InterText

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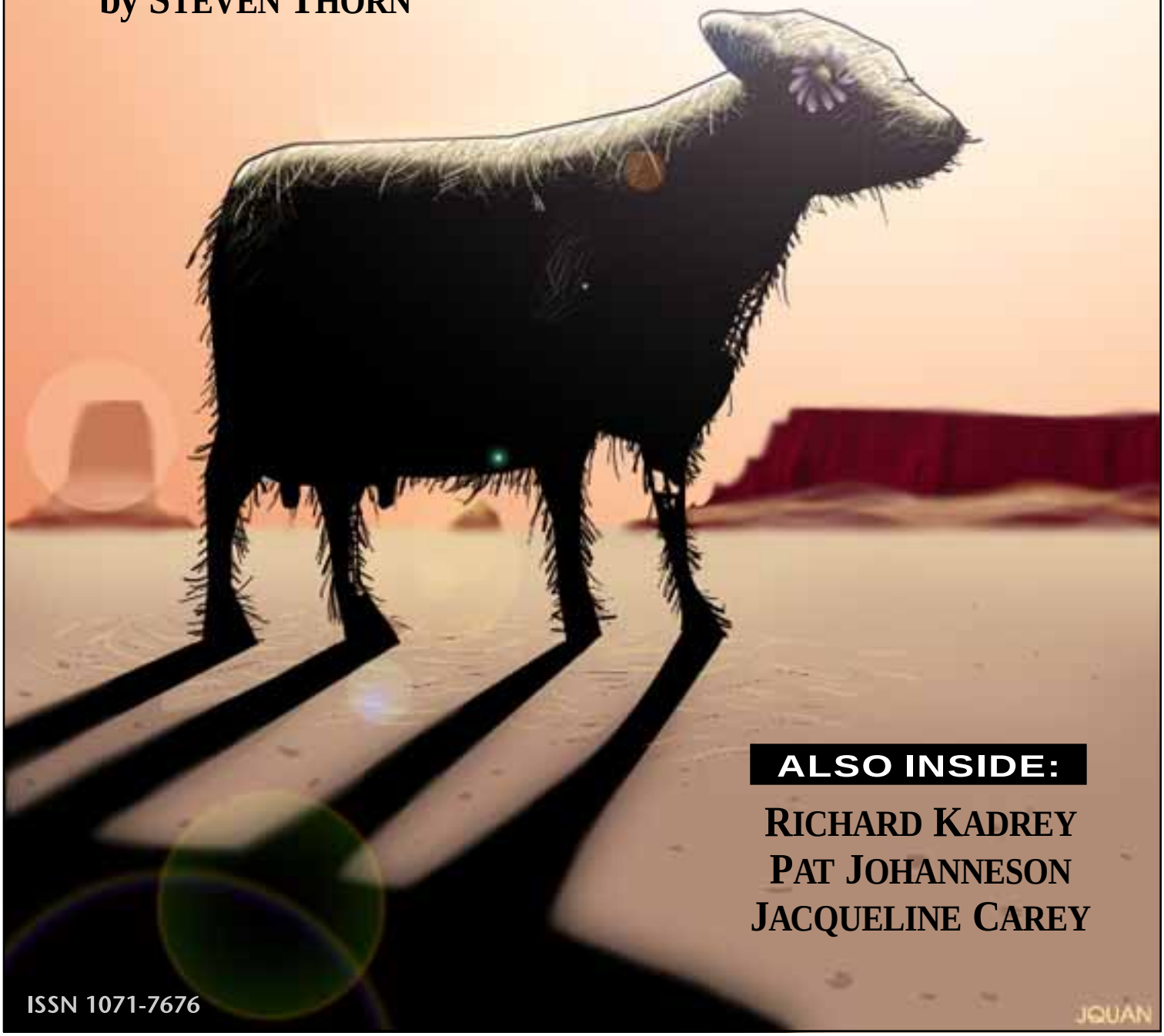
by STEVEN THORN



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JACQUELINE CAREY

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DEPARTMENTS

SHORT FICTION

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First Text

JASON SNELL

PHASE FOUR: INTERNET BACKLASH

I GREW UP IN A SMALL TOWN IN the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in Northern California. By *small* I mean that within the Sonora city limits there are about 3,000 people, and there are probably about 40,000 in all of Tuolumne County. Sonora is the county seat and the county's only incorporated city.

During my last visit to Sonora, upon entering the town and stopping at what was once the only stoplight in the entire county (there are now at least a half-dozen—the '90s haven't *quite* brought urban blight to Sonora, but they have introduced the dilemma of whether to speed up or slow down at a yellow light), I spotted a large sign in a storefront window: *Internet Access!*

It turns out that there are not one, but *two* Internet service providers in Tuolumne County, both offering e-mail and SLIP/PPP access to their customers at reasonable rates, even when compared to big-city providers. This, in the place where, in 1984, my best friend and I started the first BBS using a 300 baud modem, an Apple II+ and BBS software written in a few hundred lines of BASIC.

It was at this point that I really realized just how big the Internet has become. Yes, the flood of people who can now see the Web via America Online's web browser have shown that the Net (and especially the Web) is getting bigger, but the fact that two companies are competing in the tiny town of Sonora to provide the best direct Internet connectivity made more of an impression.

A long time ago, the Internet made the transformation from something nobody knew about to something everyone talked about, even if they didn't really understand what it meant. Now we're in the middle of phase three: just about everyone wants to get on the Net. Not on CompuServe, not on AOL—though those are certainly still good, inexpensive, easy options for online newcomers—but on the Internet itself. And by the end of the year, all the major online services will essentially be added-value service providers, offering standard Internet connectivity in addition to local forums and pay-as-you-go services like encyclopedias and news wires.

Get ready for phase four: Internet backlash. Porn aside, the Net's not all it's cracked up to be. Right now, the people back in Sonora are experiencing the heady feeling that comes with connecting to people all over the world. It's the same feeling I had when I took my first real plunge into the world of the Internet and of Usenet newsgroups.

But eventually, your view of the Net begins to mature, and things that once were exciting just because you were able to hold conversations with people you could never have talked to before end up becoming stale. You unsubscribe from newsgroups you once frequented because if you see one more flame war over the moral consequences of homosexuality or whether the *USS Enterprise* could beat up *Battlestar Galactica*, you'll be sick. You stop participating in the mailing list devoted to your favorite band because while everyone else is dissecting the same song lyrics for the third time, you've already said your piece. You realize that while the Net is a great place to find out useless information about your favorite TV shows and sports teams, it's not so hot when it comes to useful information like breaking news or full-text searches of magazine, newspaper, legal and business databases.

Of course, by the time the folks in Sonora and everywhere else have come to this point, those services will be available on the Net… for a price. But then they'll just feel angry, because they're already paying almost as much (if not more) as they do for cable TV just for their Internet dial tone. *Now you're asking me to pay more?* They'll ask.

We're now seeing stories of sex and degeneracy on the net, soon we'll probably see a slew of news articles and TV programs asking if the Net is really good for anything, I think at that point the Net will so big that no amount of backlash will be able to stop it. In the '60s, Newton Minow, then chairman of the Federal Communications Comission, said that television was "a vast wasteland," and it was. It still is. But it's still a controlling force in the lives of billions of people. And that's where the Net is headed. Right now, it's growing on the strength of discussions about *Star Trek*, but by the time we're sick of all that, it'll be indespensible. We'll be using it to make bank transactions, to shop at home, to keep in touch with countless friends and relatives, to stay on top of the latest news, to stay in contact with our colleagues.

So when *Newsweek* and *Time* say that the Net is the Next Big Thing, they're probably right, even though in the next two years, I'd lay money that both magazines will publish stories lamenting "the failure of the Internet." But by the time the Internet "fails," it'll be too late. It will have become part of our lives, and there will be no escape. We'll be trapped in a new vast wasteland. Like television, the Net will continue to be filled with wastes of time and incorrect information, as well as a lot that's useful. And like it or not, that sliver of usefulness that makes it indispensible will ensure its survival on into the 21st century.

Horse Latitudes

RICHARD KADREY

Amid the monkey shrieks and walking wounded of a San Francisco surrounded by rainforest, a dead man begins to explore the music of the Earth.

Excerpted from the novel Kamikaze L'amour *(St. Martin's Press, 1995); published in* Omni Best Science Fiction One *(Omni Books).*

FAME IS JUST SCHIZOPHRENIA WITH MONEY.

I died on a Sunday, when the new century was no more than four or five hours old. Midnight would have been a more elegant moment (and a genuine headline grabber), but we were still on stage, and I thought that suicide, like masturbation, might lose something when experienced with more than 100,000 close, personal friends.

I don't recall exactly when I accepted the New Year's Eve gig at Madison Square Garden; the band had never played one before, but it became inextricably tied in with my decision to kill myself. Somehow I couldn't bear the idea of a 21st century. Whenever I thought of it, I was overwhelmed by a memory: flying in a chartered plane over the Antarctic ice fields on my thirtieth birthday. A brilliant whiteness tinged with freezing blue swept away in all directions. It was an unfillable emptiness. It was death. It could never be fed or satisfied—neither the ice sheet nor the new century. At least, not by me.

No one suspected, of course. Throughout this crisis of faith, I always remained true to fame. I acted out the excesses that were expected of me. I denied rumors that I had invented. I spat at photographers, and managed to double my press coverage.

The suicide itself was a simple, dull, anticlimactic affair. The police had closed the show quickly when the audience piled up their seats and started a bonfire during our extended "Auld Lang Syne." Back in my room at the Pierre I swallowed a bottle of pills and vodka. I felt stupid and disembodied, like some character who had been written out of a Tennessee Williams play—Blanche Dubois' spoiled little brother. I found out later that it was Kumiko, my manager, who found me swimming in my own vomit, and got me to the hospital. When I awoke, I was in Oregon, tucked away in the Point Mariposa Recovery Center, where the movie stars come to dry out. There wasn't even a fence, just an endless expanse of lizard green lawn. Picture a cemetery. Or a country club with thorazine.

I left the sanitarium three weeks later, without telling anyone.

I went out for my evening walk and just kept on walking. The Center was housed in a converted mansion built on a bluff over a contaminated beach near Oceanside. I had, until recently, been an avid rock climber. Inching your way across a sheer rock face suspended by nothing but your own chalky fingers is the only high comparable to being on stage (death, spiritual or physical, being the only possible outcome of a wrong or false move in either place). It took me nearly an hour to work my way down the granite wall to a dead beach dotted with Health Department warning signs and washed-up medical waste. I checked to see that my lithium hadn't fallen out on the climb down. Then, squatting among plastic bags emblazoned with biohazard stickers, and scrawny gulls holding empty syringes in their beaks, I picked up a rusty scalpel and slit the cuffs of my robe. Two thousand dollars in twenties and fifties spilled out onto the gray sand.

Back in my room at the Pierre I swallowed a bottle of pills and vodka. When I awoke, I was in Oregon, tucked away in the Point Mariposa Recovery Center, where the movie stars come to dry out.

I left my robe on the sand, following the freeway shoulder in sweat pants and a t-shirt. In Cannon Beach I bought a coat and a ticket on a boat going down the coast to Los Angeles. My ticket only took me as far as San Francisco. We reached the city two days later, in the dark hours of the early morning. As we sailed in under the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco was aglow like some art nouveau foundry, anesthetized beneath dense layers of sea fog. Far across the bay, on the Oakland side, I could just make out the tangle of mangrove swamp fronting the wall of impenetrable green that was the northernmost tip of the rainforest.

