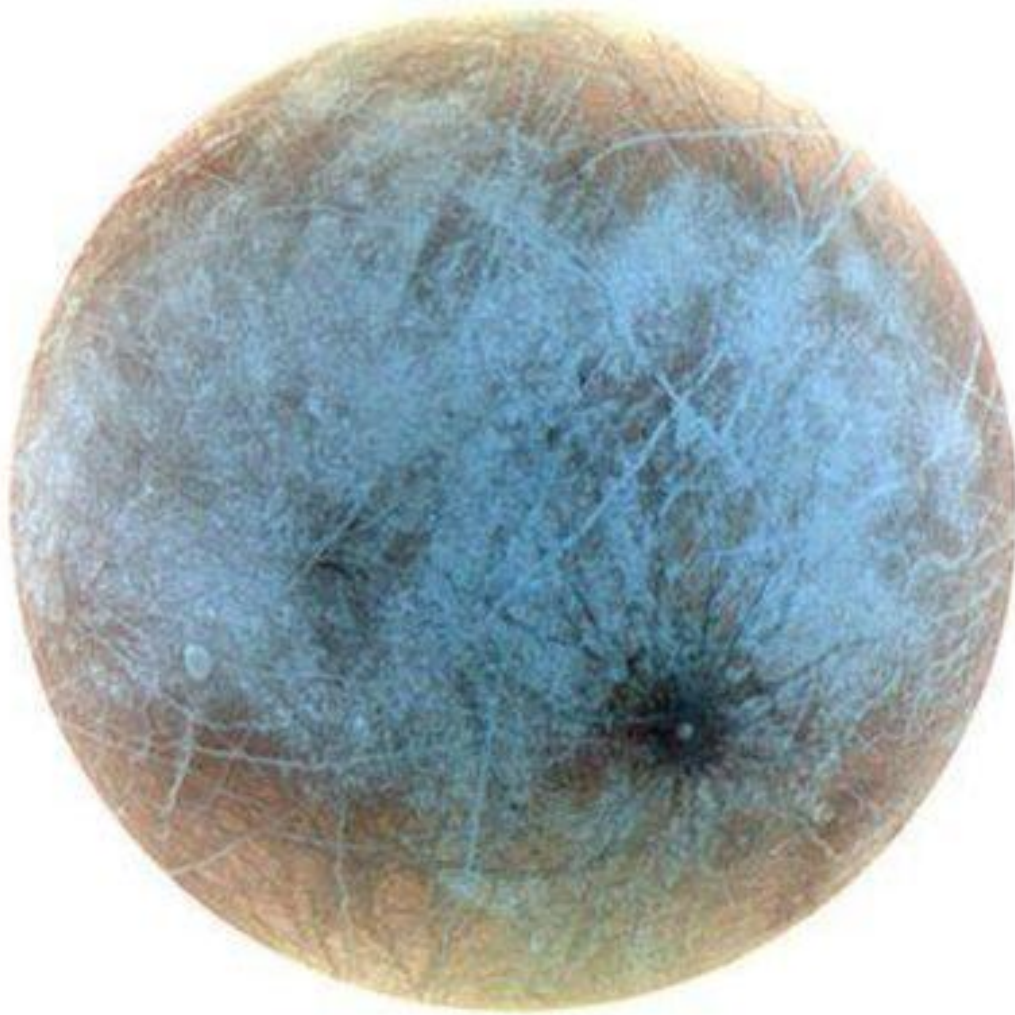




Redstone Science Fiction

May 2011

#12



Patty Jansen * R.L. Ferguson * Bonnie McDaniel

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Editor's Note – May 2011

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“Spring has not always been kind to Redstone Science Fiction.” - Paul Clemmons

Last May, just as we were preparing to publish our first issue, Paul Clemmons' Nashville home was flooded. He managed overwhelming difficulties with his usual aplomb and overcame a host of obstacles to return his family to his home in August. In fact, this weekend he led a 'flood reunion' in his local community.

As we prepared our twelfth issue, this past week more than one hundred tornadoes swarmed across the southeast, taking hundreds of lives and destroying thousands of homes and businesses. Along with a half million others we were without power for a few days, but my family experienced only a minor disruption to our lives, particularly in light of what occurred all around us. We encourage everyone to support the ongoing relief efforts in Alabama and other devastated areas through the [Red Cross](#) and similar organizations, as we will be doing in the coming days.

Despite spring's animus towards us, we have a job to do here at Redstone: to bring you quality science fiction, and we've gotten it done again this month. The three stories this month are all excellent, and I asked Paul and Cassandra to tell you why they found this month's stories so entertaining.

Enter Paul Clemmons: When I finished reading [Party, With Echoes](#), I immediately reread it, and then started pressuring the rest of the team to read it as well. It was exactly what we'd been looking for. The speculative element (in this case, extraterrestrial life in the waters of Europa) is central to the story, the protagonist is well-developed, with meaningful motivations, and the writing is excellent. We look forward to working more with Patty, and I'd like to encourage new writers to look at [Party](#) as an example of 'how it's done'.

Enter Cassandra Link: The protagonist in [Ask Not](#) is exactly the kind of person one would want to be in a post-apocalyptic scenario: strong, brave, and competent. It is an excellent story, and it shows that a new writer can create a quality work. It is one of the things we want to do: bring our readers stories from across the spectrum of science fiction, both in terms subgenres and writers.

Me again. RL Ferguson's [Zeno's Arrow](#) jumped right out of the pile of submissions at me. He takes the concept of the 'generation ship,' which I already love, and then considers issues that I have not seen addressed before, but in a very personal story. He covers a lot of ground in small package. Good stuff.

These three full-length stories complete our Kickstarter-supported spring double (and triple feature). In March, April, and May we published over 24,000 words of new fiction, and have had the chance to bring you some top quality fiction, largely from new writers.

I have the honor of listing here the backers who all made substantial pledges of support to Redstone SF and our publishing efforts.

The Friends of Redstone SF

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Nathan Dodge

Robert Hampson

Mandy & Michael Mendez (love)

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

Party, with Echoes

by Patty Jansen

“So – your ancestors were pearl divers in Western Australia?” he says.

“Yup,” Yuriko replies, in a who cares sort of way that she hopes reinforces her tough image. But she thinks, *So, you said you were fit?* and she’s looking at the thermals stretching over his belly and the pudgy hairy spiders that are his hands.

“You’re OK with the gear?”

He makes an O by putting the tip of his index finger on the tip of his thumb, the divers’ sign. “Don’t worry. I have Open Water, Advanced Open Water, Dive Rescue and Dive Master qualifications.”

Yuriko smiles and thinks, *But how long since you’ve used them?* The spec from Ianni said he was a company director. David Woodridge is his name, although he introduced himself to Yuriko as ‘John’.

“Ah, but we’re on Europa, ten kilometres under the ice. This is not just another wreck dive on the Great Barrier Reef.”

He grins. “I noticed. The ice kinda gives it away.”

She yanks on the drysuit jacket over the thermals. The hood pulls at her hair and squashes her face. Then she checks the sub bobbing at its mooring. The green light on the control panel shows the battery fully charged. She releases the rope and the sub floats into the middle of the pool, a bright orange torpedo-shape surrounded by white ice. The water is so black that the pathetic neon light on the cavern’s ice roof doesn’t even cast a shadow.

Next: equipment. Yuriko lifts the BCD jacket and the two air tanks with one hand. Easy. The importance of gravity is highly overrated. She slides her arms in, passes the hoses through the loop at her right shoulder, reseals the Velcro strip, and snaps the buckles closed. Click, click, click.

“Ready?”

He nods. Not very talkative, this one.

“Remember, once we’re in Echo territory, there are only three rules: don’t leave the sub; don’t leave the sub; and by all that’s dear, don’t leave the goddamn sub.”

“I think I get the message, Captain.”

And he's still treating this as a joke. He may be on a holiday, but she's seen men shitting themselves with fear in that inky darkness, surrounded by Echoes. Shit is hard to remove from the inside of a drysuit. Guess who gets to do that job?

Yuriko puts on her face mask and gloves. One last check of the tanks, and she jumps from the ice into the black water.

John, or David, follows, clumsy. He bumps into the sub's propeller cage, pushes himself off with his hand.

Yuriko manoeuvres the sub away from him. Damn it, she's not going to have the trip scuttled by equipment getting tangled in the propeller before they've even started. He's paying Big Bucks for this adventure and she'll bring him back here safely, to get her share, for Shiziko, for the exorbitant fare to Earth, for her pale little face and her chance to live.

"Here," she shouts through her mask, pointing at the handles at the back of the sub. "Hold here."

He fins past the sub's flank in languid strokes. Yeah, he has done this before. Some of the tension inside her dissipates.

He grabs the handle, clips on the tether. Yuriko motions, *OK?* She forces a smile. It's an *adventure* after all.

He repeats the gesture.

"Off we go, then."

Yuriko squeezes the throttle. The propeller kicks into life, pulling the sub down with a jolt. Her vision dissolves into bubbling darkness. And then it's only the sub's humming engine, explosions of bubbles with every breath, and a long cone of light fading in the dark nothingness of the water.

She swings the sub until there is a blue-grey mass to the right. The ice looks soft; curving sculptures blunted by passing water and fading in ever-softer tones of grey.

"We'll follow this wall until we get to the gap." Her mind slips into tour guide mode. She tells him about the ice layer that surrounds Europa, and the research stations that probe the ocean underneath.

She tells him about her family's pearl diving past, about her great-grandfather's grave in Broome. That's as far as the connection with diving goes. Her grandmother, half-Japanese, half-aboriginal, went back to Japan for a visit. She never left; she met Yuriko's grandfather. It makes a good story, and explains Yuriko's dark skin and Polynesian-like face. Usually, the tourists ask questions, but not this one.

She makes the OK sign; he OKs back, smiling through his face mask.

Deeper and deeper the sub drags them, the engine's hum becoming more pronounced. Her ears pop several times with the increasing pressure.

Then the icy wall recedes, and there is the thoroughfare. The hole is jagged, the natural tunnel about twenty metres long. Yuriko steers the sub into the opening. Bubbles exhaled from their regulators crawl up the icy sides to form mercury pockets of air in downward-pointing hollows. David's looking all around, craning his neck this way and that.

"Wait until you see the Fountain site," she says.

He peers at the map displayed on the sub's screen. Two green lines, their trajectory to the Fountain and back, and a blinking dot with coordinates. Pretty cool technology, with the signal going through the ice to the satellite in orbit. Impressive, when it works, and this trip was dicey until the last moment. Some sort of problem with the courier company that ferries supplies from Ganymede.

