Autobiography (2004)

Rudy Rucker

Written November 15, 2004, posted March 3, 2006.

Appeared in *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 228, pp. 329-354,
(Thompson Gale, Farmington Hills, MI, 2005)

Rudy Rucker, age 3, in Louisville, Kentucky.

My father ran a small furniture-manufacturing company when I was growing up near Louisville, Kentucky. When I was about ten — which would have been 1956 — my mother, father and I drove out to a well-to-do friend's country retreat to get big flat river rocks for my mother to put into her rose garden.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" the landowner asked me.

"A businessman," I replied, wanting to be like my father. He seemed to get a lot of pleasure out of his ever-changing small companies, all of them related to wood. One of them

— the Rucker Corporation — had gone bankrupt the year before, but Pop had already put together a new company called Champion Wood Products.

"Oh, don't be a businessman, Rudy," said Pop. "You can do better than that. You're *bright*."

"Then I'll be a scientist," I said.

As a boy, my absolute favorite reading materials were the Carl Barks *Donald Duck* and *Uncle Scrooge* comic books. Once a week I'd accompany my mother to the A & P Supermarket, and she'd give me a nickel for a comic. I loved the irreverence of the characters and the energetic, abbreviated way in which the story hopped from one frame to the next. When grown-ups would ask me how it was that I knew the meaning of some fancy word I might use, I enjoyed telling them I'd learned it from *Donald Duck*.

Every Christmas morning, my mother would arrange a fan of books around the base of the tree for me and big brother Embry. Some of the books were science fiction.

I recall being absorbed by Lee Sutton's *Venus Boy*, Andre Norton's *Star Man's Son 2250 A.D.*, and a half dozen Robert Heinlein books, including *Door Into Summer* and *Revolt in 2100*. Embry was less interested in science fiction than I, but my neighbor and best friend Niles Schoening shared my fascination. We regularly went to the downtown Louisville Free Public Library to pore over their SF holdings — which filled but a single shelf. I remember marveling over the riches to be found in books with titles like *The Best Science Fiction of 1949*.

When we were fourteen or fifteen, Niles and I discovered beer, Zen Buddhism, and the beatniks. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* spoke to me like nothing I'd ever read before. To be out in the world, free as a bird, drinking, smoking, meeting women and yakking all night about God — yes!

Brother Embry was more an aficionado of the juvenile delinquent and hot-rodder culture. He souped up a series of Model A and Model T Fords purchased from farmers who had them in their barns. But he was interested in the beats as well. Niles and I found a set of bongos, copies of *Dig* magazine, and dozens of back issues of *Evergreen Review* in Embry's basement lair.

These were the old digest-sized issues of *Evergreen Review*. Raw youth that I was, I initially combed through them in search of titillation. Instead I found excerpts of William

Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, poems by Allen Ginsberg and, somehow the most heartening, story after story by beat unknowns. Men and women writing about their daily routines as if life itself were strange and ecstatic. I wanted to be a beatnik.

When I was fifteen, Embry and I were in the back yard playing with our rusty old swing set — seeing who could jump the furthest. The chain of the swing broke; I flew through the air and landed badly, rupturing my spleen. Oddly enough, I *knew* it was my spleen, as I'd recently been studying a paperback book on karate. The pain in my side was at the location marked "spleen" on my book's vulnerability chart. The surgeon, a family friend, never got over the fact that little Rudy Rucker had known he'd hurt his spleen.

Although I didn't realize it till years later, I would have died of internal bleeding in less than an hour if my father hadn't rushed me to the hospital to have my spleen removed. Experiencing the anesthetic was very strange — going from the light into the dark and back into the light. It set me to thinking about the fact that one of these days I'd become unconscious for good. *Bam* and then — nothing.

While I was in the hospital, my mother brought me a paperback copy of *Untouched By Human Hands*, a collection of science fiction stories by Robert Sheckley. Somewhere Vladimir Nabokov writes about the "initial push that sets the heavy ball rolling down the corridors of years," and for me the push was Sheckley's book. I thought it was the coolest thing I'd ever seen, and I knew in my heart of hearts that my greatest ambition was to become a science fiction writer. Sheckley's work was masterful, and it had a jokey edge that — to my mind — set it above the more straightforward work of the other SF writers. Most of all, there was something about his style that gave me a sense that I could do it myself. He wrote like I thought.

And thus, in later years, I became a beatnik-influenced science fiction writer with a cartoony, humorous edge.

***

I was born near Louisville on March 22, 1946 — the singular cusp of the zodiac, where the world snake bites its tail.

My earliest memory is of fingerpainting the white expanse of my bed's footboard with the contents of my diaper. I didn't yet know it smelled bad. I remember the morning sun slanting in, my mother appearing behind me, her cry of dismay.

Marianne von Bitter Rucker, around 1970.

Marianne von Bitter was from Berlin, a slender aristocratic woman resembling Marlene Dietrich with brown hair. Everyone called her Nonny. She and my father met when she came to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. This was in 1937. My mother's father, Rudolf von Bitter, could sense the gathering storm, and he was happy to get his only daughter out of harm's way. Somewhere higher up in the branches of Rudolf von Bitter's family tree were a few Jews, and there was a sense that if the Nazis stayed in power long enough, they'd get around to him and his family. At least Nonny, his youngest child, would be safe in America.

Also to be found among my German grandfather's ancestors was the famous philosopher Georg Hegel. I remember the relationship under the rubric, "three greats," that is, I'm Hegel's great-great-great-grandson. When my mother left Berlin, she brought with her Hegel's schoolboy diary — a treasured family memento. Written mostly in Latin, the little book covers the period 1785 to 1787, when Hegel was fifteen to seventeen years old. Eventually my mother lent it to some scholars who translated it into German. In my favorite passage, Hegel is excited about a rumor among the local peasants that an army of dead souls had ridden by the night before. Shades of a UFO sighting! As it turns out, the peasants had been deceived by the lights of passing carriages from a late party.

My mother was opinionated, outspoken within the family, and quick to label things "amazing" or "disgusting" — two of her favorite words. But she was always patient and loving with me, always approving. One of her most characteristic gestures towards me was to smile and then nod encouragingly.

When I was in the first few grades of school, I'd come home and it would be just the two of us there for lunch together. She'd eat square pumpernickel bread and blue cheese, while I preferred Campbell's soup and perhaps a bologna sandwich. After lunch I'd sit on Mom's lap and she'd hug me. "Yes," Mom would say. "Good Rudy." Our dog Muffin would whine, wanting to get some hugs too.

My father, Embry Cobb Rucker, Sr., was descended from Peter Rucker, a Flemish Huguenot who landed near the mouth of Virginia's James River in 1790. The Ruckers and Cobbs were active in the South; one was a senator, another the first Governor of Georgia, and many of them owned plantations. Of course after the Civil War, all this was gone with the wind. My father's father was a well-off insurance man.

When Pop went to college it was the Great Depression, and having the tuition in hand, his father could have sent him to any school at all, but Pop happened to choose the Virginia Military Institute, for no better reason than that another neighborhood boy had gone there.

Pop liked to regale Embry Jr. and me with horror stories of his first year at VMI. The freshmen were called rats. One rat was paddled so hard that blood could be seen seeping through the seat of this white dress pants. Another was wrapped in a mattress and thrown out of a second-story window; I believe it broke his back. Pop himself had to squat for an hour above the point of a propped-up bayonet. He seemed happy to have survived the hazing, but still a litle angry about it. As a senior, he himself was so merciful to the freshmen that he was known as "Rat Daddy." At graduation, all the rats cheered for Pop, and his father turned to the man next him and said, "That's my boy."

