



Redstone Science Fiction

April 2011

#11

Jay Garmon • Mike Barretta • J. Chant

Cover Photo by Richard Newton
Layout by Cassandra Link

Redstone Science Fiction #11, April 2011

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Editor's Note – April 2011

by Michael Ray

Issue 11? We are closing in our first year at Redstone Science Fiction already. Simply hard to believe. Things have gone very well for us and we appreciate all the people who have contributed their efforts to Redstone.

This month I wanted to recognize the efforts beyond RSF of one of our cover artists, Richard Newton. His photos were the covers for issues 4, 6, and this month. His intense photo of Tokyo makes an outstanding cover. Richard has a lifelong devotion to Japan and the Japanese people, and in the weeks since the devastating earthquake and tsunami he has worked to provide information about Japan, encourage positive action, and to counteract misinformation. I encourage you to visit his website, [Let's Japan](#), to get a point of view about what's happening in Japan that is quite different from, and far more encouraging than, what we get from the news channels.

When I write that I like post-cyberpunk science fiction, I'm referring to the idea that there will be pervasive computing in all walks of life, not just the low-life. Speculation of how it might play out is very interesting to me and augmented reality is one facet of this. In April's [Perfection](#) Jay Garmon does an excellent job of considering how these might be used to our advantage. I love this story. (At least my sensory inputs tell me I do).

At Redstone we also have a soft spot for adventure science fiction, especially when it evokes Heinlein just a little. [Brittlestar](#) by Mike Barretta does just that, by incorporating many contemporary elements of speculative stories and then taking us somewhere we didn't expect our ultralight to land.

This month's flash piece, [Time's Arrow](#) by J. Chant, is a thought-provoking reminder of the vastness of space and perhaps the wages of sin. We're excited to have the chance to share it with you.

Our SF critic, Henry Cribbs is turning his analytical eye towards Mars and four very different novels that focus on our dusty neighbor: *Red Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson, *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells, *Martian Chronicles* by the incomparable Ray Bradbury and *Red Thunder* by John Varley. You'll be glad you checked [this one](#) out.

We have more fiction than usual to share with you this month because of our successful Kickstarter project to raise funds that would allow us to publish more original words this spring. In fact, this month we were able to publish three stories, thanks to the project. I have the honor of listing here the backers who all made substantial pledges of support to Redstone SF and our publishing efforts.

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The Friends of Redstone SF

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Can't thank all of you enough.

As always, we here at Redstone SF hope that you find something in this issue that you enjoy.

Your Friend,

Michael Ray

Editor

Redstone SF

Perfection

by Jay Garmon

Honestly, how did anyone ever fall in love back when it was optional? I say this with awe, not judgment. I mean, I admire those people that survived before antibiotics, indoor plumbing, and free unlimited bandwidth but I sure as hell wouldn't trade places with them.

Take this mark I'm working tonight. I'm always trying to up my Perfection, so for reference I idle my overlays and get a first look at her as Darwin made her. Unenhanced, no Glam-AR, no incoming subs or superliminals. She's cute enough, I suppose. Short, which has both coital and cosplay implications. Hips slightly wider than the bust, which is merely a 36-B from what I can eyeball. Crooked smile. Her Spectacles are 4th-gen, so the outward glare isn't suppressed. No idea what color her eyes are, but I'm guessing the same boring brown as her straight brunette hair. Plain black turtleneck and leggings, fairly skintight, with the renderpoints glinting every couple of centimeters in a hex pattern. The visible reference means she wants her overlays to work even with the older gear, like as much as 18 months past release. She's either cheap or mildly desperate, maybe both. A perfect test case.

I reengage my Spectacles and accept the handshake from her professed Aura. Now I see her as she wants to be seen. Her Spectacles are rendered out, which is to be expected given how embarrassingly old they are, and her invisible eyes are visible, smoldering and catlike. The effect is solid and matches up with the lines of her brow and jaw. These are probably based on her actual eyes, which is a smart play. Despite our reputations, guys will actually look you in the eye, if only to innately gauge pupil dilation and microexpression. Going cheap on the eye imagery is the easiest way to go home alone. That said, given how many salesbot programs are in the wild these days, almost every Spectacle rig comes with decent eye-rendering out of the box. That she customized the look to match her own eyes is nice but that merely tells me she's read a basic "How to Get Noticed" piece from *Cosmo*, not that she has any serious game. A few inches above her eyes, it's a different story.

The dull brunette hair is now a shimmering black, lustrous and thick. She spent some money on that image and it was a wise investment given how many secondary sexual cues are tied up in hair. In almost any culture, a woman's hair is expected to be longer than a man's because of how much nutritional and hygienic history is given away by your lovely locks. Been malnourished? The hair will show it. Been sick? The hair will show it. Don't wash? The hair will show it. That's also why gentlemen prefer blondes; it's easier to read the cues in light-colored hair. This mark stayed in the brunette range but she hasn't skimped on her augmented-reality highlights.

The smile, on the other hand, looks pretty baseline. She kept the crooked grin but smoothed out the mild dimples and added the obligatory red gloss. Dark lips convey increased blood flow and thus heightened arousal, so she's hitting her checkmarks there.

Below the neck she's a mixed bag. The leggings are gone, replaced by a black pencil skirt, demure hosiery, and classic black flats. She's slimmed the hips with this illusion but didn't try to play up her height. No sideline optical effects like false backlighting or uplighting that create a sense of verticality. She's not sensitive about being petite. There's some confidence in that, or at

least obliviousness. The black turtleneck is still there but — of course — she couldn't resist upgrading the bust. She's got false shadow lines playing her to be a C-cup, and a perky one at that. Rookie mistake. A nice pair will draw the guys from across the room but, assuming you close the deal, the false advertisement will get revealed as soon as your encounter achieves tactile fruition. Once you pull a guy out of the illusion with sensory disappointment, good luck getting him back. You can pretty up your boobs any way you wish but inflating them only ensures your date forfeits after reaching second base.

All in all, she's pretty standard, a five trying to be a seven. She wants to be a little thinner, a little bustier, a little more sophisticated, but basically herself. No daring body modifications, outlandish outfits, or anything approaching nontraditional personae. Vanilla as can be.

