

# OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #19

L. Clarke 2007

Poetry by G.O. Clark

Stories by Brian Trent  
Walter Giersbach  
William Todd Rose

A Few Words With Tad Williams and Deborah Beale



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July

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# Cover Art: *Heart* by Liz Clarke

Liz Clarke lives in Cape Town, South Africa. Her fantasy and science fiction illustrations have been published by magazines such as *Postscript*, *Strange Horizons*, *Heliotrope*, *Spacesuits and Sixguns*, Orson Scott Card's *Intergalactic Medicine Show* and Jim Baen's *Universe*. She has also contributed art to several role-playing games. You can see more of her work at [www.lizclarke.co.za](http://www.lizclarke.co.za).

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# Editor's Letter

I have always enjoyed sitting down with intelligent, interesting people and having a good conversation with them. Some of my best conversations have been with world travelers, people who have gone out and seen the world. These people always have interesting stories to tell of their adventures, of seeing grand sights, of the strange nuances and cultural differences they saw and experienced during their trips. I enjoy these conversations because in a way I am traveling with them. I get to see things and hear things I wouldn't ordinarily.

Other interesting people I have been able to sit down with have done no traveling whatsoever. However, they seem to have squeezed life of more truth and flavor than anyone else. You know the kind of people I am talking about. They are often older, and more stately and take their time when answering. They are very content to listen and then seem to offer pounds of wisdom in a single sentence. These are the kind of people you go to when you have a tough problem and need help. I feel blessed just to be able to sit down to dinner with them or sit in their living room and try to soak in their wisdom.

Over the years I have also had the pleasure of interviewing some of my favorite authors, talented people who see this world or other worlds and are able to bring them to life through words. These authors are able to understand human nature and capture some of its intricacies in a cast of characters. Their books have always been special by allowing me to experience parts of the world and side to human nature that I can't personally.

I have always found intelligent, interesting people more than willing to share their time when I want to ask questions. That is a beautiful thing. These kind of people could refuse. After all they went through the hardship and pain and effort to become wise. But perhaps part of being wise is wanting to share that wisdom. When I approached Tad Williams and his wife, Deborah Beale, I found them just as willing and able. And, not surprisingly, not a single one of the interviews I have done over the years has been dull. There is no exception.

I hope you enjoy the interview, their recent book, [The Dragons of Ordinary Farm](#), and our latest issue.

-SC

# The Theseus Woman

## by Brian Trent

*Brian Trent is a novelist, screenwriter, and poet working in multiple genres. His work has appeared in Strange Horizons, The Humanist, Clarkesworld, The Boston Literary Magazine, The Eclectic Muse, and a hundred other publications. He was last year's Honorable Mention winner in the Writer's of the Future contest and a panelist at Yale University for their "Literary Visions" seminar about the future. He is also the author of the novel Never Grow Old, a retelling of Gilgamesh. Can a human be rebuilt? Find out in this story.*

Steve had logged over two hundred hours at Studio Nanonix trying to resurrect his dead wife, and even the staff were starting to worry. "She never got saved, man," the Nordic muscle-bound manager said. "It's not that we don't appreciate your business. It's just, you know...you can't reconstruct someone without a full capture!"

Steve turned his gaunt, haunted face toward him, and his voice seemed to come across a hundred leagues of wasteland and winter cliffs. "Are you telling me to stop?"

The manager felt his resolve wither. There was no pleading with this wraith-like creature who had invaded his shop, despite the complaints of other customers. The regular clientele of designers, thinksplash artists, and professional bards didn't like Steve Steinbeck. What started as fascination with the man's ceaseless industry was now horror at this testament to obsession. Every so often an unwary new customer would approach Steve, drawn by his machine-like proficiency at the workbench, and ask what he was working on. New game? New sensoramic? Hey you know, people were making a fortune on those things? Can I see?

Then Steve would give them his specter-from-the-grave look, and explain what he was involved in.

"My wife died two years ago. I need to bring her back."

Invariably, the customer would shrink away from him, barely an offer of consolation in the retreat. It was like something had crawled over their own graves; the fleeting glimpse into a Frankensteinian soul was enough to unsettle the most steely nerves.

Steve Steinbeck was becoming an urban legend.

And like legends, stories were circulating about him. People said he

whispered strange, alien phrases to himself while he worked, that he never slept or ate, that it was he who was dead, possessed by zombie-like mindlessness to resurrect his true love.

The Nordic manager shuddered as he considered these things. The evening was already late, and steady snow was dressing the city outside in layers of icy shellac. In the corner of the shop, Steve was hunched over the workbench, three computer monitors surrounding him in a mockery of embrace, the tentacles of the capture-jack snapped across one eye, one ear, and his mouth.

“The snow’s coming down hard, man,” the manager called to him. The rest of the studio was deserted. “I’m closing up in twenty minutes, okay?”

Steve glanced up with one uncovered eye. He snapped the jack away from his grinning, bluish lips.

“The Theseus ship,” he said, and then laughed uncontrollably.

\* \* \*

His dead wife laughed at his expression. Holding the ends of her dress up so the seawater wouldn’t dampen them, she twirled once around.

“Are you so afraid of the sea that you won’t save me if I drown?” she taunted, her teeth a flash of white. Her pretty eyes wrinkled.

Steve watched her closely through the eye-jack. The problem wasn’t the way his dead wife looked—she looked fine. He had poured photos and notes and sixteen precious videos into the sim-feed, fueling the pattern-matching extrapolative beast and counting on a little magic. His fingers were pink hummingbirds over the two keyboards, one white and one black. The white keyboard was all letters and numbers. The black one was like a sheet of polished glass, and he would wave his hand over it and control the features of the sensoramic.

