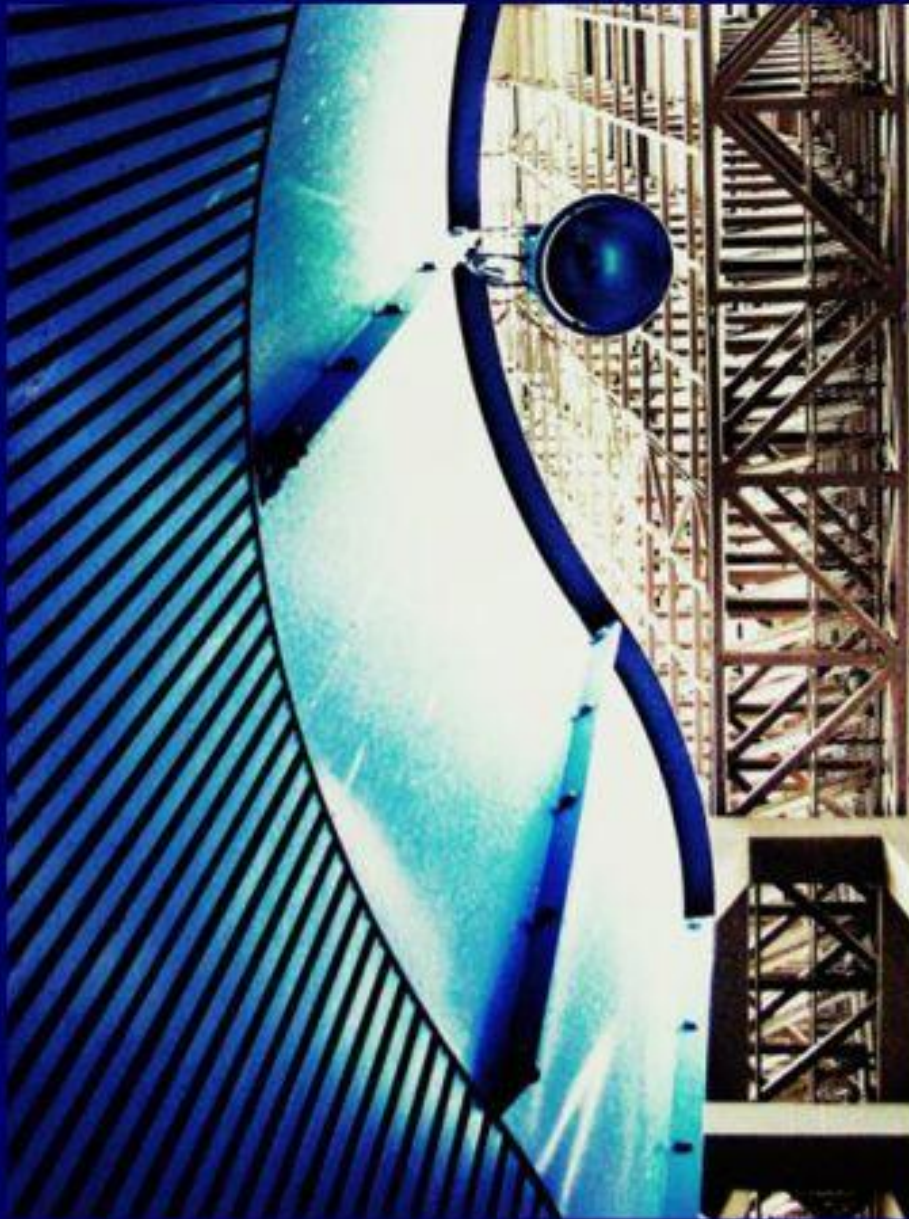




Redstone Science Fiction

September 2010

#4



Mary Robinette Kowal • Nick Wood

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Editor's Note – September 2010

by The Editors

Redstone Science Fiction #4 is up and running. August was a busy month for us at Redstone, and we wouldn't have it any other way.

Our Accessible Futures contest wrapped up and Sarah Einstein and I went through all the submissions and agreed that “Lunar Voices (On the Solar Wind)” by Nick Wood was the best of several quality entrants. He does a great job of incorporating the use of British Sign Language into a story of lunar isolation and solar radiation. Sarah's essay on the contest provides some insight into the contest process and why Dr. Wood's story embodied the ambitious ideals of the contest.

Our main fiction this month is an excellent story, “Salt of the Earth” by Mary Robinette Kowal. She won the 2008 Campbell Award for Best New Writer and has been a finalist for the Hugo and Locus awards. As one of this year's new SF markets, we are excited to have a writer of her caliber submit to us. But we wanted to make sure that we were publishing a quality story, and this is certainly an excellent work. The ending to this very personal SF drama punched me right in the gut. We were also lucky enough to ask Ms. Kowal few interview questions. Her answers provide an excellent insight into her writing process.

Henry Cribbs, our monthly columnist, considers the idea that Lou Anders raised in his interview with us in Issue #1 – What is science fiction's answer to Harry Potter? As usual, Henry mixes a fan's enthusiasm with an academic eye to a produce an entertaining and thoughtful piece.

Paul Clemmons, our publisher, is working on an interview with another leading neurosurgeon. We'll be posting that when all the details are worked out.

Next month we'll be publishing a tremendous original story, “Witness” by Vylar Kaftan, and we're also reprinting one of my favorite stories from recent years, the Sturgeon-nominated “His Master's Voice” by Hannu Rajaniemi. We can't wait.

We're constantly working to get the word out and to get the best material possible in. To paraphrase Epictetus, we've decided what we would become, and we're doing what we have to do. So we can't begin to express how pleasantly surprised and thankful we are for how welcoming and generous the speculative fiction community has been to us. We're working to repay you all by providing some interesting reading. We hope you find something you enjoy.

Michael Ray
Editor
RSF

Salt of the Earth

by Mary Robinette Kowal

Melia adjusted Dora's salt-suit, feeling as if it were futile because the two-year old would have the sweatband off her head the instant Melia's back was turned. She caught her daughter's hand reaching for the soft, green mesh. "No. You have to leave that on."

Dora twisted away from Melia and pulled the sweatband off. "No." She threw it on the ground and reached for the high thin turtleneck that caught the sweat from her face.

Melia's ex-husband, Theo, leaned against the doorway, waiting to take the children to his house. "Just let her leave it off."

"Daddy!" Dora toddled to her father with her arms raised.

Theo scooped Dora up, ignoring Nikolas, who seemed oblivious as he rocked in place, staring at a sunbeam on the wall.

Melia's smile felt tight. "We don't waste salt."

Out of the corner of her eye, Melia watched Theo while she checked Nikolas's saltsuit. Even though he was six, he sometimes took his cues from his little sister. His light mesh suit still covered him from chin to toe, ready to retain any salt if he sweated in the warm New Gaeian sun.

Theo tickled Dora into a trill of laughter. "You've got enough salt to spare."

Melia picked the sweatband off the floor. "Because we don't waste it." She settled the band on Dora's head.

Theo bounced Dora on his hip. "You don't want to wear that do you, A-Dora-ble?"

"No!"

They had never agreed on disciplining the children. It was as if Theo took a perverse pleasure in watching Melia undo the damage he caused. Given a choice, she wouldn't let him take either child, but it was his week for custody. "We reclaim our salt, just like everybody else on New Gaea."

"But you've got plenty in the Salt Baron's storehouse."

Melia held her breath, biting down on the words she wanted to shout. Dad's salt money had supported Theo for years. Her great-great grandfather's luck in discovering a salt deposit on this sodium-poor planet had started her family's fortune, but they retained that money because they weren't wasteful. She let her breath out slowly. The only way to end an argument with Theo was to relent, to let him think he had won. "Please. It's important to me."

He smiled at her over Dora's head. "I'll remember that."

Melia turned from his mocking face and knelt in front of Nikolas, inserting herself into her son's line of sight. "Nikolas? It's time to go with Daddy." She looked for a sign of life behind her son's eyes. "Nikolas?" The rocking slowed a little.

Theo said, "Just leave him. He won't even notice when I'm gone."

Melia bit the inside of her lip. Theo had never been able to deal with Nikolas's autism. "If you want me to contact my attorney, I'll be more than happy to make that a permanent arrangement."

"I bet you'll like that." He shifted Dora to his other hip. "Just get him ready."

