

Hub

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The First Hub of the Year

A bumper issue this week, with 8 (count them – eight!) pieces of Flash Fiction for your enjoyment. Initially, we were to publish seven pieces this week, but I changed my mind as we've just launched ourselves headlong into '08 with nary a thought for our safety.

This week we welcome a new member to our team – one of the world's foremost podcasters and podcast novelists, Mur Lafferty. If you are a budding writer, her weekly podcast *I Should Be Writing* is essential listening – head over to www.ishouldbewriting.com, or subscribe through iTunes. Mur's latest podcast novel *Playing for Keeps* is currently up to episode 9, but all previous episodes can be downloaded from www.playingforkeepsnovel.com free of charge. Again, if you're a budding writer (or even one in full bloom) there's something for you here, as Mur is allowing folk (under specific circumstances) to play in her universe, and she is broadcasting some of the best companion pieces alongside the novel itself. Well worth a look.

If you read *DeathRay Magazine* (and you should), take a look at the latest issue (issue 9). Hub is featured prominently in a piece denouncing the death of the short form.

Next week we're back to our usual format, with one full-length short (oxymoronic?) and reviews. Until then, have a great week!

Lee Harris

About Hub

Every week we publish a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review and sometimes a feature or interview. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of our sponsors over at **Orbit**. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at www.hub-mag.co.uk. We pay our writers, and anything you donate helps us to continue to attract high quality fiction and non-fiction.

Why Are Rocks? By Tony Ballantyne

“Daddy, why are rocks?”

Bernie McEwan looked up from his book and smiled. Emma was standing by the French windows, looking out into the garden. She turned to face him, tilting her head thoughtfully.

“Was there a big rock and they all broke off from it?”

Bernie placed his book on the floor. Three year olds were always asking questions: Baynes-Leutz children even more so. Bernie always felt compelled to give his daughter a proper answer: how else would she learn? It was just that lately he found himself at loss at what to say.

“Well, yes, Emma. Usually little rocks have broken off from bigger rocks.”

Emma nodded thoughtfully. Bernie could almost see the cogwheels turning in her mind. He knew what the next question would be.

“Daddy, why are big rocks?”

Bernie grinned ruefully. Did other parents have this problem?

“They come from underground. They were made when the Earth was made,”

Bernie wasn't happy with his answer. He wished Cheryl were here. She knew more about this sort of thing than he did.

“Maybe you should ask Mummy. She knows all about rocks...”

“No, Daddy, I want you to tell me. Why are big rocks underground?”

Bernie sat back in his chair. Any child would have said the same, he supposed. It was just that Baynes-Leutz children did it all the time. That's how they learned so fast, Cheryl had explained. Their developing minds locked on to an idea sequence and explored it thoroughly. That's why they had spent all that money on drug treatments and wetware interfaces. That's why their daughter was a genius.

Bernie played for time.

“Well, the reason that there are big rocks underground is that the Earth was once very hot and when it cooled down some bits became hard and those hard bits were rocks.”

“Like when we made jelly?”

“Yes, that's right, like when we made jelly. It was runny when it was hot, but when it cooled down it went hard.”

Emma wandered up to him and climbed onto his knee. Cheryl had tied her blonde hair in bunches today

“Cuddle me, Dad,”

Bernie felt a delighted warmth at the matter of factness of her request.

“Daddy, why was the Earth once very hot?”

Once again Bernie wished Cheryl were here. She was the Physicist; he was the Literature Major. Between them they thought to raise the perfect child. He thought back to his schooldays.

“Well, once there was a big star, and that star exploded into lots of pieces and as those pieces cooled they made planets like the Earth,”

“Why did the star explode?”

Bernie didn't know.

“Sometimes stars just explode,” he said.

“Is that like a star dying?”

“I suppose so,”

“Mummy says everything dies eventually,”

“Yes, she probably would.” He scrambled for his own contribution to the conversation. “Huxley said the only completely consistent people are the dead.” Good old Aldous.

Emma looked at him with a sudden wisdom beyond her years; something in the Baynes-Leutz program had picked up on what he was doing.

“Stop changing the subject, Dad. Did you think I wouldn’t notice? I am three, after all.”

She had learned that from her mother. Bernie smiled. It was Cheryl’s expression she had adopted. The spark died from his daughter’s eyes and she became a little girl again.

“Why are there stars?”

“Because, because... well, once space was full of stuff, lots of ... hydrogen I think it was, and those particles attracted each other to make... lumps of hydrogen and the bigger the lumps were the more particles they could attract and so these lumps got bigger and bigger until they made stars.”

Bernie stopped, feeling pleased with himself.

Emma’s eyes were glowing. “Gravity: Inverse square law, yes, yes I can see that, just like Mummy said...”

She muttered to herself for a few moments longer, and Bernie smiled with pride as he imagined the concepts slotting into place. Then she frowned.

“Dad, where did the gas come from?”

“Ah, well, some people say that a long, long time ago there was a big explosion and all of the gas came from that. Everything came from that. They call it the Big Bang...” Bernie’s voice faded. He talked himself into a corner and he knew it. He knew what the next question would be. He waited. And waited.

Emma turned and looked at him. Such a pretty little girl, you would have to feel under her hair to detect the slight ridge in her skull that was the result of the Baynes-Leutz process. There was no other visible way of knowing that this child could, possibly, see deeper than any mere human.

“Yes Daddy?”

Bernie was puzzled,

“Don’t you want to know why there was a Big Bang?”

Emma made a loud tutting noise and shook her head.

“Oh Daddy. That’s obvious. I am three after all.”

Bernie sat for a moment in stunned silence. He licked his lips and coughed.

“Ahah. Er, Emma. Go on then, explain it to Daddy,”

She looked at him in exasperation.

“Daddy, there’s no need for you to test me.”

“No. Tell Daddy. Why was there a big bang?”

But she had already turned back to look at the garden. The process had run its course; the information had been saved for later use. It was no use asking now. Something else caught Emma’s attention.

“Daddy, why are snails?”

