

(Adobe Acrobat PDF Version)

### **Contents (vol 1 num 3 – q4 2005)**

Welcome, new and returning *nanobison* readers!

This is our third issue. This month we bring an interesting mix, with a bit of humor included.

#### ***Stories:***

From the Underbubble to the Sky - by David McGillveray

Argument - by Neil Davies

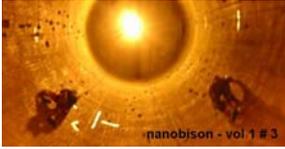
The Stone Clock - by Gene Stewart

Not Again - by Don L. Smith

A Wife in Every Port - by James Targett

#### ***Poetry:***

Why You Haven't Called Yet - by Emily Gaskin



***Editorial:***

Post-apocalyptic Fiction and the Six O'Clock New - by Doug Helbling

***Contests:***

We have a winner, for not one, but all three of the contests from Issue 1, which were carried over to Issue 2. David Olson submitted the correct answers to all three contests.

Contest 1 -

Question One: What short story contained the following line?

"I also saw that all the robots were bowed down with toil and affliction, that all were weary of responsibility and care, and I wished them to rest."

Winning answer:

Isaac Asimov, "Robot Dreams"

Question Two: What short story contained this line?

Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out.

Winning answer:

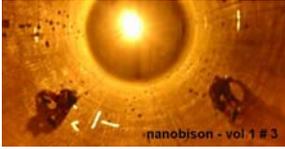
Arthur C. Clarke, "The Nine Billion Names of God"

Question Three: What short story contained this line?

"You're full of it. You're a tyrant. You have no right to order people around and kill them if they show up late."

Winning answer:

Harlan Ellison, "Repent, Harlequin! Said the Ticktockman"



## Contest Two -

### Who Wrote / Spoke This?

Following is a science fiction quote. Name the character so spoke this dialogue or the author of the work. Extra points (a.k.a. our undying admiration) if you name the work itself.

**Congratulations, Captain. Against our better judgement, the B'omar Sovereignty has agreed to grant your vessel passage through our territory.**

#### Winning answer:

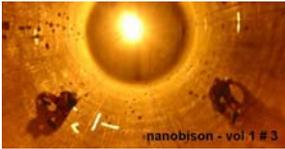
Gauman spoke this in an episode of Star Trek: Voyager called "The Raven"

## Contest Three - nanobison steganography contest

#### Winning answer:

Robert A. Heinlein, "Stranger in a Strange Land"

Congrats to David! New reader contests will be included in the next issue.



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### **Writer Contest:**

We are holding a writing contest. The mission? Write a short story of at least 1,500 words to fit the following picture from Gary Thomas:



The best story submitted will appear in the next issue.

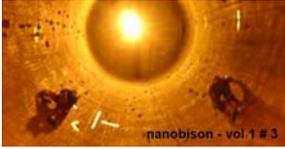
### **Info:**

*nanobison* is a quarterly electronic magazine of speculative fiction and poetry. We accept electronic submissions and pay for work published on our site. See our [submission guidelines page](#) for details.

Some of the stories and poetry published in this electronic magazine are presented in audio format for "Golden Hours" on OPB (Oregon Public Broadcasting) television, via SAP signal, and as streaming audio. Visit the links below for more information.

[Golden Hours Page Link](#)

[Streaming Media Link](#)

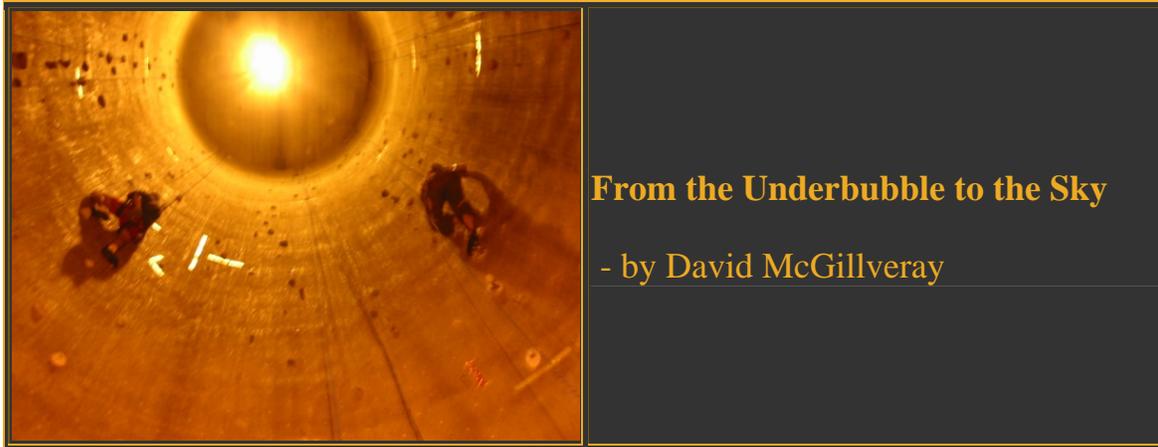
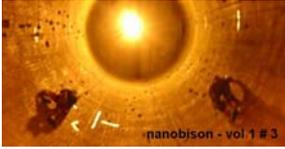


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### **Staff:**

Our dedicated, unpaid staff are ever on the job, evolving *nanobison* toward overall betterness.

- Pam Bainbridge-Cowan: Co-editor, Alpha Story Editor, Art Content Director, PR manager, Quality Goddess
- Doug Helbling: Co-editor, Beta Story Editor, Site Design Director, Resident Bit Jockey, Zine Founder
- Mary Ann Woolman: Associate Story Editor
- Brian Wilson: Associate Story Editor



The Thousand Immortal Retainers felt the quickening begin again. Ortiko could taste the changes in the paste he sucked from the nipples of the Feeding Wall. He could see the shroud lift from behind the eyes of his fellows, the spark of awareness igniting within them as it had in him.

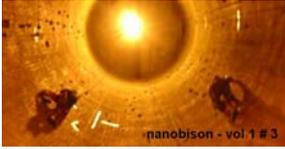
Even as he padded back across the gently inclined floor of the Underbubble, even as he sank into the welcoming fluids of the nutrient baths, even as he watched his brother retainers smile and drift back into their off-duty dreams, Ortiko knew that the cycle was beginning again. The long period of indolence between shifts was coming to an end.

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Ortiko lined up with forty-nine others before his work-party's equipment dispensary. Identical lines filled with identical, naked and genderless souls stretched from each of the twenty dispensaries, collecting the tools pertinent to their own tasks.

Ortiko spoke to the retainer in front. "It's good to see you awake again, Dundas. It's good to be back on shift."

"Only you ever say that, Ortiko," said Dundas without turning. Ortiko regarded the back of his skull, rough with the first stubble of hair growth. It would be fully grown out before they reached



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the surface. "Only you ever want to leave the baths and go to work."

"The air tastes different Topside. I like the way you can look in any direction and not see a wall. I like it that when you look up there's a sky."

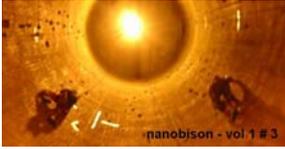
"Don't look at the sky too hard. You never know who's looking back." Dundas turned at last and regarded Ortiko with smiling, grey eyes. "It's good to see you again too."

Ortiko had lost count of the amount of similar conversations the two of them had had. He had no concept of time between shifts, lost in the near-heaven of the baths. He knew that the baths and the victuals they were fed functioned as preservatives to keep the retainers in a state of readiness for the endless cycles of maintenance. It was true what Dundas said: most of the retainers loved the long periods of downtime, even while they were barely aware of it. But for Ortiko, it was the work itself that delighted him, or more accurately the chance to leave the Underbubble and stand on the surface of the world.

The work-party was issued with cylinders full of cleanser, applicators and polishers from a mouth that led back into the incomprehensible innards of the world. They strapped the bulky equipment to their backs, buckled utility belts around their waists and headed for disembarkation. In the vast, echoing spaces of the Underbubble, lines of retainers followed predetermined routines towards their individual tasks. Few spoke to one another. Every retainer knew the team they belonged to, their individual function, their appointed destination -- it was written into the very codes that defined their existence. What was there to talk about?

"I wonder if the bell will have changed," said Ortiko. "Did you notice the little differences last time? I did. I think I mentioned them to you."

"I don't remember."



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“Yes you do. Those little spots of red? Difficult to get clean. And the dust in the air, blowing around? Never seen that before.”

“It looked the same to me.” Dundas’ hair was already noticeably thicker. The retractable adhesive pads had begun to form on his hands and feet and their work-party designation marks were clear on the skin of his upper arms.

They stood on a long platform sheared away from a circular tunnel, twenty groups of fifty retainers waiting patiently for the train to come. It started with a gentle whisper of breath against Ortiko’s cheek and then grew stronger and stronger until Dundas clutched his arm for reassurance. The train’s approach was announced by a howling of wind in the invisible depths of the tunnel. Then a glow and finally a pale, unblinking eye surged at them, filling the tunnel’s throat. Ortiko stood exhilarated, mesmerized by the power of this beast that drew up before them with an assured gentleness that belied its noisy introduction.

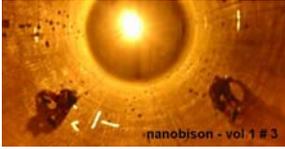
Each work-party’s carriage awaited, a stubby transparent capsule without seats. Ortiko and Dundas stepped aboard and grasped the hanging handholds for support. The doors sealed and Ortiko’s ears popped as pressure was adjusted. Without a lurch, with its new cargo safely in its belly, the train resumed its journey.

Anticipation twittered in Ortiko’s belly. Gradually, the train was eaten away as capsules broke away from the main body and followed other tracks into the darkness. Ortiko’s anticipation grew, for he knew what was coming. He counted the seconds until he could contain himself no longer.

“This is it, Dundas. This is it!”

His silent colleagues turned and looked at him with good-natured indulgence. Brother Ortiko was always the one to get excited.

The tunnel ended, as if one reality had been switched off and replaced with another. The capsule shot out between inverted



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mountain ranges pregnant with unfathomable machinery, suspended on a monorail set into the underside of the world.

Below were the stars.

Ortiko experienced a moment of dislocation as the walls of the tunnel vanished and he saw stars beneath his feet, behind him, before him. He looked this way and that, swinging on his handhold and tracing constellations he remembered from countless identical journeys. The wonder of this moment had never left him.

“Just amazing, Dundas. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It’s wonderful, Ortiko.”

“Do you think the Patrons live near any of those stars? I bet they do.”

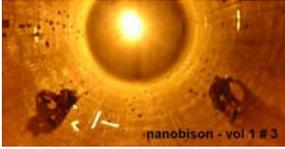
“I dare say.”

Above them was a featureless roof of black, a significant percentage of the rocky matter of an entire system hewn into one gigantic structure. The capsule sped on, frictionless and over great distance, while its occupants stared out across the light years.

#

Ortiko emerged onto a field of short grass. It stretched to the limits of his vision, caressed by a breeze that always blew in the same direction. The grass shimmered as it moved in the wind, fans of metallic blues, greens and pinks moving across the land like living things. Ortiko bent to one knee and placed the flat of his hand against the grass, breathing deep in the fresh air. The warmth of the artificial suns touched his skin.

The others were already checking their equipment. The clinking of buckles and the electrical hum of turning polishing heads broke the peace. Ortiko turned at last and faced the enormity of Mulluky’s Bell.



“Who do you think Mulluky was, Dundas? Do you think he used to ring the bell?”

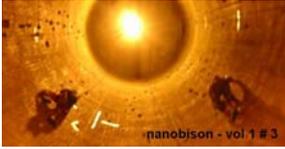
Dundas shrugged, tightening the straps on his pack. The retainers had never been granted answers to the questions Ortiko liked to ask. Answers were not required to perform their tasks.

The bell rose out of the ground at a sixty-degree angle and kept on rising. A large portion of its base was buried, or appeared to be buried, deep in the surface strata of Topside in order to support the artifact’s huge bulk. Its metal shell gleamed gold in the light of the two nearest suns and even when he tilted his head right back, Ortiko could see only the gargantuan curve of its metal shoulder, never the peak. This was a mountain of brass and the retainers were miniscule before it. Ortiko felt like a single blade of the grass under his feet.

