## An Exorcism, of Sorts

Roger Zelazny

I just realized that this will be my first story collection since Unicorn Variations was published in 1983. I I’ve since acquired a cat named Amber, a black belt in aikido, two more Hugos, the insides of twenty or so shelf-feet of books, and had an ostracod named after me (Sclerocypris zelaznyi —thank you, Dr. Martens)—and made the mistake of bragging about it to Jack C. Haldeman II, who, it turned out, had had a tapeworm named after him (Hymenapolis haldemanii —one must always watch out for the prototypes of one’s own characters, Jay being partly Fred Cassidy)—to answer those of you who’ve asked about life events. And I still live on the same New Mexico hilltop with the same long-suffering lady, Judy, now an attorney.

I have come to anticipate with some pleasure the selection and assembly of a new story collection, as these days it entails the writing of an introduction—a practice I used to abhor, but which I have discovered causes me to think in ways I ordinarily do not concerning writing itself and my writing in particular. I have discovered that I am beginning to enjoy feeling vaguely philosophical about this activity for the space of several page-hours every few years.

With some of my stories a character such as Dilvish, Kalifriki, Mari, or Conrad comes in out of the night, takes my attention hostage, and waits. Circumstances then suggest, events coalesce, and the story flows like a shadow. Generally, tales such as this are longer pieces; novels, even. Once I’ve seen their shapes, they exist as ghosts for me till I’ve pinned them to paper.

Other times, an idea presents itself first and I have to go looking for the characters to run it—as with, say, “Night Kings,” when everyone in it answered my mental Help Wanted ad within a half hour or so of the idea’s arrival. This sort of thing often happens with short stories.

Finally, there is the striking-image story. But first, let me pause and explain something:

I read some poetry every day. It’s the closest thing I can think of for a prose writer in the way of exercising the writing faculties as something like a daily run through a t’ai chi form might the body. And there was a time long ago when I favored literalness and almost total coherence in poetry. I yielded on this matter in being able to enjoy a poem for language or imagery alone way back when I encountered Dylan Thomas. Still, this was an occasional thing at first, and not too many others could produce that effect for me. Rilke could do it. A. R. Ammons could, sometimes. Some of Lorca’s stuff could, also. But it wasn’t really till I came across W. S. Merwin’s work that I realized I could be consistently happy with imagery alone when it proceeded from a person of extremely powerful vision and a personality that touched things with a tone I found somehow congenial, reminding me again of someone else’s observation: “The imaged Word, it is, that holds / Hushed willows anchored in its glow.” And this sort of thing has done its work on me over the years.

I’m a sucker for an appealing image, and there are those tales or sections of books born of a striking image— the robot crashing through the graveyard of worlds in “The Man Who Loved the Faioli,” the Hangman moving up the Mississippi River like the Angel of Death, Sam’s descent into Hellwell in “Lord of Light,” the destruction of the World Machine in “Jack of Shadows,” Time considered as a superhighway in “Roadmarks.”

Of these three doorways into fiction—for me—character stories tend to be the most powerful in all respects, though stories born of images are often almost magically potent and make for much fun in the writing. Also, when the striking image combines with the story of character or with an idea story, something good generally comes of it.

Generally—not always. Science fiction is often referred to as a “literature of ideas.” This does not, however, mean that every story proceeding from an idea is automatically one of the elect examples of the species, even when it emerges from the latest of scientific notions. Idea stories may go any which way, depending on who or what answers the Help Wanted ad. In fact, I occasionally have a strange (nonnegotiable) labor problem: The wrong characters will sometimes turn up and refuse to leave, staging a sit-down strike on the premises, i.e., the idea. I know they belong in another story, and they’re ruining the one they’re trying to take over. Will they listen? No. It’s like something out of Pirandello. They proceed to muck the idea up so much with their presence that no one else can then fill the bill. So I usually walk away in disgust and try to forget the whole thing. There are lots of others where that came from. Who needs that sort of aggravation?

But they do sometimes come back to nag and tease—

I’ve got one that won’t go away, and it’s occurred to me that a telling of the story I can’t tell may be even more fun than telling it, if you follow me. I want to destroy it, I want to exorcise its incendiary ghosts.

It was not all that long ago that I read of the new mappings of the earth’s interior by a kind of seismic tomography, with the location of upside-down analogs of surface features on the core—anticontinents, antioceans, antimountain ranges. As I considered this, it occurred to me that if mountain ranges can impress the earth’s core with inverted surface geography, why wouldn’t an artifact of sufficient size do the same? A major city has to mass as much as some mountain ranges. Supposing there’s an anti-Manhattan down there? Or an anti-Paris? Or an anti-London? How could one get at such a situation to exploit it fictionally? I turned to Life Beyond Earth, by Gerald Feinberg and Rupert Shapiro (William Morrow, 1980), a fun book full of hypothetical species designed to make out in a great variety of environments. Came across one I might borrow, too—a “magmobe,” probably thermophagic or making its living off of radiation pockets. Not the most easily justifiable of life-forms—still, the focus would be on the antigeography of the core, which was now generating great images to go along with the idea.

I could give these slow-moving, magma-swimming creatures commensurately long life spans, I decided, so that they could observe the (to them) speeded-up features of the antisurface, as an anti-Carthage, anti-Constantinople, anti-Lisbon, anti-San Francisco, anti-Hiroshima flashed by. And then …

But I wasn’t happy with the magmobes—which, I suppose, was silly—and then I discovered that they wouldn’t go away. Right. I had an idea and some pretty images, with something I visualized as fiery trilobites trailing lava all over the place. (All right, “magma.”) I wanted to retire them and start over again, but they wouldn’t let me. I know that this occurred in mid-July because I’ve a note in my diary on attending a performance of Cosi Fan Tutti at the Santa Fe Opera on July 15, where I ran into Suzy McKee Charnas and her husband, Steve. I had a terribly strong impulse to say, “Suzy, I’ve got this great idea you can have free. Never mind why.” But the lights were blinking and there was no time. And I didn’t run into her afterward, and then I decided to keep the idea in case I figured a way to beat the trilobites. I never did, and the more I think of it, it’s probably just as well. I can still close my eyes and see the anti-Manhattan skyline, a fiery heaven flowing like the Day of Wrath beneath it (with strains of anti-Gershwin blackmassing a soundtrack?)—and then these burning, segmented fossil-types come swimming by, making deep chuckling sounds. What if the damned thing were like a computer virus in one’s writing program?

I’d hate to give it to a fine writer like Suzy, who is also a friend. Exposing it this way, though, should simply destroy it, I hope.

Anyway—as I was saying—there are for me stories of character, stories of idea and stories of image. These refer to the portals by which they enter my universe. The completed product, in the best of all possible worlds, should contain all three elements. But two is okay. And I’ll even settle for one on a bad day when I need the money.

Otherwise, when things don’t quite mesh, I enjoy spending time with the ghosts, especially during my morning coffee break, while I’m watching the mountains.

So much for my writing quirks.

I want to include something here on another matter. The amount of mail I’ve been receiving from readers has picked up quite a bit recently, and there is simply no way that I can respond to it and still conduct my life and my writing in a relatively sane fashion. I can no longer even attempt to answer questions about my work, myself, my feelings on particular matters. I simply want to say thank you, here and now, to those who’ve taken the time to drop me a line. I wish I had more time, too.

Thanks for wondering.