

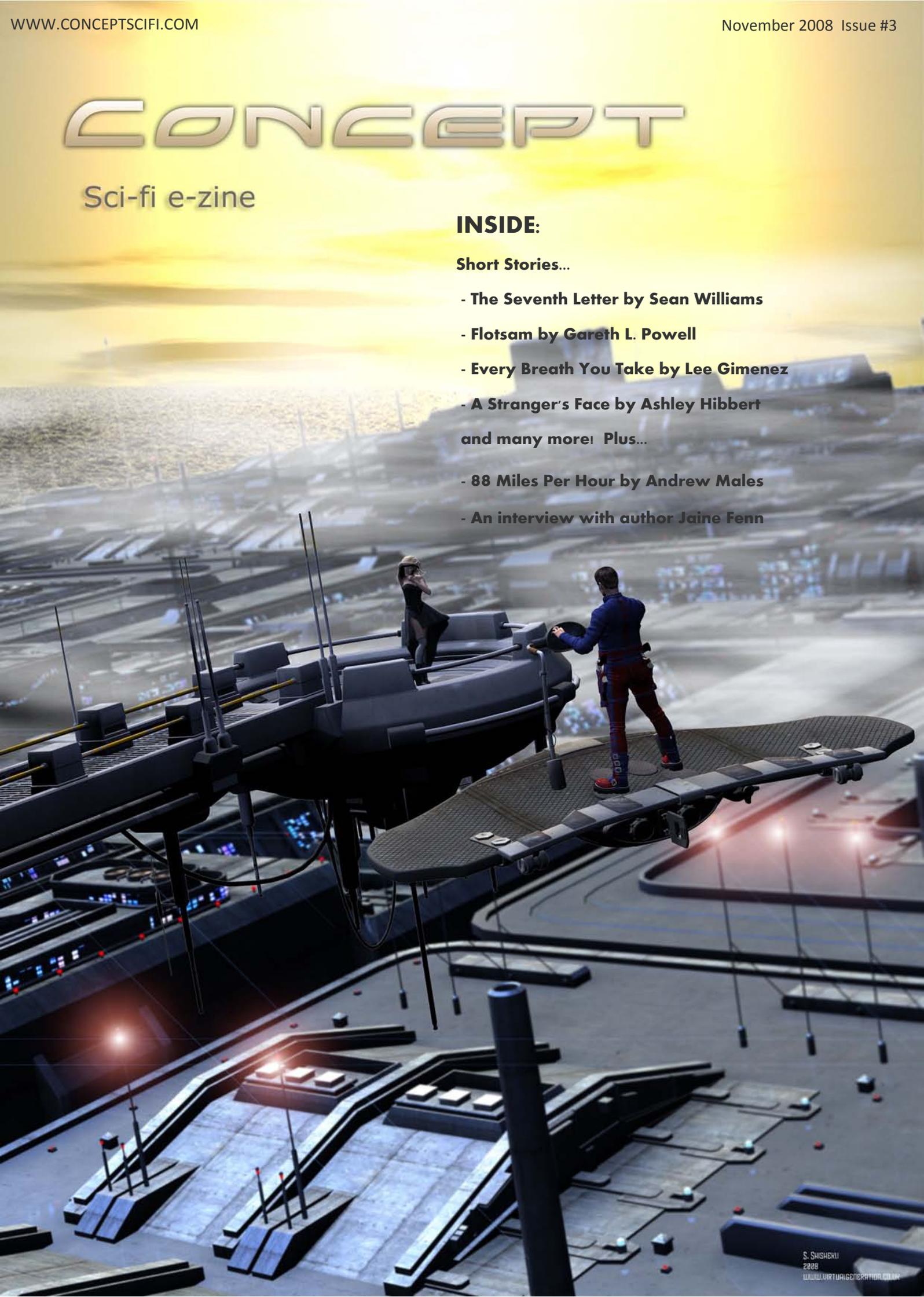
CONCEPT

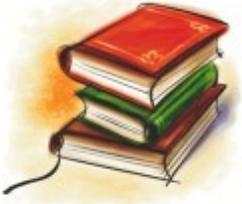
Sci-fi e-zine

INSIDE:

Short Stories...

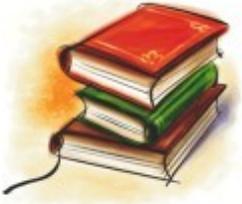
- The Seventh Letter by Sean Williams
- Flotsam by Gareth L. Powell
- Every Breath You Take by Lee Gimenez
- A Stranger's Face by Ashley Hibbert
and many more! Plus...
- 88 Miles Per Hour by Andrew Males
- An interview with author Jaine Fenn





In This Issue

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Editorial..... | 3 |
| The Seventh Letter..... | 4 |
| by Sean Williams | |
| Too Late..... | 12 |
| by Graham Storrs | |
| Barbarian Blood..... | 21 |
| by Pavelle Wesser | |
| City Of Light..... | 23 |
| by G. O. Clark | |
| Every Breath You Take..... | 24 |
| by Lee Giminez | |
| Echo From The Future..... | 29 |
| by Terry Ray | |
| 88 Miles Per Hour..... | 30 |
| A regular column by Andrew Males | |
| A Stranger's Face..... | 36 |
| by Ashley Hibbert | |
| An Interview with Jaine Fenn..... | 44 |
| by Gary Reynolds | |
| Flotsam..... | 47 |
| by Gareth L. Powell | |



Editorial

Welcome to the third issue of the Concept Sci-fi E-zine.

In this issue we have two reprints. The first is 'The Seventh Letter' by Sean Williams, author of the Astropolis series and a number of Star Wars novels. His story in this issue won the Aurealis Award for Best SF Story a couple of years ago – and it's certainly a good one. The second reprint is 'Flotsam' by Gareth L. Powell. This story was first published in his short story collection 'The Last Reef'.

We also have our regular column from Andrew Males who this time looks at the writing process and offers some sound advice for people who are just starting out on writing speculative fiction. And we have an interview with sci-fi author Jaine Fenn.

As always if you have any suggestions or comments, please email feedback@conceptscifi.com. And if you'd like to subscribe and get future issues directly to your in-box for free, then please visit <http://www.conceptscifi.com/ezine.htm>. I hope that you enjoy reading issue #3.

Gary Reynolds.

Editor.

Artwork

Sam Shishekli at www.virtualgeneration.co.uk

Fiction

Sean Williams, Lee Gimenez, Ashley Hibbert, Gareth L. Powell, Pavelle Wesser, Graham Storrs

Non-fiction

Andrew Males, Gary Reynolds

Poetry

G. O. Clark, Terry Ray

Special Thanks To

Jaine Fenn



The Seventh Letter

by Sean Williams

The stroke hit him like a thunderbolt in front of the whole Board. The world vanished as if a shutter had been drawn. Later, he remembered the feel of his left hand at his temple, where a knife seemed to enter his brain and twist, before all consciousness was snuffed out. He didn't remember the blow that left a deep, purple bruise above his left eye, where his head struck the table so hard it would've knocked him out cold if he hadn't been already.

Then...shadows, shapes, distant conversations. He wasn't truly aware for some time. Forever, it seemed to him, when he could think at all. He was a puzzle in its box, with all the pieces tumbled and unlikely to fall into place on their own.

When he returned to himself, he was flat on his back in a well-lit, white room, loomed over by an ashen-haired woman with protuberant ears.

"What happened?" he croaked.

The woman looked pleased but not unsurprised. "Welcome back, Mr Jameson. How are you <----->?"

He blinked. "How am I what?"

"<----->, I said. Is there any pain? Can you move? I'm Doctor Harrod. We put you on <-----> within an hour of your stroke and the scans seem mostly clear now. The devil, however, is always in the details. Can you feel it when I do this?" The doctor lifted his hand and manipulated the joints.

He pulled it back. "Yes, I can feel it, but--"

"What?"

He didn't want to say it. He knew what a stroke was. Everyone in their 50s knew. If his mind was broken, would it be better or worse to see the cracks?

"Talk to me, <----->. If you describe your symptoms fully, there's a chance we can see to them."

"What did you just call me?"

The doctor lost some of her bedside cheer. "Your name, Mr Jameson. I used your first name. Don't you remember what that is?"

He shook his head, and the full force of his mortality struck him in that moment.

"Excuse me, Mr Jameson, just for a second. I will be back."

Unlike me, he feared as the doctor swept out of the room. Unlike me.

A battery of tests consumed the next few hours. He clearly wasn't entirely well, despite the full recovery of his physical functions. He could sit, point, eat, and excrete to the satisfaction of the therapists summoned to examine him. The problem was more subtle than that. He had trouble with some instructions, particularly those specific to one side of his body--a problem of comprehension, not volition. If he couldn't understand what was asked of him, how could he comply?

The disability was thus isolated to the speech centres of his brain, where words were formed. Even so, its exact nature still proved stubbornly elusive. Some words were simply absent, excised from his brain with a semantic scalpel. There seemed to be no pattern to the excision. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs were victims, but not all nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

His wife came to visit, flamboyant in sombre tones. She too called him by a name he could not understand, and looked appropriately dismayed when he could not say hers.

"Oh, pumpkin. What's happened to you? Do they think you'll recover? The Board is anxious. They can't keep the <-----> on hold forever."

He suppressed a flash of irritation. Who cared about the Board when his life had been shattered?

"Please don't call me 'pumpkin'," he said, aware of a nurse by the door. His circumstances embarrassed him sufficiently as it was.

"Well, what am I to call you, then? You've already made it clear you won't hear your name, and you won't use mine either."

"It's not that I won't. I can't. They don't sound like any words I've heard before." He searched for an appropriate metaphor in his oddly truncated vocabulary. "There are times when we're not in the same country. I'm here and you're in Paris. You speak French and I speak--"

He couldn't finish the sentence. The name he needed wasn't in his mind any more, escaped like so many other words. There had to be a way to talk about such matters, but all too frequently he found himself road-blocked.

The expression on his wife's face was one he would come to know well, in the days ahead.

#

More tests. Flash cards and electrodes taped to his scalp. Extended, self-conscious conversations with psychiatrists and speech therapists. Occasional incarcerations in claustrophobic tubes in which every neuron of his brain was untied and examined. The lesion proved difficult to isolate, and without isolation a cure would be impossible. He endured it all, keenly aware that with every day his case became odder, strayed further and further beyond the medical norm. Sometimes it was difficult to tolerate, the awareness that the puzzle he represented was more important than who he was. His condition was to be defeated, not cured.

In the end, an intern achieved what all the experts had not. Sam was affable, warm-natured, and had taken to him despite the difference in their years. He came frequently to chat. The topic of Jameson's condition could not be avoided, but Sam seemed interested in a personal capacity, as well as professional.

It was Sam, the intern, who had proposed that he, the patient, use his middle name, Lee, in place of his first. That worked. Lee Jameson was acceptable to his inconveniently broken mind.

"I had an idea, Lee," Sam said on another occasion. "You can turn left but not <----->. You can run but you've never been <----->. You can say Lee but not <----->. Has anyone asked you about the alphabet?"

Lee shook his head. "What about it?"

"How many letters there are, for instance."

"26. Everyone knows that."

"Tell me them, then."

He felt like a child but did as instructed. "A B C D E F H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z."

"That's 25."

"Nonsense. Don't mess with me, Sam."

"I'm not. You missed a letter."

"I'm sure I didn't."

"Try once more."

"A B C D E F H I J--"

"Stop there, Lee. What comes between F and H?"

"There's no letter between F and H."

"Then that's your problem." Sam beamed. "You've lost <----->."

Lee shook his head. The sound Sam had made bore no relation to any in his lexicon. It didn't exist. It didn't exist to *him*.

More tests followed. Sam's theory was upheld. Odd as it seemed, one letter out of twenty-six had utterly vanished from Lee's life. Any word spelt with that letter was therefore incomprehensible to him, whether written or said aloud. The extraordinary plasticity of the brain enabled him to fold his speech around that absent letter so effectively that its absence was invisible to him, but the consequences remained dire. His name, which contained that letter, had vanished into the blind sport, as had his wife's. Whole sections of the dictionary and the phone book now meant zero to him. Some suburbs seemed like lands more distant than Denmark. Entire tenses were denied him.

The only consolation he could see was that he hadn't lost one of the vowels--E would have been very difficult to lived without--or a common consonant like S. How could he have coped without plurals?

"So you can say Jameson but not <----->, and Jesus but not <----->?"

"Yes."

