

TIGERSHARK magazine



Issue Thirty-Four – Autumn/Winter 2023 – Alternative Times

Tigershark Magazine

Issue 34 – Autumn/Winter 2023

Alternative Times

Editorial

Alternative timelines and other lives. What truths lie hidden behind the tales we know and what might have happened had things been different?

Best, DS Davidson

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Editor and Layout: DS Davidson

Next Issue's Theme: Transformation

Change from one form or state to another.
Shapeshifters, whether magical, alien, or cursed.

Alchemical transmutations.

Reincarnation and rebirth

Political and social change.

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thinking of my life
how events went without you
how things might have been

By Aeronwy Dafies

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Actions...		
<i>By Donna McCabe</i>		
Ripples of life		
Actions having consequences		
Spreading far and wide.		

You Could be Roses

By Sebastian Herzfeld

All the pain would be gone and the sun would go down,
Every voice in town muffled beneath 6 feet of ground...
But if I'm still around?

I'll tell everyone the story of your faded bullshit glory,
And the fake smiles for every mile you walked in someone else's shoes.
I'll be blue.
I'll shed some tears and tell everyone you showed no fear at the end of life,
Though you cheated like hell on your loving wife without remorse at all.

And as they stand before the wall of your tomb and tell everyone the room beside it's open for the griever to be delivered to their waiting end?

They'll send flowers and they'll lie and they'll they'll fake every single good bye.
They'll see you in your pretty corpsed up poses and think...
Some day you might be roses.



Hiding Inside

By Valkyrie Kerry

Smothered from without,
bleak shadings muse live canvas,
It's hiding inside.

A viral spectre,
vomiting a ghastly hue,
it's hiding inside.
Binary plagued code divides,
unites on canvas.

Too Many Changes

By Celine Rose Mariotti

Too many changes
It makes your head spin,
Technology is not a win,
Too many changes,
All the rearranging,
Companies and banks,
New web sites,
Mergers and takeovers,
New CEO's,
New systems,
The world of the 20th century
Fading away
None of us have anything
To say,
A future with
No voices
No choices,
No freedom of expression
Too many changes,
Too much INDIGESTION!
CALL THE DOCTOR!

Read Celine Rose Mariotti's
Snow Monster From Uranus
on **Altered Reality Magazine**
Four parts online now, more to come!



Los niños que crecieron en tiempos de guerra por ser niños

ENTRADA

Francisco Capel

So as not to forget

By Ronald A. Busse

Oh, the burden!
Thirty-four years, although
The count will never end
Even after death,
For all of eternity cannot heal
And will not forgive

Oh, the guilt and remorse!
Pain that can never subside
Nor ever compare with
The pain you suffered,
Ending with the jolt that was
Your untimely death

It should have arrived
Even sooner
Only by grace were you spared
A little longer
So you may know love and
Gentleness before you departed

Oh, the pain, such selfish
Pain! Though I tried
To repent, tried
To forget again
And again but my memory
Keeps what it wants

A constant reminder,
A lesson learned but
Still practised
Endlessly and forever
But never mastered
And impossible to forget.

Untitled

By Wayne Russell

The pendulum swings to and
fro, counting moments of days.

A candle flame flickers in a dark
room, luminous; yet knowing.

Ghosts of a disgruntled past are
swirling, intertwined they moan.

Dusty windows are hazy, and
cracked right through.

A small rodent squeaks and
scampers away, into an opening
in the wall.

The voices of a haunted past
reverberate within this weary room.

As seasons change outside this
dilapidated clapboard house,
another candle has reached it
time of expiration.

The decrepit hand strikes a match,
weary arm reaching out, a new
candle has now been lit, the clacking
of an ancient typewriter resumes.



DONATELLO MAGALOUFE: THE HAT FILES AT LAST

By Neil K. Henderson

Historic documents have finally been released regarding mysterious Renaissance hat wearer Donatello Magaloufe, whom many millinery historians had thought to have been overlooked by posterity. Three written references to the hat-wearing courtier have now been authenticated and published in the hat section of *Sixteenth Century Style Abuse* by Arturo Bork, monkey photographer and peeping tome compiler.

The recently enlarged ‘bible of historic inelegance’ now records that Ippolito d’Este, cardinal and warrior, once wrote to explain some late attendance, remarking: “I had to give a kick to that hat-wearing nonentity Donatello Magaloufe.”

On another occasion, we find that Ludovico Ariosto, epic poet and diplomat, noted in his journal: “Our amusement was all quite ruined by Donatello Magaloufe, who was wearing a silly big hat with buns stuck on. It attracted so many pigeons that our clothes were all bespattered with their excrement.”

Finally, no higher an authority than Pope Alexander VI wrote: “Donatello Magaloufe, hereby excommunicate and abandoned to perdition for wearing a vile purple hat with yellow tassels near the Vatican.”

It would seem from these that Donatello Magaloufe was a well-known figure in his time, if not exactly loved.

“You could put it that way,” Arturo Bork agrees. “But then, it was only his outrageous headwear that drew attention to him. The hats, not he, were the personalities. He seems to have been a nobody in himself.”

Yet there aren’t any portraits even of those hats surviving, just the three references containing only two actual descriptions. And the descriptions themselves are pretty vague.

“Donatello Magaloufe was a pretty vague figure. Besides, they had nothing like this state-of-the-art digital camera then. With this baby, I could take a super-sharp likeness of yourself, for instance, and you’d have it on your smart phone instantly.”

And there we have to leave the enigmatic Donatello Magaloufe and his biographical miniaturist, Arturo Bork –

“Hold still a minute, till I get you in the frame. Come on! You don’t want to end up pictorially non-existent, do you? Don’t worry about the monkey, he won’t bite...”

– and close another door on history.

Ends

Snow in Lockdown

By DJ Tyrer

Children explode from their homes in a moment of unbounded freedom, doors flung open, chill air flooding into houses that had been sealed against the world. Apps forgotten, they revel in the snow, scuffing pathways through the pristine white, throwing snowballs, squealing in delight. Then, the snow is gone, the moment has passed, the children vanished.

Ends



The Cannabis Fliers

By Ross Balcom

*the Blue, the Green
the Leaf, the Wing
we are the Cannabis Fliers*

John Wayne, the swaggering Republican pilot and pothead,
worked for Ronald Reagan, the biggest dealer on the west coast.
He hooked us up with plants and planes, and we took to the boundless blue.

*The Leaf gave us Wing
and it's of the Leaf that we sing
we are the Cannabis Fliers*

Fueled with grass, our planes were steel stoners, hippie headcraft
built for altitude and speed. Marijuana miracles of flight,
they carried us on mission after mission in the perilous skies.

*our Story's no Lie
we're Sons of the Sky
the invincible Cannabis Fliers*

The psychedelic defence against all perfidy and terror,
we bombed the Commie hordes before they could take
our guitars, our grass, and our guns. The Duke cheered us on.

*We bomb Commies to Hell
and we think that's just swell
we are the Cannabis Fliers*

We kept America free, buzzing and high, the land of the leaf,
a stoners' paradise bought with fierce hippie steel.
Our light-show rippled across star-spangled skies.

*the Blue, the Green
the Leaf, the Wing
we are the Cannabis Fliers*



The Father Quack's Shadow

Poem and photo by Daniel de Culla

Whenever I walk
At the foot of this hill
The Father Quack's shadow
Appears to me
Dressed in his cassock
That is casting lots
Seeing which boy or girl
He touches or will touch
To take out their entrails.
A shepherd who saw him
Urinating with a long cock says:
– This sacrilegious priest
In that hole he has his bed.
There he hides
And he guards the children
And a puppy dog
That he found
Picking watercress
To make a salad.
This shepherd, according to
He saw him, one day, fussing
To a woman from Zamora
Regular of his parish
Turn them off and turn them off
To whom he begged:
– Up your two thighs
My zamorana bitch
If you don't give me the rabbit
I'll smack you in the face.
Then after
The lady told us:
– This priest Sacamantecas (quack)
Is the son of a black donkey
And a brown mare.
In a small cupboard
In a jar without a lid
Save butter from a child
That he kidnapped
When he jumped a wall.



