



Redstone Science Fiction

February '12

#21



Thoraiya Dyer & Chuck Wilkerson

Cover Art by Lyzz Self

Redstone Science Fiction #21
February 2012

Fiction

[White Lies](#)

by Thoraiya Dyer

[Dragonfly Girl](#)

by Chuck Wilkerson

Publisher's Note

[by Paul Clemmons](#)

Interviews

[A Conversation with Thoraiya Dyer](#)

by Paul Clemmons

[A Conversation with Chuck Wilkerson](#)

by Paul Clemmons

White Lies

by Thoraiya Dyer

Brian sweated, unable to settle, thinking of all the white lies he'd told her.

Once they crossed the border, he was finished. Felicity would connect to the American network. She would turn that poisonous expression on him, the one she had turned on the accordion player with the dancing bear, right before she kicked over his coin-filled case, broke her ankle and ended up staying six weeks longer in Shanghai than she'd intended.

Brian's bunk wasn't rolling. In fact, the entire junk was still, as though the harbour was holding its breath. The only sounds were the honk of sea birds, the rumble of tugs and the distant blast of cargo ships.

No, it wasn't the boat pitching him from side to side. It was the intensity of his infatuation. The tide of his guilt.

I have two masters degrees, he'd said carelessly. One in computer engineering and one in computer science.

Of course I don't think vegetarianism is stupid.

A big family? I love kids.

Brian clutched his skull. Inside it was his American node, connecting him to all his fellow citizens when he was on American soil. The wet net was an improvement on the old, electronic, editable encyclopaedia and search engine systems. It needed only to be asked a question and it would ping every person in the network, gathering answers based on firsthand experiences, before reporting the majority response as the correct one.

Sadly, there were three people who had firsthand experience of Brian's skittishness when it came to starting a family. First was Brian's mother. She'd asked him if he really thought she shouldn't have brought him into the world – and was shocked when he said yes. *People who can't afford to raise children properly shouldn't have them*, he'd said. Then, there was his ex-girlfriend, Winnie, the stripper who wanted to start with the baby-making not six months after they'd met.

Brian was an agreeable sort of guy, but some things you didn't just agree to on a whim.

Finally, there was Winnie's lesbian aunt, Peta. Brian had expected Peta to appreciate his derision for brainless breeders, but she had lectured him on his selfishness instead.

There was no escape. He'd said a lot of things early on in his relationship with Felicity, not knowing her and not caring, thinking it was a holiday fling, not realising her penchant for fact-

checking everything. Who could be bothered doing that? Not Brian. He'd be the last person to start sending out questions as soon as he crossed the border to make sure Felicity really had always wanted a Niagara Falls wedding, or that she really did have a secret fondness for chest hair.

But she would check. She would find out that he'd lied.

Or had he? Being with Felicity electrified him. It had changed him. He didn't care that she wanted five kids or that she didn't eat meat. She was a force of nature. He adored her.

She'd never believe that. She'd believe the net and turn on him, the way she'd turned on that pickpocket at the Great Wall, leaving him with a handprint on his face, rips in his shirt and a widening circle of his own friends staring voyeuristically in the direction of his departure.

Brian sat up on his bunk. It was not quite pitch blackness, but he still had to feel for the zippers on his backpack, drawing out his typesheet by touch.

There was a way out. Questions asked of the net would skip over individual nodes without tallying their answers if those individuals had been through the prison system. Since most criminals these days were mental illness sufferers – nodes made it all too easy to gather eyewitness evidence without subpoenas or court appearances - it was a cheap, albeit discriminatory way of eliminating hallucinations and other skewed experiences from the system. The list of felons wasn't stored in the nodes themselves, but rather in the national criminal records database.

He could hack it.

He'd done it once before. The conviction had led to Brian himself being added to the criminal records database. No matter what experiences he had, they were invisible to the wet net. If Felicity asked the question, *Does Brian Tempest love me?*, it would be the observations of others that were surveyed, not his.

Strangers who had seen them kissing in the rain, then returned home to the American net with their experiences stored, ready to be rifled through without them even being conscious of it. Singaporean rickshaw drivers who had heard them giggling in back and then returned to their families for Chinese New Year, whose memories would become freely shared information the moment they crossed the border.

Winnie, who he'd walked out on.

Peta, who'd overheard him telling a friend about which yacht he'd get after he'd married and divorced a rich heiress.

And Felicity had just sold her start-up business for a tidy two point five million.

It wasn't fair. Brian would have fallen for Felicity even without the millions. He was the best authority on his own feelings. He was the only authority on his own feelings. If he'd been arrested before he could finish his masters degrees, that didn't mean he wouldn't have passed ten times over with genius to spare. It was just that he'd gotten overconfident. He'd gotten caught. If no officer of the law had asked the question, *are you guilty?* then the fact of his guilt would have been irrelevant.

He hadn't lied to Felicity. Not really.

I check everything, Felicity had whispered to him when their local guide had informed them that Nanjing Road was one of the Seven Greatest Roads in the world. She asked her Chinese cousin, Grace, to immediately put the question to the Chinese net.

Chinese citizens who had never left China were agreeable to the greatness of Nanjing Road, but those more widely travelled gave as their consensus the galling answers of Broadway, Hollywood Boulevard, the Road to Giza, Orchard Road, the Champs Elysees, Via Dolorosa and Venice's Grand Canal.

