

ESC!

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ESC! Magazine

For Aspiring Writers and Artists



Paul ©
Tucker



PRODUCED IN THE USA

Vex p.13
Dia De Los Muertos

The Wanderers
A New Trilogy Begins p.9

Meet
Miriam Lee p.20

New fiction & poetry by

Robert Potter, Guy Qualls, Farida Mihoub, Brendan Connell, Bob Potocki



Vol.6 No.2

Publisher

Michael R. Potter

SUBMISSIONS:

Writers: We are looking for all genres including; science fiction, mystery, suspense, horror, or general fiction. Stories should be limited to no more than 2500-3000 words. Longer work may be considered. Poetry is accepted. Submissions should be typewritten and double spaced.

Artists: Black and white line-art and illustrations are preferred. Please DO NOT send the originals! A high quality photocopy will suffice. Artwork should be limited to no more than 8½" X 11" in size. Cover illustrations can be 11" X 17" or 8½" X 11". Please reduce larger images with a copier to the correct size. Comic strips and comical illustrations are welcome!

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 by Paul B. Tucker

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Milestones

an editorial by



Michael R. Potter
Publisher

This issue concludes the first decade of ESC! Magazine. I had little idea in 1992 what effect producing a small press magazine such as this would have on those whose work appeared within.

I did have hopes however.

ESC! Magazine was founded with one purpose in mind: Publish the works of those who have not yet been published. The thrill of finding an acceptance letter is a hard one to come by – sometimes folks never find it. The moment it first happens, however, can ignite the spark that soon turns a writing hopeful into a full-fledged published Author. I've seen it happen again and again and this issue profiles an author who had just such an experience. Too many rejections, on the other hand, have the potential to, instead, smother that spark leaving those of us who seek out new and different writing forever deprived of getting to know that particular writer's work.

Knowing ESC! is for the aspiring writer makes deciding what should or should not appear in each issue is a tough call. As I explained last issue, I'm a very forgiving editor. I can forgive clumsy prose or exposition that needs a little work in order to expose a hopeful writer to a world they have not yet experienced, but, I expect to see growth from that writer if I am to continue to accept their stories in the future.

So where does a fledgling writer turn to experience that growth, to get the feedback needed to build themselves into a better writer? Certainly there are workshops and classes. Privately organized "reading parties" also spring to mind. Within two months I hope to have my own solution – an online "Writer's Workshop" where writers of all skill levels will be grouped together to provide feedback for one another's ideas. The workshop will resemble a typical online forum but there will be special "group forums" to which I will assign anyone who signs up and wants to participate. In order to keep the atmosphere friendly and more "one-to-one" I do not expect to make any one group more than 4 – 5 individuals. If this idea intrigues you and you would like to register or get more information before the debut, please send an e-mail to writersworkshop@escwebs.com then look for the Writer's Workshop to appear online sometime around November or December of 2002.

Another Milestone

A major milestone was reached on September 21st of this year. My brother, Rich, and his girlfriend of seven years, Cindy, were married. It was my honor to serve as his Best Man and I look forward to seeing him enjoy many, many wonderful years with his new bride. They make a beautiful couple.

The poem "Together" – written by our father and appearing on page 5 of this issue – celebrates this new union. "Together" was a gift to Rich and Cindy on their wedding night and it is only with their permission that I am able to present it to you here.

Feedback

I don't traditionally get much feedback on the magazine, but I would love to hear what you think of the Writer's Workshop. Is this an effort worth putting my time into? Please write or e-mail me (editor@escwebs.com) to let me know.

As I mentioned in the past, being small press with a tiny circulation doesn't always indicate the merits of a magazine or book. Accomplishments do. If you are into small press, please take a moment to give some feedback and let me know how things are going from your perspective. What do you like or dislike the most about ESC! Magazine? It is only with your feedback that I can help ESC! grow into something you'll want to turn to again and again.

See you next issue!

Joyce G. Bradshaw: Joyce was raised in Westfield, New Jersey. After attending Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia for two years, she became the wife of a Presbyterian minister and had the opportunity to spend five years as a missionary to the Mayan community in the State of Campeche, Mexico.

Joyce presently resides in the Texas hill country and is a full-time freelance writer and author of three books: one is a volume of poetry, the second is a study of the modern process of globalization, and the third is the story of the way that her own writing and that of her mother shaped both their lives. She has three daughters and seven grandchildren, of whom she is exceedingly proud.

Brendan Connell: Brendan Connell has had fiction published, in numerous magazines, literary journals and anthologies, including *RE:AL*, *Tabu*, *Heist*, *Devil Blossoms*, *The Dream Zone*, *Darkness Rising 4* (Prime Books 2002), *Redsine* (Cosmos Books 2002), and *Leviathan 3* (Ministry of Whimsy Press 2002). He has had translations published in *Literature of Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Prentice Hall 1999). This is Brendan's first appearance in ESC! Magazine. Brendan may be reached at: huysmans67@hotmail.com

Farida Mihoub: Born in Paris, France, where she still lives, Farida is 45 years old and the mother of three. "I currently work as editorial assistant for a medical journal. While French is my mother tongue, the English language is my passion!"



