her lap a bundle of fur stood and transformed into a sleepy silver cat. It stretched and yawned, revealing pointed white teeth.

-This poor thing was in a right state. It must've got in as you left. How many times do I have to remind you not to rely on the automatic lock? Its chest was covered in blood but I haven't been able to find a wound.

At last Bea sensed a piece of the picture was missing.

-Where's the dog? she asked.

---

*Neil Ayres was born in London in 1979. He's had numerous short stories and poems published in the independent press, most recently in Electric Velocipede, Fusing Horizons and Aesthetica. His first novel, Nicolo's Gifts, is available from Bluechrome publishing. Neil is currently project managing the Book of Voices, a short story anthology aimed at raising awareness of the work of Sierra Leone PEN. He lives in Surrey. He is also the content editor of Fragment, a PDF*

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### ***There's a New God In Town*** **L.J Bothell**

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Several years ago, I worked at a temp job, which offered lots of free time and a Starbucks coffee kiosk in the building lobby. One morning, I stumbled downstairs like a zombie to get my daily fix, and as I clasped my hands around my tall mocha and inhaled the energizing steam, I thought to myself "hail to the gods of coffee. " Luckily, it was a slow day at work, since the resulting story flowed out of me and into the word processor like my first rush of caffeine.

The old man, wearing rags seemingly as ancient as he, sat in the firelight surrounded by the youth of the community.

"Welcome, boys and girls, " he said in a crusty voice, flourishing like a maestro. "Let me tell you of the fall of civilization. "

*Listen:*

Once upon a time not so long ago, but very long ago, though not the long ago of princes and dragons and faeryfolk and the exquisite tortures of the flaming Inquisition, another God came to the Godless people of the world. This God had no face, It had all faces, and Its only legs were those of the hairy spiders that crawled over Its body and Its voice was the millions of voices singing cheesy rock and roll songs. Do you know of this God?

"Java! " they cried in unison.

*Listen:*

The God was subtle, the God was bold, and the God slowly bought people with pleasure and soon wracked their bodies with jitters and insomnia. All people succumbed, from the clone-like business people to the robe-clad housewives, from the honey-voiced politicians to the screaming youth, from one end of the globe to the other. Java spared no one, and Its minions passed Its influence to one another like a case of the clap. Cardinals of Cappuccino (did you ever wonder what they wear under those robes?) presided over the Holy Mothers of Mocha and the Knighted Sainthood of Starbucks™, and their flock was known as Java Junkies. At first the God seemed quiescent, merciful, giving pleasure as liberally as a ten-dollar whore at the airport. And it was good.

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*Listen:*

Then the factions came: the hazelnut Lattes, the Cappuccinos, the Mochas, the mint Frappachinos, the Espressos, the Espresso beans, the straight-shots, and the watered-down coffee, steamy and icy, so many kinds and sizes that it seemed there was room for everyone without coffeeism bias. You could find the new churches on every street corner and in every establishment, and they rang with cries of "tall restretto Mocha! ", "single vanilla Latte! ", "grande double mint Latte! " and an occasional AH-HAAAAA! Worshipers handed over money with both hands and trembled as they drank of the God's blood and ate the flesh of croissants and scones and 8-grain muffins and occasionally bagels (lite cream cheese, please). And it was good.

*Listen:*

Soon the God began to have his way with his worshippers, in any way, every way, in elevators, at desks, in grocery stores, and most especially at the ballet. It loved getting them off in public, jolting Its children to climax at the street fairs, in business meetings, and occasionally after sex. First, trembling hands handed over greater and greater amounts of money, then clutched at a cup of Java's blood; eyes widened and nostrils flared, mouths squirted saliva, and bodies shuddered as Java hit before the faces donned the post-coital expression (smoking not permitted) as It slid lovingly (oh, YES!) down their throats. At Nine am every morning one could hear the collective sigh of millions around the world—AHHHHHHHHH...(if one wasn't already sighing oneself, the *sacrilege!*)

The golden age of Java had come. Hymns and prayers were replaced with rock and roll ditties and the new lingo where "Hi, how ARE you " meant "may I take your order? " and "we exist ONLY to serve you " meant " will that be *cash* or *charge?* " (learned, of course from noonday prostitutes). Politeness reigned as convicted felons (at knife-point) and politicians (at pen-point) alike smiled "All Hail to Java " to you before soundly screwing you over. You could visit the Houses of Love to immerse yourself in pits of Coffee grounds (great for the complexion, dear), steaming Mocha dips and cold Coffee baths, all the while sipping straight Java essence like opium from eggshell cups and making love to the God and each other and the statuary if you really wanted (animals were removed after the first month or so). Java set you free, helped you find the child inside, (Everything is BEE-AU-TI-FULL!) and all that happy crap, can you gimmee hallelujah? God had come and It walked among us. And it was bloody terrific.

*Listen:*

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Then Java got serious. Money was, after all, the only real goal, the true purpose. Lattes started at \$20, Mochas went up to \$35, and soon the addicts began to balk as their Visa™ and Mastercard™ and American Express™ bills rolled in. So sad. So *very* sad (said the creditors, but only after affirming All Hail to Java.)

Java sent Its minions to whip the scattering flock into submission, and the beans really flew. Soon, triple espressos became the norm at \$30 a shot on a good day, (after the Cardinals, in ripped T-shirts and Coffee-splattered jeans, took a sip from every shot, lending a crazed and truly prophetic look to their eyes). If you didn't drink up, any time, all the time, three or four at lunch if you please, you were a wimp, a wuss, and Java's gates (where millions of *oh-so-hairy* legs, promising to get you off for eternity, waited in *screaming* anticipation) were closed to you forever and forever. . .

Java's children jittered and jived, Its minions wandered slack-jawed, Its Cardinals compared who could knock back the most shots of Java, and the entire flock became as empty-eyed zombies, shuffling from one church to another, clutching cups of steaming Joe (you'll only get my Java when you pry my cold, dead fingers from It) like they were lifelines, looking for all as if they should be hooked up on Java IV's by the cute little nurse down the hall who says "this won't hurt A BIT! " as she jabs the two inch needle in your throat. (Oops, *missed!*)

Soon even the Catholic Church crumbled (the third world religions didn't have a chance) when the Pope proclaimed JESUS IS GOD even as he drooled and pitched forward to grab a newswoman's Mocha in front of millions on international TV. After all, the only God is the one who controls your pocketbook, right? Things sucked.

*Listen:*

The end came quickly, rather as a surprise, and the world screamed in unison. Some aliens came down and really flamed, totally burned all of Java's fields (no matter HOW many fertility ceremonies went on beneath the moony nights). Beans popped and screamed, jumping like a cowboy who gets in the way of the branding iron meant for the prize bull, and Java promised retribution. Junkies dropped like flies, twitching with a palsy unlike any seen since the Job's Daughters of Seattle got bad mushrooms at Woodstock 3. The Cardinals were disrobed (oh, that was REALLY fun), the Saints turned out to be sinners themselves, and the Pope took up with a Vegas showgirl (I'm a DAN-cer!). No one could help, not NATO, not bleeding Jesus, and most certainly not your momma.

*Then:*



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A new God, much smoother, (for a kinder, gentler world) came home to roost. It had been a minor deity under Java's watchful eye: Cocoa, chocolate, bitter and sweet, white, dark, oh-so-milky, and ever-ready, Chocolate even kept the Energizer Bunny™ going during Java's caffeine withdrawal tremors.

We tore down the Java churches and salted the ground, building choco-sanctuaries instead. Everyone did the Jamaican Ska and got back to work, a little slower, probably not wiser, but certainly a little more laid-back and ready to forget (after all, the holocaust never *really* happened either, *right?*) And everyone lived happily....ever...after....

The old man's head nodded forward. Singly, and in pairs and groups, the youths moved away. One remained behind.

"What happened to the aliens? "

The old man's head raised a little, and the youth saw cataracts covering his eyes with a milky white film.

"Chocolate killed them, " he cackled, and the youth scurried away.

He cackled again, popping a handful of New And Genetically Improved chocolate-coated cocoa beans into his mouth. His eyes rolled upward and he shuddered in an ecstasy of a caffeine rush. Of course, there *were* no aliens, he cackled to himself. Nothing kills a God faster than old-fashioned capitalism. Anyone with a brain *knew* the Cocoa Bean Cartel had wiped out Its competition.

AHHHHHHHHHHH. . .

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*L.J. Bothell is a Seattle graphic designer/writer who has been involved with the independent press for over 10 years. She published/edited the Heliocentric Net SF/F/H magazine, the Stigmata anthology, and the Writer's Network newsletter. Several dozen writing credits include fiction in The Urbanite and 365 Scary Stories, nonfiction about writing in Writer's Digest Forum and Speculations, and career-oriented nonfiction in Today's Careers and Net Temps. She is currently developing a mystery series.*

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### ***Better*** **Charles Tuomi**

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Many of my stories are the result of a peculiar line or phrase occurring to me for no apparent reason. The process of writing for me in these cases is the process of exploring a possible meaning behind that phrase. In this story's case, the phrase in question is the very first line. Why it occurred to me in the first place, of course, remains a mystery even to me.

When he was very angry, my father sang Christmas songs.

It was a scary thing to watch.