About the Author

Tony is the author of three published Science Fiction Novels (Divergence, Capacity and Recursion). Recursion was nominated for the Phillip K. Dick Award. Tony has just completed his fourth novel and is looking forward to the rewrites...

BRAINFISH

By

Steve Cooper

If there's one thing they really drum into you at medical school, it is this: do not stick an eight-inch lumbar-puncture syringe in your own eyeball whilst having a seizure.

*

As the sun was setting over the university lake, I turned on the lights and illuminated the neurology lab. The light made me wince; a migraine was making me sensitive. In the centre of the lab, surrounded by a small array of optical and IR cameras, was Cagney, our lab rat. I picked a sterile pin from the supply cupboard and checked Cagney's sensitivity with an old-fashioned pin test; when I jabbed his left paw, he flinched. *Good*, I thought. *The nerves are being replaced*. I checked the levels on the IV; plenty. Nothing now for another thirty minutes.

I sat and read Emerson, whose mind had toppled to the slow erosion of Alzheimer's disease. I have been forty years in the search, and have found no cure. Cagney was going to change all that.

In the literature we called them DABs – dendrite-axon bridges – but my research assistants had christened them brainfish. They are machines the size of a cell, silvery and squid-like under the microscope. They patrol the brain, chemically sniffing for the scent of ketones that leak from dying cells. When they smell it, they swim to the cell, and wire themselves in as a replacement; it's a puncture repair kit for the brain.

This is what we'd given Cagney; we'd injected brainfish into his spinal cord, where they swam waiting for attack, and then we attacked them with the neurotoxin, tetramine. As Cagney's brain cells died, the brainfish swam to the rescue, replacing the dying cells with robot doppelgangers.

I stood to check Cagney, and my migraine pulsed painfully. All of a sudden I felt a numbness in the left side of my face. I lost track of where I was and what I was doing, and slumped heavily into my seat. *Stroke*. I was having a stroke. Somewhere in my brain, a blood clot had become stuck in a vein, and all the cells downstream of the clot had stopped receiving oxygen from the blood. They were dying. Language, memory, inspiration; my soul was about to rot away inside my skull.

I got unsteadily to my feet. I stumbled across the room, knocking a sheaf of papers to the floor and crashing heavily into Cagney's cage as I went. I wrenched open the door to the supply cabinet and found the first needle I could – a needle for taking spinal fluid samples – and staggered back to the central table. Trembling, I pulled out Cagney's IV of DABs and tetramine, and swapped the needle, my shaking fingers fumbling the steel needle and rubber tube.

I lifted the syringe up, and looked up a little, as though I were preparing for eye drops. One last, long blink, and then I drove the syringe down, into and through my eye, down into the optic nerve.

When they found me next morning, I was laying on my back, the syringe still in my eye, in shock but alive. My brain had died, replaced by the brainfish, but my soul remained intact.

No More Angels by Ellen Phillips

My friend Emma emailed me a photo of a church sign-board. It read 'Staying in bed shouting 'Oh God!' does not constitute going to Church'. Underneath, she'd typed, 'So, does it?'

I thought the photo was a bit harsh. After all, I was fucking an angel at the time. So I emailed Emma back. 'Yes, it bloody well does. Especially when you know God's listening.'

She was online. Seconds later, her reply popped into my inbox.

'Does that make God a voyeur?'

I sniggered. Glancing round, I saw my boss watching me, so I wiped the smile off my face. It's taken years of practise to sound like Muttley, but not everyone appreciates the effort I've put in.

'So you think He's not listening when you do it doggy style?'

There was a cough from the corner of the office. Emma hastily reached for a glass of water. I flipped back to the spreadsheet I was meant to be working on.

'No, I'm fine,' Emma protested. Big Charlie, our boss, was watching her with concern.

'You're not coming down with something, are you?' he asked, worriedly. He's the biggest hypochondriac ever, and fundamentally unsuited to being in charge of an office of ten people. There's always someone off ill. It's great. Just cough in his direction a couple of times, maybe sneeze over him, and you've got the rest of the week off.

'Just swallowed the wrong way,' Emma smiled, and wiped the tears from her eyes.

'If you're sure...?' Charlie persisted.

Emma nodded, and pointedly turned back to her screen. As soon as Charlie was safely back at his seat, my email alert flashed up.

'Cow!'

I sniggered again, very quietly. But Emma saw my grin, and she mouthed 'Payback!' at me. I couldn't wait for lunch.

We grabbed sandwiches from Boots, just down the road.

'Do you want to make that a meal deal?' the cashier asked. I shook my head. No crisps for me! Well, not until the next time I overindulged. Too many glasses of red wine always brings on the munchies. And other appetites. Which is why Emma was tugging me down the street.

'It's too cold to go to the park!' I protested.

'So walk quickly, then!' Emma snapped, towing me through the gates. It wasn't really a park, more a small green square with benches for the winos to gather on. It was too cold even for them, though, and we had the place to ourselves.

'So?' Emma demanded, ripping open the packaging round her sandwich.

'Mm?' I was engrossed in taking a bite of my sandwich. Emma grabbed it out of my hand and danced backwards.

'No more sandwich! Not until you tell me about Saturday night!'

I sighed. 'There's not much to tell.'

She snorted. 'You ditch me in that dive of a bar, head off with the fittest guy I've ever seen, and you're telling me nothing happened? You didn't even drop me a text to say you got home okay.'

I put on what I like to think is a mysterious face. 'Maybe I didn't get home okay,' I said cryptically.

'You look like you just swallowed a lemon,' Emma kindly pointed out. 'And if you didn't get home okay, how come you made it into work today?'

'Ah, well, that'd be telling,' I smiled enigmatically. Emma threw my sandwich at my head with a shriek of frustration. I caught it, but a blob of low-fat mayonnaise sailed on and hit my hat.

Emma looked at it for a long moment, then collapsed, giggling. 'You look like a bird shat on your head!' she gasped, holding her sides.

'Gee, thanks. So do you want to know, or what?'

That shut her up.

