

TRANSVERSIONS

Talking Jehovah
WITH
JAMES MORROW



BOOK REVIEWS BY TANYA HUFF,
JOHN PARK, SALLY McBRIDE AND
ROBERT CHARLES WILSON

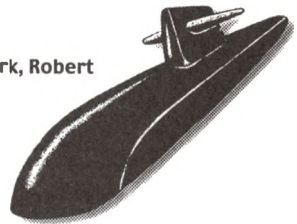
NEW WORK BY JAMES SALLIS,
JAMES VAN PELT, GEMMA FILES,
EILEEN KERNAGHAN, MARY CHOO,
M. TRAVIS LANE AND MUCH MORE!

TRANSVERSIONS



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Editorial – Dale L. Sproule

Five years ago, Sally McBride and I came up with the concept of *TransVersions* and launched it with an issue containing work by Michael Coney, Sean Stewart and Charles de Lint. We published one thousand copies of #1 and still have at least 700 in a basement closet.

Our plans for world domination or even genre domination were replaced by dreams of establishing a genre presence — hoping that if we put out a good magazine, somebody would notice. And they have.

We've amassed a big fistful of positive reviews, honourable mentions in the various year's best anthologies and award nominations. Our circulation, which dropped to 250 with issue 2, has more than doubled since then. The early issues were colour photocopied and saddle stapled until Marcel Gagné, Sally Tomasevic, Phyllis and Kelly Gotlieb made contributions to the cause which allowed us to go to the current format.

So, here we are, finally on the verge of getting some real respect and we're quitting. Sally McBride stepped down late last year and after this issue, my participation will fall back to layout and art direction. Why? We're exhausted and we simply can't afford it any more — not strictly in the financial sense. The process of editing/publishing/laying out and publicising one's own magazine turned out to be all-consuming and expensive on the short-term (it can take months or even years to make money back on an issue and as soon as a new issue comes out, sales of the previous issue stop abruptly).

Thank heavens we found Marcel and Sally — or more accurately, they found us. Capable hands (they proved it with issue 10) into which to pass our baby. We are grateful for all the friends we've made and all the great stories we have seen. We couldn't have done it without the support of people like Gerry Truscott — who has copy-edited for us since issue one, not even complaining when typos magically appeared after he had vetted the copy (making him appear less competent than he really is — sorry, Gerry)! We are grateful to Mike Coney, Eileen Kernaghan, John Rose, Derryl Murphy and Nancy Bennett for their continued support above and beyond the call of duty. Huge thanks to Phyllis Gotlieb — who is not only the mother of Canadian Science Fiction, but one of the main sources of our early and continuing credibility. Thanks to White Dwarf and Sentry Box. Thanks to the contributors who continued to send us great work — Gemma Files, Sean Stewart, GAK, Adam Corbin Fusco, Lorri McMullen & Stepan Chapman leap immediately to mind, but there have been so many of you. And apologies to everyone we weren't able to publish (there are a number of rejections we regret).

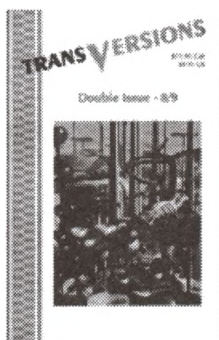
Long live the new *TransVersions*. We trust it will live long and prosper under the guidance of Marcel and Sally. Subscription information is on the next page. Please invest in the future of Canada's Literature of the Fantastic.

New Literature of the Fantastic

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TRANSVERSIONS

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TransVersions 11

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James Sallis is probably best known to SF readers as one of the leading lights of the new wave, with groundbreaking stories in publications such as *New Worlds* and *Again Dangerous Visions*. If like us, you have despaired at his low profile since the 70s, you'll be delighted to discover his story collections, literary criticism, books of musicology and novels including *Death Will Have Your Eyes*, *Eyes of the Cricket*, *Black Hornet* and *Bluebottle*. Check out his website at www.btinternet.com/~richnabi/index.html

He left her there on the litter by her parent's trunk, knowing she'd need to be alone now.

He went out into the other room and sat by the open door sipping at the pod of warm pulp she'd set out for him before. It was dark outside, grey turning relentlessly over inside itself, almost morning. In the open square just beyond the door a tree moved several steps to the right, into a patch of dull light, and resettled itself with something like a sigh sounding in its leaves. The leaves were perfectly rectangular, curling towards midline and tip like a tongue.

Much of his life, he knew, would be spent contemplating what had just taken place. But for now, newly set adrift on his future, he took refuge in the past, in his own memories and those of his parents.

A limitless white ceiling, the only world he yet had. The voices that came to him there, like a rain one heard — voices that came to him still sometimes, unbidden.

A crimson, restless sea.

Fields of migrating grain.

The husk of his parent's body just before he returned it to the trees.

The tree moved again, to the left this time, and settled back. He thought how so much of their lives, fibre for clothing, materials for shelter, medicines, even basic sustenance, came from the trees.

Then she emerged from the back room.

They sat together in the doorway, soles of their feet pressed against one another. He passed the pod and she drank. Pulp, from the tree.

The world looks no different, she signed.

No.

But it is. I thank you for your choice, for my freedom.

He signed that it was of no import and passed the pod to her again. Lowering her head, she drank. Lifting the pod, he drank. Light pushed gently at the backside of grey beyond the door. The tree shifted again, into whatever tatters remained of darkness.

She drank off the last of the liquor, gathering final shreds of pulp onto her smaller thumb and offering it to him.

There is more, she signed. He assented, and she went to draw another podful from the gourd as, waiting, he witnessed morning's arrival. Slow eddies gave way to pools of silver above the trees; then, riding from its centre, there was sudden light. Around them the low, wordless moan of the trees.

And with the morning, morning's chill.

She closed the door and sat beside him again, soles of her feet against his. He watched her across this chasm, you could bridge it with an outreached hand but no one ever would, her lidless eyes, pale blue skin.

Passing the pod from hand to hand, they drank. Unseen light went on growing outside, reclaiming its world. A general sense of increment,

augmentation. A growing sense of loss.

These walls, he signed. That shut us away?

He sat watching one. Pale white like the pith of plants rising from still water, like every wall he had ever seen.

There could be openings, he signed. Eyes in the walls. Out of those eyes we would continue as part of the world, never again be shut away from it. Those eyes would be formed of some material one could see through.

But there is nothing like that, she signed, nothing one can see through.

He assented. Then stood to sign:

There is a stone, a tree. Man waits. In due time, he steps away from the stone.

Woman waits too, she signed. In due time, she steps away from the tree.

He took from her the bundle she offered. Tied with a single white ribbon, it was almost weightless.

Nothing left but the world now, he thought as he went out the door. All this light. All this future he carried with him. The new memories he would have.

Flagging a barge nestwards, he sat on narrow branches among others rushing to or from. At length as they watched, dark began to gather, coming not from the sky, not as descent, but pooling up from the ground like oil: tree and stone united.

Nested, he pulled loose the ribbon tie about the bundle she'd given him. Light as thistledown it unscrolled, barely there at all, floor visible beneath as through water.

Some material one could see through.

Her face fell lightly, transparently, almost weightless, against his hand. Vacant eye slots looking up.

As dark fell then, lifting this precious skin to his lips, he began to eat, began to remember. ❖

pink venus **Rhea Rose**

beneath howling rage and nightcloud steam
sulphuric shell caked in heat,
milky poison pearl
ripples
hell is pink

Plausible in Hindsight in the Interviewee Steve Sneyd

i love alien beings best of all if they
listen to what i say as they wrap me in
twenty-eight or whatever curly fruit-soft
arms in fact even if they don't if they
obviously unfriendly entrap me in metallic
cloaks of corset-style entrapments what
does it matter as long as they listen which
after all the wife the kids the friends haven't
for these decades of my life at least if these
out-of-Nowhere beastmen want to take on board
what i stutter out to them good luck to them
! When they rule our planet soonnow let them
be god to me inspiring and enshining let them
be anything to me i don't care what they do
to me as long as they before they disappear
me listen even ever so briefly to one word
even of understanding as i cry out oh god
like you i am alien on this earth and maybe
with luck they'll say at least "you did well"
or "you did enough" or even "sooner you than
we" before let's face it as you would do lost
in a strange place so hungry as the cobs they
eat me first and honoured above all word by word

IS HIS SWALLOWING OF THE DICTIONARY

And If She Should Eat Geraniums

Mary Choo

She has grown
has worked forever,
anchored by this garden; the signs
she copies in the earth
are private languages
runes perpetual to night.

When she blinks
the moon becomes a crystal
for her ruined eye;
she recalls the pond as always, the spotted frog;
she can't remember why he sings,
envies the grey crow
shifting in the pines.

Where she breathes, old spells
exact an older trust; names
for vanished marigold
or martyred rose;
she has wrapped their summer shoots
in weathered hands,
has kept them warm.

And if she should eat geraniums,
she might still learn
nocturnal dialects from flowers,
extract their darker secrets
from some crevice of the wind.

But should she speak their tongue
just once, just softly
she might snap their jealous roots,
and with disentangled limbs,
among the unforgiving blooms of moonfall,
rise enchanted
on the brightness of wings.

Glose for the World's End Eileen Kernaghan

*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.*

— **Rikahu, 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.

glose: an elaboration or gloss (hence the name) of another poet's quatrain. Originated in the 14th century Spanish court. Each stanza must end with a line from the borrowed quatrain.

Talking Jehovah with James Morrow

by Dale Sproule and Sally McBride

A slim, wiry man with his hair in an unruly grey ponytail, James Kenneth Morrow has a glint in his eye and an expression that could be interpreted as sardonic. The man is renowned for writing Bible stories for adults and has been called “possibly America’s greatest satirist”. He was easy to talk to and fascinating to interview:



Do you believe in God?

MORROW

I believe in the God that is a verb rather than a noun. It’s an idea I take from Buckminster Fuller: a God who is ourselves acting well. I don’t believe in any “entity”, and that’s not just because there’s no evidence for it—and there is no evidence for the God of revealed scripture—I’m really an atheist in that sense because it’s so uninteresting. It’s such a boring theory of reality, that some quasi-personlike entity is responsible for it all, kind of dreamed it up and did it, like an electric train platform. What a boring notion that is to account for the astonishing diversity of life on the planet, all the mysteries. . . . I guess I believe in a sort of Carl Sagan universe, where our human sensory apparatus has severe shortcomings, and our ability to wrap our minds around reality is constrained by this stuff in our skulls. So I think there’s always going to be a frontier of mystery, an unknown—and that’s God enough for me. The universe as revealed by science is far more miraculous, transcendent—religious if you will—than anything I’ve ever found in the Bible. The sense of awe, to me, is to be had through the telescope and the microscope—the secular instruments.

If you find it so boring, why is Christianity such a big component in your writing?

MORROW:

Because so many other people seem to take it seriously. It’s a popular idea. It’s what Dawkins, the biologist who wrote *The Selfish Gene*, would call a

Morrow Interview

meme — one of these ideas that's imbedded in the culture because it's so satisfying. At some level the idea that you're being looked out for by a super father-figure is tremendously appealing. Plus, many of us would prefer not to die, and the Christian world-view says "You ain't gonna die! We've got that licked for you!"

As a satirist I feel a kind of moral obligation to keep a conversation going about these issues. You don't have to venture too far into history to see just how mischievous religion can be. The amount of evil that's been done in the name of fulfilling God's word would fill several volumes. Much of the history of religion, sad to say, is written in blood. I think that constantly needs to be addressed. I'm sometimes asked, though, why I pick on Christianity. Why not go after liberals, or Hindus, or something, and I say, well, it happens to be the reigning culture in which I reside. I'm not against Christianity per se. I'm against received wisdom, established "truths".

I'm often asked, since I write religious satire, among other obsessions, do I get fundamentalists threatening to kidnap me or torch my house or something like that. The answer is basically no. If I'm interviewed, say, on a live radio program where anyone can tune in in their car, somebody of a hardball Christian persuasion might pull over, call the station and say, "How dare you give this man air time? Why are you putting this sort of garbage on your show?" But on the whole, I'm afraid that science fiction and fiction as a whole is such a minority pursuit that the fundamentalists don't pay any attention to it. If in some alternate universe somebody were to make a movie out of *Only Begotten Daughter*, or *Towing Jehovah*, and stayed true to the vision behind those books and made a very irreverent movie, then you can be sure the pickets would show up. But I think for the fundamentalists, all science fiction is demonic ipso facto.

A lot of your books are about a sort of moral Armageddon. Why moral rather than physical?

MORROW:

In *This is the way the World Ends*, my nuclear holocaust comedy, there is a literal exchange of thermonuclear weapons, but my real concern was the morality of the arms race, which at the time the book was composed—the mid-eighties—had reached a fever pitch of nuclear sabre-rattling. I wanted to write a novel that was different from other nuclear holocaust novels in that it would not be a book about the survivors. Even a work as admirable as *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is really about people who have, in one way or another, survived a nuclear holocaust, and there is a kind of cyclical theory of history whereby the Catholic church and its avatars carry on the program of civilization by other means.

I've always been sympathetic to the opposite argument, which I believe was first made by Ursula Le Guin.

She argues that the "survivalist type" of holocaust fiction is really a branch of pornography—that it is really pornographic and obscene, when we're talking about mass extinction, to focus on survivors of any sort. Whether they are admirable people, whether they're barbarians, you're not speaking for the victims. You're ignoring the victims, and that, for Ursula Le Guin and me, is pornography. So, through the resources of speculative fiction, the tools of science fiction, enabled me to come up with a conceit whereby everybody would die. There really would be a human extinction, and (the novel) would be about the victims. It would not be about people moping around on the radioactive ashes trying to remember what they learned in Boy Scouts about how to survive, and what sort of moss to eat. It would be about intolerable loss.

It's my most personal and autobiographical book in the sense that my daughter was three years old when I wrote it, and there's a little three-year-old girl named Holly in it, and it's about her father's illusion that he can somehow be reunited with her when they get separated after the bombs fall on their home town.

I was able to bring other "creatures" on stage in the form of hypothetical people whom I call the Unadmitted. The Unadmitted are all the people who would have been born had the human race not cancelled itself. It's an idea I stole from Jonathan Shell, whose book *The Fate of the Earth* was a seminal Bible of the peace movement. I was very involved in the nuclear freeze activism in the mid-eighties, and the paragraph in Shell's book that spoke most to me was the one where he talks about extinction as a crime, a disaster, a tragedy of a different order than any other Armageddon that we might imagine, because an extinction not only eradicates everyone who is alive at the moment, it eradicates all the future generations who are lined up waiting to get in.

It was that concept of how do we picture our non-existent descendants, what sort of claims do they have, what sort of reality do they occupy if we're going to stockpile nuclear weapons and play Russian roulette with them? That passage moved me so much I said: "That's what science fiction is all about; that's an idea I'd never thought about before." These people are lined up like ghosts, so I gave them a literal form—a one-year tenure on planet earth. Providence allows them a brief sojourn during which they round up the people they regard as responsible for the holocaust—the various war-planners, designers of weapons, politicians, military leaders—and put them on trial, so they get the sort of oblique satisfaction of calling their murderers to account, even though they're all going to fade away within the year.

So it was the moral dimension of nuclear war that really grabbed my imagination as opposed to *The Postman* (David Brin), a novel I admire very much, which is a novel I think about the resilience of humanity and how

Morrow Interview

people can bounce back. David Brin has a less sardonic sensibility than I do; he's not a satirist, although our world-views are very similar. We're both optimists up to a point.

I'm probably a satirist first and a science fiction writer second. The tangled Kafka-esque thinking of the east-west stand-off intrigued me as a satirist. "My enemy was about to kill me in self-defence; so I had to kill him in self-defence."

So you had these strategists really planning to fight and win a nuclear war, even though at another level you would agree that it simply can't be done. I'm not sure how the science fiction writers split on the whole issue of strategic defence, SDI, or what's sometimes called the Star Wars program, but I was certainly not on the Heinlein-Pournelle side that said "Yes, let's throw up this umbrella that's going to protect us." I was always a little annoyed at people who championed this, such as Ben Bova, because they would say "look, our strategy has always been mutually assured destruction, and you don't like mutually assured destruction, do you?" MAD is the perfect acronym, there's never been a more accurate acronym, so because none of us like mutually assured destruction, you know, that's so defeatist and un-American, we therefore must have SDI. What was disingenuous about that argument was that our strategy has never been mutually assured destruction, that's never been the strategy of the U.S. military — it has always been to fight and win.

MAD was one component — and one component only — of the nuclear arms race and it's what's called deterrence. MAD has been a deterrent but it's never been our strategy, and I think the SDI people did a disservice by muddying the water.

How did Godhead Trilogy come to be?

MORROW:

Towing Jehovah is a novel that arrived in the form of an image that I couldn't shake—the corpse of God. Other books of mine have been more conceptual or verbal. In the case of *Only Begotten Daughter*, I wanted to do a novel about what it would be like to be a deity, a really primary deity, like the daughter of God, in the twentieth century. In this existential age when there's no consensus any more about religious truth. But with *Towing Jehovah*, I just saw this supertanker and it was hauling this very large body, and I said, "What's that all about? I'll bet that's the corpse of God." And then I said, "No, that's a ridiculous idea, an embarrassing idea like something in a comic book or worse," and then I said, "Well, that's why God invented science fiction—to make people believe stuff that's ridiculous." I wanted to take on the challenge of somehow making it plausible that a supertanker would get hooked up to the corpse of God and be assigned this burial detail. I knew I'd lucked into something pretty rich when I saw that it connected to

the death of God, a theory that intrigued a lot of Protestant theologians in the early sixties. It connected to Nietzsche of course, and to a genre I've always loved, the sea-saga of ideas. I'm a great fan of *Moby Dick* and *Lord Jim*—in fact, *Towing Jehovah* is something of an homage to *Lord Jim* and similar stories. Sea captain is disgraced and has to redeem himself through heroics.

The other thing I liked about working within the sea saga was that a ship immediately becomes the whole world. I was able to have a microcosm of society in general transpiring on the deck of the supertanker.

But that's a pretty big topic, and everything I know or could learn about life, death, God, the universe could be shoehorned into this book. It was too much for one book, and I wanted to try three different takes on the same ridiculous premise of the two-mile-long corpse of God. I was riding pretty high at the time. My last book, *Only Begotten Daughter*, had been well reviewed in the *New York Times*, and so the publisher was willing to sign me up—I'd changed publishers—based on just a couple of chapters from *Towing Jehovah* and a vague sense that there were two other books. One would have something to do with putting God on trial, which became *Blameless in Abaddon*. At the time I didn't know that it was also going to be a re-telling of the Book of Job. I said, "Oh, it's going to be a courtroom drama, might be a sort of fun take on the problem of evil, see if I can figure out a way to rationalize evil as well as Saint Augustine did."