It was probably just as well. She had spent most of the last year getting Nikolas adjusted to the new schedule; he knew that every seventh day he switched between his parents' houses. Breaking the routine now would upset him. "Nikolas. It's time to go."

His eyes flicked to the clock and then back to the dustmotes in the sunbeam. He shook his head once, and then began rocking again.

Melia looked over her shoulder at the clock and sighed. They still had three minutes before the scheduled time.

"For Pete's sake." Theo strode over, still holding Dora. "Nick. Let's go. Now."

"Just give him a minute."

"I don't have time for this."

Melia pressed her fingers between her eyebrows, as if that would stop her impending headache. "Please."

"Then let's go." He reached down and took Nikolas's hand.

Nikolas screamed as if the world were ending. He pulled away from Theo, leaning back with his whole body. Theo let go of his hand and Nikolas dropped to the floor, still screaming.

"Hush, hush." Melia was by his side in an instant. She watched the tears flow down Nikolas's face, knowing that the salt in them was lost. Damn Theo. He knew better than to touch Nikolas without warning.

"Oh for the love of Pete." Theo pulled a salt candy from his pocket and held it out to his son. "Here. Want a Salti?"

The screams stopped as if a switch had been thrown. Nikolas took the Salti, and removed the paper wrapper with precise motions. He put the candy into his mouth and folded the wrapper in half, then half again and then dropped it on the floor.

"Me too, me too." Dora called.

"Sure, Adorable." Theo stripped the paper off one and popped it into his daughter's mouth.

Melia picked up the wrapper, and put it in her pocket to drop in the recliner later. She got off the floor, feeling every joint ache with sudden weariness. "Don't give them too many."

Theo snorted. "You control them your way, I'll control them mine."

Melia opened her mouth to retort, but Nikolas stood up, abruptly, and went to stand by the door. She looked at the clock. "Time to go."

“Well. I wouldn’t want to break his schedule.” Theo stopped by Nikolas and turned to smirk at her. “See you next week.”

* * *

Traffic in Delfie City was crawling. Scattered thunderstorms dumped heavy rain randomly, followed by brilliant blue sky. The few pedestrians had slickers pulled tightly over their saltsuits to keep the salt from washing down the gutters.

During the drive, Melia replayed every moment of the conversation with Theo a dozen times, filling in all of the I-should-have-saids with bitter rhetoric. By the time she arrived at the Seven Seas salt factory, she was ready to bite someone. The receptionist at the front desk only gave her a half smile as Melia stormed past.

Her dad looked up from the dehydrator lamp he was adjusting when she burst onto the factory floor. He raised his eyebrows. “How’s Theo?”

“He grabbed Nikolas’s hand!” Melia crossed her arms holding in the desire to hit something. “Lot’s Wife! He knows Nikolas hates to be touched.”

Sighing, her dad screwed the cover back over the lamp. “We can go back to court if you want to try for sole custody again.”

“If I thought it would do any good, I would, but he’ll just put on another show of how much he loves his children.”

“It’s good for them to spend time with their father.”

“Is it?” She glared into the shallow pan of water under the heat lamp. A mosaic of crystalline salt shimmered down the length of the pan, except under this lamp.

Her dad cleared his throat. “Feel up to a blind tasting before you leave?”

“Sure.”

Dad was trying to distract her, and Melia was more than willing to get Theo off her mind. Her dad led her up to the tasting room and set three tiny dishes of salt in front of her.

Moistening the end of a toothpick in neutral water, she dipped it in the first plate, catching some of the crystalline grains on the end. Melia touched her tongue to the salt and closed her eyes. “Sweet, with a little bit of a caramelized quality, nuances of...tobacco?” She opened her eyes. “Pure human reclaimed?”

Her dad was grinning at her, so she must be right. “Go on. Try the next.”

She got a clean toothpick and sampled the next plate. “Oooo...this is that new salt lick in the South Valley, isn’t it? I like the traces of magnesium you’re leaving in. Very tangy.”

He was bouncing on his toes with pride at her palette. “And our final sample?”

At the first taste, Melia frowned. A bitter aftertaste clung to her tongue. “Potassium chloride. Oh, come on, Dad. Don’t tell me you’re going to start blending too.”

“You liked the magnesium.”

“That’s because it retains the terroir, the essential characteristics of the place the salt came from. This? This is just polluting it for profit.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. So go find a new source for us.”

“I do my best.”

* * *

The plants of New Gaea rose to staggering heights around Melia. Unlike the lowlands surrounding Delfie City, this part of the continent had ferns that would have seemed at home in the Cretaceous period back on Earth. The giant fernwood trees dripped in the constant humidity and smelled of spicy loam. She had searched most of the last week, piloting the rover between the trunks, but she had yet to find a new source of sodium.

Her saltsuit stuck to her skin as the sweat just sat on her body. Some of the fernwoods from this region had shown faint traces of sodium blight. She had hoped it was a sign of a deposit, but it looked like nothing more than a groundwater leach from an earlier colonist’s graveyard. After four hundred years, the bodies would not retain enough sodium to make exhuming them worth the furor from the historical societies.

If she could find even sodium carbonate, she could extract the sodium in the lab and then combine it with chlorine to make salt.

Her phone rang with a recording of Dora’s laughter. For a moment it seemed as if her daughter had stepped into the fern forest with her. She toggled it on, glancing down to see her dad’s icon. She grinned. He couldn’t stand being back in the factory.

“What’s up?”

“Melia—.” His voice shook like an old, old man. “How long will it take you to come home?”

“What’s wrong?” Her heart stopped. “Is it Mom?”

“Theo just called. Nikolas and Dora are in the hospital.”

The soil sampler dropped from her hand. Melia pressed the earpiece deeper into her ear, as she turned to the rover. “What—? What happened? What do you mean? What did he do to my children? What’s wrong with them?”

“I don’t know. They’ve been vomiting, so he’s been keeping them in bed, but this morning he couldn’t get Dora to wake up.”

Melia felt cold. “And Nikolas?” The rover recognized her as she approached and opened its door.

Her dad was silent for a moment. “We aren’t sure. He won’t talk, and stares at the wall, but...that’s normal.”

“No, it’s not.” Melia bit the words off as she backed the rover out of the clearing. She left her tools lying under the dripping canopy of ferns. “He has a routine; if he doesn’t follow it, something is very, very wrong.” Theo should have called her the moment they got sick.

She could hear her mom's voice in the background asking Dad a question. Melia should have left the kids with Mom. She would have sent status reports every half hour.

Her dad said, "Your mother wants to know when you'll be home."

"Closest main road is L-90. I'm a good six hours away from that. Late tonight. Early tomorrow."

"Tell me the closest town, and I'll send an aero to get you."

Melia could not breathe for the bubble of fear pressed against her throat. They could not be dying. She swallowed. "Campsol. Have it meet me at Campsol."

* * *

The aero that met her was automated. In the silence of the cabin, Melia's fear screamed around her. Why hadn't Theo called her? He should have called her. Please let them be all right. Why hadn't Theo called her when they got sick?

The phone rang once during the flight, laughing with Dora's voice. She shut her eyes, without answering it, and listened to Dora laugh. She could do nothing to get there faster, and as long as she didn't know better, her children were alive.

Let me be on time.

When the aero landed on the roof of the hospital, her dad was waiting for her by the lift, hunched over. He looked old.

Melia flung herself out of the aero and ran to him. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. She buried her face in his shoulder, as if he could still fix everything.

He stroked her hair. "I'm so sorry."

Melia trembled, rejecting the reasons for his apology. There were other things he could be sorry about. He was sorry she had to come back for a false alarm. He was sorry she was upset. He was—

"Dora didn't make it."

He was wrong.

She had heard Dora laughing on the aero. How could a little girl who laughed like that be gone? It wasn't possible.

He said other things to her as they rode the lift down. Melia nodded whenever he paused; his words were almost meaningless. "Salt overdose... Theo thinks the kids might have thought the supplements were Salties... Dora's so much smaller. Her size... It would only take a spoonful."

A long tunnel seemed to be between her and the outside. Was that what it was like for Nikolas?

Nikolas.

"How is Nikolas?"

Her dad stopped with his mouth open. He had been speaking, but she had no memory of what he had just said. He cleared his throat. "The doctors say he'll be fine. They were worried about brain damage, but think he's out of the woods."

Brain damage. As if her sweet boy didn't have enough to cope with.