I throw my latest version of Perfection at her.

I've got root privileges on her Spectacles in less than a full second. She has top-line aftermarket security software, and it's installed well, but no AR rig that old can handle what I'm broadcasting. Hell, I may have to lend her Spectacles some processing bandwidth just so they can render my Aura without a noticeable lag.

My Perfection starts with a fairly baseline image. Even mundane, I'm pretty tall, but the initial retouch takes me from lanky to trim. The outfit is nondescript, greyish trousers and white long-sleeve shirt, with a flashy wristwatch designed to draw the eye. Security breaches aside, the watch is my Trojan horse. It's an accepted symbol of fiscal status and there isn't a man or woman alive who won't take a gander at it to determine what sort of conspicuous consumption I'm trying to project. It's a great big bullseye for the mark to focus her conscious attention on while my Perfection goes to work.

"Carla?" I say, placing my hand lightly on her shoulder as I approach her spot at the bar. As I expected, there's a mild feedback from the turtleneck. She's monitoring and adjusting her galvanic skin response. Wonder what habit she's trying to biofeedback her way out of? Teeth are too white for a smoker and the skin pallor doesn't suggest drinker. Pills, chocolate or one night stands? Hopefully it's door number three. I like a challenge.

"I'm sorry?" she says, turning to face me. My Spectacles record her collective physical responses to my clothes, my face, my build and — yes — my watch. The face she likes. The clothes, less so. The watch is an obvious hit.

"Pardon me," I say, "thought you were someone else." Her eyes are focused back on my face, and the pupil response — which, without my software takeover, could not be believed — is positive. My Perfection is subtly adjusting my features with a refinement algorithm based on her own unconscious cues. A bit brighter eyes? She likes that. Stronger chin? Too much, reverse course.

"So you decided to walk on over, instead of just ping my Aura?" She's pushing back, but her voice stress is declining and her skin response is elevating. Progress.

On cue, I blush. And it's an authentic blush, too, modeled after real recordings of my actual embarrassments. Shows I haven't set my Aura to constantly project unassailed confidence. I'm a real guy.

"Carla is my best friend's ex," I say. "When they broke up, I went on her permanent block list. No Aura pinging for me. We always got on but I guess Steve got me in the divorce, as they say. I was hoping we could patch things up with actual words but, ah, you're not Carla."

"No," she smiles, "I'm Denise." The smile is legit, not reflexively polite, based on the skin response. My Perfection uses the minute uptick in sweat and stress as an opening and starts hacking the biofeedback goads to agitate her slightly, keeping her perceptions off balance.

"Roger," I reply and glance down at watch, drawing her attention back to it. My outfit shifts slightly during the motion. My Oxford collar becomes a unbuttoned Nehru, the sleeve buttons give way to platinum cufflinks. I now have a belt, and laced wingtips. Sleek professional, just the way she likes it.

"Sorry to bother you, Denise," I say, and turn to walk away. The cut of my shirt flares down, making my shoulders appear wider. Her heartrate is faster now, jumping a full ten beats per minute as she thinks I might leave.

"Wait," she says, her hand on my shoulder now. The physical contact draws me away from my feedback monitors and I look past my Spectacles at her for a moment. She's loaded a new flare routine into her eye rendering. They have a green tint that wasn't there before, nor was the coy glimmer. Bringing her fastball, as it were.

"This Carla must be quite pretty if you're willing to go round your best friend to chat her up." She bats the green, playful eyes at me. My Perfection is on the right track.

"What's the appropriate response here?" I stammer. And it's a real stammer. "I mean, I just told you that you look like her, so if I say she's not pretty, I'm insulting you. But if I insist that Carla was a stone fox, you'll assume I'd sell out my best friend for pretty face." I smile, and feel a bit flush at how quickly she cornered me. I cue my Perfection to start in on the infrasonics, using her Spectacles' audio output to silently play a bassline that will up her heartrate a little further.

"Quite the rhetorical trap you sprung on me, miss Denise."

"Sorry," she blushes again, though I'm a bit too flustered to doublecheck its authenticity rating. My Perfection is throwing too many datapoints at me right now. I need to work on the interface, clean it up and filter down the noise. Anyway, back to trimming the mark.

"It's a side effect of my job," Denise tells me. I stay focused on her eyes simply to keep my Perfection from overwhelming me. "I work for an IP enforcement firm. Everyone has a sob story about why they couldn't pay their license fees. I'm the lucky girl that gets to play hard-heart and force them to pony up."

“Well then, we shall be mortal enemies,” I grin, regaining some composure. “I’m an opensource developer, dyed-in-the-wool copyleftist. My code is shackled to no man’s patent.”

“Oh my,” she grins back. “And here you looked like such a grown-up.”

I suddenly feel my own heartrate spike. Could my Perfection have been wrong? Was the clothing refinement overplayed? I start up a diagnostic on the self-correcting target-response loops, despite the fact that the extra readouts in my Spectacles throw me even further off balance. I stare past it all at Denise.

“A wolf in sheep’s clothing, I suppose.” I swallow hard, then wait for my Perfection to regain control of her.

“Let’s hope so,” she smiles, her red lips glossy and luscious. She rubs the top of her chest slowly, and unconscious sign of the physical feedback she’s after. My Perfection is working.

“Can I buy you a drink?” I say.

She bites her lips and shakes her head. “How about you call us a cab, instead?”

She takes my hand, and I follow her excitedly out the door. Her gait is deliberate and fierce as she leads me to the cab. Her skirt clings to her sensuously, her black hair refracting the surrounding light with every authoritative step. I can almost smell her.

I don’t notice the security alerts until we’re already in the cab.

My Spectacles are screaming at me, bright red antivirus popups crowding the edge of my vision. But all I can see is Denise.

“Your code is really...solid,” Denise says, her hand locked around mine. I feel her trembling next to me, and want to check the biofeedback monitors from my Perfection, but I can’t take my focus off her perfect, emerald eyes.

“My...code?” I half choke out. My own heartrate is pounding in my head, ringing in time with the intrusion alarms and countermeasure requests shrieking from my Spectacles.