Six weeks later, I left my apartment in the Sunset District and headed for a south of Market Street bar called Cafe Juju. A jumble of mossy surface roots, like cords from God's own patchbay, had tangled themselves in the undercarriages of abandoned cars on the broad avenue that ran along Golden Gate Park. Here and there hundred-foot palms and kapoks jutted up from the main body of the parkland, spreading their branches, stealing light and moisture from the smaller native trees. The Parks Depart-

ment had given up trying to weed out the invading plant species, and concentrated instead on keeping the museums open and the playgrounds clear for the tourists who never came any more.

Downtown, the corners buzzed with street musicians beating out jittery sambas on stolen guitars, and improvised sidewalk markets catering to the diverse tastes of refugees from Rio, Mexico City, and Los Angeles. Trappers from Oakland hawked marmosets and brightly plumed jungle birds that screamed like scalded children. In the side streets, where the lights were mostly dead, golden-eyed jaguars hunted stray dogs.

Overhead, you could look up and watch the new constellation: Fer-De-Lance, made up of a cluster of geosynchronous satellites. Most belonged to NASA and the UN, but the Army and the DEA were up there too, watching the progress of the jungle and refugees northward.

Inside Cafe Juju, a few heads turned in my direction. There was some tentative whispering around the bar, but not enough to be alarming. I was thinner than when I'd left the band. I'd let my beard grow, and since I had stopped bleaching my hair, it had darkened to its natural and unremarkable brown. As I threaded my way through the crowd, a crew-cut blonde pretended to bump into me. I ignored her when she said my name, and settled at a table in the back, far away from the band. "Mister Ryder," said the man sitting across from me. "Glad you could make it."

I shook the gloved hand he offered. "Since you called me that name so gleefully, I assume you got it?" I said.

He smiled. "How about a drink?"

"I like to drink at home. Preferably alone."

"Got to have a drink," he said. "It's a bar. You don't drink, you attract attention."

"All right, I'll have a Screwdriver."

"A health nut, right? Getting into that California lifestyle? Got to have your Vitamin C." He hailed a waitress and ordered us drinks. The waitress was thin, with close-cropped black hair and an elegantly hooked nose sporting a single gold ring. She barely noticed me.

"So, did you get it?" I asked.

Virilio rummaged through the inner recesses of his battered Army trenchcoat. He wore it with the sleeves rolled up; his forearms, where I could see them, were a solid mass of snakeskin tattoos. I couldn't be sure where the tattoos ended because his hands were covered in skin-tight black kid gloves. He looked younger than he probably was, had the eager and restless countenance of a bird of prey. He pulled a creased white envelope from an inside pocket and handed it to me. Inside was a birth certificate and a passport.

"They look real," I said.

"They are real," Virilio said. "If you don't believe me, take those down to any DMV and apply for a driver's license. I guarantee they'll check out as legit."

"It makes me nervous. It seems too easy."

"Don't be a schmuck. The moment you told me your bank accounts were set up with names from the *Times* obituaries, I knew we were in business. I checked out all the names you gave me. In terms of age and looks, this guy is the closest match to you."

"And you just sent to New York for this?"

"Yeah," Virilio said, delighted by his own cleverness. "There's no agency that checks birth certificates against death records. Then, I took your photo and this perfectly legal birth certificate to the passport office, pulled a few strings, and got it pushed through fast." From the stage, the Stratocaster cut loose with a wailing solo, like alley cats and razor blades at a million decibels over a dense batucada backbeat. I closed my eyes as turquoise fireballs went off in my head. "You never told me why you needed this," said Virilio.

"I had a scrape with the law a few years ago," I told him. "Bringing in rare birds and snakes from south of the border. Department of Fish and Game seized my passport."

Virilio's smile split the lower part of his face into a big toothy crescent moon. "That's funny. That's fucking hysterical. I guess these weird walking forests put your ass out of business."

"Guess so," I said.

The waitress with the nose brought our drinks and Virilio said, "Can you catch this round?" As I counted out the bills, Virilio slid his arm around the waitress's hips. Either she knew him or took him for just another wasted homeboy because she did not react at all. "Frida here plays music," said Virilio. "You ought to hear her tapes, she's real good. You ever play in a band, Ryder?"

"No," I said. "Always wanted to, but never found the time to learn an instrument." I looked at Frida the waitress and handed her the money. From this new angle I saw that along with her nose ring, Frida's left earlobe was studded with a half-dozen or so tiny jewelled studs. There were more gold rings just above her left eyebrow, which was in the process of arching. Her not unattractive lips held a suppressed smirk that could only mean that she had noticed me noticing her.

"That's interesting," Virilio said. "I thought everybody your age had a little high school dance band or something."

"Sorry."

Frida folded the bills and dropped them into a pocket of her apron. "They're playing some of my stuff before the Yanomamo Boys set on Wednesday. Come by, if you're downtown," she said. I nodded and said "Thanks."

As she moved back to the bar, I saw Virilio shaking his head. "Freaking Frida," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"Frida was okay. Used to sing in some bands; picked up session work. Now she's into this new shit." Virilio rolled his eyes. "She sort of wigged out a few months ago. Started hauling her tape recorder over to Marin and down south into the jungle. Wants to digitize it or something. Says she looking for the Music of Jungles. Says it just like that, with capital letters." He shrugged and sipped his drink. "I've heard some of this stuff. Sounds like a movie soundtrack, *Attack From the Planet Whacko,* if you know what I mean."

"You ever been into the rainforest?" I asked.

"Sure. I've been all up and down the coast. They keep 101 between here and L.A. pretty clear."

"L.A.'s as far south as you can get?"

"No, but after that, you start running into government defoliant stations, rubber tappers, and these monster dope farms cut right into the jungle. Those farms are scary. Mostly white guys running them, with Mexicans and Indians pulling the labor. And they are hardcore. Bloody you up and throw your ass to the crocodiles just for laughs."

"I may need you to do your name trick again. I have some money in Chicago—"

"Not anymore you don't. Not for two or three months. Nothing but monkeys, snakes and malaria out that way, from Galveston to Detroit. If you have any swamp land in Florida, congratulations. It's really a swamp." The kid took a sip of his beer. "Of course, I could do a data search, see where the Feds reassigned the assets of your bank."

"No never mind," I said, deciding I didn't particularly want this kid bird-dogging me through every database he could get to. "It's not that important."

Virilio shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, and shook his head wearily at the bare-breasted young woman who bumped drunkenly into our table. "Run, honey," he told her. "The fashion police are hot on your trail," as she staggered over to her friends at the bar. The local scene-makers had taken the heat as their cue to go frantically native; the majority of them were dressed in Japanese-imported imitations of Brazilian Indian gear. It was like some grotesque acid trip combining the worst of Dante with a Club Med brochure for Rio: young white kids, the girls wearing nothing but body paints or simple Lacandon hipils they had seen in some high school slide show; the boys in loin cloths, showing off their bowl-style haircuts, mimicking those worn by Amazonian tribesmen.

"The Santeros say that this shit, the jungle, the animals, all the craziness, it's all revenge. Amazonia getting back at all the stupid, greedy bastards who've been raping it for all these years."

"That's a pretty harsh judgement," I said. "Are you always so Old Testament?"

"You've got me all wrong. I'm thrilled. L.A.'s gone. They finally got something besides TV executives and mass murderers to grow in that goddamed desert." Virilio smiled. "Of course, I don't really buy all that mystical shit. The FBI are covering up for the people who are really responsible."

"The FBI?" I asked.

"It's true," Virilio said. "They hushed it up—same branch that iced Kennedy and ran the Warren Commission.

"A couple of geneticists who'd been cut loose from Stanford were working for the Brazilian government, cooking up a kind of extra fast-grow plants to re-seed all the burned-up land in the Amazon. Supposedly, these plants were locked on fast forward—they'd grow quick and die quick, stabilizing the soil so natural plants could come in. Only the bastards wouldn't die. They kept on multiplying, and choked out everything else. Six weeks after they planted the first batch, Rio was gone. It's all true. I know somebody that has copies of the FBI reports."

"The Santeros say the jungle, the animals, all the craziness, it's all revenge. Amazonia getting back at all the stupid, greedy bastards who've been raping it for all these years."

The band finished their set and left the stage to distracted applause. I stood and dropped a jiffy bag on Virilio's side of the table. "I've got go now. Thanks for the I.D.," I said. Virilio slipped some of the bills from the end of the bag and riffled through them. "Non-sequential twenties," I said, "just like you wanted."

He smiled and put the bag in his pocket. "Just to prevent any problems, just to short-circuit any second thoughts you might be having about why you should give a person like me all this money for some paper you could have gotten yourself, I want to make sure you understand that the nature of my work is facilitation. I'm a facilitator. I'm not a dealer, or muscle, or a thief, but I can do all those things, if required. What I got you wasn't a birth certificate; any asshole could have gotten you a birth certificate. What I got you was *the* birth certificate. One that matches you, close enough so that getting you a passport, letting you move around, will be no problem. I had to check over two years of obituaries, contact the right agencies, grease the right palms. It's knowing which palms to grease and when that you're paying me for. Not that piece of paper."

I slid my new identity into my jacket. "Thanks," I said.

Outside Cafe Juju, the warm, immobile air had taken on the quality of some immense thing at rest—a mountain or phantom whale, pressing down on the city, squeezing its Sargasso dreams from the cracks in the walls out onto the streets. I pulled out my emergency hip flask and took a drink. I was reminded of the region of windless ocean known as the Horse Latitudes, called that in remembrance of the Spanish galleons that would sometimes find themselves adrift in those dead waters. The crews would strip the ship down to the bare wood in hopes of lightening themselves enough to move in the feeble breeze. When everything else of value had been thrown overboard, the last thing to go were the horses. Sometimes the Horse Latitudes were carpeted for miles with a floating rictus of palominos and Arab stallions, buoyed up by the immense floating kelp beds and their own churning internal gases. The Horse Latitudes were not a place you visited, but where you found yourself if you allowed your gaze to be swallowed up by the horizon, or to wander on the map to places you might go, rather than where you were.

I'd walked a couple of blocks up Ninth Street when I realized I was being followed. It was my habit to stop often in front of stores, apparently to window shop or admire the beauty of my own face. In fact, I was checking the reflections caught in the plate glass, scanning the street for faces that had been there too long. This time I couldn't find a face, but just beyond a wire pen where a group of red-faced *campasenos* were betting on cock fights, I did see a jacket. It was bulky and black, of some military cut, and one side was decked with the outline of a bird skull done in clusters of purple and white rhinestones. The jacket's owner hung back where vehicles and pedestrians blocked most of the streetlight. It was only the fireworks in the rhinestones that had caught my eye.

Just to make sure it wasn't simple paranoia, I went another block up Ninth and stopped by the back window of a VW van full of caged snakes. When I checked again, the jacket had moved closer. I cut to my right, down a side street, then left, back toward the market. The jacket hung behind me, the skull a patch of hard light against the dark buildings.

I ran down an alley between a couple of closed shops and kept going, taking corners at random. The crumbling masonry of the ancient industrial buildings was damp where humidity had condensed on the walls. I found myself on a dark street where the warehouses were lost behind the blooms of pink and purple orchids. The petals looked like frozen fire along the walls. Behind me, someone kicked a bottle, and I sprinted around another corner. I was lost in the maze of alleys and drive-thru's that surrounded the rotting machine shops and abandoned wrecking yards. Sweating and out of breath, I ran toward a light. When I found it, I stopped.

It was a courtyard or a paved patch of ground where a building had once stood. Fires were going in a few battered oil drums, fed by children with slabs of dismantled billboards, packing crates, and broken furniture. Toward the back of the courtyard, men had something cooking on a spit rigged over one of the drums. Their city-issued mobile shelters, something like hospital gurneys with heavy-gauge wire coffins mounted on top, were lined in neat rows against one wall. I had heard about the tribal homeless encampments, but had never seen one before. Many of the homeless were the same junkies and losers that belonged to every big city, but most of the tribal people, I'd heard, were spillover from the refugee centers and church basements. Whole villages would sometimes find themselves abandoned in a strange city, after being forcibly evacuated from their farms in Venezuela and Honduras. They roamed the streets with their belongings crammed into government-issue snail shells, fading into a dull wandering death.