Then *The Eternal Footman* (fall 1999, Harcourt Brace) was going to be a kind of nebulous Holy Grail story in which people would try to relieve the planet of a plague that had descended. I figured that at some point the body of God is going to decay and become a vector for disease, but the book went in a rather different direction. "The Eternal Footman" is Elliott's sort of death avatar. There is a plague in the book, but it's not that the body is the vector of this contagion, it's that everybody is so depressed by the death of God.

The skull is about all that's left by now. It starts to expand, pops into the troposphere and goes into geosynchronous orbit, like a satellite. So you walk out at night and see this giant grinning death's-head. Really depressing.

You can't get away from the fact of God's death, and this depression is the vector of disease. Once you're infected you start to see your own death. I use the folklore idea of the fetch, which is the sort of premonition of your death, and it turns out that everybody has a kind of doppelganger who you don't want to meet, but you do. You might be waiting in line at the grocery store to check your food through, and you look over to the next line and there's your death. There's your eternal footman. And you can strike up a conversation with your death, you can try to reach an understanding, but such conversations are rarely satisfying.

In the third book, it's a global disaster. It's no longer a secret that God is dead, and there is chaos. It's probably the darkest of the books. A lot of

Morrow Interview

people die, there's no possibility of redemption—but it ends on a somewhat bright note: that maybe there is a reality beyond this concept of God. To get back to your original question “Do I believe in God?” — I'm saying that God is dead, and probably ought to be dead. But there are other Gods out there, and I give a hint of this in the climax of *The Eternal Footman*.

In science fiction, people keep writing the same books over and over. You have a real talent for hitting things that no one else has covered.

MORROW:

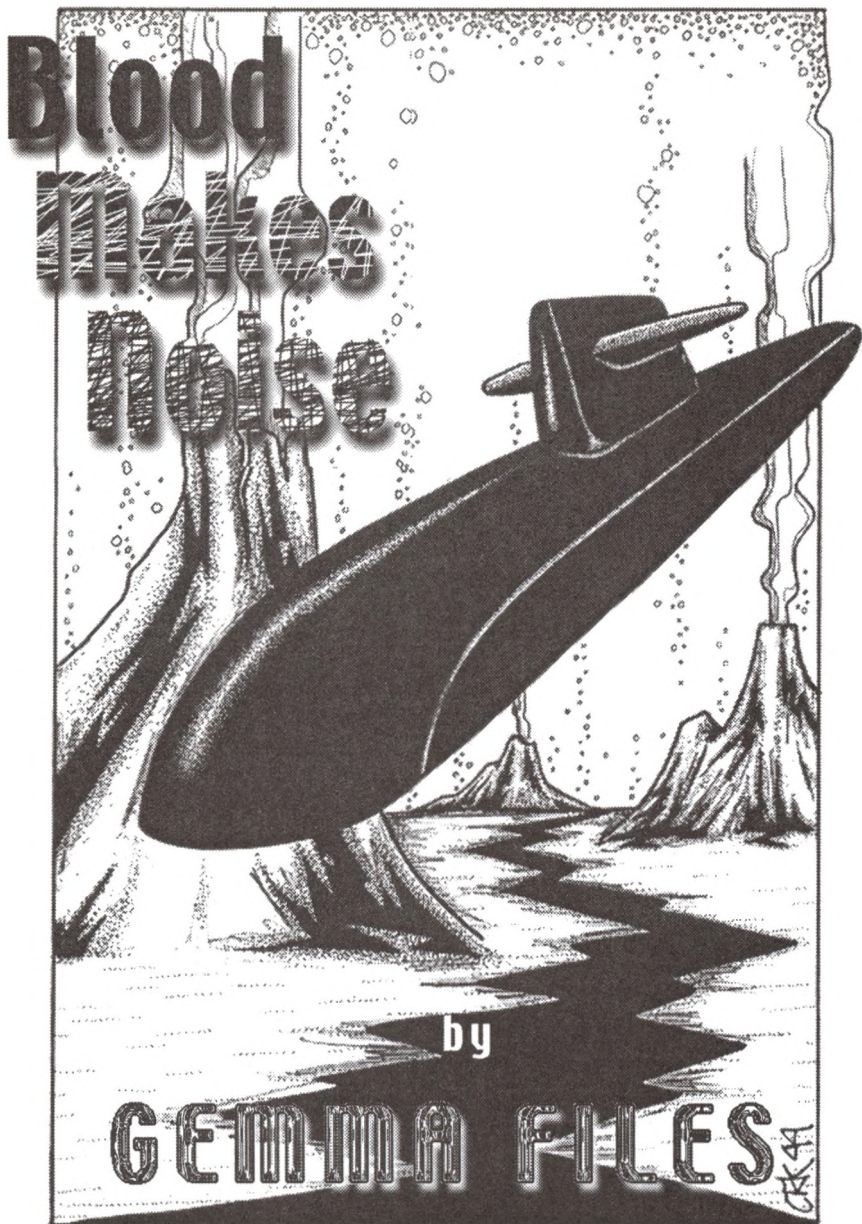
I don't come at science fiction through the normal route. I draw my energy more from mainstream literature. I had a wonderful course in the sort of subversive, satirical stuff I'm trying to write when I was a mere tenth-grader.

For some reason the honours English class took a chance on the notion that 15-year-olds could handle Voltaire, Ibsen, Flaubert, Dante, Dostoyevski... major writers. It was a revolution and a revelation in my head that fiction could be about questioning the established order of things. It wasn't just about a story. Or it wasn't just about personal human psychology — it was about the world, it was about civilization.

The other strand for me was actually much worse than having read science fiction as a kid. I love horror movies, and I used to buy *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine. I must admit the energy of that kind of popular culture is very much in my fiction. I need that strand too. I need the intellectual, literary strand, and I need the joys of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* . . .

I think what's wrong with a lot of science fiction is that it feels like it's about science fiction, about the tropes of science fiction. I've always thought that what's wonderful about the medium is that it's able to accommodate so many passionate agendas. What I tell students is, write not about what you know — that's a dead end — write about what you care about. Which may or may not be what you know. Write about the things that make you angry, that drive you nuts, that get you puffed up one way or another.

Rather than writing about your affection for science fiction — a perfectly respectable affection — know that the medium can do so much more. If you have any sort of religious, political, psychological, philosophical problems, it's ready made. In fact, I often think that the conventional literary criticism should be turned on its head. I think that “mainstream” realistic psychological fiction is the subset, and the overarching literature that we have in the west is the literature of the fantastic. Within that you can maybe carve out mimetic reality as one genre, but certainly if you look at the history of the great epic poems, and Shakespeare's plays, pretty much up until the nineteenth century, an element of the fantastic and the speculative is taken for granted. It's a very different universe than you find in John Updike. ❖



Here's another great story from Gemma Files. You'll also find her work in *Northern Frights* 5 and in *TransVersions* 5, 7 and 8/9. She's a movie reviewer for Toronto's *Eye* magazine, writer of script's for TV's *The Hunger* and appears frequently in the Honourable Mention section of *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*.

Depth drunkenness brings strange thoughts — stranger than usual, at least. Right at the moment, it's like I'm seeing my deaf paternal grandmother's hands hover in this darkening air, signing the scenes of my life away syllable by syllable: old, new, in and out of order. These slippery reminiscences, repetitive and elusive — squid-ink images written on oil, squirming from close examination. A memory flip-book, curling at the corners: Nanny Book's crepe-paper skin, laced with pale blue veins; the vestigial webs between her arthritic fingers, spread to catch the light.

My unit bracing to take its turn — pulses shallow, impatient with dismay, most of them more terrified to gauge the true limits of their shameful, mounting fear than consider the circumstances prompting it — as Captain Kiley lies propped up against his bunk, making rabbit-shadows on the holding cell wall.

The sky over Pittsburgh when I was five years old, dirty as a bed of nails.
A map I saw once of the twin moons of Mars.

Hit, flash: popped bulb, clicked lens — image, then absence. Whispers in my skull, like the roar inside an empty shell: blood echoes. Music to — in — my ears.

And just what the hell is that word for the fear of fear, anyway?

Fear: Phobos. Fear of: phobia.

Phobophobia?

. . . must be it.

I press my eyes closed, momentarily forgetting to remember just how deep we must already be. HPNS regulations at least breached, for certain-sure, if not exceeded — more than deep enough to check my hands for tremors, and count off the rest of those prospective High Pressure Nervous Syndrome symptoms our mission literature listed: increased excitability, motor reflex decay; aphasia. Mental glitches.

. . . under the deep black sea, who loves to die with me . . .

— glitches. Psychosis. Cyanosis.

And eventually. . . .

I slam my head back, skull on wall, hard enough to ring myself true — short, sharp shock, broken left incisor into lip, tweak of clarifying pain. Instant coherence. Kiley's rules, channelling themselves:

Keep alert. Tell it through. No opinion without research. No solution without . . .

. . . with — out. . . .



"Book," the Doctor whispers, beside me. I shift a bit towards him, deliberately trying to find the floor's sharpest angle, to bend my hip in such a way as to make the pain flare just so, girdling my pelvis. Making myself uncomfortable.

"Doctor," I answer.

“Book, Regis. American. No . . . registered rank.”

“Specialist.”

He coughs. “I . . . didn’t know that.”

“No reason you would.”

The Doctor give a snuffling gasp, a liquid retch. Something catches in his throat, rattles there briefly — then flicks out again, splattering the floor between us with wet, red bile. I glance back at the wall I just used for a memory aid, which could frankly use a few shadow animals right about now. And as though he’s read my mind —

— which may, I suspect, no longer be quite as hard to do as it once was — “Black . . . Ops . . . operative. ‘Wet . . . boy.’ Yes? C . . . I . . . A — puppet.” I smile, thinly. “Whatever.”

But at least you know my first name.

“You . . . are a . . . coward, Book,” the Doctor tells me. Then lets all his breath out in one big rush, ragged with the effort, like he expects me to pause, to take note — to congratulate him on his sudden insight, his startling perspicacity.

As though this were really some big revelation.



Okay. Step back. Start over.

To call the situation bleak would be an understatement. Down to our last few hours of oxygen, high on our own fumes and drifting blind: trapped inside a lost, crewless, experimental submarine — make and model strictly classified, even if it mattered — trolling rudderless, black and silent, along a smoking ridge of volcanic fissures at the bottom of the Subeja Trench. Engines blown, no fuel reserves, interior lights dimmed down to a thread or two of emergency luminance along the hallways. With nobody left to tell the whole tale but me and the Doctor, enemies in an undeclared Lukewarm War, huddled across from each other behind the blackout blinds, the two-way mirrored walls, of what we used to call the Waiting Room.

Me sitting quiet, chin on knees, cradled by a weak but quenchless glow that emanates from somewhere deep inside me — quivering, almost imperceptibly, against the back corner of my former prison. Watching him, on the floor, slumped in on himself — curled, fetal. Broken. Moving just enough, every once in a while, to give up the occasional cough — weak and wet, greased with pinkish phlegm; visible fallout from a buried haematoma, a crushed rib, a punctured lung.

Blood whispering in my inner ear, static between stations: radio Tintinitus, the voice of the virus. Of that indefinite thing to whom I owe my freedom, my breath and life itself, but whose true nature remains as much a mystery to me now as when they finally threw me into this same room, head-first, to sweat and scream out my appointment with its presence behind a triple-mag-locked door.

The barely-there voice of my master, my soon-to-be saviour.

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It cajoles, flatters. It says: My love. It says: You know I will honour my promises. It says: Time means nothing. And in the same non-breath, self-contradictory, it says: Soon.

Soon, soon.

And I sit here, still, not answering. My whole body nothing but a thin skin suit, stretched tight over an endless scream.



When three of the Doctor's largest "orderlies" finally dragged me down to the Waiting Room, they had to break two fingers just to get me through the door. I lurched, tripped, came down face-down and felt my bottom lip split open on impact with the floor, left eyetooth cracking in half like a piece of candy-corn. Mouth full, head tolling, I spat, swallowed, screamed back at them — and him, for all I couldn't see him through the two-way's glare — every invective phrase I could form in their wonderfully poetic native language: "May goats rut on your grave! May nuns use your bones for dildos! May God fill your heart with shit and drown your grandchildren in blood!"

And then, reverting under the stress of the moment to pure all-American: "Fuck you! Motherfuckers! Fuck, fuck, FUCK ALL Y'ALL!"

Unlike the rest of my former unit, you see, I knew exactly what to expect — because I'd already been there behind the mirror myself, helping the Doctor record what happened to each and every one.

I felt like I'd broken the rest of my fingers on that fucking door, before the pain calmed me far enough down to get me thinking straight again.

So: Slowly, I turned. Made myself look back.

And there it was, in the Waiting Room's far corner — almost close enough to touch.

The thing.

They found it at the bottom of the sea somewhere, in relatively shallow water. Took it out real deep to test it, just in case — a fairly good idea, in my personal opinion. Given what I've seen it do.

White coil of unknown — metal? Bone?

Silence. Compressed dust.

Whatever, Doctor.

A funnelled, calcified glass shell, an empty tube-worm knot, utterly alien. Shedding icy light the way we shed blood, and looking somehow slick while doing it. Somehow . . . unclean.

But that might just have been the fear talking.

Blink-flash fast, I conjured a mental image of the Doctor comfortably ensconced behind that mirror, taking his notes, making his calculations, running his useless experiments; the same fucking data, over and over.

You go in. And it sits there. And you sit with it.

And then — the glow begins to change. To grow.

And then —

— you die.

Five times out of five. Granted, I'm a traitor, not a scientist — but to me, those odds do suggest a certain pattern.

I felt myself freeze, then, settling instinctively into much the same position I hold now, except with my back up against the door instead of the corner. Freeze and listen, straining for a hidden warning, some cold whisper beating up through the rush and gasp of my own hot blood — a hum beneath the hum.

Beneath the human.

The flutter of my pulse, quick and light with morbid anticipation. The — (Phobos)

— inescapable fear —

(phobia)

— of my own fear.

. . . and why do I keep forgetting that fucking word?

Oh yeah, right; brain melting. Memory — drowning.

Terror-struck, I held my breath, tried to slow it down. Closed my eyes and prayed to simply disappear, before the sheer, dull, palpable horror of it all ate me alive.

But I didn't piss my actual pants until the first time I heard that noise in my blood begin to talk.



Two weeks, ten days and five other men ago . . . five men I knew well — my trusting comrades, my trusted cooperatives . . . five men plus dear, dead Captain Kiley, that old Cold-War-horse, who once let slip (in strictest confidence) how he considered me his second son. . . .

The call came straight from the top, wherever that is: a need-to-know mission with an unstated goal, just a set of coordinates and a schedule on a sheet of inflammable fax-paper. Search and destroy, no questions asked. So we smuggled ourselves into the area, clinging barnacle-fast to the hull of a rented African smuggling ship — dropped blind, docked ourselves at the base of volcano 037, got equalized with the pressure, and spent the rest of the day marking off time. And when the sub's shadow fell over us, we swam to meet it in perfect formation, convinced — like the brave little hard-bodied boy scouts our training had made us — that the computerized codes we'd been issued with would be enough to trick our way inside. Which they were, of course; when you're working for folks who routinely drop \$50 million or so on new toilet paper dispensers, a string of numbers probably comes comparatively cheap.

No, it wasn't the codes that betrayed us, or got us captured within an insulting half-hour. The codes didn't give us up to the Doctor, to serve as

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cannon-fodder in his continuing quest to find out what that thing in the Waiting Room was — aside from almost-instant death for anybody he threw in with it.

‘Cause codes, you see, don’t really come equipped for treason — hold no political opinions, weigh no options, covet no raise in monetary reward. Risk nothing and nobody on the simple hope of gettin’ pee-ay-ei-dee-paid.

So who?

Well. . . .



Like participants in any arranged marriage, The Doctor and I agreed to consummate our vows only after an exhaustively negotiated ritual of long-distance courtship. Acting under Kiley’s orders, I used my satellite access as the unit’s translator and intelligence liaison to track the sub’s location and eavesdrop on its internal mutterings — and when his back was turned, I used the same good ol’ U.S. technology to slip inside the Doctor’s laptop, read his notes. Send him e-mail. Tell him he could protect his precious project, and gain a core group of experimental subjects, for the one-time-only price of a hefty Swiss bank-account deposit, a trip back to the surface and an artfully-faked sole survivor scenario: me cast momentarily adrift in the unit’s life-pod, beacon on, with an enemy bullet lodged in some suitably fleshy body-part (exact location to be determined later on, at both our conveniences).

“You tellin’ me all this’s about money?” Kiley demanded. And I just shrugged, snapping back: “What else?”

Thinking, all the while: Disappointed? Well, fuck you, dead man. You can yap all you want about honour, and duty, and the idiot joy of the holy patriotic Cause — but from where I stand, you’re nothing but worm-food with an attitude. So go ahead, strike that pose. When you’re being buried with full military honours, I’ll be cutting myself a slice of apple pie and negotiating a thousand-dollar blow-job.

“You know when the Old Ma’am and the rest of those REMFs back at HQ find out, they’re gonna cancel your sorry ass.”

I smirked. “Find out from who?”

“Ain’t you got no pride at all, boy?”

“Well. I guess not.”

Behind me, somebody spit on the floor. All of them glaring through me, turned back first — if looks could eviscerate. Even fey little Ed LoCaso, the training camp’s token cocksucker, suddenly pumped full of indifferent hauteur and undying contempt — if the situation hadn’t been just a little too butch to bear it, he looked like he might have given me the finger-snap, or maybe just the finger.

“You just better be ready to live with yourself, Book,” Kiley told me, finally, right before they hauled his kneecapped ass onto that medical stretcher and took him down the hall to meet our mystery guest. Last words,

and he knew it, so he thought he had to make them count — make his point before it was too late for me to repent, and come to an impressive eleventh-hour understanding of the error of my ways.

“Is that meant to be some kind of challenge?”

A frown — a wince, almost. Like: Jesus, Regis!

“History — ”

“Yeah, right. Now, let’s see: who is it writes history, again, exactly?”

We both knew the answer, and so did everybody else — it’d been one of Kiley’s favourite saws, back up top. So no one bothered to reply.

Not even him.



Distant echoes, as the dim lights fade further: roils and rumblings, metal gamelan trills. The odd hollow clang, barely audible, as the Waiting Room floor’s dip slowly steepens. Behind the two-way, I hear the Doctor’s autopsy equipment start to skitter down the counter, catch and clatter on the fixtures — all those poor lonely clamps and scalpels, laid out in eager anticipation of my corpse.