Farida has been published in several E-zines and poetry magazines. Farida also writes children's stories. "One last thing...! I cannot live without music, especially jazz and soul." Farida's poetry was published in the Spring 2002 (V6N1) issue of ESC! Magazine. Farida may be reached at: mihoub@chello.fr

Bob Potocki: Bob has been a movie critic for several midwestern newspapers including the Kane County Chronicle. In addition to movie critic, Bob also was an art critic for the Indiana Times news chain, wrote articles on travel for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and some special articles about Navy Pier for the Indianapolis Star. Bob has written several plays, one of which, "Kelly's Wake", is being considered for production by a Chicago area theater company. This is Bob's first appearance in ESC! Magazine.

Robert Potter: Bob Potter is a contributing editor to ESC! Magazine. Bob Potter, communication instructor and consultant, is on the faculty of the University of Phoenix. In addition to providing valuable editorial advice and guidance to ESC! Magazine, Bob's short story "The Vial Solution" and poem "Birthing A Man" appeared in the Premier issue of ESC! in April 1992.

Guy R. Qualls: Guy Qualls is a regular contributing editor to ESC! Magazine. Guy made his first appearance for us in the fall of 1998 on the ESC! Magazine website. Guy is a valuable and talented regular in our pages.

Guy was born and raised in West Texas. A former "Gulf War Volley Ball Veteran", Guy enjoys spending his time both indoors and out pursuing his hobbies of wildlife photography and computers. Guy feels his greatest asset is his family who he "takes too much for granted and appreciates far too little." In his own words: "Everything is dedicated to Mom — she was the greatest fan a person could have ever had!"

Paul B. Tucker: Paul Tucker is a regular contributing editor to ESC! Magazine. Paul's work has graced many covers of ESC! Magazine including the Premier issue back in 1992. In addition, Paul continues to contribute chapters of his beautifully written and illustrated story "Vex". Paul also designed the logos for both ESC! Magazine and ESC! Publications. Paul lives and works in Chicago, IL as a professional illustrator.

NEXT ISSUE (V7,N1) Available April 15th, 2003

- The Wanderers Part 2
- New Fiction by Miriam Lee
- This and more coming Spring 2003!

To Rich and Cindy on your wedding day . . .

Together

*Come my darling, swim with me,
For now we are husband and wife:
Joined today, our destiny,
To swim in the River of Life!*

*River changing constantly,
Our life an adventure will be,
Sheltered by the certainty
We're swimming as one to the sea.*

*Conquering adversity
And rapids that cut like a knife,
Nurtured by our family,
We'll swim in the River of Life!*

*And when we swim, we'll swim together,
And when we tire, we'll help each other,
And when we love, we'll love forever,
As we swim in the River of Life.*

Love, Dad

:: Brendan Connell ::

The WALL Of ALOES

Both the pick and shovel were slung over one shoulder. I had carried them for two blocks. It would not have been a good idea to park directly in front or too near. The night was clear and the almost full moon shone brightly. Crickets chirped, the sound seeming to ricochet from one ear to the other.

The gate was locked. The small sign read: Gate Hours 8:00 AM - 6:00 PM. I threw the pick and shovel over the wall, one at a time. The pick-axe landed, producing a non-resonating sound. The shovel must have hit stone; it rattled. I climbed over. It was easy and made me think of other walls that I had climbed, years earlier. I felt fairly sure that no one saw me.

Once inside, the trees blocked out the larger portion of moonlight. I was not happy about it, but preferred it that way. There were plants and I felt them with my hands, their smooth and serrated tongues. I saw their jagged profiles.

The shadows provided cover. I could hear the wind, which was gentle, brush through the leaves. It did not frighten me. I knew that it was wind.

I drew a breath, sighed, looked around and got my bearings. Finding things at night is not always easy. I picked up the gear and walked down the path, gravel crunching beneath my feet.

I thought of her. She was beautiful. I loved her. I buried my head in her hair and smelled its fragrance, felt it, and how soft it was. We walked arm-in-arm and she kissed me, even in public places. To open my eyes and be next to her was comforting. I could never sleep well alone.

I was in the older section and smelled the eucalyptus. The obelisks and monuments stood as the black skyline of a dead city. In the distance I heard a car speed by. It was probably a drunk making his way home at that late hour. Who did he have waiting for him? I stood still and listened. The sound

of the motor receded into the night. There was nothing and I felt alone.

As I walked, the pick-axe and shovel scraped against each other. I put one over each shoulder. I separated them so that they would be quiet. I heard the breath drawing in and out. The path went from the big trees into the newer section. It was flooded with moonlight. The grass looked very white, as if it had been covered with a coat of snow. Far off to my left I could make out the caretaker's cottage. A small green truck was parked in front.

I turned right and walked along the edge of the older section, the moon casting my shadow into the darkness. I felt that it offered me protection and I was satisfied to be blended into the obscurity. The trees were older than I was. They would shield me.

I left, but it was only for two weeks. She said that she wanted to have my children. That made me happy. I truly believe that. In the city I took care of my business. So much activity and so many people distracted me. It was a fault not to always be thinking of her. I called her and described everything. We laughed, then spoke in low, tender voices. I admit, there were moments when I enjoyed my independence. I went to the museum and saw the paintings and sculptures. While walking down the street I noticed how the women's eyes followed me and I liked it. I should have never left her. That was my sin.

When I returned it was too late. She had been laid to rest. The world did not collapse, but I noticed how

it froze. Everyone I spoke to was revealed to me. I saw what they were and they, the ghosts, did not please me. It was not them I wanted to see. Her face and body were buried in the ground before my eyes could meet them. She disappeared while I was away.