“It got past my firewall, past almost all my defenses.” Denise’s hand slides up my arm, then my neck. She draws me in. “You got inside me,” she whispers heavily. “No one ever gets inside me.”

“I could say the same,” I whisper back. “What did you do to me?”

“Karma trap. Sent your own viral code back to you.” Both her arms are around me now. I feel like we’re moving at a thousand miles a second, and I’m sure it’s not the cab.

“This has never happened to me before.”

“I like it,” she smiles, those flawless red lips gleaming, and her impossible green eyes holding me helplessly, longingly in place. “What do you call it?”

Suddenly, all the alarms and the feedbacks and the readouts disappear. Even though I didn’t shut them off. I pull Denise to me, feel her real breath on my face, and her real pulse against my neck. I smile, and I answer her.

“I call it Perfection.”

The End

Jay Garmon has been a professional writer since the late 1990s, with everything from encyclopedia entries, radio & television commercials, technical articles and (somehow) a weekly trivia column to his credit. For his efforts, he’s been cited as a source in the Wikipedia, lambasted publicly by John Scalzi and earned a regular radio gig (for more trivia questions) in Chicago, where Jay doesn’t live. Redstone is the first venue to actually pay Jay to write fiction. He hopes it’s the start of a trend. You can find out for sure at www.jaygarmon.net.

Brittlestar

by Mike Barretta

“I always get the shakes before a drop,” explained Major Joseph Anniston. He fidgeted nervously at the ramp’s hinge point. The flight technician smiled at him and he thought he detected a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“Come back home,” said the flight technician.

“I’ll try,” he lied. It wasn’t likely and, in any case, he had no desire to make it back. That small fact made him perfect for the mission. Somewhere in the nightmare that was Florida, Amanda, his wife, waited for him. Maybe she was reduced to a drooling moaning horror or worse: a hyper-intelligent hybrid. Either way, if he found her he would do what needed to be done.

The cargo bay depressurized and his ears popped. The jump light turned amber casting a dreary pall through the bay. It was nearly time. Hydraulic servos whined and the ramp yawned like a toothless mouth to reveal abyssal darkness. His helmet’s night vision system activated and made the cloudscape look like a roiling green hell. The jump light turned green. He looked one last time at the last human he would ever see and let himself fall over the edge. The slipstream stripped him away from the aircraft and into dark green silence. He watched the silhouette of the big cargo jet bank away as he nosed over into the night at terminal velocity. Cold sank into his bones as he fell.

The only warm spot on his body was where the 100 kiloton demolition nuke nestled against his chest.

* * *

At 5,000 feet above the Gulf of Mexico smart fabric wings deployed and stiffened into rigid forward swept airfoils. Simultaneously, molecules aligned in his suit to turn his body into a rigid faceted fuselage. He dove through a thin stratus layer into clear air and tested his maneuverability with gentle banks. G-forces built up as leveled off at fifty feet above the water. He turned on course and followed a flight path plotted to keep him clear of brittlestar swarms.

The world screamed by in a synthetic hyper-spectral reality generated from his suit’s passive sensors and the satellite feed. He turned at a designated waypoint, east of Tampa, and his threat warning chimed. Hostile icons represented as red diamonds appeared in his field of view and his flight computer identified the fast moving targets as Florida Air National Guard F-16’s. The hostile fighters turned towards him and increased speed.

“Snapshot,” said Major Anniston and his onboard computer launched a barrage of micro-wasp missiles from his suit’s hardpoints. The missiles leapt forward in a burst of white flame that temporarily blinded him. He pitched up and climbed towards the F-16’s. The fighters split apart, putting on G’s faster than a normal human could tolerate. A micro-wasp found a target and a doomed brittlestar F-16 exploded in a bright splash of flame across the night sky.

The two remaining F-16's crossed his flight path, rattling him with turbulence. He banked hard and his flight suit squeezed his legs and abdomen, forcing blood into his head so he wouldn't black out from gravity induced loss of consciousness. One F-16 pulled into a knife edge turn to get its nose around and point its weapons at him. He saw the bright flash of rocket motors from the brittlestar aircraft. The missiles thundered past and he felt the heat of their exhaust but they failed to find his small radar and IR signature. He ripped two more micro-wasps. The brilliant-class missiles caught the attacking F-16 at a combined speed of 1400 KPH and it blossomed into an orange fireball. Anniston reversed towards the remaining F-16, straining the engine, burning too much fuel, and wasting time. The F-16 rolled away and then back even tighter trying to get inside the turn of his more maneuverable wing suit. Anniston fired his last barrage of micro-wasps. The doomed F-16 reversed and dove to escape. The missile flew directly into the engine, blowing the tail off the aircraft.

Anniston sighed in relief and turned back to course. His satellite feed indicated the airspace was clear. Fortunately, humans still owned the sky. On the ground it would be different. The brittlestars were alerted to the incursion. He imagined them tearing at his protective suit with ragged bloody fingernails and the burn of acid mucus as alien nerve fibers subverted his body.

Once the horrors got under his skin they would breed rapaciously, fissioning and growing, and fissioning again, consuming nonessential fatty tissues until they filled all the in-between spaces. They would clog his digestive tract, leak from his sinus cavities, and devour his brain leaving nothing but the stem to keep the body alive for as long as it would last. He would be a moaning stumbling drooler, the horrid shock troops of the species.

Or perhaps he would be the other kind.

* * *

Anniston dropped the last chunk of concrete rubble to sink his parachute in the drainage ditch along eastern edge of the space shuttle runway. He considered his helmet for a moment and then tossed it in the water. The night vision system would be useful but the mask obstructed his field of vision and at best, it would only slow a brittlestar attack. He had more to gain by seeing clearly.

He wiped sweat from his face and scanned the runway's debris strewn length for movement. As a child he watched gleaming white orbiters touchdown with little puffs of tire smoke. No more. The last space shuttle touched down over six years ago. Space was the domain of military robots and up until recently: wealthy tourists.

