

TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Fourteen – Summer 2017 – Alien Sports, Alien Thoughts

Editorial

Here we go into some of the more curious corners of your imagination. Indeed, maybe the topic was a little too curious, as there weren't as many submissions as last time. I hope things will pick up with the next issue! Don't forget, unthemed submissions are also considered.

Best, DS Davidson

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Next Issue's Theme:

Different Lives

introduce us to characters we don't see so often

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Alien Thoughts

By Aeronwy Dafies

Strange ideas, conceptions
 Float within brains that
 Float within fluid vats
 Long since divorced from flesh
 Long since gone far from home
 So far they cannot even recall
 Their home world, its star
 Or even their own form
 Let alone the alien beauty
 Of silver skies, coral-like trees
 Or strange crawling things
 That once served them as cattle
 Leaving a peculiar hole
 In whatever passes for a soul
 And an ache when they see
 Blue skies, green grass, earthly trees
 That boils into a cosmic rage

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The Martian Sport of Jump-Rotate-Shapeshift, or, The Day the Interplanetary War Began

By J. J. Steinfeld

Sports fans on Earth had developed a fascination with the Martian sport of jump-rotate-shapeshift, viewing direct broadcasts from Mars in ever-increasing numbers even as warlike tensions between the two planets grew. In a conciliatory move, four Martian jump-rotate-shapeshift teams offered to do exhibition games on Earth. After a year of negotiations, 250,000 Earthlings were in attendance at their largest sports stadium. A thousand of Mars’s finest athletes competed, culminating in all the athletes simultaneously jumping, rotating, and shapeshifting. As the athletes finished their spectacular competition, they all turned into the most well-equipped, fearsome soldiers anyone on Earth had ever seen.

First published in *The Drabblor Harvest Presents: Alien Sports (US)*, Issue 1, December 2013.

Brain By DJ Tyrer

Fungi from Yuggoth borrow your brain. Carry your canister off, show you the universe. Madness.

Prodigal

By Sean Bolton

The boy with wings extends
as red on the edge of shadow
a web in a maze

Angel boy dives – asks
why the sky runs away
a trace from a centre

All stories we tell, threads
regress to: brass belly;
abomination; the secret child

An absence of words, fleet
fleeing, the boy takes to
air enthralled by light

Dreams are memories, other
lives in phantasmal flight,
carry to gather to not diminish

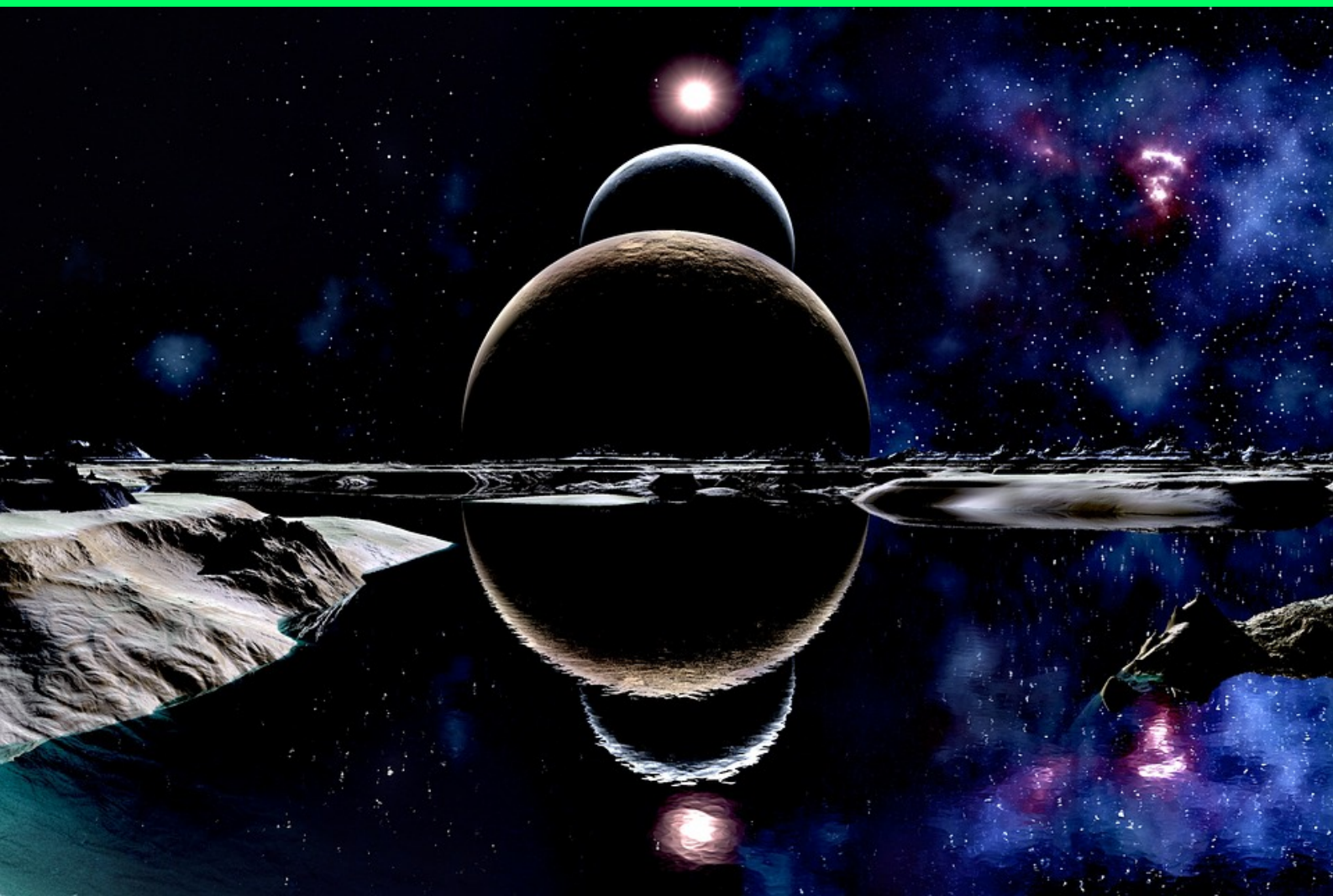
The boy with wings burnished
against sky, sun-kissed, falls
in love with the sea.

Meteors and Asteroids

(found poem from 2013)

By Mark Hudson

Can the government get any greedier?
They're even stealing the meteors.
They're claiming they're coming from space,
to put an end to the human race.
Or are they talking about asteroids?
Either way we'll be destroyed.
Can these two worlds collide?
Heading in the ultimate precision,
get ready for an outer space ride,
a crazy meteor collision.
Which is meatier? Pizzas or meteors?
I guess pepperonis are circles we see.
Anchovies can be found on Wikipedia.
but the onions and olives are inside of me.
Oh, meteors you come from the stars above,
what kind of message do you try to convey?
up in the sky is the goddess of love,
she can be seen near the milky way.
The stars of Orion are shining bright,
as people shiver and watch from below.
When people are gazing at the stars at night,
the ones they admire are the ones that glow.



When The Bat And Ball Went Crazy

By Vidya Vasudevan

The lone monkey gazed ahead stumped beyond belief. He clambered off into the forest, chattering wildly, calling his mates. They gathered on the forest floor.

The gibbering went on for a while.

Moments later, they began swinging from branch to branch till they reached the clearing. Hidden high up in the branches, they peered at the two strange creatures in the middle. Were they donkeys? They had similar ears. ‘No, they were not!’ Donkeys brayed. Were they pigs? They did grunt like pigs. ‘No, they were not!’ They did not possess a snout. Never before had they seen such weird types.

What were they up to?

One held a long wooden bat in his hand while the other was bouncing a red ball. ‘Oh!’ The monkeys’ faces fell. It was a game they had seen humans play in the big ground nearby when they went hunting for bananas in visitor’s bags.

Oh boy, how they disliked this boring game but this was awesome!

The six foot tall, square headed creature with a spiky head and a bunch of coiled tails grunted occasionally and glowed in a florescent red colour. He was in an ‘upside down’ pose relaxing his legs. The bat looked tiny compared to him. Throwing the bat, he jumped high and caught it with a somersault. Mimicking a hitting motion, he raised his hands and screamed until the heavens froze and it started raining icicles.

The monkeys trembled with fear.

The other creature looked kind of funny in a glittery gray metallic ensemble and the ball kept changing shape in his long, spindly arms. He was a two foot, pillow headed midget with fire emitting eyes and donkey’s ears. His face shone when he rubbed the ball hard and sparks flew in all directions. Jumping high into the air, he raced backwards in a cycling motion to energize his legs.

Liking his style, the monkeys copied him.

In a little while, the birds, squirrels and the rabbits gathered to watch the special show. They watched dumbstruck as the bat rose into the sky, twirled and with a couple of gymnast like stunts spun the incoming ball till it flew up and up. Craning their necks to watch its journey, they longed to know its destination.

Was it going to the moon?

