



FEATURING STORIES BY
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MICHAEL SWANWICK
CATHERYNNE M. VALENTE
AND MANY OTHERS

THE BEST
SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY
OF THE YEAR

VOLUME SIX

EDITED BY JONATHAN STRAHAN

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SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY
OF THE YEAR

VOLUME SIX

Also Edited by Jonathan Strahan

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THE BEST
SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY
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EDITED BY JONATHAN STRAHAN

NIGHT SHADE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

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© 2012 by Jonathan Strahan

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*For Ross E. Lockhart and Marty Halpern, the unsung heroes of
these books, with gratitude.*

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INTRODUCTION

JONATHAN STRAHAN

2011 was a strange, interesting year that left me in little doubt that science fiction and fantasy short fiction, however you might define it, is in pretty good health. A flood of stories appeared in an enormous variety of venues, print and electronic, around the world during the year. In my annual year-in-review last year, trade magazine *Locus* reported that about 3,000 stories of genre interest had been published in 2010, and it continues to be my belief that underestimates the true number by as much as a factor of five.

As always, there is a great urge to look at the tiny selection of stories collected in these pages—just thirty-one of those thousands of stories—and look for trends and make prognostications about how the science fiction and fantasy field is developing. I've always been a little uncomfortable doing this because my view of the field seems to steadfastly resist such efforts. Still, some trends are becoming clear and, despite what news from book and magazine publishing might suggest, the genre short story continues to appear to be in good health. There are two trends that I'd comment on here.

First, pleasingly, and importantly for the continuing health of the genre, science fiction and fantasy is becoming more diverse. I find myself encountering more and more excellent work written by women and men who are not straight or white or Christian or just from the English-speaking publishing world. That increased diversity, which was clearly evident this year, leads to new and different stories being told, and that can only be a good thing.

Second, while 2011 continued to see genre boundaries blur and mix, something that has happened throughout the modern history of the field but which has seemed more prevalent in the last five years, I was pleased to see evidence that the SF story might be staking out some new ground for itself. I've been increasingly concerned about the market for science fiction short stories, so I'm encouraged to see SF magazine *Lightspeed*, which launched in 2010, have a strong first year, Solaris launched a new annual SF anthology series, *Solaris Rising*, and MIT's *Technology Review* debuted an annual SF anthology/magazine, *trsf*, all focussed on what my colleague and friend Gardner Dozois would call "pure quill SF." Combined with the NASA/Tor announcement that they would be publishing a series of science-fiction-themed books as "NASA Inspired Works of Fiction," and author Neal Stephenson's efforts to highlight similar ground, there's cause for real optimism that the ongoing discussion that the SF field will continue into the future.

That said, it was a far from encouraging year in publishing. The major stories of 2010—the rise of e-books and the decline of print book publishing/bookselling—were the major stories of 2011.

Possibly the most dramatic story was the closure and liquidation of the Borders chain of bookstores which reduced the amount of shelf space devoted to selling books in the US by about 30%. This was underscored by reports that Barnes & Noble, the other major chain, was reducing its bookshelf space and that Canadian book distributor H. B. Fenn had filed for bankruptcy, leaving many publishers with heavy losses. In Australia, the REDGroup collapsed, closing all of its Borders stores and a number of its Angus & Robertson stores. The most commonly reported culprit for these closures was the rise of e-books. While these reports don't really bear up under close scrutiny, it's undeniable that e-book sales are changing publishing irrevocably. E-reader and tablet sales boomed during 2011, with annual sales projected to hit 25-30 million units, three times the number sold in 2010. E-books sales rose dramatically throughout the year too, with the Association of American Publishers reporting that sales had grown by 1039% since 2007, and now represent 13.6% of adult fiction book sales in the US. A good example of this was George R. R. Martin's September induction into the Kindle Million Club, selling a million e-books for the device (his *A Dance with Dragons* reportedly sold 300,000 copies on its first day, and 50% of those sales were e-books). These sales undeniably meant bad news for print booksellers, and there's a lot more uncertainty ahead, but even in the face of all of this change, it's hard not to believe that readers will still find stories.

The magazine market was, if anything, stranger. In April *Locus* classified just five print magazines as "professional"—*Analog*, *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Interzone*, and *Realms of Fantasy*—and those magazines published just thirty-eight issues between them. Where circulation figures were available, they showed a significant and continuing drop in sales. However, there is cause for optimism here too, with reports of steadily rising digital sales. Unsurprisingly, *Realms of Fantasy*, which opened and closed twice in recent years, suffered a 51% drop in sales between 2008 and 2010, and ultimately closed which must surely be a final time late in the year. Unlike their print counterparts, online magazines reported steadily growing readerships, with Hugo winner *Clarkesworld* reporting to *Locus* that it had about 21,000 readers per issue, *Fantasy* about 15,000, *Lightspeed* about 20,000, *Apex* around 12,000, and *Tor.com* around 300,000 per month (though this figure covered the whole site and not just fiction). Figures weren't available for other major online magazines, *Subterranean* and *Strange Horizons*, but both reported healthy readerships. The only question remains how these fine magazines are converting their growing readerships into sustainable businesses. That they do so is, in my opinion, critical to the future of short fiction. I should also note that in August Marvin Kaye bought *Weird Tales* from Wildside Press, announcing he would edit the magazine himself. *Weird Tales* won a number of awards and great acclaim in recent years under the editorship of Ann VanderMeer, whose editorial voice will be sorely missed, while in October John Joseph Adams bought both *Lightspeed* and *Fantasy* magazines from Prime Books.