“It’s got worse since we were here last, look,” Ortiko said. He pointed at a patch of discoloration perhaps fifty meters above their heads. “There. And there!” The bell’s surface had become spotted with tarnished patches, rust or green. Up close, tiny cracks like capillaries etched the solid metal and the wind dislodged tiny flakes and carried them away.

“Then we’ll just have to fix it then,” said a retainer named Doello.

There were no leaders here. Theirs was a shared function and they went about it with an unspeaking empathy. Such was the understanding between the members of the work-party that there was no need for discussion or direction. They split into pairs, linking to one another with a length of elasticized rope for safety and then they began to climb. The adhesive pads that had developed on their hands and feet since the quickening, allowed them to cling to the surface of the bell as surely as if it was solid ground, even on the side that hung above open air. Muscles designed for the task could carry their weight easily for days at a time and the concentrated nutritional cocktails drawn from the



Feeding Wall meant they could work tirelessly for the entire duration of the shift.

The work pattern meant they worked from the top down. Ortiko dragged Dundas up behind him, eager to reach the summit. They climbed for a long time before they reached the shoulder.

"Careful of the damaged patches," warned Ortiko. "They're less easy to get a grip on."

The going was easier above the shoulder and for a while they could almost walk upright before the bell began to taper again. It was topped with a vast ring of solid brass so large that the train that carried them here could pass through its eye several times over. The two of them scaled the curving surface, spiderlike and untiring. Only at the very peak did they allow themselves a mouthful of water and a moment to look outward.

"I love this."

"Me too, Ortiko."

"The Patrons can do wonderful things."

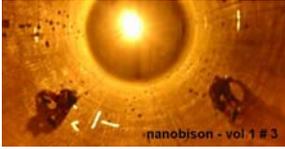
"And fearsome ones, Ortiko."

"Wouldn't you like to talk to them? Ask them things?"

Dundas regarded Ortiko in disbelief. "Where do the things you say come from? It's not our place to even see a Patron, and if they notice us it's because we're not doing our jobs properly. Then you'd better be afraid. You could get decommissioned."

The Patrons: they breathed life into the Thousand Retainers and created the world. They were invisible, all-powerful, watchful, and their servants were required to remain unobtrusive. The Patrons lived above the sky, managing and overseeing and living. The retainers existed to work. They understand that at a level as deep as instinct.

Ortiko sighed and returned his attention to the view. "It seems a waste, that's all."



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Other pairings were making their way up the side of the bell, but Ortiko always insisted on being first. From here, he felt he could see forever, but he knew that was not true because he could not see many of the other artifacts. Only twice from here was the flat horizon broken, and only then by the tiniest of discrepancies. These were the other train destinations, with their own work-parties specialized to their care and upkeep. Ortiko didn't even know which of them he could see out there. The Face, maybe, or Shimmer? He liked to wonder and he liked to follow the exquisite patterns the wind made as it moved across the endless grass. Here, he was acutely aware of the size of Topside and of the freedoms that were possible on the open plain. It made him think of how little he had seen of his own world. From here, the Underbubble and the claustrophobic nutrient baths were a dimension away.

The wind, stronger here, plucked at their new hair and rattled their utility belts.

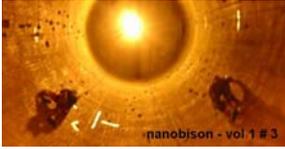
"Let's get to work," said Dundas.

It was a huge task, even for those as perfectly adapted as the retainers, but one they went at without complaint or cease. It never grew truly dark Topside: the clockwork waltz of the four artificial suns played patterns of light and shadow across the surface of the bell but it never put a stop to the work. After a time, the patterns repeated and many such cycles passed in which Ortiko and Dundas and all their fellows cleaned and polished the surface of Mulluky's Bell, methodically scouring the outer shell in its entirety.

At last they grouped together to rest on the warm grass out from under the bell's wandering shadows and admired their work. Here and there patches of discolored metal still persisted.

"I think the bell is getting old," said Ortiko.

"What do you mean, 'old'?" asked Doello.



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"I mean wearing out, like a used polishing head. It sits up here in the air and the light and the wind blows against it. It doesn't have a nice bath to settle into and make it feel better between shifts. The bell is on shift all the time. How would you like it?"

Doello looked up at the metal wall before him with a new respect. "Maybe you're right. Put like that, it's a hard worker all right. Shall we do the inside now?"

The retainers' task was only half done. It was cooler inside Mulluky's Bell and they had to bring their own light. The areas of erosion were more pronounced on the inner surface, perhaps because the bell trapped more of the moisture in the air. Ortiko remembered a time when every tiny piece of the bell had shone bright and new. Not any more.

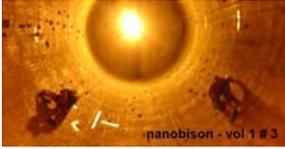
He led Dundas up the angle of the wall into the interior, vaster even than the space inside the Underbubble. Occasionally, he felt the disconcerting lurch as a foot or a finger came loose from the surface, drawing with it a covering of rust or worse, a thin flake of metal. This was a new and frightening development, one that had not been foreseen in their designs. Ortiko climbed that little bit slower as a result, learning to circumvent the worst areas.

Once they were right up inside the peaked roof, they began to scrub. They sprayed fluid and removed any build-ups of residue and polished the metal clean, their head-lamps dancing together on the curving walls. Side by side, Ortiko and Dundas worked their way downward. Occasionally, one of the work-party would call out instructions to each other but otherwise they worked silently, efficiently, without complaint.

It was only when Dundas slipped that Ortiko cried out.

"Dundas!"

Ortiko let go of his tools and fastened as many of his extremities as he could to the wall -- every finger-pad, every toe -- waiting for the impact as the rope between them stretched to its limit.



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Lights were turned towards him, but his colleagues were all too far away. The slope of the wall was precipitous here and the jolt was harder than Ortiko expected. His fingers were dragged painfully across the surface, making a terrible squealing sound. Then an entire hand was pulled free as Dundas bounced on the end of the tether. Ortiko waved wildly in space and then his other hand fell away at a third jolt. He fell backwards, sliding on his back and gathering speed. He shouted and scrabbled desperately for purchase. Still their momentum grew.

“Dundas!” His voice was torn away in the rush of air.

He was rolling, falling.

Below, he imagined he heard Dundas cry out, the crunch of an impact. No, surely the walls were smooth. He fell past something, a faint light.

Then he jerked on the end of the rope. The breath was crushed out of him. It hurt where the utility belt dug into his flesh, but he had stopped. He bounced gently, breathing deeply as he recovered.

“Dundas? Are you there?”

“Yes.” The voice was tiny, shocked. His light had gone out.

“Have you stuck yourself to the wall again?”

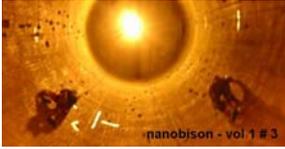
“Yes. I’ve hurt my arm.”

“Can you climb?”

“I think so.”

“The rope caught on something. Meet me up there and we’ll see what it is. Then we can release the rope and get you down to the ground.”

Ortiko scrambled upwards, reeling in the rope as he went but keeping it taut in case Dundas slipped again. He saw the light he had passed as he fell, not the soft yellow of their head-lamps but an outline of hard, brilliant green.



It shone from behind a square metal hatch that had risen seamlessly from the inner surface of the bell. Their tether had snagged over one corner of the hatch. The cover itself seemed to float, apparently supported by the light. Symbols glowed in the wall above in inscrutable Patron text and a small orange triangle winked at him. He tried to peer at what was inside, but the glare pushed his eyes away. They settled on the triangle again. Tempting.

Ortiko touched it, only the lightest touch with the side of his thumb. Before he could even leap back in fright, the hatch cover disappeared. It shrank to a blank dot in the centre of the light and vanished. A shaft of emerald immediately illuminated the area, piercing the inner darkness of Mulluky's Bell like a searchlight and bathing the surrounding wall in an underwater radiance.

"Ortiko, what have you done?" Dundas appeared at last, his right arm hanging limp and his worried face painted green by the strange light. "That's Patron tech. You can't go interfering with Patron tech. It's against the rules."

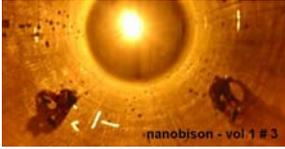
"I couldn't help it," said Ortiko, gazing raptly along the finger of light. He shook himself. "Your arm! Is it bad?"

"It hurts, but it'll get better. I'll still work the shift." Tiny machines swimming in the Underbubble's nutrient baths made the retainers quick healers.

Dundas tried to look into the source of the light. Its glare had moderated a little, but he still screwed up his eyes. "How are we going to fix this mess?"

There were shouts coming from higher up the wall now, as the rest of the work-party converged on their position. They congregated in the light of the open hatch, clinging to the angle of the wall on all fours like an agglomeration of insects. Their eyes were wide and their mouths hung open in stupefied wonder.

"What's happened?"



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“Are the Patrons coming? Are they here?”

“Stay away from it. It’s Patron tech. We mustn’t touch it.”

Ortiko was looking into the light. Inside the hatch lay a hypnotic vortex of greens, aquamarine and hints of gold. It was impossibly beautiful.

“It was just there,” said Dundas. “I slipped and we fell and I hit it on the way down. It was an accident.”

“It must be here for a reason,” said Ortiko, still staring.

“Yes, a Patron reason,” said Doello, pushing his way to the front. “It’s not for us to concern ourselves with. We should go back to work.”

“But what if something’s wrong? Dundas slipped on one of those ugly patches of metal. They’re all over the surface and it’s never been like this before. And we’ve never seen anything like this before either. Something’s changed.”

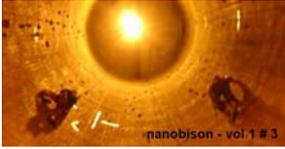
“If it has, then the Patrons will fix it. We’re here to clean the bell. That’s our job. This is outside the guidelines.”

“Ortiko opened it,” blurted Dundas, massaging his arm.

There was a collective intake of breath and Ortiko dragged his eyes from the swirling patterns of light to look sharply at his friend.

“But what if the Patrons can’t fix it? Has anyone ever seen a Patron, ever since the beginning?” Ortiko edged closer to the lip of the hatch. “Maybe we need to do something. This light-thing was put here for a reason, so maybe we’re here for a reason too. Maybe this is the only way to help make the bell better again. We can’t just leave it.”

“We should go back to work,” Doello repeated. There was a rumble of agreement from the rest of the work party.



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The Patron script glowed softly in the wall. Coils of beguiling light turned and merged in intricate patterns. The retainers hung paralyzed with fear and wonder and indecision. Ortiko stepped into the light.

#

For a moment he hung suspended in a place without color or scale or mind. Then he was taken, whipped away along a tunnel of emerald mirrors towards a single inescapable destination. He tried to scream but there was nothing to breathe. Instead, he felt the kiss of exotic energies and the faintest whisper of a deific scrutiny.

He fell forward onto a hard floor, thick with dust. It blew up in clouds and Ortiko sneezed and spluttered. Through a lifting fog, he felt a tugging at his middle and as he moved his hand towards it, he realized. The tether! He was still attached to Dundas when he stepped through the portal.

The taut line ran backwards into an identical vortex to the one inside the bell. Even as he took hold of it, he felt the tension lessen. Ortiko peered into the hypnotic patterns. Maybe he would see Dundas approach through the void. Maybe --

Dundas shot from the surface like lightning from a cloud and ploughed straight into Ortiko, sending them tumbling together in a windmill of limbs and puffs of dust. They lay there breathing heavily until Dundas spoke:

"What did you do that for?" He was bewildered and, for the first time Ortiko could remember, annoyed.

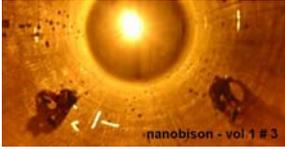
"Is your arm all right?"

