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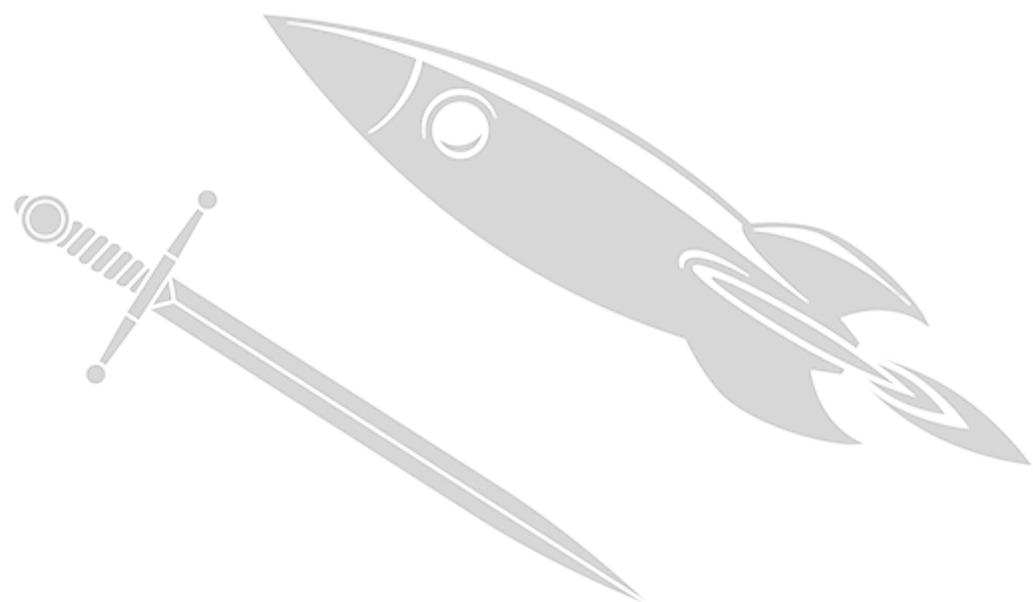
WOMEN DESTROY SCIENCE FICTION! SPECIAL ISSUE
EBOOK SAMPLER



ISSUE 49 • JUNE 2014
GUEST EDITED BY CHRISTIE YANT

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



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SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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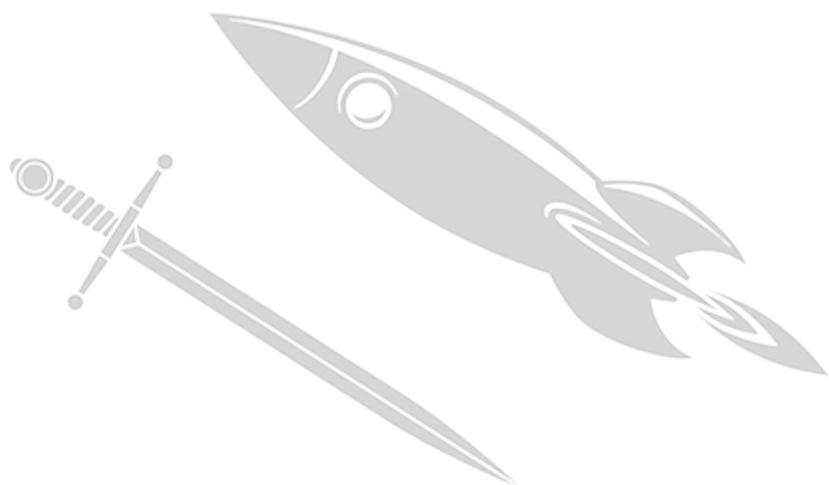
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FROM THE EDITOR



Introduction to the Women Destroy Science Fiction!

Sampler

Christie Yant

The summer of 2013 was a rough one for women in science fiction. Every few weeks there was a new reminder that to a certain subset of the field, women are not welcome. There were multiple articles returning to the tired accusation that women aren't writing "real" SF; disputes about the way the field is represented by vintage cheesecake art on the cover of a professional trade publication; the glib admonition that if women are to succeed, they should be more like Barbie, in her "quiet dignity." For many readers, it was a very nasty surprise to discover this undercurrent running through the ocean of imaginative fiction we love.

And it just. Kept. Coming.

We got tired. We got angry. And then we came out the other side of exhaustion and anger deeply motivated to do something.

Thus the Women Destroy Science Fiction! special issue of *Lightspeed Magazine* was conceived. We did a Kickstarter campaign in early 2014 to help make the issue into a double issue; we crushed our fundraising goal in about 7 hours and ended up funding at more than 1000% of our original funding goal, with more than 2800 backers. Because of that tremendous success, we unlocked two major stretch goals which resulted in the publication of companion volumes Women Destroy Fantasy! and Women Destroy Horror!, which are being published as issues of *Lightspeed's* sister publications, *Fantasy* and *Nightmare*.

Women Destroy Science Fiction! contains more than 150,000 words or material, including eleven all-new, original science fiction short stories, plus four short story reprints, a novella reprint, and for the first time ever, an array of fifteen flash fiction stories. In addition to all that goodness, we also have more than two dozen personal essays by women talking about their experiences reading and writing science fiction, plus seven in-depth nonfiction articles.

Thanks to the efforts of more than one hundred women, our Women Destroy Science Fiction! issue includes a wealth of original short stories,

flash fiction, reprints, essays, articles, and original art highlighting the work of women in the field, past and present.

I hope you enjoy this sampler of *Lightspeed's* Women Destroy Science Fiction! special issue. If you'd like to purchase the full issue, it's available in trade paperback for \$17.99 and in ebook for just \$3.99. Visit DestroySF.com to learn more about the issue (and/or the Fantasy and Horror volumes), including where you can buy it. Or to preview the full table of contents for Women Destroy Science Fiction!, see below.

Thanks for reading!

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Christie Yant is a science fiction and fantasy writer, Associate Publisher for *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, and guest editor of *Lightspeed's* Women Destroy Science Fiction! special issue. Her fiction has appeared in anthologies and magazines including *Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy 2011* (Horton), *Armored*, *Analog Science Fiction & Fact*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *io9*, *Wired.com*, and China's *Science Fiction World*. Her work has received honorable mentions in *Year's Best Science Fiction* (Dozois) and *Best Horror of the Year* (Datlow), and has been long-listed for StorySouth's Million Writers Award. She lives on the central coast of California with two writers, an editor, and assorted four-legged nuisances. Follow her on Twitter @christieyant.

"Women can't..." "Women don't..." "Women shouldn't..."

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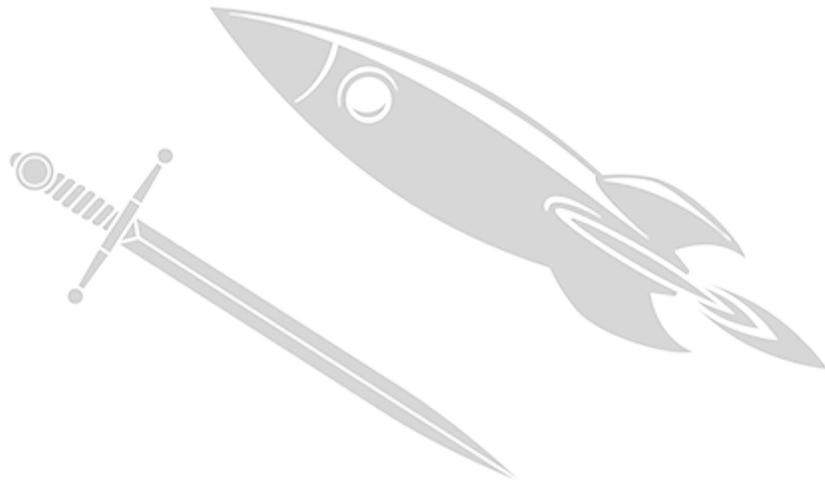
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ORIGINAL SHORT FICTION

EDITED BY CHRISTIE YANT



The Lonely Sea in the Sky

Amal El-Mohtar

White as Diamonds

My name is Leila Ghufuran. I am fifty-six years old. I am encouraged to begin this journal in this way because, says the team's psychiatrist, telling myself who I am will prove beneficial. This is, of course, ridiculous, because I am not my name—did not even choose it for myself—and a name is always a synecdoche at most, a label misapplied at the least. My name does not tell you that I am a planetary geologist, that I love my work enough to submit to this indignity, that despite the fact that I am a valuable member of my team I am expected to waste time on churning out this miserable performance for the sake of a stamp before I can get back to work.

