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SERPENTINE



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This is my first issue as the Editor-in-Chief and I'm glad to finally have a chance at the reins, even though my title assumes me certain authorities. It is with no hesitation that I say that this magazine and I would be nothing without the constant effort and dedication of my staff.

From broken equipment, impending deadlines, office nuisances, and even a severe case of kidney stones, we have all managed to get our work done and bring you this issue. (A symbol to the men and women who drove themselves [and me] crazy for four months collecting, editing, and laying out the examples of creative expression that you, the student: you, the artist: you, the future, have given to us to display.)

Overall, I could not be happier with how this issue turned out. We really came together and combined our ideas superbly. We were very fortunate this year to get interviews with some of the industry's leading artists and authors. Michael A. Stackpole, Kevin Seimbida, and Ken Kelly were all very helpful and gave us a great deal of insight into their lives and careers. I only wish the best for us, for our current staff, and for any future members.

Humbly,

Daniello Cacace

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Pillow Talk

by Ashley Hurwitz

He climbs off of me sweating, with hair in his eyes.

"My life is unfulfilled." He doesn't make eye contact as he says this, but simply looks at the dirty carpet littered with clothes and speaks to the silent air. I pull the sheets around myself, reaching for pants that seem so out of reach. If I wanted a depressing speech I would have fucked my resident crazy fuck toy that always cried as he came.

"I wanted to be something. I guess I just hold too high standards for myself." I look at him with a blank expression. What can someone say at a time like this?

Sitting naked in a bed that isn't my own, I am at a lost for words.

"I blame my father. He always had the same problem." Daddy issues too. I really need to start asking these faceless men some background history before I spread my legs and invite them inside. It doesn't make me a whore, it makes me a lonely person looking for someone to pretend like I matter for the day, or normally, the few hours I spend with these men.

"I always wanted to be an actor. I think if I was, maybe my life would be better. I could probably be happy then." At this point I contemplate walking out without any clothes on. I'm waiting for the tears to come streaking down his face, but to my dismay he doesn't cry. He simply continues, "I would give up almost anything to be an actor; it is the one thing that can make me happy." Another actor. Seems like everyone in Hollywood is a struggling actor, fucking the bottom feeders that they pick up in nightclubs. I make a mental note to never fuck a struggling actor ever again...well, I probably will, but not until I ask them first if they hate their fathers. Maybe I'll even make little forms or cute little signs; "You have to be this sane to ride." Everyone in Hollywood has illusions of grandeur. Every mediocre waiter carries headshots and resumes in their back pockets in case they ever stumble across Jack Nicholson or George Clooney. I get served coffee and a script is pushed my way, another struggling artist that came to the dump that is Hollywood to whore out their cheap, overdone ideas.

And I just fucked one of these tourists of fortune.

"I have never really felt content, except when I am on the stage. I just thought my life would be going in a different direction by now." He moves his hands to his face, hiding his eyes behind his fingers. Is he really going to cry, or am I stuck in a horrible movie that I didn't realize I was a part of? Either way I might be sick if he continues; if only I could find my underwear. He cries silently into his own hand. If he is looking for a shoulder to cry on, he is looking at the wrong woman. I have my pants in hand and I plan on not looking back as I walk out that door... once I find my other shoe, of course.

"I promised myself I wouldn't let my career take control of my life like this. But I just feel so empty." I shake my head, this man deserves an Oscar, fuck I'll nominate him myself if he stops crying. When I met him at the nameless bar I wasn't after a back-story. I didn't even want to know his name. My other shoe is almost in reach as I hear him pull the covers back around himself and bury his face into the white pillow. His tears streak down the fabric and wet the bed around it.

I hate one-night stands.

As I slip my foot into the black stiletto I stop momentarily and listen to him weep. I could only hear mumbled words and soft gasps as his lips sucked in deep, shallow breaths. If I had more of a heart I would have turned around right there and patted him on his back as he whimpered into his pillow. But I am not that kind of girl. As I slowly close the door I smile to myself. Then as I stand giggling silently with my back pressed against the shitty apartment door, I remind myself to never fuck a struggling actor.

This is Heaven?

by Eric Matos

“Wake up little one.” I am instantly awaked from the darkness that surrounds. I feel a little groggy and I try to shake the fuzziness out of my mind but to no avail. I sit up from the cold ground that I’m lying on and try to look around but the only thing that I can see is darkness. I stand up but there is nothing to see and I’m afraid to move.

“Don’t be afraid.”

“Who said that?” I say to the enveloping darkness that is encased all around me. I wait but there is no response.

“Who is there?” I say with a little more authority in my voice. Again no one answers.

“So much to do, so little time. Now, can you step forward?”

“Step forward, where?” I ask my self. I’m starting to get a little more annoyed here. First, I know that there is someone talking here and they refuse to answer me. Second, I can’t see a dam thing and I’m being told to step forward, even though I can’t see a dam thing, be some un-know voice. I’m really starting to get afraid here and I don’t know what to do.

“Don’t be afraid.”

Great, now this person is a mind reader.

“Can you step forward?”

“Where god dam it?!” Then as if by magic a beam of light shoots up from the floor. The light is weak at first but it is slowly getting brighter. I begin to step forward, not knowing what I might get myself into, but for right now this is the only place to go.

As I enter the ring of light, I see that the light is growing wider and wider. The light forms an even bigger circle than the one that I entered not even a minute ago.

“Power sleeps within you. If you give it form, it will give you strength. Choose wisely.”

Again as if by magic, three pillars begin to rise up from the ground surrounding me. There is one pillar in front of me and a pillar to each of my sides. The pillars only rise up to chest level when three sparks of light surround me and place themselves on top of the pillars. I look at the one in front of me when a sword appears out of the blue. I look to the sides of me and a shield is on my left side and what looks like a staff is on my right. I walk up to the sword and I take it off the pillar.

“The warrior, invincible courage, a sword of terrible destruction.”

And just like that, the sword disappears. I really don’t know what going on here but it just started to get interesting. I take a walk over to the shield and lift it off of its pillar.

“The guardian, kindness to aid friends, a shield to repel all.”

And just like before the shield disappears. I would have been cool if I could have kept the shield. I would have been even better if I could have kept the sword. This place is so weird.

“Two down, one to go.” I say to myself. I walk over to the third and final pillar. This one holds the staff like ting that I saw earlier. I take this one off of its pillar too and just hold it in my hands.

“The mystic, inner strength, a staff of wonder and ruin.”

Again the staff disappears. This is getting really old really fast. All of a sudden, the pillars begin to collapse on themselves and I immediately begin to step backward.

“The closer you get to the light, the greater your shadow becomes. But don’t be afraid. And don’t forget, you hold the mightiest weapon of all. You must keep your inner light burning strong. Behind You!”

“**AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH**” I fell out of the circle of light and I’m falling in to the darkness. It begins to surround me again and I just can’t seem to fight it off. My hand reaches out to grab something but there is nothing there.

“Don’t be afraid.”

I continue my feverish fight, struggle against what can not be fought. I continue my struggle when I realize that I am lying down again. Where the hell am I? I sit up and I'm surrounded by purple fog. Stand up to my fullest height (5'11) and I see trees in the distance. I quickly rush over to the trees only to find them all distorted. Their trunks are twisted into spiral shapes and there are branches with no leaves on them that extended in every direction. But this is not just one tree but there are other trees just like this one. In fact, there is a whole forest of trees that look like they have been rung out and left to dry. I look up and there is a full moon out but it has several clouds that are covering half of it. I walk back out of the forest and there are a million plain old looking doors. I quickly run up to one of them, it doesn't open. I run up to another one, this one does not open either. I run up to a third one, and again it refuses to open. They are all locked. I began to cry thinking that I'm never going to get out of this place.