His wife looked at him in a way that revealed she didn't quite believe him. Her scepticism hurt less than he could have expected. They still hadn't decided what he should call her, now her name was off-limits. That worried him. Now that his condition had been defined and declared no immediate threat to his life, he was free to return home.

Perhaps the condition would be named after him, he speculated. His last name, he hoped, not his first.

After Sam had finished his shift and when the shadows were thickest in the ward, Lee dressed in the clothes his wife had provided for him to wear home the next day. She had booked a car from him, under his new name. The clothes didn't quite fit. He had become thin in hospital, older. His hair stood up in a wild, ivory wave when he looked in the mirror. The bruise above his eye temple had turned yellow. He pulled at his cheeks and blew himself a kiss that looked more final than he had intended.

Somewhere behind that skull was a tiny scar, one that had thus far utterly eluded the finest of science's searches and could remain undiscovered for years, perhaps forever if he was unlucky. He would wait all that time for his name to be returned, for the lexicon to be restored. Wouldn't it be better to accept who he was now and move on?

Move on to what? He could be a carpenter, or a teacher. No, not a teacher. He was a card short of a full deck. His pupils would matriculate with a one-letter deficit, innocent inheritors of his own fundamental flaw. His choices were limited to ones he could pronounce and therefore think of, such as carpenter, mechanic, postman, scientist.

It would be unwise, too, he decided, to pick a field in which communication was essential, such as politics or the priesthood. How could he be a priest when he couldn't even say the word most people used for "deity"? He

lay awake in search of the absent letter and the hole in his head that it had fallen into. That was an entirely different sort of existential mystery, one he was already tired of.

He tore his stare from the mirror and put a hand on the doorknob. At that moment it turned. The door opened to reveal a tall man in the corridor outside. His cheeks were hollow. The hat he wore was broad and old-fashioned, his suit conservative and uncreased.

"Mr Jameson?"

Lee stepped backwards, filled with an unaccountable shame at his planned escape. It was his life; he could do with it whatever he wanted, even run off into a new one if required.

"I'm sorry to startle you at this late hour." The hat came off with a practised sweep. The man's shoulders were stooped, as of one ill-accustomed to his superior stature, but his manner was confident. "I came the moment I learned of your condition from Doctor Harrod. Here." A business card issued forth from an inside pocket, proffered with an economical motion of one hand. "My name is Simon Le Hunte."

The card said: "Treasurer, Royal Society for the Semantically Impaired."

"My condolences," Le Hunte offered with his hat held to his chest. "May I talk with you for a moment?"

"I--yes, of course. Come in." Lee retreated to the bed, concerned that a sudden pins-and-needles sensation in his extremities heralded a new neuronal assault.

"I want you to know, first and foremost, that you are not alone." Le Hunte stood at the end of the bed, his hat now at his side. "Neither is the injury you have suffered completely unknown to science, even if it is often misdia--ah, that is, often overlooked in the normal rounds of medical treatment."

He understood then that Le Hunte's word-choice was carefully considerate, so Lee could understand every word. The rest followed naturally.

"Which letter have you lost?" he asked.

"Alas, I cannot tell you. I can only refer to it as the 17th letter."

A quick count revealed that to be Q.

"We are fortunate, you and I," said Le Hunte. "With a more inconvenient overlap, we could barely converse. That's why I am often chosen to introduce the Society to new recruits. I am pleased to be about that service today." He executed a small bow.

A joke occurred to Lee then, but he could not put it in words. In his mind's eye he saw an assembly of the Semantically Impaired, all with different letters lost and forever stuck in the attempt of conversation. It could be impossible for them to communicate except by Morse code or numbers or even semaphore. But he could not

find the words to describe such an assembly. He had attended many such as chair of the Board of his company, but he could not name them now because those words were lost.

Words lost like those of the man before him and who knew how many others? Words that had never returned.

For the first time he wept, not just for himself, but for his wife whose name would remain forever unspoken by his lips--and for people without the letter L who could not speak of love, those denied M and the word "mother", and others whose incapacities he could barely conceive of. Even Le Hunte would never toast the Queen, which had never before seemed an important part of life. To be denied any aspect of speech and perception was unbearable. Inhumane.

Le Hunte made no move to physically reassure him, but he did speak.

"It's perfect alri--I mean to say, you shouldn't feel ashamed. We've all felt this way at some point. It is not easy to be as we are, alike and yet profoundly unlike. It's not amnesia; it's not aphasia. It's entirely too difficult to explain to those without our particular lack. And to lose your name..." Le Hunte's expression became mordantly sympathetic. "I would have you know that you're not alone in that circumstance, either. There are others on our books in the same straits."

"Is that supposed to cheer me up?"

"Perhaps not. But there is a chance of recovery, if that is what you need. Science has made terrific advances in recent years. Doctors cannot yet repair the lesions that cost us our letters, but there is talk of prostheses--artificial letters, if you like, rather than ones that have been reversed or distorted as offered to us in the past. I was born with this condition and remember all too well the awkward spectacles and lenses forced upon me. Now, there is none of that. Society has learned of our condition, however slowly, and makes adjustments. For instance, there exist translations of classic novels that permit even the most unfortunately impaired to read as others do. There is hope, you see, Mr Jameson. There is always hope."

"Really?"

"Yes. And--well, I don't wish to be harsh, but people survive far worse disabilities. We are fortunate, you and I. There is much we can still say--and limitations, some believe, only make us more creative. For every common word denied, an old one is revived. Shakespeare and Chaucer would be pleased, I think, with some of our more inventive members."

Lee reached into a pocket for a handkerchief and blew his nose rather messily. "Has anyone else lost my letter?"

"The seventh? Not anyone I have met."

"I'm unique, then."

"You are what?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm one of a kind."

"I see. Yes. That's certainly true. Is that a comfort to you?"

He wanted to say, no, not really, but that wasn't entirely true. He did feel somewhat better for the joint awareness that someone else had his condition too and that he wasn't just another in the herd.

"Well," said Le Hunte, hat atop his head once more, "you have my card. Call me any time. We meet weekly. Please join us. You are most welcome."

Lee stood to shake Le Hunte's hand. "Thank you. I really am terribly..." He floundered, at a momentary loss for the correct word.

"Appreciative?"

"Yes."

For the first time, Le Hunte smiled. "I believed you would be. Farewell, Mr Jameson," he said with a wave. "Au revoir. See you anon. Until next time!"

When the sound of his visitor's footsteps in the corridor outside had faded to silence, Lee took off his street clothes and returned to bed. Prostrate in the darkness, with his hands behind his head, he considered all that Le Hunte had said. How peculiar that his condition could be so common that a Royal Society existed to assist its sufferers--and odder still that all across the world were dotted people whose alphabets deviated from everyone else's! Did such exist in China, Russia, Israel? He supposed they must. He hoped they had the equivalent of a Royal Society to cater to their needs too, to help them find a new path in their oddly contracted but expanded worlds.

No more did he feel the need to run away. There could be no escape from his condition, even if it was one that he would find difficult to explain to people. He had no visible symptoms. He could, with a little practise, function. Yet he had lost his name, which in every society had a symbolic and undeniable effect on his sense of self. He was Lee Jameson now, and who that was remained to be seen. His old-self certainly wouldn't have resolved to tell his wife that "pumpkin" would be fine, provided he could call her that in return. And he wouldn't have spoken to the duty nurse to put in a recommendation for Sam the intern. He had been too busy with the Board and his other responsibilities.

Lee Jameson had new responsibilities, new demands. His relationship with the world had been turned upside down by a purloined letter. Never before had he suspected how complicated words could be. They were for much more than mere description. What one can't find the words for, he decided, cannot exist in one's experience--and what is the world, after all, other than the sum of one's experience?

Reassured that he had found a level of comprehension sufficient to survive the days and weeks ahead, he let his eyes drift shut and sleep take him away.

And his dreams, like those of the blind who dream in colour, were full of mergers, board meetings and gun-fighting guinea pigs riding stagecoaches of pure gold.

© Sean Williams

Note from the editor

Hands up if you noticed that this story avoids the use of the letter "g" throughout, except for the final sentence? And check out the artwork from Sam Shisheklı inspired by 'The Seventh Letter'





Too Late

by Graham Storrs

There was that light again. It was like car headlights swinging by on the road – only there wasn't a road. Nothing for miles except their own drive. Michael checked his watch and went to the window. It was two AM. Should he wake Damian? What if it was prowlers? But he couldn't bring himself to do that, not after the row they'd just had.

Damian's gun was in the cupboard in the utility room but it was locked and the key was on Damian's keyring – which would be in the pocket of his shorts. Anyway, it was probably just lightning. Out here in the mountains a storm could creep up on you without you noticing.

Beyond the window the night was solid black, as if reality ended at the walls of the house, as if Michael and Damian were adrift in space in a brick-built spaceship. These days, to Michael, it often seemed like that even during the daytime. Maybe he should turn the light out so he could see better? As it was, all he saw through the window was his own, dark, image badly reflected.

He made himself walk away from the window and sit down again. Half-glimpsed lights in the darkness! He tried to laugh at himself. He was just feeling unsettled and vulnerable because of how things were with Damian at the moment. That's all it was. And so unlike him to start imagining things. He was supposed to be the sensible one. The mature one. God knows, Damian had enough fecklessness for both of them!

This got him brooding once more about the letter he'd found and Damian's stupid, childish attempts at denial. He chewed his lower lip as he remembered the shouting and the crying. He cringed at how he had humiliated himself with accusations and recriminations, demanding kindness, pleading for justice, all but begging for love. And worst of all was the distaste – disgust even – that he had seen in Damian's eyes as Michael had ranted and sobbed and tried to understand. To forgive.

When Damian had finally stormed off to his room and slammed the door, Michael had been outraged, cut to the bone, but also drained and glad of the chance to sit alone as the night grew old, licking his wounds.

There it was again!

He got up and went to the door, turning the light out as he went. There was a walking stick in the hat-stand and he picked it up.

Out on the veranda, with the lights out, he could see a little more than from inside. The night was perfectly clear, with stars crusting the sky from horizon to horizon. There was no Moon. The granite bluff on which the house stood was barely visible beyond the wooden decking and the tall gum trees at the edge of the forest were just a deeper black where the sky met the ground.

He moved away from the house, into the big open spaces that surrounded it, and peered into the darkness, holding the walking stick like a cudgel. He listened for the sound of a car engine, but there was nothing. Even the frogs and cicadas were quiet for once and the air was unusually still. Something was out there. His eyes swept the empty silences once more before he turned to go back to the house. He would call the police and report a prowler. It would take them - what? - thirty minutes to get up here from the town. Until then, he'd stay inside, ready to wake Damian.

Even as he made the decision to go, a bright light pinned him to the spot. Not just a bright light but a dazzling, blinding light that stabbed down out of the sky like the finger of God. It blazed in the air around him, penetrating his clothes and his flesh. Even the ground under him took on a hazy, translucent appearance as the light shone through it like a torch shining through fog.

In a blink it was gone again, leaving a deeper, harder blackness pressing in around him. He stood where he was, barely able to think or breathe, rigid with shock and confusion.

A helicopter, was his first coherent thought. The light from the sky must mean there was a helicopter above him. He looked up. The stars had gone and the sky was veined with red. After-images. 'Damian!' he shouted, but his voice was hoarse and weak, his throat too tight for words. Where was the noise? Helicopters made a lot of noise. There should be noise.

Then there was noise. Lots of it. But not the mechanical clattering of helicopter vanes. This was a booming, echoing hum, as if an old valve amplifier of enormous power had been turned on full. As if he were standing beside the biggest damned electricity sub-station in the universe! And there was light too. Up above him, a brilliant array of coloured lights hung in the sky. The colours rippled as if in a heat-haze. They picked out a shape: a disc. A perfect sphere that drifted down toward him, a clear ten metres across, dwarfing the large three-car garage that Damian had spent so much time and money fitting out. It settled a man's height above the ground and hovered, Damian's car, standing on the concrete apron rattling and humming too as it vibrated up and down on its suspension.

Damian came bursting out of the house, gun waving dangerously in the air, the screen door clattering noisily against the house.

'What the fuck?'

Michael kept his eyes on the sphere.

Damian stared, open-mouthed at the great ball of light. 'Holy Mother of God!'

Michael glanced at him and the sphere's lights went. Silence. Quickly, he turned back, but the sphere was hidden in the darkness, the only evidence of its existence the final, quiet creaking of Damian's suspension echoing through his mind.

Neither of them took their eyes off the place where they knew the sphere must still be.

