



William Gibson

Burning Chrome
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SOURCE CODE

Nothing acquires quite as rapid or peculiar a patina of age as an imaginary future. As a boy in the nineteen-sixties, I read a great deal of science fiction, much of it written in the nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties. This actually forced me to decode, early on, some fairly major elements of modern history, if only because one can't really enjoy what science fiction does without being able to recognize the point at which the imaginary lifts off from the known. But history, I've since come to believe, is the ultimate in speculative narrative, subject to ongoing and inevitable revision. Science fiction tends to behave like a species of history pointing in the opposite direction, up the timeline rather than back. But you can't draw imaginary future histories without a map of the past that your readers will accept as their own. The less you think your map of the past imaginary (or contingent) the more conventionally you tend to stride forward into your imaginary future. Many of the authors I read as a boy possessed remarkably solid maps of the past. Carved, it seemed, from doughty oak. Confident

men, they knew exactly where we were coming from, exactly where we were, and exactly where they thought we were going. And they were largely wrong on all three counts, at least as seen from this much further up the tracks. But there was another, variant species of science fiction, unnamed but to my mind somehow distinct, which seemed to start from less fixed assumptions of history, a fiction whose writers seemed willing to entertain ideas that suggested we might, in fact, not know where we'd come from, or even where we were — that we were perhaps failing to recognize where we were for what it most basically was. Alfred Bester, Fritz Leiber, Robert Sheckley (to name only three, but very fine, examples) all did this for me, whereas Heinlein and Asimov didn't. The writers who made science fiction do what for me was its most magic thing seemed to inhabit a more urban universe, a universe with more moving parts, one in which more questions could be asked (if far fewer definitively answered). These writers were somehow in a different relationship to what I would learn, later, to call "the Modern." By the time I came to be writing the stories in this collection, in my own mid-twenties, in the nineteen-eighties, cultural models of modernity were starting to lose resolution. The dissatisfactions I brought to their writing, the burrs under the saddle of my early method, had to do with some sense of that — of the Modern starting to suffer from bit-rot, and from a conviction that science fiction hadn't quite been doing its best job about that. Or perhaps more fairly that most science fiction seemed seldom to be doing that which I personally most enjoyed it doing, in spite of what seemed to me to be a host of entirely new and wonderful opportunities. But if you'd asked me to define what it was, exactly, that I wanted science fiction to be doing, I probably couldn't have told you. Being as constitutionally incapable of theory as I was of criticism, all I could do was write these stories. Which I didn't, as a glance at the table of contents shows, always do entirely on my own. For those committed to the Auteur Theory of Literature, no excuse will suffice here, but for the rest of you I simply make the point that I evidently wasn't alone in my dissatisfaction. The source code for these stories was compiled in equal measure from the dissatisfaction mentioned above, from a childhood that had exposed me simultaneously to science fiction and the Beats (mainly Burroughs and Kerouac), and from my personal association with writers on the order of Sterling, Shirley and Swanwick, all of whom had burrs, not dissimilar, under their respective saddles. Had any one of these three factors been lacking, you probably wouldn't be reading this introduction. "Fragments of a Hologram Rose," the first piece of fiction I ever managed to complete, was written in lieu of a term paper for a course in science fiction taught by the late Dr. Susan Wood at the University of British Columbia in 1977. "The Gernsback Continuum" actually began as a long review of an illustrated history of the streamlined Moderne, which was promptly rejected by a science fiction fanzine as being bafflingly off-topic. "The Belonging Kind" was my uninvited attempt at rewriting a John Shirley manuscript, the ultimate in longhand criticism and the only kind I was capable of, with John turning the tables on me by promptly selling it as our collaboration. "Johnny Mnemonic" was the second piece of fiction I ever attempted, beginning in 1977 and finishing in 1981 (I had paused to observe, as an age-designated noncombatant, the phenomenon of punk rock, which also has its place in the source code). "Dogfight" began with my telling someone of my hypnagogic vision of miniature biplanes flying inches above a pool table; they mentioned this to Swanwick, who shortly phoned from Philadelphia to announce that he'd worked out the technological rationale to a nicety (an extremely dreamlike start to a collaboration). "Red Star, Winter Orbit" was proposed, I'm sure, by the endlessly energetic Sterling, who would later, with identical enthusiasm, suggest that we write a very long novel together about steam-driven Victorian computers, my experience of "Red Star" predisposing me to not instantly run away, screaming. "Burning Chrome", written in early 1981, feels to me now like the end of my career in short fiction. It wasn't, chronologically (and short fiction is something I perpetually hope to take up again, eventually) but it was in some way the real start of my career as a novelist. Within it gun the engines of Neuromancer, and not only in its introduction of "cyberspace," a word that first saw the light in red Sharpie on a yellow legal pad. It was the first time I ever quite got something else to work, in fiction, though I still don't know exactly what that is. It's been argued that "the single" (a one-cut vinyl recording in either 78 or 45 rpm format) was the medium that defined the most perfect expressions of rock: that the single is in fact that music's optimal form. The same has sometimes been said of the short story and science fiction. In the case of rock, I'm inclined to suspect nostalgia for a dead media-platform. In the case of science fiction, I think there may be something to it. It requires a very peculiar sort of literary musculature to write a very short piece of science fiction that really works. If I ever did that, you'll find it here. In any case, enjoy the patina. —October 21, 2002.