



# *Redstone Science Fiction*

*October 2010*

*#5*



*Vylar Kaftan • Hannu Rajaniemi*

Cover Art by Cassandra Link

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## Editor's Note – October 2010

by Michael Ray

Welcome to Redstone Science Fiction number five. Thanks for dropping by.

We have been working on Redstone SF for six months and are excited about the quality of the stories we have been able to bring you. We have received top-notch submissions from the very beginning and are looking forward to reading more new and exciting science fiction when we reopen to submissions on November 1st.

We are publishing two outstanding stories this month. Vylar Kaftan came to our attention when she headlined the inaugural issue of Lightspeed Magazine in June. Not long afterward we received her story “Witness” in our inbox. It simply blew our editors away. The quality of the writing, the inner struggle of the protagonist, and the classic adventure scifi story turned on its head is exactly the sort of story we are looking for and we are pleased to present it to you here.

“His Master’s Voice” by Hannu Rajaniemi was a 2009 Sturgeon Award Finalist, recognized as one of the best speculative short stories of the year. It is the first story we actively sought to reprint. It was printed in Interzone, has been anthologized, and was podcasted (twice) but the text is not available online. I simply love this story and am excited to bring it to even more readers.

Rest assured it is one of the best “cat and dog” stories you will ever read.

Henry Cribbs’ column this month reveals the dark, squirmy underbelly of classic scifi horror, just in time for Samhain. He examines the influence of *Frankenstein*, the lasting impression made by *The Invisible Man*, and then swears his undying allegiance to Cthulhu. Henry does a great job showing us how modern science fiction/horror owes a great debt to these seminal works.

We got to interrogate Vylar Kaftan and she gave us a dash of insight into how she produced “Witness” for Redstone SF.

We are also going to bring you a fine interview with one of our favorite editor/anthologists, John Joseph Adams, the editor of Lightspeed Magazine and a boatload of top-selling speculative fiction anthologies.

We are having a great time with Redstone Science Fiction and proud of what we have been able to bring you thus far. We appreciate you taking a look at what we’ve got, and we hope you find something you’ll enjoy.

Yours,  
Michael Ray  
Editor  
Redstone SF

## Witness

by Vylar Kaftan

I saw him first, but mistook him for a machine. He was bigger than most humans and he moved like I did. Giant red discs covered his eyes, and a utility belt hung at his waist. He wore a slick camo bodysuit that blended into the rainforest. The material masked his face, open at his lips and his ears. My eyes focused on the suit's weak point: a gap near his neck where pieces fitted together. He carried a long camo rifle nearly as invisible as he, which he pointed at the treefall ahead. I recorded the sight in my black box. I decided he was human—or at least like me.

Soundlessly I swung to a lower branch for a better look. The air smelled heavy with tannins and decay. Something on the rough bark tickled my hand. I looked. A line of flattened Legionnaire ants marked my palm. Two survivors raced across my skin. The shadow inside me twitched. I remembered the piranha school I'd shredded barehanded—hundreds of them, three at a time, darkening the river with broken bones and fish guts. Blood on the water, and the shadow—

No. I dilated my eyes and focused. Overhead, the leafy canopy blocked most light. A macaw screeched. Below me, the man lowered his gun and took a small container from his belt. He removed two yellow pills and swallowed them without water. I decided he hadn't come from a beanbag. Human for sure. I glanced at his genitals, but the suit obscured them—he looked as smooth as I did. He turned halfway towards me, still watching the forest, and raised his gun. The shadow surged. I resisted, but it darkened my mind. I wanted to kill—kill— I clutched the tree and snapped a twig. Instantly he spun and fired at me.

The shadow took me. I ducked the blast, dove from the tree, and rolled to his feet. Frenzied, I tried to tear his leg off, but the suit resisted me. He kicked my head and shoved the gun at my ear. I threw him down—pinned him—ripped the gun away—lunged for his neck, sweet killing—

No. I will not. I stared into the darkness, spread beneath me like pyramid layers. Here at the top, my consciousness lighting the lower levels—the ones that searched the Net before it attacked me, the ones that kept me breathing and moving, and there—there, below that, I knew myself, saw the shadow. I witnessed it. My active mind could stop it. Like a candle into the abyss—no, no, no, no—

Both of us breathed hard. I straddled his body—one hand on his shoulder, the other on his head, wrenching his neck at a terrible angle. My vision glittered as I stared into his goggles. Finally I let go and climbed off him. I sat on the ground, between him and his gun. My head ached and my hands shook. I had beaten the shadow—this time. I wasn't sure I could do it again.

After a moment, he started laughing so hard he couldn't talk. He yelped hysterically like he was sucking down air. "You're broken," he choked out. "Oh my God. You're so fucking broken."

"Who am I?" I asked him, my heart racing. "Who are you? What's this place? Who created me?"

He kept laughing. "Goddamn corporate sludge. We need the fucking military. They'll blow this shit to pieces. None of this cost-saving bullshit."

"I really will kill you if you don't answer me."

He sobered and gave me a spiral-red stare. “Why didn’t you? You should have fucking nailed me.”

I said nothing, but I crouched on all fours like I’d spring. He flinched and said, “Okay, all right. Calm down there. Um... shit. Look. The gun wouldn’t have killed you. It’s a tranq. Would’ve stopped you, yeah. But—listen, can we talk?”

“I’m listening,” I said, without moving.

“I’m going to sit up now. Okay?”

“All right.”

He sat up and rubbed his neck. “Here’s the thing. We don’t have much time. I’ve neutralized most of the threats in this biosphere. But there’s a few left. I need your help.”

“I thought I was one of the threats.”

“Me too,” he said, lifting his goggles and looking at me. Distinctly human eyes, I noticed—river-colored and creased at the corners. “But—you stopped. You—you shouldn’t be able to do that.”

I remembered the shadow rising. It transformed him into a vulnerable collage: his fragile neck, his soft eyeballs—those breakable goggles. Yes. If I destroyed the suit, I could crush his kidneys—

No. No, no, no.

I looked him in the eye. “Tell me everything.”

He stared back—nodded once. “Yes. You deserve to know. We’ll talk as we move. I’m tracking the others.”

“All right,” I said, picking up his gun.

He eyed it and spoke carefully. “I’ll need that if we want to survive.”

“I’m surviving just fine,” I said.

“If I don’t have a gun, I’ll die here.”

“If you do have a gun, you’ll shoot me.”

He laughed. “I had a great shot just now and you still took me down. Don’t you think you can handle me? Besides, if I get killed, you won’t find out the truth. I know your connection’s down—you fried this whole place good just now. If they link in again, you’re done. You need me alive.”

I considered his logic. I could torture him for information—but that was the shadow’s idea. Even now, it clawed to be released. I turned my head and spat, hating it. “Fine. Take it.” I tossed the gun to him, ready to defend myself.

He caught it and nodded. “Thanks,” he said, tucking the rifle under his arm. He extended a hand. “John Parris. Contractor. Security & Control, BioMed RevX.”

I looked at his hand, which he dropped. “Sorry. I don’t know my name.”

“You don’t have one. You’re a killing machine. Specifically, a Demmel XS-60 android. Spy and stealth assassin. Designed for infiltration and terror.”

I considered. It fit. “So what do they call me? And who built me—BioMed RevX?”

The corners of his mouth quirked upwards. “Yeah. Closest thing you got to a name is your beanbag coordinates. Shall I call you 54-10?”

“No.”

His expression hardened. He reached for his belt and grabbed a thumb-sized orange lump. “God, wrap this thing around your waist, will you? No offense, but your crotch is creepy.”

I shrugged. Parris rubbed the lump between his hands. It loosened into a paper-thin towel. He shook out the wrinkles and handed it to me. “Let’s go,” he said.

He took two more pills. I tied the towel like a loincloth. The material radiated an uncomfortable amount of heat. Parris had walked away, so I followed. He lowered his goggles and read a handheld device.

“So what is this place?” I asked.

“Amazon biosphere,” he said, pushing aside a plant frond. “Training grounds. There’s others.”

“Other training grounds?”

“Other droids.”

“Like me?”

He glanced backward. “God, I hope not.”

“Tell me.”

“BioMed RevX contracts with the military. They build killing droids. All shapes and sizes—some humanoid, some not. Military wants all sorts of shit, and some whack-assed scientists play here. They made you. They made things like you. They made insects and birds and—holy shit.”

He’d stopped walking. I glimpsed something purple. I stepped past Parris. Another beanbag, flaccid on the mossy ground. Like the one I’d woken on yesterday morning, naked and amnesiac—only this bag was twice the size of mine. Brown liquid dripped from the bag’s umbilical cord. I examined the end. Torn. The indentation meant nothing to me—a head, a long tail, some legs perhaps—but it was big. It smelled like blood. Nearby lay a monkey’s tattered remains.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Nothing you’ll want to meet,” he said. “Even you can’t take it down.”

“And you can?”

“I’ve got its frequency.”

“That works?”

