

Redstone Science Fiction #15 Cover



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Redstone Science Fiction #15, August 2011

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Editor's Note – August 2011

by Michael Ray

We've had a fun summer here at Redstone. We've published some excellent stories & essays and we've achieved our initial goal of being an [SFWA qualifying market](#). We're still smiling.

We have had a lot of people contribute to our efforts here, and no one has been more important to our show than Henry (Hank) Cribbs. He contributed a quality essay of science fiction criticism for every one of our first fourteen issues. Outstanding stuff. At least one of his essays has been discussed as the basis for a literary journal article. His goal was to make it through the first year with one article a month. While we focused on the fiction, Hank covered the literary criticism bases with aplomb. He's taken a little time off to work on a massive project, but he'll be back with us soon.

Another person we want to make sure to thank is Sarah Einstein. We are in the homestretch of our second summer contest with Sarah. (Submissions close on 8/15/2011). She has been a great contributor to and supporter of our magazine. She has written excellent essays for us, and the contests Sarah has guest-edited for us have drawn a great deal of attention to Redstone SF. The encouragement she has given me as a writer and as an editor have been invaluable. She starts a Ph.D. program this fall in one of the nation's preeminent Creative Non-Fiction programs. Thanks, Sarah.

You can find all their work in our reorganized [Non-Fiction Section](#).

Our stories this month are both top-notch, and are very different. [Vaporware](#) is a sociological scifi story that examines something we may well see in the future, projecting how one's children might turn out. It is both heartwrenching and encouraging, somehow. [Evoë! Evoë!](#) by Rob Pritchard is a mesmerizing story. It is as close to a fantasy story as we'll go, and we hope you are as overwhelmed when you read it as we were.

I had the good fortune of quizzing several of our recent authors about their stories and about what they are up to both online and out there, you know, in the "real" world. Check out the outstanding insights we got from [Mishell Baker](#), [Morgan Dempsey](#), [Angela Ambroz](#), and [Patty Jansen](#). I was quite impressed at the excellent answers to my often smart-ass questions. Give them a look.

Thanks for your support of Redstone Science Fiction. As always, we hope you find something here that you enjoy.

Your friend,
Michael Ray
Editor
Redstone SF
7/31/11

Vaporware

by *Mishell Baker*

Ever since he had first spotted the girl in the park, Max had become drawn to the stolen simulations again. Back in the days when Kestrel would cry unless she was in motion – great air-siren shrieks that would send her mother into panicky tears – Max had spent nights bouncing her with one arm and working his computer with the other. So many bleary-eyed dawns, still fretting over the pirated files, wondering where the clinic had shipped the seven rejected zygotes and if they were any happier.

It was File 3 that concerned him now, as he sat in the kitchen with the remains of rye toast and coffee, waiting for Emma and Kestrel to come downstairs. He had come to think of this particular simulation as “Natalie,” since that had been the name he had wanted for his daughter.

Max brushed crumbs from his hands and used his fingertips to enter the day’s date and then gently turn the virtual fifteen-year-old toward him on the screen. Max’s current system balked at running the obsolete software; distortion like heat warped the image as it moved, and it winked out for a moment before reappearing. Upstairs he could hear the whine of the hair dryer, the opening and closing of drawers.

“Natalie” simulated at fifteen was just short of pretty, with Emma’s pale eyes and his own walnut hair. The file said she would be shy, like Max, but optimistic, like Emma. Organized, but lacking ambition. She was also marked as a 15% leukemia risk.

Emma, spooked by that number, had chosen File 6. Avian names had been the rage then, but they had mostly run to inoffensive Wrens, Larks, and Starlings. Just like Emma to invoke a bird of prey and then not know what to do with it.

Kestrel came downstairs so quietly that Max didn’t notice her until she was in the doorway; he almost folded his own fingers into his computer.

As usual, her sunken, sleepless eye sockets were filled in with bright violet shadow, her lashes painted canary yellow. Max had no fear that she would initiate conversation; two steel ring piercings sealed her black lips nearly shut. It was the Saturday of Labor Day weekend; she wore the erect-penis T-shirt that had gotten her suspended from school three months ago.

No sooner did Kestrel see him than she made a moue of disgust and opened the fridge, her incandescent rainbow braid swinging behind her. She grabbed a smoothie and a straw and sat as far from Max as possible at the kitchen table.

“You’re up early,” he said.

Kestrel jammed the straw between her lips and slurped, staring somewhere over Max’s shoulder. Her eyes were the same as Emma’s, textured with pale ripples like light on the bottom of a pool.

Several minutes after the silence had become unbearable, Emma glided down the stairs in an apricot sundress, her buckwheat-honey hair ruthlessly knotted at the nape of her neck. “Good morning,” she said with a smile. Silence lay like a placemat as she poured herself some coffee. “You’re not wearing that shirt today, I hope?”

It took Max a moment to realize she was talking to him. He looked down at his short-sleeved button-down; it was blue.

“It’s the weekend, precious. I’ll find you something without buttons. But I need to hurry; I’ve got two back-to-back ear sculptures at nine.”

Kestrel threw her empty bottle across the room. It came closer to Emma’s head than to the trash, bouncing off the wall onto the floor with a soft hollow sound.

Emma tensed as though she’d been shot. “Pick that up.”

Kestrel paused, then sent her chair skidding backwards and launched herself out of the kitchen, her boots heavy on the tile. Max started to rise, eyes on the abandoned bottle, but Emma made a sharp sound.

“Leave it,” she said. “If our daughter wants to eat in this kitchen again she’ll pick it up herself.”

The front door slammed, and Emma spooned sugar into her coffee.

* * *

Dew still lingered, scattering sunlight, when Max pulled into the park wearing a more appropriate weekend shirt. He got out of his car and walked to his usual bench, still claiming the left side although Kestrel hadn’t come with him in years.

The dark-haired girl he thought of as Natalie ran back and forth on the other side of the lawn with her mothers and their two Jack Russell terriers. The five of them were taking turns catching a bright blue spinner.

Today Natalie wore ragged green shorts and a cross-wrap, her hair thrown back in a ponytail. She was the right height, the right build, the right temperament, and from what he had seen of her face, it was identical. She shouldn’t be here, if the clinic had followed protocol, but perhaps her mothers had recently moved here, by coincidence or fate.

As he watched, one of the terriers tore across the grass after the spinner, darting into Natalie’s path. Unable to slow her momentum, the gangly girl stumbled over the dog and sprawled face-first on the lawn. Max leapt from the bench before stopping in embarrassment. The older of Natalie’s mothers was already there, kneeling next to her in the grass.

