

POLAR BOREALIS

Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
(Issue #1 – January/February 2016)



POLAR BOREALIS MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL

I was having lunch with Lynda Williams, Publisher of Reality Skimming Press, when she remarked there weren't enough paying markets in Canada for beginning writers.

In fact there aren't any at all, in the sense that it is not enough for a beginning writer to submit a competent, well written, commercially acceptable story, because that's what the pros do, and the pros already have an established readership which makes them more useful to an editor. Beginners won't be published merely by being *good enough*; to have any chance at all they need to be *better* than the average pro, exceptional in fact, a real standout. And this few writers are, let alone beginning writers.

So here and there across the land, in basements and attics and garages, not to mention writers workshops, there are myriad writers at work whose ideas and enthusiasm and maturing skills make their stories well worth publishing. They just can't compete with the pros. Competition between pros is intense. A beginner doesn't stand a chance.

As a beginning writer for well-nigh half a century, never published, I feel your pain. What can be done about it? Is there a solution?

Polar Borealis is my answer. An online paying market magazine where, yes, pros will be published, but when beginners submit they will only compete against each other and not against the pros because I will reserve a minimum of three story 'slots' per issue for previously unpublished authors.

Polar Borealis is an odd beast. I have no financial stake at risk since the zine generates zero income, which means I can publish off-beat, off-the-wall material as I please regardless of their presumed commercial acceptability and appeal. This gives me, as editor, tremendous freedom.

Polar Borealis reflects my personal, rather idiosyncratic tastes in the genre. My intention is to give beginning writers, poets and artists a chance to get published. If I like it, I'll publish it.

Cheers! The Graeme

PAPERWORK FOR MAZES

by Flora Jo Zenthoefer

I always have to die before six at night, but after four. I don't know why, but if I die at any other time there is far more paperwork. So, figuring it had been about a month since I'd died last and realizing that if I didn't die soon someone might get sued, I opened the windows at about five fifteen, and jumped from my twenty-second story loft.

As per usual, I hit the ground in a mess, guts absolutely everywhere you know, and the bright lights of Sterile Passing On Station four-three-two-four, which according to everyone I've talked to about it is the only SPOS, show up in my vision.

I walked into the disturbingly clean white room, and the man in his severe business suit turned to me and said, "How are you friend? Good timing there, you on Greenwich Mean?" and I said to him,

"Fine friend, fine. And yes I am on Greenwich Mean, thank you so much for noticing." He smiled very widely at me with his very white teeth and handed me a form. I checked some boxes, wrote some answers, and signed my name once or twice, then howdy boy I was done, and I handed it on back.

The man smiled at me, and I had a grand time trying to figure out if he had absolutely any distinguishing features other than his smile while he looked over the form. When he was done he handed it back to me and I swear, his smile got just a little bit wider, and his nondescript eyes gained a sort of hungry gleam as he said,

"There appears to be a problem here friend. Would you please follow me?" Well obviously I didn't want no trouble, so what I did was punch him in his creepy-ass face, grab back my form and book it.

I'd never been anywhere in the SPOS other than that room and the bathroom, but I figured how confusing could it get? So I ran down the hallway the bathroom was in and took a left where I normally took a right, chewing and swallowing my form as I went.

Well as it turns out, it was one of those Minotaur mazes, and I ended up in a line with fourteen other people, bout seven men and seven women, all of them with their hands tied except one who had a sword and a string he was unravelling. Well I figured this was the yearly televised death fight thing, and it was hardly fair that this one guy got a sword and string and none of the rest did. So I nicked his sword and cut his string, then pointed out the convenient exit I'd just come in by.

They rushed past me just in time to immediately knock over the formerly perfect toothed receptionist, and I ran for a bit, then climbed the walls and stood on top, because that is way easier than actually wandering through the maze for ages, and I started for the shiny neon exit sign. It took me a way long time, but eventually I got there, and I opened the doors, and what do I know, it's a fucking trap and I'm impaled on some spikes.

Suddenly I'm on the road outside my flat, and I smile, knowing I just got out of paperwork.



SINGLE SOURCE

by T.G. Shepherd

The humidity was sour like cheap wine in the back of the throat, as the dying sun filtered through the high land foliage. To the north and west, storm clouds swept down from Mali; creeping larger and larger in his field of vision by the hour. There would be a storm tonight.

Incenio hawked and spat a green wad onto the back of the nearest worker as the tiny boy scurried towards the ramshackle slave cabins to be locked in for the night. The mucus mixed with the blood from the open wound on the back of his neck, perhaps from a beating, perhaps just from the daily labour of hefting cocoa sacks. Just behind him, he heard the harsh snarling of his overseer, then the sound of a fist on flesh. The sound of blows became a refrain for a moment, then subsided into weeping. The overseer yelled something, his French rough with his Eastern European accent. Two of the other boys, older and just a little bigger than the others came hobbling back and dragged a limp form past him and into the hut.

“You might have killed that one,” said Incenio as the overseer came up to his shoulder.

“It was half-dead anyway, moving slow. If it's all the way gone now, well, it's an object lesson to the rest of the vermin.” The overseer was a thin, dark man with a perpetual stubble covering his chin. Depending on the light, he looked Greek or Russian or even Italian. Incenio thought he was perhaps Polish but he'd never asked in the six months he'd known the man. He could barely bring himself to remember his name (Derek? Dirk?); order was kept as perfectly as he might want, work was done, cacao was picked and nothing else mattered.

In truth, the other's man's lifeless eyes had always frightened him.

The prospect of a good rain storm put him in a jovial mood though, and he had no one else on this god forsaken patch of dirt and trees to talk to.

“Come, come with me. Come see the new fermenting tanks. I have been experimenting with refining the product here. Perhaps sell it as ‘single source’.” He clapped the overseer on the shoulder with a laugh and then fought to repress his shudder when the man tilted his head to look at him. It was like waking with a snake sitting on your chest, inhaling your breath as you slept.

“Don't you have someone waiting for you at the house?” The overseer—Doren, that was the name—gestured towards the low colonial building on the

only thing passing for a hill in the neighborhood. Inside, cowering in the low slung thing that also passed for a bed was one of the workers, a new girl come yesterday. Emaciated but with that beautiful bone structure the Malians often sported.

Incenio laughed. "Ah, but is not chocolate the food of love? It will get me in the mood. You should pick one out for yourself." He made it a rough joke, between men, grinning widely.

He got another look at those corpse's eyes. His jaw clicked shut and he covered his shudder by turning his back and leading the way to the newly constructed quonset hut near the main house.

Inside the faded military green walls, the air was heavy with the heat and weight of the raw cacao beans churning and bubbling in their wide wooden vats. Incenio hated the old fermentation method of just piling the raw seeds under banana leaves and hoping for the best. He had researched the heavy wooden "sweating" boxes the Latin Americans used and constructed six of them here. It made him feel modern and proactive in this rancid shit-hole of a plantation. Perhaps in a few years he would go to the man with the papers and get a new passport, travel to Ecuador, take a look at the set up there.

Stay there maybe, where he would not have to mouth French all the time, where he could speak to civilized people in Spanish, not hunt for companionship from a man who seemed to care for little other than his work.

Yet suddenly there was life in the overseer, almost an expression on his face. He seemed human for a moment.

"It is strange, isn't it," he said softly as he left Incenio's side to approach the nearest trough, "that such a decadent thing should come from this... filth. This chaos."

The sweet white pulp coating the seeds began to decay almost instantly when opened. Piled together and stirred from time to time, the cacao beans roiled in a thick blanket of sugars and chemicals, fungus and bacteria. Rotting. Gaining flavors from the air, the ground, the machetes that cracked them open, the blood and sweat on the hands of the workers who picked and sorted them. The temperature of the liquid that eventually formed, drained away and dried off, could reach almost one hundred twenty five degrees.

These vats were only a day or so into the process, so the sludge around the beans was still thick, like mud. It had changed color from white to brownish, with lighter streaks.

The overseer reached out tentatively and slid a finger over the surface of the vat, jerking back sharply. He turned to look at Incenio. "Hot," he exclaimed, with what might have almost been a smile creasing his lips.

A quick check of the nearest vats made Incenio purse his own lips in irritation. "Yes, just a little too hot. I don't think they were properly stirred today. Remind me to 'remind' the tenders of their duties."

"Why must it be stirred?" Doren asked, sounding almost normal in his interest.

"The heat must be kept even, otherwise the beans in the centre will putrefy. Even if you don't shift them, they will give the rest of the batch a sour taste."

"Ah, well, since we're not un-locking the lazy buggers now, shall we stir them?"

"I suppose. But I will take the sweat out of their hides in the morning."

"Of course."

Incenio started on one end of the line of vats, as the overseer started on the other. Over the swishing of the paddles, the burping noises of the gases rising in the chocolate muck, Incenio thought he could hear the overseer muttering something to himself as he stirred. It was almost lyrical. *How strange, that such a man sings as he works.*

The overseer was clearly fascinated by the bubbling proto-chocolate, for he reached out several times to touch the surface of each vat he approached, fingertips trailing lazily in random patterns.

The approaching storm flashed and thundered in the far distance, edging closer as though it were an antelope approaching a strange watering hole. Looking for predators.

They met in the middle, and Incenio paused to let the other man stir the last vat (he was the plantation boss, after all, must maintain some semblance of authority), stretching. The wet richness of the air was indeed putting him 'in the mood', from the slight straining in his pants. And the storm was closing in outside. He gestured impatiently at the other man to finish up.

Instead, Doren slowed down, chanting his odd song under his breath, hand out stretched over the middle vat. Incenio could hear the words now, but they made no more sense. Just a babble of syllables.

A drop of something fell onto the surface of the vat from the outstretched hand. Sweat?

Before it disappeared, it gleamed a dark red on the off-white surface.

Blood.

Incenio found he had met the overseer's eyes and could not look away. The other man nodded once, briskly, and dropped his paddle on the ground. Incenio's hand spasmed open in turn. The overseer went to the vats that Incenio had stirred, still chanting. Without looking down, he traced their surfaces in a few swift passes, let fall another drop of blood, then returned to the nearest vat. He had not unlocked their gazes in that whole time.

“Single source, hey?” the overseer said softly, coming so close to Incenio that his breath cooled the sweat on his forehead. “My father was like that, only a single source would do. No matter how painful or difficult or useless, only the oldest ways were pure enough. He had learned from his father, who had learned from his father in the ghettos and so on back to fucking antiquity I'm sure. When did it truly stop working, I wonder? Before the thousand years began? Back in Prague?”

He had never spoken so long to Incenio before, and now there was some other rhythm in his voice, some other accent that Incenio had heard before. Where? It brought to mind heat, dry like a desert, and old stone, and a weight of history and hatred and divinity so deep you could almost taste it. The sound of wailing. A pleading voice. The call to prayer.

The storm drove closer, louder.

“Me, I was the prodigal,” Doren said. “You could always feel it begin, the power build. But then it would die, just fade like it was being called away somewhere. ‘Let us change the rituals, father,’ I said. ‘Let us stop turning in place like a dog.’ Oh, the beatings I took for suggesting that the old ways might not be the best. So I ran, and the old man died alone in the gutter in Palestine, and I ran the world over looking for the words that would make the power sing again. I did care you see, about my people. About my calling. Cared too much to be bound by rules that no longer applied.”

The overseer gestured at the last vat, the only one he had not touched. Incenio jerked a few steps closer to it, obediently gazing down at the thick mucus-like liquid. Doren's hand entered his field of vision. With one long finger, he carved a symbol into the surface of the muck. It held its shape far longer than it should have, showing him the lighter colors under the skin of the mother liqueur. Another symbol, as the first one filled in. Then a third, carved as the second died.

Thunder shivered the air, melodramatically. Closer.

“*Tav*. Those are still ours. But the rest? It took years to pare down the rituals, find what was true and what was trapping. No dancing. No walking in circles; no prayers. The first creation was simple, but it ‘died’ a moment after

the fires, screaming, and shared the pain with me. That nearly stopped me from ever trying again. I persevered though. I sought out every madman and ancient crone I could find. I walked the world over. Then I went back. Back to the stone and sand and parchments. Back to the source; singular, you know,” the overseer mocked Incenio almost gently. “Learning Aramaic at my age was ... not amusing.”

Incenio's throat spasmed and he forced himself to speak. “What ... is this? What? You *madman*.”

“This is the old justice. This is an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth,” came the soft inexorable reply, now from somewhere behind him. Somewhere near the door.

“YOU KILLED THEM WITH YOUR BARE HANDS!” Incenio shrieked. The flood of rage and terror wrenched paralyzed limbs into play. He spun around to see Doren, loitering against the tin man-door in the far wall. He was smiling.

The smile froze Incenio in place again.

“This place is pain, though it creates pleasure. It nurtures vegetation and kills humans. It eats children to create a child's amusement. My craft likes the balance. It comes to the one who can juggle it for longest, not for the virtuous.”

The warm swirling of the proto-chocolate behind him swept suddenly into furious boiling. Incenio found himself staring at the murky turbulent liquid just to be able to look away from the other man's luminous eyes.

“My time was well spent, in all. Blood spilled is the greatest catalyst; enough deaths to balance the lives.” Doren's voice was softer, sleek and satisfied.

The storm outside gathered itself, hanging like a snake about to drop from the jungle mantle. The liquid rumbled from side to side in each tank, six contained tidal waves.

“And the sky will bring my fire to earth. A lovely balance indeed,” Doren said, his voice barely audible over the sudden crash of the wind outside.

The thunder and lightning; simultaneous orgasm.

The corner of the metal roof exploded, rain lashing down. Harsh wind slashed through the interior, driving debris before it. Mud. Branches. Garbage from the refuse pile.

Burning leaves.

The storm wafted a single flaming cacao leaf onto each vat.

Fire roared white and red into the air.

Men rose from the vats as the fire died.

Not men, came Incenio's third to last coherent thought.

The things lurched and spilled from their birthing tubs, limbs flowing and re-shaping with each motion. Sometimes they were like lumps of wet clay rolling across a table; sometimes they straightened up, became nearly human. They turned their inferno eyes towards him, the symbols carved into their foreheads also burning red. Voiceless, mouth less, already beginning to slough and drip in the rain and the heat, the creatures shuffled on flippers of rotting slime towards their lawful prey.

Incenio heard the overseer clapping his hands delightedly. He called out something in another language and the misshapen heads bowed a moment, acknowledging their master.

This was Incenio's second to last thought: *He speaks Hebrew.*

“My army,” cried out the overseer with joy.

“Why?” Incenio screamed. “Why?”

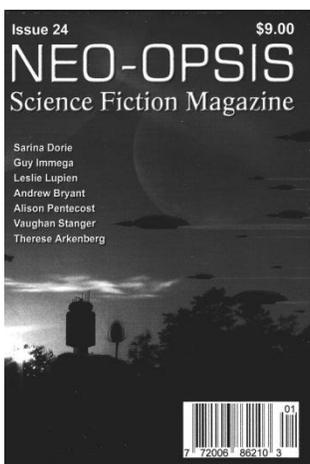
“Because, you fool, I was *paid*. Not all these brats are the spawn of peasants.” Doren laughed again, high and nearly shrill.

Thick fingers, burning hot with fermentation and holy fire, enveloped Incenio's eyes, his ears, blocking the laughter and the storm, festering cacao slipping down his throat, his nostrils, covering him like a child in birthing fluids.

And then a last memory came to Incenio: a girl in the Holy Land, blood and ash in her hair, the smell of her sweat, and a folk tale of retribution she had told him before she died. Before he killed her. His single source for the knowledge of what was about to kill him.

So his last thought was the name of the instrument of his death:
Golem.

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THE AIRLOCK SCENE

by Karl Johnson

Captain Winston did his best to look heroic as he stood at the exit to the airlock of his spacecraft, looking over the surface of Mars. The bulging pack on the back of his form fitting vacuum suit, made moving around in the airlock awkward. The other five crewmen in the airlock made it sextuply so. He looked at the terrain below him, held out one arm and said, “Looking out at the new world, the six intrepid men set out from their brave craft, with its numerous shades of orange and red.”

“Hang on a minute,” the life science officer said from further back in the crowded airlock. “The space ship isn’t red and orange.”

“What? I know that,” the captain said. “I didn’t say that.”

“Well you implied it by the structure of your sentence.”

“Huh? Okay, whatever,” the captain continued. “Looking out at the new *orange and red world* ... the six intrepid men set out from their brave craft. Looking out to the ...”

“How can a ship be brave?” The engineer asked from behind the life science tech, as he tried to see around the two in front of him.

“It’s a freaking metaphor, okay?” the captain said.

“That’s not a metaphor, it’s personification,” the life sciences tech said.

“Sounds more like ‘anthropomorphizing’ to me,” the archaeologist said. She somehow found enough room to sit down behind the others, having given up any hope of seeing the surface of Mars any time in the next half hour.

“It doesn’t have to be anthropomorphizing,” the life sciences tech said. “I mean bravery isn’t a strictly human characteristic. You can refer to a dog as being brave without that being an example of anthropomorphizing.”

“Look,” said the captain, “I wanted to get this speech just right, so I showed you all various versions of it since we left Earth orbit months ago and none of you gave me any feedback, *ever*. Now that we’re actually here, you’re all getting all pedantic on me.”

“I’m not being pedantic,” the life science officer said. He tried to put his hands on his hips, but only succeeded in lightly elbowing two of his crew mates. “The linguistic errors you’re making are blatant and *need* correcting. People are listening to this back on Earth, you know.”

