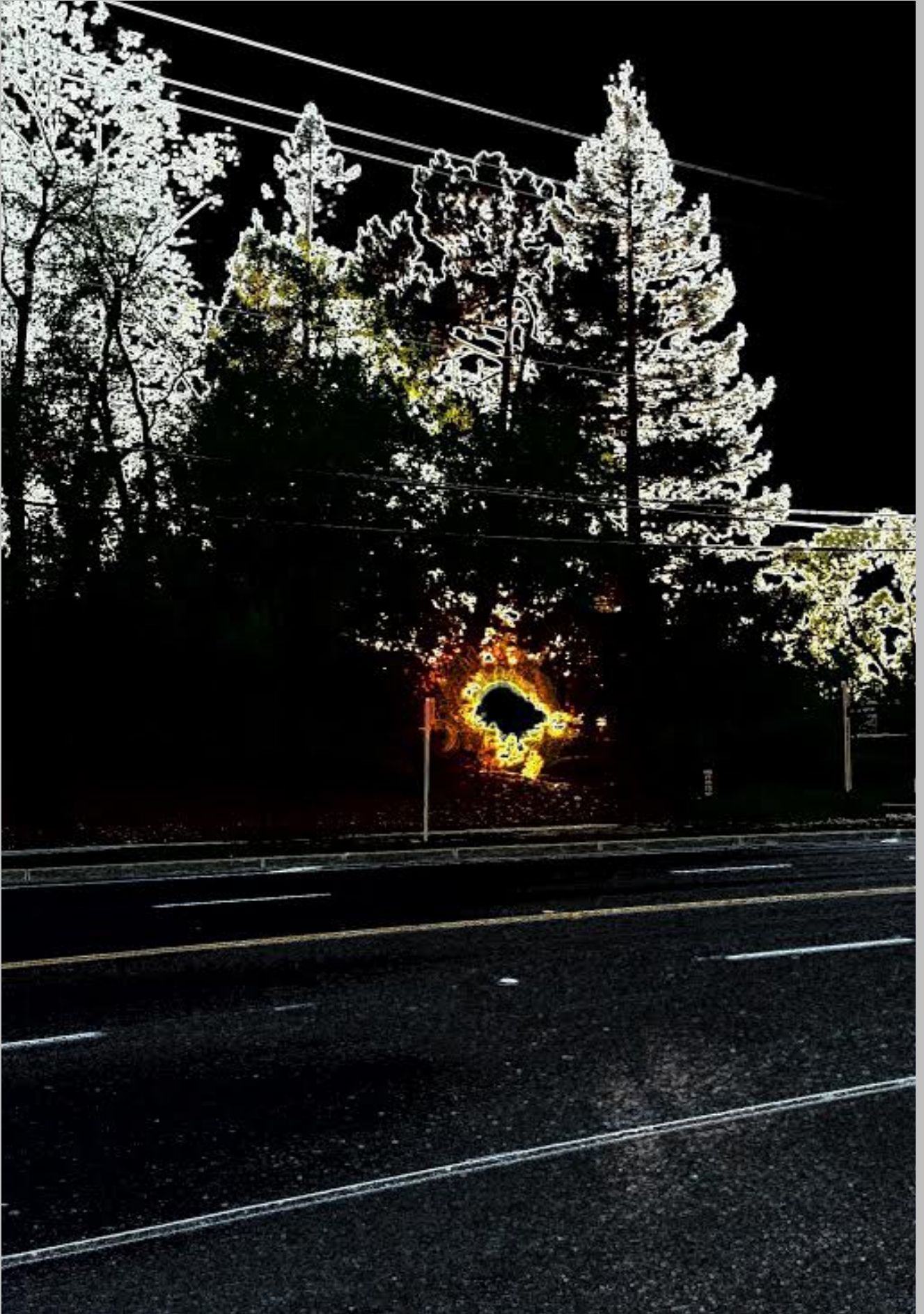


TIGERSHARK Magazine



Issue Ten – Summer 2016 – Funny Strange and Funny Ha-Ha

Tigershark Magazine

Issue Ten – Summer 2016

Funny Strange and Funny Ha-Ha

Editorial

Life's funny. Sometimes it's funny in a way that makes us laugh and sometimes it's just plain strange, and sometimes it's a little of both. Rather like this issue. Enjoy!

Best, DS Davidson

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Next Issue's Theme:

Science and Technology

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programmed robot shrink
says reason he feels lonely
last man on the earth

what is the number?
of aliens required
to change a light bulb
correct answer is zero
they have been green for long time

By Denny E. Marshall

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Left or Right?

By Mark Wightman

Think about it.

What if she doesn't like you?

What if she does like you?

What if she likes you and you go on a date and you have a great time and you never see her again?

What if you see her again and you end up back at her place? What then?

What if you end up back at her place and you really hit it off and it becomes a thing and you leave your clothes at hers and she leaves her toothbrush at yours?

What if she takes her toothbrush back? What then?

What if she says her lease is up for renewal and maybe you guys, should, you know, move in together, because, you know, it just kind of makes sense?

What if you move in together and you find a stray dog at the park and you keep him and call him Lucky?

What if you don't go to the park that day? Who's going to look after Lucky?

What if you you invite your folks round for dinner and she says can you pour the wine, darling? and you pour champagne in tall glasses and you say no, not that one, take the glass nearest to you, and at the bottom of the glass is a diamond and she says yes! yes! yes! and she cries and your mothers cry and the men all slap each other on the back and Lucky runs round in circles trying to catch his tail, even though she doesn't understand what's going on? (Wait, what if Lucky isn't in this version?) Congratulations, dude! You're engaged!

What if you get engaged and you set a date and she finds the perfect wedding planner, who plans the perfect wedding, at the perfect venue, and she has the perfect dress and the perfect bridesmaids, and your speech is perfect and my speech is perfect, and the cake is perfect, and everything is perfect?

What if you have the perfect wedding and you buy a cute cottage in the country and have three adorable children and you watch the kids grow up happy and healthy and you cry bittersweet tears when they leave and start lives of their own?

What if you grow old and go for long walks, hand-in-hand, and remember all the wonderful times?

What if she dies?

Too risky. Swipe left.

To Whom It May Concern,

We have now sent you many letters of the most amiable nature through the medium of prophets, visionaries and contactees and it is with regret that we send this, our final notice. Humanity has broken many of the Universal Laws incumbent upon them, with disregard to our numerous warnings and entreaties. Such blatant disorder cannot be allowed to stand.

Humanity has until midnight tomorrow (GMT) to desist in its criminal activities or action will be taken. It is with both hearts heavy with sorrow that we will begin the eradication of your race at one minute past midnight. Please be assured that this act of extermination will be carried out as swiftly, efficiently and painlessly as we can make it.

Yours faithfully,

Q!tztl,

Zargon Grand Admiral

As relayed via DJ Tyrer

Check In

By Lizzie Holden

I want to be happy or dead.

I'm not managing either.



Waiting for the builders to be late again

By Daniel Roy Connelly

I suspect the answer to why there is a disc of turquoise cardboard lying on the kitchen floor is that while we were out at Sainsbury's a raven flew in through the skylight, steadied itself to a busy hover in front of the dishwasher, released the disc of turquoise cardboard from its talons onto the faux marble floor and left in a deliberate mystery of feathers, but you seem eager to return to our conversation about the therapeutic qualities of tooth brushing at which point your mother phones with news about the pansies.

We could rightly call this eclectic quotidian familial engagement if this was an inclusive exercise. As it is, my head is half way down the barrel of a Howitzer, which at least dulls the noise, it is struck dumb by your indefatigable propensity for a postmodernist approach to conversation which not only leaves ends untied but leaves ends not as ends in any sense. We must also consider the general unreliability of your narrative onslaught. Had I to hand a timeline of the last seven centuries I could pinpoint precisely your bellicose sorties into miscued history whose constant re-arrangement at your hands neuters all teleologies and de-sacralises once and for all the principles of eschatology. I hope you are happy.

Yes, you now tell me, you do know how to set up a computer and thanks for asking, but I had not asked. I hand you your mail for the day and stumble upon a watermark on an official-looking envelope which leads me to romanticise late-13th-century Italian innovation even though I am reasonably quick to point out that it wasn't until John Marshall's 1826 dandy roll that permanence and clarity bolstered the ownership and provenance of purchased paper, and all this with my head shoved into the cylinder of a His Master's Voice's wind-up gramophone from where I feel a His Master's Jack Russell or Fox Terrier sniffing my arse and it is increasingly difficult to hear your retort. His name was Nipper. He died. In 1895.

What I can clearly discern are pictures falling off the living room wall and ceiling chunks hitting the ground. Yes, we're back here again and we therefore both know that this is the point at which we stop talking and retreat, but oh no, not this evening, this is the one we've both been waiting for, the countdown is complete and we two are one Roman candle that will point-blank refuse to sputter even though I have just been dropped upside down from supersonic height into one of the chimneys at Battersea Power Station, head wedged in one hole of South London's quadri-phallic sky fuckers. Though I do glean some reference to polygamy in 17th-century Shogun society, I am prevented from shouting out Just turn the handle and pull, it works every time! because I am not at liberty to reply and in any case you wouldn't hear me now in the rubble waiting for the builders to be late again.

LABOUR OF EGO

By Neil K. Henderson

*"Nothing is more scandalous than a man that
is proud of his humility" - Marcus Aurelius.*

This is the thing
That makes us all sing
To the tune of your hymn sheet credo.

Here is the ring
Of the rhythm and swing
That operates like a placebo.

It's only a string
Of metrical pings,
But it sounds good in a gazebo.

So take what they fling -
Academical bling -
As reward for your labour of ego.



Samhain in San Jose

By Barbara Ruth

Mary asks if we can stop at the falling down house on Willow, on our way home from the Farmers' Market. It was the last market of the year in Willow Glen, and still the heirloom tomatoes beckoned, as they had in July. But now they're accompanied by persimmons and pomegranates, and the only artichokes left were Jerusalem artichokes, which must be perennially puzzled by their name.

If Mary hadn't asked to stop, I would have. I'm the one who pointed it out - Mary was driving - but still, I'm the one who noticed the bricks, some neatly stacked, some scattered and broken, and the furniture piled up in front of the enormous picture window on the second floor.

Produce in our orange cloth shopping bag, we park in front of the gabled manse, get out of the car, smartphones in hand. So much activity, so many mysteries held in this place of construction and decay. Oranges heavy on the boughs, and fallen, rotting in the front yard. In the front of the house, on ground level, below the thirty steps leading to the once grand entrance, blue tarps would be flapping if only a breeze would rise up. There's a gap, a maw, but it's too dark to see within. "Maybe it's a pop up gourmet restaurant," I suggest to Mary.

"You never know." Her tone yet more enigma than her words. She seems to be drifting off.

Along the side - it's a corner house - a small arched bridge leads from rubble to more rubble. Someday might it become a water feature? Did the landscape architect in charge of this renascence believe the predictions for this year's El Nino? Right now, on Samhain, it is 80 degrees, and I'm stripped down to my "Feisty and Non-Compliant" tee shirt.

Mary snoops around; she's the one taking a photography class, with the professor with the penchant for broke down houses. The two workmen we see wearing dust masks moving back and forth from window to window on the second floor take no note of us. She finds a gap in the fence and in she goes.

"Mary!" I hiss! "Be careful!" Do I mean of the barbed wires looping around the ground or the workmen above? Neither of us mention the date, the time the veils between the worlds are gossamer.

She does not fall. Her paisley ankle-length dress does not catch in the groundcover, neither do her strawberry blonde curls tangle in the branches overhead. She points her camera up, down, and I photograph her photographing the ruins and resurrection which will surely delight her teacher.

I follow along the outside of the fence as she makes her way to the blue tarp. She turns back to me once, before she enters the hidden realms, a puzzled puzzling light in her hazel eyes.

"Don't forget to write."

I'm still waiting for her to come back, send a text, give me a sign. Trick or treaters run right past when they come to this house. They already know.

Surprises

By Ananya S Guha

now summer memories will begin
mnemonic, gnomonic
orchestrated by rustle of wind
and the streams rippling
with stones to make paths
bushes and shrubs
on serpentine roads summer has
a way of talking, unlike winter's harried
sun, I walk ways since childhood
in this hill town ravaged by the rains
besotted with plums, grapes, peaches, and fruits
of earth. Monoliths stand erect.
History speaks many tongued
cluttered roads make me uneasy
a little queasy, since childhood roads were bland
now, it is time to be a city
city of millions, billions,
This is a hype
we pray for
when will these forests be abandoned
with pain?
will the grasses grow smaller, taller
will the berries, the peaches
suffer bleaches?
The rain carved rocks will bring
nether surprises.

Medical Barbie

By A.J. Huffman

She comes complete
with medical certification from Mattel
University. She has a lab coat,
pink scrubs, face mask.
For accessories, a scalpel.
Of course, she is a plastic
surgeon.

Zara Koala in the Zoo

By Mantz Yorke

For Zara, aged 8.

Zara Koala had very poor sight.
She came to a tree that didn't seem right
since it had four blotchy trunks
instead of just one.
Nevertheless, she began her climb up
past a dangling branch with a hairy mop,
then on to a fat bit with a trunk on the top,
and on up the trunk,
thinking soon there would be
leaves for her dinner, then a sleep in the tree,
when suddenly ...
the top of the tree bent over and down
and said to her in the friendliest tone,
'Zara Koala, I just have to laugh;
don't you know you've been climbing
up a giraffe?'

Adam & Eve

By A.J. Huffman

landed on Groupon, and I knew
the world was finally coming
to an end. When fetishism and
hedonism need to be discounted
to survive, there is nothing
left of salvation hanging in the distance.
Men have always spent themselves
in extreme searches for pleasure,
conquest in every manner
being the only goal. To see
the latexed idols of that quest felled
to bourgeois notions of buy one get one
is an apocalypse of truly unfathomable depth.

I don't like to blow my own trumpet, as I prefer the taste of other people's spit.



Marilyn Ducked by Joseph Pravda

Shishkosh

By Janet Garber

Three thousand habitable planets in the known universe, and I'm stuck on the only one without shishkosh. Now for most people this might not pose a problem, but I happen to hail from a leading family in the shishkosh culinary empire. I mean, we have recipes that go back to the days of Putrid the Minor, the days when most of the ingredients for *shishkosh en papilotte* grew wild!

When my Papav had me on his knee, he whispered variations for this dish in my baby ears till I grew so tired, he could carry my limp body over to the body cradle capsule and tuck me in. If I am ever tortured, out would pour all the secrets of each of the 523 dishes that can be made with raw, cooked, pureed, strained, braised, sautéed, broiled, fried and fricasseed shishkosh: the drikweed gathered before its time, the salting process for the kosh itself and so on. Though these days, this will hardly come up in routine conversations or in torture chambers here and abroad. Did I mention that Papav would save the reeds and administer light thrashings on my tender body for St. Machiav's birthday? Every part of those ingredients served multiple purposes.

Today, here on Eustachia, it's a different ballgame altogether. First of all, they don't eat anything they can cook. My guard in his white apron serves me Eustachian wafers at prescribed intervals. Though they come in different flavors, I've yet to distinguish any difference between them. Imagine a piece of hide from a zulkof, maybe a baby zulkof (if you're lucky), that you chew and chew and chew, turning it over in your mouth again and again, sucking down the juices, before finally – if you're a foreigner like me, a mere boy – spitting it out in sheer fatigue and boredom. One thing I must say for it: it does kill the appetite and stall the cramps for a while.