"Don't be afraid, don't cry"

"Shut up!" I scream at the faceless voice.

"Show your self!" I scream.

"If you wish" Out from the moon a beam of light strikes the ground. There is a circle of light right where the moon's beam hit. The light begins to intensify so much that it hurts to look at. I shield my eyes and turn away from the light. I hear kind of a popping noise and the light instantly vanishes. I look back and right where the light was, Roald Dahl is now standing. I look at him and I can't believe my eyes.

"But you are dead" I manage to stammer out.

"And so are you" He replies.

"Wait I'm dead?"

"Yes you are or you wouldn't be here"

"Where exactly is here? And wait I'm dead!"

"For the last time yes and welcome to heaven"

"But wait, how did I die?"

"That's not important. What is important is that you know that while in heaven, anything that you think of is turned into a reality for you. Your imagination is key here. Be very careful what it is that you think of."

"But what if I have a question?"

"Just call out my name, ask your question and you shall receive an answer"

"Can I ask you a question now?"

"You just did but go ahead"

"What's with all of the twisted trees that have no leaves? What's with all of the doors that are locked? And, why is this place so dark?"

"This place is a replica of your inner mind. These things are all here because this is how you see the world. You believe that the world is a dark and dreary place so your heaven mimics it."

"Why are you here then?"

"I'm here to help guide you along in your heaven. I'm here to answer any and all questions that you may have."

"But why do you look like my favorite author?"

"That's because I'm Roald Dahl. I mean here because I'm the one person that can easily relate to you and help you adjust better to your new life. Now, I must get going. There are other people who need my help. Just remember two things. Heaven is what you make it and call out my name and I will answer any question that you have. So goodbye for now."

OBSERVATIONS

by Nelo Maxwell

I've started to wonder why people make pointless small talk when there's nothing to say. Even though awkward silence is uncomfortable, maybe it's supposed to be that way.

It's like an abrupt break in a sentence for no apparent reason, or like a skip on a record; it disrupts the flow of interaction and breaks the synchronicity of relation. Silence is golden, and words convey that with ease proving they are not. Stop breaking the line, stop skipping the record.

It was raining today and I was upset. Well, almost upset. I realized something that I shouldn't have forgotten: the storm is moving north being pushed by the wind. It's going somewhere else. I suppose it's like a crossing deer. If clouds could they'd probably say, "Don't get angry with me, please. I'm just being pushed by the wind, I can't help it." Just like a deer crossing, "Please don't be mad at me, I'm trying to get across the road you built in the forest that I live in." Poor cloud can't control its own movement, poor deer in the wrong part of the forest.

I was talking to my friend today and we got to talk about my novel. I tried to explain to him a concept that he was familiar with. I hate that, it sucks that I feel people are stupid or don't understand what I'm trying to explain. Maybe I just like explaining things. It used to make me feel important or smart. Pretty stupid of me. One who wields knowledge should not need to be reminded of the fact, they need only wield it

The idea of staring into a black hole, what would that be like? Would it be maddening? Wouldn't staring into such vastness prove sublime? Would something so beautiful as the collapse of a star be a sight to see? Is there a line between madness and the sublime essence? If we could grasp this euphoria out of insanity, would the Abyss that is our souls be so frightening the next time we stared into it? Or the next time it stares into us?

It is my belief that existence started through thoughts and those thoughts came from dreams. Dreams of being born and dreams of interaction. I think that this Dream is still traveling across the cosmos, like a siren call, traveling to the ears of every living being. Dreams are the basis for existence with out them life isn't worth living. From dreams come thought, from thought, existence, from existence, Evolution.

Does the universe speak? If so what does it say? Would it say, "Nelo Maxwell, you're not profound at all, you just think to much?" Growing up I noticed people don't like folks who think a lot. I'm not sure why, I may never be. Is it because thinking reminds them of their lives and how they've ended up? People get frustrated with people who think a lot. Maybe it makes me important when I out think people, again an example of insecurity on my part, trying to feel smart. I'm a victim of the human condition. Something that leads us spiraling toward a dreamless oblivion.

Upon observation, I have realized what goes around doesn't come around. I'm tired of people bastardizing the meaning of Karma. Karma is only cause & effect. People have no concept of its true meaning. Karmic repercussions are only affected by an offset of events, usually having nothing to do with the individual in question. Chance is what it is, sometimes there is no plan and Karma is the proof of that. I sometimes find myself asking "Why me?" And then I think if not me, then someone else, right?

My observations on Myspace seem to be a recurring thing. I'm no more profound then any one else. Well actually, that's not true but I'm nowhere near profound as certain others. I'm pretty sure people observe their own behavior, as well as the behavior of others. At least I hope they do. The world needs more observation. It seems that everyone just exists in this world, but never stops to look at it. That's why I ask questions; because no one else does, and that's why I try to challenge people. Oh well...

The universe is vast and infinite, cold and uncaring. It is truly unaware and unaffected by its smaller parts. Like a mother turning from her child, I have never been privy to a more unfeeling. It allows its children to be pounced upon by the wolves of oppression. 'Tis a bad mother, the universe, much like all mothers, all parents. They take you to a funeral under the guise of a birthday party, false hope and fair wells.

Poetry by Hobbes Matias

Untitled

Random thoughts evoke verses.
 Having been absent for some time they elicit a thirst to rhyme
 that's inevitably composed and rehearsed in his mind.
 But this artist's dissatisfied and his frustration corrodes
 the colors on an easel that only his mind holds.
 Work against time because this beauty will run
 and all that you've done is under the gun.
 Art's lost all its fun when you're pressured,
 but the pesky fucker pesters when you least expect her.
 She'll nag you at night until you pay her your mind-
 only to be given a dab of color to work with this time.
 So take what little you have and make use of your talent.
 For not everyone's so fortunate that they too, possess it.

Untitled

She's been left and forgotten-
 Maybe discarded as rotten,
 But either way gotten
 Around cuz she fucked them.
 Used, abused and consumed as they continue this ruse
 and she was indeed fooled to believe that she was their muse.
 Used only for that which was utterly lewd,
 She was often the victim of an eager man's tool.
 Each boy that fell victim to her looks and perfume
 Were inevitably lost to their insatiable mood.

Beautiful

Aesthetically pathetic-
 Not to mention it's tragic he's empathic
 for practice in sadness leads to one's madness.
 Through no fault of his own he'll suffer alone-
 for Apathy's filter withers all joy,
 Leaving just pain for this browbeaten boy.
 Criticized cruelly for foolhardy deeds,
 He can never be human from what others see.

Angels

It was dark and the frigid winter air howled through the city streets. The snow fell light and soft as cotton balls, the wind blowing it about in flurries. Salvador took a long puff from his cigarette. He hated the snow- it made the nights brighter than he would have liked them to be. He spit into the snow just past his feet and crushed what was left of his cigarette on a garbage can lid. Picking up handfuls of snow, he rubbed them over the shoulders of his worn navy-blue sweat-shirt, over the light grey woolen cap on his head that he hated but stole anyway from a cart on the street, and over the legs of his jeans. He had made sure that these jeans were dark so that the cuts, tears, and holes in them would better contrast with his pale skin peaking out from underneath. His hands were naked and had been rubbed with ash and soot to make them dirtier. He had also rubbed lightly just beneath his eyes. He scratched irritably at the stubble on his chin and, making the most pitiful expression he could muster, made his way onto the street.

