

Sybil's Garage

Speculative Fiction, Poetry & Art

No. 4

Rick Bowes

Steve Rasnic Tem

Cat Rambo

Leah Bobet

Bruce Boston

Ekaterina Sedia

& more

Interviews with

Jeffrey Ford &

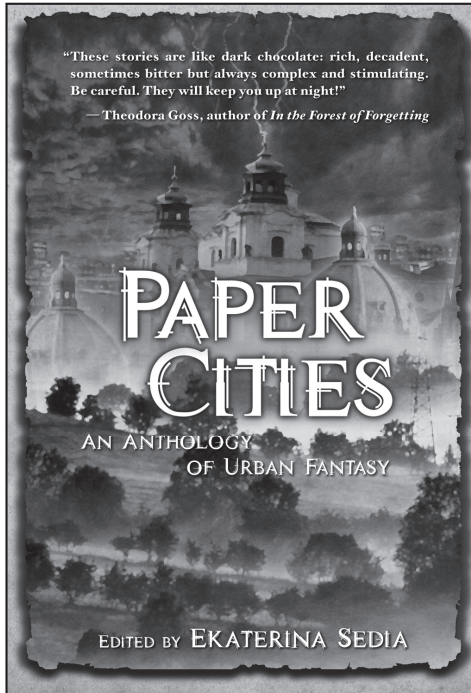
Stephen Segal

\$5 US



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AN ANTHOLOGY OF URBAN FANTASY

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ISBN: 978-0-9796246-0-5, 288 pages, 6"x9", \$14.95 US

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sybil's Garage

Speculative Fiction. Poetry & Art

Really Now!

(there's no need to brawl)

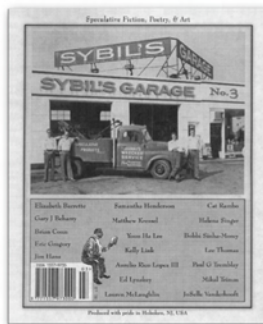


Leah Bobet
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John Bowker
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There's Plenty of Sybil to go Around

Sybil's Garage No. 3



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Samantha Henderson
Yoon Ha Lee
Kelly Link
Cat Rambo
Lee Thomas
Mikal Trimm
Paul C. Tremblay
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& more

Sybil's Garage No. 2



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sybil's ぐらぐらぐら

No.4

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After the War
Translucence
Jetsam
Pairings
An Appetite for Love
On Death and the Deuce
Means of Communication
Strangeness

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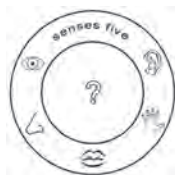
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Flesh Into Sand
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Farewell
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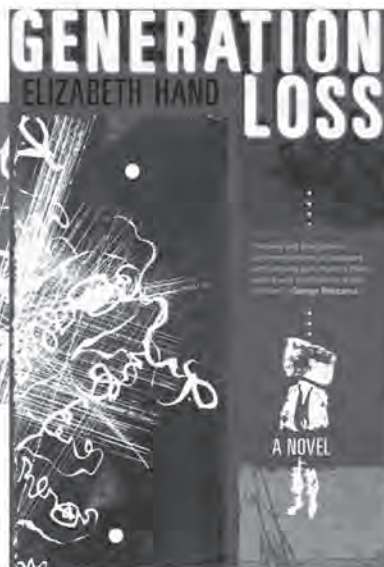
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a novel by
elizabeth hand

★ “Hand (*Mortal Love*) explores the narrow boundary between artistic genius and madness in this gritty, profoundly unsettling literary thriller.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



April • 978-1-931520-21-8 • hardcover • \$24



Besides Kim Stanley Robinson's fantastic *Sixty Days of Rain* and Carol Emshwiller's *The Secret City*, here are three more books for spring. Which just happen to come from Small Beer Press. *Thanks for the space Matt!*

Interfictions: An Anthology of Interstitial Writing (trade pb • \$18 • 978-1-931520-24-9) Edited by Delia Sherman & Theodora Goss. The literary mode for the new century: 19 stories from six countries by some of today's most innovative writers which will change your mind about what stories can and should do

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Sybil's Garage

no. 7

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"It's been awhile since an anthology had this kind of emotional impact on me...this one is highly recommended." — *N.K. Jemisin, Hugo-nominated author of The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms.*

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Seas of the World

Ekaterina Sedia

to the sound of Tom Waits' "The Briar and the Rose" ...

Jillian sits on the windowsill and looks outside, where the first snowflakes flutter in the pale glow of streetlights. It is cold; her breath leaves a white patina of fog on the black plastic of the phone receiver. She imagines the phone ringing in Rick's dark apartment. The answering machine does not come on – he never had one – and she counts the rings. Seven. Eight. Anything to keep her mind from wandering. She can spend all night listening to the receiver. Fourteen. She imagines Rick's bare feet padding across the cold ceramic tiles of the kitchen floor, his hand tugging up the pajama bottoms riding low on his waist. Last she saw him, he looked like he'd lost weight.

"Hello?" His voice breaks through the twenty-first ring, hoarse. "Jill?"

"Yeah. Did I wake you?" It's a stupid question – it's 4 am, of course he was sleeping soundly in this dead hour. She feels a small pang of guilt at denying him oblivion.

"Yes." He never lies, not even in the small reflexive way when he's woken up. "Are you all right?"

"I guess," she says. And then she is crying, weeping into the receiver, a part of her mind worrying if it's possible to cause a short by crying into an electrical appliance.

"I'll come over."

"No need to... I'm all right."

"I'd like to come over. If you don't mind."

"I don't."

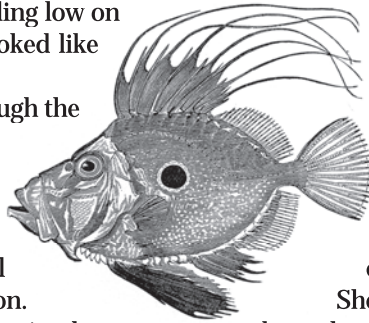
The phone is silent again, and she sits on the windowsill, trying to keep her mind away from the horribly missing piece of her existence. She thinks of the ways Rick annoys her.

She thinks of their meeting in court. The divorce proceedings were over with, and there was just the question of custody. Jillian bit her lip all the way to the courthouse, and spilled her coffee down the front of her white shirt as soon as she got there. She despised herself for this, especially once she saw Rick in his immaculate suit. Not an expensive one, but the man made any clothes look good. He owned them, while she couldn't reach a truce with hers. Her clothes betrayed her by getting dirty or twisted, just like her hair tended to get in her face,

and her makeup smeared itself at inopportune moments. How she hated Rick then, how she feared him! Any judge in his right mind would take one look at them and decide that she was a pitiful mess, while Rick was together, a fit parent. Able to provide good care to a child. Reliable.

She mopped up the coffee stain the best she could, and stood before the judge brimming with desperation. She stammered out her reasons why Derryl should stay with her – she loved him so much! – and fell quiet, turning an uneasy gaze to Rick. He didn't look back, the pale clarity of his eyes for the judge only. He didn't argue that Jillian should have custody, he just wanted visitations and vacation time. She hated him for being more generous than she.

The dead receiver in her hand comes to life. "If you require assistance from the operator..." She puts it back on the cradle, startled, upset that the delicate silence of the night and the snow was spoiled by this mechanical voice.



SYBIL'S GARAGE

She cringes and thinks of Rick, willfully, like it is some sort of an exercise. Thinking of Rick keeps her together until the doorbell rings.

She hugs him as he comes in, and cringes at how prominent his ribs are, how gaunt his face looks. He didn't get a chance to shave, but even the scruff looks proper on him. Like he meant it.

"I missed you," he says, studying her face, searching for clues. Always searching for an indication of how she feels.

"I missed you too," she says, and forces a smile. "Don't worry, I'm not going to ask for sex."

He breathes relief and adds, "I didn't say you are."

"But you thought it."

He doesn't deny this.

"Want anything? Coffee, tea?"

"Coffee," he says. "Please." He sits at the kitchen table, his large pale hands lying passively palms-down on either side of his empty cup. She hugs her shoulders and waits for the coffee to percolate.

"I'm sorry I woke you," she says.

"It's all right." He looks at his hands. "I'm the one who's sorry. It was my fault that —"

"No," she interrupts. "I don't want to talk about that." It's enough to know that he's feeling what she's feeling.

He takes the cue. "How's work?"

"I haven't been in for a while." She looks at the snowflakes dancing outside the window. It will get light soon. "Don't go tomorrow... I mean, today. Stay here. Call in sick."

"Okay," he says, always obedient.

When they first met, his obedience shocked her. She found him on the beach ten summers back. It was late, and the beach was deserted; she enjoyed her solitary walks, almost dissolving in the darkness and the relentless pounding of the surf. She screamed when she stepped on something that seemed alive; it turned out to be the hand of a man lying

in the sand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

She squinted as he sat up. In the pale moonlight, he seemed lost.

"It's okay," she said. It was difficult to tell what he looked like in that light. "I must be going."

He followed her. She should've been scared, but she wasn't. He followed her not like a prowler but like a lost puppy. He spoke quietly, and she strained to hear his words above the surf. "Caspian," he said.

"Is it your name?" she asked. "Caspian?"

"Yes," he said, his eyes wide and dark.

They reached the boardwalk and strolled along the fronts of rickety wooden shops.

"What's your first name?" she said, just to say something.

His gaze cast about wildly. "Rick," he finally said. She followed the direction of his gaze to the sign of the Rick's Bait and Surfing Supplies. She pretended not to notice.

He sips his coffee, his face turning pink in the hot steam. He whispers under his breath, and she strains to hear. He takes a deep breath. "Aral," he whispers. "Azov, Black, Red, Arabian, Laccidive, Andaman, Yellow, Dead."

"Dead," she repeats, and starts crying again.

"It's my fault," he says. "I shouldn't have told him."

She cries too hard to answer, to react, and he resumes his litany. A nervous habit he has, naming all the seas in the world.

"Philippine, Sulu, Koro, Java, Halmahera, Mindanao, Savu, Sunda, Arafura, Celebs, Molucca, Bismark, Coral, Solomon, Tasman, Bohol, Visayan, Camotes, Bali, Sibuyan, Flores, Timor, Banda, Ceram."

It calms her a bit, like it calms him. "It's not your fault," she says. "It's nobody's fault."

"I shouldn't have told him."

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"Told him what?"

He swallows hard. "About me. About him. The way we are."

She stares at him. She thinks he might be finally cracking, feeling the loss more than he shows. She feels selfish for forcing him to always be reliable, to make her feel better. "You want to tell me?" she says.

"Caribbean, North, Irish, Hebrides, Celtic, Baltic, Bothian, Scotia, Labrador, Sargasso, Balearic, Ligurian, Tyrrhenian, Ionian, Adriatic, Aegean, Marmara, Thracian..." His eyes are distant, glazed over. Dark. "These are my seas. His seas."

It is always like this. Ice and water, jagged black cracks like stationary lightnings running across the floes. The taste of fish, tightly clenched nostrils, lungs expanded like bellows. The shadows of other seals, floating in a graceful arc, their flippers trailing behind them like twin tales of a comet.

Rick does not know if it's a dream or a memory; neither does he care. He tells Derryl of the slow falls and rapid ascends, of the green depth of water. Of the migration routes, of the ecstasy he felt as the water turned from icy to balmy, with every mile south. Of the coral reefs where water ran clear as tears, of the fishes as bright as they were poisonous, of the quick darting of dolphins overhead, of their staccato laughter superimposed over the short, sharp barks of the seals.

Derryl listens, wide-eyed, as the two of them walk on the beach. "How did you become a person?" he asks when Rick stops talking.

Rick shrugs. "I just stopped being a seal." He talks about the Sargasso Sea and its streaming grasses, undulating underwater like mermaid's hair, and of the fat eels that come to this sea from

all over the world. He talks about following the stream of eels from the Black Sea all the way to Sargasso, of the Aegian and Marmara, Ionian and Adriatic, of Greeks and Scythians, the deeds of men forever branded into the ancestral memory of the seals.

Derryl looks at him with his warm brown eyes. "I want to be a seal too," he says.

Rick is listening to the surf. "Then you'd have to stop being a person," he says, distracted.

It is light outside when Jillian looks out of the window again. The world is dressed in a shroud, a shroud her son never had. A shroud for a boy who did not want to be a person.

"It was an accident," she says.

He shakes his head, vehement now that he has found the courage to tell her.

She sighs. "It doesn't matter, Rick. It doesn't matter why or how." She makes more coffee and they drink it, silently, as the snow falls outside.

Jillian thinks of the Arctic seas and the ice – so thick – that opens suddenly wide to reveal black water underneath. She thinks of the smooth seals turning cartwheels in the black depths, oblivious to cold and wind whipping the land half to death.

"Laptev," Rick whispers, "White, Barents, Beaufort, Chuckchi, Lincoln, Kara."

Jillian thinks of the black seals perched atop white floes, of their sharp barks that tear the frozen air like tissue paper. She wonders, beyond hope, if Derryl got his wish.

Rick calls work, telling them that he won't be in. Then he settles by the table again, his hands palms down on the stained surface.

"Tell me about the seals," Jillian says. 🐟



The Answer Compounded

J.C. Runolfson

to the sound of Craig Armstrong's "Bolero"...

If you don't understand
the importance of salt
imagine the world
without blood or seawater.

Every ocean dried up
every vein collapsed
no need to worry
about meat without savor.

No need to wonder
how bread would taste
or how we would mourn
without tears.

There'd be no mourning
there'd be no dead
there'd be no living
no life.

There'd be no hearts
to beat counterpoint
to sing and speed
at love's approach.

There'd be no words
to talk of love
to talk of faithfulness
or oaths.

There'd be no you
to ask
and no me
to say

I love you more than salt. 🐟



After the War

Leah Bobet

to the sound of Kate Bush's "Army Dreamers" ...

After the war, after the toil, you will not be welcomed home.

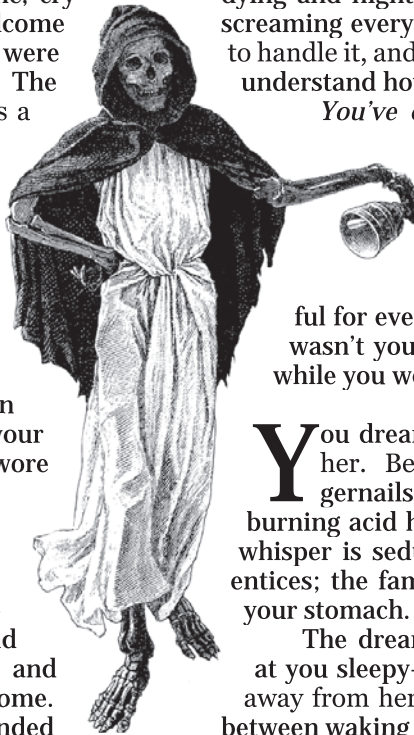
That's what the drill sergeant, the recruitment officer, the man who became your lieutenant told you that first day in the Forces. You will sweat and ache, cry and bleed, and they will not welcome you home. You didn't care: you were young, dedicated to the cause. The war needed fighting. There was a duty to be done. Your convictions would carry you through.

You were young.

And so you kept silent as they told you to look right, look left, for one of those two people would not make it home. You kept silent as they described the hardship of life overseas, the loneliness, the pain and futility of it all. You signed your name on the dotted line and swore your allegiance to the flag.

You were young.

And now it is after the war. You have served with distinction, forged lifelong bonds, made it home alive to your family and town and the woman you love, and they have not welcomed you home. While you were gone, surrounded by blood and ammo and hot sun and hate, the mood on the home front shifted. People no longer support the war; people marched in the streets, accused your government of killing you for an unjust cause. Later, people called you murderers, participants in a conspiracy to rob a nation of riches and dignity. You knew none of this. Your only care, off in a distant nation where nobody spoke your language, was the strangling loneliness of the war.



After the war, nobody meets your eye in town. They spit on the street when you pass. Nobody thanks you for the sacrifice you have made to keep them safe. Four years of your life without wife and family, four years of death and dying and nightmares you still wake up from screaming every night. She doesn't know how to handle it, and you can't explain. She doesn't understand how things worked in the war.

You've changed, she says, and there are tears in her eyes. *You came back different.*

You still haven't come back; you're half a world away. You dream of killing and dying and being thankful for every pockmarked sunrise. But it wasn't you who changed. They changed while you were gone.

You dream of it at night: you dream of her. Beckoning dirt-death-brown fingernails, kukri-knife teeth, her touch burning acid holes around your throat. Her whisper is seductive in the way the familiar entices; the familiarity is revolting and turns your stomach.

The dreams wake your wife; she looks at you sleepy-agonized, and you almost shy away from her touch in those first moments between waking and sleeping. The tension rips you fine and painful: pulling away, pulling close to her for comfort.

In the bars, late afternoon, you all stare into your drinks, stare at each other, try not to speak about the tendrils of dream still curled around your throats. You try not to speak.

One day, your wife comes home with plane tickets in her hand.

We're going back, she says. *You and me.*

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Your reaction is near violence. You don't want her to go there, your wife who is so small and strong and fragile all at the same time. You went so she wouldn't know hunger, disease, pain. You lost yourself for that.

We're going, she insists. I'm not spending my life avoiding this. I'm going, and I'm bringing you back home.

You board a plane. It takes off—you dream and scream and frighten the stewardesses—and it sets back down.

After the war, it is still a place of stench, of poverty, of anarchy, of death.

A year later, you can't tell what the war did for the people here. Then, you were on a mission of liberation. Things were going to be different: ugly now, but it would improve the lives of millions. You were doing good work.

You were young.

You beg your wife not to stay: you can change your tickets, go to Italy or France or Scotland, see the sights for a week, relearn the rhythms of each other's company. Maybe it was the transition. Maybe you need a change of scene. Anything but this, you finally whimper, but she is adamant. She will see what you see. She will go where you went, even if she must walk cloaked and covered here so the locals don't jeer at her bleach-blonde hair. She will understand.

You give in. You take her out to the ruins of the base camp.

The creature is still there.

After the war she is still monstrous: her eyes are black pits, her skin blood-red, her torso draped with ropes of skulls that do not conceal the spike-sharp black nipples which weep blood and pus and shit night and day. She is sinuous, vicious, smiling through sharp teeth. She is birth and love and death, and the cord trailing from her belly is still wrapped tight around your throat. She is hot as the desert, and just as sterile, and the sight of her is terrifying and comforting and makes you want to run.

You bury your face in between your wife's breasts. You inhale her smell deep, the smell of

woman and home. You pray.

Your wife cradles you like a mother, comforting, soft, but she raises her voice like a warrior: *The war is over, she says. Let him go. Let my lover go.*

The monster laughs; it is jackboots on glass, on broken stone, on the debris of smiling statues. *The war is never over. The war never ends.*

It does. It has. He's not yours anymore, your wife says, and you can't understand how her voice is so strong and calm. The hips of the monster give birth to land mines. Each finger ends in a tiny pistol. There are pestilential sores on her thighs and lice crawling on her arms.

They are always mine, the monster says, and her laugh is the whine that the missiles made a moment before they hit, the whine that told you to run as fast as you could if you wanted to make it home after the war. Her arms are opened at the wrist. Thick black smoke drifts from the long stigmata. *I can wait.*

You shudder, because it's true, it's true.

But your wife does not droop or wilt or surrender. *Then I'll go to him. Tell me about the war,* your wife says. *Make me understand so he will love me again.*

No! you say. You joined up to spare her this. And yet a tiny voice in the back of your throat, a whimper, a wail: *understand me. Love me again. Thank me, respect me; I did this for you.*

Liar, the blood-brown dirt beneath your boots whispers, and you start to weep.

You didn't know. You're crying, because you didn't know. How could you know what it was like? You were innocent; you were young; now you're a thousand years old. You never asked those who fought the last war what that was behind their eyes, that darkness that never went away even when they smiled. It didn't matter to you, because it was after the war. The war was over.

So no, you say again. *Take me home. It's all right again,* even though it isn't. You turn your back on the monster, even though you can feel the umbilical cord from her belly connect-

SYBIL'S GARAGE

ed to a million souls, to your soul, drawing you back through the plane trip home, over ocean and plains and mountains, tying you to her for the rest of your life. You lie, and you smile, and you make love to your wife slowly and not in the fervent, frightened, rough way you have since the end of the war. You learn the motions of what's expected, and she settles down.

The worry smooths from her face, and the household is at peace once again.

After the war, you are always a battlefield. Need and necessity, desire and duty, the reason you said you went and the reason you really did tramp over you in formation, each gaining and giving ground in turn. Your children see it and grow up pacifists; they know

from the tilt of your head, the shuffle in your step that war is a horrible thing. There are questions, even grown, that they never ask.

After the war, you put on your uniform for Veterans' Day and march to the town square, where times have changed again and the bitterness has been forgotten. Trumpets blare; drums pound. Speeches ring out through afternoon air, praise you for serving your country, for doing your duty, for sacrifice, for courage, for high-mindedness. You stand in rows, each old soldier wearing the blank face, the blank eyes that keep the war fenced in behind your teeth.