I stood there the day before. I wanted to see her. She was very close. I lay the bouquet of flowers down and they seemed pathetic. It was orchids and birds of paradise. They were the wrong flowers. Absolutely inappropriate. The significance of the event did not strike home. It was there, in front of me, but covered.

So I was returning. I still saw her smile in my mind's eye. She was the only real thing. Walking through the gloom I observed the newer section to my left. The stones were regimented, nearly alike. I knew that modern society did not like diversity. I felt that it was unfair to have her hedged into that mold. She was not the same.

I believed that I was in the correct area and turned to my left, into that garden of stones, as if I were walking down the isle of a church. The rounded heads sat on both sides, quiet and sanctimonious. From many angles I was now clearly visible. My shadow stretched behind me and aped me. There was a fizzle. The sound came suddenly. I felt the blood pump through my chest. A spray of water slashed across my legs. The sprinkler system must have been on a timer. Everything is like that. She was the kind of woman who would enjoy walking through

the sprinklers at night.

My feet squashed through the grass. I found where I had set that ridiculous bouquet. She was there. The pick sank into the earth. It was so soft. I took the shovel and could feel the strain on my arms as I tossed aside the clods. There was the smell of night, moisture and digging. I heard the rat-tat-tat of the sprinklers. They were not exactly where I was and their water no longer touched me. Yet I became damp with sweat. I took off my shirt and tossed it aside. The gentle breeze touched my skin and I shivered. I remembered why I was there and worked harder. Finally the shovel made contact. There was a hollow sound. In the distance a dog barked. I scraped away the dirt and threw it over the edge of the hole. With my bare hands I cleared the surface.

The lid did not move when I pulled at it. I had no crow bar. With the edge of the shovel I pried it open. The nails screeched as they left the wood.

I did not see her. There was cloth which I felt and tore at. The moon, which had always been near, appeared over tops of the trees and let its light fall to the hole. She was there. I put my lips to hers. They were stiff and unresponsive. I noticed the smell. Her hair was brushed in an unnatural way.

I tried to hug her and explain. Then I heard the barking. Looking up I saw a dog at the edge of my hole. A strong light shone in my face. I could only see his feet and legs. The charges were correct.

- END -

Memories Avoid

Voices in the wind
Trouble on my mind
Listen to these words
 All changes in time

Feelings are always new
Thought are in a jumble
Am I the only one thinking
 We are all in trouble

Vicious circles run to and from
Precious memories fade away
Time aimlessly marches on
 This is how we pay

Guy R. Qualls
Outta the Void

Memories Devoid

Let go of the past
But first draw the line
Remember all you can
While you still have the time

Streets are filled with people
You didn't know yesterday
Faces you might have remembered
But would have forgotten anyway

Hold on to the memories
While time fades away
Always remember yesterday
Just don't forget about today

:: Joyce G. Bradshaw ::

The WANDERERS

Part 1 - The Magic Of Friendship

Erik and Jonah were true wanderers. Without familial roots, they were not bound to any particular territory. Lacking specific goals, their travels were not limited by purpose. The two were perfectly free to come and go as they chose.

Erik was a tall, slender young man with a strong physique and handsome face. His blonde hair was just long enough to swing easily as he walked. His stride was confident; his eyes were clear and his gaze intent. He dressed casually, preferring jeans and hiking boots and a hefty flannel jacket in chilly weather.

Jonah was a mixed-breed canine who had lived long and hard. Part lab, he was sturdily built and gentle-natured. Part German shepherd, he was sharp and aware of his surroundings. A touch of beagle gave him uncommon coloration and distinctive markings. He was a fine specimen, ideally fitted for the open road.

They met on a remote section of the Appalachian trail in eastern Pennsylvania. Each was traveling alone and both were pleased to find a suitable hiking partner. Neither questioned the other's reason for being there or inquired as to a final destination. They simply fell into step and followed the pathway through the autumn-tinged forest groves.

The first night together was spent getting to know each other's habits. Erik was not much of a talker, but he whistled often, mostly tunes of his own design. Jonah was an observer and passed the time taking note of Erik's camping procedures. During the second day, Jonah learned that certain shouts meant "Are you still with me?" And Erik grew accustomed to Jonah's penchant for striking out on his own when the mood struck him. By day three, they were best friends and fellow travelers.

Erik was generally headed north-east and that was okay with Jonah. Actually, direction didn't matter to either one of them, as long as they kept moving along. They arose with the sun, ate sparingly from what few supplies Erik carried with him or from what natural treats happened to present themselves. Coming down out of the hills after almost a week on the trail together, they took advantage of the bounty of an isolated village. They shared a haystack in a barn at the edge of town, refreshed themselves in a nearby stream (hastily, for the water was already beginning to have the bite of winter to it), and panhandled tidbits from the locals.

It was during that brief contact with civilization that Erik began to pick up on some new information about Jonah. For one thing, the approach of cold weather had brought an icy chill to the winds and also a slight limp to the dog's gait. It had been no secret that Jonah was not by any means young and Erik surmised that there was a minor problem with arthritis, not uncommon to shepherds. For another, an almost-mishap with a boy on a bike, despite a warning bell, indicated that Jonah's hearing was failing a bit. Considering that the pooch's face, chest, and legs had already turned white with age, that came as no real surprise either. It did explain why a mere whistle brought no response from Jonah. It also caused a change in the way the two communicated.

