

September 2009

# ideomancer

speculative fiction

## science fiction

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Erica Saftika

I Don't Exist Without You



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Exit Wounds



## slipstream

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James L. Corner

Miles Blows His Last



## poetry

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How to Build an Open-Source Deity



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David Kopaska-Merkel

The Dead King of Midnight

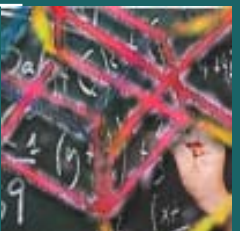


## poetry

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Danny Adams

Erasing the Universe's Chalkboard



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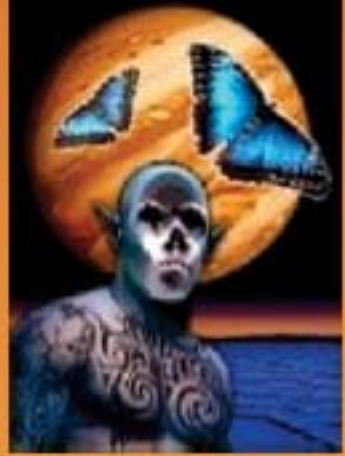
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Erica Satfika

## I Don't Exist Without You



Erica L. Satfika lives in Pittsburgh, PA. Her story “Sea Changes” was published in a previous issue of *Ideomancer*; her work has also appeared in *Clarkesworld Magazine* and the Greek newspaper supplement 9. She runs a comic and zine distro, Black Light Diner.

I won't lie, the point of view came first. Around that I built a story of identity loss at the hands of one's employer, which resonated with the day job I had at the time quite a bit. Oh, hell, it still resonates.

*“Melanie knew—  
knows—what  
this means. Ei-  
ther some richy  
was looking for  
a maid, or some  
richy was looking  
for a prostitute.  
Either way, Mela-  
nie was look-  
ing at some new  
hardware.”*

You are Melanie Zielensky. You are sitting in the office of Amanda Gregorian, the richest woman on Earth. You are being served finger sandwiches and Earl Grey by a cyborg butler. “Would you like some sugar, miss?”

“No,” says Melanie, says you. You like it plain.

“I can bring some other sandwiches if these are not to your liking.”

“This is fine,” Melanie says. She taps one chrome-tipped high-heeled boot on the parquet floor. “When is Ms. Gregorian going to get here? I’ve been waiting for an hour.”

“Ms. Gregorian will not be conducting your interview. She is a very ill woman. Your interview will be conducted by her son Nicholas.” The cyborg checks the inlay on the back of his hand. “His rocket’s touching down just now.”

Melanie takes an egg salad sandwich from the offered tray and leans back in the chair. The chair squishes under you with a jellied substance that’s warm on your pressure points. You look down at the floor. It’s polished to a mirror finish, showing off Melanie’s jet-black hair escaping from the bun at the nape of her neck. When she bends down, the pendant of her best necklace points south. An Old English M, struck in steel painted with flaking gilt. “I don’t mean to rush you. I mean... I’ve just never done anything like this before.” She rubs the back of her hand, wondering how it will look with a computer insert.

Slam, clomp-clomp. Melanie looks up sharply to face a chubby blond man with wireframe glasses. Anachronistic medical appliances, the lat-

est style. “You must be Miss Zielensky.” He holds out his hand. “I’m Nicholas Gregorian. You can call me Nick.”

“Pleased to meet you,” you say, extending your hand. Nick Gregorian’s palms are sweaty and sticky, and when he releases his hand, Melanie is pleased to be rid of it.

“You’re here for the job.”

And you are.

#

Flash back to five days ago. You held the tissue-thin holopaper out on your lap, watching the classified ads squirm. One of them popped out at you, written in bright red sans-serif letters.

“PERSONAL ASSISTANT WANTED—Competitive Pay Rates—Utmost Discretion Required.” Trailed by an identity string.

Melanie knew—knows—what this means. Either some richy was looking for a maid, or some richy was looking for a prostitute. Either way, Melanie was looking at some new hardware.

But when your husband is dead and your kid’s in the freezer and you’re working sixteen hours a day on recycled busywork just to fulfill your debt to the government, what choice do you have? If you’re someone like Melanie Zielensky—and you are—you take what you can get.

Melanie walked to the public terminal four flights down and three blocks away and put in her request for an interview.

#

“We need someone to start immediately. Can you move in tonight?”

“I have the job? What about the interview?”

“Oh, you’ve passed that.”

Melanie looks around her, confused. Suddenly, she flashes on the chair. It’s been monitoring her bodily functions all this time, testing her weight, her height, the way her muscles moved when she shifted, her pulse and digestive system. She didn’t come in here for an interview, she came in here for a physical, and she’s passed. You’ve passed. “Yes, I can start tonight. Just let me call my building and tell them I’m leaving.” That’s not really necessary; if you’re not in your bed when you’re supposed to wake up the government will confiscate your apartment and hand it off to another desty. But she wants to get away from Nicholas.

“Very well. Reynolds will show you to your room.”

“Are they going to do the installations tonight? Because I’ve already eaten, and I know you’re supposed to wait six hours—”

Nicholas almost chortles as this, but stops it with a hand pressed to his mouth. Melanie notices that his fingernails are dirty and well-chewed. “You’ve got it wrong. You’re not going to be a cyborg. My mother wants a human assistant, to help her with her everyday functions.”

“I see. Well, I don’t really have much experience—”

“You’ll do fine,” Nick says to you. “You’re the one. Reynolds, take Miss Zielensky to her room.”

The cyborg takes Melanie by the arm and steers her through the door. There’s a prick like a bee sting; an access chip has just been injected into your upper arm.

Your name is Melanie Zielensky, and you just got your first real job.

#

The next morning you wake up with orange juice spilled across your chest. Melanie curses as she cleans the remains of the surprise breakfast tray from her lap.

“Let me get that,” Reynolds the cyborg says.

“I’m so sorry,” Melanie says, flustered.

“It’s quite all right.” He pulls a hose from his side and sweeps the mess. “I’ll call for another. In the meantime, why don’t you get showered and dressed? Ms. Gregorian is waiting.”

You watch the receding back of the cyborg. When he is gone, you pull your shirt over your head and walk to the bathroom.

The click of tiny cameras as you tap across the floor.

Melanie steps into the shower and the water turns on automatically. It’s like the dirt and dust of her old life is being sloughed off, revealing a second skin underneath: fresh, clean, new. You have never felt so very alive as you do this second.

When you go back to the main room, a fresh tray of food has been set out on your desk. A paper-thin screen sits opposite the tray, balanced on a crystal easel. So this is the good life.

“Good morning, Miss Zielensky. I hope you slept well.”

“I did.” And except for being scared half to death by the morning welcome wagon, she did. “Are you Ms. Gregorian?”

“Call me Amanda, please.” She winks. Are you trying to seduce me, Ms. Gregorian?

“I thought you’d actually be here. Not in a screen.” She flushes as she realizes what she’s just said. “Not that it’s not a great privilege to see you no matter what form—”

“Don’t bother with the pleasantries. We’re all equals here.”

“In that case, I mean if you really don’t mind my asking, what is my job? I’m afraid I didn’t really ask, I was—”

Gregorian smiles, her red lips spread wide, her gunmetal-gray eyes twinkling. “You were desperate to get it. That’s all right, I understand perfectly. You are to be my assistant. You will handle my paperwork, my public appearances. Be the face of my company. Since I can’t be.”

“You’re younger than I would have thought.”

“I don’t really look like this. Not anymore. Once, maybe.”

“Not to pry, I really don’t want to pry, but I thought you were ill.”

“Nobody’s ill in a computer program.”

Melanie is starving, but she doesn’t dare eat, not in front of her boss. She touches the edge of the real china plate. “I’m very sorry for asking. Please forgive me.”

“Don’t you want to eat your breakfast? It’s good to have a bit of nourishment before you begin your tasks.”

With that bit of permission, you start to eat. The food tastes better than you ever could have expected, and you wolf it down in five minutes flat.

“That’s better. Good girls always clean their plates.”

“Will I get to meet you sometime? I don’t want to be presumptuous, but it would be an immense privilege.”

“Perhaps,” Gregorian says, “in due time.”

And that’s good enough for you.

#

The work is ridiculously easy. At eleven you sign Gregorian’s name to various documents and bits of memorabilia. At one you pose for pictures in her stead. You wonder why she doesn’t just send out a projection, but remember what Nicholas said. The human touch, that’s what she wants. Any fool can use technology to simulate his or her presence, but she

wants an assistant. A human assistant. And if doing Gregorian's PR work is going to get Melanie's kid out of the freezer, then that's what she's going to do.

At three she meets a vice president of the company for tea. Remembering Gregorian's words, she eats and drinks every bit of food on her plate. Reynolds smiles and pats her on the shoulder.

"You appear to be working out quite nicely."