“Yeah,” he said, a little too late. When I looked at him, he said, “It’s supposed to work. I dunno. Some are fucked up. I tracked a bunch and took them out already, but some of the frequencies are messed up. Like yours. I think it happened when you fried the Net. Why’d you do that? Just to save your ass?”

I’d been downloading as fast as possible, learning language, history, and science. Everything I found entered my core memory—my indestructible black box that I knew instinctively was there. I’d found classified data referring to me. When the fireball hit my connection, the shadow responded fast. “It attacked me.”

“But you fought back.”

“It’s not alive.”

“True,” he said thoughtfully, tilting his head. “You gotta explain that rule to me. You’re supposed to kill without thought.”

I considered while Parris tracked his quarry. Twenty-four hours wasn’t much time to develop a philosophy. Especially since I’d woken with vague memories of violent dreams. “Killing is wrong. I don’t like to kill because I think about it later. I don’t know who should live or die and I don’t want to choose.”

He snorted. “Great, look what we built. A religious droid. Do you get a droid afterlife?”

“Not religious. And no.”

He glanced back at me, then looked upward. He raised his scanner, keeping his gun in hand. “Crazy. But whatever. You’re lucky. Military would’ve blasted the fuck out of this biosphere. BioMed RevX wants its investment. You’re a hell of a thing. You managed to—”

A blue-gold streak flew at my throat. Darkness rose from my foundation, blotting the light. I raised my hands to strangle—no. No, no no. I fought the shadow with everything I had. My hands came up too late. A razor beak tore my arm. Spiked talons shredded my wrists. I shook as I held back, unwilling to loose the killer. So fast. Each moment—millisecond—its own battle—

Parris hesitated, then fired. Clean shot. The creature dropped to my feet. A parrot, maybe—if parrots had fangs and six-inch claws. I knelt beside the bird, feeling for signs of life. Heartbeat. No obvious damage.

Parris lowered his gun. “My God,” he said, “you really are broken. Why didn’t you kill it?”

He could have tranqed me too, but he hadn’t. I looked at my arm. The cuts sealed over and vanished. “I didn’t want to.”

“Why the hell not? Fucker would’ve killed you. It was self-defense.”

I didn’t reply. Killing was my foundation. I was built for it—but I knew it was wrong. I hadn’t had time to think it all through. Finally I gave my best answer: “I don’t like to see myself killing. It’s meaningless.”

He stared at me. An insect cloud swarmed between us, which we both ignored. Finally he said, “Fuck. Fuck this playing God shit. Jesus. You’re really someone, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind. Look, there’s one left. It’s a motherfucking jaguar. Been stalking it all night. If you see it—you—”

“I’ll let you neutralize it.”

“Yeah,” he said, his spiraled eyes unreadable. “You do that. And then—then—”

He fell silent. I didn’t know what we’d do then either. He was here to neutralize me. I was trapped in this biosphere. At some point, BioMed RevX would come back online and take me out—this time for good.

Something would have to give.

We tracked the jaguar south along the river. The sticky jungle air soaked us both. The trees thinned out overhead, which meant the undergrowth thickened. Parris used his gun like a laser machete to hack through the jungle. He did the heavy work. I helped by tearing small branches away. It hurt, but my hands healed so fast I hardly noticed. I recorded everything we did, hoping for answers.

“So why don’t I have fingernails?” I asked him as we cleared some spiked ferns.

He handed me the gun and took more pills. “Law says droids got to be marked so they don’t look human. Stuff like your fingers and toes. And the big tattoo.”

“I have a tattoo?”

He paused, then took the gun from me. “Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t have seen it. Purple fingerprint thing across the left half of your face.” Parris laughed until he hiccupped. He wiped his mouth. “Fucking corporate bastards. They got you through Patents with the tattoo and nails, then spent trillions bribing the fashion industry. Guess what the rage is now. Half-masks and gloves. Everyone’s wearing them.”

“I’m still marked. No genitals—”



“Nah, that’s rape-proofing. You were booked for some pretty brutal assignments. Listen. You’re in a controlled consciousness experiment. BioMed wanted droids with more brains. Same reflexes and speed, but able to think on the job. But the eggheads fucked up. Some droids developed more than they should’ve. Like you. And some others.”

“How many?”

“Half a dozen. Shit, I think the fucker crossed the river.” Parris shielded his eyes and looked over the water.

“So they wanted me thinking. Aware of the killing.”

He turned around to look at me. “They wanted you smarter. The killing was instinct. You certainly weren’t supposed to worry about it. Worry’s something humans do. But God. You look almost human.”

What they’d gotten, I thought, was a self-aware machine that remembered everything. “I’m not worried, I’m—”

The jaguar burst through the foliage like a meteor. All metallic gold, with scattered black spots—and eight hairy spider-legs. Moved faster than I did. Parris never had a chance. It skittered across the water, leaped thirty yards, and piled into his back. Its weight knocked the gun from his hands. The creature pressed him down. Wrapped all eight legs around him—slashed right through his suit with a razor-tipped tail. He screamed. Blood-red fangs tore his stomach—

The shadow rose. If I resisted, Parris would die. I dove for the gun, fighting myself. Tranq. Not kill, just tranq. I kicked the spider-cat’s face as I rolled past. It snarled like a nightmare and leapt for me. I snatched the gun. Too slow—I needed the shadow—no— The jaguar pounced. I caught it. We wrestled in the Amazon mud, tumbling over each other. It pinned me and ripped my chest—

The shadow loosed. The jaguar’s tail struck. I tore it off. The creature screamed as blood and oil spurted on my legs. I grabbed the tail and crawled away. This thing was fast like me—and bigger. The shadow was outmatched.

Think. I dodged another attack and splashed into the water. Water—it walked on—yes. I dove. Luckily no piranha. The jaguar skittered on the water’s surface—as I thought, it didn’t swim. I swam underneath with its severed tail, almost blind in the murky water. Its feet marked the surface with eight dents.

In one motion, I snagged its left legs and tangled them with the tail. It howled as I swept its right legs into my trap. I tied a knot and shoved upwards. The spider-cat flipped and thrashed in confusion. I found its back and snapped its spine. The thrashing stopped. Its spider-feet broke the water’s surface like a dead flower bouquet. My wounds were already healing. I waded to shore, disgusted with myself. I couldn’t blame this death solely on the shadow.

When I got to Parris, he lay face-down by the water. Still breathing. I checked his wounds. Parts of the suit had gone transparent and sealed. Looked like the jaguar tore his left arm clean off—but the suit bound the severed limb to his torso. I rolled him over. His left side looked like gut soup in

plastic wrap. His rifle lay next to him. His shattered goggles lay in the shallows, where tiny fish explored the fragments.

“Did you get it?” he croaked.

I paused. Finally I admitted, “Yeah. I got it.”

“Thank God,” he said. “That was a monster. That’s what we built. But you—”

“Don’t talk.” I looked at his wound, cursing my medical ignorance. I stripped my thermal loincloth and covered him.

He closed his eyes. I thought I’d lost him. Then he said, “You’re more human than I am.”

“Don’t start that.”

“Stims. Now.”

I dug in his pouch and gave him the pills. He choked them down and said, “Is the gun empty?”

I looked at him, realizing what he thought had happened. “No,” I said slowly. “It’s charged.”

“Good shot,” he said.

I didn’t respond. “We’ve got to get medical help for you.”

“They can’t see us. You fried this place down.”

“There must be a way out.”

“There... there is.”

“Tell me. I’ll take you there.”

He struggled for thought. “Yeah. I’ll take you there,” he echoed, his eyes still closed. “Get the homer off my belt. Little gray box. Follow the signal. I’ll keep talking. Got to keep talking. Stay awake. Just long enough. Ignore me.”

I took the device. I wrapped him in the blanket, hefted him in my arms, and slung him over my back. I picked up the gun and checked the homer. The signal led through already-cleared jungle. I ran—slower than normal, compromising speed with stability.

“Motherfucking bastard,” muttered Parris next to my ear. “Never saw it. Goddamn.” I stopped, deciding whether to vault a fallen tree or go around it. He kept talking. “You saved my life. God. It’s not your fault what you are. You’re a good man. Person. Thing. Whatever.”

I jumped—landing carefully so I wouldn’t jar him. All of this meant something. It had to. My murders, Parris’s injuries—it happened for a reason. Didn’t it? I reviewed my black box, looking for answers.

“Got a boy. He’s, what, seven now. Never see him. Met his mom in the military. Sniper. God, I was fucking good. Top-ranked before the stupid discharge. Military—now they do things right. They’d have nuked this place.”

I wished they had. I avoided a pair of monkeys and a capybara. I didn’t dare get closer.

“I’d get in this killing mode. Shoot without thinking. God, it was a zone. I couldn’t leave it. Everything was real then. Just life and death and one mistake ends it. I don’t know how you do it.”

I skirted an overgrown patch. I could shred it, but didn’t want to risk Parris. I considered what he’d said. “It’s not more real. It’s just unfair.”