After a couple of days, they were both ready to abandon village life and get back on their own. Erik acquired a few necessities and started to head for the road out of town.

Jonah was sleeping at the time and didn't hear him go. With the distance between them growing, Erik did the natural thing: he clapped his hands. Jonah reacted immediately and went trotting off to join the young man. A clap was, from then on, a summons or a caution or even a greeting. Jonah's reply was most frequently an enthusiastic wag of the tail.

To avoid the encroachment of early snows in higher elevations, the two of them kept to the low country for the next few months. As they advanced northward, they made more visits to out-of-the-way communities, always finding the populace friendly and generous with their assistance. Before long, however, Erik realized that his money supply was quickly being exhausted (a little quicker than he had expected, since he was now providing for two) and that he would have to find odd jobs somewhere. Winter months in New England can be exceedingly difficult and opportunities to make a few dollars were fortunately numerous. He would chop wood for the ubiquitous fireplaces, shovel snow so the elderly could leave their homes to shop and socialize, push cars and pickup trucks out of ditches, and even carry bags of groceries (for free) across ice-bound streets. In one picturesque little town, he found a grocer in need of a temporary stockboy and an owner of a local hardware store who was glad to have someone to sweep the aisles and the front porch. None of the jobs paid too much, but gradually Erik pocketed enough cash to tide himself and Jonah over for a while.

Through the days of Erik's employment, Jonah stayed close by,

apparently just as pleased to suspend his travels while the pain in his hindsides persisted. Since he couldn't always hear what Erik was doing, he tended to remain alert, his eyes shifting slowly back and forth as the young man went about his business. But toward the end of the afternoon, he would tire of watching and finally allow his chin to fall on his gracefully crossed front legs. It was obvious, during those naps, that his cross-country trek was still on his mind, for his sleep was accompanied by random motions in all his limbs. It often appeared to Erik, who stole a glance or two in the dog's direction, that a rabbit must have transversed the path and lured Jonah into a chase. His paws would tremble violently and the hairy chest would rise and fall more rapidly as the dog breathed heavily from the imagined activity.

At the end of a workday, Erik would rouse Jonah with a clap and, knowing that his words might not be heard, would gesture with the fingers of his cupped hand for his companion to follow him to wherever they had been bedding down at night. It was not long before the "Come" sign had become an integral part of their relationship. Due to the fact that Jonah was not too welcome inside certain stores and restaurants, the two of them worked out a second gesture (taken directly from standard sign language) that served an important purpose. Erik's four fingers, waggled rhythmically under his chin, let Jonah know that he must wait by the door until the young man returned. By the time that spring was making its way into the area, the pair of wanderers had

established a regular and very efficient method of communicating.

Soon, under the influence of shimmering sunlight and balmy breezes, wanderlust infected both of them. Erik's mind drifted from his work to the road away from town. Jonah began to disappear from sight occasionally as he investigated possible escape routes. Almost simultaneously, the two of them could no longer contend with the restraints of society. Without notice, they took off toward the coast and freedom.

By early summer Erik started forming a vague plan, something he rarely did. Years ago, as a youngster, he had visited Cape Cod with his family during a two-week vacation. The more he thought about it, the better it sounded. He wasn't sure that Jonah would want to go with him, but the dog showed no signs of wishing to depart from Erik's company. So they headed for the place where the peninsula was attached to the mainland, increasing their daily mileage as though to hasten their arrival. Jonah, of course, was not aware of their destination, but he could surely sense his comrade's resolve. He trusted Erik implicitly and followed him willingly.

On one unexpectedly significant morning, the pair of wanderers woke early in their "motel" under a bridge just west of Wellfleet Harbor. An especially thick fog had crept in overnight and as the two sleepyheads crawled out of their temporary shelter, they found themselves surrounded by heavy gray mist. Jonah strolled off to a nearby tree and virtually disappeared from view. Erik clapped twice and shortly, the dog reappeared. They had arrived in the area late the evening before, too late to view the ocean waves from the top of the sand cliff that ran along the shoreline. So they had bedded down for the night without further delay.

Even though the sun was not yet visible to the east, Erik felt a burning need to return to the beach where he and his now-deceased father had shared many magical hours. He knew that, because of the height of the ridge of dunes, it would be next to impossible to reach the waterline without the aid of one of the ladders that had been extended down the cliffside. But he was not certain where those steps were located. Gesturing for Jonah to follow him, Erik headed out in the direction of the shore, using the

muffled sound of the waves as a guide. He had walked quite some distance, never sure whether or not Jonah was still with him. He had clapped one or twice, but the fog swallowed the sound instantly and the dog did not turn up.

By the time Erik realized where he was, it was almost too late. He heard the tide waters and was rushing to where he could see the incoming waves. He hesitated for a split second, unsure of his location.

"Master! Do not go any farther! You are in danger!"

The voice was distinct, but its tenor was most unusual. Erik froze, trying to fathom what he had just heard. The admonition was repeated even more emphatically. "Master, you must stop where you are! Please!"

At that moment, a six-inch slab of sand, loosened by his weight, gave way right in front of Erik. Only by throwing himself backward onto the ground did he managed to escape tumbling over and down the steep, treacherous embankment. He sat there, stunned and shaken. Jonah emerged suddenly from the depths of the fog. Without a sound, he approached Erik and licked his face affectionately.