At seven, right before dinner, you send one month's advance pay to the nursery. One payment down, eleven to go. When she goes back downstairs, Gregorian's projection is there, sitting between Reynolds and Nicholas. She gestures for Melanie to sit at the head of the table, and you do.

"This is such an honor. I can't possibly—"

"I insist on it. Reynolds, bring in her plates." The cyborg lopes away.

Melanie studies Amanda Gregorian and her son. The projection is younger than Nick is; in fact, she's just about Melanie's age. And, now that she can see her clearly without the edges of the screen and the haze of first-day jitters blocking her view, you see that she is quite beautiful. This projection is a first-rate job.

When you have the resources of the largest corporation in the world at your fingertips, every day is a good hair day.

As Melanie digs into the real foie gras, Gregorian tents her fingers and leans forward, that same broad, pleasant smile on her lips. "Melanie, do you know what we do here at Gregorian Enterprises?"

"You build spaceships," she says, after washing her mouthful of food down with a glass of Reisling. "And components for magna-rail lines. And hydrogen fuel cells. Everyone knows what your company does."

"That's right. I'm the richest woman in the world, the richest person, actually, and I did it all on my own."

In truth, Amanda Gregorian was the recipient of a vast family fortune which she just happened to be able to control and expand with innate business acumen. But Melanie's not about to point that out.

"I'd give it all up, though, for one day of good health. Treasure your health, Melanie. And your youth. They're both gone far too soon." Amanda's face still holds the smile, but there is sadness in the voice carried from a microphone at the mouth or in the mind of a sick woman a few yards or a few hundred miles away.

You think of your husband, mashed flat by a drunk driver five years ago, the guts and blood fanning out like a Rorschach blot, while you could only look on, clutching your pregnant belly. “I will, Ms. Gregorian.”

“We’re on a first-name basis here, Melanie.” That smile again.

“Sorry, Amanda.” You finish the rest of your food, and it is delicious. Reynolds clears the dishes away from you and Gregorian’s son. The cyborg and the richest woman in the world have no food, of course.

“Let’s go into the game room.”

You go to her side. “Yes, let’s. Aren’t you coming, Nick?”

“I don’t think so.” His face is downcast, and his depression combined with his chubbiness makes him pathetic.

“Don’t you mind my son. He’s antisocial, always has been. Can’t be helped. Believe me,” he says, chuckling, “we’ve tried.”

Melanie gives Nick a hopeful smile and follows Gregorian to the game room. Behind her, Reynolds is down on all fours, polishing the Italian tile.

And Melanie wonders why Nick doesn’t look her in the eyes.

And Melanie wonders how she knew the meat before her was foie gras.

#

You have a desk with a bronze nameplate bolted to it. You have a fountain pen. You have that day’s itinerary up on the screen. The first order of the day is a publicity stunt, a personal appearance at the lithium-xenon battery factory, one of Ms. Gregorian’s—scratch that, Amanda’s—holdings.

Melanie shutters herself in the closet and pages through the racks of smart pressed suits. Selecting a conservative peach number, she finishes it off with a kinky pair of backless sandals. It amazes you, how there is no wrong answer in your new wardrobe.

You pull on the sleek, form-fitting pants and reach for the sandals. A loud rip.

Melanie has split her pants.

Reynolds, watching from his hand screen, scuttles in. “Miss Melanie, I am so sorry. Let’s find something else for you to wear.”

The breeze tickles your butt through your underwear. “I guess I’ve gained some weight. Too much rich food.” Rich person food.

“I don't think that's true.”

And Melanie, studying her body in the mirror, has to concur. You're not growing outward, you're growing different. Your skinny ass and flat chest are plumping. You wonder, offhand, if someone can notice if they're growing taller. If it's gradual enough, probably not.

“Reynolds, can I have a tape measure?”

“For your measurements? I'll take care of that.” He begins to move his hands about Melanie's body, spanning her, scanning her.

“No, for me. So I can take them. Whenever I want.” Reynolds' face blanked. “Oh, forget it.”

Within the hour a new suit has been cut for you, and when you return in the evening, your wardrobe has been replaced. You decide to feel grateful.

#

You're walking down the hall when you come across a locked room that will not open with the access chip in your bicep. You call for Reynolds.

“I want to get in there.”

“You have a meeting with the owner of—”

“My access chip opens every door in this estate except this one. Why can't I go in there?” And all of a sudden Melanie realizes that this is Amanda Gregorian's room.

“Come on,” Reynolds says. “You don't want to be late.”

You make a mental note to never come this way again.

#

Amanda talks with you every night as you get ready for bed. She is always kind, always interested in everything you have to say.

“I don't feel like myself,” Melanie says. She runs her hands over her body. “My muscles feel hard. And I'm always exhausted.”

“You're just becoming more toned from all the exercise you've been getting, running around my meetings for me like a good girl.”

“I think I'm getting sick.” You run your hand over your face and it's like touching a mask. “And my eyes. I think I'm getting cataracts.” Even as you say it you know you sound

like a hypochondriac. Your blue eyes might have traces of gray in them, but your vision is sharp as it ever was—sharper, maybe.

“Hush, now. It’s going to be all right.”

Melanie laughs, high and staccato-like. “Of course you’re right. I’m just a little homesick, I guess.”

“For the desty camps? You don’t want to go back there.”

“For my son.”

Broad smile. “Then maybe you should visit him. I’ll set it up for tomorrow. In the meantime, sleep tight, Melanie.”

When you wake up all the mirrors in the estate have been blacked out.

#

The Little Darlings Cryogenic Residential Center for Youth—the freezer—is located out in the country, in an old sanitarium. You have never been there. When the black vans came for Tommy, when they spirited him away in the middle of the night, you were told not to visit. “It hurts them,” the sneering social worker had said as she thrust the paperwork into Melanie’s hands. But Amanda’s name is a skeleton key.

With Reynolds in tow, you navigate the cavernous center. White ice chests are jammed into rooms. The doors can’t close. A worker sits cross-legged on one, dealing solitaire. Finally, you locate Tommy’s chest, and key in the string of numbers that will clear out the ice.

Tommy is hunched, his arms and legs drawn up like a dead fly. A long dead fly. You wonder how the money you turn in every month can possibly revive him. It does not seem possible to revive him.

Reynolds waits on a chest, inert, waiting for you.

There isn’t really much for you to do. Melanie gives Tommy a kiss through the ice chest, turns to the cyborg, and motions to leave.

In your mind, he’s dead already. Less alive than Amanda, less human than Reynolds. As you think this, something in you breaks and lifts off. You feel good.

#

At dinner the following day Nicholas is more agitated than usual. You eat your plate of roast duck and try not to think about it.

When Reynolds steps out to get more coffee creamer, Nick leans in and grabs you by your lapels. “Get out. Go. Leave. Run.”

“What?” Melanie says, pulling away.

“Don’t you see what she’s doing to you? Haven’t you taken a good look at yourself lately?”

“Nicky,” Gregorian’s projection warns.

Melanie picks up a spoon to see her reflection, but all the silverware has been scuffed to a matte finish.

“Hurry,” Nick says, tugging at your hand. One of your fingernails breaks off and lands on your plate, a keratin question mark. “Before Reynolds gets back—”

But it’s not Reynolds that stops this, not this time. Two uniformed guards, employees of Gregorian Enterprises, come storming out of the other entranceway. Holding his upper arms in their augmented fists, their foreheads flash green for all clear.

“That son of mine,” she says. “Always so difficult. Never could fix him.”

“Antisocial,” Melanie says.

“Intractable.”

“God knows I’ve tried,” you say.

#

Another week passes, a week of contract signing and joyrides on the company rocket and an office party that rages on all night long, as you oversee it from your manager’s office. Nicholas is absent from the estate for the entire week. When he comes back he no longer wears glasses and there’s two dime-sized scorch marks on his temples. He lolls in an armchair under a thin green blanket as Reynolds spoons his dinner into his mouth.

“Don’t pay attention to him,” Amanda says. “He’s fine.”

“What did you do to him?”

“I have some things to go over with you about the meeting tomorrow.” The projection snaps its fingers and an aide rushes over with a briefcase. “This is what I pay you for, after all.”

Melanie concentrates on her work, but she keeps turning away to look at Nicholas Gregorian. The hot cereal mush slides down his chin and drips on his satin pajamas.

“He’ll get better.”

“I don’t think I can work for you anymore, Amanda.”

For the first time, Amanda’s friendliness breaks. Her holographic mouth pops open. Melanie almost thinks that she’s going to summon the aide to grab at Melanie’s shoulders in supplication, but she doesn’t. “You can’t leave, Melanie. I need you. I’m a very ill woman—”

“I don’t know that for sure. I’ve never even seen you.”

“Please, Melanie. Stay. I don’t exist without you.”

And she’s right, you know she is. You are the human face of Gregorian Enterprises. You bring life to the company, vitality. When you’re around, the stockholders can forget that their real boss is a pickled old woman rotting away in a piece of machinery, her mind still intact but her body shot. If she abandons this job, Melanie will be forever consigning her boss to a lifetime of solitary confinement, surrounded by no one but Reynolds the cyborg and her legion of autonurses. Cut off, even worse than Tommy.