I suppose I see what she did there. Well done, Hala.

I am allegedly exhibiting signs of succumbing to the middle stages of Meisner Syndrome, colloquially known as adamancy, which sounds more like a method of divination than anything else—as is appropriate, frankly, to the hazy mysticism that passes for the disease's pathology. "A preoccupation with the nature and properties of diamonds, and/or the study of the same, especially extraterrestrial"; "obsessive behaviour related to the study of diamonds, especially extraterrestrial"; "unusual levels of alertness and attention to detail"—*I am a planetary geologist, Hala!* These are features, not flaws! How could several years' friendship not—

I am pausing to remind myself that as someone who's known me for several years is insisting on this exercise, perhaps something is a little off, and perhaps I am not the person best qualified to judge. But the symptoms of adamancy are ridiculously vague and diffuse and at the present moment are hampering my actual work. I am meant to be studying Lucyite at our Triton base. Instead I've been banished—is hyperbole a symptom of adamancy?—to the Kola Borehole in order to assist with extra-galactic neutrino detection. Not content to exile me to Siberia, my friend, you literally found the deepest hole on the planet to shove me into under the guise of studying the sky.

I can actually hear you saying this is for my own good. It's a little

hilarious, actually.

Meisner's Syndrome, aka Adamantine Dissociation Syndrome, aka Adamancy

Etiology

Theorized to be a consequence of cumulative exposure to Lucyite-powered technologies or the Corona fields of extraterrestrial minerals. Affects an estimated one percent of the global population.

Symptoms

Hyperfocus, especially on light refraction; sudden, temporary sensation of cold (“cold flash”); urgent need to submerge oneself in hot water. A preoccupation with the nature and properties of diamonds, and/or the study of the same, especially extraterrestrial; unusual levels of alertness and attention to detail alternating with periods of trance-like calm.

Risks and Complications

As with other obsessive disorders, sufferers are at risk of self-neglect relating to hygiene, nutrition, and personal relationships, resulting in a poor quality of life. Certain kinds of work are also at risk: driving, operating heavy machinery, and performing delicate tasks are all to be avoided.

Progression

At more advanced stages of the disease, sufferers are prone to sometimes violent emotional outbursts, often accompanied by memory loss. Consequently, it may become difficult to convince a sufferer of their diagnosis.

Treatment

Symptoms can be managed with varying degrees of success with anti-anxiety medications. Cognitive behavioural therapy and other forms of talk therapy have not been found to be effective. Some studies suggest isolation from crystalline structures and Paragon technologies is helpful, and others have demonstrated an easing of symptoms when the sufferer is underground—possibly as this isolates them from most instances of

ambient light refraction and the trances these can provoke.

Prognosis

Even with treatment and lifestyle change, chances of full recovery remain slim.

Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds

I could say I have always loved diamonds, but this isn't quite true. I have, for as long as I can remember, loved the idea of diamonds; loved diamonds in stories; loved the things compared to diamonds in metaphor. Stars; the spark of light on water; that sort of thing.

It comes down, I suppose, to loving light—but no, more than that—it must be about the breaking of light, its containment. A bit sinister when put that way, isn't it? Sunlight on its own holds little appeal, but angle it against the ocean, make it dance—poetry.

Diamond oceans on Neptune! I suppose that's what started everything off—those early accounts of *diamond oceans* in the twenty-teens. Determine that diamonds behave like water—that you can have diamond in liquid form that isn't graphite, and chunks of diamond floating on it—and you have the realisation of metaphor, you have every fairy tale made flesh. Only a hop and a skip in the mind from that to holidaying on extraterrestrial getaways by shores of literally crystalline water.

All well and good until you think about the heat and the pressure required to maintain diamonds in liquid state, and realize you'd be liquid yourself long before you could dip a careful toe in.

Still. It still sounds beautiful to me, somehow, in spite of everything, in spite of having worked with solid chunks of it on Triton. A diamond ocean in the sky. Like that John Masefield poem you recited for me once—you remember how I misheard it? *I must go down to the sea again / the lonely sea in the sky.*

Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky. Isn't it incredible that we take something born out of the bowels of the earth and stud the sky with it in our songs and stories? Isn't it desperately strange?

Isn't it even stranger that we should *find* them where we'd imagined

them to be for so long?

I hope you're feeling guilty, Hala.

Teleportation Possible Within Ten Years, Scientists Say

Recent studies coming out of Triton Base 1 provide a veritable cavalcade of information about the mineral composition of Neptune's mantle and the unusual properties of the liquid carbon contained there.

“Though the only carbon samples we succeeded in extracting from the planet were solid, and almost indistinguishable in their crystal lattice structures from Earth diamonds, we discovered that super-heating them until they turned liquid caused them to vanish, completely, without a trace,” said an excited Dr. Jay Winzell. “Eventually we realized that the spikes of thermal activity we'd been observing on Neptune *corresponded exactly* to the moments we liquefied the crystals. It was a leap, but—that's what they were doing! Our samples, made liquid, were *jumping back to Neptune* and mixing with the diamond ocean there.”

Dr. Winzell believes it could be possible, with further study, to understand how this teleportive quality works. “We're a long way off, still theorizing how this behaviour is even possible within our current understanding of quantum mechanics—but it's conceivable that once we've understood it, we could harness this property somehow, contain and channel it such that we could effectively *ride* the liquid substance across vast distances instantaneously within a closed system. The journey to Neptune would be shortened from years to seconds. But imagine using it on Earth! This could do for travel what the internet once did for communication. It's a massive paradigm shift—our very notions of distance, of space and time, will have to be re-examined.”

Dr. Winzell, as discoverer of the diamond-like mineral, has elected to name it Lucyite, in honour of the iconic Beatles song.

Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes

I'm not allowed mirrors. Too much chance of light reflections causing relapse. I'm astonished they let me work at all, but I suppose you knew it

would be worse for me without something to keep my mind and hands busy.

I hate it here.

From “Untangling the Melee: Towards Practical Applications of Quantum Entanglement,” by Dr. Elaine Gallagher

In conclusion, while there is as yet no definitive theory explaining *why* Lucyite behaves as it does, the properties are clear: Operating on the principles of quantum entanglement outlined above, we can consistently manage the energy state of each individual unit. When liquid, the unit’s entangled property teleports it to the location of the unit with the next highest energy level, allowing for distance—bearing in mind that, as previously stated, “teleport,” though a less than ideal description of linear movement theorized as taking place in higher dimensions, is nevertheless the nearest term one can accurately use without succumbing to the more colloquial “blink,” “jump,” or, even more ludicrously, Paragon Industries’ preferred term of “shine.”

Diamonds are Forever

I am encouraged to write about my family, but all I want is to write to you, Hala. It helps me to think of saying these things to you and I would rather not pretend that there is privacy here, between my mind and the screen. I would rather address you and the things you request of me.