People weren't paying him any mind. Their bodies pressed forward as they walked, faces partially hidden behind hats and scarves. Salvador stood beneath a flickering street lamp and studied the people as they passed. A group of teenagers, all wearing the same monotonous jeans and dark coats, spoke loudly amongst themselves about girls or their jobs or whatever. Salvador turned away from them. A heavysset woman waddled her way onto the sidewalk beside him, her arms heavy with bags. She glared at him in disgust as she walked past, her nose and cheeks reddened from the cold. "Fat bitch," Salvador grumbled. The words were drowned out by the honking of a car horn. He sat down on a bench by the street; it was a dirty white color and made of recycled something or other. Worthless piece of shit. He was brought from his thoughts by a gloved hand holding out money. He looked up expectantly, but it was only some man in a business suit. Salvador smiled as genuinely as he could and accepted it. The man smiled back and continued walking down the street. Salvador looked at the money in his hand- a five-dollar bill. Cheap bastard he thought as he snorted and shoved the bill into his pocket.

Maybe he'd have to look somewhere else. Just as he stood up, Salvador caught sight of her. She was standing at the corner of the street a few feet away looking around as if she didn't know what to do with herself. She was wearing a black peacoat and knee-high leather boots with a three-inch platform. He knew she was wearing a black miniskirt of some type even though he couldn't see it and her purple and black stripped tights were just visible above her knees. A black hat with cats ears on top of it and yellow eyes sewn into the fabric covered her long wavy tresses. He knew she loved this hat

because she always wore it while roaming the streets at night. Salvador had been lucky to see her hair once when she took it off to readjust it. Her gloves were black as well with faces of Jack from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* on them. They were too thin and she'd occasionally rub her hands together to keep them warm. She never wore any makeup save for a thin line of black eyeliner.

Salvador smiled as he walked slowly in her direction. The crowd had thinned out and the snow fell a little heavier. The girl leaned against the side of the building and stared at the occasional passing car. "Do you always stand out here by yourself in this weather?" The girl looked at him, her face expressionless for a moment. "No, of course not." She stood up straight. "I was just taking a breather. I have to go—"

"Oh I'm sorry," Salvador replied quickly. He lowered his gaze but continued to watch her from the corner of his eyes. "It's just . . . it isn't safe to be out at night by yourself. You reminded me of my daughter and I thought I'd just see if you were okay, that's all."

"Oh." Her eyes widened slightly and he struggled to hide a smile. "I didn't mean to be rude . . ." She tugged unconsciously at the side of her hat.

"No, no," he waved a hand, "you have every right to be on your guard on these streets." He pulled out a crumpled photograph of a child he didn't know and showed it to her. "See? Her mother took her, our home, and everything else I had years ago." He sniffled for emphasis. "Now I live on these streets all alone and wonder how she is." He put the photo away with shaky hands.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" She looked at him sadly for a moment before turning her gaze to the ground.

Salvador looked her over. He noticed that her boots were scratched and worn; he noticed the small hole near the finger of her left glove, and he noticed that her coat was a bit too tight over her large breasts and slightly protruding stomach. She was probably thinking about her own family— about how her parents were always out and didn't really give a shit about her, about how she probably wished she wasn't an only child, about a cheating boyfriend, or friends who weren't really there. Did she even think of her small, empty, run-down apartment when he mentioned home? "Well I'm sorry to have bothered you. I'll be on my way." He took one step backwards. "It's cold out and there is a garbage can with a lit fire just behind this building."

"Wait, um, I'll go with you— if you don't mind that is. It is cold out and you don't have to be by yourself . . ."

His eyes darkened. "Sure; come with me. It's just this way."

"Thanks. I'm Camelia."

Salvador smiled— he knew this was a lie. Alanna knew not to trust strangers. Isn't that what all parents teach their children? Oh well, he'd humor her for a while. "Nice to meet you. You can call me Sal."

She didn't reply, much to his disappointment, but followed him

down the street and into the ally. The fire was there as promised and she rushed over to it. Salvador marveled at how the flames made her face glow and reflected in her dark eyes. He stood nearby in silence, gradually getting closer to her and studying her defenseless form and how relaxed she was. Soon he stood right beside her. "Warm, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Alanna smiled at him and slowly adjusted her hat.

He grabbed her hand and pushed her back against the wall. Holding her in place, he pressed his body against hers. She gasped and tried to push him away. "It's all right," Salvador whispered softly into her ear as he wrapped his arms around her. "Let me protect you. I won't let anyone hurt you ever again."

Her body grew rigid. "What?"

"I thought you were an angel, you know. I saw you standing in the street nights ago. You looked sad." He loosened his grip on her. "So very, very sad. Just standing there all by yourself . . . Did someone hurt you? Did someone leave you all alone?" His voice was soft and gentle and he brought his hand up to cup Alanna's cheek. There were tears in her eyes. "I love you no matter how sad you are, no matter what anyone says. I'll always love you." Salvador embraced her again for an instant before he let her go and made as if to leave. As he turned to walk away, she threw her arms around him.

"Wait! Please, please don't leave me all alone!" She buried her face into his back.

"Don't worry," Salvador smiled as he reached slowly into his coat pocket. "You won't have to be alone ever again . . ."

"That's my little angel," Salvador whispered to Alanna as he finished drawing her wings in the snow with his finger. He smiled as he regarded her laying there, her eyes glassy and half closed, her lips pale and slightly parted. Her blood glistened in the snow and momentarily reminded him of cherry ices that a Puerto Rican woman used to sell on the corner in the summer. He bent over and slowly brought his tongue over the spot, savoring the cold flavor. Then he leaned in and brushed his mouth against hers in a gentle kiss. There was no response. He shrugged and stood up, looking her over one final time. He slipped the small switchblade back into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and walked out of the ally and back onto the street.

By Nina Diab

An Autumn Day

by Ramzes Martinez

It was a cool crisp autumn day. You know one of those days where its a bit chilly but still nice enough that you only needed a jacket. The sun was shining through a thick canopy of tree branches as I walked through the grassy field. As I continued onward I passed some squirrels and other small animals scrounging up the last few bits of food before the great winter slumber. I kept walking until I came upon a tall gnarled ol'oak tree.

The tree has been here for many years; it has stood there tall and proud through several generations of Qadirs as a great heirloom to the past. On the lower trunk there are names carved in from each generation of Qadirs and their friends. As I stood here waiting, I could see memories of the past flit before my eyes as I relived those good old times. It had been years since I was last here. I remember this because it was a nice summer day when my friend and I first carved our names into this tree. Since then I everything in my life (and the world) has changed so much. My clothing, my tastes, attitude, lifestyle, everything. The last time I was here it was with my friend Juan and we had made a deal to meet back here twenty years after high school and see how we each were doing. So here I am thirty seven years old and waiting for an old friend to show.

It was sorta funny because I wasn't even sure he remembered and was going to show. When I had called him up a few weeks ago, I had left a message on his machine hoping he would get it and show. I know Juan though. If theres one thing that never changes about him its the fact that he's ALWAYS on-time. There could be a typhoon or some other cataclysm and he would still be there neat and punctual, as always. I on the other hand was the one who was pretty much always late to most things and came as I was. Odd pair of friends eh? I think this is one of the few times that I ever arrived early or on-time to something in my life. I was approaching the time when he should be arriving when I spotted a figure emerging from the woods. It was Juan.

Juan it seemed had changed just as much as I had. His once jet black hair was lined with white streaks from age and stress. He was still muscular like in the past but there was some fat on his bones which was never there before. He was however, still neat, and had the appearance still of just emerging from his house. I on the other hand had a neater appearance then my past which was customary these days. I had the same streaks of gray in my hair as well and was a little thicker than my youth. We almost looks like its the same old pair of knuckle heads together again.