She really did check everything. Brian had no choice, even though he'd sworn he'd never go back to jail. Being forced to kiss hairy man-butt was an experience the net could have benefited from in terms of deterring would-be cyber criminals. Brian had not forgotten the acute humiliation he'd experienced daily on the inside.

But this was an emergency.

He couldn't live without Felicity.

She hadn't agreed to it yet, but they were practically engaged.

Why had he told her so many lies?

Text began to scroll invisibly down the surface of the typesheet as he directed his thoughts towards it. The typesheet was connected to the relic of the electronic web, which most people still used for number-based or projected information that was difficult to garner from polling direct experience: maximum daily temperatures, transport schedules, formalised education and entertainment. There was no crossover between the electronic web and the American wet net, except at the criminal records database, which acted as both bottleneck and filter. Brian had attacked it before because the wet net had the potential to be so much faster.

He attacked it now in a lovesick frenzy.

In the bunk below, Felicity slumbered peacefully.

* * *

Peta Knight stooped to remove an imaginary stone from her shoe.

It was the signal they had agreed on. Out of the mass of black umbrellas moving through rising evening fog, a single umbrella detached itself, held slightly higher than the others by a man taller than she expected. Footage of seated ministers or of lectern-shielded spokespeople at press conferences could be misleading.

“Mr Qing,” she said as he fell in beside her. They strolled through the park, two black umbrellas knitted together over black suits, black shoes, as night began to swallow the city.

Night could only be useful for concealment if they avoided well-lit places; mushy snow lay on both sides of the path through the park and ruffled, roosting ravens were all but invisible in the bare branches of the trees.

“Ms Knight,” Qing said. “It is unfortunate we must meet like this.”

“Is your family well?”

“Quite well, thank you. My mother enjoys her ninetieth year. And your family?”

“They are well. My niece has given birth to a healthy baby boy.”

“How long before you begin drilling into his head, then?”

Peta did not rise to the bait.

“They are all noded at puberty, Mr Qing. The dull-minded and the constantly questioning alike.”

“If one has a correct answer,” Qing replied, “there is no need to constantly question. That is why there is no need for a constant connection to the net.”

“If the threat to our nations’ integrity is realised,” Peta said, “the ability to remove your people’s extradermal nodes will not preserve your cultural isolation. The common people will not accept the mass withdrawal of census patches, as you call them, by the government.”

“Why would we withdraw them when we outnumber you three to one? Americans will ask the net, ‘is there a God?’ And the net will tell them, ‘no.’”

Peta kept her features impassive. The spread of atheism was her government’s greatest concern, if not her own personal one.

“And what will happen if the Chinese ask the net whether their officials are corrupt? You remove census patches from anyone with firsthand experience, but ours cannot be removed.”

They crossed a stone bridge over trickling meltwater. Ahead, a moon gate framed the darkened entrance to the ginkgo pavilion. Its columns were red and gold by day, colourless in the twilight.

“There is a bypass system,” Qing said. “Your criminal records database.”

“Any attack on it will see the alert level raised to stage one.”

“On whose authority?”

“Mine,” Peta smiled. “Which is why any attack on me personally will see the alert level raised to stage two. If that should happen, the consequences will be out of my hands, Spokesman Qing. I am doing all I can to keep the hawks at bay, but it is not easy.”

“And I am doing what I can, Agent Knight. The status quo must be preserved.”

“We traced an attack to the Party last week.”

“It was a sally,” Qing said soberly. “Not a true offensive.”

“It must not happen again. From this moment, any venture with its origin in Chinese territory will be seized on by my opponents.”

“I understand.”

They passed through the moon gate together.

* * *

Brian rubbed his tired eyes.

He'd worked through the night but it was no use. The criminal records database was computationally and algorithmically secured. Since he could not solve the mathematical equations which would give him access, the only weak link in the system was the corruptible human being; anyone with auto-authority, anyone whose identity might be borrowed.

In the world of the wet net, that was impractical. Still possible, but he didn't have the equipment to forge a node; had never done anything like it before.

He set the typesheet aside on his bunk, his gaze caught and held by a coin-sized circle of sunlight which shone through a hole in the bow. It seemed like it would brand the wooden wall that it fell on, so intense was its glow in the below-deck gloom. One of the other foreign backpackers on the tour roused herself, stumbling towards the amenities cubicle in the forward part of the ship.

Brian almost warned her to keep out of the light. It unsettled him, as though a giant child with a magnifying glass was crouching beside them, waiting to fry them.

The answer came to him.

He knew a way to put Aunt Peta's node out of commission. Hers first, then his mother's, then Winnie's.

American nodes, being internal, functioned optimally at body temperature or slightly below. They also had to be as small as possible, to take up a minimal amount of intracranial space. They couldn't incorporate the same cooling mechanisms as the external Chinese models did. That was a weakness Brian could exploit.

If enough requests were made of a particular node, it would overheat. It would shut down before damaging nearby brain tissue.

He had to get a bunch of strangers to query Peta's node all at once. Somehow, he had to rouse their curiosity about something only she had direct experience of. An affair with someone famous ought to do the trick.