"It still hurts, if that's what you mean. Paired with you, it's a wonder I still have any limbs at all. That was horrible."

"I'm sorry."

Dundas shook dust from his hair and blinked. "Where are we?"

"I don't know. The other end of that tunnel."



"We shouldn't be here, Ortiko. We should go back."

"You want to go through that again?"

"No."

"There aren't any Patrons here. This place hasn't been cleaned in a dozen shifts at least. I told you there was something wrong."

They climbed to their feet. "You don't know anything, Ortiko," said Dundas.

"Well let's find out, then."

An arched doorway stood at the opposite end of the room. It led into a plain grey corridor with low ceilings and a gentle curve, the floor again covered in dust. The two retainers left their equipment packs behind and began to walk, and continued walking. They walked until they saw a patch of scuffed floor where they had first emerged.

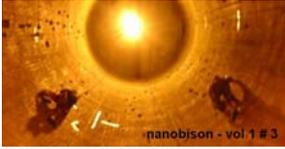
"We've turned a circle," said Ortiko.

"Let's go back to Mulluky's Bell. We're behind schedule."

"Dundas, will you stop saying that? I'm not leaving until we find out what this place is. Did you see those symbols on bits of the outside wall? They looked the same as the ones before. They must be doors."

Ortiko almost expected to be confronted by another light tunnel when the door slid upwards into the ceiling. Instead there was a tiny room and a flashing green light. With a good degree of trepidation and a deal of urging from Ortiko, they stepped inside. The door closed and a second later opened again. There had been no sense of movement but when they emerged it was to a completely different place.

The walls glowed with a comforting translucence. The floor was clean of dust, pristine, and the air was heavy with scent that sprung from a diversity of plants growing in apertures set back from the corridor. Ortiko had only ever seen the grass that carpeted Topside before. The rich greens of leaves and the vivid



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colors of flowers filled him with wonder. He walked from plant to plant touching their fronds and stems, bending to smell their perfume and stopping to smile at Dundas.

This new corridor curved as before, but along the outer wall were broad archways that led into galleries filled with hanging images, sculptures of all sizes, shimmering incandescent light shows and strange music. Even the walls themselves were richly patterned, at times with random whorls of color and at others with rows and columns of geometric uniformity.

“Dundas, look at this.” More of the Patron script glowed in the wall beside another entranceway, this time leading into the interior, towards the centre of whatever structure they were exploring.

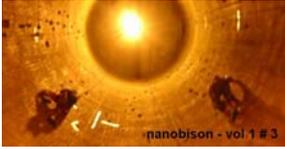
Inside was the greatest wonder of all, evidence of the real power of the Patrons: they had the power to capture a world.

The floor of the broad circular room that they stepped into was transparent glass. Looking down made Ortiko dizzy with perspective. Dundas’ jaw hung, slack as his injured arm.

The four corners of Topside lay at their feet. The perfect square of their world rippled like water with island-sized waves of wind-blown grass. Twenty toy-sized artifacts no bigger than Ortiko’s thumbnail were spread across this palette in geometric patterns. They were shapes he recognized from stories in the Underbubble. Above it all the four artificial suns, one for each corner, danced their tango among shreds of cloud.

Testing the floor ahead of him with a toe, Ortiko advanced gingerly across the transparent floor. Despite his encouragement, Dundas would not leave the safety of the entrance. Ortiko gazed between his feet, searching for something until at last he found it.

“Dundas, I can see Mulluky’s Bell! Come and look.” Ortiko was surprised when the intensity of his stare and his longing for a closer look were rewarded. A portion of the glass below him



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seemed to warp and an image of the bell rushed towards him. When he stumbled back, his vision returned to normal. Gathering courage, he looked again. The image of the bell expanded and kept expanding the more he willed it, as if he was looking through the eye a god.

“Oh my, oh my. Dundas, I can see the work party from here. They’re all standing on the grass wondering what to do.”

“Really?” Dundas finally joined his friend standing suspended over space. The magnifying glass showed them it all: the obsidian visage of Face with its kilometer high nose pointing at them, the perpetually frozen explosion of ice that was Geyser, the monstrous walking fingers of Pendulum, the warped, distorting cliffs of Shimmer. These were things they knew only in name or through the vague, overfamiliar descriptions of the other Retainers. Now it was set out for them like a feast. It was almost too much.

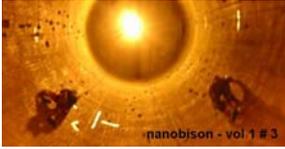
“NO UNAUTHORISED MAINTENANCE CREW ON THE VIEWING GALLERY.”

The voice came from everywhere and filled the room like a storm.

Dundas jumped so high he ended up clinging to the ceiling with both feet and his good hand, eyes wide with fright. Ortiko spun around, taken by a sudden dread that all his fellows’ warnings were true and that the Patrons would shortly punish his presumption. Still, he could not quite dispel the thrill of possibilities that a meeting might bring. He heard Dundas whimper as a figure appeared in the corridor beyond the doorway.

“Dundas, come down from there,” Ortiko hissed. “Do you want to meet your first Patron hanging upside down? It’s undignified.”

The figure stepped closer. It wore unfamiliar robes and was pointing a staff at them menacingly. Dundas moaned in terror.



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“Get off the viewing floor,” barked the figure. “I’ve only just cleaned it.”

Ortiko and Dundas looked at each other.

“I said get off it!”

The two of them scampered towards the new arrival across the cloud tops below. As Ortiko approached the figure in the doorway, he saw that the staff he carried was a mop, still dripping at one end.

Dundas fell to his knees. “We’re sorry, Patron. It’s all been a terrible mistake.”

“I don’t think he’s a Patron, Dundas. I think he’s like us.”

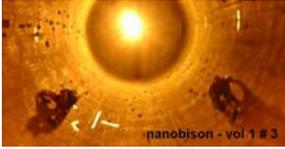
Apart from the robes, the creature that stood before them with an outraged expression on his face did indeed resemble the two retainers. He shared the same stylized features; the grey, oval eyes, the broad, flared nose, the thin lips and rounded chin. His hair was a dark helmet and where his arms emerged from the robes, Ortiko could see work-party designation markings, though not ones he recognized. The only difference between them was that the newcomer’s skin was a darker brown, corrupted with puzzling wrinkles and sagging flesh.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” The voice was imperious but Ortiko could hear uncertainty and fear beneath it.

“I’m Ortiko and this is Dundas,” said Ortiko. “We’re retainers -- like you? We work Topside, on Mulluky’s Bell. We came through a green tunnel.”

“It was an accident,” Dundas said.

“You came through the emergency maintenance hatch?” demanded new arrival, aghast. “How did you operate it? Actually, forget that, why did you operate it? All protocols clearly state that maintenance drones are forbidden from operating Patron-designated conduits. In fact, all Patron tech is off limits. Didn’t you see the signs?”



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Ortiko cleared his throat uncomfortably. "It just, sort of, opened up. Then we were here."

The newcomer eyed them with suspicion. "Hmmm. Well, it wouldn't be the first thing to break down around here, I suppose. I take it the wormhole ejected you on the upper levels. I haven't been up there in, well, in . . ." He began to absently push the mop across the floor.

"What's your name?" asked Ortiko.

"What? Oh. Munbee is my name." Munbee drew himself up. "I'm the caretaker here. Patron-appointed, you know."

"You've met the Patrons? Are they still here?" Ortiko glanced at Dundas, who seemed to have got over the worst of his nerves and was rubbing at his hurt arm.

"Still here? No, not at the moment. I think they said they'd come back, though. That was a while ago now, but I trust them. They'll be back."

"Do you know when they left?"

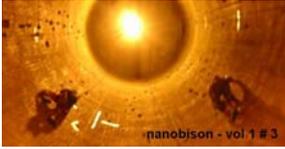
Munbee stopped his mopping and frowned. "Now you've asked, I couldn't tell you. Like I say, it's been a while."

"Is that why your face has all those lines on it?" said Dundas.

"Ortiko says when things get old they wear out, like the bell." Ortiko kicked him on the shin.

Munbee pointed a finger at both of them. "I'm the caretaker. I'm on my own. Have you any idea how much work it is just keeping the Viewing Gallery up to standard? I've not got the time to lie around in a nutrient bath while the galaxy turns. I've had to settle for what little rest I can spare. I'm busy. Not like you lot, scurrying around once in a Patron's lifetime. You'd look like this if you did any proper work."

"You must know all about the Patrons," Ortiko said in an effort to placate him. "They must have really trusted you, to leave you in charge."



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“That’s the first bright thing you’ve said since I found you,” said Munbee. He set the mop against the wall and scratched his head. When he looked closer, Ortiko could see streaks of silver among the caretaker’s otherwise black hair.

“So what were they like? Where did they go?”

Munbee cocked his head to one side and a puzzled expression deepened the wrinkles of his face. “You know, now you mention it, maybe I never actually met them after all. It’s difficult to remember. Maybe I just woke in the bath with the guidelines for this place already in my head. In fact, I’m not sure what I remember any more. Did I mention I’ve been here quite a while?”

“But you know about this place,” pressed Ortiko, beginning to feel things slip away.

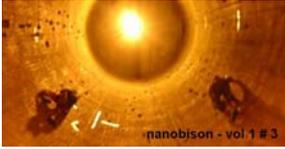
“Oh, I know all about this place. There’s very little I don’t know about this place. That voice earlier, for example? That was me. I even watched your silly friend nearly die of shock. Very funny, that.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to interfere with Patron tech,” Dundas said. He looked around him as if waiting for the voice to prove Munbee wrong.

“Ah, but we can all adapt if we want to. That’s why the Patrons worked the capacity for learning into our genetic templates, so we can do our jobs better over time. Of course, in some of us that ability is more well-defined than in others.” Munbee pursed his thin lips and stared at Dundas.

“I couldn’t have kept this place going if I didn’t learn how it worked,” Munbee went on. “There’s always something going wrong -- a plant dying, a light fading, a fused optical circuit or a fusion reactor gone askew. You name it. I can fix it. That’s why the Patrons will be happy when they come back.”

Ortiko gestured about him. “So what is all this?”



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“This is the Viewing Gallery, like I said, a gallery for viewing. The Patrons like nice things, you see. They like to look at the things they made.” Seeming to forget his previous complaints about cleanliness, Munbee took Ortiko’s arm and led him back out onto the glass. “This place exists and we all exist so that the Patrons can admire their work.” Munbee pointed downwards at the multicolored blanket of Topside strewn with the Patron’s trinkets. “That, my ill-educated friend, is art.”

#

“They’re not coming back.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

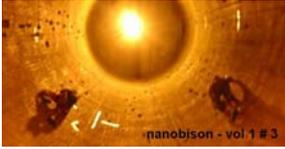
“How do you know, Ortiko?”

The three retainers stood once again inside the Viewing Gallery looking down at Topside. Munbee had guided them through the corridors and rooms of his lonely kingdom keeping up an endless stream of incomprehensible talk about solid state machinery and tapping the universal essence and perpetual power and art. Ortiko felt a palpable hunger to absorb it all, to understand everything as Munbee did. As they walked and as he failed to grasp the mechanical things Munbee described, he reached an understanding of another kind.

“Think,” he said. “Munbee has seen us emerge for our shifts a hundred times and that’s only since he broke his conditioning and stopped using his nutrient bath so much. Imagine how many shifts we worked before that. All Dundas and I have known is the shifts and even though Munbee says he’s been here for a very long time, he can’t remember there ever being anyone else here.

“And then think about Mulluky’s Bell, Dundas. Think how something as huge and beautiful and perfect as that, that was built with the expertise of the Patrons themselves, think how long it would take to get old.”

“But none of it’s ours, Ortiko,” Dundas said. His arm was almost repaired now and each of them had suckled at a feeding nipple.



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“Why not? We’re the only ones who have ever lived here for as long as anyone knows: in the Underbubble, on Topside, in the Viewing Gallery. Think of all our work for all that time. What was all of it for?” Ortiko’s voice became tinged with bitterness. “It was in the name of art, but there was never anyone here to appreciate it. Except us.”

