I CAME TO THE SHORT STORY BOTH EARLY AND LATE. In 1964, after the birth of my oldest son, Nathaniel, I wrote a story about a kid born with wings. “George” won honorable mention in a Story magazine contest and made me fifty dollars. After a couple of false starts, though, I gave up the form entirely.

Then in 1988, after three or four published novels, I wrote “Over Flat Mountain.” It was to me not really a story but the fictional illustration of a conceit—the Appalachians being all rolled up into one mountain; a goof, if you will. By this time I was a published SF and fantasy novelist, and when Ellen Datlow asked me if I had ever tried short fiction, I sent her this one with the warning that it was “not an OMNI story.”

She told me she would decide what was and what wasn’t an OMNI story, thank you very much. And bought it. There’s nothing like an eighteen-hundred-dollar sale to revive an interest in short fiction.

The rest of the stories in this book were written between 1988 and 1993.

“The Two Janets” is, like “Over Flat Mountain,” the fictional illustration of a conceit that turned into a short story in spite of itself. Owensboro is my hometown.

“They’re Made out of Meat” has its inspiration in Allen Ginsberg’s reply to an interviewer who kept prattling about their souls communing. “We’re just meat talking to meat,” the poet corrected him.

“The Coon Suit” came to me in a vivid daydream while driving through Oldham County, Kentucky, twenty-five years ago, and never went away. I find most horror unintentionally funny; this story, which I thought funny, wound up in a horror anthology.

“Canción” is my attempt at capturing the unaccountable sadness I felt watching street singers in Madrid one Christmas Eve. It is (also unaccountably, perhaps) one of my favorites.

“Volunteer” was originally published as “Carl’s Lawn & Garden.” The true title came to me late.

I thought of “Partial People” while driving over a box.

“Are There Any Questions?” is what you might call a throwaway.

I heard of a Chicago neighborhood ringed by pollutants called “the toxic doughnut” while I was reading Shirley Jackson’s biography; the two influences converged in a story.

“By Permit Only” is still another environmental short short. It was written over Christmas, which probably accounts for its overheated sentimentality.

It’s probably no coincidence that so many of my environmental stories are short shorts. Save a tree! Even beyond the paper, think how much imaginative timber is wasted on plot, background, character, action, and atmosphere. Better to dispense with them all! Like the lemon cream pie on Saturday Night Live (“No lemon, no cream, just pie”) these short shorts are all story.

I associate the title story with my daughter, Kristen. We were driving on an interstate with beautiful timbered medians when I said, “I just got an idea for a story.” “What is it?” she asked. “All I know for sure is the title,” I said. I agree with Ted Mooney, author of the overlooked SF (well, sort of) masterpiece Easy Travel to Other Planets, that the title is (or can be) the target toward which you shoot the arrow of the story. In this case, a good title, “Bears Discover Fire,” gave me my best shot ever, going on to win the Nebula, the Hugo, and the Sturgeon awards, being published in Japan, Germany, and Russia, and even making a college lit anthology.

“They’re Made Out of Meat” was a Nebula nominee; “Press Ann” was a Hugo nominee; and “Next” won The Chronic Rift TV show’s coveted Round Table award (a plastic device from a pizza box). Adapted for the stage, it was directed and produced at New York’s West Bank Theater by Donna Gentry (along with “They’re Made out of Meat” and “Next”).

“Two Guys From the Future” is my homage to Classical Time Travel Paradox Light Romantic Comedy.

Years ago in Louisville, right after “George,” I wrote a story called “Mr. Zone” about a man to whom nothing ever happened. The story was never published, but the character turned up (as Fox) in “England Underway.”

Sheila Williams of Asimov’s has been kind enough to describe my short fiction as warm and charming. “Necronauts” is my attempt to undermine that image. Its origin is in a project by artist Wayne Barlowe; he and I once tried to think of a story to illustrate a series of paintings and drawings he called his “Guide to Hell.” The story reaffirms for me how much we all owe to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

“The Message” is more of the old-time mad scientist stuff. Or maybe it’s “The Coon

Suit” minus the dogs. Or maybe it’s “Bears” without fire (or hair).

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Every once in a while I find myself compelled to revisit the old dominions of hard SF—my home country as a reader, if not a writer. Voyage to the Red Planet was that among my novels; in the stories it is “The Shadow Knows.” Somehow, these visits home always seem to start with an old fellow returning to space. “Shadow,” my longest story, and “Meat,” one of my shortest, both deal with the same venerable SF theme: first contact.

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It was in the midst of writing these stories, that I found “George” in the files of my literary ex-mother-in-law and read it, for the first time in years, with some trepidation. I was pleased to find that though I wouldn’t write it again, I wouldn’t change a word in it. Since my first story was noticed (if never published) by Whit Burnett of Story magazine, it is my connection with another era in literature; that also pleases me. And it is reassuring to me in another way.

I have sometimes felt that I was a gate-crasher in the world of SF, passing off odd mainstream works as fantasy and science fiction in order to get them published. “George” assures me that I have, in fact, for better or worse, been a fantasy writer from jump, engaged in a long process of coming home.

I hope you like these stories, the contrivances of my heart.