Mass media. He had to upload something phony to the entertainment channels. Something that would leave everyone gasping and wondering if it could be true. There were endless vidfiles on the web; he could easily substitute Aunt Peta's face for any one of those moaning porn actresses.

Brian hesitated. It might damage Aunt Peta's reputation, sure. She was some kind of paper shuffler in a government organisation; at least, she was always wearing suits and security passes and she had the telltale tic in her left eye of a person who takes too many retinal checks.

But she'd be cleared. Eventually. And by the time Peta got a new node, Felicity would have finished interrogating the net and Brian would be saved.

The media outlets were a breeze to hack after a night spent banging his head against the impenetrable wall of the database.

He sent the altered vidfile through to half a dozen destinations.

That was Aunt Peta taken care of.

Brian had just started to brainstorm the best way to burn out his mother's node when the backpacker came back to the bunkroom, carrying a cup of coffee whose smell filled the small space. Other bunk occupants began sitting up, rubbing sore muscles, scratching bedbug bites.

Not for the first time, he wondered what all those idiot children were doing in China, taking tours like this because they were cheaper than hotel accommodation, boasting about their suffering as though the lack of air conditioning entitled them to bravery medals. Brian's childhood bed in the shipping container his mother had called home had been a pile of cardboard boxes, but no-one had suspected that until he'd been noded, such pride did she take in his appearance.

She had ironed his school shirts with a metal dog bowl heated over a gas-burning stove. A teenager with tear-filled eyes from a big name charity had come one day to give her a real iron. Since the wet net, the organisational costs of such institutions were minimal. They were able to do a great deal of good simply by asking the net who was in need of what.

As Brian had gotten older, he'd become acutely aware that only by using his wits could he escape from that metal container. Crossing castes was difficult, but not impossible. Winnie had been from several strata above Brian. He might have stayed with her, if not for the way she chattered about leaving her job to have five or six children. No matter what the net told her, she refused to believe that they could ever be without money. She was convinced that God would provide for them.

Because he had been imprisoned, Brian's memories of eating bread dipped in the boiled water left over from yesterday's hot dogs were not available to Winnie, or to anyone else.

Well. All that was behind him, now. It had been a hot dog stand where he'd bought a twelve-pack of Shanghai Surprise noodles, filled out a form to enter a prize draw and been flabbergasted by the arrival of complimentary travel documents a month later. He'd never left the country before, never been curious about places whose images and sounds could be called up instantly, mentally and electronically.

But the trip was free, so why not?

"Brian?" Felicity wondered lazily from the bunk below. He quickly rolled up the typesheet and slid it into its waterproof cylinder.

"Yes, ma'am?" Brian answered, dropping down from his bunk onto the floor.

Her smile was impish, her curls loose around her broad, freckled face.

"I can smell coffee. Yum."

He kissed her. Her lips were dry and she tasted slightly sour, but they had eaten a great deal of garlic squid the night before.

"I'll be right back," he said. There was time. Another full day before they transferred from the junk to the cruise ship and crossed the eastern boundary of the Chinese net. A series of platform-mounted towers across the East China Sea separated Chinese net territory from Japan, which was American net territory.

Another full day. He could spare time for coffee.

* * *

The alarm sounded shrilly over the muffled roar of the jet's engines.

Peta's attention jerked from the conference interface to the silver skullcap on the table. Red LEDs flickered all over it. Her node was under attack.

It wasn't her true node, any more than Peta Knight was her real name. Intelligence operatives couldn't go around plugged into the wet net like ordinary people. They had state secrets to keep safe.

Still, the node that was docked on the table, the one that was being maliciously overloaded, was the node registered to the false identity of Peta Knight.

"What is it, Agent?" her superior demanded from the interface, brows drawn together, unable to see the table and yet alerted to the breach by her demeanour.

"It's my node," Peta said calmly. "It's under attack."

Outside the window of the plane, under a cloudless sky on a moonless night, the glitter of the Chinese mainland receded. She would cross the border into New Afghanistan any moment. New Afghanistan was one of the American wet net territories. Below her, in darkness, lay the double row of communications towers which secured that border.

If the towers were disabled, the American wet net would immediately expand. American soil and the territories of its signatories were defined as the space between one longitudinal marker and the next. In the absence of Western China markers, the area would be redefined. The entire globe would be included and the nodes of Chinese citizens would be re-labelled American.

Unless the Chinese destroyed their border markers first.

"You were careless," snapped another holographically depicted member of the security advisory. The meeting had been hastily convened. Half of them were in slippers and bathrobes, ill-tempered at the disturbance so late at night and the frightening implications of a Chinese attack so swiftly on the heels of her meeting with Qing.

"I was not," Peta said.

"You were seen with him," a third member accused.

"I was not seen."

"Pride has brought them to this," the first speaker said.

"Their pride?" the second speaker snorted. "Or ours?"

Peta fell silent as they shouted at one another, ignoring her.

"They consider themselves in a position of strength. They think their net will engulf our own."

"And so it will."

"Unless we detonate our towers first."

“We will still be overwhelmed – ”

“We have taken steps to ensure the inactivation of – ”

“I have assurances from our people – ”

“Those assurances are worthless – ”

Far below, the earth turned. Dawn crept up from the rear of the plane. Before it could touch any but the highest mountain peaks, Peta was forced to close the sun visors over the windows.