But it wasn't always that way. Some of the tribes were evolving quickly in their new environment, embracing the icons of the new world that had been forced on them. Many of the men still wore lip plugs, but their traditional skin stains had been replaced with metal-flake auto body paint and dime store makeup. The women and children wore necklaces of auto glass, strips of mylar, and iridescent watch faces. Japanese silks and burned-out fuses were twined in their hair.

Whatever mutual curiosity held us for the few seconds that I stood there passed when some of the men stepped forward, gesturing and speaking to me in a language I didn't understand. I started moving down the alley. Their voices crowded around me; their hands touched my back and tugged at my arms. They weren't threatening, but I still had to suppress an urge to run. I looked back for the jacket that had followed me from Cafe Juju, but it wasn't back there.

I kept walking, trying to stay calm. I ran through some breathing exercises a yoga guru I'd knew for a week in Munich had taught me. After a few minutes, though, some of the tribesmen fell away. And when I turned a corner, unexpectedly finding myself back on Ninth, I discovered I was alone.

On Market, I was too shaky to bargain well and ended up paying a gypsy cab almost double the usual rate for a ride to the Sunset. At home, I took a couple of Percodans and washed them down with vodka from the flask. Then I lay down with all my clothes on, reaching into my pocket to hold the new identity Virilio had provided me. Around dawn, when the howler monkeys started up in Golden Gate Park, I fell asleep.

I tried to write some new songs, but I had become overcome with inertia, and little by little lost track of

myself. Sometimes, on the nights when the music was especially bad or I couldn't stand the random animal racket from the park anymore, I'd have a drink, and then walk. The squadrons of refugees and the damp heat of the rainforest that surrounded the city made the streets miserable much of the time, but I decided it was better to be out in the misery of the streets than to hide with the rotten music in my room.

I was near Chinatown, looking for the building where I'd shared a squat years before, when I ran into a crowd of sleepwalkers. At first, I didn't recognize them, so complete was their impression of wakefulness. Groups of men and women in business clothes waited silently for buses they had taken the previous morning, while merchants sold phantom goods to customers who were home in bed. Smiling children played in the streets, dodging ghost cars. Occasionally a housewife from the same neighborhood as a sleepwalking grocer (because these night strolls seemed to be a localized phenomenon, affecting one neighborhood at a time) would reenact a purchase she had made earlier that day, entering into a kind of slow motion waltz with the merchant, examining vegetables that weren't there or weighing invisible oranges in her hand. No one had an explanation for the sleepwalking phenomenon. Or rather, there were so many explanations that they tended to cancel each other out. The one fact that seemed to be generally accepted was that the night strolls had become more common as the rainforest crept northward toward San Francisco, as if the boundary of Amazonia was surrounded by a region compounded of the collective dreams of all the cities it had swallowed.

I followed the sleepwalkers, entering Chinatown through the big ornamental gate on Grant Street, weaving in, out, and through the oddly beautiful group pantomime. The streets were almost silent there, except for the muted colors of unhurried feet and rustling clothes. None of the sleepwalkers ever spoke, although they mouthed things to each other. They frowned, laughed, got angry, reacting to something they had heard or said when they had first lived that particular moment.

It was near Stockton Street that I heard the looters. Then I saw them, moving quickly and surely through the narrow alleys, loaded down with merchandise from the sleepwalkers' open stores. The looters took great pains not to touch any of the sleepers. Perhaps they were afraid of being infected with the sleepwalking sickness.

Watching them, cop paranoia got a hold of me, and I started back out of Chinatown. I was almost to the gate, dodging blank-eyed Asian children and ragged teenagers with armloads of bok choy and video tapes when I saw something else: Coming out of a darkened dim sum place—a jewelled bird skull on a black jacket. The jacket must have spotted me too, because it darted back inside. I followed it in.

A dozen or so people, mostly elderly Chinese couples, sat miming silent meals inside the unlit restaurant. Cats, like the homeless, had apparently figured out the pattern the sleepwalking sickness took through the city. Dozens of the mewing animals moved around the tables, rubbing against sleepers' legs, and licking grease off the stacked dim sum trays. I went back to the kitchen, moving through the middle of the restaurant, trying to keep the sleepers around me as a demilitarized zone between me and the jacket. I wasn't as certain of myself inside the restaurant as I had been on the street. Too many sudden shadows. Too many edges hiding between the bodies of the dreaming patrons.

There were a couple of aproned men in the kitchen, kneading the air into dim sum. Cats perched on the cutting tables and freezer like they owned the place. Whenever one of the sleepwalking cooks opened the refrigerator doors, the cats went berserk, crowding around his legs, clawing at leftover dumplings and chunks of raw chicken. There was, however, no jacket back there. Or in the restroom. The rear exit was locked. I went back out through the restaurant, figuring I'd blown it. I hadn't had any medication in a couple of weeks, and decided I'd either been hallucinating again, or had somehow missed the jacket while checking out the back. Then from the dark she said my name, the name she knew me by. I turned in the direction of the voice, and the jewelled skull winked at me from the corner.

I followed the sleepwalkers, entering Chinatown through the big ornamental gate on Grant Street, weaving in, out, and through the oddly beautiful group pantomime.

I had walked within three feet of her. She was slumped at a table with an old woman, only revealing herself when she shifted her gaze from the tablecloth to me, doing a good imitation of the narcotised pose of a sleeper. She motioned for me to come over and I sat down. Then she pushed a greasy bag of cold dim sum at me. "Have one," she said, like we were old friends.

"Frida?" I said.

She smiled. "Welcome to the land of the dead."

"Why were you following me?"

"I was raiding the fridge." She reached into the bag and pulled out a spring roll, which she wrapped in a paper napkin and handed to me. As she moved, I caught a faint glimmer off the gold rings above her eyebrow. "You, I

believe, were the one who only seconds ago was pinballing through here like Blind Pew."

"I'll have my radar checked. Do you always steal your dinner?"

"Whenever I can. I'm only at the cafe a couple of nights a week. And tips aren't what they used to be. Even the dead are peckish around here."

The old woman with whom we shared the table leaned from side to side in her chair, laughing the fake, wheezing laugh of sleepers, her hands describing arcs in the air. "So maybe you weren't following me tonight," I said. "Why did you follow me the other night from Cafe Juju?"

"You remind me of somebody."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Your face doesn't belong here. But I don't know where it should be, either. I know I've seen you before. Maybe you're a cop and you busted me. Maybe that's why you look familiar. Maybe you're a bad guy I saw getting booked. Maybe we went steady in the third grade. Maybe we had the same piano teacher. Ever since I saw you at the cafe, I've got all these maybes running through my head."

"Maybe you've got me mixed up with someone."

"Not a chance," said Frida. She smiled and in the half-light of the restaurant I couldn't tell if she knew who I was or not. She didn't look crazy, but she still scared me. I'd gone to the funeral of more than one friend who, walking home, had turned a corner and walked into his or her own Mark David Chapman. Frida's smile made her look strangely vapid, which surprised me because her eyes were anything but that. Her face had too many lines for someone her age, but there was a kind of grace in the high bones of her cheeks and forehead.

"You're not a cop or a reporter, are you?" I asked.

Her eyes widened in an expression that was somewhere between shock and amusement. "No. Unlike you, I'm pretty much what I appear to be."

"You're a waitress who tails people on her breaks."

She shrugged and bit into her spring roll, singing, "Get your kicks on Route 66."

"Now you're just being stupid, " I said. "Virilio didn't tell me that part. He just said you were crazy."

"Did he say that?" She looked away and her face fell into shadow. I leaned back, thinking that if she was crazy, I might have just said the thing that would set her off. But a moment later she turned back, wearing the silly smile. "Virilio's one to talk, playing Little Caesar in a malaria colony." She picked up a paper napkin from the table and, with great concentration, began wiping her hands, a finger at a time. Then she said: "I'm looking for something."

"The Music of Jungles?"

"Jesus, did he tell you my favorite color, too?"

"He just told me it was something you'd told him."

"Red," she said and shrugged. "I *am* looking for something. But it's kind of difficult to describe."

"California is on its last legs. If you want to play music, why don't you go to New York?"

She reached down and picked up a wandering cat. It was a young Abyssinian, and it immediately curled up in her lap, purring. "What I'm looking for isn't in New York," she said. "I thought from your face you might be looking for something, too. That's why I followed you."

"What is the Music of Jungles?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. I think I made a mistake."

I slid the hip flask from my pocket and took a drink. "Tell you the truth, I am looking for something, too."

"I knew it," she said. "What?

"Something new. Something I've only seen in flashes. A color and quality of sound that I've never been able to get out of my head. I started out looking for it, but got distracted along the way. I figure this is my last chance to see if it's really there, or just another delusion."

"You're a musician?" she asked.

"Yes."

She picked up the flask, sniffed, and took a drink, smiling and coughing a little as the vodka went down. "What's your name?" she asked.

"You already know my name."

"I know a name," she said, setting down the flask. "Probably something store bought. Maybe from Virilio?"

I shrugged and took the flask from her. "Your turn. What's the Music of Jungles?"

She looked down and leaned back in her chair, stroking the cat.

"First off, " she said, "it's not the Music of Jungles. Jungles are in Tarzan movies. What you're trying to describe is a tropical forest or a rainforest. I don't use rainforest sounds in my music because I think they're beautiful, although I do think they're beautiful," she said. "I use them because they're the keys to finding the Songtracks of a place."

Frida set the cat on the floor and leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. "Here's what it is," she said, "Some of the tribal people in Amazonia believe that the way the world came into existence was through different songs sung by different gods, a different song for each place. The land, they believe, is a map of a particular melody. The contours of the hills, the vegetation, the animals—they're notes, rests and rhythms in the song that calls a place into being, and also describes it. Over thousands of years the Indians have mapped all the songs of Amazonia, walked everywhere and taught the songs to their children.

"Where we are now, though, is special," Frida said, and she drew her hands up in a gesture that took in all of our surroundings. "The forest that surrounds San Francisco, it's Amazonia, but it's new. And it has its own unique Songtrack. That's what all my music is about. That's what I'm all about. No one has found the song of this part of Amazonia yet, so I'm going to find it," she said.

"When you find it, what will the song tell you?" I asked.

She shrugged, pressing her hands deep into the pockets of her jacket. "I don't exactly know. Maybe the story of the place. What went on here in the past; what'll happen in the future. I don't know exactly. It's enough for me just to do it."

I put the flask in my pocket. "Listen, Frida," I said. "The atmosphere in here is definitely not growing on me. Would you like to go someplace?"

"I don't live too far away." She paused and said, "Maybe I could play you some of my music."

"I'd like that," I said. As she stood she said, "You know, you managed to still not tell me your name."

I looked at her for a moment. An old man shuffled between us, nodding and waving to sleeping friends. I thought about the Music of Jungles. Was this woman insane, I wondered. I'd been dreaming so long myself, it hardly seemed to matter. I told her my real name. She hardly reacted at all, which, to tell you the truth, bothered me more than it should have. She picked up a bulky purse-sized object from the floor and slung it over her shoulder, looped her arm in mine, and led me into the street.

"This is a digital recorder," she said, indicating the purse-thing.

"I go to Marin and Oakland whenever I can; fewer people means I get cleaner recordings. I prefer binaural to stereo for the kind of work I do. It has a more natural feel."

"Teach me to use it?" I asked.

"Sure. I think you can handle it."

"Why do I feel like I just passed an audition?"

"Maybe because you just did."

