

TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Thirteen – Spring 2017 – Dribble, Drabble, Twabble...

Tigershark Magazine

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Dribble, Drabble, Twabble...

Editorial

A new year and a new issue. We're keeping it short, this time, with most contributions sticking to short forms such as the dribble (50 words exactly), drabble (100 words exactly) and twabble (100 characters exactly) for prose, and poetic forms such as haiku, tanka and limericks. We've had some very creative submissions and I think you'll enjoy what people have done in so few words!

Best, DS Davidson

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Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

Next Issue's Theme:

Alien Sports, Alien Thoughts

inspire and amaze us with the truly different

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No more thinking big
Welcome to issue 13
Tiny but perfect

By DS Davidson

Winter snowfall white
Chilling the bones of the land
Until Spring's release

By Aeronwy Dafies

Enjoy reading this:
Tigershark issue 13;
Unlucky for some.

By DS Davidson

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SLEIGHT OF HAND

By Diane Arrelle

The first ever starship from Earth landed on the distant planet in a solar system a thousand years from home. The brave travelers, who had left their loved ones behind to age, wither and die, stepped onto the soil of a new world.

At first overjoyed at the aliens gathered around them, their joy quickly faded as a hundred decks of cards were thrust at them and they heard, “Pick a card, any card.”

Dejected, they walked back into the ship and as they blasted off, the captain sighed, “God, this is ever worse than the planet of the mimes!”

END



What a quirky mirror the world is, she thought. It frowned when she smiled, smiled when she frowned.

Subhankar Biswas

Court of Law

By DJ Tyrer

Find a loophole, make a plea –
What a farce: Justice cannot see!

DEATH IN THE BATHROOM

By Rebecca Linam

I unwrapped the towel, and a mane of wet red hair fell down my back. Picking up the hairdryer, I aimed at my hair and pressed the “on” button.

A bulbous cockroach shot out and latched onto my hair.

“Bloody murder!”

Hands flailing wildly, I dropped the hairdryer and clawed at my hair like a one-person catfight.

The cockroach sprang onto the carpet and waddled innocently away. Grabbing the nearest spray bottle, I blasted him with toilet cleaner.

He paused, then took two wobbly steps before my foot crushed him. Needless to say, there was no love lost between us.

End



Excogitation

By Ash Krafon

he doubts the stars are fire
until his own wick is kindled
conflagration of new belief

"YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT!"
that's what all of the books say
then I guess I'm NUTS

By Wendy Lee Klenetsky

THE BEST THAT MONEY CAN BUY

By Diane Arrelle

We bought a hergot from an intergalactic website. Cute little critter, like a green cat-monkey. We were supposed to declaw it but we loved her too much for that.

Loved her so much, we decided to breed her. Earth-born hergots are worth a fortune. Yeah, it’s forbidden, but that’s just big business being big brotherish.

All went well, but my wife disappeared. Next day I found six babies curled up in her pulpy, shredded corpse.

Sure I’m upset, but I’ve sold the babies and believe me when I say my wife’s going to have the best funeral money can buy.

END

Cold-Blooded

By David M. Hoenig

I killed a man today.

I hadn't known what indelicate impulse had brought him out amid the rocks, cactus, and sharp sunlight. It didn't matter to me what his dreams had been, nor for whom he had voted. I never wondered if he had a wife and children, or maybe just a girlfriend who stripped at the honkytonk for extra cash, who might miss him afterwards.

I hadn't even known his name: he'd just surprised me, is all.

It was a shame that he was too big to eat. My tail rattled softly as I left him where he'd fallen.

END

The Phone Booth

By EM Eastick

They say a cult of satanic boiler-makers used the phone booth in the old industrial estate as a sacrificial temple. They say if you pass the booth during a full moon, you can hear garbled voices mixed with the crackle of static.

It was the perfect place for us to test our new EMF meter with enhanced ghost detection features. Jerry entered first, the meter leading the way. I held the flashlight and video recorder and froze when I heard voices.

Three seconds later, Jerry sighed and ushered me outside.

"Not ghosts?"

He shook his head. "Damn alien transmissions again."

END

Eternity

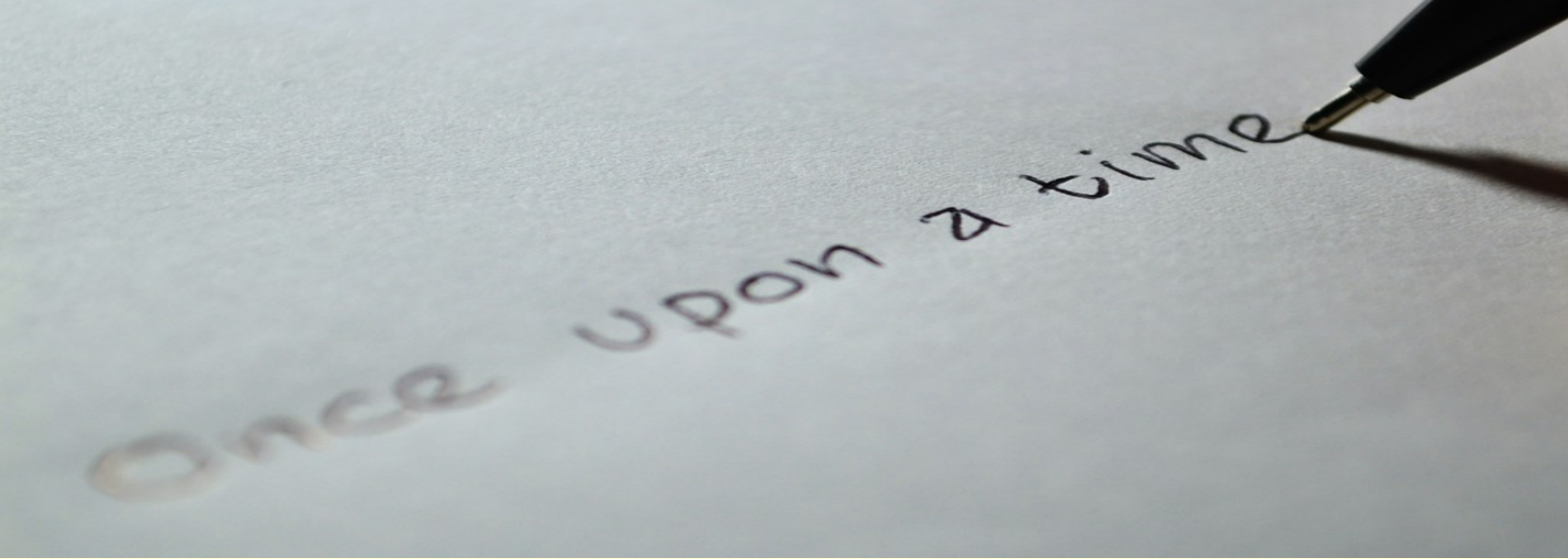
By Victor Nandi

Universe trembled as Gods plunged into a cataclysmic war for authority over three worlds. Deities wielded their annihilating weapons and dissolved into oblivion in their apocalyptic avarice. After a thousand years, Themetrius, having defeated everyone, became absolute monarch of three kingdoms.

However, essence of ultimate ecstasy doesn't lie in everlastingness.

Themetrius' titillating taste of triumph transformed into tedium with time. In pursuit of true happiness, he wandered across the three kingdoms until he fell in love with a cyprian from mortal realm. His touch sanctified her, hers melted his immortality. His pursuit ended. In her love, he had found eternity.

END



Most fairies are small
Stories about them are short
Haiku fairy tale:

Once upon a time
The good defeated the bad
Happy afterwards

By DS Davidson

**A Tiny Tale Told
Or, Sir's Sold Short
Or, Joust A Little Harmless Fun**

By DJ Tyrer

Some days, Sir Blodry hated being a Knight of the Round Table. For example, yesterday he had been dispatched to slay a Cockatrice that had been terrorising the region: He had very nearly fallen from his horse in fear!

But, today, things were looking bright...

Old and blind, with a dicky heart, it had been unable to petrify (except through fear!) and had keeled over when he yelped in fright!

Once again he was a hero!

Originally published in [Awen Online 3](#).

End

A Sinner's Fate

By EM Eastick

I opened my eyes slowly, expecting fire and fumes and lakes of lava. A golden river hummed like a harp, a rainbow arched a meadow of flowers, and a beautiful maiden stroked my hand. The grin hurt my face as I considered my fate. If I'd known paradise awaited, I'd have stolen with more daring, lied with more colour, murdered with more gore.

The siren urged me to my feet and led me forward. "This way to eternity."

"Isn't this it?"

The smell hit me first, and then the heat. "Oh no," she purred. "This is just the waiting room."

End

GAME ON

By Sarah Novello Ruckley

The branches of the charred, black trees reached upwards, tiny shoots springing out, struggling to force life back into their long-dead withering torsos. Seedlings emerged from the ground, pushing back molten lava, straining to feel droplets of rain bathe their newly formed stems. The sun, however, had long gone. Now there was no day. Just the dim light of the moon to feed the much-needed energy to what life there was below. There was no sound. Nor would there ever be. The seedlings' tenacity was fruitless. This was a dead world.

"Perfect!" muttered Kay'tan, twirling the domed dead planet around in his white gossamer hands. He glanced around at the other domes placed on pedestals in his vast, crystal chamber. He had played the game before, but this time the excitement and anticipation of a fresh start was overwhelming him more than any other previous game. He shuffled and slumped back into the chair of his magnificent marble game table and placed the dome carefully in front of him.

"Where to start?" he muttered.

His frail hand peeled back a segment of the soft dome, revealing the north crown of the barren planet. His body arched as he took a deep breath and exhaled long and carefully through the open skylight. His breath instantly whipped up a maelstrom, flora sighing as life coursed back into their brittle veins.