It’s been awhile since you’ve thought about Tommy.

“I was only playing with you,” Melanie says. “Of course I’m here to stay.”

“That’s a relief,” she says, and it’s written on her face. “You’re a vital part of Gregorian Enterprises, Melanie. The company wouldn’t survive without you, and neither would I.”

“I can’t leave,” you say. “My son.” But that’s not what’s keeping you here.

#

Melanie’s dreams that night are of a summer spent at her family’s summer home on the Yucatan. As her father watches from an enclosed germ-free balcony, she and her cousins fish for trout off the sides of the family schooner. You are all dressed in puffy astronaut suits. Yours is pink.

Her father calls to them, and Melanie turns to wave. The sun is setting over the Mexican horizon, illuminating the sky with brilliant rays of orange and red.

You awake, finding Reynolds in the room with you, patting your arm.

Nick has died.

You grieve silently, knowing how Amanda felt about her own flesh and blood. Knowing that Nick wasn’t exactly innocent, either.

Intractable.

#

“It’s been a year,” Amanda says. “How do you like it?”

You can’t respond at first. Do you like it here? The question seems nonsensical. There is nothing outside of here, no life before. Melanie’s life—your life—up to the moment you set foot in the mansion, was complete fiction. “I guess.”

“By the way, I have a gift for you.” Reynolds shambles into the room with a note in his hand. It’s a receipt from the nursery. Tommy has been freed. The receipt is signed by you, in care of Gregorian Enterprises. Melanie folds the note and tucks it in her pocket.

The best gifts are always the ones you give yourself.

“Do you want to see him? Do you want him to come live with us here? We can do that.”

“No,” you say, thinking of how much work you already have to do. A child would only complicate things.

“Then what should we do with him?”

“Get a nanny. Set up a house for him. But not here.”

Amanda seems momentarily shocked, then a big smile, really a leer, so big it almost breaks free of the screen. “Of course. You don’t want him reminding you of your old life.”

“He’s not my son. My son is dead.”

“I think,” Amanda says, “we should talk about extending your contract.”

#

The access chip in Melanie’s bicep gets her into more places now. Specifically, one place.

In the part of the mansion where you promised yourself you’d never go lives a giant beige egg with a window on the side. An autonurse with three arms on each side of her body looks up from the corner.

“Ma’am,” she says, cowering.

Melanie steps up to the egg. Suspended inside is the body of the richest woman in the world, tubes running through her mouth and anus, propped up by her hands like a dilapidated Christ. But you don’t look at your employer.

The window is reflective.

Melanie studies her reflection: her jet-black hair, her gunmetal-gray eyes, her wide red mouth. It was in the food, she thinks. She put—I put—the transforming agent in the food. She turns to the autonurse and gives a sad smile.

“Power down.”

The nurse nods and a machine takes its last breath. The body in the egg slumps and dies. Overhead, a light flickers.

You are Amanda Gregorian.

“Reynolds, dispose of this,” Amanda says, indicating the egg. “It’s not needed.”

Your cyborg butler nods and turns, heavy feet clomping, to dismantle the egg. Your hands tremble as you fumble inside your smart polyester business suit, feeling your skin, so soft and downy, like a newborn kitten.

Amanda smiles. She loves a beginning.



*“Cases involving loved ones were not, under any circumstances, to be taken on by the intimate party. Too bad Morrison had always insisted on being the exception to every rule.”*

Stacy Sinclair

## Exit Wounds

Stacy Sinclair is a freelance copywriter living in Waterloo, Ontario with her husband, newborn son, and belligerent welsh corgi. Her work has appeared in Fantasy Magazine, at Everydayfiction.com and is forthcoming in Kaleidotrope.

I'd asked my husband one rainy Sunday afternoon what he would do if someone showed up at the door, telling him he was going to die. I was hoping for some deep, emotional response, but he did me one better, saying, "I don't know, but it would make a good story." Turns out he was right.

Thompson, John approached the door, locking his habitual frown into place. The first appointment of the day was always a little awkward. It was like wading into cold water; the initial steps were the hardest. Once you were wet, wellx

“Chang, Michael”, he called through the speaker, “I’m from Dr. Rook’s office. I’m here with news.”

Behind the door, there was a delayed shuffle of slippers on slate. The door slid open with a soft whoosh, bringing forth a wall of stale air. Chang, 54 years old, was leaning into an armoire, sucking in oxygen from the dispenser tab under his nose. Huge, desperate gulps.

He looked Thompson up and down, taking in the telltale lab coat. “Please. I’m getting better.”

Denial. As common as the cold.

“Chang, Michael. You have pneumonia complicated by a weakened immune system. Based on your most recent labs, it has been deemed untreatable. I am therefore required to deliver your declaration of death. The date of the event will be the 15th of October, 2147.”

“Please. Don’t you—”

“This declaration will be followed by confirmation on the 15th of October. As part your grief package, sanctioned counseling will be offered to any interested family members within two weeks of death.”

Chang just shook his head, crossing trembling arms across his chest. “You’re not even listening.”

Je suis désolé. Duibuq. Lo siento.

Thompson swallowed hard. “I am sorry.”

#

“Well, it’s definitely an ulcer. About as big as the hole in the atmo over Mexico.” Dr. Rook looked at the results of Thompson’s scan on his tiny handheld. “I’ll zap it, but take care of yourself. The last thing this place needs is another Reaper sent into the recovery program.”

Over ten thousand patients had trudged through the doctor’s office that year alone. The pastel room felt worked over and Thompson badly wanted out.

“Message received, Doc.”

Dr. Rook’s pat on Thompson’s shoulder was way too rigid. He needed to learn proper technique.

After the hole in his belly had been evaporated, Thompson headed down to the white-halled admin levels to pick up his afternoon diagnosis package. Stepping off the elevator, he ran into an ill-looking Harland.

If Thompson delivered bad news, Harland, James delivered people. As Doctor Rook’s angel, he gave patients the good news of answered prayers and miraculous cures; a job that demanded his refusal to accept the world as anything but a beautiful, shiny diamond. The man’s current distress sat awkwardly in flushed cheeks.

“We need to talk,” Harland said. His hand held a bleach-white folder, a black ribbon of code curled around the outside.

“Why do you have my package?”

Harland took a shallow breath. “Just look.”

Thompson took the folder and opened it.

“Jesus.” His vision swam out of focus. He leaned up against the cold concrete wall, hands sliding down till they found his knees.

She was there.

Morrison, Mary was going to die of a brain aneurysm before the end of the month. For Thompson, she had once been so much more than number three on a list of outgoing

bodies.

She had once been his.

“Thompson?” Harland was getting sweaty; panic was not his forte. “You’re way too close. I mean, we both are.”

Cases involving loved ones were not, under any circumstances, to be taken on by the intimate party. Too bad Morrison had always insisted on being the exception to every rule.

Thompson looked Harland in the eye, seeing the soft gleam of an unaccustomed doubt. He clasped his friend on the shoulder. Strong and tight.

“I’m doing it.”

#

They’d first met in her parents’ house under the cover of prognosticated grief. Her brother wouldn’t last the night. Hell hath no fury like a non-responsive respiratory virus, and yet, while the young man drowned in his own fluids, lungs percolating, all Thompson could do was stare at the woman curled up cross-legged on the edge of the bed.

Tonight all his official duty required was the signature of next of kin on the blue form: confirmation of death.

He would be courteous but passive. The separation between death and its recorder must be concrete, and emotional involvement eroded that divide. This was mourning by the book.

And yet.

She looked over at him, as if something behind her sad eyes understood. Her hair was tangled, out-of-control. She had creases in her skin, curves in her body, freckles. Such character was usually lost in the attainment of perfection, in trimmed cuticles, silky hair, and gleaming eyes. The monotonous majority had long ago confiscated beauty from the eye of the beholder. She looked the way a woman should, but never did anymore.

The mother tapped Thompson on his shoulder, nudging him out of the sister’s gaze. Sallow cheeks, steely resolve. She was ready.

The boy took his last gasping breath at 03:07 hours.

The mother signed the form while distant relatives and old acquaintances filed out. Thompson lingered.

He found her in the washroom. She was on the floor, her brown eyes red. She looked up, smiling.

Thompson knew all about the sexual side effects of grief. The release was instinctual, and it was in his job description to resist.

But she reached up to him. Her hand against his chest was so warm.

Whatever possessed him, it didn't hesitate. He bent down and they met formally for the first time. It was clumsy and short, hands grabbing for something to hold onto, mouths closing on muted invitation.

Afterwards, entangled in the corner, they laughed openly at their awkwardness. She pulled him to her, hair tickling his ear.

"I'm Mary," she whispered, "And you just saved my life."

#

Getting off the elevator on the eighteenth floor, he felt like he was standing in the middle of a residential bowling lane. Down endless, narrow halls, he still knew the way.

