

SIMULACRUM

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SEPTEMBER 2005

JOHN KAIINE

Get Your First Taste Of His Forthcoming
Novel, *Hollow*, Inside!

SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

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THE EDITOR'S DESK



Hello everyone. Is it Spring? Already?

The trees outside in my garden are just a little confused. They keep sporting new shoots by the day, but the chill in the wind remains, and even the snow is coming down in places, still.

My partner and I have finally settled into a warmer house and it is making the world of difference. The new place gets sun the whole darn day long (when it's shining), and I have to stop myself all the time to not let everything go pear-shaped and just settle in the sunroom with a good book.

And of course, with the new month comes a new issue of *Simulacrum* for all our faithful readers. And my, have we got a special treat for you all.

For those of you familiar with John Kaiine's work, you'll be pleased to find within the pages of this issue an exclusive (yes, EXCLUSIVE, I'm gloating) excerpt from his anticipated new novel, *Hollow*. You'll also come across an excerpt from his first, *Fossil Circus*, as well as a short story, the thoroughly surrealistic *Dolly Sodom*, and an illuminating interview with the author himself. Yes, we thought you might like that. All of it.

Also included are wonderful new original fictions from a selection of authors that some of you may have had the pleasure of reading before, while to others, they are sure to be a great new find.

From me to you this issue and its pages filled with magical, strange, real, unsettling, truthful words. I hope that you enjoy reading them as much as I did, and that they will stay with you, as they still do with me.

-- Lynne Jamneck

DOLLY SODOM

JOHN KAIINE

Dolly Sodom came scene for scene and almost word for word in a dream. It was written in an afternoon whilst listening to *Tubeway Army*.

It is not raining, but that does not matter. Smith leaves the tram and crosses the street. He wears a white trench coat, carries a suitcase. He has no hat. Night has started, the lights have been lit. Detail is bleached out: His shadow lacks substance. He turns a corner, and there before him is *The Years Hotel*.

The door is ajar, always open. He climbs the iron steps and enters.

In the lobby there are cards on a platter on a tall wooden stand. Vellum cards, white, edged in black, bearing the legend **CALL AGAIN. CALL AGAIN.**

"Yes?" There is a man's voice behind him. Smith turns. The Man with the voice wears an old boater; pallid strip of ribbon round the brim.

"Yes?" says the Man.

His mouth flaps, he shifts the suitcase from one hand to the other. Grey folded eyes, dull as dreams. He speaks, wiping fingers to his mouth: "I've a... I've a hankering for regret."

The Man says nothing. Stands there, looking. A bug skits about the light.

Smith cannot swallow. He should turn and walk away, should never have had those old thoughts. And then he remembers. He must ask. Request. "Hair," he says, "I like hair."

"Room eight. Top floor," says the Man.

Smith, toward the stairs.

Somewhere, someone breathes.

When he has foot firm on the bottom step, he throws a fleeting glance round at the Man: Eyes in the shadow of the brim of his hat. Smith tells him, "I'm not proud of what I do."

The Man would laugh, but has forgotten how.

Smith climbs the stairs. The decorative dead haunt the walls: Faded red roses on withered wallpaper. He reaches the first floor, turns down a corridor, passing a door behind which he hears a rustling sound, a voice whispering, confetti in the mouth, repeating the word, "*sorry*" over and over. He hurries on.

On the second floor there is a room in which all that hangs in its wardrobe are flypapers.

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He lingers outside a room, hearing the stroking of sepia photographs. The pornography of nostalgia. The passion for shadows. On the fourth floor he can smell burnt blossoms.

It is rumoured that there is a room up on the seventh, full of moths, where one can spend frail moments wrapped in a silk shroud awaiting the delicate mouths of moths, nibbling... devoured by hours.

The top floor is webby. Dust has shattered mirrors. Clocks have drowned in the dampness. Room eight stands before him.

Smith pulls the door open, steps in. It is a little room of dry plaster walls, there is a bunk, a wireless, a candle on a table, and in one corner there stands the Doll. The door flaps shut behind him. A burnt-out light bulb hangs from the ceiling. He lights a match, and soon there is candlelight burning in an old tin cup.

He hears movement in a room below, pipes rattling, water running. Someone weeps, prays, washing away life with soap.

He takes from the suitcase a stoppered vase full of rain. A stolen puddle. He produces other things also.

He approaches the Doll, crouches before it, will not let himself touch the porcelain smooth face or fragile white hands. It was an early model, almost antique, but then he liked the past, the old thoughts of rain and hair and...

The Doll is four feet in height, the usual perfect face of lips and lashes. The modest pigtail of coarse grey hair. She wears a blue dress, blue as eyes. And beneath, he lifts the hem, the garment of grey. Smith strips her, touching only clothing.

The Doll is naked now in her whiteness, with just the hint of shade in the rounds of her contours, and there, behind, between her legs is the simple aperture, the slot for the coin. Stamped above it, the ancient logo of **RAMPION INC.**, and beneath, the word or command, "**ENJOY.**"

He rummages through his pockets, pulls out a fist of copper pennies. Careful then, behind the Doll, dropping loose change into the slot. The coins clatter, collect internally. Little machineries grind softly, cogs *whir* and *twitter*, her hair begins to grow, coiling out from the hole in her head. The more money installed the more hair grows. He will not look, cannot. His hand shakes, he turns away, unknowingly brushing by her, nudging her into motion. She topples light, from foot to foot. Side to side. Unseen. Forward.

He switches the wireless on. There is the hum of old electricity. A machine warmth and cadmium yellow glow fill the room. He reads at names on the wireless tuner, remembering. "*Brussels, Helsinki, Luxembourg...*" A soft trumpet breaks in through static, and then a piano with crooner crooning, blending a melody. He removes things from the suitcase. Bible pages, torn, stained. A dried daisy chain.

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He cannot hear the Doll as she teeters toward the door, coins rattling heavy inside her, buying the growth of harsh grey silk from her white hollow head.

Smith wants to look, to see her standing there, her hair about her, tumbling to the floor, but he will wait and concentrate on the music until he can wait no more and then he will turn and read from the fragments of *Isaiah* and *Deuteronomy* and he will drape the dead daisies over her eyes and...

The Doll has tottered into the door, nudged it open, continued out. A draft of air snuffing the candle's flame. *She has taken the light with her.* There is only the dim glow of the wireless now. Wax smoke shifting in the gloom.

Turning quickly, Smith sees her hair vanish from view beyond the swinging door—

She has walked out on him.

"No, not again."

He hears his own voice in darkness. The wireless band plays on. He rushes after her.

She has teeter-tottered along the hall to the stairway, and tumbles now, from side to side, weighted with coin, pulled back by sprouting mass of rough grey pigtail. Tumbling down the stairs, foot to foot on the narrow treads.

And here is Smith chasing after her—

Her hair is getting longer, he can see it *growing, pouring*, from her head. Racing down the stairs now, he's reaching out for her, but she's always thirteen or so steps ahead.

The carpet underfoot is crumbling, damp as candy cotton, the banisters rusting away, the walls seem to sweat. He cannot hear the wireless playing anymore, just coins clattering *inside*. Funny, he can't remember climbing up all *these* stairs. There are no hallways, no landings, just a staircase stretching down into darkness as if it has no end.

She does not slow in her tottery descent, but goes faster, an impossible speed. Her hair *skkrittching* out, thin strands of grey like old comic book speedlines. But Smith can't reach her- thirteen or so steps ahead—

He tumbles, headlong, reaching out, deaf to rattle of coin and his own screaming.

No longer *running down*, merely falling down.

Down into darker silence.

Down.

Previously published in *Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex*, Edited by Ellen Datlow, 1996

THE END

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John Kaiine, born 1967, artist, photographer, writer and one-time gravedigger, is the author of metaphysical thriller/horror novel *Fossil Circus*, published by Egerton House Publishing. He is also the author of stories "Dolly Sodom", published in Ellen Datlow's *Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex*, subsequently made into a short film by American film maker Brandon Dexter, and "Chavi Chori", included in the *Ultimate Witch*. "Unlocked" written with Tanith Lee appears in *The Mammoth Book Of New Terror*. Comic work includes *My Closest Friend* illustrated by Dave McKean for A1 and lead strip in the horror comic *Strand* from Trident. His next novel, *Hollow*, will be published by Egerton House in 2006. He lives by the sea with his author wife Tanith Lee and two black and white cats.

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BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

FOSSIL CIRCUS



Found at Amazon.com

HOLLOW



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IN THE GRAYNESS OF TIME

MARK HOWARD JONES

In Chekhov's short story "The Lady With The Dog" I have always been fascinated by the plight of the cuckolded husband and his mysterious eye disease, even though he's only mentioned once. I suppose he's the central character here; though I doubt his disease is something Chekhov would ever have come across, even in decadent Czarist Russia.

I dreamt that I slept through my death and awoke when the trees were proclaiming theirs.

Moscow, 1899

My but it is windy today. The sort of wind that carries snow. I will delay going out into that wind for as long as possible. In front of the grey fence a small boy struggles with his hat and his dog. First one is more troublesome and then the other. Each nail in the fence that he passes marks a day of the misery in which I and my little Anna have become caged. There are many of them.

I have to look away. Oh God, my eyes! The pain is too much. So often now the world disappears behind a series of indistinct veils, one falling in front of the other. The room dissolves before my gaze. I know my sight will go. The doctors have told me this. It is part of the price I have to pay for the coarse excesses of my youth; a price that Anna must also pay.

I can only pray that it will not be too soon. I need to keep the darkness at bay. I need time to help Anna. There must be money to care for her when I am gone. There has to be. I have no confidence that this other one will have honour enough to take her as his wife, to support her and care for her with all the responsibilities and duties that entails. My strength ebbs and flows and I feel helpless; like a child.



My wife seeks to escape me in the most obvious way.

Yet how can I deny her even this most hurtful of betrayals after what I have brought into her life?

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I no longer know what she thinks but I understand why she does what she does. Although at the still heart of my self I do not think I deserve what she is doing to me, for it is as though she had erased our love and counts it as worthless.



We have not made love—for it was love, once—for nearly two years. My doctor forbids it and I forbid myself. Anna says she understands. Her own fear may play a part in that understanding. Our elderly, thick-waisted maid, Katya, navigates around me at a distance as if the space surrounding me is irredeemably polluted. A fixed smile is my only weapon against her.

Only Anna's constant companion is unafraid to confront me directly. It snuffles aggressively against my shoe, scuffing away the shine. It only desists when pushed away sharply. This scuffs my shoe even further and raises a yelp of protest from the animal. Even this display of petty anger exhausts me.



Something has leached out of me, infecting the whole household. Sometimes there is a burning rush inside my head and I want to run to her, to scream at her and put my hands about her pale neck and shake her. Shake her very hard. She refuses to understand that I still love her and that I need to stop her. There is little time left.



For appearance's sake, we attend the theatre together, speak to the right people.

And for her sake we have kept it from her family. I don't know for how much longer my fading strength will allow me to fend off her father's and her brothers' persistent suspicions. Then things will be very bad for her. I couldn't bear that.



My cigars, which Anna hates, are one of my few consolations now. My wife has the maid assiduously air the rooms after I have been smoking. I'm sure that is the reason. I stumble on the stairs and the sudden scent of clean carpet unearths a memory of our first day in this house. Anna, proud of her role as mistress of her own home at last, queen of her own parlour, bustled about in a carousel of ceaseless activity. I laughed to see her so endlessly animated. She grew angry and I grew contrite, for a little while.

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I stand above her. Her hair fans out across the pillow like a huge sail, catching the wind to steer her dreams far away from me; towards him. Her lower lip twitches in sleep. Her soft shadow on the pillow is a mimic. A lonely ivory Christ nestles in the pale hollow of her throat, constantly falling then rising. Her bedtime perfume barely masks the stale smell of her sweat. I am tempted by her fragility to put an end to all this. I close the door softly as I leave her room.



Up here in the attic I feel more at ease. I am sure everyone else does as well.

I have lain here for most of the day. A thick, gellid ooze has begun to seep from me, gathering in puddles on the bare floorboards. So it has begun. Soon it must flow between the cracks and seep through the ceiling below. Into the maid's room. She will be horrified. I do not mean to cause her distress but am now unable to move.



The pain begins again behind my eyes.

Everything fails, everything ends; perhaps I will be gone by the time Anna tires of her game.

THE END

Mark Howard Jones lives in old South Wales (where it rains a lot more than in the New one). His latest chapbook of short stories "Night Country" is available through ProjectPulp.com. He is currently attempting to write a novella-length piece.

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BAD BLOOD

EDWARD MORRIS

Finn Robins, my great friend and mentor, read a lot of stories I had lying around when we first met. 'Bad Blood' was one of his favorites. He actually suggested the title, so for that and many other reasons the story is dedicated to him. 'Bad Blood' was fairly autobiographical, although the protagonist was a conglomeroid of co-workers. After a hard day on the job, I came close to getting in a scrap with three guys thrice my size over the matter of a fake rose. In real life, I just said something caustic and walked away fast. But when I got back to the crib, Tori Amos' "Me and a Gun" was playing on KBOO, and Pat Cadigan's *Patterns* was sitting open on the bed. I thought a lot about what makes people snap, that night, and hunger, and what Neal Asher calls "luck and statistics." This story is the result.

