


OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #11



Stories by Eric Del Carlo
Gary Wedlund
Bruce Golden

Poetry by Kristine Ong Muslim

A Few Words With Patrick Rothfuss

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March

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Seth Crossman *editor*

Jeff Ward *cover art*

Cover Art: *Sundered Enemy* by Jeff Ward

One of Jeff Ward's first illustration commissions was for Fiske Planetarium in Boulder, Colorado. It was a set of illustrations for an audio visual show entitled *Distant Worlds*. Since then, he has created various book cover illustrations for authors such as G. Miki Hayden, and magazine illustrations for publications like Paradox Magazine. He has also illustrated for gaming companies like Bastion Press, Green Ronin, and Hero Games.

Jeff has received awards at art shows like Philcon, Roc*Kon, and Tropicana. More of his work can be seen at www.stungeonstudios.com.

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Editor's Letter

We are living in an incredible age of advancement.

You only have to look at the news to see how quickly our civilization is catapulting forward with discovery. Every day we have new inventions, when only a century ago they came every year, and a millennium ago they happened every fifty or a hundred years. Here are a few recent discoveries that are right out the stories you and I are writing.

In the Arctic, the 100 million seed project is heating up. Earth is planning for a doomsday scenario. (And Doomsday happens to be a movie that just came out on March 14th). Millions of seeds (corn, wheat, beans, sorghum) were collected around the world and brought to a tiny Norwegian island in the Arctic. There, they were sealed in vaults deep in an Arctic mountain, safely resting in case of a natural or human disaster. If that ever did happen, and we pray it doesn't, I can just imagine someone finding it. Aliens land on our planet years in the future and wonder what strange structure is protruding from the middle of an icebound land. They land and investigate, finding millions of seeds and no other trace of life. Hhmm...

At the University of Washington, researchers are developing bionic contact lenses. These lenses can zoom in like your camera, or when it gets dark out, you can switch to night vision. They could also be used for gaming applications, video feeds, and monitoring the health of the wearer. Think of that! No more binoculars at the baseball game. TV commercials and breaking news bulletins while I am driving. One of the few problems left to hurdle is powering the lenses, which is not a problem if...

Researchers from Stanford complete their work on a new lithium battery that can last up to forty hours. The key? Silicon nanowires. Soon we will have cell phones, laptop computers, and cameras that rarely need a charge.

On a dangerous, but very intriguing note, the U.S. just blew up a satellite in space. Were we just testing our ability to fire rockets into space? Were they sending a message to other countries, or even other intelligent life? Is it a precursor to war in space? They claim they were averting a disaster (the satellite was going to crash down to earth full of harmful fuel). Since the satellite was launched two years ago, it hasn't worked a day. But rather than fix that costly investment, they blow it up. I bet most of the common public will never know the seventy percent of this story they didn't tell us.

As you can see, we are very fortunate to be living in this advanced age where science fiction writers have finally found homes at most of the major newspapers.

My only hope is that with this incredibly fast paced growth of discovery,

the infrastructure around it—our understanding, our culture, our grasp of human nature—is growing at the same pace.

–SC

The Herd

by Eric Del Carlo

Eric Del Carlo is the coauthor of the fantasy series, Wartorn, with Robert Aspirin. His new novel, The Golden Gate is Empty, co-written with his father Victor, is being published by Curious Volumes. This story was inspired by Eric's own experience with the storm, Katrina.

Incredibly, the words rasped from the boy's gap-toothed mouth: "Rescue choppers..." Incredulity, my response—but only for that first stunned pulse. From the sky, a thumping like lively fingers on bass strings; on the ground the beginning of commotion, others pointing skyward, *waving*.

I seize the boy's scruff and bolt for the grimy shadow of the overpass.

The interstate is awash with stench, slick with waste. It is difficult running as we batter bodies out of the way. Dazed, slogging, pausing now, shading eyes against pastel tropical-like sunshine, the others watch the helicopters swooping, in formation.

When I was in combat, in a jam, inevitably someone would reference "the cavalry"—without irony, without appreciation of the modern mechanized warfare being waged. So too now this boy's "*rescue choppers...*" Obsolete words.

We reach the overpass. Down I throw the boy, and down I go on top of him. The commotion is rumbling harder, crowd-roar of mindless hope and confusion. A thousandthousand heads bob excitedly, and the human mass seems to be boiling in a pot.

The helicopters start their strafing, and the herd goes mad.

* * *

I have water in a yogurt container, and I huddle the boy against me so he can sip secretly. Water enough to get us both killed.

"Toenail's hurtin' me," he says. His high-topped sneakers are caked with a slime of scum, blood, feces. The vehicle-less roadway flows with it; and with a grubby jubilee of litter; and with corpses.

"Wad something around it."

He doesn't sit, and I keep his balance for him, a hand spread on his bony back. I see the toenail dribbling pus. Nothing to be done.

"My name's Khamisi." He shows the dark wedge between young bright teeth. The water has made him feel better.

"Cyrus," I say, after two days of his lurking near, eyes always on me.

Before the strafing I hadn't shared water with him.

Many in our vast drudging mass have the luxury of believing that their loved ones are alive; merely separated; that this same bloated column might contain them. And that will be the case for some. Not Khamisi, though, who saw his mother and father floating. Who pulled their stiffening arms block after block, until he had to wade on alone.

We resume, a numb mechanical stride, but Khamisi's toe doesn't bother him so badly. He says so.

* * *

A dog is being roasted in a shopping cart, with four men standing around it, two with pistols, two with clubs. Arm hooking Khamisi's narrow chest, I haul him back, back, his mouth gaping and damp, his black-nailed fingers clawing the air. People are flowing in toward the succulent smell, the ravening need the same in the boy, in me. Days and *days* and no eating.

Khamisi tries wriggling free, then he sobs limply, then is limp and still. I have retreated us from the strengthening human flood. Fools for cooking that dog.

Gunshots pop and make no difference. I carry Khamisi past the savage churn. Bodies propelled by ravenous mouths, mouths hollering in the greasy twilight.

White misty hunger pours through my head; and I have to set him back on his feet, have to hold the boy's hand to keep him from running back toward that savory aroma still tantalizing the air. But that hand is also balancing me upright as we continue on down the road, the human mass stretched miles ahead and miles behind.

* * *

Someone is pulling on Khamisi where he nestles against me, and I wake and yell off the male. Khamisi mutters, moans, never knows what has happened. His color is souring.

I move us, but twenty minutes later the male, with confederates, finds us among the endless shapes bedded down in the many lanes.

"Gib up da bitch-punk."

I stand over the boy, asleep on the rancid pavement. When the male comes, I chop him across the bridge of the nose, purely for the cosmetic effect. It changes his mind. His partners just watch.

"Fine, old man." He spits blood. "Keep 'im for yo'self. Keep your punk."