He extracted a foil pouch of water from a pocket, tore the corner, and drank the vitamin laced water down in two big gulps. He tossed the packet into the brush and then reconfigured his gear for easier carrying. He shouldered the heaviest load, the nuclear warhead and slipped it onto his back. He cinched down the straps and stowed his remaining gear, mostly ammunition, in his combat harness. He took the safety off his modified M-4 carbine, and walked to the space shuttle tow road. For the moment it was peaceful. Cicada trill and mosquito hum filled the air.

The broad tow road swept south through a feral landscape of wave-tossed debris subsumed in organic flowing humps of bramble and wild grape. The road ended at his destination, the vehicle assembly building. The massive building's imposing flanks towered over the surroundings. Inside the vehicle assembly building, the brittlestar hybrids were building something and his mission was to find out what it was, relay the intelligence via satellite link, and if necessary destroy it with the nuke.

Anniston stopped and listened. His senses were far better than a drooler's. He could smell the rich aroma of salt marsh, hear the croak of frog and taste the cloying humid decay of Florida air and it reminded him of Amanda and their cottage home in North Carolina.

They met the day he checked into Marine Corp Air Station New River as a fleet replacement pilot for the V-22 Osprey. She was a civil engineer building new support facilities for the new V-44 quad rotor the Marines had purchased. At first she wanted nothing to do with a Marine but with time and charm on his side he changed her mind. They married upon his return from his first deployment.

Upon completion of the New River project, she accepted a job at NASA as a facilities engineer. It involved a lot of travel, but no more than his career as a Marine Corp pilot. Every rendezvous was like a honeymoon. At Test Pilot school he was selected to evaluate the Nightwing Infiltration suit and she was put in charge of converting NASA facilities into national parks. She was at the cape when the western flank of the Azore's Cumbre Vieja volcano collapsed into the Atlantic ocean creating the massive tsunamis that devastated the eastern seaboard of the United States. A Red Cross team sent him a message that she was alive and well, but the destructive waves washed up a completely new menace: a nightmare horde of bizarre creatures churned from the ocean's ultra-deep hadalpelagic zone. Feathered worms, glassy manta's, gulpers with teeth too long for their bodies, and needle walking urchins six feet across littered the Florida coast. All of the creatures died and rotted in the light and the heat of the surface world except for the hive-minded brittlestar. The strange creatures from the bottommost depths found a way to live.

First contact was made and the battle for the world began.

* * *

He heard the crunch of glass underfoot and held his breath to listen as blood roared in his ears. He crouched behind a pile of tsunami-tossed wreckage and saw the shambling black silhouettes of droolers. The creatures hunted in lurching stumbles and would continue to do so until they reached the end of their lifespan when the human component failed under the stress of occupation.

A metallic screech sounded behind him. He turned to see a drooler caught in a length of chain link fence. The drooler, a woman wearing the remnants of a sundress, dragged the fence behind her for two steps before breaking free. She renewed her awkward steps towards him stumbling over sheet metal and fragments of buildings. She craned her head and let out a low plaintive moan to alert the others. Anniston aimed his carbine at the lone female drooler and fired. The

pyrotechnic chemical round exploded and engulfed the entire torso of the creature in greasy flame. She fell over, dropping first to her knees and then prone onto the broken pavement. Her body ruptured and hundreds of tiny black brittlestars escaped. The creatures desperately squirmed as the chemical fire spread over them. Anniston turned back to the alerted sentries. They focused on him and picked up speed. He stood and aimed carefully, firing in rapid succession. All four fell and writhed on the ground, moaning as their flesh burned. He swept up escaping brittlestars with the high-power laser bore sighted to the carbine. The sticky black creatures exploded in the collimated light beam.

Something slapped at his leg and he looked down. A half-burned brittlestar clung to his pant's leg. Tentacles whipped and snapped against the impenetrable fabric searching for breaches in his uniform. He shook the thing off and crushed it under his boot.

A second wave of droolers staggered closer spreading out and encircling him. He moved from covered position to covered position looking for a way to advance or retreat. Satellite intel indicated that the area was empty of droolers but they kept coming. Hiding perhaps? Whatever the brittlestars were doing was worth protecting. He fired his remaining rounds in a steady rhythm dropping the creatures with deadly accuracy until the last magazine clattered to the road. He swept the surrounding area with the laser, boiling black brittlestars, until the laser guttered out in a pale flicker of pink light. He dropped the depleted weapon to the ground.

More droolers entered the ring of light from the scattered chemical fires.

He let the nuke slip from his shoulders and set it on the ground. He flipped open the guarded cover and the LCD display illuminated as he typed the arming code to begin the six hour countdown. His target was well within the blast radius. Accelerometers and pressure sensors guaranteed a detonation if the case was moved more than ten feet or opened. Only a remote command from the National Command Authority could turn it off.

Another blood-warm brittlestar reached his leg and he grabbed the squirming mass. It pulsed like a beating heart through his gloves. He crushed it and tossed the sticky remains to the ground. He unholstered his 45 and wracked the slide back to chamber a round. The swarm closed in on him. The muzzle felt cold under his chin.

“Stop,” said a female voice.

The brittlestar swarm stopped their advance. The loose creatures escaped from the hosts he had liberated milled over and under each other making wet sucking sounds.

Anniston eased the pressure on the trigger. A hybrid walked toward him out of the darkness. It was not the painful lurch and shuffle stride of a drooler but the walk of a hybrid, a fully functional being. The carpet of brittlestars parted for her like the Red sea before Moses. Droolers backed away as she made her way through the smoldering pyres.

“I knew it would be you,” said the hybrid.

“Amanda? Oh God.” He had fantasized about finding her and thought about what he would do. But now...

She walked closer to him. In the light of the fires he saw that her skin was absent the delicate black filigree of the common drooler. Adrenalin fear coursed through his body. He decided and pointed the 45 at his wife’s head, at the hybrid’s head. There was only one of the obscene creatures in her body rather than a gravid horde and the bullet would tear it out. It would have been easier to pull the trigger if she was a drooler, mindless and hostile.

“I’m still me, Joe,” said Amanda

“No, you’re not.”

“How can you be sure?” she asked as she walked towards him.

He imagined a liquid black starfish straddling her brain sinking its delicate tendrils into the fleshy folds of her mind, tugging on her nerve fibers to make her talk and walk like a puppet.