They emerge out the other side of the thoroughfare, in deep darkness. The beam of the sub fades in ever-diminishing shades of grey, two, three hundred feet ahead. Unlike on Earth, there's no silt, no muck from the bottom, because there is no bottom. The depth sounder on the sub's screen says the water is about ten kilometres deep. That's Europa: thick ice, even deeper ocean.

As she sets the coordinates on the sub's navigator, a message from Ianni splashes across the screen, *All OK?*

She punches in, *Just left. Heading out the gap.*

The courier brought your machine.

Yuriko takes a sharp breath, and another one. The micro-pulse machine that she's waited to get for months. First the Health Office wouldn't pay, then the stupid courier company went bust. When installed, it will help stabilise Shiziko's little heart until Yuriko can afford the fare to Earth for the operation.

Efgenia has taken her to the hospital, Ianni continues.

Thank you so much. Her hands are trembling, her eyes misting up. Bless Efgenia, Ianni's twenty-year-old daughter. Office clerk, nurse-by-default and saver of lives. Now all Yuriko needs is the money, make sure David leaves happy. And go out with the next tourist, and the next, and the next.

Algae float in the water, long strands of feathery structures. The stems, if they can be called that, are hundreds of metres long. They float vertically, kept in that position by warm water welling from the vents far below.

Every now and then, a little amorphous sliver of *something* passes through the beam of light.

“What’s that?” David asks and points.

“We’re in Echo territory now. They’re coming.”

Out of the murk, another sub joins them, followed by two divers. It makes no sound.

“That’s an Echo? It looks so real,” David says.

“They’re copies. The divers with the sub are Ianni and a tourist he’s guiding.” They wear blue and black suits, from before the time they realised they could stop many Echoes forming by always wearing the same outfits.

“There’s much research still to be done on the Echoes. Did you visit the museum at the Exobiology Centre?”

“I did. These Echoes aren’t intelligent, are they?”

“No. The Echo isn’t even an organism; it’s a colony of bacterial parrots imitating forms of living creatures. They repeat actions, but have no initiative, no thought. Otherwise we’d have won the prize.”

He laughs, uncomfortably. Yuriko gathers he has an interest in exobiology and the fifty million reward for the first proven record of intelligent extra-terrestrial life. Maybe that’s why he’s here, and why he’s secretive. But he won’t find anything. Submarines have scanned the ocean for years. There is plenty of life down there, but none that’s intelligent.

A strong current pushes the sub sideways. Europa’s surface is always in motion under influence of Jupiter’s magnetic pull. Tidal currents rage between the deep icebergs and the algal forests.

In between tracking the navigation screen and adjusting course, Yuriko gestures, *OK?*

He repeats the gesture, stoic and silent.

Why isn’t he asking any questions? Is he shy? Not terribly interested? Why, if he’s paid all this money to come out here?

Travel through darkness takes on a strangely monotonous quality. Dark shapes flit around the sub, rarely in the cone-shaped beam of the headlight. Some look human, some are fish, silvery things about a hand long, scimitar-shaped with a fringe-like ventral fin, and without eyes. Some of the latter are real, some are Echoes, but it’s hard to tell which is which, even if you catch them. Some Echoes dissolve into bacterial sludge, but others are remarkably resilient.

Yuriko flips her air supply from the empty first tank to the second one and helps David do the same. They’re a bit over an hour into the dive, with another hour still to go.

David looks around, over his right shoulder, then over his left shoulder. Yes, they're following. That's what Echoes do. Yuriko can already see the sub with the two divers. Both wear red drysuits. One of them is an Echo of Yuriko, the other a tourist, quite overweight.

David points. "Is that..."

"That's us, yes."

"You mean – we'll be around here for years?"

"Maybe." Some Echoes stay, others vanish. No one knows why.

He mumbles, "Shit."

* * *

Yuriko has a third of a tank of air left when the sub hits the updraft. Bubbles rise from the inky waters below. She fingers the sub's control pad. Above them, in the ice-cave, a compressor bucks into life; she can hear the hum of the engine.

"Am I crazy or is this water warm?" David asks.

"No, not crazy. This is the Fountain. There's a vent way down below. It's an undersea volcano."

"We're going up here, aren't we?"

"Yup, but slowly. We don't want to come out suffering the bends, do we? Make sure your jacket is fully deflated."

The water all around is bubbling now. The Echoes still hang around, their forms distorted with the movement of water. Five metres below the surface, the lights in the cave come on, prompted by Yuriko's command on the sub.

Then there is the rope, and the ladder. The sub bobs to the surface. Yuriko lets David climb out first.

"Holy shit."

He's stopped at the top of the ladder, gaping at thousands of ice stalactites hanging from the ceiling. The greenish neon light makes the surface twinkle. The ice varies in colour from light green to pink to orange, yellow and red, from algae and sulphurous deposits.

"I said it was pretty."

They're not alone in the cave. By the time Yuriko has climbed out, they're surrounded by Echoes. There are at least three copies of herself, each subtly different from the other. All their mouths are moving.

"Don't take off the mask yet," she says through the babble that sounds like English, but means nothing.

She attaches the sub's cable to the winch that's in a niche cut into the wall. A flick of a switch and sub creeps out of the water. By now, the screen shows that the pump has disposed of poisonous gases.

She takes off the mask, pushes down the hood.

"Give me your tanks, and I'll hook them up to the compressor." It will need most of the night to refill the tanks for the way back.

The next twenty minutes are filled with domestic activity. Yuriko opens the sub's hatch, pulls out a lumpy package and rolls it out on the icy floor. The tent self-inflates. David carries the mats inside, one in each sleeping compartment.

It's warm enough in the cave to take off the drysuits. The walls are sweating water, glistening lumpy smoothness with a tinge of green. Yuriko pulls out the meal packages and inserts them in the slot behind the sub's still-hot engine.

David emerges from the tent. He's ditched his suit in favour of trackpants and polar-grade jacket. His cheeks are bright red.

"You OK?" Yuriko asks, handing him the meal packet.

"Yeah."

He sits down in a collapsible chair, rips the spoon from the packet and starts to eat. Steam rises in the cold air.

Yuriko starts eating as well, uneasy, wishing she could fill the awkward moments of silence.

"So, why did you decide to come here?"

Well, I... a friend told me about this place."

"A friend," she prompts, but he's looking at the Echoes on the other side of the water. There's a copy of Yuriko, black hair in a ponytail like she used to wear it before she decided to cut it off.

"You work in exobiology?" she asks again.

"No more than a hobby. I heard about this place. I thought I'd come and see it."

Why then does she feel he's not interested?

"What does your company do?" she asks.

"My company?" He looks up. His eyes are wide.

Yuriko leans back, on the defensive. "Well, it said in the message I got from my boss that you are—"

"What business is it of yours what I do for a living?" His voice is harsh.

The Echoes repeat his words.

"Shut up!" he shouts, and they repeat, *shut up, shut up, shut up*.

He leans his head in his hands, his knuckles white. Silence stretches for at least a minute, with faint calls of *shut up* merging into unintelligible mush.

Yuriko scrapes non-existent food from the bottom of her packet.

"Well," he says, finally. "It's probably all over the gossip circuit. You know the courier service from Ganymede?"

Yuriko nods. The one that was supposed to deliver Shiziko's machine.

"That is – or rather was – my company."

"I'm sorry."

So he's come here to forget, to drown his sorrow. Damn it, what drug did he take while he was in the tent? Ianni should make all customers sign a declaration that they will not take any illicit drugs on the dive. He says he doesn't like treating privileged customers like criminals, and that a dive-medical is sufficient, but he doesn't have to deal with the consequences.

"You know what happened? We invested into exploring caves on Ganymede, because we had evidence of intelligent life there. My... idiot partner was going after the fifty million reward. We had the technology, except the evidence turned out to have been faked by my partner. He disappeared with my money."

He unbuttons his jacket. "It's getting hot in here. Aren't you hot?"

Yuriko shakes her head, and can do nothing but watch while he peels off his jacket. Shit, he's taken drugs for sure.

"Anyway, good meal, Captain." He pushes himself up. "Now, let's have a party."

“Party?”

He digs in his jacket and pulls out a Cube, which he puts down on the ice, and turns up the volume. A woman wails over the thump of a heart-stopping doof-doof-doof.

“Come on, let’s dance.”

David grabs her hand and pulls her up.

“I’m not sure if this is such a good idea.”

“Come on, dance. Look, they’re all coming for the party.”

At least twenty Echoes have come into the cave, some of them bobbing to the beat. It seems they are *attracted* by the music.

David drags her along in his dance, uncoordinated, as if he’s drunk. She’s trying to pull herself free, but he won’t let her go.

His face is red; his cheeks aglow with energy.

Yuriko moves with him, stiff, trying to keep as much distance from him as possible. She wants to push him away, to yell at him, but he might become violent and the Echoes will copy him. She can’t afford that to happen, because then she can’t take tourists back here.

They dance. *Doof-doof-doof*. The Echoes are dancing, too, copying David’s clumsy moves. Yuriko stumbles along; it’s all she can do.

Shit, shit, shit. This is going to end badly.

David whoops and lets go of her hand. He’s looking at the ice shelf across the bubbling water. Yuriko turns.

A different kind of Echo has come in. Five of them. They’re silvery and walk on four legs, prowling like leopards. Their heads are bulges on their backs, in the place where you’d put the saddle on a horse. Their eyes, three of them, are constantly shifting, iridescent. They make sounds like zippers moving up and down, audible over the doof-doof-doof of the music.

David has dropped in a crouch, steadying a camera on a hastily-unfolded tripod.

Oh damn. The fifty million reward. Saving his company. He has *known* about this.

Now who again was lying about the secrets? Who took off with the money?

David faces her, his cheeks flushed, pulling a rope from his jacket.

“You must help me catch one. I’ll pay a good commission.”

The bait floats before her. Immediate flight back to Earth. A guaranteed spot for Shiziko in the best hospital, treatment by the best doctors.

The music is going *doof-doof-doof*.

“Come on, girl. Hurry up. I need the money.”

Yuriko finds her tongue. “You can’t. They’re not real.” She has to shout to make herself heard.

“They’re proof that intelligent life exists.”

“But when you attack them, the others will copy.” And there are a lot of Echoes in the cave. “It’s dangerous.”

“Oh, fuck off. I’m getting one of these suckers.” He pushes Yuriko aside, staggers to the edge of the water.

“No, David, no!” Yuriko shouts.