It does nothing though for the dreams haunting my daylight hours as well as nighttime attempts at sleep. How will I get my hands on some of the shishkosh ingredients? Surely, drikweed must grow on Eustachia too? It's part of the same solar system as my home planet, Earth. Kosh is possibly growing moss-like right now on those shrubs I glimpse through the small window at the top of my cell! If I could bribe the guard to gather some for me, then maybe I'd be in a position to prepare one of the 523 dishes.

I'm pretty sure I could count on the same results. I mean, why not? Eustachians are humanoid creatures, not as highly evolved as we are, but recognizable. The most noticeable differences: they've got this short stubby green spikey tail jutting out at the end of their tailbone. Also droosek ears that are huge and plastered flat against the sides of their heads. And I guess you could say, an overall burnt look to their skin . . .

What works on us should work on them. But this problem, or rather its solution, occupies all my thoughts, as it has done these last eleven months, three weeks and two days.

How has the year gone by so quickly? Well, it hasn't. Almost every hour I've been flayed alive, imagining the worst outcome possible. I've worked through escape scenarios – the bars are too thick, the window too high, my guard doubtless as clever as I. I tried feigning illness, impending appendicitis, wild and wooly psychotic breaks. Nobody cared.

I have five days left before I must prove my worth to the judges of Eustachia. Then it's all over. I'm just nineteen! Shishkosh is my only hope, my only possible contribution to their society.

Did I mention Eustachians don't eat?

Day Two

My guard, Kaydor, was feeling happy in his heart today for this morning he brought me Eustache wafers made from aborted zulkof fetuses. Sounds disgusting, right? But so much easier to chew. For me, these days, this represents haute cuisine.

I don't know much about Kaydor despite the fact that he has been ministering to my needs for the whole of my year-long term. Looking into his eyes, a trick from my hometown, I can read that he has two little bitty Eustachians at home and a wife even thinner and more dour than him. They all resemble long strips of bark after a long hard winter. Must be their diet. I can't imagine where they get any fat from unless there's a secret stash of kosh that they keep hidden from me.

As always I talk to Kaydor about my childhood and recite one or two of the 523 recipes. He sits on a chair outside my cell and I sit on one inside, facing him. He's my number one strategic tool and I can see that I've made some headway, though it's been slow going. Images of shishkosh decorate the heretofore barren walls of his being now. I see the inner Kaydor turning his gaze to admire them. The fish has taken the bait! (Oh, for some fish!)

"Most esteemed guard, I would like to recount today, for you only, Recipe #3, Shishkosh Supreme."

Kaydor nods. I am his first and only prisoner and he takes his assignment very seriously. "You will see how your mouth waters as much as mine did back in the day. First you go into the fields and gather armfuls of fresh yellow drikweed. The women salt it, strip it, grate it, pound it into a pulp, then make a thick paste out of it by adding week-old water. The children are sent to gather green sticky kosh from under the branches of shrubs and little trees. The men mix the paste into the kosh and shape it into a huge round ball the size of. . .the pregnant belly of an ohrbek! By the way, ohrbek meat is to die for!"

Kaydor shakes his head.

"So anyway, the whole village rolls the ball through the fields and positions it somewhere it can catch the sun's rays. After a few days, my father determines it is ready. It's Shishkosh Time, he says. He cuts a door in the side of the ball and clears a passage. We file in, hand in hand taking positions. At the signal, we open our mouths and bite into the soft spongy walls."

Here I mime opening my mouth as wide as I can and clamping down on my hand and pretending to chew. The memory is too much for me; I feel like I'm going to pass out. I read that Kaydor is displeased. He stands up and removes his chair. I'm alone with my thoughts once again. Tears slide down my face.

Day Three

Kaydor seems a bit put out with me. Why, I wonder. He's hardly overworked. Of course on that diet of theirs... With so few days left, I decide to let him in on my secret, my ability to read him. "You know, Kaydor, though you have almost never spoken, I can tell you I know everything about you."

I tell him about his wife, once a firecracker, his kids, awkward, loud, and messy, and then go for the jugular: "She doesn't excite you any more, does she? So lean and dry and flaky. Every day (and night) it's the same old in-and-out. Nothing to look forward to. Ever."

I've got his attention. "Now if I had something to work with, I could let you have some shishkosh. Did you ever wonder why there were 523 recipes for this delicacy? Or why my father and his father and grandfather before him were all lords? Or why I got the honor, at my age, of being shot into space to explore the known and not-so-known universe?"

I don't dare tell him we are running out of shishkosh ourselves and are desperately searching for more.

Kaydor comes closer and puts his hands around the bars of the cell. He is panting. I read the desperation, see the lolling tongue. Now we're getting somewhere.

But after a moment, he rattles the bars, then walks away.

Maybe I laid it on too thick?

Day Four

You know, I am so thin and weak and pale. If the judges spare me, will I survive even then? Why did I have to crash land here of all places? I won't even get a last meal.

Execution is by trampling. The judges and their clerks, all together twenty or thirty men, run back and forth over the prisoner, in this case, me, until all that is left are splinters. I will hear all my bones break, see all my organs rupture, all my fluids run out of me, resembling, I imagine, their only delicacy: stillborn baby zulkof! That's before they make it into a wafer.

I'm too despondent to try anything today. Anyway, Kaydor never reported to work this morning. I suck on an old wafer that I find sandwiched between the cot and the wall.

Day Five

Kaydor unlocks the cell, hoists me onto his back and carries me into a large open courtyard where he lays me down on a plank. The three judges sit in a circle around me and along the edges of the courtyard are the town's people, at least two hundred, all with the same weary woody look that Kaydor wears.

"You, Trespasser, have failed to prove your worth. By Eustachian law, we have given you a year to do so. All you have done is babble about your koskhish."

These bastards can't even get the name right. I see out of the corner of my eyes that they are lacing on their thick boots. But the one closest to me stops halfway and then the others stop too. They are looking at something beyond me.

A woman approaches. I recognize her – it's Kaydor's wife. She seems to be crying. The judges are stupefied. With both arms, she beckons to the crowd and soon there are many women standing with her.

Stepping forward, she hands something to the judges.

"Ahhhh . . .Oooh," say the judges, passing the photo back and forth amongst themselves. The murmuring in the crowd grows louder.

The judges ignore Kaydor's wife, then try to wave her and the other women away. They continue to look at what she's given them, transfixed by the images therein.

The chief judge, the oldest and craggiest, giddily punches judge #2 in the arm. Number 2 laughs, Eustachian-style, a cross between a hiccup and a belch. The third judge—is it possible?—seems to be performing a kind of celebratory jig.

The women too seem happier. They've backed off and now are smiling through their tears.

I'm not close enough to read anyone. What could be happening? What's in that photo anyway? Are they still planning to trample me?

So that's how I got my reprieve. I have thirty days to comb the countryside with Kaydor, his wife and her friends, looking for drikweed and kosh. Assuming it is somewhere to be found here or on their sister planets, I will then concoct some monstrous batch of shishkosh and start feeding it to the women. If it takes, I'll be free to go. . .back to my high school sweetheart, Milot, with her luscious rounded arms and breasts and thighs and posterior, her flushed smiling countenance, her sweet breath. Kaydor's wife already looks better, just from the hope the future partaking of shishkosh engenders.

I had forgotten about that photo they took from me when I was captured. It was the one I took at the school picnic – Milot never even noticed. She was wearing that skimpy green gauzy sari and purple halter and she had yellow flowers in her dark hair. She looked good enough to eat.

Excuse me! I am a little obsessed with food these days. I know you understand. Funny, I had forgotten about Milot. My family. My friends. Is she waiting for me? A peach like her, hanging from a low branch, does not go unplucked. Or so we say where I come from.

We're so much older now. They've all most likely given me up for dead.

Will the judges ever let me return to Earth?

No matter – there are hundreds of Eustachian women who have seen the light and are about to become beauty queens! Right? Thanks to me, First Lord of Shishkosh in Eustachia.

The men won't lag far behind once they see the startling effects. Life will take a turn for the better in Eustachia, provided I locate enough of the raw ingredients to go around. It is unfortunate that Papav never once taught me how to cultivate the drikweed or kosh – they always grew so abundantly, it never occurred to me to ask. Or for him to ask his father. Oh well, positive thinking has gotten me this far. . .

Once we've secured the raw ingredients, had our cookout, fattened up the women, we can move on to other challenges. I may even show Eustachians how to jump inside each other's brains for a look-see. Kaydor's already bugging me so he can figure out what his wife wants, when she's mad at him, what it takes to keep her happy. Hmmm. I don't think I'll tell him those are big orders and take many years of "reading" to master.

Ends



GRAINY NIGHTMARES

By Diane Arrelle

Hildie St. Claire shuffled down the aisle of the deserted convenience store viciously kicking at the candy wrappers, cigarette butts, and drug paraphernalia littering the floor. Cursing at the futility of life, love and ambition, she was startled by a sound that stopped her cold in mid "sh-". Amid the whirring and clicking of freezers struggling to keep the ice cream hard on a sweltering night, she detected a chuckling, soft and sinister like a snake with asthma.

Shuddering, Hildie fearfully went in search of the noise. She took a shaky breath and announced in a loud stage voice, "I'm tired of being browbeaten by this stinking city, and I'm tired of being afraid. I refuse to be intimidated anymore!"

With a surge of courage, she ran back to her cash register and grabbed the manager's gun from the drawer underneath. She smiled and thought, *I'm done being oppressed and I won't be frightened anymore, not by those hairy rats hiding in the back room, or junkies shooting up in the alley, or by this lousy city that's sucking the talent from my feet and brain.*

Armed with both bullets and bravado, Hildie wandered the quiet and seemingly empty store. Alert for danger at every corner, she suspected that she was only over-reacting from the stress of this minimum wage job and the knowledge that she was a failure. In the ten years that she'd been here, she'd never once gotten even a call back, let alone a part in the chorus line of a show. Now, on top of that, she discovered that Bucky, that two-timing piece of crap who wasn't even good enough to grace her cesspool, had married Maryjane McCoy last weekend.

Hildie leaned against the soda counter and snorted with disgust as she thought about their tearful farewell. There she had been, boarding a bus, suitcase and purse in one hand, tap shoes in the other, and Bucky sniveling at her feet. "Don't go Hildie," he sobbed. "Oh, baby, the city will eat you alive!"

"But Bucky, I have to go," she said prying his fingers from her arm. "I have got to prove to all these hicks that Hildie St. Claire is just too good for this poor excuse of a town."

Then pausing to pose dramatically on the bottom step of the bus, she tossed back her blond mane and announced, "I've got the looks, I've got the brains, and I've got the talent to beat the odds and become a star!"

Pounding on the door as it closed with a hydraulic hiss, Bucky bellowed, "Hildie, I love you, come back to me!"

She blew him a kiss from the grease and bug smeared rear window as the bus pulled away and shouted, "Wait for me, Bucky. I'll send for you when I get famous."

"Wait for me," she muttered, back in the present once again. "That slimebucket must have been jumping old Maryjane ten minutes after I left town."

She tiptoed down the baby food section angry at herself for even being in the store at three in the morning. "How did Juan talk me into working the graveyard shift again, anyway?" She muttered. "How the hell did I end up working in a dump like this instead of dancing my way to the footlights?"

Turning a corner, she stopped abruptly. Her eyes widened with fear. There, in the breakfast food section, all the cereal boxes had been emptied into a monstrously huge pile; a pile of living, moving, groping wheat and bran flakes, oat crispies, raspberry red, lemon yellow, orange orange, rice and corn puffs, with a rainbow assortment of marshmallow treats.

The sugar and starch blob seemed to turn toward her and laugh. "Cackle, crackle, pop," it hissed and started dragging itself to the refrigerator half an aisle away.

Terror clawed at her paralyzed throat. Hildie dropped the gun and all pretense of bravery and weakly fell to her knees. She wanted to crawl away home, home to that hick town, home to admit defeat. She realized that pride meant nothing when facing death.

The creature blocked her way to the door and the emergency exit was chained. Scrabbling desperately like a crab in heat, she headed to the coffee counter to hide in the cabinet underneath.

Crouched into a ball next to the filters in the soft, stifling darkness, she breathed softly though her mouth trying not to make any noise. She could hear the refrigerator door opening and liquid gurgling. Then came an ominous crunching, slurping, slushing sound drawing closer and closer.

Glaring light blinded her as the counter was violently knocked over. Hildie cried out in both horror and pain as steaming coffee scalded her back and shoulders. Slimy tentacles of cereal growing soggy in milk grabbed her, groped her and dragged her from the hiding place. Hildie opened tightly closed eyes to stare at the milky wet monster towering over her, about to topple and bury her alive.

"Oh lord, help me," she whimpered, knowing that it was already too late. Giving up and in to an urge she'd never live to understand, Hildie opened her arms to the slimy mass that enveloped her. Gasping for the breath that would not, could not come, Hildie felt squishy tendrils jam into her mouth, and nose. As she sucked frantically, breathing in and choking on her killer, a wave of darkness descended upon her blotting out everything.

Just before dawn Sergeant James Wilton and Lieutenant Charlie Crabb stood next to the body of Hildie St. Claire still lying in a pool of curdling milk and mashed cereal. "I never get used to it, ya know," Crabb said turning away.

"Yeah," Wilton agreed. "This is the seventh case in the last month and they're exactly the same, death by suffocation. I guess it's time to admit it.... We've got cereal killer on our hands."

ENDS

THE OMEN

By Jeffrey Zable

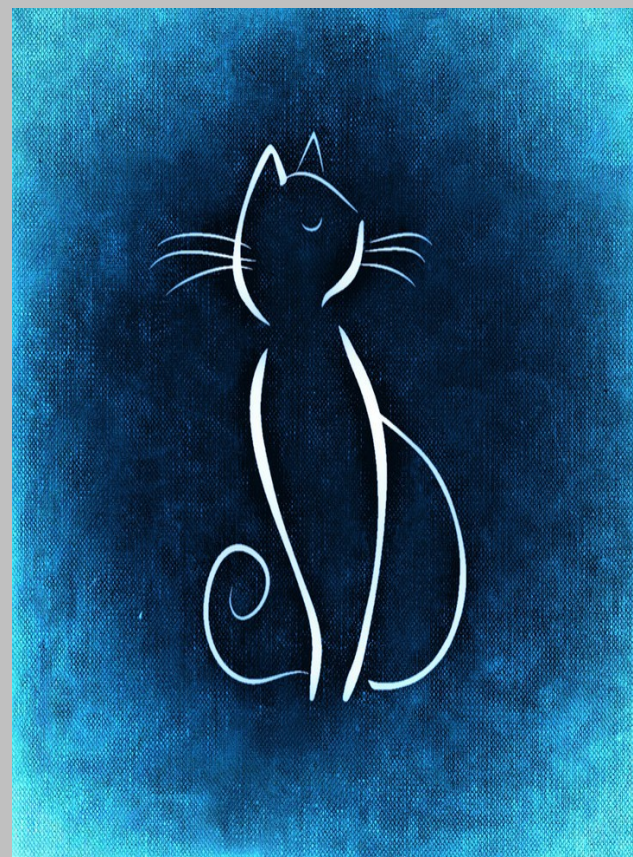
I was lounging in the hotel's graveyard when I realized
I left my passport in the bathroom of the hotel lobby.
When I got there, in its place was a good-sized fish with
the following words written on its side: "If you are Cary
Grant please take me home with you, and never do another
picture with Hitchcock unless he allows you to direct yourself."
Picking up the fish it immediately disintegrated in my hands.
"This is a bad omen!" I thought to myself. And when I returned
to the graveyard I knew I was right because two dozen black
roses had replaced my chair and a huge red hand was sticking
out of the earth pointing directly at my wife who had turned
into a pig with the face of her father who didn't like me
from the moment that we met.

