



# ***PROBE 167***

***SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY SOUTH AFRICA***



## **PROBE 167**

**March 2016**

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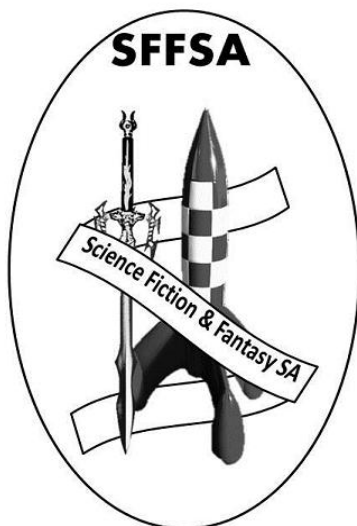
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# Editorial

# Gail

After some time another edition of “Ramblings” from Tony Davis has appeared from the depths of Toronto, in Canada, where he has now been living for what must be around twenty years.

For those SFFSA members who have not been around for a long time, Tony is a Canadian who spent about ten years here in South Africa and was for a time the Chairman of what was then SFSA.

Looking back the earliest edition of “Ramblings” that I can see, appeared in PROBE 40 in 1979 when he was Chairman of the

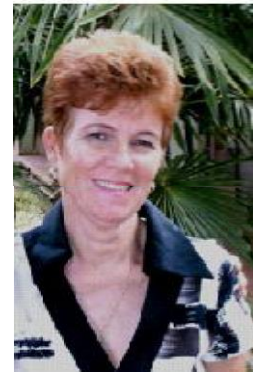
Club. He mentions some of the SF films to be seen in 1979. He mentions “Capricorn One” but dismisses it as an adventure film, as well as “Battlestar Galactica” and hopes (in vain) that it will be the last of the “Star Wars” spin-offs. “Lord of the Rings” (part 1); I wonder how many of us remember the animated Ralph Bakshi version. I think I need to go and find it and watch it again. It was fun and very well done, in my opinion.

I smile when I see that in 1979 the long awaited first full length “Star Trek” movie was being finalised, starring the “old crew” of the original U.S.S. Enterprise. Not so many of them left now sadly.

He also mentions the house that L. Ron Hubbard lived in in Observatory, Johannesburg when he lived in South Africa in 1960 and ‘61. SFFSA were invited to the house for a presentation about “The Writers of the Future” and four or five of us went up there a couple of times. It is in a beautiful spot right above Joburg with a magnificent view of the southern part of the city. The house had been refurnished since the Hubbard lived there but once the Scientology movement had bought it back they had used photographs to return it to an exact replica of how it had looked. Interesting to see a house from the 1960’s and however we may feel about the following of L. Ron Hubbard, the home of an iconic SF writer.

The New English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, who holds an almost complete collection of PROBE is moving to a new building and are setting up a long term display and wish to show some of the covers of PROBE. We have received permission from the artists and are delighted about this. I will ask for photographs when they are complete and will see if I can put them on the back (colour) page of PROBE

Just to note that I do not have details of who the artist is of the cartoon that is on page 52. I apologise and hope that somebody will recognise it and let me know who drew it.



## **RAMBLINGS by Tony Davis Books vs Kindle & Kobo**

I went online at Amazon recently to purchase a recent book title I hadn't been able to find in stores. But to my dismay the book was only available in an electronic version on kindle. Damn.

Ok, I'm old-fashioned (or just old) but I like books. I don't have to enlarge screen fonts. Fiddle with buttons. Get texting tendonitis. A hardcover or paperback book is tactile. It has texture and it looks good on a bookshelf. Books can be passed on to others for reading. They can be donated to schools or charities. And some books have market value. They can be exchanged at used book stores (which are disappearing and replaced with online booksellers). And some books have value to be sold at conventions or on ebay.

Yes, I like books. As I tell my kobo-using wife, our house will never blow away in a tornado because the combined weight of all the books in the basement will keep us grounded.

There are also fond memories – seeing the early 1960s Edgar Rice Burroughs (Tarzan) and Robert E. Howard (Conan) paperbacks on the wire racks in convenience stores and buying them often because of the fantastic cover art by Frank Frazetta and others.

Books also make for great alarm clocks – when I'm reading a book late at night and my eyes shut and the book drops from my hands, to my knees and finally thumps on the floor. Time to get up and go to bed!

So my choice is books. I figure I have enough anyway that I haven't even read yet to keep me busy when the print form is no longer produced. I tempted my son to read everything by Robert Heinlein by giving him the paperbacks even though he's always on the computer, cell phone or tablet.

When you see the SFFSA emails promoting the club's library books – try it out. Read a book. Full size. Don't squint at a screen the size of your palm.

## **Scientology & South Africa**

L. Ron Hubbard, founder of the Scientology movement (or "religion" as members like to call it), has some interesting links with South Africa and SFFSA. Hubbard was a popular pulp fiction author, writing for numerous genres, but particularly for fantasy magazines such as Unknown Worlds. In 1984 the movement's publishing wing, Galaxy Press, brought out "Battlefield Earth" (yes, that bad movie of the same name starring John Travolta). And later came the "Mission Earth" series in ten volumes, starting with "The Invaders Plan". Probe at that time ran book reviews of several of the Hubbard books (to mixed reviews – generally nice tales but too wordy).

Galaxy Press later approached SFFSA (SFSA) at the time about the launch of its "Writers of the Future" anthology. We included flyers from the competition in Probe. And there was a "local" winner! Nancy Farmer, an American living in what was then Rhodesia, won with her story "The Mirror". The competitions are still held today.

Returning to Canada in 1988 I started attending the pulp fiction conventions in the United States and at one such Pulpcon I heard sf writer and editor Fredrick Pohl relate how he and several sf and fantasy authors in a New York hotel room were told by Hubbard that he was going to make lots of money by starting a religion. My exposure to pulp fandom brought me into the Hubbard universe as fans of Hubbard's writing were paying big dollars for his obscure fiction and one such fan (Rex Layton) recently produced a mammoth tome on the pulp stories of Hubbard.

Recently I was intrigued by a newspaper article about Hubbard's South African home – a small house that he lived in during 1960-61 in Observatory (Jhb) which is still standing today and is owned by the Scientology movement. Apparently Hubbard was intrigued by correspondence from one of his members living in South Africa and came for a visit. Of interest are the contents of a letter that Hubbard wrote in November 1960 to Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd about the forced resettlement of black South Africans at the time. "Having viewed slum clearance projects in most major cities of the world may I state that you have conceived and created in the Johannesburg townships what is probably the most impressive and adequate resettlement activity in existence." (The letter was revealed during South Africa's 1972 commission of inquiry into Scientology.)

The next time you are driving through Observatory look for Hubbard's home!

#### **PROBOT from Kai Bosse**



### **Nova 2015: Final Judge's Comments**

#### **Arthur Goldstuck**

We had a slightly better response to Nova 2015 than we had last year; there were 28 entries submitted by 24 entrants (of which 4 were club members). This is still rather

depressing when compare with the halcyon years when we use to receive more than 80 entries. Let's hope 2016 will be reminiscent of the mythical phoenix.

For the first time since 1998 we decided to scrap the SA section of Nova. We had just received too few quality entries in the past few years that qualified, and were not able to justify maintaining a separate competition. We therefore only offered three prizes this year.

Two of our members (Sharon Angus (joint 3rd) and Deon Schneider) made it into the top ten, as judged by our preliminary judges. The youngest entrant was Hope Lester (13). She maintains the recent tradition of young writers making it into the top ten.

Arthur Goldstuck (a longstanding SFFSA member) was the final judge for 2015. Arthur heads World Wide Worx, who co-sponsor the competition. In addition to the cash prizes, books to the value of R1500 brought the total value of prizes to R5000 for Nova 2015.

## **Results :**

1<sup>st</sup> Prize R2000 "10" Mike Hardaker

2<sup>nd</sup> Prize R1000 "A Harmonious Tale" Sean Watkins

Joint 3<sup>rd</sup> prize R250 "The Desert Does Not Forgive" Sharon Angus  
R250 "The Office Dragon" Brian Warner

## **Finalists** (in Title order)

The Cleansing Hope Lester

Error #451 Leon Louw

Lost in transition Deon Schneider

The Passenger Deon Schneider

Travelling Brian Warner

What we do Anton Taylor

Hope Lester (13) was the youngest entrant. She maintains the recent tradition of young writers making it into the top ten, as judged by our preliminary judges.

This is one of the best selections of SFFSA short story entries I have yet had to judge, and it was a privilege to be asked to choose the winners. There is an almost complete absence of "sciensplaining", when the narrator feels obliged to spell out history or technicality, explaining the science of the fictitious scenario in excruciating



detail that stops the story dead. In the winning story, this is achieved naturally and through convincing dialogue. Only two of the top ten stories fell briefly into sciensplaining, making the judging a welcome change from previous experience with the South African category. Having said that, don't take too much for granted or leave too much unsaid, as it robs the story of context, meaning and relevance.

"10" is a clear winner.

10, Mike Hardaker

From the very first line, 10 is beautifully written. It is also brilliantly conceived, and carries off the theme and plot consistently and convincingly. The climax creeps up on us almost unnoticed, just as it blows us away. One of the best stories I've ever read in the SFFSA competition.

Runner-up is "A Harmonious Tale"

A Harmonious Tale, Sean Watkins

A fascinating story, well told, with a powerful climax but an unlikely epilogue. It's a superbly contained story with most of the action taking place in one room. Ironically, the moment the action moves out of that room, the consistency of style and pace begins to dissipate. A core strength of the story is that no narrator explanation is given for a complex process, but it is clearly understood through natural dialogue and actions.

Joint third are "The Desert Does Not Forgive" and "The Office Dragon".

The Desert Does Not Forgive, Sharon Angus

A story told with tremendous command of language and impeccable style, but without much plot and with a predictable conclusion and epilogue.

The Office Dragon, Brian Warner

An enchanting tale about what happens when traditional magical creatures become bureaucrats. The plot is somewhat thin but strangely satisfying.

Here are the finalists, in alphabetical order of author's surname:

The Cleansing, Hope Lester

A potentially good story undermined by a disjointed and unsatisfying plot, haphazard asides by the narrator and the absence of context.



Error #451, Leon Louw

A well-told and fun story, but with little substance. The epilogue is too explicitly spelled out.

Lost in Transition, Deon Schneider

Too much explanation and too many adjectives get in the way of a story that starts as cliché, complete with stereotypes of Cape "bergie" and stupid aliens, but ends quite beautifully.

The Passenger, Deon Schneider

Well-told story but suffers from similarity to Zombie-virus and astronaut-returns-withdeadly-cargo plots.

What We Do, Anton Taylor

Post-apocalyptic scenario that offers little more than scenario. The descriptions of scenes and settings are gritty and realistic, but with little context and confused linkages, eventually making survival from frequent injuries unrealistic.

Travelling, Brian Warner

A fascinating concept but no plot and only a sequence of emotions expressed during an experience in the distant future. Could have served as a good background to a story.

## L.O.C.

Hi Gail

I read the September 2015 edition of Probe with very mixed emotions.

We now understand why we did not receive our annual email from Simon Scott. We usually receive one after our Christmas card eventually reaches them. Last year it was February due to the postal strike. The last time we met with Simon and Mary (and the Great Danes) was 2010 when we were over to watch New Zealand play in the FIFA World Cup. At that time Simon was frail and Parkinson's was playing havoc with his physical condition but he was still sharp of mind and had not lost his sense of humour. We will miss him.

I also noted that one of the 1974 short story prize winners was one AJ Cooper aka Tex – the founder of SFSA. I attended the second meeting of SFSA held at Tex's house in Pretoria in 1969 and from that meeting we developed friendships with the Cooper and Scott families such that we have been in regular contact even after our departure from South Africa in 1987. We will catch up with Tex and Rita later this year.

On the bright side, it was good to see the quality of writing, the ongoing commitment to SF and Fantasy and that conventions and short story competitions are still being held.

I will continue to drop in on the SFSA website from time to time.

Regards to Ian and other members

Robert and Helen (O'Reilly) (who now reside in New Zealand)

1706-24 Eva Rd. Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C 2B2

December 10, 2015

Dear Gail:

Thank you and the club for sending me yet another issue of Probe, this time issue 164. I will try my best to write something coherent. Nah...