At VMI, Pop learned to shoot a pistol from a horse, lost a front tooth playing center on the football team, and lost the denture during a wild night at a notorious bordello called Lucille's, in Lynchburg, Virginia. Once Pop was suspended for hopping onto the dining-table in the mess hall and hollering something obscene at an upperclassman who'd just finished intoning the grace in a manner that Pop found gallingly pompous. He also got a

degree in Civil Engineering, despite having enormous difficulties with the obligatory class in Calculus. "I never figured out what they were talking about," he'd always say, amazed that I'd ended up teaching the subject.

He was a great story-teller; sometimes after our Sunday dinner or evening meal, Pop would spin tales for my brother and me. The stories were always different, but they usually involved dwarves. One event would flow into the next in a logical yet unpredictable fashion. Pop prided himself on making up the stories as he went along. I learned a lesson: keep narrating and the ideas will come.

Embry Cobb Rucker, around 1970.

When Pop was forty he took it into his head to become an Episcopal minister. He covered the required course work by independent study, passed the required academic, theological and psychological exams, and was ordained, first as a deacon and then as a priest. When he was interviewed on a Louisville TV show called *Pastor's Round Table*, and was asked why he became a minister so late in life, Pop claimed to have answered, "Well, I couldn't make a go of anything else, so I thought I'd give this a whirl." Although, really, his latest wood business was still bringing in a modest amount of money.

I never did understand exactly why he became a priest. He didn't talk a lot about

religion to us. But he was always committed to being kind to people, to doing good, to helping the less fortunate. One reason might be that he had a need for approval, and that he took pleasure in evoking positive feedback. But his priesthood was about more than his own needs. When he was standing at the altar, holding up the wine and the host, he'd acquire a truly numinous glow.

For her part, my mother wasn't thrilled by this turn of events. "I *never* planned to marry a minister," she once remarked. She was fairly shy, and felt uncomfortable when thrown together with new people. It was no joy for her to entertain parishioners whom she might find dull or tacky. But she was so charming and smart that, in the end, people always liked her. She stayed the course and did the necessary; she took good care of her husband and her two sons.

Not that her life was all about being a home-maker. She was an artist for her whole life, producing scores of paintings — mostly landscapes. In her later years, she took up pottery, turning out cartons and cartons of lovely cups, bowls and plates.

One ongoing problem was that Mom developed diabetes around 1962, and had trouble controlling the disease. She was punctilious about her insulin injections and her diet — too punctilious. Periodically her blood sugar would drop so low that she'd have frightening insulin reactions. The effect was if she'd suddenly be very drunk; we'd try and force orange juice on her, but sometimes she'd refuse it. Occasionally my father or I had to give her a glucagon injection to bring her back.

When my father turned sixty he had a heart attack and a coronary bypass operation. The technology of procedure was still crude, and it had a devastating effect on him. Overnight his personality changed. He grew distant and depressed. He'd point to the vertical scar on his chest and wince. "They opened me right up."

Later I would model the character Cobb Anderson in my novel *Software* on Pop during this period of his life. My character Cobb is a man with a bad heart whose body is replaced by a robot copy of his flesh body, with his memories being transferred from his discarded brain to the computer mind of the robot. At first my character doesn't even realize the transfer has taken place, but then he notices a little maintenance door in his chest.

My parents' marriage became increasingly strained. Pop was drinking heavily. And nearly every holiday meal was preceded by one of Mom's dramatic insulin reactions. At age

62, my father retired from the ministry and left my mother for another woman. My parents divorced and they never spoke to each other again. Mom was quite unhappy.

I held a grudge against my father for his having left my mother, and our relationship was never again as close as it once had been. Over the years my parents' health declined, and eventually they both died of strokes. The very last time I saw Pop, we quarreled.

"It just ends in tears," my mother used to say when we boys would do something reckless. Life ends in tears.

***

I spent my elementary school years at an all-male private school called Louisville Country Day School. I had a terrible time there; for some reason I was one of the pariahs of the class. The boys were rich and clannish. Bullies picked on me. The teachers were unjust, unpleasant and incompetent. My grades were only fair.

My mother was big on doctors, and as one of them had diagnosed me as having hay fever and possibly asthma, she gave me a Benadryl capsule with my orange juice every morning. This had the effect, I believe, of making me somewhat dull and sluggish during this period. Or maybe it wasn't the Benadryl. Maybe I was just a late bloomer. My biggest interest was playing with my dog.

When I reached the eighth grade, my mother and grandmother came up with the idea of sending me for a year to a boarding school in the Black Forest of Germany. I enjoyed this experience very much. The German language came easily to me. My classmates were friendly for a change. I liked the little intrigues with the girls in my co-ed classes. The other students and I went for lovely hikes in the mossy, brook-filled woods.

Age 13, playing with a Diabolo top in Bonn, Germany.

Back in Louisville, I switched to an all-male Roman Catholic school called St. X, for St. Francis Xavier. St. X was believed to be have the best science classes in Louisville, and my parents were bent on seeing me become a scientist. Socially I fared better at the largely blue-collar St. X than at snobby Country Day. But, being a Protestant, I was still a bit of an outsider. The other boys would sometimes threaten to "baptize" me.

I had good teachers at St. X, especially in English, mathematics, and physics. My best friend at St. X was a boy named Mike Dorris — who later turned out to be a writer of such well-received novels as *A Yellow Raft In Blue Water*. Dorris and I spent endless hours on the phone together, gossiping like girls, talking about our schoolmates, about dreams of sex, about literature. He was a good pal.

Thanks to my cool big brother, I was admitted into a city-wide high-school fraternity called the Chevalier Literary Society. We had weekly meetings where we'd share information about parties and plan ways to raise funds. I'd often take the occasion to ask one of the older boys to buy liquor for me — it was quite hard to purchase alcohol if you were under twenty-one.

To legitimize their existence, each of the Louisville high-school fraternities put out a literary magazine once a year. One year I contributed a rudimentary science-fiction story to the Chevalier *Pegasus*, another year I wrote a beat stream-of-consciousness piece that I later pasted into my "transreal" or autobiographical science fiction novel *The Secret of Life* — which depicts this period of my life in detail.

On Derby Day when I was sixteen, I got drunk and rammed my mother's Volkswagen into a tree. I was unconscious for a minute, and awoke tangled in a fence. I'd flown out of the car and narrowly escaped hitting my head against the tree. The same observation I'd made after the removal of my spleen returned to me. "Someday I'll be dead."

I worried about the problem of death quite a bit during the coming years, trying to come to terms with it. I sometimes think of the problem as a koan, a tricky puzzle meant to open one's mind: "You're alive, this is wonderful, but it's all going to end. What are you going to do about it?"

Although, being a minister's son, I was regularly ushered to church, I didn't feel satisfied by what I heard there. Perhaps as a result of my unhappy grade-school experience, whenever I'm in a group of people who all believe the same thing, my first reaction is to say they're wrong. And, being a rebellious youth, I certainly didn't want to believe the same things as my father. This said, to this day I do occasionally attend Episcopal church services.

But as a teenager, I found solace in a cobbled-together mysticism of my own devising. I came to believe in a cosmic life force, with a droplet of it inside each of us. Years later I saw a poster with a slogan "The dewdrop slides into the endless sea," and this pretty well summarizes the view of death that I arrived at.