Natalie rolled onto her back and threw an arm over her reddened face. Peals of awkward teenage laughter skimmed on the wind toward him as the other mother tried to coax the startled terrier out from under a picnic table.

Max sat back down slowly. No one had noticed him. He pulled his computer from his back pocket and unfolded it. He prepared to once again to test the defenses of his clients at the city planning commission, not that there was much point. Emma had made more money in six months plumping lips and lengthening eyelashes than he'd made in the past three years as a white hat. His work was vanity now, a bad comb-over that fooled no one.

* * *

That night Kestrel locked her bedroom door, and Max could hear pulses of discordant music all the way from the master bathroom as he brushed his teeth. Most likely the music was a cover for having climbed out her bedroom window, but the last time Max had suggested breaking in to check on her, he and Emma had a fight that ended with Emma screaming into a pillow.

She asked him something now as she turned off the flosser.

“What?” Max cupped a hand behind his ear to suggest that it was the music, and not inattention, that had made him miss the question.

“Do your cheeks still hurt?”

He turned to the mirror to look at his sculpted face and forced a smile. “No. Your work heals fast.”

“Your dimple...” Emma’s gaze grew overcast as she stared at his reflection. “Smile again. Smile.”

Max did as she asked. He’d always had a crescent-shaped dimple in his left cheek, but now it was gone. “Huh,” he said. “I guess when everything got tightened up...”

“It’s gone,” she said, fingertips trembling at her mouth. “It’s gone.” She reached her hand up, tracing a small C-shape into his left cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“We’ll go in tomorrow, if you want, to put it back.”

“I don’t know how to do that.” Her eyes turned up to his. She was a full foot shorter than Kestrel. She brought a white-knuckled fist to her mouth and started to cry.

Max reached for her, but she flung her palms up between them and fled into the bedroom.

* * *

If the software had been newer, Max could have made File 3 smile, or even heard the timbre of her voice. With a pirated application nearly two decades old, all he had to go on was her frame, the lines of her face, the description of her temperament. More compelling than facts, however, was his gut certainty.

Even if it was true, what could he do? He had given up all rights to the rejected *in vitro* embryos and let them be shipped out of state to other couples. He had let Emma spin a 15 percent chance into a nightmare of chemotherapy and child-sized coffins, and they had officially designated File 3 Someone Else's Problem, someone else's daughter, someone else's mornings in the park.

The front door squeaked slowly open. Kestrel. Max glanced at the clock: five thirteen a.m. He did not fold his computer right away; Kestrel would try to slip by unseen.

Only, she didn't. She loomed in the half-light, framed by the kitchen doorway, the tension in her coltish limbs reminding him of glass and barbed wire. Her face was contorted with rage, but she wasn't looking at him.

Max followed her gaze to the plastic smoothie bottle that still lay on the kitchen floor from yesterday. A line of ants zigzagged from its mouth to disappear under the cabinets.

"Your mother said that you can't eat in here again until you pick it up," Max said as gently as he could.

Her murderous-raccoon eyes turned to him now, and Max regretted having spoken. He averted his gaze to his computer screen, exiting the file and opening up his monthly budget spreadsheet. Kestrel's footfalls approached like measured doom, and Max prayed to whatever god might be listening that for once she would just do the simple thing and pick the bottle up for Chrissakes.

There was a long silence, then a juicy crunching sound. Max looked up from his spreadsheet and saw that Kestrel had removed her lip rings and grabbed an apple from the basket on the counter. She savaged it with her teeth, smearing black lipstick on its blood-red peel. While she chewed, she stared directly at Max, blackened juice on her chin. Max remembered using a tiny plastic spoon to scrape prune puree from her face in a much smaller kitchen. He let out a weary exhale.

"I don't want to fight with you, Kes. Just please pick it up."

Kestrel took the five steps necessary to get within spitting distance, then launched a glob of half-chewed pulp onto the floor at his feet. Then she turned and walked out, apple in hand.

Max shuddered and lowered his eyes to his spreadsheet, overwriting his thoughts with orderly columns of figures. But the columns made him think of ants, and he finally slammed the computer shut and picked up the goddamned bottle himself.

* * *

By the time Max arrived at the park Sunday morning, Natalie and her mothers were already finished with their game. They sat at their usual picnic table with sandwiches and translucent plastic cups of what looked like lemonade. The dogs were tied up nearby, dozing in the shade. Natalie swatted at flies on one side of the table next to her younger mother, who picked uneaten potato chips intermittently off of Natalie's plate. The older mother told a story with animated hand gestures that occasionally endangered her lemonade.

Max wondered, not for the first time, if it would be possible to hack into the clinic's files and find out what they'd done with the other seven. If he could find the names of Natalie's adopted parents it would help him confirm or allay his suspicions, but he frankly hadn't managed to keep up with today's fractal encryptions. Even the few local government offices who still hired him had become alarmingly efficient at icing him out, and it was only a matter of time before someone younger and cleverer stole the last crumbs of his bread and butter.

There was an empty space next to the older mother, and Max absently tried to imagine himself seated there. As hard as he tried, all he could see was himself working at his computer, his eyes on the screen while the other three women ate and talked and leaned on one another.

"Flores, señor?"

Max started and turned to the old woman with the armful of red roses. He shook his head, and she started to wander off toward Natalie and her family.

"Wait," he said, and the woman turned around.

* * *

The roses didn't look as pretty in the fluorescent glare of Emma's waiting room. Something had eaten through one of the petals; he removed it and put it in his pocket, then watched the clock.

In twenty-three minutes, Emma emerged, crisp and white and so flawless that for a moment he forgot why he was there.

"Hello," he said, rising.

"Please don't come here in the middle of the day, Max," she said. "What did you need?"

Max had bought the roses for a woman who'd touched his cheek the night before, looking for something she'd destroyed. This was someone else.

"I see, how thoughtful," she said as though he were a pretty cat with a dead thing in his mouth. "Why don't you take them home and put them in water? I should be home in time for dinner."

Max paused, then walked out of the waiting room. He threw the flowers in the trash at the end of the hall.

* * *

It was spritzing rain on the morning of Labor Day. Now that Max had finally mustered his courage, he worried that Natalie and her family would not make it to the park. To make matters worse, he didn't trust his computer to the weather, and so he was forced to sit with his hands folded on his knee, doing nothing but waiting. The rain stopped just before nine, and within fifteen minutes he heard a car door slam behind him, followed by a bark and familiar laugh.

He stood up from the bench and headed toward the parking lot. The older mother noticed him first, and gave him a polite smile.

"Good morning," Max said to her, pausing on the way to his car.

"Do you live around here?" the woman said. "We see you all the time."

