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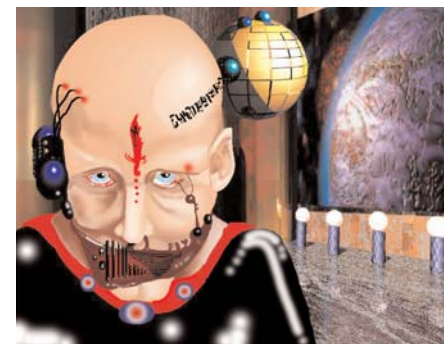


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So I'm rambling ... but it's important rambling!

by Jeff Georgeson

This is the sixth issue of *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine*, marking our first full year's worth of issues. It would make me teary-eyed if I weren't looking back at it all with such a sense of wonder. I was going through our covers the other day, and suddenly it struck me: Wow. Look at what we've done.

Now, I'm not new at this game; I've been an editor of something-or-other since the early nineties, be it magazine or newspaper, and I've had plenty of issues worth of material to look at. And I've had this sense before, looking over vast swaths of work; it is, after all, such a wonderful feeling to look back at a forest you normally only see the individual trees of. But with *Penumbria*, I get a sense of growth, of finding its place in the world, and a real sense we're going somewhere with all this ... and, even better, I don't know where our destination lies. Every issue is a dynamic thing unto itself, and yet fits somehow into the gestalt of the whole.

I'll save some of the "back when we started" meandering for our first anniversary issue in June, but I do want to thank the authors and artists who submit work to us, who make every day's adventure into the mailbox a search for treasure that is far more often rewarded than I had experienced elsewhere. Sturgeon's Law seems to be in abeyance here; we have to reject more work than we'd like, and we REALLY like the work we do accept.

I can only imagine the joyous hell it's going to be to pick works for our first "Best of" print anthology (due out late July/early August, we hope).

Back to the issue at hand ...

For the first time we bring you an article rather than an interview, focusing on the world of cyberpunk. "What?" you may say. "But

that's been dead for years!" Au contraire. It's been alive all along, from *Neuromancer* forwards, in a continuous line through to *Ghost in the Shell* and *The Matrix* and beyond.

We also bring you more of the excellent work of Christina Sng, whose poetry we cannot get enough of, and Robert Elrod, whose art and stories are not just horror but something far more. And even beyond that: We bring you stories by Darren Speegle, Leslie Aguillard, and Vincent W. Sakowski; poetry by John Grey; and art/narratives by Stan Yan and T. Motley.

Starting with this issue, there is a subscriber's only section of the site. For now, this includes the archives and the pdf version of the current issue; in future, more of the magazine may be limited to subscribers. Subscribers also get a 15% discount off the annual print anthology. Subscriptions are only US\$6 and may be purchased in any number of ways; click here to see further details. If we get enough money coming in this way, we won't have to further restrict the site. Then again, maybe some people would love to see it restricted ...

Until next time!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor, psmf
April 2k3

Do you have comments about anything in the magazine?
Click the following: [Comments](#)



The Further Rebirth of Cyberpunk

How a genre was born,
proclaimed dead, and renewed
in movable and colorful form

IT IS ODD that a genre (or, technically, subgenre) as forward-thinking and predictive as cyberpunk would seem, by the very mention of the word, to be something passé, to be a thing of the past and not of the future. In our minds it conjures up the very best days of ‘Net cowboys and cyborgs, a time when the wild, sprawling megacities had yet to be tamed or even explored properly, a time when anything went and frequently did (to our chagrin). And yet, in a world that in some ways has caught up to the original cyberpunk predictions of it, these stories and the genre itself have sometimes been relegated to the same status as fairy tales: Classic stories, yes, but clichéd and a bit old-fashioned; stories to nod at and be thankful for, but nothing any sane publisher would keep an eye out for.

PICTURED: Still from Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* (1995; copyright Masamune Shirow/Kodansha Ltd./Bandai Visual Co., Ltd./Manga Entertainment)

What a horrid state of affairs! And how illusory! For with the success of films like *The Matrix* (1999) (a cyberpunk story if ever there was one), surely we can see how the genre continues, how cyberpunk thrives and is vibrant and well, thank you, in a world that threatens to keep pace with it (and for that very reason needs it). Academics might argue, of course, that the current cyberpunk as exemplified by *The Matrix* et al is not cyberpunk at all but is instead post-cyberpunk (brought to us by the same strange jargon that brings us “modern”

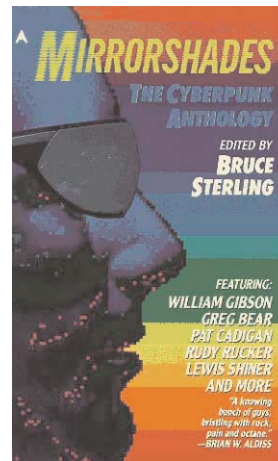
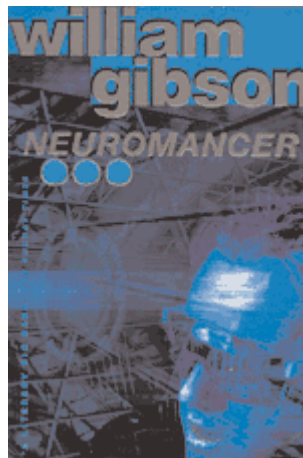
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[meaning barely 20th century], “post-modern,” and “post-post-modern”), as cyberpunk itself is dead and buried somewhere out beyond Boot Hill and, thus, anything resembling it must either be a figment of our imagination or a different animal altogether, as academia does not allow for resurrection; as we shall see here, however, the genre never really went away, it merely dropped below the radar of those looking for the Hottest New Thing.

And no, we’re not doing it by some goofy sleight-of-hand like using Bruce Sterling’s (flippant?) remark that anything written by a cyberpunk author is cyberpunk, and thus since William Gibson etc have been writing right along cyberpunk never really went away; nor are we of the opinion that, as Andrew Butler (2000) implies in *The Pocket Essential Cyberpunk*, once the original group has stopped writing in a genre, it has disappeared. To do so would be like first claiming that, even if all sf (science fiction, that is) authors in the 1930s stopped writing sf and started writing gardening books, that those gardening books would somehow be sf; and then claiming that, once those writers stopped writing even gardening books, that any new writers coming along and writing sf wouldn’t be writing sf at all. So no genre survives beyond the first group of writers? This absurdly generational viewpoint will not be further explored.

Where do we start? Let’s get our bearings ... Cyberpunk is ... well, difficult to corner into any single definition. It is a subgenre of sci-



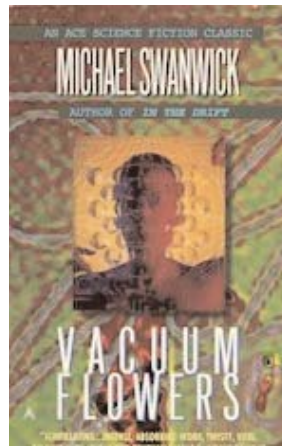
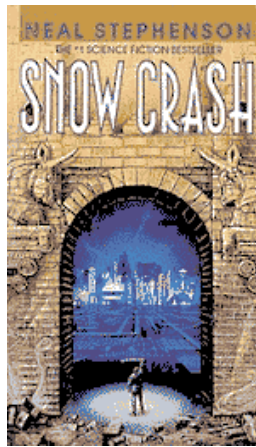
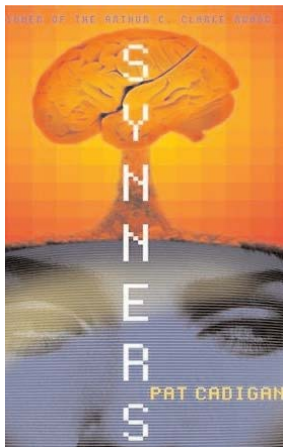
PICTURED: (*this page*) Covers for William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, *Mirrorshades* (edited by Bruce Sterling); (*opposite page*) Pat Cadigan's *Synners*, Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, and Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers*

ence fiction. Its worlds are generally near-future Earths in which corporations have more power than governments, and cities have grown so that many have joined into sprawling megacities stretching, for instance, across the eastern seaboard of the US. Computers, the Internet (an advanced version thereof), and AIs (artificial intelligence of some nature, be it robot, cyborg, or mainframe) figure prominently, and often in an “everyday” sort of way (as in, these things are so commonplace, no one thinks them remarkable). And the heroes are often rather low on the social totem pole, people who are nearly on the wrong side of the tracks, or perhaps are. There is generally a distinctly noir-like atmosphere, as though PI Philip Marlowe had found his way into a video game and couldn’t get out.

How much of this laundry list has to be in a story to call it cyberpunk? That is up to the individual reviewer to decide, or the author, when authors are given the liberty to make such choices. We’d say the computer/AI/Net element is absolutely necessary, and the near-

future, gritty world is also important. The bounty hunter/lowlife/punker characters are next in importance, although a good cyberpunk story can move beyond such stereotypes and still be cyberpunk—*Ghost in the Shell* (1995), for instance, is certainly cyberpunk, but the primary characters are government agents (and primarily cyborgs).

So you want examples? It is generally accepted that the book putting cyberpunk on the literary map publishers consult before setting out on any financial journey was William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), complete with all the elements listed above. Staying with Gibson a moment, we have *Count Zero* (1986) and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) (sort of sequels to *Neuromancer*), then much later *Virtual Light* (1993), *Idoru* (1996) (our favorite), and *All Tomorrow’s Parties* (1999). There is also a book of short stories called *Burning Chrome* (1986), which includes “Johnny Mnemonic” (made into an absolutely terrible film) and “New Rose Hotel” (also made into an absolutely terrible film).



to popularize the term, may have been doing first readings. Dozois was also the editor of *1983 Year's Best SF*, the year Bethke's story was published in *Amazing*, so it seems likely, in a circumstantial way, that Bethke coined it, and Dozois popularized it.