Paper rustles. Flags wave. The crowd rises to sing: *Glory, glory, hallelujah.* ♣

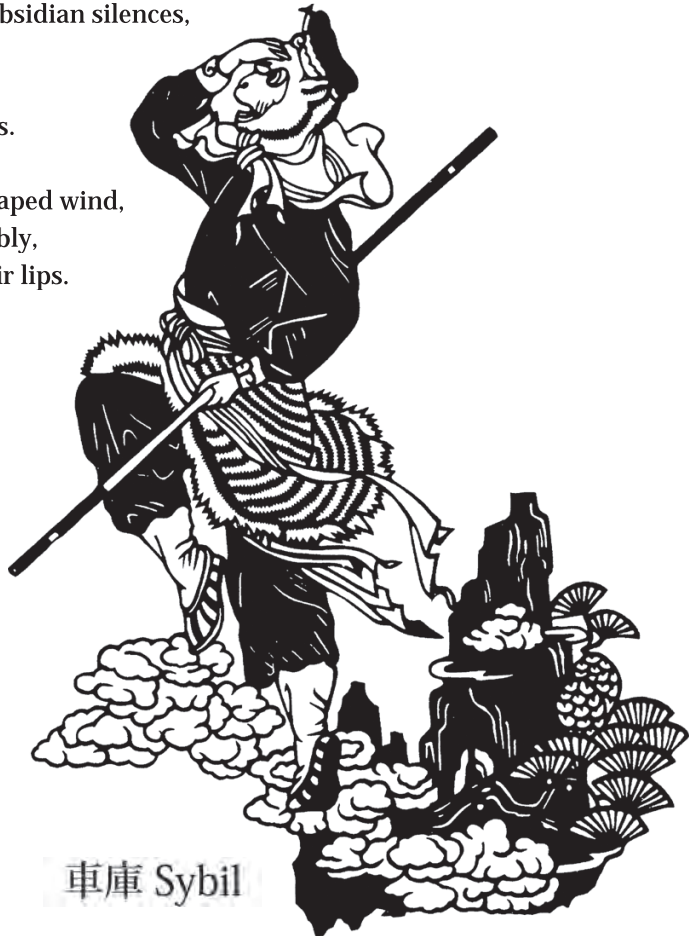


Frayed Worlds

David C. Kopaska—Merkel & Wendy Rathbone

to the sound of "Over the Top," by Louis Armstrong...

Holes in his head, windows to a river of dark matter
 rushing to an ocean without a shore
 where shapes behind shadow take form,
 leak into our world and hurry down the winter road
 rolling under the wooden horses like crumbling bricks
 and stealing into houses bearing lethean gifts.
 We've forgotten these dusk songs and obsidian silences,
 rain-stars in a magician sky
 so full of glittering possibilities that
 dreams reach out and shake us like gods.
 This is the rampaging garden,
 this is where the soul aims its sword-shaped wind,
 this is where the black iris nod inscrutably,
 where beasts of jet, unblinking, lick their lips.
 The windows stare with candle-eyes,
 an echo of illusion,
 a moment transforms myth to reality;
 somewhere, new cities are born
 inside this house, this head
 blooming beyond all mind 🐟



車庫 Sybil

Interview with Stephen H. Segal

by Devin Poore

to the sound of "Greet Death" by Explosions in the Sky...

Stephen Segal serves as creative director for the Wildside Press magazine group, including *Fantasy Magazine*, *Weird Tales*, and *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror*. I first met him at ReaderCon in 2005 where he was pitching a new magazine concept titled *Earthling*. After that, we continued to run into each other at conventions, conferences and readings. Our conversations always revolved around speculative fiction and media, how to get it out to a wider audience, why we would even want to try.

From our first meeting, I realized that someone should be writing down what Stephen had to say. Last year, prior to one of the fall KGB Fantastic Fiction readings in Manhattan, Stephen and I sat down to put this to paper. Incidentally, at the same time, Crispin Glover was being interviewed on a door stoop across the street. Stephen and I have yet to decide if that was a good or bad omen.

To start off on a less than serious note, an employee under the Wildside banner wanted me to ask you why you decided to give up the motion picture martial arts career. Along those lines, do you have many *Office Space*, Michael Bolton-type moments with your name, even though you do pronounce your last name differently?

It's funny — the bad jokes had finally tapered off a few years ago, and then, inexplicably, they came back worse than ever, despite the fact that Steven (spelled differently) Seagal (spelled differently) hasn't actually been making any new movies. Yes, it's a rare week when some bank teller, checkout clerk, or peruser of my business card isn't moved to laughter by my name. I've long since grown past being irritated by it, though — hey, if something as simple as that can brighten someone's day,



far be it from me to rain on their parade.

I should point out that there's also a Steven T. Seagle who writes some terrific comic books, and I'm occasionally asked more seriously if that's me. Nope! I am Stephen Harry Segal, the Atlantic City kid turned Pittsburgh journalist turned speculative-arts creative director.

First real question: you started out as an Arts and Entertainment editor in Pittsburgh, which is a far cry from working at Wildside Press as manager and creative director. Or is it? While in Pittsburgh, how much of your job dealt with entertainment of a speculative nature? And if the job itself did not deal with it, were you able to turn it in that direction at all? And how much of that experience with the "regular" enter-

tainment scene can you bring into play with your new position at Wildside?

I've thought about this a lot, because I've noticed how many of the most interesting sf authors today are current or former journalists: Gaiman, Doctorow, Scalzi, Sterling...

On the broadest level, basic reporting experience can be a great education. Your job is to meet lots of interesting people of all kinds and talk to them about their lives. How cool is that? Is there any quicker way to come to appreciate, first-hand, such an incredibly broad cross-section of society? In seven years writing and editing for Pittsburgh's alternative newsweekly and city magazine, I got to know artificial-heart scientists and 80-year-old blues musicians, millionaires and shit-poor kids itching for a better life, sleazy artists and open-minded ministers and honest politicians. And it's hard to immerse yourself in getting to know real people without being forced to throw away lots of preconceptions about "these" people and "those" people. You come to understand that it's a lot more helpful to approach the world with questions than with assertions — and that, to me, is the heart of all speculative fiction: the question, the "What if?"

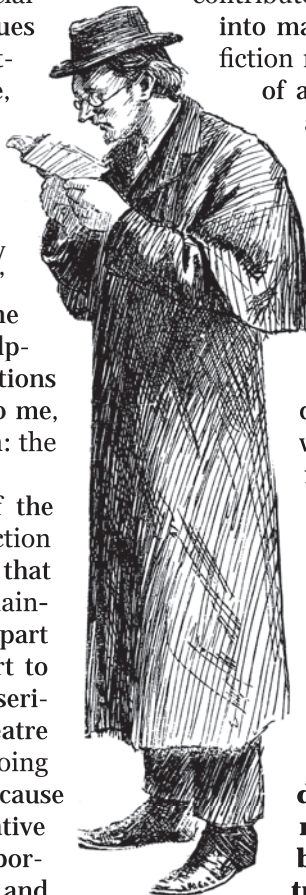
To answer a different part of the question: As a lifelong science fiction and fantasy reader, I always felt that the field got short shrift in the mainstream media. So when I became part of the media, I tried to do my part to cover our unique art form just as seriously as I would cover music or theatre or filmmaking. I had the most fun doing it at the alternative newsweekly, because obviously s.f. has been an "alternative arts-based culture" every bit as important as, say, punk rock or hip-hop — and

yet I found it was rarely talked about in that way. So that's what I'd do. The week Samuel Delany was coming to town to give a university lecture, for instance, we ran a cover story about the close thematic links between science fiction and surrealist art. More importantly, I'd try to make sure that as frequently as possible, every issue included some casual, passing reference to a touchstone of s.f., just as another pop-cultural reference carrying the unstated implication that *hey reader, you maybe oughtta know what we're talking about.*

Today at Wildside? The main area of overlap is that I'm working with our editors and contributors to introduce more nonfiction into magazines that identify themselves as fiction magazines first. It's a simple matter of audience awareness — people today are far more accustomed to reading nonfiction magazines than fiction magazines, and giving potential new readers a whiff of comfortable familiarity makes it a lot easier to lure them in to be captured by the far-out weirdness of our fantastic universe.

The other aspect is that, as art director, I'm willing and eager to look waaaaaay outside the narrowly defined field of "fantasy art" for artists of all kinds who are doing awesome, mind-bending work that's as unexpected, unsettling, and exciting in their own way today as Kelly Freas or Margaret Brundage were 50 or 60 years ago.

I'm often surprised by the unwillingness of people to deal with speculative entertainment because of what I can only broadly label as the "geek culture" associated with it. I was



speaking with a neighbor last weekend about Cormac McCarthy's fantastic book *The Road* and when I told her the premise she said "I don't read sci-fi" with the same speed and distaste as someone might say "I don't watch porn".

Yeah, it seems to me that that sort of vehemement, visceral reaction usually comes from one of two places:

(1) As you say, some people are turned off by the fanaticism of geek culture — usually because they think of themselves as smart people but desperately fear being associated with the classic nerd stereotype, a key component of which is being laughed at by other people. See Exhibit A, "Urkel."

(2) They pride themselves on being realists, and so they sneer at the "silliness" they perceive on the surface of any kind of fairy story, whether the fairies in question are elves or aliens (or angels, depending on whether they're semi-honest atheists or hypocritically religious "realists").

The former person is simply tragically insecure, too worried about being mocked to stand up and enjoy what they ought on their own terms. The latter person is missing the point — failing to understand that mythic narrative and imagery can be wielded with equal force in the service of either escapism or societal engagement.

(Or both. I've been saying ever since September 11 to anyone who'll listen: I wish Berkeley would release a new anniversary edition of *Dune* onto the general fiction shelves, with a grand, full-scale marketing push but not one word about "science fiction classic" anywhere on the package. Instead, the cover would read something like: "The most important novel of our time — *Dune* — a prescient tale of desert warfare, religious terrorism, and ecological catastrophe.")

WEIRD TALES HAS BEEN THE BIG, EXCITING CHALLENGE BECAUSE THE ORIGINAL INCARNATION WAS SO INCREDIBLY INFLUENTIAL

But now we are seeing the success of *Spider-Man* and other superhero movies, acclaim for shows such as *Heroes*, *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, with more and more speculative books showing up on the "What's New" shelf at Barnes and Noble. Is this a sign of the genre making itself more general and middle-of-the-road, palatable, or is the audience at large now simply more willing to accept what has always been there?

A bit of both — with the note that it's not because the genre is making itself more "middle-of-the-road" or "palatable" in terms of content, but in terms of presentation. As far as the book world goes, I suspect a lot of credit is due to the success of the approach taken with Gregory Maguire's books. *Wicked* wasn't aimed at the fantasy market, despite the fact that it's not only pure genre fantasy through and through, it's Fanfic, for Pete's sake. But Harper Collins recognized that it was a wonderfully written story with the potential to push the primal mythic button in the brains of a huge audience — and they gave it the sort of crossover marketing support it deserved. As a result, fairytales won back some of the adult cache they'd lost over the past century.

Similar story with *Spider-Man*. The movie was, for all intents and purposes, utterly faithful to the comic-book source material — which was hugely popular to a general audience in 1965 but considered a primitive, juvenile medium by the average adult American in 1995. Our culture just had to wait for visual-effects

technology to catch up with the fantastical requirements of the story, so that the appealing tale could once again stand up to the suspension of disbelief.

Speaking of visual updates, we have noticed some changes in design and presentation of some of the Wildside magazine titles, specifically *Weird Tales*, since your arrival. Is there more of that to come, and what are the specific reasons for those changes and updates?

It's the first rule of magazine publishing: Have an identity. There are way, way too many magazines of all kinds out there on the bookstore shelves for a publisher to be able to get away for long with producing a magazine that isn't uniquely appealing. So we sat down and looked at the Wildside magazines after I arrived, and we decided that their looks weren't quite evoking their distinct editorial missions — and we needed to address that.

Fantasy Magazine was the easiest, because its mission is very straightforward: It's the magazine incarnation of our Prime Books imprint, dedicated to highly literary, intellectual, myth-driven fantasy, and propelled by the great talents of emerging next-generation writers who may not be familiar names yet — but will be soon. Our editor, Sean Wallace, had a very clean, modern, elegant look in mind when he first launched the magazine, and we've simply tried to streamline and develop that, making it a bit more typographically sophisticated so the visual style matches the literary style. The look works well for *Fantasy*, I think — it's much more visual than the digest-sized *F&SF*, and much more fiction-centric than the glossy

Realms of Fantasy.

With *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror*, we decided that the original logo was coming across as too psychedelic — and even though that was one valid interpretation of the Lovecraft aesthetic, we thought the horror motif would resonate better with readers if we found a look that was simultaneously grittier and classier. So we went with the blown-up metal-type look for the logo and the headlines — and then we redesigned the interior pages around the concept of vertical lines and centered symmetry, which gives a very understated, subliminal sort of ancient-stone-tablet vibe that I think is even more appropriate to Lovecraft.

The final result, hopefully, is a magazine that exudes moody, Lovecraftian darkness while standing out as very different from all the movie-horror mags that clutter up the newsstand.

Weird Tales has been the big, exciting challenge, because the original incar-

nation from the 1920s through the 1950s was so incredibly influential, launching not only Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard but Ray Bradbury and even, for Pete's sake, Tennessee Williams. And the current incarnation, which is now almost 20 years old itself — while it's published hundreds of outstanding stories by great writers like Ligotti, Campbell, and Lee, as well as oodles of terrific artwork by the likes of Barr, Fabian, and Rowena — has suffered over the years from the difficult realities of small-press publishing, changing ownership several times and never quite getting a handle on the modern demands of circulation and marketing. So we wanted to put together not just a new look, but a whole new vision for *Weird Tales* that incorporates all the best aspects of the recent run that our subscribers enjoy, while more consciously



evoking the groundbreaking, subversive, counter-cultural mission of the original 1920s magazine, and simultaneously reaching out from the newsstand to fresh, young, new readers in the 21st century who may not yet self-identify as “fantasy readers” or “sf fans” per se. Goth kids, punk kids — they would love *Weird Tales* just as much as the devotees do if they noticed it and picked it up, but until now they haven’t. We want to fix that.

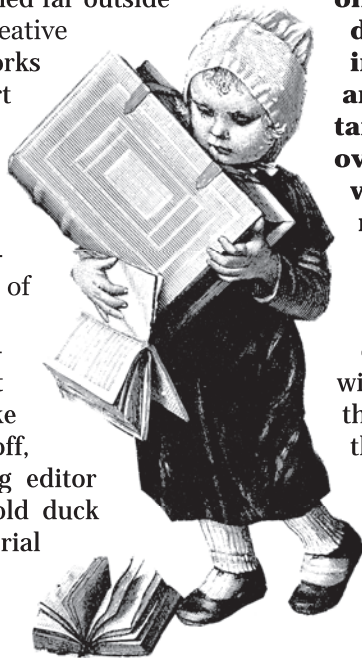
How to do that? Well, obviously, the fiction is still the heart and soul of the magazine. We’re bringing in Ann Kennedy VanderMeer as our new fiction editor, starting with the October 2007 issue. Ann is not only an incredibly cool person and a terrific editor, but she straddles both the traditional and the avant-garde sides of the genre. The surrealist-fiction magazine she founded and ran in the ‘90s, *The Silver Web*, published several of the same authors and artists that *Weird Tales* was featuring — and at the same time, also reached far outside the sf establishment to find creative people who were producing works of speculative literature and art from very different perspectives. We don’t want to replicate *The Silver Web*, but we do want Ann to mix up fresh and unexpected brews of strangeness, building upon the context of the *Weird Tales* tradition.

We’re restructuring the non-fiction content, too, in a way that I think old and new readers alike are really going to enjoy. First off, we’ve taken senior contributing editor Darrell Schweitzer out of his old duck blind hiding behind the editorial “we” so we can spotlight his insightful musings about fantasy in a first-person-singular bylined column, dubbed “The

Cryptic.” The actual editorial, “The Eyrie,” will now run much shorter — just a page or so — so we can add a new, rotating guest essay titled “Weirdism,” devoted to the weirdness of real life. The debut installment is a piece by Caitlin R. Kiernan, marking her first *Weird Tales* appearance. We’ll be refocusing anew on conducting interviews with fantastic creators of all kinds, we’ll be including nifty historical notes on a page titled “Old Weird, New Weird,” and we’ll be launching a couple of art-centric series that I won’t spoil just yet, except to say that I don’t mean writings about art.

How much of your work towards luring new readers to the medium is focused at the existing adult demographic, and now much is focused towards grabbing the attention of young readers, where it seems that the affinity with the speculative is most likely to take hold? You once told me “You build new audiences NOT by initiating them into the existing arcane rituals and clubs, but by simply entertaining them and winning them over”. Isn’t that most prevalent when looking towards young readers?

It sure is. Just think about your own journey into sfdom for a minute, and you’ll realize that the organized structure of Fandom-with-a-capital-F is almost certainly the last thing you discovered, and thus the least important. Taking me as an example — and forgive me, these are approximations — I fell in love with *Doctor Who* and *Star Wars* and *Superman* when I was 5, D’Aulaire’s mythology when I was 7, Madeleine L’Engle and C.S. Lewis and *Star Blazers*



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when I was 9, Asimov and Tolkien and Marvel Comics and giant Japanese robots when I was 11. At that point, I leapt into my father's bookshelf full of Heinlein, Clarke, Norton, Varley, Doc Smith, spent junior high devouring them all — and I was confirmed as a lifelong lover of the fantastic. It wasn't until high school that I discovered *Star Trek* conventions, and not until after college that I entered the world of organized literary fandom.

So what does that suggest? To me, it suggests a couple things. First, that us grown-up literary sf fans damn well better embrace the onscreen “sci-fi,” of all flavors, that first grabs the attention of children with its glorious imagery. Whether that's *Flash Gordon* or *Star Wars* or *Transformers* or *Avatar*, it's a starting point from which the connections to increasingly mature works can be nurtured, and we shouldn't mock it just because we're perversely embarrassed that we used to have kid tastes when we were kids.

From a publisher's perspective, it reminds us that, as an industry, it's incumbent upon us to make sure that every generation has their own material to enjoy as they grow through those stages. On the one hand, that means making sure the truly timeless classics don't appear stale (e.g., in the 1950s Asimov's robots may have been illustrated somewhat fancifully by Freas' generation, in the 1980s they were illustrated photo-realistically by artists like Michael Whelan, and in the 2010s they probably ought to show a lot more anime influence). On the other hand, it means that we've got to remember not to only publish sf for ourselves. For me, that's been one of the most exciting chal-

lenges with repositioning our Wildside magazine titles, particularly *Weird Tales*: working to ensure that it's not just appealing to people who already know the cultural history of *Weird Tales*, but to an entirely new generation who ought to be able to discover the magazine for the first time and fall in love with it fresh, just like so many teenagers did in the 1930s.

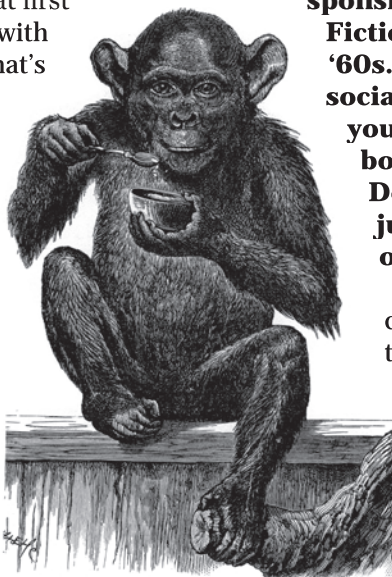
You mentioned that *Dune* is relevant to the state of the world today. In the past many have argued that the Cold War and the uncertainty it bred was responsible for the rise of Science Fiction and Horror in '50s and '60s. How much of the current social, real-world climate do you look to highlight in your book and magazine content. Do you seek it out, or does it just naturally bubble up out of the community?

Well... I think the best social commentary in art is the stuff that puts itself there through the artistic requirements of the work, rather than overt political propagandizing. But these days, I'm just a creative director, not an editor. Come back and ask me that question again after I launch *Earthling*, and I'll

have a much, much longer and more interesting answer.

You come across as one of those people who is never satisfied with “good enough”. Let's say it is the year 2012: where do you see the Wildside magazines?

Hmmm — prognostication is dangerous. But I can tell you where I think the Wildside magazines ought to be in five years with a bit



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of luck. *Weird Tales* should have at least doubled its current circulation, by reaching out to new and younger audiences through new distribution channels — and that doesn't just mean more retail stores, but also a truly awesome Web presence that takes online sf into currently-undreamed-of places. *Fantasy Magazine* should be a well-established market where writers working in serious, sophisticated fantasy can know that they'll find an enthusiastic audience. And *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror* should not only be wowing horror fans as the niftiest literary-horror magazine in print, but also as the online starting point for anyone who's making any sort

of foray into the Lovecraft Mythos.

For the field in general, where do you see speculative fiction, and entertainment in general, in the year 2012? Will advances in technology, especially the web, allow the medium to reach those that have no inkling of what exactly is available?

By the year 2012, I expect that narrative storytelling will undergo a convergence of all media, and will hitherto be composed by intelligence-enhanced cyborg monkeys and transmitted through touchpad sensors in our socks. At least, I hope so. 🐒



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no. 7

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Translucence

Rowena Southard

to the sound of "Two Sleepy People" by Gato Waller...

The lepidopterist was out collecting specimens when he saw the woman. He had never seen another like her. He spied her from across the long park lawn, resting in a lawn chair, tightly swaddled in tan blankets from head to toe, with a turban wrapped around her head. From far away he wasn't sure if she were as beautiful and weak as she looked, so he circled around to approach her from the side. His collecting net quivered in his hands. As he grew closer, he could see her pale colorless face, the only skin exposed to the light. He took a deep breath and moved close to her, only a few feet away. For a few glorious moments he watched as she lay, wan and frail, warming herself in the sun. Desire gripped him.