Fading the Leather

By Valkyrie Kerry

Camouflage painting,
reptilian advantage,
fading the leather.

Rotating stark eyes,
waiting for the luncheon flies,
fading the leather.
Modern, cool dragon,
eternally impatient.

Reality

By Richard LeDue

When the simulation crashes,
we'll wake up
and wonder where the coffee filters went,
but the revolution will be on,
with people emerging naked and free,
as they reinvent clothes,
along with \$5 cappuccinos.

Bacchus Against The Wall

By Roy Duffield

83pp, 979-8397473811, \$13 / £10.21

This book leaves few institutions, few facets of the capitalist system unburned. Disparate and desperate are the voices who take to the pages of *Bacchus Against the Wall*. We live through a working-class youth, police brutality, war, and life on the road to rebellion. As well as the search for solidarity among the few genuinely trying to change things.

Includes the extended, never before published, "Bacchus Against the Wall –or– the orgy you know damn well's coming." All those silenced and suffering under the current system come together, for a transgressive *fiesta* – fighting violence with pleasure, oppression with liberation, hypocrisy and corruption with some decent exposure.

If you're about ready to stand up and start fighting for a better world, this book could be the straw that cracks your back.



Praise for *Bacchus Against the Wall*

"Forget about holding back, because Duffield sure as hell doesn't. His language is raw, unfiltered, and as honest as a drunk confession at 3 a.m. He captures the essence of Bacchus, that rebellious spirit that demands you break free from the chains that bind you."

— Owen Grey, author of *Puking Up Rednecks*

"Duffield's words don't tiptoe around polite society; they kick it square in the balls and laugh about it. This chapbook is a wild ride, an invitation to embrace your inner Bacchus and unleash the chaos within."

— Sophia Jameson, author of *Keep the Fat Side Down*

About the Poet

Roy Duffield is a nomadic writer, translator and editor, with strings of words in **Feminist Review**, **Rise Up Review**, **The Nashville Review**, and scores of zines. They've won some stuff, and been nominated and shortlisted for other stuff: most recently runner-up in the **Still We Rise** competition for revolutionary poems, inspired by Maya Angelou.

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EDGAR ALLAN POE, SEXUAL MISCONDUCT INVESTIGATOR

By Neil K. Henderson

A lately discovered memoir by Edgar Allan Poe has cast a startling new light on that most enigmatic author. His dissipation and tragic love life are an open book, but this journal tells more. "It was during a period when my fortunes were low," it begins, "that I accepted the post of Sexual Misconduct Investigator – a subject which was of interest to me, having been accused of it more than once myself."

It appears the document had been suppressed by the authorities, lest mass reproduction provoked a deluge of wantonness. Fortunately, one copy survived in the secret compartment of an escritoire auctioned at Baltimore. In it, Poe details some of the many cases he examined, often before they were reported. Indeed, his testimony suggests some inside knowledge of the business, often referring to brothers Jubilee and Escapologist Myrmidon, known purveyors (and no doubt inventors) of dubious 'romantic apparatus'.

For instance, there was the 'Petticoat Pendulum' – to be passed off by the host as an unusual clock feature. It would gradually slice through a lady's clothing while he kept her chatting. Then there was the 'Bustle Buster' – a portable pump used to inflate the buttocks while the lady victim was either asleep or unaware. It may have proved somewhat invigorating, as few ladies made a complaint. Poe also records a smaller version called a 'Corset Buster', used to boost the upper torso. (And one even smaller known as 'Gusset Buster', but we won't go into that.)

In a case worthy of his sleuth Auguste Dupin, Poe dealt with an outbreak of 'upskirting', as we call it now. From the "obliging testimony and physical re-enactments of the recipients", Poe was able to deduce the Myrmidon 'Patent Multiple-Leg Power Lens Periscope', a device used to infiltrate crinoline underskirts and similar bulky entrapments. "Sadly," he reports, "the apparatus is so widely available that no one perpetrator can be singled out." However, he notes with satisfaction that the inquiry yielded valuable material for his archives. These have not been found.

Poe, of course, could not be seen to use such 'criminal instruments' for his own forensic inspections. Hence the introduction of the 'Organ Utan' – an ape specially trained to investigate where Poe was too genteel (or not legally permitted) to go himself. Before the journal abruptly ends, the Organ Utan is reported to have "got underneath" the daughter of the Chief of Police.

The matter never came to court. He possibly claimed it was research for *The Murders In The Rue Morgue*.

Ends



The Reunion

By Samantha Brooke

He woke up with a painful crick in his neck from where he had fallen asleep on the sofa. The bottle of whiskey that he had been drinking to celebrate his success of the night before had fallen from his hand while he slept and rolled across the carpet, its contents spilling out and soaking into the threadbare surface underfoot. The smell of the pungent liquid was strong in the air and he breathed it in deep, with a smile on his face. For it was a smell that always reminded him of her. The very first night they met, all that time ago, had been at a house party thrown by a mutual friend. Neither of them had been in the mood to socialise much that evening – and so, before long, they had found themselves tucked away together in one of the quieter corners, passing a bottle of whiskey back and forth between them and swigging it down neat as they talked, both growing increasingly intoxicated. Neil hadn't been able to believe his luck. She was beautiful. Stunning. With dark red hair, sapphire blue eyes and ivory skin. And when she had asked for his number later that night, and then called him the very next day to invite him to go out for a coffee with her, he had been certain that he was the luckiest man on the entire planet.

From that point on, he and Clare had quickly become inseparable. He had asked her to move in with him after just a month, and she had happily done so. Everything had been absolutely perfect at first. A fairy-tale.

But then, the arguments had started to creep in. She often cried, accusing him of being controlling, jealous. She had thrown a mug at him on one occasion, hitting him on the side of the head. Her angry words and ugly accusations tore into him like barbed wire – and yet, through it all, he loved her more than life itself. He always forgave her. It was not really her fault, after all. He had a sneaking suspicion that she was unwell, mentally. Depressed, perhaps. Maybe even manic depressive. He had heard about those people. And when she was not shouting or weeping, she was silent and withdrawn.

He didn't mind any of it, really. As long as they were together, that was the only thing that mattered...

And then had come the day when he popped out to the shop for some milk, and arrived home to find that she had packed her bags and fled. She had smashed one of the windows to get out. He always kept the doors and windows locked, for her safety. That day, his heart had felt exactly like the jagged glass in the window. Shattered and broken.

It had taken him a long time to find her after that. But he loved her, adored her with every fibre of his being. And he knew that he would never give up, no matter how long it took. Then, finally, last night, he had managed to track her down...

She'd been waiting for him to come for her. He had been able to see it in her eyes the instant that her gaze fixed upon him...

His smile grew broader now as he relived this sweet moment. He got to his feet, casting a look at the bedroom door. It was completely silent beyond, so he thought that she must still be sleeping. Perfect. That would give him time to prepare her some breakfast in bed, to celebrate their reunion. He would make her favourite – pancakes with poached eggs, and a pot of fresh tea.

He hurried into the kitchen and hummed happily to himself as he set about his task. Now that she was his again and they were finally back together, that horrible weight in his chest had disappeared and his heart felt lighter than ever.