Editorial are always tough to write, and especially for me, articles of any kind are, too. I have written thousands of letters, but can count the articles I have written on the fingers of one hand. I prefer to write letters, they are reaction to what I read, and I have always thought that letters in a fanzine help to build community. (Dr. Spock??? Gail! That's the baby doctor!)

String Magic...the story was a little confusing, especially with so many different ideas thrown together. The idea of controlling dreams, tunable brain scanning, levitation, alchemy, the fifth dimension...quite the mix, a mix of SF, fantasy and junk science. Too many ideas, and not enough story for me, but then, it looks like it might be just the first part of an ongoing story. Perhaps the whole thing will resolve itself in a future chapter.

Short Cuts and Paige Unturned...both interesting stories, but it was a struggle to get through them both. There's no incentive to read a story if it is one big block of type. Both stories need formatting and paragraphing. You'll get more readers with that. The Hunter was also an interesting read, but it ends with a writer's trick that I find as a cop-out...how could the author ever know the thoughts of a character as he dies? That might be picky on my part.

And, must read books...I am pleased to say that I have read them all, with the exception of the Scarlett Thomas and Alison Goodman books, and I have never heard of either author. I must do a little digging.

Yvonne and I are getting ready for Christmas, and I imagine you are too. So, we wish you all a happy and comfortable Christmas, and a happy and prosperous New Year. May 2016 be the year we get what we need, and wish for the most. See you next year with the next issue!

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

December 23, 2015

Dear SFFSAns:

It's only been about two weeks since my last letter of comment to you, but seeing that issue 165 of Probe just arrived, this would be part of my massive catch-up just before Christmas. As I type this, tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and it is quite mild outside, probably like it is in Johannesburg. This is not typical for us, and seems to be a

combination of El Niño and global warming/climate change. We will enjoy it, but at the risk of real change in our weather, and massive changes to crops in the spring.

The Stag...I had a little difficulty keeping the story line in mind. Still, it was all right, even if the imagery at the end reminded me of Krampus. That's just me, I think.

Top 10 SF movies to see...I have seen many of them, but I have seen very few of the more recent ones. I guess I know what I like, and am unwilling to risk money on unproven movies. I haven't yet seen the newest Star Wars movie, and to be honest, I am in no rush. I suspect I will see it sometime in January.

I won't name the stories, but I think the one thing that turns me off so much current fiction today is the dystopian mood they exhibit. There's nothing positive any more. I read very little modern SF, and I think that's the reason why.

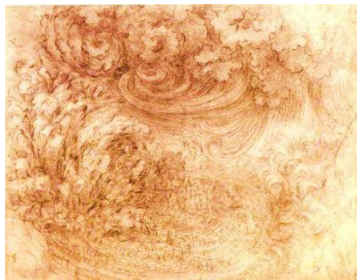
I didn't want to end this letter like this...like I said, it's me who's not reacting properly to the writing, so I think I should wind it up. Thank you to the entire club for sending me copies of Probe all these years, and we wish you all a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. I will try again with better letters of comment starting in 2016. Deal? See you then.

Yours, Lloyd Penney

## Book Review: Gavin Kreuter

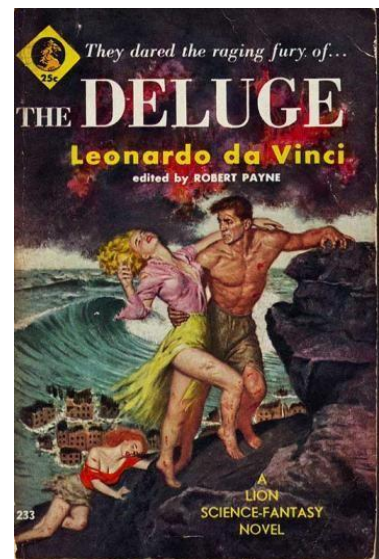
### *The Deluge*, by Leonardo da Vinci.

What? Surely not **the** Leonardo? That's as likely as an SF novel written by a TMNT. Well, you're wrong. And right. It **is** a ScienceFantasy novel written by **the** Leonardo, edited by Robert Payne. At least, that's what the blurb says. More accurately, it's a fantasy in the genre of demonology, written by Robert Payne, (very loosely) based on fragmentary notes written by the Renaissance master and polymath. Leonardo seemed obsessed by the concept of a deluge wiping out humanity, and made a few sketches on this them late in his life, such as:



Robert Payne allegedly "discovered" the fragmentary notes, and "plugged the gaps" a bit.

Or more than a bit. It's difficult to be certain.



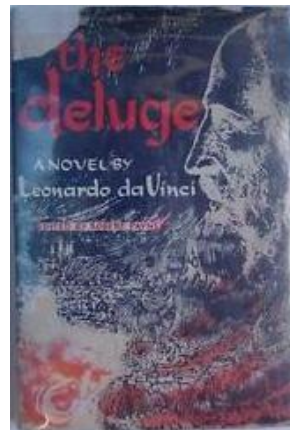
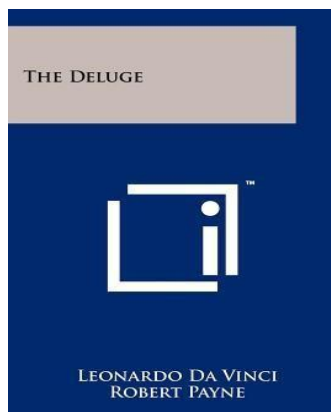
In the Editor's Notes, an appendix in the book, Payne mentions, for example, a fragment like "The prophet driven away and given his freedom and his benevolence". From this tenuous note Payne incarnates the prophet with a name, a character, and a few significant scenes (including dialogue).



I was intrigued by another character, the necromancer, an almost-antagonist. It turns out that Satan is a mere prince of Hell, subordinate to the true opponent of God: Beelzebub. This is of genuine historical interest; Satan means "adversary", while Beelzebub (Lord of the Flies) was originally a Philistine god.

The cover of the Lion publication (pictured above), 1955, was without a doubt designed to create a sensual and sensational image that would, today, be euphemistically categorised in the genre "historical fiction", aka old romantic pulp. One would have to read the story to realise that the two voluptuous sirens are actually the shirtless, virile protagonist's daughters, not his harem. Below are two more sedate covers that are much better.

What about the plot itself? What plot?



We now have the Lion edition in our library, thanks to the donation by Leon le Roux. Why not check it out for yourself? 'Pain shared, my brother, is pain not doubled but halved. No man is an island' - Neil Gaiman.

1/5 (content)

3/5 (historical interest)

### News of a new publication from Nick Wood:

Just to let you know my new book is published and due to be launched at the BSFA national Convention this Easter. It might be of interest to some SFFSA members?

Cover art by Capetonian Vincent Sammy.

## **Nova 2015 First Place “10” Mike**

### **Hardaker**

—Now, tell me about the words, the woman across the table said. Tell me about the words that are not there.

They’ve been very nice about it, really. They were careful as they packed up my laptop and my telephones and my other bits and pieces. They were polite as they helped me out of the house and into the back seat of the black Range Rover. They were gentle when they clipped me into the seatbelt and they didn’t crowd me when two of them sat down, one either side of me. And they didn’t waste time on chitchat during the drive, which I’d guess at an hour or maybe a little longer. Thanks to the blindfold—an eyeshade, really; the sort of thing they hand out on overnight flights—I couldn’t see the dashboard clock so I can’t be certain.

The eye-shade and the handcuffs were back in the pocket of the man in the white shirt and the black suit who’d led me into the room, the man who sat behind me by the door on an upright chair with his handgun under his left arm and who didn’t appear to be paying attention to anything, as if he was a machine on pause. I rubbed my wrists, not because the handcuffs had been too tight—they were more comfortable than I’d have guessed—but because I’d started wondering what handcuffs would feel like if they were too tight.

—It’s a little... strange, I said. I was still blinking in the white light. I felt I should be saying, Who are you and why am I here? But I was pretty certain that I knew the answers, and it didn’t really make that much difference anyway. Because there was a man on pause with a handgun under his left arm sitting right behind me.

I figured I’d go with the flow. A needle had pricked the back of my hand while I was blindfolded in the Range Rover; whatever that contained was probably helping me along.

—I had this algorithm for looking at books, at texts, I said. Generating something like Vonnegut’s shapes of stories. You know that? Where he said that stories had a shape that could be plotted out on graph paper?

She nodded.

—Like that. Only from a statistical analysis of the emotions that are essentially embodied by different words. Those words and their distribution. I produced graphs, charts that showed the, the—I always tried to avoid the term plot, but the... handful of simple emotional trajectories that pretty much all storylines share.

She wasn’t taking notes. She had a black Lamy fountain pen and a blank white pad on the table in front of her, but she didn’t touch them. She just looked at me. I got the sense she already knew what I was telling her, but that didn’t stop me.

—And, well, a lot of people in the world of critical theory seemed affronted by this. They were angry, even. They said such reductionist, positivist approaches were unhelpful. Unhelpful. That was a word they used a lot. They said that my analysis was

unhelpful because literature was as much about what the author didn't write as what they did. What they left out rather than what they put in. And that could only be discovered, understood, recognised by reading and interpreting the text through the lens of critical theory.

—And you disagreed.

—I didn't agree or disagree, but I thought they were missing the point. I wasn't proposing an alternative to what they did, just a small addition to it. But they got me thinking about the words that writers leave out. The words that aren't there. I started thinking about the possibility of signed words, as I saw them.

—Signed words? Like... she tapped the tabletop rapidly with her fingernail a few times. Like signed numbers? Positive, negative..?

—Exactly. Negative or positive words, minus or plus words. Yeah, it seemed absurd, but then Western mathematics didn't accept the existence of negative numbers until, what, the late seventeenth century? Maybe there could be negative words. I thought I'd see if I could find them. Or if not them, exactly, then their traces, the evidence of their existence at some level.

—And you succeeded.

—Well, I found something. How well do you understand binary?

It's an old joke: there are 10 kinds of programmers—those who understand binary and those who don't. All programmers understand binary but those who really understand binary, who grok computers at the lowest level, they're the ones can crank code and sometimes even see the world in a different way to the rest.

—I understand binary, she said.

—Well, then you know a computer, a binary system, doesn't do negatives. Each bit is either on or off, high or low, one or zero. It can't be minus one. So if we want to deal in negatives we have to create what is really an illusion of a negative number, one that even though it isn't really negative, allows us to work with it as if it is. So the computer shifts bits, offsets positive numbers into what it pretends is a negative space.

She nodded, in a patient sort of way. I figured that she probably did, indeed, understand binary.

—OK. So after a lot of false starts I did something similar, only with words. Shifted them sideways across the bits and then looked at what appeared in the offset. I found a way of iterating—waterfalling— taking words, then phrases, sentences, paragraphs... on and on, layer on top of layer until an entire text is processed. Or even a group of texts. And then counting the minus words, the negatively-signed words or whatever they are. The implementation's a little hairy in places, sure. But the thinking's simple enough. Anyway, I had found a way of counting the words that writers leave out. Or that's what it seems to be. And the surprising thing is how robustly it withstands challenge. From the usual suspects, I mean. The number of minus words correlates really very closely to the profundity of a text, as understood by the critical consensus. The more minus words that you have, the quote better unquote the book.

—But you don't know what the words are.



—No, I don't. I don't even know if they're actual words as we understand them. They're... minus words, negatively-signed words. They may even be the opposite of words. Anti-words. I may not even be actually enumerating—perhaps I've just produced a profundity index, not a count of anything.

—We want you to find out, she said. And we'll pay you well to do it.

I like being paid well, although at this point I was quite happy going with the flow.

—We know how to tell when certain people, politicians and diplomats, are lying, she said.

—So do I, I said. Their lips are moving.

—Hah hah, she said, although her eyes didn't laugh. She smoothed the skirt of her black suit over her knees and told me that the social anthropology was a little more nuanced in practice. But now, she said, we want to move it up a notch. We want to know what they're not saying. We want to know about the words that are not there.

\* \* \*

The next few days were full of little surprises. It was a surprise to find out that I hadn't been uploading my code to my usual Open Source server for peer review but to an elegantly cloaked replica of it. It was a surprise to find out that the online journal to which I had submitted a paper outlining my concept of signed words didn't, in any conventional sense, exist. It was a surprise to find I'd been positively vetted over a three-month period and given security clearance to a level of 2A. There were a lot of these surprises, one after the other, as I went through what was described as a fast-track induction process.

