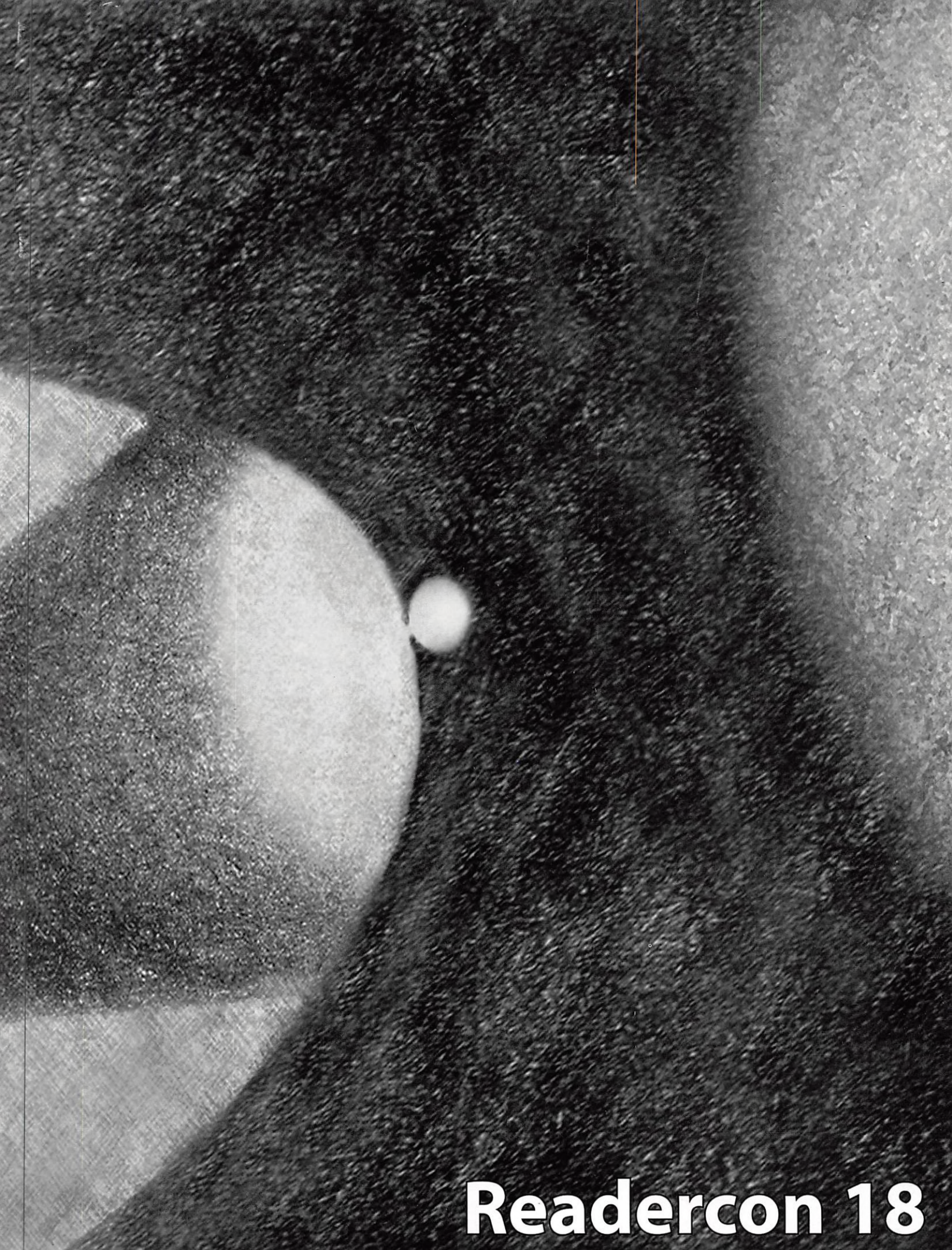
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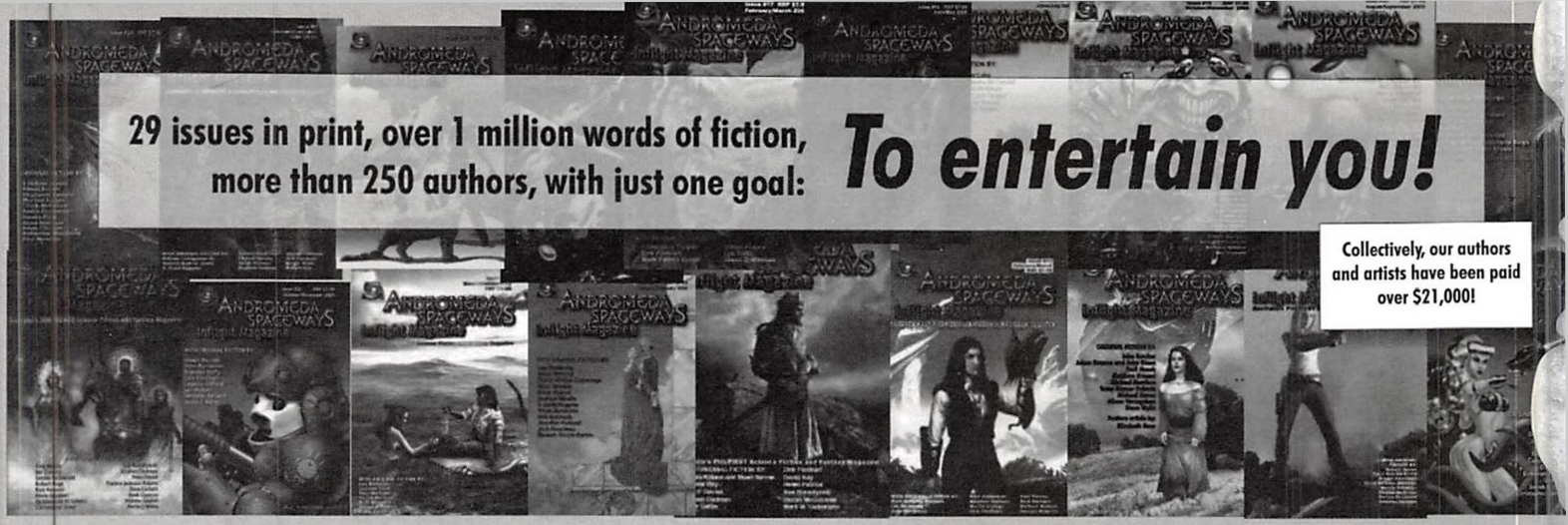

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Contents

Editors: The Ad-Hoc Editorial Collective
Design and Production: David G. Shaw, Belm Design
Bibliographies: Val Grimm
Copyediting/Proofreading: Amy West, David G. Shaw
Advertising: B. Diane Martin
Details: Body text Adobe Minion, titles Adobe Myriad. Pages produced in Adobe InDesign CS3 on a Macintosh G5. Printing by Quality Graphics, Somerville, MA.

Cover: Untitled, Tamara Gurevitz, copyright © 2007.

Interior illustrations: illustration (page 9), endpapers (page 17), and cover (page 26) by J.K. Potter copyright © 2007, taken from forthcoming collection of Lucius Shepard short stories published by Subterranean Press.

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Karen & Lucius: A Portrrait of Two Teachers

by Charles Oberndorf

Charles Oberndorf, who's taught for 23 years, would be at Readercon now if he weren't called in as a replacement chaperone for a group of 8th grade Latin students touring Italy.

It was February or March in 1987. The most recent issue of *Asimov's* announced the upcoming roster of teachers for Clarion East. I was looking at the names of the famous people: A.J. Budrys, Suzy McKee Charnas, Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm. I'd first heard of Clarion when I was in high school and reading every book I could on the art and craft of writing science fiction. I dreamed of one day attending Clarion, but now I was 27, my wife was pregnant, and I knew I would never go.

When April saw the ad, she said, "You've got to go."

She was going through a chancy pregnancy. I thought it was a bad idea.

She insisted.

Why?

Lucius Shepard and Karen Joy Fowler were the other two instructors.

I can't remember when, but April had handed me a story, and said "Read this." It was set in Central America and reflected the realities I'd been reading and hearing about (in 1985, a friend had led a crew of carpenters to build housing for a dirt poor farming cooperative in Nicaragua). I now went through every issue we had of *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, digging up Lucius Shepard stories. April was so in love with Lucius' writing that she let me borrow a copy of *Playboy*, a forbidden text in our home, so we could read "Fire Zone Emerald." Later that year we had long heated conversations over "R&R," a story she understood better than I did.

Around the same time I had bought a copy of *Artificial Things* because some reviewers had made a big deal of it in *Locus*. April read through the entire book in an evening; she insisted I read "Gate of Ghosts," which I really liked. But I didn't read more until much later, when I read "The View from Venus," which was the story that made me a fan. It was April who loved the writing, the way it caught the tensions of life that April had not seen expressed often enough in the fiction she'd read.

April loved both these writers, and because she loved them, she insisted that this was the year I go to Clarion. "You're certainly not going next year," she said.

Sometimes fine writers don't make fine teachers. This was my biggest worry.

Our first instructor thought it'd been a mistake to hire Karen and Lucius. He felt that new writers didn't know enough about the ups and downs of the field, nor about complex nature of craft. Both these caveats are true, but what the new teacher brings is the energy and enthusiasm that the wise teacher lacks. First year teachers are the ones you fall in love with because they're so open to the love that is part of good teaching.

And both Karen and Lucius came with a quality that resonates more in the sf community than anywhere else: the fame of being the hot new thing.

Karen had a string of short stories, written over years, but published in a short period, and her minor fame gave her an aura of great confidence. The fact that she was friendly in a way only a Midwesterner can be only drew us to her with greater affection.

Karen was also blessed with this unique talent, something I'd discovered only once before in my life: she could deliver bad news about your fiction, and you wouldn't feel wounded. She'd sound like a cousin given you secret advice, and you'd nod your head. Like many great writing teachers, she read widely and accepted all styles. While students in the workshop sometimes spent their time arguing against a story because it wasn't their kind of story, Karen was accepting. Her commentary was almost like a conversation with the story itself. If you want to do this, shouldn't you try this strategy to get your effect?

Karen has continued to teach. For a while she taught every other year at Clarion (she's teaching there this summer). She helped found a summer workshop at Cleveland State, and over a decade her July visits to Cleveland were an annual event (and she's returning again this summer). She's toured the country teaching at workshops as well as serving stints as a writer in residence at a few universities. A scholar tracing Karen's work at Clarion would probably discover a huge embracing tree, branches reaching out and in support of a number of our fresh voices in our field.

Lucius came to Clarion with his own fame. He'd already had one novel, a series of stories, and a forthcoming novel in a prestigious trade paperback literary series. He came with the reputation of having traveled to Vietnam and Central America. And he was so popular that one of the 17 Clarion students was modeling his writing on Lucius's style.

The big surprise was that Lucius, the most articulate of writers, was an awkward speaker in real life. Only when he'd built up a head of stream, when he was on a roll, did he become the articulate speaker we'd see in later years. Lucius was more like a high school teenager whose mouth couldn't keep up with his mind, and when he wasn't able to complete his thought, he'd break out into laughter, his own form of ellipsis. During workshop, he'd roll up manuscripts into tight telescopes as he searched for words, and his suite of rooms was a trail of scattered papers, curled up like Viking ships.

But like Karen, Lucius could utter whatever truth without causing harm. We'd all made fun of some gaffe in one story, and Lucius said, "Yeah, I'd fix that, but it's no big deal." In fact, he asked David Wright, the Michigan State University professor in charge of that year's Clarion, to photocopy "The Sun Spider," a problematic Shepard story, so we could workshop it.

One day about eight of us sat down to lunch at an MSU dining hall, and we were discussing some industry gossip. At the same time, Lucius was reading a manuscript and marking lines. I realized at some point it was my manuscript, the one we were going to talk about later that afternoon. No way in hell was I going to listen to this guy.

But when I sat across from him in his disarrayed room, he went over item by item, and I couldn't disagree. He raised one sheet of manuscript.

"This has got to go," he said.

"Why?"

"I don't believe what they say to each other."

"But we really said those things."

"Remember, the talk we had about what works on the page and what works in life? Besides, it's boring." And he dropped it behind him so it fell behind the couch. "You don't need it."

And those terrible line edits made while we talked gossip? Each one made sense. I couldn't read the scrawled comments above them, but Lucius's verbal memory is so attuned, he could remember what commentary he'd made and why he'd made it.

Lucius had been a student at Clarion in 1981, and he felt that Clarion had been the key to his current success as a writer. He had come with a debt to pay, so any manuscript we gave him, he read. Powered by giant size cups of Pepsi (or maybe it was Coke), he stayed up all hours reading what we handed him. I'd passed on the opening 90 pages of a novel. He said, "These terrorists in the background, are they going to do anything in the book?" No, I said. It was just a love story with a bitter background.

"You read *Endless Love*?"

I had.

"Look, if it's going to be love story, it's gotta rock like *Endless Love*, and this is no *Endless Love*. Hell, Spenser never wrote another book as good as *Endless Love*." He then told me to call the novel *Loverboy* and put the terrorists in the thick of things. That's what you did with stories, you combined diverse elements to create this energy. Once I was done, he told me, I should send it to his agent.

Of course, this probably wasn't the most professional thing for a teacher to do, and it's usually bad form for a student to ask for an in to their teacher's agent, but it's a measure of Lucius' absolute dedication.

Both writers continued to offer support long after Clarion. Karen, being Karen, was the quietest supporter. She wrote a lovely blurb for my first novel even though she told me in person the qualms she had with the ending of the book. As usual, what she said made perfect sense, and I didn't feel the least bit defensive. She read a draft of my third novel during a difficult time and offered a response that was essential to my rewrite. She got a key annual writers' workshop to invite me in for a year so I could get a larger sense of perspective.

Lucius was more flamboyant. I visited him at Disclave when he was guest of honor (I think it was 1989), and he took me around the dealers' room, introducing me to people, saying, "This is Charlie Oberndorf. He's hot shit." He called across a bar to Gardner Dozois, "Hey, Gardner, you have to buy stories by this guy." Gardner said, "Lucius, writers have to send me their stories. It's considered unprofessional if I go into their homes and steal manuscripts from their desks."

Of course, this is an account written by someone who benefited from the extra steps Karen and Lucius took on my behalf. I probably wouldn't have written my first novel without Lucius, and I probably wouldn't have left Clarion with such confidence and a will to write without the support those two teachers provided. But in the workshops and conversations, again and again, I watched the two of them bring out the best in each student and encourage each toward their greatest energy and passion, which, to my mind, is the greatest form of teaching.

Both are fine writers, but the world is full of fine writers.

We don't have the same abundance of fine teachers.

The Superior Liar

By John Kessel

Written in March, 1987, originally appeared, in slightly different form, as the introduction to "Aymara" by Lucius Shepard in Axolotl Special #1, *Pulphouse Publishing, 1989.*

Consider the story as a date. The writer, in his opening sentence, asks the reader to spend some time with him; he promises at the very least a pleasurable experience and at the most a meaningful one. But he needs to have his prospective date listen to him long enough to give him a chance, and if the relationship is going to last beyond a single encounter that date is going to have to have seemed worthwhile. To do this the writer, from that first moment on the phone until that last lingering kiss on the doorstep, is going to have to maintain credibility.

The credibility problem the science fiction writer has that other kinds of writers have in lesser degree or different kind, is that the place he takes you to does not exist. Now many of the worlds of conventional fiction writers, from Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha to Judith Krantz's New York City, don't exist either. But the places the sf writer describes may be said to not exist in a more fundamental way than those of the realist. The story is set in the late Mesozoic, during the heat death of the universe, within the bowels of the mechanized city, aboard the space colony, on the worlds circling Aldebaran, or inside the hero's mind while he is plugged into computerized space. The characters are the cyborg, the evolved man, the alien being, the robot, the deracinated future man, or the citizen of the galactic empire — to say nothing of the emperor himself.

How can we take any of this seriously? This has been one of the habitual complaints against science fiction, and one of the habitual concerns of its practitioners has been thinking up various ways to cajole a "willing suspension of disbelief" from their readers. To put it in plain language: all fiction is lies. But some lies are harder to swallow than others. How can an sf writer be a good liar?

He may resort to several tricks. Early writers like Shelley, Verne, and Wells begin the story in the familiar world and only gradually introduce the Creature or the Nautilus or the Martians; they buttress the fantastic about with rationalization. Later writers from Huxley to Heinlein thrust us boldly into the strange world, and treat the strangeness as if it were ordinary, hoping to convince us that, because the hero doesn't make anything of the epsilon-minus elevator operator or the drugstore stripper, such changes are natural. Others distract us with breakneck action or with carefully delineated character, slipping what explanation exists into the natural breaks that occur in any good story.

What I want to talk about, however, is something that operates independently of such tricks: the authority of a writer's voice. Listen:

> The stranger came early in February one wintry day, through a biting wind and a driving snow, the last snowfall of the year, over the down, walking as it seemed from Bramblehurst railway station and carrying a little black portmanteau in his thickly gloved hand. He was wrapped up from head to foot, and the brim of his soft felt hat hid every inch of his face but the shiny tip of his nose; the snow had piled itself against his shoulders and chest, and added a white crest to the burden he carried.
>
> — H.G. Wells, *The Invisible Man*

> Horselover Fat's nervous breakdown began the day he got the phone call from Gloria asking if he had any Nembutals. He asked her why she wanted them and she said that she intended to kill herself. She was calling everyone she knew. By now she had fifty of them, but she needed thirty or forty more, to be on the safe side.
>
> — Philip K. Dick, *Valis*

> It is possible I already had some presentiment of my future. The locked and rusted gate that stood before us, with wisps of river fog threading its spikes like the mountain paths, remains in my mind now as the symbol of my exile. That is why I have begun this account of it with the aftermath of our swim, in which I, the torturer's apprentice Severian, had so nearly drowned.
>
> — Gene Wolfe, *The Shadow of the Torturer*

> Three weeks before they wasted Tecolutla, Dantzler had his baptism of fire. The platoon was crossing a meadow at the foot of an emerald green volcano, and being a dreamy sort, he was idling along, swatting tall grasses with his rifle barrel and thinking how it might have been a first grader with crayons who had devised this elementary landscape of a perfect cone rising into a cloudless sky, when cap-pistol noises sounded on the slope. Someone screamed for the medic, and Dantzler dove into the grass, fumbling for his ampules.

I don't think you can help but hear in these openings the voice of authority. All of these stories will eventually resort to the other devices of the sf writer to create verisimilitude, but what carries you from the first sentence of any of them, long before you know the circumstances of time and place, long before you meet the invisible man or the guild of torturers, is an overwhelming sense of common reality. There is no trace of self-doubt, no hint of apology. The writer tells you the simple truth, and no matter how much your intellect may suspect he is making it all up, your soul reacts to the veracity in his tone. The writer is a superior liar.

Which brings us to Lucius Shepard. The last of these beginnings is from Shepard's story "Salvador." I had read one other Shepard story before I picked up the April 1984 *Fantasy and Science Fiction* but it was with this paragraph that I and a lot of other people realized that this Shepard was a liar we were going to have to reckon with. The trump card that Lucius Shepard has the ability to play whenever you might otherwise

think he is in danger of losing the game, is the immense conviction of his voice.

It may seem that I am making much of little here, but unless you have tried yourself to write a convincing tale about people who don't exist doing things that will never happen, you can have little idea of how hard it is to maintain this tone of authority. All stories, like all lies, have thin spots that it is necessary to skate over. To do so demands more knowledge of your background, characters, situation, and action than shows on the page. It is something of a sleight of hand trick to pull this off, and as with stage magicians, it calls for a degree of confidence that most people find difficult to maintain. I am not one who in general tries to put barriers of mystification between artists and audiences, but I think it is true to say that in some significant ways writers are not normal: they have by temperament and training the ability to immerse themselves in a fancy that is not real. It is something they have in common with schizophrenics. The difference is that the writer must convince us that his delusion is real, and in order to do that he must keep in mind at all times that it is false. It's a balancing act that few can manage successfully for any length of time, and still fewer can do it from their first attempt.

One of the reasons why Lucius Shepard has attracted so much attention in so short a period of time, and why, is that he seems to have been able to perform this trick from his first appearance in print. I don't know how he got to be this good this fast. As with most "instant successes," I suspect that it has involved years of work. I do know that he has done many things before turning to fiction writing: he dropped out of the University of North Carolina, played in several rock bands, got married, had a son, got divorced, traveled extensively, and attended the Clarion science fiction writers workshop. He has obviously read a few books, both sf and non-sf. All of these things have, I suspect, contributed to the conviction we hear in his voice.

Lucius Shepard *knows* things. Most superficially he knows how to construct a story, how to move an action along by alternations of tension and release. He knows about the cadence of words. He knows how different people speak. He knows enough science to justify a plot, and for the kind of science fiction he writes this is sufficient. He knows about magic and realism and something called Magic Realism. He also knows about life in Central America, about living on the edges of society, about war and how it feels to the soldier. More important, he knows about the strange ways men and women can twist each other, and about a certain edgy sensibility that makes them capable of doing anything no matter how monstrous or ennobling, and how they somehow keep the consequences of their actions at bay long enough to allow them to act. He knows that this is both good and bad.

I suppose his ability to convince us through his voice may be considered another kind of cheap trick. A writer like Shepard can get away with a lot because of the aura of veracity he carries with him. We may come back from the date dazzled by moonbeams and romantic music, only to wake up in the morning, look back over the events of the evening, and wonder that we were taken in so easily. We may feel used.

But the good writer—and Lucius Shepard is a good one—uses his voice to tell us things that are worth hearing. In the case of Shepard his subject is strangely parallel to his voice. He writes about the authority that comes from authenticity in human actions, about people who, caught in a world of moral ambiguities, must make choices that determine their physical, emotional, and moral survival. Sometimes these types of survival are put in opposition to one another, and the decisions get very hard. "Aymara" is a story about individual choice in a science fiction world where choice can make the difference between alternate versions of history. A world where the consequences of action and inaction are not clear, a world whose narrator is brought to take a desperate chance.

Lucius Shepard knows about taking chances; I suspect he is a man who has taken more than a few himself. This is evident to anyone who has read "Salvador," or "The Jaguar Hunter," or "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule," or *Green Eyes*, or the astonishing "R&R," or the story you are about to read here. The knowledge that comes from taking chances informs his character and his voice, that seductive, dangerous voice that compels our belief even when we don't particularly want to believe. Listen:

> My name is William Page Corson, and I am the black sheep of the Buckingham County Corsons of Virginia. How I came to earn such disrepute relates to several months I spent in Honduras during the spring and summer of 1978...

Boxing Lessons in a Bar

by John Langan

1. The Eleven Dollar Martini

This is my Lucius Shepard story. In October of 2003, I attended my first and so far only World Fantasy Convention in Washington, D.C.. Among my reasons for making the five-and-a-half-hour drive south from my wife and then-infant son was the chance to meet Lucius, with whom I was scheduled to read at the KGB Bar in lower Manhattan the following spring. "I think you two'll be a good match," Ellen Datlow had written to me. To explain the way I felt to my family and friends, I compared myself to a kid whose garage band has just been asked to open for the Rolling Stones. Introducing myself to Lucius beforehand seemed like a good idea; I just couldn't figure out how to do so. Finally, I asked my wife. "Offer to buy the guy a drink," she said. Ah. Of course.

That was what I did. I found Lucius at the hotel bar, where I watched other young writers — Dale Bailey, Nathan Ballingrud, Alex Irvine — take turns conversing with him. "Yep," Dale said to me over beers, "sooner or later, everyone comes to the altar of Lucius." (When I repeated this remark to Lucius, he smirked and said, "Oh really?") My own trip to the altar, so to speak, came early afternoon on Saturday, when, immediately after he finished talking to yet another acolyte, I positioned myself at Lucius's right elbow as he turned to watch the Florida game on the bar's TV. When he looked around, there I was. Clearly, he wasn't expecting to see anyone; he jumped.

Great, I thought, *way to make a first impression.* I apologized, introduced myself as the person who was going to be reading with him in the spring, and asked if I could buy him a drink.

"Sure," he said, and ordered a martini with a lemon twist. It cost eleven dollars.

To anyone used to bars in D.C., Manhattan, Boston — any big city, I suppose — that price won't seem especially high. But although I pretend to urbanity, I'm from what used to be a fairly rural part of upstate New York. For two years of classes at the CUNY Graduate Center on Fifth Avenue, I couldn't help myself from looking up at the Empire State Building across the street each time I entered and each time I exited the Grad Center. I know: I might as well have saved the muggers the trouble and walked around holding out my wallet. To make matters worse, I'm the child of Scottish parents, and while reports of Scottish thriftiness may have been exaggerated (by the English, naturally), my father and mother were big on what they called Knowing the Value of a Dollar. As you might guess, the eleven dollar martini, not to mention the six dollar beer I ordered, does not count as a prime example of my parents' monetary philosophy.

I placed a twenty on the bar, however, willingly if not cheerfully, and took the stool to Lucius's right. It's always difficult when you meet a writer whose work you admire. You want to say something meaningful, profound. You want to tell this person how much his stories have meant to you, have signified to you as a writer, the endorsement they've been of your own aspirations for complexity of style and ruthlessness of perspective, the example they've offered of what an ambitious writer might accomplish. But the words you have no trouble summoning when discussing this person's work with fellow admirers are suddenly nowhere to be found, and instead you fumble with vague platitudes you're sure must sound as banal to the writer you're addressing them to as they do to you saying them. I stumbled through some remarks about how I thought Lucius's fiction offered a way out of some of postmodernism's dead-ends (don't ask me — I don't know), which trailed off as I noted the suspicious look on his face. "Yeah," he said, one of those yeahs that's more placeholder than affirmation.

Already, the conversation was slipping away from me. I jettisoned the academic in favor of the personal, and said that what I was trying to say was that I saw in Lucius's fiction signposts to guide me through some of my own writing dilemmas. That perked up his interest, and in short order, I was relating the problems I'd had writing short stories, as opposed to novelettes and novellas. Specifically, as a self-identified horror writer, I couldn't figure out how to write a short story that wasn't what I called a trap story, i.e. one whose sole aim was to lead its protagonist to an unpleasant death.

Lucius said, "I wrote a story called, 'A Little Night Music.'"

I nodded. "Uh huh."

"You might want to take a look at that."

"'A Little Night Music.'"

"Yeah."

From there, our talk moved to matters of style, which brought up the introduction Lucius had written for *¡Limekiller!*, a recently-published collection of Avram Davidson's Latin American stories that he had sitting on the bar beside him. He opened the book to have me read a passage in which he'd described the flexibility and versatility of Davidson's sentences; no doubt I'm flattering myself, but I had the sense he was pleased to find someone else interested in the possibilities of a more complex use of language.

A play by Florida brought our attention to the TV, and our discussion of writing gave way to sports and autobiography: football and boxing for Lucius, track for me. I heard the story of his introduction to boxing as a boy; I listened to him describe the particular love you come to feel for someone against whom you've struggled physically; I learned the proper way to throw a punch, twisting your hand as you do so in order to deliver a harder blow. Thinking about it now, I'm tempted to turn this part of our conversation into an extended metaphor for Lucius's writing: the autobiographical connections; the concern with the knot of struggle, violence, and love; the attention to and importance of technique. As tropes go, it's not a bad one, but it's probably a bit too facile. Better to say that boxing and writing converge on something else, maybe a way of engaging the world.

By now, Lucius's martini glass and my beer glass were empty. There was a panel I wanted to attend, and anyway, I

didn't want to overstay my welcome. Before I left, I asked Lucius if he'd mind signing my copies of *The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter* and *Louisiana Breakdown*. "Yeah, sure," he said, reaching for them. When he was done, I shook his hand, said I'd see him in April, and headed for the panel.

As it turned out, Lucius couldn't make the KGB reading the following spring, so I wound up reading with the estimable Rick Bowes. That conversation at World Fantasy, though, that eleven dollar martini: I've recounted versions of the story (no doubt too) many times, frequently to the same people. It's become a kind of shorthand for my continued esteem for Lucius's work, as well as a way to express similar sentiments about other writers' fiction. In fact, given that the years since that meeting have brought the massive *Trujillo, Viator, A Handbook of American Prayer*, and, most recently, *Softspoken*, I'd happily buy him *two* martinis. (Sorry, Mom and Dad.)

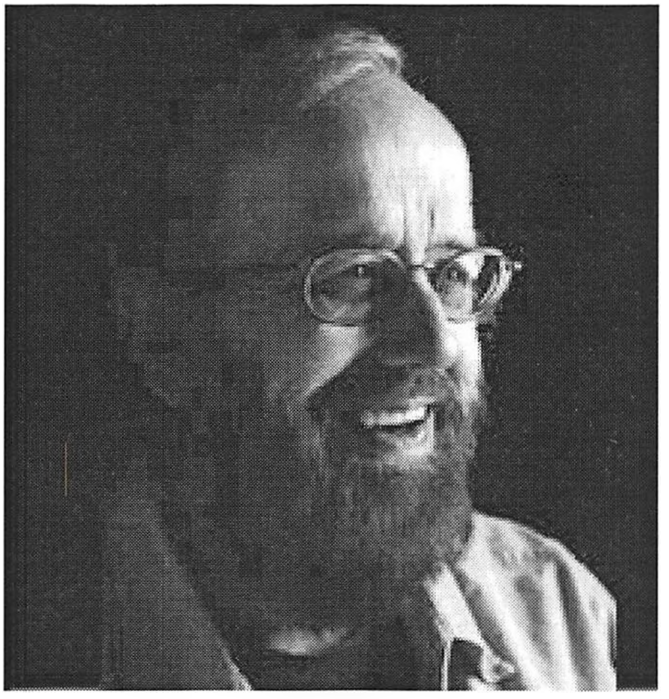
I haven't given up hope of reading with Lucius. Some year, I tell myself. In the meantime, I've read and reread "A Little Night Music." I've read and reread other stories, too: the astonishing "Only Partly Here," "Beast of the Heartland," the recent, brilliant, "Vacancy." And I have the advice he scribbled in my copy of *The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter:* "Left hook under does it."

2. The Tavern, the Vortex.

This is the story behind the story. I first ran across Lucius Shepard's name when I was in high school and leafing through magazines like *Asimov's* and *The Twilight Zone* at the local Waldenbooks. I would have been reading reviews of Lucius's second novel, *Life During Wartime* (1987), his first collection, *The Jaguar Hunter* (1987), his stories, "Delta Sly Honey" and "Shades," in Jeanne Van Buren and Jack Dann's anthology, *In the Field of Fire* (1987). More than anything, I recall the tone of those reviews, that of readers bowled over by what they had encountered in this book, these stories. It was the way my friends and I would talk about certain books in college, the books you had to read, not because they cool, or clever, but because something about them told us they were essential.

Despite having read those long-ago reviews, it took me more than a decade finally to read a Lucius Shepard story. It's one of those facts that, once it's been contravened, seems incredible. *How did I miss this?* I have no good explanation: doubtless, a host of similar moments await me on my bookshelves. The story that served as my introduction to Lucius's work was a long novella, "Eternity and Afterward," which made its first appearance in the March 2001 *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, a special issue focusing on Lucius. That opening paragraph — it was like a lesson in how to begin a story. You started with an observation about Viktor Chemayev, the protagonist, which was elaborated in a succession of sentences that sketched Chemayev and the Moscow underworld in which he moved. The paragraph concluded by establishing Chemayev's motivations for the ensuing story, as well as setting up its first scene. There are plenty of writers who can manage fine, even extraordinary, opening lines. But the number who can achieve fine, even extraordinary opening paragraphs is a more select group, and as the beginnings of such subsequent Shepard works as *Valentine* (2002), *Floater* (2003), *Trujillo* (2004), and *A Handbook of American Prayer* (2004) would demonstrate, Lucius is at its forefront.

The story that grew out of that paragraph was densely written, richly detailed, the fluctuations in its protagonist's interior weather charted with a meticulous hand. A Lucius Shepard story looks different on the page: flip through any magazine that contains one of his stories, and you'll locate it easily. His pages display one, maybe two paragraphs. The sentences that constitute those paragraphs are frequently long, structurally complex, but not overwritten, not fustian. In a series of posts on his message board last year, Lucius disagreed with the well-worn stylistic maxim, "murder your darlings," arguing that instead of clearcutting their style, writers — especially beginning writers — should be encouraged to farm their idiosyncrasies, grow a language that isn't like everyone else's. Don't murder



your darlings, nurture them, and see what they yield. Obviously, it's an approach he's embraced in his own work. I sometimes wonder if this is the reason why Joseph Conrad's name so often crops up in association with Lucius's, not because both men give us stories set in the more remote parts of the world, but because both employ dense-but-not-impenetrable styles devoted to rendering their individual visions as thoroughly, as completely, as they can. Within the community of writers of fantastic fiction, there's been a lot of talk in the last few years about style, about the stylistic ambitions and accomplishments of various newer writers. While I have no desire to detract from anyone's efforts, I would point out that Lucius's successes in this regard have been long-term and continuing; they dominate the literary landscape like one of the smoldering volcanoes you find in his stories.

Also in "Eternity and Afterward," I ran across a couple of images that I've come to think of as central to Lucius's fiction.

The Eternity of the story's title is a nightclub-cum-labyrinth-cum-intersection of this world and others. In assorted guises, this space reappears throughout Lucius's work, from the Dragon Griaule, who sprawls across such stories as "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule" (1984) and *The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter* (1988); to Castle Banat, home of the vampire Family of *The Golden* (1993); to the ramshackle afterlife of "Limbo" (2003); to La Vida Es Muerto, the sinister bar at the end of *A Handbook of American Prayer* (2004). Sometimes it's more watering hole, sometimes more maze, and sometimes more intersection. It's frequently a secret space; albeit one in which the actual nature of the world shines darkly through. I call it the Tavern — not the most inspired name, perhaps, but one that gets at this space's roles as place of consumption and conviviality, and place of travelers' meeting.