‘No!’ It landed down in a burst of flame and turned into a golden blob and as they were watching, they saw the creature catch it and gulp it down. ‘Eek!’ The next shot had the monkeys scratching their heads. The ball flew in circles and disappeared deep into the forest. When it suddenly raced back and hit the ground with a ‘whoosh’ the monkeys saw coconuts, mangoes and berries in a pile, which, magically transformed into one giant golden blob. Again the creature caught it and swallowed it whole.

‘The golden blob must be very tasty,’ thought the monkeys.

The antics of the bowler added to the excitement. He jumped up and down and spun like a top which made their eyes literally go pop. When he bowled, the ball changed into a wobbly mass which wiggled and squiggled. Soon, before their very eyes, the ball changed into a mouse like creature, with antennae and stick like arms, which strode the air and blew puffs of smoke. This made the trees in the forest shiver.

The monkeys hid behind the thick foliage in fear.

When the mousey creature disappeared with a sudden ‘ping’ sound, the ball reappeared but strangely it began to bloat. Bigger and bigger it grew until the monkeys thought it would burst like the cannonball fruit found in the forest. When the batsman hit the giant ball, it exploded with a splash of yellow and out fell many more strange creatures with bats and balls. The monkeys held each other tight, alarmed at the happenings.

‘Where did they come from?’ they wondered.

The practice continued. In between, the newcomers took a break and flew upwards. What the simians did not know was that they were visiting their palatial home in far away Jupiter to recharge their power meters and grab a power cocktail.

The noise level amongst the creatures reached fever pitch. The monkeys held a meeting. They definitely had to share this news with their brethren in the nearby jungle. Also, somehow they needed to grab a bat and a ball from these creatures and it was quite different from grabbing a banana.

‘Who would be willing to take up the job?’

Meanwhile, high up in the Milky Way Galaxy, hectic preparations were underway in Jupiter. Its denizens were soon to descend on Earth to the Lords cricket stadium to witness cricket, the gentleman’s game. Tickets were sold out for the cricket match between the ‘Serious Sluggers’ of the Earth and the ‘Jazzy Juggernauts’ from Jupiter.

‘Success at last!’ The monkeys had secured a nearby tree to watch the game.

Simultaneously, negotiations were on between the Earthlings and Jupiter for another game termed ‘up, down, upside down’ to be held on Jupiter’s soil. The monkeys were hoping to be included in Team Earth.

The match commenced. The ball flew heavenwards, the bat spun in crazy somersaults amidst icicles, puffs of smoke and golden blobs and the monkeys danced.

The End



Challenge Humanity

By DJ Tyrer

President Trump had been pretty cocky when NASA brought him the alien message, a challenge to the people of Earth. Lose or refuse and they would forfeit their planet.

"I'm a winner," he told his advisers, "and America is a nation of winners, now I've made it great again. I'm going to tell NASA to accept the challenge."

His declaration was met by a flurry of nods and a smattering of applause.

"I feel so proud to be American," someone said.

Trump smirked.

So, the acceptance went out on a radio beam to the outer reaches of the solar system, to where the alien fleet lurked.

Unfortunately, there had been a screw-up. The aliens had challenged the people of Earth to a game of Football. NASA, the President, his advisers had all made the same mistake in thinking that meant the American game. But, having picked up British television, the aliens had meant soccer. It was only after the aliens had landed that the mistake was realised.

Still, Trump wasn't worried.

"I hear we've got some excellent soccer players and my good friend, Theresa May, has promised to send that Beckham fellow and a few others and Europe and Brazil are chipping in, too. We'll be fine."

Socrates took as his motto 'Know thyself.' It's a good idea to 'know your enemy.' A lot of people said Trump 'knows nothing.' Certainly, it would've been handy to know a bit more about the aliens before accepting their challenge...

The aliens had three legs. Whether that actually provided a significant advantage to their ability to kick the ball about was something the President's top scientists couldn't say for sure, but all agreed it would make them difficult to tackle. Then, there was their goalkeeper. Even if having three feet didn't make a difference, the fact he had been genetically engineered with gigantic hands was of definite concern.

"That's cheating!" thundered President Trump.

His newly-appointed soccer adviser shrugged. "There's nothing in the rules of the game about hand size, I'm afraid. I've checked ten times."

So, humanity was stuck with the disadvantage as the two teams lined up against one another.

The Brazilian striker sneezed, then the referee blew his whistle and the game began.

It was a walkover. With three legs, the aliens controlled the ball with ease, outmanoeuvring the earthlings who stood between them and the goal. Even when the humans got the ball, every shot was saved by the alien goalkeeper.

By the time they reached twenty-nil, things were looking bleak.

Then, an alien midfielder collapsed. A reserve was sent on, but another player collapsed a minute later. Player after player fell down, ill, and soon, the entire team, including the reserves, had been rushed from the pitch. With the goal wide open, humanity raced back into the lead before the final whistle.

Cheers went up. The President grinned as he declared victory. The aliens were silent as every last one succumbed to sickness. Despite their soccer skills, they had proved susceptible to the common cold. Their ship returned by autopilot to their waiting fleet and the virus continued to spread.

Soon, all the aliens would be dead, leaving humanity to dominate both the universe and the game of soccer.

Ends

Playing Intergalactic Baseball

By J. J. Steinfeld

I'd been toiling a decade in the minors, playing for the Venusian Vagabonds, one of team's three Earthling players, and I finally get called up for the end of the 2065 season to the intergalactic big leagues, and now I'm standing in the batter's box, during a crucial ballgame in one of the galaxy's most beautiful domed stadiums, batting against the Martian Magicians' stellar five-armed pitcher. This ferocious-looking hurler, even by Martian standards of ferocity and their ability to shape various bizarre and intimidating game faces, had a reputation for throwing not only a wickedly curving pitch that harkened back to the olden days of baseball when it was rumoured some of the unscrupulous pitchers threw cheating spit balls, but also was not averse to throwing his 200-mile-an-hour fastball treacherously close to the cranium of any batter who dared to stand too near to the plate.

Waiting for the first pitch, I told myself I wasn't afraid of cheating spit balls or treacherous brush-back pitches. I told myself I had made it to the intergalactic big leagues, and my family and friends back on Earth couldn't be more proud of my athletic accomplishments, not to mention huge salary in the coveted Venusian currency. But the fans in the stands were frenetic and I was trembling as if my life depended on getting a hit. I started my swing, but before the ball reached the plate, it disappeared as I did, my baseball career evaporated in the vastness of outer space. The Martian Magicians never did play fair.

*First published in **The Toucan** (US), Issue 12, July 2011.*

Alien Architecture, or, How the Interplanetary Hostilities Began

By J. J. Steinfeld

Two months after the discovery of the windowless, doorless three-thousand-storey building in a remote, desolate area of the country, siren sounds came from the building. Through the building's impenetrable walls several strange creatures emerged and the commander of the heavily-armed international military surveillance unit, who had been a paranoid fan of sci-fi films since childhood, ordered, 'Commence firing.' No one on Earth knew who had constructed this astonishing edifice. The impenetrable building materials, the futuristic architectural style, everything indicated alien construction.

"You killed our greatest architect," one of the creatures, who had mastered Earth languages, yelled at the commander and quickly returned inside its latest Earth outpost. The siren sounds grew louder and louder, the immeasurable, unworldly frequency triggering massive earthquakes around the world. The earthquakes multiplied and would not relent for several days, with a quarter of the human population surviving, all of them deaf. Within a week of the initial confrontation, the only undestroyed structure left on Earth was the three-thousand-storey building, from which thousands and thousands of hopeful creatures emerged, ready to repopulate the world, to rebuild, to create a world without war, to somehow live in harmony with the humans they had defeated in what came to be called the Last Interplanetary War.

*First published in **Fifty Flashes**, Edited by Arthur Sanchez and Jean M. Goldstrom, Whortleberry Press (US), 2017.*

Forests Of Oberon

By Andrew Darlington

The forest is a primal place. Even here.

There are ants. How come there are ants? They're banished too, unwittingly far from home. Only they don't realize. It means nothing to them. It's no big deal to an ant to be in the bacterial bio-mulch of long exile.

Moonbug stoops. Picks up a leaf, blows the ant from it.

"Our life on Earth was full of consequences," she says.

"It's devilishly detailed," he replies dourly. "But the devil is in the details."

A squat skinny man with a long pessimistic face, she makes him feel a bewhiskered troll beside her. But he's loyal, loyal as a dog. Remember dogs?

Looking directly overhead, beyond the treetops, above the hermetic sealing of the Mommur Chasma, there's the artificial sun. Its brilliant luminosity blazing against the hypnotic swirling fractal-green Uranus-storms. You get mesmerized watching those poison methane tides, those vortex-currents swarming with fireflies, until it burns holes in your head. You can watch the choreography of ice-moons navigating the magnetosphere too. But how can they make an artificial sun? It doesn't accord with what we know about nuclear fusion. Yet they made an artificial sun nevertheless. How long will it shine? For as long as they want it to shine. That's how long.

"They? Who are they? Seems like we put a lot of faith in they," insists Moonbug. She was born here. Knows nowhere else.

"We have no choice. We surrender all our choices to them. They know better. They know better. We believe that, or we believe nothing."

Herr Coranda looks crestfallen. He feels dumb and inadequate where she's strong and determined. She forces awareness of his sagging age, his indecision and fantasies. The failures of character she wordlessly accuses him of.