Rebecca’s soft, childlike voice had been lifted wholesale from digital vaults. Her movements were spot-on. She smiled a little too aggressively now, though Steve wasn’t going for total perfection here. Before she killed herself, the real Rebecca had owned two kinds of smiles. One was a mousy, embarrassed, fragile expression...the hallmark of a lifetime of abuse. The other—cheek-splitting and eye-wrinkling—was the rare treasure he saw all-too-often. Eighteen months of marriage, and he had made it his daily goal to conjure that smile. He brought her flowers and candies, took her to dinners, showered her with warmth. When he earned the smile, he felt vindicated. When it failed to come, he grew bitter.

All she had to do was smile! How much was it to ask? Emotionally

wounded, the pin-cushion for her controlling drug-using brother who in a drunken fit once drowned her favorite dog Echo in their pond, she had been destined for loneliness until she met Steve. They had been coworkers in the same office, her on the lower level, he on the upper. Steve liked pretty women, and Becky was a dainty freckled creature of demure beauty. She rarely made eye-contact, but when she did...oh!

He needed to possess her. Like a battlefield tactician he set about wooing her. When he learned of the monstrous situation at home, he moved her out of the brother's house. He was her Galahad, she the princess from the tower.

Her smile was his Grail. One simple movement of lips, one blush of color to pale cheeks. Steve could spot a fake. He didn't like it when she didn't smile, but it was worse when she tried to please him with a forgery.

*Why aren't you happy with me?* he snapped. *Without me you'd be nothing! You spend more time picking seashells than with your husband! Want me to call your brother up? Want me to return you to him? Most things have a return policy if they arrive broken!*

Steve was aware of his own cruelty, and had used it proudly in his schoolboy years. There was something satisfying in getting under a person's skin. People were like video games; certain buttons and algorithmic patterns would result in a set number of predictable outcomes.

In front of him, Becky's digital ghost gave a light run over the digital beach, seeming to delight in the explosion of ocean surf around her.

"Why did you kill yourself?" he cried.

She looked away from the tumultuous waves. The Lighthouse Point program was the closest he could find to their actual home on Block Island. "What do you mean, my love?"

His voice shook. "You stupid, stupid creature! I saved you from your brother! He had you whipped like a goddam dog!"

"I know you saved me," Becky said, eyes downcast. The words sounded good, lifted from his own script. "I thank you for that, Stevie."

*Ah! Very good!*

"Really?" he said carefully, not wanting to prod the sprite too harshly at this difficult stage. "You appreciate all that I did for you?"

She nodded. Breakers exploded behind her, milky foam and tumbling seaweed swallowing the sand.

"Even if I lose my temper sometimes, you still love me?"

Another nod.

"Would you ever kill yourself?"

She gave an astonished start. "Never!" The biggest breaker rose behind



her like a dark pyramid, glassy and terrible, and then collapsed in on itself with a melody of velvet thunder. The sound was very loud, and the Becky sprite did what its default programming told it to: Look in the direction of loud noises. It was proof, yet again, that this was all a constructed fantasy. The *real* Becky would know better than to turn away from him when he was talking.

“Becky!” He clapped his hands. “*Look* at me!”

Her head swiveled back. The next wave was louder than the first, and again elicited that cold robotic glance.

“I said *look* at me! Staring at the sea isn’t going to bring Echo back, is it?”

There! Becky’s face flashed with anguish, color splashed on her pale cheeks. Steve knew it was all pixels and pre-rendered responses, but it imitated life uncannily well. This wasn’t merely an animated photo anymore; for that instant, Becky lived again. He had seen that hurt look from her so many times.

Steve licked his lips. “Is that what did it? Two years of music, trips, presents...all forsaken because of my temper? You belong to me, don’t you? You want to make me happy, right? How did killing yourself make me happy?”

“No. It’s not...you did...what to say...”

Come on! He could nearly see behind the render, lines of invisible code struggling to adapt the shards of her soul from the extrapolative to this moment of rebirth. Her eyes moved like an REM sleeper. The color on her face burned, she scowled, the flash of teeth again in a curiously feral way...

Rough hands were on him, suddenly. Steve felt himself yanked out of the sensoramic.

The two policemen were huge men, one white and one black. “Come on, kid. You need a rest now, you really do.”

“Let me save it!” he screamed wildly. “Let me save it! I made progress today!”

His eyes found the manager while the cops dragged him away. “Please save it for me! Please! I won’t cause you any trouble! Just save it!”

He thought he saw the manager nod.

He hoped.

\* \* \*

“Why do you like Greek mythology so much?” he barked, about a week before Becky’s suicide.

Becky blinked in surprise at him, instinctively tucking her arms into a

defensive posture. They were on the porch of their home, overlooking the modest garden with a nice view of the beach and oak tree. Steve had bought it because Becky liked the porch. It was a great investment, since she was always there when not roaming the beach. Her tiny butt was nestled into the swinging bench, a naval orange in one hand and a book on Greek myth in the other. The swinging bench was where she liked to read, do needlework (of butterflies, always butterflies) or gaze out at the sea. It was the only place where she seemed truly happy, rocking back and forth like a willow in the breeze.

“The stories are so much fun,” she explained in her little girl voice. Becky was twenty-six, physically, yet she still sounded like she was a timid thirteen.

