

ideomancer

march 2003

speculative fiction

horror

Necropolis

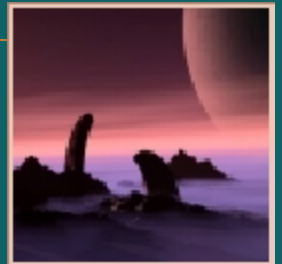
Robert Hood



science fiction

Mélisende On My Mind

Cyril Simsa



fantasy

Among The Cedars

Hannah Wolf Bowen



classic

Death And The Woman

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s p e c u l a t i v e f i c t i o n

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"David Brin endlessly flirts with ideas and narrative devices that would elicit a groan from hidebound writing tutors, yet just as endlessly presents them with verve and ingenuity."

Lee Battersby

Kiln People

David Brin

The Deus Ex Machina. Cheapest gag in the book. Bane of first year writing tutor. Great big fat neon glowing tattoo on the forehead of the beginner writer screaming "amateur, amateur" for all to see. But. What if? What if the God in the Machine was really a God? And what if the god in the machine that was really a God was really a human? And what if...or perhaps I should just leave it there.

It's just one of the games David Brin plays with his readers in this book. He endlessly flirts with ideas and narrative devices that would elicit a groan from hidebound writing tutors, yet just as endlessly presents them with such verve and ingenuity that the reader can't help but be swept along by the sheer force of inventiveness he exhibits. The central conceit of the novel, that humans can imprint their consciousness upon clay 'ditto' who then perform tasks for their human original, allows him to use a number of stylistic tricks, and Brin makes full use of his extensive repertoire. Multiple points of view, differing tenses and time frames, a subtle distortion of narrative voice, all are employed to keep the complex and convoluted plot bubbling along at breakneck speed.

And it really is very easy to let yourself be swept up by the constant switching of viewpoint. Brin's use of his central narrator and three 'ditto' copies, each with a subtly different take on their

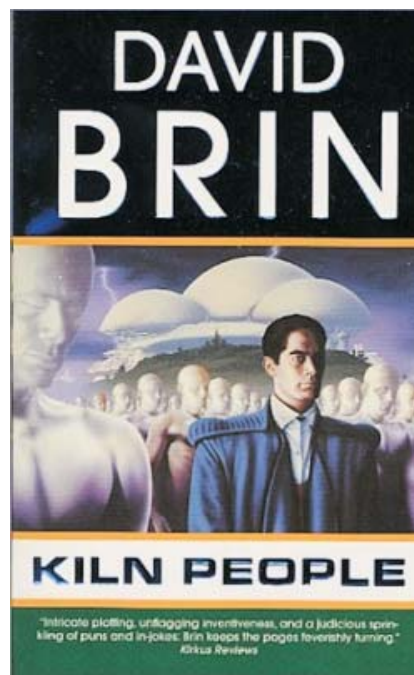
circumstances and at times wildly disparate agenda, allows him to circumvent the greatest problem writers face when using a first person point of view, namely that the action can only follow the 'eyes' of the narrator. In this case Brin's characters can quite literally be everywhere at once, and as human converses with human, and ditto converses with ditto with human with not-sure-one-way-or-the-other, the complexity of the social interactions become as hypnotic and fascinating as

the central plot, namely a murder mystery that may not be a murder, unless killing a ditto can be counted murder assuming of course it was a ditto and not a human and...well, you see where a simple reviewer could get confused....

So where does the God come in? Well, you know I don't give away stories in this column. Suffice to say that in the best murder mystery tradition the death of the stooge is only the tip of the ice pick. The

escalating plot takes in questions of identity, humanity, godhead, and the point at which they are defined, and coincide. Dittos are disposable, but is a creature with the full measure of human thoughts and emotions truly just an appliance, even if it is a construct with a planned obsolescence? And can such a tool contain the spark of a higher being within? The novel builds gradually and irrevocably toward an answer.

It is when the novel makes the





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transition from action-based mystery to literary meditation on spirituality that Brin's prose starts to struggle. The change of tack is quite sudden, and involves a steep conceptual 'climb', and the mammoth intertwining of story threads creaks at times under the strain. But Brin is a writer of supreme confidence and ambitious grasp, and despite an occasional "As You Know"-ism, *Kiln People* remains at all times an immensely readable and enjoyable novel filled with rounded characters, a subversive thread of humour, and enough conceptual range to leave the reader with an internal conversation long after the task of reading has finished.

NEXT MONTH: Mwoooohahahaha, three continents of horror ensconced between the pages of "Gathering The Bones". Lee dresses up as the beefiest vampire since Angel and says "Knackers to that. I DO drink vine...."

Lee Battersby has long been regarded as the definitive Shakespearean adaptation of "A Midsummer Nights Dream," taking place as he does within the leafy confines of Brian Aldiss' Hothouse stories. Currently growing his hair in preparation for his daughter growing old enough to want to braid it, he divides his time between doing far too much internet shopping and deciding whether he is a winter or summer colour.



Robert Hood

Ideomancer Featured Author **Robert Hood** answers ten quick questions from fellow writer **Deborah Biancotti**.

Deborah : Why on earth did you want to be a writer?

Robert : It's almost a cliché, but really, I never felt like I had much of a choice. Sometime during primary school I started to love writing stories. I'd write stupidly inventive little compositions based on dumb puns and the like. Then when my reading kicked in — during high school — (and I was consuming everything from literary classics to pulp, in particular loving the SF magazines of the 1960s and 1970s), I began writing longer, more complex stuff. I didn't know what I was doing and they were generally awful, but from that point on that's what I'd say I wanted to do with my life: be a writer. It had nothing to do with a perception of realistic career paths, nothing to do with earning money. I simply loved writing.

Ever since then I haven't been able to stop even when it becomes unbearably frustrating and stressful and my output diminishes to nothing through creeping lethargy. Eventually I get edgy and dissatisfied when I'm not writing and am driven back to it.

I used to rationalise my writing in terms of vast metaphysical concepts: fulfilling the urge of divine creativity that lies at the centre of my humanity, the will to 'create times and spaces' (to quote William Blake), to internally reform the external world into something other than it is. To express myself. I'm not sure that's the whole story now. But I am certain that storytelling is important personally and socially, and somewhere along the line the act of writing became

an integral part of the way I defined myself. To stop writing would be to stop being me, at least in my own eyes. It's been said before, but the answer to the question: "Who should become a writer?" is always, "Those who can't help themselves!"

I also used to think — imagine — that one day I'd be able 'to be a writer for a living', but though I sometimes make decent amounts of extra income from it, it's never enough to live off, and the prospects have never been positive enough to allow me to abandon caution altogether and to become a 'full-time writer'. Perhaps that's a failing. I do admire those who, against the odds, take the bit between the teeth and simply plunge themselves into poverty and insecurity in the cause of making themselves a career in writing. For myself, I'm beginning to think I never will be a full-time career writer. Maybe that's a good thing. There's less pressure to simply follow the market, less pressure to find paying jobs even if the pursuit of such jobs means doing something I'm not interested in.

Deborah : You began your writing career as an author of crime fiction. Have you left that all behind you now?

Robert : Crime fiction didn't come first. My first serious writings were SF and fantasy. My first sales were SF and fantasy. Writing crime was a chance thing: I'd just finished writing a story ("Dead End") that didn't have a supernatural element (apart from a dream sequence), when I saw an advertisement for a competition (the first Australian Golden Dagger competition for short crime fiction), probably in a writer's newsletter. The story had a body in it, though I'd never thought of it as a crime story, so I entered it for want of another



market. By chance, it won, was published in a mass-market book, and has subsequently been re-printed many times.

