

**Edited by** Forrest Armstrong

**Cover Art** by Danielle Coenen

**Forrest Armstrong**  
**76 Linden Street**  
**Needham, MA 02492**

**Email: [delarocha59@yahoo.com](mailto:delarocha59@yahoo.com)**

**[www.theswallowstail.tk](http://www.theswallowstail.tk)**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

“The White Wall,” by Miriam Mabel Martinez, originally appeared in *Underground Voices* in 2006.

“Green,” by Mark McLaughlin, originally appeared in *Aberrations* issue #20.

## Table of Contents

### **NOVELLA**

*The Instigation Bureau* by AD Dawson {23}

### **SHORT STORIES**

“The Crotch Grab” by Jason Earls {4}

“Diamonds” by Michael Woods {7}

“Green” by Mark McLaughlin {10}

“The White Wall” by Mabel Martínez, Translated by Toshiya Kamei {11}

“Cheapermuphs” by Rue Franklin {14}

“Fun with Robotics” by Patrick O’Leary {16}

“The Story About The Story” by Arc {19}

“The Hole” by Jeremy C. Shipp {58}

### **POETRY**

“New Sure” by Dan Halpern {49}

4 Poems by Ray Succre {50}

“Keeping a Broken Heart in Check” by Bryon D. Howell {53}

2 Prose Poems by Thomas Wiloch {55}

### **NON-FICTION**

Book Reviews {56}

**Author Bio’s** {62}

## The Crotch Grab

By Jason Earls

The Saturn V rocket and the stealth bomber came together near the outer edge of the stratosphere and exploded on impact, the rocket's parachute opening a millisecond before the crash, but not in time to do any good – Yet this catastrophe, which slightly changed the super string vibrations in the 11<sup>th</sup> dimension, had nothing to do with the fact that Troy Mezger was down on earth staring into his full-length bedroom mirror getting ready to grab his crotch as hard as possible – Troy stood only five foot four, weighed about 140 pounds, and liked to wear a mullet-style hairdo – His face had a squashed up pug dog look to it and he had a little ball of fuzz growing beneath his chin that he enjoyed fondling whenever he got nervous – His girlfriend Matilda with her numerous freckles and unruly red sprouts of hair passed through the bedroom door and glanced at Troy just as his hand made contact with his crotch and he pulled the contents upward.

Troy, what are you doing? she asked.

i'm practicing my crotch-grab for my acceptance speech tonight, he said.

What speech. i thought you were competing in the whistling tournament.

i am. But after i win the Grand Prize i'll have to give a speech and i'm going to do a big crotch-grab at the end to really freak out the chicks, and so i'll get a reputation for being wild. i want more people to like me. i'm tired of being such a boring person.

But i'm your girlfriend. i should be the only chick you want to freak out.

Oh i've freaked you out enough already in this lifetime. Now go away, Matilda. i need to practice.

Troy did a few more crotch-grabs trying to get his technique perfect, he

turned at different angles, practiced smiling and squeezing really hard until he had the move down perfect – Then he went to the closet and took out his brand new black Stetson hat – He put it on and strutted out of the house and climbed into his yellow station wagon, drove down to the concert hall and went inside – He found a vacant practice room and started warming up for the contest by running a few scales, drinking some fresh lemon juice, and massaging his adam's apple for awhile – Then he did some jumping squats, pushups and backflips until it was time for him to perform.

He went to the stage and whistled his ass off for thirty minutes straight – Classical music – Contemporary pop – Weird bird noises – Soul and funk – Coltrane and Miles Davis – Unusual sounds from the “rubber-mouth” technique he had invented years earlier – Then he ended with some Ornette Coleman style free jazz – He performed each piece flawlessly – No melody seemed out of reach for him – Then he stopped and leaned in close to the mic and wanted to make a small announcement – But he was too shy to actually say anything – So he just thought these words in his mind instead of speaking them: *now i'm going to give you my grand finale, folks* – He grinned and closed his eyes and started whistling this melody:

*E F D D<sup>b</sup> G# E ...*  
*E F D D<sup>b</sup> G# E ...*  
*E F D D<sup>b</sup> G# E ...*  
*E F D D<sup>b</sup> G# E ...*

He whistled it over and over again – A riff he had discovered in his youth – He loved how evil it sounded – The *D<sup>b</sup>* meant that particular note was to be

whistled an octave higher than the preceding *D* note – At first he whistled it with a semi-distorted tone because he was the only person in the world who could simulate a distorted electric guitar with his lips – Then he cranked the distortion up higher and added some licks between each repetition of the melody – A few trills, some arpeggios, then a few insane screeches with some ridiculously wide vibrato.

And do you know what, readers? – You really should hear that melody – i'm serious – Have someone play it for you ASAP to get the full impact – Find a pianist or a guitar player and ask them to perform the riff a few times – You won't be disappointed – It has a truly evil and menacing quality which comes from the flatted fifth: *D<sup>b</sup> G#*. The tune is lethal and discombobulating and upon hearing it you will either laugh or cry or get the full blown creeps since deep inside the tune lies the essence of the Tetragrammaton along with several cryptic messages – Matter of fact, i think it could conjure Lucifer himself if you lit a few black candles and drew a pentagram on your face before playing it.

So Troy whistled the evil melody as the last part of his performance and two women in the audience fell into a trance – Their eyes turned bright yellow and they saw flashes of psychedelic colors along with images of machine sharks trying to devour them – Then long strings of white gauze erupted from their mouths and wrapped around their entire bodies like mummies – But the women quickly returned to normal when Troy ended his performance and the crowd erupted in full applause.

He was thrilled with their response – He raised his arms in triumph and the judges didn't even announce a winner for the contest – The main man just went over and got the Grand Champion trophy and brought it over to

Troy – Then the judge bowed and moved his hand toward the microphone, letting Troy know it was time for him to say a few words.

He crept up to the microphone hesitantly – Troy rarely got nervous before he had to perform – But when it came time to do any kind of public speaking he always got major butterflies – He hadn't written anything down in preparation for the speech and now he seriously regretted that – He leaned forward and started mumbling into the microphone:

i... oh, well... um... i thank everyone here greatly for appreciating my whistling ability... yes and... well most of you already know i began whistling at a young age... i think i was around three when my parents couldn't get me to stop... and you see where it led me... grokking the drivel... also the birds in my yard should be mentioned... i imitated bluejays and robins at first... then moved on to cat squeals and dolphin mating calls and various types of sonar... well i don't want to bore you with my life story, but uh...

Most of that made sense – But then Troy's mind started fogging up – He felt no more words forthcoming and it made him even more nervous – His brain transitioned into panic mode and he gasped and his face turned bright maroon – Then he started spouting pure nonsense into the mic:

my lips pucker up and occasionally i get cold mouth alcoholic beverage but the pink parts here see my teeth temporarily fried to the possibilities of doing regard on your box – oh christ, my god what am i saying... okay i am not lucky in life... no trophies no awards except those received from being whistling champion... six years – nothing but the matrix sea of short distances and the luxury of false positives in a plethora of caldron candy... malicious cotton

usually a miserable failure in my possession... but what can you do about it die wheeze brain on a hair pin trigger swallow up alley pipes with a peeled hair shapeshift... cheat the malkin and hang golden heads where the stains fall from side street pubes plagued by high prices and silver halos... whistling is pure enough... not stained in the lap of luxury with carbolic acid... surely as most do not translate a moving panorama in order to express periodic quietude... wings on strings of drum templates... phrasing the dragon cycle and bumper morphine trance relieved by my vagabond hall body... attend with talking cut throats... trophy award with fortune... good living inside hundreds... dose the failure miner inside property pink color and stick it in her os ... oh, i don't know what i am saying... i should just stop now... so i'll stop.

Troy staggered away from the microphone realizing he had made a terrible fool of himself – But he didn't lose all hope quite yet – Because he still had his crotch-grab to perform – He hoped it would save him from the embarrassing scenario – Allow people to forget the speech and make him look good again – Yes – He was confident the crotch-grab would be astounding enough to shock everyone and give him a wild reputation and even freak out a few chicks.

He looked out at their bewildered faces – They still seemed stunned from listening to his ridiculous rant – But he made his way past the microphone and stepped to the front of the stage – He smiled and poised his hand to perform his crotch-grab – Grinning, hunched over a little, he looked down and started moving his hand forward – A few inches and his palm made contact with the fabric of his trousers – He pulled his hand in until he could feel his balls, then his penis, and he yanked the three objects upward.

But his nerves were still on edge – He began pulling them too high and yanking too hard – He was still smiling though as the tendons and skin began to rip – His scrotum started feeling like it was being ripped in half and a thousand volts of electricity were shooting through him – Yet he still continued pulling and yanking harder and couldn't stop because he wanted to complete the full-blown crotch-grab – Needed to release everything back to the normal hanging position before it could be considered finished – But the pain was too much and he worked hard to stifle a scream – And in the middle of the crotch-grab, he looked into the audience again and saw his girlfriend, Matilda, sitting there frowning at him – She was staring with her cheeks red from embarrassment – Her unruly red mess of hair protruding in all directions.

But then the pain in Troy's crotch tripled in scope and he couldn't hold it back anymore – He looked down without finishing the grab and screamed and fell back onto the stage – The trophy he had been holding hit him in the forehead and his new Stetson hat went flying and he was knocked unconscious – But only for a few seconds.

He awoke and found himself lying back stage on a stretcher – Covered in sweat from the bright lights and pain shooting from his crotch up to his confused brain – He didn't know it but the people in charge of the whistling contest thought he had killed himself – So did Matilda, who left the building and began looking for a new boyfriend – They all thought he was dead than a rusty pencil sharpener and planned to carry him out on the stretcher and throw his corpse in a ditch behind an old crackhouse – The whistling officials were just going to forget about the greatest whistler ever born in the state of Texas, even after he had been the champion for six years running – They

didn't know what else to do and didn't want to be bothered with him.

Four people of the whistling committee stood huddled in a corner trying to decide whether they should give the Grand Champion whistling trophy to the second place finisher – But Troy wasn't dead yet – He lay there looking down at his hand dripping with blood – His testicles rolling around in his palm – Then it finally hit him that he had completely castrated himself with the crotch-grab and he fell into uncontrollable screaming – A few people in the huddle looked at him – Then he glanced down again and luckily saw his penis still dangling there – It made him feel a little better, but he knew his rod wouldn't be much good now without his testicles to go with it.

But down in the hole where his balls used to be, he felt some movement – A slight jerking motion and a little mild grinding – He leaned upward and saw an object beginning to emerge from the hole – His eyes grew large and puffy as he watched a black object start to make its way out of him – He gasped for breath as the thing struggled to push its head out more and more – Troy watched it and shook his head and his heart boomed.

Finally the thing got itself all the way out – A small creature with the body of a spider monkey and a panther-shaped head with long fangs and silver horns and large leathery black bat wings – Troy heaved and wanted to hurl the little thing away from him but he was also afraid to move – The small monstrosity looked around and wiped some blood off its body – Then it ran up Troy's stomach and sat down on his chest – After staring deep into his dread-filled bloodshot eyes for several seconds while licking its deformed lips, the creature whistled the *E F D D<sup>b</sup> G# E* melody three times and finally said to Troy:

Whoo, it's about time i got out of that scrotum hole. i almost suffocated in that damn place. Hey, you got anything to eat around here?

## **Diamonds** **By Michael Woods**

I finished in the shower and then entered my room and removed a towel from around my waist and began choosing some clothes. I picked up a black shirt and sniffed the armpits and they stank so I returned the shirt to the floor. I picked up a red shirt and sniffed the armpits and they smelled okay or at least tolerable and so I put the shirt on. I picked a fresh pair of boxers from the top drawer of my dresser and I put them on. I picked up the pair of pants that I'd been wearing for the past two weeks or so and I thought for a second about wearing different ones but I didn't. I unfolded a pair of white socks and I put them on.

The telephone rang. I answered it.

"Hello?"

"Larry?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, its Mark. Are you busy? No, you're not busy! Say, why don't you meet me down at The Chalk Outline Lounge for drinks and chats? Sound like a plan?"

"Sure, I'll be there in a half-hour."

"Okay."

My hair was short at this time so there was no need to style it. The weather was warm so there was no need for a jacket. I left the apartment.

The air in the street was thick and made a person think of many wounds but which were hopefully being well attended to. I saw a junky woman doing the junky dance and I saw a guy with an okay body but who was on something bad and with his back arched back and staring at the sky

and mumbling. If he drooled it would have entered his nostrils.

When I arrived at the lounge Mark was already there and he was sitting at a table by a window. I joined him. I hadn't even ordered a drink when he had a spoonful of what looked like tiny blue diamonds held below my nose.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Sniff," he ordered.

"They look like diamonds," I said.

"They dissolve quickly," he assured.

I sniffed.

They stung for a moment and then dissolved as Mark promised they would and then I felt like I'd inhaled a tiny amount of cold and purified water through my nose and I felt self-conscious about the idea of water trickling out but the water and the trickling of it were mere sensations.

"What is the name of this substance?" I asked.

"Blue diamonds," Mark answered.

"That's exactly what they look like," I commented. "How long before they begin to act?"

"Very quickly," Mark answered, and his answer sounding like it was spoken by a giant bubbling jellyfish coated in lemon juice and butter. He began to say something else but all I heard was an L consonant before his tongue extended until hitting the table and then piling on itself like cold syrup being poured.

I requested that he repeat himself.

"Look," he said while pointing through the window at a woman who was crossing the street towards us. She was tall and less than thirty-years-old and was wearing makeup that wasn't obvious except for her very red lipstick and she had long black hair and she wore a dress made of the skin of some silvery glittery fish and which came down to about a hand's width above the knees of her olive-colored legs and which revealed the

cleavage of her breasts across which her every high-heeled step sent an elegant ripple and she was wearing dark sunglasses so I couldn't tell whether or not she was looking at my pathetic face as I pathetically gazed at hers. When she reached the sidewalk outside our window she turned so she was facing opposite me and I watched her ass as she walked and I yearned to push my face into it.

"I'm sorry but I don't think that woman got all dolled up for you two bozos," I heard a good girl's voice say more with my left ear than with my right. I turned my head to see the name Dorothy glued to a name tag pinned to a white shirt with a collar and short sleeves and tucked into black pants and wrapped around the top half of a pretty girl with shoulder-length blonde hair. Her eyes were softly accusing and her smile was mean.

"Now that I have your attention, could I fix you guys some drinks?" Dorothy asked.

"Could I please have a blue beard with extra blueberries?" Mark asked.

"Yes you may," Dorothy answered, then looking at me.

"May I please get a red retina with extra cinnamon?" I asked.

"Yes you may," Dorothy answered. "Will there be anything else?"

"Um," I contemplated. "Would you like to come to a boxing match with me later?"

"Sure," Dorothy replied. "I will join you at this table once my shift has ended which is in roughly half-an-hour."

"Great," I nodded, just before and as she began to walk away. She returned quickly with our drinks for which we thanked her and then she left again.

"So, Larry, what's new?" Mark asked.

"Oh, you know," I answered.

We continued talking until a half-hour had passed and in which time I



drank my drink and Mark drank his and in which we paid and left tips and in which Dorothy's shift ended and Mark went somewhere. Dorothy and I left the lounge and headed with linked arms towards The Fist Factory wherein the boxing match would be hosted. I thought about how the effects of the diamonds were brief but nice and didn't leave any annoying residual haze.

"So who are the contestants in tonight's match?" Dorothy asked.

"Ducky Duckworth and The Dancing Dick," I explained. Dorothy said that she had heard of Duckworth but not Dick and I told her that Dick was a jobber and would probably lose and she said that that was a pity.

A lot of the people in The Fist Factory were drunk or on drugs and Dorothy and I were seated close enough to the ring to see the bruises but far enough away that we wouldn't get any blood on us. The ring announcer was a small man who looked like a giant brain with eyes and a mouth on it and nostrils drilled into it and arms coming out the sides. He moved by hopping and using his arms the way a normal person but with a hurt ankle would use a pair of crutches. Ducky was wearing heavy boots and red leather shorts and was holding onto a running chain saw and Dick's feet were bare and he was wearing tight white underwear and his left ankle was chained to a corner post. A bell rang and the fight began. Ducky walked towards Dick and taunted and poked at him with the chain saw and Dick's behavior was like that of a starved and maddened dog and then Ducky made his first attack and sawed off Dick's right foot. The crowd cheered as Dick screamed and as his leg sprayed blood onto the ring and onto many of his immediate spectators. When the burst of excitement subsided the crowd began chanting BOTH FEET! BOTH FEET! BOTH FEET! Ducky put one of his

hands briefly to one of his ears to encourage his fans to cheer louder and then he proceeded to cut off Dick's remaining foot and Dick bled and screamed more than before and then Ducky threw the chain saw away as he was sure he had won the fight and while his fists were raised victoriously into the air Dick bit onto Ducky's crotch through the red leather and then Dick chomped and chewed until blood ran down Ducky's thighs. Ducky submitted to Dick's maneuver and it was announced that Dick was the victor which surprised many and myself and then all the women in The Fist Factory except Dorothy removed their shirts to display breasts that were all conveniently and unnaturally huge and then they all twisted left to right to left to right at their waists so that their breasts would oscillate and hypnotize while they all chanted WE LOVE DICK! WE LOVE DICK! WE LOVE DICK! I wanted to smother my face between all the women's breasts and I could see through my peripheral vision that Dorothy was unimpressed and then she said she was leaving and I asked if I should see her home and she said that would be fine.

When we reached Dorothy's front door I asked if I might be invited inside and she asked, "Why, so I can spread my legs while you close your eyes and augment me?" She smiled while she said this but I still felt like an asshole because I knew that she was at least partly if not totally justified in her accusation. She blew me a kiss and I took it bitterly and then she went into her home and I began walking towards mine.

Once inside I took off all my clothes and went into the bathroom so I could pull on my dick in front of the mirror and at the point when I should have been firing a ropey jet my muscles remained constricted until a little white thing that looked like a frog but

maintaining its larval tail and with black pinhead eyes crawled out and then perched upon my dick head facing towards me and then uttered a sound like that of a squeaky mouse mimicking a dog and then it crawled up my torso and onto my chest and bit me on my right nipple and then quickly sprouted what looked like whitened bat wings from its little shoulders and then flew away.