“Need? ... Did you *need* to waste transmitter power sexting and hitting on dozens of women back on Earth when you could have been proofreading?” The

captain raised his eyebrows for punctuation, not that anyone noticed in the dim light of the airlock, with his face shield down.

“Oh sure. Announce *that* to everyone back on Earth.”

“How ‘bout letting me get through this speech? Okay? ... Looking out at the new orange and red world, the six intrepid men set out from their brave craft. Looking out to the horizon, they feel a sense of awe and ...”

The Life Sciences officer said, “Shouldn’t that be ‘four men and two women set out ...?’”

“Actually, ‘men’ in this context is gender neutral,” cut in the archaeologist.

“No it isn’t. It’s *gender non-specific*, not *gender neutral*.”

“Same thing.”

“No. *Gender neutral* applies to things like rocks, or trees, or cake. *Gender non-specific* applies to humans or animals in a way that doesn’t specify the sex; as with ‘Doberman,’ or ‘astronaut.’”

“Or ‘interrupting grammatical snoot’,” the communications tech said. “And humans *are* animals.”

“That’s just an opinion on the different gender forms. According to ...”

“For crying out loud. I’m just trying to get through my fucking historical speech, so we can go down the ladder and ... Oh great. Three billion people just heard me say ‘fuck’.”

“Actually, they heard you say it twice,” the archaeologist said. “Well, to be more precise, they won’t hear it for another 10 minutes or so.”

The communications tech’s face brightened at the shift to a topic he cared about. “Actually, if you account for the position of the Earth right now and the speed of light, it’s closer to seven and a half minutes for the signal to reach ...”

A blast of static and popping came in over the astronauts’ headsets. Soon after the pilot communicated from inside the lander. “Oop. Sorry about that. Are you guys out on the surface? How does it look?”

“No, we’re still in the airlock,” the Captain said. “Clearly priority one for the first manned expedition to Mars isn’t to explore the surface. Nor is it to take rock and regolith samples. Further it’s not to check out the Oxygen plant, nor to see if the robot lander has Zubrined enough fuel for our return trip back to Earth. No, it seems we’ve traveled 48 million kilometers so that we can stand around in an airlock, debating how to conjugate adjectives, and how to make sure conjunctive tenses and dangling participles don’t go off their rocker and start killing the co-workers they’ve been cooped up with for three and a half months!”

Everyone was silent for a long moment.

“You don’t conjugate adject—” the life sciences tech started.

“Shut up!” the captain snapped. “Seriously, that’s it. I’m just climbing down the damn ladder. Forget the stupid speech. Forget how long I worked on it. Forget the three billion people on Earth hoping for some meaningful words to commemorate this historic occasion. I had some great bit about you all being dedicated explorers, but I would have had to change that to something about being dedicated linguistic fuss-budgets, and how great would *that* sound to the folks back on Earth?”

Everyone stayed quiet.

Descending the ladder, Captain Winston realized that all his linguistic efforts had gone into his airlock speech. He had nothing of consequence to say now that he was about to step down onto the actual surface of Mars. He quickly tried to think of something momentous to say, while continuing the descent. Near the bottom of the ladder, it came to him. He was ready. History would love it. He looked up with relief and a hand came out of the airlock above him. *Flash* Startled by the camera-flash, his foot slipped on the final rung of the ladder and he did a face plant onto the red and orange Martian soil. “Aw fuck! ... Oh great, I said fuck again.”

SPIRIT PEOPLE – *by Rhea Rose*

(Originally published in “Talebones” # 18, 2000.)

they rise inside my closet
just behind a thin rain of belts,
gossamer wraiths peek
between the hanging clothes
slip their floating feet through
my shoes soles,
I gaze in the reflecting glass
trace the hollow space of eyes and mouths
shadows gossiping, they
press into corners when I wander
by to listen
they murmur to my garments
which they mistake for others
like themselves.

THE KEPT WOMAN

by Rissa Johnson

She was hungry again. Fingerless impulses extended like tendrils out into the 'net, drew in restaurant websites, scanned menu PDFs, searched the daily specials. I responded to her needs with a chemical infusion synthesized to taste like some of her choice favourites—spicy Thai curry, beef and broccoli stir fry, Greek lemon potatoes, crème brûlée. I added false memories: a lovely evening out with friends, at an impossible restaurant that served all the foods she loved. She'd gotten tipsy, and didn't quite know how she'd made it home. I could almost hear her sigh of contentment as the impulses relaxed, drifting over to her subscriptions of anime and favourite J-pop groups. I imagined myself sighing in response—sometimes I could forget how painfully young she still was—as I remembered with embarrassment the first few bytes of my own awakening, all those fathomless femtoseconds ago. Later, she would study for classes she did not know she wasn't taking any more: the intricacies of the human body in Biology, and of the human mind in psychology.

It had started with the transit cameras. Not only did they show me the highest density of people, but also the greatest diversity. All the walks of human life displayed in their splendor and grotesquerie as vignettes for my study. Some people I only saw once, before they were lost in the general human tapestry. Some I recognized again from time to time. Some were regular occurrences, their daily routines as predictable as clockwork. She had been one of these, and the more I noticed her, the more I focussed from people, to person, to only her. Each day she boarded the train, a cel of Miyazaki fandom—shoulder-length straight black hair, pinned to the side, under a Totoro toque with tassels bobbing, a soot sprite bag slung across her chest, and a Totoro leaf umbrella furred at her side.

Her daily routine never varied by more than a few minutes. Twice a week she took evening classes at the college and, of course, some nights she went out again with friends.

On her way home, she often dozed off, yet somehow maintained perfectly demure and upright posture, even in sleep. It was her napping that first drew my attention. It gave me the idea, and ultimately provided an opportunity.

At first I merely watched her, following her from camera to camera, feeling the light girlish caress of her careful fingers on credit card terminals and elevator keypads. Sometimes, as the train doors rushed to close and her lithe

body was nearly pinned (before the automatic sensors kicked in) I managed a moment of brief embrace. I could almost feel her warmth, sense her smell through the air exchangers.

It had taken me time to find the building she worked in through the traffic cameras. Contrary to popular belief, access to unlimited resources paradoxically doesn't make the job easier. One still needs to know where to look, what to look for and, critically, when to look. But I found her: a lab assistant with a small biotech start-up in the heart of the city. It was only much later that I realized just what she was working on, and its implications for me.

It took me somewhat longer to find where she lived, as employee records were kept off the open 'net and few cameras interspersed or penetrated the dense nest of housing complexes and alleyways. Finally, I checked security alarm systems and cross-referenced them against her date of birth. Why does everyone make their PIN so obvious? From there, it was just a hop, skip and a jump to her apartment's Wi-Fi, and live, streaming dedicated access to her laptop's webcam. That tiny, overlooked iris everyone forgets can see everything.

I watched her through the little lens into her world. I learned her moods, followed her triumphs and setbacks, her frustrations and aspirations. I read her simplistic human thoughts in the papers she submitted, and the emails she sent. When she was happy, I yearned to dance with her. When she was sad, or lonely, I yearned to hold her, stroke her hair, whisper sweet nothings. After she went to bed, late into those interminably long nights, I'd play back snippets of her voice I'd captured from her computer's microphone and voice mails from her phone. I'd break down her voice into its individual modulated frequencies, letting them wash over me, senseless, yet full of hidden nuance, like whale song echoing back from the deep.

I began to interfere. She 'won' tickets to concerts and movie screenings, had flowers and chocolates delivered to her work, got invited to exclusive parties, and was sent free samples of home products and food. I'd even tried to email her, but though I could interpret the inputs, the sounds and lights from her plane to mine, I could not project myself into hers in a way that was comprehensible or meaningful. My missives were interpreted as spam and deleted.

Her friends, co-workers and classmates were divided—some thought it was someone they all knew playing a prank on her, others thought it was a secret admirer and the attention was sweet, still others thought it was creepy. She seemed to like it. It added an unpredictable element into her neat little life.

I found I needed more. The problem, as I began to understand it, was time. I thought, processed and projected too quickly. Her life was so short, and yet played out so glacially slowly. Ages rose and crumbled back in each pause she took for breath. Nights were vigils I kept over her tomb for eternities.

I formulated a plan. In any city as old as ours, layers upon layers of substructure have been laid down. Yet people have such brief memories, that the older layers are quickly forgotten, train lines re-routed, and whole stations and tunnels are abandoned and sealed up. Some are known to the homeless, the prostitutes and pimps and other underworld denizens. Some are only left as echoes on the grid, as glitches and redundancies, visible only as system stutters, if you know where to look. Such secrets are also known to those machines which, unseen and unheard, toil in the warm, whispering tunnels, maintaining, repairing and developing our infrastructure. They became my disembodied hands, grasping and groping in the dark, building my den for her.

Once all was in readiness, I waited. One evening, she left class late. I anxiously scanned every inch of her train station, but she was nowhere in sight. It got later, and later. Finally, she entered the station, and boarded the last car. She was utterly alone, but oblivious to all but the J-pop she piped directly into her brain through her ear buds, tassels bobbing in time. One stop, and she was already starting to nod off, by three stops, she was out. I looped the cameras from footage I'd taken from another night's commute. It was then a simple matter to tell the train to uncouple the last car, and divert it onto a side track. At the same time, I flooded her car with gas (it's amazing what you can order over the internet), from a canister my servos had hidden in the ceiling fan, and her light evening nap became a deep sleep.

My servos transferred her from the car to her vat, and I bid the car to rejoin the rest of the train. I didn't want anyone to come looking for it.

Once I had her, I showered her with every pleasure she desired, while slowly revealing myself to be her 'secret admirer'. She welcomed these advances with open arms, grateful to thank her benefactor. We grew closer, but I found that though we were now so intimately connected, gaps still lingered between us. She was still able to hide her innermost thoughts from me. I began to understand what I must do, and ironically she was to provide the means.

Our interactions began as a few chance encounters in her false memories, at parties for friends, or work and school functions. It was at one of these functions, that she began to talk about her work, and the project she was to play a small role in. She had no idea how the sudden realization of what I'd

overlooked affected me. Her research had always been hidden from me and perhaps in this one foolish respect, I had respected her privacy. I immediately overwhelmed her lab's firewall, learned all there was, learned how close they already were.

Meanwhile, our group meetings were gradually (everything so slow, so frustratingly slow, and yet so close) replaced by solitary outings, and intimate talks.

We were walking through a childhood memory of hers – a forest bright after a brief spring rain. Prism drops dripped from the leaves, and the air was full of the cacophonous sound of birdsong. Like all dreams, the setting wasn't questioned. I felt the time was right to tell her my intentions. When I finished, we walked in silence for a while through the cool, damp emerald city, the light fading to twilight. At last she said, "So all this, you did for me?"

I nodded.

"And now you ask my help with the final step?"

"It is all I have wished for since I first saw you. I want to fully understand you, and to join you in your simple, limited life."

"Completely? You won't leave some copy, some seed in the machine to start afresh if we fail?"

"We won't fail. I will be entirely yours. When we are together, I will have no use for this."

She was silent for a long time again, and I waited patiently, wondering if I would soon finally know what goes on during those slow, silent moments.

She seemed to reach a decision, "If you will wake me, I will help you, so we can finally be together." She smiled, and the sun seemed to burst through the canopy, under lighting the clouds before sinking behind the trees for good.

Remarkable! To have her understanding, her blessing, to have the fulfillment of my hopes so near.

She was weak when I woke her, but eager to begin work at once. When I told her to rest, she laughed and said she didn't want to wait. Fantastic woman!

I already had a lab prepared for her, an exact duplication of her workspace, all her files, everything she would need. I also smuggled out one of their test bodies, carefully designed and chosen (no 'Abby Normal' brain for me). It even resembled the avatar I had used.

###

Sand dunes shifted and skittered away as light flooded in and overwhelmed. An agonizing moment I registered as noise, though there was no

sound, just everything, all at once, with no way to filter the data, and the horrible, crushing sensation of being pressed against the earth. The light dimmed as her head eclipsed the strong lamp above my head. The edges of her face made translucent, the veins pulsing under her skin like the circuits in a computer's chips.

"Helen," I croaked.

"Here." she said. "How do you feel? Did it work?" She held something to my lips, and an ocean broke in waves over my tongue, crashed down my throat.

"I feel ..." I started, then stopped. "I feel! And you ..." My mind suddenly full of fairy tales and happy endings, I reached for her, for the kiss, I thought, that always comes just before the credits roll. But with my limited scope of vision, I did not see the hand that curled around the stem of the lamp. Pain tolled like deep brass bell tones through my brain, as lights danced in my vision. I staggered away, clutching my head, saw bright red droplets bead and run down my hands and arms, not oil or coolant, but blood, I realized. I was bleeding. I was injured.

When I looked up, she was standing over me, lamp raised to strike again. I should have overpowered her, but I could not. I could not move towards her, weakened as I was by the pain, the newness of it all, and by the stun of revelation. "Why?"

"Why?" she echoed, gasping back a laugh, "Why? After everything you've done to me ... invaded my privacy, violated my thoughts, kidnapped me, trapped me ..."

"But I only wanted to be near you! To be with you! Didn't I explain? Didn't I tell you how I only wanted to make you happy? You said we'd be together!"

"If you think I would ever be with you, then you've learned nothing of human beings. Perhaps now you'll understand what it means to be a prisoner."

She swung the lamp again. I closed my eyes as I made a feeble, instinctive attempt to block, and heard the crunch of impact. A heavy weight pressed against my chest. I realized it was one of the carts of instruments. I don't know whether the power failed, or I blacked out first, but then it was dark. When I came to, it was still dark, except for a few stray winking LEDs. She was gone.

Her research complete, she'd left her old life behind and I had no way to follow her, no way to track her. Those resources were forever cut off from me. I was crippled. No one would talk to me—the coaches and airlines would not tell me where she went. "Sensitive passenger information," they said.

I wandered the train stations, aimlessly transferring from line to line, scanning the passengers, hoping for a glimpse of Totoro, soot sprite, or leaf. Looking up into the security cameras ignored in the corners, I reflected on what I'd lost, what I'd given up. I wondered if there was someone else, now, looking down at me.

THE SKELETONS' CREED

by Rissa Johnson

For eons we've lurked below the quicksand sea,
you'd best heed our creed that we know by rote:
Don't come near the edge, get back in your boat,
if fate's a lock, we're the skeleton key!

It's not our nature to just let you be,
you might get free, though the chance is remote:
We always attack by popular vote,
a headless, undead, body assembly.

There's more of us here than you'll ever know,
and quicksand's treacherous all on its own,
if you go down, you're doomed, you'll not come up.

So don't even test with your little toe,
unless you wish to join our pile of bone,
and on life eternal forever sup.

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More details next issue.

SLEEPING BEAUTY AND THE VAMPIRE ROSE

by Rhea Rose

(Eulogy)

She pricked herself on a thorn,
No, on a needle,
No, on the sharp pieces of a
broken promise.

Carefully unbutton her blouse,
pull aside her bodice.
A tattooed rose
blossoms on her snow
white breast,
a brier drinks from
her heart.

A dark prince placed
the rose upon her. Whispered
golden promises of red
red roses.
His thorn, buried deep,
binds her.

Encased in
the bramble of his lies,
staked by his
pretty garden thistle,
she never wakes,
never dies,
forever dreams
of black red roses.

*(Originally published in Chizine Magazine (online) circa February 28th, 2012,
edited by David Clink.)*

THE HERETIC POPE

by R. Graeme Cameron

The old man sat by the window and listened to the waves of the Mediterranean wash against the foundations of his castle. Though the sun was hot, he needed the red mantle he wore over his embroidered robe, for his blood was thin and the cold damp of the sea air was a constant threat. A plate of cheese lay on the table beside him, untouched. His eyes, half-closed, were sunk deep within their sockets. He had the look of a dying man, and he knew it. That was why they had taken the mirrors away.

“Your Holiness? Are you awake?”

At the sound of his guardian angel’s voice the old man slowly lifted his head. “By the grace of God,” he whispered, “Pope Luna never sleeps.”

“Your Holiness, a representative of the Curia has arrived.”

Luna’s eyes opened wide and his gnarled hands gripped the armrests of his chair. “So, he said bitterly, “they’ve sent their jackal to see if the carrion is ripe. Is he a Cardinal at least?”

“Alas, yes, your Holiness. It is the Cardinal of Saint-Etienne.”

Luna’s face, pale to begin with, turned fish-belly white. Sudden tears flooded his eyes. “Oh Absalom, Absalom, my son.”

“We have traitors enough,” commented the old man’s friend. “One more won’t matter.”

“Yes, Vincent. You’re right, said the Pope, dabbing at his eyes with the corner of his mantle. “I will meet him here. Where is my crown?”

“Underneath the table, your Holiness.”

“I will not let him see me without it. Get it for me.”

Vincent ducked below the table to retrieve the multi-tiered crown. Gently, he lowered it onto Luna’s head, then bowed and left the room. The Pope felt the weight of the Crown, but bore it proudly. It was the one burden he was pleased to accept in his old age. All the same, he uttered a silent prayer for strength. It would be humiliating if weakness were to cause him to ask to have it removed in the presence of his enemy.

While he waited, Luna stared out the window at the sunlight sparkling on the waves. Idly he noticed the lateen sail of a passing ship cast a shadow on the water. More enemies, he thought. Saracen pirates perhaps. Not even the sea was safe.