He carried the laden tray carefully along towards the bedroom and opened the door with his elbow. He moved around the bed and placed the tray down upon the bedside table. He saw that she was awake now. She whimpered as he reached out a hand towards her.

"I've brought you breakfast, look," he said. "Now, I'll remove your gag if you promise to be a good girl and not try to scream. You know that when you do that it upsets me. So will you promise me that you won't?"

She nodded jerkily in response.

"Good."

He fished out the wad of material that he had wedged into her mouth.

"Please –" she croaked. "Just let me go, Neil. I won't tell anyone. Just let me go –"

Her wrists and ankles strained uselessly against their bounds, fixed securely to each one of the four bedposts.

Neil felt his face fall into a frown.

"Go?" he asked. "Why on earth would you ever want to go anywhere? This is where you belong. Right here, with me. And this time, I'm going to make absolutely sure that we're never apart again. Don't you worry about that, my love."

She began to cry then. But, they were tears of happiness, he was sure.

Ends

Fifty Years On

By DJ Tyrer

2014: The year when it all began
The twin events that sealed our fate
Fifty years on in 2064.
2014: When Russia annexed Crimea
To barely bleated opposition
Ukraine soon to follow.
2014: The year of the referendum
Scotland independent, Wales soon after
England left the EU a little later.
With cutbacks and flooding and no Faslane
Trident was scrapped, no deterrent
Army, navy, air force pared back, too.
A brownwater navy struggling
Unable to patrol our coasts
Let alone defend the sceptred isle.
An air force largely grounded
Lacking fuel, spares, aircraft
With which to take wing.
The army reduced to a defence force
Largely guarding unwanted land borders
Against noisily belligerent neighbours.
2014: Also the year the SAS was neutered
Their training made less gruelling
Ending their glory days.
On the borders of Europe we watched
The EU collapse in upon itself
Russia encroach westward.
Until today, fifty years on
Rioting offers a reason
A handy excuse to act.
Russian troops land at Heathrow
Move to occupy Mayfair and Chelsea
To protect Russian interests there
Acting as they've done so many times before.



Doomsday Clock to Ragnarok

By Mark Hudson

In my room, I opened a doorway,
and traveled back to Norway.
There in ancient Scandinavia,
I met a girl named Octavia.

She was sent from another realm,
on a Viking ship at the helm.
To Viking knowledge we tried to delve,
to explore the history of elves.

A land of gods and giants,
defied all logic of science.
It was the realm of Odin,
like a poem by Rodin.

The head of the Vanir is Njord,
as we drifted down the fjord.
There is a god named Loki,
who is doing the hokey-pokey.

There were female gods named Norns,
gods of agriculture of corn.
The Vikings existed during this period,
their people were very myriad.

Then it was back through the time machine,
to the end of all things seen.
We went to the future Ragnarok,
and saw the approaching Doomsday clock.

The moon was in a state of ruin,
gods and mankind meeting death soon.
But here comes Thor, to battle the end,
swinging a hammer as his friend.

Once again the apocalypse is halted,
and Vikings are not the ones faulted.
If there is to be an end to all we know,
the process has begun long ago.





Unicorn License

By Brenda Kay Ledford

If I can find
a unicorn,
may I keep one
in my backyard?

If you can find
a unicorn,
you have permission
under these conditions.

You must follow
the Los Angeles County Code:
one must have
sunshine and rainbows.

You may have a unicorn
if you keep the horn polished
with a soft cloth and the
glitter must be nontoxic.

If you can follow these rules,
then we will issue to you
an animal license
when you find a unicorn!

Kronos

By Thomas Cunningham

Time sprung free from the circle of the clock
no longer trudging, sixty steps after sixty
not rushing forward, but deepening,
quarrying a lucid abyss, Earth's memory.
Asleep by the labyrinth, nothing is lost
in the winding passages, coiled around
the unattainable center.

Bison and aurochs, painted by the hunters
in the sacred chamber.

Crouching grapevines wring sweetness from the soil,
each note of the lyre echoes the clash of swords,
proud bronze sinks to verdigris,
the spires of Atlantis still tower over the devouring waves,
each star embracing its myth.

Thunder of crows over the sodden fields,
triumphs of iron hammered on the sullen anvil,
successions of moons over the watchful stones,
scurry of plague rats on the unguarded wharfs
silence of ash and cinders.

The last move of the royal game
leaves a chessboard empty of chessmen.

The Fall From Grace

By Matt MacBride

'Twas on the eve of December 9th, 1547, that I made my way through the darkened thoroughfares of London to The Bull and Bear near St. Sepulchre's in Newgate. I was expected. A room had been reserved for my visit on the same night for the past five years.

Snow lay thick in the narrow alley leading to the inn and a hidden obstacle caused me to stumble. My curse was echoed by a muffled yelp and I realized my hindrance was caused by a vagabond huddled against the wall, his frosted garments rendering him almost invisible. My hand reached for my sword.

"Forgive me Lord!" he begged, "I mean you no harm. I only seek some small shelter from the cold."

There was something in his voice that gave me pause. He sounded young, and spoke not like a ruffian, but rather as an educated youth. I was struck with both pity and curiosity as to his circumstances.

"Accompany me into the inn, boy, and I will furnish a hot meal if you will relate how you came so low."

Once seated in the warmth of The Bull and Bear I could see that Aldwin, for that was his name, was in his early twenties. His clothes were ragged and he appeared half-starved. The pot girl brought us both tankards of ale and bowls of stew and he began to eat greedily. I allowed him a few spoonfuls to sate his hunger before I pressed him for his story.

"Sire, it has been ten years since I made a terrible mistake. I have told no one, and feared for my life each and every day. But now I know that King Henry is dead, I can at last tell my tale."

Aldwin drank deeply of his ale before beginning.

"I was but thirteen years old and had been apprenticed to one Gilbert, a carpenter by trade, for some months. It happened that Gilbert had won the task of maintaining the rail fencing on the tourney ground at Greenwich Palace. A grand tourney was arranged for the morn of January 24th that year so, on the evening before, I accompanied Gilbert to make sure all was in order. Alas, my master was something of a drunkard and we stopped at several taverns on the way. We arrived at a late hour to find that a tent had been erected for our use and a brazier lit. It was a freezing night and Gilbert retired to his cot with a bottle of brandywine, telling me to check the fencing.

I did so, and discovered a bottom rail snapped clean through. When I reported this, my master flew into a frenzy, saying it must be repaired, for the king would be jousting on the morrow. There was not time to fashion a new rail so I was ordered to run back to our workshop and fetch a roll of thick copper wire with which to bind the broken ends together.

This took me some hours and when I returned, Gilbert was snoring loudly. He was dead to the world and would not awaken. So I took the wire and fixed the rail as best I could, wrapping the wire around to join the pieces. It was nearing dawn by the time I was done, but then I found I could not break the wire from the remainder of the roll. I had not thought to bring cutting pliers. The best I could do was flatten the roll onto the ground and cover it with straw."

All this time I had been eating my stew as I listened and realized that Aldwin's must be almost cold. I indicated he should eat, while I reflected on what he had told me so far. I well knew what had occurred on that fateful January morning and could guess at what was coming. But I wanted to hear it from his lips.

"We had to stay for the tournament in case any repairs were needed," he continued. "All was going well until the king's horse fell and then the day turned into a disaster. Gilbert and I watched Henry carried away on a stretcher. We both thought he was dead and I, painfully aware of the probable cause of the horse's trip, felt the icy prickle of dread.

Sure enough, when the officials had gone, I ran over to the rail. The roll of wire was lifted and bent where the hoof had struck. I was sure I had killed King Henry."

"T'would have been a blessing if you had killed him," I muttered under my breath.