'Michael, I...!' Damian said, softly. But whatever he was about to say was forgotten as a new light appeared from the sphere: a small, pearly brightness that lit the concrete under it. Two small creatures appeared.

Damian gasped. 'Oh Jesus.'

Michael watched the two creatures as they approached, the little patch of light following them as if it radiated from the air around them.

'Do not be afraid,' one of the creatures said. 'We will not harm you.'

Neither Michael nor Damian spoke, their breath coming rapidly, eyes fixed on the creatures before them. Michael felt the buzz of adrenaline in his limbs. His thoughts fizzed in his head. *Stay calm*, he told himself. *Don't do anything stupid*.

'My name is Artira,' said one of the aliens.

The other bobbed up and down. 'And mine is Orket.'

They sounded the same. They looked the same. Neither was more than chest height, with four, long legs supporting a shapeless lump of a body from which two thick stalks protruded at the top. The legs and body were hairless but the stalks seemed covered in floppy strands of skin that hung down and spread over the top of the body. Michael couldn't tell if they were wearing clothes and could see no sign of eyes or mouths.

'You are aliens, right?' Damian asked. 'I mean...Jesus.'

'We are visitors from another part of the Galaxy,' Artira confirmed.

Michael and Damian both took a step backwards.

Artira shuffled. 'Please be calm. We will not hurt you.'

Despite the relaxed tone of Artira's voice, despite the fact that the creatures looked light, even spindly, Michael was not yet prepared to believe them.

'You speak English,' said Michael. The stupidity of the question hit him immediately. He remembered tales of alien abduction, stories of vivisection and imprisonment. He used to laugh at such nonsense. Now the possibility that it was true spread like ice inside him.

'We monitored radio signals on our way down. We are still monitoring them for extra vocabulary. We have access to many data networks as well as live broadcasts. It was quite simple to assemble a grammar and a lexicon.'

'Yours is not a difficult language,' said Orket.

'We were pleased to find you. Intelligent life is most interesting to us.'

'What do you want?' Damian demanded.

He seemed to have recovered himself more quickly than Michael. *More testosterone*, Michael thought. *It's all bravado*. Now Damian had the gun pointing at the aliens and his stance was steady and belligerent. Michael moved a step farther back from the visitors.

'We wish to observe you,' Artira told them.

'We would like to talk to you and to see your nest,' said Orket.

'Your home,' said Artira.

'Stay where you are!' Damian shouted, although the aliens had shown no signs of approaching.

'We should call the police,' said Michael. 'The Army, maybe.'

Damian thought about it. 'Right. That's right. You make the call. I'll hold them here.' He raised the gun and sighted it at the creatures.

Michael set off for the house but didn't make it. After just two steps he fell to the ground, unable to move.

Damian looked at him then back at the aliens, 'What the fuck?' His gaze kept moving back and forth between them and Michael as he tried to understand it and to work out what to do next. His heart was hammering in his chest. 'Michael! Are you alright? What'd they do?'

Michael wasn't sure. All he had felt was a terrible weakness in his legs and he'd fallen as if his strings had been cut. 'I'm alright. I think. I just... couldn't...'

'You will be well in a moment,' Artira told him.

'We do not want you to bring any others here,' Orket explained.

'We wish to be discrete.'

Damian was still breathing in short, ragged breaths. He pointed the gun at them again. 'How did you do that? I didn't see you move.'

'I am sorry if we scared you,' said Artira. 'We only wish to learn a little about you and your ways.'

Damian waved the gun at them. 'Oh yeah? Well why don't you just piss off instead? Fuck off back to bloody Venus or whatever.'

The strength had come back to Michael's legs and he managed to drag himself back to his feet. For some reason he felt calmer now. Perhaps it was because the aliens had incapacitated him so easily and yet so gently. It made him trust their intention not to harm him. Or perhaps it was because Damian was growing more aggressive and unstable and he could see how dangerous that might be for both of them.

'It's alright, Damian,' he said, putting a hand on his partner's bare shoulder. 'They're not going to hurt us.'

Damian turned to him quickly then looked back at the visitors. In that brief moment of eye contact, Michael saw Damian's fear.

'We are not from Venus,' Orket said. It turned to Artira. 'Is that the limit of its knowledge, or of its imagination?'

'Perhaps both,' said Artira.

'Where are you from?' asked Michael, stepping forward.

'You wouldn't know it,' Artira assured him. 'Another star, but I can try to explain if you would like.'

Michael was ready to talk now. 'What do you want to know?'

Damian jumped in, his voice unnaturally loud. 'No way we're gonna stand here and be grilled by these freaks!' He looked at Michael again, quickly, trying to keep his eyes on the aliens. 'No fucking way, Michael. They're not gonna cut me up to see how I tick.'

'I assure you -' Artira began, but Damian shouted over him.

'Shut up! If you try anything with me, I'll blow a fucking hole through both of you.'

Michael was horrified. 'Damian, you've got to calm down, or you're going to make this whole thing worse.'

'Worse? Worse!' Damian struggled to find words and gave up.

'That is a weapon,' Artira said.

Orket agreed. 'It expels small projectiles.'

'It's alright!' Michael stepped forward again in alarm, raising his hands. 'He won't shoot you. He's just scared. We both are.' Even as he spoke, he began to realise that the aliens did not seem afraid, only curious. He turned to Damian. 'For God's sake put the bloody gun down you idiot! Are you trying to get us killed?'

'You're joking. What d'ya think they're here for, a polite chat?'

'Yes, you dickhead, that's exactly what I think they're here for. Unless you start a fight with that bloody thing.'

'You always were a chickenshit coward.'

'And you think you're such a fucking man, don't you, just 'cos you can...'

Michael stopped speaking, shocked that, somehow, he had come right back to the same thing they had argued about all evening, that festering sore he couldn't stop picking at even in a situation like this. A glimmer of triumph showed in Damian's eyes, a moment of pride and contempt. And Michael knew it was all over between them. It could never be the same again, not after what had happened, not now he could see how Damian really felt about it.

He remembered the visitors, still patiently watching the two men argue, no doubt lapping it up. He turned to them wearily. 'Can't you find someone else to bother? Can't you just leave us alone. There are things going on...'

'We have questions,' Artira told him.

'We wish to see your home,' Orket added.

'Over my dead body!' Damian said through gritted teeth and raised the gun again. Then, abruptly, he lowered the barrel and fired a shot into the ground just a couple of metres in front of the aliens. A great spray of shot and gravel rattled away into the night and a cloud of dust and smoke hung in the air. Michael swore and cringed away from the retaliation he thought would come.

'The next shot is for you two unless you clear off right now!' Damian sounded almost triumphant but Michael could see that the visitors had not even flinched. They seemed as relaxed and calm as ever.

'Damian don't. You'll only piss them off.'

'We'll see about that!'

He took careful and deliberate aim. Michael was in no doubt that a shot from this distance would kill or injure both the aliens. They looked so fragile, you could probably smash them up with a few well-aimed rocks. 'This is insane, Damian,' he said, pleading now. 'Those things are aliens, from another star for Christ's sake. You can't just kill them like they're roos or something. It's murder –.'

But, even before he could finish speaking, Damian pulled the trigger and the crack of the gun's retort drowned him out. He spun to see the aliens, ready to rush to them and help, to try to save what was left of them. They were fine, standing just as they had done the whole while, untouched by the shot and unfazed by the murderous attack. Both men stared open mouthed at the visitors as the gun-smoke drifted away on the light breeze.

The aliens began to walk towards them, their skinny, multiple-jointed legs moving oddly but smoothly.

'Oh shit,' Michael whispered. He waited for something to happen, frozen to the spot like a rabbit caught in the headlights. With a yell of animal terror, Damian turned to run for the darkness. He had hardly begun to move before he fell to the ground, unhurt but immobile.

Artira moved to stand directly in front of Michael. 'Your companion will remain that way for some time.'

Michael forced himself to stand his ground, despite the voice inside telling him to run. 'You're going to kill us.'

'No,' said Orket simply.

'You will show us your home now,' explained Artira.

'You will answer our questions,' said Orket.

'I don't understand.'

'Is that true?' Artira asked.

'Sadly, it is,' said Orket. It moved to stand beside Damian. The helpless human, lying on his back, looked up at it in horror. 'This one?'

'Whatever you recommend.'

'No, don't hurt him!' Michael rushed forward and tried to stand between Orket and his partner but an invisible force held him back. Lights with no apparent source began to play across Damian's body. Michael felt sick with fear.

'Your companion is better now,' Orket said after a few moments.

Damian's eyes were shut and he was no longer moving. Michael stared intently until he was certain he could see him breathing gently.

'Take us inside now,' Artira said and, with a last look at Damian, Michael led them into the house. He walked mechanically, his mind a swirl of jumbled thoughts and fears.

They stayed perhaps twenty more minutes, asking questions about how humans lived and what Michael believed. They picked things up with their front legs – ornaments, Damian's wristwatch, the cappuccino machine, a pair of trousers – and put them down again. Sometimes they used their hind legs. Sometimes they brushed things against the fringed stumps on top of their bodies. All the while, the questions kept coming in an endless, eclectic stream. All the while, Michael kept thinking about Damian lying outside on the grass and the casual way the visitors had struck him down.

When at last they left, Artira spoke to Michael in an almost friendly aside. They were standing close to the sphere and Damian was visible in the light from the house, still lying on his back where he had fallen.

'Your mate will recover shortly.'

There had been several questions about how humans formed attachments and Michael had tried to explain his relationship with Damian. If Artira wanted to think of them as mates, that was fine by him.

'Your mate will be unable to procreate,' Orket said.

'You've misunderstood,' said Michael. 'Procreation between two males is not possible anyway...'

Artira turned to Orket. 'You have neutered the human?'

'Yes. It will be happier without the aggression it feels.'

'What?' Michael was beginning to understand. The horror of what he was hearing left him too shocked to protest.

'It is a kindness.'

Michael stared, speechless.

'You must move away from our lander or you will be damaged when we take off,' Artira explained.

Still numb from the creatures' terrible revelation, Michael stumbled away from the sphere. He was still moving away, towards Damian, when the sphere's massive hum shook his chest and coloured light flooded the clearing. He turned to see the spacecraft rising majestically above the treetops and, in a streak of colour, it vanished into the sky.

He stood there for a long time, gazing at the blackness where the sphere had stood. *You said you weren't going to hurt us*, was the only thought in his head.

'Michael?' It was Damian, conscious again, regaining his strength, trying to turn onto his side, looking for his partner.

'I'm here.'

'Have they gone?'

'They've gone.'

'I don't feel too good. Help me up.'

Wearily, Michael climbed to his feet and went over to Damian. 'You should lie still for a while. I'll drive you down to the hospital. Just stay there and I'll bring the car over.'

He took Damian's keys from him and headed off for the car, hoping it still worked after having been shaken so much. When he got to it, he threw open the door and leaned against it. He felt as if he'd run miles, hefted tons. And it was then that the irony struck him.

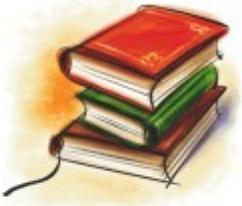
Michael could remember the words of the letter with complete clarity, he'd read them over so often. It was a letter from a woman. A woman he didn't know. It ended;

'Our baby is due in August, Damian. I hope by then you will have realised that the responsibility you have towards me and our child is more important than whatever keeps you away from us. Please don't turn your back on us my darling. Remember the love we share and the little miracle it has created within me.

'Please be there for us.

'Your loving Margaret.'

He looked up at the sky thinking, *You came too late, you bastards*. A laugh bubbled up in his throat and he choked it down. He knew that he needed to get Damian to the hospital. That was all that mattered.



Barbarian Blood

by Pavelle Wesser

Ever since I felt the warmth of your blood coursing through my veins, I prayed to the circling moons above that I might find you. And after searching I did, in a dungeon oozing slime, imprisoned by barbarians. Had I not found you, death would surely have marked your destiny.

You were thrashing amidst violent nightmares, uttering words from your language that would soon be extinct. I knew I had to take you back to my planet. It may be a wasteland, but it is home. As far as I am concerned, beyond my familiar domain lies confusion buried within layers upon layers, heaped over and under yet more layers comprised of desiccation and death.

On that night I came to you, your eyes shifted back and forth behind closed lids as I infused my blood into yours. In this way you were mine:

“We’re going home,” I told you, as I whisked you away from your race of savages, knowing they would mark your disappearance as one more mystery in their dark age of unknowns.

