



PROBE 163

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY SOUTH AFRICA

PROBE 163

Published by: Science Fiction and Fantasy South Africa (SFFSA)
P.O. Box 781401 Sandton 2146 South Africa
www.sffsa.org.za

Twitter address: - <http://twitter.com/SciFiZa>

Facebook address: - search under groups as Science Fiction & Fantasy South Africa (www.facebook.com/group.ph7p?gid=7967222257)

Probe is supplied to all SFFSA members and is for sale or exchange.
Contributions of all types are very welcome.

Electronic transmission is preferred, but all text should be typed.
There are no longer any limitations on the artwork supplied for *Probe*
Photographs are accepted but will be converted to grey scale.

Email: gailjamieson@gmail.com

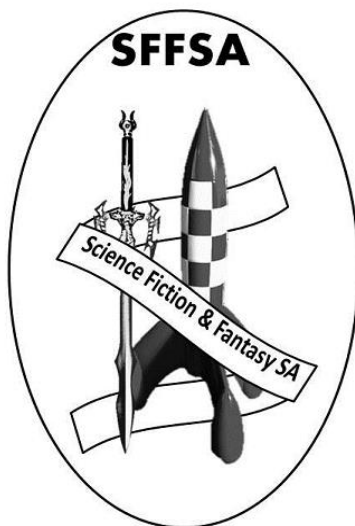
Probe is typed by Gail Jamieson and other contributors.

Illustration page 13 Gary Kuper

Cartoon page 34 Ian Gunn

Cover artist Alexander Preuss." Mining Facility"

Cover finalisation by Michael Haitel



Layout is by Gail Jamieson and Ian Jamieson

Created in MS Word

Probe © 2014. All rights reserved.

PROBE 163

March 2015

- 3. Editorial
- 4. Nova 2014
- 7. 1st Place S.A. Section Chemical Creatures by Gary Kuyper
- 19. Magazines received
- 18. L.O.C. Philip Machanick
- 20. 1st Place General Section. Foxfather by Maya Pillay
- 36 .Book Reviews
- 39. 2nd Place S.A. Section What Shem Remembered by Reen Collett
- 43. Books Received
- 44. 2nd Place General Section Electric sheep by Kerry Anderson
- 54. Blast from the Past. Probe 132 2006.
Tswaing Crater Expedition
- 56. Alien Minds from The Daily Galaxy

Editorial

It's the 28th of February 2015. Yesterday Leonard Nimoy died. He was 83 and by his own admission had lived a long and fulfilling life. But for many, many thousands of Star Trek fans Spock, the resolutely logical human-alien first officer of the Starship Enterprise will never die. Somehow for myself, and, I suppose many others, Spock was the pivotal character in Star Trek. I know I always enjoyed the slightly quizzical lifting of an eyebrow at the antics of some member of the crew.



At first the character of Spock was simply one he played but he later admitted was a mystical identification with Spock, the lone alien on the starship's bridge.

Yet he also acknowledged ambivalence about being tethered to the character, expressing it most plainly in the titles of two autobiographies: "I Am Not Spock," published in 1977, and "I Am Spock," published in 1995.

In the first, he wrote, "In Spock, I finally found the best of both worlds: to be widely accepted in public approval and yet be able to continue to play the insulated alien through the Vulcan character."

"To this day, I sense Vulcan speech patterns, Vulcan social attitudes and even Vulcan patterns of logic and emotional suppression in my behaviour,"

But that wasn't such a bad thing, he discovered. "Given the choice," he wrote, "if I had to be someone else, I would be Spock., he admitted in the 2nd autobiography

Science fiction will miss him. Live long and prosper, Mr Spock!

This issue of PROBE has the winners and runner's up of the Nova 2014 short story competition printed in it. We appreciate Arthur Goldstuck and Jennie Ridyard's having done the final judging for us. I must also mention that the winner of the General Section, Maya Pillay was only 17 when she penned "Foxfather". SF desperately needs the input of younger fans and this is not the first time we have seen young winners. I should then also note that our long-standing member Gary Kuyper has won the S.A. Section with "Chemical Creatures" so we are seeing a balance in the writing skills in this country.

I've chosen a "Blast from the Past" from only nine years ago this time. Maybe it's time for the club to go on another outing. Any suggestions from anyone out there?

On this note please read the L.O.C. from Philip Machanick. And let us know what you think.

Nova 2014

2014's number of entries was rather lower than usual and so there were only 2 prizes awarded in the South African section. However the quality of the entries in both sections was still of a high enough standard to award the following prizes:

The South African section of the competition is sponsored and judged by Arthur Goldstuck of WorldWideWorx (<http://www.worldwideworx.com>). The General Section judge was Jennie Ridyard (<http://chroniclesoftheinvaders.com/authors.php>)

The results are:

General Section

1st place	Foxfather by Maya Pillay
2nd place	Electric Sheep by Kerry Anderson
3rd place	Short Cuts by Stephen Nel
Special mention	String Magic by Leon Louw

Highly Recommended (In Title order)

And the Word Was Hope by Sylvana West

Paige Unturned by Marinda Botha

The Hour of the Rat by Casper Cloete

The Hunter by Gavin Kreuter

Whealdon's Law by Sunee le Roux

South African Section

1st place	Chemical Creatures by Gary Kuyper
2nd place	What Shem Remembered by Reen Collett

SFFSA Nova 2014 Judging and Comments: General Section

Talk about having your prejudices turned on their head! I tend to shy away from excessive description in fiction, an inclination rather too many of the entries clearly didn't have, and yet, and yet....

The winning story, FOXFATHER, surprised me by being filled with description, yet this is handled so delicately, and is so integral to the prose, that there is none of the jarring (and yawning!) that excessive adjectives and adverbs can cause.

FOXFATHER is wonderful: beautifully written and compelling from beginning to end. I was intrigued from the very first line, and when it finished I wanted more. It immediately felt like a winner.

I wasn't disappointed on re-reading either. FOXFATHER's world-building is intricate yet feels entirely natural, and the new yet familiar landscape it creates is rich with detail, taking in superstition, ritual, festivities and religion in a fearful, old-fashioned place where dual moons are due to eclipse, "pressed so close together now that they form a misshapen hourglass."

This sort of thing can so easily be overworked, yet only once did I reach for my red pen and question a line, and then only because it wasn't quite as smooth as the others. The main character -- a young girl -- is layered and complex, and those she encounters are delicately painted yet vivid. Creating such vitality and depth in less than 6000 words is an impressive achievement indeed. I hope this talented writer never puts their pen down!

Second place goes to ELECTRIC SHEEP, an entirely different story, being firmly science fiction, and set in the technical, jargon-rich world of gaming. It's fresh and smart -- occasionally too smart, for the writer clearly knows their stuff, and the computing references sometimes went over my head. Also, I'm not entirely sure the use of lower-case "code" names for the protagonists -- root, banks, grub -- works, but techies may differ.

However, into this world are introduced sympathetic characters that are skillfully, sparsely drawn yet completely real -- game developers with an obsession -- and there is much delightful wit, clever banter, and an excellent storyline too, with a sharp twist. The writing is great: clean, crisp and clearly the work of someone with real skill. I liked it one hell of a lot.

Third place goes to the truest "short story" of all those shortlisted: SHORT CUTS. It isn't necessarily the best creative writing out of the other entrants that didn't make it -- occasionally it's dry, and the introduction of the "sci-fi" elements is at times clumsy and hackneyed -- but it is consistent, it sticks firmly to its purpose, it doesn't veer off

plot, and it juggles elements of Dystopian versus Utopian realities very deftly. With nods to current affairs, echoes of classic science fiction, and a very firm salute to 1984, SHORT CUTS is snappy and smart, and has a twist that made me shout "hah!"

I'd also like to make special mention of STRING MAGIC. At just shy of 8000 words, this read like a sped-up novel that had been crammed into a short story, which put it out of the running for one of the prizes. There is just too much happening, too much being skimmed over as if the writer has cut chunks to make it fit the competition criteria. Basically, it needs a polish.

However, the more I read the more impressed I was by STRING MAGIC's wit and humour, and the great dialogue and rounded flawed, funny characters.

It could well become a fantastical sci-fi novel with a real South African flavour. I do hope the writer expands it, and makes it into the hectic, energy-filled ride of a book (or books) that it could be.

And then there are the others. Generally, the shortlist showed varying degrees of writing talent, and there were a few near-misses for the top three: some are beautifully written but lack coherent plot, some start well then go off on tangents and end up in plotline cul-de-sacs.

Often I felt there was a great story lying beneath something that needed more work, and then conversely I'd find a story that was worked to death, and had become overwrought.

Further down the list descriptive passages tended to be weighty, adding nothing but bloat to the stories. Some showcased elegant prose, and I sat to attention, but then the plot became flaccid, or the characters drifted away and lost me.

Many entries felt very much like detailed outlines for novels.

Once or twice I was frustrated by a lack of continuity, while on several occasions I snarled at characters having "visions of" things, and "seeming to understand" things, and "somehow knowing" things.

Clichés crept in, as did sneaky grammar demons, particularly with "is" and "are". I'd recommend particular vigilance with self-consciously "great" writing, because sometimes a window merely closes, sometimes a glass just breaks -- no verbose description is required. Kill those wordy babies! Stuff them in a computer file along

with those tired clichés -- the piercing eyes, that deafening silence -- and let them be forgotten.

And then keep writing, because writers write.

- Jennifer Ridyard

NOVA 2014 1ST PLACE SOUTH AFRICAN SECTION

CHEMICAL CREATURES by GARY KUYPER

Signal Hill – it was Bart’s favourite spot in all the world. On a clear day he could see Robben Island and the actual curvature of the earth where shimmering ocean met azure sky. On a clear night the city of Cape Town was a magical kingdom where highways and streets became rivers and tributaries upon which glowing insects glided in well-coordinated formations. Those that approached were shining diamonds; those receding - glimmering rubies. Beneath him lay the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront, behind - the vast mesa of Table Mountain. Day or night the sight was beautiful...breath-taking...marvellous.

Yet these were not the thoughts mulling through Bart’s mind on this moonless night. For although he gazed from his parked car upon a city of shining gold, it was no El Dorado. Beneath that shining veneer lay another city; another world – a dark underworld. It was especially at night that it became blackest of all.

Like pus from a septic wound they would ooze out onto the streets and back alleys. Pushers, pimps, prostitutes, pickpockets and every other sort of vileness that walked upon two legs (Except for the fake cripples that hobbled along on their stolen crutches). They stank of stale alcohol and even staler urine; dangerous animals that hissed or growled and stared at you with rheumy, bloodshot eyes determining your weight in gold (Literally); sizing your wealth, and whether or not the hunt and kill was worth the amount of meat and fat to be gained. Like cowardly wild dogs they

operated mostly in packs, targeting only the weak and the unwary. They were vampires that crawled back into the shadows at the approach of dawn; leeches who sank into the darkness of the quagmire at the approach of the painful, sterilizing light. Cape Town – two worlds in one. By day - a vibrant, bustling mix of creativity and culture; by night - a cesspool of destructive denizens.

Signal Hill - this had been a place of many firsts for him. First time he had dipped his wick. First time he had gotten high smoking a joint. It was where he had gotten the inspiration for his best-selling novel. It was here, after a long nervous drive up the long, winding road that he was informed by the man from the Testing Facility that he had passed his Driver's License. It was also the place where he had first experienced, or at least been aware of the strange blackouts that he had experienced on two separate occasions. The first had been in the first car he had ever owned - a beat up old Beetle. The analogue clock on the dash had shown sixteen minutes past eleven. He had closed his eyes for what felt like a few seconds only to find that the clock now showed twenty five minutes past one. He had put it down to the probability that the air was thinner up here, as well as the fact that he had just smoked a considerably large joint, and had kept the windows closed to enhance the experience. He had found the event more intriguing than disturbing. It was only when it happened a second time that he began to become concerned. Sure the place had been the same, but the conditions were entirely different. There had been no intake of any legal or illegal mind altering substances. Now it was not only the glowing digital clock on the dash of his new Audi that heralded the fact that much time had passed but also the glowing horizon indicating that the new day was soon to dawn. This time the blackout had lasted over 5 hours. And although he had felt mentally well rested, his body ached as though he had undertaken some strenuous physical activity.

