

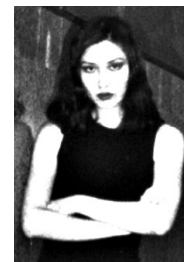
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The party's just started!

by Jeff Georgeson

Welcome to the first anniversary issue of *Penumbria*! Ignore for the moment the sound of party horns in the background, pick up a bit of fine confectionery and settle yourself here for a few reminiscences of the year gone by.

What were you doing a year ago?

We at *Penumbria* were scrambling (near the beginning of June, which is a year ago as I write this). The first issue was due out very, very soon, very few of the templates were done (and those that were kept metamorphing into strange new things), and I was trying to transcribe an interview from tape to computer. Now, as I type with the speed of a small slug that has been tied to a post and glued to the ground with fast-acting slug-adhesive, this wasn't going so well. And the interview (with James Cukr) had gone very well indeed ... but that meant I had ninety minutes of tape to run through, sort out, and try to transcribe. I tried shifting it to CD, but that only worked moderately better; I tried speech-to-text programs, but those only got about three-quarters of the words right. In the end I just hunkered down and spent hours going through it, then choosing the best forty-five minutes worth to actually print. Great! Interview done!

Then, at the last minute, the Flash part of the site wouldn't work properly. We'd originally had this extremely complicated Flash interface planned out, and then we discovered, amongst other things, that Flash doesn't display small text very well. Or, rather, it seemed to operate on the Heisenberg Uncertainty principle: If you can get 10-point text to look sharp (and not like a fuzzy blob), then you can't set it to be fully justified or any of a number of other things necessary for creating a good layout; conversely, going for layout meant you couldn't read the text. While that may be fine if your magazine is so artsy that text is merely part of the art and is not meant to be read, *Penumbria* is specifically *for* reading! In the end, we simplified the Flash layout and were very unhappy with it (eventually we

dropped the Flash part of the site entirely, as you can see here today).

Finally, on the very night we were going online, my grandmother was in a serious automobile accident, the details of which are not pleasant and shall not be repeated here. She survived quite nicely, thanks, but at the time we weren't absolutely certain she would, and it put a pall over the proceedings. My grandmother is a former editor herself, having published a small town weekly newspaper for several years back in and around the 1980s, and I'd worked with her one summer, copyediting the tiny strips of paper on which the articles had been printed; there were no nifty PCs on which to do publishing in those days (at least not in a small town), and everything was still typeset on a special machine, waxed, and pasted to a sheet of paper before being hauled off to the printer. That was my start in this business, and to find my grandmother in ill health at the start of a publishing enterprise was not the best of all possible beginnings. Still, everything got done, we somehow redid the Flash pages, I managed to eek out an editorial, and ...

We did it!

And now, a year later, we're still doing it!!! And we couldn't have done it without the support of you readers and, of course, the submissions of all the authors we've had the pleasure to work with over this past year. Thank you all, arigato gozaimasu, merci beaucoup, danke and tak så mycket and all the other ways to say it: Thank you!

And now, let's see where the *next* year shall take us ...

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor, psfm
June 2k3

Horror and technology

but certainly no horror of technology ... Christina Sng embraces the best of all worlds

* * *

FIRST, THERE'S THE UNASSUMING BIO: Christina Sng, human, resident of the world, lives on the Equator with her husband and their big-boned cat.

But lurking beyond this is a highly talented crafter of hundreds of dark poems, some creepy, some chilling. And quite good. Sng is the author of poetry collections *The Darkside of Eden* and *Angelflesh*, and her work has appeared in numerous North American, British, and Australian publications. Altogether she has sold more than 200 poems, all in the last few years.

But, as they say, wait ... there's more. For beyond a writer of fictions, she is an avid proponent of science, of technology to make our world a better place and to take us beyond this world, out into the stars. And this isn't some passing fancy; she has published articles on art, astronomy, broadcasting, business, engineering, and IT, and continues to write for several of these industries.

Sng, who besides all this enjoys playing role-playing games, reading horror novels and comics, watching Cantonese sword-fighting serials, and haunting second-hand bookstores, and who is certified as a PADI Open Water Diver and holds a brown belt in karate, gave us this interview over that most technological of media, the 'Net, for this anniversary issue of *Penumbra*.

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PICTURED: Christina Sng



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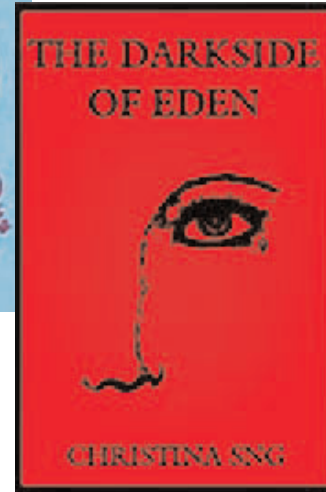
How did you become interested in speculative fiction (and, thus, a writer in this genre)?

The speculative genre fascinated me since I was little. My brother was a fan and through him I was introduced to horror and science fiction movies. I began reading horror novels and relished the ghost stories told on dark and stormy camp nights. There was always much wonderment in the genre for me, and after a while I read only horror.

When I began writing seriously back in 2000, I'd sent my work to the usual suspects—literary magazines, as most writers do, I reckon. I got the regular form rejects and began to reconsider if literary markets were the place for my work.

One day, while going through the *Poet's Market*, I decided to try a magazine called *Dreams and Nightmares*, which accepts email submissions, an essential and invaluable medium of communication to writers outside the United States. The editor, David C. Kopaska-Merkel, responded promptly and accepted two of my poems to my absolute delight. And through his website I discovered the speculative fiction community. At that moment everything fell in place, and I found myself writing for the genre I love most.

OK, so this is the second obvious question, but how did you become interested in being a writer? You write a lot of fiction, but also



PICTURED: Cover of *Angelflesh*, *The Darkside of Eden*; Christina Sng



non-fiction ... are you equally interested in both?

I think I've always been interested in writing. When I was a child, I was cared for by a nanny as both my parents worked full-time and my sibs were all at school. Most afternoons I would watch Cantonese sword-fighting dramas with my nanny, and later play with my stuffed dolls in some imaginary universe I made up.

My mother instilled in me the love for stories. Every night while she tucked me into bed, she would read me a story. Those stories inspired me to write poems about little children (with rhyming names) and their daily adventures. I started writing and illustrating a series of comics about my cats. Later in my preteens I wrote novellas during class when bored, which was often. I was

also an avid diarist, although an irregular one. In university, I learnt the art of objectivity and brevity, which was invaluable in honing my journalistic skills.

Non-fiction is an odd thing for me. I don't get excited about writing non-fiction before writing it. But when I do, it simply flows. It's good money too! On the other hand, creative writing is often thrilling all the way, even during the editing process each poem must go through.

Essentially, I am equally interested in both, but in different ways. Non-fiction is to me,

more mathematical, while poetry is a balance of art and mathematics in the method in which I write it. I consider each word's synchronicity in relation to the whole poem before I add or remove it, and perhaps as a throwback to my younger days, ensure there is some rhythm to the whole poem, although not always.

Do you do many drafts of your poetry, or does it generally "work" the first time through?