Last year I found most of the stories I liked in magazines, but noted that with the wide variety of venues producing excellent work no single source dominated. This year that trend towards diversification continued. About half of the stories collected here come from the pages or screens of magazines, a few from author collections, and the remainder from the pages of anthologies.

As I noted last year, we are still at a point in the digital era that we find ourselves bound, it seems to me, to discuss whether magazines appear in print or online. This doesn't seem a particularly useful distinction to me, given that at the end of the day a magazine is a magazine and an issue is an issue. That said, the majority of the stories from magazines that I liked in 2011 came from online sources. Last year *Subterranean* had a particularly strong year, and it dominated again in 2011. Editor Bill Schafer proved that he has a canny editorial eye, delivering a terrific mix of fantasy, oddball SF, and other stuff, including major stories by Karen Joy Fowler, Catherynne M. Valente, Kelly Link, K.

Parker, and many more. The Gwenda Bond guest-edited YA issue was a highlight and was uniformly strong. *Subterranean* was, on balance, in my opinion the best single source of top-notch fiction in 2011. John Joseph Adams's *Lightspeed* proved that it has quickly developed into a major market for SF, featuring excellent stories by old hands like Robert Reed and Nancy Kress, alongside newcomers like An Owomoyela, Ken Liu, and Genevieve Valentine. *Tor.com* was, again, slightly less impressive but when it was good it was very, very good, and included a terrific story by Michael Swanwick, and very good stories by Charlie Jane Anders, Ken Macleod, and others. Finally, Hugo Award winner *Clarkesworld* has clearly evolved into one of the major magazines in the field. This year it featured top-notch stories from Nnedi Okorafor, E. Lily Yu, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Gord Sellar, and others.

Of the print magazines, *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* again had the best year producing terrific work by established regulars like Paul McAuley, Kij Johnson, Robert Reed, and Michael Swanwick, alongside newer writers like Nancy Fulda and Ken Liu. Editor Sheila Williams doesn't really get enough credit for the efforts she's put in over recent years to broaden and redefine *Asimov's* but it again showed this year. Gordon Van Gelder's *Fantasy & Science Fiction* had another good year with strong stories by M. Rickert, Ken Liu, and Geoff Ryman. It remains a reliable source of quality fiction. I'm not quite sure how to classify MIT Press's *trsf*. It's an annual magazine, I think, but may be classified in some places as an anthology. Regardless, it featured excellent SF from Cory Doctorow, Ken Macleod, Pat Cadigan, Gwyneth Jones, and Elizabeth Bear. I strongly recommend it and look forward to future issues. There were many other print magazines published, but these were the ones that struck me as the best.

It seemed to me that 2011 was a particularly good year for anthologies. I should offer the caveat here that I edited several anthologies that appeared during the year, so I offer without comment several anthologies *Life on Mars* and *Engineering Infinity*, and mixed SF/F anthology *Eclipse Four*. All contain work I think deserves your attention. The best original anthology of the year was, without question, Gavin Grant and Kelly Link's superb *Steampunk! An Anthology of Fantastically Rich and Strange Stories*. I have grave doubts about how it parses as steampunk, but it includes some of the very best stories of the year by Libba Bray, Dylan Horrocks, Kelly Link, M. T. Anderson, Christopher Rowe, and others. There literally isn't a bad story here and if you buy only one original anthology of the year, this should be it. Jack Dann and Nick Gevers's *Ghosts by Gaslight* occupies similar territory and, if it's not quite as strong, is still a very good book with strong stories by Paul Park, Theodor Goss, James Morrow, Garth Nix, and others. I greatly enjoyed Holly Black and Ellen Kushner's *Welcome to Bordertown*, a shared-world fantasy anthology with strong work from Kushner, Black, Catherynne M. Valente, and others. Essential for readers who've been to Bordertown before and a great introduction for others. I don't cover horror in this book, though I perhaps include a little too much dark fiction for the comfort of my colleague and dear friend Ellen Datlow. For this reason I simply mention that Datlow had a banner year, editing *Blood and Other Cravings*, *Teeth*, *Supernatural Noir*, and *Naked City*, all of which were excellent. And since I'm mentioning horror I should add that Stephen Jones's *A Book of Horrors* is one of the landmark horror anthologies of recent years. Finally, Jeff VanderMeer and Ann VanderMeer's *The Thackery T. Lambshead Cabinet of Curiosities* was, in my opinion, even better than their first Lambshead book, and featured great work by Jeffrey Ford, Garth Nix, and others.

I was very pleased to see more SF anthologies published this year. Setting aside my own two titles I was pleasantly impressed with Ian Whates's *Solaris Rising* and thought Marty Halpern's *Alien Contact* and Gordon van Gelder's *Welcome to the Greenhouse* were very good indeed.

There were also two stand-out retrospective anthologies of weird fiction published during the year.

John Pelan's *The Century's Best Horror Fiction* was a strong work, but the most impressive was Ar
VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer's staggeringly enormous *The Weird*, which is likely to stand as th
definitive anthology on the subject for many years.

Here in Australia, a small but excellent handful of books were published by independent publishers
Twelfth Planet Press launched its Twelve Planets series of collections with Tansy Rayner Roberts
excellent *Love and Romanpunk* and Lucy Sussex's *Thief of Lives*. It's a crazily ambitious project and
seems to be coming off in spades, underscored by publisher Alisa Krasnostein being awarded the
World Fantasy Award for her work. Long-established independent press Ticonderoga Publications
also published several top-notch books in 2011, and their best was *Matilda Told Such Dreadful Lies*
The Essential Lucy Sussex, which belongs on every good bookshelf.