## **Green**

**By Mark McLaughlin**

A pale creature with infected green fingernails he was, and yet there was something utterly genteel about the way he nibbled at the dead rat. I was determined to save him from himself.

“Good Mr. Social Worker,” he whispered, “your services are not required here. I pray you leave me be. I am expecting old acquaintances...very old! I asked them to visit many years ago – a terrible mistake – and they do insist on returning every now and then.”

“You need help, my friend.” I smiled and patted his bald head. “The department will take care of you. We’ll put the color back in your cheeks.”

“Yes...but which color?” The old man wrapped what remained of his dinner in a sheet of green waxed paper. “You must have other appointments to keep. My guests shall be arriving at any moment. I cannot imagine that time has mellowed their dispositions.” He shuffled over to a cupboard and placed the tidbit in a stack with several other small green bundles.

A single faint knock sounded at the door. Can a sound have a chromatic quality? A tint? Certainly that soft, soft knock was coated with a sickly green patina.

“Hellfire!” the old man whispered. “Under the bed with you, young fellow. It would not do for my guests to find you here.” So saying, he pushed me to the floor – his strength was inhuman! – and rolled me into the suggested hiding place. Then he threw open the door and in they swarmed.

Green was the color of their desiccated flesh and glowing eyes. Green was the mold that grew in huge swirls and splotches on their tattered garments. Their throats, clotted with green dust, coughed forth a mad litany of vicious truths and

delicious lies for hours on end. Listening, I learned that these singular individuals had discovered a magical means of turning death back into life...

A greenish sort of life.

In time, one of the dusty guests (his name was Mr. Crowley) brought forth a piece of green chalk and etched the outline of a door on the wall. He made a series of gestures and a portal of green fire appeared, through which the guests passed, dragging the old man. Then the portal vanished and I was alone.

I left the old man's ramshackle house, my eyes brimming with tears – green tears, because of all that dust. My hands and clothes were streaked with the hideous stuff.

Churning green clouds rolled across the sky as I drove through the city. A growing stench filled the air – a nauseating green reek. I had stopped at the store before visiting the old man, and so sacks of produce and packaged meat rested on the seat next to me. The contents of these bags had decomposed into a thick green slime. I rolled down the window and flung the sacks from the car.

Green concrete towers loomed before me like lichenous monoliths. The flesh of the people on the sidewalks putrefied before my eyes, taking on a horrid green cast. The other drivers I glimpsed bared their decayed green teeth at me.

Suddenly, there was a furious crash of metal. My head snapped forward and back – bones cracked in my neck. I had collided with a dark green car driven by a smiling green thing in a dusty shroud.

Green mist clouded my vision. Needles of green pain danced in my brain. I stumbled from the car and my legs gave way beneath me.

In a moment, Mr. Crowley began to trace around my body with a stub of green chalk.

## **The White Wall** **By Miriam Mabel Martínez** **Translated by Toshiya Kamei**

Every morning, the nightmare of not recognizing Ezequiel's face torments me. I worry I'll wake up one day and find him gone. I don't dream anymore. Or rather I no longer remember the images that gallop through fitful sleep. An empty feeling draws out my night. I sweat with agony between the sheets. I find no peace.

Some nights sick with fear, I wake him up. He's aware of my nightly anxiety, even though he doesn't understand it. Sometimes he caresses my back, his fingers drawing lines along my spine, scribbling unfamiliar words on my flanks. Other times he hugs me and whispers, "Everything's fine." He really thinks so. I don't know what causes my anxiety. "Everything's fine." Maybe he's right. Those shuddering movements that tear me apart inside are normal. I have to grasp onto the echo of his voice to get to sleep. Once in a while I need to suck his cock, to feel him throbbing against the roof of my mouth again and again. Before he ejaculates, I beg him to come in my face. The taste of him still lingers in my throat. I don't know why, but his cum works as a sleeping pill, as if this fluid could quench my anguish. But it's never enough.

I fearfully open my eyes. The first thing I see is a white wall that dilates my pupils. I wish this bright light in the bedroom could help me clear my head. Sometimes the light lingers in the room and blinds me. This temporary blindness soothes me a little. The whiteness creeps into my corneas and goes to my brain. For a moment I feel safe from Ezequiel. I think I won't be afraid of not seeing him. My vision gets cloudy, forcing me to blink. Then, slowly, the picture of the

whales, the Chinese lamp, the blue quilt, the closet door, my nightdress, and his flat feet come back into view. Before fixing my gaze on his butt (I love the scar on the right cheek), I keep my gaze on my knees (I've never liked them). I stare at my stretch marks (I think of the mental ones and the emotional ones), tracing the fast-growing swelling.

Ezequiel says I have been precocious. Well, it's his excuse to explain away our age difference and torment me with his jealousy. "You've had a lot of lovers," he protests. I don't consider myself precocious, not even a good lover. Though he does say I move deliciously. He likes to stick it into me. I don't know whether my cunt fits his cock or the other way around. I'm very naive. Maybe I've been precocious in practice, but not at heart. This is the problem. No, my problem is that I still believe in love, devotion to each other, or fidelity. I still believe in stupid things like fairness and tolerance that every time it becomes more difficult to keep on believing. My horror increases every day.

I don't know which terrifies me more: night, the white wall, or him.

I don't know how long – years, days, or minutes – I have been thinking how I could stop being afraid. I have lost track of time and my time seems to belong to Ezequiel. I'm scared of finding him gone, I worry about being abandoned.

Sometimes he wakes up before me. He licks my breasts, bites my nipples, and puts his cock into my hands. Almost instinctively, I stroke him until he comes. I lick his semen off my fingers so that he could later suck them. "Yeah, baby, yeah," he begs. "I'm going to fuck you..." And he fucks me.

When he penetrates me, I feel our present times come together. My body burns and I plead him not to stop until my hours are new again. Until I can

reconstruct myself minute by minute. Until I can mark the seconds on my body.

I've told R (he's my best friend) that Ezequiel steals my days. Every time he makes love to me, I grow old. It torments me to imagine I won't wake up next to him. I need Ezequiel, how much I want him sexually. R gets horny and stares at me. I know he wants to bite my breasts and play with my pubes. He wants to fill my mouth with his cock, but he keeps quiet. I can feel his desire even in silence.

R says Ezequiel is evil, he only wants my submission. That's not true. Ezequiel is good, he loves me. He overlooks my insomnia and problems. I try to behave myself so that he won't get angry with me, I couldn't stand for him to leave me. I shudder at the thought. Every morning I'm afraid of finding only traces of his body on the mattress. The thought of hearing him, touching his back only in my memory, startles me. I can't hold back my despair anymore. I wish the whiteness of the wall would blind me and soothe me a little. Sometimes I wish I weren't with him, even though it means giving up my years, vagina, and pleasures to him. But the terror and enormity of this wall hold me back.

"He's killing you," says R. He's right.

"I love him." I defend myself.

"You say that because he possesses your time."

"I love him because he pushes me to the limits."

"What do you mean?"

"I've just told you."

"You're crazy."

I have thought so too. Ezequiel drives me crazy literally. I need to see him, even though I can't stand looking at him. If one day I wake up and he's gone, I'll search everywhere until I find him. I could recognize his smell, the rhythm of his footsteps, his shadow. I'll nag him, cry, demand him... I'll make him pay.

I hate him. Who is he thinking of? Surely, he plots how he will leave me. I won't let him. One day I'm too weak to wake up – after facing the white wall, coming to terms with my stretch marks, recognizing the smell of his armpits – too weak to break up with him once and for all. I want him to go away. I want to hold these sheets close to my skin. I wish I were brave enough to kill him!

Kill him. What for? What's the use of wishing him dead when I won't get my days back? What good will it do to resist him his “I really love you,” “I'll be good, I promise”? Or when he says vulgarly, “You taste delicious,” “I want to stick it into you”? I can't resist his panting or begging, much less his dirty talk. He'll talk me out of it (I know him), touching me on my butt, kissing the inside of my thighs. He'll try to reach for my pubes with his tongue. He knows how much I love seeing his cock harden quickly and feeling it swelling inside me. He knows it very well. They all did. I was afraid of them as well. They also wanted to seize my years. I was lucky to figure them out before they got their way.

First, Mateo with his demands and eccentric tastes. He used to tie me naked to a chair, or the bed, pinning me down to play all kinds of tricks on me. Sometimes he brought someone to play with me, other women to have fun with him. I loved him, so I slept with his friends. But later he wanted to walk out, leaving me there and taking my time with him. I cried a lot, the rest was easy. I just asked R to help me loosen the lug nuts from two tires of Mateo's car (“I need to take them to the mechanic, don't worry”) and it was done.

Antonio kept me on the margin of his life. He turned me into his sex Barbie doll and he taught me new tricks. We enjoyed each other. He never understood why the white color of his bedroom made me nervous (to this day, neither do I),

even though he agreed to paint the walls blue after he made me promise to jerk him off when he woke up. One morning, I didn't do it, then he started complaining, protesting...hitting me. My hours became years, my twenties caught me in his body. I was in love, even though I knew he wasn't. I eased his neurosis. His priority was his writing, his “work,” as if it were art! Then my insomnia started. I lay awake at night, wondering what I could do to please him. The noise of his pencil rustling on the paper or his fingers beating on the keys got on my nerves. To Antonio reading and writing were more important than my desire. Even when I slipped under his desk and lowered his zipper to suck his cock, I couldn't make him make love to me. Now I know that he was a pervert. He was excited to hear me pleading, crying, begging him to at least stick his fingers into my vagina. Tired of being slighted, I mixed powder into his coffee. R told me he had read in a science magazine an article about a substance that destroyed the intestines when taken regularly in small doses. I learned of Antonio's death in an obituary in the newspaper. I'm sure he would have been pleased to know that at his wake a lot of important people eulogized his “work.” In the papers, lots of articles about him and his books appeared.

Gerardo was fascinated with my knees. “Your knees are the waiting room to heaven,” he used to say. I didn't do more than open my legs, feel his tongue on my navel (I get excited when they kiss me there) and wait for him to penetrate me. We were very happy, we rambled from one place to another. He indulged my whims (mostly my sexual ones). He even agreed to paint his room peach (he didn't like white either). After we made love, we planned long trips across the country. We wanted to travel a lot and we did: Veracruz, Colima, Morelia, Sinaloa, Tabasco, Puebla, Campeche, Chihuahua...

He went alone to Tijuana, I stayed in the city to finish a few illustrations R had asked me to do. Gerardo was strong, good-looking, and kind. He became violent only when I made him angry, but he always apologized. He adored me. I don't know what happened, even though I grow every day more convinced that it was for the best. God looks after me. My Gerardo died for a reason. It had been a week since he left town, it was Friday. That day I bought myself a beautiful dress--red, my favorite color. I wanted to look pretty for him, I came home and put it on. I decided to wait for him in this new dress. I got ready to finish the illustrations when the phone interrupted me. It was R.

"I'm still working on the details."

"Yeah, that's fine. Let's see. You still don't know?"

"What?"

"Gerardo is dead."

Since then my fear has grown as much as this anxiety about waking up and not recognizing the man that sleeps next to me.

I fix my gaze on this wall. Rage pours into my head, I feel it spread and gallop in my body. I'm afraid of turning to Ezequiel and not finding him there. I'm a tolerant woman. I've made efforts to overlook his flirting. I grapple to keep my jealousy at bay, get used to his instability, his lack of commitment. There are always photography, meetings, friends, work before me. I feel like biting his cock, rubbing it until it gets hard.

Right now, while I caress my thighs, I struggle in vain to keep calm. My eyes recover from the absence of color. I wish I were strong enough to get up in silence, get dressed without looking at him, and leave. I'll never, ever again wake up worried that he isn't there, or think of this wall.

I take a deep breath. I try to calm myself, but this sensation and this whiteness drive me mad. I turn toward

Ezequiel. He's there, sleeping peacefully. Who is he thinking of? I suck my fingertips and pinch my nipples. I try to guess the color of R's room. I wonder what it'll be like to wake up afraid of not finding him next to me.

The light bounces off the wall and bleaches my mind, telling me it's still early. I just have to leave the gas on and forget about this wall. It's going to be a long day. I want lipstick that matches the dress I bought for Gerardo. I want to make myself look pretty, very pretty. Tonight I'm going to see R.

## **Cheapermuphs** **By Rue Franklin**

I cut off both of my ears because of her. I couldn't hear a word she was trying to communicate to me. At least I think she was trying to communicate: to get her idea across to me, and somehow staple it to my brain for later pondering, while I sip tea and act orderly, and decent, and proper, while not wearing my bathrobe or looking too overly exposed.

I couldn't tell if she was making noise or just exercising her right to make fish impressions. Her mouth opening: big O, little O. Her hands trying to get something out of her neck rolls.

"What is that you said honey?"

Her mouth distorts in waves of geometry. Her mouth usually looks like this, opening and closing, but that is only when she is eating flesh and Jelly Beans.

For the record she is always eating.

That is why this moment is so awkward: she isn't eating. She is going through all the motions, but she isn't eating anything, she isn't shoveling anything into her mouth; neither crushing bones, nor my ego with every bite. She just opens her mouth in unison with her

thoughts I guess. I don't know I can't hear her.

For the record she did not eat my ears.

Like I said I cut them off. I was giving myself a haircut. After I shaved my beard. After I shaved my chest hair, and after I shaved my pubic hair. And thank God I misjudged while cutting the hair on my head; I'd hate to cut myself shaving my pubic hair.

And with my misjudgment of only a few feet, my scissors found my ear, and cut like a lead pipe through a brick wall, only with more spurting and splattering, and more of a mess to be proud of.

I only took off about half of my ear when everything she would say sounded like she was underwater, like she was gurgling. I told her to chew softer. With grace. But she wasn't eating.

For the record I couldn't stand the gurgling.

I cut my ear all the way off and left it in the sink.

The sounds that came next were incomprehensible, like fast-forwarding an episode of Sesame Street while riding a merry-go-round: with only one ear. I would have to turn my head to hear her, and all I could hear was her gurgling. I couldn't stand her gurgling. So I did what any normal person in my position would do—who's going to turn their head every moment to hear someone gurgling?—I cut off my other ear. This time I couldn't prove that my missing a second ear had accidental merit. So I lied about it: "I can't believe how sharp these things are, we should get another pair."

For the record they weren't sharp at all. I had to hack, and pull really hard to get my ear off. I ruined a really nice shirt in the process.

For the record I really should have rethought cutting off both of my ears. Look at everything I am going to miss out on: earmuffs, headphones, piercings,

cotton swabs, earwax sculptures, slime-patrol-troll action figures, and cauliflower ear; all of these will never be a part of my life. My life that will go on to break my heart as I never find a job as an actor: 'We just can't spend the money to digitally alter your earless head.' I'll even get beat out for the part where all they get is a butt shot, and a grunt for a line.

I'll never be accepted again with no ears.

Would you like a happy ending to this story?

Well, for the record, she stopped gurgling. She—her corpulent seven-hundred-pound self, naked and covered in donut crumbs—just stopped doing much of anything. She doesn't even make the fish impressions anymore. She doesn't do much of anything—not like she did before, but now she doesn't eat so much. Which is great because she doesn't eat at all anymore: I save so much on groceries.

## **Fun with Robotics**

### **By Patrick O'Leary**

In bed with my wife, the nightly need arises. I lean over, lightly touching her shoulder.

“Hey Honey.”

Her eyes open, “I’m tired.”

The bed shifts as she rolls over, already sleeping. Leaning back, I stare at the ceiling.

It is crisp and white. So are the sheets. When we were younger, first married, our sheets were covered in sperm and juice, not crisp at all. Now starch and drool is all there is. The sheets are clean and Sharon’s too tired to help me mess them up again. The only love I get is a peck on the cheek and the sound of her snores.

It’s not her fault. During the day I work. Not hard, but long. She works hard and long. A part-time job while the kids are in school, Mom when they are not. Maid, cook, accountant, tailor, plumber, cobbler in between. When was the last time we had sex? January 19<sup>th</sup>, 11:08 pm. My 46<sup>th</sup> birthday.

It’s now September.

Sharon’s bulk lies next to me as I do the math. Eight and a half months. The longest streak yet. Even when she was pregnant we did it more than that.

I poke her in the side with my finger. It goes in almost all the way. Since when did that happen? She used to be so firm I couldn’t even get past my fingernail without hurting her.

Sighing and rolling over, I manually pump the release valve. Even after that, sleep is slow in coming.

In the morning Sharon’s gone. She has duties that need doing, and

unfortunately I’m not one of them. This leaves only myself to take care of my erection and that’s not half as fun as it sounds.

Downstairs, there are three or four sleepy children eating cereal. Sharon is running from child to child to stove to sink to child to child. My arrival amongst the waking is greeted with murmurs and nods. Trying not to disturb the delicate balance, I swallow my coffee and head out the door.

Work is ar-du-ous. The dashes represent the two masturbation sessions in the men’s room that break up my day. In fact, that’s all I care to mention on the subject.

Work lets out early however, and I take to the streets with a coworker. After a short walk through the city we find ourselves at a bar. Drinking, talking. The lack of light, the smoke, and the alcohol make me a bit dizzy and free-thinking. I mention the problems with my wife and Stan lights up.

“Get a robot.” He says.

“What?”

“Get a robot. The robomaid thing that’s on TV. Then you’re wife won’t be as tired and you can bang the shit out of her.”

I had not seen the commercial, but Stan knew some people who had them. Expensive as hell, he says, but worth every penny. In my semi-inebriated state it sounded great.

At home, some internet research confirmed the robot did exist. The company website claimed the Robomaid 5000 could cook, clean and even baby-sit the kids to a limited degree.

Clicking on the demonstration video, I was treated to the site of a silver Stepford wife. She looked like a statue of a supermodel. A walking, talking, bending



over supermodel. Cleaning and cooking, dusting and baking. It was amazing. A metal woman, wearing real clothes, silver hair flowing like water. Slim, sexy, and doing everything she was told.

I ordered one, not telling Sharon.

A few days later, the delivery van finally arrived. The sliding door opened and out she walked. A shining vision. A work of art. Five foot nine inches of firm, manufactured, woman.

After some explaining and pleading with Sharon, and a tutorial by the delivery guy, our RoboMaid 5000 was ready to go. I christened her Tanya. Right away she started a load of laundry, and then some pasta.