Very few work perfectly the first time; most need some editing. Usually the average is two drafts before I am happy with it. That said, I have been through 50 drafts of some longer poems. "Succubus" is one of them, as well as the poems I was commissioned to write for the very talented and remarkable artist Frank Wu (<http://www.frankwu.com>). On the contrary, "After the War" and "Postwar" are examples of poems that worked just right the first time through.

From your website we can see you have a wide range of interests. Is your focus on any one of them, or are you equally interested in all?

There is always a "current" interest, which can last anything from a week to years. My previous decade-long fascination with space and space exploration has somewhat waned as now I am fully focused on nanotechnology.

My preoccupation with nanotechnology stems from the fact that it has the potential

to extend our lifespans indefinitely and build the infrastructure to travel in and inhabit other planetary bodies. Only with such longevity and technology can we truly explore space. Space, in that sense, has taken a backseat (although still high on the interests list) to nanotechnology simply because to actualise my dreams of space exploration, nanotechnology has to be sufficiently advanced to make it happen.

Then there are the ever-constants that never fail to tickle my sense of wonder, like giant creatures in the sea, leviathans, Jovian ecology, or any other planetary ecology for that matter. In fact, that just gave me an idea to compile a poetry collection on my ever-constants, and I'll call it ... *Strange and Wondrous Creatures*. Thanks for the inspiration, Jeff!

Most of my interests are boundless sources of inspiration for my work. It is a great delight to be able to write about something you have great passion for. My poems are often about a variety of my current interests, my ever-constants, and sometimes, my hopes and dreams.

Do you think nanotechnology is a near-future thing, or distant?

Nanotechnology is here already actually. The only thing holding it back is politics, and with it, insufficient education about what nanotechnology involves and what it can achieve. This leads to a public fear of the unknown (e.g., IVF when it was first introduced, and more recently, irrational

responses to the SARS virus). This is despite the fact that nanotechnology, with proper governance and support, can improve and extend the lives of everyone on Earth. Consider how lifespans today are extending beyond 90 thanks to modern medicine. Nanomedicine can greatly improve on this number.

I was very disappointed to hear that Michael Crichton's latest book *Prey* is about self-replicating nanomachines eating up everything on Earth like locusts. It is a logical impossibility. This is like saying a computer will turn rogue on you without a specifically implanted program to do so, and then reproduces and infects the next computer. Nanomachines are just that—machines—and they do what you program them to do. The book is awfully misinformed, and may unfortunately turn public opinion against nanotechnology, despite its vast benefits.

Nanomachines can be programmed to clean up oil slicks, mine ores, separate one mineral from another, gobble up fatty deposits in your bloodstream, kill cancerous cells, repair bones, and the list goes on. Self-replicating nanomachines can be injected with such programming to constantly repair your body from disease and degeneration. This means, barring accidents and extreme mutilation, you can pretty much live forever. I'd explain more but it'll take up another article at the very least. If you are very curious, visit the Betterhumans.com website for daily news on nanotechnology or read Ben

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SUCCUBUS

I.

You have risen in several forms.
A speck in someone's eye,
A painful, annoying zit.

The grit stuck
In a cat's paw.
She gnaws to shake you loose.

A cancer
In a loved one's body.
An almost irreversible scar.

Glass, passed off
As diamonds.
Only blind men will buy you.

II.

Ravenous, a barren bat,
You wandered the track
For a tasty snack.

Spied him in my arms,
Beautiful and young.
The cat got your tongue.

Quiet as cancer, you crept into me,
Plucked the berry from
My chest cavity,

Devoured it
With golden frenzy, spitting
The seed back with dark envy.

(My blood, it
Tasted of honey;
Pyre to your black kidney.)

Gravid with blight, you fled
With he, now impotent of sight,
Away into the limpid night.

And I,
Whipped silent screams
Inside my empty shell

Churning the undercurrent
Of the once-placid lake
Sweeping upward, gushing,

A red geyser spitting globules
Of bloody life; where
Volcanic anger burned, revived.

With crimson hands
I inverted my skin, spilled
The contents deep within

Uncovered my lacerated heart.
It was carved
With your teeth marks.

And I cut it out,
Threw it in the fire.
I would grow another.

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Bova's novel *Moonrise*. It is very inspiring.

The best news I've heard all year was on May 15th. In Qinghua University, Beijing, Chinese scientists have, and I quote from a very recent news article in *Betterhumans*: "used nanotechnology to develop artificial bone that is absorbed into the body and has already helped treat 18 bone disease patients." That's the future, folks.

Leaping from there, what are your life's ambitions?

Well, to live, really. My ambition is to live fully each day, each moment, no matter what

I am doing. Most of my prior existence has been existing, especially when I wasn't thinking. I think art helps one focus on living, instead of drifting from day to day without being mindful of what is being done, and how one feels when it is done.

And also love the ones I love more, give a little more. Write a little more.

What is it like writing in your part of the world? Are there a lot of jobs writing/publishing locally, or do you have to reach out to other places?

I write mainly non-fiction in my part of the world, mainly technical writing, articles, and white papers. There are more non-fiction publishers here (scientific, industry-specific, educational) than those who pub-

III.

Dear pinched pustule,
The stars have realigned;
Fortunes turned, redesigned.

The seasons have moved on,
Shedding their hides,
Leaving you far behind.

In your sleep
You dream of a death
Of a million bites;

A pawnshop
Where the owner
Shatters you on sight.

Peddling your wares
On a frigid
Winter's night;

Being shot and stabbed
In the cross-fire of
A gangland fight.

O, the berry has grown
Into your eye, its tendrils
Rendering you purblind.

Unfurled rind,
You begin to unwind.
The clockwork of your mind

Turns orange and hard,
Like the malignant tumour
In your blood,

Chafing all others.
She who birthed you
Cowers in disgust

Inward, and at you.
She'd known from the start,
But she let you, Black Death,

Pariah of the land,
You were poisoned
By your own hand.

lish creative works. As for poetry, my market is mainly outside Singapore.

Have you always lived in Singapore?

I lived in Toronto, Canada for two years, and subsequently two years in Melbourne, Australia where I met my husband. In Toronto, I completed Year 13 and then went

on to do first year at the University of Toronto. I moved to Melbourne after, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Criminology and Philosophy at the University of Melbourne.

Your BA includes Philosophy. What is/was your focus (or favorite focus) philosophically?

While at U of T, I wanted to major in Logic, a field of study under Philosophy. I found great beauty in the proofs. But then I moved to Melbourne, and they had no Logic courses, let alone a major, so I turned to my next area of interest, which was Philosophy of Religion. If I had to choose between the two, it would still be Logic, hands down.

My favourite philosopher is Friedrich Nietzsche, despite his misogynistic tendencies. His ideas were revolutionary in his time, and still are, perhaps even more so during our time. It has helped shape much of my thinking and my personal philosophy.

Is writing your "day" job?

I maintain an Intranet by day. It is my dream job actually, as it gives me the opportunity to nurture a site and grow with it. I write my code from scratch in Arachnophilia (http://www.arachnoid.com/arachnophilia/index_old.html—download v4.0 ... less buggy than the new Java-based 5.2)—an improvement to Notepad. My specialty is troubleshooting buggy codes, not too dissimilar to Logic proofs really. In a way, writing code is like writing poetry. The codes, like alphabets, may not belong to you, but how you put them together, as concisely and efficiently as you can, makes them yours.