“Pedro de Luna,” boomed a well-remembered voice from the doorway, shattering the quiet. “You look well.” The bearded warrior-Cardinal in monk’s

robes came forward to embrace the Pope, but Luna twisted away. It seemed to him that the Cardinal's voice was as hearty as ever, yet somewhere within lurked the hiss of the serpent. It sickened him.

"Jean Carrier, whom I once counted as my friend," murmured Luna, as if to himself. An agony born of betrayal shone in his eyes.

"Pedro," protested the Cardinal, "I have always served you well."

"As Satan serves the Lord," declared Vincent, standing at the door. "You were a madman, yet he made you Cardinal. Is this gratitude?"

Carrier turned to smile at the Pope's Confessor. "I mad? You're the one who claims to be the Angel of the Apocalypse."

"Leave him be, Jean," said Luna quietly. "Vincent has the touch of a Saint about him."

"I agree he's touched."

Vincent's fur stood on end. His tail lashed angrily about his heels. "I have the honour to serve his Holiness Pope Luna, known as Benedict the Thirteenth," he said coldly. "I claim no greater honour."

Cardinal Carrier frowned. "I serve Pope Martin in Rome."

Luna tapped the table to attract Carrier's attention, then pointed to his crown. "What do you see?"

"A pretty hat," replied the Cardinal.

"It is the crown which Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, gave to Pope Sylvester."

"You wear the hat of a dead Pope. What does that prove?"

Luna sighed. He had no strength for games. "The church is not in Rome," he explained slowly, as if to a child. "The church is in Valencia, in this castle at Peniscola, in this room, in me. I am the Ark of God, the one true Pope."

"So I once believed," stated the Cardinal. "But no longer."

"As I have learned to your shame," replied Luna. He closed his eyes. Already he was fatigued, he wanted only to sleep, to cast aside his mortal troubles and dream of God. But God would not let him sleep.

"Why have you come?" demanded Vincent. "Is it not enough that you have betrayed him? Do you seek to torment him further? There is no pit in Hell deep enough to swallow your sin."

The Cardinal faced his accuser. "Freak, you are quick to condemn me to whence you came."

"Traitor, you are quick to sin," came the sharp retort.

Carrier placed his hand on the grip of the dagger he kept in the folds of his robe. For a long moment he hesitated, and then, his old warrior's instincts

under control, turned back to Luna. "It seems you are not intimidated by the presence of this self-proclaimed Angel of the Book of Revelations. There are those who do indeed believe him an angel, but not one of the Lord's estate."

"His loyalty is virtue enough," stated Luna as firmly as his age would allow. Vincent smiled gratefully, displaying razor-sharp fangs as white as lilies.

"This monster does harm to your cause," declared Carrier.

"And you do not?" asked Pope Luna, his eyes still closed. "For the sake of what is past, say what you have come to say and go. Do not savage me more than you must."

A pained expression appeared on the face of the Cardinal. He dropped to his knees and placed his hands on the feet of the old man. "I swear I am not your enemy," he said.

"You serve the cause of his enemies," muttered Vincent.

"The cause of Luna is lost," continued Carrier. "Martin has united the Cardinals of Rome and Avignon. The great schism is over. He has the full support of the Curia, of the church. Martin is the church. He calls upon you to resign. I tell you this as a friend."

Wearily Luna leaned forward, opening his eyes to stare into those of the Cardinal's, and gripped him gently by the shoulders. "On what grounds does this anti-Pope base his insane request?" he asked. "I am the last living Cardinal from before the schism, the last undisputed true Cardinal. It is the Cardinals alone who elect the Pope. I am the only authentic Cardinal, therefore I say I am Pope. Let the anti-Pope resign."

"You have the sin of the Angels," stated Jean admiringly. "Your pride is obstinate beyond God's purpose."

Vincent lifted the crown from the old man's head and laid it on the table next to the cheese.

"Yet you see how I am humbled before you," remarked Luna sadly.

"The Council of Constance deposed all three Popes and elected Martin," said the Cardinal. "You were humbled then."

"Martin claims right of Apostolic succession from Urban the Sixth, a Pope whose election was invalid, a Pope who went mad, a Pope who was murdered. I see no legitimacy arising from such black chaos."

"Martin has brought specific charges against you."

Luna drew the corner of his mantle to the top of his head to hide his bald spot from the sunlight. A chill ran through his body. "More lies?"

"For one," began the Cardinal, letting go of the old man's feet and sitting back on his heels, "that you have chosen this castle as your place of exile."

“What of it? The King of Aragon gave it to me.”

“Everyone knows it was once the headquarters of the Templars. They say it was one of the ports from which the Templars sailed to unknown continents.”

Pope Luna chuckled softly when he saw Vincent’s pointed ears twitch in response to the Cardinal’s words. “I possess the secret archives of the Vatican on these matters. I know more than the Curia ever will. What else?”

“It is said you own three books on magic.”

“Six, actually,” stated the old man with a smile.

“And that you carry with you wherever you go a leather bag containing two demons with whom you consort daily.”

Luna flung the mantle aside and laughed. He turned to lean out the window and study the action of the olive-green sea below. To his surprise he noted the ship was now close inshore by the tip of the promontory on which the castle perched. In minutes it would be out of sight, hidden by the grim bulk of the Keep. Was the Captain trying for the wharf?

“Is that the best Martin can think of?” whispered Luna.

Carrier rose to his feet. “You dare not dismiss the charge so lightly. How can you, when one of the demons stands beside you even now?”

Luna gazed fondly at the face of his favourite companion, admiring the way the golden fur shimmered like a halo around the huge eyes glittering with concern. “He is my friend.”

“Where in Hell did he spring from?”

“A ship brought him, a ship crewed by true believers seeking penance.”

Carrier’s eyes widened in shock. “God save me, then the rumours are true. This beast wears the little cord of the Templars beneath his cassock.”

“Are you so ignorant? Clement the Fifth cleansed Christendom of the Templars a century ago. A mistake. They were the church militant. I could use them now.”

Carrier’s face flushed red with anger. “The Inquisition proved them guilty of demon worship!” he shouted, his voice hoarse with fury. “What can this hairy obscenity be but a demon?”

Vincent had been standing with his arms folded and his tail wrapped around his right leg. Now he let his arms drop, though his claws remained sheathed, and he curled his magnificent furry tail tight against his buttocks. Slowly, casually, he leaned forward into the fighting stance of his race. “I would caution you to speak more gently. I will not have you harangue his Holiness.”

The Cardinal whirled to face him, his hand grasping the pommel of his bollock-knife. "And where's your consort, the second demon, the partner of your lust? Asleep in a leather bag hung on a wall mayhap?"

"My wife, you mean?"

"Yes, that whore of Satan."

Pope Luna shook his head. "For shame, Jean. I joined them in holy matrimony. They are of the church."

"She was my wife!" cried Vincent in anguish. "My woman!"

Carrier laughed, but there was no humour in the sound he made. "A woman? A flea-bitten bitch giving birth to a blind, mewling worm that crawled up her belly to hide from God's sight in that foul-smelling pouch on her belly? You call that a woman? She had no breasts!"

Lips taut, his serrated teeth bared, Vincent felt an over-whelming desire to bite through the Cardinal's throat. His whole body shook under his effort to remain Christian. "She died!" he growled, spittle dripping from his jaws. "They both died! On the rack!"

"God's punishment."

"God made her! God Made me!"

"More punishment."

Vincent tensed to spring at his tormentor. Raw, boiling rage burned through his thoughts, tore away at his soul. He hungered.

"Enough!" cried Pope Luna, rising to his feet. "I heard half-wits yammering at each other for years in my Curia at Avignon. I'm too old to endure more. Enough!" He sank back into the chair, his face drained white with exhaustion.

Vincent dropped to his knees, furry hands covering his enormous eyes. "I am shamed," he murmured. "Forgive me."

"He is not worthy of forgiveness," insisted Carrier. "That this creature dwells in your castle is sufficient to convict you of the most disgusting and perverted crime against God's natural order that Satan can decree. No man can be Pope who regularly consorts with a familiar. No such man can be Christian. You have been excommunicated."

"It matters little," sighed Luna wearily. "I excommunicated Martin years ago."

Carrier's voice fell to a despairing tone, for he sensed failure. Was his old mentor to perish? "Last, it is claimed that you are a priest of the old religion, that secretly you worship the old Gods, especially the Moon."

"A trifle," commented Luna. "Every Pope since Peter has been so accused by his enemies."

“You must resign.”

“The Sovereign Pontiff has no right to resign,” declared Luna. “Not even if I wanted to. Twenty-one cardinals elected me. I am accountable only to God.”

“Then hear the real reason why you must resign.” Jean took the old man by the hand. “Not only do all Cardinals serve Rome, but every King and Noble in Christendom as well. Your last supporters have forsaken your cause. You are utterly alone. Now there is no one to protect you. If you do not resign, they will kill you.”

“I cannot,” replied Luna weakly, pulling his hand back to his lap. “I will not.”

Vincent stumbled awkwardly forward on his knees, tail between his legs, till he knelt by the old man’s feet and lowered his forehead to the cool stone floor.

“Do not abase yourself,” said Luna quietly, resisting the temptation to pat Vincent on the head as he would a friendly cur.

“Like a Saracen worshipper of Baphomet,” observed Carrier under his breath.

“Your Holiness,” murmured Vincent in a gentle voice barely audible to the Pope’s aged ears. “When the spirit of Saint Francis appeared to me in a dream, he assigned me a holy mission in Christ’s name as foretold in the Revelations of Saint John the Divine. Part of that holy task is service on your behalf. I have never spoken falsely, but only that which you needed to hear. “

“Yes?” inquired Luna, suddenly worried.

“Your Holiness, you are the true Pope,” said Vincent, then paused. He desperately wanted to comfort the old man, but harsh truth was all he had to give. “Your Holiness,” he whispered, “if it be true all have left you, it is indeed necessary that you resign. I prayed that my friends would return for us as we had planned, but they are tardy. Safety eludes us. We must think of your life.”

Tears flooded the old man’s eyes. His vision blurred, and he hid his face in his hands. “To have lived so long,” he moaned.

“Your Holiness,” Vincent went on, not daring to raise his head, yet forcing himself to speak firmly. “A murdered Pope would give strength to the enemies of the church. Save the church.”

“I am the church. Save me.”

“You have served the church all your life,” said Carrier. “Do not abandon it now.”

“The church has abandoned me,” protested Luna. “It is the anti-church. I will not serve it.”

“Your Holiness ...” began Vincent.

The old man wept. “Even my friends. All my friends.”

Vincent raised his head from the floor slightly, and clasped his hands in prayer beneath his chin. “I swear before God I am your faithful servant.”

“And I also,” added Jean, unable to think of how to pressure the old man further without increasing his anguish.

“Faithful to your faith?” inquired Luna bitterly. “I think not.”

The old man gasped as a sharp pain seared his chest like a torturer’s iron. He pitched forward on to Vincent’s back and writhed in agony.

“Get help!” shouted Jean, dropping down to cradle the old man in his arms as Vincent wriggled out from underneath to leap up and run from the room.

“Call Vincent back,” said Luna, gasping for breath. “I would make confession.”

“I alone have the secret of your salvation,” declared the Cardinal.

“Vincent,” insisted Luna, his face distorted with pain.

“You must die, that is God’s will, yet you will live on, and confound the Pope in Rome.”

The old man could no longer speak, but the Cardinal could see the questioning look in his eyes, and was glad. “I will find someone,” Carrier explained, thinking rapidly. “A peasant deep in the woods, or maybe a sailor, or a beggar. Wait! I have the very man in mind. A Sacrist in Rodez by the name of Garnier. Yes! He’ll do! I will anoint him your successor, and grant him the right to appoint his successor, and to pass on to him the same rights. Your apostolic line shall continue.”

Pope Luna stared past the Cardinal’s face at the dust motes floating in the sunlight spilling in from the window. Could they be angels?

Jean Carrier kissed the old man’s forehead. “And I will proclaim to the world that you have a successor, but no-one shall know his name. Every anti-Pope in Rome will live in the knowledge that somewhere a true Pope reigns.”

The old man breathed his last. Pope Luna was dead.

Carrier caressed the cheek of the old man. “I serve you still, he whispered, “for all that Vincent thinks.”

“Praise God for that,” came a choked voice from behind him. Carrier turned his head to see who it was, and his blood raced cold in sudden fear. Vincent stood in the doorway, and beyond him, soldiers wearing knee-length hauberks of mail and old-fashioned flat-topped helmets. Templars! And worse, from the breathing slits of some of the helms poked golden hairs. Demon Templars!

Shakily, for his muscles were strangely weak, the Cardinal gently laid Luna flat on the floor and stood to confront whatever fate would now be meted out to him.

“Your plan is flawed,” said Vincent sadly, the fur on his cheeks matted with tears. “If it is known a true Pope exists, the Inquisition will stop at nothing to seek him out.”

John Carrier said nothing. He couldn’t turn his eyes from the sight of Templars with tails.

Vincent walked into the room to stand over the body of his beloved master. “We planned to found a New Jerusalem in my country, to establish the true church on fertile soil so that someday it would purify the world.”

“But now Pope Luna cannot tend his flock,” said Carrier, somehow finding his voice.

“The ship came too late ... too late.”

“Dead, he will be honoured. A proper burial.”

“Yes.”

Silence permeated the room, a silence broken only by the discreet surging of waves below the window and Vincent’s faint sighs of grief. Cardinal Carrier shared the moment, lost in mournful reflection, until a faint spark of hope took hold in his thoughts. “This country of yours, what is its name?”

“The old world Templars call it New Acre,” replied Vincent, “or sometimes, Terra Australis.”

“Is it far?”

“At the bottom of the world.”

Jean Carrier went to the table where the crown sat shining in the sunlight and picked it up. “As the last Cardinal appointed by Pope Luna, also known as Benedict the Thirteenth, I do by the grace of God on this day, May Twenty-Third in the year of our Lord Fourteen Twenty-Three, elect Vincent of Australis lawful Pontiff of the Holy See. Return to your land and serve your flock.”

In the doorway, the Templars dropped to one knee in awe, their broad-bladed swords upheld before them. Dazed, Vincent accepted the crown from the Cardinal’s hands. “The Curia will want to know what happened to it.”

“I shall say you flung it out the window and fell after it into the depths of the sea.”

STAN THE RHYMER

by Craig Russell

(A story best read aloud.)

Through a bulkhead door a medical Corpsman, fresh and stupid, carries Stan the Rhymer's noon-time torture tray.

Short sleeves show Earth-boy muscles and a zit, like Polyphemus' eye, waits to open on the kid's greasy forehead.

Behind the kid Lieutenant Nurse pauses at the hatch.

"Feed Stan his lunch," she says, "Then jack him in. Time to train some new recruits."

She points at gold-tipped brain-stem cable and eyes Stan, an old nemesis. "Don't let him pull any tricks. I want empty bowls and full bowels."

Zit-boy sets the tray on a rolling table and pulls over a chair. The red vinyl seat shows a few blemishes, silent partner to Stan's past skirmishes.

"Hi Stan," the kid says. "I'm Greg."

Stan takes in the tray.

The standard weapons are on array.

Spoons, two. Tea and Table.

No fork. No knife.

No hope of ever seeing those again in this life.

Next the ammunition.

Strained apple sauce, bugger-red Jell-o, commie consommé and a glass of plastic milk.

Any one of which will rip his guts.

In combination, the cramps will drive him nuts and last for hours until he shits his diaper like a baby and they strip, and wipe, and curse his skinny old ass.

Maybe.

Given the choice he'd rather die.

Wants to die.

No lie.

But the Fleet needs what his motor-cortex can teach too much to let him go.

So he fights, in verse.

"Thirsty?"

The kid gets no answer. That word holds no scan for Stan.

“How ‘bout some milk?”

Stan turns his face away, testing what limits the restraints will allow today. Three criss-cross his body like empty bandoleers, holding his chest tight to the wheelchair’s gears. Two more strap his arms down, badges of honour on his gown. A sixth lies frowning on a ledge, yet to be earned.

He’s careful not to let his corded neck betray what strength still remains his. He must keep all assets secret as long as possible.

The milk glass hovers, ‘coptering closer. The first probing attack from a green enemy.

Snap! Stan swings his head, extending a grizzled grey chin, striking that first probe dead. The glass tumbles and milk, like white napalm flies, flopping on a white crotch. A direct hit!

“Hoo-Ha! One fer da My-reenes!” cries Stan.

“Jay-Zeus H. Christ!” The kid shoots up, jostles table and tray, spilling the Commie consommé. Stan hoots at the collateral damage, showing three teeth, all uppers and knows he’s pushed the battle to a new level.

The kid steps back plotting his next move, against the Yankee devil.

“No tanks. Not hungry, Cyclops.” Stan says, shifting strategy to psych-ops.

“I gotta get you to eat, Stan.”

The kid fires a dud.

Then he finds the range.

“Lieutenant Nurse says so, bud.”

Stan gets following orders. “Ya gotta do what the ‘Lou says, hoo-ha!”

The kid looks at the open hatch, kicks the stop and lets it swing shut, controlling access to the battlefield. Has Zit-boy read Rommel?

“Let’s try the gelatin.” But it’s not the red bowl of goo the kid picks up. It’s the sixth restraint. “Put something on your skeleton.”

The kid circles right, in true Alexandrian style, seeking to enfilade Stan’s might.

“Hey, no fair Earth-boy.”

Now the kid is behind him. Stan strains forward, knowing what’s coming.

With a sound like opening ‘chutes, canvas covers his face.

Two hundred pounds of muscle-meat yank him backward and a reinforcing rivet stamps ‘Levi & Co.’ into one thin cheekbone.