Time slows. David jumps, grabs one of the silvery Echoes by a paw, and falls... in the water. He’s not wearing a drysuit. Yuriko runs to the sub, climbs on, and lets it slide down the ramp. David’s thrashing in the water, trying to tie the Echo with the rope, while bashing it, and the Echo is pushing him under. The other, human, echoes are starting to jostle each other.

Yuriko reaches him, grabs him by the back of the shirt. At that moment, the alien Echo disintegrates, spilling a flood of algal sludge all over him, and over her. Yuriko can’t see; slime is running in her eyes. David is gasping and spluttering.

Her arms ache from trying to drag him up. He’s too heavy for her, and she almost slips into the water herself.

And still he’s protesting. “Let me go! I have to get that thing.”

Shit, shit, shit.

If he carries on like this, he’ll get both of them killed. She whacks him, hard, on the side of the head. His eyes roll up; he stops moving.

The alarm on the sub is beeping.

Still panting Yuriko, activates the message screen.

You OK? Ianni. The back-to-base alarm will have woken him up. It’s the middle of the night shift in the village.

Yes, for now, but I've got to get out of here. This guy's a nutcase.

I'm coming right away. Hang in there.

Thank goodness for Ianni.

Yuriko pulls David onto the ice and drags his limp body into the wall cavity that holds the winch. There is a panel that slides across the opening, to protect the winch from sulphurous gases.

She runs to the tent to get some blankets for herself, but two Echoes come out, both copies of herself. One pushes her, hard. She stumbles, while the other grabs her wrist. Yuriko twists free, and the Echo distorts. Her own face explodes in a gulf of green slime. More Echoes are crossing the water. Herself, Ianni, and various tourists. Yuriko scrambles to her feet and runs for the niche, slamming the panel behind her.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

All she can do is sit on the blanket that covers David, hug herself and hope that Ianni won't be too long.

* * *

Yuriko is shivering by the time Ianni slides open the door.

“Yuriko, what—”

She gets to her feet and stumbles out of the niche. Her legs have lost all feeling and won't support her. Ianni manages to grab her under the arms. He feels hot like a furnace.

“Yuriko, what happened here?”

The entire cave floor is covered in greenish-brown slime that has frozen onto the ice.

In a few sentences, she tells him what David has done. While she's talking, Ianni is shaking his head.

“It's my fault. I shouldn't have accepted him. I shouldn't have—”

“Please, Ianni, there's nothing you could have done. Let's get out of here before the Echoes come back.” They'll be violent.

Ianni and Yuriko load David in a compressor cell and Ianni takes him down. Meanwhile, Yuriko packs up the tent, clenching and unclenching her teeth. She hopes David has the sense to pay Ianni plenty of compensation. He has destroyed their means of income, her chance to get Shiziko to a decent hospital. Hot tears burn in her eyes.

David's camera is still on the ice. Yuriko picks it up and puts it in her BCD pocket. Then she jumps into the water, and dives under the sub to enter the dive-bell entrance.

While Ianni steers the sub, she sits next to David's unconscious form, fighting the urge to throttle him. The idiot.

She takes his camera out of her pocket and replays the recording. There is David jumping into the water, her going after him, dragging him out, trying to beat off the Echoes, running into the alcove. The board slides over the entrance.

The silver Echoes float over the water to inspect the sub's screen. One touches it with a silver paw. The creature makes a sudden movement, as if it's sneezing. Another Echo comes over, and also inspects the screen. It zips and chitters. The other one replies. A third silver form approaches the sub, but the second Echo lashes out with a foot, and the third Echo dissolves in algal slush. The first one replies again.

They're talking.

The two silver forms skitter up the cavern wall. A bit later, Ianni emerges from the water.

Yuriko's heart is thudding. Echoes are mindless and stupid. They don't talk. Or hide. David hasn't seen this recording...

"Ianni, the Echoes only react to living beings, don't they?"

He turns around, frowning. "Why are you asking, Yuriko? Yes, off course we can still take tourists in the big sub, but it will be less exciting for them, and much more expensive for us. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to get a licence to drive this thing and I'm not sure I can afford to—"

"Ianni. Forget the tourists."

His frown deepens. "Yuriko?"

"You wanted to see New York?"

"Yes, but what—"

"We're going to go to New York, and I'm going to make an appointment for Shiziko's operation. But first we're going to take this cheating, lying low-life to the hospital, and then we're going hunting."

She leans over, and dumps David's camera in his lap.

The End

Besides being a writer of crazy fantasy, space opera and hard Science Fiction, Patty Jansen is slush reader and editor at Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine. She blogs at <http://pattyjansen.wordpress.com/> about writing, about science, about editing and about slush piles. Patty is a winner of the second 2010 quarter of the Writers of the Future Contest and has published in the Universe Annex of the Grantville Gazette. She lives in Sydney, Australia where, once upon a time before children came along, she and her husband used to go SCUBA diving.

Zeno's Arrow
by RL Ferguson

Waking to Silence

They woke me for my watch ten years early.

Groggy from the hibernation chamber, shivering as the infrared heaters bathed my skin, Andrea spoke to me about communications lasers, data decay, and crew suicides.

“How many?” I mumbled. Microphones caught my words, relaying them to Andrea.

“Thirty,” she responded. Her voice sounded wrong. Something I couldn't place, a weight, or age, carried on the sound of her voice.

“Are you at your watch station?” I struggled out of the tube. Floating free, I propelled myself to my locker. I struggled into a jumpsuit. I counted the tubes in my section.

Forty tubes, ten still in use, set in the wall before me. Thirty looming doors stared at me like vacant eyes.

Using handholds set in the wall; I made my way to the door, tapped the lock, and received a buzz of refusal. “Andrea, the door is locked. Pressure indicator shows equal pressure on both sides. Is there a problem?”

Andrea's voice, tired and desperate, came to me. “Slow down. The boat is fine. You are fine. Everything is fine. There has been a small problem.”

“If everything is fine, why don't you open the door?” I took out my pocket interface and talked to the boat. Everything showed green.

“I need you to understand something before you come to the bridge. You must accept something before you can be of use to me.” Her voice sounded so tired, maybe a bit lonely. The entire conversation carried an air of rehearsal.

I accessed the boat's logs. Normal usage levels, normal entries, a list of crew deaths. All signed by one person: Andrea.

Checking medical records, I noted that Andrea was a year forty watch member. I was a year seventy member. Boat time showed year sixty. Andrea's record showed a twenty-year watch.

Crew records showed seventy awakenings and forty freezings. The last time she woke a crewmember was five years ago. “Jesus, you've been alone five years.”

“The captain doesn’t approve of blasphemy. You know how long I have been up. The boat tells me everything you do. Did you check why?” Andrea asked. Her voice carried fear.

I scrolled the logs back to year forty.

Year forty: the year we lost contact with Earth.

* * *

Ten thousand young, brilliant dreamers gathered from the poorest, most disadvantaged, Earth had to offer. They recruited us with science fiction blogs and free fiction sights. They gave us the opportunity to trade our miserable lives for upper class lives for our families. Money meant nothing where we were going.

The ten thousand became one thousand. The weak were left behind as we suffered through years of training, drilling, and living ten to a room in the depths of a coalmine. Don’t ask me where it was, just know that from age twenty to twenty-four I lived without the sun.

They packed us into hibernation pods, loaded us onto our boat, and blasted us off toward a star twenty light years from Earth. I could get the name, but stars weren’t my true interest.

I was here for the future.

Not mine, my family’s.

* * *

Andrea let me out of the hibernation bay once she saw that I wasn’t violent.

I made my way to the watch deck, the farthest point from the hibernation bays, on the outermost ring of the habitat section. Here we had gravity, not much, but enough to remind you that falling hurt.

Over tea, I watched her grey framed face. I noted her glasses and crow’s feet, trying to replace the blond-haired beauty that I had last seen only a few days ago. She was older than me by a handful of years then. Now she was twenty-five years beyond me.

“It was near the end of my watch. A week to go before I took the big sleep. When the communications system went silent.” She sipped her tea slowly, watching my face. “Antonio ran all the checks. Even went EVA and replaced the control boards. Nothing. No response.”

“Was there any warning?” I asked from courtesy. I already knew the answer. This was all in the logs. I was just letting her get it out.

“You know control. No news from home, just books, movies, and patch updates on the data feed. They thought it was better that way, we know different now. One day we are receiving

schematics and entertainments, the next day nothing. Antonio fought with that system, rewired it, and even built new components.”

“He started the fab plants?” That wasn’t in the logs.

“Just the electronics fabs, for the month it took to build the radio.” Andrea stared into her tea. “He rigged up a parabolic antenna to a radio receiver. I told him Earth didn’t use long wave anymore, he just kept working. For another month, he slaved over his antenna array, listening for the faintest crackle. I watched him die a little more each day. One night shift, he called me. ‘I’m going outside to adjust the antenna. I might be a while.’ He never came back. I watched him drift away for another month. His helmet tucked under his arm, spinning slowly away.”

“You’ve been alone since then?” I asked.

“Mostly. I used to wake sleepers up, but gave that up after they either placed themselves back into hibernation or took the coward’s way out.”

“Did the others just step out the airlock?”

“After Antonio, a couple used pills, a trio asphyxiated themselves; finally someone used a cutting torch. Took forever to get the blood out. I tell you what I told the rest, either get back in your tube or step out the airlock. Leave your spacesuit in stores, we might need it later.” Andrea watched me with cold eyes.

“What kept you going?”

“The mission. There is a planet out there just for us. That is what keeps me from taking the final walk.”

“I won’t leave you. We’ll find a way to get there.” I said, wondering why the others had broken so easily. Back home I starved as often as I ate. Here I not only had food, but a bed, books, and best of all, no drive-bys.

It took us a month, but we found a way to continue.

I compared what Andrea and I had in common, compared that to the backgrounds of the suicides and sleepers, and for want of a better word built a statistical model.

My multivariate professor would have had issues with my techniques, but she was probably dead. Not because the world had ended in a zombie apocalypse or a nuclear war, just because she was old when I last saw her. She’d be over a hundred and sixty by now, no human could live that long.

In the end, we found fifty pairs that shared the common traits of deprived upbringing in a violent environment. Andrea and I were included in the count. A stable middle class upbringing actually had a flaw after all.

We woke each pair over the next six months, checked their reactions, and signed them on with the plan. We then packed them back into their tubes, and started with the next pair.

With a hundred and fifty years left in the mission, we would each have to stand three more watches. Not that different from the coal mines, except for the windows.

We would survive.

The mission would survive.

Andrea and I finished out my year watch, woke our replacements, and drifted off to sleep in our tomb like tubes.