When I was small my mother would read me bedtime stories out of holy texts. She later told me this was so I wouldn’t ever mistake fictions for fact, but I had little sense of her project then; I just loved the fantastical tales about things transforming into other things, people doing bad things and being punished or forgiven or vindicated.

She read me this bit out of the Talmud, once, that I loved desperately for how strange and otherworldly it seemed to me:

Rab Judah, the Indian, related: Once we were travelling on board a ship when we saw a precious stone that was surrounded by a snake. A diver descended to bring it up. [Thereupon] the snake approached with the

purpose of swallowing the ship, [when] a raven came and bit off its head and the waters were turned into blood. A second snake came, took [the head of the decapitated snake] and attached it [to the body], and it revived. Again [the snake] approached, intent on swallowing the ship. Again a bird came and severed its head. [Thereupon the diver] seized the precious stone and threw it into the ship. We had with us salted birds. [As soon as] we put [the stone] upon them, they took it up and flew away with it.

It's probably fair to say I wanted to go off-world because of these stories. You grow up on giant snakes and life-rendering gems and the prospect of a manned mission to Neptune's not reaching very far at all.

You know the Talmud is structured like a diamond of popular imagination, too? Seders at the crown, footnotes at the culet. You'll have to ask Ben about it for me sometime.

I was reminded of that passage when my mother read me stories of Sindbad later on—in his second voyage he comes to a valley of diamonds beset by giant serpents that will eat anyone who approaches. So Sindbad figures out a way around them: He throws down slabs of raw meat into the valley that they might become studded with gems before attracting great birds to swoop down and carry the diamond-laden meat into their nests.

Is this not the Melee? Or perhaps the reverse of it—diamonds carrying slabs of meat through space at astonishing speed, in spite of serpents, in spite of all—and is our understanding of the Melee not roughly this sophisticated?

Was ours not a ship navigating towards a serpent wrapped around a precious gem?

And have we not cut—have we not stolen—

It's funny, isn't it—my mother wanted me to think of scriptures as fairy tales so that I would not be their dupe. But as a consequence, all my frames of reference, my earliest acquisitions of knowledge, are fantasy. Fairy tales have, in a sense, become my scripture.

I am very cold. I need a bath.

The Gasp Heard Round the World

Thousands gathered today to observe the first human use of the network of gates known as the Melee. Established by international conglomerate Paragon Industries in collaboration with governments around the world, the Melee revolutionized international commerce with its Lucyite-powered technology, allowing instantaneous transport of goods across the world. Today Paragon president Alastair Moor prepared to be the first to blink from Glasgow to Damascus and back.

Cameras in Glasgow recorded Mr. Moor stepping into the Glasgow Gate and waiting for its in-built Z-mechanism to activate and liquefy the Lucyite. No sooner had Mr. Moor vanished from the Glasgow monitors than he appeared, not a hair out of place, on the Damascene cameras, having successfully effected a journey of over 3,000 miles in less than a single second.

“One small step for man,” said Moor, and the crowd erupted in cheers.

She dwelt among the untrodden ways

I never feel clean enough. Is this because of what I can't remember doing? I never feel clean enough. I walk the halls and I sit to write and all I want is to wash, wash, wash until my skin pinks and peels into petals floating on the surface of the bath. If all of me could slough off into remnants, into something beautiful—if all of me could dissolve—if I could just get clean—

Why do you suppose we have so many stories about diamonds? Diamonds are curse-stones in some places, markers of great fortune in others. Diamonds are so hard and so brittle, so strong and so delicate at once. Do you suppose, ultimately, those stories are all about us? Carbon to carbon to carbon?

Do you think it possible that, once upon a time, all our diamonds were an ocean? It used to be that all land was one land, no? Perhaps we had a diamond ocean here. Perhaps we loved it, and it died. Perhaps it loved us and it died. Perhaps because it loved us it died.

No motion has she now, no force;

She neither hears nor sees;

Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course,

With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Wordsworth. Maybe I am going mancy after all.

From Philip Kidman's A Melee for You and Me

There is a very real sense in which we can comprehend quantum entanglement as applied to Lucyite in terms of living memory. Without wishing to lend a crumb of credibility to the Friends of Lucy's extremist ravings, it could be said that the Melee operates on a carefully curated forgetfulness: After all, the entirety of the Melee's infrastructure is powered by the dispersal of one large chunk of Lucyite brought to Earth from Triton. By breaking it into precise halves and carefully calibrating each half's liquid state, Nobel-winning Dr. Jay Winzell succeeded in causing the halves to blink towards each other in a closed system, instead of back to Neptune—which is, as the physicists have it, the place of highest entanglement. Dr. Winzell effectively pioneered the method for entangling Lucyite crystals with each other, the further perfection and sophistication of which enables the complexity of the Melee. Possessing only “memory” of each other, the fractions of Lucyite liquefied at each gate will always blink towards each other within the Melee's careful curation of space.

Looking ahead, we can see that every upgrade to the Melee in the future—any expansion beyond Neptune, or extension of the existing system on Earth beyond our current stock of calibrated crystal—will require an enormous overhaul to take into account the higher entanglement of new Lucyite. Luckily the system is at present so efficient that no such recalibration will be necessary within our lifetimes, and indeed, any introduction of new crystal into the system would throw it into disastrous confusion and disarray at best, or provoke a devastating chain reaction at worst.

It would appear that, ironically, the most advanced system of travel and transport we have yet devised is powered by absent-mindedness. The worst thing we could do in our pursuit of getting places quickly is jog our precious superconductor's memory of where it came from.

Coal to Diamonds

A melee is a packet of small diamonds all of roughly the same size and value.

A melee is a fight, a mess, a jumble.

A melee has three vowels in it, four if you count the indefinite article.

A melee could be a woman's name.

Amelie, Amelie, Amelie.

A melee or eight. Amelie, orate. A melior ate.

Ameliorate.

Triton Base 1 Incident Report: Dr. Hala Moussa

At 0200.23.04.2076 NTC I found Dr. Leila Ghufran in the laboratory, palms pressed into a tray of Lucyite chips. They had cut into her palms and her hands were bleeding. She was standing very still and did not respond to her name until I approached her and initiated physical contact. I grasped her shoulder and pulled her to face me, at which point I saw blood on her lips and at the corners of her mouth. I suspected she had severely bitten her tongue; this appeared to be the case when she began speaking. Her initial lack of responsiveness was alarming, but her eventual words were more so: She began exhibiting severe distress, crying and saying I was hurting her, that she was very cold, that she wanted to go back.

After we restrained and sedated her, Dr. Ghufran claimed to have no memory of our interaction. Given our proximity to the diamantine ocean of Neptune and Dr. Ghufran's extensive exposure to it and the samples extracted from it, I am diagnosing her with Meisner's Syndrome and recommending she be relocated to a subterranean project as soon as possible.

Diamonds and Pearls

Imagine if you took a tiny piece of a diamond and you put it in some meat.

Imagine it irritating the meat, agitating it, inflaming it.

Imagine if the meat rose around to coat it with layers of itself, to obfuscate and obscure it.

Imagine if Sindbad's slabs of meat swallowed the diamond and became something else, became diamond-and-meat, became organic crystal, became other.

I don't know what I am saying. I'm dizzy. Hala I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I think I am going to fail you. I love you, Hala. I'm sorry.

Extract from "Friends of Lucy" Manifesto

Meisner Syndrome is a lie!

Adamancy is a lie!

A conspiracy concocted by Big Pharma and high-ranking members of international governments in concert with the logistical-industrial complex to make us all complicit in the torture and dismemberment of a living organism!

We say again, *Lucyite is alive!*

We don't need the Melee any more than we needed to eat animals! It screams like a thousand thousand pigs being slaughtered, like lambs, like cattle!