I walked over to one of the benches and sat down. 'I just turned around,' I said, closing my eyes, 'and there he was. The most beautiful man I've ever seen.'

Emma plonked down onto the bench beside me. 'I know that bit. I saw him too, you know.'

'You're just jealous,' I said, smugly.

'Hell, yes!' We laughed.

'So... he said, and I quote, "I'm the angel Gabriel. Want to take me home and make my wings flap?"'

'No!' Emma gasped. 'That is the cheesiest line I've ever heard!'

I nodded. 'But there was something about him. He was just so... intense. Like he was offering me the whole world, not just a fuck. And when he looked at me, the rest of the room didn't exist. So I said yes.'

'How much had you drunk?' Emma asked, innocently.

'About a bottle and a half of wine, I think,' I said, frowning. 'But I felt completely sober once he spoke to me. And I'm really sorry I didn't come and tell you I was going, or anything. I just...'

'You legged it out of there faster than I've ever seen you move!' Emma interrupted. 'Don't worry, I was watching you. If he hadn't been so gorgeous, I'd have been over to make sure you were all right.'

I flashed her a quick smile. 'You're a good mate, Emma. Better than me, anyway.'

'Of course I am!' she said, archly, then nudged me with her elbow. 'Get to the good stuff!'

'Well, we walked home, but I don't really remember the walk. He took my hand, and then we were back at my flat.' I could still feel the shock of his hand taking mine, the vast empty spaces of the universe wheeling through my mind, just for an instant, and the promise of salvation in his eyes.

'Did you offer him a coffee?' Emma asked, her eyes shining.

'I was going to, just to be polite. But he took his shirt off.' I paused at the memory of that skin, so pale, so perfect. Each muscle sculpted just the right amount. His chest in utter proportion.

Then Emma stuffed a tissue in my face. 'You're drooling! Your boy was that pretty?'

I picked up the tissue and held it in my fist. 'He wasn't pretty,' I said, carefully. 'He was beautiful. There was nothing pretty about him. And he certainly wasn't a boy! Imagine the most perfect body you've ever seen. Male body. A man. You know. But without the hair. And so pale, like he was a living, breathing statue. That was him.'

Emma's eyes darkened. 'You lucky, lucky cow!'

I grinned, a feral grin which showed my canines. I thought it made me look a little wolfish.

'Stop it! You look like you're retarded when you do that.' Emma thumped my arm.

'Good for my ego, you are.' I complained, rubbing my arm.

'You don't need any more of an ego boost after Saturday night! I'm the one who needs all the ego boosting!' Emma retorted.

'He was going commando,' I said, to distract her.

'Ooh...'

I handed her back the tissue.

'Well, you know, it'd have been rude to make a guest feel uncomfortable. So I took my clothes off too.' I left out the bit about how dumpy I felt, how too many glasses of wine, bags of crisps, pizzas weighed down my thighs, and pulled at my stomach.

But then he'd smiled, and put out his hand, and none of that mattered any more.

'So you got him into bed. And? Was he any good?' Emma's insistence broke into my reverie.

'Outstanding.'

'Once?'

'Five times.'

Emma squealed. 'Five times! You slut! I don't believe any man could get it up five times in one night.'

I shrugged. 'He wasn't a man.'

'Don't tell me you bought that crap about him being an angel?'

'He had me singing Hosannas.' The memory of what he'd done to get me singing made me tingle. I shivered, and it had nothing to do with the cold.

Emma shook her head. 'So he was fabulous. Did he stick around in the morning?'

'An hour, I guess. Then he had to go.' He'd pulled on his clothes, looking a mortal in the grey light of a hungover Sunday morning.

'He said, "I'll see you," and then he kissed me, and then he let himself out. And that was it.'

'Have you heard from him?' Emma asked, anxiously.

I shook my head. 'It's only Monday morning. What do you expect?'

'From a guy who fucked you five times in a night? I don't know! Roses, maybe. And champagne. Or a limousine!'

We laughed.

'Really, that's it,' I said, and bit into my sandwich. Around a mouthful of prawn mayonnaise, I mumbled, 'Time for work.'

Emma sighed as we stood up. As we left the park, she asked, 'How is it you always get the good-looking ones?'

I smiled my best enigmatic smile, only spoiled by Emma wiping mayonnaise off the corner of my mouth. 'I'll let you in on a secret,' I said. 'I'm really a succubus. Special ops division. I don't do mortal men, and all the immortal beings are really fit.'

Emma thumped my other arm. 'Cow! Don't tell me your secret, then. Only, can I have the next one?'

'Sure,' I laughed, and we headed back into our dingy office.

But I didn't tell Emma that I had the best reputation in town. One by one, all the lonely angels came to me. And I didn't tell her how, each time we'd fucked, Gabriel looked a little less divine, and his wings, which had reached the burning stars on the far sides of the universe, fanning them into burning hotter than ever, had shrunk and faded, until when he left, as they all do, all that was left were two feathers, lying on my rumpled sheet.

Ring Road Surfers by Martin Nike

As the black Peugeot sped around the ring road, Danny Morris gripped the armrest.

A Jaguar pulled up alongside them on the inside lane, its driver a grey haired, middle aged man. Shaking his head in disgust, the man glared at them for a moment.

"What was his problem," snapped Kevin Jones, a shaven haired lad of nineteen, clad in a designer T-shirt.

"Slow down! You're scaring the hell out of me!"

Kevin laughed and accelerated away from the Jag, past a sluggish row of bumper to bumper vehicles on the inside lane.

Danny wanted to close his eyes, but felt compelled to watch.

With vehicles merging with the main carriageway at the ring road's many tightly packed exits, it was vital to pay attention.

The Jaguar pulled alongside them again.

Kevin cheered. "At last we have someone who wants to race me!"

No chance of beating that, Danny thought, not in this wreck.

"Let's get some racing action going," snarled Kevin, moving too close to car in front for Danny's liking. "Come on, move across!"