I'd almost stopped being surprised when I found out that Lizzie, my on-off girlfriend of the last few months, wasn't called Lizzie and was no longer my on-off girlfriend as she'd been brought back in from the field to do desk-work for a few months. And I wasn't surprised at all to find out that nobody I knew would find it in any way odd that I would be out of contact for a month, or two, or whatever it took. And it didn't surprise me that I took all this in my stride because they were indeed paying me well, and there was the constant presence of one or more from a pool of maybe thirty tall men with white shirts and black suits and handguns under their left arms who appeared not to be paying attention to anything at all.

I was allocated three statistical programmers called Nick, Mick and Rick, which they swore were their real names. I knew a fourth programmer was assigned to join us two days later and I assumed his name would be Dick, but it turned out she was called Siphokazi. I was a little surprised at that, when she walked into the white room where we were working and introduced herself.

Nick, Mick and Rick started out by reprogramming most of my source code in a language I don't know called R (I'd used the C language) while Siphokazi rewrote the algorithmic core of it in more exquisite C than I could ever manage. All four of them sighed a lot when looking at my code. I didn't care, because I wasn't there to crank

code—I understood that I was there to think, to think of ways in which we could find the words that are not there, the negatively-signed words, the minus words, perhaps even anti-words, the opposite of words.

When we had the new code—it took me twelve years to develop and it took them eight days to re-write, refine and unit-test a better version of it—we started trying to make it perform tricks. First we took old speeches and quotations from politicians and diplomats, situations where we didn't just know they were lying, but we knew what they were lying about and how seriously. And then we ran them through the system to see if we could establish reproducible patterns, where we could parse a speech we'd never read before and say with a degree of certainty that Politician FOO or Diplomat BAR was lying with a level of  $x$  and a seriousness of  $y$ . This is actually quite different to assessing how profound a piece of literature may be, and involved a lot of grappling with the very nature of lying, especially as practiced by politicians.

—We've had to switch to a two-pass process, I told one staging meeting. Because we need to filter out bullshit as noise, before dealing with the actual lying.

I'd included a copy of Professor Harry Frankfurt's 1985 paper "On Bullshit" with the hand-outs. It'll help to clarify matters, I said.

— In short, I said. Politicians bullshit all the time, diplomats a little less. But, either way, we don't really care about it when they do. Bullshit's annoying but harmless. However, it can look a lot like lying. We need to filter it out. Then we can focus on the actual lies.

Eventually, we could process a piece of political or diplomatic text, calibrated to one of five rhetorical levels—where a casual aside would be ranked very low and a stump speech very high—and say, with a six-point-four percent margin of error, how much lying it contained, what form that lying took and exactly when it took place. And we could do this in eight languages. For our own amusement, we also reported the amount of bullshit. This occasionally broke a hundred percent, which we thought was a bug we were going to have to fix until we understood that the system was correctly identifying a politician bullshitting about two things at the same time. This, Nick, Mick and Rick agreed, was arctic.

—It's a good start, the woman across the table said, when I took her the most recent set of results. Her name, she had told me, was Nicholls. No first name, no title, just Nicholls.

—Now do you want us to focus on the lies themselves? I said.

—No, Nicholls said. I want you to focus on the truth that's not being told. She ratatated her fingernail on the table top and said, I want to know all about the words that aren't there.

\* \* \*

The heart of the problem is this: nobody—not me, not Nick, Mick and Rick, not Siphokazi—actually understands how our system works. We know that it does work, because it produces completely consistent output. We understand the underlying

principles of what we are doing, or think we do. But we know nothing about the data we are doing it to. We don't know what happens to language when it's on the negative side of the median, how it behaves, what rules it follows, what shape it has. We know we are counting something. And that something behaves, it seems, like the words that aren't there, negatively-signed words or even anti-words. But we don't actually know what that means.

—It's just ones and zeroes, I say. We just need to walk the binary data and see what's happening. Something is bound to make sense.

So we dump the raw data and work through it byte by byte, bit by bit, but nothing does makes sense. The data seems to shape-shift. It has no consistent form or pattern. None of the usual signifiers. The whole thing seems impossible. And for day after day we try again, fail again. We don't even fail better—it's just the mother of all hairballs.

—We're doing this wrong, Siphokazi says, eventually. We're looking for something that looks like words. We should be looking for something that looks like language.

—What do you mean?

—We're thinking of a text, of a book, a speech, as a collection of words. It's not, it's a combination of words held together by rules and conventions and suchandsuch. That's what your waterfalling does. It processes the words, but then it processes the words as elements of a sentence, and then the sentence as an element of a paragraph, and so we go. It processes both the data and the logic.

She pokes her finger at the fanfold printout on her desk.

—These ones and zeroes, she says. They aren't data, but data and code encapsulated. This is a language object. That's what we need to unpack. It's not just a bunch of anti-words; it's anti-language. Ford knows how we'll unpack it though.

—Disassemble it, I say.

Siphokazi may crank code that has a rare and lustrous beauty, but she doesn't grok binary like a native. I'm about to earn my money.

—We need to find which of these clusters of ones and zeroes are triggering processor instructions, I say. Let's throw an iterative disassembler on this stuff. See what gets left behind when we strip out any logic we can identify. It might just be that we find the words that aren't there.

\* \* \*

Binary. We think of it as ones and zeroes, but that's just a representation of what are really simple switches. Switches that can be on or off, high or low, as the wire-heads put it. You start stringing switches together and you can represent words or numbers or curves or pictures of kittens. But you can also create logic gates. Two switches in parallel, one beside the other, make an OR gate: either A or B is true. Two switches in series, one after the other, that's an AND gate: are A and B both true? And all the other Boolean operators can be handled with nothing more sophisticated than more combinations of simple switches. And with those you've all logic at your fingertips.

All possible truths are, at heart, binary.



Life is binary: you are either alive or dead, one or zero. You may think you're half dead with exhaustion, but that's just a figure of speech. You're alive. This is true even in the quantum world. Schrödinger's cat is both alive AND dead, one and zero. If you open the box it'll be either alive OR dead, one or zero. It's never in some intermediate state.

When we die, when we stop being alive, it's a simple state change. One becomes zero. It's like flicking a switch.

I'm half dead with exhaustion. We all are. We've run the iterative disassembler for days and devised a filter that pulls out what seems to be a lot of logic. What remains is starting to look a little like data ought to look, but I'm not convinced. Even the coffee's stopped kicking in like it did maybe fifteen hours ago. It just seems to make us tetchier, not more awake. Maybe the coffee's fine but we've just hit the limit of the combat drugs we think they put in it to help us along. Whatever, we're gronked.

—Why don't we just put the data back through the system and see what happens? I think it's Rick who suggests this.

—That'll just reverse it again and we'll end up with the words that are there instead of the ones that aren't there. Waste of everybody's time, dude. Nick, or maybe it's Mick, is as scratchy as the rest of us.

—How d'you know?

Rick's got a point. We don't really know how the system works. Who knows what's going to happen?

—Maybe he's got a point, I say. Maybe it's a waste of time. But let's try it anyway.

So Rick runs the data through the system and grabs some snapshots of the new output. It's still gibberish. Nick, or maybe its Mick says that it was always going to be a total waste of everybody's time, dude.

—Too many waterfalls. Siphokazi's voice comes from under her desk, where she's curled up in a ball using a large soft black-and-white penguin toy as a pillow, trying to grab some Zs but too full of coffee or combat drugs to switch herself off.

—What?

—Too many waterfalls. You don't need the all the waterfalls. Just run one pass at the word level and disassemble that. Forget the phrases and sentences and what-what. You once told me that we maybe didn't have an actual anti-word count,

—No, maybe it's just an index of dishonesty, but... Siphokazi

scuttles out from under her desk.

—But you were right, and it's important! The waterfall can't be giving us a word count, an anti-word count, because each iteration chews up a layer of syntax as it's working on it and takes us farther from the words. We must be finding out how much isn't there, not how many. And we can't strip logic out of the final output if we've added five or six iterations of corruption. When I said the output was a language object I didn't mean it was one single language object but, after all the processing, that's what it is. An impossibly complicated language object that encapsulates all the anti-language that's in the text.

—We'll never unpack that, I say.

—No, so we need to work with early-stage data, where there are multiple language objects.

That actually makes a lot of sense.

—Let's stop frobbing around and start clean, I say. Let's start with something where we kinda know what we're looking for. Try, mmmm... I click my fingers a few times... Try one of Nixon's TV addresses. I lean over Rick, grab his mouse and scroll through his Input Data folder. That one, I say.

I'm ahead of Siphokazi now. Rick runs the speech through the system, but with a breakpoint added after the first pass, no waterfalling. We grab a snapshot. Gibberish. Rick feeds the output into the disassembler, then into the logic filter.

—Dudes, he says. Take a look.

He points to the right-hand column, where the ones and zeroes of the main display are represented as ASCII characters. Letters, numbers and symbols. We've seen nothing but gibberish for days. But this isn't anything like as cruffy. It has some form.

—Some of them look like words, he says.

—Where?

We all look at the screen. They're not words of any language I know, but they look like they might be.

—They might be the opposite of words, I say. Or negative words.

—Bit-flip it, says Siphokazi. It's still in the negative space. Reverse the sign.

Rick types the commands, and the bits are flipped.

Siphokazi woots, quietly. In the right hand column where the binary is rendered as hexadecimal characters are words, thousands of words, maybe tens of thousands of words, all joined together like in a mediaeval manuscript, streaming up the screen as Rick scrolls through them. Words that aren't in Nixon's speech. Words that are trivial, words that seem significant, words that seem to jump out because they're profane and words that jump out because of context:.

ERWASHINGBUTSUPERMARKETELVISMICROPHONETHENBREATHESHITPLU  
MBERFURBALLMANUFACTURERTABLESEEBOOBSAWATERGATEMANANDFR  
ANKHAMRUBBERSARMOROPENMOTHERFUCKERSCHEESEBURG

.—We've found the words that aren't there, I say.

—But there's too many of them. The lies must be in there but how do we know where? They're mixed in with the bullshit and Ford knows what other random crap. It's just as useless as that cruft we started with. It's prettier cruft, but cruft. We're spinning our wheels.

The tiredness has kicked back in. Siphokazi is suddenly bletcherous as all hell.

I think of Vonnegut, of the shapes of stories. I think of how I used high-pass filters and low-pass filters and Gaussian filters to smooth out the data and get the clean shapes that showed how storylines ebb and flow.

—The full waterfall dump is more than an index of dishonesty, I say. We can use it as a filter; it gives us the shape of the lies. It's like a topographical map, with peaks and troughs and plains and valleys. We overlay that map on the raw input data and only mine the areas that matter to us.

I explain we'll only explore the deep valleys of falsehood for words that aren't there. We'll just pull out the words that aren't there at the exact moment of the biggest lies. It's still going to need some interpreting, but I've got a feeling, a hunch, that it'll be good enough for the analysts. I say I'm going to get some sleep. We can see if I'm right in the morning.

I know in my bits that I will be right.

\* \* \*

Every decision we make is binary. We either do something or we don't, yes or no, one or zero.

I've made my decision.

They're being very nice about it, really. Nicholls taps her fingernail on the table top and says she would have preferred for me to stay and work on other projects, but she understands and accepts my position and thanks me for all I've done. They're very clear and polite as they explain how my laptop and my telephones and my other bits and pieces have been replaced with new ones that will be waiting for me when I get home: solid-state disks and memory cards filled only with zeroes. They're understanding and regretful that I can't say goodbye to Nick, Mick, Rick and Siphokazi, who are already on other jobs in other locations. Their eyes almost smile when they explain that they've wired even more money than we'd agreed into my bank account. They're courteous and correct as they lead me through the long white corridors and into the white elevator that takes me down to the sub-basement parking garage where the black Range Rovers live.

There's even a kind look on the tall man's face as he turns to me, reaches across his white shirt and into his black suit, reaches under his left arm, slides out his handgun and, with his thumb, flicks a switch.