Dad crooned through big gritted teeth, his face florid and eyes protuberant. A vein on his left temple bulged and thumped irregularly. His massive arms clenched and gesticulated like some frenzied conductor with an invisible baton. The muscles on his face spasmed and twitched; his mouth leered and his nostrils flared, and his fingers snapped as if grinding something living into dust between them; the balls of his feet tapped like he wanted to thrust them through the floor.

Now and then, in between verses, those big teeth of his *chomped*. As if rending meat.

It was a *terrifying* thing to watch, and Dad knew it. He regretted it, terribly, but couldn't stop just the same. Dad had things in him most people would not have been able to bear. He was a hero, really, for doing as well as he did, for as long as he did.

I still don't know how he pulled it off.

\*\*\*\*

Once, just the one time, my big brother Sean asked Dad about the Christmas carols.

It was mid-July, upstate New York was in the middle of a record-breaking heat wave, and business was slow at the hardware store, as usual. According to Dad we didn't have the money for air conditioners to replace the two that had simultaneously gone on the fritz a week earlier. In a couple of rooms feeble old fans attempted to stir air as thick and hot as Mom's fresh—made pudding while we all sweated and cursed them silently.

On Mom's request, Dad went out that afternoon to mow the back lawn. He had been holding off, waiting for the heat wave to soften, but the grass, in defiance of all logic considering the heat, had grown high enough to tickle his shins. We had begun to breed a host of ominously beefy mosquitoes back there that seemed to laugh at bug repellent and could drink copious

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amounts of blood. Mom was persistent, if gently so. Eventually Dad gave in, though it was clear he was not happy about it.

He mowed the lawn haphazardly, in quick unfriendly strides, back and forth over the grass with our rickety electric mower rattling in front of him like every one of its screws was loose and the whole thing was about to come apart. The lines he made in the grass were crooked, and the cuts uneven, and if he missed a patch he did not bother to correct his mistake.

The whole time he mowed, he sang the words to the first verse of *Let It Snow*. Just the first verse, over and over again, out there in the sweltering heat in his shorts and t—shirt.

*Oh the weather outside is frightful  
But inside it's just delightful...*

I remember thinking Dad must have been infuriated; I could hear him clearly over the whir—clacking of the mower, even after I moved into the living room, at the front of our house. Volume was always a good indicator as to just how pissed off Dad was. So was his mangling of the lyrics.

*No particular place to go,  
So Let it Snow Let It Snow Let It Snow...*

I was old enough—seven, I think—to be embarrassed, aware that if I could hear him, the neighbors sure could, aware that what he did was not normal, aware that this reflected on me somehow. I was just beginning to dislike my father for this, but it was a dim emotion, muddled and without real strength.

When Dad finished, he came storming through the back porch door. He had moved on to a slightly softer, mellower version of *Winter Wonderland*, but he still seemed in no mood to cool down anytime soon.

Sean had the misfortune of being in the kitchen as he passed through. I watched from the living room couch as Dad snatched him by both hands and made him dance along with him while he crowed. Dad twisted Sean around with flourishes, making him do pirouettes Sean obviously (from the vaguely repulsed look on his face, and his reluctant, listless spinning) wanted no part of.

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I remember feeling badly for Sean. Sweat had soaked through Dad's shirt and dripped from his hair, his face was the blotchy purple of an old drunk's nose, and he was no one you would particularly want to be around, never mind get close to. When he sang like this his breath smelled too, something inexplicable, like rubber burning.

I also remember being relieved it wasn't me he was dancing with.

Dad glanced around now and then to see if Mom might be watching. She wasn't. She had gone upstairs to her room when the singing started and closed the door.

Leaving us alone with Dad.

She did that a lot.

In between "it's a beautiful sight " and "we're happy tonight ", Sean suddenly stopped moving. Dad tried for a few seconds to get him going again, then stopped himself.

"What's a matter, kid? Don't like CHRISTMAS!?"

Dad spoke like the voiceover of an obnoxious television commercial; too loud, saccharine, salesy. His big grinning yellow teeth glistened wetly. They gave me a pit in my stomach. I wanted to kick those teeth in. Or run screaming from the house. Or hug Dad until he just stopped. I didn't know what I wanted, really.

"Dad, " Sean asked, almost in tears. "Why do you do this? "

Sean was eleven, a few years older than I was, and a good bit more ashamed by Dad's behavior, I think, than his younger brother. He fielded questions from the neighbors' kids about my father, and I suppose he'd gotten fed up.

"Well, " Dad said, leaning over to get his face on Sean's level. He was still grinning, a jaundiced, malevolent crescent that creased only his mouth and never reached his dark eyes.

"It's better, ain't it? "

"Better than what? " Sean asked.

"Than killing your mother, " Dad said softly.

Then he went downstairs, to the basement. Still singing.

\*\*\*\*

So Sean and I learned, over time, not to ask questions. My father and mother had secrets, or maybe it was just one big secret but they kept it so well we could never tell.

They almost never spoke to one another, except for Mom to tell Dad to do something around the house, and for Dad to argue until Mom was at him long enough that he agreed. Or at night, on occasion, when we were asleep, or they thought we were, and they held hushed, spitting

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discussions in their room. Sean and I tried hard to hear what was being said, but were never very successful; the walls in our house were pretty thick.

All we could gather was that Dad had problems Mom wanted him to see Someone about, and that Dad would go to hell before he saw that Someone, and that was that.

Life was abnormal, but in a normal way. We lived on edge all the time, and gritted our own teeth while Dad gritted his and we enjoyed the tender moments he did manage to provide. He could be funny sometimes, and he wrestled with us on the coarse rug in the backroom of our house, playfully, like this big, well—trained bear, soft and furry and strong. He never skimped on the "I love yous," and he came to our Little League games, and he usually behaved pretty well. He did voices, too, when he read us stories: it was like he had a thousand mythological creatures living inside, at his disposal.

He never actually got violent with us. He took things out on inanimate objects: the butcher block beneath his hacking knife or a door that wouldn't open or a toy that got in his way. We never asked for pets.

We eventually learned to laugh along with the other kids who made cracks about him, rolling our eyes in agreement, and we got by.

Dad kept it to singing and things, he managed to keep us all safe, and we pretty much got by okay, until the day he hit Mom.

\*\*\*\*

I was playing in the back yard and so I wasn't there when it happened, but Sean was.

It was late November, and they'd been fighting over a leaky radiator Dad refused to fix. For some reason Mom was a little more aggressive than usual, getting into Dad's face and pointing her finger, screaming about how there had been no heat in the spare bedroom for two weeks and winter was coming.

It was a bad row, but there had been plenty of worse ones. Sean was only half paying attention. He was doing homework on the floor of the back porch and could see them facing off in his peripheral vision through the doorway. Their words ran together in one long uninterrupted stream, curses and insults and complaints hurled into the air, useless and redundant and uninteresting.

Sean paused only when he heard the unmistakable sound of a fist hitting a skull, and something heavy hitting the ground.

He looked up to see Mom sprawled across the kitchen floor, Dad standing over her like

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Cassius Clay over Liston, like he would hit her again if she dared get up. She didn't. She lay crumpled up on the floor, sobbing.

She was saying "Ow ow ow ow ow ", over and over again and holding her face in both hands.

Sean jumped to his feet and ran into the kitchen. He told me later he had no idea what he should do, only that he should be in there with them. So he got in there and just stood. Dad stumbled into him as he backed away from Mom, and when he first looked down at Sean it was if he had no idea who the little kid in front of him was. Then something in his face changed, and recognition passed over his crumpled features. Dad took Sean firmly by both of his shoulders and fixed him with his eyes.

"You can't *do* that, " he said somberly.

Then he tousled Sean's hair and walked out the back porch door, out to where I was playing in the sandbox, bundled up in my winter coat against what was becoming a bitterly cold wind. With a half-attentive wave and a soft "hey kid ", he moved past me and into his tool shed at the far end of the yard. I heard the sound of something heavy moving across the shed floor and in front of the door, then silence.

The sound of Mom crying inside the house reached me then, just barely, and I knew something horrible had happened.

I knew, too, that something more horrible might be about to happen. Something truly awful. It hung in the air like fog, a moist blanket covering everything. It tickled my scalp like an impending electrical strike.

When the screeching whine of a table saw started to pour from the shed, and Dad started to sing:

*You better watch out,*

*You better not cry...*

I stood up, grabbed a couple of my favorite toys, and walked inside the house.

\*\*\*\*

We left him out there for the rest of the day, while Sean and I devoted all of our efforts toward helping Mom. I got an ice bag for her face, the entire right side of which was blooming into one large bruise, and re-filled it as needed. Sean got her drinks, and we all held hands in



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silence for a while. I wanted to ask Mom what had happened; Sean had only been able to give me the barest details. But I knew better than to ask questions.

Eventually, as afternoon deepened, Mom told us that she was tired and going to bed for a while. On her shuffling, uneven way up the stairs she whispered a caution.

*Don't bother your father.*

Once she was gone, Sean began pacing back and forth through each room on our first floor. He was biting his nails and muttering. I don't think I've ever seen a more conflicted human being in my life. His face, lean and lupine like mine and Dad's, and not what you would call kind, flashed emotions like a slideshow being continually replayed: a shifting mask of rage, sympathy, sorrow and confusion.

For my part, I was simply pathetic. I cried and stamped my feet and ordered Sean to calm down. I said we had to try not to make it worse. I really just wanted him to stop pacing because it made *me* feel worse. I wanted someone older than me to be in control, and he was the only one left.