As a result of the win, I was asked to submit to various crime anthologies, so I wrote more 'crime' stories. People liked them and I enjoyed writing them. They gave me scope to get as dark as I liked and some even had a suggestion of the supernatural about them.

I haven't stopped writing such stories. Horror fiction and crime fiction, as separate genres, cross over very strongly in places. My stories often exist in that particular borderland. Like most short story markets, however, the market for short crime fiction is at the moment a lot smaller than it was in the heyday of my involvement in it.

Deborah : So have you always enjoyed speculative fiction?

Robert : Speculative fiction has pretty well always been my major love. The first books I remember reading from personal choice were the Simon Black In Space books, Patrick Moore's Mars books and Capt. W.E. John's juvenile SF. Then I read H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* and the lifelong love affair really kicked in. I used to love watching the late-night creature feature stuff on telly, when I was allowed to stay up. One of the major epiphanies of my youth was when my mother presented me, out of the blue, copies of both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. I'm not sure she realised what she was starting.

Deborah : And I understand you don't even like the label 'speculative fiction'. Why is that?

Robert : Well, I've probably sprouted off about it at some point because it strikes me as artificial and forced as an 'all-inclusive' category. But I really don't mind it. We seem to need the categories — or at least publishers and book marketers do — and everyone knows what it means, so who cares? It is useful in blurring the boundaries, and my stories often cross over between horror, fantasy and science fiction, as is quite common these days.

Deborah : You're now known particularly as a horror writer. Is that a label you enjoy?

Robert : I don't mind at all. I play on it at times. Sometimes it's more useful to use the term 'horror-fantasy' or 'dark fantasy', of course, because 'horror' carries a lot of baggage and can prejudice readers — making them avoid stories they would find enjoyable if they weren't put off before they started. But 'horror' stories belong to a wide-ranging and venerable tradition. I enjoy them, so I'll accept the label.

Ironically perhaps ('ironic' because of the attitudes toward horror stories as such that people have), I was originally attracted to writing horror stories because it seemed to me that the genre allowed for a broader approach, a more literarily variable approach to its subject matter. People think of 'horror' as being the most formulaic of the genres and the least respectable. But that's not my view. To me, 'horror' veers from subtle to extreme, from simple to complex, from shallow to profound, from playful to deadly serious, depending on the author and the motivation. It's a wonderful genre and continues to produce great works of literature (as well as formulaic throw-aways).

Not long ago, Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* was published, and was nominated for the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel. I'm proud to be associated with a genre that can lay claim to that particular work — a more complex, learned, innovative, compelling, touching and profoundly chilling novel would be hard to find, anywhere. It left me breathless.

Deborah : I was at the launch of your short story collection, *Immaterial*, in 2002. Jack Dann was the MC that day, and he described you as one of the most important writers of horror in Australia today. Were you surprised by that?

Robert : Modesty forbids me answering that one truthfully! But, yes, I was surprised, and delighted. Jack has been extraordinarily supportive, and it's



great that someone of his significance thinks so highly of my work. It's hard to remain positive at times; even the 'most important writers' have runs of rejection or don't make it into particular markets that they feel it important to have cracked.

Despite your essential arrogance (a fundamental part of being a writer, I suspect), you sometimes begin to wonder if there's any worth at all in what you do. That's the writer's lot. You get over it. Such judgements are relative anyway. But to be praised occasionally, and by prestigious commentators, is good, as long as you don't take it too seriously.

Deborah : You've successfully crossed genres. You've also written for different audiences, selling stories for children, young adults and of course, adults. How important are these boundaries, really? Does it make a big difference to how you write?

Robert : There's certainly a difference between writing for adults and writing for younger kids, especially in the horror field, where humour becomes very important. But young adult? Apart from some extreme language complexities perhaps, and conceptualisation that takes place at a formative level, it doesn't seem to make much practical difference once the writing is under way.

You try to be immediate, you try to write in an exciting and emotionally clear manner — but that's something you try to do for adults, too. Most of the time. Writing for adults probably leaves you freer to become abstract in your approach — but having said that, it's all relative. YA books are often conceptually complex, full of abstract notions translated into immediate forms.

What are YA readers anyway? The category barely existed when I was a young adult. I mainly read adult books. So do young adult readers today, I suspect. What the category does allow for these days is the publication of shorter novels, something that appears to have been banished from adult consideration. SF novels of the 1960s and 1970s were often 100-120 pages long. It's a terrific

length for SF — and for horror. The category also allows for teenage protagonists — something that doesn't happen much in avowed 'adult' writing. When you look at YA novels, they are often adult in all but publisher's category. Are Garth Nix's excellent books *Sabriel*, *Lirael* and *Abhorsen* any less suitable for adults because they are marketed as YA?

When I think about this question, I think about my own YA novel *Backstreets*. The fact that it is considered YA is a matter of chance — a YA publisher contracted me to write it. But the subject matter came from the deepest part of my psyche and out of profound emotional reflection; it would have taken the form it took (more or less) no matter for whom I wrote it.

Deborah : You've written and sold over a hundred short stories and a few dozen books. Not to mention all the plays and articles you've done. You've also earned a number of awards and nominations. Are you bored with it yet?

Robert : No, never. I guess there are writers who manage to write a startling, unique book that expresses everything they wanted to express and achieves all that is in them to achieve and I guess this means they don't write anything else, nothing worthwhile anyway.

But the rest of us — fallible and obsessed human beings living in a state of continual temporal change and emotional chaos — never finish. Certainly my personal views morph and grow. I see new things; I understand less. Weird stuff happens. The world continually surprises me, thrills me, disappoints me, and I respond by writing another story. Each story is a different entity. Finding its 'true' form is exciting, even when the process is utterly frustrating.

Writing forces you to look outside your own comfortable perceptions, sometimes it shatters your view of things. Getting stuck into sorting out the mess, inventing new worlds, peopling them, or exploring some deep, barely tangible



emotion: how could that ever be boring?

Deborah : What do you see as the future for genre fiction?

Robert : I'm sure it will be a fascinating and fecund one. Just when you think the genres are becoming stale and derivative, something weird and wonderful crops up, no matter how frustratingly conservative the publishers seem to become. Take *House of Leaves*, for example. Or the recent works of China Mieville. Or Mary Gentle's *Ash*. For a while I thought I'd never again feel the sort of wonder I used to feel in response to an SF novel. Then I read Vernor Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky*, and Sean William and Shane Dix's *Echoes of Earth*. From somewhere comes something as barely categorisable as Jack Dann's *Memory Cathedral*. Or a new collection of horror stories from Terry Dowling.

And there are writers out there who are taking the genres to places they've never been before, with a literary brilliance and inventiveness that is stunning — writers like Ted Chiang and Kelly Link. No, genre fiction seems to me to go up and down in terms of popularity, but what the genres offer is too important to be lost and the talent keeps coming.

One of these days even the masses will tire of brick-sized, formulaic, under-developed bestsellers, and will start to look elsewhere — and the other, non-fantasy genres will get a much-needed boost.

(Not that I mean to insult the currently popular high-fantasy genre as such. But I am amazed that, along with some very excellent work, there is a slew of puzzling bestsellers in the genre that are badly written and unimaginative — and given how hard it is to sell anything to a publisher these days, you do wonder why they were even considered and how they managed to sell well once they were published. Ah, the foibles of the market!)

Deborah : And what about the future for Robert Hood, what does that hold?