"Knowing that I would be hung, drawn and quartered if arrested, I walked off the tourney ground and kept walking. I journeyed the length of England and far into the land of the Scots. I heard tales of Henry's evil doings and knew that I had not killed him, but still expected execution for my part in the mishap. I knew that Gilbert would have made sure the blame fell fair and square on my shoulders."

"And when you heard that Henry was gone, you believed you would be safe in London?"

"I believe that after ten long years, and his passing, it must be forgotten," said he.

"But not by all," I stood, drew my rapier, and slashed the razor sharp tip across Aldwin's windpipe.

His eyes widened in shock and he grasped his throat in a vain attempt to stem the blood. The landlord and the few other customers flew to my side in horror.

"Master Culpeper, Sir! What have you done?"

"You know what the morrow brings, Landlord?"

"Yes, Sire. Six years to the day of your brother Thomas's execution."

I nodded as Aldwin slid to the floor.

“And when I pay homage at his grave at St. Sepulchre’s, I can tell him the whoreson responsible for changing King Henry into a murderous monster is dead. At long last, my brother is avenged.”

Ends



Visit: <https://casabonalba.podbean.com/>

Hoist the Sails

By Wayne Russell

this poison oozing
through bleak corridors
this declaration upon
uniforms in mock
bravado

i march upon these
grounds within these
unknown ancestral
landscapes
oppressive past

i can't venture into that
good night
where
boats composed
and
set
to
sail
with
sleek design

where
ravens and seagulls
define my life
safe in the
confines
of
childhood
mockery
safety
roped
to the
moors
trembling
landscapes of
nothingness

Reveal Party

By Dan Belanger

REVEAL! REVEAL! REVEAL!

The commanding voice of the unseen one pronounced the words as they soared across the sky in big white alphabetical clouds. We had to run to avoid being flattened as Reality rolled up like an old carpet to be tossed onto some cosmic junk heap. A new Reality appeared where apparently it had always been, in a layer beneath the old one.

So we had to start over again, adjusting our ways of being to the new realism, just as we had done each time that it had happened before. It was never easy.

It wasn't something you worried about, though, until it occurred. You'd go along in one Reality unaware that there were any others. You only became cognizant when the words streaked across the sky, the bellowing voice boomed and Reality suddenly began to roll up. Then you remembered that this was something that happened, and instinctively started to run. If you weren't quick enough, you'd get flattened. I'd seen it happen to many people and it wasn't pretty.

If you were lucky enough to make it to the next Reality-layer, you'd be in a whole new place with a whole new set of possibilities. There would be trees, birds and animals the likes of which you would have never seen before. The drudgery of existence, which would begin to drag you down over time spent in a finite world, would be obliterated.

We were fortunate enough to be able to stay together, Berceuse and I, through the many changes. I never remembered previous realities back then so there was no reason to ask myself the question that has plagued me in recent days- was it really Berceuse who I met in each new reality or had a versioning process taken place, producing a Berceuse unique to each world?

Although it was uncommon, in some realities we, ourselves, were changed. I rolled out into one reality, for instance, to find myself an old woman with an aching back, while Berceuse was a little bird that came and sang by my window in the late afternoon sun. In another, I found myself in the shape of a cloud floating up above the world. Berceuse was there, but far below me, living a normal human life. Although we could not spend time together, her proximity gave me solace.

Thankfully, though, in most realities, unlike everything around us, we did not change. Berceuse remained a woman of medium height with dark brown hair, gold-flecked green eyes, a crooked nose and a kind smile. It was not her physical features that made Berceuse Berceuse, however. It was her wit, and her wits which made her the better part of the ongoing conversation of our life together.

I had only a vague notion of my own physical appearance. Elbows and knees were certainly prominent in that ill-fitting form of mine, best described, perhaps, as awkwardness incarnate. I often said or did the wrong thing, but for some reason, almost always landed on my feet.

While awkward on my own, the symmetry of my relationship with Berceuse, lent a certain unlikely grace to my stride. This symmetry was, no doubt, the key to our ability to stay together, because with it we managed to run in the same direction and at the same pace when realities rolled up.

Once, however, overwhelmed by my awkwardness, which had a tendency to rear its gawky head at the most inopportune moments, we accidentally ran in opposite directions. I didn't know, then, if she made it or not. I just kept running.

As was the case with all things, even love, after rolling through the changes of the next several realities without Berceuse, I completely forgot about her, and assumed that I had always been alone.

It only occurred to me after reuniting with her that the sadness tinging each of the worlds that I travelled through after being separated, arose from the chasm that opened up in her absence.

Our eventual reunion occurred in a long blue ribbon of a reality. I saw her first as just a distant figure moving towards me. She was walking along a stream of blue that was flowing in both directions at once.

Here, moments weren't fleeting but permanently moving backwards and forwards, all up and down what I would soon learn to be a blue river of pure time.

“Ostinato!” Berceuse called my name, before I could make out her features.

“Yes?” I replied tentatively.

“It’s me,,” she exclaimed with a playfully theatrical little bow.

“Oh you!” I cried, although I didn’t recognize her. “But where have you been?”

“Some kind of dark alley world,” she replied. “When we were separated, when the world was stripped away, I landed there where the rodents ruled. I struggled to escape the brick and shadow of that rude universe, vying for shards of light after observing that a tiny prick of sun blinded my potential tormentors. I hid behind the light, once I found it, until Reality rolled up again.

I’ve since travelled through a desert world, a mountain universe, and an unfeeling city ground down under frowns, and draped in gowns of dense gray fog before finally arriving at this place of streaming blue time.”

“How do you remember?” I asked. “Each time I find myself waking up somewhere in the middle of life, I can’t for the life of me figure out how I got there.”

“I drank from the River Time that flows in both directions,” she explained. “It made me aware. The river I realized is the source. All worlds rise from the river. Drink from the river that flows both ways at once, and you may find yourself, like me, remembering the future, as well as the past.”

Berceuse accompanied me to the edge of the stream. Kneeling there, I cupped the liquid time in my hands, and drank. Then I knew. That is how I have been able to recount my journey through the many worlds.

Once reunited, we stuck close by one another, Berceuse and I, successfully surviving numerous Real Reveals.

I paid close attention to the unique qualities of each Reality that we rolled through from then on, striving to learn what I could, to try and solve the mystery of my existence. In one Reality, for instance, I learned that there was an in between time that existed outside of the temporal Realities. I found this out when the Reality that I was in rolled up without the next one immediately appearing. I was aware of myself, in that instant, of being me outside of any Reality.

I could see Berceuse and many others floating free there as well before falling into the next Real Reveal, which finally appeared. It occurred to me then that there must always be an in between, though, in most cases, it probably only lasted for a fraction of a millisecond. I asked myself if the fact that we continued to be in the in between was proof of our eternal existence. Was each of our minds a forever moment?

It made me wonder where the Realities came from, and where they went when they were gone. I worried, also, about what happened to those who did not run fast enough, and were flattened by the Reality Roll-ups. While I hoped that maybe they were still there somewhere in the in-between, I strongly suspected that those forever moments merely came to an untimely end.

I never learned whose voice boomed when those revealing words appeared in the sky but I’m starting to think that maybe it was you, whoever or whatever you are that’s reading this story of departure and arrival.

Perhaps the real world ended eons ago, and you are an artificially omnipotent being, pulling the strings and having a laugh at our expense. Perhaps, but how in these worlds would I know?

Berceuse and I continued travelling hopefully together through many a Real Reveal until one day, when the voice boomed, and the words streaked, I looked into her eyes for the very last time.

Those eyes that contained, in their beauty, all the sorrow and all the hope of the world, suddenly filled with fear as I watched Berceuse, somehow, in that instant, infected by my awkwardness, stumble and fall. I found myself running, then, alone into the harshest of Realities. There I went on living without hope until those mysterious words returned.