Back in my crater, we stared transfixed at the multiple moons, placing our mutual trust in their pale surface. Our nerves pulsed in unison and our hearts pumped in tandem, mine defective, yours corrupted -- both toxic. Had only time been measured by your clock of twelve, would it have been sixty minutes, twenty four hours, twelve months, or does it even matter: Enough of it passed for vertigo to set its course.

“I’m homesick,” you said.

“This is your home,” I insisted, as implosions, explosions and eruptions spewed forth in steady streams.

We argued until we turned on each other with venomous rage, consumed by scorching flames and insatiable thirst. Had we glanced up, we would have noticed that the multiple moons had ceased to rotate. Had we looked within ourselves, we might have realized that our nerve pulses had been interrupted, our heartbeats had slowed and our blood had gone cold. We had nothing to take from each other but life itself, and in this we nearly succeeded. In parting, you told me the one thing I would never forget:

“I’ve had enough. I’m going home.”

... As though your race of savages could offer anything but death, and I hadn't already saved you from their barbarism.

The multiple moons have since reinstated their rotation above me. Within them I see your image buried within layers comprised of more layers heaped with death and destruction. I close my eyes and picture the dungeon where your shadowed, shifting shape awaits death. Your blood still courses through my veins as mine does through yours. If you perish, so shall I.

And while you claim that you would rather pray to your barbarian God than gaze on the beauty of the multiple moons, you have no memory of the fact that I have saved you many times before. Your blood is not your own and will alternately freeze and burn until we reconcile. We are bound through endless cycles of infinite time, repeating the same charade we have acted out and out into eternity. You exit one door only to enter another, but you never see...

Home is where your blood flows best. I am coming for you so that as one, we may fulfil our destiny.

© Pavelle Wesser 2008

Pavelle Wesser's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in: "AlienSkin," "Silver Thought," "Flashshot," "Bewildering Stories," and others. She lives with her husband and two children in Connecticut, where she teaches English.



City Of Light

by G. O. Clark

Great spires of glass
brightly aglow beneath the
beacons of the night,

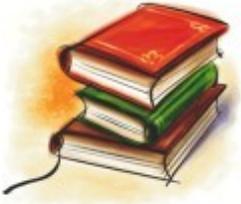
the rockets of desire
long ago taken to the sky, old
star maps turning brittle,

the neon nuns humming in
their cubicles three octaves above
the gray machinery's drone,

archivists of the eclectic
beneath the city of light, to alien
eyes a beacon in the night.

© G. O. Clark

You can visit G. O. Clark's website at <http://my.att.net/p/PWP-goClark>



Every Breath You Take

by Lee Giminez

Monday

I've got seven days to live. I saw this coming, but didn't have any way to stop it. I looked at the meter on my corneal implant – the small screen showed 167 hours, 10 minutes and 52 seconds left. I relaxed my breathing and the seconds ticked down slower.

My name is John Harrison and five years ago I was sitting on top of the world. A great job on Wall Street, a beautiful girlfriend and a fat investment account. Then the stock market crashed, wiping out my investments and bankrupting my employer. Before I knew it, the bank foreclosed on my co-op, my BMW was repossessed and my girlfriend dumped me. It went downhill from there.

There was a flash on the implant alerting me to an incoming call. The man's face showed up on the small screen. Damn, it was him again.

"Mr. Harrison," he said, his long, gaunt face set in a grimace. "This is agent Johansen with the B.R.S. You're down to below a week. I strongly advise you to make a payment. You know we don't kid around."

"I've been trying to pay," I replied. "I just don't have any money left. You've got to give me more time..."

Johansen's grim tone didn't waver. "You know that's not possible. You've got to come up with the money, or else..." With that, the agent turned off the call.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead and put my head down in my hands. My mind raced, trying to come up with a plan, any plan, to make the madness stop.

Tuesday

The meter read 143 hours, 5 minutes and 26 seconds. Six days left. I slowed my breathing again, trying to will the meter to stop counting down. *Who am I kidding?* There's only one way to add time to it, and that's by paying my taxes. If only I had anything left to sell. I'd already pawned all of my possessions and borrowed so much no lenders would touch me. If only I could find another job; but with the damn Depression, about the

only thing left was joining the military. And with the war with China still going on, that was like a death sentence.

My implant flashed; I accepted the call and saw it was my old boss, Jeremy.

“I got your message, John,” he said, a worried look on his face. “How you doing?”

“Not good,” I replied.

“What are you down to?”

“Less than a week now. Listen, Jeremy, I know I owe you money, but I’m desperate. Is there any way you could give me another loan?”

Jeremy shook his head. “Sorry, man. Wish I could. But I’m down to 3 months myself.”

“Jeremy, please...” I plead.

“Look, I would if I could, but I’m stretched pretty thin...got any job prospects?”

“Nothing. Wall Street firms aren’t hiring and I can’t even get a job driving a taxi. There’s a thousand applicants for every job.”

Jeremy nodded. “I know. Listen, if I hear of anything, I’ll let you know.” With that, Jeremy cut off the connection abruptly.

Wednesday

I’ve been living in a deserted tunnel underneath the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. I’ve been here a month, ever since I couldn’t pay the rent on that flop house motel in Hoboken. It’s dark and damp and the smell of gas fumes is bad. But at least it’s safe. I haven’t seen any vagrants in days, and the street gangs haven’t found this area yet. I munch on a Snickers bar and sip a warm Pepsi.

Today I’m going to the Army recruiting station on 42nd street. Got to find out what that’s about. I don’t want to, but I’m not sure I have a choice; I only have five days left.

The sergeant folded his arms across his chest, his biceps bulging. “So, Harrison, I see on your application that you used to be a stock broker, making big money.” He looked at my scruffy coat and worn shoes. “Looks like you’ve come down a peg,” he adds with a smirk.

“Yeah,” I responded. “I’ve had some rough years.”

“So you want to join the Army?”

“I...I’ve been thinking about it.”

“You sure you want to? You know you’ll go in as Infantry and be sent to the front lines...”

“I’m way behind on my B-Tax; I don’t have many options left.”

The sergeant nodded. “Yeah, that Breath Tax is a bitch all right.” A wicked smile spreads across his face. “I get a lot of my recruits because of it. You know, once you enlist, we add your three year tour of duty time to your meter. So you don’t have to worry about the Breath Tax for that whole time.” He printed out a form and handed it to me. “Read this contract over; make sure it’s what you want to do. Cause once you sign it, your ass is mine.”

I took the contract and left the station, heading east on 42nd street. I wandered around Manhattan, walking past the run down electronics stores, the grimy tattoo parlors and boarded up office buildings. I headed back toward the Bus Terminal building before it got dark, before the gangs came out.

Thursday

The meter read 95 hours and 31 minutes – I have less than 4 days left to live. I started to hyperventilate and I noticed the seconds tick off faster. I ripped the wrapper off another Snickers bar and shoved it in my mouth. I’m down to fifty dollars in cash and if I eat just candy bars maybe I could stretch it until I come up with a plan.

How the hell did this country get in this mess, anyway? It all started years ago, when everyone thought the flat tax was such a good idea. We’ll get rid of your income tax, the politicians said; we’ll even get rid of your property and sales taxes. We’ll just tax your breathing instead. It was the perfect consumption tax. Everyone would pay the same amount. What could be fairer than that? Bio-chips implanted in your lungs monitored your usage and a meter showed you how current you were with your taxes. The big problem started when the Depression hit five years back. The economy crashed and tax revenues plummeted. Food shortages spread; rioting broke out in the streets. The government issued a state of emergency and martial law was imposed. That’s when the B.R.S. was created, the Breath Revenue Service. What the government hadn’t told us years ago was that along with the bio-chip implants, a killswitch was inserted near your heart. If the meter went down to zero, the B.R.S. would trigger the killswitch to stop your heart from beating. It was an extremely effective way of making sure you paid your taxes.

Friday

It was 4am and I was on the roof of a building on 51st street, prying the reinforced metal grating off an air-conditioner vent with a crowbar. I cut my hand, but kept going. I couldn’t stop now; I didn’t have much time left. I crawled into the ductwork and made my way down to the ceiling of the top floor. I looked through a vent

to the floor below; it was a storage room of some sort. I wrenched open the ceiling vent and dropped to the floor, twisting my foot. *Damn, that hurts.*

I turned on my flashlight and hobbled out to a long corridor, leading to a staircase. At the staircase there was a map showing the layout of the building. The computer parts warehouse was two levels down. I made my way down to that level and forced open the warehouse door with the crowbar. A red light went on, but I rushed in anyway, desperate to get what I was after. The warehouse was large, stacked two deep with pallets of computer parts. Along one wall, stored in a Lexan cabinet, I found what I was looking for...cases of computer chips. I could sell these for big money. I tried to pry open the lock on the cabinet, but it wouldn't budge.

Just then, I heard a noise out in the warehouse. I froze and turned off my flashlight.

"Who's in there!" a loud voice yelled out from behind me. "This is Security. Come out or I'll shoot!"

I held my breath and pressed my body against the side of the cabinet, gripping the crowbar tightly.

The guard's flashlight beam danced around the warehouse.

"You there," the guard screamed, "drop that and come out here!" He pointed his gun at me.

"Sure, no problem...I give up," I said, lowering the crowbar to my side, then flipping it at him. The bar hit him in the shoulder and the gun went off, the blast deafening. I rushed him and pushed him into the wall, the gun scattering. He fell to the floor, dazed. I looked down and saw he was an old guy; probably making minimum wage. A piercing alarm sounded, lights flashed on and off. Picking up the automatic handgun, I limped out of the warehouse and made my way back out to the roof.

Saturday

I was in the tunnel again underneath the Bus Terminal. I had just finished re-bandaging my hand; it hurt like hell but at least it had stopped bleeding. My ankle hurt too. And all I had to show for my stupid trip yesterday was this gun. I picked it up and felt the cold metal in my hand. Today I would go out and try to sell it.

I've run out of time and don't know what to do.

I've got two days left.

Sunday

I looked at the meter again. 8 hours, 46 minutes and 10 seconds. The seconds ticked down. I gulped a warm Pepsi as perspiration beaded on my forehead.

Finally, I decided.

I walked to the building on 42nd street. The Recruiting station was brightly lit, open 24/7. The same sergeant greeted me at the door.

“So, I guess you’ve made up your mind,” he said with a wry grin.

“I guess I have, Sergeant,” I replied. “I always did want to serve my country.”

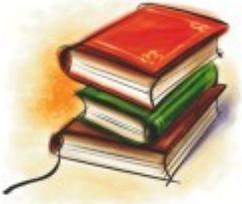
© Lee Giminez 2008



Lee is a science fiction writer and a member of SFWA. One of his other stories, "Daniel 7" was published in Issue #2 of the Concept Sci-fi ezine.

His other science fiction stories have been published or are forthcoming in the following magazines: Cosmos ; Nature ; Afterburn SF ; Beyond Centauri ; Fifth Dimension ; Escape Velocity ; Bewildering Stories ; AlienSkin ; Aphelion ; Morpheus Tales ; The Cynic ; Arcane Twilight ; Antipodean SF ; New Voices in Fiction ; Expressions ; Skive Quarterly ; Skiveflash ; Green Wave.

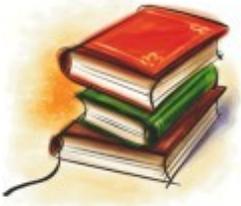
For additional information about Lee, please visit his website at www.leegimenez.com.



Echo From The Future

by Terry Ray

I had a dream about the future,
saw mutants writhing in a burning mist.
Their eyes wept, streaming, unseeing.
What are these beings
whose lost howlings
reverberate
inside my mind?
Then it came to me
that it was us;
these shapes within the glowing acid mist
were our children
and the strange world was Earth,
a tormented orb sucked dry
of all the goodness there ever was.
When I awoke, sweating, screaming,
the future echoed in the echo...



88 Miles Per Hour

A regular column by Andrew Males

Would you rather attempt to be a published author, or try to run and complete a marathon?

Given my recent experiences in both, you'd be surprised how these two seemingly disparate disciplines are alike in their challenges and what you can learn from them.

Writing and running both appear to be very easy from a basic level: Most people know how to invent stories and write; most of us know how to put one foot in front of the other and run. The difficulties arise when the challenges are high and you realise you have to have serious commitment if you want to achieve success. I'm just a novice in both, but have picked up a lot on my journey in each.