“Amanda, stop.” It looked like his wife and talked like her. Pulling the trigger wasn’t as easy as he thought.

“Joe, please. I need to show you something.” She looked at the nuclear weapon at his feet. “It will all be over in six hours anyway.” She turned and the wall of droolers parted for her.

He wondered how she knew. He aimed at the back of her head and began to squeeze the trigger. She stopped, but did not turn around.

“You can kill me later,” said Amanda. “If you still want too.”

He looked at the droolers and then down at the nuke and decided. He lowered his aim and followed, stepping over liberated bodies and cooked brittlestars. The droolers moved back just enough that he could smell their wet, salty breath. Black bile leaked from their noses and mouths and tiny black stars swam in their glistening empty eyes.

She walked to the driver’s side of a car.

“Get in,” she said as she opened the driver’s side door and slipped into the seat.

He surveyed the backseat, opened the door, and slid in, expecting a jack-in-the-box brittlestar to spring from the glove compartment into his face. She shifted the car into gear and drove towards the vehicle assembly building. He studied her face as they drove in silence past mindless droolers and tsunami wreckage. She looked the same as he remembered, maybe a little tired. Ahead the walls of the vehicle assembly building towered over wave-tossed landscape.

Her right hand slipped into his left. She smiled at him and for a moment he felt as if it was long ago before the waves. He pulled his gloved hand back as if he was burned.

At the building, she parked the car and got out. The bottom thirty feet of the historic building was stained with the tsunami's high water mark. Panels had been torn away and debris was pushed up in twisted drifts along the base but it was still serviceable. Power cables snaked across the ground in haphazard tangles. He could hear the menacing growl of heavy machinery, the buzz of cutting tools, and electric hiss of welders. He followed her inside.

The ship rose to the highest reaches of the building and stretched to a depth of at least 300 feet in the excavated space beneath. Pods of engines and furled heat exchangers wrapped by translucent atmospheric fairings crowned the ship. Bright lights glinted off of a tapered fuselage that looked to be made of layers of translucent silver silk. Ovoid pods clustered at the bottom.

"It's a compromise design. Fusion cycle engines will pull the ship into orbit and then we will deploy the living module into flight configuration. It would have been much more elegant if we could have built in orbit," said Amanda.

She turned to look at him and pushed his gun down. His hands shook.

"Do you remember where we met?" asked Amanda

Her body pressed against him and he looked down into her face. He was completely vulnerable. If she wanted to she could turn him.

"Yes."

He wanted to kiss her, but he didn't know if it was her. Then again, it didn't really matter who he was or if he was. His mission, to collect intelligence and if necessary destroy the brittlestar project was over. Less than a mile away his demolition nuke would vaporize everything within five miles and signal the opening move in the end game. An international coalition of nuclear forces would incinerate the major Brittlestar swarms as a prelude to counter-invasion. Everything left alive after the strike would be nerve-gassed. He dropped the satellite camera and put both hands on the side of her face and pulled her close.

"Kiss me," said Amanda.

"Will I still be me?"

"Yes," said Amanda.

He wasn't convinced even as he kissed her. She tasted just as he remembered and her sigh was exactly the same. Her arms pulled him closer and he waited for an electric sting, the shock of becoming less.

The pain was instantly overwhelming. Tendrils of fire wove amongst his neurons dropping him to his knees. She fell with him and held him as he surrendered to the inevitable. He took one, two, three deep breaths and the pain abated. Something squirmed in his skull, expanding and filling the ripples and folds that made him who he was. Adding, but not subtracting.

Her voice was far away and distant. “We’re leaving,” said Amanda. “Not all of us. Most want to stay and fight. They won’t go back to the mud and the dark. Will you come?”

The world swam in a chiaroscuro of brilliant blurry colors. He saw with a network of many eyes. Flashes of light from inside his head blinded him. He experienced the brittlestars before the Cumbre Vieja collapse. A lost species, conjoined, intelligent, and crippled by cold dark mud, a biological network spread out in the deepest reaches of the ocean and now with tenuous foothold on the surface they had no intention of giving up.

“Amanda.” He was surprised that he was himself...and more.

“I’m here Joe. I’m here.”

He felt her physical and mental touch. He felt himself expanding amongst bright points of light that he recognized as a brittlestar perfectly blended with a human. Darker confused blotches were the drooling insentient monsters.

“I am,” he said. “We are.”

“We are,” she repeated. “It’s okay Joe.”

Pain faded to a shallow buzz. With his eyes closed he saw her perfectly and she saw him. He stood back up and she helped steady him. His integration into the whole was consensual. He could shut them out like blinking an eye. There were thousands that had made the transition and there was no limit to what they could accomplish together in perfect cooperation. He could never go back. He turned to look at the starship.

“Yes,” he replied to her question.

* * *

The vehicle assembly building exploded apart as the ship rose on brilliant pillars of splayed photon beams. The ground beneath vaporized into a monstrous billowing cloud of steam as the fusion engines stepped up their power. The ship rose higher clearing the fire illuminated clouds.

Thunder, so long absent, returned to the cape.

The ship buffeted as his demolition nuke detonated. It steadied and accelerated, leaping to seven gravities and then twice that and then twice again escaping the atmosphere. The brittlestar fibers lacing his body cushioned the ferocious acceleration. Beyond geo-stationary orbits, safe from human weapons, the starship’s modules unfolded like an origami construct into flight configuration.

He was more than human in some ways and less than human in others. He held his wife’s hand in the adjacent acceleration couch. He was just as human in the ways that mattered.

In moments, the other engines, the ones that would leave Einstein confused, would activate.

Far below monsters battled each other for dominion of Earth with the power of the stars.

The End

Mike Barretta is a husband, father and retired Naval Aviator. He now works for a major defense contractor as a helicopter pilot. His first sale was to Black Ink Horror and his first professional sale was to Jim Baen's Universe. He was the 2009 winner of Jim Baen Memorial Writing contest and SFReader's 9th annual short story contest. He has also managed to sneak his way into New Scientist magazine and a few anthologies when no one was looking. When he finds the time, he writes science fiction and fantasy stories and agonizes over a half completed novel.

