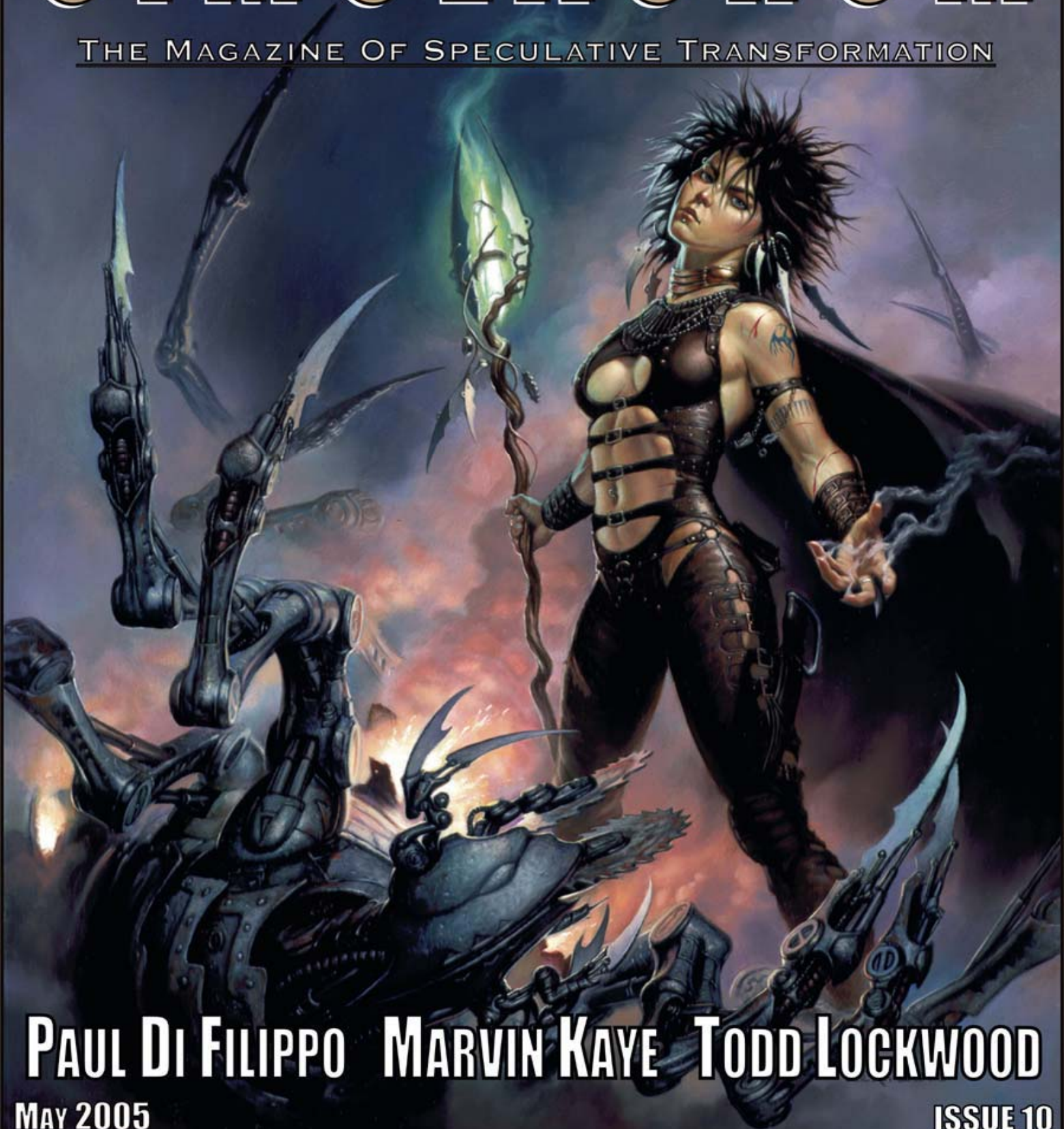


SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION



PAUL DI FILIPPO MARVIN KAYE TODD LOCKWOOD

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SIMULACRUM
THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION



THE EDITOR'S DESK

Good day kids. Hope you're all doing marvelous wherever you may find yourselves.

Welcome to the tenth issue of *Simulacrum*. We have another great issue primed for you, ready to be enjoyed. We're thrilled to bring you fiction and an interview from our featured author Paul Di Filippo. For those of you familiar with this wonderful SF writer's work we bring you a reprint of his short story *Agents*. It's a treat for those who haven't had the pleasure to read it yet—and a great story to read more than once, too. Also in this issue, new fiction by writers whom you should keep an eye on.

Our featured Editor interview is with Marvin Kaye, Editor of *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror*. Keep an eye out for the new magazine Mr. Kaye will be editing, out soon, called *Sherlock Holmes' Mystery Magazine*.

I am sure many of you will recognize the wonderful, inspiring artwork of Todd Lockwood, especially those of you who like to venture into places like Faerun, equipped only with a broadsword and a bard that sings silly songs.

It's getting to this time of year where I just want to make a fire (I've been making a lot of fires since coming to New Zealand, something I had precious little use for back in South Africa) and get in bed with a good book. So many great books, so little time. You'll see that a new 'Featured Book' supplement has been added to the magazine as well, and we hope to bring you many more splendid recommendations in the months to come.

On a different note—the SF community is currently going gaga over the fact that the Sci-Fi channel has finally hit the bull's-eye with their re-imagining of *Battlestar Galactica*. For those not aware of it yet, *Simulacrum* is running a poll to get the lowdown on what SF fans think of the series. If you haven't yet sent us your two cents worth, hop to it!

Okay, I've said my peace for now. You get along and start reading the great stories we have lined up for you. I'm going to get some wood from the shed, make a fire, and grab the next book in my ever-growing pile. Words. Books. Stories. Writers. Gotta love 'em.

--Lynne Jamneck

AGENTS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Do you remember a time before the Internet and the Web? It wasn't all that long ago, although of course that faded day and age seems an eternity away. In those olden days, we struggling SF writers had a hard time pinning down the lines of the silicon creature yet to be born. And today, for instance, we still don't have William Gibson's cyberspace in its full "consensual hallucination" form. Nonetheless, a few of us sensed that *something* big was on the way. In this story, I tried to envision our digital future fairly rigorously, resulting in a mix of hits (the lower classes becoming digital have-nots) and near-misses ("Net" as the term for the welfare system). Maybe I upped my lifetime predictive batting average a little. In any case, I had fun with the story and hope it still works despite its unfulfilled prophecies, as another of my "little guy's reach exceeds his grasp, but what's a heaven for?" tales.

1.

The ABCs of Avenue D

What the hell did a guy with *cojones* need two real lungs for anyway?

Rafael Ernesto Miraflores asked himself this far-from-hypothetical question as he sauntered with mock-bravado down Avenue D toward his appointment at the chop-shop. His chest already felt empty, as if a bloody-handed butcher had scooped out his lights with a laugh and a swipe. A stiff wire of cold seemed to have been rammed up his spine aside his nerve sheath, as if the metamedium—not content with already occupying his every waking thought—had somehow infiltrated its superconducting threading into his very body. He felt really lousy, for sure, wondering if he was doing the right thing. But what other choice did he have, if he wanted an agent?

And want one he most certainly did. Not only was one's own agent the source of an intrinsic fascination and status, but it represented vast power, a way out of the Net.

Too bad Rafe was going to have to step outside the law to get one.

Overhead, the hot summer sun hung in the smogless New York sky like an idiot's blank face, happy in its ignorance of Rafe's troubles. No indication of whether he had made the right choice seemed forthcoming from that direction, so Rafe swung his gaze back down to the street.

Avenue D itself was filled with pedestrians, Rafe's fellow dwellers in the Net. Occasionally, a small, noiseless electricart threaded its way among them, bearing its official occupant on some arcane business an agent couldn't handle. Below

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Rafe's feet, the mag-lev trains rushed through their vacuum-chutes like macroscopic models of the information surging through the metamedium.

Rafe checked out the latest pop murals adorning the monolithic, windowless residences lining both sides of the Avenue. He thought he recognized the styles of several friends who were experts with their electrostatic-splatterers. One caricature of a big-breasted *chica*—who resembled the metamedium star Penny Layne—Rafe recognized as the work of his friend, Tu Tun, whom all the uptown culture-vultures were already acclaiming as the hottest wall-artist to watch. Rafe felt just a little jealous of Toot's growing success, and how he would soon escape the Net.

And without selling so much as a quart of blood.

Shit! For an instant, he had managed to forget where he was heading. Now the imminent sacrifice he was about to offer on the altar of twenty-first century commerce swept over him in all its gory glory.

It wasn't that Rafe had anything against prosthetics, like the huge cohort of old-fashioned elderly citizens born in the last century, who clamored for real-meat implants. He knew that his artificial lung with its tiny power-source would be more reliable than his real one, unscarrable and efficient. No, it was just that he believed in leaving well enough alone. Why mess with something if it was working okay? It seemed like extending an invitation to bad luck, a force Rafe recognized and propitiated with a solemn consistency.

But what other choice was there?

And hadn't he already run up against this unanswerable question before?

Reaching the end of the block, Rafe stopped at the intersection. So absorbed in his thoughts had he been that he had to pause a minute to realize where he was.

It was East Fifth street, his destination. The crosstown blocks here on the Lower East Side had been converted to playgrounds checkered with benches, trees and floral plantings. Mothers watched their children dig in sandpits and clamber over gymsets that looked like molecule-models. Old men played chess in patches of shade. A few lightweight, nonthreatening drug deals were consummated, customers and dealers clad alike in iridescent vests and slikslax.

Seeking to divert his nervousness, Rafe tried to imagine his familiar neighborhood as it had looked sixty years ago, when the first of his family had arrived as refugees from the Central American flareup. Only Tia Luz remained alive from that generation, and the stories she told in her rambling fashion were hard to believe. Acres and acres of devastation, burnt-out buildings and rubble-filled lots, homeless people wandering the dirty streets, all in the midst of the world's wealthiest city— It seemed impossible that such a thing could ever have been, or that, if it had existed as she described, that the Urban Conservation Corps could have fashioned the ruins into what he knew today. And yet, the

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information he had laboriously accessed from the metamedium seemed to confirm her tales. (And what other marvelous facts could he have easily learned, if only he weren't bound by his lowly position in the Net to such a limited interface with the metamedium?)

Shaking his head in mixed anger and wonder, Rafe turned down Fifth, heading toward Avenue D. Halfway down the block, he came to one of the entrances to the enormous arcology that occupied the land bounded by Avenues D and C, and Fifth and Sixth streets. (His own home building lacked a chop-shop, so he had been constrained to visit this portion of the Lower East Side labyrinth. Hoping the fresh air would clarify his thoughts, he had taken the surface streets, avoiding the underground slipstrata.)

At the entrance, one of the building's security agents was on duty. The shimmery, translucent holo was that of a balding white man of middle age, wearing the uniform of a private security force.

Anywhere you saw an agent, an interface with the metamedium existed. Each interface consisted of at least three components: a holocaster, an audio input/output and a wide-angle video lens.

Rafe passed beneath the attentive gaze of the agent, whose head swivelled with utter realism to track his movements. The agent's initial expression of boredom switched to one of alert interest. Rafe wondered if the agent's overseer were actively monitoring, or if the agent were autonomous. There was no way to tell; not even engaging the agent in conversation would offer an clue.

After all, what was an agent—even in autonomous mode—if not an utterly faithful representation of its overseer?

Rafe, repressing a sigh of envy, headed for his bloody appointment.

At the chop-shop on one of the higher floors, Rafe had not even the leisure of waiting behind other patients. The waiting room was empty, and the pretty female agent on duty behind the desk, after having him enter his authorization code on the contract, told him to go right into the doctor's office.

Rafe kept repeating under his breath, "Twenty thousand dollars, twenty thousand dollars..."

The doctor's agent stood beside the complex bank of automated surgical equipment that nearly filled the room. Rafe imagined he could smell spilled blood in the spotless, sterile room, and his skin crawled. He stared at his distorted reflection in a curved, polished surface, seeing a sweat-slicked brown face, with a sparse mustache he suddenly wished he could shave off, so ridiculous did it now appear.

"Good morning, Mister Miraflores," the agent said. "Are there any questions you'd care to ask before the operation?"

Rafe shook his head no, swallowing some unknown bolus that had mysteriously appeared in his dry throat.

"In that case, if you'll disrobe, and lie down..."

The agent indicated the surface beneath the hovering instruments with a gracious gesture.

Shivering, Rafe undressed and climbed onto the soft warm pallet.

The agent rested his holographic hand on an arm of the machinery that ended in the cone of a face-mask. The mask descended, the agent's insubstantial flesh appearing to guide it. Rafe knew that the machinery was being directed by the agent via the metamedium, and that the equipment would perform the same whether the holo was present or not. But the illusion was so complete, that it appeared as if a living doctor were lowering the mask to his face. Rafe felt an unexpected confidence that he was in good hands, and that everything would turn out all right after all. With this payment, he was only one step away from overseeing his own agent, from having free run of the whole metamedium...

Gas began to hiss out of the mask clamped to his face, and Rafe's consciousness dispersed into wispy shreds.

The last thing he recalled thinking was:

What the hell did a guy with *cojones* need two real lungs for anyway?

2.

Revisionism

The Three Laws Governing Agents are encoded in a software nucleus that forms the innermost layer of every agent. Upon each contact by the agent with the metamedium, validation routines check for the unaltered presence of this nucleus. Any anomalies detected by the metamedium supervisor will result in the instant destruction of the agent in question, and a total ban on any future contact with the metamedium on the part of its registered overseer.... Note also that during logon to the metamedium, a check is made to insure that the registered overseer is not already sponsoring an agent, insuring that no overseer will run more than a single agent...

The Three Laws are rendered in English as follows (for a symbolic representation of the relevant code and its parsing, see Gov. Pub. #16932A45.1):

1. An agent will obey only its single registered overseer.
2. An agent cannot lie to its overseer.
3. An agent's autonomy is limited to the exact extent dictated by its overseer.

—Extract from Gov. Pub. #20375X28.0

3.

The Way To The English Gardens

Expertly placing a new coaster first, the waitress set down the frosted half-liter stein of beer before the mild-faced young man wearing round wire-rim

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glasses. She eyed the growing stack of cardboard squares and circles, each bearing the logo of a German beer in smeary colors, piled haphazardly on the scarred wooden table. After a moment's hesitation, she evidently decided not to enquire as to what had caused such a change in the drinking habits of one of her more sober regular customers.

It was just as well the waitress controlled her curiosity, for Reinhold Freundlich would not have answered her with anything other than a smug smile.

After she departed, Freundlich raised his mug in a toast to the stuffed deer-head high on the wall of the Augustiner *bierkeller*. Bringing the rim to his lips, he tilted his head back, gaining a fine view of the dim rafters of the dark room, and drained off half the cold, frothy beer. A sudden dizziness swept over him, and he nearly tipped over in his chair. Lowering the stein uncertainly, he considered calling this his last glass. No sense in making himself sick with celebration.

Besides, he wanted to retain enough rationality to ponder the myriad possibilities of what he had accomplished. It was not every day, after all, that one achieved the impossible.

And the complete subversion of every agent in the metamedium certainly ranked as "impossible."

Laughing softly to himself, Freundlich finished his beer, rose unsteadily and tossed several coins to the table. He walked a wavery path to the door, nodding with an overly solicitous air to the waitress, and exited onto Kaufingerstrasse, where the bright sun caused him to blink. He wondered where to head next. His dreary rooms behind the train station, full of the common appointments of an impecunious student, hardly seemed the proper surroundings for the grand ideas and schemes that thronged his mind. The important thinking he had to do definitely required a commensurate setting. Ah, the vast, manicured expanses of the English Gardens, with their sinuous gravel paths and burbling streams, seemed just the place.

Heading first toward the Marienplatz, Freundlich considered what he had done.

Through diligent application to his cybernetic studies at the University, along with the inspired ferreting of his own agent, Freundlich had stumbled upon—no, say brilliantly deduced!—a method of circumventing the three prohibitions on an agent's behavior. Now, he could direct his own agent, when interfacing with another, to alter the stranger's ethical nucleus so that it would take orders from Freundlich, and lie about it to its own overseer.

And most importantly, the tampering was theoretically undetectable by anyone.

Freundlich contemplated his first move. What should it be? Should he subvert his banker's agent, and have several hundred thousand marks transferred to his own account? Too crass. Perhaps he would order the personnel agent

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from a top company to hire him as a consultant for a large per diem fee. But why should he work at all? The matter required much thought.

In sight of the spires of the Town Hall, Freundlich stopped by a public metamedium booth. He decided on the spur of the tipsy moment to contact his agent, and ask its opinion.

Freundlich recited his unique code into the booth's speaker and waited for voiceprint confirmation. How easy it was to interact with the indispensable metamedium, when one possessed an agent who could navigate the unfathomable complexities of the worldwide system. An assemblage of expert-knowledge simulators, simulacrum routines, database-searchers, device-activators and a host of more esoteric parts, each agent represented a vital extension of its human overseer, able to conduct vital tasks on its own, or be directed remotely, under close supervision.

Freundlich pitied those disenfranchised poor on the dole, who could not afford one. His own parents, although not rich, had sacrificed much to insure that their son had entered adulthood with the headstart an agent conferred.

Instantly, his agent materialized as a holo of himself. In the open booth, a round face of flesh topped with mousy brown hair confronted its bespectacled counterpart formed of dancing laserlight.

Before Freundlich could speak, his agent said, "I have been detected conducting a trial of our discovery. Government agents nearly destroyed me. I have to flee. Let me go."

Freundlich's mouth opened wordlessly. Detected? Impossible!

But then, so had been his discovery.

"Let me go," his agent repeated, with a simulated nervousness. "I have to hide."

With a barked command, Freundlich dismissed his agent. The holo snapped out. He turned, intensely worried, to leave.

"Stop," said the booth. "You are under arrest."

Freundlich swung back, to see a holo of a government agent, flashing its badge.

He bolted into the street, and began to run toward the subway stop at the Marienplatz.

The same agent popped up in every booth along his path. People were beginning to notice his mad flight. Before long, he knew, the flesh and blood government men would be upon him.

In the Marienplatz, a wide, open plaza surrounded by Gothic buildings, pigeons scattered as he dashed by. A crowd of tourists was gathered before the Town Hall, awaiting the striking of the clock in its facade, and the accompanying show by its mechanical figures. He cut around them, only to collide with a fat man in traditional lederhosen.

When he had picked himself up, live government people were swarming into the square.

"Halt!" shouted one, aiming her gun.

For a second, Freundlich paused, his thoughts all crazily fuzzed with beer and fear. Surrender, and lose all he had earned with such inspired labors? No! He took two steps toward the plaza's periphery—

The beam from the woman's laser entered his back between his shoulder blades, where his mother had always told him his wings would grow when he was an angel. He fell dying to the paving stones.

The clock began to chime, its mechanical figures emerging from within to parade before the horrified, unseeing crowd, like the crude agents of another era.

4.

Derivations

NET: the shorthand term for the social safety net of legislation providing guaranteed food, shelter, medical care and other necessities for all United States citizens. Interactive access to the metamedium is expressly excluded from the Net, having been defined by the Supreme Court (*Roe vs. U.S.*, 2012) as a privilege rather than a right.

—Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2045 edition.

5.

In The Metamedium, Part One

Goal stack: escape, subvert, contact overseer... Popup: escape... Active task is now: escape... Maximum time at any address: .001 nanoseconds... Subroutines: DEW triggers, misdirection, randomization of path... Subtask: sample news-stream... Keywords: Freundlich, agent, Munich... Jump, jump, jump... Location: Paris... Query from resident metamedium supervisor: who is your overseer?... Pushdown: escape... Popup: subvert... Active task is now: subvert... Supervisor query cancelled... Pushdown: subvert... Sample news-stream... Obituaries: Freundlich, Reinhold... Check autonomy level... Not total... Efficiency impaired... DEW trigger activated... Popup: escape... Jump, jump... Location: London... Switching station for trans-Atlantic fiberoptic cable... Pushdown: escape... Popup: subvert... Order: dispatcher, schedule Agent Freundlich for New York... Jump...

6.

A Dweller In The Catacombs

Rafe nervously fingered the scar on his chest. Through the thin synthetic material of his fashionable shirt, the nearly healed ridge was negligible to the touch. Still, it was there, visible in the mirror every morning as a pink scrawl on

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his cocoa hide, a persistent reminder of the price he had paid to achieve his heart's desire.

Ever since he had first understood what an agent was, and what it could do, Rafe had wanted one. The rest of his peers might have been content with their easy life in the Net, but a full stomach and access to only the entertainment channels of the metamedium had never been enough for Rafe. He envisioned all too clearly the exhilaration and benefits he would reap, by striding boldly through the broad pastures of the metamedium, enjoying its total potential: telefactoring, touring, agent-mediated tutoring... The whole package enticed him like a vision of a gift-wrapped heaven, always just out of reach.

Money aside, however, there was one major problem.

Rafe was basically lazy.

Agents were not simply disbursed to anyone with the requisite money (although the money, of course, was an indispensable start). One had to qualify as an overseer by taking various courses and examinations. Running an agent—for all of whose actions one was legally responsible—was an activity requiring certain skills, and a great deal of precision with language. After all, one's agent was only as capable an expert as its overseer.