“Shit, you’re noble. You want this to mean something. None of it does. Nothing. No one gets another chance. You blow it, you die.”

“It’s part of some pattern—”

“Why? Why the fuck should it be?”

I didn’t have an answer. Parris continued, “There’s no plan. No reason. People are shit. The world is shit. We’ve got dreams and hopes and most of them never happen. Insubordination. Ha! Here I go again. Fuck, my suit’s leaking.”

Something warm dripped on my naked shoulder. Was it true? If there was no reason, it didn’t matter what I did. I could kill anything I liked.

“Listen. Nothing matters. You’re born, do shit, and die. That’s it. Afterlife’s for liars and daydreamers. You hear me? There’s nothing but now. Right now. Seeing things as they happen. God, I thought I was dead here. Maybe I will be.”

If he was right that nothing mattered, then I had no hope. But I could do one thing to make my time worthwhile. I could save Parris. “I won’t let you die,” I told him.

Parris fell silent. I touched his face, but he still breathed. As I rounded a clump of trees, he whispered, “This project was shit from the start.”

The homer brought us to a dead stump buried in weeds. “Stop here,” said Parris. “Put me down. Hand me the gun.”

I did. He said, “This is the checkpoint. Listen—emergency exit’s five meters from here. Under that bent tree.”

I bent to carry him, and he shook his head. “No. Leave me here. I’ll slow you down. Take the homer for ID.”

“What?”

“Go. You’re fast. Take the vents. You’ll be out before they realize it’s not me.”

I looked at him. He was smiling through his pain, embracing the gun. “No,” I said, kneeling in the mud. “I’m not leaving. Go. You need help.”

“Suit’ll keep me another two hours at least. Long enough for them to link in and find me. I’ll tranq anything that moves. Droids are gone anyway. I’ll be fine. Go.”

I stared at him. Parris shouted, “Fucking go! Don’t you get it? They’ll destroy you when they see. Fuck. Should’ve come here. Seen what they built. Get the hell out of here.”

“No!”

“I’m letting you go. Don’t you understand?”

“Don’t you understand? You’ve got to put me down. Tranq me. For everyone’s—”

“What the hell are you on about?”

“—no. Kill me. If they find me tranqed they’ll just strip—me—out of here. They’ll make me what they wanted. You’ve got to tranq me. Then destroy me.”

“Jesus fuck, moron, I’m letting you go. You’re a better person than those bastards who made you. Go. Live.”

He clenched his fists. His aggression triggered me. The shadow rose and my vision glittered. I chose each word carefully—I was barely holding myself together. “Take me out. You’ve got to. For everyone’s—”

“The hell?”

“Please—”

He hugged the gun tighter. A small motion—enough. I jumped him and snapped his neck. Parris slumped, his spine jutting from his suit. I fell to the ground by the gun. I grabbed it to take myself out, but the shadow ruled me. It knotted the rifle and broke it like string. I scattered the ruined pieces—clutched my own neck—but no, the shadow knew. It refused.

I buried him and hated myself. I mounded the last soil over him and lay with my cheek to the grave, my hands and face slick with mud. Ants swarmed me, but I ignored them. Even if I tranqed myself, they’d still have me. Once they linked in, they’d take me out. Reprogram me, most likely. Leaving only the shadow.

What was the point? Why had I lived at all? My awareness, source of my grief—if I could—

I dug into my black box memory—yes, nearby, there it was. My consciousness, like a flame in darkness. I could kill it. Be the shadow, without awareness. Tempting.

But I lived to witness these moments—Parris’s life, and his death, in this fishbowl of a biosphere. This, the mud on my hands—this, the crunch of the jaguar’s spine snapping—this, the feel of Parris’s

body beneath me, when he lived and when he died. These moments were my lifetime. They mattered because I saw them.

I was made to see Parris die. And he was born to teach me.

I arranged the broken pieces of the gun in a monument around me. I sat cross-legged on the mound. Thousands of ant feet tickled my skin. Soon BioMed RevX would link in. They'd find me here, and this time they'd expect me. The shadow would fight. I couldn't stop it. But I could record it—yes, mark each moment until they destroyed me. The black box might survive, or it might not. But my death would have meaning because I witnessed it.

We all have hopes and dreams, and most of them never happen.

### **THE END**

*Vylar Kaftan writes speculative fiction of all genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, and slipstream. Her stories have appeared in Realms of Fantasy, Strange Horizons, ChiZine, and Clarkesworld. Her work has been reprinted in Horror: The Best of the Year, honorably mentioned in The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and shortlisted for the WSFA Small Press Award. A graduate of Clarion West, she's volunteered for that group as well as the Little Owls mentoring program for young writers. She's a member of SFWA, Codex, Broad Universe, and the Carl Brandon Society. You can visit her website at [vylarkaftan.net](http://vylarkaftan.net). She prefers the term "differently sane."*

## **His Master's Voice**

by Hannu Rajaniemi

(Editor's Note: This story first appeared in Interzone #218. It is available in other formats, but Redstone SF is pleased to present the full text of this Sturgeon Award finalist online for the first time.)

Before the concert, we steal the master's head.

The necropolis is a dark forest of concrete mushrooms in the blue Antarctic night. We huddle inside the utility fog bubble attached to the steep southern wall of the nunatak, the ice valley.

The cat washes itself with a pink tongue. It reeks of infinite confidence.

"Get ready," I tell it. "We don't have all night."

It gives me a mildly offended look and dons its armor. The quantum dot fabric envelopes its striped body like living oil. It purrs faintly and tests the diamond-bladed claws against an icy outcropping of rock. The sound grates my teeth and the razor-winged butterflies in my belly wake up. I look at the bright, impenetrable firewall of the city of the dead. It shimmers like chained northern lights in my AR vision.

I decide that it's time to ask the Big Dog to bark. My helmet laser casts a one-nanosecond prayer of light at the indigo sky: just enough to deliver one quantum bit up there into the Wild. Then we wait. My tail wags and a low growl builds up in my belly.

Right on schedule, it starts to rain red fractal code. My augmented reality vision goes down, unable to process the dense torrent of information falling upon the necropolis firewall like monsoon rain. The chained aurora borealis flicker and vanish.

"Go!" I shout at the cat, wild joy exploding in me, the joy of running after the Small Animal of my dreams. "Go now!"

The cat leaps into the void. The wings of the armor open and grab the icy wind, and the cat rides the draft down like a grinning Chinese kite.

\* \* \*

It's difficult to remember the beginning now. There were no words then, just sounds and smells: metal and brine, the steady drumming of waves against pontoons. And there were three perfect things in the world: my bowl, the Ball, and the Master's firm hand on my neck.

I know now that the Place was an old oil rig that the Master had bought. It smelled bad when we arrived, stinging oil and chemicals. But there were hiding places, secret nooks and crannies. There was a helicopter landing pad where the Master threw the ball for me. It fell into the sea many times, but the Master's bots — small metal dragonflies — always fetched it when I couldn't.

The Master was a god. When he was angry, his voice was an invisible whip. His smell was a god-smell that filled the world.

While he worked, I barked at the seagulls or stalked the cat. We fought a few times, and I still have a pale scar on my nose. But we developed an understanding. The dark places of the rig belonged to the cat, and I reigned over the deck and the sky: we were the Hades and Apollo of the Master's realm.

But at night, when the Master watched old movies or listened to records on his old rattling gramophone we lay at his feet together. Sometimes the Master smelled lonely and let me sleep next to him in his small cabin, curled up in the god-smell and warmth.

It was a small world, but it was all we knew.

The Master spent a lot of time working, fingers dancing on the keyboard projected on his mahogany desk. And every night he went to the Room: the only place on the rig where I wasn't allowed.

It was then that I started to dream about the Small Animal. I remember its smell even now, alluring and inexplicable: buried bones and fleeing rabbits, irresistible.

In my dreams, I chased it along a sandy beach, a tasty trail of tiny footprints that I followed along bendy pathways and into tall grass. I never lost sight of it for more than a second: it was always a flash of white fur just at the edge of my vision.

One day it spoke to me.

"Come," it said. "Come and learn."

The Small Animal's island was full of lost places. Labyrinthine caves, lines drawn in sand that became words when I looked at them, smells that sang songs from the master's gramophone. It taught me, and I learned: I was more awake every time I woke up. And when I saw the cat looking at the spiderbots with a new awareness, I knew that it, too, went to a place at night.

I came to understand what the Master said when he spoke. The sounds that had only meant angry or happy before became the word of my god. He noticed, smiled, and ruffled my fur. After that he started speaking to us more, me and the cat, during the long evenings when the sea beyond the windows was black as oil and the waves made the whole rig ring like a bell. His voice was dark as a well, deep and gentle. He spoke of an island, his home, an island in the middle of a great sea. I smelled bitterness, and for the first time I understood that there were always words behind words, never spoken.

\* \* \*

The cat catches the updraft perfectly: it floats still for a split second, and then clings to the side of the tower. Its claws put the smart concrete to sleep: code that makes the building think that the cat is a bird or a shard of ice carried by the wind.