Robert : Who knows? Our intentions are apt to get bent and twisted in

unpredictable ways. But certainly I intend to keep writing. I intend to keep writing short stories, especially in the horror-fantasy genre, though I've been dabbling in more science fiction as such lately. I'm currently writing a fantasy novel — an 'otherworld' fantasy with a fair bit of horror in it — and am still hoping that an already-written, oft-rejected fantasy novel (brick-sized) that is still doing the rounds will eventually find a home.

I've also nearly finished a straight-out horror novel — *Dead Matter* — which has one of my favourite obsessions in it, zombies. And I am intending to co-edit (with Robin Pen) a collection of giant monster stories, which will be published (all things being equal) in 2005.

Meanwhile anyone who wants to read some new stories from me should look to upcoming issues of *Aurealis*, *Redsine*, *Dark Animus* and *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, and in the anthologies *Ideomancer Unbound*, *Agog! Terrific Tales* and *Consensual 2*. A kid's horror novella, *Hard Rock Rodney*, is also due out from Pearson's Education.

Robert Hood has produced a large number of SF/F, horror and indeterminate-genre stories for a large number of magazines and anthologies over a large number of years. His most recent longer works were a series of four supernatural thrillers, *Shades*, and a collection of ghost stories, *Immaterial* (published by Mirrordanse Books).



Necropolis

Robert Hood has produced a large number of SF/F, horror and indeterminate-genre stories for a large number of magazines and anthologies over a large number of years. His most recent longer works were a series of four supernatural thrillers, *Shades*, and a collection of ghost stories, *Immaterial* (published by MirrorDanse Books).

"Necropolis" grew from his late 1970s-early 1980s' obsession with the idea that the world was on the brink of nuclear disaster (nothing changes, eh?). At the same time he'd been writing a ghost story to enter in the Macarthur FAW Ghost Stories anthology (Campbelltown being the home of one of Australia's most famous spooks, Fisher's ghost). From the dark repository of interesting ideas that lies somewhere south of his rational mind, he thought it would be interesting to create a world in which it was not the ghosts that do the haunting.... "Necropolis" was runner-up in 1985 Macarthur Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW) short story contest; published in *Ghost Stories*, Macarthur FAW and Campbelltown City Council, 1986; and in *Day-dreaming On Company Time*, Robert Hood (Five Islands Press, 1988).

"A Herald flag-waved in his hand, newsprint spilling into the grey shadows. 'Reagan's gone gung-ho. Reckon he'll do 'em this time.' His tongue slithered between his lips and lapped up the traces of enthusiasm from the corners of his mouth."

I must have fallen asleep.

When I sat down here on the front step of the terrace, the afternoon was still warm with spring. I felt relaxed, anticipating nothing.

Then, suddenly, evening was settling in like my Grandma on one of her visits. It hugged me so that I shivered, and asked me how I'd been.

"Just fine," I said, "Just fine."

It didn't acknowledge this, but slumped low over the azaleas, and sighed. I shivered again. There was a hint of chill in the night breeze. I waited. I had nowhere else to go.

"Evenin', Susie," a shadow whispered at last. It leaned over the fence. Wispy hair rose like smog. "Doin' anything special tonight?"

"Maybe, Barry. Maybe just sleeping."

Barry laughed. He always laughed. The fence shivered.

"Bad night to be alone in a cold bed, Susie. The world's unravelling."

That made me feel bad, though I couldn't remember why. I wrinkled up my nose. The air smelt of decay. Someone's rotten garbage.

"Is it?"

"Another hijacking. Yanks in Beirut."

I yawned. "What do I care?"

A Herald flag-waved in his hand, newsprint spilling into the grey shadows.

"Reagan's gone gung-ho. Reckon he'll do 'em this time." His tongue slithered



between his lips and lapped up the traces of enthusiasm from the corners of his mouth.

"Like that, would you, Barry?"

He laughed. "We'd really see something then."

We both giggled. I couldn't think why.

"Reckon we would. The Big Bang maybe."

"Russians have warned Reagan off. They're sending troops. It's Cuba over again, I tell you, Susie." He leapt over the fence suddenly, hanging in flight for a moment while old wood groaned. He was light, though he looked heavy.

"I didn't invite you in."

"Very rude of you too."

We sat and the sun boiled behind us, spilling flame across the city. Night thickened. Centrepont Tower stuck up sharp on the horizon like a giant stirring-spoon. Light-bubbles churned through the buildings.

"Nice this time of the arvo."

"Getting chilly."

"I can warm you up quick enough."

I slapped his creeping hand away. Barry and me used to get on pretty well when we were kids. He took me to the movies and we groped each other in the dark. I think we had intercourse once but I can't remember when. Not any more. He doesn't really love me or anything. It's just habit now.

"We can go down the pub, Susie. Good band playing."

"No thanks."

"Oh, come on. We get along okay, don't we?"

I eyed him. "I haven't decided."

He laughed. "Come down the pub anyway. Just friends."

What was it I saw reflected in his eye? Jagged lines darted quickly for cover behind the folds of his eyelid.

"What's up?"

I was staring.

"Sorry. Thought I saw something."

He laughed, but as though there was a threat, a murderer in the dark. "Don't do that, Susie. You know how it goes."

"Do I?"

"Yeah. So tell me what's up then."

"Your lies maybe."

He laughed again, more easily. "You're weird, Susie, you know that?"

I smiled. Fey, Grandma said, Susie, you're fey.

"You know what 'weird' means, Barry?" I tasted almonds on the breeze now. "Do you?"

"I know what I mean."

"Means second-sighted. Not quite in this world."

"Not all there is right."

I got up, shivering like palsy as the night drew nearer. "I'm cold. Come round at seven. We'll go to the pub. I guess we've got to."

"Great!"

"But no talking about war and that stuff. If you talk about all that, you can forget it."

"Why?"

"A Herald flag-waved in his hand, newsprint spilling into the grey shadows. 'Reagan's gone gung-ho. Reckon he'll do 'em this time.' His tongue slithered between his lips and lapped up the traces of enthusiasm from the corners of his mouth."



"A Herald flag-waved in his hand, newsprint spilling into the grey shadows. 'Reagan's gone gung-ho. Reckon he'll do 'em this time.' His tongue slithered between his lips and lapped up the traces of enthusiasm from the corners of his mouth."

I tried to remember. There was pain, my memory a blaze of fire.
"I don't know."

"It's important, Susie. Those bastards'll blow us up."

"I know. Just don't talk about it. There's bad luck around tonight. I feel it."

He stuck his lip out, half-pout, and ran his hand through his spiky hair. "Superstition'll get us nowhere."

"It'll get me to the pub. What's it matter if you don't talk about it this time?"

He clicked his tongue, and I had to close my eyes because the terrible thing was there again, a scar across his cheek. "Then I'll be superstitious," he said, laughing. "Don't name the devil and he'll stay home by the fire, eh?"

I turned away, edging around a bad feeling that lurched there on the step. I went inside. "Come by at seven, Barry. Seven."

I heard him laugh behind me, but casting back over my shoulder, I saw he had become another shadow in a patch of dimming sunlight, soaking away into the footpath.

I shut the door, but the evening was there anyway.

"It's something bad, isn't it?" I said to Grandma.

A house-board creaked and suddenly Grandma was just a memory. I couldn't remember what I'd asked. Or why.

I kept moving and watched while I fussed about in the kitchen. I didn't eat much.

Barry came by at seven and we went down the pub as we always do. I was feeling really bad, as though I was being poisoned slowly. My head was going numb.

The King George was one of those old square pubs stuck between a renovated bottle-shop plastered with green specials signs and a real estate agent's office that had fly-dirt all over the fading pictures in the window. The pub had a lot of tile everywhere, but someone had tried to update once and there were patches of wood panelling too. I remember the rock-a-billy poster on the wall above a Pac-man machine that was always out of order and a dart board that had been played so much it was coming apart. Most times the King George was full of people to about six foot above ground level and smoke the rest of the way to the ceiling.