The car in front of them dithered and pulled in, forcing the Jaguar to slow down. Kevin roared with laughter and sped away again. In the mirror, Danny saw the Jaguar overtake the slow car and close in on them, its driver glaring angrily at them.

"You're scaring me."

"You don't mind when I'm giving you lifts to the pub."

The jaguar came right up behind them, and Danny realized that they'd almost completed a circuit of the city centre. When the Jag skipped lanes and moved alongside them, as if taunting them, Kevin cursed.

When Danny glanced at the driver, a chill ran up his spine.

The man's face had changed: he now looked as if his face had been punched so hard it had collapsed inwards, with shattered bone visible beneath dripping flesh. Bloody eye sockets stared blankly. Danny yelled. Startled by this, Kevin lost control of the steering wheel for a moment and the car headed towards the central reservation. Danny felt an explosion of nerves in his stomach and his heart rate quickened.

When Kevin regained control of the car, Danny laughed nervously, but noticed Kevin's face was pale. Clearly shocked by the near miss, Danny thought.

"Bloody Jaguar owners think they own the roads!"

"Can we stop this now?"

Kevin nodded slowly and Danny relaxed, but his heart rate showed no sign of slowing. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the smashed faced-man, still alongside, laughing at them, his broken jaw flapping with unnatural jerks.

"Just get off this bloody road! Now!" cried Danny.

Kevin slowed down to take the next exit, but the Jaguar matched their speed and blocked their path into the inside lane in order to take the slip road.

"Dickhead!" yelled Kevin. The smashed face man grinned at Danny as they curled around the city centre, the Jag blocking every exit, preventing them from leaving.

They completed two more circuits of the city centre in this way. On their third circuit, just before the road dipped down into a below ground section of road, Danny noticed flashing blue police lights next to an exit.

"What was that?" he cried, trying to look back.

"I don't know! I just want this idiot to move across so I can get off!"

At the next exit, the Jaguar moved over and joined a slip road that rose up to a large junction. Just before it vanished out of view, the occupant opened the window and waved at them.

Kevin laughed, and when they came to the next exit he turned the wheel to move across and get onto the slip road.

But the car did move. For a moment, Danny's heart skipped a beat, and he watched Kevin spin the wheel uselessly. They sailed past the exit and continued around the city centre.

"Get off, Kevin," Danny wailed, as they came up behind the car in front.

"It's not working!"

The car, now with a life of its own, followed the road on its perpetual orbit around the centre of the city, passing exit after exit. All other traffic appeared to let them pass without hindrance.

After another orbit, they came back to the police lights.

Danny gasped as he saw a car punched against the embankment, a police car and ambulance alongside it. And in the car, its front squashed like a concertina, two bloody bodies, their faces smashed beyond recognition.

“That car looks like yours,” gasped Danny, as they sped past.

At the next exit Danny spotted the Jag parked up on the bridge overhead. The grey haired man, now appearing normal, waved at them as they sailed beneath him. He stuck his thumbs and nodded, and Danny swore he mouthed thanks.

A chill ran down Danny’s spine.

On the next circuit, he caught a glimpse of the occupants of the smashed car being giving them CPR by the road. For a moment, he tried to feel his heartbeat, but it had gone.

And the next time round, two still bodies, broke and bloody, lay next to the wrecked car while the police and paramedics stood around shrugging sadly.

Next time round, only a bloodstain marked the spot where the bodies had been.

Danny sat back, at peace, as the car rode smoothly around the ring road, making endless circuits of the city centre. Danny stopped counting after thirty. It wasn’t long after that the wreckage of the car vanished.

As they circled the city, Danny told Kevin that he’d have to race again so they could get off. Give the road its next sacrifice in return for their freedom, just like the man in Jag had done to them. Mentally, he cursed the post-blitz planners for building the ring road, surrounding the in a necklace of concrete.

Kevin nodded, understanding, and gripped the steering wheel.

“That’s all I wanted to do,” he said, with a sad smile.

Bereavement By R. J. Smith

The first was a petal.

Martin had been half asleep when he trod on it.

He usually woke up to the sound of his radio alarm. He would lie for a few minutes in a daze whilst his mind adjusted to the difference between reality and dreams, and then he'd wander downstairs to make a cup of tea.

Not today, though. The thought of waking up today to songs like 'Every thing I do' and 'Total Eclipse of the Heart' turned his stomach. If he could move past Valentine's without having to witness it, so much the better.

The alarm on his mobile had jolted him from sleep into a state of confusion, fumbling about trying to remember where he'd put it so he could stop its shrill squealing.

Feeling his way downstairs, he hardly opened his eyes at all. It was only once he'd set the kettle to boil that he'd reluctantly dredged up the energy to inspect what had gotten itself stuck to the bottom of his foot.

It was a petal. Somewhat worse for wear for having been trodden on, but a petal nonetheless. Martin had blinked at it in surprise, then flicked it into the bin. He supposed it must have come in on his coat or shoes or something. It was no great puzzle.

When he went out to his car there had been more of them, but that only explained the first. It was perfectly reasonable to suppose that if a bunch of them had been blown down here, one might have got stuck to his coat. Minor mystery solved, he got inside and drove away.

The incident at work made him frown.

He usually felt a bit isolated, tucked away from the rest of the team in his own little office. Today, though, he'd been somewhat looking forward to hiding from the excited buzz of people discussing their evening plans; or loudly declaring that they were single and glad not to be subject to Valentine's Con.

He didn't want to hear about it.

He was single, yes, but he was still in love, even though Ella was gone. He didn't want to move on. He didn't want to get over it. He didn't want to try speed-dating, or night classes, or fish around for an office fling. Not just because he had doubts about the effectiveness of such things, but because he had no interest in their being successful. He had had someone he loved, and who had loved him back. That had been enough.

So it had been with relief that he'd shut his door against the world and walked around his desk to slump into his chair. But what he saw when he got there sent a shock through him, curdling his stomach. Placed artfully upon his keyboard, there was a single, withered rose. It was beautiful, and delicate, and fragile; the deep red of the petals blackened at the crumpled, curling edges.