Again I carry Khamisi to a new spot; and nestled once more on the ground I feel his hand groping me and know he is aware of what has transpired in the night's fetid murk. He is aware of *all* implications.

He croaks softly, "Like..this, Cyrus?"

"You don't have to do that. It's not like that."

He stops. He wasn't a street urchin; instead, had parents, a home, schooling. But feral instinct has worked out the new order for him.

Through the night there are wails, weeping, shrieks, even dementedly taut laughter. Fewer babies crying, though. Almost none, in fact.

* * *

Billboards and road signs soar over us. The ads are from a world we scarcely remember; the white-on-green signs disinterestedly mark off miles to the next city north, where we all think we are going. That is the plan, if it can be said that this herd has one.

New commotion rumbles. It rolls back over the long column, infecting excitement into exhausted muscles and hallucinating brains. The plodding pace is changing. I make sure Khamisi stays with it. We jog along, and I see his limp worsening; but he doesn't falter. The mob-voice swells, vibrating into my bones, and some of that deranged excitement is in me too. We surge ahead, thundering the road underfoot.

A roadside convenience center—gas station, chain stores and fast food franchises—has been evacuated at the foot of the exit ramp down which we deluge. Bodies go clotting and trampling. Swarming over the mall, other bodies are crushed against the unlit entrances.

Soon enough they are inside. Again I am restraining Khamisi, as still more are heaving and hurling down the ramp.

I guide the boy around the back, to the dumpsters; and we find a wealth there, and he cries deliriously while he eats. We have it to ourselves, long enough to load our pockets and stuff our clothes with crusts and castoffs. My stomach cramps in delicious wonder. Khamisi throws his gaunt arms around me, unabashedly smothers his face. The uproar of the ransacking isn't unlike sounds I recall from overseas combat.

Eyes roll up from the level of my chest. "How come—*me*?" he asks, mouth muffled.

He reminds me of myself at some vulnerable age—11, 13, 15; I don't know how old he is. That is a reason. But I tell him another.

"I had a kid would be your age. About." Who wasn't there when I came back home.

They are pulling the roofs down on themselves in the frenzy. Khamisi

and I climb back onto the waiting interstate.

* * *

Looted liquor, consumed by the strongest, touches off rampages. Indiscriminate assaults, violations. Bands rove the road, come into contact, fight bloodily.

But they are few, and we are a thousandthousand and much more than that; and there is a kind of queasy solidarity, and there are kindnesses, even, here and there among us. We merely go on northward, though. That is the extent to which we are organized.

I covertly trade someone scraps for more water. A good trade. Khamisi is cheerful about our opulence. He catalogues what he misses most—appliances, soft bed, soapy baths—and never mentions a person. Later he says, admiringly, “You really know what to do.”

“This is the third herd I’ve been in,” I say.

A woman we are passing is indignant. “I ain’t no *herd!*” she yelps. “Ain’t part no fuckin’ *herd!*” She wears a denim shirt as a loincloth, above bruised legs, below bruised breasts.

Khamisi hides his gap-toothed grin because he recognizes the irony. A few strides later, “Third?” Awe rasps in his voice. “You been in three herds?”

I give a grin of my own. “Just bad luck.”

Which is all it is; which I’ve told myself for a week. I don’t want to feel singled out. Which is a reason I stay with this herd.

The boy is practically hobbling now, but every time I slacken the pace, he increases it. There are fewer miles north every hour. His head lifts from a haze of weariness and tedium. Intelligent awareness is sudden in his eyes.

Conspiratorially to me he says, “Smells rainy.”

I know it does.

* * *

An outer band of clockwise rotation—a graze, a brush, but that will be enough. The sky is being angered.

We have long since run out of alphabet. Out of Greek alphabet as well. So too has the season burst its confines, and this year the storms started early and are going late. They come one atop the other, too fast and too many to name now. Too mighty as well. They come ashore, they come inland, farther and farther; and places that were out of reach are invulnerable no longer. Which is why this is my third herd.

The road is lighted here. Electricity seems miraculous. The early dusk deepens. I am tired, tired, fantastically weary. I stumble over the sprawled and crawling and dead. Khamisi is wobbling, and a permanent grimace now shows me the pronounced gap in his teeth.

The air remakes itself, takes on a new density.

And the rain falls.

Mouths open desperately, and foul clothing is stripped off. Scabby bodies dance and twirl. The tropical downpour intensifies. It scours some of the stink off me, and I rake my fingers lusciously through my caked hair. This is some other weather system than what drank the city to our south, and we celebrate it. Jubilant cries, because here—*finally*—is, if not rescue, then relief. Or some tiny measure of it. Water from the sky, to wash us and slake our thirst. At last we are being pitied.

A moment later we find out why the road is lit.

The ground units cut through us. Gunfire is bright beneath the scrubbing rainfall. Clacking treads carry the armor. This assault is more efficient than that of the helicopters, more hands-on, more last-ditch; for of course that city, just north now, doesn't want us, can't provide for us. They will have their own storm soon enough, inevitably. I have known this every step of this journey, but I don't regret being part of this herd.

Not even when the gap-toothed boy is very suddenly and conclusively no longer at my side.

* * *

Somehow there are captives, and somehow I am among them. Maybe not *somehow*. I still have my training, after all.

I am singled out, and many hours later I am in a room, eating soup and drinking coffee. They have my records. When an officer enters, I recognize the snap and grace of that uniform and demeanor.

He tells me how it is.

He finishes, "Your choice."

Choice?

I finish the soup and the coffee.

* * *

On the inside hatch of the armored vehicle into which I climb, someone has spray-painted GET WITH THE POGROM. It is a busy season, the busiest ever. The herds are on the move.

The Eleventh Stranger

by Kristine Ong Muslim

Kristine has published more than more than 500 poems and stories in more than 200 publications worldwide. Her work has recently appeared in Not One of Us, Tales of the Talisman, and Abyss & Apex. She has received an Honorable Mention in Year's Best in Fantasy and Horror and won Sam's Dot Publishing's James Award for genre poetry twice.

The Eleventh Stranger

The eleventh stranger shielded the sun from us.
We did not know how far his foot was anchored
down or how far up his head had broached the universe.

Calculations indicated that he was standing,
his hand curled around the sun.
That blackened behemoth.
That faceless apocalypse.

We sent warships to destroy that fist,
claim back our sun as the planet began
to turn colder each hour.

The thermonuclear weapons produced
blisters on the eleventh stranger's skin.
But we did not have enough energy to make more
of those; we could not even heat our homes enough.

We waited, frozen in our beds.
And the hand around the sun
remained in place.

Out of His League

by Bruce Golden

Bruce Golden has been a professional writer/editor for more decades than he cares to count. He has sold stories to publications such as Oceans of the Mind, Aberrant Dreams, Odyssey, and Postscripts. His first book, Mortals All, is a futuristic love story. His second book, Better Than Chocolate, is a quirky futuristic mystery and has been reviewed well. This story takes an interesting look at our solar system.