He pondered over an array of bright yellow and orange orbs on the table to his right. "Shall I try two? Or just the one again?" He glanced back down at the dome, plotting his next move. "Let's try two this time eh?" Delicately cupping his chosen two, he placed one inside the topmost part of the dome, and nestled the other between two mountains near the bottom. Instantly, the gratifying sounds of rebirth filled the whole chamber, small whispers as plants stretched out to the sunlight above and below.

Kay'tan was once again astounded by the ferocious spread of the lush green carpet. He hurriedly picked up a vial of ice blue liquid, opened two more segments and carefully poured it in. More exhalations as plants sucked the moisture out of the ground, the rivers splitting and ebbing their way around this new-born world. He smiled and pared back the final pieces of the dome, the planet wondrously holding its shape as its skin was removed. "Now, the creatures..."

To his left, standing on countless chequered boards, was an array of fantastic creatures Kay'tan had painstakingly created over the years. He released his two favourites first, the magnificent thorny rocs, their vibrant feathers shaking off the dust, plummeting down, swirling and swooping excitedly at the prospect of a new game. Two silver ethereals next... "Oh, so industrious, my little ones."

He methodically carried on choosing the fauna he knew would fight a valiant battle in his new game. When he was satisfied with his decisions, he pushed himself back into the chair, and watched carefully as his creatures investigated their new home.

Toppling, he raised his tired body and shuffled over to the back of the chamber. He struggled to unbolt a magnificent, ornate, pewter door. "Finally, my last move." The room revealed thousands of tiny metal figurines, each upright, standing to attention. Legions of Batanians and Turinians, the mighty Baldarhi and the lowly Hemanites, hundreds of different races, each with their own unique quality. Each with their own individual game plan.

He looked at the king and queen of the Soarites. "No, not this time I think."

His hand slowly hovered over the hordes of figurines, taking his time, knowing that this could be his final move.

His hand stopped on the Rashi tribe. A noble but fierce race. Gathering them up, he slowly made his way back to the game table and tactically placed the Rashi figurines around his new-born creation. Sitting back and readying himself to witness the final contest, he smiled and murmured, "Game on."

END

Fate's Shorthand

By Joseph Szewczyk

She wore a dress. It was blue, tattered, with yellow stains. The mud clung to her thigh with a lover's touch.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked.

"Because I have to," she said.

He was prone. His body stiff with drink. The weight of the girl pressed against his chest. Suffocating.

"Relax," she said.

"I can't breathe," he said.

Her nails – organic – were sharp; they were covered in an intricate pattern of blues and purples, speckled with blood. They burned his flesh.

"I never meant to..." he mouthed, numb with fear.

"I know," she said.

She smiled.

END

Tag, You're It

By Shannon Connor Winward

"That's what he said," she said.

"That's what you say he said," I replied.

"What are you saying?" she queried.

"Nothing," I snipped.

"Oh, "talk-to-the-hand"," she huffed. She held up her hand. "You totally inferred something," she insisted.

"No, dear, you inferred," I retorted.

"I don't know why I bother saying anything to you," she said.

"How often do I ask myself that same question?" I asked myself under my breath.

"What did you mumble?" she demanded.

"I said "I wonder the same thing!" I blurted.

She sighed. "Talking to you is impossible," she complained.

"You don't say," I quipped.

END

Bio Graphy

By Kevin Flude

I hated You
From Page 1

It seems you were:
Predestined
In a Linear Direction
To arrive at the Top.

Friends, neighbours even acquaintances
Remember you with pride
They glamorise your mundane
Load meaning on even the little things you do.

When you are bad
Leave your wife, abandon your children
We understand the reason
Comprehend the artistic
Imperative.

Hindsight lends your life
Meaning.
The arrow of time for you
Is direct
Giving you an unfragmented purpose.

Unlike me.
Someone, quick,
Write me my biography.

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)

By Daginne Aignend

When I finally
crawled out
my shielded shell,
I was overthrown by
a tempestuous
pandemonium
Menacing images
blinded my eyes
Malevolent uproar
tortured my ears
Shocked by unfeeling,
callous indifference
I rushed back into
my shell
to never
appear again

haiku

By P.J. Reed

2)

drinking tea unpaired
old woman sits alone as
people hurry passed

3)

poetry of pain
unloved we cling to shadows
watching colours dance

Double-decker Bus

By Mark Hudson

I was lost in Chicago, I wanted to cuss,
when I saw coming a double-decker bus.
It would drop me off where I needed to go,
I got on tired, and the ride was slow.
Like an accordion, the bus stretched around corners,
letting people on who looked like mourners.
One man got on, saw a girl who sat in the middle,
he pulled out of his pocket a receipt that was little.
He wrote his number on the receipt and gave it to the girl;
then he got off the bus and left the tilt-a-whirl.
When I got home, I had never so much appreciated bed,
I got under the covers, and rested my tired head.

Closure

By Holly Day

across the street, a man invents a funeral for the past year
rakes fresh leaves into a pile around your photograph
an old russet tomcat blinks in the sunlight nearby.

the man gently scoops detritus over your face
makes a pillow of birch leaves and grass clippings
presses down with his hands as if performing euthanasia.
the garbage truck lurches down the road, startles the man
scares the cat.

Available Now

Sudden Conflicts

A Novel by Gary Beck

Author Gary Beck once again captivates with his newest novel, **Sudden Conflicts**. Three brilliant college roommates, from disparate backgrounds, aspire to join the world of high-tech super giants. Armed with newly-earned PhDs, they share a tiny New York City apartment. Humor, and years of deep friendship help them endure long months of searching for rich investors.

While the trio fights to gain millions of dollars from entrepreneurs, threats, hackers, and intrigues build to a climax. When TJ and Pete start dating two lovely young women, danger escalates, FBI agents become involved, and a Chinese businessman makes an offer they might not be able to refuse. The friends are forced to make hard choices when revenge and morality present opposing pressures.

Sudden Conflicts is a 298 page novel. Available in paperback with a retail price of \$15.95, and an ebook for \$2.99. ISBN:1945646136 Published by Lillicat Publishers. Available now through all major retailers.

Sudden Conflicts Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNjeO7UvUL8>

Tremors

A poetry collection by Gary Beck

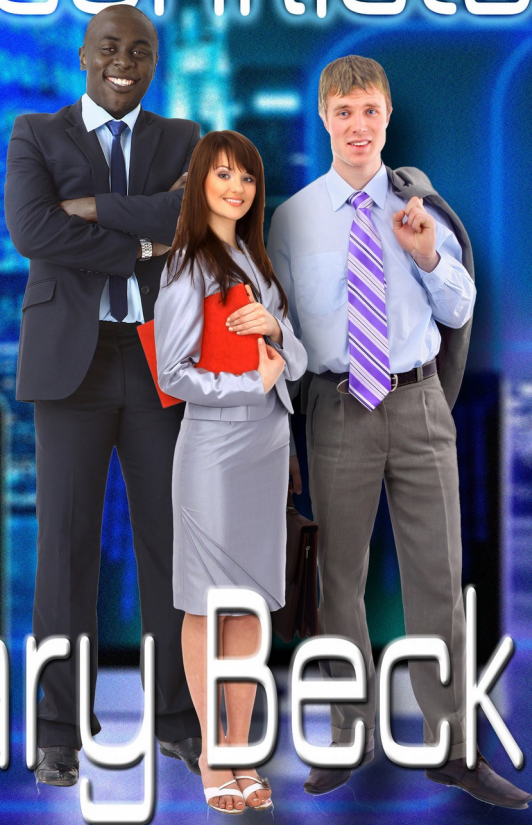
Poet Gary Beck once again captivates with his newest collection, **Tremors**. As a driving force for creative expression, outrage has dissipated and turned into complacency and disconnection. But his complicated life continues to present many disruptions that grow or diminish, but are often disturbing. And as we encounter these bumps in the road, they are often seen from a place of fear and confusion, leading us to ponder whether civilization is declining or if it is merely our own aging bodies and minds.

Tremors is a 124 page poetry book. Available in paperback with a retail price of \$10.99. ISBN: 1941058647 Published through Winter Goose Publishing. Available now through all major retailers.

Tremors poetry video:

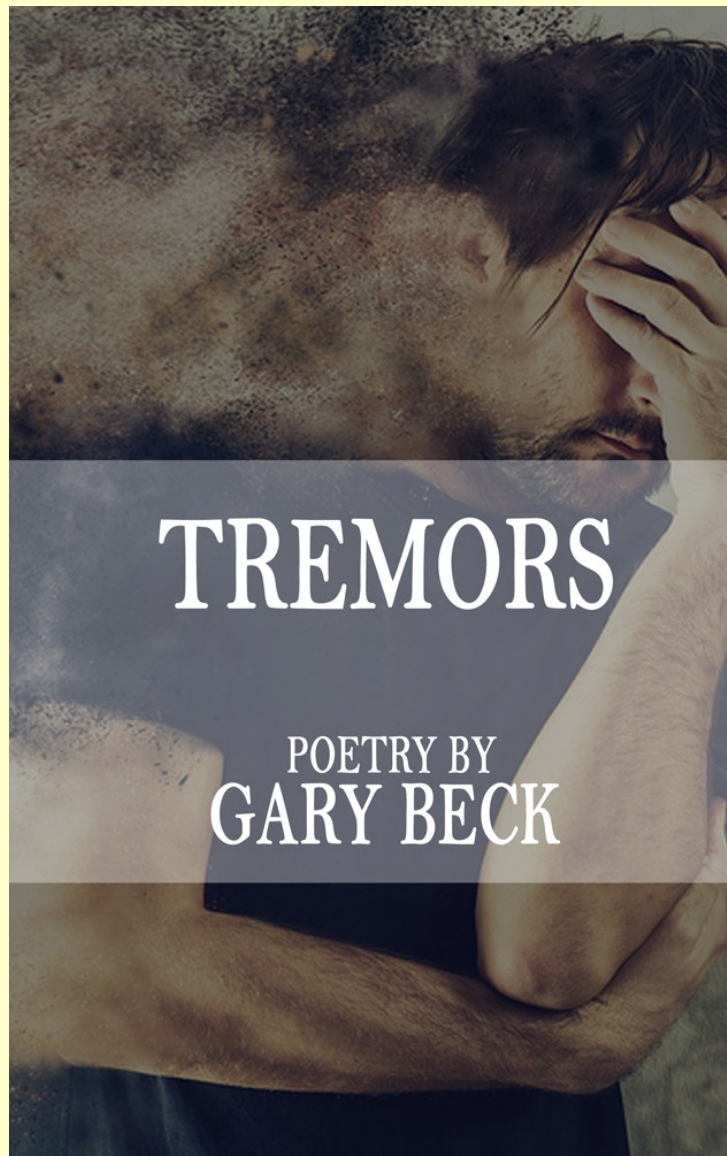
<https://youtu.be/r70UibME2q8>

Sudden Conflicts



TREMORS

POETRY BY
GARY BECK



ODE TO A PANACOTTA

By Sarah Novello Ruckley

The long wait till next I hold you again is over.
I stare at your creamy, alabaster body –
The sweet redness of your caress
Hiding the heavenly scent of what's below.
I dread to touch you. spoil your perfection
But temptation envelops me
And I break your virginity, not caring of your shame
Or decimation of your beauty.
I devour you whole, no disgrace in knowing
That tomorrow there'll be another you to satisfy me...



Dinner Date

By Maria Venditozzi

He comes in from work as she's cooking,
all teenage bluster and hunger,
raiding the fridge. She coaxes the lowdown on his life.

They sit in the kitchen talking.
He disagrees with vegetarian sausages.
He learned to make sweet pepper humous today.

Both of them are quiet now, tiring.
Soporific post-meal comfort.
He starts to doze as she strokes his arm.

Cool skin feels familiar, memories
on her fingertips. Gazing at his newly hairy chin,
those lovely lashes on a changing face.

Longing to hold him again
on her knee, warmed by his sweet breath
when she stroked his cheek to sleep.

Heron

By DJ Tyrer

Lazy flap of grey wings.
Reflected image. Water ripples.
Spies prey – darts head down.

*Originally published in **Bard** (2004).*

I like my coffee
Like women hot as hell
But sweet as heaven

By John (Jake) Cosmos Aller

*Published in **Eskimo Pie***

December 2016

*Published in **Coffee with Underhill***

January 2017

PUSSY FOOT THE WILLOW

By Neil K. Henderson.

Men of septic hardiness,
Join hands! Join hands!
Men of septic hardiness,
Be joined in septic strength.

Women of gross pustulance,
Pour forth! Pour forth!
Women of gross pustulance,
Pour forth the grace of pus.

Communities who fester fit,
Skip high! Skip low!
Communities who fester fit,
What price a footbath now?



The Smokescreen

By Eve Simmonds

Mary looked at them from behind scowling eyes as they did everything possible not to make eye contact with her. No matter how easily the hurt turned into anger inside her, part of her understood - she looked dishevelled with her scruffy clothes and the stench of smoke that refused to leave her garments, no matter what she tried to do to get rid of it. It haunted her everywhere she went, serving as cruel reminder of the family she lost the night their home caught fire and she found herself as the only survivor. The guilt ate away at her every day, why did she have to survive? Why did she have to be the one left here alone? The memory of her daughter's golden curls and her husband's booming laugh were all she had left. No photos. No videos. No belongings. Nothing to cherish. Nothing to hold onto. Everything had been lost to the selfish, greedy inferno which had consumed her life and spat her out like she wasn't even worthy of perishing with her family. All that remained with her was the faded images in her mind, which she doused in alcohol from morning to night.

She spent her days here in this quiet, country pub sitting at the end of the bar growing more and more bitter by the day. No one spoke to her. No one even acknowledged her. She would walk in to find a double whisky waiting for her on the bar, which the staff would continuously top up whilst she wasn't looking, knowing that she wouldn't be leaving until closing time. She hated them. She hated herself. And their treatment of her tortured her tormented soul more than she cared to admit. If there had been another pub within staggering distance, she would have happily taken her custom elsewhere, but there wasn't, and so they were stuck with her, and she was stuck with them.

"Afternoon, Jack," the barman said warmly as one of the regulars walked in.

"Hiya Tom, how's it going? Busy?"

"Just the usual," Tom replied with a flicker of his eyes gesturing over in Mary's direction.

Jack nodded his head with wide, knowing, eyes as he took a not-so-discreet sniff of the air. "She's here," he whispered in an attempt to conceal his words from her.

Mary pretended not to notice their blatant rudeness, even though it stung deep to her core. She watched as Jack wondered off to the other side of the pub to sit with the other regulars, and wondered how he could be so cruel to a lady who had lost everything? She refused to let the tears surface and stuffed them down as far as a large swig of her whisky would take them, before summoning every ounce of bitterness and anger that she could to override the unbearable emotions which she was desperate to conceal.

What hurt the most was that one upon a time she knew these people. Not well, but well enough to say hello to and exchange pleasantries. Yet after the fire, it was like no one knew what to say to her. She had forgiven their treatment of her for years based on her assumption that they had felt awkward for her loss and didn't know what to say, but her excuses for them were rapidly dwindling as her frustration grew.

"Drink Mike?"

"Oh, go on then, thanks."

"I'll have one Sam."

"Me too, thanks."

The jovial voices drifted across the bar to antagonise Mary further. They never offered her a drink. The barman wouldn't even take her money! Every time she realised that her drink had been refilled, she would add the payment to the collection of coins which sat on the bar in front of her, but they were never added to the till, not whilst she was

there anyway. It was like no one wanted to touch her coins. Like they would somehow jinx the holder and pass her bad fortune to them. Like she had some sort of horrific, contagious disease of bad luck. She washed the painful thoughts down with another large dose of whisky in an attempt to dull their effect on her, but the alcohol seemed to be losing the battle as it failed to hit the spot. Her pain had grown so strong that the booze barely cast a hazy cloud over her sorrow anymore, and she longed for the fuzzy tingling sensation of numbness to grant her a brief respite from her anguish.

As the day faded into night, Mary compared herself to every woman who walked into the pub and ignored her like the one before, wondering how another woman could fail to show the smallest amount of empathy or compassion for a Mother who had lost her child and husband in such a traumatic way. She watched as they met with friends or loved ones, without even glancing in the direction of the lonely woman sitting alone. Mary didn't doubt that she had become unapproachable, the years of heartache and loneliness had hardened her, but when she looked at them she briefly remembered how she used to be. Her flowing, long golden hair had greyed and thinned, leaving her with a mass of unruly strands hanging carelessly below her shoulders. Her once sparkling blue eyes, were now dull, harsh pools of pain, edged with the lines of age and grief. Her lips no longer welcomed the world with a smile, instead they stood guard, pursed together tightly with the corners facing down to the floor, along with her spirits. She had lost all interest in clothes and grooming long ago, she wore the same tatty thing every day, and despite her house being refurbished after the fire, for some reason the smell of smoke lingered and infected everything, including her and her clothing. It was a pointless exercise trying to keep her garments fresh, and so she had given up long ago. She sometimes wondered if the smell was her husband, or her daughter, somehow stuck between worlds and trying to let her know that they were there. Sometimes, when she was alone at night, she allowed herself to believe it and would beg the empty space around her to show her a sign that they were actually there, but the comfort it brought quickly faded as the morning light brought the reality of another lonely day and stole her fantasy away.

The evening flew by with the opening and closing of the pub door, which brought new people in, and let the old ones out. Mary sat alone in her spot, envying the life of every other patron, and dreading the inevitable moment when the hours would become too late and she would have to return to the solitude her own. The bell for last orders rang like the Grim Reaper's toll. Its vibrations tore through her being causing her to bow her head, as though she thought by making herself smaller she could somehow hide from the implications of its chime. Just like every other night, she stuck it out for as long as she could, hoping that the other customers would keep their pace slow and prolong her time there. The hate she had felt for them just hours earlier now softened, she knew that she needed them to stay so that maybe she could too, and her eyes searched the bar in desperation as the last two drinkers leant on each other and headed for the door as the barman collected the stray glasses. Mary tried to catch their eye, but it was pointless, even if they had looked at her, there was no way they would persuade the barman to serve them another drink just so that she could stay a little longer. It was clear that everyone viewed her as some sort of parasite that they would happily extinguish.

The door to her right opened, and the light from inside the room blinded her as it beamed into the dimly lit bar. Mary's eyes scrunched up in response to the abrupt interruption as they attempted to adjust.

"Come on now. It's time to go," the figure standing in the doorway announced.

Mary barely looked up. She knew the drill. It made her feel so worthless that the barman who served her all night wouldn't even utter those final words to her, and that he had to go and get his boss to tell her to leave. Did he

think that just speaking to her would wreak death and destruction on his life? Mary turned away to leave quietly as she fought the mixture of volatile emotions which raged inside of her. It felt so unfair. Why her? Why were people so mean? What had she ever done to deserve losing her family? What had she ever done to deserve being treated like a leper? Suddenly, something inside her snapped and unleashed the torrent of emotions she had barricaded behind the wall of alcohol and denial.

"Your staff could speak to me, you know? I sit here every day and no one speaks to me. No one!" She surprised herself with the force of her words after spending so long in silence. It was like she had opened the floodgates and suddenly had no control over what was coming out of her mouth. "They won't even touch my money! What do they think I'm going to do? What do they think *it's* going to do to them? It's not my fault my family died. It's not my fault no one will speak to me. What did I ever do? I have feelings too, you know? I'm only human!" She felt breathless from her outburst, and strangely, slightly relieved for finally speaking up for herself. A sense of pride washed over her, a feeling she hadn't felt in a long time as she turned to leave the pub, vowing that she would never return.