The Power and the Glory

When Gibson's *Neuromancer* came along, the genre was well and truly born. After all, it is a collective hallucination, in some ways, that genres exist at all; genre is merely a way of categorizing and organizing works, and for better or worse publishers (and movie moguls) have a significant say in creating new ones. And when *Neuromancer* became a best-seller, when it won the Hugo, Nebula, P. K. Dick, Seiun, and Ditmar awards, something no other SF work has done, publishers gathered around "cyberpunk" like stray cats after a nice fresh bit of haddock. It was in their interest to promote this new genre, the latest new thing, and as long as it remained profitable to do so, they continued to hype cyberpunk as a genre.

This is not to say that cyberpunk is entirely the creation of publishing houses, and that really these books and films and stories are just sf, plain and simple. It is a useful categorization, a useful distinction to separate cyberpunk from the rest of science fiction; it is a distinct type, and a distinct sort of story and worldview. But the publishers' involvement in genre-making is extremely important to note, because it plays a large role in the perceived "death" of the genre—to wax Monty Python-esque, when cyberpunk became a has-been haddock, when

The politics, if you will, of cyberpunk were put forth by Bruce Sterling and others in Sterling's newsletter *Cheap Truth*, of the same time period as *Neuromancer*, which hyped the members of this movement (not yet called cyberpunk) and railed against mainstream sf. Sterling has also contributed to cyberpunk in other ways, not the least of which is *Mirrorshades*, a collection of "cyberpunk" stories that, oddly, contains some very non-cyberpunk stories as well as some definitively cyberpunk ones. (This may not be so odd given Sterling's claims noted above.)

Continuing with books, Pat Cadigan's *Mindplayers* (1987) was well received, and her next two novels (*Synners* [1991] and *Fools* [1992]) each won the Arthur C. Clarke award, making her the only author to have won the award twice. Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) is also highly acclaimed, and Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers* (1987) is good as well.

Hmmm. Already, if you're looking at the pub-

lication dates of the books we've mentioned, it would be hard to say the genre died at some point, wouldn't it?

Perhaps now would be a good time to delve into the history of the genre (before giving you this tremendous list of works, both literary and film, leaving you to wonder how anyone could ever have declared cyberpunk dead ... we'll leave that ultimate sense of wonder for later). For much of the historical information we are indebted to the alt.cyberpunk FAQ, although really most sources agree on the early history of cyberpunk ... it's just later that everyone scatters for their own pet theories (including, we must admit, ourselves).

In the Beginning ...

... was the word. No, really ... the word "cyberpunk" was first the name of a short story by Bruce Bethke (available for free at www.infinityplus.co.uk/stories/cpunk.htm). This story was submitted to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1980, around the time Gardner Dozois, who was the first person

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Select List of Cyberpunk Works

Books/Short Stories

Bethke, Bruce

“Cyberpunk” (1980; published *Amazing* 1983)

Cadigan, Pat

Mindplayers (1987)

Synners (1991)

Fools (1992)

Tea from an Empty Cup (1998)

Dick, P.K.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep (1968; way ahead of its time)

Gibson, William

Neuromancer (1984)

Count Zero (1986)

Mona Lisa Overdrive (1988)

Burning Chrome (1986)

Virtual Light (1993)

Idoru (1996)

All Tomorrow's Parties (1999)

Ings, Simon

Hot Head (1992)

Hotwire (1995)

Newman, Kim

The Night Mayor (1989)

Robson, Justina

Silver Screen (1999)

Rudy Rucker

Freeware (1997)

Realware (2000) (see also other novels in the “ware” series)

Semiotext(e) (1989)

Stephenson, Neal

Snow Crash (1992)

Sterling

Mirrorshades: A Cyberpunk Anthology (ed) (1988)

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the cats had torn it to shreds and thought that there was not so much to profit from, for the moment, they turned away, looking for the next Big Thing. That's the way publishing works. Heck, that's the way almost everything in US culture works.

But there was more. Perhaps using different media, but certainly more.

What Are These Here Moving Pictures?

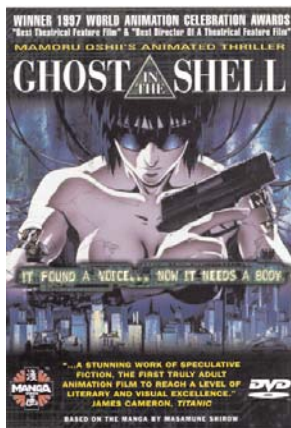
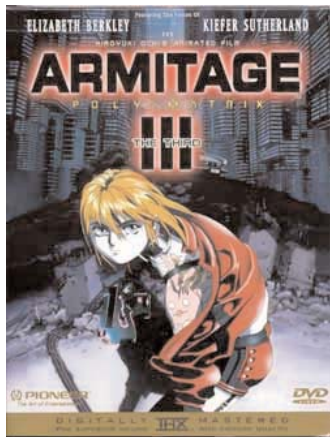
Cyberpunk in film really must begin before the genre was named ... so in this sense we must revise our origin story. *Blade Runner* (1982) is universally acclaimed as a cyberpunk film; it is complete with gritty city, bounty-hunter protagonist, AIs that are “more human than human,” large dominating corporations (well, one, anyway), and noirish overtones (especial-

ly in the original theatrical release, which included Harrison Ford's voice-over). However, at the time of its release it was not called cyberpunk, so it is not officially the beginning of the genre.

Yeah, right.

But soon after *Neuromancer* had reached heights of acclaim, we saw a spate of films and TV series of a cyberpunk turn of mind. The best of these survive to this day in reruns or on cable TV: *Max Headroom* (1985), for instance. Actually, some of the worst survive as well, given cable and satellite television's endless appetite: *Lawnmower Man* (1992), as an example, was not exactly an award-winning effort. And then, strangely (if you subscribe to the idea that cyberpunk died in the late eighties), there is more and more cyberpunk in the visual arts. *Strange Days* (1995) and *Johnny*





PICTURED: (this page) Covers for the DVD versions of *Armitage III* and *Ghost in the Shell*, image from promotional material for *Serial Experiments: Lain*; (opposite page) detail from poster for the film *Blade Runner*

Mnemonic (1995) both did fairly well in theatres (some would say despite themselves, although we liked *Strange Days ... Johnny Mnemonic* was, as mentioned earlier, awful), and both still make the rounds of cable television. Films like *Ghost in the Shell*, which did extremely well in Japan, its country of origin, and very well even in the US, for an animated non-Disney non-Dreamworks film (and did all the more remarkably well given that US audiences have been trained to see anything animated as “something for kids”), brought cyberpunk back into public view, and this continued with everything from TV series like *Reboot* (1994-2001), which really is an animated program aimed at kids (well, and adults), and *Serial Experiments: Lain* (1998) (definitely NOT aimed at kids) to films including, ultimately, *The Matrix*, which not only kept cyberpunk in the public view but thrust it into the very forefront of the public imagination, if there is such a thing.

Thus it would seem to us, with very little room for argument, that cyberpunk is certainly still a viable genre. *The Matrix* came out only four years ago and was one of the most successful films of the year. Two more films in the series are due out in 2003; if these are also successful they will create a market (or a perception that a market exists) for live-action cyberpunk in the US. *Ghost in the Shell* has spawned both a television series (*Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*), already running on Japanese TV and due out in the US sometime soon, and a second *Ghost in the Shell* film (*Innocence*) that is in production. And Mamoru Oshii, director of the *Ghost in the Shell* films, recently completed a live action film called *Avalon*, which came out in 2001. Regardless of the success of these, the Japanese enthusiasm for things cyberpunk will continue unabated, and thus the followers of anime and manga in other

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Swanwick, Michael
 Vacuum Flowers (1987)
 Williams, Walter Jon
 Hardwired (1986)
 Voice of the Whirlwind (1987)

Films/TV

Armitage III (1994)
Avalon (2001)
Blade Runner (1982)
Bubblegum Crisis (1987) (and *Bubblegum Crash* [1991], *Bubblegum Crisis 2040* [1998])
Ghost in the Shell (1995) (and *GitS: Stand Alone Complex* [2002-2003], *Innocence: Ghost in the Shell* [2004])
The Matrix (1999) (and *The Matrix: Reloaded* [2003], *The Matrix: Evolutions* [2003])
Max Headroom (1985)
Reboot (1994-2001; a sort of “cyberpunk for kids”)
Serial Experiments: Lain (1998)
Strange Days (1995)

Works About Cyberpunk

Alt.cyberpunk (newsgroup)
Cyberpunk by Andrew M. Butler (2000)
 The Cyberpunk Project (www.project.cyberpunk.ru)

What the Manga?

Books and film aren't the only places to get your fair helping of cyberpunk—manga (Japanese graphic novels, or comics, if you wish) are another very influential direction to follow. You might especially wish to follow the works of Masamune Shirow, who brought us *Ghost in the Shell* (the manga preceeded the film) and, more recently (in fact, just beginning to be released in the US), *ManMachine Interface*.

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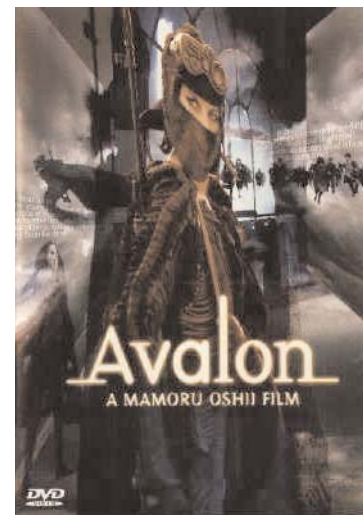
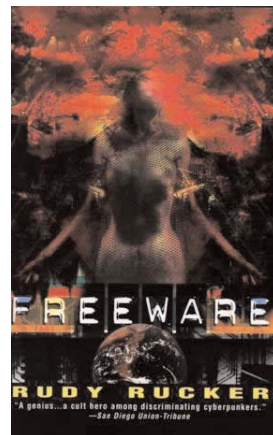
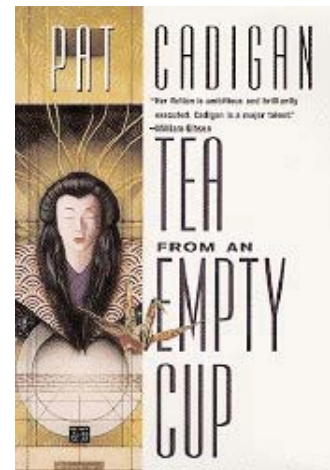
parts of the world will also continue to see cyberpunk material.