Bats slammed into lockers, cleats scraped the floor, and frothy spittle stained the walls. An influx of uniformed combatants filed into the room, some mumbling, others grumbling—the sure sign of another loss. In moments the place smelled of dirty socks and planetary jocks.

As if to alter the mood, one of them began revolving around the post-game spread waving his arms. “I say we put this one behind us,” called out Saturn in an upbeat tone. “I say we go out and find some bodacious local asteroids in need of a good fertility rite. What do you say?”

His idea was greeted by a colorful array of expletives. No one seemed in the mood to party.

By the time little Mercury showed up with the *really* bad news, the room was already subdued. Most had changed out of their uniforms, and were already in and out of the showers. Mars noticed the normally peppy infielder appeared usually glum.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a black hole.”

“Did you hear what happened to Pluto?” the speedster asked the room in-general. “They cut him.”

“What?” Mars slammed his fist against the wall. “Damn it! I knew something was up.”

“Are you sure?” asked Jupiter, scratching his oversized head with sausage-like fingers.

“Yeah,” replied Mercury. “He’s in with management right now. I hear they’re sending him down to the dwarf league.”

“I bet it was Terra’s fault,” grouched Mars. “He’s always stirring up trouble. No telling what he told management behind Pluto’s back.”

“Well, Pluto’s always been a little erratic,” said Saturn, fresh out of the shower and adorning himself with his usual bling. “He’s not the fastest guy in the galaxy either.”

“Maybe,” said Mars, “but he’s a scrappy little player, and he was always

there for us, eon after eon.”

Jupiter stood, stretched his massive arms, and yawned. “I’m going to miss the little guy.”

“What’s this going to do to team chemistry?” wondered Venus.

“Management doesn’t care about chemistry,” carped Mars, “all they care about is astronomy.”

“We should tell the others before he gets here,” suggested Venus.

Saturn volunteered. “I’ll get Neptune, he’s still in the shower.”

“That figures,” responded Mars. “Hey, while you’re in there, get Uranus out of the head.”

Before Saturn returned, Terra walked in. “Did you guys hear what happened to Pluto?”

That was all Mars needed. He grabbed Terra by his uniform and slammed him up against a spate of lockers.

“What did you do, you prissy, waterlogged, rodent-infested little—”

Jupiter and Mercury moved quickly to intervene, separating the pair.

“What did you tell them?” Mars ranted as Jupiter held him back.

“What are you talking about?” Terra seemed stunned by the attack.

“Mars thinks it’s your fault they’re sending Pluto down,” explained Venus.

“What? I didn’t have anything to do with that. How could I? Why would I?”

Before Mars could continue his diatribe, Pluto walked in. He was already in street clothes, but went straight to his locker. The room hushed noticeably and, for a moment, everyone acted as if nothing were amiss. But when Pluto began emptying out his locker, Mercury went over and put an arm on his shoulder.

“Sorry, my man. We all heard. It’s a bum deal.”

Pluto shrugged. “It’s part of the business. I didn’t get the job done.” Then, mustering a bit of bravado, he turned to face the room and added, “I’ll be back. Don’t you worry about that. I’ll go down, I’ll get my game together and then I’ll be back. It’s just a slump. You’ll see, I’ll be back up here in no time.”

Jupiter nodded his big head and his bassoon-like voice bellowed, “That’s right. You’ll be back in no time at all. You go down there and give them a good showing, Pluto old bud.”

“Yeah,” called out a couple of other voices with less than genuine enthusiasm.

Unable to hold back the tears, Venus turned away. Mars looked like he wanted to break something.

Searching his rather voluminous cranium for something else to say—

something inspirational—Jupiter came up with, “Just remember, you can’t steal first base.”

“Yeah . . . right. Thanks, Jupiter,” responded Pluto. He knew the big guy well enough not to waste time puzzling over anything he said.

But Jupiter wasn’t finished. “Did I ever tell you how I could have been a star?”

Venus waved him silent. “Not now, Jupiter.”

Pluto finished bagging up his stuff and started out. Terra stepped up and shook his hand.

“Good luck, Pluto.”

“Yeah,” said Mercury, “knock ‘em dead down there.”

Pluto looked like he wanted to say something else, but couldn’t get the words out. Instead he glanced away and walked out.

Mercury stared at Jupiter. “You’re a real gasbag, you know that? *You can’t steal first base?* What kind of idiotic thing is that to say?”

Jupiter shrugged his mammoth shoulders. The gravitational effect of the movement pulled Saturn back in from the showers with Neptune and Uranus in tow.

“What happened?” asked Neptune, still dripping.

“They cut Pluto. He’s gone.”

“Cut him? Why?”

“Why do you think?” Mars replied sarcastically. “He wasn’t orbiting up to expectations.”

“It’s not *why* that matters,” offered Mercury. “It’s *who*—who will they cut next?”

A Few Words With Patrick Rothfuss

Patrick, your first novel, The Name of the Wind, has come out to much acclaim, brisk sales and a quickly growing readership. But your own path to becoming a writer is a great story in itself. Many people are familiar (or can be through your web site) with how you broke out with your debut novel after winning first place in the Writers of the Future contest, an advantageous meeting with Kevin J. Anderson where your book finally had the chance it needed, before landing in the lap of an incredibly diligent and enthusiastic editor.

How would you define your story of becoming a writer? Was it luck, years of hard work that finally paid off, fate, or God's design?

Becoming a writer is easy, all you do for that is write. Becoming a published writer is something else entirely....

I think anyone who gets published will admit that luck plays a part in the process. Maybe you meet someone at a convention and impress them. Maybe your book is the one that the editor takes on vacation with them. Maybe you end up sitting next to Steven King on a plane and he forgot the book he was reading back in the terminal...

But the lucky break is only half of it. When you finally get your lucky break, if you don't have the goods, it won't do you any good.

The Name of the Wind is my debut novel, and a lot of folks out there are really enjoying it. But I've been working on my writing for a long, long time. When people tell me I'm really lucky about the reception it's been getting, I joke and say, "Yeah, it only took me fifteen years to become an overnight success."

Your first book is finished, but I understand the whole series has more or less been written. How long did it take you to write, including rewriting?

Fourteen years, give or take. That's not working on it consistently, obviously. I did a lot of other things...like going to grad school and learning to rollerblade.

Fourteen years! Were there ever times you wanted to give up and become a professional rollerblader?

Not really. The reason I was writing was because I loved working on the story. Have you ever heard of someone quitting their hobby because it was taking too long? “Ah hell Earl, I’ve been fishing for twenty years now and I’m not a pro yet. I think I’m going to pack it in...”

Generally speaking, people fish because they like fishing. If you’re writing because you think it’ll make you rich and famous, you’re probably doing it for the wrong reason...