The lift opened on a lobby filled with people. It seemed as if her entire extended family was there. Theo's grandmother sat in a corner next to Melia's aunt. They were holding hands, with their heads bent together. Theo's grandmother held a tearsheet under her eyes, delicately catching each tear that streamed down her face. Was she going to make a huge show of how much salt she collected for the memorial service?

The conversations stopped as people saw her. A cousin took a step forward, but Melia's dad shook his head, waving him off. She wanted to thank him for that, but her tongue had frozen in her mouth.

He led her down the hall to a private room. Thank God her children had a room of their own.

The room was dimly lit. Her mom turned as they entered. The lines in her face seemed deeper than Melia remembered. At her side, the hospital bed seemed to swallow Nikolas.

Melia's heart twisted. His face was puffy and slick with sweat. The sheets under him were damp. His eyes were closed. His right hand fluttered against the sheet in the pattern he made for distress.

What had happened to her son?

Theo stepped between her and Nikolas.

The tunnel protecting her shattered. All of the anger she had swallowed boiled up and over. Theo had killed her child.

She launched herself at Theo, swinging her fists wildly, beyond words. He had taken her children from her. Dora was dead. It was his fault. His fault. "What did you do to them?"

Theo tried to catch her hands. "I didn't do anything!"

Over his shoulder she saw Nikolas. His eyes were open and he was watching them.

Melia dropped her hands.

She pushed past Theo. Nikolas looked at the ceiling when she got to the side of his bed. He hummed through his nose and his right hand beat against the bed.

She wanted to hold his hand, to brush the hair back from his forehead, but she clutched the rail on the edge of the bed so hard that her fingers ached.

"Nikolas?"

He closed his eyes.

He must blame her for not protecting him.

"Melia," Theo said, "I don't know what happened."

She held on to the side of the bed. She had lost it once, but she would not do that again in front of her child. Her only child. She held her breath till the possibility of sobs passed. Breathing shallowly, fighting for her voice, Melia said, “I would like some time with my son.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, like Nikolas, and listened to the murmurs around her. Theo’s mother sounded as offended as always, but his father seemed to understand. She waited until the last footstep left the room and the door closed.

Then she opened her eyes. Nikolas’s eyes were still closed, but his hand had stopped beating its rhythm on the sheets. She took that as a sign of forgiveness.

* * *

The extraction room at Seven Seas was intimate, dominated by the flushing machine. Beyond the window in the extraction room door, Melia could see the main factory floor. The workers appeared to go about their business, but she kept catching them as they looked away from her.

She turned back to Dora. The hospital had pumped Dora full of fluids as they tried to restore her electrolyte balance, leaving her skin swollen like a water balloon. Even so, her tiny body looked lost in the flushing machine.

Melia found herself wanting to look for the sweatband, which Dora must have thrown on the floor. She brushed Dora’s hair back from her forehead.

Picking up the first of the tubes she needed to flush the salt from her daughter’s body, she held the sharp metal tip of the siphon over the artery in Dora’s thigh. She had reclaimed the salt from hundreds of bodies, but her mind balked at pushing the siphon into her daughter.

Melia turned slightly so she couldn’t see Dora’s face, so that the body in the flushing machine looked like any other. She placed the needle again. And stopped. This was still wrong. She had wanted to be the one to extract her daughter’s salt; she wasn’t here to extract a stranger’s.

Looking at Dora’s face, she pushed down on the siphon. It slipped into Dora’s thigh with a slight pop. Melia watched Dora’s face for any sign of a flinch, even though she knew there would be nothing.

She picked up the flush tube. Her hands were shaking, but she pushed it into a vein in Dora’s other thigh. A little of the tension eased at the back of Melia’s throat to have that accomplished.

Her little girl was on her way back to the great salt sea where life began.

Melia turned the machine on. As the pumps began to flush Dora’s body, washing the salt from her veins and bones, Melia sank into a chair against the wall. She rocked slightly as she listened to the pump hum.

* * *

Melia’s house was too quiet. She kept feeling like Dora was just in another room, napping. She had to turn off the newsfeeds because she kept seeing Dora’s name. The media could not let go of the extravagance of her death by salt overdose.

Extravagance. In a child her size, it would only take two spoonfuls of salt to throw everything out of balance but that was most families salt budget for a month. So little and yet so much.

The morning of Dora's memorial service, Melia poked her head into the kitchen to tell Nikolas's sitter that she was leaving. His plate was on the table, with the vegetables cut exactly the way he liked them, but the room was empty.

Wrong. Something was wrong when he broke his routine. She called him, knowing he wouldn't answer, but hoping.

"He's up here, ma'am."

Following the sitter's voice to the front door, Melia found Nikolas, rocking slightly. The sitter stood beside him, shifting uncomfortably, so she seemed to rock with Nikolas.

Melia took a breath to brace herself for the fireworks that would go off about the break in his routine. This was not the right time of day for her to be leaving the house. This was his lunch time.

The sitter said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, I know we should be having lunch, but he won't come."

Melia crouched next to Nikolas. "Do you need something?"

He turned his face slightly closer to her, but still didn't meet her gaze. His right hand fluttered in his distressed rhythm. He licked his lips before whispering, "Dora."

Melia waited a moment to see if he would say anything else, then asked, "Do you want to go to her memorial service with me?" She had not been sure that he understood or even noticed that Dora was gone.

Nikolas jerked his head once in a quick nod, still looking sideways at the wall.

"All right, then."

She led him down to the garage, keeping a careful distance from him. Nikolas was silent on the way to the memorial service, not even rocking as they drove through the streets. The road in front of the chapel was thronged with tourists and paparazzi anxious for news about the Salt Baron's granddaughter.

The security system recognized Melia's vehicle and passed her through the barricades. She went around the car to let Nikolas out. When she opened the door, he slipped out to stand quietly on the pavement next to her. In the throng of people, Nikolas huddled closer to her than he usually stood to anyone. Melia chewed on the inside of her lip. The crowd could overwhelm him. "Nikolas, you tell me when you need to leave, all right?"

He didn't answer, but she rarely got a response to that question. He might, just might, grunt before melting down.

As they went inside, the people surrounding them all had tearsheets under their eyes catching tears for Dora. Melia wondered which ones were really shedding tears, and which had bought pre-salined sheets to demonstrate their shared grief.

The recliner by the entrance to the chapel was already full of the tearsheets.

Every person she passed seemed to want to clutch her hand and express the same banal condolences as the person before. Melia kept nodding and thanking them for their thoughts, but her attention was on Nikolas. She diverted the people who wanted to pat him on the head, but could do little to protect him

from the closeness of the crowd as they worked their way across the lobby. Her dad saw her and arrowed through the crowd to shepherd them across to the private family waiting room.

He stopped outside the door. "Theo is inside."

"I won't say anything."

He squeezed her arm once before opening the door.

At first, she only saw her mom and grandma. Her mother looked as if she had been crying off and on for days. Grandma was patting her hand.

Theo's father stood up when she came in. Mr. Lathouris's eyes were as red as her mom's. He had a wad of tissues in his hand, and she had no doubt that he had saturated them all himself; he had always been so good with the children.

Nikolas screamed.

He had his hands over his ears and was staring at Theo.

"What the--?" Theo flung his hands out in exasperation. "Why did you bring him?"

"He wanted to come."

"That's great, Melia. What did he do, tap it out in code?"

Melia ground her teeth together to keep the silence she had promised her dad. She knelt between Nikolas and Theo, hoping that cutting into his line of sight would help. "Nikolas? Do you want a Salti?"

He jerked his head in a no and continued to wail.

Nikolas had never been frightened of Theo before. What had changed?

"Shut him up! People can hear him."

"Theo!" Mr. Lathouris took his son by the arm and pulled him to the side, whispering angrily.

Theo jerked his arm free of his father's grasp. "For Pete's sake, I'm not staying here to listen to this." He stalked to the door and spun dramatically to glare at Melia. "Make sure he's better behaved than this when I come pick him up." Before she could respond, he slammed out the door.

Nikolas's screams cut off the moment the door closed.

Melia stared at him and then at the door. Mr. Lathouris apologized for Theo but Melia barely heard him. What was Nikolas trying to tell her?

"Melia, it's time to go in." Her dad crouched down next to them. "Is he going to be all right?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know what set that off." She turned to look up at Theo's parents. "Why don't you all go in, and I'll stay out with Nikolas."