Although my heart was with the mystics, the beatniks and the French existentialists, I got top grades in high-school, and I won a National Merit Scholarship. Which college to attend? This was a sticky wicket. Each college application required the student to write a brief essay, and I committed the error of writing what I considered to be the truth: that life is essentially meaningless because we're all going die, that whatever career I picked made no real difference so even being a truck-driver might be okay, and that I planned to spend my years living as authentically and ecstatically as possible. I was too pigheaded to change my essays even when my parents suggested that I should. Surely the wise academic administrators would share my disdain for the status quo!

My first-choice school was Harvard. I remember going downtown to the office of a local Harvard alum, a stockbroker. He could hardly believe what he was hearing from me. "These existentialists you're going on about, that Sartre fellow, how old is he? Has he ever held a job?" My second-choice college, Swarthmore, was on the point of rejecting me as well, but my father phoned up the admissions office with something like tears in his voice. "My son has a National Merit Scholarship. I thought — I thought that meant he could go to pretty much any school he liked." I was furious and embarrassed at the old man's meddling. But it worked. The same month I went off to college, my father took a job as the rector of a church in Alexandria, Virginia, making my break with Louisville permanent.

Age 22, with wife Sylvia Bogsch Rucker in Boothbay Harbor, Maine.

I loved my four years at Swarthmore, and made some of the best friends of my life — most importantly, I met my future wife Sylvia Bogsch. I encountered Sylvia on March 21, 1964, on a charter bus taking students from Swarthmore to the Washington, DC, area. She was beautiful, sophisticated and intelligent. I liked her smile and her laugh. She seemed to understand and appreciate me more than anyone I'd ever met in my life. We talked about Pop Art, electric eels, and the game of pretending your finger is a scythe reaching out the bus window to mow the landscape. We dated through the rest of my time at Swarthmore, and the

week after I graduated, we were married in her parents' then home town of Geneva, Switzerland, at the American Episcopal Church, with none other than my father officiating. "The best day's work I ever did," Pop would say in later years, beaming at us. Mom loved Sylvia; indeed, if Sylvia and I ever disagreed, Mom would tend to take Sylvia's side against me.

Getting back to my college days, it was great to be around so many smart, quirky people at Swarthmore: people like myself. I didn't work very hard at my studies, and with the stiff competition I got mediocre grades — I think my overall college average was an exact C. Instead of studying, I was walking around the grassy campus, talking to my friends, reading popular books, and enjoying the chance to be with girls — remember that both my elementary and secondary schools were all-male.

Although I longed to major in philosophy or literature, my father urged me to study something more technical. "You can read all those books on your own," he insisted. "Be a Renaissance man!" I decided to major in physics and invent an antigravity machine, but due to not taking the right course sequence, I ended up having to major in mathematics. This was agreeable, as mathematics comes easily for me. I always liked the fact that, in mathematics, there are so few brute facts to memorize. Everything follows logically.

Age 19, with friend Gregory Gibson at Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

One of my closest Swarthmore friends was a boy named Gregory Gibson. He shared

my interest in writing and in the beats. We liked to quote passages from William Burroughs's *Junky* and *The Yage Letters* to each other, and we spoke of Burroughs as *Der Meister*, affecting ourselves to be apprentices in some celestial academy of beatdom. Part of the appeal of Burroughs was that his work was often so close to science fiction — *cool* science fiction. Two problems I saw with Burroughs's writing were that his surreal routines never extended more than a few pages, and that he had a tendency to open up a parenthetical statement with a "(" and fail to deliver the closing ")".

Greg and I shared other literary interests as well: Hemingway's *In Our Time*, *Catch-22*, and Thomas Pynchon's *V*. One wonderful rainy morning, Greg read the whole of *The Miller's Tale* to me in Old English, doing voices and adding glosses comparing the characters to our friends. We were also devotees of the now all but forgotten "black humor" writers Terry Southern and Bruce Jay Friedman.

Greg and I sometimes wrote things together, taking turns on my portable Olivetti. I recall a scabrous black humor pastiche, "Confessions of a Stag," which we composed on a Ditto master so that I could mimeo off copies for our friends. In our small circle, this work was a solid *success d'estime*. But publishing it in the campus literary magazine *The Roc* was out of the question. *The Roc* did however print a literary vignette I wrote about my experiences working as a construction worker in Alexandria during the summer months.

Greg and I also shared a love of drinking beer, and when our junior year rolled around, we began experimenting with pot. I liked it a lot. I hadn't looked at any genre science fiction for quite a few years, but now I came across a novel by Philip K. Dick: *Time Out of Joint*. For the first time I began to see the outlines of a beatnik science fiction, of a literature that was ecstatic and countercultural, but with logic and rigor to its weirdness.

Greg summed up my budding notion in a letter he wrote me a few years later while we were trying to write a science-fiction novel together. "The cool thing to do would be to write a science fiction book that's about your real life."

After college, Sylvia and I were married, and we both attended Rutgers University, where I would get a Ph. D. in mathematics, and she an M. A. in French literature. Above and beyond any mere academic tasks, Sylvia bore us two children there: Georgia and then Rudy, Jr.

Age 24, with wife Sylvia and daughter Georgia in Highland Park, New Jersey.

My doctoral work was in set theory, the branch of mathematical logic which deals with different levels of infinity. I delighted in studying this field as to me it felt like mathematical theology — and I still had my fascination with mysticism. This interest was brought to a head on Memorial Day in 1970, when a friend appeared at our doorstep with a dose of LSD for me. He himself had taken the drug the day before, and hadn't enjoyed the effects. But despite his warning, I took my medicine, eager to be a true part of the Sixties. There was no evading the ego-death. My mind blew like an overamped light-bulb, and I was immersed in white light. God. The One. "I'm always here, Rudy," a voice told me. "I'll always love you." I never really recovered from that experience — and I mean this in a good way. For one thing, my fear of death was greatly reduced.

There wasn't much point taking psychedelics again. Although I made one or two half-hearted attempts, drugs would never again get me to that same place of transcendent illumination. But I'm expecting to see the White Light again on my death bed.

Another big Sixties thing was the politics. Our elected government was very seriously bent on sending me and my friends to die in Viet Nam. What with a student deferment, a fortunate lottery number, and a faked asthma attack, I didn't find it terribly hard to dodge the draft. And of course that made me a traitor and a bad citizen. It broke my heart

to see less-fortunate guys my age being slaughtered. Underground comics seemed perfectly to capture the doomed, drugged spirit of the day. I was a passionate devotee of *Zap Comix* and the work of R. Crumb. With the government out to kill us, there seemed no longer any reason to be civil or respectful towards the establishment's values.

The high point of my graduate studies at Rutgers had to do with the campus's proximity to Princeton and the Institute for Advanced Study, where the reclusive genius logician Kurt Gödel was in residence. All of the most fascinating and difficult results I was studying bore Gödel's imprint, and I thought of him as a supreme guru. I was doing some interesting, although not earth-shaking, work in set theory, and I'd given a talk at Rutgers on a recent unpublished manuscript of Gödel's that purported to solve the century old Cantor's Continuum Problem about different degrees of infinity.

My thesis adviser Erik Ellentuck was visiting at the Institute, and I was attending a set theory seminar there. I'd applied for a post-doctorate position at the Institute, and Gödel invited me to come in for a conversation with him. Meeting Gödel was a very big deal for me, a blessing, a stroke of good fortune — the initiate's journey to the Master's cave. I've never since been in the presence of so overwhelmingly great a mind. I wrote in some detail about our encounters in my non-fiction book *Infinity and the Mind*, and Gödel inspired the character G. Kurtowski in my novel *Spacetime Donuts*.