## Magazines Received

Via email:-

**Newsletter of the Middle Tennessee SF Society** (aka The Nashville SF Club)

**Reece Moorhead** reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue 158 December 2105

Issue 159 January 2016



Issue 160 February 2016

**David Langford** news@ansible.co.uk

**Ansible** 341 December 2015

342 January 2016

343 February 2016

**Cathy Palmer-Lister WARP 94**

<http://www.monsffa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/WARP-94-LR-2.pdf>

Good luck finding the MonSFFA rocket--since people thought finding it in W93 was easy, I really buried it this time! :-)) Ste. Julie, Quebec, Canada

cathyp1@sympatico.ca <http://www.monsffa.ca>

## **Nova 2015 Second Place “A Harmonious Tale” Sean Watkins**

"Wait, wait! Go back!" Erika said, "The last song, I could feel it."

Thina moved the mouse and clicked it once, the music halted and started at the beginning again after a few moments. Thina sighed irritably and sucked her teeth, she clicked the mouse twice with far more force than was necessary. The previous song began to flow from the speakers. Erika closed her eyes and leaned forward.

"I think this will work, Blessed Harmony I hope it works "Erika said tiredly.

Thina tapped the spacebar pausing the song.

"Do not curse in my home," Thina said. "Are you sure? I do not think I can stand listening to too many more songs for a few seconds at a time."

"Um. I haven't heard it before, which is surprising," Erika replied.

Thina looked at Erika doubtfully and made an inarticulate gesture, "Carry on then."

Erika smiled and focussed on the glass of water standing on the sturdy looking oaken coffee table.

"Ready?" Thina asked, her finger hovering above the spacebar.

"Mmh."

Thina tapped the spacebar again and the song resumed.

As Erika listened, the rest of the room seemed to fade from her consciousness becoming background noise. The song hit her ears, fluttering and pouring down it pooled in her abdomen. She absorbed the music; every note and chord sparked a mini explosion of power in her eardrum, adding to the stream. The more intricate the progression, the more complex the melody, the more power that was generated.

A particular part of the song caused a fierce eruption. She stopped listening for a second and immediately felt the power begin to drain from her. Erika quickly calmed herself and continued listening.

Erika began to shape her Harmony. She shaped it slowly and carefully, wanting to achieve more than the task required. She only had to move the water in the glass, but she wanted to splash it out of the glass. She manipulated the power this way and that, trying to keep it focussed as it flowed from her, being careful to catch it as it rejected the order she was trying to impose of it. It was always difficult to control another's music, but it was the easiest to pool as Thina had said.

She pushed on it a bit harder pointing it towards the glass. The Harmony was beginning to tear itself away from her so she didn't have much time left before she lost control. The power became erratic, jumping away from her at odd angles. She missed some of it, and it fizzled to nothing. She began to push it harder, hoping it would stay long enough to reach the glass. The harder she pushed, the more it sought out its own entropy. She was losing control of it. She was sick of this task, it was supposed to have been easy. Her anger flared and she shoved the remaining Harmony she had at the glass as hard as she could.

The glass cracked. Water trickled down, forming a puddle at the base of the glass.

Erika sat back in the oversized armchair, irritated; the dull pulsating pain behind her ears was not improving her mood.

"Technically, "Thina was looking at her, an eyebrow raised and a slight pout on her lips. "The water did move."

Erika barked a laugh, "Isn't technicality central to music?"

"It is central to playing an instrument. Harmony on the other hand, is more about control and a few other things that we will get to," Thina's face softened into an amused smirk.

Erika rubbed her face and let what Harmony was left drift to her head before it dissipated, alleviating her headache slightly.

Thina stood, picked up the cracked glass and disappeared into the kitchen. Erika heard the tap open and a glass being filled. Thina returned holding a whole glass, filled with water, and set it on the coffee table where the other glass had been. She sucked her teeth, "Ugh, forgot a cloth," she made a dismissive gesture, "Well, if you crack this glass I will only have to clean up once I suppose." Erika looked at Thina and back to the glass.

"Again," Thina said sitting back in her usual position on the couch.

"What?"

"I don't remember stuttering...Again."

"Please Thina, I'm tired, it's hot, my head is pounding. I've done this five times over already just today. You told me that it's dangerous to use Harmony when you're tired."

"I did, but you are not that tired yet, believe me. Enough complaining now. "

"I can't!"

"And why not?" Thina's voice was growing cold, her words were clipped.

"I just told you! I am tired, and have a headache. I can barely think right now," Erika almost shouted.

"You asked me to teach you, and so I am; now either carry on, or get out. I will not beg you," Thina spoke like a glacier cracking, her face was calm but her eyes were terrible. Erika would normally be frightened, but she was too tired and in too much pain to care.

"I did ask you to teach me," Erika shouted. "Not to torture me!"

"Do. It. Again." Thina said. Erika knew there was no point in arguing any further.

Erika's face was flushed. She wasn't sure when she had stood up but she sat back down. She was fuming and the dull thud in her mind was making her more irritable than normal. She stared into Thina's eyes for as long as she could, but the strength and frost of Thina's gaze soon cooled her anger. "Fine," Erika said. "What song am I going to use?" "I'll play you something," Thina replied.

Thina rose and moved to sit at the grand piano, just behind her couch. She lifted the fallboard. Erika had never actually heard Thina play before but Erika knew she could otherwise she wouldn't know anything about Harmony.

"Are you ready or not?" Thina said, snapping Erika back to the moment.

Erika flushed again as she realised she was staring at Thina.

"N...No, um I mean, I'm ready." Erika stammered a reply.

Thina practiced a few scales and arpeggios to warm up; Harmony was already trickling from Erika's ears.

Thina stopped her warm up and fell into playing a piece. Her playing was magnificent. Erika had never seen her so at ease before. Thina flowed from one part of the piece to the next with the elegance of a queen, her hands as graceful as a ballerina as her fingers danced across the keys lightly and perfectly controlled. Her technique was exquisite. It was like nothing Erika had ever seen before. Erika knew the piece but she had never heard it played so perfectly before.

She is incredible Erika thought. She stopped watching and began listening.

The trickle suddenly became a torrent causing Erika to gasp and clutch at her ears. She had never felt so much Harmony before. The amount of power that was swirling around in her was almost painful. Apparently her belly wasn't large enough to contain the Harmony. It began to move throughout her body. Just about every pain and ache she had was instantaneously gone, even her headache had disappeared. The Harmony, once finished with her ailments, began to fill her. She could feel it rushing, crying out to be used. She forced her eyes to open, not realising they were closed until now. Her vision was bleary and there were flashes of light flickering across her vision.

She thought she saw a smile on Thina's face, but she could barely see. Erika looked down towards where the glass should be and began weaving some of the Harmony towards it. It flowed easily but it was more erratic than before, more chaotic - it did not want her manipulating it. She released her hold on it, unable to control it any longer. The Harmony fizzled out into nothing, barely making a dent in the surge she contained.

There is so much Harmony, I could just push it as quickly as possible Erika thought. She moulded a relatively small piece of the Harmony and flung it at the glass.

The glass fell over, spilling the water all over the table. Erika looked up at Thina who was watching her; she wasn't playing anymore. She could still feel the Harmony rushing through her body. Thina walked over to Erika and said something, but Erika couldn't hear her over the roar in her ears.

Thina grabbed Erika's face and pulled in close and she mouthed the words, "Let it go". Erika nodded dumbly. She started throwing off the Harmony bit by bit, pushing it out of her, letting it fade to nothing once out of her control.

Slowly the flood became a river. "I think I am ok now," Erika said.

"Good," Thina said.

"What happened?"

"Live music is a better generator than recorded music. Your body needs to learn to stretch and accommodate it."

"But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why is live music better?"

Thina tapped her chin with a finger unsure of where to start.

"Harmony...Is complex. Generators have originality and talent at their core. A song that is new will always produce more Harmony than a song that has been played often.

"The skill of the musician is also a factor. The better they are the better the generator. This is why recorded music is such a bad generator. It is made by people who call themselves musicians, who are mediocre at best, playing the same songs with the same technique a thousand times over. With all the digital correcting of musicians, they no longer need to practice and better themselves. Everything is fixed after their performance, it is...wrong.

"There are so few instruments being used anymore, it is no wonder Harmony is dying. The few Harmonists left have been fighting to keep it alive for years, but fighting against the whole of pop culture is not a battle that can be won easily," Thina said.

"I...didn't know that," Erika said.

"Why would you? I just wanted to show you what Harmony can be. You have been using minuscule amounts of it to teach yourself control. Containing and manipulating enough Harmony, like you have just experienced, could kill you if you cannot control it."



Thina got up and went to the kitchen, she returned with a cloth and began cleaning up the water that had spilled.

"You can go." Thina said.

Erika got up and left without a word.

Erika knocked on the door. She was late. Thina did not accept tardiness. Erika was ready for the tongue-lashing she was about to get. Erika heard the sound of a key entering the lock and turning. There were a few more clicks as deadbolts were drawn.

She is very paranoid, Erika thought.

The door swung open and warmth billowed out. Erika would be glad to get out of the cold winter air. Thina stood in the doorway, her eyes were like steel, obviously unimpressed. Erika gave her most innocent smile, an attempt at mollifying Thina. It didn't work.

Thina moved away from the door leaving it open, Erika knew this meant she should come in and close the door behind her.

When the door was locked, Erika removed her scarf and coat, and hung them over the back of her usual armchair.

"I am so sorry I'm late, I was at Linkmed visiting Paul and I fell asleep next to his bed," Erika said apologetically.

"Paul? The friend in a coma?"

"Yes..."

"Don't be late again. Sit."

Erika moved over to the piano and sat down.

"What are we doing today?"

"You are doing your normal warm up and then I will give you a suitable task."

Erika wiped the sweat off her brow and huffed. Her wrist ached from playing solidly for the last several hours. She had lost track of time. Thina had been more irritated at Erika's late arrival than she had let on.

"Took you long enough," Thina said.

"You've never wet the wood before, it requires much more heat than I expected."

"Were you only heating it directly?"

"Yes. What else could I have done?"

Thina looked at Erika with the sheer disbelief that accompanies a person realising just how stupid someone can be. "You idiot girl, why not just move the water out of the wood, or heat the middle of the wood, or break the wood exposing its dry insides, you could—" Thina shook her head.

"I...didn't even think of that."

The small blaze in the fireplace crackled warmly as it burnt off the last of the water that had doused it.

“What are the central tenets of Harmony generation?” Thina asked angrily.

“Originality and Talent.”

“So apply what you know! You are rich in talent, but your originality is depressingly lacking. Even your mind splitting is impressive, which I can’t say for most people, but you need to think.”

Erika looked down at her shoes, embarrassed at her teacher’s disapproval.

“I’m sorry.”

Thina sighed, “It is fine, just think next time. Let us have a short break. Can I offer you something to drink? I have cookies and cake that I baked this morning.”

Erika nodded, “Do you have coffee?”

“Yes, but I don’t have any of that fake, instant nonsense.”

“That’s fine, thank you.”

Thina stood and went to the kitchen.

Erika had been here so often but she had never looked around. She knew her chair and the piano rather intimately, but other than that it felt like a completely strange room. She got up and walked around the room, looking at Thina’s collection of things. Everything was related to music in some way or form, or at least Erika assumed so; some of the objects were less familiar to her. Framed pieces of ancient sheet music hung like a portrait of a child on the wall. An old antique cupboard and an oaken kist with a few carvings of different musical instruments delicately and purposefully placed on them. The distinct lack of anything related to family or Harmony struck Erika. There wasn’t a single Harmony pendant or charm anywhere – almost everyone had one, even if they didn’t know what they were. Thina had showed her a journal full of information on Harmony. It explained all the different shapes that formed most of the jewellery and art of the day but there was none here.

Thina returned with a tray of coffee and a plate full of cake and cookies, “You never said which you would prefer, so I brought both.”

“Thank you.”

Thina gave her a warm smile, or what Erika thought was a warm smile. She hadn’t seen Thina smile before. Thina placed the tray on the coffee table and pushed down the plunger of the coffee pot and the pleasant aroma of roasted beans wafted through the room. Thina poured the coffee into two cups and handed one to Erika.

Erika lifted the cup to her nose and took a deep breath. The fragrance was exquisite, much better than instant coffee.

“May I have some milk and sugar please, I don’t mind fetching—” Erika started, but the look of pure horror on Thina’s face cut her off.

“What’s wrong?” Erika asked, growing worried.

“You cannot have milk and sugar in coffee. It destroys the taste.”

“Oh. I can’t drink it without – it’s too bitter.”

Thina sat down on the couch across from Erika, “Blessed Har...” Thina cleared her throat, closed her eyes and took a few deep breathes.