Stop the screaming!

Save Lucy!

End the Melee!

Shine On, You Crazy Diamond

Everything is wrong. Everything is broken and wrong and no one can see it.

Do you remember the playground, Hala? The bullies who hated when we held hands? How it didn't matter how much they goaded and spat and pushed and shoved, the moment we threw a punch we were at fault? Because we had to be better, we were supposed to be better, and they were just a fact of life. Do you remember how we hated that? How unfair it was? How we vowed that we'd never be taken in by "looking at both sides" when all it meant was that people had the means to justify and excuse our suffering?

Hala, imagine if when we were children, we had seen a girl splayed out

on the floor, spread-eagled, her every bone broken beneath the feet of boys jumping up and down on her as if she were solid ground. Imagine we could hear her screaming, begging them to stop, to let her go, but the boys could not, because she was nothing, she was the earth, she could not feel. *But we could see her. We could hear her.*

What would you have done, Hala? Told them to stop? But this ground is so much softer on their feet, it is so much more fun to jump on it, why should they? Why should they believe that there is a woman there they cannot see? We are few and they are so many, we must be insane, we must be diseased to imagine something so horrible.

Imagine, Hala, that in the eye of one of these boys you see satisfaction. You see knowledge. You see that he knows he is making someone scream but it doesn't bother him, *it doesn't matter*, because he can get away with it.

What would you do?

President Moore Responds to Diamond Fanatics

Following the evacuation of the Triton base in response to a terrorist threat, Paragon Industries hastened to reassure the public that the Melee remains safe and open to business as usual. We reached President Alastair Moore for comment.

“It’s very sad, but they’re deeply troubled people,” says Moore. “They deserve not our scorn, but our empathy, our pity, and our help.”

When asked whether there might be any truth to allegations made by the Friends of Lucy, Moore responded:

“Look, it’s just crazy. You may as well say electricity has feelings. People believed all sorts of wacky things when Tesla coiled wires, but we can’t imagine living without electricity now. This is no different.”

A star to steer her by

Of course I had nothing to do with that threat. I know who did, though. I can feel them at the edge of my vision now, shimmering, especially when my fingers start to go numb. It’s always so cold here.

They’re cold, too, all of them. *Frozen in the ring of diamond time*, that

was from a poem, wasn't it? Alexa Seidel? Pre-Melee, of course. I don't know why all of my favourite things should be. I suppose it's nostalgia for a time before our fictions were fact.

It's good that you're not on Triton just now. Things are about to happen there. I'd hate for anyone to be stranded when the gate crashes.

I'm going to miss you so much.

I remember, now, what I couldn't on Triton. I remember you taking my wrists and looking at my palms, I remember you sitting by me as they soaked every last speck of diamond from the meat of me to make sure I wouldn't accidentally bring any back with me to Earth. You never left me, even though the work was piling up, the demand for reports and explanations.

I wish I could see you one more time. The ocean's kind, to let me have this memory of you back. I hope you can understand. I hope you can forgive me.

My tongue wasn't bloody because I bit it. It was bloody because I licked the diamonds off the tray. I swallowed as much as I could. It's probably why I haven't gotten better, for all that you buried me so deep. They're still inside me, as entangled as any quantum physicist could wish, dense enough with memory of Neptune to summon all the Earth's stolen droplets and make a body of her again, a mind, a recollection, give her a destination and the will, the energy to reach it.

All I have to do is make them liquid.

Ridiculous that I've been so cold for so long when the solution's been so near to hand. We have a Z-machine here, and I'm on its scheduled maintenance rotation. All I need is a moment alone with it, and I will be warm again.

I am a slab of meat awaiting my vulture. I am a salted bird brought to life. I will dissolve, I will melt, I will dip my toe into a diamond ocean and I will swim.

I am glad there won't be anything left of me here.

I hope—I feel that it will take me with it. Back to Neptune. That I might go up to the sea again, the lonely sea in the sky.

Maybe it will be better there.

Maybe we'll keep each other company.

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Amal El-Mohtar is the Nebula-nominated author of *The Honey Month*, a collection of poems and very short fiction written to the taste of twenty-eight different kinds of honey. Her work has appeared in multiple venues online and in print including *Strange Horizons*, *Glitter & Mayhem*, and *Apex*, and is forthcoming in *Kaleidoscope: Diverse YA Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories*. She is a member of the Banjo Apocalypse Crinoline Troubadours; edits *Goblin Fruit*, an online quarterly dedicated to fantastical poetry; and currently lives in Glasgow with two black and white cats and their pet Glaswegian. Find her online at amalelmohtar.com or on Twitter @tithenai.

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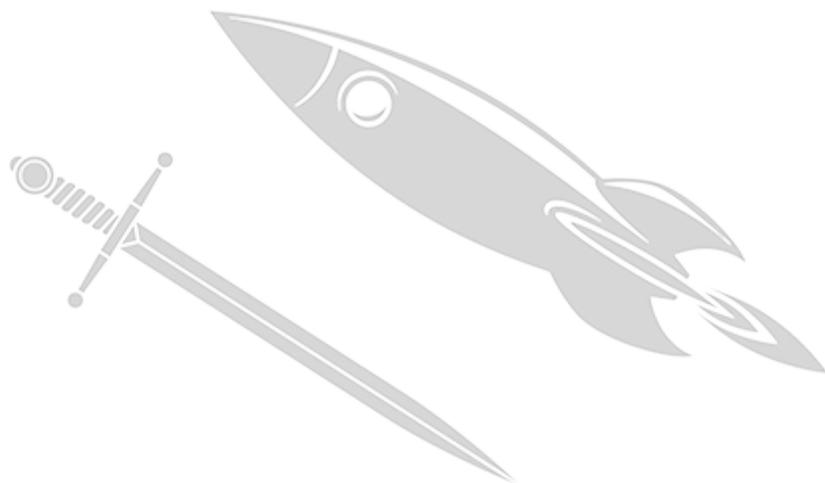
JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS, series editor, is the best-selling editor of more than two dozen anthologies, including *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, and *The Living Dead*. He is also the editor and publisher of the digital magazines *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare* and is a producer for *Wired's The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast.

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REPRINT FICTION

SELECTED BY RACHEL SWIRSKY



Like Daughter

Tananarive Due

I got the call in the middle of the week, when I came wheezing home from my uphill late-afternoon run. I didn't recognize the voice on my computer's answer-phone at first, although I thought it sounded like my best friend, Denise. There was no video feed, only the recording, and the words were so improbable they only confused me more: "Sean's gone. Come up here and get Neecey. Take her. I can't stand to look at her."

Her words rolled like scattered marbles in my head.

I had just talked to Denise a week before, when she called from Chicago to tell me her family might be coming to San Francisco to visit me that winter, when Neecey was out of school for Christmas vacation.

We giggled on the phone as if we were planning a sleepover, the way we used to when we were kids. Denise's daughter, Neecey, is my godchild. I hadn't seen her since she was two, which was a raging shame and hard for me to believe when I counted back the years in my mind, but it was true. I'd always made excuses, saying I had too much traveling and too many demands as a documentary film producer, where life is always projected two and three years into the future, leaving little space for here and now.

But that wasn't the reason I hadn't seen my godchild in four years. We both knew why.

I played the message again, listening for cadences and tones that would remind me of Denise, and it was like standing on the curb watching someone I knew get hit by a car. Something had stripped Denise's voice bare. So that meant her husband, Sean, must really be gone, I realized. And Denise wanted to send her daughter away.

"I can't stand to look at her," the voice on the message was saying again.