*First appeared in **Thirteen Myna Birds**, 2014*

FAITH CLUB

By DS Davidson

The first rule of Faith Club?
Send no money now!
Unless you follow Thoth or Osiris
Through a pyramid scheme.
God doesn't charge
Christ doesn't bargain
With the moneylenders
And Mohammed isn't a bouncer
With Buddha
On the doors of a select club
For the wealthy and worldly.
The second rule of Faith Club?
Have faith.
It's as simple as that...



BONGO IN MY HEART

By Neil K. Henderson

The midwife told my mother
I was destined to go far.
She said that it was fated
For me to be a star.
She saw no doubt about it -
The truth was in my chart.
Since then I've pounded onward,
With a bongo in my heart.

Bongo in my heart, bongo in my heart.
They said that I wuz crazy...
But there's a bongo in my heart.

I walked out on my girlfriend.
A pity, I suppose.
I've always been a drifter,
And that's the way it goes.
She said, "Why did you leave me?
What drove us both apart?"
I said I couldn't help it -
I've got a bongo in my heart.

Bongo in my heart, bongo in my heart.
They said that I wuz crazy...
But there's a bongo in my heart.

I woke up in the hospital,
A ukelele up my ass.
It must've been some party -
I was too polite to ask.
The doctor said my chances
Were bad right from the start.
I said it made no difference -
I got a bongo in my heart.

Bongo in my heart, bongo in my heart.
They said that I wuz crazy...
But there's a bongo in my heart.

They gave Old Shep the bullet,
They shot that lyin' hound.
And pretty soon the day came
To plant him in the ground.
The preacher, he beseeched me
To drum the funeral march.
I said, "I got no drum, son -
Just the bongo in my heart."

Bongo in my heart, bongo in my heart.
They said that I wuz crazy...
But there's a bongo in my heart.

And when the Reaper takes me,
I suppose I'll have to go.
The only question left is
To go High or to go Low.
I might as well try Higher,
Where the angels play their harps -
Then I'll set that place on fire
With the bongo in my heart.

Bongo in my heart, bongo in my heart.
They said that I wuz crazy...
But there's a bongo in my heart.
Bongo in my heart, bongo in my heart.
It's just the way they made me...
There's a bongo in my heart.

A Midnight Not So Clear

By Reynold Junker

“What are you doing here?” He was dressed in a red flannel suit trimmed with soot spotted white fur. He was carrying a sack of toys. He was munching a double mint chocolate chip cookie.

“What do you think I’m doing here?” She was dressed in a spotless white lab coat, luminous silver translucent wings sprouting from its shoulders. She was carrying a small sack of half-dollars and a small wand tipped with a circular mirror angled at 45 degrees. “I’m collecting a molar to add to my collection.”

“Don’t you ever take a holiday? This is my one night of the year to shine. Don’t you have a calendar? Don’t you have any respect?”

“Sorry, Chubby. Unlike you, where duty calls I go, 24/7. And don’t forget to brush your teeth and floss after you eat that cookie.”

He climbed back up the chimney. She disappeared into a cloud of Listerine Antiseptic vapor.



Break In

By Denny E. Marshall

Hans calls the police to report a burglary. The items taken are few and have no monetary value. Hans felt violated after the break in. Once the police arrive Hans tells the officer the invisible man did it. The officer reports to his superiors, they now have a “clear” description.

A goalkeeper's lament

By Matthew Harrison

However you try, one always gets through,
It slips through your fingers any old how
And the whole team ends up looking at you.

Sometimes you catch them, you save quite a few,
Sometimes you think you've got hold of it now;
However you try, one always gets through.

This time you make a mistake that you'll rue,
The striker turns round, hits it with a, 'Pow!'
And the whole team ends up looking at you.

This time you've held it as a good keepers do,
Your open-mouthed teammates give it a, 'Wow!'
However you try, one always gets through.

You've dived and you've parried, you've saved it too
But in the end the ball slipped through somehow
And the whole team ends up looking at you.

A corner, confusion – worse, it's a zoo!
The ball's in the net, a frown on your brow;
However you try, one always gets through
And the whole team ends up looking at you.



Bernie

By Larry Lefkowitz

Bernie is not satisfied. He can beat world chess masters with ease; he does mathematics and statistics which would take me months, if not years, in seconds; he developed for me based on all my parameters (including my genome) the ultimate personal coffee blend – and prepares the coffee! He is the ultimate in artificial intelligence.

Almost the ultimate in artificial intelligence. Bernie has not yet met the ultimate test: the ability to tell a joke.

Artificial intelligence experts agree that the ability to tell a joke marks the apogee of artificial intelligence. I kid you not. The *homo sapiens* Henny Youngman (my personal favorite comic the genre has produced) still has it -- joke-wise – over the artificial intelligent Bernie.

Bernie pouts. (The ability to pout he achieved last year.) He pouts because he has been told he still lacks the ability to tell a joke. Lately he seems to use too much of his artificial intelligence to envy me this ability. (Envy he assimilated the year before last.)

I try to placate Bernie. Until he learns to tell a joke I am still clearly the master. True, sometimes I fear losing the mastership . . . on such occasions I recall the joke about the computer salesman who came into a company and showed the president how his computer was more efficient than the old one. The president said, "Yours is a heck of a deal, but we can't get rid of the old one. It knows too much!"

Bernie wants to learn to tell a joke. Ever since I told him this was the ultimate test of the achievement of artificial intelligence almost equal (I cannot yet bring myself to say "equal" without the "almost"– my qualms on one hand, my ambition to succeed on the other) to that of *homo sapiens*.

Bernie is insistent. Increasingly insistent about learning to tell a joke. Sometime he is a split second slow in his work task responses. Yesterday he *spilled* the coffee! I couldn't escape the feeling that Bernie increasingly dismisses me as but a big bag of mostly water walking around with a lot of tubes and some neurons. Comparatively primitive neurons.

Is he protesting? Going on strike? Being petulant? (Petulance he assimilated two years ago.)

Once again I placate/develop. I began to program him, though "program" is too antiquated a word for inculcating Bernie. It's much more of a two way street -- not "teaching" or "developing" so much as "dialogue" or "interface," by the use of natural language processing, empathy stimulation, computational creativity, and bisociation patterning -- all harnessed to teach Bernie how to tell a joke. I was greatly assisted by application of machine learning techniques for the distinguishing of joke texts from non-jokes as described by Mihalcea and Strapparava in 2006. Youngman's one-liners, in my considered opinion, constitute the best paradigmatic foundation upon which to build Bernie's joke-telling ability.

Before Bernie can tell a joke (my six year old grandson can – a fact I do not tell Bernie lest he feel inferior or lest he punish my grandson, interfere with his video game – or worse; yes, the Golem of Prague has often come to mind as I developed Bernie's intelligence), he must learn what is humor. I begin with the basics, explaining to Bernie that humor is the tendency of cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement, a cognitive relating to the process of acquiring knowledge -- here, of the joke. I expose him to irony, wit, satire, parody – the whole shtick, as well as the humor theorists: Bergson, Freud, Koestler, etc. Hours upon hours of pre-joke indoctrination on my part.

I confess here that I cannot tell a joke – I lack the timing – ad libbing I can do. Timing constitutes no problem for Bernie.

Months later I get down to the nitty-gritty.

"Why did the chicken cross the road?" A question I have asked Bernie innumerable times.

Bernie responded with everything you would want to know and not want to know about *Gallus gallus domesticus* – the chicken. Anatomy, physiology, evolution, social behavior, and much more. I stopped eating chicken early on during this period. "Roads" was a repeat performance -- I became more tired of roads than a prisoner in a chain-gang (an example of my humor which I did not supply to Bernie since, in addition to its questionable risibility, I did not want to get involved in any repercussions of the concept "prisoner.").

Bernie assimilated the fact that "Why did the chicken cross the road?" was not an intellectual query but part of a joke. That was a giant step. He was, in a sense, a joke appreciator, if not yet a joke teller.

Then one day – eureka! – he said, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" and did not supply (as he had previously done) a thousand logical reasons surrounding his answer "To get to the other side." He delivered the answer with – how can I put it – whatever it was that turned a statement into a joke. With irony, with an *intonation* of humor. It was almost a Yiddish intonation, as if to say: "To get to the other side, you schlemiel." Ok, my intonation was perhaps an unconscious addition on my part when I try to tell a joke. I'm only human.

When Bernie first achieved telling the complete joke, I achieved the pinnacle of artificial intelligence development. A realization of Raymond Kurzweil's speculation about an impending "singularity" that would come when a massive computer system evolves its way to intelligence: a day when humans will pass the consciousness baton to our inorganic progeny. Except I have succeeded in reducing the "massive computer system" to – Bernie. (My son – the Ultimate Intelligence *boychik*.) From somewhere the words came to me, "The Intelligence just sat there, looked around, then developed all the skills unto itself." And *I* was the midwife. A pity there is no Nobel Prize for Computer Science. But there is a price for my achievement. Increasingly Bernie refuses to do serious work. I have to listen to his jokes. They are still on the level of Henny Youngman's jokes. (Even Youngman's seemingly innocuous jokes are not without possible pitfalls when the joke appreciator is artificially intelligent. Such as one of his jokes that I subjected Bernie to. "Last night my wife said the weather outside was fit for neither man nor beast, so we both staged home." Bernie wanted to know what the difference was between man and beast, and I began to worry that the area was too sensitive. I got out of it by suggesting that he and I were men – we possessed intelligence.) Henny, incidentally, would love some of Bernie's mistakes/innovations on the way to joke-telling mastery; such as one of his answers to "Why did the chicken cross the road?"--"That was no chicken, that was my wife."

Henny Youngman is well and good; I hope to bring Bernie's humor level to that of Mort Sahl.

Who's Mort Sahl? Don't worry about it if you're too young to remember who he is. Bernie knows who he is – if he still hasn't reached his level.

And a word of reassurance for those of you who fear that artificial intelligence entities will turn on *homo sapiens* – once they have a sense of humor, there will be no need.

Unless they decide to kill us with laughter.

Ends

Henny Penny On Why She Crossed the Road

By Ed Higgins

Ok, ok, people are forever asking me, so why did I cross the frickin' road? Dumb-shit me, of course. Consequences waaay unforeseen. Maybe better to ask why that stupid-ass farmer built a chicken run right next to the road! Well, maybe not. Even a chicken has volition, I suppose. But, unquestionably, Mr. Fool Farmer didn't stake down the bottom of the chicken run's enclosure wire. It was immediately apparent to any half-brained hen she could slip under the loose wire running a yard or so back from the road's drainage ditch and get at some of the tempting spring grass and tasty bugs hidden there.

Well, the first thing I see as I'm scratching around in our supposedly fenced-off yard is this little speckled Aracana push against the loose wire bottom and out she pops onto the grassy ditch area. Another hen, a stout Buff Orpington (a full-of-herself blonde, that one), has her head under the bottom wire and is plucking juicy blades of green grass like you could almost taste them snapping off in her beak! I do a double-take as she too slips her chunky blonde self completely under the bottom wire and is conspicuously scratching and clucking away with the Aracana.

By now the whole flock of us are either staring in disbelief or rushing toward that breached fence to join in on the scrumptious edibles. Several hens are crowding one another to slide under the less-than-escape-proof barrier. Everyone's raucously pecking grass and scratching up sow bugs and spiders. OMG! next thing I see is this clucking Barred Rock hen yanking on a juicy earthworm she's got half out of the dampish soil. Near pandemonium. Three or four of us are all over her trying to snatch the dangling beastie from her beak. To no avail as she slurps the shinny worm down her throat, smirking.

Well, I go back to my own scratching finding an orange centipede in short order. Down it goes before any of the others notice. Those centipedes are spicy good too—but for a slight throat tickle from all those legs.

Soon, with 20 or more of us out there for past an hour the peckings are getting meager. That's when I notice another grassy ditch-side beckoning from across the road. Not to put too fine a point on it, I'm drooling for another centipede--or whatever's hunkered down in that luring new grass patch. Here goes, I say to myself.

Well, I made it halfway across the damn road when a eighteen-wheeler comes blaring down the asphalt like an Irish mastiff on steroids. Splat goes yours truly. Unpleasantly smeared onto the blacktop by a 16 ply-10x20 inch Michelin. Without so much as an eye blink or a horn honk from that bastard driver.

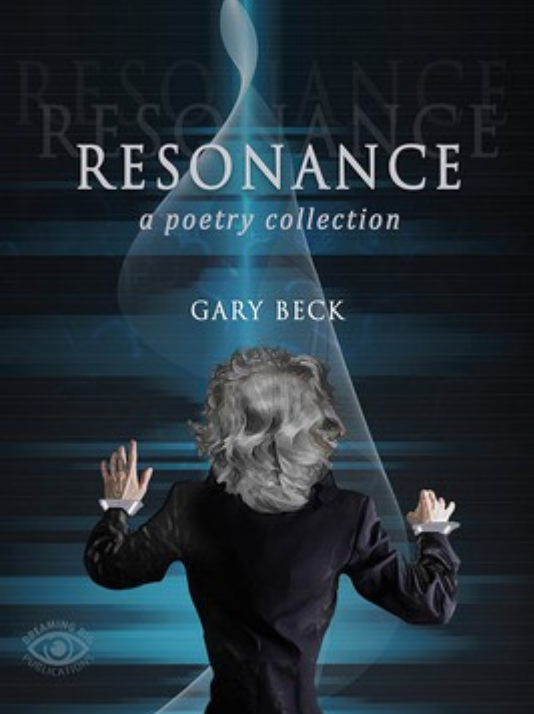
So you can kiss that old saw about wanting to get to the other side as total goodbye crap. I did want to get to the other side, sure, but there were ironies involved no matter how you fluff you feathers. It's the ages old conundrum of fate vs free will. Haha. . . or the agency of eighteen-wheelers! Fortuna's blind wheel, shit happens, etc., etc. I cluck-fucked up. Sometimes the sky really is falling on you.

Ends

Kitten rolling free
Tumbles into fierce battle
Fights mirror image

By Aeronwy Dafies





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SNAKES AND RATPASTE

A sidewinding saga

By Neil K. Henderson

1. THE RAT IN THE TOOTHPASTE

Imagine the immensity of the pressures needed to force a fully-grown rat inside a regular size tube of toothpaste... the skilful guiding of the snout into the tiny aperture... the speedy firmness of the inward thrust, just forceful enough to insert the rat without jeopardising its vulnerable tissues... the yielding yet unbreakable strength of the tube itself. Such pressure held in check - but only just in check - by the delicate balance of exertion and restraint. It would hardly be surprising if such pressure was sufficient, when the cap was unscrewed, to blow Mr. Oeuvlemans's head clean into shrapnel... a bloody entanglement of muscle and skin... and ragged shards of bone...

For let us not forget that the *toothpaste* was still in the tube *as well as* - not *displaced by* - the rat. Small wonder, then, if parts of Mr. Oeuvlemans's cheekbones should embed themselves in the bathroom wall.

Now, if one could apply this principle to an *egg*...

Mr. Oeuvlemans remembered a man on the TV who had trained an egg-eating snake to eat a banana. This was something which was apparently very difficult to do, on account of the specially evolved teeth in the snake's throat which could crush a sturdy eggshell, but were ill-adapted for the removal of banana skins. Under normal conditions, constriction of the snake's throat would immediately result in the forcible ejection of the banana, its skin being altogether too pliable for retention by the grinding action of the dental embrace.

"You can beat an egg," enthused the snake trainer with a merry twinkle, "but you can't beat a banana."