Ortiko walked over the transparent floor, beckoning the others to follow. When they stood at the centre of the room, he lay down on his stomach and stretched his arms out over his head. “Look,” he said.

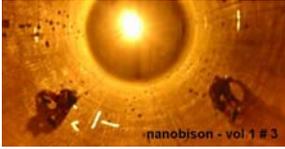
Munbee and Dundas lay down on either side.

“Munbee understands Patron tech,” Ortiko said, “He has learned what he needed to learn to keep his world alive. We can all do that too and we don’t need the Patrons to do it. We can be alive all the time, like Munbee. We needn’t miss a single breath of wind or a single blade of grass if we don’t want to. We don’t have to be confined in the Underbubble or up in the sky. It’s *all* ours. The Patrons have given it all up. It’s ours now. We have earned the right.”

#

And so Ortiko the Retainer became Ortiko the Prophet. Together with the Follower and the Technician he returned from above the sky with a message of change and inheritance. The retainers learned to break the prison of their genetic templates and to understand the workings of the world the Patrons had left them, from the Underbubble to the sky.





He could not remember who started it, or even what it was all about.

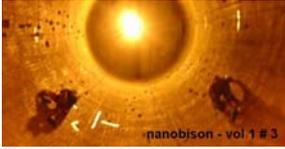
Sarah had always been volatile, with a quick and vicious temper that was as slow to fade as it was fast to arrive. Maybe he had been partly to blame, but she had turned it into a major issue and started the actual argument, hadn't she? Did it matter any longer?

Yes! It mattered.

He drove the car fast along the unlit country roads, accelerating the anger out of his system. The headlights swam in the lashing rain, splashing over the trees that lined the road. They failed to penetrate more than a few short feet into the interior of the woods that surrounded the small Welsh village they had lived in for the past three years.

His wheels skidded on the gravel scattered at the roadside, and he had to fight to keep the car away from the wooden fence and the sign that announced 'Country Park' in the flash of his bounding headlights.

He let out the breath that he had not even realised he'd been holding and relaxed his foot on the accelerator. Take that as a



warning, he told himself. Ease off. There's no point in getting yourself killed.

Almost ten years ago, when he first met her at University, he would never have argued so strongly. He had watched his father take what he called 'the path of least resistance' with his mother so many times, he just presumed that was the way to behave when you loved someone. Never argue. Just agree. It seemed to work for his parents, who had stayed together until his father died. He just wanted the same.

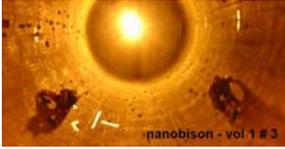
Sarah Anderson was the kind of girl that he, Michael Samson, never stood a chance with. He remembered the first time he saw her, striding across the campus with such confidence, such poise. Her black hair bounced on her shoulders, as she smiled and talked with another girl. He could not remember what the other girl looked like. He had been too captivated by Sarah.

He remembered she wore a loose fitting T-shirt with a bright yellow smiley face on it. The face seemed to laugh and leer at him, as her breasts jiggled freely beneath the light material. She wore a short skirt, barely longer than the T-shirt, and her legs were long and shapely. He couldn't say what she wore on her feet. His eyes never got that far.

He was a geek. He knew it. His glasses were too big, his teeth weren't straight enough, his body was scrawny. Worst of all, he was no good at sports. He read books. He worked hard. He got A's for his assignments. But he was no 'jock'. Girls like Sarah Anderson always ended up with 'jocks'.

But he didn't know Sarah Anderson. He didn't know she was that rarity, a beautiful girl who was not impressed by the fact, not overwhelmed by the attention, and not interested in sports or the people who played them. She was a bookworm too. She just didn't look like any bookworm he had ever seen.

Since that day when he fell in love with her at first sight, he had seldom argued, seldom disagreed, never threatened her with anything. Until tonight.



He had hit her.

He had never done that. Not in seven years of marriage.

She had provoked him before tonight, certainly, and there had been times when the thought had crossed his mind. But he had never given in to it. Striking Sarah was the last thing in the world he would have wanted to do, before tonight. Tonight the anger had rushed up at him so fast and so hard that his hand had lashed out before his mind could control it.

He remembered the pain in his palm as he slapped her, a stinging pain that was mirrored in her shocked eyes. He, too, had been shocked, more so when he saw the trickle of blood coming from the corner of her mouth where he had split her lip.

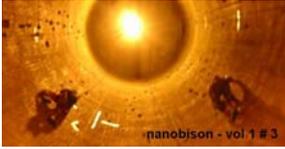
She said nothing, just stared at him, her eyes glistening with tears that welled and overflowed down her cheeks.

She had grabbed the car keys from the hall table and was almost out the door before he caught her. He was still angry, ashamed by his violence, yet driven by it also. Driven to dominate the woman he had always been careful to agree with. Driven to abuse the woman he had always cared for.

He grabbed the keys from her hand and pushed her away, feeling nothing as she stumbled and fell heavily. The car was his and only he was going to drive it from now on! She would have to pay for her own in future!

He had stormed out of the door instead, taking the initiative from his stunned and shocked wife. If anyone was going to disappear dramatically into the night it was going to be him.

It had been work. That's what the argument had been about, at the start anyway. He had worked late again. He had forgotten to phone to tell her. She had accused him of caring more about work than her. She had even suggested he might not be working late at all. That he might be seeing someone else.



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It had been that last twist in the argument that had finally snapped something inside him. He had been working late. He did need to finish the work, and they needed the extra money the overtime would bring in. But worst of all, there was just that grain of truth in what she shouted at him.

Not that he was having an affair, but he had thought about it. Fantasised about it with at least two girls in the office. That was enough to add guilt to the anger. The mix had been explosive!

For a moment he had even considered suicide. He felt so alone, angry and miserable, driving through the night on deserted roads. Perhaps he deserved to die? That was when his foot had pressed harder on the accelerator, almost causing him to skid off the road. Now he was more in control. Now he thought about Sarah.

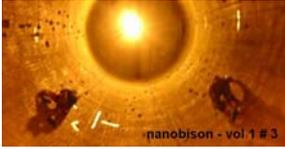
He did love her, more than anything else. Tonight was just an aberration, a moment of stupidity. They would get over it. He should not have stormed out. He should head back immediately.

The car that pulled out in front of him made his foot slam on the brake. He swore at the taillights as they sped away and then he pressed harder on the accelerator again. No one was going to do that to him!

It wasn't hard to catch the other car. The driver either did not know the roads as well, or was much more nervous about night driving. He was going to flash his lights and beep his horn when the coincidence hit him.

The car in front was exactly the same model and colour as the Ford Escort he drove. Everything, even down to the rust patch above the left rear light, seemed identical. He felt an icy block slide down into his stomach, but he ignored it. Just a coincidence, that's all. What else could it be?

He was startled out of his surprise as the car in front began to weave, seemed to lose control, and with a grotesque squeal and stomach churning crash, cart-wheeled into a roadside ditch.



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He braked the car to a shuddering stop, as metal and plastic was spat into the air behind a cloud of gravel. His car rattled with the dry shower as he stared horrified, at the scene before him.

As the dust settled he stepped from the car, unable to take his eyes away from the twisted remains that lay crushed against the trees of the woods that lined the road. No one could have survived that. Whoever had been driving must surely be dead. He had to call the police, anyone.

He was turning to leave when a rectangle of metal caught his eye, lying in the road near the remains of the crashed car. A license plate.

He read it.

He read it again.

His eyes stared. His mouth fell open.

It was the number of his car!

But it couldn't be! It was true that the car in front had seemed identical to his, but not the license plate. It was not possible!

And then he saw the body.

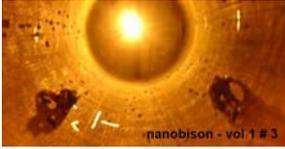
She must have been thrown clear in the crash, but it had not saved her.

The mangled remains of a woman lay twisted on the road, arms and legs snapped and bent, head at an angle that suggested it was barely part of the body anymore, and the clothes....

The clothes. He thought he recognised the clothes.

He stepped nearer, not daring to think it, not daring to look but having to. He stood above the body and looked into the dead, staring eyes of his wife, Sarah.

He screamed but no sound broke the stillness of the night. He turned to run back to his car but there was nothing there. How could there be? His car lay mangled in the roadside ditch.



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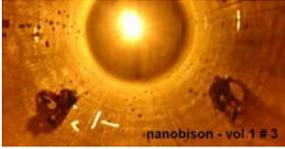
He fell to his knees and raised his head to the sky, his mouth open in a long, silent shout of anguish.

And then the road was empty, save for the bloody remains of a wife who, in anger and shock, had driven recklessly away from her raving husband.

In the living room of the house Michael and Sarah Samson had called home, Michael Samson lay dying on the carpet, trails of blood leading from his wrists to the razor blade almost lost in the deep pile. There was no sound from him, no outward sign that his life was rapidly ebbing away, but his eyes were wide and terrified, filled with horror at what he had done, at what he had forced his wife to do.

Now he knew. It really did not matter who had started the argument. It really did not matter at all.





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## The Stone Clock

- by Gene Stewart

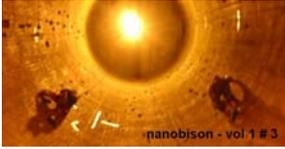
Alexander Baynes Colton the Fourth sat in the leather chair facing the bay window. The chair was older than Alexander and made more noise these days. It creaked with his every breath. Right now those breaths came harsh and deep and fast.

He was scared. The lawn, dark beyond the mullioned glass, dark beyond the clear pane in the center, showed nothing frightful. Not yet, he thought, as a bead of sweat made a break from his hairline to the cover of his left eyebrow.

Blinking, he concentrated again on tying his right hand down. That was the hardest part. It could not be his left hand. Only his right would do.

Behind him, the stone clock ticked smugly. Tick, it seemed to say, and then, of course, tock. Naturally. One followed the other. No escaping that. An order must be preserved. It ran deeper than the grain in the stone the clock was made from.

He knew his great-great-grandfather, a notorious Alchemist, had made the clock. He'd used primitive tools and had taken many years to complete it. A sculptor, he'd worked the stone perfectly. It was the only known grandfather clock made of a single piece of stone, its inner workings carved, it was said, from chips off the original block. The same could be said of the pendulum and the decorative flakes studding its face and sides.



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It resembled a cello without a neck. Its face, hexagonal, featured a blindingly shark-sharp spike of stone at eye level. It was the axis around which the hands moved.

Everything about it was stone, from the fist-shaped counterweights to the toe-shaped feet.

Like a squat old man, the stone clock told time and listened to no one.

Only its chain was metal. Even that, Colton knew, had a family story. Supposedly it had bound his great-great-grandmother when a raiding party, led by his great-great-grandfather, had taken her, a woman of 17 years. Kidnapped, she had quickly developed what today is called Stockholm Syndrome and the rest was history. He married her, fathered children on her, and owned her as proudly as he did any of his many other possessions.

Things were different back then, Alexander thought.

His right hand, tied with copper wire to a wooden breadboard, was cold now. The cincture cut off blood flow. The skin of the hand looked white with a faint blue cast, a mottled, old man's skin. The hand trembled.

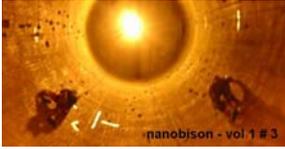
He had nailed the board to the top of the old desk. Other nail holes showed he was not the first to have done this.

Grimacing, he struggled but could not move his hand.

Behind him, the clock chimed midnight in its cool, slithery stone voice. Its bell was carved of the same stone, and wasn't meant to announce time to a house or even a big room, so its quiet, faintly hissing sound sufficed.

Colton's brow broke more sweat. When he inhaled, he shook, as if his lungs were afraid.

He had one minute, he knew. One minute out of a lifetime, a minute he'd prepared for over many years. Braced, he reminded himself that not doing this would break the line of blood sacrifice and destroy the family fortunes.



Oh gods, where was the boy?

"In," he called.

His nephew entered, all of twenty-three and wide-eyed with excitement and curiosity.

"What's the big secret, grandpa?" He was fiddling with the crowbar he'd been told to fetch. And then he saw his grandfather's hand tied down and he stopped talking.