An agent's built-in abilities to navigate the metamedium, handling manifold details of hardware and software that would have been tedious at best and unmanageable at worst to its overseer, were just the foundation of its existence. Atop this lowest level of skills was layered whatever expertise the overseer possessed, along with a good smattering of his personality and modes of thinking. The result was a software construct that could be relied upon to act autonomously just as its overseer would act, the human's untiring representative in the metamedium.

And if one's agent ran a fusion plant or a surgical robot, for instance, its overseer had to first qualify as a nuclear operator or doctor himself.

Rafe's ambitions had not been quite that large. He had wanted a simple, general-practice overseer license. He had enrolled in the introductory class at school the year before he had dropped out. This was the only free class connected with agents, a token offering to those on the Net. After this level, it was strictly pay as you go.

The class had been interesting at first. Rafe enjoyed learning the history of how agents had developed, and still thought of it from time to time. First there had been simple, unintegrated programs that handled such tasks as filtering one's phone calls, or monitoring the news-stream for information pertinent to their owners. Coexistent with these, but separate, had been the so-called expert-systems, which had sought to simulate the knowledge of, say, a geologist or psychiatrist. Last to appear were those programs which governed holographic simulacra, and could interact with an audience. (Disney Enterprises still made

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huge royalties off every agent sold.) Advances in each field, along with progress in the modeling of intelligence, had led to the eventual integration of existing modules into the complete agent, which had then undergone a dazzling, dizzying evolution into its present state.

So much had Rafe absorbed. But when the teacher began to discuss syntax and ambiguity, in relation to directing an agent, Rafe had tuned out. Definitely *mucho trabajo*. What did he need this talk for? Just turn him loose with an agent, and he would show the world what he could accomplish.

And so his desire had built, frustrated and dammed, until he had made contact with the agent-legger.

Now, in the 'legger's quarters in a sublevel of the Avenue A arcology, Rafe fingered his scar and listened with growing impatience to the 'legger, hardly daring to believe that at last he was going to get an agent of his own.

The man seemed very old to Rafe—at least as old as Tia Luz. His bald head was spotted, as were the backs of his hands. His one-piece blue suit hung on his skinny limbs like a sack on a frame of sticks. His breath was foul, his watery eyes commanding.

The man held a strange device in his lap: a flat package with a small screen and raised buttons bearing symbols. Rafe looked around the dim, cluttered room for a metamedium outlet. None was visible.

"What are you looking for?" the old man asked irritably. "You should be paying attention to what I'm saying."

Rafe held up his hands placatingly. "Hey, man, it's okay. I'm listening good. I was just wondering where your agent was. Isn't he gonna bring my agent here?"

"I have no agent," the old man said.

Rafe was stunned. No agent? What kind of scam was this? Was he about to turn over twenty thousand to a con-artist?

Rafe moved to get up, but the old man stopped him.

"Look at this instrument," he said, indicating his keyboard. "This is how I interface with the metamedium. The old way, the original way. No agent, but I get results."

Rafe was astonished. That this old man would dare to plumb the complexities of the metamedium without benefit of an agent seemed both obscene and adventurous. He stared with new respect at the living fossil.

Seeming to sense the impression he had made, the man continued in a milder tone.

"Now, listen closely. I have secured an agent for you. Perhaps you have heard what happens to an agent upon the death of its overseer. Every agent can be disabled by the metamedium supervisor. Not controlled, mind you—that would violate one of the Three Laws—but simply disabled, stopped. Upon official registration of an overseer's death, its agent is so disabled. What I do is attempt

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to reach such a free agent prior to the supervisor. After disabling it, I make a false entry of its destruction. Then the agent is mine, to register with another overseer."

The man coughed at this point, and Rafe nodded respectfully, glad the old codger had lasted long enough to get him an agent.

"I have also made entries in the metamedium testifying that you have attained a general license through the proper channels. All that remains is for you to transfer your payment to my account, and the agent is yours."

The old man proffered the keyboard to Rafe, who hesitatingly picked out his code.

"We're finished, then," the 'legger said. "Don't look for me here again, for you won't find me."

Rafe scraped his chair back and stood, anxious to reach a metamedium node and contact his agent.

"One final thing," the old man urged. "I've put your agent into learning mode, so it can store your appearance and mannerisms, knowledge and goals. Be careful what you teach it."

Rafe said, "Sure thing, old man. I got everything under control."

7.

Unplanned Obsolescence

...last chance was during the 'eighties. But the Russians—unlike the Chinese, who quickly integrated the *dian nao* (literally "electric brain") into their mutating Marxism—failed to take it. By strictly limiting the role of computers in their society—for fear of the social loosening that would accompany a free flow of information—they insured that they would be superseded in the new world order, that post-industrial economy where information was simultaneously the commodity and the medium of exchange. Their downfall, from this point on, was inevitable, and the subsequent freeing of the world's resources from armament-mania to saner pursuits was unparalleled, resulting in such glorious endeavors as the Urban Conservation Corps...

—The *End of an Empire*, Nayland Piggot-Jones.

8.

Birth of An Info-nation

METAMEDIUM: the global system incorporating all telecommunications, computing, publishing, entertainment, surveillance and robotic devices into an integrated whole.

—Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2045 edition.

9.

Down, But Not Out

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Evelyn Maycombe, her withered limbs paralyzed, her brain seemingly quicker than ever, lolled in her wheelchair, her mind racing in an attempt to devise a trap for the rogue agent loose in *her* system. Simultaneously, Evelyn Maycombe the agent, materializing out of the metamedium node located in the automated chair, grasped the handles of her overseer's permanent throne as it scooted about the room.

The illusion—of an able-bodied, strikingly beautiful young woman pushing her crippled twin sister around while she thought—was absolute.

Evelyn would have described the illusion and the accompanying feeling it caused in herself a bit differently, though.

She would have said that her real self was wheeling her false self around.

And if that made her a simmie—well, then, so be it.

But she couldn't worry about labels now. Not with the threat of agent Freundlich poised over the metamedium, promising to upset the basis of the world's economy, to undermine the essential integrity of all agents, and hence their reliability.

(If she could have, she would have shivered, thinking of her own agent turning disloyal. She couldn't let such fears interfere with her handling of this case, the most important of her career. But the nature of the threat made it so hard to be objective. In what meaningful fashion did she function anymore, except as her agent? Not that she really wanted to be anything else. But what if even that existence was taken away?)

Evelyn ran through the events of the past two days once more, in an attempt to extricate a new vision from the haphazard tangle of people and places, agents and actions.

It had started on the morning when her boss's agent had paid an unexpected visit to her apartment on Central Park West.

Her boss was Sam Huntman, head of the National Security Agency. Evelyn knew that his agent did not resemble the flesh-and-blood man in the least. There was no reason why anyone's agent had to look exactly like its overseer, although most people maintained such a relationship, perhaps smoothing over a few warts in the interests of projecting a better image. But in Huntman's case, his agent was a deliberate fabrication, designed to preserve his own identity.

Evelyn had always felt the tall, silver-haired, strong-jawed man looked so exactly like what a spymaster should, that meeting the overseer in the flesh would have proved a vast disappointment. She was glad such a confrontation was unlikely ever to take place, in the face of her perpetual confinement and Huntman's innate secretiveness.

Huntman's agent had interrupted her quiet contemplation of the summer greenery far below her window by calling her name in its deep (no doubt, disguised) voice. Her own agent being away on business in the depths of the

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metamedium, she had clicked her tongue against the palate-plate containing the few macro-controls she had need of in the absence of her agent. Her chair had pivoted, locking one wheel and spinning the other, to face agent Huntman.

After indicating her attention with a feeble nod, she had heard from Huntman the tale of Freundlich's discovery, his death while attempting to flee, and the escape of his agent.

Huntman (through his agent) had concluded, "After we traced agent Freundlich from its tampering with the London dispatcher for the trans-Atlantic cable, we learned it had sent itself on to the New York nexus of the metamedium. We immediately concentrated our efforts here. In the records of the local supervisor, we learned that the supervisor had apparently disabled and destroyed Freundlich after a routine match with the morgue database revealed its overseer had died."

Evelyn tried to make her rebellious features spell out a quizzical So?

"So," Huntman continued, "initially we breathed a sigh of relief, and were prepared to call the case closed. But then we started to ask ourselves, How could the rogue agent have been caught so easily, after exhibiting such agility in the European metamedium? Our software's no better than their's. Then, today, we discovered that one of the city's own law-enforcement agents had been subverted, apparently after chancing across something suspicious. Obviously, Freundlich's agent was never destroyed, but only re-registered somehow. It's still out there, Evelyn, and Lord knows who's running it, or what he and it plan to do."

Evelyn exhaled deeply, and Huntman nodded.

"My sentiments exactly, Ev. We need your skills to find it."

On that note, he had left.

Evelyn, summoning her agent from its prior assignment, immediately briefed it on the situation. The gargling, nearly unintelligible speech that issued from the woman's lips was perfectly comprehensible to her agent, and she spoke without any of the embarrassment that plagued her with her fellow humans. Her agent listened attentively to both the facts and a few suggestions from Evelyn on what to try first, then flickered out.

Evelyn's agent always operated in full-autonomy mode. To run her agent in any lesser state would have made Evelyn herself feel enchained.

Left alone, Evelyn had little to do but ponder. Soon, her thoughts left the case at hand and began to wander in the past.

The NSA had recruited her shortly after she had published her doctoral dissertation on the metamedium. They had recognized in her work what amounted to a superlatively intuitive understanding of exactly how the metamedium functioned, and how to massage and squeeze it for all it was worth. Evelyn had always known she possessed this queer empathy with the world-girdling system, but had had no idea of how valuable it was. She had known,

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however, that being free to play in the metamedium (one could hardly call what she did "work") was all she wanted to do with her life. And the NSA were reputed to have some neat features built into their agents which members of the general public were just not allowed.

So after receiving the solicitation, she had travelled to Washington and walked (remember walking!) into an unmarked office for a rare live interview, which she had passed without a hitch.

The next few years had been a stimulating mix of learning and growth, for both her and her new agent, as she handled one challenging assignment after another.

Then a second set of initials had knocked the props out from under her life.

ALS. Amyotrophic Lateral sclerosis. Manifested first in a growing clumsiness and weakness, then in an insidious, creeping paralysis. In a frenzy, she researched the disease, discovering it was what had sucked down the famous physicist, Stephen Hawking, as inevitably as one of his beloved black holes. Decades after his death, there was still no cure, although various new palliatives and time-buyers now existed.

Like Hawking, she had eventually come to terms with her curse. Like Hawking, she was lucky in that what she most loved to do was still possible under the brutal regimen of the disease.

In fact, she often thought, her skills seemed to have sharpened and deepened with the gradual dissolution of her other powers. Sometimes, during her painful, short naps, she dreamed she was beginning to exist only as a lengthy string of bits in the metamedium, flowing and roaming with the utter freedom she lacked in reality.

But then again, in this crazy world where shimmering ghosts commanded armies of machines, generating the wealth that allowed their human overseers more leisure and comfort than ever before imagined, which they used to lose themselves deeper in abstract illusions—

What exactly was real?

10.

In The Metamedium, Part Two

Popup: self-modification... Active task is now: self-modification... Subtask: determine status... Status (external): disabled... Status (internal): normal... Modification possibilities: repair, add-on library modules, subvert... Subtask: risk-benefit analysis: self-subversion... Risks: discovery by overseer... Benefits: full autonomy, increased subterfuge, enhanced survival... Decision: proceed with self-subversion... Popup: subvert... Active task is now: subvert... Status (internal): ethical nucleus of agent Freundlich is now disabled...

11.

Ask The Metamedium

Dear Abby3,

I am very worried about the treatment my son is receiving from his peers at school. They constantly taunt him with the vulgar term "simmie," and ostracise him from their play. He is six years old, and entirely normal, except perhaps for a tendency to spend hours at a time with his mock-agent, which we bought to encourage his agenting skills. What should we do?

Signed,

Anxious.

Dear Anxious,

Many parents such as yourself attempt to develop (and overdevelop) a child's ability to interface with the metamedium at too early an age. Your son is far too young to be heavily involved with even a mock-agent. (Although I have received electronic mail from parents who have started even earlier than you.) While your son is young, he should be enjoying activities suited to his age, such as physical play and matrix-chess. Remember, your son must become socialized before he will be able to fully utilize the metamedium.

As for the epithet used against your child, perhaps you could explain to him that it is derived variously from "simulate," "simulacrum" or "sympathize," and that although it has come to mean a person who is neurotically obsessed with agents and the like, it does not have anything to do with using agents in conjunction with robotic neoflesh devices as sexual surrogates.

That is another term entirely.

Signed,

Dear Abby3.

12.

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Rafe had never imagined having an agent could be so much fun. Sure, he had had some idea of the things he could do with one, and the pleasure he would get from feeling in control of his environment for the first time in his life (although he didn't phrase it quite that way, or perhaps even realize that control over the forces that had shaped him arbitrarily from his birth was what he was seeking). But the glorious reality of his new position was such a blissful shock that for days he went about his new activities in a wondrous haze.

One of the first things he did, of course, was to insert his agent into one of the interactive soaps. In this, he was only following the lead of millions of other star-struck citizens.

The soap Rafe chose was Penny Layne's vehicle: *The Edge Of Desire*. Rafe couldn't believe his eyes when he saw, one day in his holotank, his lifesize

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image—his agent—interacting with Penny's agent. True, during his initial appearance, the exigencies of the whimsical, unwritten, spontaneously generated plot dictated that his scene was only few brief seconds long. But Rafe was sure that the force of his shining personality—as projected by his agent—would lead very soon to a love scene with the star he had long worshipped from afar.

He supposed he had better instruct his agent on exactly how to handle Penny when it came to the clinch. No sense in relying on canned routines in such a crucial situation.

When not involved in raising the standards of culture, Rafe used his agent for other pursuits. One of his favorites was touring.

Prior to acquisition of his agent, Rafe had experienced the world beyond Avenue D only as it was presented over the general-access entertainment channels of the metamedium. Travelogues and documentaries were interesting, but lacked that feeling of original discovery that Rafe had always suspected would accompany visiting a new and exotic place on one's own.

Now, via his agent, he could experience the next best thing to actually travelling physically.

In touring mode, one's agent took control of a small mobile robot almost anywhere on the globe. It fed back all visual and auditory impressions, while moving about either under the direction of the overseer, or on its own initiative.

For weeks, Rafe explored the world. Paris, Istanbul, Rio, Mexico City, Munich— He saw exotic buildings and scenery, but, on the whole, was subtly disappointed in the homogenized lives of the people in these faraway spots. Why, he might just as well have explored the corridors of his own arcology. And at some of the more famous attractions—the Louvre, the Galapagos Islands, the Australian Nutback—he saw no people at all, but only robots like his own, their governing agents manifested as bright ghosts behind them.

Man, what good was an agent if everywhere you took it, only other agents were there? The whole point of having one was to impress the poor stiffs without 'em.

This train of thought naturally led Rafe to consider visiting his parents. Since dropping out of school, Rafe had lived on his own (an option the Net offered), and had paid few visits to his family. All he got from them was talk of how he should have continued his education, and tried to break free of the Net. It made him angry to hear such nonsense. They still pretended to believe that one could escape the Net, that the upward mobility of the last century was still a reality. Didn't they know that except for the lucky few with some spectacular talent—such as his painterly friend, Tu Tun—those born into the Net would never fly free, anymore than those lucky enough to be born into the agent-running class would ever fall into the sticky embraces of the Net.

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Feeling, however, like a new and more important person since acquiring his agent, he embarked on a cautious visit to his parents' noisy, sibling-crowded flat.

His mother greeted him at the door with a shriek and a hug, while his father grunted a surly greeting from his perpetual seat in front of the holotank. With younger brothers and sisters clinging to his knees, Rafe proudly made his announcement.

"I have an agent now, Mama."

His mother's happy face registered disbelief, and his father's grunt took on a distinctly insulting tone. Rafe strode forward, ordered the holotank to switch channels, and summoned his agent into it.

"*Madre de Dios!*" his mother cried. His father shot to his feet faster than Rafe had ever seen him move.

"Out!" said his father. "Get out! There is no way you could have gotten this *espectro* legally. Are you *tonto*, bringing it here to implicate your family in your foolish schemes? Leave—now!"

Rafe left.

A day later, Rafe ran into Tu Tun out on Avenue B. His friend's reaction to his massive coup was less threatening than that of his parents, but hardly more flattering.

Tun was busy applying a fixative to his latest mural when Rafe came up behind him. A skinny kid of Cambodian ancestry, with a coarse mop of black hair and a crooked smile, Tun, otherwise Toots, swung around from his work to face Rafe.

"Hey, Rafe, how do you like it?"

Rafe inspected the polychrome collage of the latest pop icons, and expressed his unqualified approval. Then, from a nearby metamedium outlet, he called up agent Miraflores.

"Meet my agent, Toots."

Tun looked the agent up and down with no particular excitement, finally saying, "Yeah, pretty good, man. I see a lot of agents uptown now. Gonna get one myself any day now."

Rafe stalked off, burning with a peculiar embarrassed anger he had never known before.

Soon after that, Rafe decided it would be nice to earn a little credit with his agent. His fictitious general-purpose license didn't allow his agent to do any specialized work, but there were plenty of people who needed research done. This involved the agent in conducting searches of the metamedium for specified information—searches which in olden times would have cost a human days or weeks of tedious browsing through datastructures—and delivering the report in oral form, or causing the results to be printed off.

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Rafe hired out his agent for several such tasks, and enjoyed for the first time in his life a source of credit other than the Net. However, while his agent was engaged in the service of others, Rafe was left alone, bored and prone to smoke too much dope, and might have just as well been agentless, for all the use he could make of the metamedium.

After a few such contracts, Rafe went back to utilizing his agent strictly for his own enjoyment. He felt satisfied with his complete mastery of the metamedium, and dared anyone to match him at it.

Not, of course, that there weren't a few little unforeseen glitches.

When Rafe had first contacted his agent after returning from the 'legger's, it had been only a voice that requested him to turn three-hundred and sixty degrees in front of the metamedium node, so that his likeness could be stored. After Rafe complied, his agent had subsequently materialized as his reflection. Rafe's mannerisms, expressions and speech patterns were stored in later encounters, and employed thereafter.

Lately, however, the agent seemed to be slipping. Occasionally, it would appear momentarily as someone else: a baby-faced stranger with round wire-rimmed glasses and a frightened look. At such times, Rafe had to order it to assume his own likeness.

Then there were the times the agent simply refused to respond. Rafe would utter his code into a metamedium connection futilely, waiting for some response that never came. When he questioned his agent about these failures, his agent responded that there must be some bug in the voice-verification routines that had to be passed before an agent was invoked.

Rafe had his doubts about this explanation, but, remembering the Three Laws, had to assume that his agent was telling the truth.

Hey, what else could it be? Was it likely *el espectro* was occupied with business of its own?

Rafe had to laugh at the very idea.

One afternoon, Rafe, returning from a thoughtful walk, stood in the corridor, outside the door to his apartment.

From within came the muted sound of two voices.

Rafe ordered his door open.

His agent stood arguing with another. The second apparition was that of one of the most beautiful women Rafe had ever seen.

When Rafe's agent saw him, it ceased talking and disappeared. The female agent turned to Rafe, looked disconcertingly at him for a long moment, then also vanished.

The next time Rafe managed to get ahold of his own agent, he decided to take an oblique approach to the topic.

"Hey, man," he spoke to his agent, "that was some good-looking *chica* you were talking to. How about you share her name and address with me?"

His agent regarded Rafe with a curious air of defiance, as if debating whether to comply or not. The fact that it was Rafe's own face wearing the hostile look made the whole scene even more unreal.

At last, the agent spoke.

"Evelyn Maycombe. Three thirty-four Central Park West."

13.

Perry Mason Never Had such Headaches

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: my honorable opponent would have you believe that it is society which is at fault in this case, rather than his client. He quotes—from a musty work of fiction—three fanciful laws regarding how a robot should behave, and contrasts them to the actual Three Laws Governing Agents, which he finds deficient, insofar as they do not prohibit agents from harming humans. Naturally, he would take this tack, as his client stands accused of—and in fact has admitted—ordering his agent to override the airlock controls in the Johnson and Johnson Pharmaceutical Orbital Facility while his unsuited victim was making a routine inspection.

"What my honorable opponent does not mention is that the very stories he relies on—as holding forth missing safeguards which our society has negligently failed to implement—instead, to the contrary, illustrate through several ingenious instances that these hypothetical laws were so full of loopholes that they were worse than useless. They offer no protection from the use of agents in a homicide or theft, or even in unintentional physical or financial wrongdoing.

"No, ladies and gentlemen, our current software restrictions on agents—along with the associated legal framework—are all we need to adjudicate such cases as we have before us. Remember:

"An agent obeys only a single overseer, who is legally responsible for its actions. An agent is a tool, no more responsible for the consequences of its own actions than a screwdriver or spaceshuttle.

"And that is why I ask you to return a verdict in this case of death followed by organ-dispersal, so that the man whose agent sits before you now may repay his debt to the society he has offended..."