"The Wanderers" will continue in the Spring 2003 and Fall 2003 issues of ESC! Magazine -- Available April 15th and October 15th, 2003.

Send me a picture

Don't send me the picture
that was taken when youth
was arrogant and restless.
I know that girls giggled
when they crossed your path,
and fancied to be in your arms.
You could pick up any one
because your smile invited
so many allusions in their minds.
Your dark glasses would make you
the most mysterious of all.
The tight flowery shirts
would raise the wild desire
to touch and caress you.
The wide black belt on your jeans
was like a magnetic door
made to open heaven.

Send me the picture
that was taken today,
as you woke up so tired.
I want to see your grey hair,
your white beard,
those lines on your face,
and your slow pace.
I want to see the trace of time
that was not always kind.
I want to see your eyes after
they cried and dried.
Send me a picture
of truth and knowledge,
of wisdom and reality.
Send me the picture
of yourself.

— *Farida Mihoub*

Día De Los Muertos



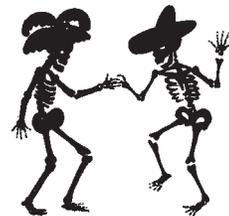
It's the Day of The Dead again.
When I'll think of all lost friends.
I'll think of times gone by.
The wisdom it's brought me.
Always at my side.
Not a death to haunt me.



I'll try to put it all behind me.
Remembering man and not the bones.
Thinking not of the event.
But of all the hope.



Can I take this day to be content?
Happy for all those times.
Not dwell on the pain. Of a day not so kind.



Paul ©
Tucker



HEAR THE BIRDS

Find a way to hear the birds sing
Because every day is a new thing
Find any way to hear the birds sing
and the day will be alright

Take the time to smell the flowers
Fade away and just relax for hours
Now is the time to use your lesser powers
and this day will be alright

If its time you need - to escape success's greed
Then you need to charish the hours
Even if its just a way to enjoy the day
And you will find your inner power

Find the birds and the bees, the flowers and the trees
and the day will be alright.

Guy R. Qualls

Outta the Void

:: Bob Potocki ::

The MUSE

In retrospect, I don't recall being aware of his existence until we were 50 miles past Cheyenne. He must have boarded the train while it made the red-eye stop in Wyoming's capital. That's my calculation on the subject. Nothing he said later contradicts my surmise.

The drinking car was open late and I sat there, partaking of God's nectar, doing the brood over dim prospects. My relationship with Shirley had taken the deep six and I was asked to leave. The last few days with her weren't pretty. I accused her of squashing my literary talent, making it impossible for me to write. In turn, she accused me of leaching money, room and board. Furthermore she leveled a most damning charge. I was not, quote her, "...a writer at all. Your literary pretensions have no basis in reality. All they are is a rather pathetic transparent excuse to avoid working for a living. Writers write. Dreamers pretend."

Well, with that I lost complete control. I mentioned that she was gaining weight, her best days, beauty wise, were in the rear view mirror and the future...ho...ho...would be filled with fruitless attempts to buy another boyfriend. Predictably she went berserk. My sudden eviction notice was interspersed with hard objects thrown across the room in my direction. Even then, I realized that I had grossly miscalculated, had stepped way over the line. Rule number one – never aggravate, let alone kill the golden goose. I had just a little money. How long could I last? Two months? At best! Then what?

As I was packing an inexplicable idea came to me – San Francisco! There it was, a goal for the next Hemingway. And why not? Many American writers end up in the city by the bay: Ginsberg, Kerouac, London, Steinbeck to name a few. In a few years, add my name to that

list. I would be free to write there, unhindered by that old pesky siren of romantic entanglements. If things didn't work out? Well, there's always the ocean. Step in and continue to walk toward the sunset.

So I bought my favorite Midwesterner a train ticket to the west coast and 24 hours after Shirley had shoved me out the door, I was on my way – headed hopefully for literary success. After a full day and a half of chung a chung a chung, the allure of California began to wane.

The club car, by this time, had morphed into my home. I sat there alone, despondent, nursing my third drink, trying desperately to connect with my muse when the stranger entered. Except for the highly polished black cowboy boots, there was not a thing about him that stood out. He looked ordinary enough that he could easily be overlooked in a small group. I noticed him only because of the hour. The bartender and the drink server were starting their clean-up and it appeared that the newcomer missed his chance to imbibe. But money is always money, so the server approached him at the small table near mine.

"What may I serve you?"

"Milk, please." He replied in an even toned voice; quiet enough, but not so quiet that I couldn't hear him. The server didn't even blink, probably from long years of hearing every wacky request imaginable.

"We don't carry milk here, sir. You have to go to the dining car for that and they are now closed."

"Ok, then orange juice – a small glass." All said with no emotion.

"Yes sir. We do have that.

One small orange juice."

The server walked up to the bar and mumbled something to the bartender. Both shook their heads. Undoubtedly the milk request provoked their disdainful reaction. His choice of a drink puzzled me as it probably did the two late-night attendants. Appearance wise he looked uninteresting. Yet there was this milk thing. Was there more there? I said to myself, "Let's find out." Writers need conversation like a gourmet needs food. So, I went for it.

"California bound?" I figure that should get him going.

"Yes!"

"Vacation or relocation?"