The crowbar fell to the floor with a metallic thunk.

"The axe." Colton gestured with his free hand to the implement propped beside the desk. "Quickly, pick it up."

"It's tonight? Oh, hell, you've got to be kid—"

"We don't have time."

The boy was pale now, and his movements were wary as he lifted the axe. It was old, also made of stone, with a wooden handle burnished a bronze-black by time's patience.

"Hurry, we don't have time to wait. It's coming."

The boy approached, beseeching with his gaping eyes. All those stories, proving true? "Are you sure, gran—"

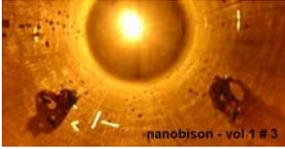
"Now!"

The old man turned his face away and injected the clear solution from a syringe into his right biceps with his free hand.

As he did this, the boy closed his eyes and, as trained in so many games, swung the axe down hard, grunting with the effort.

He would have missed if the blade had not been so wide.

Instantly a wild shrieking, like animals caught in traps being lowered into boiling water, burst from the dark lawn. The sound penetrated the old window and cracked the new, clear pane of glass. The mullions seemed to spin, spirals of a light that did not illuminate.



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His grandson screamed and dropped the axe. It clattered to the floor to the side of the desk. He gaped at it. He was crying now, and ran from the room, slamming shut the door.

“No, wait!” Colton had felt the thump as the axe had bitten into his arm. He’d even heard the snap of his bones breaking, just before he’d heard the axe fall to the ground.

He glanced at his wrist; no hand. Blood trickled. Waves of pain warmed and numbed by the morphine kept pulsing through him, as if a sun had developed a heartbeat. He could ignore them, though. They seemed far away, somehow.

On shaking legs he struggled to stand, ignoring the shrieking, which had now become the battering of hundreds of leathery wings at the window. Darkness seemed to have condensed into famished bats or vultures.

He had to hurry. He had to spike his now separated right hand onto the clock face in a dark, bloody parody of the hands of time. But the hand was not on the desk.

Had it bounced off?

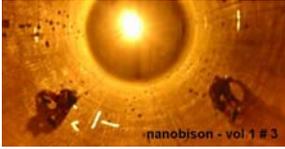
“Oh gods, no!” Colton looked at the floor; the Turkish rug was stained now. Even as he looked, the stains were being absorbed, the carpet’s threadbare appearance returning to normal.

“Where is it?”

He could hardly move, his forearm was still tied to the desk. He leaned as far left as he could, peering around the edge of the desk.

There it was, his hand, quivering and partly clenching lying palm up in the waste basket. Irony, he wondered?

He could not reach the damned basket. Sliding the chair’s protesting casters as far left as he dared, he tried to reach with his left leg. He wished he’d thought to have a crowbar ready so he could prize up the board and free his arm. Instead he’d sent



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his grandson for one at the last moment, and the boy had panicked and had dropped it out of his reach.

At the window a chaos of insanity stormed to be let in.

As he strained, the chair slipped out from under him. It rolled backwards across the study and bumped the stone clock, which ticked smugly, as always.

Was it ticking faster?

Dangling from the desk by one arm, bleeding now that the cincture had begun to loosen, Colton felt lightheaded and sick to his stomach. His grandson had run; he called for him but got no answer. The boy was probably cowering in his room.

Beasts outside craved his flesh, his bones, his soul. They clamored to eat him, to swallow him whole forever in an endless fall of bad luck, curses, and evil. Killing him would claim for them the whole family, until the line gave out. This, he knew, was about staving off extinction.

Colton's knees hurt. The floor under the carpet was hardwood, with wide boards from the times when trees actually grew huge. He scrabbled and tried to reach the basket, then realized it stood three quarters on the edge of the Turkish carpet.

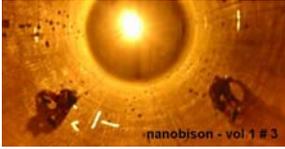
He pulled at the carpet, as slowly as he could force himself to do it. Once nearly toppling over, the wastebasket slid closer, closer.

His hand trembled as it reached for his other hand.

It felt heavier than he'd imagined.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that he could not reach the stone clock. It was too far away, against the wall opposite the window. Holding his own detached hand, becoming more faint by the moment, his ears battered by the importunate madness just outside the room, he called once again for the boy.

No answer.



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He tried to think, the noise from outside a demonic distraction. There, a lamp. Yes.

He grabbed the Tiffany lamp from the desk and pulled the cord, hard, to unplug it. With this, he thought, maybe I can...

After several tries, Colton managed to snag the stone clock's face. The cord had come down behind one of the clock's hands; he prayed it was strong enough, and that the plug's two-pronged end wouldn't slip.

Tugging as hard as he could, he tipped the clock. It rocked and struck the wall with a room-shaking slam.

At once the creatures outside hushed, but only for an instant. They then renewed their cries all the stronger.

Further cracks appeared in the clear pane, which now showed parts of shattered faces, broken fangs, torn claws. So much damage wanted in, so much entropy; a family history's worth.

The clock rocked forward again, overbalancing this time.

Dropping the cord, Colton had only enough time to grab his detached hand and hold it palm up. Hanging from the desk, he aimed as best he could from his awkward position, and slapped the hand onto the clock face's spike as it came down.

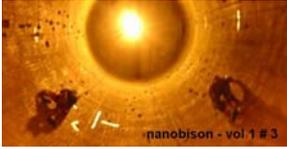
The whole house shook with the clock's weight hitting floorboards laid three hundred years ago.

Colton gasped. Instant silence deafened him.

He lay pinned, both arms now useless. One crushed under the clock. The other, still wired to the board that was nailed to the huge oak desk, had been torn from its socket. Only flesh held it to his torso now. He realized that there was pain morphine could not contain or dampen. He took up the tortured screaming, as if accepting a torch of sound from outside the room.

His grandson found him a few moments later.

"Grandpa." Kneeling, he grunted, trying to lift the clock.



"No."

The old man still lived. He whispered the proper things to say and reminded the boy of his lessons.

"Those old poems? The... spells?"

"Yes. Say them. Quickly."

The boy, thinking he was indulging an old man's dying whim, began reciting. To his credit, he managed to keep it up as the clock shuddered, pulling its spike from the floor. It stood, still shuddering, and moved itself back to stand in its accustomed place. It moved like a snail but it moved. Once there, its gears ground for a moment, as if fighting to move the hand now skewered on the spike in the center of its face. Then, with its soft stone whisper, it struck one.

They'd done it, Colton thought.

One minute had become one hour, and once again all was well.

He lay happy and even smiling, as the boy called an ambulance, knowing now there would be plenty of time to train his grandson in the arts of stonemasonry and the mastery of chthonic earth forces.

To what the boy's father would teach, Colton would add lessons not written in any book. Lessons that would one day bring the boy to a single minute of magic. That minute would appease the darker subterranean gods for another cycle, and he'd have time to train his son and grandson in turn.

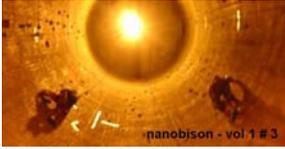
"Did you hear them?"

"Outside? Yes, Grandpa. What were they?"

"Our creatures. If we can keep them."

"You mean those, those things work for us?"

"How do you think we find all that oil, all those minerals, when a thousand others fail?"



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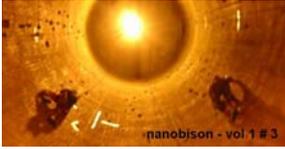
How else, Colton continued silently, is our family's fortune made and our family's will enforced, if not by those earth forces that gathered to try, as once a generation they must, to free themselves from our family's bondage?

But he said nothing. Not just then.

There would be plenty of time to teach, and to learn, Colton told himself, now that the stone clock had once again struck one under their guiding hand.

Looking down at his ruined limbs, he vowed to teach the boy to take better precautions when the next cycle came around.





## Not Again

- by Don L. Smith

Tarisha, stifling a yawn, lounged at her desk. The sign above her door, "Sword for Hire", needed a fresh coat of paint but she couldn't muster the effort. There didn't seem to be much reason, as customers weren't exactly knocking down her door these days. Sighing, she reached for her coat.

The door burst open and a red-faced halfling dashed in, followed by an old man in a billowing white cloak. The halfling bumped into her desk and stared wide-eyed at her. The mage, however, sat in her best chair and blew smoke rings from his pipe.

"Hello," Tarisha said. "Welcome to the Sold for Gold Adventuring Company. I'm Tarisha." As the smoke reached her, she wrinkled her long nose. "Sir, I don't permit smoking in the office."

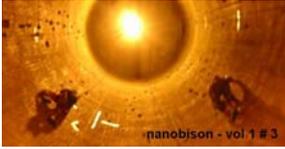
The mage wiggled his fingers and the pipe disappeared.

"What seems to be the trouble?" Tarisha asked.

"The Dark Lord," gasped the halfling. "Orcs, whole squads of them, the world is doomed! Dragons - big ones!" The halfling mumbled.

"Hold on," said Tarisha, regaining control. The halfling ducked behind the mage. "Calm down, please. Could you tell me the entire story slowly?"

"Indeed," said the mage. "It all began in the Year of the Black Night when the Dark Lord was born. He had a bad childhood so



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he grew up worshipping Daminas, the God of Evil. As he grew to more power, he began to draw a following of orcs. Eventually, a war resulted. Things looked bad for humanity until Istar the Elfin King arrived with the Legions of Light. The tide of battle turned until the Dark Lord released the dragons of night upon the host. Then ...”

“Wait a minute,” Tarisha interrupted. “Before you continue with the history of the world, I’d like to know your names.”

“I’m Gindo,” said the halfling, peeking around the mage.

The mage stood tall. His eyes glowed. “I am Darion of the White Robes.”

“Oh Lord!” she mumbled to herself. She decided that she could have guessed each of their names. Something was definitely wrong.

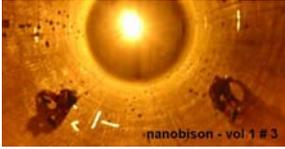
“What’s the point of your story and what needs to be done?” she asked as she shifted in her chair.

“Indeed,” said the mage. “Eventually the Dark Lord had been slain. We thought that he would remain dead. Alas, this assumption has proven incorrect. The Dark Lord has arisen and now threatens humanity once again. So, there are many things that we have to do. First of all, we need to send an army to occupy the Dark Lord’s forces. Then we’ll form a small group to perform the important affairs that relate to the prophecy. Indeed. I think that I’ll let Gilfandel explain the next phase.”

“Gilfandel?” she echoed. With a name like that it had to be an elf.

As the next figure glided into the room, she smiled. She had guessed correctly. She shook her head. This all seemed so .... She failed to find the correct word.

Gilfandel the elf bowed deeply. “Dear lady, your beauty is unsurpassable.”



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And you're as charming as a troll, she thought. The last person who had said something similar had meant it as a punch line.

"My great lady, for the next phase we must journey to the Silverdell Forest. One of the Dark Lord's minions, a sorcerer of great evil, is using his magic to defile the trees. He's destroying the very fiber of the land. The earth rumbles in pain."

"Of course," Tarisha said. "The classic defile-the-elfin-forest move. I hate that!"

"We need to free the elves to join the armies of light. They're the only ones who can possibly contest the power of the dragons."

"Wicked dragons," said Gindo who had crawled underneath the mage's chair. "With big, sharp, nasty teeth!"

"Quite," stated the mage. "It all has to do with the prophecy. A most important document. Written by a mad man, most of them are, you know. Most people ignore it, but it's all true."

"Really?" asked Tarisha skeptically.

"Quite," replied the mage.

"I suppose next we have to reclaim the sword," Tarisha guessed.

"A most worthy inference, fair damsel."

"Boy, is she fearless!"

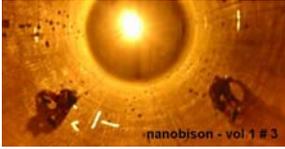
"Indeed."

Tarisha grimaced at the replies. "So, someone tell me about the next step in defeating the Dark Lord."

