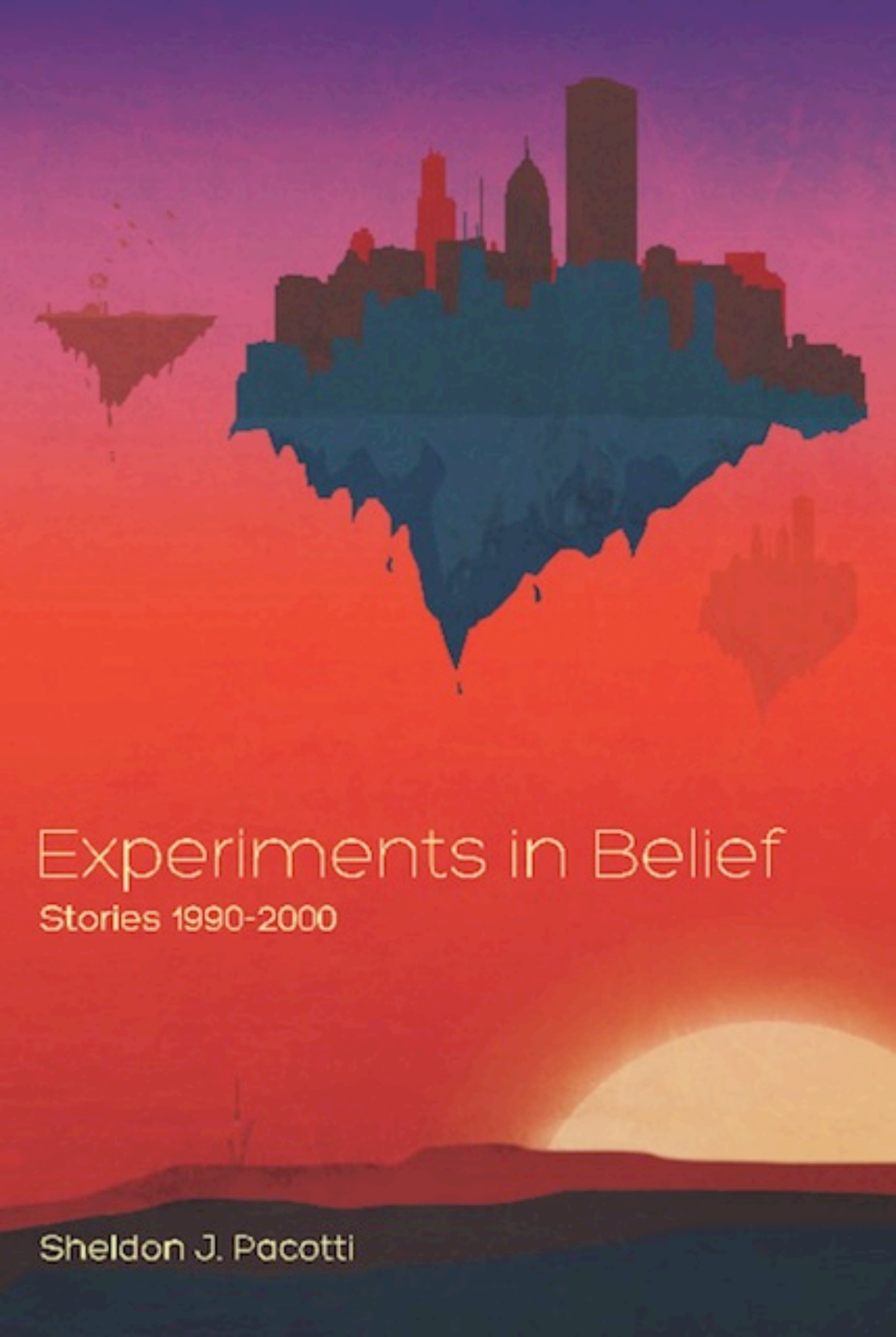
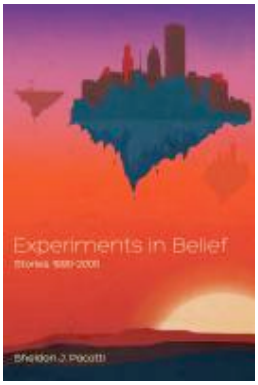

Experiments in Belief
Stories 1990-2000
Sheldon J. Pacotti



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Stories 1990-2000

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Sheldon J. Pacotti
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Preface

Of the dozens of stories I produced during my 20s, these are the thirteen I think are worth saving. Many of them were written in or near graduate writing programs, so they often embody a certain daring irrelevance. Others were wild attempts to break into the commercial science fiction market. Increasingly, I tried to do both at the same time. The result was some of my better work: "Incantation," "Evil Spirits Travel In Straight Lines" (*The Bridge*, Winter 2000), "Khodoki" (*Bellowing Ark*, July/August 1998)—none of which really fits into "genre" science fiction and has therefore landed mostly in small literary magazines.