"I'll see if I like it. If no, I'll move on."

"San Francisco?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. We'll see."

"Heard San Francisco's nice."

This time he didn't answer. The old label machine in my head came out with a tag – taciturn type. He talked like one of those anal Midwestern farmers, except he didn't have the exact look of a farmer. His face lacked that burnished color that one gets working beneath the solar glare. As a matter of fact, he looked rather pasty, like someone who spends all day inside and drifts outside only at night – like a vampire.

The drink attendant finally arrived with the O.J. The stranger lifted the glass which was hardly bigger than a shot glass, took a small sip and put it down. Then he did a quite curious thing. He stared at and past my left shoulder and jolted imperceptibly. Reflexively, I looked at my shoulder, than back. Nothing. When I turned to face

him again he was staring out the window. My gaze followed his – to look at what – no lights on the ground. After all we were out west, where open spaces are exactly that – open spaces. Above it all was that vast, dark vault, that infinity of distant stars which shone down on our lonely perturbed planet saying to it, "You are inconsequential." A low grade depression swept over me, and I decided to remove it by trying to get this cipher to open up. Once again...

"Got a job waiting for you out there?"

"A what?"

"A job – something, anything, you know." This was tough.

"No, I don't know – and no."

"Most people have a goal..."

"Most people? You ask a lot of questions mister." He said this with what seemed a vague hint of menace in his voice. Yet on second thought it wasn't exactly menace, but something else, something I couldn't identify. For the first time this guy was beginning to make me feel uneasy. I looked over at the only two other people in the club car – the attendants. They were busy in a separate world, washing glasses, cleaning off the tables. For all practical purposes the stranger and I were alone. I felt that I should let this go, stop right then and there, but some strange wheel was turning and rolling me forward to what end was impossible to say.

An apology was in order, but before I could offer one, he spoke, this time without benefit of my provocation.

"You're using me!"

His unsolicited comment alone startled me. WHAT he said though

made me ponder who I was dealing with. In short, was this guy crazy? “Better be careful here, very careful,” I thought.

“Using you? In what way?”

He didn’t answer immediately. Instead he did that odd thing again, staring at and beyond my left shoulder. As before I instinctively look at where he was staring – my shoulder and behind. As Before there was nothing to be seen. I felt ashamed of my involuntary response.

“You’re using my words and the way I look just for your artificial construction.”

“Artificial what?” God, I was hoping that the two attendants would look up. But they disregarded us as if we didn’t exist. The weird thought struck me that the stranger could stand up, pull a gun, shoot me and the bartender and drink attendant would continue their clean up. The stranger and I seemed to be living in another dimension, totally.

I decided to leave, stood up when he barked at me.

“Sit down!” Spoken quietly but with considerable force. I obeyed. He took a moment to compose his thoughts.

“Now you’re looking for a story and I’ll give it to you... I know you’re a writer or at least you think you’re one.” I almost jolted out of my seat with that. How could he know? How could he have possibly seen that in me? Was I that transparent...?

“How did...?”

“Quiet!” He ordered again.

“You make me sick. Everything’s got to be spelled out for you.”

Then he hesitated. I held my breath. He did it again. He stared over my shoulder. This time my gaze didn’t follow his. I just waited. Then he began a monologue – something that 10 minutes before would have seemed impossible.

“You know how it is with them. Can’t live with them, can’t live without them. The whole business is held together with glue.”

“Glue...? I was puzzled.

“Yes glue. And that glue is trust. Plain old ordinary trust. When I walk out my door, I expect no man to walk in while I’m gone. See, I’m an over the road truck driver, interstate. Away for a week or two at a time, driving all night, sleeping in broken down motels during the day. But I ain’t like the others. I’m not into hanging in honky-tonks and pinching waitresses on the Beehind. No sir, I got eyes for her and only her. And I thought she felt the same, that it was that way with her too. But it wasn’t. It sure wasn’t.

He paused and looked out the window. The deep darkness still covered the landscape. The train lurched a little and he turned to face me again.

“I lived with my illusions about her until Willis set me straight.”

“Willis?”

“Yeah, Willis. And it was so odd, me meeting him – and him actually telling me. Can you believe that – him actually spilling his guts out about the whole sick business – to me, without knowing who I was...”

“I don’t understand” I sensed that his story was leading to a dark place, but I was getting hooked and I now got curious to hear what he had to say.

“I was driving my truck in Nebraska – late night, very late and I see this hitch-hiker edge of the road, handsome looking young guy, smiling. Though we all got orders not to pick anyone up, I decided to give this fella a lift. Well he got inside my truck and immediately began to tell me everything about himself: his name which was Willis, his profession which was none except living off of women, you know how that is...”

He gave me a curious look. My face got hot.

“He was, so he said, a songwriter for country music. Never got anything produced, but it was only a matter of time. Played the guitar a little, though he didn’t have one with him. And then came the corker, he wanted to tell me about his women, all the women he had, he’s got one in every city, every small town, seems he’s on a brag, didn’t believe hardly any of it, but it’s entertaining anyhow so I let him have his brag. Says his appeal is them good looks he’s got and his guitar, oh them ladies loved that GEE – TAR. So I’m listening and driving, waiting for nothing in particular when he come up with it. He says there’s this one lady he’s seeing – her name is Alma, which I hadn’t told you yet, is the name of my wife. Well Alma is not a common name but my wife wasn’t the only Alma in the world, so I pass it of to...to...”