The Tavern is complemented by the Vortex, which Chemayev encounters near the conclusion of his story, and which spins through Lucius's fiction from "How the Wind Spoke at Madaket" (1985) to "A Spanish Lesson" (1985) to *Floater* to *Trujillo*. It's associated with the sinister supernatural, with the coming to light of what was hidden, with the passage to other worlds, with the spiral of the self down to destruction. It's present in Lucius's most recent book, *Softspoken* (2007), in which one of the characters names it as such. Given its chaotic swirling, the Vortex seems the opposite of the Tavern's more ordered dimensions, and it's tempting to try to graph Lucius's fiction on the x-y axes of the two. No doubt there's something to this impulse, but I have a more-than-suspicion that the apparent opposites connect, as do those horizontal and vertical lines, and that the place of conjunction, the point where x bolts to y, is the spot from which a critical investigation of Lucius's work might best be conducted. I hope to undertake such a consideration myself, some day; in the interval, let me say that I think both maze and whirlpool may meet as emblems for the self, in large part unknown to itself, full of hidden corridors and rooms, strange figures, driven by disturbances that sweep in in great, curving gusts.

I haven't yet mentioned the plot of "Eternity and Afterward," which involves Chemayev's attempt to buy the freedom of Larissa, the woman he loves, from Yuri Lebedev, Eternity's owner. It's a riff of sorts on Orpheus and Eurydice; one whose outcome is every bit as devastating as its mythic predecessor. Past arresting beginning, compelling style, past Tavern and Vortex, the story's plot brings us somewhere near the heart of Lucius Shepard's fiction. A relentless concern with relations between men and women, all their various permutations, is one of the engines that powers his work. In a review of *Trujillo* for *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*, I suggested that these relationships index the protagonist's success at navigating the world in a fairly direct way, i.e. those who establish healthy romances will prosper, while those who do not can expect a less happy fate. It's a reading I remain comfortable with; although I also believe there's more to it than that. Part of what's going on is a concern with desire, which sometimes leads to a critique of it that would make M. John Harrison blanche. Part of it is a concern with communication, with the way that we represent ourselves to ourselves and to others, which may brick the path to other kinds of disaster. And part of it is a concern with one of the fundamental human motivators, the DNA we find coiled inside the nuclei of all manner of stories.

The observations I've offered in regards to "Eternity and Afterward" could as easily be applied to *Softspoken*, Lucius's scathing portrait of a marriage disintegrating inside a decaying South Carolina mansion. I don't pre-order many books, but I had my order in to Amazon a good month before this one was due to be released. Reading its evocation of a young woman moving relentlessly towards a confrontation with the source of a ghostly voice only she can hear, I was as impressed as I had been half-a-dozen years before, as I have been so many times since then.

Lucius is humble, maybe excessively so, about his writing, his status as writer: in his last interview with *Locus*, he noted that Hinduism places the profession of writer in the vicinity of that of thief, adding that that seemed about right to him. To his fellow almost-thieves, however, he's a figure of great admiration, as witnessed by his friendships with Katherine Dunn, Russell Banks, and Jeffrey Ford. Probably, literary reputations are best left to history, which will have the last word on them, anyway. But the fact that so many other writers — so many other fine writers — admire Lucius's writing tells you something important about it.

Call this the reason for my nervousness at the prospect of reading with Lucius, of approaching him at World Fantasy. Call it the first draft of a longer appreciation and study. Call it a receipt for an eleven dollar martini, and boxing lessons in a bar.

A Few Quiet Words in Praise of "Beast of the Heartland"

by Michael Swanwick

It starts with a dream. Bobby Mears, a middleweight boxer on the downhill side of his career, suffers a vision of "a twisted mandrake root of a god, evil and African, with ember eyes and limbs like twists of leaf tobacco." When the vision vanishes, it remains behind as a throbbing red pain inside his head, something he must fight yet cannot touch.

Thus begins one of the best stories of the late twentieth century.

Lucius Shepard has written a great many stories, and many of them are first-rate, but I don't think he's ever written anything quite as good as this. Though "Only Partly Here" comes close. The man has a fierce imagination. He's populated his work with living trains, a dragon the size of a mountain, a helicopter that might be God, and — in the sadly-neglected comic book, *Vermillion* — an orbital ring-city that contains the entire universe. But here he throttles it back to tell a simple, stripped-down tale that might not even be fantasy at all. Mears is legally blind and hiding the fact so he can keep on boxing. He's got a match coming up with a murderous opponent he knows he cannot beat. Against all advice, he goes into the fight anyway, faces down his fears, and in accepting defeat achieves victory.

That's it.

But if the plot (borrowed, probably, from the life of Sam Langford, who may have been the greatest boxer in ring history but never had a shot at the championship because he was black and the promoters didn't want a second Jack Johnson) is old, that hardly matters. It's just a frame for the revelation of character — which in the case of Bobby Mears is very admirable indeed. And if you look closer, Mears himself is in turn merely the platform for the exploration of an extremely vital but deceptively simple question:

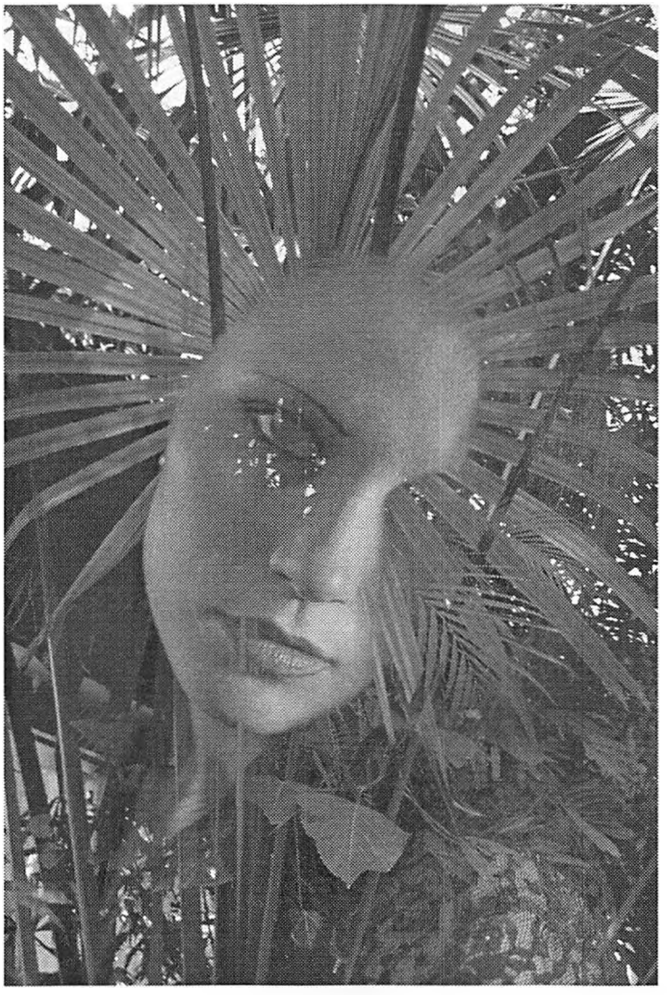
What makes a man a hero?

This sounds trite because it's a theme that's been botched and mauled by hacks and third-raters since long before the invention of the cuneiform tablet. Forget all about that. Come to the story as the author does, as if it had never been told before, and its relevance to you and your life becomes obvious. As Shepard writes:

> He knows most people would consider him a fool for continuing to fight, and he accepts this. But he does not consider himself a greater fool than most people; his is only a more dramatic kind of foolishness than the foolishness of loving a bad woman or stealing a car or speculating on gold futures or smoking cigarettes or taking steroids or eating wrong or involving yourself with the trillion other things that lead to damage and death.

Which is to say that all lives confront the same issues, though in some of them those issues stand out more clearly than in others. Now, Shepard writes about boxing with the kind of passion and authority that can only mean that he's a follower of what its adherents call "the sweet science." The fight scenes are as good as prose action gets, visceral and detailed and convincing. Even an outsider can follow them, blow by blow, which is a form of clarity that requires a special talent to achieve. Ultimately, however, "Beast of the Heartland" is not about boxing at all, but about love, about fear, about losing, about aging. It's about how you spend those few fleeting decades you have been granted on Earth. It's about the common condition.

This is what we're all writing about, of course, but some of us do so more directly than most. Lucius Shepard has spent his career grappling with the big questions, trying in story after story to express things so basic they can hardly be put into words. Ages ago, when the O.J. Simpson trial was the national



JK Potter

hula hoop, I was shocked to discover that Lucius watched it compulsively. "For the love of God," I said, "*why?*"

"Because it's got everything, man," he said. "Race, sex, money, fame, violence — everything that's going on in this country. I'm not going to be using this material directly, but I need to know it for my writing."

All those aspects of our national pathology are touched upon in this story. A book could be written on what Shepard has to say about race. But because I've got only so much space, and even less time, I'm going to stick with the hero thing.

So what does it take?

Not winning. The triumphant arc of Bobby Mears's career was stopped dead long ago by Marvin Hagler. Nor fame. "Bein' famous ain't about nothing," as the boxer himself puts it, and the true victory that he achieves is known only to himself. Nor intelligence — it's clear the guy is no Brainiac. Honesty has a lot to do with it — the refusal to lie, particularly to oneself. So does love. (Mears is almost heartbreaking when talking over the phone to his ex-wife, a woman who still loves him but cannot bear to watch what boxing does to him.) But ultimately what makes him a hero is the refusal to back down from the Beast, whatever that Beast might be.

Whatever it is, it's not a symbol for anything else — the author worked very hard to make sure of that. Because the story is not about the victory but about the man. "Beast of the Heartland" does not end with Bobby Mears's triumph over his enemy. It goes on into the aftermath, when he has nothing left to look forward to but the rest of his life and the inevitability of death. Throughout, the word "black" has been thematic, evoking not only blindness but the inherent darkness of a corrupt world. Now, in the penultimate paragraph, in the company of a new woman, one who is not a trophy but a fellow human being who needs him at least as much as he needs her, Mears experiences a moment of (there's no other word for it) transcendence:

> Between two department stores, two great, diffuse masses of white light, there's an alley, a doorway, a dark interval of some sort, and as they pass Mears draws Arlene into it and pulls her tightly to him, needing a moment to get his bearings. The blackness of street and sky is so universal it looks as if you could walk a black curve up among the blinking red and green lights, and as Arelene's breasts flatten against him, he feels like he is going high, like it feels when the man in the tuxedo tells you that you've won and the pain is washed away by perfect exhilaration and sweet relief.

Isn't that beautiful? Did you notice the reversal there, how the blackness becomes warm and welcoming, and all of life a dark interval between diffuse masses of white? Shepard can be a flashy writer when the mood is on him. He once introduced a character as "an American fool of no consequence," and another time ended a story with the words "and from that day forward she lived happily ever after. Except for the dying at the end. And the heartbreak in between." Either of which quotations is good enough to make you reach for your commonplace-book. But there is a particular kind of elegance that lies on the far side of flash, that requires a writer who can achieve spectacular effects but has moved beyond them. Once you accelerate past light-speed, you find... something else. Something better. Something that resists being reduced to a 1,500-word essay.

Something that, if you want to appreciate it, you'd best read for yourself.

Writing is a chancy business. Writing when your forte is short fiction is a brutal one. It takes enormous effort to keep afloat financially. Every day you've got to get up in the face of a universe that blatantly doesn't give a damn and climb into Mr. Hemingway's ring one more time, whether you feel like it or not. You've got to give it your all in the face of an audience that is painfully close to being silent. And for what?

For the chance of writing a story like this one.

Lucius has done that. As I heard it, he had to travel from the West Coast to New York City, opted to go by way of train, and by the end of his journey had written three stories, only one of which is under consideration here. If so, it was written quickly. But God, or so the Bible asserts, created the universe in six days, and sensible people judge a work not by the length of time it took to construct but by the length of time it looks likely to endure. Here, Lucius Shepard has, in defiance of all the world, written something that nobody else was capable of.

He wrote it because he could, and he could because the man's got heart. Lucius Shepard is an American original, a writer of genuine consequence, a true hero.

Five Reasons Why Nobody Else Writes Like Lucius Shepard

by James Patrick Kelly

1. His name. Like the title of a great story, Lucius was blessed with a byline that seethes with meaning.

2. The size of the man. Just look at him; Lucius is larger than life. Can you imagine the size of the heart that beats in that chest?

3. He takes risks. Okay, we all take risks. But we never put up the kinds of stakes that Lucius has put up. Sometimes his friends worry, but Lucius has earned the right to type every word in those remarkable stories.

4. The resume. At times, it seems more fantastic than the fiction.

5. The laugh. It rumbles out of him like a merciless force of nature. Lucius does not hesitate to skewer fools, or the platitudes of hypocrites , or pretentious art, or bad movies, or the Boston Celtics, or even, on occasion, himself. His laugh, in person and in print, is irresistible.

Chinandega

by Lucius Shepard

Taken from the forthcoming anthology, The Solaris Book Of New Fantasy, *to be published in December 2007 by Solaris Books (http://www.solarisbooks.com).*

Have you never been to Chinandega, my friend? It is no place for tourists.

At sunrise a third-class bus from the capital wheezes and grinds across the coastal plain, the passengers packed so tightly they might be chained together in the darkened interior. The driver hunches over the wheel as though bound to some grim purpose. There are no empty seats so the fare collector stands with back braced against the windshield, holding hard to a stainless steel grip, enduring jolts and sideways lurches, his weary face cast in chiaroscuro as he looks into the east toward three volcanoes limned against the reddening sky. Stars in the west still shine in ancient configuration above the Gulf of Fonseca.

Waking amidst the staleness of sleeping bodies and the smell of diesel, Alvaro Miguez cannot feel his foot and bends to rub it, pushing a drooping wing of black hair from his eyes. A copper-and-roses complexion bespeaks his Mayan blood. His head is large, and his prominent features register emotion slowly if at all. His hands, too, are large, but his frame is compact and this lends him a dwarfish aspect. Straightening, he's startled to discover the seat beside him, empty when he fell asleep, occupied by a gaunt old farmer with an apocalyptic eye, clouded like an embryo and crossed by a machete scar that notches both cheek and brow. His jeans are creased, his plaid shirt buttoned at the wrists. He tips his straw hat to Alvaro, bids him good morning, and asks where he's going.

Chinandega, says Alvaro.

And what will you do there?

I'm on vacation.

The farmer looks askance at him. Have you never been to Chinandega? Unless you have relatives there, or some pressing errand, you would do well to take your holiday elsewhere. The heat is infernal, better suited to tarantulas than men. Half the town remains in ruins from the earthquake in '72, and drunken sailors overrun the other half. The whores outnumber the cockroaches and are equally as vile. It is no place for tourists, my friend. A town without a soul.

Alvaro, who studies literature at the university, recognizes that the farmer is an old-fashioned sort and speaks from a Catholic perspective; but nettled by the implication that he is a tourist in his own country, he replies that he does not expect to stay in the city — he plans to find transportation to El Cardon, the island where Rubén Darío wrote a number of his most famous poems. If he intends this comment to demonstrate his intellectual superiority (and perhaps he does, for Alvaro, though not snobbish by nature, has a temper), it has a minimal effect. The old man nods, tips his hat down over his eyes and goes to sleep. An hour or so later, the bus pulls up beside a freshly tilled field and, without a fare-thee-well, the farmer climbs down and strides off along the rows. The field extends to the horizon and Alvaro can see no sign of habitation, not a shed or a shack or even a clump of trees that might shelter a *casita*. It's as if the old man's destination is an infinity of black dirt and pale cloudless blue, as if he has been produced from that medium solely for the purpose of issuing his warning.

* * *

He took breakfast at a restaurant frequented by railway workers, a place of blue-and-white painted boards isolated in a landscape of cinders and weeds, close to the tracks of the *Ferrocaril Pacifico* that crossed the western edge of the city center. After eating, he walked among the tables, showing his sister's picture to the other diners. The photograph was of a pretty fourteen-year-old whose looks were more *mestiza* than pure Mayan and he told the men she was a year older now than portrayed and likely had exchanged her schoolgirl uniform for a more provocative costume.

She is a whore? The man who asked this question was middle-aged, grizzled, fat, and covered with soot, having just come off-shift at the railyard.

So I have heard, said Alvaro.

Well, if she's whored for a year, she's had more dicks in her than there are hairs on a goat, said the man, making sure everyone in the restaurant could hear him. She probably looks like a goat by now.

The other men laughed and, encouraged by this response, the fat man said, Are you sure she is your sister? It appears to me that your mother was shot by two different pistols.

Laughter trailed Alvaro out the door, his cheeks burning with anger and shame.

Though not yet nine o'clock, it was already hot. He removed his shirt, knotting it about his waist, and went along a wide treeless street, Calle del Pacifico, lined with cantinas, shops, restaurants, and hotels whose rooms rented by the hour. Mostly buildings of one or two stories, concrete block done in pastel shades of pink, tan, blue, with lifeless neon signs: they bore on their walls false promises of what lay within: shiny billiard balls and green felt tables adorned a pool hall with warped cues and tattered tables worn to a mossy hue; quarter notes cavorted among bubbles rising from champagne glasses that were tilted at angles suggestive of merriment, decorating the façade of a cantina that had never known the pop of a cork. Many of the businesses had been open since seven, some never closed, but others were just opening, men spraying the sidewalks to wash away the night's debris and rolling up their several corrugated iron doors with a horrid rattling like a portcullis being raised. Vendors squatted curbside, offering cigarettes and sandwiches, displaying cheap jewelry and T-shirts and toys on spread blankets. A few cars jounced over the potholed asphalt and scooters zipped past, making sounds that seemed the amplified buzzing of the files fussing over a dead cat in the gutter. Greater sounds came from the sky, faint metallic shrieks and drones that formed an umbrella of industrial

noise over the town — Alvaro imagined they derived from the container port at Corinto, though it lay miles away.

As he ranged the street, showing his photograph to whoever would look, the sun climbed toward meridian, leaching vitality and color from the scene, appearing to shed a ghastly white pall, almost palpable, as if a gauze winding sheet had been prematurely wrapped about his eyes. Heat pressed in on him, like the heat from a burning forest. The thought of his sister in that heat, among these men, in a windowless back room on an iron bed with stained sheets, it never left him. At the end of the street stood an old frame hotel of forbidding aspect, like a castle without turrets: the Hotel Circo del Mar, three stories of dark green boards with a peaked roof and windows glazed with dazzling reflection that give no evidence of the interior, its entrance guarded by a burly man with a bandito mustache and a holstered pistol. Alvaro showed him the photograph and asked if he has seen his sister. Her name, he said, is Palmira Miguez. The man told him to fuck off.

That afternoon, he bought a *bocadillo* from a vendor and sat in the doorway of a closed cantina, the only shade available. A starving yellow dog stared hopefully at him from the curb, until Alvaro shied a pebble at it. The stringy meat of the sandwich expanded in his mouth, and he thought that the dog, which had not gone far, sniffing at rubbish in the gutter, may have been attracted by the intoxicating odor of an ex-brother-in-misery. A ragged boy sat beside him in the doorway and, his face arranged into piteous lines, held out his hand and muttered, I am hungry, Senor. Give me a cordoba. My belly aches. Five centavos for bread, *por favor*. Alvaro told him to beat it, but the boy persisted and finally Alvaro broke off a corner of the sandwich and gave it to him. The boy looked disappointed, but popped the fragment into his mouth. He chewed for a while, appearing to assess Alvaro, and then said, Do you wish to buy drugs, Senor? Marijuana? Heroin? Cocaine? I can take you.

I am searching for my sister. Alvaro let him see the photograph.

The boy reacted excitedly. I have seen this girl, Senor. Perhaps I can assist in your search.

Bullshit, said Alvaro.

No, I have seen her! May Doña Bisalia take me if I have not. Where she sleeps, I do not know. But I have seen her ... on this very street.

Alvaro examined the boy's face. You're lying.

The boy shrugged. As you wish. But I can guide you to a man who can tell you where she is.

Who is this man?

The Recluse.

Now you're fucking with me.

No, Senor! I am not. Everyone knows of the Recluse, and he knows everyone. He lives in Colonia San Jeronimo. It is very far, but I will take you there for three cordobas. You will not regret it, I promise you.

They negotiated a price of two cordobas, to be paid after the boy had discharged his duty, and started off in the direction of the container port. Colonia San Jeronimo was, indeed, very far. As they trudged over dirt roads, past garbage dumps and through disastrous slums, Alvaro chastised himself for allowing the boy to hustle him. At last they came to a shack with a rusting tin roof in the midst of a patch of cocoa-colored earth, set well apart from others like it. Alvaro knocked and a man's voice said from within, Who is it?

Alvaro Miguez, from the capital. I wish to speak to the Recluse. I am looking for my sister.

After a silence the man said, You may enter.

The boy snatched the money from Alvaro's hand and ran off. Alvaro shook his head. What an idiot he had been.

The gloomy interior of the shack was as expected, though its owner was not. Sacks of flour, beans and rice hung from the rafters. A bicycle rested in one corner; in another, a small charcoal stove and some pots and pans. Magazines and shoes, heaps of clothing, piles of notebooks and an assortment of tools littered a packed dirt floor. Wearing a pair of shorts, the Recluse reclined in a red-and-blue hemp hammock strung at the center of the room. He was not the ancient of days that Alvaro had presumed. In his late twenties, pale and handsome as a pop star, with long hair hanging over his shoulders: he gazed languidly at Alvaro and indicated that he should have a seat on a nearby stool. The tattoo of an antique box camera, realistically achieved, on his left arm and a gold piercing beneath his lower lip were his only visible adornments.

Do you have a picture? he asked.

Alvaro handed him the photograph. The Recluse angled it so that it caught the light from a rear window. After considerable study, he said, Her name is Palmira, is it not?

Surprised by this, Alvaro said, You know her?

I have seen her.

Where is she? Can you tell me?

First there is the matter of payment. How much money do you have?

If I am frugal, enough for a week.

What did you pay the boy?

Again surprised, Alvaro asked how he knew about the boy, and the Recluse said, He ran past my window. How much?

Two cordobas.

The Recluse made a disapproving sound. You should have paid no more than one. Give me thirty cordobas and you will not need to stay a week.

Reluctantly, Alvaro passed him the money.

Your sister is with Doña Bisalia, the Queen of the Whores, said the Recluse. Or so she is called.

Alvaro recalled that the boy had made mention of Doña Bisalia and informed the Recluse of this fact.

Because she is an exotic, people invest her with the powers of a witch ... or a goddess, said the Recluse. I tend to believe she is neither.

Surely you *know* she can be neither?

Death and the mystery of death are the only certainties. Doña Bisalia is not without power. In the mystical order, she stands between the seven and the nine. The Recluse reached down blindly to the floor, groped for and retrieved a pack of cigarettes. You can find your sister at the Circo del Mar, but you must wait three days. The Queen is hosting a private party for a group of government officials and fruit company executives, and the hotel is closed to all but the invited.

And my sister will be there?

Your sister is a favorite of the house. She commands the highest prices. It is nearly inconceivable that she will not be there. But it may be possible to approach her when she is outside the hotel. Sometimes she takes a promenade in the early afternoon, during the siesta. There is an arcade two blocks down from the hotel — *Juegos Galaxia*. She enjoys playing the racing games when few customers are about.

A car engine turned over outside, but faltered; someone cursed in frustration.

How do you know these things? asked Alvaro. You are called a recluse, yet I cannot imagine you acquired this information without leaving your house.

To be reclusive demands isolation, this is true; but isolation need not be a matter of geography. The Recluse lit a cigarette and directed his smoke toward the window. I realized early on that I was cut out for an idle life. I cast about for a profession that would allow me to indulge my disposition, but found none that met my requirements. And then it struck me that people were always asking questions and that they would pay to have them answered. Since I had no intention of relocating, I began gathering information about Chinandega.

The car engine fired up again, rumbled to life, and then died. Several people began shouting at once.

The Calle del Pacifico was the perfect conduit, said the Recluse. Everyone in town had reason to go there. I wandered up and down the street, mainly at night, when it was most alive, and I listened, I watched. I spoke to no one, interacted with no one — I merely observed. In the midst of revelry and strife, pleasure and pain, I remained distant. Before the year was out people began coming to me, asking if I had seen this person or that, or if I knew where the cocaine dealer with the little black dog had gone. I have performed this service for thirteen years. The longer I performed it, the more expert I grew in interpreting information, in understanding the principles of connectivity. My thoughts became less thoughts than meditations upon the world's facticity. I know so much about the Calle del Pacifico, I am able to anticipate events from changes in the patterns of information. Indeed, thanks to this gift I have learned the answers to larger, albeit trivial questions. I can tell you, for instance, when the world will end and how it will transpire. I am always...

You know the exact date? Or do you mean something imprecise like, let us say, sometime during the next century?

I know the precise hour and minute, the Recluse said, irritated by the interruption. May I continue?

Yes, of course.

* * *

I'm always cataloguing information, the Recluse went on. Always excising inessential and outdated details. As a result I have very little interior life relating to my personal concerns. So you see, I am more of a recluse than a hermit in his cave. And my ambition has been satisfied. Many people pay me considerably greater sums than thirty cordobas, thus enabling me to live idly.

What of friends? Alvaro asked. And women? Do you not feel the lack of them?

Friends! The Recluse seemed to ridicule the idea, passing it off with a laugh and a dismissive wave. As for women, they, too, have a need for information. Occasionally I permit them to pay in a currency other than cordobas.

You say you can anticipate events. What do you anticipate, if anything, for me?

The Recluse flipped his cigarette out the window. I will not disturb the order by telling you what may or may not happen. It is enough to know that you will find your sister.

Well, then, said Alvaro, seeking some way to validate the Recluse's information. Tell me when the world will end. Surely my knowing that will change nothing.

It is a peculiarity of men that they tend to place a value on information in inverse proportion to its relevance, said the Recluse. This seems strange to me, but it is a rule I am, out of financial necessity, compelled to obey. For the answer to that question, you must pay a thousand cordobas.

* * *

At dusk the Calle del Pacifico woke from its daylong lethargy. The crowds thickened; the vendors became aggressive, shouting the virtues of their wares, setting up grills on the street, these small fires adding to the suffocating heat, and soon the smells of barbecued meat and frying dough mixed with the vague industrial odor of the town; the neon signs were switched on, girdling each block with an embroidery of glowing words, with lime green parrots, purple sombreros, indigo cats, a winking, glittering bestiary, and, as the stars materialized, the sky yielded its dominion to the greater magnitudes of the street below, growing unimportant, an afterthought like a black cloth dropped over a child's model railroad. Walking in groups, sailors from China, from Poland, from Cuba and Angola and America, added their voices to the rubric of music from the bars, pop laments and *punta*, salsa, reggae, and rock. Seething from doorways, the whores of Chinandega pounced on them, tugged at their elbows, fondled their genitals, sleek young girls and fat *mamacitas* and dried-out addicts, their breasts overflowing tube tops and halters, their asses sculpted by mini-skirts and hot pants, peroxide blonds and natural brunettes, black girls from Bluefields and Corn Island, sallow girls from Grenada and Jinotega, all cajoling and demanding and laughing shrilly. A drab infestation that marginally corrupted the general hilarity, beggars shuffled and limped and crawled about the edges of the crowd: shrunken widows in black shawls; abandoned mothers with infants-in-arms; mutilated victims of the Dole Corporation, some missing a hand, some an arm or a leg, but most suffering from the kidney disease that afflicted cane workers and banana workers alike, turning their skins saffron and causing them to piss blood when they could piss at all, barely able to stand, their black stares tunneled inward, empty of vitality, so enfeebled that when they murmured their entreaties you heard only a faint sibilance like the speech of dead men, a few last words extracted by dint of magic from desiccated lungs and bloated tongues, offering inaudible cautions as to what lay beyond the borders of life.

Alvaro had witnessed such scenes in the capitol, yet despite its chaos, he sensed that this one possessed a hint of ritual, of organization, and, as he skirted the crowd, passing a clump of young men with cruel mask-like faces and lavaflows of black hair and sharply drawn eyebrows and scythe-like mustaches, smoking in the doorway of a shop, he saw that eight

or nine smiling men were gently urging people back, creating an aisle down the center of the street that allowed the passage of a yellow-skinned woman with masses of black curls and swelling breasts, a magnificent woman in the full bloom of maturity, clad in a black bustier, high heels and a diaphanous nightgown worked with black lace. She, too, smiled and her smile broadened whenever she stopped to address someone, before proceeding onward in the direction of the Circo del Mar. Behind her came six... no, seven men of grim mien and erect carriage, whose eyes shifted to the left and right as if seeking out a threat.

As the woman drew near, Alvaro pushed to the front of the crowd, the better to see her, for he knew the woman must be Doña Bisalia. She paused to exchange words with a whore not far away, and the whore inclined her head as if receiving a blessing. The lace pattern on her nightgown was composed of interlocking scorpions and the material of her bustier was worked all over with a design of a design of satin faces that appeared to change expression as the light shifted across them. A gold choker with a green stone, the green of the Circo del Mar, encircled her throat. She moved on from the whore and, to Alvaro's surprise, stopped in front of him, engaging him with a steady look and eyes as shiny and depthless as chitin.

What is your name, boy? she asked in a deep yet feminine voice, and touched his naked chest with a tapered black fingernail (or perhaps it was dark green, for he realized now her bustier and robe were of that color).

He told her his name. She repeated it and then asked, Do you know me?

He intended to respond in the negative, yet he felt thick-headed and all he could manage was a nod. Though she stood eye to eye with him, he had a sense that he was in the presence of a giantess, that she was in actuality immense and her apparent normalcy was a disguise, or else this was the way men saw her, their senses incapable of grasping her true dimensions. She continued to talk, chatting about the possibility of rain, about this and that, the sort of things a politician might say to charm a voter, and he came to think her voice was produced by a system of pipes connected to a great organ miles away, and that he heard only its faint resonance. One of the nine who had preceded her staggered sideways, as if overcome by fatigue, then slumped to the pavement and lay still. No one came to his aid and, although she noticed the fallen man's plight, Doña Bisalia did not appear to be in the least perturbed.

You must come to see me, she said to Alvaro, a pronouncement that had less the ring of an invitation than of a statement of simple fact, and walked on toward the Circo del Mar, whose windows blazed with many-colored lights.

The crowd closed in behind her, hiding the body from view, and Alvaro, dismayed by the man's apparent death, by the indifference shown by those in the vicinity, and equally dismayed by his reaction to Doña Bisalia, wandered onto a side street, where it was darker and comparatively quiet, hoping to sort out his impressions. On a corner, under a streetlamp, some kids, five or six of them, were sniffing glue from paper sacks with wet bottoms, and he noticed that one was the boy who had guided him to the home of the Recluse. He waved, but the boy, though staring straight at him, gave no sign of recognition. His face had acquired a sullen aspect and he and his fellows, who all wore the same expression, the same ragged clothing, shuffled aimlessly and bumped shoulders and stumbled beneath the lamppost, like a troop of imps separated from a larger force, cut off from the vigor and direction of their master's will.

* * *

He spent the night in La Gatita Blanca, a brothel that also served as a hotel, in a room that smelled of stale joy, windowless, with a standing floor lamp that shed a bilious light and walls of unfinished stone and a round bed fitted with a plastic sheet. It had a mirrored ceiling, but the mirror was so befogged and bespeckled that all he saw standing beneath was a rough caricature of his face — he imagined that the act of love would show as an indefinite thrashing, more disturbing than arousing. The plastic sheet felt greasy to his touch. He sat in a wooden chair against the back wall and thought about Doña Bisalia; but the whores refused to leave him in peace, tapping on the door and whispering temptations through the thin plyboard. Eventually they stopped, but after an interval of a half-hour there came a knock and a girlish voice said, May I have a moment of your time, Senor? This approach was so direct and child-like, he opened the door and found a young *mestiza* standing in the corridor, wearing a white cotton shift that reminded him of Palmira's nightdresses. She asked if she could talk with him, saying that the malediction was upon her and thus she could not work, and further that she was lonely. Would he mind if she kept him company for a while?

He admitted her and she perched on the edge of the bed in the dungeon-like room, sitting with her hands between her knees. She looked no older than Palmira, resembling her somewhat, and had about her a playful air that further reminded him of his sister. Her name was Adalina and she hailed from the neighboring town of Chichigalpa. The death of her father from the kidney disease had forced her to become a whore. He felt at ease with her and talked of Palmira, saying that he intended to remove her from the Circo del Mar and bring her home.

Adalina's mouth tightened and then she said, Perhaps she had a reason for choosing this life.

We are not wealthy, said Alvaro. Yet there is always enough food, enough for clothing and schoolbooks. What other reason could she have had aside from desperation?

There may have been trouble at home.

Alvaro denied this vehemently.

You seem defensive, she said teasingly. Did she catch you staring at her *tetas*?

If you're going to talk like that, get out!

Calm down! I was making a joke. Once she had succeeded in placating him, she said, You will have to ask her why she ran away, but I can tell you this much: Doña Bisalia will never permit her to leave.

Who is this Doña Bisalia that people are in such awe of her.

Cocaine dealers have their saint; whores have their queen. It's as simple as that.

She is the queen of *all* whores?

All? I cannot say. But her influence is wide. Men come from America, from Chile and Argentina, to speak with her. She has great wisdom. From her window, it is said that one can see the floor of heaven.

Once you scratched the surface of how people felt about Doña Bisalia, Alvaro thought, the oil of superstition came welling up.

She stands between the seven and the nine, Adalina said. She...

Does that refer to the nine men who led her down the Calle del Pacifico last night? The seven who came behind?

She shrugged. It's just something I've heard.

What else have you heard?

Adalina gave the matter some thought and said, That a man can die from standing too near her, yet in her embrace he can be reborn.

Alvaro cast his mind back to the weary manner of the man's collapse on the Calle del Pacifico, and remembered how drained and unsteady he had felt when she spoke to him, as if affected by some radiation emitted by her flesh. He questioned Adalina further, but she grew petulant, saying that people talked constantly of Doña Bisalia — how could she be expected to retain it all? She coaxed him to join her on the bed, to get some rest, assuring him that the sheet was clean, and Alvaro, overcome by stress and fatigue, surrendered to temptation and lay beside her, thinking they might find innocent solace in each other's arms. Looking up at the mirror, he saw his reflection with relative clarity, but of Adalina he saw patches of her white shift — clouds of grime and discoloration obscured the remainder of her image and this seemed to devalue the notion of innocence. After a minute or two she began to caress his chest and stomach, and offered to gratify him orally for ten cordobas. He gave her five and evicted her from the room. She stood in the corridor, complaining loudly that he had cheated her and that he had taken up more than ten cordobas of her time; but as she walked away he heard her telling another whore how the fool in Room Nine had paid five cordobas for nothing.