Two effects of meeting Gödel were that I was emboldened to take mystical philosophy quite seriously and that I began studying Einstein's work on relativity theory — Gödel had interests in both these fields. Gödel strongly believed that the perceived passage of time is an illusion, that we are in fact eternal patterns in spacetime. Like my vision of the White Light, this teaching also reduced my anxiety about death.

Although Gödel enjoyed talking with me, and let me visit him again, I didn't get a post-doc at the Institute. I was bitterly disappointed. And finding a teaching job proved difficult. My thesis work, although publishable, wasn't compelling enough to land me a position as a high-powered logician; and for more general kinds of teaching jobs, my expertise in the rarified field of mathematical logic was not an asset. I received exactly one job offer: assistant professor of mathematics at what was then called the State University College at Geneseo, New York.

In 1972, Sylvia and I settled into Geneseo with our two young children, and soon we

were blessed with Isabel, our third child. Initially we rented a small house at 41 Oak Street, which would later be a setting for my novel *White Light*. The costs of living were low enough that we could live off my salary, with Sylvia spending most of her time with the kids. In some ways this was a difficult time for her — filled with isolation and chores. In other ways it was a good time; the children were wonderful to be with, and she got deeply involved in painting. Sylvia developed a special sharp-edged, cartoony style, colored in warm tones. We were proud when she had a hanging of her works in one of the local business's windows. The college-town aspect of tiny Geneseo meant that we had a full social life, with none of our new friends living more than two or three blocks away.

One of the courses I taught at Geneseo was called Foundations of Geometry. The standard textbooks for the course seemed boring to me, and I developed the notion of writing up my own notes on the fourth dimension to use as a text. I think that, having spent five years studying mathematical logic and the related philosophical field known as the foundations of mathematics, the word "Foundations" in the course title served like a checkered flag to me, a signal to start my engine and step on the gas.

I'd first heard about the fourth dimension in high-school from my friend Niles, who lent me a library copy of Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*. As chance would have it, Pop bought me a copy of this same book in paperback at the Swarthmore drugstore at the start of my freshman year. I'd read a number of science-fiction stories that mentioned the fourth dimension — I think particularly of the classic mathematical SF tales that appeared in the Clifton Fadiman-edited volumes *Fantasia Mathematica* and *The Mathematical Magpie*. Under Gödel's influence, I'd been reading books on relativity theory. And I was wondering how to reconcile the notion of the fourth dimension as an odd unknown spatial direction with the notion of the fourth dimension as time. While at Rutgers, I'd begun trying to work out some ideas about the fourth dimension in a special notebook, mostly by means of drawings. I recall showing my 4D notes to my father. He was puzzled. "Where are you going with this?"

In the period 1973 to 1976, I expanded and rewrote my 4D notes to use as handouts for the Foundations of Geometry course, under the working title, *Geometry and Reality*. At first I mimeographed the notes for the students, and then, as I got more organized, I had the Geneseo bookstore photo-offset the notes and sell them as a text. The students seemed to

enjoy my little volume, so I showed it to some of the textbook salesmen who haunt a professor's office.

Their companies deemed my book too quirky, too popularized, too untextbooklike. But now I'd gotten the publishing blood-lust. I hit on the idea of sending my book off to the publisher that was keeping in print so many of the esoteric mathematical and philosophical books that I enjoyed: Dover Books. Back in Louisville, Mom had regularly ordered Dover books for me on all sorts of obscure topics.

Dover quickly agreed to publish my book, suggesting only that I give it a title more indicative of the contents. So it became *Geometry, Relativity and the Fourth Dimension*. Eager to cloak my shaggy young self with academic respectability, I identified myself to my unseen editors as "Professor Rudolf v. B. Rucker." They paid me, I believe, a thousand dollars for perpetual rights to publish the book. This struck me as real money. Although I was also getting a couple of my set theory papers in print, academic publishing was slow going, with no sense of there being an actual readership, and with no checks in the mail. The idea of being paid to write popular science books seemed very good to me.

Shortly after *Geometry, Relativity and the Fourth Dimension* was published, a woman editor from Dover turned up at my door. She was in Geneseo to deliver one of her children to the college. She was surprised how young I was; the "Rudolf v. B. Rucker" ruse had convinced the Dover editors that I must be an aging, German-accented scholar. We had a good laugh, and she remarked that mine was one of the few non-public-domain books that Dover was publishing. "We have a saying at Dover," she said. "The only good author is a dead author."

I'd never lost sight of my dream of being a literary author, and all the while in Geneseo I was writing poems, my way of wading into the field. David Kelly, a poet-in-residence at SUNY Geneseo was an encouraging influence. We often partied together in traditional bohemian style. Another influence during this period was the poetry of Anselm Hollo, whom Greg had told me about. I never bothered sending my poems out to magazines, but I'd join in the periodic faculty poetry readings, handing out my works in mimeographed form.

In 1976, Sylvia and I went to see the Rolling Stones play outdoors at the Rich Stadium in Buffalo, New York. It was the Stones's Bicentennial Tour. Given that the Stones

have been touring ever since, it's a little hard to remember how important they seemed back then, how of-the-moment, how radical. I almost wept to see Mick and Keith in person — two leaders I was willing to follow, two public figures in whom I could believe. The day after the concert I was so energized that I sat down at my red IBM Selectric typewriter and started writing a beatnik science fiction novel: *Spacetime Donuts*.

I composed the book in the style of my father telling a story after a meal: I made it up as I went along. But I had a particular science idea to present, and this guided my journey. The idea was that if you shrank to a small enough size, you'd end up being bigger than our galaxy. The notion of finding galaxies within our atoms is of course something of a cliché. But my notion of bending the size scale into a circle was more unexpected. I hesitate to say that I was the *first* to suggest the notion of circular scale as, over the years, I've found that essentially every possible idea can be found somewhere in a pre-existing piece of genre science fiction — the corpus of SF is our own homegrown Library of Babel.

Spacetime Donuts included another element, the notion of a cadre of people able to plug their minds directly into their society's Big Computer. This in some ways prefigured William Gibson's epochal novel *Neuromancer*, in which console cowboys jack their brains into a planetary computer net called cyberspace. Another overlap with what came to be called cyberpunk SF was that the characters of *Spacetime Donuts* took drugs, had sex, listened to rock and roll, and were enemies of the establishment. The early sections of *Spacetime Donuts* were loosely based on my experiences in graduate school, and the hero's love interest was modeled on Sylvia.

I was initially unable to sell *Spacetime Donuts* as a book, but there was a new SF magazine called *Unearth* which was willing to serialize it. And so I was off and running as a real science fiction writer. It was an incredible rush to see my name on the lurid cover of a digest-sized pulp magazine.

The economy was in a recession at this time, and Geneseo was eager to eliminate faculty positions. Some of the senior math faculty disliked me — I probably had the longest hair of any professor on campus; I'd allied myself with our chairman, who was embroiled in a losing departmental power struggle; and I had a bad habit of too openly speaking my mind. The fact that my Geometry course notes were being published as a book gained me no traction, and my fledgling science-fiction success was but a provocation. In 1978, I was out

of my first job.