And cheated instead: cheated, cheated.

For now.

The voice seems to smile, seems to agree. And tells me:

Soon.



Oh, Book, Book — shape up, soldier. You think you really got all the time in the world? You believe everything some fossil full of prehistoric bacteria tells you?

. . . can’t believe I even just thought that sentence. . . .

So talk it out straight, for once, you crooked motherfucker — before your brain turns irretrievably to mush.

Regis Aaron Book: Me. 28 years old. Specialist rank 4, Lang- Intel. Cheat and smart-ass. Traitor.

Coward.

Born in Louisiana, raised in Pittsburgh; deaf grandma, absent Mom — gone so long, all the photos burned, I barely remember if she had a face. But I suspect she was probably pretty; I sure am.

After she ran off, Dad re-enlisted, went to Germany. Got all ripped on LSD one night and drove his tank into the Rhine. The government sent us a letter. I got to it before Nanny Book could see, read it, and flushed it down the toilet.

No great conversationalist, my Nan, and that wasn’t all because of her pronunciation problems. She did teach me ASL before I was five, though.

Ever see the sign for drowning? It’s kind of cute.

I played football in high school, got a university scholarship. Fucked my left foot (deliberately, I must confess) — hairline fracture, long-healed now.

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Transferred streams. Did languages: French, German, Hungarian, Romanian, five different Slavic variants — the USSR grand tour, they used to call it. Which is how I caught certain people's eyes.

When I went ROTC, I told people it was because the recruiting officers said they'd kick me \$40,000 towards the rest of my fees. But that was a lie. I joined the army so I could kill people — after which I joined the CIA, so I could do it for no good reason and be virtually assured of getting away with it.

I'm an American, born and bred. I like money. I like power. I like sex, as long as it doesn't lead to anything permanent. I —

. . . blood in my. . .

— what else? Anything relevant?

(there's a concept)

Oh, fuck: Shut up. Will you just shut the hell up, already?

. . . noise. In my. . .

My name is Book, Regis — Regis Book — and yes, I am a coward. And you know why? Because the proper synonym for coward, in this messed-up post-Berlin-Wall world of ours, is "smart person". Cowards always come out on top. We try harder, and when we screw up it hurts worse, so we make damn sure it never happens again. We're the ones who live to fight another day — or just to live.

. . . blood.

Stay alive. My sole, my only legitimate consideration. The only one that matters.

Five more minutes, five more hours. Five more days, more years. Fifty. Five hundred — I don't discriminate. But I am selfish. Oh, yes. You damn betcha.

Because I'm not going to die, not here — never here, never like this. Watching image- and word-meaning shuffle off into disintegration as my mental deck of cards deals me a dead man's hand, and the air runs out. Watching the Doctor cough his life away. Watching the lights dim, and hearing this thing inside me hold its figurative breath, waiting for me to get so loopy I don't care whether or not I'm part of it, or it's part of me. Or if there's any me still left for it to be a part of.

No. I'm not going to die like this — or any other way, if I can help it. I'm coming out of this sub just the same way I came



in, the same way the Doctor and company found me when they opened the Waiting Room's mag-locked door, after the mandatory five hours had finally elapsed: alive alive-oh, just like sweet Molly Malone. . . .

. . . before the fever, that is. Before the last verse.

Yeah, well, whatever; folk music was never my strong suit.

Alive, spelled ay-ell-ei-vee-ee.

Anything else is gravy.



The Doctor has lapsed into some kind of half-sleep. In the two-way, I catch a glimpse of my fine new self, post-thing: my bone-blonde hair, my bleached-out skin. My eyes like bruises, cilia purple with broken blood-ves-sels. I sniff the air, and decide that my skin has begun to smell like hash packed in sulphur.

And this glow, this glow, around and inside me. This inmost light.

The whispers tell me: You are a chrysalis. And I counter by forcing myself to think hard about the shrivelled husks I saw left behind in Nanny Book's back yard, after the butterflies had gone on their merry way. I imagine my mouth splitting slowly open, ripping. Bending like vinyl under the eruptive strain, as a hitherto-hidden larva sloughs me off like so much deluded dead skin.

I feel the fear rise up in me again like wine, like flame — the salt and spices of it distributing themselves through my body while I struggle in its slow-cooking flame, rendering me ever more tender, more juicy. More appetizing.

'Cause fear is what this thing goes for, see? It loves it. Eats it. Got it in little tiny jolts from Kiley and the boy scouts, one by one by one; suck 'em dry and move along, bub. Skin packets, lit and hollowed from within, irradiated with detritus radiance. One big bruise, left to rot: an empty, man-sized wrapper, stuffed full of crumbly bones.

And why was I the only one, apparently, to ever figure this particular connection out?

Just my luck, I guess.

Drips and drabs, after the long drought on the sea-bottom — aside from stealing the occasional muffled howl from a passing, boneless thing or two, in between geological epochs. From me, though, a veritable stream of terror, so constant as to skirt actual sanity. Fear-engine Book, running on empty. C'mon in and make yourself at home.

The Doctor turns his head again, heavier. Barely able to open his eyes. And tries to ask:

"What . . . happened . . . to — the — ?

"The shell?" I shrug. "Dust in the wind, Doc." Adding, as though in explanation: "It was old."

"Pre- . . . Pleistocene."

"Yeah, that sounds about right."

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A wheeze, a cough. "And — what was . . . inside . . . ?"

To which I smile, curling back my bruised lower lip. Showing the tips of all my remaining upper teeth — my ill-set front caps, my jagged, half-missing left incisor. And reply:

" . . . went — inside me."



And hey, there's even evidence: the Doctor taped it all, obsessively anal to the last, with a camcorder installed (as per tradition) behind the two-way — images skipping and fading between intermittent washes of static. I wound it back, watched it, in those first dim eons after I knew for sure that no matter what, the sub would just keep right on drifting further down and faster. Talk about post-modern: my cruel apotheosis, shot by shot, in all its real-time glory.

Hour one: Me pounding, pleading. Slumping. Turning.

Hour two: Me and the shell.

Hour three: The glow, beginning. Spreading.

Hour four: My hypnotized attention. Our conversation, me and it — that thing; not something which really seems to register, actually, on the purely visual scale.

Cajoling, flattering. Saying: my love. Saying: you know I will honor my promises.

The glow increasing steadily throughout, meanwhile; a slimy glitter. A blazing smokeless cloud, pillar of salt-white fire. A certain sense of boiling. Of moving outward, then — inward. Saying: soon.

Soon, soon.

And in hour five. . . .

The Waiting Room door clicks open, admits four — Doctor and goons, the original three-pack, already braced for action. They see me on the floor, face-down; the declining line of my limp back, head clutched in hands, shadow-rapt. No more light, bright or otherwise. No more shell.

. . . this quintessence of dust . . .

"Bastard ate the fucking thing, fuck your mother," I hear one blurt. And think: you could say that.

The Doctor kneels, waves them closer. One kicks me over. They see my face, hesitate as one —

. . . this noise. . . .

— and I feel my hands knot, my insides furl. I feel them start to reel away from me, then stop dead — sway, dazed. Instantaneously lulled. All of them, Doctor included, plunged into a kind of half-intoxicated trance brought on by my — (its) — proximity. Like standing next to a generator, invisible energy pouring off me in waves. Drowsiness seeping in through the pores.

I feel their fear, like I feel my own. And I feel what was once inside the shell — what's now inside me — sniffing at it. My mental tastebuds, gear-

ing for the feast. My mouth, watering. The glow rekindling, a slow flame under my skin. This radiance looking out through my eyes, bruising them from the inside with the pressure of its glare.

. . . in my blood. . . .

Disconnected, surfing the current: a battery, a contained conflagration, run on incipient panic. I lever myself up with both hands, mirroring the Doctor. Look around. See them return my look, all of them — helpless not to.

“Bet you wish we were back in El Salvador now, fellas,” I remark. Conversationally.

And I feel it let go of me, the thing, exploding outward like a concussion bomb-blast. Blow out the bridge, bring the bulkheads down. Crush the goons back against the Waiting Room walls. Crumple the Doctor in on himself. A surge of pent-up energy, driving me upward — haloed, paralysed, cocooned in power. Catapulted into some pupa stage, lapped in adrenaline and brain-opiates. I feel the shell’s former inhabitant slip away from me, in search of fresher fields, and my terror surges, babbling. I match it, promise for promise — set myself up as its carrier, its willing Judas Goat.

Succor and repair me — love me for real, like you love yourself — and I will bring you prey and praise.

A modern Prometheus for the century’s end: eat my fear anew each day, that I may live forever. Trying my level best to make it understand, through instinct rather than intelligence, that I’m not just a host

— not just some new flesh shell for it to hide and sleep in, hibernating until the next best thing comes along. Wordlessly eloquent, I vow to trade keeping myself in a constant state of fear and pain for a vaccination — however temporary — against the whole concept of death. Death by drowning, by slow suffocation, death here at the bottom of the deep black sea, in the pressure-drunken final fathoms.

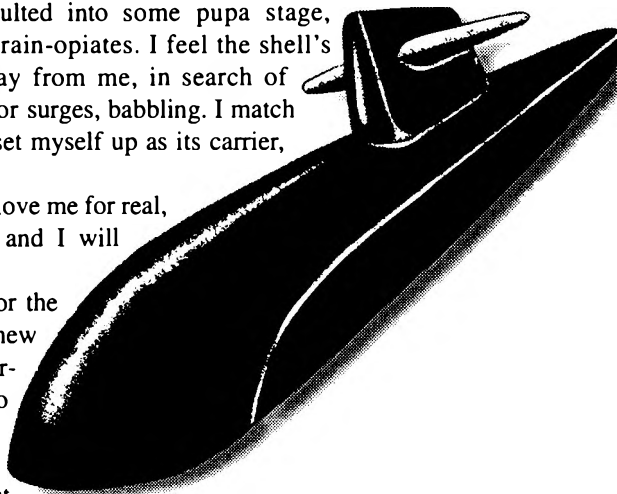
Making sure to also point out — with strictest possible attention to detail — that if I lose my personal identity, then I won’t know what I have to be scared of anymore.

And you’ll starve.

I hover, wait for its reply. Until the words come, soft as necrosis. Cells collapsing. A lie for a lie:

Time means nothing. . . .

Yeah, yeah: to you.



. . . to us.



Which brings us, I believe, right back to where we started.



“Book,” the Doctor whispers, now — so soft I can barely hear him, over my own constant internal whisper.

“Doctor,” I reply. The word not meaning quite what it used to. Two empty syllables, ringing hollow in my skull. Language no longer seeming necessary, even as a nervous tic.

He clears his throat, or tries to, blood rattling in his lungs. Spits, or tries to. And shapes the words, with a last feeble breath:

“. . . I’m . . . a — fraid.”

I shift my gaze back to him, slowly. Take a moment to remember his title, his significance. Then nod. And think:

But not as much as me.

Thankfully.



Here on the Subeja Trench’s second shelf, already too far down to hope for rescue — anytime soon, at least — we drift past holes belching black lava, coral mountains crusted five arms deep with vivid, fleshy anemones. Everything watches us go by, large or small. They give us sidelong glances, and bare their teeth. And we keep on slipping down, fathom by fathom, until the foliage thins and the light falls away. Until there’s nothing to note our descent but a congregation of boneless, blazing things that regard us with a total lack of curiosity.

While I note the Doctor’s broken corpse, sprawled and sloughed on the floor beside me. Feeling similarly little.

Wondering: did I really strike a bargain, just then, or do I only think I did?

But if I can still think coherently enough to even consider the question, I guess, it probably just doesn’t matter all that much.

The sub buckles, twisting in on itself deck by deck. But I hold fast, foot-loose and evidence-free, to the improbable notion that I have been promised exemption — that even when the water seeps in under the Waiting Room door, this thing’s internal patronage will render me impermeable, slicked with infection. No swelling, no softening, no gentle nibbles from passing teeth; just a long sleep, a long, long dream. One long nightmare, a phobic haze, during which I can jim in my own stew —

(you fucker, you promised)

— stew — swim in my own . . . juices. Awhile.

. . . a while, a minute, a century. . .

And when they (the CIA, the Doctor’s bunch, a salvage crew, whoever) finally find us, and pry open this busted can, how very sweet I’ll be. Well-marinated, and ready to serve. To be my prehistoric saviour’s chosen

liaison, its translator. Its face prepared to meet the faces it will eat.

Or maybe we'll just stay down here, forever, unfound and unmourned, until entropy eats us both.

I raise my hand, look at my fingers. See my vision narrow. My pressure-drunk brain, squeezing itself flat. Glitches, sparking and fading; images fizzling. Kiley's shadow-animals. Nanny's hands.

The two moons of Mars, on that childhood chart. Deimos and —

— Phobos. Meaning panic —

(phobia)

— and fear.

Fear, my motive, my spur. My dark and guiding star.

All my life, I think, my fear has driven me to take the easiest way. And where does the easiest way lead, usually?

Well, that would probably be — down.

Down here, at the bottom. Where there are a lot of things, and most of them glow. . . .

Thinking: when you get what you ask for, you really have no right to be surprised.

. . . including me.



Grave Mary Choo

Your eyes, once favoured, drip green,
pernicious into bone,
your rich clothes racked
on rib and limb,
preserved under anthems of mahogany.

For you the rain is heavy
as the slide and slip of fetid soil,
as pride, disfavour,
all your immutable rage;

when it shifts your rest,
do you clench your ruined hands,
recalling troubled children?
Where your rings still gleam like ransom
and the thin worms wander,
do you turn?

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Book Reviews

Tesseract 7 edited by Paula Johanson & Jean-Louis Trudel (Tesseract Books, pb \$9.95 hc \$23.95) Review by Tanya Huff

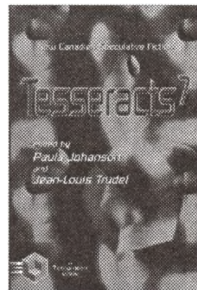
SPECULATING AT THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

There are two questions a reviewer must keep in mind when dealing with most anthologies. One: Does each piece work individually? And two: Does the anthology work as a whole, is it greater than the sum of its parts? With *Tesseract 7*, however, there's a third question. Does this most recent showcase of new Canadian speculative fiction stand up to the critically acclaimed *Tesseract 1* through *6*?

So does each piece work individually? Well, given that there are 37 short stories and poems (44 if the wryly sarcastic, darkly humorous *Altered Statements* is broken up into its eight presented parts) there's pretty much a guarantee of a mixed reaction. Any given reader will find pieces they love and pieces they hate and that's good — it shows the editors are willing to take a chance, to take the unusual over the bland, to allow or even evoke extreme reactions.

My reactions? Well, the most extreme was definitely caused by Cory Doctorow's "Song of Solomon" a disturbingly logical first person look at the Rapture-and-after that's been lingering in my head for days. Not a pleasant story, but very powerful. Gerald L. Truscott's gently hopeful "Millennium Songs" makes a nice counterpoint. Without being didactic, Truscott uses the emotions of the millennium's end to remind us that one person can, and should, make a difference. I found Bob Boyczuk's "Query" to be both over the edge funny and also a weirdly accurate look at publishing. Readers and writers both can appreciate lines like: ". . . I began to suspect that many of our regular correspondents wrote more novels in a year than they actually read." And "Everett's Parallel Universes or How to Make Love to Someone Without Ever Meeting" by Pierre Sormany (translated from the French by Wendy Greene), a "he said, she said" by way of quantum mechanics, is a clever idea, well executed, that explains why some relationships have so much trouble working.

One of the great things about the *Tesseract* series is that they publish poetry as well as prose. Carolyn Clink's "Alien Poetry" opens the anthology with a purple rose kiss and Eileen Kernaghan's "Zero Visibility" closes it



with Guy Lombardo. In between, a scattering of pieces explore everything from an Old Woman who puts the world in order (“Old Woman Comes Out of Her Cave and Puts the World in Order” by Mildred Tremblay) to the irony of a music box in a tomb (“Mummy Bones” by Shirley Meier). Richard Steven’s “Pascagoula Creatures” even rhymes — and that’s something you don’t see every day.

Does the anthology work as a whole, is it greater than the sum of its parts? Yes. Firstly, it gives us an amazingly inclusive look at the state of Canadian speculative fiction — touching on physics, mysticism, vampires, and pretty much everything in between. Three stories were translated from the French, one from the Spanish (by way of Cuba and Newfoundland). The authors are spread from coast to coast, north to south, and, according to the short biographies in the back of the book, bring an interesting array of backgrounds and experience to the anthology.

Secondly, while it can be argued that all fiction is a comment on the times in which it was written, many of these pieces are specifically a comment on these times from the corporate takeovers in the news to the appalling lack of personal connections in many modern lives. Taken together, they’re a fascinating look at where Canadians are at in this, the last year of the millennium.

My only complaint with *Tesseract 7* is that, in a couple of the stories, style won out over substance and I was left thinking, “Huh?” The words went together prettily but I finished reading with no idea of what the story was actually about. This, to me, is a failure of communication on the author’s part. Perhaps they were trying to be literary, where literary is defined as stylish and obscure. Or perhaps these stories just weren’t for me. In an anthology of this size, it’s entirely possible that for the given reader mentioned back in the beginning of the review, some stories will miss entirely. Even given the misses, I’d much rather see an anthology where the editors take chances than one where they try to be all things to all people and end up catering to the lowest common denominator. We certainly don’t need any more of that. Not with cable or satellite dishes in most Canadian households.

Over all, *Tesseract 7* is a smart anthology, disturbing, funny, provocative, with poetry that skims an idea down to the gleaming ivory of its bare bones and prose that examines the details. Ideas are what speculative fiction is about, after all, and *Tesseract 7* has no shortage.

Does this most recent showcase of new Canadian speculative fiction stand up to the critically acclaimed *Tesseract 1* through *6*?

Definitely.



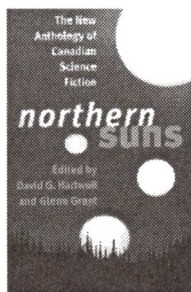
Northern Suns, edited by David G. Hartwell and Glenn Grant (Tor, hc \$34.95). Reviewed by John Park.

Northern Suns is the successor to the first Hartwell/Grant collection, *Northern Stars*, devoted to Canadian SF. All the stories this time are

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reprints, and by intention no author appears in both volumes. Still, there is a good range of age and background, from Margaret Atwood and Robertson Davies to Geoff Ryman, Cory Doctorow and Robert Boyczuk.