Signal Hill – it was the place where he had proposed to the beautiful, kind and caring Yvonne. It was not the first time that Yvonne had been proposed to, but it was the first time that she had said, “Yes.” In fact, it was a very loud and enthusiastic, “Yes, yes, oh YES!”

Maybe it was the shock or the fact that his mind had refused to believe that she was dead that he never cried when he first heard that some carjacker had put a bullet in her eye. But it was here on Signal Hill that he first wept for her.

And it was here that he had first garnered the notion of suicide.

It was not the loss of his wife alone that had brought on the thought, but the fact that the doctors (Yeah, he had seen more than one. That was during the Denial Stage) had all told him that he had contracted the big A. At first he refused to believe it. How was it possible? He hadn't had any sexual contact since Yvonne, and that was over two years ago.

Doctor Fayaad had gone through a list of possibilities. When the doctor reached 'Dirty Needle', he had his answer.

It was at the height (Or should that be depth?) of Bart's depression that Theodore Du Plessis, a fellow writer who could have been an Andy Warhol clone, had told him of a place in Muizenberg where he could 'kill his pain.'

"Tell Ray I sent you. Tell him you want his 'Happy Cocktail.' Oh, and get me some mesc while you're there. I'll pay you back."

"Meth?"

"God, no! Not meth – mesc! Mescaline."

"Mescaline?"

"Yes, it's an entheogen."

"Entheogen?"

"God, Bartholomew, for a best-selling author you really are naive. It's a psychedelic drug used in religious and spiritual ceremonies. The word literally means 'Generating the divine within.'"

"You mean like the Rastafarians claim to use dagga."

"Exactly! Only please don't call it dagga. That's such a crude and antiquated word."

"A rose by any name. Besides, it's what my seller calls it." Bart did a terrible Capie accent. "'Haai meester, so whatillitbetoday? Purple Nurple? Some Pineapple Express? I got all the best dagga money can buy. Maybe some Durban Poison?'"

"You're a goddamned Neanderthal, Bartholomew! Get yourself to Ray!"

Bart had done just that. And having had no experience in admitting drugs intravenously, he had thought it best to leave it to the expert. Ray would surely know the proper method to administer the mind-altering substances as well as the proper dosage for a first time user. He laughed now thinking about how he had been worried about kicking the bucket from an overdose. Now it was the very thing he sought.

Visiting Ray had become a rather frequent pursuit. So frequent that Bart had even taken to using the term of endearment, 'My Ray of sunshine and hope.' But, as they say, 'Familiarity breeds contempt.' Bart had thrown caution to the wind; taken to trusting that the doctor was always unwrapping a fresh, unused (Or at least sterilized) needle. Well, whether it was truly a contemptuous attitude or simply an incautious act - the damage was done.

On each occasion Ray administered a shot of H with the recommended chaser of diluted morphine. For a short time Bart would be immersed in a sea of euphoria, relaxation, drowsiness and even thoughts of an ambitious nature. Yep, he had been successful to 'kill the pain,' but he had also been successful in killing himself. And if he hadn't done quite a good enough job yet, tonight was it!

He smiled cynically, thinking, 'How fickle the human mind. How totally we are controlled by the substances that pump, in a lesser or greater degree, through our silly old noggins. Altering perception, mood, consciousness, cognition and behaviour; bringing joy, anger, depression or a range of other uncontrollable emotions. Worst of all, most of these substances are produced naturally by our very own bodies. In pituitary glands, adrenal glands, in the spinal column, in the bone marrow, in the testes, the ovaries or some other obtuse organ.'

"Endorphins, adrenalin, testosterone..." he mumbled to himself. "Euphoria, rage, arousal and libido. Even risk-taking, inspiration and sleep – all affected by bloody hormones and such." He glanced down at the bottle of pills in his left hand. "And also death when taken in excess." He read the label, "'Active ingredient: Benzodiazepine.' If memory serves me well, Michael Jackson died after taking

benzodiazepine. Ironically in one of his greatest hits he sang, 'A friend like Ben.' Well, I hope Ben will be my friend tonight?"

He glanced at the beverage in his right hand. He read the label, "Red Bull Energy Drink." Then he muttered. "Energy drink? Sure the taurine, originally gathered from the bile of bulls, might improve muscle condition, and the sucrose and glucose give you energy, but it's the large amount of caffeine they add that brings on that power high. Caffeine, a legal psychoactive stimulant drug. Get enough of it pumping through your brain and you feel ready to take on the incredible Hulk. Most people don't know that it's the main ingredient in many pesticides. An excess can even cause death. Many soft drink companies add it to their products. Makes one wonder why they don't have to print warning labels as do the tobacco companies?" He chuckled to himself, but regained his dark composure when remembering that the doctors had told him that there were drugs that could allow him to live a long and normal life. "Normal!" He downed half the Red Bull, cracked open a half jack of Jack and topped up the beverage. "What the hell is normal? Pills to take you up; pills to bring you down. The mind is just a glorified biological elevator. Whether we want to or not we all get to ride upon the mood swing, that mercurial metronome called the brain." He read the label, "40% volume."

He recalled that Jack Daniels whisky was once produced at 90% proof, but this was later lowered to 80. Still, 80% proof meant the high 40% alcohol volume. Compared to beer and wine, which are only around 5 - 8 and 10 - 12 % volume respectively, this was plenty.

The volume content was printed as, '20cl.' Bart also knew from experience that 20cl, being the same as 200ml, was sufficient. Any more and he would end up regurgitating everything. And that was definitely the last thing he wanted to happen tonight.

"Alcohol!" he blurted loudly. "Just another legal psychoactive drug. Only this is a depressant. Yeah, believe it or not. Even if it makes you feel like partying – it's actually a depressant. Get enough of this flowing through the old emotion centre - and I've certainly done it enough - and you'll end up crying like a baby because you burned the meat on the braai. The Afrikaners have a good word for it – dronkverdriet. It can make big tough rugger players weep snot en trane. And, what's more, alcohol

is also a poison. Yeah, imagine that. And no warning labels as well. The Bible even mentions that it bites like a snake.” The thought made him recall that after learning about Anthony’s demise, Cleopatra had committed suicide by allowing an asp to strike her hand. “Bart, you’re a coward. You want to end the mental anguish, yet you’re terrified of physical pain.” There was some sort of revelation. “Hey, that’s why they call it, ‘The easy way out.’ And the easier I can make it – the better.”

He emptied the pills into his open palm. The 8 capsules of mesc were clearly distinguishable from the 30 bens. Ray had guaranteed they were 50mg each. So, 400mg, although not considered dangerous should create a good experience. He raised the Red Bull mixture in salute and made a toast.

“To a truly divine experience!”

He took the mesc two at a time and finished them as well as the Red Bull cocktail. Then he popped a ben in his mouth and tried to down it with a swig of neat Jack. He coughed and spluttered and then cursed that he hadn’t brought more Red Bull to wash down the sleeping pills.

That’s what the tablets containing the benzodiazepine were - doctor prescribed sleeping pills, and not the over-the-counter brand containing the less lethal diphenhydramine. Sure, benzodiazepines weren’t quite as lethal as your sedative/hypnotic brands of barbiturates but when one added alcohol to the mix it was like...like offering your hand to a deadly serpent. In fact, the label clearly warned against the simultaneous intake of alcohol.

He remembered that he always carried a bottle of distilled water in the trunk of his car for topping up the battery. He quickly procured the half-empty bottle (Over the past few years Bart had certainly become a half-empty type of person) and poured the remaining Jack into it.

“Much better,” he announced after taking a sip. “Smoooth.” When he had finished the last of the whiskey he had also taken all the bens.

It was the alcohol that reached his brain first. He knew its dulling effect well as it was his main means of trying to ‘kill the pain’ prior to his introduction to Ray. “No need to worry about the cops pulling me over tonight,” he said disdainfully before cursing as

he realized that he should have brought along something to smoke. “Ah, well. Maybe too much of a good thing, hmm?” As he put his head back he hoped strongly that he might experience another of those mysterious blackouts. Only this time he would never wake from it. The clock on the dash glowed 23:35. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply as the alcohol seemed to gently hum in his ears. “I wonder if one’s life flashes before your eyes when you’re feeling this mellow.”



Signal Hill – it was 353’s favourite spot in all of this world. His actual designation was Harvester 13598012353 but his immediate superior, as well as his peers, had always referred to him as 353. The Annikki, Propagator 626555, who had removed him from the incubator and nurtured him (The word ‘him’ being used subjectively due to the fact that the Annikki had become a race of sexless, as opposed to androgynous, beings that appeared more male than female in their physicality. And although they had lost the ability to procreate through sexual means, had by no means lost the ability to proliferate their species) to adulthood, had referred to him simply as 3. One

would think this to be a term of endearment but the Annikki had also progressed (The word 'progressed' is also used subjectively as the present state of Annikki is not one that was reached through evolution or mutation, but by self-manipulation) to a state where emotions were not sensed to any vital degree.

353 did however experience fear and shame in vast quantities. Fear at displeasing his supervisor by not bringing in the minimum required quotas; shame when his fears were realised. It was also to his shame that after many solar cycles that he yet remained a Harvester: Class 3. He had once been promoted to Class 2 but this had been brief due to the fact that he had made an error programming the somnambulator. The subject he had been harvesting had awoken during the procedure and caused quite a ruckus. By the time 353 had managed to anesthetize it again, it had caused some rather extensive damage to a lot of the sensitive equipment aboard his disc.

His superior did however use 353's full designation whenever he was forced to reprimand. And for a race near void of emotion, 353 had a knack to resurrect certain ancient...sensations in his mostly sedate boss.

"Harvester 13598012353: Class 3," he had said calmly, yet 353 could clearly determine a level of irritability in the clicks and squawks they called speech. "What happened?"

"Uh, sir, that's actually Class 2."

"That, 13598012353, remains to be determined by your explanation of the...incident."

His superior, who was renowned for becoming a Class 1 in an exceptionally short time, would often bring up the fact that it was the harvesters that insured the continuation of their species.

"If it had not been for the harvesters, you would not be here today. Where do you suppose the nutrients and such come from that were used in the vita pod that nourished you into the early stages of adolescence?"

The Annikki procreated as the need arose. 353 had been grown in something like a petri dish. He was then transferred to a vita pod that was constantly replenished with the necessary nutrients for the accelerated growth. The vita pod served as both

womb and umbilical cord. From there he was placed in an incubator where his once dormant lungs were acclimatized to breathing the frigid atmosphere of 8.

Annikki produce a natural antifreeze that prevents them from solidifying, but the genetic manipulation that they inflicted upon themselves in the hope of improvement brought about unforeseen biological misfortune when the glands and areas of their bodies, that produce the chemical, slowly shuts down over an extended period.

The Annikki expressed everything in simple numbers:

“353, you are to proceed to Bay 121. There you will take Disc 28 and travel to Galaxy 12 Sector 4560 Planet 3. You will harvest, or at least attempt to harvest (This was added with not just a hint of sarcasm and skepticism), the following: 1) Item 45-34-26, 2) Item 82-78-09 and 3) Item 33-67-99. We are especially in need of the last item: 33-67-99. We already know from past experience that it is safe to remove it entirely from a subject without the slightest detriment to its well-being. Gresh willing (Gresh had once been a deity that the ancient Annikki worshipped, but although they were now entirely a race of atheists, some of the old adages remained), be sure to harvest enough of the required items before the sub-space fold collapses and automatically extracts your craft back to 8.”

8 is the name and designation of the Annikki homeworld. There are 12 planets in the Annikki’s solar system, and 8 is the eighth one farthest from their sun. It lay in an orbit known as the comfort zone – an area where their methane sea remained in a liquid state. Any closer and it would boil, and the low gravity would ensure that it dissipated into the vastness of space. Any further and it would freeze, making the preservation and continuation of life impossible.