In the quivering light of the mercury vapor lamps, the activity of the Chinatown looters was almost indistinguishable from the sleeping ballet of children and merchants.

RICHARD KADREY

Was the Senior Editor at Future Sex *from 1993 through 1994. He is the author of two novels,* Metrophage *(Ace, 1988) and* Kamikaze L'Amour *(St. Martin's Press, 1995), as well as the non-fiction* Covert Culture Sourcebook *(St. Martin's Press, 1993; version 2.0, 1994). His work has appeared in* Omni, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Wired, Mondo 2000, Interzone, *and many other publications.*

Chronicler

PAT JOHANNESON

"He gets involved in his stories" is usually a high compliment to a journalist. But "He becomes part of the story" is an insult. The line between the two can be as sharp as a razor.

I SHIFTED A LITTLE BIT, ENOUGH TO GET SOME FRESH blood down to my feet. They'd gone numb, so numb I'd forgotten about them, down there in my ancient high-top Reeboks. Now they came back, first with that weird fizzy feeling like when you put your hand over a freshly-poured glass of 7-Up, and then a sparkling pain, pins and needles, the pain of fresh blood washing out the fatigue poisons or whatever it is. The science editor explained it to me once, but I wasn't really paying attention.

I hate this city. It disgusts me, that something like the Zone can exist in a theoretically civilized world.

I suppose that, hating the city, hating the Zone, I should by extension loathe myself, but I don't. The way I see it, hating myself for what the world has made me is a cheap excuse to climb onto the accelerating downward spiral of drinking.

No, I don't hate myself. Even if I am a vulture.

SOMETIMES I WONDER WHAT THE KID'S REAL NAME IS, the one who keeps calling me. He tells me his name is Lupus Yonderboy, but I know that's not it because that's the name of a minor character in a book I read a few years ago. I wonder if Lupus read that book. There was one time there when he didn't call me for about four months, and I started wondering if maybe he'd been one of the dead-and-dying left there bleeding. Then he called again, and when I picked up the phone his voice was a little bit deeper. "Jack?"

I recognized the voice and automatically slipped into our pattern, created on our first conversation and never strayed from since. I said, "Yo?"

"Lupus."

"Yeah."

"Fourth and Mason."

"Yeah."

"2 A.M. Hasta la vista, baybee."

I wanted, that time, to ask him where he'd been, but there was a dry click and dial tone.

TONIGHT WAS NINTH AND KRUGUER, 3 A.M. I SHIFTED again, 7-Up on my calves now, and touched the pad on my watch.

`02:42`

I always come two hours early, always on foot. If they ever see me, they never let me know. Maybe the camera bag is my white flag of truce, my ticket of safe passage.

Maybe they don't know about me, but I think they do. My neck hairs can feel their eyes on me, just out of my range of vision, in the dark under a dark sky.

`02:49` in dark seven-segment numerals against the pale blue glow. I always do this, in the last twenty minutes or so. Check my watch every couple minutes, wondering where the hell they are. It's a twisted kind of anxiety, kind of like a vulture waiting for an animal to die, and I really prefer not to think about it. This way lies madness. Or at least booze, and I'm not about to get back into drinking.

Downward spiral, get thee back.

`02:51`

I GROUND MY CIGARETTE OUT ON THE WALL BESIDE me, then looked out the window. Nothing but dark street, the glitter of a full moon glinting off smashed windows in dead buildings. Where the hell *were* they? Maybe they were out there and I just couldn't see them. I'd trashed my night vision smoking that cigarette, and it was still rebuilding. Should've closed one eye.

I check my watch every couple minutes, wondering where the hell they are. It's a twisted kind of anxiety, kind of like a vulture waiting for an animal to die.

I shifted again—feet—and pulled open the "soundless" Velcro closure of the camera case. It made a sound, but in the tomb-quiet of the abandoned tenement, my *breathing* was loud.

I grabbed the camera and hoisted it out, brought it up to my face. My thumb found the power stud on the light-amp hood by memory, and I was looking at the crossroads of Ninth Street and Kruguer Way by green daylight.

Nothing. No one. A framework of rust that had probably been a Camaro, up on blocks. One of the cinderblocks had collapsed and the ex-Camaro was now tilted, the right front wheelwell on the sidewalk. Ruined buildings, some blackened by fire. Cracked and busted asphalt.

I thumbed the switch again and it was all gone.

`02:55`

RACHEL CALLED ME A VULTURE WHEN I TOLD HER about Lupus, which was after the third call. That was

when she was my wife instead of some woman who happens to have the same last name as me. I never figured that one out, why she kept my name.

"Where were you last night?" she asked, that morning three years ago.

"Out. Lupus called."

"Lupus?"

I didn't want to tell her, but I also didn't want to lie to her. She wasn't happy when I told her how Lupus had been calling me when there was a battle coming, and she *really* didn't like it when she wormed it out of me that I'd been in the Zone.

"You could have been killed," she'd said, and I didn't have any kind of reply to that. But then she asked me how old I figured Lupus was, and when I said fifteen maybe, her eyes went all hard and she said, "Jack, you're a vulture." Then she got up and started to get dressed.

When I touched her shoulder at breakfast, standing behind her chair, she shrugged my hand off and my stomach just fell.

It's a weird irony that she got the divorce when she did. All those years while I was busy killing myself, she stuck with me, but then when I got off the booze she walked out because I took pictures of people getting killed. Maybe she liked cleaning me up when I shit myself, but I don't think so.

I think she blamed me for the Zone, the war going on there. The children dying every few days in skirmishes and battles at the core of the city. The war's been there for fifteen years but it's my fault. My fault, even though I'm not a general, not a combatant, but only the war's chronicler.

02:59 AND I HEARD A SOUND, A CLICK, BOOTHEEL ON pavement.

Brought the camera up and thumbed the switch. Green daylight.

Forty of them, give or take. About half in longcoats with no sleeves, no shirts on underneath, muscles rippling. The rest were in no particular uniforms but they all wore white cloth strips around their right wrists. I'd seen these two gangs go at it before, a couple months ago. All of them were packing: Uzis, pistols, a couple sawed-off shotguns, you name it. One guy with a cloth bracelet had a machete strapped to his back and a .30-06 in his hands. The strap for the machete doubled as an ammunition bandolier.

They sometimes have a weird version of the Geneva Convention in the Zone, and occasionally some rules of engagement. The two groups just glared at each other for a few seconds, and then—at 02:59:30 by my watch—they scattered.

03:00:00 brought gunfire and screams.

IT'S KIND OF LIKE BEING A WAR CORRESPONDENT, really, only less and more frightening at the same time.

Less frightening because, at least instead of being alone in some foreign land, I'm in my own city.

More frightening because *I'm in my own city.*

You never get cops down here. People living near the Zone have gotten hardened to the sounds of war. Of kids, screaming and killing and dying. Gunshots. I wonder sometimes why I bother to take the pictures anymore.

While I wonder, my index finger does the work for me.

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Instants frozen in time:

…A Longcoat firing a .357 Magnum, the flash from the pistol overwhelmingly bright in the light-amplified photo, a round ball of glare blotting out most of the gun.

…A long-haired White Bracelet sliding down a wall, mouth slack, leaving a trail of shiny darkness.

…The guy with the machete, grinning insanely as his blade cleaves a Longcoat's forearm, the fingers still clutching an Uzi as the meat falls to the ground.

…A White Bracelet lying in the street with no face.

…The guy with the machete standing with a great dark cloud coming out of his back, the flash still fading from the pistol held by the Longcoat who has just shot him at near point-blank range. The guy with the machete is still grinning like a berserker. I watched him as his knees buckled and he collapsed to the blood-wet pavement.

…A Longcoat crouched behind the tilted hulk of the Camaro, reloading his pistolized eight-gauge pump.

…and so many more, black-and-white photos, grainy with light amplification, taken from a third-story window in a condemned tenement in the heart of the Zone.

A vulture and his camera.

AND IN THE MIDDLE OF IT ALL I SAW LUPUS.

It had to be him. The way I'd imagined him, talking to his voice on the phone. *There*—blond hair to his shoulders, cloth bracelet white against the skin of his wrist, everything tinged green by the light-amp hood. He shot three while I watched, forgetting to take pictures, one in the throat—dead—one in the chest—dead—the third taking the bullet high and a gout of blood from his shoulder—running. Lupus. Yes, it had to be him. I knew that, just this weird intuitive certainty.

And I knew I had to meet him.

03:34 AND IT WAS ALL OVER. USUALLY WHAT I'D DO was wait at least an hour before leaving, just in case, but this time—

Well, I *had* to meet him. Had no idea *how*, but I decided I'd think of something.

I popped the image chip out of the camera and hid it in the little pouch in my jeans, in the back of the knee, sealed the soundless Velcro. Packed the camera and hoisted the case, stood up and let the new blood do its work, pins and needles all down my legs. `03:40` and I was out the broken doorway, down the stairs, and out onto the street, where the dead and dying lay silent or moaning. Soon other, more dangerous vultures would be out: the ghouls, pall-bearers of war night in the Zone. I didn't want to be anywhere near Ninth and Kruguer when *they* showed up.

I got about a block and a half down Ninth, headed west, the way the White Bracelets had gone, when something heavy and hard hit the back of my head.

There was a brief, intense light show…

…AND I WAS GAGGING, SPUTTERING, COLD STALE water in my sinuses, my face.

"Wake *up,* wake *up,* we want you a*wake* fer this—"

"W…" I said, then gagged again. Whoever it was quit pouring water in my face.

"Hey, mutha*fuck*a," said a voice, "where you get a toy like this?" I looked towards the voice and it was Lupus, dangling my camera. They doubled back, I thought, like that was going to help me. "Nice fuckin' toy," said Lupus, in a voice that wasn't his, and I realized then the terrible mistake I'd made. He grabbed the camera by its case, both hands, and hurled it into the paved ground. I heard glass shatter, the multitude of lenses trashed, and a piece bounced up again, high as not-Lupus's waist. The light-amp hood. "Now it's shit."

"Hey," I said, starting to roll, to get up, and faster than that the other guy was on me, knee on my chest, something sharp at my throat.

"Tell'm what we gonna do, Skull," said not-Lupus.

"What we gonna *do,"* said Skull, "yeah, is we gonna take you a*part,* my man. You come in here, man, comin' deeper into our Zone, you ain't fuckin' *wel*come here, so we gonna take you the fuck a*part.* Slow." He grinned. "An' you stay alive, man, for hours and fuckin' *hours.* 'Cuz we start with your feet."

Not-Lupus laughed and stooped down and showed me something made of shiny steel. A scalpel. It glinted in the moonlight. "Gonna *start,"* said not-Lupus, "with your *fuck*in'," and right then there was a spray of something warm on my face and the knee was gone from my chest, the knife from my artery, and two gunshots and not-Lupus was on his back screaming, I was standing, Skull was dead with a huge hole punched in the middle of his forehead, not-Lupus was screaming screaming screaming a raw thick high girl-wail that went on and on and on and on there was something gray and shredded hanging out of his flayed belly in a long obscene loop I turned and a huge dark fist hit me in the face drove me to my knees my nose was bleeding and through a haze of pain I watched the black guy in the sleeveless longcoat stride (click of bootheels angry on pavement) to not-Lupus and point a pistol, shoot him one more time in the face and not-Lupus finally quit screaming.

Then the black guy came over and grabbed me by the back of my jacket, hauled me to my feet. I saw not-Lupus with a hole right between the eyes and a dark puddle around his head starting to stain his blond hair to red.

"Are you Jack?" the black guy said, conversationally. I knew that voice.

"Why'd you—" I couldn't say it, couldn't say *kill.* I have no idea why.

"Gutshot. Can't leave a man to die like that. You Jack?"