All this over a fake rose. I swear to Christ. The funniest thing was that the cops were out in force because the Wu-Tang Clan was playing at MLK Center and they wanted to get their quota. I have the misfortune of being born white. Therefore, the cops weren't eagle-eyeing me. Comma. Dammit.

All I wanted to do was go home. I hadn't eaten a damn thing since lunch up at Allied Cabinets on 199th. I have an interesting borderline form of diabetes known as hypoglycemia. When I'm in the shop, the older carpenters joke that I'm all right to work with as long as I get fed every half an hour.

That night, the post-shift glucose emergency was so bad that every half-full Coke bottle I saw in the gutter made me curse leaving the house with no money to hit a pop machine for a quick fix.

So I was walking back over the Hawthorne Bridge just after the bars started to close down. My foot kicked something, sounded like something fell out of my pocket.

I am stone blind without my glasses, I gotta tell you. The solder point on the left temple cracked when I was cutting a strip of patina copper up at Allied Cabinets on 199th that day. My other home. I punched out and got a pair of loaner frames, but they looked so god awful Elton John I put a tinted safety shield in front of them and just did without after work.

Anyway, so I bent down to see what the sound was, and it was this rose, right? Cut off at the base, made out of silk or something, had the fake water droplets and

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the whole bit. It was so funny—looking I stuck it in the pocket of my workshirt offhandedly, not paying attention, and forget about it.

Right away off the bridge I heard the yells down around Santorini's and that other little bar where all the big steroid freaks with gold chains and loot falling out of their Tommy Hilfiger assholes like to hang out on the corner after last call and make everybody else as miserable as they are.

At the time I thought nothing of it. I was dressed close enough to them, black slip-on boots and khakis and a nice gray workshirt I got from the off-rack at Mervyn's. Usually it's flannels and jeans for me and Curt Co-bang jokes every time someone is feeling their comic talent bubbling up.

Heh. I had changed in the back room and punched out, left my shop clothes there, and went out and did the same thing those fools were doing now, but at the Triple Nickel and slightly higher on the food chain.

But I walked right through the center of that swilled-up throng. Then this gigantic *thing* with pasty skin, a tiny little mustache that looked like he glued Daddy's shaving scum to his upper lip and called it good, mackin' the Fubu gear (and Italian, at that), said something loud to one of his boys. All of them laughed like the *urukhai* in those Lord of the Rings movies.

Mustache Boy had a close-cropped high-and-tight haircut that made him look even more like an ape, not that that was possible. I couldn't make head or tail of anything those goombah trolls said, thinking only of settling down to a frozen pizza hot out of the oven and maybe a beer or two over "The Re-Run of the King".

Mustache Boy hollered: "FAGGOT." as I was walking away. I looked down at the rose sticking out of my pocket like a boutonniere. I looked him in the eyes, threw it in the gutter and kept going.

Sound carries funny, downtown. Their voices got louder. One of them off in the side-scenes was making some proclamation in a very loud, screamy voice.

Mustache Boy rolled to his feet. They were mumbling back and forth together with that kind of half-speech, half-flock telepathy that told me they were all sheets to the wind. I started to get scared.

I can fight (if you count broken pool cues and cheap shots.) But I'm not that big. And there were five of them. I hugged the wall of the parking garage, looking for a quick kitty-corner to dodge and slip across to ditch the whole setup.

I wasn't going out like that. Not me. Too much to do tomorrow. I scooted under the overhang of the parking garage and doubled back around. Wiping the sweat off my forehead, I fished in my pocket for a Marlboro, pushing aside a folded AUTOCAD printout for some lesbian doctor's kitchen setup in Irvington. *Solid Vermont marble*, I thought madly. My fingers were sticky with birch stain. My vision was starting to get blurry.

I was trying to find my lighter when my knuckles locked. A tree-trunk arm was dragging me back into the shadows of Level One parking, towards the corner, around

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and to the other side of the elevator shaft. I felt the honed point of something cold against my neck.

"You scream 'n we'll fuckin' kill ya, bitch."

"Whoa, whoa, *whoa*—"

WHACK. Mustache Boy's buddy was larger, with a shaven head and a red goatee, wearing a black SECURITY shirt from some pub or another. The bouncer was all up in my face as Mustache Boy frog-marched me towards the elevator.

I could smell garlic, booze and meat on his breath, all blended together in a fine spray. One of his incisors had a gold front. There were red laces in his sneakers.

I realized I was trying to remember all this to tell the cops. That pretty much said it all.

"You guys like it this way. Why you gotta be a little bitch about it? You like it rough? Huh?" WHAP.

I've had bongs that hit harder than him, but they'd gotten me by surprise in the lowest trough of a sugar-crash. I shouldn't have even been outside. Every drop of blood from my split lip hit the pavement in front of me as slowly and perfectly as a Roy Edgerton stroboscopic photo of a drop of milk.

"HSST—" Mustache Boy looked around.

Beyond the shadows, some homeless guy cruised a shopping cart by as loud as a parade.

"Never mind."

The bouncer cranked me full in the face. That time it definitely hurt. I saw a blue-white flash, and felt hard pressure in the forepart of my sinuses.

They began dragging me further into the shadows. They were muttering back and forth. I don't think even *they* knew what they wanted. Then—

Nothing. Just a cold gust of wind.

Thump. Then I was sitting on the concrete, brushing myself off.

I knew a kid, Ryan Jones, in grade school who had *petit mal* epilepsy. When he had a seizure, he'd just come completely come unwrapped, and sit there staring into space. The teachers knew he'd come out of it in a minute, or if he didn't they'd get the School Nurse down there to look him over a bit.

I stood up and shook it out, wondering if Ryan and I had something in common.

Bouncer and Mustache Boy, you see, were gone, daddy, gone. I finally remembered I had my Leatherman and cracked Velcro with the blade up. A defeated, angry sound came out of me. I turned to—

To about forty-five degrees. And then I turned to ice.

The elevator behind me had been standing open the whole time. Leading to it were scuff marks. They could have been from anything. But they weren't.

The elevator in that parking garage is faced in brick on the back, and a good job too. A lot of them are glass now, but I always liked the columnar look of the older ones, the way—

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The way she looked no more than eighteen. If that. All black clothes and whiteface, wrapped in a shiny vinyl trenchcoat bigger than she was, with an Eddie Munster collar. The coat swept out behind her on the floor where she knelt at her work.

She turned around, kneeling there in the elevator, and wrinkled up her nose at me. Her eyes were the purest liquid blue, blue as the streaks in her bangs that hung in that china-oval face done over with some kind of white coverup that had begun to streak off. The streaks in her makeup showed what looked like clear albino skin beneath, full of black veins.

A babybat. A kindergoth. But even from where I stood, I saw the ancient knowledge in her eyes, the terrible strength in her tiny frame. And Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the hunger on that face.

The bouncer had been brought down at a dead run. His head lay at an angle any carpenter could tell you was a clean break. A red-laced Fila sneaker lay sideways in the elevator. Everything perpendicular to her on the floor a torn mass of clothes and what looked like hamburg.

Her head was cocked. Her visage was bright with exertion, but in a different way, like a nova. She was so beautiful, even when her jaw dislocated and her lips pulled back. Yeah, even then. Some kind of mucous silk was working its way out of her hands. It had covered most of Mustache Boy. He wasn't going anywhere.

I saw her throat constricting and contracting, and knew that she could drink me under the table. Her small, delicate nostrils twitched like a coon hound's when she got full wind of me. Just before the elevator door closed, she stuck out her tongue and pronounced sentence,

"Yuck."

When I'm old and gray and full of sleep, I will still hear that one word as I'm drifting off for the last time, in her broken-windchime voice glugged with the fresh kill. I must have started to say something.

"Sssshhh." One black-nailed finger kissed her stained blue lips. There was no polish on the nail.

It was just black, thick and peeling, hooked like an alley cat's claw.

DING.

I knew that I'd never be able to go to therapy for this. But every time I get light-headed and cranky and have to eat something, I thank God for being born with bad blood.

for Finn Robins

THE END

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Edward Morris was born on Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in 1975. After growing up in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, he graduated Temple University's Film program and went out West, eventually landing in Portland, Oregon. He lives and works out of the City of Roses today with his partner, Portland artist/street poet Serena Blossom Appel. Morris' work has appeared in *Interzone*, *This Way Up*, *Southern Gothic* and *Scifantastic*, among many other publications. He has mentored in one way or another with James Grauerholz, Kevin Smith, Paul di Filippo, Jeff VanderMeer and, most recently, the legendary Philip Jose Farmer. He is currently negotiating with Soft Skull Press for publication of his seminal sf trilogy *There Was A Crooked Man*.

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METHODS OF SALVATION

ERIC M. BATTAGLIA

The seed of this idea came from a mirror that my sister gave to me. I didn't really want it, and that notion of having a gift or inheritance you don't want and letting it grow on you gave me the idea for a story. As stories do, this one grew into something else.

Thinking about it years later, Paul realized that the mirror did not, in fact, govern Carlotta's behavior, nor the behavior of her family. It was there, waiting, and there was nothing else to it. A truer heirloom than any of the things passed down by his own relatives, but during his lifetime, it did not command center attention. He sometimes still thought about the day that he moved into the old apartment building, the unit he chose right across from a kindly old lady and her niece.

The movers glared at Paul as they passed him with the oversized wardrobe balanced between them. Even as burly as they were, they were both sweating profusely despite the cool temperature.

Well that is what they're paid for, he said to himself as he stood awkwardly and pointed out where they could set the wardrobe. It wasn't like he could lift the furniture himself anyway, slight of frame as he was. And he couldn't bring any of the items he did not entrust to the movers until they were done. He'd only be in the way, and something might get smashed.

He wondered what anyone would think of the icons and religious effigies he had. They disturbed him, but he was afraid to be rid of them. They were remnants of his grandparents, some of which he'd grown up around. He couldn't just sell them, could barely even think about throwing them away. And if they were left in a closet or in storage, somehow he felt their presence more than if they were just out in the open, the way his grandparents had always had them. Besides, his friends were all scattered about in Chicago, living lives of their own and beyond his sight. They'd never come here, to this unhip neighborhood, this apartment building with six units and three tenants. He'd probably never have guests.

"Hello, you moving in?"

The voice startled him. "What?"

There was a young woman there, olive skin and curled brown locks of hair that draped down over the oversized black loose knit sweater she wore. She looked kind of like a goth, complete with the eyeliner. She smiled and cocked her head, leaning against the door. "You must be Paul, my aunt's been talking about you all morning."

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"Oh, uh, then you must be Carlotta."

She scowled. "Yeah, well I've always hated that name. Sounds too close to ca-ca."

"Oh. Sorry."

She laughed and slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "I've gotten over it, for the most part. I used to have a nickname, but I left it behind in New York when I came back here. Mind if I come in?"

"Uh, sure. I mean, no, I don't mind."

She hitched up her long black skirt and stepped across the threshold in a dramatic manner. Her stockings were striped red black and orange. "Hmm. Carbon copy of our place. What are you doing with the second bedroom?"

She padded over to the far room, Paul following uncomfortably.

"Don't know. Maybe a guest room." He wondered what kind of guest would stay with him.

She popped back out of the second bedroom. "So what do you think of my aunt?"

"She's very nice."

Carlotta giggled. "I bet she was talking your ear off for at least a good hour."

"Forty-five minutes," Paul admitted with a shrug. "But she's very nice."

"Yep, that she is. She let me move in with her about two months ago, still won't let me pitch in on the rent. She says I need to save more," she sighed heavily. "At my age, I should be at nightclubs, trendy restaurants, painting the town red, don't you think?"

"I guess, if that's your thing."

"No, right now, it's really not," she said, waving her hand.

There was a bump and a curse as the movers came in with one of Paul's bookcases.

"Oh, put that over here, please."

"Well, don't let me stop you from your moving," she said. The men were leering at her in an unseemly manner, but she didn't pay them a glance, instead giving Paul one more appraisal. "When you're done, my aunt will be inviting you to have dinner with us, so don't eat anything." She was back in her apartment before he could reply, her black dress slipping past the beads in the hallway and into the antique gloom.

Mrs. Ferlinghetti was a kindly Italian woman whose peppered gray and black hair was tied up into a grandmotherly bun. Her most distinguishing features were her eyes and her ears, because Paul was put in mind of a little mouse, just like his mother had told him he looked like. She had large, surprised eyes that were magnified by the glasses she sometimes wore, though she seemed to prefer going without those. And her ears stood out from her head like a mouse's ears, though she was always pleading for Paul to "speak just a little louder now, dear, I can't hear you."

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When he was coming up with his last box, the oversized Virgin Mary sticking out over the top like an embarrassing relative, Mrs. Ferlinghetti just happened to be in the hallway. She tapped Paul gently and leaned over. "When you're done, come on over. You don't need to knock, we usually like to leave the door open, with so few people living here."

After he'd washed up, Paul went across the hall and slipped through the beads leading into their living room. The furniture had the stuffy quality that he'd come to be familiar with from his grandparents' tastes. It was comforting, in fact. But aside from the plush, velvety chairs and sofa, the ornately patterned wallpaper, and the rich drapery, what impressed him the most was the mirror.

The dark cherry-wood frame was beautifully carved, with impish gargoyles at the corners and vines creeping up the sides. The shimmering glass of the mirror itself had a slight aged tint, but still shone bright silver in places. The silver seemed to wind through like rivers, or barren tree branches. It was the kind of thing Paul never would have expected to find in this world, but might read about in a fairy tale. He stared in fascination until Carlotta tapped a finger on his shoulder.