Darion smiled. "We'll let Borpin tell you the next vital step in the plans."

"Of course," Tarisha sighed, "the dwarf." Their story seemed all too familiar.

The dwarf trudged into the room, muttering curses. The elf slid out of his way. The mage raised an eyebrow, and the halfling burrowed underneath the mage's cloak.



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“Fardo’s beard!” started the dwarf gruffly. “I don’t have time to explain this stuff!” He glowered up at Tarisha. “You’re ugly,” he announced.

Tarisha was momentarily taken aback. The halfling spoke, his words muffled by the magician’s cloak. “I think Borpin likes you. He doesn’t call many people ugly.”

Borpin scowled at the halfling and told him to shut up or loose a hairy toe. He unstrapped his axe and the halfling ducked from site. The dwarf, scowl locked on his face, turned back to Tarisha. “In the Year of the Burning Sun, a great tragedy occurred to the dwarves of Dok Logod. The orcs ...”

“Wait a minute!” interrupted Tarisha. “Let me take a guess. The orcs have taken over the underground dwarven homeland and now the dwarves want to win it back. And, naturally, the dwarven sword is in the caves of Dok Logod, and is guarded by some dread creature.”

“Fardo’s Big Toe!”

“Fair maiden, thy beauty outshines even mine own!”

“Wow, is she brave!”

“Quite.”

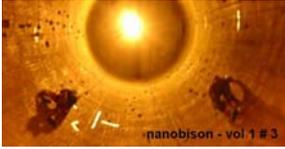
Tarisha buried her face in her hands. “Go on – but if anyone mentions a ring of power, I’m leaving.”

“Ring of power? Don’t be ridiculous.” The mage chuckled.

The halfling gazed up at the mage. “But you said ...”

A swift kick from the dwarf sent the halfling back under the mage’s chair. Darion looked back up at Tarisha and smiled innocently. “Quite as you so rightly guessed, the sword is in Dok Logod, and it is guarded by a dread creature. None have lived to describe the beast, but its roar echoes throughout the caverns. You are the one destined to kill this foul creation.”

“Me? Why me?” asked Tarisha.



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“Because you’re so brave!”

“You’re so ugly you’ll scare it to death.”

“A lady of your high station could not lose!”

“Well,” the mage continued, “you see, it all has to do with the prophecy. I really wish that I could decipher this one part.” The mage pulled out a piece of parchment. “This part about the child of light and the dark sky that will spread across the lands until the black ....”

Tarisha shouted. “Stop! Just tell me what we do after we recover the sword.”

The mage scratched his head. “You mean you don’t know? Well, why don’t we let Taghar explain the final battle?”

A large, heavily muscled man strode through the doorway. His long, coarse black hair hung in his scarred face. A battle-axe was strapped across his back, a long sword sheathed at his side, and a dagger was attached to his boot. Taghar approached her, his face devoid of thought.

The dwarf muttered. “Come on, Taghar. We don’t have all day.”

Taghar, his brow furrowed, opened his mouth. “Ugh.”

“Excuse me?” Tarisha asked.

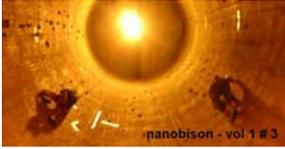
“Ugh,” Taghar repeated with more confidence.

Tarisha glanced at the mage who smiled. “Very nice try, Taghar, but I had better explain more fully. Next, lady, we attack the very lair of the Dark Lord himself. With the sword, we can destroy him once and for all.”

“Ugh!” yelled Taghar, brandishing his sword in one hand and his battle-axe in the other.

The mages pipe reappeared, Gilfandel’s voice burst in a popular elfish tune, and the dwarf crossed his arms and cursed. Gindo cheered cautiously from underneath the mage’s chair.

“Will everyone please calm down?” Tarisha asked.



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Taghar responded by demonstrating the quality of his blade upon her desk. “Ugh,” he explained.

Gilfandel launched into another verse of Estarr the Elven Lord.

“It all has to do with the prophecy, of course.” Smoke rings floated into the air. “Wish I could have met the author. Quite and interesting subject. Of course, you will be joining us, won’t you?”

“NO!” Tarisha’s voice carried an edge as dangerous as Taghar’s blade. The halfling cringed. The dwarf cursed. The mage cocked an eyebrow.

“Ugh?”

“Fair maiden, you would not desert us in our hour of greatest need?” Gilfandel asked, his exotic eyes wide.

Tarisha crossed her arms. “I will not take part in this ... this ... this stereotypical adventure!”

Gindo dashed from the room. The dwarf muttered and trudged after the halfling. Gilfandel bowed gracefully then glided out the door.

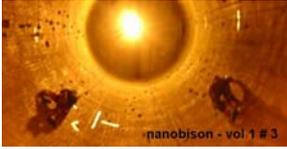
“Ugh!” Taghar said regretfully as he left.

Darion stared at her. “You’re passing up your destiny. The prophecy ...”

“Just leave, please.”

The mage inclined his head and did so, shutting the door behind after him.

Shaking her head, Tarisha decided that she had gone through enough for one day. She grabbed a coat and started towards the door when it creaked open. A man in a dark cloak slithered in. Two red eyes glowed from underneath his hood. An aura of darkness swirled around him and a growing sense of malignancy and fear penetrated the room. Pointing at her with a skeletal finger, he spoke in a guttural voice. “I’m looking for ...”



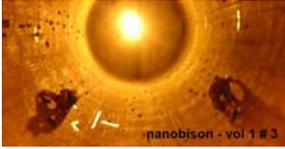
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"They just left," she said. "If you hurry, you can still catch them."

The being snarled then wisped from the room.

"Never anything new," Tarisha muttered as she left, locking the door firmly behind her.





## A Wife in Every Port

- by James Targett

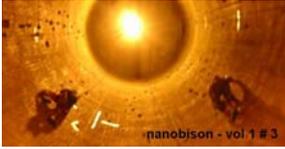
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Every port is much like any other, no matter what the colour of the sky above it. Junctions ruled by the heavy-handed triumvirate of trade, industry and commercial enterprise; who take no prisoners and accept no excuses.

The spaceport serving the world of Gormenghast, in the Steerpike system, was of the orbital variety. A station of industrial, boxy grey modules, Medusa-like knots of power cables, and pragmatic engineering set against the backdrop of God's architecture. It's utilitarian quays surrounded by a constantly moving flotilla of shuttles, lighters, and transports.

Drake, a trader, was glad to have reached the port. He wasn't happy because his safe arrival allowed him to buy and sell and turn a profit for his masters: the shipping line, but because he was going to see his wife again.

Still groggy from the effects of nearly a decade in coldsleep, he waited impatiently for The Trojan Horse to clear Customs. The name had started out as a drunken piece of wit, but after half-a-dozen trips Drake was beginning to think that he should rename his ship again. Finally, grudgingly, the dour faced official authorised his cargo.



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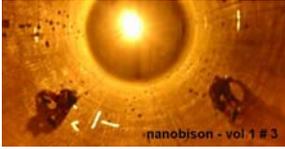
Drake tried to savour the moments as he made his way groundside. There was that tense feeling in his gut, a delicious tangle of anticipation, excitement and hope at the thought of seeing his wife again; tempered with a slight trace of fear that something might have gone wrong, that their relationship would not pick up in the same way that they had left it. It was one of the risks of stellar travel when you left loved ones behind.

In the thirty years since Drake had last been to Gormenghast much had changed. Then, the Port Authority's orbital docks had been the outer station in the cluster of orbital bodies that made up Silver City. The City had floated over the dry, stony surface of the planet below like a seedpod blown to barren fields by malicious winds.

Now the colonists had finished growing the slender thread of an orbital tower. The City was being disbanded, slowly stripped for parts and shipped groundside. Leaving only the docks and essential facilities behind. From one of the porthole windows Drake could make out the shape of cargo pods running down the tower like beads of mercury on a chrome rope.

As he rode down to the planet's surface in an elevator module he gradually made out the silver and steel coloured spiderweb of Titus City below. The air, when he stepped out of the air-conditioned terminus, smelt of cinnamon and hot stone. That was something that had not changed. Drake marvelled at the new shantytown stores with corrugated iron roofs. The roofs of new homes packed with compact satellite dishes and squirtlink aerials. The settlement was moving as fast as the sewers and the power cables could keep up; a rolling wave of stone and plastic and metal.

Drake didn't think he would have found the house, but the rickshaw driver had no problem in locating it from the address Drake had given her. The rickshaw pedalled away as Drake stood outside the white stone walls, overnight holdall at his feet.



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Drake's heart warmed at the sight of the building. His home. It was a comforting sight after the wake from cold sleep and the disorientating, almost claustrophobic, culture shock: seeing thirty years of change in one hot, juddering rickshaw ride.

He walked up to the door, placed his hand on the palmplate. The house's system, not geriatric yet, recognised his biometrics. With a smooth click and whisper, the door unbolted and opened.

Fresh plants in the hall, the smell of coffee and fresh bread, sunlight filling the inner courtyard; that feeling in Drake's heart rose higher. He left his bag at the end of the wooden stairs, walked through his house. He found Marjorie in the kitchen; not a day older than he remembered. What had he worried about? She had not changed at all. Soft skin, with the golden-brown trace of a fresh suntan, black raven's hair, hazel eyes widening with joyful surprise as she saw him.

"You bastard, you were supposed to call when you got to the port!"

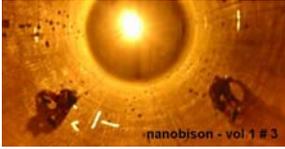
"It's all changed. I thought I'd take a rickshaw, get a feel for the place again."

Drake stepped forward, slid a hand around her waist and pulled Marjorie into him. He buried his head in her shoulder and smelled her before he did anything else. He had missed the scent of warm, friendly skin, the touch of her flesh against his cheek. There had been no respite in the hours when he had been awakened to make decisions; or the times that he had had to go EVA to repair a battered squirtlink relay, or mend the torn sails of the solar panels. No relief from the lack of loving contact.

He brushed his lips against the hollow of her collarbone and her neck. Then he lifted his head and kissed his wife fully.

"Sleep well?"

"The house woke me last week, right on schedule. It got the signal from your ship when it passed the cometary halo."



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“So you’re rested from thirty years of sleep. Built up some energy?”

Drake kissed her again, and led her through to the bedroom.

#

Drake left Gormenghast six weeks later, cargo found, new contracts negotiated, and an engineer to replace the one who had decided that he didn’t want to sleep his life away any more.

He kissed Marjorie goodbye, as she lay down in the coldsleep tube like Sleeping Beauty in the fairytale. He watched the cold glass slide shut over his wife’s frozen features. After that he went back upstairs, threw out the flowers in the hall and disposed of the food in the refrigerator. He set the house’s systems to dormant, and the security system to maximum. He locked up, took a rickshaw to the spaceport: the feelings in his heart being locked down.

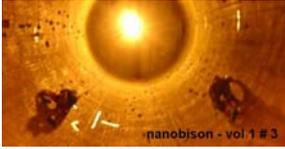
By the time he was riding the elevator module skywards he was an empty, hollow relic of a man again.

||

He rode in the cargo hold of the dropship, resenting every lurch and bounce of turbulence as it carried him down from The Horse – Drake had decided to remove the ‘Trojan’ from the name – towards the groundside of Nova Angeles.

Drake was ready and waiting, one hand wrapped around a fistful of cargo webbing, while the dropship crew lowered the exit ramp. His ears popped as the dropship equalised its cabin pressure with the external atmosphere and the hold was filled with the scent of dusty vanilla. Letting go of the webbing, he slung his bag over one shoulder, and started to stroll down the metal ramp.

“Stop!”



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The spacer captain looked up, across the blastcrete surface, a man was running towards him with the tails of a long-suit jacket flapping behind him. The man had to keep one hand on top his head to stop his ridiculous, hemispherical hat blowing away.

“Has to be a lawyer,” said one of the dropship crew. “No one else looks that well-dressed and stupid at the same time.”

“Captain Drake! Stop! Don’t get off the ship!”