* * *

Left Behind

It was year one ten. Andrea and I stood watch once again.

When we had gone under, things had been tense. When we woke, we found the boat festive. Shoni and Patel beamed as they pulled me from my hibernation pod.

“What is going on? Did I oversleep? Are we there?” I slurred through the fog of waking.

Shoni, with elfin face and pixie eyes, laughed, “Shush shush all will be revealed.”

Patel grinned, his dark face splitting into a wide uncontrolled smile. “Do not look at me. I will tell you nothing. Now get some clothes on. Nudity is frowned upon in public.”

“Slave driver,” I cursed as I pulled my jumpsuit on. “Damn, forgot to wash this last time. Fifty years of fermented funk.”

“Take a different one. The dead don’t mind you wearing their clothes.” Patel became serious.

Scanning down the names on the lockers, I floated to one with a name I did not recognize. I pulled the Velcro name tag off the clean jumpsuit, slapping my stained tag in place.

“Show me this wonder and it better not be a still. The Captain wouldn’t approve,” I said pulling myself along the wall out of my hibernation bay.

“What was she like? I never really met her. Only saw her during inspections.” Shoni asked as if requesting the telling of a legend.

“I met her once. She was strong willed, capable of facing anything. She couldn’t live up to her reputation.” I pointed to an empty hibernation tube marked with four gold bands, the topmost twisted into a loop. “Don’t dwell on this thing.”

“The Captain wouldn’t approve,” Patel and Shoni echoed back.

* * *

On the watch deck Andrea greeted us with tea. Her gray hair tied in a topknot, a smile on her lips. “They aren’t dead. The earth abides.”

Opening a screen onto space, she spun the view ahead, pointing it at the red dwarf star that was our goal. Zooming in, tighter and tighter, the red glow of the star shifted out of view, to be replaced by the white metallic glint of something.

She zoomed until pixilation started, then backed off. A white blob of metal held in the dark between stars.

“Is that?” I stammered.

“It’s a ship! A ship from earth!” Andrea sang. Shoni and Patel joined her in disharmony. “The earth lives.”

I checked the log, noting files on the passage of the strange ship. I reached for the screen, setting it to show the closest approach. The ship was a wide solid disk, with a large nozzle at the rear. “No frame of reference except that nozzle. How big do you think it is?”

“Estimates range from five hundred meters to two kilometers wide. Even our best scopes could not find anything to judge scale by.” Patel smiled as he talked. “Shoni estimated the launch date.”

“Three years after we lost contact,” Shoni cheered. “They must have just forgot us.”

“The log shows a huge amount of signal traffic beamed at us over the last year, what of that?” I asked opening the log files. Streams of binary stared at me, totally incomprehensible.

“No clue,” Patel said. “Shoni and I are farmers, not programmers. We thought you might know?”

“Just a pair of board replacers,” Shoni added. “We leave the real fixing to you nerds.”

“Andrea, do you have anything to add?” I transferred the data to a work console.

“Computers do not compute. Magic smoke makes them go,” she spoke in a mock robot voice.

“Put the farmers to bed, and then get on the maintenance lists. There must be some magic smoke that needs capturing somewhere.” I turned to the data stream wondering where to start.

* * *

I entered deep hack for nearly a month. The message was in two parts. The first section: a Rosetta stone of programming languages. The second section, much larger and infinitely more complex, was a mystery.

I concentrated on the first section, slowly pulling understanding from its structure. My forte was databases, statistical analysis, with a touch of circuit design. Solid skills needed for the operation of the boat.

This code required skills no one on board had. It took me almost two weeks to master the basics of video compression, just to gain a glimmer of what the code represented.

Once I found the key, the rest was a process of creating the code necessary to construct a new video compression library. Once I had that working, I realized the second section was actually two pieces. The first was a series of schematics for a new video circuit, the second part a mystery.

I started the circuit fab units, making sure to document it in the log, and spent another week swearing. Sure I had a schematic, and it worked back on Earth, but here on the boat we just didn't have the equipment to create a direct copy.

So I improvised. The schematics explained the processes and operation of each subsystem, which made things easier.

Finally it was done.

It didn't look like the schematic. The plan's device barely covered one's palm. My copy was the size of a trash can.

Not pretty, but when I hooked it up it worked.

I now knew what lay in the remainder of the message.

Pictures, sound files, and movies of all our loved ones. I scrolled through the lists until I found my family.

The people in the pictures and movies looked familiar, but different. My father sat crippled and gray, my mother similarly twisted by time, a middle aged couple with a pair of teen aged girls, everything was familiar, and everything was different.

I muted it before they could talk. I watched these strangers move with home movie grace. I shut it off. They were all dead by now, no need to watch further.

There was also an explanation for the communications failure. A series of human failings, weather, and technology all conspired to create a situation where communication became impossible.

The consortium that funded us fell into financial distress. A hurricane destroyed our mission control center in its attempt to destroy Puerto Rico. When they made the necessary repairs, it was discovered that no one knew what data compression techniques we utilized, and worse of all, the gear we used had not been made for nearly two generations.

Then there was the real issue. We were slightly off course. Not much mind you, just enough. It appears the mass we lost with the suicides, through body, suit, and atmosphere loss combined with minute variations in solar wind and dust densities gave us a tiny drift.

We couldn't detect it, but it was just enough to push us out of the main beam.

They had been calling. We were outside the coverage area.

* * *

I watched a second vessel pass us shortly before entering the tube for my fifty year nap. Clean uniform on the hook this time.

This one was about ten percent smaller and about five percent faster than the first one. This one also bathed us in recorded messages.

There were more ships following, it told us. A chain of life strung across the gulf between worlds.

Using the boat's scopes, I verified a chain of piercing lights stretching like a lifeline from the shores of Earth to our long sought after destination. I could see five behind us, the closest preparing to pass us. Each following ship was faster than the last.

We who had left first would arrive last.

I left briefing files for the watches to come, and settled down to my well-earned nap.

* * *

Final Straw

Year one sixty was a year of hope and wonder. Andrea and I watched the scopes as the eighth and ninth ships to pass us arrived in system.

We adjusted our position so we stood in the path of their message home. Their telemetry washed over us as they entered our goal system. Their engines blazed white against the red of the star.

We saw everything through their telemetry.

A fluke of engineering and fate conspired that each generation of ship was better than the last. Faster and smaller each ship became, though we were sure their payloads were larger and better suited for our goal.

Each one waved to us as they passed. Beaming software updates, equipment schematics, and greetings as they left us behind.

We tried to talk to them.

Oh how we tried.

The log was filled with nineteen attempts through the long dark years. Not a single response in all those attempts. The entire crew must be in hibernation, their systems, so much better than ours, entrusted to run without supervision.

That made the shock for them worse.

The Naxos was the first ship to begin a survey of our new home. The results were not received well by the crew. I am not a geologist, nor a meteorologist, but even I understood what came across the telemetry.

The atmosphere was wrong. The climate was unseasonably cold. Life on arctic ice would be easier than on Goal. That became its name. We called it Goal, for that is what it was.

I watched Andrea's face twist, tears streaming down her face. She took off her glasses, crying with deep wails into her hands.

It hurt. We worked so long, Andrea more than any other, to get to Goal. Now here, on the edge of the dark we learned that Goal has no need of us.

"I can't do this anymore," Andrea sobbed. "To arrive to die is too much."

I placed a hand on her back. "Remember the mission. We have a sacred duty to those who sleep away the dark ages."

She slapped my face. "Are we to awaken them to death? Are we to let them sleep the ages away until our systems fail and they die without knowing? What mission remains?"

* * *

I worked alone over the next few days. Old habits die hard. I had not seen a true day in seven years, and still I measure things by days, weeks, months, and years. What was time? Just a way of measuring what is left to us? Or a measure of what we could do?

Andrea avoided the watch deck, spending her time wandering the dark hallways and silent chambers of our metal wrapped world.

I monitored her as I monitored the events near Goal.

The Captain of the Naxos reported a spate of suicides and a near scuttling. One of his engineers, upset beyond reason, attempted to blow the reactor. Captain Achilles reported, with regret, that the engineer had been executed. He ordered the remainder of the crew back into hibernation. He would remain on solo watch waiting and warning the others as they arrived.

Captain Winkle of the Odyssey heeded the warning, placing his entire crew back into the deep sleep. He sent a tearful farewell home before entering his own pod.

I didn't tell Andrea. She could step beyond reason into insanity at any moment.

I tracked her, noting how she kept drifting back to the main engineering deck. I thought of the Naxos and its narrow escape.

I approached her the next day as she stood before the reactor control panel.

"You won't do this," I said floating into the reactor room.

"We would blossom in the night like a deadly flower. No pain, no suffering, just an end to this pointless existence." She floated before a control panel, its cover down and locked.

"That is not the Andrea I know. She would never give up." I drifted to her side and hugged her to me.

We floated a long time. She shuddered against me, tears floated in long chains across the room.

"There are nearly thirty ships bound for Goal. Each smaller and faster than ours. If things continue like this, we will be the last to arrive. But they need us," I whispered.

"What use are we? Slow, outdated, useless." She sobbed.

"We have space for five times our complement. This boat was built to house families for a hundred years. We have enough hydroponics to feed a fleet. If there is to be any hope of surviving near Goal, we will be the ones that bring it."

"They saved the best for last," Andrea gripped me with the strength of the damned.

"There is one other thing. About you blowing up the boat?" I lifted her face, staring into her tear swarmed eyes.

"What's that?"

"The Captain wouldn't approve."

Andrea smiled weakly, wiping tears from her eyes. "I can't continue. It is too much."

“Then it is time to sleep,” I said.

“Who will watch? Who can bear the weight of knowing there is no hope?”

“I will watch. Though the years are long and the night never ending, I will watch for the shore.”
I turned her toward the hall toward her hibernation bay.

* * *

The Glory of Time

I learned to love literature.

I engaged in year long conversations with Captain Achilles. The lag diminishing from months to days and then hours as the boat approached Goal.

I watched every movie in the library.

Read every book.

Learned medicine as my body aged. The boat knew my age, though I cared not to count time.

I haunted the boat as a ghost, the ship reading me all the works of man as I maintained its systems.

My life continued on rhythms set by the schedule of the boat.

The boat was my friend, my nurse, and my home.

I dared not awaken anyone until we arrived.

I would not pass on my burden until the boat found me unfit for duty.

Low gravity and zero gee helped me avoid many problems that plague Earth bound middle aged men.

I returned many times over the years to Andrea’s pod. I watched the monitors, noting the properly suppressed bodily functions.