Let It Not Be Forgotten

Just to add more fuel to our discussion (argument? But how can it be an argument when we have so soundly defeated any supposed opposition?), cyberpunk is not dead as a written genre, either. Many cyberpunk novels and short stories came out in the 1990s and still do today. As mentioned earlier, Gibson's *Virtual Light*, *Idoru*, and *All Tomorrow's Parties* came out all across that decade. Pat Cadigan's *Tea from an Empty Cup* came out in 1998, Justina Robson's *Silver Screen* in 1999, and Rudy Rucker's *Realware* in 2000. These are not being hailed as great successes a la *Neuromancer*, but then, how many things are? These books are still reaching an audience and certainly still have a place on the shelves, virtual or otherwise, of bookstores.

In Conclusion, the Future Holds ...

What, now we're supposed to go and predict the future of cyberpunk? The future of any genre depends on having visionaries who not only create but create in new and productive ways, who move the genre or, indeed, all of literature forward, however slightly, with each page, with each scene. Rather than write another *Matrix*, move your texts, your philosophies in different ways. If your philosophy is the same as that put forth in existing works, find new ways to show it to your audience; perhaps they'll understand and be moved by your presentation, whereas they weren't by those who came before you. If your aim is



PICTURED: Detail from DVD cover for *The Matrix*; covers for Pat Cadigan's *Tea from an Empty Cup*, *Freeware* by Rudy Rucker; DVD cover for *Avalon*

simply to entertain, then find a way to do it that hasn't been tiresomely re-used by your forebears. As cyberpunk is a relatively young genre, writers in it have the advantage of not treading where thousands have already worn the road into a deep chasm; and as cyberpunk

is writing about the vast and infinite possibilities of the future, there is no limit to what you may write, and write convincingly and well. Whether your chosen medium be words or graphic narrative or film, you have the opportunity to change the world.

Escape Theory

by Darren Speegle

By day thirty-one, my only focus was escaping. The pain and weakness were distractions, but my focus was greater. I had to get back to Julie and the kids. What must she have thought by now?

No one knew I had been abducted. I was sure of that. It had been done by night and by an extremely efficient team, quick, silent, practiced. I wasn't sure exactly where I was now, but I thought Verena S4 or S5. We were definitely on one of Verena's satellites, as the silvery-yellow curve of the planet in sunrise affirmed, but we were inside a dome house, common to that quadrant, and the window only came around once a cycle-period. The rotation had nothing to do with the calendar as we humans know it, but my mind associated each complete turn with an earth day.

The Xinix had me—this I knew. A contractor, so to speak, had done the nabbing, but the Xinix were certainly behind it. Occasionally the aLlineal, who also acted as my torturers, even made a vague reference to them. I pretended I didn't hear. The Xinix don't exist, let's be clear. It wasn't to uncover solid evidence of their existence that I had been sent to Verena in the first place. I was just a political kidnapping. Right.

Knowing who my veiled captors were, I strongly suspected a ransom had not been demanded, nor any other manner of note sent. Julie and the girls, strangers on a strange world, were no doubt thinking the worst. People were known to die unnaturally in this solar system. The sector had become one of the fiercest examples of Holdout unrest. Among the more informed, of which I unfortunately happened to be one, Verena had risen to the status of highest priority. Galactic News had even started covering the region, although the product was more of the ilk of myth and legend than of real news. The last headline I'd seen before my fateful ride home from the embassy read:

XINIX ANSWER TO YVADORS? BELIEVERS SAY SO.

I had shaken my head and passed it on to the ambassador. His answer had been "Maybe they are." This out of the mouth of the representative of the United Worlds Against the Common Enemy. I had been impressed. Not only did the remark appreciate the religious fervor surrounding the Holdout in the Verena System, it also spoke to the ambassador's belief in the invisible race said to share the world.

My immediate captors were far from invisible, with their probes and their all-too-cousinly explosions of emotion. I wondered as we went through the routine day in and day out why the Xinix had put such barbarians on me. They had to know I was a graduate in psychophysiocontrol and that my physical pain threshold was very high. I had spent a decade in the military and another in law enforcement. But put the multi-appendaged, pleasure-taking aLlineal on me they had, and as one wound healed, another appeared, until I became concerned for my life. The creatures were expert, almost surgical at their work, but there was always the danger of the body reacting unpredictably.

Escaping became the only option. My focus honed on its own. When they probed, so did I, but in the other direction. The window slipped by that one time per day, a quirk in the time properties changing the physiology of my captors such that they quivered in a sort of liquid-like transparency for a few seconds before the window was gone. I could only assume I was at a molecular advantage, as I existed in one time only and did not require a dome house to correspond physically with other races. I did, however, wonder why the window remained open when interaction with the now was unnecessary. They might just as soon have opened a portal to any of the other temporal planes, as I was a prisoner within the control field of the a-temporal creatures for

Escape continued next page

which the domes existed. It was as if they were taunting me with that merest glimpse of the present and my inability to affect it.

By day thirty-one, a number significant in no other way, I felt I had the problem of escaping the dome solved.

I figured if I acted at the first sign of the ripple in their flesh, I could be at the eleven o'clock position a full second before the window arrived. Its turn was slow enough that I could easily step through before it left the time in which I existed. The opening was visible for a total of seven seconds as it made its pass, five of those ticking off before it widened to its maximum gap of about a meter, which occurred at the eleven o'clock position, relative to my location.

My location was a second problem. I was bound to the spot by disorientation and nothing else. Even in the black period when my captors were not around, I could not venture far from my position without retching—and there was scarce little to regurgitate besides water and blood. Over and above breaking through my probers, managing to carry myself to the eleven o'clock would require the most extreme

control I could exert.

But once I was out of the dome, I was out of danger. The aLlineal would not be able to pursue. As to conditions, I knew there were no gravity or respiratory risks to me on either of the two moons I've mentioned. The air outside the dome would be exactly the same as it was inside—in its properties, in its breathability. Unlike the quadrant's drifting aLlineal, the native Verenans were very much like humans—at least the Verenans that were visible.

Considering how careful they were with their devices, failure to make my window would probably not result in execution, but it would surely mean the window's closing, and that one glimpse of space I was allowed each day. The window extended from floor to apex. By the thirtieth day, I thought it resembled a strangely beautiful wound.

Where I would go when I was out was a question I would deal with then. What I did know was that not so long ago, in the Verena System, treatment of the sort I had suffered was not only frowned upon but forbidden, as indeed was confinement itself, except in extreme cases. Lying out on the fringes of the galaxy, Verena was a neutral, liberal, independent world. It fit the profile that the Verenans should include

Misclassified Romance

by Stan Yan



themselves among the Holdout sectors. It also fit the profile that their resistance to UWACE came primarily in the form of statements. It was the aLlineal causing all the chaos.

My knowledge that the Verenans lived on their moons and I wasn't out here in nothingness was the final deciding factor. I would run for the nearest farm, the nearest factory, the nearest whatever it was that didn't rely on the manipulation of time to accommodate. They would put me in touch with the authorities, who would in turn contact the embassy, and my wife would be informed that I was alive.

The pool of blood in which I stood never hardened. The aLlineal enjoyed that, tasting it on their many fingers, moving their grippers through it.

"How to today?" I calmly asked them.

When the day's probing began, the window was never far behind. The timing was no doubt intended. They liked to watch the reflection of hope die in my eye before giving it their full enthusiasm.

"What is today?" they returned, testing their probes.

"Today is day thirty-one to me," I said.

"Bah, thirty-one, one thousand-one, what is the difference?"

Getting to it at once, I said, "I'm nagged by a question. Who are they?"

"Who?" they returned, almost in unison. The galactic tongue lost all sophistication with these creatures, scarcely holding together at all.

"Your employers. Puppeteers, gods, whatever they are."

We know your threshold, conveyed the one who pretended to know me best. *You would be wise not to press.*

"Not only don't you know my threshold, you don't know your own

transparency," I said, revealing to the rest of them that I knew *they* knew he had become so familiar with me—a transgression of order among the aLlineal.

They put harm on my flesh, day's first. I reacted to the instance in my leg by taunting. They sniffed and shifted uncertainly. Suspiciously.

"We would eagerly take out bits and pieces of your brain, human."

"Would your employers approve of that?"

Why would they care? shot back the one who pretended to know me best.

"If they didn't instruct you to keep me sound, why bother—"

A pain shot through the groundmost part of me. The beasts! My feet were the parts that would take me there, to eleven o'clock. I shut down the thought as soon as it emerged. I wasn't sure they could extract from my mind as easily as they could speak into it, but they'd time with them. Which scared me most of all.

Did they know the future? Did they know I was looking for the window? Did they know day thirty-one was the day? Logic said my worry was paranoia. They weren't clever or perverse enough to wait until I believed utmost in my escape to let me know they were closing the window. It would have already happened. Of course it could have happened and I just didn't know it yet.

I put my hand over the severed blood vessel on the bridge of my foot and thought I might ask.

"When will I lose the will to live?"

"When?"

"You know the answer, right? You're the aLlineal and not subject to

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time as I know it.”

In the dome, time is to us as time is to you. We can only control the killing. The surviving is your own.

I hid the fact that my question was answered. Time was nearing.

He said aloud, “Why are you here, spy?”

In other words, let the interrogation begin. But a side of him had grown fainter, as if deprived of something. The window was coming.

“I know all about your employers,” I announced. “I know all about the Xinix.”

“What do you know?” they laughed.

“I know they are in league with the Yvadors, that they are going to allow the Yvador forces the use of this star system.”

The noisy blowing they did when irritated was nothing compared to the bellowing that now issued from them. Forewinds of change trembled through their flesh. I acted.