“I had hoped you had a more sophisticated pallet than that, but I have obviously overestimated you. The sugar is in the cupboard above the stove and the milk is in the fridge. Help yourself.”

Erika walked to the kitchen to fetch the milk and sugar. She returned soon after with a satisfied look on her face.

She sat down in her usual arm chair and grabbed a cookie. She took a bite. She could taste cinnamon and peanut butter.

“These are delicious, thank you.” Erika said.

Thina nodded, giving another, probably, warm smile.

They sat in silence for a while which was odd for Thina’s house. There was almost always music playing here.

Erika sipped her coffee slowly, trying to lengthen the break as much as possible. Thina had eaten a small piece of cake and a cookie and was sitting with her eyes closed, cross legged tapping her foot to the rhythm of some mental tune.

“Um, Thina?”

“Mmh.”

“Why haven’t you used any Harmony while teaching me?”

Thina opened one eye and slowly regarded Erika, “I cannot.”

“But, you said any musician can use Harmony and I heard you play, you are amazing.”

Thina smiled again; today was a rare day.

“Thank you. I hurt myself a long time ago - I am Dissonanced.” Thina said.

“What does being Dissonanced mean?” Erika asked carefully.

“It means I cannot use Harmony. Or rather I can, but barely enough to light a candle.”

“How did you hurt yourself?” Thina

sighed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to pry, I’m just curious.”

“No no. I knew this would come up eventually, but you had not asked before. I had hoped you wouldn’t.”

Thina closed her eyes, as if she was fighting back tears. She took a deep breathe. Then another. She opened her eyes which were glistening with tears she would never cry.

“I miss the Harmony. I miss the constant battle for control and the finesse... I have accepted the fact that I hurt myself and have no one else to blame, but the pain that I feel every time I play or hear someone play is excruciating. It is the reason I drill you to be better, to get better at controlling your Harmony. It is vital to prevent you from hurting yourself, or others, the way I did.

“I was impatient, and wanted to get more powerful too quickly so I used my Harmony to try and enhance my hearing so I could generate more Harmony when I listened. I was experienced, but young, foolish and arrogant.

“The nature of Harmony is to bring balance; the tasks we do all show some form of imbalance that we are trying to rectify in some small way – the glass of water contains liquid from the ocean and in order to return it to the ocean it cannot be in the glass. The more implausible its imbalance is the more difficult it will be to return it using Harmony. When I tried to enhance my ears the Harmony rejected my attempt to break the natural balance of things. My Harmony snapped. There is no better way to explain it.

“It left me barely able to use Harmony, and Harmony cannot act on me. That is why it is called being Dissonanced. It is also less accurately known as being Deafened,” Thina said. She fell silent, and they both sat there. Erika absorbed what she had just learned about her teacher and Harmony itself. Thina was remembering her time before her Deafening.

“I’m so sorry Thina. It must be awful,” Erika said eventually.

“It is, but there is nothing to be done. I made a mistake and I must live with it,” Thina said with a weak, unconvincing smile. Erika was unsure what to do, thinking it might be best to move on.

“Why do you want to learn to use Harmony?” Thina asked.

“I...I just want to save Paul.”

“Your friend. Why is he in a coma?”

Erika was surprised she remembered, she had spoken of him often before, but had to remind Thina about him at every mention, “His father beat him into a coma—” her voice caught in her throat, she let out a sob before she could catch herself. She sniffed and rubbed at her eyes to clear away the beginning of her tears. She hated crying.

“That is a good goal – working toward the good of others is of Harmony.” Thina said.

Erika nodded, still fighting back the tears.

“Now, I would suggest you do not do so until you are ready. You could end up hurting yourself or your friend. And that will only be after I give you permission to use Harmony outside this house.”

“I will get better and help him.”



"I like your determination. Now prove it to me Erika."

"What must I do?"

"Let us try something a little more difficult than lighting a fire," Thina had an odd glint in her eye, "I want you to summon a Shrill."

"You can do that?" Erika was shocked, she had heard of the mystical apparitions. They were used all over the world for many a menial task. They could carry messages faster than a vehicle, more securely than using any electronic medium and only slightly slower.

"Of course. Where did you think they come from?" Thina said.

"I've never thought about it, honestly." Erika said, "How do I summon one?"

Erika split her mind into two, setting the one part to listen and the other to begin improvising. She started playing. The piano sang a beautifully complex piece of music; Harmony immediately began to flood Erika. She let it pool for a long while as she needed almost as much Harmony as she was able to contain. She could hear the roar in one part of her mind while still focusing on maintaining the music with the other. She began to perspire with the mental effort involved in keeping this state going. She focussed on calling a gentle breeze and mixed it with some Shrill dust sitting on the top board.

The Shrill began to take form, or as much form as a shapeless spectre could have. It began to spin slowly at first, but gathered speed until it was a blur. A small light began to form in the centre of the swirling haze. The light grew brighter. Eventually it was too brilliant to look at directly. The light swelled and eventually flashed so bright that Erika had to close her eyes. She kept playing; feeding the centre of the light with a continuous stream of Harmony.

The light faded as quickly as it had appeared, leaving a slight, pure white, ethereal glow that was the Shrill.

The first part of the Shrill was complete, Erika now needed to add the final thing to bring it to some semblance of life. She lit the candle on the edge of the top board with a quick burst of Harmony. Then she drew the flame into the centre of the Shrill's body, adding more Harmony all the while. The white light changed, vacillating between blue and yellow.

The Shrill shifted and morphed, varying between a multitude of different shapes. The changes slowed stopping when it was in the shape of a wolf pup. Erika gasped.

"A familiar shape." Thina said.

"How...it looks like Regy, my dog," Erika said. "He's been dead for years," she continued to play.

"Harmony is very personal, especially Harmony generated from your own music."

"It knows my dog?"

"It does not know anything, but it is a part of you. It looks complete. Try talking to it. It will only ever do what you tell it to."

“Ok, I’ll try,” Erika said, she turned to the Shrill, “Hello.”

“Hur, Hurlo, Hurelo,” the Shrill frowned its puppy face and worked its jaw trying to make the dog-like mandible supple enough to speak. It clicked its mouth closed a few times and tried again. “Huh Llooooo.”

“What is your name?”

“Mah nayme Reg gee,” the Shrill said.

“Really...”

“I told you, it is a part of you. You project yourself through your Harmony. You chose the name, not it,” Thina said.

Erika turned back to the Shrill, still playing, “Can you deliver a message for me?” “Yiss”

“Tell Thina she is a wonderful baker.”

The Shrill sped through the air to Thina. It hovered right in front of her face, “Erka say, ‘She is wunderfool bayka.’”

The Shrill zipped back to Erika. Its tongue flopped out of its mouth and it panted.

Erika ended her piece and sat looking at her Shrill. She was feeling pleased with herself. She had summoned a Shrill on her first attempt.

The Shrill ran around chasing its tail making Erika laughed, “He reminds me of Regy, almost exactly.”

The Shrill started to grow blurry, and the pup started to lose its shape. It winked out of existence and the Shrill dust fell back down to the top board.

Erika opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out. Erika was confused, what went wrong, I did it exactly the way I was meant to.

“You did not give it permanence!” Thina said coolly. “The last part, the easiest part of summoning a Shrill, and you did not do it! Cursed Dissonance girl.”

Thina was standing shaking her hands at Erika, her face awash with irritation.

“I’m sorry, I got distracted because it looked like Regy,” Erika said.

“I am sick to death of you being sorry, child, I told you exactly what you needed to do.”

“I’m...I’ll do better next time,” Erika was looking down at her hands. A tear of frustration and embarrassment dripped from her cheek onto her hand.

“Are you crying?” Thina said. Her voice was chilling.

Erika just shook her head. Another reason she hated crying

“Well? You have not yet explained how you managed to neglect the single, easiest part of an otherwise challenging task!”

“I just said, I got distracted. It won’t happen again.”

“What am I going to do with you? It’s been five months and you are still making the same mistakes.”

“I am trying my best!”

“Well you need to do better!”

“Why are you yelling at me! You are getting irritated with me just because you can’t do what I can. I might not be perfect, but at least I can use Harmony, at least I haven’t done anything stupid enough to hurt myself—“Erika stopped, knowing she had gone too far.

“Get. Out.” Thina said her voice sounded like thunder to Erika, though it was barely a whisper.

“Thina, I’m sor-“

“GET OUT!” Thina screamed. She had never raised her voice before.

Erika flew to the armchair, grabbed her coat and scarf and almost ran to the door. She opened it and slipped outside. She caught a glimpse of Thina as the door closed.

Thina had sat down with her head in her hands, shoulders rocking with her silent sobbing.

Erika sat in her usual chair, listening. Thina was silent and there was a lack of the otherwise perpetual music in Thina’s house. Thina had her eyes closed, her lips were turned up in a small smile; Erika had learnt that meant she was enjoying what she heard, which was odd because there was nothing to hear.

Erika was looking around, trying to figure out what to do. It had been a few months since she had stopped generating Harmony through playing an instrument or recorded song. She was convinced that Thina was punishing her for what she had said in anger a few months prior, so she made Erika sit in complete silence for hours on end only opening her eyes when it was time for Erika to leave. Erika was desperate to use Harmony again, she was missing the challenge of trying to control it and the satisfaction that accompanied achieving anything with it. She would have just used her piano at home, but Thina’s only rule for agreeing to teach her was that she not use Harmony outside of this house until she was given explicit permission. So Erika sat in complete silence, trying to impress Thina without any idea how she might achieve that.

“If you keep fidgeting and looking around this will take longer than if you just listen,” Thina said so suddenly, Erika jumped in her seat. She had been shifting around to get comfortable. Even the most well-made cushion becomes like a stone after sitting on it for too long.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to be listening to Thina, I can’t hear anything. I feel like you are punishing me for what I said and I don’t think I’ve apologised to you. I am sorry Thina.”

“Are you sorry you said it, or sorry that you meant it?”

“I didn’t mean it!” Erika protested. “I just lost my temper.”

Thina laughed, for a good long minute. Erika sat, more confused than ever.

“Child, do you really think I am petty enough to punish you for several months over something you said in the heat of a tense moment? Erika, you are a child, a young woman perhaps, but it wouldn’t speak of my character much if I held a grudge over a child’s words. What you said did hurt, but only because I hadn’t thought about it for a very long time. I shared it and didn’t expect it to come back at me quite so quickly,” Thina said with a smile.

“I am truly sorry Thina, I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Let us move on. We have quite a bit of work left to do if you are going to help your friend.”

They were running out of time. Paul was still in a coma and his brain activity had been steadily decreasing over the last couple weeks. If he became brain-dead, his mother would turn off the life support machines.

Erika breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you,” Erika said.

“Now as to what you should be listening to, you will be hard pressed to find anywhere in this world, man-made or otherwise where there is complete and utter silence. You just need to listen well enough and you will hear,” Thina’s tone was almost motherly.

“But what do I do if I hear something?”

“Find the music in it and allow it to generate Harmony. And no humming, that would be cheating.”

“How would humming help?”

“Think Erika.”

Erika’s eyes widened, “Harmony can be generated from any music...” Thina nodded.

“So I could sing or hum or tap my foot to a tune, and that would generate Harmony.”

Thina laughed again, and gave Erika a wide smile, “By The Harmonics, you can think!”

Erika flushed crimson. “Now, listen, tell me what you hear.”

Erika closed her eyes for a while. She let out a surprised sound, “I can hear the wind, the creak of an open window and the sound of traffic drifting in from outside. There are birds flapping their wings and their excited chirping. There is the rustle of the trees’ new leaves.”

“Precisely! Music is everywhere Erika, all the time. The world itself sings a song that never stops. We call it the Everlasting Symphony. Harmonists can tap into that and let it generate Harmony. You can, if you choose to, live in a constant state of being filled with Harmony by just listening to the world.

“The Everlasting Symphony is perfectly unique and so beautifully complex it can never be reproduced, which means it is the perfect generator. Perfectly original and a ‘talent’ second to none. Every bird chirp, wingbeat, leaf rustle, engine roar, wood creak, blowing wind adds its own little part to the Symphony. Now listen closely and listen to the world around you sing a song of power, elegance and beauty.”



Thina was on the verge of tears. Her eyes gleamed as she spoke about the Symphony.

Erika felt the impact of her words more than she understood them. She closed her eyes and listened.