“Coincidence?” I tried to be helpful.

“Yes, coincidence. Now you pay attention to all this, you hear. You’ve had a few drinks and you’ve got to remember this stuff – it’s important for later.”

“Later? What do you...?”

He shot me a dirty look and I became quiet. He expected me to fully participate in the experience.

“Then the hitch-hiker said something that really rattled me. He said that Alma lived in Springfield – yeah, he called her Alma from Springfield...and that’s the town I live in...but then I thought...Springfield is a common name of cities throughout the country and all this could still be a coincidence, but then he let it out that Alma’s husband was an on-the-road trucker and was out driving a week or two at a stretch and that’s when he and Alma from Springfield got together and would spend days at a time in the sack. I figured by now, he was talking about my Alma, but...and here’s the joke...I thought he was lying about the other stuff. The temptation came to punch him in the face for being a damn liar, but what came next chilled my blood, almost killed me on the spot. He told me about the tattooed butterfly on Alma’s buttocks, on how she could make the insects wings flutter by gyrating her hips – a sexy turn on if there ever was one. My heart must have been beating about 200 strokes a minute. How I didn’t pass out or give myself away still amazes me. Finally he described their love-making sessions – how they would be doing it and laughing at me, you hear, laughing at me. Then he would bring her to ecstasy by singing an old Elvis song to her, “One Night”. I was breathing hard trying to keep myself from falling over. Still I listened and drove as he went on and on for another hour or so about other exploits. Then he

stopped, put his head back and dozed off. I quietly pulled the gun out from beneath the seat, pointed the weapon at his sleeping head and pulled the trigger. Over! Gone! From some crazy reason I spoke to him ‘Goodbye to your short singing career.’” He wiped his lips with his trembling hands.

“I got rid of the body several miles down the road. It was still dark and I pulled the corpse out of the truck, put the remains in high brush, got back in my vehicle and drove off. There was blood all over the truck’s cab, but that didn’t concern me. I wanted back to Alma’s as soon as possible. I turned around at a U-turn allowed crossing, drove the rest of the night trying to figure out how I would do it – how I would make the world right for me again.”

At this point, he looked me squarely in the eye. It was like he was trying to link up our souls, our thoughts together. I, of course, was speechless. How do you react to someone who has just confessed to committing murder. He stared out the window and then faced me. There was more. “The whole way back I kept seeing them do it, him singing ‘One Night,’ her screaming for joy, them laughing at me. I must have cried half the night.

“Finally I got back to Springfield, to the trailer park where I used to live. It wasn’t home anymore, but it was where Alma and her butterfly resided. I parked the truck outside the trailer park compound, so she wouldn’t hear me coming. I walked the half mile to our trailer home and stood there for a few minutes. The sun had just risen and my mood rose with it.

“Though I had a key, I knocked on the door. She opened the door, face beaming. She thought it was him. Her mouth dropped, and then she smiled again.

“How come you’re back. You’re supposed to be gone for another week,’ she said nervously.

“Run got cancelled.”

“You’ve got...blood...on you’. She pointed to my shirt.

“Oh that...it’s not blood...got some paint on me.

“Paint...’, she smiled. She was shaking like hell. I guessed, she was expecting him to come back shortly but that was hardly possible, him being a state away, hitchhiking his way west of here.

“C’mon let’s go in,’ I suggested strongly. She hesitated for a moment. It was if, in a very strange way, she knew what was coming. I pointed toward the bedroom and she immediately walked into it.

“Let’s see the old butterfly.’ She laughed and removed her clothing. I removed mine, and then without going into all the details we started to make love. It was as good a sex as I’ve ever had with her. She started to moan, when I raised my head and started singing ‘One Night’ to her. You should have seen...you should have seen.”

For the first time he laughed. He was almost doubled over with laughter. Even the night attendants looked toward us. “The horror on her face” with tears streaming from his eyes. I couldn’t tell whether it was mirth or sorrow. Perhaps both.

“I started choking her, and I choked her and choked her until she was no more. Poor Alma, poor butterfly. Then I showered, changed

shirts, had a glass of milk to cure what had always been a sensitive stomach and..."

"Stop it," I urged, "stop it right now. This adventure of yours never happened, never, ever." I finally caught on. The whole story was a lie.

"You say," he retorted with a grin on his face. "What makes you think so?"

"A hitchhiker several hundred miles from yours and Alma's home? A guitar player and you say there's no guitar? Making a U-turn on the interstate – impossible and illegal for a truck? And a butterfly that moves its wings on human skin? There's so many holes in all this, what do you take me for? Why did you tell me this tale – this false story?" He surveyed me as one would the village idiot.

"Why? Why indeed! What you see as a fairy tale, a bloody, gory yarn is my way of making you see the light. It's obvious that I'm here to help you resolve your own situation and furthermore to help you fulfill your quest."

"Ah, crap," I retorted, "you've just wasted about an hour of my time."

"Not really." He was smiling like the Cheshire cat.

"Yes, really," I said angrily, "You're as crazy as a loon and I'm even crazier for listening to this

lying garbage."

With that, I threw down the money for my drinks, waved goodbye to the attendants and went back to my seat. I was angry, but, even more, tired.