Providentially, I was offered a visiting position at the Mathematics Institute at the University of Heidelberg, funded by a grant from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. I was perpetually applying for grants in those days, and this one happened to score. My research was to be on the same Cantor's Continuum Problem that I'd discussed with Kurt Gödel.

Age 32, with son Rudy, Jr., daughter Georgia and daughter Isabel in Heidelberg, Germany.

So Sylvia, Georgia, Rudy, Isabel and I decamped to Germany. We were anxious; I remember Georgia asking me, "Do they have Halloween in Germany?" and I told her, "*Every* day is Halloween in Germany." In a kidding way, of course, not in a mean way. I liked pretending to trick the kids, and letting them figure out the joke. For instance, later, when we lived in Lynchburg, I told them that Jerry Lewis and Jerry Falwell were the same man, only wearing different makeup and clothes. I loved hanging around with the kids, talking with them, sharing in their wonderfully fresh view of things, getting down on their level. To me,

they were better company than grown-ups.

When we got to Germany, it turned out that Gert Müller, my grant supervisor, was very *laissez-faire*. He gave me a nice quiet office in the modern building of the Mathematics Institute and told me to do whatever I liked. I worked away on Cantor's Continuum Problem for a few months, reading most of Cantor's philosophical writings in German. But sometime early in 1979 I despaired of making any mathematical progress and wrote the novel *White Light* instead. And I gave it a subtitle lifted from a paper by Kurt Gödel: *What is Cantor's Continuum Problem?* As I recall, I started writing the book in longhand while I was alone with the kids for a long weekend, with Sylvia visiting relatives in Budapest.

White Light was my first book written fully in what I came to call my transreal style. That is, the novel described, more or less accurately, my life as an indifferently successful academic at a small college in upstate New York. That was the "real" part. The "trans" part was that my character, Felix Rayman, leaves his body and journeys to a land where Cantor's infinities are as common as rocks and plants. I fused beat autobiography, science-fictional adventuring, and science-popularizing mathematical rigor. The book's title was, of course drawn from my memorable acid trip. Other influences were the *Donald Duck* and *Zap* comics that I loved so well — *White Light* has both a chapter featuring Donald and his nephews, and a chapter where objects start talking, as they sometimes do in R. Crumb strips.

I finished the manuscript for *White Light* late in 1979, and after a few false starts, I managed to place it with Ace Books in the US, and Virgin Books in England. I made the Virgin connection by attending my first science-fiction convention, Seacon in Brighton — recall that I was living in Heidelberg at the time. The atmosphere at mathematics conferences had always been rather frosty. There weren't enough jobs to go around, and newcomers weren't particularly welcome. But the science-fiction folks were, like, "the more the merrier." It was great. Some guys from London got me high on hashish, I met a man who was editing a new line of books for the Virgin record company, and I got my hands on a copy of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* — a hilarious, sorrowful transreal masterpiece.

In 1983, I'd describe my ideas about this new way to write science fiction in an essay, "A Transrealist Manifesto," which appeared in the *Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America*. The word "transreal" was in fact inspired by a blurb on the back of my Seacon

copy of *A Scanner Darkly* to the effect that Phil Dick had written "a transcendental autobiography."

Over the years, I'd write several transreal books rather directly based on my life, and even the more freely-invented books would often use characters and scenes inspired by the people I knew and the things I saw. Case in point: Dennis Poague, the younger brother of my friend Lee Poague, a fellow untenured professor at Geneseo. Dennis was a wildman, a free spirit who always said exactly what he was thinking. He was relatively uneducated, but he had a brilliant, undisciplined mind. In some ways he was my Neal Cassady, serving as inspiration for the character Sta-Hi Mooney who appeared in my next novel, *Software*. The theme behind *Software* was that one might be able to extract a person's personality from their brain, and it might then be possible to run the extracted human software on some fresh hardware, for instance on a robot resembling the person's former body.

I finished *Software* during the second year of my grant at Heidelberg, and had no trouble selling this to Ace Books as well. The world software was new in the early 1980s, and my idea of copying a person onto a robot was fresh as well. The book gained power from the intensity of its father/son themes and from the colorful anarchism of my robot characters, whom I called "boppers," and endowed with bizarre beat rhythms of speech. The book has an unforgettable cyberpunk scene where some sleazy biker types are about to cut off the top of a guy's skull and eat his brain while he's still alive. In 1982, *Software* was honored with the first Philip K. Dick prize for the best paperback novel of the year. To this day, people tell me that I'm Phil's legitimate heir, and that my SF has that same off-kilter, subversive quality that Phil's did.

Given how many Dick-based movies there are, it's seems possible that one of my books might eventually be filmed. Indeed, in the Nineties, *Software* was under option to Phoenix Pictures for ten years, and went through ten scripts. But the film was never made. Some other books of mine are also under option, but I try not to put much emotional energy into speculating about what Hollywood might or might not do with my work. If a film is ever made, great, but there's no point letting a long-shot dream dominate my life.

While in Heidelberg I also started a non-fiction book entitled *Infinity and the Mind*, dealing with some of the same issues as two Heidelberg SF novels. I've often worked by alternating between writing science fiction and writing popular science. Since I tend to

invent new things in my popular science rather than simply repeating what's well-known, there's a nice interplay with the thought-experiments of my science fiction.

With my grant expiring, it was time to find another job in the U. S. Once again, I received but one job offer, this time from Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. Sylvia, the kids and I were happy to be back in the States, but the Lynchburg of 1980 took some readjustment. For one thing, it was the home town of the then-famous TV evangelist Jerry Falwell. Far from being populated by beatniks, hippies and university types, Lynchburg seemed filled with rednecks and preppies. There were but three people in the Mathematics Department, and the chairman and I never saw eye to eye. He disliked that I didn't collect and grade homework on a daily basis, and after two years, I was out of that job as well.

What with getting fired from two jobs in a row, I had a lot of punk sentiment; indeed, for a very brief time, some other terminated faculty and I formed a punk rock band called The Dead Pigs. I was the singer, even though I can't really sing — but I can't play any instruments either. It was exciting, and fun to be doing something non-intellectual for a change. But, as per usual with punk bands, we self-destructed fairly fast. I was unhappy and Sylvia was unhappy too. It was a tough time, an emotional low point.

Age 36, in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Even so, life in Lynchburg had its positive aspects. We'd bought a nice big house,

the kids were settled in their schools, and we had a lively social life. Sylvia had found her way back into the workforce, first as a sign-painter and then as a teacher. Pulling up stakes for yet another doomed low-status academic job seemed futile. We decided to tough it out and stay in Lynchburg a bit longer. Sylvia was teaching French and Latin, and I was going to try and make it as a freelance writer.

This seemed feasible, as not only had *Infinity and the Mind*, *White Light* and *Software* been published, but Ace had also bought my earlier novel *Spacetime Donuts*, a story collection *The Fifty-Seventh Franz Kafka*, and a new novel *The Sex Sphere*, about nuclear terrorism and — well, a giant butt from the fourth dimension.

I rented an office for fifty dollars a month in an abandoned house at 1324 Church Street in downtown Lynchburg, right next to the offices of the building's owners, some friends who ran a small graphics design company. I got a contract for a new nonfiction book for Houghton-Mifflin titled *The Fourth Dimension*; I had accumulated more ideas on this topic and was ready to treat it again. This book and *Infinity and the Mind* have been my most popular, and have been translated into a dozen or so languages.