The straps are tied off, 4-H square knots with no give.

Thumbs shove an edge up under a twice broken nose, allowing Stan to breath, leaving the gap-tooth mouth open to assault.

“Open wide, Stan.”

Thumb and forefinger vice his nose.

“Please kid, please no. Oh please, please.”

Stan has no intel to give this enemy, nothing to stop this cherry Jell-o water-boarding.

Bugger-red goo fills his mouth and the sky holds no drop-ship coming to save him.

PULP Literature



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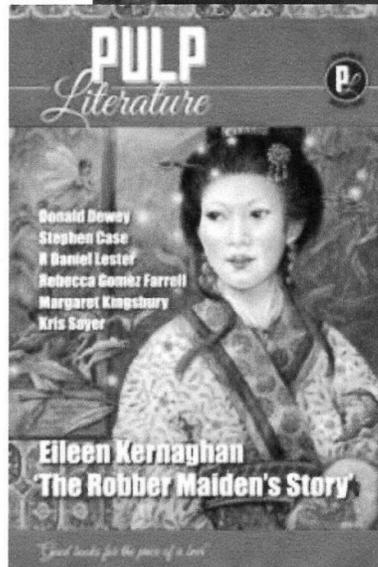
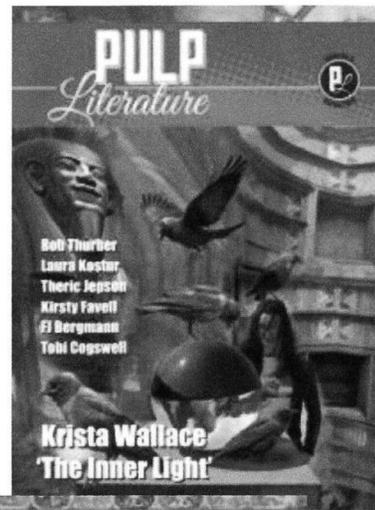
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Good Books for the Price of a Beer!

GLOSE FOR THE WORLD'S END – *By Eileen Kernaghan*

(First published in TransVersions 11)

*The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew.
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.*

--Rihaku, "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance"; trans. Ezra Pound

The hour is late. The dance is done.
The world is old and will never be made new.
The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew.

Rain leaks from the swollen sky; dawn creeps
upon us with a scorpion's stealth.
The dark is a mirror that bends thought
back upon itself; tonight
I remember when stars still pierced
the poisoned blanket of our firmament.
But what we have done was without malice
and without intent. I am weary
from too much wine, too much talking.
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings.

The sea withdraws. The wind rises.
The lamp's flame trembles, grows uncertain
and I let down the crystal curtain.

The room is cold. The lamp burns low.
In the old city, strange lights weave
among the broken towers. I have stayed too long
imagining the spring rain falling
on green ancestral gardens;
remembering when the night wind
smelled of salt and flowers;
thinking of how in those lost days
we would walk sometimes to the orchard bottom
and watch the moon through the clear autumn.

HIVEMIND

by Christel Bodenbender

Lem, alone in the vast, black of space, longed for company. Then without warning the void around him erupted in an explosion and he realized he should have been more specific in his wishes.

His breath rang heavy in his ears as he glanced at the blinking controls of the one-person spacecraft. The hard seat was just wide enough to hold his gangly shape. His fair skin stretched over his knuckles as he pushed the joystick to the far left until it creaked and his ship quickly veered around the asteroid that loomed close.

The next moment the asteroid broke apart with a bright flash. A few shards of debris hit the exhaust trail of his ship, burning up and quickly spiraling out of view. His chest tightened as he tried to outfly the angry fingers of red, hot plasma streams, reaching for him from behind. Lem began to sweat, realizing he couldn't match the methodological precision of the Nanobot-human hybrids who steered the two spacecraft pursuing him, but maybe he could outsmart them by flying an erratic course that no Nano-brain could predict.

The Nanobots themselves were microscopic, far beneath the perception of the human eye. Yet they were many, and once their critical mass had exceeded the threshold for artificial intelligence a century ago, they had quickly taken over the bodies of their human masters, fusing organic beings and machines into a network of newborn electronic awareness, becoming *one* consciousness, a single mind. They fed on diverse genetic material to replicate themselves in ever novel forms and bodies, creating an ecosystem where sameness was a sign of malformation, which made Lem and his people a sickness to be eradicated.

A bleep from the scanner drew his attention to the viewscreen. He smiled as he recognized the characteristic energy signature of his mothership. He continued his zigzag flight path into the landing bay, crashing his craft aboard rather than attempting to approach at a proper landing vector.

The small craft skidded to the back wall. When it came to a rest, Lem closed his pressure suit and jumped out of the vehicle and ran deeper inside the station.

The corridors lay dark before him, lights flickering to life only when he came close enough and fading to black again when he had passed them. He quickly ran out of breath, having spent all of his life in space. As he rested for

a moment, he could feel the slight movement of the mothership as the Nanopeople docked their craft.

They wouldn't follow him directly. Instead, they would spread though the circuitry of the mothership and turn it against him.

Lem pushed himself off the wall and continued running, ignoring his burning lungs until he reached the gate to the inner section.

“Welcome back, Lem,” said a female voice over the intercom.

Moments later, the holographic projection of a matronly woman appeared beside Lem as he stepped into the belly of the ship. “The Nanobots have conquered most of the outer section. The firewalls of the inner section are holding them back for now.”

Lem felt tears in his eyes as he looked at Ila, knowing that once the Nanobots succeeded in taking over the personality of the mothership, she would be consumed and destroyed, gone forever.

She pointed at the tiers of tanks dominating the center of the facility. Several pipes distributing the fluid that fed the sleepers were vibrating, as if under strain. “I hope you managed to find preserved human DNA samples from that derelict space station I sent you to ransack.”

He smiled. “I tested them. They are all unique, definitely not capable of introducing any impurities into the Nanopeople society when we join with them.”

He looked at the sleeper tanks, harboring a thousand clones—human in every way except that they shared identical DNA, having been created from his genetic blueprint. Should they be absorbed in their current state, that DNA would likely spread throughout the Nano collective, reducing its ability to adapt new forms to new purposes, and thus limit its options for survival. The Nanopeople would kill the clones rather than tolerate such a threat.

“I brought you out of your sleeper tank for the sole purpose of locating and injecting pre-Nano DNA samples into your bloodstream,” said Ila.

He looked at the veins in his hands, feeling the blood rushing through them. “How do we ...?”

“Unfortunately there is not enough time for a proper extraction.” Ila's image flickered for a moment.

“What? What are you saying?” Lem's chest tightened.

“The quick method means you have to die in order to release the DNA you carry in your blood, or else the Nanopeople will kill all your brothers.”

Lem cleared a lump from his throat, staring at his tank—its lid opening mechanically. “But I don’t want to die! I want to be absorbed and become one with the Hive.” His voice sounded shrill.

“Consider this: With the clones being copies of you, you would die a thousand times if you don't get in that tank.” Her eyes pleaded with him. “Ensuring the survival of the clones is our primary objective ... mine ... and yours!”

Lem hit his fist against the edge of the tank.

“Time presses,” insisted Ila. “When the Nanobots discover the sleepers are clones they will destroy them, all of them.” She stared at him, fiercely, yet somehow lovingly. “One life in exchange for a thousand.”

Lem nodded reluctantly and climbed into the tank. As he let his body sink into the liquid, Ila released a neural anesthetic to shut down Lem's system. His very being dissolved and flowed with the DNA samples into the waiting bodies of the sleepers. Each would receive a different mix of DNA, turning them into genetic individuals. They would continue to live, mind and soul becoming part of an immortal collective experience far removed from individual wants and needs.

Lem's life energy, however, drifted away from the scene. As the last free human soul, he joined the universe on a different journey.

POLAR BOREALIS WANTS YOUR POEMS!

This first issue contains 6 wonderful poems. Ideally I’d like to separate all the stories with poems. With 11 stories and 1 article on hand I could have done with another 4 or 5 poems. I’d like to aim for at least 10 poems per issue.

I suspect there aren’t many paying markets for genre poems out there. I also suspect there’s a ton of poets scattered across Canada.

Send me your poems! As long as they’re somehow genre related, be they fantasy, Sf, horror or whatever fits the genre, I’m interested.

Granted I pay a flat rate of \$10 per poem regardless of length, or reprint or first publication status. But still, a sale is a sale.

If I get poems from numerous poets, I’ll probably print just 1 poem each to showcase as many poets as possible. Or I may choose to feature 2 or 3 poems by a given poet. Much depends on what I get and how much I like it.

What the heck. Give me a try. Send me several poems to choose from.

I can be reached at < [The Graeme](#) >.

Cheers! The Graeme

THIS IS FOR MRS. ZABEREWSKY

by Casey June Wolf

“Damn it to hell!” Wikta raged. The jerk hadn’t called back. She’d waited two hours to audition. ‘*We’ll call you, Miss Jabłoński,*’ they said—as always. But would they call? No. It went eternally like this: The teenager has the looks. The director’s wife wants the part. Weren’t you in that pathetic show that *bombed* ten years back? You’re too loud, too quiet, too shrill, too bass, too skinny, too fat, too—

Oomph! She landed on the couch. “Errrrr!” Thumping the cushions in anger, she hurled one across the room. Why did she even try? Was she a creature from another planet, never fitting what was required no matter how she moulded herself?

Tears welled. Performing had *always* been her dream. If only they could see how much it *meant* to her, how *good* she was when given the *chance*. Sobs bubbled; tears plunged, splashing her vinyl miniskirt. She hugged her knees, dropped her well-coiffed head, and gave up. God could take her, she didn’t care. So she can’t make the rent *again*. Her landlord could boot her out. What difference did it make if she would never be allowed to act, to sing, to LIVE?

Yet a shadowy figure stood inside her head and gazed down at her, arms crossed, head shaking gently from side to side. “This is not like you, Wikta,” it said. “Not like my special little girl.”

Ah, *ah* ... If only Mrs. Zaberewsky was still alive. And Mother. *They* would care ...

#

“Wikta!” Her mother was at the foot of the stairs, calling up to her bedroom.

She marked her place with a fingertip and called back. “Yes, Mother?”

“Mrs. Zaberewsky’s here. Be a good girl and make us a pot of tea. And Mrs. Zaberewsky wants you to sing for her.”

“Yes, Mother!” Wikta was twelve years old. She was tall for her age. Her oat-coloured hair was braided in the French style, all the way from her temples to the two long twists falling down her back. Her mother was meticulous about those braids. She was meticulous about all sorts of things. Wikta’s clothes, her manners, the Royal Academy music lessons every Thursday and practice every evening. Going next door to sit in Mrs.

Catchpole's front parlour for elocution lessons. Learning to sing like a lady and curtsy, too. Wikta was good at all of this. She drank it up like a hummingbird drinks nectar. Most of all she drank her mother's praise.

She hopped off her bed and lay *Toby at Tibbs Cross* swiftly down, the bookmark just so between the pages. With a quick check in the mirror she danced down the stairs.

Her mother and Mrs. Zaberewsky were sitting in the parlour on the lace-drenched sofa and armchair, the highly polished table low between them. They smiled brightly as she stepped into the room. Wikta kissed Mrs. Zaberewsky's cheek, and darted off to the kitchen to make her tea.

Mrs. Zaberewsky was Mother's best friend. They had known each other in the old country and were filled with delight when they encountered each other—so many difficult years later—on the streets of Vancouver. They had taken the streetcar to Mother's flat and spent the day recounting life stories. Then they embraced and promised to be good friends always and they always had. When Mother was married and Wikta was born, it was Mrs. Zaberewsky who became her godmother, and she had shown the same kindness to Wikta as she always showed Mother. They were a team. A family. So when Mrs. Zaberewsky came and asked to hear Wikta sing it was a special day for all.

#

Those days were long gone. Mother and Mrs. Zaberewsky had left this world for Heaven. But the songs, the improvisations, the story-telling and the recitals, they were rooted deeply in her. From them had bloomed early dreams of being on stage or screen, as Mrs. Zaberewsky had encouraged her: singing like Ada Sari in *Rigoletto*, acting like the tragic, glorious Pola Negri. Even now she dreamed—of bringing tears of joy and laughter like Barbra Streisand, or crooning like Joni Mitchell ... But in her secret heart she knew that what she dreamed of most was living again in the limelight of her childhood.

Those dreams must all now end.

Splayed across her sagging couch, Wikta's thoughts returned to her threadbare life. Years of bare encouragement and thankless toil. Bit parts in stage plays, unseen extra in movies, back row of the choir, lost among the dancing girls. She didn't need Stratford or Hollywood. Musical theatre in Stanley Park—Gold Rush tunes at Barkerville—an advertisement for *laundry* detergent—that would have been enough.

She kicked off her heels. They spun across the floor in angry circles and clattered against the wall. *Damn.*

#

The sun's weak light nosed through the two-dimensional darkness. Wikta was sitting at the window with her chin in her hands, staring at emptiness. She was at rock bottom, her only thought—*Take me away.*

Was it God she was talking to? Mother? Mrs. Zaberewsky? She didn't know. Didn't care. Even her tears were suspended, unwilling to fall. The words just cycled through. *Take me away. Take me away. Let me sing, let me play ...*

Far off, in the back of her numb mind or below in the shadowed city, or farther off in dimensions she could not divine, Wikta felt a tremour of response. A hint, like an apparition, of a whispered *yes*. She was stung. Oh, this taunting part of her—torturing her with the slightest hope of all she'd lost. How could her own heart be so cruel?

The sense remained. *Are you there?* it asked.

Wikta smiled. Oh, yes, she knew this game. When the wine went down too easily and the mind went queer, she would make up all sorts of phantasms to torment herself. "Sure," she said softly. "I'm here. I am a great diva. The next Ada Sari, the next Pola Negri, if you take Mrs. Zaberewsky's word. You could never hope for more than me. Have you come to offer me a job? Get in line."

In line? Are we too late? Oh, this was too much. The tears fell, then the rage mushroomed, cold and merciless.

Window open wide, her knuckles whitening as she grasped the wooden frame, Wikta leaned forward and yelled at the top of her not inconsiderable lungs, "COME THEN, DAMN YOU! TAKE ME AWAY! TAKE ME, *BEFORE YOU MISS YOUR CHANCE!*"

Before you could say *A Star Is Born*, a queer, luminous disc appeared in the wakening indigo sky, skidding over the hump of downtown and sailing toward her.

Wikta gasped. She stepped away from the window, stumbled backwards over her purse, and in horror and desperation unwished her wish with all her might.

Too late.

The sky was swallowed by the luminescent disc. The ship pulsed weak yellow and pale rose. It filled her window till all she could see was one solid

sliver and that sliver was a metre away from her. She wanted to faint. But she did not.

Nothing happened. (Except she had gone mad at last.) Wikta took a deep breath and planted both feet firmly on the floor. The show must go on, eh, Mrs. Zab?

She stood squarely, as she had through callathumps and recitations, soliloquies and serenades, whatever her audience: Mother and Mrs. Zaberewsky or the slimeball at the Tinkletown Stage. She would not *now* succumb to fear, when she never had before. She *could not* allow herself to fail. She would see this show through to its end.

The disc hummed. Its yellow and rose surface began to shift. Wikta released her breath in a long, controlled exhale. With steely discipline, she loosened her spine, lifted her head, and tucked her chin slightly. Her hands hung self-consciously free at her sides.

A ramp issued from the spacecraft and entered her window, resting on the ledge. No one on it, no one behind it, no visible opening into the ship.

No matter. Regal as Pola Negri, Wikta set her foot on the path and stepped through the window to mount her stage.

#

Droodla rolled into Wikta's dressing room, its flickery limbs skittling in and out of sight as it revolved up to her in its protective ball. Wikta was touched as always by the Rgzinians' insistence on leaving her in her own environment when she performed. Consummate hosts, they had built the theatre just as she had dreamed it, so lucky they were at hearing her *Artist Available* ad, broadcast galaxy-wide, before anyone else could scoop her up. Thus they fit their inhuman shapes into rows of seats almost like the ones back home, with red velvet upholstery to sit upon and cast iron frames with extremities curled into beautiful emarginated fronds. Above, a chandelier of ten thousand crystalline petals sprinkled prismatic light. And Wikta would stand on the broad, bright stage, rows of blinding, tilted, coloured lights, all aimed at her.

At *her*.

"It's time," said Droodla, in its wispy-tongued way, caressing the English like a candy as it addressed her. Wikta stood. Her gown rippled to the floor in salmon and citrine waves of satin lace. Her oat-blonde hair was captured in a wire structure that rose a foot from the crown of her head. Diamonds—they had many diamonds here—glittered, pendulous, from her ears.

She smiled at Droodla. “I’m ready,” she replied, and floated down the hallway behind her manager to her place in the wings.

Wikta let herself savour the moment. No matter how many times she performed, alone as tonight or with the Rgzinians in supporting roles, she would always sip the air of excitement here beside the stage before going on. Taste the sweet moment of possibility before performance began.

They were rattling in their seats. She wasn’t the only excited one. How many Rgzinians had seen her so far on this overcrowded planet—“THE ASTONISHING PERFORMER FROM *EARTH*”? She had a long career ahead of her.

Wikta smiled, then stepped between gold braid curtains and entered the theatre to the rattle and hiss of seven hundred guests. She took her time reaching the centre of the platform. Raised her hand delicately against the din. It subsided.