"No, you're not," the voice from the doorway answered.

Mary was surprised, she hadn't expected him to actually reply to her and the experience startled her a little after so long with no interaction. She held her arm up to her forehead in an attempt to shield her eyes from the light and get a better look at the dark figure.

"I'm not what? What do you mean? Just because I live on my own and look a bit scruffy, doesn't mean that I'm any less of a person," she retaliated with an accusing point of her finger.

"You think that's why no one speaks to you?" the man asked calmly.

"Well, what other reason is there? I've never done anything to anyone," Mary could feel the anger rising inside at his unemotional questioning.

"You think these people are that shallow? That superficial? That *cruel*?" he continued.

Mary paused before answering. This was the question she asked herself every day before coming back to the same conclusion.

"Well, what other reason is there?" she snapped.

The figure walked towards her, eclipsing the light enough for her to take her arm away from her eyes, but not enough to get a good look at him.

"Maybe they don't see you?" he offered.

Mary laughed at the ridiculousness of his comment. "Don't see me? What are you talking about? How can they not see me? They can smell me, they make that pretty clear when they crinkle their noses in my direction. It's not my fault, I can't help it that the house still smells of smoke! I've tried everything to get rid of it. I've even tried leaving the windows open in winter, but they won't stay open."

"You still don't get it, do you?" the man asked. "I come here every night and tell you it's time to go, and every night you just walk away from me."

"Don't get what? Yes, you tell me to go, and I go," Mary replied slightly irritated with the vagueness of this conversation.

"But I'm not telling you to go Mary, I'm here to take you away from this," he explained.

"You know my name? All these years and you know my name," she said with a mixture of annoyance and elation that she mattered enough for him to remember her name. "Take me where?" she added with confusion as the rest of his words sunk in.

"To your family," he clarified.

"My fa... My family? What do mean, my family? My family are dead," she said warily as unease spread throughout her body and an eeriness suddenly descended.

"It's okay. There's nothing to be afraid of, you just have to let go Mary. You clung so tightly to life that you missed your crossing. The reason your house smells of smoke, is because of you. You haven't left. You still see the old space, not the house that it has become. The reason your windows keep closing, is because the people who live there close them. The reason no one speaks to you, isn't because you're scruffy or because you smell of smoke, it's because you're not meant to be here anymore. They can't see you. They know you're here because they sense you, but that's it. No one sits on your side of the bar, or on your stool because the smell of smoke and the chill in the air are both so intense that it scares them."

Mary's thoughts raced as she tried to process the words and piece together the puzzle he was creating for her.

"No, no. It can't be. The whisky!" she said triumphantly, "the man pours me whisky all day and all night."

"Do you see him pour it?" he asked.

"Well. No. But he does it when I'm not looking," she said suddenly doubting what she had believed for so long.

"The whisky that waits for you when you arrive is what you want to find here. No one pours it for you, and no one refills it, it is a figment of your transitional consciousness. The reason the barman doesn't touch your money, is because it's not there. Well, not to him anyway. Only you see it. The reason the whisky doesn't hit the spot anymore is because you're not really drinking it, and any effects you feel are just fading memories from your life before."

Mary was in shock. Part of her wanted to run away from this rambling psycho, and the other part of her had to admit that what he said made a little sense. The way the local's blatantly ignored her, the way the whisky was always full, and the way the barman never took her money. A sense of relief washed over her at the thought that maybe they weren't horrified by her appearance, and maybe they didn't think she was this cursed, damaged, dangerous person that they wanted nothing to do with. Tears began streaming down her face. It wasn't her fault, it really wasn't her fault.

"So...you're saying that I died in the fire too? Is that what you're telling me?"

"You got so mixed up when the gas exploded that you missed the light coming for you."

"I'm dead?" she said patting her body down with her hands and trying to make sense of it all. "They weren't ignoring me? They don't hate me? And I don't have to go back to that house on my own?" she asked hopefully.

"No, they don't hate you. And no, you don't have to go back there. Well, not unless you want to? You don't have to come with me Mary, not if you don't want to," the man replied warmly.

Mary shook her head. She hated that house, she could think of nothing better than never having to return there again.

"And Sarah? And Phil?" she asked as her tears multiplied without permission.

"They're both fine. Just missing you."

She suddenly felt light, like the burden of her existence had lifted in a single second. Everything she wanted was hers for the taking - she could finally escape this endless cycle of misery and join her family. The thought of them waiting for her filled her with happiness and fear all at once. Questions crowded her consciousness, what would

they look like on the other side? Would they have changed at all? Would they be mad at her for getting so lost here and not leaving with them?

"You've nothing to be afraid of," the man said gently, as if reading her mind. "They love you. Everyone loves you."

Silence hung in the air as the tears continued to cascade down her cheeks . Words failed her. She *was* afraid. But she was also relieved, and part of her felt foolish for not being able to die properly. A comforting breath of laughter escaped her lips at the thought.

"Don't worry. You're not the only one who misses the light. You'd be amazed how many people we come back for, but, like you, the longer they stay, the harder it is for them to see me. The logic of human existence tends to get in the way a little," he said with an air of humour, "and this obsession with having to be able to prove something to believe it's real. But we got there, didn't we? I suppose it all comes down to whether you're ready to leave with me, or not?"

Those little words carried so much meaning, "*whether you're ready to leave with me, or not?*" Every instinct inside her wanted to fight to stay here and cling onto the life she thought she knew. But what was she staying for? There was nothing here for her anymore. She nodded her head slowly. What had she got to lose?

The figure beckoned her to the doorway of light behind him and held out a dark hand for her to hold. She hesitated for a moment, feeling unsure of what his hand would feel like to touch. She cautiously extended her own hand and flinched a little as it made the connection with his. Suddenly, a surge of energy flowed into her, removing any fears or doubts that she had about following him into the light, and she took those few, short steps to the doorway filled with hope for what lay on the other side.

Ends



FOR THE GRACE OF GOD

By Sarah Novello Ruckley

Grace sat in her 25-year-old crimson, damask armchair looking at the festive pot pourri bowl on the table. “Time to put them away for another year,” she thought.

Her frail hand grasped the silver bauble nestled amongst the dead flora, white lights catching the tiny particles of glitter on its surface. She rolled the ball in her cupped hands and staring, saw that the reflective lights were beginning to move, swirling and whipping up an array of colours which were melding together to form blurred images.

“Mummy, I can swim!” The lights in the bauble fused to form the idyllic scene of Grace and her family on the vast, open sand of the Gower peninsular.

“You can do anything you want to if you try, Sarah!” Grace called back to her youngest child. Bryn and the two boys were busy catching crabs in the rock pools nearby.

The vibrant colours in the bauble danced, melding into more sombre browns, blacks and dark greens. “Let us out daddy!” Grace winced at the memory and twirled the ball around to escape the dark reminder.

The image blurred and the colours transformed into pastel hues. Sarah was in a hospital bed handing Grace her first grandchild. “Megan...” she murmured.

Again, the unwanted dark shades of light forced their way through, pushing the pastels back into the belly of the bauble. “Grace, it’s not good news...”

She watched the bauble as the memories faded back into white, the animation slowly dying. She smiled a poignant, resigned smile, lent her head back against the chair and closed her eyes. Her grip on the bauble relaxed and it fell tumbling to the floor, rolling to a stop, robbed of all life.

End

Arrow Paradox

By DJ Tyrer

Keep slicing up time
An infinite one moment
Never concluding
The arrow never striking
The moment never ending

Originally published in Eccentric Press I.



The Golden Bones

By Ellery D. Margay

I did not desire the lady Theodosia. In truth, I feared her—feared her grasping hands and her lascivious vulturine stare—for in succumbing to her wanton whims one risked the swift vengeance of her husband, Magnus Victorinus Aquila, a general at whose name the empire trembled; and in snubbing her advances, one was liable to provoke the ire of the lady herself, a blunder near as deadly as the first. Indeed, even the most virtuous of liaisons with this fiendish temptress held the potential to thrust one into a perilous dilemma, and so it was that I studiously avoided her presence—particularly in situations of seclusion.

Today, however... Today I had been *summoned*. I would find her in the bathhouse, I'd been told—the colossal construction perched high atop a craggy hill at the westernmost wing of the general's sprawling villa. As I ascended the interminable multitude of stone steps that led to its palatial pillared entrance, I invented excuses in earnest—"I am ill, my lady; I am newly wedded, my lady; I am so preoccupied of late that I would not be enjoyable company, my lady"—but when at last I'd made my way through the expansive entry hall and the dim labyrinthine corridors, and arrived weary and breathless at my destination, all words and contrivances had taken flight.

The chamber prearranged for our meeting—a vast steam room—was impressive indeed. Floors, walls, and vaulted ceiling were richly patterned in tiles of lapis, turquoise, and gold. Along the centre of the room ran a low, spacious bench of similar decoration; and upon this bench there lounged, semi-recumbent, the lady herself, in sultry vainglorious splendour.

Theodosia was not beautiful; and the formless lines of her aging face intimated that, for all her hauteur, she never had been. Years of indulgence and idleness had imbued her figure with a slack shapelessness, a loosening of the ample curves—an effect further emphasized by the numerous baubles she wore—broad cuffs, slim armlets, and bejeweled anklets that bit the tawny flesh.

She was said to come of lofty stock—the daughter of a Greek nobleman, I believe, or perhaps a Carthaginian prince. Whatever her heritage, no Egyptian blood was hers to claim, a fact at which she had long waged aesthetic rebellion. She painted her eyes like the queens of the Nile, and the scanty garments that were her wont might have easily been fashioned by pharaonic hands.

"Well, if it isn't Opilio, my favourite wine merchant," she purred. "Come and sit with me, my dear." Though I'd been sent for by name, her air was one of happenstance—that of illicit lovers who've fatefully crossed paths in a deserted street.