I could go on and talk about reprint anthologies, collections and such but I'm running long as it is
so instead I'll simply say it was another fine year, and let you get to reading the wonderful stories that
feature in this year's book. As always, I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I've enjoyed
compiling them. See you next year!

Jonathan Strahan
Perth, Australia
November 2011

THE CASE OF DEATH AND HONEY

NEIL GAIMAN

*Neil Gaiman was born in England and worked as a freelance journalist before co-editing *Ghastly Beyond Belief* (with Kim Newman) and writing *Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion*. He started writing graphic novels and comics with *Violent Cases* in 1987, and with the seventy-five installments of award-winning series *The Sandman* established himself as one of the most important comics writers of his generation. His first novel, *Good Omens* (with Terry Pratchett), appeared in 1991, and was followed by *Neverwhere*, *Stardust*, *American Gods*, *Coraline*, and *Anansi Boys*. His most recent novel is *The Graveyard Book*. Gaiman's work has won the Caldecott, Newbery, Hugo, World Fantasy, Bram Stoker, Locus, Geffen, International Horror Guild, Mythopoeic, and Will Eisner Comic Industry awards. Gaiman currently lives near Minneapolis.*

It was a mystery in those parts for years what had happened to the old white ghost man, the barbarian with his huge shoulder bag. There were some who supposed him to have been murdered and, later, they dug up the floor of Old Gao's little shack high on the hillside, looking for treasure but they found nothing but ash and fire-blackened tin trays.

This was after Old Gao himself had vanished, you understand, and before his son came back from Lijiang to take over the beehives on the hill.

This is the problem, wrote *Holmes in 1899*: ennui. And lack of interest. Or rather, it all becomes too easy. When the joy of solving crimes is the challenge, the possibility that you cannot, why then the crimes have something to hold your attention. But when every crime is soluble, and so easily soluble at that, why then there is no point in solving them.

Look: this man has been murdered. Well then, someone murdered him. He was murdered for one or more of a tiny handful of reasons: he inconvenienced someone, or he had something that someone wanted, or he had angered someone. Where is the challenge in that?

I would read in the dailies an account of a crime that had the police baffled, and I would find that I had solved it, in broad strokes not in detail, before I had finished the article. Crime is too soluble. It dissolves. Why call the police and tell them the answers to their mysteries? I leave it, over and over again, as a challenge for them, as it is no challenge for me.

I am only alive when I perceive a challenge.

The bees of the misty hills, hills so high that they were sometimes called a mountain, were humming in the pale summer sun as they moved from spring flower to spring flower on the slope. Old Gao listened to them without pleasure. His cousin, in the village across the valley, had many dozens of beehives, all of them already filling with honey, even this early in the year; also, the honey was as white as snow-jade. Old Gao did not believe that the white honey tasted any better than the yellow or light brown honey that his own bees produced, although his bees produced it in meagre quantities, but he

cousin could sell his white honey for twice what Old Gao could get for the best honey he had.

On his cousin's side of the hill, the bees were earnest, hardworking, golden brown workers, who brought pollen and nectar back to the hives in enormous quantities. Old Gao's bees were ill-tempered and black, shiny as bullets, who produced as much honey as they needed to get through the winter and only a little more: enough for Old Gao to sell from door to door, to his fellow villagers, one small lump of honeycomb at a time. He would charge more for the brood-comb, filled with bee larvae, sweet-tasting morsels of protein, when he had brood-comb to sell, which was rarely, for the bees were angry and sullen and everything they did, they did as little as possible, including make more bees, and Old Gao was always aware that each piece of brood-comb he sold meant bees he would not have to make honey for him to sell later in the year.

Old Gao was as sullen and as sharp as his bees. He had had a wife once, but she had died at childbirth. The son who had killed her lived for a week, then died himself. There would be nobody to say the funeral rites for Old Gao, no one to clean his grave for festivals or to put offerings upon it. He would die unremembered, as unremarkable and as unremarked as his bees.

The old white stranger came over the mountains in late spring of that year, as soon as the roads were passable, with a huge brown bag strapped to his shoulders. Old Gao heard about him before he met him.

"There is a barbarian who is looking at bees," said his cousin.

Old Gao said nothing. He had gone to his cousin to buy a pailful of second-rate comb, damaged and uncapped and liable soon to spoil. He bought it cheaply to feed to his own bees, and if he sold some of it in his own village, no one was any the wiser. The two men were drinking tea in Gao's cousin's hut on the hillside. From late spring, when the first honey started to flow, until first frost, Gao's cousin had left his house in the village and went to live in the hut on the hillside, to live and to sleep beside his beehives, for fear of thieves. His wife and his children would take the honeycomb and the bottles of snow-white honey down the hill to sell.

Old Gao was not afraid of thieves. The shiny black bees of Old Gao's hives would have no mercy on anyone who disturbed them. He slept in his village, unless it was time to collect the honey.

"I will send him to you," said Gao's cousin. "Answer his questions, show him your bees, and he will pay you."

"He speaks our tongue?"

"His dialect is atrocious. He said he learned to speak from sailors, and they were mostly Cantonese. But he learns fast, although he is old."

Old Gao grunted, uninterested in sailors. It was late in the morning, and there was still four hours of walking across the valley to his village, in the heat of the day. He finished his tea. His cousin drank a finer tea than Old Gao had ever been able to afford.