He stood still, staring at it. Then came alive again with anger. He snatched up the rose and crushed it in his hands; tearing at it until it was nothing but a dark, twisted stem and a decimated pile of fragmented leaves and petals. He gathered up what he could and threw it in the bin.

He'd made no secret about the fact that he wanted no part in this day. Whoever had left the dead rose for him was either one sick customer, or even more oblivious than Martin generally gave people credit for. The anger simmered beneath the surface of his thoughts the whole day; coming out in snapped remarks and the thrashing treatment he gave to the keys of his keyboard.

When he got home he was greeted by a smell.

Roses again.

This was something rather more serious. Someone had entered his house, perfumed it, and done God knew what else whilst he'd been at work? Becoming genuinely worried now, Martin fumbled out his phone and edged back towards the door. As his outstretched fingers brushed the knob, it swung free of his grasp and gently closed behind him.

He was frightened now, and trying not to be – because this was silly, wasn't it? Nothing could really be going on. Martin pressed his back against the door. He swallowed. He tried the handle a few times to make sure, but it wouldn't budge; it wasn't even that it was locked – it just wouldn't turn.

"What is this?" he spoke into the room, his voice level, stern, as though displeased and losing patience with a childish prank.

For a long time no one answered. Then a movement, barely a shimmer behind the mottled glass of the dining room door, and a voice – hesitant, hopeful: "I-it's me Mart, just me"

He still strove for an effect that would salvage his dignity, should there be any plausible outcome to this encounter. He spoke back: "This is juvenile and pathetic, not funny. Now get out of my house – I'm not impressed. Did you think I would be?"

But he wasn't met with mocking laughter or a sulky prankster. Instead, the door from the dining room began to swing open. "No!" he said, his resolve breaking. "Stop! Wait!" But she didn't.

And there she was. Ella. Beautiful and pale; not in the suit they'd buried her in, but in the white ball gown with the empire-line and the whispish overskirt. The one she'd jokingly called her wedding dress on the very few occasions she'd worn it, even though neither of them believed in marriage.

"What are you...? Why are you...?" words trailed off, he had no breath to speak. A hot tear trickled down his cheek. She came towards him, her movements so smooth he was sure she must be a ghost. But when she brushed the tear away her hand was warm and firm, and he could smell her underneath the roses. Not an earthy smell, or a dead-thing smell, not a smell of the grave. Just... Ella. He stared into her eyes. Not wanting to blink because he loved her and had missed her so much. Not wanting to move because he was afraid of her, and she couldn't be real.

"But you're dead," he said at last.

She nodded, tears in her own eyes now.

"But you..." he scrambled for words, and then just shook his head and laughed. "You don't look like a zombie," he said. "And you don't feel like a ghost."

She smiled at that, and it nudged the building tears down over her lower lids, and she looked more beautiful still. "That's because I'm not," she said.

"Then, how...?"

She shook her head. "Do you know how all your muscles move when you walk, or what happens in your brain when you look at the sky? I don't. I don't know how this works, I only know why. It works because we need it to. Because you need me here, today, and because I will always need you."

"I don't understand. Have you come back to me? Was there some kind of mistake?"

"No," she said softly, reaching a hand up into his hair. "No, there's no mistake, and I can only stay for tonight, and I'll never come back to you again, and no one will ever believe it, so you won't say a word. But I will be here. Tonight. And I can hold you, and take that with me when I go, so that forever can be one last moment with you, and not the smell of disinfectant and the sight of hospital walls. And I can be with you, so you -" Her voice broke, but she kept talking. "So you can say goodbye, and I can comfort you." She brushed his hair back from his face and kissed him.

"And you can move on," She said when she let go.

"No, no, no, no, no," he said, grasping her shoulders with hands somehow too weak, giving out in the intensity of emotion right when he needed to grip her firmly - even if it hurt - so that she would stay, so that nobody could take her away.

Ella stepped back from him as easily as the doorknob had slid from his fingers. She clasped his hands together between hers and kissed them. "Yes," she said. "Because you must, and you can't. Because that's what life is - always to be moving on. You've decided to live, and I'm glad, but you're not doing it yet. You're not doing it yet because there was no one here to help you - no one who could be with you, so that you could be the person you are when you're with me. When the dawn comes I'll say goodbye, and so will you. And you won't ever stop loving me, and I won't ever stop loving you. But your heart will ease, I think, because I could be here for you."

She kissed him again, her lips soft and warm, her tongue so familiar on his - the way her hands in his hair made his scalp tingle - her breasts pressing against his chest through the fabric of her dress - the way his hand felt against the small of her back when he pulled her to him - like it had slotted into place, back where it always should have been - and oh yes, this is what he had missed. The simple rightness of her. He had known that she had loved him, but to feel it - to have her tell him that even in the grave he meant the world to her, and that she would take this memory of loving him with her into oblivion - it broke

something in him. Some barrier, some knot of thought and feeling. And he didn't know when the kissing became crying; and they slid to the floor; and she held him as he wept great wracking sobs, that were too raw, too open and painful for anyone else to see; and too much, too melodramatic somehow, for him to have indulged in on his own.

Eventually his breathing calmed. He was hiccupping by the time he was able to brush the tears from his eyes and sit up again. They didn't have to speak, then. He took her hand and led her up to the bedroom. They made love. They talked for hours. They made love again. And although he could never have believed that he would, when the dawn came it found him sleeping.

Ella kissed her Martin goodbye and stepped out of his world; out of life. Being with him was the last thing she had done; the last piece of this world that was hers. It was the last piece of her. And it always would be.

Timestealer by Steve Stanton

This story first appeared in a Canadian small-press magazine by the name of *Rampike*, in 1990. It was reprinted in Canada in 2003 in *Neo-opsis* issue #1.

You never know what's going to sell these days. It's a real problem for professional timestealers like me. You can study cultural profiles, analyze market trends, hire publicity shamans – and still have a sequence on the skids. There are no guarantees and no explanations. You just cannot tell in advance whose time will prove the most valuable.