Who are your favorite authors/biggest influences?

My biggest influence is Sylvia Plath. She is

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the first poet I read who struck a chord, and her style has greatly moulded mine to what it is now. Her death was and still is a great tragedy.

My favourite authors are Ben Bova for hard SF and Robert R McCammon for Horror. Bova showed me the future out there in space and then brought me along for the ride; McCammon showed me how horror and beauty can synergise into art. Both are brilliant and visionary writers that greatly inspire.

What's your favorite work (of your own)?

As with everything else, I have a few favourites.

The first of my three favourites that I share here is “Succubus” from my poetry collection *The Darkside of Eden*. It is a long poem, which prior to being edited had caught the eye of a *Harvard Review* poetry editor who’d asked me to expand on it (it was just part I then), but unfortunately by the time I sent it back, he had left. Nevertheless, I am extremely grateful for his advice, as it has driven me to beat “Succubus” into the form it is in today.

In “Postwar,” I have this grand vision of Armageddon, inspired by McCammon’s epic novel *Swan Song*, setting the protagonist, the little girl, and her cat Perry in the wastelands of postwar Earth. What makes this poem special to me is the successful

POSTWAR

The scent of burnt flesh
Seeps into my pores.
They are burning the corpses.

I venture an open eye,
Scan the war-beaten horizon
Which boasts only

Of charred bodies and corn stalks.
Beside me, a child lies curled,
Holding her cat in her arms.

She looks at me, eyes wide
As I scoop her up and dash across
The barren field into our shelter below.

Safe, she asks for my name,
And exchanges it with hers.
Her cat’s name is Perry, she adds,

And her parents are dead.
I ask if she knows what has happened today.
How our people were crushed in their iron fists.

She nods and asks,
The humans have won,
Haven’t they? Yes, I say.

And I lead her into the sewers,
Our new home, where she summons Perry
To catch us some prey.

placing of my cat into one of my works, and now that I think about it, perhaps the little girl is me.

“After the War” is very close to my heart because I absolutely love *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*. It was written on one of those days when I felt like I was falling through the rabbit hole myself, and the ideas just fell together into a poem about very dear and sentimental characters from my childhood days. And I’ll tell you a secret here: I’m a huge Humpty Dumpty fan, having had one since I was a month old.

Any advice you’d give to aspiring writers?

Read widely, write a lot, send your work out and take the advice of editors who are kind enough to critique. Don’t give up. There will always be a market for your work. You just have to find it.

More about Christina Sng can be found at <http://www.christinasng.com> and <http://www.mephala.com>. The Darkside of Eden is available through the Allegra Press (<http://www.allegrapress.com>) website via Paypal or credit card, or at Project Pulp (<http://www.projectpulp.com>). Angelflesh is available through Sam’s Dot Publishing (<http://www.samsdotpublishing.com>), Project Pulp, and Shocklines (<http://www.shocklines.com>). Her poetry can be seen in myriad magazines, including back issues of Penumbric.

AFTER THE WAR

Greed drives through
Our war torn country
In a shiny red Cadillac.
The tires are greased
With live roadkill, lining
The streets with fresh meat.

Bodies litter the broken towns
As virgin white snow once did.
The few who remain
Divide loyalties,
And slay all those
In their way.

The world swings upside down
As Wonderland turns to hell.
Alice transforms
Into the wicked witch
To drive the punters
From her cell.

Humpty kills the king’s men
With her fall, rules the state
From her red brick wall.
Clamping an iron fist,
She restores order
From radiated mist.

The Ex-girlfriend

by Giovanni Agnoloni

I hadn't eaten for three days. Yes, I had got down some bits of food, now and then. Yet, since I had witnessed that scene, I hadn't been able to return to normal life.

It was an ordinary day. Exactly like all the others. I had got out to buy little stuff, just to complete the purchases of the previous week, which were themselves quite abundant. She had left me a month before, but I already didn't think of her anymore.

She had really offended me, the way she had behaved. After three years spent together, one day she had come out saying that she was sick and tired of my never being present. It was useless to explain to her that I was a night guardian, and in the day I mostly slept. I had thus kicked her out, given that the house was mine. Anyhow, she still had her family to stay with.

So, I was saying, I went to the supermarket. It was pretty late, but I would surely be there before the closing time, as that was at eight and there still was half an hour left. The thing is, since it was winter, it was already dark. And it was bloody cold. At least the air was clear, due to a strong wind blowing from north. I entered the supermarket and bought the stuff I needed—just a couple of bags, not even too full. Then I returned to my car, which I had left in the parking area. It was then that I saw her.

What first caught my attention was not so much the unmistakably yellow colour of her automobile, but the fact that she was talking with a man. She didn't notice me, as I was walking on the sidewalk and I was partially covered by the vehicles parked along it. I didn't recognise the guy she was with. I just saw he was tall and wore a leather jacket. A little before I reached my car, they got in hers and left.

More curious than worried, I resolved to follow them, obviously keep-

ing a fair distance. They drove about two kilometres on the main road, then turned right onto a secondary street that went inside a rather dangerous area. A thread of preoccupation was already beginning to gain possession of me. I fought between the will to complete my pursuit and the fear of possible perils. But in the end I went on.

Two, three more turns and then the car pulled over. I stopped right around the corner, with my headlights off, knowing that they couldn't have noticed me; also, other cars were actually passing through that neighbourhood. I got surprised when I saw that it was her who got out of the car, while he was replacing her at the driving seat. And then she disappeared behind the front door of a two-storey building, and ten good minutes passed without anything happening.

In the end she came out again, with a white raincoat on. I managed to see her naked legs—protected by stockings, I guess—since they seemed to be trying to escape from her clothes, so inadequate to the present weather. She got back in the car and again their engine was switched on. It was 8.25 p.m.

They drove along two more blocks and eventually they got onto an avenue flanked by trees. I had never come there. There were prostitutes along the sides. Not so many, to be honest. It was still early. The problem was that I wasn't prepared. No, definitely not, when I saw her get off again, say something like a distracted *goodbye* to that chap and take her place under the closest streetlamp. I remained there where I was, kind of petrified, headlights still off, my gaze lost in space. Her friend had already left again, and his car had disappeared beyond the farthest point my sight could reach.

The blue flashes in the sky continued. They had been showing themselves for days, now. Almost nobody bothered anymore with whatever they meant. I especially didn't pay any attention to them now, after

what I had just seen. *She was a bitch*, what the hell. I was trying to explain to myself how all this could be possible, when one of those women approached my car, perhaps thinking that I was lingering there because it was my first time and I couldn't make up my mind. She knocked on the right side window and asked me what I would like, kind of awakening me from a nightmare.

I just had to ask and she would satisfy me, for a good price. I answered that I was in a hurry. I was about to start the engine and leave, when the idea came to my mind to ask her if she knew the girl with the white raincoat. She replied that, no, she didn't know who she was. She had arrived there only three days before and she didn't speak with anyone. She must be a foreigner. I U-turned and went back towards the city. My shift was going to begin in half an hour. But from that moment on, I couldn't stop thinking about my ex-girlfriend.