Sharon was impressed. That night, it felt like Christmas Eve. We could not wait to see what the morning was like with Tanya in charge. Slowly, we drifted off to sleep with fantasies.

The morning was incredible. A good hot breakfast was on the table. The kids were awake and behaved, staring at their new metal guardian. They were asking questions that Tanya would answer simply with her automated feminine voice.

“How old are you?”

“I was created 4 months ago.”

“What are you made of?”

“An alloy of titanium and stainless steel.”

My eyes never wavered from this marvel of engineering. She was wearing a skirt, a blouse, and an apron, and looked just like a real woman. Except metal. Every time she bent over to put something in the dishwasher her skirt crept up exposing the curve of her upper thighs. She truly was a marvel.

Sharon just sat silently during the whole affair.

Eventually, I left for work. Ignoring all my duties and taking a short day allowed me to get home early. When I arrived, the kids were still behaved and

awestruck. Sharon looked calm and happy. Tanya was vacuuming. Things were all falling into place.

Dinner was incredible, just like breakfast. But to my dismay, Sharon hurried things along. She wanted to get to bed and expend some of her newfound energy. So after Tanya tucked in the kids and started washing windows, Sharon and I got down to business.

Nine months without sex made it awkward at first, and Sharon’s globular body kept it that way. The whole experience was soft and floppy. I put on a good show, of course, and my wife seemed satisfied.

I, however, was not.

Once Sharon fell asleep I crept out of bed and found Tanya. She was plugged into the wall, charging. Lying on the floor, a feminine silhouette, it looked like she was sleeping. I moved closer. Her eyes were closed and she was still wearing the skirt and blouse. In the darkness she almost looked alive.

Breathing heavily, I put my hands on her body. Everything was hard metal, and warm. Sliding them up her thighs and under her skirt I found just smooth metal, nothing of use. My hands kept moving, finding their way under her blouse. Tanya’s breasts were anatomically correct. Two hard metal nipples perched atop the metal globes. This whole experience was riveting. I decided to spare one hand to masturbate while I pinched and prodded.

After my orgasm, I swear Tanya’s eyes were open and she was looking at me.

Jumping back I hurried to bed. For the rest of the night Tanya was still on my mind and the mound that used to be my wife looked like a walrus in comparison.

The next day at work, during the dashes in ar-du-ous all I could think about was Tanya. That metal goddess walking

around my home. The strain was too much, so I went out for drinks with Stan again, and told him everything.

He laughed, and smiled knowingly. Apparently the RoboMaid 5000 had affected one of his friends the same way. Stan told me of a place where they could modify her for me.

“Get her modified” he said.

“What?”

“Get her modified. This place will take care of everything. Then Tanya will be anatomically correct and you can bang the shit out of her.”

Needless to say, I took down all the necessary information.

The next day, telling Sharon it was a free service check-up from the manufacturer, I took Tanya down to Al’s Robot Repair shop and left her there overnight. Al himself assured me everything would be done with care, precision, and discretion.

Twenty-four hours of thoughts, fantasies, hopes and dreams later Tanya was ready. I picked her up on my way home from work.

She sat next to me in the car, silently, still wearing that skirt. The curve of her breasts and her smooth thighs kept appearing in the corner of my eye. The strain in my pants was becoming too much. I pulled into a deserted parking lot and stopped the car.

Tanya turned and looked at me expectantly. “Spread your legs.”

She did, no questions asked.

“Lift your skirt.”

Again, she did, and I was treated to the sight of my dreams. Robotic or not, that would have awoken very un-robotic thoughts in any man.

Not being one to waste such an opportunity, I unzipped. After a few orders, my rod was deep inside her. The whole experience felt great. Smooth, tight, firm, and surprisingly feminine. Tanya

even made sounds and acted like she was experiencing pleasure.

Al did some great work.

For the next few days, a trend started to develop. After work, the house would be spotless and organized. Tanya would be entertaining the kids, and Sharon would be rested and horny. When we went to bed, she would try to jump me and I would feign a headache or some other ailment. Spurned, she would fall asleep. When the coast was clear I would go downstairs, take Tanya into the garage and fill her metal body in as many different ways and from as many different angles as I could imagine.

This went on for weeks. Tanya stayed just as firm, I was just as eager, and Sharon became more and more withdrawn. We rarely saw each other.

One day after work Tanya wasn’t there. Running to Sharon, and trying to hide my real concerns, I asked where Tanya was.

“At the manufacturer. Her annual service checkup. The van came and picked her up this morning.”

Sighing, I tried not to make my relief too evident. Then another thought popped into my head. What would the company think of the modifications? Well, it was too late now. Anyway, modifications like this must be done all the time. It would be a wise business decision for them to turn a blind eye.

The next week was agonizing. Until finally, one day after work, Tanya was there. No worse for the wear it looked like. She was cooking dinner. Sharon sat on the couch, reading a magazine, unconcerned. The company must not have mentioned anything.

When Sharon’s back was turned, I flipped up Tanya’s skirt to take a look. The area was familiar to me, and to my relief, nothing had changed.

Bedtime could not have come fast enough. Neither could the sound of Sharon's snores. Finally hearing them, I hurried downstairs, grabbed Tanya's arm and led her into the garage.

There was an old mattress stored in there. Throwing it on the ground as usual I ordered Tanya to get on her hands and knees. She was still wearing that skirt, with no underwear, just how I liked it.

Already rock-hard, there was no need for any manual stimulation. I knelt down behind her and slid it in. Last time was so long ago, I was fit to bursting. My hands tightened on her hips as I thrust. It was heavenly.

For a few seconds at least.

Not even a dozen strokes into it, Tanya clamped down on my member. Hard. I couldn't move it. Frantically, I tried to tug it out, but it was just too tight. The pain was building and building and she just kept getting tighter and tighter. If I tugged any harder I would have torn myself clean off.

I was just about to yell at Tanya to stop, but the door to the garage burst open and there stood Sharon. She was smiling and holding what looking like a remote control. Pointing it at us, she pressed a button. Tanya stopped tightening but did not loosen. I wasn't going anywhere. Struggling through the pain, I tried to speak.

"Sharon... I can explain."

She laughed. My wife. Short, plump Sharon. Holding a remote control with a sinister smile on her face. Unfortunately for me, this was all starting to make sense.

For a surreal second I wondered where to put my hands. Should I put them somewhere on Tanya or just hang them from my sides? Then Sharon spoke.

"I have one question for you."

"Anything Sharon... just let me out."

She smiled. Her teeth glinted like the metal of Tanya's backside. Then she asked her question.

I groaned and fumbled for an answer. An answer that wouldn't make her press a button and crush me into a piece of string. An answer that would somehow make her pity the sad little man in front of her with his penis stuck in a robot. The pain was dulling my thoughts and I could only think of one thing to say. So I said it.

"She's thinner..."

Sharon smirked, fingering the remote.

"Now you are, too."

Then she pressed the button.

## **The Story About The Story By Arc**

In an Unfortunate series of Faber-Castle mishaps, some that could not be erased, it came to pass that lungbutter evolved. This would have been more ironic had the author of this incident taken the time to research the used terms *unfortunate series* and *some that could not be erased*.

... and how those used terms correlated with regard to logic in one sentence.

If it all, at all, smacks the thigh of idiocy ... I, as that author, would like to point out the three words: you .. just .. wait.

So as I employ the faculties for which, according to Descartes, I govern, and continue to defy the insignificance of a particular inanimate object, to inform of the aforementioned incident, it

is worthy to note that nothing new has happened thus far.

In other words, all that has occurred is that lungbutter evolved.

And all this, was necessary, to express the view that often and then an occasion presents itself, wherein exists the absurdity therein human nature to conceive an idea without detailing the difficulties of that idea herein.

Or it could just be a fancy and clever structured paragraph on behalf of the author to justify the author's intent or lack thereof.

Writer's block has only now, at this present moment, occurred to the author.

Also the lack of apology, or any insinuation to one, is due to the obvious fact that the author has just tabled artistic licence as a further defiant stance on what is often regarded normal or appropriate in relation to the art of writing.

No sane individual would dare assume normal and or what is appropriate in or of writing whilst using nous as the basis of their argument.

Common sense suggests that these such people, despite their appearance, are in fact articulate brussleSprouts that mutated freakishly as a result of paradigms.

But I am clearly not the best judge.

Bipolar people are the best judge of characters.

Now the author chooses to pause for personal reasons.

I have since returned, and therefore decided to include the origin of the evolved lungbutter.

*Pneumonia.*

Which is not that *new* at all. But does make people *mo-(a)-n*.

The *ee'a* (ia) comes about in that obscure moment just before the cough that results in the external congealed mucus from the respiratory organs known as lungbutter.

And this pretty much was how it came to be.

It also did not assist matters that the origin of the lungbutter was born in an era when drinking an experimental mind-control drug (that is also a by-product or waste of aluminium manufacturing) was the "in" thing. On top of that he was contaminated by radiation while working as an employee for cancer-causing scientists, later doused with D.D.T, riddled with black-lung, asbestosis, and infected with enhancers used to "beef-up" milk production on robotized dairy farms.

He also suffered the chicken-flu, the Russian flu, and most recently died from SARS.

But not before producing that lungbutter from pneumonia.

How it evolved was an equally complex array of bleach, infected blood, clean blood, ly (spelt wrong – I mean, *human fat*), some disregarded human tissue, vomit, and other toxic assortments typically found in hospital waste bins.

The simple fact is that that aforementioned lungbutter evolved and was not feeling particularly Cindy about it.

Whatever is a girl to do?

So to keep it trendy, PC and prove for all that cultural imperialism is rampant:

Mc Unhappy Jan, not part of the Liberal Coalition of the Willingly Stupid, decided to absorb the slogan of interaction.

After all, it's a government agenda. Therefore ...

stalking is a great way to socialise, according to ms Jan.

And Mr. Squabble could not be reached for further comment.

We hitherto find the latter statement more irreverent than if it had not been included.

The author's brain is presently exhausted.

Yes, another pause.

Some three hours later and I've returned. But I'm not sure. It could have been four hours.

Anyway, the adventure of our beloved evolved lungbutter continues – and this time with a title:

THE DAY THE WORLD WAS HORRIFIED TO DISCOVER CAPTAIN BEEF-HEART ON A HUNGRY JACK'S MENU BOARD ...

dum dum dum dummm – melodramatic (conspiracy) reverb ...

and who claims to use 100 per cent Australian beef? And why do you think Sergeant Pepper was happy? And why do you think the Beefeaters were behind it?

All this ... and more on the otherside of your regularly scheduled programme.

Ms Unhappy-evolved-'butter discovered to her delight that the world she was in was not

one that she would feel particularly out of place in.

Coke and Pepsi drinkers threw cans of Dr Pepper and Schweppes at each other,

Heath-fanatics were found to be armchair slobs,

Bananas slipped on human peels,

Snot cola was a favourite among vegetarians,

Vegans were voted a favourite alien species by Star Trek fans in a recent TV poll,

Smokers were able to reduce stress, but there was a dramatic climb in the number of politicians being murdered annually,

Grinspoon were grinning away quite blissfully until they met the smirking ladle,

A certain monastery in France wants words with Sophie Monk,

International sports celebrities were actually discovered to be spies,

A recent newspaper poll suggests that no one actually knew what the poll was about or what newspaper was that required it, but 32 per cent of those surveyed said yes – 1 per cent, no – and 75 per cent do not give a fxcx who is the most eligible bachelor; they should make their names readable, which had nothing to do with the poll,

Also there's:

Lollipops sucking people, persons and people grinders for salt and pepper, and peopleshakes are available in three flavours for milk to enjoy.

All in all, a not all that bizarre place to be – especially if you're

a recently evolved specimen of lungbutter.

That most certainly cheered her up a bit ... seeing all that.

Then the thought came to her, quite by chance, about the same time she slipped into a drain during a rainy day, that she wanted some bone structure so she could lean on things with the same cool as council workers.

Keeping an internal bone structure required too much concentration, she discovered over long periods of experimentation, and it still left her open to too many things.

It was then she opted for an exoskeleton around a virtual reality bodysuit.

The bodysuit would give her greater control over the exoskeleton as the entire function of the VR-BS was calibrated, and re-calibrated, to interface only with that exoskeleton.

It also gave her a greater ease being inside another object after so long.

(the discarded milk-bottle episode does not count)

And it took far less concentration.

The exoskeleton itself was stainless steel with an interlocking inner layer of carbon plating, in-between which a simplistic network of optic-fibres coursed from head to toe.

A copper microchip – inlaid, itself, with optic-fibres – situated in the frontal cranium was where the hood of the bodysuit and exoskeleton interfaced.

A back-up chip resided in the chest and, as a further measure, in case, a back-up chip and a system over-ride was situated in the groin. The entry / exit was through the ears. And the back-up escapes were between the two digits closest to her big toes.

She quite liked her new form.

Well, it sort of was human, wasn't it?

It stayed within the confines of the “reverse Pinocchio” theme.

And she lived happily forever before.

# **The Instigation Bureau**

## **By AD Dawson**

### 1 – The Instigators

Notwithstanding that I've worked up here in the I.B. for the last 60 years or so, I can still remember my very first shift herein. World War Two ravaged Europe at the time and everyone was dashing around trying to provoke an antithesis to it all - not exactly what could be classed as a good case of instigation that. However, everyone can make a mistake - it's a difficult job and we can't be held responsible for any global imbalance - after all we are only The Instigators. To be fair, things *have* been tightened up somewhat since the 1940's - nowadays we are obliged to have our work passed by The Head Hitter before it is dispatched. Not that The Head Hitter is any wiser than the rest of us, he's definitely not - it's just that he's worked here longer than most. Indeed, the only person who has worked here longer than him - apart from Gus himself of course - is poor old Sisyphus. Gus is really p\_\_\_\_d at Sisyphus for some reason, and that is reflected in his present lowly position.

Sisyphus is The Barrow Pusher - the most thankless of all the jobs up here. He is obliged to collect the empty notion pods from the depot, load them up into his barrow and bring them along to us, The Instigators. He then has to exchange the empty pods for the charged pods. After he's loaded the charged pods into his barrow he has to wheel them back down to the depot again for dispatch and thereafter to load up the returns for our usage again - you could say his task is eternal. If he delays for any reason, it is not long before The Head Hitter brings The Shovel down across his balding pate. To be honest, we have all occasionally felt

the weight of that d\_\_\_\_d shovel across our skulls when we have erred - but not nearly as many times as The Barrow Pusher. I am told that the shovel has been in use for upward of seven centuries - each retiring Head Hitter passing it on to his successor. I hope that one day it is *my* hand that it is reverently passed into - I would surely spare Sisyphus his daily discomfort. It is commonly accepted that the shovel, a very fine specimen indeed, was finished in the great forges of Vulcan - destined never to be broken asunder upon any uncommonly hardened noggin.

I am the only Instigator hereabouts who has any respect for Sisyphus - for he was once a great king and ruled wisely over the province of Corinth. I always ask after his health given the opportunity.

*"neque auribus neque oculis satis consto."* (I am losing my eyesight and getting deaf) He replies after every enquiry.

The others, they mercilessly abuse him - spitting tobacco juice onto his toga or tripping him when he passes close by. I hate them for this. Nevertheless, despite my hatred, it is for Sisyphus to stand up for himself - I once made the mistake of speaking up for him myself - ne'er agen.

It was in my forth year with the bureau when I unwisely spoke out. Cass, who sits at the next desk along from me, cruelly unclogged his nose into The Barrow Pusher's face as he trudged unhappily by.

"Cheer yourself up you stupid old misery," He called out to the delight of his ilk (that is all The Instigators except yours truly). "Maybe I'll empty my bladder into your face if you do not return a smile next time." He jeered.

Sisyphus wiped at his face with an old rag and carried on with his work with out a bother.

"That is not called for, Cass," I remonstrated. "He's but an old man

carrying out an arduous and never-ending task - surely you don't expect him to smile often?"

"*tempests courtier,*" (a storm is rising) mumbled Sisyphus as he hurried away with his barrow.

Cass put his nose back into his work - made ashamed by my complaint I wrongly thought. I allowed myself a Victor's smile as a shadow passed over my page.

"I see you like to play solitaire, Instigator?" roared a voice to my behind. I took a turn to see The Head Hitter standing over me clutching the d\_\_\_m shovel to his chest. "Maybe you would like for me to deal you a hand." He continued menacingly.

I nodded my foolish accord. Without a care, he brought the full weight of the shovel down onto the top of my head laying me senseless in a trice.

"I will let you know if he speaks out again, Head Hitter," said Cass.

"You should do that, Instigator," returned The Head Hitter as he went - his black cloak bellowing behind in the gale of his rapid departure.

More than 50 years have passed and I still have not enjoyed any revenge regarding the unfortunate incident described aloft. Yet 50 years is not such a long time hereabouts - maybe it will be today that will bring the terrible twain to their justice - the horrible Head Hitter and the contemptible, Cass.

I've been at my desk for over an hour already and it still isn't breakfast. My fingers are numb with the cold and I'm desperate to empty my bowels. The trouble with working up in the clouds, is that there is no privacy - The Head Hitter sits aloft watching our every movement - he would have even watched the movement of our bowels if Gus had not disallowed him! I nod to The Head Hitter my intention - and he reluctantly nods a

solemn return. Seeing the lower approach of a solitary rain cloud, I somersault backwards from my stool and land expertly into the damp puff below. Lifting up my toga - lest I should s\_\_t upon it, I crouch and wait for release. An unexpected gust takes the grey cloud nearer to a its warmer counterparts - not a good combination as any school boy will readily tell you. Before I can pull up my garment and leap clear, electricity fills the air and a lightening bolt flashes across the sky - like a raggedy doll I am tossed afar. I eventually land with a bone-wrenching jolt atop of a previously unencountered snow covered peak. I am forced to lay still for a while to recover my breath. Whilst in recovery, I hear a familiar voice speaking below the clouds - it is Gus.

"I will get The Head Hitter upon it straight away then - he shall appoint his most persuasive Instigator without delay." He uttered to no verbal response.

He said a brief farewell to the unknown party and was gone.

I waited a while before I dared to move a muscle. Eventually, when the coast was clear, I was able to find the way back to my station just in time for breakfast - a wooden platter sat awaiting my attention. Whilst enjoying my sup, I was not to be surprised when The Head Hitter was summoned for the attention of Gus. The hooter sounded and I was just about to return to my work when Sisyphus happened by. Before he could be gone I held him by the elbow.