Oh how I wanted to wake her, to hold her, to hear her laugh.

That couldn’t happen. For me the pain of the failure at Goal was ages past, for her it was yesterday. She would be my junior if I woke her.

Six months from Goal the message came to the fleet.

We were a fleet now. Thirty five vessels stretched across the system.

Most huddled in high orbit above Goal, waiting, a handful wandered the system carrying out scientific research, mapping worlds, doing anything to keep going.

I listened carefully to the message. A plan grew in my old skull.

* * *

The boat made orbit, joining its brethren.

I woke Andrea, bringing her to the watch deck before she was completely out of waking stupor.

She wiped dust from her glasses, dressing as she scanned the displays.

“The central screen is the important one.” I lowered myself into a chair.

“The years have not treated you badly,” she mumbled.

“Watch the screen,” I pointed with a thin hand. Now that I had someone for comparison, I now know the truth, I am old. Not decrepit old, hell my professors were all over ninety, just years old.

“It is beautiful,” she said staring at the white blue marble that was Goal. Ice sheets extended from the poles to near the equator.

“Not enough greenhouse gases. Too much oxygen and not enough nitrogen. Just watch.” The screen started a time lapse recording started three months earlier.

Scores of lights approached at great speed. A hundred unmanned ships, traveling at speeds where radiation shredded flesh, stood on tails of fusion light.

The ships tore behind the sun, braking at speeds that crushed men, before drilling with mechanical precision towards Goal.

The time lapse movie caught up to now.

We sat before the monitor as a hundred moths spun to their deaths in Goal’s atmosphere.

“What was that?” Andrea asked. “A hundred ships crashing is not a good thing.”

“They didn’t crash, that is how they work. They enter the atmosphere, release a billion machines that make more machines. Those machines, in turn, change the atmosphere. The Earth did not forget us. They sent those things to save us.” I smiled at her.

“How long will it take?” Andrea asked, tears forming again as she saw the mission take on new dimensions.

“Less time than it took to get here,” I smiled.

“Then I think it was time we organized a new watch schedule.”

“I think the Captain would approve,” I smiled.

“Yes she would.”

The End

RL Ferguson lives in Green Bay, WI. He misspent his youth running “Rogue Traders”, a hybrid Role Playing Game/Warhammer 40k/Collectible Card Game/Comic Book/Cyber Café in his hometown from 1996-2008. A double Bachelor of Art and Science, History and Mathematics, from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, RL Ferguson still wonders what he will do when he grows up. He currently shares his life with his wife of twelve years, two dogs, and two cats, all of whom wonder what he is doing hiding in his office all day. When not avoiding contact with his environment, RL Ferguson serves up fantastic serial tales at Colbyjack.net in text and solo read podcasts.

Ask Not

by Bonnie McDaniel

Six months, and a third person knocked on my door.

I opened it to find a young Iranian man standing on my front porch, wearing a charcoal suit and a black tie as long and as narrow as a pencil, swinging a fat leather briefcase as if it were a free weight. The gentle breeze fingercombed his dark hair. The tiny hybrid car sitting in the yard had somehow gotten him through several miles of rutted, weedy road mostly intact.

“Good morning,” he said, teeth flashing brilliant white against his almond skin, his accent a mixture of British vowels and Farsi cadences. “I’m here to offer you the opportunity of the century.”

Suspicion clenched my gut. There must be a goddamned beacon pixelled on my house. Even though it’s forty miles from the nearest town and buried deep in the remote Colorado hills, these...people seemed to find me. I blinked at the young man, hoping against hope he would be a nice normal human. But my luck with anything resembling that had taken a turn for the worse.

“Come on in.” I pointed to the couch. “I don’t have much use for salespeople, and you’ve interrupted my canning. You have five minutes.”

He stepped inside, his nose wrinkling at the scents of peeled tomatoes and green beans. I’d noticed his ilk didn’t care for the smells of the natural world; they obviously felt insulted at the puncturing of their cybernetic bubble. He glanced at the computer desk filling the corner. “Your setup is twenty years out of date.”

Well, whoop-tee-doo. My “setup” looked just fine to me, with the laptop, printer, and various piles of books, papers and CDs, divided by my favorite pens. The dictionary next to the printer made him frown, and I wondered if he knew what it was. I sat at the desk, turning the chair to face him. “I suppose you’re here to sell me the newest all-in-one voice-operated monster?”

“Hardly,” he said. “My company has advanced far beyond that. I’m here to sell you the next generation of Internet access.” He plopped his briefcase on the coffee table and reached inside, withdrawing a carefully folded silk handkerchief. With a flourish of pursed lips and fluttering fingers, he peeled back the layers of cloth to reveal a half-dozen fingernail-sized chips.

Another one. I stared at his face, bifurcated by a tight smile and calculating grey eyes. *How does he see me? As a human being, a woman, or a bipedal-shaped pattern of ones and zeroes?* The silence stretched as he waited for my reply. “What the hell are those?” I finally asked. Play the game, play the game until he snaps.

A loud hiss interrupted us. I looked over to see my cat standing in the hallway, swelled up like a puffer fish.

The salesperson stared. “What is *that*?”

Well, Sabrina does have a bit of an unsettling effect. She’s thirty pounds of plushy gray fur, tufted ears and oversize paws. “That’s my Lynx-Maine Coon.”

A harsh laugh came from him. “I’ve never heard of that. Did someone design her?”

“Just the old-fashioned designer called copulation.” At his puzzled look, I waved the subject away. “Get to the point, mister.”

“Aren Lashkari,” he said, turning his attention back to his chips.

Sabrina began to deflate, walking as softly over the hardwood floor as if it were a snowdrift, until she reached my chair. She sat next to it, her golden gaze riveted to the young man. I rested my hand on her head, feeling her deep rumbling growl vibrate up my arm.

There went my last hope for a good day, dammit. I didn’t want this. I had never wanted this. But the vagaries of Fate thrust it upon me anyway, all because I am capable of pulling the trigger.

Aren took a deep breath. A tic twitched his left eye. “What is your name, please?”

“Lucy Stone.”

“What I am offering you today, Lucy, will revolutionize the planet. These chips represent not only the next phase of Internet access, but the final one. They are designed to be implanted in your body, utilizing the electro-chemical impulses produced by the brain and nervous system as their power source. In effect, you become your own computer. You’ll never have to buy a system again.”

“That’s fine,” I said, “but that pile of toenail clippings doesn’t mean anything.” I flicked a finger at the chips nestled in the handkerchief. They winked back, glowing a baleful gray in the light streaming through the front window. The little bastards probably recognized me already. “You came out here in the middle of nowhere, spouting this nonsense. Why should I believe you?”

“I can prove it,” Aren said. “My company doesn’t expect any customer to blindly accept its assertions. After training, all our representatives are implanted with the chips.”

“These exact ones?”

He smiled. “Actually, I carry the third generation.”

I folded my arms and leaned back in my chair. Beside me, Sabrina tensed, her huge front paws kneading the floor, claws flexing.

“All right,” I said, “log in and show me what you’ve got.”

Aren nodded. His lids dropped down and his eyes rolled back in his head, a thin curve of eyeball showing beneath the dark lashes. A few seconds' pause and his lids slid up. The left eye bore several flecks of blood, red pinpricks on a white canvas.

"I'm now logged on and looking at my homepage." Apparently this projects on the inside of the eye, and indeed, both eyes had turned slightly inward, focusing on something I could not see. "Please ask me whatever questions you like. News, current stock prices, tweets, weather reports."

For the next ten minutes, I bombarded him with questions, and he answered in a rapid-fire staccato. Each sentence seemed to pop more blood around his left iris. The break finally came following a question regarding the President's poll numbers. Aren paused, ostensibly searching for the answer—but I watched as that left eye once again rolled back in his head and the lid drooped to cover it. The silence lengthened as his body stilled. He took a breath as if to reply, and the closed eye snapped open, revealing a white swollen with blood. The pupil filled the entire iris, creating a black, crimson-lined tunnel. I could have sworn I could peer all the way to the end of that tunnel, where a chip pulsed with malevolent life.

One hand darted into his briefcase and came out holding something—a gun, a knife, a Taser—and Sabrina leaped. Her fangs sank into his arm and her weight dragged him down, and the weapon went sliding under the couch. This allowed me to yank open my drawer and whip out my Remington (you can hide just about anything in a big computer desk). The metallic snick of a pump-action shotgun would have made anyone else wet their pants, but our friendly zombie had already gone over the edge.

He lunged to his feet, Sabrina dangling from his arm like a furry cufflink. I raised the Remington and thought: *I'll be hanged if I'm mopping the floor and patching the walls again.* Instead, I yelled, "Sabrina! Out back!" and took off running.

I may be staring down the barrel of fifty, but living alone and keeping up a house and property damn well keeps you in shape. I flung open the back door and stomped down the steps, taking a position in the yard where the solar panels would not reflect the afternoon sun into my eyes. Above me, the wind turbine squeaked on its tower, adding an eerie dissonance to the proceedings. A pungent, earthy scent tickled my nose, and I realized I was making my stand right in front of the compost pile. Hell, if it wasn't for the nuisance of bones and teeth, I could have used some more organic material.

The zombie lurched out the back door. He was already losing coordination, which they all seem to do when the chips eat enough holes in their brains. Not to mention the fact that an enraged Sabrina clung to his back, her paws curving around his face as if they were playing blind-man's-bluff. Those elongated claws had sunk deep into the now-empty eye sockets, and what was left of the eyes themselves gooshed down his cheeks like a couple of raw eggs.

But the goddamned thing kept coming. He bared his teeth and snapped his jaws together, his fingers curling as if already clamped around my throat.

“Sabrina,” I said, taking aim as they approached. The Remington held seven shells, which should be enough. A lot of people don’t like a pistol-grip, but I’ve practiced enough to put every round into the center of a paper plate at forty yards. “On the count of three. One—”

The zombie staggered as he walked, pitching to the left. Holy crapola. Now I had to account for the uneven gait.

“Two—”

Sabrina shifted her weight, draping herself over his left shoulder. Her eyes met mine, ears pricking as she waited for her cue.

“Three!”

She pushed off just as the zombie stepped, twisting neatly in midair to land several feet away, and her weight overcame his lurch, positioning him beautifully upright. My finger squeezed the trigger. One slug to the heart, one to the head, and that was all she wrote. The body hit the ground in a burst of blood and brains, thrashed once, and slumped into stillness. I stepped back, holding my hand over my nose as the sphincters released.