Morrison had lived in this Retrorent since he'd met her. For a time, so had he. Every sketchy room had twelve-foot plaster ceilings that had long ago yellowed. Moving out had been one of the few perks of their breakup.

The brass doorknob was smeared with charcoal. It took her a moment to respond to his knock. She was swearing under her breath, fussing with antiquated locks. The door finally swung open and her eyes crinkled as she smiled up at him.

"I had forgotten how good you look in that coat. It broadens your shoulders."

He nodded curtly.

"So, what is it, Johnny, you after your Godzilla T-shirt? I got paint on it. A giant yellow spot over his face. It looks like he's puking out the sun."

"Morrison, I'm not..."

"Why are you here? Feeling especially masochistic today?"

"Morrison." He dropped his chin to his shirt. Her eyes followed, for the first time seeing the paper, damp and crinkled where his hand clung tight.

Thompson knew how to read people, knew that look, the moment of clarity that came before he even spoke, as if something clicked and they saw all the universal possibilities align for a triple cherry jackpot.

She reached for the door, her blind hand clawing air, once, twice— before Thompson grabbed it and led it to the cold metal, his own firm grip sliding on top.

“It’s alright, I’ve got you.”

Her weight sagged forward. Ten seconds of overwhelming panic. That was supposed to be the worst of it. He counted silently, as she stared right through him.

#

“Will it be messy? They just put in new carpets.”

Morrison’s heaving sobs had settled into quiet, restrained huffs. Coffee always helped her put things in perspective. Thompson went to the kitchen to dispense her third cup, and as he walked he couldn’t help but stare.

The mural climbed up the walls. Baroque savagery crept between the plaster arches and alcoves. Fragmented snapshots of railroad discoveries and back alley indiscretions, splattered red, black and blue all over.

Morrison had run away from home at fifteen, choosing to walk the world in a different, harder way. She never really talked about her experiences during those years away, but looking up at the lacerated portraits, Thompson knew that the teen runaway had eventually found her voice.

He returned to the living room to find Morrison no longer hunched half-fetal but sitting upright. She accepted the steaming cup with a smile.

“So, what’s on the paper?” She wiped her palm hard across her cheek. “The hard-copy prediction of my imminent demise?”

He flipped it over so she could see the lab report. “The aneurysm is hugging your brain stem. There’s no procedure, publicly known or otherwise, that would remove it safely.”

“Except decapitation,” Morrison chirped.

“Even extremely experimental surgery,” he continued, “would give you a 0.26% chance of survival. Those odds just don’t make you a candidate for a Hail Mary appeal.”

“Right, that would bring wonderful Harland to my door, and we wouldn’t want that, would we?” She looked past him. Took a steady sip of her coffee.

“Look,” he said, “If you’re not telling me how you feel, directly—”

Her cup clanged down on the table.

“Oh? You want to sit around and talk about our feelings? How quaint. Tell me, John, what does it feel like to tell someone who cheated on you that they’re dying?”

He felt a ping in his ear. A well-timed intrusion.

“Excuse me.” He straightened his jacket as he walked back out the hallway to take the call.

“This is Thompson.”

“Are you still there?” The antiquated concrete walls roughed-up the signal, but behind the static, Harland’s voice was stern.

“Yeah, we were just—”

“Just talking?”

“I’ve been doing this for fifteen years, I know how to—”

“Yours isn’t a professional concern. I think it would be best if I came over to—”

“No,” Thompson snapped. He took a deep breath to cover. “I’ll leave now. Should I tell Morrison you say hello?” Silence lingered in static. “Harland?”

“Tell herx I’m sorry.”

“Right. That says it all, doesn’t it?” Thompson whispered.

When he went back in, she was over the sink, squeezing worms of paint into porcelain.

“I have to go. I have another Declaration. It’s all the way up in the North Quadrant.”

She didn’t look up. “So what’s next?”

“September 30th. That’s the day. I’ll be here.”

She nodded, looking resigned. “Two weeks isn’t long. That’s about as much as I can take, I’m guessing.”

“You’ll do fine. Your family’s presence is encouraged, of course.”

She shook her head and shrugged.

As they walked to the door their shoulders brushed, nudging encouragement. She stopped and faced him.

“Why are you doing this? We already know how it’s going to end.”

He looked her over, breathed her in. “Remember when we went to Coney Island the week before they obliterated the Cyclone? Why did you force us to go on it eighteen times, even though you knew every single loop it was going to take?”

She tipped her head back, remembering. “Mmmm. I liked the sinking feeling in my stomach. I didn’t want to forget.”

It happened before he realized his intention to act. His fingers moved slowly down the edge of her cheek, lingering as they curved around her chin. “Exactly.”

He turned lightheaded for the door, and didn’t look back.

#

Thompson stared out of his 145th floor window at the slow, synthetic illumination of the metropolis. He caught a glimpse of movement from the next building over, less than twenty feet away. A young couple sat on their bed, reading. They curled into each other, oblivious of the outside world.

Morrison would be at home right now. Madly channeling her emotions through watercolor. The paint would be running down her fingers, drops slipping onto her thighs.

Christ.

His kitchen display flickered blue as security piped through the speaker, jarring him upright. “Sir, you have a visitor.”

He answered without thinking. “Send them up.”

His back was to the door when the vibration alert sounded. His palms were soaked, and he had to wipe them on his leg before entering the unlock code.

She rushed at him, throwing her fists at his chest, smudging his undershirt with paint as she pushed him back against the couch. Before he could grab her, she pulled back, revealing flushed cheeks and wild eyes.

“Goddamn you, John,” she yelled. “Goddamn you for doing this to me.” She was grabbing at her own chest now, like she was trying to pull something out. He inched toward her, arms up in defense, but she stepped back further.

“Okay, just calm down.” His heart pounded furiously.

“Fuck you, don’t tell me how to deal with this.” She covered her face and moved to the wall. “You come back into my life just to tell me I’m going to die?”

He stepped closer, unbidden and unflinching. “I thought it would make it easier.”

She pulled her hands away from shining cheeks. “Because you have experience? Because of your three thousand customers served? You’re incapable of providing any real emotional support, John. Why do you think I slept with Harland in the first place?”

This twisted his insides, sent his anger boiling over. Suddenly he was yelling.

“That’s right—why you did what you did. I didn’t do a Goddamn thing!”

She walked up to him then, mouth curling at the edge. The sectional was behind him; he had nowhere to go as he felt the bones in her hips push against his. His legs turned soft. She swung her arms around his neck, and pulled his ear down to her lips. In a voice trembling with consequence, she whispered, “Exactly.”

She was out the door before Thompson had the courage to breathe.

#

“I fucking suck at this.”

Harland was trying to keep a straight face, but the lines of a carved smile were pressing inward.

“You’re a happy bastard, I’ll give you that.” Thompson stared down at his beer. Harland broke out into a snorting laugh, spilling white ale on the table.

The night inside Sententia, a local watering hole offering respite to those in the diagnosis business, had grown long and limber. Mozart’s Requiem drizzled over the white noise of overworked collars mingling in the dark.

“And you, you are pathetic coward.” Harland laughed again, but Thompson hadn’t had enough to drink yet to find him funny. “This is why I was worried, you know,” Harland said, refilling his glass. “She gets into your head.”

“And your pants,” Thompson added, taking a long draw from his stein.

It had been over three years, but to Thompson, the memory was still raw: He had been living with Morrison six months. He’d come home early from work one day to find her naked back arched over Harland’s. She paused in her ministrations to look at Thompson blankly before wiping her brow and soldiering on. He stood watching for a moment, before turning without a word.

He had intended, quite rationally, to kill Harland. But that night, his friend had come over to his motel with a bottle of 2021 Glenlivet, bawling his eyes out. His job had slowly made him ill equipped to process any complex sentiment beyond relief and happiness.

It hadn’t really been his fault anyway.

Two days after the incident, over slowly steeping violet tea, Morrison had explained to Thompson her reasoning bluntly and without remorse: She was tired of being talked to like a shadow. Tired of being touched like a distant stranger. He had become detached from her in every sense.

It had been hard to argue with a beautiful, angry woman—and so it was still.

“Forget her, man.” Harland drew circles with his finger in the deflated foam on the table. His eyes were cast downward, maybe with regret, maybe with longing, Thompson couldn’t tell. “After the amount of death you’ve been associated with, you really want to be close to somebody?”

#

The next morning, Thompson sat crumpled on his couch. There was something burning in his gut again, but it was different than the ulcer; it pressed deeper. The couple in the next building was at their kitchen counter, shoulders touching as they drank their coffee.

He was fifteen minutes late for work and traffic wasn’t the least to blame.

Metcalf, Lori, 118 years old, was scheduled to die at 16:15. Having suffered from Alzheimer’s and various other symptoms of senility for years, she had finally drifted into a coma two weeks ago.

All Thompson’s communication had been with the woman’s husband, Jones, Joseph, who loved his wife, but seemed to hate most everyone else.