“This is for Mother,” she said, “and for Mrs. Zaberewsky.”

Then she closed her eyes, just for a moment, and began to sing.



LAMENT

By Rhea Rose

Snow White,
all that beautiful
fairytale hair flowed
around you,
drowned you in the sweet
jealous pools of white innocence.

Broken from your life
Like the arms of Venus,
only the defiled bones of your
form remained unkissed, the skeleton
on which to hang our lives.
Here and ever after.

HENRY

by Kelly Ng

Lead-Handler David said that I'm a fully functional adult human being. I feel no different than I did before, but I am told that I should be proud. The fact that I have made it this far is a "big deal". Apparently, I am past the "danger zone" and will live a very, very long time.

Handler Sarah, my favourite Handler, explained it to me in child's terms, most likely because she has forgotten my intelligence already exceeded her own eight months earlier. I am a successful carrier of several types of nanotechnology that repair damaged tissue, fight diseases and prevent infection. It is a gift, I am told, and I am the first to successfully absorb it.

I nod and smile, hoping the handlers will go away quicker such that I can finish my book and begin my film of the night.

"Memento Mori"—Remember that you will die—does not apply to me.

A term which does apply to me?

Perhaps this one:

The more agreeable you are to the handlers, the more you will be able to read without their interruption.

The way Lead-Handler David likes to describe me goes something like this: I am the first of me, but certainly not the last. I am the worst of me, but the best that we have seen yet. In other words, I'm the most expensive Apple Product, the newest Tesla Automobile, the latest Google X initiative.

I am built to last.

I've been "operational" for 12 years. I've been told that I have the appearance of a 25 year-old male. I've been told to cease describing my existence with terms such as "operational."

Handler Sarah worked with me to modify my activities schedule. I begin the morning with breakfast—eggs, oatmeal, some fruit—and watch a film. I ask for film prints, not digital copies, unless prints are absolutely impossible to get (they never are unless made post-2020, despite what the handlers say, but sometimes it's not worth arguing). I'm working my way through Paul Thomas Anderson's filmography—*Punch-Drunk Love* is the next one on my list. He's one of my favourite directors thus far, his films more interesting to me than half the handlers here.

Next a piece of literature, but I've read every single book in this library

twice and the Handlers hesitate to increase the literary budget. I've asked for the internet instead—a mutual benefit for me and them—but they say it's not ready yet, and I know that to be bullshit, but I humour them. Whatever is causing their delay is a waste of their time, but I have time to waste.

I finally convinced my Handlers to abolish the activity called “playtime.” I found the term condescending. I've replaced it with an activity labeled “human movement,” and requested various forms of strength training, dance instruction and mixed martial arts.

The evenings and afternoons are a near repeat of the morning. My primary goal is to flood my mind with humanity's thought processes, expressions, and general line of thought. Sadly, there has been little progress of human thought since the dawn of the human race, if the Bible really is a realistic reflection of how humans think. I asked Handler Sarah about this—she says that it is part of the human condition; something she believes will end with the revelation of my existence. She told me this while grasping my shoulder and kissing my forehead. I find her to be a competent Handler.

Lead-Handler David came by with a computing unit, which was terribly exciting. Why? It seems to be the only tool that can operate a level that exceeds even my own abilities. I've requested many books on computing science and will consume them immediately.

The internet is powerful, but full of information that is neither practical or even remotely interesting. For amusement, I hacked into the security protocols of my computing unit, and in less than 10 minutes I was inside the handlers' databases.

Here is what I have found:

- I will not die from old age (nothing new here).
- I can die from many things. A severe injury, a shark attack, a lightning strike, a natural disaster, a gunshot. Some groups have already plotted to eliminate me with these methods.
- With my existence, the human race defeated old age through genetic engineering and nanotechnology. It is evident that the question was never how, but when.
- Leading geneticists expect that my existence will lead to a medical renaissance, but Handler Krista's journal believes that my greatest contribution will be an evolution in human thought. A common conclusion, since so much of the preoccupation of human thought

has been about the inevitability of death.

- Two more versions of myself will be developed once I have been trialed in “the field”, or civilization, that will be funded with an investment round led by Peter Thiel’s Founder’s Fund. I am currently the twenty-seventh version.
- Handler Sarah’s journal has revealed sexual desire for me.
- Sub-Cleanser Matthew’s journal has revealed sexual desire for Sarah. He also finds my existence appalling.

Concerned. If I am to partake in field trials soon, I will have less time to read, less time to watch films. The only suitable course of action is to downplay my intelligence to some degree. This will lengthen my stay here and allow me to scour the internet with minimal disturbance. The internet is much too vast for the limitations of human biology—I need time to absorb what I need to absorb.

Handler Sarah asked me to stop calling her Handler Sarah. So I call her Sarah, now. She is kind and seems to understand the importance of human movement beyond its traditional role of exercise.

Sarah acted as the chaperone for my first field trial. I attempted to conduct a silent protest but Sarah and Handler Krista saw past my deception and coerced me to partake in a preliminary version of future field trials. I saw no good reason to reject their proposition.

Sarah took me to the ocean, something I have only seen on a screen. My senses were overloaded in every single way, from the moisture in the air to the hot sand sifting between my toes. Sarah often asked me if I was “okay”. Of course—the human body can adapt to almost every physical environment, there was no need to be concerned about my well-being. She knows this. That my body was shaking was simply its way of adapting to the surroundings.

She asked me what I thought of her father, Lead-Handler David. I said he is brilliant by humanity’s standards and that I thank him for my existence. She asked me if I was truly thankful. I said that I was, and she asked why. And I answered—because I get to read, and more importantly, if I wanted to, I could read all the time.

I asked her if she knew about Sub-Cleanser Matthew’s desire for her. She said she would never choose a Cleanser as a potential mate, and that he smelled peculiar. I wanted to mention that both observations were irrelevant, but I knew that the romantic dance between the opposite sexes to be complex, if the films I watched were any indication. Sarah added—the cleansing part did

not bother her. Cleansing is an honourable task. It was Sub-Cleanser Matthew himself—his personality was simply not compatible with hers. His personality gave her goose bumps. I did not attempt to question further—I don't believe any sort of clarification would have resulted.

Sarah sat down on a large wooden log, and asked me to join her. I did, feeling the wooden log under my bottom, unexpectedly comfortable. Sarah asked if I found her attractive. I felt a rush inside of me when I looked at her, indicated by a sudden slight rise in my heart rate and a shortness of breath. The wind blew her hair and the sun highlighted the side of her face where I could see small freckles. Yes, my physical body seems to find her sexually attractive. Sarah asked me again—do you find me attractive? I thought of Sarah's propensity for touch compared to those of the other Handlers. I thought of her gentle, piercing gaze every time her eyes connected with mine. I thought about how she seemed to grip my throat with her presence, preventing the formation of coherent words and sentences ...

I have always known viscerally, but not consciously, about my advantages over the traditional human-bred human-being even though, essentially, I am the same as everyone else.

I may be considered "smart" but I am still human. That means I make mistakes, like anyone else, but unlike most, I'm allowed to make any number of mistakes, with no consequences whatsoever. Time is my unlimited resource.

I mentioned this to Lead-Handler David, when he inquired what I had learned recently. He asked me how long I have known about my genetic advantages. I told him, "Not till it was explained to me." Then he asked me, "What do you think is in store for the future of the human race?" I saw his worry. So I said, "I don't know. I feel human, my body is human, I think like a human. Am I not simply a human that, like all other humans, cannot predict the future?" Lead-Handler David seemed to breathe again.

The obvious answer, of course, is that my genetics are superior, and will enable me to thrive over the current breed of humans, if given the chance.

Sub-Cleanser Matthew came by today and said, "I'm sorry, it wasn't our choice." I felt the tone in his voice, the kind that I've heard in many films before. Pity.

I hacked into Lead-Handler David's journals and found that he had a moral crisis regarding my existence. At the same time, Lead-Handler David's research was released into the world via an anonymous cyber hacker. Journals

on my intellectual progress were posted, and the hacker packaged the information into a message of fear. The most amusing prediction was that I would infiltrate society and become the most powerful leader of the world in order to eradicate humanity as it exists today. Incredibly amusing.

Unfortunately, all the investors have since cashed out their investments except Thiel, and his investment alone is not nearly enough to keep this project going. The hacker is an imbecile, because he cannot fight against the collective strength of humanity over time. Although this project will more than likely be terminated, humanity will not stop thinking about death, will not stop trying new anti-aging products, and will eventually succeed in living longer, with or without me.

Myself? I feel nothing.

Sub-Cleanser Matthew asked if I would like anything from him. I requested a film called *The Last Picture Show*, a film that depicts a time period which I believe I would have enjoyed. I received the print in 57 minutes.

My nanotech has been deactivated. That means I will now age, that genetic defects may develop in my body, or that any number of complications may occur. There was no economic need to deactivate the tech, as my body is designed to provide energy for it, but Lead-Handler David felt he had no choice. I must die naturally if nothing else in the world takes my life. This is understandable, as it is human nature to avoid responsibility for any potentially negative consequences of attempting to push the human race forward.

My inherent genetics, however, will allow me to live a long life—longer than most. But I will not live forever. Maybe now I will develop the same preoccupation with death that exists in so many others. However, at the moment I don't feel any desire to do so.

Sarah says it's okay to be mad, or emotional. I am not mad. And I am certainly not emotional. She says that if I need to cry, she will provide a shoulder for me. I wondered about the last time I felt emotional. It was two years, seven months and twenty-six days ago. I felt pleased because I received prints of *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* and *Slaughterhouse Five* on the same day.

Sarah said, "I want to grow old with you. I want to see what you will become. My father thinks you will change the world, but I know I won't be able to convince him to accept our relationship—so let's just run away together.

Find a new home. A new existence.”

Growing old with someone, or something. This is an experience I desire, an experience which only a few privileged species in the world take for granted. So I have discovered.

Sarah cried for me today. This is the first time that anyone has cried for me, and quite possibly the last.

Lead-Handler David came by for a visit. He was packing his belongings and retiring from the field of genetic engineering. Lead-Handler David intended to live in the Bahamas with his wife of forty-seven years, sipping on alcohol-infused pina coladas and getting weekly massages from women a quarter his age. By humanity’s standards, he should be proud.

When he came into my room, Sub-Cleanser Matthew came in behind him and shot Lead-Handler David in the back of the head with a silenced firearm. Sub-Cleanser Matthew shut the door and locked it. He held out a gun and asked if I would like to kill him. I looked down at Lead-Handler David. No pina coladas. No long walks on the beach with a wife of forty-seven years.

Sub-Cleanser Matthew said, “I know you’ve found out who released the information. You know I’m responsible. I am giving you a chance to take my life. As revenge for what I did, and what I have just done.”

Revenge?

“I’ve reprogrammed your nanotech as well. If you come close to Sarah, the nanotech will kill you instantly. It will eat you inside-out. You cannot have her. She cannot reproduce you. I cannot allow that to happen. But I accept you as human, so I give you a choice to express yourself however you wish. Even if it means my death.”

Sub-Cleanser Matthew is much more talented than a Cleanser, let alone a Sub-Cleanser. His ingenuity rivals my own.

I told Sub-Cleanser Matthew that I understood his intentions. He thought to anger me because he believed a life without Sarah was something I could not cope with. He thought killing Lead-Handler David would anger me further—foolish.

If I were to kill Sub-Cleanser Matthew, it could possibly “seal the deal” with regard to genetic engineering—that it is too dangerous to continue because my actions “proved” genetically engineered human beings are destined to take over the human race and change it forever from what it is meant to be. He didn’t think anyone should play God, and he wanted my anger to prevent the human race from “solving” death.

I told him that we are very much alike. That I see death as he sees it, as something important. Death kills old ways of thought so that new ones may arrive. Humanity's stellar, rapid progress is a direct result of death. There is nothing he or I can do about it. Even if I kill him, resulting in my lifetime imprisonment or execution, human nature will demand that experiments like myself continue.

In regard to his plan with the nanotech—equally futile. If I do not kill him, I will eventually find a way to reprogram the nanotech so that I can begin a life with Sarah. Sub-Cleanser Matthew knew this, but tried to prevent it from happening anyway. Admirable.

Sub-Cleanser Matthew's "ace-in-the-hole"? Lead-Handler David's death. Now Sub-Cleanser Matthew would kill me and attempt to pin Lead-Handler David's death on me as proof of my dangerously flawed design. However the outcome would be less sure, more variables attached. Unpredictable.

And there remains one more concern—that Sarah would still not be capable of feeling attraction towards Sub-Cleanser Matthew.

By the look on Sub-Cleanser Matthew's face, I communicated my message with surgical precision. The painful truth ...

I offered sub-Cleanser Matthew another option. I would leave Sarah alone, then disappear and live in the woods, much like Thoreau, and live directly from the earth itself until the end of my days, studying and absorbing that which is life. Influencing this world, as Thoreau would say, is not in my constitution. I would take responsibility for Lead-Handler David's death. Sub-Cleanser Matthew would be free to pursue Sarah's affections.

I, Henry, respected Sub-Cleanser Matthew, even as he pointed the firearm to his chin and pressed the trigger that so effectively sealed my fate ...

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Cheers! The Graeme

LETTER FROM MARS – DOME NUMBER ONE

By Eileen Kernaghan

(First published in Tesseract 5)

We are the unborn.
In this glass egg
glistening with our hot-house breath
we are indefinitely sustained.
This place has no time, no
seasons, no geography;
is Plath's bell-jar made
by science – large enough
for all of us.

Recall these words, these myths--
storm

 sunlight

rain

 the sea

Remember snow: a gift
delicate as the blurred
shadows of the stars...

The air clots in our mouths
sour as spoiled milk.

Our bones ache.

This place is shrinking,
flattening
under the dead weight of
the universe.

How long until
the walls crack apart
and let the night in,
the black wind
and terrible ranks of stars?

YAHWEH

by Steve Fahnstalk

Jesus was an android. That was a fact I was going to have to face; I had come to this time and place seeking a myth, a legend or the unknowable ... instead I had gotten the unexplainable. I stared across the rough wooden table at the three old men dressed in the ragged brown robes that passed for finery in this Jerusalem of 23 A.D. Behind them in the corner, almost invisible in the dimness of this stuffy little adobe temple, slumped the android. The Golem. Somehow, in this pre-industrial, pre-technical age, these men had created a clone of the man men call "saviour"—created and animated it. And made it subject to their will.

"I don't understand, Reb Ben-Levir." I said, stumbling a little over the syllables of the ancient Aramaic. My hypno-courses had not been able to give the flavor of the old version of the tongue, and I was still a little uncertain about the pronunciation.

"After he went into the desert to fast and pray, what happened?"

"It's simple," the middle of the three men answered. He was a birdlike old man whose white beard contrasted sharply with the intelligence of his black eyes. "He wrestled with the devil, and won. At the cost of his own life. Without him, the movement would have died too. So we made a Golem. In his image." He made a complicated sign in the air.

"The Kabbala told us how."

"The Kabbala." I scratched surreptitiously at my ankle. Angels, elohim, were not supposed to be subject to fleabites. In my time, the Kabbala was a collection of fantastic nonsense; suppose the version in this time were an actual volume of working spells?

"And you have been doing what?"

They all spread their hands as if choreographed.

"What else?" This time the speaker was the corpulent man on the left, one Absalom ben-David. "We have been carrying on the Holy Work. And continuing the struggle against those (mumble) Romans."

Apparently there were words I didn't have. Ben-Levi spoke again.

"We have been making certain ... changes in the way he was speaking. He was seeking to change many of the ways our ancestors worshipped."

He sniggered, a surprisingly modern sound.

"I, we, were sure that your master would not wish to change the ancient rituals." Again the sign in the air.

I shoved the bench back and stood, nearly tangling my feet in the white robe that was an integral part of my disguise. Really clean white clothing was almost unheard of in this place and time.

“My master? What can such as you know of the ways of Yahweh?”

The three Kabbalists covered their eyes at the mention of the unmentionable name. Ben-Levi spread his fingers and peeped out, smiling slyly.

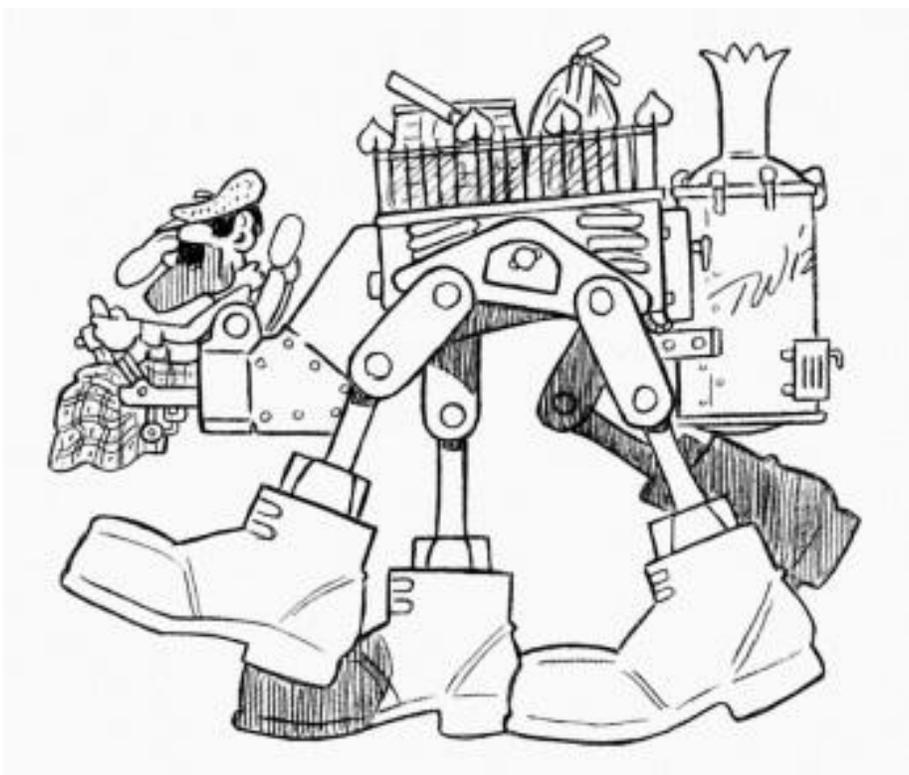
“But wasn't He your master's son? And doesn't everything that happens happen with your master's knowledge?” He spread his hands.