We also have a pretty mixed bag of content: 21 stories, an essay by John Clute and an Introduction by Glenn Grant, plus an appendix of Canadian SF awards. If there is a Canadian theme in *Northern Suns*, it didn't leap out at me (despite the fact that several stories are explicitly about Canada). And yet there was a specific feel to the collection. . . .



For one thing there's little hard SF. I count one definite and a couple of maybes. Karl Schroeder's "Halo" is the hardest SF piece in the book. It's set in a partly terraformed planet orbiting a brown dwarf — the only story not set on Earth. It is as much about its world as about the disaster that is averted, or the woman who first learns of the danger and is faced with a wrenching decision. Character, plot and setting are well imagined and nicely linked; all that's missing is more sense of place in the early scenes. Alain Bergeron's "The Eighth Register" turns on a new invention — usually a hall-

mark of hard SF. But this story is also an alternate-history piece — about the likelihood of alternate histories — set in Canada in a theocratic descendant of the Roman Empire. The invention — which computes the probabilities of different courses of history — is kept in the background; the focus is on the theological repercussions of its output. The ideas are intriguing and the plot is well worked out; only some remoteness of execution and blandness to the cast of characters limit its effectiveness. Eric Choi's "Divisions", though formally another alternate history piece (set in 1981 after Quebec voted to separate), resembles a lot of hard SF in its (slightly clunky) writing and its optimism, and in the way the story uses a problem-solving plot (about the use and ownership of communication satellites) as its backbone.

Among these, it might be noted, only Schroeder's story involves "big" technology, and even that is mostly slotted into the background.

The absence of big technology and space stories seems to have accompanied a turning from the future. Several stories set in the future are in dead-end worlds with a nostalgia for the past (Ursula Pflug's dense and evocative "Bugtown", Nalo Hopkinson's "A Habit of Waste" — a well-drawn cultural portrait but with a predictable message — and Derryl Murphy's quietly elegiac "The History of Photography"). A couple explicitly and effectively evoke versions of our own past. Michael Skeet's "Near Enough to Home" is set in the American civil war, in a North America dominated by Canada. A famous US politician has a major uncredited role. Scott Mackay's "The Sages of Cassiopeia" recreates the astronomical work of Tycho Brahe in the

16th century. And a need to recapture the past is one of several layers in Cory Doctorow's funny and poignant story of alien and human rummage-sale addicts, "Craphound."

If hard SF and the future are rare, aliens are even rarer. The mysterious changes that happen in Scott Mackay's story may be caused by extraterrestrials, but apart from Cory Doctorow's "Craphound", only Sally McBride offers us an alien in the flesh, in "The Fragrance of Orchids". Its orphaned female alien is perhaps a little too human, psychologically, but her problem and that of the protagonist nicely complement each other.

Since this is nominally an SF collection, it's not surprising to find little or no traditional fantasy. Nancy Kilpatrick provides a fairly straight horror story "Farm Wife"; Robertson Davies, a whimsical Faustian bargain. But beside these, there is more material from the magic-realism zone than a pure SF anthology would normally accommodate. W. P. Kinsella's contribution is a short fable. Jean-Pierre April's "Reve Canadien", though creakily written (or translated) for much of its length, uses a magic-realism device to ask questions about Canadian physical and political realities, and builds to a climax of some power. In a less serious tone, Charles Montpetit's, "Beyond the Barriers" offers a new take on one of Canada's defining characteristics. It could also be put in the "satire or social comment" bag, along with Margaret Atwood's rather essayistic "Freefall" and Jan Lars Jensen's "Domestic Slash and Thrust" — a polished update of what Pohl and Kornbluth started 40 or 50 years ago.

The other stories, like several mentioned above, are near-future SF, in which the focus is about equally spread over the character and the idea . . . (I consider this a good thing, though some might wish for a brisker flow of ideas.) These include Wesley Herbert's dark and cyberpunkish "Twilight of the Real", David Nickle's "The Dummy Ward" and Robert Boyczuk's well-written "Doing Time".

The gem of the collection falls into this category. Geoff Ryman's "Fan" is a complex and moving study of a teenager who becomes infatuated with a pop singer. She finds a computer recreation of him that she can talk to, and over the years uses this pseudo-relationship to fill the emptiness in her life. Ryman gives the young woman enough intelligence to understand what she is doing to herself and why. As a result, the story is able to ask what such infatuations mean in general, while pulling us ever deeper into the woman's world as she struggles to escape from her own trap.

Stepping back a bit, I think my slightly procrustean exercise in categorising the stories makes *Northern Suns* sound like a line from Glenn Grant's introduction: "tending towards surrealism, allegory, and folktale, rather than . . . extrapolative science fiction." — except that he was describing Franco-Canadian SF. In this anthology, at least, we seem to have a union of the two solitudes. The result is a collection with a rather domestic tone — the varied

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chatter of a familial-group telling stories beside the fire. A few eyes are turned outward, but most are focused on those mysterious creatures we share our lives with, and whom they watch with pain, laughter and fascination.

Violent Stars by Phyllis Gotlieb (Tor, hc \$32.95) Review by Sally McBride

Phyllis Gotlieb's *Violent Stars* is a hurtling, brilliant banquet of a novel that succeeds as gorgeously on its own as it does in spinning the continuing tale of alien intrigue that started in 1998's acclaimed *Flesh and Gold*. In a future crammed with life and filthy with intrigue, the girl Verona finds herself a pawn in a tangled story of love and hate that started centuries before she was born, and knotted itself tighter when a race called the Lyhrt made a devil's bargain with the ruthless Ix.

I won't try to describe the plot, other than to say that it moves at a breathless clip and involves quite a lot of mayhem. Gotlieb tosses off more invention in 280 pages than a lesser talent might display in a trilogy. You can tell that she loves her characters and knows them well. The confused, resentful Verona is a completely believable teen, the various alien races are satisfyingly flamboyant yet understandably motivated. Ned Gattes, the undercover agent from *Flesh and Gold*, is back and not too happy about it. The Khagodi telepath Skerow is here too, a force to be reckoned with. Ah, yes . . . this is what science fiction is all about: non-stop imagination, big themes, characters splendidly heroic and magnificently villainous; throughout, a sense of language that only a poet could deploy.

Gotlieb is really hitting her stride here; I hope the rumours are true that she's writing another book in the series. I haven't had such a jolt of sense-of-wonder for a long time, and I want more of it.



Starfish Peter Watts Reviewed by Robert Charles Wilson (Tor, hc)

I've never much liked undersea stories. This is an unreasoning but consistent prejudice. At a very early age I learned what to expect from underwater science fiction, viz: bubble cities, gill men and Creatures of the Benthic Deep; or at the more plausible end of the scale, ploddingly realistic novels about espionage and fish-farming. Captain Nemo snuck into the genre on a technicality, I figured, and his heirs sit uneasily at the banquet table.

Peter Watts, of course, is a marine biologist as well as a talented writer,

and *Starfish* is an underwater for a majority of its narrative. It features bubble cities (well, pressurized industrial installations on the shoulder of the Axial Seamount (an underwater volcano off the coast of Washington), gill men and women (kind of), and not a few Creatures; also espionage of a sort, though not much in the way of fish-farming.

I raise these objections in order to dismiss them.

Peter Watts, in the best sf tradition, has looked at all these tropes with a fresh, sharp and scientifically-informed eye. the ocean may be at the centre of the narrative, but it doesn't define the narrative's limits. Events and implications ripple out from the sea-floor like tectonic events. Watts' ocean isn't just scenery. It has context, an historical context, a geological and biological context. A metaphorical context.



PETER WATTS
STARFISH

The novel starts relatively slowly. A group of criminals and emotional misfits, augmented with technology that permits them to move around the sea-floor relatively unencumbered for extended lengths of time, are stationed at an experimental geothermic site near the volcanic "black smokers" of the Juan de Fuca Ridge. The reader may be forgiven the initial impression that this is Ripley-meets-*Abyss* stock casting. Yes, certainly, we're in that kind of emotionally brittle and jargon-driven territory, but for good reason.

The plot unfolds (in darkness, fluorescing now and then) as a series of self-discoveries and revealed motives. the deep sea erodes certainties and lies, exposes fundamental truths and then erodes those, too. The machinery of the large events and players – self-evolving biological computers, archaic pyranosol RNA-based life, tectonic manipulation – mirrors the psychological breakdown and reconfiguration of the protagonists. The limits of the human are pushed in more ways than one.

Wrapped around all of this is Watts' prose, closely focused and often claustrophobic (as it should be), never poetic in the obvious sense but evocative and complex. At times, the mood of quietly desperate disintegration is nearly Ballardian.

Science fiction, as a genre, is obliged to consistently re-invent itself or lose freshness. one of the many virtues of *Starfish* is that Peter Watts has succeeded in making the deep-sea setting all his own. Read *Starfish* by all means, but don't expect Captain Nemo. Expect peter Watts. Watts is more interesting.

Publications Received and Recommended



The Dragon's Eye by Joël Champetier – translated by Jean-Louis Trudel (Tor, hc \$34.95) Quebec writer Champetier demonstrates why his work is so popular in his native language. His first book to be translated into English was also his first in French — a riveting intergalactic spy story.

The Blood Jaguar by Michael Payne (Tor hc \$31.95) Nobody tells animal stories like Michael Payne. *The Blood Jaguar* is Payne at his best – hip, funny, emotionally engaging and edgy.

Magazines

On Spec — More Than Just Science Fiction, Quarterly
Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6

1 year/4 issue subscription – \$19.95 Can/\$18.00 US

A Canadian SF institution that continues bring great stories and high production values into the 21st century.



Rue Morgue – Horror Culture and Entertainment, Bi-Monthly
1666 St. Clair Ave. West, 2nd floor, Toronto, ON, M6N 1H8
1 year/6 issue subscription – \$27 Can/\$20 US

Articles on film, literature, comic books, music and other ways in which horror has an impact on our lives. Jazzy, slick and always interesting

Parsec— An alternate view of Sci-Fi – 6 issue subscription – \$25.50

Won't win any layout or design awards, but *Parsec* presents a nice mix of fiction and articles on sf entertainment.



Fall Babe by Nancy Bennett

Seasonally symmetries of blushing petals fade
tall trees take on the austerity of autumn within the fold all fall
lands and lay lines, chants of skyward flocks
awaken in me a frosted haze chilled to be born again. . . .

The night has shed its clouds
and how like the morning I tremble
cold and wet, alien born out of season
plucked from a star too far away.

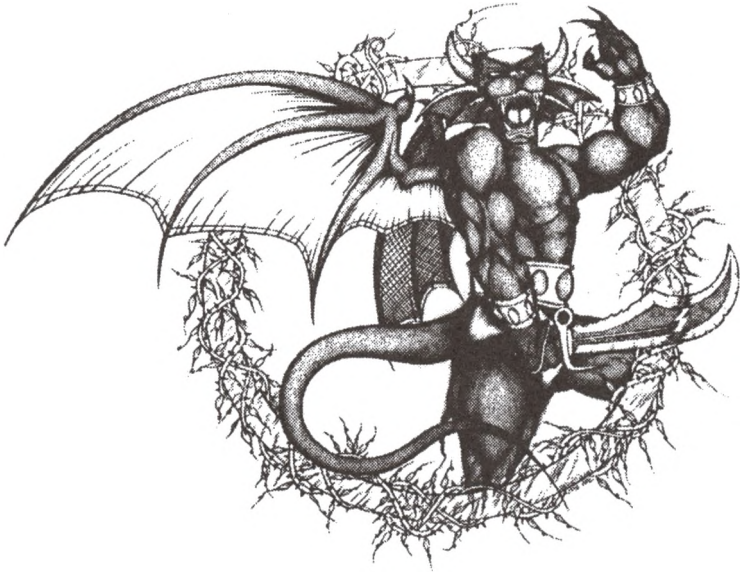
Struggling to grow old before winter stunts me and drops me
like a leaf into a concrete maze
a child born out of time, pushing my webbed fingers
towards a sun feigned summer, too soon, to fall, again. . . .

Bennett

Heaven's Wrath Matt Doeden

Strands of hot yellow-white
like shards of broken glass
wrapping the sky
in their dance of Heaven's wrath

Shouting in heavy clouded bursts
giants in the sky
living lives told of instants
and eternities



HERNE'S OAK

M. Travis Lane

("Be you in the Park about midnight, at Herne's oak, and you shall see wonders." Falstaff to Ford, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Act V, Scene I)

Under a rag of mistletoe, hollowed
by lightnings and winter rains,
Herne's oak fills up with leaves, a beggar's purse.
Named for a hanged cattle-thief
or for the herons, who, summer dusks,
gather themselves into its leaves,
it is a sort of benchmark in a wood
obscure with inky trespasses:
thickets, mires, bogs, swamps, deerlots,
hills coursed with rock walls full of snakes,
briars, vines and tiny, tortuous trails
unblazed except by mice and, now and then,
a weasel's scent.

Where the marsh dissolves the loggers' road,
there is a sort of clearing, scorch-marked,
crusty with broken nut shells, and,
kneeling on an asphalt rug
of dumped roof tiles, the hero in his underwear,
a stag's horns strapped to his white head,
waits his appointment with the moon,
letting her torchlight dazzle him.

Midnight.

A kind of Green Man in sere leaf
he thinks he hears the noise of her wild horns;
it ices him. Knees down
he is a sort of tree himself, disguised by wine,
by winter, and by lust.

II

And now the fairies enter, like school-kids —
all airy elbows, serious t-shirts,
milling about like giggling moths,
their tinfoil pinwheels rattle like dry leaves
caught in a bike's spoke, or buzz like hail.
Among them float pale clouds, the matron
maenads with their bride's gowns light
as thistledown (or mother's dacron curtains),
steeple hats and ivy wreaths —
a fox brush on a lantern's pole as if to set
the woods alight — and a flicker of red
(a tree retaining rage, or a jack of temper
out of it) —

Lane

They pin him to his landscape.
 Dizzy, downed, the cataracts of age
 make him a kind of waterfall
 that hardens to rock as the night moves on,
 and the backstage prickles with new dawn.

Enter the Fairy Queen, the fire captain's friend.
 "What have you done with my old friend Jack?
 Who plays with him in the long green fields,
 now that the sunlight scratches me
 with its bewildering fingernails?"

III (the Queen continues:)

"I felt about me as the dark
 fled into the bushes. The little bats
 sank into their cave by a wisp of steam.
 The ground was as hard as a stone jug.

My sheets are paper and scribbled on.
 I could make a book
 and, like a book, I could lie in it.
 These are the endings of good times.
 Who'll whistle me now, or mow, or find me fair?
 I've been as faithful as fashion, need,
 or custom found me plenty, found me out.
 My treasure's gone dry
 as an old sack.

What times we had when the moon was full,
 those summer nights, that never seemed to end,
 when we heard the church bells ringing at midnights,
 and cocks, that scarcely slept, revived again.

Now I stand cold in a logged bush, my crown
 broken like Jack's or tumbled Jill's,
 my court fled, hanged, or murdered in the wars,
 and Jack, my lively Juggins, emptied out."

IV (continues)

"Old women make poor orators; our voices squeak
 against the noisy roarings of young kings
 banging their recruiter's drums:
 Forward to Madness, Cruelty!
 While poetry creeps crippled in the sun."



James Van Pelt's stories have appeared in *Analog*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales* and many other venues. He was a finalist for the 1998 John W. Campbell Award. "The Diorama" is a sweet but melancholy reminder that we shouldn't get too set in our ways.

“Black! Black! He’s painting the house black!” Owen glared through his picture window at Gary’s house across the street. Emma, reading a *Roads West* magazine grunted as she pushed herself out of the recliner.

“You’re smudging,” she said. Owen pulled his hands off the glass, then she buffed his marks away with a handkerchief she produced from her jeans’ pocket. Owen thought a woman her age shouldn’t wear jeans, but decided he didn’t want to start that argument again.

She said, “It looks more like navy to me. No one would paint a house black.” She tucked the hanky back in her pants as she looked out the window, her face halfway between thoughtful and laughing. It was an expression of hers he’d always loved. “Of course, navy would be just as bad.”

She almost disarmed him with her smile. Despite her thin grey hair, and the complicated splay of wrinkles from the corners of her mouth, she suddenly reminded him of the young woman he’d married fifty years earlier. But he caught another glimpse of the disaster across the street. “Navy? You’re out of your mind, Emma. He’s painting it black and he’s doing it to spite me because of the houseboat and Fenton and Associates.”

“With all those trees in the way, I can’t tell.”

“I’m not talking about the trees. Who cares about the trees? I can live with trees. Can’t you see what colour he’s using?”

“I’m old, not blind. Might be navy, might be black. Why don’t you talk to him?” Emma walked back to her magazine, sat down in the chair, then adjusted her reading glasses. “Not that he’ll listen to you anyway.”

“I will. I’m on my way right now.” Owen slammed the heavy, front door behind him.

He winced at the brightness of the warm October afternoon. Almost instantly a prickle of sweat formed on his forehead and the back of his neck. When he reached the sidewalk he looked back at his own house, a sand-tan with sienna trim, plain Colonial two-storey, much like every other house on the block. Emma had returned to her reading, her still trim legs tucked beneath her, a finger resting on her cheek in concentration. She didn’t look up.

Owen marched across the street and onto the twigs and leaves beneath Gary’s trees where the temperature seemed ten degrees cooler. The paint-filled air smelled like silver polish. Gary perched awkwardly, high on an aluminum extension ladder, his right leg extended almost parallel to the ground to counterbalance his dangerous reach to the left. He sprayed paint onto the gutter and then pulled a foot wide swath of black down the side of the house half-way to the ground. Then he attacked the next section of gutter and added another broad ribbon of black to the side of the house. The asphalt shingles on the roof were already painted.

Gary sprayed the five feet of siding from the corner of the house towards the first bedroom window while Owen, with his arms crossed on his chest waited impatiently to be noticed. Owen wondered how Gary was going to

avoid spraying the glass when he reached it, but Gary didn't break his rhythm: he continued the same pattern, painting the window and brown frame a solid, flat black.

Owen's jaw dropped. "You can't do that," he announced. Gary looked down, his face covered with a dust mask and oversized goggles.

"Ah, Owen." He clambered down the ladder. He pushed the goggles onto his forehead and pulled the face mask onto his neck. Grey over-spray outlined his aged face. A few white hairs stuck out from under his baseball cap. He was a tall, skinny man whose most notable features were his hands. Long fingered and huge knuckled, arthritic looking; they constantly moved, picking things up, setting them down, rubbing his chin, scratching his chest. The two times Owen had talked to Gary, once at a home-owners meeting and the other during a short but heated discussion on the street in front of Gary's houseboat, he had found it hard not to watch them. "Would you give me some help with the ladder?" Gary asked. Owen pushed his hands deep into his armpits and scowled. Gary shrugged, pulled the ladder upright and carried it a few feet further down the house. The top clanged when he dropped it into the new position. He said, "Still steamed over the houseboat aren't you?"