At one point, the whine of that saw out back halted with a shriek so loud and sudden it was almost a bang. For a while we could still hear Dad's singing, though it was soft, muted and tuneless enough that we could make out only that it was his voice, and could not identify the particular song. The singing seemed to fade with the sunlight, and soon it was quiet.

Mom and Dad were in two separate places, both silent, with Sean and I in between. After a while we got hungry. Sean went upstairs and knocked on the bedroom door but Mom didn't answer. Even though we were never supposed to enter their room without a parent's say-so, he did. With some difficulty, he got Mom to half-sit up, and gave her some aspirin with a glass of water from the bathroom sink. She told him she loved him, and asked him to tell me she loved me, too, and when he came down after fluffing her pillows, he did.

Sean made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and we ate them together at the dining room table, then cleaned up after ourselves.

Around eight or so, something fell clanging and thudding in the shed, like a stack of paint cans tumbling over. Out of habit I awaited a curse from Dad, which would most likely be followed by a short carol.

There was nothing.

It got darker, and crickets and tree frogs filled the silence, a little.

Sean and I got ready for bed then, a half hour early. We put on our pajamas and brushed our

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teeth and said our prayers, all of the ones we were supposed to say. I even knelt by the bed, hands piously pressed together, imploring.

We both went out to the shed in our pajamas and called good night to Dad from outside it. The dim light of the utility lamp he had hung in there seeped around the edges of the doorway. After holding his fist up to the door for close to a minute, Sean rapped lightly with his knuckles. We waited. Dad didn't answer.

Finally, Sean stormed off across the back lawn.

"Fuck you Dad! " he yelled, just before stepping inside the house and slamming the back porch door after him. A second later, he opened it again and yelled:

"Merry fucking Christmas, you goddamn freak! "

I stood alone in the darkness for a few moments, pressing my lips, my ears, then my lips again, up against the crack in the shed door.

"I love you, Dad, " I whispered, then scurried away without waiting for a response.

I still wonder if he might have heard me. I doubt it, but I wonder. I like to think that he did.

We went up and kissed Mom good night and Sean fluffed her pillows again and gave her more aspirin. She mumbled a few things and hugged us, hard. She cried and told us she was sorry, so sorry, so so sorry...

And we said we knew she was, and we meant it.

\*\*\*\*

Dad explained it all in the note. The carols, the constant, mounting anger, everything. As much as he could explain it, anyway.

He explained how his own biological father had murdered his mother on Christmas day. How he had watched the monster do it with a dull knife and sharp thrusts, right in front of him, his own eight-year old son, in their living room. How the son of a bitch had put the gun to his own head and pulled the trigger afterwards, looking straight into Dad's eyes as he did it.

How his father had been convicted, posthumously, of three other murders in Albany, based largely on evidence police had found in his bedroom after the suicide. Each victim was a prostitute who had been mutilated. Horrible things, sights and details Dad knew of but could not bring himself even now to discuss.

How Dad had from that point on felt urges, like vermin scabbling over the terrain of his mind, as if his internal wiring was just *wrong*, and he was fighting, constantly, to hold off an insistent darkness that wanted him and would not take no for an answer. How hard and lonely it

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had been for him, to have lived his whole life that way, struggling always against his own nature, and his past. How he knew there would be no curing him, not really. How he felt sure it was a physical malstructuring of his brain, or some other inherent, unfixable flaw he had inherited from his father.

How he had concluded the battle was his alone to fight.

And how he knew, from the beginning, that he would almost certainly, one day, lose.

He explained, too, how much he loved his family, how much he *had* to love us; it was his love for us, of his kids especially (he wrote this more than once, naming Sean and me in blue ink smudged with tears), that had kept him from giving in, that had kept him battling all these years.

God he loved us, he wrote.

He loved us so much.

And he was so, so sorry.

We found the note in the shed the next morning. It was on a side table right next to Dad. Sean and I had forced the door open to get inside, pushing the bureau he had blocked the doorway with out of the way with all the brute force two elementary school kids could summon. It had taken us nearly half an hour.

A frigid blast of air hit us when we finally opened the shed.

A blast of air, then the smell of our Dad.

He had done terrible things to himself.

Both of his hands were on the workbench, on either side of the circular saw that had severed them. He was seated on the plywood floor in the opposite corner of the room, his head lolled back against the wall, his now incomplete arms folded contemplatively in a lap drenched with dark fluid, and his eyes staring upward, beseeching, as if seeking a peace that from the look on his face, he never did receive.

\*\*\*\*

That was a long time ago.

Sean and I have since grown up.

Mom died of breast cancer a few years back. Funny thing, she didn't change much after what happened. She had known, I think, from the start what she was getting into with our father. Nothing in the note was news to her. When Sean ran screaming into the house for her and she made her way out to the shed and she saw what Dad had done, she was upset, sure, but she just didn't seem that surprised. It was more like you might act upon the death of a relative who has

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been terminally ill for some time.

On some days, I think that, in some ways, Dad cared about us more than she did. But maybe I'm being uncharitable. I should probably remember my own mother more fondly. She did not have an easy life.

Sean lives in Phoenix now, a long way away from upstate New York, and me. He has a wife and two children. A boy about eight, a real whiz kid, and a six-year old girl with Shirley Temple curls and the bearing of a princess. He sends me school pictures of the kids every now and then, and once he sent me some home videos they had taken. The kids are very cute, sweet.

They remind me of Sean and me, a little.

I still live just outside Albany, a couple of towns away from the one we grew up in. I spend my days in a cubicle, working as a claims examiner for a commercial insurance company. I'm generally regarded as competent and professional and sometimes even pleasant, though I like to keep to myself.

I don't have any family.

\*\*\*\*

Horrible things still happen around these parts now and again. Every year, for instance, between mid-November and December, young women start showing up murdered. Mostly they're prostitutes, but sometimes they're college girls who've stumbled off while partying, or even professional women out where they really shouldn't be late at night. A handful each year, a half-dozen to a dozen, then after the holidays, it stops.

The police are pretty sure it's the same guy, because of the temporal pattern, and because all of the victims' bodies share a certain characteristic.

Both of their hands are missing.

I get upset some nights, right around this same time of year. Agitated, I guess, is the word. It's a bad time for me, filled with unwanted memories.

Sometimes, I literally crawl out of my bed covered in sweat, with wrenching stomach cramps and a throbbing head. When this happens I usually call Sean. If he answers (or if his wife answers, annoyed, but she gives him the telephone), he helps me feel better.

If he isn't there, I get restless. I'll try him a few times, one right after the other, then I'll go out for a walk. Sometimes I get home and can't even remember where I've been. Sometimes, God help me, I have an inexplicable mess to clean up the next day.

When Sean does answer, though, which is usually what happens, he takes the phone some

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place private; I hear his voice lower and him moving around surreptitiously. He takes these calls very seriously, I can tell, but does not want his wife to hear.

I'm not sure if it's because he loves his little brother, or if it's something else that motivates him. I'm not sure if he hears about news in Albany anymore.

But we sing, both of us. Christmas songs to one another, over the phone.

Softly, too. Not angry, and not at all like our father once sang them. Sean has a nice voice, built for lullabies. His kids are lucky. Come to think of it, so am I.

When we're done, Sean asks me: How are things now, little brother?

And I say what I always say.

Better.

---

*Charles Tuomi lives and writes in southeastern Massachusetts. His fiction has appeared or will soon appear in ChiZine, Ideomancer, Flashquake, FlashShot and Flash Fantastic, and his novelette 'Weeds' will soon be published by Scribe Press.*

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### ***Soul Surprise*** **Susan Franzblau**

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Way back when, I occasionally helped out at a travel agency. We all sat behind desks in long rows - like high school but with phones. People would come in and wave at us all the time. If it was James Stewart (who had his office in the building), we'd wave back; if it was a solicitor, we'd wave him along. I started wondering who'd we let in and it all rolled out from there.

This guy walks into the office and everyone is a bit put off because he obviously doesn't have an appointment and then we see the box so we know he must be selling something. Which is no big deal, we always have peddlers coming and going, no matter what the "No Soliciting" sign says about prosecution and security. We all get ready to ignore him. But this guy is different. It's not perfume or scarves or stuff like that, it's dreams. In a bottle.

With no small degree of savoir-faire, he opens his black case to reveal three rows of tiny bottles resting in black velvet luxury. The more reckless of us stop what we are doing to watch him. As he looks us over, his lips form a small smile. "What in life is more wonderful than dreams? It is where our minds and our hearts coalesce to create our only truly private experiences—some beautiful, although," he paused, "sometimes terrifying. That is until now since, as we all know, scientists have learned how to manipulate gamma-endorphins in the brain to create extraordinary dream experiences. And I am very pleased to tell you that these programmed dreams are no longer just for the very rich. One drop of any of these liquids," he says, "and you'll dream the most beautiful or the most outrageous dream you've ever had. Perfect in every sensual detail from sight and sound to smell, taste, feeling... And I don't mean merely physical sensation." And again, that tiny, knowing, smile.

The sounds of inputting goes quiet as we each look up from the rows of desks. It's because of guys like him that there is a designer watch on your wrist, not to mention other luxuries some of us possess. The gray market *is* the American way.