Time's Arrow

by Jay Chant

It's a law of our Universe that cannot be broken, time's irreversible, relentless arrow piercing the future. I'm hurtling through time at the speed of light. As are you.

There is.

Nothing.

I.

Can.

Do.

I cannot skip ahead into the future. It's not there yet. Neither can I undo what I've done. However vividly I remember it, the past is unreachable.

I stare out of the window of the craft into vast emptiness.

The chances that I'll be found are so remote as to be virtually zero.

The idea of an escape pod is a wonderful one. But my ship was designed as a shuttle between larger craft, its life pod only to keep someone alive, hanging in space, until another ship detected its beacon. At close range. A shuttle craft was perfect for my trip to Ganymede. It can't be picked up until it's so close it will be assumed to have come from the moon.

No idiot would fly a shuttle across the solar system.

Out here, in the middle of nowhere, my escape pod is a bloody pointless thing. Not enough fuel to keep pace with my ship, or do anything but drift away from the major shipping lanes. It's stranded. I'm stranded. And it was all a mistake.

My ship will be found at some point and salvaged, given the course it was on. Someone will find my cup of tea and half-eaten sandwich on the table. They'll find my log, but of course I hadn't kept up with that like I should have done. And it's not the kind of ship that records the release of a lifepod in time and space so a course might be plotted. Nothing to indicate where I left my ship.

I. Can't. Undo. That.

I should look around and see what will run out first. Water? Oxygen? Food? But I don't bother. I can't bring myself to discover my fate.

My imagined salvagers will no doubt, eventually, find my small, hidden cargo. The cargo that led to this. The cargo I didn't need to take.

I could be snug in my sleep sack. I could be drinking my tea. Finishing my favourite relish and gruyere sandwich. Safe. Instead my mind feels as though it will at any moment shatter along fault lines into a million fragments. Maybe more. Each moment that I could change if time didn't have an arrow.

Small, irreversible decisions.

Sometimes I glance out of the window and imagine I see movement. The impossible glint of a craft. But no one's coming.

The cargo was stable. I knew that. But you hear of accidents, smugglers ships found in deep space, wrecks, carcasses. There was a rumbling in my ship. No doubt just the shuttle protesting at a journey far longer than it was designed for, but in my mind's eye I saw the cargo on the verge of reacting.

I didn't even check the instruments. I got into that life pod, didn't think about how it worked, slammed the hatch and released it. Propelling me away. Drifting.

Too.

Late.

I've never taken risks. I panic at the thought, can intricately map out every pit fall, every wrong turn. Except I lack imagination. When something goes wrong in my calm staid life, it always takes me by surprise.

I'm going to die.

It's making me philosophical. For the first time ever. I visualise the granular nature of time, building forwards one way.

The Arrow.

Smugglers are romantic. Heroes. Brave. We sing songs about them, make films about them. Just once in my life I wanted to be that.

I can look back in time. If I look out of the window I'm physically seeing the past in every star's light. But I can only look to the past in points far away in space. Never the space I occupy.

I may never run into anything. Not even when Andromeda crashes into the Milky Way.

I could drift in the cold void, until the end of the Universe. Or maybe this little piece of matter will echo into the future, be imprinted on a new Universe. Maybe I'll be responsible for a new star, with a planet, with life.

I'd be a God.

Or maybe I will be found. That we can't go faster than light is as hard and cruel and cold a rule as the arrow of time. But maybe I could be the first contact between humans and another civilisation. True, I'd be long dead, but the speed you travel at doesn't matter then. And once I'm dead there's no life signs. The pod shuts down. I'll be preserved perfectly in the cold.

Shit. Warning light.

Fuel.

* * *

He stroked the face of the alien. Most found him unnerving to look at, cold and unfeeling, with features that jarred. Naked, vulnerable flesh.

But Aven found his spaceman beautiful. He'd taken only twenty years to translate his writings. And from the pod he knew that for earth that would have been eighty years. A lifetime for this creature. Of course, this particular spaceman had not even reached half of that time span.

They had found him drifting at the edge of the solar system. His trajectory would have sent him crashing into one of the outermost planets. Destroyed. But they saved him. Preserved him.

Earth. He dreamed of it. His knowledge of it was fixed. Only what the spaceman had brought. And it was unreachable in space and time. None could travel over those vast distances alive. Not to another galaxy. And it was inconceivable the spaceman's civilization still existed. There might not even be decaying ruins.

He could see the spaceman's galaxy. The spaceman had even known one day the two galaxies would collide. Perhaps earth might come close. In his mind he could reach out and touch it.

But that was in the unreachable future.

The End

A writer with a lifelong passion for science and science fiction, J. Chant lives in Cambridgeshire in England with her husband and daughter, and is studying for a degree in history. Her science fiction has also appeared in Daily Science Fiction and Raygun Revival.

Four from the Fourth Stone: A Mars Attack for April Fools

by Henry Cribbs

I played an April Fools' joke on myself this year, without meaning to. I thought I'd pay homage to one of the greatest April Fools' pranks of all time: Orson Welles's Mercury Theatre production of H.G. Wells's classic novel *The War of the Worlds*. In this 1938 radio broadcast, Welles moved the setting of Wells's 1898 novel from England to New England, and presented it in the form of news broadcasts and interviews. Despite disclaimers and reminders that the broadcast was fictional, the program is legendary for causing widespread panic among the American populace. Depending on the estimate (Bartholomew 2001, Hand 2006), anywhere from a hundred thousand to nearly two million frightened listeners believed Martians had actually invaded Grover's Mill, New Jersey.

Readers who have followed *Redstone* from the beginning will know what a big fan of Mars-related science fiction I am, starting with the Martian Tales of Edgar Rice Burroughs (see [RSF#1](#)). Given Mercury Theater's glorious prank, I figured April Fools' Day would be the perfect occasion for revisiting that fourth planet from the sun. So I set out to read and review as many Mars novels as I could this past month, starting with Wells's seminal *War of the Worlds*, followed by another classic, Ray Bradbury's 1950 *Martian Chronicles*, and then a couple of much more recent visits to our red neighbor, Kim Stanley Robinson's 1993 *Red Mars* and John Varley's 2003 *Red Thunder*.