I nodded. The guy was maybe eighteen. Maybe.

"Lupus. How'd you get so fuckin' stupid, Jack?"

"I thought—"

"Why the fuck didn't you stay put? You always did before."

"I—"

"No," he said. "Don't bother. Just get out."

"What?"

"Get the *fuck* out of the *Zone.* Go."

"Lupus," I said, "thanks."

"You're welcome. Run."

I ran.

I HAVEN'T GOTTEN A CALL FROM LUPUS IN EIGHT months now. I don't expect to anymore.

I've been moved to the science section—I have an undergrad degree in physics, after all—and I'm doing fine there. No more nightmares. Well, not so many anymore, anyways.

And on the nights when the faint sound of gunfire comes to me over the four miles separating my place from the Zone, I call the cops.

One of these days they'll go in there. Maybe then we can start reclaiming the Zone.

PAT JOHANNESON

Lives in Brandon, Manitoba, Canada, where he works as a computer operator at Brandon University.

Bludemagick

JACQUELINE CAREY

Faith and belief are things we learn—no matter how tightly we shut our eyes, reality always shimmers at the edge of our vision.

THE MAJOR HAD KILLED HER ROOSTER. THAT WAS what, after she had scrubbed away his seed all sticky with dirt and someone's blood mixed in it, hardened her heart. Brave rooster. He'd come at the major rattling his feathers like spears, red eyes glaring, spurs cocked like Le Diable's horns. But the major had two quick hands, to grab and give a scrawny, feathered neck one sharp twist and hurl the limp bundle away.

That was the star by which she would set her course; poor Tio Noche, a ragged bundle of black feathers held together by bone and scrawn.

Clever major, but there was such a thing as being too clever. All roosters were sacred to Oudun Redeye, and Tio Noche especially. He'd been dedicated. Sabada was no fool. She'd saved the scrap of cloth she'd used to wipe off the major's seed, and now she tied it around one of Tio Noche's stiff, skinny legs to make him remember. She drew a circle of flour around the rooster, then sprinkled its body with Spirit-Stay-Put powder.

She would need a drummer, that was one thing, and it had best be done tonight. Otherwise Tio Noche would start to forget and not be angry any more. Sabada tied a bright scarf about her head and sallied forth.

Christophe was sitting in the morning sun, carving on a half-finished totopo with its butt end anchored between his feet. He gave her a sidelong look.

"Heard you yellin' last night, girl. Saw a man leave." Christophe was no vodu-guru, but he knew things on account of what the wood told his hands while he carved. "My Gina tell me she hear that major-fella trade for three bottles of rum yesterday."

Three bottles, and he'd only brought one. Sabada spat in the dust like a viper. "He come by 'bout moonrise. Ask me to read the cartas for him, look in the candle flame."

"I said it before, your mama should've seen you handfast afore she died." He spoke mildly, but the astropo he wielded by its double handles flashed in the sun, broad, thin wood-shavings curling in its wake. "You ought to know better than to believe them that come asking after vodu readings and isn't born Izladoran."

"He said," Sabada said fiercely. "The candle and the cartas."

"Never trust no man bringin' rum." Christophe's face was stubborn. Ripe, rounded, double curves took shape beneath the blade of the astropo; La Dama, who the women called Lady-have-pity and the men called Swaying Hips.

"He killed Tio Noche. I'll fix him for that."

"Well." Even Christophe knew the major had no call to be doing that. "You be careful, girl. You think about usin' the bludemagick, you be careful."

Sabada looked at the hard, red rage in her heart and avoided responding. She drew a line in the dirt with the hard heel of one foot.

"Well," said Christophe finally. "He shouldn't have killed the rooster." The girl had set her course and he held no sway to turn her. He watched her walk away, then spit in his hands and offered a quick prayer to Bon Dieu Bon to keep her safe; not that he carried much sway with Bon Dieu Bon either. His Gina'd come out to hang the wash and she caught his eye, shook her head.

SHE WAS A HEADSTRONG ONE, SABADA WAS, AND proud enough of it. Not long a woman, but she had a mean temper when crossed. Christophe's Gina said once that La Fria must've spit in her eye the day she was born and today Sabada thought with satisfaction that it might be so. She stood with her fists on her hips and stared up Mont Peligra at the village Millie Tarries nestled in a gorge. The major lived there, him and other mericanos, soldiers and sailors and who knew what. They felt safe there—safe, Bon Dieu Bon, in the shadow of Tarry-no-more! Many an' many of them that wasn't born Izladoran had made that leap, from the peak of Tarry-no-more straight into the arms of old Papa Bones.

She stood with her fists on her hips and stared up at the village Millie Tarries nestled in a gorge. The major lived there, him and other mericanos, soldiers and sailors and who knew what.

"He Mister Highstepper," Sabada murmured. "Ain't no wall tall enough to keep him out. You watch out, major. You wake up and find Mister Highstepper a-knockin' on your door."

She made her way down to the sea and sought out King Jambo, finding him mending his net on the shore. He looked up when her shadow fell over him, flashing a white, white smile.

"Miz Sabada, you lookin' as bright and pretty as bouganvillea. What bring you down 'mong all these smelly fishnets?"

"Looking for a drummer, King."

"Holdin' a fete galante, Miz Sabada?"

"Bludemagick."

King's sunny face darkened. "Who done what, girl?"

"The major, he force me. He trick me. And he kill my Tio Noche."

"Oo-wee, Miz Sabada! You don' say. I be there 'bout sundown. Do you some righteous drummin', catch old Brother Blood's ear."

"We do that, King."

WILLIE HANDELMAN WAS SITTING UNDER THE EAVES on the Club's porch, playing cards with Private Macauley, and he let out a long whistle when the major walked up. "Looks like she hoodooed you but good, major!"

"Shut your mouth, Willie," the major said. He was the only major on the base, on the whole of the island, and proud of it. There had been a naval lieutenant, but he was gone now. It was what you'd expect. The officers never lasted long. "Who's manning the radio?"

Willie looked at Private Macauley, who shrugged and shifted his cud of coca leaves to the other cheek.

"Neevil, or Harris, I reckon," the private said. He squinted at the sun. "T'ain't my shift. You oughta put you some asafoetida on them scratches, major."

"I've washed them already, private."

"Them's nail tracks, they fester real easy. You'll be wantin' a good root and leaf man for that," Willie said helpfully. "My gal Jessamine, her brother's fixin' to be a feuille docteur."

"I'll let you know if I need the services of an herbalist," the major said sourly, and pushed his way through the saloon doors into the dark of the Club.

"Hair of the dog, major! Best thing for it," Willie called after him.

"Likes of him won't listen," said Macauley, and shifted his cud again.

"Nope."

"Workin' at that radio seven year now. Ain't nobody ever gonna answer."

"I reckon not. You ever hear anything on it?"

"Heard, sure. One time I even heard 'em comin' outta Cape Cannibal; in Florida, you know? Thumbed that mike till I blistered raw. You?"

"Reckon I have. Merican Airliner. Cuba, even; it ain't so far. Same thing's you. Blistered my thumb, hollered myself hoarse."

Macauley snorted with laughter. "Transmitter's probably been broke since before we went down."

"Before we set out," Willie agreed.

"Before we was born, maybe."

"Yep."

They'd said it all before. There were always new catchphrases, a few months after a new group was marooned. When they started to wonder if they'd ever get off the island, but still thought in their hearts that some day they would. Time took care of that, ground down the sharp edges of their black humor until nothing was left of it but a few well-worn, familiar words.

The first death or two always took off the edges too. Leapers, island sickness, vodu; hard to tell the difference sometimes. And there were the ones who tried to leave, the ones who washed back ashore a week later. It wasn't always bodies. Engine parts, boards, lifeboats, part of a nameplate sometimes.

None came back alive, and there was never any rescue.

"Major fixin' for trouble, you reckon?" Macauley asked after a time.

"Yep," said Willie.

HE KNEW, THE MAJOR. HE KNEW. UNLIKE THE others, who either died fast or evolved gradually into the slow, strange rhythms of Izladora, the major maintained a survivor's passions toward the island that had saved and claimed his life.

The rage was unintended. It was a horse he couldn't curb, a demon on his back. She had a temper and a tongue on her, Sabada did, but that was no excuse; he had known, when the red fog cleared, that he had crossed a bad line. Cold and rational, a weapon that thought, his mind denied the whisper of vodu revenge, but his blood knew better. The pumping of his heart anticipated the beating of drums and each surge of blood was impregnated with fresh fear. The major was sweating.

"Abuelito, give me a rum and lime," he said brusquely, pulling up a stool. "With a splash of soda."

The old man behind the bar blinked once, slowly, and shuffled to the rack. He peered at the scratches that furrowed the major's neck and disappeared into his collar, shook his head once, slowly, and mixed the drink.

"Not a word, Abuelito." The major picked up his glass and downed half the contents at a gulp, grimaced and set the glass back on the bar. The tropic sweetness of the rum coated the inside of his mouth with a syrupy taste that neither the tartness of lime nor the fizz of soda could allay. "Goddammit."

Abuelito did not speak, but his thick, heavy eyelids creased briefly. His skin was the color of well-oiled teak and he had tended the Club at Millie Tarries since long before the major had arrived.

"What?" the major asked irritably, but with a pulse of fear beneath the irritation. "What?" The old man's eyes gleamed under his heavy lids. "Tell me, dammit."

"Eh." Abuelito shook a hand-rolled cigarette from a faded cigarette pack given him by a long-ago serviceman, then lit it with a crudely made Izladoran match, cupping the match between his hands. "Seen many an' many men with the mark on them."

"What mark?" A drop of sweat crawled from the major's right temple to his jaw. The Club's fan, propelled by a windmill atop the roof, rotated slowly. "Goddammit! What mark?"

"Fear." The old man's eyes gleamed again.

"I don't believe in vodu," the major said stiffly. Abuelito shrugged.

"Not vodu," he said. "Bludemagick. There's them that are born with the drawing power in they blood. Your Miss Sabada, she's a one."

A shudder that began deep in his bowels racked the major. His sweat turned cold and his heart rate increased.

If you give in, his mind whispered, the island will have won. It will have broken you. Izladora will laugh while the last sane man on the island bids his marbles farewell.

And if you don't, his blood whispered, you'll die. You'll stand on the edge of Tarry-no-more with Oudun Redeye's hot breath on the back of your neck and Oudun Redeye's sharp spear in the base of your spine and you'll jump and you'll scream all the way down, and when your mind snaps and your bones snap and stab their way out of your flesh you'll still be screaming.

And if Redeye doesn't get you tonight, his sister will, La Fria will come, Knife-in-the-dark, and she'll creep into your head and you won't ever know until you wake up screaming, your knife in one hand and your private parts in the other and after the knife flashes and La Fria's black smile shines in the dark you'll still be screaming.

The major shuddered again and lifted his fear-sick gaze to meet the old man's eyes. "Help me," he said.

DARKNESS WAS FALLING ON THE ISLAND. SABADA'S hut was lit with many candles. She hummed through her grinning teeth as she drew in white flour on the dirt floor the veve-sign of Oudun, which would enclose both her and the rooster.

In the corner, King Jambo had begun drumming; softly yet, the drumming only a rasping, thrumming pulse. He hummed too, and swayed as he drummed. He was the best drummer on Izladora, King was, and he loved drumming for drumming's sake, so much that the Espiritus would come sometimes just to listen.

Tio Noche lay in the center of the veve-sign, his stiff claws pointing toward the roof of the hut, a black candle at his head and a red candle on either side; before him sat the empty bronze bowl and the flint knife.