By now everyone in the rows of desks has stopped working to watch the different colors swirl around like liquid clouds in the tiny bottles. Loreen, the receptionist, is the first to leave her desk. She stands on the tippy-toes of her high heels to look in the velvet-lined box. Each bottle



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has a different name which she reads out loud: "First Kiss," "Antarctic Explorer," "Around the World," "Sweet Revenge," "Space Voyage," "Moonlight over Paris."

"What's that one?" she asks as she points to 'First Kiss.' But, before he can answer, she adds, "how do you make it work?"

"It's the easiest thing in the world. One drop, two at the most, dabbed on the tip of your tongue before you go to sleep and you'll be the star in your fantasy made real. Every nuance complete, all those tiny details that are so important; they're all there to create the fullest and deepest experience for you to enjoy and savor for years to come... And, tell me, is there anything more romantic than one's first kiss?"

"My first kiss?" Loreen asks while the rest of us come to look at the bottles.

The man looks everyone over as he leans his head down to hers so that their eyes are only a few inches apart. "Was your first kiss full of longing, aching love, so sweet that you were afraid to touch his lips because it just might break the spell?"

"Well, no," Loreen says uncertainly. It's easy to see embarrassed memories of fumbling in the dark cross more than a few faces, yours not excepted.

"Well, it will be from now on," he whispers to her. "One drop tonight and you'll have the first kiss you always wanted—moonlight and candles, romance laced with that essential element of innocence. The first time is the most important, the one you always remember in your heart."

"No side effects?" Loreen whispers back.

"Guaranteed or a full refund, it's all right here in our literature." From a hidden spot inside the box, he pulls out a brightly, yet tastefully colored brochure.

As Loreen steps off to one side, the crowd (and we are a crowd now, since everyone is out of their chair) moves forward. No one is immune from the excited hush. When someone asks about the differences between "Daredevil" and "Antarctic Explorer," the man explains how each and every one of the dancing fluids was created and calibrated to guide a sleeping brain along the pre-designed track. The exact look and feel of Antarctica, the precise sounds and smells, as real as if you were there in person. The chilling cold, but without the danger of frostbite. The speed and thrilling sensations of successfully leaping a motorcycle over the Grand Canyon. Exhilaration in perfect safety—except for that touch of the unknown that makes it all the more thrilling. Everything is precisely the way it would be if you were actually living it. In fact, as long as you are asleep, you *will* be living it. Your secret fantasy come to life.

While people peer at the rows of bottles, the man goes from person to person. For each one

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he finds a certain bottle that contains a little piece of what they've always wanted. Lori from Accounting giggles that, yes, "Reckless Abandon" does sound just a little bit tempting. Prescott, the office eavesdropper, tattletale, and bore has his attention caught by the purple and blue bottle named "King/Queen of the World."

But none of those seem really interesting to you.

Then the man picks up an iridescent black bottle and comes over. The label reads "Soul Surprise."

"This," he says almost conspiratorially, "is a very unusual blend. Most created dreams are stories that follow along a basic pattern, but not 'Soul Surprise.' You take one drop—only one drop, mind you—and you will have an experience that will change your life. " As wonder spurs with disbelief, he says, "'Soul Surprise' reaches down into the center of your psyche. You might have the sudden insight that allows you to undo the destructive patterns in your life. Or you might discover your true bliss. Or," he almost smiles, "the answers to your deepest questions."

Swallowing hard, you stare into the dancing liquid.

"...without pain, I assure you. There are no nightmares here. Only your own heart's truth."

The varying shades of purple with just a hint of black swirl effortlessly in the bottle, mesmerizing. "You can find out... anything?"

He speaks so softly that it requires all your concentration to hear him. "I've heard that some people have experienced the Ultimate of Ultimates and dreamt their way to the Other Side, beyond life itself. When they wake up safe and snug in their own beds, they *know* the greatest mystery of all."

It is only a few moments later that you realize how wrapped up you've been in reverie. The man has returned to his velvet box. And, again, you find yourself drawn to the undulating black waters inside the bottle. The phones are ringing and can no longer be ignored. The man slowly begins the process of packing up, but first he waits a moment. Most mouths are silently calculating. Some lick their lips when the final figures are reached. The man pauses.

Nearly everyone buys a bottle and yours is black. After that, very little work manages to take place. The day creeps by until it finally gets to 4:30pm and then, by mutual consent, everyone goes home early. When the familiar face across the dinner table asks if anything interesting happened today, you shrug it off with a "not really."

There's nothing on the TV that's interesting, so you yawn loudly as you get up from the couch and announce your plan to hit the sack a little bit earlier tonight. "A long day," you say.

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"See you in the morning."

Sitting on the bed, you use no small degree of formality as you lift the dropper to your tongue—surreptitiously, because you do not want anyone else to know about this. Tomorrow you'll share it; but not now, not tonight. Tonight this is your secret to be savoured in your own private world. You carefully close the bottle and lay it next to the clock on the nightstand.

Crawling into bed, you start to wait. The sheets won't warm up. It seems as though you've been trying to fall asleep forever even though the clock says only ten minutes have passed. But then you can feel sleep's silken tendrils flickering as they make their way up the back of your head. They pull you down deep as time takes a time-out. All is hushed, quiet, quieter, then still.

Now it is time for the moment of truth. You wait for the tunnel of light. For familiar, long ago voices. A parent, grandparent? Or maybe even that boy who died in the sixth grade. But then the blackness grows increasingly heavier, dragging you down the eternal sea of darkness. All becomes nothing except one thought. You know the man lied for you are tasting much more than a flicker of fear. Oppressive silence envelopes you as pain begins to radiate from the centre of your being. And then, everything stops.

\*\*\*\*

Bright lights. People talking. Metal clanks loudly against metal. You open your eyes but must blink two, three, four times before comprehending that the bed you are in is not your own. This is a hospital. The face you last saw watching TV now sits across the room stained with tears.

"What happened?" you ask through a throat made of chalk.

A person in hospital scrubs with a stethoscope standing next to you speaks using words like "defibrillation" and "cardiac arrest."

It doesn't take you long to understand. You had a heart attack and, for a terrifying moment, your heart stopped completely. Suddenly you find that you're screaming, yelling, "He killed me, that lying bastard, that poison killed me!"

Hands restrain you and comfort you firmly back to the white-sheeted bed. Tears now stain your cheeks, tears of rage.

"No," the person in white says, "Whoever sold you this stuff definitely cheated you, but he didn't kill you."

Your unspoken question contorts your face.

"It was a scam—there's nothing active in that bottle. It didn't cause your heart attack. We're

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running tests now."

*That bottle* is now sitting on a metal tray next to your head. You stare at the iridescent waves of black as they fold and ripple behind the glass. Disgust overwhelms you for taking the bait and you took it, you literally took it to heart.

The "Ultimate of Ultimates"—the ultimate in stupidity is what the man was probably thinking to himself when you took the bottle and he took your money. And, yes, there is a soul-shattering surprise in finding out that you are a gullible idiot, fair game for the most obvious of sharks. This must be the worst, the absolute worst. The metal tray reflects a mockery of your face and you stare into the disfigured eyes.

Then you think about the properties, though not those of the black swirling water in the bottle, but of the capabilities of the mind. If what was in the liquid didn't stop your heart, then what did? And slowly you begin to wonder. Not so much about your last dream as of your next.

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Susan Franzblau was lucky enough to attend Clarion East during Kate Wilhelm and Damon Knight's last year. Since then she has sold a story to the ezine *Electric Wine*, and has written encyclopedia-like articles for a British *Star Trek* publication, which involves coming up with rational explanations for the patently illogical. Outside the field, she runs a meeting planning business, write sales materials for screenwriters, and am a soccer aunt sans SUV.

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## Simulacrum

# ***Rodney Matthews*** **Featured Artist**

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### Vital Stats

**Age:** 58

**Country:** UK

**Training:** West of England College of Art

**Medium:** Inks

**Influences:** Arthur Rackham

**On The Web:** [www.rodneymatthews.com](http://www.rodneymatthews.com)

**Contact:** [douging@rodneymatthews.com](mailto:douging@rodneymatthews.com)



**Can you remember what your very first paying art commission was? How much did you get paid?**

Thin Lizzy EP cover *New Day* (1969) £40.00. I did this while still working in Ford's Advertising, but as a freelance job. The band had seen one of my event posters at a gig.

**Tell us about your collaboration with guitarist Jeff Scheetz—the two of you wrote music inspired by your artwork?**

This project is still under way with most of the instrumental music written but not recorded. Recording will take place in Jeff's studio near Kansas City and at a studio in Bristol, England. Titles include: The Heavy Metal Hero, Rivendell, Drum Tower etc. and a couple based

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on new illustrations such as Spirit of Trafalgar and Trinity. We are hoping for involvement by some well-known rock musicians.

### **Have you ever been courted by major film companies to do a film based on your art?**

Yes, many times, usually concerning animation projects. I have made visits to a number of studios of note particularly in Los Angeles, including Disney, Warner Bros, Henson's, Sony Wonder and Film Roman. The latter almost taking a property for a TV special. To date the only success has been my children's series 'Lavender Castle'. I continue to present my ideas to film companies.

### **Tell us about your latest project, *Starflush*.**

Star is a multi-spoof, space adventure comedy, based very loosely on the great African explorers Dr Livingston and H.M. Stanley. A manuscript for a novel and movie shooting script now exists. The story and scripting has been done by American Marco Palmer and myself, with input from Doug King. Some of the scenes and characters can be viewed on my website and we are working on a 2 minute animation pilot film right now. This project features some of my most bizarre images to date, with some unexpected twists and turns.