* * *

Juegos Galaxia contained three rows of video games, with a cashier's counter at the rear and posters of movie villains and rock stars affixed to the walls. After satisfying himself that Palmira was not inside (there were barely a handful of customers firing chain guns and energy bolts at a variety of monsters), Alvaro went outside to wait. Because it was Sunday, the street was almost deserted. Beggars drowsed in the doorways and a drunk staggered zombie-like along the opposite side of the street, seeking shelter from the dynamited white glare of the sun. A bearded man sat in the gutter, repeatedly touching the blood that matted his temple, disturbing the flies gathered about the wound, and singing brokenly to himself. It seemed a place from which the tide had retreated, leaving behind this debris. Half a block from the arcade, a middle-aged woman in a thin dress, its pattern effaced by repeated launderings, paced agitatedly in front of a doorway, accosting strollers and shrieking at passing cars. Another drunk, thought Alvaro. Yet rarely did you see a woman make such a public display. Curious, he moved closer. Huddled in the doorway behind the woman was a dead man. His eyes were open, but had begun to glaze, and a grayish pallor suffused his saffron-colored skin. Apparently he had been set there to beg the previous evening and had succumbed to the kidney disease during the night. When the woman noticed Alvaro, she ran at him and clutched his shirt and begged him to help move her husband's body. Her worn face was contorted in anguish, her hands patting and clawing at his chest.

I cannot, he said. I have an appointment. But I will call the authorities to help you.

The woman seemed only to have heard *I cannot*. Wild-eyed, she cursed Alvaro and spat at him, calling him a coward and the son of a whore, and she continued reviling him as he backed toward *Juegos Galaxia*, calling upon God to punish him. Once inside the arcade he approached the cashier and asked him to make the call. The cashier, who was of the same approximate age of Alvaro, said it was none of his business; but Alvaro, shaken by the woman's ferocity and the sight of her husband in the awkward rectitude of death, gave him money and the cashier relented.

Chinandega, Alvaro told himself, was all that the farmer on the bus had said it would be: hot and vile and soulless. He took a seat in front of a shooter game and for the next half-hour tried to smooth out the tumble of his angry thoughts by slaying demons that were turned into yellowish ooze when struck by a sufficiency of bullets. He looked away from the screen now and again, checking the entrance, and came to realize that a woman seated at a game closer to the street bore a resemblance to his sister in coloration and carriage. She wore skintight pink jeans and an off-the-shoulder blouse. Gold bracelets encircled her wrists and dark curls frosted with blond highlights framed her face. Her lips were sketched in carmine and she had on so much eye shadow that from a distance her eyes appeared to have been replaced by deep pits. She looked to be nineteen or twenty, but as he came toward her he saw more youthful and familiar lines emerge from the shell of make-up.

Palmira? he said, still not convinced that this slut could be his sister.

She glanced up sharply and her face hardened. She returned her attention to the roaring, tire-squealing game, maneuvering a red bullet-shaped car between two others and taking the lead in the race. He was tempted to drag her into the bathroom and scrub her face until her natural beauty was restored.

Palmira, he said again and, when she gave no response, he put his hand on the steering wheel, sending the red car flipping end-over-end into the infield, where it burned with unnaturally steady digital flames.

Cono! Palmira said, and pricked the back of his hand with a fingernail, drawing a drop of blood.

That's what you have to say to me? Alvaro asked. After a year?

Don't exaggerate! It hasn't been a year.

All right. Eleven months.

It's closer to ten.

If he hadn't been so furious, Alvaro might have been amused at how quickly they had dropped back into a pattern

of childish bickering. Fine, he said. Whatever. Is that all you have to say after leaving without a word? Mama and Papa...

What should I have told them? That I was running away? That would have been self-defeating.

She looked pleased with herself, as if the concept of self-defeat were something she had only recently mastered. He caught her by the arm and tried to pull her to her feet, but she clung to the seat and said, What are you doing?

Taking you home.

She shook him off. I go where I please, nowhere else. I am one of Doña Bisalia's girls.

So you want to be a whore? You sound as if you are proud of it.

And why not? I love to fuck. Men like me. A good whore is the remedy for the illness of marriage. Just ask Papa. Do you still believe he spends his Friday evenings in church? He's on his knees, all right. Licking some whore's *pipote*.

Though Palmira had always been a rebellious girl, Alvaro was shocked to hear her talk in this manner. He tried another tack. Mama thinks you are dead, he said.

Well, now you can tell her I am alive, she said pertly. I am not Mama. I have no wish to make a respectable marriage to a man I do not love and live like a mouse in his shadow. That was my future if I stayed. It's different for you. You are a good scholar. I only had two choices... and I have chosen.

What is your future now? Is it any better than the one you would have had at home?

Who can say? Whatever it may be, it is not Mama's. Doña Bisalia is my mother now.

Alvaro felt like slapping her. How can you say such a thing? Have you forgotten the woman who gave you life... who nurtured you?

Mama may have nurtured me, but it is Doña Bisalia who has given me life. Soon she will rise to her true estate and I will share in it. She picked up her purse, snapped it shut, and her distant, reverent tone grew terse. Anyway, what do you care? We were never close.

That's a lie. Who walked you to school each day? Who walked you home at night?

Palmira seemed about to say something, but she bit back the words and stood. I have to go.

Alvaro followed her as she went toward the dark green fortress of the Circo del Mar, trying to think of some logic or persuasive truth that would move her; but he was at a loss for words. He had expected Palmira to be grateful for his intercession or, if not grateful, sympathetic and glad to see him. He could not have predicted her utter disdain for what he had to say. He began telling her about her friends, how they were faring, seeking to awaken nostalgia, but though she expressed mild interest, her step did not falter and, on reaching the corner across from the brothel, she kissed him on the cheek and wished him a safe trip back to the capital.

I want to talk more, he said. Tomorrow. Can you meet me tomorrow?

So you can argue with me? What's the point?

I am your brother! Despite what you say, I have missed you. I haven't seen you for a year.

Ten months.

I have missed you, Palmira, he repeated. Can't you spare an hour to take a cup of coffee with me?

She hesitated and then said, If you promise not to argue, I will meet you at noon in the arcade.

He promised, she kissed him again and walked briskly off. Two men guarded the entrance of the brothel and, as she passed between them and ascended the stairs, she exaggerated the swing of her hips, causing one of the men to shake his hand loosely in a gesture of lascivious appreciation and share a laugh with the other.

* * *

Alvaro was angry with himself for not having been more forceful, although he blamed Palmira's shallowness and self-absorption for sapping his aggression. After months of searching for her, their reunion had been anti-climactic — he might have come back from the corner store for all the enthusiasm she had displayed on seeing him again. His face grew hot and numb, as if he were a jilted lover. He should have dragged her from the arcade, he told himself. He should have locked her away in a hotel until it was time for the bus to leave.

He walked up and down the Calle del Pacifico, half-inclined to leave her to fate, yet determined to make some effort, however futile, on her behalf. As evening approached, frustrated, he bought a Coca Cola and a bottle of cheap rum, and wandered into the waste that lay behind the Circo del Mar, a tract of weedy, broken ground littered with paper trash and flattened cans, patrolled by pariah dogs who looked at him anxiously, and sat on a hummock of dried mud, mixing rum and Coke in his mouth, staring at the rear of the brothel as if its hulking shape and green boards were a puzzle he had been challenged to rearrange in a more comprehensible way. Lace curtains fluttered in the windows on the second floor; heavy yellow drapes were drawn across a high, narrow window on the third. Now and again, a blocky young man with a Mayan complexion, wearing a baseball cap and a white apron over his clothes, emerged from the back door carrying a garbage bag, which he deposited in a bin. After each of his appearances the pariah dogs would come to sniff the ground near the bin, hopeful of fallen scraps, and seagulls, strayed inland from the port, would swoop down to reconnoiter before resuming their aimless aerials above the town.

Drunkenness overcame Alvaro at dusk and he slept for a couple of hours, curled up on the ground, using his shirt for a pillow. He woke with a throbbing headache and a sore back, and with the notion planted firmly in mind that he should make a bold effort to rescue his sister that very night. He told himself that such a precipitous action would likely get him beaten or killed — if he tried to force her, she would cry out or find some other means of raising an alarm that would bring men with guns. And yet the idea was irresistible. It was as if a spirit had visited his dreams and lodged a message in the front of his brain, urging him to flee Chinandega before its poisonous heat could steal his will. He staggered to his feet, gazed dumbly at the patternless scatter of pinprick stars showing through a thin cloud cover, and picked his way across the waste to the side of the trash bin, stopping once to pick up a loose board. He squatted in the shadow of the bin, his thoughts reduced to a fretful static, listening to the romantic

ballads issuing muddily from the brothel. When the kitchen door banged open, he went on the alert and, when the bin was flung open, he jumped up, startling the man with his load of garbage, and whacked him on the back of his head with the board, dropping him to his knees. A second blow and the man fell forward onto his face. Alvaro bound and gagged him, wedged his limp body behind the bin. He put on the man's apron and baseball cap, jamming it down onto his ears, and, without pausing to reconsider his decision, he pushed into the harsh lights and bustle of the kitchen of the Circo del Mar.

Ignoring shouts that might or might not have been directed at him, Alvaro kept his head down, slipping a steak knife into his pocket as he passed a warming table, and made for an inner door. The door opened onto a corridor that led away to the interior of the brothel. He took the first turning and ascended a stairway to the second floor, where another corridor lay before him — a wide passage carpeted in dark green, with wall lamps shedding a soft light and recessed doors and shimmering, sea-green wallpaper bearing a sparse design of tridents and conch shells and seahorses. The hubbub of the floor below was muted, the air laced with perfume. Made uneasy by the quiet, he started along the corridor, hunting for a place in which he could shelter and take stock. Between rooms were niches in which fleshy, broad-leaved plants in brass urns were set and, on hearing a door open, a man speaking in American English and then a woman's voice, also in English, but with a Spanish accent, Alvaro sprang into the nearest niche, pressing back among the pliant stalks and greenery. There was insufficient space behind the plant to crouch, so he stood peering through the leaves as the man, a thickset sort with bushy gray hair and white sideburns, stepped from a room just down the hall and stood adjusting his belt beneath the overhang of his belly. He patted his sides in apparent satisfaction and strode off toward the stairs. Alvaro went to the door from which the man had emerged. He put an ear to it and listened, then turned the knob and slipped inside. The room, which echoed the color scheme of the corridor, a blending of softly lit greens, was unoccupied, but he heard water running behind a door to the left of the rumpled bed. He took a position beside the door and waited for the woman to be done with her ablutions, his eyes ranging over the furnishings. After a minute or so, the door to the bathroom opened and a pale, dark-haired girl no older than he, wearing a loosely belted robe of emerald silk, came forth. He caught her from behind, muffling her cry with his hand, and showed her the knife and cautioned her to be quiet. She signaled with her eyes that she would comply and he allowed her to sit on the bed, where she began brushing her

JK Potter

hair with a jade-handled brush that she took from a bedside table, appearing unconcerned with him.

He asked if she knew where Palmira was and, with an annoyed expression, she said, Why do so many men ask for Palmira? Am I not more beautiful?

She let the robe slip from her shoulders, continuing to brush her hair. Though entranced by her, Alvaro asked again where Palmira was and the girl said, On the third floor, of course. I'll take you if you like.

Don't think you can trick me, he said. If you are tempted to give me away, remember I have the knife.

The girl laughed, a chilly, bright sound, like two ice cubes dropped into a glass one after the other. Do you believe Doña Bisalia is unaware of your presence? She knows you are here. She knows everything about you, whoever you are.

She stood, the robe puddling at her feet, and struck a seductive pose. Her secret hair had been trimmed into a complicated shape, one from which he averted his eyes before he could discern its exact outlines.

I am Josefina, she said. Stay with me and I'll make you forget that skinny bitch Palmira.

I doubt that.

Josefina affected injured pride, but he could tell she was merely playing with him.

Tell me about Doña Bisalia, he said. How can she know anything about me?

She is Babylon's daughter, born of the union between the stars of commerce and pleasure. Josefina winked at him. You know. It's the same old story. You've heard it a hundred times.

Be serious! I'm trying to understand her.

Serious? Very well. Josefina pitched her voice into a spooky whisper. She has been ordained by the light of certain stars to rule over the lower depths.

Stop fucking around, okay?

She is a woman like any other, but soon she will ascend to her true estate. Josefina walked to the door, paused with her hand on the knob, and smiled at him. It could happen at any second. You'd better hurry.

As he followed her up the stairs, he began to be afraid not of being caught, but of the unknown, of Doña Bisalia, his rational outlook giving way before his superstitious nature. At the top of the stairs was a closed door and, as Josefina made to open it, he caught her wrist and said, Keep close to me. Pretend we are together.

We are together, she said drily. But if you think I can protect you, I cannot.

Let me be the judge of that.

She patted his cheek. Don't be afraid. You are lost already, but it is good to be lost, to be free of one's past.

He tucked the knife under his shirt. You may be free of the past, but I am not. Palmira is my sister.

Oh! And you have come to rescue her, I suppose. Again she laughed. Had I the time, I would tell you a story about such a rescue. But you'll know the truth soon enough.

Men standing in groups, smoking and laughing and talking together, populated the corridor beyond the door. American men in casual dress, Latin men in sport coats and suits — they gazed incuriously at Alvaro as he passed, gripping Josefina's arm, and several greeted her and patted her on the ass. He thought he recognized some of them from the newspapers. They were anonymous, well-groomed men of the type who gathered at the elbows of public figures in photographs captioned by the announcement of a new trade agreement or a leasing of mineral rights. They were the powers behind the throne, the corporate functionaries, architects of political betrayal, princes of bureaucracy, defilers of the public trust, dispensers of the kidney disease, liars, thieves, and murderers with summer places in Cozumel and Cancun. Alvaro knew people at the university who would sacrifice a great deal (or would claim as much) for an opportunity to be armed and at close quarters with such men; but his personal concerns dulled his revolutionary sensibility and he was more aware of them as potential threats to his safety than as political adversaries.

This corridor was truncated, scarcely half the length of the one on the second floor, terminating in dark green double doors; both it and the rooms along it (twice the size of the rooms below) were papered in shiny gold foil that was worked with a design too small to make out, their entrances unencumbered by doors or curtains, furnished with yellow sofas and chairs and deep pile rugs upon which men and women were having sex, singly and in groups. Alvaro could hear grunts and cries of delight over the conversational murmur, but nowhere did he spot his sister. There were too many people in the rooms and some wore masks, making identification even more difficult. He asked Josefina to help him and she told him he would find Palmira beyond the green doors at the end of the corridor.

When they entered the room (furnished like the others, yet much larger, filled with a babble of voices and an insistent electronic music), they became separated almost at once, forced apart by the densely packed crowd around the door. Alvaro, certain that Josefina would betray him, tried to hide in the press along the walls, edging along, drawing the occasional stare, but generally going unnoticed in the hubbub. He eased behind a sofa and, between shoulders, caught sight of a girl who might have been Palmira, bent over a chair, her head down as a bearded man took her from behind; but when he pushed close, calling to her, she brushed the hair from her eyes and, shaken by the man's fierce thrusts, looked at Alvaro stuporously, proving to be older and thinner and coarser of feature than his sister. He retreated, bumping into people, wedging past them, until he reached the security of a corner and stood with his back against the wall, his heart jumping in his chest, alarmed by everything, by the milling crowd, the pulsing music, the yellowness of the room, the naked bodies splayed on couches and the men looking on, the gold foil wallpaper... The design it bore was varied yet of a pattern. Close at hand was the image of seven tiny *guanacaste* trees juxtaposed with nine oranges, and higher up were seven dogs and nine crosses, seven birds and nine roses, seven children and nine rakes. Always there were seven of one object and nine of the other. He could not grasp the significance of this, yet knew that it must be significant. Moving deeper into the room, he spotted the Recluse in a small open area, his handsome features composed and watchful, and he had a glimpse of Josefina being fondled by a group of men. He came abreast of three men who were

engaged in an intense discussion, standing by an unoccupied sofa, and realized to his astonishment that they were debating aspects of the poetry of Rubén Darío. Here, he thought, was a conversation in which he could hide, blending in with these professorial types (all of them wore shabby suits and beards salted with gray, smoking pipes and cigarettes, dribbling ashes whenever they gestured) until he was able to get his bearings. Their concern seemed to be whether or not Darío's *Songs Of Life And Hope* had announced the modern era or if they were the last mutterings of the Neo-classical period dressed in new clothing.

Gentleman, Alvaro said, inserting himself into their circle. Darío's impact is clear. He shrugged off the decaying mantle of the Neo-classical and adopted new poetic themes.

He paused, summoning lines from memory, and quoted the following lines from "To Roosevelt:"

> You think that life is fire,
> That eruption is progress,
> That wherever you shoot
> You hit the future...

Even the syntax was new, said Alvaro. Without Darío, there would be no Paz, no Lorca, no Neruda.

The poem is political, a populist slogan, and thus constitutes an aberration, offered a lanky man with a prominent Adam's apple. Within this same volume, Darío provides us with a text — a major text — that embraces anew the structures of the past. I am speaking, of course, of "The Optimist's Salutation."

Surely you realize that the antiquated language of the poem is an irony? said Alvaro.

The discussion grew heated and Alvaro lost track to some extent of his purpose for invading the Circo del Mar, though each time a woman passed by the sofa, he looked to see if she was Palmira. He began to hear a ragged unanimity in the voices of the crowd, as if some of them were repeating the same words. This rattled him, but he fixed his mind on the argument, assuming that some ritual — a drinking contest, perhaps — encouraged them to speak in chorus. As he attempted to refute a point by quoting from "The Optimist's Salutation," quoting the lines, Abominate mouths that foretell only misfortune/ abominate eyes that see only ill-fated Zodiacs, he heard the crowd uttering the lines along with him and broke off, knowing that his presence had been discovered.

The crowd finished the quote, hundreds of voices sounding the lines:

> ...abominate hands that stone the illustrious ruins,
> or that wield the firebrand or suicidal dagger.

The music ceased, and the professorial men, the government officials, the whores, the Americans — they fell silent and began to move back against the walls, assisted in this by nine men of pleasant manner, who shooed people to one side or another. Alvaro found himself looking along the avenue that was created at Doña Bisalia. She was enthroned in a yellow easy chair, and she wore a dark green latex cocktail dress that cinched her waist and pushed up her breasts. Her black curls gleamed as if fashioned of polished obsidian. At her back, in casual array, stood seven solemn and unsmiling men, and behind them was a high window partly concealed by yellow drapes. She beckoned to Alvaro and, having no choice — the crowd at his rear was packed in solidly, making escape impossible — he walked toward her, stopping a few feet away.

My sister, he said. Where is she?

You have no sister, said Doña Bisalia.

Alvaro nudged the knife beneath his shirt with the back of his hand. Palmira! he shouted.

Oh! So it is Palmira you wish to see. Doña Bisalia mocked him with her smile. Why didn't you say so?

Palmira stepped forth from the crowd, naked except for a necklace with a green stone, her body agleam with oil. At her side stood a short, muscular man with skin of a ruddy copper hue, a mask in the form of a snarling mastiff covered his head. He was also naked and in a state of tumescence.

Are they not beautiful? Doña Bisalia came to her feet, a movement that captured Alvaro's attention, and posed with her hands on hips, her voluptuous figure tortured into the shape of an 8 by the green latex. Yet their beauty is not that of brother and sister, she said. No more than would be the case if you were at her side. She is not your sister, but the child of your father's favorite whore, Expectacion. She told your father the infant was his.

That's a lie, Alvaro said weakly, his eyes returning to Palmira — he had not known she was so womanly.

Whores lie, said Doña Bisalia. It's true. And Expectacion lied. She saw in your father a fool who would take a nuisance off her hands. Blood knows blood, Alvaro. If she were your sister, could you look at her as you are now?

Turning to the man beside her, Palmira removed his mask; as she lifted it from his head, he misted away as though he had never been, vanishing before Alvaro could register his features. The crowd seethed. Palmira approached to within a foot of Alvaro, her expression empty of emotion, and held out the mask.

The man's disappearance did not affect Alvaro — he had seen more spectacular tricks at country carnivals. He stared at the slim perfection of Palmira's body and the blank indifference of her face, half-wanting to believe she was not his sister, yet refusing to take the mask. Doña Bisalia stepped up beside him and slipped her arm through his elbow. The pressure of her breast against his arm seemed to drain him of strength and will.

Will you not entertain us? No? Doña Bisalia gave a dusty laugh. Come with me, then. I have something to show you.

One of the seven unsmiling men sprang to the window behind the easy chair and drew back the drapes that concealed it. As Doña Bisalia guided him to the window, Alvaro cut his eyes toward her. She had, he thought, the simplified beauty of statuary, the statue of a sexual goddess carved from yellow stone, with breasts and hips like sculptural principles, and black eyes like cabochons; yet there was nothing sexual about her, no hint of warmth or humanity. Her smile did not develop, but shifted into place, as if it were an artifact she summoned up whenever necessary, and the perfume that clung to her was a coarse, heady odor like incense. She instructed

him to look out the window, which he did briefly, seeing nothing other than the waste that lay behind the brothel. Suddenly timid, overwhelmed by her closeness, he asked what he was supposed to see, and she said, The world ... of which the Circo del Mar is not truly a part. You must look deeply or else your journey will have been for nothing.

The darkness appeared to ripple and bits of phosphorescent life bobbed about in the air, as if the night were an ocean beneath which the brothel was submerged ... and then he realized that what he had mistaken for phosphorescent glints were the scattered lights of Colonia San Jeronimo. He rubbed his eyes, trying to rid himself of the rippling effect, and when he looked again he found that he was peering in the window of a house, a shack, a foul nest built of canted boards inhabited by two creatures that might have been the fantasy of a medieval artist, an emaciated man and woman, grotesquely malformed, scarcely more than skeletons dressed in rags of flesh and flaps of pallid gray skin, their shoulder blades so pronounced that they resembled stubby wings. They crawled into their matrimonial hammock, croaking love noises and mauling one another, exhausted tides of emotion filming across their faces like washes of scum, their feelings as easy to read as the intent of spiders. He tried to look beneath the surface, to see behind their lives as Doña Bisalia had told him to do, but — though he came to recognize that the window was a lens through which he could view every quarter of the town (and perhaps afforded a wider view than that) — there was no greater depth to perceive, no roots twisting down beneath the houses that tapped into a black reservoir, no snickering demons perched atop the roofs and manipulating those within, no apparent cause for their grotesquerie. Monstrosities populated every house in the colonia, and he knew to his soul that what he saw from the window of the Circo del Mar was literal and real, shorn of all illusory beauty and grace. Each new thing he saw was a blow that weakened one or another of his fundamental assumptions, that abolished some rule of order, and forced on him an unvarnished view of the world. Along the Calle del Pacifico, whores with leech-like mouths and sagging bodies hustled big-bellied American swine, and broken-down old men with goiters the size of pineapples and old women with hairs sprouting from their skin cancers sheltered in the shadowed doorways of unlit shops, their faces seamed with bad life, with ugly hungers, with brutish contempt and blue-movie dreams, the faces of hawk-rats and bat-roaches and scorpion-dogs, and in the more prosperous sectors of the town, wife-beaters and child abusers and priests with their fatty self-absorption and their penchant for sodomy and their love of guava jelly, the average meat nobodies of a dying age stared into nowhere with lechery and avarice. They breathed in brown gas, breathed it out as sulfur; their bones were petrified shit, their hearts were empty leather sacs, their minds were stinging vibrations; pink insects were glued to their groins, and their screams were all the music there ever was; they had larval visions of huge wallowing and gulpings, earthquake moans and enormous torsions of suety flesh. Life had betrayed them ... or rather betrayal was the medium of their lives. They fed on the dung of lies, flies orbiting the garbage of illusion. They clung to nothing, squeezing sticky handfuls of nothing hard in hopes that their grip would transform it into a bright something that they could sell themselves, that would provide them with a reason to continue.

Alvaro had always believed that the world was a wasteland and evil, but seeing things in this hard, sudden light toppled the tissue-paper castles of philosophy behind which he had been hiding, banished them beyond recall and unhinged him to such a degree that a powerful hatred of life was bred in him. When he turned from the window and saw grotesques of a kind with which he was familiar, sleek women and well-dressed men, and realized that the illusion of beauty was somehow sustained within the Circo del Mar — this deceit so inflamed him, he could no longer contain his rage and despair. Letting out a yell, he drew the knife from his waist and slashed at the air.

You see, said Doña Bisalia. Here you have found refuge from the world. Here you are free to please yourself however you will.

She made a gesture and the man who had opened the drapes now hurried to close them.

There, she said. You need never look at it again. Now Palmira can be yours. I think she likes you. She has always liked you, and you her. Now you can express yourself fully one to the other.

She moved closer to him and, though she was draped in firm yellow flesh and a dress of dark green latex, he knew the hateful thing she was, he felt her vile, venereal heat on his skin and understood the release she offered.

You can be my kitchen boy, she said, and smiled broadly. I believe I have need of a new one.

She moved closer yet, the points of her nipples grazing his chest, and just that touch, that slight stimulus, triggered his rage. He stabbed down with the knife, yet he lacked a murderer's conviction — the blade bit into her flesh an inch or two. Doña Bisalia yielded a soft feminine moan, a breathy exclamation of pleasure, and that moan seemed to be echoed throughout the house, as if every woman in the Circo del Mar had experienced a sweet pang. All the whores within sight stood with eyes closed and lips parted, mirroring Doña Bisalia's stance. Blood welled from the slope of her breast. She clutched Alvaro's knife-hand and placed the tip of the blade against the wound he had made.

Strike deeper, she said rapturously.

When he did not respond, she spat into his face, thick spittle that hung from his nose and chin, and when that did not move him to act, she struck him in the face and said that he was not a man. Without knowing why, for his rage had fled, supplanted by a bleak, uncaring emotion, Alvaro pushed the knife home.

A second moan issued from Doña Bisalia's lips and from every portion of the house, louder and longer than the first, a finishing cry, a gush of sound that might have signaled lust well spent. For an instant she appeared to ripple and billow, as if he had penetrated illusion, and he thought that the image of the yellow room and the crowd might be sucked into the rent he had carved in her breast, leaving behind a nightmarish environment populated by sub-humans; but she collapsed on the floor with a meaty thump, looking more vivacious in death than she had in life, with black curls partly obscuring her face

and her legs akimbo and the rivulet of blood running down across her skin to pool on the golden carpet.

Alvaro expected to be borne under by an angry mob, but — following a momentary silence — the crowd erupted with shouts of joy and delirium. She has ascended, they cried. She has claimed her estate. The seven and the nine mingled, shaking hands with one another. It seemed that the punishment for murder committed in the Circo del Mar was to be smothered in congratulations. Men came to clap Alvaro on the shoulder and embrace him, women to kiss him on the mouth and cheek. Confused, he shoved them aside, but they lifted him to their shoulders and carried him aloft, all the while exclaiming a shrill, nonsensical litany. She has ascended! She stands between the seven and the nine! He understood none of it, but was infected by their merriment and soon he raised his arms in triumph, joining the celebration, happy that no blame attached to his crime.

At length Doña Bisalia's body was borne away, and thereafter the room emptied swiftly, everyone going off to their separate revels, leaving Alvaro and Palmira alone in that vast yellow space. She walked up to him and wordlessly offered him the mask worn by the man who disappeared. Alvaro did not know what to say to her or, for that matter, what he would say to anyone, so he took it and turned the thing over in his hand, pretending to examine its snarling, toothy mouth and alert ears, sticking his fingers through the eyeholes.

Put it on, Palmira said.

He hesitated.

No one will disturb us, she said. Go ahead. Put it on.

Why did you run away? he asked.

You know why. I wanted you, and I knew you wanted me, though you would never admit to it. Imagine if you had. We would have become lovers and then the situation would have been even more intolerable.

He started to deny it, but could not. What happened here tonight? Doña Bisalia ... I don't understand.

It's not important that you understand. I don't understand. No one does, really. Now put on the mask. It will make things easier.

She reclined on a sofa, positioning herself so as to give him a full display. He pulled the mask over his head. It was hot and smelled of sweat and fit snugly to his ears, making his breathing sound like a beast pausing open-mouthed over its prey. The tiny eyeholes limited his view. He could see her belly or her breasts or her thighs, but not the entirety of her body. When he lifted his gaze, he noticed there was a pulse in her throat, and her face, ardent and flushed, the mouth distorted by a mature passion, did not resemble his sister's at all.

* * *

Whores lie.

All men being whores, for Doña Bisalia to have made this statement, one that implied a distinction, was, Alvaro thinks, unnecessary. He wonders if she intended the words to be self-referential, if she lied when she told him Palmira was not his sister. It matters little now, yet nonetheless he wonders. He sports with other women of the brothel, but Palmira is by far his favorite and their hours together are his sole treasure. Their affection is thin, as are all affections, but the sex is good and suffices to sustain it.

Sometimes they walk hand-in-hand down to *Juegos Galaxia* and play the racing games. Alvaro keeps his eyes lowered, not wanting to see things as they are, though he is aware that the illusion he has accepted is a strong one, made even stronger by the ascendancy and death of Doña Bisalia, and he will likely see nothing out of the ordinary. It has been explained to him that he and Palmira and the seven and the nine were part of a design that permitted Doña Bisalia to assume her place among the gods, and it has been pointed out that a new constellation hangs above the Gulf of Fonseca, one shaped roughly like an 8 or an hourglass — this is proof, it's said, that she watches over the folk of the Circo del Mar and guarantees their continued well-being. But the explanations are words, merely, and there are so many stars above the Gulf of Fonseca that one could arrange them into any shape. On occasion he sees her taking a promenade along the Calle del Pacifico, standing between the seven and the nine, and chatting with bystanders. On other oc casions she strolls through the corridors of the brothel. In both instances, the wound on her breast is plainly visible, still bleeding. Alvaro is not entirely free of guilt where she is concerned and it is possible that these apparitions are a kind of self-punishment. None of their proofs are persuasive, yet he cannot discount the idea of her divinity. It is simply unimportant.

He works in the kitchen of the brothel and sometimes it seems that he has always worked there. The former kitchen boy, whom he struck with a board, has disappeared as completely as the man in the mask. Since both men were stocky and of Mayan blood, like him, and as he never saw their faces, he suspects that they were doubles fashioned of illusory stuff and served some unfathomable purpose; but he is not in the least curious about them. Curiosity is no longer a function of his personality. He no longer cares about literature or politics. He no longer wishes to embrace life's complexity, its cruel simplicity having been confirmed to his satisfaction. He goes through the days ploddingly, carrying trash to the bin out back, scraping off dishes, mopping floors, and taking pleasure wherever he can find it, inspired to this dogged continuance by a single goal.

Money is not difficult to come by at the Circo del Mar and Alvaro does not have to spend much. His meals and a place to sleep are provided, drink is plentiful, and Palmira sees to his other needs. Now and then he buys her a present, a cheap trinket, a CD — she requires no more — but otherwise he saves his tips, the change he finds on floors and in ashtrays, and the banknotes that the whores slip him in return for favors. Someday soon he will walk deep into Colonia San Jeronimo and hand the Recluse a thousand cordobas and then, not with dread, as one might expect, but with eager anticipation (this being the one remaining thing that he is curious about), he will ask to be told the precise hour and minute at which the world will end.

A Lucius Shepard Bibliography

"...In fact it's not at all certain that he is still here. Some will tell you he is dead. Others say he lives in Chile, in Tahiti, in a dacha on the Black Sea. He's been reported in Turkestan, Montreal, Chiang Mai. He is seen everywhere. But no one knows where he is. No one will ever know."

"That's quite clever, that is," March said.

— from Eternity and Afterward, 2001.

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JK Potter

Figuring Karen Out

by James Patrick Kelly

I have never been able to figure Karen Joy Fowler out. I think she likes it that way. Come to think of it, so do I.

If memory serves, the first time I met Karen was in 1986 at the very start of the second Sycamore Hill Writers Workshop. We had both finished our stories at the last minute and so had to make our way to a copy shop in Raleigh, North Carolina to reproduce the manuscripts so we could hand them out to the rest of the workshop. I have to admit that I was a little tongue-tied at this meeting. Although Karen was and is a friendly soul with an infectious laugh, she also has a certain indefinable presence (I had to keep myself from hitting the shift key there to capitalize Presence). I have known her all these years and have been with her often (although not often enough!) and it has been my experience that not only is she invariably the coolest person in the room, she is also the sharpest.

Anyway, back to that fateful first meeting — I think we must have handed each other our respective manuscripts before we headed back to the dorm where the group was staying. So I probably read her story before any of the others. And here the real puzzlement began. You see, although Karen likes to workshop, her work often as not defies critique. Like her own sweet self, hers are usually the sharpest stories in the room. So why does she come to workshop? A puzzlement. There is a surface to her work, sometimes glittering, sometimes deceptively straightforward. Yet just beneath that surface lies a tangle of deeper meanings and intense, sometimes conflicting, emotions. Readers who never really break Karen's surface can still enjoy the work, although they may be vaguely disquieted by the feeling that they have missed something.

Some of the Sycamore Hill regulars have coined a term for a technique that Karen is a master of. This coinage can also be applied to some of Kelly Link's and Mary Rickert's work as well. Somewhere in one of their stories they will place a trap door. If you find and open it, the subtextual wonders of the story will be revealed. There have been times, and that first workshop was one of them, when more astute readers than I had to point at the trap door and then actually open it before I truly appreciated the power of Karen's craft. Over the years, workshopping with Karen has made me a more careful reader, so I am now able to explore her stories more or less on my own. It has also led me to try to write like her. As *if!* But it's true. Of the seventy some stories I have written, there are a handful that I think of as KJF homages. Alas, I haven't got it right so far, but then I'm not done trying.

Yet although some of Karen's best work does not yield its secrets to a casual reading, she has also written a wildly popular best seller. Once again, a puzzlement. (I know a lot of great writers, but my immediate family, my in-laws and even my ex-in-laws are really only impressed that I'm friends with Karen. My daughter Maura is well on her way to being a Fowler completist.) *The Jane Austen Book Club* — soon to be a major motion picture! — is vastly entertaining in part because it is so sharply observed. In the interests of full disclosure, I should confess that I haven't actually read it; I listened to the audiobook version. (When I told this to Karen she made a face and said that she didn't particularly care for the performance. I take her point: the best interpreter of KJF is Karen herself. She is a superb reader and you absolutely should plan to attend her reading. Oh and get there early! The place will be banged out.) Although stylistically *The Jane Austen Book Club* might seem to represent a new direction for Karen, thematically it is of a piece with the rest of her career. Because one of Karen's grand themes, I think, has to do with the way men and women are different, and how they struggle to overcome those differences. I might have said that her literary obsession was love, but that isn't quite right. Love may certainly play a role in her work, but Karen is also keen to examine the other forces that bind women and men and force them apart.