"What are you doing?"

"Here? I'm painting, of course."

"No, I mean what do you think you're doing."

"You don't like the colour?"

Owen closed his eyes. He hated it when someone was purposefully imperceptive. Worse, he hated to think Gary was laughing at him. "Yes, I don't like the colour. It's not a colour at all. What are you doing?"

Gary bent over a box with four one-gallon cans in it, pulled one out and pried the lid off with a screwdriver. He poured it into the five-gallon bucket. "Colour's a matter of taste, don't you think? But if it's any of your business, which it isn't, this is just an undercoat."

"You painted the window!"

"No law against that. Now, at least, I won't have to clean it." Gary opened and emptied a second one-gallon can.

"Don't think you're so smart. The Neighbourhood Association will have something to say about this."

Gary hmphed. He pushed the screwdriver into his back pant's pocket and slid the goggles over his eyes. "Coming from their impeached past president? Why don't you wait and see what it looks like when I'm done?"

"I won't like it, and they won't either, this breach of the covenants. We have a nice neighbourhood."

"Depends on what you like, I guess." He covered his mouth with the dust mask. "You need a hobby, Owen. Retirement is making you an old man. Or were you always this quarrelsome?"

“Old man!”

“Well, I know it’s an insult to the elderly, but it’s the worst I can think of right now.” He picked the spray gun out of the bucket, shook the lacquer thinner off and put a foot on the first rung of the ladder. “By the way, Owen, when I retired I gave all my suits and ties to the Goodwill, but even when I was working I wouldn’t wear them on a Saturday.” He climbed back to the gutter.



Owen’s ear hurt from pressing the phone against it for ten minutes. Emma said, “Why don’t you hang up and try later?” He turned his back to her. The city building’s tape of music for people on hold started over, a medley of old Rolling Stone’s tunes done with violins and French horns. He grimaced again at the coincidence of the first song, a syrupy, upbeat rendition of “Paint it Black”.

The line clicked. “City Manager Lisa Younger here, what can I do for you this time Mr. Burrows?” Owen heard the conciliatory tone in her voice. He clenched the phone in annoyance.

“I pay taxes. I vote. I don’t expect to be on hold until you get around to answering your calls.”

Lisa was silent for a moment. The line between them whispered with tiny sounds, ghost voices. “I’m sorry. They had a hard time tracking me down.”

“Gary Guy’s painting his house black. Stop him.”

“The fellow with the houseboat and the hot air balloon? Really? Black?”

“Yes. Flat black.” Owen stretched the cord from the wall phone so he could look out the picture window. “Trim, windows and front door. He started three hours ago and the front’s all black now. Our covenants specifically forbid ‘decorations not consistent with the general tenor of the neighbourhood’.” Owen heard a shuffling of papers on her end.

After much discussion, which mostly consisted of Owen reading from the covenants, Lisa said, “Paint is not considered a decoration. It’s discussed under the general upkeep definitions. I’d advise you to enlist the help of your neighbourhood association.”

“I don’t need advice, I need the city to do its job.”

Owen pushed the cut-off button, ending the City Manager’s chance to apologize and made a mental note to send a letter to the city council about Lisa Younger’s job performance. Emma stood at the window beside him. The setting sun seemed to rest on the peak of Gary’s house, shining directly through the grove of oak, casting shadows into their living room. The house itself looked like a hole where a house had been, as if the house had retreated backwards and left a space that hadn’t missed it yet.

Emma said, “A completely black house. What a wonder.”



Owen slammed his hat into the love-seat. Emma lowered her head so she could look over the top of her glasses at him.

“The home-owners meeting didn’t go well?” she said.

Owen hung his jacket in the closet, then brushed it with short, brisk strokes. He could feel the heat in his face.

“All they could talk about was the fee we still owe Fenton and Associates for the houseboat thing. Just a bunch of blather about ‘the former president’s unauthorized expenditures of association funds.’ They wouldn’t even let me raise the question of Gary’s painting. Seems I wasn’t on the ‘agenda.’” Distracted, Owen passed her on the way to the window, trailing his fingertips against the top of her chair.

“I’m not wrong about this, am I, Emma?” Owen looked out the window. “They hate me, and I did it for their good.” He sat on the love-seat he had pulled in front of the picture window a week ago. A huge pair of binoculars rested on a table within easy reach. The sun had set two hours earlier, but Gary was still painting. A Coleman lantern on a stool to his side cast a harsh light filled with sharp-edged shadows.

Emma had been reading when Owen came in, her feet curled up beneath her on the recliner. She closed her magazine, then moved onto the love-seat with him, put her hand on his shoulder and said softly, “Of course not. You’re not wrong. You’re clumsy, though. You didn’t use to be so clumsy. You used to take time to consider.”

He shrugged her hand off. “They hate me.” He picked up the binoculars and peered through them. Gary bent over a palette, dabbed a wadded rag into a colour and applied it to the wall. “What is he doing now? Is that a tree he’s doing? Here!” He thrust the instrument into Emma’s hands. “You tell me what he’s doing.”

“Don’t bark at me, Owen, and I won’t peep at Gary Guy because you’re mad at the home-owners.” She handed him back the binoculars. “As a matter of fact, it is a tree. A California White Oak. Some people call it Valley Oak. I asked him about it.”

“You talked to him? What are you doing talking to him? What was he doing in my house? The maniac might have strangled you, or . . . or . . . painted you or anything.”

She laughed. “You are ridiculous sometimes. He’d been working all afternoon and I took over a beer. We talked for twenty minutes. He’s doing a whole forest.”

“A mural. The maniac is painting a mural on the front of a house in Cherry Hills. Across the street from me he is painting a cheap Mexican restaurant mural? And you didn’t say anything?”

“What would be the point? You haven’t listened to me in years. And if you won’t be civil, I won’t tell you the rest.”

Owen leaned toward her, opened his mouth to speak, sort of coughed instead, and fell back into the love-seat.

She said, “It’s not a mural: it’s a diorama, and he plans on finishing it by early November. He said he got the idea from the Museum of Natural

History.” Emma took the binoculars and focused them. “See, he’s doing a limb now. I imagine he’ll be on a ladder later to get the high parts. The idea, he said, is to make the trees in his yard blend into the forest on the house. You won’t be able to tell where one stops and the other starts, just like at the museum with the stuffed animals.”

“Why would he do such a crazy thing? He won’t be able to sell his house. The city will have to act now. This is a beautiful neighbourhood.”

“Oh, I’m sure he is going to change it back after November. He said he won’t need it after then.”

“What does that mean?”

“The project will be done, I guess, and he’ll be able to go on to something else. You know he only flew the hot-air balloon once. When he finishes one thing, he dismantles it and starts another.”

“A balloon in his backyard was bad. The houseboat was bad. But they were only there for a little bit. He’s ruining his house.” Owen looked from Emma to the window suddenly. “Ha! The trees! The trees!”

“What? What?”

“He planted the trees a year ago. Are you going to tell me he’s been planning this project for a year? And he will just clean it up when he is done? He must have some other idea in mind. No one works for a year on a whim. Nobody buys a beautiful house just to paint it black. Either he’s after me, or he’s crazy, or he’s got some plan. Why he can’t retire gracefully and enjoy the fruits of his labour is beyond me.”

“He said he didn’t want to die in that house.”

“He’s sick?”

“He said the neighbourhood looked like a mausoleum.” She laughed again. Owen hated it when she laughed at him. “He said you looked like an undertaker.”

“Well I say he looks like an idiot.”

Emma walked away towards their bedroom. “Maybe so, but he’s a nice man. Very polite. I liked his tree.”



The next morning, Owen settled into the love-seat next to the binoculars. From the kitchen came glassy clinks and dishwater swishing.

“Isn’t it about time for you to go to the Veterans Hall? It’s Tuesday,” called Emma. He imagined her blouse sleeves were rolled up above her elbows and her hands were hidden deep in the murky water.

“Those old fogies. A few rounds of canasta and they’re ready for naps. I’ll stay home today.” The noises stopped for a moment, then resumed.

“Are you feeling all right?” she asked.

He picked up the binoculars and focused them through the window. Gary stood at what used to be the front step of his house, except now the grey sidewalk didn’t stop at the door. It continued on, curving slightly through a flowered meadow until it vanished a hundred yards farther in a dense thicket.

All the trees, and there were dozens of them now, glowed as if in direct sunlight. Their yellow and red leaves flamed across the house. The shadows of the closest trees cast purple streaks across the meadow.

Gary pulled a note pad from his overall's pocket, flicked it open and consulted one of the pages. Then he bent down, tugged on what looked like a tent peg with a string running from it to the base of one of the trees and moved it over a couple of inches. He walked down the front of the house, first looking at his notebook, and then shifting each of the pegs with strings on them that stretched from the real trees to the wall.

The binoculars limited Owen's vision so he could see nothing other than Gary's painting. The illusion of gazing into a mountain oak forest was perfect. The real trees blended into the painted ones. Owen rested the eye-pieces on his cheekbones and peered over the lenses. The effect vanished. The neighbouring houses, prim, plain and proper gave Gary's property a weird, surreal frame. But Owen had been looking through the binoculars for so long it took him a moment to shake the impression the forest was correct and the neighbourhood around it was out of place.

Owen's front door opened, and he sat up. His back popped and he lowered the binoculars gingerly to his lap. His elbows had stiffened. Emma stood, one foot in and one out. A picnic basket hung from her hand.

"What are you doing?" Owen asked.

She held up the basket and nodded her head across the street. For a moment, she appeared very girlish, like a teen on an outing, and he felt a pang of jealousy.

"How do you think it looks, you being seen over there while he's making a fool of me?"

"He's not even thinking of you, Owen. If you thought about yourself half as much as you think about him, maybe you'd see more."

"What do you mean?"

"You should pay attention to your own house. Nothing else."

"So, you're siding with him?"

Emma put the basket outside and sat on the door-sill. Owen could see the curve of her back and a fall of wispy white hair covering her collar. She didn't say anything for some time. She said, "Do you remember right after we married when you wanted to take a job in Ontario and I said it was a bad idea?"

Owen answered cautiously, "Yes."

"I made lots of excuses: I wanted my kids to be American; I didn't want to be away from my folks; I didn't like cold weather; I didn't know French. But the real reason I didn't want to go was because I was afraid of changing my picture of the future." She hunched over. Owen guessed she had her arms wrapped around her knees, but he couldn't see for sure. "I had this vision of the way my life was going to go, and Ontario wasn't part of it."

“You were right. Ontario was a bad idea.”

“Maybe, except we never had kids, my folks died, and I’m cold all the time now.”

Gary scrambled for something to say. He hadn’t talked to Emma this way for years. “You still don’t know French.”

“No, I don’t.”

“What’s your point?”

“When we argued about going, you said you didn’t want to live, work and die in the same place. You said if we didn’t keep our options open to *the magic of possibility*, we’d just fade away. *The magic of possibility*. You always could turn a phrase.” She started rocking. Her ear appeared, then vanished. He glimpsed the side of her face. “It seems to me somewhere in the last fifty years, we’ve switched positions.”

“I kept you in new clothes. You always looked good.”

“I don’t want on my tombstone: ‘She wore new clothes.’”

“Everybody is talking about dying lately! What’s this got to do with Gary?”

She turned, faced him and braced herself with one hand on the floor inside the house. Owen thought it a very youthful manoeuvre. It reminded him of when they had met. She had been sitting on the end of a dock at Smallee Lake, tossing stale donuts to the ducks. She had turned and looked at him when she felt his footsteps behind her.

“He’s leaving, I think. Pretty soon. Maybe in the next couple of days. I don’t want him to believe no one cared. You know, he’s been our neighbour for four years, and all he’s got is anger. His wife dies and nobody brings him a casserole. Two months later you’re threatening to sue him because he parked a houseboat where you could see it. It doesn’t feel just.”

“The thing blocked the whole street. You practically had to drive on my sidewalk to get around it.”

“Well, you didn’t have to bring in the lawyers. His children stopped him. He had this idea about selling the house and getting away, and it turns out his children convinced a judge he wasn’t competent. Can you imagine? He’s on an allowance now. He sold everything to buy the trees.”

“Where’s he going?”

“I don’t know. He says he’s getting away from it all though, somewhere the children won’t find him.” She took a deep breath, held it, then let it out in a rush. “He’s not crazy, but I think he believes he can walk into the diorama. He hasn’t actually said what he’s going to do, but he talks like that’s what he wants to happen. He tells it like a story. He said, ‘What if the sun was just right?’ I don’t know what he means exactly. But he said, ‘What if the sun was just right? and my attitude was right, and I only had a few seconds where I could slip in?’”

Emma looked at him, as if waiting for him to contradict her, then continued, “When it doesn’t work, he’ll go someplace else. He’s talked about a ranch in

Washington where he used to go, an artist's colony. He said you don't have to be an artist to go there; you don't have to be any more an artist than me, but the people listen to each other, and they don't push each other around. Either way, his kids will be stuck with a badly painted house. It seems fair."

"You know this, and you don't think he's insane? Why can't he settle into his retirement like we have?"

"Have you ever thought, Owen, that retirement is just waiting for death?" Emma rested her cheek on her bent leg and looked at him. She didn't blink. "It seems we've spent our entire lives waiting. Besides, when he talks, he makes sense. He says you have to believe in what you're doing, and not care what other people say. He says he's on the edge of knowing enough to do what he wants to do and being too old to do it. He says most people don't even know when they cross the border, but it's there just the same. I like listening to him."

"I don't want you going over there."

"I know."

She got up, picked the basket off the front stoop, closed the door behind her and walked down their sidewalk, and across the street. Gary came out from beneath the trees and met her. She said something to him and he shaded his eyes, looking in Owen's direction. Gary waved, clearly a "come on over" wave. Emma stood motionless beside him, then she waved too. He felt like they were testing him. This was his moment of decision. Owen clenched his jaw, straightened his back very stiff and didn't move.



A sound awakened him. Owen opened his eyes and read the time, 6:20 a.m. Grey morning light faintly illuminated the dresser, the posts on the bed, a bentwood rocker with lace arm sleeves by the window, and on the wall a seascape Emma had painted years ago. He strained to hear the sound again. There was silence. He knew she was gone without looking; he swung his feet out from under the covers and grabbed his robe from behind the bedroom door.

"Emma!"

He walked briskly from room to room. He wanted to run, but what if Emma stepped out of a door and saw him, running? What would she think? What would she say to him?

She would say, "Owen, why are you running? What will the neighbours think when they hear you were tearing around your own house at the break of dawn?"

He threw open a bathroom door and the spring door-stop buzzed on the rebound.

He paused at the top of the stairs. The living room was empty. Her magazines were neatly stacked beside the recliner. His binoculars were in the case by the love-seat.

“Emma?”

He tip-toed down, suddenly afraid to make a noise. The carpet scratched at the bottom of his feet. The balustrade slid smoothly beneath his hand.

He looked into the kitchen. The rising sun flushed the curtain over the back-door window. The light streaked the polished linoleum.

Then he ran.

The front door was ajar.

Slanting sunlight turned Gary's trees a mellow, softer colour than Owen had seen before. He sprinted down the sidewalk, his robe untied, flapping behind him. The street stung his feet.

“Emma!”

He thought he saw a movement at the end of the trail on the house, the trail Gary had painted into the mountain forest, a flash of colour like a ray of sun on the backs of two people a hundred impossible yards away.

The leaves skittered beneath him. A breeze creaked branches in the trees above, and for an instant it seemed like the trees in the painting swayed too. The sun cast long shadows from the real trees exactly matching the shadows painted on the meadow.

He skidded to a halt. “Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.” He stood on the sidewalk, peering into the painting. In the distance the rising sun caught the face of a snowcapped range of mountains, reflecting orange and blue. A deep purple and black gash marked a pass, a place for the path he was on to go through. “Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.” He closed his eyes and ran forward.

The front door slammed him down on his rear, and his left cheekbone and eyebrow swelled his eye shut instantly.

He sat with his legs spread and straight before him, his hands on the sidewalk behind. His left hand hurt. He brought it up to where his right eye could see it. A chunk of gravel was imbedded in the middle of a broad, red scrape on the heel. He shook the stone out and then felt his cheekbone and eyebrow.

He rolled onto his knees then forced himself upright. The doorknob was a bright, meadow green, but easily visible this close. He turned it. Light spilled through into the empty living room. There was no furniture. In the kitchen he found a card-table with one folding chair pulled up to it. A single plate and cup rested in the drying rack next to the sink. His lungs felt like they were filling up with water. Each breath bubbled.

His footsteps, soft as they were, echoed. He turned on lights as he went, and for a moment couldn't figure out why the house was so dark, until he remembered the windows were covered with paint. Upstairs, in the master bedroom, was a bedsprings and mattress lying directly on the floor. The bed was made. All of Gary's belongings could have fit in the back of a small pickup.

After a while, he shuffled through the house turning off lights and shutting doors, locked the front door, crossed the street, went inside and sat in

the love-seat in his own empty, empty house. He stared out the window, unfocused for an hour. Eventually, he picked up the binoculars and pointed them at the forest. The left eyepiece he canted away from the swollen side of his face.



The next morning, just before dawn, Owen waited under the trees. He wore new hiking boots, new jeans, a bright blue backpack over a new flannel shirt, and his old yard-work cap. He shivered. Frost edged the leaves and a wind swirled some of them into the air. He could smell the inevitability of snow although there were no clouds. Indian Summer had broken.

A sliver of sun popped over the peak of his house. He adjusted the shoulder straps. Shafts of light fell through the limbs and remaining leaves of the oaks. He faced the painting, half-embarrassed to be standing there but fully resolute to do something insane.

The light grew and he watched. The trees in the painting stood still, exquisite, convincing, but still. They never rustled. The wind didn't touch them. He watched the shadows from the real trees. They didn't quite line up to the shadows of them painted on the meadow now. Where they first touched the house the difference was minute, a fraction of an inch, but perceptible. Yesterday, the shadows matched perfectly, but the earth had moved on. They shadowed the painting; they never lay down as if there were no wall there. When the sun cleared his house completely, he took off the backpack and dropped it on the ground. He laced his hands on top of his head like a prisoner of war and walked home.

Later in the morning, the phone rang. He listened to it for a long time, ten rings, before lifting himself out of the love-seat.

"Mr Burrows? This is City Manager Lisa Younger. I have some good news for you."

"Yes," he said dully.