"Hey Juan how you have been all these years man? Its been years since I've seen ya! Hows thats Job out in California treating ya?" "Hey Iman! Been great actually. What job? Oh that one! Well I left it some years ago it was too constricting." "You what?! But you were doing so well! I though you loved that engineering stuff? Me I know I've always been more of the literature type, but you ditched engineering? So then what do you do now?" He pauses for a second and takes deep breath "Well you remember when they had the architect come into class to talk about his job?" "Wait you mean that "artsy" guy? Yeah we were too busy cracking jokes in the back for most of the class and fooling around to notice him much. What about it?" "Well maybe I was joking too much because I actually like that stuff more than engineering." I take a step back in surprise "Oh. You do? I would have never guessed. You didn't seem very interested in it in the past when I was around. Whats the real reason for the change?"

A sad look came into his eyes "I'd rather not go into that. It took me and Sharon quite a while to settle that. Oddly enough it was how we meet." "Sharon? Ohhhh, that must be your lovely wife. Looks like you finally got married you old dog. So whats she like." "Well she's nice and caring someone you would like." "Oh. Sounds good."

This is strange. In the past he would tell me all and I likewise but now hes just so distant. I know this because when we first met he was the more outgoing one and I quiet, shy, bookworm. It was a crisp spring day then and I he just sorta came up to me and introduced himself. He had noticed me reading Asimov's "Foundation" series and had read some of it too. We had just started talking about it and from that day onwards we had become good friends.

"Look Juan I'm sorry about the wedding, you know I wanted to be there. Its just that I wasn't in country and you were in California. The injury I had taken back then and it wouldn't allow me to leave." "Yeah I know, its alright." Even as he said that I knew he didn't mean it. I could always tell when he was lying or hiding his feelings. It still really bothered him that I wasn't around for the crisis befor his wedding and the actual wedding itself, but the fact is I just couldn't be there. Being in critical condition in a hospital stops a lot of things. Just then a bitterly cold wind passed between us.

"Well enough about me what have you been doing with yourself Iman?" "Me? Well I got married to a lovely woman named Fatima. She is one of those more outgoing, bossy types but she is still pleasant to be around if you know her. I guess you were right, you always did say I was going to marry someone even more stubborn than myself." With that a small smile came to his face and quickly dropped. It seemed to be rapidly getting colder as time went on. "Well you know the next high school reunion is coming up this January. You gonna be there?" He looks at the sky and says quietly "I don't know. I'll see if I have the time." A long uneasy silence passes between us. "Umm look. If I do show up maybe we can talk more. (He glances at his watch quickly). I have go now and I'm sure you have things to do as well. It was good seeing you again." He stiffly shakes my hand and as he turns to leave "Bye Iman." "Bye Juan".

As I watch him leave I can almost see the large void that exists between us these days. It probably will never will be like the old days again, but as I know he does, I will always cherish those wonderful times in the past. As I turned to leave myself, I looked at the sky and saw snowflakes start to appear. Its seemed colder still than before. It appears that after all this time, winter has finally arrived.



Only The Owl Knows? by Jordana Syetta

Out of the darkness, in the stillness of the woods.
The only sound is that of an owl,
As it devours its prey.

There is a shift in the woods
And yet the only acknowledgment is that of a mouse.
A distant cry in the night,
Swallowed into the darkness, because its out of sight.

Though it is not seen, nor is it heard,
The owl croons its great song of victory.

Though the pain is evident,
The sound is deafening,
And the sight is clear

It is never felt, heard, or seen
Except by the prey who cowers against a tree, sur-
rounded.
And the owl who smiles his bright smile of victory.

For in the darkness of the woods,
As they continue to walk onwards
Their gaze never wavering from the brilliant light of the
sun,
Its easy for people to choose not to know.
But that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

Am I Okay?

by Gina Abitabile

Did you just waste your breath?
 Asking if I was okay
 With a smile on my face
 I just say, "I am fine"
 But hearing you're your voice repeat in my
 head
 Soon becoming the poison that
 Runs throughout my veins
 Slowly beginning to kill me
 With each breath I take
 With every look you give me
 I begin to feel
 My heart crumbles to pieces
 With each piece bearing your name
 How could I be okay?
 With each smile you give me
 Pretending everything alright
 As it only becomes another cut on my
 wrist
 Wishing only to spill out
 The poison
 That becomes the love I have for you
 Just wishing everything will fade away
 Am I really okay?

Your Only Reject

by Gina Abitabile

Lay in your arms
 Watching you as you lay peacefully with
 me
 A sweet smile spreads across your lips
 You listen to every word I speak
 As it soon becomes the map you follow
 Having me be your finally destination
 I will speak the words that you want to
 hear
 As they are so false in my heart but true
 in yours
 Only leading you to your only failure
 As you follow me step in step
 I will soon lead you falling
 Your only wish was that
 I will be your safety net
 But I only end up being the
 Sharks that eat you alive
 With a smile playing on my face
 I being you're only reject
 I will leave you with theses
 Empty words
 Leaving you heartbroken with
 A lost expression on playing on your
 face.

Peter Pan

Gina Abitabile

You can be my Peter Pan
And I'll be your Wendy
You can sprinkle me with your
Fairy dust
And take my hand
We can fly to Neverland
With your face as my happy thought
Your sweet kiss will hang around my neck
But once you let go of my hand
I drop into deep sea
Being captured by Captain Hook
He runs his shaped hook down my chest
Ripping your kiss off my neck
I turn my head away
Trying to picture you in my mind
To recall my happy thought
But I was all a blur
As He pushed me down onto the floor
I begin to lose sight of my fairy world
As he took my body tore it in half
Ripping my innocence away
And all I can do was scream
The screams echo thorough the room
I look up soon finding out
I am no longer in
Neverland
And I could never go back
Because I was no longer a child
That can play make believe
Or believe in imaginary things
Now when I recall back to the days
Of make believe
All I can see now is
The face that haunts my dream
That my once beloved Peter Pan
Is now my demon?
Captain hook.

Damn I'm Good

by James Hamilton

King dropped the paper in front of me like it was the heaviest thing he had ever carried.

"Ya seen that Fortune?"

"What?"

"Look, look the paper."

I stared at King, it took a bit to take it all in. He was a large man to say the least, six foot seven inches of beer gut and muscles. His pale white skin, baked to a soft brown from the summer sun, had a dim sheen to it. "All that muscle and no brains, damn what a waste. I looked at the paper finally and saw why King had brought it to me. There on the front page, in all its beautiful, glorious color was the Pompeii diamond. It was being shown at a museum not far from where I now sat. I looked up at King again and saw a gleam in his bright blue eyes.

"So we gonna get it Fortune. Huh...Huh?"

"Calm yourself big gut, let me think about this for a few minute." I looked again at the diamond. I sure could use the money and poor King could too, but that city is dangerous for people like us and I'm not to keen on going there. Also, how would I fence something like that? Well actually, now that I think about it, I could break it up and re-polish the fragments, even in pieces it would be worth millions. "Yeah we're going for it." I could see his eyes gloss over as he took in what I had just said.

"King. KING!" I shouted. "Look at me!"

"Yeah Fortune?"

"Not a word to anyone, okay?"

"Yeah Fortune, nobody."

"Good now go finish your workout. We need you good and strong if we are going to pull this off."

"Okay."

I picked up the phone and dialed Marcus' number. This was too big for two men and Marcus was the perfect third for our group.

"Elow?"

"Marcus it's Dean, how's it hangin?"

"Same ole, same ole. What's up wit you?"

"Well I have a job opening that was tailored just for you."

"Really? Well that last job you had for me lasted two years too long if you catch my drift."