He reached his hives while it was still light, put the majority of the uncapped honey into his weaker hives. He had eleven hives. His cousin had over a hundred. Old Gao was stung twice doing this, on the back of the hand and the back of the neck. He had been stung over a thousand times in his life. He could not have told you how many times. He barely noticed the stings of other bees, but the stings of his own black bees always hurt, even if they no longer swelled or burned.

The next day a boy came to Old Gao's house in the village, to tell him that there was someone—and that the someone was a giant foreigner—who was asking for him. Old Gao simply grunted. He walked across the village with the boy at his steady pace, until the boy ran ahead, and soon was lost to sight.

Old Gao found the stranger sitting drinking tea on the porch of the Widow Zhang's house. Old Gao had known the Widow Zhang's mother, fifty years ago. She had been a friend of his wife. Now she

was long dead. He did not believe any one who had known his wife still lived. The Widow Zhar fetched Old Gao tea, introduced him to the elderly barbarian, who had removed his bag and sat beside the small table.

They sipped their tea. The barbarian said, "I wish to see your bees."

Mycroft's death was the end of Empire, and no one knew it but the two of us. He lay in that pale room, his only covering a thin white sheet, as if he were already becoming a ghost from the popular imagination, and needed only eye-holes in the sheet to finish the impression.

I had imagined that his illness might have wasted him away, but he seemed huger than ever, his fingers swollen into white sausages.

I said, "Good evening, Mycroft. Dr. Hopkins tells me you have two weeks to live, and stated that I was under no circumstances to inform you of this."

"The man's a dunderhead," said Mycroft, his breath coming in huge wheezes between the words. "I will not make it to Friday."

"Saturday at least," I said.

"You always were an optimist. No, Thursday evening and then I shall be nothing more than an exercise in practical geometry for Hopkins and the funeral directors at Snigsby and Malterson, who will have the challenge, given the narrowness of the doors and corridors, of getting my carcass out of this room and out of the building."

"I had wondered," I said. "Particularly given the staircase. But they will take out the window frame and lower you to the street like a grand piano."

Mycroft snorted at that. Then, "I am fifty-four years old, Sherlock. In my head is the British Government. Not the ballot and hustings nonsense, but the business of the thing. There is no one else who knows what the troop movements in the hills of Afghanistan have to do with the desolate shores of North Wales, no one else who sees the whole picture. Can you imagine the mess that this and their children will make of Indian Independence?"

I had not previously given any thought to the matter. "Will India become independent?"

"Inevitably. In thirty years, at the outside. I have written several recent memoranda on the topic. As I have on so many other subjects. There are memoranda on the Russian Revolution—that'll be along within the decade, I'll wager—and on the German problem and... oh, so many others. Not that I expect them to be read or understood." Another wheeze. My brother's lungs rattled like the windows in an empty house. "You know, if I were to live, the British Empire might last another thousand years, bringing peace and improvement to the world."

In the past, especially when I was a boy, whenever I heard Mycroft make a grandiose pronouncement like that I would say something to bait him. But not now, not on his death-bed. And also I was certain that he was not speaking of the Empire as it was, flawed and fallible construct of flawed and fallible people, but of a British Empire that existed only in his head, a glorious force of civilisation and universal prosperity.

I do not, and did not, believe in empires. But I believed in Mycroft.

Mycroft Holmes. Four-and-fifty years of age. He had seen in the new century but the Queen would still outlive him by seven months. She was almost thirty years older than he was, and in every way a tough old bird. I wondered to myself whether this unfortunate end might have been avoided.

Mycroft said, "You are right, of course, Sherlock. Had I forced myself to exercise. Had I lived on bird-seed and cabbages instead of porterhouse steak. Had I taken up country dancing along with a wife and a puppy and in all other ways behaved contrary to my nature, I might have bought myself another dozen or so years. But what is that in the scheme of things? Little enough. And sooner or later, I would enter my dotage. No. I am of the opinion that it would take two hundred years to train a functioning Civil Service, alone a secret service..."

I had said nothing.

The pale room had no decorations on the wall of any kind. None of Mycroft's citations. No illustrations, photographs, or paintings. I compared his austere digs to my own cluttered rooms in Baker Street and I wondered, not for the first time, at Mycroft's mind. I needed nothing on the outside, for it was all on the inside—everything he had seen, everything he had experienced, everything he had read. He could close his eyes and walk through the National Gallery, or browse the British Museum Reading Room—or, more likely, compare intelligence reports from the edge of the Empire with the price of wool in Wigan and the unemployment statistics in Hove, and then, from this and only this, order a man promoted or a traitor's quiet death.

Mycroft wheezed enormously, and then he said, "It is a crime, Sherlock."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A crime. It is a crime, my brother, as heinous and as monstrous as any of the penny-dreadful massacres you have investigated. A crime against the world, against nature, against order."

"I must confess, my dear fellow, that I do not entirely follow you. What is a crime?"

"My death," said Mycroft, "in the specific. And Death in general." He looked into my eyes. "I mean it," he said. "Now isn't that a crime worth investigating, Sherlock, old fellow? One that might keep your attention for longer than it will take you to establish that the poor fellow who used to conduct the brass band in Hyde Park was murdered by the third cornet using a preparation of strychnine."

“Arsenic,” I corrected him, almost automatically.

“I think you will find,” wheezed Mycroft, “that the arsenic, while present, had in fact fallen in flakes from the green-painted bandstand itself onto his supper. Symptoms of arsenical poison are a complete red-herring. No, it was strychnine that did for the poor fellow.”