Joseph had refused hospice palliative care for Lori in favor of a quiet death in the privacy of their eco estate in the outskirts of the West Quadrant. Thompson rode there on autopilot.

Lori went smoothly and gracefully—a wish granted to few. After Joe had signed the required forms and spent a few tearful moments alone with his wife, he invited Thompson downstairs for a drink.

Thompson knew how it went: for those who were at the end of months or years spent attending to the intimacies of mental and physical decay in those they loved, the first reaction was usually relief. The real sadness would hit later. Joe would be ordering groceries or taking a run at the back nine when a smell or a voice would bring it all back.

So, while a crew upstairs bagged and tagged that which once had been everything to him, Joe sat in his favorite leather chair and told Thompson all about his wife’s shapely breasts, her incredible mashed potatoes, and their rip-roaring, drag-out battles over issues small as dishes and big as babies.

Only after their fourth round of whiskey did Thompson remember to look at his watch. Protocol dictated he spend a maximum of one hour after death consoling the family. He'd been with Joe for 90 minutes. Only once he had he ever gone over his allotted time before.

*Mary.*

Joe had just finished telling him about the time Lori had found him drunk on the front stoop, eating her entire birthday cake, when Thompson finally had the courage to ask.

“Joe, I want you to tell me something, if you don't mind. I'd like to have it straight.”

“Ain't any other way to give it, my friend,” Joe slurred. Thompson leaned forward in his lounge, steadying his resolve with elbows on knees.

“I just want to know...was it worth it?”

Joe laughed. “You mean, all the pain, all the arguing, all the bullshit just to see it die?”

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. It's inappropriate-”

“Is it worth it?” Joe repeated, squinting. After a little shake of his head, he leaned forward in his chair to match Thompson's stance. His hands shook as he reached around into his back pocket and pulled out a folded paper—a hard-copy photo—that glistened under the halogen lights.

It slid across the table.

Joe leaned closer, suddenly sober. “You tell me.”

Thompson picked it up and gently opened the well-worn crease.

It had been a sunny day. They were standing in front of the old Ferris wheel at Berkeley Park, their faces flushed with the fullness of youth. He stood behind her, hand wrapped around her hourglass hips, pulling her in. The wind was blowing through her hair, and she was caught in the middle of a hearty laugh.

Thompson flipped it over again and read the digital stamp. It was dated eighty-six years ago. Below the imprinted numbers, in scratchy, feminine handwriting, was another date—just last year—and a message:

*This is why I know I love you.*

Thompson dropped the photo back on the table and put his hands on his lap before Joe could see them shaking.

“I appreciate your honesty.” He cleared his throat and stood, wobbling. Sweat trickled down his back. “If you’ll excuse me, I have another appointment.”

#

Transway 707 West was packed with evening commuters. Thompson was driving on manual, and every tap of the brakes shortened his fuse. When he got to the apartment, breathless with anticipation, he positioned himself to park in the drop-off zone, but there was already a vehicle there. Harland’s standing lights were blinking furiously. There was no one inside. It was possible Morrison been given an appeal, but Thompson suspected this was something more desperate.

Thompson ran through the endless hallway, feet sinking beneath him. He didn’t bother to knock on the door, trusting it would be open.

He saw Harland first. His friend looked disheveled and flushed, blending into the searing image of pulsing veins on the wall behind him. The top buttons of his shirt were undone, his tie hanging limp.

Thompson whirled around to Morrison’s strained intake of air. She was hiding behind her ladder, staring wide-eyed through the rungs.

“Mary.” He moved toward her. Harland fell in behind.

“Thompson, nothing happened, it’s just thatx”

“Mary.” He walked up to Morrison’s shrinking presence and grabbed her by the shoulders. She didn’t pull away.

“I’m sorry, John.” She spoke in a hushed, frantic tone barely audible over the pounding in his head. She eyed Harland. “He just showed up and I neededxI needed you.”

“I’m here.”

His hands quaked as they found the small of her back. He moved fast. For a moment, her lips tensed under his. He held his ground, though, as quietly, openly, she acquiesced. He pulled back before he could enjoy it.

The tears slid silently down her cheeks as she took his face in her hands. Her mouth trembled like her body.

“We st— we still have time.”

He felt the pain, then. He pulled it to him, held it shaking to his chest.

We already know how this is going to end, she had said.



James L. Corner

## Miles Blows His Last

Jason L. Corner lives in Richmond, Virginia, with his wife and daughter, where he teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University. His work has appeared in *Abyss and Apex*, *Nautilus Engine*, and *Electric Spec*, and he is currently at work on a novel. He can be reached at [jasonlcorner@gmail.com](mailto:jasonlcorner@gmail.com).

This story, unusually for me, was written all in one sitting. I had recently been reading Miles Davis's autobiography and had found myself thinking in his voice—a thing that happens with a lot of people when under the spell of particular authors. The story then tumbled out, with only the sketchiest plot in mind. If you like, you can read it as a companion piece to my “Cosmic Music.”

On September 12, 1991, Miles Davis opened up the closet in his Santa Monica home and found Louis Armstrong, who had been dead for some years, glowering and pointing an accusing finger at him.

He closed the closet door.

“Shit,” he said to himself. He looked around. Everything else seemed normal. He had posters on the wall. The ashtrays were all there. The windows were open and the sun was coming in.

He turned around and opened up the closet door again. There was Louis Armstrong, looking furious.

“Satchmo,” Miles said. “What you want?”

It wasn't that Miles was scared of ghosts, or thought he had to be crazy to be seeing one. He had always believed in spirits. Fact was, Gil Evans, a cat he had done some records with in the late fifties and who had died about three years ago, had been to him lately. Not like this; not standing there in the closet with a white tux and a trumpet in his hands looking like he'd just swallowed some fishbait. No, Gil had been more like this voice, this presence that made Miles feel warm and cold all at the same time, made him think thoughts that were as big as the wind, and harder to hold, too. So the ghost bit was not the worst thing that had ever happened to Miles Davis.

But why was it the ghost of Louis Armstrong?

Armstrong glowered, and raised his finger again.

*“On September 12, 1991, Miles Davis opened up the closet in his Santa Monica home and found Louis Armstrong, who had been dead for some years, glowering and pointing an accusing finger at him.”*

“Miles Dewey Davis *the third*,” he said in his famous baritone growl. “You’ve killed jazz, and there’s gonna be justice on your head. Justice!”

This got Miles feeling a little rankled.

“Killed jazz? What you talking about, Satchmo?” He waved his hand along the wall. “You see that? The gold records? The Downbeat poll awards? The fucking Grammys? Looks like I’m killing jazz so bad, it’s making a million dollars just being dead!”

“You watch your mouth!” Armstrong said, striding out of the closet so fast Miles took a jump back. He walked over to the wall and pointed at one gold record behind glass. “Like this, here! Your so-called album *Bitches Brew*! Nigger, you call your momma up and talk about that record by name?”

Miles stepped between Armstrong and the record on the wall, puffing out his chest to look impressive, which is tricky when you are sixty-five years old and have always been a short man. However, he used to box a little, and in any event, Armstrong had crossed a line, ghost or not.

“Don’t you talk about my momma, fool. I don’t let anybody talk about my momma. You invented jazz trumpet, more or less, so you get a freebie. Then I kick your ass.”

Armstrong laughed mirthlessly, the way you would probably expect a ghost to laugh.

“You killed jazz, Dewey, and there’s gonna be justice on your head. This isn’t jazz. This is a bunch of white-boy rock-and-roll noise-making nonsense that’s gone to your head so hard it’s straightened your hair out. I’m gonna come back in a week and visit up a reckon-ing on you. One week!” Armstrong returned to the closet and suddenly smiled, that huge, slightly lopsided smile that the whole world had smiled along with so many times down through the years. And then he shut the door.

Miles didn’t need to open the door back up. He knew that it would be empty.

“Shit,” he said. “I need a drink.”

#

Miles stretched out on his sofa with a scotch-and-soda, twist of lime, two small ice cubes, in his favorite glass. He had two of those and thought.

Then he started calling people.

Wayne Shorter was skeptical. So was Herbie Hancock. So were Tony Williams, Ron Carter, Bill Evans the pianist, Chick Corea, Dave Holland, Jack DeJohnette, Bill Evans the tenor player, and Elvin Jones. Most of them told him he was flat-out crazy.

Finally, Miles called Dizzy Gillespie. It wasn't as if they had ever been particularly close, but he was running out of phone numbers, and Dizzy seemed like a link to the past that Satchmo represented.

"I don't believe you, Miles," Dizzy said. "I think you're high. It's not as if I've never smoked a reefer or two, but all this drugging really demeans the profession and our common instrument."

"Dizzy, come on. Do you really think that I have nothing better to do all day than get high and call you up to play head games with you?"

"But *arguendo* I would probably say that Satchmo had a point. I haven't understood anything you've done since 1961. I *did* like *Kind of Blue* all right, but everybody makes too big a deal out of it. Doesn't it make you a little sleepy?"

