

in for a penny

james p. blaylock

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In for a Penny

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Subterranean Press

P.O. Box 190106

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email:

subpress@earthlink.net

website:

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my own back yard

an introduction

I won't say that the stories in this volume are particularly autobiographical (with the exception of "The Other Side" which – as unlikely as it sounds – is largely drawn from life) but all of them are close to home in one way or another. "Small Houses" always reminds me of my old friend Mike Kelly, who had on his left arm a tattoo of a skeleton pitching a shovel full of dirt over its shoulder. Beneath a half dug grave were the words, "dig your own." The main character in "Small Houses" decides to build his own coffin, and blithely informs his wife that he'll use it as a tool box during his time on earth, and then as a casket during his time beneath it. If you've read the story you know that she's less than excited about the idea.

In fact, that bit of inspiration happened to me in just that same way, and unhappened just as quickly. I had bought a couple of hundred board feet of red oak to build some furniture, and there was quite a bit left over, and it dawned on me one Saturday morning when I was pushing sawdust around out in the garage, halfway through my first cup of coffee, that with a couple of days' work I could kill two birds with one stone: coffin and toolbox both.

I've always been most comfortable surrounded by stuff, mainly books and baubles — tin toys and ceramic Humpty Dumpties and salt and pepper shakers and other odds and ends of junk that I'd accumulated over the years. We're told that you can't take it with you, but I wondered about that. The old Egyptian mummies didn't go empty-handed into the underworld, and I couldn't see why I should either. Why not turn the coffin into a sort of portmanteau — corpse in the bottom and afterlife accoutrements in the lid? It wouldn't be bad to have something to drink, for example, and so I would build into the casket a slot that would fit a bottle of Laphroaig scotch and another slot for a glass to drink it with. I'd pack some books, say five of them, including *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tristram Shandy* and a collection of Stevenson's essays. The books would take some consideration. Maybe I'd want a pocketknife, maybe a half dozen of my favorite marbles and of course a couple of photographs. During the years that I played out my earthly existence, I could lodge a sliding T-bevel in the slot where the scotch glass would go, an assortment of hammers in the book niches, and so forth, maybe put the box on casters so that I could drag it down the driveway without throwing my back out....

I went into the house in a rare state of excitement. Viki was washing dishes at the sink. "Listen to this!" I said, and then revealed the plan in all its glory, and all the time she kept washing the dishes, as if I weren't there at all, the expression on her face unchanging. After I was done, or better yet, played out, she said, "No, I don't think so." She picked

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up another dish and put it into the sink, and I went back outside and built a table. About six months later Tim Powers heard that Mike Kelly had shot himself down in Mexico somewhere.

Later yet — several years later — I had one of my characters build the coffin for me, and it was in the writing of the story that I saw that he wouldn't take anything with him after all, that the story was in fact about the difficulty of leaving earthly things behind. The tree house in which he's living sits on stilts in an avocado tree in my own back yard; his goldfish belonged to my young friend Sarah Koehler; the bottle of sherry was one that Viki and I nearly bought when we were traveling through Spain, but didn't, because it was too expensive — nearly eight dollars, as I recall.

"Home Before Dark" is a companion story, so to speak, to "Small Houses," except that the main character is dead when the story opens, and he's got a brief few hours to come to terms with that. Both of the stories are strange in one way: unlike the perhaps more typical story in which a character grapples with some variety of trouble, my characters had to grapple with a lifetime of relative happiness and with the sad fact that there's an inevitable end to it.

I've always liked what Dorothy learns in *The Wizard of Oz*. I think that for most of us it's true. I've noticed that Westerners are always scuttling off to the east in search of gurus, looking for the Way. Somehow I don't see as many Easterners heading west in search of the same thing (unless the Way has to do with money), and maybe that's because they believe what Dorothy came to believe, and which I've been convinced of most of my life, as sentimental as it sounds.

"His Own Back Yard" and "In For a Penny" started out as the same story, or were at least the product of the same thinking and note-taking. I wanted to write about treasures and about greed, and I had it in mind that my character would bury coffee-can treasures as a child, and then when he dug them up as an adult, they would have magically

metamorphosed into authentic treasures, and he would fall under their spell, and dig himself silly before it was over. I myself, however, have buried a few coffee-can treasures in my life, back when I was a child, and then again when I had children of my own — there’s one or two out in the back yard right now — but I’ve never drawn a map, nor have I remembered their location for more than a week. Those small treasures, however, didn’t seem to want to be put into a story about greed. They had something to do with my abiding happiness with stuff, which I’d already meddled with in “Small Houses,” and something to do with nostalgia, and something to do with the sad passing away of bits and pieces of our lives. Greed just wasn’t in it, so I determined to write two different stories about treasures. As I pegged away at “His Own Back Yard” I saw that my character was suffering from a temporary case of the cup-half-empty syndrome, and had to discover that he was looking for something he already had, but had temporarily lost sight of. I concluded that to some small extent, if we’re lucky, we gain as much as we lose over the years. It was another story about happiness.