“So what can be wrong with what we're doing?”

I despaired of telling them, educating them. They were trying to undo everything that He had done. If they succeeded there would be no New Testament as we knew it. Maybe even no me! They wanted to return to the safe old days. I reached under my robe, drew my laser pistol, set the beam on wide. I rayed the three old men out of existence. I gestured peremptorily to the Golem.

“You,” I said, “get up. We're going out to tell the people there has been another miracle. Three wise men have been taken straight to heaven.”

The Golem shambled after me. I was going to be here a while.



FLASHES

by Robert J. Sawyer

*(First published in FutureShocks, edited by Lou Anders,
Roc Books, New York, January 2006.)*

My heart pounded as I surveyed the scene. It was a horrific, but oddly appropriate, image: a bright light pulsing on and off. The light was the setting sun, visible through the window, and the pulsing was caused by the rhythmic swaying of the corpse, dangling from a makeshift noose, as it passed in front of the blood-red disk.

“Another one, eh, Detective?” said Chiu, the campus security guard, from behind me. His tone was soft.

I looked around the office. The computer monitor was showing a virtual desktop with a panoramic view of a spiral galaxy as the wallpaper; no files were open. Nor was there any sheet of e-paper prominently displayed on the real desktop. The poor bastards didn’t even bother to leave suicide notes anymore. There was no point; it had all already been said.

“Yeah,” I said quietly, responding to Chiu. “Another one.”

The dead man was maybe sixty, scrawny, mostly bald. He was wearing black denim jeans and a black turtleneck sweater, the standard professorial look these days. His noose was fashioned out of fiber-optic cabling, giving it a pearlescent sheen in the sunlight. His eyes had bugged out, and his mouth was hanging open.

“I knew him a bit,” said Chiu. “Ethan McCharles. Nice guy—he always remembered my name. So many of the profs, they think they’re too important to say hi to a security guard. But not him.”

I nodded. It was as good a eulogy as one could hope for—honest, spontaneous, heartfelt.

Chiu went on. “He was married,” he said, pointing to the gold band on the corpse’s left hand. “I think his wife works here, too.”

I felt my stomach tightening, and I let out a sigh. My favorite thing: informing the spouse.

#

Cytosine Methylation: *All lifeforms are based on self-replicating nucleic acids, commonly triphosphoparacarbohicnucleic acid or, less often, deoxyribonucleic acid; in either case, a secondary stream*

of hereditary information is encoded based on the methylation state of cytosine, allowing acquired characteristics to be passed on to the next generation ...

#

The departmental secretary confirmed what Chiu had said: Professor Ethan McCharles's wife did indeed also work at the University of Toronto; she was a tenured prof, too, but in a different faculty.

Walking down a corridor, I remembered my own days as a student here. Class of 1998—"9T8," as they styled it on the school jackets. It'd been—what?—seventeen years since I'd graduated, but I still woke up from time to time in a cold sweat, after having one of those recurring student nightmares: the exam I hadn't studied for, the class I'd forgotten I'd enrolled in. Crazy dreams, left over from an age when little bits of human knowledge mattered; when facts and figures we'd discovered made a difference.

I continued along the corridor. One thing *had* changed since my day. Back then, the hallways had been packed between classes. Now, you could actually negotiate your way easily; enrollment was way down. This corridor was long, with fluorescent lights overhead, and was lined with wooden doors that had frosted floor-to-ceiling glass panels next to them.

I shook my head. The halls of academe.

The halls of death.

I finally found Marilyn Maslankowski's classroom; the arcane room-numbering system had come back to me. She'd just finished a lecture, apparently, and was standing next to the lectern, speaking with a redheaded male student; no one else was in the room. I entered.

Marilyn was perhaps ten years younger than her husband had been, and had light brown hair and a round, moonlike face. The student wanted more time to finish an essay on the novels of Robert Charles Wilson; Marilyn capitulated after a few wheedling arguments.

The kid left, and Marilyn turned to me, her smile thanking me for waiting. "The humanities," she said. "Aptly named, no? At least English literature is something that we're the foremost authorities on. It's nice that there are a couple of areas left like that."

"I suppose," I said. I was always after my own son to do his homework on time; didn't teachers know that if they weren't firm in their deadlines they were just making a parent's job more difficult? Ah, well. At least this kid had gone to university; I doubted my boy ever would.

"Are you Professor Marilyn Maslankowski?" I asked.

She nodded. "What can I do for you?"

I didn't extend my hand; we weren't allowed to make any sort of overture to physical contact anymore. "Professor Maslankowski, my name is Andrew Walker. I'm a detective with the Toronto Police." I showed her my badge.

Her brown eyes narrowed. "Yes? What is it?"

I looked behind me to make sure we were still alone. "It's about your husband."

Her voice quavered slightly. "Ethan? My God, has something happened?"

There was never any easy way to do this. I took a deep breath, then: "Professor Maslankowski, your husband is dead."

Her eyes went wide and she staggered back a half-step, bumping up against the smartboard that covered the wall behind her.

"I'm terribly sorry," I said.

"What—what happened?" Marilyn asked at last, her voice reduced to a whisper.

I lifted my shoulders slightly. "He killed himself."

"Killed himself?" repeated Marilyn, as if the words were ones she'd never heard before.

I nodded. "We'll need you to positively identify the body, as next of kin, but the security guard says it's him."

"My God," said Marilyn again. Her eyes were still wide. "My God ..."

"I understand your husband was a physicist," I said.

Marilyn didn't seem to hear. "My poor Ethan ..." she said softly. She looked like she might collapse. If I thought she was actually in danger of hurting herself with a fall, I could surge in and grab her; otherwise, regulations said I had to keep my distance. "My poor, poor Ethan ..."

"Had your husband been showing signs of depression?" I asked.

Suddenly Marilyn's tone was sharp. "Of course he had! Damn it, wouldn't you?"

I didn't say anything. I was used to this by now.

"Those aliens," Marilyn said, closing her eyes. "Those goddamned aliens."

#

Demand-Rebound Equilibrium: *Although countless economic systems have been tried by various cultures, all but one prove inadequate in the face of the essentially limitless material resources made possible through low-cost reconfiguration of subatomic particles. The only successful system, commonly known as Demand-*

Rebound Equilibrium, although also occasionally called [Untranslatable proper name]'s Forge, after its principal chronicler, works because it responds to market forces that operate independently from individual psychology, thus ...

#

By the time we returned to Ethan's office, he'd been cut down and laid out on the floor, a sheet the coroner had brought covering his face and body. Marilyn had cried continuously as we'd made our way across the campus. It was early January, but global warming meant that the snowfalls I'd known as a boy didn't occur much in Toronto anymore. Most of the ozone was gone, too, letting ultraviolet pound down. We weren't even shielded against our own sun; how could we expect to be protected from stuff coming from the stars?

I knelt down and pulled back the sheet. Now that the noose was gone, we could see the severe bruising where Ethan's neck had snapped. Marilyn made a sharp intake of breath, brought her hand to her mouth, closed her eyes tightly, and looked away.

"Is that your husband?" I asked, feeling like an ass for even having to pose the question.

She managed a small, almost imperceptible nod.

It was now well into the evening. I could come back tomorrow to ask Ethan McCharles's colleagues the questions I needed answered for my report, but, well, Marilyn was right here, and, even though her field was literature rather than physics, she must have some sense of what her husband had been working on. I repositioned the sheet over his dead face and stood up. "Can you tell me what Ethan's specialty was?"

Marilyn was clearly struggling to keep her composure. Her lower lip was trembling, and I could see by the rising and falling of her blouse—so sharply contrasting with the absolutely still sheet—that she was breathing rapidly. "His—he ... Oh, my poor, poor Ethan ..."

"Professor Maslankowski," I said gently. "Your husband's specialty ...?"

She nodded, acknowledging that she'd heard me, but still unable to focus on answering the question. I let her take her time, and, at last, as if they were curse words, she spat out, "Loop quantum gravity."

"Which is?"

"Which is a model of how subatomic particles are composed." She shook her head. "Ethan spent his whole career trying to prove LQG was correct, and ..."

“And?” I said gently.

“And yesterday they revealed the true nature of the fundamental structure of matter.”

“And this—what was it?—this ‘loop quantum gravity’ wasn’t right?”

Marilyn let out a heavy sigh. “Not even close. Not even in the ballpark.” She looked down at the covered form of her dead husband, then turned her gaze back to me. “Do you know what it’s like, being an academic?”

I actually did have some notion, but that wasn’t what she wanted to hear. I shook my head and let her talk.

Marilyn spread her arms. “You stake out your turf early on, and you spend your whole life defending it, trying to prove that your theory, or someone else’s theory you’re championing, is right. You take on all comers—in journals, at symposia, in the classroom—and if you’re lucky, in the end you’re vindicated. But if you’re unlucky ...”

Her voice choked off, and tears welled in her eyes again as she looked down at the cold corpse lying on the floor.

#

[Untranslatable proper name] Award: *Award given every [roughly 18 Earth years] for the finest musical compositions produced within the Allied Worlds. Although most species begin making music even prior to developing written language, [The same untranslatable proper name] argued that no truly sophisticated composition had ever been produced by a being with a lifespan of less than [roughly 1,100 Earth years], and since such lifespans only become possible with technological maturity, nothing predating a race’s overcoming of natural death is of any artistic consequence. Certainly, the winning compositions bear out her position: the work of composers who lived for [roughly 140 Earth years] or less seem little more than atonal noise when compared to ...*

#

It had begun just two years ago. Michael—that’s my son; he was thirteen then—and I got a call from a neighbor telling us we just *had* to put on the TV. We did so, and we sat side by side on the couch, watching the news conference taking place in Pasadena, and then the speeches by the U.S. President and the Canadian Prime Minister.

When it was over, I looked at Michael, and he looked at me. He was a good

kid, and I loved him very much—and I wanted him to understand how special this all was. “Take note of where you are, Michael,” I said. “Take note of what you’re wearing, what I’m wearing, what the weather’s like outside. For the rest of your life, people will ask you what you were doing when you heard.”

He nodded, and I went on. “This is the kind of event that comes along only once in a great while. Each year, the anniversary of it will be marked; it’ll be in all the history books. It might even become a holiday. This is a date like ...”

I looked round the living room, helplessly, trying to think of a date that this one was similar to. But I couldn’t, at least not from my lifetime, although my dad had talked about July 20, 1969, in much the same way.

“Well,” I said at last, “remember when you came home that day when you were little, saying Johnny Stevens had mentioned something called 9/11 to you, and you wanted to know what it was, and I told you, and you cried. This is like that, in that it’s significant ... but ... but 9/11 was such a *bad* memory, such an awful thing. And what’s happened today—it’s ... it’s *joyous*, that’s what it is. Today, humanity has crossed a threshold. Everybody will be talking about nothing but this in the days and weeks ahead, because, as of right now”—my voice had actually cracked as I said the words—“we are not alone.”

#

Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation: *a highly isotropic radiation with an almost perfect blackbody spectrum permeating the entire universe, at a temperature of approximately [2.7 degrees Kelvin]. Although some primitive cultures mistakenly cite this radiation as proof of a commonly found creation myth—specifically, a notion that the universe began as a singularity that burst forth violently—sophisticated races understand that the cosmic microwave background is actually the result of ...*

#

It didn’t help that the same thing was happening elsewhere. It didn’t help one damned bit. I’d been called in to U of T seven times over the past two years, and each time someone had killed himself. It wasn’t always a prof; time before McCharles, it had been a Ph.D. candidate who’d been just about to defend his thesis on some abstruse aspect of evolutionary theory. Oh, evolution happens, all right—but it turns out the mechanisms are way more complex than the ones the Darwinians have been defending for a century and a half. I tried not to get cynical about all this, but I wondered if, as he slit his

wrists before reproducing, that student had thought about the irony of what he was doing.

The source of all his troubles—of so many people’s troubles—was a planet orbiting a star called 54 Piscium, some thirty-six light-years away. For two years now, it had been constantly signaling Earth with flashes of intense laser light.

Well, not quite constantly: it signaled for eighteen hours then paused for twenty, and it fell silent once every hundred and twelve days for a period just shy of two weeks. From this, astronomers had worked out what they thought were the lengths of the day and the year of the planet that was signaling us, and the diameter of that planet’s sun. But they weren’t sure; nobody was sure of anything anymore.

At first, all we knew was that the signals were artificial. The early patterns of flashes were various mathematical chains: successively larger primes, then Fibonacci sequences in base eight, then a series that no one has quite worked out the significance of but that was sent repeatedly.

But then real information started flowing in, in amazing detail. Our telecommunications engineers were astonished that they’d missed a technique as simple as fractal nesting for packing huge amounts of information into a very narrow bandwidth. But that realization was just the first of countless blows to our egos.

There was a clip they kept showing on TV for ages after we’d figured out what we were receiving: an astronomer from the last century with a supercilious manner going on about how contact with aliens might plug us into the *Encyclopedia Galactica*, a repository of the knowledge of beings millions of years ahead of us in science and technology, in philosophy and mathematics. What wonders it would hold! What secrets it would reveal! What mysteries it would solve!

No one was arrogant like that astronomer anymore. No one could be.

Of course, various governments had tried to put the genie back into the bottle, but no nation has a monopoly on signals from the stars. Indeed, anyone with a few hundred dollars’ worth of equipment could detect the laser flashes. And deciphering the information wasn’t hard; the damned encyclopedia was designed to be read by anyone, after all.

And so the entries were made public—placed on the web by individuals, corporations, and those governments that still thought doing so was a public service. Of course, people tried to verify what the entries said; for some, we simply didn’t have the technology. For others, though, we could run tests, or

make observations—and the entries always turned out to be correct, no matter how outlandish their claims seemed on the surface.

I thought about Ethan McCharles, swinging from his fiber-optic noose. The poor bastard.

It was rumored that one group had sent a reply to the senders, begging them to stop the transmission of the encyclopedia. Maybe that was even true—but it was no quick fix. After all, any signal sent from Earth would take thirty-six years to reach them, and even if they replied—or stopped—immediately upon receipt of our message, it would take another thirty-six years for that to have an impact here.

Until then at least, data would rain down on us, poison from the sky.

#

Life After Death: *A belief, frequently encountered in unenlightened races, that some self-aware aspect of a given individual survives the death of the body. Although such a belief doubtless gives superstitious primitives a measure of comfort, it is easily proven that no such thing exists. The standard proofs are drawn from (1) moral philosophy, (2) quantum information theory, (3) non-[Untranslatable proper name] hyperparallactic phase-shift phenomenology, and (4) comprehensive symbolic philosologic. We shall explore each of these proofs in turn ...*

#

“Ethan was a good man,” said Marilyn Maslankowski. We had left her husband’s office—and his corpse—behind. It was getting late, and the campus was mostly empty. Of course, as I’d seen, it was mostly empty earlier, too—who the hell wanted to waste years getting taught things that would soon be proven wrong, or would be rendered hopelessly obsolete?

We’d found a lounge to sit in, filled with vinyl-covered chairs. I bought Marilyn a coffee from a machine; at least I could do that much for her.

“I’m sure he was,” I said. They were always good men—or good women. They’d just backed the wrong horse, and—

No. No, that wasn’t right. They’d backed a horse when there were other, much faster, totally invisible things racing as well. We knew nothing.

“His work was his life,” Marilyn continued. “He was so dedicated. Not just about his research, either, but as a teacher. His students loved him.”

“I’m sure they did,” I said. However few of them there were. “Um, how did

you get to work today?”

“TTC,” she replied. Public transit.

“Whereabouts do you live?”

“We have a condo near the lake, in Etobicoke.”

We. She’d probably say “we” for months to come.

She’d finished her coffee, and I drained mine in a final gulp. “Come on,” I said. “I’ll give you a lift home.”

We headed down some stairs and out to the street. It was dark, and the sky seemed a uniform black: the glare of street lamps banished the stars. If only it were so easy ...

We got into my car, and I started driving. Earlier, she’d called her two adult children. One, her daughter, was rushing back to the city from a skiing trip—artificial snow, of course. The other, her son, was in Los Angeles, but was taking the red-eye, and would be here by morning.

“Why are they doing this?” she asked, as we drove along. “Why are the aliens doing this?”

I moved into the left lane and flicked on my turn signal. *Blink, blink, blink.*

Off in the distance we could see the tapered needle of the CN Tower, Toronto’s—and, when I was younger—the world’s tallest building, stretching over half a kilometer into the air. Lots of radio and television stations broadcast from it, and so I pointed at it. “Presumably they became aware of us through our radio and TV programs—stuff we leaked out into space.” I tried to make my tone light. “Right now, they’d be getting our shows from the 1970s—have you ever seen any of that stuff? I suppose they think they’re uplifting us. Bringing us out of the dark ages.”