The Dream

Whether it's to see your name on top of the best-sellers list, a short story published on a recognised website, or just to complete something you can be proud of, it helps if you start off with a dream. There's lots of advice you can find on targets, goals, dreams, visualisation etc., but they all centre on having something to aim for. Do you start your car in the morning without a clue where you're going? Maybe you don't know exactly how far you can go with your writing, but I found it helps to at least set some smaller targets if you're just starting off. For me, the first goal was to get something published on the Internet. I didn't have a clue what sort of places existed or how to get it on there, but if you're reading this, you probably have the advantage of knowing that sites such as Concept Sci-fi give you a great chance if you just write something and submit. Likewise, I always wanted to run the New York Marathon, but hadn't run in ten years. And here's the first lesson: things just don't *happen* and dreams like these just don't come true by themselves – you have to actually *do* something.

I had lots of ideas but “never had the time” to write anything. What a load of cobblers! In reading various articles, books and talking to published Internet writers, two things were clear: 1. You have to *make* time, and 2. if a single mother holding down two jobs can knock out a decent story once in a while, then I certainly had time somewhere. Once I stopped making excuses, planned where I could substitute in some writing time instead of watching a Simpsons repeat for the third time and actually got at my desk and started typing, it was amazing

what could be done. I actually found I enjoyed it, and after several sessions and weeks the words mounted up as my confidence increased. This was it – I was on my way to becoming a writer and achieving my dream...

Then I hit the next hurdle: I couldn't finish anything. Just like running, what seems like a great challenge that you enjoy can suddenly feel like a burden you just don't want any more. The start is great – the words/legs flow, you feel fresh and the pages/yards fly by, until you realise that you have to reach the finish. Starting lots of stories won't give you a completed one; running 26 daily one-milers won't get you a marathon. I soon realised I loved the start of writing – the initial ideas, the buzz of things popping into your head from seemingly nowhere – but sitting down at my keyboard and fitting everything together to make something complete was an altogether different prospect. I'd got stuck in, written scenes I was pleased with, but wasn't sure how I was going to make it meet up at the end that I'd originally thought of. Hell, I was even wondering if my ending was where I now wanted it to go.

It was at this point I decided to get help and bought some "how to write" books. Writers seem to have different opinions of these guides – some welcome them and claim that they wouldn't be here without them, others appear sceptical, perhaps scared of the magic disappearing when you discover the magician's secrets. After going through these books, reading my so-called sophisticated efforts felt like they were no more than the basic rabbit out of the hat; I had so much to learn!

Stephen King's *On Writing* gives a great insight into his thought process, including many useful tips any novice writer would gain from. The man's a legend and deserves your attention, after all. However, it was strange to see how his process differs from techniques given elsewhere: the question of Planning versus "Uncovering".

Methods

I like plans. I work in a process-driven, plan-led world where things fit nicely into cells within a spreadsheet. Plans have a start, an end and an estimate of how long it will take to get there. When I read that I should plan a story – all its characters and scenes – at the start and map it all out before I even put down the first word, it was like someone had given me the keys to a cosy room for me to work in. It started to work for me - not only was I enjoying the planning stage, but by the time I'd jotted down the conclusion it felt like the whole story had almost been written and I just had to let my fingers do the rest.

Stephen King's angle is that the story is always there, and the writing process was never planned, it just happened by slowly uncovering the plot. "*...I believed stories are found things, like fossils in the ground...*"

To me, it seemed he was describing an almost magical process, to unearth the book that is 'in everyone'.

I've also read that characters just develop themselves, almost taking over and coming alive, in charge of their own destiny. Experienced writers may also tell you this, but for me this hasn't quite happened yet - at the moment they do what I tell them to do! It'll be interesting to see how I develop in years to come, and whether my writing will evolve in this area. I have already experienced, however, the intriguing emotional pull of one of my characters whilst writing about her experiences of a loved one dying. Although just a short story, for the first time the words I'd typed seemed to have a life.

In running, you also have to work out your own style. Roads or treadmill? Heel landing or Pose method? Flailing arms, bobbing head, pumping arms? Do you plan your route, your mileage, or just go where you feel like going?

Do what feels natural to you, but don't be ignorant of other methods. Research, try out a few and pick one. It doesn't mean the rest of your career will be dependent on that method as you can always change later on.

Submit

I have a great football sci-fi story currently sitting on my desk. I like it; it's got potential. I can see it published somewhere where people marvel at its idea and heap praise on my writing. But it's been sat there for nearly two years, having been my first effort at serious writing. I did the hard parts – putting down the words and getting to the end – but never got round to properly editing it in order to get it into shape for submission. Like going out and running on your own for hours, unless you enter, prepare for the race and turn up to the start line, the miles you've put in are just for your own benefit.

Learning how to edit your writing and motivating yourself to do it are two important tasks that a novice must learn. I always thought I had a great grasp of the written English word, and lived in a world where grammar didn't frighten me and it was only my vocabulary that needed expanding. My advice: you may be dumber than you really think you are! A good exercise is to give an experienced writer a piece that you've written and are quite proud of and see what comes back. I was amazed at the number of grammatical mistakes that I didn't know about, the rules I'd broken and the poor impression I would give any editor as a result. The dream of becoming a published author was pushed far into the distance.

But fear not. You can quickly learn the rules, avoid the mistakes and with a bit of help turn a piece of work into something that actually looks half-decent. Again, like running - once you discover how it should be done, it becomes fun and rewarding. Suddenly things start to click into place and the effort lessens as the rewards grow. Sure, you may be a long way off a novel or a marathon, but little by little things fall into place. The dream begins to appear back on the horizon.

Thanks, but no thanks

I'd had an idea about a novel for a long while, but after several aborted attempts at trying to come up with a full plot, I was left with no more than a vivid opening scene in my head. This scene was going to be so intense, so powerful that it was bound to draw the reader in like a black hole. I'd written it several times in my head...so when I realised it would be perfect for the world of Flash Fiction, I got to work. It poured out of my head, via a blur of fingers onto a greasy keyboard, and into glorious black-on-white text in front of me. With a few edits here and there, it was good to go. I eagerly sent it off and waited.

I wasn't naïve to the fact that getting accepted and published can be extremely difficult, and that even the best get rejected, but I wasn't exactly going for Asimov's. I don't often fail at a task I put my mind to, and whilst I knew it was no masterpiece, it was surely more than acceptable for the target publication. Weeks later, I was shot down in flames. "Confusing". "The hook was missing". "I had no idea what was going on, so I gave up". The comments were wrapped in a nice thanks-but-sorry-and-good-luck way, but they might as well have driven to my house and taken turns slapping me in the face with a wet sock. Were they insane? How could they not see it? Confusing?

It was many weeks later that I truly appreciated what had happened. Firstly, I was so caught up with the whole reality and back-plot stored in my head to realise that no-one else could see it. Secondly, I had ignored the warnings of others who'd previously read my story and questioned it. I learned two lessons, things any novice should learn without doing it the hard way: the first is to really question your work from an outside viewpoint, and the second to carefully listen to the negative feedback other people give to you.

Looking back at my piece, I had to concede an argument I tried to put up against the issue of it being confusing. I was trying to leave it up to the reader's imagination what the machine at the centre of the story was going to do. It didn't really matter, I thought, as it was all about the character. I knew what I had intended it to do, and that's all that mattered. Or so I thought. When asked of its function, I didn't tell people, but was surprised when fists were waved in their need to know. If I hadn't confused the reader, I'd angered them in their thirst for the knowledge of the story. Reading it again from a newly-landed alien point of view (they'd had enough time on the trip to learn English, ok?) suddenly nothing made sense. Sheepishly, I dug it out again, edited it and, with a little effort, I had managed to keep some of the mystery, but had been able to give to the reader what they so desperately craved.

It's a hard truth to take, but you learn more from your mistakes and failures than your successes. I've failed in races and training runs, but it's how you react to these and how you change to improve your chances of success next time. In the darkest hours of rejection, you have to find that torch and climb your way back up.

I'll print it...but can you make just a few small changes?

Ah, the bitter-sweet reply that you can get from an editor. They like it, so you're ecstatic. But after you experience it for the first time, the next time you read those words you will start sweating. If you're like me, the response from you will be one of: a) you'll do whatever they say - you just want it in print! b) you'll defend your words with as much force as would repel an entire Martian invasion or c) with as much swearing as revelation, you'll enter negotiations and plan what to sacrifice in order to maintain the parts that simply *have* to stay (in your supreme opinion). In my short experience of editorial exchanges, my advice is to listen and not be so protective of your baby. Objectively consider the changes they suggest. If you're a novice, they probably know more than you and know what they're talking about. But that doesn't mean you have to 'sell out' or accept everything - they simply might have misunderstood something.

The sweating comes from the fact that you realise that the story you've put so much effort in to completing and editing yourself and thought was finished, is now about to be re-opened. You have been given more time to correct it...but also more time to make a mess of it again.

Re-submits are even more nerve-racking - what if they don't like it again? What if I've made it worse? What if it leads to yet more suggestions? What I've come to realise, is that this process is just something you have to accept, so roll with it. Hopefully you can trust the editor and the fear factor fades with every new submission.

A note also about accepted formats. Why do some places make you jump through hoops, ring a bell and insist on a perfect two-footed landing otherwise they'll reject your otherwise perfectly-written story? "Entries must be in Windows Word 2003 format with Tracking Changes off, Arial 12pt, single-spaced, black font, with your name, address, inside leg measurement and mother's maiden name clearly printed 1.25 inches from the left margin on every other page." Other places seem happy to accept little more than the text embedded within an email. The point is, don't argue. Do what they say and don't give them an excuse to reject it apart from what you've written!

The Moment

The best motivation for me is the vision of success. I'd crossed that finish line a hundred times in my head – laughing, crying, jumping, crawling – every way possible. No matter what would happen, if I made it to the start line, I would make it to the finish line. I wanted it so badly. There is simply nothing better than experiencing the moment where everything you have worked so hard for comes into place and you achieve your goals.

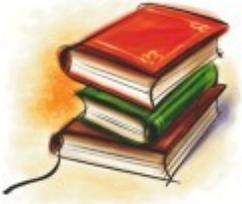
When I received my first email of acceptance, I could have cried. My first little victory in this new battle I had undertaken, and nothing could take that away from me. When I first saw my story up with the other competition winners, I was the proudest man alive for that split second.

Life is about moments like these. They rarely come to you on a plate, so you have to make them happen yourself. Feed on the emotion when they come, and use it as fuel for the future.

So, having run two marathons and a few minor publishing successes, but also unfulfilled ambitions in each discipline, which do I think is easier? Both take dedication and commitment. You have to be slightly insane to be serious about either. Each takes up more time than you really want it to. You suffer setbacks and experience breakthroughs of the magnitude you never thought possible. You get encouragement and you get criticism. You become your own worst enemy. But you follow your dream because that's what it is: your dream, and you owe it to yourself to go for it.

For a short-term buzz, a day to remember for the rest of your life and a sense of physical achievement you will eventually no longer be able to match, marathons are great. But the reward of seeing your name and story 'in print' for the world to see, to experience positive feedback from strangers on ideas that came from your own mind, and to possibly leave behind even a little something that someone for years to come will pick up and be impressed with, I think going for the novel might just be worth doing.

Whether you, or I, succeed in the adventures we undertake, only time will tell. But, as someone once said, if you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything.



A Stranger's Face

by Ashley Hibbert

Darkness - cold, stagnant, stale air; wrenched out of time and place; echoes of a voice, gender neutral, haunting and somehow not right.

I do not belong here.

I stand and look around: an alter cut from an Aztec temple, circular steps leading up - I really do not belong here.

Where - am I? Who - am I? Identity lost with normality.

Voice: Jonathan

How - did I get here?

Image of the decaying shell of the Opera house - the steady drip of acid rain from the ceiling into puddles of grime on a stage that had not felt the touch of a singer's feet for decades; seats scavenged, others strewn discarded and useless. Where once had been plates of glass now only planks of wood sealing a time capsule from the past. Its purpose lost; a temple amongst a city of atheists. A red moon fails to penetrate all but a few gaps in the roof, through air clogged with levitating dust, casting a column of light to the stage to illuminate me.

Now another illuminating column, though artificial, encircles me.

I look up at the light. The voice resumes.

'You have been chosen to participate in an Exchange. The program begins - now.'

'Wait. What is-' A flash of white light as if from a thousand suns engulfs, burns, and scorches me.

I know fear. For my body was but a shell for another soul to inhabit.

Yet what of me? I try yelling through lips I no longer possess. Where shall I go?

From another altar - above another carcass, another voice repeats my fear, repeats my question.

I am falling, plummeting into darkness.

‘And do you know what? It was the butler after all. You would never have guessed, would you? - Alex?’

Is she talking to me?