The slit of soft light fell as I broke through their appendages. The window opened as my stomach lurched into my throat, and the weight of my body on my injured foot pressed blood over my skin. A foul taste filled my mouth. The window widened, and the silvery rim of the great world that was Verena became visible. The bellowing and blowing behind me sent phlegm across the back of my neck, through my hair, but I refused to let even my own wretched matter, now spewing out of my mouth, stop me. It seemed for a moment I had lost the window, and myself along with it, then there it was again, wound to freedom.

I'd a full second to reconsider as I waited on eleven o'clock, then it arrived and I was slipping through. I turned in time to see their arms

withdrawing, submerging into the liquid substance of their bodies.

The vault of night surrounded me. Filling nearly half the heavens was the planet. The other half ...

Ships. Leviathans. Tens of them, hundreds of them ...

I could only gape as the fleet multiplied before my eyes. The Yvadors were coming, and their vessels were as many as the stars. I thought of the accusations I'd made to the aLlineal, but what I had fed to them about the Xinix being in league with the Yvadors was a sliver of my imagination, with no base in reality.

It is enough for us, then.

I whirled, searching my surrounds, though I knew the message had appeared inside me.

“Enough ... ?” To no one.

Look again. The sky ...

I looked again. The ships were gone.

Is it enough for you?

“I ... try to understand.”

Go to the farmhouse at the end of the road.

“The end of the road?” But I could see it from where I stood, across a plain, perhaps two kilometers away. The paving beneath me led there. There was nothing else.

I was a man alone in the dome of night, Verena dominating. Despite my tattoos, there was no pain. Grain flanked the road, and music drifted across its light, whispery tops as I walked towards the house. There was something acutely familiar about it all; *deja vu* bristled in me, my skin crawling with tiny claws. In the sphere of a porch light, a Verenan

male sat on a swing, with his pet.

He watched my approach with what resembled puzzlement. When I was within range of his conversational voice, he said, “Did you come from the rotating dome?”

“I did.”

“From what time?” said he.

I was confused by the question at first.

“Now,” I said.

“Why are you here?”

“I must contact the UWACE embassy on Verena. May I—”

“The who?”

“The UWACE. United Worlds Against the Common Enemy.”

He shook his head. “New one on me.”

I studied him. He returned the look ignorantly.

“The Yvadors?” I said.

“Who?”

“Xinix?”

“There’s a name I know.” He smiled a wide smile.

He shoed his pet away, patted the empty spot beside him. “Come sit by me, human.”

“But I don’t have time for this,” I said. “I have been kidnapped and haven’t seen my wife and children for thirty-one days.”

“Days? I suggest it has been far longer than that,” he said. “They haven’t even been born yet.”

I felt a barb working inside me. “What do you mean?”

“I ask again. Is it enough for you?”

“Is what enough?” I almost screamed.

What you have been shown. Has your search for proof been satisfied?

The words from my mouth seemed as familiar as the amazement surrounding them. “You are a Xinix?”

You have seen the future in the sky, and the past in your presence here, conversing with me. The present is yet to come. The memory is all you will take with you to Verena. It will be enough to plant a seed.

“What seed?” It was as though I stood watching the re-materialization of some wondrously alien thing.

“The seed of the Xinix. Otherwise, worlds will be without hope when the Yvadors appear on the horizon.”

“I don’t want this,” I stated starkly.

“You came searching for proof. The proof is in your conviction.”

I scrambled to keep myself intact. I had to make him understand about my wife ... my children ... my life ...

“They will come,” he said. “The present you left is now two decades away. Your wife, your children, your life, they are in front of you.”

I was about to tell him how fantastical that seemed when my eyes fell on my foot, my unsoiled, uninjured foot, and suddenly all I had the willpower to do was sit down on the swing and gaze up at the silvery rim of Verena.

You Never Know

by Leslie Aguillard

Chips got out early, barely dawn, better to beat the “crowds” and better the chances of finding useful stuff. He pulled his raggedy furs and cloth around his thin chest and crept through the camp of smoldering former fires trying to avoid broken glass and other noisy or potentially dangerous debris. He hoped to find something to use as shoes today; he didn’t want to wake the others.

The sky was greasy gray, streaked red and gold from a fast rising though obscured sun. “Plenty of light,” Chips cautioned himself, but surprised at the lack of activity. It was just six months into the time of recovery and survival since the War of Great Stupidity had devastated the world. Most of the population had already died, and, as in any great disaster, there were survivors. This war took its highest toll fast and now, in the aftermath, life was a grim competition to see who could outlast the residual effects, who might be alive long enough to carry on the DNA of the species and repopulate the planet.

There were arguments that the planet would be better off without humans. There were some who felt it was a divine compulsion to breed. Chips was not interested in re-population. Chips had great anger and no respect for the species which would do this to themselves and all others out of their greed and ignorance. He didn’t like being a “victim” and he thought of himself as such, being too young to have affected any political power which might have altered the course to destruction. Chips was black with hate and fear. The filthy camp was quiet as death and he was glad to slip away unseen.

Sometimes he wondered about it all, his impotence in the “adult world.” “What could kids have done? Anything?” No thoughts of alternatives or possibilities came to his mind; none ever did.

Too late to think of that now. “Mom used to say it was pointless to cry over spilled milk. It was pointless to cry over anything done and gone

and over. Violence and destruction were never a good answer. Move on, boy, move on or else you may die where you stand!” Move on meant “grow up.” He didn’t want to move on; growing up was dubious; he didn’t want to die, either, not just yet.

Today he would go farther than ever before from the camp. He had found a small bicycle under some rubble and had hidden it from the others. Such a means of transportation was extremely valuable and rare and it was his as long as he could keep it. He had twelve inches of metal pipe and a three-inch knife. He had also made a sling and carried a sack of projectiles along with his sack for collections. All good weapons and tools for salvage and maybe protection.

Crouching now he carefully surveyed his surroundings. There were no sounds of other hunters, he saw no movements, but he waited a long time to be sure and then uncovered his bike and rode toward the remains of the near city.

Nothing alive remained in the cities and after six months the smell of decay was tolerable. Outlying survivors were warned to stay away from these “hot spots,” which had been the main targets and held the most radiation. Chips was both practical and fatalistic. The issue of survival was a day to day event, and although there never had been guarantees that one would live a long life, at least once there had been fantasies and the likelihood of enjoying a life. Chips could not feel anything akin to joy anymore.

He was thirteen and he could well remember his older siblings and their wanton disregard of anything resembling responsibility. Their actions were wild and their cognizance of consequences nonexistent. They just wanted to have fun as if fun was all that mattered. They wanted to just feel good despite that much of the world had nothing to feel good about. They cared only for themselves and now look what

has become of the world. Now they, too, were nonexistent. He both despised their memory and desperately missed them and the life they once shared. But no time for that, just more spilled milk.

“Regret is an empty plate before a starving man and is no good to anyone,” he told himself. He also grumbled, “it’s just not fair,” and pedaled the bike hard over the rough ground.

His task today was to eat and live another day, and to find something to use as shoes. The bite of autumn was in the air and soon he would have to move south where he might find warmer temperatures. He remembered birds flying south in winter and he didn’t want to freeze any more than he wanted to die in any other way. What he wanted to find was a shopping mall or at least a department store, shoes would be there for sure, that is if they hadn’t disintegrated right off. He thought of how far south he might have to go to keep from freezing. He wasn’t sure. He also wasn’t sure why he saw no others. The group’s numbers were dwindling by the day, probably staying too close to the once densely populated areas was a mistake. So many mistakes had been made already, what were a few more? Chips listened. There was nothing to hear.

There had been talk of staying away from cities, theoretical discussions once upon a time, of what to do when and if the worst would happen. They talked of going into the hills and joining up with other groups. But groups had not worked out for Chips. Groups had jumped him and robbed him. He couldn’t believe there were any groups worth joining. “Safety in numbers?” Chips didn’t have that experience. Maybe they had left for the hills after all, left during the night, left him behind. Chips didn’t care. “Good riddance to bad rubbish,” he muttered and pushed on.

His skin and sinuses prickled and burned but he kept pedaling east. The rags around his feet buffered his callused soles from the bare metal brackets that once held rubber pads; the pedals, he guessed, had melted off. The tires were flat and hard but the wheels still turned over the rubble scattered everywhere. It was difficult but better than walking. Everything still looked molten, burned and gave off heat like the bad breath of some sleeping monster across whose scales he rode hop-

ing it would not wake before he could escape. Deeper into the destruction Chips rode his bumpy and rickety ride, though nothing looked promising. He coughed, his breathing was more labored.

Maybe this was a mistake after all, a big one. Maybe he should have listened to the elder ones, that there was nothing left to salvage from cities, nothing but rot and radiation. He was feeling nauseated, which was almost preferable to being hungry all the time but not quite. He pedaled faster.

There was no straight path, no signs, no clues. After what he figured to be about an hour or maybe two of riding he could still see nothing but great dusty piles of debris in all directions. All directions. That was the problem now. His only directional clue was the hazy light from the sun, which was still east, and he had come from the west. Maybe he’d still be OK if he just turned around now and headed away from the sun. Maybe he’d still make it out and not be too sick. Nothing remotely indicated a former mall or store or anything else. He had been stupid to think otherwise, now that it was obvious, now that he was exposed. Why hadn’t he listened? Mom had told him that people who didn’t learn from history were bound to repeat it. At the time he wasn’t sure what that meant but now it seemed more clear. Experience. Learn from the experience of others so you don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Who had the experience? The elders. And what had they learned from history and the experience of others? Not enough, apparently, because they destroyed the world. He coughed, but he was too bitter to cry.

Chips pedaled harder but blisters were forming on his feet and it was difficult to move the bike as fast as he did before. Had to keep going though. Nothing else to do but keep going. Even though it was pointless, he had regret. He regretted coming to the city in hopes of finding anything. Had there been anything wouldn’t it have been taken long ago? If there had been anyone, wouldn’t they have taken it with them when they fled? Sure, it made sense now, now that it was too late. He wasn’t sure now where the sun was, all around was a uniform gray light and haze.