Not so in the old days. We had all those vicarious pleasures to provide, all those users hungry for new experience. Athletes had marketable time then, skydivers, mountain climbers at the summit. Ever ride a luge down a glistening tunnel of ice? That was one of my good ones back then. Ever run with the bulls at Pamplona? Or wrestle anaconda in the Amazon rain forest? Those were all big sellers in their day.

Porno was big too, an outrageous thrill with no risk of disease. I did a lot of sleazoid synching during my early apprenticeship – anything to fill my quota – and long hard work it was too, you've no idea. Prostitutes were an easy and obvious target, but if you knew what went on in their heads it would drive you to chastity out of sheer boredom. Supper for the children, laundry, is this guy going to have a heart attack on top of me or what? How some of them make a show of animation is beyond me. Most are not worth the computer time to steal the sequence. It takes a real fanatic for even marginal porn.

And to give equal time on the other side of the coin, let's recall the old evangel sequences. Remember *Charisma*? Remember presiding over a rally of thousands, surrounded by a sea of hands held aloft in prayer, the spirit of glory hovering above the waters, moving in your heart, speaking with your lips – it was my first million seller, one that confirmed my reputation as a timestealer *par excellence*. Those were the good old days.

Now the public is satiated, and rightly so. Every human act conceivable has been recorded. Enough time has been stolen to stretch back to the Pleistocene. It is simply impossible to shock the modern sophisticated user, to bring anything novel to his vast experience. He's already won the World Series and been elected President of the United States. He's already been weightless in outer space and made it with Marilyn Monroe look alikes, possibly at the same time. What can a timestealer add to that?

Concentrate on technique, I tell my best students today. Timestealing is an art, the ultimate form of entertainment. We're intelligent professionals stealing for intelligent users, and it's not what we reveal but what we intimate that counts. The raw human experience is only a base on which to build, the background harmonics to an experiential symphony. With good technique a timestealer can make *Librarian at Rest* a bestseller. What secret thoughts lay hidden behind those affable eyes? What exotic imaginations? You can explore the subconscious levels if you're properly tuned: you've got to use every technological advance. I'm working now on a new generation of "superconscious" sequences. The discriminating user today...

Where was I? Did you ever see my *Hero* sequence? Sometimes you stumble onto a classic like that without a moment's forethought. I was in my mobile unit that day, scanning the streets for anything

unusual to make my quota, when I happened upon the burning building, a two-storey brick house with flames roaring out the front door and a smoky haze curling under the eaves. The building sucked air with an audible whoof, chugging for oxygen like an overheated wood stove. A crowd had gathered. The firemen were restraining the parents from going back inside. You could actually hear the children screaming through an upstairs window.

I activated my system and began visually scanning the bystanders. I was looking for a particular emotive base, that horrid bloodlust feeling you sometimes find in a death audience – just a crass commercial flash-in-the-pan sequence for the weeklies. I noticed a young man gazing up with rapt attention, his face stony with tension, and I thought I'd found a worthwhile target. I probed and found good emotive content. I locked in on full cerebral and began widening my filters. Horror, panic – an overwhelming signal. I fine-tuned visual to correct for slight astigmatism and maximized the olfactory smoke signal. I boosted amygdala and hippocampal levels for artistic effect and toned down verbal cognitive, which seemed to be mired in a repetitive circular routine having to do with supernatural agencies. I synched and began the bypass sequence.

I/we were there, tasting smoke like hot acid, hearing the children's cries above the chatter of the crowd, recoiling inwardly and bouncing back to full surface awareness, bouncing back and forth like a drumbeat, like a zoom lens focusing in and out on a scene too grisly to behold. I/we could not accept the reality, the torture of innocents.

Something snapped – that's still how I describe it to this day. A total conceptual reorganization. Out of chaos came fixed determination, out of horror a grim resolve. I/we ran into the fire, up the blackened stairs, smoke-blind and gasping, never fearing death. I/we were invincible, superhuman. I/we followed the cries, kicked open burning doors, crawled over smoking carpet. Two children under a bed and a babe unconscious in a crib. I/we gathered them like sacks of laundry, rolled them in blankets and hoisted them aloft. I/we noticed pain then, dizziness, weakness. I/we retched out smoke and bile and stumbled forward.

You've experienced the sequence; you know the peculiar timelessness of the hero's escape. Even now in retrospect I wonder how I retained enough professional acumen to signal the computer for overtime. Legal eagles are quick to criticize such action, as is their right, but dedicated users understand why I went overtime on *Hero*. I had to get it all, statutory amendments or not. I was there the first time, I suffered the unedited version; don't tell me my job.

The hero's hands and feet were permanently mutilated, face disfigured, lungs seared and blackened. The children were treated in hospital for smoke inhalation and released. The parents converted to Christianity. The hero later told reporters he didn't remember a thing about what happened. Of course not – I'd stolen the entire episode. I sent the hero a prepublication run and offered him ten percent as an out-of-court settlement for the extra time stolen. (Final editing left the sequence at seven and change, as you know.) He is a rich man today.

I am constantly asked whether I influenced the hero in some way to undertake his daring rescue, whether my synching and stealing his cerebral activity in some way manufactured the sequence, which, of course, is absurd. Timestealing is purely passive, unnoticeable and untraceable by the subject. A two-way communication has never been attempted outside the lab, and the results are not worthy of publication – glorified telephone conversations. The hero would have plunged into those flames with or without me, and he can thank his lucky stars and garters...

Where was I? All right, let's deal with questionable ethics. First tell me who really is going to miss five minutes of mental process? People waste more than that standing at a transit stop or meditating on the toilet. Some people are so drugged they forego higher cerebral functions for most of the day. A culture with no respect for time can well afford to lose an inconsequential fraction to timestealers like me. If god had meant our thoughts and feelings to be private he would not have allowed the monitoring technology to develop – and I'm not just trying to be funny; I've seen too many strange things to deny his existence outright. I'll confess my worst and let you be the judge. Remember *Virgin Bride*? Now this young woman may have had some cause for complaint. Those crucial four minutes and fifty-five seconds may indeed have had a certain sentimental importance – as a male, I can only guess to what extent – but think of the vicarious gratification she provided for millions, male and female, virgin or otherwise. She has contributed to the social gestalt, she has influenced the contemporary milieu. She can always buy the sequence; I'm sure it's gone mass-market by now. In any case...