The next morning I returned home at seven. There was the radio on. I recall Mike Olmstead's voice saying that by now the experts were pretty sure that the sort of aurora borealis that was still going on in the sky every night was an atmospheric phenomenon caused by the close passage of a comet. It probably was because I hated that guy—I thought he was a bloody kiss-ass of powerful people—but I wasn't too convinced by this theory, although it wasn't the first time I had heard it. Anyway, I tried not to think about it. I had other problems at the moment. Outside it was extremely cold and wet. I didn't remember leaving the stereo on, the previous evening, and I must say this detail scared me a little, since I wasn't drunk.

Nonetheless, it could just be tiredness, as the previous afternoon I had slept very badly. I went to the toilet to wash up and then got back to my bedroom to put on something comfortable. It was then that I found the message on the phone machine. The red light was on. I pressed the *play* button and listened. At the beginning I heard nothing, just a dull sound, like a deep buzz. I thought I heard also another sound, kind of rhythmic. It seemed that of cicadas chirping. I didn't understand the meaning of it, so I turned the machine off to avoid further problems. I fell asleep a few minutes later.

If I hadn't been a stubborn materialist, I would have thought there was

some kind of spirit's action. After not even two hours, in fact, I was awakened by the phone ringing. I was lost in one of the worlds of my sleeping mind, and I didn't at first pay attention to it. The phone machine, so, began its work. I realized it because, instead of the normal alarm, I heard again that rhythmic chirping. What I asked myself, then, was why all that was happening again.

Only a few seconds later I noticed the oddest particular: that the phone machine should have been off. How come it was working, instead? Doubting my mental sanity, I checked the time: 8.50 a.m. I *had* actually slept, and I wasn't in a dream. The phone call ended before I made up my mind to answer. I was unsure whether to try sleeping straightaway, but first of all I wanted to dial the number from which the call had been made. In fact, I could read it on an electronic tool I had recently bought. At least the mystery would be solved.

So I dialed the number, and, to my utter surprise, I just heard my voice returning as an echo. I shivered. As a matter of fact, this could mean only two things: that I had phoned myself, which was absurd, or that the person who had answered was very close to me, maybe using a mobile, so that I could hear my voice through his phone. I put the receiver down. There was only one thing to do: go to the other room and check. Fortunately I had my revolver with me. I always kept it in a drawer of my bedside table.

I took the revolver, and then I carefully opened the door and entered the corridor. Still nobody around. I passed to the kitchen. The wall-window opening onto the garden wasn't closed anymore. On the table there was a mobile phone, which seemed on. On the chair someone had left a white raincoat. There was no doubt: It was hers. I grabbed the mobile. At that very moment a message arrived. I read it. It was an appointment, apparently:

34th Street, East Side. In two days at 10 p.m.

Then the mobile turned off, without my having touched any button. I tried to switch it on again, but there was nothing to do. It was sort of

Ex-girlfriend continued next page

dead. I also tried to search in the raincoat's pockets, but found only an old napkin. At that point I resolved to get back to sleeping; in any case I wouldn't get anything more from what I had. I slept worse than the previous day.

The next two days it was all a series of sounds and visions. I woke up at one p.m., ate half a sandwich and got out to buy something, waiting for the night shift. I realized that the strange colours in the sky were making me worried, now. It didn't worry me very much whether they were alien influences, climatic changes, pollution, or other stuff, but they made me uneasy. I had always hated having to accept what the majority of people said just because it helped them live quietly. If it hadn't been for this, thinking of such weird stuff would help me remove my ex-girlfriend from my mind. But the fact is that my inner world was as troubled as the sky above my head.

What's more, I couldn't think of anything else but the appointment with her. I wondered why she had left me that raincoat. Was it a kind of pawn, a message, or just a virtual signature? Probably she simply didn't want me to misunderstand: It was with *her* that I was to meet. While I moved from one area to the other, checking if any intruder had got in, the only detail I had been able to figure out was the exact location of the place where our *rendezvous* had been fixed. It was not very far from the point at which that guy had dropped her. There had to be a connection. I realized that night they had probably noticed me. One thing was sure: I had received no more phone calls. And the mobile, since it had spontaneously turned off, hadn't come back to life.

In the end the night of our appointment arrived. I took a leave for the occasion, and decided to eat properly, as I sensed I would need all my energies. As I was tidying up my kitchen, I wondered why I hadn't yet tried calling her at home. I rapidly came to the conclusion that it must have been for fear. Nevertheless, tonight I wouldn't withdraw. Perhaps I still felt a slight form of affection for her. Or maybe it was just curiosity. Before putting on my jacket, I picked up my revolver. I

didn't know what I would have to face. I tied it to my right leg, to hide it under my trousers. It was then that the mobile rang. I rushed into the kitchen, but the alarm had already ceased. And the phone was off again.

I had been a night guardian for nine years, and nothing dangerous had ever occurred to me. Get in, patrol, get out. This is what that that job meant to me. And I would never imagine a possible threat could arrive from her. But I decided to keep my revolver with me, on the occasion of our meeting, if only because of the her male friend: His possible presence was not a danger to be overlooked.

While I was driving to reach the place of our appointment, I tried to find an explanation, to understand who or what might have led her to choose that life. Maybe the need for money, maybe the taste for dirty things, or someone blackmailing her. I browsed my memories of the three years we lived together, but couldn't find traces, omens, or any other sign that might let me recognize her real nature. Not that our relationship had been perfect. On the contrary, our arguments, with time, had become more and more frequent, and eventually had probably caused our breaking up. But they were just normal incomprehensions in an ordinary pair's life.

I gave up my efforts to find an answer right when I entered an area of the city that I didn't know very well. I realized I was going down one of the streets of the first night. In fact, a few seconds later I recognized the prostitutes' avenue. There were about ten of them, but she wasn't in their number. She was surely waiting for me elsewhere. I drove until the very end of that boulevard, where I found a "T" intersection. From the map I had I deduced that I had to turn right, and so I did. Only a few houses flanked the street, and they looked rather poor. Nobody was walking around, and only two or three cars came the opposite way. It seemed that I was the only human being who had chosen that direction. I felt fear coming over me, but I rejected it with a swallow.

At a certain point I saw the sign indicating 33rd Street. It meant the next one was mine. "East side" implied that the meeting point was on the other lane, so I would have to go down the whole avenue and then

U-turn. Before getting onto 34th Street, I checked if my revolver was still under my trousers. It obviously was. I turned right. What I saw were two lanes, separated by a series of trees and hedges in the middle, which prevented me from seeing clearly what was beyond. Along the sides there were houses, with almost all the lights off.

I proceeded rather slowly for about a half kilometre, without anything happening. Eventually I found a roundabout. At that point, the avenue evidently finished. The moment had come. I U-turned. Now in front of me there was the same avenue, but seen from the other end. It looked the same. Dim lights, silent houses, not a single soul around.

I had driven down about half of it when I realized that a noise was coming in from outside. I could hear it because the window was a bit down. I diminished the speed and listened more intently. Chirping. Like that of cicadas. One more time. It had to be the sign. The confirmation came from the mobile phone, which abruptly turned on and rang. I started back in fear, but my reaction was good enough to be quicker than the caller. I immediately answered. A woman's voice that I didn't recognize told me, "Get off. I'm waiting for you at home."