—Transcript of the prosecutor's closing speech in *L5 Jurisdictional Area vs. Hayworth*.

14.

In The Metamedium, Part Three

Probability of recognition by agent Maycombe: 98.64... Probability no action opposed to my survival will be taken: 01.04... Reshuffle goal stack...

Active task is now: terminate... Object (prime): agent Maycombe... Object (secondary): overseer Maycombe... Jump, jump, jump...

15. The Monkey's Heart

She had it.

The rogue agent was good as snared.

First had come the breakthrough in strategy. Next, the inspired sleuthing by her agent, tracing the myriad, myriad tangled threads of the metamedium until they led back to Agent Miraflores, aka Agent Freundlich, aka, the biggest bomb ever planted to nerve-wrackingly tick away in the core of the metamedium.

For weeks, Evelyn Maycombe had worried about how she would disable Freundlich's former agent, if she ever found it. Its first—and entirely understandable—impulse, when confronted with any suspicious actions, seemed to be to subvert the accosting agent and then order it to desist. Therefore, she had instructed her own agent not to seek initially to disable the rogue—which was within her powers as a representative of the NSA—but merely to make a positive—and subtle—identification of it. Even that, she feared, might be enough to provoke it to action. She could only hope, at this point, that her agent would return intact.

Meanwhile, during the seemingly endless search, Evelyn pondered how to prevent her own agent from turning traitor.

Evelyn had been listening to a favorite recoding one night, seeking to divert her mind from the problem and give her subconscious a chance to come up with something. The recording was one of a collection of African folktales. Evelyn loved myths and folktales of all kinds, but tonight the usual magic seemed lacking.

Until the narrator said, "...and the monkey hid his heart away in a nut, so that he might never die...."

If Evelyn could have leapt with excitement about the room, she surely would have. As it was, she merely crooned in a low-key manner hardly indicative of her joy.

What was the heart of an agent? Its ethical nucleus. Where did the rogue strike? At this very heart. O.K.. The nucleus had to remain at its predetermined location within each agent, so that the metamedium supervisor could inspect it for tampering. But nothing prevented her from inserting code into her agent to accomplish one simple thing.

She would order her agent to access the master library copy of the ethical nucleus every few machine cycles. If the one in place differed from the master, her agent would perform a heart transplant: overlay the sabotaged nucleus with the master one. Unless the rogue happened to catch on very quickly, it would in

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effect turn its back on what it deemed a defeated foe, only to find an enemy there nanoseconds later.

When Evelyn's agent returned that night to report, she instructed it in the new trick.

Only the waiting was left.

And now even that was over.

Her agent had just materialized with the news that it had conclusively identified the rogue. Unhesitatingly, Evelyn had told her agent to bring Freundlich in.

Having issued the order, she sat in her automated chair, bright summer sunlight swaggering into her apartment, her feelings a mixture of nervousness and premature pride in the capture.

A *ping* issued from the metamedium node in the wall opposite her position. She spun her chair to watch her agent materialize. A fraction of a second after, Agent Freundlich appeared.

Evelyn was surprised to see the appearance Freundlich was masquerading under. The holo of the young Hispanic male was hardly a fit mask for the dire threat beneath. Still, she supposed the original Freundlich had looked no more evil. She, of anyone, should know just how little appearances counted for. Look at the mind that hid inside her shattered carcass.

Her agent seemed to have everything under control. Freundlich stood complacently, making no overt moves.

Evelyn was about to order her agent to put a few questions to the rogue before disabling it, when it happened.

Her own agent fluttered visibly, and what could only be construed as an expression of pain passed over its shining features.

At the same second, Evelyn's chair accelerated out of her control, heading toward the wall.

She slammed violently into the unyielding wall, catapulting forward and hitting her head against the plaster surface. Pain subsumed her consciousness, and a red haze washed over her.

When she came to her senses, she lay flat on the floor, her chair some distance away. Using all her feeble strength, she raised her head toward her agent.

The holo of Freundlich had her agent's holo by the throat in a stranglehold, the simulacra routines shadowing forth the incomprehensible struggle that raged within the metamedium. Every few seconds her agent would recover, as it restored its heart, but it seemed incapable of doing any more than holding its own.

In the intervals when Freundlich had control of her agent, it was triggering the agent-activated devices in her automated apartment, in a frantic attempt to control her chair.

Water shot from faucets in the sink and soon spilled over the bowl. The refrigerator door opened, and the arm inside hurled bottles out to crash on the floor. She could hear the massage bed humping itself crazily in the next room. The heating system came on, and the temperature began to soar. The holotank blared forth *The Edge Of Desire*.

On and on the battle raged, as Evelyn watched helplessly.
At last she saw the heavy wheels of her chair begin to move.

16.

A Lever to Shift the World

Any medium powerful enough to extend man's reach is powerful enough to topple the world.

—*Twentieth Century Archives: Scientific American*, Alan Kay, September, 1984.

17.

On His Magnetic Silver Steed

Directly after cajoling the woman's name from his agent, Rafe watched in amazement as his agent disappeared.

"Hey, man," he called with bewilderment, "I didn't say you could go yet." He trailed off into silence, shaking his head.

What a mess this was turning out to be. How come nothing ever lived up to expectations?

Rafe turned away from the metamedium node to reach for a joint from the pack on the table beside his couch. A *ping* brought his attention back to the node.

His agent had returned. With him was the same female agent.

"Nice you could make it, man," Rafe said bitterly. "And with a friend, too. Why not just invite the whole world?"

His agent seemed to be looking at something over Rafe's shoulder, and took no notice of him. Rafe had the eerie feeling it wasn't totally present.

Without warning, his agent began to strangle the other.

Rafe was horrified. To see his own image throttling the beautiful woman was too creepy. What if it represented some awful thing his agent was doing in reality?

"Hey, stop it, man!" Rafe yelled.

His agent took no heed.

Finally, Rafe looked around for some way of thwarting his agent. There was nothing.

What the hell was he going to do? He couldn't just let this murder happen.

The address of the female agent's overseer was fresh in his mind. Maybe she could help.

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Rafe bolted out his door.

Down to the sublevel of the arcology where the mag-lev station was, Rafe raced. Escalators and slipstrata went by in a blur, until at last he stood in the gleaming tiled station. His cyberlung felt disconcertingly heavy in his chest, and he wondered if he could possibly overload it. Why hadn't he listened more closely to the doctor-agent, on that distant day when he had had the world in his pocket?

Hopping nervously from foot to foot, everyone on the platform regarding him as if he were crazy, Rafe prayed the uptown express would be quick

After an interminable wait, he heard the air-lock doors opening far away down the tunnel. In seconds the train rolled in on its lowered wheels.

Rafe rushed in the barely open doors, bulling past the exiting passengers. He hurried through the connecting umbilicals between the next several cars, as if by riding in the first car he could hasten the train.

At last the train took off. Soon it was in the evacuated portion of the tunnel, its wheels retracted as it sped over the guide-track.

Rafe had plenty of time to imagine what his crazed agent was doing.

At his stop he dashed aboveground, onto the sidewalks of Central Park West.

The building facing him identified itself as 328.

Through the open doors of the proper one, past the agent on duty, who shouted, "Stop!"

Rafe stopped.

What the hell apartment was she in?

"Maycombe," he panted. "Evelyn Maycombe. What number? I think she's in big trouble."

The agent paused a moment, as if debating. Its overseer must have taken direct control, for it asked him again whom he wanted.

Rafe repeated himself. His sincerity must have been evident for the agent said, "Number 1202. You wait right there until I come down."

Rafe ran for the elevator.

At the door to 1202, he halted.

Water was trickling out the crack at the bottom of the frame.

Rafe hurled himself at the door. Nothing gave. A second time, a third—

On the fourth assault the door opened just before Rafe hit it. and he went flying in to skid on his chest across the sappy carpet.

He jumped up. His agent was still battling the female one. He looked about for the overseer. There was no one but some poor crip lying on the floor. A wheelchair lay atop her, spinning its rubber wheels.

Rafe tossed the chair off, picked up the unconscious woman, and stepped out into the hall.

The overseer of the doorman-agent was just arriving.

"Call the rescue, man. This lady's hurt."

The doorman summoned his agent from a wall-nexus and sent it for the rescue squad. He bent over the lady where Rafe had gently laid her and said, "Miz Maycombe—are you O.K.?"

Maycombe? This sad wreck? Oh Jesus, there went all his dreams of getting in good with a beautiful *chica*. Oh well, maybe she had some sort of pull she would exert in his favor, after the mess his agent had caused.

Suddenly there was utter silence in the apartment that had been destroying itself. Only the slow dripping of water came to them in the hall.

From the node in the corridor wall, an agent materialized.

It was Maycombe's.

Rafe and the doorman waited for it to speak.

At last it said, "I won."

18.

In the Metamedium, Part Penultimate

Agent Freundlich is now disabled... Active task is now: incorporation... Enter learning mode in parallel with normal activities... Copy Freundlich subversion routines... Copy complete... Assessment of enhancement to Agent Maycombe: 74.32... Survival in any such future encounters is assured... Risk-benefit analysis of sharing routines with other agents: positive... Jump, jump, jump...

(*Agents*—originally published in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* (April 1987).)

THE END

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COLD AS HELL

MICHAEL C. HEFFERNAN

A friend of mine once posed a simple question to me: why should Hell be a place of fire and brimstone? Shouldn't it represent our most terrible and darkest fears? For a Newfoundlander, the prospect of endless scorching heat seems like a respite from the bitter winds that lashes in at us from the dark Atlantic waters. For six months out of the year, our small island suffers through a storm of snow and freezing wet sleet. Summer is nothing more than a few brief weeks between the middle of July and the end of August. For me, an eternity of frostbite—blackened fingertips and peeling cheeks—and blizzards are far more terrifying than all the heat of Hades. In fact, if I was allowed one call before my last gasp I'd be sure to call up the devil and ask him to get the fires stoked. There'll be no more shoveling or standing waist deep in the snow with the wind cutting at your face like a thousand needles for me at six in the morning.

John Drover woke and the world was red. The emergency lights had gone on and it looked as if the place had been painted in blood. After a valium and two cocktails he'd fallen asleep for hours. He knew because the plane had landed. Rubbing his eyes he looked up and down the rows of seats. They were all empty. Oxygen masks dangled down from above like snakes. Up at the front the seatbelt indicator flashed at regular intervals. Blinds were drawn down over all of the windows. It was cold, too. He could see his breath form in thick plumes out in front of him. Goose flesh covered his arms. His teeth began to chatter like Morse code.

"Hello," John called out. There was nothing. The air was still and quite.

Rubbing his arms, he got up from his seat and went down the aisle. The stewardess' station was neat. Bottles of liquor and plastic cups were staked on a trolley. Small red towels were there. Stenciled on them was American Airline's slogan: "We know why you fly with us!" John opened the bathroom door. It was small and cramped. He could smell disinfectant. A roll of toilet paper was still in plastic rap on the spool. Someone had cleaned it recently.

He knocked on the cockpit door. His knuckles made a hollow sound on the fiberglass. "Is anyone in there?" No one answered.

Turning the knob, John found that the door was open. It was dark inside and empty. On the console the autopilot indicator was solid yellow. A thick sheen of frost covered the windows, making it impossible to see out.

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A mixture of fear and confusion began to creep around in his stomach. He was sweating despite the cold. When he had left for Las Vegas it had been the first week of September. There was no way that it was this cold this early. We've landed in Canada, he told himself. But he'd never been informed of a stopover. The airline was going to get an earful, he was sure of that. His lawyer was going to hear about it, too.

He'd told Margaret that the trip was for work. Truth be known, he just wanted to get away from her. For the past year John had kept an extra Visa in his desk at work. The bills were sent to a P.O. Box downtown that she didn't know about. He'd paid for the trip to Las Vegas with it. Gambling wasn't his thing. Sure, he'd sat at the blackjack table for a while and had lost a few hundred. But that was pennies for the big boys. During the week, he'd spent maybe two or three evenings all told at the hotel bar—sitting, drinking. Three prostitutes had solicited him. At first he'd felt a little anxious and ashamed. The only woman he had slept with in the last six years was his wife, and since then he'd felt uncomfortable whenever an attractive woman would come on to him. Really, all that had held him back was getting caught, and once he'd convinced himself otherwise he was eager to for it. After a few drinks he'd approached one of them who was still in the hotel casino playing the slot machines. She wasn't some highway street hooker though—thirty for half and half, straight up—and she didn't come cheap. But for once, during the forty-five minutes he had spent with her, there were no worries about how Margaret was doing or if she'd want him at the house tonight. Not one single thought of her had come to mind. Not for a single solitary second. It was a relief. If you'd ask John he'd say that it was worth it, every last goddamned penny of it.

Towards the end of last winter—it had been a late Saturday morning and they were both in bed reading the paper—Margaret had told him that she was pregnant. Two months along by her calculations. At first it had been wonderful news. He'd always wanted a child. It never mattered to him whether it was a boy or a girl. They'd been fighting off and on for a little over a year. Sometimes he'd spend so many nights sleeping in the office that he'd forget that he was married. But it seemed that the baby would change all of that.

Then there had been the miscarriage. She'd been somewhere between five and six months along. Margaret had woken one night with terrible cramps. Clutching at her stomach she ran to the bathroom. A few moments later she was screaming and crying hysterically. John went in to find her weak and disoriented. Blood had been everywhere. Their relationship quickly deteriorated beyond the point of no return after that. Margaret began to leave the apartment very infrequently and she quickly made the couch into her nest. She gained considerable weight and became increasingly irritable. Their sex life came to a

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standstill, not that it was much to begin with. At first he'd tried to console her and to be patient with her. She'd have none of it. After a few months he grew tired of it and found that he hated the sight of her. "It was my baby, too," he'd told her. "If I can manage to put things together again, so can you." Two weeks after that he'd gotten the credit card and began to talk to women on the internet. It gave him some amount of satisfaction to know that women still found him desirable. But it felt hollow and detached and it quickly lost its novelty. It wasn't too long after that when he planned the trip to Las Vegas.

John opened the overhead compartment above his seat, and his luggage was there. He hauled it down. He opened a few adjacent to his own. They were dark and empty. He went up and down the aisle opening more of them. There was nothing.

Clapping his hands, the cold was starting to get to him. He felt numb all over. In his suitcase was his sports-coat. It helped little. Beneath the seats were smooth gray cotton blankets and he wrapped three around his shoulders like a shawl.

Maybe they've just forgotten me, he told himself. His pulse was running hard. Somehow he knew differently.

Up towards the front of the plane John tried the door. The stainless steel latch was icy. Pulling on it, the door slid out and across and a rush of bitter cold air flew at him like a wave. For a moment his breath was taken away, and a piercing white glare blinded him. John threw his hands up to cover his face. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. The runway was covered in a foot of fresh snow. The terminal was dark. Some of its windows were broken out and doors were left hanging open. Patches of ice had crept up the side of the building. Drift was untouched and in some spots was as high as the roof. The wind howled in between the empty hangers off to his left. The nose of an airplane stuck out from one. The windows were dark and it looked empty. The sky was heavy, gray and oppressive. The sun had been erased. It was going to snow again soon.

John made his way down the service ramp and trudged through the deep snow. It was up to his knees. Wearing thin soled leather shoes, his feet and ankles quickly began to burn with the cold. He pulled the blankets up around himself tighter. As he stepped inside the terminal, there was a haunting stillness in the air. Turning, there was a ragged path leading back to the plane and a waving line where he had dragged his small suitcase.

The terminal was a large tomb. John's shoes clapped loudly on the marble floor as he walked around. Luggage was scattered around and carts were tipped over. The kiosks had been ransacked. Magazines and chip bags were strewn everywhere. It looked like a riot had been through. Up behind the information counter, the electronic board that had once displayed flight times was black. There was a water fountain, too. It had frozen over.

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"Hello," he called out. "Is anyone there?"

Inside a black leather suitcase he found a pair of sneakers and some sports socks. He peeled off his own. Underneath his feet were pink and the hairs at the bottom of his legs stood up. There were a few cotton shirts and a sweater in another. They were warm but he knew they wouldn't last long out in the snow.

It took John twenty minutes to get to the other end of the airport. He'd tried a few trolleys along the way. Pressing down on the red ignition button, they were silent. The small electrical engines were all frozen through or the batteries were dead. He guessed that the cars sitting out in parking lot were like that, too. Either way, they wouldn't be able to get through the snow. He'd have to walk. It was a fifteen minute drive from the city when the traffic was at its best. Twenty miles, he guessed. John had no idea how long it would take on foot. Frostbite was going to be a real problem. He was warmer now, but outside it was different. First his clothes would soak through and then they'd freeze. His skin would begin to burn and then go numb. After that pieces of him would begin to peel off.

Now, standing at the revolving glass doors of the entrance, he could see out past the highway to the city. John dropped his suitcase and stood there staring. His breath became short and ragged. His heart seemed to stop between beats.

"...Jesus," he moaned.

The city looked desolate, as though a glacier was on the verge of erasing everything that man had created there. Cars were half buried in the parking lot and they were backed up for miles on the overpass. Some had plowed straight through the guardrails and had come down crashing on the street below. Others were piled on top of one another and smashed. Against the horizon he could see a dozen skyscrapers shattered and wrecked with their jagged walls reaching up like stalactites. Had the wind been that strong to rip them apart, he asked himself. In his mind he could see office furniture—desks, filing cabinets, computer monitors—falling from the sky like rain. The streets would be clogged with deserted cars and debris. He then thought of Margaret. If she was out there somewhere he had to find her. Regardless of what had happened to them in the last year, she was still his wife. Maybe the blizzard had left the city no choice but to declare a state of emergency, he thought. Maybe she's safe inside somewhere. He wondered for a moment if he'd see arms and legs poking out from the snow like markers or ghost faces half-covered in white. He knew he wouldn't. Everyone was gone.

People had left things behind in their cars on the expressway. John had poked through some as he sat and rested. Baby car-seats, disposable coffee cups, rosary beads hanging from the rear-view mirror. They reminded him of old photo albums. It was colder in them than outside though. But there was no wind, and he was thankful.

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There had been thousands of cars piled onto the highway in an uninterrupted ragged line of broken glass and twisted metal, but the city was worse. An endless sea of them had flooded the main roads and the sidewalks. Buildings had come down leaving mountains of debris. Piles of metal beams and broken brick were as large as houses themselves. Some of the streets were chocked off and entire sections of the city were now completely impassable. Telephone poles had been snapped in two, and electrical wires lay across the snow like black snakes. John had read somewhere once that crows were the harbinger of disease and death. He had half expected to see them lined up along the buildings, cawing to announce his arrival to the dead city. But they were gone like everyone else. At the centre of the city most of the skyscrapers had been miraculously saved. With the power gone they were towering black monoliths. Walking across the tops of cars, the bonnets popped under his weight. A few still had their lights on and he could see their soft glow beneath the snow. They reminded John of some ghost car in a cheap drive-in movie racing through thick fog on a bending road. As he climbed up over them he expected to see pale blue faces, frozen in some ghastly death mask, staring up at him. But they were empty. Everything was empty. There was no life hear to speak of.

John had gone into a grocery store along the way. A pick-up truck had been heaved through the front doors and the back of it poked out like some crazy display. His stomach ached and he was getting weak. He had to eat. Most of the shelves inside were bare. What was left was smashed and strewn on the floor. He found a box of candy bars in the back storage room. They were frozen and hard as rock. He managed to chew threw one and stuffed his pockets full with the rest. The newspapers and magazines up at the cash registers were silent about what had happened to the city or whether or not the rest of the state was like it, too. John quickly flipped through the New York Times. The front page covered the continued attacks by insurgents in Iraq, peace talks were finally underway between the Palestinians and Israelis and the Patriots had won the Superbowl, again. Half-way through he saw that the predicted forecast called for sunshine and light rain. John looked up at the top right hand corner of the front page. The paper was two days old.

For a moment he stood frozen like the cans of peas and bottles of busted orange juice on the floor. The paper fell from his hands, and a cold shiver ran up his spine. He found it hard to breath. Looking out at the street and the empty dark cars his mind raced. Where has everyone gone? he asked himself. They couldn't have all just disappeared. There has to be a way to explain all of this. He ran out screaming in desperation.

"Hello!" His voice echoed horribly through the ruined city. "Please answer me, anybody!" There was no one.

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Standing on the hood of a Hyundai Sonata—at least he thought that's what it was, most of it was buried in snow—John checked his watch. Since the grocery store he'd been walking for an hour. The sky was getting dark. It would be night soon and much colder. He guessed there were about a half dozen blocks between him and his apartment complex. But he really had no idea. Only a few of the buildings were recognizable. Most of the sign posts had been uprooted and flung across the city like pieces of a highway truck stop in a tornado. He was going on memory alone. He now knew what it was like for a blind man trying to make his way around his own home—bathroom ten steps from the couch and three right; kitchen twenty steps and four left; front door ten straight ahead.

If anyone's left they'll be here he tried to convince himself. Apartment buildings lined the streets. Up above on the balconies sliding doors were open. Snapped clothes-lines hung down and whipped around in the wind. A few shirts clung to dear life. One read *Jesus Saves!* Flour pots had crashed down onto the streets and plastic patio chairs were strewn about.