Readers more knowledgeable than I will have already recognized my mistake. As I began gathering research and fact-checking, I discovered Mercury Theatre's infamous radio play was really first broadcast not on April 1, as I had always thought, but on October 30, 1938, instead. You'd think I would have realized that, since Orson Welles ends the performance with a classic disclaimer (which to avoid mass hysteria should perhaps have been provided *much* earlier in the program), "Remember please for the next day or so the terrible lesson you learned tonight: that grinning, glowing, globular invader in your living room is an inhabitant of the pumpkin patch, and if your doorbell rings and nobody's there, that was no Martian; it's Halloween." Since it was a Halloween prank, rather than an April Fools' Day joke, the joke is now on me, since not only had I already read my Martian books for the month, I had already sent the title for this article to my editor. Faithful readers will please forgive my poor memory (see [RSF#9](#)) – though my editor may not.

Mercury Theatre condenses into one hour the events which take place over several days in H.G. Wells's novel, and manages to include most of the novel's basic elements using much of Wells's original language: the mysterious cylinders, the tripod war machines, the heat rays, the black smoke, and the invaders' ironic destruction when Earth's own miniscule army infiltrates the Martian defenses. But what the radio play leaves out makes it well worth reading this classic of the genre. Like most great scifi, Wells's *War of the Worlds* tells us more about men than Martians.

This does not mean *War of the Worlds* doesn't have plenty of hard science; it does. Wells speculates rather advanced (for his time) scientific explanations for various phenomena. He explains how the invaders have evolved to be almost all brain, so that Martian anatomy (like the

kaldanes of Edgar Rice Burroughs's Mars) must rely on lesser creatures for digestion and other bodily functions. Principles behind Martian weapons such as the heat ray are also provided: "[I]n some way they are able to generate an intense heat in a chamber of practically absolute non-conductivity. This intense heat they project in a parallel beam against any object they choose, by means of a polished parabolic mirror, much as the parabolic mirror of a lighthouse projects a beam of light." Even the Martians' eventual defeat is foreshadowed by a quirk of Martian ecology.

But while he gives us the scifi trappings, Wells really uses the occasion of an invasion from Mars to show us just what we *humans* are made of. Some of it is noble and heroic. The narrator exhibits an Odsyssean determination and loyalty as he struggles to return to his wife. His brother chivalrously risks his life to assure the safety of two women he meets along the road. A naval vessel's crew sacrifices themselves to allow refugee boats to escape. But Wells is also aware that there is a darker side to our species, and so a number of the Deadly Sins show their human faces. Avarice is illustrated by a refugee trying to escape the destruction with bags of hoarded gold. He is run over by a wagon and trampled by the fleeing mob when he stops in the crowded street to pick up coins. Sloth is represented by an artilleryman who has grand plans for fomenting an underground (literally) revolution against their unearthly conquerors, but spends his day playing cards and drinking instead of digging the tunnels he says will be necessary. And Despair, that deadliest of sins, is personified in the curate, whose faith has been so shaken that he is incapable of any action (except to eat up all of the rations of food, which also takes care of Gluttony). Even the narrator has his own heart of darkness: in an act of desperate self-preservation, he causes the death of another human being and is racked with guilt afterwards. Our human triumphs and failings are nicely captured in this classic.

Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* is another classic of the Martian subgenre, only in it we humans are the invaders and Mars is the victim. (Bradbury gives a nod to *War of the Worlds*, in that the way in which the Martians are eradicated in "And the Moon Be Still as Bright" echoes the method by which Wells's invaders are vanquished.) In his introduction Bradbury self-describes it as a "book-of-stories-pretending-to-be-a-novel," so it should appeal in particular to readers of *Redstone*'s short scifi. Each of Bradbury's stories is perfectly capable of standing alone (several of them had been published separately), but I do recommend reading the stories in order, as there are some recurring characters, and the stories have a definite chronology (though Bradbury had to update that timeline in the 1997 edition, adding about 30 years to the dates he had originally assigned when real life finally began to catch up to his future history). All of the stories in this collection – even the half-pagers – are filled with that poetic, playful, hauntingly surreal imagery which is characteristic of all of Bradbury's fiction – so much so that I would also describe it as a "book-of-poetry-pretending-to-be-prose."

Bradbury also quibbles over whether the *Chronicles* should even be called Science Fiction (his capitals). He claims that only one of the stories in it actually "obeys the laws of technological physics." (That story, "There Will Come Soft Rains," in which the main character is a house, is my absolute favorite of the bunch, and let me just add that I am *extremely* upset that a certain textbook publisher removed it from the latest edition from which I teach.) I suppose he's right in that these stories are not "hard" scifi; it's mainly the fact that they are set on Mars that qualifies them at all. His Mars, after all, has a blue sky and a breathable (if thin) oxygen atmosphere,

which Bradbury well knew was not the case on our red brother. So it's really best described as a "book-of-slipstream-pretending-to-be-scifi," written forty years before Bruce Sterling thought up the term "slipstream" (and I'm a little surprised not to find Bradbury on Sterling's [canonical "slipstream" list](#)). But it doesn't really matter if it counts as scifi or not, since like *War of the Worlds* (and other great scifi), *The Martian Chronicles* is not really about Martians, or even Mars, it's about humans who happen to be on a slightly strange and surreal Mars.

As the people of Earth begin to colonize the Red Planet, they bring with them all of their old Earth customs and culture, and their virtues and vices become mirrored on Mars. Lust appears in "The Silent Towns", in which the last man on Mars is desperately trying to find the last woman. (But be careful what you wish for.) Envy rear its head (and Lust again, too) in "Ylla," about a husband who is jealous of her wife for dreaming of man from another planet. Pride and Anger show up in "And the Moon Be Still as Bright," when astronauts, thinking themselves superior, carelessly disrespect the planet's former inhabitants, and the anger this arouses has dire consequences. But the good side of humanity is also represented in the three Virtues. Faith is exemplified in "The Fire Balloons" (a story which didn't make it into some earlier editions), as Father Peregrine hopes to convert the remaining Martians; Love is shown in "The Long Years," as a man spends his last day on Mars with his family; and Hope is found in "The Million-Year Picnic," which, after a series of pessimistic stories about the future of Earth ("The Off Season," "Usher II," "The Watchers," and "There Will Come Soft Rains"), expresses a cautious optimism about the future of Mars and Mankind. But overall we tend to destroy things, as Jeff Spender points out in "And the Moon Be Still as Bright" when he says: "No matter how we touch Mars, we'll never touch it. And then we'll get mad at it, and you know what we'll do? We'll rip it up, rip the skin off, and change it to fit ourselves."