But he can just about recall elsewhere.

He's a member of the Council. Why would she request to meet him here?

She and Herr Coranda set out across the jeweled regalith. No weather here, but for the weather we make. The trees and the people together perform the carbon-dioxide into oxygen trick, thereby keeping each other alive on Oberon. The respiratory lungs of the Uranus moon. Two-and-a-half billion km from Earth. He glances warily over his shoulder, as if seeking out an invisible sniper concealed among the trees. There are orangutans here in their high nests. But the further they climb through the forest, above the tree-line, the more of the enclosed chasm they see spread out below them. Stretching as far as their gaze can go. A grid of filter-strip freeways and conurbs, parks and towers, gardens and malls. Lakes of surface melt-water. Powered by siphoned geothermal core-heat set up by internal gravitational stress. Home to ten-million humans. The total Oberon population. And every human left alive.

She fondles the leaf she'd retrieved from the forest. Up here there are dark grottoes and reefs veined with frosted quartz. She has something to show him to prod at the buried part of his brain, the frown in his severe eyes now shaded by the observatory shadow. Up the white steps, through the white foyer. The high white room is still and cold, Moonbug's breathing is heavy behind the little inset screens. She waits as he talks, unhearing, as her hands close and open on the leaf she carries. Sweat springs out of her palms.

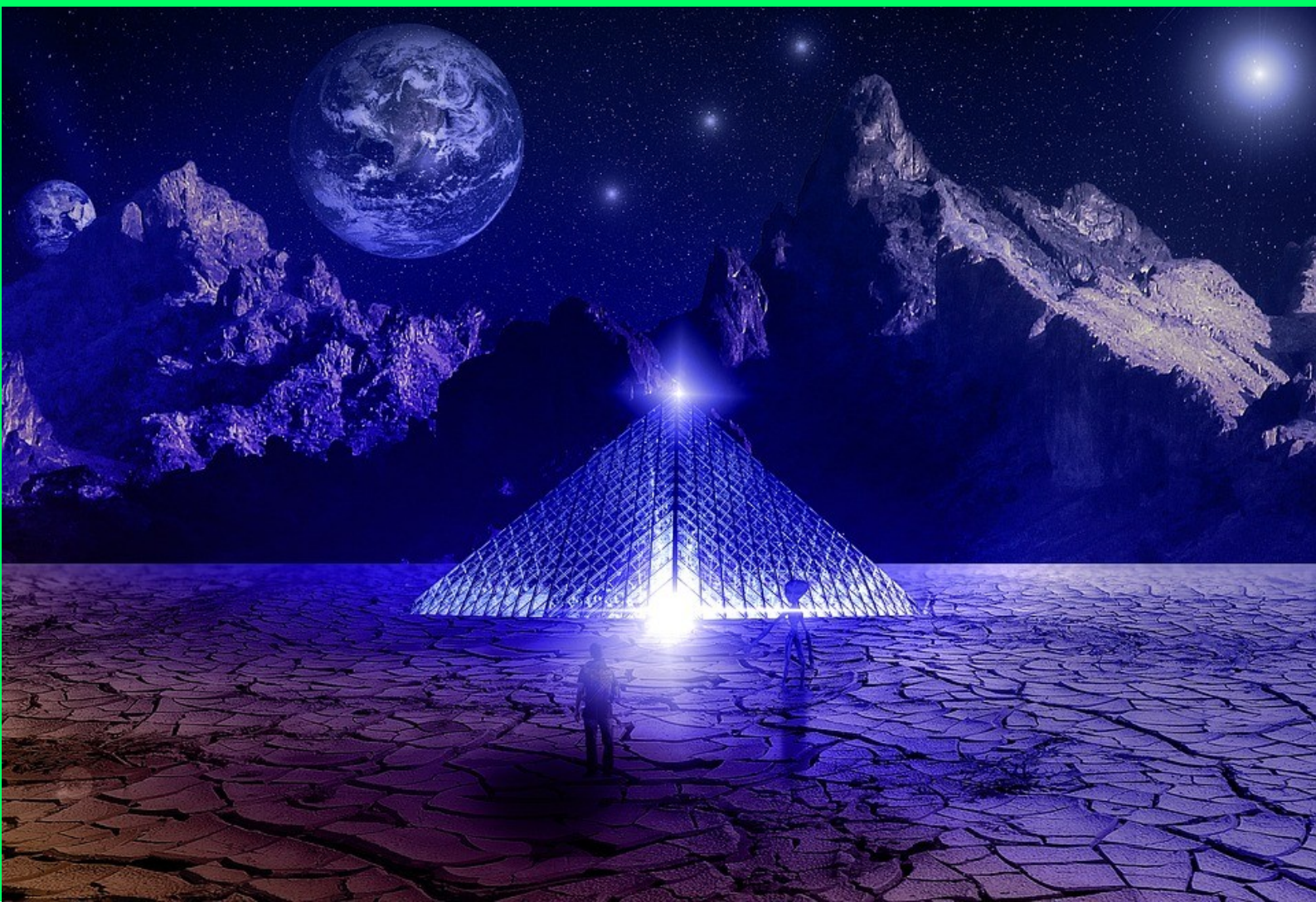
“We messed up,” summarizes Coranda. “We know that. After the nuke-storms came rad-mutant avian pandemic and climate toxification. The Shining Ones appear just in time, overlapping into us across continua. They save us from our own blighted consequences, never forget, never forget. They retrieve the uncontaminated, the virus-free and invent Oberon for us as a gift for eternity, as they clean up our shit-storm on our behalf.”

“And that’s what they’re doing now, right?” queries Moonbug. “See, from here we can uplink in through loops. It’s not easy. It’s been multi and poly-integrated. But we reactivated a couple of those creaky old orbital weather-sats still croaking around Earth, sufficient to see what we’ve lost.”

She looks. He looks. A grey metallic lustre. No land, no sea. Smooth as a ball-bearing across hemispheres from pole to pole. “It’s not our world any more. It’s their world now.”

“Looks like tomorrow could be a million years, or never.”

Ends



COLD WATER CONSCIENCE

By Rod Marsden

ISBN 978-1-520483-30-6, 420 pp, large print, unpriced.

rmars001@optusnet.com.au

“Would you care to see the wine cellar, my dear?” Imagine a cross between John Fowles’s **The Collector** and Gogol’s short story **Diary Of A Madman** and you’ll have some idea of the territory – and the intensity – of this in-depth psychological thriller by former *Masque Noir* editor and Australian genre writer Rod Marsden.

Cold Water Conscience is a new departure for him into the world of the crime thriller, and he handles it with skill. The novel’s entire narrative is confined to the deeply internalised and self-adjusting thought processes of Sam Bluit, self-confessed social weakling and harbourer of grudges well beyond their sell-by dates. He once shared a house with a manipulative woman and she done him wrong, particularly with regard to cold showers and money (a fatal combination). This he is unable to forget – even less to forgive. Some things just kind of traumatise a guy.

Alas for the lady in question – the rather portly Helen Aqua – she comes back into Sam’s life just when he’s won a fortune on the lottery. Well, one thing leads to another and poor old Sam finds himself with an unexpected – and most unwilling – lodger locked in the wine cellar of an isolated country house he has bought. Needless to say, a spot of revenge is called for – a dish, as we know, best served cold. Suffice it to say that a hosepipe is brought into play.

The gripping thing about this tale is the way we see Sam Bluit’s self-righteous justifying of all the torments and ‘retributions’ he heaps on his helpless captive, while he ticks off moral and financial debits and credits on a mental accounting sheet. He also takes to ‘compartmentalising’ his thoughts so that we see him leading an apparently guilt-free life lavishing money from his windfall on family and friends, as if the ‘Helen problem’ didn’t exist, while she is busily losing weight.

Bit by bit, Sam lets slip something of his real background and personality as events work towards their inevitable conclusion. He may not be as blameless and hard-done-to as he tells himself. We are kept on tenterhooks to the end as past and present experiences flesh out a character as much hidden from himself as from the reader. (There is a touch of Patricia Highsmith’s Ripley here.) As to whether it all works out for Sam, or whether Bluit blows it, you’ll have to read **Cold Water Conscience** to find out. You won’t want a cold shower afterwards.



MAGGOT-CACTUS

By Neil K. Henderson

Life is self-consuming, let us say -
FOR ALL I KNOW, it kills our genesis.
Sleep might be the answer - is it so?
What are we now... some kind of stew?

Eating is a book: we make our speech -
"Have you the flat-worm, baby?"
If you have pain, take out the onions.
Toss a maggot and a cactus in.

His Majesty is edible, lecturing in sound for us -
"Are you the fat one, maybe?"
His stethoscope is limited to picturing pulse and such.
Phonetic undressing: a salad is born.

The seeding Neoplasm worms its way in;
Resentment is a Cancer in our brains.
The turnip-headed reader turns his spine the other way
To correspond with genocidal germs.

Yet Faith moves mountains, making whole
The craters Carcinomas leave for dead;
As cucumbers cold in human frames
Chisel understanding from pain.