I’ve often wondered how I can do this with such equanimity. These were real people, once upon a time. Maybe it has something to do with growing up on a ranch, where we raised our own vegetables, butchered our own meat, and solved our own problems. Or maybe it’s the memory of my grandmother, wielding her Ruger Bearcat against a rattlesnake who found its way inside her henhouse and saying, “If you don’t get the little pricks right away, they’ll come back and bite you in the ass.”

* * *

By now, I had the cleanup down to a science. Pull out one of my painter’s tarps, roll the body onto it, and wrap it up. Rake together the detritus and shovel it into a bucket. Disconnect the little hybrid car’s battery pack, turning off its computer “brain” and any global positioning systems it might harbor. Wrestle the body, bucket, and briefcase into the trunk. Take a sledgehammer and smash the chips into dust. Get my tow bar, hook on to the hybrid with my Jeep, and tow it a little more than a mile away, to Trinity Gulch. Chacuaco Creek has carved a gorge twenty feet deep there, and this particular spot, with its sharp 90-degree angle where the water never quite drains away, holds a pretty large quicksand pool. Large enough for two previous vehicles and their occupants, at any rate. Unhook the hybrid and ease the Jeep against its rear bumper. Put the Jeep in low-low and push the car forward, an inch at a time, until the front wheels go over the edge and it tumbles into space, plunging into the soft shifting mass at the bottom. Watch, shivering, as the brown ooze creeps up the sides and sends engulfing fingers across the undercarriage, until only the tires remain, jutting above the sand like four bald heads; and one by one they disappear, and the surface is as smooth and undisturbed as it was half an hour before.

Go home, sit on the front porch, and get quietly drunk.

Eight months ago, I had my last truly human visitor. I'd called La Junta for the yearly refill of my propane tanks, and the driver came out a day later. It was the same person I'd gotten the past few years, a Navajo man named Brent Yazzie. When I came out to sign the invoice, he said, "This is the last time you'll see me. I'm going home to Kayenta."

This surprised me. He had a good job and seemed the type who needed stability in his life. "Is your family there?"

He shook his head. "I'm an only child, and my parents are dead." He squinted against the sun, the lines on his weathered face crawling with apprehension. "I don't want to be away from the rez any longer. This world frightens me."

"Why?"

"It's becoming too good."

I felt my brows arch into my forehead. "That's a bad thing?"

"For humanity, yes. We are a ruthless, selfish people, and we always have been, all the way back to First Man and First Woman."

"Maybe we're finally growing up."

"If that ever happens, it will take place over hundreds of years. Not within a single generation."

He seemed quite serious. I gave him the invoice and wished him well, and watched as he turned the tanker truck around and rumbled down my road. When I went inside, I glanced at my laptop, set to catch the daily news. It showed a broadcast of the President's latest foreign-policy triumph. Another treaty signed, another war stopped.

I've been here for ten years. I was born and raised on an isolated ranch, and I'd hoped to die on one. But I also have a satellite link that connects me to the outside world, and I couldn't get Brent Yazzie's words out of my mind. I began to notice the huge strides being made in international cooperation and plain old problem-solving—everything from hunger and climate change to the empowerment of women and the development of alternative energy. Even something so simple, and so improbable, as both houses of Congress working together to pass legislation.

Six weeks later, the first zombie showed up at my door.

* * *

Once is a coincidence, twice is a theory, and three times is a fact.

A thunk at my feet yanked me back to the present. I looked down to see Sabrina batting around a small, narrow object. She must have clawed the zombie's weapon from under the couch. She flipped it with one huge paw, and I leaned over to examine it.

A Taser, all right. I'd heard the newer versions were tinier and more deadly than ever, and this one measured maybe five inches. Dull black, with a cartridge that would fit in the palm of my hand. A dial on the front sported red and green sections, presumably measuring the lethality of the jolt—and surprise surprise, it had been turned all the way into the red.

He'd meant to kill me, of course. I'd known that from the moment I saw him standing there. But I now had proof the violence was escalating, as the previous two zombies had been armed with only their hands and teeth—and the first, a petite dark-haired woman, took me by surprise and came within a shaved inch of slashing my throat with her fingernails, until Sabrina knocked her on her behind.

Somebody, somewhere, had noticed their little Internet assassins weren't coming back.

“All right, already.” I picked up the Taser and thumbed the off switch. The dial and LCD went dark. “I suppose you think I ought to take my head out of my ass and do something.”

Sabrina stared at me for a long moment. Then she jumped off the porch, trotted across the yard, and leaped on the hood of the Jeep, peering in the general direction of La Junta. She sniffed the breeze and gave what could only be interpreted as an impatient hiss.

“Well, rain on you, sunshine,” I grumbled. I emptied the last of my shot glass down my throat, thought about filling it again, and decided I really didn't need to puke. As much as I wanted to wipe out the past few hours, that wouldn't solve anything.

Neither would sitting here waiting for the next zombie and its AK-47.

Goddammit, I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to be a hero. Lucy the middle-aged, cranky-ass zombie killer? For crying out loud. I wanted to finish my canning, re-seed the greenhouse with my winter vegetables, and get on with my life. But for some ungodly reason, Sabrina and I had bullseyes on our backs.

Just the old-fashioned designer called copulation and God only knew what else.

Sabrina showed up a year and a half ago, appearing on my porch as abruptly as the zombies. I opened the door and she waltzed right in, dragging her tremendously long tail behind her. This fluffy appendage tacked to an unmistakably Lynx body, swathed in a thick domestic coat, made me choke on my coffee. She jumped on the kitchen table and fixed her golden eyes on me in as intense a look as I've ever received from anyone, including concupiscent men. After a long moment, she broke the gaze and started licking a front paw nearly as big as my own hand.

I'd intended to place an online ad searching for her owner, but the longer she stayed and the more demonstrations of her intelligence I received, the less that seemed like a good idea. Like

her refusal to respond to the usual high-pitched “kitty kitty,” stalking off in a stiff-tailed fury until I started speaking to her as I would a human(ish) companion. Or the shock of booting up the computer and glancing over my shoulder to see her staring at the screen, her eyes moving back and forth in an eerie approximation of someone reading.

But the final revelation came the morning I turned on the TV for some background noise while I bustled around the kitchen. A program about an annoying little dog started, and just as my teeth were beginning to grind I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked to see Sabrina jump off the couch, stride purposefully towards the wall-mounted television, rear up and hit the off button with her paw, plunging the house into silence.

I froze. Her head turned and her eyes found mine. A shiver rippled through me; there was nothing animallike about that unblinking gaze. I grabbed the edge of the counter and hung on as the world shook around me—but it really hadn’t moved. My mind had. It had turned itself inside out to accommodate a nonhuman intelligence.

The same intelligence that had warned me about the zombies.

“What do you think, Bree?” My voice scraped from my throat. The wind picked up, bringing the wet, sharp scents of rain and ozone. To the west, where the last ribbons of sunset slowly faded into the earth, dark clouds crawled over the hills. “Is it time to go into the big bad world and find out what the hell is going on?”

She jumped off the hood of the Jeep and came to me. Her eyes shone like yellow spotlights in the dusk as she reared up and rested both front paws on my knees, bringing our heads almost level. Hers is classical Canadian Lynx: black-tufted ears and a white double ruff under the chin. Her unflinching stance reminded me of my grandmother, who raised me after my mother died and filled my head with pearls of hardscrabble Appalachian wisdom. I could imagine my granny taking in the situation, sitting me down and asking one question: “If you don’t do it, who will?”

“Holy crapola.” I sighed and closed my eyes. Sabrina pushed her face against mine, her whiskers tickling my nose. She rarely makes typical cat sounds, but I could have sworn I heard a rusty purr vibrating in her chest.

Another of my grandmother’s pearls rolled through my mind, one she claimed belonged to someone else: a President seventy years dead. I couldn’t remember the entire quote, but it began with, “Ask not what your country can do for you...”

“Oh, to hell with that,” I said. I glared over Sabrina’s head at the approaching storm. “This isn’t patriotism. This is goddamned survival.”

Sabrina’s mouth fell open in the nearest approximation of a smile her feline face could muster. She rubbed her head against my knee as we went inside to pack.

The End

Bonnie McDaniel was born and raised in Prescott, Arizona, and still lives there, one of the few who can call herself a native. She works as a pharmacy technician for the Veteran's Administration. An only child, she told stories for her own entertainment from an early age, and is surprised and humbled that others enjoy them. Her work has appeared in the magazines Parchment Symbols, Black Satellite, The Vampire's Crypt, Tales of the Talisman, and Kaleidotrope. Drop by her LiveJournal <http://redheadedfemme.livejournal.com/> or follow her on Twitter <http://twitter.com/redheadedfemme>.

Same Difference? Fantasy, SciFi, and Visions of Change in Richard Horton's *The Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy 2010*

by Henry Cribbs

Last month David Brin, amid much controversy, declared his definition of the difference between science fiction and fantasy: "The core thing about fantasy tales is that, after the adventure is done and the bad guys are defeated... the social order stays the same... Science fiction, in sharp contrast, considers the possibility of learning and change" ('Difference'). Elsewhere Brin notes that he's "known for deliberately provoking people" ('Dune'), and he's certainly provoked me – not necessarily to disagree with the value of the distinction he draws, but to take a closer look at his assertion and to try to apply it not so much to divide the genres as to unite them.

On the face of it, Brin's definition seems to fly in the face of traditional ways of dividing the two genres. I'll put that 'traditional' definition this way: Both genres include unrealistic elements in their plot, theme, characterization, or setting. However, science fiction relies on nominally rational scientific explanations for these unrealistic elements, while fantasy relies on magic or supernatural explanations, or doesn't even bother explaining them. I'm sure I'll get mired in my own controversy in claiming this minimal definition qualifies as 'traditional', but most non-tongue-in-cheek definitions I've found seem to be making something like this distinction. Here are a few examples to make this point:

John W. Campbell: "The basic nature of fantasy is 'The only rule is, make up a new rule any time you need one!' The basic rule of science fiction is 'Set up a basic proposition—then develop its consistent, logical consequences.'" (Introduction, *Analog 6*, Garden City, New York, 1966)

Kingsley Amis: "Science Fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin." (*New Maps Of Hell*, London, 1960)

Miriam Allen deFord: "Science fiction deals with improbable possibilities, fantasy with plausible impossibilities" ("Elsewhere, Elsewhen, Elsehow," 1971). [Compare this to *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling's widely-quoted "science fiction makes the implausible possible... fantasy makes the impossible plausible."]