"Been coming here every morning for years," he said.

"We just moved here."

"Kipper!" Natalie called suddenly. "Kipper, no!"

But the dog had slipped her grasp and bounded over. It sniffed the sole of Max's shoe, its entire body rigid with fascination.

"I'm so sorry," Natalie said breathlessly. She bent to pick up the dog in her arms, her eyes lowered. Shy, just like the file said. "He doesn't mean any harm."

"That's okay," said Max. He wanted to say more, but as he looked at the uneven part in her walnut-colored hair his throat closed on the words.

She looked up then, her eyes warm. Muddy green, like a stagnant pond. She ducked her head and darted away, and Max felt a wave of vertigo. Green. Not blue. Max stood for a while, trapped into making small talk with her mothers, not hearing his own words.

* * *

As soon as he returned home, he tried to work, but found himself staring at the files. All of them. He had only to enter the day's date to see how they had grown. His daughters, raised by those who couldn't have children of their own.

"Did you pick up that goddamned bottle?"

Max started and closed the program. Kestrel was quiet, when she wanted to be. "Yes, I did."

"Pussy." She dared him with her cold hollow eyes, face fixed in an ugly snarl.

Max stayed silent for a long moment, simply returning her gaze. “Come look at this,” he said at last, opening up the program again.

Kestrel paused, thrown off balance. She approached him warily, then hooked a chair with her ankle and dragged it over to his side of the table.

“What is that, porn?”

“They’re the the ZGP simulations from when you were conceived. There were eight. Mom picked yours right away but I pirated copies of them all. I’m not supposed to have them.”

“Mom picked?”

“She felt strongly, so I just—“

“Why the hell did you keep them?” Kestrel interrupted in a brittle tone. “That’s creepy.”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Bullshit.”

“It’s hard to explain. I know they don’t belong to me. But they’re still mine.” He brought up File 5 so he didn’t have to see the familiar contempt in Kestrel’s yellow-fringed eyes.

“That one’s ugly,” she said.

“The next one’s yours.”

“I don’t care.”

The file opened up, showing a tranquil fifteen-year-old in a white shirt and shorts, spun-honey hair falling just past her shoulders. It had been a long time since Max had seen his daughter’s face without makeup, but he could recognize the lines of it in the simulation: the full lower lip, the arch of the brows. He was amazed by the accuracy: height, complexion, downy arms and lanky angularity, but the image seemed less alive than the others, a canvas awaiting paint. The others would have seemed hollow too, if he had known their footfalls and their scowls and the way they slammed a door.

Kestrel stared at the screen. Max watched her face, trying to understand what he saw there, but she remained opaque. Concentration, deep thought, or possibly fury compressed her sooty lips. When she finally spoke, Max did not recognize her voice.

“*That’s* who Mom wanted.”

The silence gained weight. Emma’s blue stared into Emma’s blue, but there was nothing at all of his wife in Kestrel’s stoic profile.

Max's hand found his daughter's braid and closed around it. He felt the frayed substance of it in his fist and gave it a gentle tug, as though ringing a bell.

Kestrel turned to him, and he saw that her eyes were bright and wet. "Quit it," she said.

"I can mess with the code, you know," he said, still holding her braid. "I can turn them all into monsters." Max tugged twice: ding ding. "Want to?"

Kestrel blinked, wetting her yellow lashes. Then, like a sliver of moon in a cloud-blown sky, a crescent flickered into her left cheek and was gone.

The End

*Mishell Baker is a graduate of the 2009 Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop, and maintains the workshop's official blog at <http://clarionfoundation.wordpress.com> when she isn't busy writing about movies for money or washing tiny plastic spoons and sippy-cups. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Electric Velocipede*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband and daughter (who attended Clarion in utero), and she is currently at work on two novels (so she can procrastinate one by writing the other).*

Evoë! Evoë!

by Robert Pritchard

“We’ll draw one card.” He shuffled the deck rapidly. “You depart tomorrow; the full moon sails among the clouds: it will be the keystone card.”

We walked in the formal gardens; the reflection of the moon was a white smear on the river.

“The sect you are to investigate denies the cards,” he continued after a spell. “They believe—how is one to put this? Just the opposite of us, that man is not free yet may nevertheless do anything.”

I frowned and worried the hem of my toga between thumb and forefinger.

“They possess a machine,” he said. “No, the word is not quite apt. In appearance it is a room, only an empty room. But if two men enter the room, they leave as one man. What one knows, the other also knows. They can co-operate without speaking, even if separated by great distances. The sect itself was created by the machine—that is, by the first to re-discover it. Only they know where it is located, whether in the Taurine City itself or elsewhere on their island.”

“How do you know these things?”

“We too possess such a machine, in the catacombs. It is very old. Like most relics, these rooms are not to be meddled with, and until recently, none of us have.”

My superior among the watchers handed to me a flat oblong case, black and lusterless, the size of a pocket ledger. Inside, coiled on a bed of nacre, was a silver whip with a thin bronze handle. Even at rest, the whip seemed to vibrate like a plucked guitar string; it was impossible to actually set one’s eye upon it.

“You will not be permitted to carry a weapon in the Taurine City, but few will recognize this relic for what it is. If questioned, merely say it is a diplomatic gift.”

He fanned the cards. I drew one and held it face down. “Remember,” he said, “nothing occurs by chance. The jagged line of mountains on the horizon reproduces itself in the movement of prices on the exchange. The bifurcations of tree branches are reflected in the veins of a man’s arm, and each causes the other. The future causes the past. The complete image, though it be shattered, can be seen in any shard. What card you hold there is only another aspect of the order.”

I turned it over: the Mirrors. A youth sat between parallel mirrors making an infinity of reflections. The illustration was cunningly designed so we could not tell whether the young man faced us, showing his true face, or away, so we saw only the multiplying reflections.

“What is the place of this card in my voyage?” I handed it back to him.

“Whatever it is,” my superior said, “you will lose it.” With that he flicked the card over the railing into the placid Nile.

* * *

I walked down the gangplank and stood a while on the pier. A wind-rippled awning shielded me from the blazing sun as I watched. The Taurine City marched up the hills that, amphitheater-like, surrounded the harbor. On the west promontory, I could make out what I recognized as the Vitreous Castle, relic of antiquity, seat of the local court.

The liaison greeted me where the pier met the limestone cornice. After politesse that neither of us believed, he said, “I’ve detailed a servant to see after your things. No doubt you wish to view the crime scenes.”

“No,” I replied. “The watcher solves not the crime, but the society that created it. Tell me about the sect.”