"About the matter of Gary Guy's house, I had a man go by and take some photographs, and I think we can make a case that he's violated the city's sign code. We ought to be able to get the sheriff to serve him papers forcing him to change it, or we can condemn the property and do the job ourselves. Also, your home-owner's association president, Mr Nguyen, came by with a formal request for the city to enforce your covenants. Either way we go, the place should be back to normal in a couple of weeks."

He said nothing for a moment, then he rubbed his forehead. "You can repaint it without his permission?"

"Yes."

"What if you can't find him?"

"It won't matter. We can condemn the house anyway."

"No."

"Excuse me?"

“You can’t change the house.” He gripped the receiver tightly. He saw Emma’s *Road West* magazine face down beside her chair. “The house has to stay the same. It has to stay like that for a year.”

“But, Mr Burrows, we wouldn’t be involved if you hadn’t given me a call. We’ve gone to a lot of trouble at your request.”

He thought. “Do you know the law firm of Fenton and Associates?”

“Yes.”

He extended the phone cord from the wall to the window so he could see Gary’s house. “Well, if you try to change the house . . . that . . . work of art, I’ll have a court order from them blocking you every which way to Sunday.”

“Mr Burrows, it doesn’t fit into your neighbourhood. It doesn’t match the appearance of the other houses.”

He started to speak, paused, and then said, “Who cares what the neighbourhood looks like?”

Her voice was amazed. “You did. Have you lost . . . I mean . . . changed your mind?”

Owen saw his new backpack still sitting beside Gary’s house. A pile of leaves partially covered it now. He made a mental note to go pick it up.

“We’ll have to consider the possibility,” he said. ❖

Dust Witches Jack Fisher

Mushroom witches, cold as albino frogs
with their brooms leaving tracks of snail
paints, drew skulls and bones in the
dust then sneezed them away.

Woodstock Nocturne

Barry Butson

Circled by countryside where the cattle have been long ago milked and the ditches are now full of frogsong, the trees in town have sleep-wrapped their birds, the jewellery shops are barred though electronically alert, the lounges have emptied and the last pickup has spun its wheels out of the gravel lot.

Still at large are alleycats and crazed dogs, a few supermarkets open and absolutely brilliant in the blinking eyes of nighthawks scanning their aisles for canned meat and Kraft Dinner. Cops cruise the rears of factories, taking their breaks in the lovely darkness, radios turned down. Truck tires buzz on the distant 401 and windows here and there in the hospital light up for a moment, then go black again. Motors of swimming pool heaters thrum away in backyards. B & E boys arrive at their well-researched targets, just before the morning newspaper carriers cover their routes in cars without lights on. Somewhere a man who has checked himself out of the hospital is wild with the pain of cancer, while the doctor who warned him sleeps past the porch plop of the *Globe & Mail*. Worms mate on wet lawns and the moon sweeps the sky of darkness as gradually as a man on his last shift.

Soon the first-up — the elderly and babies — will be boiling water or yammering for something to put in their mouths. Then will come awake the breakfast cooks, road crews and mourning doves with their morbid coos.

It will be time for the B & E boys to sleep, for one man to re-enter in undignified desperation the emergency ward, for the cattle to rise, the rooster to crow and the trees to gently stir up their occupants. A squirrel will stretch before scampering down its first trunk and the sun will wonder what to wear.

But now the town is balanced in black like a blind gymnast before her final dismount

Butson

Evolving with Age Nancy Bennett

Rejuvenation within the wetted folds stinging rays of drying light,
an old earth-bound woman opens a weaved tapestry of growth.
Wrapped in a prism of wetted sheets, a shroud of turning, shy of becoming
but knowing she must evolve.

She beats her draped body dry, rushes to flesh out
before time itself expires on a current of old crone dreams. . . .



Nancy Bennett '18

Bennett

MYSTERIES of my TOASTER OVEN

Curt Wohleber

Boyd lies dead at my feet, sprawled semi-foetal on the grimy tile floor of the men's room. The air is thick with the stench of piss and gunpowder.

Andromalos comes in as I holster my .38. He looks down at dead Boyd with clinical interest.

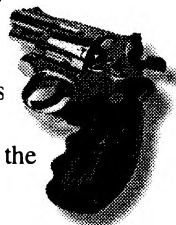
"He tried to kill me," I say. "He sold out. Joined the Conspiracy."

"I had feared as much."

"You knew?"

"I suspected that you suspected Boyd." The tweed-wearing, professorial Andromalos looks out of place here in the men's room. "I detected your fear of him, noticed your furtive glances and palpable distrust. Many pieces fell into place then. I wouldn't have known if it hadn't been for you."

I feel vaguely pleased at this, but then I wonder if Andromalos is just being kind.



◆

The Conspiracy of the City lives. Boyd's death has merely pruned it, opening the way for further growth, more elaborate levels of horror. A new round of play is to begin, an ominous new era, a time of deceptions full of truth and betrayals as gentle as the whispers of lovers.

◆

In the back room of the bar, Casey brings me another gin-and-tonic to calm my nerves. Flynn reports the news of Boyd's death on the pay phone in the hallway. Andromalos and Casey hover over me like uncertain parents.

"Actually," says Andromalos, "you were in little danger. I had taken the precaution of loading Boyd's gun with blanks."

"With blanks?" I am aghast. "Then I didn't have to kill him, did I?"

"You didn't know," says Casey. "You did what you had to do."

I remember what Boyd told me just before I shot him. *You're a part of it too, now. Either way, a death, feeding the enigma, adding to its fear and mystery.*

Casey runs a hand through her short blond hair and leans against the cinderblock wall. She looks at me and her gaze dissolves into a flat, glassy-eyed stare. I saw that same expression during our encounter with Todmeister Hagen's thugs down at the wharf. She wielded her stiletto (she only carried bladed weapons) with a terrible surgical precision. That was the night we lost young Parker, who was torn apart by dogs.

The two couriers from the coroner's office arrive with copies of the report on the fat man found murdered in the park this morning. Two deaths today. Will there be more?

We read in silence. The coroner has an elegant prose style. His account of ruptured organs and massive haemorrhaging possesses a lurid grace. The

men in white come to take away our fallen, traitorous comrade. A city bureaucrat detains us to fill out forms and sign affidavits. These documents will be faxed to City Hall, the relevant information entered into the investigative database.

It's past eleven by the time I catch the subway for home. I am alone in the rattling car. The fluorescent lights give off an agitated glimmer. The train hurtles around a slight bend with shriek of tortured metal. A vestibule door opens and a transit employee staggers in. He rips the subway map off the wall, stuffs it into a satchel, and replaces the map with a faint mimeograph on 8 1/2 by 11 paper. The new map looks like a crude sketch of tangled seaweed.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Service changes. Effective immediately."

"Does this train still go to Grottney Circle?"

"It's on the map. On the map. You gotta go back and change for the Trade Street line."

"The Trade Street line goes to Grottney Circle now?"

"Tuesdays, Thursdays, Sundays and national holidays."

"Today's Wednesday."

"Trade Street line now goes only as far as Lake Street on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. You'll have to go there, get a transfer for a 71C or 71D bus, take that out to Steckley Plaza, walk across the Muldoon Expressway overpass, and catch the West Avenue line at Lawrence Street."

I get off at Centre Boulevard and hail a cab.



Mildewy drifts of snow have collected on the concrete steps at the front of my building. I check my mail in the dark foyer. There's a letter from my ex-wife; I read it in the shuddering elevator to the sixth floor.

My toaster oven is on. Through the darkness of the kitchen I can see its malevolent red glow. It was given to me by my sister, who is now an aerobics instructor in a distant city untainted by the Conspiracy. I never use the range; it leaks gas—perhaps the work of a saboteur. For a time I used the toaster oven to prepare simple, unhealthy meals, but it no longer works in any consistent way, unaffected by any action I perform upon its small, worn knobs. It turns itself on and off, seemingly at will, generating random amounts of heat for arbitrary amounts of time. Sometimes I hear it in the middle of the night, little snaps of expanding metal. I tried to unplug it once but the merest touch of the cord gave me an electric shock that threw me against the refrigerator.



The phone rings.

"Jack? It's Andromalos."

"They changed the subway."

“Devious,” he says. “Poor Flynn.”

“Flynn? What happened to Flynn?”

“Nothing, I hope. But he lives out in West Park with his aged mother and an incontinent dachshund. I looked at his route on the new map. He has to change trains twice just to get to Batsgarven. The Huddleston Bridge is out, so from there he’ll have to take the ferry then catch a 67B bus. And now it’s an extra zone change to West Park.”

“The buses only take exact change.”

“Correct. And Flynn gave his change to that beggar on Canter Street.”

“He’s lost, Stavros. For the love of God, why doesn’t he drive in from the suburbs?”

“You remember, Jack. He’s afraid of city traffic and parallel parking.” A valve on the radiator hisses and sputters. “This move was deliberate. They’ve established control of the transit authority.”

“This phone line could be tapped,” I say.

“Jack, this phone line could be tapped. We’d better talk tomorrow.”

Click, silence.

I have a view of the immense air shaft that pierces the core of my building. The shaft modulates the sound of wind skimming the rooftop, making it a deep, dull roar.

They control the subway.

They planted Boyd.

Perhaps there were other spies. Perhaps they were all spies: Flynn, Casey, Andromalos. Of course, this makes no sense — unless the conspirators, for reasons of security, made sure their spies were not aware of each other’s identities. When it becomes known that I am the only true investigator remaining, I will be efficiently eliminated.

My toaster oven goes off and its tiny bell chimes flatly.

Rodriguez, one of the original investigators, was crushed to death in an elevator shaft last April.

Parker: torn apart by dogs.

The fat man who tried to contact us this morning was stabbed to death in Miner’s Park, near the duck pond.

Conspiracy labs have unleashed a deadly new addictive drug called bluebird now making its way through the streets.

Channel Seven’s investigative reporter was shot four times in the chest and twice in the face on live television by a bitter ex-girlfriend.

The Brightwood area is going condo. The Rivermen’s Museum was turned into a mall. The Orpheum Theatre was converted into a twenty-seven cinema complex.

During the summer it rained for twelve Sundays in a row.



I sit before the window in a worn armchair, looking up at a sliver of leaden, moonlit sky. Boyd said I was now part of it. Was he right? Is the Conspiracy

so exquisitely formed that its agents need not be conscious of their own complicity?

My first thoughts in the morning are usually of the Conspiracy. Half-formed connections swirl in a bilious haze of fear and fatigue. When we meet my fellow investigators and I take compulsive notes, jotting down connections, making diagrams, graphs, flow charts, lists of names and organizations. This provides us with a brief, hollow sense of control, invariably shattered by some new awfulness. A colleague dies: Parker, Rodriguez, even Boyd, and we all think, *Am I next?*

We respond predictably to the machinations of the Conspiracy: we are shocked, indignant, enraged. And, of course, as the mammoth complexity is gradually revealed, we are afraid. But in the great wash of data, these emotions are severed from their moorings in brute fact and float free, guided now by their own atavistic logic; were the Conspiracy to vanish overnight, its scheming members to take up fishing or macramé, the fear would remain. The trembling, the sweating, the tightness of the throat and the racing of the heart, these are more than the adrenaline responses to the Conspiracy's crushing weight; they are now the rituals of devotion to formless deities in a cruel mythology of dread.

I need new socks.

Someone taps on my door. "Who's there?"

"Casey."

I open the door — recklessly, for I have not asked for the code word to verify her identity. She stands in the hallway, elegant, poised and alert. I think of the knives she keeps concealed in her boots.

"I couldn't get home, Jack. They rerouted the subway. I took the Verak Street Shuttle and ended up at Grottny Circle. I couldn't find a cab."

"Andromalos called. He thinks Flynn is hopelessly lost."

"Flynn, the fearful one."

"We're all fearful."

"But Flynn was the most fearful," she says. "His fearfulness was a barometer of the Conspiracy's effectiveness."

"His fear distracted us from our own fear. What will we do now?"

Casey sheds her coat and scarf and sits on my threadbare couch. "I hope you don't mind me intruding on you like this."

"Not at all."

"I'll just warm myself a bit then try to call a cab."

"Do you want to call your husband to let him know you're all right?"

"Stuart and I are no longer together."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"It's all right. He's entering the priesthood. I think it's best for both of us."

"I see." I adjust the knob on the radiator, feigning absorption in this minor task. I study the mechanism like a NASA astronaut inspecting some delicate

component. The slightest misalignment could hurl the spacecraft forever into the depths of space. I love Casey, I always have. Houston, Houston, we are out of control.

“Sit next to me, Jack. I don’t want to be alone.”

I do as she asks. We find each other in a desperate embrace. The Conspiracy dwindles, becoming remote and indistinct. The fear begins to ebb at last, just when I began to think I could bear it no longer. That fate should bring us together on this night. . . .

“Jack?”

“They planned it this way, Casey.” I’m on my feet, looking out into the air shaft. “Changing the subway, sending Flynn into oblivion and bringing you here, to me. We’ve let our passions compromise our professional relationship and imperil the investigation. They must have known, charted our vulnerability.”

“My God, perhaps you’re right. This is no time for love.”

“We have a responsibility.”

“We’re professionals.”

“We could endanger our own lives, and the lives of others.”

“Yes.”

The fear has left her eyes, and something else is gone too. Houston, do you copy?



Over the next week we expose the ugly tumor of corruption at the transit authority. Arrests are made, confessions extracted. The mayor congratulates us, though we strongly suspect that the mayor himself is part of the Conspiracy.

The police find Flynn in a drunken stupor near the stadium.

My toaster oven doesn’t work at all anymore. One time I awake in the middle of the night, stirred perhaps by some sound at the threshold of audibility. I look for the warm glow of the toaster oven, but whatever strange magic it once possessed is now gone. Faint moonlight penetrates the kitchen, painting it the colour of dreams, of memories. ❖

Curt Wohleber’s “100 Candles” appeared in *TransVersions* 10. He is also a reviewer for *Science Fiction Weekly*.

One Hundred Dennis Rodmans Robert Vanderwoude

In the city of Toronto one hundred Dennis Rodmans resided.
 Forty-two considered themselves black.
 Six spoke Chinese.
 Fifty-one seemed of the white race.
 One was a woman.

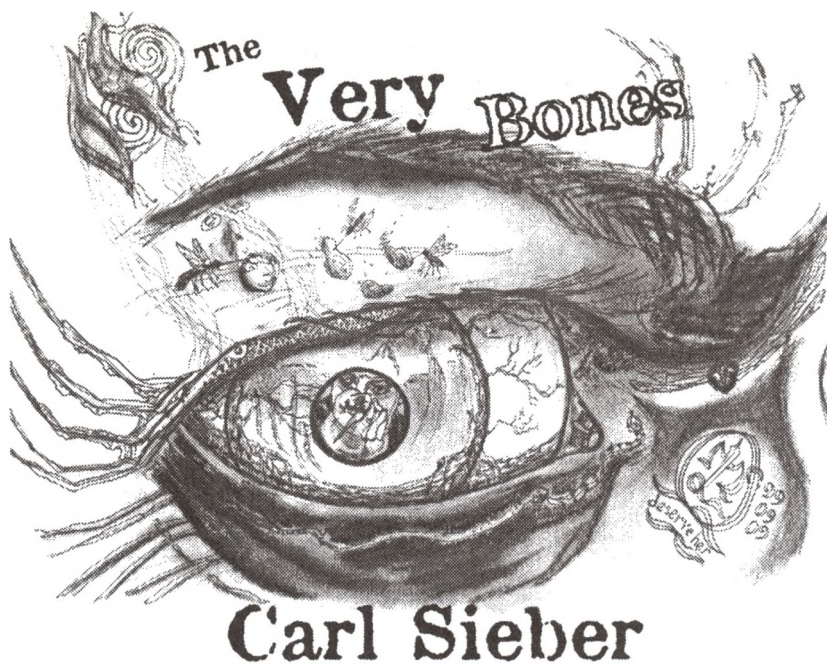
All smeared themselves with make-up and perfume.
 Seventy dyed their hair red.
 Twenty went to the salon and came out bleached blond.
 Nine were fair-haired to start.
 One was bald.

Were they clones?
 No.
 Were they tall?
 Not at all.
 One was small.

Did they make the team?
 Not all.
 How many did you count on the court floor?
 I counted four.
 One was tall.

Explain!
 A neurosystmolanalysogist did measure Mr Rodman's brain.
 Copied all the patterns into special hats.
 Hats that changed the tertiary patterns of the special protein in the cerebrum
 of the brain.
 But one was lost!

A hat was lost you say!
 In a bar in Toronto on a day in May.
 Some who wore it began to play.
 And now one they say.
 Has made the NBA. . . .



Carl Sieber's "A Bird in the Head" was one of the most popular stories from *TransVersions* 8/9. His work has also appeared in *Tesseract* 7 and *The Silver Web*.

“Hemingway,” I say as sort of an ice-breaker, extending my hand and dragging a finger along a vein in my wrist, “got any razor blades?” Slapping a rusted knife that stinks of fish guts into my palm, my river guide moves his cigarette to one corner of his mouth, and, speaking above the roar of the outboard motor, sympathizes with me: “Trying to quit writing?”

Nerving myself up, I look boldly into his cadaverous face. “Decided it would be the best thing.”

“Coward’s way out.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“No, that’s just my breath.”

Some kind of unseen bird I don’t care to know the name of screams in the swamp mist. I twitch.

“Besides,” Hemingway continues, “you can’t bleed the words out. Doesn’t work that way.”

“Worth a try.”

“Not really.” He offers me his right wrist by way of explanation and I can

Sieber

see healed and unhealed scars patterning his pallid wrist. I flinch from the evidence and he's so amused by my unmanly display of nerves that I give him his knife back.

Point first. Three inches into his chest.

"The fever," he explains, looking past me into the mist rising from the black water, "the fever lives in the very bones, not the blood."



In the swamp, everything begins to rot before it begins to mature. I think my relationship with Hemingway got off to a bad start when three days ago I'd laughed and asked for his real name. He'd turned and spat off the edge of the dock, letting the oppressive silence oppress me a while before deciding to say something more. "You got a real purpose, for wasting my time with questions, boy?"

Hemingway spoke slowly. Languidly. Slurred his words. More so than could be attributed to any accent.

I counted out two hundred dollars at that point. Slowly. Thumbing them into a fan between my sweaty fingers. "Leon. My name's Leon. You were pointed out to me as a guy with a boat." He fixed his eyes on me. "And a knowledge of the bayou." He extended his hand.

I let the cash brush his fingertips. "And an acquaintance with Mama Editor."

A drop of sweat eased down my jaw.