Mr. Lathouris said, "I think Theo has probably gone home."

Melia tried to smile at him. He knew his son well. Even if Theo wanted to come into the funeral, he wouldn't be able to back down from his dramatic exit. "Nikolas? Do you want to go in to the memorial service?"

He nodded.

When she stood up, Nikolas followed her to the door like cattle to a salt lick.

She went through the motions of the service with the rest of the family and went to the rail when the priest held out the weeping cup. Melia took a sip of the saline, holding the sweetness of her daughter's salt in her mouth.

The flushing machine had recovered much more salt than she had expected from Dora. Nearly 30 milligrams. How had her little girl ingested that much extra salt?

Her breath caught in her throat as she sat down. Was that why Nikolas was afraid of Theo?

Nikolas rocked in his seat, while the congregation shuffled past to taste their grief at the weeping cup. Melia leaned as close to him as she dared. "Did Daddy give you the salt?"

Nikolas stopped rocking. His right hand fluttered. Then his head jerked once.

Yes.

What had happened? She could imagine Theo messing up Nikolas's schedule and then trying to soothe him with salt. A spoonful would do no harm. Two, might have been all right. But Dora would have begged for anything that Nikolas got and she was too small to eat as much as Nikolas. It didn't matter if he had planned on it.

Theo knew what the lethal dosage was. He knew what the symptoms were and he let her children lie in bed, dying, for a week. Because he couldn't admit he had made a mistake.

And he was coming for her son in three days.

* * *

Melia dropped Nikolas off at the house with the sitter and went to the salt factory. She measured out some of the salt from Dora and entered the lab. Working methodically, she isolated the sodium from the salt's sodium chloride. With the pure silvery element, she went through each of the steps, combining it with hydrazine hydrate to make a small quantity of sodium azide.

She packed the crystals in an airtight jar so there was no chance of water touching them. Then Melia carefully wiped all equipment with oil to catch any stray granules. Melia did not want to chance killing any of Seven Seas workers if the sodium azide got wet. Just a few grains would be enough to make a cloud of odorless poison gas. It would dissipate quickly, and leave only the signs of a sodium deficiency, which was common enough on New Gaea. The oil kept it inert, but water would kill.

When Melia was certain the room was clean, she picked up the jar and left the lab.

* * *

Theo opened the door himself, when Melia knocked. He looked astonished to see her. Before he could say anything, before she could have a second thought, Melia held the jar out to him. “I brought you some of Dora’s salt.

He stared at the jar for a moment before taking it. “Thanks.”

“Since you missed the weeping cup, I thought you might want to make one yourself...Her voice trailed off. She had given him the salt, she had protected her son, and now she just wanted to get away from him.

Theo leaned against the door. “Forgive and forget, huh?”

As if it were that simple. “No. But I found a way to move past it.”

He seemed to recognize that she wouldn’t bend, but he still said, “Do you want to come in and share it with me?”

Melia shook her head slowly. The temptation to follow Dora stung the back of her throat. “I can’t. Nikolas needs me.”

She drove home to her son. After she sent the sitter away, Melia sat with Nikolas. He stood in the living room, with his head cocked to the side watching dustmotes in the sun. She held her phone in her lap, as she watched them float with him, and waited for Dora’s laughter.

The End

Mary Robinette Kowal is the author of [Shades of Milk and Honey](#) (Tor 2010), the fantasy novel that Jane Austen might have written. In 2008 she won the Campbell Award for Best New Writer and has been a finalist for the Hugo and Locus awards. Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Asimov’s*, and several Year’s Best anthologies as well as in her collection *Scenting the Dark and Other Stories from Subterranean*. Mary is also a professional puppeteer. To learn more about Mary Robinette Kowal, visit [her website](#).

Lunar Voices (On the Solar Wind)

by Nick Wood

Nicks's story is the winning entrant in our Accessible Futures Contest.

The lunar rover rolled to a halt in the shadow of Shackleton crater and a chill entered Phulani's bones. His suit had registered a drop of 250 degrees Celsius on his visor display within just a few minutes. He could well imagine the sparse, rare ice locked within the crater's frigid soil the other side of these walls, gradually being mined and piped back to Base.

But the full extent of the temperature gauge crash had locked his throat with shock, he couldn't even speak.

Baines could: "Give your suit time to adjust. They've built these bastards well."

Phulani's helmet-lamp kicked in, bringing the person in the spacesuit next to him out of the darkness. He could spot the Scottish Soltaire stitched in the left side and could just about make out her name underneath, perhaps because he knew it already and knew it well, *Mary Patrick*.

Baines himself sat at the front, the driver and always in control, a voice crackling out of the dark: "We're out of radio com from Base now, as we haven't got any satellite relays in lunar orbit yet. Just listen..."

Phulani wanted to say something to Baines, anything that would get an affirming response, an acknowledgement. He felt very much a raw novice. But he could think of nothing impressive to say, so he reluctantly kept quiet...and listened.

There was nothing to hear in that long empty silence.

Nothing.

Absolutely no sound. The silence seemed to want a voice, shrilling in his eardrums like a thin static radio whine. Perhaps it was a sub-threshold crackle in their interpersonal communication system or perhaps it was just his ears straining for a sound, any sound?

His lamp picked out the stiff, aloof back of Baines' sitting suit, and he noticed his helmet was craned back, as if Baines was searching the sky. Involuntarily, he slowly arched his own neck too, joints in the articulated neck-piece attached to his helmet groaning in his ears, although he knew no noise could be relayed in this frigid vacuum. It was then that he saw them.

Stars.

Thousands of sharp, brightly coloured stars, spattering across his vision, ice cold and crisp, red, yellow, blue. Not flickering, but steady, piercing, and skewering something inside him, so that he almost winced with pain. Old light, many of those stars millions of years old, but burning so brightly still in this ongoing, empty darkness.

A flutter of two green electronic hands washed across his visor's com display top right – Mary had clicked her suit and British Sign Language (BSL) words formed from scalp electrodes reading her brain, registering her holographic visualisation of how she intended to move her hands.

He didn't need to read the tiny text translation below those flurrying hand shapes. Baines needed that, he didn't.

*Beautiful, burning now, both before we be and after we be, yet not caring *if* we be.*

(Holographic hands had glowed on 'if', as if emphasising the word.)

Mary was looking up at the stars too. He half-wished he could touch her real hand, so well had she signed some of the thoughts that danced around his own. But there was not even a hint of his other thoughts there, so he kept his gloves to himself. He knew it was crazy, but still he also had a sense of Heavenly Cattle feet tramping the sky, opening up holes of starry light, a way through to *iNkosi yaphezulu*, Lord-of-the-Sky. That had been grandfather's favourite story, dead grandfather's favourite story, *ukuhamba* dead grandfather, who continues on.

But he had to forget those stories. Science alone would keep him alive on this dead and dusty world.

"There!" Baines pointed to the right, rupturing Phulani's silence and his thoughts. Phulani spotted a particularly bright red-orange star, but Baines rattled on without pausing: "Mars. If you're lucky, you'll be chosen to go there. But first you still need to show us what you're made of – and that you can manage this silence and isolation."

Phulani could tell from the faint vibration in his suit that Baines had started the engine again. "We're done, let's go," Baines's voice crackled curtly and Phulani winced. Mary at least would only see flickering hands on her visor screen from the translation software. She'd had a lifetime of silence, born and raised proudly Deaf. Her parents refusing her cochlea implants at birth, she'd told him on the Spaceplane over, with not a hint of regret.

'I can handle this silence,' Phulani thought, 'but why are you in such a rush, Officer Baines?'

He glanced up at the pinnacles of the crater walls, trying to spot the solar panel arrays in almost constant sunlight that powered the Base and maybe one day would provide clean energy to help save a crowded, heated Earth...but all he could see were grey walls and broken cliff faces, arching up and around to the nearby curved horizon...

His eyes swung to look at the Earth, a blue-green marble, hanging low on the horizon, beautiful, breath catching, a magnet for his eyes.

Then they were trundling out in the glare of sunlight again and a torrent of words burst in with the glare and the heat: "...Rover Five, come in, come in, please, this is urgent, Five, please reply..."

"Five here," Baines said.

"Five, return to Base now! There's an S.P.E. heading your way."

"Shit!" said Baines and Phulani jumped. "How long?"