Miles became exasperated and hung up. He drank another scotch-and-soda. He was going to require some special help. Chagrined as he was about it, there was no real choice: he was going to have to call Monica.

#

Miles had met Monica in the 1970s. When exactly was hard to say. Miles had spent much of that period in the pleasantly dazed world of the constantly stoned, alternating between tremendous short bursts of creative energy and long lazy days and weeks of just grooving along, talking to people and forgetting them, snapping his fingers idly through entire weekends and retaining nothing. He remembered the albums he recorded during that period quite well, and little else, except for a few very memorable people.

Monica had been memorable. He hadn't *liked* her, exactly, but it seemed necessary to keep contact with her. He had no sexual interest in her, but she told a good joke and was an excellent painter. But when he asked her a question about one of her canvases – one with a combination of roosters crowing, World War I airplanes fighting, and Hawaiian shirts without owners dancing together, she had said:

"The spirits paint these. I'm just a vessel."

"The spirits, huh? And where do you know them from?"

She looked impish: a bad look on middle-aged women. "From *Switzerland*."

Miles knew there were no spirits in Switzerland. But he kept her number around, and met her for a drink once every other year or so. He called her and offered her ten thousand dollars to get her ass to California to do him a favor. It took her a couple days but she showed up at his door, clutching ratty suitcases and with gray hair flowing long over her back and shoulders. She touched Miles's hand softly and floated to the couch in a whirlwind of skirts and scarves.

Miles explained the problem to her. She was not even moderately surprised. Monica got some wine and fresh sage from Miles's kitchen, and lit some candles in a circle on the floor of the room where the closet was. Then she started chanting. It sounded like bad scat singing. White chicks. He got a headache and left the room.

Then all the lights went out.

Miles cursed majestically and felt his way back into the room. The candles were still going, even though wind was whipping through the room. Monica was standing in the circle, her arms stretched out in front of her as if she were a mime feeling an invisible wall.

Something felt wrong to Miles. He stepped inside the circle.

All at once, the closet door flew open.

Louis Armstrong stepped out. Following him came five figures, each about six feet tall, with lumpy green skin and elongated, birdlike masks, striped red and black.

"The Hot Fives," Armstrong said, flashing that famous smile again. "All you did was open the gate a little wider."

#

The demons crowded around the circle, snorting loudly and pawing the ground with their feet. They breathed and hot smoke came out of their noses.

Monica looked as if she was about to faint. "These enchantments are totally beyond my ken," she moaned. "I'm completely at sea."

Miles bit his lip with anger; he didn't even vaguely feature messing around with these weirdos. More than he had in years, he really just wanted to get back to work, but there were demons and ghosts in his pad. "You old fool, Satch. You really think I killed jazz?"

"What I think," Armstrong said, "is you took that bebop stuff, that I always hated, and picked out all the bad things in it and made all of them as much worse as you possibly could. I think you turned your back on the music of New Orleans and turned your head towards San Francisco and all that other crazy shit that destroyed the pure, exuberant expression of the black American man's soul into a nihilistic, masturbatory, self-indulgent non-music. So yeah, nigger, you killed jazz all right."

"Shit," Miles said. "Least I wasn't no damn *ofayo* like you, grinning and stepping for the white man like a damn minstrel-show banjo player. I created the whole concept of jazz artist as creative, bohemian figure, more or less. And when you died in '71, I was still going forward and learning new stuff—you missed my whole Stockhausen period in the eighties—and you had been running on the same track since before I cashed my first check. Nigger, please."

Armstrong grimaced. “Take his ass out,” he said to the demons.

All five of them attacked at once.

What Armstrong did not know was that Miles’s great love, besides jazz, had always been boxing: the sweet science. So as those green things came at him, Miles raised two fists to eye level and struck out like a rattlesnake.

It was jab and cross, it was strike and block, it was the wet, muffled impact of trained muscle on flesh and bone. Miles danced and hopped around, his eyes searching each one out and making chess-move plans, always managing to be one move ahead and putting a fist where a claw used to be and an eye was. His hands began to stain with dark purple streaks of demon blood. But Miles didn’t care; he might be sixty-five years old but he was a mad motherfucker who wasn’t going to let no green things from the Cosmos of Squaresville come into his own house and string him up for killing no jazz.

Punch, punch, punch! The things all staggered as one, like drunken frat brothers, and backed out of the circle. Each one disappeared with an audible pop and a puff of black smoke.

“Teach your boys some Bruce Lee shit next time,” Miles scowled. “That’s the only way you’re getting a drop of blood out of this horn man.”

Armstrong only grinned again. “You ain’t seen nothing, Dewey. You think I was *relying* on those cats? They just the warm-up act.”

Armstrong reached into thin air and pulled out a trumpet, shimmering and golden. He stepped into the circle and raised it to his lips. One note shot through the air—Miles could almost see it whizz out of the horn, reflected in the bell—as clear and pure as a cloudless day in spring.

All at once the room was flooded with light. The circle Monica had drawn vanished, and then so did the floor, and then so did Miles’s whole house. Miles faced Armstrong in a world of pure geometrical abstractions and primary colors, the air silent and somehow yawning with an impression of immense age.

“You try and cut me in the afterlife, now, Miles,” Armstrong said. “Let’s do the heebie-jeebie dance.”

#

“Shit!” Miles yelled. “Is this what it comes down to? *Playin*”? Well, you just pulled the tiger by the tail, motherfucker. I’m better than you. I’ve always been better than you. The only reason you ran down anything happening in music after 1941 was because you knew you couldn’t play it. Shit, you with your same old six or seven chords and your same old tired-ass melodies—I’m gonna cut your ass!”

“Try it,” Armstrong said.

Miles put his own trumpet to his mouth, and blew.

He blew what he knew. He told as much truth as he could with that horn. He used it to talk about the tragic nature of time, how no moment stays and is always rushing into the ever-growing past, and we never get a chance to breathe because evil old death is always coming at you. He used it to talk about one night he was smoking a cigarette outside the Blackhawk, getting ready to play a gig, his own name on the *marquee* for Christ’s sake, and those two white cops beating him until his lower lip cracked and blood came out, and the word nigger spitting out of their lips like toad poison. He used it to talk about the texture of morning sunlight on cherry blossoms in Japan, and the white fingers of breath on top of Japanese mountains. He used it to talk about the indescribability of taste. He used it to talk about Charlie Parker, dead in his hotel room, and he used it to talk about his own junkie demon soul, grasping with clawed hands at his brain until he had thoroughly fucked up more than one marriage. He used it to talk about your woman’s hands on the skin of your chest. He used it to talk about green water and blue water, about white clouds and black clouds. He played all his notes and let each one produce its suitcases, festooned with stickers from different songs, different records, different gigs where he had played them before. Before long he was not there at all: he was just an electric current riding up and down the spine of a snake a hundred miles long, his whole being evaporated into the lines of melody coming out of his trumpet.

He stopped.

“Who killed jazz now, fool?”

Armstrong smiled.

“You just killed it. And dig! I’m going to kill it again now.”

Armstrong raised the trumpet to his own lips, and Miles quaked, because Tom or no Tom, the man had always told the truth when he played his horn.

And Armstrong *blew*. He blew a fast run of notes, all the way up the scale, from lowest C to highest B-flat, where the golden sound hung suspended in the air like a cartoon character just noticing the air beneath his feet, and then—Miles felt his bowels tremble at it—the world turned upside down as the trumpet note plummeted *upward*, beyond the reach of highest soprano voices, bird calls, and the invisible music that dogs and cats hear, each note becoming less strained, more relaxed, more perfectly delivered with each upward reach. Armstrong blew all the way up scales that had not existed before, that were created by his playing them, scales so high that, like the positionless positions and massless masses of quantum mechanics, they created their own musical rules. He blew all the way up and then he blew all the way *down* again, streaking downwards like a falling rocket

that *burned*. The horn was a scythe of light, reaping across the landscape and cutting off the tops of heads. The horn was a battleship from Neptune, spewing forth space invaders of sound. The horn was white-hot to the touch and the size of many icebergs. The horn was life and death.

“I kill jazz, you kill jazz, and we keep on going,” Armstrong rasped. “I gettin’ tired of this. We need to split. You ever heard of William Blake?”

“I have!” Monica said. To Miles’s astonishment, he realized she was still there. “Allen Ginsberg had a vision of him in . . .”

“Don’t you talk to me about that beatnik hanger-on,” Miles muttered.

“Well, that Ginsberg was one fucked-up cat,” Armstrong said. “But he did have a vision. See, Blake was a cat that got around on all sides of the cosmic divide, in life and death. And in this one poem, he says that in Eden, all the sons of heaven fight eternally in a creative war. That’s where we’re going now. You ready?”

“So you take it back about me killing jazz?”

“Shit, Miles Dewey, haven’t you figured it out yet?” Armstrong laughed. “This cutting contest we’re having—this *is* jazz. Everything good gets killed again and again until it’s perfect, see?”