"Sisyphus," I whispered - safe that The Head Hitter was not at his post "Tell me, who lives on the snow capped mountain below?"

He pulled sharply away from me as if my friendly fingers were the barbed talons of the Harpies. Claspng his hand tightly over his mouth he backed away from me in terror. I could see Cass looking over so I made to start my work.



I do believe, Dear Reader, that, at this point in the narrative some kind of explanation is required regarding the work of an Instigator. So, therefore, I will try to make clear to you what is not really clear to me. Please, read on...

...Man is the most idle of the animals that dwell upon Earth and needs constant motivation in whatever endeavour he is concerned with... or rather, not so concerned with. Indeed the Gus were forced to arm him with the strongest of sex drives, or he should never even bother to mate. That is where we, The Instigators, come into our own - we are the motivators of man. *Why aren't you called The Motivators then?* I hear you ask. The simple answer to a fair question is - it is the way in which we motivate that calls for us to be called The Instigators. We are only allowed to use certain... er tactics in our profession. We are allowed to **incite**, **persuade**, **provoke** or **urge** - no more... no less. The means by which we execute our trade, is by way of the notion pods. We write the *urger*, as we like to call it, onto a manuscript and put into a notion pod - this is called *charging*. The pod is then despatched towards Earth. When it reaches the atmosphere, the pod automatically opens up and allows the urger to fall to Earth. It is quite a willy-nilly process and who ever becomes *urged*, if anybody, is quite arbitrary - unless a priority recipient is preferred and then his/her name is written on the side of the pod alongside a request for a voice-over. You've probably heard of the story of Noah - he was a priority recipient. It has been said that Man would still be living in caves if it had not been for my predecessors urging them along.

So, now I have explained somewhat, let us get back and continue the narrative should we?

We hadn't been back at work for very long when Cass is summoned to The Head Hitter - no surprise there then. The most persuasive Instigator he is not - but that has no matter here, he's got the brownest nose - that's what matters hereabouts. The Head Hitter looks stressed and he fetches The Shovel onto Cass' head to calm himself - I swear that I can see stars circling Cass' head as he reels about. The Head Hitter violently grabs Cass by the golden locks and pulls his ear right up to his mouth. He whispers something into his lug and then violently pushes the bootlick away from him when he is told. Cass struggles to control his erection - well excited by his rough treatment.

"I am chosen again," He brags as he crawls back behind his desk - his toga taking on the appearance of a scout tent.

"Because you are truly the most persuasive Instigator here, *mon ami*," I mock.

"Thank you, Instigator - your compliments will not go unheard if ever I should step up some."

"Why thank you, Cass," I retort - trying to stifle my laughter.

"Shouldn't you be working, Instigator instead of giggling like a big girl?" Bellows The Head Hitter from my behind.

He raises up The Shovel for an almighty smite and I drop my bonce to the desk and wrap my arms around it for protection.

"Move your arms, Instigator."

"No." I reply.

"Move your arms, Instigator."

"No." I return once more.

"Please move your arms, Instigator."

"No."

"Why won't you move your arms, Instigator?"

"Isn't it obvious, Sir? You would bring The Shovel crashing against my skull if I should!"

"No I won't."

"You won't?"

"Of course not."

Gingerly I remove my arms from around my head.

**whack!!!**

He lied.

Only 10 minutes more until lunch - I can see Sisyphus lifting the steaming cauldron into his barrow below. To my utter astonishment, when he thinks no one is looking, he grabs a bread roll and rubs it against his crusty old penis - nice... there is life in the old dog yet. I hope I don't receive *that* bread roll though - the dirty old b\_\_\_r.

"Here you are Cass, have my bread roll - it will sustain you as you set about your work.

"Thank you, Instigator, that is most kind of you."

He bites avariciously into the bread - "It taste rather cheesy this one."

"It's a new line we are trying," lies Sisyphus as he ladles copious amounts of broth into our bowls.

" I see - it is very tasty I must confess," retorts Cass.

I can see that he has written the name of a preferred recipient upon the side of the pod he has been furtively working upon for the last hour - however, d\_\_\_m, it is too far way for me to make it out. He sees me looking and pulls the pod to himself. Only Gus, The Head Hitter, Cass and the voice from the mountain know whatever is written on that pod - and I crave to add my name to that list. Cass begins to cough - spraying crumbs from his greedy mouth all over us.

Suddenly he falls to his knees grasping at his throat. The Head Hitter jumps down from his seat and runs over to the choking man - he vigorously thumps him several times in-between the shoulder blades in an attempt to dislodge the foreign object from his throat. It is obvious that the procedure is not working so he throws Cass to the floor and probes about in his mouth with his forefinger. He cries out in triumph as he pulls a thick and curly hair clear of the airway - one of Sisyphus' best I wager. Cass pants his gratitude as The Head Hitter swaggers heroically back to his seat.

This whole event, Dear Reader, may have only taken but a moment to play itself out - but it was a moment well long enough for me to sidle unseen over to Cass' desk and make mischief of a sort. I spitefully changed the preferred recipient on the pod and quickly popped it into the barrow for despatch - Cass will never realise anything is amiss after his recent distress.

Revenge is soooo sweet...

### 2 – 132 Longstoop Road

Longstoop road is best viewed in black and white - like one of those old Bela Lugosi films. Notwithstanding the dulled bricks of the terraced houses that make up the cripple-lined street, the people that live in them can claim no more than ashen to their faces themselves.

To fill the tin bath with water hot enough to rinse away the pit muck was no mean feat. But to fill it twice a day, like Alice - once for her son, Ernest, who was on first shift, and once for her husband, Ernest, who was on back shift, was positively backbreaking.

With her son due home in an hour, Alice lifted the tin bath from the wall of the coal house and dragged it into

the kitchen - the blackened pans of water were already on the fire to boil. Just as she placed the bath into its position in front of the fire, someone knocked at the door. Tutting at the inconvenience, she painfully limped across the matted floor towards the door.

She opened the door to see two grey-jerseyed rascals running away up the street laughing.

"You little buggers," she yelled after them. "I'll knock your heads together when I catch up with you."

It wasn't so much that her left leg was withered, she could cope with that. It was her right leg, which was three times the thickness of a normal adult leg, which ailed her. The sheer weight of it pulled her body asunder every time she stepped out - just like her mother and her grandmother before her. Her only son, Ernest, had inherited the family curse to his right leg - although, fortunately for him, he had also inherited the ordinarily dimensioned left leg of his father. *His* broad right leg forced him to attend to the pit ponies with the old men rather than filling coal at the coal face like the rest of his peers. After looking down at the over-sized leg of her baby soon after his birth, she said no more - the curse would pass on no further from *her* womb.

She could hear Ernest pulling off his pit clothes in the yard outside. He was never very dirty upon his return from the stables and didn't really need a bath - a rinse under the cold tap would have been enough. However, Alice did not want her son to miss out on a hot bath in front of the fire like his father would enjoy after his shift - she thought it would derange him in some way if he was to miss out.

Just as she had finished pouring the hot water into the bath, Ernest limped happily into the warm kitchen. He kissed his mother and put his snap bag down onto the kitchen table.

"I need to be quick for my bathing, Mother, for there's a match kicking off on the green soon."

"I'll leave you to it then, Ernest," She answered as she stepped outside to allow him his decency. "I'll have a read whilst you're at it."

With that she closed the door behind herself.

The hot water felt good next to his skin. He washed away the smell of the horses from his hands and arms with a bar of coal tar soap. Once soaped all over the rest of his body, he lay fully back into the water to wash off the lather. As with any lad of his age stripped bare, his penis was soon standing erect above the top of the water demanding some attention. Fearing he would make too much noise splashing about - lest his mother should hear him - he arched his back clear of the bath water before furiously masturbating. He ejaculated with a soft moan into the soapy water.

"I'll be seeing you later then, Mother." He said as he stepped fresh into the yard. "I'll be well home in time for dinner."

"Enjoy the football match, son." She called after him as he struggled through the gate and into the street beyond.

If the water was not too cold or dirty after Ernest's bathing, Alice would strip off and climb into the tub herself to bathe. She put her hand into the water and found it still to be pleasantly warm. She took off her black tight-waisted frock and underwear and stepped clumsily into the bath. She sighed as the water lapped gently at her tired limbs.

*Gus help the world if all the women were her sort down on bathingsuits and lownecks of course of course nobody wanted her to wear I suppose she was pious because no man would look at her twice.* Said

James to Joyce as they floated aimlessly in the warm broth of life waiting for a fertile land to appear on the horizon which would let them into a port which was rumoured to sit betwixt two promenades which lay beyond soft rolling hills which led inland as far as they could see from their position which gradually allowed them to realise their intentions after the storms had calmed and allowed them to make their way forward under the steam of evolution and onward into the cavern beneath the black jungles and beyond where they fight each other for survival and where only the fittest survives and breaks through the membrane of truth and latches onto the lies that have corrupted from the most primeval time under the red sky that gave way to leave the children to play

Alice awoke with a start. It was nearly dinner time and she hadn't yet peeled a potato or boiled the bath water - her husband, Ernest, would be home from the pit very soon and playfully demanding his hot bath and sup.

"You will give birth to The Chosen One." She thought she heard someone utter from the rooftops.

She laughed at her folly as she climbed clumsily from the water.

"I couldn't give birth to anyone never mind The Chosen One," She retorted angrily. "I haven't even been with my beloved husband, Ernest since my son, Ernest was shown up to be a cripple." She continued with venom.

A sudden clap of thunder outside caused the windows to reverberate and a fork of lightning illuminated the yard. In fright, she pulled the threadbare towel up to her naked shoulders. She felt nauseous and her head began to eddy until she fell to the floor in a violent paroxysm.

\*\*\*

The following nine months were very eventful for Alice. Not only did her

belly swell as a pig in labour with some unknown phenomenon, but her husband, Ernest, was killed by a roof fall at the pit. And, moreover, her son, Ernest, had been bedridden for the last three months by the coughing consumption.

At the end of the nine months, to her utter astonishment, a baby dropped out as she hung the washing to dry - her family disowned her forthwith.

"How could you not know you were with child? And, furthermore, you've admitted that it isn't Ernest's bairn. It is a bastard and no bastard is ever welcomed into our family," raged her Mother, Mary as Alice brought the new-born to her breast and suckled it well.

She named the child Ernest after her husband. Ernest soon grew into a very sturdy youngster indeed. Not only were his shoulders as broad as a young adult's afore he was eight, but *both* his legs developed thick and powerful.

It was with one of life's glad ironies that he has inherited the family curse to *both* legs - and it was to be an irony that would never be a hindrance to him - as he would soon discover.

Alice would burst with pride as she watched him chasing the delivery vans as they drove by the house carrying the wares she could never afford. It wasn't very long before he could catch them before they could drive on from the narrow streets towards the city. By the time his early teens came along he demonstrated an athleticism that no dust-gobbling miner's son could ever emulate. They all stood open mouthed one crisp autumn morning when he overtook the bread van for the first time - the driver nearly sent the loafs into the pit tip with shock as the dark-haired boy easily outstripped his vehicle.

"He's a daft bugger, that one," said a neighbour to the amusement of the others, as he raised his arms in triumph at the end of the race. From that moment on

he became the victim of cruel gibes from adult and child alike whenever he stepped out of doors.

\*\*\*

"I tire of painting, Mother," said Ernie (as he was now known as) as he dropped his brush to the table in frustration. "I need some fresh air... it is donkey's years since I went to the green and enjoyed a football match."

"There's a match this very afternoon, Ernie. I'll take you if you like - you can lean on my shoulder if you cannot stand alone after a while." replied his enthusiastic younger brother, Ernest.

Alice frowned - she did not share the enthusiasm of her youngest - the sickness had all but taken Ernie and she did not want the weakling to be outdoors in the dampness that is October. She was just about to remonstrate when a loud thud came to the window. Alice jumped up from her chair grasping at her heart.

"What in heaven's name was that?" She shrieked hysterically.

"I think it may have been a bird flying into the pane, Mother," answered Ernie.

The trio stepped outside to see a small wren laid on its back with its legs in the air comically caricaturing death. Alice knelt down and picked up the bird. She cradled its pathetic and lifeless form in her hands.

"Pass it here, Mother, I shall put it to rest where the cats cannot bother it," whispered Ernest.

She gently lowered the dead bird into his hands for disposal. Ernest brought it up to his lips and kissed it softly at the breast. The bird suddenly flapped into life within his palms. It frantically took itself into the air and hastily disappeared over the outhouses and away.

"I've never seen anything like that before," said Ernie in astonishment.

"Someone told he was going to be different," muttered Alice, so as no one could ever hear her words.

\*\*\*

"Don't throw me about so," complained Ernie from the broad shoulders of his brother. "Can you not just take your time this once?"

"We shall soon be there, Ernie, you don't want to miss the kick off do you?"

"Would you just look at that pair?" Said the neighbour as the brothers made up to the touchline.

"Put me down then, Ernest, for we are here and everyone is staring at us."

Ernest placed his brother gently down onto the lush grass of the green. The referee put the whistle to his lips and the game began. Ernest didn't like football. Nevertheless he didn't mind staying a while to care for his ailing brother - albeit he would much rather have been running across the tops with the wind at his hair. The village team's Centre took a feeble attempt on goal. The opposition's Goalkeeper easily saved the shot and booted the ball back up the pitch.

"A weak shot that," remarked Ernie -

"What do you know of shooting?" returned the neighbour.

"He should have put more weight behind his boot and kept his head looking to the ground," continued the informed Ernie.

"Maybe you should keep *your* head looking to the ground so as you don't spread that filth that lies in your pitiful lungs around," said another in bitter sarcasm.

Ern was upset at the cruel remark and began to cough. He pulled a large white handkerchief from his jacket pocket and pushed it up to his mouth to stifle his violent hacking. An angry Ernest held his brother's ribs firmly until the coughing

stopped. He gave him a drink of tea from the flask and moved himself between Ern and the neighbours. He fixed them silent with a stare that would have turned even the Medusa to flee.

The game proved to be hopelessly uneventful as it progressed - neither side had even nearly netted a goal and it was almost half-time. Nevertheless, Ern was enjoying himself and he explained to his brother the soccer skills and footballing techniques and that both sets of players sadly lacked that autumn afternoon. Just afore half-time, the ball spun out of control from the foot of the Centre once more. It ballooned well over the heads of the spectators and landed 50 metres to the back of Ernie and Ernest. The latter set off to retrieve it. After picking up the ball in order to throw it back to the pitch, he noticed that in his absence the neighbour was at poor Ern once more. Remembering what his brother had said earlier - *put plenty of weight behind the boot and keep the head looking to the ground* - he placed the ball back down to the grass. He sent it off from his right boot with a tremendous swing of his mighty thigh - the ball soon travelled the fifty metres and struck Ern's tormentor with the power of a meteorite sent from the high heavens. Before the neighbour was properly decked, the ball looped over the groping Goalkeeper's head and into the net. Notwithstanding that the goal was not to be allowed, the shot caused quite a stir betwixt the turnout.

"Did you ever see such a cannonball of a shot as from that kid over yonder?" Let out a ashen-faced youngster in glee, as he pulled repeatedly at the worn sleeve of his Father.

"The Cannonball Kid," enthused a tidy man to their side, "That's what he shall be called hereafter if I should ever have my way with him."

E\_\_\_\_, died a week later.

"What are we to do, Ernest? For we are even too poor to bury our poor E\_\_\_\_."

"I shall find a way, Mother," replied Ernest sadly with his eyes cast down towards his worn out shoes.

"He'll be buried as a pauper the day after next..." Her voice trailed off into a loud and single sob.

Ernest beat the kitchen table with his fist until it threatened to fall under his might. His anger was arrested a while as a rap came to the door. Alice gently placed her hand on the weary shoulder of her only son as she went to find out who might be calling. Ernest heard an unfamiliar voice call his Mother by name. She allowed the stranger to step by her and into the room. He pressed a business card into her hand as he went.

"Mister T\_\_\_\_," he called out cheerily as he offered his skeleton hand towards Ernest.

Ernest engulfed it inside his shovel-sized mitt.

"Why you look so sad?" He asked.

"It is because we do not have enough money to bury our poor E\_\_\_\_," blurted out his Mother in desperation.

"Money? Well that can soon be remedied - how much do you want?" He said as he put his hand into the inside pocket of his dark overcoat.

Mother and Son watched in silent bewilderment. He pulled out a wad as thick as a door step and began to count out the notes as he peeled them off.

"50, 100, 150, 200,....1,000... here that should be enough to bury the poor unfortunate lad."

He pushed the money firmly into Alice's hands.

"I shall pay you back, Sir," said Ernest as he stood to embrace the stranger.

"Our Ernest shall have his resting place after all." continued his Mother in appreciation.

The stranger's hand went once more into his inside pocket from where he pulled out a blank piece of paper.

"Sign down there at the bottom," He asked as he handed Ernest a biro.

"Is it the terms of your loan, Sir?"

"No it is but a contract," he replied amicably.

"But there is nothing written thereon..."

"What sort of contract?" Interrupted Alice.

"Your son is to be a footballer."

"A footballer? Why I've never kicked a ball in my life."

"Nevertheless," said the man, "Sign there and you'll be playing for the big boys before too long... Cannonball..."

### 3 – The Glass Palace

"You fail to do it for me any longer, Prime Minister," winged The Queen as she pushed the kneeling politician out from between her blue veined thighs. "Get from my sight," She added, as she adjusted the red robe of state to cover her pale nakedness.

The Prime Minister wiped the foul-smelling slime from his mouth and nose with the back of his hand as he slowly backing out of the room. Once alone, The Queen rose from her throne and limped slowly over to the golden framed mirror which hung lonely against the grey-stone walls. She looked into the glass and sighed - no longer did the young girl who had almost single-handedly thwarted the advance of The German army in the 1940's stare back out at her.

"We are now weak," She uttered as she tugged at the hanging bell pull to the side. "We need new blood to run through our veins or we shall surely perish."

Weakened by her Labour, she slowly returned to her throne. Presently the huge oaken doors creaked open and in scraped The Servant - who took on the diminished appearance of a dwarf alongside the tremendous doorway which he had left open to his rear.