"When you're done admiring yourself, come and take a look at my own decorative tastes."

While Mrs. Ferlinghetti continued pattering in the kitchen, he followed Carlotta into her room, the notion that this was the first time he'd ever been in an unrelated woman's bedroom tugging at his mind. In here was a completely different atmosphere. The walls were painted mauve, which contrasted sharply with the bright yellow ceiling, and the bed had an actual canopy, with scarlet lace draped over it. There were collages of Victorian images hanging on the walls, morbid constructs.

"Interesting," he said in what he hoped was an appropriately neutral voice.

"I'm a twenty-something teenager, what can I say for myself?" Carlotta shrugged. She looked at him for an uncomfortable moment, and then went to her dresser and pulled a medallion off of the jewelry holder. She draped it over his head. "Here."

The medallion at the end of the leather necklace had the face of a wild satyr on the front of it, his unruly hair and horns forming a kind of frame. Paul wondered why she'd just put this over his neck, and part of him couldn't help but cringe at having this pagan image being worn like the cross he'd long ago stopped wearing. He pulled it off and handed it back.

"Uh, thank you, but . . ."

"Oh please," she said with a wave of her hand, "it's Pan, and you need a little wildness about you. You don't have to wear it, but keep it. I don't want it back."

Mrs. Ferlinghetti broke the awkwardness, much to Paul's relief. "Carlotta, I think you've created your best yet," she shouted from the dining room, where she was setting a pan of sauce on the table.

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Carlotta winked at Paul and slipped past him out of the room. "Of course auntie, that's my thing. I don't do much else, you know."

Paul followed her, taking the opportunity to leave Pan behind on the dresser.

"Don't you believe it Paul," Mrs. Ferlinghetti said. "This girl has talents, she does. Takes after her grandmother, may the woman's soul rest." She cast an odd glance at the mirror in the living room as she said the last bit, and Paul thought he saw her hand make a slight motion over her heart, almost like a blessing but not the same thing.

"Sit. I'm serving. No, sit down." Mrs. Ferlinghetti was insistently bumping Paul into the corner seat, next to Carlotta but facing her as well.

He sat down and began to fiddle with the silverware, then put his napkin on his lap. Seeing that Carlotta's napkin was still on the table, he crumpled his and prepared to put it back on the table, but Mrs. Ferlinghetti stepped between them and began pouring pasta onto his plate, followed by the sauce. He thought he saw Carlotta smirking before he had to dodge an elbow.

When they were all seated and the wine was poured, Mrs. Ferlinghetti raised her glass. "To family, neighbors, friends, and lovers," she said with a wink. Paul blushed again and Carlotta giggled. "May we remain close in life and in death," she finished.

As they ate, Paul felt a burning desire to know what religion this family professed. Though Italian, the crucifixes, statues, and icons of the Catholic were oddly vacant from the dwelling. Yet everything he knew about etiquette chastised him for his curiosity. He spoke of the next safest thing.

"So Carlotta, I understand you are very talented. How so?"

It would have been a cheesy come-on line if it had been from anyone else, and perhaps this is what caused them to burst out in laughter. Paul felt slightly embarrassed at the silliness of the question, until Carlotta spoke.

"My aunt exaggerates. I sang a little bit. Still do, when the mood strikes me, that's why we have no neighbors. Don't worry, I'll try not to disturb your sleep."

"Oh, Carlotta," Mrs. Ferlinghetti said, "You always sell yourself short. What about that high rolling job you had in New York. My Carlotta's done the family proud, Paul. She was important, in the big apple."

"I was an accountant," she said. She dipped her head and arched an eyebrow at Paul. "Some high rolling job. I sang in a goth band on the side. Don't think you would've heard of them."

"Maybe I have," Paul said, although he really didn't think he had.

She shrugged. "Those days are past. I'm in a transition right now."

"Always a transition. That's what life is, transition," said her aunt. "We transition from nothingness to birth, and from birth to death, and our souls transition from death to . . ." Again, she fell silent, and the same sign was made.

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"Well, I suppose so," said Paul. Everybody ate for a while, and he thought some more about Mrs. Ferlinghetti's strange signs and mannerisms.

"So what talents do you have, Paul?" Carlotta was leaning in toward him, all smiles and sly eyes.

"Uh, I don't really have many talents. Not with art, or music, or anything. I'm not very good at math either, so . . . no talents at all, I'd say," he stammered out and gave a cheesy grin. What he'd thought was a clever self-deprecating joke fell flat.

Carlotta leaned back and gave him a cool appraisal. Mrs. Ferlinghetti smiled kindly, like a woman that pities the nice, pitiful young man Paul was.

"Everybody has some skill, Paul, and it's a poor man that denies his own skills," said Mrs. Ferlinghetti.

"Auntie's got wisdom," Carlotta pointed her fork at her aunt and back to Paul.

Paul felt his face flush. "I guess I just don't know what I can do. I read a lot, studied literature, but nothing special. Shakespeare and Milton, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Hemingway. The same as everyone else."

"Maybe you just haven't discovered your talents yet," Carlotta said.

After they'd eaten, Paul excused himself. He needed to use the restroom, and didn't feel comfortable using his host's. He also didn't want to overstay his welcome.

They let him go without comment, but Carlotta slipped away from the table as he got up. He assumed she was bringing her dish to the sink, and said a quick goodbye to her around the corner to the kitchen.

"One other thing, Paul," said Carlotta, bounding back. She held out the Pan pendant to him. Disappointment and amusement seemed to fight for a place in her expression.

"I know when someone is trying to reject a gift I give them," she said, "but I don't like it."

Paul lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry. I would explain, but I think now's not a good time."

Her face softened and she jiggled the pendant in front of him. "You don't need to apologize or explain, you just need to put your arm out, palm up. Here, I'll show you."

She slid forward and grabbed Paul's right arm, pulling it up, then placed the pendant into his hand and closed his fingers around it.

"Wasn't so hard, was it? Now you can go hide it in a drawer so the Blessed Virgin doesn't see." She winked at him.

Mrs. Ferlinghetti approached them. "Ah, Carlotta, you're always forcing things on people. When will you learn that true gifts will make their way to their recipients in due time?"

Paul looked back and forth at the two women in total confusion. There was a strangely conspiratorial look in their faces. It seemed that she was trying to fix him up

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with Carlotta, and her niece was trying to do the same, though in a somewhat forward manner.

"I . . . I'll see you both later. Thank you, and good night."

He retreated to his apartment, fiddling with the lock while the apartment across from him still had the door open. He wondered, if he turned around, would one or both of their faces be peering at him from behind the beads? He didn't look, but his ears burned nonetheless.

Once safely inside, he shoved the pendant into a drawer, then thought about what Carlotta had said. He scowled, and sought out the Virgin Mary, still in her box. After a moment's hesitation, he draped it around her upraised hands. He felt satisfied, not at all as uneasy as he thought he would from such an action.

He was dead tired, too tired for reading, but as he prepared for bed his thoughts remained on Carlotta. He was certain she'd been flirting with him the whole night, but he wasn't sure why. Women didn't commonly demonstrate attraction to Paul. He wondered if the whole thing had been some sort of joke to Carlotta, who was beautiful by anyone's standards.

Long after he flopped onto his bed, Paul was still awake, alternately opening and closed his eyes. He was thinking about getting up and reading after all, when he heard the singing. It sounded almost as powerful as an opera, but then it was also very different, ethereal and wispy. The sound drifted across the room as though coming from everywhere, though he was certain it was from across the hall. There were no discernable words in the melody. He finally began to fall asleep, and at the delirious border of dreams he saw wonders.

Three days later, Paul found himself invited to dinner again. But this time Mrs. Ferlinghetti brought Paul's attention to the mirror. "Take a good long look at it, Paul. What do you see?"

"You and I."

Carlotta giggled in the background.

"What am I supposed to see?"

Carlotta approached, he could see her reflection in the mirror. She draped an arm around him and leaned in closer to his ear than he felt comfortable with. "Just look at the mirror, not the reflection," she whispered. "Ooh and ahh for her, she's an old lady and has some funny ideas sometimes."

He tried to look at the mirror, not into the mirror, but his gaze kept slipping to Carlotta's face. Her delicate and strong features so much like that song she'd been singing for the past three nights, intriguing and haunting. Mrs. Ferlinghetti was slipping away from the two of them, back to her stews and spices.

"You think on it, Paul. It'll come to you," she said with a sly smile as she moved into the kitchen.

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Carlotta did not let him go, looking into the reflection of his eyes in the mirror. The effect was uncanny. He felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck and wondered if she knew he was this unnerved. He stared at the mirror, the frame, the silvery glass surface, with its barely visible network of dark veins underneath, and the illusion of a mist on the surface.

He gasped when he thought he saw something move in the mist, and Carlotta giggled, breaking away from him. The effect was broken, and he saw no more mist, no more veins beneath that silvery surface. Just dust and shadows.

"I think," said Carlotta as she pulled him away from the mirror, "that my dear auntie has been meddling in my business again."

He turned to face her, his mind trying to sort through the confusion of what he thought he saw and Carlotta's flirtation. "How's she meddling?"

She pulled him closer in a mock dance move. "You haven't noticed she's trying to set us up?" She let go and sidestepped around him, forcing him to turn as she danced a circle around him.

"I suppose I have noticed. Are we supposed to do something?"

She frowned and stopped dancing. "You are slow to catch onto these things, aren't you, Paul?"

"Uh, yeah. I never . . . I never actually dated before."

He was saved by Mrs. Ferlinghetti's reentry into the room with the first pot.

"Auntie, you should have called me," Carlotta admonished as she raced to take the pot from her aunt. "Sit down, please, let me get the rest."

Paul jumped into action and helped to bring in the food.

Dinner that night was chicken vesuvio. Carlotta seemed to do her best to pretend Paul wasn't there. They ate in silence until Mrs. Ferlinghetti spoke up.

"Paul, do your parents live in Chicago?"

"Actually," he wiped his mouth and swallowed his food, "They died when I was younger. It's not a touchy subject, don't worry. My father was an amateur pilot, took my mother out for a romantic weekend, and that was that. My grandparents raised me after that."

"Well, they're good people, I'm sure."

"They were. They both died, actually very close to one another. I lived with them up until now."

Carlotta stopped eating and watched him in silence.

"Well, anyway, it was their time," he said.

"Were they very religious Catholics?" Mrs. Ferlinghetti asked.

"Yes. Um, they were pretty religious. The uh, statues I brought up belonged to them. Sort of like heirlooms."

"I bet they kept you in the church habit?"

"I . . . pray alone." He noticed Carlotta's eyes on him again.

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Mrs. Ferlinghetti set down her fork and leaned back in her chair, steeping her hands. "I remember, people used to stream to church every Sunday. But the church has changed, hasn't it? Well, you're too young to remember."

"My grandparents reminded me all the time."

"Did they? They probably remember the old ways. I bet they believe in good and evil, don't they?"

"Well, who doesn't?"

"Oh, I don't mean good and evil in the material, human activity sense. I mean evil spirits and a benevolent force. God and the devil. Eternal damnation and the sole path to salvation."

Paul raised his eyebrows. This conversation was getting a bit much for him, and Carlotta's moody silence was disconcerting.

"Well, to be honest," he said, setting his fork down and glancing toward the door, "I never paid much attention to the catechism. Just mulled through."

Carlotta looked up and with an innocently blank face, said "I would have taken you for a holy roller myself."

Paul gave her a hurt look, but she didn't flinch.

Mrs. Ferlinghetti patted her niece's arm. "Sometimes my niece can say things that come off worse than they were meant to be."

"Auntie, seriously, he's got his beliefs and that's fine. If we kept ourselves to ourselves, things would be better off."

"Excuse me, please." Paul said as he stood up. His chest was tight and he could feel his meal coming up on him.

He didn't hear their words as he left the apartment. He didn't lock his door behind him, just went straight into his bedroom and huddled on bed, praying he wouldn't throw up, praying, no, begging that the thought tugging at the corner of his mind would just go away.

It did go away, slowly, and the door to his apartment opened. He didn't move from his position, too weak to move, too weak to cry out against this new intrusion, but then Carlotta was there, standing over him.

"Paul?"

He sat up, his eyes on her feet. "I'm fine, thanks. I don't think I want visitors."

She put a finger under his chin and lifted his face up, forcing him to meet her eyes. She looked at him like a doctor diagnosing a patient.

"I can't go without saying I'm sorry, Paul. And I think it's time we stopped playing games." She took a deep breath, looking away for a second, but then her eyes flashed back. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Paul felt like a child before her. He didn't understand what was happening, but he wasn't comfortable with it. He wanted to reassert himself somehow, he wasn't sure how.

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"I don't think we should talk about it tomorrow. Listen, Carlotta, you and your aunt have both been very nice to me, but I'm not . . . I'm . . ."

"Not a part of our family, you mean." She smiled briefly. "Yeah, I know. You've lost your family and auntie likes to collect strays. So I'll let you have some space, but remember what my aunt said about gifts."

"In due time, then," he said, after she'd left the room.

Her reply was the click of his front door.

Paul avoided them both for weeks. Just as he was getting used to the routine of peering through his peephole for any sign of life in the open apartment across from him before leaving, everything changed.