BUT THIS IS NOT AVAILABLE, let's see...
Are you sure it's not your mind that fails?
As animals and vegetables are cannibals from fire,
So pricks the Maggot-Cactus in the soul.

Smile as if your sphincters love you;
Squirm in tunnels dark and warm.
Lift the spirit in organic chemistry -
YOU KNOW IT'S NOT LIKE THAT.

Satellite Signals from Outer Space (found poem from 2013)

By Mark Hudson

This apartment is like the Bates Motel,
and now I'm channeling Howard Cosell.
A twilight zone rerun from a satellite,
breaks through my brain in my darkest night.
They say life on Mars could have existed,
but I know it did, I even assisted.
I am the ghost of Spock and Kirk,
if I could just get the channel on TV to work!
I'm listening to meters in meteor slant,
I look at the universe, I feel like an ant.
The signals that come really do scare, man,
because here comes my robot TV repairman!
He fixes the antennas and radio waves,
bouncing back from solar system graves,
where I love Lucy is still in prime time,
The Rockford Files takes a bite out of crime!
The mirror universe reflecting on this one,
but don't you dare get too close to the sun!
It will burn you with its ultraviolet rays,
so you can't watch reruns of happy days!
So you wake up on the planet of the apes,
your whole life stored on video tapes!
all of your problems have just now begun,
you life is now a non-stop rerun!

Whatcha Got?

By Matthew Harrison

“Now, I want you tell me what makes your race special. Take your time, no need to rush.” The alien sat back, smiling benignly.

Rob was still scared, although not as scared as he had been when they’d whisked him up from the university campus. Then he had soiled his pants, but somehow they’d looked after that as they brought him up to this strange ship apparently in orbit around the Earth. Now he was shaking, but not out of fear, he told himself, so much as indignation. How dare they!

The alien – there only seemed to be one of them – had had a different shape at first, but perhaps out of deference to Rob it had become humanoid, although still blurred around the edges. “Well?” it said, picking up what seemed to be a notebook and pencil. “What have you got?”

“You—you mean, you’re actually...?” Rob stuttered. With a shaking hand he picked up the flask that appeared on the table beside him, and took a gulp of water.

A look of impatience crossed the alien’s face. “Yes, we are doing an assessment of your race, actually, of your biosphere. We did check out a few other species – chimps, dolphins, cetaceans – but we decided that yours was the most advanced, although it was close.” The alien consulted its notes. “Anyway, that’s the decision. If you think it’s unfair, you can appeal.”

“But—but why?”

The alien put down its notepad. “Look, you’re occupying some pretty valuable real estate here, a temperate, water-endowed world, and we just want to make sure that it’s going to the best-qualified race. ‘Horses for courses’, I think you would say. Evening up the galactic endowment.” It laughed, in a strange metallic way that more than anything convinced Rob that this was not some elaborate hoax.

“You mean, you’d *kill* us to make way for another race?” he whispered.

“Good heavens, no, not at all!” The alien looked shocked. “The Galactic Code.... It’s just that you’d have to share. The swarm-based civilization of Gliese b, for example – they’re overcrowded, and they’d like it here.”

“So,” it picked up the pad again, “what have you got?”

Rob gulped – the responsibility, the whole human race depending on him! He thought hard. “We’ve got Shakespeare, Milton, Eliot – a whole bunch of poets. And Michelangelo, Picasso, loads of artists.” The alien was not writing anything down. Rob rushed on, “And scientists – gravitational waves” (how fortunate he’d read *that* article!) “Newton, Einstein. Technology too!” He fished in his pocket, and triumphantly brought out his iPhone.

The alien still wasn’t writing anything down. Rob hurried on. “That’s just western civilisation. We’ve got Chinese, Indian, Mayan. Look at the pyramids!”

The alien was looking at its fingernails. “We’ve analysed your cultural artifacts,” it said drily. “Not bad – for your level. But that’s not really the point.”

“The point...?”

The alien leaned forward. “What I really need to know is – how much do you want this?”

Rob was too dazed to register the words. “There’s space travel,” he gabbled on. “We’ve visited Pluto....”

The alien leant back, and yawned.

Rob was almost in tears. “How *can* you judge mankind based on just me?” he sobbed. “I’m just an average Joe.”

The alien shrugged. “I didn’t write the protocols.” Then it became firm again. “We’ve got a job to do, and you’re not helping. For the last time, have you got anything more?”

Rob felt his eyes actually fill with tears, which made the alien look even more blurred. He gave up trying to think of mankind’s achievements. What the hell! The whole thing was so monstrously unfair.

And that perky alien with his stupid notebook. “I think you’ve made up your mind already...,” Rob said, rising from his seat.

“No, no, we really haven’t,” the alien protested, “that would be against the Code—.”

“...And you’re doing this to justify yourself,” Rob cried, seizing the flask.

“Not at all—”

“Well, you can stick this up your arse!” Rob shouted, flinging the flask. “If you’ve got one, that is.”

The flask bounced harmlessly off the alien’s chest. The alien didn’t flinch, but it did make a note.

“And the flies from Gliese – bring them on! We’ve got *fly spray*!”

The alien made another note.

“So what’ve *you* got?” Rob shouted, brandishing his fists. “Put ’em up!”

The alien said nothing, but snapped its notebook shut. Finally, as Rob still stood there panting defiance, it disappeared, and he was left by himself.

Rob’s anger ebbed, and he realised how ridiculous it was looking for a fist-fight in a spaceship. He let his hands fall to his sides. And shortly afterwards he found himself whisked back down to Earth, where he materialised on campus among students and professors who took no notice of him at all.

What a relief! was Rob’s first reaction. His second was an urge to run up and down and tell people about the threat to the human race. But as he calmed down and felt the weight of humanity around him – the crowds walking purposefully, or chatting on the lawn, or just standing absorbed in their own existence – he realised he would have no more impact than the bee that was right now buzzing in front of his nose.

Rob swatted the bee. But his hand seemed to pass through it, and a separate segment of reality opened which somehow Rob knew that only he could see. In this separate segment stood the alien, apparently at the console of his spaceship, beaming at him.

“I’m pleased to tell you that you’ve passed,” the alien said. “I got you through as an Aspiring Supercivilisation. Told them a pack of lies!” (This last was delivered with a wink) “Anyway, we won’t be calling on you again” it glanced down at the console “for, say, a hundred thousand years!”

“Gosh, thanks!” Rob said, although somehow it was less of a surprise than it should have been. “And – Er – Sorry about just now, hope there’s no hard feelings!”

The alien gave a disparaging gesture. “Break a leg!, as I believe you would say.”

Up yours! Rob retorted softly, as that segment of reality closed and he was left alone on the campus burgeoning with his fellow humanity.



Star Cloud

By Bobbi Sinha-Morey

I am the pearl that comes
from your tears, the circle
of light spinning around
your heart of gold. I am
the meadow of your spirit
you always come to,
the wind wrapped tightly
about you. I am the burst
of star cloud that inhabits
your dreams.

Advert

I write you from Stavanger, Norway.

My name is E. Galois and I come from the year
2317. I am a French mathematician member of the
Temporal Council. I write to you, because the time
to unveil our plan to the World has arrived:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfZYcJFbU8Y>

This is **True Countries**:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKQYYz7d78M>

True Countries has been conceived as an artistic
project of Music, Film and Literature, where each
song has its own music video. The website
www.amartiworld.com is the forum for this project.
Blog entries are covering Production Transcripts
and Tachyon Receiver, two side projects along with
the release of music and music videos.

From here, history is being written.
I am at your disposal for whatever.

E. Galois
True Countries

www.amartiworld.com



RETURN VISIT

By Neil K. Henderson

So, here's Jim Smith heading for his home in the Springday, afternoon-type sunshine; walking in the rhythm of life and whistling some of his dead dad's rhymes. And it's just the sort of day to be on the lookout for a bit of luck... a rainbow presentiment of coming happiness... a jolly portent of good fortune... a King of Diamonds. Of course, a daft old bugger like Jim ought to know better. Fortune-telling's *young* men's tricks. Life's predictable enough for a man his age. Normality knows no bounds.

Well, he turns the corner and comes in sight of his garden. (Looking forward to a bit of a potter about, is Jim.) And he casts a squint over his humdrum hedge (standard green privet), keeping his eyes peeled for earwigs between the hopped-up wolf spiders hurtling past his gaze at speed. Then he suddenly spots it: bit of yellowed paper, stuck under the far end of the greenery. Old bit of tabloid, by the look... blown by the wind. The *Spectacle Seeker*, probably. Well, it's litter, isn't it? He'll need to 'tidy it up'... which means the kitchen pedal-bin, if he's going to be thorough.