When the veve-sign was finished and nightfall lay like on the island like a black cloak, Sabada set aside the flour and smiled fiercely to herself. She pulled the bright scarf from her head and tugged out the pins that held her braids in place. The braids fell free, writhing and tangling like black mambas, all the way to her waist. "Time now, King," she said, smiling still, and the whites of her eyes had gone all scarlet with blood.

King Jambo swayed, and the drumbeat deepened.

"THAT'S ALL." THE MAJOR WAS TREMBLING WITH THE force of his confession. "By all that's holy, I swear it."

He knelt at the feet of Mere d'Mere, Mother of the Espiritus, Mother of All. The major was far from Millie Tarries.

Abuelito scratched his ribs through his sleeveless undershirt and nodded at the major. "Buen. You give her the offering now, major."

The ribbons that marked his rank and history and achievements were clenched in his fist. The major opened his hand with an effort. Mere d'Mere's face was neither welcoming nor compassionate; it was smooth and impassive, heavy-lidded and broad-lipped. The major averted his eyes as he fastened the ribbons on the effigy's rich robe, which was already crowded with offering tokens. His hands shook.

A shudder that began deep in his bowels racked the major His sweat turned cold, his heartrate increased. "I don't believe in vodu," he said stiffly. Abuelito shrugged.

Then it was done, and something in his mind gave way, taking with it an enormous weight and leaving him weak with the delerium of relief and surrender. He could almost laugh, and he could have curled at the feet of Mere d'Mere and gratefully slept.

"Eh, buen." Abuelito ground out the cigarette he was smoking and tucked the butt carefully in a pocket of his baggy, wrinkled trousers, then shuffled over to one of the lamp-lit shelves that lined the grotto of Mere d'Mere, chiseled from the rocky walls. From a wooden bowl he took a handful of salt, and then shuffled to the pool in the center of the grotto and cast the salt on the water. "Salt be blessed, purify this water." He nodded at the major and gestured at the pool with his chin.

The major stripped down and climbed into the pool; the water was cold and looked black and oily in the wavering light of the lamps. Chest-deep, the major shivered. Abuelito squatted on his haunches at the edge of the pool and placed a hand on the major's head. Once, twice, three times the old man submerged the major.

"You get out now," he said.

The major climbed out shivering. Abuelito dug in his pockets and found a small, stoppered bottle of blue glass. "Holy Oil of Repentance and Sorrow," he said, and drew an oil-smeared cross on the major's brow. "Mere d'Mere, this man has crossed you and he is sorry. He place himself under your protection and ask forgiveness. He has crossed your son Oudun Redeye and he is sorry. He makes repentance to you in the name of all the Espiritus and the Bon Dieu Bon. This man makes an offering and asks for your protection. He asks you intercede on his behalf with your son Oudun Redeye. This he so beseeches. Mere d'Mere, hear his prayer." Abuelito removed his hand from the major's brow. "Grace misery cord. Amen."

"What happens now?" The major was still shivering. The old man shrugged and sat on a boulder, rolling another cigarette.

"Wait and see."

THE DRUMMING WAS GROWN WILD AND FRENZIED. King Jambo was far gone into the rhythms, his eyes closed, his hands a blur, his skin glistening with sweat.

Sabada swayed, and the stone knife danced in her hands. It wove patterns in the candlelight, it leapt from hand to hand and pricked her skin with sharp kisses that drew tiny beads of blood.

Oh, they had caught old Brother Blood's ear for sure this night. Sabada felt his presence crowding her hut, felt his dark and thunderous interest pressing against her skin, his smell like ozone and heated bronze.

"Oyé!" she cried, "Oyé, Oudun Redeye, Spear-shaker, Brother Blood! Come, Redeye, come, I have for you to drink. Oyé, come, Oudun Redeye!"

The stone knife flashed dully across her left forearm, opening a new seam in skin which already bore several straight scars. Rich, red blood spilled into the bowl.

"You see, Redeye, you see Tio Noche, your servant. We asking justice for his death. You see he be marked with the seed of the man who done it; we asking justice."

Clever major, foolish man. She'd have shared with him what he wanted, maybe, if he'd have come courtin' rather than lyin'. Even then, with the rum... but there was no giving to them that wanted to take. He'd crossed her, and he'd killed her Tio Noche.

The knife cut again. Sabada held both arms over the bowl, letting them drain and chanting, "Oudun, Oudun, Oudun." The drum drove her heart-pulse, her heart drove her blood, the blood drew the Espiritu. The bronze bowl grew full.

Outside her hut stormclouds gathered and spears of lightning jabbed the night. Thunder rolled through the drumbeat and Sabada laughed aloud.

"Oudun!"

The Espiritu answered. Sabada screamed once and went stiff, her eyes rolling up to show the blood-red whites.

He came, he answered. Tio Noche's dead feathers rattled. The candle flames fluttered wildly. King Jambo's hands fell silent on the drums. The bronze bowl spun and spun and emptied, spun and wobbled and settled into stillness. Oudun Redeye's war cry thundered; he came, Oudun Redeye, came and went.

"EH." THE OLD MAN CRACKED OPEN ONE EYE AND peered at the gathering storm. "Oyé, Spear-shaker."

An angry rumble of thunder replied. Abuelito glanced at the sleeping form of the major, who slept with his knees drawn up, his hands tucked between his thighs. The thunder rumbled again, an impatient spark of red winking in the roiling clouds. Abuelito grumbled and found his feet, taking a seat on a boulder and addressing the storm while he searched his pockets for a cigarette.

"Oyé, patience, Spear-shaker. I am an old man." He cupped a match between his creased, leathery palms and lit a cigarette. "Eh, buen," he sighed, exhaling smoke. "Well, I have given your rightful prey into the protection of Tu Maman Grande's arms. So. The girl is young, and headstrong. She uses you for what is rightfully between her and the man. That leaves only the rooster. So?"

Lightning flashed violently.

"Aiee, well... He has repented, and been shriven." Abuelito drew thoughtfully on his cigarette. "Let us say... Suppose I take on the blood debt for the rooster. Would that be acceptable, eh?"

There was a long peal of thunder. The old man shrugged.

"It is a matter between your mother and myself, let us say. So. Do we have a bargain?"

The stormclouds roiled furiously, the red eye in their midst flashing. Crescendos of thunder boomed and shook the island. In his sleep, the major whimpered. Abuelito coughed and spat alongside the boulder. Lightning flickered; once, twice, three times, and the storm clouds drew in upon themselves and disappeared with a final, fading burst of thunder.

Stillness returned to the island.

"Oyé, Mamacita," the old man said to the effigy of Mere d'Mere, "A Millie Tarries man for the blood-price of one rooster. Pretty good, eh? Your son is not happy, but I am thinking I made you a good bargain." A deep silence answered, and the old man nodded to himself, then glanced at the major. "Eh, major. You a part of Izladora now, and the island, she is part of you. Fight her no more."

In his sleep, the major sighed deeply and relaxed.

SABADA WAS AWAKENED BY KING JAMBO'S HAND shaking her shoulder.

"Gotta be goin', Miz Sabada. Fish don't wait for no bludemagick."

"Mercy, King. Be seein' you." She watched him leave with his drums tucked under his arm, and full waking greeted her riding on a wave of disgust. The aftermath of bludemagick, sure enough; and worse. Something had gone wrong. If it went right, the power returned threefold, but Sabada was as weak as a day-old kitten.

No tellin' where the blame was to be laid just yet. Sabada wrapped a sarong around her waist and walked to the river to wash the dirt and black blood and flour from her skin. Her nanny goat Cleo bleated at her, pleading sore to be milked, and the taro patch sore needed water.

"Heard old Spear-shaker rattlin' the roofbeams last night," Christophe called as she walked back from the river. Sabada didn't answer. "You think maybe he could 'splain 'bout that fella comin' down the path there, girl?"

It was the major. Sabada would have spat when she saw him, but there was no spit left in her this morning. The major didn't look like himself. She'd never seen him without Millie Tarries clothes on, but he didn't have nothing on but a pair of short pants tied up with sisal rope, and a big old cowry shell 'round his neck, and a scrawny little black rooster under one arm and a bottle of rum under the other.

"What you want?" Sabada asked, making her voice mean. The major set the bottle down and held the rooster out to her.

"To make amends," he said. "He's for you. Abuelito said to tell you his name is Paga á Pecado."

"I don't need no damn rooster from no vieux mexicali guru-man. Rooster don't pay for sin. Rum don't pay for no sin. Blood pay for sin."

"No." The major went down on one knee and released Paga á Pecado, who began scratching in the dust around Sabada's feet. "Life pays for sin." He picked up the bottle of rum and stood, holding it out toward her. "Here. I'm sorry."

Sabada gave him the evil eye sidelong, but her power was weak and the eye had no sting. She pointed at his cowry shell with her chin. "Token of Mere d'Mere, eh? He's smart man, that vieux mexicali. Come to bludemagick, she 'bout the only thing holds sway to turn the Espiritus. They listen to they Maman. Always a price, though, 'specially if you in the wrong."

"Yes," he said. "My military rank."

"So, no more Millie Tarries guru-man, eh? Poor major," she scoffed. He shrugged.

"I wasn't a very good guru-man. I used to be, before. Not here, not on Izladora. Everything's different. You were born here, you don't know."

"Many an' many of them that wasn't born Izladoran make the leap," Sabada said in dire agreement. "So you believe now, eh major? No more mockin' the candle and the cartas, vodu and bludemagick and the Espiritus. No more, eh? You believe."

"I do," he said, and he expected a shudder of terror and loss, but there was none; only the hot morning sun, the scratching rooster and the woman.

"Good." Sabada stooped and picked up Paga á Pecado. "Pay for sin, eh major? You start by waterin' my taro patch." She turned on her heel and made for her hut. The major scratched his head, smiled wryly at his cowry shell token, and followed her.

Behind the bar at the Millie Tarries Club, the old man chuckled to himself and rolled another cigarette.

JACQUELINE CAREY

Studies anything from Goedel's theorem to Egyptian astrology, all or none of which may inform her writing. Her work has appeared in a handful of small press publications, and she supports her writing habit by working as the coordinator of the DePree Art Center & Gallery in Michigan.

The Farm Story

STEVEN THORN

In the movies, a hard-working farmer and his family endure hardship but always come up all right in the end. What do they do if they're not in a movie?

THE GUNSHOTS CRACKED ALL DAY, FROM WHEN the sun blazed into the blue above the eastern pasture, beyond the rusting frame of the old windmill that had been the fortress of so many childhood imaginings, to when it fell, casting a thickening bloody light over the wheat field, whose upward grade made it seem a vast expanse extending to the horizon.

The ripeness of that ugly stunted rust-ridden wheat and its seeming immensity under that sun, were lies. Hollow betrayals of light and land.

THE GUNSHOTS WOKE ME. A DISTANT, DRY CRACKing. As dry as the hot wind rushing over the fields of dead wheat.

I pulled on my jeans and boots and ran through the kitchen, grabbing a piece of toast from Margaret's hand as I passed, before she had time to slather on any butter. She gave me a stern motherly look, her eyebrows rising.

"Grandad said not to. He'll be livid!"

But I had kicked open the screen door and was running, for what I thought would be the last time, to my tower.

I clambered up the iron frame and sat on the wooden platform below the rust-eaten triangles of the blades. I could see Grandad, a small figure in white beside the tractor. The dust-red Hereford herd, their white faces like skulls, milled around before him. Grandad pushed up his hat and dabbed at his brow with a bandanna. Then he tied it around the barrel of the .33 Winchester slung over his shoulder, took bullets from a box on the nose of the tractor, began thumbing them into the breech.

I stared, stunned, as he lifted the butt to his shoulder, took careful aim, and pumped bullets into the heads of the calm and lowing cattle.

A red star exploded on the white skulls. The cows lost their dung and dropped. I could imagine their eyes rolling with surprise and momentary pain as they staggered and fell heavily on their sides, raising a burst of dust. Some would kick their legs a little, searching for the hard earth, before they were finally still.