I parked there. I got out of my car and walked the length of the path that led from the gate to the front door. The house had to be that in front of which I had received the phone call. It appeared in better condition than those around. It even had a small wooden arcade before the entrance. That's where I found myself, at that point. From now on, things could change dramatically. I extracted my revolver and knocked.

I think that for a few seconds I got very close to that region of the human mind that is called terror. Yet, nobody came to open. In fact, it wasn't necessary. The door wasn't locked. I pushed it and entered, still keeping my gun ahead of me. I found myself in a living room, lit up by a rather big lamp, which threw its warm flash of light onto an elegant carpet. There also were white bookshelves, a sofa, and an armchair right in the darkest part of the room. On it a woman was sitting.

"Welcome," she told me, even before turning her face to me.

"Why did you call me?" I asked. I was still tense, with no intention of letting go of my revolver yet. But now her voice seemed to me more familiar.

"And why have you immediately rushed here?" she replied. And then: "Take a seat. You won't need your gun. We're alone."

My arm relaxed. I took a few steps inside the house. The living room was definitely large. I put the revolver at safety and sat down on the couch in front of her. It was then that she turned to me. I found her strange, changed, as if the events she had gone through since she had left me had sucked her in from outside.

"You know," she started, "I am aware of the fact that you don't have a good opinion about me ..." I didn't interrupt her to rebut her words. "... but the fact is that we're no more similar to each other, do you understand?"

"I don't grasp what you mean," I replied, placing my gun beside me. "I just know that you saw me follow you. You got into my house, you tapped my phone and worked—I don't know how—on my electronic equipment. You are a prostitute. Please, just tell me, what do you want from me?"

She kept silent for a few moments, and then she stood up and walked towards the bookshelves. She wore a long dress, surely too elegant for the informal occasion. When she reached the wall, she turned around and spoke to me with visible difficulty.

"Do you remember our last vacation?"

"What's the point of this question, now?" I objected.

"Do you remember it or not? It's important," she insisted, now visibly nervous.

"Yes, yes, I recall it. We were at the seaside."

Ex-girlfriend continued next page

“Very well. What did we talk about before we left?”

“I don’t know ... about the end of our vacation, the sad duty to go back to work ...”

“And about the desire to leave for a never-ending travel, right?” she came out.

“Yes, OK, you told me how great it would have been to travel forever, without time or space limits ...”

“That’s the point!” she exclaimed. Then she didn’t say any more words. I was feeling uneasy.

“What do you mean?” I muttered.

“During that period, I often went out at night, you’ll recall it.” She was right. Almost every night of that week she had gone out on the beach very late, when I was already in bed. The flat we had rented was very close to it, so she just had to cross a path and her feet could walk on sand. I had asked her what was going on, but she said it simply helped her sleep better, afterwards. I wasn’t surprised. We had repeatedly quarrelled, during that vacation, and maybe she needed to stay a little by herself.

“One night, I walked a bit farther than usual, until I reached a sort of remote bay, surrounded by rocks,” she went on.

“And so?” I was beginning to suspect she had gone completely crazy, but the story intrigued me, as well.

“I saw a light coming from what seemed to be a cave, and I got close to it.”

“What was there?”

“A girl. A girl like me,” she said.

“What do you mean *like you*?”

“I mean that she looked exactly like me. She turned to me and smiled. Then she motioned for me to get near, and I couldn’t resist her call. She stretched out an arm and touched my forehead.”

“And then what happened?” I was sweating.

“I understood everything. I realized we are nothing but the mirror of the real world. A pale image of what life could be if we were better than we are. That girl was the soul that had long before abandoned me—or should I say that I had abandoned her. She was offering me a chance. A chance that came from another world.”

I felt as if I was floating out of time and space. Her words had sort of cast a spell upon me. But I was still aware of my thinking and speaking. “What world?” I asked her.

She didn’t answer. She just said: “Then I returned home, and you awoke, and asked me what was going on. It was then that I told you how beautiful it would have been to just leave, with no destination or worry. I was referring to *that* world.”

“What world?” I repeated, this time shouting.

Her expression changed. It was as if she changed identity. She became cold, and observed me with a severe look, before speaking: “Perhaps you haven’t got it yet, but your fiancée is gone.”

Such an abrupt revelation awakened me from my dream condition. I couldn’t believe my ears. I observed: “Well, I know she left me, but I think she’s still here, right in front of me.” I was beginning to be afraid of her. She looked very strange, as if she was a dead person coming back to life. “Did you know you had a sister-in-law?” she asked me.

“No,” I answered. “You’ve always told me you don’t have any siblings. But what’s the relevance of this?”

“A high relevance, indeed, because *I am* that sister.”

I remained wordless. I couldn't believe it was not her, but only a very similar sister. Practically a twin. This is why I saw her different. Still, I couldn't really accept this news. I asked her: "Wait, you mean that you are not ..."

"No," she stopped me. "I've told you. She was sick and tired. She needed a new start. She left for a faraway place. Not even I know where she is now. But she wanted me to talk to you about her story."

I was astonished. "What is the sense of all this?" I insisted. She explained: "She didn't love you anymore, since she had rediscovered her soul. Yet, she couldn't stand her departure without leaving you a message like this. But she lacked the courage to pronounce it with her own mouth, so she asked if I could do it for her."

"And how come you didn't look for me at home, instead of inventing such a comedy? Why did you enter my flat, and how did you manage to tamper with my radio and phone machine?" I pressed her.

"I didn't come to your house to talk to you because I didn't want to be seen around, given my job. As to the intrusion, I didn't make it myself. It was my friend, the one you saw me with in the car. I sent him there."

"And that odd mobile, that turns on and off when it decides to do so? And the strange sounds I heard in the phone messages you left me?" She was going to answer, when I realized another detail, which the charming sound of her voice had made me overlook, until now. "And why," I urged her, unwillingly standing up, "have you started this conversation talking as if you were her, whereas you are only her twin?"

"All this belongs to the things you can't understand," she said, changing the tone of her voice. "But I see you've got a bright sense of intuition. It will help you rediscover your soul, as it happened to her. Or should I say *to me*?" She stopped for a second, looking at me meaningfully. Then she added: "Or should I say 're-discover *your brother*'?"

What did she mean? I just know that I felt an embryo of comprehen-

sion taking shape in my mind. My brother? I didn't have any. Whereas she had said she was *her sister*. But at the same time she indifferently used *her* and *me*. Who was she in truth? And was she trying to suggest that the two sisters were in reality the same person? I was completely losing my reason. I realized that thinking about it would just drive me crazy, but I would still miss the solution.

Something fortunately distracted me. The front door opened by itself, silently, as if answering a mute call. I instinctively brought my hand to my revolver, which was still on the sofa. She stopped my movement with a gesture. From outside, the chirping sound of cicadas had relevantly increased. She started walking towards the exit, and

Ex-girlfriend continued next page



continued from *Ex-girlfriend* previous page

ordered me to stay where I was. Then she disappeared around the corner and I didn't see her anymore.

I stood up. The chirping noise was becoming unbearable, and I wondered, now very scared, what was happening and why no one intervened from the near houses. I didn't resist any longer, and got out of the house. In that very moment in time, the noise ceased altogether.