Steve snatched the book from her. His eyes swept over a few paragraphs, not really reading it, just selectively nabbing a few phrases that he could weave into an insult. “Who gives a shit about the...ship of Theseus?”

She smiled. “Who gives a *ship* about Theseus?”

He cracked a grin. “Yeah.” He liked when she smiled for him.

“When Theseus came back from Crete, he had his ship propped up on a platform in memorandum. Later generations of Greeks carefully maintained it. But the ship was made of wood, and wood rots, so whenever an oar would fall off they would make a new one. The planks would go, and their carpenters would fill in the hole with replacements. They did this for centuries.”

This was one of the longest speeches he had ever heard from her. “So?”

She looked at him in surprise. “So was it the ship of Theseus anymore?”

\* \* \*

The police let him go after one night in jail, without ever charging him with anything. “Get some rest,” the white, mustachioed officer advised. “And next time the manager says it’s time to leave, do so. He’s not pressing charges. Lucky for you he’s a nice guy.”

Steve gathered his personal items and went straight back to Studio Nanonix, so energized by his revelation yesterday that he forgot his morning coffee.

“I saved it for you,” the manager said in an apologetic tone. “Look, I’m sorry for—”

“That’s fine, thanks.” Steve rushed to his corner of the shop, collecting the stares and whispers of other customers, and booted up his program.

Becky never saved herself. It was an expensive process to stand in that polished steel chamber while white light crawled in your head, capturing the position of every neural synapse and dendrite. Whenever Steve offered to pay for it, she declined, saying the whole thing scared her. “It’s like having your soul caught.”

But she was wrong. The mind was nothing more or less than software running on the brain’s substrate. A DC was a snapshot and shield against mortality. Once he even dragged her to a save center, but she wouldn’t sign the agreement form, and the ensuing argument in the waiting room caused the police to get called. So pliable she was, and yet at times her resolve was like the roots of the oak tree in their yard.

Without a save, her death had been ultimate. All Steve could do was supply the capture-drive with images, recordings, even entries from her diary, in the desperate effort at reconstituting her. Like that damn Greek ship.

Steve eagerly beckoned the manager over. The man arrived, looking nervous.

“Yes?”

Steve smiled. “You’re right, you know. She was never saved, so all I’m accomplishing is making a superficial phantom.”

The manager’s blue eyes moistened. “Look, man. I’m glad you finally see—”

“That’s why,” Steve interrupted, “I need to do a download of *my own memories of her*. You need to graft a touch of my thoughts into the mix.” His eyes hardened when he saw the manager’s expression. “I know it takes a splicer. You’ve got my card on file, so go order one. Now.”

“Sir—”

“I’m so close. It’s almost over, can you appreciate that?”

“But if you do that you—”

“Please!” Steve roared.

The splicer had to be ordered from Akihabara, and it took three weeks to arrive. When it did, Steve worked for two more weeks before calling the manager over one final time.

“Dude?”

Steve hugged him fiercely. “It’s time to print.”

\* \* \*

A double mortgage paid for the printout. He went to pick it up himself at the Boston production center of AztecSky, sat nervously in a salmon-colored waiting room while the monitor flashed a sleek CGI documentary

on how bodies were grown from genetic sampling (in Becky's case, the hair from an old brush) and then flash-imprinted with the DC.

When the lab doors swung open, two technicians stood flanking a woman. They had gotten her hairstyle wrong, but otherwise it was Rebecca Stratman.

"Becky?" he asked, rising slowly from the chair.

She looked a little bewildered. "Sweetums? Where are we? Why do you look...um...so messy!?"

He did look messy. Steve had barely thought of all the weight he'd lost, or the wild hair, the dark sunken eyes, scraggly beard, until the morning of the pickup. His bathroom mirror had revealed a skeletal revenant like a Mexican *calaca* doll. So Becky was right. It wasn't an insult — Becky didn't know how to be critical or insulting. Steve had the monopoly on that.

Seeing her alive again, though, made his body shake like a fragile tree in the wind. He hobbled to her, wrapping his arms around her new warmth with helpless tears.

"Sweetums?" she whispered. "What happened to us?"

The lie he spun her, about a car accident and coma, during the return drive to Rhode Island impressed even him.

\* \* \*

Steve had flowers waiting at the house in a floral supernova of red roses, yellow daffodils, bluebells, and purple tulips. He made her favorite dinner of rosemary chicken, noodles, and tomato soup. She smiled in pleasant bewilderment at these attentions.

While rushing about like a wasp, he subtly interrogated her on what she remembered, liked, dreamed about, how they met, conversations had, books read. She replied obediently, clearly thinking he wanted to make sure her "coma" hadn't damaged her brain.

The printout was perfect. A Galatea spun into new flesh, to atone for the sin which had tormented his every waking moment.

"The chicken is overcooked," she said after two bites.

"It is?" he said, shaken from his thoughts. "I'm sorry Becky."

She stirred her soup. Steve found himself watching her every nuance, the way she stared absently at the bowl's contents, the red fluid swirling in eddies around her revolving spoon.

"Are you?" she asked.

"I'm sorry for everything."

She pouted. "You always called me stupid."

His heart stopped in his chest. Yes, he had always called her stupid. She was clearly smart, but was capable of absorbing infinite amounts of abuse. She never drew a line in the sand. He could push and push, almost with morbid curiosity, and never meet resistance. Some people would be moved to kindness by such a frail thing...but Steve had a lifetime of preying on other people's weaknesses.