"What did you wish to discuss, my lady?" said I, remaining on my feet. "Time is short, I'm afraid; I must reach Constantinople by nightfall."

"Oh, you must stay here tonight. We have many comfortable rooms for guests... and my own bedchamber is, of course, the most luxurious of all."

"Thank you for your hospitality, but I cannot accept. At sunrise I am meeting an important buyer at the harbour, and I mustn't be late."

"Do you know why my baths are emptied of servants?" she asked.

"Why, my lady?"

"Because servants can't keep secrets. This bathhouse is my kingdom, and within its walls I can do what I like."

Now... come and sit with me.”

Perhaps it was the vapours that played havoc with my wits—the cloying steam and heady scents of sandalwood, sweet jasmine, and myrrh—but, to my chagrin, I was near ready to oblige her request when there emerged from a shadowy portal at the far end of the chamber a blond youth in a thoroughly rumpled tunic, thus drawing the attention of my distractable hostess.

“Crispus!” called Theodosia. “Come here, my love. Come and sit beside me. Opilio, this is Crispus, my beautiful golden boy. Is he not a wonder to behold?”

Reluctantly I nodded my assent, for it could not be denied that, in all my travels, I had scarce beheld a more exquisite young man. His features were of a fine patrician mold; the fair hair hung just below the shoulders in soft, shimmering ringlets; and as he smiled in greeting, the white of his teeth contrasted strikingly with the deep, sun-burnished tan of his skin.

“Opilio,” said the lady, hooking one arm about the lad’s broad shoulders, “tell us what delights you are selling.”

Sensing that, with the arrival of Theodosia’s “golden boy,” any imminent danger had dissipated, I gathered my nerve and recited a concise list of my wares: reds from Messenia and Chios, white from Mt. Falernus, olive oil from Crete, and a handsome selection of Thracian wools.

“Which wine is the sweetest?” she asked.

“The Falernian white. If you wish, I will fetch a sample.”

“There’s no need. I have every faith in your expertise. Crispus shall accompany you to your cart where you will sell him the largest amphora of Falernian white. Pray tell what it will cost?” Within the uncharacteristically formal words lurked a note of bitterness, and in searching her face, I saw what I had dreaded; the painted black eyes were ablaze with resentment—and a challenge.

“For a woman of your unrivaled beauty,” said I, “the wine is free.” Theodosia grinned, her ego appeased, and I once again drew breath.

As Crispus and I embarked on our errand, the youth lagged timidly behind until, upon nearing the sunlit door of the entry hall, he seemed to come to some private decision. Darting forward, he seized my arm, and urgently bid me stop so that he might discuss with me a matter of the gravest import.

“Very well, we’ll speak here,” I agreed, “err we’ve both been winded by those pitiless steps.”

“The general is coming home,” he said. “Soon—perhaps this very night—and I do not wish to be here when he arrives. Do you understand?”

“No. Kindly elaborate.” His predicament was, in fact, plain as day; and I furthermore deduced what favour he was soon to ask, but I confess I was well amused by the lad’s anxious attempts at elucidation.

“General Aquila is an uncommonly clever man. He is also exceptionally cruel. Those who cross him are found murdered, and always in the most bizarre and outlandish of ways—he is an artist of death. I do not believe that Theodosia would tell him of our... closeness—not in words, at least—but her eyes are shameless; they cannot lie! With one glance she would betray us both. You know nothing of me, but I’ve been told you are a good man—kind and noble. I care not about your destination—take me with you when you leave this place!”

“As it happens, I’m headed not immediately to Constantinople, as I implied to the lady, but to the neighbouring village of Sarna where I intend to eat and drink and sleep until high noon tomorrow. I will likely reach the city very late that evening.”

“Let me ride with you!” he pleaded. “If it’s payment you seek, I’ll do my best to oblige.”

At this, I softened. “No payment is necessary, my friend. You are quite welcome in my cart, though I confess that my reasons aren’t entirely selfless; the road to Constantinople is a long, lonely one, and I am greatly heartened by the prospect of company. I’ll wait at the foot of the stairs. When you’ve delivered Theodosia’s wine, return straight-away and we’ll set out.”

“Then it is true; you are a good man. But I’m afraid I must further impose upon your kindness. I mustn’t leave now but early tomorrow—preferably before sunrise.”

“Why?”

“Theodosia loves me dearly. I cannot abandon her without even the dignity of a farewell.”

“That woman does not love you,” I said. “She loves everyone and therefore no one. As her affections are multifold, they are divided, like the mighty river that splits into many nameless tributaries, weakening at each divergence. A love so scattered must rightly be given another name.”

“Supposing, then, that *I* love *her*?”

“And is this sentiment as dear as your own life?”

“Of course not, but I hardly believe a word of goodbye would spell doom.”

“The risk is yours to take,” I said, and we agreed to meet at the foot of the steps the following morning, directly before first light.

When the amphora of Falernian white had passed safely into the hands of my new associate, I left him to his foolishness and went down the road to Sarna where I passed the night at an inn of questionable repute. Owing to the bawdy antics of its patrons, sleep proved elusive, and I awoke later than intended. The sky was lit with green and grey when at last I reached the villa and found our intended meeting place deserted; dawn had come—and Crispus had not.

Cursing the boy’s tardiness, I lead my horses to the foot of the stairs and lashed them to one of the stunted trees that grew from the rocks. There I would wait, but only ‘til the sun was above the horizon. As the morning progressed, I grew uneasy. Where was he? Had he decided against our plan and merely forgotten to inform me? From the fertile sludge of worry, arose a host of more sinister explanations, but I promptly dismissed them—he had overslept, no doubt. There was no immediate reason to believe anything had gone amiss. Yet something had; I could feel it.

As I scanned the marble colonnade for signs of movement, a figure appeared at the crest of the stairs—that of a female of a distinctly voluptuous build. It was only on the rarest of occasions that Theodosia left the villa, but, suspecting that it was she and wanting keenly to avoid an encounter, I unbound my team and made a hasty retreat.

On the road to Constantinople, I found myself conflicted. Equal to my eagerness to reach the city was my fundamental abhorrence for loose ends, and I at length concluded that my mind would not rest till I discovered what had become of my young acquaintance. Having no cohesive plan, I passed that day and another night in Sarna, and, before sunrise, returned once again to the villa.

At my previous post, I waited and watched, half expecting the lad to appear upon the stairs. Daybreak did reveal someone—a slim, lanky figure pacing to and fro along the colonnade, but Crispus it was not. Judging by his garb and the hefty spear he toted, he was likely a young soldier—one of Aquila’s men. The general had come home. Presently a second figure emerged from the door of the baths—Theodosia. If I were to learn the fate of the boy, this was my chance, so, grumbling at the task before me, I began the arduous climb.

Both lady and guard had vanished by the time I'd reached the colonnade—retreated, it seemed, into the recesses of the bathhouse—leaving me no choice but to follow. In the entry hall there loitered a profusion of soldiers, their crude, careless voices echoing discordantly in the stillness of the cavernous chamber. A few eyed me sullenly, but as none moved to impede my progress, I pressed on.

In approaching the steam room, I discovered it closed. Across its entrance had been hung an opaque black curtain, and before this dour blockade stood two grim-faced guards and the lady Theodosia. The latter did not look herself. She was clothed in a heavy gown of unadorned white, the drapes of which covered every inch of skin; her arms were wrapped tightly about her bosom in nervous self-embrace; and her cheeks, when she turned to face me, were streaked with kohl. The brazen temptress had vanished; in her place stood an ordinary woman, frightened and alone.

“Opilio!” she cried. “I am so glad you’re here. Where is Crispus? Do tell me, dear. I won’t be angry; I only want to know that he’s safe.”

I admitted with regret that I hadn’t seen her golden boy—not since the day before last.

“Then... was it not you?” she asked in puzzlement. “He said he was leaving me—going away to the city. I assumed you’d offered him transport.”

“It was I, yes, but he never showed up.”

She looked stricken, as though her blackest fears had been confirmed—and I sensed that there was more to tell. Leading her gently out of earshot of the guards, I asked: “Beyond the obvious fact of his disappearance, have you reason for alarm?”

For a moment she hesitated, eyes restive and downcast. “My husband knows,” she said. “He returned home mere hours after Crispus had revealed his plans. I was so angry—so hurt!—by my love’s betrayal that when Magnus came to my chamber, I ... I told him of my golden boy and the passion that we’d shared.” “And what did he do?” I demanded. “How did he seem when you told him?”

“He grew very still. For a frightfully long while he sat at the edge of the bed, neither moving nor speaking. When I implored him to voice his thoughts, he rose and left the room without uttering a word.”

“Since that night, has he mentioned Crispus?”

“No. We breakfasted on the terrace the following morning and he seemed in high spirits—as though nothing had happened! Now he has barred me from the use of my own baths, for a surprise, he says, is being installed. Oh, please speak your mind, Opilio. I can’t bear to see you look at me that way!”

“I am thinking,” said I, unable to mask my disgust, “that you’ve condemned the lad to death.”

My honesty was met with a flurry of impassioned denial: “We don’t know that! Perhaps, in learning of Magnus’ return, he has simply gone into hiding.”

Abruptly, her protestations ceased, for in the darkened hallway from whence we’d come, a man approached: the general, Magnus Victorinus Aquila. He was neither old nor young—a robust, ageless figure in dramatic red and white. Purpose in his stride, he brushed past me without a glance, seeming only to want words with his hapless wife.

“The workmen have finished,” he announced. “Come—your surprise is ready.”

“In a moment, husband.”

Then his eyes fell upon me—amber, they were, and full of unspoken scorn—the eyes of a hawk.

“What,” he sneered, “is the wine merchant doing in your bathhouse? He is not another of your diversions, I hope.”