Mycroft said no more to me that day or ever. He breathed his last the following Thursday, late in the afternoon, and on the Friday the worthies of Snigsby and Malterson removed the casing from the window of the pale room and lowered my brother’s remains into the street, like a grand piano.

His funeral service was attended by me, by my friend Watson, by our cousin Harriet and—in accordance with Mycroft’s expressed wishes—by no one else. The Civil Service, the Foreign Office, even the Diogenes Club—these institutions and their representatives were absent. Mycroft had been reclusive in life; he was to be equally as reclusive in death. So it was the three of us, and the parson who had not known my brother, and had no conception that it was the more omniscient arm of the British Government itself that was consigning to the grave.

Four burly men held fast to the ropes and lowered my brother’s remains to their final resting place, and did, I daresay, their utmost not to curse at the weight of the thing. I tipped each of them half a crown.

Mycroft was dead at fifty-four, and, as they lowered him into his grave, in my imagination I could still hear his clipped, grating wheeze as he seemed to be saying, “Now *there* is a crime worth investigating.”

The stranger’s accent was not too bad, although his vocabulary seemed limited, but he seemed to be talking in the local dialect, or something near to it. He was a fast learner. Old Gao hawked and spat into the dust of the street. He said nothing. He did not wish to take the stranger up the hillside; he did not wish to disturb his bees. In Old Gao’s experience, the less he bothered his bees, the better they did. And if they stung the barbarian, what then?

The stranger’s hair was silver-white, and sparse; his nose, the first barbarian nose that Old Gao had seen, was huge and curved and put Old Gao in mind of the beak of an eagle; his skin was tanned to the same colour as Old Gao’s own, and was lined deeply. Old Gao was not certain that he could read the barbarian’s face as he could read the face of a person, but he thought the man seemed most serious and, perhaps, unhappy.

“Why?”

“I study bees. Your brother tells me you have big black bees here. Unusual bees.”

Old Gao shrugged. He did not correct the man on the relationship with his cousin.

The stranger asked Old Gao if he had eaten, and when Gao said that he had not the stranger asked the Widow Zhang to bring them soup and rice and whatever was good that she had in her kitchen, which turned out to be a stew of black tree-fungus and vegetables and tiny transparent river fish, little bigger than tadpoles. The two men ate in silence. When they had finished eating, the stranger said, “I would be honoured if you would show me your bees.”

Old Gao said nothing, but the stranger paid the Widow Zhang well and he put his bag on his back. Then he waited, and, when Old Gao began to walk, the stranger followed him. He carried his bag as if it weighed nothing to him. He was strong for an old man, thought Old Gao, and wondered whether all such barbarians were so strong.

“Where are you from?”

“England,” said the stranger.

Old Gao remembered his father telling him about a war with the English, over trade and over opium, but that was long ago. They walked up the hillside, that was, perhaps, a mountainside. It was steep, and the hillside was too rocky to be cut into fields. Old Gao tested the stranger’s pace, walking faster than usual, and the stranger kept up with him, with his pack on his back.

The stranger stopped several times, however. He stopped to examine flowers—the small white flowers that bloomed in early spring elsewhere in the valley, but in late spring here on the side of the hill. There was a bee on one of the flowers, and the stranger knelt and observed it. Then he reached into his pocket, produced a large magnifying glass and examined the bee through it, and made notes

a small pocket notebook, in an incomprehensible writing.

~~Old Gao had never seen a magnifying glass before, and he leaned in to look at the bee, so black and~~
so strong and so very different from the bees elsewhere in that valley.

“One of your bees?”

“Yes,” said Old Gao. “Or one like it.”

“Then we shall let her find her own way home,” said the stranger, and he did not disturb the bee,
and he put away the magnifying glass.

The Croft East Dene, Sussex
August 11th, 1903

My dear Watson,

I have taken our discussion of this afternoon to heart, considered it carefully, and am prepared to modify my previous opinions.

I am amenable to your publishing your account of the incidents of 1903, specifically of the final case before my retirement, under the following conditions.

In addition to the usual changes that you would make to disguise actual people and places, I would suggest that you replace the entire scenario we encountered (I speak of Professor Presbury’s garden. I shall not write of it further here) with monkey glands, or a similar extract from the testes of an ape or lemur, sent by some foreign mystery-man. Perhaps the monkey-extract could have the effect of making Professor Presbury move like an ape—he could be some kind of “creeping man,” perhaps?—or possibly make him able to clamber up the sides of buildings and up trees. I would suggest that he could grow a tail, but this might be too fanciful even for you, Watson, although no more fanciful than many of the rococo additions you have made in your histories to otherwise humdrum events in my life and work.

In addition, I have written the following speech, to be delivered by myself, at the end of your narrative. Please make certain that something much like this is there, in which I inveigh against living too long, and the foolish urges that push foolish people to do foolish things to prolong their foolish lives:

There is a very real danger to humanity, if one could live forever, if youth were simply there for the taking, that the material, the sensual, the worldly would all prolong their worthless lives. The spiritual would not avoid the call to something higher. It would be the survival of the least fit. What sort of cesspool may not our poor world become?

Something along those lines, I fancy, would set my mind at rest.

Let me see the finished article, please, before you submit it to be published.