‘Oh, yes I completely agree.’

Good - that should not have happened though. My eyes run along the tables: cousins, relatives - my closest family and myself at the head.

All as it should be - all except me.

I gulp for fresh air. Repulsion strangles me. Something is happening - I have to get out of here.

I push the chair back roughly, standing up.

‘Excuse me,’ I mumble. I head towards the closest door, bursting into a white-walled lobby, decorated with holograph-paintings, Gen-Eng plants, and a lone man by a set of turbo-lifts to my right.

I rush towards him.

‘Where’s the toilets?’

A grin and he points down the lobby to a set of doors. I thank him -

- And crash into the cubicle, sliding into the welcoming wall and onto the seat. My arms and legs throb. The cubicle twists around me.

‘What’s happening?’ I ask the locked door. I scream at the blank tablet of my mind. A few tattered memories belonging to some stranger are the only remnants of a larger canvas that I can grip before they slip away.

I take a deep breath. Calm - calm. It’s temporary amnesia. I’ve had too much to drink. It will all soon pass.

My breathing slows, and I wipe away the tears.

I stand up, and vomit into the sink -

- And splash the chilling water on my face, trying to wash away the doubt. Face dripping and tears washed away, my mind afresh. I fumble for a towel and dab my skin dry, yet when I take it away, I see a stranger, staring back in matched surprise.

This is not me. This cannot be me. His short black hair is not my hair. His smooth chin and recently shaven face not mine; his nose, eyes, teeth, head, body, arms, legs, fingers, toes everything - all belong to a stranger. Still, I explore my new fused face, jamming twenty years of discovery into just a few moments.

What potential waits for release beneath this skin?

Where is the soul that once carried around this hunk of flesh and water - what of my flesh and blood?

Thoughts run through my mind in a clear, detached mode of calm and cool logic. Their answers can wait; I know at least that I am in a better place - a much better place.

Noise - I turn around, and dead wind blows into my face. 'Why?' 'Who?' 'Where?' 'When?' I see a distant yet familiar theatre. I breathe the dead yet homely air, and with the air, there comes an image - an altar, standing in a column of light, a voice and a flash of light. There is something here I missed - the first time. There, on that altar in the timeless placeless-place: a face staring over at me from an identical altar, a face filled with a horror equalling mine.

A face burned into my mind's eye - a face that I now wore.

The scene fades and I am again standing in a washroom. The dank smell has vanished.

I breathe deeply.

'You have been selected to participate in an exchange.'

'Selected'? 'Exchange'?

I lean against the wall, searching for the answers. Then I know and the realisation awes me - it is an exchange concerning not merchandise or services but a living, breathing human. Two individuals with opposite backgrounds - our bodies swapped.

Why me though? I had traded positions with someone of extreme wealth, possessed and acquired his identity, body, and lifestyle and yes - trickling into my consciousness, then gushing were two decades of memories.

Images, sights, sounds, feelings, and scents overwhelm me, and I lean back, grinning.

This is not an exchange - this is a rebirth.

Who am I really - with the body and memories of one person, and the soul, or mind, or conscience of another? What had this combination created, and who had the upper hand?

Am I just a germ, or am I the host - just because I have the memory of an extra person does that make me them?

I stop in my tracks and take in my surroundings, trying to decipher some secret that could lead me from the generic corridor. Wait, there - what's that? I look closer - a cool breeze of air, but from where? I close my eyes; feel the rush of O₂ on my face. Like a boy following an invisible path of light, I reach out - and touch a previously hidden doorway merged with the wall.

A murmur - sounds of laughter. I scavenge the wall for something that retreats from my eyes.

Aha. I depress the segment of wall with my open palm and the panel lights to my touch, the doorway parting.

I made my way into the kitchen where two familiar men sit on benches. Both are cooks who've helped prepare the feast, and with their work done their flocks lay discarded nearby, and they slouch on benches with relaxed expressions; the smell of spices, greens, synthetic flesh.

The big one is Doug - in his 40s yet with the joviality of youth. He starred in my earliest memories. The one by his side is his son. Human Resources work was easy: a job for life for you and your children. Every person who worked at the Palace was either the child, or grandchild, of a previous worker. His son was born within the Palace's walls, and chances were he would die within them. So would his own son.

It was a smart set up - if your whole family had worked for another family, you weren't likely to poison them.

'Ev'nin' Al'.' they chorus. They're pleased to see me.

'What's happening - haven't you got a birthday party to go to?' Doug teases.

'Birthday?' I ask, genuinely surprised. They burst into laughter, Doug wiping tears away, and clutching his side in pain.

'The kid's forgotten whose birthday we're celebrating.'

I look between the two of them and remember.

'You know how it is; relatives and friends all waiting for me to make a fool of myself - someone's sure to spike my drink.'

The two men nod understandingly. My eyes examine their faces and for the first time since the "Exchange" I feel the sense of brotherhood. It's as if these are people I don't have to be someone else with.

I realise that for the first time in my life, I feel trust. I go with it.

'Would one of you mind making sure that I get to my room?'

'I will,' a small feminine voice speaks. I notice her for the first time. She is stunning, and I feel a deep surge of desire. There is a long lasting bond between us. Her sandy blond hair covers a small delicate head. 'Elfin' comes to my mind. Her Vulcan ears point up; a boy's chest.

For longer than we can both recall, we have been friends.

I watch her, intrigued, as she stands and walks over. She takes my arm tightly yet gently. The two of us have traversed the passages of the Palace and life. We are siblings at heart if not by blood. She leads the way. We arrive at a doorway. I take my cue and key in my PIN. I feel brave, courageous, and ask her if she wants to come in for a nightcap.

She declines.

‘I’ll have heaps of stuff to clean up when your birthday celebrations die down tomorrow morning. And you need to catch some z’s - you look run down.’

‘OK Mum.’ We both laugh. She waves goodnight and begins down the hall, then stops, and turns.

‘Hey - are you really all right? You don’t seem yourself tonight. Anything you’d like to talk about?’

She looks puzzled and slightly worried. Yet I relax - she, who has grown up alongside me, is the only one to even slightly notice.

‘For better or for worst?’ I deflect her question. Yet I also yearn to know. She stands for a while, then a sneaky grin and she nods affirming.

‘Yeah, I think I like the new you.’ She walks down the corridor, yelling as she recedes into the distance. ‘Hey, get some sleep. God knows you’ll need it for tomorrow.’

Tomorrow - what’s tomorrow? Of course - how could I forget? Tomorrow would be the Ceremony of Advancement, where as a 21 year old I would now inherit the empire of my father - an empire awaiting my coming of age since his assassination.

Tomorrow I will inherit an empire.

I step forward and look over my ‘new’ quarters.

‘Very impressive indeed,’

Do I belong? Is this right? These questions skim my mind like pebbles across a lake.

I pat a couch, smell a rose, caress a leaf, stare at the ancient Amazon, and listen to the synthesised whistles of an extinct Lorikeet. A garden of ferns and creepers inhabit pots lining the ceiling, amongst which is an owl perched statically on a rod. He outstretches wings and glides silently down to my shoulder, his claws cling to my robe. We stare into each other’s eyes - trust.

I reach into my pockets and raise my seed-filled palm to his beak - he empties the seeds quickly, leaving their empty shells. His metallic eyes blink like the shutter of an SLR camera.

I make my way to a window filled with greenery, Nook rocking on my shoulder. It is a window to another world. A whispered command, the forest fades, the music of an interspecies orchestra dissolves, and I behold a great view.

The view is a facsimile of the Palace: her towers reaching into heaven above the megalopolis like the hand of a god. I search for my room in the picture transmitted from a tiny capsule some mile or two away. I give up - I am looking for merely one amongst a thousand windows.

Another command and the real view replaces the image - I am looking directly across the harbour, her streets revealed by night-lights and fire-plumes.

The scene is alive. I rip open the door and jump out onto the balcony. I am at the City's mercy and exposed to the elements. Yet she and I know each other from long back - she has sheltered me many a time and taken me into her. She greets me in her usual way - wind bellowing against my face and almost dragging me out beyond the balcony. I feel Nook's claws cling desperately tighter. Fire licks the air above the Industrial zone, then another, like the keys of a saxophone.

The sky threatens a downpour like no other, a bluff called long ago. Mingling clouds of acidic vapours suffocate the land below of any light - star, moon or sun. Day or night - who knows? Sydney's sky is a sea of toxin, her ground a basin for the homeless. Her leaders are killing her. The Palace is killing her.

It stops tomorrow.

'Mistress Katrina has just arrived at the Gondolier entrance, Master Alex' - the raspy voice of a guard.

'I'll be there soon,' I reply.

Katrina - I try her words in my mouth, relishing the anticipation. What will she be like?

I know it will be a pleasant surprise. Nothing, though, prepares me for what I now behold. I know I look a fool yet I think little of it. I struggle to fathom the angel before me. I want to take her in my arms, put my lips to hers, and hold her forever.

Her short black hair and equally short black skirt contain a well-maintained, athletic body. The brief moments of exposure to the outside air have given her a red-tipped nose like the lipstick she now wears. Jewellery of liquid fire dance from underneath each ear like the twin gems between them - green eyes glittering with excitement.

She twirls full circle, pleased at my awe.

'What do you think?' she asks expectantly.

I walk up to her and come to a stop only a few inches away from her face.

'You look amazing, Katrina,' I whisper into her eyes.

She chuckles, embarrassed, and I bask in her voice. It's perfect.

'Happy birthday, Alex,' she says, pressing herself against my chest, her rich perfume intoxicating me, our arms encircle the other. She wears a smile of mischief yet also a trusting face. 'Are you ready?'

'I'm ready for anything,' I reply honestly.

Conquer worlds, restore the earth and humanity to its past glory, make two people one - with her by my side, I can realise every dream.

She smiles and we turn to the Gondolier carriage awaiting us. We step in, and the giant cogs grind into action.

We take our seats side by side - never close enough.

The Gondolier carriage stops at my command. It swings, alone in the night.

Katrina looks up at me, puzzled. I raise my open palm, pleading for patience.

Should I? I wonder - but I have an advantage my predecessor never had. I know that the moment you hesitate you are dead.

I dip the same hand into a front pocket, removing a flat object two by three inches; featureless bar a hologram: the Palace's emblem.

I offer it. She feels its sides, and examines the hologram.

'What is it?' she asks, head still lowered.

I take it between my fingers. Her eyes follow, hypnotised.

'With this,' I explain, 'you can enter the Palace any time, day or night.' I look deep into her eyes, earnestly. 'Please, accept it from me to you.'

Before she can reply however, the communication panel chimes.

'Master Alex, we've received a video transmission from Zone-Z. Sender is a 'Jonathan', at a public videophone. Do you wish to reply? He seemed to have ... intimate knowledge of the Clan - Sir?'

'Give me a minute.' I knew that this would come - that it took this long was the only thing that surprised me. I look at Katrina's face and see that this interlude will give her time to think it over. 'I'll just be a moment.' I stand, placing the card where I had sat. Her gaze follows me; our eyes meet, and then break. I activate the com-panel on the far extreme of the Gondolier. The time for confrontation has come. 'Patch him through Roberts,' I order.

The screen bursts into life. It takes a second - then recognition flickers for both of us.

'Listen Jonathan - I don't know how this all happened, but we must get together and work out how to reverse it.' An explosion followed by a flash of light sounds behind him and he swings around, horrified. He turns back, fear drowning all expression. 'This place is falling apart. You have to get me out of here.' He yells above the sound of gunfire. He turns around again like an animal on the run. He turns back to face the screen, and I know what I have to do.

'I'm sorry; you must have the wrong number. I don't know any Jonathan.'

Realisation dawns and I see amazed dread on my own face - a face that had grown far too used to such expressions.

‘No, no, you can’t do this. Please – no!’

He was still screaming when I cut the connection.

I stare at the blank screen. There are no regrets - there was no way I was going back to the city below.

I resume my empty seat besides Katrina - and let her take her time.

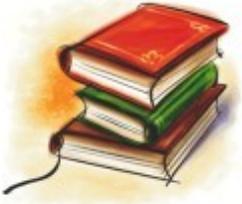
I have done the right thing.

Our resolved faces meet. She has a pleased look on her face.

‘When can I move in?’ she asks.

I grin.

‘Anytime - babe - anytime.’



An Interview with Jaine Fenn

by Gary Reynolds



Let's start with the age-old 'how did you get into writing' question.

Somewhere in the depths of the University of Hertfordshire's Linguistics department is a C30 cassette tape of me, aged four-and-a-bit, telling the story of an as-yet un-broadcast Star Trek episode.