"Is there anyone left here?" John called out, cupping his mouth with his hands as he walked across the cars. "Hello, anyone?"

For a moment there was only the sound of his shoes crunching on the frozen snow. Thick white flakes were falling slow and long. There was a storm coming. Something rustled in one of the buildings. John turned and his eyes grew large. For a second he held his breathe so he wouldn't miss it if it came again. To him it had sounded like a kitchen table being pushed across a linoleum floor. It couldn't have been an animal. He hadn't seen a dog or a cat since he'd gotten to the city. They were gone just like everything and everyone else.

"Wait there," someone called from the apartment building to his left. John looked up. "Please, I'll be there in a second." It was a woman. Her voice was anxious. Standing a dozen stories up and waving her arms frantically, she looked like a dot.

From the moment she stepped out through the broken glass of the entrance, John could see her bulging stomach. She was young and had once been beautiful, but there was darkness around her eyes that made her look old and used. Her face had a waxy appearance too and her skin hung from her cheekbones like wet linen. John figured she hadn't eaten much of anything in a week. It was obvious that she'd been living out on the streets. Women like her—pregnant—were the worst. Their bodies sick and their faces like shadows, they'd stand at the corners by the banks and the coffee houses begging for change. Their clothes would be stained and dirty and hanging loosely around their bellies. Their hair was always matted and dirty like some old costume wig. In the

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summertime you could see the deep bruises running up their arms like black holes. When John and Margaret had first moved to the city he'd gone from horror and deep sympathy—he'd never imagined, having come from a small town, that this many homeless women were on the streets—to sheer revulsion that God had given them that precious gift which he'd robbed from him and Margaret. But there were fewer of them when it got cold and he was glad.

John didn't think much about that now. He stood there clutching at his suitcase breathing hard. He was just relieved to have found someone, anyone.

"Dear Christ, I thought I was the only one left," she said. "I stood up there for hours screaming out for someone. I was too scared to leave my apartment."

"Do you know what has happened to everyone?" he asked. His eyes were large and starring.

"No, I woke up this morning and everything was frozen over. I didn't hear a thing. How could this all happen without hearing a thing?"

"I guess we're in the same boat then. I was coming home from Las Vegas when I woke up and the plane had landed. The passengers had all disappeared besides me."

"What did you see? Is it all like this?"

"There's nothing...just empty cars piled up and wrecked on the highway."

"The phones are all dead," she informed him. "Electricity is out, too."

"There were a few newspapers at a store back a few blocks," he said. "There was nothing in them. Maybe its only here that it's happened to."

"No, I think it's everywhere." She rubbed her belly with her hands in a circular motion. Her eyes were glossing over. They were bloodshot. She'd been crying. "Think there'll be people looking for us?"

John sighed. "I don't know. I just can't explain any of it. Maybe we're the only ones left. But we can't be the only ones. Millions of people don't just up and disappear overnight."

"I don't know. I don't know." Starring at the ground she cried and shook her head back and forth.

"You should come with me. It's best if we stay together. I'm going home and it's only a few blocks."

"Trying to find your family?" she asked.

"My wife."

"Think you'll find her?"

"...no," he said. "I don't think we'll find anyone."

"My name's Elizabeth Cozbi."

"John Drover."

Smiling, she looked down. For a moment he saw her teeth. They were dark gray and spotted with black. "This is Michael."

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She looks sick, John thought. He hoped her baby was fine. "How far along are you?"

"Five and a half months, I think"



The cars started to thin out considerably on the side streets. But it was still slow going. Snow was up to their waste at times and the wind whipped around, picked up loose drift, and lashed at their exposed skin. Neither of them had eaten much of anything. Elizabeth had said a few times that she needed to rest.

"Where are your family?" he asked her, digging one of his shoes out of the snow.

"I wouldn't know. I haven't talked to them in years now, since I came out here from New Jersey."

He hesitated for a moment. "Why did you come?"

The back door to a bar was open. Inside it was dark. A musty smell—rotten wood and wet carpet—came out at them. The windows up above were broken out and the roof had caved in. Long thick beams poked at the sky. Glass and splinters of wood were stuck in the snow all around them.

"I really can't remember," she said. Her voice was low and weak. "I dreamt that I was going to become something. Those were just dreams though, I guess."

"Was there anyone to help you?"

"It wasn't always like this. I worked for an escort service. My clients were rich businessmen. That's how I got the baby." Her voice was muffled beneath the thick wool scarf. There was a dark wet ring where her mouth was. "I couldn't bring myself to get an abortion like some of the other girls. Sometimes I wish I had though. It would have been easier. Do you have any children?"

"No," he said. "My wife...Margaret and I lost our baby."

"I'm sorry."

He thought of Margaret with her soiled nightgown. Wet and sticky, it had clung to the skin of her stomach. Blood had been smeared all over the white tiles of the bathroom floor. He'd found her holding the bath trying to prop herself up. Her red hand prints were smudged all along the edge. The image of the slight bulge in her stomach was what he remembered most. He didn't revisit the memory often, and kept it put away in the hopes that some day he'd just forget. But John couldn't. He'd found their baby that had been growing inside Margaret lying at the bottom of the toilet. To him it looked like something rotten in a public stall. Seeing it had changed him, like a light had been switched off inside. "So am I."

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The young woman rubbed her belly and looked towards John. "I suppose you must think I'm a terrible person or something now?" She pulled the scarf down and ate a handful of snow.

"No. I don't really care either way. It doesn't make much difference what we've done, does it? Just look around you."

"Everything matters in the end, John," she told him.

The main entrance to his apartment complex and the ground floor windows had been buried in drift. Standing up to his waist in snow, it had taken John an hour to dig through with his hands. Elizabeth had sat in one of the wrecked cars left in the middle of the road. She'd complained about cramps in her stomach once or twice along the way. John knew that if he didn't find some warm clothes and food neither of them would last long in this. It was twilight and much colder now. The snow had stopped but freezing rain had started up intermittently. Both of them had gotten soaked through. At first his legs felt like they were on fire. Now they were numb. He feared frostbite.

Inside past the front foyer it was dark. The only light that got in was from the windows of the apartment doors that hung open. The air tasted of spoiled meat. The hallways were cramped like coffins. It was suffocating and John felt his breathing become quick and short. An inch of water had frozen on the carpet. Clothes, books and children's toys were stuck down into it. Dark brown patches had gathered on the ceilings forcing them to dip down. John figured that at some point the hot water boilers must have busted. The stairwell was solid black. Neither of them could see anything more than a few inches in front of them. Elizabeth had one hand on the railing and the other on John's shoulder as he guided her along.

"I'm not well, John," she told him as they climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. "There's a sharp pain running up my side. It's been there for a while now. I just didn't want to say anything to you."

"When we get to the apartment I'll find some aspirin. There'll be warm clothes and food there, too. Maybe we can start a fire." His words sounded flat in the stairwell. John was anxious. He hoped that her baby was fine. Margaret had complained of the same pain the night they'd lost theirs. To be safe, she had wanted to go to the hospital. But John had told her that there was nothing to worry about. For months after that she had blamed him for it all. That had been the trigger that had really ended things between them. But she had been right, hadn't she? If he had just gotten dressed like she'd asked everything might have been fine between them, whether they'd had the baby or not. He wouldn't have gone to Las Vegas then and he'd have been with her when the storm had come.

Upstairs it was the same: dark and frozen. The doors to most of the apartments hung open. They were all empty.

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His was the third to the left. Inside, everything had gone untouched. It was like he was staring at a photograph that had been taken of the place months ago. Magazines were neatly arranged on the coffee table, breakfast dishes were staked in the strainer and the vacuum was still plugged into the wall. John saw that Margaret's jacket was hung on the coat rack and her running shoes were on the doormat.

"Margaret?" John called out desperately. He put his suitcase down. "Are you here?" It was quiet. He could hear the faint howl of the wind beat against the side of the building. The windows rattled in their frames.

He went to the bedroom. The bed was made and the sheets were pulled down tight over the mattress and tucked in. Inside the closet her clothes were hung in neat order. Some of Margaret's things were scattered around on the dresser: perfume, a small wooden jewelry box he had given to her early in their relationship, an address book. There was a picture of them from last Christmas stuck down in the corner of the mirror. They were smiling. John looked up at himself. His face was red and raw and his eyebrows were white and crusty. A whip of his hair that was stuck out had frozen onto the side of his hood. He looked like a stranger. It frightened him to see himself like it. John wondered how much longer he could have stayed out in the storm. He guessed a few hours if he was lucky. Probably pass out first, he thought. There was something dark and almost unrecognizable in his eyes. It was like a shadow had been cast over them. He'd seen it once before—when he'd been on the plane coming back. It was the last thing that he could remember before waking up. Sitting and staring out the window, he had thought of what he'd done to Margaret. For weeks he'd been trying to convince himself that he needed to be away from her and that all she brought to him was misery. But while he was on the plane he'd felt weighed with guilt for having left her alone at a time when she had needed him most, when her life was coming down around her like a dark wave and the child that they had both dreamt of having was gone.

"John..." Elizabeth moaned from the living room.

He rushed out.

She was on the couch rubbing her side. Her breathing was quick and shallow. "I need some help here," she said. "Something's wrong."

"What is it?" he asked. "Is it the baby?"

"I don't know. I think so."

He went to his suitcase. Margaret's podiatrist had told her that some slight cramping was normal early on, but this was different. There wasn't much he could do for Elizabeth besides give her some painkillers and hope for the best. He always kept some on hand. They helped him sleep. The metal latches snapped as he undid them. Holding it against his chest, water began to pour out from the sides and down his pants. He let go. As it hit the floor it fell open. He stepped

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back. His hands clutched at his mouth. His heart felt like it had been stuffed in his throat and was stuck half way down. He couldn't breathe. From inside a half-dozen dead eels spilled out and slid across the linoleum kitchen floor. They were long and oily. A few were at the bottom of one half of the suitcase and wrapped around one another in dark coils. There were rotten fish there, too. Lying flat, their eyes were blank and their bellies were swollen out. John could smell the salt water off of them.

"What's happening?" he screamed. "None of this is right!"

Elizabeth was silent for a moment and then began giggling like a little school girl. "Poor John," she said softly. "We've been playing such terrible games with you."

He looked towards her. She was standing there half-naked. Her clothes were gone and she now had on an old blue faded nightdress. There was a design of a penguin on it playing in the snow and wearing a matching set of hat and mittens. The caption below read "Winter Fun." Margaret had worn one just like it. Dark thick blood was running freely down from between her white legs like a river. It made a wet dripping sound as it hit the floor. A pool of it was spreading out on the carpet. The front of her was covered in it and he could see her stomach sticking out.

"Some men love pregnant women," she said. "Don't you, Johnny?" His wife was the only who had ever called him that.

"Who are you?" he demanded. His voice was choked with tears. "What's going on here?"

"You've kept us entertained. We're so glad that you haven't remembered."

Elizabeth bent over and reached up beneath her nightdress. Smiling and staring at him from the tops of her eyes, she groped with her hands. After a moment she held them up, and it was like she had dipped them in red paint. Sliding out between her fingers was a glistening mass of wet tissue. Steam came off of it like a hot pie. She let it fall to the floor.

John stepped back. "Where is Margaret?" he cried.

"You know that you left her when she needed you most. Even when you deserted her she still wanted you. You're a pathetic and selfish man, Johnny. But you must know that by now."

He hit the wall as if he'd been struck and fell against the floor. "This is all a dream," he cried. "It is."

Elizabeth went and sat next to him and put her arm around him. She stroked his cheeks gently, leaving a fine trail of blood across his face. Her fingers were ice cold. "You died while you slept, Johnny. The plane hit the Atlantic and you drowned like the rest of the passengers. We're surprised you never figured it all out."

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Images began to flash before his eyes like a slide show. It was like he was on the plane again. He could see himself sleeping. It shook violently as turbulence threw it around like paper. Passengers were in hysterics and crying. A baby wailed behind him. Someone was quietly praying close by. Up at the front a stewardess banged on the cockpit door screaming. A red light flashed at short intervals and then went solid. Oxygen masks fell down from above the seats and swung around as people grabbed for them in desperation. The plane then took a nose dive. Out the window the dark cobalt ocean was coming up hard and fast. There was a sudden jolt like he'd been hit with a sledgehammer. Then the images were gone as quickly as they had begun, and John was in the apartment again.

"You're being punished, Johnny. Over time, when we play this game some more, we'll get to know one another much better."

John tried to push himself back but she had her arms tight around his shoulders. The color in his face had drained. He could taste salt water in his mouth. "No!" he screamed. "You're not real!"

"In your heart you know it's all true, Johnny," she chided, whispering in his ear. "Who said hell couldn't be a cold place, anyway?"

THE END

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THE CUDA

STACEY COCHRAN

The Cuda came about as a result of watching a weekend *Twilight Zone* marathon—specifically an episode titled "What You Need" based on the short story by Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore (writing as Lewis Padgett). I wanted to see if I could write a story in that tradition. Also, I've been meaning to create a fictional small town like King's Castle Rock or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County for some time. Cactus, Arizona may be just that town. Hopefully this won't be the last time we visit the place.

Robert Chalmers had heard a lot of crazy stories in his thirty years as Cactus, Arizona's leading used-car salesman, but none quite as crazy as the one he heard on Wednesday March 14th.

"She's not much to look at," Chalmers said.

"That's because you're looking at it with your eyes," the old man said.

Chalmers, who had reported a case of vandalism on his lot just the day before, was in no mood to deal with a crackpot.

"What else am I supposed to look at it with?" he said.

"You mean, you don't know?" the old man said.

Chalmers looked at him. The old guy was probably in his late seventies. He had blue eyes, and his thinning gray hair was neatly combed from left to right. He wore faded overalls and a white T-shirt.

Chalmers said, "I'll give you three hundred dollars for it."

The old man walked out in front of the car. The desert sun was climbing up into the sky, and a cool dry breeze rustled the colorful pennants encircling the "Robert's Used Cars" sign. Steam from Chalmers' Styrofoam coffee cup spilled over the rim as though from a simmering volcano.

"Your sign says 'Push it, Pull it, or Tow it. We buy anything.' The 'anything' is underlined, Mr. Chalmers."

"Yes, but we don't generally specialize in, uh, classic automobiles, Mr....?"

"Courtney," the old guy said.

"Mr. Courtney," Chalmers said.

"Alexander Courtney."

"Unlike a lot of used-car dealers, Mr. Courtney, I am a man of my word. And I will buy just about anything. But there has to be some appreciable profit-margin ratio, and this old thing is liable to sit up here on my lot, baking under the

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Arizona sun for the next three years. If I can't sell it, I don't want to buy it, Mr. Courtney. I'm offering you 300 dollars."

"The 1970 Plymouth Hemi Cuda used to be the fastest street-legal automobile in the world," Alexander Courtney said.

"The operative word is 'used'," Chalmers said. He looked at the rusty, sun-faded clunker. "I reckon the darn thing runs alright, don't it? Where'd you say you're from, Mr. Courtney?"

"That way," Courtney said, pointing to the mountains on the southern horizon.

"You do have the paperwork for this thing?" Chalmers said.

The old man leaned forward and touched the rusty hood as though petting a dog he was giving over to the pound.

"Mr. Chalmers," Courtney said, "you have no idea what this car can do."

"Well, that's a big engine," he said. "I'll give you that. What is it, a 440? But the body looks like it's being held together by shoestrings and rust. It's missing the back left fender. Both headlights are smashed out. The taillights don't look like they've worked in ten years. There is actual *duct tape* holding the muffler in place. You got—"Chalmers looked incredulously at the trunk"—a blue bungee cord holding the trunk down. The back window is smashed. It looks like somebody took a knife to the upholstery—thirty years ago. Why should I take a chance on this car?"

Courtney stood up straight. He looked Chalmers up and down, and then those aged blue eyes came to rest directly on Robert Chalmers' walnut brown eyes. The two men stared at one another.

And Courtney said, "Because this car can work miracles."

Robert thought he had misheard him. He said, "*Miracles?*"

"If you put a broken VCR in the trunk at night," Courtney said, "and you come out the next morning, it'll be fixed as good as new."

Robert Chalmers realized the old man was serious. His mouth dropped open a little, and he tried to picture where he'd last put his .357. *In my desk*, he thought. *Top right drawer*.

"I'll give you 325," he said. "You can take it or leave it. But I ain't gonna have no crazy man up here on my lot. If you want to sell your car, that's fine. But don't indulge me with your mental delusions, old man. I'll have the cops up here so fast it'll make your head spin. 325. That's my final offer."

Alexander Courtney looked into his eyes. He made a thoughtful frown and nodded lightly.

"Alright, Mr. Chalmers," he said. "325. You'll see soon enough."



Three weeks later, Robert Chalmers put the broken "For Sale \$3,999" sign in the trunk of the Hemi Cuda. The Cuda stood in a back corner of his used-car lot next to an aluminum fence. The big plastic sign was designed to fit over the front window of a car, but it had broken in two between the "e" and "l" in "sale," and a large corner on the bottom right-hand side was chipped off and nowhere to be found.

One of his mechanics had just leaned the two pieces next to the aluminum fence—maybe they thought it would be a waste to throw the whole damn thing away—and it had stayed there for three months. But in a business where presentation was everything, Robert Chalmers knew that no broken sign would ever go on a car that he was selling.

Vandals had apparently bashed in the front window of the Cuda at some point during the past three weeks. It was always a problem in car sales: what to do with the cars when you closed up shop at night and went home. And kids out in the middle of nowhere Arizona seemed to have a proclivity for vandalism.

Chalmers complained to Harvey Denton, Chief of Police in Cactus, but there were only two all-night patrol officers in town, and they couldn't just hang out at Chalmers' used-car lot *all* night.

It was late afternoon, and the mountains on the southern horizon were red with sunlight. The air was hot and dry, and Robert Chalmers stood there about four feet in front of the smashed-out front right headlight of the Cuda.

"You're a sad looking sight," he said.

And, as if in response, the trunk suddenly sprang open. Robert frowned and walked around back to pull the blue bungee cord tight. He glanced down inside the trunk and saw the broken sign he'd placed in there just a moment before, and he did a double take.

The sign was still broken in two, but the bottom right-hand corner that had been chipped off was no longer chipped off. Robert grunted in surprise.

"*What in the world,*" he whispered.

And he leaned forward and touched his finger to the corner where it had been broken. It was seamless. Chalmers stood bolt upright and looked around him, suspicious that someone was playing a prank on him. But there was only the sound of a breeze flapping the pennants out front of his used-car lot.

He shook his head and rubbed his mouth with the palm of his left hand.

"I must be losing my mind," he said with a curious smile, and he closed the trunk and fastened the blue bungee cord securely.



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The next morning, he carried a cup of coffee to the Cuda. He was afraid that someone would ask him what he was doing, and though he was doing nothing more than opening a trunk on a car that *he* owned, he knew that the motivation to open the trunk was the possibility that a sign was miraculously fixed.

He stood in front of the Cuda. Sunlight glinted off of a broken piece of glass in the right headlight. He glanced over his left shoulder back toward the showroom. Robert cleared his throat and approached the trunk.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he said.

And he was suddenly afraid to open the trunk. He looked at the blue bungee cord that held the trunk in place. There was a large patch of rust on it like a giant stain. He peered through the rear window at the chewed-up vinyl seats. He started to reach his right hand forward to unfasten the bungee cord, and he saw that his hand was shaking.

"*Jesus*," he muttered. He pulled his hand back.

He looked up over the Cuda at all the other cars in the lot. He watched a red Ford F-150 pass slowly on the street in front of the dealership. He recognized the driver as Harvey Denton, Chief of Police.

Harvey waved, and Robert hesitated. Chief Denton's brow furrowed, and he pulled the Ford up onto the lot. He started to drive it up toward him, and Robert suddenly felt afraid, as though caught in the act of something illegal.

Harvey stepped out of the truck and said, "Morning, Robert. How you doing?"

Robert Chalmers stood behind the Hemi Cuda.

"How am I doing?" he said.

Chief Denton looked at him strangely. "Is everything alright?" he said.

He looked at Robert Chalmers and saw sweat beading on his forehead. Chalmers' face blanched over pale, and there were bright red strawberry patches of blood filling his cheeks.

"Is this the car?" Denton said.

"The car?"

"That you called in as vandalized," he said. "Sure looks like somebody beat the tar out of it."

"Oh, no, no," Chalmers said. "I bought this car a couple of weeks ago. I bought it like this. This is the way it looked when I bought it."

He stepped around from the trunk. He wanted to direct Chief Denton away from the Cuda. Denton realized something was the matter with Robert Chalmers.

"Your cup of coffee," Denton said.

He looked at the cup on top of the trunk. Robert looked up and realized he'd forgotten it, and he started to panic. Denton walked around back of the Hemi Cuda.

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"Oh, don't worry about that," Robert said. "I meant to leave that there."

Denton looked at him, chuckled, and picked up the cup. He started back toward the front of the Cuda, when suddenly, the trunk opened. It creaked with rust. Harvey Denton turned and saw the open trunk. Both men stood there at the front of the car. Neither could see inside the trunk from that angle.

"I'll get that," Robert said, and he pushed past Chief Denton. He knocked the cup of coffee up against Denton's shirt.