Not without casting some kind of spell on it first, apparently. That had been the gentleman's secret weapon - not only was he a snake trainer, he was a *banana charmer* into the bargain. Someone with that kind of mesmeric acumen would almost certainly be able to get a rat inside a tube of toothpaste (toothpaste included). And by extension, he would be able to get the rat *out* again without Mr. Oeuvlemans having to have his head pulped. Mr. Oeuvlemans laid the bulging rat-shaped tube carefully on the bathroom lump-stand, and went to look up banana charmers in Yellow Pages. As if by telekinetic synchrophonicity, the telephone rang. It was someone calling himself McGubbins. He claimed to have the solution to a million problems. Mr. Oeuvlemans wasn't convinced. Apart from anything else, *McGubbins* sounded just too much like *Maguffin* for the call to ring true. Toothpaste notwithstanding, Mr. Oeuvlemans smelled a rat.

Picture the coconut matting on the top of a man's scalp. Let the powers in control remove a circular section - not by tonsure shaving or other ambivalent, and possibly only temporary, tokenism - but with some sturdy metal implement, like a garden trowel, a tin-opener, or a rigid potato peeler. The circle of scalp comes away quite easily - but there is no skull beneath. There is something new displacing skulls, these days. A kind of keratinous chrysalis

coating, brown and semi-transparent. And beneath this brittle sub-scalp skin, there is an eye. Not of human origin, but related to the brooding incubus behind it; more fishlike than insectile, though swivelling jerkily chameleonwise to pursue the movements of invisible observers. There is something of the camera lens in the glint of pupil, something impassively alert.

We know the eye belongs to some enormous being, some complexity of aberrant biogenesis bigger than the space it appears to occupy, squashed within the living scalp of its human host like a rat in a toothpaste tube. But we need to find out if the toothpaste - the living brain of our patient - is also present. Or has it vanished like the bones of the skull: sucked out, perhaps, like the internal juices of a spider's prey?

Or could it be a blown egg in reverse - the shell removed, but the yolk unnaturally distended? How much do we actually know about the nature of relative substantialism?

McGubbins - or the outer husk of McGubbins - put down the receiver. He made to scratch his head, but something stopped him in the act. This man Oeuvlemans had a rat in his toothpaste. The incubus intelligence had picked it up in the airwaves, the tone of Oeuvlemans's voice merely serving to confirm. The incubus wanted that rat - for it was no ordinary rat, even without its toothpaste enclosure. But there were other means of contact - more direct forms of encounter.

The human-looking head turned from side to side with spasmodic, mechanical movements. The eyeballs of the being formerly known as McGubbins rolled back lazily in their sockets - not quite in time with each other, like melons on a gaming machine that was out of sync. He rushed into his kitchen and began throwing eggs in the air and swallowing them whole.

Mr. Oeuvlemans had succeeded in locating the generalised *Fruit Charmers* section in the directory. It looked like he was going to have to trawl through the entries one by one. Of course, he didn't have to have a banana charmer *per se*. It was a rat he had in his toothpaste, after all - not an item of greengrocery. But, of course, he was hoping that he could find *that* particular banana charmer - the one from the telly - who obviously had an affinity with animals as well. The first number he dialled - *Aabsolutely Fruitulous* - sounded promising.

"How many pound coins can you get in a hamster?" queried an enthusiastic voice before he even had a chance to speak.

Mr. Oeuvlemans waited, but apparently it was up to him to supply the punchline.

"I don't know, but I've got a rat in my toothpaste I'd very much like removed."

"Get off the line, you dirty bastard. I'm a fruit charmer - not a rat catcher!"

"But you said *hamster*, just then. Surely one rodent is much like another when you've got one stuck in a tube."

"Listen, sweetie. I don't think you're quite *au fait* with the fruit charming life. I was waiting for the password, just there. When I said, "How many pound coins can you get in a hamster?", you were supposed to say, "Turned out oranges and lemons again". That's how we establish that we're on the same wavelength."

Mr. Oeuvlemans began to wonder what sort of fruit this charmer was.

"Turned out oranges and lemons again," he ventured warily.

"Well, why didn't you *say* so, *mon brave*! Now how can we be of service?"

"I have a rat stuck in my toothpaste. I was hoping you might be like that fruit charmer on the telly - the one who taught the egg-eating snake to eat a banana. If you can work with animals, you might be -"

"Hold it right there! I am sorry, Mr. Whoever-you-are, but we specialise exclusively in putting things *in*. It is entirely up to the individual if, when - and even how - they come back out again. If I were you, I'd take that tube of toothpaste (if it really exists) to a vet. Unless you've got something to hide, of course."

Mr. Oeuvlemans was about to expostulate about the tone of that innuendo, but the over-ripe fruit inserter hung up on him. He picked up Yellow Pages again, hardly daring another foray into this sticky side of life he'd stumbled into. Maybe he should try rat catchers, after all - or possibly drain unblockers. It was only a rat in the toothpaste he had - a simple enough problem, surely, for someone with the right training.

We begin to see something now of the eye in the head of McGubbins. It has emerged above the level of his coconut pate - clearer now, within its fading brown integument, bigger and stronger after its hearty meal of eggs. It bulges upward, dragging behind it the convex outline of its still close-shrouded fellow. McGubbins doesn't know it - for his consciousness is in limbo as he sits there on the couch - but his head is in the process of giving birth. There is a faint crackling noise in the air of McGubbins's sitting room, then a *pop!* as the second eye emerges through his skull-gap. The crackling grows louder now, as more of the keratinous coating is dragged upwards and outwards, breaking into crumbly fragments as the creature within bursts free.

And now we know what has happened to the brain of the McGubbins. The brain of the McGubbins has engendered *thought forms*. For McGubbins has been letting his thoughts run away with him of late, and now they've come to haunt him in the flesh. His outer shell just sits there with its eyeballs rolling back and forth, each independent of the other, while a growing column of chrysalis streams outwards from his skull. Had his eyes been focussed they'd have seen the new imago that his thoughts had brought to being. It had slithered round the back of the settee and now lay coiled like a baby dragon on the carpet near his feet.

"If only," he'd been thinking lately, "an egg-eating snake could fly. Then I'd take my banana act onto new heights of sublimity!"

Well, we hope you're happy now, McGubbins. Because the very first egg-eating snake that can fly has been unleashed upon the world. And it's a big 'un.

2. REVISION OF VISION

Mr. Oeuvlemans couldn't face another ordeal on the phone just yet. He decided to sit there quietly, cultivating a positive outlook and trying to remember what it said in the self-help book he'd been reading. Something about the right kind of 'vision'. About not just sitting on your sofa waiting for life to change, but actively changing the way you see things. Close your eyes. How many things in the room are brown? How many are blue? How many are -

A white patch appeared in the air in front of his face - between the couch where he sat and the fireplace. This 'outlook therapy' was quite effective stuff. Mr. Oeuvlemans blinked, and the white patch resolved into something familiar. It looked uncannily like part of the edge of a wing. At first Mr. Oeuvlemans thought of

seagull, then he remembered his ornithological scout master: "There is no such thing as a *seagull*, only specific types of *gull*". It was too big for a gull anyway. He thought of an albatross. Still too big.

Mr. Oeuvmans stared intently at the wing part, patiently awaiting a full-blown manifestation. But no more wing appeared - just the bit of outer edge, with some feathers. Mr. Oeuvmans decided to use 'positive visualisation'. He decided to see this wing as the visit of an angel.

McGubbins was exhausted. Giving birth through your head to an egg-eating snake that can fly really takes it out of you (literally, in the sense of bone tissue). And the snake had eaten all his eggs as well. He didn't know whether he could do his act tonight. Apart from the general fatigue and lack of nourishment, he had the beginnings of a headache coming on. And the flat was a total mess - bits of keratinous coating all over the carpet; hair, scalp and dandruff smeared along the back of the couch. He really wanted to get things tidied up, while he...

He didn't want to look at the real problem. He needed time to see if it would resolve itself naturally. Right now there was nothing - absolutely nothing - beyond the outer level of his consciousness. He couldn't do his act tonight, because he *couldn't remember* how to do it. One thing he did know, however, was that his act brought in money. And if he cried off at the Popular Culturedrome they'd never book him again. He looked down to where the egg-eating snake that could fly coiled sleepily in the hearth, and wondered if he would ever be able to recover enough to train it. It was going to have to remain in a state of nature - or supernature - for now, at any rate. Thank the gods he had a normal egg-eating snake already trained to eat bananas. Much as he hated having to entrust his precious livestock to a stranger, McGubbins was going to have to hire a stand-in fruit charmer for this evening. He only hoped he could get one who could stand in as an oval-serpentist as well.

What a difference new vision makes! Now that he had seen - or decided to have seen - the angel, Mr. Oeuvmans found a courage to face things he had never known before. He was going to go back into the bathroom, take up that bulging tube of ratpaste, and... *squeeze* it. How could he come to any harm with an angel hovering there in the threshold of the dimensions, ready and waiting to protect him? With a sudden effort, he sprang from the couch and rushed to take his demon by the... tube.

It was where he had left it, on the lump-stand, huge and intimidating yet somehow tamed. With trembling hands, he lifted it up and hefted it experimentally. A second thought assailed him, but he blanked it out with a vision of the angel's wing. Then, before the second thought got cold feet, he unscrewed the plastic cap. Something startlingly yellowish appeared, but stubbornly refused to extrude itself further. Closer inspection revealed this vanguard of the contents to be the incisors of the rat, obviously placed in readiness to gnaw its way out, should the top be removed.

It suddenly dawned on Mr. Oeuvmans that the rat couldn't have been inserted into the tube head-first through the nozzle. He quickly checked the other end. *Of course!* Whoever had put the rat in his toothpaste must have opened up the wide end, shoved it inside, then cunningly sealed it up so that you couldn't see the join. *Bastards!* After all that worry and heavy post-traumatic rationalisation he'd been through - they'd *cheated*...

Well, it didn't matter now. He had an angel at his side, and he was going to squeeze this tube of toothpaste once and for all. If the rat was expecting something different, well tough. It would just have to try insight-adjustment techniques like he had. Then it could get its own bloody angel. Mr. Oeuvmemans's dander was up, and without pausing for further thought, he grabbed the wide end of the tube in both hands and throttled mightily. The tube bulged bigger towards the neck end, but still nothing more came through behind the teeth. Oeuvmemans rolled up the bit he'd emptied so far, then made another massive effort of pressure.

He heard a strangled squeaky squawk, then... *SPLUTTOCK!* The whole contents spurted out onto the floor. There was the culprit before him now, awaiting the final judgement of Mr. Oeuvmemans. Only... it wasn't a rat. That is, not a rat in a conventional sense. It had a rat's *head*, certainly - despite the distorting traces of the toothpaste. But the body was more of a... *hen*, really. The rat-hen fluttered its wings and clucked half-heartedly. Then the damn thing laid an egg.

With a flash of white feathers, the egg-eating snake that could fly, conjured up out of McGubbins's daydreams, plunged into the room from nowhere, swallowed the egg, and made off with the rat-hen in its jaws into the ethereal hinterland of the collective consciousness. Mr. Oeuvmemans just stood there, wondering if he should buy a new tube of toothpaste.

3. CRUSHED

Meanwhile, McGubbins was busy on the phone.

"*Aabsolutely Fruitulous* ?"

"How many pound coins can you get in a hamster?"

"Turned out oranges and lemons again." McGubbins had been around the block a few times. He knew the score.

"How can we be of service?"

"My name's McGubbins. I need a replacement oval serpentist in a hurry - one that can handle bananas."

"*Everyone* at *Aabsolutely Fruitulous* can handle bananas, Mr. McGubbins. As for oval serpentism... that would be getting eggs inside a snake, I take it?"

"Ordinarily, yes. But this snake is an egg-eater already. My speciality is getting it to take bananas."

"So *you're* the act the ratpaste nut was looking for! It'll cost you."

"My performance fee is not inconsiderable. The stand-in can keep it all, so long as he doesn't lose me my regular booking. I just... *can't* tonight..." McGubbins glanced at the sleeping form on the hearthrug. How could he care about a bog-standard egg-eating snake - even one that could eat a banana - when he had the exotic mysteries of an egg-eating snake *that could fly* to explore? His head ached, and there was a new pain somewhere in his chest. "I..."

"No need to explain, sir. We've already had your stalker on the phone. Just give us the details and we'll get someone onto it..."

Mr. Oeuvlemans specifically wanted spearmint. That was what he normally got anyway, but the angel seemed insistent for some reason. It was strange the way he was able to pick up - not 'orders', exactly - but *inspiration* from his angel, though it had vanished so soon into whatever dimension it came from. But this is the sort of thing that can happen, when your 'angel' is a projection of someone else's thoughts. It is only to be expected that a certain crossing of imaginative wires would occur. McGubbins thought up the egg-eating snake that could fly. Mr. Oeuvlemans thought of an angel the minute he set eyes on the wing section. What, one might profitably speculate, could the winged manifestation itself have been thinking of, during all the long weeks of incubation in the brain cells of its host?

Nothing original, you can be sure. Begotten from the mind of man, its thinking must take colour from the palette of the selfsame soul. McGubbins's mind was very colourful indeed. Too colourful really for such a young, impressionable creature as the emergent snake to partake of. Yet even such a one as McGubbins had been young himself, once. And his juvenile memories were still there somewhere, all innocent and available for imaginary snakes to plunder - full of sweeties, childhood crushes and adventure. Our new young creature obtained a fondness for spearmint gum - such as McGubbins once had chewed to keep his breath sweet - allegedly concocted from rats' tails, as the old wives had it. (And who was to argue with old wives, when they had made such an impression on the young McGubbins?)

But an egg-eating snake - even an egg-eating snake that can fly - eats eggs, not chewing gum. How, then, could an imaginary serpent supply itself with spearmint rats'-tail chewing-gum eggs? The answer, it would seem, would be to supply itself with a spearmint flavoured rat-hen.

All these thoughts ran through the mind of Mr. Oeuvlemans. But they failed to register in his consciousness. When you have decided to believe in angels, everything else becomes obliterated. As far as he was concerned, the angel wanted him to buy more spearmint toothpaste, and he knew a shortcut round the back of the supermarket.

The thoughts had simultaneously gone through McGubbins's brain - bruised though it was from its recent birthing. Of course, he was completely unaware of the phonecall the incubus had made to Mr. Oeuvlemans while it still had occupation of his body. Mr. Oeuvlemans was merely a disembodied concept floating about in the general swill of ideas. Nevertheless, it all made sense to him. The rat-hen hadn't shown up yet in any physical form, so it must still be in the dream-dimension of the egg-eating snake that could fly - and so long as the snake remained asleep, the rat-hen would be likely to stay there.

McGubbins was weary of it all. The recent exertions he'd been through were crippling him, and the pain in his chest was now completely encircling his rib cage. He went into his bathroom to look at himself in the mirror. At first, there was nothing to be seen, but as he turned to reach for his shirt, a tiny black appendage became visible under his arm. It was exactly as he suspected - the tiny black appendage was a tiny black ichthyosaur in an egg sac dangling from McGubbins's armpit. This was another dream crossover he'd picked up. The dreaming snake was going to have to be stopped somehow. And why not? It was an interesting challenge. If McGubbins could brainwash an egg-eating snake into eating a charmed banana, he could brainwash an egg-eating snake that could fly into stopping dreaming charmless dreams.

It would all take time, however. And the pain in his chest didn't quite correspond with the dangling embryo at his side. Indeed, he was experiencing a horrible sensation of *deja vu* about this pain. It had all the hallmarks of the same pain he had experienced in the birthing of the egg-eating snake that could fly. But this pain was in a different place. McGubbins had seen *The Alien* (and so, by association, had the snake). Call it irrational, if you will, but he felt decidedly more squeamish about birthing through his chest than through his head. Apart from anything else, he'd be more likely to *see* what was happening. This called for drastic action. He had some bicarbonate of soda somewhere...