She thought about Qing’s ninety-year-old mother and what she would do when she found out Qing himself was responsible for the razing of the little Buddhist temple in the village where he had been born. He had asked the Chinese net how many people used it, and the answer was barely a dozen; he had asked it how many people might use a new indoor tennis centre, and the answer had been several thousand.

It was the net which had demolished that temple, really. The people had spoken. Yet Qing was not noded any more than Peta Knight was noded. He knew too much and so his mother would never find out about his discreet little poll; all she would see was his hand cutting the ribbon to open the tennis centre.

On the table, the node overheated and died. The attack was successful. She couldn’t prevent what would happen, now.

Winnie’s new baby had been born into an uncertain world.

Peta sighed. She’d done her best to protect a determinedly individual society from the weight of the impoverished global masses. In the end, it wasn’t religion she worried about, or corruption, or even mob rule.

It was hope. When confronted with the hopelessness of most people’s meagre lives, it seemed impossible for a person to delude themselves into hoping for something better.

The un-noded might be the best hope for the future, or they might be an ignorant, easily-manipulated menace. There was no telling.

“We go to advise the Commander-In-Chief,” Peta’s superior said, terminating the connection.

To divert herself from her gloomy thoughts, she checked the morning news. There was her face, mapped professionally onto a stranger’s body. Oiled skin gleamed. Enormous breasts bounced.

It would have been hilarious, if it wasn’t the end of everything.

* * *

Brian moved gingerly aft, two cups of steaming coffee in his hands.

He froze.

Something wasn't right. A prickly sensation passed through him and was gone. One of the coffees spilled onto his hand. He swore, spilling it some more.

"What was that?" he shouted.

The wet net answered him, translating as it went. The prickle was the integration of his ex-American node into the Global Chinese net. The implications leaped out at him, filling him with equal parts thrill and dread. The criminal records database had been bypassed. He was part of the Chinese net. *Everybody* was part of the Chinese net. That meant his experiences could be accessed by Felicity.

She would know for certain that he loved her, would do anything for her.

The problem was, she would also know he had wiped out Aunt Peta's node and plotted to wipe out two more.

But only if she asked.

Even with the world's knowledge at their fingertips, people had to ask questions in order to get answers.

What kind of engagement ring will she like best? Brian thought giddily at his node.

Images blasted him. Felicity laughing in her ex-boyfriend's face, telling him that marriage was enslavement, that he was a pig for even asking her.

She had lied. Happiness drained out of Brian. More and more knowledge planted itself in his skull. She was a pathological liar. She took holidays outside the American net because she couldn't be found out right away, because building false identities thrilled her in a way that Brian's lovemaking skills never could.

She found his chest hair repulsive; had laughed about it with her cousin Grace. There was no start-up company, no money, nothing.

From the mind of the hot dog vendor, he plucked an image of her, stuffing her face with processed meat. She'd entered the same competition that he had, winning a trip the very same way. Hers was supposed to finish before his had begun, but she'd broken her ankle and the insurance had paid for her to stay on.

"Felicity," he croaked. "Don't you love me?"

And the net said, *No*.

The End

Thoraiya Dyer is an Australian science fiction and fantasy writer with a passion for travel diminished only by an unreasonable fear of sharks. Her short fiction has appeared recently in Cosmos, Nature and ASIM #51, and is forthcoming in Apex. Winner of the 2011 Australian Ditmar Award for Best Novella/Novelette (“The Company Articles of Edward Teach”) and the 2010 Aurealis Award for Fantasy Short Story (“Yowie”), a collection of her original short fiction will be published by Twelfth Planet Press in 2012.

To discover why pirates are better than robots, see <http://www.thoraiyadyer.com>

Dragonfly Girl

by Chuck Wilkerson

Lily sprawled on the porch swing as only a ten year old could. One leg stretched over the armrest nearest the old farmhouse. The other leg hooked over the back, foot tapping the air to an unheard rhythm. Her head lolled just off the edge of the swing, above the book now resting on the porch.

A shimmering blue dragonfly darted near the posts, dipping toward the ground, dancing into the air. Lily's eyes followed the insect, admiring its aerobatics, imagining dancing on the warm summer breeze. The unyielding surface of the swing, the heat of the day, the smell of cooking from inside the house, all fell away.

She swung her legs up, around, and down, landing on the porch with a quiet thump. The dragonfly danced away, then drifted back, searching for prey. Lily could see others like it further out in the yard, flying and chasing. She walked into the yard, stirring up the shaggy, weedy grass with her steps.

Many of the tiny bugs hiding in the depths of the grass took wing, and the dragonflies arrowed toward her, feasting. Lily giggled, and walked, stirring up the grass until she decided she was hungry too.

When she entered the kitchen, her mother stood over a pot on the stove, stirring. The pleasant odors pushed the smells of grass and old leaves out of her nose.

"You must be hungry now, after all that marching."

"Marching?"

"In the yard, Lily. You looked like you were leading a parade."

Lily did not bother questioning how her mom saw what she was doing from a room away with her back to the door. Her mom always knew.

"I was talking to the dragonflies," Lily said as she gathered bread, butter, and jam for a sandwich.