This is exactly the premise of Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *Red Mars* (the first in his Mars trilogy, including *Green Mars* and *Blue Mars*). If *Martian Chronicles* is slipstream at its best, the Nebula-winning *Red Mars* is the paragon of hard scifi. Like Bradbury, Robinson chronicles the colonization of Mars, from the voyage out through settlement, society-building, and war, but Robinson, unlike Bradbury, gives details of ship design, hazards of interplanetary travel, plausible terraforming methods, Martian geology (called "areology"), bioengineering, automated robotic construction, medical advances, space elevators, and more, bringing a verisimilitude to the red (and later green) world he has created.

Red Mars is chock full not only of hard science but also of hard politics. Frank Chalmers quotes Machiavelli as he manipulates the members of the "first hundred" in the original expedition, negotiates with governments back on Earth, and arranges a New World Order for this new world. American, Russian, Japanese, and Arab cultural differences provide a backdrop for an intricate web of intrigue, and Robinson provides a nicely balanced and sophisticated view of how each of the different cultures might change (and be changed) by Mars (and by each other). Governments must also forge agreements with transnational companies with annual incomes which dwarf that of most GNPs. Throughout the social and political philosophy is sprinkled, along with discussions and examples of how technological advances (such as a medical treatment which halts aging) may affect society.

By far the biggest political conflict in the novel is between the “Reds” and the “Greens”, which terms Robinson cleverly reappropriates from their normal Terran meanings. The Reds are not communists (not necessarily, anyway, though the first hundred, being a scientific expedition, each provide according to their ability and use according to their need without in the utopian vision of communism). The term Red instead comes from the idea that Mars’s natural ecology should not be tampered with. The Reds, led by Ann Clayborne, believe the Red Planet should stay Red, in its natural state, and are in favor of disturbing it only as much as is necessary for scientific study. The Greens are *not* environmentalists (at least not in the usual sense). Rather, they are the direct opposite. Instead of preserving Mars’s ecology as it is, the Greens, led mainly by the physicist Sax Russell, wish to terraform Mars, altering its environment for the benefit of humans. So while it’s set on Mars, *Red Mars* just as much about human society as it is about the fourth stone from the sun.

Robinson pays homage to both Wells and Bradbury in his work (and I’m not just talking about simply naming some of the first Martian settlements after those distinguished authors). For instance, many of the scientists on the expedition are *extremely* concerned about bringing Terran microorganisms to the planet, since such entities might eradicate any life that might be found there. And though *Red Mars* is clearly a novel, not a book-of-stories-pretending-to-be-one, Robinson follows Bradbury’s structure in breaking his work up into smaller segments, each from the point of view of a different character. He even connects them together with brief interludes of poetic meditations, something like what Bradbury in his introduction to the *Chronicles* calls “Martian pensées, Shakespearean ‘asides,’ wandering thoughts, long night visions, predawn half-dreams.” These interludes and switches in perspective keep Robinson’s monumental epic from being oppressively monolithic.

There are also more subtle references to Bradbury, whether consciously intended or not. For example, the love triangle between Frank, the head of the American colonists, and Maya, the head of the Russian colonists, and John Boone, the ‘First Man on Mars,’ is satisfyingly reminiscent of the similar relationships between Ylla, Mr. K, and the First Man on Mars in Bradbury’s “Ylla” (even down to replicating the resolution of that conflict). Michel Duval, the expedition’s psychiatrist, ironically finds himself going insane, much like Mr. Xxx does (or thinks he does) in Bradbury’s “The Earth Men.” The Reds and Greens also echo the earlier *Chronicles*. Bradbury’s Jeff Spender is willing to kill in order to preserve Mars as mankind found it, making him the prototype Red, and just in case the title of Bradbury’s “The Green Morning” doesn’t tip you off, Benjamin Driscoll, the ‘Johnny Appleseed’ of Bradbury’s Mars, is most definitely the ur-Green. When Earth consumes itself in war near the end of Robinson’s novel, the inhabitants of Mars declare themselves Martians and cut themselves loose (literally) from all traffic with the mother world, just like Robert in Bradbury’s “The Million-Year Picnic.”

John Varley’s more recent *Red Thunder* isn’t so much about colonizing Mars as it is about getting to it first. The Chinese and the Americans are in a race to the Red Planet, but the American mission hits unexpected trouble. A group of Florida down-and-outs, a forcibly retired alcoholic astronaut, and an idiot-savant engineer try to cobble together out of junkyard scrap a vehicle which can rescue the lost expedition and still reach Mars first. It made me wonder what would happen if B.A. Baracus had been in charge of building *Salvage I*. Never underestimate the usefulness of duct tape, monster trucks, and abandoned railroad cars! But the voyage still

wouldn't be possible without the misfit team's discovery of a radical new technology, the 'Squeeze drive,' which serves as both MacGuffin and unobtainium in the story. As unobtainium the 'Squeezer' provides an easy technological excuse for violating the laws of physics, making such a swift voyage possible. As a MacGuffin it provides a source for conflict, something which governments (and other factions) struggle over, so the team must use a number of paranoid tricks to keep it from falling into enemy hands (or rather, into *anyone's* hands, since the Squeezer is *that* powerful and *that* dangerous). And it's around that conflict that much of the political and very human drama unfolds.

All four of these stories reveal many of those things about ourselves and our society which we like to pretend could only occur on another planet. So remember please for the next day or so the lesson you learned today: If the doorbell rings and nobody's there, that's no Martian. It's you.

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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.