I was selling some articles to a popular science magazine called *Science 83* (they changed the last digit of their name every year). For one article I got to interview the wonderful mathematics writer Martin Gardner, and he lent me a box of rare books on the fourth dimension. After the artist David Povilaitis illustrated one of my *Science 83* articles, I privately engaged him to illustrate *The Fourth Dimension*, which did much for the appeal of the book. I was in the writing business and I was proud of myself.

As if descending from Olympus, no less a figure than my boyhood hero Robert Sheckley appeared to bless my venture. He was touring the country in a camper van with his then-wife Jay Rothbel Sheckley. He knew where I lived because I'd recently sent a story to *Omni*, where he was for a time the fiction editor. (Although Sheckley bought my story, his higher-ups wouldn't print it.) Sheckley parked his van in our driveway for several days, plugging into our electricity and water. My mother was visiting as well, and it was fun to see the two of them together, almost flirting with each other. Sheckley had read *White Light*, and said he liked it exceedingly.

I had another memorable visit in 1983, from Bruce Sterling, William Gibson, and Lew Shiner. They'd started a new movement in science fiction which would come be known

as cyberpunk. They were a bit younger than me — I was thirty-seven by now. They'd read all my books and they looked up to me. I was thrilled to join forces with them, it felt like being an early beat. I met the other canonical cyberpunk, John Shirley, that summer when we were both staying with Bruce and Nancy Sterling in Austin, Texas. I recall driving a rented car around town with John, with him riffing off my book *Software*, leaning out our car window to scream at other drivers, "Y'all ever ate any live brains?"

Although Ace was buying my books, they weren't paying very much, and, as a freelancer, money was increasingly important to me. After getting the Philip K. Dick award for *Software,* I'd signed on with a literary agent, Susan Protter. She found me a good two-book deal with a new company called Bluejay Books. They published my transreal three-wishes novel *The Secret of Life*, and my jokey classic SF novel *Master of Space and Time*. And then they went bankrupt.

As *The Secret of Life* was such a personal book, it was very important to me. By way of preparing for it, I first wrote a ninety-foot scroll called *All the Visions*. I'd always savored the legend of Jack Kerouac writing *On the Road* on a roll of teletype paper. So as to emulate the master, I got a roll of copier paper, rigged up a holder for it, and pounded away for a couple of weeks. I was still using my red IBM Selectric. There was really no hope of selling *All the Visions* to a large publisher, but eventually a small press put it out as a back-to-back double volume bound with *Space Baltic,* a book of poems by Anselm Hollo.

One of fate's kind gestures had brought my literary idol Anselm to the Lynchburg area as a poet-in-residence at Sweetbriar College, and we immediately recognized each other as kindred spirits. Meeting Anselm rekindled my interest in poetry, and I put together a Xeroxed chap-book of my poems called *Light Fuse and Get Away*, calling myself Carp Press after a line in Rene Daumal's book, *A Night of Serious Drinking*: "I have forgotten to mention that the only word which can be said by carp is art." I later reproduced these poems along with my stories and essays in a small press omnibus, *Transreal!*

On the commercial front, I got a deal for another nonfiction book with Houghton-Mifflin; this was for *Mind Tools*, a survey of mathematics from the viewpoint that everything is information. My agent knew an editor at Avon Books, and she got them to reissue *Software* along with my newly-written sequel, *Wetware*, perhaps the most cyberpunk of my novels. *Wetware* was, I believe, the first of my books that I wrote using a word-processor;

the previous dozen were all typed, with much physical cutting and pasting. I wrote *Wetware* at white heat, in about six weeks. The book has considerable snap and drive, and it earned me a second Philip K. Dick award.

The money wasn't coming in fast enough. Although my books were selling and getting good reviews, none of them were big hits, and my advances weren't great. The kids needed braces, and their college tuition fees loomed on the horizon. Professional writers have to spend all too much time worrying about how to sell their work. As I once heard someone say, "Amateurs talk about art, pros talk about money." It gets old. After four years of freelancing, I was ready to look for another teaching job.

This time around, I got lucky. A mathematician friend of mine was working in the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science at San Jose State University (SJSU) south of San Francisco, California. I happened to be complaining on the phone to him about how broke I was, and he told me that they had an opening, and that several of the faculty admired my book *Infinity and the Mind*. I flew out for an interview, and gave a talk based on *Mind Tools*. Given that I'd been thinking about this material for a year, my talk was well-prepared; one of the faculty later told me it was the best interviewee talk they'd ever heard. I got the job offer on my fortieth birthday.

Sylvia was fed up with Lynchburg by now, and the kids, though somewhat anxious, were excited to be moving to California. We rented a big Ryder truck and headed across the country; Sylvia driving our station wagon with two of the kids, and one kid riding in the truck with me and our beloved collie-beagle dog Arf. I rotated to a different kid each day. It took about a week, a wonderful adventure. We felt like pioneers.

The California housing costs were insanely higher than we'd imagined. But culturally we felt like we'd come home. As my new department combined two disciplines, I was offered the choice of teaching either mathematics or computer science. I decided to go for computers, even though I knew next to nothing about them. For her part, Sylvia retooled and got a Master's degree in teaching English as a second language (ESL). We had to scramble pretty hard for a couple of years, but soon she'd found a good job teaching French and ESL at Evergreen Community College, and I was teaching all kinds of computer science courses at SJSU.

I very much enjoyed working at San Jose State — both the Math and the CS

departments (now no longer combined into one) have a very pleasant atmosphere, and the students are lively and interestingly diverse. It's one of life's ironies that, after my strenuous efforts to avoid being sent to fight in Viet Nam, a large number of my SJSU students were in fact Vietnamese. I wouldn't go to Viet Nam, but Viet Nam came to me.

New opportunities kept cropping up. I was like some Darwin's finch with a beak evolved for cracking open a special kind of seed. While there'd been no seeds of the proper type in Lynchburg, they were all over the place in the Bay Area.

Some Berkeley freaks named Queen Mu and R. U. Sirius were editing a radical magazine called *Mondo 2000* — they hailed me as a representative of the new style of SF. I wrote some reviews and short articles for *Mondo*, and eventually I helped them put together an anthology called *The Mondo 2000 User's Guide to the New Edge* — which was featured in a *Time* magazine cover story on cyberpunk.

I found many writer friends in California: Pat Murphy, Michael Blumlein, fellow cyberpunk John Shirley, Richard Kadrey, and the antic Marc Laidlaw. Marc and I wrote a few science fiction surfing stories together and referred to our shared technique as Freestyle SF.

By dint of teaching computer science courses of every level, I acquired some expertise. Programming was close enough to mathematics to be congenial for me. And I relished the interactive and experimental nature of computer work. I took to lugging my heavy IBM AT computer to parties to show fractals and cellular automata to my friends. All sorts of computer types came out of the woodwork; many of them fans of my work and eager to meet me. One of them, John Walker, happened to be the founder of a booming Sausalito corporation called Autodesk, and before I knew it, he'd hired me on.

So now I had three jobs: writing, teaching, and programming for Autodesk. Inevitably, my rate of literary production slowed down.

I'd started research for my next novel, *The Hollow Earth*, while still in Lynchburg. I'd participated in a so-called bateau race, during which several teams traveled down the James River in hand-made flat boats. In the nineteenth century, these bateaus were used to transport tobacco to Richmond, and as it happened, one of the first builders of a bateau was an ancestor of mine named Ambrose Rucker, who lived north of Lynchburg near, yes, Ruckersville, Virginia. I composed a tale of a country boy who leaves his farm, travels down

the James in a bateau, meets Edgar Allan Poe in Richmond, and travels with him to Antarctica and the Hollow Earth.