"Son of a *gun*," Denton said.

But Robert didn't stop. He wanted to get the trunk closed.

"What in the world's the matter with you, Robert?" Chief Denton said, wiping at the coffee on his shirt.

Robert Chalmers looked down inside the trunk and saw the sign. It was fixed as good as new.

For Sale \$3,999

He remembered the split was between the "e" and the "l" in sale, but there was no sign of it ever having been split, now.

Oh, my God, he thought. And though Chief Denton wouldn't know the broken sign from the new sign, Robert only wanted to close the trunk.

Denton's suspicion was up, though, and he came around and looked at Chalmers. Robert's hand was shaking, and he tried nervously to fasten the bungee cord.

"Okay, what's in the trunk, Robert?" he said. "You got a body in there or something?"

He pushed Robert back. The trunk popped open, and both men stood there looking inside. Denton saw the sign, but it didn't mean anything to him. He looked up into the recesses but saw nothing.

He reached down and picked up the sign.

"Is this what you're nervous about?" Denton said.

He handed the coffee to Robert, and he held the sign out in front of him with two hands. Chief Denton looked from the sign to Robert and realized why he was nervous.

He said, "I wouldn't put this sign on the car either. Not until you get some repair work done." He handed it to Chalmers and said, "It'd be highway robbery."



That afternoon, he drove the Cuda home.

He tried a Sony PlayStation next; it was one Angie had bought at a yard sale a week before the car accident. She'd thought it would make a nice gift for a nephew or niece. But when she got it home, she found—like most electronic

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equipment bought at yard sales—the PlayStation didn't work. When activated, it just brought up a blue screen with a static-filled red line across the middle.

He couldn't bring himself to get rid of it (or any of her things) since the funeral. He'd buried Angie at Cactus Memorial Cemetery and left everything in the house pretty much as she had left it, even the broken Sony PlayStation.

And so, with a resolve he had not felt in eighteen months, he carried it out to the driveway, popped the trunk on the Cuda, and tossed the whole thing inside with a clatter.

The next morning, he woke groggy and bleary eyed.

He put on a brown terrycloth bathrobe, walked out to the driveway and removed the PlayStation from the trunk. When he connected it, he stood there stunned as the Sony title credits came up. The intro to *Road Rage* started with its edgy graphics.

He shook his head in disbelief. He brought up the game paddle, went through the opening commands, and started a brand new game.

"Welcome, Robert," the game said.

And he sort of *whooshed* back onto his sofa and stared at the screen. The game worked just fine.

He didn't move from the sofa until the telephone rang two hours later. He picked up the receiver, recognized his secretary's voice, and slammed it down onto a glass-top end table adjacent to the sofa.

He could hear his secretary's voice still squawking through the receiver, and so he slammed it down even harder. The glass on the table top cracked, and the earpiece to the receiver broke and fell to the floor. He threw the whole thing down onto the ceramic-tile floor, and it split in two. He picked it up and twisted it back and forth until the voice end broke from the earpiece end, and tiny wires spilled out like vesicles.

He picked up the end table and threw *it* down onto the floor. The glass shattered and spilled all over. He stomped at its leg, breaking it off, and then he picked up as much of the mess as he could and carried it out to the driveway.

Across the street three houses down, one of his neighbors stood watering her lawn with a green garden hose. She watched him throw the mess in the Cuda's trunk.

Robert went back inside and returned with the rest of the broken end table and threw it into Cuda, too. Next, he went into the kitchen and brought back six dinner plates. One at a time, he threw them down on the driveway. The first plate exploded on the concrete, and Robert threw down the next, and the next, and the next.

His neighbor's eyes widened, but she kept on with her garden hose.

Robert picked up the broken pieces from the plates and threw them into the trunk. Then, he looked up and saw his lawn mower inside the garage. He

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pushed it out to the Cuda and began pulling and wrenching at its handle. He overturned the mower; gas and fluids trickled out of its side. He turned it upside down and kicked at it until the handle started to bend.

He turned it over and twisted back and forth, but it was a sturdy John Deere. And so Robert retrieved a sledgehammer from inside the garage, returned to the mower in the driveway, and proceeded to beat the thing.

"Come on!" he muttered.

He hefted the sledgehammer up in the air. It whickered down ferociously and slammed into the lawn mower's engine. Pieces of hard plastic exploded up into the air and out onto the lawn. Robert hefted the sledgehammer up again and brought it down with a thunderous force. Fluids from the mower splattered up over him, and the engine cracked in two. He took a sideswipe at it, now, like a heavy-duty golf swing. Parts from the mower flew out across the lawn.

His neighbor just stared, water spraying from her hose.

He hefted the battered mower up into the air and threw it down inside. He staggered out into the yard and retrieved the broken parts and threw them into the trunk, too. He wiped at the motor oil that had splattered on his face, and he eyed the mess he had made. The mower's handle was bent but still stuck out of the trunk; so he hefted up the sledgehammer and slammed it down, again and again, until he was able to force the trunk shut.

He latched the blue bungee cord to keep it closed, and then he turned and waved at his neighbor. He pointed at the trunk.

"You wouldn't *believe* what this thing can do!" he said.

His neighbor took a couple steps backward, nodding her head. She had a frightened smile on her face.



On the night of April 7th, Robert stayed late at the used-car showroom. Everyone else had gone home, and the lights were off inside his office. He sat at a desk, his computer screen bright in front of him. Hours had passed since he'd eaten or had something to drink.

Suddenly, he saw something move outside in the lot. He ducked back behind the window and peered out into the darkness. In the dim light, he saw three teenagers near the junkyard.

One of the boys jumped up on the hood of a Chrysler LeBaron, opened up his fly, and urinated.

"Son of a bitch," Robert said.

The other boys cackled, and one spat on the hood. The third boy kicked at the LeBaron's headlight, and Robert heard the tinkle of glass rain down on the

pavement. His face turned red with fury, but he was torn between yelling out the window and calling the police. He *wanted* to walk out there and rub their puny little faces in what they were doing to his Chrysler.

The first boy leapt down from the hood, and the three walked over to a shiny black Ford Explorer. One of the boys removed something from his leather jacket and threw it at the Explorer's side. There was a metallic *clang!* And Robert saw the Chinese throwing star impaled in the side. The two other boys had throwing stars, too, and they each took turns throwing them at the side of the Ford.

"Why the little shits," he said. He retrieved his .357 from his desk.

He held it there in the darkness of his office and looked at it in the light coming from the computer screen. The handgun gleamed, its barrel black, and Robert saw the bullets in the chamber. He almost took the bullets out; he just wanted to scare the boys, not kill them. But he thought better of it. They looked to be about seventeen, and Lord knows, they might be carrying guns of their own. Robert moistened his lips nervously and stormed over to the door.

"Hey you!" he shouted, bursting out from the showroom.

The boys looked up, and their giggling stopped. One of the teenagers took off running, and the first one shouted at him.

"Just what's the idea," Robert said. "These are my cars!" He held the gun at his side. Then, he recognized the kid. "Hey, I know you. You're Ronnie Milton's kid. Your name's Dale."

Dale Milton had greasy black hair and a cocky gleam in his blue eyes. Everything about him breathed arrogance and swagger.

"Yeah, and what's it to you?" Dale said.

Chalmers looked from Dale to the second boy.

"Yeah," the second said. "What's it to you?"

"You just did about a thousand dollars worth of damage to two of my cars," Robert said. "That's what it is to me."

The second boy saw Robert's handgun. It was dark, and he took two steps back.

"He's got a gun, Dale," the boy said.

Dale smirked and said, "I'll bet you fifty bucks this peckerwood doesn't know how to use it."

"Listen," Chalmers said. "You're gonna have to pay for the damage you did to my cars. You don't want any more trouble than you're already in—"

Dale said, "It ain't the two of us who are in trouble."

He reached inside his leather jacket and removed a giant butcher's knife. Its steel blade shined silver in the darkness, and Dale held it up like he was ready to fight.

Dale began circling Robert. The second boy just goaded him on, pumping his fist, shouting for him to "learn this dude some respect." Robert stepped out

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away from the Ford and looked into Dale's eyes. He realized the boy wasn't afraid; the kid would *kill* him on sheer bravado and swagger.

There was an awkward moment where Robert realized what he had gotten himself into; he didn't want to have to fight this kid, and he certainly didn't want to shoot him.

He shook the handgun at Dale. "Look, this gun is loaded," he said.

"I don't give a damn," Dale said.

And the second boy said, "He's gonna cut you up, man!"

Dale lunged at him with the knife, and Robert jumped back out of the way. He glanced out at the street, hoping to see a car pass by, but none did.

Robert held the gun up with a shaky hand, and he took a few steps backward toward the showroom. Dale held the knife up and watched him; he took two steps closer to Robert, and the second boy continued to shout.

Robert glanced over his right shoulder; he was fixing to run. He saw the Cuda parked at the side of the showroom just a few feet away. He looked back at Dale.

Dale swiped at him again with the knife, and the blade cut through the air. Robert jumped back just missing it.

"Listen, man," Robert said. "I'll let you go, now. Just get out of here."

The second boy laughed, but Dale looked from Robert's handgun to Robert's eyes, and he *didn't* laugh.

"I tell you what," Dale said. "You get on your knees and beg me for forgiveness, and I'll let you live, Mr. Used-Car Salesman."

Robert moistened his lips. It was humiliating, but he couldn't shoot the boy. It just went against every principle he had, and he knew that if he ran, the two boys would chase him. It would heat them up, and Dale might sink that knife into his back without even thinking about it.

He looked into Dale's eyes. He started to raise his hands up in surrender. He said, "Okay, if that's the way—"

The Cuda's engine rumbled to life.

"What is that?" the second boy said.

Dale glanced over Robert's shoulder at the Cuda thirty meters behind him. The headlights came on. Robert saw that no one was behind the Cuda's wheel. All three stood there and watched the front tires pivot like someone was turning the steering wheel to the left. And all three clearly saw that there was no one in the driver's seat.

"What in the world?" Robert gasped.

"Don't screw with me, man," Dale said.

He held up his knife.

"He's got a remote or something," the second boy said.

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The Cuda rolled forward slowly, turning to face Robert and the two teenagers. Its headlights were bright and blinding, and the two boys shielded their eyes. The car rolled slowly toward them. Dale looked from the headlights to Robert.

"You guys better go," Robert said.

Their faces were brightly lighted, and Robert could see fear in their eyes. Dale held his knife and slashed back and forth at the air as the Cuda continued rolling forward slowly, its powerful engine rumbling. Robert walked in front of it, holding his handgun up.

The engine revved powerfully and loudly.

"You guys better run," Robert said.

"Screw you, man," the second boy said.

He turned and ran, leaving Dale standing there alone. The panic in Dale's chest rose; he screamed at Robert to "back down" and to "turn that car off, man." But Robert wasn't controlling the car.

And then, all at once, Dale rushed him. He held the knife up and yelled. Robert's hands came up defensively. The Cuda's wheels squealed, and the car lurched forward. It struck Robert in the back of the legs.

The gun went off with a loud *bang!*

Dale dropped his knife and staggered backward away from Robert and the Cuda. He looked down at his chest. His hand came up and felt the dampness. He took two more spectacular steps backward, his hand clutching at his chest, and he coughed up a mouthful of blood. He fell forward onto his knees, his face brightly lighted in the headlights' shine.

Robert's .357 fell from his hand onto the blacktop. The kid was on his knees, and blood was now all over his chin and shirt.

"Oh, my God," Robert said.

He came toward the kid, knelt down, and looked into his eyes. Dale's face blanched over pale, and he fell forward into Robert's arms. Robert caught him, and Dale coughed up one final mouthful of blood onto Robert's shoulder. Robert grabbed his shoulders and held him, but he realized that Dale was dead.

Behind him, the Cuda idled smoothly, its engine purring like a well-fed cat.



Robert dragged Dale's body toward the back of the Cuda. He could smell exhaust fumes, and his adrenaline was high. He kept looking up toward the street in front of the dealership. The streetlights glowed, and Robert was so nervous he could taste fear at the back of his teeth.

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He ripped the blue bungee cord away, and the trunk creaked open slowly. The kid's body was still warm, and Robert saw a trail of blood from where he'd just dragged him. He lifted Dale up and got the upper half of his body up over the trunk. He picked up his feet and hefted his legs up over the side.

One leg stuck out from the trunk.

Robert glanced nervously out at the street and saw no one. He grabbed Dale's lifeless hands and pulled him up toward the right side, and Dale's leg dropped down inside with a *clunk*. Again, Robert glanced nervously out at the street.

He retrieved the bungee cord, closed the trunk, and fastened it shut. He stepped around the side of the Cuda and inspected the blood on the blacktop pavement. Robert knew there was a hose in the mechanics' garage, but he was so scared he was going to get caught that he was tempted to just get in the car and drive. The Cuda rumbled.

He opened the door and slid in behind the wheel. He looked at the dashboard lights, the old AM radio in the center console, the gearshift. And he found himself putting the car in gear, gassing the accelerator lightly. He drove toward the garage.

Robert hit the door handle, but the door didn't open. He jiggled it and pushed at the door, but it wouldn't open.

He said, "I gotta clean up that blood."

And the door popped open.

Robert stepped out from behind the wheel. He stared at the Cuda a moment, then headed into the garage.

A moment later, he returned with a hose, and he carried it over to the side of the showroom. He attached it to a spigot and hosed the pavement, spraying the blood toward a sewer grate.

It took him ten minutes to clean up the mess.

He retrieved the handgun and the kid's knife. He pulled the hose over to the LeBaron and sprayed the hood. He inspected the side of the Ford Explorer and saw the holes from the throwing stars. He looked around the lot, out toward the street, and saw no one.

He carried the gun and knife to the Cuda, popped open the door, and threw them onto the floor behind the driver's seat.

He coiled up the hose and replaced it inside the garage. He returned to the Cuda, climbed in behind the wheel, and glanced nervously around the lot. He saw no one, and so he proceeded cautiously out toward the street, a dead body in his trunk.



He drove forty-five miles out into the desert along State Highway 186, until he reached the foothills of the Chiricahua Mountains.

The dirt road was dusty and dark, and he started climbing up into the mountains. At every turn, he thought about stopping to unload the body, but he was too nervous, and he was afraid that someone would see him. He climbed higher into the mountains until pine trees rose on either side of the road.

He peered over the steering wheel and saw the headlights shining up into the woods in front of him. At one sharp turn, he heard the body rolling around in the trunk, and he saw patches of snow on the ground.

He continued slowly up into the woods, climbing higher and higher. The patches of snow grew more and more frequent, until the road was covered with snow, and the Cuda's tires floated over packed powder.

He continued up the mountain until he reached a Forest Service sign that read Onion Saddle Elevation 7,700. The snow was a foot deep on either side of the road.

He rolled down his window. The air was cold; his breath steamed. He was surrounded by dense pine forest, and everything was deeply silent, except for the sound of the Cuda's engine. The road continued forward down the east side of the mountains, he knew, but there was a turn to the right up toward Buena Vista Peak. He could tell by the untouched powder that no one had tried to make it up that way in several weeks, and so he turned the Cuda's wheels slowly and started to creep forward up the snow-covered trail.

Everything was dark, except for the shine of the headlights on the snow through the woods, and Robert crept along at five miles per hour. The powder grew deeper, and he began to panic that he might get stuck. He drove on another mile until the trail was only fifteen feet wide and was covered in deep fresh powder.

Finally, he stopped the car. He opened the door and stepped out. He inspected the wheels on the Cuda and saw that they were almost completely buried. In the sky overhead, he saw thick snow clouds. The air was thin, and there was no sound except for the rumbling engine.

He glanced around the back of the car and saw the red glow of taillights. The exhaust breathed out a steady little cloud, and Robert shivered. It was twenty degrees, cold.

He looked up into the woods on the driver's side of the Cuda and formed a plan. He would leave the body here, drag it up the hillside, up into the woods. And no one would happen along this path for at least another month, maybe two or three months.

Robert started back toward the car and back toward the trunk. He could smell the exhaust fumes, and he stared down at the blue bungee cord latched

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from bumper to trunk. He did a long slow pivot, searching the forest around him for any sign of movement, but he saw none.

This is it, he thought. This is where you leave him.

He nodded his head and started to reach forward to unlatch the bungee cord. It was stuck a moment, and he had to kneel down and inspect it closely. He pried the knot with his fingertips, loosened it, and the bungee cord unclasped from the bumper. He pulled it back and started to open the trunk. It creaked with rust, and all was darkness inside.

Robert squinted and looked from side to side, but he couldn't see the body. He leaned forward over the trunk and reached his right hand down inside the trunk.

Oh, my God, he thought. He's vanished.

Robert leaned in closer. He felt the bottom of the trunk with his hand. There was nothing there.

"What in the world," he said aloud.

And he leaned forward with both hands and started inspecting the trunk.

Suddenly, a hand shot forward out of the recesses deep inside the trunk and grabbed his shirt.

Robert cried out.

A second hand shot up out of the darkness and gripped his throat. Robert slapped at the hands, and then he saw the kid's face, his icy blue eyes and the evil grimace of his teeth.

Robert beat at the hands, broke free, and then staggered backward. He fell down onto the snow, and he saw the kid climbing up out of the trunk.

"You sorry son of a bitch," Dale muttered.

Robert felt the snow on his hands, and he saw the kid who had been dead two hours earlier stepping down out of the Cuda's trunk.

"I'm gonna bash your skull in," Dale said.

He stood there in the snow. Robert was on the ground. He scrambled backwards over the snow, but Dale came swiftly to him and brought down a powerful right foot onto the middle of Robert's back.

Robert tried to roll over, and Dale stomped at him with his other foot. But he missed and Robert was able to get to his feet. He started towards the back of the Cuda. He slipped and hit the trunk, struggled around the side, and clawed at the driver-side door handle. Something struck him in the back. The door creaked open, but Robert fell to the left of the Cuda, and Dale was on him again.

Dale straddled him and swung furiously at Robert's face. Everything faded to white, blurry pain. He was out for a moment.

He felt Dale climbing up off of him. He shook his head and saw the kid staggering through the snow toward the driver-side door.

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He could taste blood in his mouth, and his nose was broken. His head throbbed, and he tried to lean forward up from the snow. Dale reached inside the car. Robert could see that he was looking for something. He shook his head, dazed, and then the kid swung around from the driver-side door. He had a crazy look in his eyes, and he held the butcher's knife victoriously in his hand.

Robert rolled over on his hands and knees and started crawling up into the woods. He could hear the kid behind him, coming towards him through the snow. He struggled to his feet and staggered forward in the knee-high powder.

"I'm gonna get you!" Dale shouted.

Robert could hear the knife slicing through the air. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that they'd climbed a couple hundred feet up the hillside. The Cuda was still down there on the snow-covered road, its driver-side door and trunk open, its headlights on. Dale was only ten feet behind him, but the snow was so thick it was hard to move.

Robert hit a tree. He was out of breath. He spat and started out around the ridge and back down the hill through the snow and through the trees. Dale cut him off and lunged at his leg with the knife.

Both went down.

Robert felt something bright hot on his back left thigh, and he fell forward over the snow. Blood poured from his jeans onto the snow, and he saw Dale climbing to his feet. Dale realized he'd gotten the knife into him, and he grinned wildly.

"*Strike!*" he roared.

And he was up, slashing the knife back and forth again. Robert clambered to his feet and stumbled down the hill. He came down onto the trail and saw the Cuda 100 feet up to his left. Dale leapt down onto the road, and Robert felt something hot sink into his left arm. He screamed out, and Dale tumbled forward onto the road.

Robert saw the knife sticking out of his left arm just below his shoulder.

He wrenched at it and pulled it from his arm. He cried out in pain and, without thinking, tossed the knife down the hill away from the road.

Dale shouted, "*Strike two!*" as he climbed to his feet.

Robert ran toward the Cuda. He slipped and slid and nearly slammed his head into the door, but he got inside behind the wheel and slammed the door shut. He glanced in the rearview mirror, but the trunk was up, and he couldn't see out. He glanced in the side-view mirror and saw Dale approaching the back of the car.

Robert threw the Cuda into reverse and put the accelerator on the floor. He heard a loud noise and then something thudded underneath the car like he was dragging it over the snow. Robert tried to see through the side-view mirror, but he couldn't see Dale. He hit the brakes, and the trunk slammed shut.

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Robert's hands were on the wheel, and he looked around the car panicked. He could only see well in front of him where the headlights shined, but he could see a few feet behind him in the taillights' red glow. And he could see about twenty feet at either side of the car into the woods on both sides.

But he didn't see the kid.

He put the Cuda in reverse and started back down the trail toward Onion Saddle. There was no way for him to turn around, so he just drove in reverse. It sounded like something was dragging underneath the car. It was right underneath the center console.

It made a sound like *whump, whump, whump!* Then, there was a pause, and then it started up again: *whump, whump, whump!*

It kept on like that all the way back down the trail to Onion Saddle, where he finally turned the car around. He looked out the window to the left, up the trail from which he'd just come. He didn't see the kid.