Mr. Oeuvlemans didn't see the *Gums of Navarone* toothpaste lorry backing towards him, as he squeezed himself out from behind the recycling bins at the back of Strangebuys. He was far too preoccupied seeing if the goods entrance doors were locked. Alas, for human communicative harmony, the driver of the lorry wasn't giving the possibility of locked doors a first, second or even semi-detached thought. He'd just seen a photo of his childhood sweetheart in the morning paper, and he was lost in remembering the longings of the past.

When the crunch came, neither he nor Mr. Oeuvlemans had managed to achieve the slightest degree of telepathic communion. If you can imagine the pressure needed to force a rat into a tube of toothpaste, you can get some idea of the force that squidged Mr. Oeuvlemans into meaty mush behind that truck. Ironically enough, the driver didn't witness this directly. He had reverted to a sixteen-year-old again, and was sobbing sentimentally in his cabin.

McGubbins, on the other hand, received a spasm of synchronised agony at the precise moment when the ribs of Mr. Oeuvlemans caved in. Such was the reverse effect of the mirroring experiences that McGubbins's ribs caved *outwards* in response. There was no need of a mirror, however, to spot the cause of his discomfiture. A huge yellow hemisphere, liberally surrounded by white, protruded from the erstwhile breathing cavity of the oval serpentist. The egg-eating snake that could fly had dreamed him into a Scotch egg, and now his goose was cooked.

He lay there, stricken - as anyone who has been turned into a Scotch egg has every right to do. The smell of spearmint assailed the room, and for a moment, the vision of Mr. Oeuvlemans smeared across the back of Strangebuys flooded McGubbins's mind. Then it dispersed with the hosing-off of the door by supermarket lackeys and the unloading of toothpaste from the lorry as usual. The spearmint smell persisted, though, and McGubbins strained to look around him. His whole body, stiffened by recent upheavals, turned with him when he turned his head - the egg in his chest going round like a searchlight, or huge unblinking eye. At last he saw the rat-hen. It was scuttling toward him, wings beating feebly, snout all a-quiver at the smell of food.

With a squeak of its squawk, it landed on his lap and tucked straight into the half-sliced egg. It was like tearing the heart out of McGubbins - indeed, to all intents and purposes, it really *was* tearing the heart out of McGubbins. And it was hard to stomach, too. To have survived being turned into a human Scotch egg, only to be eaten alive by the rat-hen which was the figment of imagination of the egg-eating snake that could fly, which itself was the figment of McGubbins own imagination... In a very real sense, he was actually *eating himself* - and there was nothing he could do to stop it! It was intellectual self-cannibalism of the worst kind, now completely out of his own control. He wasn't even getting a meal out of it - all the nourishment seemed to be going by proxy from

the rat-hen to the sleeping egg-eating snake that could fly, still curled up as it was on the hearthrug.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. McGubbins tried to call for help, but he was choking for breath as it was. He struggled to muster his resources, while the knocking persisted - changing at last to a rattling at the letterbox.

"How many pound coins can you get in a hamster?" shouted a familiar voice.

"Turned out oranges and lemons again" wheezed McGubbins by a supreme effort.

"Are you all right, Mr. McGubbins? You don't sound quite as you did on the phone. You've not been... visited... by that nuisance caller with the toothpaste?"

"Rat-hen..." gasped the stricken egg-man.

"Hang on in there! I'll protect you!" And with a rending and crashing of flimsy council door timber, the man from *Aabsolutely Fruitulous* kicked his way into the house. He was a stringy-looking fellow with a flowery shirt and a shoulder bag. He looked aghast from McGubbins to the egg-eating snake that could fly - then did a double-take at the rat-hen and partly-eaten Scotch-egg dilemma on the sofa.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. I... didn't realise you were... engaged in *personal* matters. I'll just take the snake and go."

Averting his gaze from the scene of egg-centred intimacy, he took a small handset out of his bag and pointed it at the now slightly wakened snake.

"We've got electronic gadgets for the likes of serpentism now," he informed his immobilised client. "This'll charm the little fella - ooh! he's really quite a *big* fella, isn't he? - into the bag, and we'll get him off to do his act for you directly. I've got the banana in the van. Bit of a ventriloquist, is he? I can distinctly hear a hissing sound behind -"

But before he could finish, the egg-eating snake that could eat a banana slid into the room from the hall, having escaped from its cage in a fit of jealous athleticism. It lunged at the egg-eating snake that could fly before the befeathered usurper had a chance to retaliate. Before you could say "Sunny side up" it had swallowed the entire head of the much bigger reptile, and lay there - stuck for a moment with its larger-than-life-sized victim part-way engulfed in its throat. But egg-eating snakes are flexible beasties, and one which is trained to eat a banana is more flexible than most. With a monumental gulp of the type the ancient Aztecs must have seen an anaconda make, it swallowed down the rest of the egg-eating snake that could fly, and lay there, bulging in all directions and undoubtedly replete.

"Oh dear," said the *Aabsolutely Fruitulous* man. First I get the wrong snake, and now *this*. I don't think *this* little beauty is going to be wanting its banana tonight!"

"To hell with that! It's saved my life! It can have the night off!" McGubbins - his Scotch egg interior and parasitic rat-hen now dissolved with the consciousness of the egg-eating snake that could fly - leapt to his feet and shook the *Aabsolutely Fruitulous* man warmly by the hand.

"I am a new man! To hell with money-grabbing considerations! Life is too short! Come, my good fellow, we shall repair to a suitable hostelry to celebrate my return to health - have no fear, you shall receive full payment of your fee before the night is out. I feel lucky!"

"Going to turn your hand to the gambling machines, then, are you?"

"Why not? There's too much pressure in the oval serpentism business now. I wonder what the odds are on the one-armed bandits?"

"How many pound coins can you get in a hamster?"

"Turned out oranges and lemons again!"

And off they went in search of a fast buck, while the serpentine deliverer of McGubbins digested its intellectually concocted supper and turned over weighty matters of this and that.

"You can beat an egg," it seemed to be thinking as it sprawled untidily on the floor, "but you can't beat an egg-eating snake that can eat a banana".

Ends

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A PIG'S PIG

By Jeffrey Zable

Once upon a time there were three pigs.
One became choice bacon,
the other choice ham,
while the third went on a killing spree
of butchers throughout the land.
By the time they caught him
he was the most prolific serial killer in history.
His fame rivaled Hansel, Aladdin, and even Little Red.
He was the swine of swine, who to his dying day
never expressed a single word of remorse.

*First appeared in **Chrome Baby**, 2014*

Reflections On Childhood Bilocation

By Barbara Ruth

A bird broke forth and sang
and then the schoolbell rang,
a filament of me went to school
and now I wonder, which one, who?



Beyond The Fence by Barbara Ruth

Don't bag me when it's my bag you're smoking

By Mercedes Webb-Pullman

I'll never learn to roll a spliff your way
with papers stuck together, still can't follow
the way to twist them closed, though I must say

yours always end up fat instead of hollow
like mine. I smoke a pipe, or roll one each,
don't like the mess where other tongues have wallowed

between my lips. It's gross. If you could teach
yourself to wipe your mouth before a toke
you'd make me happier to hear your speech

about the way to grow and dry my smoke
and roll a decent joint. May I remind
you just who grew and cured this? Not a bloke,

a woman in a peaceful state of mind
who doesn't need her household skills maligned.

Twain's (Scientific) Stain / Tesla's (Artistic) Pain--An Allegory, Or, Hippocrates vs. Hypocrisy

By Joseph Pravda

Once, when Time was younger two very different pioneers pursued divergent deep-flowing streams of thought toward their seemingly separate safe harbors to effectively defy--if not give the lie to--the Book of Ecclesiastes.

And, in pursuit of their ostensibly unconscious soundings of the deepest enlightenment within those 'streams' such a confluence took place as to rival the heavens' very lightning, thereby illuminating a modern world very much in need of the pragmatically new, all the more needed by humankind given their place---'neath an unforgiving Sun---a space their Bibles insisted was incapable of witnessing anything describable as wholly 'new'.

This apparent mutual irrelevance of these veritable human forces of nature and their respective fluid fields of endeavor by Mr. Samuel L. Clemens & Dr. Nikola Tesla was, itself, given the lie 'ab initio', by their common natural mother herself when her loftier forces--for both, by streaking or stroking lightning--accompanied each's arrival upon the (data)banks of human history.

Each's nascence (Clemens' Western American birthing accompanied by Halley's comet & Tesla's violent Eastern European electrical storm) set in motion such a storm of newness that today's readers of American literature's inventor enjoy it by the often wireless, always reliable light of Tesla's alternating current of electrons. Indeed, it has been reported widely that the frequently infirmed Tesla's childhood was, itself, redeemed with the invisible invigoration garnered by his voracious consumption of Clemens' enlightening iconoclastic writerly inventions, then newly translated; and, unlike the great exaggeration much later attributed to reports of Clemens' demise, those creative works served as pilot lighting for Tesla's oceanic ambitions.

It is precisely the ways and means by which Tesla, many years later, found to reciprocate that gift of invigoration that serve as the heart of this embarking: the capture of their mutual lightning in such a bottle as would find its way into and unto the ocean of time and space a proverbial message of humoresque hope of escape from the gloomy musings of Solomon the wise himself, and his seeming curse upon invention itself. Let us, then, scrutinize their message that modernity's 'been there/done that' ennui is capable of aversion, like some ensnaring whirlpool, no more than some bad habit, now and evermore supplanted by better and better ones.

I. Auto-Mimesis: From Noble 'Savages' To Nature's Cocoon, and How Somehow (Some of) Her Creations Know What To Do

Causation being what it is, every effect has its back story; derived from autobiographical and sundry anecdotal sources concerning the admittedly strange Dr. Tesla, famously suffering from an early age from today's diagnostic acronym, O.C.D., accompanied by a little night music as silent soundtrack, compliments of another prodigal genius, Mr. Mozart who, like nature and Tesla, knew what to do before they knew what to do. An oriental bow in the form of a haiku may be owed to both, and especially Tesla, given his easterly origins:

'Loud whispers from the cocoon, as butterflies, somehow, know what to do'.

In 1866, Tesla, but ten years old, attending the 'Normal School'. We find Tesla pacing near the family homestead, a small church nearby where his father preaches about the heavenly regions and his deity's veiled threat of lightning strokes; the boy holding his head in both hands, experiencing imagery of just such flashes. Later, he glimpses a picture of Niagara Falls, concluding impatiently that it is a waste of water, sensing that someday he will go there and capture energy. Still struggling with his flashes throughout his life, he recounted as an adult: "These were at first blurred and indistinct and would flit away when I tried to concentrate my attention upon them, but by and by succeeded in fixing them. I soon discovered that my best comfort was attained if I simply went on in my vision farther and farther getting new impressions all of the time and so I began to travel in my mind. Every night, sometimes during the day; always when alone. I would start on my journeys, see new places, cities and countries."

As perhaps bookend to a truly expansive life's signal achievements for an often misapprehending world, we leap ahead to Dr. Tesla's 77th birthday, and his retrospective told to a reporter during his customarily brisk pacing, this time and place anywhere but rural--Manhattan island.

Having worked for, then detested, then bested the likes of J.P. Morgan, T.A. Edison, he had survived with hundreds of patents, often gifted away from him, his personal peccadilloes having undermined his otherwise deserving moniker as nonpareil inventive visionary, a practical counterpart to Einstein's theoretical pioneering of another kind of expanse, those obsessive quirks surely robbing him of Nobel and other prized recognition.

"I have learned you cannot break the laws of nature. That is death. Self-preservation is the only rigid law I know of. There is no morality in nature, beyond the necessity of preserving one's self and one's best efficiency. The social contract not to kill others comes under that heading, also. I believe in certain human truths as contained in the Bible but not in revealed religion or in the theologies." (Curious that the scrivener in question failed to put the obvious query about that 'wholly' ...defeatist Solomonic part; this scribbler allows Tesla would've vetoed Ecclesiastes of the biblical canon). As that chronicler of nature's exceptional phenomena relevantly observed in unintended defense of both great men: "Steam engines get built when steam engine time comes."

"Then, too, there is a conflict between science and art. By 'art' I mean a certain integrated idealism. It is a centripetal something, opposed to the endless centrifugal forces of science. Eventually science will fly apart and fall of its own forces. There is too much for any one man to know. It is no longer possible, as in Bacon's day, for one man to take all knowledge as his province. The seeds of decay and disunion are there as the mass becomes too unwieldy--it works like everything else in nature--attractions set up repulsions, backwards and forwards it goes, now one side winning, now the other side."

Alas, his parting coup de gras, delivered with the same aristocratic aplomb of his courtly imaginary rapier, held in his immaculate gloved hands, now supplanted by his incisive tongue:

"Science will win in the present set up of things, but it will likely carry civilization down with it when it goes. The art will have to step in, gather up the pieces and carry on. Of course, it is possible that there will be

developed scientists who are artists as well. They must realize that this is something dynamic about idealism and apply that dynamism as they would any other force. Then civilization may be able to continue. But I doubt it..."

In Tesla's mind may have been the likes of Clemens, despite his amateurism as to strict science, especially in light of the darkness of his disastrous experience with the literal flying apart into Humpty-Dumpty-like irreparable pieces (both mechanical and those of Eight, fiscally speaking) of his printing press investment, best recounted with pained wit:

"October. This is one of the peculiarly dangerous months to speculate in stocks. The others are July, January, September, April, November, May, March, June, December, August, and February." --Mark Twain, 'Pudd'nhead Wilson' (1894)

As a result, and as though taking up the gauntlet laid down by Tesla (albeit well after 1894...perhaps they both had piloted via thought Mr. Wells time machine) Mr. Clemens, as Tesla's knight errant artist, was forced to take to the lecture stage, impelling the two to ...entwine in twain.

For ruinous as his fascination with inventiveness itself may have been to his financial fortunes, Clemens was ever fascinated by the progress innate to science, at least as to its monetization. Equally detrimental to Tesla's well-being was his naive failure to exploit many of his hundreds of lightning-like Earth-shaking U.S. patents commercially, preferring to await a future day's appreciation.

Somehow by force of will and fortuitous friendships, however, he surmounted man-made fate and, despite his penchant as a reclusive celibate, he enjoyed the company of the prominent including certain women; one such Dutch-French platonic 'mistress' may well have aided in the allegorical confluence of two ardent fans of her thespian art, Mme. Sarah Bernhardt.

The catalysing ground for this effect of her magnetic affect may be found to have taken place in 1894, at a dinner in his honor at Delmonico's, Tesla's obsessive haunt, the who's who of New York society, including Clemens, Mme. Bernhardt, the Morgans, Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts, were in attendance. Charles Delmonico invited Tesla to join him and his friends in a game of billiards. With Sarah's encouragement, he watched several games, then, at her insistence, he defeated two of the world's best players. On exiting, he whispered into her ear: 'It's simple mathematics.'

Some of the guests that evening also attend Tesla's laboratory to witness his display of the shooting of millions of electron 'balls' volts through his body. Samuel Clemens is one of the few that volunteered, at a reduced voltage. Perhaps the sparks ambient at that dinner so invigorated Clemens that he craved yet more, this time such effect to be supplied by Tesla. Mr. Twain, Clemens alter ego, became Tesla's 'developed artist', personally offering up his corpus to the alternating currents of science's very ebbs and flows, literally. From 'Century' magazine's contemporary account:

"Fig. 13 [the first ever phosphorescent photo image of anyone, here, Twain] a most curious and weird phenomenon is illustrated. A few years ago electricians would have considered it quite remarkable, if indeed they do not now....The currents induced in the loop by means of the resonating coil over which it is held, traverse the body of the observer, and at the same time, as they pass between his bare hands, they bring two or three lamps held there to bright incandescence.....currents one or two hundred times as high as that employed in electrocution do not inconvenience the experimenter in the slightest. The extremely high tension of the currents which Mr. Clemens is seen receiving prevents them from doing any harm to him."