There was always a thin guy with glasses and hair like a purple bristle-brush smoking a joint in the corner.

The moment I walked in the door with Barry I knew I should've stayed at home alone tonight. I tried to remember why and there was something there, but it wouldn't become clear.

I mingle with the lost, frightened people, waiting patiently for something definite to begin. They yell to hear themselves above the band, a punk-derived R & B mutation called Lost On The Reefer. Stupid, eh? What'd I have to be here for?

A woman so thin I thought she'd been twisted dry like a hand-washed shirt nudged me and grinned. Her breath was brimstone.

"Call this livin', do ya?" she croaked. I felt my gut tighten. The terrible lines I'd seen on Barry's face spread over hers in a thicker pattern. I nearly caught the message in them. Something was trying to be remembered but it was playing hide-and-seek in my mind.

"Piss off!" Barry said to the woman.

She spat and went away.

"I think she's sick," I said.



"A Herald flag-waved in his hand, newsprint spilling into the grey shadows. 'Reagan's gone gung-ho. Reckon he'll do 'em this time.' His tongue slithered between his lips and lapped up the traces of enthusiasm from the corners of his mouth."

Barry pulled me toward the bar. "Don't want sickies around," he yelled. But Barry, I scream, they're all sick! I can see it now. Sick like they're running on borrowed life — life that was never meant to fit right. It'll drop out of them any minute, I think, and they'll topple over into little piles of ash. What'll we do then?

I looked hard at Barry.

Barry's life was fragile too. That was what I'd seen. The lines of death — life's threads unravelling.

"Two beers!" he said to the barman, who looked as lively as one of them zombies in *The Night of the Living Dead*, "Lager!"

But we never got them.

The world ended then, you see, just as arbitrary as you like. No early warning sirens sang in the twilight, no broadcast hysteria heralded the bombs. Only a thudding in my head, which was like my brain was freezing up and dying, and death-lines unravelling on the faces around me.

"Great game on Sat'dy," a large man says. "Ref was a bloody mug though." The side of his face peels away as unnatural fire engulfs the wall he's leaning on, taking half of him with it. But he's still moving and his skull-mouth laughs or cries, I can't tell which. There's no difference any more.

"We dance, we dance!" a charred skeleton screams, what was once flesh tightening blackly with its movements. Noise roars so loudly that ears spill blood, and the blood boils away, but the ghosts dance, for the roar is the roar of the jukebox, cranked up to infinity.

Everywhere they dance — the punks, the trendies, the young execs. They dance as waves of light and sound tear them apart, and images of the dead — flame and dismemberment and starvation and plague — dance with them in the chaos. They're good friends now, all those visions of death that've haunted mankind since he first touched a bone and wondered. They gather together here in the midst of violence and shout the name of their victim to make him come away. And mankind comes and joins the dance.

But there's no peace in death.

I've read the books. Ghosts haunt the scene of their unnatural passing, re-enact like an obsession the moment of death.

I imagine all 'round the world it's the same. A rite of passage that never ends.

"Susie!" Barry yelled, turning to me as the wall fell in and a furnace opened to engulf him.

There was nothing in his eyes then. Only blackness. The lines had grown and his face was gone.

I felt it all in the second before detonation. The missile must have hung there, waiting for my sight to clear.

"Two beers," Barry says to the barman, "Lager!"

Then the ground shakes and as I suck in my breath the world is on fire.

"Susie!" Barry yells, but I'm not there.

I am fey. Grandma said so. I can step outside the world and watch from a distance. I watch it now. Half in the world but in that moment of ending not in it at all.

There is fire, ice, pain. I watch — but I must go back.



Together the ghosts and I tread out the steps. We move through the twilight hours, enter the King George, cough and shiver and always fail to remember what's to come.

I am alive.

I could break the cycle.

But I don't. If I did, the ghosts might go away. And if they went away, I might be alone forever.

So I sit on my front step, knowing something will happen that has happened before.

Sometimes I sleep.

"A Herald flag-waved in his hand, newsprint spilling into the grey shadows. 'Reagan's gone gung-ho. Reckon he'll do 'em this time.' His tongue slithered between his lips and lapped up the traces of enthusiasm from the corners of his mouth."

Mélisende On My Mind



"It was a sensational discovery. Our first encounter with an alien race, or at least the archaeological remains of one — not even that far away, on a tiny island off the north coast of the major landmass of a planet named Mélisende"

Cyril has been knocking around the margins of the SF & fantasy genres now for more years than he cares to remember. He has contributed articles and translations to a wide variety of publications, and fiction (published and forthcoming) to *Weird Tales*, *Darkness Rising*, *Central Europe Review* and *The Tangled Web*.

"Mélisende on My Mind" was inspired by his visit to the Neolithic settlement at Skara Brae in the Orkney Isles, a truly awe-inspiring place, and about the closest you can get to an alien world from London by car.

It was a sensational discovery. Our first encounter with an alien race, or at least the archaeological remains of one — not even that far away, on a tiny island off the north coast of the major landmass of a planet named Mélisende. So when my news editor asked me whether I wanted the assignment, I didn't hesitate. U BETJA, I flashed at her, and jumped on the first connecting flight to the shuttle.

That's one of the advantages of being a by-lined journalist. You actually get to go and look at things in person. Your subscribers pay extra for getting the no-nonsense, no-holds-barred, hands-on-noses-on-ears-belly-and-toesies-on, full-body experience. Like in those old-time brothels that they like to make fun of Down Under: hand experience, mouth experience, no-nonsense, no-holds-barred, hands-on-noses-on-ears-belly-and-toesies-on, full-body experience... Well yeah, I know, it loses something in the retelling.

So anyway, there I was a few days later at the American University of Lowellville's base camp on Mélisende, standard-issue multi-resolution recording unit to the left of me, paradigm-crunching alien archaeological remains to the right, three jobbing archaeologists doing their best to seem pleased to see me to the front. Actually, of the three, only two of them cut it. Deputy Director Fulk — two-metres-something of very stiff, very blonde, bristly-moustached, ex-basketball-scholar stick-insect — made himself scarce, just as soon as he twigged he couldn't abide me. Which was fine by me, because I couldn't stand him, either. That left me in the capable hands of Rosalind Sancho, Distinguished Professor of Exobiology and Exomorphological



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Processes at Lowell, who was at least nominally Fulk's boss, and her assistant, Catnip. I presume Catnip must also have another name buried away somewhere on his birth certificate, but I never did find out what it was — something Vietnamese after his father, I guess, or something Midwestern after his mother — but what with his goatee beard, long black hair, tatty waistcoat, and little round sunglasses, Catnip seemed pretty much apposite. Or near enough, anyway, to stop you worrying.

"So where do you want to start?" asked Professor Sancho, brushing the sand from her eyes, as we turned away from the prefab porch of her office. "The beach or the headland?"

"The beach sounds fine to me. I should try to get some background, before we move on to the hard stuff."

"Okay. Well, watch out for the razor shells in the dunes." And she set off down a well-trodden path through a field of something that looked very much like marram grass, even if, logically, I knew it wasn't, shading her eyes from the wind-blown sand with her left hand.