I remain, old friend, your most obedient servant,

Sherlock Holmes

They reached Old Gao’s bees late in the afternoon. The beehives were gray wooden boxes piled behind a structure so simple it could barely be called a shack. Four posts, a roof, and hangings of oiled cloth that served to keep out the worst of the spring rains and the summer storms. A small charcoal brazier

served for warmth, if you placed a blanket over it and yourself, and to cook upon; a wooden pallet the center of the structure, with an ancient ceramic pillow, served as a bed on the occasions that Old Gao slept up on the mountainside with the bees, particularly in the autumn, when he harvested most of the honey. There was little enough of it compared to the output of his cousin's hives, but it was enough that he would sometimes spend two or three days waiting for the comb that he had crushed and stirred into a slurry to drain through the cloth into the buckets and pots that he had carried up the mountainside. Finally he would melt the remainder, the sticky wax and bits of pollen and dirt and bees, in a pot, to extract the beeswax, and he would give the sweet water back to the bees. Then he would carry the honey and the wax blocks down the hill to the village to sell.

He showed the barbarian stranger the eleven hives, watched impassively as the stranger put on a veil and opened a hive, examining first the bees, then the contents of a brood box, and finally the queen, through his magnifying glass. He showed no fear, no discomfort: in everything he did the stranger's movements were gentle and slow, and he was not stung, nor did he crush or hurt a single bee. This impressed Old Gao. He had assumed that barbarians were inscrutable, unreadable, mysterious creatures, but this man seemed overjoyed to have encountered Gao's bees. His eyes were shining.

Old Gao fired up the brazier, to boil some water. Long before the charcoal was hot, however, the stranger had removed from his bag a contraption of glass and metal. He had filled the upper half of it with water from the stream, lit a flame, and soon a kettleful of water was steaming and bubbling. Then the stranger took two tin mugs from his bag, and some green tea leaves wrapped in paper, and dropped the leaves into the mug, and poured on the water.

It was the finest tea that Old Gao had ever drunk: better by far than his cousin's tea. They drank cross-legged on the floor.

"I would like to stay here for the summer, in this house," said the stranger.

"Here? This is not even a house," said Old Gao. "Stay down in the village. Widow Zhang has a room."

"I will stay here," said the stranger. "Also I would like to rent one of your beehives."

Old Gao had not laughed in years. There were those in the village who would have thought such a thing impossible. But still, he laughed then, a guffaw of surprise and amusement that seemed to have been jerked out of him.

"I am serious," said the stranger. He placed four silver coins on the ground between them. Old Gao had not seen where he got them from: three silver Mexican pesos, a coin that had become popular in China years before, and a large silver yuan. It was as much money as Old Gao might see in a year selling honey. "For this money," said the stranger, "I would like someone to bring me food: even three days should suffice."

Old Gao said nothing. He finished his tea and stood up. He pushed through the oiled cloth to the clearing high on the hillside. He walked over to the eleven hives: each consisted of two brood boxes with one, two, three or, in one case, even four boxes above that. He took the stranger to the hive with four boxes above it, each box filled with frames of comb.

"This hive is yours," he said.

They were plant extracts. That was obvious. They worked, in their way, for a limited time, but they were also extremely poisonous. But watching poor Professor Presbury during those final days—his skin, his eyes, his gait—had convinced me that he had not been on entirely the wrong path.

I took his case of seeds, of pods, of roots, and of dried extracts and I thought. I pondered. I cogitated. I reflected. It was an intellectual problem, and could be solved, as my old maths tutor had always sought to demonstrate to me, by intellect.

They were plant extracts, and they were lethal.

Methods I used to render them non-lethal rendered them quite ineffective.

It was not a three pipe problem. I suspect it was something approaching a three hundred pipe problem before I hit upon an initial idea—a notion, perhaps—of a way of processing the plants that might allow them to be ingested by human beings.

It was not a line of investigation that could easily be followed in Baker Street. So it was, in the autumn of 1903, that I moved to Sussex, and spent the winter reading every book and pamphlet and monograph so far published, I fancy, upon the care and keeping of bees. And so it was that in early April of 1904, armed only with theoretical knowledge, I took delivery from a local farmer of my first package of bees.

I wonder, sometimes, that Watson did not suspect anything. Then again, Watson's glorious obtuseness has never ceased to surprise me, and sometimes, indeed, I had relied upon it. Still, he knew what I was like when I had no work to occupy my mind, no case to solve. He knew my lassitude, my black moods when I had no case to occupy me.

So how could he believe that I had truly retired? He knew my methods.

Indeed, Watson was there when I took receipt of my first bees. He watched, from a safe distance, as I poured the bees from the package into the empty, waiting hive, like slow, humming, gentle treacle.

He saw my excitement, and he saw nothing.

And the years passed, and we watched the Empire crumble, we watched the Government unable to govern, we watched those poor heroic boys sent to the trenches of Flanders to die, all these things confirmed me in my opinions. I was not doing the right thing. I was doing the only thing.

As my face grew unfamiliar, and my finger-joints swelled and ached (not so much as they might have done, though, which I attributed to the many bee-stings I had received in my first few years as an investigative apiarist) and as Watson, dear, brave, obtuse Watson, faded with time and paled and shrank, his skin becoming grayer, his mustache becoming the same shade of gray, my resolve to conclude my researches did not diminish. If anything, it increased.