"Talking to them? Are you sure?"

"Not talking like this. More like listening," Lily corrected, though listening was not the right word either. "No," she said before her mother spoke. "More like feeling. I felt what they felt."

"Hmm. And how did they feel?"

“Hungry. Watchful. Not scared of me at all.” Lily bit into the overstuffed sandwich. Her mother turned to her, wooden stirring spoon in hand.

“Do you have room to taste the sauce?” she asked, holding the spoon out toward her daughter.

“Mmm. Are we having it tonight?” Lily asked after her taste.

“Yes. Finish your sandwich and go see your grandpa.” She turned back to the stove. “And Lily, tell me what other things talk to you in this way, yes?”

“Sure, Mom,” Lily said. She wolfed the rest of her sandwich and chugged her milk in her hurry to visit her grandfather. She was sure he would know more about talking to dragonflies.

* * *

“Yellow jackets,” Lily said to her mother’s back, renewing the conversation as though two years had not passed. They stood in a different house, over a brand new stove, having moved to follow her father’s work. Her mom examined the contents of the skillet. Lily could smell chicken, vegetables, and herbs from the garden.

“Talking or feeling?”

Lily laughed. “Feeling, of course. Busy. Busy. Busy. Watchful.” Lily paused, lining up her words. Her mother valued thoughtfulness and precision in all things. “When I stared at a rotten apple they hadn’t found, a whole mob of them went right to it.”

“You think they heard you tell them about the apple?”

“Not in words. Now if I could tell them where that SOB Tommy McClemore is, maybe he’d quit calling me names at school.” Lily drew up, waiting for her mother’s reaction.

Her mother turned, as calm as ever. An expression of mild disappointment on her face. Lily stood her ground, not defiant, but not shrinking, trying to be her mother’s equal.

“And what have the yellow jackets done to deserve this?”

“What?”

“What do you think would happen if a swarm of hornets attacked your classmate?”

Lily bit back the obvious reply, and tried to think like her mom.

“People would freak out and start spraying everything with bug spray,” she answered. Her mother’s face softened and she wrapped her arms around Lily.

“Always think this way first, Lily,” she said as she released Lily from the embrace. “And don’t call people SOB.”

“Grandpa says it all the time!”

“He has earned that, and he says it to the newspaper or TV, but he doesn’t call people such ugly things. Now go. Tell him about the yellow jackets.”

Lily turned to leave, but then stopped and said, “Will Dad be home tonight?”

“Yes. Four days on, now three days off.”

Lily jumped and spun in the air. Her mother looked at her and laughed. “I would do that too, if I was a young girl like you!”

* * *

The hot sand felt good beneath her feet. They had moved again, following her dad’s new work out in the Gulf of Mexico. She missed the farm house, and the little ridgetop house before that. The little trailer they now called home was one of eight, clustered against the beach and sandwiched between towering condos.

She walked toward the road, a busy stretch of pavement lined with condos, houses, restaurants, and stores. There were also swaths of marshy ground, dunes, and pools, protected from development. Lily paused to slip on her flip flops, and crossed the scorching highway to walk along a strip of marsh.

Dragonflies swarmed around her. She had never seen so many in one place. Their jewel green bodies littered the ground beside the road, but even more of them filled the air around her.

Hungry, she knew. Hungry, hungry, hungry! The raw instinct translated somehow into a human thought and bounced around the inside of her head, uncontainable and unignorable.

“Okay!” she said, feeling silly the instant she said the word. She pushed that thought aside and filled her own mind with feelings of danger. In her imagination, legions of ants crawled, covering every bit of dry ground or foliage. Frogs poured into the ponds. Expanding schools of tiny fish flashed through the standing pools.

Every flying or leaping insect within two acres took flight. The dragonflies were waiting. Lily felt the hunger shift to satiation and the frenzy faded. She walked on, heading toward a run down building advertising the best seafood on the gulf.

Lily did not need extra senses to feel the eyes upon her as she picked up the few items her mother wanted. Often, she wished she could not intuit the raw feeling directed her way, however briefly.

In this, she had not yet consulted her mother, and would never breathe a word of it to her father or grandfather. Instead, she practiced disarming with a smile, deflecting with a gesture, and waited for the moment when she would encourage with a glance, and perhaps a thought.

The next day, Lily returned to marsh. The dragonflies had gone, but not far. She could see a cloud of them down the road a few hundred yards away. A few birds perched on stunted trees, or circled overhead. Although it looked no different than the marsh just a short distance away, the desolation of it took her breath away.

She fled, running as fast as she could and bursting through the screen door and straight into her mother.

“Good Lord, Lily! What in the world?” Her mother held her while Lily fumbled for the right words.

“Mama! I think I killed it! I killed them.” Lily pressed her face down into her mother’s shoulder and wept. When she had exhausted her tears, her mother was ready.

“What did you do?”

“I fed the dragonflies yesterday. They were so hungry and there were so many of them. And they knew. Somehow they knew. I just made all the little bugs in the grass jump up. And now today there’s nothing there but grass and a few birds!” Her voice cracked, and tears threatened again.

“Balance, Lily. You forgot balance. Do you understand?”

Lily looked at her mother, hoping to hear more reassurance. She shook her head. “No. I don’t understand.”