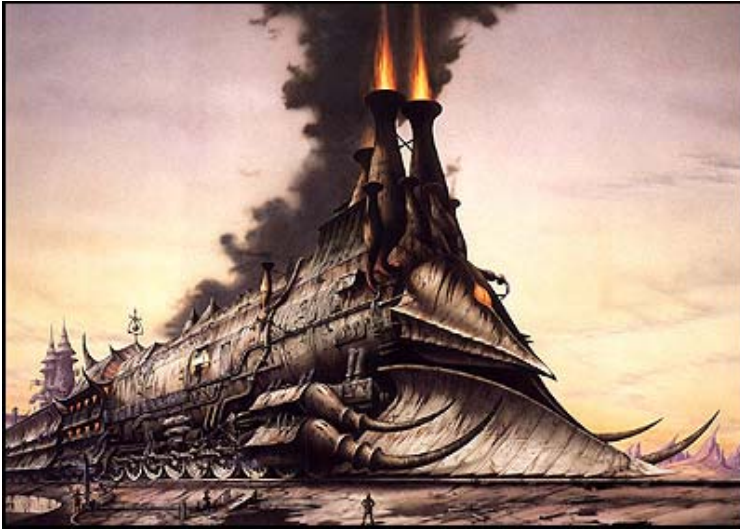
**Your work has appeared in numerous different formats, including calendars, record covers, jigsaw puzzles and postcards. Is there something—some project—you have not yet done that you'd like to see your work used for?**

Well apart from a full-blown movie like The Lord of the Rings! I have plans for combining my images in animated form, with my own music, for DVD release. This would consist of perhaps fifteen shorts of say four minutes with sympathetic audio tracks. The best thing I've had marketed for years is the series of ten snow boards produced by Ride Snowboards, USE. I have



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not done T-shirts for many years, but now the American company Blastwaves is on the point of marketing a range of four shirts with my rock album cover designs featured.



**How long have you been working as a professional illustrator?**

Upon leaving art college in 1962 I was employed as a designer and visualiser in advertising until 1970. Then until 1976 I had a partnership with Terry Brace under the title

'Plastic Dog Graphics', after which I became completely freelance. So we're talking about some forty-one years as a professional illustrator.

**What made you decide to ditch life as a Rock and Roll star for that of an illustrator?**

I never did achieve the status of 'Rock Star' having failed to sign the elusive recording contract. Pete Sinfield from King Crimson tried to get my band a contract but even he could not pull it off. Eventually, I made the decision in 1974 to concentrate on my art, with music becoming something of a side-line. Recently, I have released a CD of three tracks from my old band Squidd (1972) recorded for a BBC radio show in Bristol. This is



available from [www.rodneymatthews.com](http://www.rodneymatthews.com).



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### What is your favorite medium to draw in?

Over the years I have tried oils, and acrylic gouache with some success, but most of my mainstream art is done with pigmented inks these days. I also use watercolours for some of my cartoon styled work. I am particularly fond of pencil sketching because there can often be a freshness or spontaneity lacking in more accurate colour pieces. Some day soon, I hope to publish a sketchbook of such sketches. Content will include computer game drawings and work from the *Lavender Castle* children's space comedy TV series.

### Which artists have influenced you the most—stylistically, thematically?

Top of the list must surely be Arthur Rackham, the English illustrator of children's books. There are others in the same genre—Edmund Dulac and William Heath-Robinson to name a couple. I admire the work of American fantasy artist Frank Frazetta and for different reasons, the surrealist Magritte and the illustrator and painter Norman Rockwell. Style and theme taken into account in each choice.

### What's the fascination with *Alice In Wonderland*?

As a child I was taken to the local cinema by my elder sister.



Certain films linger in my mind even to this day, and have influenced my work to some extent. Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* is one such indelible experience for me. Of course Lewis Carroll's original text inspires creative thought in the artist and illustrator, and for me Rackham has produced the finest interpretations.

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**What should a good illustrator always be aware of?**

That he or she is part of a great universal family dating back to the first cave painting. Recipients of the God-given gift of creativity, the desire to use implements from the sharpened flint to the computer mouse to express a galaxy of creative thoughts.

**Parting shot:**

Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming (Matthew 24:42)

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## **Simulacrum**

### **Short Oddities: Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr**

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#### **Fast Food Religion: Taco Hell**

A Demon ordering food at a Drive-Thru in Hell.

"I trust today's flesh is hot and spicy?"

The clerk replies: "Nothing better than religion to keep the ol' oven burning. So what'll you have?"

"I'll take a number four and a half-pound bunker buster burrito—extra spicy."

"The most popular item on the menu," the clerk confesses, "next to our suicide solution burrito."

"So how do you guys keep up with demand?" the Demon asked.

"It's not tough. Throw in a few misguided translators. Help them decipher a word here and there inside one of their ancient texts. The next thing you know, Armageddon."

They both laughed. "Humans!"

---

#### **The Shaman's Quest**

Once upon a time, he had no flesh; the maggots ate good that night! Then one maggot decided he was fly. But only after many days and many flights did he wish otherwise. You see, one day in the garden of life, that very same fly came upon a godly spectacle, a rainbow colored butterfly—nature's gift of the eye—and from that moment on, the fly knew no wings of Earthly flesh could ever carry him that high. So one night in a carnivorous fit, the fly got drunk, passed out and dreamed he was a giant raven. Now with new powerful wings he searched out his sky and found good ol' butterfly resting on a tree limb. Then without much effort, he swooped down

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and plucked that butterfly out of God's eyes and digested his late dinner. The next morning, the fly woke up and discovered he was a man!

---

*Mr. Wilmoth lives in Las Vegas, Nevada. His poetry has appeared in Penumbric, Flashshot, Raven Electrick, Story House, and several other print and electronic magazines. He is also the owner and editor of SpecFicWorld.com, an online resource guide for speculative fiction writers. And at the moment he is hard at work editing the SpecFicMe! Market Newsletter and Rogue Worlds Magazine.*

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## ***The Message Got Nuked With The Rest Of Belgrade*** **Richard Kunzmann**

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Richard Kunzmann is an author who can't decide where he wants to live, flitting between London and Pretoria in the meantime. His first novel, *The Bloody Harvests*, is due out in September, while the second, *Salamander Cotton*, is taking up far less of his time than it should be. He is currently working on a number of projects for magazines in South Africa, including Marie Claire and SL.

Here, he takes us on a neon-tinged, washed-out fluorescent journey; from the beginning of an era, through its influences, and a future seemingly as uncertain as our present.

The light in an alley of the *Empty Zone* is a trace of halogen green, the gutter running alongside a dumpster is even darker. A group of people is clotted around something lying in the trash. They are gazing at the body of a punk sprawled amongst the pizza boxes, rotten bits of salad and chicken, needles strewn all around it. The punk's torn blanket is wedged under its unwashed body, now crawling with overworked nanophages, trying to keep this city clean. **(Che Guevara was a doctor)**

The punk's fifteen minutes of fame burnt out, became the substance of retro-newsgroups,

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now chattering in virtual bars, and make-belief spas, sipping cyber-neon green cocktails in *Cyberspace*.

It's raining—it always seems to rain in *Night City*—the oily drops leaving red rashes on the faces of the silent observers. I'm not sure whether they're mourners, or whether they're relieved witnesses. That punk caused a lot of trouble, some would say, others would reckon it was ahead of its time.

It was born in an era when the truth was needed. Its exploits started a revolution back in the eighties, and the repercussions are still being felt, whether you like it or not, whether you call it something else, or not.

**Progress backwards, BWI**

It was the first time someone stepped forward and spoke about our immediate humanity and our society, by holding up a near-future mirror, reflecting on things that may realistically come to pass. The reflection was raw, unfiltered. It had a bloody nose, bare fists, nails and razorblades hammered into the soles of its boots. This is was personal.

"Christ," says one of the faceless men, pointing, "what the hell's that?"

At first the others don't see it, still shocked by the punk's deathly countenance; the glow of its radiant green hair slowly fading as its body cools; its open Kiroshi™ eyes, glittering silver as always, give no sign of its life or death. Its black PVC jacket is shredded around the large wound gaping in its chest.

Another of the witnesses stoops and fingers the wound, before suddenly yanking his finger back. "Shit!"

From the wound millions of flea-sized machines emerge, writhing, feeding, coagulating in the blood and gore. **Freedom is a virus, BWI**

Out of the hole in the punk's chest five tendrils seem to emerge, flopping this way and that as they solidify, gathering the organic, the changeable, from around them. Soon the extensions resemble a hand, fishing for a firm grip out of this dead husk.

The millions of little creatures spread out, snipping bits and pieces off the punk's body, assimilating the trash in which it lies, recycling and engineering. There is material everywhere, old and new, but what will the synthesis be? I don't know, but I feel hope as long as the Hegelian dialectic continues.

The man who spoke first is unshaven, and in his sixties. His eyes glow with a fierce light. He shoves his fists deep into his pockets, and steps back from the widening pool of foaming activity.

"Who were its parents anyway?" When no one answers him, he turns away from the

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spectacle of death and glowers at the crowd.

The man with gore on his fingers wipes it off on his shredded jeans. "Ol' man *Gibson*, wasn't it?"

"Bull," interrupts a short podgy man, with large flared nostrils, like two open mineshafts. "Brunner, *John Brunner* was its father, not William."