You’ve called yourself obsessive when it comes to writing. In what way?

After talking with editors and writers over these last couple years, I realize I don’t do things the ordinary way. A lot of authors write a draft, revise it once or twice, then send it to their editor. They get the editor’s feedback, make changes, then it gets copy edited, proofed and printed. That’s somewhere between 3 and 6 revisions, depending on how you count them.

Me? Well...I must have read The Name of the Wind over two hundred times with a red pen in my hand, making notes and corrections. Tightening dialogue and description. Tweaking the language, threading in new plots, adding and removing characters. Combining scenes and moving around chapters...

Plus I probably had over 100 people read it and give me feedback over the years in its different versions.

So yeah. Compared to the norm, I’m obsessive. But I’m happy. That’s how I make sure when my book comes out, it is as good as it can possibly be.

You know what it’s like when you’re reading a book and you hit a patch that doesn’t seem to make sense? Or it’s a little confusing? Or boring? Or logically inconsistent? I don’t ever want those little bits in my book. I want to fix ALL of those before it gets into print. I want people to pick it up, read it, and have it blow the top of their heads off with how good it is...

Figuratively speaking of course...

Can you tell us three books, or writers, that have blown your head off?

The Last Unicorn by Peter S. Beagle.

Something Wicked This Way Comes By Ray Bradbury.

Declare by Tim Powers.

Before your success, you claim you were rejected by every agent in North America. What did it feel like to finally get that phone call, “We want your book!”

It would have been great if that had been the case, but the process was much more gradual than that. I wasn't like suddenly Ed McMahon showed up at my house with a publishing contract and a giant novelty check for a billion dollars.

I won an award, and six months went by. Then I went to the workshop connected with the award and met Kevin Anderson. He introduced me to his agent, and a couple months went by. The agent says he might be interested in representing the book, but that it needs work. So I work on the story and six months go by. I send it to the agent and another month goes by. Then he says it's better, but it still needs more work, so I work on it for a few more months...

You see? It didn't all happen like a thunderbolt. Starting in 2001 it was a lot of little pieces of good news all spaced out over a long period of time. This year the good news has been a little more tightly packed, admittedly: awards, foreign translation deals, graphic novel adaptation, movie talk...

But still, the long gradual start to the process has helped keep me on an even keel. That way, I can avoid being a spaz when something else cool happens.

Since your book has come out, have you met any cool famous people as a result?

Yeah. I had dinner with Tad Williams about a year ago. He's an incredibly nice person, and we share an editor and agent, so we're practically related. I met Orson Scott Card online after he wrote a terribly flattering review of my book. I've only emailed with him, but he's also been very gracious and cool. He invited me to participate in series of online articles with him talking about the Harry Potter series over at Belief.net.

And I met Neil Gaiman. I didn't get to hang out with him very long, but he was very easygoing too. That one I was nervous about. I was trying hard not to be a spaz when I met him.

I know very little about chemistry and physics, but the depth of believable detail (or imagination) you include throughout the book, from Ben's lessons, to Master Kilvin's Fishery, to Sympathy is impressive. Were you always interested in this subject or was it the product of research?

I'm a science geek from way back. I used to be a chemistry lab assistant back in high school, and if things had gone a little differently I'd probably be a chemical engineer right now. I love the hard sciences. A couple weeks ago I spent two hours talking to a physics student about how magnets work.

Generally speaking, I'm interested in everything. Physics, astronomy, sociology, philosophy, psychology, geology... That's the reason it took me 9 years to get my B.A. I liked learning about all that stuff. I'd still be going to school if they hadn't kicked me out...

You could always try another school... Does this mean you are from the camp of "write what you know?"

No. I think that's mostly crap. If you ask writers to write what they know, you mostly get a bunch of boring stories written about writers who are all emo about not being able to write. *Sigh.*

"Write what you know" gets a lot of airtime because it's quotable and it sounds good. Like Decarte's: "I think, therefore I am." It's catchy and clever sounding, but that doesn't mean it isn't logically flawed crap.

Before you became a novelist what did you do? Your worst job?

I've done all sorts of things. Bus boy. Parking lot attendant. Math tutor. Taco Bell employee. Professional mover. Delivery driver.

As for the worst job.... Well... Some people probably would have hated those jobs...but I didn't mind any of them very much. Generally speaking I kind of enjoyed them. I tend to make my own fun, and you can learn a lot as a parking lot attendant if you keep your eyes open...

What was the sweetest ride you got to park as an attendant?

I didn't get to drive the cars. I just pointed to the parking ramp they were supposed to park in. Still, it wasn't a bad job. I had a lot of time to think...

You used to teach at your old university. Why did you stop teaching?

I don't like to think that I've stopped, really. I'm just taking a break to focus on my writing for now. That way I can be obsessive and still meet my deadlines.

Hopefully I'll go back and teach some creative writing classes before too long. Or maybe a class on science fiction and fantasy literature. That would be awesome...

Can you tell us what we can expect in Book 2?

More sex. More violence. More Kvothe. More Bast.

But not all in the same scene. I'll leave that particular combination for the fanfic writers.

I don't really know what to say about the second book. I suck at summarizing my own stuff. Kvothe grows up a bit, and because he knows more, he has the ability to get into more serious trouble. He gets involved in politics a bit, and he heads into the Fae...

I think that's all I'll say. I'm not big into spoilers or teasers. Sorry.

Sounds good. When can we expect the next installment? Anything else you are working on that might come out in the meantime?

Book two is currently planned for spring of 2009. I've also got a few projects coming out with Subterranean Press before that.

You have been published. The reviews have been great. What dreams do you have now?

Man. I had this really weird dream where I was having a three-way with a sumo wrestler and my ex-roommate. That was a trip.

Ooh!. And there was another one where I was being threatened by this am-

bulatory gas can with a set of clicky teeth. That freaked me right out. Seriously.

Uh...that is interesting and slightly scary, Pat. I should have said, what goals have you set for yourself now that you've been published?

Oh. I see. This is one of the perils of inexact phraseology.

I'd like to have the next book be at least as good as this first one. That's a major goal. I'd also like to teach a writing class in the not-too distant future. I think I'd be pretty good at that.

What is your favorite writing snack food?

Is coffee food? If yes, then coffee.

If no, it's still coffee.

You are very active on your web site, and respond to many of the emails you receive. What is the coolest thing a reader has written in? Have any of the emails made you tear up?

I actually wrote a blog that contained one of my coolest fan mails ever while I was answering a question. You can find it over here:

<http://www.patrickrothfuss.com/blog/2007/10/ask-author-3-what-good-is-fantsay.html>

Patrick, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to answer of few of our questions. We appreciate it and wish you the best of luck with your writing. We can't wait for the next book!