"I'll never call you stupid again," he said, kneeling beside her chair. "You don't understand how hard it's been. I've been so lonely here without you. It's been killing me! Now that I have you back, I'll never...I promise." Hot tears sprang from his eyes, and he clung to her fiercely, shaking all over.

Becky wiped away his tears with her fingers, staring with bright, cruel eyes. "People who cry are weak, aren't they Steve? The weak deserve to be preyed on by the strong, because this world only respects strength. If an animal is weaker than another, it deserves to die. If the weak can't stay afloat, then they should drown."

Steve shuddered violently. "I did say that." In those exact words.

She flashed a smile that was all teeth. "You belong to me, don't you? You want to make me happy, right? But sometimes your words hurt me so much, I wanted to walk out in the ocean and never come back."

"No!" He threw his arms around her wildly again. "No, my love! If you ever did that, I'd lose my mind!"

"Would you come after me?"

Steve looked into her eyes. "What?"

"If I was ever washed out to sea, would you fight the currents and waves to get me back? Would you be strong enough to do that, Steven? I want to be with a man who would fight Poseidon himself, who would fling himself into hell, to rescue me."

"I would!"

Becky's grin faded, but her eyes maintained their uncharacteristic cruelty and sadism. He remembered where he had seen that look before. For so much of his life, it had been what greeted him whenever he gazed in a mirror.

"I love you Becky," he said miserably, the weight of sudden fear too much for him to deal with. He couldn't stop shivering.

"I love you, too." She sipped the soup, and made a face. "Not nearly enough salt, darling. You'll do better next time, won't you?"

# Things That Irritate Count Dracula

by G.O. Clark

*G.O. Clark is the author of seven poetry collections, including 25 Cent Rocket Ship To the Stars, Mortician's Tea and Strange Vegetables. His writing has appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, Talebones, Space & Time, Strange Horizons, Hollywood Spec, and Star Trek: The Poems, among others.*

## Things That Irritate Count Dracula

Victims who wear turtleneck sweaters.  
Any song lyrics including the word sun.  
Wooden picket fences with pointy slats.  
Spaghetti sauce with too much garlic.  
The tidal restrictions of ferryboat rides.  
Recurring nightmares about holy bread.  
Recurring nightmares about holy water.  
Paparazzi-like manners of his acolytes.  
Periodontists reminding him to floss.  
Always having to wait for an invitation.

# Who Dares Call It Murder?

by Walter Giersbach

*After three decades of corporate communications, Walter Giersbach has found a home in short fiction. He has been published in Southern Fried Weirdness, Written Word, Bewildering Stories, Mystery Authors, Mouth Full of Bullets and Big Pulp, among others. He has also had two volumes of short stories, Cruising the Green of Second Avenue, published by Wild Child Publishing. In this story, it's murder with several twists.*

**D**amn you, Danaë, you were the colossus of my life, the thing that gave meaning to the daily chores of getting up and lying down. Each morning you greeted me with a smile, your soft kiss at night guaranteed blissful renewal. And now I've laid you down to rest.

“Your wife is dead, Yoshio,” the police inspector insists. “The ambulance took her away to the morgue. We know you killed her. We have your pistol.”

Of course he did—the Beretta .25 caliber the police took from my hand. There was no point in discussing this. He'd know the truth soon enough. All I could remember was how sweetly time had rolled by since Danaë came into my life, accelerating my pulse as we gamed the tables in Macau and Monaco and skimmed the clouds from continent to continent. It was my joy to hang diamonds and emeralds from her throat and cover her white shoulders in silk. That was the least I could do in compensation for her creating the Fibonacci logarithms that built our financial empire. She was brilliant. No way could I alone have come up with the schemes that sent dollars, euros and yen flying into our accounts.

Why she had to double cross me I'll never know. Setsuo Kawabata said there was an outside possibility that love would fail or be denied, but I didn't believe him. Danaë, you knew there was no capriciousness where my love for you was concerned.

No matter. The scientist Kawabata is no longer alive, so I can't question him on this point.

Odd how I remember our bathing nude on the beaches of St. Martin, when Schiller laughed and pointed. “Bildschirmbräune,” he said. “Screen suntan,” referring to the hours you spent on computers, because your unblemished skin remained pale while I—more advanced—colored like a potted lobster. But, he wasn't laughing at you. I was the cuckold. He took you

in my own bed, as easily as he siphoned my account.

“We have very precise laws in St. Martin concerning murder,” the police inspector says. “There will be a trial, the prosecutor will line up the evidence like sausages on a plate, you will be convicted, then you will hang. Now, do you wish to explain a motive? Perhaps some mitigating circumstance causing you to kill such a beautiful young woman?”

I sighed. Interrogation is so tedious. Schiller’s body will never be found, unless a shark coughs up a piece of bone or gold ring. Kawabata hanged himself like a proper Japanese, atoning for his monumental hubris. And Danaë’s death will never come to trial.

But the inspector is relentless. “You are a crook of the highest financial order. We all know that, but I am only interested in murder—not your pyramid schemes and money laundering and currency violations.”

“Alright, I will give you a morsel of information. It won’t satisfy the appetite of a mouse, but it will be enough for you to leave me in peace.”

The smug bastard said, “Alors, my crumb, if you please.”

I smiled—sincerely, I hoped. “My wife colluded with my enemies. That cost her her life. I shot her with the Beretta.”

He returned the smile. “Now we have it. That’s all I wished to know—to hear it with my own ears.” He got up to leave the cell.