Signal Hill – it had been a place of many firsts for 353. He had harvested his first subject here under the careful eyes (All 3) of his superior. It was here that his disc’s flux modulator had malfunctioned for the first time (Luckily the inferior lifeforms had been more interested in gazing towards their brightly lit constructions below). And it was here that the incident had occurred that had seen him earn his shameful demotion.

Yet, still it remained his favourite spot. He knew this place in Galaxy 12 Sector 4560 Planet 3 well. For some strange reason the inhabitants of this planet ascended up here in their primitive vehicles and remained stationary for extended periods of time before simply descending again. Mostly they would come in twos, but every so often 353 would find a vehicle with a sole occupant. And although the flux modulator on his disc would prevent him from being seen or heard he still preferred to come here only after the planet had rotated this area away from its yellow star, and the single satellite, that orbited this warm world, floated on the bright side of the planet. Although unnecessary, he somehow felt more at ease operating in darkness.

353 noted, or at least the equipment duly informed him, that this particular subject had been harvested before – twice! He also noted with some slight trepidation that this was the very same subject that had been instrumental in his demotion. He immediately wondered whether repeated exposure to the somnambulator might build up some sort of resistance to its influence. He swiftly double checked the readings of the emitters as well as the wave patterns generated by the subject's small brain. Both were within the normal operating parameters. Just to be safe he increased the resonance by a notch. Last time, in his haste and anxiety he had turned the dial to max. And although it had worked, the subject did not return to a state of consciousness for a much extended period of time. This was a practice frowned upon most severely by all Annikki superiors.

To 353's delight, the equipment now also informed him that the subject contained a vast supply of Item 33-67-99. This was indicated in glowing red in a blue holographic image that floated and turned lethargically above the prostrate sleeping subject. The red glow showed that although much of the 33-67-99 had found its way into the creature's circulatory system, the bulk of the item yet lay in the digestive tract and organs. 353 had been told that it was safe to remove it all without causing any harm. Still, he would play it safe; a practice he had undertaken meticulously ever since his demotion.

He smiled (Though no human being would ever discern it to be a smile) realizing that he was blessed (Although blessed would indicate the presence of a deity) with a

record of this subject. He quickly pulled up the file from the vast data bank and allowed the hologram to float in unison alongside the other one. Now it was just a simple matter of using the past record as a template – a filter. He set the equipment to extract all items until the images were a match, or at least as close a match as was possible. This way it would be impossible to cause any damage. He started the process and watched as the red glow began to slowly diminish. To his right was a shelf of large clear vials that began to fill with substances of varying hue. He noted with glee (Although glee would indicate a state of heightened emotion) that although a few were filling at a rather accelerated rate the one marked 33-67-99 was outdoing the rest by far.

#

It seemed like only seconds since Bart closed his eyes, and yet the clock read 01:55. The gentle buzz in his ears was gone as was the dulling sensation.

“No...no...NO!” He gazed down at the empty containers on the passenger seat. “What...how? Were they all just placebos?” He shook his head. “Nah, that’s not possible. The alcohol was real enough.” A revelation. “Is it possible that this stuff all cancelled each other out? Is something like that even possible?” He climbed out of the car. A strong breeze was coming from the ocean. He took a deep breath. He could smell the salt. It smelled good. And even more importantly – he felt good. In fact, he felt great – alive! “Well, that’s another first for Signal Hill.”

It would be 2 weeks later, during his monthly visit to Doctor Fayaad, that he would discover that yet another first had occurred. Only this time nobody connected the dots to Signal Hill. Even though he had seen 3 doctors, it was simply explained away as a lab error - there had obviously been something in his blood at the time of testing that had highlighted the incorrect markers. After all, it was impossible to be cured of an incurable disease. And Bart knew that he had been putting a lot of crap into his system since Yvonne.

With this new revelation, a new Bart walked out of the doctor’s rooms. Sure the pain was still there, but it seemed much duller. And his world seemed just a little less...dark.

#

No harvester had ever gathered such a vast amount of Item 33-67-99 from a single trip. In fact, many harvesters had never gathered as much 33-67-99 in their entire lifetimes.

353 was duly promoted back to a Harvester: Class 2. There was no pomp or ceremony involved. His superior simply stated, "It took a damn long time, but you finally did it. Gresh only knows how long it'll take for you to become a Class 1...if ever?"

And although 353 knew that the sparse privileges that came with being a Class 2 were not overly extravagant, his world seemed just a little less...cold.

L.O.C.

Hi Gail

In one of the 2 Probes I just received there was a request for ideas for raising SFFSA's profile.

How about running events in the National Arts Festival? There is a process for proposing fringe events. The closing date is 16 January so you would be too late for this year, but the process should be similar next year. For example, for a movie, you need to provide detailed information, pay R200 for their costs, provide two copies of a DVD and they take all proceeds (presumably on the basis that fringe events don't attract numbers that would pay their way).

Film guide attached. Note the option to schedule time for a person associated with making the film to give a talk. If we could pull off something like showing District 9 with Neill Blomkamp or one of the cast being there, it would bring in good numbers.

Even if it would not be a money-spinner, paying the costs of a few movies with someone to explain the club and hand out membership applications as each one starts could bring in significant numbers.

--Philip

--

Philip Machanick <https://www.facebook.com/SAwinActive>

Department of Computer Science, Rhodes University

Magazines Received

David Langford news@ansible.co.uk

Ansible 329 December 2014

330 January 2015

331 February 2015

Best of SFSA Volume III

The Best stories from the Nova short story competitions in the 1990's.

If you don't yet have a copy contact the secretary and we will send you one.

secretary@sffsa.org.za

Nova 2014 1st Place General Section

Foxfather by Maya Pillay

She says, "Your father was a fox." They had finished icing the girl- and boy-cakes and were arranging them in round wooden boxes, very neatly; rows of delicate pieces fanning out like the spokes of a wheel. "Your father was a fox who came out of the woods one night. I was watching when he did. I was sitting out there on the porch and I saw him, just walking into the garden like he owned the place. His fur was the colour of rubies."

The daughter smiles down into the box she is carrying, but does not respond. She hears this story once a year, at least, usually more often. It's not one she particularly enjoys. There are more girls than boys in this particular box, she thinks; she would count, but her mother's eyes are on her, stopping her. She feels a rare prickle of irritation come running down her spine.

"Have you ever seen rubies?" the mother asks. She is sharpening a knife on the whetstone, the blade crying out with each stroke. The mother's shoulders move like stiff trees against a distasteful wind.

"No," the girl says.

The rasping noise is very loud. "Speak up, then. You know I can't hear."

"I've never seen a ruby," the girl says. The words are like stones in her mouth.

"I've seen rubies—back when I used to work up in Lamb's Manor, before you were born, I used to help Lady Lamb dress herself every morning and before dinner. She had a heavy necklace of rubies set in gold; she wore it all the time; and when I saw your father's fur, I knew at once it was the very same colour."

The story is the same every time. The daughter has never come any closer to knowing what colour the fox's fur was, since her mother never explains the colour of rubies, but she imagines them to be a very overwrought colour somewhere between orange and red, like the coals of an autumn fire. She's seen a few foxes, too—skulking around the compost-heaps in the garden and scratching away at the front

door, never failing to fill her with a strong sense of unease—but their coats are rusty and washed-out, a weak colour, like milkless tea.

She has never asked for a better description. She pushes lank brown hair out of her face and tries to count the cakes with her eyes.

“ 'How strange!' I thought to myself. 'He looks just like that necklace—the very same one I fasten around my Lady's neck every evening!' And so, I went out a few steps further onto the porch, just for a closer look. When he saw me, he sat right down at the other end of the garden and stared right back, as calm as anything. His eyes were black as beads. I suppose I should have realised then that something wasn't right.”

The girl-cakes are a very pale blue, like stars, or like the chipped enamel on her grandmother's plates, and the boy-cakes are a very pale red, like rosebuds with the green parts stripped away. Underneath the layer of icing the boy-cakes are a darker red and the girl-cakes are white. More girls than boys can't be a good thing.

“There's no love story,” the mother says, pausing from her work. She rests her chin in her hand. The clear mid-morning light from the window strikes her face, making her squint, throwing the fine lines of her skin and the protrusion of her bones into relief. “You can't have a love story with a fox. I left him some scraps of meat that night—just in the spirit of the Week, you understand, trying to be generous—and when I woke in the morning he was lying in your grandmother's flowerbeds just like he belonged there. I tried to chase him away, but he wouldn't leave: he stayed for three days and three nights, lying in the sun, rolling around just like a dog doing tricks.”

The boy-cakes have a small amount of cherry liqueur in them, and this makes them arrestingly sweet. The girl-cakes have a black paste at their centres that gives them the crying-cold, very fine taste of a mountain stream drunk at the source. The daughter is not sure what goes into this paste; her mother doesn't make it, but buys it at the market in little tubs.

“I realised, of course,” the mother says, inspecting her nails; they are smeared blue and red, like stained-glass. The sugar is crusted underneath them. “What he was. I tried to ignore him, but by the fourth day, he wasn't a fox anymore.”

There are fifteen girls and only thirteen boys in the box, as she suspected. She's sure of it. If she reaches in to take some of the girls out, her fingers will bruise the icing, and there's no time to redo them now.

Her mother is waiting. The girl puts the lid on the box. It's made of thin, glossy wood, stamped with a checkerboard pattern, the same boxes they sell in the marketplace every Week.

"Men are sly creatures," the mother says, watching her. A few of her words are tinged with a rich woman's accent, something picked up from her days of service that's never left her. The knife she has been sharpening lies gleaming on the table beside her, too large to cut bread or even meat. "They can be very sweet at first. But they're capable of tearing up every inch of your skin—they can rub dirt into your cuts until you'll never get yourself clean."

The girl's aunt lives in a house built with honey-coloured stone, brought up into the mountains from the quarries at Heaven's Loft. This house is important because it has more windows than any other house in the town, save—of course—for Lamb's Manor, which is like a squat jewel down in the valley, to be glimpsed only on clear days. On either side of it, the smaller houses are drowning in rich purple banners, strung from the gables and across the outside walls; some new and printed with the crooked bars of Warding, others faded by years of light, turning violet. The garden smells of magnolias.

This house seems naked today, quite stark, all bare walls and closed windows. Against the edge of the verandah, three pale, hard dolls are propped up, their faces painted very delicately, with lips like drops of blood and dresses like the tapestries at Lamb's Manor. These are the artefacts of the cousins. She's only met them a few times, and even then, they have a habit of vanishing when she's near. They are very quiet and the older ones are away at boarding school at the Eye Port now, as they are for most of the year.

Her aunt's husband is a merchant, born somewhere in the Southerly cities but grown mostly in the Eye Port, come up into the mountains to sell the fine cloth from his father's factories. He does not sell anything hardy enough to be used for Warding-banners, and he won't tolerate anything as un-Goodly as the Week to be brought into his house—of course not. No banners, no clay Warding-pillars to be

lined up at the gates, no smell of fried food and festival cake from inside, and (ideally) no nieces from the cottage on the hill.

There are muffled footsteps inside. The girl shifts the box in her arms. The door swings outwards, brass ring clattering against the wood.

The aunt is very tall and very thin, and has pale hair that she washes with lemon juice and dries in the sun. It looks as if the skin of her face is pulled tightly back from her nose, which is pointed and always reddened at the tip, as if she has always just been crying.

“Oh!” she exclaims. She says the girl's name. One hand goes to her cheek, although it can't be that surprising.

“I brought these,” the daughter says. She holds the box out to her aunt, who takes it from her quickly, holding it by the pale ribbon. “My mother and I baked them just this morning.”

“Did you!” The aunt's smile is like a wide-open segment below her sharp nose. “Well. . . your mother does things the old-fashioned way, doesn't she?”

“I'm glad,” the daughter says with a polite smile.

The aunt takes the box into her arms, cradling it like a baby. “And will you and your mother be in town tonight?” she asks.

“She will be with Father tonight,” the girl says. “I don't know if she'll want to come down into town.”

“Oh, of course,” the aunt says, “your father,” and she leans against the door-frame, one hand shading her eyes against the sun, the other holding the box by its ribbon, loosely. The sight of this angers the girl—it might slip free at any moment, and then the cakes that she'd spent so long baking and icing would tumble to the wood and be wasted. The thought makes her blood boil, which startles her into action.