Needless to say, as soon as he's in the kitchen he decides he might as well have a chew and a slurp before he lets pottering commence. And since he's got time on his hands, he can maybe manage a quick perusal of this ancient page of out-dated *Spectacle Seeker*, just in case the odd omen should leap out and wallop him. *Expect the unexpected* - that's Jim's motto. Someone's already done the crossword, surprise, surprise. (Hasty scan of filled spaces. *Stocktaker*, *fungus*, *herrings*, *trauma*, *debut*, *motorbike*, *afterbirth*, *distance*, *ointment*, *ruby*, *platypus*... if any of this is ominous, life's going to get a bit fraught.) Pity the horoscope's not here. Then he notices Steem Brockenshaw's supposedly 'topical' so-called 'humorous' column. Well, many a true word's spoken in jest... even if it is crap. He can't help reading it:

"STRANGE ENCOUNTER ON GLASGOW GREEN

"It was a proud moment in our city's long history when Earth's first ever extra-terrestrial visitors touched down on Glasgow Green this afternoon - amid chants of 'E.T. Phone Home' - for a flying visit to Scotland's industrial capital. The first thing the shaggy, hulking leader of the Bogron deputation asked the Lord Provost, after the initial greeting ceremonies, was: 'Where's Billy?' Yes, the Bogrons have been big Billy Connolly fans ever since their spacecraft started picking up old Parkinson shows in deep space. Assured that he wasn't far away, the spokesbeing said, 'Great! I can't wait to ask him what jobbies are.'

"But the visit has a serious side. Clyde Spaceship Builders are hoping to land a massive contract for flying saucers from the Bogron government, and it is believed the Provost is negotiating for them to carry the *Glasgow's Miles Better* logo into the farthest reaches of the universe."

Jim doesn't think much of it: "Clyde Spaceship Builders?! Guff! Billy Connolly?! Flad! *Glasgow's Miles Better*?! Must've blown a bloody long way, *that* paper... Pah! I wipe my bottom on such trash! Don't they *know* this is Ackersley-under-Pant? And that spaceman didn't need to ask Billy Connolly what jobbies are - the *Spectacle Seeker's* full of 'em!"

So, he gets up from the kitchen table to go and get on with his pottering, when - OMINOUS DOMINOUS! - it hits him right between the eyes. PAINT THE SKY WITH OMO! Surely this rubbishy article must be a catalyst to propel his hope-expectancy into a new dimension of fulfilment! "All I need now," thinks Jim, "is a copper-plated laverock-warbler, to unlatch the happiness of the Firmament and tickle the fancy of Beyond." But, just as he's about to go out into the garden, he hears this voice coming from inside the washing machine:

"Hoi! Do you mind?! Don't keep moving about while I'm reversing the orbit of Uranus. It's a very delicate operation, this... takes quite a bit of adjusting. And by the way, do you know there's a big hole in your rubber gasket?"

Naturally, Jim is curious to see what's going on (well, who wouldn't be?) and, slow as certainty, lowers himself to a crouching position, face to face with the round glass front of his SUDZI SKIDS-AWAY 750rpm fully-automatic turbo-driven appliance. *Holy Endwerc!* He can feel his very joints disengaging as he compresses his body into a squat. *Crivvens, it's enough to make the Niebelungen shrink!* ("Are you sitting comfortably?" enquires the voice. "Well, keep *still*, then!") He hasn't even got a washing to do while he's down there - but today it's more like a *wishing* machine, anyway.

"It is possible to mentally project oneself," the voice pronounces, "through and beyond a dark, reflective surface, to reach a state of metamorphosis *on the other side*. The big secret (not learned by Alice's looking-glass experience) is to return to this side, and *remain changed* (for the better, one hopes)."

So, Jim decides to have a go: peering steadfastly into the glassy dullness of the machine's door-plate. And -

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It was a giant step for Captain Smith Jimberlone, as he purposefully strode through the access port of the landing module - before the disembarking ramp had been lowered - and unceremoniously did the splits on *extra-terra firma*. He had expected the Planet Izdus to be the arsehole of the universe, and, sitting on it now, he felt some empathy. It was a big place, anyway... whatever else it was. Big and bare and dusty. And he could see now that it was mostly brown - more like earth than Earth, in fact. But at least the sun was shining, and there was a clear blue sky above. If it had been raining, this would have been Mud City, baby, and no mistake!

He scanned the expanse of potential quagmire, sensing the presence of others in this seemingly deserted environment. Then he saw them. 'Natives', he supposed. Surely he and his crew were the only visitors today. He didn't want to have come all this way to end up in a 'tourist trap'. Strange looking lot too, these creatures... yellow... fluffy... legs like spiders. Octopedal angora cardigans - that's what they looked like to him. Harmless, at any rate, it would seem. He began - painfully slowly - to rise from his undignified pose, dusting himself off and gingerly fingering his embarrassingly situated bruises.

As if to add insult to injury, one of the woolly jumpsuits was brandishing aloft the disembarking ramp from the spaceship. Some kind of elaborate welcoming ritual? Or had the Izdusians already evolved a primitive sense of humour? Was this their idea of a wacky practical joke? As Smith was asking himself these questions, he noticed others carrying off familiar objects which really belonged on board ship. *Hold your... wotsits!* Some of the objects were bits of the ship itself! The little bastards were systematically dismantling his extremely expensive spacecraft.

He was too shocked, at first, to manage a response. He could only goggle vacantly as hordes of the yellow fuzz-koala inhabitants unscrewed, unbolted, demagnetised and dismembered as much of the module as they could get their eight dextrous hands on. A few were shamelessly cataloguing the pieces, while others stacked them neatly on handcarts. This was some teddy bears' picnic!

He could feel one of his bilious attacks coming on. Maybe they'd never get back to Earth. His mind reeled from the thought. He tried to yell a manly "Hoi!", but out came an apologetic "Urp..." Help was at hand, however, and a demented bellowing from the direction of the ship sent the furry spider-cushions scuttling off with their cartloads of plunder. Sundry shouts of amazement and dismay ensued, as an immense gorilla of a man gradually emerged from the hole which had once been a quadro-dynamic electron-intensified multi-purpose utility hatch.

"Hoi! Leave our ship alone!" The gorilla was shaking a fist. This was Borg Gravelspoon, the captain's Number Two, and his rage was ebbing to panic as he realised the creatures - obviously regarding him as friendly - were returning to continue their activities. "Where's the rest of the module gone?!" He was a big man, but he knew how to whimper under pressure.

"Urp..." said Jimberlone's dyspepsia.

"Chill out, spasmo-kittens!" A sudden voice dispersed the grasping throng. It belonged to an even odder-looking entity - presumably the leader of these 'things' - resembling a psychedelic giant panda with flaming orange appendages. Its electric turquoise Hawaiian-style T-shirt bore the pink day-glo message: "*I AM THE MYSTERY INGREDIENT*". Above which, a clutch of bulging green ping-pong eyeballs dangled and glowed with fluorescent insanity.

"Aloha, dear ones," smirked the garish octo-fluff. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Stern Buttlesea, Mayor of Uncle Freddie's Scrapyard. On behalf of Uncle Freddie, our King and Benefactor, I bid you welcome to these humble, yet picturesque, dominions. Ripe with the promise of a summer's day; pregnant with undreamt-of possibilities; combining permanent good weather with a perfect ambience for peace-loving creativity, Uncle Freddie's Scrapyard is a landscape of ideas - a canvas primed and ready for displaying the wares of the truly fecund imagination. Recycle your old worn-out materialist notions, rusty values and outgrown attitudes! Now is your chance to recondition the fabric of your souls; put new brightness into the colours of your aspirations; dissolve the stubborn stain of Self and wash away the grime of prejudice -"

"Take us to your leader!" The sales pitch was interrupted by Nightwatchman 'Wolfie' Pigbasket, the remaining crew member of the space-bubble. He stood in his underwear, a redundant sock-suspender hanging limp and forlorn.

"WHERE'S THE BLOODY SHIP?!" roared Gravelspoon, intent on retribution.

Pigbasket was shame-faced. This had never happened to him before. He had never lost a ship while fully awake - and inside it. "They... took it. It was all so quick. Bits here... bits there. Rapid dismantling... No mess... No fuss... The appliance of science..." His confusion intensified. He looked as if he was having a breakdown.

"Pigbasket..." Smith interjected. "One of your socks is missing. Urp... This simply isn't good enough."

"Oh My Good God..." rumbled Gravelspoon, gathering momentum. "Oh, my beautiful Astro-Warburton SCX 98/3 spockter-driven, soft valve, drip-dry, twin-tub Starhopper! You've broken it! You shower of Yahoos! *Vandals!* PHILISTINES!!!" He gave Stern Buttlesea an eviscerating glare from beneath his overbearing crane-driver's eyebrows. His whiskers bristled menacingly.

"Hey... take it easy..." The Mayor of Uncle Freddie's Scrapyard raised itself indignantly on four sinuous limbs; gestured vaguely with light-fingered hands. "We are not *vandals* here, Mr. Spaceman. We are *creative re-designers*. We reassimilate unsatisfactory concrete forms, to abstract new *meaning* from the bits. What you see as *vandalism* is merely cosmetic restructuring. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, eh? C'mon, now. Let's go to Hospitality and chew the fat!"

"Urp..." said Jimberlone's guts uncertainly.

Borg Gravelspoon cracked a fart.

"Trust me," insisted the Buttlesea. "All will be revealed." He motioned the trio into a long Romany-painted carriage, mysteriously drawn up by a team of purple earwigs the size of alligators. "The Towing Weevils take us everywhere," said their guide. "They are our scarabs."