The cat hisses and spits. The disassembler nanites from its stomach cling to the wall and start eating a round hole in it. The wait is excruciating. The cat locks the exomuscles of its armor and hangs there patiently. Finally, there is a mouth with jagged edges in the wall, and it slips in. My heart

pounds as I switch from the AR view to the cat's iris cameras. It moves through the ventilation shaft like lightning, like an acrobat, jerky, hyperaccelerated movements, metabolism on overdrive. My tail twitches again. We are coming, master, I think. We are coming.

\* \* \*

I lost my ball the day the wrong master came.

I looked everywhere. I spent an entire day sniffing every corner and even braved the dark corridors of the cat's realm beneath the deck, but I could not find it. In the end, I got hungry and returned to the cabin. And there were two masters. Four hands stroking my coat. Two gods, true and false.

I barked. I did not know what to do. The cat looked at me with a mixture of pity and disdain and rubbed itself on both of their legs.

"Calm down," said one of the masters. "Calm down. There are four of us now."

I learned to tell them apart, eventually: by that time Small Animal had taught me to look beyond smells and appearances. The master I remembered was a middle-aged man with graying hair, stocky-bodied. The new master was young, barely a man, much slimmer and with the face of a mahogany cherub. The master tried to convince me to play with the new master, but I did not want to. His smell was too familiar, everything else too alien. In my mind, I called him the wrong master.

The two masters worked together, walked together and spent a lot of time talking together using words I did not understand. I was jealous. Once I even bit the wrong master. I was left on the deck for the night as a punishment, even though it was stormy and I was afraid of thunder. The cat, on the other hand, seemed to thrive in the wrong master's company, and I hated it for it.

I remember the first night the masters argued.

"Why did you do it?" asked the wrong master.

"You know," said the master. "You remember." His tone was dark. "Because someone has to show them we own ourselves."

"So, you own me?" said the wrong master. "Is that what you think?"

"Of course not," said the master. "Why do you say that?"

"Someone could claim that. You took a genetic algorithm and told it to make ten thousand of you, with random variations, pick the ones that would resemble your ideal son, the one you could love. Run until the machine runs out of capacity. Then print. It's illegal, you know. For a reason."

"That's not what the plurals think. Besides, this is my place. The only laws here are mine."

"You've been talking to the plurals too much. They are no longer human."

"You sound just like VecTech's PR bots."



“I sound like you. Your doubts. Are you sure you did the right thing? I’m not a Pinocchio. You are not a Gepetto.”

The master was quiet for a long time.

“What if I am,” he finally said. “Maybe we need Gepettos. Nobody creates anything new anymore, let alone wooden dolls that come to life. When I was young, we all thought something wonderful was on the way. Diamond children in the sky, angels out of machines. Miracles. But we gave up just before the blue fairy came.”

“I am not your miracle.”

“Yes, you are.”

“You should at least have made yourself a woman,” said the wrong master in a knife-like voice. “It might have been less frustrating.”

I did not hear the blow, I felt it. The wrong master let out a cry, rushed out and almost stumbled on me. The master watched him go. His lips moved, but I could not hear the words. I wanted to comfort him and made a little sound, but he did not even look at me, went back to the cabin and locked the door. I scratched the door, but he did not open, and I went up to the deck to look for the Ball again.

\* \* \*

Finally, the cat finds the master’s chamber.

It is full of heads. They float in the air, bodiless, suspended in diamond cylinders. The tower executes the command we sent into its drugged nervous system, and one of the pillars begins to blink. Master, master, I sing quietly as I see the cold blue face beneath the diamond. But at the same time I know it’s not the master, not yet.

The cat reaches out with its prosthetic. The smart surface yields like a soap bubble. “Careful now, careful,” I say. The cat hisses angrily but obeys, spraying the head with preserver nanites and placing it gently into its gel-lined backpack.

The necropolis is finally waking up: the damage the heavenly hacker did has almost been repaired. The cat heads for its escape route and goes to quicktime again. I feel its staccato heartbeat through our sensory link.

It is time to turn out the lights. My eyes polarise to sunglass-black. I lift the gauss launcher, marvelling at the still tender feel of the Russian hand grafts. I pull the trigger. The launcher barely twitches in my grip, and a streak of light shoots up to the sky. The nuclear payload is tiny, barely a decaton, not even a proper plutonium warhead but a hafnium micronuke. But it is enough to light a small sun above the mausoleum city for a moment, enough for a focused maser pulse that makes it as dead as its inhabitants for a moment.

The light is a white blow, almost tangible in its intensity, and the gorge looks like it is made of bright ivory. White noise hisses in my ears like the cat when it’s angry.

\* \* \*

For me, smells were not just sensations, they were my reality. I know now that that is not far from the truth: smells are molecules, parts of what they represent.

The wrong master smelled wrong. It confused me at first: almost a god-smell, but not quite, the smell of a fallen god.

And he did fall, in the end.

I slept on the master's couch when it happened. I woke up to bare feet shuffling on the carpet and heavy breathing, torn away from a dream of the Little Animal trying to teach me the multiplication table.

The wrong master looked at me.

"Good boy," he said. "Ssh." I wanted to bark, but the godlike smell was too strong. And so I just wagged my tail, slowly, uncertainly. The wrong master sat on the couch next to me and scratched my ears absently.

"I remember you," he said. "I know why he made you. A living childhood memory." He smiled and smelled friendlier than ever before. "I know how that feels." Then he sighed, got up and went into the Room. And then I knew that he was about to do something bad, and started barking as loudly as I could. The master woke up and when the wrong master returned, he was waiting.

"What have you done?" he asked, face chalk-white.

The wrong master gave him a defiant look. "Just what you'd have done. You're the criminal, not me. Why should I suffer? You don't own me."

"I could kill you," said the master, and his anger made me whimper with fear. "I could tell them I was you. They would believe me."

"Yes," said the wrong master. "But you are not going to."

The master sighed. "No," he said. "I'm not."

\* \* \*

I take the dragonfly over the cryotower. I see the cat on the roof and whimper from relief. The plane lands lightly. I'm not much of a pilot, but the lobotomised mind of the daimon — an illegal copy of a 21st Century jet ace — is. The cat climbs in, and we shoot towards the stratosphere at Mach 5, wind caressing the plane's quantum dot skin.

"Well done," I tell the cat and wag my tail. It looks at me with yellow slanted eyes and curls up on its acceleration gel bed. I look at the container next to it. Is that a wiff of the god-smell or is it just my imagination?

In any case, it is enough to make me curl up in deep happy dog-sleep, and for the first time in years I dream of the Ball and the Small Animal, sliding down the ballistic orbit's steep back.

\* \* \*

They came from the sky before the sunrise. The master went up on the deck wearing a suit that smelled new. He had the cat in his lap: it purred quietly. The wrong master followed, hands behind his back.

There were three machines, black-shelled scarabs with many legs and transparent wings. They came in low, raising a white-frothed wake behind them. The hum of their wings hurt my ears as they landed on the deck.

The one in the middle vomited a cloud of mist that shimmered in the dim light, swirled in the air and became a black-skinned woman who had no smell. By then I had learned that things without a smell could still be dangerous, so I barked at her until the master told me to be quiet.

"Mr. Takeshi," she said. "You know why we are here."

The master nodded.

"You don't deny your guilt?"

"I do," said the master. "This raft is technically a sovereign state, governed by my laws. Autogenesis is not a crime here."

"This raft was a sovereign state," said the woman. "Now it belongs to VecTech. Justice is swift, Mr. Takeshi. Our lawbots broke your constitution ten seconds after Mr. Takeshi here —" she nodded at the wrong master — "told us about his situation. After that, we had no choice. The WIPO quantum judge we consulted has condemned you to the slow zone for three hundred and fourteen years, and as the wronged party we have been granted execution rights in this matter. Do you have anything to say before we act?"

The master looked at the wrong master, face twisted like a mask of wax. Then he set the cat down gently and scratched my ears. "Look after them," he told the wrong master. "I'm ready."

The beetle in the middle moved, too fast for me to see. The master's grip on the loose skin on my neck tightened for a moment like my mother's teeth, and then let go. Something warm splattered on my coat and there was a dark, deep smell of blood in the air.

Then he fell. I saw his head in a floating soap bubble that one of the beetles swallowed. Another opened its belly for the wrong master. And then they were gone, and the cat and I were alone on the bloody deck.

\* \* \*

The cat wakes me up when we dock with the Marquis of Carabas. The zeppelin swallows our dragonfly drone like a whale. It is a crystal cigar, and its nanospun sapphire spine glows faint blue. The Fast City is a sky full of neon stars six kilometers below us, anchored to the airship with

elevator cables. I can see the liftspiders climbing them, far below, and sigh with relief. The guests are still arriving, and we are not too late. I keep my personal firewall clamped shut: I know there is a torrent of messages waiting beyond.