“I'm afraid I have to go,” the girl announces. She cups the heavy pocket of her dress with grim purpose, feeling the slide of the coins inside. “I've got errands to run.”

Her aunt glances at her, startled from her reverie. She asks, “Can't I get you some water? Something to eat? You know we, ah, don't celebrate, but--”

“That's fine,” the girl replies, pushing the words through gritted teeth, “I'm fine. I have to go.” The anger in her is like a hand drawn back, about to strike. It's alarming.

“Enjoy,” the aunt says, and it's not until the girl is stepping down onto the grass that she speaks again.

“I met your father,” she says. “Just once. A few months after you were born. Your father was a bird.”

The girl stands still and squeezes the money tightly in one hand. The coins grind against each other with a faint, musical sound.

“He was a bird who flew down from the mountains,” the aunt says. She sighs. “I don't know if I should be telling you this, but I suppose it's time someone did.”

The girl already knows the story. Her mother keeps no secrets from her, even when she would prefer her to.

“It was a year before your mother met him, I think,” the aunt says. “Your mother was working at the Manor all that Week. The dates of the Week were off that year; they were only just starting to air their banners out when the alignment happened, so there was a bit of a panic. Anyway, I knew what he was at once; he'd strut on the windowsills and fly up into our faces when we were in the garden. . .”

“What kind of bird was he?”

The aunt doesn't seem to hear.

“I'd carry him on my finger,” she continues, “or let him perch on my shoulder. . .now and again, you understand. He was a very beautiful bird. His feathers were white as sugar and his beak and feet were very dark, with a shine to them, as though they were polished wood. I showed him off for a few days, but midway through the Week, he wasn't a bird anymore.” She smiles weakly. “I couldn't have imagined that he'd come back next year. How persistent! I often think that if your mother hadn't taken her leave and come up from the Manor at just that time--”

“What kind of bird was he,” the girl says again, louder this time, and the aunt flinches in the corner of her eye.

“I couldn't say,” the aunt says. “I thought he was a dove, at first, but he looked a bit too sharp-eyed to be that. I don't suppose it's important. Men are beautiful creatures, you know; no matter how cruel they can be. . .I'd never seen anything as pretty as your father when he blew in that first day, so prettily-formed, with those dazed dark eyes and wide wings. No matter what my husband says. . .something so beautiful can't be all bad.”

"I have to go," the girl says, after a moment. "I need—I need to be home before dusk."

"All right," her aunt says, and then in a rush: "Week's Wardings."

"You too," the girl says, and walks off, as slowly as she can, trying to ignore the dark thing pulsing in her. The door closes behind her. When she turns back to look up at the house, she sees a wide, plump, mystified face looking down at her from a second-floor window; just for a moment, then the window is empty.

So even the older cousins are back home for the Week, which is strange, because they won't be allowed to set foot outside the house until it's over.

The town looks as though it's been scrubbed clean. Which it has been, more or less; the shopkeepers have filled up the window-displays and their wives have washed the steps, and the purple banners hide everything else quite admirably. The square is milling with people, too, so the dust hasn't had a chance to settle back down onto the cobbles; people are leaning over the fruit-stalls with their crumbling pyramids of gold and red apples, and over the meat-stall with its tray of greyish cooked things in thin wet pastry, and over the stall owned by the school-teacher's wife, piled with green glass bowls of brooches with tiny hanging bells. There are three streets leading into the square, and the fat red Warding-pillars are already lurking in clusters around their mouths, ready to be put into their lines in the evening. The faint ghosts of the two moons—pressed so close together now that they form a misshapen hourglass-shape—are just barely visible in the sky.

The girl slips into the crowd quite comfortably; if anyone notices her, they don't show it, and even the school-teacher's wife's bright blue eyes pass over her with neutrality. But she keeps her head down, and doesn't linger; crowds are never good, even if they sometimes seem so.

Saltwife Jeanine has moved out of her stall and into a proper shop, a little room sandwiched between the bakery and the chandler's. She doesn't look up when the girl comes in; she's tallying something, greying head bent over the ledger-book. The saltwife—almost six feet tall, thick and shapeless with age--looks like she's been cut out of a stone, all weathered, eaten skin and great craggy features; her hair is bound into a queue like a man's, and her cheeks have no colour in them.

The girl comes right up to the counter, places her hands on the cool granite. The room is dim, the shutters half-closed. What light there is falls in a thick stripe along the saltwife and her book, and along the deep wooden bowls of salt, making the crystals glitter. One pile is white as ice; one is coarser and dove-grey; and the third is a blushing, sea-shell, sunrise pink. The girl feels an almost uncontrollable urge to plunge her hands into them, to feel the crack and crunch of them in her fists.

She knows better, of course. She knows that the fate of all salt is to become unpleasant.

“Two Heads of the grey, please,” she manages to say. Fumbles for the coins in her pocket. The grey salt is the ugliest, and therefore the cheapest.

Without a word, the saltwife sets her pen down—ink dribbling onto the paper—and picks up the little metal cup she uses for the salt. The girl looks up into her wide face, trying to see some kind of animation in it, but there is none. She throws the salt into a paper bag with alarming speed, not even looking at the cup. It's as if a customer is a hindrance.

“Wardings?” the saltwife asks abruptly. Her voice is like a cart rumbling down a track.

“What?”

“The salt.” The cup returns to its place under the counter. “It's for your Wardings?”

“Yes,” the girl says, taken by surprise.

“You live up in that cottage?” the saltwife asks. She rolls the neck of the paper bag down. “Near the woods?”

The girl stares at her. It makes sense that the saltwife would recognise her, of course—her mother doesn't leave the house often anymore, so the girl's been down to see Jeanine every month or so. Despite that, the old woman has never shown any sign of familiarity before.

“Yes,” the girl says.

“Your mother used to work at the Manor, then, didn't she. I remember. I made the deliveries.”

“She did,” the girl tells her, and adds “I'll tell her you said 'hello'.”

“Met your father once,” the saltwife says. She places the bag on the little bronze scale beside her ledger, watches the arms bob for a moment before continuing.

"Years and years ago. He was a fish, back then, a nice pink salmon. Too nice, I mean. Too big for these waters. I used to work at the water-mill and I'd see him every day, swimming past me nice as you like. . .some of the boys I worked with wanted to catch him, just for the sake of doing it. But by the time he was tangled up in their nets, he wasn't a fish anymore."

The girl presses her tongue against her palate for a moment. Words swarm up against her teeth.

"Where's the water-mill?" is what she allows herself to ask.

"Oh, it closed down long ago," the saltwife said. "I was very young then. It was up where the river turns, on the road to Harwood. The machines are still there, I believe. You've never seen them?"

The girl shakes her head. She's always been well-disposed towards the saltwife before this—a quiet woman, who never looked at her twice, and who never asked many questions—but now it seems as though the unavoidable fact of the Week has loosened her tongue.

"Your father used to spend a lot of time there by the river," says the saltwife, meditatively. She holds out the paper packet of salt. "It was hard to talk to him. He'd been a fish so long his whole body radiated cold, like his veins were full of river-water. Men are cold, though. What can we say?"

The girl takes the packet; folds it over on itself. Perhaps she's a little clumsy with it, or perhaps a few crystals are clinging to the outside, because the pain that shoots through her hand isn't something that could come from a needle-prick or anything as mundane as that. In a second, it feels as though her whole arm is being clamped in a hot vice; the packet hits the ground, and she doubles over with a cry.

Saltwife Jeanine puts her hand to her red chin.

"I've always thought it strange that your mother sends you to buy salt," she says. "I suppose she wants you to remember that—"

"Shut up, old bitch," the girl spits. Her hair, which was brushed only a few hours ago, now hangs over her face like a sandy curtain. Her fists are clenched. The small muscles of her arms tense to lash out.

The saltwife, behind her counter, is unmoved. She has walked as far as the Southern coast and as far as Berta's Glade in the North; she has seen worse than

this. She puts her head down, returns to her ledger, the dullness fallen back over her eyes. The girl bends and retrieves the salt, hands trembling, pinching the paper between finger and thumb.

“Wardings,” the saltwife says, tonelessly, from behind her. The girl can feel sweat trickling down her back. She turns on her heel and walks out.

When she's back in the square the day seems a little less pleasant, the sun a little harsher as it dips lower in the sky. As she approaches the Holding-House she's aware not of eyes on her, but of eyes turned pointedly away, in a way that she wasn't before.

It feels like walking through a flock of birds, crowding the way they do the barley-field after the seeds have been sown; they move out of her way as she approaches, and their gazes sting her back after she has passed. The weight of the salt in her pocket is vaguely hot, as though it wants to burn her through the paper and cloth. How many of them are thinking of the old days, before the Holding-House was built, when the signs on the purple banners were not Warding-bars of rejection but Pointing-hands, fingers angled towards the woods, signaling the direction in which the fire-bearing processions would move?

She's halfway across the square when the first shout rings out.

“Witch-kin!”

The girl feels her heart fall inside her chest; drop right down into her stomach. She feels her eyes grow round and hot. She keeps walking.

“You, witch-kin! Where are you going?”

Out of the corner of her eye she sees him: Goodman Adler, nearly seventy now, more than twice the age to sit on the council but too much of a young man ever to do so, with his snow-white tangle of beard and speckled skin. Around his neck hangs a string of rough purple crystals, dug out of the riverside caves where the moonlight cannot reach. When she was younger, he'd told stories to them outside the schoolhouse in a voice just like a Southern minstrel's, and despite never having spoken to him she'd seen him as a bit of a rowdy grandfather, someone sprung out of one of his own plays. Now his face is flushed with drink, and the eyes that had passed over her face in a crowd of small faces are trained directly on her.

“There's no point in going back to the forest,” he calls, “when you'll only try to get out again.”

Someone laughs, loud and sharp, and without her willing it, the girl's legs break into a run. She can't help it. A sob is brought up deep from her insides, and that black and restless dog that had barked inside the saltwife's shop has its paws pressed against her ribcage, whining to be let out. Adler is laughing. Nobody tries to stop her, but nobody tries to help her, either. They turn their heads to watch her go.

At the Holding-House she veers left and darts through the rusted gate, which hangs now loose and squeaking in the breeze. On either side of the path, marble statues of the Beholden Saints stare down at her from between the saplings, their fine faces all perfectly identical. This path leads to the new graveyard behind the House; to the people in the square, perhaps, it will look as though she wants to visit her grandmother, who was buried just barely a week after her birth.

The truth is that the Holding-House is safe. During the rest of the year, the girl never sets a foot inside its wide dark doorway without a miserable shiver; there is always a new sermon to listen to, or a new hymn to memorise, in amongst the pews crowded with staring faces. But during the Week, she knows, the House-Holders will all be locked away and clustered around the altar, praying to the Beholders to lift the Unreason from the town, as they do every year; and the townspeople will have more important things to worry about than attending Mass.

Shaking, the girl comes out into the graveyard—a tiny pocket of land, scarcely larger than her own kitchen, and crowded with cheap tombstones, none older than ten years. The clean grey newness of them has always left her unable to believe that there are real bodies beneath them, made of real bone and real dust.

Today, though, she is not alone. A tangle of colourless hair, a mess of weathered skin under a hood, a mouth pulled into a vague smile. The girl freezes, herbs clutched protectively to her chest. Leaning against the stone wall of the Holding-House, the unfamiliar woman makes a slow, clumsy gesture of warding.

“Are you the beastie, then?” she asks. Her accent is Southerly. She must be one of those from the caravans, on their way to Bertha's Grove to join in next month's Jubilation, trapped here for the Week by the closing of the forest road. Her clothes

are mismatched, her white cotton blouse frayed and yellowing, but her wrists gleam with bright metals.

The girl holds her breath. The woman raises her head and she sees milk-white eyes, dull as if enameled over.

"I heard them talking about you," she says. "Earlier. And now all the shouting. Poor wee beast."

"Who are you?" the girl wants to know.

"My name is Margery," she says. "I sell bells."