Okay, okay — so I've gone all literary on you. Were you expecting something lighter? The juicy gossip? Maybe you'd rather be reading about literary feuds? Just who was flirting with who? Hilarious *faux pas* at cons? The identity of the culprit who short sheeted all those beds at Sycamore Hill?

Too bad.

Karen has proved herself many times to be a true friend. She has been a cheerleader for my own work and she was my confidante when I got divorced. We worked together with others to save the Clarion Writers Workshop; she is the Chairperson of the Clarion Foundation and I am proud to be her Assistant Chair. She got me my first ever gig teaching at a literary conference, the Imagination Conference at Cleveland State University, where she will teach once again later this month. In fact, you might say that she's partly responsible for me not being here this weekend. I'm in Maine, teaching at the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA program. When I applied for the job there, the Imagination Conference was one of the key credits on my resume.

And yet, despite her many kindnesses, I've never been able to figure Karen out. So I'm not happy to be missing this particular Readercon. After all, this might have been the weekend I solved the puzzle of KJF. As *if!* Instead, you get your chance.

Have fun with that. Keep a sharp eye. Let me know what you find out.

Karen and Me

by John Kessel

Karen Fowler, in her unassuming way, has been a major influence on science fiction and fantasy over the last twenty years. We should note her brilliant short fiction, her impeccable novels. Her example of applying the highest standards of literary craft to everything she writes has inspired many of us to try to do likewise. *Sarah Canary* is one of the best novels of any sort that I have read in the last twenty years, and John Clute has called it "the finest first contact novel ever written" (so subtle an exploration that non-sf people don't even see the alien). Then there's her co-founding of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award, her teaching at Clarion and elsewhere. Her friendship and good advice to dozens of writers. Beginning with the second Sycamore Hill Writers Conference, in 1986, I have invited Karen every year to this retreat and workshop for published sf professionals because her calm but strong voice at the critique table is unique. I have seen her stand up to Bruce Sterling in full Chairman mode without flinching, and earn his respect (a hard thing to do). The general reader cannot know how many books and stories, through her behind-the-scenes work, Karen has affected for the better.

To speak more personally, Karen has greatly influenced my own writing. Her examination of male-female relationships has moved me to write things I never would otherwise have written, and has altered stories that may seem to have nothing to do with feminism or gender issues. By now I have this little virtual Karen Joy Fowler in my mind who looks over my shoulder and asks me difficult questions as I write. Damn you, Fowler!

Finally, and this may be the most personal of all, and I hesitate to say it for fear of claiming something for myself I don't deserve (she is a dancer, I am a bricklayer), I feel there is a fundamental congruence between Karen's and my views of the human race. Though her fiction always surprises, frequently puzzles, and sometimes confounds me, I also feel completely in sympathy with her judgments. The complex moral, emotional, and ethical world she lives in is the same one I inhabit. The dark [and light] humor in her work is a tone I continually seek in my own. She is quietly savage, yet exhibits a fundamental human sympathy. When she writes a story, my common reaction is, "Yes! I wish I had thought of that." More than once, as in my story "The Invisible Empire," which is an elaboration of a single paragraph from her story "Game Night at the Fox and Goose," I have directly borrowed from her. I am pleased to believe that her story "The Travails" bears a similar relationship to my own "Gulliver at Home." I think my fiction is in conversation with hers, though she does things that I cannot do, and that make me want to throw my computer out the window and take up potting.

Then I go out, dig my computer out of the holly bush, bring it back in and return to work, insipired.

In Appeciation of Karen Joy Fowler

Diane Martin asked me if I would write an appreciation of Karen Fowler.

I have no time. I am currently severely over-employed. I am working at The Crucible, a nonprofit school of fire arts, where the executive director is under the delusion that I am a marketing director. I have tried to disabuse him of that notion, but he isn't buying it and the man has a flamethrower and what can I do? I am also working at Klutz Press, a children's publishing house where I am editing a book of board games, so I'm playing board games day and night, which may sound like fun for a while, but you give it a try and see what you say then.

But I do appreciate Karen Fowler. I appreciate her so much and in so many ways that I will write this stream of consciousness rant of appreciation and you there at Readercon will read it in the cold light of day in the program book and scratch your heads and wonder what ever happened to Pat Murphy's once fine mind. (Lack of sleep, my friends, lack of sleep. That, and too many propane fumes. On the other hand, you're at a convention, so you just might be a little sleep deprived yourself, in which case you appreciate my condition.)

But enough about that — I am here to tell you that I appreciate Karen Fowler because she is a trouble maker. I will give you my best example: the James Tiptree, Jr. Award.

Some 15 years back, Karen and I were talking about women in science fiction, which we talked about a lot more back then when we weren't so short on sleep. We talked about how it would piss some people off if we started a women's science fiction award. It would get the conspiracy theorists going, wondering, "What are those women up to now?" We could make this a plexiglass cube with all this "women's stuff" floating in it: little plastic babies and cooking pots and ironing boards and sewing machines.

Then Karen looked thoughtful (always a dangerous sign) and said, "You know, there really is no science fiction award named after a woman." Let's see: we have the Hugo (for Hugo Gernsback), the Theodore Sturgeon Award, the John W. Campbell Award, the Philip K. Dick Award. No women. *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, has been call the first science fiction novel, but there is no Mary Shelley Award.

And then Karen, who tends toward brilliance, said, "What about James Tiptree, Jr.?" And it seemed like such a perfect idea. James Tiptree, Jr., winner of multiple Nebulas, revealed in mid-career as Alice Sheldon, and forever after, in every introduction, revealed as Alice Sheldon. James Tiptree, Jr., who

helped break down the imaginary barrier between "women's writing" and "men's writing." James Tiptree, Jr., author of "The Women Men Don't See." And so I wrote to James Tiptree's estate to see if we could start an award for science fiction that explored and expanded gender roles. The Tiptree Estate, which turned out to be Jeff Smith, said, "It sounds like a fine idea."

Of course, it would never have gone that far if it weren't for Karen. You see, I realized that no one would take the award seriously if it didn't have money attached and where were we going to get that? But Karen said — in that quiet way of hers that is so very dangerous — "Bake sales."

So I announced in my guest of honor speech at Wiscon that we were going to start the Tiptree Award and fund it with bake sales. And after the speech a lot of people ran up to me and said, "We'll have a bake sale." And so they did, and the award was founded and it was too late to back out. Karen claimed (though I don't quite believe her) that she was kidding, and I claimed (though nobody believes me) that I was joking, too. But here we are: co-founders of an award. You have to wonder how these things happen.

I also must tell you that Karen and I have Plans. A number of years back we threatened to collaborate on a novel. I don't remember for sure, but I believe it involved pirates.

What I remember quite clearly is this: anytime that anyone in this book tried to have a serious conversation of any kind, we would nip it in the bud. Sort of like this:

"I've been meaning to talk with you about..."

Suddenly, a shot rang out!

And then all hell would break loose and we'd never get back to that conversation.

One of these days, Karen and I will write that novel. (And I know, as she reads this, she will smile because she knows that I am joking, but also because she knows that jokes can be very dangerous.)

And that is one of the many things I appreciate about Karen: she is someone who knows exactly how to take a joke. How, and where, and for how long. That's a rare and valuable trait.

— Pat Murphy

When I picture Karen she is always barefoot. At writing workshops she often sits cross-legged in the chair, or slouches, with her shoes kicked off in front of her feet. It's the lithe mannerisms of a teenager, of someone flexible. That's a good way to think about Karen; flexible. While in one sense, there is a rock-bottom Fowler-ness about her writing — themes of miscommunication, misunderstanding, misapprehension, and families, and unexpected (and often not exactly pleasant) strangeness, explorations of strange byways of history (Japanese, or Californian, or even literary history like the novels of Jane Austen). These are stories full of slippery voices, deceitful narrators who are lying to us, or to themselves. The writing ranges across several genres and the stories, especially, come in a range of styles from science fiction with honest to goodness bonafide aliens in them ("The Poplar Street Study" which is about a suburban neighborhood after the aliens come and turn it into a kind of animal behavior lab) to funny and poignant riffs on popular culture ("The Faithful Companion at Forty" in which an unnamed sidekick not unlike Tonto addresses a hero not unlike The Lone Ranger) to "The Marianis Islands" (a story about, among other things, family, but which involves a submarine, a politcally radical grandmother, and a root canal.) "The Marianis Islands" has one of my favorite secrets in the whole world in it. When the grandmother is asked for a secret by her granddaughter, she whispers, "There are no grown-ups."

You know that cliché where the kids all gather around and say, "Grandpa! Grandpa! Tell about how the Red Headed Woodpecker got stuck in the outhouse!" or whatever it is that people ask other people to tell a story even though they've already heard it? I don't actually know very many people who do that. Once in awhile, people will say to their spouse, "Go ahead, you tell it," but that's usually a grudging admission that they are about to tell a story that really belongs to someone else. That whole business of the storyteller so good that people would request their favorites? I always figured that was one of those homespun things, like sing-alongs, that people did before TV. But I've been there when someone said to Karen, "Tell about the time you were stuck in the bus station and the pimp had those seventies platform shoes and they had goldfish in the heels." (Karen will hate me for this.) But I've even asked her to tell that story. I mean, I've heard it before, but it's funny, and I wanted some of the other people to hear it, even though a bunch of us had heard it before. If you ask her to tell it, please don't mention my name.

I loved her stuff when I read it, and then when I heard her read it, it all changed. I could hear the quiet, faintly skeptical and often funny voice of Karen when I read her stuff after that. I'm not saying it's better after you've listened to Karen read it. The stories aren't dependent on dramatic readings. But they are, I don't know, informed by them? They're more Karen-ish after you've heard her read? I got her voice in my head, and then afterwards, it was with me. I recommend that you go to her reading. It might happen to you, too.

If so, you'll be lucky.

— Maureen McHugh

Karen Joy Fowler is the funniest woman in science fiction, and she doesn't half get credit for it.

Oh, she gets credit for brilliance, she gets credit for subtlety. She gets credit for the depth and complexity and intelligence her books and stories possess. But somehow the hilarity of her vision is seldom acknowledged.

How could this be?

I think it's because much of her humor is conveyed in the unique cadences of her voice, which is at once reassuringly calm and partly exasperated, ruefully acknowledging the ironies of existence and vagaries of human folly. And to hear those cadences, you must hear Karen speak.

Karen's normal, everyday speaking voice is very much like her normal, everyday writing voice, but with the addition of an ironic overtone that adds color and emphasis to her phrasing. Her voice insinuates itself into your head, the way Kelly Link's stories insinuate themselves into your reality. You will start hearing Karen's inflections in your own speech, and in the speech of others who have been in Karen's presence. For

a couple of days or so, your conversations will be funnier and wittier and more observant.

That effect fades, alas. But the very first experience will permanently active the KJF receptors in your brain, and all of a sudden you will be able to access all the tone-of-voice humor in Karen's work. It's like being able to hear the higher parts of the audio spectrum or see into the ultra violet range.

At Readercon, you will have a number of opportunities to hear Karen talk about serious matters. Take advantage of them. Attend her reading. Listen to what she has to say. Fight your way through her crowd of admirers who are far less worthy than yourself and talk with her. Then go home and reread all your favorite Karen Joy Fowler stories. You'll see: she's the funniest woman in science fiction.

—Eileen Gunn

My first glimpse of Karen Joy Fowler was, I am ashamed to admit, as a member of a jealous mob. This was at a BayCon some time in the very late eighties. At the end of a panel discussion — the subject and participants now long-forgotten — I stood with a group of fellow aspirant writers and watched as the editors in the room seemed to swarm around a notably attractive young woman who exuded sanity and calm, an odd emanation in that situation and place. Someone in my group — was it Angus McDonald? Stephen Crane? — said "That's Karen Joy Fowler. She's the hottest new short story writer in the field." We all gaped in naked hunger and confusion. How could this be happening to her and not to us? What had she done to deserve it? Then, I am less ashamed to admit, we sought out her stories, and understood.

A few years later I had the luck of being invited to a workshop-style writer's conference with Karen, who immediately A. took me kindly under her protective wing, beguiling and consoling me with her understated charisma and and gentle worldly wisdom and making it apparent I could confide in her any of my deepest secrets and, B. demonstrated her appetite for gossip at its most intricate and entrancing, sharing with me many of the deepest secrets of others in the group. I have never put these two apparently contradictory things together until just this moment and I now understand how much I likely have to regret in knowing Karen.

But let me quit being cute: I love her, and I am in awe of her work.

—Jonathan Lethem

Karen Fowler has spent the last twenty years very quietly and subversively changing the world.

With *Sarah Canary* and *The Sweetheart Season* and "What I Didn't See," she opened up the borders between SF and fantasy and mainstream fiction, and made us question the whole idea of using bookstore-shelf labels to figure out what we like. (Made some of us question. Others had flame wars and — very possibly — bar fights, arguing over what to *call* a story when they should have just been reading.)

She is one of the founding mothers of the James Tiptree Award, which not only put explorations of gender into the SF public eye, but also threw a lovely monkeywrench into the whole awards business, expanding ways to honor and appreciate people whose work we love. No nail-biting banquet. Instead, chocolate, a tiara, and a very nice check, while the impromptu Tiptree choir sings a song written just for the occasion.

The choir keeps growing.

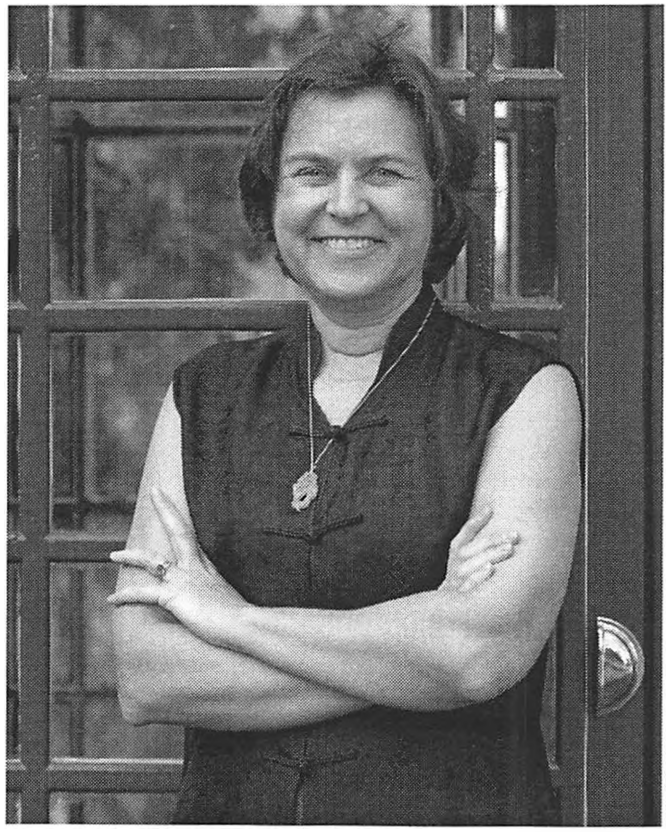
Because Karen keeps inviting people to sing. She encourages new writers to find their voices, whether as a teacher at one of the Clarions, or as a peer at Rio Hondo and Sycamore Hill.

I know. I was one of them. She believed I could be a good writer long before I did, and gave me the confidence to keep trying.

Karen Fowler changed my life.

Pay attention this weekend. She might change yours.

—Ellen Klages



She's so very smart, so off-plumb funny, and she's got this x-ray vision thing going — can look into the heart of ordinariness and see every vein of oddness, every peculiarity. And having seen what's hiding there, she writes about it so we can see it too. And she does this while seeming, herself, to be perfectly ordinary. Don't be fooled.

—Molly Gloss

Karen Joy Fowler is, simply, the best that ever was. The first time I met her was in Atlanta at a World Science Fiction Convention, and I was co-hosting the SFWA Suite. She showed up in the company of another writer, but he ceased to exist immediately. As did the din of the convention. I won't say the heavens opened up with seraphim and cherubim and angelic music. It was more like Gene Pitney singing

"Every Breath I Take." Not long after that I attended the second of John Kessel's Sycamore Hill Writing Workshops in Raleigh, NC, and who should turn up there but Karen. And who should turn out to be funny, pithy, clever, wise, compassionate, and as precise and observant a reader as she is a writer? I've been in love with her ever since and always will be. She is, as I said, just the best, and the world is a richer place because she is a part of it. Who could want it any other way?

— Gregory Frost

Karen Joy Fowler is a soft-spoken, compassionate, rigorously intelligent person whose humor can sneak up on you and ambush you with delight. She is the best anecdotalist I've ever heard; I still remember her telling a story about her children's reaction to the movie Field Of Dreams: They began to leave notes for her around the house. Perhaps a recipe for chocolate chip cookies, and a note that read, "If you bake them, we will eat." I remember her being upset because of the shoe murder in Who Framed Roger Rabbit? She is a thoughtful and perceptive critiquer, and subversive in many wonderful ways. I could listen to her talk about anything. Her presence is a gift.

— Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Karen Joy Fowler has saved my life three times over the years. I don't think I could say that about any other writer, except that Jeffrey Ford once sucked the snake venom out of my big toe during a jungle expedition. On the first occasion regarding Fowler, I was about to perform a delicate operation involving an adverb and an independent clause. The whole thing came apart in my hands and the adverb whipped around toward my neck. Fowler threw a block of wood in front of it and it attached itself harmlessly to that. The other two events are too painful to recall, but in both cases Fowler saved my life by excising needless chapters and paragraphs. I should say she didn't do this directly, but indirectly through the example of her prose, in which it might often be said that she makes the reader see the invisible by leaving out rather than putting in. I have also seen her levitate, do card tricks, and swim the Yangtze. But those are all stories for another day.

— Jeff VanderMeer

When I heard that Karen Joy Fowler had sold a novel about a Jane Austen reading group, author and subject matter were the sum total of my information on the project. But immediately, and simultaneously, I thought: 1) It's the right time for such a novel; 2) How wonderful that it was Karen who came up with the idea; 3) She doubtless did a great job with it; 4) This novel is going to be a bestseller! In all the twenty-five years I spent as a bookseller, I had never experienced this instant, absolute certainty about any forthcoming book. I proceeded to inform all my friends of my fearless forecast, which turned out to be correct — with bells on. (P.S. to all Dear Readers: If you haven't gotten round to *The Jane Austen Book Club*, among the pleasures you have not experienced is probably the most sympathetic, yet truthful, portrayal of an sf fan in mainstream, genre, or any other sort of fiction.) Congratulations, Karen!

— Kathyryn Morrow

When the old man himself invited me to join his Ernest Hemingway Book Club, I knew I'd been accorded a great honor. The protocols of the group are famous. At the first meeting we did not discuss *The Sun Also Rises*, which we'd all made a point of not reading. We played poker instead, and caught marlin, and did the dishes in each other's households. The second meeting was occasioned by our not having read *A Farewell to Arms*. We attended a bullfight, climbed Kilimanjaro, and cleaned one another's bathrooms. This is a terrific club, I told the old man at the start of our third meeting, which was not dedicated to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. I especially admire its generosity of spirit, its sardonic wit, and its acerbic assessment of men's foibles, I added. You mean it's like a Karen Joy Fowler story? the old man asked. That's it exactly, I replied, a Karen Joy Fowler story. The old man beamed with pride, gave me a bear hug, and went back to vacuuming the rug.

— James Morrow

Mr. Jinx and Miss Lucy

(Excerpt from a forthcoming novel. — ed.)

Mr. Jinx and Miss Lucy, they jumped in a lake.
I'm not that eager to make a mistake.
— Bob Dylan

One:

Those who know me now will be surprised to learn that I was a great talker as a child. We have a home movie, taken when I was two years old, pre-video, of course, so there is no soundtrack, and by now the colors have bled out — a white sky, my red shoes a ghostly pink — but you can still see how much I used to talk.

I'm doing a bit of landscaping, picking up one stone at a time from our gravel driveway, carrying it to a large tin washtub, dropping it in, and going back for the next. I'm working hard, but showily. I widen my eyes like a silent film star. I hold up a glinty stone to be admired, put it in my mouth, stuff it into one cheek. My mother appears and removes it. She steps back out of the frame, but I'm speaking emphatically now — you can see this in my gestures — and she returns, drops the stone into the tub. The whole movie lasts about seven minutes and I never stop talking.

I'm prettier as a child than I've turned out, towheaded back then and dolled up for the camera. My flyaway bangs are pasted down with water and held on one side by a rhinestone barrette shaped like a bow. Whenever I turn my head, the barrette blinks in the sunlight. My little hand sweeps over my tub of rocks. All this, I could be saying, all this will be yours someday.

Or something else entirely. The point of the movie isn't the words themselves, so much as their extravagant abundance, their inexhaustible flow.

My parents valued this, but there were still occasions on which I had to be stopped. When you think of two things to say, pick one and only say it, my mother suggested once, as a tip to polite party behavior, and the rule was later modified to one in three. My father would come to my bedroom door each night to wish me happy dreams and I would speak without taking a breath, trying desperately to keep him in my room with only my voice. I would see his hand on the doorknob, the door beginning to swing shut. I have something to say! I'd tell him, and the door would stop midway.

Start in the middle then, he'd answer, a shadow with the hall light behind him, and tired in the evenings the way only a grown-up is. The light from the hall would reflect in my bedroom window like a star about to go out.

Skip the beginning. Start in the middle.

Two:

The middle of my story comes back in the autumn of 1974. I was meandering through college then, paying little attention to the niceties of units or majors or other requirements for graduation. I had no particular ambitions beyond becoming rich, famous, and widely admired, and no major seemed to lead reliably to that.

My parents, who were still paying most of my expenses, found this aggravating. My mother was often aggravated in those days. It was something new for her, daily doses of righteous aggravation and she was as rejuvenated by it as anyone. She'd recently announced that she was through being translator and go-between for me and my father; he and I had hardly spoken since. I can't say I minded. My father was a college professor himself, and a pedant to the bone. Every exchange contained a lesson for me, none too hidden. To this day, the Socratic method makes me want to bite someone.

On my way to class one morning, I heard a large flock of Canada geese passing overhead. There was a morning mist so I was feeling polished by the wet air and maybe just a little migratory myself, just a little wild. This meant that I might flirt a bit in the library if I sat next to anyone flirtable or I might daydream during class. I often felt wild back then; I enjoyed the feeling, but nothing had ever come of it.

At lunchtime I grabbed a bite to eat in the school cafeteria. Let's say it was grilled cheese, because I often ate that on the cheap. Let's say that I left my books on the chair next to me where they could be quickly moved if someone interesting came by, but would discourage the uninteresting. At twenty-three I had the shallowest possible definition of interesting and was far from interesting myself.

A couple was sitting at the table next to me and the woman's voice gradually rose to the point where I was forced to pay attention. "You want some fucking space?" she said. She was wearing an orange sunburst t-shirt and a beaded necklace that looked homemade. Long, dark hair braided messily down her back. She stood and cleared the table with one motion of her arm. She had beautiful biceps.

Dishes clattered to the floor and broke; catsup and coffee spilled and mixed in the breakage. There might have been music in the background, Motown — Have you seen her? Tell me, have you seen her? — although background music wasn't as pervasive then and maybe there wasn't any. Maybe there was only sweet silence and the spit of grease on the grill.

"How's that?" the woman asked. "Don't tell me to be quiet. I'm just making more space for you." She pushed the table itself over, swung it to one side. "Better?" She raised her voice even louder. "Can everyone please clear the room so my boyfriend has more space? He needs a fucking lot of space." She toppled a chair into the pile of catsup and dishes.

The rest of us were frozen — forks halfway to our mouths, spoons half dipped in our soups, the way people were found after the eruption of Vesuvius.

"Don't do this, baby," the man said once, but she was doing it and he didn't bother to repeat himself. A saltshaker landed on my table, spinning its way across and then to the floor. "This is just the shit I can't take," he said. He was a big guy and dressed like a revolutionary. Blue jeans and a long black coat.

"You go ahead and tear it up, you psycho bitch. Just give me back the key to my place first."

She kicked at another chair. It fell against my table, upsetting it, and though I grabbed my glass and plate, my books hit the floor. "Come and get it," she said.

Which struck me as funny, a cook's invitation over a pile of broken plates. I laughed once, convulsively, a strange duck-like hoot that made everyone turn and then I stopped laughing because it was no laughing matter, and everyone turned back.

"Don't think I won't." He took a few steps in her direction. She scooped a handful of catsup-stained sugar cubes up from the floor and threw them.

"I'm finished," he said. "We're finished. I'm putting your shit in the hallway and I'm changing the locks." He turned for the doorway; she swung her coat so it hit him in the head. One arm wrapped around his face, then dropped lingeringly onto his shoulder. He shook it off. "You owe me for gas," he said without looking back. "Mail it." And he was gone.

The woman turned on the rest of us. "What are you losers looking at?" She picked up one of the chairs and I couldn't tell if she was going to put it back or throw it. I don't think she'd decided.

A campus policeman arrived. He approached me cautiously, hand on the hip where the gun was — me! standing above my toppled table, still holding my harmless glass of milk and my plate with the harmless half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich. "Just put it down, honey," he said, "and sit for a minute." Put it down where? Sit where? Nothing in my vicinity was upright but me. "We can talk about this. You can tell me what's going on. You're not in any trouble yet."

"Not her," the woman behind the counter told him. She was a large woman, and old — maybe forty — with a beauty mark on her upper lip and eyeliner collecting in the corners of her eyes. You all act like you own the place, she'd said to me once, on another occasion, when I sent back a burger for more cooking. But you just come and go. You don't even think how I'm the one who stays.

"The tall one," she told the cop. She pointed, but he was paying no attention, so intent on me and whatever my next move would be.

"Calm down," he said again, soft and friendly. He stepped forward, passing right by the woman with the braid and the chair. I saw her eyes behind his shoulder.

"Never a policeman when you need one," she said to me. She smiled and it was a nice smile. Big white teeth. "No rest for the wicked." She hoisted the chair over her head. "Look, ma. No hands." She launched it away from me and the cop, toward the door. It landed on its back.

When the policeman turned to look, I dropped my plate and my fork. I didn't mean to. The fingers of my left hand just unclenched all of a sudden. The noise spun the cop back to me.

I was still holding my glass, half full of milk. I raised it a little, as if I were about to propose a toast. "Don't do it," he said, a whole lot less friendly now. "Don't do it."

And I threw the glass onto the floor. It broke and splashed milk over one of my shoes and up into my sock. I didn't just let it go. I threw that glass down as hard as I could.

A Karen Joy Fowler Bibliography

A woman is laid out in the second of these chambers — a priestess or a queen in a coffin of clay. There is a necklace of gold leaves, a gold ring, and several of the colored beads she once wore in her hair have fallen into her skull. The bodies of seven other women kneel about her. There are two groomsmen and two oxen and a musician with what I imagine, when we've reconstructed the missing bits, will be a lyre.

— from Private Grave 9, 2003

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The Infernal Desire Machines of Angela Carter

by Jeff VanderMeer

I. An Introduction

Angela Carter was, without question, a 20th Century original. No matter what one thinks of her writing, no one can argue that she was ever less than unique. Magic Realism, Surrealism, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Gothic, Feminism, Postmodernism — all of these categories apply, and yet all are one-dimensional in their application to Carter; none of them, with the possible exception of Surrealism, encompass the full spectrum of her accomplishments.

Carter's maiden name was Stalker, perhaps more fitting than the surname of her first husband, which she retained as her own. The daughter of socialists, Carter grew up in South London. All of her immediate female relatives were strong women of striking candor and pragmatism. And yet, paradoxically, Carter fought to overcome teenage anorexia caused by low self-esteem.

Well-off but pro-active, Carter anguished over the closing of mines and the breaking of mining strikes in the 1960s, and over the failures of the socialist revolution in general.[1] While a student at Bristol College, Carter hung out in sidewalk cafes and at smoky backroom poetry readings. In addition to absorbing the bohemian nightlife, Carter studied psychology and anthropology. She also developed a strong liking for Rimbaud and Racine, and for French literature in general.

A devout atheist who first dabbled in poetry and journalism, she metamorphosed into one of the most original writers of the post-World War II period. Her creativity was fed by travels to Japan and Russia that greatly influenced her fiction. When she did finally come to the United States, it was almost as an afterthought, although she captured the essence of the country in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977).

Lorna Sage makes the excellent observation that Carter seems to have lived her life out of the normal order:

> Angela Carter's life — the background of social mobility, the teenage anorexia, the education and self-education, the early marriage and divorce, the role-playing and shape-shifting, the travels, the choice of a man much younger, the baby in her forties — is the story of someone walking a tightrope. It's all happening "on the edge," in no man's land, among the debris of past convictions. By the end, her life fitted her more or less like a glove, but that's because she'd put it together by trial and error, bricolage, all in the (conventionally) wrong order. Her genius and estrangement came out of a thin-skinned extremity of response to the circumstances of her life and to the signs of the times.[2]

Neither did her work ever fit, as Salman Rushdie pointed out, the definition of "moral fiction" as championed by John Gardner:

> Angela Carter was a thumber of noses, a defiler of sacred cows. She loved nothing so much as cussed — but also blithe — nonconformity. Her books unshackle us, toppling the statues of the pompous, demolishing the temples and commissariats of righteousness. They draw their strength, their vitality, from all that is unrighteous, illegitimate, low.[3]

A literary guerilla and 20th Century Bosch, Carter infused her work with humor and wonderfully profane wisdom. At the heart of her fiction lay a sturdy, non-didactic Feminism. Few writers have as successfully told stories within stories, created dense, baroque prose, and still, in the end, delivered on an emotional level. Carter's untimely death from cancer in 1992 at the age of 51 was a great loss for fiction.

II. The Early Works

Very few originals come to us from any field, whether it be the arts or the sciences. When they do, they rarely drop fully-formed from clear skies, already armed to the teeth with eccentricity and genius. They also rarely find a ready audience for their originality — they must struggle for recognition, and in this struggle, this essential opposition to status quo, more fully refine and define themselves. In a sense, the greater the opposition, the more stubborn, the tougher, such originals become ... if they truly are originals.

Carter wrote her greatest works — *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman, The Passion of New Eve, The Bloody Chamber,* and *Nights at the Circus* — in the mid-'70s to the mid-'80s: ground-breaking works that defied easy summation or analysis. But how did Carter come to write these masterpieces? What was the process of her development? She certainly did not fall out of the sky possessed of all the knowledge, all of the technique, necessary to write them. Where did it come from? How did she accumulate it? These questions are best answered by an examination of the strengths and deficiencies of Carter's early work.

The mid-'60s to mid-'70s would serve as Carter's apprenticeship to literature, for she did not leap out into the three-ring circus of the fantastic without a net. Instead, feet planted firmly on the ground, she sidled in crabwise, three of her first five novels set in a bohemian, hippyish London populated with post-Beat Generation deadbeats and described with grotesque Gothic flourishes: the counter-culture of *Shadow Dance* (1965), *Several Perceptions* (1968), and *Love* (1971). *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, has much less of this atmosphere, and *Heroes and Villains* (1969) has none.

Written while she still lived in Bristol, Carter's first novel, *Shadow Dance* (published as *Honeybuzzard* in the United States) features the malignant, magnificently bizarre *Honeybuzzard*, an amoral protagonist who has, before the novel begins, disfigured his gorgeous girlfriend and who, before the novel ends, will commit a murder. Strange events and bizarre characters are commonplace. Most reviewers dismissed Carter as an author who had "read too much Carson McCullers."[4] Puzzled, Carter would later remark, "[the novel] didn't give exactly mimetic copies of people I knew, but it was absolutely as real as the milieu I was familiar with: it was set in provincial bohemia."[5] Carter's bemusement is endearing, even comical, for she seems genuinely unaware of her knack, even early on, for the stylization of familiar elements into symbols both dark and grotesque.

Carter's second novel, *The Magic Toyshop*, chronicles 16-year-old Melanie's coming of age under the tyrannical thumb of an uncle who runs a decidedly disturbing toyshop. Melanie, her brother, and her little sister live in the country until their parents, lecturing in the United States, are killed in a plane crash, and the children must move to the less elegant digs of London's south end. There Melanie endures her Uncle Phillip's abuse, learns the secret of his toyshop, and eventually runs away with Finn, her uncle's adopted son. The novel fits comfortably within the bounds already circumscribed by other British writers (most significantly Dickens; one can almost imagine cries of "Little Melanie!" much as purveyors of penny dreadfuls cried out, "Little Nell!").

The Magic Toyshop deserves special mention among Carter's early works because many of her "signatures" are already in place, including the evil puppet maker, the grotesquery of the puppets themselves, and her ability to create quick, charming brushstrokes of characterization, such as this description of Melanie's little sister:

> Victoria had no sense of guilt. She had no sense at all. She was a round, golden pigeon who cooed. She rolled in the sun and tore butterflies into little pieces when she could catch them.

However, several elements work against the novel, the first being such inexplicable and ill-advised passages as, "... before their eyes, [Victoria's] miserable O spread out into a Happy Sambo melon-wedge grin."

Secondly, when Carter uses symbols, she more often than not either telegraphs or needlessly obscures them.

In particular, the novel's allegorical content proves its undoing. As Carter explained in an interview, "They're escaping like Adam and Eve at the end of Paradise Lost... The intention was that the toyshop itself should be a secularized Eden."[6] As allegory, the book suffers a confusion of images. If the toyshop represents Eden, what is the significance of the garden Melanie escapes from at her country home before she moves to London?

More crucially, the attempt at allegory explains *The Magic Toyshop*'s third flaw: Uncle Phillip's existence as a character so one-dimensional that his very presence undermines the novel's integrity. All the reader knows of him is his brutality and his queer puppet shows. (For one such show, he recreates Zeus-as-swan impregnating Leda/Melanie.) Otherwise, brutish Phillip remains as faceless and gray as when Melanie first meets him: "Blocking the head of the stairway on the kitchen landing was the immense, overwhelming figure of a man. The light was behind him and Melanie could not see his face."