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“That’s what Monday morning quarterbacking meant. That’s what hindsight is 20/20 meant. Sure, now it is clear as a bell.” The wheels barely turned and there was no end in sight of the debris field. No end in sight. It was hard for Chips to breathe. He felt frightened and lonely. He looked up into the hazy sky searching it. He looked in the direction he imagined was west and the safer though more difficult hills. He saw nothing. His eyes burned, but he was too dehydrated for tears, so he just stopped and closed them and kept them closed.

Up in those foothills above the valley of devastation Sheila looked down into where the city had been. She remembered times sitting up here admiring the lights at night and the stars above in the velvet darkness. There was nothing down there to admire anymore.

She had hated having moved away from the city back then, hated the little mountain residential area where no kids lived that had anything in common with her. How totally uncool she had thought them, but now, now that all the shit there was hit the biggest of all fans she realized that the move had saved what was left of her life. She reflected on how shallow her world had been not that long ago. Her manicure, her hair color, the coordination of her clothes, all superficial, all image and no substance, that’s what was important then. She cringed just thinking of it but didn’t want anyone to see tears. Where had she found the courage to wake up and grow up so fast? She rubbed her belly and wondered if the growing fetus there would be born, if it would live, if she would live. The father of that child was dead already. There was no time to grieve.

She held her mother’s binoculars but could see nothing moving anywhere down below. Truth was, it would have been difficult to see a Mac truck, much less a person, from that distance. Still she would look when she had the chance; she looked for survivors. She saw nothing.

Sometimes survivors were worth incorporating; that’s how she joined this small band of young people herself. They were moving south, a slow few miles a day but it was progress. In two months at this rate they would be in the San Juan valley and hopefully live through the

once famously mild winters there. There were farms there, or had been. There was water. Then the next march would take whoever was left down to New Mexico and eventually to the Gulf of California. That was the plan anyway. It was good to have a plan. It wasn’t survival of the fittest anymore, because nobody was particularly fit. It was survival of the smartest, survival of the best plan, the best problem solving, survival of the lucky. Most of the group had bicycles but they did not ride them as much as use them to carry supplies like mechanical donkeys. Some bicycles were slung together to haul more like a wagon. Those you could let go and not have to pick up again because they kept standing. Sheila hoped to find another bicycle. Autos were almost unheard of. There was no gas.

The travelers rummaged through whatever structures they came across for whatever might be useful but kept moving. They had found canned goods and a few utensils in a small cabin yesterday and had enough energy from that to move on with renewed spirits. They were spread out just far enough to keep visual contact with the next person in the group, and they all moved quietly.

The adults were gone, mostly. Though every once in a while one would be encountered and it was always bad when that happened. Crazy, mean and dangerous, every one of them so far. But you never know. They might come across one who had some intelligence and vision, someone who might be concerned at least as much for the future as for the present. Adults might learn once and for all. You never know.

She made visual contact with the boy to the west. He was someone from the mountains, a guy she had ignored at school, one of the great uncool, she had thought. It was almost painful thinking of how grateful she was now that he had come to her house and got her to come along. He had hope as well.

She nodded to him and pushed her share of the supplies along, stepping carefully over rocks and limbs and thinking about playing with her baby on that far away beach. She wasn’t sure there was a beach. She wasn’t sure of anything, but her choice was to hope life would be worth the effort. The travelers in front and behind her waved their

acknowledgment, made visual contact with her. This meant the group was still OK, and the group would then keep moving. Tomorrow they'd be past the city's remains and would take a road down to the plains and make better time.

She rubbed her belly and wished she could sing a little song to her baby but then counseled herself not to wish for too much. "There will be time for singing if we survive," she whispered to herself, and imag-

ined the sound of ocean waves and the soft sinking sounds of sand under her mismatched tennis shoed feet. She laughed softly to herself, put away the binoculars and, remembering all the silly things she once thought, lifted the front wheel of her bike over a tangle of charred limbs and kept on walking, pushing, and listening to the ocean waves in her hopeful imagination. The boy to the west watched her moving among the trees; he held a picture in his mind too, a family, a cabana. You never know.

HECTOR

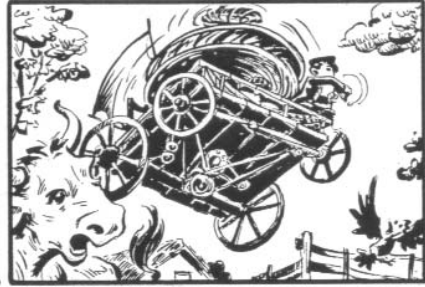
By T. Motley

MY TRIP to the MOON A SCIENTIFUNCTION ADVENTURE

DURING MY BRIEF TENURE AS A BARRELMAKER'S APPRENTICE, I WAS ABLE TO ASSEMBLE THE MATERIALS I NEEDED TO BUILD MY INVENTION—A COMPACT AIR VESSEL POWERED BY A PADDLE-WHEEL, LIKE A MILLWHEEL LAID ON ITS SIDE.



I STOCKPILED PROVISIONS FOR A LONG JOURNEY AND SET ABOUT TURNING THE HANDLE ON THE SYSTEM OF GEARS AND PULLEYS THAT PROPELLED MY UNTESTED CRAFT.



AFTER SEVERAL HOURS AT SKY, I GREW FATIGUED, BUT CLEVERLY ENLISTED THE WIND'S AID IN CRANKING MY HANDLE, BY ATTACHING MY COAT AND BREECHES TO AN OUTER COG. THIS WAS I ABLE TO SLEEP THROUGH THE QUICK NIGHTS (NEARER THE SUN, THE NIGHTS GROW SHORTER) ALBEIT UNCOMFORTABLY—SHORN OF MY BREECHES AND WARMED ONLY BY THE OCCASIONAL PASSING STAR.



THE PEOPLE OF THE MOON-VILLAGE WERE VERY MUCH LIKE THOSE OF MY NATIVE AMSTERDAM, BUT WITH SOME STRIKING DIFFERENCES. THEIR SHOES, FOR EXAMPLE, ARE WORN ON THEIR HEADS, WHILE THEY WEAR HATS ON THEIR FEET. MOON CARTS ARE PULLED NOT BY HORSES OR CATTLE BUT BY HEADLESS SHEEP—TETHERED ALL AROUND TO GO IN ALL EIGHT DIRECTIONS. AND OF COURSE, MOON VILLAGES HAVE CRATERS RATHER THAN DIKES. TRAVELLERS CROSS THE GELATINOUS WASTES ON RUNNERLESS SLEDS.



MOON TALK SOUNDS VERY MUCH LIKE OUR OWN, BUT IS ACTUALLY QUITE DIFFERENT.

WHAT THE MOON-MAID SAID TO ME:	WHAT SHE MEANT:
IN THE SIXTH SHADE OUR STAR BLOSSOMS.	YOU LOOK STUPID IN THAT HAT.
FARTHER MEADOWS HAVE TURNED THAN THIS.	MY BOYFRIEND'S MEETING ME HERE.
DO WE SNEEZE IN SIMPLE DAYLIGHT?	WHY ARE YOU FOLLOWING ME?

As She Walked By

by Christina Sng

The daffodils wilted
As she walked by,
Cloak cutting a wake
In the still night wind.

By dawn, the forest was dead.
Saplings brown and dry,
Great oaks drained of life
After she walked by.

By the road in the clearing
Of the forest, she waited
As the sun rose
To greet the new day.

A car drove by, ignoring
Her wave. And another.
Then a kindly old bachelor
Stopped and let the stranger in.

Heading toward the city,
Death smiled, lay her head
Back to rest and slept.
There was much work to be done.

Home Is Where the Hearth Is

by Vincent W. Sakowski

November. Trees barren. Air crisp. Sky clear. The son stands raking dry, dead leaves on the boulevard in front of his parents' house. Last of the leaves on the block. Doing them a favor.

No. That's not it.

Rather: Duty. Obligation. Sacrifice.

More?

Yes. Always more.

His father: unable to walk. Laid up, post stroke, but still smoking, drinking, eating all his old favorites, maintaining his "quality of life."
His mother: seriously heavy, totally unwilling to do such labor, especially when there is a fistful of channels dedicated to the Idea of Jesus.

And still there is more.

But no time for contemplation. There's work to be done.

His rows are neat. Ready for piles. Then bagging. Plus, there are small stacks of dead branches and bits of wrappers, paper cups, and cigarette butts. He'd love to take everything in the backyard and bum it all in one huge heap, especially after sundown. Enjoy the fire dancing; the comforting aroma of the smoke; the embers eventually dying. But that's not allowed anymore. Not in years. Unsafe. Illegal. And with the old, crotchety neighbors they have now, someone *would* squeal. No doubt.

He glances up. On the grass five feet away there is a chrome plated

row bar for a truck—halogens and all, but in three pieces. Used, but in excellent condition. Shining in the sun.

"What the hell?" he breathes. The pieces were never there before. And how did they get there, steps away, without him noticing? The son spins his head around, searching, but there is no one else nearby. "Did I pass out?" Checks his watch.

No. The time is right.

He steps forward, holding the rake in both hands, ready to strike out. Grasping the end of the handle, he taps one of the chrome-plated bars with the rake's claws. The metal pings. Again, he looks around, up and down the street, but there is no one. Nothing else has changed.

No.

Wrong.

Something *has* changed.

The neighbor's house to the right of his parents' isn't the same as it was ten seconds ago, or as it has been for the past five years. In its place is the original house which had stood there since long before he was born, over thirty years ago: flat roof, bright key lime sherbet green stucco halfway down, met by dark chocolate siding. In the yard: long dead pine trees and nothing but junk. Fuel drums, broken pieces of chairs, couches and tables, mud-covered pants, shirts, skirts, underwear, bikes, dolls, toy vehicles of all shapes and sizes, oil-caked car

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parts, and more are scattered all over the hard-packed soil and rusty pine needles.