Damn, that's disconcerting. Where was I? Quality is the key word these days. A good quality product will never be out of style. It is nowhere chiseled in granite that the commercial market will not accept the subtleties of artistic expression. Any timestealer can master technical accuracy, and many can

learn to break standard rules to good effect, but only the best students show that spark of originality, that love of theme and format necessary for a classic sequence. The rest will follow the fads and fashions of their day; they'll supply good work to the weeklies and maybe make the charts now and again with supreme effort and a little luck. And no one will be safe from their spotlight. When royalty piques some interest they'll descend like herd animals on kings and queens throughout the world; when a new pope is elected they'll swarm like flies after sugar donuts. I followed the trends for most of my own career, so don't misinterpret my criticism. I'm merely pointing out that the search for novelty has to end somewhere, sometime.

Users have stood on the Sea of Tranquility and watched the Earth hover above a craggy lunar landscape. Users have danced to tribal drums on a fire-lit African plain. Users have borrowed the brain of a subatomic physicist to ponder the first few nanoseconds of creation, when the universe itself was no bigger than a hydrogen atom. Yet even after all these years, the search for the ultimate sequence shows no evidence of slackening; the weeklies scream for more, the public swallows it up, critical, demanding, and now attention seems to have focused on the timestealers themselves. Sometimes I wish...

Where was I?

The Chamber by Anthony Leigh

The baby's arm was surprisingly difficult to tear from the body, but it was worth the effort. The taste was similar to that of an adult, but sweeter; purer. The ravages of age and the usual toxins – alcohol, tobacco, drugs – hadn't yet had a chance to spoil the meat.

Gen looked up from his prize and wiped the blood and spittle from his chin. "I know you're watching me! Fuck off!"

That there was no reply only served to stoke his fury. He swung the arm through 360 degrees, as though hoping to strike in invisible opponent, only just out of reach. The scene – had there been anyone present to witness it – was surprisingly comical, considering the circumstance; a twenty stone bodybuilder, wielding an infant's arm as though it were a sword.

Gen lumbered around the room half-heartedly looking for an exit, knowing he would find none. The stone chamber seemed to have been carved out of the earth itself – no door, no window, not even a vent for air – a fact which long ago ceased to intrigue him. Gen couldn't understand how he could have been placed into the room; but then, there were a lot of things Gen didn't understand.

His food was always delivered when he was asleep, so he didn't know how it arrived. He'd tried to stay awake to catch the delivery, but always without success. Once, he was certain that he'd nodded off for no longer than a few seconds, only to find his next few meals sitting across the room from him gazing at him with frightened eyes; but as there was no way to effectively measure time in this place he could easily have been mistaken.

His meals arrived sporadically. They were generally delivered a day or so after he had finished picking the current bones clean. They were always male, always Caucasian, always delicious. Occasionally Gen would engage his meal in conversation for a while before the slaughter. It had been so long since he'd had word of the world outside that he was willing to debase himself like that, willing to converse with his food. He dimly recalled a childhood in which he was told never to play with his food, though he could not remember ever having been told not to talk to it.

His meals never had much to say, however. They usually spoke English, but tended to be traumatised. Whether it was the method of their transportation into the chamber that was to blame, or some treatment prior to their current incarceration Gen was never able to adequately ascertain. Bumbling fools, most of them; unable to form the most basic coherent sentence – death was practically a mercy. On one occasion he was able to converse at length with his food on the nature of life and the importance of politics. He found that he disagreed with his meal on practically every point, however, and when the time came to eat his debater he suffered the most dreadful diarrhoea.

Gen felt nothing for them. At first he had, of course. At first he was unable to kill without feeling a dull sense of disgust followed by remorse, but the feelings gradually faded. It was so long since he'd felt

anything other than hunger and boredom, however, that remorse was merely the memory of a memory.

As he tore the flesh from the baby's fingers Gen massaged his left leg. He occasionally suffered a dull cramping pain – the result of one of his meals objecting to the eater/food relationship that Gen was expecting. Gen never took his food for granted; sometimes it fought back. In the beginning he used to apologise to his guests (always nice to have someone over for dinner, haha) and explain to them they were about to be killed; that if they kept still he would make it as quick and painless as possible. His food always seemed to fight harder when they heard this, however, so he soon gave up explaining and relied on surprise, instead, which usually worked better.

He wouldn't be here forever, he realised. He was delivered as someone else's food originally, and had fought back; the meat becoming the eater. One day he would be too slow, too weak, too tired, too blasé, too apathetic to beat his opponent, and then someone else would take his place, his chamber, his life.

And his meat, of course.

Not today, though. He felt he must have pleased someone, performed well in some unspoken task. The baby's flesh was exquisite. Today was a good day.

Gen settled down to a dreamless sleep and woke to find a young woman sitting opposite him.

This was a first.

Not only was she a *she*, but she was also sitting on a stool. No-one had ever been sent in with furniture before.

"Behind me", she said "is a door."

Gen rubbed his eyes and saw that – yes – there was an opening there. How could he have missed it? Now she mentioned it, it was obvious.

"Behind the door" she said "is your one and only chance for freedom. You have only to walk through the door and your freedom is guaranteed."

Gen walked up to the opening and peered through. He could see only the rough walls of a dimly-lit tunnel, but he felt he could hear the whispering of the wind, and the freshness of the air made him almost giddy.

"Freedom." he repeated.

The woman gestured to a document she held on her lap, and gestured toward it with a pen.

Gen took the pen and stabbed her in her eye, twisting her neck until it cracked.

He looked up and was unsurprised to see that the door had disappeared, but he had a good week's worth of eating.

And a stool!