Occasionally a beast would meander away from the herd. Then Grandad would whistle a particular way and Petersen, our black-and-white Collie, would leap around and bark and nip at its ankles until it returned.

When a dozen or so were dead, Grandad would climb into the tractor, kick over the engine with a spurt of diesel exhaust, and then reversed, using the grader on the back to push the carcasses into a ditch.

From my tower I watched Grandad's methodical labor. When half the herd lay dusty in the ditch and the sun was a rage of gold high in the sky, I returned to the house.

Grandad came in with the dusk. From the front room, among the suitcases and packed cardboard cartons, Margaret and I heard his boots clump heavily up the steps. We turned from the television to watch him through the screen door.

Sweat ran down his arm, trickled over his fingers and steamed off the barrel of the Winchester. He made a circling motion with the rifle, so that the bow of the kerchief tied around the end of the barrel licked the dust off the floorboards. Then he dropped it. A shot rang out the evening, with a certain finality, and Margaret clutched Zebediah, her toy horse, tighter in her hands.

Grandad's eyes were rolling, then staring, bloodshot and mad. Had he not been such a hard man, they probably would've been filled with tears. He seemed not to have heard or noticed the shot at all. Eyes rolling and staring into the blackening night, as mad as Margaret's pony Old Bent Back's were the day he'd eaten jimson weed and gone wild.

We'd had to shoot Old Bent Back. It looked like we'd have to shoot Grandad too. Margaret cried for a week when we shot Old Bent Back, until Grandad had made a small bedraggled unicorn out of wire, straw, glue and some of Old Bent Back's mane. Grandad had carved its horn from a steer's cropped horn. Old Bent Back's soul was in that unicorn, Margaret said. She named it Zebediah and that had quieted her.

There were speckles of blood dried to black on Grandad's shirt and on his moleskins. Moths and gnats and mosquitos and iridescent beetles flickered around his head. He chucked off his hat, brushing at the insects which swarmed around his hair. He stomped through the front room without barely a nod at Margaret and me, and went down the hall to shower.

He was mad yesterday. Today he was crazy.

IT WASN'T THE DROUGHT THAT HAD RUINED OUR earth, like it had so many others. Grandad was canny. He'd used the last overdaft to stock up on cattle feed. Said he could smell a dry season coming on the breeze from the west. The government had deregulated the market, though. Imported beef from Asia was cheaper than our dust. It cost more to truck the herd to auction than what we'd get for it. South West Queensland Beef and Dairy owned the

trucking. They owned the auction yards. They owned the abattoir, the estate agent and the bank. We were shafted.

The bank delivered the foreclosure notice and posted the auction signs. A South West Queensland Beef and Dairy subsidiary would buy our farm, our cattle, like they had so many others, and razor a profit while we yet owed them our labor and our blood.

Grandad wouldn't even let the suit from the real estate borrow a shovel to dig the post holes. Perfectly within his rights, Sheriff T. Jackson-Flynn said. The bastard had to drive the 127 kilometers back to Windorah to get a shovel.

As soon as the sheriff and the bankers and the estate agents had gone, Grandad took a can of gas, doused the *Auction: Foreclosure* signs and set them blazing.

"Bastards. Sweating, collared men," he spoke with derision, "with narrow eyes and small minds. The suits hang on their crooked shoulders like the hunched wings of carrion birds. Vultures, let them profit and feast on carcasses." He didn't curse much, especially in front of Margaret, so when he did you knew he meant it.

Margaret just said how pretty the flames looked, all halloween orange, burning triangles within squares "livid against the dusk."

Me, I said nothing. I knew it was futile. I just could smell the burning in the air. It seemed to herald… something special, like Christmas Eve and the last day of school and the day after the finish of harvest put together. An expectancy of something new—change and freedom—yet also an ending. Everything complete, but not quite, and everything about to start again, but not quite yet.

After dinner of greens and carrots and lamb roast that Margaret had put on in the afternoon, a dinner at which no said as much as "Pass the salt please," Grandad sat on his wicker chair on the porch drinking straight from a bottle of Johnny Walker he'd been keeping for a celebration. He'd given that bottle to Dad ten years ago when Margie was born. Mum and Dad died a month later in a car smash.

I was four then, so although I remembered a lot about them, the smell of Mum's perfume and Dad's rough chin, and the sound of both their voices, Grandad had always been there too. That bottle had sat on the shelf ever since. Yeah, tonight Grandad was celebrating.

We did the washing up and Margaret helped me with my algebra homework; she was good at that sort of thing, but I never had the patience. Then we watched TV for a while, a program set in the lush English countryside. I couldn't bear it, the taste of dust still dry on my tongue, so I went to bed.

THE MOON LIFTED HUGE AND YELLOW OVER THE fields out my window, and I was too restless to sleep. There was a smell, heady on the warm breeze, like when we'd drive into Windorah along the highway, past the abattoir.

As I turned my mind to what the city'd be like (we'd be going in just under a month, after the auction, to stay with Aunt May in Brisbane) and began finally drifting into dreams, I heard Grandad go out into the night, the creak of the barn door, and then, like the breaking of clock whose mechanism yet refused to fail completely, the rustle and twang of bailing wire, extolling some purely imaginary hour.

Margaret woke me earlier than the sun and said she couldn't find Grandad. She'd cooked a big breakfast of sausage and egg and fried tomato, and had made both tea and coffee. But when she went to wake him, he wasn't there.

"And I'm absolutely livid!" she added, (she'd heard the word *livid* on TV and had been applying it liberally ever since) pointing at the breakfast, now cooling, laid on the best Gingham cloth, with Zebediah clutched in her hand. Her cheeks were flushed as she held her face tight against the welling tears.

Petersen was barking and chasing a chicken that he'd half-mauled so it was running with its head held on by one or two gory tendons. The dog was well on its way to becoming wild.

I went outside and looked for him. Grandad had let the chickens out, and Petersen had killed a whole mess of them and was chasing the rest around.There were feathers and bloody chicken carcasses scattered around the yard. The rooster, escaped into the lower branches of a scraggly gum by the coop, crowed mournfully.

Petersen was barking and chasing a chicken that he'd half-mauled so it was running with its torn off head, held by one or two gory tendons, dragging a trail in the dust. The dog was well on its way to becoming wild. There was blood on his white bib, and he gave me barely a glance as I shouted his name.

Then under the crystalline blue of the shadowless predawn, we saw something glinting, moving in the wheat field. Margaret, standing by me on the porch, pointed with Zebediah clutched in her hand, its horn piercing.

The glinting, shimmering as the sun licked it, made a twangy chimey music as it dashed through the wheat. It raised a dust haze as it ran, kicking the earth and crushing the heads to powder. It swung something into the air, a crooked stick, a scythe that caught the sun and arc on its blade.

It was Grandad. I could see tufts of his ashen hair through the wire cap on his head. He'd wrapped himself in baling wire and was hacking at the wheat with the scythe like some madly animate scarecrow. He'd leap and twang and chime and slash a mighty slash out of the dead dry wheat. In the gusts of powder, he looked like some emaciated Michelin Man, like the one on the paint peeling sign at Murray's Tire and Gas in Windorah.

He seemed to tire. I wasn't sure if he'd noticed us. He stuck the handle of the scythe into the earth and let go of it as he dropped to his knees, vanishing but for a gleam amongst the chest-high stalks. The scythe bent over him like some curious long-necked, silver-beaked bird, and as Grandad sobbed the wire jangled and twinged like tinny bells.

He grabbed handfuls of the cut wheat, its heads turned to dust under the pressure of his hands. He just sat there, suddenly still, the dust running through his clenched fingers and the sun gleaming on his armor of wire.

Margaret, tears wet on her face, suddenly ran forward. Blubbering, she prised open his hands, taking the bundles of straw from his fist and pressing Zebediah into them.

"Don't be sad because you had to shoot all the animals, Grandad," she said. And with her little hands she bent the thin sheafs of stalk around each other, so they looked a rough straw doll of a beast. "We can make more, like you made Zebediah, and they'll be even more pretty and their spirits will wander the fields of heaven with Zebediah."

Grandad's head sprang up all of a sudden, like he'd heard a shot. He stood, all ajangle and glowing silver in the risen sun, and said, "These fields forgotten. This earth has forsaken us, but that is the way of earthen things. I love you kids. Let's forget this earth and have a celebration." He put his silver twined arm around Margie, smiling as they emerged from the wheat, and we walked back to the house.

"Steven," said Grandad as we finished wolfing down the now-cold breakfast, "your father's black suit, the one he wore to Grandmother's—bless her soul—funeral, in the brown trunk, I think. Margaret, wear your mother's satin party dress. We'll rustle the best damn herd anyone's ever seen, and watch those duffers from the bank's faces when they come to auction off the beasts."

So I dressed in my father's black suit, which smelled of camphor, and Grandad found, rummaging in a box, Great Grandad's harness-racing silks, so over the top I wore a harlequin vest. Then Grandad tied a green-and-blue polka dot tie around the neck of my red shirt, and pinned his father's war medals on my chest.

Margie strolled out, beaming, in Mum's emerald satin party dress, too loose around her thin shoulders. So she tightened it up with sashes of silk around the waist, and a gold clasp that bunched up the baggy bosom, and draped herself in Mum's and her own jewelry so she glittered with chains of gold and brooches and pearls and rings, loose on her fingers.

Grandad strung his wires with the pull-tops of beer cans, brass washers, Christmas tree ornaments, bells, fridge magnets the shape of fruits and Disney characters and smiley faces, ribbons of aluminum foil, my old toy matchbox cars, keys, and other bright metallic and jangling odds and ends, and finally stuck our Christmas star in his cap.

Margaret put on her straw hat, and I donned my wide brimmed Akubra. Grandad pulled the brim so the hat sat at a jaunty angle and said, "Now we're ready." He took his camera and set the timer, so it trapped a photo of us together on the end of the porch, with the scattered bodies of chickens and Petersen leaping about behind us.

We pulled on our gumboots, and Margaret said, "We look positively livid!" I had to agree. We were dressed for the maddest Halloween costume party ever.

Then Grandad, with a jangle and a magician's flourish, held up the tractor keys.

"Mow the wheat field, Steven, my boy. Mow it all." He had never let me drive the tractor by myself alone before, though I'd driven it a few times when he'd been out in Windorah. I grabbed the keys and ran for the barn, waving my hat in the air and hollering.

"I want a good-sized stack, ya hear?" he shouted, then laughed.

I climbed into the cabin, adjusted the seat downward and forward, put in the key and pressed the starter. The engine kicked and I revved the engine so it spouted exhaust. I snapped on the stereo to a rock station, raised the harvester blades and roared out to the field.

I raised a hell of dust, both ocher red chaff and the brown of cracked earth, as I carelessly churned the wheat. The dust rose and drifted for kilometers, turning the sky to red. The tractor roared, I bellowed and the music blared. I was inscribing my bitterness, my anger, into the earth that I had loved and that was no longer mine.

When the field was reduced to stubble, carpeted in straw, I lowered the hay grader and reversed, inscribing a star from points to center, pushing the wheat into one enormous stack. The scythe, I realized, had been forgotten in my storm. Like the proverbial needle, it was lost in the depths.

Then I mowed the wild straggle that edged the field, the Paterson's curse. Mum had planted it when she'd kept an apiary, and I remembered the distinctive taste of the honey from those purple flowers. Mum had caught me, my fingers sticky, sucking the sweetness from them. But all she said was how the scrubby, purple flowered weed was also called Salvation Jane. Then she dipped her fingers in the jar too.

When the sun was middling in the sky and the dust clouds had mostly settled, Grandad and Margaret drove out in the Ford pick-up, a tangled jigsaw of wire jangling, teetering and towering in its bed.