If Uncle Phillip does represent "God the father, a ruthless and heartless man," as Carter puts it, then he is a petty, distant figure and Carter provides no insight into either the flesh-and-bones or the symbolism.

What, then, to make of *The Magic Toyshop*? Carter's portraits of Melanie and of Finn — and especially her examination of Melanie's journey into adulthood — provide numerous pleasures, and yet, the book falls short of the visionary quality that would become Carter's trademark. The book is most valuable in its role as a forerunner of Carter's later novels, in which the tapestry of plot, allegory, symbolism, characterization, and description is seamless. Here, the stitches show, and thus the story cannot succeed on multiple levels.

If these books constituted Carter's only works, she would no doubt be remembered today as a disturbing writer of Gothic psychodramas, a minor but interesting talent, along the lines of a Walter de la Mare. However, Carter reinvented herself between 1969 and 1972, a reinvention and a deeper focus brought on by a failed marriage and three years spent in Japan (the trip financed by her Somerset Maugham award for *Several Perceptions*). In Japan, she "became radicalized and realized what it meant to be a woman."[7] While there, she also met many French surrealists, who had fled their government's 1968 crackdown.

From these cultural, personal, and philosophical contacts, Carter emerged as a much different writer — more determined, more of a feminist, and a more accomplished stylist. Between 1972 and 1977, she authored *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, the uneven but seminal *Fireworks*, and the incendiary (if under-appreciated) *The Passion of New Eve*. Ironically, during this time, Carter had less commercial success than at any other time, no doubt because she'd become less accessible to the readers who had enjoyed her earlier work.

Preceding these books came *Heroes and Villains* (1969). *Heroes and Villains* may be Carter's worst book, in that, like *The Magic Toyshop*, it only half-succeeds. A fictional "laboratory" erected to discuss and critique the writings of Rousseau, *Heroes and Villains* is a didactic, post-cataclysm novel in which characters divided into Savages and Professors say things like, "You're not a human being at all, you're a metaphysical proposition." Despite the novel's failures — especially a turgid lack of narrative movement in its middle portion — it must be considered one of Carter's two pivotal works (the second being *Fireworks*), for it crossed the line between that which exists and that which does not exist.

As previously noted, Carter's other novels had been set in a contemporary London, and events occurred within them that, although often outrageous, remained within the realm of possibility. *Heroes and Villains* represented a significant break with even a semblance of reality. Although Carter would publish one more novel, *Love*, which fit comfortably into her former canon, she would rarely thereafter be bound by the

dictates of the here-and-now, and as a result her work would never again be truly Gothic. For all that she might use Gothic trappings, her style would forever after serve an entirely idiosyncratic muse.

Another way in which Carter began to branch out is through experimentation with the short form. Her first attempts at the short story (1970-1973) were captured in the collection *Fireworks*. Several of these stories achieve near-perfection and several others are unabashedly awful; but taken as a whole, the collection substantially extended Carter's range.

Fireworks achieves an uneasy balance between the personal and the profanely Other, between stories about loneliness (or the art of being alone) and stories about the impenetrable nature of individuals not ourselves. "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter" and "The Loves of Lady Purple" are classic Carter in the vein readers would come to expect: postmodern tales in exotic settings, stylized and remote. The distinction between the tale — often based on myth or legend, stylized, and featuring intentionally "flat" characters — and the short story — which is often more realistic, three-dimensional, and psychologically complete — is very important. Throughout Carter's career, she would straddle the boundary between "story" and "tale," thus helping to redefine both.

A good example of the folklorish nature of the tale is "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter," which was, by Carter's own admission, "the first serious short story I ever wrote," the result of "a bet I made with someone I met in a cafe who said that fiction has to be kinetic, it has to move. I thought it was nonsense to say anything so categorical about art."[8] "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter" concerns not only incest but also the stoppage of time, for indeed nothing happens in the story's real-time. The setting — a baleful, almost Mongolian highlands — becomes a character in and of itself, but a stagnant character, for this is a people and a place that do not change, "the air choked all day with diffuse moisture tremulously, endlessly on the point of becoming rain." The very fact that nothing happens — that the "plot" revolves around the frozen scene of the executioner about to behead his son for committing incest with his daughter — adds to a sense of menace, a coiled tension: the reader is a voyeur, spying on an alien culture and time. The movement in the story is derived from character development and has a stationary quality quite unnerving for a flashback. The performers are no less alien by story's end, but the reader understands the logic behind the culture that created them. Elements of the story may well have been influenced by Carter's introduction to Japanese comics, the series of stills "unfolding only in the personal time of the reader" and thus achieving a state of "continuous static convulsion."[9]

"The Loves of Lady Purple," reprinted in anthologies with some frequency, revisits the fascination with puppetry Carter first displayed in *The Magic Toyshop*, although here, in compressed form, to heightened symbolic effect. The story's sweeping aside of the mystique to reveal the wires and machinations behind the puppetry also reveals Carter's life-long fascination with surface appearances and their symbolic underpinnings. "The Loves of Lady Purple" succeeds not because of the fantasy element but because it deals with the invention of masks, with the way men try to re-invent women in order to control them. Thus, the tale the puppeteer tells his audience about The Lady Purple becomes reality, and the reality devours the puppeteer.

Although the previous two stories are certainly important, the strength of the collection lies in three stories which serve as a trilogy of transition, loss, and isolation — "A Souvenir of Japan," "Flesh and the Mirror," and "The Smile of Winter." All three were written in Japan, are set in Japan, and were put down on paper bare months after Carter's divorce from her first husband. Taken as three variations on a theme, of similar mood and subject matter, they form a personal chronicle that approaches autobiography. Never again would Carter commit such a personal account to fiction, certainly not in a manner that would so perfectly mirror her own situation at a particular time: a female, first person narrator coping with loss, with the ironies and inequalities of relationships.

"A Souvenir of Japan" describes a British woman's affair with a Japanese man whose name is Taro, after the Kabuki story of Mamo-taro, "who was born from a peach." Taro too "had the inhuman sweetness of a child born from something other than a mother, a passive, cruel sweetness I did not immediately understand, for it was that of the repressed masochism which, in my country, is usually confined to women ..."

The story, in its evocation of culture clash — between men and women even more than between Japan and England — is deadly. The narrator must objectify her lover before he can objectify her, so as not to lose her own sense of self: "I knew him only in relation to myself," "At times I thought I was inventing him as I went along," "... it is, perhaps, a better thing to be valued only as an object of passion than never to be valued at all." And here she frames the crucial and enervating core of many relationships: that women accept their status as objects in return for their mates' passionate attention, the man's appreciation of the woman as a body which gives him pleasure.

Carter's description of the unabashedly male-dominated Japanese culture ("In the department store there was a rack of dresses labeled 'For young and cute girls only.'") serves as a devastating backdrop to a discussion of a relationship rather than a plotted story in the conventional sense. Nonetheless, Carter manages to drive home such disaffected rage, passion, and sadness that the last lines have the power to reverberate throughout the rest of the collection:

> ... soon we would learn to treat one another with the circumspect tenderness of comrades who are amputees, for we were surrounded by the most moving images of evanescence, fire works, morning glories, the old, children. But the most moving of these images were the intangible reflections of ourselves we saw in one another's eyes, reflections of nothing but appearances, in a city dedicated to seeming, and, try as we might to possess the essence of each other's otherness, we would inevitably fail.

Such stylization, accomplished as much through choice of elements as through the style itself, makes the story a compressed gem. This, Carter's first overtly feminist work, is not a firework for it does not explode; rather, internalized, it implodes.

"Flesh and the Mirror" continues in much the same vein: appearances versus reality, and how appearances can become reality. Alone in Tokyo, her boyfriend absent from the airport when she arrives back from England, the narrator wanders the streets waif-like: "... when I was an intolerable adolescent, I learned to sit with my coat collar turned up in a lonely way, so that people would talk to me." She cannot drop the "predatory habit." She searches for her boyfriend, who has obviously abandoned her, and ponders the sleepwalking dream she has called her life: "There I was, walking up and down, eating meals, having conversations, in love, indifferent, and so on. But all the time I was pulling the strings of my own puppet; it was this puppet who was moving about on the other side of the glass." Distraught, she picks up a stranger and has sex with him in a hotel with mirrors on the ceiling. In these mirrors, she sees herself for the first time in motion, even if it is the meaningless repetition of sexual congress, with a stranger. The mirror is merciless, for it shows her the real condition of her life.

When she finds her boyfriend the next day, they quarrel and she tries to pretend she still loves him, tries to "pull her own strings." She ignores his angry words because they do not fit her image of him, nor of them in love:

> In order to create the loved object in this way and to issue it with its certificate of authentication, as beloved, I had also to labor at the idea of myself in love. I watched myself for the signs and, precisely on cue, here they were! Longing, desire, self-abnegation, etc.

As in "Souvenirs of Japan," the woman struggles for control of her own image, but in "Flesh and the Mirror" the struggle is entirely internal, and perhaps more deadly because of it. The narrator of "Flesh and the Mirror" has yet to externalize the implications of her own internal struggle.

"The Smile of Winter" provides an aftermath to "Souvenirs of Japan" and "Flesh and the Mirror": the female narrator has shed her lover and, although still melancholy, has achieved an aura of strength. "Smile" is a more subtle treatise on being alone and recovering from loss. The reader never learns any details about the extent or nature of such loss, but instead gleans clues through the narrator's description of her surroundings on a Japanese beach: "Because there are no seagulls here, the only sound is the resonance of the sea" and "The old houses in the village are each one dedicated to seclusion and count on individual sequestered sadness." The proliferation of images of isolation and desolation evokes an atmosphere of sadness both undermined and strengthened by the narrator's self-conscious recognition of her own condition: "I have read about all the abandoned lovers in their old books eating their hearts out like Mariana in so many moated granges."

The story ends on a note of solitary defiance: "Do not think I do not realize what I am doing." The images that crowd the last few pages mock her own transitory condition. The natural world knows nothing of loneliness and, ultimately, the concrete images with which the narrator weaves her smile of winter are indifferent to her and her plight. This indifference mocks the narrator, mocks the sadness, for she will become indifferent to her own loneliness, and thus escape it.

These three stories mark a definite transition in Carter's work. Where before she was content to show the interplay of men and women in relationships, now she becomes more assertive, more passionate in her own definition of herself as a woman. In *Shadow Dance*, all of the women are victims. The female protagonist of *The Magic Toyshop* is acted upon by the men in the book and finds safety on her boyfriend's terms. *Love*'s heroine is fought over by two men, who reduce their lover to an object. However, following *Fireworks*, especially in *The Passion of New Eve*, *The Bloody Chamber* and *Nights at the Circus*, female characters deal with male counterparts on their own terms, as true equals or superiors, empowered, unafraid, and courageous. This awakening, in terms of a literary chronology, can be traced back to these three very personal stories in *Fireworks*. In them, the reader discovers a writer waking up, a writer struggling to assimilate a foreign culture and a foreign sex, and in the cross-hatching of the two, finding her own bearings as a woman and as a political entity.

Of the remaining stories in *Fireworks*, only "Elegy for a Freelance," a return to her bohemian roots, and no doubt inspired by the 1968 student riots in France, is of interest. "Master" is a competently-told South American tale, but suffers in comparison to work by Gabriel García Márquez or Mario Vargas Llosa. Stories like "Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest" and "Reflections" are abstract and formless, and so fail; the former an awful attempt to recreate a tale of the Fall, and the latter perhaps an attempt to fictionalize some of Breton's weaker theories of the supernatural.

However, Carter would rarely hit a false note again, even as she expanded her oeuvre to include Surrealism and Fairy Tales. Carter had always possessed a gift for controlled grotesquery, stylistic flourish, and thematic elegance. She could have remained a quite good, even excellent, Gothic Revival novelist, disturbing and accomplished, but instead chose to evolve into something quite different: an original voice meshed to original subject matter, with the intellect and instincts to become a novelist of the first rank. As Brian Stableford put it at the time:

> ... it is only in her most recent work that a general concern with the existential predicaments of the modern era has been narrowed down to a concentration on the politics of sexual relationships. This narrowing down has given her more recent stories both intimacy and intensity, and has saved her from the remote detachment which characterizes certain other writers who have followed similar lines of development from mild surrealism to wholesale fabulation.[10]

III. The Master Works

The mid-'70s to the mid-'80s would prove Angela Carter's most ambitious and successful creative period, in part because of her ability to use for her own purposes two different literary traditions. *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* represent the culmination of her experimentation with Surrealism, while *The*

Bloody Chamber and *Nights at the Circus* successfully assimilate aspects of myth and folklore.

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman

While certain elements of the Gothic and Magic Realism traditions can be found in *The Infernal Desire Machines* and *The Passion of New Eve*, these aspects are subservient to the overwhelmingly surreal aspects of these books. "Gothic" defines only a type of description when discussing these works, and "Magic Realism," much more "reader-friendly" than surrealism, does not do justice to the intellectual rigor and background of the writing. Magic Realism is very much an ism of emotion and the mystical, usually manifested through unusual events that occur within a realistic setting. But despite the passion of her tales, Carter also displays a hardy intellectualism and a propensity for treating the fictional form as sociology and satire that hardly fits within the narrower confines of Magic Realism. Perhaps Carter's work represents that brand of literature with which surrealists sought to replace the gothic, the "new collective myth appropriate for our era."[11]

There is no doubt that the Surrealist movement interested and captured Carter, as she commented on in her 1978 essay "The Alchemy of the Word":

> Surrealist beauty is convulsive. That is, you feel it, you don't see it — it exists as an excitation of the nerves. The experience of the beautiful is, like the experience of desire, an abandonment to vertigo, yet the beautiful does not exist as such. What do exist are images or objects that are enigmatic, marvelously erotic — or juxtapositions of objects, or people, or ideas, that arbitrarily extend our notion of the connections it is possible to make. In a way, the beautiful is put at the service of liberty.[12]

Later in the same essay, she writes:

> ... although I thought [the surrealists] were wonderful, I had to give them up in the end. They were, with a few patronized exceptions, all men and they told me that I was the source of all mystery, beauty, and otherness, because I was a woman — and I knew that was not true. I knew I wanted my fair share of the imagination, too. Not an excessive amount, mind; I wasn't greedy. Just an equal share in the right to vision.[13]

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman not only exercised her "equal share in the right to vision," it went a step beyond and may well be the finest surrealist novel of the past 30 years. It perfectly captures the ideas and ideals of surrealist beauty.

Infernal Desire Machines pits the Minister of Determination, de facto ruler of an anonymous South American city, against Dr. Hoffman, a professor of metaphysics who has besieged the city with the "forces of unreason." Dr. Hoffman recalls the gleefully anarchic Breton, founder of the surrealist movement. The "hero" of the piece is one Desiderio, a half-breed who serves the Minister. Desiderio describes the Minister as "not a man but a theorem, clear, hard, unified and harmonious. I admired him. He reminded me of a string quartet." A man of calm and reason, Desiderio becomes the Minister's prime agent against the good doctor because he is one of the few people unaffected by the onslaught of unreason: "I knew some things were necessarily impossible. I did not believe it when I saw the ghost of my dead mother clutching her rosary." Nor does he believe when agents of Dr. Hoffman change the name plate on his door to the names of his heroes, "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart" and "Andrew Marvel."

The nature of the conflict becomes clear when the Minister and Desiderio meet with an ambassador for Dr. Hoffman. This effeminate man — of whom Desiderio notes, "The skin of the Ambassador's throat was so luminously delicate one could see the glowing shadow of the burgundy trickle down his gullet after he had taken a sip" — is actually the good doctor's daughter, Albertina, with whom Desiderio will eventually fall in love. Desiderio records the proceedings, which eventually devolve into recriminations by the Minister over issues such as roads turned suddenly mutinous:

> Minister: But ought the roads to rule the city?
>
> Ambassador: Don't you think we should give them a crack at the whip now and then? Poor things, forever oriented by the insensitive feet of those who trample them. Time and space have their own properties, Minister, and these, perhaps, have more value than you customarily allow them. Time and space are the very guts of nature and so, naturally, they undulate in the manner of intestines.
>
> Minister: I see you make a habit of analogies.
>
> Ambassador: An analogy is a signpost..
>
> Minister: You have taken away all the signposts.
>
> Ambassador: But we have populated the city with analogies.
>
> Minister: I should dearly like to know the reason why.
>
> Ambassador: For the sake of liberty, Minister.
>
> Minister: What an exceedingly pretty notion!

"For the sake of liberty" rather closely echoes Carter's statement of "beauty in the service of liberty," and indeed Dr. Hoffman's assault seems philosophically aligned with this ideal. It also mirrors one of Breton's most famous definitions of surrealism:

> I hope that it stands as having tried nothing better than laying down a conductor between the far too separated worlds of waking and sleeping, of exterior and interior reality, of reason and madness, of the calm of knowledge and of love, of life for life and the revolution, etc.[14]

At the height of the siege, the city in flux knows no separation of the "worlds of waking and sleeping" and becomes a literal madhouse of metaphors and similes made flesh:

> Dead children came calling in nightgowns, rubbing the sleep and grave dust from their eyes... pigeons lolloped from illusory pediment to window ledges like volatile, feathered madmen, chattering vile rhymes and laughing in hoarse, throaty voices, or perched upon chimney stacks shouting quotations from Hegel... I often glanced at my watch only to find its hands had been replaced by a healthy growth of ivy or honeysuckle which while I looked, writhed impudently all over its face, concealing it.

Playfulness alone makes such passages a delight, although Carter's purpose is not merely to provide entertaining surreal set pieces, but to describe what a surrealistic revolution might be like, for as Breton was fond of saying, "Man must be in permanent revolt against limits of all kinds... [to] transform the world."[15] What is Dr. Hoffman's war but the ultimate surrealist revolution? To overthrow the bourgeois, to undermine the traditional and the mundane? As George Hay put it in his *Foundation* review of the book, "[This novel] is a demonstration of metaphysics, as distinct from being about metaphysics."[16]

Soon the ravages of Dr. Hoffman's "shock troops of the irreal" take their toll, and to preserve the city, Desiderio agrees to accept an undercover mission from the Minister — to find and kill Dr. Hoffman. Desiderio poses as an Inspector of Veracity and travels to the seaside resort of S, there to investigate the "proprietor of a certain peep show who had operated his business upon the pier throughout the summer." This proprietor taught Dr. Hoffman physics at one time and the Minister believes that through him Desiderio can find Dr. Hoffman. The proprietor's exhibits include "Exhibit One: I HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE."

> The legs of a woman, raised and open as if ready to admit a lover, formed a curvilinear triumphal arch. The feet were decorated with spike-heeled, black leather pumps. This anatomical section, composed of pinkish wax dimpled at the knee, did not admit the possibility of the existence of a torso. A bristling pubic growth rose to form a kind of coat of arms above the circular proscenium it contained at either side but, although the hairs had been inserted one by one in order to achieve the maximal degree of verisimilitude, the overall effect was one of stunning artifice. The dark red and purple crenellations surrounding the vagina acted as a frame for a perfectly round hole through which the viewer glimpsed the moist, luxuriant landscape of the interior.

An elaborate and clever bit of writing on Carter's part, for not only does the exhibit display the same monstrously erotic qualities of a Dali painting, but it also serves as functional foreshadowing and symbolism. The scene within the "perfectly round hole" contains a far away castle that is very obviously the castle of Dr. Hoffman, as Desiderio discovers by the end of the novel. Furthermore, Desiderio will find this castle only through his desire for that "effeminate man" who is really a woman, Albertina. Carter's bawdy sense of humor delights in making this symbolic gateway a vagina.

After Desiderio's encounter with the proprietor and his exhibits, the novel opens up into a series of surrealist experiments/adventures that serve to test the protagonist's state of mind. Desiderio plods mundanely through this fevered landscape without an appreciable sense of wonder to encompass and understand it, despite a strong emotional commitment to Albertina. The vagueness of Desiderio's past actually plays to the novel's advantage — in keeping with the surrealistic contention that only the current state of mind, perception and reaction, is significant.

Carter's imagination had never before worked at such a fever pitch, sustained without effort for the entire novel, and her control of language startles with its opulent clarity. The episodic journey shines with pearls of symbolism and satire — for example, the Swiftian centaurs and the subsequent examination of sexual mores, not to mention her manipulation of the Erotic in a chapter entitled "The Acrobats of Desire." Her earlier plots, unwieldy and clunky at times, give way to a seamless series of episodes that lead to a satisfying climax, either because the "quest" form provides her with a ready-made structure, or because of her growing sophistication.

When Desiderio finally manages to restore reality by destroying Dr. Hoffman, and with him Albertina, Carter speaks through him in regret for the fall of the imagination:

> ... I am so old and sad now, and, without her, condemned to live in a drab, colourless world, as though I were living in a faded daguerreotype. Therefore — I, Desiderio, dedicate all my memories to Albertina Hoffman with my insatiable tears.

Reviewers seemed to think that because Desiderio chose reality, this meant that Carter had, ultimately, rejected and refuted chaos, irreality, and surrealism. Nothing could be less true, as her next fiction would prove.

The Passion of New Eve

If there has been a neglected Carter masterpiece, that book would have to be *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). This novel marks the culmination of her Surrealist period, with the folklore/fairy tale-influenced *The Bloody Chamber* to follow in 1979. However, with the exception of the early (1968) novel *Several Perceptions*, Passion is Carter's most overlooked novel.

Compared to *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, *The Passion of New Eve* is a crude, ugly book, by measures erudite and pompous, angry and profane. The plot has a streamlined single-mindedness dedicated in part to feminist satirizing of the image of the United States promulgated through its movies, the most obvious and potent of the tactics employed by the agents of cultural/gender imperialism.

Evelyn, an Englishman, who has been offered a job teaching in New York, arrives only to find that the country has gone belly-up. Harlem is a walled city defended by African American extremists, tanks rumble down streets of broken glass, and radical feminists fight it out with the National Guard. The level of breakdown described by Carter is only a few steps beyond the Los Angeles riots and the call for the Guard to patrol

Washington, D.C.; it is, however, leavened by black humor, especially as regards the feminists:

> They blew up wedding shops and scoured the newspapers for marriage announcements so that they could send brides gifts of well-honed razors... there were rumors of a kamikaze squad of syphilitic whores who donated spirochetal enlightenment for free to their customers out of dedication to the cause.

Evelyn soon finds that his university position has been liquidated and, penniless, he takes up with Leilah, a black woman whom he uses as sex partner. Despite their relationship, he develops no emotional attachment to her; which is hardly unusual for Evelyn, who rarely sees women as anything other than disposable sex toys. He soon impregnates Leilah and forces her to have a disastrous abortion that nearly kills her. With the benefit of hindsight, he muses:

> She was a perfect woman; like the moon, she only gave reflected light. She had mimicked me, she had become the thing I wanted of her, so that she could make me love her and yet she had mimicked me so well she had also mimicked the fatal flaw in me that meant I was not able to love her because I myself was so unlovable.

Carter isn't after subtlety or surprise. Passion functions as a sledgehammer, with many secondary agendas and one primary purpose: to expose the inequalities imposed on women by men and, in the laboratory created by the author's imagination, to bring into conflict those elements that will best serve her purpose. If it is propaganda, so be it, but it is transcendent propaganda.

Fleeing his own cruelty, Evelyn wanders into the desert. He is soon captured by a cult of Amazonian-type women and brought to their underground laboratories. There, Evelyn meets the leader, Mother, a former plastic surgeon and geneticist who has made herself into an amalgamation of all the mother goddesses ever given life by worship, fashioning eight breasts for herself. She admonishes Evelyn like a character from Milton's Paradise Lost: "And you've abused women, Evelyn, with this delicate instrument that should have been used for nothing but pleasure. You've made a weapon of it!" Mother rapes Evelyn and reveals her plan to surgically transform him into a woman, and then impregnate this new Eve with his own sperm, that he might escape the source of his corruption and bring forth "the Messiah of the Antithesis." In a brutally ironic scene, Evelyn protests this punishment to one of his women captors, only to be asked, "Is it such a bad thing to be like me?"

Mother completes the transformation, but before the new Eve can be inseminated with his/her own semen, "she" escapes into the desert, where the blind poet Zero captures her. Zero has become a deity in his own right, a cruel Cronos rather than a Zeus, having acquired a harem-cult of seven worshipful women. He repeatedly rapes Eve, thus initiating her into her new womanhood. Zero embodies male machismo and, from his name alone, the reader can guess what Carter thinks of male machismo. Zero may be two-dimensional in his brutality, but Carter isn't writing realism; she is reworking the myths of the United States with frank and obvious symbolism. The symbols in *Passion* are in-the-flesh symbols as Carter creates human deities with all the tragic stupidities and larger-than-life attributes of Greek gods.

Through Zero's rough ministrations, Eve truly learns her role, for "... although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations."

Zero's sole ambition, his sole passion, is to find the reclusive former film icon Tristessa, long retired and living in seclusion in Arizona. By coincidence — and there are many coincidences in *Passion of New Eve*, perhaps the only element that threatens the novel's integrity — Tristessa has long been Eve/Evelyn's great mythological love; s/he has suffered with Tristessa through many a tragic movie. In fact, Tristessa has given her a blueprint for womanhood — starring in tear-jerker after tear-jerker, playing lepers and widows and any number of emotionally or physically crippled women in the manner of the most masochistic of romantics. (She also played George Sand at one point in her career, but as Eve recounts, this was a "mistake.")

Harem in tow, Zero discovers Tristessa's glass mansion and, finally, Tristessa herself. In Tristessa, Eve sees a certain barren beauty, a beauty that has no interconnectedness with the other, but only with itself:

> Tall, pale, attenuated enigma, your face an invitation to necrophilia, face of an angel upon a tombstone, a face that will haunt me forever, a face dominated by hooded eyes whose tears were distillations of the sorrows of the world, eyes that delighted and appalled me since, in their luminous and perplexed depths, I saw all the desolation of America, or of more than that — of all estrangement, our loneliness, our abandonment.

This is the beauty of an archetype that, coiled and concentrated, takes on all the symbolism of sorrow, for Tristessa portrayals represent universal, and thus mythic, suffering.

Zero strips Tristessa naked only to find "the rude, red-purple insignia of maleness" beneath his skirts. Carter drives home her point with deadly skill:

> That was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world.

But beauty is an ephemeral and highly subjective quality. The beauty that men most desire, Carter tells us, is of the female as dependent, as masochist submitting to the male's will; that what men find sexy is their domination of women. Tristessa may have made himself beautiful in the flesh, but it is the tenor and type of roles taken that have established him as

a film icon, as the world's "most beautiful woman." The forty pages that describe the assault on Tristessa's mansion contain a finely-tuned satire of Hollywood and of male-female stereotypes.

After various adventures, Eve, alone, travels to the coast, where she finds Leilah. Leilah, who works for Mother now, and who may always have worked for Mother, brings Eve to a cave; inside, she says, is Mother. Thus begins Eve's penultimate journey: as she descends into the cave, it becomes a womb and time flows backwards, so that "... the foal leaps back into its mother's womb; the gravid mare sniffs the air, which smells of entropy, and takes fright, trots briskly back down the sinuous by-ways of evolution." Finally, Eve is expelled back onto the beach.

Leilah, renamed Lilith, waits on the beach and offers Eve Evelyn's old genitals, which have been preserved in ice. Eve "bursts out laughing" and shakes her head. Having transcended the male-based mythologies of the world and her own woman-hating past, Eve, as the novel ends, commandeers a boat and heads out to sea in search of a new Eden.

The Passion of New Eve makes complex demands on the reader, the pages aflame with dangerous ideas and fantastical images. The book requires readers to question the nature of current male-female relationships and gender roles; it requires that they have a thorough understanding of the implications of masochism and the myths of the silver screen; it also assumes an all-encompassing knowledge of world mythology to recognize the intentionally-obvious symbolism.

The grotesqueries of this Greek drama-meets-Candide-meets-Orlando should not work, should be reduced to silliness and thunder. The book is disjointed, awkward, verbose, and relies too much on coincidence. The technology of the women's laboratory is crudely and ridiculously soldered onto the old west of Zero's farm and then appended to the suave decadence of Tristessa's mansion, and finally to the civil war in California. Only Carter could, by the tenacity of her imagination and drive, hold this macrocosm of bastard throw-aways together so that it becomes something more than the sum of its parts: a chemical, rather than physical, reaction. The mixture of mythology and science together with the bleak and barren landscapes, the evocations of the Mother Goddess, inhabit a land where J.G. Ballard and Joanna Russ collide, and presage both the myth-science of Ian MacDonald's *Out on Blue Six* and the surreal America on display in the visionary novels of Steve Erickson.

If anything, *Passion* has more relevance today than when it was written, but, unfortunately, only critics of science fiction have attempted a serious exploration of the novel. Readers were put off by the blatant feminism while mainstream reviewers misread the intent and focused almost exclusively on the lack of subtlety in the symbolism. In addition, Paddy Beesley, writing in *New Statesman* criticized what he deemed "court silliness" [17], while Peter Ackroyd in *The Spectator* deplored language he believed was so "grandiose and verbose it can only transmit fantasies and visions — and no novel can survive for long on such a meagre diet."[18] Today, the book remains criminally neglected; a pity because *Passion* marks the very limits of Carter's vision. None of her later works could quite recapture the white hot energy of *Passion*.

Luckily, and to Carter's credit, retrenchment in her case would add further depth and humor to her work.

The Bloody Chamber

This retrenchment marks the second reinvention in Carter's career, a reinvention that would follow a path through the tangled knots of folklore, a bastard genre that must have appealed to her sense of the low and the illegitimate.

Carter's next project, the short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), unrepentently sensual and feminist, rewrote, updated, and expanded the fairy tales of Western Europe. Unlike *Fireworks*, *The Bloody Chamber* does not derive its strength from semi-autobiographical elements, but from Carter's evocative use of archetypes to recreate original stories. These tales, for better or worse, firmly engrained themselves on the public and critical imagination. The collection won the Cheltenham Festival Award and would prove to be her most popular, exciting interest in the previously oblivious United States. Eventually, it would inspire the Neil Jordan film The Company of Wolves, perhaps the only intelligent werewolf movie ever made. On the strength of *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter would lecture at many United States universities, teaching at Brown University from 1980 to 1981.

Certainly the use of language in *The Bloody Chamber* is brilliant, and the thickness, the density, of the prose plays well against unexpectedly subtle, understated endings; but the goals seem less grand, success achieved at a lower plateau than, for example, *The Infernal Desire Machines*. For her part, Carter disavowed any intent to create "Feminist fairy tales," "adult fairy tales," or "versions," despite reviewers attempts to label the collection those terms:

> My intention was not to do "versions" or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, "adult" fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories. The stories could not have existed the way they are without Isak Dinesen, Djuna Barnes and Jane Bowles — especially Isak Dinesen, because in a way they are imitation nineteenth-century stories, like hers.[19]

Carter's invocation of Dinesen et al. speaks volumes regarding her irritation at the simplicity of the critical response. However, this time the critical response had equal validity. Careful readers can see the influence of Dinesen in the style, and many of the stories succeed in spite of their fairy tale origins, but readers will invariably compare and contrast these tales — the basic plots — to the folklore on which Carter based them. Whether introduced to Little Red Riding Hood through Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, or a Disney cartoon, almost every potential reader of *The Bloody Chamber* was already familiar with the basic tales. Such tales, once engrained in the popular culture, can never be truly new; at best all any writer can do is renovate them so that they regain some of their original vigor and intensity.

Carter's specific achievements — aside from her literary success — are to update, twist, and de-bowdlerize the classic

fairy tales. By definition of twentieth-century literature and Carter personally, such a salvage job must include redefinition through feminism or strong female characters. Until Perrault and, later, the Brothers Grimm took these tales out of the oral tradition, they had been largely rural and matriarchal in vision and conception. Perrault, a contemporary of nobility at Versailles in the 1600s, first codified most of the tales Carter uses as the foundations for her own pieces, and his versions added morals already explicitly laid out in the fairy tales themselves.[20] The Brothers Grimm, in the early 1800s, preserved many oral traditions that might otherwise have floundered or disappeared entirely, but at the expense of sacrificing the matriarchal content of such tales. In this context, Carter's reinventions restore to the tales the original attitude and point of view while adding the more sophisticated elements of the modern psychological short story. Like Perrault, however, Carter has also included a coda: Beware of men, beware of becoming subservient to men. For example, in the two versions of Little Red Riding Hood, men are cast as sexual predators — "the worst wolves are hairy on the inside" — a role well in keeping with Perrault's version but, in this case at least, far removed from the actual origins of the tale: a literal warning against going out into the woods at night.

What most intrigues the reader about *The Bloody Chamber* is the number of versions or spin-offs of various tales: "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride," both variants on the Beauty and the Beast tale first codified by Madame Le-Prince de Beaumont in 1757, and "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves," both variants on the Little Red Riding Hood tale (with the collection-ending "Wolf-Alice" peripherally connected to "red cap" as well).[21] While the other stories in the collection entertain, they do little more than provide a new gloss on old material. The title story is probably among the most textually complex takes on Bluebeard, but to what effect? Nothing comes of it because, unlike the other stories, it adds nothing new to the original except a rather weak and coincidental rescue for the heroine by her mother.

Not so "The Tiger's Bride," a riff on both the Beauty and the Beast story and the animal groom cycle in general. In fairy tale parlance, the animal groom cycle represents the highest level of sexuality and love. As Bruno Bettelheim explains in *The Uses of Enchantment*, "... the oedipal love of Beauty for her father, when transferred to her future husband, is wonderfully healing."[22] However, whereas in most of these tales the beast transforms through the love of a woman into a man, usually a prince, Carter, wonderfully perverse as usual, reverses the structure. Here the beast hides behind the mask of man: "... only from a distance would you think The Beast not much different from any other man, although he wears a mask with a man's face painted most beautifully on it."

The narrator is the virginal daughter of a wealthy merchant. Her father soon loses her to The Beast by playing cards in Italy, where "the deathly, sensual lethargy of the sweet South infects the starved brain." The daughter may be virginal and still struggling to define herself, but she is no fool: "You must not think my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but, at no more than a king's ransom."