As the Symphony fell on her she felt a floodgate open and Harmony filled her almost immediately Erika felt like she had come alive from being asleep all her life. Her every sense seemed to scream for attention: she felt the heat of the afternoon sun on her skin; the variety of spices in Thina's kitchen became distinct to her; she could recognise each flavour from the cake she had eaten when she had arrived earlier; her eyes, now open, could make out the kaleidoscope of colours in the coffee table. She could see every rut and rise in the wood as if she were running her hand over it.

Tears began to streak her face, tears of pure joy and contentment. It was the most lovely experience of her young life.

"Thina," Erika said on the verge of breaking down, "I am so sorry. I didn't realise what I was saying."

"Child?"

"I never realised the true beauty of Harmony, to have this taken away..." Erika began to cry, she lowered her head into her hands and sobbed. For someone who hated crying, she seemed to be doing it often lately.

Thina waited patiently for Erika to compose herself.

"Are you ready?"

"For?"

"I want you to summon a Shrii...with permanence this time," Thina said with a wink. "If you do this on your first attempt, you have my permission to use Harmony as you see fit, outside my house."

Erika was struck dumb. Her mouth fell open and her eyes fluttered.

"Child, close your mouth. You look defective."

Erika snapped her mouth shut for a few moments, "Thank you."

Thina fetched the Shrii dust and poured some onto the coffee table, "Two rules for this: one, you must light the fire in the fireplace and use that, and two, you will need to pull a wind, not a breeze."

"That's fair."

"And do not, for the love of Harmony, forget the permanence. "

"I won't."

Erika closed her eyes and focused on the Symphony. She quickly lit the fire place and with practiced ease, she then began to call a wind. The wind blew in, it started as a breeze but increased steadily. The small antiquities began rattling, and the sheet music on the piano began to fly off the music rack. Thina sat still. Her clothes whipping in the wind. Erika mixed the Shrii dust with the wind and drew the fire in from the

fireplace. The Shrill took its form. Erika called the Shrill over and sang a word of permanence, so softly that Thina couldn't overhear. Erika forced herself to stop listening and the stream of Harmony trickled to a stop. Her Shrill sat on its haunches in the middle of the air.

Erika reached out to touch it. Her hand passed through it, distorting its dog-like form for a moment, before it slipped back together. It felt slick and wet but left no residue on her fingers.

"It seems you are ready. You remembered that the word of permanence should only be known by the creator of the Shrill. I am impressed. Other students have sung it at the top of their lungs. You may now use Harmony whenever you deem it necessary, but please be careful and always let my story be a reminder to you of how dangerous it can be."

"Thank you Thina," Erika rushed to Thina and threw her arms around her teacher. Thina stood rather awkwardly for a moment, before encircling Erika with her arms, returning the embrace.

"What will you do now?" Thina asked.

"Well, I was hoping we could continue our lessons, I feel you still have a lot to teach me. I also need to learn how to heal people," Erika said.

"Oh yes, healing is quite the topic, but we will tackle it soon. First let us celebrate your...graduation...I suppose." Erika was beaming.

"The last thing I will teach you today is about Harmonic Food," Thina said striding into the room and returning with a dark brown bottle and set it on the coffee table with two glasses.

"It's basically just food or drink made with Harmony. It sounds more interesting than it is," Thina said. She poured a small amount into each glass and handed one to Erika, holding onto it, "How old are you?"

"Eighteen..."

"Good," Thina released the glass, "This is FruitSong."

"FruitSong? Very original," Erika said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"I hate the name," Thina said.

Erika laughed and Thina joined her.

"To Harmony," Thina said.

"To Harmony," Erika echoed.

Thina downed the drink in one gulp, and Erika followed suit. It was a wonderfully delicious drink that left them feeling warm inside. The same feeling you have after listening to your favourite song.

Erika left late that night a little tipsier than she ought to have been, Regy bounding through the air next to her.

Erika arrived at Linkmed Hospital; Paul had taken a turn and was declining quickly. She rushed through the wards, Regy loping in the air alongside her. The smell of sick, alcohol-based cleaners and blood made her incredibly nauseated, she hated being here. The walls were bland, they looked like they had been whitewashed, the vinyl flooring was eerily spotted with what Erika hoped wasn't blood. She gagged into her closed mouth and walked a bit faster.

She had spent the last few months preparing for this visit, getting ready to finally help her friend. Paul was special to Erika, he was instrumental in her love of music. Paul's family had always been better off than Erika's and could afford to send him to piano lessons, in turn Paul taught her everything he had learnt.

Paul was Erika's closest friend, and had been for as long as she could remember. She desperately wanted to help him. He hadn't deserved to be beaten, especially not to this degree.

Erika greeted the nurses with a smile, most of them had been friendly to her when she had come to visit. They returned the gesture, not blinking twice at Regy. She knocked softly on the door to Paul's room, it was just after visiting hours, so there shouldn't have been anyone inside. The only person who visited was Paul's mother, who seemed to burst into tears every time she looked at Paul, Erika didn't mean to seem unsympathetic, but she couldn't stand the never-ending crying.

She entered the room after a few short moments waiting. The room was as she had seen it during every visit. He was alone in the room, his bed lay halfway between the door and a large partially blacked-out window. There were a few chairs surrounding his bed, one had always been empty; the room wasn't overly large, just big enough for medical personnel to move around the bed unhindered. The entire room was clinical, right down to the design of the space.

"It's been a beautifully hot day today hasn't it," Erika said to Paul. The doctor had said he should be able to hear her. "The hospital is freezing, do you know why they keep it so cold?"

"It might just be to keep all germs asleep so they can't infect anyone else," Erika carried on nonsensically. "I have some good news, Thina says I can use Harmony whenever I want to, so I am going to try and get you back on your feet. I can't wait for you to experience Harmony. Thina says any musician can, and you have always been so much better than me.

"Oh! I forgot, this is Regy. He looks just like my wolfhound, do you remember? He's a Shrii, they are really useful little creatures and Regy is rather affectionate," she said as he licked at her ear. She couldn't feel it exactly, but there was a sensation there she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Erika sat next to him and took his hand. He was breathing normally, people in comas on TV always had tubes down their throats, but Paul was just lying there as if asleep. He had a few wires connected to his head, monitoring his brain activity. Erika looked at the lines on the screen, she had no idea what they meant or what it was supposed to look like, but that didn't matter. Erika was going to wake him up.

She sat down and listened to the hospital around her, sounds flooded into her, the chatter of nurses, the beeping of machines going off, the clicking of pens as they wrote

on paper. There was a dull thrum from the fluorescent lighting and the soft sounds of sobbing and sniffing coming from the rooms around Paul.

The pool was filling up. Erika was bursting with power. She took more and more, she didn't know how much would be needed to heal Paul but she didn't want to take a chance. She pooled more than she ever had before, her head was pounding from the roar in her mind. She looked at Paul and laid her hands on his head. She began pushing the Harmony into Paul's brain. Healing a broken bone was one thing, you just had to knit the bone back together. The issue with the brain is there aren't two broken parts to put back together. She figured that the Harmony would be able to do the work she needed it to.

There was a knock at the door. Erika stopped listening to the Symphony and the Harmony began to ebb away from her.

A nurse's head popped in, "Oh dear. The other nurses were meant to let me know when you got here."

It was Nurse Wanda – she was the Matron here and the kindest person Erika had ever met. She single-handedly broke down every rumour Erika had heard of cruel and uncaring nurses in the medical fraternity.

"How are you dear?"

"I'm good. Better today," Erika said smiling, "and how are you ma'am?"

"Wanda dear not ma'am. I'm troubled."

"Why?"

"His mother didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"I'm so sorry to tell you dear. Paul was declared brain dead this morning."

Erika stood waiting for the words to sink in. She went numb. She understood what Wanda had said, intellectually, but she couldn't quite believe it. She sat down heavily in the chair and stared at the ground.

"Why...why is he still here then?" Erika said, her voice devoid of emotion.

"He is an organ donor."

Erika looked at Wanda with wide eyes, "Even like this, he wants to help people."

"I am so sorry dear. Everyone spoke well of him."

"He was the best person I have ever met. My best friend."

Wanda walked over and squeezed Erika's shoulder. Wanda gave a sympathetic smile, "I'll leave you to say good bye."

Wanda's voice was so caring it made Erika sick. As the door closed Erika began to cry. She still didn't quite believe what had happened but she knew she would never speak to Paul again. She knew they would never play music together or spend hours



just sitting and listening to the radio like they used to. She cried harder as she thought of everything Paul had meant to her, everything Paul had done for her. She thought of how she had failed at the only thing she needed to have done for him. She cried because she had missed him for a year and had tried keeping herself busy instead of being here with him. She wept for her friend and for herself. She couldn't help herself, she couldn't stop herself from crying and so she listened. She was good at listening. She had practiced listening every day for the last year to the detriment of the rest of her life. So she listened to herself cry. The wailing of the Symphony, bidding farewell to Paul, caused Harmony to erupt with a force Erika had never felt before. It was so much power she didn't know what to do.

Thina opened the oven and grabbed the tray with mittened hands. Scalding steam hit her face, she berated herself for not waiting for the steam to settle first; she had baked so often before, but she still made this mistake almost every time she opened the oven. She kicked the oven door closed with her foot and set the tray on a wooden board. The smell of cinnamon and roasted peanuts wafted off the freshly baked cookies; Thina took a deep breath in and smiled to herself.

She turned and put the kettle on. She poured some freshly ground coffee beans into the plunger. Just before the water started boiling she poured it over the grinds and stirred it a few times. She returned to the cooling cookies and flicked two onto a plate, being careful not to burn herself. Excess grinds had floated to the top of the coffee plunger so Thina scooped them off with a spoon and plunged the coffee carefully. She poured herself a cup of the strong, dark, bitter liquid; picked up the plate of cookies and walked to the lounge. She sat in her usual chair in front of the TV, her back to her grand piano.

She turned the TV on and took a sip of coffee and a bite of a biscuit. She chewed slowly savouring the flavours of the buttery peanuts and sugary cinnamon. A satisfied sigh escaped her.

The evening news had just started. Thina wasn't a fan of the news. It was far too sad and dreary, but she didn't get out often, if at all, and it was her only means of catching up on the going on's of the world. She frowned at the TV, this was something she hadn't seen in a while.

“—Explosion at Linkmed Hospital, authorities aren't giving us many details. They have found a survivor. It seems as though the explosion originated on the third floor, the ICU— excuse me, we have word that the fire department is giving a statement, “ the newscaster said.

A representative of the fire department came into view, “It's not looking good in there, we have made three attempts to move into the building, only one attempt was successful. My men have reported seeing no one else alive as of yet. We have also identified the lone survivor as Erika Colwell—“

Thina began chuckling to herself, “It is amusing how many people cannot tell the difference between balance and chaos.”

Thina's chuckle became a cackle, she laughed madly as she ate her cookies.

# THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

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An Introduction to the World of Cosplay

## Written by Tim Morty

A little more than a year ago, had someone asked me about cosplay, I might have offered the rather brief and clinical description of “the practice of dressing up as a character from a film, book, or video game, especially one from the Japanese genres of manga or anime.”

I'd seen a few people dress up at some of the local ‘geek’-centric events but I can't say I ever paid much attention beyond thinking to myself, “Well that might make for an interesting photography subject someday...”

As chance would have it, in January 2015, I offered to take one of my godchildren to an event hosted by AnimeWorX, the “AWX Mini Cosplay Event” at Brightwater Commons. In an attempt to be the diligent shutterbug that I profess to being, I approached the organizers to find out if they would allow me to take some shots of the event, intending to snap away from the side-lines. Much to my surprise, I soon found myself roped into the event proper and facing a group of cosplayers that needed photographing.

Before me stood depictions of characters both known and unknown; from anime to comics, from games to brand mascots – Attack on Titan, Bleach, Love Live!, Mortal Kombat, Marvel's Thor, and AnimeWorX's very own beloved mascot character, Eri.



Some of the models seemed about as nervous as I was, if not more so, leading to some quick shuffling of shoot order; in the end we managed and I walked away with some images of some bright and colourful characters. Not my finest work, by any stretch of the imagination, but certainly something new and different.

This was my introduction to the weirdly wonderful world of cosplay.

The term "cosplay" is a Japanese portmanteau of the English terms costume and role-play. Nobuyuki Takahashi coined the term while attending the 1984 World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) in Los Angeles, which he reported on in Japanese magazine "My Anime".