We walked up a narrow street, crowded with merchants. Fish near the harbor gave way to brass dishes and jugs, then to woven mats and wicker furnishings.

“A standard secret society,” he lied. “By a series of assassinations they seek to destabilize the state. What goals they have beyond the seizure of power are unknown.”

“In the Nilotic Kingdom they told me little about their leader. What can you add?”

He coughed. “Lord Zagreus may not exist. No one has seen him in ten years—no one reliable. In any case, the reports are not credible.”

“How so?”

“That he can change appearance at will. That he can be in more than one place at once.”

“Thank you.” My smile did not touch my eyes. We stood in front of what was to be my hotel. “If I require your services I’m certain I can find you.”

“My instructions are to accompany—“

“Your Sovereign requested a watcher because you have been unable to solve these crimes or penetrate the sect on your own. If you desire more failure, by all means hinder me.”

The liaison was transparent as glass. After seeing that my effects were in order upstairs, I went to the café in the front of the hotel and ordered coffee. I sat watching the street until the other spies waiting for me revealed themselves. I left the hotel and, after eluding them, walked along the main semicircular thoroughfare, then up one of the radial avenues. At the crest of the ridge the paved streets and plastered houses, blindingly white under the hard sunshine, gave way to

dirt paths and dry-stone huts. Beyond, orchards and villas dotted the rocky hills leading away to the faded gray serrations of the island's central spine of mountains.

I traced the path of the killers. They intercepted their quarry, an advisor to the Sovereign, at night along the road from his country house to the city. His driver and his valet said that the mob, after overturning the coach, pursued the three of them over the fields. Howling inhumanly, they overtook their victim—ignoring the other two—and, with bare hands, tore him apart.

Since then, two more had died in similar fashion. Now few dared to traverse the countryside after dark, and the rural estates were barricaded and guarded by armed men.

I looked up from the earth, where no trace remained, among the fragrant sage and heather, of the blood spilled there. The sun was below the rim of the valley. Before I made it halfway back to the road, night fell and a steady wind picked up. Lacking a trail, I had nothing to guide me in the dark. My linen toga was inadequate for this more northern land and its sea-born wind, and after the second or third time I stumbled over unseen rocks, I resolved to seek shelter for the night. It did not escape me either that I was in the countryside shunned by the natives, and their fears were not unjustified.

A tiny light revealed a farmhouse, distant but manageable. I rapped on the stout wooden door.

I made apologies to the man of middle age who peered through the hatch, but he interrupted me: "You've come. That's all that matters."

Inside were white-washed walls and terra cotta tiles. The man put a plate of charcuterie in front of me and I ate ravenously, not having realized how hungry I was. "Who are you?" I said after finishing.

"Names aren't important. We need to discuss the next part of the plan. Our infiltration of the Taurine government is well advanced. Their order is fragile. For our part, we need only the signal to fuse our disparate cells into one body, as the bees do to swarm." He rubbed a hand across an unshaven cheek. "What is your next imperative?"

"To find the machine of the empty room," I guessed.

"Let the Sovereign's agents believe you are loyal. We'll arrange your passage to the place where the machine is hidden."

"Will Lord Zagreus be there?" I said.

"You ought to know the answer to that."

Something made me tell the truth. I told him I didn't really have any idea what he was talking about.

"You will," he replied.

* * *

In a café at the margin of an urban square, I laid out the cards. The Weathervane and the blank card both showed up. I scowled. A shadow fell across my table.

“You never returned to your hotel last night.”

He was gray and brittle, with the laborious movements of a marionette. The two men with him stared blankly; visible under their enveloping capes were jeweled weapons.

“How touching,” I replied, “that you waited up.”

“What do you have to report?”

“They think I’m one of them,” I said. “I’m close to finding the machine. But I need more space—and no surveillance.”

He crinkled his face with both assent and a touch of chagrin. No doubt he was aware of the poor performance of his agents in tailing me yesterday.

“And I want answers,” I continued. “Who is Lord Zagreus?”

“How should I know?”

I gathered my new woolen cloak about me and made to rise. “You’ve got the wrong man.”

He put a hand on my forearm. “You won’t cooperate?”

“Not unless I have all the facts.”

The courtier sighed. “Zagreus was an aristocrat who rebelled. For a time his partisans threatened to overthrow our Radiant Court. The—ah—point of contention was, remarkably enough, that little item you have there.” He pointed to my divination cards.

“What happened to him?”

“Because he was of pure blood, he could not be killed. So he was exiled. He went, I believe, to the Nilotic Kingdom. Apparently no one has seen him since.”

Hours later, walking through the city, I came to a place where a wagon overturned at an intersection, spilling its cargo of dozens of tailor’s dummies. For convenience during transport, or for some other reason, many dummies had been partially assembled, but haphazardly, with disparate limbs, torsos, hands, and heads fashioned into startling configurations. As I pondered what significance this event might have, I was struck forcefully on the head and, consciousness guttering like a flame, pushed into a coach that simultaneously drew up beside me.

My vision, initially of a black blur in a womb-red cavern, resolved into a man in a djellaba on velvet cushions. I nudged aside the heavy drapes to see a sliver of some tenement rush past. “They’ll prevent us from leaving the city,” I said.

The man smiled. “I think not.”

I couldn’t see much, but it seemed a tumult had drawn away most of the guards; those remaining studiously ignored us, and our gilded carriage sprinted through the gate. The man, calm throughout, smiled again complacently.

The road wound through leagues of chaparral. At higher altitude, we turned onto a narrow trail through a grove of oaks. Finally, as churning clouds choked out the day’s last sunshine, the coach stopped in the turnaround before a sprawling villa.

Slowly walking down the grand staircase came a man whose ashen robe matched the massive walls. After bathing and taking dinner, I met him in a room looking onto a small courtyard where a few cycads stood among waves of raked sand. The conversation soon turned to my presence, or mission, in the Taurine City.

“You’ve deduced already,” he said, “that your coming here was no accident. We indeed engineered your selection by the Synod of Watchers. What you don’t know is why.” He filled two goblets from a cut-glass decanter. “I’ll tell you a story. Twenty years ago, the owner of this land discovered a hidden machine. This relic had many powers, which the man used in his ascent through the Radiant Court. It altered memories, erasing the old and creating the counterfeit. It seemed to strengthen the intelligence of those who spent time inside. And if two men went into the room, they could hear each other think. Soon their thoughts blurred until they were like one man in two bodies.”

“How did it work?”

“All creation is made of a kind of dust; the ancients had other names. When acted upon by special machines—it cannot be touched by human hands—space and time may not exist for it. This dust is inside our heads. If the cloud of one man’s mind is linked to the cloud of another, what affects one affects both, no matter how distant. A man may move from one body to another, and if the original is destroyed. . .”