"True but when you got out who was there with your cut?"

"Whatever man. What's the job about?"

"Come down to the warehouse over on Chancy Street at five. We have to move fast to pull this one off."

"Alright see you then, and Fortune."

"Yes."

"Plan well man, cause I ain't goin to jail again."

Click.

Well that went better than expected. I wouldn't have called him but, he is really good at what he does and considering the size of the vault they store that stone in overnight, he will have his work cut out for him. There was one last thing I had to consider and that was how this caper would end on the best note for me, so I got to thinking about the possibilities as I headed to the shower.

Marcus arrived at four forty-five. I guess when you work with explosives, lateness is not in your vocab. As he entered I watched him from the upstairs office. He looked much as I remembered him, like me his curly hair had been shaven off (seems to be the thing for black men) his body was still thin and moderately muscled. Unlike me he had an angular and sinister face which actually fit him in my opinion since I know he has killed many a man in his days. But haven't we all. I turned away from the window and went to the down leading stairs, once again running the heist through my head.

"Marcus, glad to see you could make it on such short notice."

"Stop bull-shiting Fortune. I want to get home by ten, there's a special on building demolition I wanna to see."

"Fine." I said as I tossed the paper over to him. He picked it up and as I watched, his face ran through several emotions finally settling on surprise.

"You want to go into the city and take that gem? What are you? Stupid?"

The reaction was what I had expected from him. "No not stupid just very, very sure that we can do it."

"Very sure huh?"

As he said it he looked straight at me, as if trying to read my mind. So I opened it up and let him see my confidence. After a few seconds he looked away and said...

"How?"

“One sec. KING get over here.” In a moment King came running out of his room.

“Fortune?”

“Sit down. I am going to tell you two how we are going to pull off the smoothest heist in history.” And as I told them I couldn’t keep the smile from my face.

The next morning, bright and early I arrived at the museum with the rest of the crowds. As people milled about the huge ornate building I worked my way around spotting every camera I could. It helped that these morons bragged about their security on the net. “Closed circuit cameras. Twelve inch thick safe walls.” Whatever, no defense is perfect, but hey they’ll learn that soon enough. “Really soon.” I thought as I continued my recon. It looks like a child designed this place’s security, cameras had been placed to catch pick pockets and lost kids, and their coverage was useless at best. The guards were another joke; one tall poorly dressed guard’s eyes were red and glazed over indicating a very tired individual. To test that theory I walked up to him and asked for directions to the dinosaur exhibit. Two yawns later I got my answer and walked away. The other two guards were just plain young, a woman with her hair pulled sharply back kept talking on her cell phone. The third, another man, not much over twenty I’d guess, fidgeted in the info booth as if he had someplace else to go. I began to feel like that this was a waste of time until I noticed that a few of the people standing around me looked very suspicious. Well I use the term loosely, to me, they looked suspicious. They spent just a little too much time doing everything. Guards, undercover and better than most. Unfortunately for them I spotted and committed each one of their faces to memory. Now that I had the guards and cameras accounted for the only thing left to do was tap the cameras. I had taken the liberty, before hand, to access the blueprints for this building online and guessed that since the structure was so old they most likely had not upgraded to fiber optic wire for the cameras. I was right again, so the only thing needed was a very small signal relay box magnetically clamped to the rear of the main switch box. The box was conveniently located near the Egyptian exhibit which in turn was in an equally convenient security dead spot. With that done I wandered around for another hour or so “hey I made a donation just like everyone else” and then left.

Time moved faster after the museum run. I rented a room at a hotel within two miles of the museum, that’s the range of the signal amp on the box. From there I watched the guards night and day learning their schedules. Marcus gathered up the tools he would need to crack the safe. I have to admit when he showed up with that big ass gun I nearly choked on my breakfast.

“You want to what?” I yelled.

“Bring this to the job.”

“Come on man. How the hell are we going to carry that? I mean what the hell is it anyway?”

“A two hundred watt laser.”

“WHAT!”

“A two hundred watt laser.”

Jeez he said it with a straight face, twice, he must be serious.

“But that wall is a foot thick how the hell do you expect a laser to cut through it in the time we’ll have?”

“Look do I tell you how to plan? No, so don’t tell me how to break open a safe.”

“Alright bring your laser. If it will get that safe open I’ll work with it.”

“Good, then I’m ready whenever you are.”

Then he walked out. I couldn’t help but notice the smug look on his face as he did, I bet he just loved seeing me lose my cool. Dickhead.

The night before the job I began to use the S.R.B’s other function, the insertion ability, to start sending false readings from the door we would use. I give the guards this much, they checked the door two more times than I had given them but the thirteenth of the night was too much and nobody moved. If it was my place, the third time it went off I would have had the manufacturer in there to look at it, but this is a bureaucratic building. If it’s done by next month I’ll be surprised. During the day there was no point in using it though because the door that we would go in is left unlocked and open so people can come and go as they please. I went once more to recheck the place and nothing had changed. The same old guards and cameras watched the place with bleary tired eyes. So I left, no sense wasting time here when I could be getting ready.

The time was finally upon us, at twelve thirty in the morning Marcus, his big ass gun (excuse me, his laser) carried by King and myself waited in a van a block and a half from the museum. Anticipation raced through my body but I never let it touch my mind, this was just another job after all and a clear mind would ensure that it stayed that way. At twelve forty five we started moving towards the building and stopped at the side door.

Marcus looked at the lock and nearly laughed.

“I could pick this with a shoe horn.” He whispered.

“Shoe horn, lock picks who the fuck cares man, just open it gently.” I whispered back.

He looked back at me and mouthed, “Pussy.” I didn’t let it get to me though, I had a job to do, plus I knew this was how Marcus worked I got cool and he got hot. As the locks popped open and he began to push the door

open a brief jolt of worry ran through me but it was unneeded for as I watched on the small screen I had brought with me, the guards merely shut off the alarm and went about their business. We moved slowly once inside, I had mapped out where we could and could not walk to avoid the cameras the only obstacle was the door that leads to the safe room. That door had a camera facing straight at it with a light shining down on it. This would normally be enough but with the signal tap I was in control of every thing they saw, a simple looped video made that camera as worthless as the rest in stopping us and we made our way down the stairs.

The safe room was big and plain. Uncolored steel reinforced walls protected it from tunneling and shock while cameras, three of them, watched the safe door. These cameras were new to me and did not show up on my screen, so I assumed that they were on their own separate line. It didn't matter too much since they were focused on the safe door, so I told King to help Marcus with setting up his equipment on the side of the safe.

Fifteen minutes and one guard beat upstairs later they were finished. The big ass gu... laser, was on a tripod and wrapped in foam padding, resembling a hot dog wrapped in pastry.

"Ok now stand back and absolutely do not touch the safe."

Both I and King took two then three steps back as Marcus switched on the laser. A deep but gentle hum filled the room and a part of me worried that one of the guards upstairs would hear it. Well there was nothing I could do about it now so I waited for the steel to start melting. Of course I could not see the laser working but suddenly I started feeling very, very, very cold. My breath began to form small clouds of vapor as I breathed, as I looked at the steel wall of the safe it began to get dull and dark, light seemed to hit it and get stuck.

"Ma... Marcus... what the hell are you doing?"

Shhhh." He said.

A few seconds later he turned the laser off and smiled at me as he picked up the hammer we brought.

"Hey Fortune. Knock, knock." Then he hit the steel as hard as he could, and it shattered like cheap glass.

"Impossible." Was all I managed to get out. King to his credit did better than me.

"Wow, Marcus that was something else."

"I know King. I know. And don't worry fortune I'll explain it to you later."