How he must have pleased his captors – a baby, a woman (more than just eating on *that* he thought) and a stool! All in one day!

Gen sat on his stool and smiled.

Scar Tissue

By Alasdair Stuart

'What the hell are you doing?' The voice was polite, precise, and dripping with fury. Matt had snapped to parade rest before he was fully aware he was even moving.

'SIR! Performing vital maintenance sir!'

'Interesting. Stalin airbrushed party officials he no longer favoured from photographs. One of the earliest TV stations erased decades of tape simply for economic reasons. Were they performing vital maintenance?'

'Sir?'

'It's a rhetorical question, crewman, don't try and answer it. Turn around.' Matt did so and fought the urge not to swear. He was face to face with Captain Bara Jensen and she looked as far from happy as he'd ever seen her.

The Hammer of Jupiter.

Angry at him.

'Sir, I meant no offence whatsoever. I was simply attempting to make myself useful.'

She smiled, slowly. 'I know, crewman. What's your name?'

'Matthew Hatcher, sir.'

'What do you do on my boat, Mr Hatcher?'

'I'm damage control and emergency response, Captain.'

Jensen nodded appraisingly. 'No you're not, Mr Hatcher. You're the glue. You're the glue, the mortar that holds this ship together, you and your colleagues are my final weapon, my final line of defence.' She took a step closer to him. 'You can be relied on to put other people's lives above your own, to close the bulkhead door whilst you're still on the wrong side, to vent air from your compartment so others can breathe. To die, if called upon. And all of that with no weapon in your hand.'

She stared at him for a moment.

'Mr Hatcher there are days when I can't bring myself to look at the troops in your department, knowing what I will one day ask them to do. And there are days when the thought of your teams is all that keeps me functioning. Now, another question? What did you see, on this bulkhead, that made you want to repair it?'

Matt paused, Jensen smiled encouragingly. 'Carbon scoring, denting, heat and impact damage sir.'

'Good eye. Look behind you, at the other bulkheads in this section. At the walls, the floor. What do you see?'

Matt turned, obeyed. Every door, for as far as he could see was as pitted and scarred as this one. There were ugly, crude welds holding deck plates together, an entire section seemingly welded on from another ship. As he looked, he realised the floor tilted.

'The scoring is from an engagement with the Jovian separatists. The hull plating buckled during a weapons test. The corridor section from the *Hood*, was added following the first Elliptical War.' Her voice was quieter now.

'This is where my ships shows its scars. This is where we honour those that have died to protect us by never letting ourselves heal, not entirely. This, Mr Hatcher, is history. So you can understand why I didn't want you repairing it.'

He opened his mouth, closed it again.

'Captain I'm so-'

'Don't be. You were doing your job.' Then she smiled. 'Walk with me, Mr Hatcher. Let's broaden your horizons.'

Bara Jensen strode off into the past. After a moment, Matthew followed.



Welcome to the premier of *SciFi Subscribed*, the new column about speculative fiction podcasting. My name is Mur Lafferty and I've been a podcaster for three years and a freelance writer for six years. I'm delighted to be able to bring both experiences to *Hub* to let you know what's going on in the podcast/SciFi world.

Since this issue of *Hub* is dedicated to flash fiction, I wanted to focus on the podcasts that cover flash. A handful of excellent podcasts address flash fic, while some focus on it entirely.

The most popular podcasts for any kind of fiction are *Escape Pod* and *Pseudopod*, both of them featuring short fiction (*Escape Pod* showcasing science fiction and *Pseudopod* focusing on horror). Every once in a while, apart from their weekly episodes, they will feature a piece of flash fiction.

And of interest to writers, these are both paying markets for flash and longer pieces.

If you're familiar with the excellent website *365 Tomorrows* (<http://www.365tomorrows.com/>), which publishes one piece of flash fic per day, you will be delighted to hear about *The Voices of Tomorrow* (<http://voicesoftomorrow.libsyn.com/>), where some of the founders of *365 Tomorrows*, J.R. Blackwell and Steve Smith, host a weekly podcast of one of the stories from the site. The podcast is on hiatus now, but there is a plentiful archive to peruse.

Another veteran of *365 Tomorrows*, Jared Axelrod, has two of his own short fiction podcasts. *The Voice of Free Planet X* (<http://planetx.libsyn.com>), focuses on one of his stories, with a short personal essay to begin it and ending with some "podsafe" (or Creative Commons licensed – something we'll get into at a later column) music.

Axelrod also writes and produces *Aliens You Will Meet* (<http://aliensyouwillmeet.libsyn.com/>), showcasing a surreal, short piece that has your precognitive alien advisor looking into the future and telling you about the aliens you will encounter during your journey and how to deal with them. Part science fiction, part etiquette, part travelogue (if a preemptive one), *Aliens You Will Meet* is definitely worth the small amount of time it takes to listen.

The last flash podcast I want to bring up is *100 Word Stories* at <http://podcasting.isfullofcrap.com>. Self-explanatory, the site offers challenges to listeners to do their own stories and send them in, and they have a large pool of contributors. They're usually not science fiction in nature, but many have a weird twist to them that make them worth the listen.

And honestly, with a one hundred-word story, you'll not waste a lot of time if it's not very good. In the time it'll take you to say, "This one's not working for me," it will be over and you can go on with your life. Actually that works for any flash, honestly. When it's done well, the pleasure from a piece of flash can last a while, and when it's done poorly, it's an easily-forgotten smudge on an otherwise normal day. So try out a couple of these short podcasts, you have very little to lose.

About The Author

Mur Lafferty is one of the foremost podcasters in the world. Her book *Tricks of the Podcasting Masters* (co-authored with Robert Walch) was one of Amazon's top 5 best-selling reference books of 2006. Her previous podcast novels (*Heaven – Season One*, *Heaven – Season Two: Hell and Heaven – Season Three: Earth*) are enormously popular, and can be downloaded free of charge from www.podiobooks.com.

Mur's current novel – *Playing for Keeps* – is available from www.playingforkeepsnovel.com and also from www.podiobooks.com.

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