The Art of Avoiding Projectiles

By Gary Wedlund

Gary Wedlund has a degree from the Columbus College of Art and Design and an MBA from Ohio State University. He is new to the science fiction field, and is finishing up a five book historical fantasy series which he hopes to publish soon. In this story, a bullet in space means death and that's not always an easy thing to deal with.

Sitting opposite me on the electronics bay floor, Ann reads a schematic on the wall's flat-screen and jots 'Cell Test 2068' into her laptop. The keyboard is like her freckles; I've never seen her without it. Ann's laptop pad is a part of her hand, a permanent member of our ménage a trios; for me, keyboard salt peter.

Below us, several hundred fibers trunk thirty-two level light from one side of the electronics bay to the other at slow, but reliable gig-speed. It's the arteries and veins of our little round house, the Spaceship Flyby.

"Our test target says T-bin seventeen on the third link in the manual. Slate-violet fiber coating with a yellow tracer," she mumbles so low I nearly miss it under the ventilator whistle. Electrons last forever, but they've never found the cure for bearing wear.

I watch the rows and columns of yellow and green crystal indicators telling me everything is smooth. I repeat, "It says T-bin seventeen, slate-violet, blah, blah; so and so and so what? The manual's even a prototype, not even as-built. Besides, all we need to know is which alarm indicator on this wall matches the functioning card on your wall. Colored cable's on the back. Shoot light end to end, bingo, good, bad, da-di-da. Knowing tedious and intermediary T-bin nomenclature and tracing glass in the hole won't get us any closer to finishing this stupid exercise before I cramp."

I pull a spare card out of its cradle. I am careful to hold it on the ground foil because I hate straps. I show her the micro-switches. She doesn't know it's a spare, and I don't tell her because it makes me feel like Jesse James to see her fluster over what she doesn't know, what she is erroneously sure I don't know, and especially over what's not orderly and by the manual.

I start to tell her we can compare switch settings, sure to be the exercise's last check, but she interrupts me with her fast mouth. "Jesus, Joe! Don't touch that. You'll blow the chips. When are you going to start using some common sense?"

I hate that common sense line. Someone always hits me with the phrase

right when I am doing my best work. Giving her my favorite dumb look, I slide the card back into the useless slot. Screw her. I figure she needs another hour of bending over her schematics, keying nonsense, following every circuit trace before she'll figure out the card she wants is the one right next to the spare I've just scared the bajesus out of her by yanking.

Ann is a micro-management freak. I am an, "As long as it works," freak.

Still, there is a limit to my patience with her quick mouth, so I tell her, "You know your problem is you're an engineer. Engineers can't fix anything because they never back up and admire the art. It's never enough to just know what something does; you have to count photons in the fiber every time you do anything."

I always hate statements started with, "You know, your problem is," too, but it was the first thing that came to mind.

"What are you talking about? We're all engineers. We've all been engineers since we were fifteen years old, twenty-five years ago—except Mobley. He's been an engineer since before Lucy," Ann informs me with her teacher voice.

I'd expected her to say something flippant, but instead she'd gotten professorial—except that part about Mobley. He isn't quite that old. He only seems old, mainly to me. Her lectures are wasted on me though. All the rhetoric in the universe can't make a person be an engineer if he doesn't want to be one. I'm determined to be wrong when it makes me feel good about my rotten life.

The PA chirps overhead. Mobley is at the communications console. He reads us our rites, "The Mosah projectile launcher is on course. Ninety-seven plus probable. One hundred percent, within ten meters if it launches, and it will. I have an impact time. Twenty-one-oh-three...to six digits." Then I sense, as much as hear the PA's disconnect.

There's no reason to distrust Mobley's math, though it isn't his best skill. He's a pilot, in spite of the fact we can't really steer this crate. God forbid someone should beat him at flight simulator. Everybody knows that rule.

"I'm not an engineer, but when you're through being a control freak, I'll show you how to document the T-bin cross-connects without pouring over all of that," I told Ann.

"What?" she asks. Her mind is stuck on Mobley's announcement of doom, I guess. I doubt she even heard me, which isn't historic. She puts her light-pen down on the keypad, and ignores the laptop too. That is historic.

She has good reason to be distressed. Mosah is one of six independent colonies from earth. It's the fourth planet doing an ellipse on Alpha star. In the best of cases, the colonies are only marginally hospitable, but Mosah has

a pretty ingenious way of making life even more miserable. They'd made survival engineering into a religion. To the Mosah, God is a soul moving ribbon law, much like gravity or magnetism, only with incense, candles and some rather rancid green wine. It's the creator's duty, (that's them), to bio-engineer itself, (them again), to bio-conform in order to facilitate consciousness procreation; that's like Hindus on Dianetics—only minus the skinny cows, strobe lights and b-movie sponsors. Oh, did I mention cloning? Anyway, that's all we know, given last contact. Things have probably gotten a little strange since then.

Everybody on Mosah is an engineer. That makes them kind of like the five of us, I guess—except for me of course. They engineer their environment. They engineer their society. They even engineer themselves. After half a century, nobody even knows what a person from Mosah looks like anymore. Ask me, and I'll be the first one to tell you I'd rather piss in my own boots than find out.

The Mosah feel the same way. In order to keep themselves from being polluted by us, they have a habit of shooting at anything that passes within three or so planets. Nobody really knows the exact passage limit, or at least nobody who has ever lived. We'd come no closer than three and a half, but that had been close enough to earn us their best shot.

I'm the only person in the universe who knows what's wrong with the Mosah. They suffer from too many engineers.

Too much engineering makes you into a pudding head. I don't mean that as a joke. It's just something that happens to be true.

Our current little situation isn't exactly fresh news.

The projectile launcher has been chasing us for over a decade. We know from posthumous transmissions that the bullet pod can launch its projectile at roughly a million meters. That gives us an hour to try to outmaneuver the five centimeter bullet after its launch. The bullet is simple. It has a metal trace sensor, about a half meg worth of mentality, and enough fuel to alter its course two or three degrees. Truly cave-man stuff, huh? But, then again, so is any bullet. When this one hits our ship it'll come in one side, and right out the other. Depending on what it hits, it might never stop unless it chances on some gravity to burn on it—unlikely until the universal collapse. They don't call this place space for nothing, you know.

Look at me, worrying over a bullet's fate. Maybe the bullet hits the uranium core on our fusion pulsar and only flies for a couple billion more years. By contrast, in less than an earth day, this place is going to do the instant pucker. Pucker, that's not an engineering term.

"What's so funny!" says Ann.

My garbage is getting to her, I realize. I don't mean to be insensitive.

After all, Ann can't help it if she is an engineer. "Hey, I'm sorry. I was just thinking about home." I lied, but my protective male hormones kick in because I know she's about to cry.

Of course, talking about home is simply the wrong diversion. She starts crying over her laptop anyway.

She needs a distraction. I reach over on her wall and pull out the first card my fingers touch. A corresponding red indicator lights on my end of the bay.