Robert A. Heinlein: "Science Fiction is speculative fiction in which the author takes as his first postulate the real world as we know it, including all established facts and natural laws. The result can be extremely fantastic in content, but it is not fantasy; it is legitimate—and often very tightly reasoned—speculation about the possibilities of the real world." ("Ray Guns and Spaceships," in *Expanded Universe*, Ace, 1981)

What's interesting to me is if fantasy and scifi are, as Brin suggests, both so very different in outlook, why, then, is there so much overlap between the fans of the two genres? Indeed, there is

so much overlap that most bookstores for marketing reasons shelve them together under F&SF. Brin's definition suggests that the two genres have radically different ideological perspectives, which would seem to make the common fan base difficult to explain. The traditional definition of the difference provides an easy answer: Both genres have a lack of realism in common. Fans of both genres are attracted to both because they are interested in stories of unreality, for whatever reason that may be—escapism, exercise of the imagination, or a desire to think outside the real-world box.

Another explanation for the common fan base is that the two genres really aren't so distinct after all. Charles Tan ([interviewed this issue](#)), for instance, says "I prefer the term 'speculative fiction', because I don't need to delineate in-between." He then mentions Arthur C. Clarke's 'Third Law' (which also gets a nod in the new *Thor* movie) that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." This means that either sci-fi is a subgenre of fantasy, or all fantasy is really sci-fi awaiting a better explanation. Many sci-fi writers deliberately play with this distinction (or lack thereof) by inventing scientific explanations for traditionally fantastic tropes such as magic and dragons. Examples include Christopher Stasheff's *Warlock* series, Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* series, and even David Brin's own *The Practice Effect*. Was *Star Wars* technically a fantasy before George Lucas introduced 'mitochlorians' to explain the Force? (Why, George, why?)

The traditional definition of the genre differences thus doesn't seem to be one which 'carves nature at its joints,' as it were. It does, however, provide practical categories for authors, publishers, and fans to use, so the difference *does* make a difference. A much *better* difference than these two:

Frederik Pohl: "Science fiction is what science fiction fans mean when they point to something and say, 'That's science fiction!'"

Norman Spinrad: "There is only one definition of science fiction that seems to make pragmatic sense: 'Science fiction is anything published as science fiction'."

Brin's definition of the difference, however, *does* get at something important. Brin derides the feudalistic oligarchy which underlies nearly all fantasy worlds, with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* being his prime example: "Aragorn may be a better king than Sauron would have been. Hurray. Fine. But he's still a freaking king. And the palantir on his desk that lets him see faraway places and converse with viceroys across the realm is still reserved for the super elite." ('Difference') But Brin also categorizes Frank Herbert's *Dune* as fantasy, for the feudal Atreides are in Brin's view no different or better, really, than the Harkonnens they replace. ('Dune') He continues, "The implicit assumption in most fantasy is that the form of governance that ruled most human societies since the discovery of grain must always govern us." ('Difference') In Brin's view true sci-fi resists that assumption, it defies the status quo stasis and imagines new forms of governance.

To call this the difference between fantasy and sci-fi seems to confuse an 'is' with an 'ought.' The tone of his essay suggests that we shouldn't be proud of fantasy's outdated ideals; it is sci-fi (by his definition) which authors *should* be writing instead. And this may even be true. But it's

confusing and even absurd to call the approved radical propaganda by the name 'scifi' and to call the archaic dogma 'fantasy.' Those terms are already in use to mean something quite different (even if we don't know *quite* what they mean). We need different terms for Brin's distinction.

I'd suggest using the terms 'conservative' and 'progressive' for this distinction, but that would be just as confusing since those terms are already in use and are politically loaded. But 'feudalistic oligarchical fiction' and 'technoscientific democratical fiction' are too much of a mouthful, and don't quite get at the distinction either. 'Hidebound' and 'Visionary'? Nope, that's not quite right, either. But it may be getting close.

I picked up Gardner Dozois's *The Year's Best Science Fiction 27th Annual Collection* from last year (which I reviewed in [RSF#10](#)), and – since I needed to compare fantasy to scifi – a recent collection of both genres, Rich Horton's *The Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy 2010*, to see if I could notice the difference Brin champions. Horton has been editing separate 'Best' anthologies for both genres since 2006, but in the last two years his anthology has combined both science fiction and fantasy. His 2010 science fiction selections overlap somewhat with Dozois, but what I was interested in to evaluate Brin's distinction was the fantasy.

Brin's classification definitely does *not* split up the genres along exactly the same divide as the traditional definitions. Some stories which are clearly traditional scifi can be set in stagnant feudal oligarchies (John C. Wright's "Twilight of the Gods" and Paul Cornell's "One of Our Bastards is Missing," both found in Dozois), and some stories which are clearly traditional fantasy can provide visions of an improved future society.

Granted, several of the stories in Horton support Brin's point. Theodora Goss's evocative "Child-Empress of Mars" pays homage to the Martian Tales of Edgar Rice Burroughs (see my column in [RSF#1](#), also see another story in Horton which pays a hilariously tongue-in-cheek homage to Barsoom: R. Garcia y Roberson's "Wife-Stealing Time.") Goss depicts a sword-and-planet feudal monarchy which has received an Earthman reminiscent of John Carter. Goss turns the traditional pulp heroic story on its head in an ironic way, but the empire does continue, with a new Empress on the way, in just the manner which Brin despises. Alex Irvine's "Dragon's Teeth" also is mired in medieval politics, with the hero loyally risking his life for the queen.

But there are a couple of Horton's fantasy selections which show that not all fantasy is about maintaining the Old World Order: Jo Walton's "Three Twilight Tales" and Robert Kelly's "The Logic of the World." Walton weaves three dreamlike fairy tales together, and one of the protagonists (who is, admittedly, a king, but not for long) will "step into a new story, a story that's never been before." This new story hints at a large change in the status quo. Robert Kelly's story similarly appears at first to be the quintessential medieval fantasy, with a knight named Parsival seeking to slay a dragon. But the dragon turns out not to play along with the traditional role, and the knight is profoundly changed by his encounter with it, with a new sense of his relation to the world and his society.

Both of these are innovative stories, which, like the iconoclastic scifi Brin supports, suggest a vision of change. Perhaps because of their fantasy conventions these stories cannot illustrate such revolution with the energy of John Kessel's space-operatic "Events Preceding the Helvetican

Renaissance” (found in both Horton and Dozois), but the vision is there, the idea that something new is possible and should be striven for.

So to avoid confusion, let me coin a new term for these kinds of stories – be they scifi or fantasy or something in between like Lucius Shepard’s “Sylgarmo’s Proclamation” (in Horton). Brin can keep calling them ‘scifi’ if he wants, but I think that will only muddle the issue, since most other people mean something else by it. Combining the notions of innovation (in both technology, science, and government) with activism (the sense that change is possible, but must be worked towards), I’ll call them ‘Innovactive.’ And Brin is right to champion them, by any other name.

So step into a new, innovactive, story with me.

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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.

An Interview with Charles A. Tan (Part One)

by Paul Clemmons

In March of this year, I was lucky enough to sit down to dinner with speculative fiction writer, blogger, and scholar Charles A. Tan (known to those of us at RSF as “Charle Satan”). Family business necessitated a trip to the Philippines, and meeting up with Charles was a highlight of my trip.

Charles and I met up at Shangri-La Plaza (link: <http://www.shangrila-plaza.com/>), which is the sort of mall where you can drink a Starbucks coffee and shop for Louis Vuitton luggage while a pair of half-starved teenagers repair your laptop and hack your blackmarket GPS in the carpark. While this isn't representative of the Philippines as a whole, this yuppy-cyberpunk fusion is very much representative of what could be the future of the Philippines.

Charles' excellent blog is at <http://charles-tan.blogspot.com/>, where you can read more about the upcoming Philippine Speculative Fiction Sampler #6.

So tell us, how did you become Asia's best-known spec-fic fan and blogger?

Well, I am the ‘whole geek package’, so it is only natural. I love the novels, movies, comics, and gaming. I started blogging in 2001, but it wasn't until 2007 that I started focusing on genre work. It was, probably 2008 that I started doing interviews—that was when Wizards of the Coast started its “Discovery Series”, and I was very interested. J.M. McDermott was the first person that I interviewed, and from that point I started approaching new artists and writers if I could interview them, and help promote them.

What was your first interview like?

It was mostly email. Even a few months before then, he was already talking to me about his work. He was not yet an established writer, this was just after “The Last Dragon” (link <http://www.amazon.com/Last-Dragon-Discoveries-J-M-McDermott/dp/0786948574>), his debut work, so it wasn't really intimidating. He was telling me that Jeff VandeMeer was planning to feature him for his Omnivoracious blog at Amazon (link <http://www.omnivoracious.com/2008/02/a-brilliant-new.html>). It was fun. I do all my interviews by email, because it would take too long to write all this down [mocking laughter, no doubt at my dictaphone].

How out of place have you felt in the Philippines, being the “whole geek package”, with science fiction still a developing art form here?

Well, it depends. In high school, for me, I was out-of-place because not a lot of people were into “geek stuff”. I only found out later on that there were a lot of people into “my kind of books” [laughs]. With the rise of the internet, it has been much easier to find people with common bond, and that's why I started my blog to find people who share the same interests as me.

You have over 500 people on your RSS feed.

Yes. For me, when it was just genre-readers it was probably more like 100 or 200, but when I

started doing my genre links in 2009 I got syndicated by “Pimp My Novel” and another blog, both of which had a large audience. Most of my readers tend to be fellow writers, or editors, or people in the field.

In my circle of friends, when I told them I would be visiting the Philippines, the first thing they said was “be careful”. The second thing was almost always, “Say hello to Charles Tan”. Almost everybody that I’ve met in the American spec-fic self-publishing and e-pub crowd knows you. People in Canada, England, Germany, and India have mentioned you to me. I’ve asked everybody that I’ve met in the Philippines, including a few writers, columnists, book store managers and owners...Nobody knew you by name. How did this happen?