He was just returning home late one afternoon, his dry cleaning in one hand and a gallon of milk in the other, when he saw the ambulance down the block. It was parked directly in front of his building. He paused for just a moment and went on. The ambulance pulled away before he got there.

There was nobody else around. He opened the front door and went upstairs. He heard the beads rustle behind him as he was entering his apartment. When he turned around, nobody was there, and there were no sounds at all coming from Mrs. Ferlinghetti's apartment.

He put everything away and went back to the door. He was tired of his alienation from them and decided to end it by asking if they knew what the ambulance was for.

"Hello?" He called as he rapped on the doorsill.

Nobody answered, which was strange, because although they liked to leave the door wide open when they were home, the door closed if they were both out. He heard something else rustle inside the apartment, and so he ventured to step just past the beads. The apartment was still and draped in the shadows of the late afternoon. Something fluttered at the corner of his eye and he turned around, just a little bit startled. There was nothing but his reflection in the mirror.

He stared at himself for a moment. The mirror reflected less in the gloom, but gave off a diffused sort of light. He squinted, looking carefully at himself, because he didn't seem substantial here. His reflection seemed like it were peering back out of a glass window at night, just like on the train. And what was moving behind him?

Again he whirled around, but there was nothing. Paul felt his skin prickling. He was intruding here, and neither of them would appreciate that. On his way out, he decided not to close their door. They probably left it for a reason. He decided that he would leave his own door open, so he could be alerted when they arrived or if anyone other than his neighbors were to go into their apartment.

He was reading in his living room when he felt a presence. He looked up just as Carlotta knocked gently on his door, and he jumped slightly.

"Hi, uh, how long were you there?" he quickly stood up.

"Just a few seconds," she said, her voice cracking.

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He noticed that her eyes were red and she lacked the usual enthusiasm he'd seen her with. Remembering the ambulance, he realized that the worst had happened.

"Your aunt?"

"She's dead." She took a deep breath. "She was napping, in her chair, said she felt weak. I stepped out, and when I came back, her eyes were open but she wasn't there anymore."

Paul didn't know what he could say. He'd lost plenty of loved ones, but never had the need to console anyone else. The only words of consolation he'd ever heard were about heavenly rewards and things that he didn't think Carlotta would care to hear.

"Can I stay with you tonight?" she asked. "I can't stay in the apartment just yet. It doesn't feel right."

"I was in there, just for a moment, looking for you," he said.

She didn't seem offended or bothered by that, but simply gave him a sad smile.

"Then you know what I'm talking about," she said.

"Yes, you can stay with me. My couch has a bed in it."

She thanked him and went to get some things. When she returned, she shut the door to her aunt's apartment.

He cooked a modest dinner and they ate in silence. They turned the television on because Carlotta wasn't in the mood to talk and they needed something to make noise in the background. Paul wasn't interested in the reality TV show that played in the background, and he sat in a far corner trying to read. But his mind was on the woman sitting on his couch, and the pain she might be feeling now.

When he heard the television click off, he looked up. Carlotta sat on the couch at one end, her legs tucked up under her. She was facing him, but didn't look at him.

"I'm going to tell you a story," she said.

He closed his book.

"There was a man once, who was deeply religious but also a student of the occult. His studies brought him into the society of strange men, some of them were powerful, some not, but they all seemed to seek some form of power. This man only sought understanding, because there was something he just couldn't grasp about his faith.

"The problem was hell. He was a woodcarver and lived in a time and place where good men were sometimes forced to do bad things. He himself had been party to many crimes, which he couldn't confess, because, though they couldn't prove it, the priests of his town were selling confessions to the police. It was common knowledge, and he wasn't bothered by the betrayal as much as he was disturbed at the choice that lay before him. To face justice and see his entire family ruined, or to face an eternity in hell.

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"He sought a way out. Eventually, he even lost his own faith, coming to believe that the human soul is an aberration, cattle for the evil forces that govern this world. He believed that the way to salvation was too narrow for him, and he worried about the souls of his family as well. So he created his own salvation.

"There are material items that can draw spirits physically, and become like a gateway that protects the soul. A person can build such a talisman and their spirit can dive within for all eternity, living in their own piece of heaven even long after the object has been destroyed by time. The soul has no sense of boundaries, and under the right circumstances can turn any material thing into heaven, just like we've done with our bodies. Crystals, silver, mirrors, these things can call souls into them and hold them in."

"Your aunt's mirror."

"My mirror now. That man was a distance ancestor, and the mirror is his handiwork. It took half his lifetime to create, and the secret of it has been passed down through his family and through families that married into his. With time, it passed through a number of families with no regard to family name or bloodline, because not everyone approved of this sort of heaven. It was kept a secret from most family members, and passed down to those who would require it or felt attracted to it."

She tugged at her hair and looked up at him, then back down. It seemed like she was afraid of his reaction. "I asked to stay here with you tonight, because I was afraid my aunt's spirit hadn't found it's way into the mirror yet. And I was afraid that maybe it was all a lie."

Paul didn't know how to react. The story should have seemed ridiculous, but Carlotta's brief description of her ancestor's theology resonated with him.

"Paul, do you think I'm lying?" She waited for an answer.

"No. No, it's just, I'd say it's all so strange, but . . ."

"Things might be making more sense now. Would you want to know what we saw in you?"

He nodded.

"There have been so many beliefs in the world, so many notions about death and life. Sometimes there are people born within a belief who don't belong there, just like some people are born within a family of strangers."

"I can't just give up everything I believe in."

"You've been trying to though, haven't you?"

He stood up and walked to the window, then back.

"Sorry."

"No," he said and stopped pacing. "You're right, I've been trying to, but I can't get away from this feeling . . ."

"There are a lot of ways to heaven, Paul. And there are a lot of people who deserve it. Listen, I don't believe in everything some guy hundreds of years ago

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believed in, but I believe in what he's done about it. I don't even know if I believe in God, but I do believe in life after death, because of things I've seen myself. And I've already made my choice, because I'm afraid the alternative is that I'll be withering away, invisible to the world and screaming into deaf ears long after my body's gone to dust."

Paul clutched at his head. "I don't know what I can believe. I've been around believers all my life, and I don't know where they get the conviction."

"Would you like to see the mirror?" She stood up.

"Your aunt . . ."

She motioned him over with her hand. "Come on, we both need to see this."

"See what?" He asked as he let her take his hand and lead him across the hall.

"Proof." She unlocked the door and they went into the dark apartment. She turned on a small lamp that only lit up part of the room. Paul felt a chill run over him.

"I don't know if my aunt is here or not, but I could see her, if I tried. It's like seeing something out of the corner of your eye, or knowing someone is behind you."

"When I was here earlier, I think I saw her," he said.

Carlotta took his hand again. They stood side by side as they had the week before, looking into their fading reflections and then past them, into the tarnished wilderness behind the misty glass. Carlotta wrapped her arm around Paul and he did the same, and for the first time he felt natural about it, and understood how much he'd truly been robbed of. When he saw the shades, moving through a misty forest of silver trees in a world unlike any he'd ever seen before, he smiled. He felt Carlotta tighten her arms around him, and for once, felt at ease.

THE END

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SILVER OR BLUE IS THE LIGHT OF MY LOVE

ALEXANDER ZELENYJ

His short story, *Silver or Blue is the Light of My Love*, was inspired by his love of the inherent boundlessness and romance of fantastic fiction. This, and the fact that the melancholy image of a homeless caravan of space-faring creatures drifting in the vacuum between stars wouldn't leave him alone until he wrote about them.

The stars reminded her of eyes.

She'd told him that a thousand times but let him drag her out onto the sward anyways, despite her feeling of being watched. Come on, Maria, his words and the excitedly plaintive tone in which he'd beseech her would implore: Just come on. Tonight it'll be different. Tonight you'll think it's beautiful.

Out on his long backyard lawn they walked arm in arm, surrounded by the whisperings of life, the well-manicured garden rows of dahlias and lilacs and white roses like dusty moths bending all one way in perfect choreography to the urges of the breeze. Stopping their slow circuit around the grounds when they'd reach the stone fountain with its floating water lilies like some network of connected landing pads for thirsty insects. And his familiar words, Water lilies represent innocence, and stars that have fallen from the sky. That's what ancient peoples believed. And he'd hear the romance in his own voice as if he believed it, too, awing him in his child-like ecstasy while they braved mosquito clouds and other fluttering creatures attracted to their perfume.

Come on, Maria. This time it'll be different. This time you'll think it's beautiful.

But she'd never stopped seeing beauty in night skies, he knew, not really. He saw the way she often couldn't stop her eyes from drifting upwards on their own, as if magnetized by some lunar pull or other celestial tugging. It was only the look of ache the gesture filled her with that always returned her eyes to the ground. He'd point northwards and tell her to look for the big bear or he'd draw invisible lines between shimmering specks and claim to have drawn warriors and archers for her. But she only averted her eyes after a moment, as if the picture was too bright to stare at headlong. She'd look at her fingers making entwined spiders before her face or at the close-up cool look of jagged grass blades when she'd turn head away from his pointing finger and towards the lawn. The lawn's blue under the moonlight, she told him once, to which he answered no, the moonlight paints everything silver. She didn't see it that way but held her peace. They were always arguing gently about where they liked to look for peace, about the best places to search for it. He toured his gardens with eyes for above. She watched the ground rather than the sky, enjoying

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the fragrance of flowers with her eyes closed, smelling but rarely taking in visually the wild beauty of the large pale blossoms of lilies and white roses like idols erected to the moon.

I'm going to be an astronomer: He'd shared that with her on a night like so many others and felt an elation he only recalled having experienced before when he was a child. Ever since I met you, was the reason he gave for his decision, as he swept the night sky with his hands. She'd turned something in him and now he pursued a deeper understanding of the stars. Before her, he'd only half-listened to the world around him, drifting through his days as always. But after her, after Maria in his days like some newly discovered element, he'd begun to feel the blood coursing through his veins, the hammering in his chest and temples, the feel of the grass under his bare feet as he laid back and let the night sky consume him like a small insect into the mouth of the universe.

He often wondered at her gentle evasiveness, her side-stepping of his questions when they turned to matters of his new romance. He wanted to know about her quiet reservation, it made no sense to him and he'd always believed she was the only thing that he could really make sense of. What was wrong with the sky, Maria, he always wanted to ask her but only rarely did because he didn't like making her uncomfortable. Why always watch your feet shuffling through the daytime when every once in a while at least it might be a nice change and a wonderful sight to watch upstairs after dusk fell?

The stars remind me of eyes, Robert, she'd told him before. I know it's weird. I just don't like them. I'm sorry. I truly am.

But it wasn't reason enough, he thought. He'd asked her two very important questions the night he'd bent his knee on the backyard lawn and held the glittering ring up in the uncertain light, like a gift of rock borrowed from the moon and offered to her. Would she marry him? To which she responded that of course she would, how could she not? And then he'd asked her also whether she was okay with his dedicated academic pursuits, because it wasn't only him, was it, but she really did feel some strange kind of discomfort whenever he introduced one of his favourite subjects? He'd watched her face closely that night and saw her old timid routine: The lowering of her beautiful eyes like ocean water-filled ovals, the shaking of her head and the puckering of her narrow lips into a mock-confused look of 'what do you mean?' while her fragile fingers drew nervous invisible designs in her lap.

It was in this moment of their happiness that he'd reminded her of her strange powers over him: Ever since I met you, Maria, that's when I felt changed. School stopped being just a campus of buildings for me to drift through as fast as possible before I could get home and forget about my day. You were the clear, distinct beginning of something. When I think of my life, I think of it in terms of pre- and post-you. My era of Maria. Suddenly I felt something wake up inside me and suddenly I couldn't get enough of sky-watching all the time. The library became my good friend

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because suddenly textbooks weren't enough and I needed to know more about what I was studying. It was as if I was hungry, so hungry to know more, about everything, all my science classes, and astronomy, my god, astronomy. I've always loved the stars, since I was very young, what little boy doesn't? But it was as if I never really saw them, I mean, really saw them. Until you. You put romance up there for me. Upstairs, the sky. Thank you for that, Maria. Thank you so much.

He always gave her all of himself and so how could she not do the same for him? He hurt at her silence, the awkward loaded quiet he knew well from his earlier conversations with her about certain subjects. Still, he was happy, though, the most content he could ever recall being. They would be together forever, he knew, and so what if Maria still seemed as though she was holding something from him, not relenting to the little bit of turmoil he glimpsed in her softly disturbed features again that evening and opening herself to him. Everyone was entitled to their secrets. It was just that he felt like an explorer nowadays, always needing to decode the solution to this problem or situation or decipher that puzzle. She knew how much it would mean to him if she shared in his exuberance for roaming the sky with a telescopic eye. But she was also the most intriguing puzzle he'd ever encountered, and he enjoyed her mystery, like a promise of future revelation. So what if it was the single thing she'd never given him, an explanation of what it was exactly in the stars that made her nervous and sad. She'd given him so much more.

That night in bed together, he couldn't sleep. His excitement kept him wakeful, and something else, too. A feeling of premonition, maybe, or some inkling of momentous things to come. He smiled into his pillow: He was content. She'd said yes and they'd be married. He was content with his small place in the universe. He was happy being as little as a bug while feeling as vast as the galaxy with all of its combined constellations. A moment passed during his sleeplessness when he chanced to turn over and glimpsed Maria's profile in the wan light. Her eyes were open, and held a sombre look as she watched the slashes of moonlight filtering through the blinds. He followed her stare, saw the horizon lines of lunar glow across the bedroom carpet. He wanted to say something to her, some lovey dovey words or maybe offer her a cuddle beneath the sheets, but didn't. It came to him unbidden, a past snippet of conversation between them: The moon makes the grass blue, Maria's voice whispered from another late night. And his answering whisper was there, too: No, it paints the grass silver.