REVEAL! REVEAL! REVEAL!

This time I did not run. I let myself get rolled up and flattened straight out of existence. I awoke to find myself cradled in a pair of hands holding me up to a blindingly bright light.

“Birth is the ultimate reveal party!” a woman’s voice said with a laugh. “I’m so glad you kept it a mystery! It is a wonderful surprise to learn in the very moment that you give birth. Congratulations, daughter, on the arrival of your son.”

Ends



Mice

By Sebastian Herzfeld

I didn't hear you falling down the stairs or in love,
And one you see can so often be as painful as the other with nothing to soften the fall, Not a single thing to prevent you from hitting the wall so hard you slip to your knees and whisper curse laden threats,
And pleas to deities so divine you wonder for a moment as a third eye opens for a second did those ancient Appalachian gods of hill and sky ever die?

Did they ever fall before the eye of heaven laden so heavy with clouds they're sinking down,
And now you see the angels everywhere it's become so scary down here in the hell we've made,
But still you'd think it's as nice a maze as any one could find and we're the mice running out of time across the thin cracking ice.



Tree Spirits

By Brenda Kay Ledford

The leaping spirits of trees
bend to form a heart,
branches hug a leafy room.

A buck with antlers
reaching to the skies,
the leaping spirits of trees.

A temple in the woods,
the oaks spread a table,
bend to form a heart.

Cardinals lift cheerful tunes,
this day is sacred,
branches hug a leafy room.

A Nuclear Wasteland in 2023

By Richard LeDue

A cockroach realtor,
scurrying among our bones,
probably wonders if ribs are
an abandoned jail cell
and if skulls were always empty.

It definitely doesn't debate
capitalism versus communism
or remember the birthplace of democracy.

If it knew about dinosaurs,
then it could categorize us,
treat our perfectly killed remains
like evidence of an extinction event
we never believed would happen.

Glory

By DJ Tyrer



Juno went out the window head first. She would've preferred it had been open at the time. Rolling into a crouch, she paused for the briefest of moments to swipe glass from her face and hair, before lunging behind a water butt in search of cover. Bullets followed her as she dashed through the darkness. Just her luck to stumble into a nest of diehard Confederates. The town was swarming with them. Of course, had it not been, she wouldn't have been in this mess.

One of the men leaned out of the shattered window, searching for her with eyes that glinted red, relics of his war service. She could only hope they weren't night-vision lenses; the Bushwhackers had been keen on such devices, all the better for the raids on sleeping civilians they preferred. She kept her position behind the butt, just in case. He was definitely searching for her.

Still, he might have the night-vision lenses, but silhouetted against the lamplight, the man presented a perfect target. Juno took careful aim and shot him. He slumped over the frame, his gun falling to the ground from limp fingers.

Not pausing to confirm a kill, she dashed away through the shadows. She'd long ago learnt the virtue of discretion.

But, as much as killing him had raised her spirits, it had left her no nearer to getting back inside the building, which was the one place she needed to be right now.

"Don't worry, Di, I'm coming," she muttered as she lost herself in the filthy streets of New Hope. No Hope, in her opinion. Ousted from their old haunts, the ol' Gentry were making folk's lives a misery out west; desperately trying to pretend that life hadn't changed.

Still, they weren't the only folk in town and Juno knew there was a Hoodoo shop in the berg. If she was going to get inside again, she was going to need some help.

"Can I help you?" hissed the old woman behind the shop's counter. It was an archetype the shopkeepers were always happy to play to, satisfying their naive customers. It was like having the desiccated alligator hanging from the ceiling, a piece of showmanship.

"I need a Hand of Glory," Juno told her.

"A Hand of Glory?" The old woman sucked on her teeth. "Costly. Very costly."

That was true, she knew. There were laws against them, and you needed the hand of a hanged man for the genuine article. At least out here in the territories there were plenty of lynchings to serve as a source.

"Whatever it costs," Juno replied. "I need one right now."

The old woman chuckled as if Juno had asked for the moon, but, again, that was all part of the act. She had one, Juno was certain. She was right.

A few minutes later, she was clutching the lifeless hand to her chest as she made her way back to the saloon. It was impossible to tell if the hand had come from a black man or a white man, or even an Indian, for, as part of the ritual, it had been anointed with all sorts of chemicals, which had shrivelled and blackened it until the claw that was adorned with a candle stub was barely recognisable as human. She almost laughed as she thought back to a time when she never would have dared touch such a vile object, let alone clutch it to her. But, that was a time when everything had been very different: before Diana.

Once she was back outside the saloon, Juno paused to light the candle that sat in the palm of the hand, then stepped up to the doorway, silently praying that it was working. If it was, the occupants would be in a deep sleep from which they couldn't be roused until the candle burnt down to nothing. She estimated the stub would give her about five minutes. That was probably long enough, if things went well.

Juno stepped inside. A hulk that had once been a man, but who'd been heavily rebuilt with piston limbs and steel plating, was slumped against the wall beside the door. He hadn't been there on her earlier visit.

Obviously, they didn't want her to return. Well, he was in no state to stop her. She didn't mind disappointing them.

There were a half-dozen other patrons in the bar, each of them a veteran with obvious signs of having been rebuilt. Having lost so much in their doomed cause, it seemed all they had left cling to was their cause. All of them were asleep. Most of them were snoring. A few produced the sound of whirring gears. She imagined they were dreaming of the past.

Juno strolled past them, untroubled. It was eerie. She had only used a Hand of Glory once before and still found its effects startling, half expecting it to fail.

On her last, fleeting, visit, Juno had only had the opportunity to view the bar and a single backroom, largely having been preoccupied with getting out alive. When she'd heard Diana had been sold on here, she hadn't expected this set of patrons. Of course, Diana was as pale as she was dark, so it was no surprise her face was welcome here. Nor was it any surprise they thought they could buy and sell human flesh.

Despite the time she'd spent out West, Juno had no experience of such institutions. She'd too much pride to ever work in one willingly and was too wild to be made to. Unfortunately, that lack of familiarity meant she wasn't certain where she should start.

Still, thinking about it, one of the upstairs rooms seemed most likely. If there was anyone in with Diana, Juno swore, she'd kill him before she left.

But, Diana wasn't there. There were some girls, and Juno felt a terrible guilt at leaving them behind to their fates, but carrying more than one outside in the time that remained was impossible, and she had yet to locate Diana.

The only other possibility, after she'd glanced into the other backroom to discover a card game frozen in mid-hand, was that Diana was down in the basement.

Juno checked the candle stub before she opened the trapdoor behind the bar. She probably had a minute left. That was cutting it fine. She wished she could snuff it and relight it later, but once it ceased to burn, its magic couldn't be rekindled without a fresh candle and blessing.

Quickly, she climbed down the steep flight of stairs into the cellar. There was a youth dangling off a chair, a shotgun across his lap, jaw slackly open and drooling. Pausing a moment to take his shotgun, Juno jogged past him and checked the cellar rooms: there were casks of beer and barrels of spirit. Then, she found a room with four cages in it, three of which were occupied. In one was Diana, slumped unconscious on the floor, clad only in her undergarments.

The candle was almost gone.

Juno drew her revolver and lined it up with the lock of the cage and fired. The shot boomed loud like a cannon blast, but nobody stirred, not even Diana, as fragments of the lock rained down on her. Juno paused to blow out the other two locks, too.

Then, Juno swung the cage door open and knelt beside Diana. She seemed in a pretty good state despite her situation, for which she was thankful. Had they hurt her, Juno would have taken as slow a revenge as she could upon them.