For a moment Drake thought about defying that order, but a career in space had driven a sense of caution deep into his personality. He would wait until he had heard what the lawyer had to say before he did anything.

As he stood there, looking at the dusty airstrip with the ragged brush beyond, he noticed another party of individuals striding towards the dropship. At their head was a middle-aged woman dressed in widow’s weeds. Her silver hair was held up in a bun by a hairnet and a cluster of long pins. Her jaw jutted in sullen anger, while the tip of a furled black parasol tapped out a marching beat in time to her strides.

Behind her came a cluster of other individuals, including a photographer, a young woman in a nurse’s uniform, and, if the crewman was right, more men dressed as lawyers.

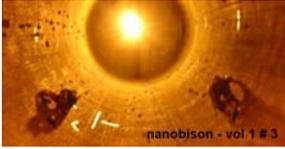
The dropship crew and the airstrip stevedores stopped their work and gaped at the free entertainment.

“Captain Drake – You are Captain Drake?” asked the first lawyer, as he reached the maw of the cargo bay. The lawyer stopped running, and tried to stand upright, the breath wheezing in his lungs.

“Yes.”

“First things first Captain Drake. Don’t step off that ramp. If you do, you are in a world of hurt.”

“If I do -?”



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“Secondly, may I present my card?” The lawyer removed a silver case from his inside jacket pocket, opened it with a practiced slide of his thumb, and removed a small piece of ivory cardboard with ornate black and gold writing.

“Captain Theodore Drake, you come here this instant! And as for you, you dirty craven mercenary worm.”

It was the widow, at the head of her concerned looking entourage.

“Leech, ma’am leech. Lawyers are colloquially known as leeches. Not worms.”

Drake took the card. In large print it read “J Hobson. Legal Services.”

“James Hobson, sir. The Nova Angeles legal representative for your employers.”

“I know who you are. You’re a rotten sheep’s turd. I don’t want to deal with you. I want to deal with this man here.”

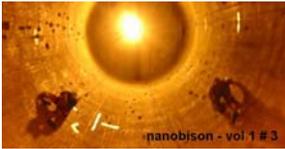
“I’m sorry madam, I haven’t had the pleasure –” began Drake.

“Oh you’ve had the pleasure alright. You had the pleasure more than forty years ago. I’m your goddamn wife, even if you don’t recognise me. And now I want the goddamn pleasure of having a goddamn divorce, you goddamn bigamist son of a bitch!”

“Michaela?” Drake asked. He found himself staring into a pair of angry brown eyes. They were familiar; but the love in them, that he had been dreaming about since he’d woken from coldsleep, had been replaced with the divine wrath of God. Involuntarily Drake took a step back.

“Don’t you Michaela me! I’m going to serve notice. I want everything you’ve got, for forty years of pain and misery and humiliation. That ship you’ve been cavorting around the galaxy in, is mine!”

“Excuse me Mrs. Drake,” interjected Hobson. “Technically you cannot serve divorce papers, or claims for damage from



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emotional trauma, until the recipient is within the same legal jurisdiction. And Captain Drake is not within Nova Angeles's jurisdiction until he steps on the planet's soil."

Everyone looked at Captain Drake's feet. They remained firmly on the metal ramp of the dropship. The feet took another step back up the ramp, away from the soil of Nova Angeles.

"Now if you'll excuse us, Captain Drake will be retiring to the ship's cockpit to hear some advice from his legal aid." Hobson stepped onto the ramp, ignoring the shouts from Michaela and the hasty whispering from her lawyers as they consulted their books and personal dataspheres. He took a dazed Drake by the arm and led him back into the metal cavern of the cargo transport.

"You, Captain Drake," he said, "are going back to your FTL clipper and then you aren't going anywhere until you ship leaves orbit. The only reason that the shipping line isn't throwing you to the dragon you married out there, is that they are afraid that they are liable, to some extent, for crimes of bigamy you committed while in their employ. You are under express orders never to set foot on Nova Angeles again."

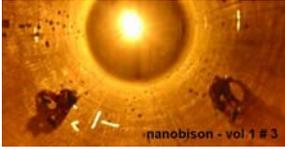
"How'd she find out?" asked Drake, suddenly terrified of the answer.

"Some of the worlds around here share data about marriage licenses. You're a spacer: that alone puts you under suspicion. If I were you I would not enter orbit around Orchard, or Atlantis Rising, either. As you know, you had wives there too."

"Had wives?"

"They successfully filed for divorce on the grounds of neglect - NA is more archaic in that it demands both parties appear in court - but I'm sure that your ex-wives, despite their divorces some forty years ago, could quite happily sue for damages."

"You have my card. Give me a call if you need me."



Hobson gave him a last look of contempt, then pulled on his professional face and marched out of the ship to do battle with Mrs. Michaela Drake's unit of lawmen.

Drake slumped down into the bucket seat that he had been strapped into throughout the dropship's fall. He couldn't believe that Michaela had aged so much, or that she wanted a divorce. She'd been happy with him.

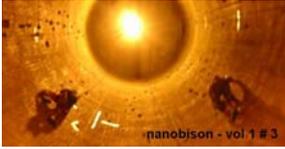
He felt as though he had been thoroughly used as a punching bag.

### III

On the world of Dairien the spaceport lay near the planet's southern tropical region. The air carried the smell of thriving vegetation; an odour of green that swept over Drake as he strolled across the 'crete of the landing grounds to the arrivals lounge.

In one hand he carried his holdall, underneath the other arm, wrapped in faux-silk fabric, was a parcel. He smiled at the thought of it. Unlike the vibrant, artificial fibres of the wrapping, the package contained lingerie of the finest, realworm silk. Drake looked forward to the process of his wife on Dairien unwrapping her gift, and then, later, the process where he got to carry out his own unwrapping.

There was something about the scent of this world. Unlike the dusty scents of Gormenghast, or Nova Angeles, the green, hot smell of Dairien got under his skin and made him feel incredibly fertile. It was the effect of so much life in close proximity; all busy growing, expanding, living, and reproducing. There would be nights to come where he would end up lying half-awake, listening to the orchestral sound of the cicada and the hum of the air-conditioning, while his mind dreamt fever dreams of incredible



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erotic potency. He would need five years in coldsleep just to recover.

He felt excited, glad to be alive. The faintest trace of guilt only added some delicate spice to the mix. Nova Angeles had also added something else to the game, something that had been missing for quite awhile: that element of risk. There was a chance, however slim, that he might be found out. It just made him feel bolder, more daring. It put a swagger in his step.

Edwina meet him outside customs. She wore a pale dress, with a bright, yellow floral print. It suited her slim figure. Her black hair was pulled up in a knot and covered by a straw hat, showing off her slender neck. A teasing smile twisted her lips in just such a way that Drake ached to strip her clothes off and take her right there, on the tiled floor of the crowded Arrivals Hall.

She squealed as he picked her up off the ground and spun her around. The other people, beneath the ceiling of glass and steel, smiled as they took in his wife's obvious joy.

Her hazel eyes sparkled as she pretended to brush dirt from the scuffed ribbing of his spacer's jacket.

He hugged her tight, letting her feel the effect that she and the planet were having on him. He kissed her long and slow, before letting her go.

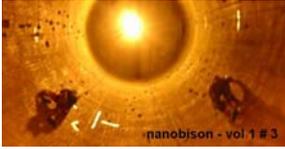
"Where to my hero? Do we need to get a hotel room?"

"Home," Drake said. "It means nothing if you don't have a home to go to."

He did his best to grin like a dashing scoundrel.

## IV

He landed on Cathedra in the middle of the night. The shuttle that brought him down from Le Chevalier dropped behind the



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terminator so that the descent was a process of crossing through golden light into darkness.

The coldsleep had been a bad one. Drake decided that he would ask one of the technicians to take a look at his tank. He was tired and disorientated. Misty coils of sleep and dreams tugged at his mind. It felt as though he were half-a-step beyond the frame of reference shared by the rest of humanity.

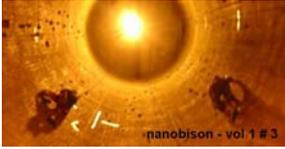
He bought a strong coffee from one of the vendors that filled the niches in the wide corridor between the Incoming Lounge and the maglev terminal beneath the spaceport. The coffee tasted bitter and acidic: it only gave him a headache.

The electric lights made his eyes hurt. It was as if someone had tampered with spectrum while he slept. Everything he looked at had a blue sheen. The steel and chrome of the fixings seemed incredibly polished, while the stark white of the strip lights possessed an aura of turquoise flame that burnt his retina.

Squinting, he caught an express train from the spaceport. It hissed smoothly out of the train station and powered its way through the multi-levelled tunnel that linked the artificial island of the spaceport to the mainland. Drake leaned his head against the cold glass of the window and watched the reflection of the spaceport lights in the black waters of the ocean.

He closed his eyes. Beneath his eyelids he saw hair like raven's wings; his desire to be home visualised in hallucination and delirium. He woke, feeling no better, as the maglev lurched to a stop at Grande Terminus Station. His mind's eye filled with half-remembered visions of raven wings above a dirty battlefield; dream images of robotic carrion, dead meat, and radioactive earth soaked in oil.

Black holdall slung over one shoulder, Drake hailed a cab painted in yellow and black chessboard colours. Home, Drake thought, as he sat down on the ripped ruby-coloured plastic of the backseat. I need to be home, with my wife



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The cab dropped him outside the entrance to the arcology. Rain had stained the once pristine metallic façade with dark streaks of rust or mould. In the darkness he couldn't quite tell which. Drake placed his hand on the palmlock. There was a chugging sound as the software pulled up his biometrics from dusty memory banks. Eventually, after a digital age of thirty seconds, the indicator LED shifted from red to green. The armoured door slid open. Drake picked up his holdall, and walked in.

An elevator carried him slowly up to the eighty-third floor. Drake tried not to shut his eyes, nor to slump against the mirrored panelling. He yawned as the elevator slid to a stop. Again he picked up his bag as doors opened. Unsteady on his feet, he walked down the hall until he found his and Valeria's flat.

He palmed the door lock. The arcology AI was faster this time: it remembered his details from the front door and registered his biometrics in a few seconds.

Drake stepped into darkness. The apartment smelt stale. No coffee brewing. No bread slowly rising in the oven.

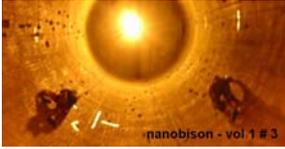
There was a bright blue actinic flash as a light was switched on. Drake dropped his bag in shock and pain. The light plunged through his eyes and into his brain like a sharp needle. He shut his eyes, pushed the base of his palms hard into his eyes sockets, trying to restore his vision.

"You're late," said a voice that he didn't recognise: low, female, with a Cathedra accent.

There was a pause. Drake waited, expecting more pain; the further shock of sudden violence.

"Over here." A hand took his shoulder, gently guided him forward into where he remembered the living space to be. He still had his eyes tightly shut. A soft hand took his own palm and used it to show him where an armchair was. He sat down. The seat felt damp and smelt of something decaying; possibly mould.

"A bad run huh? I hear it happens once in awhile."



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Drake tried to understand what was happening. But each time he almost had two or more thoughts assembled in some logical pattern, he was distracting by the needling pain behind his eyes, or the suddenly sour taste of coffee in his stomach, or hallucinations of robot corpses burnt by laser fire.

"Somehow I expected more from a spacer captain. Then again, I wasn't particularly expecting much from you. Seeing as you're a cheap weasel as well as a spacer."

"Where ... where is Valeria?" Drake croaked. He had been longing for the feel of warm skin and laughter.

"Look at me."

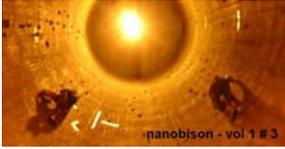
"I can't. It hurts."

"Open your eyes and look at me goddamit!"

Her shout made him flinch; jarred him as much as a blow to the face. Momentarily he was in sync with the universe. Before he started to slip away again Drake tried to open his eyes. He felt nauseous, but his eyes surprised him. They struggled and filtered out of the harsh blue-white light, focused and resolved what was initially little more than a silhouette.