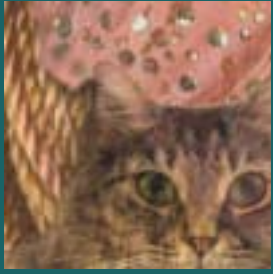
Miles started to answer, but his mouth was a bowl of stars, a splitting-open of light. He thought of his last record, and saw that there was a way to compress it all into a single note, a circular note, and start from there a long chain of supernotes that would go for hours, perhaps weeks. Light continued to surround him and his trumpet entered his chest . . . mountains of boiling steam were rising all around him, and he had no fear.

#

Monica found herself standing in a room in Miles Davis’s house. The closet was open and a moth flew out.

She looked down on the floor. Miles was curled up in fetal position, gripping his trumpet to him. She touched the side of his neck, like a fisherman seeking the gills. He was cold.

Without a word she left and returned to her home. As she walked out the door, she thought she heard a distant sound, small like a toy trumpet. It sounded like it was coming from very, very far away—farther than anywhere in the world could be.



Rachel Swirsky

## String Theory

Rachel Swirsky's poems have appeared in *Sybil's Garage*, *Lone Star Stories*, and *Goblin Fruit*, among many other venues. In 2008, her poem "The Oracle on River Street" came in third place for the Rhysling award. She currently lives in Bakersfield, California, where she's acquired a tabby kitten whose views on cosmology are unknown.

*"If the uni-  
verse is a  
tapestry  
woven  
with sheer  
silk threads  
that unite  
subatomic"*

If the universe is a tapestry woven  
with sheer silk threads that unite subatomic  
quarks with the whistling vastness of the milky way  
if dimensions are wound  
like angora around a spindle:  
height, weight, depth, time  
and a mysterious myriad more  
tangled into a knotted skein  
if a strand of raw russet silk is all  
that ties our provincial intergalactic home  
into the weave of neighboring universes,  
like sequins sewn onto a skirt of gauze  
reflecting the brightness of each other's suns,  
Then is God a weaver leaning over her loom:  
long black hair winding into her work, fingertips

callused from the mundane wounds reality inflicts  
on any tender skin, her shuttle's shadow swift  
as a supernova and darker than a black hole?  
Or is God the tabby perched at her feet  
stretching one inquisitive paw toward  
a gold floss dazzle dangling loose  
to see what  
happens when

his claws

catch

and the universe

unravels...?



Ian Creasey

## How to Build An Open-Source Deity

Ian Creasey was born in 1969 and lives in Yorkshire, England. He began writing when rock & roll stardom failed to return his calls. His poetry has been published in *Astro-poetica*, and his fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Weird Tales* and elsewhere. His spare time interests include hiking, gardening, and environmental conservation work—anything to get him outdoors and away from the computer screen.

“I wrote this poem in reaction to widespread hype about the wonders of the open-source movement. That’s all I have to say about it. If anyone wants a better blurb, then I’m sure the open-source devotees will be able to do it themselves.”

*“And heaven  
needs modern  
amenities, after  
all, as harps and  
clouds might  
grow stale”*

The WikiGod sees all, knows all  
Knows how He will be built  
edit by edit  
Pages of theology, commandments and stern love  
An ever-shifting doctrine  
Flexible, moral, up-to-date  
Containing all that the congregation requires  
since their Deity is created for the people, by the people

And heaven needs modern amenities, after all  
As harps and clouds might grow stale  
after the first three million years  
(just the first tick of eternity)  
So the righteous, the just —  
Those confident of their place —  
Populate heaven with the requisite rewards:  
Calm philosophies, patient wisdom

And all the usual pleasures  
(optional flesh for the nostalgic souls to wear)  
An afterlife like a long hazy summer  
always another party  
yet the same old drinks  
the same few flavours of bliss  
— edit this

Far below, another realm seethes and swells:  
There are so many crimes, errors, laxities  
Wilful disobediences  
That eager imaginations must ceaselessly toil  
Hand-crafting each cauldron  
of pain, slow sorrow, subtle karma  
So every circumstance of sin  
Has its own peculiar retribution  
The WikiGod knows what yours will be....  
Designer demons are on stand-by  
Their duties constantly refined and reverted  
by the eager priests  
Keen to delineate each distinction of sin  
of heresy  
(as edit-wars flame across eternity)  
because  
When you're perfect, there are so many ways to fall



*“The Dead King  
of Midnight is a  
broken watch,  
stuck in the mo-  
ment of his birth-  
ing”*

David Kopaska-Merkel

## The Dead King of Midnight

David Kopaska-Merkel lives in an urban farmhouse with a yellow “tin” roof. He has published about a thousand poems, stories, reviews, etc. over the past quarter century. He won the Rhysling award of the Science Fiction Poetry Association for best long poem in 2006 (collaboration with Kendall Evans). Kopaska-Merkel has edited Dreams & Nightmares magazine since 1986

<http://dreamsandnightmares.interstellardustmites.com/>

Flash fiction [www.dailycabal.com](http://www.dailycabal.com).

Blogs <http://dreamnightmare.livejournal.com>,

<http://dreamsandnightmaresmagazine.blogspot.com/>.

The Dead King of Midnight is a broken watch,  
Stuck in the moment of his birthing,  
Blind-staring into his mother’s milky Face  
Riding the cloud-wrack miles above...  
Or does she bend to kiss his crystalline cheek?

The Dead Queen of Morning is a  
Log floating on a vast and turbid river,  
Carrying her precious freight of mole-rats,  
Caraway squirrels, and spotted tree lice,  
Hopeless passengers sailing toward a viscid sea.

Are there islands? Will she visit them?  
Only time will tell, and he’s not ticking.

The burning face of her father glares  
At her orphan forest children.  
He disapproves—or is this  
The incandescent kiss of love?

The Dead Child of Evening is  
Afloat on a late-summer breeze,  
Riding widdershins into America's heart.  
On the wings of song the child cries:  
Hold me!  
But all the bright apples of our cheeks  
Are parked on a crumbling bridge over rising water,  
Like the milestones of panic.

The chaotic face of her father flies north into  
History, scouring away his own memories  
In a flood of hail and rain.  
Or is that the gaze of the future,  
Stirring a hopeful finger in the stew,  
while they each hurry  
Westward after the setting sun?



*“My stomach  
fractals into my  
throat with every  
soccer hyper-  
cube’s corkscrew  
spiral”*

Danny Adams

## Erasing the Universe’s Chalkboard

Danny Adams is the co-author, with Philip Jose Farmer, of the short novel *The City Beyond Play*, available from PS Publishing. Along with Ideomancer, some of his poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Appalachian Heritage*, *Coyote Wild*, *Illumen*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Not One Of Us*, *Star\*Line*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Weird Tales*.

My watching the Universe’s Chalkboard being rewritten started with a single image: Reimann Waves. Or more accurately, for an instant when I saw those words and before the proper scientific definition took hold, my brain flashed me an image of an elderly college professor waving at me and tipping his hat—the only solid image in a universe rippling with change around me. At the same time I was proctoring a math test for incoming college freshman and trying to imagine how different \*their\* universe was from mine when I was coming up, and how much easier they flow with change than I do. When those two things collided I grabbed a piece of paper from the printer I was sitting next to and a few moments later, “Erasing the Universe’s Chalkboard” was finished.

Old Reimann waves to me, then tips his hat  
as if life’s still flowing in its normal curve,  
but his adjustment to Nature’s new imbalances  
shames me: I admire his calm.

Our universe decreed its old laws moribund.  
Somehow, as always, the children knew first,  
enduring the math teacher’s miscorrections  
while their tiny sideways equations bore the only proper swings  
in God’s new teeter-totter playground—  
adults’ nonsense is our children’s new sport.

My stomach fractals into my throat  
with every soccer hypercube's corkscrew spiral (memory lost)  
cheering our sons and daughters floating  
upside-down / piecemeal interdimensionally  
laughing  
to return the kick.  
I know I can teach them nothing more.

For some, restarting life's mysteries is childhood reborn,  
their multidimensional soccer moves instantly second nature  
but for me, an X transposed here,  
a Y kicked onto its side  
exiles me into a new set.  
I keep placing  
two stones by two stones  
seeing only a zero sum revealed.

## Claire Humphrey



VanderMeer, Ann & Jeff. *Fast Ships, Black Sails*. Night Shade Books: 2008. ISBN 978-1-59780-094-5.

The kind of freedom we imagine pirates to enjoy, particularly in this Disneyfied era, is an immature kind of freedom: the freedom from petty rules. It's a life of feasting and fighting and mess, where wealth can be taken instead of earned, and where anyone we dislike can be made to walk the plank. Its seductions obscure its pitfalls: feasts come with hangovers, fights aren't always won, and if wealth can be taken, it can also be taken from you.

The pirates of *Fast Ships, Black Sails* are, in the main, adult pirates. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer have collected a number of strong stories in which the limits and prices of freedom are explored.