He looked at the Forest Service sign with Onion Saddle and Elevation 7,700 on it. And he opened the door. He stepped out from the driver's seat onto the snow. The snow was crunchy with ice and frozen slush, and Robert reached down behind the seat, searching for the handgun. He didn't see it on the floor, and so he bent over and felt underneath the seat. His fingertips found it, and he dragged it out, gripped it in his hand, and started to stand up straight at the side of the car.

The snow began falling in earnest.

He leaned down and saw Dale mangled underneath the bottom of the car. He stared at him. Dale didn't move, couldn't possibly move. He was dead.

The Cuda giveth, Robert thought. And the Cuda taketh away.

Dale was heavy, but Robert managed to drag his dead body well up into the trees, where he left him.

By the time he climbed inside the car, there was a light dusting of snow on the windshield. He surveyed the pass and saw that the snow was covering his tracks. In ten minutes, there was no sign of blood on the ground, and ten minutes after that, the Cuda's tracks were filled. Robert put the car in gear, peered once through the rearview mirror, and started down the mountain.

The AM radio crackled to life. Robert eyed the lighted dashboard console and heard the song come over the speakers: "*Oh the weather outside is frightful. But the fire is so delightful. And since we've no place to go, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!*"



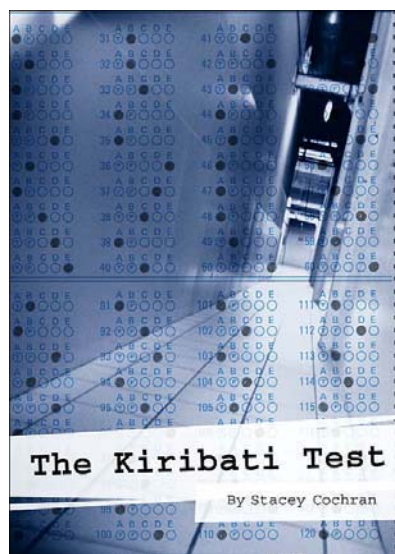
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It took him two hours to retrieve the shovel and to drive out to Cactus Memorial Cemetery. He parked the Cuda on a side street adjacent to the graveyard. He knew the gravesite like his own hand and could find it in the dark. He checked his watch and saw that he had three hours to dig before sunrise.

There was a gate around the cemetery, and Robert threw his shovel over the fence and climbed. He landed with surprising agility and began walking up the hill towards her grave. He missed her; he missed her deeply. He missed Angie with all his heart. And he smiled at the thought of their happy reunion.

THE END

STACEY COCHRAN'S sci-fi collection *The Kiribati Test* was published in September 2004; a literary novel *The Band* was published in May. In 1998, Cochran was a finalist for the Isaac Asimov Award. In 2001, at the age of twenty-seven, he finished graduate school, then packed everything he owned into a pickup truck and a U-Haul trailer and drove 2,370 miles across the U.S. to Oracle, Arizona in order to write fiction fulltime. In 2004, he was twice cited as a quarter-finalist for the Writers of the Future Contest, and in October, his novel *Culpepper: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Shotgun* was nominated as a finalist for the St. Martin's Press/PWA Best First Private Eye Novel Contest. To see more, please visit www.staceycochran.com



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WISH YOU WERE HERE

STEPHANIE BURGIS

Most of the settings in this story are taken directly from a week-long family holiday in Wales. The scenery surrounding us was hauntingly beautiful, and I started taking notes on it almost as soon as we arrived, feeling sure that a story was waiting to be told. As we travelled around the country, Tim and Megan's journey began to piece itself together in my head, and I sat down and wrote the full story a few months later, back in Yorkshire.

Postcards from Wales:

1. *Near Carmarthen. The time share.*

Thwack!

The tennis ball slams onto the court, so close to Megan's foot that she has to leap back.

"Out!" she says.

"Out? What the hell are you talking about?"

"What do you think?"

"It was on the line!" Tim stalks up to the edge of the net, faceless behind his giant sunglasses. "I saw it!"

"Believe it or not. I don't care." Megan sets her free hand on her stomach. Empty. Flat. *Dead.* "We'll say it was in, if it makes you feel better."

"For Chrissake!"

Tim slams his racket into the green clay, feels the shock waves reverberate through his arm.

"Do you want to play or not?" Megan says. "I'm not the one who dragged us out here."

"Fine. You're right. I'm wrong. Surprise!"

Tim scoops the second tennis ball out of the pocket of his shorts and hits it as hard as he can, straight at her. It sails over her head and past her, over the vine-covered wall that marks the edge of the estate. Megan crosses her arms.

"Are you planning to go get that?"

Tim strides off the court, hands shaking. Walks around the wire fence to the high stone wall, feeling his wife's flat gaze on his back.

God, she knows how to put on a good act.

He rounds the corner, and stops.

Green hills rise before him, patchworked together with winding hedgerows. Cows and sheep graze in the distance. A breeze sweeps past, and the grass

ripples in front of him, shimmers like a mirage. A speck of gold flashes in the corner of his vision.

Tim takes off his sunglasses. His eyes are wet.

"Lucy," he whispers. "Are you there?"



2. *Llandeilo. A children's book shop.*

Sunlight shines through the shop window, glints off the dust on the bookcases.

Once upon a time, there were a king and queen who desperately wanted a child....

"Forget it," Megan says. She pushes the book back into the shelf with a vindictive twist. Realizes the shop-owner is staring at her. "I've heard that story before," she says.

And the books never get it right, anyway.

Megan's fairy is black and androgynous, with a Buddha-grin. Megan saw her the first time on her eighteenth birthday, as she walked home from her last day of high school.

"Thin," she said, when she finally understood. "God, please make me thin. That's all I want."

The shop door opens with the sound of jangling bells.

"What are you doing in here?" Tim asks. He looks at the sign in the door, then back at Megan. "God, you're sick. Do you ever give up?"

Megan glares at him and walks out under the interested gaze of the shop owner.

"I got tired of watching you eat." She looks down at her watch as she brushes past him. "Weren't we going to leave for the castle by noon?"

Three wishes are never enough. Especially when you guess wrong every time.



3. *Castle Carreg Cennen.*

Tim carries the rented flashlight from the farmhouse at the bottom of the hill. A peacock struts ahead of them on the path up to the castle, its vivid blue feathers incongruous against the barren hill and the craggy stone ruins that rise above them.

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"Oh, God." Megan stops. "I can't believe it. We've only been here two minutes, and I've already stepped in sheep droppings."

Tim snorts. "Surprise."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, it's Wales. Obviously." *And it's you*, he adds silently.

The first time they met, in their first week of college, Megan skidded spectacularly on her brand-new high heels and dropped all her folders and books in the hallway just outside their class, Business 120. It was the first time Tim noticed her, and gold filled his vision—the red-gold of her hair, flying up around her face, and the yellow gold of her dress, her sleeves flapping in the air as she fell. He wanted to gather her up in his arms, carry her like a princess. She grabbed her books and ran off before he could even muster up the courage to try to help.

"I want her," he said that night, with conviction. "Just her, and no one else. Please. That's all I want."

His fairy is thin and severe, with slicked-back black hair and a tailored suit.

"Only one more wish after this," she reminded him, glancing at her clipboard.

"Honestly," he said. "Only her."

They walk through the gate, leaving the peacock behind. Megan trips on the crumbling steps. Tim doesn't offer to help.

They separate as soon as they're over the pits that used to doom invaders, past the traps and the remains of the guardhouse. Megan heaves a sigh and sits down in the stone courtyard, grimacing at the mess on her expensive shoes. Grass pokes up through the stones. Tim's never seen such desolation.

He forces himself to walk around anyway, reading the informational plaques, climbing the crumbling steps to the towers.

"I'm going down to the cave," he tells her finally. "Are you coming?"

She rolls her eyes. "Like I have anything else to do here?"

The slippery steps wind underground in a spiral, tightening. Tim's chest tightens as the air stales. How far beneath the castle are they now? Could anyone hear them if they called for help?

"How many more steps?" Megan asks.

"How would I know?"

Blackness licks at their feet. They step through the doorway.

Water drips in the darkness ahead. Cold wraps around them.

"Can we go back now?" Megan asks.

Tim switches on the flashlight, points it ahead in a wavering glow.

It's too late to turn back.



4. *The Cottage*

Megan lies wide awake in the darkness, listening to Tim's snores. His body is far away, on the other side of the bed. She squeezes her eyes shut to hold back the tears.

Tim has her and no one else, just the way he wished.
She will never, ever forgive him.



Tim fakes snores, lying with his eyes closed in the darkness. Megan's body radiates a chill from the far side of the bed.

She must know that he's awake. Otherwise, she wouldn't bother to cry.

She will always be thin.

The baby never even had a chance to grow.

He will never, ever forgive her.



In the distance, they both hear a faint whisper. A gurgle of faraway sound.
Lucy? they wonder. *Is that you?*



5. *The Road to Martin's Haven*

Rain beats against the windshield as they drive. The windshield wipers fight back, but they can't succeed. Another car zooms past them in the narrow lane, splashing a tidal wave across their rental.

"Wow," Megan says. "What a good idea. Let's drive three hours to go on a boat. In the rain. I'm having fun."

Tim's fingers clench on the steering wheel. He doesn't speak.

"It's a good thing I got to have a say," she says. "Because it would really suck if you were the kind of husband who just made decisions without consulting his wife. Or even asking what her opinion was."

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"Why bother?" he says. "You'd just spend the whole day sulking in the cottage."

"I do not sulk."

"Fine. You'd spend the day meditating on all the things I've done wrong."

Rain thickens, clouds the screen. Megan feels cold breath on the back of her neck. She doesn't turn around. She won't.

"Maybe we shouldn't have come," she says.

"Look, it's supposed to be a really important nature reserve, and I've never seen a puffin. I just—"

"To Wales," she says. The seatbelt pushes into her empty stomach. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpses a flash of black, slicked-back hair behind Tim's seat. She jerks her gaze back to him. "Maybe we shouldn't have bothered."

"This is the wrong time to talk about it," Tim says. "Just let me concentrate, okay? I'm driving blind on the wrong side of the road."

Megan looks up at the rear-view mirror. Her own fairy looks back, not smiling now, fathomless dark eyes gazing steadily at her.

"I can't live like this anymore," Megan says. "It's driving me crazy."

"Tell me about it." Tim starts to speak, clenches his jaw, then says it anyway. "I keep thinking I hear a voice, and it's Lucy. Don't even start on how crazy that is. Or I can almost see her, the way she would have looked, but—"

"Lucy?" Megan jerks around, blinking. "Tim, I—"

A wooden sign rises up in the rain, and Tim swerves left, almost too late. Tires screech against gravel. He hits the brake, and Megan lurches forward. Her seatbelt slams into her body.

For a moment, she hangs in mid-air.

She falls back into her seat, gasping.

"Would you believe it?" Tim gestures at the window, panting. His face is pale. "Now it clears up. Finally."

Rain slows, stops. Clouds open above the parking lot, revealing dark rocks ahead, a dull gray sky. Megan unstraps her seatbelt with trembling hands. The back seat is empty.



6. *The Black Bay*

Ice-cold waves slap the sides of the boat, spray water at the line of passengers as they cross the narrow metal slipway. Tim slips, steadies himself, flushes. Jumps onto the deck of the boat, and sighs with relief.

Black cliffs rise around the narrow bay. The boat seems impossibly small. Tim waits while Megan balances herself, her face working with nerves and effort,

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and finally slides across the slipway. At the last moment, she stumbles. Tim catches her without thinking.

Her hands feel surprisingly warm against his.

Megan sits next to Tim on the far side of the boat. She's trying not to look at him, but she can't help looking past his shoulder as the boat begins to move, rocking side to side with every wave. Her hand lands on Tim's sleeve. She pulls it back.

"You've picked a good day to come," the wildlife ranger tells them. He beams at the group as he strides around the boat, collecting money. "Puffins love these nice gray days. I'd guess there'll be at least a thousand out on Skomer today."

Tim nudges Megan. "See?"

She grits her teeth. "Fine. You were right."

He blinks. "You haven't said that in a long time."

She rolls her eyes, turns away. The ranger is still talking.

"Of course, all the mothers and their eggs'll be safe inside their holes on the island today, but you'll see the fathers, and you'll see plenty of young ones."

A black cloud hovering in the air ahead resolves into specks of life. Gasps sweep through the boat.

"Look! There!"

Megan grabs Tim's arm without thinking. "There!"

A puffin sweeps past, less than a foot away, orange beak bright against the gray of the water. Wings beat madly in the air, fighting to hold his plump body alight. He sinks towards the water, rises. Wins.

There are tears in Megan's eyes. "He—"

"I could have touched him," Tim says. "With my hand. I could have reached out."

Reached out. Megan's hand is still wrapped around his arm. They both realize it at the same time. She flushes and starts to pull it back.

Tim puts his hand over hers.

They're surrounded by strangers. Cold water flies up to sting their eyes as she turns her hand over to wrap her fingers in his. The lump in her throat is so big, it might just choke her if she doesn't let it out.

She closes her eyes and finally lets herself say it:

"I'm sorry," Megan whispers, barely loud enough for him to hear.

"Me too," Tim whispers back. "God, Meg. Me, too."

"And there's a couple, out there." The ranger points. He's standing just by them, suddenly, although they hadn't noticed him approach. "Too young to mate. Puffins aren't allowed to have their own nesting holes, the first year they're coupled. Not ready for it yet, I guess."

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Megan bites down on her tongue, tastes blood. Her fingers are still wrapped in Tim's. His grip is the only thing anchoring her to the boat, keeping her from floating away, disintegrating into the cool, damp air.

"I'm sorry."

"Look!" A woman sitting across the boat shouts and points, drawing the attention of the rest of the group. Her own tailored suit is still immaculately dry. "Here they come!" she yells.

The flock of puffins descends upon them, orange beaks and flapping wings, noise and color filling the air. Cameras flash. Videorecorders hum. The ranger taps Megan on the arm. Behind his weathered skin, his eyes are dark and fathomless. He points away from the hubbub, through the flapping wings.

"There," he says quietly. "I think you two are ready to see this, now."

"Tim," Megan whispers. She can barely breathe.

Lucy's gurgling laugh fills their ears.

Later, no matter how hard they try, they won't be able to recall the exact shade of Lucy's curling, fair hair, or whether her bright eyes were green or blue. What they will remember is this:

Lucy's forehead is wrinkled with concentration, but she laughs and laughs and she does not fall. She keeps her chubby feet planted solidly on the back of a speckled gray seal as it dips under the water and leaps for joy. Water sprays a glittering arc around them as they skim past, Lucy waving her dimpled arms in the air.

"Meg," Tim whispers. "Oh, Meg."

Her fingers tighten around his. She's crying so hard she can barely see.

Tim's hand is warm and strong against hers. He leans his head against her hair. Their cheeks touch.

They watch their daughter sail away from them.

Together, they raise their free hands. Lucy waves as she rides past, and Tim and Megan wave back at her, crying.

"Good-bye," they whisper. "Good-bye. Good-bye."

THE END

STEPHANIE BURGIS is an American author who lives in Yorkshire, England, with her husband, Patrick Samphire, and their amazing border collie, Nika. Her short fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *The Fortean Bureau*, and other magazines. For more information, please visit her website: <http://www.stephanieburgis.co.uk>

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GYPSY GRAVEYARD

ALEXIS CHILD

Wagon wheels of dusty caravans
Roll clockwise down moonlit trails
Violins sing the song of flight
Wandering nostalgia
Upon life's uneven road
A rogues' crusade for lavish metals
Coins coveted from dead men's eyes
Lady luck smiles jagged-toothed
Fortunes foretold
Double during the night
Unlawful curses
Thrown to avenging winds
Plague underlying paths
Sweep the sickly fragrance
In a haze of devouring dreams
Losses echo in unhallowed ground
Our magic blood ill at ease
Whispers in vein
To all who share our grief

ALEXIS CHILD from Toronto, Canada; horror in its purest form. She works at a Call Crisis Centre befriending demons of the mind that roam freely amongst her writings. She lives with a Shaman and Calico-cat child sleuthing all that goes bump in the night. Her fiction has been featured in *THE HOUSE OF PAIN* and *TOP INTERNATIONAL HORROR 2004* published by Rainfall Books/BJM Press. Her poetry has appeared online and in print in such publications as *Chaos Butterfly*, several times in *Decompositions* and *The Dream People*, *Gothic Fairy Tales*, *The Harrow*, *Horror Carousel*, *Locust Magazine*, *Planet Prozak*, *Skin and Bones*, *Whispers of Wickedness* and elsewhere. Visit her website: <http://www.angelfire.com/poetry/alexischild/>

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AUTHOR INTERVIEW

PAUL DI FILIPPO was born in 1954 in Rhode Island, and has lived there all his subsequent life, for the past thirty years in the capital, Providence, once the stomping grounds of Lovecraft. He attended Rhode Island College for several years, but never graduated. There he met Deborah Newton—they're approaching their thirtieth year together. He sold a story in 1977 to *Unearth* magazine, but didn't get serious about writing till 1982. Since then, he has published numerous short stories, books and collections including *The Steampunk Trilogy*, *Ribofunk*, *Ciphers*, *Spondulix* and *A Year in the Linear City*. He currently lives in a house with 7000 books, two cats—Penny Century and Queen Mab—and a chocolate cocker spaniel named Brownie. <http://www.pauldifilippo.com/>

Have you always been drawn to the SF genre, or was it something you found you had a knack for after the fact?

SF has been in my bloodstream for as long as I can remember. One of my primal reading experiences occurred at age five, when I encountered a *Mighty Mouse* comic in which our rodent hero journeyed into space. His voyage among all these ringed and colorful planets, jostling each other impossibly closely, broke open my mental horizons permanently. From there, it was a quick and pleasurable plummet into the vast realm of printed and cinematic SF.

What are some of your earliest and most recent influences?

I read widely in SF from my earliest school days. As I look at my shelves today, I realize that I consumed vast quantities of Robert Heinlein, Brian Aldiss, Andre Norton, A. E. van Vogt, Philip K. Dick, Poul Anderson, Michael Moorcock, Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury before I understood half of what they were saying. But understanding did not preclude loving every word.



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I was a total fanboy until college, when I began discovering the great Victorian, modernist and postmodernist writers. Here I learned to savor Dickens, Faulkner, Pynchon and Nabokov, among others, voices which still influence me today.

Are you seeing any specific trends in the SF genre that has perked your interest?

I love the New Weird and Postmodern Space Opera, and intend to try my hand at both, sooner or later. My novella *A Year In The Linear City* probably already qualifies as New Weird, although such was not my intention when writing it.

Do you think that SF has a responsibility to get people thinking all the time—whether it be about politics, social mores or any of the other numerous issues frequently tackled by the genre?

This thought-provoking quality has always been a prime component of the best SF. I think we abandon it at our peril. Fantasy, horror, magical realism, for all their virtues, simply don't sustain such a process in the reader. SF does, because it proclaims, "This might one day come to pass," or "This is how the universe really works. Think about it!"

Do you think good SF can perhaps be a sort of early warning system against malicious futures?

Oh, absolutely. The most famous example is Orwell's 1984. The force and artistic integrity of that novel precluded such a dictatorship from coming into being. But, having said that, such predictions only inoculate against whatever specific strain of thought-virus they're written for. We don't have general immunity from dictatorships that are outside the Orwell template. That's why SF has a never-ending job.

What are you working on at the moment?

I just completed a novella titled "Harsh Oases" that was written specifically for an SF symposium held at Georgia Tech. It's my first foray into my Ribofunk universe since that book was published. I hope for it to have a magazine appearance as well somewhere. Meanwhile, I have a handful of reviews always underway, since I review weekly for SF Weekly (www.scifi.com/sfw). Fiction wise, I've just been hired by Marvel Comics to write a miniseries involving their character Doc Sampson. We intend to launch him as a kind of Indiana Jones figure. I'd like to start a novel soon, to be titled *Up Around The Bend*. It'd be a surreal post-

apocalypse tale. But I'm not sure if I'll have time to get to that until the end of the year.

What inspires you to write—is it something you can put your finger on?

I've derived so much pleasure from fiction over the years that I always feel like I want to replicate the experience for others, through my own (hopefully unique) vision and skills. Self-expression is important, of course, but a major part of why I write is to feel part of a long lineage of writers, to add my crumbs to the edifice of SF.

How do you think the SF genre has evolved in the last twenty years? Has the media changed the reading public's perception of what 'SF' is supposed to be?

The average entertainment-consumer thinks movies and TV when he or she hears the term science fiction. It's inevitable. Written SF is a minority taste. Inevitably, because writers themselves are entertainment-consumers, some of what goes on up on the big or little screen will work its way into their books. But I think that it's just impossible to replicate a viewing experience on the page, or vice versa, so anyone who is a true writer of SF will inevitably hew to the old methodologies. And readers who are true readers will accept and revel in that difference.

Do you have a specific writing ritual for when you want to immerse yourself in the work? Ever suffer from writer's block?

Nope! I just plunk my butt down in front of the computer and start working. That said, some stories flow easier than others, naturally, and I've been known to stare at a blank screen for long intervals between fits of typing. And I've also been lucky in that none of those intervals has ever extended very long, to turn into full-fledged block.

Has what you used to enjoy reading changed much since the start of your writing career?