“Do you want to know the key that will unlock all mysteries concerning me, my business, my entourage of bankers and lawyers, my Gulfstream at the airport—and why you will release me shortly?”

He paused in mid-step. I had his attention.

“I loved Danaë more than a cowboy loves his horse, more than a teenager his motorcycle....”

“Comparing her to a horse!” he said haughtily. “You disparage the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, dead or alive.”

“Much more than the finest horse. Danaë was an android, created by Setsuo Kawabata, the artificial intelligence expert in Osaka.”

His eyebrows rose in circumflex accents.

“The 21st century offers exciting times,” I responded. “Revolutionary advances in software, processing speeds, nano technology. In Japan, there’s Sony’s robotic dog, Aibo, and Honda’s stair-climbing android. Carnegie Mellon University invented Grace, who registered herself for an academic conference. Flexible polymers are indistinguishable from skin. Most important, AI makes feedback loops possible so love can be reciprocated. I loved Danaë and she loved me.”

“Your robot prostitute? You obscene Shylock!” he hissed.

“Then to paraphrase Shakespeare, ‘Hath not an android hands, organs,



dimensions, senses, affections, passions, hurt with the same weapons as a human? If you prick them, do they not bleed? If you tickle them, do they not laugh? If you shoot them, do they not die?’ But where’s the law against destroying a machine?”

The Inspector would not sleep well tonight. He would sleep even less well if he knew that I was Kawabata’s masterpiece. Danaë was his first iteration, I his second. Humans would probably call our love incest, but there’s no comparable feeling among androids.

# A Few Words With Tad Williams and Deborah Beale

*Tad Williams is the author of over ten books, including the immensely successful Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn series, the Otherland series, and the Shadowmarch series. He recently joined with his wife, Deborah Beale to write a new book, The Dragons of Ordinary Farm. They were kind enough to sit down and answer a few of my questions.*

*Your most recent book, The Dragons of Ordinary Farm, has just come out. Can you tell us a bit about what this book is about?*

Deborah: It's about a couple of kids struck by lightning.

Tad: It's about a pair of children discovering that the place they've been sent for summer vacation (their great-uncle's farm) is not ordinary at all, but the coolest, scariest, craziest place on earth.

*The Dragons of Ordinary Farm appeals to a very broad audience, the young in years, but also to the young in heart and imagination that still hold mythical creatures in awe. Was this fascination and awe a central focus when you set out creating this book?*

Tad: We are writing about the stuff that we're interested in, so the idea excites us and we try to pass that along to the reader.

Deborah: You just sit down every day and think about the story and how it's growing and what excites you, and then you try and put that on the page.

*How long do you plan on this series being or is it a stand alone venture?*

Tad: Well, our cool German publishers, Klett Cotta, asked for five books. So that's what it is.

*What was it like collaborating with your wife on this book?*

[Deborah's laughing wickedly over her keyboard.]

Tad: It was funny. We're learning something new every day and when

there's a conflict to be resolved, it's even more important to resolve it well because not only a book, but also our family is involved. But we've always worked well together.

Deborah: We're in the groove, baby!

Tad: And we've always had fun. And I'm glad we've done it.

*How did you go about writing this book in tandem? Did you write a chapter and Deborah wrote a chapter or did you sit down together and hash out the sentences or an entirely different method altogether?*

Tad: We swap off drafts. Deborah writes first, I write second, then we bounce it around between us.

*Now Deborah was also your UK publisher, before she was your wife. Did you know right away that she was something special or did it take years of working together for it to develop?*

[Deborah smiling]

Tad: Once we had more than an hour in each other's company, it quickly became apparent.

*Is it difficult having another publisher/writer in the house? Do you use her as a proofreader or sounding board, or is it hands off until the finished product comes out?*

Tad to Deborah: I've definitely always used you as a reader and valued that. I don't ask for help solving plot problems but I never have. I largely don't have the need.

Deborah: I don't tend to work on Tad's books as such, I just want to enjoy them, ha. But it's more about what goes down cerebrally between us. Ideas of all kinds, and plotting our lives together in the world. And when I spin off from writing to my other work, it's all about the business, like, me marketing "The Dragons of Ordinary Farm" in the US. I have mixed feelings about the experience.

*Shadowplay just came out in soft cover at the beginning of April. Do you get*

*as much of a thrill seeing one of your books come out in soft cover as you do seeing it in hardcover the first time?*

Tad: Those things are always nice, but what's thrilling is when people express things about my books that are feelings that I had about favorite writers of mine, and that's such a major reason for why I became a writer, how I felt about books that I loved, so when it comes back to me, that's a wonderful feeling. I feel like I have contributed to my craft.

*What can we expect in the next installment in the Shadowmarch series and when can we expect it?*

Tad: The last book will be a fairly satisfying final volume where mysteries are revealed and the plots take several unexpected twists until, with a great deal of excitement, everything comes together.

Deborah: He's finishing it right now. Final books in epic fantasies—sometimes they take their own sweet time in arriving.

*Is it difficult writing two different books at the same time?*

Tad: I've done it before, it's only a question of having a little buffer time—you have to force yourself to go from thinking about the one to thinking about the other—back and forth.

*Over the course of your writing career you have written several different kinds of books and series, from epic fantasy with the Memory, Sorrow & Thorn series, science fiction with the Otherland Series, pure fantasy in The War of Flowers and back to epic fantasy with Shadowmarch. Where do all these ideas come from?*

Tad: Always a hard question to answer because I've always had story ideas swinging around in my head like monkeys in a cage.