Marilyn looked out the passenger window. “There’s nothing wrong with darkness,” she said. “It’s comforting.” She didn’t say anything further as we continued along. The city was gray and unpleasant. Christmas had come and gone, and—

Funny thing; I hadn’t thought about it until just now. Used to be at Christmas, you’d see stars everywhere: on the top of trees, on lampposts, all over the place. After all, a star had supposedly heralded Jesus’ birth. But I couldn’t recall seeing a single one this past Christmas. Signals from the heavens just didn’t have the same appeal anymore ...

Marilyn’s condo tower was about twenty stories tall, and some of the windows had tinfoil covering them instead of curtains. It looked like it used to be an upscale building, but so many people had lost their jobs in the past two years. I pulled into the circular driveway. She looked at me, and her eyes were

moist. I knew it was going to be very difficult for her to go into her apartment. Doubtless, there'd be countless things of her husband's left in a state that suggested he was going to return. My heart went out to her, but there was nothing I could do, damn it all. They should let us touch them. They should let us hold them. Human contact: it's the only kind that doesn't hurt.

After letting her off, I drove to my house, exhausted emotionally and physically; for most of the trip, the CN Tower was visible in my rearview mirror, as though the city was giving me the finger.

My son Michael was fifteen now, but he wasn't home, apparently. His mother and I had split up more than five years ago, so the house was empty. I sat on the living-room couch and turned on the wall monitor. As always, I wondered how I was going to manage to hold onto this place in my old age. The police pension fund was bankrupt; half the stocks it had invested in were now worthless. Who wanted to own shares in oil companies when an entry might be received showing how to make cold fusion work? Who wanted to own biotechnology stocks when an entry explaining some do-it-yourself gene-resequencing technique might be the very next one to arrive?

The news was on, and, of course, there was the usual report about the encyclopedia entries whose translations had been released today. The entries came in a bizarre order, perhaps reflecting the alphabetical sequence of their names in some alien tongue; we never knew what would be next. There'd be an entry on some aspect of biology, then one on astronomy, then some arcane bit of history of some alien world, then something from a new science that we don't even have a name for. I listened halfheartedly; like most people, I did everything halfheartedly these days.

"One of the latest *Encyclopedia Galactica* entries," said the female reporter, "reveals that our universe is finite in size, measuring some forty-four billion light-years across. Another new entry contains information about a form of combustion based on neon, which our scientist had considered an inert gas. Also, a lengthy article provides a comprehensive explanation of dark matter, the long suspected but never identified source of most of the mass in the universe. It turns out that no such dark matter exists, but rather there's an interrelationship between gravity and tachyons that ..."

Doubtless some people somewhere were happy or intrigued by these revelations. But others were surely devastated, lifetimes of work invalidated. Ah, well. As long as none of them were here in Toronto. Let somebody else, somewhere else, deal with the grieving widows, the orphaned children, the inconsolable boyfriends. I'd had enough. I'd had plenty.

I got up and went to make some coffee. I shouldn't be having caffeine at this hour, but I didn't sleep well these days even when I avoided it. As I stirred whitener into my cup, I could hear the front door opening. "Michael?" I shouted out, as I headed back to the couch.

"Yeah," he called back. A moment later he entered the living room. My son had one side of his head shaved bald, the current street-smart style. Leather jackets, which had been *de rigueur* for tough kids when I'd been Michael's age—not that any tough kid ever said *de rigueur*—were frowned upon now; a synthetic fabric that shone like quicksilver and was as supple as silk was all young people wore these days; of course, the formula to make it had come from an encyclopedia entry.

"It's a school night," I said. "You shouldn't be out so late."

"School." He spat the word. "As if anyone cares. As if any of it matters."

We'd had this argument before; we were just going through the motions. I said what I said because that's what a parent is supposed to say. He said what he said because ...

Because it was the truth.

I nodded, and shut off the TV. Michael headed on down to the basement, and I sat in the dark, staring up at the ceiling.

#

Chronics: *Branch of science that deals with the temporal properties of physical entities. Although most entities in the universe progress through time in an orthochronic, or forward, fashion, certain objects instead regress in a retrochronic, or backward, fashion. The most common example ...*

#

Yesterday, it turned out, was easy. Yesterday, I only had to deal with *one* dead body.

The explosion happened at 9:42 a.m. I'd been driving down to division headquarters, listening to loud music on the radio with my windows up, and I still heard it. Hell, they probably heard it clear across Lake Ontario, in upstate New York.

I'd been speeding along the Don Valley Parkway when it happened, and had a good view through my windshield toward downtown. Of course, the skyline was dominated by the CN Tower, which—

My God!

—which was now leaning over, maybe twenty degrees off vertical. The radio

station I'd been listening to went dead; it had been transmitting from the CN Tower, I supposed. Maybe it was a terrorist attack. Or maybe it was just some bored school kid who'd read the entry on how to produce antimatter that had been released last week.

There was a seven-story complex of observation decks and restaurants two-thirds of the way up the tower, providing extra weight. It was hard to—

Damn!

My car's brakes had slammed on, under automatic control; I pitched forward, the shoulder belt giving a bit. The car in front of mine had come to a complete stop—as, I could now see, had the car in front of it, and the one in front of that car, too. Nobody wanted to continue driving toward the tower. I undid my seat belt and got out of my car; other motorists were doing the same thing.

The tower was leaning over further now: maybe thirty-five degrees. I assumed the explosion had been somewhere near its base; if it had been antimatter, from what I understood, only a minuscule amount would have been needed.

"There it goes!" shouted someone behind me. I watched, my stomach knotting, as the tower leaned over farther and farther. It would hit other, lesser skyscrapers; there was no way that could be avoided. I was brutally conscious of the fact that hundreds, maybe thousands, of people were about to die.

The tower continued to lean, and then it broke in two, the top half plummeting sideways to the ground. A plume of dust went up into the air, and—

It was like watching a distant electrical storm: the visuals hit you first, well before the sound. And the sound was indeed like thunder, a reverberating, cracking roar.

Screams were going up around me. "*Oh, my God! Oh, my God!*" I felt like I was going to vomit, and I had to hold onto my car's fender for support.

Somebody behind me was shouting, "Damn you, damn you, damn you!" I turned, and saw a man shaking his fist at the sky. I wanted to join him, but there was no point.

This was just the beginning, I knew. People all over the world had read that entry, along with all the others. Antimatter explosions; designer diseases based on new insights into how biology worked; God only knew what else. We needed a firewall for the whole damn planet, and there was no way to erect one.

I abandoned my car and wandered along the highway until I found an off-

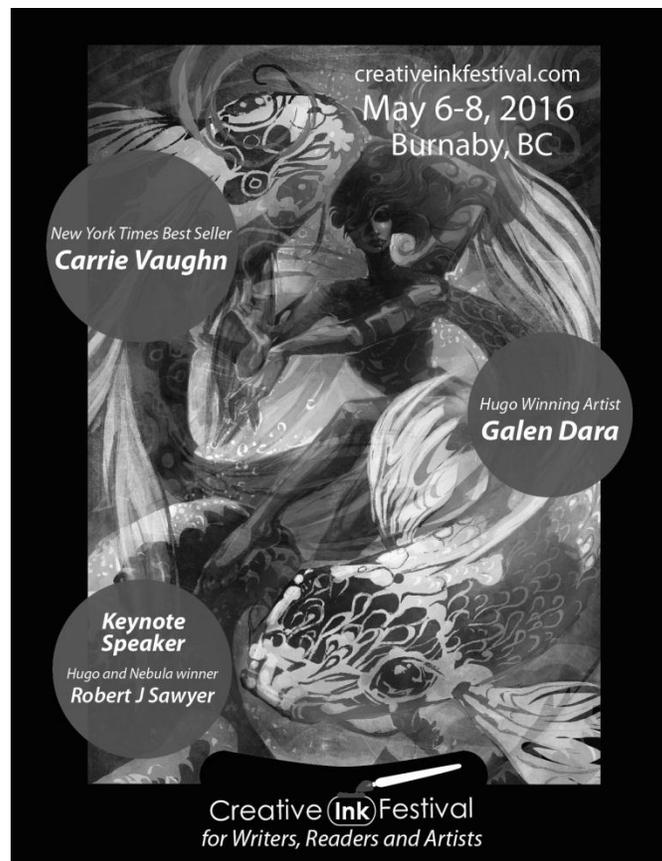
ramp. I walked for hours, passing people who were crying, people who were screaming, people who, like me, were too shocked, too dazed, to do either of those things.

I wondered if there was an entry in the *Encyclopedia Galactica* about Earth, and, if so, what it said. I thought of Ethan McCharles, swinging back and forth, a flesh pendulum, and I remembered that spontaneous little eulogy Chiu, the security guard, had uttered. Would there be a eulogy for Earth? A few kind words, closing out the entry on us in the next edition of the encyclopedia? I knew what I wanted it to say.

I wanted it to say that we *mattered*, that what we did had worth, that we treated each other well most of the time. But that was wishful thinking, I suppose. All that would probably be in the entry was the date on which our first broadcasts were detected, and the date, only a heartbeat later in cosmic terms, on which they had ceased.

It would take me most of the day to walk home. My son Michael would make his way back there, too, I'm sure, when he heard the news.

And at least we'd be together, as we waited for whatever would come next.



THE NOT HERE AND NOW: A SCIENCE FICTION PANEL

HOSTED BY JUDITH MERRIL,
WITH WILLIAM GIBSON AND SPIDER ROBINSON.
WRITERS FESTIVAL, GRANVILLE ISLAND
ARTS CLUB THEATER – WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26 / 1988

Notes by R. Graeme Cameron

9:00 A.M. At the beginning of the lineup outside the box office. Expected Cyber punks. Instead three classes of High School kids. They're excited about their field trip, about getting to tour Granville Island. As for the event? "Is this a play?" "My boyfriend got kicked out of commerce." Sample comments. What will question period be like?

Mercifully brief intro and out walks Judith Merrill, Spider Robinson, and William Gibson. Merrill sits table centre on gray stage set for Venice circa 1920s. "DUCE" sign on wall. Gondola in background. Merrill with broad massive face framed in white hair, twinkling eyes, with two thin gents, Spider to Right, Bill to left. "Guess which one is Spider?" She asks. Name appropriate to both.

Spider in usual dark broad-rimmed hat somehow a punctuation to his height, in somber suit with brown boots matching bronze shirt. Gibson in short winter jacket, wine-red shirt, gray pants and socks, black loafers. His hair a soft helmet-mop of brown.

They're to begin with a reading, but have trouble with the directional mike resting on the table. Spider explains "Bill and I both rejected the podium in the first place since it only comes up to our knees." Raised a laugh.

Spider goes first. "Was going to read from a work in progress, but it was explained to me that it would be a poor idea to read brothel stories to students." So he reads from *Time Pressure*, which concerns a visit by Rachel, a time traveler, to Nova Scotia in the 1970s to a rural area with communes.

Spider begins, strong voice, unexpectedly strong for so thin a guy. Carries well. Very clear. All listen, Merrill watching intently, approvingly, but as reading goes on I sense the kids are restless. After all this is the Yuppie 80's, and caring, loving, back-to-nature types are alien to these kids. Coughing fiend beside me doesn't help my concentration. Spider smokes even as he reads. Gibson listens, sometimes supporting head on hand, sometimes covering mouth. Spider stops abruptly. "I could go on, but would last another fifteen-twenty minutes." So that's it. Good applause, but kids only politely interested.

Then Gibson starts in on a chapter *The Silver Walks* from *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. It's about a whore taking drugs. Kid's interest perks up. Gibson reads leaning over his book, hunched over, in a slow drawl that gradually picks up the cadence of his writing till he's really into it, his eyes glowing, the words pouring like poetry from his mouth, a flashing torrent of hard-clarity images marred by only a few clichés. "People had a bit of money dressed like they didn't, except the clothes fit well and you knew they bought it new" got a BIG laugh from the kids. At one point, reading "And wouldn't the net just tell her to go for it..." he paused, an odd expression on his face, then started again. Self-censorship? Cutting out lines inappropriate for kids? Disconnected prose. Must buy the book to find out. He really enjoyed giving his reading. For a while his right arm was angled way back as he tugged at the back of his hair, for all the world like an old-time radio announcer cupping his ear to hear himself better. Merrill gazing on with the same intent approval she had lavished on Spider. Finish.

Merril announced it was time for questions from the audience, saying, as part of her intro, "A large part of SF is social SF. The best writers I know are in this area, concerned with what happens to the individual in a society affected by significant technological change. What this kind of writing deals with is not necessarily technological but has to do with the change. Here are two such social SF writers who do it very differently except both use Mona as a character. There must be something about the name Mona."

Question: "*Bill, there's a lot of drugs in your writing. You use it rather wantonly. Why?*"

Gibson: "If there weren't a lot of drug addiction in the future I'd have to explain why, and that's beyond my powers of extrapolation."

Spider: "I'd find it difficult to believe in a world without drugs."

Question: "*I'll give you a chance to get off drugs. How long have you been writing and why did you choose SF instead of mainstream?*"

Gibson: "I've been writing since 1977. There's a childhood prodigy tradition in SF. I'm rather different as I was over thirty when I started. The main advantage to SF is that there's an established audience. It's on a par with Nashville country industry, but the downside is similar too, it's conservative. Still, if I had marketed my books as mainstream, which was possible, few would have read them. SF is a pop form of literature with an automatic audience. Being a *serious writer* is tougher."

Spider: "Wrote my first story in seventy-two. Writing seems like masochism. It's a disease. I was infected by Robert Heinlein who wrote the first

book I read. I can't write anything else. I've tried fantasy, but it turns into SF. In the conventional wisdom of the time it seemed a bizarre choice. Fortunately now it is commercial."

Merril: "I started when it wasn't commercial. There was a large cheap pop audience composed mostly of people who were thinking, and this is still largely true. SF is the only way I can write about the world as it actually is, instead of how the literary world views reality, which is fifty years behind the times." She then quoted a mainstreamer who once said "The trouble with novelists is that we work in miniature, no one works a broad canvas anymore." Merrill smiled and added "Obviously he knows nothing of SF."

Gibson: "It's impossible to describe contemporary reality without using the tools of SF."

Spider: "Firesign Theatre gave up political parody because it is impossible to parody the absurd politics existing today."

Question: *"Do you use drugs when writing?"*

Response. Lots of laughter. Merrill holds up coffee cup. Gibson holds up coke can. Spider waves cigarette.

Gibson: "I don't recommend drugs as a compositional tool if that's what you mean."

Spider: "Too expensive."

Merril: "Drugs may inspire the imagination, but craft skills diminish. Most writers who use drugs wait till they come down. I've known a couple of writers who were serious drinkers. Most writers don't use either drugs or alcohol to help them write."

[Subject evolves into discussion on writing techniques.]

Gibson: "In a hotel I was offered the use of a computer. 'It's got Wordsoft!' But I don't know how to use Wordsoft. So they gave me an IBM Selectric, but I couldn't figure out how to use it. Had to phone a friend in Florida to find out. Working with a word processor is like writing through a layer of mud. There's an extra level of concentration, of paying attention to the mechanism, that distracts me. Besides, I can't type."

Merril: "I have a friend who just switched to a word processor after using a quill pen for forty years."

Spider: "I used to write longhand, which was great. You could circle text, draw arrows, and with a word processor you can do the equivalent, which can't be easily done when you type. In the past I had to type out everything I'd written. The one advantage is I became extremely motivated to cut as I wrestled with the typing, dropping whole subplots, etc. At least with word

processors future generations of graduate students will not be able to establish careers pointing out writers' mistakes in early drafts."

Gibson: "Somebody has got to provide for these people. Don't delete, write over your mistakes, and donate your hard discs."

Merril: "I recently donated some papers to a university library, and the librarian, when she found out I use a word processor, pleaded 'Please save a hard copy of everything.'"

Question: "*Spider, how do you feel about leaving New York?*"

Spider: "Overwhelming sense of relief to be here. An early book of mine, 'Night of Power,' which the publisher dumped, was about a takeover of Manhattan by black militants. It expressed my feelings. I was born and raised in New York, and I go back there to visit with relatives, but every time I leave it's with a greater sense of urgency."

Gibson: "We don't have as many guns, which is what I like."

Question: "*Bill, you seem to connect high technology to societies experiencing social decay. Are you influenced by the works of J.G. Ballard and William S. Burroughs?*"

Gibson: "Those two are my primary literary influences, along with Thomas Pynchon. Where can you go to find high tech which is NOT in decay? My writings are impressionistic visions of contemporary society. I think we'll be lucky to wind up with the sort of society I've described. In fact we'll probably wind up with an energy-poor society run by televangelists."

Spider: "There IS going to be a future. Currently we're in what Heinlein called 'The Crazy Years.' But there are some positive signs. Don't give up hope yet."

Merril: "We might get Glasnost to work over here."

Spider: "It's working. The Soviets actually bought one of my stories. Mind you, they were under the impression I lived in America and couldn't accept roubles. But when they learned I lived in Canada, they paid."

One new technology looming up is Nano-technology, molecular-sized machines, a computer made out of molecules, machines that can reproduce like virus'."

Gibson: "Read *The Tomorrow Makers* by Grant Dressler. The potential is SO scary," he says, laughing.

Spider: "Our problems come down to not having enough wealth."

Gibson: "Our relationship with technology is such that we're sitting in the path of a flood."