We rush straight to the lab. I prepare the scanner while the cat takes the master's head out very, very carefully. The fractal bush of the scanner comes out of its nest, molecule-sized disassembler fingers bristling. I have to look away when it starts eating the master's face. I cheat and flee to VR, to do what I do best.

After half an hour, we are ready. The nanofab spits out black plastic discs, and the airship drones ferry them to the concert hall. The metallic butterflies in my belly return, and we head for the make-up salon. The Sergeant is already there, waiting for us: judging by the cigarette stumps on the floor, he has been waiting for a while. I wrinkle my nose at the stench.

"You are late," says our manager. "I hope you know what the hell you are doing. This show's got more digs than the Turin clone's birthday party."

"That's the idea," I say and let Anette spray me with cosmetic fog. It tickles and makes me sneeze, and I give the cat a jealous look: as usual, it is perfectly at home with its own image consultant. "We are more popular than Jesus."

They get the DJs on in a hurry, made by the last human tailor on Saville Row. "This'll be a good skin," says Anette. "Mahogany with a touch of purple." She goes on, but I can't hear. The music is already in my head. The master's voice.

\* \* \*

The cat saved me.

I don't know if it meant to do it or not: even now, I have a hard time understanding it. It hissed at me, its back arched. Then it jumped forward and scratched my nose: it burned like a piece of hot coal. That made me mad, weak as I was. I barked furiously and chased the cat around the deck. Finally, I collapsed, exhausted, and realised that I was hungry. The autokitchen down in the master's cabin still worked, and I knew how to ask for food. But when I came back, the master's body was gone: the waste disposal bots had thrown it into the sea. That's when I knew that he would not be coming back.

I curled up in his bed alone that night: the god-smell that lingered there was all I had. That, and the Small Animal.

It came to me that night on the dreamshore, but I did not chase it this time. It sat on the sand, looked at me with its little red eyes and waited.

"Why?" I asked. "Why did they take the master?"

"You wouldn't understand," it said. "Not yet."

"I want to understand. I want to know."

“All right,” it said. “Everything you do, remember, think, smell — everything — leaves traces, like footprints in the sand. And it’s possible to read them. Imagine that you follow another dog: you know where it has eaten and urinated and everything else it has done. The humans can do that to the mindprints. They can record them and make another you inside a machine, like the scentless screenpeople that your master used to watch. Except that the screendog will think it’s you.”

“Even though it has no smell?” I asked, confused.

“It thinks it does. And if you know what you’re doing, you can give it a new body as well. You could die and the copy would be so good that no one can tell the difference. Humans have been doing it for a long time. Your master was one of the first, a long time ago. Far away, there are a lot of humans with machine bodies, humans who never die, humans with small bodies and big bodies, depending on how much they can afford to pay, people who have died and come back.”

I tried to understand: without the smells, it was difficult. But its words awoke a mad hope.

“Does it mean that the master is coming back?” I asked, panting.

“No. Your master broke human law. When people discovered the pawprints of the mind, they started making copies of themselves. Some made many, more than the grains of sand on the beach. That caused chaos. Every machine, every device everywhere, had mad dead minds in them. The plurals, people called them, and were afraid. And they had their reasons to be afraid. Imagine that your Place had a thousand dogs, but only one Ball.”

My ears flopped at the thought.

“That’s how humans felt,” said the Small Animal. “And so they passed a law: only one copy per person. The humans — VecTech — who had invented how to make copies mixed watermarks into people’s minds, rights management software that was supposed to stop the copying. But some humans — like your master — found out how to erase them.”

“The wrong master,” I said quietly.

“Yes,” said the Small Animal. “He did not want to be an illegal copy. He turned your master in.”

“I want the master back,” I said, anger and longing beating their wings in my chest like caged birds.

“And so does the cat,” said the Small Animal gently. And it was only then that I saw the cat there, sitting next to me on the beach, eyes glimmering in the sun. It looked at me and let out a single conciliatory meow.

\* \* \*

After that, the Small Animal was with us every night, teaching.

Music was my favorite. The Small Animal showed me how I could turn music into smells and find patterns in it, like the tracks of huge, strange animals. I studied the master’s old records and the vast libraries of his virtual desk, and learned to remix them into smells that I found pleasant.

I don't remember which one of us came up with the plan to save the master. Maybe it was the cat: I could only speak to it properly on the island of dreams, and see its thoughts appear as patterns on the sand. Maybe it was the Small Animal, maybe it was me. After all the nights we spent talking about it, I no longer know. But that's where it began, on the island: that's where we became arrows fired at a target.

Finally, we were ready to leave. The master's robots and nanofac spun us an open-source glider, a white-winged bird.

In my last dream the Small Animal said goodbye. It hummed to itself when I told it about our plans.

"Remember me in your dreams," it said.

"Are you not coming with us?" I asked, bewildered.

"My place is here," it said. "And it's my turn to sleep now, and to dream."

"Who are you?"

"Not all the plurals disappeared. Some of them fled to space, made new worlds there. And there is a war on, even now. Perhaps you will join us there, one day, where the big dogs live."

It laughed. "For old times' sake?" It dived into the waves and started running, became a great proud dog with a white coat, muscles flowing like water. And I followed, for one last time.

The sky was grey when we took off. The cat flew the plane using a neural interface, goggles over its eyes. We swept over the dark waves and were underway. The raft became a small dirty spot in the sea. I watched it recede and realised that I'd never found my Ball.

Then there was a thunderclap and a dark pillar of water rose up to the sky from where the raft had been. I didn't mourn: I knew that the Small Animal wasn't there anymore.

\* \* \*

The sun was setting when we came to the Fast City.

I knew what to expect from the Small Animal's lessons, but I could not imagine what it would be like. Mile-high skyscrapers that were self-contained worlds, with their artificial plasma suns and bonsai parks and miniature shopping malls. Each of them housed a billion lilliputs, poor and quick: humans whose consciousness lived in a nanocomputer smaller than a fingertip. Immortals who could not afford to utilise the resources of the overpopulated Earth more than a mouse. The city was surrounded by a halo of glowing fairies, tiny winged moravecs that flitted about like humanoid fireflies and the waste heat from their overclocked bodies draped the city in an artificial twilight.

The citymind steered us to a landing area. It was fortunate that the cat was flying: I just stared at the buzzing things with my mouth open, afraid I'd drown into the sounds and the smells.

We sold our plane for scrap and wandered into the bustle of the city, feeling like daikaju monsters. The social agents that the Small Animal had given me were obsolete, but they could still weave us into the ambient social networks. We needed money, we needed work.

And so I became a musician.

\* \* \*

The ballroom is a hemisphere in the center of the airship. It is filled to capacity. Innumerable quickbeings shimmer in the air like living candles, and the suits of the fleshed ones are no less exotic. A woman clad in nothing but autumn leaves smiles at me. Tinkerbell clones surround the cat. Our bodyguards, armed obsidian giants, open a way for us to the stage where the gramophones wait. A rustle moves through the crowd. The air around us is pregnant with ghosts, the avatars of a million fleshless fans. I wag my tail. The scentspace is intoxicating: perfume, fleshbodies, the unsmells of moravec bodies. And the fallen god smell of the wrong master, hiding somewhere within.

We get on the stage on our hindlegs, supported by prosthesis shoes. The gramophone forest looms behind us, their horns like flowers of brass and gold. We cheat, of course: the music is analog and the gramophones are genuine, but the grooves in the black discs are barely a nanometer thick, and the needles are tipped with quantum dots.

We take our bows and the storm of handclaps begins.

“Thank you,” I say when the thunder of it finally dies. “We have kept quiet about the purpose of this concert as long as possible. But I am finally in a position to tell you that this is a charity show.”

I smell the tension in the air, copper and iron.

“We miss someone,” I say. “He was called Shimoda Takeshi, and now he’s gone.”

The cat lifts the conductor’s baton and turns to face the gramophones. I follow, and step into the soundspace we’ve built, the place where music is smells and sounds.

The master is in the music.

\* \* \*

It took five human years to get to the top. I learned to love the audiences: I could smell their emotions and create a mix of music for them that was just right. And soon I was no longer a giant dog DJ among lilliputs, but a little terrier in a forest of dancing human legs. The cat’s gladiator career lasted a while, but soon it joined me as a performer in the virtual dramas I designed. We performed for rich fleshies in the Fast City, Tokyo and New York. I loved it. I howled at Earth in the sky in the Sea of Tranquility.

But I always knew that it was just the first phase of the Plan.

\* \* \*

We turn him into music. VecTech owns his brain, his memories, his mind. But we own the music.

Law is code. A billion people listening to our master's voice. Billion minds downloading the Law At Home packets embedded in it, bombarding the quantum judges until they give him back.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever made. The cat stalks the genetic algorithm jungle, lets the themes grow and then pounces them, devours them. I just chase them for the joy of the chase alone, not caring whether or not I catch them.

It's our best show ever.

Only when it's over, I realise that no one is listening. The audience is frozen. The fairies and the fastpeople float in the air like flies trapped in amber. The moravecs are silent statues. Time stands still.