These stories represent ten years of exercises and experiments, going back to my first published story, "Match Heads" (*Foxtail*, 1991). I was lucky in my '20's, during the Internet tech boom, to be able to buy many quiet hours between part-time software jobs. Here you see the triumphs of those blank, open spaces in my resume, those months I passed unrecorded by the technocracy. Where these stories led was to an aesthetic and a voice that would define my second released novel, γ (*Gamma*), forthcoming at the time of this writing.

I came to the conclusion that any sufficiently advanced science fiction is indistinguishable from reality. (To abuse the maxim by Arthur C. Clark.) The magic seeped out of my fictional worlds and was replaced by detailed research, naturalism, and the simple striving of ordinary people. But these later stories were much more magical for me. I had finally figured out how to get the "real life" out of an imaginary setting, and I

found that readers were connecting to my writing much more strongly. In the end, these experiments succeeded in creating belief in readers—and, by extension, belief in myself as a writer.

Confident that I was on to something, I turned to the writing of γ around the start of the millennium, bringing this phase of story writing to a close. It was a happy moment for me, finally figuring out what I wanted to say and how to say it. Perhaps some of that thrill of discovery will come through as you read the various tales in this collection.

Sheldon Pacotti
Austin, Texas: May, 2013

End of a Long Winter

I saw one today. She was a little leprechaun. Green overalls, a Sim-Monsters Frog Helmet, green eyes. Terribly bright green eyes. We all stared and stared, like we were watching a visitor from another planet. She was trying to climb on the back of a dog her mother had on a leash—and failing, squealing gleefully every time the poor animal wriggled free of her legs. I'd forgotten what a delight the world can be to a child. It was all hers—the dog, the wide lawn of the park, the spring day, all of us watching—and she loved it. She made me so happy, just being alive.

There is hope for the human species. You might not believe it, looking around this dreary little gameshow we've made of our world, but human nature—what we get from our biology—is full of trust and wonder and kindness. She still had hers. Though her mother clearly wanted to hurry past the bench I occupied, the dog came sniffing at my shoes, and the little girl—bless her heart!—told me I looked all "crinkly."

She said that because I was over eighty when the Therapy was developed; though people around three-hundred look fine, at three-hundred fifty I look like an old raisin. "I'm an old man," I said, cheerfully.

"How old are you?" She smiled, rocking on her heels.

I told her.

The number was too big. She covered her confusion with a bashful smile. "I'm four," she said, holding up the fingers for me to count.

Nearby, the mother stood stiff and patient as a servant, uncomfortable but conscious that her daughter should be allowed to feel at ease. "I'm sorry," she said to me in a confidential voice.

I did not have to reply. Delight and fascination were written all over my old face.

"Can I touch the crinkles?" asked the girl, in perfect innocence. She raised her arms to be lifted onto my lap. I asked the mother if it was okay, then brought the girl side-saddle onto my leg.

Little hands moved over my cheeks and nose. I couldn't help but laugh, like I'd been tickled. How could such a small creature be so alive and intelligent?

"It's soft," she said with surprise.

"I'm not made of wood," I said. "I'm a person, just like you and your mother and everyone else."

"My face isn't soft," she replied.

Tiny fingers made fists and tried to make taffy out of my chin.

"Be nice, Julie," said the mother. "The gentleman isn't a toy."

Obediently, the girl removed her hands, her green eyes flashing. She smiled, pleased and guilty. "When I get old, I'm going to be like you."

"No, no." What a silly thing to say. "No one gets wrinkles anymore. You'll always look young and pretty, like your mother." The mother shivered. I became more aware of her discomfort, the discomfort of my grandchildren's generation, who associated marks of age with disease, as though growing old had once been a virus, like smallpox.

"Why?" asked the girl.

"People live forever."

"Why don't you die?"

"I live forever, too."

"I wish they could make you better."

The mother took the girl away then, apologizing emphatically. I wasn't offended and tried to tell them, but off they went, the mother embarrassed, the daughter absorbed in the dog again, the next game.

I was lucky, though, to have actually held one of the New Children, and it made my day. I went back to the little suburban house my great-grandchildren are always pestering me to lease them, had my can of Nanospam on the balcony, and for the first time I can remember I felt genuinely pleased with the direction in which the world was moving. The Nanospam was awful, like salty tofu, but I had faith that the government would find a way to get nanites to make something a little more complex,

like a good cheeseburger, and that then the earth would support a couple hundred billion people, instead of forty, and that furthermore—it seemed just around the corner—middle-income families like those of my great-grandchildren would qualify for children. If that ever happened, I would lease the house to someone in the family. The old place would come alive again, doing what it had been built for, raising children. The planet, too, would come alive for a time, perhaps for centuries, until again the population reached a maximum.