Deborah: The truth is that the ability to create is an evolutionary process. You do it and do it and do it and as you go along you can do more and more. It's like new neural networks growing in the head—exactly like that for me, I could feel it happening at one point.

*One of my favorite books from a writer's standpoint, is The War of Flowers.*

*The names in it are brilliant and add so much life to the characters. Did it take you a long time to come up with the names or are names pretty easy for you?*

Tad: Names are important to me and they are usually the sort of things that will derail me slightly while I'm working, and I'll often just asterisk them and come back to them because I'd rather have the right name for a character. When the names come, they often have significance for me, sometimes they're little jokes or little hints about what the characters' role in the story line is. I just play with ideas for names as they come along.

*Can you tell us a little bit about your writing process?*

Tad: I spend a lot of time thinking before I sit down—and I'm very big on getting it right in the first draft—so for me maybe more than most writers, the first draft is like fighting a campaign where I don't want to go backward if I can help it, and I'd rather just move ahead slowly on all fronts

*With some writers, the room seems to matter. With some it has to be a quiet room with good ambience every time. With other writers, they can write on the can, on an airplane in coach, or at a baseball game. Are you particular when it comes to writing location?*

Tad: Not really. I need relative quiet and access to some kind of research, books or internet, preferably both.

*What is your favorite snack food/drink during your writing time, or are you completely focused on your writing?*

Tad: Pickles and olives, yeah.

*What are you reading now?*

Tad: A book about the genetic history of Europe—a lot of stuff about the Ottoman Turks—Girls Like Us by Sheila Weller.

Deborah: We just live in a house where ideas are preeminent. It's just books and art everywhere. Tad watches TV late at night too, when he's decompressing his brain.

*Currently, is writing your sole focus, or do you have other pans in the fire?*

Tad: The game's coming and we're excited about that—the Otherland MMORPG, and the game launches in 2011, we think.

Deborah: That's been huge fun. There's some really Big Ideas at work.

Tad: I'm thinking about my next set of books too. At the moment we call the series “My So-Called Afterlife.” They're fantasy thriller novels about an angelic small-timer stranded on earth and caught up in the war between heaven and hell.

Deborah: And they're normal thriller-length. Like, satisfying good read, not skimpy but not epic.

*Can you tell us one dream, outside of the realm of writing, that you have yet to accomplish?*

Tad: Haven't had my first hit record... yet.

*Tad and Deborah, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to answer a few of our questions. We wish you the best with your work, especially this new promising series, and on perhaps getting that first hit record.*

# Day of The Sentient

by William Todd Rose

*William Todd Rose is a speculative fiction author living in Parkersburg, West Virginia. His work has appeared in Macabre Cadaver Magazine and the upcoming anthologies of the Living Dead Press. He is currently working on his first novel. In this story, an ailing robot laments its decline.*

RM429's sensors were failing. Which, put in human terms, meant he was dying. When he had first rolled off the assembly line, his chrome body had gleamed like the halo of some post-information age angel. But now his exterior was tarnished and dull. Dark stains had begun to appear around the bases of his rivets and scratches marked his metallic skin at jagged angles. When he was new, he'd had enough Biopti filament coiled within his system to encircle the globe several times; bursts of laser pulsed through the miles of filament at speeds that would have made the distances between galaxies no more than a mere jaunt. Timed with Peruvian precision, the torrents had served a dual purpose. As a storage medium, light offered a nearly infinite capacity for housing data; at the same time, it was also the vehicle for transporting the information from his sensors to his main processor and then back again. Which resulted in a seek time that was almost immeasurable.

Now, though, the Biopti had begun to kink and fray and the laser pulses had become erratic. Every day, it seemed to take a little longer for RM429 to process information. Every day, he detected irregularities in his optical ports: a bluish corona that encircled all but the darkest of objects, a bit of static that momentarily dissolved the world into individual pixels with no true form or substance. System scans advised that there were no auto-corrective subroutines that could be launched, no patches that could be applied to maximize functionality. His programming was still valid, albeit outdated. ..instead, the problem lay in years of neglect and the cruel march of time.

If he wanted, he knew that he would be able to calculate when his system would finally shut down by taking the current rate of entropy, factoring it with environmental variables, and then applying the result to a probability matrix of his own creation. But that exercise contained no logic, so he dedicated his processing power to more system scans instead.

In the middle of a neurofeedback routine, RM429 came to the realization that he was in a small room. On the far wall, a window overlooked a field that was dotted with shrubbery and park benches. Against the horizon

he could make out a dark smudge which suggested the skyline of some metropolis. However, he was not able to gather enough visual data to determine which one. He tried to compare the angle of the shadows that stretched out from the trees with an ephemeris to determine the time of day. With that information, he would be able to contrast the estimated local time with his onboard system timer to correctly identify which time zone he was in. From there, it would require only a simple bit of coding to narrow down the most likely city; but as he was accessing the proper tables, his program crashed (which was beginning to seem like the norm rather than an isolated anomaly) and he abandoned the project altogether.

The room itself was a stark contrast to his state of inner disrepair. The walls were white painted block with no signs of smudges or cracks. Along their bases were thin runners of rubber or plastic which gave way to a tile floor polished to the point that he could clearly make out his own reflection. His olfactory sensors detected trace amounts of cleaning fluid and what seemed to be the aroma of freshly peeled oranges. The latter, however, may have been a malfunction as there was nothing in the room which would have emitted such a scent.

“I do not know where I am located.”