I looked around. The strange flashes of purple light continued, up in the sky, as mysterious as ever. She wasn't anywhere. I reached the sidewalk, but neither she nor anyone else could be seen in either direction. Behind the house there was only an old garage, but it was locked from outside, and lots of dust had accumulated on the handle. She couldn't be in there. Suddenly, I heard the mobile phone ring. I had left it in my car. I ran there to take it. She answered:

"Hello? Are you still there?"

"Where have you gone?" I asked her, panting.

"Now I'm with my sister. Remember that there are good and evil. They are the two sides of the same coin, and the coin is each of us. You are a coin, and I'm the evil side of your girlfriend's coin," she said.

I couldn't understand, even now, but that candle lit in my brain, that beginning of intuition, it was growing, I felt it. I just had the time to ask her: "But where are you, now?"

She eventually answered: "Look for your soul in nature, 'cause you lost it as your ex-girlfriend had. That will be the good side of your coin. When you find it, you'll know where we are."

And she hung up.

Misclassified Romance

by Stan Yan



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Welcome to Mystery Hill

by Greg Beatty

“The House on Mystery Hill! You’ll ask, ‘How do they do that?’” my sister read from the brochure. “I wonder what Mom would have thought of that?”

“The real question is, why would anyone go there!” I countered. “After Deer Park and Christmas Year Round, aren’t you people sick of these stupid roadside attractions?” Everyone ignored me. As usual. Dad pulled the car into the parking lot, and we all trooped up a long flight of stairs to the decrepit house on the hill, taking turns reading the signs that flanked the steps. “Shocking!” “Mysterious!” “Stupid,” I added.

We were greeted at the door by a thin, pale man. “Welcome to Mystery Hill,” he said. “We’re so glad you could join us today. Now that you’re here, we have enough visitors for a tour. I’m Victor. I’ll be your guide.”

Victor went on for a while, laying out a tired spiel about how, over a hundred years earlier, the original owners of the house had discovered the site was special even before the house was complete, only they were too stubborn (or stupid, I thought) to change their minds about living there, even when plants grew in the cement and all the house pets disappeared.

“Probably bored out of their skins,” I said. Victor peered at me from under an exceptional set of eyebrows. “In any case, we welcome you to the House on Mystery Hill. We promise to show you things that will stay with you for a Very Long Time Indeed.”

Yeah, right. With that, Victor led us into the kitchen. After he delivered another general spiel on the Wonders of Mystery Hill, we followed him to the sink, where he told us that “What we’re about to see simply cannot happen, because as we all know, water seeks the low-

est level—right?”

With that he turned on the tap. A steady flow of water came out. It fell straight down for a moment, then bent in mid-course, twisting to splash against the side of the sink.

“How in the world ...?” my brother began.

“Magnets,” I said. “They put iron filings in the water, and then turn on a magnet at one side of the sink. Notice how it only bends to one side?”

Victor gave a little smile, talked the crowd through a wrap-up, and walked them into the parlor, where, he said, “We will see even more fundamental distortions of the forces of nature!”

What we saw was an old pool table. Victor talked about probability, friction, and gravity as he racked the balls. When he broke, the balls went in all directions, just like normal. Then they started curving every which way, snaking towards the padded edges, then towards each other and away again.

“The table’s not level,” I said. “That’s what’s causing it.” But in all directions? “Some people,” Victor said, “claim that the table isn’t level.” He whipped out a level—I couldn’t quite see where it came from—and placed it on the table. The bubble floated in the center of the glass tube, right on the line.

“It’s rigged.”

But no one listened to my admittedly feeble protest. Instead, they fol-

Mystery Hill continued next page

lowed Victor into "... the room of True Sight, where your inner self is revealed!"

There were two full-length mirrors in the next room. Nothing else. Somehow my brother and sister had ended up in the front of the crowd. My dad drifted up behind them and put his arms around them. "Well, go ahead. Take a look."

My brother stepped in front of one mirror, my sister in front of the other. The tourists burst out laughing. In the mirrors, my svelte sister had ballooned to immense size, while our chubby little brother had narrowed and elongated.

"Oh great, sideshow mirrors ..." then I stopped, because when they switched places, the distorted visions had followed them to the new mirrors. The mirror that had made Kurt skinny made Jolie fat, and vice versa. I didn't know what to say, and truth be told, it was a bit weird. Jolie was so proud of never being over X% body fat (I never listened) that if she ever weakened, she'd eat an entire package of Thin Mints. And Kurt only overate since Mom's accident. I can understand. We all miss Mom.

"Let me try!" But by that time a long line of tourists had formed. All of them laughed and marveled as they became thin, tan, and in one odd instance, Scottish. At least, the mirror showed the guy wearing a kilt. As he moved on, Mr. Duncan was telling everyone that his name really was Scottish, and that maybe he should do genealogy.

At last I had a shot at the mirrors. I stepped in front of the first one, and blinked. "Okay, I have to ask. How do you do that? That's more than a kilt."

I looked at the mirror in front of me. It showed a rotting corpse, rocking from side to side, turning its head as if to better display the maggots squirming under its cheek bones.

"Try the other one," Victor said.

I did, and the revenant followed me. I did a little hokey pokey, and watched the putrid thing in front of me stick its right leg in, stick its right leg out, only to have something fall off behind it as it stuck its scrawny leg out.

I heard a faint, moist sound. I looked behind me; a curled piece of something that looked fried had fallen to the carpet. I squinted into the mirror. The leg in the mirror had a new bare patch on its leg. And is that what a shin bone looks like? "Look, Vic, this is getting a little creepy. Where did everyone else go?" He gestured towards the room's far wall. Had those three dark doors always been there? I opened the first one. Rather than a room, I peered down a shadowy hall. Somewhere in the distance, I heard a woman call, "Ethan? Look out!" Then I heard a great crash, the sound of metal twisting, and something like a sudden crackle of flames. Somewhere beyond it, I heard crying.

I winced, and slammed the door shut. That could not be my mother. That could not have been the accident. "That was the past," Victor said.

I cracked the next door, just a touch. It was just a room, with a big window. I walked over and looked out. I had a good view of the parking lot, where my dad was reaching over to check my sister's seat belt, the way he always did now. I tapped on the window. Nothing. I pounded then, and waved my arms and shouted. My dad got in the front seat, started the car, and drove away.

"Wait! Guys! I'll be nice!" I called. "Nicer." Victor probably thought that sounded feeble, but they knew what I meant. Back when everything was good, before Mom died, whenever I was sarcastic or hurtful, Mom would get a sad little frown on her face and say, "Be nice." I wasn't nice then, but I would be now. I swear. But there was nobody left to hear me.

I stood by the window for a long time, watching our Volvo drive away. When I turned away, there was a moist, opaque smear on the window. I went back to the room with the mirrors.

"And that door was the present."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it, you bastard," I said. I threw open the third door. It revealed a long flight of stairs leading down to the parking lot. A grubby family was making their way up the steps, a small boy struggling to read the word "mys-teri-ous" from the sign.

"Oh no," I whispered. At least, that's what I thought I said. What I heard emerge from my rotting lips was a hearty "Welcome to Mystery Hill!"

Then they were past me and into the main foyer, where Victor took over the spiel. I stood anchored at the doorway to the larger world, wishing I could leave, knowing I could not. Behind me, the rest of the ghosts of Mystery Hill writhed and moaned as they bent water and played spirit pool to mock the living. We are all as much haunted as haunting, a sad and desperate collection of undead oddities, trapped forever in the House on Mystery Hill.