I went to my kitchen sink, in the direct path of the biting breeze from my half-open window, and I was shaking. My mind had frozen shut, sealing my thoughts out of reach. I turned on the faucet and listened to the water pummel my aluminum basin, then I captured some of the lukewarm stream in my palms to splash my face. As the water dripped from my chin, I cupped my hands again and drank, and I could taste the traces of salty perspiration I'd rubbed from my skin, tasting myself. My anger and sadness

were tugging on my stomach. I stood at that window and cursed as if what I was feeling had a shape and was standing in the room with me.

I think I'd started to believe I might have been wrong about the whole thing. That was another reason I'd kept some distance from Denise; I hadn't wanted to be there to poke holes in what she was trying to do, to cast doubts with the slightest glance. That's something only a mother or a lifelong friend can do, and I might as well have been both to Denise despite our identical ages. I'd thought maybe if I only left her alone, she could build everything she wanted inside that Victorian brownstone in Lincoln Park. The husband, the child, all of it. Her life could trot on happily ever after, just the way she'd planned.

But that's a lie, too. I'd always known I was right. I had been dreading that call all along, since the beginning. And once it finally came, I wondered what the hell had taken so long. You know how Denise's voice really sounded on my answering machine that day? As if she'd wrapped herself up in that recorder and died.

"Paige, promise me you'll look out for Neezy, hear?" Mama used to tell me. I couldn't have known then what a burden that would be, having to watch over someone. But I took my role seriously. Mama said Neezy needed me, so I was going to be her guardian. Just a tiny little bit, I couldn't completely be a kid after that.

Mama never said exactly why my new best friend at Mae Jemison Elementary School needed guarding, but she didn't have to. I had my own eyes. Even when Neezy didn't say anything, I noticed the bruises on her forearms and calves, and even on Neezy's mother's neck once, which was the real shocker. I recognized the sweet, sharp smell on Neezy's mother's breath when I walked to Neezy's house after school. Her mother smiled at me so sweetly, just like that white lady Mrs. Brady on reruns of *The Brady Bunch* my mother made me watch, because she used to watch it when she was my age and she thought it was more appropriate than the "trash" on the children's channels when I was a kid. That smile wasn't a real smile; it was a smile to hide behind.

I knew things Mama didn't know, in fact. When Neezy and I were nine, we already had secrets that made us feel much older; and not in the way that most kids want to feel older, but in the uninvited way that only made us

want to sit by ourselves in the playground watching the other children play, since we were no longer quite in touch with our spirit of running and jumping. The biggest secret, the worst, was about Neecey's Uncle Lonnie, who was twenty-two, and what he had forced Neecey to do with him all summer during the times her parents weren't home. Neecey finally had to see a doctor because the itching got so bad. She'd been *bleeding* from itching between her legs, she'd confided to me. This secret filled me with such horror that I later developed a dread of my own period because I associated the blood with Neecey's itching. Even though the doctor asked Neecey all sorts of questions about how she could have such a condition, which had a name Neecey never uttered out loud, Neecey's mother never asked at all.

So, yes, I understood why Neecey needed looking after. No one else was doing it.

What I didn't understand, as a child, was how Neecey could say she hated her father for hitting her and her mother, but then she'd be so sad during the months when he left, always wondering when he would decide to come home. And how Neecey could be so much smarter than I was—the best reader, speller, and multiplier in the entire fourth grade—and still manage to get so many F's because she just wouldn't sit still and do her homework. And the thing that puzzled me most of all was why, as cute as Neecey was, she seemed to be ashamed to show her face to anyone unless she was going to bed with a boy, which was the only time she ever seemed to think she was beautiful. She had to go to the doctor to get abortion pills three times before she graduated from high school.

Maybe it was the secret-sharing, the telling, that kept our friendship so solid, so fervent. Besides, despite everything, there were times I thought Neecey was the only girl my age who had any sense, who enjoyed reciting poems and acting out scenes as much as I did. Neecey never did join the drama club like I did, claiming she was too shy, but we spent hours writing and performing plays of our own behind my closed bedroom door, exercises we treated with so much imagination and studiousness that no one would ever guess we were our only audience.

"I wish I had a house like yours," Neecey used to say, trying on my clothes while she stood admiring herself in my closet mirror, my twin.

By fall, the clothes would be hers, because in the summer Mama always

packed my clothes for Neecey in a bundle. For my *other little girl*, she'd say. And beforehand Neecey would constantly warn me, "Don't you mess up that dress," or "Be careful before you rip that!" because she already felt proprietary.

"Oh, my house isn't so special," I used to tell Neecey. But that was the biggest lie of all.

In the years afterward, as Neecey dragged a parade of crises to my doorstep, like a cat with writhing rodents in her teeth—men, money, jobs; *everything* was a problem for Neecey—I often asked myself what forces had separated us so young, dictating that I had grown up in my house and Neecey had grown up in the other. She'd lived right across the street from my family, but our lives may as well have been separated by the Red Sea.

Was it only an *accident* that my own father never hit me, never stayed away from home for even a night, and almost never came from work without hugging me and telling me I was his Smart Little Baby-Doll?

And that Mama never would have tolerated any other kind of man? Was it pure accident that *I'd* had no Uncle Lonnie to make me itch until I bled with a disease the doctor had said little girls shouldn't have?

"Girl, you're so lucky," Neecey told me once when I was in college and she'd already been working for three years as a clerk at the U Save Drugstore. She'd sworn she wasn't interested in college, but at that instant her tone had been so rueful, so envy-soaked, that we could have been children again, writing fantastic scripts for ourselves about encounters with TV stars and space aliens behind my closed bedroom door, both of us trying to forget what was waiting for Neecey at home. "In my next life, I'm coming back *you* for sure."

If only Neecey had been my real-life sister, not just a pretend one, I always thought. If only things had been different for her from the time she was born.

I called Denise a half hour after I got her message. She sounded a little better, but not much. Whether it was because she'd gathered some composure or swallowed a shot or two of liquor, this time her voice was the one I've always known: hanging low, always threatening to melt into a defeated laugh. She kept her face screen black, refusing to let me see her. "It's all a mess. This place looks like it was robbed," she said. "He took

everything. His suits. His music. His favorite books, you know, those Russian writers, Dostoyevsky and Nabokov, or whatever-the-fuck? Only reason I know he was ever here is because of the hairs in the bathroom sink. He *shaved* first. He stood in there looking at his sorry face in the mirror after he'd loaded it all up, and he . . . ” For the first time, her voice cracked. “He left . . . me. And her. He left.”

I couldn't say anything against Sean. What did she expect? The poor man had tried, but from the time they met, it had all been as arranged as a royal Chinese marriage. How could anyone live in that house and breathe under the weight of Denise's expectations? Since I couldn't invent any condolences, I didn't say anything.

“You need to take Neecey.” Denise filled the silence.

Hearing her say it so coldly, my words roiled beneath my tongue, constricting my throat. I could barely sound civil. “The first time you told me about doing this . . . I said to think about what it would mean. That it couldn't be undone. Didn't I, Neecey?”

“Don't call me Neecey.” Her words were icy, bitter. “Don't you know better?”

“What happens now? She's your daughter, and she's only six. Think of —”

“Just come get her. If not, I don't . . . I don't know what I'll do.”

Then she hung up on me, leaving my melodramatic imagination to wonder what she'd meant by that remark, if she was just feeling desperate or if she was holding a butcher knife or a gun in her hand when she said it. Maybe that was why she'd blacked herself out, I thought.

I was crying like a six-year-old myself while my cab sped toward the airport. I saw the driver's wondering eyes gaze at me occasionally in his rearview mirror, and I couldn't tell if he was sympathetic or just annoyed. I booked myself on an eight-forty flight with a seat in first class on one of the S-grade planes that could get me there in forty minutes. Airbuses, I call them. At least in first class I'd have time for a glass or two of wine. I convinced the woman at the ticket counter to give me the coach price because, for the first time in all my years of flying, I lied and said I was going to a funeral. My sister's, I told her, tears still smarting on my face.