She is very pale, he thought, almost translucent.

As he stared at her, he became transfixed by her beautiful pallid features. He loved her small gaping mouth, barely distinguishable from the rest of her face except when she momentarily strained in an exhausted yawn. Her bulbous eyes hardly opened, just enough to let in as little light as possible. A few strands of fine colorless hair wormed their way out from under the turban, framing her formless face with a pale tangle web.

"Let me help you," he whispered into her ear.

"Yes," she whispered back, looking up at him through the pale little slits of her eyes.

He carried her to his van and placed her on the front seat. One of her many tan blankets

bunched up around her ankles and covered the insect specimen bottles that littered the floor of his front seat. Most of her blankets remained tightly bound around her legs and torso, but her thin arms were able to emerge from the fabric that held her. He could see her tiny weak hands partially exposed from the folds of the blankets and they thrilled him. She sighed and leaned her heavy turbaned head sideways on the headrest. He threw his collecting net into the back seat and looked fervently at her.

"I will take you home with me," he said as he headed the car toward home.

"Yes," she replied.

"I will care for you," he said.

"Yes," she replied.

He brought her home with him and placed her in a lounge chair in front of a sunny window in his study. He arranged the blankets carefully around her and adjusted her chaise so that she had the best view possible of him as he worked. He longed to pull off her blankets and see the pale weak figure that lay beneath, but he didn't. He would care for her and she would change. She would grow strong and someday she would emerge from the blankets on her own. It would be because of him and she would be grateful. She would be his. He thought of this and he was pleased.

His wood-paneled study was filled with leather-bound books, and framed insects covered the walls. He had collected the insects himself. He was considered an expert in his field, and his col-



lection was very valuable. He was careful when collecting, making certain that the insects were in perfect condition when they were captured. People from all over the world looked to him for collecting advice, and he had been quoted in many textbooks. "Collecting insects is a specialized occupation meant only for the expert," he had been quoted as saying. His desk was covered with wads of cotton and silver stickpins. He was proud of his knowledge, and he enjoyed having her near him so she could watch him while he worked.

From then on, they spent each day together in his study, she in her lounge chair and he at his desk. Every day he tended her, bringing her water. She was unable to eat much at first, and he worried that she might become ill from lack of food. She drank tremendous amounts of water, coiling and uncoiling her thin tongue, which lay strangely curled in her mouth like the spring of a clock. The act of drinking seemed to tire her, but he thought he could see improvement and he was patient. He loved her.

Eventually, after several weeks, she was able to eat lettuce too, as long as it had no dressing. He sat mesmerized as he watched her pick at the wilted green leaves with her translucent fingers. He was certain he could see her heart beat in her fingernails. Each imagined pump of her heart sent a corresponding pulse through him. He wanted her.

She is mine, he thought to himself. I am helping her.

Certain practicalities concerned him, but he was always considerate. He was a gentleman and unwilling to embarrass her with indelicate questions, so he simply carried her to the bathroom three times a day. Carrying her made him feel strong, and he relished their daily routine. He would leave her, pale, squirming, and still swaddled in her tan blankets on the tile floor and close the door. When he returned ten minutes later he would find her in the same position, but

she always seemed a little more relaxed. Then he would lift her from the floor, careful not to displace her wrappings or turban and carry her back to her chaise. His curiosity had once compelled him to listen at the bathroom door, but the high-pitched scraping sounds had frightened him. He never listened at the door again.

HE LONGED FOR THE TIME WHEN HE COULD REMOVE THE BLANKETS AND SEE WHAT WAS UNDERNEATH

During his life as a collector, he had traveled the world in search of rare and seldom-seen specimens. His collection was rivaled by no other in the world. As he sat near her in his study, he held up his most prized specimens for her to see. He explained the difficulties of his occupation and spoke to her in his own mix of scientific and romantic language. He explained the most important aspects of collecting.

"One must collect only specimens in perfect condition," he said, as she lay motionless in her chaise. Then he explained that a collector must keep the specimen without damaging it.

"Finally, specimens must be mounted within a reasonable amount of time," he said waving a rare cherished butterfly for her to see. He had collected it several years before in the Philippines, in a remote and isolated area. He had mounted it in a beautiful mahogany shadow box, and he held the box in front of her face so she could admire both the insect and his handiwork.

"Isn't it remarkable?" he asked her.

"Yes," she replied. Her weak puffs of breath caused her hair to dance ever so slightly around the edges of her turban.

Time passed. He sat by her side, lustful and patient. He spent hours talking to her, showing her his collection and hoping for her to improve.

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At times she seemed to be getting stronger, and he occasionally suggested that she try to stand. Once he tried to force her to stand and she simply fell into a tan, turbaned heap on the floor. He felt terrible for trying to rush her. From then on, he tried to mold his life to fit more with hers, sitting quietly with her day after day, eating only what she ate. He began to lose weight from their diet of lettuce and water. Before he brought her home to live with him, he had loved to eat meat and potatoes. Now he shared her diet out of courtesy. Each day he hoped she had recovered enough for him to add dressing to their salad. He felt himself growing tired from lack of food. He secretly ate radishes while she slept.

He longed for the time when he could remove the blankets and see what was underneath. Each day, as he sat gazing at her tiny, occasionally gaping mouth and bulbous half-opened eyes, he imagined her unswaddled, translucent and glowing on his lounge chair. He imagined looking through her nearly transparent skin and watching her blood vessels dilate at his touch. He had nonchalantly offered to unwrap her once, but it had been a mistake. She had looked at him, opening her bulbous eyes just a little more than usual and made a strange hissing sound. He thought the look on her face was a look of alarm, but he wasn't sure. It might have been exhaustion.

He tried to stay by her side at all times, but he began to grow weary from lack of movement and food. He grew disinterested in his work. Unlabeled jars of insects sat on his desk, wings collecting like tiny broken windows in the bottoms of jars. He decided he must get some exercise to keep up his strength, running perhaps. He bought a new tan running suit and some special running shoes. He started run-

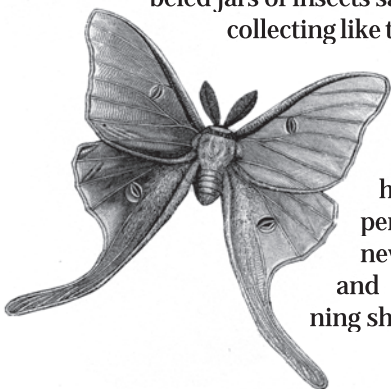
ning every day.

Away from the house, he dreamt of their life as it would someday be. He saw other women as he ran, but none were as beautiful as she. He thought of her skin and her wispy hair and her spring-like tongue. He wanted to pin her down and kiss her. He imagined her tongue coiling round and round in his mouth. He was proud that he had been able to be so patient. He wanted her to want him, and he knew that eventually she would because he had cared for her.

Although he ran every day, he could feel himself growing still weaker. His own clothing weighed him down as he ran. His feet dragged along the sidewalk as he ran, and the tops of his new running shoes became worn from scraping along the cement. He eventually grew so weak that he stopped moving his arms at all when he ran. They hung at his sides, limp and useless, and he was barely able to lift his knees. Finally he had to give up running. Secretly, he was glad. He hated being away from her. He decided to stay home with her forever.

He set up his study so that he rarely had to leave. He had a tiny refrigerator brought in that was just big enough for a few bottles of water and some lettuce. The two of them sat near each other, he at his desk and she on the chaise. He was waiting, and he assumed she was waiting with him. Over time, he grew accustomed to sitting quietly with her in his study. He napped often, dreaming of her tiny otherworldly hands reaching out for him. He dutifully cared for her, certain that she would emerge soon. He loved the way she rarely spoke. He loved the way they sat near each other and ate only lettuce. His running suit and running shoes lay in a pile in the corner.

He still managed to get her to the bathroom three times a day even though he was weak, but he wasn't able to carry her in his arms anymore. Now he was forced to pull and drag her through the house to the bathroom. This worked most of the time, but once in a while he had trouble in the



areas where the carpet was thick. Her swaddling seemed to catch on the fibers and made it hard for him to pull her to where she should be. The effort it took exhausted him. He would leave her on the bathroom floor, close the door, and then collapse in the hallway until it was time to drag her back.

She is improving, he thought to himself as he lay in the hallway. Soon she will reveal herself to me. I will see what is under the blankets. I am making her well.

In between their trips to the bathroom, he pretended to catalog his insects, writing their names in perfect little columns in his notebooks. In reality, he couldn't remember the names of the insects anymore. The orders and families and species all blurred together in his mind and he didn't care. He watched his own trembling hand write meaningless names in orderly meaningless rows. Words which used to give his life meaning were now difficult to spell and only vaguely familiar. His colleagues occasionally called for help with identification of insects, but he was rude and claimed to be too busy for them. He grew pale from lack of sunshine. Water and lettuce began to feel like a filling meal. He dozed often, weak and anemic. The insects on his desk collapsed into weightless litter at the bottom of jars. Dust covered them all.

Then finally it happened.

One afternoon a strange humming noise awakened him as he sat napping in his chair. He opened his eyes and there she lay on the lounge chair, unwrapped. She had emerged. The blankets lay strewn around the dusty floor, and he could see her beautiful naked frame covered only by a thin layer of gauze. He blinked at her, opening his eyes only a little to shield them against the bright light. He studied her pale form spread lightly across the chaise. He felt faint at the first sight of her but recovered. Under the thin gauze, her arms seemed to be bent at impossible angles. Her turban was gone and her hair was divided

into two unusual sections, which curled around her face, framing her black, black eyes.

He got up from his chair and went to her. He was weak as he walked to her, and he fell against the wall knocking off his prized, framed butterfly collection. Pieces of the mahogany frame crushed the mounted insects' wings and the broken specimens lay shattered near his desk. He seemed not to notice. He stumbled toward her and touched her cool, strangely bent arm.

"May I?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

He moved next to her, lying lengthwise on the chaise and draped a weak arm across her middle. He could see a thin sliver of her perfect bare skin under the gauze. He could see the outline of her hips. This is what he had been waiting for. She would finally be his. He had cared for her and now she loved him. Something stirred within him, but was lost. He suddenly felt cold and weak and tired. She seemed uninteresting and he wanted her to leave.

"I am cold," he said.

Very slowly she lifted his arm off of her midsection and got up off the chaise. She moved gracefully, remnants of the thin gauze fluttering behind her as she moved. She bent down and collected some of the blankets that were strewn around the floor. Her hands looked stronger now, and her black, black eyes were opened wide. She took the blankets and wrapped him tightly from head to toe, leaving only his pale anemic face exposed. She leaned down, her face next to his, with her coiled tongue only inches from his mouth.

"Let me help you," she whispered. 🐟



Sybil's Garage
back issues
www.sensesfive.com

Dear Melody

Rachel Swirsky

to the sound of "Where You Are" by October Project...

When we floated together in our mother's womb,
I consumed you as one scared thing
will do to another in this lonely world.

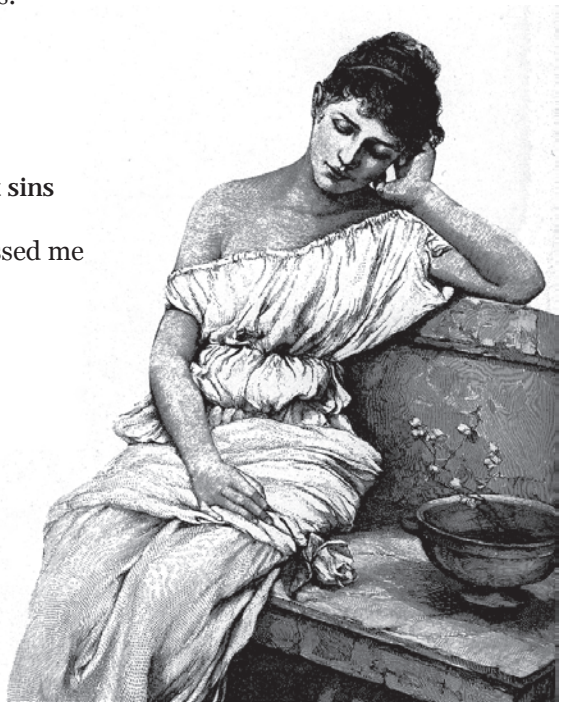
My guru, David, says your soul is beautiful.
An artist's soul. A dancer's soul.
He pressed his face to my belly
& said he could see your aura
shimmering through my abdomen
lovely as a mirage.

I feel you when I sit in my organic co-op chopping kale
& dreaming about murals you'd have painted.
I feel you when I hear a homeless man melt joy
like rich warm caramel into his saxophone's strains.
You beg me to slip off my moccasins
& dance barefoot on concrete.
It was you who wanted to dye my hair magenta,
wasn't it?

Paris, my hypnotherapist, says understanding past sins
is the first step toward karmic equilibrium.
In her office behind the acupuncturist's, she regressed me
through memory's folds to mother's womb,
we chimera twins wrapped in fetal embrace.

Yearning gaped in my essence
like the universe hungering for God.
The cells that were me transmitted that hunger
to the cells that were you
& your kind soul, your beautiful soul,
offered yourself to fill me.

I felt an echo of that hunger last night
as I lay with David on the beach
salt air lapping our skins, thighs pressed
into the timelessness of granite cliffs



SYBIL'S GARAGE

worn to sand by millenia.
Gulls cawed, seals chorused, waves murmured,
the cosmos rumbling its approval.
David slipped his hand down my belly & tried to fill
my lingering emptiness.

Handless, tongueless, you took part as you could,
sending an egg with your DNA into my uterus
where David's cells waited, ready to make
the child only we three could conceive.

For a moment as he filled me
as you filled me
I became one with the universe that is you & me & him
& kale & communes & murals & barking seals
him me you becoming
 youhim

 meyou
 himmeyou
 meyouhim
an endless recombination of souls & DNA
together miraculous
like clashing weather fronts birthing the wind.

Most people live forever terrified
the universe will abandon them
to the frozen pall of solitude.
I am so lucky to be twice filled
twice reassured I will never be alone.

Melody, I promise:
Our baby will learn
to paint & dance. 🐟



Jetsam

Livia Llewellyn

to the sound of "The Last Secret" and "Land of Lyss" by John Serrie...

Jetsam, \jet-səm\, noun: The part of a ship, its equipment, or its cargo that is cast overboard to lighten the load in time of distress and that sinks or is washed ashore.

I'm writing this down because I'm starting to forget. I may need to remember someday. The chemical air is already kissing my mind, biting my memory away. Something terrible happened at work today. Beyond imagining...

Jay stops reading the worn fragment of paper, and looks up. "I don't remember writing this. Where did you find this, again?" She speaks to the young man behind the counter, who's examining the creases of a jacket flap. His glasses slide down his nose as he stops to pull a book out of the thick stack on the counter.

"It was stuck in this one." The man holds up a worn copy of a short story anthology. It is one of about 20 books Jay has lugged into the used bookstore to sell.

"Oh. I thought I searched all of them." Jay takes the book from him. It is old, as thick as a tombstone. Her hand trembles from the weight. "Wait. This book doesn't look familiar—are you sure it's mine?"

"It was in the box with the others. The paper was stuck behind the jacket flap. That's why I like to go through everything before you leave the store. Thought you might want it back."

"Thanks," says Jay, and walks away from the counter. She sits down on a worn upholstered chair and turns the paper over in her fingers. One side is crammed with writing, and the other

is affixed with a single nametag, a sticker with a smeared red mark on it. She recognizes her writing. But she doesn't recall writing the words.

It was so still after all the previous commotion, as if the traffic and people had bled off the edges of the city. Emptiness, everywhere. Only the smoke plumes in the sky, coiling like worms.

What day was this? What date? Nothing on the paper gives it away. Annoyed, Jay lets it drop to her lap. At the top of the torn edge, the name of the old publishing company she worked for stands out in crisp block letters. It's surely the thought of her former job that sends little shivers of distress sparking up her spine, and nothing else. That's what she tells herself.

"A lot of books from the same company," the man calls out. He is still methodically examining her offerings. "You're in publishing, right? I can usually tell."

"Not anymore," Jay says. "I work in finance now. Better pay."

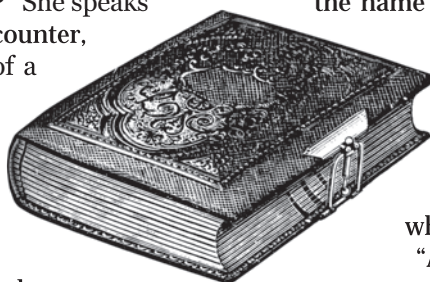
Jay runs her finger along the jagged edge of the paper. She's really only told part of the truth. She didn't leave the company. The company left her.

"Didn't like the job, eh?"

"Didn't have a choice. They left the city," she replies. "The attacks. Some people jumped ship. You know."

The man is respectfully silent.

Everyone was in their offices, all cramming



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things into boxes, or staring numbly out the windows into space. Like I was.

The company did more than jump ship. It vanished. Jay and a few employees—the ones who hadn't been warned—traveled into the city one morning to find the building as empty of life as the smoldering ruins on the tip of the island. Whispers on the street said they'd fled to another country, leaving behind the detritus of their long history: piles of old books, unread manuscripts, and discarded employees. Just as devastating, in its own way.

"I have your total." The man holds another slip of paper, the credit for the books. "This is how much we'll give you in books, or you can take half that amount in cash. You can use it now or later—just don't lose it."

Jay takes the cash. Not much, as always, but it doesn't matter. Relief is the only payment she needs—relief that there is a little less crowding around her, a little less intrusion on her life. She needs to know that at home, at night, she has some space to think and breathe.

"Thanks. I'll come back next Saturday with the last load." Jay grabs her metal shopping cart and heads for the door. As she picks her way through dusty stacks, she shoves the receipt into her pocket. She stares at the fragment one more time, then slides it in as well.

From my office, I watched the apartment building across the street. Some windows were lit up in the rainy gloom like soft yellow candles, others were dark and tomb-like. Most had pale curtains drawn across the glass.

As she walks back home, Jay sees herself reflected over and over again in dark storefront windows. In one tall pane of glass, a ghostly woman walks beside her whose face still flirts with middle age while her body has fully embraced it. In another she is thin and chic, a wom-

an of the City, proudly urban in her clothing and demeanor. In a third pane, she's little more than a wraith. But her face remains the same in all those reflections: there's a furrow nestling between her eyes, a deep line of fear bisecting her brow. The sight of it shocks Jay. She hasn't seen that look on her face for almost five years.

EVERYWHERE SHE HAD TURNED THAT MORNING LONG AGO SHE HAD SEEN THAT STRANGE MARK

That's how long ago her old life ended, how long she's kept herself from dwelling on her past. No reason to remember, Jay tells herself. It's over. But even now, part of her still wonders why the company left without a trace, while another part secretly rejoices that she escaped something worse than what had been intended for her. *What had been intended...?*

As she rounds the corner, her apartment building slides into view. It is thick and solid, comfortably utilitarian. From across the street her living room window is just one of many black rectangles, indistinguishable from the others. It doesn't have a view of the city skyline—she blocked it off years ago. She has no desire to see where she's been.

To the left of the building a massive clock tower rose like a cream-colored phallus, laced with delicate scaffolding from base to tip.

The clock, the time—it was the last day she'd gone to work in the City, that was it. She'd been late. Only a week since the attack, and smoke still billowed in toxic sheets over the lower part of the island. Chemicals and flesh—the dead settled in their mouths and lungs. Jay hadn't wanted to step outside. But bills had to be paid. So she'd

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reluctantly crept down into the subway, taking her place within the throng of silent commuters. And when she emerged from the underground, when she saw the company's triangular building, saw the dun of the sky—

No. She does not want to remember. To her right sits a battered trashcan. Through the iron mesh, magazine covers press against thick seeping paper bags, sodden bricks of newspapers, strange dribblings of food. The fragment is a tight ball in her hand. It's only trash. But her fingers can't release it. She stares at the crumpled paper as it unfolds, an image blossoming in her mind...

Broken things pressing against each other, faces and bricks all jumbled into one terrible mass... And a word—no. A single letter. Everywhere she had turned that morning long ago, she had seen that strange mark.

Jay crosses the street in quick steps. She pushes the shopping cart into the building courtyard, past the molding statue and stunted trees, toward her entrance. She stops to take out her keys, and the ball in her hand flattens out suddenly as her fingers work the paper open. It's a compulsion she cannot control.

Between the buildings two inky smears of clouds slowly passed. They lingered briefly in the space before drifting toward the open square, as if surveying and cataloging the sodden masses below. If only I'd known—

She saw something that day. Not clouds, not smoke, not the ashes of her friends. Something moved...

Jay stands at the edge of the entrance, her body rigid. Her eyes slide up to the tops of the

building and beyond, looking for the edges of the City, reassuring herself that she cannot see it. That it cannot see her. She runs her tongue around her mouth. It tastes as if something foul has just moved through her. There is more than the memory of ash in her mouth. She tastes *marked*.

The door swings out behind her.

"Could you—" says the janitor, and Jay grabs the door as he wheels his cart out. He gestures to the gaping mouth of plastic.

"Trash?"

Jay looks down at the fragment. "No. Thanks." She shoves it into her pocket.