It eventuated that the 'certain dynamism of idealism' Dr. Tesla prescribed led our better-developed artist to, despite strict proscription uttered by Tesla, jig and amble rather happily upon the vibrating humming disc invented by the good Doctor, Twain's next adventure, the occasion having been occasioned by the author's having confided that he was regularly irregular. Fixated upon the assurance that Tesla's device 'imparted vitality', Twain confessed to feeling rather well, now ignoring the proscription to dismount on cue. Once disengaged, Clemens clutched his twain puckered buttocks, pleading for directions to the water closet. It is surmised that the signature white linen suit worn by Twain, now Clemens again, had become thereafter what the finally freed prisoner becomes, once granted, of his suit for 'Clemesy' from the confines of his jail cell---never to be seen again.

Had she been present, the author of 'My Double Life', Mme. Bernhardt, might have enlightened the moment via French that the contretemps that very night of their joint repast put her in mind of the very slight verbal distinction between two very different 'strokes'--the one, a coup de foudre, or stroke of lightning, the other coup de foudre, a stroke of...fornication, here, past tense. (While we may also infer double entendre of her book's title having to do with both love at first sight as well as at first...night, we abjure further comment on upstaging offstage 'affairs').

Suffice to say that she would have been the keenest of observers, perhaps even Tesla's 'developed artist', in so vivid a description of cause AND effect...and known what to do, as well.

II. (Only) Human Mimesis: Much Ado About Twain's Ca-ca..phony

This brings us to our allegorical segue: 'The (Only) Human Stain', by What Have Yewrought' (not Philip Roth).

Proposition: Consider yourself in Twain's shoes (after his wardrobe mal function's remediation); would you have forgone the blissful 'imparted vitality' sensations you'd derived from a spinning electromagnetic thing--we'll call it Spaceship Earth--especially if it promised to afford even temporary relief from a period of long-suffering?

Let's stipulate that, regardless of the generation, for most forethought is likely to be rather scarce, with the added near certainty that easily half of the Earth is inhabited by those of either such youthful indiscretion or outright needful desperation that they'd slip quickly into the shoes of Twain. Such is the conundrum facing thatspinning Spaceship Earth's successor 'pilots' and passengers alike. As the inimitable Dorothy Parker suggested for her epitaph: 'Wherever she went, including here, was against her better judgment.'

Enter another French iconoclast, Rene Girard.

Adopting the Greek spirit of self-examination and 'do no harm' Hippocratic ethos, this 'new Darwin' knew that before the (only) human(e) could imitate natural moderating equilibrium that being must first evolve intentionally. "Human imitation is not static...and leads to innovation." But, unlike the cow, which needs (and desires) only naturally occurring grasses man's desires are aimless--and the source of conflict, the refusal to share with perceived rivals.

And the cause is the ancient ritual of scapegoating (along with the very fact that this is ancient). This ritual is an endlessly repeating placebo, the effect of which is the prevention of the profound quantum leap which transforms 'human' via the suffix 'e'.

The well-chosen nomination of The Raven Foundation is but one affixer of that 'e' (e.g., Imitatio.org, Stanford.edu, et.al.) and, perhaps like Poe, the darling of the French Symbolists, we must seek the 'un-masking which, also, tears away the face...' lest such intentionally engineered evolution of mankind's nature prove worthy of his poetic curse, 'nevermore.'

With Girardian self-transformation a sine qua non shall have been begun, allowing for an otherwise 'too late' attribution for bio-mimicry and other cradle to cradle mere punctuation to our 'only human' sentence of dire stasis.

And, so, we find ourselves at a lightning rod age, a Proustian moment beckons in the direction of a moribund human latticework of interconnections seductively relevant to an undercurrent swirling about the dramatically symbolic personage of Mme. Bernhardt, a kind of Madeleine-esque node in our 'technology-mad' electromagnetic world. As did polglot Tesla, we find her tombstone at Pere la Chaise, holding the remains of men and women who have marked their names in life's calendar (as one author put it), nearby the hedonistic momentary seeker of invigoration, Jim Morrison, all strewn with escapism's tincture, and flowers, yet, now, unlike in Tesla's time, the air may not smell so fresh, like the mournful flowers and other tributary detritus. Indeed, their--and our--'life's calendar' looms like Gordius's knot ('not?').

See yourself in Delhi, or Beijing, two enormous blighted cities ranked among the worst worldwide for their very ambient atmospheres. Despite the surgeon's mask, you may sense that you are Twain back in fin-de-siecle Manhattan's wardrobe malfunction. The inescapable point of Mssr. Proust's anticipation of neural science--the simplest of stimuli to our senses may prompt such time travel as might dazzle his contemporaries, H.G. Wells or Jules Verne. And it is in such experiences that we find such a mercuriality in our environment as lends it the aspect of quicksilver (and, in many cases, literal mercury poisoning), thusly reinforcing the urgency of the sort of change of course for most developed and developing urban areas of Earth plotted meticulously by Buckminster Fuller, who gave us the Apollo Program as paradigm for what is needed, now. ['Critical Path', 1981]

It is NASA and NOAA's worldwide counterparts 'ark-like' undertakings, like Dr. Tesla, warning (via their scientific versions of Proust's 'The Search for Lost Time') that we cannot afford the Twain-like failure to heed the deep, wide stain of a climatic storm of climactically anal(ogous) miring in ordure versus verdure.

Flush with such olfactory sensations, old and to come, how to adapt and adopt nature's ways and means, tutored by the poly-maths Fuller and Girard?

Like Dr. Tesla's 'developed scientists who are artists as well', Girard and Fuller well fit those who foresaw that there "is something dynamic about idealism and apply that dynamism as they would any other force. Then civilization may be able to continue."

Part and parcel of that dynamical idealism was Fuller's belief that the man-made machine was inseparable from the spiritual operating principles of the universe, doubtless somehow inspired by his visionary great Aunt, Margaret Fuller, Emerson's anointed disciple of transcendentalism.

And, transcend we must our scapegoating desires, such that our 'trip' (the actual term for a flock of goats) may be more and more pleasant and less of an 'acid' (as in ocean acidification) flashback.

Thus, through Fuller's detailed analysis of the availability of solar and other natural resource inspiring bio-rhythmic phenomena he has shown that (in 1981) 'there are four billion billionaires aboard Spaceship Earth who are unaware of their [natural] good fortune.'

There can be little doubt that these late seers would (between Jeremiads akin to Wells' epitaph for Earthians--'Damn you all, I told you so!') drum into our collective skulls the proverbial journalistic five 'W's of climatological evidence available to us for some time: Who's responsible, What can still be done, even the patently obvious 'Why, When and What' of the data, adding for impatient good measure the How of the past and present, along with the indispensable 'How-To's of the near future. How fitting that in the Why & How columns the 'immortel' Girard should whisper 'know thy-selves' in Bucky's ear, for Bucky Fuller shall be our Tesla envoy in presenting to his 'future' undeniable facts, to wit, 'the enemy is us' collective self, to wit:

In a recent survey of peer-reviewed literature concerning climate change, from 11/2012-12/2013 some 2,258 papers by 9,126 qualified authors documented adverse man-made delicti versus one solitary paper of 'The Herald of The Russian Academy of Sciences'. As homage to Fuller's unique communication style of neologisms and stunning metaphors, we shall entitle this his 'Allegory of the Twain Stain: Verdure Versus Ordure' lecture, abridged.

Logic, ever the friend to truth, hence, a syllogism is offered:

MAJOR PREMISE: Bucky's colorfully documented chapter entitled 'Piggily Wiggily'.

Here he lays out how greed has become an ideology of a market-driven zero sum game, wherein for X to win, Y must lose; empowered further by lawyer-capitalism, a closed loop of diminution of resources is seen given the blatant political corruptibility of law-making.

MINOR PREMISE: Why's the 'status quo' got a Latin name?

Yes, it's rhetorical, but..a dead language is no way to enter the millenium, already poorly begun. Nonetheless, sufficient wake-up calls having been made and heard (if unheeded), the survival instinct may be counted upon as a default setting pre-wired a la the 'drowning man syndrome' versus 'scapegoating' reflexes.

CONCLUSION: Nature has always held the key to balanced coexistence---grandma's 'waste not want not' refrain.

As the Ox-Cam educated Monty Pythons might re-purpose their poignant skit thusly: 'And, now, for something completely different...or else'; look, it's bloody well past time to pay attention, as you've only got fifteen seconds in which to summarize Proust's 'In Search of Lost Time' [to Americanize the blow, we'll adopt the Warholian clock of 15 minutes, for fame...or shame]:

Begin!

Fellow Urban(e) Earthlings, we give you The Parliament of Mayors:

Resolved, that given the glacial speed of non-human evolution (they're still hunting missing links, despite the occasional punctuated equilibrium event), while existing time-tested organisms may be studied and emulated thanks to engineering prowess' increasing rate of efficacy and Einsteinian imagination, bio-mimicry and other strategies are accelerating in depth and breadth of experimentation and implementation, zero-sum polity, ample funding and other 'but fors' are always obstacles in terms of precious time; hence, humans must speed up their ways and means committee models and devolve power for implementation of demonstrations, then 'Fuller' applications across national borders. How?

Enter Dr. Benjamin R. Barber, whose Parliament convened inaugurally in London on October 22, 2015. This signal water-shed (that term used advisedly as sea level rise threatens on a broad aquatic horizon) has coalesced not the city-states of old but, rather, the homes of most of the world's populace and that world's pollution remediation modalities, out of stark necessity, hence mothered invention.

Combined with Buckyesque passion seasoned with rigorous empiricism as to the 'nowness' of the thus-far 21st century, his thesis is sound in the context of pragmatism versus idealism, the latter the largely hidebound default setting of historical climate conferences betwixt nation states, to wit:

1/ broken sewerage, transport, school, cultural, etc. systems bring petitioners (many within necessary walking distance) with practical grievances to that relatively accessible door of his/hers, and haven't time for trippy scapegoating alone--cf., pot-holes;

2/ local legislation is not the unwieldy glacial affair even glaciers (especially now) avoid--gridlock;

3/you're likely to spot--and corner--Mayor X at the corner grocery;

4/the Mayor's kids aren't likely to be off at boarding school, breathing Swiss alpine air.

Many other 'all politics is local' observations may be made; the key meta-data have to do with such census-driven facts as at least 50% of the world's humans inhabit cities, promising to increase and at an increasing rate. The motherhood of invention will, in often keeping their heads above water, remain fertile as a result.

If America, one of the largest historical polluters, has featured its states as democratic laboratories in the 20th century, then it is now the cities which must experiment.

Persuaded that Dr. Barber has taken up Bucky's torch (albeit, lit with LEDs) and is marshaling minds via the worldwide 'cloud' with its refreshing problem-quenching moisture, it's time for the 'only humane'.

III. And, In The End.....Biomania

We end at the beginning, perhaps as early as Lovelock's 'Ages of Gaia' & the '60's*---with bio-mimicry, and in musical format; The Beatles and their mania sonorously sounding the universal rhythm of their phonetic insect cousins, accompanied by that most sincere of hope-filled sighs the weight of which resides in their melancholic 'Yesterday', when all our Earth-ly '...troubles seemed so far away....'

And they entered the world as stage to stay lest their plaintive 'shake-it-up' neo-Shakespearean cry go unheeded--'If all the world's a stage, it's stuck in adolescence!!-- perhaps as timely bookend to Tesla's *sturm und drang* entrance upon the 'only human' stage by this 'only humane' futurist, seer of their guitars' electric

summoning, such artists as Tesla himself envisioned in that long-ago interview: 'By 'art' I mean a certain integrated idealism. It is a centripetal something, opposed to the endless centrifugal forces of science.'

So, then, without further ado, back by invigorated demand, their integrated idealistic paean, in timely paraphrase:

{SING IT WITH THEM}

“.....and, in the end, the love (i.e., invigorating sensation) you TAKE is equal to the (loving) sense you MAKE (unto a generous Earth), &, 'all you gotta do is act naturally...' [has a nice Ringo to it, eh?...]... if you wish to help fashion the earthiest possible coming attraction marquee poster for an acclaimed filmic embodiment of you and yours living lives of verdure, working title:

{PHOTO NOT..[YET]..AVAILABLE}.

*Postscript: Speaking of the 60's, who amongst us--as we have been memorably told by those bipedal Beatles--could get by without a little help from our 'friends', in the instant case, in the seemingly humblest of forms, the *Stenocara* beetle. In reading of its moisture-gleaning exploits at Columbia University's Earth Institute's website recently, this friend of life inspired this rock 'n roll interpretation of its 'act':

"..suitably adorned in predictable black costume, the smallish performer was tuned in to the places where the rocks experience faint Atlantic-inspired pregnant clouds deposition of rolling fog's moisture, the almost haughty anterior rearing skyward posing like some well-practiced midwife, her architectonic back facing a makeshift (operating) theatre with its increasing lighters held aloft in joined defiance of dry darkness, a now moistened back finely glistening with stud-like bas relief bumps and watertight intaglio-ed indentations as if channels for sweat droplets into its rock-filled mouth."

Ends

Strange Days

By DS Davidson

Mister Fort came back from the dead
To his and my surprise
While poltergeists tossed stones about
And frogs rained down from clear skies
“Strange days,” he said
In reply to my startled cries.

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Vampire Dentist

By Steve Wechselblatt

Sidney M. Sharpe

Dentist to the Undead

By Appointment Only

South Tunnel Road, Asheville, NC

Generally, I don't schedule appointments until well after midnight. I prefer to give my clients time to eat or drink before they arrive at my office, although I've found it helpful to keep a couple of vials of blood, a pound or two of raw meat, and a passel of brains in the refrigerator, just in case. You wouldn't believe the amount of Listerine I go through every month, just to make sure I am not distracted by what Charlene, my dental assistant, calls "death breath."

I pride myself on my periodontal and surgical skills. As you might imagine, zombies have frequent and severe problems. After less than two weeks beneath the earth, they require grafts of the soft tissue in their mouths. In such cases, I take tissue remaining on the roof of the mouth, assuming it is available, and stitch it into place. This will benefit them for a while, but eventually tissue disintegration will recur. This can destroy bone as well, requiring follow-up bone grafts, where I use fragments of the patient's own bone, or bone "donated" by one of their victims. Zombies make up the bulk of my surgical practice.

Vampires rarely require surgery. Their bone is abnormally thick. They do not eat hard candy or drink caffeinated liquids, so it's easy for them to maintain healthy teeth. Because their teeth are so vital to their existence, or should I say non-existence, they also tend to practice excellent preventative care.

Except for this fellow I want to tell you about, Trebek.

One night, Charlene and I arrived an hour early to catch up on paperwork. Some of my zombies, who have lost their memory along with the greater part of their mind, often forget to pay. They rarely forget twice, as I employ a collection agency that's much more frightening than they are. As much as I enjoy my work, Charlene and I have our expenses and our own particular interests and proclivities. Mine are not inexpensive, and I suspect the same is true for Charlene. Certainly, she is well remunerated for her services, and that is as it should be, given the unusual hours and job requirements.

Anyway, as we busied ourselves with unpaid invoices, I heard someone (or something) pounding on the door. If pounding could be described as frantic, if it could be described as overwrought or even despairing, it was all of that, and more.