"Ma'am." He offered - his chin pressed firmly against his chest.

He waited patiently as the aged monarch rose laboriously without return and struggled over to the window that was carved clumsily into the irregular stone walling - her footsteps remained resounding across the marbled floor long after she remained still.

"Why is it that no one ever comes to see me anymore?" She mumbled. "No longer do I ever see the running noses of school children and their stripy bag wielding Grandmothers pushed against my gates."

The Servant shuffled uncomfortably - not sure if the question was addressed to his humble self. He coughed nervously.

"Do *your* children press their ashen faces against my perimeter, Servant?" She said in a louder tone as she swivelled on her heels to face him.

He shook his bowed head sadly to indicate the negative.

"Then what is it that amuses them?" She asked softly.

"Football, Ma'am - they like to watch the football."

"Football?"

"That is where they are this very afternoon, Ma'am - watching the football. It's United against City and the newspapers say that The Cannonball is up for his hatrick without a doubt."

"The Cannonball. Whom is the Cannonball?"

"He's every child's hero, Ma'am - every child's hero..." He enthused - lifting up his head to meeting her gaze.

\*\*\*

"Who is this Cannonball? Who is this hero of the children?" She raged into the looking glass - albeit to no response from within.

"Ah, Cannonball give us a goal." sang out The Crown Prince as he fopped into the chamber. His Mother remained staring forward despite his sissy approach. He skipped across the chess board marbling as a child would engage in a game of hop scotch. "It is no wonder we don't have many visitors, Mummy, for this room with its cold marble floor and damp stone walls is very unappealing." He added with a heavy blink.

The Queen sighed heavily as she turned around. He was fixed with a stare that sent him immediately to stone - only his squint betrayed him as flesh and blood.

"I shall send you such a twat that it will set your eyes straight, you fool." She bellowed out - her voice resounding against the bleak walls to repeat itself more than twice.

"Why is that, Mummy?" He let out as if a naughty three year old. "For I've only just come into your presence this moment."

He had been hated the very moment he fell out from her womb the sickly child as he was. He grew up with only a nurse for company - his Mother found many a reason to visit abroad during her first borns formative years. She returned home when he was aged 10 to give birth to his sister, The princess, after a long stay at her cousin's palace in the region of D\_\_\_\_\_.

"Where is your d\_\_\_\_\_ sister at this moment?" She asked without emotion.

"She's just about to step out with your Great Uncle I believe."

"Well listen to me and listen to me good. You are to get her away from him and lock her into the dungeons below and

bring me the key without anyone's knowledge - is that clear?"

As he nodded his accord a sly smile spread across his thin blue lips.

"Let me down at your peril," She shouted after him as he skipped towards the portal humming the Cannonball ditty as he went.

"Cannonball, Cannonball, give us a goal..."

\*\*\*

As predicted by the newspapers, Cannonball *was* well up for his hatrick that afternoon. 3 pile driven shots were sent into the back of the City goal from his revered boot afore the 90 minutes were up. Both sets of supporters poured onto the pitch at the end of the game and lofted him high above their shoulders for all the world to see.

"Hasn't that lad done well for himself," said The Neighbour through gritted teeth as he turned off his television set.

\*\*\*

The Princess pressed her red and overblown face against the wrought bars and sighed heavily. A large brown rat ran across her satin slippers and caused her to start.

"What is to come of me?" She uttered forlornly as the rat disappeared up a dripping drainpipe.

She heard someone giggle to the shadows.

"Who's there?" She called out into the darkness.

The Prince stepped out into the weak light of a pitch torch which was fixed to the damp stone walls. He bowed theatrically as the flame flickered and threatened to be extinguished by the extravagant swish of his baseball cap. The same brown rat fell from the drain pipe and ran hither thither across the soiled floor of the dungeon.

"Just a rat for a playmate, Sis?" The Prince mocked.



"Better it be a rat as a playmate than you," She retorted angrily.

"But does the rat know why you are locked behind those bars?" He scoffed.

She knew he wouldn't let on, so she refused herself a much sought after enquiry.

"Cannonball, Cannonball, give us a goal," sang The Prince as he skipped out past the advancing guard and away.

The black-faced guard, who, by his own choice, hadn't seen the fair light of day for this last two decades, placed a wooden platter for The Princes' consumption.

"What is this rubbish that you serve up to me each meal time, you miserable wretch?" She bawled as he pushed the food under the cell door for her convenience.

The skinny-ribbed guard stood erect and dumb in response. Suddenly, with a rapidity that belied his dire disposition, he bent down and scooped up the rat which had rubbed itself up against his bare fungus feet. The Princess became nauseous as she watched him press the willing rodent to his cracked lips and kiss it about its pipe cleaner whiskers. She sent the dish and its contents against the wall with a mighty boot.

"You are for the irons if I ever get out of here, Old Man."

"Sweet," He insanely replied - causing her to be unnerved even further

*One day my Prince will surely come* - She thought as she pushed her chubby palms to her eyes.

\*\*\*

Ernest slowly rubbed his digit along the smooth edge of the embossed card which he was holding in his sweaty palm - *Why should it be that he had received an invitation to attend a Royal Ball?* - He thought - *After all, he was only a footballer.*

\*\*\*

It was to be the first Royal Ball since before the black-faced guard had last watched the red sun set behind the glass palace twenty years since. Invitations had been sent to all that mattered, fine food had been ordered, the press had been made aware and a top band had been secured to ease the guests into their dancing. The Queen busied about the palace making sure everything was carried out to her specifications - The Prince minced about his wardrobe wondering what on Earth he should wear for such an unprecedented occasion as this.

At last, the livelong day came - the day of The Royal Ball was upon us. The Queen stepped out onto the balcony and looked down at the crowds who had gathered below.

She offered a wave - non were returned. She watched spitefully as limousines came and went - dropping the guests at the red carpet which ran up the stone steps and into the palace. Film and sports stars were cheerfully whooped at by the crowd; politicians and minor royals were hatefully booed. Despite the chill of the autumn evening, many of the crowd stood only in sports shirts bearing the name of their hero across their shoulders. When, at last, he stepped from the limousine - his evening suit straining to contain his muscularity, the crowd let out a roar that had never been heard since V.E. Day. Mothers swooned, children jumped up and down, Fathers nodded and sons wished. Ernest nervously pushed his finger into his collar so that he might breath a little. He autographed books, breasts, scraps of paper, photographs, thighs, football etc., as he made his way up towards the stone steps - his face glowed scarlet with embarrassment as he disappeared into the palace.

"That's the one I presume," said The Queen as she stepped inside - The Prince cocked a snook behind her back to

the amusement of The Sniggering Chancellor.

The guests applauded him as he entered the great hall - no one noticed The Queen as she was helped onto her throne. A footman rapped his staff against the floor to get the attention of the gathering. All faces turned into the direction of the throne - a sudden silence occurred that could have been shattered by the dropping of a pin onto the marble floor. Their monarch cleared her throat nervously.

"Welcome," She managed before falling into a choking fit - the footman prudently indicated with his staff that the dancing should begin.

Ernest's back was patted, his cheek kissed, his hand shook and his company sought - He could have had anyone's attention in that chamber that evening. The Prince was introduced and Ernest fell into a perfect bow that belonged back in the days of the brothers Grimm - The Prince tittered like a peasant girl at her haystack deflowering.

"Pleased to meet you at last, Mister Ball," swooned The Prince as he held out his limp hand for Ernest's.

"Likewise, Sir," said Ernest as he took the clammy hand offered into his grip.

"Do you know that we share the same birthday, Mister Ball?" Continued The Prince flirtatiously - holding onto Ernest's hands longer than was comfortable.

"Really?" replied Ernest as he pulled away his hand. "How interesting."

"Come, let me introduce you to my Mother," said The Prince as he took the reluctant hand once more into his grasp.

The Queen sat at her throne sipping at a glass of water. Ernest stepped forward and completed a bow as before - The Queen sneered at his modesty. She indicated that she wanted to step down

from the throne and one of her lackeys, a tall dark man wearing a black suit and sunglasses, moved to her aid and roughly lowered her to the floor by her elbow. Angry at her indignity, she churlishly pushed away his hand.

"I should want that you follow me, Mister Ball," commanded The Queen sternly.

Ernest was unsure of her discourse. However, to put him on the right track, The Dark Man lifted his jacket to one side to display a silver revolver set into a worn leather holster. He nodded to the way and Ernest followed The Queen's crooked footfall through the crowd and towards the stairs. His heart thumped furiously into his chest. Once through the door at the top of the stairs, The Dark Man sent his revolver across the footballer's broad shoulders. Ernest stumbled forwards but spun around at once to confront the man. Unfortunately The Dark Man's revolver became pressed against the tip of his nose before he could react in the way that he had wished. The Prince closed the door behind them and making the forth.

"This, Mister Ball, is The Princess," sang out The Queen as she stepped down the stairs towards her daughter's cell - The Dark Man quickly dispensed of the guard with a well aimed bullet between his eyes.

The Princess lay wrapped in a dirty and ragged blanket on the straw covered floor. She pulled the blanket slightly away from her gaunt face to see who had caused the commotion.

"You are a loyal subject are you not, Mister Ball?"

"\_\_\_\_\_"

"Well Mister Silent Voice," She continued in a sarcastic tone. "It is your duty to pump new and strong blood into your monarchy's veins for Gus, Queen and country"

"\_\_\_\_\_"

"She may not be much to look at, Mister Ball - but according to my Great Uncle, she goes like a bloody steam train as you sporting boys would be want to say. Ha, ha, ha...bloody ha, ha..."

Ernest winced slightly as The Dark Man went to set a chain and ball to his mighty leg. As The Dark Man bent to hammer the pin into the manacle, Ernest brought up a mighty thigh which poleaxed him in a trice - he fell in a heap to the floor. The conniving Queen pushed her son forward and into Ernest so as she could make her getaway up the stone steps. Ernest grabbed The Prince's head with his sausage fingers and fatally cracked his crust against the stone. Just as The Queen was about to open the door and call out for support, Ernest sent the ball and chain off into her direction with a swing of his trusty right foot. Her head and the thick oaken door were easily smashed asunder by the well-aimed missile. He turned and angrily ripped open the cell door as if it were made of liquorice rather than wrought iron. He lifted the blanket clear of The Princess' face only to witness her last breath. Her eyes gently closed and a smile spread across her blue lips. Ernest went to her and kissed her ravaged brow - however, this little bird was not for reawakening. He scooped her up into his arms as if she was a rag doll and made his way up the bloodstained stairway. As he stepped into the great hall the music stopped and all eyes turned to him and his pathetic charge. A revolver sounded off and The Dark Man staggered into the hall - The Rat scurried close at his heel.

"The Queen is dead, long live The Cannonball," He proclaimed before firing several bullets through the roof.

"Torch the place," shouted the guests in unison - as if hired for monster burning peasants in a Hammer House of Horror production.

The minor royals flew for their lives as fists and boots were sent into them as they hastily made for the exits. The liberated rodent helped itself to the leftovers - a fine feast for any King Rat.

They stood for many an hour watching the palace crumble and burn... The Princess limp in her Saviour's hand...

Cannonball, Cannonball give us a goal...

#### 4 – The Jar Man

Another classic case of instigation that - I don't think! To bring down the British Empire in one fell swoop is bad enough, but to facilitate the total annihilation of the royal family to boot is definitely not acceptable in anyone's books - least of all Gus'; and he is still asking serious questions. The Head Hitter hasn't been seen for many a day - the shovel lays redundant resting against his unattended lectern. Poor old Cass isn't relishing his new job - nevertheless his soft hands will soon harden against the coarse wood of the wheelbarrow. Things have gone well for Sisyphus, who has been deservedly reinstated as an Instigator. And me? - well I just get on with things as usual and without complaint. However, despite the tone of summary, before this narrative comes to an end, one thing is still needing to be discovered - who was the man that Gus was speaking to atop of the snow capped mountain the other morning? Well, Dear Reader, stay a while and I feel like today may supply us with our answer.

I reluctantly drag myself to my desk as usual of a morning. Sisyphus is my new neighbour and he has been busily working away long before any of us have arrived - I fancy him for the next Head Hitter.

To get on with my investigation, I need to find a way of becoming absent for a while without drawing any suspicion to myself - Gus is rightly keeping a close eye over proceedings of late and one move out of turn will bring his wrath crashing down on my head. I decide to feign a stomach ache.

"My guts are up for the turn this morning, Sisyphus" I say over loudly as Gus passes close by.

"See that it does not effect your work then, Instigator, for we have plenty to remedy." Sisyphus retorts belligerently - and that is before he is handed the shovel!

For the next hour or so I groan at intervals and clasp my hands to my belly.

"Maybe Cass has been rubbing the bread against his cock, Instigator," quips Sisyphus as I put to an end my most theatrical turn this morning - he has soon forgotten *my* allegiance to *him* whilst he pushed that d\_\_\_m barrow about the clouds. Great King of Corinth? More like Great King of the Rats - I wish a great big f\_\_\_g pox on him the b\_\_\_d.

As the afternoon approaches, I decide upon an extreme course of action to bring about my investigation - I shit myself where I sit. The sour smell of my stool is wafted immediately towards Sisyphus.

"My Gus, you pathetic creature," He lets out. "You've actually gone and shat yourself - go and clean yourself up this minute."

"It would be no good at all."

"It would be no good at all?" He reiterates.

"No," I say as I clutch my middle and screw up my face. "For I feel another will arrive very shortly."

"You must go then until it is passed and I will square it with Gus." He rages.

I do as he asks.

As soon as I am away from his view, I strip off my soiled toga and wipe it across my arse before discarding it. I draw another from the stores before my journey begins. My enthusiasm knows no bounds and very soon I am once more arrived upon the snow covered peak. I sit still awhile and listen for any murmur. Unfortunately it is so quiet hereabouts that I am very soon fallen asleep.

I awake with a start and discover myself to be in darkness. I go to move but discover myself to be well and truly trussed. I shout for help for awhile but none is obviously arriving as yet. I can feel the onset of panic creeping through my chilled bones - for it is well icy where I am secured. I can hear someone whistling at a short distance so I call out once more.

"Is there anyone thereabouts?"

"\_\_\_"

"Let me loose at once before you feel my wrath!" I shriek in panic.

The door opens and the raw light of day comes flooding in - I cannot see the figure that stands before me very well because my eyes have not adjusted to the brightness. He sniggers as a sharp blade cuts through my bonds. A heavy boot sends me rolling from my cell to the sun-filled outside. I rub at my eyes and they gradually fall back into focus. I sit up rubbing at my wrists. Before me is stood the strange sight of my jailer. He is wearing the garb I have never seen the like for many a year - a grey great coat reaches from his shoulders right down to his black boots. Placed upon his head is a black helmet with a steel spike pointing up towards the heavens. The peak of his headgear covers his eyes and nose so I am left facing a mouthful of rotted teeth towards his identification.

"Come." He utters in broken English.

As I go to stand he grasps hold of my foot and drags me across the rough terrain. When, at last, we come to a rest at

the outside of a cave, my back is in ribbons and blood is soaking through my toga. He sniggers once again at my plight - If this is the man that Gus has been talking to, then I am very surprised indeed at the association.

I look about and find the area to be scattered with what look like wine racks. However, it is not wine bottles that sit upon them - it is jam jars. Upon closer inspection it becomes evident that creepy crawlies have made their home within the glass - they wriggle about at the bottom underneath a dock leaf or two.

"What are the jars about?" I ask, although not expecting any kind of explanation - for the man has not spoken more than a word as yet.

He does not disappoint and taps the side of his peak with his forefinger for effect.

He goes over to one of the racks and picks up a jar - I can see that there are small labels stuck to the side of the glass. He shakes the jar and then places it down onto the floor opposite where I am cast. He sits down too - the great coat rides up to reveal a pair of blue trousers with a yellow stripe running down the leg - rather like the 7th. Cavalry would wear during the mid 19th Century campaigns. He sits crossed legged and drags the jar towards him. He lifts up the jar and shakes it once more before replacing it back to the ground.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Me." He replies suddenly. "Why I am The Jar Man."

"The Jar Man?"

"What else should they call a man surrounded by as many jars as this?" He continues whilst waving his hand to indicate the host of jars that surround us.

He puts his forefinger up to his lip to indicate that he requires some hush - his eyes not once straying from the jar that stood between his legs. I see two spiders in the jar - one red and one black -

and they are running up towards the neck. The red spider arrives first and the black slides back down to the leaf that rests at the bottom. The Jar Man takes the red spider from the jar and squeezes it between finger and thumb.

"This one is getting too good." He ejaculates as he wipes the gore against the fabric of his trousers.

"Too good? I don't understand."

"Didn't you see? He outstripped the black spider without any trouble at all - he is too good... It is not fair in the way of things."

My head felt like exploding with perplexity - what is happening hereabouts? He seemed to read my thoughts for he smiled and waved his hand so as I would be calm.

"...In the way of things," I reiterate. "What does that mean?"

"The way of things - the way things are meant to be - the weird if you like.."

"The weird? What do you mean - *The Weird?*"

He slowly removes his helmet to expose more of his face than his mouth. He has a prominent nose and piercing blue eyes - his hair is as fair as a flaxen maid's.

"Weird, *mon ami*, is one of the few old English words that we still use nowadays - although usually within the wrong context." He states mechanically whilst he pushes his shovel hand through his mane.

I shrug my shoulders.

"*Weird* means *Fate*..."

"Fate?"

"Destiny if you like... the destiny of mankind."

"What has the destiny of mankind got to do with two spiders racing each other to the top of an empty jam jar?"

"You think I should use a roll of the dice you fool?" He screams out angrily as he fetches me a blow across my face.

As I recover I hear someone cough to my backside - it is Gus.

"That is how the destiny of mankind is usually decided, Instigator," utters Gus without further ado.

"Two spiders scurrying up a jam jar; they will decide the fate of mankind - that is an outrage." I protest vehemently.

Gus nods as he stoops to pick up the jar. He reads the label aloud - "Red Spider victory = fair weather and Black Spider victory = rain"

"The weather forecast, Gus..." Explains The Jar Man

"...For Eastern Europe, I see." Gus observes after further scrutiny of the label.

A black thought suddenly clouds over my mind.

"So, Gus," I speak out well above my station. "We Instigators are without effect - that is what you are saying here. It is clear that everything is already decided for mankind - right down to the weather - by this fool here with his array of spider containing jam jars. We can in effect change nothing?"