"Bells?" the girl mutters. She tries stepping to the right, then to the left. Margery's dreamy smile does not change, neither do her eyes move. She's blind.

"That's right," she says. "I'm a bell-seller."

She lifts one fragile wrist, then the other, and the girl sees that it's true. What she first took to be gold and silver bracelets—such as she imagines Lady Lamb might wear—are in fact cheap, crowded chains of tiny bells, like garishly-coloured seeds. They make a noise like many birds chirping all together.

"The dancing-boys at Cimbria wear bells just like these," the woman croons. "Wouldn't you care to buy a few for tonight?"

The girl would. "No," she says stoutly, and steps closer to the corner of the Holding-House to listen. Adler has fallen silent—mercifully—and in a few minutes, she'll likely be able to emerge again.

"The rest of my wares," the blind woman says, "are in my caravan, on the other side of town."

"Then what are you doing here?" the girl asks.

Margery heaves a long sigh, smiles, and makes no answer. Her eyes are fixed somewhere a little to the right of the girl's face.

Giving up, the girl leans her head back against the stone wall, sighing. Although she doesn't necessarily like being at home, she can't think of anywhere she'd rather be right now. Up in the sky, the moons—one hidden almost completely behind the other—are only growing brighter. It will be dark soon.

"So, witch-kin," Margery says behind her, "I assume you're the same beast-girl who lives up on the hill by the woods, unless of course there are two of you, which would be rather exciting."

The girl doesn't answer.

"I'm joking, of course," Margery says. "Of course there's only one of you. They say you live all the way up there," (a trembling, vague movement of the hand towards the sky) "up by the woods, in a house all surrounded by Warding-pillars."

"I do live there," the girl says stiffly.

"In that case," Margery said, "I've a feeling I've met your father." When the girl stares, she laughs, as if she can feel it. "Oh, many years ago, when I passed through here last. Tens of years ago. Saw him with my real honest-to-God eyes." She cackles. "What do you think happened to me?"

The girl gapes at her.

"I'm joking!" Margery says. "Your father didn't make me blind. But, listen, I did see him once. I'm not lying."

She leers. Perhaps, without having seen her face for many years, she doesn't know how widely her lips part, how her yellow teeth peek out. "I remember it so clearly, girl. Those moons weren't aligned; nothing could come crawling out of your forest. But I went walking into it; I certainly didn't expect to see anything unusual there. . . ." Her pale woody fingers drift across her eyelids. "I only glimpsed him for a moment; I knew I had to run. So many wings, girl, and his feathers the colour of white gold. . . and the light that fell from his flesh and his eyes, as pure as morning dew. Just like the stories."

A shudder runs down the girl's spine.

"Just like the stories," Margery repeats placidly, eyes focused on nothing, spinning one of her drooping chains around her wrist. "All eyes and teeth once he saw me, but, you know—it was my own fault, being not from around here, and wandering off like that."

"How do you know he was my father?" the girl asks. Her own voice is husky; she is surprised to find tears lurking at the edges of it.

Margery doesn't reply for a long moment. Then she says: "I don't, of course."

"There are many, many. . . men like my father in the woods."

Margery's lips split in a smile. She is not as old as she looks, the girl thinks; the road-life has ruined her completely, but her lips are still red and full. "In that case, it

doesn't make much of a difference, does it? Whether it was your father, or another one just like him. . .” She cackles. “Men!”

“I'll be leaving,” the girl says, and when she leaps to her feet the hot tears are jolted out of her eyes, falling down her cheeks without much ceremony or purpose.

When the night comes it comes gently, the way it tends to in small towns; a shadow lowering itself slowly over the houses until they become indistinct, and only the Holding-House and the house of the cloth merchant from the South are illuminated, windows spitting light onto the purple banners that tremble in the warm wind. The moons are lying almost across each other, like a great eye with a wide autumn-yellow pupil, and their gathered light fades the stars.

In the square the people have gathered, as they do every year; the Warding-pillars barring each exit blaze with candlelight. Goodman Adler stands on the raised verandah of the Holding-House and tells the stories of the men and women who have been found, over the years, after the end of the Week, and of those who have not been; he tells the stories of the old processions, which took place in the days when the town was a city, and of the burning of the nests of the creatures in the forests, who sleep so long and so deeply that only the doubled light can wake them.

And at the edge of the town, the Southern travelers have fashioned charms of cedar and bird-blood for protection, and have filled bowls with honey and milk and left them at a great distance from the caravans, so that any visitors from the woods may be more inclined to drink than anything else.

The house on the hill is silent.

Downstairs, the windows have all been closed, their curtains drawn. Salt lies in thick, narrow, greyish scabs along the bottoms of the door-frames and along the windowsills. A single candle burns red in the kitchen; the girl's mother is making herself busy.

The girl is upstairs in her bedroom, in a more complete kind of darkness. The curtains drawn over her windows are made of thick, dark cloth; the spaces around her door is stuffed with thin Warding-rods, the same scratched sticks which are brought out every year. The ropes dig into her wrists and ankles. Her bladder is uncomfortably full, but it's better than being thirsty.

In the woods, those things stir.

Here: it is midnight. The Week has begun. The girl's mother sits at the kitchen table with the knife in her hand, a huge and delicate thing, blade sharpened to a perfect and unsustainable point. The low light of the candle is dissolved in it. She balances the edge against her thumb, idly, waiting. She does not leave the house often; her skin is milk-white and soft with lack of work; the red welt beads with blood.

Outside, the girl's father is smiling very widely; he does not know how to do anything else with his human face, which is far more complex than the snout of a fox or the beak of a bird, and also a much newer and more unfamiliar device than either of those. His eyes are bright and shining. His cheeks are as smooth as apples and as soft. His body is naked but not cold. He knocks at the kitchen door.

The girl's mother points the silver knife at the door. The bare toes she glimpses between the door and the floor cannot, to the best of her knowledge, cross salt, but the creatures in the woods have lived a long time and, she suspects, knows things she does not.

"Stay away from her," she says. After all these years, her voice doesn't even tremble. This, she knows, is as close as she will come to the tight cell of the family; the mother and child warm in the house, and the father out in the dark asking to be let in, and the scene repeating itself year after year. The next knock makes the windows tremble. Outside, the father is still smiling, and he presses a wide palm against the wood as if to soothe it.

"Let her come to me," he says. His voice is weak and unclear. In the girl's bedroom, her eyes roll back into her head.

"Get away," the girl's mother murmurs. There are no scars left, but the memory of various pains—in her wrists and between her legs—have returned to her with a vast and miserable clarity. She raises her voice. "Fuck off!"

The moons have fallen perfectly into each other; the father tilts his head back so that their light can be brought into him; and in the bedroom the girl begins to scream. Her flesh burns with the shadows of other things, runs every which way; feathers break through the skin on her face, soft and downy and slick with blood, only for an instant; the backs of her hands and her knee-caps thicken with scales; the fur that crowds her neck and presses on her wind-pipe with its weight is the precise colour of

Lady Lamb's rubies. The pain is unbearable. Her feet kick and thump against the floor as her legs thrash, as if they would run if they could.

She will faint soon, the girl's mother thinks, and then there will be silence. She gets to her feet, presses her ear against the front door, caressing her palm with the knife-blade.

"She is mine," the father says. "She will come into the forest one day."

"Nothing is yours," the mother says. "Men can't own things."

"She is mine," the father says.

The girl strains, howls, writhes, but the ropes hold. In the town square, they are trying not to notice the eyes which glitter like dust in the alley ways, or the way the flames of the Warding-pillars shiver and falter, but in the house the mother is not afraid. The girl is the only thing she has left to lose. She flips the knife around and holds it out towards the door.

"You stay away," she says, and on the other side of the wood the father's grin widens.

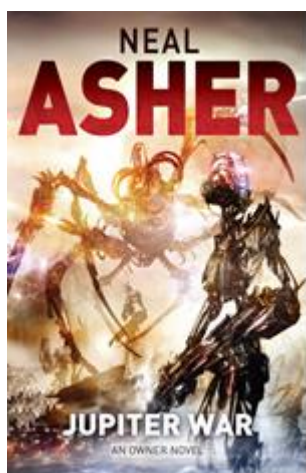
#####



Book Reviews Ian and Gail Jamieson, Kyle Brunette

Neal Asher Jupiter War. "The Owner Series" Book Three. (Paperback)

Pan Macmillan. R160



Alan Saul is now part human, a very small part, part machine, and last something else. He is converting the space station Argus into a FTL starship, but he does not have much time. He has thwarted the plans of Earth's supreme dictator, serene Galahad, and she is determined to stop him from leaving and to very publically execute him.

In the meantime the spaceship Scourge, now badly damaged, is limping back to Earth with its psychotic captain, Scotonis, determined to annihilate Galahad at

any cost. Saul knows his powers are greater than anything else, but he badly underestimates his adversaries who force him to crash on Io. However his adversaries badly underestimate him, and he finally triumphs..... HOORAY!

Asher is one of my favourite authors and he writes exceptionally well, but this is not one of his best books. His descriptions of Saul are ambiguous at best and do not explain his motivations.

3/5

Ian

Daniel Abraham :The Widow's House" The Dagger and the Coin. Book Four.

Pan Macmillan (Trade Paperback)

I have sometimes wondered how many of the villains in history, and even fiction, look on themselves as such. This is certainly true for Gedar Palliako, Lord Regent of Anthea, and completely under the thumb of Basrahip, chief minister of the Spider Goddess. He is the most human of villains, not sure about this, dithering about that, worried about all the paperwork.

Marcus Wester, ex-general, warrior and mercenary has just managed to awaken Inys, the Last Dragon, after it's sleep of thousands of years. Not being too happy about



the length of its sleep, Inys decrees Wester to be its voice and servant.

In the past the Dragons were at war with the Spiders and Inys takes up his task again, only to be humiliated by opposing warriors who knew he was coming and designed weapons to be used against him.

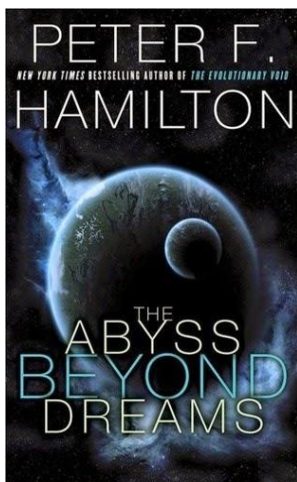
There is far more to this book than this, but readers should start at Book One and follow the whole story.

This is a well-paced novel, entertaining and the /Dragon is a delight. The characters are very human, the story flows nicely and this is epic fantasy at its best. BUT, the book does not end. It simply stops at the last chapter in the book. Something I dislike intensely.

4/5

Ian

**The Abyss Beyond Dreams. A novel of the Commonwealth. Peter F. Hamilton
PanMacmillan. Uncorrected Proof copy**



Hamilton returns us to the worlds of the “Commonwealth”, and the Void, an artefact at the centre of the Milky Way which is slowly but steadily expanding and consuming all stars in its path.

The alien Raiel, who have been guarding the borders of the Void for over one million Earth years, believe it is due for a massive expansion. They ask the help of Nigel Sheldon, billionaire adventurer, to go inside the Void on a journey of exploration. Sheldon crashes on an Earth-like planet ruled by the Captain, great-great grandson of the captain of an

Earth starship which had somehow entered the Void and crashed leaving its crew unable to return.

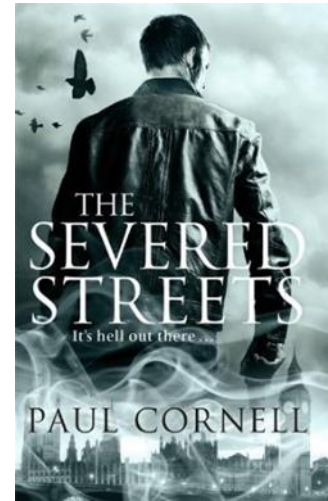
This is an entertaining space opera and, dare, I say it, romance, written with style, but it is not Hamilton at his best. The first 100 pages are mainly dull, and too often there are long descriptive passages which add nothing to the narrative.