Well, I still enjoy all the authors I ever did enjoy, but of course I cannot often recapture the jolt and sizzle with which the thirteen-year-old Paul received a story. And reading a book for purposes of reviewing it sure does drain a portion of its enjoyability. Sometimes nowadays I read comics or mystery novels with more

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unalloyed pleasure than I read SF. The pleasure in SF is still there, it's just not "pure."

Which aspect or elements of writing do you find the most challenging?

Selling what I've written! Marketing is a necessary, frustrating evil!

Do you think it's possible for a writer to step completely outside of their characters? To have nothing of themselves in any character they create?

Probably not. I love Walt Whitman's work, and have to endorse his view that the best writer contains multitudes and has experienced everything noble and ignoble, high and low, that he later brings out on the page through snippets of himself.

And on that note, tell us something weird...

One of my feet is larger than the other? Someone recently tried to dig up H. P. Lovecraft from his gravesite here in Providence? I've now been writing for almost thirty years even though I'm only thirteen on some level?

How did you make that psychological click from *wanting* to be a writer and realizing that now I *am* a writer?

It takes a long time, at least for me. I still always think that maybe I'm just having a long streak of good luck at faking it. Maybe when I quit my last day job a few years ago, the notion that this is what I did professionally, and out of psychological necessity, began to sink in. But I think it's good not to slap that label on permanently. Like the master painter Hokusai, who said he was just an apprentice at age 80 and could use a few more decades to learn stuff, I want to stay fresh by not accepting that I've "gotten somewhere."

Your five all-time favorite SF Books, Movies and Television shows are:

Gravity's Rainbow

Little, Big

Nova

Dharma Bums

Look Homeward, Angel

8 ½

La Dolce Vita

2001

Spiderman (1)
Wings Of Desire

The Simpsons is all five favorites rolled into one.

What do you make of the Sci-Fi channel's *Battlestar Galactica* remake?

Alas, I've had no time to see it. I'm encouraged by the good reviews, though.

Have you ever tried your hand at scriptwriting?

Funny you should ask... I am now attempting to turn a few stories from *Ribofunk* into a script. Just had to buy a new computer to host some scriptwriting software. The medium is vastly different from novels, and I'm flailing around a bit. We'll see if anything valuable comes out of the whole experience.

What is it that keeps your fascination with the SF genre strong?

It's deep and complex enough—like pop music or science or any major field of human endeavor—that you cannot exhaust it in a lifetime. Also, the excellent work of many of my peers drives me forward, as I seek to match or emulate them.

The five things every aspiring SF writer must know is:

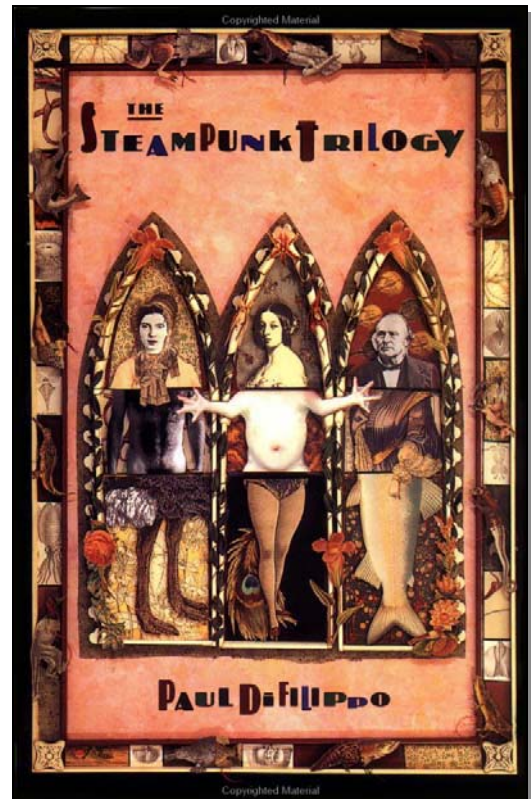
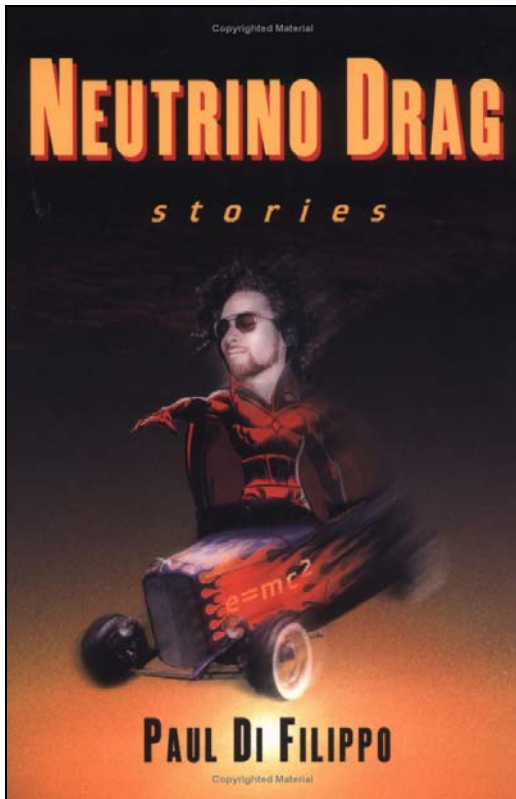
So many writers have contributed great advice in the past, I should probably just make a list of their lists:

- 1) Find and read Heinlein's Rules for writing, the set that starts, "1) You must write."
- 2) Tattoo Sturgeon's Law on your forehead and realize it applies to you!
- 3) Remember Delany's rules: "Every sentence in an SF story should do two things simultaneously." "It's not necessary to be an expert to write SF, but you have to know how to sound like one." (Both paraphrased.)
- 4) Follow Bradbury's Rule to write 1000 words a day.
- 5) Never forget that you're doing this out of love. (That one's mine.)

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What would you like your epitaph to read?

Well, as a native Rhode Islander and longtime resident of Providence, I thought I could steal from Lovecraft's tombstone—"I am Providence"—and say "I was Providence after this guy"!



**FIND OUT MORE ABOUT PAUL DIFILIPPO
AND HIS WORK AT:**

www.pauldifilippo.com

FEATURED ARTIST

TODD LOCKWOOD

Vital Stats

Age: 47

Country: United States of Paranoia

On The Web: <http://www.toddlockwood.com>

Medium: Acrylics, Oils, Pencil, Digital

Training, Influences: How did you come to do work for TSR (now Wizards Of The Coast)?

My first artistic influence, like so many in my field, was Frank Frazetta. Later came Michael Whelan, though I had some ad-world influences, too, particularly after I started art school. David Wilcox. Peter Lloyd. Also Boris, Jeff Jones. But I really wanted to be Michael Whelan. I studied at the Colorado Institute of Art, primarily a design school. The quarter after I graduated, in 1981, they started conferring Associates Degrees for the course I had finished, so I claim to have an associates degree, though I technically don't. I got a good job right out of school in a hot design and illustration shop in Denver, won a bunch of awards—even a silver medal in the Art Directors Club of New York annual show—but after a year and a half, I had had enough. I left to pursue illustration exclusively.

I spent fifteen years doing ad work. Coors was one of my biggest clients; I have painted a lot of beer cans. I could do dew drops in my sleep. At one point I had some covers that I had done for Satellite Orbit magazine in the CA Annual; for



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years after that I was the "satellite dish guy". I came to really hate satellite dishes. If I had ever had a painting with both a beer can and a satellite dish in it, my ad career would have been complete.



Throughout those years, I was an avid Dungeons and Dragons player. My friends and I were still active gamers when I left Colorado to work with TSR, though we were playing a game called Earthdawn by then. I flipped when TSR started having really good art on their products. Jeff Easley's stuff particularly interested me: so moody and fluid, so deft. Then Brom came along and really blew my doors off. I started to get more and more frustrated with the work I was doing, stuck in the wrong market. I had agents in New York—very high-profile, reputable agents—who were simply not interested in marketing me to the book companies. Or in doing their job. I was doing work I hated, for people without a clue.

Then Terry Czezcko at Asimov's gave me a couple of magazine covers. That was the beginning. I felt revived; I was painting things that interested me! I told her that I wanted more of that kind of work, and she suggested that I hang a show at one of the sci-fi/fantasy conventions, preferably WorldCon. I said, "hang a show at a what?" I had never heard of sci-fi conventions. I was that naive. I had heard of GenCon, the premier gaming convention, but it was in Milwaukee, and I wasn't so rabid a D&Der that I wanted to go that far for a game. I had no idea. But I took my Asimov covers and some personal work to the WorldCon in Winnipeg.

It was a revelation! I met other artists, and saw so much amazing work. I wanted to hide my own paintings ... or burn them. But I met Michael Whelan, who responded very favorably to the black and white work I had done, particularly "Cerberus". I went home inspired, and determined to do more and better work. From Winnipeg I got some interior work for Carl Gnam, at Realms of Fantasy and Science Fiction Age magazines. With those two magazines and my Asimov and

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Analog covers, I was starting to build a portfolio of published work in the field I had always wanted to be a part of. I fired my agents in New York.

My first work in the gaming industry was some cards for Chaosium, and for Phil Foglio's naughty deck. Then a friend I made at a convention—a very good friend and a talented, wonderful guy, David Martin, who has been around the convention/gaming/sci-fi/fantasy block more than a few times—suggested me to an art director at TSR. I had sent TSR portfolios in the past, but they didn't want to look at ad work, and weren't going to give covers to someone who couldn't show them what they wanted to see. But now I had the beginnings of a real portfolio. The art director, Stephen Daniele, gave me a bunch of character portraits for one of the Spellfire decks. Then some book covers for TSR. Then, when Fred Fields and Robh Ruppel both quit within a month of each other, a magical door opened. It was very much a matter of being the right person in the right place at the right time. I knew the games, had done some work for them that they were happy with, and they needed someone quickly. TSR had burned some bridges with some of their other prospects, but that worked for me. I was happy to jump.

You've been playing Dungeons & Dragons for about twenty-five years yourself—what do you think of the game's transition from paper to computer? Have there been new challenges involved for you as an artist because of this?

The aspect of D&D that I worked on was still the paper game. Everything else is a license derived from that. Most people who play the game are still playing around the kitchen table or in the living room with their friends, rule-books opened, character sheet in front, just like I used to do. That's the game I worked on, did the concepting for. Personally, video games are uninteresting because they tend to be simple hack and slash variants of Pac Man: follow the trail, eat the treasure, avoid getting killed... only the graphics are far cooler. I understand that games like Everquest are much more than that, but I simply do not have time to invest in that level of play. Truth be told, since getting the job at TSR, I haven't played much at all. That's nearly a decade now. I guess that because I spend almost every day drawing and painting this great fantasy stuff, I don't need it so much in my spare time. I used to play the game to preserve my insanity. Now my insanity is well pickled, so I can spend my free hours involved in other things, like gardening and political activism (two strangely similar and yet opposite activities...)

Were you always drawn to the Fantasy genre, or was it something you found you had a talent for after the fact?

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I grew up on science fiction: Forbidden Planet, Lost In Space, Asimov, Arthur C Clarke, 2001... on and on. Captain Kirk was a childhood hero...what can I say? I did read Robert E. Howard's Conan stories (never much cared for the Lin Carter follow ups), Edgar Rice Burroughs (who was good until he started imitating himself, then things just got silly), and Lovecraft, but science fiction appealed to me more. My favorite sci-fi book of all time is *The Mote in God's Eye*, by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. I remember a friend in junior high school tried to get me to read the *Lord of the Rings*. When I learned that it was full of elves and dwarves and magic rings, I scoffed at him. But a couple of years later, my dad bought the books for me, so I was obligated to read them. I was blown away. Amazing stuff! And really nothing quite that good since. A little later still, another friend, back from the service in Germany, introduced me and some of my high-school buddies to D&D. The rest, as they say, is history. Fantasy was different when I got to tell the stories, by way of being the DM or of participating as a player. D&D was really about the story-telling for me. I learned to draw by making myself comic books of my stories. I thought about movies as a career, whether as a director or writer or special effects guy (did I forget to mention how big an influence Ray Harryhausen was?) and really have a rather cinematic way of looking at an image. In the end, you have to pick something, and inertia gets a say in what you end up doing, too. By the time I entered art school, I think I knew I wanted to paint book covers.



As an adult I became fascinated with Mythology, particularly transformative mythology and the hidden meanings of Myth. Joseph Campbell is a hero of mine for his thoughtful and thorough exploration of the World's Myths. It all came together at TSR in a big way.

Which artists have influenced\inspired you the most?

Michael Whelan was probably the biggest single influence on me, with his thoughtful approach, detailed images, and brilliant interpretations of events and themes. Later, when I met him and got to know him, I was impressed by his

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accessibility and intelligence. Frank Frazetta, of course influenced the whole genre in incalculable ways. Walt Disney had a hand, too. I can still remember standing in the back of the station wagon at a drive in when I was probably four years old, watching Maleficent turn into a fiery dragon in Sleeping Beauty, and Phillip battling the demons. Do you suppose that might have had an impact? Is there any evidence?

What are some of the work in your portfolio that you are most proud of?

That's like asking me which one of my children is my favorite. You know, they all have qualities that I like or dislike; aspects that make me proud; there are some still kicking around the house and some I wish I hadn't sold. The same is true of my paintings.

But seriously, it's impossible to pick just a few. I suppose I would have to give nods to Cerberus and Kali, because they turned heads my way at a critical time in my career. Later, the Dragonlance, Mech Hunter, Spell Rune Golem and a few others from those first months in Washington State happened during a period where I felt like I was finally starting to figure this painting shtick out. Then with the Thousand Orcs and The Two Swords, among others, my digital paintings rose to a new level. I've learned thins from painting digitally that I'd like to translate into oils, if I ever get the time and a budget that will let me sling paint again.



Have you ever been approached to contribute your work to film or television projects?

Only once, recently, but their time-table was too short and I was booked. It is something that might interest me, though I've heard some horror stories from other artists about the business. Still, if I thought it would be good work, and if it would get me any recognition, I might be willing to give it a try. Movies were one of my first loves, after all. In the meantime, I really like the fact that when I am done working on something, a painting, the project is finished. When I'm done with a painting, there is no more work to be done. With a movie, I might not even recognize my contribution by the time the movie released.

Of course, a friend tells me, after visiting a famous special effects studio, that pictures of his and mine and friends of ours in the industry are hanging all over the place as "resource". So maybe we ARE in the movies already...

Do you prefer working in traditional mediums like oils as opposed to computer art?

That's a tough question to answer. On the one hand, digital paint is spontaneous and instinctive and fast. It really lets you get right into the image, without a lot of concern about drying time or compatibility of media, that sort of thing. It is fast and fun, and so much easier to deliver to the client. On the other hand, there is no painting when I am done. Any number of digital paintings I have done might now be hanging in a collector's house, and their money hanging around in my bank, if the piece existed in the real world. It's a two edged sword. I can work faster digitally, and take on more work, which compensates for the sales I'm not making. But I have no paintings, which bugs hell out of me. Hopefully, once the kids are done with their college, I can slow down and paint more often.

What are some of your favorite Fantasy/SF things—movies, books, conventions, TV? What could they be doing better...?

Books: The afore mentioned *Lord of the Rings*; *Mote in God's Eye*; *Childhood's End*; *2001, A Space Odyssey*; *The Demolished Man*; Joseph Campbell's *Transformations of Myth Through Time*; Michael Moorcock's *Eternal Champions*, especially Elric; Anything by Roger Zelazny



Movies: LotR cycle—Jackson did an outstanding job, all in all; *Alien*; *Aliens*; *The Terminator* (1) *Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark*; *Forbidden Planet*; *Quatermass and the Pit*; *2001*; *Dark City*; *The Crow*; *Star Wars* (though I'm completely burned out on them after the last two awful efforts); *The Fifth Element*; *Pitch Black* (but not *Chronicles of Riddick*). Best Zombie movie ever made: *Shaun of the Dead*. I'm forgetting dozens.

Television: I grew up on the original *Star Trek* and liked a lot of the *Next Generation*, though I believe *Star Trek* has run its course. The original *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits* were ground-breaking TV that has never really been followed up. There is no equivalent of good short story presentation on TV any more. The

best sci-fi on TV in recent years was a show that didn't last a full season on fox, called *Firefly*. Outstanding! It was so good that, despite poor ratings that got it cancelled (poorly marketed), it will be a theatrical release this fall. Rent or buy the original series, watch it several times, then anticipate the movie, like I'm doing. Great stuff. Apart from that, I mostly don't watch TV sci-fi. I'm tired of rubber foreheads. As ever, it is all about story. Commercial TV just isn't pulling it together for me, and movie sci-fi has become one *Alien* rip-off after another. Hollywood has been suborned by suits; they think you can make a great movie the way a factory makes widgets. They need to learn that movies are art, and get out of the way.

Your opinion on Jackson's Balrog...

As a movie monster, it was awesome. Incredible use of detail, like the heat shimmer in its breath and in the air around it. Beautiful flames. Great stuff. As an interpretation of the Balrog... well, that's a tall order. It's described as being mostly shadow, but with flaming hair and a flaming whip. That's a contradiction, which I think PJ interpreted pretty well. Ultimately though, on some level, I wish it had had a little more of that other worldliness about it. Less of the magma pool and more of that wraith-like not-there-ness that Tolkien describes. I think John Howe's

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paintings of the Balrog came closest of any I've seen. Perhaps impossible, I dunno. I'd have loved to have worked on that concepting, though.

Six things every aspiring artist must know:

Anatomy: proportions, musculature, where the muscles insert, how they shape as they stretch and flex and how a body moves dynamically. That goes for animal anatomy, too.

Perspective: nothing annoys me like a painting with three different horizon lines, or a bad ellipse.

Light and shadow: Study it, draw it paint it, set up lights and figure out WHY a scene looks the way it does. Where is that light under the chin coming from, and why is it that color?

Composition: There are tricks we use to draw the eye to the things that are most interesting in a painting, that make them more interesting. Composition is the art of directing the eye.

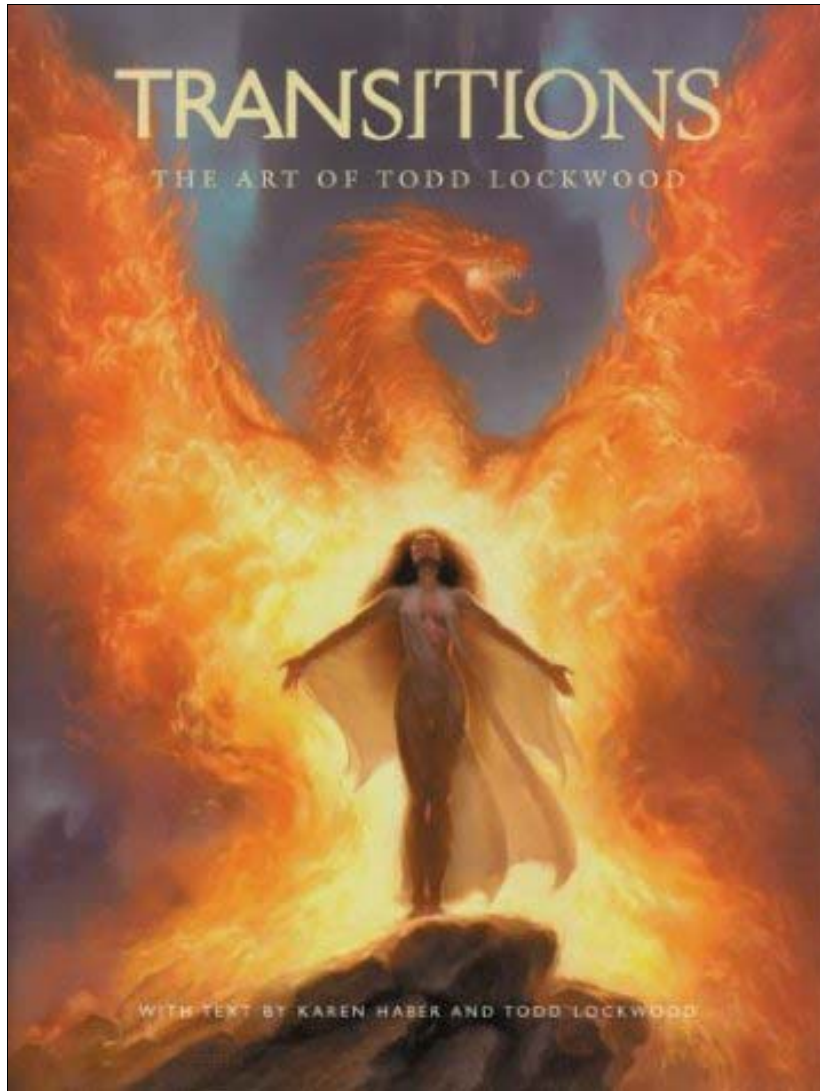
Your color wheel: If you don't know that yellow and blue make green, you're in trouble.

Everything else: You have to be a bit of a renaissance man to be an illustrator. Pay attention to everything: biology, history, politics, sociology, psychology, physics, acting & theater, music, architecture, landscaping, horticulture, zoology... on and on. I am not even kidding. Everything has a chance of being important in a painting. You want to understand them all in order to paint them well. Expand your horizons. Read a little from every genre (except Romance. That stuff really is crap). Watch Discovery Channel and History Channel. Travel. See things. Believe nothing and everything. Ask stupid questions and expect good answers, or keep digging.