It was still early morning, and the sun was only just beginning to peek over the hills to the back of us, when we came through the dunes to the edge of the cove. Mélisende is a much more strongly tidal planet than Earth, and I wasn't really prepared for the huge plain of sand and mud that stretched out for what seemed like miles to either side of us. The nearer headland, to the South, stood out like a petrified walrus in a puddle of melt-water, towering over the marshy ground where a creek cut through the dunes to produce at least the first hint of a mud-flat. The headland to the North, where the settlement had been found, was larger and lumpier, with a broad south-facing slope to catch the sun. In between, flurries of creamy-white sand snaked over the dryer parts of the beach, rippling like the decorative bands of a ceremonial fishing knife from the long-forgotten workshop of a Neolithic flint-knapper. Automatically, I clicked on the recorder.

I narrowed my eyes, focussing on the grand sweep of the bay. The shimmer of early morning sun, gleaming back from the ripples.... The salt-water tang, and the scurrying sand-devils.... I breathed in the cool morning air, and dug my feet into the slippery dunes. I listened to the whisper of the grass and imagined the millions of creamy-white sand grains tinkling like silver. *Good, I could add music later.* Then I panned over to look at the looming black headlands. The professor turned back to see why I had stopped, and I moved in to her face, her corn-rows harmonising with the beach, like a shadowy echo of the ridges and sand-ripples.

"Rosalind Sancho," I subvocalised her name, so the machine would remember to add subtitles.

And that's a wrap. I turned off the recorder, hardly aware of what I was doing, so ingrained had the practice become.

It was a beautiful morning, I decided. In the winter it would be very different, I knew, with constant rain and vicious storms and frequent flooding. Indeed, it was one of the storms that had torn open the headland to reveal the archaeological treasures within. But now, with the sun and the sky and the green-topped dunes, it was hard to believe that this bay and its hollow hills could ever be anything other than paradise.

Catnip, sneaking up from behind, came to a halt on a tussock of the false marram grass beside me, and touched me lightly on my arm. "Look up there." He pointed a long, thin finger at the looming flat hump of the aliens' headland. "Against the skyline, those pits and shadows. That's the site. That's where the uni-verse changed."



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My eyes clicked and whirred. "Do we have any idea what they looked like?" I asked, carefully preparing to record his every last word.

But Catnip just shrugged. "No, not exactly. We have some little clay figurines. That could be them. But no skeletons."

Well, that's brilliant, — I thought. The first guaranteed alien encounter in human history, and they turn out to be a bunch of Small Clays.

"They seem to have cleared out their town before they vanished," Catnip was slowly getting into his stride. "There are no animal remains at all, except for a whole load of broken shellfish and the odd fishbone. The usual domestic junk, piled high in the middens. No written records. No oral tradition, obviously. Nothing to go on but their material culture... Shelves, pots, bed-spaces, a warren of half-buried ovular living rooms, linked by passages. All made of clay or stone, and all of it much too small for the likes of us. They couldn't have been more than a metre-twenty on average. A metre-thirty would buy you a clan leader with a broken head, or a high-priestess of the moons... A metre-forty would have been eliminated by Darwinian sexual selection, they would never have survived long enough to breed..."

He smiled.

"But you know what's the most frustrating thing about this whole situation? If we'd got here four-hundred years earlier, we would have met them. The site was in continuous occupation for thousands of years, constantly rebuilding, constantly adjusting, constantly sitting there on its lookout point between the sea and the stars... And then four hundred years ago — four hundred of our years — they just upped and vanished. Really, sometimes I wonder whether the Universe might not be playing an elaborate joke on us. Here we are, presented with this unique exoanthropological opportunity, and the Universe has delayed our own evolution just that little bit too long for us to make good on it... I begin to understand how the first European explorers must have felt, when they reached all those isolated islands Down Under and found that the local macrofauna had already been hunted to extinction by the locals... the Aepyornis and the giant lemurs of Madagascar, the pigmy hippos of Crete and Cyprus, the giant ground sloth of South America... Just a few hundred years earlier, and they would have found viable breeding lines, living creatures. In the event, all they got were traces and legends... often not even a proper skeleton."

"But these aliens up on the headland..." I objected. "What about cemeteries? Don't you have at least a few partial remains from them? Surely they must have buried their dead?"

"Apparently not," Catnip was glum. "Or at any rate, if they did, we haven't figured out where yet. They were very big on putting out their trash, that's certainly true. They have middens everywhere. That's how we can date the site. But if they ever disposed of their people..." He paused. "It's like they always like to say Down Below — *close, but no sitar.*"

Now there's a puzzling turn of phrase. I mumbled a note to myself to leave it out of the final edit.

Professor Sancho, meanwhile, had got far ahead of us, and was leaving the beach by a narrow, well-worn path that led up the headland.

"Hey, maybe we should go and catch up with your boss," I suggested, and Catnip nodded. So for a while we just trudged along the shifting sand in companionable silence.

The site, when we got there, was really spectacular: a labyrinth of half-buried stone chambers, with stone storage cupboards, stone fireplaces, stone bedsteads,



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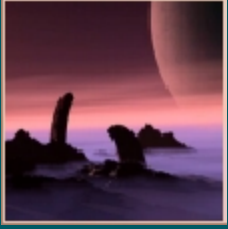
shell and stone cutting tools, and those mysteriously humanoid clay figurines, apparently formed from the mud of the river under the southern headland. I potted around happily, recording my impressions from every conceivable angle, and picking the brains of Catnip and the Professor for technical details. Excavation had been stopped for half a day to give me a free hand, and I made the best of my chances. When the excavators — mostly young volunteers from the Professor's own department — began to trail up from the beach in twos and threes, I made my excuses and went to sit up on the headland, so I wouldn't get in the way. Secretly, I could tell, the Professor was glad to see me go, and I couldn't say that I blamed her. Journalism and the historical sciences are sufficiently alike for me to know how frustrating it can be to be distracted involuntarily from an unfinished investigation. Let her work, then. There would be time enough to talk later.

The sun on the hilltop was warm and the wind was cool, and I settled down in a comfortable crevice in the rock, to watch the incoming tide filling up the broad, sandy plain below me. I tried to imagine what life for our dwarf alien race must have been like here in those previous centuries, with nothing but the sea and the stars and the sand to shape their world-view. They must have been a meditative folk, I decided, perched on their promontory between the rhythm of the Earth and the rhythm of the Heavens, with an abundance of food, no enemies or predators to speak of — nothing to worry about, except how to build an effective house for the winter and their place in the Universe. Home improvements and the Cosmos... It was a heady combination. I could see them now: the long winter evenings around a driftwood fire in their great hall, baking mussels and telling implausible stories of how the world came into being from the mating of a storm cloud and a sea squirt... Summer evenings on the seafront, modelling clay from the mud-flats, gazing in awe at the orange sunset and the bloody green waves of the dunes... Quick bursts of love-making in the alcoves of the warren, on a bed softened with dried herbs and lichens... Foraging expeditions down on the foreshore, followed by careful divination from the carelessly unknotted entrails of whatever passed locally for the equivalent of a herring...

So why were they extinct, then? Did they exhaust their natural resources for all their apparent harmony with nature? Did they eat themselves to death, dying from the diseases that come with obesity? Did their conflict-free existence leave them ill-equipped to deal with stress when they struck it? With no writing, no weapons, no drive... Did they simply lie down and perish, when the harmony of the Universe seemed to demand that they perish, rather than struggling to find new ways of living, new places to live? Not with a bang or a whimper, but with a deeply contented sigh of fulfilment, that at last they had found their meaning in life?

All this and more went racing through my head as I sat in the sun, between the tide and the flickering shadows of the high-flying, feathery clouds that occasionally blotted the landscape. Most of all, though, I remember feeling a sense of gnawing frustration that we hadn't reached Mélisende just a few centuries earlier...