That smug smile crept across his face again but I was too stunned at the results of his handiwork to care right now. There before us was a hole made three feet on each side through a foot of steel and titanium. In a matter of minutes, I began to think of a new plan.

"Marcus you and King pack that thing up and get out now. I will meet you at the truck."

"Ok but hurry up." Marcus replied.

I took off my right shoe as I watched them first walk up the stairs, then on the screen until they got outside. Once they were safely out of the museum, I grabbed the gem. It was heavy, a lot heavier than I had expected making me wish I had kept King here with me. I looked at the screen and waited for the right time to go. It came and I ran as fast as I could up the stairs. Unfortunately, for me this time, I had forgotten to loop the video for myself and so the guards saw me leave the safe room with a diamond so big it caused me to waddle.

Needless to say they were waiting for me at the door, the guards not my guys. I didn't put up a fight and simply dropped the rock to the floor, the last thing I needed was assault added to my attempted grand larceny. When the cops got there they threw me in jail so fast it wasn't even funny, at least not yet.

I found out later from King, who visited me several times, that when the guards saw me the whole block lit up. It seems they cared less about someone getting in than they did about someone getting out and there security was set up to facilitate this end. My trial went quickly enough, I pled guilty and since it was my first (recorded) offense, I was sentenced to just over two years. That went fairly fast as well and in the process I evened a score between myself and Marcus. He doesn't know of course but, my last plan included him getting caught much like this one included my arrest.

So, here I sit in my cell thinking about my route thru life. Prison does that to you ya know. Makes you think of what you have done wrong in your life. I, fortunately do not suffer from the same mental instabilities as my peers, I do what I do because it is fun. The satisfaction of a plan worked to the hilt is better than any high from drugs. They say prison changes you. But, nothing has changed for me; I am still an arrogant know-it-all with good cause. Like Marcus, I am really fucking good at what I do. Take this heist for instance, I'm not stressed that I am sitting here in jail in fact you'd be surprised how fast two years will go by when forty million dollars is waiting for you at the end. What do I mean you may ask, well it's like this. I wasn't really after the diamond. It was just a coincidence that King brought it to my attention when he did. In fact an antiques dealer had requested that I procure him a scroll from the museum that was owned by some Egyptian King. I had a fake made to replace it and hid the original, which was also in the safe in my shoe. The problem was that if I had gotten away they might have tested the scroll to be sure it wasn't damaged, but it could not be examined until after I had been tried and convicted for breaking into the safe and stealing from the museum. Now if they find out it is a fake and some how connect it to me I have already been tried for that particular crime of theft. Although I doubt they will, for that other plan I thought up while robbing them blind has worked perfectly. It involves me working for them as a security consultant. You would think that they wouldn't even consider hiring me but, sure as shit my contract arrived in the mail this morning.

NO LONGER LIVING

BY JORDANA SYETTA

EVERY TIME I CRY
ANOTHER PIECE OF ME SLOWLY DIES
THEY IGNORE ME
THEY PRETEND THERE'S NOTHING TO SEE

WHEN THEY ASK WHAT IS WRONG
ALL THEY REALLY WANT IS THE SAME OLD SONG
WHEN THEY ASK FOR AN EXPLANATION
THEY SAY IT'S ALL A BIG EXAGGERATION

I CAN'T STOP CRYING
OR MY HOPES OF DYING
I JUST WANT ALL OF THIS PAIN TO GO AWAY
BUT IT FORCES ME TO STAY
IF I COULD RUN IF I COULD HIDE
IF ONLY I COULD ESCAPE ALL OF THIS PAIN DEEP INSIDE

IT HURTS TO THE POINT THAT IT EVEN HURTS TO BREATHE
AS I STRUGGLE TO CONTINUE I WONDER WHY, WHY I CAN'T JUST LEAVE
BUT I CAN'T BECAUSE IT WON'T BE SUCCESSFUL NOTHING EVER IS
SO LOST IN THIS PAIN I NO LONGER REMEMBER WHAT I USED TO MISS

NO LONGER LIVING
MERELY PRETENDING EXISTING
I CRY MYSELF TO SLEEP EVERY NIGHT
I NO LONGER CARE ABOUT ANYTHING I CAN'T REMEMBER WHAT I BELIEVED WAS RIGHT

I JUST WISH ALL OF THIS PRETENDING WOULD END NOT JUST MY OWN
ALL OF THIS PRETENDING IS MAKING ME SICK THEY BEG ME TO PRETEND LIKE THE SMILE OF A CLOWN
I SHOULD TAKE SOME LIPSTICK AND PAINT A BIG SMILE
I MIGHT AS WELL MAYBE THEN I COULD BE HAPPY FOR AWHILE

CAUSE MY LIFE IS CONDEMNED, CAUSE THERE'S NO WHERE LEFT TO RUN, CAUSE I CAN NO LONGER STOP CRYING,
CAUSE I GAVE UP ON LIFE AND NOW EVEN ON DYING.

SHATTERED PIECES

By EVAN PEREZ



This was truly good bye,
 Wasn't it?
 It amazing what the body puts you through,
 When you feel like your heart has been shattered,
 Into many pieces.
 These broken pieces,
 Of a former heart,
 Have turned into dust.
 You watched it all,
 As it fell apart,
 And others did everything they could,
 To stop this undeniable truth.
 It became utterly pointless,
 For only one of you tried,
 While the other stood there,
 And let themselves fall between cracks.
 Why fall for someone,
 Why go with them,
 Why do the things that was done,
 If you truly never wanted to be with them?

Misconception of the heart,
 Is what brings this child down to his knees,
 And tears that turned to sorrow,
 To forget the pain that has been endured.
 A fiery determination,
 Allows the child to live on,
 And try to find what he seeks,
 That of which,
 No one knows.
 Walk your paths,
 To never speak again,
 Wish each other luck,
 But never look back,
 For you were never friends,
 You two were just people,
 Who mistook each other for the one.
 Through shattered pieces,
 Find another to love,
 Once again.

Trial Among My Peers

I stand here,
Among you all,
And sense your judgmental eyes.

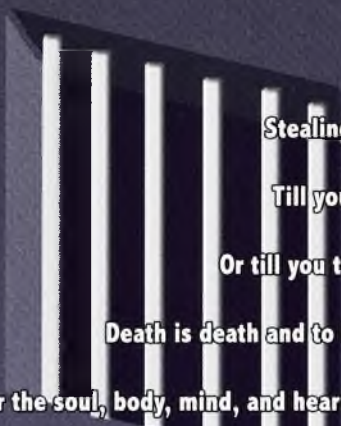
I stand alone,
To tell you all,
No to judge me,
Till my side is heard.

You may say that my ideals are mad,
That I am wrong for the ideals I teach,
That I am guilty for my immoral actions,
But is it truly wrong for me to think differently than the rest of you?

I teach what I believe,
But it doesn't mean,
You have to listen,
I say what's on my mind,
Doesn't mean or make it right.

Murder is murder,
Unless asked to rid of their pathetic life.
Rape is rape,
Unless they don't tell you to stop,
Or if that person likes to be treated like that.

Lie is lying,
Unless you don't get caught,
And hide the truth.



Stealing is stealing,
Till you are caught,
Or till you tell the truth.
Death is death and to Die is to die,
For the soul, body, mind, and heart were weak.

A will can be broken,
Through manipulation and corruption.

Yes, my ideals are different,
But they are my ideals.

I know many of you,
Won't accept them,
And many of you,

Will judge me harshly.
I pleaded my case,

Said what needed to be said,
And wait your judgment.

If speaking your mind is wrong,
Then I am guilty.