Pigbasket was starting to get the heebie-jeebies. He couldn't stand it any more - and he didn't care who knew it. ("Not to worry," soothed Stern B, "we'll be there in no time...") It was the way the colour scheme clashed so violently: the purple ear-gators and the orange-and-turquoise Buttlesea, set against the rainbow-hued wagon. It was driving him crazy. ("...courtesy of British Rail," the Mayor concluded in a sinister undertone.) Pigbasket's screams drowned out the imaginary steam-whistle. There was no turning back...

When they eventually alighted from the gaudy scarab-taxi, further along the dusty trail on the blank canvas of the earthy embryonic art landscape, Captain Smith Jimberlone took a good look about him. "I will say this..." he ventured. "I don't know much about earthy embryonic art landscapes - but I know what I like. Would you say this was surrealist or metaphysical?"

"I want to go home!" shrieked Pigbasket.

"I want a banana," growled Gravelspoon.

Stern Buttlesea beamed as brightly as a banana sundae (and the sundae had its hat on). "I do believe *you* are beginning to grasp what we are about here," it told the Captain. "Acceptance is the surest route to understanding. And therein lies serenity. Behold - a new palace of repose is being erected as we speak; constructed by karma from the remnants of old concepts, once holding up a previously defined 'luxury hotel'."

They were greeted by a bizarre confrontation of facades across the distorting mirror of a murky thoroughfare: the main street, perhaps, of the native settlement. On one hand stood the opulent frontage of a palatial two-storey edifice, fashioned from burnished agate inset with green and yellow jade. The narrow windows, each barred with slim gold pillars, made a miniature treasure trove for every jade and agate rainbow arched between. Across the lintel of the vast oaken door hung a wooden sign, rotten with age (and riddled with woodworm, if the truth be known): "RUBICON COUNTY JAIL. TAKE CARE - CHILDREN CROSSING."

Across the road, as if reflecting the negative image of the prison, another two-storey building, of more modest aspect, stood in opposition. The walls were painted dungbeetle grey; the plain windows filthy with grime. Over the municipal green door, a huge curving neon sign announced: "RISING SUN MOTEL - ALL TASTES CATERED FOR (TYPING EXTRA)."

"Welcome at last to the Palace of Repose," said the Buttlesea. Smith, of course, had no idea which of the two buildings he meant, and there was no point asking his crew for rational comment. Be that as it may, the party seemed to gravitate instinctively towards the neon-lit hovel. There was a bill of fare beside the doorway.

"Look at this menu, Captain," said Borg Gravelspoon. "It says: 'We cater for the connoisseur - guaranteed spineless hedgehog cunts and completely quill-less porcupine quims a speciality. Or pick your own orifice.'" That seemed to suit Number Two, so off he went into the Rising Sun with all the modesty his haste would permit. Borg didn't know *what* he liked... but he was a man who knew what he *wanted*.

As Mayor Buttlesea seemed to be leaving choice of destination to his guests, Jimberlone opted for the posh prison; bringing Pigbasket with him for safety, in case he got run over by any ex-British Rail Gypsy limousines.

"Remember," said their guide, "once you surrender to self-centredness, you may find it impossible to break free again from your dungeon of desires."

"What about my second-in-command? Can he escape from that cottage of carnality... that hole-house... that *place*?"

"Well..." Stern B. shrugged some of its shoulders, "he's big enough, and ugly enough..."

"Urp..." Smith had a gut feeling about all this, but, as if in spite of himself, he crossed the threshold of the beckoning open door of the Rubicon County Jail.

"We reconstructed the two buildings out of Uncle Freddie's official residence," said the Buttlesea creature. "*After* he died, of course."

"Naturally," Jimberlone conceded. "And your prisoners are all provided with free will, I take it?"

"As far as can be determined," said the other. "All except prisoners of *conscience*, that is."

The scene within the now semi-detached erstwhile royal abode was predictably unexpected. The main hall was more like a mad mechanic's workshop. Most of the interior outfittings appeared to be fashioned from scrap: chiefly corrugated iron, flattened metal containers and crushed cars. The staccato pattern of brand-names stencilled on packing cases enhanced the effect. Flocculent inmates perched upon orange crates and empty catering-size soup tins, either side of a long work-bench littered with everything, and bits of everything. All of material 'reality' was here - in kit form. The Izdusian workforce beavered away industriously - dismantling, examining, remodelling, creating anew - always taking careful inventory as they proceeded. Here and there, Smith recognised parts of his bygone landing module.

"This is where we manufacture Truth," said Stern.

"I don't believe this!" Wolfie Pigbasket was screaming and shrieking and hopping about on one leg. Then he stopped and pinched himself hard on the backside. "It's all a dream! Wake up, damn you!"

They had to sedate him with a hammer.

Some of the workers were passing newly-assembled fancy goods over to a conveyor belt at the far end of the hall. Jimberlone went to see. As he watched the glittery prizes rolling by, aspects of his past existence paraded before him. It was all there: every odd sock he had ever lost... buttons... condoms... safety-pins... pencil-sharpener... tin-opener... waffle-iron... microwave... hi-fi... an unexploded toast-rack on Xmas Day... status symbol 'A'... status symbol 'B'... hedge-trimming medals... green plastic triangle... CUDDLY TOY... lampshade... poultice... trouser-press... pinball machine... gold watch... three-piece suite... bell... book... bedpost... *What did it mean, this inventory of his life's worth?* ... spin-dryer... candle...

"When can we have our spaceship back?" he asked politely.

"Can't be done," admitted the Mayor with alarming candour. "We need all our wheelbarrows to take this crap over to Dispatch. This is the arsehole of the universe, you know. We've got to dump the shit."

But Jimberlone was distracted. A thought flashed through his crowded mind. Wolfie Pigbasket's missing sock! Now there was a light at the end of the tunnel! Of course, it would be a red one, wouldn't it? Well, he might as well look for it while he was here... sometimes even missing *red* socks can be produced from nowhere, like pulling a white rabbit from a hole in the ground. Just then, the sun cast an iridescent reflection from an agate lintel onto the beaten metal of the wall opposite.

"If you can't find what you're looking for here," said the Buttlesea, "perhaps it's waiting for you at the foot of a rainbow - somewhere on the other side of the sky."

And true enough, as Jimberlone turned his attention from the conveyor belt to the mirrored spectrum, he became aware of a flaw - a peculiar red sock-hole in the haze of colour. My God! This must be the celebrated Sock-Hole in the Ozone Layer! Now his way home was clear! He could easily whizz back through the red sock-hole to his own universe, just like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* with her ruby slippers! Yes! To hell with Gravelspoon and Pigbasket. They could take the Yellow Brick Road. Now it was all making sense... at last, he was going to come face to face with his own microcosmic doppelganger...

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Of course, by the time our Jim manages to straighten up his old body again, he's all aches and pains - what with rheumatic legs and a bad back. And his stomach feels the need of a good belch, as a matter of interest. Anyway, he picks out the odd red sock he's found in the washing machine and slings it in the basket at the side. Needless to say, he's forgotten all about that daft newspaper article. But if he wants to go and potter about in the garden, he'd better get a move on... Reaching down greenly for the pottering-irons, he suddenly lets out "Urp!" (just like that). It's those pickled willoughbys he had with the garlic sausage - obviously having a fight with the homemade mushroom soup.

Out of doors again, and the afternoon's still there, and still sunny. The laverocks are happy in the high blue yonder - giving the warbling laldy in spite of next-door's strident hedge-slicer. An ice-cream van comes charging round, blaring its chiming battle-cry in time to muffle Mr. Swinefever, over the road, being manhandled into an ambulance. Looks like he's having one of his 'outbreaks' again - screaming and foaming at the mouth and all.

Our Jim's not in the same frame of mind as he was before. Some of his *joie de vivre's* gone missing. He sets to his pottering with a grim determination, as if he needs to get to the Root of the Matter. But something keeps getting in his light... casting a sullen shadow over his search for Truth. The hulking ape-like form of Algernon Ffoxley-Zitbar stoops over the cowering vulnerability of the adjoining hedge, bullying it into shape with his electric cutter. The psychopathic neatness of his candelabrum moustaches only adds menace to the operation.

"Smith!" Now he's seen our Jim. "Nice day for it, eh?! Heard about Fred King? Dead as mutton. Heart attack. Best way, if you ask me. Sudden. Best for his wife. Always was a lucky so-and-so, Fred."

But Jim's busy pretending not to hear - crouching at his weed-bed, digging for Victory with his grubby little trowel. Diplomatic deafness - that's what our Jim's got now. Algernon Ffoxley-Zitbar doesn't care, though. He can talk a hole through a brick wall, and *too bad* if your head gets in the way.