At its core, cosplay centres around these two terms, and regardless of skill, age, colour, creed, shape or size, all are welcome to join in on the fun.

Sometimes, the timidest of souls finds new courage and a flair for the dramatic while acting as their favourite character and the unlikeliest of people can don costumes to become someone totally different; the desk-bound office worker becomes a mighty hero (or villain!) and loses themselves, if only for a little while, in the role.

After my initial exposure to the local cosplay scene, I began to dig a little further. I made contact with some of the event's participants and soon found myself attending crafting workshops and social gatherings where I got to know the people behind the costumes a little more, and gained some insight into their craft.



It was here that I learnt about the different types of cosplay crafting. While some crafted their outfits by traditional means, through sewing on or off pattern, others shaped and moulded foams and plastics into somewhat more durable armour and in some cases, props such as weapons.

The average crafting cosplayer, as an individual, combines all the roles and does all the work that may be assigned to a production costume and props team, with far less resources, limited time and quite often expensive materials. Here, the common tools of the trade are glue and heat guns, sewing machines and often, Dremel multitools or similar.

Ask any cosplayer about crafting-related injuries and most will regale you with stories of their latest glue-gun burns (or gluing themselves to something they're busy working on), sewing needle injuries, craft knife cuts and caffeine-and-sugar fuelled late nights, trying to finish off or correct part of their costume before an event.

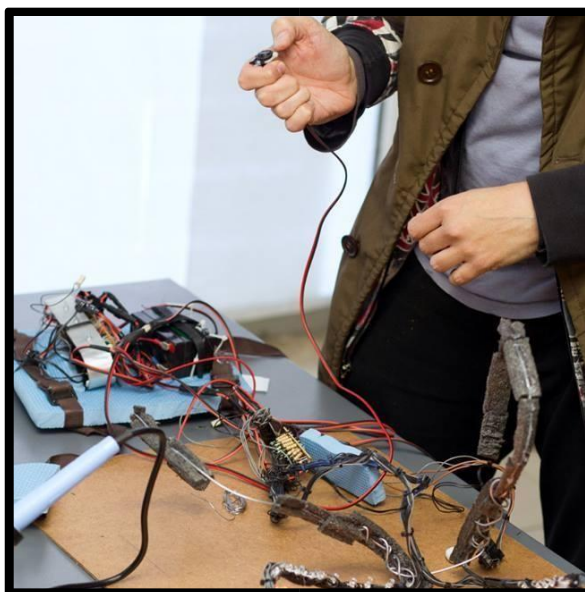
Many might question their devotion to their craft, but one need only observe the animated expressions on their faces and hear the excitement in their voices, while talking about a costume finally coming together as planned, to understand that it is a passion and it goes beyond a hobby.



Just when I thought I'd seen everything that could be cut, and glued, sewn or stitched together, I was introduced to the world of costume electronics and prosthetics.

This led me to research some of the dark arts of professional cosplay prop making. Not satisfied with some simple LED lighting, folks like Harrison Krix of Volpin Props, have built elaborately crafted game-related replicas incorporating some fairly complex systems, incorporating light, motion and sound. As a testament to the level of craftsmanship that goes into his work, some of his pieces have found a permanent home at their relevant game studios head offices.

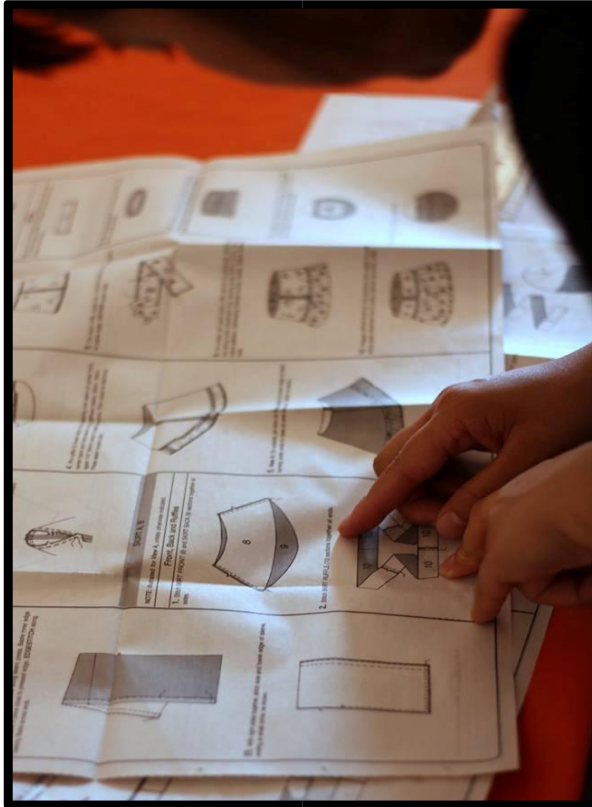
While not everyone has Krix's crafting facilities and resources, the local cosplayers have nonetheless wowed crowds with their own creations, often crafted from scraps or other materials of humble origin. I know of quite a few cosplayers that spend more time at Builder's Warehouse than most avid DIY'ers.



The other unexpected and very welcome aspect of the cosplay community is one of sharing and helpfulness. Some host workshops and share their knowledge through teaching. Others assist in more direct ways, by organizing meetups at the local



haberdasheries and material warehouses, or having 'sewing days', poring over patterns and image references while listening to anime or game soundtracks



Looking at the attention to detail and relative accuracy achieved by many of the cosplayers out there, some might assume that they are sponsored professionals. This is sadly not the case, and while some have found a way to partially monetize their craft, most do not see any reward

## Exciting News for Gene Wolfe Fans

Do you love Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun? Are you in South Africa? Better yet, are you in Joburg?

I'm currently planning a television adaptation for Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun to be produced completely in South Africa.

Maybe you love fantasy books or movies or science fiction books or movies or classics in either field (as well as horror). Book of the New Sun has it all and more and will challenge you in every possible way.

So, I'm looking for anyone who already knows Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun or is at least willing to try read it and see if it bites them as it has so many people. I would love to connect with you and who knows perhaps you could be involved in this massive undertaking? Perhaps you're heavily connected to the television production world and would love to finance this undertaking? Or maybe you could just network and connect supplies and demands to see a



masterpiece of science fiction-fantasy-horror manifested visually and in our beautiful country?

Please drop me an email if this has set a fire in your belly:

Lee@darkcontinent.tv

Thanks. Lee Pretorius aka General Meadow

## **Book Received**

**JonathanBall *Publishers***

Gardner Dozois. The Mammoth Book of Best New SD 28

Little Brown R310.00

## **Joint 3<sup>rd</sup> Place Nova 2015 Sharon Angus**

### **The desert does not forgive**

The woman walked into the city with the last bloody rays of the setting Sun, and with her came a burning bitter wind, tasting of salt and sand, as though the sirocco of the coastal desert had crept inland to the cities of the plains. A lone hooded figure, moving upstream against the current of people leaving the city, seeming to slip between them like Smoke. The masses ignored her, concentrating on getting out before the gates closed. It would be dangerous outside the city at night – there were jackals and pariah dogs, and the occasional wandering sandcat. But many preferred those dangers to the ones that lurked within the city walls.

One of the duke's guards, lounging against the wall, called out a drunken remark to her as she passed beneath the portal of the massive iron gates, three feet thick and studded with nails the size of a man's head. The woman took no notice of the guard's indecent proposal; but later that night, as he thrust a whore down onto his filthy bed and fumbled under her skirts, the same guard suddenly remembered the slender

cloaked figure, and a dry wind blew in through the broken pane of the window, and his enthusiasm melted away like snow fallen in the desert.

The woman made her way among the crowded and maze-like streets of the city, not looking to right or to left, apparently knowing exactly where she was going. The crowds of people hurried past her with eyes cast down at the muddy street, rushing to get behind closed and bolted doors before dark, trying to avoid attracting the notice of the groups of the duke's guards who lurked on the corners, a palpable aura of menace hovering around them like the stench from a dung heap. A young maidservant out on an errand for her mistress Scurried past them like a frightened mouse, but in her haste to get away from them she tripped on the uneven cobblestones and fell sprawling at their feet. Quickly she scrambled to her feet and would have fled, but one of the guards had already blocked her escape route.

"A pretty girl like you shouldn't be so clumsy," he said, leering at her. "The duke doesn't like clumsy women. We shall have to teach you how to walk properly!"

The young girl stared at the ground, shaking with fear. "Go on," the man taunted, slapping her across the face when she made no move. Slowly, cowering as though she expected a blow, the girl took a few uncertain steps. When the guards did nothing, she grabbed her courage with both hands and tried to run away from them. Instantly her tormentor put out a foot and tripped her again, so that once more she fell on the hard cobbles, cutting her knees. "How clumsy!" he chided her, "you shall have to try again until you can walk properly!"

The crowds hurried past, not looking at the bleeding and sobbing girl and her tormentors, accustomed to the cruelty, relieved they were not the victim. After all, the girl was lucky she was only entertainment for the guards, and not for their master. She would suffer only bruises, and perhaps a broken bone, or the loss of her maidenhood if the men felt so inclined. At night, screams of agony echoed from the duke's castle, and people taken to amuse him never returned.

Eventually the guards tired of their game, and with a final kick they left the girl lying in a heap on the ground, and moved off, laughing. As they did so, the first man, the one who had forced the girl to her feet and instigated the whole event, tripped over the very same cobblestone that had brought the girl to her knees, and fell awkwardly. There was the sickening crack of breaking bone, and he screamed in agony.

The maidservant, huddled on the ground, lifted her face and noticed that scattered across the cobbles of the street were grains of sand.

The alehouse called the Snake was a dirty and foul-smelling hovel in the worst part of town, patronised by a motley collection of thieves, cutthroats and noblemen seeking to amuse themselves with a little wanton cruelty that would be impossible in a better part of town. Here, nobody noticed if a girl or two went missing, or cared about the bloody corpses found in the gutters come morning.

The evening was well underway, the floor already spotted with a mixture of blood and vomit, when a hot wind blew the door open and it thudded dully against the wall.

A silence like death fell over the noisy interior, and they stared at the hooded woman who entered with the wind.

It was unheard of to see any woman except one of the local whores in an alehouse like the Snake, but none of the men even considered her to be one of them. They watched in silent fascination as she walked up to the landlord.

"Well, my pretty, and what can I do for you?" he leered. The strange aura about her had obviously not filtered through to a mind pickled in wine for many years.

The woman looked at him in silence for a long moment, and then put back the hood of her cloak. She was pale as milk, her hair silver-gilt and flowing around her like mist, her skin translucent as marble. Even her eyes were pale, as though she were blind. The landlord took a step back, and made the sign to ward off evil. "We don't serve your kind here, witch!" he snarled.

The woman merely looked at him. "I did not ask to be served," she replied, her voice low and lilting, her consonants strangely sibilant. "I have come to dance." And she lifted her head that all could see the mark at her throat, two small scars like the bite of a snake.

Among the tables whispering began. That mark was the sign of the snake goddess, Meretseger, She-Who-Loves-Silence. Older than the rocks themselves, enigmatic and secretive, she was mistress of the hungry desert and the dry bones that lay there, the goddess of both death and life. Her worship was largely forgotten now, trampled under the feet of the conquerors, her name little more than a myth. But the people who lived on the edge of the great wasteland that had never fallen to the foreign soldiers, the hostile desert that still held its secrets – they remembered her. And sometimes, in

those isolated villages, a young woman would dream of Snakes, and wake to find the twin marks on her throat, and know that the power of Meretseger ran in her veins – a power that could both heal and kill. But the whisperers were not interested in theology. To them, only one thing about the snake goddess was important— her dances. Rumour claimed them to be a form of worship, a dance twisting and sinuous as a snake. Few people had ever seen the dance – and those that had, could tell nothing of it, only lose themselves in dreams and longings. The landlord made the sign against evil again. “We'll have none of your sorcery here, witch!” he growled. “Now get out!”

The woman said nothing more, but turned and walked quietly out of the alehouse. A few paces up the street, she stopped, and paused for a moment as though listening, and then continued on her way, walking slowly as though waiting for someone to catch her up.

Someone did catch up with her – a panting youth, a mix of fear and excitement written on his face. “Wait,” he gasped, putting out a hand to catch her sleeve and then thinking better of it, “My master will pay you!”