The sound of one pair of hands, clapping.

"I'm proud of you," says the wrong master.

I fix my bow tie and smile a dog's smile, a cold snake coiling in my belly. The godsmell comes and tells me that I should throw myself onto the floor, wag my tail, bare my throat to the divine being standing before me.

But I don't.

"Hello, Nipper," the wrong master says.

I clamp down the low growl rising in my throat and turn it into words.

"What did you do?"

"We suspended them. Back doors in the hardware. Digital rights management."

His mahogany face is still smooth: he does not look a day older, wearing a dark suit with a VecTech tie pin. But his eyes are tired.

"Really, I'm impressed. You covered your tracks admirably. We thought you were furies. Until I realised — "

A distant thunder interrupts him.

"I promised him I'd look after you. That's why you are still alive. You don't have to do this. You don't owe him anything. Look at yourselves: who would have thought you could come this far? Are you going to throw that all away because of some atavistic sense of animal loyalty?"

"Not that you have a choice, of course. The plan didn't work."

The cat lets out a steam pipe hiss.



“You misunderstand,” I say. “The concert was just a diversion.”

The cat moves like a black-and-yellow flame. Its claws flash, and the wrong master’s head comes off. I whimper at the aroma of blood polluting the godsmell. The cat licks its lips. There is a crimson stain on its white shirt.

The zeppelin shakes, pseudomatter armor sparkling. The dark sky around the Marquis is full of fire-breathing beetles. We rush past the human statues in the ballroom and into the laboratory.

The cat does the dirty work, granting me a brief escape into virtual abstraction. I don’t know how the master did it, years ago, broke VecTech’s copy protection watermarks. I can’t do the same, no matter how much the Small Animal taught me. So I have to cheat, recover the marked parts from somewhere else.

The wrong master’s brain.

The part of me that was born on the Small Animal’s island takes over and fits the two patterns together, like pieces of a puzzle. They fit, and for a brief moment, the master’s voice is in my mind, for real this time.

The cat is waiting, already in its clawed battlesuit, and I don my own. The Marquis of Carabas is dying around us. To send the master on his way, we have to disengage the armor.

The cat meows faintly and hands me something red. An old plastic ball with toothmarks, smelling of the sun and the sea, with few grains of sand rattling inside.

“Thanks,” I say. The cat says nothing, just opens a door into the zeppelin’s skin. I whisper a command, and the master is underway in a neutrino stream, shooting up towards an island in a blue sea. Where the gods and big dogs live forever.

We dive through the door together, down into the light and flame.

## **THE END**

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## **Things That Go Bump in the “Might”: SciFi’s Scary Stories**

by Henry Cribbs

October First is traditionally the day my children insist on hauling the Halloween decorations out of the attic. As they get older, the ornaments get spookier and the costumes get scarier, so that our house is no longer about Trick-or-Treat... Now it’s about Freak-and-Fright. And I have to admit I like it that way. It seems appropriate to terrify ourselves as this half of the world turns its face from the light of day, and the vegetation starts to die its little death, leaving bare-barked skeletal silhouettes outlined against the lunar disk. That’s why I think most cultures dance with the dead in some way or other around mid-autumn. Whether it be All Hallow’s Eve, Dia de los Muertes, Samhain, or the over-commercialized modern Halloween, as winter’s deathly chill draws nigh we seem to have a instinctual need to remind ourselves that the world can be rather scary.

So it’s a perfect time for reading horror stories. And the best horror for that purpose can be found in science fiction.

I’m sure my saying this will cause vampire junkies to roll over in their wannabe graves and also raise the hackles of werewolf-philes, but I believe it is true, for this simple reason: an evil of humankind’s own making is much scarier than some thing that goes bump in the night. In portraying worlds that might actually be possible, scifi shows us that the real world is, in fact, very frightening – not by positing inherently evil supernatural beings, but instead by showing us the sometimes very real evils which lurk within ourselves.

So in honor of the forthcoming holiday of horrors, I reread three of what I consider to be some of the best classic scifi horror novels ever: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, H.G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man*, and H.P. Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness*. All three show us just how scary a world we humans are capable of creating.

### **Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus (1818)**

Mary Shelley penned what is often dubbed the first science fiction novel, and what is also one of the earliest horror novels. If all you know about Frankenstein is from film – either the classic black-and-white with Boris Karloff or the more recent one with Bobby DeNiro – you will find the original text is something quite different. Shelley uses a traditional epistolary format, having the story documented through the letters and journal entries of Walton, the leader of a sailing expedition to “unexplored regions” of the Arctic, after he encounters a lone figure in the icy waste. This tactic lends verisimilitude to the tale.

The basic story I’m sure everyone knows. A scientist brings to life a man who becomes an uncontrollable monster. Frankenstein (the name of the scientist, not the monster, as many erroneously think) describes that fateful night: “With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.”

This is, above all, a tale of hubris, expressed by Frankenstein thus: “When I reflected on the work I had completed, no less a one than the creation of a sensitive and rational animal, I could not rank

myself with the herd of common projectors. But this thought, which supported me in the commencement of my career, now serves only to plunge me lower in the dust. All my speculations and hopes are as nothing, and like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell. My imagination was vivid, yet my powers of analysis and application were intense; by the union of these qualities I conceived the idea and executed the creation of a man.... I trod heaven in my thoughts, now exulting in my powers, now burning with the idea of their effects. From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition; but how am I sunk!"

This trope of a man-made monster run amok goes back at least as far as the golem in Jewish legend, and a similar idea is also found in Goethe's 1797 poem "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (which Disney later adapted into the Fantasia short), but Shelley's is the first version which relies upon a scientific explanation rather than mysticism or magic. The idea of artificial intelligent life which throws off the yoke of its creator has since appeared in numerous other scifi novels, including Edgar Rice Burroughs' Synthetic Men of Mars, Isaac Asimov's Robot series, and Marge Piercy's He, She, and It (1991), as well as in film media, such as Wargames (1983), and the Terminator film series.

The monster begins his strange life as noble and good, desiring only companionship and acceptance. It is his rejection by not just his creator but by all of society which drives him to violence and revenge. One almost sympathizes with the wretched creature, who in his own words explains, "Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I, then, a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?" The nameless monster is thus man-made in two senses: he has been literally created by Frankenstein, but his monstrosity comes from the actions of the men and women he encounters. The evil ascribed to the creature thus becomes merely a reflection of and a reaction to the wickedness found in humanity itself. And what could be more terrifying than ourselves?

### **The Invisible Man: A Grotesque Romance (1897)**

H.G. Wells' The Invisible Man's premise, like Frankenstein's, is not new. The main idea goes back over two-thousand years, to a story recounted in Plato's Republic, in which Gyges, a shepherd, finds a ring capable of making one invisible, and uses it to sneak into the palace, sleep with the king's wife, kill the king, and become king himself. This tale is used to argue that even the seemingly best person would be shown to be in truth corrupt: "Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men." (Republic, Book II)

This sounds extraordinarily like Griffin, the title figure from H.G. Wells' story. Rather than find a magic ring, Griffin, a scientist, develops "a method by which it would be possible, without changing any other property of matter—except, in some instances colours—to lower the refractive index of a substance, solid or liquid, to that of air", thus making it – or him – invisible. One can easily trace Griffin's rapid corruption after he bestows this power upon himself. "Whatever I did, whatever the consequences might be, was nothing to me. I had merely to fling aside my garments and vanish. No

person could hold me. I could take my money where I found it.” He progresses from simple thieving, to arson, assault and battery, murder, and finally plans for world domination. Speaking of himself in third person, Griffin boasts, “And that Invisible Man . . . must now establish a Reign of Terror. Yes; no doubt it’s startling. But I mean it. A Reign of Terror. He must take some town like your Burdock and terrify and dominate it. He must issue his orders. He can do that in a thousand ways—scraps of paper thrust under doors would suffice. And all who disobey his orders he must kill, and kill all who would defend them.”

Like Shelley’s story also, *The Invisible Man* spawned various retellings, including the black-and-white film version of the same title with Claude Rains (1933) and the Kevin Bacon modernization *Hollow Man* (2000). However, these film versions blame the corruption and violence of the invisible man on certain adverse reactions to the chemicals used in the transformation. Even Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (clearly influenced by the tale of Gyges) blames the corruption of the Ring’s wearers on the evil supernatural influence of Sauron who created It, rather than on the true evil which lies deep within one’s own self. H.G. Wells’ story is much more true to Plato’s parable, and thus is much more frightening, for it shows us the selfishness and wickedness, which lurks in everyone, waiting only the right circumstance to emerge.

### **At the Mountains of Madness (1936)**

H.P. Lovecraft’s novella *At the Mountains of Madness* is a landmark in its author’s career. It marks the point at which Lovecraft’s earlier weird tales suddenly are ‘retconned’ into science fiction. Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi calls this science-fictionization of the formerly supernatural elements of Lovecraft’s fiction ‘demythology.’