3/5

Ian

Paul Cornell The Severed Streets Tor Pan Macmillan R269.00 (Hardcover)

This novel gives us another chapter in the adventures of the under- cover policemen and plain-clothes detectives who are led by Detective Inspector James Quill in a rather different London. This is the squad that gained an ability to see into the occult in Cornell's earlier novel, "London Falling" and they continue to use their ability to see into "Hell" to get to the bottom of a series of crimes that seem to be based in some way on the Whitechapel series of murders attributed to "Jack the Ripper", with one very noticeable difference: the victims are all rich white men.



The killer seems to have the ability to be able to move through solid objects slowly and invisibly and so it would seem that the supernatural abilities of the squad will enable them to track down the killer.

But things are not simple and budget cut and a looming police strike also complicate matters.

Adding Neil Gaiman to the mix of a gothic London underground and you get an entertaining and intriguing story.

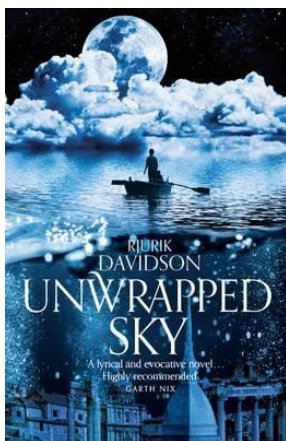
Once again Cornell's experience at writing gothic novels and epic BBC TV episodes and the fact that he writes exceptionally well have given us a book that is well worth perusing, even if you have not read "London Falling".

I look forward to further episodes in the future

5/5

Gail

Rjurik Davidson Unwrapped Sky Tor PanMacmillan (Trade paperback)



Fantasy novels often are about politics, but from outside and the "hero" is often the story of a "simple" character who is destined to become king.

Rjurik Davidson's, new book, Unwrapped Sky, is rather different. Davidson writes fantasy in which political struggles take place within societies, rather than simply between them. Unwrapped Sky unfolds in the city of Caeli-Amur, where magic co-exists with a degraded industrial civilisation, and factory workers rub shoulders with minotaurs.

The narrative charts the fortunes of Kata, a philosopher-assassin, Boris Autec, a bureaucrat on the rise, and Maximilian, a seditionist – and, through their interactions, the fate of Caeli-Amur in a time of revolutionary upsurge.

The descriptions of the city are beautiful but there is also a lot of sad reality in the novel which make it a rather dark and unhappy novel.

Also the main characters are not the type of people I was able to find a great deal of sympathy for in their struggles.

In a lot of ways this novel is more about ideas than people and so at times a little heavy going.

Having said that it is very well written and if you are not inclined to the “happy-go-lucky” fixes all type of story; this one might be for you.

3 ½ /5

Gail

Erika Johansen Queen of the Tearling

At this point in time, fantasy stories are a dime a dozen, and Erika Johansen's Queen of the Tearling is no different.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, however, because if you like fantasy, then you'll probably enjoy this book.

Johansen tells a somewhat interesting tale of the young queen, Kelsea Glynn, who, raised in secret after the death of her mother, returns to rule the Tearling on her 19th birthday



All in all, Queen of the Tearling is well-written and entertaining, with enough of a story to make it worth the read. However, it does fall into the all-too-common (and lazy) "magic solves everything" ending, which is unfortunate considering that it had built up to that point rather well. Apparently this is the first book of a projected three, so there is still more story to come. It will be interesting to see where it leads.

Kyle

Nova 2014 2nd Place South African Section

WHAT SHEM REMEMBERED by REEN COLLETT

The two translators looked at one another. They had at last found a story, one that was reasonably coherent, among all the clay tablets, some in fragments, lying on the table before them. George was the specialist in Sumerian cuneiform, and Steve was the writer. It had been a hard slog in many ways, trying to piece together the fragments, and even guess at some words and phrases that were gone...crumbled in the dust of aeons. But as the sentences unfolded they'd been excited to discover a real story...perhaps even a bit of ancient history.

It was George who'd changed the Sumerian 'heat adjusting arrow' to 'thermostat', and 'silver water' to 'mercury' and so on. And Steve had managed to do a bit of writerly magic, re-arranging the awkward phrases so that they sounded less odd to modern ears, and omitting the chant-like repetitions.

They'd put it on video, along with photos of the tablets at the relevant parts.

They inserted the video, sat back and read the text as it unrolled...to the faint accompaniment of Middle Eastern music, courtesy of Audio Network, their favourite source of music.

What Shem Remembered

Granpapa's name was Boru but everyone called him by his code name, Shem. He said it meant Sound or Name, in some language his parents admired when he was little. We often listened to his splendid stories of those other times, before the Great Deluge. And he loved to tell them too. He said it was good for the memory, which could get rusty from lack of use. He was, of course, extremely old. About one thousand years would not have been improbable. He was completely illiterate...as were most people of his day when all communicating devices were voice-activated, as was all information technology. He did not agree with all this 'writing' that some people did nowadays, and said it chased away many inner skills that people used to have in those other times. He told me to resist the temptation to learn it, and to leave it to the Scribes whose job it was. As a result, my own memory is good. Here, since you ask, is a story from Grandpapa Shem's life. I have written it down exactly as he told it to us. You will have to get someone who can read our clay tablets to translate it for you:

Think of it, children! There was I, a youngster of about sixteen seasons! My father... that is your Great-Grandfather Zu Sudra...he being Captain of the vessel, had

allowed me to watch the red line of the temperature gauges, and make sure that temperatures in the Chamber of Seed-life were steady and the thermostats followed the spoken instructions. I was immensely proud, as you can easily imagine.

We had been underwater for weeks, to many islands, garnering specimens of marine life, to bring them back unharmed and alive. It was all part of experiments that my father's employer, Lord Enki, or 'Earth Chief', was performing. He, a huge giant of a man with blond hair down to his waist in many plaits, called them 'Life Experiments'. Sashun was his real name. We knew him simply as 'the Chief'. He was a Mukulian, and a clever scientist, one of what the scribes and the common people called 'Anunaki'. That meant Son of Anu. Anu being the ruler of Mukulia*. Many people had seen them arrive from Mukulia in their skycraft.

The vessel? Yes, the submarine! My word, it was huge. Made of specially-treated woods, powered by mercury. Marvellous living quarters. Once inside and under water, you missed nothing. There were food gardens under Life-lights, exercise courts, bathing pools, the kitchen where Mother and the other women put together delicious meals with no cooking whatsoever. Well, they were trained dietary experts, you see. Staterooms and cabins were small but comfortable, with every amenity. They had Viewing Screens, electromagnetic communicating devices...that is, the ECD as everyone called it...and what else? The excrement ejector! Correct! A touch of a lever, and out it went, into the sea. Bathing pools? Yes, that water, plus our drinking water, all was desalinated on Level 5, alongside thermostats, and the air-conditioner.

So, to get back to my story... an urgent call came to Father to return to base immediately. I was disappointed, because we had not yet been to the Far East.

But Father said, 'Never mind, Shem, the Chief has all the marine life he needs from there, so we would have anyway passed through very quickly'.

We arrived back in Middle Lake, through the Rock Portals and into the Island's harbour, just in time to see a fleet of oriental Vimanas rise into the air and zoom off before disappearing in a string of silver flashes. It had been a while since they had paid a visit, so Father put his ear plugs in to listen to the Chief. My older brothers, Leo and Jahan were there. I watched everyone, trying to guess what had happened. Father's face became grave, as he listened. Everyone was silent. The moments passed but I knew I had to get to my task, so...I missed what was said. Jahan told me all about it later.

The urgency, as it turned out, was this:

In the East, the Atlantean armies were at it again. They had in a past century threatened the Rama Empire, and been made to look silly by the Empire's Rishis, as their scientists were called. But it appeared that Atlantis was now under new management, so to say, and were more aggressive. They had developed fantastic new weapons. Yes, you are right... brahmashiras ...nuclear explosives!

Could not the Chief, Lord Enki, do anything, you say? Of course... he tried very hard, as did Lady Hursag. They discussed the matter with the Enlil or 'Commander' ,

but that one was adamant. He was not going to interfere. He was strong on that. He and Anu were of one mind: Let the antagonists finish one another off.

According to Anu, they had become inbred, aggressive, and stupid with it, and the quicker they got rid of one another the better. Lord Enki tried to reason with the others. Nuclear weapons would mean ecological disaster! Possible cataclysms, which might easily set off a domino effect. According to Father, the Chief was greatly upset. Father and my brothers listened in and heard him pleading in desperation.

It would mean sacrificing the innocent, along with the guilty, he cried. It had no effect. The other two threatened to endanger his experiments, even put a stop to them, if he did not comply with the orders of non-interference. They said his experiments had become ridiculous.

'It is just an ego-spree on your part, brother!' said the Enlil, 'and a dangerous one at that! Look what has happened in the tropical forests? Pah! Where was your so-called compassion then? Hm? Sashun! Switch off the transmitter...' and the sound died.

Father and my brothers stared at one another, their thoughts circulating anxiously.

All right, I will tell you what was happening. Father's Chief, Sashun the Enki, had discovered the secrets of cross-species breeding...Did you not know that? A legend? Nonsense. I thought you children knew all about this. What were they? Well, you have seen the records. That is exactly how they were. You have all seen that frieze of two slender, long-necked dogs with cat faces being led on leashes by attendants? There were dogs with wings and lion's heads, cats with horns and beaks...well, of course centaurs you know about. They were successful. Gorillas in the tropics. They were successful. If you can call that success. That is what Anu was alluding to when he mentioned compassion. The gorillas and orangutans suffered badly. They begged the Chief to make an end of them, but he had not the nerve to kill what he had created.

Killing has a severe karmic result and he was not prepared for that on the scale that would have been necessary. He thought his fish folk... yes, mermen...were wonderful. Leaping marsupial donkeys, bigger than houses, in the Southern Hemisphere...very successful. Father used to say he thought the Commander's family were jealous of the Chief's growing success and popularity.

Then a strange thing happened.

My shift had ended and I was present then, and saw and heard it all.

Father's ECD – the communicating device, remember? – started spluttering and the power-lights flashed. Almost as if someone had tried to adjust something. We began to overhear an argument. A faint sound of distant voices came through. The clearest one was the Chief's:

'You want me to stand aside and see innocent communities wiped out? What for? Cannot they be given ARQ 1040...?'

'There will not be time!' said another voice. 'Even if we brought in enough vessels, ARQ 1040 instructions need weeks of educating, plus a long screening process to weed out the...' There was a hiss and crackle and other voices were heard:

'You're a minority of two, Sashun!... You and Lady Hursag!'

'...Is that transmitter off...?' (That sounded like Anu).

'Yes, yes, Anu, the sound-screen is on...' (That was the Chief).

Then Anu again: 'Your lab will be wiped out! All your work gone! Do you understand me, Sashun? Unless you comply!'

'But Anu...by the gods! It will be global disaster!...'

'Hardly...the higher altitudes will not be much affected...'

'Call me egotistical, inhumane...! This is insanity...!' His voice sounded broken.

Suddenly the same voice sounded very near but in a low tone – 'ARQ1040 to...NO, AH!'

Then, 'What is going on?' Anu could be heard demanding.

The Chief replied, his voice again far away, 'Nothing... I touched a live ray...this thing is faulty...' There were hisses, splutters, and then silence.

'ARQ1040!' Father whispered.

We all understood. 1040! The Prime Survival Instructions code! Its panel light was flashing. Instructions had been voice-activated by the Chief himself. And it could not be revoked.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind. We had been meant to hear it.

Leo quickly voice-activated the submarine's ECD and the screen showed his code name: CHAM, followed by emergency instructions which had been voiced-in by the Chief himself long ago, when the submarine was still being constructed.

At once everything went into emergency mode. All Lord Enki's lab work, living cells, both sexes of everything he had, Human as well, in phials and flasks by the thousand, slid easily into position on Level 4.

Jahan then spoke his own code: JAFTA, and stores for several months were hauled in. Following instructions, all workmen on the docks were told only that it was a new project for the Southern Hemisphere.

