

LUCIUS SHEPARD, HE WAS A FRIEND OF MINE

“Not Long after the Christlight of the world’s first morning faded, when birds still flew to heaven and back, and even the wickedest things shone like saints, so pure was their portion of evil, there was a village by the name of Hangtown that clung to the back of the dragon Griaule.” These are the evocative opening words to Lucius Shepard’s “The Scalehunter’s Beautiful Daughter,” a novella that won the 1988 Locus Poll and came in second in our own Readers’ Award poll. In all the years that I’ve worked at *Asimov’s*, this is, perhaps, the loveliest beginning to a story I’ve ever encountered.

My own friendship with Lucius began about thirty years ago when we published “A Traveler’s Tale” in our July 1984 issue. I first met him in our office in the spring of 1984. He was moving to New York from Florida, and for a while I got to see him in person fairly often. After a couple of sublets in Manhattan, he moved to Staten Island and visits became rare. But, like many of his friendships, our relationship continued to grow and deepen over the telephone. In those days before Amazon, he was a bit isolated in that outer borough, so calls would come in asking for favors—*can you mail me a ream of computer paper? How about a copy of the I Ching? I need its advice for a story I’m working on.* But mostly the calls were about every imaginable subject. Politics, religion, philosophy, movies, my new boyfriend, Lucius’s love interests, my father’s adventures in Mexico, Guatemala, and elsewhere, his son’s accomplishments. Lucius would tell me about the books and articles he was reading, his latest obsessions—Lee Christmas and the United Fruit Company, boxers and hobos—all the subjects that would eventually find their way into his stories. He had a stunning voice, and he would sing songs and read me pieces from his latest work.

Not all our visits were on the phone. One snowy New Year’s eve we played Trivial Pursuit at Jack Dann’s home in Binghamton, New York. Once Lucius got the dice, the game was over for the rest of us. He barreled along answering every question correctly. There was one moment when he wavered and I thought I’d at least get another turn. The Entertainment query was “Who rode Diablo?” and I can still hear that resonant voice repeating “Diablo.” I was excited when, for an instant he mused, “Pecos Bill” but then, “Nah, he rode Widow-Maker.” Of course Lucius knew the rider was The Cisco Kid, just as he knew all the other answers.

In 1987, his April 1986 novella, “R&R,” won the Nebula. As his ideas for “Barnacle Bill the Spacer” (July 1992) took shape, he promised me he would bring home the Hugo for *Asimov’s*. When he called to read the following passage, I thought he just might be right. “It was beautiful, of course. First a tiny stream of fire, like a scratch made on a wall painted black, revealing a white undercoat. This grew smaller and smaller, and eventually disappeared; but mere seconds after its disappearance, what looked to be an iridescent crack began to spread across the blackness, reaching from the place where *Sojourner* had gone superluminal to its point of departure, widening to a finger’s breadth, then a hand’s, and more, like an all-colored piece of lightning hardened into a great jagged sword that was sundering the void . . .” And he was right. It also tied with Isaac Asimov’s “Cleon the Emperor” for best novella in our Readers’ Award poll.

Lucius wrote remarkable tributes for the tragedies that touched our lives. His poem, “The Challenger as Viewed from the Westerbrook Bar” (October 1986), moved

one reader to write that it was the best one we'd ever published in the magazine. And the lyricism of the novelette "Only Partly Here" (March 2003), "Bobby spotted a woman's shoe sticking up out of the ground. A perfect shoe, so pretty and sleek and lustrous. Covered in blue silk. Then he reached for it and realized that it wasn't stuck—it was only half a shoe with delicate scorching along the ripped edge," exquisitely captures the sadness of the World Trade Centers' destruction.

After I had children, I couldn't put in the extra hour or two after work to make up for the time on the phone. Lucius had moved west by then, and even when he called me at home it was often just before I had to run to pick up a daughter from daycare or elementary school. Still, though the calls fell off, we stayed in touch. After my father died he left me a sweet message about how he always felt they were simpatico.

He promised to send me new stories and swore that the one he had in mind would be a Hugo winner. But such was not to be. Last summer he had a terrible stroke. Rehabilitation was rough and I hesitated to get in touch. Finally, our good friend Ellen Datlow arranged a time for a phone call in January. Once again, our conversation touched on many subjects, but it was difficult. This man who knew everything kept pausing to retrieve words and names. I'm glad we spoke, though, because I was able to tell him how much he meant to me. On March 19, I saw Ellen in Florida. She had only just learned that Lucius had died the day before.

The last words of "The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter" are a vast improvement on the usual fairytale ending as well as an epitaph for nearly everyone, including—with a gender swap—Lucius. "From that day forward she lived happily ever after. Except for the dying at the end. And the heartbreak in-between." Lucius's tales broke my heart and brought me much joy. I will miss my dear friend.

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