"No you cannot." He retorts bluntly.

"But what about the other day? I heard you and The Jar Man speaking - you said you would put your best Instigator upon the job - what is the point? We have no sway"

"Ah, Instigator, I... we... still cut sway at some stations. You must have heard the ditty..."

*...Gus save our gracious Queen...*

## 5 – The Castle Cannonball

### One

\*I want a hero: an uncommon want,  
When every year and month sends forth a  
new one,  
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,

The age discovers, he is not the true  
one...\*

### **Byron**

He sits in his cell eating bugs for effect. What was/is his crime? Why, he clicked his heels and laughed like a drain for no reason at all... \*that\* was his crime and he needs to pay. But that is of little matter to him... for he waits patiently for the day when his Master will come.

\*\*\*

They built a castle where the glass palace had once stood - the walls were as thick and strong as an English oak. Ernest stayed behind this great bastion of stone, pacing the floors with nothing but a leather football for a companion. In the great hall he would take pot shots at the trinkets that they had placed there for him - and in the drawing room he would blow his nose on the fine drapery that they had hung.

One winter's evening, when the wind blew hard and cold against the parapets, Ernest was at great loss for something to do. Bored of kicking his ball at the busts and urns of the great hall, he ventured deeper into the bowels of the castle than he had ever done before. He came to an unfamiliar wooden door which was made from the finest oak and studded with the hardest of nails. He pushed at the handle but it refused to yield. Without further ado he took a few steps backwards and placed his ball to the floor. After sending it forward with a mighty swipe, the door lay as matchwood across the stone floor within. He stepped into the semi-darkness without a care and found himself to be stood inside a cell no bigger than his Granddad's potting shed. The walls felt damp to the touch and the rancid smell therein would force him to tie a handkerchief across his mouth if he should linger. As he turned to leave his

foot came across a bottle and it was sent spinning noisily across the floor. He picked up the bottle and took it out of the cell and into the light for a clearer examination. He found it to be one of Market Town's finest beers - Market Bitter. The best before date was still to be overtaken and he was well tempted for a draught. He sat down on the steps to savour his beverage - hoping that The Coach would never ever discover his folly. After forcing the stopper free with the edge of the step, he lifted the bottle to his lips. However, no bitter came forth. Instead, to his dismay, a flash of light, much brighter than a 1000 flash cubes came about and a cloud of smoke as dense as mustard gas bellowed into the still air. In fright, Ernest dropped the bottle back to the floor and rubbed at his eyes for clarity - lest he should remain blinded forever.

"Gadzooks," he let out lamely, "What sort of wizardry is this to behold?"

As the smoke gradually cleared, he became aware of someone stood to his side - he picked up the discarded bottle for a weapon.

"Come any closer and you will feel this bottle agen yer skull," He warned the Raven suited man.

The man giggled... and then he giggled again... and again. As he reached into his inside pocket, Ernest brought the bottle crashing down. However, when he came to the end of his swing the man had disappeared.

"He's behind you." Came a sweet singing voice.

And, behold, he was behind. Ernest swung again... and again... and again - but to no furtherance; for the man more than easily dodged his blows every time. Ernest dropped the bottle in defeat. The glass smashed against the hard floor.

"What is it you want?" He asked breathlessly, as he slumped against the cold stone wall.

"Me? Want?" He said as he adjusted the hang of his snowy white waistcoat.

The man reached into his pocket once more and, to Ernest's relief, plucked out a business card. Ernest received the card into his quivering palm and read the gold leaf etched thereupon.

\*Mr. Cass - Agent Supreme\*

"That's me, Mr. Cass at your service," He said as he scraped a bow.

"And what is it that you want?" Asked the perplexed Striker.

"I want to be your agent, Cannonball old son" He retorted smugly.

"I've already an agent..."

"...I'm better," The man interrupted rudely whilst blowing against his fingernail for effect. "And I can prove it right now!" He added with gusto.

"How can you prove it?"

"Tell me three things that you wish for and I will grant them for you before the sun rises in the morn...If I fail, then you will never see me again... and I make a solemn promise of that."

Ernest thought long and hard. Eventually, after much deliberation, he nodded his agreement. The man coughed loudly into his hand.

"And what if I do deliver, then what? What is in it for me?"

"Then you will be my agent and manage my affairs."

The man shook his head. "That's not good enough."

"It's not?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The man smiled warmly. "No offence, Cannonball... Ernest. You are a sportsman.... one of the finest may I add? But you know little else - save chasing delivery vans along Longstooop road. If I was to be your agent, then I would want to manage your affairs... without interruption from your good self... agreed?"

"Agreed."

Ernest offered the business card back to Cass. However, as Cass stretched out his hand to receive it, Ernest pulled him violently towards himself and pushed his head between his thighs before the man could react - or so he thought. He squeezed tightly.

"If you f\_\_\_k with me, Cass, I'll break your neck like a twig."

"We are not going to hurt each other Ernest are we?" He replied with a gasp, whilst pushing a slither of broken glass up to Ernest's twitching testicles.

\*\*\*

Ernest's first wish was that he wanted his Mother to come and live with him because he was lonely at the Castle Cannonball. He had asked her many, many times in the past but she had refused, because she was well settled and comfortable at 132 Longstoop Road. Cass spoke briefly into his mobile telephone.

"Granted."

Ernest's mobile rang. It was his Mother and she was in tears.

"Please, Son, I need to come and stay with you," She bawled.

She went on, in tears manifold and with plenty of dribble, to relate that a curious and unexpected storm had just whipped up over the grey rooftops of Market Town, and that a cracking fork of lightening, as if from the hand of Zejus himself, had lifted the tiles clear of the roof. And, furthermore, the torrential rain, that fell in OVERSIZED buckets, had flooded the house right down to the cellar itself.

Ernest was pleased and promised to send a car for her forthwith.

"It's already on its way," bragged Cass as he pushed his hand through his lion's mane.

Ernest, although reluctant to praise the boastful fellow to his fore, was impressed and he told of his second wish.

"I wish that I could stand at my window and look down onto an empty parade below and without a thunderous applause to my every movement... For I am not the Pepe."

"It will be done." Cass replied as he beckoned Ernest to follow him.

He skipped lightly up the stairs - humming like a bumble bee as he went. When they came to the window, he requested that Ernest should look out. As he did, a deafening noise rose from the multitude that stood below in the rain waiting for a glimpse of their hero. "Cannonball, Cannonball, give us a goal," They sang out as if in a trance. Our reluctant hero clamped his hands to his ears and fell to his knees with hysteria.

"Make it stop, make it stop..." He begged.

Again Cass spoke briefly into his mobile telephone.

"Granted."

The evening's drizzle suddenly stopped and the red setting sun of a long past Summer's evening peeped out from behind the clearing clouds.

"Tis a sign," called out one of the throng. "Look, look to the West,?" He added in wonder as his eyes came across what he thought was a holy vision.

They looked and saw - they would have flown instead if they had known what was about to occur. To the West they could see a cloud approaching at speed. Before they knew it the cloud, which buzzed like a dozen chainsaws, was above them. They failed to react until it was too late. Millions of locusts broke away and fell upon them. They bit mercilessly through the rags and at their flesh as the people were sent to their heels and away. Infants, Mothers, Fathers fell victim to their carnivorous bites. The screaming crowd was no more after a moment and the parade was clear - except for the trampled carcass of a young boy that lay with his blood in a pool. His



tattered shirt lay next to him - the moth-eaten name of "Cannonball", that he had proudly worn across his shoulders from aged two, barely recognisable.

"I didn't mean it to be like this," Cried out Ernest, a single tear ran the length of his reddened cheek.

"Enough," Bellowed Cass with malice, "Your sort make me sick... I have done as you wished and now you blubber." He sent his heavy hand down across the shoulders of the blubbering figure afore him - to more than emphasis his displeasure.

"What is your third wish before it is you that perishes like that pathetic whelp down there with his damn head busted asunder?"

"I want my Princess back," He sobbed. "I want my poor dead Princess back..."

"Granted."

## 6 – The Expiation Department

Well, My Reader, how are you? I hope you are well. I am not. You see, things have turned somewhat pear shaped for Yours Truly of late - especially career wise. I've had to take a sideways step, as they are wont to call it hereabouts, after recent events in I.B., and I now work in the Expiation Department - it is Purgatory in here. My job, task... or whatever you wish to name it, is to register newcomers upon their arrival. I inscribe the deceased, The Dead.

The Dead come here at The E.P. to be cleansed - or purged, as The Elders prefer to call it, before they are allowed to move on to their desired destination. It is a monotonous occupation for someone like myself and I am sat in front of a monitor from dusk to dawn - not that there are any windows herein to witness the natural change in the hours. My office is... is sterile for want of a better word. The walls and high ceiling are white and the floor grey. The only access is via a lift

- whose sliding aluminium doors let The Dead in for the beginning of their journey - so much for the Peely Grates... and my name definitely isn't Pater. My desk sits annoyingly central and my computer hums like a deranged bumble bee as we are so overworked up here at level 3. The lift is up and down like a whore's draws - for want of a better phrase. After I have processed the dead - that is take all of their details, I give them a form to take with them to level 2, The Cleansing room.

Can you guess who works in The C.R.? You will be grinning like a loon shortly if you have just now uttered Sisyphus. Yes, it is Sisyphus, who was also moved sideways on after an unfortunate indiscretion with his bowel movements, who blasts out the Dead's organs with his high powered hose - such an endless task is that - and it sure as Hades beats pushing the barrow for a punishing eternity. Nevertheless, despite the monotony, we do have regular breaks here and it is time for my lunch the now. I switch off the infernal machine, for all the information stored therein is very confidential, and head for the canteen. It is my favourite today, rissoles, and I am served by my favourite Dinner Lady, Doris. She often joins me in my repast and we touch knees under the long wooden tables at which we sit to eat. It is frowned upon that I fraternise with someone from the lower quarters - but we don't care about that - we are in very much in love. After I have eaten - and flirted like a good 'un with my beloved - I make my way reluctantly back to my desk. Sisyphus joins me in the lift on his way down to level 2.

*"fletum cobibere non posse."*(hardly able to restrain one's tears). He laments. I have heard it all before and I ignore him - he utters those words for effect and, besides, because of his ill temper toward me up at the I.B latterly, I have fallen out with him and do not wish to engage him in any conversation.

I have a feeling that something is amiss when I step out from the lift. I am just about to ask Sisyphus to delay a while in my department when the sliding doors close and make my request ineffectual. I can hear the buzz of the computer - did I not switch it off as I always do when going for my break? Of course I did. I can hear a flapping noise and I look up to see a enormous Magpie flying up at the rafters - its wing span must rival that of an Eagle. How did that get in here? Birds are not allowed into Expiation - it is forbidden. Before I call pest control, I must first go to the computer and find out whether the data therein has been accessed. However, I think that I am overreacting here, for it is nearly impossible to access the computer without a password. There are only two passwords which can gain entry. The first is my personal password - which I have never uttered to anyone, and there is the official password which is only known to Gus, and he would never let on - would He? My Cannonball screen saver has been activated - it's quite clever really, it shows The Cannonball taking a shot at goal and the ball passes through the hands of the goal keeper to his dismay - well I think it is clever! I jump back in alarm - someone has indeed been in. The page stands open at P. Prince Y, Prince Y.Z... Princess... Princess of England, Glass Palace, May 2004. &C is highlighted. Gadzooks! I have been infiltrated. What am I to do? I will be forced to take responsibility for this. Should I not let on? My mind is in a turmoil and to make matters worse, the d\_\_\_n Magpie decides to take a swoop at my head. I fend it off with a heavy volume and it sails back up to the rafters - it sends down a s\_\_\_t which splatters my toga. I am beside myself with anger and I kick out at the side of my d\_\_\_m desk. I regret this petulant act immediately as my toe nails painfully splinter asunder - open sandals, without a doubt, are not the correct

footwear for this kind of juvenile behaviour.

Pest control is engaged and I slam the receiver back into the holder so heavily that the sound resounds hideously about the chamber. 'To H\_\_\_l with them, I'll deal with the vermin myself. I fashion a sling shot from my belt and handkerchief - it is a goodly weapon indeed, even if I say so myself. I cut a ball bearing from the obligatory executive toy which sits useless atop of my desk, and place it into the sling ready. I'll take the bird in one, I predict. It looks down at me with a smugness that reminds me of someone that I would rather forget... I forget who. I take careful aim. Whoosh!!! I let it go with a quick flick of the arm. D\_\_\_m it the bird has flown. The ball bearing bounces ineffectual from wall to wall until... Ouch... dizziness...

...I am shaken awake by a rough hand. Sisyphus stands over me breathing his turd breath into my face - that in itself is enough to send one back to the land of Nid. My head is throbbing like a good 'un and my mouth is as dry as a Turkish tram driver's jock strap. Sisyphus tries to shove a flask between my lips but I push him away with a unexpected surge of strength.

"What is occurring with you?" He returns in disgruntlement.

"The bird, has the bird flown?" I ask through cactus lips.

Sisyphus looks to the heights. "I can see nothing." He replies in bewilderment.

I grab the flask from his fingers and take a long draught - lest I should remain parched.

"Have you seen anything out of sorts at your department this last hour or so?" I ask, remembering my dilemma.

He shakes his head in a negative response.

I must get over to level 1, Storage, to see if anything is amiss thereabouts.

The doors open and I step out at level 1 - Body Parts Storage (BPS). A wooden counter stands three steps from the doors and a small man wearing a brown coat and cap stands behind and awaits my interrogation. He is leant over some papers upon which he traces a path with a chewed-top biro.

"I have some questions for you old 'un." I announce without any nice introduction.

He looks up from his work. "And maybe I have some questions for \*you\*," He answers in vexation.

"You have some questions for me? Never."

"Well if I did, I would ask thou why thou has shite all over yer toga and a hole in your skull."

I put my hand up to my head to feel the warmth of my blood leaking from a gaping wound - notwithstanding that my legs go wibbly, wobbly, for once I am able to remain standing and coherent.

"Well I do indeed have a question for you and if you do not answer it forthwith, I will let my friend here rip you limb from limb." I menace whilst indicating to Sisyphus, who is stood to my rear, with my raised thumb - in truth Sisyphus could not pull the piggedly legs from a daddy-longlegs without a struggle.

"Then if that is your attitude, I will tell you to bollocks and return to my office at the back."

I look to Sisyphus for guidance. He smiles and steps forward. "I think we may have got off on the wrong foot just now, My fine fellow." He suggests calmly.

"Maybe we have, young man."

Sisyphus leans to the counter. "Has anything strange and curious happened hereabouts this last hour or so, Comrade?"

"No... nothing at all."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

We are just about to leave when I hear him mutter: "Princess of England, Glass Palace, May 2004. &C" I turn abruptly to see him send an inky line through the same information on his page.

"What is that you utter?" I ask.

He repeats the same.

"Why are you referring to The Princess of England just now." I inquire - struggling to keep my fingers from his turkey throat

"I have just released her body parts if you have to know - but I didn't say so if you let on."

"And prey tell who you let these parts to," Interrupts Sisyphus, sensing my urgency.

"He was an Instigator - showed me his badge, he did... "

"...What did he look like," I, in turn, interrupt"

"Usual... bit like you... his white vest apart."

Careful inquiries suggest that the Princess' shell has been removed from The R.I.P, or Residual Intern Pacing Department to give its proper name, and taken by the same also. Who would have a care to fool around with something such as that combination... surely not an Instigator as the man suggests? That wouldn't be right in the way of things... would it, Dear Reader? To fool about with the deceased is not allowed hereabouts and someone will pay dearly.

### 7 – The Return of the Queen

\*The hand of our dear Ernest,  
Will steer us through the melee.  
We'll fight across the streets of Albufeira,  
to see his arm lifted in victory.\*

**(sung to the tune of Land of Hope and  
Glory)**

There was a good feeling about the land of the Ingerlish. Their beloved soccer eleven, with Cannonball well at the helm, were favourites to win the forthcoming European Footballing Tournament. It was to be held in Portugal and the team were due to fly out on the Saturday and 3 days before the opening game against the much hated and despised French.

\*\*\*

"Shall you be at the football, Ernest?" Asked the Princess as she lightly stroked at his thunder thighs, "Or shall you remain here with me and let someone else take on your cannonball shooting?" She added with a mock naiveté.

"I have to be there to lead the line, My Princess," replied our hero modestly - thereafter kissing his bride with a loud smack.

"It's not fair," sulked The Princess, "we are newly weds and you shouldn't want to leave my side."

Ernest sighed heavily and made to embrace his wife.

"Get the fuck off me you simpleton, for I shall have your head for this betrayal." The Princess raged as she pushed her man away with venom.

"If anyone's head is for the taking, it will be yours for sure," roared Cass as he stormed unannounced into the room - a line of flunkies followed close at heel. "Is it *\*your\** name they are chanting night and day outside the castle walls? I think not."

The Princess grabbed her gown and was gone from the room in a huffy trice. In her absence, Cass sat down at the foot of the bed and inhaled deeply for effect. He sent off the sycophants with a wave of his hand - they stumbled awkwardly as they backed out from the chamber.

"There shall be no question of your absence from the squad for Portugal, Ernest."

Ernest shrugged. " But maybe...."

"... There shall be no question of your absence from the squad... Ernest"

Ernest nodded his accord.

They gathered outside of the castle as they had done before - Cass had instructed that it was right and allowed that they should once more. As before, it was impossible for Ernest to look down onto the parade from a window without hearing a stirring chorus of the latest Cannonball ditty. He felt wretched and missed his beloved Princess - he hadn't seen her since yesterday, and he was due to fly away with the squad the next day. He slouched into his throne - lonely and in torment. Only a few days earlier he had sat there proudly with his beautiful bride and the flashbulbs of the world's press at his beck and call. To his pleasant surprise, the heavy wooden door creaked opened and he saw his wife standing there at the entrance and with a smile. The door shut behind her as she stepped in. She was wearing a purple hooded cloak which fell to the floor as she made her way seductively towards her melancholic husband. He well appreciated her near nakedness as she dropped her head between his mighty thighs. His head fell back with pleasure... pain.... pleasure... pain... pain... PAIN? His hand went to the wetness and he sighed in premature relief, for the Princess jumped up from him with her teeth all bloodied and mean. She laughed like a maniac as a used dagger dropped to the floor with a metallic clang that resounded about the vast chamber. Cass came running as his charge bellowed out in agony - a deep slash had cut nearly through to the femur and his foreskin was in teeth-marked tatters. The hacked femoral artery sprayed blood about like a loose fireman's hose. A doctor was

summoned forthwith. The Princess found herself dragged to the dungeons with only the rats for company as the doctor battled to save her husband's life. The blood-spattered doctor also found himself behind bars as soon as he had won the fight and Ernest's blood had leaked out no more - for he would never have the chance to let on what had occurred there that day.