The candle flickered and died. Juno swore softly. No sneaking out, then. The prisoners were beginning to stir. There was no guarantee how long it would take anyone to awaken from the effects of the Hand of Glory.

Gently, Juno reached out and shook Diana awake. She started in surprise at the touch.

"Wh-?"

"Shh. Don't panic. It's me." Juno leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "I'm getting you out of here. Come on."

She helped her to her feet and handed her the shotgun she'd confiscated. The other two women woke and stood, confused. Juno told them to follow her and Diana.

"I'm gonna get us all outta here," she said.

"Thank you," Diana said, hugging her.

"Follow me," Juno said, heading for the door.

She carefully eased the door open and peeked out. The youth was still asleep. She held a hand up to indicate the others ought to wait and drew a knife before creeping towards the still-sleeping boy. She was trying to think of what to do with him without killing him, despite a distinct lack of ideas presenting themselves.

The boy's eyes opened dozily as she drew near and he looked up in surprise at her. He groped stupidly for the shotgun she'd taken and, before he could shout for help, she plunged the knife into his heart and placed her hand over his mouth. She turned the blade and held him firm as he shuddered and died. She hated to kill him in cold blood, but he was with the vile thugs running this place, so doubtless deserved to die.

She gestured for the others to join her at the bottom of the stairs.

"I have a plan," Juno said. She told Diana to fetch a bottle of Kentucky Bourbon for her and stuck a rag into its neck, which she lit. "I'm gonna stage a diversion. When I say go, run for it. We'll only have a moment." Although she said nothing of them, Juno was also thinking of the girls upstairs, hoping that she might be able to offer them a chance of escape in the chaos.

Opening the trapdoor, she saw the barman was down at the far end of the bar. She could hear the patrons mumbling groggily of their confusion at having fallen asleep. Juno took the bottle and tossed it into a stack of liquor bottles behind the barman, which shattered and burst into flames with an almighty *whoosh!* The barman threw himself over the bar with a cry and the room filled with shouts of panic and confusion.

"Go – go – go!" shouted Juno, crouching low so that she was concealed by the bar as she sprinted past the spreading blaze, Diana and the others running after her.

Exiting the cover of the bar, she dropped the barman with a single shot and winged another of the veterans. Then, the hulk by the door loomed before her, an enormous pistol that looked like a small cannon in his piston-powered hand.

Juno fired her remaining shot, which pinged off a steel plate in his skull. He levelled his gun at her. Juno swore at her luck and prepared to leap aside.

Then, there was a boom and he staggered back, peppered with shot. Diana lunged forward and fired straight into his leg. Oil splattered as the metal limb blew apart and he toppled.

They ran past him and out into the night. The men poured out of the saloon after them, but were too confused to halt them. Juno hoped the girls upstairs would take advantage of that confusion to make their own escape. If the saloon burnt to the ground, so much the better.

"I've got a couple of horses on the west side of town," she told Diana as they ran through deserted streets that would soon fill with spectators to the fire building behind them. She glanced at the two girls running after them, and added, "Don't worry, we'll get you to the next town." After that, they'd be on their own. She wasn't their keeper.

Finally, they reached the horses and Juno could pause to properly hug Diana.

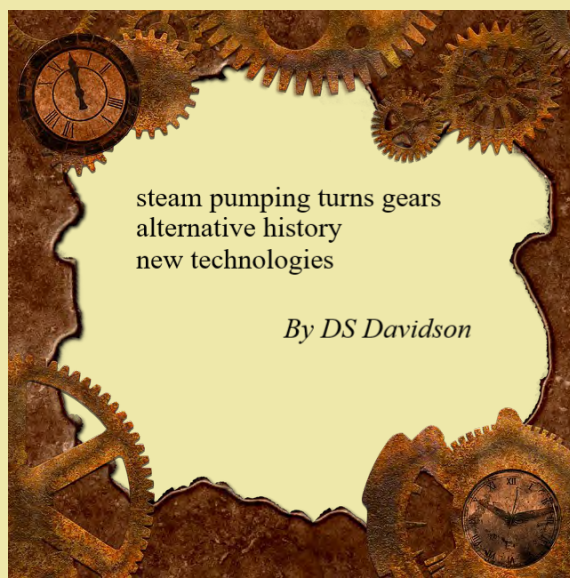
"Thank you for saving me," Diana whispered.

"You know I'd never abandon you," she replied. "Right, now, let's get the hell outta here..."

Behind them, the blaze lit the night sky and the sounds of chaos filled the air. Juno felt a distinct sense of satisfaction. The more of the scum who went to glory, the better.

Ends

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I'm a Good Ol' Yankee

By Harris Coverley

(The following lyrics were transcribed from a wax phonograph cylinder found in the attic of the mansion that served as the home-in-exile of the Union General Ulysses S. Grant in Moncton, New Brunswick. It is possible that it is Grant himself singing, but no other known recordings of his voice from before his death in 1885 exist to compare.)

O' I'm a good old Yankee,
Now that's just what I am.
For this fief o' slavery
I do not give a damn.
I'm glad we fought again' it,
I only wished we'd won,
And I desire no pardon
For anything I've done.

I hate the fake Secession,
And the cracker knaves who slay,
Riding through our Northern lands,
In uniforms of gray.
I hate the Southern braggart,
With his ramblin's and his whores,
That brutal thievin' Dixie,
I hate 'em more and more!

I hate the Dixie nation
And everything they do,
Their treach'rous Declaration
Of Independence, too.
I hate the Confederation-
Still dripping with our blood-
Their callous White Man's Banner,
I fought it all I could!

I rode with General Sherman,
And the troubles we incurred,
Got wounded in four places
And shot at Gettysburg
I caught the rheumatism
From camping in the snow,
But I killed a herd o' South'ners
I'd like to kill some more!

[transcription was impossible for this part due to damage to the cylinder]

[...] Northern steel and shot,
I wish they were five million
Instead of what we got.

I can't take up my rifle
And fight 'em now no more,
But I ain't going to love them,
Now that is for damn sure,
And I desire no pardon
Surrender I repel
I won't suffer no slavery,
So Dixie go to hell!

O' I'm a good old Yankee,
Now that's just what I am.
For this fief o' slavery
I do not give a damn
I'll never get on my knees
And hail the traitor rag
They can hang me from a gallows
In the starred and striped flag.

O' I'm a...

[recording fades out and stops]



The Friary Wall

By Valkyrie Kerry

Staring up in the dark,
history cries deathly tunes,
from the friary wall

Twisting my iced neck,
surrounded by the monk's tombs,
from the friary wall
rancid, tortured screams roar out,
death came years ago.

Lost in the Abyss

By Kimberly Nedopak

Lost in the abyss
Of the deepest thoughts
I swim a river of memory
Breath of life, the eternal cost

Deeper I go...
The air flows quicker
Until I gasp for relief
Grasping and feeling lost.

Dependence on truth
A compass broken with dust
Upon last breath
I reach towards Heaven

Metamorphic

By Donna McCabe

In a state of change
Metamorphosing
From one state to another
On a spiritual path of enlightenment
As one chapter closes, another opens
Full of unlimited possibilities
I am uplifted in brightness
Of a new path and future.

My Good Friend, Poetry

By Ronald A. Busse

When Billy Joel sings about how
Living alone isn't all that it's cracked up to be,
He could be singing about me
To an advanced degree

I try halfheartedly to agree
When I hear Kelly Clarkson sing that it
Doesn't mean she's lonely when she's alone,
But that doesn't cure or condone
My telephonophobia

So I turn to my good friend, Poetry
So vital to my vitality
And though still by myself,
Feeling lonely as a bare tree in an ice storm
Or the letter E atop an eyechart,
Poetry never fails to come around
And keep me company
For my friend, Poetry
Always has a comforting word for me.