"What the hell do *you* people know?" chirrups someone from the dark. Only the dense smoke from the man's rollup can be seen, curling languidly into the residual light. "Fucker's dad was a Texan boy, editor of that sheet, *Cheap Truth*. Whaz his name?"

"That was *Bruce Sterling*," replies the unshaven man.

"Yeah, that's him, the father."

**[the future is disposable]**

"What about *Bruce Bethke*, he wrote about this kid first in *Cyberpunk*? Isn't he the father?"

"Whoever the father was isn't important," growls a deep womanly voice from underneath a wide-brimmed hat, similar to a Stetson, except it keeps flashing bright adverts and news clips over its surface, distracting everyone. "Its mother is the only one who counts; she needs to know its dead."

"*Pat Cadigan*?"

"No." The woman's fingers deftly flick and roll, creating a cigarette from tobacco and paper.

"Put that shit away. You crazy, woman? The cops'll smell us out!" hisses a kid, his hair cut Mohawk-style, his clothes looking authentic. An anarchy 'A' tattooed around his eye is *too* authentic, straight out of a catalogue. The woman looks up abruptly, and the others see she's a haggard gorgon, snake-curls coiling around under the brim of her hat, writhing in her ears and down her neck. One eye is swollen shut, and she smells of the dumb-dumb

**[Chew on the truth? No, it's too damn tough].**

A cackle bursts from her throat. "Hey patsy, which enclave you from anyway? You enjoying slumming it here with the rest of us? You hip now? You cool? This your first dead body eh...eh?" The kid looks away. "In my day we didn't give a rat's ass what the cops would do. Nothing! We had nothing like your toys to lose, only our lives—and our souls didn't seem worth much." She whips up two fingers and sneers at him over the gesture. "As I was saying," she turns to the other witnesses, "it's *Mary Shelly* who brought this kid into the world."

"Mary Shelly?" echo a number of voices.

"Yup," replies the woman sagely, before torching her cigarette.

"But she's dead, long gone," replies catalogue boy.

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"Sonny," she says, after a drag. "We're all dead and long gone, the way the world is going. That's what the punk here tried to warn us about. Now no one's left to tell it like it is."

**[trust your technolust, BW]**

"But it's been written down, documented, how can people forget?"

"Exactly what did it tell us?" asks the man standing in the dark. "I mean it was always kicking up a fuss, but what did it *actually* say?"

The man in the shredded jeans suddenly laughs, glancing nervously at the corpse. "I don't think it ever said anything specific, but whatever it said, it said it with *style*."

"Style?" laughs a Siren, dressed in a chromed corset, sterile white skirt and boots in stark contrast to the filthy alley. "He was always about style, rather than substance. That's all this dirty punk ever cared about—not us, not the world, not technology—just the stuff that would make him the coolest cat in town." The woman holds up a hand to the light, and extends long spindly silver nails. She stares at them a while, reflecting on what she'll say next. "He was condemned to flee monoculture, but in so doing he led it."

Everybody else is quiet. The only other sounds are the hover traffic above them, the ancient octane four-wheelers on the streets close by, and a sound like bees coming from the mutilated corpse. They wait for her to have her say, because they know she was once the *idoru* of the punk.

"Did he hate what was wrong with the world; people indulging in technology for its own sake; turning to cybersex, too scared of and too grossed out by verbal contact, and physical exchange? **[Consumer worship]** Did he hate folks for forgetting who they were in their rush for cash, the big win, the latest game, flash bulb glamour? No, he didn't, because he was *The Artificial Kid*. Hell would freeze over if he wasn't the last man standing, with the future grasped tightly in both hands. He never looked back, he never thought of the repercussions."

**[Kill for a label]**

"I thought it spoke about alienation?" blurts an unshaven man, rubbing his hands together as if he's cold.

The punk's ex-lover throws him an angry glance, and extends all her ten digi-blades. "Yeah, well, he alienated me." With that she storms out of the alley, her boots thudding hard on the wet tarmac.

"Uh-uh," denies a synthesised voice in the remaining crowd. "Embodiment, identity, *that* stuff was real. That was its message. These things were taken away from us by technology, the corps, and the government—all of 'em didn't want us being ourselves—too dangerous."

**[evolution is illegal]**

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"It spoke about finding your voice—"

"Not your voice, your own way of life."

"The 'punk created a distance for us." A tall black man steps forward. "So that we could examine our own lives, and the future we were heading into, not some dumb-dumb-minded dreamworld of spaceships. For the first time someone injected a debate about our present society into the genre."

The woman with the strange Stetson chuckles, clears her throat and spits near the body. "You all full of shit—reading things into what punk here did, like he was the messiah or something. It was just indigestion from the rapid changes of the time. But when the heartburn finally cleared up, the rest of us realised there was really no issue at all. There's no place for the punk anymore. Causing trouble for troubles sake is stupid—it don't get you anywhere. **ask no questions!** That's what the punk realised, that's why it killed itself."

"The gorgon may be right," says the man who spoke first, prodding the punk's hand with a muddy boot. "It was troublesome, and even if its intentions weren't the best, it got the rest of us thinking for a while—at least till the newscorps started clamping down, entertainment became the goal of toil, and the government realised it is free to do as it pleases, because impulses to violence and unrest were pacified." **!not in my name?!**

"It sold us out," says the man, still rubbing his hands. "That's what it did."

"Oh, and you were part of its exclusive club, where you?" snorts the old woman. "How old are you, buddy?"

"Old enough."

"Hell, no one is old enough to know what went on. Like everything, and everyone that was, is, and ever will be great, it was about a story waiting to happen, and it finding the right voices to tell it *right*. There was no exclusive club, just strong speakers, at the right time."

"I was old enough, I was there," argues the man. "And I say it went mainstream; big-budget movies; lots of latex and PVC; pod stars and vid gods all looking the same; Times magazine reviews; freaks and creeps calling themselves console cowboys. *Burning Chrome* my ass. All they ever did was cash in on what wasn't theirs. We nurtured it, we read it, and it sold us out."

**!information is never free!**

"Everybody lays a claim to it these days," The speaker finally steps into the light. His short blond hair is slicked back over his scalp, dark glasses rest on his nose. A black turtleneck and trench coat complete his image.



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"It was *Bruce Sterling* who said, 'An underground in the light of day is a contradiction in terms', wasn't it?" asks another face, which looks like it was cloned and sculpted from one of Keanu Reeves's *Spares*.

Murmured agreements go up amongst the witnesses, punctuated by loud gaseous emissions from the corpse. Its stomach and cheeks now give the impression of countless snakes and worms writhing under the skin. The witnesses barely pay it attention, too taken with their own dialogue, none too concerned whether the punk's really dead or not. A Noonian fly suddenly zips through the ally, arcs up into the air, and comes swooping down low like a dive-bomber, excreting a message on the assembled crowd.

### "Brent's Best Piz –"

A deafening gunshot goes off. The insectile *blurbvurt* explodes into millions of maggoty slivers of circuits and wires. No one saw the slick-blond man pull his *Arasaka* GN. Must be chipped up or stimed to high heaven to move that fast. Probably served in Panama or St Petersburg, most likely both.

"Sorry," he says replacing the weapon in its holster. "No peace and quiet, since *Noon* enterprises brought that shit out on the market."

"Nice gun," says mohawk boy, his eyes aglitter. "Can I see it? What make is it?"

"*Talsorian* Industries, one of the best."

"I'm getting outta here," rumbles the tall black man. 'The scene's gonna heat up; the cops'll want to know what that was."

**Who watches who?**

**Who watches you?**

**BW**

"No point in running, you're *One of Us* now. You saw its body, and you didn't do anything about it fast enough."

"Somebody has to inform the Trinity."

"No, *The Idol*, *The Voice*, and *Le Femme*: Gibson, Sterling and Cadigan."

"Surely the Famous Five are more entitled to know that it's dead?"

The man with the oiled blond hair steps forward and looks at the body getting digested by its surroundings, society, by the popular world. "They declared it dead a long time ago, when its anger ebbed, and the impersonations began. They were heading in a new direction already, not as powerful, but more balanced. It would've loved to die as a martyr, but instead it survived."

"But it's dead," whispers the Mohawk boy, close to tears at his sense of loss.

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**You have been relegated.**

**You have been regulated**

**You are regularly hated**

"We'll see," replies the blond man.

"The famous five?" asks the sixty-year-old who spoke first. "Who are they, and what did they have to do with its murder?"

"Rudy Rucker, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, John Shirley and William Gibson. Perhaps they had nothing to do with its murder. Maybe they just grew up, entered the *Diamond Age*, buckled down and faced the future: not too much hassle, not too much strife, just getting by fine. Folks don't want uncontrolled ups and downs; they want to see life through as best they can. The punk didn't want to reflect that. It liked staring at the down and dirty."

***Who watches the watchman?***

A penthouse, top floor of The Ivory Tower, overlooking Times Square. Two complete sides are glazed with Krick Resistance© glass and provide a panoramic view of New York, two hundred and fifty floors below.

"*Librarian*, zoom times hundred and fifty: Times Square Bulletin. I want to read it there."

"Yes sir," replies a sonorous British accent from deep inside the apartment. The remaining two walls are lined with aluminium shelves, holding a vast array of hardcopy books in vacuum compartments. Light and temperatures are regulated in the display units.