The woman turned, and regarded him thoughtfully. “To dance for him!” the youth stammered, “He will take you back to his house, and will pay you to dance for him and some of his friends!”

“Who is your master?” the woman asked softly. “Lord Ketch,” he replied, and then suddenly realised that he had been specifically told not to reveal the name of his employer. He crossed his fingers behind his back, a protection against spells.

“There is no need to be afraid,” the woman said gently, “I won't hurt you.” She looked back down the street to where the lights of the Snake shone out through the open door. “Go tell your master I will dance for him, for the sum of thirty pieces of silver,” she said. Although her face was hidden in shadow, somehow the youth was certain that she was smiling faintly, and he shivered.

In an opulent, gold-and-crimson furnished room filled with the most expensive luxuries, the woman from the desert danced for the salivating noblemen. Her simple, loose white gown and silver-gold hair swirled around her, making a cloud of mist like those that blew in from the sea and hovered over the waste, golden in the dawn light. She became the desert – the silence that echoed, the wide openness, the everblowing wind; and the creatures of the desert – the small pocket mouse, shy and timid,

scurrying between the clumps of dry grass; the desert hawk, master of the air, wheeling above; the lizards, quick-moving and shiny like molten metal.

At last, she was the goddess herself, the cobra, queen of the desert-silken, sinuous body and a bite that was sudden death. Afterwards, she vanished into the night, leaving her audience of bored men unable to speak, caught in the web of her dancing. That night they would sleep restlessly, tossing in their velvet-hung beds, waking in the morning full of dreams of twining coils of pale hair and sinuous white limbs.

Word got around very quickly among the rich lords and ladies of the city – soon servants came every night to the Snake in search of the snake dancer.

Nobody knew where she went in the daytime, but every evening she took up a seat in the corner, among the shadows, eating or drinking nothing, waiting as still and silent as the desert. Grudgingly, the landlord left her alone, since her presence brought more customers to the alehouse, people to gawk at the strange creature from out of the desert and out of their legends.

On the opposite side of the city, the Mother Superior of the Convent of Our Lady of Roses, haven for girls and women fleeing from dangers, heard the rumours of the Snake dancer, and prayed that the city might be protected from her evil and that of the demon she worshipped. Then she thanked God for the gifts of silver, thirty pieces at a time that arrived every morning in the tiny chapel, and prayed that whoever was the giver would receive blessings beyond number for their generosity.

In time, the whispers of the dancer reached the bored ears of the duke, and he sent one of his servants to the Snake to bring the woman to the ducal palace, to perform for him. Obediently, she came, and danced, her white eyes half closed, her breasts moving beneath the thin fabric of her gown. The duke felt an urgent heat in his loins, a fire that seemed to stain his vision red as he imagined that white skin streaked with blood, that soft lilting voice screaming with pain. He ordered the woman taken to his chambers.

There, he ripped the white gown from her body as she struggled, and forced her down on the blood-stained bed, tying her wrists and ankles to the corners with leather thongs. Then he bent over her, and with a knife began tracing the whirls and spirals of her dance on her skin.



The woman opened her eyes and smiled, like a hunting snake that has just scented prey might smile.

"The Dance of Meretseger is not merely a dance," she murmured in her lilting voice, her accent more apparent than usual, giving a sibilant hiss to her words. "It is the weaving of a net, like the ones used to catch wild pigs, who see only the sensual pleasures of sweet honey and not the trap behind it."

Her blind eyes looked straight into his soul, and her voice spoke inside his head. "Do you remember me?"

And memory came flooding back, an incident he had almost forgotten. Himself and a few friends, hunting sandcats in the desert. A small sanctuary dedicated to the snake goddess, a place of healing, inhabited only by a lone woman. They had burnt the sanctuary to the ground, and raped the healer, several times over, until she could not even scream anymore.

It had been his turn, and as he stood over her doing up his pants she had opened her eyes, red-gold in the light of the flames, and looked into his soul, and her voice echoed within his head. "The goddess will not forget," she had whispered. And he, frightened and angry at his own fear, had taken the knife out of his belt and slit her throat.

She had died there, her pale skin darkened by ash, her blood flowing on the Sandy floor, forming circles and spirals, glistening in the flickering light from the burning temple. The duke tried to draw away from his prisoner, but his legs would not obey him. Then he tried to scream for his guards, who would be waiting just outside the door, but realised with horror that they were quite used to screams. "But you are dead!" he whispered.

"Yes," the woman agreed, "I am dead. You killed me yourself." Her smile became faintly cruel. "But She-Who-Loves-Silence is a powerful goddess, and her anger is terrible to raise. That night, as I lay dead among the ashes, the daughter of the goddess came to me, the black cobra of the desert whose bite is death. But for me, she had a different gift."

The shackles around her wrists and ankles broke with the sound of tearing leather.

"She gave me life. Life enough to seek vengeance. And my task is almost done." Again he tried to scream, but could not. The woman half-closed her eyes, and pulled him down, to kiss the hollow at the base of his throat. Her lips were cold, and then burning

hot, and with their touch came two sharp stabbing pains, like twin needles, that seemed to inject acid into his veins so that his blood was on fire. And yet, with the agony came a fiery pleasure, more intense than any climax he had ever felt.

The woman dropped her head from his throat, and there was blood on her mouth. She smiled in savage triumph, and licked her lips with a tongue that was forked, like a snake's. As the duke collapsed onto the bed, she seemed to fade and diffuse from underneath him like a cloud of smoke from a fire.

The next evening, the regulars at the Snake were so busy discussing the mysterious death of the duke, found dead that morning with not a mark upon him except two faint bruises on his throat that they did not even notice the empty corner where the Snake-dancer was wont to sit and wait.



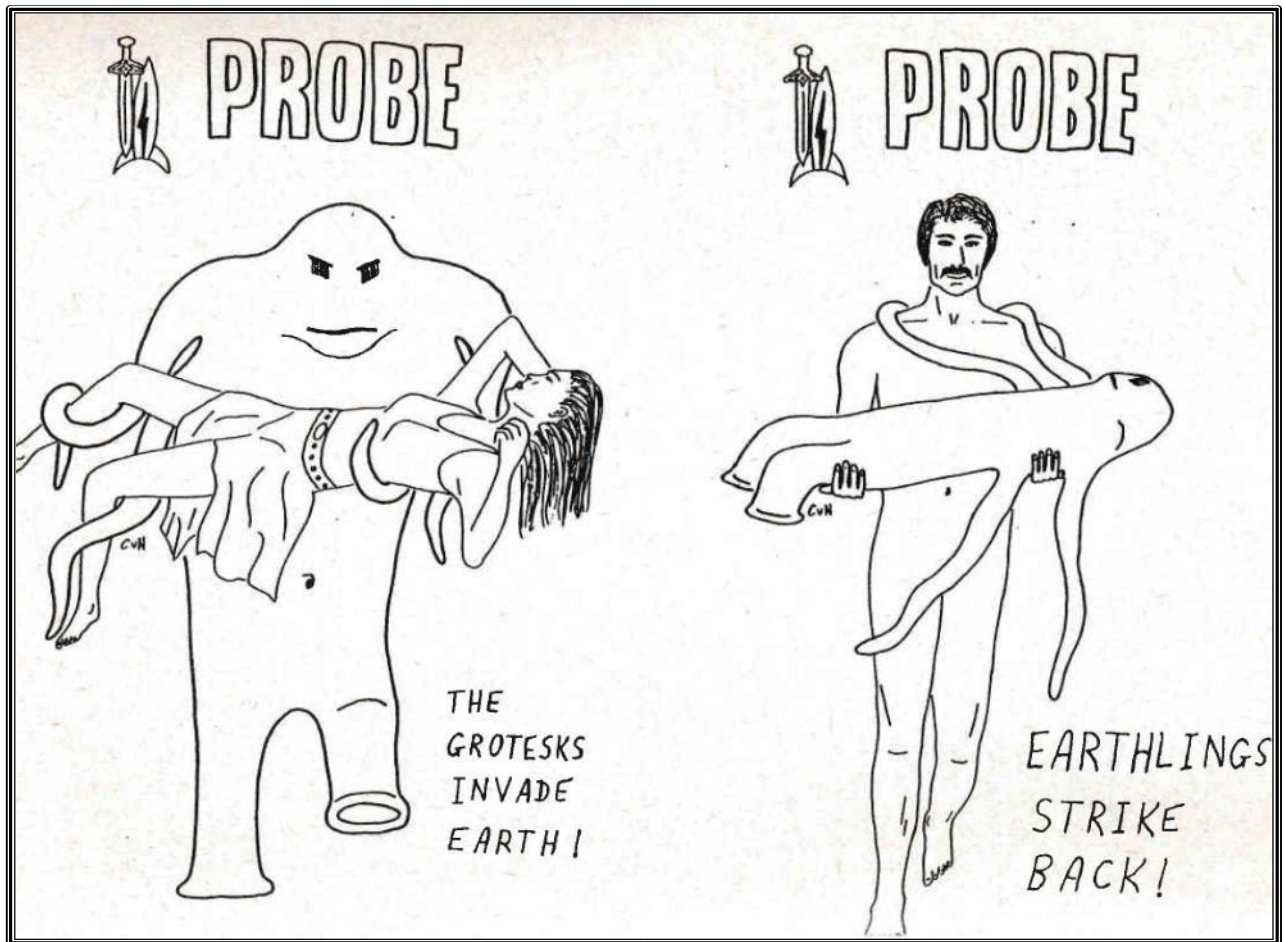
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## From The Daily Galaxy

Earth came early to the party in the evolving universe. According to the new theoretical study, when our solar system was born 4.6 billion years ago only eight percent of the potentially habitable planets that will ever form in the universe existed. And, the party won't be over when the sun burns out in another 6 billion years. The bulk of those planets -- 92 percent -- have yet to be born. This conclusion is based on an assessment of data collected by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope and the prolific planet-hunting Kepler space observatory.

The NASA researchers say that future Earths are more likely to appear inside giant galaxy clusters and also in dwarf galaxies, which have yet to use up all their gas for building stars and accompanying planetary systems. By contrast, our Milky Way galaxy has used up much more of the gas available for future star formation.

A big advantage to our civilization arising early in the evolution of the universe is our being able to use powerful telescopes like Hubble to trace our lineage from the big bang through the early evolution of galaxies. The observational evidence for the big bang and cosmic evolution, encoded in light and other electromagnetic radiation, will be all but erased away 1 trillion years from now due to the runaway expansion of space. Any far-future civilizations that might arise will be largely clueless as to how or if the universe began and evolved.

"Our main motivation was understanding the Earth's place in the context of the rest of the universe," said study author Peter Behroozi of the Space Telescope Science Institute (STScI) in Baltimore, Maryland, "Compared to all the planets that will ever form in the universe, the Earth is actually quite early."

Looking far away and far back in time, Hubble has given astronomers a "family album" of galaxy observations that chronicle the universe's star formation history as galaxies grew. The data show that the universe was making stars at a fast rate 10 billion years ago, but the fraction of the universe's hydrogen and helium gas that was involved was very low. Today, star birth is happening at a much slower rate than long ago, but there is so much leftover gas available that the universe will keep cooking up stars and planets for a very long time to come.

"There is enough remaining material [after the big bang] to produce even more planets in the future, in the Milky Way and beyond," added co-investigator Molly Peeples of STScI.

Kepler's planet survey indicates that Earth-sized planets in a star's habitable zone, the perfect distance that could allow water to pool on the surface, are ubiquitous in our galaxy. Based on the survey, scientists predict that there should be 1 billion Earth-sized worlds in the Milky Way galaxy at present, a good portion of them presumed to be rocky. That estimate skyrockets when you include the other 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe.

This leaves plenty of opportunity for untold more Earth-sized planets in the habitable zone to arise in the future. The last star isn't expected to burn out until 100 trillion years from now. That's plenty of time for literally anything to happen on the planet landscape.

While Earth and the other planets in our solar system travel around the sun in nearcircular orbits, planets in other systems can have more comet-like orbits in which the distance from the planet to star varies. Such orbits, termed eccentric, would cause the planet to move in and out of the habitable zone. A habitable zone, shown in green here, is defined as the region around a star where liquid water, an essential ingredient for life as we know it, could potentially be present. Earth always remains in its habitable zone.

The results appeared in the Oct. 20 Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.

The Daily Galaxy via NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center





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