“No!” exclaimed the lady, as if the very idea were unthinkable. “He sold us a lovely white wine on credit and he has come to be paid.”

“Then he shall be, but first—to the steam room! Your merchant may accompany us if it pleases him.”

The anticipation in that cold, callous voice filled my heart with dread, and in studying him I saw reflected—in his stance, his smirk, his mien of latent merriment—the truth that I had sought. The general was gloating—what terrible vengeance had he wrought? Words can scarce describe with what profound aversion I beheld his invitation. The inquisitive zeal that had lured me back to this den of depravity—tenacious as it had been—had dispersed in the space of an instant, and, like a horse that scents carrion, my sole instinct was to flee. I was about to excuse myself, to tell the general he might keep the wine as a homecoming gift, when the gaze of Theodosia arrested me. There was terror in her eyes, and a silent plea: “do not leave me, for I cannot bear it alone.” She had drawn the same conclusion as I.

“Why do you dally, dearest?” said Aquila, and, seizing her by the wrist, he led her through the narrow tenebrous passage to the threshold of the steam room, where the curtain had been lifted and the guards dismissed. I owed Theodosia nothing—neither the comfort of communion nor a word of defence—yet, as if borne onward in the immutable events of a nightmare, I followed.

Upon entering, I initially noted no significant difference—none, that is, but the lighting. Where Theodosia’s sanctuary had been dim and murky as its purposes, a multitude of torches and braziers now burned, casting all about a lurid play of flickering light and shadow. Gone were the scents of myrrh, of sweet jasmine and sandalwood, subverted by the reek of lamp oil and smoke. If this was the surprise, it fell far short of its fanfare. Perhaps, I mused, it was meant as a metaphor; that in banishing the darkness, Aquila hoped to illuminate, and so squelch, his wife’s infidelity.

Then Theodosia gave a shriek—shrill and anguished—chilling to behold—and in following her line of view, I soon perceived the cause. High above the tiled bench in the centre of the room was a sight I would not soon forget; there, glinting grotesquely in the rude torchlight, hung a grinning skeleton, each individual bone of which had been sealed in a brilliant cast of purest gold. The dreadful object was suspended by twine of a near invisible fineness and positioned in the semi-horizontal posture of an angel in flight—arms outstretched as if in embrace. Of the identity of the bones, there could be no doubt.

When his wife’s fevered shrieks had given way to a succession of low dolorous sobs, the general spoke: “Now, my darling,” said he, with the triumphant pomp of a speech that is practiced, “your golden boy will always be with you, here where you spend all your days.”

Whether Theodosia’s appetites were diminished by the ghastly fate of her lover, I could not say, but she never again cast a lustful glance in my direction—nor did she return to the bathhouse she adored.

END

The Sound

By Maria Venditozzi

She heeds the call of the sea,
rests in its lap, legs creamed in swirling.

Watches strands of spume
ripple and weave filigree,
merge and dissipate in the surge.

Arms stable in porous strength;
stones sucked to sand
in the roll and pull of a thousand seasons.

Attunes to quiet truths,
whispered on cooled air amid tidal song.
Pondering on countless thinkers,
dreamers who've shared this solitude,
sifted thoughts to grains of gold -

heart-tide swelled and emptied
until waters run to clear.
Until they breathe an understanding.

The Bicycle Light

By Mark Hudson

The Lady on the bicycle turned the corner to the right,
off of her bicycle fell her red light late at night.
It went rolling out into the middle of the intersection;
cars drove past it, not noticing the light's reflection.
I thought the tires were going to crunch the light flat,
but a man went out in the street to get the light back.
He gave it back to the lady, and she thanked the man,
she put the light back on the bike, and her next ride began.

Lost and Found

By John (Jake) Cosmos Aller

I was lost
And you found me

You walked out of my dreams
And into my life

And that made all the difference
In the world



THE KEEPER OF MYTHS

By Sarah Novello Ruckley

My eyes open, revealing nothing. The same nothingness of unconsciousness, a heavy blanket of white, not one solitary image to focus on. Heaven? No, I haven't died. Or have I? My last recollection is lying in bed reading "Redemption of Lost Souls" and smirking. Trealle had woken, realising the adventure had all been a dream. "Oh, sooo obvious." I laughed, closed the book and turned off the light.

A dream then? Yes, it *is* obvious...just a dream. Get over it Sarah. But...I inhale deeply...can you *smell* in a dream? The sweet scent of fresh pine invades my lungs, urging my eyes to find the source. Just a snow-covered tree please, anything familiar to disperse this unnerving void. My bare feet burn with an intensity I realise can only be snow...real snow.

Wake up Sarah, I don't like it here. Staring into the empty space, the mist before me slowly begins to disperse, a deep resonating hum pushing through it. A giant, mystical white bull emerges, its muscles contoured out of all proportion, its shaggy white coat knotted in ringlets of ice. Eager white orbs dance around it. The bull's translucent neon blue eyes stare into mine, warming my body and quelling my fear.

"Sarah," The bull's voice is deep and rich. "Approach..."

I inch slowly towards the beauteous beast, the snow crunching loudly with each step. "Who are you?"

"I am Maldath, Keeper of Myths and Guardian of Liberation."

"Why have you brought me here, Maldath?"

"I did not bring you here. You have always been here; this is your home. But it seems you have lost your way as Redeemer of Souls, Sarah,,,"

"Redeemer? Redeemer of Souls?! Me?! What...?"

The bull starts to shudder, letting out a titanic roar. The force of its breath stirs the snow from the distant trees, bringing a welcome colour into the milieus. More colour now as shards of light project from its torso leaping high into the air, bursting into an array of hundreds of phantasmal creatures, the white orbs jabbering excitedly, welcoming them.

"A dream?!" Maldath's eyes turn a fiery red. "Have you forgotten your life as a Prionite Sarah? Your vows as a Redeemer to purge evil from our lands so our people can grow strong and re-build our cities'?" The phantasms above become agitated, swooping and whirling, loud screeches crying out their disapproval.

"I know nothing about that!" I yell at Maldath and the nightmares. "You can say anything you want because THIS IS A DREAM!"

"Then go back to the life you think you know Sarah the Redeemer," Maldath turns and walks slowly back into the mist, the creatures reluctantly following. "But when you wake up, realise that what you think is your reality is only your dream..."

End

THE CHEESEY BISCUIT GOBLIN

A hard luck story by Neil K. Henderson

He knew he shouldn't really, but rather than get up from his comfy chair and head for bed, Timothy reached for the biscuit barrel and removed a packet of Cheesey Slims. They were the one luxury he could still afford in his poverty-trap existence. He wolfed a couple down in quick succession, then conscience forbade him further greed. However, when he got up to put them away, he took a chance that his conscience wasn't looking and sneaked one more. At which moment, a shrivelled old man the size of a china dog magically appeared atop the sideboard, wagging a long-taloned finger at the miscreant.

"Griddle-di-dee! Griddle-di-dee! A cheesey biscuit frae Hell for thee!" crowed the orange-clad apparition.

"Oh, shut up," answered Timothy, and with nary a qualm brought down his hand and squashed the goblin *splat*, like a big bole beetle filled with blancmange. But that was not the last he heard of the Cheesey Biscuit Goblin... not by a long chalk.

That night, his dreams were filled with cheese as he tossed and turned with churning guts amid the tangle of sweaty sheets. He dreamt he was an usher in the House of Cheese, where all the cheese in the world was stored away indefinitely. There was so much cheese crammed into the finite space, it was a dairy disaster waiting to happen. The cheeses were arranged with the largest balanced on the top shelves, the others tucked discreetly into docketts underneath - row upon row in the badly aired hangar. There was one gargantuan yellow Gouda looming over the chute from the uppermost layer. The enclosed warmth had softened the inside of the cheese beneath its waxy coating, and as the great circular slab began to roll, he knew this spelled the coming of the end of an era. He was powerless against Fate, as is often the way in dreams. Everything went yellow for a second. Then it was all over...

He stood there, covered head to toe in soggy yellow curds. All he wanted to do was escape, but the heat was becoming unbearable; his walking hampered by the sticky mass.

And it was beginning to smell.

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*

On waking, he found his pyjamas soaked in sweat. A cheesey crust had formed around the jacket collar, and the garments reeked with Gorgonzola feter as the drying perspiration oxidised into butanoic acid. He discovered in the shower that little balls of cheesey matter had formed in his armpits and groin, even - he had to crane his neck and use a mirror to confirm it - in the upper cleft between his buttocks. His pores were visibly dilated, strange secretions forming on the hairs of his legs and lower abdomen as he watched. This was not the cheese that dreams were made of: this was Cheddar Fever in all its gruesome lumpiness. Timothy had waited months to get *Cheesey* - Lord Roquefort's 'Memoirs of a Cheesey Biscuit Fiend' - from the library; but once read, the disgraced peer's descent into the Cheddar Abyss of nightmare hallucinations and sweaty pongs was indelibly imprinted in his brain. Now it was happening to Timothy himself - and he'd thought only toffs got rich diseases like that.

From here on, Timothy Fibbs, humble working class biscuit eater though he was, was marked as somehow different from the rest of society. He received funny looks in the street, as though he was coated with rotten cheese as thickly as in his dream. Shopkeepers were reluctant to serve him. He was escorted out of McTumphrey's Hyperdeli

for apparently disturbing the other customers. Lord Roquefort had had it easy compared to Timothy. All *he* had to do was send a flunkey for his shopping.

Things went on in similar vein as the days and weeks went by. Funny looks soon developed into open hostility - people ostentatiously holding their noses as he passed. It didn't seem to matter how often he showered. The Fever kept on unabated. Shops stopped serving him altogether, and it got harder and harder to find the basic necessities of life, like food... and soap. If the situation got any worse, he would be driven by an unwashed survival instinct to the ultimate act of debased self-preservation: *eating his own cheese*.