I sipped the red wine he’d given me. “So that’s why you summoned me.”

“Correct. Lord Zagreus is scattered, and we have lost the pieces.”

“And now that you’ve found him?” I asked. “Another revolution?”

“Let’s call it a revolution by stealth.”

“I see. Shall we draw to reveal a trace of the truth?” I produced my cards from a pocket.

The man stiffened. “There is nothing for them to reveal. Lord Zagreus fought his war to put an end to that faith.”

I smiled. “But I’m not who you think I am.”

* * *

The mercury rose quickly as the cloud cover broke apart after last night’s thunderstorm. Across the square from the city barracks, I dealt the cards in the tetractys array and my face darkened. I was represented by the Fool; worse, that parcel which he carries was forbidden to me. I lit a match and, without glimpsing that card’s face, ran the flame under its edge. The fire crept up the card, blackening and curling it, and when only a corner remained to grasp, I flung the disintegrating ashes to the ground.

After I had told Taurine courtiers of the route to the heretics’ villa, a battalion immediately set out from the city. Now, as it returned, a soldier I bribed told me of how they’d found the place, arrested all those inside, and discovered many valuable codices but not the machine of the empty room.

In the barracks, they were reluctant to let me see their captives, but my writ embossed with the Sovereign’s seal persuaded them.

“You see?” I said when I was alone with the prisoner, the one I’d met before. “I’m not your messiah.”

“Are you sure? I seem to recall something similar happening before.”

“But in that myth, the messiah was the man betrayed, and his betrayer hanged himself. You’re not Zagreus, and I assure you I have no intention of hanging myself.”

The man took my divination cards, which I’d been idly tapping on the tablecloth. He shuffled, then invited me to cut: the Hanged Man.

Slowly, I ripped the card to confetti. “You gimmicked it.”

He shrugged. “If I did, wouldn’t that be as much a function of fate as whatever card turned up in an honest reading? If the cards indeed reveal truth because of an underlying reality that manifests in everything, then why not in my actions?”

“Because your actions are subject to your will.”

“And what is the will subject to?”

“Man is free to serve fate or not, but if he does not, he will suffer,” I said. “Happiness is having a will that is in accord with fate.”

“There is no fate, but we are creatures of our heritage and our world. We follow from our antecedents.”

“Madness,” I said. “Chaos.”

“You might call it so.”

I wanted to stop talking about fate. “Where is the machine? They didn’t find it at the villa.”

“Whoever said it was at the villa?”

The first heretic I’d met had seemed to imply it, but I realized now his meaning was vague. “Then where?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll arrange your passage to the place where the machine is hidden.”

Those were the same words the other had used. For the first time I felt like the victim of a conspiracy, or perhaps the sole audience member for some kind of meta-theater, instead of a participant or author. “Why not tell me?” I said.

“You wouldn’t be a very good watcher if you can’t figure it out for yourself.”

“He was right,” I said to myself once back on the crowded street. “A watcher discovers in plain sight what others can’t see.”

I walked for hours, but even as the day grew hotter, I grew colder. I couldn’t see what I was supposed to see. Doubts multiplied. If the heretics spoke the truth, I had never been a watcher. I thought back to that evening beside the Nile when my superior drew my keystone card: the Mirrors. If that memory was a fiction from the heretics’ machine, could they have intended the loss of a symbol of self-awareness to mean my identity was itself fictitious?

My hand found my divination cards and extracted one. Unthinkingly, it fell from my fingers and blew away. The Magician—the one who wields hidden knowledge—was the worst possible draw. Lord Zagreus was the Magician, it implied, and I his puppet.

Maybe my memories were indeed counterfeit, but they could still serve me. I recalled the words of my mentor when, in the rites of purification, we held our hands to a flame: “If it burns, try to change some little thing in yourself.” As I turned a corner, where the tangled alleys opened to a broad square with views of the countryside, it finally worked. If I couldn’t see what no one else could, I would see what was obvious to everyone. There, poised at the cliff’s edge, was one of the known world’s more prominent relics. The machine was inside the Vitreous Castle.

I had all the time it took to walk there to invent a subterfuge or pretext to enter the Castle, but upon arriving, still having not devised anything suitable, I found it deserted. I strode past broad quartz columns, shot through with pyrite and ultramarine, in the Castle’s empty and echoing central hall. Here and there prisms embedded in the walls cast rainbows. Though the Castle

was, as promised, built all of clear materials, the myriad intersecting planes created such a thicket of reflections that one could be certain of little.

I was not alone. What I had at first perceived, through the crystalline walls, as a refracted shard of carmine, resolved, as I progressed, into a man in a hooded robe. I stepped through a doorway and could at last see him directly. His face was hidden by a plain silk mask the same deep red as his robe.

“Come,” he said, little above a whisper.

“Where is everyone?” I suspected a trap, though there was nowhere to hide a mechanism. Nevertheless, I was already in the trap. “Is this not the seat of the Radiant Court?”

“The true Castle is under ground.”

I approached the alabaster throne, carven with bas-reliefs so fine they tended to translucence. Then I noticed the memories. I remembered lurking in the Vitreous Castle as a young man. It had been in this room that I found, by touch, a toggle made invisible by some ancient art. Turning it seemingly changed nothing, and I thought so until, some time later, my childhood friend accompanied me here and we turned it together.

I recalled my rise through the Taurine aristocracy, my rebellion against it, and how, through the machine’s benefices, I had replaced the old Sovereign Idomeneus. I even recalled setting in motion the events that led one unwise watcher to this place.

No doubt the Sovereign absorbed my memories as well. He knew my childhood along the Nile, my training in the watchers’ schools, my journey here three days ago.

“Why?” I asked.

“In the myth, the god sacrifices himself at his followers’ hands. Their abandon in the pursuit and attack catalyzes their evolution. For the sect to coalesce into one mind, we need a catalyst.”

“So those others. . .”

“Were not political assassinations at all, nor acts of terror,” the Sovereign said. “The maenads genuinely believed each victim was Zagreus, but they were mistaken.”

“Unfortunately for those men.”

“Yes, unfortunate.”

“They took the role that’s rightfully yours,” I said, “but their imitations weren’t truthful enough, and you wouldn’t play that role yourself. So you found a ready tool, and gave me your memory.”

“That’s one interpretation. Another is that you are Zagreus returned from exile, and you gave me yours.”

I fled, bursting from the wavy glass doors. The earth was in that state of twilight when the land is sunk in gloom though the sky remains bright. I could hear, among the boulders, voices chanting in an unknown tongue. I took out the deck of cards and the case containing the silver whip.