Every other house, including his parents', has remained as they were moments before.

He can't explain it, and he isn't sure if he wants to or not. All he knows for certain is that he needs to finish raking these leaves, and that the row bars are in his way.

"Gotta be his."

The son leans the rake against an elm. Lifts one of the heavy row bars and carries it to the neighbor's yard. Places it on the ground by a rusted out engine block. The house is quiet. He considers knocking on the door but he wants to get this over with. Quickly. Has to finish soon. No time to waste. So, he goes back for the second piece, then the third with the halogen lights on top.

Turns to leave. But the door opens and he is stopped. Stunned. An infernally hot woman stands. Her face: sculpted sharp edges, with deep eyes, full arched brows and pouting lips. Short dark hair tousled. Her body: lean, petite, covered with a white terry cloth robe and little else, or so it seems. Roughly his age: mid- to late twenties, but her eyes are older. Much older. As she smiles and takes a step towards him, her robe opens a little. The son catches a good view of a black satin push-up bra, although her breasts don't seem to need the help. Her eyes are both playful and scolding. Hungry.

No. *Ravenous*. Drawing him in.

"Going without even saying hello?" Her voice: light but biting. Gnawing at him. Paring him down. *Fast*.

Smitten, he crosses towards her. All else is unimportant. Almost forgotten. His thoughts: cloudy and chaotic. He can only focus on her. Can't remember seeing her before, ever, but somehow he knows this

is her house.

"I was just—"

"Yes. Thank you. My husband was in a hurry."

Keeps closing the distance. Mesmerized. Perhaps more than he should be, but no one is judging him now.

She holds out her small hand but he steps past it. Instead, he reaches his arm around her waist. Holds her tightly. The neighbor's wife wraps one arm across his shoulders, which stings and burns like a jellyfish, but he can't break free. And despite the agony he doesn't really want to. She rakes the long, lacquered fingernails of her other hand across his stomach. Again, he is racked with intense pain and nausea. Utters a cry. Feels the welts rise on his abdomen. Still, he stumbles towards the door. Wanting to be with her. Yearning. Can't deny her.

The neighbor's wife holds the door open for him. He enters the shadowed living room, how he remembers it as a child. Everything is in shades of brown: shag carpet, paneling, furniture. All rough, worn, scarred. Dirty. But, no other personal touches anywhere—no photos, art, knick-knacks, anything. He falls into a torn and lumpy couch, expecting her to stay with him. However, she remains leaning against the doorway, her hips thrust forward. Showing a bit of leg now. Teasing. Swaying. Revealing a little more. Yet the same reproachful hunger in her eyes remains. The son still can't remember her living here at any time but he doesn't care. He has other things on his mind.

"What are we waiting for?" he wheezes. Severely weakened by her touch. But she only smiles down at him, arms crossed again under her breasts, pushing them up even farther. Taunting him. The son aches. Holds his stomach. He wants to sweep her up and tear her robe off, but he can't find the strength. *Anywhere*.

Suddenly, three of her friends come from the kitchen in the back, cups and saucers in hand. Unlike the neighbor's wife, they are fully clothed: in '50s style knee-length sun dresses—one in mauve, one in

lime, the last in peach. All wear matching costume jewelry: clip-on button earrings, fake plastic pearls the size of marbles around their necks and wrists. Each has a huge diamond set in gold on their left ring fingers and a silver brooch over the left breast: a cat, a crow, and a dolphin. All alluring: long hair curled and swirled upward, tied in coordinating ribbons, unblemished pale skin, and fine, full hourglass figures, ending in bright white bobby socks and shiny shoes.

They sip and chatter away, oblivious to the scene between her and the son. Moments before, only silence from the house. Now: constant giggling and clucking. The peach sits down next to him, while the other two each take a different chair, and the neighbor's wife holds her position. Eyebrow raised. Lips licked. Coily scrutinizing him. But with all of their talk, he can distinguish nothing: *no single word of their conversation*. He doesn't recognize it as any other language, but he doesn't think it's gibberish, either. All he can understand is the *tone*: wickedly playful but tense, deeply sexual but dangerous. Whether or not he is their subject, or *object*, he doesn't know.

As their "conversation" continues, the peach slides towards him a few inches at a time until she is thigh to thigh, shoulder to shoulder. Unlike the neighbor's wife, she is warm and inviting. Perhaps just as big of a tease, but when he puts his arm around her, it doesn't feel like it is burning off. Ignoring everyone else, he draws her closer and starts to run his other hand over her slightly exposed thigh. She doesn't resist, and settles in a little more while she continues to chat and sip her tea.

But before he can go any further, the neighbor's wife announces from the dining room: "Dinner is served!" And the house is full of people. Wall to wall. Men and women, all casually dressed in a mixture of modern and retro '50s clothes. Without a backward glance, all three women stand up and leave the son on the couch.

But he also finds himself standing in front of the buffet table, bright blue ceramic plate and stainless steel cutlery in hand. Realizes he is hungry and not just for the women. Spread out is a huge pot of a heavy, dark stew, oven roasted baked potatoes, five-bean chili, whole

wheat bread, chips and dip, four pickle and cheese dishes, and an assortment of squares on a three-tiered tray. Coffee and tea. Pop and beer. Vodka and Scotch.

As the son fills his plate more people arrive. Soon he can't move. Jammed shoulder to shoulder. Barely able to hold onto his food. The room gets warmer and louder. Almost unbearable. Unbreathable. But before he can take a bite, or even think about leaving, the neighbor comes in the door and calls out to him by name. There is a hint of silence for a brief moment, then everyone returns to whatever they were doing.

The son doesn't know what to do. How to respond? Does the neighbor have any idea what happened between him and his wife? Not that there is much to know. But still, the son feels the pangs of guilt along with the searing of her touch. He quickly glances around the room but she's gone. His meal has also disappeared, and he sees the neighbor cross towards him.

Large and menacing, but more like a big brother than an over-sized, anonymous bully, the neighbor works through the crowd. Without a word, he takes the son by the arm and leads him out the front door. The son says nothing and allows himself to be led. The neighbor ignores everyone else despite the hearty greetings and leaves them all behind. No one tries to follow the two. On the street, a massive black 4x4 king-cab truck is parked, completely covered in dirt.

"Thanks for returning my rack."

"No problem."

Arm draping over his shoulders, the neighbor guides him around the side of the house to the backyard. But there are no longer any houses—only a swamp as far as the son can see—with the exception of his parents' house, but that too seems almost miles away. The water is thick and murky, studded with oily tree stumps, and a heavy mist reeking of sewage drifts over the surface. All is calm. Silent.

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Looking more closely, the son notices a pattern to the stumps, and he watches as some stumps grow and transform, binding together. Reeds sway and vines hang in various spots. A combination of a jungle gym and obstacle course. One section is constructed of three fifty-foot, almost horizontal logs—the end closest is a bit higher: one above the other, with the thickest at the top and vertical supports on both ends, twelve feet high. It almost appears like a section of fence for a giant.

The neighbor slaps him on the shoulder. “You want to go home?” But he doesn’t wait for an answer. “Or do you see this as a test of strength? Ingenuity? *Character*? Well, let’s see if you can survive first, eh? You may go whichever way you choose, but I will give you a hint for that one section of three logs at least: if you take the top log it means you are ...” But his words are lost in the air. “If you take the middle, it means you are ...” Again. “And if you take the bottom, it means that ...” And again. “So there you are.” Once more he slaps the son on the shoulder, forcing him forward into the heavy water.

The son feels up to the challenge, especially with the neighbor’s wife out of the way. Wades through the water to the first stump. Like all the others, it is covered in crude oil. It takes him awhile to climb on top, but he is prompted by all of the unexpected movement in the water nearby. He stands unsteadily as he watches rats, snakes, and other assorted reptiles and unfriendly fish swim by. Crocogators. Allidiles. Barracudas. Piranhas. Arms wide. Knees bent. Shaking. Trying to maintain his balance. Contemplates his next move. There are many other similar stumps, some within leaping distance, while others float horizontally on their own. Without thinking any further, he jumps forward, pushing off with both legs, but reaching with his right, and he lands only to make a second leap in another direction. Soon he is spinning on a log for a few moments. Then, springing upward and grabbing a vine, he swings onto another stump. From tree to tree, slipping, skidding, stumbling, but feeling *alive*, he makes each move without hesitation, ignoring any stirring and snapping in the water around him.

Eventually, he stands before the main obstacle composed of the three

logs, but he doesn’t wait for long. Climbs to the top. Sits for a moment, with his seat sliding on the surface. He remains seated and pulls himself along. Arms out. Pulls. Slides. Over and over again. A third of the way across, he hugs the log and allows himself to slide around it until he drops down to the middle log. Carefully turns himself onto his stomach. Goes the next third on this log in the same way. Again, he lowers himself down to the bottom log and finishes without falling. He sits for a moment. Proud. Happy.

Then, no longer caring—about getting home; about the test; about the dangers; about anything—he slides into the water. Starts splashing and spinning around. Surprisingly, nothing approaches. They’re gone. The dark, oily water is calm again. His parents’ house still appears to be miles away from here. So, he decides to return to the neighbor standing at the swamp’s edge in his backyard.

The neighbor holds out a hand for him, which he grabs, but neither speaks. Out of the swamp, the son is dry and clean again, but he feels the strain of this test. The neighbor takes him back inside his house. The people barely pause for a moment to take them in, then they return to their own tight circles. The two pass the neighbor’s wife, who is still wearing her robe. Again, she darts her hand out and rakes the son’s ribs while she gazes sharply into his eyes. He almost doubles over, but the neighbor keeps him up and brings him to the buffet table. The son is handed another plate. Before he can fill it, however, the neighbor’s wife snidely calls out to him, silencing the room:

“Shouldn’t you be stoking your fire? I imagine your parents must be getting pretty cold by now.”

The son looks at her dubiously; confused, but there is also a spark of awareness. There is something he has forgotten.

“The embers must be getting pretty low. I’m surprised you’ve taken such a long break.”