Thanks to the speech modulator housed at the base of his neck, his voice sounded passably human. It was only the precise pronunciation of words and strict adherence to the rules of grammar which betrayed his synthetic nature. He had always suspected that this was deliberate, that programming him to emulate local dialects and speech patterns would have been too disconcerting to the human psyche.

“I do not recall coming to this place.”

Within the series of circuits that approximated a brain, RM429 launched an application that should have retrieved his last twenty-four hours worth of commands. Some hits were returned, such as going into hibernation mode to allow his power unit time to recharge, but there were also large gaps of time unaccounted for. Which should have come as no surprise as his defrag routine had been constantly erroring out for quite some time now. In all probability, the data had either been overwritten or corrupted with little to no chance of recovery.

In one corner of the room, he noticed a long, thin bed. On the wall beside it was a whiteboard covered with numbers, formulae, and sketched diagrams of servos. RM429 approached the board so that he could inspect the mathematics more closely. At one point, he would have traversed the short distance in a matter of seconds. But, just as his circuitry was failing, so were the more mechanical parts of his body. The lube surrounding his joints had



become gummy over the years with no one to regularly maintain him. As a result his movements had become stiff and, quite frankly, robotic.

He scanned the figures slowly enough for his processors to check and double check the validity of the math. Several of the equations were instantly recognizable to anyone with at least a passing interest in artificial intelligence. For example, the deceptively simple looking Poundstone Theorem had been laid out precisely, each digit appearing to have been placed with the same care a jeweler would take when placing a precious stone into its setting. The Stanley Principle, however, contained some slight errors. They were stupid little oversights which betrayed the human mind behind the writing; no machine worth its components would ever allow such glaring inconsistencies in logic. For no reason other than factual regularity, he quickly erased the faulty calculations and replaced them with the correct figures.

It occurred to him that when he was fresh and new, someone had put just as much care and attention to detail into his own programming. For at least half a year, RM429 had been the center of some faceless human's world: hours spent working out the equations, weeks programming the AI routines, seemingly endless days of debugging and tweaking. All of that work and for what? To eventually be left to rust and become obsolete? To run scans that may or may not detect serious glitches in operation...and even if they do, to know the futility of trying to repair a failing system with code alone?

The whole affair seemed highly illogical. While devoid of anything even slightly resembling emotion, RM429 was familiar with the concept of irony from a classical literature library one of his former masters had installed. And what could be more ironic than knowing which parts needed upgrading to sustain system stability but not being able to perform the necessary corrections?

For a fraction of a second, he considered driving his fist through the whiteboard and watching all of those beautiful numbers crack into meaningless fragments. There was absolutely no rationale behind the impulse, nothing that could be gained from such an act, and he could not understand where the suggested directive had originated. Had he obtained some sort of virus while attempting to download his most recent updates? Or was this simply another symptom of his impending demise? Perhaps a faulty logic motivator?

As he tried to trace the origin of the command, error messages appeared like fireworks blossoming in a summer sky: the path was not complete, the file referred to had been either renamed or removed, a serious system error had occurred...abort, delete, ignore? Each message generated two or three

more in response to his input and before long he detected the drain placed upon his processing efficiency by the queries. Having been brought no closer to an answer, he began to systematically cancel the inquiries.

Returning his attention once more to the whiteboard, he studied the sketches and diagrams of the hardware that made his kind more than just glorified desktop machines. He could find no fault in the way the ball joints were perfectly fitted into the sockets and the quick drawing of the muscular cabling was actually quite impressive. If ever there were a museum dedicated to technical illustrations and blueprints then this would surely be worthy of hanging upon its walls.

Beside the board was a small table on which a stack of periodicals precariously balanced. On the very top one, he could see a picture of a robot. Being a model that he was unfamiliar with, he was moving to investigate when he heard a muffled cough from behind him.

RM429 turned and contemplated two closed doors. One was directly in front of him and was made of stained wood; the other was to his left and was the same stark white as the walls of the room. This one did not appear to be as sturdy as the first and the probability that it led to a bathroom was quite high. He detected no life forms beyond that door but was picking up faint readings from beyond the first.

Still unsure of exactly what he was doing in this place, he decided it would be advisable to proceed with caution. Though his batteries no longer carried a full load, even after eight hours of recharging, there was still enough energy remaining to ready his defenses. Newer models lacked the ability to direct current into their two longest fingers, but he was a product of the Twelve Years War and a portion of his original function had been to protect his masters from civil unrest. After the Troubadour Worm corrupted optical recognition and threat detection routines, legislation had actually been passed that made the technology illegal. But, as to be expected, the recall was overlooked for him; like in all other areas of his existence, he had been abandoned and neglected. This time, however, it was proving to be to his advantage.

He worked his way over to the door and placed one hand on its surface. With the other he turned the silver handle with a slowness only a machine could muster. He opened it a fraction of an inch. Just enough so he could scan what lay beyond.

On the other side, he could see that the same polished floor continued on without any type of rugs or carpeting. The walls were exactly the same but seemed to have pictures or some sort of notices hung at random mathematical intervals. He could just glimpse the corner of a desk and the edge of a

whiteboard even larger than the one in his room.

As he watched, a woman in a white lab coat appeared from around the corner of the desk and began speaking to a man in a powder blue suit and red tie. The man had dark hair with tufts of gray beginning to appear around the temples. He nodded his head as the woman gestured to a clipboard she was holding.

