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## At Death's Door

Larry Hammer lives in Arizona, where the chaparral is dry and the hacienda is far across the arroyo. He wrote "At Death's Door" to resurrect an obsessive image from an otherwise failed short story.

Within the waste, dawn was diluted light  
not yet tinged with colors other than shades  
of black. Soon the sun's flood would stream high  
above him, washing the bare world sere and pale  
with the heat of desiccation, but for now,  
small mercies, it was cool enough to walk

and bright enough to see where others had walked  
before him—sunset drained away the light  
to a dark unlike any he'd known till now,  
no moon nor star, nothing to splash a shade.  
He had been glad to rest, though. Taut and pale,  
he stood, hiked his battered pack up high

on his shoulder, and continued on to the height  
of the next slow rolling hill at a walk.  
By the time he reached the ridge, the sky had paled  
enough he could see the next had the same light  
slope, the same thorn scrub, same lack of shade  
as everywhere since the forest, and only now,

after countless stones and dry arroyos, now  
he felt despair. After days of dearth in high  
plains, after the Dark Wood with its angry shades,  
what here drained all purpose from his vain walk?  
He couldn't tell. He stared at the endless light,  
at this uncrossable wasteland of Death's Pale

until he saw them: four buildings of pale  
adobe in the wash below, visible now  
that he knew where to look within the light  
landscape. He hadn't expected this--a high  
tower perhaps, with walls on which guards walked  
to keep apart the living and dead shades.

*"but for now,  
small mercies, it  
was cool enough  
to walk"*

Sun poured in his face, forcing him to shade  
his eyes with a gaunt hand. Below, his pale  
wife waited, the lodestone of his walk,  
his be-all end, his life. It was time now  
to do what he had once set out with high  
purpose to do but seemed, in this alien light,

a shade of wish: fetch her. But how? Well, now  
he must. Before the pale sun surged high  
he walked to Death's Hall under its flowing light.



Sonya Taaffe

## Lamellae (Hipponion and Cambridge)

Sonya Taaffe has a confirmed addiction to myth, folklore, and dead languages. Poems and short stories of hers have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Locus Award, shortlisted for the SLF Fountain Award, and reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Alchemy of Stars: Rhysling Award Winners Showcase*, *The Best of Not One of Us*, *Fantasy: The Best of the Year 2006*, *Best New Fantasy*, *Best New Romantic Fantasy 2*, and *You Have Time for This: Contemporary American Short-Short Stories*. A respectable amount of her work can be found in *Postcards from the Province of Hyphens* and *Singing Innocence and Experience* (Prime Books). She holds master's degrees in Classics from Brandeis and Yale.

"Lamellae (Hipponion and Cambridge)" was the natural child of waiting for a real-life postcard while proofreading a study of Bacchic-Orphic underworld texts; it is not autobiographical, except insofar as the postcard never arrived. This is what happens to perfectly ordinary behaviors inside my head. Everyone winds up looking for dybbuks, on the wrong side of katabasis. Someday I will write a poem in which the main character simply visits Florida.

For a postcard from that farthest country  
 I waited too long and longer, against the count  
 of candle-burned hours and waking too late  
 for the sun cloud-shy on the cold side of the bed,  
 the warmth I rolled over for faded like its trace.  
 The days thawed into wind and willow catkins  
 and I pored over strangers' palms by the river,  
 peered in at their eyes for a fishtail flick  
 of recognition, the hawthorn-haired boy  
 rolling an antique hoop along the railings,  
 the girl with earbuds and bleached cornrows  
 glad-handing bread for a squabble of goslings,  
 even a soot-black squirrel, if a tsking flirt  
 and scold could be our password, precipitous  
 as plane fruit, a teased returning unknown.  
 As if under the operative regard, a soul  
 could rust visible as lemon ink, carnately  
 disclosed: the last parched promise. Just so,  
 the steaming gates of hell slammed in his face,  
 the soldier who ordered death into his knapsack

*"For a postcard  
 from that farthest  
 country  
 I waited too long  
 and longer"*

trudged the slow snail's spiral to paradise,  
a redeeming wisp of the damned at his back  
and the last sworn to call him beyond the bars  
of chrysoprase and amethyst and immortality:  
between the flies of heaven and the traps of hell  
he roams forgotten, whistling a sad foxfire.  
Who can secure the remembrance of the dead?  
Beneath the pale cypress, you knelt and sipped  
of the welling dark, Lethe sweeter than the blue  
of an infant's opened eyes, and rising stepped  
away from pledges, grudges, loyalties, regrets,  
all unsent intentions spilled to silence,  
all the answer I can await from you.



Sean Melican

## June Reviews

Byrd, Tim. *Doc Wilde and the Frogs of Doom*. G.P. Putnam's Sons: 2009. ISBN: 978-0-399-24783-5

McDonald, Ian. *Cyberabad Days*. Pyr: 2009. ISBN: 978-1-59102-699-0

Bacigalupi, Paolo. *Pump Six and Other Stories*. Nightshade Books: 2008. ISBN: 978-1-59780-133-1

I grew up on the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, the Three Investigators, Encyclopedia Brown, and Tom Swift. Tom Swift belonged in this group of intrepid teens, but unlike the others—teen versions of Agatha Christie novels, Sherlock Holmes, and Ellery Queen—Tom Swift was a juvenile version of the Hugo Gernsback hero-template, and arguably my first brush with science fiction. Within the sf community, there are tired arguments about the graying of the readership, and one of those tired arguments is the lack of gateway stories. It's a fallacy, as there the legions of J.K. Rowling, Christopher Paolini, and Stephanie Meyer fans can attest to. Those, however, are all fantasists.