“Here, let me show you.” And the neighbor guides him through the crowd to the kitchen. There is an open trap door in the floor, and the neighbor climbs down the ladder first. The son follows, still uncertain,

but he knows he has to check it out one way or the other.

A single bare bulb hanging from the low ceiling lights the room. The air is filled with mildew and rot, and their feet sink into the earthen floor. There are a few rough, wooden shelves filled with mason jars. Some empty. Some full. Some movement within. Though the son can't tell what the full ones contain. He doesn't *want* to know. Otherwise, the room is empty. The neighbor crosses the room and holds back a horsehair blanket covering a doorway. Then, he leads the son through a series of halls and rooms, clicking on more bare bulbs here and there to light their way. Most of the spaces are filled with odd bits of furniture, boxes of old clothes, huge stacks of yellowed newspapers and magazines, and tons of broken toys—both old and new. The paint is cracked and peeling. Wallpaper water-stained, torn or chewed away by mice or rats. Often, the walls are covered in indecipherable hieroglyphics in crayon and finger-paint.

Finally, they come to an open doorway, which leads into a massive cubic room, forty feet on each side. Here the floor is covered in warm gray ash and a few burning embers. The walls are black. Covered in soot. Above, there is a small hole in the center of the ceiling through which the heat is rising, and the son *knows* he is beneath his parents' house.

"I'm supposed to fill this myself?"

"Yes."

"I'm *supposed to fill this myself.*" And now the son also realizes that he is almost out of time. How could he have forgotten something so important? He shoves the neighbor aside. Goes back down the hall, gathering any combustibles he can find: some sweaters, half a chair, a bundle of old newspapers. Returns to build up the dying embers. The flames grow. More smoke starts to rise but it isn't anywhere near enough. Again, he goes down the hall and returns with an armful of materials to be burned. But the son quickly learns just how easily the flames die in such a large and cold place.

Soon, many of the partygoers come down and gather around the

perimeter of the large room to watch as the son works in a frenzy. But no one helps him, not even the neighbor. It is not their responsibility. It is *his* alone.

Some begin to call and taunt him. He ignores them as best as he can, even though he finally understands what they are saying. The neighbor and his wife are nowhere to be seen—their roles in distracting him complete, he thinks. The son realizes that his resentment at his duty to his parents gave them the initial foothold to draw him away, so he doesn't hold them responsible for his failure. Again, his failure is his own. But he doesn't miss them or feel their pain any longer. He won't allow himself to become distracted again. *Ever*. For any reason.

One partygoer steps forward and tries to grab a broken piece from an old headboard. Without hesitation the son strikes him down with a table leg. Another has brought down the son's rake and has the nerve to stir up the embers. Thin them out. However, the son wrestles the rake away and hammers the claws into the offender's skull without a second thought. Rips the skull open as he pulls the rake away. No need for a second shot. The offender drops. Dead before he hits the ash. Shortly, others move in, but the son beats back anyone who comes too close to the fires he is building.

Eventually, he finds nothing useful in the basement, so he climbs back upstairs with his rake in hand. The neighbor's wife sees him and reaches out, but he passes her by without a glance. Or a thought. Everyone on the main floor keeps back as he tosses a number of chairs down the trapdoor. They still call out to him, and some sneak in a swing or two. Focused, the son takes a blow, then strikes back mercilessly. More skulls crack. Flesh is ripped away. Bones are broken. And still, the son and his rake carry on. As for himself: One cheek is bruised and swollen, and he has several cuts and a couple of cracked ribs, but nothing too serious, yet. Word travels quickly about his dexterity with a rake, and no one faces him head-on. And nobody gets more than one chance at a sneak attack.

The son runs outside. Gathers up dead branches. Knocks others off of

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the pine trees with his rake. Notices his rows and piles have been kicked apart. Makes a note to hit a little harder anyone who is looking too smug. Shoulders his way back through the throngs. Throws the branches down the trapdoor. Desperate, he jumps down, twisting his ankle, but he ignores the pain. He knocks aside several onlookers as he carries the bits and pieces back to the fire room. The flames are already burning low again. The son rebuilds them with what he has. But since he has to go farther for wood, and with everyone against him, he can't do it. Can he?

While considering his options, he is rushed by a middle-aged couple: The man has an oversized red plastic bat, and the woman has a set of salt and pepper shakers. Before the man can get in his first swing he gets a faceful of claws. Teeth shatter, and he stumbles backward. Arms wide, his wife closes the distance, screaming maniacally. Oblivious to her cries, the son easily sidesteps her and swings his rake around in a wide arc across the back of her neck, snapping her vertebrae. Before she drops dead, the son uses his momentum and slams the rake into the side of the man's temple. The body lands on one of the small fires, smothering it. In anguish, the son runs forward to roll the body off, but he sees the man's clothes catch fire, and slowly, the flames rise again. Suddenly, the son is inspired.

"It's going to take *a lot* of bodies though," he whispers lightly to himself.

Grabbing any nearby fallen bodies—alive or dead—he throws them on the flames. Many onlookers flee, realizing that they don't have to attack him in order to be next. Meanwhile, others stay because *now* things are just *starting* to get interesting. The son defends himself against a few more challengers and distracters, and he beats a few others to death just because they are close enough. However, if anyone runs, he doesn't take up the chase for too long. His ankle can't take it. Plus, he doesn't have the strength and stamina anymore. Unfortunately, he still has a *long* way to go to fill this room.

Frantic but exhausted, he hobbles through the halls and is soon back

outside. Across the street is a massive V-shaped elm tree. The son stumbles towards it, noticing some twigs and leaves at its base. Squats down and gathers them up. A moment later, he feels a tickle and he is bit on the ankle. But not the one that is already twisted. Drops his armful of leaves and branches. The son tears off his shoe and sock, still feeling whatever it is biting him, burrowing and burning into his flesh. The sock off, he sees a welt begin to rise, and he sees the stinger embedded in his skin. But the rest of the spider—or whatever it was—is nowhere to be seen. Immediately, he pulls out the stinger, feeling both sick and woozy. But with the stinger gone, the welt rises and reddens: it swells to the size of a marble, then two inches into a thumb. Three inches. Four. The son screams in fear and agony, not knowing what to do. The skin turns from red to yellow and it pulls out in front of him like a piece of taffy three feet long. The son thinks he is going to collapse when the yellow taffy rips right off of his ankle and disappears. There is still a scar on his ankle, but he no longer feels the poison coursing through him.

"Maybe somebody's on my side after all." But he knows he'll have to be more careful. Doesn't need to be warned twice.

The son glances up at his parents' house, happy to see a small but steady plume of smoke rise from its chimney. Goes back to gather up the leaves on the ground, eyes wide and searching with a smile on his battered and bloody face.

"I can do it."

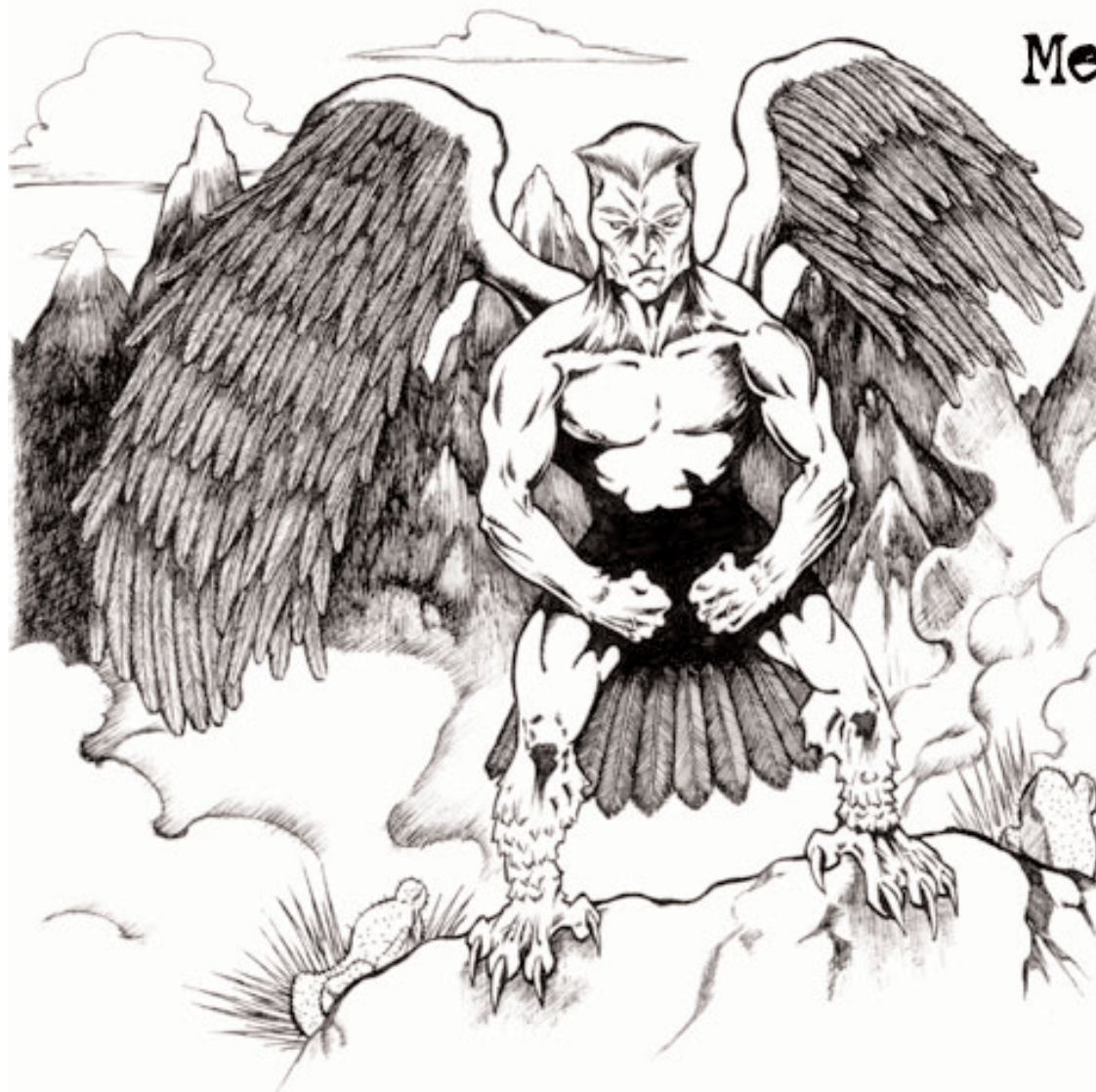
Why He Must Be God

by John Grey

Nobody else has the word
“Sanctuary”
slashed across his chest
or beats his head against
the wall
to stop his hands from twitching.
Nobody else garrotes cats
and drops their innards out the window
or plays along to TV preachers
on a loud distorted Hawaiian guitar.
There is another on the block
who eats nails
but not with a worm garnish.
And the old man
in the basement flat
only exposes himself
some of the time.
There’s the scattered writers
in their garrets
but none write in blood,
and no budding local painters
splatter their palette with it.
He has no followers
unless you count his mangy dog.
No, I forgot,
he slaughtered the dog
for the barbecue
at the neighborhood block party.
Their meal,
God’s secret.