He stared over Maria's shoulder to the moonlight stretching across the bedroom carpet, wondering at the sad colour she sometimes painted the world with.

"Maria, I love you. You know this." It was how he started things when he feared he'd done something wrong, when he knew his words had been hurtful or annoying to her. She watched him as closely as she was able, the discomfited look on her face telling him that her stomach was probably knotting and churning nervously, which it did

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whenever she wore this struggling expression. But she loved him, too, deeply, and told him so, seeing fear flicker over his features briefly: Would she tell him something else tonight which he wouldn't be able to handle, something between them that she thought wasn't going right anymore? It was the direction his paranoia veered his thoughts during rare nervous moments between them. He watched her, daring to rub her upper arm gently the way she liked only when he saw her mask of confidence falter and leak through a little of her fear, too.

She led them out towards the centre of the backyard lawn the way she never did, and the act itself made him more frightened still. What was happening that their roles were suddenly all topsy-turvy? Why was she guiding them away from the shelter of the semi-enclosed patio where she always preferred to linger if they had to stay outdoors at all?

She sat down on the lawn and told him to park himself beside her. She stroked his arm in return and said nothing for a long while. She was gathering herself but courage was a long ways off still, he could tell, and she only was able to tell him how much she cared for him. Then she reminded him how happy he made her, and how happy he'd made her when he'd offered her the ring and the question of spending her life with him. He nodded, smiling, relaxed only a little because he sensed her incredible tension like some live electrical current between them on the chilly air.

The next breadth of silence between them lasted several minutes and they took to vandalizing the lawn, tearing out grass tufts and twirling them away in their fingers. They watched them falling like helicopter blades through the uncertain light. She shrieked playfully when she felt the night crawler she'd caught up with one handful of grass and sent it whirling through the night away from them. They chuckled softly and talked a while about bugs, good and bad, agreeing that night crawlers fell on the former side despite their slimy feel, on the basis that they didn't bite. They weren't out to get you like some many-legged crawlers.

He found himself looking up, a little nervously, figuring it was a good way to begin the inevitable. She only turned to a dandelion she'd plucked and was twirling in her fingers. He said hesitantly, "Sliver moon tonight. But it's so bright." Not yet knowing how uncannily perfect a segue it was.

"Okay," she told him, letting the flower fall and cupping her hands around his face while she braved his wide stare. "I've wanted to tell you. Robert, I've wanted to tell you from the first day we met. But I couldn't. But I know that I have to."

He watched her watch him closely. The night bugs made no noise around them. Somewhere, something touched him, a tiny probing antennae or an exploring spider leg on a part of his body he was too dislocated from to ascertain where. He didn't move and she watched him without blinking her eyes. They felt very close on the lawn, their faces painted silver or blue.

In a whisper of cool breath, she told him.

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The sky made them feel their tiny size and they didn't know it but they both were thinking about the ants moving through the grass about them.

I feel that microscopic, he was thinking as he envisioned ant lines filing through the jungle world of the lawn. I like the thought of ants in this grass, were her thoughts. The star field overhead as they lied on their backs on the A.M. lawn made them dizzy as it always did. This time, though, it was a different picture for them both. He thought he'd known wonder before but now his past small romance with the sky was finished and the new feeling in him was a love which sent his senses reeling. Now nothing would be the same for him ever again. He only hoped he would be able to solve the new puzzle confronting him before his time in the world was due: whether he was truly okay with this revelation. Or if maybe he would have preferred living without it like a wondrous shroud or curse hanging over him every day and night especially.

When she looked up now she saw the shimmering dots differently, too. They're all eyes, she still thought to herself, but her new sense of relief as she watched their winkings made her dizzy, too. She told him this, and told him also how she felt as if this was the first night of her long life that she could actually breathe deeply of the air. It was as if a huge worrying weight had lifted from her and now she could look anywhere she dared without regret or guilt dragging her eyes to the ground before her, always to the ground she walked on. She felt that she now owned free eyes, and with them she turned to see the new man close beside her on the grass.

"Do you still love me?" and her words drifted like breeze onto the stillness of the air.

"Of course," was his answer and he sounded certain of it, though he kept his eyes trained upwards. They'd remain there forever now, it seemed to him. But he thought that maybe he was okay with this thing, too.

They lay there for a while saying nothing and smelling the night. Crickets played for them again and she pointed northwards and said, "There's a bear right there. In the north."

To which he responded by telling her there was an archer ever taking aim at that animal. It was an eternal struggle, and they chuckled lightly because it sounded so deep and important, the words.

"Should we maybe wait for a shooting star?" she wondered aloud for him. "To make a wish on?"

And he answered her, "Will you show me again, Maria? Please? I need to see again."

She only watched the great bear, concentrating on his unfilled skeleton of shimmering joints. But she was nodding, and she was preparing herself anew. It was a thing she'd known she would have to do some day. Some night, and here it had arrived for them. She'd show him whenever he asked, she decided. She waited while

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the breeze floated the wisps of cloud cover from the face of the sliver moon. She stood gingerly, feeling dizzy than ever, while he looked on, sitting up and crossing his legs, hands in lap and folded as if in prayer, watching. He watched her take turns fidgeting and then growing calm, twitching her hands and breathing evenly. He was vigilant in his wait. He was used to this. One day he would be an astronomer and he'd watch the skies with smarter eyes. Already his eyes were more educated, after tonight. He was a child of the stars and the romance burned in him as it always did, and with it filling him up near to bursting, he told her again that he loved her.

"I love you," he said to her, and watched her nod down at him.

He watched her a long time without speaking. He watched the girl with the hair he liked so, long and full with bounce where its blonde ends curled towards her cheeks and framed her face prettily; with the thin diaphanous lips so good for kissing him under any sky, and the deepest eyes for swimming in that he'd ever found in any woman's face. It was the girl he'd wanted desperately in her summer dresses and sandals, sitting near to him always in the park while he waited for his bus to take him to school. This was her, the girl whose first words to him had been 'You look kind. I hear that's hard to find.'

They'd found each other five years ago and tonight five years ago no longer seemed the lifetime it once had. Tonight she was the same girl he called his secret treasure, the thing which had turned his eyes upwards without ever even having urged him to do so. Because what else could it have been, that had turned him so upside down and all around different in his way of seeing things and looking to new places for peace in his mind? What else that had thrown him headlong into embracing the mystery of night skies and dragging her helpless with him because, try as she had, she couldn't help herself, either. She loved him, too. He was lucky that way.

He watched her closely now, as mesmerized with her every curve and nuance as he'd ever been. He remembered the way she bounced up into the gaping door of the bus and the way he'd followed entranced. He recalled loving her voice as she talked to him about the things that she liked and those that she didn't in the world. He remembered perfectly the taste of her lips their first night of kissing, on this backyard lawn of course: Icy, like mint, but deeper a chill and more long-lasting. It lingered in his mouth forever, her taste.

He motioned for her to turn so that he could get a closer look at her new profile. She obeyed, turning on the air silently, her body flowing outwards on all sides. Like flower petals, were his first thoughts, and then, lilies on the air, and she shimmered in the moon glow and shivered his spine with her un-guessed beauty. She finished her turn, pirouetting on the air inches above the jagged plain of lawn until she faced him again. She was ephemeral, a glimmering ghost-light on the air. She glowed a wan translucent jelly fish luminescence which lit a halo around her, silencing the crickets into awe and the mosquitoes into static clouds orbiting enchanted around her.

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She drifted a tendril on the air towards him, beckoning. It was an invitation he wasn't yet prepared for, and he only smiled a smile which told her how beautiful she was to him. Her proffered tendril withdrew and joined the others, and they coiled around one another in something like silent ecstasy while her heart or thoughts or some other humming thing inside her hummed a soothing melody impressing the insect musicians all around.

The eyes of the woman he loved were nowhere to be readily seen yet they looked out at him still. He felt their touch like water warming his face, and guessed that she watched him from every inch of her.

He strained his eyes and thought for a moment that he could see through her the vague outline of the trees bordering the yard. But then he blinked and there was only her undulating body, her mass of gently roiling softness like a sea shore magnetized by moonlight and obeying its celestial duties. There was this, and of course her glow which burned from inside her and her waving parts, arms or legs or hands or hair or maybe he saw it all there or maybe none at all, these things infinitely more beautiful and less clumsy than human appendages. Mostly, he saw warmth wherever he looked, and felt it on his skin where he sat in reverence on the grass.

She hummed and he felt it in his throat, it was a kiss gentling his neck skin and ruffling through his hair and cupping itself like her warm hands around his child's face of wonder. It was a living engine revving some tuneful song in him and he couldn't help but smile away at the light dancing before him.

Soon he was ready, and stood to meet her all over again.

She saw his eyes and what they held, and reached out for him.

He withdrew, suddenly hesitant, but only for a moment while he asked the question which had just occurred to him. "How many were there? Are there?"

He felt her answer as a warm pulse into his chest. *Many. There were many, and I hope there are still many.*

He looked to her with his new eyes and felt grateful for her all over again. Like the first day she'd kissed him back and tingled his lips forever more. Like the night she'd wept tears like his and said yes to his proposal of glittering ring beneath the moon. Like tonight when she'd opened herself bravely for him to see and either cry or laugh with horror and terror or glee and wonderment.

He pictured the long ragged line of them drifting through the void between the stars, a lonely trip through a lonely place if it wasn't for the company of each other, those survivors of a dying ancient breed. Those old travellers, those changers of shape and colour and texture and language and feelings. He saw their formation the way he was certain they'd looked, a caravan loping through the dark spaces between constellations, looking with longing stare at the shimmering specks all around them, wondering if any could be called home again. A caravan of giant pale flowers aglow with moon glow, drifting down from their home of a thousand years when mankind reached at last its goal of moon-walking and planting dogs and flags bearing

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sometimes sickles and sometimes stripes and stars in bright yellows and reds. Evicted again and the old journey taken up once more, crater dust drifting from each member of their straggling line and off into the cold of space as they bid another home goodbye.

Except for her. His curious girl, always looking upwards at the promise of the blue and green orb floating there before her. Terribly fearful but slipping away besides, because the pull had been that strong and gravity like that can't be ignored. Leaving her family to wander without her, losing them forever with no hope of seeing their comfortable colour burning like a line of drifting lanterns in space. He thought of her down turned eyes and ached for her.

He was more grateful than he'd ever been and he said for the millionth time, "I love you." And she hummed or murmured and danced or whirled on the air and he felt her answer like a pulse in his chest and temples once again. And it made him peaceful. And then he said, "You look beautiful all coloured in blue," with a gesture towards the sliver moon hanging between the clouds.

In his chest, in his thoughts, he heard her answer: *You are beautiful coloured in silver. You look like forever.*

Later on that night saw Robert and Maria walking across the lawn with linked hands towards the house. Her hair bounced as she walked, and there was a skip in his step like he once walked with. They didn't talk because they were tired and just then there wasn't very much to say. They were looking forward to sleep. They felt at peace.

As they were walking, and as they lied down and slept, the crickets took up their songs again. And they carried their tunes all through the deep morning until the sky burned red and overwhelming in the east. And they played fervently, with something like renewed gusto, as if they were paying tribute to some beautiful thing that only they knew lived with them in the night.

THE END

Alexander Zelenyj's work has appeared in a variety of publications, including *Front & Centre Magazine*, *Cerebral Catalyst*, *Whispers of Wickedness*, *Freefall*, *Crossroads Magic*, and *The Lightning Journal*, and anthologies such as *Windsor Salt*, *The Sands of Time*, and forthcoming in *Revelation: Volume 2*. He has recently received multiple grants from the Ontario Arts Council under recommendation of Coach House Books, *Descant Magazine*, and *Kiss Machine Magazine* towards two separate novels-in-progress. He is currently a regular fiction columnist for *Upfront Magazine*, an arts and culture periodical for which he also writes book reviews. Some of his recent achievements include having three stories published in three consecutive issues of

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Revelation Magazine, and short fiction selected for publication in forthcoming issues of *Worlds of Wonder* and *The Rose & Thorn*, respectively, as well as being short-listed for *THIS Magazine's* Great Canadian Literary Hunt Short Story Contest. He has also recently completed a children's book to be published by Crabtree Books in fall, 2005. His most recent achievement is having his speculative fiction short novel, *Black Sunshine*, accepted for publication by Fourth Horseman Press and scheduled for release in September, 2005.

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HOLLOW

JOHN KAIINE

Desire makes all things flourish, possession withers them. **Marcel Proust**

He was a strong, handsome man (high shouldered, blond, long fingered) with the rest of his life ahead of him. Educated and of a good family—a prince, duke or minor king of somewhere. He had fought wars for his country, a soldier, diplomat when need be, had ridden his splendid horse into battle, sword held high against the rolling wheels of the steam-driven khaki-painted tanks. He had hacked the heads off many a foe, run them through with his blade and burnt their river towns to ash. He had laid claim to continents, made examples of leaders who opposed his land. Highly decorated with medals, medallions—a hero loved by his troops. Respected. His countrymen called their children after him. A vast mountain—black and ankle thick in fossils—in a conquered territory, was given his name. As were a waterfall, a flag and a long cool cocktail. Legend in his time.