It was while the last bits and pieces were being put into position that we heard that a part of Atlantis had blown up. Tsunami warnings were received. Then oriental latitudes began showing abnormal radiation readings...

On a day of heavy rain, the ARQ submerged. I Shem, and my brothers Cham and Jafta listened as Father voiced-in a farewell message to his Chief, using his own code-name: "NOAH, to the Enki..."

*Lost Cities & Ancient Mysteries of Africa & Arabia, By David Hatcher Childress

See also: lemurianfellowship.org: "Within an incredibly short time, the... Mukulian Empire ... was organized 78,000 years ago on ...what is now the Pacific Ocean... it eventually achieved cultural and material accomplishments which would seem impossible today."

The two men looked at one another. George was smiling broadly. Steve was nodding, his expression thoughtful. "I can see some things to alter already".

"Nonsense, Steve. It's spot on."

"Do you think I should leave in that footnote?"

"Why not? Sort of finishes it off nicely."

Steve picked up one of the fragments. "I suppose so. And what else are we to make of this...'reed screen' and 'reed wall' business, anyway? Your translation as 'sound screen' is great, since sound and voice operated everything." He tossed it unceremoniously back among the others.

George clicked 'Save', leaned back and stretched. "I know. The scribes were after all only writing gospel according to the reigning Anunaki ruler."

"... and later according to the Sumerian king appointed by the Anunaki. It happens all the time. History according to the victors...or the government of the day..."

"Who by that time had lost most of the knowledge of what had actually gone on so many thousands of years before..."

"Exactly. So they can only imagine what some previous scribe meant by 'reed'....It could even have been a code term for some piece of voice-activated technology."

Steve nodded. "Like the early Peruvians who called some deity's communication device a 'stone that speaks oracles'. I love that! A good slogan for a cellphone company's new model!"

They closed down and went off to lunch.

Books Received

PanMacmillan

Sword in Steel. Douglas Hulick R160.00

The Severed Streets. Paul Cornell R269.00

Unwrapped Sky. Rjurik Davidson no price

Jupiter War. Neal Asher R160.00

The Abyss Beyond Dreams. Peter F. Hamilton

Book Promotions/Jonathan Ball

1411 QI Facts to knock you sideways. Lloyd and Mitchinson R210.00

The Mammoth Book of SF Stories by Women. Alex Dally MacFarlane R190.00

Empire. John Connolly & Jennifer Ridyard. R265.00

1001 Movies You Must Watch Before You Die. Steven Jay Schneider. R350.00

The Dagger's Path. Glenda Larke. R185.00

The Mammoth book of New SF 27. Gardner Dozois. R270.00

Nova 2014 2nd Place General Section

ELECTRIC SHEEP BY KERRY ANDERSON

"How am I going to sell this, root?" groans banks. He is hanging over root's shoulder, violating about a hundred of her personal space edicts. Still, she can't really blame him. When she and grub designed the office space for their server hosting they decided office space was less important than a kick-ass server room. But Server rooms get noisy. With her headphones on this is not usually a problem. Root slouches over her keyboard uncomfortably, trying to avoid physical contact with banks. Or death by eau-de-you-overpaid-for-that asphyxiation.

"It's not for sale. It's ..." root adds in a mental dun-dun-daaa, "free." This has proven to be a conversation-stopper in the past though so she adds: "Banks. As I keep trying to tell you, there is a huge online gaming community for text-based MUD games. And it's not just hard-core old-timers. It's newbies who love a puzzle or role-players or non-vis gamers or ... or ... well lots of people." She doesn't want to add 'people like me' because she knows banks and she knows what he thinks of her and so she knows this will not help her case.

"So by 'huge' you really mean 'niche'. Is that about right?"

"Fine. Niche. Whatever. This helps you banks. My gamers don't pay for my games but they might pay for all the other ... stuff ... you produce." Actually not even she believes this but it might be worth a shot with banks. Banks for his part looks hurt.

"It would be helpful, root, if you occasionally gave me a little credit. So tell me about it then."

"It's a simple quest called 'Electric Sheep'. The objective is to find the Dolphin Hotel, then find the Sheep Man. All players must choose a character that is a hybrid of an animal, either real or mythical. Your character has particular gifts based on what sort of animal you choose. The human component is there basically just to slow you down." Banks is staring at her like she has lost her mind.

“FCOL, root.” Banks does love him some acronyms. Root does a mental eye roll along with an acronym of her own creation. “Are you still obsessed with that Japanese dude.”

“Haruki Marukami. Yes.” Root acknowledges easily. She codes for the loners, the purists, the ones like her. In her heart, she believes Haruki Murakami writes for the same audience. The ones for whom normal is a too-tight undergarment that must be worn every day. Besides, she has always liked the idea of coding a space 'like a button on a shirt buttoned wrong'. Like the Dolphin Hotel.

“Anyway ... so far, so predictable, right? The twist is in the code.” She speaks quickly now. There is a window of about 90 seconds to talk to banks about code. After that he glazes over. “The game tree begins as a simple recursion. But I've added in a sub-function, essentially a web-crawler, that attaches a new game tree from another game at each iteration.”

“Which means ...”

“At any given moment my MUDder is playing in any one of a number of possible environments with their own set of rules.” I'm losing him. “So imagine you're in street downtown Zorg. Turn left and you're on a dune on Planet Gudon. Turn right and you're in a forest in the Zorg low countries. The Dolphin Hotel, the Sheep Man could be anywhere. You have to interact with the other players to find out where you are and then to figure the clues I've planted.”

“Is that legal ... to crawl other game trees I mean?”

“Well,” Dammit. This is why she should not be speaking to banks. “I'm sure they won't mind?”

“This is an experiment, root. Got that? Do not go live with this. Wrap it up and start helping grub with the new Project:Blitz game.”

Banks was so much more fun at 'varsity. There, he had latched onto root and grub as the scribe for their work. No one likes to document but Banks would do it for them in exchange for a shared mark on pretty much every computer science project after first year. And they need him. He does the marketing and sales for their bread-and-butter server management business and the more mainstream games they produce. As root and grub poured themselves into the moulds of their adopted names, so did banks.

Shortly after banks has left, there is a stirring at the desk behind the server rack. Papers shift. Mostly likely grub's bills. He has an innovative approach to bills: he uses the paper as if it were blank, to work out his gaming algorithms. It appeals to his sense of order in the universe. He feels that bills are incorrectly used to inflict numbers on people as if they were weapons. He creates algorithms where numbers are used like poetry. His poetry cancels out their weapons. Needless to say, the companies concerned seldom see it that way. A hand appears on the desk, followed by a birds nest of hair, its colour like a tarnished ten cent piece, two sleep-encrusted eyes, a too long nose and limbs gangly and sloth-languid. Grub hauls himself onto the junk shop chair behind his desk, yawns widely and dons his headphones. And just like that root is happy.

grub> 'sup, root?

His typed message appears on her screen.

root> Banks is not loving the electric sheep mud.

grub> Let me guess: text-based MUD based on your disturbing obsession with a Japanese author?

root> You been peeking?

grub> Geez root.

Their chat is interrupted by another massive yawn and some random scratching.

root> How's Project:Blitz? Come up with any new ways to randomly annihilate stuff?

He ignores her jibe.

grub> Not bad. It'll sell. Uses some new-fangled invention called a GUI ... you may have heard of it?

grub>Need coffee?

root> Yes ... you give me milk again I'm going to delete random code segments from your game.

He smiles through the ragged red undergrowth of his beard. The effect as he stands is of continuous-feed computer paper unfolding.

A little later the server room door opens again, letting in an incongruous beam of semi-natural light from the corridor into the twilight of the server room. Grub grabs a

seat next to root on one of the Pilates balls she once bought them with the best of intentions. He stares over her shoulder at her screen. Somehow the personal space edicts don't apply to him. Now she is just aware of her greasy hair, sloppy T-shirt, unbrushed teeth.

"Would you like to try it out?" Her voice is a little croaky. She thinks she prefers typing.

"Sure?"

"I'd like your opinion."

Grub smiles at her response and ruffles her hair. "Let's mud ..."

> You are standing on a deserted street in a downtown nowhere. The street is lit by neon signs in a language you cannot identify. The rain is pouring down and you are getting sopping wet. You must find shelter.

To the north: the deserted street ends in mist.

To the south: a dense forest.

To the west: a row of bars and restaurants, their windows blackened so that you cannot see in.

To the east: an hotel.

And we're off.

Grub finds himself in a hack and slash MUD very quickly and is annihilated.

"woah!"

Root looks up.

root> What?

grub> I've just been splattered on a pavement by a rogue goblin. What the hell kind of game is this?

root> Well, it was a sort of role-play mystery. But I added a modification.

grub> Tell me.

root> I want to see if I can build a fractal game by adding game-trees to this one.
grub> Just because you can hack into other games doesn't mean you should, root.
root> I know ... But aren't you just a little bit interested to see what would happen if all the game worlds collided?
Grub looks up and grins and root knows she's got him.

Hours later, root trudges home through muddy streets. Rain has come and gone and the freshness that it brought has turned to steamy sludge. It must be late because there are few other pedestrians on the streets. As if rising with the steam from the pavement she hears the languid trumpet notes of Stardust, its broken dreams melancholy pauses her weary steps and she looks up, seeking its provenance. She passes this way every day. She wonders how she could have missed the neon sign hanging askew above the smoky light emanating from the doorway to the club. Peter Cat. She shakes her head. She has been spending too much time in the game. Peter Cat is one of her red herrings. MUDders can be distracted there by a variety of characters designed to mislead them. She hurries on.

Her apartment block looms ahead, a grey concrete homage to the brutalist architecture of the 1970s. The lifts aren't working again so she huffs her way up twenty three flights of stairs. The emergency lights are on in the corridor. There must have been a power failure in the building. It suits her. She goes straight to bed without bothering to change and falls into a deep sleep.

In the morning, the power appears to still be off so she forgoes any attempts at coffee and stumbles to the bathroom. After a cold shower, she towels herself off and glances at herself in the mirror. Never her favourite time of day. Without her glasses her reflection appears fuzzy, undefined.. She makes a note to see an optometrist soon. Funny, she never struggled with her eyesight before.

The street to work looks the same now. No smoky club, no evocative jazz melodies to waylay her. Back at the server room, there is also no sign of grub. And his desk is clear. No papers, no coffee cups, no takeaway bags. The server room continues to

shriek its tune of silicon and plastic and heavy metal. A sales manager wanders in sometime during the day as if looking for someone.

“Can I help you?” she shouts, taking off her headphones (Charlie Parker, 'How Deep is the Ocean?') He ignores her and leaves. Odd, she thinks, then returns to her computer. She has ported a list of the game trees her game has accessed to a text file and is going through it. It begins with the obvious and ends with the obscure. In fact some of it looks like research: there's a sequence from her old university's faculty of human sciences that bothers her. She tries to puzzle it out for a while then decides to move on.

She connects to her game to find herself in the same place as yesterday (was it yesterday?)

> You are alone in a white room. On the table is a set of three cards. In order to leave the room you need to guess the cards.

look

> The walls of the room are white. There are three corners.

i

> you have no inventory

Root thinks. It seems a bit over simple but perhaps a binary Pascal's triangle? And the suit: in the absence of further clues she extrapolates from the triangle. She types:

Diamonds one, three, five.

> a door slides open. You may proceed. You find yourself in a maze. You can hear movements on the other side of the wall.

i

> You have no inventory

who

> players grub, banks

group grub, banks

> You are alone. You cannot group with players grub or banks. They have something you need. You must find them.

look

> To the north (n): blank wall.

> To the south (s): blank wall.

> To the west (w): open passage.

> To the east (e): blank wall.

w

> player grub tells you "Quit the game now, root."

> Minotaur enters the maze. You must now evade. Player banks tells you "help me".

> player grub tells you "NOW".

Quit

Root sits frozen. Then, at once, she grabs her rucksack and leaves the building, just walking. Although she is sure she has not taken the route home, she finds herself outside Peter Cat. Again, strains of a solo trumpet wisp and swirl around her. This time she does not resist its allure and enters the bar.