“No free lunch. Do you understand that? Action and reaction? Are they teaching you anything in that fancy school you go to?”

Her mother’s levity was better than reassurance. Lily’s panic dissolved and her brain started working again.

“They’ll come back? Just like after a hurricane?”

“Yes. What you must do is not be the hurricane. Never be the unbalancer if you can help it, Lily. Though sometimes, sometimes that is what is needed too.”

Lily looked at her mother, not really understanding. “I’ll go talk to Grandpa,” she said, beating her mother to the punch.

“You do that.”

Hours later, Lily found her mother sitting on the beach. The sun had settled behind the buildings to the west.

“We watched Spider-Man. The movie, you know?”

“Yes, Lily. I have been to the movies once or twice. And what did you learn?”

“Don’t get bitten by mutant spiders?”

“And?”

“Don’t make me say it, Mom.”

“You don’t believe it anyway. I wouldn’t make you say something you didn’t believe.”

Lily leaned in toward her mother. “It’s like a trick question, isn’t it? Grandpa just wanted to see if I’d grab some easy bit of fluff.

“I don’t know what to think, but I don’t think one sentence in a movie is going to enlighten me.”

“Depends on the movie, and the person.”

“You aren’t going to tell me, are you?” Lily said. Her mother offered no response. “Tell me who we are then. You never even blinked at any of the things I’ve said or done. No one in my class goes around listening to bugs!”

“That you know of. And you are listening to the earth, not just to bugs. Your father listens to the wind, and sometimes the waves. And I listen to hearts. And Grandpa, I’m not sure sometimes. He just seems to know things.”

Lily opened her mouth to argue, but remembered some of her mother’s other lessons before she could say a word. She sat back, elbows planted in the sand.

“We aren’t gods,” she said. Even from behind, she could see her mother’s satisfaction.

“You learned that lesson quicker than anyone else in our family.”

“So I’m not destined to wear tights and lead my bug legions to world conquest?”

“Probably not.”

“Good. I hate tights.” The sky was filling with color now as the sun set. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Do you really expect an answer, or are you just talking out loud?”

“It was worth a shot,” Lily said. “Because I really don’t get it.”

“I’ll tell you what I think, then, and you can make up your own mind. It’s enough to live a good life. Help others when you can. Use all your gifts, but they do not define you. Maybe the world will need you to accept greatness, or maybe making me a grandmother someday will be enough.”

Lily laughed and sat up. “There are some cute guys around here.”

“I said someday, not to-day.”

They sat, listening to the surf as the sky darkened over the water.

“Are you hungry?” Lily’s mother said. They stood and brushed sand from their skin and clothes. Holding hands they walked home.

“You already knew, didn’t you?” Lily asked.

Her mother squeezed her hand.

The End

Chuck is a long time reader of science fiction. After thinking about writing for a few years, he finally decided to jump in with both feet. Currently living in Huntsville, he is an electrical engineer by day. The support of his wife and children make writing possible for him.

Wanting More: A Publisher's Note

by Paul Clemmons

For as long as I can remember, I've heard folks complain about (and complained myself about) the limited viewpoints and limited opportunities for many writers in speculative fiction. Over the history of our genre, you can 'graph out' published SF works by race, sex, sexual identity, sexual preference, and cultural orientation with a relatively straight line. Over the past few years, this notion has been the topic of numerous articles, blog posts, flame-wars, and RaceFail09. Different ideas have been floated as to why only 'Blue-eyed He-Devils' from the UK or the USA have a disproportionate representation in SF. There are many factors that play into this, and not all of them are nefarious, and, while progress has been too slow for our tastes, there has been progress. Ultimately, I believe it is pretty simple: professional publishers are buying the product that they believe will make them the most money, and they tend to base these assessments upon past and current revenues.

Those of us that complain about limited choices in terms of stories may want to consider how we can impact what choices are available. My whinging on the internet has been fun, cathartic, and largely unproductive. Leading gripe-fests at 'cons' has gotten me a lot of free drinks over the years (usually provided by a self-appointed representative of the disenfranchised). That's all well and good, but what I believe has done the most to get me access to the sort of stories that I like is buying them, spreading the word, and encouraging others to do the same. The solution seems pretty simple; use your own money, and the money of whomever you can influence, to encourage more production of what you want to read. Start your own venture, financially support authors/sites that provide what you like for free, or purchase works that you like (directly from the authors, or from a vendor that is passing along a fair portion of the proceeds to the author). Borrowing, stealing, shopping second-hand bookstores, and reading for free online saves you money, but does nothing to encourage a greater production of what you like to read. I am not telling you not to do these things, but if this is how you obtain your reading materials, it seems a bit daft to bitch about not being able to find what you'd like to see in print (or e-pubbed).

If you like something that you've read, tell everybody that you know. Give copies as gifts. Get the word out, and get money flowing (well, maybe trickling) to the author that produced it.

At Redstone Science Fiction, we've been dedicated to publishing whatever the hell we want. Thus far, we've been wildly successful at that (our accountant might question our definition of wildly successful, but we aren't measuring our success in units of profit—which might even mean that we are part of the problem). The fact that Mike, Mary Ann, Tobermory, The Ferlie and I are not dependent on RSF for our livelihoods allows us to pick what we like without worrying overmuch about salability—we're only limited by what writers choose to submit, our ability to agree about what to buy, and our ability to generate enough cash flow to pay the writers a professional rate. Hopefully, this will lead to us getting to read more excellent stories, and getting exposure for those who write what we like to read. So far, so good.