She is led to her rooms in The Beast's palazzo, where she is told by his valet that if she will only reveal herself naked to The Beast, she will be restored to her father. As she ponders this offer, she recalls the tales told to her by her nurse about the tiger-man who "if this young lady was not a good little girl... would put on his big black traveling cloak lined with fur, just like your daddy's... and ride through the night straight to the nursery and — Yes, my beauty! GOBBLE YOU UP!" The recitation of an oral tradition for the tale is a nice touch, com-

ing as it does within the larger frame of a written version; it also advances the plot by enumerating the narrator's anxieties.

At first, she refuses The Beast and stays in her room, attended to by a mechanical maid of which she notes, "and, if she did not see me... peel down to the cold, white meat of contract... then so much more like the market place, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence." And, later, "I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason." These are the strongest statements on the subject of women's objectification and, yet, no matter how repugnant that objectification, it does signify attention.

In the end, Beauty has the choice of being alone and of remaining sexually repressed, or of meeting The Beast on her own terms, of taming him, and of loving him. Thus, she becomes a beast — becomes real, no longer artificial, no longer the double of the artificial woman. A very relevant question: Has she given up her autonomy? Or made the best of a bad situation? Is she now a slave to the beast? No, for The Beast, posing as man, is a sexual predator, but revealed as beast is no longer predator, but pussycat: "... a tremendous throbbing, as of the engine that makes the earth turn, filled the little room; he had begun to purr." The Beast comes to her and begins to lick her: "Each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after suc-

cessive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs... my beautiful fur." Once they both cast off the constraints society puts upon them — for The Beast is as much outcast as Beauty ("... all the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with the flimsy, insubstantial things [called souls] when the good Lord opened the gates of Eden and let Eve and her familiars tumble out.") — her fears abandon her along with her repression.

More complex are the two (were)wolf stories based on the Little Red Riding Hood tale, for if "The Tiger's Bride" forms the collection's beating heart, the "red cap" stories constitute its soul. The "red cap" tale has a long history, from the Greek myth of Cronos eating his children only to have them miraculously escape from his belly, to a Latin story from 1023 by Egbert of Lieges called *Fecunda Ratis*, in which a girl is found in the company of wolves. Perrault's serves as strictly cautionary ("Don't talk to strangers") and ends with Red Riding Hood dead in the belly of the wolf. The wolf is an obvious metaphor for the sexual predator, and cannot be believed as a wolf "hairy on the outside." Thus Perrault's version cannot function on the subconscious levels that Bettelheim claims distinguish a fairy tale from other folklore. A genuine fairy tale must work on a non-allegorical level first and must have a happy resolution, in order to achieve therapeutic catharsis in the reader.[23]

The Brothers Grimm version is more widely known: a hunter comes along and cuts open the wolf's belly while it sleeps, freeing Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. The wolf then dies from the stones Red suggests the hunter put into his stomach before he sews it back up.[24] Bettelheim much prefers the Grimm version because it fits with his interpretation of the red riding hood fairy tale, specifically, "crucial problems the school-age girl has to solve if oedipal attachments linger on in the subconscious, which may drive her to expose herself dangerously to the possibility of seduction."[25] The hunter represents the good, fatherly side of men and the wolf the "dangerous seducer." When Red Riding Hood is cut out of the wolf's belly by the hunter, and then suggests the method of the wolf's demise, she has transcended her oedipal anxieties.[26]

In a typical feat of compression, Carter manages to combine the Perrault and Grimm versions and also to combine the hunter/wolf into one motif while also adding a sense of the culture that gave birth to the oral tradition. Perhaps her most brilliant compression is that of combining hunter and wolf by means of the werewolf. Thus, the "hairy on the inside" wolves are symbolically complete people: Red Riding Hood can repudiate the werewolf (wolf) and embrace the werewolf (hunter) — dealing with her repression of sexuality, her fear of it — both at the same time.

Carter's pacing and sense of context have never worked to better effect. Using a stunning array of authentic details, she slowly establishes the culture of the oral tradition and intertwines it with the legend of the werewolf. Only then does she send Red Riding Hood on her way. In the first story, "The Werewolf," Red Riding Hood finds that the werewolf is actually her grandmother and kills her, thus setting herself free from repression by killing that which would hold her back. The second, and more complex story, "The Company of Wolves," begins with a wonderful description of wolves, making them so real that any metaphor is truly secondary, unlike Perrault's version:

> One beast and only one howls in the woods by night. The wolf is carnivore incarnate and he's as cunning as he is ferocious; once he's had a taste of flesh then nothing else will do... if a wolf's eyes reflect only moonlight, then they gleam a cold and unnatural green, a mineral, a piercing color. If the benighted traveller spies those luminous, terrible sequins stitched suddenly on the black thickets, then he knows he must run, if fear has not struck him stock-still.

Red Riding Hood in this story is the youngest of the family and has just begun her "woman's bleeding, the clock within her that will strike, henceforward, once a month." She is "an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel... she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing." She meets a young man in the woods who bets her he can reach her grandmother's house by a short cut before she can reach it by the trodden path. And if he wins? "A kiss. Commonplaces of a rustic seduction."

The man is a werewolf, and upon reaching the house he devours the grandmother. He waits for Red Riding Hood with eyes "the size of saucers, saucers full of Greek fire, diabolic phosphorescence." When she enters the house, the werewolf doffs his grandmotherly disguise and bars the door. At first afraid, she is a wise child and "since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid."

What big teeth you have, she says.

All the better to eat you with, he replies.

"The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat."

By mastering her fear, the girl overcomes the werewolf, who feeds upon her fear. Thus overcome, he is no longer fearsome, but merely twinned to her in the triumph of libido over repression:

> It is Christmas Day, the werewolves' birthday, the door of the solstice stands wide open; let them all sink through. See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.

Not all critics thought Carter had done a good enough job of rewriting the tales to a feminist agenda, particularly Patricia Duncker in *Literature and History* magazine. She argues that "Carter envisages women's sensuality simply as a response to male arousal. She has no conception of women's sexuality as autonomous desire." Carter, Duncker believes, uses the sado-masochistic language of men and does not subvert the symbolism to serve purely female causes:

> Carter chooses to inhabit a tiny room of her own in the house of fiction. For women, that space has always been paralyzingly, cripplingly small. I think we need the "multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative." To

> imagine ourselves whole... We need the space to carve out our own erotic identities, as free women. And then to rewrite the fairy tales — with a bolder hand.[27]

Duncker's argument has merit, in that these tales could have been much more radical. The Carter who wrote *The Passion of New Eve* could well have written more caustic, feminist versions than the ones included in *The Bloody Chamber*. But would they have been little more than propaganda? Hasn't she instead created characters who are still bound by the real pressures of a male-dominated society, but have done this much: been made self-aware of their condition of imprisonment. Visionary as Carter could be, she was also a pragmatist. Her stories and novels always examine the ways men treat women; they never form a blueprint for utopia. But who can deny the rage of *The Passion of New Eve*, or the wisdom of the child who conquers her fears in "The Company of Wolves"? And her characters are forever escaping, socially, mentally, or physically, the traps laid by men. If she deals with established stereotypes in *The Bloody Chamber* rather than fully-fleshed out characters, then this is because fairy tales clothe themselves in stereotypes and archetypes.

Nights at the Circus

Critics could carp and grouse that *The Bloody Chamber* was not feminist enough; they could harumpph and snort that Passion of New Eve was mere propaganda in the service of feminism, but they could do nothing but applaud and fashion a revisionist history for Carter with the publication of *Nights at the Circus* in 1984. Valentine Cunningham gushed in *The Observer*, "it goes without saying that the Booker Prize Judges want their heads and their critical standards examined for not putting this stunning novel on their shortlist."[28] A decade earlier Cunningham had dismissed *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* as "little [more than] a flux of images."[29] Others began to rewrite history, calling all of her novels "Magic Realism," perhaps because Magic Realism had become trendy and acceptable in ways that surrealism, by definition, could not. Once again, the literati labeled the work "Gothic," but the Gothic was never like this!

It would, for one thing, never had accommodated such a gargantuan, all-encompassing sense of humor. For, in this, Carter's penultimate novel, the characters leap lustily off the page, pirouette and speak in voices so distinctive and sublime, that the babel of dialects and glottal stops alone is a pleasure to the ear. Abandoning the restrictions of the short form, Carter employs a faux eighteenth-century picaresque structure to create a wonderful three-ringed, three-act circus that revolves around the tough but beguiling Fevvers, a six foot two Cockney woman with wings and no navel. Fevvers has just signed on — at the "smoldering butt end" of the nineteenth century — as an aerialist for the circus of Kentucky native Colonel Kearney, who treats his enterprise as a Ludic Game, and who keeps as his business associate and familiar Sybil the pig. The acquisition of Fevvers is quite a coup for the Colonel and his vision — he wants to out-Hannibalize Hannibal by bringing his pachyderms to St. Petersburg and Siberia. For Fevvers is already famous, or infamous: "Everywhere she went, rivers parted for her, wars were threatened... showers of frogs and footwear were reported in the press..." So infamous that an American journalist, Walser, has asked for an interview to bunk or debunk the myth of Fevvers' wings, for his article on the great hoaxes of the world.

The novel is divided into three sections — London, St. Petersburg, and Siberia — and Carter conducts it all like a circus, complete with sideshows to the main attractions. Every character, down to Sybil the pig, has a story to tell; and we hear them all, in such a riot of voices that it's astonishing that Carter can control them all. But control them she does, from the very first paragraph, as she recounts the particulars of her birth to Walser:

> "Lor' love you sir!" Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. "As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old London, didn't I! Not billed the 'Cockney Venus' for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me 'Helen of the High Wire,' due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore — for I never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no, but just like Helen of Troy, was hatched."

Even Fevver's thick accent comes unstuck after a time and Walser soon drowns in the richness of Fevver's autobiography. She recounts her discovery at the door of a brothel by Lizzie — her constant companion and mother figure — and her subsequent adoption by Lizzie and, to a lesser extent, the whorehouse madam Ma Nelson. Ma Nelson keeps a Titian above her mantel depicting Leda and the Swan, a myth much referred to in the novel and, previously, in *The Magic Toyshop*: "When I asked Ma Nelson what this picture meant, she told me it was a demonstration of the blinding access of the grace of flesh." This serves as the only explanation of Fevver's navelless and winged existence, and one of the novel's strengths is that the reader soon stops caring whether or not Fevvers is a fraud; for Carter herself never blinks, never slows the pace long enough for a failure of nerve.

The question of nerve, and failure of nerve, represents a major chasm between Carter and other, lesser, fabulists. Most genre practioners would discard the idea of a winged woman entirely, unless they could, in some concrete way, justify her existence. Carter simply conjures up Fevvers, makes her flesh-and-blood, and then dares the reader to disbelieve. (For all her disavowal of surrealism, Carter seems in league with a mischievous Breton here.) The reader is then free to disbelieve the wings, but can never disbelieve Fevvers the woman. She is all too real, whether in the brothel, in the freakshow of Madame Scheck, for whom she is merely a grotesque embodiment of perverse fantasy, or in the circus itself. In the arena of the circus, Carter delights in teasing the reader about Fevver's charlatanism:

> Indeed, she did defy the laws of projectiles, because a projectile cannot mooch along its trajectory, if it slackens its speed in mid-air, down it falls. But Fevvers, apparently, pottered along the invisible gangway between

her trapezes with the portly dignity of a Trafalgar Square pigeon flapping from one proferred handful of corn to another, and then she turned head over heels three times, lazily enough to show off the crack in her bum.

Carter also delights in paralleling the physical act of flight with the mental flight of freedom. Fevvers escapes the burning remains of the whorehouse, Madame Scheck's freakshow, and finally the clutches of nobleman who hopes to sacrifice her in return for eternal youth; only to escape back to Lizzie and finally into fame, where people still gaze upon her, but with admiration rather than fear and loathing. If she must always be spectacle, then it will be to her own profit and on her own terms. And yet this, too, is a trap she must eventually escape. Throughout the novel, her jailers are both male and female, and Carter is often hardest on those, like Madame Scheck, who betray their own sex into submission or slavery.

Fevvers is so real as to be four-dimensional; Walser comes across as two-dimensional, by virtue of his own narrow definition of who he is. Whereas Fevvers is fully complete in her identity, Walser is half-formed, and while Fevvers can love him at first sight, she cannot see in him an equal companion:

> He would have called himself a "man of action." He subjected his life to a series of cataclysmic shocks because he loved to hear his bones rattle. That was how he knew he was alive... In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection. If he was afraid of nothing, it was not because he was brave; like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver, Walser did not know how to be afraid.

By the end of the first section, we know Fevvers as well as we know ourselves, but we know Walser only as well as he knows himself. This inverse relationship between Fevvers and Walser, and the sexual tension between them, serves as the thematic frame for the second and third acts.

The plotted tension comes wholly from the travails and politics of the circus itself, which tend to focus lightning rod-style around Walser. Walser, at the start of the second section, "St. Petersburg," has signed on with the circus as a clown, to gather further evidence to debunk Fevvers, or so he has persuaded himself. The Colonel asks Walser, "How does it stand humiliation?" and Walser has no answer, although he soon finds out. In order for Walser to become more than a shell, he must first be broken down into his constituent parts. As John Haffenden pointed out to Carter in his 1985 interview, Walser, for all intents and purposes, becomes an object. Carter's reply:

> Yes, he does become an object, and it's amazing how many people find it offensive when you do that to a chap. What happens to him is exactly what happens to another, though a much nastier person who runs away with a music-hall artiste and is forced to personate a rooster in the Blue Angel. But nobody forces Jack Walser to behave as a human chicken. It is systematic humiliation, but it's not Fevvers who does it to him — it's life.[10]

Yet the clowns are, in their way, much more tragic and human than Walser, as Walser, a journalist pretending to be a clown. No matter what the humiliation, he can always wash off his mask of wet white and return to America. As if to make up for their tragic status, Carter gives the clowns all the best lines in this second section. Bringing to mind the best of Ray Bradbury and Charles Finney, Boffo the Great, the head clown, initiates Walser into clown philosophy in a ten page section destined to become the definitive statement on clown life and circus literature. Boffo's teachings to Walser and the other clowns befit his position at the table "in the place where Leonardo seats the Christ, reserving to himself the sacramental task of breaking the black bread and dividing it between his disciples." Boffo on clowning:

> We are the whores of mirth, for, like a whore, we know what we are; we know we are mere hirelings hard at work and yet those who hire us see us as beings perpetually at play. Our work is their pleasure and so they think our work must be our pleasure, too, so there is always an abyss between their notion of our work as play, and ours, of their leisure as our labor.

The compression and Shakespearean control and rhythms of language in this section beggar the style of most other novelists.

Although the clowns dominate the "St. Petersburg" section, Carter sustains movement and tension as she tells us the stories of Mignon, Europe's bastard child, the lion tamer, the strong man, the intelligent chimps, and a cavalcade of others. Walser manages to become involved in everyone's lives, only to be saved by Fevvers repeatedly. He slowly loses all sense of self, until, wounded by a tiger and almost stabbed to death by Boffo, he can no longer write his journalistic accounts — no longer a journalist imitating a clown, but a clown truly, and thus broken down almost completely from his former self.

All these conflicting stories culminate in a cataclysmic final performance in St. Petersburg which results in death, madness, desertions, and Fevvers' near-death at the hands of a Great Duke. The tension is played to perfection, as if Carter had flung the players into orbit and then allowed them to follow their own natural decaying trajectories: come to earth in their own individual, devastating ways.

A much reduced circus trundles aboard the train bound for Siberia and the narrative deliberately splinters into limited third person and first person from omniscient as Walser and Fevvers confront questions of their own identity. In the process, Carter calls into question societal values and ethics, larger questions that form a nice inverse relationship to the landscape now traversed, which is virgin white, virtually untouched by societal institutions.

She describes a peculiar all-women's prison set up by a noblewoman who poisoned her husband and got away with it. This noblewoman, Countess P., "assuaged the conscience that pricked her by becoming, or so she claimed, a kind of conduit for the means of repentance of the other murderesses." The Countess P. exemplifies the masochistic woman who is the enemy of the feminist: although she does not necessarily believe

herself guilty, she believes she must suffer as though guilty. All day and night from the center of the circular prison she stares at the prisoners, who feel themselves under the very eye of justice. Except for inmate Olga Alexandrovna, who brings the prison down because she refuses to believe that her innocence should be punished and thus leads a revolt.

There is an intentional parallel here between the woman prisoners and Fevvers, although Fevver's prison is not made of stones and wood. She, too, is in the position of being marked a victim merely for being a woman. She, too, has a decision to make: she must decide if loving Walser means giving up her autonomy.

Finally, outlaws dynamite the train track, Fevvers and Walser become separated, and Walser loses his memory, apprenticing himself to a Siberian shaman in a series of hilarious set pieces. Fevvers and Lizzie, racing to Walser's rescue, engage in a spirited conversation about the nature of relationships, especially the institutionalized slavery of marriage. Lizzie asks Fevvers if she understands the implications of the expected outcome: "Don't you know the customary endings of the old comedies of separated lovers, misfortune overcome, adventures among outlaws and savage tribes? True lovers' reunions always end in a marriage." Fevvers violently disagrees: "But it is not possible that I should give myself... the essence of myself may not be given or taken, or what will there be left of me." "Precisely," says Lizzie. Finally, Fevvers cannot deny her love for Walser and reaches a compromise: she will mold him if necessary.

> You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well — I'll sit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century.

It may not be a perfect compromise, but Walser, when found, does prove remarkably changed in nature, ready to love Fevvers on her terms. There will be no marriage; there is no need for it. Walser may still be a weak specimen, but Carter refuses to marginalize him as a character simply because men have marginalized women. She may point out the stupidities, cruelties, and ignorance of men, but she will not deny the individual his "right to vision." Nor will she deny the positive realities of romantic heterosexual relationships even as she skewers the negatives and promotes lesbian liaisons. For this reason *Nights at the Circus* gently threatens both the traditional man and those feminists who insist on being ideologues rather than individuals.

Nights at the Circus would prove to be Carter's high-water mark. In it, she manages to be both comedic and serious, to maintain a high level of the fantastical along with rounded, believable characters, a sustained and densely plotted structure, and didactic discussion of issues dear to her. In short, she pulls off a series of difficult stunts impossibly well.

IV. Wise Children

Angela Carter left behind a wealth of "wise children" which occupy varying positions of importance in any curious room. Some of these are cast-offs and run-aways, and others minor masterpieces. She followed the aforementioned *The Bloody Chamber* and *Nights at the Circus* with three more fictions: the short story collections *Saints and Strangers* (1986; Black Venus in the U.K.) and *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993), and the novel *Wise Children* (1992), but none of these works broke particularly new ground, although they did refine many of the themes brought out in previous works and are worthy of brief discussion.

Of the two short story collections, *Saints and Strangers* is the most ambitious, a recasting in fictional form of historical figures. Particularly interesting is "The Fall River Axe Murders," which describes the last days of the Lizzie Borden household. The story takes the form of a bubble of oil rising through water, until, upon reaching the surface, it pops and releases tension all at once, the story ending at the moment Lizzie Borden wakes up on the day of the murders. (The Carter completist may wish to compare the United States and British versions of this story.) Many of the other stories match the best from *Fireworks* and *The Bloody Chamber*, a notable exception being "Our Lady of the Massacre," which fails miserably in its attempt to evoke the world of East Coast Native Americans during Jamestown days. The lack of telling detail may be a symptom of her subject matter, as there is so little baroque, surreal, or romantic about the setting that her style fails her completely.

The posthumous *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* continues many of the themes in *Saints and Strangers*, but the collection is very uneven, including as it does several fragments and minor stories. Two noteworthy exceptions are "John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's A Whore" and "Alice in Prague, or The Curious Room."

In "John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's A Whore," Carter imagines an incestuous western love affair between Johnny (Giovanni) and Annie-Belle (Annabella) as if written by John Ford the English dramatist of the Jacobean period, and filmed by John Ford the United States director. Beneath the tragic surface lies undeniable wit, the story occupying territory somewhere between Shakespeare and Cormac McCarthy. Carter adds her own touches by commenting directly to the reader, a technique coupled with startling but effective juxtapositions of dialogue:

> ANNIE-BELLE: I count myself fortunate to have found forgiveness.
>
> JOHNNY: What are you going to tell Daddy?
>
> ANNIE-BELLE: I'm going out west.
>
> GIOVANNI: What, chang'd so soon! hath your new sprightly lord
>
> Found out a trick in night-games more than we
>
> Could have known in our simplicity? Ha! is't so?

Self-conscious devices have always been Carter's forte and in "John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's A Whore" these devices en-

hance the tragic implications while, on another level, lending the story a mischievously operatic feel.

But the best story in American Ghosts is "Alice in Prague, or The Curious Room," which serves as homage to the genius Prague animator Svankmejer. This story defiantly breaks every rule of the conventional short story — zero dialogue; didactic lecturing; no plot — and yet it is a beautiful and self-contained fiction about the conflict and crosshatching between science/logic and non-sense, with Carter defining the word much as Lewis Carroll might have: "... the world of non-sense ... is constructed by logical deduction and is created by language, although language shivers into abstractions within it." To summarize the story is to tell it over again; suffice it to report that Alice, Tycho Brahe, and Carmen Miranda make important cameos in one guise or another. The fructi-fornicating Archduke Randolph with his lively edible loves is a particular treat for those readers who possess both high and low senses of humor.

Wise Children continues in a comic vein. The book is vastly entertaining: a burlesque, vaudevillian extravaganza of surprising depth. Although I enjoyed it immensely, and believe it will prove to be her most popular book, it has no element of the fantastic — the signature in her best work — nor does it pretend to be more than a music hall-based comedy; nor does it make near the demands on the reader as do her other novels.

It should be noted that Carter was much taken with the notion of "wise children" — the term occurs in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Nights at the Circus*. Carter's favorite fairy tale in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, which she edited, was the Russian riddle story, "The Wise Little Girl," "in which the tsar asks [the heroine] for the impossible and she delivers it without batting an eyelid."[31] Perhaps a good description of Angela Carter as well.

V. Recognition & Influence

Carter's influence on other writers is difficult to gauge. As mentioned, she has had a profound effect on the study and interpretation of folklore, and no one can doubt the extent of influence she has had on children's writers who use fairy tales for raw material.

In addition, as a co-founder of Virago Press with Carmen Calil, Carter is responsible for rescuing from obscurity many excellent works by women. As Lorna Sage writes in "Death of the Author," "From [Carter's] point of view, Virago was meant — among many, many other things — to make money out of and for women's writing and to rescue it from the slough of passive suffering."[32] In typical blunt fashion, Carter put it another way:

> I suppose I am moved towards it by the desire that no daughter of mine should ever be in a position to be able to write BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION I SAT DOWN AND WEPT, exquisite prose though it may contain. (BY GRAND CENTRAL STATION I TORE OFF HIS BALLS would be more like it, I should hope.)[33]

However, this measurable influence is narrow in comparison to such a major talent. It certainly does not address the bulk of her fiction. Despite having produced what are among the greatest fantastical works of this century, Carter appears to have had little influence in the United States. I am woefully ignorant of writers in the United Kingdom whom she has specifically influenced, but in this country, the response to "Do you like Angela Carter?" is still usually, at least in my experience, a resounding "Who?" or "I've heard of her but haven't read her." How can such a diverse, varied, and important novelist be an enigma to the majority of writers in this country?

If I had to take a stab at an answer, I would point to a single but not immediately obvious answer: the majority of writers are, at heart, realists who describe commonplace, contemporary characters pursuing lives in contemporary urban settings. Very few writers dare to plunge the reader right into surrealism; they are, ironically enough, obsessed with replicating reality as the photographer captures it. But I am sick to death of photographers, even trick photographers. Painters interest me much more; if the minimalist calls the surrealist "frivolous," the surrealist calls the minimalist "colorless." I also truly believe that the majority of fiction has become merely product, and product does not acknowledge art. It cannot afford to do so because as soon as it acknowledges art, product can no longer pretend to be art.

How sad, then, that those who should influence the new generations of the Surreal and the fantastic somehow find less favor than those who should best be forgotten and buried among the old piles of *Weird Tales* some of us still have in our childhood closets.

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33. Ibid.

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Wearing an antique bridal gown, the beautiful queen of the vampires sits all alone... under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors. ... She rises when the sun sets and goes immediately to her table where she plays her game of patience until she grows hungry. ... She loathes the food she eats; she would have liked to take the rabbits home with her, feed them on lettuce... but hunger always overcomes her. She sinks her teeth into the neck where an artery throbs with fear. ... It is the same with the shepherd boys and gypsy lads. ... When she takes them by the hand and leads them to her bedroom, they can scarcely believe their luck. Afterwards, her governess will tidy the remains into a neat pile

— from *The Bloody Chamber*, 1981

Researcher's note: As a result of space constraints, we have not been able to include individual citations for newspaper and magazine articles later included in the anthology *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings* or for Ms. Carter's early journalistic work in the *Croydon Advertiser* between 1959 and 1961 in this bibliography

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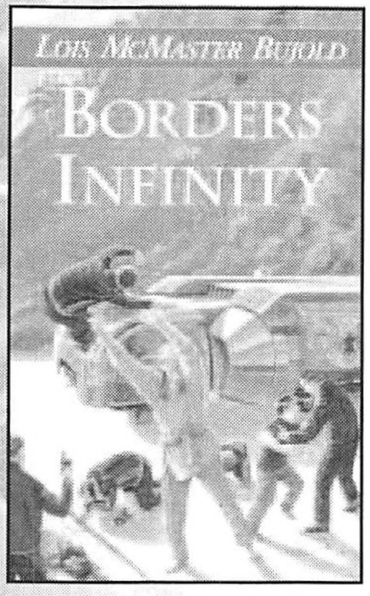

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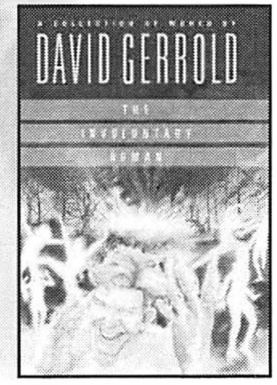

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Introducing William Hope Hodgson

by Andy Robertson

Andy Robertson is the webmaster of www.thenightland.co.uk and the editor of Night Lands, *an anthology of original fiction set in Hodgson's Night Land universe.*

William Hope Hodgson is known today as a horror writer, but his remarkably original works might equally well be classified as science fiction, for though they follow the superficial formulae of ghost haunting, psychic detective story, or supernatural tale of the sea, they invoke a framework of alien but partly rationalised and not conventionally supernatural forces in place of the normal Gothic elements of horror. In this they resemble the later and better known works of H. P. Lovecraft, though the development of Hodgson's ideas was entirely his own.

Hodgson's work, like Lovecraft's, was located on the ambiguous territory between the then-developing genres of horror and science fiction. Rather than seeking an escape from horror and mystery through rationalism, or resorting to archaic frameworks of legend or religion in search of the wonders science was apparently removing from the world, Hodgson's stories positively embraced the watching and threatening unknown and sought to focus on it, as it were, through the lens of the developing scientific worldview. In this he resembled not only Lovecraft but also the early and brilliant H.G. Wells, an author he deeply admired.

In my opinion Hodgson's two greatest works, and the two which most closely fit this analysis, are *The House on the Borderland* and *The Night Land*. Both books are in a sense part-sequels or spinoffs from *The Time Machine*. The former is a visionary romance which sends its protagonist on a voyage through time to the end of the universe and promises a sort of Omega point reunion with his dead beloved. The latter is a strange but compelling tale of humanity's survival on Earth after the death of the Sun, sheltered by a giant arcology eight miles high, surrounded by a protective force field and besieged by alien, hybrid, and unknown forces of darkness. Like *The House on the Borderland* it is a story of lost love and its recovery from the night: and it is notable that Hodgson, unlike Lovecraft, repeatedly sets the power of human erotic love as the only counterpoise to the powers of darkness and the only refuge for humanity in a radically entropic universe.

It is unfortunate that *The Night Land* is rendered in a clumsy and incompetent version of seventeenth-century English; the more so since this strange stylistic choice obscures the scenario's conceptual depth and its essentially hard-SF elements — for example, the first appearances I can trace of such tropes as arcologies, mechanically amplified telepathy, and force fields. It is also unfortunate that Hodgson's attempts to write about human love and sexuality in this book could not produce a credible picture of a human relationship. Yet despite these things *The Night Land* is a fiction and a concept unlike anything else that has appeared in science fiction, horror, or fantasy in the century since it was written, and the reader who tolerates the book's flaws and persists in trying to understand it will be rewarded by what is probably the strangest fictional universe ever imagined.

Hodgson wrote a number of other stories which share this essential two-faced nature, equally interpretable as horror or science fiction: his most popular work was a series of tales about a psychic detective, Carnacki the Ghost Finder, which has been reprinted many times. He also wrote many powerful novels and short stories about the sea, though most of these were more conventional ghost stories or mainstream tales drawing on his own experience in the merchant marine.

He was killed by an artillery shell at Ypres on April 17, 1918, but his work is continually rediscovered.

Silence of the Night

by John C. Wright

In recent years, modern writers have set new stories in William Hope Hodgson's Night Land universe. Several years ago, a superb example by John C. Wright appeared in the twenty-first Dozois Year's Best Science Fiction (2004). *Here, in a new story, he returns to the Night Land, at a time very close to the end of humankind.*

Circa AD TWENTY-FIVE MILLION
(Three million years before the final extinction of mankind; fifty thousand years before the Fall of the Last Redoubt)

I was overcome with awe, and fell to my face when I saw the Chronomancer walking slowly toward me along the balcony.

To my right, the thought-amplifying spyglasses looked out from the great embrasure upon the darkness and strange fires of the Night Lands, and I could see the shining eyes of the Great Watching Thing of the Southeast looking at me. The Thing was as mighty as a mountain, and about its forepaws, which had not moved in a million years or more, was encamped an army of Blind Ones, of Ogres, and of shaggy subhumans, of which more than half had stirred from the six thousand year paralysis, and had been stirring since the days of my grandfather's youth, and the reddish haze of severe space-distortion was all about them.

To my right, above me and below me were the other balconies, the windows and lamps of the Home of Man, and the Tower of the Monstruwacans, the monster-watchers, rose another mile above the topmost embrasures of the highest balconies. No other humans were near me, not for miles: the cities of this level, and the ones below and above, had been deserted for half a million years. The cities were silent except for the whisper of the perfect machinery built by an ancestral people, and were empty of thought-action, except for those paeans known to hinder powers of the outside, soul-vibrations taken from the thought-records of departed sages of greatest spiritual power and wisdom. He and I were alone.

* * *

Once, when I was but a youth, I dreamed of the days of light. A hollow vessel of wood, like a long and narrow dish, but great enough to hold many men, was shattered on the sea: the crew was treading water, and with loud voices they called to each other, each man telling the other as he sobbed to remain strong and hopeful, and await the dawn.

In the dream this seemed no wonder, though I later would regret I had not slept long enough to see this marvel of the ancient world.

My father was in my hands, and he was weary and cold, and I gripped him, calling out his name, although the bitter sea wave entered my mouth whenever I spoke.

There were sharks in the waters, drawn by blood, and, one by one by one, the men to my left and right were yanked below the surface. The inconstant moon appeared and disappeared between silver-edged black clouds: and sometimes I would see the silhouette of some mate or well-liked crewman bobbing on the heaving waves. But then the water would rise and fall between us, and I could not see, or the moon would hide. Then, a moment later, there was fitful light again, and whoever I sought was gone. They made no screams as the jaws pulled them under, for they were too weary.

I remember the salt-sea and the deadly cold. I remember trying to pull the wizened body of my father up onto my back, as if I could somehow lift him away from the sea. All I did was to push my own face below the dark waters.

* * *

When I woke, the dreaming glass registered a time-tension of over twenty-five million years, farther by three aeons than any accurate records reached, farther than previous paleochronopathy had recovered though thought-echoes. Even the master academicians, dwelling in the egg-shaped crystal thought-chambers of their guild, their minds augmented by surgery and magnified coherent streamers of by Earth-Current, could not penetrate the spirals and angles of time so deeply as I, when merely an untrained boy, unaided, had done.

I knew then that my life was marked: if foretellers had not foreseen someone of my power, after-tellers, those who walk through the memories of their ancestors, would return from the future to seek me.

I was not entirely surprised. In a sense, I had been long awaiting this visitation.

Did I say I was alone, fallen prone before the stranger from another aeon? Not alone. None within this Last Redoubt can be alone. Our enemies are ever with us, unsleeping, tireless, horrid.

The Final Siege of Man has been since eight and a half million years ago, or so run the estimates of Paleochroniclers, who study those books written by earlier versions of the human race.

Uncounted millions of years before that, a great lamp stood in the upper darkness, called Sun. So long ago that only the time-dreams of the strongest mystics can confirm it, this lamp was quenched to an ember, removing all the light from the outer lands. Then came the hosts of Dark, seen and unseen. Between upper and nether and surrounding darkness, the terrors are encamped against us, patient beyond the limits of eternity.

The Great Redoubt stands seven miles and more, a mighty pyramid hulled in imperishable metal lit with a million lamps, above the haunted cold waste of the Night Land; and from our balconies, by the flares from fire-pits or by the smolder of volcano-flows, we see the beings move, those that can be seen to move, or loom in the darkness, large as living hills, motionless and watching, those that cannot. Beings from the far side of the life spectrum move also, but at so glacial a rate, that tens of thousands of years span the slowness of their approach against the walls of this last fortress of mankind.

On the low hill to the North stands the august and terrible House of Silence. Through the millions of years since the

Watching Things have encamped against us to beleaguer our mountain-overtopping fortress, this small House of Silence has issued no sound, and not even the most sensitive of long-range microphones have detected a whisper. There are lights seen in the casement, and yet these never move nor flicker, not in all of eternity. The main doors stand open. It is known that men lost in the darkness of the Night Lands will walk as if asleep into those open doors, and never speak or make a sound: those who enter do not emerge. The instruments of the Monstruwacans detect that this House is the center of the fields of influence that trouble the aether for many miles across the Night Lands, and most scholars agree is it the center of all the forces arrayed against us.

A silence filled the Night Land now. I could see the eyes of the Southeast Watching Thing scrutinizing the two of us. The yammering of the kiln giants was diminished, the pounding of their machinery which heats their buried dormitories; the Things Which Peer ceased to stir atop their half-unlit headland, and their hooting was quiet. The baying of the Night Hounds ceased. A great hush seemed to fill the night. The ear of the Watching Thing to the Northwest could be seen, huge and motionless, against the dreary glow of the fire-pits beyond it. Surely our words did not escape that terrible, watchful malice.