Meaningless?

by Robert Elrod

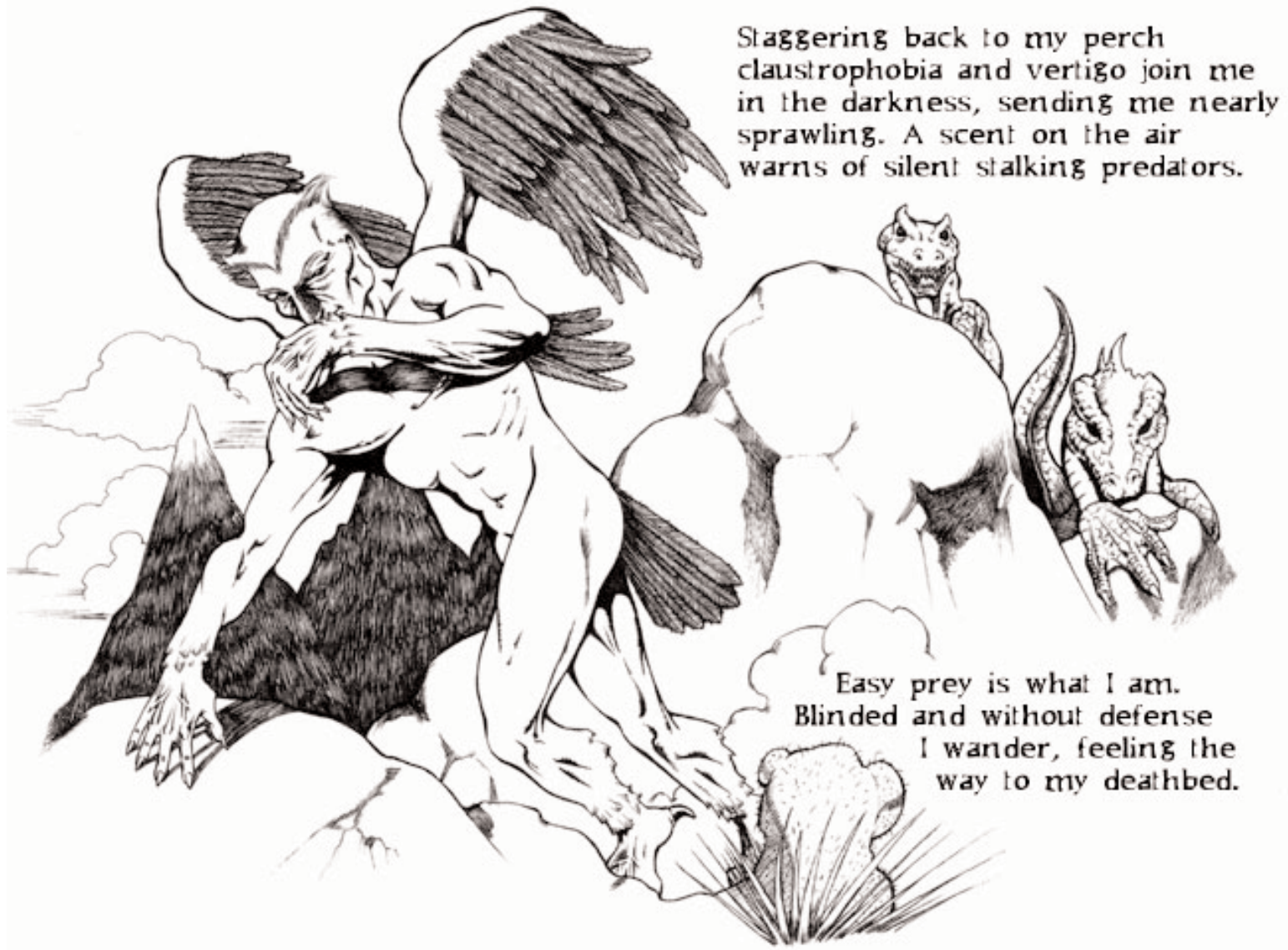


Meaningless?

Flapping my wings disturbs the dust. It finds its way to my eyes, my mouth and nose. It chokes me, blinds me. No escape for broken wings.



I flap them but cannot elude gravity. I'm earthbound ... a flyer with no way to get aloft.



Staggering back to my perch
claustrophobia and vertigo join me
in the darkness, sending me nearly
sprawling. A scent on the air
warns of silent stalking predators.

Easy prey is what I am.
Blinded and without defense
I wander, feeling the
way to my deathbed.

Searing pain propels me. I lift my limbs reflexively for defense, knowing fully that there will be no fending off the inevitable. My thoughts turn from the humiliation of being ensnared by gravity ... a new captor has me.

The burning in my side reminds me that I still live. I train my mind upon the sensations left to me – as they shall be my last. I savor them. This sweet agony – the delicious pain – is all that is left to me.





I try to concentrate ...
focus. The edges blur.
Glimpses of childhood
tease me ... running
through fields with
siblings ... games of
all sorts ... a family
long since gone ...
friends whose names
I no longer recall ...

Raising my head
is impossible. All
sensation has fled.
As I slowly drift away,
pondering my end,
I'm left with a lone
question ... was it all

Meaningless?

Contributors' Bios

Leslie Aguiard

Leslie sees the world a little differently and as an only child spent a great deal of time in creative pursuits for companionship and entertainment. Leslie wrote her first story at the age of six and since then has published poetry and articles and other short pieces of fiction. Her education and career has been primarily in the arts, though for the last twelve years she has worked as a registered nurse. A lifelong love of science fiction, fantasy and horror, especially with humor or insight that may give the reader or viewer options or broader understanding, is what Leslie prefers.

Peri Charlifu

Peri Charlifu was born in 1962. He makes his living as a freelance potter, sculptor, and graphic artist in Denver, Colorado. He attended Metro State College in Denver and studied Fine Art and Abnormal Psychology. He has written several dissertation papers on Parapsychology, the Occult, and Religion.

He is a practicing Greek Orthodox and has studied faith and the occult from a psychological and religious standpoint. He has incorporated these studies into his writing. Peri is inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft and others of his contemporaries, including Poe, as well as many of the modern masters of the genre. Much of his work reflects the hidden, unexplained terrors in our society. Not the everyday horrors, but the unseen and unexplained. Other of his work deals with the Cthulhu mythos, as written by Lovecraft—he has taken some of the Cthulhu entities and put them in a modern setting, and, he hopes, with his own twist. The third theme of Peri's horror work is based on the contention that supernatural or paranormal creatures exist in our reality. Peri has tried to integrate these creatures in believable narratives.

Robert Elrod

It was obvious from the beginning that something wasn't quite right with Robert. He would rather spend his time reading and drawing than playing sports and learning to hurt others like normal children do. Instead he wiled away the hours channeling the spirits of less intelligent creatures and communing with paper dolls. The voices claim that he enjoys many forms of music, all sorts of movies and classic television. He believes that claymation monsters are real and that Ray Harryhausen is a god trapped in human form. Robert makes his living as a graphic designer and shares

his dwelling with his mate, Teri, and their two male cubs, Rob and Matt. Their intention is to live happily ever after.

John Grey

Australian born poet, playwright, musician. Rhysling Award winner 1998. Recently published in *Weird Tales*, *South Carolina Review*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*. Collector of early horror writer first editions and sixties garage band albums.

Vincent W. Sakowski

Vincent W. Sakowski is the author of the anti-epic novel of the surreal *Some Things Are Better Left Unplugged*, published by Eraserhead Press. He is the founding member of The Brotherhood of the Rat, a collective of writers, artists, dramatists and musicians of all that is surreal, bizarre, and experimental. Currently, he is at work on his latest novel.

Christina Sng

Christina Sng, human, resident of the world, lives on the Equator with her husband and their big-boned cat. She is an author of poetry collections *The Darkside of Eden* and *Angelflesh*. Her work has appeared in such venues as *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Flash & Blood*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Space & Time*, and *Wicked Hollow*, among many others. Visit her online at <http://www.mephala.com>.

Darren Speegle

Darren Speegle's short fiction has appeared in various publications, including *Fangoria's Frightful Fiction*, *Gothic.net*, *Chiaroscuro*, and *Redsine*. Look for future tales in *Best of Horrorfind 2*, *Fresh Blood*, and *Verte Brume: The Anthology of Absinthe*. Visit Darren's website at www.dspeegle.com. Darren resides in Germany.

Stan Yan

Stan Yan is a Denver-based, self-published comic artist whose credits include "Only Chaos," "OC2: Eugene the Queen," and "The On-Campus Crusader"—all available through www.squidworks.com, where Stan exerts his dictatorial power over his creative peers. Stan has also notably contributed cover and story work to "Potlatch: Comics to Benefit the CBLDF." Currently, while he's not whoring himself out to the corporate world, he's working on a new series entitled "The Wang."