Rigel Kent

By Kim J Cowie

Dome lights glitter like bronze suns, the metal struts lost high up in the light haze make a sketch of spiderweb. A fireball of evening sun ambles toward the horizon. The only thing visible outside is that sun, rock and such. Inside the dome, dome life and everything else. This is EuropaPlatz, Dome City Two, on the planet Alpha Centauri Beta One.

Along a rutted street, an electric taxi bumps.

“Where you wanna go here, buddy?”

Ken contemplates his own face on an internal monitor. Short hair, miner muscle, helmet tan across eyes like an extinct panda bear. “A cheap hotel, I guess?”

“You nuts or what? Fleapit, ripoff, eh?”

Ken gives the driver a right boogaloo look. “Better than nothing, okay?”

The motors whine low. Somewhere soca music is thumping, elsewhere distant shouting.

Whine. Soon the taxi pulls up below a capsule hotel slung on girders above the street, a metal stair snaking domewards. Ken’s eyes lock on sex flesh sat on stairs, her with long, long leg curving up under a slit silk skirt. Black curly hair like demon wing drifts over pale smooth face like Irish angel, heart-shape heart-steal. red lipstick like a kiss.

Vladi Vaz the taxi driver starts to open the door but sex undulates across the dirt with quick strides. Her perfume makes Ken’s heart beat quick. She nods to driver Vaz but mostly has eyes for Ken.

“Hey boy, you like to get friendly?”

Ken mumbles, thinking about money, hesitates too long.

Sex snorts, about-faces, and Ken watches her legs going up the stairs two at a time.

Ken is left red faced as the driver smirks. He drops Ken’s bags out of the cab into the dirt. Ken tries to recover situation, saying, “You know her? Good ride up there or what?”

“AC/DC,” Vaz snaps, and holds out a hand for his money. Motor whine.

Scrapped machines are left in this reject district, along with old containers, everything cheap and unlicensed. This is where everybody washes up, no job, when company credit runs out. A mine dome spoil heap.

Ken has plenty time to wait for nightfall. He checks at a lobby terminal into the capsule hotel, made from 20 ft cargo containers, and climbs an outside metal stair to his capsule. The scanner lock recognises his card, and he enters a bare room that holds a smell of unwashing.

Meaning to ask the locals about work prospects, he finds a bar-room, long and low lit, fitted into a 40ft cargo container, with a long alloy bar, and small tables and stools.

Whisky Jack is holding court by the bar. He dresses in a real suit with a tie, sporting a genuine gent image.

Ken, seeing signs of prosperity, engages the man in pleasant conversation. Whisky Jack, a long resident of Dometown, has a gold credit condo in the smarter part of Dome City One. He came off the spaceliner loaded with credits, spent all on dome pleasures, invention of the pleasuredome he calls it.

“And how was your day, Jack?” the barman says waggishly.

“My day was absolutely fucking,” Jack says. “Long punt trading. I miscalculated severely. I have become measurably more unwealthy.”

Jack, Ken learns, is a Dome institution, he of wealthy Earth family with a serious urge to spend money and spending serious money gained in property scams. Jack was propelled into orbit to bring class to the book-keeping of Company operations Centauriside. After the Starmine foldup, Jack organised finances and rationalised the operations. A sound job. Later, the new boys from Africa, South America, Indonesia, all the shark boys came out to expand operations, make colony domes. Noses in trough snaffling UN billions.

Jack went independent and fronted a scheme for selling futures in cargo shipped from Earth and ordered years in advance. When Jack guessed right, he cleaned up both ends for cargo arriving when in urgent demand. He acquired a housetart babymother and brats he had to pay oxygen for.

Ken asks Whisky Jack token questions. His ultimate hope is for employment.

“My profession? I am a legalised gambler, old boy. I oil the future with promises.”

Jack is in love with gambling, forgetting he came to make money like shark boys all non-white colours.

Women in the place drink Thunderflashes fermented from hydroponic grapes, women with lined faces, skins stretched by years in deepfreeze. Around them cruises a prettyboy in T-shirt and stretch pants. At the bar, he tries to catch Jack's eye, shrugs and orders a near beer. His name, Ken learns by an ear twitch, is Francisco. A small fellow, runt legs and shabby body rags, comes in and slips Francisco some blag, sees Ken looking and winks.

Ken sees his future and does not like it.

The newcomer sidles over and introduces himself. “Vaclav, Little Vaclav, everybody in here knows me.”

Ken attempts wit. “What do they know you as?”

“I'm streetwise, I'm very streetwise.” He offers Ken a vidbox, several credits.

Ken shook his head. “Vaclav, the company PX got legit vidboxes cheaper than that in stock.”

Vaclav looks crestfallen. He offers the box to Whisky Jack, who waves the vidbox away.

“You mock me, boy. How many pallets of those did I option? I need another drink.”

Vaclav turned to Ken. “Everybody in the Dome has heard of me. Vaclav? they say. I've heard of him. He's dodgy.”

Two of the women, bored and drunk, start a fight. Francisco separates them, and it ends with him slapping one and dragging the other away, as the rejected one shouts smut abuse.

“The Vicious Sisters,” Vaclav explains to Ken with a wink.

The ground shakes, junk rattles, lights flicker, damp patter from dome and plexiglass creaks and booms. Nobody takes any notice of the planetquake.

Later Ken in his cubicle tries to sleep, not drunk enough, too much shouting outside. He opens the door to sit on the grid stair outside, look at orange dome lights, and see blurry flares outside among the rocks. Somebody comes out of the next cubicle; the sexflesh he saw from the taxi. Now dressed in an old dressing gown, still beautiful, flesh like wax.

“Noisy here, huh?” he says.

She names herself Dolores, in a deep husky voice. “Always noisy in Reject. If you want quiet, you pay.”

Ken turns sex eyes on her profile, her small breasts. They sit and look across at the Dome wall, the view, plastic. A muffled explosion, evidently outside. Sulphur flares, the dome panels boom and rattle.

“How did you come here, Dolores?” He hints at lifestory stuff.

“You got any Thunderflash in your cub?”

Ken says no.

“I won't hold it against you.”

Dolores tells her story. Boy Simeon was born in Cuban Miami, cheap rat street, macho father. One day, father came home and find Simeon in mother's underwear. Belt applied severely, and macho poppa he say, “Boy you sick, you need treatment.”

Simeon said, “Fuck treatment, I want nylons.” Poppa hit bottle, Simeon hit road, bought own girly outfit, signed up for Euromine interstellar labour scam. Some years later, Dolores gets off a starship in Centaurus system. No more Simeon ever.

“What kind of work you find?” Ken asks.

Dolores' thin fine-boned shoulders shrug. “A girl like me's no good for mining, not smart enough for secretary work. They automated the job I signed up for, by the time I got here.”

Down on the street a drunk is singing, shouting for Dolores.

Ken sleeps at last with the help of sleeping tabs. In the morning, he goes down to look for work at the mine office, in the affluent part of the dome. In a shiny lobby, the voice-operated console does not offer any jobs in his speciality. Tired of arguing with a machine, and with nobody around he can speak to, Ken gives up.

On return, he passes a capsule hotel with somebody familiar looking out of a cubicle. Mutual recognition; it is Francisco from the night before. Francisco tosses a pair of knickers out onto the stair gratings. Ken raises an eyebrow. “Whose are those?” he says waggishly.

“Some dog.”

In the next section of the dome is the robot suit store. Ken watch as a ten metres high robot suit is being tested. These machines are used for setting up digging lines in the sulphur slumps, where autonomous robots do not work well on the unpredictable ground. The massive robot has double anti-tilt legs and gripper arms, and a head with view turrets and lights. This one takes a few steps and reaches up to touch a light hanging from the dome struts.