If I remember rightly a flying fire extinguisher saved the crew from Terrible Peril (I think that was during my 'red toy' phase). The Uni kept the tape to demonstrate language acquisition and the development of abstract cognitive skills. A couple of years later I acquired written language, so I don't use tapes any more. Other than that, I'm still doing pretty much the same thing.

Can you describe your process for writing 'Principles of Angels' from initial idea through to revision and submission? Are you a planner, or do you just

dive in and start writing?

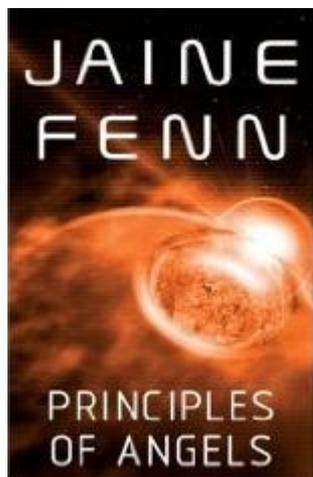
'Principles of Angels' was my first book. It was also my second, third, fourth and ... I've lost count of how many times I re-wrote it. The original idea came from one of my first ever short stories – what if an assassin is forced to kill someone she loves? The idea kept collecting other ideas, and developed an interesting setting, though as I had no clue what I was doing, attempts to bring all this stuff together and turn it into a novel initially resulted in files of disjointed scribbling which I'd abandon then periodically return to. As I learnt to write (mainly through short stories and critiquing groups), I applied what I learnt until I got the novel right. Well, good enough anyway.

As for the 'planning' vs 'going for it' question: If I over-plan, I lose interest. But I have to have the feel of a story (whatever the length) before I start. That sounds pretentious, and it's hard to explain what I mean, but it's a process that involves lots of hand-written notes and a vague outline on the computer. I have to know where I think I'll end up. Quite often, because I don't plan in detail, I find I'm wrong.

How long did it take for 'Principles of Angels' to be picked up by Gollancz?

I got the book into a saleable state in late 2004 (thanks to feedback from various critiquers, including the Milford Writers' Workshop), and initially had some interest from one of the large publishing houses in the US. This didn't pan out, but it gave me the confidence to start the process writers know so well, that of submission and rejection.

Gollancz was the tenth market I tried, and they picked it up very quickly – from submission to book deal was less than three weeks.



What did you learn from writing 'Principles of Angels' and how has it impacted upon your approach to 'Consorts of Heaven'?

I learnt a helluva lot about how to write a novel, including (some of) what not to do. Specific lessons included: to let characters tell the story and not impose my idea of the story on them; to get the first draft down without compulsive revising; and, when it comes time to revise, to cut brutally and trust that the reader will be smart enough to work it out for themselves.

Oh, and that I should leave writing in dialect to experts like Iain M. Banks.

What's your favourite sci-fi film and why?

Predictable answer this: Bladerunner. I'm old enough (just) to remember the impact it had when it came out. I liked noir detective stories, I'd just (thanks to Star Wars) discovered space opera and then along comes this story with mystery and angst and drama and a setting and atmosphere like nothing I'd ever seen before. It looks dated now, but that's because it influenced so much that came after it.

Can you tell us something unusual about yourself not related to writing or science fiction?

I'm ballet trained to a semi-professional level. Though I realised about age 14 that I didn't have either the physique or the talent to be a professional dancer, I kept doing ballet throughout my twenties and into my thirties. With the pressure off, I could enjoy dancing for its own sake. Having said that, ballet is a rigid discipline not entirely unlike some martial arts (I'm also a green belt in Ki Aikido). Believe me, a dancer apparently floating across the stage en pointe may look inhumanly graceful, but she's in a lot of pain. Toes aren't designed to be balanced on.

You write both short stories and novels. Which form do you prefer and why?

Tough question. Can I have both please? A short story gives instant gratification, and is a great way to explore a single idea (or ideally, two or three). A novel allows more depth, more time to explore, but also asks for way more commitment. While I'm being paid to write novels, they'll take priority, but some stories need to be told in short format: for example, at the beginning of this week I realised a character was about to appear in my current novel who was too interesting to just be defined by my usual '20 questions' technique. I needed to understand how she came to be what she is when we meet her in the novel. So I took two days off from the novel and wrote her back-story as a short. That story may never see the light of print, but I needed to write it to understand her.

What are you currently working on and how's it going?

I'm just over half way through the first draft of 'Guardians of Paradise', the third of the three books contracted for so far in the Hidden Empire series. It's going well: I normally find first drafts hard work, and much prefer revising, when I've got something to work with, but because I'm mainly dealing with characters I know well, things are rattling along nicely.

What can we expect to see from you after your current contract with Gollancz?

I've got an almost-finished, but as yet unsold, near-future novel set in the same universe as the Hidden Empire books which I'd like to get back to. It's the story that kicks off my whole timeline, so I want to spend a while there. However, there's a lot more to be told at the other end of the timeline too; 'Guardians of Paradise' will resolve some of the threads I've been playing with, but it'll also leave plenty of potential for future adventures – not to mention introducing a new threat (if you think the Sidhe are bad news now ... it gets worse).



Flotsam

by Gareth L. Powell

Toby Milan sits at the door of his steel cargo container, thirty feet above the ship's foredeck, watching the sun set. His is the third container up in a stack of six. From up here, he can see most of the other ships in the fleet. There are forty in all, all retrofitted like this one to provide emergency housing for ecological refugees – a floating shantytown anchored in the Mediterranean Sea, five miles off the flooded French coast.

Some ships are tied together, linked by gangways and laundry lines, while others stand alone in the gathering twilight, each a separate neighbourhood in its own right, with its own customs and hierarchies. And beyond them, he sees the town lights of Marseille, its downtown buildings and old harbour already flooded by the rising sea, its narrow streets awash.

He leans out of his container, looking down. There are market stalls pitched on the ship's foredeck and the early evening air rings with the hustle of traders and muezzins. Directly beneath him, at the foot of his stack, is a makeshift kebab stall. The smell of sizzling lamb makes his stomach growl and he looks enviously at the customers eating at the counter. And as he does so, one of them pulls back her headscarf and shakes out her bobbed hair.

Shweta!

Heart thumping, he ducks back, hoping she hasn't seen him.

It can't be her, he thinks. Not now, not here.

Inside, his container measures eight by twenty, with corrugated metal walls. Not knowing what else to do, he backs up to the curtain screening off his sleeping area. There's a hunting knife under his pillow and he knows if he can reach it, he'll feel more secure.

But then he feels her climbing the ladder bolted to the corner of the container stack.

'Milan?' she calls. 'Milan, are you in there?'

He hasn't seen Shweta Venkatesh in two years. Whatever she wants – whatever reason she has for being here, now – it can't be good news.

He crouches by the curtain, trapped. 'What do you want?' he says.

Her head and shoulders appear in the container's doorway. She holds a compact pistol in her free hand.

'Toby, is that you?'

She pulls herself up into the container, gun at the ready, body silhouetted against the fading sky. She's a little shorter than he is, a former archaeology tutor from the University of Bangalore. He hasn't seen her since he left her in Ethiopia two years ago, close to the ruins of a burned-out Reef in the mountains north of Addis Ababa.

'Toby, I need a place to hide,' she says.

The Reefs were a scavenger's dream. They started life as simple self-repairing routers in NASA's interplanetary data network – and ended up as something far scarier.

They learned to upgrade themselves. They increased their processing power. They started expanding at a geometric rate. And eventually, they became self-aware.

They were fast, intelligent and ruthlessly logical – but they were also unstable, unable to resist the temptation of further upgrades. Using the nano-scale assemblers in their repair packages, they morphed themselves into weird new fractal shapes. They built themselves extra processors and accelerated the speed of their thoughts beyond all human comprehension. And within hours, they'd burned themselves out.

Toby and Shweta were part of a university research team picking through their twisted, smoking remains in search of useful – and potentially lucrative – new technology. They were colleagues and they were lovers. They were doing a dangerous job and they depended on each other. But in Ethiopia, when a team of rival scavengers attacked the site they were working on, he panicked and let her down.

'I took four bullets in the chest,' Shweta says, lowering the gun. 'And three of them were from you.'

With the sun gone, it's cold in the container. Toby has his back to the curtain. 'I got you out,' he says. 'I got you to a hospital.'

Shweta snorts. 'You call that a hospital?'

She pockets her weapon. She tells him she's been on the run for three days now, living rough with no time to eat or sleep, nowhere else to go. Still wary, he shows her how to work the shower and while she washes, he fetches the knife and slips it into his pocket. Then he heats some leftover rice in the microwave.

When she comes out shivering, wrapped in a threadbare grey towel, hair damp and feet leaving wet prints on the metal floor, he spoons the rice into a bowl.

'Eat this,' he says, handing her a fork and stepping back out of reach, just in case.

Shweta eats like she's starving, shoveling the leftovers into her mouth. He can't help noticing her knuckles are red and raw, and there are bruises on her arms.

When she's finished eating, he takes her down to the deck and they walk up to the ship's bow, where they lean on the rail and look out at the lights of Marseille.

'So, what are you running from?' he says. He feels safer out here in the open, with other people around.

Shweta looks down at the water, letting her hair fall forward.

'It's Morgan.'

Toby takes a firm grip on the ship's rail. He remembers Rob Morgan as a colleague - a quiet, serious member of the Ethiopian expedition.

'What's he done? Has he hurt you?'

Shweta shakes her head. She still has the gun. Tucked into her belt, it makes a conspicuous bulge. 'It's not like that,' she says.

'Then what is it?'

Shweta looks up and the wind ruffles her hair. She's wearing a pair of his old jeans, pulled tight with a canvas belt, and a t-shirt so big on her that it hangs off one shoulder.

'About a week ago, we were scouting a Reef in Thailand, near the Cambodian border,' she says, 'and it attacked us.'

Toby's eyes widen. Active Reefs are exceptionally rare, and exceedingly dangerous.

Shweta tightens her grip on his arm. 'It corrupted our suits with nanotech spores. It killed Kamal and Rani. And if Morgan hadn't come in with the flamethrower and the blue goo, it would've killed me too.'

She lets go, taking a step back.

'So... you're okay?' Toby says.

She shakes her head. Discreetly, she hikes up the hem of her t-shirt to show him the top of her right hip, where the skin's hardened into something gnarled and fibrous, like coral. Appalled, Toby leans closer. He's seen infections like this before, in pictures.

'What are you going to do?' he asks.

Shweta lets the t-shirt drop back into place. Her eyes are the same colour as her hair. Overhead, the first stars are appearing.

'I don't know,' she says.

Toby takes her down to one of the empty cargo containers in the stacks near the stern, where he knows she'll be safe. He uses the last of his money to buy her some food and water, and makes sure she still has the gun.

'Stay here,' he says, and locks the door from the outside. Then he goes back to his place and pulls the hunting knife from his pocket. He won it in a poker game in Amsterdam. It has a matt black carbon steel blade and a lightweight plastic handle. He slips it into his sock and secures it in place with electrical tape.

He knows they don't have much time. The university can't risk an outbreak of Reef spores. They'll expect Rob Morgan to bring Shweta in before the infection spreads and new Reefs start appearing.

Toby's seen the havoc a live Reef can cause. But after abandoning her in Ethiopia, he just can't bring himself to turn Shweta in. He knows if he does, they'll kill her in order to kill the contamination.

Instead, he sweeps a few possessions into an old laptop case. Then he's out the door, down the ladder and past the kebab stall, heading for the stern, where he hopes to find Odette.

Two years ago, when he fled the debacle in Ethiopia, Toby walked away from everything – his apartment, his teaching job - taking only his passport and the money he had in his pockets.

Fleeing his guilt, he hitchhiked his way randomly across Europe, sleeping in service areas and railway stations. He got drunk in Prague, Warsaw and Bucharest.

And then one morning he found himself in Amsterdam, exhausted and spent, wading across a flooded street in the drifting rain. The city was half-deserted, everything boarded-up. He'd been playing cards all night above a café in the red light district, and now it was dawn and here he was, feeling wretched and looking for somewhere to sleep, a knife in his back pocket and fourteen Euros in loose change. He hadn't washed in five days, hadn't had a shave in six. His coat – which he'd stolen from a cloakroom in Zagreb – had a tear in the sleeve.

He was ankle-deep in dirty sea water, wondering where he could get something to eat, when he heard a shout. It was one of the girls from the café, a young French dancer named Odette, a nineteen year-old runaway from the outskirts of Paris. She came sloshing after him.