And in the meantime, the world was not so bad, not the way it was a century ago, when everyone was old and getting older. I'm so glad the government has allowed some children to be born. It will make all of our lives a little easier.

My first published story. This was the first thing I wrote after arriving at Harvard as a transfer student—an assignment for an expository writing class. (I had failed the test that would have exempted me from the class.) A couple of faculty members who knew me thought it was unseemly that I had been put there, but I was just happy to be at Harvard, writing.

Match Heads

(Foxtail, 1991)

I still remember the day I began playing with fire. My friend, Jimmy, called me on the phone and told me he had made a great discovery. He was breathless. "I did it!" he said. "You have to come *right now*."

This was in fourth grade, so I was not busy.

I had barely thrown my bike into a bush in Jimmy's front yard when he came out his front door. "Come on!" he said. He took me into the back-yard. There he poured a small pile of red pellets out of a coffee cup onto a paper towel while he explained that the red pellets were the heads clipped off of matches.

Then he took a book of matches out of his pocket. He lit one and held it a moment between the two of us, so that we could watch it burn. Turning, he dropped it onto the pile of match heads and they erupted into a three-foot-tall cone of flame, which hissed and warmed our foreheads for a second and then vanished, leaving behind only the putrid smell of sulfur.

This was a "flare." It exceeded both of our wildest dreams. All those discussions by the wall at recess had seemed like so much play: Jimmy's wild blue eyes, his stammering monologues about his "vision," his staring off into space at something only he could see. But after the flames had leapt up in front of our faces, we both believed.

*

A new world opened to us. The other boys were joining sports teams at this time and drifting away from us, the playground was not what it used to

be, puberty was years away—we needed something to which we could give our time.

Our first flares were small—200 to 300 match heads—but like drug users we required steadily increasing doses to get the same high. Soon we were using 500 match heads in one flare, then 700, then we hit the 1000 barrier.

We got all these matches from the local supermarket. In those days, we could get three Generic boxes of matchbooks, each box containing 1000 matches, for about a dollar. Sometimes the checkers gave us a hard time, especially if we bought more than two boxes at once. We told them we were buying the matches for our parents, who smoked a lot.

Buying matches back then was more fun than buying beer during high school. Buying matches back then was more fun than stealing expensive textbooks from the University Book Store during college.

Jimmy and I would have a little contest every time we returned from the store. Each of us would remove the wrapper from a box of matches—there were fifty books packed snugly into a rectangular, cardboard dish—and then we would each flip our dish upside down on the kitchen table. The contest involved separating the cardboard dish from the matchbooks without knocking any of them over. It was a supreme achievement to leave all fifty standing on the kitchen table.

Next we would take the books one at a time from their neat brick-like formations and clip their heads off with Jimmy's mother's orange scissors from her sewing kit, the only make of scissors, to my knowledge, that will cut match heads easily. We would fill our cardboard dish, then we would pour the contents of one dish into the other and use the empty dish as a lid: a nifty storage case.

The summer afternoons most children spent playing outside, we spent in Jimmy's kitchen clipping match heads and talking, while the afternoon passed into evening and sometimes night. We required no special effort to share one another's every thought, unlike Dean Moriarty. We had so much time.

Of course, Jimmy's mother knew about our hobby. She had a long talk with my mother one night, and my mother had a talk with me the next day. My mother was a small, kind woman with large eyes. "If we told you to quit, you two would probably run around our backs, huh?" she said.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I dunno," I said.

She smiled. "Yes, you would."

"Maybe," I said.

She told me that the "Mothers" had decided to let us play with fire, as long as one of them was present. She also told me that I was a very intelligent young man and that she was confident I would not do anything stupid.

Jimmy's and my all-time record for flare size was 3600. Despite the goodwill of the Mothers, we were afraid this particular flare would frighten them, so we lit it in a concrete tunnel behind a church. We had not gotten any sort of fuse mechanism working, so one of us would have to crouch inside the tunnel, drop a lit match onto an enormous pile of match heads, and dive quickly out of the tunnel into the sand. I made the first attempt, but fear caused me to jump before I had finished throwing the match, which consequently struck the wall of the tunnel and missed the match heads. Jimmy took a stab at it but failed as well. We were both covered in sand now. After a couple more failed attempts, Jimmy sailed out of the tunnel, crying in mid-air, "It's lit!"