Hesitating as I touched the deck, I reflected on the cards these past few days. They led like clockwork to this moment.

Then I had a thought: nothing before this moment was real.

Maybe everything was a fiction imposed by the machine. All the cards and all my experiences, deftly designed to make me accept the fate they wanted for me, were part of the narrative they concocted and placed in my memory. All I could be sure was real were the two minutes since I’d left the Castle.

I dashed the cards to the ground; they fluttered and dispersed, ensnared in the brambles. Then I took the whip from its bed of nacre. It sang with a low, resonant buzz. I turned to face them. They moved toward me across the field, howling their insane words: “Evoë! Evoë!”

The End

Robert Pritchard grew up in California and Washington State. He attended Whitman College and studied to be a teacher in New Zealand but never practiced the trade. Today he lives in San Diego and is still waiting for the world to shower riches, fame, and happiness upon him. His fiction has appeared in Zahir (“Aristeia” Summer 2008 and “Pasquale on the Evolution” Fall 2007) and his nonfiction in The New York Review of Science Fiction (“The Collapsing Crutch” Feb. 2008).

Five Questions with Mishell Baker

by Michael Ray

1) You attended the 2009 Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop. What is the biggest effect Clarion had on your writing?

Clarity. Before Clarion, I had a tendency to hold my cards close, to couch things in long convoluted sentences, to make my readers work too hard. I assumed that everyone would be lovingly poring over each and every phrase in what I wrote, looking for double meanings and subtleties and symbolism. Then I handed over a story to eighteen people who had a few hours to read and make notes on mine and three others, and I realized that people don't want to work. They want to be swept in, and entertained, and moved, and above all they want to understand what the hell you're talking about.

With the possible exception of professional literary critics, every reader is severely pressed for time and should really be doing something else right now. Everyone. Not just sleep-deprived Clarion students. So be kind.

2) You've remained involved with Clarion by becoming editor of their blog. How did they talk you into that and what have you found interesting about the experience?

I actually founded the blog several months after graduating Clarion. There was no Clarion Blog before that. I say I founded it, but only in the physical sense. The idea of an official Clarion Blog came from my classmate Liz Argall, and she kind of volunteered me for it because she saw that I enjoyed blogging. Ironically I've done very little blogging myself at all; my job mostly is finding people who are more knowledgeable and eloquent than I am and talking them into blogging. That's been the interesting part: the people I've corresponded with. I've gotten some incredible people to contribute: a slew of big-name literary agents, writers ranging from Samuel R. Delany to Jim Butcher, and editors of short fiction venues, like that creep Michael Ray.

3) Your story with us, Vaporware, is a sociological scifi story that examines something we may well see in the future, projecting how one's children might turn out. What experiences prompted you to write it?

The experience of being out of story ideas in week four of Clarion and being desperate to meet a deadline.

Oh, you mean related life experience? None whatsoever. At the time I conceived the idea of this story, I was ten years away from having children myself; it mostly came out of my empathy for a sweet, passive guy I knew who had a severely troubled thirteen-year-old daughter. I honestly have no idea where the science fiction aspect of it came from; it's been so long. We writers always sit around going "what if" and sometimes those flights of fancy stick with us and sometimes they don't. That was one that hitched a ride in my subconscious for a decade and finally rattled loose in a moment of desperation.

Most of my Clarion classmates hated the first draft, which was admittedly weak. But Kim Stanley Robinson saw what I was trying to do, and he's a dad, and he loved it. When Kim Stanley Robinson loves something, you don't throw it away, you keep working on it. I did the

final pass at it a few months after my daughter was born, which is where some of the baby-related flashbacks come from.

4) I particularly enjoyed your fantasy story in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Throwing Stones*. You have mentioned how it is set in the world of a novel you were working on. What sort of work do you find that you are currently spending most of your writing time on and why do think you made that choice?

It's novels, now, definitely. I have two I switch off between: a sort of edgy-chick-lit urban fantasy that I hope to have drafted by fall, and the novel (trilogy actually) mentioned in the BCS bio, which may take years. I am retired from short fiction for the foreseeable future. Before *Clarion* I had no ability to write short fiction whatsoever, and I think every writer should become reasonably competent at it for reasons I go into in my blog at great length. I learned enough about how to write short stories that I managed to sell a few, and so now it's time for me to get back into novels. My answer to why I'm abandoning short fiction is kind of embedded in the answer to your next question.

5) Whose work should we be reading that we may not know about (and why)?

You use the word "should," which casts the question in a different light. I can't really name names, because if you're a writer you should be reading the type of thing you write. I am constantly dismayed at how many aspiring writers say things like, "I'm writing a YA epic fantasy novel but I mostly read sci-fi erotica." This raises two points. First, it helps to be familiar with at least the big names in the field where you're trying to market yourself, or you risk looking like a bit of a doofus to your prospective agent or publisher. Second, look at it the other way around: why aren't you writing what you most enjoy reading? You'd be great at it, and as a bonus, your guilty stolen moments of leisure time are now called "market research."

Aside from that? Read Mark Lawrence's *Prince of Thorns* when it comes out at the end of the month. Not only will it make you sit up straight in your chair and go, "Wow," but it's going to be controversial, and controversy is always fun to Tweet and blog about.

Thanks for you time & your excellent story.

Five Questions with Morgan Dempsey

by Michael Ray

1) It seems that among all our social media choices, that a number of young writers and editors have gravitated towards Twitter. Why do you think it is the most used method of communication by you and the new generation of writers?

I can't speak for anyone else on this, but I can say why I personally like twitter. I'm a huge fan of concise asynchronous communication. I cringe at having to talk on the phone, and encourage my friends to text rather than call. I also love that it embraces the transience of status updates in social media. I feel like other social media sites are trying to straddle the line between immediacy and permanence, when a twitter account and a personal blog handle it just fine for me. Conversations on twitter feel opt-in, whereas on Facebook and Google+ they feel opt-out. Also it's really easy to use from my phone. No bells and whistles, nothing fancy, just send a text and you're done. It does one thing, it does it simply, and if anybody wants anything extra, well, there's the API, go hack.

2) Who are the Inkpunks and what do they have to say that is interesting?

The Inkpunks are a group of writers, editors, slushers, publicists, etc, all of us in the early stages of our careers, sharing our experiences in publishing. I think what makes us a worthwhile addition to someone's RSS feeds is the perspective from which we discuss things. We're not uber-famous and long-standing professionals, but we aim for professional quality in all the things we do. We're diligent, we research, and we work hard at our craft, regardless of what it is. And we strive to be positive in what we say. Writing can be lonely, publishing can be hard, editing can be tedious, and we want to be cheerleaders throughout that process.