So pass your judgment,
My brethren,

But know this,

My words shall never be silence.

by **Evan Perez**

The Walls

by Michael Miley

The walls loom high above,
 The skies shrouded in darkness and dread and fear.
 The climb it seems for mile into the sky and all is gray and dark below.
 Things human and inhuman, good and evil dwell below the dark skies and gray walls.
 There are worse things down there more horrid things than can be imagined.
 Their beady red eyes staring from underneath the stoops and above from the roofs.
 The walls they begin to close in, the dread shall walk beneath the dark gray skies.
 The walls loom ominously, the streets get smaller and narrower and more red eyes appear
 beneath the stoops and atop the roofs but alas none see them but me,

The snows fall and pile up ever higher.
 The chill winds blow and the people are all bound up.
 That's all it is now snow and rain, rain and snow, we're trapped every one of us.
 The snow blocks all, I have no escape, there is no escape

They grow ever more fierce and ever more vicious.
 The people slowly disappear but none notice.
 They must be fought, they must fall for none good can come from them.
 The streets get smaller, and smaller, we become more crowded as time goes by.
 The people live in fear, but none know it.

They will continue to oppress us.
 They will continue to terrorize us.
 They do it with impunity, for the monsters have come but only I know.
 The walls get higher, and the sky gets darker. And only I see it.
 The fear has come and shall stay for I cannot fight them alone, and that is what I am alone in the dead
 and darkened streets, alone in this dark and desolate place, alone in the snow and the cold, all alone.

Hands

THE GREAT

101111

Serpentine Interviews New York Times Best Selling Writer Michael A. Stackpole

At Ubercon VIII

Serpentine: What gave you the inspiration to begin writing?

Stackpole: Well when I was 6 years old I had written a poem when I was in first grade and my mother sent it off to a magazine, so the first piece of mail that I had ever gotten addressed to me personally was a rejection slip and I just happened to be competitive enough that I wanted to prove them wrong. As I was growing up I liked listening to stories, I liked writing stories, and so the idea always was to see if you could get them published. I came from a family where the jobs choices were be a lawyer, be a doctor, or a teacher, Except that my mothers father was a lawyer and back in 1937 he'd had a book of legal anecdotes published, little slim volume there were only 1000 of them printed and yet it was something the whole family was really proud of that her father was a published author. So in this sort of narrow choice of occupations that were open to me, there was this little sliver of author, and I was like "Yeah ok, cool why don't I do that?" So that coupled with the desire to tell stories and get paid for telling stories is what gave me the direction to write.



Serpentine: How did you become acquainted in the industry and first make your way into it?

Stackpole: Well I started out through the gaming industry and I had played role playing games back in the dawn of time, when they were just starting, and I did some projects, I got paid for those and got hired to work on others, That gave me an in to the role playing industry. I worked for company called Flying Buffalo and we published a magazine called Scourers Apprentice, which would take one piece of fiction per issue. So the other editors and I went to the world

fantasy convention, which in 1980 was in Baltimore and we went to the convention met a bunch of writers, listened to editors talk about writing. I had always been writing short stories and had wanted to write more short stories, but that gave me a window into the general industry, because I really didn't know anything more than anybody else would, so I kept going to more fantasy conventions, kept working in the industry, kept honing my craft, becoming a better writer by doing game table top game designs and doing other things. Then I finally began to sell some stories and I got my big break through in the gaming industry because this company FASA had a Battle Tech line of novels and they had some other projects and were willing to entertain the idea that I could write a novel. I should them Talian Revenant, which was my first completed novel and they decided based on that to give me a trilogy and so they offered me three one hundred thousand word novels and told me I had 9 months to do the job, and I basically knew if I said no I would get nothing and If I said yes I would have to do the work so I said "sure piece of cake, no problem I can do it" (Laughs). And that was that was where I got my start so in 1988 the first two of those came out and there was no looking back.

Serpentine: What is your favorite genre to write? I know you write Science fiction and Fantasy, which would you say you enjoy more?

Stackpole: I would actually have to say its fantasy, only because I haven't really written hard Science fiction, most of the stuff I've written is sort of science fantasy. I mean I like Sci-fi and I have written some science fiction short stories and stuff, but most of the stuff I'm doing is fantasy. I enjoy fantasy because it can be a lot wilder and there are a lot of really interesting concepts that you can deal with, I can make up brand new magic spells For every single book that I do and I can have fun designing that sort of stuff You know you can't make up physics for every Sci-Fi novel your going to do, you can make up new aliens but you can also make up new Fantasy races. I certainly enjoy both genres I enjoy mysteries I enjoy a lot of different things, but writing right now I'm really good at fantasy and that's probably what I'll be doing for the for seeable future, but if the opportunity came to write in any other genre I'd definitely take it.

Serpentine: About your writing style, if I could give you an analogy of the image that comes to mind when it think of your writing. I see a big kid taking an Ant farm like when you say you reach a block and you cant figure how these characters would get out of it you said you would throw in these elements these variables and see how they would react, kind of like a kid shaking that Ant farm and seeing how the ants would react to that catalyst. Where did you pick up the style as opposed to creating a character painting them up and very mechanically creating a story?

Stackpole: You know I think the very first time that I realized how I had to do this, I had done the first draft of Talian Revenant back in 1986 and my main character Nolan was always one step ahead of everyone else he was always smarter than everybody else. And while it was a good story there was something that was pain in the ass about him because he was always smarter than everyone else but the world was good and solid. When I started doing the second draft at a fairly critical juncture instead of having him be one step ahead of everybody I let him be one step behind and struggling to catch up and all of a sudden that made this huge difference, no longer was he this big know it all, who nobody would like now all of a sudden he was the underdog that everybody could cheer for. That was where I basically saw, here's something when you turn it on its head or turn it inside out and there's all sorts of other things you could do with it. I had also read a book back when I was with Flying Buffalo that was about product creation and it was written by a guy who had created all sorts of interesting products, and he said when you take something interesting and you swap black for white you turn it up side down and inside out and look at it in different ways, you all of a sudden have something brand new.

Serpentine: Is that something that you had to teach yourself?

Stackpole: Well I read his book and I would take this precept and apply it. I was supposed to do this story for a Superhero anthology, and I had a superhero named Revenant, who was very dark and batman-esque and I knew exactly what defined a Revenant story. I did two stories for the character that were B, B- stories. And I was in a funk and I wasn't feeling good about it. It was driving me nuts. And I sat down and I said ok I'm going to swap black for white and im going to turn it upside down and im going to turn it inside out. Revenant's stories were always grim and nasty and were always of him solo so I invented a super group that was putting gin him trial for something he had done. I gave him a six yr old sidekick. It was not a grim story, it was a comedy story. And I took every precept that I thought was a revenant story and I just twisted them all around and I was still able to have the same grim character except he was dealing with some characters that were a little bit ridiculous and so there got to be some humor in it. Suddenly he has a six yr old kid that he has to rescue from a compound with a kid, in essence, is being held against his will. I get to play with that. I get this whole antagonistic group of super heroes that are putting him on trial who he doesn't respect and doesn't want to deal with and all of the sudden, that

changed the whole paradigm that I was looking at and the story was just a great story that came together and so it's one of those little things that you learn. These little techniques that you apply, that you apply at the right time, and you get these brand new perspectives, and you get a brand new product out of it which is just wickedly cool. "I tend to be very mechanistic about it that way and I tend to think a lot about the process of what im doing. "

Serpentine: it's very deceptive. It seems so fluid.

Stackpole: The thing is, once you put all these structures in place. Like once you've got the house built, then you can go and decorate and it looks beautiful. But it's gotta be built and all the floors have to be level and all the walls have to be square and if you don't get that stuff down, you don't have the freedom to do the other stuff to make it look really good.