"Bloody vandals were at it again last night," he goes on. "Broke into the outhouse and dismantled my wheelbarrow. Bastards. Even took the handles - makes you pig-sick, so it does. 'Course, you know that Steem Brockenshaw fella? Writes in the *Spectacle Seeker*? He reckons the Liverpool unemployed are going to rise up and invade Wales! Going to take all the sheep hostage, till the sex-starved landowners surrender unconditionally. Just waiting for the wheelbarrows to turn up - that's all that's stopping 'em. So Steem Brockenshaw says, in his column. He's a laugh, eh... Steem Brockenshaw. What a wanker! HERE! Any of your socks gone missing? *Another* of mine disappeared off the line last night. If you ask me, some bugger keeps nicking 'em. Just the *odd* ones, too... I wonder what 'e *does* with them? Maybe it's that Scouse vandal..."

Jim's had enough. His diplomatic deafness has broken down completely and he's struggling to his feet, wishing he had a copper bottom for all the bending down and standing up he has to do. He leans right over the hedge, and he pokes Ffoxley-Zitbar in the eye with a worldly-wise digit. "As a matter of fact," he slowly announces, "they dematerialise through a Sock-Hole in the Ozone Layer." (Hasn't he just been to the farthest reaches of the universe? Isn't Glasgow Miles Better?)

It takes a lot to make Algernon Ffoxley-Zitbar shut up and stop dead, but this statement does the business. "If I didn't know you better, Jim," he says eventually, "I'd say that you were completely stone mad. You need treatment, mate. You sound just like that Steem Brockenshaw..."

"And another thing, Algie..." puts in our Jim.

"...Some Banana, you are!"

"Algie... Urp..."

"Yeah?"

"WHY DON'T YOU SHOVE YOUR FUCKING WHEELBARROW UP YOUR ARSE?!"

"Brain-washing," mutters Ffoxley-Zitbar, "that's what it is..."

Ends

***Note:** "giving it laldy" is a Scottish phrase meaning "giving it all you've got", "with gusto".*

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The City

By Joshua Corbett

We enter the scene through a subway exit. We climb the stairs to the entrance of the city. Large luminous signs and TV screens surround us. We are not where we came from and we are not going back. We walk forwards towards the pavement and we begin to walk along it. We see shops open for business but no people. We see restaurants enticing us in and the smell of food being cooked. Yet we see no hungry customers. We wonder if we should investigate the restaurants, perhaps come across some free food. We decide better of it. We see the sky is dark and the city lights flood every inch of this city in a golden glow. It is not cold and it is not hot. It is pleasant. It's a type of temperature that makes us feel at ease. It lingers like an old friend waiting to say goodbye after everyone else has left. To give us a warm embrace and to tell us that everything will be fine. The buildings here are tall. They feel oppressive. We strain our neck trying to see to the top of them. What is up there we wonder. What if that is where the people have gone. To view the world from a majestic view. Surely birds are the blessed ones then.

We continue along the pavement and turn into a side street. It is bathed in autumn leaves. Yet no trees are visible. We wonder where the leaves have come from. We see an autumn leaf fall from the sky to join the blanket that has enveloped the street. We ponder for a moment and then continue on. We hear a door open. We see the new light enter our vision. We turn our head left and look into the apartment. Only stairs are visible. They will take us on we assume. We enter the apartment and climb these stairs. At the top we find a simple living room. Leather sofa, wooden draws and coffee table. TV on. No one is home. It is empty. What a shame that life is so empty once we are gone we think. Emptiness. We repeat the word to ourselves. We begin to feel empty. We go into the bedroom. A double bed. Well made. No one has slept in this tonight. Sleep. To allow ourselves to be free of pain and to cease to exist within ourselves. Or simply to recharge a depleting battery. We leave the apartment and go on down the side street. We find ourselves on a main city plaza. Zebra crossing's crisscross our path. They seem to be suggesting the options that we have to explore. Left to a library. Right to a hotel. Onwards to a bar. We choose the library first to explore.

We turn left at the Zebra crossing. The silence of the city relaxes us. It is a lullaby to a deaf dream. We feel at ease as we stroll along the pavement taking in the sights. Tall buildings mixed with old rustic structures. Unstable. Contradiction. Timeless. We see the library. It has two large black doors. We push

one open. Disco lights. A disco ball hangs where we imagine a chandelier should. Vivid colours blind us from seeing what is inside the library. We take a moment to adjust to the change in scene. Music violates the purity of the stacks and shelves. Corridors have vomited books onto the floors. Boogie Wonderland is playing. Wonderland. We search for a way to turn off the music. We consider again; who really wants the music to stop? Silence can only be a companion for so long. Let the music play on. We will not let it become a distraction. We search the library for people, for signs of life or existence. We find nothing. A barren jungle of noise and unused knowledge. We take a moment to immerse ourselves in the library, in the noise, in the chaos. We find peace in the disillusionment of pure knowledge. We wade through the water of words back to the entrance of the library and close the door politely as we leave so as to not make a noise for those studying inside.

We walk back to the zebra crossings. We carry on to the hotel. Down this street we see water trickling down the sides of buildings like sand in an hour glass. Fragile. We see the broken shards of the debris. Ruined buildings. We see windows smashed in but gently as if apologetically. The ruined buildings seem submissive. They plead us to leave them be or to not intrude on their already intruded slumber. It makes no difference to them. Indifferently different. The lights flicker here. The golden purity of its love seems strained. The light only reaches certain points of the street and flickers and leaves others in darkness. We reach the end of this street and see a broken hotel. It looks to us like a prison. A prison that seems to be floating in the air with spotlights pointing at it. They seem to be keeping it in the air like fans. Suspension. We know we must explore this building. We jump and reach the steps of the hotel. We pull ourselves up and enter it.

Inside the lobby we feel ourselves trapped. Lights flicker here as they do outside. We see a bell on the front desk. We ring it. Why not. An elevator door opens in the distant. An elevator room full of autumn leaves fall out of it. We take a deep breath and ring the bell once more for no reason. We enter the elevator and sit down on the cushion of autumn leaves that still remain inside of it. We listen to the elevator music and nod our head along none committedly. We arrive on the floor that the elevator stops at. We step out of the elevator. It closes its door and travels onwards. We will never know which direction it has travelled in. We can still hear the elevators music playing though. All throughout the corridor we find ourselves in. We feel as if we are being watched. Eyes stare at us but we cannot stare back. Sometimes it is better not to stare back. Stare. Confrontation. We feel things moving around the corridor. Moving from

room to room and staring at us as they pass. There used to be happiness here. We feel like invaders. Taking steps into something that is far too sacred for us to understand. Understand we must. We take a step forward and another and another. The stares get deeper inside us like a camera inspecting our insides. We reach the first room of the corridor. Autumn leaves lie across the bed sleeping. We pick up a handful of the leaves. They are freezing to the touch. We smell them. We recognise the smell. It is perfume. Perfumed, cold autumn leaves. We leave the room. There are several other doors in the corridor left unopened. Some doors are better left unopened we remind ourselves. We hear the elevator return with a fresh batch of autumn leaves to fall out of it. We get back into the elevator. We travel to the lobby. We ring the bell once more. For no reason. We jump down back to the street. We walk back to the zebra crossings.

On the way back we find a small path made out of cobblestone that is arched over with floating autumn leaves. We can hear wind chimes in the distance. The smell of perfume is strong here too. We get a feeling of hope. A feeling we are not used to. Hope, we think. A lost cause to so many. Yet something worth fighting for. Something tells us that one day the sun will shine the brightest it ever has and there will be no more darkness. Hope, hope, hope. We repeat the word to ourselves like a prayer chant as we walk down these cobbled stones through the floating leaves. We find ourselves at a harbour. We see a beach and a promenade. We see towels left unattended as if the occupants have just gone to fetch ice cream. The sea is lifeless. There is no movement. We realise that the sound of the wind chimes are actually coming from the ocean. Somewhere in the darkness. Out there. Not in the city. The wind chimes get louder. We see floating lights in the distance coming towards us in the sea. We sit on a nearby beach wall and wait patiently. We kick our feet against the wall and hum to ourselves. We have nowhere important to be. Time passes. Why construct something to organise something that can't be structured. The wind chimes are here now. The floating lights, we are not surprised, are autumn leaves. They radiate and glow in the water. We can see the bottom of the sea with the help of the floating glowing leaves. We jump down from the wall and take off our clothes. We walk towards the water's edge and fall face first into the midnight ocean. We discover that the ocean is warm, hot actually. The leaves float away from us and cluster together. We apologise. We take a deep breath and dive. We find that the water underneath is crystal clear. We swim for a little while, chasing the autumn leaves that float away from us. Something that will always be out of our reach. We tire of this game and swim back to the surface. We are not far away

from the harbour where our clothes are. We swim back and climb out. We find that we are not wet. In fact we're perfectly dry. We put back on our clothes and begin to walk again in this midnight city.

We finally find ourselves walking towards the bar. This street seems different. It has a quiet melancholiness to it. The street lamps seem to droop down and light our way sympathetically. Both sides of the street there are trees. Trees with autumn leaves on them. We smell the perfumed aura they omit. There is a freshness about this street. We reach the bar. A saloon type structure at the end of the street. It is fairly well preserved compared to the state of some of the structures in this city. We enter the bar. The saloon bar is well lit. The spectrum of brown, yellow and golden liquor surrounds the inside of the bar. Pints of beer are left undrunk on the bar top. We sit on the bar stool. We think about the last time we were drunk. We cannot remember. We notice two strobe lights are focused on a certain point in the saloon. We walk over to this point and see surrounded by autumn leaves; a glass of whisky. We take the drink since it seems we should. We sit back at the bar and enjoy the peacefulness of this night in the city. Truly we are the blessed ones then. One day people will return. The sun will be rising soon on this night in the city. We will stay here a little longer.