"What are you doing!" Ann shrieks. Her voice is piercing as the ventilator stops blowing.

"That's the ventilation system. It crosses directly across the bay to card 1744," I say like I haven't just learned it. The backup has already picked up, so my voice has to compete with a resurgent compressor.

Ann screams, "God damn-it Joe! Are you trying to get us all killed?" She pushes the card back in with a ka-snap.

I pull another one, two columns over and down a ways. It lights red on 1524, straight across again, prompting me to say, "I don't know what that one is, but I think we've established a pattern already."

The station's rotation picks up a smidgen.

"Joe, god-damn-it!" Almost before I've extracted my hand, she pushes that card in too, putting her hands, legs and back up to the board so I can't do another.

"Sorry," I apologize. "Did you get all of that down on your laptop?"

There's a look of terror on her face, drawing her cheeks in, reminding me of someone trying for all of her worth to become a skull. I know my actions are irresponsible, but I don't think the fear I see has been born in this particular bay. She's taking it out on me though, and I don't mind; I just hope it'll help her cope a little longer. Better pissed at me than frozen with fear over the bullet.

Apparently it works some. "You pull one more circuit and I'll call the others in here to help hog tie you for the rest of the trip," she threatens.

I say, "Sound's kinky, but I'll have to pa—"

The PA pops on. Katrina interrupts, "Hey Joe; check the diags. We lost status on a rotation vent for a second."

Ann's eyebrows lift, "See, you could have screwed up our spin with that last dumb move. We could be ending this tour with all of us strapped to our chairs."

She is right, of course. Without spin control on our spaceship, we'll not be able to maintain our gravity, or worse yet, we'll over-rotate and squash ourselves in our own weight. Kind of like sitting on Venus. On the way out the door, I poke, "Don't forget to get that down in the notes section," letting

the door re-seal on her unsavory reply.

If you're thinking we're pretty juvenile for astronauts—think again. The five of us have been traveling together since before puberty, except for Mobley, who's a bit older, but otherwise in the same boat. Ann is my sister as far as I'm concerned. She has to be. If she was my mate, there would be no way to divorce her properly up in this dinky nuclear pulse propulsion rotating donut of ours.

Mobley is on deck. He sits in his recliner with one foot on the console counter and a hand on his coffee cup.

The first time I ever saw him, some three decades ago, he looked just like that. He was gazing at the big crystal screen, looking at our solar system. Our star is a mere light year away now. A few dozen months more and we'll be finished with deceleration for our last swing and reorientation onto earth's orbit. Boy, won't that be something, I figure, ignoring the bullet at our backs.

The screen is a digital readout, although it looks real and tasty. If we actually had windows, we'd be constantly dizzy from looking at our own gravitational spin. This is better. In fact, it is a lot more interesting because we can play disks on it, and even zoom in on stuff, sometimes seeing the damndest things. I usually end up tracking and zooming up on some uncharted planet during my stay at the helm. Literally hundreds of minor planets orbit most solar systems so far out that they are, for all intents and purposes, loners. Every few thousand years they swing back around, sometimes at observable distances through habitat planet sensors, if they know where to look. Up here, spotting one is a piece of cake.

Generally the planetoids are covered with ice, but if I go magnetic or angstrom, I can see the craters and chipped off edges really well. It's the closest thing to exploration one is likely to find up here in space, where the buzz-word is wait. Well anyway, Mobley likes simply looking at the frozen destination on real-scale, because his mind is really clear I think, and he likes to keep it clean like that too. Don't ask me why.

"Lighten up on her, Joe. She's not taking it well," Mobley says to the screen of stars. He and Ann have been boning it ever since Mobley first noticed she jiggled when she jogged on the tread.

I say, "I'm treating her just fine, Mobley. You just make sure you don't fall asleep and run us into something." It's an old joke, but Mobley never laughs, and sure doesn't seem in the mood to break the trend today.

"It's going to hit us, you know. I'll do evasives in the last hour when the bullet separates from the last of its main fuel capsule, but it won't make any difference," he confides. Mobley is right. At our rate, over half light speed, we can move out of line a mere few tenths of a degree. It's both physically

impossible and ill advised to go beyond that; we'll miss our orbit and spend the next six generations inbreeding engineers just to bring home a time capsule.

The universe might never recover from the shrug, I figure.

"Sure is," I answer the 'It's going to hit us' speech. "You'll think of something though. You engineers just keep working on it." I'd been a Trekkie as a kid, and believed every space adventure had a last minute out. It's a cultural given.

"You're an engineer too, Joe," he answers, monotone, still watching the digital universe twinkle. It is a habit everyone has, lying to me like that.

I head through the next hatch, saying, "I was going to get you a new cup of coffee, but you can get it yourself for that."

When the door re-seals, I stand in the kitchen. Everybody calls it the galley, but I know galleys are on ships. We've been drinking our own piss most of our lives. I am fairly certain there isn't any big water around, and so it is a kitchen. I have even made some magnets for the refrigeration unit as proof when someone gets crazy enough to argue that it isn't a kitchen.

Two of the magnets are space fighters. One looks like Darth Vader's ship, black with white needle-sharp seams. I had added flames and a cotton ball of smoke just for laughs.

The other looks like the boy Luke's ship. It's white to match the virgin who rode it; you know, the boy who said stuff like, "May the force be with you," and other utterly moronic nonsense. Hairpin turns at warp speed, and armor piercing lasers—UH, HUH. All it takes is one bullet launched at the point blank range of a half million astronomic miles. I pinch off the smoke, and transfer it to the white virgin's ship. There, that looks more like my view of the universe.

Katrina and Jane are seated at the video table in the next room, playing euchre with a simulated computer couple named the Smiths. I've played with the Smiths a few times myself. They always get drunk by the last hand, making the play progressively easier and the text fairly enjoyable.

It may have been an engineer who wrote the syntax, but it was a person straight out of Bellevue who wrote the voice synth. Nothing beats getting pissy with the Smiths. I have an instant urge to play, but the women are using the game for therapy, and besides, in my mood I'll only rile up the Smiths and a riled drunk isn't anything like a philosophical one.

This is our house, or at least that's what we call it. Two Polaroid screens partition off a pair of double bunks from the main room as well as from one another. There are four more bunks behind the console deck. Eight bunks for a crew of five is some social engineer's idea—not that the genius told us why he'd done it that way. Jane, Katrina and I have sat around discussing it

a lot. We live back here and have talked about everything at least a few hundred times. I figure the engineer had planned on us getting on one another's nerves, so he gave us enough bunks to move around. Jane thinks the idea is for us to make space babies. Katrina isn't sure about the engineer's intent, but deep down I think she wants to make space monkeys too.