Serpentine: what can you say of your new project that you see different in your old projects.

Stackpole: In the new projects VS. The old projects, chars are more complex. I have them doing more things, I have more indifferent outcomes than I would have had before. I've never shied away from killing chars and I still do that but I'll have chars ending up being changed in different ways. Ways that are cool, that you wouldn't expect. In the current books that I'm doing, the age of discovery books, these books have just gone off in directions that I've never expected and I end up pushing myself to do things that have never been done before. One of the things that I ended up doing in these books that most authors shy away from is bringing a character back from the dead, and I realize that while working on these books, that death is kind of mutable in this universe- therefore instead of shying away from bringing back people, I bring bunches of them back from the dead. The question is: where are they going to show up and what good is it going to be? So now, instead of people worrying about their favorite characters being dead, they get to worry about are they going to die, are they going to be coming back, how are they going to be useful, and are they going to die again. So all of the sudden, again there are more possibilities, more energy.

Serpentine: For young writers now, what tips would you give them for developing stories and writing in general?

Stackpole: Well one: you read critically. You look at how other writers write and you adapt their techniques to your style and what you're doing. Second: never settle for good enough. There was a chapter in *One Dragon's Rage*. There was something I was doing in there that I knew I had planned for 5 or 6 yrs where there was this scene where guys were being chased. They get to a crevasse, there's a rope bridge over the crevasse, they're going over the rope bridge, and we all know the rope bridge is going to get cut. People fall off, people die, all this other stuff. It's a scene we've all seen in a dozen B movies and that was what I'd intended to do. The chapters were indicating that that was what was going get happen and the morning I sat down to write that chapter I said. "ya know what, I've seen that in dozens of B movies so if I do that, I'll have given them stuff that they've already seen." So I wondered how do I do this better? How do I do it differently? How do I turn it on its head? So my characters are being chased and it's snowing, arrows are flying and they turn the corner because they're going across the canyon. They're going to go down that bridge, they're going to get across the crevasse, they're going to be saved because they've cut it behind them and one man turns to the one that's leading them and says "when was the last time you were here?" and the other man says "75 yrs ago" and they said they were going to do this and I never thought they would. There's no rope bridge there, there's a frickin 4 way highway, granite bridge, beautiful art, statues, everything. Not only can they not cut it after them, it's too wide for any of them to defend it. They are so screwed. It's horrible and right there the moment where that little conversation goes on, the readers whose expectation has been: rope bridge cut, stuff like that, they're all sitting there thinking "holy shit. Oh my God. I didn't see this". So there it is. You have to push yourself to go beyond and push yourself to do more than you would normally and once you do that, things are going to be cool.

Serpentine Interviews Kevin Seimbida of Palladium Books at Ubercon VIII

Serpentine: Ok, explain to us your role at palladium. I've been on your site and I know it's a big one.

Seimbida: My role at palladium is sort of a little bit of everything. I founded a company, I started out being a gamer myself and I was running this D&D game and I didn't like a lot of role-playing rules and this was back in 79 ' , 80'. I started changing/to tweak things and I really wanted to be a comic book illustrator, maybe a comic book writer and the



more I tweaked the did games and rewriting entire parts of it, I got more and more involved in role-playing and analyzing games and stuff, the next thing I knew, I had guys telling me "kev this is great, you gotta publish your own books". So I shopped my game system around and couldn't find a buyer and I said "what the heck, I'll try publishing it myself" and one thing kinda led to another and the next thing I knew, I was heading a company for the next 25 years. My role in it to this day is I'm then chief game designer, I edit and rewrite submissions from freelancers. I handle the publicity, and advertising and marketing and generally runt he business and cut deals, whether it's for film, or smaller licenses and things. So I'm kind of a jack-of-all-trades and do a little bit of everything

Serpentine: The rift system that you created, how did that come about and what're the elements in it?

Siembida: Well I guess, like I said, a lot of it was I started playing original did (I guess actually it was second edition) and there were things in the game that I didn't agree and didn't like that they were doing and I guess my motivation was kind of how could I make this better or how could I change this and there were things that didn't challenge me and I wanted more emphasis on character and story. I thought some of it was dumb. Like ok, we'd kick in a door and beat up these goblins and you go to the door next door and kick that in there's a whole other gaggle of god knows what, orcs, or a dragon and obviously you didn't know who you were fighting down the way and I just thought "that's kind of ok and it's fun for awhile" but I wanted more elaborate stories and more focus on character. So that was really sort of my inspiration although I draw a lot of my inspiration from comics as well. That was my original goal: to be a comic book writer and artist. I love the way comic books tell a story and if you really look at a lot of my books, there's elements of comics in there from characterizations to our artwork, and it (artwork) always reflects on the writing and to me the illustrations are as much a part of our books and our story as the actual text.

Serpentine: Now would you consider actually coming out with your own comic book for your label or having other people do it?

Siembida: Actually I'd love to see either one. We've toyed with doing comic books for a long time actually. In fact we have an idea we've been kicking around for the adventures of Erin Tarn. She's one of our major characters in the rift books (and it'll be about) as a girl, so you'll actually get to see her as she grows up. I'm thinking a cool way to do that would be manga. It'd be a great format. I'm looking for a really good manga artist right now and letterer and stuff and I think it'd be really fun to do. So yea, we've definitely played with the idea, it's just one of the things with running a company, and people always look at me a little strange when I say this, is trying to figure out what not to do. There're so many opportunities but you can only do so much and so much well so we focus a lot on role laying but yea I'd love to break out into comics and get a good creative team and maybe license some of our stuff. Someone had once mentioned that they knew Jim Lee and his company might be interested in doing stuff and I said, "JIM LEE!?! Yea! That'd be great"- because I love Jim Lee's stuff and that never went anywhere, at least not yet. But yea, if the right team came along and a great company and I thought they'd be able to do a good job, I'd be glad to license it and let someone else do it too.

Serpentine : I read that you got the license to robotech and ninja turtles. How will you go about keeping up with those stories?

Siembida: Actually, we used to have Robotech and ninja turtles. They were two licenses that helped launch my company back in the mid 80's and we got the robotech license back and we'll be building sort of on what they want. When you license something you kinda hafta go with what the licensure wants. We've seen Shadow Chronicles and we're going to kind of build from that. We will draw from the old material so you're going to see some things from the old macros and mos peda and southern cross material but we're going to take it in some different directions and kind of build on what shadow chronicles set up. With TMNT, we love the license and we've been talking about possibly getting the ninja turtles back as well because it was fun and we'd had both of those (licenses) for 15 years and did a great job with it and it's kinda fun going back to our roots and redoing them.

Serpentine: Last question: How do you feel about being here at Ubercon this year and representing your company as a major head. What's your take on the whole thing and your role in making this possible?

Siembida: Well it's always a little strange especially when they go "wow, you're such a nice guy and you just talk to us like normal people" and I'm like "One: no gamer is normal but, two: I'm just a gamer geek just like you guys. It's just that I happen to be a published gamer geek- so, much like you guys: I like telling my stories, I like hearing your stories, I like exchanging ideas". As a guest at a convention, I feel it's my job to be there, chat, exchange ideas, sign autographs and stuff like that because that's what helps make it fun for our fans. So I always have a great time at conventions and Ubercon's been fantastic. We've had a couple of great games. Yesterday was a charity auction for the Red Cross and they scared me because they were charging 20 bucks and I'm thinking, "Wow 20 bucks to play in one of my games? I'll have like two people. . . ", but I had 13 people and we had a blast and played until 12:30am. It's been great. I though Ubercon was a really fun convention, I had fun and I hope you did too.

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