"No books today? That's a first." The man smiles pleasantly at her. Jay sidles past him into the empty hallway.

"Not today. I've read enough already." She drags her cart up to the seventh floor.

Giant bins of trash surrounded the building—the last remnants of the publishing company. Just twenty minutes ago, men were walking from bin to bin, red paintbrushes in their hands, marking them for removal.

Jay presses her back against the bolted door. The solid slab of painted metal makes her feel safe. Before her a cool and empty living room sits in silence. The lack of furniture and decoration comforts her profoundly. Owning nothing means nothing can be taken or thrown away, nothing can be forgotten.

She examines the sticker more closely. "MY NAME IS*" borders the top in thick letters. The white space below is stained red, smeared and slightly cracked. Jay cocks her head slightly as she tries to interpret it. The original mark is lost to her. All that's left is on the paper.

Dropping her coat to the floor, Jay walks to



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a large, empty bookcase and pulls it aside with a groan. Behind the case, a grimy window looks out on the quiet street, the buildings, the sky. Breathing hard, Jay presses a finger to the glass, then, as if writing a secret language, slowly traces the tops of the buildings as they sprawl across the horizon.

The creeping skyline of this city both fascinates and repels her. No matter where she looks, the sky seems to stop at the rooftops—and there is a space, a thin crack where reality does not quite knit together. She imagines something pulsating at the edge, watching and waiting. Waiting for a sign, a mark.

Workers clustered in small groups, whispering fearful gossip back and forth. During the night a thousand companies fled. We had been abandoned.

“If I get rid of this, there won’t be anything left of that day. Not even my memories. But you can’t take things I don’t have,” Jay whispers. Her hand curls around the paper, crushing it neatly. “You can’t take nothing.”

A woman with a clipboard was shouting. “Proceed to your floor and pack your belongings—”

Her hand uncurls. It’s no use. She still has the fragment. And now: trickles of memory, staining her soul like drops of blood in water. *Still marked*, she tells her reflection in the glass.

“—nothing will be left behind!”

The sky looms overhead like a bowl of metal riveted to the edges of the earth.

Jay stands in the middle of an empty street, before her old employer’s building. Beyond it, the island stretches out in one festering sweep of land. In five years, the corruption of the attack

has spread outward and up the blocks. Now only smoldering piles of metal dot the landscape. Nothing whole remains, except the strangely triangulated building before her—a stone ship caught in a scoria sea.

A low boom catches her attention: in the distance a colossal wall, one hundred stories high, slices the island in half like a surgical scar. Rooftops of still-healthy buildings are visible over the top, while, at the base, tiny figures scurry back and forth in the thunder and wake of ponderous machines. Below, subways gag on hardening concrete. Jay had to bribe a man at the borough docks to ferry her across the water to the island. There was no other way in.

“Why not you?” Jay asks her old building. It cannot be coincidence that it alone remains. Rows of windows grin at her like blackened teeth, revealing nothing. Pink stains the worn stone. Some brighter color once ran down its sides, then faded with time. Jay’s fingers grasp the wrinkled paper.

The woman slapped a nametag on my coat while a man shoved an empty cardboard box into my arms. “You have fifteen minutes to get to your floor,” he said. “Put your personal items in this, and wait in your office to be escorted out.” As I made my way through the lobby, my fingers slid over the tag. They came away red.

She picks her way past the rounded tip of the building and tries the lobby door. After a few pulls on the handle, it swings open. The landscape behind her reflects as wavering ribbons in the thick glass and brass. Jay looks back over her shoulder.

Two dark grey clouds float along the eastern shore. They creep over the rubble as if they are snuffling and rooting their way inland. Jay slips into the building and pulls the door firmly shut, then presses her face against the glass. One cloud rises slowly, thinning out as it catches the

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sluggish wind. The other pulses slightly—the ruins beneath it shift.

Jay backs into the lobby until darkness envelops her. More drops of memory trickle through her. Outside, the grey mass of air spreads itself farther out and up, until it is beyond her vision.

SHE CAME HERE FOR AN EPIPHANY AND RESOLUTION. THERE IS NONE

At the far end of the lobby, beyond the elevator banks, there is an open door to a brown stairwell. Jay hesitates, listening for any sound. After a moment of silence, she begins to climb. Her footfalls sound distant, as though her body is walking somewhere she can't yet see. She knows something terrible happened that day, to everyone who entered the building. Somehow, she escaped so thoroughly that she even escaped the remembering of it. Her bones remember, though.

My floor was a wreck. I picked my way through broken furniture, crushed bookcases. Dust choked the air. And everywhere, papers and books crammed in boxes, all marked with the same red paint. The same letter.

The water fountain is dry. Jay clenches her jaw, and air shoots out of her nostrils in tortured bursts. Fourteen floors—twenty-eight small flights of steps. A quick glance to the glass doors of the old office space: the glass doors are open slightly, one large crack running down the right side. Beyond lies empty office space.

Jay walks through the doors into the reception area. The silence is profound. As she makes her way down the narrow hall, Jay marvels at how stripped and spare it all is. No boxes or books anywhere, no furniture, no light fixtures. She moves through bands of muted light and

shadow—even the blinds were removed. As she passes each office, she glances at the sky.

At the thinnest end of the building is her little nook. It's not really an office, just a space made out of bookcases and file cabinets. Jay stops before the opening. Her desk is gone, but two thick indentations mark the carpet where it once rested. She steps in and runs the toe of her shoe along the groove, then turns to the bookcase, placing her back to the window.

I packed my box in minutes, then sat on the desk and pulled the nametag off. It stuck to my fingers as I held it to the light. What did this red mark mean? As I lowered it, a movement caught my eye. I glanced out the window.

She swivels around and stares at out the window. Five years ago, clouds had reflected off glass buildings, cold and clean.

The sun shifted, and light threw red reflections across the glass. I watched the color intensify in waves—red sunset in midday. And then....

"I saw," Jay says, although the words mean nothing. She still can't remember. "I saw."

That's when I realized what it was. What I had become.

Jay imagines herself five years ago, suspended in cold air, mouth open and slack, eyes huge with the sleepy pull of the clouds as they drift from left to right. She imagines pulling the layer of past over the present, moving one grey sky onto another, matching the clouds one by one....

*I saw
I don't remember the name
remember remember*

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But she cannot, and there is nothing more on the paper to help. The last sentence ends in an illegible scrawl of repeated pencil marks, smudged beyond recognition. She squints at the last word, larger than the rest, in the darkening light, then frowns. The letters are barely distinguishable, but still. It looks like her name.

Jay rubs her eyes. She has no idea what happened that last afternoon. But does it really matter? Will it change anything? She came here for an epiphany, for understanding and resolution. There is none. She has a new life now. Everything else is trash. It will only drag her down if she clings to it. She crumples the fragment into a ball and throws it against the window with a papery ping. Her eyes continue up to the top of the frame.

A wet red line oozes down the glass.

Everything fades and falls away, except for the line, suspended between her and the sky. It grows thicker as it descends, as if an invisible hand is marking where she stands. Another line joins it, and a third. The buzz of blood and fear nips at the back of her neck and down her spine, until her body flushes it out in a thin stream of urine. Behind the red line, the horizon grins wide, hiccups, then splits.

"I knew," Jay says. "I knew."

Where the sky has stopped short at the edges of the horizon, hundreds of cloud-like creatures blossom and spill forth like sea anemones expanding to catch the currents. One cloud darts forward shockingly fast. The blunt end expands. Ropey spirals of wet flesh unfurl and catch the rotting ruins, suckling them up.

"Were you waiting for me?" The words barely pass her lips. Jay sees giant chunks of buildings work their way through the tubes into churning pockets. Sides bulge outward; bodies expand and adjust. They fan out across the is-

land. The largest stretches leisurely and shoots out toward the building.

"Yes," Jay says to the floating beast, "I think you were."

Red explodes across the glass. Jay leaps back into the hall. Moving in slow strides toward her are figures in white biohazard suits.

She backs up into the final office, all the way to its very end, to the prow of the building; she's trapped. The window is painted shut. Below she sees more men in suits move an undulating hose back and forth. Red bursts forth from it like fire, dancing intricately around the coils, forming the mark they once had five years ago.

"Stop! I'm still in here!" She pounds on the window, but they can't hear. Above, the creature pulses, and tiny veins of lightning run down its sides. Something slides around inside the mass, bending the grey flesh without breaking: the tip of the old clock tower. She punches the glass, ignoring the blood and pain.

"Turn her around!"

Figures grab her from both sides and pin her arms against the walls, while a third holds up a clipboard. An electric voice pours out of a black faceplate.

"Is this you?" He thrusts the clipboard into her face. One thick finger points at a word on the page.

"No." Her voice is firm over the rising wind, with only a tinge of panic. They will listen to reason, she tells herself—they have to. "That's not my name, there's been a mistake. Please get me out of here."

"I didn't ask if this was your name. You don't have one! This is you, right?"

"No! That isn't me. I told you. I have a name!"

"What are you, then?" The man raises his voice. "Come on! I don't got all day—tell me what



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you are! What's your 'name'?

Jay's face hardens.

"My name is—my name—"

I'm writing this down because I'm starting to forget, I may need to remember someday.

Her name. She cannot remember her name.

"My name is Jay?" she asks.

"Hey, wadda ya know? That's what this says." Even with the creature growling outside, she hears their laughter float through the room.

"She's the last of the trash, boys—let's do it."

Someone steps forward with a small machine and presses it against her right arm. Shafts of metal tear through the bone and flesh, impaling her to the stone wall. Her head snaps back against the glass, and the window finally breaks. Too late.

Gloved hands rip open her blouse, and another machine appears. Thin lines of light embroider her skin, searing through the flesh. Someone is screaming—is it her?

"Yeah, she won't escape this time."

More laughter.

The entire building shudders. Everyone falls silent and looks up at the ceiling. From above, there is a crackling, then a thunderous roar of ripping stone and metal.

"It's started—everyone out!" The figures grab their equipment, jostling with each other to be the first from the room.

"Why?" Her howl bounces off their backs. "Why are you doing this? What's happening?"

From above a second wave of destruction pounds down through the building. The man with the clipboard looks back at her but doesn't stop moving for the door.

"Nothing personal, lady. I'm just the garbage man."

He turns and runs.

Vibrations burrow deep in her bones—they travel up from the stone and through the metal pins. Bits of ceiling break away. With a waterfall of sound, everything around her rises. Something smashes against her side, then rips away. Jay no longer feels her right arm. She no longer feels. She stares up into the sky. There is no sky, only the pulsing grey. Membrane and ridges curl back to reveal a mouth as wide and long as her blood-stained eyes can see.

"This isn't my name." She wants to point to the mark but cannot move. "I'm Jay. I'm Jay—" She lets out a small sob, almost a laugh, as the weight of her name drags it downward. It seeps through the skin, nestles into her soul.

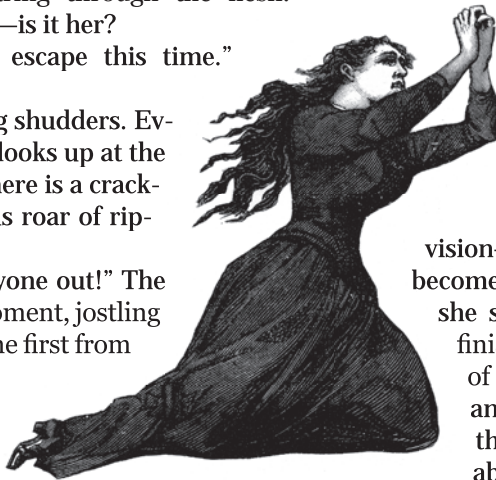
Jay is a letter. It is the *mark*. It is not her name.

The grey sky inhales, and she rises.

Jay is a traveler now, squeezed through tubes and shunted from one contraction to the next. Shapes flood her eyes and graze her skin: bones, granite faces, bits of carved railing and brass fixtures. Trash.

Flashes of light ripple across her vision—the grey membranes holding her become translucent as they rise. Below, she sees another creature move in to finish the job. It spreads great sails of skin and strands of flesh as it rides an unseen current. Jay would sigh at the terrible beauty of it if she were able to breathe.

Now they skim in silence over the top of the massive wall. The rest of the City appears, healthy and alive. Jay's severed right arm lies slightly below her—spires of steel sift between the fingers. She sees the City, a slow-moving river of rooftop gardens and secret alcoves,



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silver windows and neon smears, resting like the body of a lover, safe in sleep. For now. One calm moment of beauty, worth the price of Jay's pain.

The creature tilts. Trash rumbles about her as Jay is thrust forward through hooked membranes. Mucus uncoils from her throat. Everything shifts. Jay plummets into darkness like a blood-tipped comet, the remnants of the building her silky-stoned tail.

Nothing is left behind.



My name—

"What are you looking for?"

Jay looks up at the sound of the boy's voice. She is unaccustomed to being spoken to, unaccustomed to anything other than the sound of her hand sifting, sorting, pushing aside, and breaking. She pulls a cardboard box to her side, and opens her mouth. But the words fail her, as always. If she could just find the fragment, she might remember what to say....

The boy steps back and watches as Jay shoves her hair back from her face and stares into the valley. Jumbles of skyscrapers fill deep pockets in the land, separated only by occasional trickles of rivers and accidental bridges. Up where they are, blind horses cantor down cracked streets with deformed dogs nipping at their sides. Here, potters fields and wooden shanties cling despondently to each other, and the people do the same. Perhaps they are afraid if they let go, they will drift away. From where she stands, she sees no difference between the brown of earth or sky. There is no up or down in the universe's midden.

Jay and the boy both crouch as a wind rises. Heaps of trash stir and hitch around them, great stinking piles of garbage—old toys and dishes, broken lamps, bits of magazines, clothes. It is

their history. It is everything they ever jettisoned in life, before life jettisoned them. Her box is full of paper. She reaches inside with long, dirty fingers. They curl around like dark worms. Papers crumble. If she could only find a fragment, a piece, a certain word... She doesn't remember. She only remembers the wind and the search, and that sometimes the sky will open up and vomit more broken memories across the land.

"What's your name?"

My name—

The boy is speaking again. She tries, tries to mold the feelings up out of that festering sore in her chest, to trick it from the darkness in her mind. Her fingers creep, searching for inky triggers. But they find nothing, and the only word that comes out is the only word she knows. It cracks open her mouth and hovers before them, then floats away in the filthy wind, nothing more than what it is—which is everything around it, everything she has ever been.

"Jetsam." 🐟



KO SYBIL HALE UKANA

Flesh Into Sand

JoSelle Vanderhoof

to the sound of Sarah Brightman's "The Second Element, Part 2."...

Take me
where roads end in
exclamation points, where sun
burns deep inside translucent
skulls, to the place where sky
peers into clear streams
in search of wetness,
satisfaction.

Here,
beyond rag-tooth gables, stucco
streets, beyond serpent-backed
roads slick with tar and too much sun;
Here, I am waiting, long and stretched
beneath the clouds, rock-striped
back deep in time-worn clay,
sienna breasts flush full against the
firmament, thirsty for sun and rain.
More. Your fingertips to stroke my
sand, your feet to tangle in the
sagebrush heavy in between my hips.
Your belly flat against mine.

Yes.
You know you want me, always have.
from the day your chalked hands
climbed my peaks, dappled my
emerald pools and waterfalls to wash
away the dust between your breasts.
That night you slept beneath my spinning stars;
so bright. So clear. So unlike
anything you saw in the concrete city,
looking up.

That day,
I knew I would see you again.
I watched you from my mountain tops as you
bound your hair into a swinging braid,
slid your ragged cut-offs up your hips,
laced your boots up your bird-bone ankles.
As your footsteps cut along my yellow sands,



trapping the sun inside your instep's ghost,
I felt the new light glide along my thighs
and smiled to know I would see you again.
You may leave me, after all.
But I will not leave you.

You know
sure as you know your blood and bones
you can't so easily forget
my swimming heat, my sands
fierce indigo beneath the slipped moon,
wind that stirred your unbound hair like breath,
like rabbit brush in autumn.
I know because I slide in past your lips
by day, by night, each time you breathe
and look towards my cliffs veiled by the light.
Then you dream of me as deeply as I
dream of you beneath my blue-ringed peaks.

I want,
Yet I am patient.
Someday, though you can only dream it now
you will return,
Drawn to my striped rocks and my sunsets
like clear water in flood-time.
What force it is, you will not know to name
except that you will smell it clear as heat,
feel it burn beneath your freckling skin
itch down your back like sun-stirred sand.
You will come within me, like a
hermit and a penitent to search for truth.
And I will wait until you have stretched
upon a wind-carved limestone, hair unbound,

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Mingling with your sweat.

Only then
I'll strike you to your back,
my red hands on your hips,
sun in my swirling hair,
heat in my mouth that matches but
the wetness in your own I want
So much. You want so much,
my sand inside your scalp,
my rocks sharp on your hips,
toes baking in my warmth
my heat, my burning
me and everything
you want. And I will
give as I will take.

Good
that you have no mind
for consequences; how a
grain becomes an avalanche,

how skin bakes around a
Bone, and yours are so very, very
lovely underneath your
muscles, heart and other trifling things.
Before my lips part from your throat
you'll see a ripple down my back
too late you'll think of water,
too late you'll fight me off and I –

It's said,
a desert has a way of holding those
who love it best.
I will hold you close, my pretty girl,
bake your hip bones whiter than my cliffs.
My constant lover,
another pretty bead upon my throat
dazzled in the sun,
flesh into sand. 🐟

One of the Reasons Kristine Ong Muslim

to the sound of Black Sabbath's "Electric Funeral"...

Garage della Sybil



There is a sun in her mouth; I wonder
if it is real. How it burns. Must be
made of all that is yellow and real.

All shimmering wings mean something.

She says she only wants her son back.

That is why she digs up his grave,
finds him shriveled up and looking like
someone else. "Perhaps, he escaped," she tells us.

"The casket's too small. The lid's not tight enough.

He likes to play hide-and-seek, you know." 🐟

Pairings

John Bowker

to the sound of Blossom Dearie, "I Wish You Love"...

In the waning light of a winter afternoon, Catherine cloistered herself in the window seat, determined to re-pair all the black socks.

That was no small task. Her tangled piles were studies in every gradation of age and dark, threadbare wool, slick dress-black nylon, the odd navy blue confusing things. She had combed the house to find them, searching under every bed, behind every sofa, excavating bins of forgotten clothing from beneath the fading boxes of old wedding presents in the attic. The sunlight shone horizontal through the window, illuminating the rime and warming her fingers as she balled each pair with a sure movement. Every scrap before her had a mate, animus to anima; on that day she intended to reunite them all.

Michael had left early, working on a Saturday again. She didn't know which color socks he had worn and he wasn't careful with his choices. He might even have worn the socks from two different pairs. She yearned to ask him but his office phone returned only twelve rings and his voice on the machine. A promise to return her call.

Maybe that was for the best, she told herself. Michael had little patience with her tiny projects, her homely concerns. "Nobody is paying attention, Catherine," he'd say with a shake of his head at her foolishness, "Nobody cares."

But maybe it was just that *he* didn't care. Certainly not about anything she wore, and

he rarely needed anything more than casual clothing for work himself. Unless he wanted to impress someone, he wore socks to match, an endless stream of white sweatsocks of which one was the mate of any other.

When they met, she had loved him for that. His white socks had reminded her of childhood freedoms, summers and sneakers, canvases upon which adventures could be written large in mud and bicycle grease and the occasional blood of a skinned knee. Purchased in packages of a dozen, they were interchangeable, benign. Like promises.

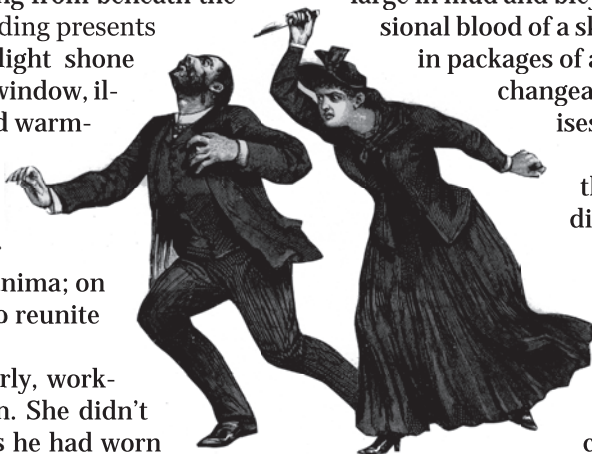
She didn't know it then, but black socks are different.

Black socks know little pleasure in their short lives. The forced silence of family dinners and funerals, visits to the physician, uncomfortable afternoons with a man who

tells you the key to marriage is communication — humorless and sullen they absorb it all. Unable to stand even their own company, they separate from the pack, sinking deep into their misery in the silt behind the clothes dryer, pushing far into the underneath of beds to lie with the dust mites, and take mean pleasure in nightmares. Alone and solitary, they are no threat.

A basket of black socks, however...that is something else.

The hair was curly and blonde, tangled in



the weave of a sock at the very bottom of the basket. Grabbed tight during a stay on a particular floor, on a particular afternoon, as Katherine's pile grew, it was passed through the slow tectonics of fabric to the surface. Against the dark background, it glowed to winter Saturday eyes like the chain Michael had given her on

their first anniversary, the one that had looked so pretty against the raven's wing of her long, dark hair.

When he came through the door that night, the first thing Catherine threw was a balled black sock.