The One is gazing out the window, a martini in one hand, the other hand slipped into the pocket of his nightgown. The clear glass behind his four-piece sofa turns opaque, pixellating momentarily as the focus shifts, then clears again. The eternal news scroll on street level heralds the punk's death.

The One takes a sip from his cocktail, smacks his lips with the sharp taste, and turns around.

"Did *you* do it?" he asks the woman. The punk's ex-lover is casually draped over one corner of the electric blue Bergenwert couch, smoking a cigarette attached to a long black filter.

She smirks, and toasts the One with her own martini, the glass's stem pinched between a delicate index finger and thumb. 'I didn't need to do anything. Like all great fads he burnt himself out. We all knew he was lightning hot, and like lightning he licked this world briefly, then disappeared back into the clouds, like a dream.'

"You sure it's dead?"

"I'm sure it's dead."

"How do you know?"

"Because its fathers are as convinced as I am. Their concerns are not for open rebellion anymore. They are neither horrified by the world they have painted, nor infatuated with it to the

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point of obsession. These extremes might have once existed in them, but now the flame has flickered and died." **[contempt for contentment]**

The One grunts as he seats himself on the largest of his couches. Behind him the window winks, before depicting the radiant cityscape once more.

"Librarian, call up Carnegie, the Library of Congress, and the William Gates World Portal Library. List all the punk's core works."

"As you say, sir."

The console on the table flickers on, then suddenly spews forth four points of light that play over the ceiling. A black and white figure appears, the hologram a crass rendition of a gentleman reading a file or book, crass as the imperfect technology itself.

A few seconds pass, before the librarian answers.

"Brunner, John: Stand on Zanzibar, The Shockwave Rider

Cadigan, Pat: Mindplayers, Patterns, Synners

Gibson, William: Neuromancer, Count Zero, Mona Lisa Overdrive, Burning Chrome, Virtual Light, Idoru, All Tomorrow's Parties, Pattern Recognition

Gibson, William and Sterling, Bruce: The Difference Engine

Kadrey, Richard: Metrophage

Laidlaw, Marc: Neon Lotus

Maddox, Tom: Halo

Rucker, Rudy: Software, Wetware, Freeware

Shiner, Lewis: Frontera, The Edges of Things

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Shirley, John:	Eclipse, Eclipse Penumbra, Eclipse Corona
Siratori, Kenji:	Blood Electric
Smith, Michael Marshall:	Only Forward, Spares, One Of Us
Sterling, Bruce:	Distraction : A Novel, Crystal Express, Islands in the Net, Mirrorshades, Schismatrix, The Artificial Kid, Globalhead, Heavy Weather, Holy Fire
Vinge, Vernor:	True Names, True Names and Other Dangers
Jeff Noon:	Vurt, Pollen, Automated Alice, Pixel Juice, Needle in the Groove, Nymphomation, cobralingus.
Brian Wood:	Channel Zero, Jennie One"

The One looks at the ex-lover, who nods ever so slightly and looks away before the pain in her eyes can be registered. He stares at her a second longer, then drains his drink.

"Erase all, Librarian."

"Yes, sir."

"You think that's going to get rid of him?" asks the ex-lover, re-crossing her lithe legs so that she faces away from the One.

"I can try."

"You don't think he's dead?"

"Things like him never stay dead," answers the One. "Computer, erase the following visual data from all commercial and public archives. '*Strange Days*, *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix* trilogy, *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Brazil*, *Robocop*, *Fifth Element*, *Freejack*, *Gattaca*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Akira*, *The Mad Max* trilogy, *Terminator*, *Tron*, *War Games*, *Hackers*, *Wild Palms*. Locate all references to keyword *Cyberpunk*. Erase all links." He turns back to the woman, now running one long metallic nail over her lips. "Now that it's dead, it better *stay* dead. Not just that, it's going to be forgotten too." The One puts his glass down on the table with a loud clack.

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Just then the door announces in a deep French baritone. "Monsieur, your guest has arrived."

"Bring him up," commands the One.

"Very well."

"You know it doesn't matter what you do to the *Metaverse* banks, people will still remember. He had an impact on us—even you—who scorns him so."

"People forget too."

"Not when forced to."

"We'll see."

The door announces the One's guest and slides open. The soldier with the slick blond hair steps into the room, bowing curtly to the ex-lover. He removes his glasses to reveal ice-blue Nikkon eyes.

"It's gone."

"What's gone?"

"The body."

"What!" The One jumps up. "What happened?"

"We think there was a glitch, an anomaly. What seemed like the city assimilating the body, was in actual fact it assimilating the city—to some extent. There was an information exchange, not one-sided degradation as usual. The punk has spread throughout the city's network."

"It's escaped?"

"He'll be reborn," says the ex-lover, an involuntary smile spreading over her face. She bights her finger to stop it from growing bigger.

The soldier turns to her. "It is already reborn. There was a *Snow Crash*. It has diversified, infected cultures and communities. It has become a language of its own, a cobralingus, filtering the system that once censured it."

The console on the table chimes. "Sir, a message for you. Byte source and date unconfirmed."

"How's that possible?" Surprised, the One glances at the ex-lover and the soldier. "Relay."

"You know who I was," begins a young voice, which no one recognises. No vid figure appears in the hologram. Instead it's as if a Puppet Master is pulling the strings of the Librarian.

"Once I was called technologically facile, ethically vacuous, a computer-assisted vandal. This I still am. But as my creators have grown old and shifted their focus, so I have matured and differentiated. I am no longer a *Ghost in the Shell*, but a soul in the machine. You will no longer

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only find me on the street, spoiling for a fight, blood on my face, calloused fists raised. I will be everywhere, for I have absorbed this world, as it has assimilated me. Not everything I said was noted, but what *was* noted will be said by many more people. I may seem tamed now, subdued by this Brave New World, a world bought by The Ivory Tower in 1984. I will cut you down, wake people up. I'll reveal the truth. I'll *make* them listen!"

There's an audible click, and the console dies. When the ex-lover speaks her voice isn't shocked. It purrs with undisguised pleasure. "What now?"

The One suddenly laughs out loud. "It thinks it can fight me like this? Hah! It's now become another trademark, another medium to be toyed with, to be deconstructed. People will wear the badge, and own the screensaver. It's lost, it's lost. It's rebirth signals it's death with finality. *It's Lost in Generica.*"

**Subvertisement concept: Brian Wood (BW)**

Check out The Cyberpunk Project: <http://project.cyberpunk.ru/>

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## ***20 Questions With Gordon Van Gelder*** **Interviewed by Lynne Jamneck**

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Gordon Van Gelder published his first short story while in high school and says his writing career went downhill from there. He worked as an editor for St. Martin's Press for more than twelve years, during which time he helped publish such writers as George P. Pelecanos, Kate Wilhelm, Christopher Priest, and William Browning Spencer. In 1996 he became the eighth person to edit *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* over its fifty-plus year history. In 2000 he left St. Martin's Press in order to become the magazine's publisher. He lives in Hoboken, New Jersey, with his wife, Barbara.

**How did you become the Editor of *Fantasy & Science Fiction Magazine*? Were you still working at St. Martin's Press at the time?**

Yes, I was. In fact, I'd been the editor at St. Martin's for a *Best from F&SF* anthology, which is how I'd gotten to know Ed Ferman. And when Kris Rusch decided to resign, Ed called me up

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and said, "I'm looking to hire a new editor. You're probably not interested, but I thought I'd ask anyway." I said I might be interested, we talked more, and about six weeks later he gave me the job. I continued working at St. Martin's for more than three years after taking the *F&SF* job, up until I took over as publisher of the magazine.

**Nobody ever seems sure about the stability and long-term potential of short fiction magazines these days. What are the pros and cons of starting either a print or electronic speculative fiction magazine?**

Nobody has ever been sure about the stability of short fiction magazines. I can dig out quotes from thirty and forty years ago predicting the imminent demise of the short fiction market, and in fact, back in the 1940s, the launch of *F&SF* was delayed a couple of years because of uncertainty about the market after WWII.

Since I haven't actually *started* a magazine (I took over an existing one), I can only comment on what I've observed. And the main thing I've seen is that the hardest part of starting a magazine is keeping it running. It's relatively easy—and easier now than ever before—to put out an issue or two of a magazine. But once that initial burst of passion and enthusiasm has faded and the deadlines start looming, then it's harder to keep the magazine on schedule.

**Is short fiction still the best way for an aspiring writer to break into the field? How do you see the influence of online publishing affecting the future of the short story?**

That's two separate questions.

Question #1: the answer is yes—for some writers—and no for others. Novels have more influence now than ever before in the history of the field, and they generate far more money than short stories do. I think that Cory Doctorow and Ted Chiang are the only two writers to win the John Campbell Award for Best New Writer without already having published a novel. Ted is a great example of a writer who has broken in by way of short stories only. On the other hand, I can easily rattle off the names of writers who have broken in by way of novels: to my knowledge, Mary Doria Russell has never published a short story, I don't think Richard K. Morgan has either, and on and on.

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Question #2: I don't see online publishing affecting the future of the short story much, one way or the other. Did the advent of the audiotape affect song lyrics? I think this is a case where the medium isn't particularly the message.