So: my initial hypotheses were tested upon the South Downs, in an apiary of my own devising, each hive modelled upon Langstroth's. I do believe that I made every mistake that ever a novice beekeeper could or has ever made, and in addition, due to my investigations, an entire hiveful of mistakes that no beekeeper has ever made before, or shall, I trust, ever make again. "The Case of the Poisoned Beehive," Watson might have called many of them, although "The Mystery of the Transfixed Women's Institute" would have drawn more attention to my researches, had anyone been interested enough to investigate. (As it was, I chided Mrs Telford for simply taking a jar of honey from the shelves here without consulting me, and I ensured that, in the future, she was given several jars for her cooking from the more regular hives, and that honey from the experimental hives was locked away once it had been collected. I do not believe that this ever drew comment.)

I experimented with Dutch bees, with German bees and with Italians, with Carniolans and Caucasians. I regretted the loss of our British bees to blight and, even where they had survived, to interbreeding, although I found and worked with a small hive I purchased and grew up from a frame of brood and a queen cell, from an old Abbey in St. Albans, which seemed to me to be original British breeding stock.

I experimented for the best part of two decades, before I concluded that the bees that I sought, if they existed, were not to be found in England, and would not survive the distances they would need to travel to reach me by international parcel post. I needed to examine bees in India. I needed to travel perhaps farther afield than that.

I have a smattering of languages.

I had my flower-seeds, and my extracts and tinctures in syrup. I needed nothing more.

I packed them up, arranged for the cottage on the Downs to be cleaned and aired once a week, and for Master Wilkins—to whom I am afraid I had developed the habit of referring, to his obvious distress, as "Young Villikins"—to inspect the beehives, and to harvest and sell surplus honey in Eastbourne market, and to prepare the hives for winter.

I told them I did not know when I should be back.

I am an old man. Perhaps they did not expect me to return.

And, if this was indeed the case, they would, strictly speaking, have been right.

Old Gao was impressed, despite himself. He had lived his life among bees. Still, watching the stranger shake the bees from the boxes, with a practised flick of his wrist, so cleanly and so sharply that the black bees seemed more surprised than angered, and simply flew or crawled back into their hive, was remarkable. The stranger then stacked the boxes filled with comb on top of one of the weaker hives, and Old Gao would still have the honey from the hive the stranger was renting.

So it was that Old Gao gained a lodger.

Old Gao gave the Widow Zhang's granddaughter a few coins to take the stranger food three times a week—mostly rice and vegetables, along with an earthenware pot filled, when she left at least, with boiling soup.

Every ten days Old Gao would walk up the hill himself. He went initially to check on the hives, but soon discovered that under the stranger's care all eleven hives were thriving as they had never thrived before. And indeed, there was now a twelfth hive, from a captured swarm of the black bees that the stranger had encountered while on a walk along the hill.

Old Gao brought wood, the next time he came up to the shack, and he and the stranger spent several afternoons wordlessly working together, making extra boxes to go on the hives, building frames to fit the boxes.

One evening the stranger told Old Gao that the frames they were making had been invented by an American, only seventy years before. This seemed like nonsense to Old Gao, who made frames as his father had, and as they did across the valley, and as, he was certain, his grandfather and his grandfather's grandfather had, but he said nothing.

He enjoyed the stranger's company. They made hives together, and Old Gao wished that the stranger was a younger man. Then he would stay there for a long time, and Old Gao would have someone to leave his beehives to, when he died. But they were two old men, nailing boxes together with thin frosty hair and old faces, and neither of them would see another dozen winters.

Old Gao noticed that the stranger had planted a small, neat garden beside the hive that he had claimed as his own, which he had moved away from the rest of the hives. He had covered it with a netting. He had also created a "back door" to the hive, so that the only bees that could reach the plants came from the hive that he was renting. Old Gao also observed that, beneath the netting, there were several trays filled with what appeared to be sugar solution of some kind, one coloured bright red, one green, one a startling blue, one yellow. He pointed to them, but all the stranger did was nod and smile.

The bees were lapping up the syrups, though, clustering and crowding on the sides of the tin dishes with their tongues down, eating until they could eat no more, and then returning to the hive.

The stranger had made sketches of Old Gao's bees. He showed the sketches to Old Gao, tried to explain the ways that Old Gao's bees differed from other honeybees, talked of ancient bees preserved in stone for millions of years, but here the stranger's Chinese failed him, and, truthfully, Old Gao was not interested. They were his bees, until he died, and after that, they were the bees of the mountainside. He had brought other bees here, but they had sickened and died, or been killed in raids by the black bees, who took their honey and left them to starve.

The last of these visits was in late summer. Old Gao went down the mountainside. He did not see the stranger again.

It is done.

It works. Already I feel a strange combination of triumph and of disappointment, as if of defeat, or of distant storm-clouds teasing at my senses.

It is strange to look at my hands and to see, not my hands as I know them, but the hands I remember from my younger days, knuckles unswollen, dark hairs, not snow-white, on the backs.

It was a quest that had defeated so many, a problem with no apparent solution. The first Emperor of China died and nearly destroyed his empire in pursuit of it, three thousand years ago, and all it took me was, what, twenty years?

I do not know if I did the right thing or not (although any "retirement" without such an occupation would have been, literally maddening). I took the commission from Mycroft. I investigated the problem. I arrived, inevitably, at the solution.

Will I tell the world? I will not.

And yet, I have half a pot of dark brown honey remaining in my bag; a half a pot of honey that is worth more than nations. (I was tempted to write, *worth more than all the tea in China*, perhaps because of my current situation, but fear that even Watson would deride it as cliché.)

And speaking of Watson...

There is one thing left to do. My only remaining goal, and it is small enough. I shall make my way to Shanghai, and from there I shall take ship to Southampton, a half a world away.