But there were heavier things to follow. 🐟

Farewell

Jaime Lee Moyer

to the sound of The "Atheist Christmas Carol" by Vienna Teng...

At noon on Sirius 5,
Beneath suns grown red,
Swollen in the race toward death,
Doe-eyed Sidhe women and
Tall amber-skinned men,
Tuck sleeping spelled children
Into berths on silver vessels,
Kiss them farewell,
Watch silently as
Hopes and hearts hurtle into space,
Toward a fate they pray
Is kinder than their own.

And when it's done
The strongest weep,
Return to houses silent with sorrow
And fall into each other's arms,
Saying farewells of a different kind.
One last time to feast
On sweet caress and
Drink deep of kisses
Heady as the finest wine,
Cry out in bright release,
Before suns flare and
They enter the eternal Dream. 🐟



An Appetite for Love

Cat Rambo

to the sound of "Skullerusher Mountain" by Jonathan Coulton...

He wooed me in the language of flowers. Are you familiar with that charming, although dated, convention? The Victorians used nosegays to express their feelings, to convey the passionate messages they were too repressed to speak aloud.

That first day, my salad plate was garnished with leaves of lemon balm, tiny citrus-scented flowers, signifying that one is looking for love. I picked a sprig up and when I saw him looking through the kitchen portal at the diners, tired eyes filled with desperation, white chef's hat askew, I caught his glance and touched my lips to the leaf, leaving a smear of pink lipstick. He smiled and turned away, back to his duck confit.

In the following weeks, his messages garnished each daily special placed before me: mint for warm feelings, marjoram for joy and happiness, lavender for devotion, dandelions for wishes come true. I ate each rich dish they decorated: pigs' tongues with pomegranate sauce, cochon du lait, and grouse stuffed with veal sweetbreads.

Inevitably this correspondence led to a thickening of my hips. A decided paunch rode my belly, swelling out

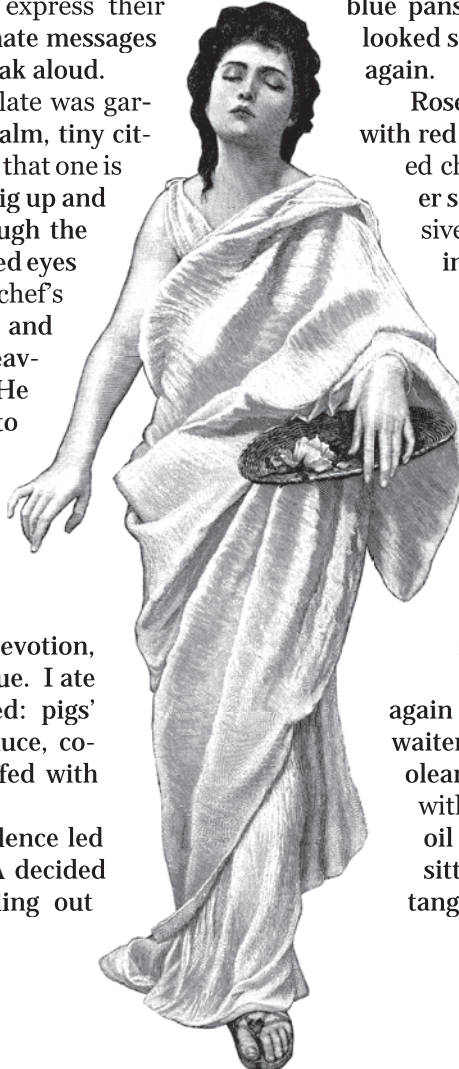
over my mons. But when I spurned a plate of poulet Basquaise on a bed of eggplant, chateaufortelles, and bits of pepper garnished with blue pansies for thoughts of love, he looked so forlorn I picked up my fork again.

Rosewater pudding sprinkled with red and white petals, sage roasted chickens stuffed with sunflower seeds – I ate missive after missive, sacrificing my girlish figure in an effort to please my love.

Eventually my jowly ardor drove him away, made him withdraw, despite the fact that the rosemary-twig women he sent salads dusted with red carnation petals eschewed them all for glasses of water.

I watched and the sympathetic pain in my face angered him.

Now I pick up my fork again and look at the plate the waiter has set before me: deadly oleander and monkshood, served with a dribble of white truffle oil and balsamic vinegar drops sitting on the leaves like dark, tangy tears. 🐟



On Death and the Deuce *

Richard Bowes

to the sound of "New Age" by Lou Reed and The Velvet Underground...

In the last days that the Irish ran Hell's Kitchen I lived in that tenement neighborhood between the West Side Docks and Times Square. An old lady of no charm whatsoever named McCready and called Mother rented furnished studios in an underheated fleabag on Tenth Avenue. Payment was cash only, by the week or month with anonymity guaranteed whether it was desired or not.

Looking out my window on a February morning, I spotted my Shadow heading south toward Forty-Second Street. He was already past me, so it was the clothes that caught my attention first. The camel hair overcoat had been mine. The dark grey pants were from the last good suit I had owned. That morning, I'd awakened from a drinking dream and was still savoring the warm, safe feeling that came with realizing it was all a nightmare and that I was sober. The sight of that figure three floors down filled my mouth with the remembered taste of booze. I tried to spit, but was too dry.

Hustlers called Forty-Second Street the Deuce. My Silent Partner turned on that corner and I willed him not to notice me. Just before heading east, he looked directly at my window. He wore shades, but his face was the one I feared seeing most. It was mine.

Seeing that made me too jumpy to stay in the twelve by fifteen foot room. Reaching behind the bed, I found the place where the wall and floor didn't join. Inside was my worldly fortune:

a slim .25 caliber Beretta and, beside it, a wad of bills. Extracting six twenties, I stuck the rest in my boots, put on my thick sweater and leather jacket, and went out.

At that hour, nothing much was cooking in Hell's Kitchen. Two junkies went by, bent double by the wind off the Hudson. Up the block, a super tossed away the belongings of a drag queen who the week before had gotten cut into bite-size chunks. My Silent Partner was not the kind to go for a casual walk in this weather.

Looking the way he had come, I saw the Club 596 sitting like a bunker at the corner of Forty-Third. The iron grating on the front was ajar but no lights were on inside. As I watched, a guy in a postman's uniform squeezed out the door and hurried away. I knew that inside the 596, the Westies, last of the Mick gangs - short, crazed and violent - sat in the dark, dispensing favors, collecting debts. I also knew what my

Silent Partner had been up to.

But I went to breakfast, put the incident to the back of my mind and prepared for my daily session. The rest of my time was a wasteland, but my late afternoons were taken up with Leo Dunn.

Mr. Dunn lived in a big apartment house over in the East Sixties. The outside of his building gleamed white. The lobby was polished marble. Upstairs in his apartment, sunlight poured through windows curtained in gold and hit a glass table covered with pieces of silver and



* This story first appeared in May '92 issue of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction

crystal. "Kevin, my friend," Mr. Dunn, tall and white-haired came forward smiling and shook my hand. "How are you? Every time I see you come through this door it gives me the greatest pleasure."

I sat down on the couch and he sat across the coffee table from me. The first thing I thought to say was, "I had a drinking dream last night. The crowd watched like it was an Olympic event as I poured myself a shot and drank it. Then I realized what I'd done and felt like dirt. I woke up, and it was if a rock had been taken off my head."

Amused, Dunn nodded his understanding. But dreams were of no great interest to him. So, after pausing to be sure I was through, he drew a breath and was off. "Kevin, you have made the greatest commitment of your life. You stood up and said, 'Guilty as charged. I am a drunk.'"

Mr. Dunn's treatment for alcoholics was a talking cure: he talked and I listened. He didn't just talk: he harangued, he argued like a lawyer, he gave sermons of fire. Gesturing to a closet door, he told me, "That is the record room where we store the evidence of our mistakes. Any booze hound has tales of people he trusted who screwed him over. But has there ever been anyone you knew that used you as badly and that you went back to as often as you have to booze?"

We had been over this material a hundred times in the last couple of weeks. "You're a bright boy, Kevin, and I wouldn't repeat myself if I hadn't learned that it was necessary. We go back to the record room." Again, he pointed to the door, "We look for evidence of our stupidity."

For ten years my habit and I had traveled from booze through the drug spectrum and back to booze. Then one morning on the apex of a bender, that fine moment when mortality is left behind and the shakes haven't started, I found myself standing at a bar reading a *New York Post* article. It was about some guy called Dunn

who treated drunks.

Three days later, I came to, empty, sweat-soaked and terrified, in a room I didn't remember renting. At first, it seemed that all I owned was the clothes I had been wearing. Gradually, in jacket and jean pockets, stuck in a boot, I discovered the vaguely familiar pistol, the thick roll of bills and the page torn from the *Post*. The choice that I saw was clear: either shoot myself or make a call.

BOOZE IS A VICIOUS, MIND-ALTERING SUBSTANCE. IT GETS US AT ITS MERCY BY POISONING OUR MINDS

My newly sober brain was blank and soft. Mr. Dunn remolded it relentlessly. On the afternoon two weeks after our first meeting he saw my attention wander, clicked a couple of ashtrays together on the table, picked up the gold lighter and ignited a cigarette with a flourish. "How are you doing, Kevin?"

"OK," I told him. "Before I forget," I said and placed five of the twenties from my stash on the table.

He put them in his pocket without counting and said, "Thank you, Kevin." But when he looked up at me, an old man with pale skin and very blue eyes, he wasn't smiling. "Any news on a job?" He had never questioned me closely, but I knew that my money bothered Mr. Dunn.

Behind him, the light faded over Madison Avenue. "Not yet," I said. "The thing is, I don't need much to get by. Where I'm living is real cheap." At a hundred a week, Leo Dunn was my main expense. He was also what kept me alive. I recognized him as a real lucky kind of habit.

He went back to a familiar theme. "Kevin," he said, looking at the smoke from his cigarette. "For years, your addiction was your Silent Part-

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ner. When you decided to stop drinking, that was very bad news for him. He's twisted and corrupt. But he wants to live as much as you do."

Dunn said, "Your Silent Partner had the best racket in the world, skimming off an increasing share of your life, your happiness. He is not just going to give up and go away. He will try treachery, intimidation, flattery to get you back in harness. It will take every resource you have within you to stop him."

He paused for a moment and I said, because I had to talk about this, "I saw him today. Across the street. He saw me too. He was wearing clothes that used to belong to me."

"What did he look like, Kevin?" I guess nothing a drunk could say would ever surprise Mr. Dunn.

"Just like me. But at the end of a two week bender."

"What was he doing when you saw him?" This was asked very softly.

"Coming from a mob bar up the street, the 596 Club. He was trying to borrow money from guys who will whack you just because that's how they feel at the moment."

"Kevin," said Mr. Dunn. "Booze is a vicious, mind-altering substance. It gets us at its mercy by poisoning our minds, making us unable to distinguish between what's real and what isn't. Are you saying that you had to borrow money?" I shook my head. Very carefully he asked. "Do you mean you remembered some aspect of your drinking self?"

"Something like that," I said. But what I

felt was a double loss. Not only did my Shadow haunt me, but Mr. Dunn didn't believe what I said. My Silent Partner had broken the perfect rapport between us.

At that point, the lobby called to announce the next client. As Leo Dunn showed me to the door, his eyes searched mine. He wasn't smiling. "Kevin, you've done more than I would have thought possible when you first walked in here. But there's what they call a dry drunk, someone who has managed to stop drinking or getting high but has not reached the state beyond that. I don't detect involvement in life from you or any real elation. I respect you too much to want to see you as just a dry drunk."

The next client was dressed like a stockbroker. He avoided looking at my street clothes and face. "Leo," he said, a little too loudly and too sincerely, "I'm glad to see you." And Dunn, having just directed a two hour lecture at me, smiled and was ready to go again.

Outside, it was already dark. On my way across town, I went through Times Square and walked down to the Deuce. It was rush hour. Spanish hustlers in maroon pants, hands jammed in jacket pockets, black hookers in leather mini skirts, stood on corners, all too stoned to know

they were freezing to death. Around them, commuters poured down subway stairs and fled for Queens.

Passing the Victoria Hotel, I glanced in at the desk clerk sitting behind bullet-proof glass. I had lived at the Victoria before my final bender.



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It was where everything I owned that I wasn't wearing had been abandoned. Without trying to remember all the details, I sensed that it wasn't wise to go inside and inquire about my property.

Back on my block, I looked up at my bleak little window, dark and unwelcoming. Mother's was no place to spend an evening. Turning away, I started walking again, probably ate dinner somewhere, maybe cruised the movie houses. Without being stoned, I couldn't connect with anyone.

Mostly, I walked, watched crowds stream out of the Broadway theaters. *A Little Night Music* was playing and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Then those rich tourists and nice couples from Westchester hurried into cabs and restaurants and left the streets quiet and empty.

In Arcade Parade on Broadway, goggle-eyed suit-and-tie johns watched the asses on kids bent over the pinball machines. Down the way, a marquee announced the double bill of *College Bound Babes* and *Bound to Please Girls*. Around a corner, a tall guy with a smile like a knife gash chanted, "Got what you need," like a litany.

Glancing up, I realized we were in front of Sanctuary. Built to be a Methodist church, it had gotten famous in the late '60's as a disco. In those days, a huge day-glow Satan had loomed above the former altar, limos idled in front, a team of gorillas worked the door.

Now it was dim and dying, a trap for a particular kind of tourist. Inside, Satan flaked off the wall, figures stood in the twilight willing to sell whatever you wanted. I could remember in a hazy way spending my last money there to buy the Beretta. My trajectory on that final drunk, the arc that connected the pistol, the money, the absence of my Silent Partner, wasn't buried all that deeply inside me. I just didn't want to look.

At some point that night, the rhythm of the street, the cold logic of the Manhattan grid, took me way West past the live sex shows and into the heart of the Kitchen. On long dirty blocks of

tenements, I went past small Mick bars with tiny front windows where lines of drinkers sat like marines and guys in back booths gossiped idly about last week's whack by the Westies.

I walked until my hands and feet were numb and I found myself over on Death Avenue. That's what the Irish of the Kitchen once called Eleventh because of the train tracks that ran there and killed so many of them. Now the trains were gone, the ships whose freight they hauled were gone, the Irish themselves were fast disappearing. Though not born in the Kitchen, I identified with them a lot.

On Death, in a block of darkened warehouses, sat the Emerald Green Tavern. It was on a Saturday morning in the dead of night at the Emerald Green that I had found myself in a moment of utter clarity with a pistol and pocket full of money, reading a newspaper article about Leo Dunn. I stood for a while remembering that. Then maybe the cold got to me and I went home. My memory there is vague.

What I will never forget is the sight of a ship outlined in green and red lights. I was intensely cold. Gradually, I realized I was huddled against a pillar of the raised highway near the Hudson piers. One of the last of the cruise ships was docked there and I thought how good it would be to have the money to sail down to the warm weather.

In fact, it would have been good to have any money at all. My worldly wealth was on me, suede boots and no socks, an overcoat and suit and no underwear. In one pocket was a penny, a dime and a quarter - my wealth. In another was a set of standard keys and the gravity knife I'd had since college.

Then I knew why I had stolen the keys and where I was going to get money. And I recognized the state I was in, the brief, brilliant period of clarity at the apex of a bender. My past was a wreck, my future held a terrifying crash. With nothing behind me and nothing to live for,

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I knew no fear and was a god.

With all mortal uncertainty and weakness gone, I was pure spirit as I headed down familiar streets. A block east of Death and north of the Deuce, I looked up at a lighted window on the third floor. I crossed the street, my overcoat open, flapping like wings.

Security at Mother's was based on there being nothing in the building worth taking. Drawing out the keys, I turned the street door lock on my third try and went up the stairs, silently, swiftly. Ancient smells of boiled cabbages and fish, of damp carpet and cigarette smoke and piss, a hundred years of poverty, wafted around me. This was the kind of place where a loser lived, a fool came to rest. Contempt filled me.

Light shone under his door. Finding a key the right shape, I transferred it to my left hand, drew out the knife with my right.

The key went in without a sound. I held my breath and turned it. The lock clicked, the door swung into the miserable room with a bed, a TV on without the sound, a two-burner stove, a table. An all too familiar figure dozed in the only chair with shoes off, jeans unbuttoned. Sobriety had made him stupid. Not even the opening of the door roused him. The click of the knife in my hand did that.

The eyes focused then widened as the dumb face I had seen in ten thousand morning mirrors registered shock. "I got a little debt I want to collect," I said and moved for him. Rage swept me, a feeling that I had been robbed of everything: my body, my life. "You took that god-damn money. It's mine. My plan. My guts. You couldn't have pulled that scam in a thousand years."

For an instant, the miserable straight-head in front of me froze in horror. Then shoulder muscles tensed, feet shot out as he tried to roll to the side and go for the .25. But he was slow. My

knife slashed and the fool put out his hands.

Oh, the terror in those eyes when he saw the blood on his palms and wrists. He fell back, tripping over the chair. The blade went for the stomach, cutting through cloth and into flesh.

Eyes wide, his head hit the wall. The knife in my hand slashed his throat. The light in the eyes went out. The last thing I saw in them was a reflection of his humiliation at dying like that, pants fallen down, jockey shorts filling with dark, red blood. His breath suddenly choked, became a drowning sound. An outstretched hand pointed to the loose board and the money.



"I was just cut down," I told Dunn the next day. "It wasn't even a fight. I was just some stupid mark killed so easily. I left that knife behind when I had to move and the Silent Partner had it and just cut me down. I looked like a fucking fool dying in that stupid room." It was hard to get my throat to work.

"It was a dream, Kevin, a drinking dream like the one you told me about yesterday. It has no power over your conscious mind. You came home and fell asleep sitting up. Then you had a nightmare. You say you fell off your chair and woke up when you hit the floor. The rest was just a dream."

My eyes burned. "The expression my Silent Partner had on his face is the one I used to see sometimes in the mirror. Moments when I was so far gone, I could do anything." Then I was crying.

"Nothing else has reached you like this, Kevin."

"Sorry. I couldn't sleep."

"Don't be sorry. This is part of the process. I don't know why, but this has to happen for the treatment to work. I've had detective sergeants bawl like babies, marines laugh until they wept. Until this, you haven't let anything faze you. Our

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stupid drinker's pride can take many forms."

"I won't be able to sleep as long as I know he's out there."

"Understand, Kevin, that I'm not a psychiatrist. I was educated by the Jesuits a long time ago. Dreams or how you feel about your mother don't mean much to me. But I hear myself say that and spot my own stupid pride at work. If dreams are what you bring me, I'll use them." He paused and I blew my nose. "What does your Silent Partner want, Kevin? You saw through his eyes in your dream."

"He wants to disembowel me!"

"The knife, even the murder were the means, Kevin. Not the motive. What was he looking for?"

"My money. He knew where I had it."

"You keep money in your room? You don't have a job. But you pay me regularly in fairly crisp twenties and hundreds. It's stolen money, isn't it, Kevin?"

"I guess so. I don't remember."

"Earlier you mentioned that in the dream you went for a gun. Do you own a gun? Is there blood on the money, Kevin? Did you hurt anyone? Do you know?"

"The gun's fully loaded. It wasn't fired by me."

"I assume it's not registered. Probably has a bad history. Get rid of it. Can you return the money?"

"I don't even know who it belonged to."

"You told me that he was in a calm eye when he came after you. That was his opportunity. You described having that same kind of clarity when you decided to leave him. You had the money with you then?"

"The gun too."

"Kevin, let's say that some people's Silent Partners are more real than others. Then, let's say that in a moment of clarity you managed to give yours the slip and walked off with the money the two of you had stolen. Without him holding you back, you succeeded in reaching out for help. The money is the link. It's what still con-

nects you to your drinking past. I don't want any of that money and neither do you. Get rid of it."

"You mean throw it away?"

"The other day you said your Silent Partner was borrowing from the West Side mob. If he's real enough to need money that badly, let him have it. No one, myself above all, ever loses his Silent Partner entirely. But this should give you both some peace."

"What'll I do for money? I won't be able to pay you."

"Do you think after all this time, I don't know which ones aren't going to pay me?" I watched his hands rearrange the crystal ashtrays, the gold lighter as he said, "Let's look in the Record room where we'll find that booze is a vicious mind-altering substance. And we have to be aware at every moment of its schemes." I raised my eyes. Framed in the light from the windows, Dunn smiled at me and said, "Keep just enough to live on for a couple of weeks until you find work. Which you will."

Afterwards, in my room, I took out the pistol and the money, put two hundred back in the wall and placed the rest in a jacket pocket. The Beretta I carefully stuck under my belt at the small of my back. Then I went out.

At first, I walked aimlessly around the Kitchen. My Silent Partner had threatened me. It seemed my choices were to give up the money or to keep the money and give up Mr. Dunn. The first I thought of as surrender, the second meant I'd be back on the booze and drugs. Then a third choice took shape. Payback. I would do to him just what he had tried to do to me.

Searching for him, I followed what I remembered of our route on the last night of our partnership. It had begun at Sanctuary.

Passing by, I saw that the disco was no longer dying. It was dead. The doors were padlocked. On the former church steps, a black guy slept with his head on his knees. No sign of my

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Silent Partner.

But I finally recalled what had happened there. Sanctuary was a hunting ground. Tourists were the game. That last night, I had run into four fraternity assholes in town with seven grand for a midwinter drug buy. Almost dead broke, I talked big about my connections. Before we left together, I bought the Beretta.