The crowd dropped off into silence when the Cannonball - the King of the Thunderbolt Shot - was not seen walking across the tarmac towards the waiting plane with the rest of the Ingerland squad. The press demanded of his whereabouts as they snapped indifferently at the rest. Cass promised a press conference to explain the centre's absence and set off to arrange it at once. However, a disgruntled Ingerland supporter bounced a half brick off his crust as he hurried away. By the time Cass had recovered from his misfortune - with 86 stitches and a brain scan - Ingerland had lost their first game to the French by 3 goals to their 0. The whole country was up in arms and demanded to know why Cannonball had betrayed them so - would he rather spend his time with his bride in Cannonball castle than leading the line against the frogs? The mood had turned well ugly on the parade as the few invited members of the press made their way gingerly through the angry crowd and across the drawbridge and into the castle.

They entered to see Cannonball sat at his throne wrapped in an ermine robe - which reached right down to his toes. The thick drapes were drawn shut and a rope held the hacks at a goodly distance. Cass, with his head swaddled like a mummy's, stood firm to his man's shoulder. One question apiece was all that he had allowed - a Henchman stood to their rear clutching a bat of sorts. However, they never even had that before

the Henchman ran amok about their noodles with his deadly aimed bat - 'cept for one, who stood like a scared rabbit staring into the headlights of an approaching truck. The fallen journalists moaned and expired as their blood mingled with the like coloured carpet that had led them up to their King.

"You are to tell them that the Cannonball is ill with the flu presently and, with Gus' blessing, may be up for the Portugese." said Cass as he put his hand on the shaking shoulder of the one that remained. "Or you will meet the same fate as your colleagues." He added with grim menace.

The lethal bat came down one more time at Cass' instruction. Poor Cannonball, weak to death with the poison that ran through his very veins from the blade of the dagger, fell from his throne with his head rent asunder.

"He is of no matter anymore," said Cass with a smirk.

The hack did as he was asked and the crowd was relatively sated for the short now. They waited impatiently as the next game, which was against the Swiss, loomed.

She... The Princess, had a goodly plan. Her last imprisonment had left her slender - skeletal some would call it. Death had fattened her none and it wouldn't take many days of starvation before she would be able to push through the bars of her cell and away. The doctor grew portly in her demise - until he ate her intended soufflé with the ground up glass in it - then it was his \*untimely\* demise.

### **Ingerland 0, Switzerland 0**

Cass was financially concerned, no less than an unlikely victory against the high flying hosts, Portugal, in 3 days time would see the Ingerlish to the quarters. Four dozen crates of Cannonball memorabilia had to be shifted before that

game - or his agent's profit would go to the dogs. He sent out the hack once more, who \*promised\*, that Cannonball would be at the Portuguese like St Gorge was against the dragon.

The day of the Portugal game duly arrived, and The Princess was able to push her emaciated frame through the bars of her cell. She waited in the shadows for the outer door to open at supper time and then she would flee past the unsuspecting guard - a bundle of rages served as a distraction under her discarded bedclothes. She felt nauseous with hunger and tears streamed down her onion face. This was indeed a Hull hole - even for her - the stinking carcasses of the press rotted all about her feet and the hideous mouth of the doctor remained open in her sight long after his scream had died its death.

As regular as clockwork, the bolts were drawn from their locks. The guard stumbled slightly in the dim light as he made his way forward with platter in hand - a dubious handkerchief was wrapped tightly across his chops to keep back the ungodly aroma that wafted hereabouts.

"Supper time, my lovely," He let out with sarcasm.

He bent low and pushed the tray through the flap and into the Princess' cell. Instead of sneaking by and fleeing like she had planned, she rushed forward like a Harpy and dashed the guard's head into the bars - he fell dead as a door knocker in a trice. She stripped off his clothes and put them on - the gruesome handkerchief made her gag as she tied it about her nose and mouth. In disguise she walked calmly from the cells - shooting the bolt as she went.

Cass was sat on the throne as she came to the hall. He drummed his fingers impatiently on the golden and clawed armrests - for two crates still remained. They would be announcing the team for match against Portugal soon and Cannonball would be absent. He had

checked that the drawbridge was drawn and that the portcullis was secure - his Henchman stood to the inner gates with his bat ready to crack a few skulls if an unlikely penetration should ever occur. The Princess walked by Cass and made her way to the doors and thereafter, hopefully, towards the inner gates and portcullis that would see her escape...

"Guard!" Cass called out before she was able to step from the chamber.

"Yeah?" She replied, in her best Billy Goat Gruff tones without once turning to face.

"Is the Princess well?"

"She is."

"Good... no more ground glass in her supper, then. We may have to give her to them should they ever break through our defences - afterall it was her that stuck the dagger in his thigh and bit a hole thorough his cheesy foreskin."

"Too true." She said as she stepped out through the door - the handkerchief still tied firmly across her face.

The Henchman stood afore her with his back to the wall smoking a cigarette. He looked out and without a care over the baying mob that stood with its angry toe to the moat. The team had been announced without the inclusion of the Cannonball and they wanted his treacherous blood.

"You are wanted in the great hall," The Princess let out to the nonchalant guard upon her arrival. "I am to stand your guard until your return."

"You are it then," said the guard as he tossed her the bat and keys before starting off to see whatever was his want. As soon as he was gone, The Princess unlocked the gates and then endeavoured to wind up the heavy portcullis - it was difficult because she was weak with starvation and her puny arms ached like the D\_\_l. However, despite her dire condition, she managed to raise it a metre.

She stooped low and crawled through the gap. The drawbridge was much easier to operate - the very weight of the timber brought it crashing down across the moat without any effort.

"They have killed him... the Cannonball has been taken from you by murder!" She yelled out as the snake throng wound its way across the drawbridge and into the very guts of the castle - for there was nothing to bar its way this evening.

### 8 – Enlightenment

The loyal Henchman soon fell under foot and was trampled to death as the lager-swilling hordes funnelled into the great hall and singing their rude songs. Their Queen, with strength renewed, led the line with a swagger - she swung the bat around her head with the dexterity of a Samurai warrior.

"That is him... that is he who has murdered The Cannonball," She bellowed as they came across Cass, as he prepared to flee. "There is nowhere for you to go, Cass for you are surrounded."

Cass laughed out loud and then took to the air. He flew high and well above their up stretched arms. He was away.

"A gold ducat for whoever brings that man down." The Queen solemnly promised her people.

However, it was a ducat that was to remain in her purse. For, although Cass soared high as he left the castle, he could not resist a flyby in order to cock-a-snook at his aggressors, as they threw rocks up into the air that were never to reach his head. Unfortunately, for him, he failed to notice a 707 flying overhead. His sorry pate smashed into the fuselage and he dropped like a stone down onto the parade - many hands were soon upon him and before he could recover.

"Unhand me for I am the son of Gus," he yelled as he was roughly hoisted up to their shoulders.

"You? You are the son of Gus?" said the Queen as she urged on her people. "Nail him to the very door of our castle and see if Gus should deliver him to safety, then." She added in a hostile tone.

He screamed out in agony as the nails were driven through his palms and feet - the crowd enjoyed every painful grimace that he gave. They stood, however, with surprising reverence and watched as his life painfully and slowly slip away... The Son Of Gus.

The Queen returned to her throne afterwards and demanded a council. 20 were duly elected and went to her - the rest returned quietly to the parade to await their representation.

"If we want true freedom we need to take it from the Gods - we must rebel. You there, sir," She indicated to a swarthy fellow with a beard, "Take as many men as you want and strip the forests of Nottingham of their finest oaks - then build me many ladders... ladders that will reach up into the clouds and into the very hearts of the Gods. You, my man," She said to a tall man wearing a cap. "You will take some men and burn Londinium to the ground - you are to be my general." He touched his cap as a way of return. "The rest of you must go out into the country and bring me an army. For after 7 nights of riotous celebration from this day forth, we will paint our faces in woad and take to the clouds to have our revenge. Now go and do as I say!"

\*\*\*

The Queen, with her face painted blue, watched with red and flaming eyes from her balcony, as the tallest of ladders were hoisted up into the clouds. Her red and white daubed army, fresh from 7 days of celebration, waited patiently for her order. However, just as she cleared her

regal throat to speak, the clouds darkened and it began to rain. The rain soon turned heavy and thunder lit up the early morning skies. The Queen leaped back into the safety of the castle as hail, the size of golf balls suddenly fell from the sky and down onto the heads the people. They screamed out in terror and were well ready to flee. However, before they began to turn a heel, the door of the castle flew open and across the drawbridge came running the Queen - knocking the hail for six with her bat as she went.

"Upward and onward," she demanded as she placed her foot on the first rung of a ladder - her blond hair blowing wildly in the wind.

They took up her example and up they went - their bodies falling as ninepins as they were knocked from their climb by the murderous hail. It was of no concern, however, for in the grand picture, for everyone that fell there was another 50 who could step into their shoes. Like ants they swarmed up the ladders and into the clouds to do battle - their brave Queen well at the head of the forward line.

\*\*\*

Well... you could say that that was the beginning of the end - or indeed the end of the beginning. Nice words - well remembered... but do not mean a dash... in the way of things. The Gods... they soon perished... they were no match for the Ingerlish in full flight and spurned on by their brave warrior Queen. \*What of Gus then?\* I hear you ask, \*What happened to Gus?\* No one really knows what happened to Gus - it was if he had never existed at all. One minute he was being defended by The Head Hitter, who swung his mighty shovel about the boney bonces of the enemy, the next, he was gone.

The Head Hitter was one of the twain, alongside Sisyphus, who came out

of the battle with some credit - although both lay dead as the proverbial dodo at the close. The Head Hitter swung his shovel for effect for many an hour before he fell. As it happened he slipped upon the blood of the fallen and fell from the clouds and down onto the North Yorkshire Moors. With both legs smashed and unable to stand, he shovelled up earth and threw it over his enemies as they climbed down their ladders to put him to a cruel finish. He ended his time in a vast amphitheatre - so much earth he had replaced - and surrounded by a vast hill which under lay buried many of the Ingerlish. From that day forth it was to be known as The Hole of The Head Hitter.

Sisyphus fought like a lion, he had quite got used to eternity and didn't want it to end. Unfortunately he was no match for The Queen who cracked his skull like an egg with her bat. It was rumoured that with his last breath he beseeched her: \*Queen, save our gracious Gus.\* Ah, a terrible irony that.

Me? What happened to me? Well you may say, that is quite a different story. Adieu... for the now.



**New Sure**  
**By Dan Halpern**

A fresh tune, a flesh wound, a misdemeanor  
Has never been meaner. Frowning for future  
And downing the new sure. Positive, we've  
    Never been so certain about the negative.  
Lightning sky bolts, thunder cloud cracks, exploiting  
Hidden perspiration under coattail, wind-blown umbrellas,  
    Inside out and thrust through the thirsty drowned.  
Mighty fist clenched armored Greek heroes can't  
Douse the fire of ten thousand smiles.  
Silent for a while  
Quiet and beguiled  
Lonely and defiled  
Sharper than any sight, hurting more than any fight,  
Dipped into the ink pad of light  
Ripped like a mirror reflecting sun night  
Empowered by teacher and forgetting his height  
Questioning questions and answering... right?  
    Frailty  
    Mailed me  
    One letter  
Too many

Poison arrows by robber barons  
City stacks of smoke and shacks, lifted fingers of God's  
    Cigarette pack  
Mars away  
Stars today  
Cars anyway

Young blood in old shoes, same blues in new news  
Yikes!

Start over, roll, Rover, good luck granted by a mutated clover  
and the Sky still stays the Sky

## 4 Poems By Ray Sucre

### Timber Warship

Shitkicker manwall, jean-tightened  
on spindle legs,  
shitkicker forward to my route  
burning coal in is stomach.

You have rolled into giant flesh  
and armored your hull in cellular prides.  
“Fuckin’ asshole.” says your tongue  
and teeth, from the Anglo and  
box-chested span,  
the gallon hat and boot-tips.

“I am pennies of great size,  
bound along; Titan, there are  
certainly more children  
for your belly elsewhere.”

Your arms reach like cedar beams  
come crashing up; I motion to pass  
but your wall moves to me,  
hairless, drunken, work-shirted wall.  
My arms are crushed, my body lifted.

I flare my knees so your boa jaw  
can’t divide me, but I am imperfect  
and first lost are my feet.  
The cowboy jaw distends,  
I jerk about your teeth as they  
chew my shins down,  
then my knees are broken, my thighs  
pulled through. My hips snap  
as you gag and drag them  
into the gullet.  
I can’t feel; my belly is pierced  
like a pouch of river water.

Shitkicker warship, I bleed smoke  
from my nostrils.  
See? Do you see?

Then, the mouth shivers and I am  
spat out, burst as if from a keg  
of saliva.  
"Don't come back to the Timber Tavern."  
he bellows.  
I'm shoved to the door like an earwig  
shaken from a burning endive.  
"You hear me?!" My fingers nudge  
weakly for the door.  
"okay," I mutter, "and have a good one."

The weaker one leaves and the  
stronger one stands.  
Both of us need so few to notice.

### Twice Over

The narrow head sins, = wallows @ heart-sold stranger,  
{becomes oiled and dies}> wearing nothing,  
then @ arrowheads in swallows = heart's oldest ranger,  
{become soiled and die}< swearing nothing.

### While on Vacation

Flystrip no work  
housefly go low  
circles slow down  
touch flat go  
egg-laying crazy  
make maggots in  
steak from freezer  
left out days.

Two return home,  
live live live  
and they clean.

### The Body (A Dialogue)

"Why'd he jump? Why would he?"  
"He had a thing against guns or pills."  
"I knew him twelve years- off and on."  
"I knew him three, but mostly off."  
"What do you think could have caused it?"

"What caused it. Whatever caused it."  
 "God... all those machines we saw..."  
 "Expensive ones, too."  
 "They were hooked in him? *All* of 'em?"  
 "Every one."  
 "And that godawful stink."  
 "That's normal. That's how it smells."  
 "What a mess. What a damned, stinking mess, the whole thing."  
 "A mess, yeah. How do you think he felt?"  
 "I don't know. I guess like jumping off a building."  
 "There you go. And here we are."  
 "You want to know somethin'? I never liked that ponytail of his."  
 "What? He loved his ponytail. What's wrong with that?"  
 "You know how ponytails are. He was just lookin' for some ass."  
 "Well, who isn't? Pay respect. Who cares about a dead-guy's hair?"  
 "I never met a guy with a ponytail wasn't horny all the time."  
 "Everybody's horny. It's got nothin' to do with hair."  
 "That ponytail... it bugged me."  
 "Shit, every last man for himself, I say. Besides, pay respect."  
 "I can't stand here lookin' at him. I don't feel so good."  
 "You can stand it. Pay respect."  
 "Well, I'm doin' it. I'm here."  
 "It's the right thing. This was a good guy."  
 "You know, he was always around if you wanted him."  
 "Yeah, he used to lend me money when I saw him."  
 "Good guy. You know?"  
 "Yeah, he was one to know. Great guy."  
 "*Great* guy."  
 "And he was always payin' tabs. Buyin' rounds."  
 "Generous."  
 "Yeah. Hell, he was *too* generous"  
 "I never paid him back anything."  
 "Exactly. Me neither. Not a damn cent."  
 "God, you're right. Too generous. What a mess."  
 "He'd have loaned you his ass and shit through his ribs."  
 "I wonder if he kept a tab. On me. Or you. You know?"  
 "Just pay your respect to him now."  
 "Yeah, I guess that evens it."  
 "Doesn't even anything. Man's dead."  
 "At least you can't see the ponytail the way they got him layin'."  
 "You know what bugs me? He doesn't look very *peaceful*."  
 "It's the posture or somethin'. And the makeup is funny."  
 "Yeah, you're supposed to look peaceful, right?"  
 "That's what everybody says, at least."  
 "I'm sayin' no makeup in my will after this. It's too weird..."  
 "Yeah, I think that's it; it's all that shit on his face."  
 "So weird..."  
 "Unnatural."

“...”  
“...”  
“But he was a good guy.”  
“Generous.”  
“Respectful.”  
“He was a great guy.”

## **Keeping a Broken Heart in Check** **By Bryon D. Howell**

I have two space  
heaters -  
both of which are  
off  
right now.

I have a window  
which is wide open.

The fan is on  
forever.

It's March in  
New England.

Just last week,  
the temperature  
dipped  
well below zero.

Tonight,  
I couldn't cool this  
apartment off  
if I dragged an iceberg  
into the room.

Plus,  
it would be  
way too much work  
moving the elephant  
to make room  
for the pink seals.

Since you left,  
I am too weak  
to do much of

anything.

My heart can't  
make up its  
mind  
if it's hot  
or cold.

I haven't shaved  
in over three  
weeks.

I'm turning  
into a polar bear.

I'm tired of eating  
tuna fish.

Maybe if I  
dig a hole  
through the floor  
the elephant  
will simply  
fall  
through?

On second  
thought,  
that's not  
a good idea.

I don't need  
anymore excuses  
to fish -  
and I know  
I'm just not  
ready for visits

from pink seals.

## **2 Prose Poems** **By Thomas Wiloch**

### The Bird and the Rock

A bird mistakes a rock for an egg and builds a nest around it, sits on the rock. As the weeks pass by she occasionally pokes at the rock with her beak, wonders why this egg is so very hard. The days wear on. Other birds have hatched their eggs but hers remains intact. It will not hatch.

"Patience," she tells herself as the other birds squawk derisively. "All I need is patience."

At night, the bird hears the faint chirping of her dream children. Their open, hungry mouths reach to her.

She feeds her children pebbles, mistaking them for berries.