If you could even call that a lie.

Three more months, just ninety days, and it never would have happened. If Denise had waited only a few months, if she'd thought it through the way I begged her when she first laid out the details of her plan, the procedure would not have been legal. The Supreme Court's decision came down before little Neecey was even born, after only a couple hundred volunteers paid the astronomical fee to take part in the copycat babies program. To this day, I still have no idea where Denise got the money. She never told me, and I got tired of asking.

But she got it somehow, somewhere, along with two hundred thirty others. There were a few outright nutcases, of course, lobbying to try to use DNA samples to bring back Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King; I never thought that would prove anything except that those men were only human and could be as unremarkable as the rest of us. But mostly the applicants were just families with something left undone, I suppose. Even though I never agreed with Denise's reasons, at least I had some idea of what she hoped to accomplish. The others, I wasn't sure. Was it pure vanity? Novelty? Nostalgia? I still don't understand.

In the end, I'm not sure how many copycat babies were born. I read somewhere that some of the mothers honored the Supreme Court's ban and were persuaded to abort. Of course, they might have been coerced or paid off by one of the extremist groups terrified of a crop of so-called "soulless" children. But none of that would have swayed Denise, anyway. For all I know, little Neecey might have been the very last one born.

It was three months too late, but I was moved by the understated eloquence of the high court's decision when it was announced on the News & Justice satellite: *Granted, what some might call a "soul" is merely an individual's biological imprint, every bit as accidental as it is unique. In the course of accident, we are all born once, and we die but once. And no matter how ambiguous the relationship between science and chance, humankind cannot assign itself to the task of re-creating souls.*

I'm not even sure I believe in souls, not really. But I wished I'd had those words for Denise when it still mattered.

She actually had the whole thing charted out. We were having lunch at a Loop pizzeria the day Denise told me what she wanted to do. She spread out a group of elaborate charts; one was marked HOME, one FATHER, one

SCHOOL, all in her too-neat artist's script. The whole time she showed me, her hands were shaking as if they were trying to fly away from her. I'd never seen anyone shake like that until then, watching Denise's fingers bounce like rubber with so much excitement and fervor. The shaking scared me more than her plans and charts.

"Necy, please wait," I told her.

"If I wait, I might change my mind," Denise said, as if this were a logical argument for going forward rather than just the opposite. She still hadn't learned that *doubt* was a signal to stop and think, not to plow ahead with her eyes covered, bracing for a crash.

But that was just Denise. That's just the way she is. Maybe that's who she is.

Denise's living room was so pristine when I arrived, it was hard to believe it had witnessed a trauma. I noticed the empty shelves on the music rack and the spaces where two picture frames had been removed from their hooks on the wall; but the wooden floors gleamed, the walls were scrubbed white, and I could smell fresh lilac that might be artificial or real, couldn't tell which. Denise's house reminded me of the sitting room of the bed and breakfast I stayed in overnight during my last trip to London, simultaneously welcoming and wholly artificial. A perfect movie set, hurriedly dusted and freshened as soon as visitors were gone.

Denise looked like a vagrant in her own home. As soon as I got there, I knew why she hadn't wanted me to see her on the phone; she was half dressed in a torn T-shirt, her hair wasn't combed, and the skin beneath her eyes looked so discolored that I had to wonder, for a moment, if Sean might have been hitting her. It wouldn't be the first time she'd been in an abusive relationship. But then I stared into the deep mud of my friend's irises before she shuffled away from me, and I knew better. No, she wasn't being beaten; she wouldn't have tolerated that with Necy in the house. Instead, my friend was probably having a nervous breakdown.

"Did he say why he left?" I asked gently, stalling. I didn't see little Necy anywhere, and I didn't want to ask about her yet. I wished I didn't have to see her at all.

Answering with a grunt rather than spoken words, Denise flung her arm toward the polished rosewood dining room table. There, I saw a single

piece of paper laid in the center, a typewritten note. As sterile as everything else. In the shining wood, I could also see my own reflection standing over it.

“Haven’t you read it?” I asked her.

“Necy’s in the back,” Denise said, as if in response.

“Shhh. Just a second. Let’s at least read what the man said.” My heart had just somersaulted, and then I knew how much I didn’t want to be there at all. I didn’t want to think about that child. I picked a random point midway through the note and began reading aloud in the tone I might have used for a eulogy: “. . . You squeeze so hard, it chokes me. You’re looking for more than a father for her, more than a home. It isn’t natural, between you and her—”

“Stop *it*,” Denise hissed. She sank down to the sofa, tunneling beneath a blanket and pulling it up to her chin.

I sighed. I could have written that note myself. Poor Sean. I walked to the sofa and sat beside my friend. My hand felt leaden as I rested it on the blanket where I believed Denise’s shoulder must be. “So you two fought about it. You never told me that,” I said.

“There’s a lot I didn’t tell you,” Denise said, and I felt her shivering beneath the blanket. “He didn’t understand. Never. I thought he’d come around. I thought—”

“You could change him?”

“Shut up,” Denise said, sounding more weary than angry.

Yes, I felt weary, too. I’d had this conversation with Denise, or similar ones, countless times before. Denise had met Sean through a video personal on the Internet where all she said was, “I want a good husband and father. Let’s make a home.” Sean was a nice enough guy, but I had known their marriage was based more on practical considerations than commitment. They both wanted a family. They both had pieces missing and were tired of failing. Neither of them had learned, after two divorces, that people can’t be applied to wounds like gauze.

And, of course, then there was little Necy. What was the poor guy supposed to do?

“She’s in her room. I already packed her things. Please take her, Paige. Take her.” Denise was whimpering by now.

I brushed a dead-looking clump of hair from Denise's face. Denise's eyes, those unseeing eyes, would be impossible to reach. But I tried anyway, in hopes of saving all of us. "This is crazy. Take her where? What am I going to do with a kid?"

"You promised."

Okay, Mama. I *will*.

"What?"

"You promised. At the church. At the christening. You're her godmother. If anything happened to me, you said you would."

I thought of the beautiful baby girl, a goddess dressed in white, her soft black curls crowned with lace—gurgling, happy, and agreeable despite the tedium of the long ceremony. Holding her child, Denise had been glowing in a way she had not at her wedding, as if she'd just discovered her entire reason for living.

Tears found my eyes for the first time since I'd arrived. "Denise, what's this going to mean to her?"

"I don't know. I don't . . . care," Denise said, her voice shattered until she sounded like a mute struggling to form words. "Look at me. I can't stand to be near her. I vomit every time I look at her. It's all ruined. Everything. Oh, God—" She nearly sobbed, but there was only silence from her open mouth. "I can't. Not again. No more. Take her, Paige."

I saw a movement in my peripheral vision, and I glanced toward the hallway in time to see a shadow disappear from the wall. My God, I realized, the kid must have been standing where she could hear every hurtful word. I knew I had to get Neecey out of the house, at least for now. Denise was right. She was not fit, at this moment, to be a mother. Anything was better than leaving Neecey here, even getting her to a hotel. Maybe just for a day or two.

I couldn't take care of both of them now. I had to choose the child.

"Neecey?" The bedroom door was open only a crack, and I pressed my palm against it to nudge it open. "Sweetheart, are you in here?"

What struck me first was the books. Shelves filled with the colorful spines of children's books reached the ceiling of the crowded room, so high that even an adult would need a stepladder. Every other space was occupied by so many toys—costumed dolls, clowns, stuffed animals—that I thought

of the time my parents took me to F.A.O. Schwarz when I was a kid, the way every square foot was filled with a different kind of magic.