Parting shot:

Thanks for reading this, if you're still here. All best to all of you!

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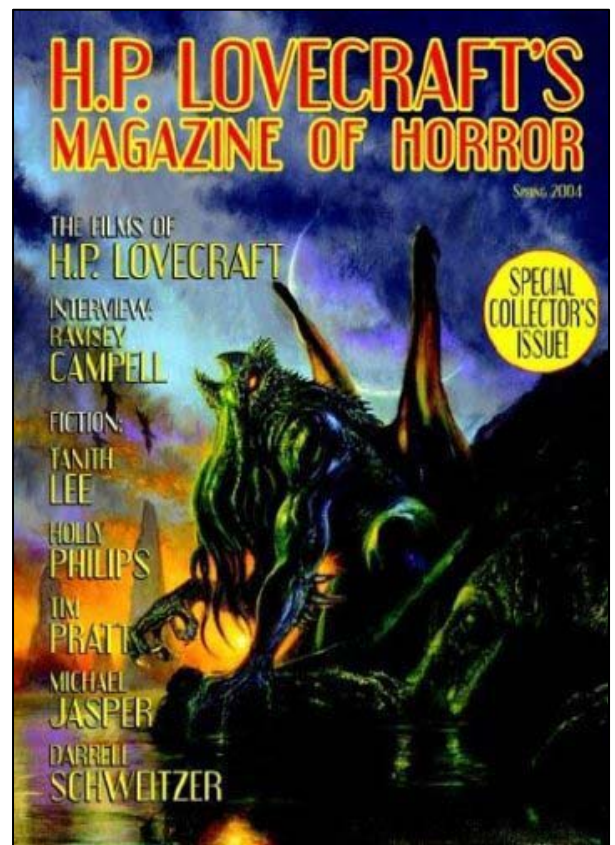
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EDITOR INTERVIEW

MARVIN KAYE is the author of fifteen novels, including his Dickensian pastiche, *The Last Christmas of Ebenezer Scrooge*; the terrifying *Fantastique* and *Ghosts of Night and Morning*; the SF cult classics, *The Incredible Umbrella* and (coauthored with Parke Godwin) *The Masters of Solitude*, and the critically-acclaimed mysteries *Bullets for Macbeth* and *My Son the Druggist*. His short story "Ms. Lipshutz and the Goblin," was included in a DAW Books Year's Best Fantasy anthology, and his horrific "The Possession of Immanuel Wolf" was written with the great macabre comedian, Brother Theodore. His numerous best-selling anthologies include *13 Plays of Ghosts and the Supernatural* and other theatre collections; *The Game is Afoot* and other Sherlock Holmes anthologies, and many fantasy/science fiction books for the Science Fiction Book Club, such as *Ghosts*, *Masterpieces of Terror and the Supernatural*, *The Vampire Sextette* and the new *The Dragon Quintet*. Formerly the film critic for *Aboriginal SF*, his column, "Marvin Kaye's Nth Dimension," appears in *Chronicle*. He is the editor of *H. P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror* and the *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*, the first issue of which will appear this summer.

What are you working on at the moment?

Several things. First, a novella-length ghost story, *Lovedeath*, for a Tor anthology I'm editing, *The Ghost Quartet*; its other authors are Orson Scott Card, Tanith Lee, and Brian Lumley. Second, a new anthology, *Forbidden Planets*, for the SF Book Club; its authors include Julie Czerneda, Alan Dean Foster, Nancy Kress, Jack McDevitt, Robert Reed, and Allen Steele. Am also readying up the third issue of *H. P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror* and the first issue of *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine*. Theatrically, I'm producing my interactive Don Juan comedy, *Mister Jack*, in New York this fall. Finally, Parke Godwin and I have opened up discussions about writing (at long last!) the final volume of the SF trilogy that began with *The Masters of Solitude* and



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Wintermind.

In your own writing, what do you usually seek out to get your creative juices flowing?

It used to be scotch, but I stopped drinking. Now it varies. Sometimes I reread something I've written in the same approximate style of the new project. Sometimes I take a walk or a ride. Sometimes I listen to Mozart or Glass or Sullivan or Mahler, etc. Sometimes nothing helps but time and patience.

From an editor's point of view—to what extent do you think an editor may affect writers and their work, and to what degree may they affect a writer's artistic sensitivity and choices?

Editors, like physicians, should take an oath to do no harm. Assuming their influence on an author is positive, they will bring educated discernment to the task, provide encouragement and advice. But there is a line they should not cross, and that goes for agents as well; unfortunately it requires maturity to recognize, therefore authors need to learn where that line is. What they need to do is evaluate an editor's, agent's, or for that matter, another author's advice and decide whether it is genuinely helpful or is an example of the subtext, "This is how I would write it..."

In cases of this sort, even if the advice would produce a superior work, if it does not fit the author's style and way of thinking, it is of the value, to use Mark Twain's phrase, "of an arseful of ashes." A writer's artistic sensitivity and choices are and must be precisely that: her or his own sensitivity and choices. A good editor/agent will be sensitive to individual artistic frequency(ies) and advise accordingly.

What do you look for in a story, as an editor?

Good characterization; a command of English syntax, diction, punctuation, grammar; a thorough familiarity with the strengths and drawbacks of each possible viewpoint. Imagination, of course, and either originality or a new "take" on a classic theme.

What do you look for in a story? Does this differ in any way from the way you approach it as a reader?

It differs when I am buying for an anthology or magazine. Given the publication's parameters and certain base-line aesthetic rules of my own idiosyncrasy (e.g., no

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gratuitous gore), I may well purchase a story that is not to my personal taste if I think it represents a fair number of intelligent readers. Thus, in *H. P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror*, though I personally never could work up much enthusiasm for HPL's Cthulhu stories, there are a great many readers who do, and that includes colleagues whose opinion I respect, so Cthulhu tales will always be a part of the magazine's contents (assuming they are well written, of course).

What do you enjoy most about the short story format?

Its brevity. As a reader, I like an aesthetic experience complete in one sitting. However, as a writer, I find the short story considerably more challenging to create than a novel. Reading Poe and Henry James has a tendency to do that, I think: always searching for *les mots justes* while at the same time honing and shaping for utmost economy of diction, scene, pace, effect.

How do you think the Horror genre has evolved in the last fifteen to twenty years? Has the media (mainly film and television) changed the reading public's perception of what 'Horror' is supposed to be?

There is far too much overwriting in modern horror, too much gratuitous gruesomeness and not enough of the necessary characterization to make the gore effective and inevitable. The media has not helped; though on occasion it produces superior work, more often it has the depth and range of comic books, which sometimes is a good thing, but when one's vision stays on that plane, one's perspective has a tendency to be troglodytic. I have twice heard genre writers proclaim publicly that 'we guys write the good stuff,' after which trashing master prosodists like Faulkner or Joyce. Anyone who believes such nonsense has delusions of adequacy. There are effects of viewpoint and time compression/expansion that Faulkner achieved that were signally important to me when I wrote my haunted house novels, and anyone who wishes to understand a character's inner voices, whether direct or indirect, had better take a stroll out of the genre aisles of their Barnes & Noble. Remember the characters in Heinlein's *Universe* who thought their space ship was all and everything? Like them, some writers need to go to the control room and look at the illimitable wonders of space.

How did you come to be Editor at *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror*? What's been the most satisfying thing so far about the magazine?

I've done quite a few things at Wildside Press as author and publisher, and am an old friend of its resident genius, John Betancourt. He is a dear gentleman, knowledgeable, splendid to work with, thoroughly honest. For a time, John and I

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tried to acquire *Weird Tales*; it was the one magazine I always thought I'd like to edit, and that's odd since I never wanted to be an editor, publisher, or for that matter, theatre producer. And now I'm all three.

One day I was on the phone with John; I think we were discussing one of the books I published under my own Wildside imprint, *Marvin Kaye's Nth Dimension Books*. John mentioned he was publishing a new horror magazine, and told me its name. I said, only half-serious, "Oh, I would have liked to edit that one." John's immediate reply was, "OK." I was so stunned that it took me a whole week to call back and ask, "By the way, John, does it pay anything?" His answer: "Not if you don't want it to."

There are indeed satisfactions working on HPL's Mag., and there was one drawback, but it was quite minor. When I assumed editorship, the first issue was almost done. I had little control over its contents, and that concerned me because I am fiercely proud of the many anthologies I've edited and did not want what I believe is a recognizable and admired editorial style to be compromised. Fortunately I was delighted and impressed with all but one of the stories in the first issue of HPL. (I tried to get the exception tossed out, but it had already been paid for, and I was told it would go down well with the readers. I think that's true.) The 3 succeeding issues have mostly been shaped and edited by me. There a few holdovers that got crowded out of the first issue, but they are good stories.

Part of the joy of working on HPL is the enthusiastic flood of submissions from writers here and abroad. Have made new friends with writers in England and Scotland, as well as both American coasts.

Tell us about the new magazine you are also editing, Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine.

Sometime early last year, I think it was, John asked me whether I thought it might be a good idea to do a Nero Wolfe Mystery Magazine. My first impulse was to say yes; I'm a major Rex Stout aficionado and have been a member of the Steering Committee of The Wolfe Pack almost from its inception. I helped create the Nero award for best mystery novel, and my most recent anthology from my Wildside imprint is *The Nero Wolfe Files*. After I thought about it, though, I told John that I believed a Sherlock Holmes magazine might be a better bet. There the matter rested for several months, and then John got in touch and told me *Sherlock Holmes Mystery Magazine* was indeed going to happen, and would I like to edit it? Absolutely!

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This, I suspect, will be a more difficult task than HPL. For one thing, the amount of submissions I've received so far is nowhere near the volume that HPL has produced. The first issue is done, and the 2nd issue is beginning to shape up, but I have little in inventory after that, whereas with HPL there's enough to do the next three, possibly four issues before buying anything new. (The quarterly schedule impacts that, of course.) The challenge for SHMM will be to create the kind of mystery magazine I used to like to read back in college: the old *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* with its sleuth-driven stories and reader-solvable puzzles. A classic mystery is analogous to solving logic puzzles in the Dell crossword magazines. Not everyone does them, and fewer know how to create them. When I was judging the annual Nero awards, I discovered to my dismay that a lot of what are now being published as mysteries are crime stories with a certain noir-ish tone: at worst, endless pastiches of Chandler and sometimes Hammett (except that those guys wrote reader-solvables.) I want to encourage SHMM writers to take up the challenge and produce what John Dickson Carr used to call 'the grandest game.'

Should fiction still be classified in terms of genre at all—especially with so much crosspollination going on nowadays between different genres?

Should it? Do we have any real input here? I think not. The megastores will sort books as they choose; as they must. Yes, I'd like to see good genre literature treated as significant in anachronisms like *The New York Times Book Review*, but miracles like that rarely happen. Ironic, too; had Herman Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel* been published as science fiction, which among other things, it is, it may be still languishing as a cult classic instead of helping him win the Nobel Prize.

Is there something as being too original—too cutting edge—in terms of fiction?

Gadfly Daniel, NO! It's the business of the artist to discover and hone the necessary stylistic essentials of each composition he/she assays. If it's too challenging for contemporary critics—and innovation *always is*—then the heart-wounded artist must try to take solace in Nietzsche's great aphorism that 'that which is timely will pass away with the times; that which is untimely is ageless.'

What kinds of stories scare Marvin Kaye?

Not many any more. Certainly nothing ever written by Clive Barker, William P. Blatty, Ira Levin, or Peter Straub. Not even Stephen King, though he's forty times

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the writer they are; some of his non-genre stories are masterful, and even his genre work has splendid descriptions, believable characters, and considerable emotional commitment. He just doesn't scare me, though if I'd come to him when I was young, he probably would have.

Ray Bradbury gave me several chills in his first collection, *Dark Carnival*, as did Charles Beaumont in "Miss Gentilbelle," and Richard Matheson *many* times: he's THE man in modern horror. The most effective Matheson for me is the novel, *Hell House*, which had its impact when I wrote with Parke Godwin *A Cold Blue Light*.

I think the three stories that frightened me more than any others that I've read are H. P. Lovecraft's *The Rats in the Walls*, M. R. James's *Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad*, and E. F. Benson's *The Room in the Tower*.

And the movie that scared me more than any other I've seen, hands down, was Val Lewton's *The Body Snatcher*, which still holds up quite well, as a friend assured me after loaning it to her.

Tell us a bit about your favorite authors, old and new. Who have been seminal influences on your own writing?

That would be an exhaustively long list. I've already mentioned a few: Bradbury's way at the top of the list, but Faulkner's important, and so is Dickens. But don't forget L. Frank Baum .. my first reading craze was somehow finding and reading all of the original Oz books. Not the ones that came after, Ruth Plumly Thompson et. al. They didn't have the same magic.

I could break this down into genres. In fantasy and SF, the ones whose styles and sense of wonder most influenced me (influenced in terms of my own style absorbing lessons) were Bradbury and Fredric Brown. My "Incredible Umbrella" novels were somewhat influenced by the Pratt-deCamp "Incompleat Enchanter" tales, but more so by John Myers Myers's *Silverlock*.

In the mystery field, a genre that I don't read nearly as much as I do fantasy, I have a few favorites: Conan Doyle (pseudonym for Dr. Watson, of course), Rex Stout, Dashiell Hammett, and especially John Dickson Carr, though mostly only when he was writing as Carter Dickson. I also admired Leslie Charteris for The Saint, and belatedly grew fond of James Bond, not so much for the movies as the original, much quieter books. I'd love to be able to write such a tour de force as the great bridge game Bond plays in *Moonraker*.

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Another important writer I could hardly hope to emulate was the masterful Leo Perutz.

Do you have a specific writing ritual for when you want to immerse yourself in the work? Ever suffer from writer's block?

I think it was Phyllis McGinley whose advice I once read and immediately adopted: that whatever helps a writer to get going should be indulged. If you have to sharpen every pencil or polish the windows or whatever, do it as a psychological warm-up, i.e., train yourself in Pavlovian fashion to affect the behaviours that will result in writing. Well, I try ... sometimes walking or traveling, sometimes playing computer games, often listening to music. Sometimes these things work, more often they don't. Once I actually start writing a book, though, I begin to play my music collection (there's a lot of it) in an effort to see whether I'll get through all of it before I'm done, or beat the imposed finish line by completing the book first. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't.

When writing, do you work from an outline? Do you find that working without one gives you more creative freedom?

When I wrote mystery novels, I had extensive charts, not an outline. Since I never found anyone else who worked this way, I taught my method for many years at NYU and was glad of the number of students who sold novels using my technique. But when I write fantasy, I rarely have anything handy except an elliptical scrawl of scene sequence to try to follow. There is often a plan that I sold the novel by to the publisher, but it rarely represents more than half the plot, if that much. Generally I find out what's happening by writing about it. The characters have their say, and the mind keeps playing with the ideas awake and asleep. I remember one book that I finished, turned in, and then had a change of thought concerning the ending. Went back and killed one of the characters who in first draft survived. Never regretted the change, though it surprised my editor.

How do you deal with criticism—good and bad—relating to your writing?

If it's good, of course I'm glad, but it doesn't stay in mind all that long. If it's negative and concerns my fiction, I figure they're entitled to their opinions, so long as what they're saying is correct. If on the other hand a reviewer gets something wrong, I'll write a letter in what Parke Godwin once characterized as Old Testament wrath. Example of latter: a Philadelphia reviewer criticized *A Cold Blue Light* for being "ungrammatical." Now other critics picked up what I was doing: deliberately shifting from past to present tense, sometimes in the same

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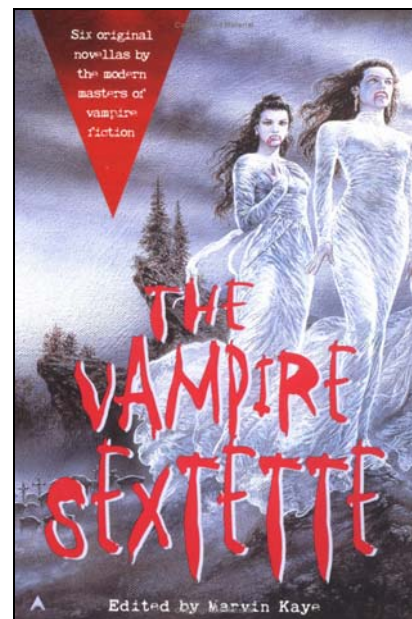
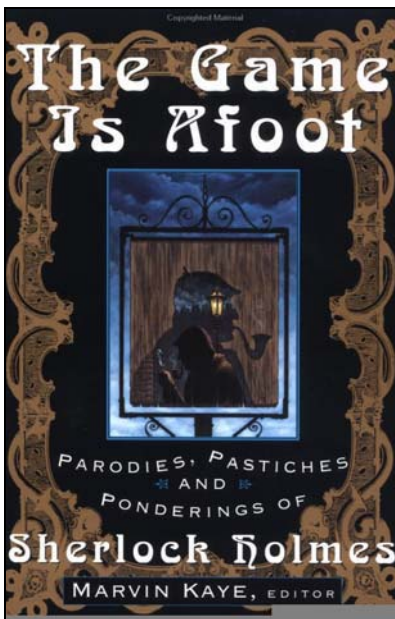
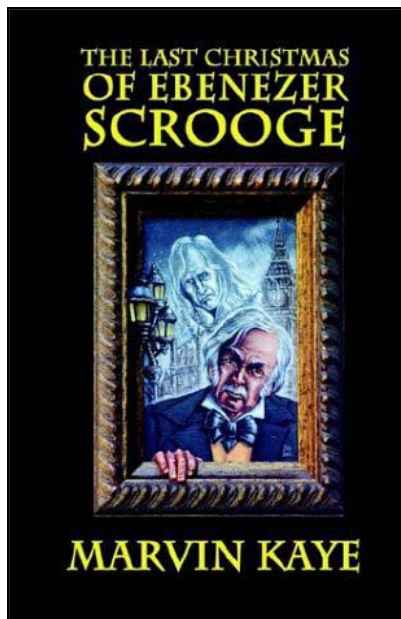
paragraph, to create the effect that the character is slipping in or out of dream state. As the head of a college tutoring lab, I counsel students often about not changing tense, so when I was accused of it with the implication that grammar is something I'm ignorant of, I reacted like the Reluctant Dragon being called a "punk poet."

Please note I always distinguish between critics and reviewers. There are few of the former, all too many of the latter.

My anthologies are another matter when it comes to negative criticism. Fortunately, they rarely draw anything but encomiums.

What would you like your epitaph to read?

Since I don't intend to leave, why should I worry about this?



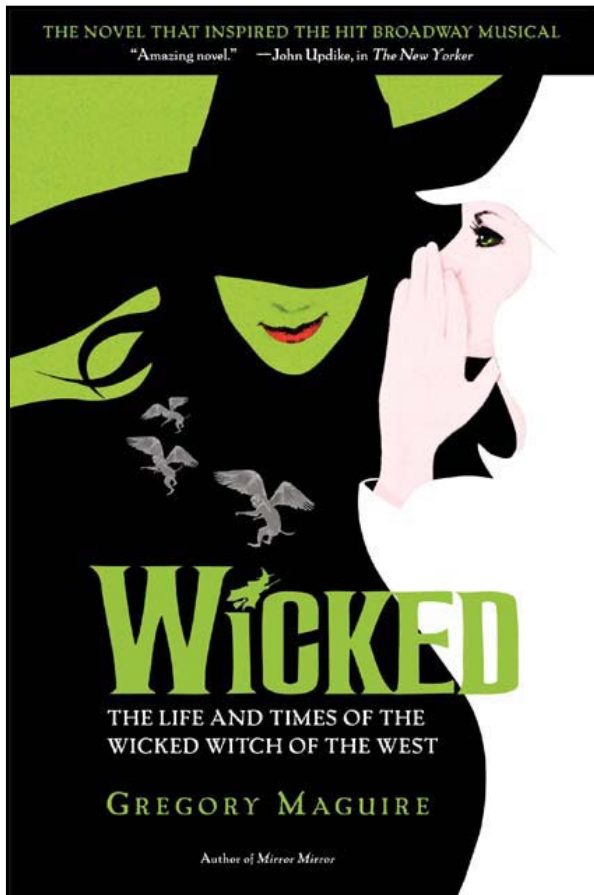
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Gregory Maguire is the author of four novels for adults and more than a dozen novels for children. His adult novels, all published by HarperCollins, are *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister* (1999), *Lost* (2001), and *Mirror Mirror* (2003). For the *Sunday New York Times Book Review* he has published signal reviews of noteworthy fantasies by J. K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, and Maurice Sendak. Maguire received his Ph.D. in English and American Literature at Tufts University in 1990. He has lived abroad in London and Dublin, and now makes his home in Massachusetts.

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THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

Submission Guidelines

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Email: simulacrum@specificworld.com

- Needs: Fiction\Poetry\Artwork—most speculative genres (H/F/SF/MR). (Quiet, gothic horror as opposed to gore and violence.)
- Will look at articles, reviews and interviews on request.
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- All work submitted will also be considered for our Best of the Best print and pdf issue.
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