"A writer," he said finally. "Another god-damned writer. My, my," he chuckled, taking my money, "that amount of cash must have been very hard for you to come by."



Three days.

"Yes. I'll take you," he'd promised.

And he had. He had taken me.

He'd taken me for a ride to nowhere.

He'd taken me for a rube.

He'd taken me for all I was worth.

And, along the way, his voice catching me off-guard when I'd grown to accept his imposing silence, he'd begun to tell me things. Evil things. Some sadistic streak in him, some twisted notion of machismo, making him decide to educate me.

"I tell you Leon, you're never going to be published. That's right, you'll never be published. I'm telling you an important thing here, so shut up. Stories are published, not people. Stories. Stories use you, they fuck you up, you give them birth, and then they leave you a dead husk. Understand? You'll never get published . . . only used."

He said more.

"Twenty-two years of trying to gain Mama Editor's favour. Twenty-two years trying to get published. Pathetic, Leon. Yes you are, and all

twenty-two years of your life count, because from the moment you were pushed into the world you had some dim, yet-to-be-unfolded notion that you were destined to be a writer. That kind of notion can waste a lifetime. You try, and you fail. And you keep on doing it. Blind, monumental, and stupid perseverance like that is . . . wondrous.” He laughed.

And then more. All in the same rich vein of deep contempt founded in experience, till he broke me; till he stripped me of illusion; till he pared me down; till he rubbed my nose in the sham and excess of all my years of word-play, and made me admit: I was a slave to the sound of my own voice.

I was willing to admit more, to apologize at length, to detail all my shortcomings, but he cut me off.

“Enough said.”

So I sat paralysed, gripping the prow for a whole day, loathe to say a word as we motored deeper into the bayou.

Finally, I asked him for a good blade.

And then.

And then.

“The fever,” he explained looking past me into the mist rising from the black water, “the fever lives in the very bones, not in the blood.”



“So, I’m supposed to write anyway?”

“Try not to.”

It’s a tangle of potent forces that govern the bayou. Set foot in it once, the saying goes, and forever after you’ll track mud into the rest of your life.

It’s an accurate saying. I’ve been here now for three days and I know I won’t ever feel clean again. In particular, the taste of mosquitoes, smoke and rotten oranges will be on the tip of my tongue for the rest of my life. And Hemingway’s voice. I’ll never be clean of that either.

I reach past him and hit the motor’s kill switch.

My jaw spasms once, twice, and now that the roar of the motor is gone, I realize that my teeth have long been clenched against it. After dragging both hands down my face, I stare about me, at certain specific things: the dead tree cracked in half, the partially-submerged oil drum painted yellow and black, and the floating remnants of a rowboat. “We’ve been here before.”

Hemingway grins at me with rotted teeth. “Five times already. Sure takes you a long time to admit you’re going nowhere.”

Three days.

The bayou air is suffocating.

I stand and take a piss over the edge, thinking aloud as I do so. “Hemingway . . . you don’t piss, eat, shit, sleep . . . all that stuff. You just don’t, do you?” Water laps at the side of the boat and my mood briefly lifts as I score a direct hit on an alligator’s eye.

Hemingway doesn't answer.

"You just don't, do you?" I ask zipping up, sensing that for the first time of our acquaintance, I've made him uncomfortable.

My bad manners?

No.

Something else.

"Piss . . . eat . . . shit . . . sleep," I repeat, trying to puzzle it out.

Hemingway clears his throat. "It helps not to."

"Pardon?"

"I said it helps." He clears his throat again. "All that stuff," he says flicking his hands in a dismissive gesture. "If you don't do it, you don't much have to write. Not so much anyway."

I stare. Until he turns away.

I stare, until I work up the appropriate level of sarcasm. "You poor baby."



"Mama Editor," I say.

We've been drifting for some time now, neither one of us moving to restart the motor. "Mama Editor," I repeat, "who is she?"

Hemingway moves his head and torso slightly; the barest movement necessary for me to understand he doesn't want to talk.

"Years, Hemingway. I've sent my stories to her for years. For nothing. Mama Editor. Tell me. What do you know of her?"

He takes off his ball cap and wipes his forehead.

"Mama Editor," I say. "You don't find a character like her everyday."

"No . . . no you don't."

I wait for him to say more.

"Character like that," he says, staring almost fearfully at the sweat he's wiped off his brow, "you don't find her. Character like that . . . you court her."

"Tell me."

"Damn you."

"Go on, tell me. Just a simple character sketch. How long has it been since you tried your hand at that?"

"Don't need to."

I reach over to him and pull on the knife. His shoulders hunch in pain as I drag it free of his chest, but he doesn't cry out. "That hurt," I tell him and he doesn't bother to deny it. "The fever," I explain, "the fever lives in the very bones, not in the blood."

"Plagiarist."

I lie back in the boat, staring up into the swirling mix of mist, mosquitoes and dragonflies. "Mama Editor lives alone with a smashed-in television, the skeleton of a Chihuahua and a grudge against the CIA."

"You use too many words."

"Live a little."

"Cut it out."

"I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

He wipes his hand across the back of his neck, and his gaze trembles.

"Well . . . let's try to have a fine time."

"That's more like it. Now, Mama Editor. . . ."

"Mama Editor doesn't live alone. She lives with the bayou. And with cherished lies."

"Longer sentences."

A squawk of cut-off laughter lurches out of his mouth. "What?"

"Try sloppy, try long-winded. Try decadent. Don't be so afraid of the sound of your own voice. For example: at the crumbling edges of the bayou, the earth disintegrates to muck, and falls, with wet plops, into the stagnant water. There, inside a mansion ancient beyond reckoning, with Spanish moss thrown over her shoulder, and her fingernails uncut for seventy years, Mama Editor sifts through her slush pile. Clutching pages close to her cataract-clotted eyes, she puzzles out, by the light of one guttering candle, a near-approximation of the writer's intent, which she then judges for originality, merit, character development, and that extra something. And . . . if the entrails of a slaughtered rat concur, she acquires "some-time rights" because who can ever know, who can predict something as esoteric as a publication date? It's the weather, you understand. At the height of the electrical storms, when lightning strikes, only then do the rusted presses finally lurch to life; spewing out copy after copy, to be caught by crows, ravens, vultures and the four manic winds. Copy after copy, to be dropped, miles away, with their spines broken, face-down in a ditch. See? Try it. Be brave."

"Advice!" Hemingway cries out, staggering to his feet. "Criticism!"

"Hemingway. You are bleeding."

He registers the dark spreading stain covering his chest. "I don't need to."

"Looks like you're doing it anyway."

He remains standing, swaying, shaking his head. "Gave it up years ago."

"Painful?"

He sits again, one hand gripping the gunwale, the other pressing the wound closed.

"Painful?"

He grits out his answer: "No."

"Mama Editor. . . ."

"Stop."

"Mama Editor."

"Leon," he says, "enough said." But as he gives the starter cord a yank, I hear something else that's almost drowned out by the stuttering motor.

"What'd you say?"

He glares at me. "I said: you'll deserve her."

As we approach it, I realize we must have passed it by several times before, but the moss-eaten collection of logs only reveals itself as a dock when Hemingway pulls the boat up close. "Mama Editor," he says, challenging me.

I hesitate, then climb out, looking hard into the shadows. One large bulk among the trees just might be that decayed mansion.

"What do you want with her anyway?"

"Tell her a story, same as everyone."

"You think you can please her?"

"Just want to see her smile. You ever see her do that?"

He pushes away. "Not in a long time."

"Hemingway."

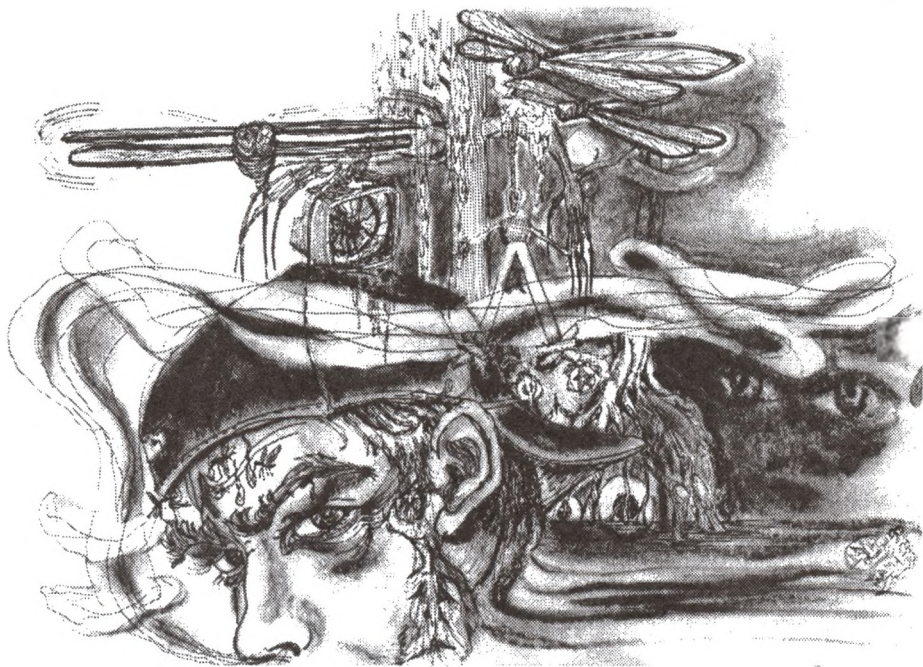
He turns to me, drifting away, one hand still pressed to his chest to staunch the bleeding. "What?"

"Blind, monumental and stupid perseverance like mine can be wondrous."

"Wondrous."

"Right."

"Right."





FRAGMENTS FROM AN ANALYSIS
OF A PATHOLOGICAL PHOBIA



HAYDEN TRENHOLM

Calgary playwright **Hayden Trenholm**'s career started with a bang in 1992 when he won the International 3 Day Novel Writing Contest. Since then, his work has appeared in many publications including *On Spec* and *Tesseract*s. We're pleased to present this fascinating look at a well-known literary character, as seen through the eyes of another famous personage of the time

Author's Note: During a recent trip to Vienna, I had the opportunity to spend the evening at the museum at Bergasse 19. I was left alone for several hours to study the archives and could not resist the urge to explore the house. Descending to the basement, I stumbled and fell. Thus it was, by chance or horrible fate, I discovered a small tin box, containing a sheaf of papers, under the loose flagstone that had waited, long years, to cause my downfall. As I sat in the gloom of this underground vault, reading by the light of a single bulb, a sense of dread grew in me, until I felt compelled to flee into the brightly lit streets of the Vienna night. Though the documents were unsigned, there can be no doubt as to the author. The following is a loose translation from the original German.



October 27, 1898

At the request of my colleague, Dr B., I have undertaken the analysis of a new patient, who has, so far, resisted all efforts to treat his disturbing ailments. As is my practice, I have required the patient, an eminent physician from Amsterdam, to submit to the fundamental rule of analysis and he has agreed to respond to my inquiries and express his thoughts freely and without censorship, no matter how trivial or disagreeable. It is clear from our first meeting that Abraham V. has been deeply traumatized, most likely during his childhood. This trauma is revealing itself in the complex of phobic obsessions and hysterical paresis that now afflict him. As is my custom, I shall keep daily notes that will serve as a means of revealing the origins of these symptoms, and, at an appropriate date, form the basis of a revealing case history into the nature of neurotic phobia. At that time, I shall devise a pseudonym that both disguises my patient's identity and illuminates his illness. This case, in particular, requires care in masking his true name from those physicians and members of the public who view a case history as nothing more than a roman à clef for their private delectation. Dr V is well known in medical circles for his work on diseases of the blood and the rare neuropathologies that arise from such infections.

Like myself, the good doctor has been criticized for the radical nature of his studies. I feel a deep sympathy for him and must exercise great care to maintain my scientific objectivity.

The patient is a man in his fifties, who has, nonetheless, maintained a robust character and, until recently, had no history of either physical or mental disturbance. According to Dr B., Abraham recently returned from England where he was involved in the treatment of an unusual plague. It was after this that his symptoms began to appear, the development of which led him to commit himself to our care.

The physical symptoms are curious and, at first glance, appear unrelated. There is a contracture of the neck that causes the head to be drawn firmly down upon the shoulders. This is accompanied by a spasmodic twitching of

the hands and arms, as if the patient were attempting to grasp and use some objects or tools. The patient complains of pain in his mouth, although an examination of his teeth and gums show them to be sound. He also suffers from chest pains despite the normalcy of his heart rhythms and blood pressure. Finally, his eyes are remarkably sensitive to light. He complains bitterly of the agony caused by even the dimmest of illumination.

Despite this, Abraham has a near pathological fear of the dark. He insists the curtains be drawn tight and a lamp kept burning from sunset until dawn. In the morning he demands the same curtains be flung wide, regardless of the pain it causes him. Several times during our conversation — conducted in English as he appears to have lost the use of any other language — Abraham referred to the darkness as if it were a living creature. This anthropomorphization of a natural phenomenon may prove central to his condition.

October 30, 1898

After a sojourn in the countryside, I have returned to the city and my patient. I found him in extreme agitation and it was some time before I was able to elicit its cause. When, at last, I was able to calm him by sitting him in the sunlight and discussing my pleasant trip into the mountains, the following conversation occurred.

“Do you enjoy the mountains, Abraham?” I asked, as a way of moving from my experiences to his anxieties.

“No,” he replied with great vehemence. “They remind me of. . .” He fell silent and shifted in his chair, his eyes darting from side to side as if searching the corners of the room for enemies. I reminded him of his promise to speak freely.

“They remind me of the *dark*,” Abraham said. He spoke of the dark in the manner I mentioned earlier.

“How so?”

“They hide so much more than they reveal,” he said. “They hold out a promise — a promise of life — but, in the end, it is only smothering death they offer.”

Before I could pursue this cryptic statement, I received dramatic evidence of the depth and complexity of Abraham’s fears. I had opened the window a crack when I arrived and now a fly entered the room through that narrow opening. In an instant, Abraham was on his feet, pointing and emitting a low keening wail.

“Get it out!” he cried over and over. Yet when I attempted to strike the offending insect with a newspaper, he collapsed into hysterical sobbing and pleaded for its life. Finally, I caught it in my hands and pushed it back into the open air. When the fly was gone, Abraham slammed the window shut and fell back in his chair in a state of nervous exhaustion. He refused to speak further and, after ten minutes, I left him to his thoughts.

October 31, 1898

When I came upon Abraham this morning, he was busy at a curious occupation. He had a small pot of a noxious substance — which I later learned consisted of putty mixed with crushed garlic — and was applying it assiduously to every crack and crevice in the walls and around the windows of his room. When I inquired as to what he hoped to achieve, he gave me a sly look.

“This will keep out the *dark*,” he said, “and all of her agents.”

Although Abraham has lost his ability to speak his native Dutch, it seems that aspects of its grammar have leaked into his English, hence the use of the feminine to describe the darkness.

“Does the dark have agents?” I asked.

“She does,” he said. “Never does she so much as take her eyes off me.”

“Even in the daylight?” I asked.

“Of course not,” he said, as if the answer were obvious, “then must she send her agents. When the sun shines, she is helpless.”

“But her agents are not?”

“You’ve seen them yourself!” His voice rose in pitch and I feared another outbreak. “Flies. Spiders. Bats. All work for her. All the lesser forms are her servants. But none of them, not even She, can pass through this.” He brandished his pot of foul-smelling paste.

“You’ve been in this room for over a week,” I said, “why did you not take these measures earlier?”

“Fool!” he spat. “Tonight is All Saint’s Eve. Her power is at its peak.”

I felt it necessary to break this train of thought. It is one we must return to, but, at this stage of the analysis, it seems less than fruitful.

“You have received a letter,” I said. Abraham stopped his work and looked at me cautiously. “It is from a young woman in England.”

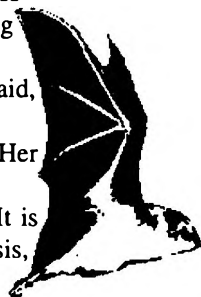
“Madame Mina,” he said, and there could be no mistaking the emotion in his voice. “I dreamt of her last night and now she has found me.”

“Tell me of this dream,” I said at once, as I have found that dreams are an excellent entry into the dark recesses of the disturbed mind.

To my surprise, Abraham slumped back in a chair, his eyes brimming with tears. He said, in a quiet voice, “Ah, dear, sweet, brave Mina, at least she is no longer in danger.”

“Your dream, Abraham, your dream,” I prompted.

“We were travelling together, as we had in the past,” he said. “But we were alone, so much alone, with only the warmth of our intertwined . . . fingers for comfort. The two of us, alone in a carriage, riding through the night. Twin lanterns illuminated the path ahead. Outside that dim circle there is only the smothering darkness, the light ahead and darkness on



both sides and closing in behind as if we were entering into a tunnel of light. We were moving toward some great moment, the climax of our mission, when we would thrust a stake into the heart of darkness and end his rule over us. The baptism of his blood would cleanse us."

"And you needed this cleansing?" I asked, noting the curious mixture of religious and sexual imagery, as well as the sudden shift in the gender of "the Dark."

"Yes! Yes!" said Abraham. "His unnatural lust had defiled her."

"Whose lust?"

Again he fell silent and watched me with the sidelong glance I had come to recognize as a precursor to deception.

"Who is Mina . . . Harker?" I asked, glancing at the letter in my hand.

"The daughter I might wish for," he said, "A woman of tremendous strength and purity." Guessing at my thoughts, he added, "A married woman. One less than half my age."

"Was she a patient of yours?"

"Yes," he said, "I was instrumental in her cure."

"A disease of the blood?" I asked, knowing this was his specialty.

"A most hideous disease of the blood," he said. "One that destroys all it touches."

"Except Mrs Harker," I said.

"Even so," he replied. "Though we almost lost her as well."

"You saved her life?"

"I saved her soul!" he said.

Again, I noticed this peculiar religious obsession, so unusual in a man of science. Abraham grew silent for a long moment. Then he turned and stared at me, his eyes burning with passion.

"Have you heard of Nosferatu, Herr Doctor?" he asked.

I confessed I had not and he nodded as if expecting my answer.

"Few have though I thought you might" he said, "as you deal with diseases of the mind. I have no doubt that a belief in the vampire would often be treated as such."

The word triggered some response in my memory but before I could make the association, Abraham continued.

"The vampire is a creature of darkness. It is dead and yet not dead. It lives after death by drinking the blood of its victims."

"I see," I said, keeping my voice noncommittal so as to draw him out.