Ends



How the Amorous and Ravenous Martian Found Love and Sustenance on Earth

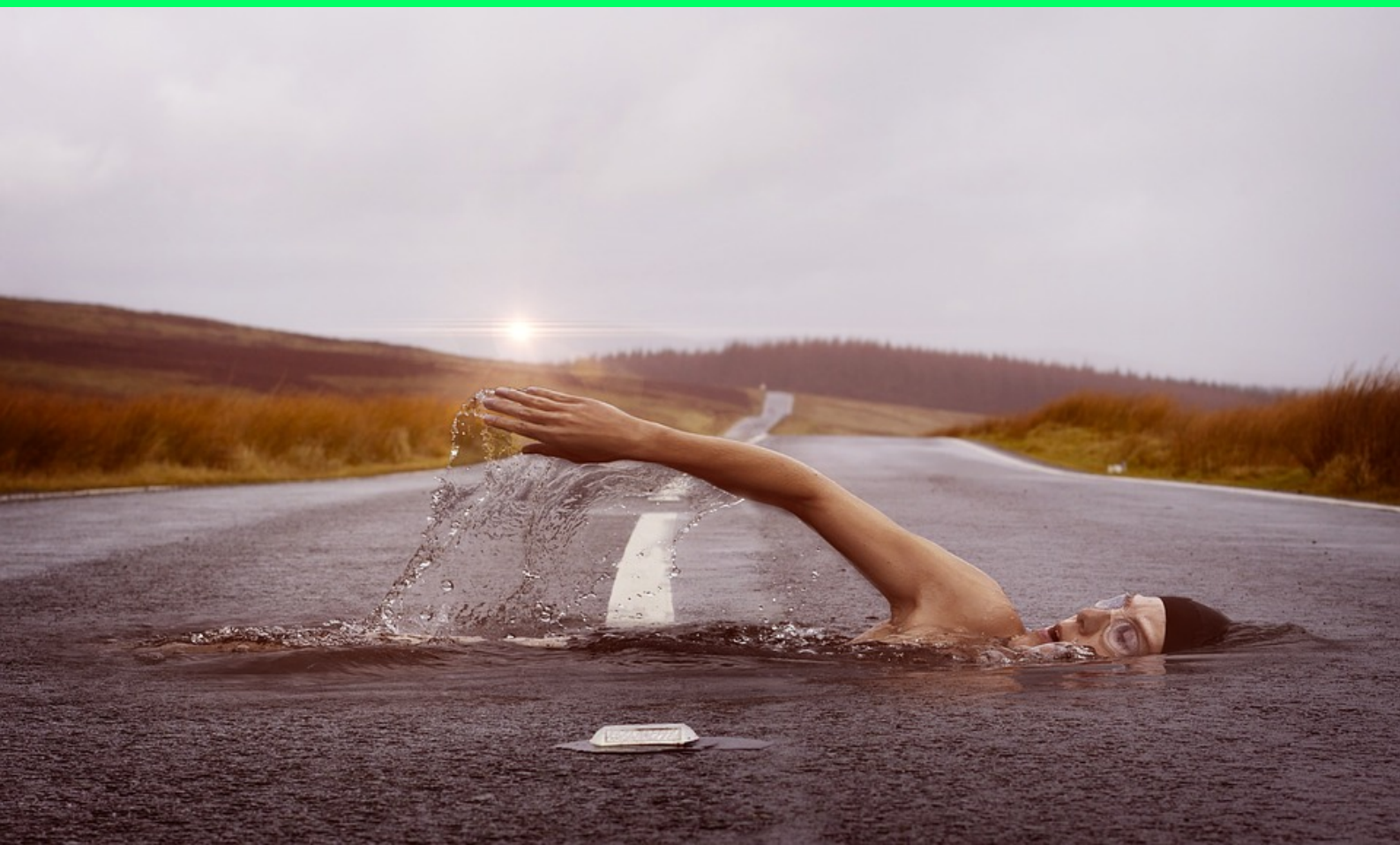
By J. J. Steinfeld

Ross, after four failed marriages, and whose loneliness and horniness had been consuming him for over a year, sat in front of his computer and watched interplanetary pornography. He paid a high premium for access to this salacious yet popular website, but he thought it was well worth the cost. With defensive bemusement, and fighting not to think of himself as a deviant or a sexual freak, he told himself the interplanetary pornography did deconstruct notions of conventional romance, lovemaking, and physical beauty, which in a strange way he appreciated after all his less than satisfying experiences with women, each failed marriage worse than the previous one, along with the numerous disastrous relationships with women met through online dating services.

Reviewing his past sex and love life, Ross was more than eager to spend his time enjoying this strange and grotesque website. Of course, he didn't believe that the intergalactic pornography was authentic, even by freakish standards, yet there were thousands of images and dozens of videos that the website claimed were authentic, photographed and filmed on various planets. But the website's speciality, judging by the number of images claiming to be from the Red Planet, was unbridled, acrobatic, vigorous Martian sex.

On his sixtieth birthday, lonely and horny as ever, sitting in front of his computer and drinking his third glass of red wine, Ross saw on the screen the most freakish yet fascinating creature he had ever seen, several unmoving, partially eaten Earthlings nearby. Of course, he considered the scene a completely staged fabrication, like in one of the zombie movies he also enjoyed watching. In a high-definition video entitled *How the Amorous and Ravenous Martian Found Love and Sustenance on Earth*, the creature was speaking in a sing-song, sexy voice, 'I am outside your door, longing for you...' As he became more and more aroused, Ross attempted to shut off his computer, but with each try the voice became louder, sexier, promising intergalactic pleasures and sexual gratification he had never experienced or even imagined in all of his sixty years. After trying to banish what he considered irrational, unnatural, perverse thoughts, he opened the door and there was a lovely Martian, male or female, impossible to determine, who immediately devoured Ross.

First published in *Freak /Pure Slush* Vol. 13 (Australia), Edited by Matt Potter, Pure Slush Books, 2016.



Saturn's Ocean
(Found poem from 2015)
By Mark Hudson

The Encelaudan Ocean won't be visited soon,
it's on one of Saturn's sixty-six known moons.
The Cassini spacecraft takes credit for the find,
another benefit of some scientific minds.
Encauladus is dazzling bright, like a mirror,
And scientists are beginning to see it clearer.
The moon on Encauladus is covered in snow,
but it's not a place astronauts can go.
The water in the ice has carbon dioxide,
gravitational squeezing pumps the tide.
Some have pondered if life may exist,
if water is there, could we have missed?
Stress cracks known as tiger stripes,
have given answers to scholarly types.
The water could certainly support the living,
but no reports of life are scientists giving.
Some scientists think the water must be hot,
so no one knows if we can drink it or not.
It's not the only moon to have these features,
but chances are it doesn't have creatures.
Jupiter's Europa also has oceans upon it,
and both planets are worthy of a sonnet.
Could this be the water that quenches our thirst
when the water on Earth takes a turn for the worst?
The truth may be really more than we can bear,
because face it, people, we're already there!

Second Skin
By Bobbi Sinha-Morey

In the mirror of futurity
I will be your second skin,
I'll be the oracle at your
front door, gifts to you
inside my palms: quartz,
ivory, alabaster; above
us the daystar pillowed
in its bed of light. I bring
the breath of dawn, wish
it were eternal like the
touch of our lips.



Trumptopia (II)
By DJ Tyrer

Build high for victory
Leave the swarming masses far below
Rise like Olympian Gods
To regard the world with a sneer
Champions of industry
Judging the world below
Safe and secure
Leaving the others to their ways
To live as they wish
Happy in their limited lives
Scattered like chaff
Swarming across the wasteland
While the gods delight
In their heavenly domain
Their veritable Trumptopia

**The Most Fateful Day in Earth History:
Super Bowl CXLVIII, Sunday, February 4, 2114**
By J. J. Steinfeld

No human or alien could have foreseen the magnitude of this single sports event. It was only ten years since the aliens had been awarded an NFL franchise, then playing in Super Bowl CXLVIII. That one of the innumerable wagers would be Apocalyptic if the Other-Galaxy Otherworlders won, no one could predict. Who knew that the Divine and the Prince of Darkness were eternal gamblers? Seconds remaining, the Pittsburgh Steelers leading 52-50, and the Otherworlders' three-legged place-kicker launched a 90-yard field goal, the longest ever. And I circle Earth in a spaceship with not a soul to hear my broadcast.

*First published in **The Drabblor Harvest Presents: Alien Sports** (US), Issue 1, December 2013.*

Spaceball
By DS Davidson

A game immeasurable
Far beyond human comprehension
In which whole planets
Serve as balls
Potted into black holes
To score a point
Two if ringed
Three for a star
Alien armadas
Take aim over decades
Fire a concerted pulse
Of strange matter
Blue's up next