The source of the sultry trumpet melodies sits on a small stage, a grizzled looking old man, with ash-grey skin and eyes like perdition. He is largely ignored by the patrons, hunched over their drinks at shadowy tables. At the bar she makes out a familiar figure.

“Grub?” she tentatively puts a hand on his shoulder. She has seen him wear this sheepskin coat before but the game has unnerved her and she wonders whether there is something ominous in his choice.

“Root.” It's not much by way of a greeting.

“Where have you been, grub?”

“Here. Root, what did you do?” He is looking at her now but there is something vacant in those grey eyes.

“What are you talking about?”

“I can't get out.”

“The game? What do you mean? Did you find the Dolphin Hotel?”

Grub turns back to the counter. “It's all the Dolphin Hotel, root. You know that.”

“Lady can I get you something or you gonna just sit there talkin' to yerself?” She looks up into the irritated face of the bartender. He is wearing a vintage smiley t-shirt with oriental characters hand drawn underneath. Talking to herself? She turns to grub. But no one is there. The bartender's expression darkens.

“Just get your crazy ass out of here, see.”

“But did you see ...?”

“Out!”

She leaves.

When she gets into her apartment, her phone is ringing. She snatches it up.

“Honey?” It's her mom. Root sighs.

“Honey, are you there?”

“Yes, Mom. Where are you calling from? The line's bad.” Her mother sounds far away. At the bottom of a turbulent ocean.

“I'm home. We haven't heard from you. Are you ok?” Root squeezes her eyes shut. It is the combination of concern and fear that disturbs her. That tone clings to her like oil.

“It's ok. I'm ok.”

“Ok. If you're sure. You know you can come home anytime, love. You know that, don't you.”

“Yes.” No. She can't. She won't.

“The doctor said you have to keep taking the meds. Same time every day. I know it's a pain.” She doesn't. How could she know. “But he says it's the only way to prevent ...” she trails off. Prevent what? The end of root's world? The end of her mother's? She can't explain it exactly. But sometimes it is as if a veil descends over the world. She speaks and can't be heard. Others speak to her but the sound is muffled, turned down. Colours are muted and there is an alienness to the familiar that edges her toward a sort of strait-jacketed hysteria. It hasn't happened often. But often enough that she has experienced some of modern psychiatry's latest innovations.

She finishes the call and climbs into bed in the dark. She pulls the covers over her head and waits for the magical oblivion of sleep.

In her dream, she and grub stand with banks between them in front of a sheet of water. Behind the water, is a wide door. The door is open but they cannot see in. The doorway gleams and glimmers, distorting through the veil of water. Reaching for each other, they clasp hands as they pass through the water. The force of the water knocks banks down, he slips from their grasp. Root feels strangely calm as she relinks with grub. They enter through the door. They find themselves inside a cavern. Water seeps through the door, washing over their bare feet. They look down to find themselves both naked. Root observes idly that she is neither ashamed nor embarrassed. The Sheep Man waits for them with a Japanese calligraphy set precisely laid out on a steel table. He beckons for them to approach and proceeds to painstakingly paint a simple repeating pattern on each of their bodies, a helix. Each

helix is no more than 10cm high. As the Sheep Man works, root looks up at a strange star-scape that spirals above them. The water level rises, washing away the symbols even as they are created on their bodies. She and grub have not let go of each other and root finds she is unafraid, tranquil even. She feels enveloped in a velvet layer of peace.

She wakes as dawn is breaking, thinking of DNA. She knows the information Electric Sheep has accessed.

Outside, the world is twilit. She briefly wonders if there is rain forecast. Walking back towards her office she passes Peter Cat for the first time in daylight. This time, no dulcet trumpet tones. Just a closed, heavy wood door. Without hesitating she pushes it open and walks in. Grub is where she left him. Or where she thought she left him.

"The fractal. I made a mistake didn't I?"

He nods. "Tell me, root."

"I thought the recursion would continue to search for game tree structures like itself. But as it added new game trees to itself it became the fractal. Just as I had hoped. I just ... forgot ... that it would then continue to look for structures like its new self. More fractals."

"Yes, root. And what is the most perfect fractal?"

"Human DNA. But where ...?"

"You remember. You remembered last night."

"The research experiment at varsity. I had forgotten it." Perhaps lost in one of the mists of her psychotic breaks. "We contributed our DNA and they linked it to our psychological profiles. The game has accessed it."

"Fix it, root. Please." Grub points towards a door behind the trumpeter's stage. She goes through the door and arrives back in the server room.

She remembers the study. She had even had a brief and unsatisfactory conversation with one of the researchers.

"If human DNA is a fractal, could a computer replicate it?"

“It's theoretically possible. But what could a computer do with it. Only the bio-sciences can feasibly do anything useful with human DNA.” She had been intimidated by his arrogance, so she dropped it. Now, she thinks of the replicants in Blade Runner. So perfectly constructed to replicate humans that they did not know what they were. Her game was even partly inspired by it. Philip K. Dick had asked 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?'

She knows she must fix her game. But if she removes her tweak, the web-crawler that searches for self-similar structures, the fractal-generating heart of her code, her game will be a lobotomized version of itself. Better to just destroy it by removing the whole recursion. She tells herself it is better this way. She takes a deep breath. And deletes.

Blast from the past.... PROBE 132 Third Issue 2006

Tswaing Crater Expedition

On October the 7th 21 members and friends of SFSA travelled to the Tswaing Impact Crater just north of Pretoria.

The main features of the site are a 220 000 year old meteorite impact crater, a variety of ecosystems and the remains of a soda ash and salt factory.

In geological terms the Tswaing crater represents one of the youngest and best preserved small bowl shaped impact craters in the world.

We began to arrive after lunch and found that our accommodation was not quite what we had expected. Arranged around a “kraal” are four Rondawels. Not the sort we're used to seeing, these each sleep 16 people. Four to a nook in two bunk beds. We knew we had to bring our bedding but had assumed that if there were single beds we could just push them together. We just put our mattresses on the floor and that was fine.

By the time the last campers arrived it was dusk and some of us had been for a walk while others had been enjoying the slowly waning sunlight over the bushveld and listening to the birds while enjoying a beer, knowing that none of us had to drive home that night.



We lit the braais in the kraal and comfortably cooked our meals. You could wander around from conversation to conversation and realize that even though some of the people had only met for the first time that afternoon that Science Fiction Fans in this peaceful setting were able to connect on many levels.

Everyone eventually drifted off to their beds and we were up early the next morning as we knew that we needed to walk before the heat of the day. Coffee and light breakfasts were consumed and we headed down to the start of the Crater walk in small groups. The length of the walk is 7.2 kilometres and it took us about 2 hours to complete. The walk takes you from outside the Crater, which is 1.3 kilometres across, up in a circular way to the top of the Crater. You pass the old structures which were homes and parts of a factory which used to extract the salt from the pan in the centre of the Crater. It is quiet except for bird calls and we could see some of our members at various points along the way.



From the highest point we could see the people who had already descended into the centre of the Crater. We climbed down and joined them, then sat in the shade and drank the water we had frozen the night before. It was now starting to get hot even though it was only around 9 a.m. From the bottom it was possible to see why the Crater had been thought to be of volcanic origin for a long time. I was interested to have seen on a plaque on the way up that it was the same Dr Shoemaker, after whom the Shoemaker-Levy comet is named who had shown that it is in fact a geologically recent impact crater.



Tswaing, (meaning "place of salt" in the Tswana language) constitutes a sensitive and unique conservation area for the careful management of its multiple cultural and natural resource, in the disciplines of geology, the environmental sciences, biology, and human history.

The climb back out of the Crater was much harder and we were glad to get back to the camp and to tuck into a more substantial brunch.

We all slowly packed up and headed back to our busy lives in the city, having enjoyed a short break with good company

Alien Minds --"We Will Encounter Superintelligence Much Older than the Human Species" – from "The Daily Galaxy"

World renowned experts from physicist Sir Martin Rees of Cambridge University to astrobiologist Paul Davis of Arizona State have asked that if we were to encounter alien technology far superior to our own, would we even realize what it was. A technology a million or more years in advance of ours would appear miraculous.

"I think it very likely – in fact, inevitable – that biological intelligence is only a transitory phenomenon... If we ever encounter extraterrestrial intelligence, I believe it is very likely to be post biological in nature, writes Paul Davies in The Eerie Silence.

In fact, Davies suggests that advanced technology might not even be made of matter and that it might have no fixed size or shape; have no well-defined boundaries. Also that it is dynamical on all scales of space and time. Or, conversely, does not appear to do anything at all that we can discern. It does not consist of discrete things; but rather it is a system, or a subtle higher-level correlation of things.

Are matter and information, Davies asks, all there is? Five hundred years ago, he writes, "the very concept of a device manipulating information, or software, would have been incomprehensible. Might there be a still higher level, as yet outside all human experience, that organizes electrons? If so, this "third level" would never be manifest through observations made at the informational level, still less at the matter level.

We should be open to the distinct possibility that advanced alien technology a billion years old may operate at the third, or perhaps even a fourth or fifth level -all of which are totally incomprehensible to the human mind at our current state of evolution

Susan Schneider of the University of Pennsylvania appears to agree. She is one of the few thinkers—outside the realm of science fiction—that have considered the notion that artificial intelligence is already out there, and has been for eons.

Her recent study, *Alien Minds*, asks "How would intelligent aliens think? Would they have conscious experiences? Would it feel a certain way to be an alien?" Knowing that we are not alone in the universe would be a profound realization, and contact with an alien civilization could produce amazing technological innovations and cultural insights.

Schneider asks: how might aliens think? And, would they be conscious? I do not believe that most advanced alien civilizations will be biological, Schneider says. The most sophisticated civilizations will be post biological, forms of artificial intelligence or Alien super intelligence.

Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) programs have been searching for biological life. Our culture has long depicted aliens as humanoid creatures with small, pointy chins, massive eyes, and large heads, apparently to house brains that are larger than ours. While we are aware that our culture is anthropomorphizing, Schneider imagines that her suggestion that aliens are supercomputers may strike us as far-fetched. So what is her rationale for the view that most intelligent alien civilizations will have members that are super intelligent AI?

Schneider presents three observations to support her conclusion for the existence of alien super intelligence.

The first is "the short window observation": Once a society creates the technology that could put them in touch with the cosmos, they are only a few hundred years away from changing their own paradigm from biology to AI. This "short window" makes it more likely that the aliens we encounter would be post biological.

Our first radio signals date back only about a hundred and twenty years, and space exploration is only about fifty years old, but we are already immersed in digital technology, such as cell-phones and laptop computers.

Devices such as the Google Glass promise to bring the Internet into more direct contact with our bodies and it is probably a matter of less than fifty years before sophisticated internet connections are wired directly into our brains. Indeed, implants for Parkinson's are already in use, and in the United States the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has started to develop neural implants that interface directly with the nervous system, regulating conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, arthritis, depression, and Crohn's disease. DARPA's program, called "ElectRx", aims to replace certain medications with "closed-loop" neural implants, implants that continually assess the state of one's health, and provide the necessary nerve stimulation to keep one's biological systems functioning properly. Eventually, implants will be developed to enhance normal brain functioning, rather than for medical purposes.

Schneider's second argument is "the greater age of alien civilizations." Proponents of SETI have often concluded that alien civilizations would be much older than our own "...all lines of evidence converge on the conclusion that the maximum age of extra-terrestrial intelligence would be billions of years, specifically [it] ranges from 1.7 billion to 8 billion years.

If civilizations are millions or billions of years older than us, many would be vastly more intelligent than we are. By our standards, many would be super intelligent. We are galactic babies.

But would they be forms of AI, as well as forms of super intelligence? Schneider says, yes. Even if they were biological, merely having biological brain enhancements, their super intelligence would be reached by artificial means, and we could regard them as being "artificial intelligence."

But she suspects something stronger than this: that they will not be carbon-based. Uploading allows a creature near immortality, enables reboots, and allows it to survive under a variety of conditions that carbon-based life forms cannot. In addition, silicon appears to be a better medium for information processing than the brain itself. Neurons reach a peak speed of about 200 Hz, which is seven orders of magnitude slower than current microprocessors.