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The Taste

by Jay Caselberg

Home no more and wanting
Holding
Casting forth the reminiscence
Of tasted pain
Rubbing it proud as it squeezes breath
Once bitten
Thrice

Trace the pattern of the wound
White like teeth and bloodless
Made of ice
Constructed of experience and flesh
Chill illusion caged
As today is to die forever

I harness the feel
Of that which was
To ask it chains me
Poor substitute and ragged
Pale memories in the cold earth
Where I stand and weep
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.

Mail Call

by Michael Morris

Professor Pickens hurried toward the large frame house at the top of the hill. He knew where he was by the familiar pattern of cracks that meandered across the sidewalk below his bony nose. The gentle California afternoon sunshine warmed the back of his head where the hair had reluctantly receded from his pink scalp. In five minutes precisely he would fit the key into his front door and step into the cool interior. He would step into his slippers, take off his tie, make a cup of coffee and eat the meal he had prepared earlier. Monday was chicken salad, with two tomatoes, a leaf of lettuce, and a pickle. He would scrape a small amount of butter onto a slice of bread and eat that, too. Professor Pickens was a man of habit.

He was, he knew, in control of his destiny, untroubled by the untidy passions and frivolous impulses which beset other, lesser folks. “No,” he mused with satisfaction, “not lesser folk; they simply lack my superior intellect and willpower.” He smiled to himself. He was a humble man, not given to announcing his superiority to the rest of the world. That, too, was one of his many virtues. He passed the roots of the tree that had crept under his neighbor’s fence during the past twenty years, buckling the sidewalk into crazy paving for what was now a full ten paces of his journey. Others, he knew, would have been unnerved by this obstacle. He was made of sterner stuff. In a minute and a half, he would reach his front door and ... “Bonk, huff.”

The “Bonk,” was the sound of a head, his head, hitting a hollow metal object. The “Huff” was the sound he made sitting abruptly and painfully on the lumpy sidewalk. In twenty years this had never happened. Each day he traversed the last, empty, fifty yards to his front door without resistance. He occasionally saw human and dog feet dance nimbly out of his path. Other people’s use of his sidewalk was an annoying but necessary price he paid for living in a suburb, but this intrusion by an absurd, bonk-sounding hollow object was alto-

gether too much. “How dare you,” he spluttered, raising his eyes to a blue mailbox, parked squarely in his path

“I’m so sorry,” the mailbox replied politely. “But you weren’t looking where you were going.” The mail-slot opened, and a giant tongue licked his face. “No, that’s not right,” the thing said, and the tongue retracted, to be replaced by a well-formed arm which helped him to his feet.

Professor Pickens brushed his jacket. He was flustered for the first time in years. He had ignored the world for decades, considering it noisy and brash. The college where he taught was not known for its dynamism, and years ago he had learnt that disdainful sarcasm was the best way to discourage tiresome questions from his students. Memorized lectures, delivered without variation in a monotonous mumble, allowed him to reflect upon his own virtues rather than everyone else’s shortcomings. He had no curiosity about the peculiar doings of today’s youth, or today’s adult for that matter, being far more interested in late 19th century postage stamps. He was aware, however, that a large mailbox with a tongue, an arm, and a voice was a somewhat unusual apparition, even this close to Los Angeles.

The mailbox was studying him intently. He realized that just above the mail-slot were two close-set gray eyes. They looked disturbingly familiar. “Hm,” it mused. “One of the soft type. One of the squishy type,” it added, chillingly.

The professor glared at the thing. He decided that it was a hallucination. Nothing wrong in that. A highly intelligent and sensitive

Mail Call continued next page

man such as himself, constantly dealing with ordinary mortals, well, he had to be excused the occasional lapse. His parents lacked the foresight to be enormously rich; he forgave them and suffered. He noted with distaste that the mail box was evolving. It had sprouted wispy hair, a petulant mouth, and an undistinguished nose. A pair of brown loafers, just like his own, was attached to its feet. "I think," it said, "the ones that move are more intelligent."

"Go away," said the professor, attempting to circumnavigate the apparition. "You're an hallucination." The mailbox barred his way, shuffling sideways in those absurd loafers. It now looked almost human, resembling a prissy, middle-aged man, bareheaded and in untidy clothes. Apart from a tin plate showing the collection times, which it wore with a certain panache on its shirt, it now looked exactly like ...

"You're me!" the professor spluttered in indignation. "How dare you!" He broke off, aware that showing anger to a figment of his imagination was not the clear and logical action he had come to expect of himself. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, counting to ten in Chinese, a discipline which he had discovered worked wonders with his nervous system. The figment watched him calmly.

"Tell me all about yourself" it said magisterially, and Professor Pickens felt, as he had not in years, like an undergraduate student in the grip of a sadistic tutor. "I already know all about you. of course," it continued. "I have read your mind." Here he gave a grimace of distaste, rather as if he had bitten into an apple and found a worm inside. "I have read your mind, " he continued, "such as it is. However, I'd like to hear you talk. I find it difficult to believe that your mental powers are so rudimentary."

Pickens, enraged, purpled and spluttered. So angry was he that he found it difficult to either move or speak. "Guh! Wuh! Gumph!" he managed, as the mailbox man looked down his nose.

"I'll explain everything," the man said slowly and distinctly, as if he

were speaking to a particularly dense undergraduate. He sounded, in fact, just like Professor Pickens crushing a foolhardy student for asking a question. He paused, rocking slightly on his feet, a habit the professor had unconsciously acquired years previously. "I'm what is called a Transferor," he continued. "I roam the universe, searching out primitive organisms, such as yourself. I then transfer my being into them, and vice versa. For a short period, a thousand years or so, I send data back to my home Galaxy."

"Quite impossible, my good fellow," Pickens sneered. "That is a totally ridiculous proposition." At least that's what he intended to say, but it all seemed to emerge as a series of grunts and squeaks, rather like a rusty machine being dragged along the sidewalk.

"How so?" the duplicate professor asked mildly, seemingly understanding perfectly. He had finished dragging the mailbox to the edge of the curb. He hooked fingers pompously in the folds of his jacket and stared beadily from behind his spectacles. "What about the speed of light?" the mailbox struggled to say.

"Space Warp, Wormhole, Temporal Continuum," the Professor answered equitably. "Mind over Matter. Instantaneous Transmission, Black Holes, Sunspots, Unified Field Theory. Too difficult for your feeble mental processes."

The mailbox broke into a light sweat. "It's illogical," it tried to say. "If you are that advanced, you must find it morally impossible to simply take over a person without his consent."

"Naturally," the Professor answered soothingly. "It would be unethical of me to coerce an intelligent lifeform. Of course, in your case, the existence of real intelligence is doubtful."

"I am a thoroughly stable, intelligent person," the mailbox attempted to shout, its mail slot flapping agitatedly. "You are the one gallivanting across the universe." It paused. "I am happy where I am. I don't want to move, and I don't want to transfer, or whatever." It banged its metal chest feebly, emitting a disconcertingly hollow sound, and gradually became still. "I'm glad you said that," the

Professor murmured “You shall, of course stay where you are.” The mailbox, looking at its former self, saw a fleeting expression which reminded it of a long-forgotten used-car salesman. Its mail slot fell open as it became aware of its shiny blue paint, its spindly legs. “Clang,” it said and went rigid forever.