God knows the three of us have gone through the motions enough—not that I'm complaining; far from it, space is boring and Puritanism would only make our brains as dull as...well, Puritans. I had Jane thinking we were making a space chimp together for a couple of years, but I was still secreting the birth control serum. It did a lot for her, thinking she might get pregnant, but eventually she just figured I was blanks. On the other hand, I quit birth control a couple of months ago without anyone specially knowing. Maybe it was knowing the bullet was coming, I don't know.

I've been betting Jane is thinking she's just holding water though. I've wanted to tell her for a long time, but this being the last day before the main event, I don't know if she'll get happy or go postal.

Somehow I figure I'll tell her and give her the thrill of her life, but then again I don't know. How do you risk ruining someone's last day? Not that I'm pessimistic, mind you. Those engineers are sure to discover something that will save us. Maybe even, the complication of a pregnancy will help jar an unusual idea out of their over-planning cerebellums?

I take some chemicals I've concocted for the occasion and go to sleep. Forever later I wake up with Jane sitting beside me holding my hand. There are these moments when I think I can stay up in space forever, and they have nothing to do with stars. She sits in a chair with her feet up on the foot of my bed, holding my hand like a mother holds the hand of a sick child.

Then she says, "I know you're taking this harder than the rest of us," and I instantly know she's right, but I lie to her anyway and tell her, it isn't so, because I went through puberty in space, taught mostly by a computer chip and don't have good sense to be honest in the face of a real human moment.

"Mobley says the projectile's been launched," she tells me. I turn white and breathe sharply. I've been told I'm going to die for years, and now I am counting my breaths. One, two, three, ready to be instantly decompressed and sucked out of the hull through a tiny pin hole, like spaghetti.

Then she leans over and kisses me. I'm in shock, doing the anxiety thing, counting to three around the softness of her lips, but on the second try I kiss her back. I pull her to me and kiss her as deep as my tongue can reach, wanting to hide in there.

Then I tear Jane's shirt off. It scares me how much I lust for her, but I think we both are loving away the same fear as we rape one another on bunk

number seven.

I'm still launching my seed inside of her womb when she whispers, "Thank you for the baby. It was going to be a girl."

I don't even feel like I have the time to put all of that into my brain; I just get up. Jane probably thinks it's her or what she said, because there's this hurt look on her face like I've said something about her having a few extra pounds on her thighs. She starts crying when I put my shorts, shirt and shoes on.

That crying stuff is female unfairness. For some reason, it ticks me off this time, maybe because we don't have the time for it. "You've given up, haven't you."

"Bastard!" Jane says.

"How long has it been, Miss Engineer?" I ask.

"A month," she answers with spit.

"No, the bullet. How long has it been since the thing launched its damned self onto its final course?" I have this feeling like I am wasting my life with every word. Each word gets heavier, more expensive, closer to death. Closer to the death of my daughter.

"Half an hour maybe—no, probably more," she lies to me.

"Damned engineers. Can't fix a thing," I run through the door. All I can think of is saving our child. Jane thinks I am being a bastard. Good, I think back. I like that. Face it Joe, I tell myself, you reach your peak when you're doing something nobody else can appreciate. It's a new feeling though, this baby thing. Under the selfish laws of self preservation, I'd been walking around, feeling kind of like a frog stuck in a flashlight beam. The baby though, I just have to do something about that.

The rest of the crew is strapped into their seats on deck. At the helm, (there's that boat thing again), Mobley is, "steering." By steering I mean he's told the command computer to blow some side vents. We're already shifting dangerously out of line by more than a hundredth of a degree.

I walk up and take the empty seat beside him. "What have you done?"

"You should have stayed in bed." Ann says and then laughs behind us, but it is a short one, full of tension. I look at Mobley with the look I slap on when I am going to do something un-kosher like spill my vitabrew in his lap.

Mobley tries to not notice. Maybe he doesn't because he's driving, as in looking at the vector numbers shift a couple thousandths of a degree per minute. I can't even tell we're moving by looking at the stars. Still, he says, "We have seventeen minutes. The bullet's tracking perfectly. It's already plotted our rate of change and as it closes, anything we do gets easier to correct for."

I ask, “What are you doing about it?”

Ann says, “Save it for your refrigerator magnets, Joe.”

I say back, “You’re not doing a thing? What kind of engineers are you people?” I turn to the women. Jane walks in just in time to hear me say, “You’re all just sitting here waiting to die!” OK, so I yell it a little.

Katrina offers, “You’re an engineer too, Joe.”

Ann tells me to do something sexual with myself.

Jane just stands there and looks at me with a baby in her eyes.

“Get into the suits,” I command. “We’ll decompress everything but the vegetable farm.”

There was a pause, after which Katrina says, “That’s a good idea, Joe. Sudden decompression is more likely to kill us than the bullet is.”

I say, “Of course it’s a good idea; what do I look like?” But, they’re already in the suit lockers, stepping into the boots.

Katrina silently mouths, “An engineer.” Not finishing my sentence, but calling me a name instead.

I ignore her, credits for the way she’s sometimes nice to me. “What’s our angle?” I ask, while seating my helmet.

“The ship is tilted at thirty degrees to the course,” says Ann.

“The bullet steers to center mass,” I start to explain.

“If we’re angle on, it will bear on the near-most hull and not center on the power plant,” Mobley responds with an idea of his own. Over a score years I’ve been waiting for one, and he comes up with a whopper.

The temptation is to say something snotty, but instead I decide to really shock them by being polite and say, “Not bad for an old man.”

Mobley counters, “You know, Joe, just before we bite it, I just want to tell you you’re a real prick. I want you to know that from the bottom of my heart.” He looks at me, as usual, without emotion and without a smile. That’s classic Mobley. I appreciate the kind comment—seriously. I guess you have to know him to understand.

I say, “Everybody should go to a different bay. Ann should go feed the vegetables. Katrina can go to bed. Jane might want to fix us something in the kitchen for after the show. I’ll drive the bus.”

“NUH UH.” Mobley scoots up to his keyboard and looks at his pointy stars.

I shake my head, acquiescently. “Alright, I’ll go crawl in the closet.”

Everybody looks at each other. We’re family, but I doubt we’ll see one another again, as we start dispersing to different segments of our donut. It’s about one hundred and ten percent that at least one of us will die, which is about ten percent worse than the odds that all of us will follow. I look at Jane and Katrina a long time. I’ve hedged my bet for Jane; the kitchen is

pretty small. The women and I hug one another's insulation. We kiss our own faceplates. It isn't enough for me.

Katrina walks away first. Then Jane goes to make us something to eat for after we die. Her baggy thighs look real good walking through the hatch.

Up at the console, Mobley is watching his motionless stars. He's in a space suit now, of course. His feet aren't up on the console and the place is too tense for bagged coffee, but I back into the electronics bay, pondering how much everything seems exactly like yesterday in reverse.

The door shuts, and that's it.