Into this mix comes Tim Byrd and his Doc Wilde series, starting with *Doc Wilde and the Frogs of Doom*: partly a gentle pastiche as the Wilde family is described as "... long-limbed and golden: golden brown hair, golden tans, and large eyes with glittering irises that seemed composed of layered gold leaf." But like the Tom Swift series, and unlike the popular novels listed above, there is solid, hard-core science driving the story.

This is science fiction. Is it gateway literature? I hope so. Specifically, dark matter and the global disappearance of frogs are linked to...

... well, the Dark Gods of H.P. Lovecraft. Which makes it science fantasy, I suppose.

This is good, heady stuff. The writing flows beautifully, with occasional forays into laugh-out-loudness: "Bartlett [the proper and requisite butler] was familiar with lots of quotations." The characters are properly drawn, interacting with one another and the story in the best of juvenile scientifiction molds. The science is artfully articulated and seamlessly stitched into the fabric of the story. There are good guys and bad guys,

car chases, cliffhangers, betrayals, action sequences to rival Indiana Jones, and an explosion of frogs that defies taxonomy. Oh, and did I mention the name of the Dark God?

Frogon. (Oh my.)

May Doc Wilde live as long as Tom Swift and do for kids what Tom Swift did for me.

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Somewhere between today and tomorrow is an indeterminate series of events that connects the two which allows sf writers to explore internally consistent worlds without worrying about external plausibility. The danger in doing so is exactly that charge of escapism. (And so, the Mundane movement: [mundane-sf.blogspot.com](http://mundane-sf.blogspot.com).)

But two of our writers do make a very solid attempt to link the possibilities of tomorrow with the realities of today.

Ian McDonald's collection of near-future India stories builds on the world created in the brilliant *River of Gods*. The stories don't break much new conceptual ground: "Sanjeev and Robotwallah" echoes the Ender universe; "The Little Goddess" bears the marks of William Gibson; and the new novella "Vishnu at the Cat Circus" (and what a fabulous title!) starts with a setup similar to "Beggars in Spain" and ends with shades of Greg Egan.

But what he does do well and marvelously is map the familiar tropes of science fiction onto the alien concepts of Indian culture. 'Brahmin', for example, shifts linguistically to signify the genetically engineered. And Mr. McDonald lovingly extrapolates the consequences of such engineering. Gestation is twice as long because growth is half as fast, a sort of progeria-in-reverse. So what does an a healthy hormonal-adolescent do when trapped in a healthy physiological-ten-year-old when he marries? In "The Little Goddess" he employs mechanical devices, a story which teaches us how else schizophrenia and Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic" would play out in an alien milieu.

In "An Eligible Boy" we learn that the long term consequence of such engineering brings about a four to one male to female ratio; Mr. McDonald carefully extrapolates the social ramifications. "The Dust Assassin" treats us to a world where water is precious because of global warming. (And let us hear a critic elaborate how sf is here an escapism).

My favorite extrapolation is the one that does not have an easy parallel, the concept of 'nute', a person who chooses to become neither male nor female. Mr. McDonald's nute characters cannot explain the difference, which is so wonderfully alien that it can only be explained as 'stepping away'. The social milieu shifts: nutes do not fill a void or become a replacement for an aware but timid vision (the *Star Trek* episode, "The Outcast", for example, dares all to tell us some people might want to be—gasp!—hetero-

*sexual*.) Instead, they create a new social niche, one that does not easily map onto any currently known phenomenon.

If I have any complaint, it is that the stories tend to be wrapped up with a bow tied neat as you please. But it is the solid extrapolation from today to tomorrow, without the familiar and easy lacunae, that raise Mr. McDonald's stories from the familiar to the important.

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But they are also comforting: even in great change and upheaval, Mr. McDonald's stories tell us, human social structures and behaviors will remain the same.

Paolo Bacigalupi does not subscribe to the idea of comfort. Where McDonald softens the blow of a global water shortage by giving us characters too wealthy to be affected, in "The Calorie Man" and particularly "Yellow Card Man" Mr. Bacigalupi dives into the hardships of the have-nots, extrapolating a world without petrofuels AND without a miraculous discovery of some new form of energy – cheap fusion or balonium. Instead, engines are powered by wound-up springs and the major consortiums are those who own the patents to genetically engineered crops.

"Pop Squad" (such a great double meaning) explores the notion of literally violent re-productive control while "The Fluted Girl" demonstrates the extremes of human behavior when wealth is consolidated in the hands of a few – a story that takes on a whole new level of horror in the recent months of the economic downturn. "The Tamarisk Hunter" stays very close to now, when water is a precious commodity; unlike Mr. McDonald's comfort in the wealthy, Mr. Bacigalupi shows us what the vast majority of the world will face.

"The People of Sand and Slag" is a proud descendant of Harlan Ellison's "A Boy and His Dog." "The Pasho" is a simplistic but evocative exploration of religious intolerance. "Pump Six" again explores human behavior in the face of change. Violent change begets violent behavior. The future is not comforting; unlike Mr. McDonald's future, Mr. Bacigalupi's future does not have assume continuity of human behavior. Finally, "Little Offerings" explores Mr. Bacigalupi's almost obsessive themes of the plasticity of behavior and reproduction.

These are not escapist; they are a reminder that the choices we face tomorrow depend on those we make today, and today, says Mr. Bacigalupi, we are making poor choices. To read this book is to realize the true nature of the future.