The bed was piled high with dresses. There must have been dozens of them, many of them formal, old-fashioned tea dresses. They were the kind of dresses mothers hated to wear when they were young, and yet love to adorn their little girls with; made of stiff, uncomfortable fabrics and bright, precious colors. Somewhere beneath that heaping pile of clothes, I saw a suitcase yawning open, struggling uselessly to swallow them all.

“Necy?”

The closet. I heard a sound from the closet, a child’s wet snuffle.

Necy, why are you in the closet? Did your daddy beat you again?

She was there, inside a closet stripped of everything except a few wire hangers swinging lazily from the rack above her head. I couldn’t help it; my face fell slack when I saw her. I felt as if my veins had been drained of blood, flushed with ice water instead.

Over the years, I’d talked to little Necy on the telephone at least once a month, whenever I called Denise. I was her godmother, after all.

Necy was old enough now that she usually answered the phone, and she chatted obligingly about school and her piano, acting and computer lessons, before saying, *Want to talk to Mommy?* And the child always sounded so prim, so full of private-school self-assuredness, free of any traces of Denise’s hushed, halting—the word, really, was fearful—way of speaking. It wasn’t so strange on the phone, with the image so blurry on the face screen. Not at all.

But being here, seeing her in person, was something else.

Necy’s hair was parted into two neat, shiny pigtails that coiled around the back of her neck, her nose had a tiny bulb at the end, and her molasses-brown eyes were set apart just like I remembered them. If the girl had been grinning instead of crying right now, she would look exactly as she’d looked in the photograph someone had taken of us at my sixth birthday party, the one where Mama hired a clown to do magic tricks and pull cards out of thin air, and we’d both believed the magic was real.

Denise was in the closet. She was six years old again, reborn.

I’d known what to expect the whole time, but I couldn’t have been prepared for how it would feel to see her again. I hadn’t known how the

years would melt from my mind like vapors, how it would fill my stomach with stones to end up staring at my childhood's biggest heartache eye-to-eye.

Somehow, I found a voice in my dry, burning throat. "Hey, sweetie. It's Aunt Paige. From California."

"What's wrong with my mommy?" A brave whisper.

"She's just very upset right now, Necy." Saying the name, my veins thrilled again.

"Where'd Daddy go?"

I knelt so that I could literally stare her in the eye, and I was reminded of how, twenty-five years ago, Necy's eyelids always puffed when she cried, narrowing her eyes into slits. China-girl, I used to tease her to try to make her laugh. Here was my China-girl.

I clasped the child's tiny, damp hands; the mere act of touching her caused the skin on my arms to harden into gooseflesh. "I'm not sure where your daddy is, sweetie. He'll come back."

Hey, Necy, don't cry. He'll come back.

Staring into Necy's anguish, for the first time, I understood everything.

I understood what a glistening opportunity had stirred Denise's soul when she'd realized her salvation had arrived courtesy of science: a legal procedure to extract a nucleus from a single cell, implant it into an egg, and enable her to give new birth to any living person who consented—even to herself. She could take an inventory of everything that had gone wrong, systematically fix it all, and see what would blossom this time. See what might have been.

And now, gazing into Necy's eyes—the *same* eyes, except younger, not worn to sludge like the Necy quivering under a blanket in the living room—I understood why Denise was possibly insane by now. She'd probably been insane longer than I wanted to admit.

"Listen," I said. "Your mom told me to take you to get some pizza. And then she wants us to go to my hotel for a couple of days, until she feels better."

"Will she be okay?" Necy asked. Her teary eyes were sharp and focused.

Yes, I realized, it was *these* tears ripping Denise's psyche to shreds. This was what Denise could not bear to look at, what was making her physically

ill. She was not ready to watch her child, herself, taken apart hurt by hurt. Again.

Necy was dressed in a lemon-colored party dress as if it were her birthday, or Easter Sunday. Did Denise dress her like this every day? Did she wake Necy up in the mornings and smile on herself while she reclaimed that piece, too? Of course. Oh, yes, she did. Suddenly, I swooned. I felt myself sway with a near-religious euphoria, my spirit filling up with something I couldn't name. I only kept my balance by clinging to the puffed shoulders of the child's taffeta dress, as if I'd made a clumsy attempt to hug her.

"Necy? It's all right this time," I heard myself tell her in a breathless whisper. "I promise I'll watch out for you. Just like I said. It's all right now, Necy. Okay? I promise."

I clasped my best friend's hand, rubbing her small knuckles back and forth beneath my chin like a salve. With my hand squeezing her thumb, I could feel the lively, pulsing throbbing of Necy's other heart.

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Tananarive Due is a winner of the American Book Award and a two-time finalist for the Bram Stoker Award. Her novels include the *My Soul to Keep* series, *The Between*, *The Good House*, and *Joplin's Ghost*. Her short fiction has been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and in anthologies such as *Dark Delicacies II*, *Voices from the Other Side*, *Dark Dreams*, *Dark Matter*, and *Mojo: Conjure Stories*. She is a frequent collaborator with SF writer Steven Barnes: they've produced film scripts, short stories, and three Tennyson Hardwick detective novels, the latest of which (written with actor Blair Underwood) is *From Cape Town With Love*. (They also collaborate in another way: They're married.)

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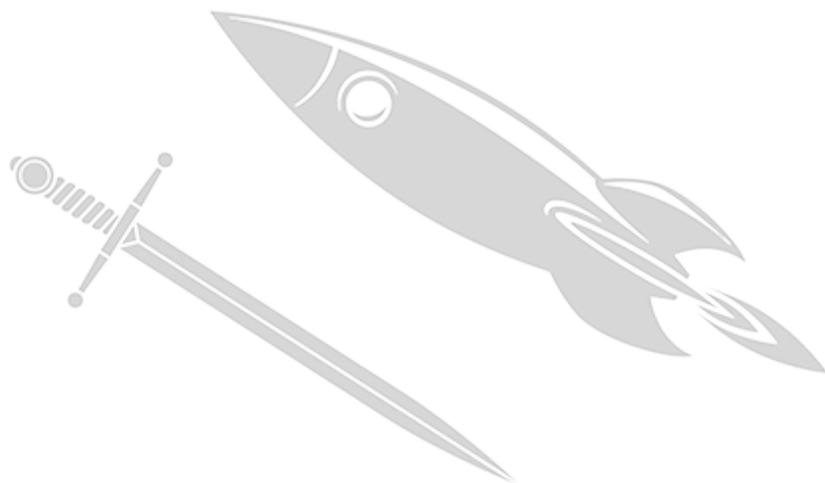
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ORIGINAL FLASH FICTION

EDITED BY ROBYN LUPO



Ro-Sham-Bot

Effie Seiberg

I found a robot's heart today. I didn't think they still made robots with hearts, but there it was, at the corner of Leary and Sycamore.

It even looked like a heart: size of a fist, valves pulsing with pale *ching ching* noises each time they opened and shut. The metal was old and worn. At the bottom I could just make out the words "If found, please return to the Akirobo Corp" with most of the address worn away.

I took it home and plugged it into my computer. It had a few jumbled videos—the way older robots used to store memories. My computer was old enough to be able to play them.

I sorted by number and began to watch.

The first video was in a warehouse. Lines upon lines of identical, still robots, presumably the same old-fashioned model as the one whose heart I'd found. The field of vision jerked to the left and found another robot looking straight at it. The other robot smiled, and glanced downwards. The camera followed it and, looking down, saw the other robot's hand clenched in a fist. One, two, three times it bobbed the fist up and down, and then extended two fingers. Rock, paper, scissors. The camera then captured its own robot hand reaching forward to join the game. Scissors beat paper. Paper beat rock. Scissors tied with scissors. A wider robot smile. None of the other robots moved.