I'm alone, sealed in a two meter by twenty meter room of green and yellow indicators. The narrowest link, this is a thin pipe intersecting the larger tubes of the circular ship. On the rubberinum floor sits Ann's laptop. For the first time in her life, I imagine, she has left it somewhere other than on her lap. It has to be true that she isn't taking it well.

Just like that experiment I'd read about where they'd left a monkey in a white room with a red dot painted on the wall, I have to play with something. Plugging the laptop into the electronics room jack, I pull up the command console's screen. There's Mobley's relentless vector numbers spinning in the top corner of the display.

I type: "COINCIDENCE TIME."

It responds: "00:05.016374984192, etcetera"

"Five minutes in engineerese," I mumble, loathing the overbearing accuracy. God forbid I should blink.

A mail menu pops up on the bottom of the screen.

Mobley is typing: "I GUESS IT WON'T BE LONG NOW, HUH?" He knows I am probing.

The baby makes me brazen. I type to the server: "COINCIDENCE LOCATION." This will take some time, I know. The computer will have to note which side of the ship currently faces the bullet, the ship's rotation rate, the bullet and ship's movement variables, and guess at things like sensor operation and accuracy. I wait. Five seconds pass between each breath. They are counted and subtracted from my life.

Mobley's next message reads: "YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW THAT. LET GOD DECIDE WHAT OR WHO IT HITS."

"COWARD," I write, just as the number appears: "127.843 DEGREES." Everything from zero to one-sixty is the main room where Mobley mans the controls.

"IT CAN'T HIT THE DECK," I write. "IT CAN'T HIT THE VEGETABLES EITHER," I was thinking with my fingers.

Mobley pecked his own thoughts: "IT CAN HIT THE DECK. THERE IS TOO MUCH OF OUR SURVIVAL PLUMBING IN THE CREW AREA,

AND THE ELECTRONICS BAY IS THE LAST PLACE WE WANT HIT; IT'S THE HEART OF THE SHIP. THAT LEAVES ME AND THE KITCHEN. THREE MINUTES."

He's mostly right, I think. The fuel cells are mainly imbedded in the spokes leading to the central power plant, but most of the oxygen uptake cells are surrounding Katrina and of course the farm isn't decompressed, so he's also right about him being a better target than her. Besides, what would we eat while we floated around dead and lost in space?

Oxygen can make us into a nova. On the other hand, the deck of the ship can't really be spared; Mobley is just being noble. We'll lose control of everything and we'll spin endlessly into space. Indispensable equipment lines every wall in the command section. I'm speed-thinking, what do I know that can change an impending hit at 127.843 degrees? Well, maybe something, but I need a few minutes to think it over.

There's nothing to do but wait. No reasoning can coax me into doing the logical and turn us so the bullet hits me first, saving me the bother of a lingering death. Mobley is right. I am a prick, but I am only a six inch prick. I have to be a whole foot worth and a big pair of balls to do something as selfish as waste myself easy. That is, again, if I can.

I look at the laptop for half a minute. Its screen saver blanks out the text window, leaving an empty screen. All I see is a black, shiny surface. Green and orange indicator LEDs reflect off of it.

I can turn the ventilator system off, I reason with as much humor as I can muster under the gun, and forgetting that at full ship decompression it's already off.

Tapping on the screen, I type: "HELP: T-BIN 1524."

The central computer returns: "CCW ROTATION VENT THREE: BENCHMARK AVERAGES: 5 SEC: 3.6 DEGREES 30 SEC: 46.9 DEGREES 120 SEC: 648 DEGREES 219 SEC: CRITICAL SPIN (18G)." Sixty pages of useless text follows.

I type: "MOBLEY, ENGAGE ONE CCW ROTATION VENT THREE AT 30 SECONDS BEFORE IMPACT."

"THAT'S STUPID, JOE!" types Mobley.

My fingers zip over the keyboard: "I'M NOT ASKING YOU, MOBLEY. I'M TELLING YOU TO DO IT. IT'S THE ONLY WAY OUT. JUST DO IT!" The time until impact is still counting on my monitor. It double zeros the minute marker and begins counting the last sixty seconds like it's racing something invisible. At this speed it is.

He pecks like a bandit: "I'M IN COMMAND OF THIS SHIP. A LONG TIME AGO I PUT ANN SECOND, KATRINA THIRD, JANE FOURTH, AND YOU DEAD LAST. WHAT DOES THAT TELL YOU BUDDY?"

YOU NEVER HAD WHAT IT TOOK TO BE AN ENGINEER!”

“Son of a bitch!” I shout, even as he types. He’s finally confessed what I’ve been saying all along, even when it doesn’t mean a damned thing anymore.

“The card!” I yell with equal intensity, the instant I have the idea. I yank card 1524. The output chips are always in the same place. Snapping the laptop connector out of the wall, I use the connector’s edge to push the card’s AUX control output pin against the card’s frame, grounding the connection, reversing its logic. Pushing it back in, I smack and hold the reset button on the backup card on the opposite wall. In reset, the backup can’t sense and take over the fault for a good half minute. A hiss shakes the ship’s hull. We start spinning faster. Neither card is taking over.

By the time I reinsert the laptop jack, Mobley is typing sexual remarks concerning my ancestry. The time is down to fifteen measly seconds.

We start to get heavy as the helm loses control and the donut picks up spin.

With one finger, I type: “I LOVE YOU JANE.” My hand gets so heavy that after the last E it’s an effort to pick my finger up before it scrawls E a hundred times. The laptop counter says one. The last thing is to let all that extra gravity help me pull 1524 back out before it crushes us.

I’m on my back.

Everything goes black except for two pricks of stellar light filtering in from two neat holes, one coming from a card near the ceiling, the other thirty degrees down the opposite wall

The holes have been soundlessly poked, and they appear so fast it’s like a magic act created them. I wait for something else, but nothing happens, except a backup brings back the electronics bay lights and 1524’s backup lightens the spin. The laptop reboots in time to display Mobley’s quick: “AND I HOPE YOU’RE DEAD, YOU STUPID SON OF A BITCH!”

I answer: “THE CARDS ARE ONE-TO-ONE FROM WALL-TO-WALL, MOBLEY. GETTING HIT AT THIRTY DEGREES WON’T TAKE OUT A BACKUP AND A MAIN ON THE SAME CIRCUIT. WHEN YOU CAN’T AVOID A PROJECTILE, THE SECRET IS IN THE ART OF KNOWING WHAT IT CAN HIT. GOOD THING I’M NOT AN ENGINEER. I KNOW HOW YOU GUYS ARE SO PROTECTIVE OF YOUR CIRCUIT CARDS.”

He types back, “YOU’RE STILL A JERK,” but he does it like the bullet is, a little slower.

I like that. Everything is as it should be. We’re family again, a growing one, and I’ve even gotten someone to admit that I’m not a damned engineer. In my mind I go so far as to picture Mobley shuffling along in the next

room, scrounging around for the repair kits...smiling or something.