Perhaps he and I could have removed to the center of the pyramid, or to the spot one hundred miles below our feet, where the deepest of our many buried acres of farms and gardenlands rest. It would have made no difference. The influence of the House of Silence was not impeded by mere solid objects.

* * *

"Exulted, how is it that I feel fear?" I spoke without raising my eyes, wondering at myself. "The passion is one we left behind long ago, once mankind achieved the icy purity of perfection."

The man from the future stood still when I addressed him, and I saw the hem of his shining robes and the gleam of his boots on the metal deck. He said only, "You know the answer."

I did. The emotion was meant for me. Even in the sober mind-discipline my race had practiced for these last two million years, it was known that mere detachment held particular dangers.

Hatred forever battered the energized sheathe surrounding the Last Redoubt, in endless tides of malefic will pouring in from remote inhuman sources, from alien spheres in distant space and from other configurations of the time-structure, and to this was added tides of something more bitter than hatred crossing the abyss from dimensions ulterior altogether to time and space. Intellectual serenity was not the best defense.

Long ago the secret of the Night Hearing had been accomplished, so that every child of the race was trained in its use, on conscious and subconscious levels, and the thinking machines that organized our webs and tapestries of thought were designed to impress upon us only those emotions and only in the degrees thought wisest and best for the mental health of our diminishing community. We still retained individual minds, for too intimate a unity had dangers of its own: but our souls were so often visitors within the thoughts and memories of others; even as often as friends visit the houses of friends, we entered each other's beautiful thoughts: and our love and understanding was so deep, that it was as if each of us had many mansions of personality in our minds. We were not one soul, but we shared much that men of earlier eons never could share.

The Mind Song determined that I should feel fear, that most ancient sensation of life. I said, " It is fitting and proper that a man should quail at a ghost."

Perhaps I was the only man left who could feel fear. Of all the retromancers, I of all my generation had passed furthest back down the slope of evolution, into even prehuman forms, and pre-animal, far back into the past life of the cells and viruses in the human body, and I had achieved even unto the simple soul of the first amoeba, that primal thing of ooze, smaller than a pinpoint, born in a flare of sky-lightning, whose origins even the sages cannot fully explain. The first ancestral cell knew nothing but light by day and darkness at night: but even before the development of the most primitive nervous system, the chemical contractions of the night produced the sensation higher animals experience as fear. Fear of the dark is the oldest of things.

"I am not a ghost," he said, "but a man, like you; Aeneas. Rise!"

"Not like me," I said.

"Rise, in any case."

Slowly I stood. I looked him in the eye, but his eyes were strange.

"How can you be here?" I asked him.

"But you know that answer as well," he said sadly. The shape he occupied was healthy and of good limb and proportion as the cellular science could make us, hale and strong even after decades of life. His eyes were not like ours, for the Mind Song did not pulse in him: he was in communion, perhaps, with his people, our remote descendants, across the abyss of time. Perhaps they watched now through his eyes.

* * *

I knew his face. The countless millions who once occupied the seven-mile-tall structure of the Last Redoubt were, in these times, reduced to a few hundred thousand, and each knew each. Heliogabalus had been a prognosticator of my class and aspect, though he walked in his dream to find the future, not the past. He sought too well, and when he woke, one of our descendents woke with him.

"You are a possessor," I said, "This is very near the arts of the Enemy."

"Not so, for the Watching Things and the Powers who set them to Watch consume the soul and destroy the inmost self: whereas I am come to consume only my own being, that those of this time may have extra years, a different fate. Heliogabalus is my host and landlord, not my victim."

I said, "You are like me. A student of retromancy."

"Not like you," he said with a small smile. "Your fame lasts even through legend to my day. Our word for one who is unsurpassed in the mystic sciences is your name."

"Yet this present is your past. Do we seem grand to you? Or diminished? Have you come to admire arts lost to your time, or to smile at simplicities you have overtopped? Is there nothing but darkness ahead? Is there hope?"

His eyes shined with the Mind Song of another time, another race of man.

"There is no hope known to me."

* * *

I was of the Seventeenth Men, the penultimate race of mankind. He was of the Eighteenth and the Last, in spirit if not in form.

Many times over the millennia, mankind has reached the pinnacle of evolution, a harmony of spirit sustained by beneficent etheric and astral sciences, while our neural systems were tinkered over generations to perfection by neuropsychiatry and abnegatory disciplines: in each period of history the pattern was repeated. At first, our ancestors conquered insanity, and then they slowly learned to dwell without immorality, and all slavery and theft and coercion was left behind, childhood sickness; and then, seeking higher perfections still, the race would achieve the mystic union of the earth-energies, the balance of forces of past and future.

Some of these golden ages lingered but a thousand years; some, multiples of millions.

Yet the machinations of the Enemy, or some inner weakness of the human frame, or mere ambition, or a disturbance in the cycles of incarnation and reincarnation, sooner or later would disrupt the delicate checks and balances of our neural-moral laws and impulses. One such age was ended when a freakish storm in the aether stirred up madness and abomination in our ancestral nerve cells. Another failed due to a diminishment of power from the Earth-Current.

Many were halted more gracefully, when a messenger from the future came to warn the generations that their current stage of evolution was complete. So it was when the Sixteenth Men gave way to the Seventeenth, and, earlier, so it was when the Neanderthals, the Second Men, without war gave way to Homo Sapiens, the Third race of Man.

In our case, some forty thousand years of dark ages passed before the lost perfection was found again: in the case of the Third Men, far longer, for they killed the prophets sent to them from the future.

When Heliogabalus spoke, I understood the dark impulse of the Third Men of long ago.

* * *

He spoke: "There is no hope known to me. For all of time mankind have known how the final siege would end. The rate of the diminishment of the Earth-Current has been calculated to within an erg-second since the time of the Fifteenth Men, and even the Fourth Men, those strange, cold thinkers composed entirely of brain, estimated within nine hundred years the date of the extinction of man."

"Then why are you here now, ghost of the Things To Come?"

"I am come that my times shall not come. I speak, and this alters the past, and I destroy myself and all my people, every generation back to this point in time."

I listened with growing horror. I wondered if I cast myself from the balcony even at this moment, and dashed myself to death against the armored walls, before another word were spoken, if it would keep future history on its destined path, and save the next generations of man, our children, from the unimaginable condition of never-having-had-been.

* * *

His words were like the solemn toll of a bell. "We have consulted with the dead, who are not anchored in time as living men are. They grow ever fewer, for the after-life condition is not immune from the assaults of the Final Siege, and it loses integrity when living men diminish. Nonetheless, the parliament of the departed have arranged signals to commune with us, and they believe the alternate which will come into being when I slay my people will ensure an additional five thousand years of human life and sanity upon this long-dead world."

"How can the dead speak to the living?" I asked. "How can you meddle with your past? If these events are changed from fate's decree, you will not have and never will have had come to be: therefore your acts, your speaking to me here, is paradox."

"Eternity is sick and trembling as a man with palsy. The boundaries of aether decay, the fabric of space-time unravels as the Enemy reaches a final condition, to compress our spacetime within their greater congruence, one where no life nor logic is possible. Past and future slip with greater ease into each other; doors long shut are opened; cause and effect becomes dreamlike. In earlier ages, paradox would have stopped me. Not now. The end of all things is nigh: even subatomic interactions lose coherence."

"We were promised that there would be a light beyond this darkness, a time when all true lovers would be reunited!"

"That report is known to us as well, but when we send a Foreteller to walk the fourth dimension of time, from that direction comes nothing but a dreadful silence, and those who turn their thoughts toward it are lost and do not return. There is nothing after the end of man."

"How will Man end?"

He said, "The prophecies you know are roughly true. The Great Southern Watching thing over the next fifty thousand years will continue forward, half an inch a year, extinguish the Electric Circle, shatter the Air-Clog to allow the influences of the Night into our windows. The Lanterns of Darkness of the Seven Towers to the West will be lit, and their beams will fall across the Western face of the Last Redoubt. A single blow from the Paw of the Thing will rend the gate and the surrounding walls, and nine great spirits of uttermost darkness from the dead stars beyond Arcturus will descend, escorted by the Lifeless Tree, and enter into the empty cities of our ground level, and take possession. Year by year they will climb the stairs, overcoming every barrier and ward and emplacement the ever-dwindling race of man shall erect against them. Those trapped in the upper citadel of the Redoubt and those trapped below in the buried gardens will diverge into two distinct human species. The boundaries of aether will diminish further; dreams will walk the balconies of the shattered citadel, solid beneath the failing lamps. The cisterns will grow dry, and men will gnaw their tongues for thirst. The ghosts of past ages will grow ever thicker, and the number of the living diminish, and the loss of memory which protects the current generation will fail. Every man will be possessed as I am possessed, but by many legions, not my one. The Last Child will be born, the most perfect of beings, who will attempt to open the Doors of

Time and allow us to escape into the past: and even though the effort is doomed to fail, he must attempt it, and must fail. The Hounds of Tindalos who enter through the angles of Time will enter, and the laws of geometry will become non-Euclidean; the laws of morality become no longer suited to our condition of being. The final tribe of men will do all fashion of corruption and abomination to their childrens minds and bodies, thinking it wise and right. The Thing Which Laughs will come forth from the Country of the Great Laughter, and his visage will blind ten thousand, who will go forth dancing and rejoicing and enter that cold and steadfast light which has without noise since eternity poured out through the ever-gaping Doors of the House of Silence. The Night Hounds will learn the Master Word and enter the upper citadel, and slay the Last Child. The Silent Ones will doff their robes and be seen in their true shape, and will enter the Tower of the Monstruwacans to dwell there, and extinguish all the lamps there, and shatter the Great Glass. The greater servants of darkness will feast on the lesser ones, and all the abhumans be slain and consumed by monstrosities, and these in turn will be drained by their dark masters.

"Know that the technology to preserve and revive ghosts, that magnetic echo of human life where our interior self is carried, will be perfected by this time, and even the death of all men will not destroy the preservation crystals where the psychic force of centuries is kept. For five hundred thousand years after the last death in the flesh of mankind, the surface of the Great Redoubt will retain some part of the charge of the aetheric force that sustains life, and all the ghosts of the slain will remain in suspension here, walking the corridors, unaware that they are dead. Then a great voice will come from the House of Silence, and speak that word which is the opposite of the Master-Word, and the ghosts of the lordly dead will enter a condition of being utter unlike and infinitely worse than if they had merely been annihilated."

I was speechless with dread for a full minute, oppressed by the vision of destruction.

"These things must come to pass?"

"Soon or late. Because I speak, I hope to add thousands of years, not centuries, to the lifespan of mankind, and delay this death by an aeon."

My next works crackled with anger, "And are all your people slain by your act? All your ancestors back through countless years?"

He was solemn. His eyes seemed not to see me. "Every man and woman and child ever born across the fifty thousand years of aborted time has been consulted, directly or by proxy, and all consent. Our race is weaker than your own, lesser in number by an order of magnitude, and yet we are not as weak as ancient men once were. No one lives in this pyramid, the mighty home of Man, who does not stand ready to sacrifice himself that others may live, or to slay their loved ones, that others may die wholesome deaths, and escape destruction."

"What is this terrible message from the future?" I asked him, and once again the awe and fear of the Mind Song was upon me. The machines in the base of the pyramid, six miles or more below my feet, throbbed and beat through the air silently, and I detected their action with my brain elements. In their swift and automatic fashion, they had linked the minds of the many souls in the pyramid together, waking and sleeping alike, men and women, and determined what emotion was right and sane for me to feel. Nothing but terror and awe was fitting, to hear a race of man, a span of eternity, condemned.

"The message has already been spoken," he said. "The clue that it is possible is enough. Only in your heart is love enough, a son's love for his lost father, to pull you from the safe serenity of this last living fortress, and down into the darkness, death, and silence of the Night Land."

* * *

And I heard the great sigh, both in my mind, and with my ears, coming from the million windows of our nearly empty pyramid.

The collected minds of all the human race could grasp in an instant what would have taken an equal number of men scattered over generations centuries to see. The machinery needed to capture the essential substance of the dead was not, after all, so different from the air-clog that surrounded the Last Redoubt, and kept the thought-forms of the Abhorrent Ones at bay. The engineers, philosophers, spiritualists and pnuematicists from many scattered cells and chambers in the great pyramid had combined their genius with the racial mind, and sketched out a rough design. The instrument would be no larger than a lantern: a man could hold it in one hand, and the housing made of aetherically-neutral metal, to dampen out thought-vibrations. A ghost-cell.

"My father is dead!" I shouted at him. I was too astonished to notice that the Mind Song selected anger, an emotion so old that only one of my order could know of it. "He fell in the Place Where the Silent Ones Kill! There has been no whisper of mind speech from him these many years! No one can survive so long in the outer darkness!"

But the future man, now of an extinguished race, was gone. The Mind Song in him was no longer that of the Eighteenth Men. He straightened; his eyes met mine; and it was Heliogabalus again, and his thoughts were shared with my thoughts, peaceful, sane, endlessly calm.

* * *

The anger was gone in a moment, and for many weeks I wondered why the machines in their wisdom had selected that particular emotion for that time: joy and hope was what should have been in my heart. I love my father, and would do anything, even venture into the Outer Darkness, to recover him. The hint that his immaterial essence, his mind and thoughts and inner self might still be in existence, uncorrupted, not suffering Destruction was hope beyond hope: as if, long after the coffin was sealed and the tomb was shut, a voice came to tell you to open it again. Why had I not felt gratitude?

* * *

The Preparation for the Going Out has not changed since four million years ago: the ways of the Forces and Powers are made known, oaths taken, information too delicate to be known to the foe removed from the brain. There is a time of fasting, and an exposure to concentrations of the Earth Current and other salvific rays and radiations. Then a last meal, consisting of certain fruits, otherwise long extinct, kept in cultivation just for this ceremony, and never eaten at any

other time. The capsule is implanted, and the other ways of swift self-destruction taught, in case the capsule, for whatever reason, should fail. Final warnings and admonitions are laid upon the soul of the Adventurer by the Captain of the Gate. Final memories and testaments are imprinted by means of the brain-elements into a book of activated metal leaves.

Only those may go who are young men, unmarried, unapprenticed, unindebted, unindentured. Orphans, or those with no living brothers to carry on their family names and gene patterns may not go, for the eugenicists will not permit a culling of our boldest over centuries, lest we breed ourselves into cowardliness. Neither the old, nor the sickly may venture forth, nor, during those aeons when insanity and crime existed, could a man go unless a jury of his neighbors bound themselves by twelve oaths that he was hale and of sound mind and good character. No man who had taken orders from the Monstruwacans could go, nor who served the Architects, nor a man who had suffered neuro-alteration, or who possessed an augmented soul; nor could pass out from our gates any dreamer who dreamed of strange things unknown to other men, if he could not account to the oneiropaths of the origin of each dream; and no woman, ever.

There are some tools, like the hand-axe or the hull of a ship, which, having achieved a most graceful shape, need no further change. The harness and gear of the Out-venture has not changed in all the ages since the time of the Seventh Race of Men: above a long vest of padding, I wore armor made of the same imperishable metal as the Last Redoubt; my helm was gray as well, without plume or device. A dun mantle of living fibers covered my shoulders, able to generate heat against the piercing chill of the Night Land, and to comfort the soul. In my script I carried a dirk of energized metal, a dial that could be read by touch, and a needle that pointed toward the geomagnetic aura of the Great Redoubt. Here also were tablets of nutriment, and the powder whose virtue was to condense water out of the air: no spring in the Night Land could be trusted, either because of soil contamination, or strange lights, or haunting. A cup could purify the water, and also be held over the mouth and nose when passing through thin air or clouds of venom or fine particles.

The Diskos is the perfect weapon. It is as if alive, and charged with Earth-Current, and the blade is a sharpened circle of massy weight which gives off a terrible light and dread low roaring when it spins. And when it is quiet, it is tense with a terrible quiet, so that to touch the still blade with a finger is to feel its hidden energy tingling. The blade is held on forks. The shaft of the weapon is cunningly made, so that the hand of the man who owns it can make the shaft grow longer or shorter, so that the head of the weapon is closer or farther, depending on the size of the monster to be smitten, and the length of the needed stroke. The charge in the weapon can electrocute even insubstantial attackers, or purge bad air. Legend says the Hog was slain by a stroke of the first of these weapons made by Carnacki the Artificer.

We carry no lamp nor candle in the Night Land, for the temptation caused by light-hunger would be too great, and watchful things would be drawn to any glimmer of wholesome radiance. The Diskos gives off a flare of white fire when we smite, and its fearsome shining extends as far as the weapon-stoke reach, and lasts for the duration of the stroke, no longer.

If a monster stands too far off to be pole-axed with our weapon, it is better not to see them, but to let them pass by, unmolested.

Neither is it hale to peer too narrowly or overlong at any creatures above the human range of life force, lest they bring nightmares, and nightmares attract the hungers of the Pneumovores as blood in the sea, back when seas still lived, attracted the shark packs who ruled those waters then. It is better to walk blind in the darkness, and see only what the Night Hearing shows.

* * *

When I stepped out into the bitter chill of the Night Land, the gate slid silently and swiftly shut behind me. The gate-way was dark, and all the masters of the Watch, the squires and custodians of the gate-house, had been present, standing on the great slope of the downward stairs in their gray armor of imperishable metal. Each one held his Diskos, but the disks were still, and the weapons were not lit, so that even the tiny hum and spark of those weapons would not escape into the Night Land and tell that some child of man crept forth.

I passed out from the North-West gate. A signal went from corridor to corridor through the great pyramid, so that, as I crept forth, a sudden great commotion was heard to the South-Eastern side of the Pyramid. I heard it dimly, and it sounded like the roar of the hidden sea that can be sometimes heard in the great pipes below the pyramid, from whence we take our water. This was meant to distract the watchers of the night world; for armigers and fulgurators were firing rockets and culverins from the low balconies (say, perhaps only half a mile above the land) across the gray dunes and down into the deep pits of the Country of Wailing.

Even from across so wide a distance, miles away from us and around the far side of the mighty pyramid, I heard the whooping, deep, low sounds of the Wail, and I could feel it tremble in my teeth, as if a great hill or mountain were to utter its grisly lament. A great Voice uttered from the Mountain of the Voice, and it was answered by the terrifying mirth that issued from unseen mouths in the Country Whence Comes the Great Laughter. And not long after, I heard the terrible baying of the Night-Hounds, but I thought they were issuing south, toward the commotion. Soon also came the wind-roaring from the underground warrens of the Giants whose kilns lie somewhat to the south and east. This clamor showed that they had lifted their great doors, for the sounds of their air-machinery can be clearly heard when their iron doors gape open, and the Giants rage forth across the pits and craters of the Night Land, thick as ants from an antish fort of dirt.

I moved quietly, and left the prints of my metal boots in the soft sand and ash that was gathered all around the foot of the pyramid. These ashes were alleged to be the remnants of great beasts and beings that had been destroyed, ninety-one hundred years ago, blasted by a flood of the energies of the Earth-Current down the armored sides of the pyramid, a flood so great that the mighty home was said to be darkened for three hours or more, and all the lamps were drained.

When I came to the Circle, it was a tube of transparent metal held perhaps nine inches from the soil. It was small enough that I could step over it in one step; and yet, on this small light, the life of all the hundred thousand who lived in the Pyramid depended. Without it, the thoughts of the Darkness would have reached from House of Silence, or the Quiet City, the Dark Palace, or other places of power, past all our walls and gates and doors, into the hearts and dreams of our children, there to grow and swell until we were no longer human, and our souls be made fit for the Enemy to consume. Such small and frail things defend us.

The clamor of the barrage meant to cover my departure was still going on when I passed over the Circle.

Then the thought of mankind was gone. Instead I felt in my brain the silent watchfulness of the Night Lands, pulsations inhuman and remote from earthly life like the pressure of a coming storm against the metal fabric of my helmet.

I was alone. For the first time since birth, since before birth (for prenatal empathies are drawn into the Mind Weaving as well) I was all alone.

* * *

All the old passions and fears of a dawn-age man were pounding in my thoughts: fear and giddiness and terror and self-will; lust and anger and sloth and a dozen extravagances. I had been trained and Prepared, but this was an intoxication I could not fathom. I went from being pure to being a beast man in one step.

No one else could have endured it. I was a retromancer of ancient recollection. In me dwelt a dozen lives or more of heroes from our past, all their passions and their memories. Like the call of a trumpet to arms, those ancient visions stirred within my breast. My fear was transformed to cool fury, my sudden passions into passionate calm tension, an eagerness to go and do great deeds.

We are not mere thinkers and savants, we men of the Seventeenth Race. Our perfection is not a trap to weaken our resolve. The blood of heroes still was in me, and all the imperfections needed to stir that blood to anger and devotion. Nothing other than being human will allow a man to stand in the silence of the Night, and not be extinguished.

I thought of my father, and my love for him gave life to my limbs. Conquering fear, I stepped away.

* * *

Scholars spend lifetimes classifying the genus and species of the horrors scratching at our windows and gates. Some are like us, occupying three dimensions of space and one of time, have blood and bones and brain. Apish abhumans, as well as taller giants, many-armed abominations, wide-mouthed ghouls and mantachores who once had upright stance: these are the least of our foes. Samples of their blood and brain matter show that their ancestors once may have been human, but they adapted to the endless dark, were mutated by the spiritual influences of those great Powers that walk in the Night, or were changed by energies released over aeons by gaps, pits and fissures in the crust of the dead earth, or by poisons they released themselves with the machines we hear pounding, forever pounding, in the warrens and sunken places of the siege against us.

Whether the Enemy builded the mile-high towers to the West, or whether it was the ancestral races of man whom scholars say dwelt outside the Last Redoubt in legendary times, no one knows.

The Silent Ones have never been known to slay a human being who did not first trouble them, or trespass into the Place Where the Silent Ones Kill. For this reason, there are some who claim they are no part of the Host of the Night, no more than the lampreys that cling to the bellies of sharks are sharks.

Others say that they are indeed the leaders and archons of the great siege against us, and that they do not deign to kill merely out of their delicacy. The books of the future have been examined by the Monstruwacans, and this is one of the pieces of information known to be on the Interdicted List: this means it is some knowledge visions have confirmed that no future generation of mankind will ever discover. It is held not lawful to inquire into the matter, since the line of inquiry is already foreknown to be unprofitable, and the time the human race has left to answer all the questions of the human condition is limited. We shall never know.

* * *

The river of mud had dug itself a deep canyon all around, and, subsiding over centuries, had left behind many lesser valleys, swales, and scars, a land of mud-pits and swampy oxbows, all embraced between two steep walls cut and rutted with the erosion of dead centuries past. It was two weary hours of scrambling up and down crumbling slopes and splashing across puddles of frozen or of boiling mud, before I reached those steep and rotten canyon walls; and another five hours of fruitless attempts and many falls before I found a crooked switchback leading up past chipped and pockmarked walls of mud-covered stone to the surface of the world again.

As I emerged from the canyon, I came once more into the sight of our mighty home. There it loomed, a pyramid of human life, mile on mile rising in the distance, balcony upon balcony and embrasure upon embrasure. The differences in texture of the surface armor as where lines of fortresses or roofed townships had been erected along the dormers, all this was erased into smoothness because of the distance.

The arched windows of the Sunderhouse men, the long and narrow window-slits of the Patrones, all these architectural curios which figure so prominently in our history and public debates, from here, were invisible. Even the acre-wide aerodrome bays, long lost and long forgotten, a remnant from an earlier aeon when the air of the outer world was different, even these were so tiny as to be invisible discolorations in the rank on rank of blazing light.

Craning my head back, I could glimpse a spark of light, brighter than most, at the apex of the converging lines of the pyramid, vanishing in the distance overhead. Of the Utmost Tower itself, or the sanctuary of the Monstruwacans, I could see nothing. Those high and distant cities which sit on the uppermost stories of the pyramid, just under the armor of the penthouse, names famed in our romances and literature: Aeloia where Scarapant once climbed to wed his lost Angelica, Golden Aeyre, made famous by the poet Erebophoebus, and Highguard West in whose greenhouses the beloved last pines grow, which will not grow in the deep farms and fields buried

beneath our pyramid, none of these were even visible at all; but a tiny mote I thought perhaps was the ninety-fathom tall Major Pumphouse by the shore of the roofed-in Attic Lake glinted in my eye, the rumored fountainhead of the Hundred-Story Waterfall, designed by the Architect Ellivro.

* * *

I will not detail the times of my marching. Many watches passed as I stalked in the night, and when the dial told me to rest, I rested, with my spirit alert about me to wake me lest some dread and deathly Power come nigh. I ate of the tablets of the scrip, and grew lean and clear-minded, for they feed only the soul, not the flesh.

The first creature I slew was a giant who came suddenly out of a sandy place near a smoke-hole, and the moss bushes deadened the noise of his approach.

He meant to dash my brains out with a cudgel, but I avoided the blow, and cut a great gash in his side with the stroke of my Diskos, penetrating hide and blubber, and the lighting stabbed through his body. He wept as he lay dying, and his sobs sounded almost human. I struck again, meaning to decapitate, but the blow landed clumsily, biting into his massive shoulder-plates and collar-bones. Nonetheless, this second blow snapped his neck, and a surge of power from the hilts of my weapon blackened the face and head of the man-creature, killing him. He was nigh twice my height: his wrist was thicker than my thigh.

That first encounter was more danger than the next six or seven I slew, for by then I was grown wary and cunning. The long weeks beneath the pulsing mental pressure of the Night Lands, the hooting voices, the strange distant lights making omens to each other, the grisly viciousness of the mutated beasts, the loathsome things that crawled like slugs, all awoke in me a deadly warlike nature that surely my oldest ancestors, from the pyramid's earliest times, must have known.

I spend more miles crawling than I did walking; I avoided far more than I slew, and I covered my tracks after. Only when I could not avoid it, as when I was in a blind canyon, or had to pass a guarded spot, did I encounter the night creatures. I smote at monsters from behind, or when they slept, or when they went to the bubbling pools of black water to sip the salty liquid.

* * *

As I passed through the diseased land of the abhumans, crawling from ditch to ditch, and hiding in the ash of cold crater-mouths, I saw the race destined to replace us, walking on their back paws with large steps across a land the dark powers had given them: stoop-shouldered, crooked-legged men with powerful chests, arms as thick as my leg. Their nails were black like iron, and their hairy pelts were thick and coarse, like the pelts of shaggy wolves from a former age; their mouths were like the muzzles of baboons, with canines keener than my dirk. They had no tool more complex than the thigh-bone of a Night-Hound that they used for truncheons; and their dams and their spratlings were equally unlovely.

But it was not their crudeness that repelled me; it was the wisdom in their eyes, their wolf-eyes glowing green beneath thick brow ridges. I saw in their expressions a cruelty, a haunting and solemn cruelty, humans are not prone to know.

They thought more like men than the Night Hounds, the giants, or the behemoths, and they were cunning to guess my ways. And so they grew aware of me, and hunted me.

With the abhumans on my trail, I was driven east, back toward the Pit of Red Smoke. I entered the rocky and broken terrain surrounding the lip of the Deep Valley which encloses the Pit, a land of cliff and standing stones. The land here was tormented, as if giants with axes had split the ground and flung huge boulders every way (though our records show no trace that the giants had ever done such a thing, here); and often I came across rows of pillars and the rubble where walls had been.

Over several watches the abhumans hunted me, and I needed to rely upon my memory of the maps I had studied in the House of the Monstruwacans of this bit of terrain, so that a retreat down some promising canyon would not turn into a cul-de-sac, and death.

When the Pit of Red Smoke was belching opaque clouds, and the land was dark, I moved; when the Pit was calm, and red shine hung on the bellies of low clouds, and red shadows fell across the stark rocks of the land, I hid.

At such times, I could see the Last Redoubt, shining and beautiful in the distance. But, nearer at hand, I saw the Lesser Dome of Too Many Doors, windowless and crusted with pentagonal cracks as if it had been the shell of a monstrous tortoise.

And, also I saw, to one side and beyond it, the lowering profile of the Northwest Watching Thing. This was the oldest and most cunning of the Watching Things, and it was several miles closer to the Redoubt than it had been in our ancestors' times. For perhaps half a million years, the Thing had lifted its mighty arm, crusted with moss and debris, and held it aloft to point toward the pyramid, hand supine, its spread fingers longer than tree boles. A lake had slowly gathered from the atmospheric moisture in the hollow of its great dark palm, and the heat from its body prevented the lake from turning to ice. None knew what the gesture presaged, but it filled all who beheld it with dread.

Once, two hundred years ago, a discharge of ground-lighting had ignited near the Northwest Watching Thing, and in that flare a Monstruwacan named Semelus had seen the smile slowly spreading across its mask-parts, observed the glitter of its strange eyes, and the sight of it had sickened him, so that he bit the capsule and died before his soul was wounded beyond recovery.

As I stood observing the terrible silhouette of the Northwest Watching Thing, it must have felt the pressure of my gaze, for I sensed a pulse of hideous thought cross the darkness of the air. It was like a horn-call, but utterly silent. Immediately I heard stealthy noises in the dark to one side of me; I fled the other way, as quickly as stealth allowed, and, in the dark, climbed a cliff, with nothing to guide me but touch to find the hand-holds and toe-holds across the icy rock. I had to draw off my gauntlets to do it, because the fingers of the gauntlet were too clumsy for this work, but the stone soon sucked all the heat and feeling out of my fingers; with numb hands, I could not feel where the stone was, and, in the dark, the rocky cliff seemed to no longer be vertical.

I heard sniffing noises underfoot, and caught the odor of abhumans thick in the air.

All at once, blinding me, a flare from the Pit of Red Smoke rose up, and I could see the cliff; I was but a little yard from the top. I scrambled to get over the rocks. The light was splashing against the height where I was, but the canyon I had just crawled from was black to my eyes, though I heard a low sardonic mutter of abhumans speaking to each other when I became visible. For some reason, it chilled me to hear them, so calm, so self-controlled, when they spotted me; I did not know what words they said, but their tones were dry and sardonic.

When I crested the brink, I heard a low, mocking laugh coming from my left. Here, out from the shadow of a tall rock, and into the leaping red light, came three hunched figures. Apelike, they moved on feet and knuckles, carrying their truncheons in their teeth, but they each rose to their back feet when they rushed toward me, grasping their truncheons in one or both forepaws; and they smiled grimly as they came. The stench from their powerful arms was terrible.

I drew the Diskos, and felt the power in the haft enter my hands and warm them; the flare of light, the terrible roar of the spinning blade, caused the foremost abhuman to hesitate; I slashed him across the belly, and lightning threw his guts unwinding from the ghastly wound; and his body jumped a yard into the air from the electric shock, arms and legs jerking; the other two closed in on either side of me, and aimed truncheon-blows at my legs and head.

One blow struck my leg-armor, which rang like a bell; and I fell, so the other blow passed my helmet, and struck the rock to one side of me with such force, the rock splintered and flew in pieces. By this mere mischance was my life saved.

At that same moment in time, the flare from the Red Pit ended, and black smoke smothered all the light. The Diskos, either by fate, or because of its own wiliness, ceased to spin and roar, so the blade went out; and the hulking mass of the abhuman I felt move near above me became invisible in the sudden dark.

Awkwardly I rolled to one side. Something in my motion startled the abhuman stooping over me. I heard his truncheon whistle through the air, I felt rock-splinters from his superhuman blow thrown, tinkling, against my armor. I struck upward with the shaft of my Diskos. There was no flare, no noise, since I struck with the insulated part of the haft, but I must have struck the soft parts of his lower belly; for he lost his footing in the dark. There was a slither of pebbles, and rush of air, and, with a low, sarcastic mutter like a curse, I heard the great beast-man fall. He must have pitched off the brink in the dark; for I heard the sound of his body passing through the air below. There were hisses from down below in the canyon, low words suggestive of irony and contempt, and perhaps a scoffing laugh or two, when the body fell among those gathered there.

I rose to my feet and lit my weapon, and the blade uttered its roar. Now there was no light from the red pit; the only light here was the flare from my blade. The remaining beast-man straightened up, and with a gesture of distaste, put one paw before his wolfish eyes in the sudden glare and stepped slowly back.

He hefted his club and measured the distance between us with his eyes. He saw that he had reach, and a more powerful blow than I did, and yet he was wary, for the mere touch of my weapon was death, for the spinning blade flashed and roared with frightful living energies. The creatures unseen in the darkness below and behind me must have been able to see the combat, for we were nigh the edge: and I heard hisses and grunts as they called out in their language smirking advice, sardonic japes and deprecations to their unbeloved comrade. From his eyes I could see he was not comforted by their calls.

At that same moment, I felt in my soul a profound chill, and I knew it was some force from the House of Silence breathing courage and inhuman intelligence into this degenerate beast-man. He picked up one of the fallen truncheons in his second forepaw, so that he held two: I saw he meant merely to feint with one and smite with the other; no matter which way I turned, he would surely smite from the other way, and have me. I am not a small man, nor a weak one, but I was as a child before this apelike mass of brawn and cunning.

He stepped hugely forward, and my spirit shrank within me, and his spirit grew like a terrible and hungry shadow.

At that moment, I heard a murmur like the roar of the sea. To my left, miles away, the Last Redoubt was visible, balcony upon balcony shining, a wall of light. People had been watching my duel. When I had first lit my weapon and struck at the first abhuman, surely men, women, and children standing in the pyramid windows, or over their telescopes, must have cried out. Perhaps only a gasp, or a word of hope, but, amplified by a million voices, it became a strong noise on the wind of the world; only now had that cry reached me.

How that sound filled my heart! I saw doubt twist the sneering muzzle of the abhuman; his eyes (for at that moment, seeming almost human) were troubled with sorrow and regret.

While he paused, I snapped my Diskos-shaft out to its polearm length, and performed a running lunge called a flèche; the monster raised his heavy bone club to parry, but it is no easy matter to parry a spinning disk; my blade skipped off and around his parry and smote his wrist. With the second club he swung a round wide blow toward my head, but I lifted my trailing hand high, to catch the truncheon on the ringing shaft of my weapon, a foot above my helm; and sparks flew up. Of its own, the shaft of my weapon extended itself and drove its spinning blade down along his arm and into the armpit of my foe.