Following my trail, I walked by the Victoria. That's where I had taken them first. "Five guys showing up will not be cool," I said and persuaded two of them to wait in my dismal room. "As collateral, you hold everything I own." That amounted to little more than some clothes and a few keepsakes like the knife. With the other two, I left the hotel that last time, knowing I wouldn't be back. I recognized my Silent Partner's touch. He walked with me at that point.

Turning into an icy wind off the river, I took the same route that the frat boys and I had taken a few weeks before. At a doorway on a deserted side street near Ninth Avenue, I halted. I remembered standing in that spot and telling them this was the place. In the tenement hall, I put the pistol at the base of one kid's head and made him beg the other one to give me the money.

Standing in that doorway again, I recalled how the nervous sweat on my hand made it hard to hold onto the .25. When those terrified kids had handed over the money, I discouraged pursuit by making them throw their shoes into the dark, to take off their coats and lie face down on the filthy floor with their hands behind their heads.

The one I'd put the pistol on had pissed his pants. He wept and begged me not to shoot. Remembering that made my stomach turn. Right then my Shadow had been calling the shots.

The rest of that night was gone be-

yond recovery. What happened in those blank hours wasn't important. I knew where the search for my Partner was going to end. Death Avenue, north of the Deuce, had always been a favorite spot for both of us. The deserted warehouses, the empty railroad yards, made it feel like the end of the world.

Approaching the Emerald Green bar, I spotted a lone figure leaning on a lamp post watching trailer trucks roll south. Only a lack of funds would have kept a man out on the street on a night like that. Touching the pistol for luck, stepping up behind him, I asked, "Watcha doing?"

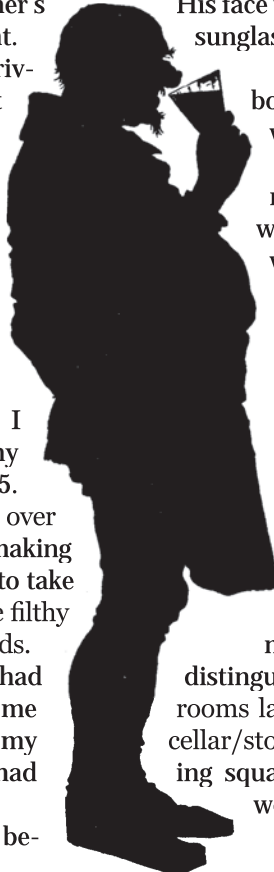
Not particularly surprised, not even turning all the way around, he replied, "Oh, living the life." I would never have his nonchalance. His face was hidden by the dark and masked by sunglasses. That was just as well.

The air around him smelled of cheap booze. "We have to talk." I gestured toward the Emerald Green.

As we crossed the street, he told me. "I knew you'd show up. This is where we parted company. When I woke up days later, all I had were these clothes and a couple of keepsakes." That reminded me of the knife. My Shadow knew as soon as that crossed my mind. "Don't worry," he said. "I sold it." And I knew he had. He went through the door first.

The Emerald Green was a typical Hell's Kitchen joint with a bar that ran front to back, a few booths, and beer and cigarette-soaked air unchanged since the Truman administration. The facilities were the one distinguishing feature of the place. The rest rooms lay down a flight of stairs and across a cellar/storage area. You could organize a firing squad down there and the people above wouldn't know.

Or care. The customers that night



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were several guys with boozers' noses, an old woman with very red hair who said loudly at regular intervals, "Danny? Screw, Danny," and a couple of Spanish guys off some night shift and now immobile at a table. The dead-eyed donkey of a bartender looked right through me and nodded at my Silent Partner. In here, he was the real one. We went to the far end of the bar near the cellar door where we could talk. I ordered a ginger ale. My companion said, "Double Irish."

As we sat, he gave a dry chuckle. "Double Irish is about right for us." At no time did I turn and stare my Silent Partner in the face. But the filmed mirror behind the bar showed that he wore the rumpled jacket over a dirty T-shirt. The camel hair coat was deeply stained. When the whiskey came, he put it away with a single gesture from counter to mouth. Up and in. I could taste it going down.

It was like living in a drinking dream. I touched the back of my belt and said, "You found out where I live."

"Yeah. Billy at 596 told me you were staying at Mother's. Of course, what he said was that he had seen me going in and out. So I knew." Indoors, my partner smelled ripe. The back of his hand was dirty.

"You owe them money?" The last thing I needed was to get shot for debts he had run up.

"Not even five. My credit's no good," my Shadow said. "You left me with nothing. They locked me out of the hotel. Ripping off those kids was something you never could have done by yourself. You needed me." He signaled for a refill. The bartender's eyes shifted my way since I was paying.

I shook my head, not sure I could watch him drink again and not do it myself. "I've got most of the money on me. It's yours. So that we don't attract attention, what I want you to do is to get up and go downstairs. After a couple of minutes, I'll join you."

"Pass the money to me under the bar." He

didn't trust me. "There's something else I want you to have." For a long moment he sat absolutely still. The TV was on with the sound off. It seemed to be all beer ads. "When you come back up here," I told him, "You can afford enough doubles to kill yourself." That promise made him rise and push his way through the cellar door.

For a good two minutes, I sipped ginger ale and breathed deeply to calm myself. Then I followed him. Downstairs, there were puddles on the floor. The restroom doors were open. Both were empty. One of the johns was broken and kept flushing. It sounded like an asthmatic trying to breathe.

The cellar was lit by an overhead bulb above the stairs and another one at the far end of the cellar near the restrooms. Both lights swayed slightly, making it hard to focus. My Silent Partner had reached up and bumped them for just that reason. It was the kind of thing that I would not have thought of. He stood where the light didn't quite hit him.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I reached back and drew the .25. He seemed to flicker before me. "Easy does it," he said. "You know how jumpy guns make you." His tone was taunting, not intimidated. "And killing me might well be suicide."

I could read him as easily as he could me. My Shadow wanted me to try to shoot him and find out that I couldn't. After I had proved myself helpless without him, we could both go upstairs, have some drinks and resume our partnership. Carefully, I ejected the clip and stuck it in my pocket. "You bought this, you get rid of it." I said. "My guess is it had a bad history even before we got hold of it."

"You'll never have another friend like me." His voice, my voice, had a whine to it and I knew this was getting to him. I reached into my pocket and took out the money and a piece of worn newspaper. "You thought about what it's going to be like to be broke," he asked. "It's not like

SYBIL'S GARAGE

you've got any skills."

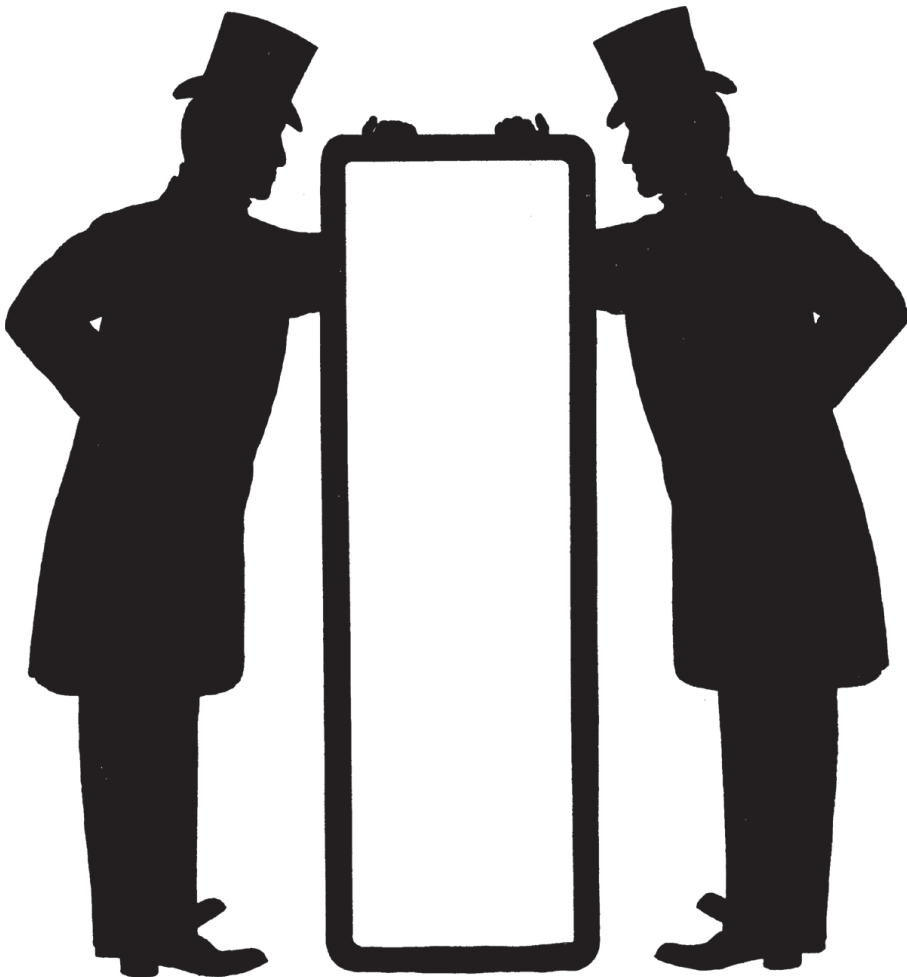
I'd had those thoughts and they scared me. I hesitated. Then I noticed that the newspaper was the page with the Dunn article. Taking a deep breath, I riffled the money and told my Silent Partner, "Almost six grand. Just about everything I have." I put the cash on the stairs beside the Beretta and turned to go. "So long. It's been real."

"Oh, I'll keep in touch," he said in a whisper. Looking back, I saw nothing but the blur of light in the shadows.

On the stairs, I felt light-footed, like a burden

had been laid down. This was relief, maybe even the happiness Mr. Dunn had mentioned. From his perch near the front, the bartender gave me a slightly wary look, like maybe I had come in at 2 A.M. drunk ginger ale and had a conversation with myself. It occurred to me that, if that's what happened, the first one to go take a leak was going to get a very nice surprise.

But as I went out into the cold, the bartender's gaze shifted, his hand reached for the pouring bottle and I heard the cellar door swing open behind me. 🐟



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Interview with Jeffrey Ford

by Matthew Kressel

to the sound of "Up a Lazy River"...

From far-flung futures in deep space to artists' studios in 19th century New York, Jeffrey Ford's works span a Cosmos of thought. He has received the World Fantasy Award for his second novel *The Physiognomy*, for his short story collection *The Fantasy Writer's Assistant*, and for his short story, "Creation." He has also been nominated for the World Fantasy Award, the Hugo, the Nebula, the Theodore Sturgeon Award, the International Horror Guild Award, the Fountain Award, and the Edgar Allan Poe Award. This interview was conducted by email in February of 2007. The illustration on the facing page is by Derek Ford, Jeff's son.

You have said previously that you shun rigid definitions of work into "genres," that it's up to the booksellers and historians to work that out later. But your work, in general, always contains an element of the fantastical or evokes a sense of wonder. Is there something you are striving to express in your fiction, even if it is not specific to a "genre"? A rekindling of childhood wonder, perhaps?

There's no one thing in particular. Childhood wonder alone seems kind of limited and it's not something I consciously want to convey. Sometimes I'm aware of the ideas and some of the emotion behind a piece, but more often I really don't know why I'm writing any particular piece at any given moment. Much of what I do is, for want of a better term, "sub-conscious." I concentrate on getting the story right and leave the interpretations to the reader.

In the author's note for your story, "The Fantasy Writer's Assistant," you say its publication in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*

was the realization of a lifelong dream. What was that moment like? How many times did you submit to *F&SF* before they accepted your story?

F&SF is a magazine that I've read from the time I was a kid. I still think it's the best US print fiction magazine out there. Gordon Van Gelder is a terrific editor. I had won the world Fantasy Award for *The Physiognomy*, but when I first talked to Gordon, he wasn't that interested in seeing my stories. He gave me my first major magazine breaks in the field by letting me do a couple of Curiosities columns for him before I submitted a story. He turned down two or three stories

before he took "The Fantasy Writer's Assistant." He had really useful comments on it. I fixed it up and he published it. I remember the day I got a copy of the issue. It felt great to see my story in print in a magazine that has published some of the greatest writers of the fantastic in the history of literature.

Did you have a break-out moment, a point where you realized you rose above



the dreaded slush pile to become a writer whose work is widely and highly regarded? If so, what was that like?

Break-out moment? Yeah, when I did the bills last week, I broke out in a cold sweat. If I had a break-out moment it must have sailed right past me. For the last 18 years, I've driven over an hour and a half each way to work and back, taught five classes a semester, raised two kids with my wife and wrote late into the night. The only difference now is that I write more in the day time. The slush pile is only the hell you make it.

You mention that the story, "Exo-Skeleton Town," was rejected dozens of times before it was published. Do you still get rejection letters today? Do you still send stories out to publishers, unsolicited, or do most of your stories go to editors who specifically request them?

Dozens of times may be an exaggeration, but it did get the heave ho more than a few times. It ended up winning the Grand Prix de L'Imaginaire in France. I can't help thinking of the old *Saturday Night Live* line – "There we are brain surgeons, here, we work for Sears." As far as if I get rejection letters today – of course, but there are fewer. The past year and a half has been crazy with story requests. I can't keep up. I'm sure that will die back down and I'll have to start sending them in unsolicited again at some point. Even if there is a

request for a story, the editor can still turn it down. I'm always prepared for that. I've had years of practice.

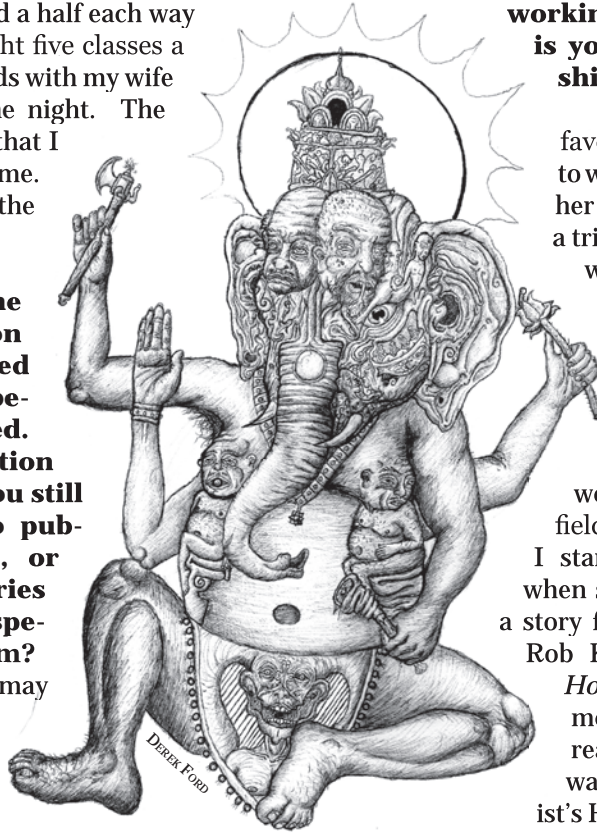
Ellen Datlow has published many of your stories in various anthologies and on *Sci-Fiction*. How did you begin working with her and what is your current relationship like?

Ellen's the coolest – my favorite short fiction editor to write for. When you show her a story, she doesn't miss a trick. I learned a lot about writing stories from her.

She allows the writer to bring their own idiosyncratic vision to the fiction – she encourages it – and assists in getting it to work. Her impact on the field has been incredible. I started working with her when she asked me to submit a story for the website she and Rob Killheffer had – *Event Horizon*. After she asked me, I went to the site and read the current story. It was Kelly Link's "Specialist's Hat." The whole site was

a writer's mandate to cut loose. For all of her influence, the new writers she's encouraged, the incredible magazine and anthology work she's done alone and with Terri Windling, she remains completely without pretension.

Would you tell us about a creative idea you're particularly proud of that you've used in a story? (Maybe the world-building, or the situation, or a plot device?) Where



did that idea come from? (What was the inspiration, or the a-ha! moment?).

I was pleased with the idea of Mrs. Charbuque, a woman whose portrait was to be rendered by an artist not allowed to see her. I got the idea from something I read about Emily Dickinson, a great recluse (supposedly) – that this woman who knew her whole life only ever saw her once, in her coffin. As it turns out, the anecdote was false, and although I'd read the passage in a book, after the novel was finished I could never find the passage again. I remember running the idea past this old guy in town who is a well-respected portrait painter. He told me it was a stupid idea, and that's when I knew I had something.

IN ALL HONESTY, I NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT ANY OF THAT CRAP FOR TOO LONG. THE INTEREST WAS IN THE WRITING AND READING AND LEARNING.

You currently teach writing and literature at Brookdale Community College. How does teaching affect your writing process?

“Writing process” – that's one of those terms born in academia. It makes it sound like you're turning out cheesefood slices. I think the term “process” is used because it makes pretensions to being something scientific. Many of the writing teachers who teach from “the process approach” view writing as mechanistic. The students in the writing classes teach me by their example – in how they tell stories and how they struggle with the art and craft of using language to do it. Besides that, we have a good time talking about writing, life, politics, the weather...

Many of us decide to become a writer in childhood after getting lost in the magic of books. For others, it comes later in life when we realize we aren't expressing our creative gene. When did this moment first come to you?

When I was a kid, my father would read to my brother and me – Rider Haggard, Stevenson, Kipling, Tennyson, Eugene Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*. The experience of listening to those works being read was so intense, I could see and feel the reality of the story, that I wanted to try to create that magic myself. The beauty of the pursuit is that the goal keeps shifting, changing, so that the sense of discovery never diminishes.

Beginning writers often struggle for years before we make our first sale, and it takes much longer to build up a name and reputation. Can you describe your early years, before you made major sales. Did you have your moments of doubt? Did you ever think you'd be where you are today?

In all honesty, I never thought about any of that crap for too long. The interest was in the writing and reading and learning. I was writing lousy stories six at a clip and digging every second of it. Not knowing where I was going with it was the draw. The writing itself was the goal. I was 33 when *The Physiognomy* came out, from the time I was in my late teens till then, it was a blizzard of half-baked stories slouching toward clarity to be born. I'd publish one here, one there, occasionally, and when the copies came it was awesome. My kids and my writing students deepened the experience. Writing and telling stories was all around me. Those times were a blast.

I've heard you read at least four times, and now when I read one of your stories I can almost hear you speaking the

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words. There's a unique cadence and rhythm to a Jeff Ford story. When writing, do you strive for a particular style, or is this something that arises naturally from your personal voice?

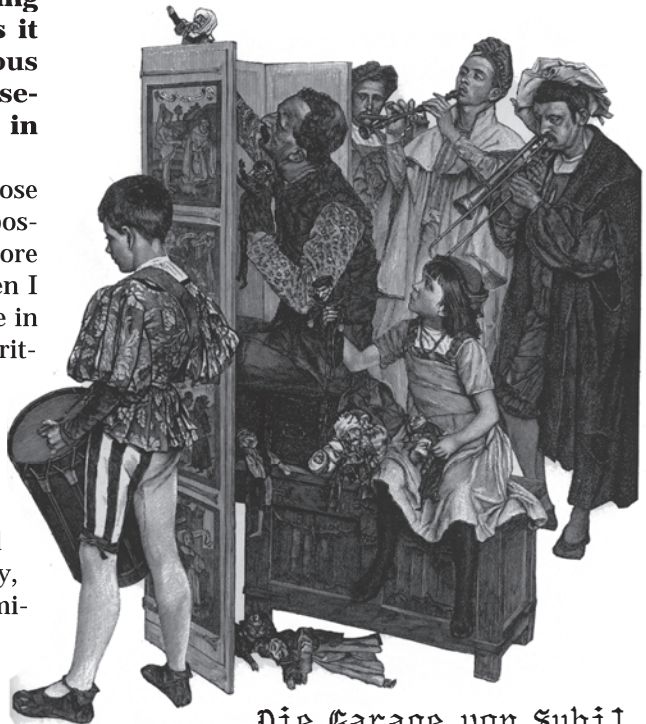
For me, the style comes out of the story. I see enough of the story in my mind when I start for it to dictate its style. How it should be told. I do think that cadence and rhythm of voice in a story is important, not that it be particularly mellifluous or jarring – but in that each story has its own voice. The same information can be conveyed in a written phrase in so many varying configurations. I believe there are certain configurations of rhythm and sound that better convey any given story.

Some of your longer works, like *Girl in the Glass* and *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque* are not overtly fantastical, yet they still evoke a sense of awe, turning the mundane into the magical. Was it difficult for you, a writer of stupendous imagination, to confine yourself (loosely, I'll admit) to our limited world in those novels?

I like the fantastic as a metaphor for those aspects of real life that are otherwise impossible to convey to a reader. Sometimes more of it is called for and sometimes less. When I write, even about King's and kingdoms, like in "The Green Word" or "At Reparata," I'm writing about some aspect of real life. It's the only compass I have. And in truth, the world we live in is not limited by any means. I'm blown away on a daily basis by the incredible things I see happening around me – weird synchronicities, small but powerful acts of heroism, the complexity, diversity and wisdom of Nature, what determination can accomplish... Fantastical fiction is a means for trying to make manifest the wonder of the real world.

Do you listen to music when you write? What albums/artists do you enjoy?