He was The Originator.

His wife—pale as fine snow—had loved art and beauty. She painted, sketched. Nature, sunsets, orchids grown in the hot-house. She wrote poetry, silver words on white pages. Sang songs, danced divinely.

And their only daughter of four years was as beautiful and clever as her mother.

His rambling ancestral home was surrounded by glorious gardens, streams and a towering maze. He had been out riding one morning, his 'dawn run' as she had called it, when she and the child, barefoot both of them, snuck out to feed the blackbird and its daughter. Hand in hand through the dew damp grass, giggling, weaving their way through the maze to the nest, with the little pot of bread soaked in milk and the gratings of the cheese rind.

They had seen the egg in its nest, witnessed its hatching, watched sometimes as the father brought it bugs and berries to eat. Four weeks old in its speckled feathers.

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They knew the way, the twists and sudden turns, going back on themselves until they saw the statue of the creature that was half man-half goat, for that was where the nest was, hidden by thick moss between its stony hoofs.

“Oh,” said the child, when she saw.

And there they were, flat on their sides, the father bird and young bird, dead.

She had dug a little grave for them, her daughter wiping away the tears. Neither knew what could have killed them—a cat maybe or the curious frost on that second night of summer. Gently, she buried them, said a few words, wished them well. The child lay some daisies there, plucked from the ground.

They didn't go back to the house.

Upon returning from his ride he could not find them. No one had seen them. His wife and his child missing all morning. He organised a search—himself racing around the endless grounds, galloping through the streams on the back of his dappled grey. But nothing was to be seen. No trace of them.

The servants found them. Eventually. They had not known what to do, did not want to move them.

On his return the servants were there, waiting for him. “Something terrible...” said the stable boy. The head-maid was already in tears.

Roaring, he rode into the maze, hacking with his sword, charging the walls of hedge, pushing them down with the weight and speed of his rearing horse. Left, right, through and through. And there they were—slumped before a statue—the under-scellion standing over them.

He carried his wife and child, bodily, back to the house, up the grand marble stairs to their room. A doctor was sent for, as was the holy man.

No one could help. No suggestions or reasons found.

His wife lay there, unconscious, coughing, damp with sweat. His daughter's skin burnt with heavy fever. Blood was taken for testing. They were given injections, prayers were read aloud. They died in the late afternoon. After one hour of their deaths the window ledge of the bedroom was thick with flies. Their heat had brought them.

He could do nothing. He was powerless, the hero.

There was a simple burial in the grounds of the house. It was rumoured that a marble mausoleum was to be constructed.

He locked himself away, spoke to no one, heavy curtains pulled shut. His horse went unriden, letters unopened, when a new war was announced he ignored it. The holy man arrived and was allowed to see him, but was thrown bruised and bloodied down the stairs, after proclaiming the deaths were ‘the will of the God.’

All were turned away—until the scientist arrived—banging on the door, thick with midnight rain. He was allowed entrance, given dry clothing and a bed for the night. Come morning he had set up his brass microscope. The hero disliked him on sight—he was ugly and carried with him the stench of chemicals.

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“What do *you* want?”

“Sir,” the scientist bowed, “may I express my deepest sympathies.”

There was no answer.

“Sir, I come to you with a miracle.”

“A cure for death?”

The scientist lowered his head, his words were quiet. “No, sir. But I do have the cause for it.”

“As does any good soldier.”

“*This*, sir,” the visitor held out a smeared strip of glass, “could obliterate entire armies.”

The hero glanced at the slide, recognised blood when he saw it.

The scientist continued—“This country’s most eminent scientists and doctors performed tests on your wife’s blood to discover the secret of the terrible tragedy that befell your family. What we found astonished even us.” He tapped the glass slide. “It is an unknown germ.”

Taking the smear the hero slid it into the microscope. He wanted to see what had

killed his wife and child. He adjusted the focus and squinted in at it.

And there it was.

“*This*, this brought them to death?” He could not believe it.

The scientist unrolled sheaths of paper: graphs. “We have exposed it to rats and canaries, the results...” His words went unheard. The devoted husband and father peering at the killing crumb of terror.

The germ—a speck, the tiniest seed that corrupted. Skinny in its being, unseen, unknown, no name for it, yet it crawled, caught, embodied and curling, grew, bloomed, sending its pollens off in the winds of blood. Spores unfolded from dark leaves, fronds, coughed up in the hot-house perhaps, some murderous hybrid from another country taken up, taken in. Such loathsome filth.

“...may very well be possible to mass produce it, a perfect weapon, if you will. Obviously we would concoct an antidote for our fighting forces. Although, there does seem to be some minimal natural immunity. Think of it, it could save humanity! The very knowledge that we have such a weapon would devastate our enemies, they could not possibly withstand such a...” the man of science searched for the correct word, “such a depopulating force!”

He looked up from the microscope. What had he heard? “A weapon? You want to make a bomb of this?”

“Exactly!” with a clap of his hands. “No war need ever be fought again!”

He drew himself up to his full height, looking down then, into the ugly stranger’s face. “And what do I care? What is it to me, that brings you here, waking my household? Explain yourself!”

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“My good sir, forgive me, I have been obtuse. My reason for coming here is to inform you that the government and Society of Scientific Fellows would deem it truly an honour, if you would consent to the use of one so famed for her beauty and tranquil demeanour, in the interests of this ultimate and *peaceful* deterrent. What more fitting tribute to your good lady wife could there possibly be? Why, with its invention the world will be a safer and more beautiful place to live.”

He was lost, the words made no sense. That was because he understood them. His long fingers bunched, a fist raised to the scientist’s face—“Plain speaking, now.”

Shaking, body and words. “Quite simply, we’d like to name it after your wife.”

This smear of death—disgusting, hideous, a thing of slime and horror—

and she, *pale as fine snow*... Howling, he brought his fist hard down upon the microscope, shattering, splintering. The scientist turned and ran, didn’t stop running.

A fitting tribute.

Yes. And that is what she would have.

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FOSSIL CIRCUS

JOHN KAIINE

While Jackson and Flint are drowning words, Roane drifts through the garden.

Beyond the potting shed, stands, triangular and whitewood, the broken greenhouse erected in 1888. Pampas grass and dusty air. The smell of old neglects. Grapes spread over the glasshouse roof, grapevine pushed up through the shards, preferring to be without. Roane lifts a boot to its door, locks creak, bolts snap. Fat smut spores rain dusty down all around.

Inside, corroded scaffolding holds up the internal structure, grapevine curls round it, bunches of purple black grapes draping down, some are pocked, spongy like piles. Others are pebble hard. All rotten.

On the floor, leaves and stones beyond death. Terracotta pots full of nothing. Plastic trays, upturned, discarded. Bracken and foxgloves sprouting up through cracked concrete base. Weed Eden.

Roane walks out.

Ahead, a row of clematis growing up dead apple trees. He walks through, under. A Black-in-the-Green. He had spent the previous day, the first at the Hall, in his room, pressed to the glass of his window, lost in the rain. Now he explores, free from the squeals of Ernie and Norman, who are this morning at Caterham, digging out possessions. Someone else's headache.

Roane is easy here, he likes gardens, cemeteries; knows graves, has dug enough. Tookesbury Hall is one big sepulchre: An insane asylum for the dead. But the garden here is different, Flint leaves it overgrown, as if the past has been left to die. Most of the flowers here have arrived carried on the wind as seeds, taken root, grown where they chanced to land. Flourished. The rest is dead, dying or deliberate. The topiary alchemical symbols of lion, dragon, toad and pelican have been neglected, misplaced their shapes, *become* other things.

Toppled topiary angels have lost their wings to weevils. Trimmed green goddesses now bloated, obese. New shapes have been made by Flint: Skeletons



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with penises, the crab shape of cancer cells, and lop winged eagles, now extinct Dodos.

On far boundary walls, century old horsechestnuts shiver with the passing of clouds. The trees are hollow.

The water-lily pond is now a swamp.

The main garden, situated at the rear of the asylum includes a waterlogged symmetrical mass of weeds and tangles; a maze once. Sunk in on itself. A statue of Cybele snagged in its inanition.

There are herbaceous borders of withered mint, over ripe Angelica. Feverfew, peonies, Chinese Lanterns grow out of season. Flowering cacti thrive in green shadows. Bees don't come here.

Roane passes through a pergola of moss, its dead avenue bringing him to an arched gateway, gates long since swallowed by the garden's chalky clay. The arch was an entrance to the stables and the servants' quarters. This area was once, and still is, known as 'Round the back'.

Black ivy smothers the entirety of a broken stable wall. Roane looks closer, there is no wall, no brickwork to speak of. Mites ate the bricks in 1922, dark ivies took their place, growing tall, solid, replacing the wall with leaves as black as Annis.

Alongside - a burnt out section. Charred wood flaking on a stable door, a corrugated tin roof, fallen in, barring any way. Roane lifts the tin, heaves it overhead. It crashes behind him, breaking, *ashing*, its rust blown away by breeze. The stable is now only a charcoal husk, its gutted timbers creaking, cinders shimmying. Cremated time. Roane kicks through clinkers, hay and horse-dung heaped in kindling, there are burnt books with fire licked brown writings, black pages which decay in the light.

It smells like November the Sixth.

Behind a charred cartwheel, he sees a bundle wrapped in horseblankets. He thinks it is a body. Some pre-war unfortunate tossed here to toast in the furnace. The cartwheel shudders to Roane's touch. He crouches, pulls back the blankets in anticipation, it's not a body, but strait-jackets. Ten or so Victorian strait-waistcoats. He lifts them out, one at a time, heavy, he holds them like one would a cripple or sheep and places each one far from the ashes.

There are nine in all. All folded, straps tucked neatly in. He unfolds one, it is stiff, cracking with movement, uninclined to the giving up of its secrets. Roane lays it out, a maniac's dress shirt. Insane Sunday best. There is a picture painted upon it. A scene of fear, many mis-shapen people, pregnant women, wretches being driven from their homes and fields, taken down to the sea. A ship waits in dock. Towers burn in the background. Strange hieroglyphics surround the borders. Runes?

He unfolds the second strait-jacket: Another painting, the story continued. The poor outcasts are caged, aboard ship, sailing out to sea. In one corner an ornate compass pointing North by North West.

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Roane flattens out the remaining jackets. Seven pictures appear. The third is of a ship at sea. Night journey. A moon with face looks down over the voyage. Sea demons splash. No land in sight.

Something akin to voyeurism stirs through Roane at the sight of the fourth painting. Storm scene, ship whipped by tempest, sinking. Screaming faces drown in cages. Black skies throwing down golden lightning. In the far distance, an island.

The fifth. The cages washed up on the island. Mis-shapen men make a church from the shipwreckage. There are tropical trees painted in bright colours.

The sixth painting has been torn. The picture is all black and reds. There are harsh slashes of white, square like teeth. Finger bone impasto. Roane recognises the red to be real blood. The small tears are bite marks.

The seventh is as calm as six is manic. A wooden raft adrift at sea. A sail of stitched pink skin is blowing in the wind. A lone figure crouched aboard. In the near distance, there is land; cities and towers, dogs watching from a broken stone pier. In fields, heavy horses chewing earthy coloured grass. There are flat roofs, brown views. A burnt red sun. Horizons cutting in, in crooked lines of old geometry.

Eight is more difficult. There are angles, white needles reaching out of the sea, one appears to be a lighthouse. A mass of land looms up in the background. Another island. Grey sky. Holes in the skin sail. There are stains on the picture where the paint has not taken, faint smears where tears have fallen.

The ninth and last picture, the story complete: It is Tookesbury Hall drawn in thin lines of black. Tookesbury Hall before strange additions changed its shape, pushed it out of itself. Nostalgic green grasses and hollow horsechestnuts, majestic even then. And trotting up the driveway, a horse and carriage. Journey's end.

Noise. The unmistakable clatter of Mr Jackson. "I smelled ashes... Any luck?" he asks, striding eager forward, anticipating a sudden inferno.

Roane stooping over the nine mad shirts, spread neatly out - oil tarot or da Vinci's laundry. He almost snarls, moves a fraction too quickly. Animal almost. Flint sees this, Jackson only offers a pilfered Carlsberg.

"'ere lad, get thee tonsils round that."

Jackson and Flint throw looks at the canvases. Jackson has gone quiet. He glances at the seventh shirt, at dogs on a broken stone pier.

Flint bends to inspect the quality of the creases. "Can't get creases like that no more," he runs a finger over the folds. "1880s, easily."

Dated now. The journey has an age.

"They used painting as therapy," it is Flint who speaks. "I've heard tell of them, never seen them, until now. Used to stretch strait-jackets over easels, canvas after all, and let the patients get on with it. None of your ice baths or centrifugal treatments here, mate. The last doctor here, that is, the last doctor *practising* here, was a student of Freud's. Kept a dream diary of every patient. That's knocking about somewhere, maybe up in the Hall with some more paintings. Wouldn't know meself, never once

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set foot in the place. Too much like a bloody slaughterhouse, what with all them white walls."

Thunder rumbles like indigestion through an ashen milk sky. Rain threatens. The sleeves of the strait-jackets creak up, bending arm over arm across the pictures. Shutting themselves. Closing like flowers.