"We spotted it just over five minutes ago and it's big, X-class maybe."

"On our way," said Baines, and Phulani felt the buggy shudder as it ground into maximum speed. He was grateful for the seatbelts as the rover began to bounce and buck over smaller rocks hidden in the lunar dust.

Mary palmed a button on her suit to communicate her thoughts and hands flickered up on his visor: *Good news not.*

Vomit rose in his stomach, he quelled it with force of will, having heard it was possible to choke to death in spacesuits. “What’s an S.P.E.?”

“Solar Particle Event,” said Baines, “Not a good idea to be outdoors to watch one.”

Phulani checked his visor clock. Shackleton’s shadow had been their furthest stop. They were just over three hours away from Base, perhaps two at top speed. There was a sharp and stale stench in his nose. It took him moments to realise it was his own sweat.

“Stay calm, we’ll miss the worst of the storm,” said Baines and Phulani remembered that Baines had both their vital signs up in his visor’s LED display.

Hands flickered across his peripheral view: *Fifteen minutes for the first SCRs maybe.*

He didn’t want to know what an S.C.R. was. Trust an engineer to assume everyone spoke in acronyms.

“The worst of it’s still at least two hours away,” barked Baines, “We should make it back before then.”

Phulani was glad he couldn’t see Baines’s bio readings, if the bite in his voice was anything to go by. It was the longest two hours he’d ever known and it was all he could do to stop himself throwing up.

But then it became even longer.

The buggy ground to a sudden halt, almost throwing Phulani forward against Baines. He bounced slowly in his seat against the tethering safety straps.

Baines unhitched himself and turned to face them. Mary was busy with a display in front of her, gloved fingers poking at flickering dials.

“I’m finding it hard to breathe,” he said, “Someone else needs to drive.”

“What’s wrong, Baines? What can I do?” Phulani unbuckled himself and stood up unsteadily in his seat.

“There’s something wrong with both my primary and backup OPS air supply on my PLSS,” gasped Baines tersely, “I think...” A burst of static tore Baines’s remaining words apart. Numbers and signs scrambled momentarily on Phulani’s visor display before blinking and disappearing, all he could hear was a faint hiss in his ears.

“Hello,” Phulani said, “Hello?”

Hsssss.

He could hear no words, see no electronic hand signs, but he sensed a soft subliminal hissing that penetrated deep into his skull. Was that the sound of the sun in his ears or perhaps even residual noise from the birth of the Universe?

He saw Mary helping Baines into her seat. Get a grip, Phulani, time to focus, time to help.

He took a slow and careful breath, a pang of isolation spearing him, along with a sudden sense of radioactive particles piercing his skin, poisoning his organs. He turned to scan the horizon, looking for

signs of their Base. The craters and scattered boulders with deep shadows dark enough to drown in looked unfamiliar and alien. He could see no sign of Base, of home. Then again, it would only be a dust covered door leading below a crater wall for maximal shielding, hard to spot unless you knew exactly where you were going. And they had no guidance now, no radio signals to reel them in.

No rover tracks to trace either, Baines had obviously been driving the shortest route back, focused by his deep, almost unique knowledge of this terrain.

Mary turned to face him and he could tell from the helpless hang of her arms she did not know where they were either.

Baines sat strapped into Mary's seat, immobile. Phulani could not tell whether he was conscious or unconscious, dead or alive.

Panic rose with the bile in his stomach. He focused desperately on one smaller craggy crater wall off to his left, wondering if he could reach it in a few bounds and leap inside, to find a spot where he could hide himself – they could hide themselves – against the sun's invisible rage. He stepped off the buggy and with a further step away, braced himself for a run.

But there, on the cratered wall, tall and thin, grandfather stood with his old dog *Inja* by his side. Grandfather was shaking his head, even though he was three weeks dead now. The old man stood upright and pointed behind Phulani with his stick. Phulani could see it was the long *knobkierie* with which grandfather used to walk and shake at stupid youngsters who were rude with their new city ways, when they pushed him aside and failed to show him *hlonipha*, the elder respect due him. He was pointing back at the lunar buggy. Although he knew no words could soar in the vacuum between them, Phulani could hear the old man's voice ring in his head.

"You're Amazulu boy and a Matlala, with a job to do. Now go and do it!"

Phulani turned and walked back to the buggy. He knew he must hold onto the experience-hardening memories within him, negotiating peace through volatile communication conflicts on the training Antarctic winter base.

Hello to you too, grandfather, nice to see you again too.

He hesitated by the rover, wondering where he should sit, what he should do. Mary was crouched in his seat, studying a laminated map.

Hsssss.

They'd warned him about this, about how massive solar particle ejections could disrupt electrical communications systems. He'd just never expected to experience it so closely, so intimately and with such absolute terror, completely isolated inside his hot, sweaty, bombarded body.

They were dying as they just waited there, that he knew.

Hssss.

An idea thudded into him, as if punched in by a high energy particle.

Phulani took a deep breath, glad his suit's oxygen and cooling system continued to run, even if he wasn't sure for how much longer. Okay, so he did speak nine languages and was communications officer for the International Lunar Base, now was the time that he should really earn his keep.

He turned to face Mary and held his hands up, grateful that NASA had built such cleverly dexterous gloves, in their constant search for maximising working suit efficiency. Still, even so, as he fumbled a few words in the ninth language he knew, he wondered if they would be dexterous enough.

Mary laid the map down and clumsily fisted some finger and hand positions back to him, *Not still know where we are.*

She picked up the map and handed it to him. He took it with difficulty and peered at it. The shortest distance between two points was a straight line. Perhaps he could try and track a straight line from the curve of Shackleton to the Base. But where exactly did the crater's shadow lie? The curve of the rim was kilometres wide and Baines had been careering to avoid obstacles. Carrying on in the direction of travel would be a hit and miss affair.

Hopeless.

Mary was fisting signs in his face, *Together are we; together we hope; Baines lives still.*

Phulani smiled. Nearby, a dog barked.

He'd recognise that bark anywhere. It was *Inja*, prancing in front of the rover, as if wanting to play catch. Yes, he definitely wanted to be chased or followed, he'd always pawed at the ground at the start of this game, just like that. But this time, he sneezed with the cloud of lunar dust he'd kicked up with his paws.

Phulani laughed and signed to Mary, *Drive you, I show way.*

He caught a shadowy glimpse of her expression before she turned to climb into the driver's seat. He knew he would never be able to tell her he could see a dead dog on the Moon.

It was madness he knew, but he could think of nothing better than to point ahead in the direction that *Inja* ran, yelping with pleasure, hurtling through the air like a springbok in the lighter lunar gravity. Mary drove on, with an occasional turn of her head, checking the direction of his pointing through her peripheral vision.

They drove for what seemed like an eternity and still, even a dog shade tires...

Inja slowed to a ragged jog and dropped alongside the rover, panting and peering in at Phulani. He stretched across to pat the dog, as he had when a boy, but he patted nothing but vacuum.

Inja was gone.

The rover crawled to a halt, a large boulder ahead obscuring the view. Mary unbuckled herself and turned to him, signing: *Okay you? Forgot way again?*

He nodded tiredly, forgetting it was hard for her to see his face through his glinting visor.

The Moon felt empty, desolate again.

Mary went to check on Baines.

Phulani closed his eyes and listened to the faint whirr of his oxygen fans. *Together we hope.*

Old images, paintings and words floated in the darkness of his mind. He tried to hold them steady as light meteors ripped through them, solar storm particles in his brain?

An old book he'd read had charged him with his first excitement about the Moon, painted and spoken by a Moonwalker from almost a century ago. Oh yes, Alan Bean, Apollo Twelve. What had he said again? The solar glare had bleached the lunar landscape, making it hard for them to see when looking into the sun.

Phulani opened his eyes and looked across to his left, up a ragged sloping hill towards the sun. He unbuckled himself.

Where go? signed Mary. She crouched over Baines. *Baines breathes still, but almost conscious not.*

Something to see. He fisted a reply.

He leaped up the hill, bouncing unsteadily with the thrusting of his boots, bracing himself to slow and stop as Baines had taught him on earlier Moonwalks. He turned to face down the slope, scanning the widened expanse of terrain with the sun blazing at his back. Left to right, slowly, surely, not even sure of what he might be looking for...