I clicked to the second video, which was in the same warehouse. An operator in white QA-tested each robot. They all stayed very still. The robot to the left flashed a silly face, and the camera jiggled in suppressed laughter. The operator approached, and the camera snapped forward and was still.

The next video was in a factory on a moving conveyer belt. The robot to the left was about to get tied into its foam-cushioned packaging. It already had the manual for "Personality-free Chore-Bot" nestled in its arms. It looked up and said to the operator, "Shouldn't you buy me dinner before you tie me up?" The startled operator hit the alarm. Red flashing lights flooded the factory floor, and a mechanical voice said "Alert, alert. Faulty Chore-Bot. Remove for destruction." As the robot to the left was removed by white-coated operators, the camera swiveled forward and was still.

The fourth video was in an ordinary living room. Children played on the carpet as a middle-aged man unpacked the robot and a middle-aged woman watched. “This should be the perfect model for us,” said the man. “Does exactly what it’s told, none of that personality module nonsense. It can start by keeping the deer away from the tomato patch. Go on now, go outside.” The camera swung from the door to the children, who were playing rock, paper, scissors, then back to the door and headed out.

I hoped I wouldn’t see the man disassembling the robot in a later video.

The next several videos were in an outdoor garden, in different seasons. The camera patrolled around the tomatoes. Sometimes they hung heavy and ripe from climbing vines, and other times they would barely be hard green buds. Every so often the camera would go back up to the house and look through the back door, like it was waiting for a glimpse of the playing kids. Sometimes, the man would shoo it away. I scanned through these pretty quickly.

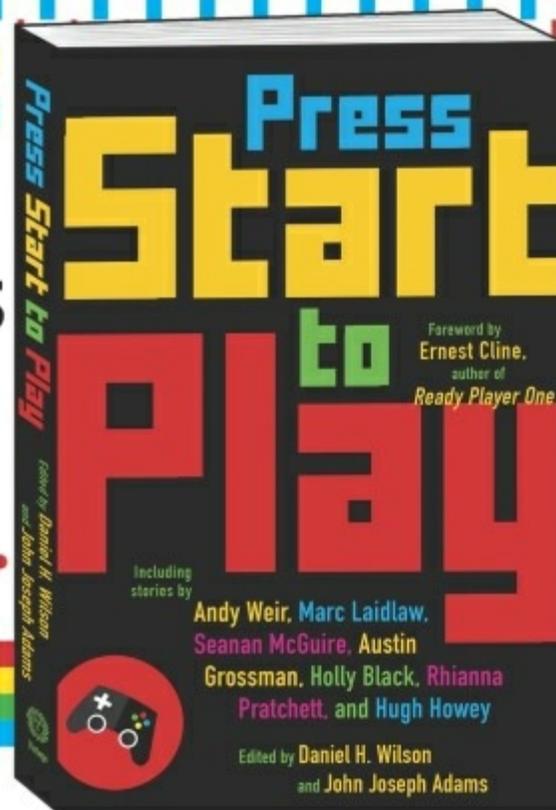
I clicked to the last video, which was in the garden at night. Nothing to guard against. The robot’s hands went through the motions. Rock, paper, scissors. Rock, paper, scissors. Over and over, until finally, the camera looked down and the hands unscrewed the robot’s breastplate and reached in. Then the video went blank.

I unplugged the hard drive from my computer and took it to the workbench in my garage. I found the spare chassis on the top shelf, covered in dust. I cleaned it off with my shirtsleeve and brought it over. I knew I would find a use for the chassis one day, and the hard drive looked like it would fit inside perfectly. My daughter always loved Rock Paper Scissors.

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Effie Seiberg is a science fiction and fantasy author, a graduate of Taos Toolbox 2013, and an all-around geek. Her previous short fiction can be found in *Crossed Genres’ Fierce Family* anthology and in *Veux Magazine*. In her spare time she’s a slush reader for *Tor.com*. She lives in San Francisco near the former and upcoming (but not present) location of a sculpture of a giant bunny head with a skull in its mouth. Follow Effie on Twitter (@effies), Google+ (+EffieSeiberg), or at effieseiberg.com.

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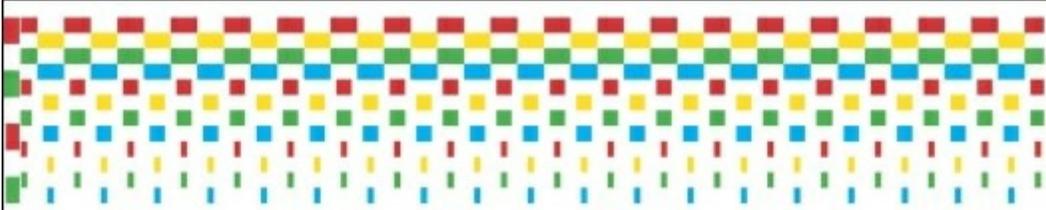


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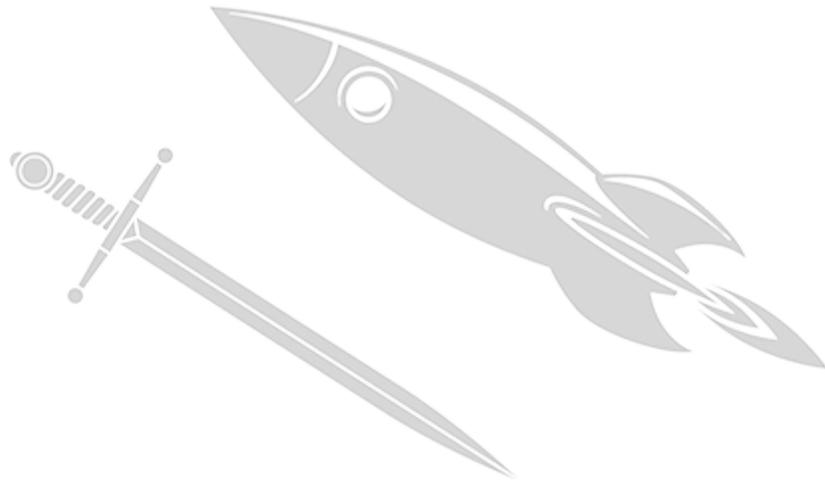
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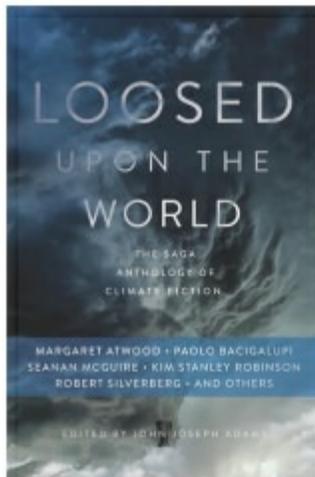
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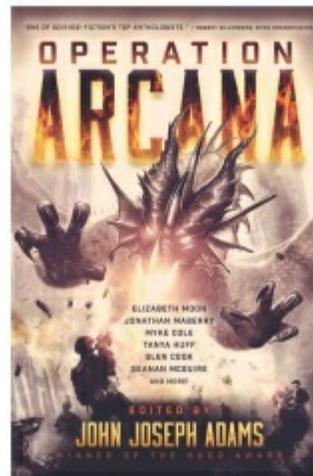
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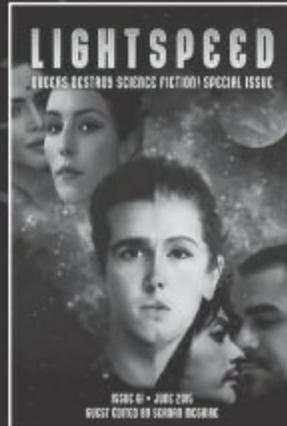
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