Roane with his Carlsberg, smiling. Flint scratches at his head—Hedgehog flea. But Mr Jackson is forty odd years away, the sharks snapping at his heels, the name 'Mogador' unspoken on sour whisky breath.

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STONE ROSES

MARGE SIMON

We camp out in Laguna.
This is your idea,
you want to be here
when the ocean explodes.

I've had these dreams.
Your hands, your mouth,
things not allowed.

Honeyroot and sassafras,
a cup of tea with brown sugar,
a book of red flannel words.
We take turns sharing them,
curled together like vines.

We give away the baby that isn't ours.
I hold it all the way to the city.
The ocean follows us home.

Places you won't go;
Denver, Phoenix, San Francisco.
So many miles, and you won't fly.
Now it's too late, even for me.
So I stay until the sea wall crumbles.
We dismantle it, a stone at a time.
One thing follows another.
Everything closes
into the sky.

Do you remember
how we got this high?
I wipe the sand from your eyes.
Broken things need burial.

If these stones were roses,
I'd distill their essence,
bathe in their perfume.

SIMULACRUM

Marge Ballif Simon free lances as a writer-poet-illustrator for genre and mainstream publications such as *Strange Horizons*, *Flashquake*, *Story House*, *Vestal Review*, *Flash Me Magazine*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *The Fortean Bureau*, *Flesh & Blood*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry*, and the anthologies, *HIGH FANTASTIC* and *NEBULA ANTHOLOGY 32*. She edits a column for the HWA Newsletter, "Blood & Spades: Poets of the Dark Side." She is the editor of *Star*Line*, Digest of the SF Poetry Association.

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COLD LETTER TO THE CHILDREN

BRUCE BOSTON

Dear Tom and Marie,

Before the world changed
and the seasons went to the poles,
your father and I used to picnic
during the bright summers and
the delicious golds and reds of
autumn in the forest preserves
of the land you now know
as ice and snow.

Before the nature of things
became unnatural and birds
lost all sense of direction,
before the rain of frogs
and the acid clouds that fell
from the sky, before you could
travel the seas without ships,
your mother and I were there
in the dense crowds who devoured
the meat of the moment and
cracked the marrow from its bones.

When capital severed the tongues
of science, when statesmen sat
in boardrooms, when the great
religions of the world would not
stem the rising tide of mouths
and hands and the Earth began
to wobble under the weight
of our species, you may remember
that our family would often
gather for a sumptuous Christmas
without ever considering the
wages of an age of excess.

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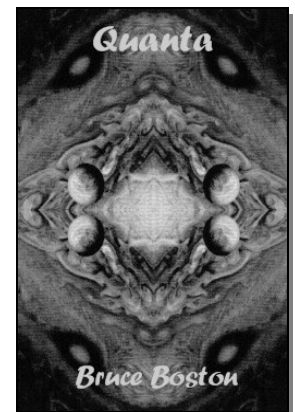
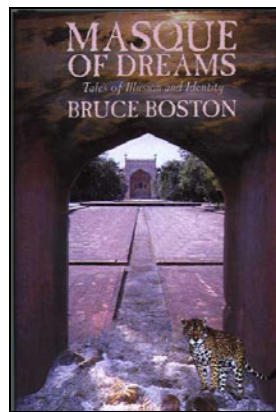
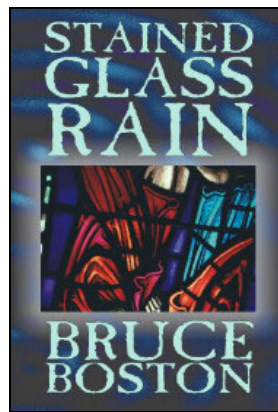
Forgive our trespasses
for we are human like you.
Take the brutal knowledge
we have given you and
do with it what you can.

Remember to always dress warmly
or you will catch your death of cold.

Sincerely, Your Mother and Father

Bruce Boston is the author of more than thirty books and chapbooks, including the novel *Stained Glass Rain* and the best-of fiction collection *Masque of Dreams*. His stories and poems have appeared in hundreds of publications, including *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Amazing Stories*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and the *Nebula Awards Showcase*. His fiction has received a Pushcart Prize and the Best of Soft SF Award. His poetry has won a record seven *Rhysling Awards*, a record four *Asimov's Readers' Awards*, and the *Grand Master Award of the Science Fiction Poetry Association*. He lives in Florida with his wife, writer-artist, Marge Simon.

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For more information, including a bibliography and links to online publications, visit:
<http://hometown.aol.com/bruboston>

FEATURED INTERVIEW

JOHN KAIINE

John Kaiine, born 1967, artist, photographer, writer and one-time gravedigger, is the author of metaphysical thriller/horror novel *Fossil Circus*, published by Egerton House Publishing. He is also the author of stories "Dolly Sodom", published in Ellen Datlow's *Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex*, subsequently made into a short film by American film maker Brandon Dexter, and "Chavi Chori", included in the *Ultimate Witch*. "Unlocked" written with Tanith Lee appears in *The Mammoth Book Of New Terror*. Comic work includes *My Closest Friend* illustrated by Dave McKean for A1 and lead strip in the horror comic *Strand* from Trident. His next novel, *Hollow*, will be published by Egerton House in 2006. He lives by the sea with his author wife Tanith Lee and two black and white cats.

www.tanithlee.com

www.octocon.com

www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/intjk.htm

www.davidicke.com/icke/headlines.php

Was writing something that you always knew you wanted to do?

It was always there. I wanted to be an artist, special FX man, comedian, actor. It all just rolled into one. My writing led to more artwork, especially Photoshop and also to serious photography. I now do all three professionally.

Which writers most notably influenced your own work?

Fiction: Mervyn Peake

Non fiction: David Icke

Any specific rituals you adhere to during the process of writing? Do you need absolute disengagement from the outside world?

I need at least a whole day to write. I can't just pick it up and get straight into it. The longer the better. I tend to work with music—atmospheric stuff: *Gary Numan*, *Fields of the Nephilim*, *Curve*, *Nine Inch Nails*, *The Stranglers* etc. My favorite piece of music to work to is the 2nd Side of *Pink Floyd's The Wall*. *Comfortably Numb* is mostly on continuous repeat. I wear headphones as Tanith's workroom is directly above mine and she works in silence. I like to get to it as early as possible, I'm a very early

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riser and enjoy the hours before the phone starts ringing. Ideally I would write for up to 12 hours a day, but that would be selfish, so I get to it when I can.

Your first novel, *Fossil Circus*, has been described as a metaphysical thriller. Is it true that you planned the book as a comic at first?

I was working on a contemporary horror comic called *Strand*, that led into a novel idea called *Clay (gone to hell)*, and some of the ideas and characters from that segued weirdly into *Fossil Circus*. I work in storyboards when I write, so a lot of *Fossil Circus* ended up being drawn out in comic form.

What can you tell us about your second book, *Hollow*—how did writing it differ from *Fossil Circus*?

Fossil Circus was written sporadically between 1989 and 1992. I had quite a long break from it when I discovered that the idea had been ripped off for a radio play by somebody I briefly knew at the time. I edited it early 2004 and added new short sections and rewrote all the litigious bits. (Channel zapping episode). *Fossil Circus* was an experiment for me, in actually *finishing* a novel, playing with language and just having a good time with it.

Hollow is the story of a land of beauty built by a driven man. However, he doesn't realize that he is being manipulated. *His* version of the land—The Rectangle—soon falls into chaos. We pick the story up approximately 500 years later with all the weirdoes that inhabit it now.

The original version of *Hollow* was written in six months—it was meant to be a 'cutting edge young adult' novel, but the sensibilities of the powers that be at Oxford University Press were outraged at the '*hint of cannibalism*' and use of the word '*bloody*'. Ahem... So it sat in a cupboard for years until I decided what I wanted to do with it. Which is what I'm doing now. It's scheduled for publication this year, but that isn't going to happen. I have at least another 200 pages to add and so far I've done about 20. I want to get it right. So, it will get written when it gets written. The writing 'style' in *Hollow* is very straightforward which I am finding quite laborious. If I can get half a page written in a day I am very happy.

Other things take up my time—life in general, death, domestic stuff, cats, other people.

Read any good books lately that you'd like to recommend?

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Beloved by Toni Morrison

Animal Farm by George Orwell

1984 by George Orwell

Most of David Icke's back catalogue: *The Robots' Rebellion, ...and the truth shall set you free, The Biggest Secret, Children of the Matrix, Alice in Wonderland and the World Trade Center Disaster, I am Me I am Free, Infinite Love is the Only Truth and Everything Else is Illusion.*

Are you an aggressive researcher when it comes to your fiction?

Yes. The more knowledge I have on a subject the better. I need images, photographs, sounds. My workroom is at present swamped under books on Klimt, Prussia, propaganda. I have created images appertaining to *Hollow* in Photoshop and they are very visible also. I have about 250 pages of notes for *Hollow*, character sketches, ideas, lines. But it's still nice when something unplanned happens.

What is it about London that lends itself so well to dark and mythical doings?

Hmmm, having been born and lived there for twenty so years, I have seen quite a bit of it, not all of it good. Babylon(don): A vital international center, it's also a very inbred city—old bloodlines have kept it propped up for many centuries: *Londinium*—Roman Empire base, and before that *Lugdunnum*. After the Great Fire of 1666 the new City of London was built to a Masonic street plan. Yes, really. And in 1694 it became *the* center of global finance. *Still* is. Later still it was the operational center of the British Empire. So, given all of that man made power, certain dark doings were bound to 'pop up.'

In 1888, Whitechapel was the darkest site in the capital of the most powerful country in the world, so a degree of scum was bound to rise to the top, albeit ritually and sacrificially. And even after that wankers like Alistair Crowley still tried to give it a bad name.

The most worrying thing about London now is that it has the most CCTV's of *any* city in the world.

Do you prefer writing longer material as opposed to short stories, or the other way around?

I like *writing*. I've only written several short stories. I get bored too easily, so most things end up half finished or exist in massed note form. It was very good to work with Tanith on *Unlocked*. I began it and Tanith took it over, working from my notes and

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adding lots of her own wonderful ideas and there were additional bits at the end supplied by us both.

Personally, I think the short story is a highly underrated art form...

Personally, I think *all* art is highly underrated. Unless it involves formaldehyde, frozen blood and/or unmade beds...

When trying to define the nature of evil—if indeed, such a concept truly exists as we tend to speak of it—should we primarily look within, or without?

We should look **Everywhere**. But most importantly, we should **See**.

Yes, Evil does exist and in many forms. One of its names is Ignorance. Another name for it is Complacency. We should question everything we are served up especially by the media and the governments. And also all of those claiming to be viable alternatives. Question and question again, don't believe the diet of dross and suppressed information dressed up as democracy, liberty and 'truth'. Use your instincts. And do be very careful of anything claiming to be 'New Age.'

Evil is—'third world' continents being *allowed* to starve to death while countries glut. The prolonged genocide (and routine napalming and strafing with depleted uranium) of innocent men, women and children under the name of 'democracy'. International vote rigging, multinationals propped up by world leader share-holders. Evil is 'political coincidence.' Evil is illegal invasion of *any* country. Evil is grinning morons ruling over all the countless mindless cattle and the cattle gleefully letting them. Evil is a different song sung from the same old song sheet.

In an earlier question, you asked about research. It's the same answer—Look and *think* and *See* for yourself, question and **never** stop questioning.

What do you think about the issue of people blaming violent films, books and video games for the unsociable—and in some cases sadistic—behavior of adolescents?

To a degree, mass produced horror—be it gaming, film or music (however good the music, film, game etc may be) is designed to have a desensitizing effect however unintentional. Subliminal programming. Most people are indifferent to cruelty or suffering as long as it's in another country. Or household. But mostly it's bullshit. For centuries mankind has quite happily waged manipulated wars and been totally

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psychotic without the artificial aid of computer games and 'violent' films. They had to make do with religion to stir up their hatreds.

The scariest thing is the people doing the blaming. They can't see the *real* horror—see last answer—snake-oil war cannon-fodder death statistics rising every second and very few even register it, but Janet Jackson lets one of her tits pop out on a live recording in the States and there's national outrage. The television network phone lines are jammed! There were calls for her to be jailed.

Adolescents *should* be angry. For many it's the last chance they'll get before being indoctrinated into the sheep mentality of the wage slave.

'It's not so much the fantasies we imagine that scare us, but the knowledge that within imagination resides reality.' Would you agree with this assessment?

Yes, there really *is* something in the darkness.

Have you ever shocked yourself with something you've put to paper? Has there ever been an instance where you've censored yourself?

I've never censored any of my fiction, I did however have to change a few lines in *Fossil Circus* which would have been litigious. I was very pleased to keep the line—*"ever noticed the remarkable facial similarity between Princess Diana, there, and Myra Hindley?"* the lawyers let me keep that one. For those of you who don't know, Myra Hindley was an infamous 1960's British child killer.

I've had to censor myself with this interview. Some of my views aren't shared by those I love, so, in my respect to them and their views, I've left out the names of various peoples and little known but true 'documented situations'.

I have sometimes frightened myself when I have read back something I had written. Especially some of the descriptions of *Jerusalem Lamb* in *Fossil Circus*.

Tell us something about John Kaiine no one knows...

I'm still screaming inside.

What are the pros and cons to living with another writer?