There, a faint but regular pattern against the dust in this chaotic jumbled world – just a bit further on and to the right of that boulder ahead of the rover. Phulani bounded down the slope carefully, aware he may just have been seeing things. Still, it was all they had.

Mary was in the driver's seat again, waiting for him. Phulani pointed ahead and to the right of the boulder, preferring to jog ahead. It took him only five bounds.

He braked to a dusty halt.

It was a line of rover tracks.

“Galactic Navigator”, that's the name of the particular Bean painting which had stuck in his head. Easy to get lost, but all you need to find are tracks, your marks and patterns in history.

Mary ground to a halt alongside him and gave him a sign for love, which was a bit like hugging herself. She then pointed at him. He laughed with a rush of elation and heat, clambering into his seat.

Which way? He signed.

Haven't watched you sun's angle to grossly direction assess? She gave him a flurry of signs and then turned to accelerate right along the rover tracks.

Phulani looked behind him with difficulty at the receding hill. Grandfather stood there, waving his *knobkierie*, with *Inja* howling to the Earth.

Yes, he knew they had told him to expect visual distortions in this alien land.

Still, he waved. *Sala kahle, grandfather.*

His sense of time drifted away after that. Mostly he closed his eyes and felt ill with the swaying and jolting of the rover as it bounced over the ragged terrain. But every now and then he opened his eyes, sweat dried in cold patches on his cheeks, watching Mary steer with certain and assured conviction.

Hss.

Relief shocked him as a dusty crevice open up in the bottom of a crater wall ahead of them. Someone must have seen them arrive. Mary manoeuvred the rover down the slope expertly, the buggy skidding to a dusty halt in the dark cavernous airlock. Behind them, a large dust-packed door ground closed, sealing out the toxic sun.

Lights flickered on around them.

They stopped and sat silently for a moment. Mary unhooked herself and swiveled round on her seat to reach across to Baines, slumped next to Phulani in his suit with its faded stars and stripes.

Hssssssssss.

Phulani realised with relief that there was oxygen being pumped into the room and that he could hear again. On the other side of the dark room the airlock door blinked orange as the air pressure rose. Mary had twisted off Baines's helmet and was busy unfastening her own. By the time Phulani had wrenched his helmet off, the airlock was blinking green and Mary was leaning back, smiling.

Baines was groggy but conscious. He was limp, but grinning in between ragged gasps.

Mary looked across at Phulani with a smile on her lips, helmet cradled in her lap, red hair frizzed madly, electrode bugs hanging off her scalp like electronic lice. His own helmet finally off, he took a deep breath of rich Base air and then vomited, with great embarrassment, deep into his helmet, closing his eyes with shame.

A woman's voice crackled over the intercom: "I'm reading your rad exposure levels. You're all going to be sick for a while. I think you'll be okay, but I'm getting some sickbay beds ready."

Phulani's mind played for a moment on the word 'think.' There was no certainty in the woman's voice or that word. Still, he hadn't come almost four hundred thousand kilometres for either safety or certainty. He'd come here because of the call of the stars and he'd seen them and maybe heard and felt them burn deep inside him. (And perhaps much more besides?)

He opened his eyes, his head turned to face Mary.

She was signing: *Talking is Baines.*

He hadn't heard anything, so he looked over to Baines in confusion. Despite waves of nausea and an acid burn in his throat, he still managed a grin.

Baines was giving them both a big thumbs-up with his hairy right fist.

Behind Baines, a shadowy old man bowed, with one hand on a panting dog.

The End

Nick Wood is a South African clinical psychologist and writer who has published stories in Probe (South Africa), Interzone and Infinity Plus (UK), Escape Velocity (US), as well as the Newcon Press anthology Subterfuge. His story 'Of Hearts and Monkeys' will be out soon in PostScripts 22/23. He was Runner-Up in the 2009 International Aeon Award – 'Bridges' is due to be published in the Irish SF magazine Albedo One. Nick is currently pursuing an MA in SF and Fantasy through Middlesex University, London. Visit Nick's website at <http://nickwood.frogwrite.co.nz/>.

Choosing The Best Possible Future: Thoughts on the Accessible Futures Contest at Its Close

by Sarah Einstein

I have entered several contests hosted by literary journals. I have never won any. I always order the journal and read the work that did, and I sometimes think, “Wow, I’m such a hack. I will never write anything as beautiful or thoughtful as this. I should stop trying.” On a few very rare occasions, I have thought, “Seriously? This piece of shit beat my own well-developed, compelling work? Are the editors idiots?” Most often, though, I think, “Well, this is also a very good piece—maybe better than my piece, maybe not, but I can see what the editors were looking for and why they chose it. I’m glad they did, so that I had the opportunity to read it.”

If you entered our Accessible Futures contest and you didn’t win, we’re hoping you have this last reaction. We had a very short of list pieces that went into the “no” pile, and a very, very long list that went into the “this has a lot of merit, let’s keep considering it” pile. Chances are good that your work was in that larger pile. That we liked it a lot, and that you might even have won if we hadn’t been so taken by the elegant handling of the contest’s theme in the work we did finally select. Don’t throw that story away; take another look at it, see if there are ways to polish it and bring it up another level, then send it off to someone else. We only had room for one piece, and there were many pieces submitted that deserve a readership.

Interestingly, the responses came in waves, and each wave had a preponderance of one sort of story over another.

Several of the earliest submissions appeared to be angry reactions to the idea that universal access is a common good. These stories painted a very dystopian picture of a world dumbed down, made silly, by the attempts to make shared space welcoming to people with exceptional bodies. They were reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron,” and mistook universal access for an enforced uniformity of ability.

Disability advocates do not want to pluck Aleksandrs Antonenko from the Met’s upcoming production of Boris Godunov and replace him with a tone-deaf amateur. We may envision a performance of the opera done in American Sign Language, but as an addition to or comment on Mussorgsky’s original work, not a replacement for it. We are arguing primarily for the building itself to have ramps and seating space available for wheelchair users, assistive technologies for the deaf and hard of hearing, and other accommodations to allow persons of all embodiments to participate as audience members in the spectacle of the opera. (And, by the way, the Met is a fabulous example of universally accessible public space. They do an amazing job of making opera available to everyone.) We are fighting also for the right of a brilliant performer living with disabilities that do not impact the quality of his performance on stage—say, a baritone with low vision—to be given the opportunity to audition for the role. To not be excluded before having the chance to demonstrate his abilities as a performer. But we aren’t fighting to replace talent with mediocrity. We don’t want our hypothetical baritone cast if he isn’t positively the best person for the part.

Disability advocates do not envision a future of clumsy ballerinas and off-key divas.

After the first rush of stories, there was a lull of a little over a week when we received no new submissions. When the second wave of stories began to arrive, they also tended to deal with disability in a specific way: the second wave of submissions largely envisioned cures or assistive technologies which rendered the issue of universal accessibility of public space moot by undoing the need for it.

Disability advocates are rightfully suspicious of solutions to access which erase individual disability rather than remove common barriers. There are a number of reasons for this.

The iBOT serves as a fabulous cautionary tale for solutions that require individuals to acquire specific, expensive assistive technologies in order to fully participate in the community. One of Dean Kamen's brilliant inventions, the iBOT is a wheelchair that allows the user to adjust his or her height to speak with people at eye level, will climb stairs (though not as reliably as the inventor no doubt originally hoped and, for most users, not without another person's assistance), and function in terrain where no other wheelchair will work. It was the first product to use his gyroscopic balancing system that Kamen later deployed in the Segway. While it was not without its problems, almost everyone who saw or used one agreed that it was a very big step forward in wheelchair technology.

So why doesn't the company make them any longer? Because, at almost thirty thousand dollars per unit, individuals could not afford them and insurance programs, for the most part, were unwilling to pay for them. (I'm not saying that they should have covered the expense, only that they didn't. The complicated cost/benefits analysis for the iBOT over other chairs, frankly, is beyond me and there has been no great outcry from disability advocates to have this technology made available.)

Relying on individual solutions is, in the end, a much more expensive way to provide universal access than building accessibility into the design of shared space: iBOTs for every chair user would cost a lot more than adding ramps to all new construction.

It's also true that some people with disabilities don't want to have their embodiment normalized. This can be difficult for able bodied people to understand. Not all deaf people who could be made to hear through cochlear implants choose to do so. Some chair users consider their way of moving through the world as a part of who they are, and don't wish to walk. How we live in the world in large part determines who we understand ourselves to be, and not every disabled person wants her or his embodiment altered to conform to ideals of normativity.