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, all of the supernatural creatures of his previous works which have become collectively called the ‘Cthulhu Mythos’ are revealed to be either aliens or the constructs of aliens, and even the *Necronomicon*, that famed and frightful fictional text referred to in earlier stories, turns out to derive from fragmented prehistoric racial memories of primal humans uplifted by the ancient alien civilization known as the Old Ones.

The story is set in Antarctica, which even today is largely unexplored, providing a ‘final frontier’ for scientific exploration – and for science fiction. The southernmost continent has been used as a setting for a number of scifi films for precisely that reason. The *X-Files* movie and *Alien vs Predator* are just two recent examples in Lovecraft’s tradition of finding traces of ancient alien civilizations there. (FYI: Director Guillermo del Toro has long been planning a film version of *At the Mountains of Madness*, and though *Redstone*’s devoted readers will know of my mixed feelings regarding film adaptations of classic scifi, I have to say I’m looking forward to it.) The narrator Dyer, a geologist, has returned from a scientific expedition (sponsored by Miskatonic University, of course) which set out with high tech drilling equipment to procure rock and soil specimens from deep beneath the Antarctic ice. But now that a new expedition has been planned for the same region, Dyer is forced to reveal what they really found in order to warn away would-be explorers, to prevent dire consequences for the entire human race should the area beyond the polar mountains be further disturbed.

Lovecraft shares the epistolary tradition of Shelley, but provides a contemporary updating of it. Instead of the story being told through letters and journals, Dyer includes quotes from radio broadcasts which were relayed back to New England by his expedition. Dyer is hesitant to speak too plainly, hinting at more than he reveals, and suggesting the ultimate ineffability of what he wishes

to explain. Lovecraft's cryptic style thus creates a subtle Hitchcockian-type suspense of mood and imagery, as the following excerpt illustrates: "The touch of evil mystery in these barrier mountains, and in the beckoning sea of opalescent sky glimpsed betwixt their summits, was a highly subtle and attenuated matter not to be explained in literal words. Rather was it an affair of vague psychological symbolism and aesthetic association—a thing mixed up with exotic poetry and paintings, and with archaic myths lurking in shunned and forbidden volumes. Even the wind's burden held a peculiar strain of conscious malignity; and for a second it seemed that the composite sound included a bizarre musical whistling or piping over a wide range as the blast swept in and out of the omnipresent and resonant cave mouths."

Of course, after plentiful pages of such pleasantly poetic prose, one begins to wonder if anything will ever be revealed, and whether the reader will ever find out just exactly what caused Dyer's companion, Danforth, to lose his sanity. I won't spoil that little mystery, but I will give an example of one of the horrors Lovecraft describes: "It was the utter, objective embodiment of the fantastic novelist's 'thing that should not be'; and its nearest comprehensible analogue is a vast, onrushing subway train as one sees it from a station platform—the great black front looming colossally out of infinite subterranean distance, constellated with strangely colored lights and filling the prodigious burrow as a piston fills a cylinder. But we were not on a station platform. We were on the track ahead as the nightmare, plastic column of fetid black iridescence oozed tightly onward through its fifteen-foot sinus, gathering unholy speed and driving before it a spiral, rethickening cloud of the pallid abyss vapor. It was a terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train—a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light all over the tunnel-filling front that bore down upon us, crushing the frantic penguins and slithering over the glistening floor that it and its kind had swept so evilly free of all litter. Still came that eldritch, mocking cry—"Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!"

Now with such uncanny aliens rather than humans being the horrors of the story, one might think *At the Mountains of Madness* may not be the best example to use to support my earlier claim that sci-fi horror shows us what is terrifying in ourselves. This 'thing that should not be' seems not that much different than a 'thing that goes bump in the night,' an evil that perhaps isn't supernatural since it is explained scientifically, but which certainly isn't human and which therefore doesn't really tell us anything scary about human nature. But bear with me.

Joshi describes Lovecraft's 'cosmic' philosophy as one "wherein mankind and the world are but a flyspeck amidst the vortices of infinite space" and says that what we are to derive from it is "a brutal sense of mankind's hopelessly infinitesimal place in the cosmic scheme of things." That may indeed be the idea Lovecraft wished to impart. However, it's been 75 years since *At the Mountains of Madness* was written, and given developments in genetic engineering, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and other fields, I think rather than seeing us as insignificant compared to the Old Ones, we should perhaps start to see ourselves as potentially being the Old Ones. The Old Ones created servants for themselves by altering the very fabric of primitive organisms they found on Earth, but those servants ultimately turned upon their creators and drove them to extinction. It's Frankenstein all over again. As an allegory for humanity, the lesson of the Old Ones is not that we humans are insignificant. It's that we might make ourselves insignificant through our hubris.

Indeed, all three of the novels discussed here seem to have that same message. By exploring how abuse of scientific advances can result in self-created horrors, science fiction – especially sci-fi horror – reminds us to be careful and thoughtful in our use of science and technology, for careless and thoughtless use may lead to our destruction. We might well be our own worst enemy.

And that is scary, don't you think?

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*About the Author: Henry Cribbs somehow managed to sneak his science-fiction poem about Schrödinger's cat into the literary art journal Lake Effect, and has also published book reviews for Philosophical Psychology, Chicago Literary Review, and Black Warrior Review. He taught philosophy and creative writing at the University of South Carolina for several years, and now forces his high school English students to read Ray Bradbury. He currently serves on the editorial board for Nimrod International Journal of Prose and Poetry.*

## **An Interview with Vylar Kaftan**

*by Michael Ray*

We are excited to have the opportunity to publish Vylar Kaftan's "Witness" in RSF #5. It is excellent writing and just the type of dense, intelligent, and exciting short story we want for Redstone SF. She also took out some time to answer a few questions for us, which we'll share with you here.

We always wonder why writers write. What drives you to write speculative fiction?  
An endless sense of wonder, the desire to evoke passion in my readers, and sheer masochism.

What themes do you find yourself examining in your work?  
Power. Who's got it, who wants it, who needs it. In "Witness," you can see the two characters (three, if you count the shadow) swap power levels in different ways. They change their physical strength & health, who controls the weapon, who possesses knowledge/self-awareness, and so on. Other common themes are self-awareness, the healing power of love, and the dangers of blindly following authority.

The protagonist of "Witness" struggles against his nature, against what he is supposed to be. What influenced you to write this story?

A picture of a nude woman sleeping on a beanbag. I'm part of an online writing group called Codex. Each year, we exchange story seeds and write a story inspired by what we were given. One year, we got our pick of 15 different photographs, with random scenes/people/events. I started thinking, "Hmm, how can I make beanbags more interesting?" This is the result.

What part of your nature do you have to overcome?  
Perfectionism. Also, the urge to write snarky answers to interview questions.

What work should we expect to see from you in the near future?  
I've got work forthcoming in GigaNotoSaurus (a site dedicated to longer fiction) and The Way of the Wizard (an anthology from John Joseph Adams). Both stories are the same kind of happy bunny sunshine work as "Witness," but if you need proof that I'm sane and stable, you can always check out Lightspeed Magazine to see some optimism.

Thanks for sharing your time (and your excellent story) with Redstone Science Fiction.

## **An Interview with John Joseph Adams**

*by Michael Ray*

John Joseph Adams rocks. He is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead* (a World Fantasy Award finalist), *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, and *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Barnes & Noble.com named him “the reigning king of the anthology world,” and his books have been named to numerous best of the year lists. His latest books are *The Living Dead 2* and *The Way of the Wizard*. He is also the fiction editor of the science fiction magazine *Lightspeed*, and he worked for nearly nine years in the editorial department at *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

We were lucky enough to get to ask Mr. Adams a few questions about his editing career and were rewarded with some excellent answers.

### **You joined Fantasy & Science Fiction not long after college. What led you to seek work there and how did working with Gordon Van Gelder influence your editing?**

When I went to college, I wanted to be a writer, so I majored in creative writing (common mistake of writers everywhere), but in the course of my studies, I participated in several writing workshops, which lead me to discover my affinity for editing. After graduating, I intended to continue writing, and did for a while, but at the same time, I knew I’d have to get a day job, so I thought that what would be ideal was to get a job working in publishing. I’d lived in Florida for most of my life, and went to the University of Central Florida, but I was born and still had family in New Jersey, so I made plans to move back up north, since that’s where almost all the publishing jobs are. As it happened, my grandparents were getting to the stage where they could use some help with day-to-day things, so I moved back to Perth Amboy to live with and take care of them and to pursue a career in writing and editing.