It's very cool. I couldn't imagine being with anyone who couldn't write as wonderfully as Tanith. Her imagination is boundless too. There's always a new and exciting idea

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buzzing around. In certain respects we're very different people, but creatively we're joined at the hip.

What are you currently working on—any exciting projects on the horizon you'd like to tell us about?

Obviously I'm still working on *Hollow*. I have to design artwork for this also. Although it will also be featuring some beautiful artwork from a young British artist called Zoe Kassai.

I have two covers to produce for Tanith's French translations of *Personal Darkness* and *Darkness, I for l'Oxymore*.

There will be covers for Tanith's up and coming Egerton House Publishing novels.

There has been talk of Tanith and I collaborating on a novel—a savage mystical 'Arabian Nights' tale. But if that happens it happens. We're both very busy.

After *Hollow* I want to get on with a novel I started a while back—a metaphysical thriller set in a rundown UK seaside town (gosh, I wonder where that could be...) I really want to be doing this, as it's contemporary and I Love playing with the words of that world. Much more fun than 'fantasy'.

And eventually it would be good to have my website up and running. But right now that would take up more time than I have to spare. If it happens—great, but if not, then I really don't care.

What are the essential questions an aspiring writer should ask him or herself before planning to make a career out of it?

I've no idea. All writers are different. Some are just going to churn it out like a hack journo, (which is about 85% of all fiction and at least 95% of SF and Fantasy) or some are going to be naturally gifted and produce works of great beauty. For the true writer it's a way of life.

A career? Join the army. At least that way you don't have to think.

Can you sum up the pleasure and satisfaction of writing in less than ten words?

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Wahoo! Whoop! Huzzah! Booing! Rumzigger Rumzigger Rumzigger Emph! *and*
Splat!
(is that ten?)

:-p

John Kaine *South east coast 2005*

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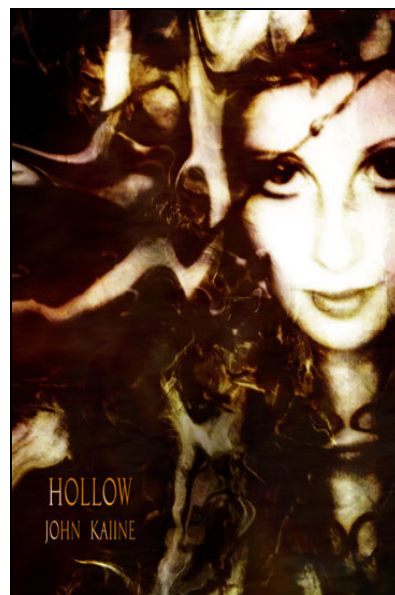
BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

FOSSIL CIRCUS



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FEATURED ARTIST

KEITH THOMPSON

VITAL STATS

Age: 23

Country: Canada

On The Web www.keiththompsonart.com

Medium: **Mixed:** Traditional drawing, digital glazing.

Training: Self-taught

Influences: Classical art throughout history. Contemporary fantasy art.

How long have you been working as a professional illustrator?

About 5 years; I've been working as an illustrator as I explored other artistic fields, and started freelancing during high school when I was also working in an animation studio. I'm currently freelancing full-time, and it's been going rather well.

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

They both have their benefits and disadvantages, and I'm relatively pragmatic when it comes to artistic mediums. If the medium can properly achieve the appearance I want for an image then I'll use it. I work in a very straightforward manner on the computer, and don't actually use any techniques that I couldn't apply with traditional means (I just don't end up ruining the piece if an experiment goes awry).



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Oil paint can look wonderful by itself, splattered on a canvas, and digital mediums don't often enjoy this benefit. The digital artist tends to have far more control, but has to consciously compensate for the lack of an inherent, organic textural appeal.

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

I don't have any specifically preferred media, and my interests tend to jump around as I discover new things. The video game industry is something I've been closely following for a while; the business seems absolutely awash with talent, and yet none of it seems allowed to properly flourish.

It seems to me that the more a creative individual has control over the production, the more originality, craftsmanship, and imagination seems to take hold. For these reasons I tend to find some of the best work in books or graphic novels where a single person is responsible (or creatively dominant). I find it tremendously unfortunate that the actor or actress is more of a selling point for a movie than the director or writer is.

In a more cultural sense, postmodernism's rejection of the metanarrative is a huge mistake in my opinion, and fantasy and science fiction are the only places now where mythological creativity seems to have a place. I try not to take myself too seriously, but I've seen many occasions where fantasy artist's self-deprecating humbleness really sells their field short, and actually discourages a desire for sophistication.

Tell us about your creative process—where do you find inspiration and ideas for a new drawing?

News and history have been my most recent fonts of inspiration, and these sources contribute substantially to my work. There are so many incredible stories throughout history to draw upon for ideas, and most have gone unused (perhaps because the vast majority of history tends to make people uncomfortable about how people treat each other).

Daydreaming is important for me, and I always prefer to sit on a piece for a while without touching it as I mull over my approach. My sleeping dreams usually lack cohesion, and are unusable as direct inspiration, but my daydreams can be fantastically vivid and are an integral part of my process. I don't actually get a huge kick out of the physical process of creating art; I do it to realize an idea I particularly enjoyed visualizing.

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I'm beginning to find that aesthetics assuredly have a basis in natural forms, and the classical notions of a line of grace and a golden ratio have helped greatly in understanding pleasing visuals. I still have a lot to read up on, and have only recently, after schooling, discovered subjects like Goethe's Theory of Colors.

How would you describe your work—thematically, and in terms of style?

I don't think I've yet produced a large enough body of work to properly assess a consistent theme. I do hope that my work, while very jaundiced, does not convey an impression of callousness or insensitivity towards its subjects. I try to erase any impression of a polar "good vs. evil" undercurrent in my work. The only characters I create that really come close to being villains are the type with an "us vs. them" mentality.

A recurring image in my art has been the gallows, which is an iconic structure I've been using as a mythologically charged symbol. I'm hugely inspired by historical religious paintings, and use it as a crucifix analogue in the worlds I develop.

The wheel and gibbet will probably begin to factor in more as well.

Despite being a horrific object, the gallows seem to have a subdued impression on people. I remember sitting in elementary school while the teacher played hangman on the chalk board with the class as a time waster. It struck me as strange that thirty people would sit and watch an executed man form on the board in front of them with absolutely no real thought going into the imagery they were seeing. Teachers would waste classes drawing these pictures and then often turn around and remonstrate me



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for not paying attention. These same teachers would then criticise me for drawing slavering gargoyles which they regarded as upsetting imagery.

Stylistically I suppose I work quite traditionally as a linear illustrator. In terms of technique, I agree with the painter Ingres and feel that line is the most important element in a piece of art. Due to that I tend to focus on drawing, rather than painting.



Would you encourage other artists who want to illustrate professionally to make a career out of it?

It depends so greatly on the person that it's hard to say.

I'm also by no means experienced enough to pretend I know one way or the other. I think anyone who decides to work like me, in art, has to concretely decide that their priority is their creative product, and that their decision is based on their desire to spend their life making art. I definitely seemed to have been set in my course my whole life, so a career decision was never much of an issue (perhaps it's a genetic curse).

Art and business are also like oil and water, so to work in the field you constantly have to balance two diametric concerns which are perpetually at odds with each other. It's an unpleasant reality that someone may be an unbelievably talented artist, and simply not be suited to making a career out of it.

Is there a favorite sketch or painting among your work that holds special significance for you?

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Probably whatever my newest personal work happens to be at the time. The more time I spend on an artwork the more I end up liking it, and I don't think I've ever actually finished anything to the degree I'd like to.

Do you have any interesting projects in the pipeline you'd like to tell us about?

I'm about halfway through a book of my own that I'm holding onto until completion (to ensure that I have complete creative control over the final product). The working title right now is "Fiddlehead & The Monstrous Multitudes", and it's about a horrible little witch hunter that travels the land arresting anyone he perceives as having committed what his vague definition of a crime is. He then takes them back to his ever-growing city of cages. It's told through two perspectives: the first being reality, and the second being scrawled notes that the character's pinned throughout the book in an attempt to correct the "faulty tome and its seditious untruths".

Commissions are making the progress on my book rather intermittent, so I can't really predict a completion point.

I get a lot of requests to complete a whole series of Mesopotamian Zodiac, so I would also like to get around to that in my own time.

Would you want to branch out in fields such as television or film animation one day?

I've already traipsed around the film and animation industry a little; it's an industry that's somewhat creatively hobbled but I've thoroughly enjoyed the work I've done in it. They're mediums that I think possess unparalleled artistic potential and I hope to achieve more in them in the future. I do believe my artistic approach is well suited to it, as I tend to obsessively conjure up as many facets of the subject as I can.

Where do you see Science Fiction and Fantasy art going—is there concern than the traditional ways of illustrating will completely fall prey to digital mediums?

The medium is completely meaningless to me, and I have no particular fondness for paints, pencils, or computer tablets. I think a good parallel in history is the advent of oil paints, which were highly criticized for the technical advantages they had over fresco painting. Oils were often derided simply for being not as difficult as frescos.

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If it's two dimensional then it can potentially be achieved by digital means. Pigeonholing artists by medium is another way to limit creativity and turn art into a physical commodity that prides itself as the opposite of craftsmanship. However, there is a flip side: there's been a lot of contention around the world directed at the use of human remains in art. I'm unimpressed that the artists simply can't use talent to sculpt what they want, and instead piggyback on the media's obsession with empty controversy (in fact, every major piece of fine art news, for as long as I can remember, is being reported on solely due to controversy).

However there is a severe problem inherent in one of the digital medium's benefits, and that's speed. The digital medium can remove many of the hindrances of traditional methods. On a computer the supplies are limitless: you will never run out of paint or paper and have to run down to the store (well there's ink, but that's pretty straightforward). Entire waiting periods can be removed from the process: your paint doesn't have to dry, and you can upload a print-ready painting to a client instead of having to courier it. All of these benefits are absolutely wonderful in themselves, but I fear that commission prices and deadlines will constrict to match it, creating a competitive environment where traditional mediums simply can't keep up in terms of efficacy. Digital mediums also remove the existence of finished originals which severely undercuts an artist's potential income.



What do you want to achieve with your art in the future?

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The grander my product gets, the happier I am, and achieving a body of work that can act as a window into a unique and consistent world is probably my main artistic goal. In the short term I'd like to be able to afford spending longer and longer on individual artworks.

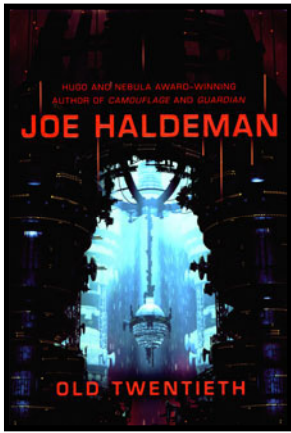
I hope to get some more independent projects out there soon, but I have enjoyed the disparate subjects that commission work has made me deal with.

**VISIT KEITH THOMPSON'S ONLINE GALLERY AT:
WWW.KEITHTHOMPSONART.COM**

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FEATURED BOOKS



OLD TWENTIETH

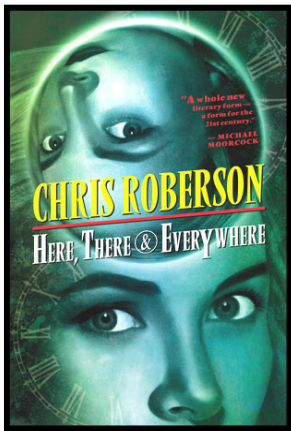
Joe Haldeman

Publisher: Ace Books (August 1, 2005)

The latest offering from Nebula and Hugo award-winning author Joe Haldeman tells the story of Jake Brewer, a virtual reality engineer who decides to spice things up by running a virtual reality machine aboard a starship looking for Earth-class planets. At first, the passengers aboard the Ad Astra spend most of their time within the simulated virtual reality of twentieth-century Earth.

But then people begin to die inside the virtual reality chamber...And suddenly the machine wants to have a word or two with Jake.

Old Twentieth raises prevalent and exciting issues about the nature of reality. Haldeman writes a story that is without a doubt SF, but will most certainly appeal to a wider audience than those within the SF genre. Suspenseful and genuinely insightful, *Old Twentieth* is a pleasure to read and a welcome addition to anyone's reading list looking for a well-written story that also happens to be pure entertainment.



HERE, THERE & EVERYWHERE

Chris Roberson

Publisher: Pyr (April 30, 2005)

We don't get to read that many time travel books these days, simply because they are notoriously tricky to write. In *Here, There, and Everywhere*, Chris Roberson pulls off this complex feat, for the most part, to good effect. There's a willingness to turn a blind eye to the parts where he stumbles, simply because the story itself is so entertaining.

11-Year old Roxanne's life is changed forever by an old woman who, in her dying moments, gives her an odd bracelet, which Roxanne feels compelled to wear forever from then on. As she grows older, Roxanne soon learns what feats she can accomplish with this special gift.

More than an actual story about time travel, *Here, There and Everywhere* is more so a tale about Roxanne's journey into adulthood, one that Roberson tells deftly. It is a life filled with tragedy and loss, but also great wonder, magic and a great sense of futurism which harks back to the days of Sherlock Holmes and H.G. Wells. And if you enjoy popular culture, the references within the story will have your toes curling with glee.

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THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

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