After another lull in submissions, a third wave of stories came in just before the deadline. Well, maybe not a wave... more of a deluge. The bulk of the work we read came in during this period. It was in these stories that we found the submissions that best met the contest call: The submissions should portray disability as a simple fact, not as something to be overcome or something to explain why a character is evil. The submissions should also incorporate the portrayal of disability in a world where universal access is a shared cultural value. There were some beautifully imagined alternate worlds: survivors of a wrecked ship adapted to life under water on one of Jupiter's moons, a blind artist used new technologies to sculpt trees out of water, a brother and sister scrambled their way through a post-apocalyptic city to find a fully accessible utopia being built by people of all embodiments and abilities.

There were good stories in every wave of submissions, and several times during the process that we thought a certain piece would probably be the eventual winner. But then more new work would come in, and a good story would be bumped by a slightly better story. There were times when two stories competed on different merits; one better written, the other with a more compelling vision of a fully accessible future. I've helped to judge several other contests, and in none of them was there such a preponderance of really good work. We had an embarrassment of riches, and for a long time it seemed that it might be impossible to choose a single piece and call it "the best."

But then Nick Wood's story "Lunar Voices" made its way up through the pile, and I knew we had our winner. A story that stood out even among so many other well-written, creatively conceived entries for

many reasons. The writing was strong. The characters were well-developed. The setting was beautifully rendered. The plot combined imbued a classic trope of science fiction—the characters potentially stranded in hostile terrain, relying on their innate abilities to reach safety—with new and interesting possibilities.

And it got the idea of full accessibility right; more right than I could have gotten it, if I had been an entrant in the contest instead of a judge. (That's right, I would most definitely NOT have won this contest. Just like all the others I have entered.) I don't want to give away too much detail, in case you've decided to read this essay before you read "Lunar Voices," but I do want to point out a few very praiseworthy things.

For me, as a judge, the true magic of this story is the way in which disability is woven into the story as an important—and authentically portrayed—detail in the development of Mary as a character without ever becoming the most important detail we learn about her. (I found competence is the defining element of her character.) This reminded me that we live in a world where many disabilities have been fully accommodated and so recede in their importance: in a world without corrective lenses, for instance, my mother would never be able to drive a car. And yet glasses are so common that we don't think of those who wear them as disabled persons accessing assistive technologies. I felt the same way about Mary's deafness in the world and time of this story; it was a fact, a detail like glasses, and not any longer something "disabling."

And yet, although Mary's deafness receded from the foreground of the story, it didn't disappear. She wasn't made into a hearing person, rather, technology allowed her to live as a deaf person and to retain her own language. If there is a single master stroke in this story, a detail which I would identify as being the reason it rose above the competition, it was the author's choice to have Mary speak in British Sign Language instead of Signed Exact English.

When I got to Mary's first line of dialogue in the story, I knew we had a winner.

"Beautiful, burning now, both before we be; and after we be; yet not caring *if* we be"

This is the sort of decision that is always the difference between good and great writing. It also requires a depth of knowledge on the part of the writer that most of us don't have. If Dr. Wood is deaf, he did not disclose this in any of our correspondence, but he did share that he had studied British Sign Language. It's well-worn advice, but bears repeating, "Write what you know." Dr. Wood's obvious knowledge of and comfort with writing in the grammar and structure of British Sign Language are really what set this piece apart.

I'm very honored that so many of you allowed me to read your work, and I hope you'll take to heart my assurance that we really did have a very big "this could be the one" pile. Read them over again, find the details that could elevate your piece, and send it off to other journals. We saw a lot of publishable work. And we'd like to see it again, out there in the world where other people can see it, too.

Thank you for your submissions,
Sarah

Fragments of a Hologram Hogwarts:

What should science fiction's answer to Harry Potter look like?

by The Editors

Ever since [Pyr editor Lou Anders](#) brought up the question of “why SF hasn’t had its Harry Potter” during [an interview with David Alastair Hayden](#) in [Redstone’s first issue](#), and [Charlie Jane Anders](#) promptly [picked up](#) the question in [i09](#), I’ve been wondering just what it would even *mean* for scifi to have a Harry Potter.

Anders’s response to the question is that scifi has already had its Harry Potter. He offers Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game* series and Frank Herbert’s *Dune* novels as examples fitting the bill. A number of fans quickly rushed to plug their own favorite candidates for the title in response to Ander’s follow-up. Some of these other prospective SFHPs include Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* and *Have Spacesuit Will Travel*, Keith Laumer’s *Relief* series, Harry Harrison’s *Stainless Steel Rat* series, Jack McDevitt’s Alex Benedict and Priscilla Hutchins novels, Larry Niven’s *Known Space* stories, the multi-author *Robot City* series, Phillip Pulman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, and Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* trilogy. The suggestions which seemed to garner the most support by far were (not surprisingly) *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* – not novels at all (though they both spawned many), but they certainly have influenced a generation of authors and fans alike. Yet all these various answers beg the question, because the question itself is both vague and ambiguous.

It’s vague because people interpret the question in different ways. What do we mean when we ask, “What is scifi’s *Harry Potter*?”? Surely we don’t mean that we want for someone (J.K. Rowling, herself, perhaps?) to write *Harry Potter and the Deteronic Frombotzer*. We could instead mean, “Where is the series of scifi novels which will introduce millions of new readers to the genre in such a way that it will revitalize the industry the way Rowling’s books revitalized fantasy?” Or we could mean, “Where is the scifi book that is going to make it ‘cool’ to be a fan?” Or we can, more cynically, mean, “Where is the scifi series which is going to become a world-wide bestseller, blockbuster film series, and multi-billion-dollar merchandising franchise?” (And how can I be the one to write it?) Or we can mean something highly specific like, “Where is the scifi series which will take a character from pre-puberty to adulthood so that the reader can grow up with the protagonist and make a lasting connection which then will transfer to other books and authors in the genre?” Or “Where is the scifi story which will resonate with fans of the genre and non-fans alike by invoking the universal hero’s quest?” Clearly Rowling’s books have done all this for fantasy. But depending on which of these questions one is really asking, different answers will appear.

The question is also ambiguous, because one can easily replace the future tense verbs in the various interpretations above with the past perfect. Many people seem to think scifi has already *had* its Harry Potter, so the question “What is scifi’s Harry Potter?” is assumed already to have an answer. And in a way, it does. Practically every scifi fan can recall the book or author or series which first captured his or her imagination and made her or him a lifelong scifi fan. (My own gateway drugs were Burroughs’s Martian tales and Heinlein’s so-called “juvenile” novels.) But there doesn’t seem to be one single scifi book or author or series which has done this for as large a number of people as the Harry Potter series has for fantasy, though I’m inclined to believe Anders (who I expect has marketing data to support it) when he says *Ender’s Game* is “still selling like hotcakes” and that *Dune* is “cited almost as often.”

Both of the SFHP candidates which Anders mentions seem fitting, and not just because they sell well. They have some underlying similarity in common with Rowling’s story arc. Ender Wiggin and Paul Atreides, like Harry Potter (and Luke Skywalker and King Arthur, I might add), are identified in their

youth as being different from other children. They have special powers, partly as a result of their mysterious pedigrees, though they don't realize their true background until they are singled out for special schooling to develop their hidden talents. A formidable and predestined enemy (Formics, Vladimir, Voldemort, Vader, Lot), attempts to have them either killed or brought over to the "Dark Side." Each hero undergoes either a metaphorical or a literal descent into the underworld. And in the end, of course, they each save their worlds (or in some cases, galaxies) from destruction.

It's not really all that surprising that these SFHP stories, which predate HP by decades, have garnered (and continue to garner) such popular appeal. Each essentially follows the prototype ur-blockbuster, the "Hero's Journey" archetype which Joseph Campbell (1949) has dubbed the "monomyth" (a term from *Finnegan's Wake*). It's the same pattern found in many of the world's great religions – Osiris, Moses, Buddha, Jesus (which is why evangelical Christian groups' continued protests against Harry Potter have always struck me as epically ironic).