Grandad waved a gleaming arm and I cut the tractor engine.

"Come on, Steven!"

"What do you think, Grandad?" I said with a nod toward the mountain of hay, edged with Paterson's purple tangles, that rose like some monstrous dusty bloom, as high as the house over the stubbled field.

"A veritable Himalaya, Steven my boy. An Ulluru of straw! The biggest mountain of hay in the world."

"It's absolutely *livid!"* said Margaret.

Grandad was excited. He was crazy excited. "We'll unload the pick-up and then have our picnic lunch."

He let down the tailgate and rolled a tar drum off the back of the Ford. Then we lashed some rope among the tangle of wire. We pulled at it, straining, and it rolled off with a flutter of petals like some enormous tumbleweed. It came to rest by the hay mountain.

The bottom of the pick-up's bed was deep in flowers—irises, violets, chrysanthemums, marigolds, angel's trumpets, and posies. It was every last flower from Margaret's carefully tended garden. We shoveled them off and the perfume crashed out of them. They sat, a small brightly-colored hillock by the hay.

Margaret had spread a sumptuous picnic lunch out across a lurid quilt of patchwork paisley. While we feasted, Grandad spoke of the city, of dynamic ribbons and globe symbols. Of white noise and chaos. Of bleakness dressed in rainbows. Of how the city was a palace of mirrors, how the reversals of mirrors are lies. Of glass houses full of stone-throwers.

And we knew he was mad, but both Margie and I listened in rapture to this man of wire and leather whose raucous laughter shook his body and rang the midday with jangling and tinkling and twangs and chimes.

"And now to work!" And we stood, brushing the crumbs from our finery.

Grandad and I started untangling shapes from the tumble of wire, while Margie packed away the luncheon. We stood wire skeletons of cattle all around. With a long-handled brush, Grandad began ladling tar over the frames, and when he'd finish one, Margie and I would stick sheafs of the hay, tangled with Paterson's curse, to the beasts. Then Margaret stuck a red chrysanthemum to the end of each muzzle as a mouth, and violets as eyes, and tied stiff straw tails to their rears.

By three in the afternoon, a magnificent herd of fat straw beasts stood quiet on the sun-blasted pasture. Tufted with straw and spattered with tar, we looked like a trio of scarecrows.

That night, I dreamed I was soaring away from an unremitting turbulence.

AT DAWN I RAN OUT TO MY TOWER FOR THE LAST time. Below me, Grandad had taken his silver wire wrappings, my father's black suit, and mother's emerald dress, our fine costumes of yesterday with regalia, and made three scarecrows. They were curious shepherds overseeing the herd from the height of wooden crosses.

Fleshed in straw and thistle and Paterson's curse
Crimson-mouthed and violet-eyed
When the farm died
After the scorching months
We shot the herd
Took a thousand miles of baling wire
A thousand miles of rust-flaked baling wire
and tied a hundred head of cattle
and three fine horse
and three fancy farmers
They stood proud, our golden calves
Then the rains blew in
And scattered them
And they rotted in the sun

SHAKE A NATIVITY UNDER GLASS AND SNOW FALLS. A wind blew, smelling fat with rain, and the beasts bristled against it. The dust raised and swirled. The shadows of our quivering beasts grew, and they seemed to move in fear, golden calves before some coming wrath.

A storm as black and immense as the onslaught of a winter's night swept over the horizon. I clambered down and ran back to the house. The rain came, slow at first, the heavy drops kicking up spurts of dust. Then a sudden hammering, scattering our beasts, tumbling them, stampeding them. The storm knocked them down, ate away their flesh of straw, plucked out their eyes and mouths. They floated away.

And we knew he was mad, but we listened in rapture to this man of wire and leather whose raucous laughter shook his body and rang with jangling and tinkling and twangs and chimes.

It thundered and flashed for only half an hour, We watched from the porch, distraught, this hell lit in lightening flashes. Then the sun came out, smeared over the slick earth. Quickly drying, glinting on the bent and tangled skeletons. Muddy clumps of straw began to ripen and rot.

GRANDAD SEEMED TRANSFORMED TO HIS USUAL taciturn self, but we knew he wasn't. He was hurting, as if cursed.

We took our cases and odds and ends and put them in the pick-up. Margie clutched Zebediah in her hands. Grandad had an old and browning family photo in his lap.

The last I saw of the farm as we drove for Windorah was a few lonely, bedraggled beasts of tattered straw and Paterson's curse, the scythe, glinting, somehow still planted in the earth, and we three fanciful scarecrows beside it.

Our flowered eyes were weeping; our flowered mouths were laughing.

A YEAR OR SO LATER, IN A SOUTHERN SUBURB OF Brisbane, in an ordinary life in which we walked to school rather than studying by relay satellite, Margaret wrote a poem that won a school competition, and was published in a local paper.

People asked me about the poem. Teachers, a journalist, Aunt May. What did Margaret mean by it?

So I wrote this story.

STEVEN THORN

Was born in Sydney, Australia in the mid-'60s, and grew up on the outskirts of New South Wales country towns, in industrial cities between sea and desert, on the streets of Sydney, and on many roads in between. In addition to his university studies, he is currently writing a film script based on "The Farm Story."

Need to Know

Books are Alive and Online!

FOR SEVERAL YEARS NOW—ESPECIALLY SINCE THE explosion of the Web—pundits have been predicting the death of the book. Why would anyone want to buy a book, when soon *any* text will be available on demand via the Net? Well, don't look now: some clever booksellers are beginning to turn these "seeds of destruction" into the fruits of success.

WordsWorth Books in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has set up "Virtual WordsWorth" (**http://www.wordsworth.com**), to serve not just information about the store itself (including directions and a map of the Boston subway!), but also its database of 100,000+ titles in a wide variety of subject areas. The store is as courteous on the Web as you would expect in real life—users aren't forced to "authenticate themselves" the instant they walk in the door (unlike many commercial sites), and they consistently give you the option send a query to a real human. As a general bookstore, WordsWorth's selection tends to have more breadth than depth, although I was startled at the number of obscure, niche publications in stock. And if you can't find it, they'll find it for you: with an e-mail message and three dollars, WordsWorth will conduct a search for an out-of-print book.

Looking for a speciality shop? The Future Fantasy Bookstore (**http://futfan.com**) in Palo Alto, California has been maintaining a Web site for some time with the assistance of Digital Equipment Corporation. As the name implies, Future Fantasy specializes in science fiction, fantasy, and mysteries, although a quick search of its online database reveals a good selection of horror and other hard-to-categorize fiction. Future Fantasy makes its newsletters and store events available, and the operation has a nice homespun feel. As is appropriate for a specialized shop, the searchable database allows more selective queries, so you can get a list of the vampire books published in paperback in the last two months (ten, if you're curious). If this doen't satisfy, check out Yahoo's Books listing (**http://www.yahoo.com/Business/Corporations/Books/**) for a rapidly-growing list.

Is there a downside to all this? If you're at all like me, you *enjoy* patrolling a good bookstore, being startled at the *Star Trek* and celebrity-tell-all franchises, and maybe finding a great book you hadn't expected. It's impossible to do this online: though most online bookstores have features on selected titles, they're mostly new, marketable releases you may not much care about. The only way to browse the shelves is to scan the databases, and while that's useful, it's certainly not the same experience.

Also, the technology of financial transactions on the Web is young, and these sites (perhaps wisely) have chosen not to immediately jump aboard. So, when you order online you face a choice: send billing information over the Net, or over the telephone. I've ordered from both the stores above, and I have wound up playing phone-tag to confirm an order.

So, is the book dead? Not yet! Thanks to these folks, I'm buying more books now than I was before the "information highway" became a buzzword. If I'm any example, the future of the book is quite secure.

—Geoff Duncan

The days when it took *two* chords to make a rock and roll tune are long gone, sonny.

InterText

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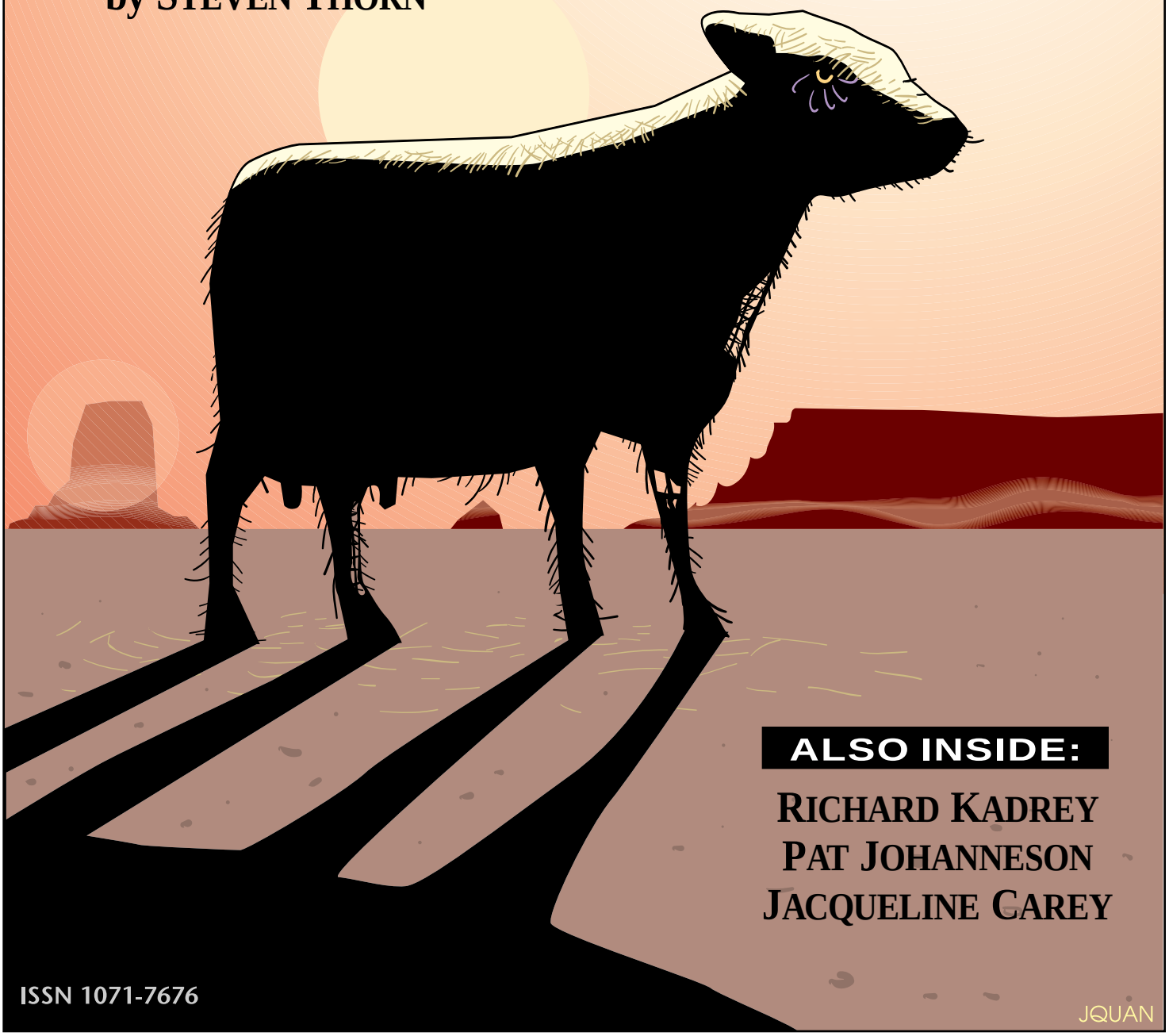
"The Farm Story"
by STEVEN THORN



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