In desperation, he went to the *Fisherman's Wellies*, down by the canal. The smell from the adjacent rubber factory would surely obliterate his own aura of cheesey culpability. Timothy ordered the macaroni, hoping to confuse the issue with an alternative source of cheeseyness. Just to be on the safe side, he nipped into the gents while the meal was being prepared, so as to minimise the risk of ejection prior to ingestion. He was absolutely ravenous - not having eaten for a couple of days. Such was the extent of his unpopularity. Say what you like about Lord Roquefort's 'ordeal'. He may have genuinely suffered in the throes of Cheddar Fever, he may have felt the shame of social degradation, but Timothy would have bet his last biscuit he never had to go hungry. Even in sickness the rich got a better deal. The Social Divide was wider than the Cheddar Gorge.

The landlord of the *Fisherman's Wellies* must have twigged who he was, because on emerging from the bog Timothy saw the macaroni in the bowl was blatantly cheeseless. Smothering tears of frustration and self-pity, he crammed a handful of the glistening white tubules into his mouth.

"Oi!" yelled a voice behind him at the same moment as the landlord appeared with a steaming tray. "Leave my fucking maggots alone!"

Well, it was a *fisherman's* pub... Lord Roquefort's embittered words sprang to mind: "You strive and strive, running in pursuit of that elusive ideal; till at last you catch hold of the cheesey biscuit of Life. (Then you see some bounder's put peanut butter on it.)"

Peanut butter for the rich, maggots for the poor, but the corrupting principle's the same. Timothy managed to leg it home, empowered by the unexpected protein, but by the time he got there all his physical resources were exhausted. It would all be up with him soon. He had nowhere left to turn. He slumped into his armchair and buried his head in his hands.

"They that wait upon the Cheeseboard shall renew their strength," something said out loud, "they shall walk and not faint."

Timothy lowered his hands and raised his head. This was it. He was starting to hallucinate. The end wouldn't be far, now malnutrition had him in its grip. A slight movement caught his eye. One of the maggots from the pub was wriggling on the arm of his chair. It must have been caught on the sleeve of his jacket. He watched as the wriggling increased and the white, pus-like body expanded into a rice pudding mass, which in turn evolved into something with arms and legs... something wagging and waving. Then - *POP!* - the Cheesey Biscuit Goblin rematerialised before his eyes, complete with flat sombrero, mouldy-looking beard and sandals. Uncut toenails peeped from ancient socks.

"My God! How the devil did you do that? I thought you were as dead as Mozzarella in a mousetrap."

"There's more than one kind of cheese on Devil's Island," responded the goblin cryptically, "as I think you've begun tae discover since ye defied me and got yerself enchedulated..."

"Enchedulated?"

"Aye, *enchedulated*. Enchanted wi' cheese. Did you think the likes of *you* could afford an elitist malady like Lord Roquefort's Cheddar Fever? Don't give yourself airs and graces! *I* caused your cheesey condition and social isolation. Though you really brought it on yourself."

"You caused it? But what have I done to deserve this... enchedulation?"

"Apart from squashing me like a big bole beetle filled with blancmange?"

"But, you're only a goblin!"

"But, you're only Timothy Fibbs!" mimicked the wizened enchedulator, a derisory grimace crinkling the crumbly skin around his eyes. "Your original misdemeanour was to injure me to the detriment of my life."

"But you're still alive!"

"You weren't tae know that you can't kill me so easily. You certainly meant to. But making you a social outcast is the very least of the things I can do. I'll have you know I'm a close personal friend of the Icelandic God of Cheeseburgers. Tell that tae yer pal Lord Roquefort, and see how he likes it. Switch on yer telly, and I'll show ye the way that cheese shapes the world."

Timothy meekly obliged. A gritty realistic street drama appeared.

"Bastard! Bastard! Eat your cheese!" said a character in a cloth cap with what looked like a fishtail sticking out the corner of his mouth. "Bastard! You've been looking at me!"

Timothy blanched. "What the hell is that?"

"Method acting."

"Wh... wh... what method?"

"The Cheese and Kipper Doughnut method. You see how my powers have influence over the fabric of ordinary people's lives! Soon there won't be any soap operas left - only *cheese* operas. Did I say I was a close personal friend of the Icelandic God of Cheeseburgers? I *am* the Icelandic God of Cheeseburgers!"

"I'll do anything you say - just help me get back to normal."

"Why dae ye want back tae normal? This beats the usual crackerbarrel cack the punters watch. And you don't need a TV licence for cheese and kipper doughnuts."

"I... I... suppose you've got a point..." stammered Timothy doubtfully. Right then he'd have eaten anything, TV licence or no. "But the enchedulation -"

There was an almighty *CRASH!* and a brick hurtled through his front window, thudding on the hearthrug at his feet. A note was attached. Timothy's enfeebled hands took a while to undo the string, but eventually he extracted the paper and read: "SMASH THE CHEESEY BISCUIT TAX!"

"Wh... wh... what *now*?"

"Change channels," suggested the goblin. "There'll be something about it somewhere."

Timothy duly did so.

"Loving youuu...(Would be easier if you took off your boiler suit)," sang an oily spiv.

Timothy pressed the channel changer.

"- without recourse to a spatula." It was the News. "And now, an update on the mounting crisis surrounding the new Cheesey Biscuit Tax announced in Parliament today. The Minister in Charge of Food and Stuff reminded critics that it was in fact a member of the tax-paying public - Timothy Fibbs of Membrane Gardens, Glasgow - who first put forward the idea of a Cheesey Biscuit Tax to the BBC, as a proposed April Fool item for one of its magazine

programmes. The BBC, however, already cheesed off with tired references to the 'Broken Biscuit Company', failed to find Mr. Fibbs's suggestion amusing."

The Minister appeared: "Rather than waste valuable resources bringing an action against Fibbs, the suggestion was passed to the Ministry of Information, who, believing the emphasis on the first of April to signify the start of the new tax year, immediately redirected it to the Treasury, who in turn contacted me. This is exactly the kind of thing which can make Britain great again - or in this case, *au gratin*. (I like a joke as much as the next man.) But seriously, we at the Department of Being in Charge of Food and Stuff see great potential in this tax, which we hope to speedily implement and extend to all biscuits in the fullness of time, regardless of cheesey content or otherwise."

"Ha, ha, ha," sneered the goblin, setting his sombrero a-wobble. "I see something's rubbed off from that Lord ye're so fond of. Tax the very biscuits in a poor man's mouth? Ye'll get yersel' a peerage yet, the way you've taken tae the New Economy. No wonder the punters round here want tae string ye up!"

"But I don't know anything about the New Economy... or any economy, come to that."

"I think it was Lord Roquefort himself who said that learning to apply New Economics was like learning to eat cheese - without using a straw..."

"Eh?"

"Meaning that it seems complicated till you try, but it's actually easier than the way you were doing things before. Which just shows how thick *he* must be. Inbreeding, no doubt. Everybody knows there is *nothing* easier than rich folks getting money off poor folks."

"But I'm not a New Economist. I don't have anything to do with Lord Roquefort. All I did was read his book. I'm a socialist. I eat Red Leicester, like Ken Livingstone... I mean, I *used* to. It's this enchedulation. It's ruining my entire life. I'm going to die despised and cheese-ridden."

"In the wold ye shall have much enchedulation. But be of good cheese, for I have overcome the wold."

The words struck Timothy as familiar, and indeed he did feel slightly comforted. He noticed the icy draught from the window had ceased; and, glancing towards it, saw the hole had been covered with a barrier of clingfilm.

"How did - ?"

"I know the way to woo the cold North Wind. It's an Icelandic God of Cheeseburgers thing. If you desire tae be saved from the unsavoury sinfulness of your own iniquity, tae be free of the curse of enchedulation, you must undergo a thorough course of Homeo-cheese-opathy. Just as the effects of poisoning by strong cheese can gradually be overcome by regular doses of slightly milder cheese, so the poisonous effects of your cheesey biscuit sacrilege can only be overcome by means of further doses of marginally less evil cheeseworthy experience."

Timothy must have shifted TV channels without realising it. The oily crooner was still singing, but the music almost drowned him out. Suddenly, a rhythmic shaking and rattling overtook the room, shoogling and shimmying the structure in time to the acid jazz stomp riverboat boogie shuffle beat of the song. It felt like being on the Waltzer at a fairground. Everything began closing in. Backward and forward danced the room, the clingfilm window and TV screen getting closer and more suffocating with every wave-like motion.

"Take off your boiler suit and boogaloo," encouraged the enchedulated telly. A thick cheesey crust developed around the neck of Timothy's T-shirt. Globules of cheese formed beneath his arms and in his navel. The world went yellow and exploded in his face...

"Welcome to Double Gloucestershire for the Annual Dutch Cheese Rolling Contest." The loudspeaker sounded far away and distorted, like the line caller at a barn dance in the middle of next week. Timothy opened one eye. He was in a huge warehouse loaded with cheeses of every size and description - just like in his dream. This must be his chance to redeem himself. If he could get the biggest Gouda down from the top shelf without accident, and then go on to win the cheese rolling contest, he must surely break the hold of the enchedulation binding him. Thus restoring his status as master and not slave to cheese. He might even get the Cheesey Biscuit Tax repealed. His mind raced with possibilities. He could write to the BBC and tell them it had all been a mistake. That *they* were the April Fools. But, now he came to think of it, he couldn't even remember sending them the joke...

Before he could make a move, the gargantuan Gouda rolled down the chute and splodged all over his newly-acquired boiler suit. The smell was beyond comparison with any smell he had known before - dead or alive. It was impossible to accept it as real - unless this so-called 'reality' was the reality of the Pit, the bottomless Cheese-Hole of Hades. So much for second chances. He was in it all over again, and there were maggots everywhere. But he didn't have time to feel sorry for himself - or even to go fishing. Two pairs of sturdy Gloucester cheese-rollers' hands grabbed him by the shoulders and ankles.