Not Valeria, although she was almost the same age as his wife. Shaved hair, silver piercings in the ears and nose - he had never liked piercings - but something familiar about the shape of the nose. Leather jacket in faux-spacer style, pulled over a dark grey, man-made fibre jumper - Drake was suddenly aware that the room was cold, unheated - black jeans, motorcycle boots splashed with red and white paint. Blue eyes with a trace of violet at the edges, just like the ones he saw in the mirror every time he shaved.

"Hi Dad," she said, almost spitting on him. "I hope this comes as something as a nasty shock to you, at least a little payback for all the shit you've put me and Mum through."



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“Where’s Valeria?” He asked. He felt the abyss yawning at his feet. The stabbing pain became vertiginous.

“At home. The medics pulled her out of coldsleep three days after you left. The Life Systems realised that she was pregnant. With me.”

And now it felt as though he was being pulled down into that abyss. His limbs felt weak, his mind as soft as treacle.

“You left us no money, no contacts. This flat was in your name only. After Mum was done with it, she left. She wanted her own life, her own independence. Me - I just wanted to see you, to see what kind of pathetic shit you really are. And to tell you that if you ever come near us, at all, I’ll cut you a new hole, deep and hard.”

A knife was in her hand, magicked from somewhere up her sleeve; a slender black blade of polished diamond that glistened like frozen spacetime.

“You’re a fucking callous arsehole, expecting a woman to sleep for two decades while you wander around the galaxy, just to revive herself for a few weeks so she can warm your bed. You got any kind of excuse?”

He tried to say something, but the hollow words broke into gurgles of nothingness before they left his mouth.

She grunted. “Thought not. You can stay here. You’ll need to buy your own food and shit. And I think the mattress has mildew.”

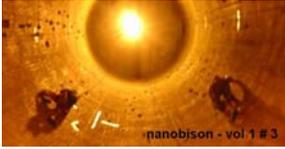
His daughter stood up, slipped the knife away.

“My advice is, sell this place, Get a lawyer and give the proceeds to your wife. You know she deserves it.”

Drake shut his eyes against the light. Her voice echoed in his head like distant thunder.

“And my name’s Angelica. Thanks for fucking asking.”

The door slammed shut. The abyss sucked him down.



V

World 1052 did not have a name. The settlers were voting on its nomenclature within the next six months. Their colony huddled around the fusion generators and the vast ducts of the air reprocessing plant, wreathed in angry grey cloud and storm winds like something from a horror holo.

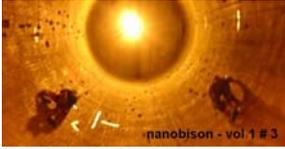
Drake cursed his luck for bringing him out here. Half the crew had resigned when they had heard the ship was travelling to the edge of the galaxy. Drake had only been able to find replacements for half the quitters. Twenty-five percent undermanned, with another twenty percent who were alcoholics, stimheads or ex-junkies.

He watched from a walkway in the loading bay as they unloaded the cargo of LOX, food and water supplies, vital electronics equipment, a precious nanotech maker; and wondered if he was in the loneliest place in the universe.

The shipping line that owned Le Chevalier was still angry with him for the divorce proceedings on Nova Angeles. They'd be sending him out to this world with its bitter winds again and again. The only thing he had seen from the windows of this forsaken city was a landscape of rock wreathed in strands of grey mist. It made his heart sit in his chest like a lump of dirty ice. It was not the kind of world that he would have chosen to set up home upon.

"Here," he slapped his new second officer in the chest with the datapad holding the details of the ship's manifest. The second officer looked at him with glazed eyes. "Make sure nothing gets fucked up, understood?"

The officer nodded slowly.



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Drake sighed and strode away, pulling his spacer's jacket tight around him.

It took him some hours to find out what he wanted. Most of that time was spent pretending to get drunk. A few generous tips to a selection of bartenders, a bribe to an official, the vague, but eventually to be empty, promise of smuggling some weapons for a low-level gangster, and some discrete questions, got him the name and address he wanted.

The office was in the lower levels, beneath 1052's surface. The howl of the atmosphere around the superstructure above, replaced by the growling thunder of machines. After half-an-hour Drake no longer noticed it, in the same way that his sense of smell had been ignoring the sulphur tang for the last two days.

"Romanowski and Goyle: Specialists in Karmic Harmony" read the crude sign above the sheet steel doorway. Caricatures of letters burnt into steel with a laser-pen.

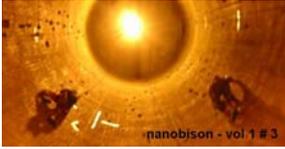
He pressed the buzzer, took a step back, and held-up his arms in crucifixion pose, so that the little camera set into the lintel could see that he was unarmed.

"Enter," said a hoarse, mechanical voice. There came a grinding sound as the door was unbolted. Drake pushed it open when the noise stopped, and stepped into the business premises of Romanowski and Goyle.

"How can we help you?" Mr. - er -? asked a man in scuffed black suit and dirty shirt. The man wore no tie. His hair was slicked back with a liquid looking gel. The face, eyes and smile, were all blank and obsequious.

"Captain Drake."

"Mr. Goyle." Against all of Drake's expectations, the man's grip as they shook hands was quite strong. "And this is my colleague, Dr. 'ski."



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Another man walked into the reception area from some undisclosed backroom. He wore a white-robe, spattered with stains that Drake didn't care to think too carefully about. Romanowski had a carefully shaved skull, prominent eyes that bulged, toad-like, in their sockets, and a mouthful of broken teeth.

"So, um .. Captain Drake, how can we help you?"

"Quite simply gentlemen, I will pay you quite a handsome sum of money to do something that is at best morally dubious, and possibly illegal. Half now, half when I return to this world and I can cash in the investments that I am about to make – which should have matured quite nicely while I've been in coldsleep."

"You do realise that we are professionals Captain," said Goyle. "We are men of law and medicine."

"Ripper docs, grave robbers, and men of low principal, by reputation. I realise exactly who you are. You are the men I was looking for," replied Drake, smiling with his teeth and not his eyes. "And it is your lucky day, as I don't want you to kill or maim anyone."

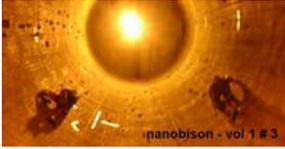
The two businessmen visibly relaxed.

"What I would like is for you to grow a body from this DNA, and imprint this soul upon it."

Drake removed a small steel sample tube from inside his spacer's jacket, followed by the dark-grey datacube of the type normally used to store personality traits.

"Her name will be Natasha Drake, and she will be my wife," he said. "My heart has been in love with the same woman all my life. And you know what they say: 'home is where the heart is'. When I return to 1052 I want to feel like I am returning home."





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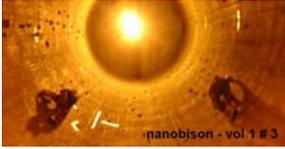
## Why You Haven't Called Yet

- by Emily Gaskin

I'm told it's mildly pathetic to wait  
on someone who's never going to call,  
but I can't give up on the idea  
that you might have a good reason  
for leaving me in suspense,  
like sunspot interference,  
or a gamma ray burst,  
an asteroid that hit your planet,  
or a supernova sun.

You forgot to pay your bill.  
Long distance is too expensive.  
You don't have my number.  
You called while I was out.  
My machine ate your message.  
You blew yourself up.

You think that I'm too young,  
too naive, too unsophisticated.  
It's too much pressure.  
You're not ready for a relationship.  
You were burned before,  
and now you're jaded.



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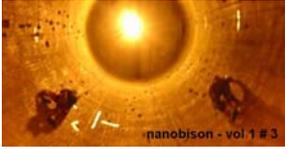
You think that I'm unstable,  
maybe even dangerous.  
What if you catch something?  
What would the children look like?  
Who would convert,  
and where would we spend the holidays?

It's the language barrier.  
You don't speak hydrogen;  
you find silicon more romantic.  
I'm too ugly to begin with –  
bordering on the repulsive –  
all gangly and squishy and, heaven forbid,  
dull in the higher frequencies.

You think you're the ugly one.  
You're afraid my eyes would melt,  
that I would scream, that I would run.  
You're shy, or just depressed –  
too depressed to get up this morning,  
convinced that no one in this vast, cold universe  
could possibly care if you reached out  
across the distance to talk about your centuries  
of tragedies and dreams.

You'd be wrong, of course,  
so very wrong,  
because I am here  
and want desperately to listen.





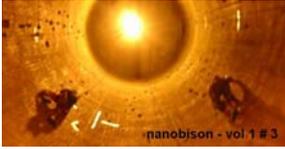
## Editorial:

### **Post-apocalyptic Fiction and the Six O'Clock New - by Doug Helbling**

Recently, I was saddened, wryly amused, then encouraged, and finally **annoyed** by the news coverage of events taking place in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. I was saddened by the fact that so much preventable suffering and loss of life was going on. I was wryly amused that my own notions of the relative competence (and lack thereof) of the federal government to "Protect Americans" proved to be accurate. (yeah, yeah, I know it's easy to be right if your Moron Detector is working even just a little bit). I was encouraged to see as much dedication and generally positive response as there was to the disaster and the needs of the people affected by it. And finally, I was annoyed that someone, anyone would use a situation like this as a means to reinforce their own racist agendas. Commentary by public personalities, including prominent figures, suggested that the level of civil disorder, looting and violence that took place in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster was a reflection of the predominance of black people in the region's population.

That this conclusion is simply WRONG should require no explanation to our readership. However unscientific my own bias might be, I hold onto the notion that readers of speculative fiction are generally a more tolerant segment of our species. After all, if we can take delight in exploring stories of beings from other planets, other dimensions, or states of consciousness, surely we are tolerant of those among us with different cultural backgrounds, languages, and pigmentations, not?

In truth, the bulk of my biases have proven to be way too optimistic. Assuming you will get the best from people sets you up for disappointment, right? Well, being the stubbornly optimistic fool that I am, I am going to continue to assume that we will get the best from some of the people, all of the time, regardless of circumstance. I am going to continue to hope that amid all of the rebuilding and relocating and re-employing and general doing over that is going on, people of different colors and backgrounds will discover wonderful and interesting



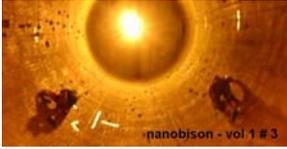
things about each other, and that the racial gaps might actually narrow a bit as a result.

I have no doubt that there will be another response to the recent wave of disasters as well: a **significant** upsurge in the volume of post-apocalyptic books and stories that are published, both inside and outside of speculative genres. I am sure the companion TV mini-series and movies will follow suit.

Science Fiction literature is rife with stories of aftermath: decayed and decaying civilizations, reduced to barbarism in the wake of nuclear and financial holocaust, natural and man-made plagues, collisions with comets and other heavenly bodies, and many other inventive forms of societal demise. SF cinema has put on film a few of the greater and many of the lesser gems of this sub-genre, in such classics as '12 Monkeys', 'Cherry 2000', and 'Exterminators of the Year 3000'. (I confess ... I own these movies and many more like them; some are real classics, others guilty pleasures)

One of my favorite books from the sub-genre is Robert Heinlein's "Farnham's Freehold". This 1964 book is even less PC than many of his other books. One of the things that make this book interesting in the light of recent news events is the notion of race as a significant dividing factor in the society that emerges from the ashes of destruction in Farnham's world. In this reality, blacks have risen to dominate the social order. Heinlein treats the subject of race in this story-turned-novel in interesting ways; to this day I am not sure what the story says about his own racial tolerance. But one point was clear: simply because something is approved by the dominant social order, that does not make it right. In this case, one of the the socially approved behaviors was cannibalism.

Those among you out there who will be reading this next coming wave of post-apocalyptic pulp may well get a chance to see new twists and turns to some of the tried and tired story lines of old. I hope that those among you who will be writing these stories will make them interesting, fresh, at least a little hopeful, and that you might also embrace notions of race and racism as aspects of human life to be explored in these new



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stories. This is all, of course, in anticipation of the day when stories of racism are **only** works of distant history and of speculation.