It would have been a minor wound, for his body was very great, had my weapon been a minor weapon, for the cut itself was not deep; but the power and shock of the earth-current shining from my blade entered his wound and made his limbs jerk and jump. Before he could recover, I stepped under his reach, switched to a one-handed grip, and guided the Diskos to continue eating into his side on its own. I heard the whine as the spinning blade cut through bone, and the blood sprayed backward in a fan, and the blade-heat lit the coarse hairs of his arm afire. Meanwhile I drew my dirk with my off-hand, stepped very nigh to him and struck into his great hairy chest at the spot where my trainers told me the heart might be.

There was no heart, but I saw, beneath the bubbling gush of blood and puddings, a cold black orb of shining black stone. I knew not what this was: it was some artifice of the enemy, something his masters had put in him. Even so, the abhuman, though he was torn open in the chest, wounded in the wrist, arm, and armpit, I saw the unclean spirit enter his eyes once more. He dropped the two clubs and grappled with me. Such was his strength that even armor as stern as mine creaked and complained; I could not breathe, and my ribs were bending.

The Diskos, as if of its own accord, shortened on its haft, so that it was the size of a short ax rather than a pole-arm, and I threw my elbow over his huge shoulder as if to embrace my foe. The Diskos flew like a pendulum and fell against the small of the creature's hairy back. I severed his spine, even as he nearly broke mine. The low roar of my weapon became shrill noise of triumph as the spinning blade sawed through hide and muscle, vertebrae and nerve-trunk. The louder and more distant roar from the thousand cities of mankind, echoing from the distant balconies miles above me and miles away, told me the blow that I could not see had struck home, and that victory was mine.

The monster fell down with me still pinned in his arms.

Somehow, he was still alive. A weird vitality clung to his frame. The arms like iron pinioned me, and only my armor saved me. The face was pressed to mine, and he gnawed on the cheek-plates of my helmet, trying to bite the flesh of my face. His canines were like daggers of bone, and a-drip with warm slobber.

"Why do you hate us?" I whispered aloud, gasping. "Why do you attack us?"

The abhuman grinned at that, and his eyes glinted like black stones, and his beast mask was transformed as the abhuman died, and the possessing force came fully to the fore: it was no longer a him, but an it.

Now the face of it was something wholly opposite a man, something antithetical to all life.

"Malice is its own reason," The words from the mouth were in an ancient language. "Malice invents its own excuses. The Great Ones could have smashed your flimsy metal house long and long ago, child of man, but it is degradation they crave: death is too noble. For centuries they will torment your dead, until even your memories are a torment. I am made in mockery of you, me and all my race, a crooked copy, merely so that you can be told this final secret: there is nothing."

"What have we ever done? Did our ancestors open up a gate into an ulterior dimension and release this horror? What is the reason?"

It laughed without breath. "No reason. There is nothing. You are to die. You scream in the night. The silence will not answer you."

By that time, I had worked a hand free, found again my dirk, and, straining, brought the point up to the soft flesh beneath its chin. Because my arm was pinned so tightly against its monster chest I could not push the dirk quickly, therefore I applied pressure until the point slowly penetrated its chin and tongue and mouth, the roof of its mouth and skull, and finally the blade found its brain, and the metal pulsed with light, radiance entered its brain pan, and it died fully and completely.

I had to saw myself free of the monster's grip with the spinning blade of my Diskos.

Then, my blade still, utter darkness fell over the scene again; and I crawled away from the combat, moving on three limbs like an abhuman, one hand on the ground. My other hand held my Diskos, and I used it like an old man's staff to support my steps.

What was it? The noise of many voices from the Last Redoubt was gone. It was as if all mankind held its breath. There was some danger near me, something the Monstruwacans did not dare to signal to me through the flashing lamps of the upper stories, lest their signal make my foes rush in.

I listened. Slithering noises of pebbles dropping was the only warning I had that the company of abhumans were scaling the cliffs behind me. Perhaps they were already here.

As silently as a man in armor can move, I fled.

* * *

Nine hours later I finally escaped pursuit by immersing myself in a stream of sulfurous water. The chemicals in the boiling river made the abhumans lose the scent. A great cloaked Walker five hundred feet high passed through the area, and the abhumans fled before it, loping away, snarling. The Walking Thing passed away south on long crooked legs, its shrouds and tatters like a black mist, billowing, and it dwindled and I lost sight of it.

I found my father's body lying just where it had fallen so many years ago. The body rested among a cluster of jagged stones. To one side shined the ghastly unwinking light from the Plain of Blue Fire. From the North, along the Black Hilltops, gleamed the Seven Lights, pale as death. Each standing stone had a double shadow of gray-white and dark blue, making a confusion of shadows. There were nests of stinging ants larger than a man's hand creeping on black legs in and out of the cracks between the rocks. Strangely enough, these were actually ants, a form of life with earthly ancestry, and so when I touched them with my spirit and spoke the Master Word, they were awed, and scuttled away from me. No doubt a nest had escaped through a broken window at some point in the near past, and the colony had not remained long enough exposed to the malice of the Night Lands to be changed by the thought-forms of the House of Silence. I took it as a good omen.

From afar, I could see how Night Hounds had torn at the face and hands, but his armor had protected the rest of him from despoliation. The electric tingle in the air, the smell of ozone, told me his Diskos was still alert, even though, in the gloom, I did not see it. The clean aura of the weapon would have discouraged any of the lesser creatures from approaching.

Even my approach was wary, for as I came near my father's Diskos I felt my own weapon stirring oddly in my grasp, due to magnetic sympathy. I felt the build-up of electrical tension in the air, but I said the Master-Word with my brain-elements, and my father's weapon quieted.

I felt a stirring in the black heavens above me, and I quailed, expecting death; and I put my lips near the flesh of my forearm where the capsule was embedded, that I might quickly bite and die before I was destroyed—but then I saw a thin white line, made of a light more pure and silvery in hue

than any lamp. I thought it must be from a higher spectrum than what exists in this continuum: there was a sense of peace to it. Where the line ended, I can not say. It seemed at first to be dropping down from the cloud overhead, as slender as a spider thread: but then as my eyes adjusted, I saw it came from a direction that was neither up nor down, nor any direction the three dimensional mind can perceive.

For as many years as the horrors have thronged around the Last Redoubt, through all the silent weight of numberless millennia, every now and again, oddly, inexplicably, one man or another who walked in the darkness of the Night Land would see a strange manifestation of something that seems to wish human beings well, not ill: but how it is that any of these ulterior ones could be aware of us, or why they would show us favor, I cannot say. No message has ever come from them: their constituent energies cannot be reduced to impulses falling within the normal psychometric ranges. In olden days, boys flung overboard at sea, back when the seas of the world still existed, would from time to time be rescued by living animals called dolphins. Even though no words were ever spoken with these swimming beings, extinct so long ago, yet they were not myth. The Good Powers were as those beings to us: a matter of tales and wonder. I had never thought to see one.

It touched me, and I knew this was one of that kind whose authority is over time and preservation from decay. It was as delicate on my face as a spring wind that once existed in the open world in the ancient days of light.

I looked, and saw where the slender silver line reached, and lo, here was my father's Diskos lying in a narrow place between two rock-splinters, deeply so that I would not otherwise have seen it. When I moved my eyes to follow the light-path, it was gone, and by this I understood that it was a ray extended through a fractal geometry of space, so that even creatures a pace away could not have seen it. It was meant for me, and for me alone.

When the light vanished, I saw my father's corpse was gone, and only empty armor, scraps of rotted lining, showing where the body had been. Where the corpse went, or how I saw it so clearly, that I do not know.

Nothing of earth, nothing of the condition of timespace as we know it, could have saved my father's soul for years untouched and uncorrupt in the middle of the dark silence of the Night Land.

I could not reach the Diskos with my arm, and I was afraid to remove my armor and reach with a bare arm: but I touched my Diskos blade to it, and the magnetism made the two cling together. Once and twice and thrice I attempted to draw the weapon from the narrow place, and each time it scraped against the side and fell back. Patiently I reached again and again, but I could not draw it up.

Then I laughed at myself, dismounted the heavy round blade of my Diskos and laid it carefully on the cold rocky soil to one side. Now I held a wand that throbbed with living metal, ending with two forks. I took out the ghost-cell, and looped its lanyard over the forks of my Diskos, and the Earth-Current in the weapon made it cling. I opened the stop-cock, and activated the etheric cell inside the little housing. I lowered the ghost-cell with its stop open on the end of my weapon forks, and gently I touched it to the Diskos.

In no wise did the weapon smite me, but instead, as if it were a living thing, and gentle of soul, it passed into the ghost-cell that which the white multidimensional line had for so long preserved within the spiritual circuitry of that weapon. I saw the charge needle on the ghost-cell swing over, and the measurement was within the norm for a human male of middle years.

The cell was no bigger than a lantern: I held it in one hand, near my eye. Before I even spoke, I heard the voice of my beloved father come to me from the cylinder, and even as I paused in wonder, I heard with my brain elements the Master-Word beating, low and solemn through the aether, coming from what I cradled in my fingers.

"You are he," I said, "Not some lying voice from the darkness, meant to snare, but my own father, whom I love."

But he would not answer me until I sent back the Master-Word, and showed him I was human.

The week or more that passed as we two traveled back toward the great redoubt were filled with great joy and also great terror. Once the Severed Hemisphere descended from the clouds, and passed overheard and I was sure our doom had come. Ready to slay even my own father, I raised the forks of my weapon and readied with one hand the stroke to drive the blades into the delicate housing of the ghost-cylinder. My other hand was at my mouth, of course, so that I could bite the capsule and perish.

For perhaps a watch the Hemisphere stood above us. I could not see it with my eye, but by the troubling of my spirit I knew it. And yet the Hemisphere passed by and did us no hurt. Silent as mist, it went from us, traveling toward the Quiet City by the shore of the Giant's Ocean: and I cannot account for this, because I was clearly within the primary radius of action of the Hemisphere. And yet perhaps it was bent on some horrid business at the Quiet City: for many of the strange unwinking lights of that place fell into the water and were extinguished, and did not rise again: whether the things in the night prey on each other is not well established. Certainly the hounds and giants, which are made of flesh, have no hesitation to turn on each other: but the evil creatures from so far above us in the scale of cosmic evolution, from zones of the universe far older than the visible universe, we cannot determine their actions.

And then the noise of a trumpet blowing came from the Western Hills where the Three Listening Granoliths rise dark and empty—and this sign is ever one that precedes some great change in the Night Lands. It was one heard in the years before the Great South Watcher approached from the south, and, two million years later, it was last heard sounding before the coming of the Thing That Nods. The Thing rose out of the shadows of the South East, beyond the Place of the Windowless Object, so that the Object was hidden from the sight of man from that time to this.

I spoke to the soul I cradled in my hand. "Father, one of the Great Powers has passed us by, and done us no hurt—and my heart misgives me."

I heard his voice with my brain-elements. "Aeneas, use now the learning that I taught to you, and realize that it is for

no good purpose that we were spared. The Force and Influences issuing from the House of Silence are cunning, but their cunning is not as a man's cunning, for they are not as we are."

"Do you mean me to kill you?" I asked in astonishment, forgetting myself, and speaking aloud. The sound of my voice echoed strangely in the gloom, and I feared I had brought a Night Hound onto my trail, and so for many hours I did not speak again, but crept from crevasse to crevasse, parallel to the Road Where the Silent Ones Walk.

After I rested and slept and woke, we spoke once more: "Why do you think harm will come if I bring you into the Great Redoubt, O Serapis?"

"Are you obedient to me, my son?"

I was not sure how to answer. "Father, all I have done, I have done for you, that I might be as you once dreamed I would be, that you would look on me in pride. And yet how do I know your fears have not overthrown your reason?" For I had examined his thought-architecture with my Night-Hearing— at least, as well as I could without a soul-glass to catch supermundane reflections. His memories were mostly intact, but it was as if his mind lacked both hypothalamus and hippocampus. And he was alone, terribly alone, as I now was, with his weaknesses unsupported by the wisdom of the Great Thinking Machines, his thoughts un-uplifted by the love of the hundred thousands in the Last Redoubt. The harmony of the Mind Song was absent.

His thought touched mine: "It was to prevent the future from which he came that the Chronomancer came into the past and possessed great Heliogabalus. What is the one piece of craft known to them, unknown to us? What is the thing his word brought about?"

"The ghost-cell. His world was one where it did not exist until later years invented it. This time line is one where a greater measure of knowledge of the ghosts and their ways will be established unto men."

"Ah, so it would seem, my son. And yet what does logic tell you? All those years I spent with you crafting your deep neural structures according to the learning of the schoolmen surely were not a waste: when you emerged from the Egg of Glass, at the pinnacle of the meditative arts, you surpassed even your teachers, even me. Your mind was clear enough to reach backward through time to encompass the record of all life. Such a mind cannot be unable to see the logic of this simple puzzle."

"You are saying that the Chronomancer sent me out into the darkness, not to prevail, but to fail? My mission is parricide?"

The notion was so horrible, so alien to the norms of sanity, I sent the Master-Word once more into his soul, to confirm that father had not gone mad during the hours while I slept.

He answered with the Word, but also asked softly: "What was in his account of the Death of Mankind which is not from any prophecy or report we have ever heard erenow, even from those who venture too close to the screaming that comes from the end of time?"

I said, "He said the ghosts of all the dead would linger in the Great Redoubt for years and centuries after the death in all their flesh of all the last generation."

"And then what?"

I did not answer him. The Chronomancer foretold Destruction for all the memories of all the race. Everyone who was safely dead and beyond their reach, every hero brave enough to take the capsule between his teeth and slay himself quickly before the Destruction of his human essence, would no longer be preserved and safe. Even the dead would be tormented and corrupted, their souls consumed with exquisite malice thought by thought.

I asked, "Is there some other place the lordly dead might be preserved?"

"After the Earth Current fails? Do not be foolish. At one time, in the youth of our race, these matters were the stuff of dreams and riddles; there were men who knew nothing of the psychic sciences, or did not comprehend how every finer mental substance must have a material substrate. But for countless ages we have known the truth, and I can confirm the guesses of the necromancers, who have studied the cycles of reincarnation for many millions of years."

"Confirm what, father?"

"Learn now the lore of the dead: even spirits must pass away. There is no life past the universal night."

"But we have studied the art of reincarnation, and know its secrets!"

"My son, the mighty Earth Current has the power to restore, even after many tens of thousands or millions of years, those who die within its aura, if their love is pure. Such heroes can be imprinted into the gene-plasm of the unborn. But the might of the Earth Current must fail in time. Know that there were once aurenetic fields alike to this surrounding the husk of our dead sun, and, at one time, surrounding the core of our dead galaxy. But the enemy, star by star, has disturbed the natural balance of aetheric and magnetic fields in heaven: and likewise disturbed the aether all the way to the core of the earth, and leached away the virtue of the Earth Current which sustains our life on this darkened world. It is a slow process. In early eons, men could be reborn on other worlds, on Arcturus, where the great sun Branchspell sheds light not meant for human eyes, in hues unknown to us, jale and ulfire. Again, men were born beneath the Green Star in the constellation of the bull, or in the unique rosette of planets captured by the star Omos in the Globular Cluster NGC 7006 in Delpinus: but as the darkness grew, fewer and fewer pneumo-astromagnetic fields survived able to act as a medium between distances. Soon men were confined only to reincarnate within the magnetic aura of the Earth-Current, both here and at the undiscovered Third Redoubt occupying the opposite pole of the planet. When that Redoubt betrayed itself and created the abhumans, the cycle was broken, and for many millennia life has been using up a stored energy that can never be revived. Nothing is promised in this new technology, this science of preserving dead memories like mine, nothing save that we will outlive the healthy and living phase of mortal life, and dwell for a time as shadows, as echoes, as recordings, and all the sacrifice we made to deny the enemy shall be in vain."

I said, "This is the future we have avoided! The Chronomancer's sacrifice was to prevent this same you decry."

"No. He reached the only time when man was perfect enough to see the difficult choice, and yet primitive enough

in impulse to know the right thing to do. You alone of all our race recall the first wellsprings of life. The heroes of forgotten years, those grim and iron-hearted men of stoic temper: they still live in you. You alone of the Seventeenth Humanity are bold enough to venture out of the Last Redoubt; they are too refined and perfected to know what must be done. Slay me, and tell the Last Redoubt that attempts to preserve the race beyond our allotted span will prove as unwise as ever a novice proved who hesitated to bite the Capsule, hoping some star of light would save him, and this hope snared him to his destruction, whence his soul-remnants do not escape forever. There are some things it is better to die than to endure: and this is truth for races as for single men."

"How can we live utterly without hope?"

"Where is hope to be found? As men in coffins, so entrapped is all our race by remorseless entropy, and a little time remains until the air runs out. It may be an hour or a minute. What shall you do, what shall we all do, in the span of time remaining? Claw at the lid as beasts might do? There is a certain low bravery in that, but it will only bring the earth down atop us. Write a sonnet on the inside of the lid? Perhaps. None will ever see it, but it will be a thing of beauty that was not there before, a defiance to an uncaring cosmos. You recall the span of human life all the way to the earliest one-celled organism. What is the right of things?"

I had to remove my gauntlet to wipe my eyes. "I will not slay my father. You taught me everything."

"I am but his shadow."

"We could imprint you into an unborn child!"

"As population falls, this would lead to many souls within each one man."

"And yet the Mind Song could coordinate all the disparate elements!"

"And preserve us until the Great South Watcher smites the gate. Preserve us for that creature! The doors of the House of Silence stand open even now to receive us. Will you see me preserved until I am lured to that place, from whence no sound, no voice, no song, no scream, ever is allowed to escape?"

"Is there no weapon against these horrors, my father? Will these creatures of light who, from time to time have manifested to preserve one lost man or another, can they do nothing to preserve the race?"

"Of what is unknown, nothing can be said. Will you pin your hopes on the Good Powers, if they are good indeed? Even though one held me in suspension for lo these many years, I still cannot tell what it was, or if it will come again. Slay me now, and let my essence spill into nothingness, so that I will not come intact and self-aware into the power of the enemy. That is my wish. You are my son."

With words of lead, I said, "Father, I cannot. All the ancient life-force in me cries against it. Will I be the name of impiety forever? No son can slay his father."

"You are confused and weak. When you return to the energized sheathe of air surrounding the pyramid, the Mind Song will balance your humors, and you will see straight again."

So it was that with the slowest and most reluctant steps I returned through the infinite terror and danger of the Night Lands. Of that walking I will give a complete report to the Monstruwacans: here I will say only a little of what I saw. I slew a manlike shape covered with spines and bristles twice the height of a man, in a pit of smooth sand near a smoke-hole. This was a great monster, and the slaver of its jaws was nasty and beastlike.

In another place I came across a coven of Silent Ones who stood without motion along the crest of a barren hill, their hoods tilted toward each other, almost in the attitude men would take, who talked and consulted. I buried myself beneath the moss bush. These great and unearthly spirits passed near by to me, but I was not slain.

I saw a regiment of Night Hounds standing in order before a creature that seemed an insect thing, all claws and crooked legs, yet made of mist that my eye could see through him. The hound-things were greater than a dray-horse of the ancient world. I have never heard report of intellect among the Night Hounds, nor that they moved and drilled as armed men, in file and rank: and surely this was a great wonder, and I did not understand it. There was no wind, and they did not scent me: otherwise I surely would not have saved myself alive.

In another place I found a ruin that indicated that human beings indeed once had dwellings, smaller strongholds, out in the darkness away from the Great Redoubt: yet I saw the little bones they left, and my father told me these people slew their children and ate them, in order that they be accepted among the abhumans.

Elsewhere I saw the stones stir uneasily, and I felt in my spirit the powerful malice radiating from the ground, and I realized I walked among the eggs of some form of life made of a substance harder than rock, and it was by the mere unwatchfulness of the guardians there that I escaped.

In another time I heard music in the darkness, calling, and it was only through the intervention of my father's ghost that my life and sanity were preserved, for he said the Master Word to me, and I was reminded of human things, food and lamplight, clean water and the laughter of children, and by this means I resisted the pull. I feared for him, because to put his power out from the ghost-cell and touch me, he exposed himself naked in spirit to the miasma of the Night Land, if only for a moment. Yet he seemed to take no hurt.

When I passed through the gray dunes, I lost sight of the Great Redoubt, and was lost. I thought I was in some deep valley, whose tall walls no doubt blocked my vision of the mighty Hill of Life. Yet I followed the needle, and it pointed toward the source of the Earth Current, but I did not see the Last Redoubt before me, and neither did I find any wall or cloud blocking my sight. I felt the power of many human souls in my mind, so I knew I was near, and I saw the weird fires of the Country of Blue Fire to the North, and so I knew I was not blind.

Not until I came to the very place of the Great Redoubt, did I see that the upper stories, many of the cities and towers of the upper balconies, were dark. I did not know the terror that the Redoubt had fallen, because I still sensed the pulse of human life within, but I was filled with doubt and awe.

Closer I crept. I could smell the burning in the air, and I knew from the disturbances in the aether that a mighty battle had taken place here, and much of the Earth-Current had been expended to ward off an invisible pressure from the House of

Silence. Of the corpses of Night-Hounds and slugs as vast as hills, there was beyond number heaped up in mounds before the Southeast Gate and the Southwest. I walked many hours to the North, till I came around the side of the pyramid: for the first time in all my life, the sight of the Northeast Watching Thing, that monster called Crowned Watcher, was lost, since a great pall of smoke hung over the Night Land in that direction, and, for once, the piercing horror of the many eyes watching us was blind. This great smoke was due to the discharges of weapons of an antique type. They had not been fired in perhaps three quarters of a million years, but the ancient and honorable guild of the Matrosses kept them in order.

There were scavenger-creatures among the many corpses gathered around, but they fled from the roar and flash of my Diskos. Once and twice abhumans spotted me, and threw stones, holding away from me and hooting for their comrades to come and slay: for they were wise enough not to come at me one at a time. But I pursued the first and killed it, and, not long after when another pelted me I gave chase, but he escaped with a wound to his leg, for he fell down a slope into a rushing creek of slime, and I dared not follow. Both times the creature-men were far from their bands, and walking alone.

I came upon two figures outlined against the dim and sacred glow of the electric circle so suddenly that I turned upon them with my weapon: but my Diskos, being wiser than I, could not strike, for these were men. The Master Word beat solemnly in the dark air.

"Here is one whose name I cannot say," said the first, "And I am Belphanes of the Savants. My order is that which oversees the oaths of men: if you have vowed to spare your father, I release you from that vow, and absolve you."

I could see the Mind Song in their eyes. To me the Song was still silent. They were on one side of the tiny line of light which defines the Air Clog, and I was on the other.

"I will not kill my father," I said. "Where is justice in this? We are perfect men of a perfect age: we will resist the temptation to preserve our dead. They will perish with us, and escape the final dread. But to extinguish their memory before that time is madness. Where is the harm in it?"

The one unnamed to me said, "Friend, you have been alone, and your mind has wandered down strange paths. You know that there is one race of mankind who will come after us, fully human, flourish for a few years, a brief and final golden age, before the abhumans learn the Master Word and come to occupy our beloved homes. Our children will not be able to resist the temptation."

"That is not proved!" I shouted, the first time one human voice had been raised in anger against another in perhaps twenty thousand years or more.

That one said, "You may prove it. You are as our ancestors were, and as our descendents will one day be. Resist the temptation to cling to life when life endangers soul and sanity. Put the cylinder at your feet. To spare you, I am come, and I promise to shatter the casing with one blow, and with my weapon tuned so that no part of your father will escape and be tainted by the Night."

I knew why he had not been introduced to me. It is not fitting that one whose duty it is to slay your loved ones be known to you.

Belphanes of the Savants shook his head toward that unnamed man. "Spare no words with him: his soul is isolated. As soon as he steps across the white circle, he will be in communion with us, and what must be done will be clear."

Such was my grief and anger that I turned away. Perhaps I meant merely to run into the darkness, blindly, without goal. Or perhaps I thought the shattered strongholds filled with bones could be restored to energy and light, and I could live out my days alone, companioned only by my father's lifeless voice.

But whatever it was I thought, I saw, remote in the distance, where the great clouds of smoke had parted, merely the suggestion of a shadow within a shadow. One shadow was a low hill set with standing stones; the other was the outline of the House of Silence, and I saw the motionless little lights in the windows: and I saw its doors were open, as if inviting me to come inside. The allure of the doors was very great. I remember thinking that it would be a heroic deed to go there, since all the members of my race feared it, and I would see what they feared to look upon, the nameless and unsleeping power that dwelt inside that place.

The two men spoke the Master Word, but I did not hear it: and they dared not step over the electric circle, for at that moment it was grown terrifically bright, and I heard the groaning of engines buried beneath the great Redoubt, bringing up Earth-Current to the task.

The aetheric disturbance could have blown my soul into nothingness, as a puff of breathe blows out a candle: but the purpose of the House of Silence is ever to take, never to kill. And I stepped one step away from the electric circle, which now blazed like lightning on the ground.

My father spoke the Master Word to me, and his spirit seemed to reach up from the lantern-shaped cell I held and touch my face. This broke the spell. I stepped back across the circle, and, at that same moment of time, sanity and moral sense returned to me.

I saw from the dials on the casing that all my debate and hesitation had been for nothing. My father was rapidly dehumanizing. He had exposed himself to the full brunt of the silence of the Night Land to save me. Before the process could complete itself, before he was trapped for eternity in an agony such that no fleshly organism can imagine, I shattered the casing of the ghost-cell down at my feet: there was a flare of light where it broke against the lightning of the electric circle. That clean and pure electric essence of the Earth Current may have swept the stain away: his individuality and memory were gone. Not even an echo of the beloved soul remained.

"Why?" I called out in grief. "Why is this dark world as it is? Are all the promises of hope in vain?"

I felt the pressure of the silence, the soul-destroying emptiness, that issued from the House of Silence, creaking against the laboring barrier that protected us.

There was no other noise from the Night Lands to answer me, except, perhaps, the mocking echo of unearthly scorn from the Country Whence Comes Great Laughter.

The Readercon Committee

Adina Adler has been studying Japanese, reading manga and watching anime lately. She will be very happy to try to converse in Japanese with anyone else. She'll also be happy to discuss the latest plot twists in *Bleach*, *Tsubasa*, or *xxxHolic* with you. (The rest of the list has been redacted so as not to occupy this entire page.)

Lois Ava-Matthew has taken a temporary, part-time position as Mother Bunches in a certain novel until something more suitable is found. Reader, one can only hope that Jane receives her with same courtesy as she received her predecessor..

Ellen Brody believes that almost everything can be explained in terms of remediation, subtext, and entropy.

Readercon founder **Bob Colby** is on break.

Richard Duffy can't quite believe that two entire decades have gone by since the peculiarly wonderful and unique little gathering called Readercon first happened, and that it's still fascinating and well worth working on like a dog (most of the time). He also still hopes to get an inspiration at the con someday on how to show in just a dozen pages that all groups of odd order are solvable; suggestions welcome..

Val Grimm fills in where she's needed. She has worked on the bibliographies for two years now. Maybe someday she'll get it right.

While taking breaks from designing exciting new web applications or slaying dragons in the wild places of Azeroth, **Merryl Gross** likes to relax and wrangle Progress Reports for Readercon. Let her know if you'd like her to add any articles on how to deal with giant bugs, Old Gods, or software developers.

Dawn Jones-Low showed up at the first Readercon back in, well it was just yesterday wasn't it? She had so much fun helping out the enthusiastic fledgling concom in a variety of essential menial tasks that she dragged **Thom** to the second Readercon. They've both been helping in some small capacity ever since. Now they mostly try to brainwash, er, inspire others to help keep Readercon running smoothly. When not working slavishly at Readercon, they live on their horse farm in Vermont with an ever growing herd of horses, an assortment of dogs and cats, numerous Legos, and more than a few well loved books.

B. Diane Martin wishes that all of her favorite authors would protect their hard work by naming literary executors in their wills. Recognizing the impossibility of that wish, she'd settle for a little more time to read.

Michael Matthew is wondering whether a proper suburbanite should have a pile of undistributed bark mulch that is larger than his pile of unread books, or perhaps vice-versa. He can see arguments for both sides.

When he is not working to convert his music collection into the online equivalent of the Library of Babel, **David G. Shaw** spends his spare time improving his cooking skills. If you dare him, he will make you a traditional haggis dinner.

Miles Martin Shaw can tell you everything you ever wanted to know about Sonic the Hedgehog or the Mario Brothers.

Eric M. Van plans to go home from Readercon, watch and score the last few weeks of Red Sox games off of DVD, start the 8th season of *Buffy* and 5th of *Angel* with his Thursday night group, do some further lineup analysis for the Sox, start going to the movies two or three times a month again, continue cataloging (and ripping to iTunes the best songs from) 1500 or so CDs, finish his article for *The Hardball Times* proving the existence of clutch hitting, push the outline of his novel *Imaginary* past the 50,000 word mark and towards completion, resume his in-depth self-education on classic film via Netflix, significantly expand the Wikipedia entry on Philip K. Dick, write up his theory of consciousness for *The Journal of Consciousness Studies*, start crunching Retrosheet data to see of his radical ideas on batter-pitcher matchups are in fact correct, buy some bookshelves and start unpacking 50+ cartons of fiction, go on tour with Mission of Burma again, start reading fiction again, and watch the Sox in the playoffs. In roughly that order. (See this space next year for much the same list!)

Robert van der Heide is an international advendurer and part-time mad scientist. He works on Readercon because it provides an island of stability and normality in his life.

Last seen busily chasing a pair of four-year-olds into the distance, **David Walrath** is in charge of nothing much at Readercon this year.

Joan Waugh has the dread misfortune of being the sister of some other committee member. The poor woman gets dragged around to all kinds of places and is talked into all manner of deeds by this sister. Luckily Joan manages to have a bit of fun despite all this. She really likes readercon and has been to *nearly* every one even before she joined the committee!

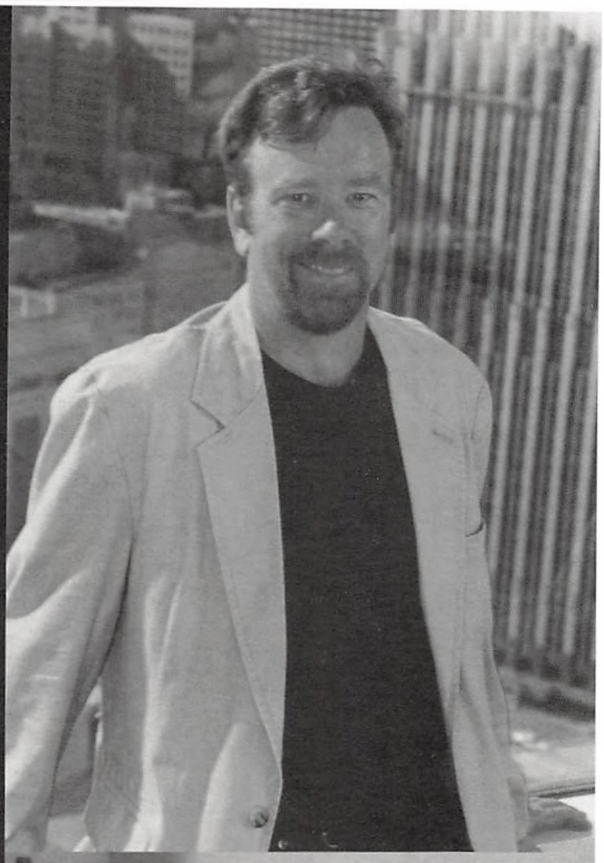
Louise Waugh: I was dragged, kicking, screaming, and frothing at the mouth, onto the committee about six years ago. ~~Don't tell them I said that or they'll force me to be con chair next year. Please help me!~~ Oh no! They heard me! Actually, it's not really as bad as you might think. I have the honor and privilege of working with some of the most intelligent, dedicated, interesting and fun people on the planet, to help them put together a science fiction convention of substance, with an intellectually passionate atmosphere that somehow manages to create a mood of relaxation and fun. I am proud to be a part

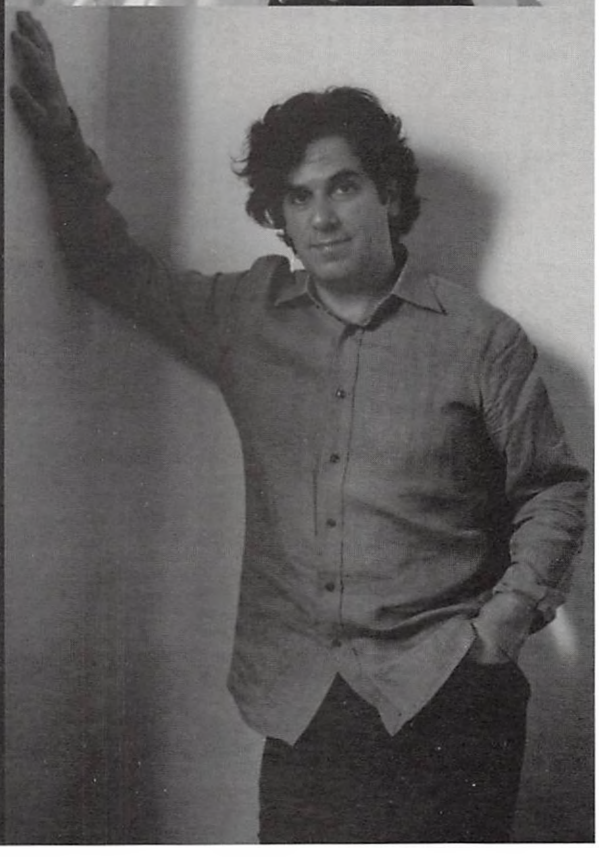
of Readercon and plan to continue to contribute in whatever way I can for as long as both Readercon and I exist. I do get sappy! Let us speak of this no further.

Now that three years have passed since his Ph.D. dissertation, **Karl R. Wurst** is seriously contemplating trying to finally get the robots to do what they were supposed to do. He thinks that this is a good sign, mental-health-wise. In the past year he became the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything and learned Italian rapier and dagger combat from Giacomo di Grassi's 1570 manuscript, *His True Arte of Defence*. He is still (semi-reluctantly) the chair of his department and his at-work theme-song is "It Sucks to Be Me" from *Avenue Q*.

Diane Kurilecz and **J. Spencer Love** are hidden deep under Fort Meade, where they are listening to your phone calls.

Readercon 19





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