"I understand your reluctance to accept this," he said, "I often find medical men to be close minded. You must learn as I have not to think little of any one's belief, no matter how strange it be." As I have indicated, Abraham is a prominent physician and is well aware of the reaction my own theories have provoked. No doubt his remark was meant as a deliberate goad to my feelings.

“And you saved Mrs Mina from this . . . creature’s depredations.” I said.

“I did,” said Abraham, “I was too late to save Miss Lucy — but then I am not sure that she wished to be saved. She was of the type certain men found alluring. Not like Madame Mina at all.”

There was a curious note in his voice. Beads of sweat had appeared on his brow and his tongue slid, unconsciously I believe, across his lips. He shifted in his chair as if experiencing a sudden cramp. Blood flushed his face. Abruptly he rose and returned to working at the window. Although he attempted to hide it, I observed with interest the stain that had appeared on his trousers.

November 1, 1898

I returned early today, anxious to see what effects the night had on my patient. I was amazed to find him standing in front of the wide open window, staring out at the garden with a happy expression on his face.

All evidence of his symptoms appeared to have vanished including the contraction of his neck and the twitching of his hands. This was all the more puzzling as I expected to see greater physical distress, not less, as is usual during the course of analysis. This recovery threw into doubt all of the theories and methods I have so painstakingly developed over the last fifteen years and I confess to a sudden pang of anxiety. I need not have worried.

Abraham turned at my entrance and revealed that the expression I had seen as happy in profile was instead a hideous rictus. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in the mockery of a smile and his jaw was so tightly clenched the teeth had been loosened in their sockets. Blood oozed from his gums and stained his mouth red. Some bruising and a rash were visible on one side of his throat, undoubtedly caused by the contracture of his neck for such a long period. When I greeted him, he was unable to reply, either because of the rigidity of his muscles or from some deeper neuromyopathy affecting his vocal chords. As he moved from the window, I observed that his previous spastic condition had been replaced by a sclerosis in his arms, back and legs. He shambled to his bed and lay there as if in the grips of rigor mortis itself. Clearly, the events of the previous day had advanced his illness, perhaps to the point where a traumatic crisis was in the offing.

I knew I must proceed with the next phase of the treatment, but this could only be achieved if Abraham was able to speak. Drawing the curtains, I approached the bed and attempted to hypnotize him using my pocket watch as the focus of concentration. His reaction astounded me. His eyes, red-rimmed from lack of sleep, glared at me, first in fear and then in rage. He struggled to speak but only managed a gurgled groan that left his mouth flecked with bloody foam. Such a response was all the more surprising for I knew Dr V. himself used Mesmer’s technique in his own studies. Reluctantly, I decided to use chloral to relax him. Under the influence of the

drug, he slipped into a trance. Even so, he could speak only with difficulty.

"Who is Miss Lucy?" I asked, knowing a direct approach was dangerous but fearing more circumspect questioning might not succeed.

"The daughter I never wanted."

"Miss Lucy is your daughter?"

"No!" he said, a strangled cry.

"Who is Miss Lucy?" I repeated, with little hope of an answer.

"She was a friend of Madame Mina," he said, "She is dead."

"How did she die?" I asked.

"Nosferatu."

We had come full circle. I groaned in frustration.

"The darkness came over her and held her to his bosom," he said. "She welcomed the darkness. Her kind always does."

"You've met her kind before?" I held my breath. I knew, somehow, the answer to this question was a turning point in the analysis.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I have."

"And what do you do when you meet them?"

Abraham shuddered and his muscles began to relax. "I destroy them," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I love them most." And with that whispered answer, he lapsed suddenly into unconsciousness.

November 4, 1898

I have been called away from Vienna, but Abraham's case weighs heavily on my mind. In this spare moment, I must make note my ideas on the matter in the hope this will clarify my thinking and assist me when I see him again.

I am certain Abraham's hysterical fear of darkness and his obsession with both Madame Mina and Miss Lucy, as he calls them, have their etiology in some early childhood trauma. Darkness is, of course, a time of great mystery, promising some release that is seldom as satisfying in reality as in fantasy. His dreams, of which I must know more, seem tinged with sexual imagery, combined, as is common with devout Catholics, with religious guilt. The division of the feminine into the duality of purity and sin is, of course, part of the deep-seated trauma all men feel, arising from their earliest sexual urges directed at their mothers. For most, this leads merely to neurosis but, in Abraham's case, may have become pathological. His fear of darkness is a reflection of his sexual guilt as well as his terror of the all-powerful and vengeful father who will punish his transgressions. The father, now dead, comes back to haunt him as the life-sucking vampire. The father steals



away, as always, the object of Abraham's love.

Further progress in this case can only be achieved if I discover the original trauma of Abraham's family life. To this end, I have written a colleague at the University in Amsterdam for information about the good doctor.

November 6, 1898

In response to my query, I received the following information. Some years ago, Dr V's children were killed in a terrible fire. The body of his adolescent son was recovered, but his daughter, Lucille, was consumed by the blaze. His wife, driven mad by the tragedy, was confined to a mental institution, where she yet remains. Although Abraham remained faithful to his wife and publicly mourned his son and continued to speak of him with great love and affection, he made no mention of his daughter. Soon, it was as if she had never existed.

His current symptoms appeared weeks after his return from England — where he was involved in the death of a, perhaps, promiscuous young woman named Lucy. Before his involvement with Mina and Lucy, Abraham never mentioned his belief in vampires; after, it was all he spoke of. I fear there is some evil connection between these events.

November 7, 1898

I arrived at the sanitarium to find it in an uproar. Dr V. had shown a marked improvement in the days following our last session, awaking the next day alert and recovered from his paresis. He was even willing to leave the seclusion of his room and walk the grounds with the other patients.



During his afternoon exercise, Abraham came in contact with a patient whose pathological obsessions were the mirror image of his own.

Whereas Abraham has displayed a morbid fear of insects, this patient sought them out — with the express purpose of consuming them! When Abraham discovered the man engaged in this loathsome act, he flew into a rage, striking the patient to the ground before attempting, unsuccessfully, to impale him with a branch he had broken from a nearby ash tree.

When I arrived, Dr V. was confined to a cell in a strait-jacket. It was only with difficulty that I persuaded his warders to release him into my care. I must, now I know of his violent potential, be vigilant in my treatment and be prepared to withdraw at a moment's notice if he shows signs of agitation.

Despite my best efforts, Abraham refused to discuss the incident, acting almost as if it had never happened. Several times, he began to laugh loudly for no reason, a behavior that I find somehow very suggestive and worthy of theoretical analysis at a later date. Finally, more out of desperation than any

expectation of response, I asked him if he had experienced any more dreams. To my surprise, he answered at once.

"I've been dreaming of a fiend."

"A fiend?"

"No," said Abraham, "a friend. I said a friend."

"And who is this . . . friend?"

"Why, you, of course."

This was progress. Some of his rage has been transferred to me, his doctor. I have become both his friend but also a 'fiend' and, hence, his father. Given his recent behaviour, this is a dangerous position indeed.

"And what have you dreamed of me?" I asked.

"You are on a long sea voyage on a ship without a crew. A terrible storm is brewing. You are looking for something. Or someone."

I took this to be wish-fulfilment, such as I have often encountered in dreams. Abraham wished me gone — perhaps for my good, perhaps for his, hence the storm. Yet at the same time he wants me to "look for someone." I suspected it was himself.

"It's Mina. You're looking for Mina. But you find Lucy instead."

Thus it always is. Analysis is filled with false starts and wrong turns. He has not dreamt of me at all. Abraham is on the ship, searching for Mina, that is, his mother, and finding Lucy, his daughter, instead. Filled with trepidation, I asked the dreadful question.

"What happened to your daughter, Abraham?"

Abraham's hands twitched. "I have no daughter."

"No, not anymore. But you had a daughter."

"I never had . . .," he paused, a look of intense pain passing across his face. "She was not . . . Gott in Himmel, Lucille!"

Tears flowed from his eyes and I resisted the urge to touch him, aware of how such a gesture might be misinterpreted by a man in his state.

"What happened to your daughter?"

A look, that in other circumstances I would have described as peaceful, settled on his face.

"I killed her," he said.

"In the fire?"

"No," he said. "I found where she slept. I drove a stake through her heart. Ah, the blood, how it gushed and flowed! I cut off her head and filled it with garlic."

"Why?"

"Because I was the one who loved her best." Tears again brimmed in his eyes.

"But why the stake?"

"To save her," he said, "to save her from a fate worse than death."

And there it was. To save her from a fate worse than death. The English language is so delicate, filled with expressions designed to circumvent the

forbidden subject. A fate worse than death, which means nothing less than sexual congress, is one of those expressions.



Abraham V., like all men, experiences his first sexual urges and directs them at the original love-object, his mother. He feels intense guilt, and also fear of his father. That fear, combined with jealousy, leads to homicidal rage and the desire to kill his father. He resists the urge but never forgets it; he buries it below the surface of the conscious mind. As a father himself, he observes his own son and the lust the boy has for his mother. It is part of the cycle of our existence, the universal trauma that generates so many neuroses. But something goes terribly wrong. The neurotic obsessions are heightened and transformed into psychosis. Perhaps, his daughter reminds him of his mother. He feels unnatural desire for her. He, of course, cannot act on it — the incest taboo is too strong. But to the unconscious mind, the fantasy is the act and creates all the internal conflicts violation of this taboo engenders. He must destroy the love-object that threatens him. Then, fate removes the temptation — the purification of fire.

The guilt Abraham feels must be enormous. He has wished his daughter dead and now it is so. He has likewise wished his son dead, transferring the rage he felt for his own father onto the poor lad, and now that too is so. He is responsible for their deaths. Still, the human spirit is resilient. He throws himself into his work, and driven by his hidden obsessions, explores the exotic, the perverse, seeking to become professionally what he fears he is personally, the unnatural man. His son, the mirror image of himself, is elevated to saintly status, while his daughter is consigned to the hells of the unconscious. Then he is called to a case in England and some trick of memory brings it all cascading down upon him.

Now, he must assume direct responsibility for his daughter's death as Lucy becomes Lucille. He creates the fantasy of the vampire, with his daughter as the central figure. He drives the stake into her heart, the all-too-obvious image of his penis entering her vagina. She bleeds, fulfilling his desire to deflower her. He decapitates her, symbolically acting out his own castration, a suitable punishment delivered by a vengeful God. And the garlic? Well, not all symbols are obvious. I must lead Abraham to this interpretation. Only by speaking the truth with his own voice can he be cured.

November 8, 1898

It was shortly after sunset when I entered Dr V.'s room to find him in a state of high animation, pacing from one end of the small chamber to the other, his hands gesticulating as if he were engaged in a conversation. Yet no sound escaped his lips. Several moments passed before my presence impinged upon his conscious mind. In those moments, I felt an inexplicable desire to flee the room. Before I could analyse the source of this anxiety, Abraham turned and greeted me with a smile.

Still without speaking, he gestured me to my chair. However, instead of sitting opposite me, he continued to pace in a circular motion so I had to twist in my chair to follow his progress.

"Will you not be still?" I asked him, trying to keep the anxiety from my voice. He answered me with one of his chilling laughs.

"We will be a long time still in our graves," he said, adding, "if we are fortunate."

"We must talk further of your daughter."

"Oh, yes, my daughter, dead she be but still alive."

"In memory," I said, "locked deep inside —"

"Oh, that locks could keep her." He laughed again.

The continuous movement of my head brought on a wave of dizziness and I must have momentarily lost consciousness. The room dimmed and seemed to fill with fog. I imagined Abraham behind me, his powerful hand gripping my shoulder like a claw. I felt his hot, fetid breath against my face and heard his voice, a harsh sibilance that carried no meaning, save terror.

Abraham cried out in a voice so filled with despair that it tore an answering cry from my own throat. Light flooded the room. He stood against one wall beneath the gas lamp, one hand still adjusting the flame. In the other, he clutched a crucifix which he held towards me like a shield. A wayward gust of wind snapped the curtains from the open window, as he cried out again.

"By all that is holy," he said, "Begone! Leave me be!"

Without a word I fled the room. Now, in the calm of my own study, I wonder at the primeval fear that gripped me. I am no longer only concerned for Dr V.'s condition, but for my own.

November 11, 1898

For the past three days, I have avoided my patient, filling my days with the trivia of medical practice. I needn't have bothered. Abraham refuses to see me. He has left a message with the wardens, to wit, "I, Abraham V., for fear of my immortal soul, will no longer trade with the servants of Dracul." The transference is complete; I am now the demon he fears, to be driven away by crucifix and curse. There is little more I can do for him. He would rather continue in his illness than face the terrible truths locked away inside his unconsciousness. And, perhaps, Abraham is right, for have I not driven him further into the dark of madness while trying to raise him to the light?

November 12, 1898

Everything has changed. Lucille is not dead. Her body was not consumed by the fire; it was never there.

Trenholm

Last evening, after I completed my despairing journal entry, I received a letter asking me to come to an address in Fleischmarkt. It was cryptically signed L. My heart pounding, I arrived at the appointed hour. The door was opened by a young woman, her pale face framed by masses of golden hair. She bid me enter and offered me a glass of wine. She herself did not partake.

"I do not find wine satisfying," she said. After a moment, she continued. "I understand you have my father in your care."

"Then you are Lucille."

"My father has spoken of me," she said, "I am surprised."

"For many years, he was unable to speak of you."

"I know. Perhaps that was for the best."

For several minutes, the conversation lapsed. I took the opportunity to observe my surroundings, seeking some clue as to my hostess's personality. The parlour where we sat was furnished in an antique style, with heavy wooden furniture upholstered in thick velvets. The floor was covered with a deep maroon carpet, matched by the heavy drapes that covered the high windows. There were neither mirrors nor any item of religious significance on the walls. This struck me as unusual in the home of a beautiful woman of Catholic upbringing. No doubt some aspect of her father's madness had infected her as well.

"Have you made progress in my father's case?"

"I believe I have," I said, "but I'm not at liberty to discuss my conclusions."

"I am his daughter."

"Yes," I said, "but some things should not be revealed even to family members." Indeed, I feared the harm that might be caused this poor young woman if she were aware of her father's lurid fantasies.

"Do you have reason to expect a cure?" she asked.

"He . . . he refuses to see me," I said.

At this she laughed, and it chilled me to the bone to hear it, for it had the same tone and tenor as the mad laughter of her father. I must have left soon after, but I have no recollection of my journey home and this morning, as I write these notes, I feel a curious lassitude, coupled with a deep sense of . . . I can think of no other word, violation. What lurid contagious fantasy has made me feel so unclean? In some earlier time, I might have sought comfort in the Temple, but my only faith is, must be, science. Only Abraham's cure can be my redemption.

November 13, 1898

Today, I tried again to visit my patient, to find him gone. He was released to the care of his daughter, who, by the warder's account, arrived at midnight in a black carriage drawn by four black horses. I questioned Dr B. as to his decision, but he claimed not to have signed the release. His signature is there

nonetheless.

I fear I shall see neither Abraham nor his mysterious daughter again. I do not think I wish to. Yet, there are wounds that do not heal, dark callings that must be answered. For all that I try to drive them from my mind, they haunt my dreams and waking memories. Beyond the fantasy of desire, there is desire for death. Eros begets Thanatos. And I wonder, as I think of them locked in their unholy struggle, what monstrosities we shall witness, in the century now birthing, should those fantastic desires, buried in the mind of history, be released. ❖



Trenholm

Dream Tribes

by Mary Choo

She's complained often to the doctors
about the monkeys in gold skirts
on the tree outside her window;
she can smell their acrid pelts. She knows
they're hungry, but the doctors don't care.

She squats on a blanket
combing blood through her hair; she's tried,
but the cuts on her head just won't heal,
and though she's mentioned it
no one else hears the burrowing sounds behind her
eyes, in her ears, that painful growing of
roots that comes when the monkeys sing.
She stops up her ears, but like pied pipers
the monkeys charm the tendrils right out through
her scalp; frightened, she tears out the shoots.

At night, when the women who murmur
outside her door have bandaged her
in white cloth and soporifics,
she can still smell the monkeys,
hear the grinding of teeth
as they summon her roots. . . .

Like shadow-priests in saffron,
scenting her wounds,
through her hunted window
they come.

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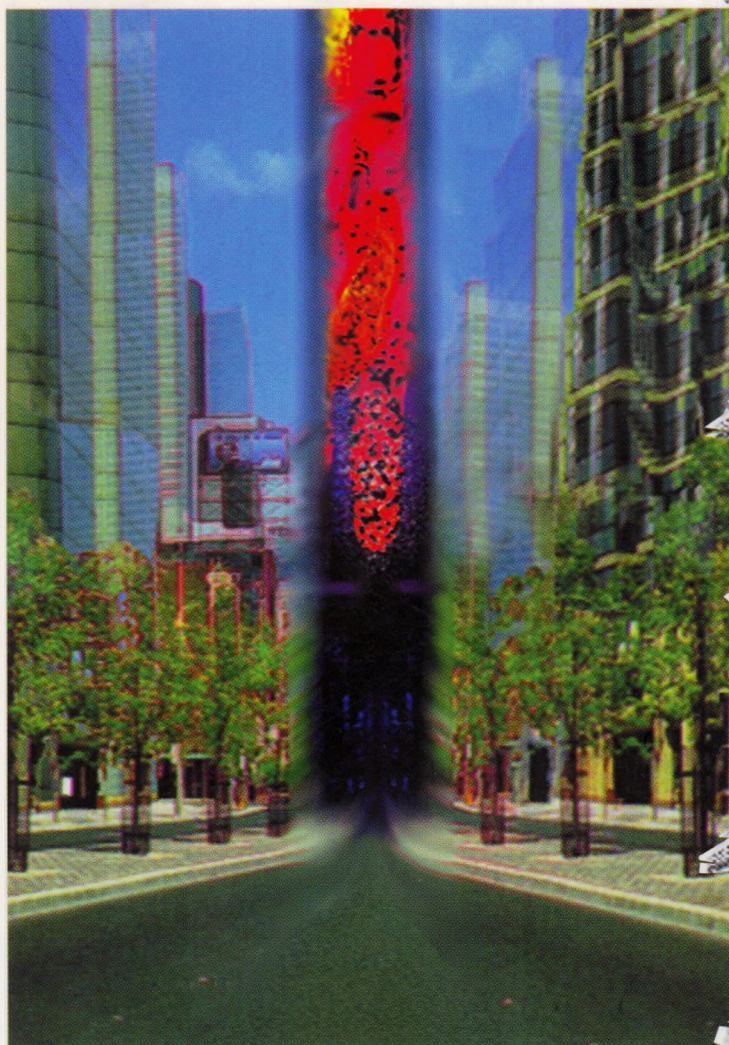
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