That evening I sat with Professor Sancho and the other archaeologists around a heavy wood-textured table outside the hut that served as their office, watching the sun turning citrus yellow and then orange over the ocean. The tide was on its way out again, and the distant sound of the shore throbbed like a heartbeat. A tepid breeze was coming up off the water, rippling the omnipresent grass on the seaward side of the sand-dunes, and a flock of small bat-like creatures had appeared, as if from nowhere, to flit squawking over our heads. Catnip had the barbecue out, grilling



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imported corn-on-the-cob and felafel. But despite the voices of the company, what I noticed more than anything else was the stillness — the overwhelming, unutterable stillness for someone used, as I was, to the teeming urban sprawl of life on the Underside. It was at times like this I understood why people became archaeologists. Or botanists. Or whatever...

"Do you think it's possible that the Melisendians' extinction was inevitable?" I asked, record mode on again. "I mean, if they chose to live in their environment like animals, instead of transforming it like humans, didn't that leave them at the mercy of their environment?"

"You mean... If you live in harmony with your environment, you also run the risk that you'll die with it?" Professor Sancho seemed sceptical. "But the environment here seems fine to me. We haven't found any evidence of an environmental crisis. And anyway, the Mélisendeans *did* change their environment, or doesn't that little town of theirs count for anything? Besides, the human race, by transforming its home environment, very near caused its own extinction..."

And I had to concede she had a point. So in the end I just made a few more recordings for filler, and the next morning I headed back to the shuttle port, to file a general interest story about these small, cuddly, environmentally-friendly aliens who had played the big crap-shoot in the sky and lost. It was a real sweetie: lots of heart-wrenching philosophising about the fragility of the human condition and the injustice of an impersonal universe... Acres of electronically-reprocessed Polynesian dub choirs and European Baroque Stabat Maters, all with the requisite doses of artificially inserted axial reverb and socket harmonics... Sunset-coloured backdrops, subliminal pace-makers set to trance, and oodles of pathos... By the time my editing console was done with it, there couldn't have been a dry synapse in its neural network, and I had half-convinced myself I was heading for a second Softie, as we in the trade like to call our Gates Awards, when The Bill isn't watching.

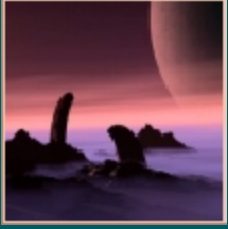
Luckily for me, I'm a terrible perfectionist. My report was late.

Just as I was getting ready to file it, I got a flash message from Catnip: COME BACK, THERE'S MORE. And the rest, as the saying goes, is history.

Of course, it's difficult for me to be sure exactly what went on at the site that morning, because to my eternal shame and chagrin, I wasn't there. But here's the official version:

During a routine excavation, Professor Sancho and her crew decided to open up a large, but otherwise unexceptional, rock fall, which on account of its size, they had been setting aside for weeks. They had no reason to suspect it would be anything more than any of the other, similar rock falls they had already dealt with so many times over the past several months. None of their scanners (or their radar guns, or whatever it is they use), had shown up anything out of the ordinary — just a perfectly plain underground chamber, with a lot of gunk on the floor and a pile of rocks by the entrance. That, at least, is what Professor Sancho likes to say now — old fox that she is — when half the media in the known world are clamouring at her door for an interview.

I wonder, though. The professor is far too good an archaeologist to leave such an important part of her investigation to chance. Now, when I think back on it, I suspect she was way ahead of us all along, working her audience with a good dose of misdirection to gain space and time. Like one of those old-time stage magicians, who provided the basic operating system for all our latter-day media professionals (politicians, spin veterinarians, AI superhighway patrol programmers, bankers,



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hackers...) To wit: *Signify one thing, and do another.*

Whatever the truth of it, her excavation of that rock fall was the moment, when — like Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings — she made her breakthrough. For behind the rock fall, she found, not simply one hidden chamber, but a whole chain of them — a veritable labyrinth of terrible, ill-lit tunnels and catacombs, piled high with the well-sorted, defleshed remains of thousands and thousands of our missing aliens... leg-bones on leg-bones, jaw-bones on jaw-bones, teeth and vertebrae tumbling over each other in macabre, unstable mounds, like knobbly sand-dunes — and all of them decaying slowly into a nasty, all-pervading dust. No wonder Catnip and his colleagues hadn't been able to find any bones earlier. They had all been tucked away here in the *Mélisendeans'* ossuary.

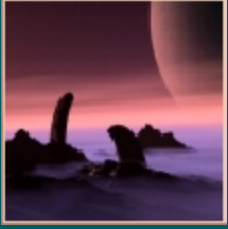
It was the group by the entrance that attracted most attention, though — that strange mixed group of elders and adults and infants, so unlike the neatly disarticulated skeletons further back in the mountain. They lay twisted and scattered over the floor — about a hundred of them, a whole population — hands horribly tensed, mouths hanging open, as if frozen in the act of screaming blind fury at the iniquity of their fate, torsos bundled pathetically around the larger rocks of the entrance, as if trying to get out. And indeed, that was exactly what they *had* been trying to do, Professor Sancho announced at her first press-conference. There was every probability they had been buried alive — *deliberately* buried alive — and then presumably starved to death, since there would still have been air coming in through the cracks in the rock fall.

It was quite a bombshell. Not only had the Professor found the first skeletal remains of any known extraterrestrial civilisation, but it seemed they had belonged to a cult. And I was the first journalist on the scene. For a few weeks there, it made me a household name — well, in so far as any of us still have households in this hyperactive, solipsistic, honeycomb-mentality age we all inhabit... But whatever my professional disappointment, when my rivals and betters came and took the story away from me, I could enjoy a certain pleasure in the fact that I had had my own little part in it. Plus, of course, we now knew how the population of the ancient settlement had so mysteriously come to vanish.

Since then, the question has, rather, become why? How does one interpret the completely incomprehensible cultural behaviour of an alien race that became extinct long before we ever reached their planet? What is there to measure it against? What strange ritual purpose could they possibly have been pursuing, when one fine afternoon, four hundred years ago, they went down the mountainside and buried themselves alive? We will never know. Instead we are confronted by the mysterious life story of a people who one day, for reasons we cannot even begin to fathom, decided they had good reason to die.

The bizarre poetry of this event, as the reader is no doubt aware, has captured the imagination of the whole Terrestrial public. Already the first pilgrims have made their expensive — and frequently not unproblematic — way to *Mélisende* to pay their tribute at the Tomb of the Sepulchre of the *Mélisendean* Revelation, as it is being called. Soon, if the pundits are to be believed, we shall be witnessing the birth of a whole new religion — the world's first extraterrestrial religion (or exoreligion, to use the voguish anthropological phrase). And I, rather unwittingly, shall have been its prophet.

What troubles me most, now, is my inability to come to terms with my own role in this religious revival, this revelation and renewal — or invention, if you prefer



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— of the Mélisendean faith. On the one hand, I suffer from a terrible sense of loss, both for having missed the original occupants of the island through one of those grand, impersonal accidents of history, and for having missed the opening of the Sepulchre by a miserable 20 hours or so, this time through my own impatience and stupidity — my haste in wanting to get away and file a premature story. On the other, I can feel the grandiloquent poetry — the history-defying majesty — of the find, and the story captivates me. But does that make me a believer? The dialectic of history I have always been trained to cope with. (What else do journalists, after all, do?) But religion? I am way out of my depth.

As I sit here in my cramped and frugal utility apartment in the neatly-stacked suburbs of Continent 5, I often wonder — should I go back? Am I not wasting a divinely-inspired opportunity, while the media still remember my role in breaking the story, to renew my acquaintance with the raw emotion — the transforming mystery — of the Mélisendean settlement and the site of the Tomb itself? The impulse is strong.