We like to think that we've picked the best of the stories sent our way, but there are no delusions that we've picked them without bias. We have had slush-help from three continents and a variety of guidance, but primarily we are three gals, two guys, eight languages, and a whole lot of opinions. After setting criteria for what we'd choose to buy the rights to publish, we picked what we thought were the best stories that met those criteria. One of this month's stories, 'Dragonfly Girl', is an example of a story that doesn't exactly fit our guidelines, but is getting published anyway. Why? Because we like it, and we want to see more like it. 'White Lies', another of this month's stories, wasn't picked because Thoraiya Dyer satisfies our non-existent quotas for female and international writers. It was picked because we think it is amazing. We want more.

Several folks with whom I've sat down recently (including Joe & Gay Haldeman, Voltaire, Gene Wolfe, and Charles Tan) gave voice to the need for SF to be open to a variety of voices, and have done so much more eloquently than I could hope to do. The conversation about this has prompted us to measure ourselves. We will never choose a story just to have a member of 'Group Label X' listed on our authors' page. We'll never choose to buy a work solely because we need to run a story about a queer-identity dyslexic Buddhist robot to feel like we are 'the good guys' (not that we'd turn down a good queer-identify Buddhist robot story...take that as a challenge, if you'd like).

We do recognize that it is important to measure any process that you want to optimize. Our 'demographic' numbers:

Total number of published original works: 41

Total number of these that are written by:

females: 15

white American males: 13

those with citizenship other than U.S.A.: 15

% of submissions that are identifiably male: ~72% (when in doubt, we left 'em out)

% of submissions that include U.S.A. mailing addresses: 83%

I won't say that we are proud of these numbers, nor would we be proud of any set of demographic data. Rather, we are very pleased that we've been receiving excellent stories from a varied group of folks (and a lot of stuff we didn't want to buy from our American neighbors). We don't keep demographics on our readership, but, as you would expect, the vast majority of the web traffic comes from North America, the English-speaking bits of Europe, and Australia (my family in the Philippines gives us a bit of an Asian skew—mahal kita, guys!).

The past year has seen a dramatic increase in individuals across the globe stepping up and making their needs, desires, and demands known. We at RSF love the power of the individual, and individual-rights themes. These inspiring acts dwarf the importance of SF, but they can also serve as an example. We hope that SF readers world-wide decide to exert their influence to increase the production of works that they like, whether they find it in RSF or elsewhere.

A Conversation with Thoraiya Dyer

by Paul Clemmons

Thanks for taking the time to let our readers and our team learn more about you and your work. Mike and I love your story in this month's issue, "White Lies". Would you mind telling us about your inspiration?

My inspiration was a slew of people taking sick days off from work and then getting caught by their bosses on Facebook putting up photos of the fish they caught, the parties they went to, themselves skydiving or whatever. I thought: If people keep tweeting or status updating every thought and every moment of every day, they won't be able to lie at all anymore. Disaster! Hahaha.

My understanding is that you are a veterinarian. Does your work inspire your writing? What sort of animal protection endeavors are you associated, and how do you see the future of these issues, both in your native Australia and world-wide?

I think my degree gave me a really good scientific grounding (yes, they even made us do physics. Like I'll ever need to know how to build my own x-ray machine, haha) and the work has taught me so much about human-animal relationships, and about human nature in general, I think. It doesn't matter if you're the richest person in the world or the poorest, a dog's loyalty can bring you to tears, a cat's companionship can calm you and the sight of a smuggler's suitcase crammed with dead and suffocating birds can make you want to break something.

I'm not a vegetarian and I don't want to free all the lab animals (the rules regarding which are incredibly strict in this country, as they should be). But I want life to be as stress-less and pain-free for domesticated animals as it possibly can be (we are wielding our consumer power in this direction, I think, which is awesome), and I desperately want the preservation of biodiversity.

It is admirable to optimistically and manically try to save individually endangered species – if I had millions of dollars I would donate them towards efforts to save the Tasmanian Devil, the Ganges River dolphin, the New Zealand kakapo and others. But I think the most long-term useful thing to do is set aside areas where we humans simply aren't allowed to go, and that's why overpopulation keeps me awake at night.

Your website features some information on your pursuit of excellence in archery. Tell us about how this pursuit impacts other parts of your life, and who are your favorite archers of literature, legend and history?

Unfortunately, I haven't shot more than a few dozen arrows since the Small One was born. Thanks for the cruel and painful reminder of this gaping temporary hole in my life. (KIDDING!) Since I listed all my favourite archers on my website, I've read The Hunger Games trilogy, which I absolutely love, and Katniss Everdeen should go on my list. But if they get the archery wrong in the movie, I'll be the annoying one at conventions blowing it all out of proportion, haha.

You've mentioned before that you came to science fiction and fantasy, at least in part, through the influence of your mother. Have you been introducing your own off-spring to the genre? If so, what do they like?