While doing the research, I read pretty much everything by Poe, drawing particular inspiration from his novel, *The Journey of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which describes a sea voyage to the walls of ice around the Southern pole, with the implication that there is a huge hole to be found there, revealing Earth's interior to be a hollow as that of a tennis ball. I came to identify with Eddie Poe — he once wrote of being possessed by an "imp of the perverse" that impelled him to do deliberately alienating and antisocial things. I've always had a streak of that myself. To round out my book, I used the hoaxing Poe-like expedient of pretending that *The Hollow Earth* was a manuscript that I found in the library of the University of Virginia.

In the years 1989 to 1992, I took half-time and then full-time leave from teaching so as to do more work at Autodesk. I helped design three software packages, doing a lot of the coding, and writing the manuals. These packages were meant to be like books, but interactive, and were based on programs illustrating new aspects of science. One was on cellular automata, one on chaos, and one on artificial life. The sales were reasonably good, but the profits from these relatively low-priced packages were negligible compared to Autodesk's income from their flagship product, the drafting program AutoCAD. When the company's stock price dropped, I was out of that job and back to teaching full-time at San Jose State. Fortunately they'd saved my position for me.

The Autodesk experience was fodder for a new transreal novel, *The Hacker and the Ants*. Here a hapless programmer becomes embroiled in a plot cooked up by his evil boss — a character loosely inspired by my ex-employer John Walker. Fortunately Walker has a good sense of humor, and he was quite fond of my book; although he did post on his website a phantom extra chapter for my book that wraps things up in a way more flattering to "his" character. He's one of the brighter people I've met, and to this day I let him vet each of my new manuscripts for scientific errors. Many of my programmer friends feel *Hacker* is the best existing fictional depiction of the Silicon Valley life.

I returned to the *Ware* world in my phantasmagoric novel *Freeware*, one of my funniest, most outrageous books.

Age 44, with wife Sylvia in Kyoto, Japan.

Around the end of this project I turned fifty. I realized that I was tired of drinking and getting high. What had once seemed to be a path to bohemian adventure had become a ball and chain. So I got some help, and I've been clean and sober ever since. The best thing about being sober is that I feel more comfortable in my own skin. And it makes for better relationships with the most important people in my life: Sylvia and children.

I'd had a slight worry that sobriety might impair my courage to write or lessen my flow of inspiration, but far from it. Indeed, the pace of my writing production has picked up. I have more time available for productive activity, and I'm better able to plan and control my projects. I feel my work is stronger than before.

Despite all this, the first book I wrote after my recovery was, perhaps thanks to my imp of the perverse, one of my oddest books of all: *Saucer Wisdom*. The book evolved in a strange way. *Wired* magazine wanted to start a line of books, and they were interested in having me write a work of speculative futurology. I sent them some ideas that they liked, but then the editors wondered if I could find a thread to tie my disparate predictions together. I suggested that I frame the book as if I'd learned my facts about the future from a man who'd actually been there. My time-traveler was to be Frank Shook, a crackpot UFO abductee who's been given a tour of the next three thousand years by his alien captors.

My old friend Gregory Gibson was visiting me at the time, and I took him along to the pitch meeting with the *Wired* editors. On the drive from San Jose to San Francisco, Greg

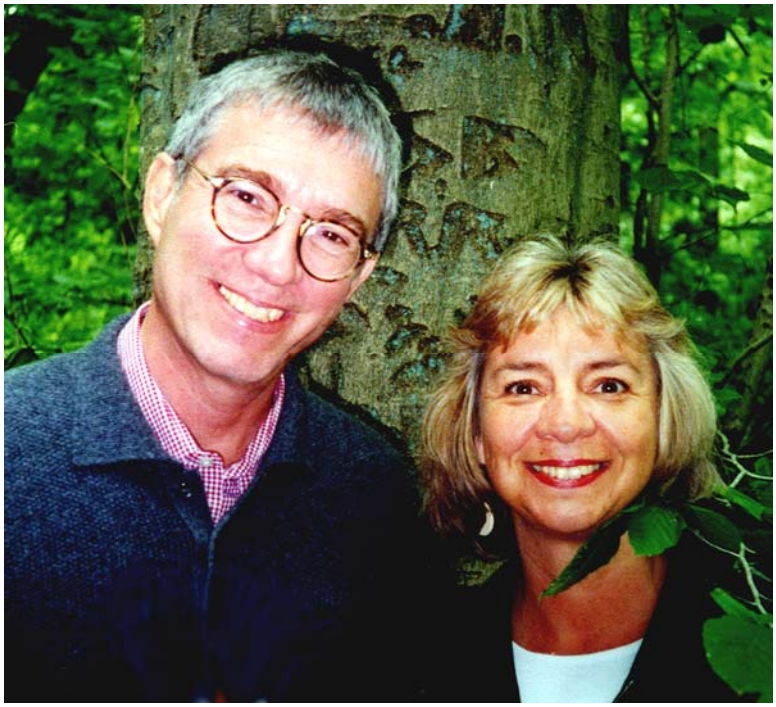
and I cooked up the scheme that he would present himself as actually being Frank Shook the saucer nut. Greg has a full beard, wears his hair very long, and has a piercing glare. At the pitch meeting, with four editors present, Greg made a few tense, distracted remarks, and then stalked out, muttering that it was too painful to be talking about his experiences to so many of us at once.

There was a stunned silence. I had the deal. After a bit, I let on that Greg really had been hoaxing them, but the editors didn't quite want to let go of the illusion. It was decided they'd present the book as a factual *Communion*-style true-life adventure starring the characters Rudy Rucker and Frank Shook. I was a little worried about what this might do to whatever credibility my name has, but I was willing to grit my teeth and go through with it — not only in hopes of sales, but also as a way of thumbing my nose at conventional notions of respectability. Eddie Poe would have done no less.

I had a bit of trouble writing the book, I even got a little paranoid that the aliens — if they existed — might show up to harass me. To further roil my psyche, Greg was leaving voice-mail messages for me in the persona of Frank Shook. Finally I got control of the book by turning it into a particularly close-to-the-bone transreal novel — as well as being a work of futurology.

Unfortunately, the week I sent the final manuscript to *Wired*, they canceled their whole line of books. Susan Protter got them to let us keep most of the substantial advance, and I sold the book again to Tor Books. My Tor editor David Hartwell didn't have the stomach for mounting a "*Saucer Wisdom* is really true" hoax — and I was relieved. Tor instead marketed the book as a nonfiction science book about the future. It may be that it would have done better if it had been presented as a novel. In any case, it bombed, and my advances went down for the next several books.

On another front, the independent publisher and editor John Oakes put out essay and story anthologies by me entitled, respectively *Seek!* and *Gnarl!* I based the pair of titles on a personal motto I'd devised during my years of programming in Silicon Valley: "Seek the Gnarl." The books work together as a demonstration of my theory and my practice: *Seek!* describes my notions about how to find interesting things to write, and *Gnarl!* displays the results. Some of this work also appeared in my earlier collection *Transreal!*



Age 51, with wife Sylvia in Swarthmore, standing in front of a tree carved with their initials SB + RR thirty years earlier.

I wrapped up my *Ware* series with a fourth novel, *Realware*. I cast the book as a sweet love story, and included a scene with a character hugging his estranged father and seeing him off to something like Heaven. I felt as if I were finally laying to rest the specter of my last painful conversation with Pop. One of the virtues of writing is that you get the chance to revise your past.