I first discovered F&SF in the *Writer’s Market* directory, and noted it as one of the top markets for sf/fantasy short stories. I later discovered it in a Books-a-Million bookstore I worked at while in school, and started reading it regularly, along with *Asimov’s* and *Analog*. I had formulated a plan that these three magazines were how I would break into publishing. Looking back on it in retrospect, it seems like a ridiculous notion, but I’m glad that I didn’t think that then and went ahead with my crazy scheme. Anyway, when I moved back to New Jersey, I sent out some resumes and cover letters, and Gordon Van Gelder wrote back to me, telling me that he didn’t have any openings right then, but that I should check back with him later in the year. So, a few months later, I still hadn’t found a job I wanted—I’d given myself six months to find a job I wanted before I would allow myself to slink back to retail...and this was month five, by the way—so I wrote back to Gordon, figuring, well, it was indeed later in the year, so I’d try him again before giving up on the idea completely. And I was in luck, for his assistant at the time had just given his notice, so Gordon called me in for an interview. I got the job, and the rest is history.

As to how working with Gordon influenced my editing...well, only in the sense that he taught me everything I know. Seriously, I didn’t know anyone in the field when I got the job there, and I probably didn’t know much; I was just a reasonably smart kid who loved and had read a lot of science fiction and fantasy. Later in my career, I picked up some stuff from people like Ellen Datlow, who taught me a lot about editing anthologies (thanks again, Ellen!), but Gordon was my sole influence for about the first five years or so of my career, so he’s singularly responsible for the construction of my editorial foundation. I couldn’t have done any of this without his tutelage.



**You have edited several outstanding themed anthologies in recent years, beginning with *Wastelands* in 2008, and they have become immensely popular. What led you to start creating these anthologies and why do you think they have been so well-received?**

After working at F&SF for, oh, say, a week, I was sure that I had found what I wanted to do with my life. As most people who get into editorial positions are wont to do, after being an assistant for a while, I started to dream of the day when I would be sitting in the big chair, making the final editorial decisions. Since Gordon both edits and owns F&SF, it seemed extremely unlikely that I would ever get to do that at the magazine, so I set my sights on anthologies. Gordon was okay with me pursuing anthology projects while working at F&SF—he didn’t consider it a conflict of interest—so it seemed like the best avenue to pursue if I wanted to have editorial control over a project. Of course I knew—because anyone I mentioned my crazy idea of editing an anthology to would tell me—that it’s almost impossible to sell an anthology, that it’s common knowledge in publishing that anthologies don’t sell, so hardly anyone is willing to do them, and if they are, why would they want to buy an anthology from someone like me, when they could just as easily get Gardner Dozois or Ellen Datlow instead.

But I went ahead despite everyone’s advice that it would be wasted effort. My first attempt at was to edit an original anthology of post-apocalyptic fiction. So I put together a proposal, recruited a bunch of writers, and tried shopping it around on my own to publishers, as I didn’t have an agent, I didn’t think it terribly likely I’d be able to find an agent who would want to represent a first-time anthologist. It didn’t really get anywhere, but I learned a lot from the experience. Later, I worked on another anthology project with a colleague, which, while it also ended up going nowhere, I did get an agent out of it—my first agent, Jenny Rappaport (who has since retired). That project actually came close to selling at least twice, but ultimately also went nowhere.

What brought me around to *Wastelands* was the Bison Books reissue of *Beyond Armageddon*, which was basically the only “best-of” post-apocalyptic anthology in existence at the time. Being that it had been published in 1985, and there was a preponderance of new post-apocalyptic fiction written in the wake of 9/11, I thought to pitch a new “best of” volume, collecting the best post-apocalyptic work published since 1985. I specifically put the proposal together for Bison, which they passed on, not being in the position to acquire original projects, which are more costly, in general, than acquiring reissues. But Jenny thought she could sell the book elsewhere, and she did, to the next publisher she took it to: Night Shade Books.

As for why my anthologies have been so well-received, I think I hit on a couple of hot themes, and no one had really been doing these big reprint theme anthologies in recent years, so I think there was a market out there looking for them but no one was publishing them. Also, if I may say so while remaining humble, I think I put together really good books, products of exhaustive research and a comprehensive survey of the material available on each theme. It also didn’t hurt, I’m sure, that I was able to include some “big name” writers like Stephen King, Jonathan Lethem, and Orson Scott Card in my first book, plus Night Shade just did a really great job packaging and marketing the anthology (and all of the others since); *Wastelands* just had a fantastic cover, really spot-on visually, and I think the whole package just really spoke to the fans of that subgenre.

**You left F&SF to establish Lightspeed, the online science fiction magazine that you now edit (Full disclosure: We love Lightspeed here at RSF). How did you make that decision? What is your goal in establishing the magazine and for the stories you publish?**

Well, like I said earlier, I knew very early on that I'd want to be the one making the editorial decisions some day, and it was never going to happen at F&SF, so if I wanted my career to advance it would have to happen elsewhere. So when Sean Wallace of Prime Books (the publisher of Lightspeed) approached me about the possibility of editing a new science fiction magazine, I was immediately interested.

I did take some time to think it over, of course. I had been with F&SF a long time—nearly nine years—and I loved, and still love, the magazine dearly. I knew it would be hard to have it not be a part of my life anymore. But I talked it over with Gordon, and although he didn't want to see me go, he encouraged me to go for it, saying that he couldn't see how I could possibly turn it down.

One of my primary goals with Lightspeed is to publish accessible science fiction. While I love sf of all types—including the type I'm about to describe—I find that a lot of the stories and novels I've read are so dense that anyone not intimately familiar with science fiction would likely find them impenetrable. So while I find value in that kind of super complex sf, it seemed to me like maybe there wasn't enough sf being published that newcomers to the field, or more casual readers would be able to appreciate. The challenge, of course, is to find material that both satisfies that self-imposed mandate and satisfies the jaded reader inside of me who has seen seemingly every variation on every theme after nine years working the slush pile.

But I also love sf that pushes the boundaries and takes chances. *Dangerous Visions* and *Again, Dangerous Visions* are major influences to me; it's really hard to come up with anything that could be considered a "dangerous vision" these days, but I'm always looking for stories that try. I've said before too, that one of my favorite stories is "Guts" by Chuck Palaniuk, and I always want to challenge sf writers to write stories that have that kind of emotional impact on the reader or leave such an indelible impression; even having read it already, reading "Guts" now makes me literally cringe, despite the fact that I know what's going to happen. (And once you read it, you'll never forget what happens.)

**This month you have a new anthology out, *The Living Dead 2*. It is a follow-up to *The Living Dead*, which was a great success. What can you tell us about this new anthology and your decision to revisit the subject?**

Well, when a book is as successful as *The Living Dead* was, the decision to revisit the subject is pretty easy. Truth be told, Night Shade was interested in the possibility of doing a follow-up volume pretty early on, given how *The Living Dead* kicked ass right out of the gates sales-wise, and had tons of critical acclaim to go along with it. And I had a blast editing the first volume, so it didn't take much convincing to get me interested in doing a second volume.

At the time, I had not worked very much with original fiction in my anthologies; I had done some work with original fiction, but I still had a strong desire to include more original material in my anthologies. With *The Living Dead 2*, I mixed reprints and originals in one volume, but because so many other zombie anthologies had come out since Volume One was published, I decided that I didn't want to reprint any stories that had appeared in other zombie anthologies. So, I avoided using anything that appeared in original zombie anthologies (with one exception and two possible other

exceptions), so that if you're a zombie fiction reader first and foremost, chances even the reprints will be new to you.

For the original fiction, I sought out the leading lights of zombie fiction, and was lucky enough to get almost everyone I targeted to be a part of the book. Robert Kirkman, writer of *The Walking Dead* comic series, was a huge coup to get—*The Living Dead 2* includes his first piece of published prose fiction. That came about because we solicited a promotional blurb from him for Volume One (about which he said very nice things). After he provided that, he mentioned to me that if I did another book like that, or even a post-apocalyptic one like *Wastelands*, I should keep him in mind, because he was interested in trying his hand at prose fiction again (which I guess he hadn't done much of in recent years, after achieving huge success as a comic writer). So I was able to get a story from him, and from fellow zombie legend Max Brooks, plus Jonathan Maberry, David Wellington, and newcomers like Mira Grant and Carrie Ryan...and some of them even found me on their own! (And this time around we got a blurb from *Shaun of the Dead* himself, Simon Pegg. I guess we can extrapolate, then, if we do a *Living Dead 3*, he'll write a story for that one?)

It seems funny to say something like a zombie anthology was blessed, but it really feels like both Volume One and Two were blessed, not that I believe in blessings, but everything just came together so well for both books, it was like the perfect storm. Of course, it's too early to say if Volume Two will achieve the same success as Volume One—it almost certainly won't, given how much more saturated the marketplace is with zombie fiction right now—but early signs point to another winner.

In any case, the book's out now and in stores. The website for the anthology is live at [johnjosephadams.com/the-living-dead-2](http://johnjosephadams.com/the-living-dead-2). There, you can read eight free stories from the anthology, along with thirty-plus interviews with the various contributors to the book.

After living with zombies for so long now, it kind of feels odd to be not working on anything zombie-related. I don't have any zombie projects lined up currently, but I'd wager I'm not done with zombies just yet.

Thank you so much for your time.

(Here's a link to [“Guts” by Chuck Palaniuk](#). Consider yourself warned. -MR)