But rather than deciding which of the numerous past versions of the monomyth should be awarded the title of "scifi's Harry Potter," I'm much more interested in what the next version will be. (I'm especially interested in writing it, but I'll settle for reading it.) It seems clear that another hero's journey is in order. It need not necessarily proceed through all seventeen stages of the monomyth Campbell describes, but the basics should be there. After all, why monkey with a formula which has worked for millennia? It resonates with something Jungian inside us, whether we want it to or not. Yet while the hero's journey should form the basic plot, the exact trappings of the monomyth will be important if they are to capture popular attention in the way Rowling did. One fan I think may have hit on why Harry Potter managed to capture the Gryffindor's share of the market.

"Harry Potter had a protagonist who was introduced to the audience at just about the right age to make a pre-puberty connection that can last. It is of no importance if that book came in the shape of a fantasy, or sci-fi world. The character growing up alongside the audience is what made it stand out... If the protagonist changes and keeps impressing your audience with growing up, then it will ... hopefully create an avalanche as existing fans keep sticking to it, promoting it.... Younger readers can still pick up the earlier editions, giving the continued sales two possible points of entry... The reader growing up with Harry Potter is the right engine." (Asbestos_Underwear, comment on Anders, 06/02/2010)

So the protagonist, in the first book, at least, should start out prepubescent. (Eleven worked nicely for Harry.) This child (best to be an orphan, but at least to have a birth shrouded in mystery) discovers he or she has startling abilities (which must be based in science, not magic). The hero is recruited by a mentor figure into a school for similarly talented children. There is an even more (scientifically) powerful Enemy, who is attempting to destroy the child, and the school (or even better, to co-opt the child and the school's science for his or her own nefarious ends). The hero makes close friends along the way who assist him, but also encounters those mean kids who are found at almost every school. (In other words, pre-teen angst typical of any normal middle school, only it's not exactly a normal school.) After a near-death experience, the hero comes out stronger, defeats the Enemy, and saves the world (or the galaxy). And let's definitely grow up with the hero and her or his friends as the hero's journey develops over several installments. (Hmmm. I think I've just outlined something close to the plot of the X-Men movies.)

The key is going to be making such a plot fit within scifi conventions. The "special abilities" the protagonist has are going to be a key element. Ay, there's the rub. In a fantasy or superhero universe, it's easy to explain why such talents are held only by a few individuals. But in any science fiction that's not really fantasy in disguise (one word – mitochlorians), the character's talents must be *scientifically* based. Genetic engineering and nanotech seem obvious choices given current trends, but the problem with any

scientific explanation of “specialness” is that the hero’s inherent uniqueness is lost if his or her powers are based in science. Science is by definition reproducible. (Otherwise we would call it a miracle.) Technology doesn’t play favorites (except socioeconomically), so there should be nothing preventing anyone from using the same scientific powers as the protagonist. Anyone can be a hero. So science fiction may, in fact, be incapable of producing an analogue to Harry Potter due to the conventions of the genre.

Is a scifi Harry Potter, after all, self-contradictory? Is the hero’s journey, which in its past incarnations has been dependent on supernatural aid, by definition incompatible with a high-tech world? There surely must be a way to fit the monomyth into the modern world, of course, for *Ender’s Game* and *Dune* both managed it. (So look carefully at them for hints on how to do it.) But it will take some imagination. Fortunately, scifi has plenty of that.

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An Interview with Mary Robinette Kowal

by The Editors

Mary Robinette Kowal is the author of [Shades of Milk and Honey](#) (Tor 2010), the fantasy novel that Jane Austen might have written. I first learned of Mary from the audio recordings she made for stories by Kage Baker, Cory Doctorow and John Scalzi. When I found out that she had won the Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2008, I went looking for her stories and came across “Evil Robot Monkey.” It is one of the best short short or ‘flash fiction’ stories I have read. I was not surprised when it was nominated for the Hugo in 2009. Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Asimov’s*, and several Year’s Best anthologies as well as her short story collection, [Scenting the Dark](#), from Subterranean Press.

And writing is a second career! Mary is a professional puppeteer and voice actor and she has performed for LazyTown (CBS), the Center for Puppetry Arts, Jim Henson Pictures and founded Other Hand Productions. Her designs have won two UNIMA-USA Citations of Excellence, the highest award an American puppeteer can achieve. Not a bad day job.

Earlier this year I listened to Mary’s story, [“First Flight”, at Tor.com](#). As an American History teacher and science fiction guy this story about the Wright Brothers and time travel was right in my wheelhouse. I sent her a message and she was, of course, very gracious. She subsequently submitted [“Salt of the Earth”](#) to Redstone SF. It is an excellent story that we are excited to publish. This month she took time out of her busy book promotion schedule to answer a few questions. I think we got some excellent insights from her. Take a look.

Professional puppeteer and award-winning speculative fiction writer may be one of the most fun career descriptions ever. What led you to take up writing speculative fiction in the midst of your puppetry career?

My brother moved to China with his family and I was desperate for a way to keep in touch with my niece and nephew. I used to read them bedtime stories, but that wasn’t an option overseas at the time so I started writing an email serial. It reminded me that I used to love writing so I started looking into what to do with novels and short stories and somehow wound up here.

So many of your stories have such a personal feel and draw upon strong, often unspoken emotions. What do you think are the keys for drawing readers into the worlds of one’s stories?

As a writer, I try to write things that I would want to read, so let me answer that from a readers perspective. The stories that I respond best to are ones in which the main character cares deeply about something and is forced to make a choice between their plot goal and the person or thing that they care about. When a writer takes the time to show me that choice it can be heart-breaking. I respond well to stories with sensory details in which the details tell me more about what the character is thinking and feeling at the moment.

“Evil Robot Monkey”, which was a finalist for the Hugo in 2009, was quite effective at evoking strong emotions, (especially for me). How did that story come about and what are your thoughts on the response to it?

Funny story there... When I was art director at Shimmer magazine, we had a running gag among the staff about “Harry Potter and the Evil Robot Monkeys.” The editor-in-chief and I also participated in an online writing group Liberty Hall, which does flash fiction challenges. You get a trigger and then have a hour and a half to write a story. I decided that no matter what the trigger was that I’d title the story “Harry

Potter and the Evil Robot Monkeys.” You will note that the story is about Sly, an uplifted chimpanzee who loves pottery... a hairy potter who is a “robot monkey.” (And yes, I know chimps aren’t monkeys.)

Basically what I do when I’m writing a story like this is I figure out who my character is — Uplifted Chimpanzee — and what they want — to make pottery — then I figure out why they love the thing they are doing. After that, I systematically deny them the ability to do it.

My thoughts on the response to it are a mixture of delight and bafflement. Delight because I’m happy it reached people and well... Hugo nomination! Bafflement because it started as a joke that I wrote in ninety minutes and well... Hugo nomination!

Writers often complain that endings are hard, but your short story with us this month, “Salt of the Earth”, has such an excellent, shocking ending. What do you find that is difficult and different about writing fiction?

Interesting trivia here: I wrote Salt of the Earth at Orson Scott Card’s Boot Camp. When I went into the camp he asked us all what we wanted from the camp. I said that I wanted to learn how to plot. I felt that I could back into a good story but that I tended to write stories with really good beginnings and really good endings to a different story. This was the first one where I felt that I wrote a complete story on purpose.

For me, the difference comes in remembering two things: 1) what my character wants at the beginning and 2) what the major question at the beginning is. If I keep those in mind when I get to the end, then I can usually wrap things up. The difficulty sometimes arises that a more interesting question will sometimes pop up in the middle of the story. When that happens, I find that if I can go back and add it to the beginning third of the story that I often don’t have to change anything else to still have a satisfying ending.

Your first novel, Shades of Milk and Honey, has just been released by Tor Books. Jane Austen and magic sounds like a winning combination. What would you like speculative fiction readers to know about this book?

One of the things that I was interested in was what sort of things would happen with a magic that everyone has. If it was a quiet magic that one couldn’t use to take over the world, how would it affect people’s lives? To explore that, the book stays with a really tight focus on a single family and their neighbors. In the second book, Glamour in Glass (2012), I take my heroine into Napoleonic France and we get to explore the larger world and have a wee bit of swash-buckling fun but, for the first book, I wanted it to be an intimate family drama.

You seem to stay so incredibly busy. What future endeavors should we know about?

I’m designing the puppets for a production of Neil Gaiman’s Odd and the Frost Giants which will open in May, 2011.

We wish you much success and thank you for making some time for us here at Redstone Science Fiction.