When I write, I do listen to music. I find that if I listen to the same CD all the way through a novel, any time I come to the writing desk and sit down cold, the music can help me more easily drop into the head of the story because I'm used to the story and that music being together. Vice versa, some times when the CD has ended, and I am still writing, I hear the music anyway. When I write, I listen to Harold Budd a lot. I have a number of his CD's but my favorite is *The Pavilion of Dreams*. I think I remember KJ Bishop telling me she was partial to Budd for writing too. For the book I'm working on now, I'm listening a lot to Phillip Glass's score for the movie *The Hours*. I can't listen to music with words in it when I write. When I work on novels, I think of their structures as if they are music. 🐟



Die Garage von Sybil

Means of Communication

Barbara Krasnoff

to the sound of "Drum Boogie" by Gene Krupa...

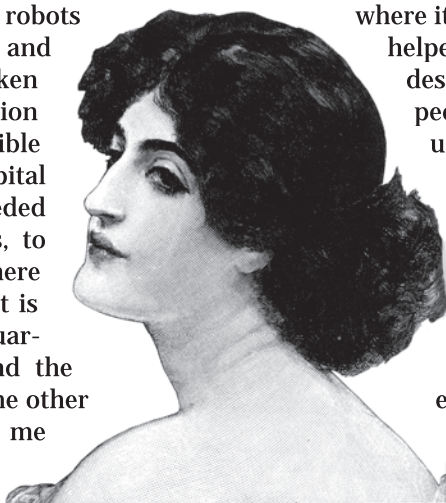
In a circle of chairs, their backs straight and voices intent, the heroes discuss the day's findings, review their videos carefully, listen to their recordings, and enter their notes. They are tall, lean, clear-faced, bodies tight with exercise and good health, intelligence shining out of kindly eyes. Their voices rise and fall in a quiet, harmonious flow; I let myself float on a river of sound that means little to me. Occasionally one looks over at me, sitting silently in my corner, and asks solicitously whether I am comfortable, whether I have enough light, enough to eat and drink. I nod; they nod and ignore me again. We are all happier that way.

Technically, I am also part of this project, this great adventure in which the human race takes the first tentative steps toward communication with an alien society. The station is bright and austere; the important sections, the labs and the engines and the control center and the airlock, are cared for by those who run those systems. There are robots to rumble over the landscape and take pictures, to repair a broken antenna or build an observation blind. But it is almost impossible for a robot to make a good hospital corner, and even Einstein needed somebody to mend his socks, to make his bed and make sure there was heat in the morning. That is my job. I attend to the living quarters, the common rooms, and the kitchen. I am not allowed in the other areas, unless my duties take me there. They tell me that this prevents me from experi-

encing any unnecessary stress.

And that is important for someone with my history. Some of it I can remember at night, when I'm in bed and my mind wanders from the tasks of the day into its own secret pathways. I recall lying on a soft rug in a bright room, watching the play of sun on the walls but not yet knowing the words in which to describe what I am watching. And sitting in a schoolroom, surrounded by bright playthings and vibrant children, hesitantly touching a synthesizer and listening to the sounds it creates. And walking down a long hallway, angry about something...something bad that was going to happen.... That is the one I come back to most often.

But these memories are few and far between. Most are hidden from me, buried in a place where I have been made afraid to search. "We have not erased your former self," the doctors told me. "We have only buried it, where it won't disturb you. Before we helped you, you were angry and destructive; you destroyed other people's peace and made them uncomfortable. Now you are free of those hateful behaviors and thoughts. Once you're one with yourself, once you are completely open to the love and the trust of others, you will be able to heal yourself of everything that we have had to bury. And your memories will return." This is what they have told me.



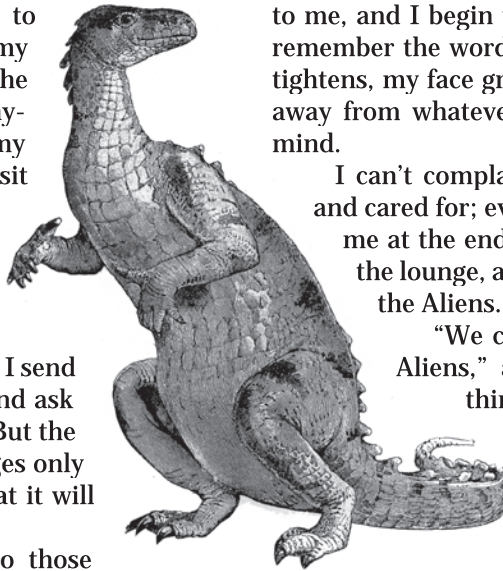
SYBIL'S GARAGE

I have tried so hard to follow their advice. I do my work faithfully. I smile at the heroes and try not to let anything wrong or hard enter my thoughts. But whenever I sit quietly and try to find the place where they have hidden my past, my stomach recoils and I must back away and turn my attention to my tasks. Sometimes I send a message to the doctors, and ask them how long it will take. But the people in the return messages only smile gently and tell me that it will take as long as it takes.

I have asked to talk to those who, like me, have had their pasts shrunk down and hidden somewhere in their mind, but who finally succeeded, made peace with themselves and regained access to their memories. But the doctors tell me that the secrets of those others are their own. "You would not," they ask, smiling, "want others to know of your past, would you?" I don't know. I no longer know what that past is. And they won't tell me.

If I think about it any more, I become disturbed, and sick — proving, says the doctor, that they were right and that I'm not ready. So I service the station; use the equipment that cleans and mends and cooks for the heroes who explore this world and study its inhabitants. They have told me that I am a hero, too, that without my help the clean-faced and clear-eyed people could not do their jobs in comfort and with confidence. But I don't feel like a hero.

Sometimes I wonder if I would have been content with this work three years ago, when I was caught, and arrested, and convicted of... something. But I have no way of knowing. Sometimes, while I am cleaning, a tune comes



to me, and I begin to hum it. But before I can remember the words to the song, my stomach tightens, my face grows hot, and I have to pull away from whatever has been planted in my mind.

I can't complain, though. I am fed well, and cared for; everyone has a kind word for me at the end of the day, when we sit in the lounge, and look at the recordings of the Aliens.

"We can't just keep calling them Aliens," argues the linguist, a tall, thin man with hard eyes.

"For one thing, it is inaccurate. These are the natives of this planet; we are the aliens here. We shouldn't call them

Aliens. It promotes a condescending attitude toward them. They should have a name."

"But that is the problem," says the red-haired man, who is the leader of the expedition. "Like T.S. Elliot's cats, these beings have several names." He counts them off on his fingers. "There is the scientific name that tells us that they are biped lizards with opposing thumbs; there are the various names given to them by an eager media that tell us that they are weird, but possibly intelligent, and not to be hated; there are the nicknames we've given them, trying to make them nameable and therefore understandable, and there is the name that they alone know for themselves." He stops counting, and smiles. "And until we know that name, then Aliens is as good an appellation as any."

But we may never know their real name. The Aliens are small, bright-eyed, active; they have towns and processions and schedules; they are, no doubt, intelligent. Yet there is no language there that can be deciphered by our scientists — the sounds they make, when they make them, seem random and without substance, while the

gestures made by their two sets of arms and hands are not elaborate enough to indicate coherent meaning.

For several months now, the heroes have gone out with their recorders and equipment and carefully, patiently, studied the Aliens. They — I'm sorry, we — have watched them farm small, quiescent worms, harvest them, and eat them. We have filmed them as they sit like stones under the sun, occasionally moving their heads to study the sky and the ground. We've even been able to record the way the Aliens are born, reproduce (as slowly as turtles, and with less enthusiasm), and die. But with all the research, and all the hours of hidden watching, there has still been no breakthrough, no way to

**"WE KNOW THAT YOU ARE
BETTER AND HAPPIER NOW
THAT WE HAVE SHUT AWAY
YOUR BAD SELF"**

decipher the system by which these small lizards make themselves understood to each other. They seem to ignore each other, and us.

"Perhaps they don't feel the need to communicate in any traditional sense," says a tall, pale woman who sometimes offers me hard, sweet candies that she brought from home. "There could be an innate understanding there that doesn't require a language."

"But they cooperate," answers the red-haired man. I don't think he likes me; my presence seems to make him uneasy. "A society at that level, with family groups and even a low level of manufacturing — they do, after all, create tools and homes — must communicate in some fashion."

"Telepathy," somebody suggests. There are several groans, quickly stifled.

I sit in back and listen to the voices of the

Aliens as the tape plays. They sound like pigeons, making contented cooing noises that, according to the heroes, don't have any meaning. But the sounds are pretty. Sometimes one of the Aliens screams, and the others all stop for a moment, and look, and stamp their feet, and then go about their business. That is pretty, too, although according to the heroes, the scream and the stamps are random and therefore meaningless.

"We've gone over this before," says the tall woman. "Their brains simply do not function at a level that would indicate telepathy. We have examined the possibility thoroughly and it is simply out of the question."

"Nothing is totally out of the question," another counters, and they are off again.

They never raise their voices, never yell or hit the furniture in frustration, never let their hands punctuate a point. They just smile, and speak softly; it would be terrible to let a rude or loud word escape. I am told that I must avoid stress if I am to open myself to myself, yet the tension that fills these quiet, controlled bodies would, I think, power the entire station.

Usually I simply sit, and listen, and allow the words that I don't understand to float past my head. But today, it has been difficult. Something is changing. It hurts to feel the stress rise in the room; the quiet river of sounds doesn't carry me anymore. I try to concentrate on the sounds the Aliens make on the recording, but even that doesn't help. Finally, I slowly stand and walk through the doorway.

Unfortunately, I am noticed. A few paces into the corridor and I am stopped by a soft voice speaking my name. I turn and see a short young man with smooth, dark skin. He is new here; he arrived yesterday with the supply ship.

"Why are you leaving?" he asks. "Are you ill?"

"No," I tell him, wishing he hadn't asked,

SYBIL'S GARAGE

but knowing I have to answer. "I just... wanted to leave."

He cocks his head to the side, very much like a bird. "Yes, I noticed that you didn't say anything all evening. Are you shy? Do you dislike groups?"

"I have nothing to say."

The young man's smile is lovely. "Oh, I can't believe that," he says. "Everyone here has something they can contribute. Why would you think...?"

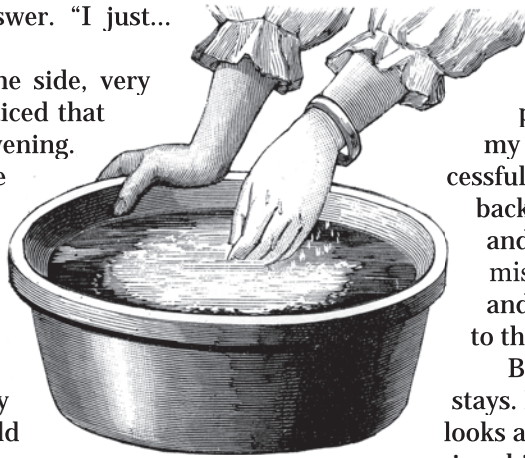
The red-haired man, who has followed us out into the corridor, bends over the young man's shoulder and whispers in his ear. The young man stiffens, and his eyes drop.

"Oh," he says, suddenly hesitant. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I hope I didn't make you feel..." His voice trails off and the two men both stare at me. I wish I knew what they saw.

But I don't want to embarrass anyone, especially members of the team. I had been warned by my doctor that this might happen. "We know that you are better and happier now that we have shut away your bad self," she told me, several times, so I would remember. "But there are those out in the world who are disturbed, even upset, by the methods used to heal you. Of course, it is not your fault that they are upset, and you should not be bothered by this. But you should do what you can to minimize their distress — as we should all try to help minimize the distress of those around us — and we will teach you how to do this properly."

So I smile at the young man, and shrug my shoulders, and say, "Please don't be distressed on my account. I am perfectly happy with my life, much happier than I was before, I promise you."

I have practiced very hard to combine the



words with the actions so that they work well, and I am pleased to see that all my training has been successful. The young man smiles back, his eyes return to mine, and he says, "Of course. My mistake. Please excuse me," and immediately turns back to the room.

But the red-haired man stays. He doesn't smile; he just looks at me for a moment, then raises his hand and touches my cheek. "I'm so sorry," he whispers. "When I called them, when I reported you, I didn't mean...I didn't know they would..." His voice dies away, and he stands there, waiting for — what? This isn't the first time he's talked to me like this. I don't want to make him feel sad, or uncomfortable, but nothing I was taught seems to help. The only thing I can do is smile, stand and wait, until he drops his hand and, without saying anything else, goes back to join the other heroes. The voices swell again, and I walk down the corridor, leaving them behind.

Just past the living quarters, in a small wing that flares out from the outer shell of the station, is the airlock that leads outside. This is an area that is normally forbidden to me, and for the first two months of my stay here I walked around the entrance, anxious to avoid the unease that hits my stomach when I go near that which is prohibited.

But then there was an accident — one of the heroes snagged her suit on a sharp rock, cutting her foot and exposing her to whatever disease could be hiding in the depths of the mineral. They rushed her back to the station, removed her suit and enclosed her in a bubble, hiding her in the sick bay until they were sure she was once again clean and bright.

SYBIL'S GARAGE

They would have sent one of the robots into the airlock to clean the blood and dispose of the suit, but then they would have had to dispose of the robot, and none could be spared. So they finally gave me a suit so that I would be safe, and said it was all right for me to enter the airlock and scrub the floor.

Nobody said, "Only this once." Nobody told the ship that I shouldn't be allowed outside.

So now, while the others are discussing their experiments, and preparing for bed, and deciding who they will sleep with this night, I enter the lock. I put my suit on carefully and check the helmet and filter, the way it says to on the safety display, and attach the heavy boots to the shining pants so that I can walk without bouncing off the surface. And I go for a walk.

I don't remember much about home, but I know it is nothing like this. The star that lights this planet is golden, redtinged, and the plants that cover the rocky ground shine dark green and purple. They are soft under my heavy boots, and as I step, tiny, translucent creatures scurry away from my tread to hide under other rocks, other plants.

It takes fifteen minutes to walk to the Alien town. Our base is far enough, I have been told, so that our presence doesn't disturb their lives, but close enough for rescue in case of an emergency. Like the insects, the Aliens live in shimmering green rocks, or rather, in large caves built of rocks over which plants have been

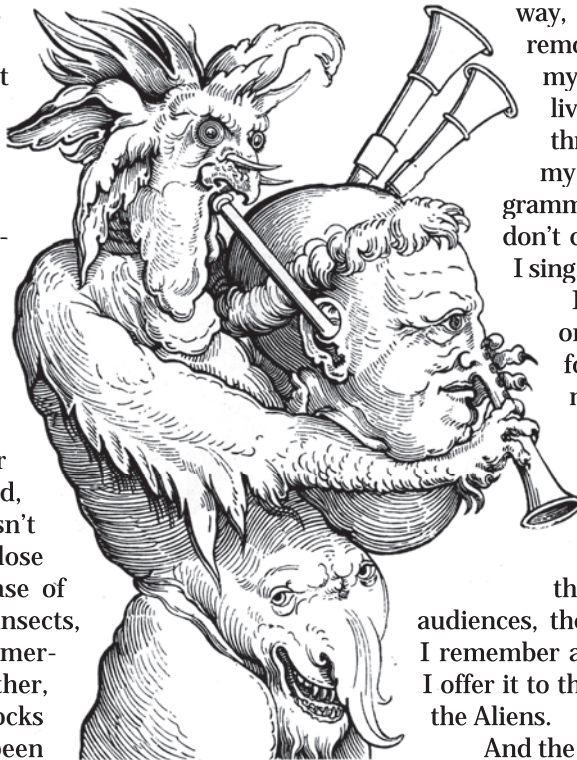
carefully tended. They wriggle out of entrances dug into the soft ground and stand around me, their bright multiple eyes reflecting the red-gold of the sun, now low on the horizon. They don't smile. They don't tell me how lucky I am. They don't ask how I'm doing. They just stare at me, and I stare back.

Suddenly one screams, and the others stamp their feet against the hard ground in a cadence that I can feel shivering through my feet and up my spine. Again and again, in strange patterns that I try to follow but always lose. Another screams. The sound pierces my head and makes everything bright, so bright that for a moment I can't see. Stamp, stamp, until I vibrate with the rhythm, until my sight returns, everything sharp and clear in the golden sunlight. Then I stamp too, and I scream.

The goddamn suit is in the way, so I pull off my gloves, remove the helmet. I clap my hands and sing the raw, living music that pushes through me. My head hurts, my stomach heaves, my programming screams "Stop!" but I don't care. I cry, I scream, and I sing.

I sing for the music that once was my life. I sing for the man who betrayed me, and who now mourns for what was lost. You're wrong, I scream. It's not lost. It's here, it's all here, and you can't have it — the music, the words, the crowds, the audiences, the anger and the beauty. I remember and I scream and I sing. I offer it to the sun and the rocks and the Aliens.

And the Aliens dance. 🐙



Arrive on Time

Bruce Boston

to the sound of "Time" by The Chambers Brothers...

Arrive on time with your luggage packed and labeled. Wear loose clothing.

Arrive on time at the station for your destination with no questions asked and your ticket in hand.

Arrive on time in the choke of the morning when objects leap from your grasp and your head is aching.

Arrive on time when your toast turns to shale and the amputee at the corner has run out of clever rhymes no matter how many quarters you feed him.

Arrive on time in your continental best, prepared to dine alfresco, ready to drink in hotel bars and be taken in hotel suites.

Arrive on time for courtroom dramas that play with swift and awkward gaps between. No sotto voce here. Many silent abortions.

Arrive on time as if you were a drone chosen by your apiary peers to service the rapacious Queen.

Arrive on time with rage suppressed and a telegenic grin pasted on your scowl.

Arrive on time for liquid blue excursions in the scuba deep. Favor the shoreline. Predators swim beyond the tide.

Arrive on time for midair collisions that leave burning human debris slathered across the land.

Arrive on time for long injections of the brew that stirs no passion in your veins.

Arrive on time in a cascade of sunsets that promise a somnambulistic week of moist viral intoxication.

Arrive on time as if you were a fish who craves the hook and being served with tartar and lemon on a linen table.

Arrive on time in your grandfather's pocket. Not really your grandfather but an influential patron of all that could be. If you can trust him.

Arrive on time like a lover who knows no option beyond the gazebo's programmed kiss.

Arrive on time with your portfolio intact. Include the confidential papers you don't want anyone to see.

Arrive on time for your graveyard eulogy and the worms' artless consummation. 🐛



Le Garage de Sybil

Strangeness

Steve Rasnic Tem

to the sound of Shostakovich, Sonata for Viola and Piano, Op. 147-I. Moderato...

Strangeness, \strānj-nəs\, noun: *In particle physics a quantum characteristic used to describe certain short-lived particles and their transformations when interacting with other particles.*

Short-lived particles. Trish looked up from the dictionary at Martin. A half hour ago she'd had to tell him that his best friend from college had dropped dead from a heart attack the previous week. The man's much younger wife had phoned with the news. She hadn't provided many details—she'd said she had so many of these calls to make—she just thought Martin would like to know. “Like” seemed cruel in such a circumstance but what word should she use? Want? No, there had been no history. Absolutely none. The woman had skirted around the precise circumstance and Trish, guiltily, had just naturally assumed sex had been involved. A transformation having taken place when two short-lived particles interacted. The result being this alien state, this strangeness, the lights dimmed, no one left at home.

Martin appeared to be taking the news with equanimity. “He was never in the best of health,” he said softly, but would not look away from the television. It was one of those reality shows;

Trish wasn't sure which one. People yelled at each other quite a bit on those shows—more than she herself had ever experienced, although she knew this was probably normal behavior in some parts of the world. Then someone was voted out of the house, off the island, into the plastic box suspended from a crane, or whatever.

She waited to see if he had more to say, if he needed her comfort in any way. This man had been Martin's best friend for many years. But Martin had barely reacted—it might as well have been some stranger on the news who died.

Strangeness had been coming into her life for years—now at last it had fully arrived, courtesy of Martin, her husband of twenty-six years. Did men undergo a change of life? Angie once said “The difference between men and women is that men go through menopause every five years.”

Angie was on her third marriage, this time to Harry, a small man who hid part-way behind her at all social occasions.

It was that sense of strangeness that had driven Trish to open a dictionary for the first time in probably ten years. Not even for Scrabble—if she had to look it up it probably wasn't a word she'd feel comfortable using. The dictionary had been hard to find, pushed to the back of a bottom shelf in a corner of this basement rec room shared by Martin's big old TV and assorted storage. Not much “rec” had occurred in this house for years, not since Molly had grown up and away to



a series of eastern towns none of whose names she could recall.

The top edge of the dictionary had been covered by a thick bed of dust, and curlicues of someone's long hair—whose she could not imagine. She and Molly had always worn theirs short. *Maybe it's angelhair*, she thought, chuckling, scrubbing off the book before daring to open it. But angelhair was a pasta—who would eat this? Of course there were poor people and people a world away whose lives she could not begin to imagine, but that was making her sad, so she derailed that train of thought.

THIS WAS A LETTER THAT HAD UNSETTLED HER, EVEN AS A CHILD, BECAUSE IT SO RESEMBLED A SNAKE.

She peeled the pages back carefully, looking for bugs. If she found any she knew she would just throw the dictionary across the room and then that would be the end of this little project.

Along the way to the S'es she'd stopped now and then to look at a word—cynosure, destructionist, hydromancy, placebo, resistivity. The dictionary was like the estate list her mother had of what had been in her grandmother's attic at the time of the reading of her will. So these are the things in grandmother's attic, which we don't use anymore, although once they had been important in our lives. These are things she had but which she doesn't have anymore, her being dead, and which we don't have, our having sold them. This is just a list of what used to be in that huge empty attic up there—this is all we have to remember them, and our grandmother, by.