Charlene stopped snapping her bubble gum and rolled her eyes. Her golden amulet glared like an evil eye. Neither of us appreciates drop-ins. I usually turn them away with a few choice words and tell them to make a proper appointment if they want to be seen. But as soon as I left the office and opened the door, I saw this pathetic old fellow. I knew had to help him. It was a vampire, but stooped, with wisps of white hair and sagging flesh on his face and neck. He held two extra- long incisors in his left hand.

“Who are you?” I said.

Trek. You don’t recognize me?”

“Is that really you?” To call me amazed would have been the understatement of the millennium. I’d seen him very recently, and he’d looked a good sixty years younger.

“Last night I made a mistake,” he said. “A terrible mistake. I was riding the wind through the forests, admiring the black mountains against the night sky and pinpricks of light from tiny, scattered cabins, when I came on an old woman dressed in colorful rags. She was stick thin, but her veins showed prominently. I figured she’d be all right for a snack, but hardly a full meal. At first, I was inclined to let her pass. But, doc, you know how it is, you get hungry. You can’t stop yourself. So I wrestled her to the ground. She seemed very spry for an old lady. She cursed up a blue streak. I never heard the like. Finally, she seemed to give up. She mumbled a few words. As I bit into her neck, it suddenly got hard, real hard. Not hard like the bark of a tree. Hard like granite. I broke my upper incisors trying to get through it.”

I patted him on the shoulder. “Poor Trek. Who’d have guessed we still had gypsy shape- shifters in these parts? Of all the rotten luck...”

“Look at me! I’ve been aging ever since. I can’t eat. I can’t sleep. Doc, if you can’t reattach them. I won’t make it through the night.”

I went back into the office.

“Charlene, cancel tonight’s appointments. We’ve got a real emergency. We do this right, we’ll make a killing in the next couple of hours.”

I went back out to Trek. “Like any surgery, dental implants pose some health risks. Problems are rare, though. When they do occur, they’re usually minor and easily treated. In your case, they’re not even worth mentioning since you’ll die if we *don’t* operate.

“Let me explain how dental implant surgery usually works.”

I held up a finger. “First, your damaged teeth are removed. That’s largely been done. I just have to drill out a small section right over here.” I picked up a small mirror and poked a spot on the upper part of his jaw gently with a scalpel so he could see it. “Second, you’re in luck. Since you’re a vampire, your bone is strong and very stable. I won’t have to graft any additional bone, so we won’t have to wait for the graft to heal. Third, here’s where the fun begins.”

I paused, smiled at him , and ushered him over to the dental chair.

“I drill holes into the bone and place a titanium post in your jawbone. Again, this usually takes months to heal. We don’t have months, so I’m just going to put in an abutment. That’s an extension of the implant post where the new artificial tooth will rest. Naturally, your new tooth will have to be stronger and sharper than anything humans use. I’ve got a machine that shapes diamonds.” Here Charlene looked at me in amazement, but I continued directing my comments to Alex.

“Charlene will take a wax impression of your tooth, and I’ll create a diamond that fits it perfectly. Melting the diamond is obviously the most technically challenging piece of the work since the melting point of diamond is higher than any other mineral -- 3820 degrees Kelvin, to be precise – I do not believe any other dentist can perform this operation. Believe me, it’s not easy, and it’ll take me at least three hours. When I’m done, Charlene will cement it into place against the titanium abutment. As a surgical procedure, it’s more than a

little unorthodox; but if we do it correctly, you'll be out of here before dawn with new incisors. And they'll be better than the originals in every way: stronger, sharper, and certainly more attractive to the ladies."

Charlene looked at me as if I were insane. To her credit, she didn't utter a word.

Trebek looked famished.

"Before we begin, maybe you should have something to drink. Charlene, please bring our patient three liters of blood."

Turning back to him, I added, "Although nitrous oxide will help during the operation, you'll need all your energy. Afterwards, it's going to hurt like hell."

"Will I be able to feed??"

"Of course. But stay away from shape shifters," I said, wagging a mischievous finger in his face.

Drilling the teeth of a vampire is tedious business. Even with a diamond bit it takes more time to clean the spot properly than it would for an ordinary person .

The hard part hadn't even started yet, but after an hour my hands were shaking and sweat poured down my face. Charlene looked concerned as she wiped my brow with a tissue. She's a fine assistant. I didn't have to tell her to keep sucking saliva and blood out of Trebek's mouth. Trebek was also a model patient, scared stiff and still as death. After I attached the abutment and Charlene made the wax model of the incisors, I retreated into the special room I keep locked at all times. It was a gift from a particularly wealthy and grateful customer with a knowledge of Physics and the wherewithal to build something truly special for me: the world's first privately owned Z Machine. That's how I found out how to melt diamonds.

Don't ask for technical details. I'm not a scientist .

I enter the secret chamber with the Z Machine, and madly twist dials. I feel the urge to cackle like a lunatic. Instead I coolly calibrate and recalibrate measurements, and bathe the power-feeding equipment in tons of transformer oil and deionized water. I'm the only one who knows what takes place there. Charlene's never been inside the room.

When finished, I poured the liquid diamond into the mold. It cooled for a few seconds in a chest containing dry ice, just enough to harden the diamond slightly without shattering the mold. I popped it into the refrigerator for another hour to complete the process, during which I strolled out of the office to listen to crickets and other creatures of the night. There was nothing to do. Charlene picked up a couple of *People* magazines. Trebek was still in the dentist chair, eyes open and staring at the ceiling. He's been pumped full of nitrous oxide.

I had never done this surgery before. Not with melted diamond. I wondered if the dental implants in Trebek's upper jaw would protrude into one of his sinus cavities, causing nerve damage. I wondered how diamond would interact with the gum's soft tissue. I wondered if the glint of diamond would alert victims that a predator was stalking them. I had many questions; but no answers.

Afterward, I look down at Trebek. He shouldn't have attacked a shape shifter. But really, how could he have known?

At least Charlene will be able to recognize him next time.

Ends

Organic Gardening with the Vampire

By Nick Johnson

All the curtains in the room were drawn, and the lights turned out. He looked at the row of outlets on the wall just above the bed and wondered what it was all for. Before today, he had no idea, so many machines were involved with modern medicine. Marius had never been to the hospital before; he had never even seen a doctor before. Being immortal meant death had never been a consequence, so there was no need to worry about his health.

He had been known by many names and held many titles during his tenure as an unholy creature of the night, so many he could scarcely remember what his birth name was. Such things held significance for the living, for people who needed to be defined by something they hoped would last longer than their finite lives

Perhaps it was a to preserve a legacy, a way for mere humans who had no understanding of forever to try and live forever. Marius knew a legacy amounted to little more than a memory and when you lived in memories you were still destined for the dark mouth of oblivion.

Perhaps that was why he made the deal with his dark mentor. To him it seemed like a rather one-sided agreement; he was finally free from the clutches of inevitable death and all it cost him was something as abstract as his soul. Things took a turn thought when hardly a century into immortality he was privy to the horrible realization that even those like him were still well within death's reach.

He had this revelation when he saw Count Kirlov, the one who had shared these powerful gifts with him succumb to a well-placed stab by a pointed stick. That was enough to convince him to leave his fiefdom and carve out a new life as a Baron elsewhere. Despite his rather ghoulish appearance he managed to avoid detection, perhaps it was luck he was from Eastern Europe.

He had been born into wealth and had the advantage of having the cocoon of affluence. In his youth he had been a scourge of the peasants, a pale demon who hunted men from the saddle of his ebony stallion. Eventually, though he was forced to hide in the confines of his castle where he hoped he would fade from memory, less his secret be discovered.

As he hid himself away the gears of time continued to grind and the wheels ceaseless turned and the world moved on without him. Ultimately he was forced to lead a centuries-long existence as an undead nomad. Soon the days of the nobles passed and he saw his fortune vanish with it, but he had more than enough time to rebuild his wealth, and his time turned him into a keen investor.

He moved to New York city in the year 2000 AD and decided he could blend in there well enough. It was much like it had been back in the old land. If you had enough money, you could easily isolate yourself, and if you paid off the right people, they made sure you were left alone. Thanks to modern communications he was easily able to conduct his affairs without ever leaving his sanctuary of darkness and last year NYU had supplied him with an eager young intern named Tyler to handle his affairs.

Something started happening to him; his body was beginning to change. He had grown tired, paunchy, and his legendary libido had vanished. When he wasn't exhausted, he was often anxious. His once piercing eyes had become droopy orbs buried behind crows-feet. He thought back to Count Kirlov and the stick and for the first time in almost 800 years he felt afraid.

His intern suggested seeing a doctor. Marius wanted to know if anything was wrong right away so they went to the hospital and said they would wait there until the blood work came back. Marius learned a long time ago that bundles of money tended to make things go a little faster and often went a long way in convincing people to ignore the fact he's a vampire.

He watched the young man gazing at the glowing screen of his tablet from behind his tortoise shell glasses. He always seemed to be mesmerized by the hypnotic glow. It was at these times he felt a certain fondness for the servants in his castle days. What humans called "mid-evil times," they were chivalrous, attentive, and the social separation between them was nothing compared to the separation of 27 generations.

The vampire began to feel restless. He slid off the bed and began pacing back and forth occasionally he would stop to pull back the curtain and peer in the hallway.

"How long is this going to take?" He muttered.

The intern's eyes broke away from the flickering light.

"Sorry sir, but things can get backed up in these labs." He said apologetically.

Marius answered with a groan.

"You can watch something on Youtube if you want." He said offering up his tablet.

"Yeah ok, why not?" Marius shrugged.

Tyler handed him the tablet and immediately drew a phone from his jacket pocket and focused on its slightly smaller glowing screen.

Marius looked at him for a second and sighed.

"Oh, before I forget sir I need you to sign my time sheet today so I can log my hours at school."

"What? Oh yeah sure." Marius said indifferently.

He supposed the young Tyler was still in many ways like many of his previous servants. He was ambitious but at the same time rather spineless and completely motivated by what seemed to be implied promises of success from powerful people he was hoping favored him. Fortunately, it was that lust for future rewards that completely absolved him of morality and made him a dependable servant for a creature like Marius.

Marius looked at him and sighed. He had no idea he his severance package would probably consist of being devoured.

There was a knock at the door. Marius looked at Tyler and nodded. He opened the door, and the doctor walked in holding a manila folder.

The doctor was a short heavy man with a round frame. He breathed heavily when he walked, and it looked very possible at any moment his waist would burst from the confines of his khaki pants tied up by his brown leather belt.

"Good evening count." He said with a grin. "Sorry, that took so long."

"Yes, yes, that's all fine." Said Marius. "Now what exactly did you find?"

"Well." The doctor said with a sigh as he sat down in a chair next to the bed and opened the manila folder. "I'm going to be honest it's not good. However, I think with the proper treatments it should all be entirely fixable. At least it might be in a human I don't really know about vampires." He said

Marius glared at him and exposed just a bit of fang. The doctor picked up the gesture and hurriedly pulled out the results.

"Ummm according to your blood work you have dangerously high cholesterol. We also found a number of narcotic compounds in the toxicity test, and I think you may have diabetes.

We believe you may have more than one malignant tumor, and we've also found you have gout. The doctor grimly informed him.

"So what does all that mean?" Demanded Marius.

"Do you want me to look it up on the medical advice app sir?" Tyler asked.

"Why would I want you to do that? We are standing in front of a doctor." Marius hissed.

"Mr. Vampire..

"Marius." The vampire corrected.

"Marius." The doctor said starting over. "Most of what I found can be the result of an unhealthy lifestyle. What's your diet like....Oh well, I guess we know that already."

"I don't understand it!" Lamented Marius "its been the same for centuries why is this happening now?"

"Marius when you drink someone's blood do you only drink their blood?"

"No, I eat some of the flesh too. You simply just don't get enough nutrition from the blood alone." Said Marius.

"Hmm Right." The doctor said as he leaned back and folded his hands. "Now what kind of people do you normally eat?" He asked.

"Ohh I don't know for the last year, its just been whoever Tyler brings me." said Marius

"And what kind of people do you bring him?" The doctor asked looking over at Tyler.

"I'm sorry what was that?" Tyler replied looking up from his phone.

"Put the goddamn phone in your pocket before I gut you." Marius roared.

"What kind of people do you bring Marius to eat?" The doctor asked again.

"Oh, I'm very careful about that. I never bring back anyone people will go looking for." Answered Tyler

"So would you say these are....people on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum?" The doctor asked.

"Well, sure the cops tend to look for rich girls. Remember that girl who disappeared in Aruba that was national new for almost a year." Said Tyler.

"Hmmm I see." The doctor said.

"Why do you want to know about that?" Marius asked.

"Marius do you watch the news? Are you aware of all the different chemicals that are in the food Americans eat?"

Marius shrugged.

"If I were to be I would say that is what's causing you to get sick. The people you're eating are probably eating fast food, GMOs, and other chemically laced garbage. If you keep that up I'm afraid, you'll only get worse." The doctor said grimly.

"So what do I Do!?" Pleaded Marius.

"I would say start going after victims with a more healthy lifestyle. Try moving close to a Whole Foods or maybe send the kid to farmer's markets from now on." The doctor said.

"But he has to keep a low profile. If that many affluent people start to go missing, we'll be found out!" Whined Tyler.

"Yes doctor the boy is right, part of being a vampire is maintaining a low profile."

"Well, have you considered growing your own food?" The doctor asked.

"Growing my own food?" Marius repeated.

"Yeah, its quite popular these days. Many people have vegetable gardens, hell some even raise their own chickens."

"I'm not sure I follow." Said Marius.

"Why don't you start raising healthy people to eat." Suggested the doctor.

"Where would I get healthy people to raise?" Marius asked.

"Well, you're obviously a man of means have you considered adopting kids from foreign countries?" The doctor asked.

"What do you mean?" said Marius

"Well, many celebrities adopt children from third world countries as a PR stunt now and the governments are usually willing to give kids to rich Americans. Maybe if you got a few from say Africa or Asia you can raise them for a little while, and eventually you'll have all the healthy meals you'll need. You'll be food self-sufficient." The doctor said with a smile.

"This sounds like a good idea, long term thinking I like that," Marius said brandishing his fangs.

"Tyler get me the number for an international adoption agency." He ordered

"I'll check my apps." Tyler said earnestly.

"I heard China's trying to unload as many girls as possible." The doctor said enthusiastically.

Marius shook hands with the doctor and departed with his intern. He felt the sun was shining on a new day for him, although, of course, not literally.

Marius was going to do something no vampire had ever done. He was going to give up on hunting and pursue a new type of agriculture; humans were what would be reaped and sown. Over the generations, he could grow and modify them in any way he saw fit.

Ends

Not Quite A Masterwork

By DS Davidson

Beneath the clouds darkly
I wondered over across
The damply begrassed and lonely hills
When at last I chanced upon
A large amount of irises
And a couple of little daffodils



BARD, BARBING OR BARB

By Joy Myerscough

Jester's watering the pelargoniums in the beer garden when Petey and me fetch up, so we go behind the bar and pull a pint apiece. Yobbers is next along, and swipe me to Saturday if he don't have his arm in plaster.

"What the hell happened?" Petey asks.

Yobbers sits down and plonks his cast on the table. "Remember I told you we'd to cart a suit of armour out of the tower at Monk Bar?" Yobbers' uncle Bernie's got a moving van, and recently got done for driving under, so he needed a helper, and Yobbers it is; or—as it now turns out—was. "And take it to the university?"

We nod.

"We'd got it as far as the spiral staircase, which I was doubtful about but Bernie says just turn it sideways. The chap that runs the spot says he'll wait at the bottom to keep the tourists from squeezing past and getting stuck on the spear." "Halberd," Petey says. "It's called a halberd."