Professor Pickens closed the mailbox slot, smiling slightly. He was well contented, sure that he would enjoy a society even as primitive

as this. And indeed, his peers and students often commented later on the vast improvement in his personality, especially the prettier female students, who he often tutored well beyond the normal hours of study. As for the new mailbox, for some reason it received very few letters. The mail slot had an annoying habit of shutting snap-pishly on unwary fingers, and despite its bright blue color, it somehow looked very ill-tempered and haughty.

A good summertime read— and beyond

Review by Jeff Georgeson

When I was a teenager I would sit in my living room for hours, eating various snack crackers and devouring whatever book the Science Fiction Book Club had “accidentally” sent me that month. Some of these were complete crap, but many were good enough, a sort of quick read that was interesting, but not incredibly deep. Sheri S. Tepper’s True Game series springs to mind, as does any number of Poul Anderson, Robert Asprin, and Piers Anthony novels.

And note I didn’t say these works were bad; they’re just not *Hamlet*, or Asimov’s Foundation series.

John B. Rosenman’s *Beyond Those Distant Stars* took me back to those days (and sent me searching for snack food as well, to accompany my reading). It is a perfect “summertime read,” as those who name things would say. It flows quickly, the action is sharp, and the prose is interesting and keeps the reader reading.

But there’s a bit more to this book, a second layer to it that, while not making it the *Hamlet* of its generation, surely makes it more than mere entertainment. There is a depth here that all sf should have—or, rather, all sf should have at least as much as this, for in fact I think this book’s biggest problem is that it doesn’t get in-depth enough.

What you get—some—in *Beyond* is an exploration of what it means to become a cyborg, to have one’s body replaced almost entirely by synthetic parts; to have one’s senses changed forever, so that you cannot feel with your hands, cannot smile without conscious decision. What does this do to one’s mental being? How does one deal with that?

However ...

What you also get—some—is a political exploration of the decline of

empire, of a war fought simultaneously within and without.

What you also get is a slew of mythological references, mostly Greek/Roman, and references to literature from across time.

What you also get is an alien race that ... well, I don’t want to give it away.

What you also get is maybe too many things, and thus the exploration of any one of them is diluted a bit in favor of getting the overall story across, which has to do with fighting an interstellar war along with political intrigue and finding oneself in a new body.

However (again) ...

This book IS quite enjoyable, and at least it brings up these issues (which, unfortunately, many books do not), if not being able to cover any one of them with great depth. One could, after all, write with the focus entirely on cyborgification and what it means to be human, or on the decline and fall of empire; Rosenman has chosen to go a different route here, and that is fine. There is some very good writing here, and very well-wrought twists and turns in the plot that also elevate *Beyond Those Distant Stars* to something a cut above the bulk of books on the shelves these days.

And that in itself is a very good reason to read this one.

(*Beyond Those Distant Stars* is available from NovelBooks, Inc. from July 21 in both electronic and POD formats.)



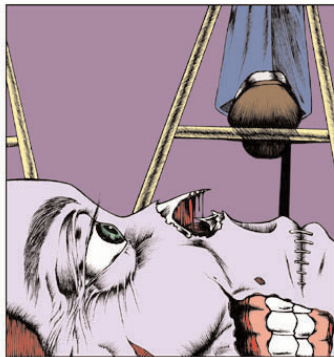
Sleepwalk

"Shallow"

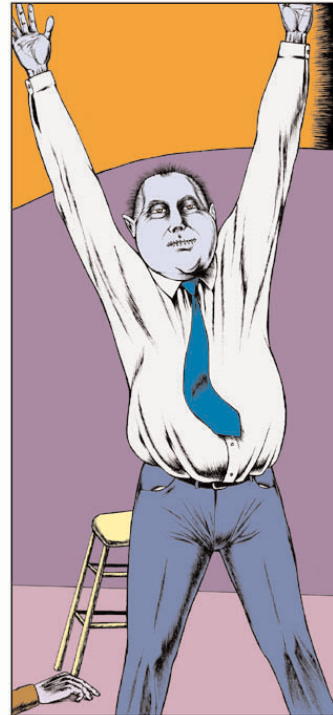
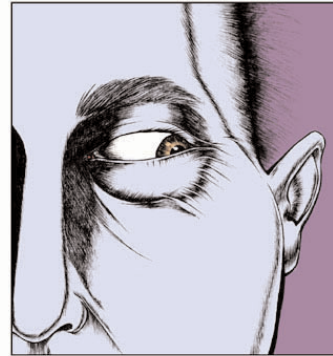
by Robert Elrod



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Contributors' Bios

Giovanni Agnoloni

Giovanni Agnoloni was born in Florence (Italy), on the 9th of September 1976. After a major in Classical Studies, he obtained an honours degree in Law from the University of Florence (June 2002) with a thesis on Data Protection Law in Italy and Common Law countries. He speaks Italian, English, Spanish, Portuguese and French, and he has worked as a translator and interpreter. He has studied in England (University of Leicester) for five months (January to June 2000), and he has travelled to Ireland (twice), France, Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic, Austria. He loves Florence as his home, but Ireland has most impressed his imagination. His published writing consists of a long essay on Tolkien's world (to be released September 2003, by Spazio Tre, Milan, Italy) and two short stories ("Steps in the sand," *Aoife's Kiss* March 2003, and "The secret," to be published in July's issue of *The Martian Wave*, both on www.samsdotpublishing.com). He has also written a techno-thriller that is currently being reviewed by various agents across America, Ireland and the UK, and a collection of short stories in Italian, under consideration of Italian Publishers. He is presently working on a fantasy novel in English and on a crime novel in Italian, apart from a long-term project for a new Italian essay in more volumes on comparative literature themes that is his most ambitious goal.

Greg Beatty

Greg Beatty attended Clarion West in the summer of 2000. He's had a number of short stories accepted since then. (For more information on his writing, visit his website at <http://home.earthlink.net/~gbeatty/>.) He supports his writing habit by teaching for the University of Phoenix Online. When he's not at his computer, he enjoys cooking, practicing martial arts, and spending time with his girlfriend Kathleen.

Cathy Buburuz

Canadian illustrator Cathy Buburuz has had art published in many fine publications over the years including *Antares* (Romania), *Probe* (Africa), *The Modern Art Cave Anthology* (USA), *Futures Magazine* (USA), and *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* (Australia). Cathy's horror stories "Beyond Ledra" and "Killing Papagello" were accepted by the editor of *Underworlds* and her tall tale of the Old

West, "Midnight in the Storytellers Saloon," will soon appear in the *Outposts of the Beyond* anthology edited by Tyree Campbell of Sam's Dot Publishing. Visit Cathy's Champagne on Ice website, if you dare: <http://www.samsdotpublishing.com/champagne/cover.html>.

Jay Caselberg

Jay Caselberg is an Australian writer based in London. His work has appeared in *InterZone*, *On Spec*, *Fangoria*, and others. His novel *Wyrmhole* is out from Roc Books in October, and another, *Metal Sky*, the following year. His website is at <http://www.sff.net/people/jay-caselberg>.

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.

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>.

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."