### Diamonds

A woman saves her tears in a glass jar. The tears solidify, become diamonds. She wears the diamonds around her neck. How beautiful, people tell her.

The compliment brings tears to her eyes.

## Book Reviews

### TALES FROM THE VINEGAR WASTELAND by Ray Fracalossy

*Tales from the Vinegar Wasteland* is a trip worth taking. The plot, while it starts slow, picks up about halfway into it and pushes through to the end as one of the most exciting and riveting reads put out under the bizarro umbrella. The imagery is fantastic and satisfyingly surreal. At times, both the setting and the imagery work to remind you of the Bunuel and Dali film, *Un Chien Andalou*, with the same soft surrealism and aesthetics. Absurdism is at work in this novel but nothing over the top, and definitely no “weird for weird’s sake,” as so much bizarro literature is accused of. This book bears the characteristics of genuine hallucination; it reads, in many sections, like an acid trip. Read “Chapter 39 Minutes” to get a feel for what I’m talking about, the hallucination sequence that begins on page 98. It’s one of the most enthralling I’ve read in a long time.

The book follows an ambiguous narrator through the irreal events that happen in his city, like his meetings with a faceless friend or his explorations of a room in another friend’s house that at times ceases to exist; stores that change hands over the course of a walk through town and act as if they’ve always been there; an encounter with Ray Fracalossy which leads to the narrator getting a chance to read about himself in *Tales from the Vinegar Wasteland*... mind-bending stuff which, because Fracalossy pulls it off so cleanly, we have no choice but to believe. But things really pick up when the narrator falls into a glitch in time and finds himself on the train to heaven. You won’t be able to put the book down until the very end, a journey that includes

meeting guardian angels, the Sunflower of Direction, and seeing the face of God himself...

Do yourself a favor and pick this book up. It’s fresh, unique, and truly genuine; the kind of voice we need more of to accelerate this bizarro vision.

### VACATION by Jeremy C. Shipp

*Vacation* is an intelligent novel that will take your head to another place. Shipp has immediately proclaimed himself as a powerful new voice on the scene that I suspect will help greatly in putting bizarro on the map. Less-off-the wall crazy than the rest of the genre but some of the most solid writing within it; there’s a great deal of surrealism but with more of a grip on reality, and the crisis here is a more human one than bizarre. Throughout the novel the protagonist, Bernard Johnson, is dealing with more than just the dreamy circumstances surrounding him; he’s coming to terms with himself and his past and overcoming doubts which have been imbedded in him throughout his entire life. And even though set in a dystopian society, *Vacation* has a lot to say about important real-life issues, such as the faults of the pharmaceutical industry and the school systems, which hit too close to home to be brushed off as mere fiction.

Bernard Johnson is an English professor greatly dissatisfied with his “secure American Dream.” He doubts whether he can attribute any of his success to himself – his wealth, his girlfriend, his status – and feels he only got to where he is because of his father’s position in the education system. He also struggles with the guilt of his lost twin sister, who died when they were both in the womb. He takes the Vacation, a yearlong corporate sponsored trip around



the world that every citizen gets once in their life, to discover himself and the world. What he finds, however, is not at all what he expected. “This Vacation must be a dream. Instead of obtaining souvenirs, I leave parts of myself behind.” Bernard is abducted through dreams to a world apart from the one he’s been taught; a world of small, suppressed societies that are aware of the fabrications presented on the rest of the planet and willing to do whatever it takes to expose them. He travels through a nightmare forest alone before being rescued into the safe haven of the Garden, a paradisiacal society that has a darker core to them than we see on the surface, and is brought through a series of initiations into the higher mind of these people. But all the while, Bernard can’t help but wonder if it may have been better to be left in the dark. Written with prose that reads like a breath of fresh air, *Vacation* is a book that will make you think on every page all the way to the volatile climax.

IF (SID\_VICIOUS == TRUE &&  
ALAN\_TURING == TRUE)  
{ERROR\_CYBERPUNK();} by  
Jason Rogers and Jason Earls

This book will fuck you up. Jason Rogers’ contribution, *Manufactured*, is one of the more interesting Rogers pieces I have read to date – but it’s still a Rogers piece, and will seem very inaccessible to some. It alternates between a man’s clearheaded account of being one of the few survivors left on Earth and incomprehensible prose that could have been attained through a number of devices. They resemble raw cut-ups and the random association Rogers uses in a lot of his writing, such as *The FBI Says This Is Not Called the Sociopath*. Overall an entertaining story that acts as a good

warm-up to the bulk of the book, Jason Earls’ *I Sin Every Number*.

Jason Earls’ contribution is a lot more accessible while remaining very experimental and unique. I really see Earls becoming one of the big names in the scene, especially with the anticipated release of his novel, *Cocoon of Terror*, from Afterbirth Books.

*Reviews by Forrest Armstrong*

## The Hole

By Jeremy C. Shipp

If you haven't seen a 50,000 ton earthmover lately, look it up online, or stand here with me by the Plasma Shack display window, sucking on your filter, and watch our government blast one of these rabid puppies toward the moon.

"It's wrong," my sister would say. Along with all her nail-biting cohorts around the globe, of course. They have a problem with the fact that the Secretary of Defense once owned the company that's paying for this multi-billion-dollar operation. I say, they're getting the job done, so who gives a shit?

Washington the Earthmover funnels into the Hole, atom by atom. The process will take about three days, but I'm only willing to devote three more minutes.

After about two and a half, crimson sparks gush out of the Hole. For a moment, I'm afraid this is It. The end. But no, it's only static.

Still, this could be the Enemy's work.

Like the girl beside me says, "Fucking Ens."

The Enemy usually sticks to poking at the big fish, like the stock market, government agency networks, and resource distribution super computers. But sometimes, they practice on us. They experiment.

I bet the little Enemies-in-training sit in their air-conditioned classrooms and molest our TV screens, our homes, our lives, and they laugh at us. Then after a blackout or a car crash, they give each other high fives. Or sixes. Whatever.

"Fucking Ens," I say.

And I repeat this phrase, mindlessly, after the clown in a pink tutu pulls a knife on me in the parking lot.

"What did you call me?" he says, and drops the knife.

I could probably kick his head when he bends down to retrieve his weapon, but I don't.

Instead, I say, "Nothing."

"Give me your wallet and your jewelry."

I hand over my wallet. "I don't have any jewelry."

"Your watch."

I'm not sure if that counts as jewelry. I don't say so.

Even now, with hot urine slithering down my leg, I don't blame the clown. He's a victim of the Enemy, just like you and me and everyone we know. If the government didn't have to spend so much on the war, maybe this guy would get a fair piece. Maybe then his smile would be real, instead of two painted on purple slugs.

"I should cut you for calling me a faggot," he says.

"I didn't," I say.

He goes on to say more, and I think I catch the word diatribe, but I'm not really listening at this point. The knife creeps closer.

When he loses his grip again, the weapon doesn't fall to the cement. For a moment, the blade sits in the air. Then it flips. Then it jitters its way to the clown's eye. The contorting metal wiggles inside the flesh, and blood soon replaces the tears painted on the man's cheeks.

You might imagine a sizzling energy spewing from my fingertips or my third eye, and you might imagine my brow furrowed in dense concentration. But that's not how it is.

I'm standing here shuddering in the cold with my forehead baking in fear, and all I'm really thinking about is how I need to get Einstein to his novelty pork chop shaped heat rock.

The clown gurgles.

As soon as I see a message of blood forming on his puffy orange shirt, I

know it's time to go. I read, "My father is," before managing to turn around.

Someone will call the police. Not me.

Maybe he'll live.

I slide into my car, and suffice it to say, I'm more than a little surprised.

I haven't done anything like this since I was a kid.

\*\*\*

"About half a dozen rankin...rankin...rankin..." my father says.

He says this because of the Enemy. Because if the government didn't have to spend so much on the war, I'm sure a vaccine or something would have been discovered years ago. Maybe then my father could say "raisin."

"They're all on it down half a dozen," my father says.

And if I'm going to be completely honest, sometimes I blame my father.

Maybe if he'd become someone important, instead of a construction worker, he wouldn't be like this. Maybe he would have eaten better and lived in a neighborhood with less poison in the water and the air and everywhere.

Maybe my father could have tried harder.

"It wouldn't kill you to talk to him," Kaelin says. She scrubs at the shit-stain on the ground. The shit itself is wrapped up in a napkin beside her. I wish she would throw it away already.

"He can't understand me," I say.

"You don't know that," she says. She carries the napkin on the palm of her hand, almost like she's about to give someone a present. But she drops it in the trash. The shit is one of the main reasons why my father is confined to his room. That, and the rest of the house isn't dementia-proof. He once cut his arm with a pair of scissors, which he then

cooked in the oven alongside his granddaughter's favorite doll. By the end of it, the two objects had melded together into a cyborg of sorts.

"He likes hearing our voices," my sister says. "They're familiar. It's a comfort to him."

"You've always seen things that aren't there, Kaelin," I say.

She sighs.

The smiling faces in the photographs all over the walls stare at me, but don't see anything, as I scoop another mound of mashed potatoes into my father's mouth. Kaelin thinks these images make my father happy. I think she's the one that's happy.

"Would you like Taran to read you a story, dad?" she says, and plucks the apples out of my father's collection of shoes.

"Everyone down in the reason," my father says. "The reason."

If I could, I would launch my invisible energy into my father's mind, and piece everything back together again.

But I can't.

My power is all about intentions, but in real life, good intentions are never good enough.

My father's already gone.

"The reason," he says. "The reason."

\*\*\*

Einstein's right at home with the likes of Charles Darwin, Marvin Harris, Nikola Tesla. He belongs. Aside from my father and my sister, these are about the only other people in my life.

And yes, they are people.

It doesn't matter that they're snakes. They're also great minds, trapped in my cages, eating my mice. I can see beyond their physical forms and sense their past lives, as that's one of my many

awesome powers. Or maybe I just pretend that it is. Whatever.

Marie Curie coils and prepares to strike.

“You’re safe,” I say to the mouse.

I may be lying, because nothing’s happening. But at the last possible instant, the mouse shifts into the air. He swims in place.

“You’re dead,” I say, and he falls.

In a few suffocating moments, my words become reality. I’m so excited, I crap my pants a little bit. I thought the clown ballerina fiasco was a fluke, but this. This means I’m special.

I head to the bathroom to wipe my ass.

Years ago when I attended the Redmount School of Psychokinesis, I never killed anyone or anything. Mostly, I sat in an air-conditioned classroom, trying to move metal cubes across my desk, while the other kids laughed and gave each other high fives when they succeeded.

If you’ve never suffered through a psychokinesis school, you probably think it’s a lot of fun. But the constant surveillance isn’t fun. The Protocol isn’t fun. And fuck if Solitary’s ever any fun.

Sitting here on the toilet, moving a ceramic iguana back and forth across my sink, I remember crying alone in that plain white room. I remember my teacher saying, “I know you didn’t break Protocol on purpose. But this is the way it has to be or you’ll never learn,” before she slammed and bolted the door.

That’s the worst part. It’s your subconscious that performs the psychokinesis. Not you. But you’re always punished along with it anyway.

I didn’t want to trip anyone or fling food or stab Marty Martinez the Student Body President with a pencil. I didn’t intend to be a bully. Sure, part of me hated everyone for doing what I couldn’t, but every time I was set free

from that plain white room, I almost cried happy stupid tears when I saw my classmates again.

“I’m trying,” I told my dad on the phone. Long distance. “My mind just won’t listen to me.”

“Try harder,” he told me.

Like usual, I begged him to take me home.

Like usual, he said no.

He wanted me to be important, and I hated him for it. Every time I cried in the plain white room, wishing for smiling faces instead of plain whiteness, I hated him for not saving me.

I return to my snakes, and a thought comes to me like Godzilla comes to Tokyo. I know I can’t win, but I fight anyway. With everything I have.

In the end, I’m sitting on the cold floor, staring at my hands, thinking my monster thought.

I can’t save my father. I don’t have the power. But I can do the second best thing.

And get my revenge.

\*\*\*

“You can’t,” my sister says, and for once she stops working. She was busy transferring diapers from one large box to another large box. Now she’s not. “No one who enters the Hole ever comes back. There might not be a way back.”

“I’m not going there to come back, Kaelin,” I say. “I’m going to fight the fucking Ens.”

“You don’t even know what they’re capable of.”

“I don’t care. Life is a constant battle because of them. They shoot their rays and their emissions across the Universe and fuck with us without ever stepping foot on our planet. They make me sick.”

“It’s galaxies away, Taran. That’s too far.”

“Sooner or later, they’ll find a way to break through our shields and firewalls and armor. If that happens, civilization will collapse in a second. I can’t twiddle my thumbs and do nothing.”

“Dad needs you.”

“No.”

“I need you, Taran.”

“You know that’s not true.”

She sits in silence. Not because she’s given up on stopping me. She just knows that I’m immature and rebellious, and listing reasons for me to stay will only make me want to run away more.

“I’m going now,” I say.

“You mean going going?” she says.

“Yes.”

Tears trickle down her cheeks. She hugs me and squeezes me and it hurts.

“You can’t do this,” she says.

“Goodbye, Kaelin.”

“At least say goodbye to him.”

“No,” I say.

My father snores.

\*\*\*

Somewhere between the Earth and the moon, I funnel into the Hole, atom by atom, along with the other Space Force recruits. I think about my snakes. I wonder if they’ll enjoy freedom in the wild, or just die trying.

The three days are almost up, and no one’s said much of anything. I don’t mind.

I’m not afraid, because if I ask my subconscious to protect me from a giant blob or a swarm of alien insects or whatever the fucking Ens are, it will obey me. I will be saved.

The Enemy created the Hole so they could spit their venom onto our world, but the Hole will be their undoing.

I’m coiled and ready to go.

Lights flash.

I can’t breathe.

The moon disappears.

When I open my eyes, I expect to find a battlefield raging on outside the window.

I see thousands of missiles and ships and tanks and jeeps. I see geodesic domes. I see Washington the Earthmover.

They’re all floating in a chaotic and inactive heap.

There’s not a planet or an Enemy in sight.

A nearby ship hails us with a beep. It’s my job to activate the intercom, so I do.

“Welcome to the Junkyard,” the man says from the other ship.

I deactivate the intercom.

So maybe the Enemy aren’t here. And maybe they’re not anywhere.

Like the girl beside me says, “They’re not fucking real.”

What I know for sure is that I didn’t run away to escape nothing.

I left everything behind.

I didn’t see the whole message written with the clown’s blood, but I know what it said. It said, “My father is still in there.”

## **AUTHOR BIOS**

**Jason Earls** – Jason Earls is a writer and computational number theorist living in Texas with his wife, Christine. He has fiction published or forthcoming in *Thirteen*, *Red Scream*, *Bust Down the Door...* and other publications. His novel, *Cocoon of Terror* will be released by Afterbirth Books in 2007, and a split novel he wrote with Jason Rogers titled, *0.13610152128...* is now available at Amazon.com. Also look for his forthcoming novel, *I Sin Every Number*, due out soon.

**Michael Woods** – Michael Woods lives in British Columbia and is the author of the novel *Snail Gun* and plays bass as the founding member of the Triceratops Collective.

**Mark McLaughlin** – My fiction, nonfiction and poetry have appeared in more than 700 publications, including *Horror Garage*, *Flesh & Blood*, *Black Gate*, and two volumes each of *The Best Of The Rest*, *The Best Of HorrorFind*, and *The Year's Best Horror Stories* (DAW Books). Collections of my fiction include *Motivational Shrieker* and *Slime After Slime* from Delirium Books, and *At The Foothills Of Frenzy* (with co-authors Shane Ryan Staley and Brian Knight) from Solitude Publications. Also, I am the co-author, with Rain Graves and David Niall Wilson, of *The Gossamer Eye*, which won a Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Poetry.

**Miriam Mabel Martinez** – Miriam Mabel Martínez was born in Mexico City in 1971. She is the author of the story collection *Aquí y otros relatos* (Daga Editores, 2002). In the US, Toshiya Kamei has published translations of her stories in *Monday Night* and *Underground*

*Voices*. Miriam is looking for a publisher for her novel *The Mapmaker*.

**Forrest Armstrong** – Forrest is the editor of this magazine. He plays bass in a band called The Kymera Effect with poet Dan Halpern and lives near Boston. Listen to his new music project, The Beat Junkies, at [www.myspace.com/thebeatjunkiesboston](http://www.myspace.com/thebeatjunkiesboston)

**Rue Franklin** – I like to write. Most of the time I even go as far as committing the act of writing.

**Patrick O'Leary** – Patrick O'Leary is a short story writer and short film director. Other than writing and directing, he spends his time trying to find other ways to get out of his corporate cubicle job. His short stories will hopefully soon be found all over the world, but until then, you can see his short films by checking out [www.myspace.com/DVinitystudios](http://www.myspace.com/DVinitystudios).

**Jeremy C. Shipp** – Jeremy C. Shipp is an author whose written creations inhabit various magazines, anthologies, and drawers. These publications include the likes of *Flesh and Blood*, *Bust Down the Door and Eat All the Chickens*, *ChiZine*, *Until Someone Loses an Eye*, and *Darkness Rising*. While preparing for the forthcoming collapse of civilization, Jeremy enjoys living in Southern California in a moderately haunted Victorian farmhouse. He's currently working on many stories and novels and is losing his hair, though not because of the ghosts. Vacation, his first published novel, is due April 2007 from Raw Dog Screaming Press. You can visit his online home at <http://www.hauntedhousedressing.com>.

**Dan Halpern** – Dan Halpern is an 18 year old high school senior from Sharon, Massachusetts, and will be attending Ithaca College in 2007. Dan sings in the

band The Kymera Effect with poet Forrest Armstrong.

**Bryon D. Howell** – Bryon D. Howell is a poet currently residing in New Haven, Connecticut. He has been writing poetry for a great number of years. Recently, work of his has appeared in *poeticdiversity*, *Red River Review* and *The Quirk*.

**Thomas Wiloch** – My latest collection is *Screaming in Code*, from the Naked Snake Press. Also had work in *Bitter Oleander*, *Little Elegy*, *Big Toe Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and others.

**Ray Succre** – Ray Succre currently lives on the southern Oregon coast with his wife and baby son. He has been published in *Aesthetica*, *Laika*, and *Rock Salt Plum*, as well as in numerous others across as many countries. He tries hard.