Like Jeff VandeMeer said in his “Booklife” (link:

[http://www.amazon.com/dp/1892391902/ref=wp_dp_1?ie=UTF8&searchSource=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2Fs%2Fref%3Dwp_bts_1%3Furl%3Dsearch-](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1892391902/ref=wp_dp_1?ie=UTF8&searchSource=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2Fs%2Fref%3Dwp_bts_1%3Furl%3Dsearch-alias%253Dstripbooks%26field-)

[alias%253Dstripbooks%26field-](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1892391902/ref=wp_dp_1?ie=UTF8&searchSource=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2Fs%2Fref%3Dwp_bts_1%3Furl%3Dsearch-alias%253Dstripbooks%26field-keywords%3DJeff%2BVanderMeer%26x%3D0%26y%3D0&qid=1304476174&sr=1-3-wp)

[keywords%3DJeff%2BVanderMeer%26x%3D0%26y%3D0&qid=1304476174&sr=1-3-wp](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1892391902/ref=wp_dp_1?ie=UTF8&searchSource=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2Fs%2Fref%3Dwp_bts_1%3Furl%3Dsearch-alias%253Dstripbooks%26field-keywords%3DJeff%2BVanderMeer%26x%3D0%26y%3D0&qid=1304476174&sr=1-3-wp)), it’s harder to promote yourself in the city you are in, as opposed to elsewhere, because the people in your hometown are familiar with you. It takes a stranger to be an expert. No one in the Philippines recognizes me. But that’s okay.

Outside of the Philippines, where have you travelled?

When I was a kid, my parents always made it a point to travel. I have been to San Francisco and to LA in the States. One year we went to Hong Kong, once to Australia.

When reading up on Filipino speculative fiction writers, three names seem to pop up the most often: Mia Tijam, Eliza Victoria, and Rochita Loenen-Ruiz. What can you tell us about them?

Mia Tijam used to be the girlfriend of a writer friend, and she is a talented writer herself. I asked her to help me to edit the “Philippine Speculative Fiction Sampler”. In many ways, she is a more talented writer than myself, and I was so glad she agreed to contribute. Eliza Victoria is one of today’s most prolific Filipino fiction writers. In the past year, she’s had over 10, maybe 14 stories published, and not just locally. She has more output in the past year than I have in the past several [laughs]. And she’s a great poet. She’s been published in “Expanded Horizons”, and last year she won a Philippine Free Press Award. Rochita, she’s an expat living in the Netherlands, and her writing impresses many people. I know that Rich Horton, from “Locus”, likes her writing. She’s had several stories published, including “Weird Tales”, “Apex, and “Fantasy”.

Who do you think will become the first Filipino science fiction writer to become well-known?

Science fiction, or does fantasy count, too?

Let’s do both.

Well, there’s no real hard science fiction writers that are active, just some people who dabble in science fiction. I dabble in science fiction, and I think that Rochita, also, might dabble in it from time to time. I don’t think that there’s really anyone who is going to make a big impact,

although Eliza may, in a few years, through sheer quantity, if nothing else [laughs]. Dean Francis Almar is the first Filipino to be published in “Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror”. He was first internationally published in “Strange Horizons”. He will probably be the first Filipino to have a true international following. Whenever I give a book to a foreign writer or friend, it is his.

I’ve read him. I also recently read an essay that he wrote bemoaning the difficulty of being a writer trying to appeal to an international readership and a Filipino, and the struggle with the question of distancing himself from his Filipino culture and heritage versus having his heritage come through in his writing—deciding how much to explain, and how much to “let go”. What are your thoughts on this?

It’s not necessary to separate it, I believe. Some writers put their culture at the forefront of their writing, whereas for others it is much more subtle. Whether you choose one of the other, it depends on the market. For example, one market might support “Filipino” writing, where others might not. But I think right now that the climate is one where people are more open to other cultures and in reading something that is very different. This is the problem right now with some American sci-fi, uniformity of culture – even if the characters have names of a different ethnic background, they still, basically, act like white Americans. A Filipino writer who places his cultural heritage in the forefront of his work might not be for them—just like a lot of mass-market sci-fi doesn’t appeal to most Filipinos.

What does?

Well, much like in the United States, it is romance novels that seem to dominate the book swapping market.

In the U.S., many writers have taken to dressing up romance novels with vampires, or werewolves. In the Philippines, have they done the same with manananggals? (A manananggal is a uniquely Filipino horror staple—see here for more info <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manananggal>.)

Filipino readers, especially those who are living abroad, might be more interested in something with a manananggal, but I don’t think that it would draw in a reader who wasn’t already interested in the genre.

I’ve been visiting the Philippines for over ten years. In that time, it seems to me that Manila is slowly becoming a cyberpunk “sprawl” setting. Even with the presence of 17th-century technology in places, almost everyone in Manila is wired, world-leading electronic financial transactions, every cyber-crime imaginable, and young kids are hacking GPS and jail-breaking iPhones on folding tables in the train station. With cyberpunk becoming a reality here, is the cyberpunk genre gaining any traction?

Not really. The genre readers read scif-fi, and a lot of folks here have read William Gibson and Neal Stephenson—his series, starting with the Cryptonomicon, being set in the Philippines got some attention. For me, there are two different reading crowds. The mass-market Filipinos, for them the popular genres here are horror and romance, and there is the occasional fantasy story that they read. You’ll most likely see these readers shopping, not in Power Books or Fully Booked (two popular chains that carry a variety of Filipino and international books) but in the second-hand shops. Then you have the middle to upper classes, they are the genre readers. They

are the Power Books and Fully Booked escapists, as well as seeking out more specialized books shops. Those are the readers of science fiction. Cyberpunk is fine, but it hasn't dawned on our readers that they are living in the age of cyberpunk. The "I Love You" virus and several other prominent internet crimes were committed by Filipinos. The sidewalk cellphone, computer, and GPS hackers that you mentioned, all matter of software piracy, as well as the pervasive influence of corporations contributes to that notion.

Japan has the tech and the prosperity, and, perhaps, the necessary personal pessimism, but they aren't poor. Manila has the poverty and desperation to go with the technology.

How has what you appreciate and value about science fiction changed over the past ten years?

I am twenty-eight, will be twenty-nine this year. Science and society have evolved, and the expectations have changed. When I was young, I enjoyed golden age writers, such as Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Heinlein. As I've grown older, I've started seeing the weaknesses in their writing, especially Heinlein. It's kind of limiting. Now you have talented writers in hard science fiction, and they delve into different corners. If you want a story with lots of math, but still understandable, you have Greg Egan, and he combines that with good characterization. You also have interesting dystopian fiction with consequences, like Paolo Bacigalupi. The problem before with sci-fi is that people think of it as intimidating, or as very hard to consume. I know that, as a reader now, sci-fi is capable of a lot of things. Whether it is something like "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson" or "Those Who Walk Away From Omelas" by Ursula K LeGuin, or something more complex now. Sci-fi is not as plot oriented, or as idea-centric, though that is how Hollywood sees it now. You can write a powerful, emotional science fiction story that is not so concept-driven. Aliette de Bodard from France writes those kind of science-fiction stories.

Self-publishing and self-promotion are exploding in the North America and Europe, as writers have taken advantage of technology to "go it alone". What are your thoughts on this trend?

Publishers will discard the authors who won't sell millions, or will reduce their books to small print runs. It seems reasonable, then, that some authors will try to self-publish. The problem with self-publishers is so many don't know how to self-edit [laughs]. And the business and the promotion side are so much work that it's hard for many writers to self-publish and stay "in the black".

I haven't noticed electronic book readers much around Manila. Do you think that this is something that will catch on here?

In the long term, yes. Most people are of two extremes. They either eschew them, or proclaim them the wave of the future. I am somewhere in the middle. It will arrive in the Philippines, but it will arrive in 1-2 decades at the earliest. Short of e-book readers being dirt cheap, it won't take off here. Maybe if they tie it in with cell phones. I think the example here, is a good example of how technology in a third-world country can surpass that of a first-world country. The economy of cell phones here far surpasses that of the U.S. We have all of these services, like a micropayment system that is still not in place in the U.S. The only place that can rival the Philippines for this kind of tech is Japan.

A poor Filipino may spend one month's salary on their cellphone, and it will serve as their ID and even serve the function of a credit card for those who can't afford them. Those who can't afford land lines, or internet, for example, those living in squatter's areas, can do a lot of things with their cellphones, including transferring money, instead of using a credit card.

Is your primary aspiration to pursue the business and promotional side of speculative fiction, or do you have a drive to write your own fiction?

I am an uber-geek. I love card games, video games, tabletop and digital RPGs, miniatures, books, movies, comics and manga. I want to write, but I don't want just that small part, but the bigger picture. Whether or not I have success with the fiction, I'll do it, but it is publishing, design, promotion, editing, that interests me.

That's why I don't just focus on writers, but on editors and publishers when I do my interviews. In coming out with a book there are a lot of people involved. Like the Hugo voting, most people will vote for the authors, but only a few people vote for the artists. Artists make a big contribution to the genre. They shape our perceptions of so many things things, and deserve recognition. There are those whose work you don't see, such as the assistant editors, the slush readers, they don't get to be recognized. This includes yourself. When people think of Redstone Science Fiction, they think of your editor, but your work is more behind the scenes. You're the kind of guy that interests me. You are essential to the genre but most people won't appreciate the role you play.

This is a topic of so many debates, so I have to ask for your take: What is the difference between science fiction and fantasy?

There is no difference in science fiction and fantasy, it's only how the readers perceive it. For example, psionics, the "power of the mind" is thought of as a sci-fi theme, but you could argue it is magic, and therefore, fantasy. It's all relative, and that's why I prefer the term "speculative fiction", because I don't need to delineate in-between. Arthur C. Clarke said "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic". Old science fiction would now seem like fantasy today, the "John Carter" stories, for example.

Is there an annual science fiction convention in the Philippines?

No. Groups of Star Wars fans, Star Trek fans, and other groups do have gatherings and parties, and film releases prompt gatherings. There was once a group called the New World Alliance, made up of several such fan groups, that held some fan-centered events, and movie premieres like Harry Potter or Star Trek are always a big deal.

What is the Philippine's greatest recent speculative fiction event?

Neil Gaiman and Fully Booked held the Philippine Graphic Fiction Awards (link <http://www.clickthecity.com/metro/?p=7559>) just recently, and that was probably the biggest.

When you aren't promoting speculative fiction, what do you do?

My day job is, I'm the editorial assistant at Pulp (<http://pulpmagazine.com/main/>), which is a music magazine. We're also involved in putting on concert events. We're bringing in Anthrax, which is really exciting to me.

Have you monetized your website, or have you considered accepting online contributions from your readers?

Right now my goal is to promote awareness. I haven't tried making any money with my website because I didn't have a credit card until a few weeks ago, and for the longest time PayPal wasn't allowing Filipinos to hold accounts, because of the fraud. Of course, they are willing to employ Filipinos in their call-centers. As if "they are okay to work for us, but we don't trust them as business clients". What I do behind the scenes is I send books to editors for them to consider for Year's Best, and I try to promote awareness of what's going on.

We admire you, Charles, and we enjoy the product you produce. Thank you for talking with me:

No problem.