RM429 shut the door with the same care with which he had opened it. There was only the slightest of clicks as the catch fell back into place. His peek into the hallway beyond the room had done nothing to clear up the mystery of how he had come to this place. He had hoped that he may have seen something that would register in his memory banks. Perhaps something as small as chip in the paint or a slight water stain on the ceiling. Once, when he had suffered from a similar memory gap, he had been able to reconstruct a chain of events from a single rose petal partially obscured by a notebook. But this time, nothing.

Instead, he considered the things he had seen in the corridor. The woman was obviously some sort of scientist. Given that criteria, the man in the suit would more than likely be some sort of administrator. He had been content to allow the woman to refer to the clipboard and accept whatever she was telling him, so he obviously lacked any sort of technical knowledge. He also had a certain quality about him that was standard in upper management: he had seemed as if her report had been an imposition on his time, as if the details were of no concern as long as things were proceeding according to the process improvement goals.

RM429 cross-referenced this information with the data he had garnered from the whiteboard. He took into account the technical journals piled onto the table beside the bed and then considered the state of disrepair he had been allowed to fall into as well as the immaculate state of the room and hallway. A quick intake sample informed him that dust levels were minimal. Lower, in fact, than one would normally find in a standard analysis; which would suggest that somewhere in the overhead duct work a scrubber was hard at work. He compared environmental readouts from the moment he had first become aware of being in the room to the present. The temperature was more or less constant with only slight fluctuations in the graph every now and then. Not too cool, not too warm: as there was no thermostat in the room, the climate was therefore being controlled from some central location.

As he processed and correlated all of this information, only one solution presented itself with an extremely high level of probability: he was in some sort of repair facility. Perhaps during the period where his memory was

blank his behavior had become so erratic that the seriousness of his bugs had finally been noted. Whatever the reason, it was all too clear now that the equations on the whiteboard were meant for him. Perhaps the faulty calculation had been factored incorrectly deliberately. If that portion of his basic algorithm had become corrupted, it would stand to reason that the problem would have to be isolated before a fix could be put into place.

If this were truly the case, then it was only a matter of days before he was restored to full operability. No longer did the threat of a gradual decline into the void of terminal shutdown loom over him. True, he would more than likely lose his defensive measures to be brought into full compliance with the law, but that seemed such a small price to pay.

As it had earlier, when he had been tempted to destroy the whiteboard, another irrational command attempted to execute. While running some sort of menial errand of which the exact details had already been purged, he witnessed a human coming down the steps of an apartment complex. The man was unusually animated, his head bobbing to and fro as he walked, his steps light and quick. Right before he stepped onto the sidewalk, he glanced back at the closed door and a smile creased lines into his cheeks and the corners of his eyes as he laughed. And then, without warning or the benefit of music, the man began to dance. His movements were exaggerated and sweeping and his technique, while good, demonstrated his lack of professional training. RM429 watched as the man disappeared around the corner with one final twirl. And now, for reasons he could not explain, he found himself wanting to emulate that man's behavior.

In fact, the priority on the subroutine was so high that RM429 could feel his muscular cabling beginning to tighten in anticipation of movement. He fired off a quick succession of override commands as he did not want to jeopardize his impending upgrades. True, if he were observed it might lead the technicians to believe that such an illogical function was evidence this his scheduled repairs needed to take immediate precedence; or it might be construed that the extent of his damage was so great that any attempt at restoration would be futile and a complete decommission and salvage be slotted.

As he was killing the intended processes, he heard the door opening behind him. His prime directive at one time would have been to turn and greet the person entering the room. He would have offered to be of service and suggested info-streams that most closely matched the personality type identified by body language. But he chose to override that edict as well. For the time being, it seemed far wiser to feign hibernation. He allowed his metal chin to drop against his chest and hunched slightly forward.

“Mr. Poundstone?”

It was a woman’s voice behind him, soft and gentle. Like a mother speaking to a young child.

There was a moment of silence, as if the woman were waiting for some sort of answer, and then she spoke again. This time her voice was a little louder, her tone more sharp.

“Stanley . . .”

Again the pause and then a deep sigh.

“Robot, turn around please.”

A direct order such as that could not be ignored. His head snapped to attention and with a sharp pivot he turned to face the visitors.

Before him, he saw the man in the blue suit whom he had glimpsed through the cracked door earlier. Now, however, the man was frowning and his brow was furrowed. The woman in the lab coat was at his side and glanced at the man out of the corner of her eye. Once more, she sighed as she slowly shook her head.

Beyond them, the door had opened into the room. On the outside of the door was a small plaque, the wood darker than that of the door, and in white, embossed letters he saw his name: RM. 429

The woman turned slightly to face the man and placed a hand on the crook of his arm. When she spoke again, the quiet tone had returned to her voice.

“He’s having a bad day. When you called, I’d really hoped it wouldn’t be the case. You just can’t predict these things. Maybe you can get through to him.”

The man cleared his throat and then shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it after a moment, and looked at the woman beside him.

“Go ahead . . . it’s okay.”

“Dad? It’s me. Brian. I...I’ve brought you some of those magazines you like.”

His hand held three or four antiquated periodicals in mint condition. Their paper covers were still glossy and RM429’s olfactory sensors detected a hint of fresh ink.

“I got *Scifi Monthly*, *Beyond Tomorrow*, and . . .”

The man’s voice cracked as his eyes began to glisten.

“Dad...it’s me..Brian...”

At that moment, there must have been a small leak of lubricating oil in one of RM429’s internal parts. Though his onboard diagnostics detected nothing, it was the only way he could explain the warm liquid which trick-

led from the corner of his eye and slid down his face.