The Small One is a huge fan of sci-fi and fantasy picture books like "Stella to Earth" by Simon Puttock and "Lettice and the Fairy Ball" by Mandy Stanley. She is fascinated by the Harry Potter concept, owns a small broomstick, pestered her father into making her a turned wooden wand, points at bald strangers from her perch in the shopping trolley and shouts, "that man looks just like Voldemort!" – but I've told her she's not allowed to read the books or see the movies until she is older.

Right now she is obsessed by the Dreaming Narrative series from Working Title Press. I expected her to find some of the plot twists of these Aboriginal stories distressing ("and then he changed into a stinging ant, and stung the monster on its lips until it clubbed itself to death, and then he changed into a man and threw the monster's dead body on the fire"! etc) but she thinks they are the BEST EVA.

Australia is known to have a thriving specific scene, but like many countries, there are good writers who have yet to acquire international recognition. Are there some Australian authors that you'd like to recommend to our international group of strangers?

A dangerous question. If I start, I might never stop. Here goes nothing.

If you love science fiction, you can't go wrong with "When We Have Wings" by Claire Corbett. If you love horror, Kaaron Warren is your woman. Paul Haines is your man. And you probably already know about Margo Lanagan. If you love fantasy, you must try Tansy Rayner Roberts, Pamela Freeman and Juliet Marillier; history buffs, see "The Priestess and the Slave," by Jenny Blackford.

Finally, if short stories are your thing, you might want to subscribe to the Twelve Planets series from Twelfth Planet Press, pick up "Tales from the Crypto-System" by Geoff Maloney, or hunt down everything ever published by Peter M Ball.

Tell us about "The Birds, the Bees, and Thylacine".

Haven't we all read science fiction stories where we go to an alien planet and destroy some innocent life form out of ignorance? (I can think of a good one I read just last week, "This Peaceful State of War" from WOTF 27, by Patty Jansen, who is another Redstone author).

Well. The extinction of the Tasmanian Tiger/thylacine is that story.

My imagination wanted to walk about in a wild world where thylacines could still be heard at dusk. The characters wandered out of the woods to go on that journey with me. The novelette is about extinction, but also about choices. Can you choose to be a pacifist in a world driven by natural selection without selecting yourself out of existence?

It seems that more and more people are catching on to your excellent writing and clever tales. This must be good for business. Tell us about what you have available (online, in print, etc.), what you've been working on, and what we can expect in the future.

Aww, shucks. Thank you. Really, ASIM #51 (in which “the Bird, the Bees and Thylacine” appears) is the best issue of Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine that I’ve had the pleasure of perusing. I understand international postage is scary, but just try it once, you won’t regret it, and you might even end up subscribing! (<http://www.andromedaspaceways.com/>)

“The Company Articles of Edward Teach,” a time-travelling pirate story which picked me up a couple of Aussie awards, is one half of a (pretty darn cool) novella double from Twelfth Planet Press (<http://www.twelfthplanetpress.com/store-items/the-company-articles-of-edward-teachangaelien-apocalypse>).

For free online fiction, see the left-hand column on the home page of my website (<http://www.thoraiadyer.com>); you can find links to my stories in Cosmos, Nature, Zahir and elsewhere.

In future, I’ll add the link to a story I’ve sold to Apex (<http://apex-magazine.com/>), which was an extremely squee-worthy moment, and also to a collection of my original fiction being published by Twelfth Planet Press (<http://www.twelfthplanetpress.com/>) as part of their Twelve Planets series. Huzzah!

Thank you for the opportunity to publish your excellent story, and we look forward to working with you again in the future.

Cheers!

A Conversation with Chuck Wilkerson

by Paul Clemmons

Your writing conjures very clear images, and is very engaging for the reader. How long have you been writing, and what can you tell us about the path that's brought you to this point?

I got the writing bug in college, but let it slide until I thought I was a grown up. I've been writing and working on improving my writing for the past five years.

Our team met you at a reading, and your 'performance' stood out from the crowd. Give us your thoughts on public readings and self-promotion. Do you have a background in theater or public speaking? Do you enjoy reading your work in public?

Despite a serious case of jitters, I really enjoyed reading that night, and hope to do it again, soon and often. The most public speaking I've done is project updates in staff meetings, which I don't think counts much as background.

Does your 'day job' inspire your fiction? If so, please tell us more. If not, please tell us where you get your inspiration.

Inspiration usually comes out of the blue and in the form of a question that starts with 'What if?' It may strike at any time, so I always keep a notebook close by.

Do you remember an 'Ah-HA' moment when you fell in love with science fiction and/or fantasy?

Absolutely! I was in the library in 6th grade and my best friend showed me a copy of 'The White Mountains' by John Christopher. I was hooked.

What can you tell us about the writers, works, or ideas that inspire your fiction?

People watching, science news, and the road not taken all contribute to my fiction. I think a fresh angle can always be found with the right twist or character.

Which is your favorite Trek series, and why?

Deep Space Nine. I liked the grittier and more combative nature of the story lines.

Where are other places that we can read your work? What are you working on now, and what can we expect from you in the future?

I'm working on a number of short stories. I still have a lot of learning to do and plenty of room for improvement and the short story submission and revision process has been a good way to work on that. I've outlined a novel and plan to start on that project later this spring.

Thanks for taking the time to do this.

Thank you for your interest.