3) You told us that you read slush (general submissions, for the uninitiated) at Scapezine. How has your experience as a submissions reader affected your writing?

Reading slush has made me more critical of my work, and of what makes a story good. The primary problem I see in slush isn't the terribad stories people like to talk about. It's that the slush pile tends to blur. The stories don't stand out. The ones that stand out do so for similar reasons: incredible voice, rich worldbuilding, vibrant character. They don't try to be clever, they don't reach clumsily for the heartstrings. They feel organic and effortless. When I write, I let the story show up and do what it wants to do. And when I go to edit that story, I just try to cut out all the boring bits. (Sometimes I add an explosion.)

4) Your story with us, *The Memory Gatherer*, is an outstanding use of a dystopian setting and reasonably advanced technology to create a heart-wrenching story of the effects of a painful childhood. What sparked your thinking on the technology and the relationships involved creating your story?

Wow, thank you! Well, on top of majoring in computer engineering in college, I also picked up a minor in philosophy. The spark of *The Memory Gatherer* wasn't technology, but thinking about what constitutes an individual's identity. If we look at a person as a specific subset of all events in time, and we could store those events as byte data, then what would life look like? From there, using AI seemed like the logical conclusion. Plus, I think robots are rad.

5) So what are you working on now and what should we expect to see from you in the future?

My short story *The Automatic City* is going to be in *Broken Time Blues*, an anthology of 1920s-themed speculative fiction edited by Jaym Gates and Erika Holt, which will be launching at WorldCon 2011 (where I'll be doing my first-ever reading!). Currently I'm working on a young adult scifi novel, another scifi short story, and a video game for the iPhone, which we hope to have a demo for in the near future.

Thanks for you time & your excellent story.

Five Questions with Angela Ambroz

by Michael Ray

1) You have lived in some very interesting locales, including Italy and Fiji. Could you tell us a little about your work and how you ended up living in such diverse places?

Ooh! Perfect opportunity to share this story: once upon a time, when I was living in Hyderabad, I took an autorickshaw with a very kindly, very pious-looking older Muslim driver. We chatted a bit, me telling an abbreviated version of my life story, and he ended up telling me that Allah had blessed me by letting me see so much of the world! It was such a sweet thing to say. (And I'm a sucker for expressions of piety.)

I've spent my whole life travelling – sometimes by choice, sometimes by circumstance. I was an immigrant's Army brat – born in one country, raised in another – and I attended universities in three different countries. Even my "true" nationality is a little blurry: my family's from a border region in Italy, and there's a lot of internal debate about whether we're Italian or Slovenian or Austrian or what. I side with Italian, but that's just because I love Super Mario Bros., pizza and the Medicis...

Now I work in international development, and that's let me live in and visit some very interesting places as well.

2) You're currently living in near Boston for school (if I have this right). What are you working on there?

I'm in Boston for work now; I've been called back to the mothership, and am slowly acclimating to being an adult in America. I work for a research organization that studies the impact of different development programs. I still do some field work (I'm actually leaving for India this week!), but my base is here now.

3) What's going on with the Post-Punk Cinema Club? That is an amazingly diverse list of movies your site has reviewed!

Thanks! And, ah, the PPCC! My baby. I'm obsessed with movies, and I tend to become obsessed with sharing the experience. I can't stand that there are some amazing movies (or scenes, or jump cuts, or melodic curlicues) out there that don't get furiously loved by everyone everywhere. I have a very strong need to sound trumpets. Thankfully, the PPCC is the perfect release for that: I can be as evangelical and enthusiastic as I want, and no one needs to pay attention to it. It's much more socially acceptable than what I used to do, which was corner people and force-feed them obscure films I thought were brilliant.

In the beginning, the PPCC was pretty dominated by Hindi films – I went through a heavy-duty Hindi movie phase, lasting several years. But I like everything: Korean, Japanese, Italian, indie, mainstream. And am always open to recommendations.

4) Your story with us, Love and Anarchy and Science Fiction, had a very personal feel, but it considered the ramifications of political actions, even seemingly unsuccessful ones. What inspired you to write this story?

I'm very derivative (hey, I cut my teeth in fanfic), and this piece was almost directly begat by

Lina Wertmuller's "Film d'amore e d'anarchia ovvero: stamattina alle 10, in via dei Fiori, nella nota casa di tolleranza..." (most often translated as "Love and Anarchy"). Lina Wertmuller is a brilliant director; one of my all-time favorites. "Love and Anarchy" is a 1970s Italian film about fascism, ignorance and, broadly, hope and despair. It's just a really wonderful film, and I wanted the story to be an homage to it.

I also watched it during a period of getting really into Italian political history: stuff like the Brigade Rosse's kidnapping of Aldo Moro, the partigiani of World War II, as well as some Renaissance history (e.g. Count Ugolino della Gherardesca). I felt inspired to get some of that meaty, complicated, terrible stuff into the Dropverse. I rarely see fraught, realistic politics in spec fic (LeGuin does it brilliantly; maybe Frank Herbert? but who else?). I also wanted to introduce a distinctly non-American way of experiencing politics.

Note of indulgence: the character of Salvatore Gennarino is played by Giancarlo Giannini in my head, and he actually took his name from other Giannini roles (hence bringing in other aspects of Italian film history). His first name, Salvatore, is taken from Giannini's role in "Mi manda Picone" – a picaresque Odyssey through the Neopolitan underworld (this informed Salvatore's Venetian backstory). The character's last name, Gennarino, referred to one of Giannini's most famous roles from another Wertmuller film, "Swept Away".

Most of my stories suffer from this fancicky habit: they're the regurgitated remnants of specific films, historical stuff, songs, personal biases, and, on a macro scale, my agenda to make spec fic more multicultural and socio-economically aware.

5) The story with us was part of your "Dropverse" world. What little we've seen published is good stuff. Could you tell us a little about the Dropverse and what plans you have for it?

The Dropverse came to me, almost fully formed, on an elliptical machine in Oxford in 2006. I was listening to some scratchy, maudlin 1950s Hindi film songs and daydreaming about Naseeruddin Shah as Mirza Ghalib, and I just thought what (I think) many spec fic writers eventually think: "You know, this would be great... IF IT WAS IN SPACE."

On one hand, the Dropverse is a place for me to explore my favorite story type: humans in pre- or post-civilization scenarios, exhibiting their particularly humanistic humanness while suffering various extreme calamities. I love the tragicomedy of it. The nobility and grace and banality of it. It's very M*A*S*H. So the Dropverse – especially the stories on the Rahu Ketu spaceship – are just some fun in that playbox.