And once I am there, I shall seek out Watson, if he still lives—and I fancy he does. It is irrational, I know, and yet I am certain that

I would know, somehow, had Watson passed beyond the veil.

I shall buy theatrical makeup, disguise myself as an old man, so as not to startle him, and I shall invite my old friend over for tea.

There will be honey on buttered toast served for tea that afternoon, I fancy.

There were tales of a barbarian who passed through the village on his way east, but the people who told Old Gao this did not believe that it could have been the same man who had lived in Gao's shack. This one was young and proud, and his hair was dark. It was not the old man who had walked through those parts in the spring, although, one person told Gao, the bag was similar.

Old Gao walked up the mountainside to investigate, although he suspected what he would find before he got there.

The stranger was gone, and the stranger's bag.

There had been much burning, though. That was clear. Papers had been burnt—Old Gao recognized the edge of a drawing the stranger had made of one of his bees, but the rest of the papers were ash, blackened beyond recognition, even had Old Gao been able to read barbarian writing. The papers were not the only things to have been burnt; parts of the hive that the stranger had rented were now on twisted ash; there were blackened, twisted strips of tin that might once have contained bright coloured syrups.

The colour was added to the syrups, the stranger had told him once, so that he could tell them apart although for what purpose Old Gao had never enquired.

He examined the shack like a detective, searching for a clue as to the stranger's nature or his whereabouts. On the ceramic pillow four silver coins had been left for him to find—two yuan and two pesos—and he put them away.

Behind the shack he found a heap of used slurry, with the last bees of the day still crawling upon it, tasting whatever sweetness was still on the surface of the still-sticky wax.

Old Gao thought long and hard before he gathered up the slurry, wrapped it loosely in cloth, and put it in a pot, which he filled with water. He heated the water on the brazier, but did not let it boil. Soon enough the wax floated to the surface, leaving the dead bees and the dirt and the pollen and the propolis inside the cloth.

He let it cool.

Then he walked outside, and he stared up at the moon. It was almost full.

He wondered how many villagers knew that his son had died as a baby. He remembered his wife but her face was distant, and he had no portraits or photographs of her. He thought that there was nothing he was so suited for on the face of the earth as to keep the black, bulletlike bees on the side of this high, high hill. There was no other man who knew their temperament as he did.

The water had cooled. He lifted the now solid block of beeswax out of the water, placed it on the boards of the bed to finish cooling. He took the cloth filled with dirt and impurities out of the pot. And then, because he too was, in his way, a detective, and once you have eliminated the impossible whatever remains, however unlikely, must be the truth, he drank the sweet water in the pot. There is a lot of honey in slurry, after all, even after the majority of it has dripped through a cloth and been purified. The water tasted of honey, but not a honey that Gao had ever tasted before. It tasted of smoke, and metal, and strange flowers, and odd perfumes. It tasted, Gao thought, a little like sex.

He drank it all down, and then he slept, with his head on the ceramic pillow.

When he woke, he thought, he would decide how to deal with his cousin, who would expect to inherit the twelve hives on the hill when Old Gao went missing.

He would be an illegitimate son, perhaps, the young man who would return in the days to come. Or perhaps a son. Young Gao. Who would remember, now? It did not matter.

He would go to the city and then he would return, and he would keep the black bees on the side the mountain for as long as days and circumstances would allow.

THE CARTOGRAPHER WASPS AND THE ANARCHIST BEES

E. LILY YU

E. Lily Yu is a senior in English at Princeton University working toward a certificate in biophysics. Her short stories and poems have appeared in the Kenyon Review Online, Clarkesworld, Jabberwocky 5, Electric Velocipede, and Goblin Fruit, and her short play on beta decay had a staged reading at Princeton in October. At school, she competes on the ballroom team, plays flute, and juggles. She was born in Oregon and raised in New Jersey.

For longer than anyone could remember, the village of Yiwei had worn, in its orchards and under its eaves, clay-colored globes of paper that hissed and fizzed with wasps. The village maintained an uneasy peace with their neighbors for many years, exercising inimitable tact and circumspection. But it all ended the day a boy, digging in the riverbed, found a stone whose balance and weight pleased him. With this, he thought, he could hit a sparrow in flight. There were no sparrows to be seen, but a paper ball hung low and inviting nearby. He considered it for a moment, head cocked, then aimed and threw.

Much later, after he had been plastered and soothed, his mother scalded the fallen nest until the wasps seething in the paper were dead. In this way it was discovered that the wasp nests of Yiwei, dipped in hot water, unfurled into beautifully accurate maps of provinces near and far, inked with vegetable pigments and labeled in careful Mandarin that could be distinguished beneath a microscope.

The villagers' subsequent incursions with bee veils and kettles of boiling water soon diminished the prosperous population to a handful. Commanded by a single stubborn foundress, the survivors folded a new nest in the shape of a paper boat, provisioned it with fallen apricots and squash blossoms, and launched themselves onto the river. Browsing cows and children fled the riverbanks as they drifted downstream, piping sea chanteys.

At last, forty miles south from where they had begun, their craft snagged on an upthrust stick and sank. Only one drowned in the evacuation, weighed down with the remains of an apricot. The survivors reconvened upon a stump and looked about themselves.

"It's a good place to land," the foundress said in her sweet soprano, examining the first rough map that the scouts brought back. There were plenty of caterpillars, oaks for ink galls, fruiting brambles, and no signs of other wasps. A colony of bees had hived in a split oak two miles away. "Once we are established we will, of course, send a delegation to collect tribute."

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