“In For a Penny” recalled a novel I wrote a few years back called *All the Bells on Earth*, which was about a number of things including what John Ruskin referred to as “the great fight with the dragon.” What is it, we might well wonder, that will defeat us if we don’t actively do battle with it on a daily basis? It seems to me that we’re in the deadliest sort of peril if we look at “down-going men” (as Robert Louis Stevenson refers to them in *Jekyll and Hyde*) and say, “that’s not me.” “There but for fortune” is a safer bet. I’m not at all certain that greed is one of my own dragons, but it has a certain luster, and it was that luster that attracted me to the story, which is simply about the common spiritual disease of believing too firmly in oneself.

As I said, “The Other Side” comes closest to home, at least in regard to the facts of the story, all of which are true except when the main character goes to the party at the house

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of the psychic. So far I haven't hobnobbed with any psychics. My good friend Jeff is a Freudian, very highly regarded in the field of psychiatry and monumentally intelligent. He's a rationalist through and through, and for him the fanciful is nonsense. I, on the other hand, firmly believe that rationalism is utterly irrational, and I read Charles Fort with enthusiasm. If I saw my grandmother's ghost appear before me wearing her wedding dress and a blazing halo, I'd be a happy man ("thrilled" is maybe a better word) and her appearance would simply confirm what I already suspect to be true — not that there are necessarily ghosts in the world, mind you, but simply that there is much in the world that I don't begin to understand, and quite possibly never will. In short, I very often favor the mystery over the solution. What would Jeff make of his grandmother's ghost? Either that someone had slipped him a psychotropic drug or that he had gone off his chump.

From time to time I wonder whether *I've* gone off my chump. After the bizarre pair of phone calls that I recount in "The Other Side," I wondered this out loud in a conversation with Powers. He suggested that I quit worrying about it, and file the mystery in the bin that's marked "inexplicable" and let it go at that. As long as I'm not cutting the heads off dogs, he said, I shouldn't worry too much. I think it was good advice. When one is caught up in the solidly irrational, one shouldn't expect rational answers, and that's what the story itself is about in the end. The happiest and most philosophical pigs I've ever witnessed possessed nothing more than a head of lettuce, and I'll bet you a nickel they didn't begin to understand it, or care to, either. As for the possum — that's just exactly how it happened, a frivolous case of precognition apparently. It was the weirdest damned thing, at least from my point of view. The possum himself, on the other hand, was just getting to the other side.

Where does that leave me? With "The War of the Worlds" which isn't really science fiction at all, and which (of all the

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stories) bears very little resemblance to anything in my own life. It was generated when a pal of mine bought the infamous eight-ball bowling ball after a night of long-neck Budweisers down at the lanes. His wife was pregnant at the time, and money was tight. The ball cost him over two hundred bucks, and he was still giddy enough when he got home to bring it into the house to show it to her, setting off a land mine that might have blown apart a marriage that wasn't quite so solid as theirs. I ran into him several months later, and he was still carrying the ball around in the trunk of his car, and from time to time he would take it out and gaze at it. He hadn't gone bowling since the night of the blowup, and he had no real desire to, but he has a hell of a bowling ball if he ever decides to take it up again. It reminds me of the geneticist who crossed a mink with a gorilla: it made a nice coat, but the sleeves were too long. There's a downside to everything, I guess.

I don't know entirely what all this means. Rethink coffins and bowling balls, that's one thing. Your wife mightn't be half as enthusiastic about them as you are. And don't bury valuables in a coffee can without drawing a map: coffee cans rust to pieces surprisingly quickly, and at least for most of us, so does our memory. Remember that easy money can be a hard life after all, as the song said. When the poet tells you that nothing gold can stay, he's probably right, but remember that there's another poet who tells us that the world is always turning toward the morning, and maybe he's right too. He just sees things from a different point of view, like the possum, and if you can manage it, it's not a bad perspective to cultivate. As for phone calls out of the void, I have no advice for you at all, except that you should be leery about who you reveal them to, Freudians included.

James Blaylock
Orange, California
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