No sooner did I lay my head back and I fell fast asleep. My slumber was not peaceful, for a disturbing fitful dream tormented me. I was back in eighth grade riding on a toy red truck. There were no other students in the room. I drove the truck around in circles faster and faster. When I reached hyper speed, my eighth grade teacher, Miss Gulch, jumped on the front of the truck and proceeded to ask me questions that I now do not remember, but to which I didn't know the answers. Every time I failed to answer she hit me with a violin she was carrying. Finally she became so exasperated that she shattered the violin over my head and then changed into a butterfly and flew away. I awoke with a start and found it to be morning. Out of curiosity, I decided to find the stranger, so I walked through the train but could discover no evidence of his presence. I asked conductors and passengers about him and no one recalled seeing anyone remotely resembling him. My fruitless search for him lasted about an hour. Finally, I gave up none too soon. The

train pulled into the station. San Francisco!

The first thing I did was to rush to a pay phone. There was someone that I had to know was all right. The phone rang and rang and finally it was picked up. Shirley answered, "Hello." I waited a few seconds, then hung up. Closure!

I next asked a cab driver to take me to any broken down hotel, better to conserve what money I had. I checked in, the bellboy took me to my room, a dingy place but a start. As he stood there waiting for his tip, he surveyed me and sensed a need.

"Say, can I get you something?"

I said nothing.

"Anything you want."

Nothing again.

"Drugs? Liquor?"

I shook my head. He smiled.

"I know. A woman."

"No, not today. Maybe tomorrow or next week."

The full flush of realization hit me. A desperate yearning came over me that was stronger than sex, than getting high, than anything else I could think of."

"What then?" he wondered.

"There is one thing, one little favor."

"What's that?"

"I need a typewriter and a sheaf of typing paper."

- END -

The article "Meet Miriam Lee" is excerpted from Ms. Lee's web site **MysteryRomance.com** and is used with permission. Ms. Lee was first published in ESC! Magazine in the Summer of 1993 (V2, N1), back issues of which are available directly from ESC! Magazine. Look for more of Miriam's work in the Spring 2003 issue of ESC! Magazine!

Meet Miriam Lee

"My Science Fiction short story, 'The Friends of Addie Smith', was the first of my fiction to be published and that was in August of 1993. When I opened the mailbox, I noticed that it wasn't a thick envelope—a good sign because it could mean they didn't send the script back as a rejection. Anyway, when I read the first lines, I was thrilled that the publisher said he normally didn't publish lengthy short stories, but this one was too good to pass up. Let me tell you, I was stoked!"

Miriam Lee always had an active imagination. As a child growing up in Downey, California, she would not go to sleep at night until she had imagined an entire story from beginning to end. These were the first signs of her innate desire to write. In her teenage years she started her first book.

Her business career has been varied, encompassing the marketing, advertising, banking, insurance and medical fields. Miriam developed and taught classes on fiction and genre writing that were presented at local community colleges and private tutorial institutions.

In her mid-twenties, Miriam wrote several stories. ESC! Magazine published her first science fiction short story, *The Friends of Addie Smith*. Her mystery short story, *Mom, Murder and Chocolate Cake* was published online at the Without a Clue Web site in April of 2000. Storyteller Magazine published her personal essay, *Journey to Self-Freedom* in Spring of 1997. **Deadly Probe** was published in February of 1999, **Masquerade Journey** in April of 2000 and **Faceless Enemy** debuted in Spring of 2001.

On the non-fiction side, Miriam wrote up four interviews for Parenting Magazine, three of which appeared in their September 1998 issues and the last in March of 1999. Several of her newspaper ads and articles have appeared in top papers such as the Times Orange County and the Orange County Register.

On March 24th, 1999, Orange County's News Channel (OCN) anchor and host of "Online," Leslie Leyton, interviewed Miriam about her mystery line's premiere book, *Deadly Probe*.

Ms. Lee works as a Marketing Manager and Senior Copywriter for a local California bank and resides in Southern California.

Read more about Miriam and her work at the following web site:
<http://www.mysteryromance.com/>



Miriam Lee



Autographed first editions of **Faceless Enemy**, **Deadly Probe** and **Masquerade Journey** can be ordered only from the publisher for a limited time at a special introductory price of \$13.00 for a trade paperback (includes tax, shipping and handling.) Expect delivery in 4-6 weeks. Autographed hardbacks are also available for \$24.00 inc. tax, S & H, (note: these are in very limited supply and will take up to 8 weeks for delivery) and no shipping is done outside of the continental United States. Make check or money order payable to Smoking Gun Press and mail to:

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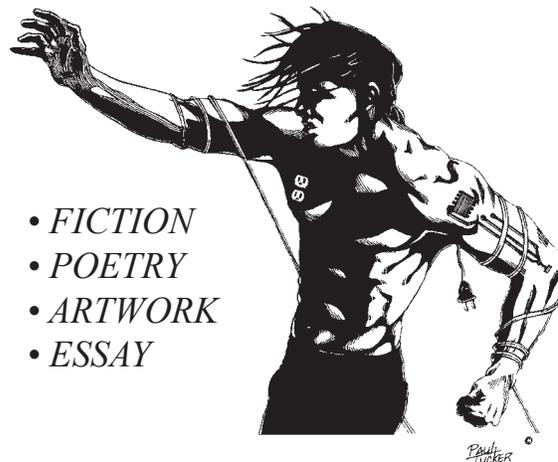
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