His neck craning around behind him so he would not miss the flare, Jimmy landed with a splash of sand as a wall of orange flame filled the five-foot-tall tunnel. A great mass of fire clawed at the cement roof and rolled over itself out the sides of the tunnel and up into the air. A second later, a black cloud of smoke and the reek of burnt sulfur were all that remained.

*

The concept of the flare held little more potential for growth, so we began inventing new ways to play with matches. We would have "flick wars," in which we would run around Jimmy's backyard and *flick* matches at each other. To flick a match, one presses the head of a match to the black striking strip, as if to light it, then one thrusts his finger forward, dragging the match along the strip. If one is fast enough, he can eject a freshly hissing match into a dartlike trajectory at his opponent without burning his own finger. A hit against an opponent in a flick war will singe the opponent's clothes (or skin) if the head of the match is still combusting upon impact and if it "sticks." Most of my shirts during this period of my life had tiny holes in them.

Jimmy's mother started giving us a hard time after we taught Jimmy's little brothers and sisters how to play, but she was not too strict with us.

Another game we played was Russian Volleyball. We would wrap a couple hundred match heads in several layers of toilet paper, light the

toilet paper on fire, then bat it back and forth, trying to keep it airborne at all times. The person who got an exploding fireball in his lap lost.

Around this time, we started a series of inventions which would inspire the term "match-head science." We discovered that, by stuffing match heads into a narrow-necked container such as a bottle for contact lens saline solution, we could use the combustive power of match heads to scoot the container across pavement. Since reliable fuses were months away, we had to light scooters by crouching down by the container, shoving a lit match into the hole, and diving to the side. It typically took a seven-foot-long blast of fire to propel a saline container six feet, so lighting scooters was a skill that required nimble figures and quick reflexes.

Soon after the invention of the scooter, I made my greatest contribution to match-head science. I reasoned that, if match heads constrained to pass through a small hole had enough power to propel a saline container, match heads should have enough power to blow up the container if the size of the hole went to zero. Naturally the prototype had some kind of hole, slightly larger than the width of a match, so that we could stuff a lit match through it.

My mother had another talk with me after she received a call from Jimmy's mother:

"Guess what they're doing now?"

"Uh-oh. What?"

"They're making bombs."

I still don't understand why the Mothers trusted us. I used to send my little brother, third grade, home for things like lighters and lighter fluid.

"Sheldon's doing an experiment at the school and he needs a lighter," he would say.

"Okay," my mom would say, "here you go."

I was some sort of trusted expert.

*

I remember thinking in those days that Jimmy and I had stumbled upon some great secret, some great flaw in society. I can't imagine what my view of the world was then, but I thought that somewhere someone had overlooked something, that the fact that two ten-year-olds could walk into a grocery store, buy the ingredients for a bomb, make a bomb, and detonate a bomb was something that would frighten those who had

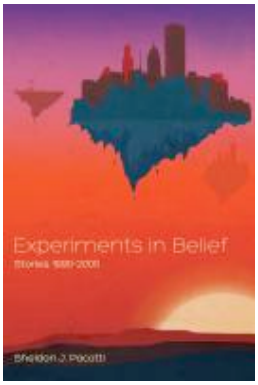
designed society, as if a hole had been overlooked. It never occurred to me that there might be even bigger holes open to adults.

By the sixth grade, we had developed rockets, spinners, and electric fuses which were ignitable with current from a wall socket. We had learned to wrap tape around the bombs to make them explode louder, we postulated the use of shrapnel, and we were dreaming of someday detonating a glass-jar bomb in an open field somewhere.

But Jimmy moved away, and, actually, two months later I moved away. We have not seen each other since. I do not know where he is and he does not know where I am. We have no idea what the other has been doing all these years, and we never will. That's time.

Two years after our separation, long after I had lost track of Jimmy, I made a pipe bomb for the Fourth of July using match heads and some store-bought fireworks, but it was a quiet, lonely exercise. I was living with my father by then, and there was no one around except my brother who remembered what match-head science had once been, and my brother did not have Jimmy's fervor or Jimmy's wild eyes. My new parents insisted that this exercise be strictly supervised, so we went to a field as a family to light the pipe bomb. It worked reasonably well, ejecting these colorful store-bought spinners rapid-fire as from a machine gun, but no one laughed or jumped up and down or felt a rush of adrenaline. There were improvements to be made on the design, but that was the last time I would play with fire.

I have been to two junior highs, two high schools, and two colleges. Homework and then work has become a concern. I have never spent three solid years so exclusively with one person, nor have I devoted myself so lovingly to any task since the days Jimmy and I made bombs. Funny the things you miss.



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