'Do you have anywhere to sleep?' she said.

He shook his head.

'I didn't think so. Come with me.' She took him back to her room – a damp studio apartment in a crumbling town house – and offered him the couch. Then she went into the bathroom and wrapped her wet hair in a towel.

'I hate what's happening to this town,' she said.

Toby shrugged off his coat and sat down. His feet hurt from the cold water. He kicked off his sodden shoes. His socks were wet and threadbare, his reflection in the dead TV ragged and unkempt.

'Then why don't you leave?' he said. He turned on the TV, found a news channel.

'Where would I go?' She came back into the room, rubbing her hair, just in time to catch the end of a news item about refugees moving onto container ships in the Mediterranean.

She lowered the towel.

'Hey, wind that back,' she said.

Now, hurrying toward the ship's stern, Toby doesn't know what he's going to do. He can't hide Shweta here, on board, and his guilt won't let him abandon her. He needs a third option.

Odette's crate is at the bottom of a small stack overlooking the stern. He walks up and raps on the metal door. He hears movement inside, and then Odette calls out:

'Hello? Who is there?'

Toby pulls the door open. 'It's me. Can I come in?'

Inside, there are candles burning, scarves and blankets taped to the walls, rugs and cushions scattered on the floor. Odette's wearing a loose dress under a tight Levi jacket, sparkly lipstick and silver nail polish.

'You look happy,' he says.

She smiles. Since leaving Amsterdam with her, he's watched her blossom into a young woman, shrugging off her teenage years like an old coat.

'I had a good day,' she says. 'I've been over on the *Topkapi*, with Safak at the bazaar.'

She looks him up and down. 'But what about you? You look worried. Would a cup of tea help? I have apple or sage...'

She reaches for the kettle but Toby catches her wrist.

'It's Shweta,' he says.

Odette pulls back and her lip curls. 'What about her?'

'She's here.'

Odette jabs her finger at the deck. 'That woman is here, now, on this vessel?'

Toby takes a deep breath.

'Yes,' he says, 'yes she is – and she needs our help.'

They step out. It's a warm night and there's music from the market on the foredeck. Odette has her arm wrapped in his. 'I cannot believe I'm letting you talk me into this,' she says.

They walk along the stern rail, past a row of inflatable lifeboats.

'Where is she?'

Toby stops. 'Down here, two stacks over.'

He adjusts the strap of his laptop case. Inside, he's carrying his passport, a few clothes, and a bottle of water. Across the bay in Marseille, the town lights are shining.

'Are you sure about this?' Odette asks.

Toby squeezes her hand. He's trying not to think about the infection on Shweta's hip. He walks over to the crate and sees with relief that the door's still locked. He flips back the bolt and cracks the door an inch or so.

'Hello?'

There's no answer. The light's off and he can't see anything inside.

'Shweta?'

He hears her cough.

'Toby? Is that you?'

He pulls the door open, letting in more light. 'I've got someone with me, a friend.'

Shweta's lying on some old sacks by the wall.

'Toby, I don't feel so good.'

She rolls over and even in the semi-darkness he can see there's something wrong with her leg – the silhouette's all wrong, misshapen with swelling.

He flips on the light and sees rough, black gnarls in the gap between her T-shirt and the top of her jeans. Behind him, Odette swears under her breath.

'What the hell is this?' she says.

Toby doesn't answer. He's looking at the denim stretched tight across Shweta's hip.

'Jesus, Shweta,' he says.

He drops to his knees and reaches forward. Her gun's lying on the deck. He picks it up. It feels cold in his hand as he slips it into the laptop case.

Shweta coughs again. 'Toby, it hurts,' she says.

He touches her hand. He wants to pick her up and move her but he's afraid of getting too close. Instead, he looks over his shoulder at Odette.

'You've got to help us,' he says.

Odette paid for his ticket south, from Amsterdam via Paris to Lyon. She had some money put aside and she didn't want to travel alone – not with half the population of Europe on the move, displaced by the rising sea levels.

'But don't think this means anything,' she said.

They were standing in a crowd of refugees, waiting for their connecting train. She wore a pair of camouflage trousers and a thick fleece, her bushy hair tied back in a frizzy bun.

'I chose you because you look like a nice man. And because I think you are still in love with this Shweta woman.' She put her hands in her pockets and hunched her shoulders. 'Besides, I think you are old enough to be my father, yes?'

Toby shook his head.

'I don't know about that.'

He had his collar turned up against the cold. He was reading a newspaper he'd found on a bench. There were bad floods in Holland and East Anglia, pictures of whole towns and villages swamped by the rising sea.

'Have you seen this?' he said.

Odette handed him his ticket. From Lyon, they were going to catch a bus to Marseille and from there, a ferry to one of the refugee ships. Around them, the other passengers stared grimly at the tracks, holding their bundled possessions, waiting for the train.

Odette turned up her collar.

'It's only going to get worse,' she said.

Now, standing outside Shweta's crate, Odette turns to him again.

'What is it that you expect me to do? I don't know what... what this is.'

He reaches for her. 'It's bad,' he says.

From the container, they hear Shweta cough again. Odette pulls away. 'We should call the police.'

Toby looks up at the fading sky. Out on the water, the other ships glitter like table decorations.

'If we don't help her, she's going to die.'

Odette folds her arms. 'But what is it you think I can do?'

Toby takes her hand, strokes her knuckles with his thumb.

'Your friends on the *Topkapi*, can they get us ashore?'

Odette shakes her head. 'I don't think so.'

'What about that pilot you're seeing, Safak?'

She pulls her hand away and walks over to the ship's rail.

'I'm sorry,' she says.

Toby hears Shweta moan. He looks back to the crate's open door.

'Can you at least *ask*?'

He watches her go. When he gets back inside, Shweta's rolled onto her back. Her eyes are closed. He crouches a few feet away and pulls the water bottle from his laptop case.

He remembers the last thing Shweta said to him, before the attack in Ethiopia. They were standing by the tents, drinking coffee in the dusty red pre-dawn chill, and she looked up at him and said: 'You know, I think you're probably the best assistant I've ever had.'

Now, looking at her lying here twisted on a pile of old sacks, he feels he's failed her.

'Oh, Shweta, I'm so sorry,' he says.

She coughs again and opens her eyes. 'It's not your fault.'

Her voice is dry and croaky. There's sweat on her upper lip. He hands her the water.

'How do you feel?'

She shifts uncomfortably on the sacks. 'How do you think?'

The gnarls erupting from her hip are black and rough, like volcanic rock. He can't bring himself to look at them. Instead, he reaches out and touches her hair, brushing a loose strand behind her ear.

'You know, when you climbed into my crate, I thought you'd come to kill me,' he says.

He looks at his watch. Time's passing and he's starting to get nervous. He has to get her off this ship, find somewhere for her to hide before anyone comes looking for her.

He stands up. 'I'm going to find a way to get you out of here.'

He steps out onto the deck, walks over to the rail. Below him, the black sea shifts like a restless sleeper. He can see the *Topkapi* anchored a few hundred metres away, and the silhouette of Safak's plane sitting like a toy duck on the water at her stern. She's an old twin engine Grumman, almost an antique, still sporting the faded livery of her previous owner, a bankrupt Croatian tour operator. Safak's had her converted to run on biofuel, and uses her to ferry refugees and equipment from the mainland, making two or three flights a week, sometimes taking Odette along for company.

Toby yawns, shivering in the cold sea air. He looks back at Shweta's crate. He knows that just by being here she's endangering everyone on the ship, himself included. He has to get her off, find somewhere she'll be safe until he can work out a way to save her.

He looks longingly at the lights of Marseille. If he can get her ashore, they can hole up in the hills behind the town while he figures out their next move.

He pats the laptop case at his hip, feeling the weight of the pistol inside.

'Hurry, Odette,' he says.

A few weeks before the expedition to Ethiopia, Shweta moved into his apartment, bringing plants and books and bags of clothes.

'It's only temporary,' she said, 'until I can get a new place sorted.'

She was a respected member of the university's academic staff. Toby helped her with her cases, and then led her into the kitchen, where he'd laid out two plates of spicy chili and a bottle of red wine. The open fire escape looked out over the roofs of Bangalore, the satellite dishes and lines of laundry still warm from the heat of the day.

'Sit down, make yourself comfortable,' he said.

She smelled of jasmine. She wore jeans and had her hair tied back in a loose braid. There was a silver pendant around her neck and – when she finally took her blouse off – a tiny tattooed rose petal between her breasts.

She saw him looking at it and touched it with her fingers. It made her uncomfortable.

'I once lost my heart,' she said.

Now, standing at the ship's rail he remembers that night with an intensity that pisses him off. For two years he's been trying to forget it, to block it out. Yet here it is, vivid and alive in his mind's eye. He leans his

forehead on the cold metal rail, trying to stop himself picturing the bullet scars that have disfigured the rose tattoo.

And then he hears footsteps. Rob Morgan slides up to him, dressed in a simple grey linen suit.

'Where is she, Milan?'

Toby steps back from the rail and Morgan looms over him. He's tall, thin as a rake. He reaches out and takes Toby by the upper arm. His hand feels like a clamp.

'Where is she? Is she in this crate?' He looks at the open door.

Toby tries to pull away but Morgan's grip tightens. 'I don't like this any more than you do,' he says. He pulls up the flap of Toby's laptop case and sticks his hand in. He pulls out Shweta's gun.

He pushes Toby's back against the ship's rail and twists the gun barrel into his side.

'I have to find her,' he says.

Toby squirms. He can smell Morgan's cologne. 'She's not here.'

'Then where is she?'

Toby opens his mouth for another denial, but then there's a cough and they both look round.

Shweta's standing in the crate's open door; hand on the wall for support, keeping the weight off her bulging thigh.

'Hello Rob,' she says.

Morgan pushes Toby aside. He looks shocked by her deformity.

'You know why I'm here,' he says.

Shweta nods. She looks exhausted, ready to surrender. 'It's all right,' she says.

She pulls herself over to the ship's rail, each painful step making Toby wince. He wants to help her but Rob holds him back.

'I'm sorry,' Rob says. He points his gun at Shweta. 'I'm really very sorry.'

She leans over the rail, favouring her good leg.

'Just do it,' she says.

He shoots her in the back. She slumps forward against the ship's rail, limbs shaking spastically. Toby cries out - but it's too late. Morgan raises his arm and shoots her again, this time in the back of the head. She tips over the rail and falls out of sight.

Toby stands stunned, ears ringing. He looks over at Rob Morgan. Then without thinking, he lunges at him.

Caught off guard, Morgan staggers back, dropping his weapon. Toby tries to get his arm around Morgan's neck but the other man twists, pulling Toby off balance, and they both crash to the deck.

Pinned under his opponent, Toby scrabbles for the knife in his sock. But Morgan sees what he's doing and slaps his hand away, grabbing for the weapon himself, ripping the tape free from Toby's leg.

Toby tries to wriggle away but Morgan's thin frame belies his strength, and he punches the blade into Toby's thigh. Everything goes red and Toby hears his own voice screaming. Then the pressure lifts and Morgan's scrambling off him.

He reaches down and lifts Toby by the shirt, the knife still sticking out of his leg. He heaves him over to the rail, where Shweta stood moments before. Below, the black water gurgles hungrily against the side of the ship.

'Do you know what you've done?' Morgan says. He shakes Toby. 'By keeping her here, you've infected the whole ship, yourself included.'

He shakes Toby hard, slaps his face.

'Now I've got no choice. You've left me with no other option. If there are Reef spores blowing around, I have to call in an airstrike.'

He grabs Toby's belt and lifts, trying to heave him over the rail.

'No!' Toby struggles. He's seen Reefs sterilized from the air before, with napalm. He knows if Morgan makes his call, the people on this boat won't stand a chance.

'No, you can't do it.' He kicks out but Morgan's got him off balance and he can feel himself going over, tipping toward the water. In desperation, he uses his free hand to pull the slippery knife from his thigh and buries it in Morgan's skinny neck. Morgan cries out and together, still struggling, they fall.

Toby hits the water so hard it knocks the breath from him. He goes under, dragged down by the weight of his wet clothes, stunned by the cold. His stabbed leg feels like it's on fire. He can't kick for the surface. Blood curls in the water around him.

This is it, he thinks, his arms flailing.

And far below, something glitters on the sea bed. Something shines. He can't hold his breath. He has an impression of something black and gnarly blossoming down there in the darkness, and then there's nothing but the roar of the water in his ears and the thrashing, suffocating pain.