And yet... And yet, in a way, I am afraid. What if, despite appearances, I were to discover that the Mélisendeans played the big crap-shoot in the sky and *won*? That their Revelation, whatever it was, was true? That the purpose of life really *was* dying? This is perhaps the thought that terrifies me most of all. Because I know, once I surrender to the irrational, I may find, like the Little People, there is no going back...

Do I have what it takes to place my life at the disposal of contingency? Never before have I felt such uncertainty.

And that is why I wanted to turn to you, dear reader. What do you think? Should I make the journey?

Press ☺ for YES.

Press ☹ for NO.

I surrender my decision — my life, my soul — to your whims and the tender chance of your natural rhythms...

Don't let your vote be influenced by my choice of symbols. The Universe does not have to be kind. Tell it the way you feel. Let chance and the gods of history take care of their own.

I am ready.

I am willing.

Now initiate me.



"You pass a trio of students on the corner, waiting for the light. One glances wide-eyed and quickly looks away – too cool for unicorns. You cut through the park, past an old man who glares at you in your comfortable clothes, looking yourself. He does not see the unicorn."

Among The Cedars

Hannah Wolf Bowen is a junior Philosophy major at Knox College in Illinois. She spends her free time hanging out with her horse and making things up. Thus far, her tales have found homes with *ChiZine*, *Ideomancer*, and *Fortean Bureau*.

"Among The Cedars" was written for a second-person challenge at the . This story is for anyone who still likes the idea of horses with horns.

You see the unicorn again this morning, cropping grass under the trees in the neighbor's yard. The dog freezes growling, ears up, hackles too: she hasn't seen it before today. The unicorn raises its head and studies you, eyes melting-chocolate dark, one behind a snowfall forelock. The dog falls quiet beside you.

Good morning, you say, to be conversational, and also, How are you today? as if myths had always come to visit.

The unicorn tosses its head and sunglow dances on sharp spiral horn. If it would like the newspaper, you decide, you aren't about to stand in its way.

A school bus rumbles past, heading towards the school; the unicorn flicks an ear but does not turn. A boy salutes with one finger and you understand the unicorn's ignoring them. A girl presses face to window glass and then looks away; she doesn't want to see.

You see, but aren't sure if you believe. How can you, in myth and magic, in an animal that shouldn't be able to lift its head? How can you not, as it nuzzles your dog and munches the tall grass around your mailbox?

You pick up the paper and turn to go. The dog joins you, trots ahead with tail gently waving. You glance over your shoulder once. The unicorn watches you go.

You return home that evening after class, pull into the driveway and stop. The



unicorn approaches, hooves ringing on dull asphalt. You glance one driveway over to your neighbor; she waves hello to you, but ignores the creature at your side.

There's no magic in this world, you tell the unicorn, but know you've never believed it yourself. You try again: must be hallucinating. You think of causes and effects and whether you could also hallucinate your dog. The unicorn stretches its muzzle towards you, but doesn't quite touch.

You don't want me, you say. Isn't it all about innocence? The unicorn watches you gravely. It seems thinner than this morning, and less present. I have to let the dog out, you say, and do.

You walk, and the dog gambols ahead, dashes back to snuffle the unicorn. You think about unicorns and about golden bridles and virgin girls. You remember the school bus and grimace, thinking of innocence.

They called you innocent, once. Also naive, for your generous view of the world. Kind, well-intentioned, but maybe not so bright. As if cynicism is a mark of intelligence.

You pass a trio of students on the corner, waiting for the light. One glances wide-eyed and quickly looks away — too cool for unicorns. You cut through the park, past an old man who glares at you in your comfortable clothes, looking yourself. He does not see the unicorn.

You turn for home past the bookstore and pause, looking in for the clerk who always remembers you and your dog, always has a kind word for your choices and a flame-brightness behind the eyes. Duller lately, less responsive to your fumbling attempts at conversation, as if the world has begun to lay heavier on his shoulders and no one will relieve the burden. You've seen that look before, in your classmates and companions. They call it growing up. Becoming practical. Seeing the world as it really is, not just how you'd like it to be.

You wonder how you missed that step, and how the clerk did not. You put your hand on the door. You wonder what you'll say. Your hand slides off the knob and back into your pocket.

I believe, you tell the unicorn, and it puffs warm breath against your face.

The unicorn seems smaller than it was and follows you inside your home. I hope you're housebroken, you tell it, but it's too busy negotiating for a share of the dog bed to notice. Much smaller then, but somehow substantial. You wonder if a unicorn will eat lettuce wilted from forgetting in the back of the refrigerator.

You open the paper, left on the table since this morning, unread. The front page is everyday destruction and corruption, one prominent group of activists disbanded, another destroying books. You find another section, an article about a musician, level-headed, laid-back, love of life warm in every quoted word. You peer at the photograph, at a unicorn watching in the background.

You call your dog. The unicorn follows.

You wonder again what to say as you trot through the dusk past the beaten-down and the self-consciously cool. You pause for a toddler who flings arms about the unicorn's leg and calls it: Puppy! The mother shrugs, apologetic; you wonder what she sees. You pause again, for a tattooed teen shooting baskets, hand stretched to velvet muzzle through chain link fence. And again for a couple from the university,

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one defensive, uncertain, the other on edge. They pat the unicorn and smile; you smile back.

The clerk looks up as you push open the door; cowbells shiver in your wake. The dog scampers over and sits and though she wins a smile, it takes a moment to surface.

Come on, you tell the clerk, glancing out the window at the waiting unicorn. There's something I want you to see.

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Death And The Woman



"She gave an exclamation of horror. Something was creeping over the window-sill. Her limbs palsied, but she struggled to her feet and looked back, her eyes dragged about against her own volition."

Gertrude Atherton (1857-1948), a noted feminist and author, wrote a series of historical novels about California, for which she is best known. She also wrote a number of effective horror stories that have seemingly slipped through the cracks of time, although she is in the process of being 'rediscovered' by readers of genre fiction.

"Death And The Woman," first published in 1892, is a powerful story about the connections we make in life, and owes a little of its style, no doubt, to her acquaintance with Ambrose Bierce.

Her husband was dying, and she was alone with him. Nothing could exceed the desolation of her surroundings. She and the man who was going from her were in the third-floor-back of a New York boarding-house. It was summer, and the other boarders were in the country; all the servants except the cook had been dismissed, and she, when not working, slept profoundly on the fifth floor. The landlady also was out of town on a brief holiday.

The window was open to admit the thick unstirring air; no sound rose from the row of long narrow yards, nor from the tall deep houses annexed. The latter deadened the rattle of the streets. At intervals the distant elevated lumbered protestingly along, its grunts and screams muffled by the hot suspended ocean.

She sat there plunged in the profoundest grief that can come to the human soul, for in all other agony hope flickers, however forlornly. She gazed dully at the unconscious breathing form of the man who had been friend, and companion, and lover, during five years of youth too vigorous and hopeful to be warped by uneven fortune. It was wasted by disease; the face was shrunken; the night-garment hung loosely about a body which had never been disfigured by flesh, but had been muscular with exercise and full-blooded with health. She was glad that the body was changed; glad that its beauty, too, had gone some other- where than into the coffin. She had loved his hands as apart from himself; loved their strong warm magnetism. They lay limp and yellow on the quilt: she knew that they were already cold, and that moisture was gathering on them. For a moment something convulsed within her.



They had gone too. She repeated the words twice, and, after them, "forever." And the while the sweetness of their pressure came back to her.