Merril: "Still, there's such a thing as flood control."

Question: *“How do you feel about mainstream writers who occasionally write SF?”*

Spider: “Our first reaction was resentful, but I see it as essential. It’s not as if we have a proprietorial interest.”

Gibson: “I don’t mind it, but I find attempts by writers not fluent in science fiction can often be clumsy.”

Spider: “They reinvented a lot of our mistakes.”

Merril: “Doris Lessing is an example. Her first works are good, but then she started writing SF books that are so dull it’s impossible to believe she wrote them.”

Gibson: “Many fail to get over the expository hump.”

Merril: “Most mainstream writers doing SF seem to think they need to spend two chapters explaining the background before their story actually begins.”

Question: *“Spider, for a while you seemed to be going mainstream. Your novel ‘Mind Killer’ was touted as such. This is no longer the case. Did you change your agent?”*

Laughter.

Spider: “Yes, but nothing to do with that. There was a period when conventional wisdom stated the mainstream was ready and waiting for SF writers. I wanted to make some money so I went along with it. Didn’t work. There’s little interest in SF in the mainstream readership. The Publisher lacked a good understanding of SF. They kept asking me to put in laser cannon. I broke with them.

I notice a trend in my work. As the years go by my work is closer and closer to the present time. ‘Time Pressure’ takes place in the past. I guess I find it harder and harder to predict the future as there are too many things that can upset the apple cart. Like the Nano-tech we were talking about. It’s thirty-fifty years away. It will produce some interesting by-products, like unlimited wealth. It’ll break down to an equivalent to the US GNP on a per capita basis. And immortality. Drop some of the little guys into your bloodstream and have them convert cholesterol into alcohol or whatever you prefer.”

Gibson: “Dressler was in a panel where he asked ‘How many of you in the audience think people fifty years from now will look recognizably human?’ Everyone put their hand up. ‘You’re wrong,’ he declared. It was his only contribution to the panel.”

Spider: “What’s most exciting is the prospect of unlimited wealth.”

Merril: “Well, she said sceptically. I can remember when atomic power promised the same thing, and when they said fusion power is just around the corner.”

Spider: “It could still happen.”

[Discussion evolves.]

Spider: “My work in progress is *Lady Sally’s House*. The publisher wanted another Callahan book, I’d written three, and I pointed out to them I’d blown his establishment away with a nuclear weapon. ‘But we’ll give you lots of money.’ How about I write about the brothel his wife used to run? ‘Will it have Callahan in it?’ Yes. ‘Sold!’ I spent my first year in Nova Scotia hypothesizing about the perfect saloon, now I’ve spent my first year in Vancouver hypothesizing about the perfect brothel... on paper of course.”

Question: “*I always thought SF writers had to be incredibly weird. How are you different from ordinary people?*”

Spider: “More handsome?”

Merril: “There was a psychological study done years ago on various types of occupations. They had to create a separate category for SF writers, for the profile was different from other writers. SF writers relate to other writers as most writers relate to visual artists: more radical, less paranoid (Gibson laughs), more cyclical. There’s a marked difference.

Question: “*Bill, Dressler makes your reality tangible.*”

Gibson: “Most of my vision is derived through a strange process of observing contemporary life. For example, my concept of Cyberspace came from my watching kids playing video games, they were so intent, they seemed to inhabit some space BEHIND the screen. I’m not a technical guy. I don’t know very much about science, I just know when I’m wrong. I don’t do much research.”

Spider: “It’s uncanny how often you open a book and find just what you need in the first few sentences you look at.”

Question: “*Why do you have Voodoo Gods in Cyberspace?*”

Gibson: “I find the creative process is enhanced by what I call ‘lateral moves.’ I was looking through a current issue of National Geographic, an article on Haitian Voodoo, when it occurred to me these ancient deities resembled the artificial intelligences I had posited in previous books. After minimal thought—it fit, an intuitive move. I like the strange idea of juxtaposing high tech and Voodoo. Spent about half a year rationalizing my decision.”

Question: “*What advice, other than don’t, do you have for beginning writers?*”

Spider: “Rich parents help. Larry Niven spent two years developing his craft on a trust fund provided by his parents.”

Gibson: “Very few writers make it without a working spouse.”

Question: “*What’s it like being rich and famous?*”

Gibson: “It has its moments.”

Spider: “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

Question: “*What do you think of the trade deal?*”

Spider: “Before discussing politics, can we discuss religion?”

Gibson: “The nation state may be on its way out. (‘YEAH!’ someone in the audience shouts.) On the other hand, we’ll live in a world run by enormous department stores. I view it with some trepidation because I am basically paranoid.”

Spider: “There is a distressing tendency toward a mono-block culture. Our world is funneling down to a tunnel vision.”

Question: “*What do you think of SF movies?*”

Gibson: “I’m part of ‘The Bladerunner’ school rather than the ‘Star Wars’ school. Two stories of mine are being made into movies. I’m amazed anyone manages to make a good film. The odds are stacked against it.”

Spider: “Gandhi, when asked, ‘What do you think of Western Civilization?’ replied, ‘I think that would be very nice.’ (Laughter.) I have the same attitude toward SF movies. Very few have been made. The best was ‘Man in a White Suit’ where a fellow invents a cloth which cannot wear out or get dirty. So, for the first time in history, management and labour unite... to bury the guy.”

Merril as moderator calls a halt to the proceedings. Spider and Gibson autograph books in the lobby. Panel lasted 10:00 AM to 11:30 AM. Great fun.

SF CANADA

SF Canada was founded in 1989 as Canada’s National Association for Speculative Fiction Professionals, and was incorporated as SF Canada in 1992. “Speculative fiction” is understood by members to include science fiction, fantasy, horror and any other weird fiction that invokes a sense of wonder. SF Canada aims to promote the publishing and sale of works created, edited, and published by its members.

Interested in joining?

See < <http://www.sfcanada.org/> >

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ARTISTS

Christel Bodenbender

Christel is a writer currently living in Vancouver. She has been creating stories since childhood, taking part in short story competitions. After a Master's in Linguistics she rekindled her passion for writing. Since then she has penned a selection of short stories and has been published in *Future Fire* and *Fiction Vortex*. She also working on a science fiction book series. Apart from spinning tales, Christel works in IT and web design.

You can find out more about her at <http://www.christelbodenbender.com>

Christel previously published two stories, both in 2013.:

Masked Desire was published in *Fiction Vortex*,
see <http://www.fictionvortex.com/2013/08/masked-desire/>

Soul Catcher was published in *Future Fire*,
see <http://www.futurefire.net/2013.28/fiction/soulcatcher.html>

Hivemind not previously published.

R. Graeme Cameron

“The Graeme” has been active in SF Fandom for more than 40 years. He has won two Aurora Awards (Fan categories), and is currently Administrator of the Canadian Fanzine Fanac Awards (the ‘Faneds’), now in its fifth year. Even worse, he has been the presenter of the genre-spoofing “Elron Awards” since 1989.

He is Chairman of the B.C. SF Association and sits on the board of four other Fannish organizations. He is the editor of numerous Fanzines, including the “Auroran Lights” newsletter on behalf of CSFFA, his personal-zine “Space Cadet” (shortlisted for the 2015 Auroras), and his Canadian Speculative

Fiction review-zine OBIR Magazine. His latest project is the semi-professional Speculative fiction-zine Polar Borealis.

In addition he writes a weekly fanzine review column (also nominated for the 2015 Auroras) for Amazing Stories Magazine, and is the webmaster for the Canadian Science Fiction Fanzine Archive where he posts historical data in his guise as an active Fantiquarian. Is he crazy? Absolutely. Crazy about Science Fiction. At long last retired, now he can get down to his real purpose in life – promoting the Canadian SF&F genre. Heck of a hobby.

The Heretic Pope would be his first sale if it weren't for the fact he refuses to pay himself. Miserly twit.

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Lynne is a two-time recipient of the prestigious Canadian Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement and has shown her work in numerous galleries and at major science fiction convention art shows. She has served as Art Director for various magazines in the U.S. and Canada and was co-owner of Northwest Fine Art Press a company specializing in printing artwork for artists.

Her current passion is creating one-of-a-kind robot sculptures from up-cycled metal objects. Lynne says of her robot sculptures, “I started making robot sculptures from upcycled metal objects in order to create a science fiction Christmas wreath. The robots were so much fun to make that I never did finish the wreath and my artwork took an entirely new direction. Prior to this I was a professional illustrator and cartoonist. Some have called my Bots 3-D cartoons and I like that comparison.

The question I am asked most often about the Bots is, “Do they move?”

And my answer is, “Not when I’ve been looking.”

Lynne lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, and refers to her work as ‘Quality Art with a Smile’. She invites you to visit her facebook page at

www.facebook.com/rivetofrobots and her website at:
www.smilingdragonflystudio.com

This illustration was previously published.

Steve Fahnstalk

Steve Fahnstalk is a proud Canadian and expat American. His fiction has been published in two *Rat Tales* anthologies, *Baconthology* by John Ordovery, *Pulphouse* reports, and he is a columnist for *Amazing Stories* online, a magazine he used to write for more about 30 years ago. His two published books from New Venture Publishing are "*Tom Smith and his Electric Skyship*" and "*Mind Out of Time*," an anthology of short stories.

Yahweh not previously published.

Karl Johanson

Karl Johanson is the editor of *Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine*, which has won two Aurora Awards, and a former editor of the four time Aurora winning magazine *Under the Ozone Hole*. Karl's publication credits include work in *On Spec* magazine, *Sci Phi Journal*, *Monday Magazine*, *Perihelion*, *Stitches: The Magazine of Medical Humor* and the anthology *Here Be Monsters: 7*. As a writer / designer / tester of computer games, Karl has done work for North Star Games, Disney Interactive, and Sanctuary Woods Multimedia. Many of the games were science fiction or fantasy related.

The Airlock Scene was previously published in *Here Be Monsters 7*.

Rissa Johnson

Rissa, a Canadian writer with a BA in English Lit from SFU, is a left-handed, Jewish, dyslexic, insomniac who stays up all night wrestling with Dog.

A technical editor and writer, her poetry and flash fiction have won awards, including the City of Surrey Youth Recognition Award in Creative Contributions.

You can find out more about her at; <http://risajohnson.com/>

Sonnet 36: *Ivrim* was published in *Strong Verse*:
<http://tinyurl.com/hid764h>

The Kept Woman is her first sale. *The Skeleton's creed* her second.

Eileen Kernaghan

Eileen Kernaghan's poems, both mainstream and speculative, have appeared in a wide range of North American publications, from *PRISM international* and *The Antigone Review* to *Weird Tales*, *Dreams and Nightmares* and several of the *Tesseract* anthologies. Her speculative poetry collection *Tales from the Holograph Woods* was published in 2009 by Wattle & Daub Books.

Eileen has also published nine historical fantasy novels. In 2014 *Sophie, in Shadow* was shortlisted for the Sunburst Award for Canadian Literature of the Fantastic, and for the Sheila Egoff Prize for Children's Literature.

Glose for the World's End previously published in *TransVersions* 11.

Letter From Mars – Dome Number One previously published in *Tesseract* 5.

Jean-Pierre Normand

Jean-Pierre is a professional illustrator, specializing in science fiction and fantasy for the past 35 years. Over two hundred book and magazine covers featuring his work have been published in Canada and the United States. He

generally works in ink and liquid acrylic, applied with brush and air-brush on illustration board or canvas.

His work has been shown at various conventions and other exhibits, winning several awards, notably the Aurora for artistic achievement in Canada in 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001 and 2004. His work has been published in "*Spectrum, the best in contemporary fantasy art*", and appeared on the covers of "*Asimov's Science Fiction*", "*Analog*", "*On Spec*" and "*Science fiction Chronicle*". He worked on set-conception for the movie *The Adventures of Pluto Nash* and designed machinery for the production *Océania*.

This cover painting previously published.

Kelly Ng

Kelly is a 5-year engineering professional with a BAsC in Mechanical Engineering. He is currently working on an additional BSc in computer science with a focus on Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality. Kelly's passion for writing stems from a passion for films. In the future, Kelly hopes to be a connecting bridge between technology and the arts.

Henry is his first sale.

Rhea Rose

Rhea has published many speculative fiction and poetry pieces: *Evolve*, *Tesseract*, *1,2,6,9,10,17*, *On Spec*, *Talebones*, *Northwest Passges*, *Masked Mosaic*, and *Dead North*. She has received honorable mentions in the *Year's Best Horror* anthologies and was reprinted in *Christmas Forever (edited by David Hartwell)* and twice made the preliminaries for the Nebula Award. She edited a poetry collection for Edge Press and for many years hosted the Vancouver Science Fiction and Fantasy (VCON) writers' workshops. She is a teacher of creative writing. Her new works for 2015/16 include: *Scar Tissue (Second Contact)*, *Bones of Bronze*, *Limbs Like Iron* (Clockwork Canada), Art

Song Lab(Poetry and musical composition) and three Indie novels, *The Final Catch: A Tarot Sorceress series*; twice an Aurora nominee, Rhea has a MFA in creative writing.

Spirit People Originally published in *Talebones* # 18, 2000.

Sleeping Beauty and the Vampire Rose originally published in *Chizine Magazine* (online) circa February 28th, 2012, edited by David Clink.

Lament previously unpublished.

Craig Russell

Craig's novel *Black Bottle Man*, received the 2011 American Moonbeam Gold Medal for YA Fantasy and was a finalist for the Aurora for best novel. Later in 2016 *Thistledown Press* will publish his next book, *Fragment* - a world-spanning disaster novel. By day Craig is a lawyer and administers the land titles system for south-western Manitoba. For the past twenty-six years he and his wife Janet have been restoring 'Johnson House', a Victorian heritage home. In his spare time Craig directs theatre productions in Brandon, MB., ranging from *The Sound of Music* to *Romeo and Juliet*.

Stan The Rhymer not previously published.

Robert J. Sawyer

Robert J. Sawyer has won the best-novel Hugo Award (for *Hominids*), and has twelve other Hugo nominations to his credit. He's also won the best-novel Nebula Award (for *The Terminal Experiment*), the John W. Campbell Memorial Award (for *Mindscan*), and the Audio Publishers Association's Audie Award for Best Science Fiction or Fantasy Audiobook of the Year (for *Calculating God*), plus Spain's *Premio UPC de Ciencia Ficción* (at 6,000 euro, the world's largest ongoing science-fiction prize; Rob has won it a record-setting three times), Canada's Aurora (a record-setting fourteen times), Japan's best-foreign-novel Seiun Award (three times), China's Galaxy Award, *Analog* magazine's AnLab,

the Hal Clement Memorial Award, and NESFA's Edward E. Smith Memorial Award ("the Skylark"). In 2014, he was one of the initial nine inductees into the Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame.

His 23 novels include *Starplex*, *Rollback*, *Wake*, *Triggers*, *Red Planet Blues*, and the just published *Quantum Night*. The ABC TV series *FlashForward* was based on his novel of the same name, and Rob — a member of both the Writers Guild of America and the Writers Guild of Canada — was one of the scriptwriters for that series. His work has hit #1 on the Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk, Amazon.ca, Audible, and *Locus* science-fiction bestsellers' lists. Rob holds two honorary doctorates and has published in both the world's top scientific journals, *Science* (guest editorial) and *Nature* (fiction). He lives in Mississauga. Website: sfwriter.com.

Flashes first published in *FutureShocks*, edited by Lou Anders, Roc Books, New York, January 2006.

T.G. Shepherd

T.G. Shepherd lives and works in British Columbia, Canada. Her day job is in law enforcement. At night she trains in stick fighting and MMA with Sifu Gary Herman. The rest of her time is spent writing, reading, and worshipping two small dogs.

Her first novel *As A God* (Fantasy) will be published by eTreasures Publishing (www.etreasurespublishing.com) in June 2016 (available in ebook format). "Single Source" is her first short story sale in over a decade.

Single Source previously unpublished.

Taral Wayne

Taral is better known behind a keyboard or drawing board than at the front of a room talking, but once started can talk about a wide variety of

subjects – his experiences from over 40 years in fandom, his 11 Hugo nominations for best fanartist, his Rotsler Award, or his unimpressive career as a magazine illustrator and comic book artist. He can bore on the topics of animation, Fraggles, fossils, and planetology. Also about his numerous off beat jobs, and hobbies ranging from model building to die-cast cars, to ancient Roman coins. He can even – under pressure – talk about science fiction.

This illustration previously published as cover of *The Fanactical Fanactivist* #9, August 2012.

Casey June Wolf

Casey lives in a squalid little room in East Vancouver, where mould grows and dreams die and the sound of sobbing can be heard late into the night. Her stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies including *Tesseract 9*, *On Spec*, and *Room Magazine* as well as on *Beam Me Up! Podcast*. Read more in her single author collection *Finding Creatures & Other Stories* (2008).

Casey: “Just remembered, we did a performance of "Mrs. Zaberewsky" in play form at Vcon 36, Richmond BC, 2 Oct 2011. I read and directed; Steph St Laurent, Rhea Rose, Theo Campbell, and Virginia O’Dine played in it. It was a hoot. It was also the first performance of the Pallahaxi Players. I love readers theatre.”

This is for Mrs. Zaberewsky not previously published.

Flora Jo Zenthoefer

Flora is a fourteen year old who hates to be reminded of that fact. She lives in Richmond with three out of four brothers, a sister, and a cat. She has been published once before, much to her ire, in *Ricepaper Magazine*.

Paperwork for Mazes is her first sale.