And then I have my larger socio-political agenda: in particular, I'm sick to death of ostensibly "visionary" spec fic being nonetheless incapable of breaking out of an American/white/male view. It's so narrow. And boring! Okay, I realize the irony (the cheek, even) of me saying that when: I'm white, I was raised in America, many of my protagonists are white dudes, and I fail the Bechdel Test pretty regularly. But the Dropverse is a way for me to sound some trumpets that I think are important, and show that the future isn't necessarily going to be as Euro-centric as is often lazily assumed.

No big plans for the Dropverse, at present. In fact, I'm cultivating a few other verses in the meantime (e.g., an alt history of the American Civil War), so we'll see how they fare on the high seas of publication.

Thanks for you time & your excellent story.

Five Questions with Patty Jansen

by Michael Ray

1) Why must we use bigger elephants?

Must Use Bigger Elephants is the title of my blog (<http://pattyjansen.wordpress.com/>). I have this phrase scrawled over a page of calculations I did for a really silly story that involved the following: supposing you filled the entire surface of the Moon with elephants. At the blow of a whistle (yeah, the whistle would be inaudible, but never mind, I did say it was a silly story), they all started running to the East. My question was: would the combined mass of the elephants speed up the Moon and show us the dark side? Well, not really, according to my calculations, at least not noticeably within a human lifetime (and that 's a long time for an elephant to keep running, never mind to hold its breath). But my story required the Moon to speed up through running elephants. The mass of the Moon is a given, and this left me with only one solution: Must Use Bigger Elephants. At that point, I realised that Science Fiction is about bigger elephants. It's about extrapolating the known into the as-yet-un-achieved so that our characters can look over a fence that is as yet too high for us to look over in real life. What if you filled the Moon with mammoths? Or brachiosaurs?

2) Your blogposts are excellent and a good resource for writers. You even defend infodumps in a recent post. How can you be so cruel to fellow editors?

Writers who write poor infodumps are not going to make it past the slush no matter what. It's not the infodumps themselves that are at fault, but the fact that the writing is dull, told, without voice and with loss of POV. The infodumps could be in the wrong place, told by the wrong person at the wrong time.

The information itself should be vital to the story. When you read SFF, you expect to be fed information at a certain point. That's part of the genre. It is up to the writer to make the information interesting and bring it at the right time. My point in the post was: if the story requires a chemistry lecture to show a cool part of your worldbuilding, don't let yourself be talked into leaving out the chemistry. Without it, the story will be poorer, harder to follow, the worldbuilding shallower and your story will be more generic and less interesting. (This is the post in question: <http://pattyjansen.wordpress.com/2011/07/29/infodumps-why-you-should-embrace-them/>)

3) What should we know about the magazine you edit, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine?

ASIM was set up by a group of Australian SFF writers ten years ago after Aussiecon3, and has so far produced more than 50 print issues. We also do PDF and have very recently added ereader formats.

The strength of the magazine is that it's run by a collective. At any one time, there are about 20 of us. Most people stay in the collective for a few years before moving on to make place for new keen young guns, and so the magazine has been the training ground for a lot of writers and editors, and still is.

I am only one of a number of editors. Each issue is edited by a different person, so the magazine has a lot of variety. Overall, we tend to prefer upbeat stories (dare I say humour?). One of our

unique foibles is that we have a blind slushing process. When stories come in, our slushmistress feeds them into a slush processing program which strips all identifying details from the story (including your cover letter), and shoots the stories at random to slush readers' email addresses. A story needs to pass three readers before it is added to a slush pool from which editors can pick. We pay 1.25c (Australian) per word, which puts us at semipro rate. That said, people often underestimate how hard the magazine is to get into. We get thousands of submissions per year.

4) Your story with us, "Party, with Echoes", takes place beneath the icy crust of Europa. There was some actual science in your science fiction. How did this story evolve?

There is always science in my science fiction, even though it may not be obvious. Even when I'm writing fantasy, there will be science. A recent fantasy project required me to do research on radiation sickness.

For this particular story, I read a fairly scientific book on what we know about Jupiter's moon Europa. This book was very useful to me, and will probably lead to more stories set on icy worlds. You can probably also tell from the story that I hold an Advanced Open Water SCUBA certificate. I'd always wanted to write a diving story, but the usual SFF diving story—a wreck dive ghost story—didn't appeal to me. When I read of the water underneath the ice of Europa (kept liquid by the same tidal heating that makes Io volcanic), I had my setting.

The story grew from my deliberations on why people would dive the under-ice sea. What would a person be doing there? Research? Meh. To find resources? So done-before! What about just for the heck of it, because it's there, as a form of extreme tourism?

Then the story required my characters to find something. This came from the fact that coral is a colony of individuals forming what looks like another organism. What if this aggregate of micro-organisms can move and looks semi-intelligent?

Add to this the mystery of diving in pitch-darkness, and you get a feel for the story.

The best stories come from combinations of ideas. I was very pleased with Lois Tilton's kind comments about it.

5) We want to know all about your trip to LA as one of the winners of the Writers Of The Future Contest for 2010. What was most memorable and useful about the experience?

Where do I start—it was just amazing. You have to realise of course that I'd never been to the US and had no idea what to expect, but I needn't have feared. It was the most amazing week I've had in my writing career and I can't even begin to sum up all the experiences.

Most useful? The networking with other writers. Not just the others in the class, but our tutors, and the previous years' winners who sat at the back of the room.

Most memorable? Meeting all these great writers (Larry Niven, anyone?) and having days with them, as opposed to the five minutes you may talk to them at a con. The awards night, which was in one word: crazy. Having someone else figure out what to do with my hair (which reaches past my backside).

My biggest fear? I never wear high heels. Never. I was afraid I'd trip on the way up the stairs.

Most amazing? Meeting and spending a lot of time talking to Greg Benford.

There is so much more. Talking to the pros about the business side of writing. Meeting friends I'd corresponded with for years but never met. The fact that one of these friends took me out for some sightseeing the day before the workshop started and another came especially from San Francisco to see me. Attending a story reading organised by Author Services, which made me think 'I must do something like this' if ever I get to do a reading at a con. Our excursion to JPL and being allowed to see the control room (yeah—I'm a space nerd in case you hadn't gathered). The crazy coincidence of meeting an Australian scientist there who I'll be seeing again in October. Having breakfast at the same table as Superman. Yes, really.

Want me to stop yet?

I have some impressions and photos on my blog under the "WOTF workshop 2011" tag.

Thanks for you time & your excellent story.