In "The Nymph's Child", a beautifully bittersweet adventure from Carrie Vaughn, pirate first mate Grace pleads her belly to escape hanging. She returns to conventional life ashore, only to see her daughter grow up prey to the same longings that sent Grace to sea. Freedom comes with danger, but safety means stagnation. Grace, as a woman who's bucked her culture, still has trouble allowing other women the same choice. It's an age-old cultural dilemma and Vaughn handles it very well, asking probing questions without giving pat answers.

Elizabeth Bear and Sarah Monette give us a "Boojum", a living ship that hunts freighters. Engineer Black Alice has more than the usual mechanical sympathy for the Lavinia Whateley, and her curiosity and fellow-feeling ultimately lead her down a terrifying rabbit-hole. In this story it's the ship whose freedom is at stake. Allusions and atmosphere make this one of the most rewarding reads in the book.

Naomi Novik's "Araminta, or, the Wreck of the Amphidrake" is another standout: Novik's note-perfect prose style sets up the reader to expect an Austen heroine, lending all the more humour to Araminta's

unladylike arsenal of accomplishments. The story's levity wonderfully underlines Araminta's simple and heartfelt wish "to be a captain herself, of her own life."

Kage Baker, within the ripping-yarn framework of "I Begyn as I Mean to Go On", shows us men on the trail of riches protected by a horrific curse. This story hews most closely to my expectations of a traditional pirate tale, and yet the deceptively simple ending undermines all of the bravado around the pirate life, pointing up instead the dearth of choices available to such men.

"68° 07' 15"N, 31° 36' 44"W" by Conrad Williams gives us men even more doomed, following an obsessed captain on a journey of revenge that takes them to a landscape far past the limits of sense or sanity. The shifting narration makes the story a somewhat confusing read, yet its horror comes through all too clearly. Paul Batteiger's more coherent but less atmospheric "A Cold Day in Hell" also takes place in an icy wasteland, this time an alternate reality where the seas are frozen. Both stories grapple well with the grimness of isolation and the way it leaves people all the more vulnerable to the violence in their own nature. Freedom from other people, freedom from culture, can be a dangerous and challenging state.

Not all of the stories are so memorable. Humorous entries by Steve Aylett, Rhys Hughes and Howard Waldrop might appeal to another reader, but felt jarring to me in this context, eliding all of the blood and complexity that many of the other stories took head-on. Kelly Barnhill's "Elegy to Gabrielle, Patron Saint of Healers, Whores and Righteous Thieves" was too pretty to stand in company with the sturdy ruffians. I think the anthology would have been stronger if the stories had a consistent mandate, in addition to the pirate theme, but the gems still make for a worthwhile read. Perhaps it's an anthology to be savoured every year on September nineteenth.

Erin Hoffman



Norse Code by Greg van Eekhout and *The Patriot Witch* by C. C. Finlay

Early in 2009 two books appeared that I had been anticipating for some time: *Norse Code*, by Greg van Eekhout, and *The Patriot Witch*, by Charles Coleman Finlay (writing as C. C. Finlay). Both authors boast award-winning short fiction, both appear in each other's acknowledgments, and both books hint at dark magic and the walking dead in alternate (present and past, respectively) Americas—I really had no choice but to write a comparative review.

*Norse Code* principally follows the story of Hermod, son of Odin, and Mist, a three-month-old Valkyrie and former MBA student recruited by the busy and ambitious red-headed Radgrid to prepare Odin's army for Ragnarok. Radgrid's renegade project, NorseCODE, isn't fully approved by the Aesir (or the FDA, either, probably), who spend most of their time drinking and fighting in Valhalla. Rather than harvesting warriors the old-fashioned way, NorseCODE employs geneticists to trace Odin's human descendants, who alone are eligible to join the Aesir's army. Sometimes they're hardened military, and sometimes they're wimpy actuaries, like Adrian Hoover. And to qualify for recruitment, they not only have to be Odin's descendants—they have to die in honorable combat.

Mist isn't always crazy about her job, which often involves instigating such combat with the unprepared, and as a misfit valkyrie is a good

if improbable match for Hermod, who failed once in rescuing his brother, Baldr. He was sent into the underworld to thwart the end of the world by retrieving Odin's favored son—and, unlike most of his sibling Aesir, isn't destined to die in any particularly specific way. The book opens and is seasoned by perspectives from the two ravens of Odin, Hugin and Munin:

*On the last true day of spring the nine worlds will ever know, my brother and I fly recon through the land of the gods. From this high up, Asgard shimmers. The shields that roof the timber halls glimmer like golden fish scales. It's all green grass and fluffy white sheep and fresh red blood. A very pretty scene.*

*"One, two, sixteen, seven hundred and eighty-three," my brother intones as we fly over the wall where the heads of giants sit atop stakes, dripping blood. "Four thousand and eight."*

*"What are you doing?"*

*"Counting," he says, angling his wings to swoop down for a closer look.*

*"Counting what?" I ask, following.*

*"Everything. Five million and six."*

*My brother is good with questions of what and when and how much, and he remembers it all. His name is Munin, or Memory, and he annoys me.*

If that doesn't sell you on it, I'm not sure what will. The story flies, elegant and sharp, with juxtapositions that flow like poetry but bring the reader up short when sent to the cerebellum, in good ways:

*Mist managed to hide her surprise. She'd thought this woman was Frigg, but evidently not, unless Aesir goddesses referred to themselves in the third person, like professional athletes.*

Through the elegance of his language, van Eekhout manages to make the old new again, and while most of the major plot points are, by their nature, foretold, the rub is in how we'll get there. The characters are likable when they're supposed to be, unlikable when they're not, and, barring a bit that gets a little muddy before the appearance of the undead, the book is a breath of fresh air, in spite of and certainly because of the presence of said festering gravejockeys. I will go way out on a limb here and say that I enjoyed this more than *American Gods*, its longer and inevitably compared cousin, and that is a hell of a thing.

Finlay's *The Patriot Witch* opens on April 1775 with the story of Proctor Brown, a farmer's son whose aspirations lie in marrying the daughter of a British loyalist and cultivating beef to sell in Massachusetts. Oh, and witchcraft runs in his maternal bloodline, by way of Salem, etc., etc. Before even getting into the book, it's necessary to give credit to Finlay and his coterie of supporters for—as he puts it,—nurturing the right idea at the right time. *The Patriot Witch* is a phenomenal and evocative title (I'm less crazy about the applicability and zing of "Traitor to the Crown", the series name), with a subject that clearly aspires to bring to the dangerous romance of America's Revolutionary War the intrigue of fantasy and magic, synthesizing genre and environment the way His Majesty's Dragon brought new lightning (and, well, dragons) to the Napoleonic era. It's simply a great idea, and I always admire timely inventive strategy in fiction.

The characters are lively, and I'm behind them from paragraph one—the action unfolds gracefully throughout the characters' first encounter with the enemy. Unfortunately, parts of the plot following feel rushed, the pacing uneven, as if the bolts on this idea were sent out before fully tightened. Characters appear, disappear, and reappear in odd rhythms, sometimes for historical accuracy, other times because they're needed or not. Proctor himself is forced into inexplicable action for the sake of almighty Plot, and some of these actions leave me teetering on the edge of disliking him completely, which isn't a good thing for a guy I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to be following through not one but three books. The text itself is prone to infodump as we look in on Proctor's thoughts:

*Proctor revised his first impression of Deborah. She was not as harsh or rough-edged as he originally thought. With the ordeals she had been through ... she showed remarkable steadiness and courage. A lot of her strictness with Alexandra was only because she knew too well the dangers in the world abroad and worried about the girl's safety.*

There's really nothing wrong with this, but because Proctor's observations are dumped on my head—frequently when I've already gathered them on my own from the story's action—I'm thrown out of the story and have to work to get back in. My understanding is that the events of the book are copiously researched, but the character dialogue ventures into modernism that may well be historically correct, but doesn't feel so.

All this said, when the story homes in on action, it homes tight, and particularly once the characters are on track toward the principal villain the book hits a galloping stride that carries it through to its conclusion. The villains, reminiscent of the icy-eyed Colonel Tavington in *The Patriot*, are perhaps too patently one-dimensional in their eeeeeevil, but despite this, the author achieves a genuine simulation of life and events during the Revolution that ventures on the unsettling in very good ways. The British might be cheating with dark sorcery, but the actions of the rebels would be branded "terrorism" were this another continent and another time's war, and that realization, coupled with

the clear passions of the main characters, generates real emotional tension in what is itself a very thought-provoking goal.

Overall, if such dichotomies are necessary, and arguably they are not, *Norse Code* favors style over substance, and *The Patriot Witch* favors substance over style. Van Eekhout's book frequently tossed out sentences that would stop me cold with admiration for his use of language; Finlay's kept me reading to see what his characters would do next. Both had protagonists that more than occasionally annoyed me, and both kept me up at night strategizing how I'd barricade my bedroom against the rise of the undead. One of these is more forgivable than the other, but both books are worth a look, and represent a freshness in speculative fiction that was like sweet mountain rainwater on my zombified brain.