"Stop!" yelled Timothy. "I am a close personal friend of the Icelandic God of Cheeseburgers!" Completely unimpressed, they hurled him down the grassy slope outside as if he had been a competition Gouda himself. "The cheese must breathe before it ripens!" he bawled, but was already cartwheeling down the incline and up the other side - tumbling over a ridge like the crest of a huge roller-coaster. There was even a carnival music accompaniment. As if to add insult to injury, internationally celebrated cheesey chanter Camembert Lumperdinck was giving it *The Last Waltz* like there was no tomorrow.

The undulating gradients rolled on and on into the blue-green distance... Lumperdinck eventually changed his tune, strains of *Cheese Release Me, Let Me Gooooo...* following Timothy's headlong career at the mercy of the runaway terrain. He wondered whether the cheeseburger bars of Iceland had funfairs like this, and when this 'fun' was going to end. As if in answer to his thoughts, other voices counterpointed the singer... *angry* voices. His sweatiness increased in chilly spurts. The whirly ups-and-downs whizzed by in a complex turquoise haze of multi-planar motion. He was beginning to think there might be some connection between this rollercoaster journey and the ups-and-downs of the New Economy, when the words of the shouting voices hit him:

"Smash the Cheesey Biscuit Tax!"

"Smash the evil tax inventor!"

"Crush the crummy number cruncher!"

"We'll give you April Fool, you bastard!"

Even cartwheeling helplessly as he was, Timothy knew that something wasn't adding up. (New Economics had a lot to answer for.) OK, these people had heard him denounced on national television by the Minister in Charge of Food and Stuff, and the Ministry got his ID from the BBC via the Treasury - but Timothy was now absolutely certain he had never submitted the joke notion in the first place. It had simply been a passing thought. An idle pipe-dream. And besides, the brick came through his window *before* the Minister exposed him on TV. It could be that the Minister had already named him on an earlier broadcast. Or else, the Cheesey Biscuit Goblin -

The freewheeling Timothy Fibbs shot straight over a sudden precipice, plummeted through empty space, then hurtled through the window of a house very much like his Membrane Gardens home. The clingfilm stretched to accommodate his flight path, thus cushioning the impact of crash-landing as he gently decelerated onto the rug in front of the fire. The clingfilm began to melt, and with one bound he was free.

"Forgive me, O great Cheesey Biscuit Goblin, for I have sinned against the Cheese and Kipper Doughnut method of social interaction - especially in the matter of eating cheesey biscuits before going to bed, daydreaming about a Cheesey Biscuit Tax, and squashing the well-meaning personification of my conscience without even giving it a fair hearing. I see it all now. *You* were my guardian spirit, Goblin. You read the April Fool joke in my thoughts, and would have saved me from myself. But when I blotted you out, I blotted out my own capacity for self-restraint, executing my ill-considered, selfish and downright dangerous plan without a qualm. You erased my awareness of doing so as part of the overall enchedulation effect, in order to teach me a lesson about social responsibility."

"Er... not exactly... I just wanted tae do something a bit postmodern for a change. Us goblins have a terribly twee public image."

The erstwhile enchedulated outcast squatted on the rug, staring up at the orange-coated goblin on the sideboard. His mouth hung slightly open. "Public image! Yes... yes, indeed! Everything is fitting into place. It is up to me to present that image of myself which shows the *true* me, untainted by the preconceptions of an ill-informed populace. It is time to stand up and be counted. It is time to take matters into my own hands. I am T... T... Timothy Fibbs! Tremble when you hear my name!"

"That's more like it. Get out there, Timothy, and *give them hell!*"

"Thank you, Cheesey Biscuit Goblin, but now your work is done. It is my turn to don the mantle of *cheddar credibility*."

* * *

Sometime next evening, the television burst into life: "Mob rule met its match today in Glasgow city centre, as a crowd of unruly Biscuit Tax protesters were dispersed from Gorge Square by an almost superhuman figure in an orange cloak, who rampaged among the placard-waving throng with an enormous Double Dutch cheese. As he went, he yelled what sounded like 'It's April in Iceland, and vengeance is come! Behold the New Norse God of Cheeseburgers!' The Prime Minister has expressed his satisfaction that decent law-abiding citizens are prepared to 'have a go' against the forces of anarchy. The 'something for nothing society' would never flourish, he added. 'There is no such thing as a free cheesey biscuit.'"

"That's giving them hell, all right!" cackled the Cheesey Biscuit Goblin from his perch on Timothy's sideboard. He clapped his hands and capered. "Pay your Biscuit Tax with pride!"

And to the distant, unearthly sound of cash registers, he jumped back in the biscuit tin to prepare his spring budget.

End

Outburst

By Dimple Shah

He had not thought she was unhappy, although no one had asked for her consent to marry an old widower. But there was a wariness in her eyes that never really went away.

Meanwhile, he filled out, basking in the silence of her servility. Sated with life, he burst impromptu into song.

Till he came home to her singing as she picked over rice.

She had stopped, the wariness now tinged with fear. It was enough to negate any notion that her momentary display of happiness had anything to do with him.

That was the day he bought the knife.

END

Premonitions

By Subhankar Biswas

The white-bearded man coughed, and the earth quaked in Kyushu.

He sneezed, and a hurricane swept across Bangladesh, blowing away houses and sinking a dozen ships off its coast.

His sniffles caused a snowstorm in London, stranding thousands of post-Christmas travellers in Heathrow airport.

"I wish I were dead," he grunted, blowing his nose. In Colombia, landslides swept away several hillside villages.

"Not yet, old man," said his two-faced companion. "Hold on for a few more seconds."

In Times Square, New York, a million-strong crowd began to count down: "Ten, nine, eight..."

Soon, an orange-haired man would be crowned king.

END

Pluto vs. Bluto

By Mark Hudson

The planet named Pluto was named in 1931,
the Disney dog character was shortly begun.

Pluto the dog appeared in Moose Hat,
a cartoon that Disney originally begat.

Bluto from Popeye, created in 1932,
makes you wonder if back then they stole too.
But the planet Pluto is now considered a dwarf,
and if Popeye ate that much spinach he'd barf.

Masked Mystery

By DJ Tyrer

The King In Yellow
The colour of autumn leaves
Asked to unmask
He replied: I wear no mask
No mask! is the bitter cry

Love Haiku 1

By John (Jake) Cosmos Aller

Full Moon in the sky
Makes me think of loving you
Until the end of time

Barbarian

By DJ Tyrer

Mighty barbarian hero storms the palace. The necromancer is waiting and imprisons the hero's soul.

END

Seven Pieces Hang from a Hook on the Door

By Christina Dalcher

She shrugs on the red robe, melts into lava, bubbling, boiling, ready to roll down mountainsides and smother cities. An orange sundress scorches the mirror, turns glass to liquid. Fields of lilies bloom from tile when she knots a yellow scarf into a rose at her throat; grass sprouts under her feet, cocooned inside fuzzy green slippers. In a blue bikini, her tsunami floods villages. In a shift the color of midnight, her darkness snuffs the sun.

Seven pieces hang from a hook. She leaves the changing room, and trudges home to cook and clean, dreaming of power and beauty.

END

Hypothetical We

By Shannon Connor Winward

Once, you and I were talking—arguing, really, in our way, about the bible and God, and such. I was trying to make a point and I used "you and I" as an example of "man and woman", or "man and wife".

You were quick to point out that there is no "you and I", to which I had to clarify that I meant "you and I" as an example, in that you are "male" and I am "female". We are representative only. We symbolize the potential coming together of the sexes, is all. Naturally, the suggestion was academic.

Naturally.

END

“M” is for

By Holly Day

tiny cut on the inside of my arm just enough
to let the extra pressure out, feel my
stress dissolving as just enough air
leaks out through the hole. No need

for a patch-kit—blood fills and seals the
hole quickly pooling with crimson ink
I resist the urge to cut another
carve pictures in my flesh, I'm saving

the rest of my arm for you.



Untitled

By Lesley Middleton

Every word had been carefully selected. The piece was immaculately punctuated. No detail had been overlooked.

With only 100 words to work with, she'd used every ounce of skill to craft her tale, reach a thrilling climax and arrive at a satisfying end.

She'd used the spelling and grammar checkers. She'd proof-read on screen and in print. She'd checked the formatting and submission requirements. It was very nearly ready to send.

There was only one thing missing. It always ended the same. After hours of writing she failed every time. Why could she never think of an appropriate, intriguing title?

END

Pi

(in 100 words)
By David Wilson

Three point one four
One five nine
How the hell
To make pi rhyme?

Irrational number
Never quite right
Diameter to radius
Mathematician's delight

So why do we use
This Greek letter called pi?
The first of "perimitos"
Or circumference – that's why

Transcendental value
Found in Science and Stats
Ubiquitous number
Of circles begat

Learn loads of digits
Of this number so Greek
And I guarantee now
You'll be known as a geek

Three point one four
One five nine
Two six five
And three five eight

Nine seven nine
Three two three
Let's stop now
Before it's too late!

The Cave (I)

By DJ Tyrer

A figure in a cave, crouched over a codex, reed pen scratching words upon vellum. The thoughts he records are not his own. They torment his dreams and linger amongst his waking thoughts, prompting him, demanding he record them, empty his mind of their unwholesome presence.

Finally, he finishes the tome, and passes it on.

*The opening to **Dreams of Futures Past**
(published in [555 Volume 2: This Head, These Limbs](#))*

Don't Touch That Button

By Ash Krafton

airlock evacuation
the exertion
sucked the life out of me

Available Now from Amazon

[A Terrible Thing](#)

Tales of the Yellow Mythos, featuring fiction by David Conyers, DS Davidson, Steve Sneyd, DJ Tyrer, Neal Wilgus, and others.