She leaned suddenly over him. He was in there still, somewhere. Where? If he had not ceased to breathe, the Ego, the Soul, the Personality was still in the sodden clay which had shaped to give it speech. Why could it not manifest itself to her? Was it still conscious in there, unable to project itself through the disintegrating matter which was the only medium its Creator had vouchsafed it? Did it struggle there, seeing her agony, sharing it, longing for the complete disintegration which should put an end to its torment? She called his name, she even shook him slightly, mad to tear the body apart and find her mate, yet even in that tortured moment realizing that violence would hasten his going.

The dying man took no notice of her, and she opened his gown and put her cheek to his heart, calling him again. There had never been more perfect union; how could the bond still be so strong if he were not at the other end of it? He was there, her other part; until dead he must be living. There was no intermediate state. Why should he be as entombed and unresponding as if the screws were in the lid? But the faintly beating heart did not quicken beneath her lips. She extended her arms suddenly, describing eccentric lines, above, about him, rapidly opening and closing her hands as if to clutch some escaping object; then sprang to her feet, and went to the window. She feared insanity. She had asked to be left alone with her dying husband, and she did not wish to lose her reason and shriek a crowd of people about her.

The green plots in the yards were not apparent, she noticed. Something heavy, like a pall, rested upon them. Then she understood that the day was over and that night was coming.

She returned swiftly to the bedside, wondering if she had remained away hours or seconds, and if he were dead. His face was still discernible, and Death had not relaxed it. She laid her own against it, then withdrew it with shuddering flesh, her teeth smiting each other as if an icy wind had passed.

She let herself fall back in the chair, clasping her hands against her heart, watching with expanding eyes the white sculptured face which, in the glittering dark, was becoming less defined of outline. Did she light the gas it would draw mosquitoes, and she could not shut from him the little air he must be mechanically grateful for. And she did not want to see the opening eye — the falling jaw.

Her vision became so fixed that at length she saw nothing, and closed her eyes and waited for the moisture to rise and relieve the strain. When she opened them his face had disappeared; the humid waves above the house-tops put out even the light of the stars, and night was come.

Fearfully, she approached her ear to his lips; he still breathed. She made a motion to kiss him, then threw herself back in a quiver of agony — they were not the lips she had known, and she would have nothing less.

His breathing was so faint that in her half-reclining position she could not hear it, could not be aware of the moment of his death. She extended her arm resolutely and laid her hand on his heart. Not only must she feel his going, but, so strong had been the comradeship between them, it was a matter of loving honor to stand by him to the last.

She sat there in the hot heavy night, pressing her hand hard against the ebbing heart of the unseen, and awaited Death. Suddenly an odd fancy possessed her. Where was Death? Why was he tarrying? Who was detaining him? From what quarter would he come? He was taking his leisure, drawing near with footsteps as measured

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as those of men keeping time to a funeral march. By a wayward deflection she thought of the slow music that was always turned on in the theatre when the heroine was about to appear, or something eventful to happen. She had always thought that sort of thing ridiculous and inartistic. So had He.

She drew her brows together angrily, wondering at her levity, and pressed her relaxed palm against the heart it kept guard over. For a moment the sweat stood on her face; then the pent-up breath burst from her lungs. He still lived.

Once more the fancy wantoned above the stunned heart. Death — where was he? What a curious experience: to be sitting alone in a big house — she knew that the cook had stolen out — waiting for Death to come and snatch her husband from her. No; he would not snatch, he would steal upon his prey as noiselessly as the approach of Sin to Innocence — an invisible, unfair, sneaking enemy, with whom no man's strength could grapple. If he would only come like a man, and take his chances like a man! Women had been known to reach the hearts of giants with the dagger's point. But he would creep upon her.

She gave an exclamation of horror. Something was creeping over the window-sill. Her limbs palsied, but she struggled to her feet and looked back, her eyes dragged about against her own volition. Two small green stars glared menacingly at her just above the sill; then the cat possessing them leaped downward, and the stars disappeared.

She realized that she was horribly frightened. "Is it possible?" she thought. "Am I afraid of Death, and of Death that has not yet come? I have always been rather a brave woman; He used to call me heroic; but then with him it was impossible to fear anything. And I begged them to leave me alone with him as the last of earthly boons. Oh, shame!"

But she was still quaking as she resumed her seat, and laid her hand again on his heart. She wished that she had asked Mary to sit outside the door; there was no bell in the room. To call would be worse than desecrating the house of God, and she would not leave him for one moment. To return and find him dead — gone alone!

Her knees smote each other. It was idle to deny it; she was in a state of unreasoning terror. Her eyes rolled apprehensively about; she wondered if she should see It when It came; wondered how far off It was now. Not very far; the heart was barely pulsing. She had heard of the power of the corpse to drive brave men to frenzy, and had wondered, having no morbid horror of the dead. But this! To wait — and wait — and wait — perhaps for hours — past the midnight — on to the small hours — while that awful, determined, leisurely Something stole nearer and nearer.

She bent to him who had been her protector with a spasm of anger. Where was the indomitable spirit that had held her all these years with such strong and loving clasp? How could he leave her? How could he desert her? Her head fell back and moved restlessly against the cushion; moaning with the agony of loss, she recalled him as he had been. Then fear once more took possession of her, and she sat erect, rigid, breathless, awaiting the approach of Death.

Suddenly, far down in the house, on the first floor, her strained hearing took note of a sound — a wary, muffled sound, as if some one were creeping up the stair, fearful of being heard. Slowly! It seemed to count a hundred between the laying down of each foot. She gave a hysterical gasp. Where was the slow music?

Her face, her body, were wet — as if a wave of death-sweat had broken over them. There was a stiff feeling at the roots of her hair; she wondered if it were really standing erect. But she could not raise her hand to ascertain. Possibly it was only the coloring matter freezing and bleaching. Her muscles were flabby, her nerves

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twitched helplessly.

She knew that it was Death who was coming to her through the silent deserted house; knew that it was the sensitive ear of her intelligence that heard him, not the dull, coarse-grained ear of the body.

He toiled up the stair painfully, as if he were old and tired with much work. But how could he afford to loiter, with all the work he had to do? Every minute, every second, he must be in demand to hook his cold, hard finger about a soul struggling to escape from its putrefying tenement. But probably he had his emissaries, his minions: for only those worthy of the honor did he come in person.

He reached the first landing and crept like a cat down the hall to the next stair, then crawled slowly up as before. Light as the footfalls were, they were squarely planted, unfaltering; slow, they never halted.

Mechanically she pressed her jerking hand closer against the heart; its beats were almost done. They would finish, she calculated, just as those footfalls paused beside the bed.

She was no longer a human being; she was an Intelligence and an Ear. Not a sound came from without, even the Elevated appeared to be temporarily off duty; but inside the big quiet house that footfall was waxing louder, louder, until iron feet crashed on iron stairs and echo thundered.

She had counted the steps — one — two — three — irritated beyond endurance at the long deliberate pauses between. As they climbed and clanged with slow precision she continued to count, audibly and with equal precision, noting their hollow reverberation. How many steps had the stair? She wished she knew. No need! The colossal trampling announced the lessening distance in an increasing volume of sound not to be misunderstood. It turned the curve; it reached the landing; it advanced — slowly — down the hall; it paused before her door. Then knuckles of iron shook the frail panels. Her nerveless tongue gave no invitation. The knocking became more imperious; the very walls vibrated. The handle turned, swiftly and firmly. With a wild instinctive movement she flung herself into the arms of her husband.

When Mary opened the door and entered the room she found a dead woman lying across a dead man.

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