**SFWA has recently changed their definition of professional magazines to those that pay five cents a word or more. This means that a number of magazines that previously were considered pro-zines no longer fit the description. Do you think this is good for the genre of speculative fiction? How would you define a professional magazine?**

I think Richard Feynman said that every organization exists for two reasons: one is to give each other awards, and the other is to decide who can belong. I'm not particularly concerned about these definitions; I'm more concerned about the quality of the work. We're not going to boost circulation by arguing over definitions of "professional," we're going to boost circulation by giving readers better material.

**How important are the small press magazines in terms of bringing fresh voices to the front?**

Very. Robert Heinlein used to claim that he sold his first story right off the bat and never looked back, but information has come out recently to show that's not the case. Every writer needs to learn the craft and there has to be a place for that learning to occur. Dan Keyes says he learned in the pulps in the 1950s. Nowadays the pulp market is gone, but the small press remains strong. I think Bill Gibson's first story appeared in a small-press magazine called *Unearth*.

**What are some of the most thought-provoking themes in contemporary SF and Fantasy fiction? Have these changed much in the last twenty years?**

I'm in the process of assembling an anthology of stories from *F&SF* about Mars and I noticed a big change in sf between 1964 and 1975. It occurred to me that the only change in SF/fantasy in the past twenty-five years that's as big has been the electronic revolution and the advent of cyberspace. Otherwise, I think most of the stories published nowadays could have been



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published in 1975 without much difference in substance. (The differences in *tone*, of course, would vary widely as we learn from the past. But that's another matter.)

The most thought-provoking themes? I'm hard-pressed to name any right now. You know, it's like asking a comedian, "Say something funny." I know the themes when I see them.

**Stanley Schmidt once defined a good Editor as someone who can help the writer do better what he\she is trying to do on their own. How far would you agree with that assessment?**

I think it's a good definition—I'd agree with it well past the 90% mark. The only place where I'd disagree is in saying that it's the only definition of a good editor (which I don't think is what Stan intended). There are a lot of different skills involved in editing. Some editors are great at working with a book, great at line-editing and at story structure. On the other hand, I know some book editors who never actually lay a pencil on a manuscript, but they're brilliant acquisitions editors—they have great eyes for recognizing talent. Maxwell Perkins was one of the greatest editors of the last century, but he was gullible when it came to books about the paranormal. I guess that's a way of saying that someone can be a good editor for one book or one writer, but not for another.

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

I was lucky in that I got to see a lot of editors at work at St. Martin's, so I learned a lot from people like Jared Kieling, Michael Denny, Stuart Moore, Bob Wyatt, and Tom McCormack. But the two editors I learned the most from are Jim Frenkel and David Hartwell. Jim gave me my first job in publishing and he was great at showing me different aspects of the business. I learned a lot just by typing up his editorial letters. David is great at mentoring editors and taught me a lot of lessons, but it's hard to say how both of them influence my own editing approach without getting to specific examples.

I should say too that as much as I learned editing from various editors, I learned more from working with writers like Kate Wilhelm and George Pelecanos. It's one thing for an editor to say, "This section doesn't work yet" and another thing for a writer to go and fix it.

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**What are the most important things any writer should know before submitting work to any professional fiction magazine like F&SF?**

Y'know, all the trite advice they give you in various writer's magazines is trite because it's all *true*. You really *do* need to read the magazine before you submit to it. You really do need to polish your manuscript before submitting it, rather than taking a first draft straight from the printer to the envelope. You can find the same advice in writer's magazines for the past fifty years and yet I still get submissions from people who have obvious never read an issue of *F&SF*.

I guess the two main things any writer should know are (1) know your market and (2) send out your best work. It used to be very common in the field for a magazine to buy a story, typeset it, and sometimes publish it before the writer even heard back from the magazine. That doesn't happen much any more, but you really do want to have your story in the form you'd like it in when published *before* you send it out.

**Did the coming and going of the new millennium have any significant influence on themes explored in particularly SF? Are there any particular settings or subject matter that you don't see enough of—that you see too much of?**

The new millennium didn't have any significant influence that I saw. As for themes and settings, there are plenty I can name that I see too much of: #1 is stories about the dead returned. I've seen droves of them over the past 2½ years. #2 is stories about memory. They almost all treat brain memory like computer memory, as though it can be uploaded and downloaded, and they've grown stale for me. #3 is contemporary settings. Ninety percent of what we receive is set in the here and now, typically about ten feet from where the writer lives. Give me something historical or something set in the future and convince me that it's real. (Stories set in the far future seem to be very scarce nowadays, although I suspect Gardner Dozois sees more of 'em at *Asimov's* than I do.)

**People—critics—are seemingly always convinced that the SF genre is taking a dive. How do you respond to this?**

I think of Tom Waits's line about ambition: I don't care who I have to step on on my way

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down.

**Has cyberpunk moved on? Or has the genre simply mutated into something new?**

**What is *The Machine's* place in contemporary SF?**

Of course cyberpunk has changed in the last twenty years. Is it gone? No, of course not—it's a huge influence still. But it certainly doesn't have the same ability to jolt us with a sense of newness that it had in the 1980s. Virtual Reality is one of those things that has petered out, for instance; I think I've bought one cyberspace story since I read M. John Harrison's "Suicide Coast" about four years ago. It's just not as interesting as real reality to me.

The place of *The Machine* in contemporary sf? I'm not sure. After reading Paolo Bacigalupi's *People of Sand and Slag* in our February issue, I'm tempted to say that we've ingested it. But a truer answer is that sf has always been about technology on some level and will continue to be.

**What do you look for in a story—what makes you sit up and take notice?**

We have a whole thread on our message board on this topic and the short and cruelly unfair answer is that I don't know until I see it. I can give you generalities—strong, clean prose, an engaging story concept, a sure hand with character—but the truth is that you can't really quantify it. I remember reading M. Rickert's first story, *The Girl Who Ate Butterflies*, in my office and saying, "Whoa. This one deserves another look." But if the story crossed my desk now, I'd say, "Whoa, this one sounds just like M. Rickert's first story."

**What are your pet peeves, editorially?**

Depends on the day of the week. On Monday and Tuesday, it's people who waste my time. On Wednesdays it's split infinitives and on Thursday's it's writers who use the word "this" as a noun too much.

I'm not sure I can give you a serious answer to the question. I guess one serious pet peeve I have is that I hate feeling like a writer is insulting my intelligence. Usually that means a writer is talking down to the audience.

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### **Who are some of your favorite authors, and why?**

Some of my favorite books are Lloyd Alexander's Prydain novels, David Goodis's *The Burglar* and *Night Squad*, Jack Womack's *Terraplane*, Damon Knight's *The Futurians*, Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* . . . I'm trying to remember some of the books on the shelf I'll try to save if I ever have a fire. As to why they're favorites, well, I notice all those books create worlds that feel real and accessible to me, without weighing down the book with ponderous chapters of world-building. They're all very story-driven books.

### **Any interesting books you've read lately that you would recommend?**

With all the reading I do for *F&SF*, I'm lucky if I finish two books a year nowadays, but one book I'm reading now that I recommend is *A Primate's Memoir* by Robert Sapolsky. It's the memoir of a scientist who spent a couple decades studying baboons in Africa. Great stuff.

### **Give us your five best SF\Fantasy films of the last decade. Are there any books\stories you personally think would adapt well into either a film or TV series?**

The only SF/fantasy film I can think of in the last decade that really made an impact on me was *Being John Malkovich*. Years ago I picked up Arthur Cover's attitude that film SF might as well be a different genre from written sf and I look at it that way now—as something that's almost irrelevant. They're different forms of shared experience. For me, the reading experience is much more intimate, and at its best there's a straight reader/writer connection. I almost never feel that straight connection with films or with TV shows; there are just too many other people involved in the production and in the audience experience.

### **Have you noticed writers from different countries explore specific themes in their fiction?**

Yes, but if you're asking me to name many, I'll have to disappoint you. I've been trying to read more international sf/fantasy, but I can't say that I've read enough to make generalizations. I agree with the general rap on British sf that too much of it is downbeat and depressing, and when

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I was in Australia I tried unsuccessfully to get a sense of what makes Australian sf different. (You can see my editorial on the subject at <http://www.sfsite.com/fsf/depts/gvg0002.htm>.) I've gotten the sense that artists in a lot of other countries have tried to make their work more American, hoping to break into the US market. Coming from the US, I'm more interested in seeing the differences in the fiction

**Are more SF writers incorporating elements of Fantasy into their work? Do you feel there is a general distancing from hard SF a la Clarke and Asimov from modern writers?**

Actually, with all due respect and then some to Arthur C. Clarke, I think he's somewhat to blame for the problem. If he hadn't said that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," would so many writers have decided they don't need to work out their extrapolations? Gardner Dozois and I have both noticed that sf and fantasy are blurring together more and the main difference between them now is one of *tone*. I'm not fond of this trend myself, but like I said before, writers need to make the work feel new and that means the stories have to change. One writer I know told me he thinks hard sf has had its day and is now behind us. I'm not convinced yet, but maybe he'll prove to be right.

**What would you like your epitaph to read?**

I'd prefer to leave that to someone else to decide. My siblings and I spent two years coming up with an epitaph for my father; someone else can go through that process for me.

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Lynne Jamneck, Editor

Publisher: Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr @ [www.specficworld.com](http://www.specficworld.com)

Contact: 12 B Pinewoods Road, Somerset West, 7130, Western Cape, South Africa

Email: [simulacrum@specficworld.com](mailto:simulacrum@specficworld.com)

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