That list had been no more substantial, really, than a list of the contents of her grandmother's pantry might have been. And these

are the things that she consumed along the way. This is just a list, mind you, for the pantry is now empty, our grandmother having eaten all these things over the course of her long lifetime, a time that has now ended and will not be, ever again.

On Martin's television young twenty-some-things lounged on inflated furniture in an indoor pool. She could tell by their body language that several different sorts of flirtations were occurring, seemingly at cross purposes. The volume was turned down so low she could make out a general pattern of tone, but no specific words. This had become Martin's preferred mode of television watching: the volume turned down, brightness and contrast turned up. The lights in the television room were set to the lowest level of dim. The combination lent a yellowish pallor to his face, interrupted by lightning flashes of white. Simply watching his face she might have thought he was watching battlefield footage.

When Trish got into the S'es, a letter that had never been her favorite, which she hated to use even in Scrabble, she remembered that this was a letter that had vaguely unsettled her even as a child, because it so resembled a snake.

Strange, \strānj\, adj. Foreign, the quality of being alien, not native.

She was somewhat surprised. Was that what the word really meant? She had expected some description of unease. Disquiet. Now that was a good word. Disquiet was the way she felt most of the time, in her house, in her life, in the marriage. Disquietude would be the noun. The place where she lived now.

Not native. That felt absolutely correct. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she had discovered she was not native to this place. The lands at the periphery of her vision, the island out the corner of the eye—that's where she had come from.

SYBIL'S GARAGE

The twenty-somethings were now in a bar somewhere. The camera work was jarring and aggressive, the colors bright, violent. Something about to happen, although she saw nothing evident on the screen. But she did not look away.

Once she'd arrived at the correct place, Trish had felt compelled to read the remainder of that dictionary page. It was like a rest stop on a long trip. Since you were already there, why not visit "the world's largest prairie dog hole?"

Strange woman, apparently, was an archaic term for a prostitute. There were other meanings, of course. But did they all have some sort of sexual association buried in their etymologies? Weird sisters and harpies and sphinxes. Strangeness back to the beginnings of art and writing. Angie, who believed in astrology and evil spirits and the living Christ, and all manner of things Trish considered strange, said that it was men who made up the words and men who compiled the dictionaries, so it should be no wonder that women were associated with things strange and vaguely sinister.

She became aware of an insistent susurrations in the room. She glanced over at Martin, whose breath whistled, as if he had fallen asleep with his eyes open. He fell asleep often these days: in front of his computer, sitting out on the porch. And this despite the fact that he was always in bed before she was. He used to complain about the resulting neck pain in the morning, although now he did not complain about anything, ever.

She did not think he was asleep. She could see his eyes flickering, his tongue darting be-

tween his lips. But he continued making that noise. As if he were having difficulty breathing. As if he were in pain.

Susurrations. Like snakes gathered together to exchange the secrets of the world. Trish hadn't realized that she even knew the word.

Martin sat motionless at the dinner table, his eyes two wet gray pebbles floating on yellowing jelly. Late afternoon spring sun afforded a relatively clear glimpse.

He'd requested the earlier dinners, and eager to please him (did she imagine this would magically fix things?) she'd obliged. It hadn't resulted in additional time together, however. He just had more time in the evenings to ruminate, to vegetate, to do exactly what, it now seemed, he did best: to stare unblinking at a life she wasn't sure she understood anymore. They used to walk in the park, garden, sit in the sun, together, but not anymore. Martin was either too tired or too busy, but she honestly couldn't figure out what he was being busy at.

His skin had a grayish, raw dough patina. The tiny cracks at the corners of his eyes appeared to have multiplied since the last time she'd noticed. She wasn't sure, but his hair appeared to be visibly thinner. It was certainly grayer. There was also a puffiness about him, as if air was trapped in hidden pockets beneath the skin.

So people age. Headline news. She chided herself. If he wanted he could no doubt catalog a dozen similar changes in her own face. But did he notice her enough to do so? He was still a handsome man—she needed to appreciate



more what she had and not, as her grandmother used to say, "borrow trouble."

"So," she ventured. "You haven't said anything about the ham."

His eyes rolled towards her from somewhere behind his lids. "This isn't ham."

"Well, no. It's what we always have. Turkey ham. It's healthier."

"It's also pinker. Real ham doesn't come this pink. I don't believe so, at least. We haven't had real ham in a very long time, I don't believe."

"If you want real ham, Martin, I'd be happy to fix you some real ham."

"No, no. You said this is healthier."

"Then what are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying to say anything. I'm just saying that you asked me about the ham, but this isn't ham. It's turkey ham. But it's perfectly fine for us to eat. It tastes just fine."

A few years ago she would have been offended by the conversation. He was so hard to please. Now it seemed more likely that he was too easy to please, or that "pleased" hadn't much meaning for him.

The remainder of their dinner conversation consisted of factual statements about the weather, the progress of the neighbor's new patio, and a repeated recollection of Molly's phone call from four days ago. She was pregnant, due in six or seven months. She lived across the country and they rarely saw her. They'd met her husband once, last Christmas. Martin had commented that the young man appeared to be stable, but that he needed a better haircut. She'd agreed. She'd actually said, "I agree," even though she thought it was a ridiculous thing for him to say. It was the only comment he'd ever made about their son-in-law.

Later that evening Trish peered into the study where Martin was reading. She watched surreptitiously as he periodically turned the pages, tears tracing his cheeks with almost par-

allel trails. She left quickly so that he wouldn't see her watching him.

Downstairs she cleaned the kitchen, although it was already spotless. She looked around for laundry to do. Towels were stacked neatly on shelves in the laundry room, sheets were in cabinets, and every bit of clothing except what they had on was tucked away cleaned and pressed in a drawer somewhere. Her rising anxiety was assuaged only when she took off all her clothes and slipped into a fresh clean robe, dropping the clothes into the washer and starting it. She would have just enough time to iron the small load before joining Martin in bed.

She went back upstairs. Martin was no lon-

WHEN THINGS START GOING BAD, THOSE MASK-DROP- PING MOMENTS ARE WHAT YOU FOCUS ON

ger in his study. She found him in their bedroom, lying in bed in his bright blue pajamas, sheet tucked tightly across his heart, staring at the ceiling. His lips moved slightly, constantly. She found the indecipherable whisper mildly irritating so she left.

"I'm just afraid there's something really wrong with him that he needs to be treated for."

Angie patted her arm with one hand and waved a cigarette sympathetically with the other. "Oh, I know, hon. You couldn't drag my first husband into the doctor's until the cancer ate his throat." Then, when Trish started crying, "Oh . . . sorry."

"He doesn't want to tell me what's bothering him. Half the time I'm not sure he even knows I'm there."

Angie's two-year-old—Trish couldn't re-

member the little boy's name—planted himself in front of her with his thumb in his mouth. Angie put the cigarette down and moved him like an errant piece of furniture. “Maybe he can't help it,” she said. “There may be other forces involved.”

Trish looked up warily. “You mean another woman.” She almost said “a strange woman.”

“I mean the devil takes on a number of different roles in our lives. And when you're wrestling with the devil pretty much everyone else disappears, including your family. I know you may not believe that, but it's what I believe.”

Harry was sitting at his own table, a small square of wood not much bigger than a dinner plate, in a corner against the wall by the sink. He'd turned his chair around to face them, but Angie's wide shoulders hid most of his body. He'd been smiling since Trish arrived, his eyes floating as if he were listening to his own, private, ecstatic tune.

“I don't know what I believe. I don't *know* that I know anything. I don't know how people find each other in the first place, or how they stay together. What do you really see in another person? A few surface traits, the way they present themselves when they know you're looking, and then those times they're losing it, dropping the mask. And when things start going bad, those mask-dropping moments are what you focus on—you find yourself running around trying to catch them in the act, you're just sneaking around looking for evidence that they've failed you—I swear, you're collecting their worst moments, and you're thinking that that's what's really true, that that's all there is. To life, I mean. You can't see what it adds up to other than a list of things, a list of words, objects purchased, things consumed. A long list of disappointments.”

She finished up wondering if she'd been spitting. Did she just lose her mind in front of Angie and that peculiar little Harry?

“Oh, honey, you're just upset. You get all upset and then you get all complicated. None of us know. It's in God's hands, finally. There's somebody for everybody, you just have to let God make the arrangements.”

“Angie, you're on your third marriage.”

“And God had a hand in every one of them.”

Trish gazed at Harry, whose face split into an even wider smile. She felt warm, and wanted to leave, but didn't know how to get out of there without being rude. The corners of Harry's mouth began traveling in opposite directions then, until the line of mouth completely bisected his head. Harry leaned back and eased open his mouth. Trish got up and left before the top of his head had the opportunity to fall in.

PEOPLE CREATED THEIR WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS DRIVEN BY WHIM—SO WHAT SUBSTANCE COULD THERE BE TO ANY OF IT?

When she got home she could hear Martin moving around upstairs. Low murmurs rising and falling. Snaky sounds. Reality TV. Which, she thought, must be the most despairing phrase in the current vocabulary of the world.

She couldn't bring herself to go upstairs so she looked around downstairs for something to fill the time. She'd never had that problem as a child. Her mother used to say, “Trish makes up the world as she goes along.”

She sat on the couch in front of the fireplace. It wasn't a real fireplace, actually, although there had probably been one, or several, in the house when it was first built. But the old chimney was at the other end of the house. This fireplace had a pretty, but plastic-looking

SYBIL'S GARAGE

mantle and a painted, optical illusion of a fire-box with lavender gas flames.

She and Martin had redecorated this room multiple times over the years, each time to something prettier (according to the fashion of that year), and a step further away from reality, so that stepping in and out of this room was like traveling to a different ... hallucination. Some day, she was sure, people would buy huge environmentally controlled boxes to live in, and video and 3D technologies would provide the decoration. Home and Virtual Living. The world outside the walls of your newly purchased skull could just go straight to hell. Why should you care?

Whisper whisper whisper. She also didn't care if their house hated her new attitude or not. By this time it probably realized something was up, that it was quickly losing its grip on her. Some of these things—that side table, the small Victorian lamp—had been her grandmother's, and some—that art deco desk chair, for example—her mother's. The rest were things she and Martin had purchased at fancy department stores, garage sales, out of a catalog (from pictures which never exactly matched what was delivered). Today there seemed no solid reason for any of it to be here. *Window dressing*, was the phrase her mother used to use.

People never stopped playing house. What was this place but her biggest dollhouse ever? People created their worlds within worlds driven by whim—so what substance could there be to any of it?

The walls of the room suddenly faded into a child's wavering crayon lines, a lopsided oval of red crayon sun showing through the broken

drawing. It smiled down at her crookedly.

Upstairs Martin continued to whisper. It might have been her name he was saying or it might not, but she decided to imagine it was. She staggered to her feet and made for the rough box that delineated where the staircase should be.

Stair steps shuffled beneath her feet like a random stack of narrow rectangular cards. The world didn't clarify itself again until she opened their poorly drawn bedroom door.

Martin lay on his back in the bed, his chest rising and falling aggressively. A large something stood or crouched on the floor by his feet, wings spread into a crucifix, head the size of a buffalo's with a huge black beak the sheen of metal, cow-like eyes bright with realization, and behind those eyes, blending into the long blonde hair that flowed down its feathered and scaled backside, a pair of flaming, multi-colored gills.

Judging from the size of the breasts Trish supposed her to be female, although visual cues seemed hardly reliable.

Martin whistled and bucked, in the throws of an oddly controlled seizure. Although Trish could see no trace of it, she felt something pass between Martin and the thing, this other she. She took something. He took something.

The whole process lasted less than a minute. Finished, the creature turned slowly toward Trish, and froze, only light moving across the eye. Trish felt as if she would completely dissolve in its greater presence.

Sweeping its wings, the creature moved again toward the window. Trish thought that such a large thing could not possibly pass



through that size opening, when it faded into the air. A brief smell passed through her mouth and nose, scouring, then evaporated with a slightly salty aftertaste.

She sat down on the floor and remained there for some time, peering now and then at Martin who appeared to be breathing easily, resting peacefully. Eventually she crawled onto the bed beside him, staring at the ceiling, barely touching his side with her little finger, but touching him deliberately just the same.

She kept listening for the flap of wings, waiting for a change of smell or shadow. To her great disappointment, nothing came.

Trish walked through the downtown shopping district with a forced, determined step. She hadn't brought her purse; she had no plans to buy. She did have a few dollars stuffed into her bra, because she did want to eat. She enjoyed eating these days—she was always hungry. *Food becomes me*, she thought, and smiled, the way she remembered Harry smiling.

Around her the narrow lines of the buildings swayed. Threads of various colors floated together briefly, becoming patches of sky and patches of store, powerlines and sidewalks, streets, the momentary smear of cars moving with one or more occupants inside. Then the fabric warped and folded, hours passed, the sun tumbled through the sky like a half-eaten fruit tossed languidly into the trash, and there she was again, continuing on her merry way.

She bent down and picked up a thread—

once part of a sidewalk, perhaps connected to a person's leg or the side of a tree—gave it a yank, then she smiled as the world tightened and leaned over slightly, before returning more or less to form, rumpled like a worn out sweater.

When she was a little girl her grandmother had knitted her the most beautiful sweater. It had at least six colors knitted into a series of intricate, irregular patterns, as if from some sweater manufacturing machine gone wild, but Trish knew it came from her slightly addled grandmother and her imperfect way of knitting things. Trish had worn that sweater proudly every day until one day one of the threads had come loose, a strand of yarn some two or three inches long. The sweater now looked shabby. Not knowing what else to do, Trish had pulled on the thread, and pulled, until it became a long line of bright color, and reluctant to ask her grandmother to fix it, Trish had kept pulling, and kept pulling, until after an hour or so the actual shape of the sweater was gone, as if it had never existed, and instead she had this pile of shapeless colored yarn.

"Mommy, who's that strange woman?" she heard a child ask nearby.

Trish's lips tasted sweet, then salty, and vaguely of sex. She smiled as the thread of the child's voice stretched out into a long, dreary wail adrift with the rest of the dangling sky. 🐟

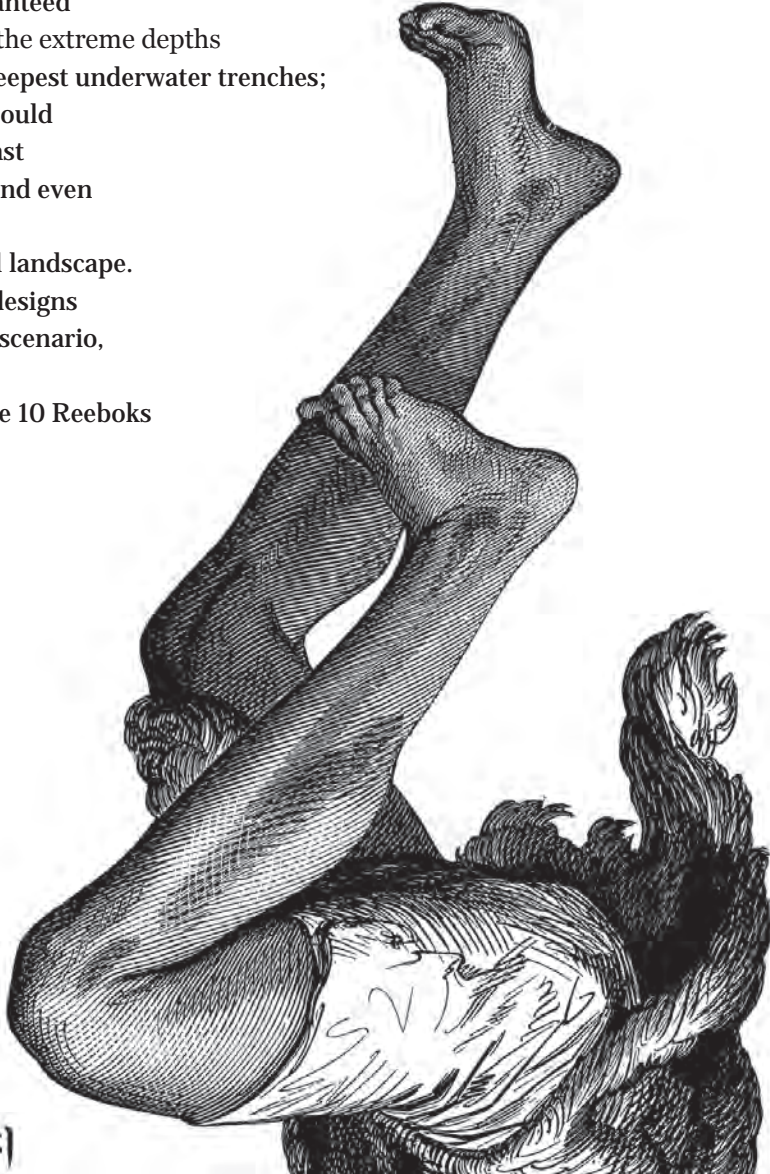


If the Shoe Fits

Aurelio Rico Lopez III

to the sound of Tenacious D's "The Pick of Destiny"...

Aqua socks guaranteed
To withstand the extreme depths
Of earth's deepest underwater trenches;
Steel-toed boots that could
Kick a rabid Helicobeast
Clear across Jupiter; and even
A pair of shoes suited
For Mercury's infernal landscape.
A thousand footwear designs
For every conceivable scenario,
Yet regretfully,
Not a single pair of size 10 Reeboks
In sight. 🐟



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Sybil's Garage

no. 7

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Contributors

To Whom We are Indebted

to the sound of a seagull crying over the Hudson River at sunset...

Leah Bobet

lives in Toronto, where she studies linguistics and works in Canada's oldest science fiction bookstore. Her work has recently appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, and *Science Fiction: The Best of the Year 2006*. She fights crime.

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has over the last twenty plus years published five novels, the most recent of which is *From the Files of the Time Rangers* in 2005. His stories have appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Sci-Fiction* and elsewhere. His most recent short fiction collection *Streetcar Dreams and Other Midnight Fancies* was published by PS Publications in England in 2006. He has won the World Fantasy, Lambda, International Horror Guild and the mainstream Million Writers Awards. Recent and forthcoming stories will be in *F&SF*, *Subterranean Magazine Special Edition* and *The Salon Fantastique*, *Coyote Road: Trickster Tales*, *Datlow Del Rey* and *So Fey* anthologies.



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SYBIL'S GARAGE

Sybil's Garage No. 4
is a publication of
Senses Five Press
307 Madison St, No. 3L
Hoboken, NJ 07030
ISSN: 1557-9735

<http://www.sensesfive.com>
info@sensesfive.com

© 2007 Senses Five Press

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*You should.
You should put.
You should put harassing women with sexual intercourse.
I should know.
I'm a medical doctor.
I have a mansion and a yacht.
You should.
You should put.*

*You should.
You should put.
You should put harassing women with sexual intercourse.
I should know.
I'm a medical doctor.
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You should.
You should put.*

Acknowledgements:

We wish to thank all the editors for their hard work, Stephen Segal for his great interview and unstoppable drive, Jeffrey Ford for his excellent interview and inspiring creativity, Derek Ford for his awesome drawing, Gavin Grant & Kelly Link for all their help in too many ways to list, Mercurio D. Rivera for his expert legal advice, Paul Berger for our trips into the Butterfly Conservatory, Greer Woodward for words in Hawaiian and in general braving earthquakes to help edit *Sybil's Garage*, Eugene Myers for his book reviews, Devin Poore for his interview & always helpful advice, Lauren McLaughlin for keeping us sane, Kris Dikeman for her beautiful touch-ups on the cover & other fantastically graphical things, John Joseph Adams for many inspirations, Doug Cohen for his mos def rap skills, all the Contributors for their excellent poems & stories, but most of all, we wish to thank you, dear reader — for without you none of this would be possible.

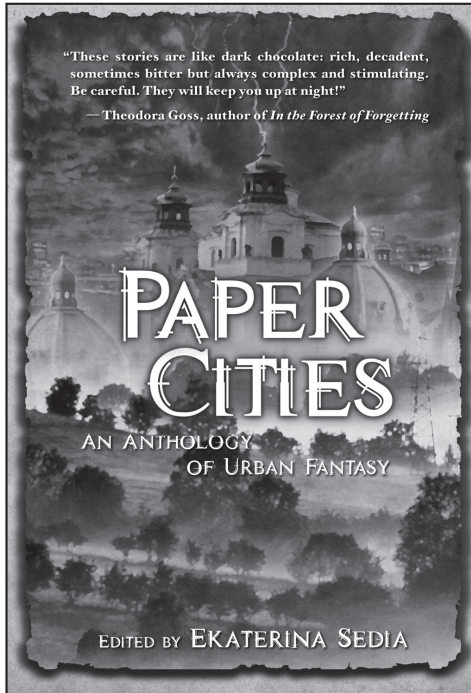
Sincerely,
Matthew Kressel
March 2007

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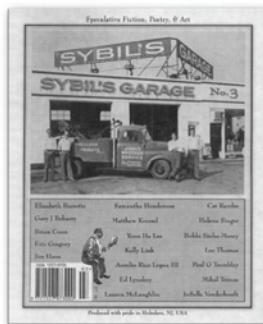
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(there's no need to brawl)



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