All this time I was teaching CS courses at San Jose State, primarily graphics, object oriented design and software engineering. Over ten years, I developed an intricate framework of C++ code that my students could use to create three-dimensional computer games of their own with a minimum of effort. I called my code the Pop framework. The Pop framework and my lecture notes led to a textbook: *Software Engineering and Computer Games*. To my mind, games are currently the most interesting area in computer science, combining nearly every aspect of the field. But at this point they're much too stiff and difficult a medium to permit free artistic self-expression.

Although it was rewarding to see my students making games, the code maintenance and overall computer drudgery was starting to get to me. As a reaction, I turned to the

sixteenth century and wrote a historical novel about my favorite painter: Peter Bruegel the Elder. This involved trips to Antwerp and Brussels and to Vienna, where most of Bruegel's paintings can be found in one amazing room of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. In addition, I took an oil-painting class with Sylvia, so that I'd have a better feel for the craft I was describing. Even after the book was done, I continued painting a bit. I enjoy the process; it's refreshingly different from writing and programming.

To me, each Bruegel picture is like a novel, rich with characters and emotions, with artifacts and events, all set against wonderfully realistic natural landscapes. I identify very deeply with the man. He loved both the fantastic and the specific; he depicted otherworldly drolleries and everyday life. His work was often viewed as vulgar or obscure, and he had only a modest success in his lifetime.

I put everything I had into *As Above, So Below: A Novel of Peter Bruegel*, and I hoped it would have a wide mainstream success. But despite excellent reviews in the trades, my book was ignored by the newspapers and magazines, and sales were indifferent. I found this extremely disappointing.

Also in 2002, I reprised the theme of the beleaguered Silicon Valley native in my novel *Spaceland*, which is a thematic sequel to Abbott's *Flatland*. Not many people are aware of it, but *Flatland* was set on December 31, 1999, and I set *Spaceland* then as well. Joe Cube, a middle manager at a computer company, receives a Y2K visit from a being from the fourth dimension.

In both *As Above, So Below* and *Spaceland*, I created my characters out of whole cloth. As I get older, the idea of modeling my characters on myself and my friends seems less and less like a viable commercial proposition. Most readers aren't interested in old people!

For my twenty-fifth book, I decided to write a fat science-fiction novel, an epic galaxy-spanning adventure. I'd never tried to hit the long ball before. To get in the spirit, I read Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* for the first time. I wanted to write something that I could have read aloud to my own kids, and I made my hero a twelve-year-old boy named Frek. Frek goes on a quest for a potion to restore the ruined ecology of year 3003 Earth: the title is *Frek and the Elixir*.

Age 54, with, from left, Georgia, Isabel, Sylvia, and Rudy Jr. in San Francisco.

In order to organize my long book, I decided to employ a technique of object-oriented software engineering, that is, to base my work's design on a well-tested pattern. I made a close study of Joseph Campbell's, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* — another book I'd never happened to read before. Campbell identifies seventeen possible stages of the universally recurring monomyth, and I decided to write one chapter for each stage. In the event, *Frek and the Elixir* grew so long that I compressed two pairs of stages into single chapters, making fifteen chapters in all.

In 2002, while I was working on *Frek and the Elixir*, I took a semester's sabbatical from SJSU, finding a position in Brussels as a guest of the Flemish Academy of Arts and Sciences. Sylvia joined me for about half of the time. A house believed to have been Bruegel's studio and dwelling place still stands in Brussels. I received my first printed copy of my Bruegel novel, and that night I walked alone past the master's old house in the rain. I felt that his spirit was at my side. He said he liked my book, and I was glad.

Also while in Brussels, I learned that there had been a "Ruckers" family of harpsichord-builders in Antwerp in the sixteenth century, and that one of them, Andreas Ruckers, had belonged to the same guild as Peter Bruegel! It's probable that the Peter Rucker who came to America in 1690 was from the Antwerp clan.

The sabbatical semester proved to be so heady a taste of freedom that, in the end, it made me unwilling to stay in academic harness. In the spring of 2004, I retired from

teaching. The endless hours of keyboarding and mousing were getting to me. The California state budget was a mess, and our teaching loads and committee obligations were going up. I felt like I was beginning to repeat myself in my lectures. And I longed to spend my remaining years on what I love most: writing and traveling.

Age 58, in Geneva, Switzerland.

As a farewell to computers, I wrote a substantial book about computation and reality. I'd meant to write this work much earlier on, but I'd gotten in too deep to have enough time or perspective. You might say that I went native on the Silicon Valley story. But now, with my teaching load gone, I had the time to step back and figure out what I'd been doing for the last eighteen years.

I'd written a first draft of the book in Brussels, where I was teaching a course on for the philosophy department at the University of Leuven. I'd jokingly entitled these lecture notes *Early Geek Philosophy*. Hoping for a better-than-usual advance for my tome about computation and reality, I engaged the prominent science-book agent John Brockman. He helped me work out the proposal, and we adopted the title, *The Lifebox, the Seashell, and the Soul*. As of Fall, 2004, I'm putting the finishing touches on the book. I'll probably add a long, explanatory subtitle: *What Gnarly Computation Taught Me About Ultimate Reality, the Meaning of Life, and How To Be Happy*.

Like many writers, I spend too much time fretting about the relative success of my books. But I also work at being grateful for what I have. After all, the vast majority of people don't get published at all. My books are printed and find a substantial audience; I get money and respect in return. I'm lucky to have the ability to write.

I revel in the craft of writing; I like being able to control these little worlds where things work out the way I want. My emotional makeup is such that it doesn't require any special exercise of willpower to stay focused during the weeks and months that it takes to turn out a book. Writing is simply what I like to do. If anything, it could be that I'm a bit compulsive about my writing, preferring it to the uncertainties and disappointments of daily life. It's no accident that so many of my heroes leave the ordinary world for adventures in fabulous other lands — for the real me, those other lands are my books.

Even so, writing is hard, and after each book is finishe*d, I wonder if I'll manage to write another. So far, I always do. But I can imagine the day coming when I feel comfortable setting down the pen for good.

I'm currently preparing to write an SF novel about a woman and a couple of mathematicians; kind of an isoceles love triangle. As for the future, I sometimes think of going back and writing another historical novel about a Lowlands painter; this time I'd tackle Hieronymus Bosch. I'd enjoy writing a sequel to *Frek and the Elixir*; I like being in that universe. And then there's the tantalizing prospect of the books I haven't even thought of yet.

Another future project I think about is writing my memoirs. I have hundreds of thousands of words of journals that I've been keeping for the last twenty years — I might either draw on these as source material, or find some way to publish the journals as is.

A grandiose approach would be to create what I call a "lifebox," that is, a large data base with all my books, all my journals, and a connective guide/memoir — with the whole thing annotated and hyperlinked. And I might as well throw in some photographs — I've taken thousands over the years. With some programming help, I could endow my lifebox with interactive abilities; people could ask it questions and have it answer with appropriate links and words. The result could be a construct that's within hailing distance of being a simulacrum of me.

A finished lifebox might take the form of a website, although then there'd be the

thorny question of how to get any recompense for the effort involved. A commercial alternative would be to market, say, *Rudy's Lifebox* as a set of files on a portable data storage device of some kind.

And then? One of these days I may well end up where I began: fingerpainting with my own excrement. God willing, I'll still be enjoying myself.