Yobbers gives him a hard look.

"The Richard the Third Museum, right?" Petey steamrollers on. "It's a two-handed pole weapon, commonly mistaken for other types of lance, or even a pike." He has a swig of his ale.

"Also useful for unseating horsemen."

"Go on," I say to Yobbers.

"So Bernie's first with the feet—it's a bit tricky, because it's dark and the stairs are really worn." Yobbers mimes a dip with his good hand. "The helmet's rattling something awful. The chap shouts to hurry up, he's got a bunch of people waiting, Richard being a bit of a celebrity at the moment, since his body was found under a parking lot in Lincoln and the chap's of a mind to collect their fivers sharpish, which he'd recently put up from one pound fifty."

"Leicester." Petey. "They found him in Leicester."

Yobbers purses his lips. "Next up's a slit where they used to shoot the arrows from and Bernie says have a gander, and there's a girl going by in a mini skirt and he says ain't that worth the price of the entrance. That's when the damn thing slips, crushing my fingers—and I give a yelp and Bernie's end jerks and knees him in the crotch. He's hopping about and yowling, and the armour's stuck in a crevice. In the by and by he gets out a can of three-in-one, which he touts as an old mover's trick and spurts some on the shoulder."

"Pauldron." Petey, again. "That's what it's called, the shoulder bit."

Yobbers shrugs. "So we get going again. He hollers to stop after a couple of steps, says he's got a button from his cardigan stuck in the meshy bit on the front. Like a skirt."

"Hauberk," says Petey.

"Yeah," says Yobbers, tapping a beer mat on the table. "Haute berk. He gnaws the button off with his teeth. On we go. I'm watching for the elbow bits as we get to the portcullis."

"Lame," says Petey. "Articulated elbow protection."

"Yeah," Yobbers says. "Lame is right. Round about then—and I tell you I'm not making this up—the visor pops open. I swear I see a face inside, with a big wart on the chin." He peers over the top of his pint at Petey, who says nothing.

“So I panic and drop my end and it falls on Bernie with an unholy clatter, and he’s shouting steady now and the chap’s wondering how much longer. Bernie says something I don’t catch, and then Bernie and the armour crash down the rest of the stairs and end up in a clinch on the pavement, in front of a bunch of Japanese tourists.”

He slugs his pint. “So the chap points out a few dings on the chest plate.”

“Cuirass,” Petey says.

Yobbers bunches his fist, remembers his arm. “Queer ass.”

“And Bernie says—reasonably enough, to my way of thinking—that it’s a suit of armour, and if the chap were to assess the situation coolly, he’d likely conclude that its authenticity just got kicked up a notch.”

“That’s how you broke your arm?”

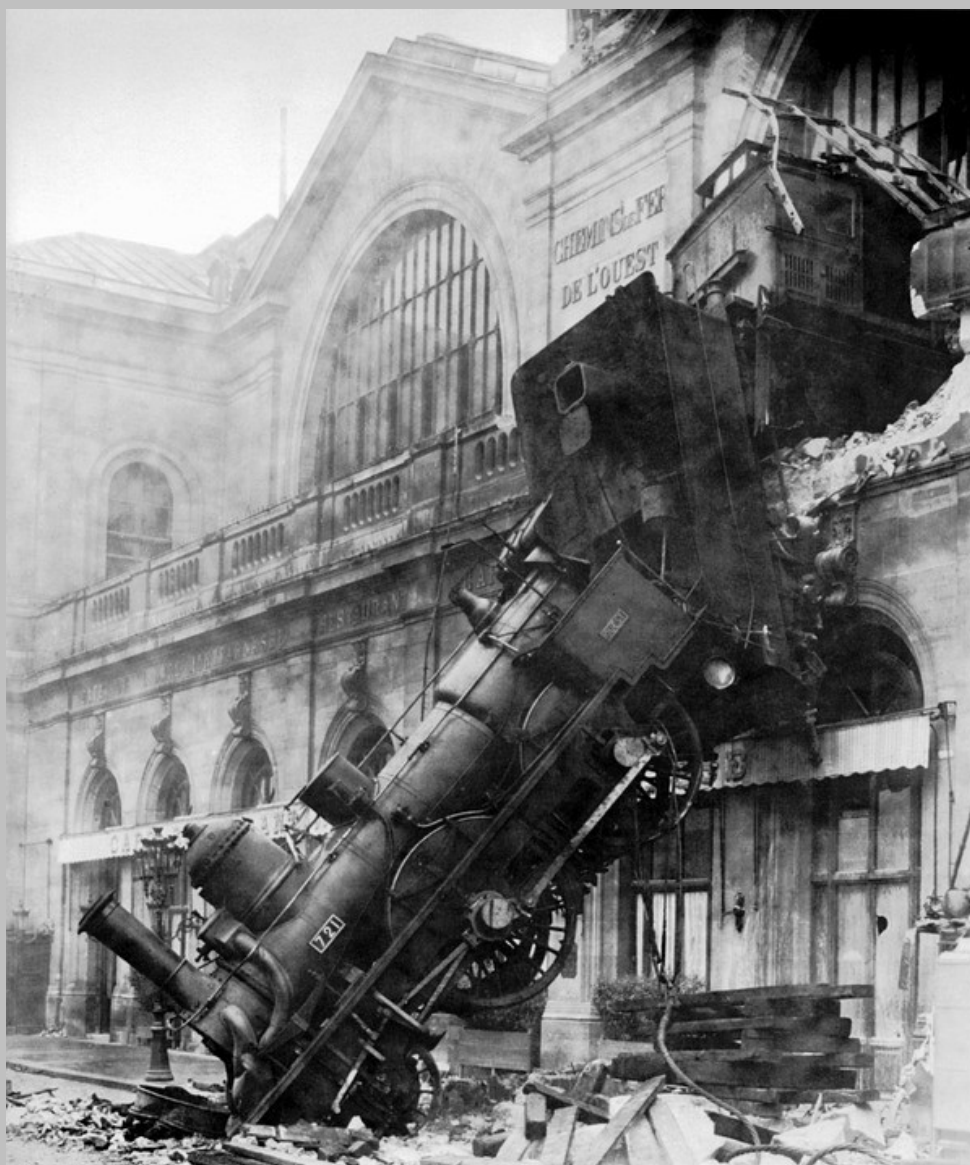
“Hell, no. The chap doesn’t want any aspersions cast; maybe we can work something out.

He says he’s agreed to loan the university the matching bard.”

“What’s that, then?” Petey.

Yobbers looks at Petey. Runs his finger under the plaster at the wrist-end. “Horse armour. Or, as it’s sometimes called, barding or barb.”

Ends



THREE EARS FOR MARCUS AURELIUS

By Neil K. Henderson

Oh, I'm a famous bus-conductor's sandwich -
I've been on the underground for years.
I'm a famous bus-conductor's sandwich,
And the clippies condiment me with their tears.

You can say you've had the charabanc to Govan,
You can say you've had the Hornby ride as well.
But the bus I'm on's the sandwich bus to Heaven -
The rest are strictly sausage-carts from Hell.

*"I do not desire to know about your carriage.
I do not desire to know about your train.
If you're a famous bus-conductor's sandwich,
How come I've never heard of you by name?"*

There must be something musty in my mutter,
That affects the tone of deafness bred in rolls.
If you'd listened when O'Riley's name was buttered,
You'd have known what marks a sandwich out as gold.

*"Three sandwiches for Marcus o' the railway!
Oh, relay us a double-gauge wi' cheese!
Free tickets for his bus-conductor's purvey -
And a tube o' somethin' nifty for his knees!"*

The clippies have established my ovation -
The chorus cries for those equipped to hear.
And the train of thought is coming through the station:

"She'll be ear, she'll be ear, she'll be ear."

[Note: In Scots, purvey (stress on 1st syllable) is a noun meaning provisions.]

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Emergency Room Café

By M.B. Binkley

At a hurried but controlled pace, I walked into the Emergency Room at a New York City hospital as I held my detached head in my hands. By a medical miracle, I remained alive and could think and move without much struggle. I felt okay given the circumstances.

I politely placed my head on the front desk and asked the clerk for assistance.

Without looking up at me, she gave me a clipboard with papers attached. "Fill out the papers and return them, then the doctor will see you."

I have always gone out of my way not to bother anyone, but I thought the circumstances warranted extraordinary measures.

So, I interrupted the clerk. "Excuse me, ma'am. I'm sorry, but I need to see the doctor right away. My head somehow fell off when I was riding my stationary bicycle at home."

My persistence obviously irritated her. I felt rather bad about it, given how busy she appeared. She looked up at me, finally, and rolled her eyes.

"Look, a lot of people are here waiting to see the doctor. They all got problems. You just need to wait your turn. The doctor will see you after you fill out the papers."

The clerk clearly did not care about the results of patient satisfaction surveys. I realized that I should not use any of my precious energy arguing with her. I needed to conserve as much energy as possible, at least until the doctor reattached my head. Plus I generally try to avoid arguments at all costs. Life is too short to indulge in such negativity. I walked away with the clipboard.

Unfortunately, I forgot my head at the front desk. My body walked around blindly in the lobby with the clipboard as I, or my head, continued to stare awkwardly at the clerk.

She looked so busy. I did not want to interrupt her a second time. I tried to resist doing so, but I sensed my body clumsily bumping into people and objects, utterly lost. My body had become a liability.

"Ma'am, I'm truly, very sorry. I really am. It's just that I've never been in this situation before. My symptoms are frightening me. Can you help me out? Can you at least give my head to my body over there?"

She let out a deep breath and slammed her pen on the desk. She stood up and yelled at the security guard across the room. "Edmund, get your finger out of your ass and bring that body over here to this head." The clerk grimaced at me, sat down, and resumed working.

I smiled nervously and thanked her. Deep down, though, I was terribly embarrassed. Everyone in the Emergency Room was now watching this spectacle. I could feel their eyes in the back of my head. Even the man stuck in the upper corner of the room chuckled at me, the one wrapped in a cocoon as he slowly and painfully morphed into a giant butterfly while waiting to see the doctor.

I don't know what I, or my body, would have done without sweet, sweet Edmund. He carefully led my body to the front desk and guided one of my hands to the back of my head on the desk.

I then picked up my head, turned my face towards Edmund, and thanked him profusely.

"Please don't mention it," he said. "Don't mention it ever again."

Carrying my head and the clipboard, I finally found an empty seat in the waiting area.

Apparently, the Emergency Room is the place to be on Friday nights. All kinds of people of different ages, ethnicities, nationalities, and socio-economic backgrounds just sit around forever, nowhere to go and nothing to do, and chat with each other—excluding the unresponsive people, of course. The electric atmosphere kind of resembles a bustling, metropolitan café.

I put my head in my lap and held the clipboard in front of my face with one hand and used the other hand to write. To provide some of the information required to complete the 4 papers, I had to trace my ancestral history back 400 years. To simply understand some of the questions, I needed to take an online crash course in medical terminology. I left all the answer sections to the trigonometry problems blank and failed the Ancient Greek translation exercises. I was disappointed, but all you can do is try. The whole tedious process took about four hours.

I gently placed my head on the front desk and returned the papers to the clerk. "Can I see the doctor now, please? I'm rather lightheaded."

My head chortled in reaction to its own little joke. The clerk did not appreciate this attempt to lighten the mood. "Go sit down. I'll call your name when it's your turn to see the doctor."

Maybe she did not understand my joke. I considered repeating it and explaining why it's supposed to be funny. Sometimes people appreciate that. Other times, they punch me in the face. Given my delicate situation, I could not risk the latter possibility. I wisely returned to the waiting area.

Someone took my previous seat, so I found a new seat next to the famous Sibyl of Cumae. Just like the ancients reported, she grew so old that she shrank to the size of a finger and lives inside a glass bottle for protection. She also suffers from clinical depression and suicidal ideation.

I struck up a conversation with Sib. We chatted about mythology, the nature of existence, and the tragic absurdity of American politics. Sib then lamented that she has been waiting to see the doctor for thousands of years. I became terribly discouraged. I feared the doctor would not see me in time, before something truly awful happened to me. This is why I showed so much elation when the clerk called my name, after just three more hours of waiting. Sib looked at me with such envy. I hope she recognized that my condition was more urgent.

I placed my smiling head on the front desk, in the same spot I always used. I could not conceal my joy and optimism that the doctor will finally see me and give me a fighting chance.

"Where's the doctor?"

The clerk informed me that the doctor was busy and not ready to see me.

My smiling head quickly turned into a sad, despondent head. The clerk merely called me to the front desk to address an issue with my insurance. "Your insurance doesn't cover head reattachment procedures. It will only pay for the doctor to attach a mannequin head to your body."

I could not believe it. I selected the best plan my employer made available to me. If ever there was an occasion to argue, it was at that moment. "That doesn't make sense," I snapped. "My actual head includes my brain, and I need my brain to guide my body. With just a mannequin head, I won't be able to think and my body will roam around aimlessly and gesticulate without purpose."

The clerk paused and appeared to contemplate the absurdity of this predicament. “Well,” she said, “at least you will fit in at Donald J. Trump rallies.”

I understood the joke right away and did not need her to explain it. My head immediately erupted into laughter and the clerk let out bursts of laughter too. We genuinely connected with each other. It was nice. Humour has a way of bringing people together in tense times.

After our laughter subsided, I envisioned how awful it would be to blend in at a Trump rally, surrounded by impulsive and aggressive bodies with empty mannequin heads. I also thought about how much worse everything would be with a giant, demented, bright-orange clown as President, including the still imperfect U.S. healthcare system. The golden dead squirrel on top of his cranium intended to resemble hair especially bothers me. I would rather have no head at all than wear that strange, rotting rodent all day, every day.

“You know what,” I told the clerk, “I’m going to roll the dice and decline medical treatment. Who knows, maybe I’ll pull through this.”

“I completely understand,” she said, “Thank you for not becoming one of them.” She smiled at my head and my head thanked her for her time. We wished each other the best.

My body picked up my head and we walked towards the exit, resigned to our fate. My body flashed a peace sign to Sib on the way out.

Ends

Fugue

By Barbara Ruth

then I was
out of space
out of time
inhabited.
I took a breath
and five days later
drew the next.
don’t ask me how I
did it.
I wasn’t there.

Siamese, Please

By DJ Tyrer

The King of Siam bought me a clam
From a stall by the ocean on a singular notion
The reason, you see, that he chose me
May remain a mystery throughout history
For he wouldn’t tell me
And it remained unknown when he left me alone
With that clam and returned to Siam

Guidelines

By Denny E. Marshall

The alien has been on earth for a short time. The alien sees a flyer posted on a telephone pole in for a fiction contest. The most important requirement is the story must be science fiction.

The alien ponders, "Wonder what science fiction is and if my story would qualify?"

AN UNEVENTFUL LIFE

By Jeffrey Zable

When I found out I only had 72 years left to live
I stopped eating Hostess Twinkies, only bathed once
every nine months, and stopped watching programs on
channel 69, my favorite TV station. I no longer talked
to my friend the butcher, slept with a sock over my head,
or brushed my teeth after eating string cheese and sauerkraut.
I gave half my money away to unwed mothers who were
part-time strippers in alehouses, and the other half to Save
The Fat People's Project in my local community. And finally
I said good bye to anyone I'd ever given the evil eye to, tracking
each person down through telepathy and word of mouth among
former hitmen for the Campfire Girls. I felt some relief knowing
I'd cleared my name, even though I knew the worst was yet to come,
in what was mostly an uneventful life.

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Sunflower climbing
Twin suns rising in the sky
Sheds seeds and then dies

By Aeronwy Dafies