But there were no robot suit driver jobs for Ken.

That evening in bar Dolores sits familiarly with Ken.

The Vicious Sisters snicker. “Yo, man, you look good together.”

Ken, wanting a snack for himself and Dolores, fiddles with his smartphone, but the app is not responding.

The bartender shouts across, “What do you want, buddy?”

“Chicken culture nuggets.”

The bartender leans over and punches buttons on the dispenser. The device hums and lights blink before a warm package clatters out, and the bartender tosses it over to Ken. “That'll be seven.”

Ken examines the bag for the tear-off, but is distracted by noise in the night and sounds of shouting. The side of the bar's container reverberates to a great metallic bang, and the place tilts wildly, glasses smash and liquor dribbles on the floor. Women shriek with alarm.

“Shit!” Ken says. It seems wise to vacate the premises, and he grabs Dolores’ arm.

Outside, a mobile suit is backed against the stack of cargo containers which has been knocked off its stone props. From the battered casing and weather-beaten paintwork, Ken deduces this robot, a no.54, is from the nearby scrapyard. Men in uniform are running up and shouting and keeping well away from the suit. Ken grins. Without using artillery, there is nothing the Company can do against a rogue suit operator. And certainly not inside the dome.

The other barflies gather in a group to watch.

A shovel loader with eight legs approaches the suit, which shuffles around in response. Suddenly the loader scuttles forward with a puff of black exhaust and aims at the robot suit’s leg. The robot steps aside and cuffs at the loader with a long tool arm. The loader topples onto its side with legs waving. A robot foot raised and placed on the loader’s side stops its self-righting procedure. A robot hand grips a metal loader leg and rips it off with a screeching of metal.

The loader shuts down. The watching idlers cheer, while the scowling men in uniform form a perimeter and urge the watchers back.

“Who’s in that?” Dolores asks.

“No idea.” Ken is inclined to support the operator of the robot suit, who is obviously out to cause trouble. But the guy in the smaller loader must be brave, and his life could be in danger.

Another mobile suit, a 78, clumps into view from the direction of the scrapyard, moving with careful steps as if the operator were inexperienced. In one claw, it holds a length of construction beam as a weapon.

“Fight! Fight!” the barflies chant. The uniformed men step aside to make way for the newcomer, which looms above the improvised buildings and steps forwards like a gladiator from the robot shows. The women cheer.

“Six to four on the 54!” Whisky Jack yells above the noise. “Who’ll give me six to four?”

Several barflies shout bids.

The advancing type 78 edges around an electric police cruiser. Robot 54 has seen it and stops damaging the loader, turning to confront this new threat.

78, apparently representing the forces of law and order, swings its weapon, hitting one of 54’s arms. In retaliation, 54 lunges forward and catches one of 78’s pincers. The two struggle, and 78 swings the beam again, this time hitting 54’s head unit. 54 stumbles against the container stack, which totters.

The barflies shout their support.

Ken is unsure. He catches Dolores’ eye. “This isn’t good.”

A crash further up the alleyway gets everyone’s attention. A third robot has exited the scrapyard, and moving at speed, has smashed an arm against a stack of containers as it fails to complete a rapid turn. Debris falls to the ground. The ground vibrates as it pounds forward. The Vicious Sisters scream, and the police scurry backward.

“Now who’s this idiot?” Ken wonders aloud. He judges that the third suit has an unlicensed operator inside. It picks up the police cruiser and hurls it forward, where it strikes the feet of the 78, erupting with a brilliant flash and a sheet of blue flame. The car’s battery pack has short-circuited.

From behind, the third suit grabs the 78.

The first suit, the 54, remains in position, and Ken can see a small round hole in one of the legs. He runs forward, stopping himself with a hand against the jointed metal column, and jabs a finger into the hole.

The 54 shudders, moving into its park position and releasing and lowering its grippers. An access hatch on its back pops open.

The third suit is wrestling with the 78 and trying to grab the beam, but Ken sees it is not moving its legs, and seizes his chance to run around and twist a switch located in a recess on one of the back legs. With a hiss, the suit straightens to its park position and pops its hatch.

The alley quiets.

“I’ve won,” somebody calls to Whisky Jack, who scowls.

The police advance with caution and, skirting the burning car wreck, remove the operators of the two immobilised rogue robots.

Ken is about to take himself off, not sure of how the barflies will judge his actions, when he is seized by the arms.

“You’re wanted,” says one of the police.

Ken makes a token struggle. “I haven’t done anything.”

They take him before a uniformed man who, with extra braid, appears to be an officer. The officer removes his round helmet. “You’re not in trouble. I just wanted a word.”

The police don’t let go. Ken eyes the man with distrust.

“How did you know how to stop them?”

Ken shrugs. “Work.”

“You’re a robot man? How could these things be started up so easily? Don’t they need keys?”

Ken shook his head. “Key thing’s not what you need with construction equipment. Like, if there’s a ‘quake and you need to move the gear in a hurry, you don’t want to be hunting for no keyholder.”

“I see. And since these were scrap, why weren’t they immobilised?”

“I guess like it makes it easier to move ‘em around the yard. Otherwise you’d need a thirty-ton crane.”

“Ah.”

Little Vaclav, looking very crestfallen, with his hands secured behind him by tie-wraps, is being led away by police.

“Let me see your ID,” the officer says to Ken.

Ken complies.

“And what’s your address?”

Ken turns and points. “Up there. Capsule B431.”

“Do you know your way around robots?” the officer asks, with a glance at the 78, which is slowly disentangling itself from the mess.

“Certified operator.”

The officer nods. “Did you recognise that man?” Pointing after Vaclav. “Or the other one?”

Ken is conscious that some of the barflies might be listening. “Dunno.”

The officer sighs. “All right, you can go.”

Minutes later, Ken finds Dolores.

“What did the pigs want?” she asks.

“Wanted to know how I stopped the robots. And if I knew Vaclav.”

Dolores grins. “And do you know Vaclav?”

Whisky Jack steps from the shadows, scowling. “You lost me some bets. And who told you to turn off my robots?”

Ken confronts him. He overtops Jack by several centimetres, and is younger and fitter. “Two against one wasn’t fair. And they wrecked our bar.”

“Point.” Whisky Jack scowls and backs off. Dolores remains.

“Who’s Vaclav?” Ken says with a grin, answering her question. “Is there another bar in this dome? I feel like a drink.”

Ends



Let Her Hair Hang Low

(Ghazal Variant)

Poem and art by Lee Allane



I am bonded to a weaver, watch her spin and sew
A kiss a stitch, a stitch a kiss, let her hair hang low

Three sisters weave in silent bliss, footprints scar the snow
Which a stitch and which a kiss, let her hair hang low

Each loom is built of hope and dread, sorrows ebb and flow
Pledge of colour, pledge of thread, let her hair hang low

The warp and weft of endless time, stag shadowing the doe
Knots embrace and patterns rhyme, so let her hair hang low

Fingers braid my flesh and bone, buzzards stalk the crow
Weave for me and me alone, and let her hair hang low

Plait silken tresses around my spine, seeds are born to sow
My skein is hers and hers is mine, let her hair hang low

Lovers woven in their bridal bed, kisses standing in a row
The words they speak forever said, let her hair hang low

Spider silent sits in its gauzy maze, fly moving far too slow
Begin the counting of your days, and let her hair hang low

True weavers weave forever thread, the arrow and the bow
The dead alone must mourn the dead, let her hair hang low

A stitch a kiss, a kiss a stitch, must brush away departed woe
Head bent towards the potter's ditch, let her hair hang low

Weave still the web eternal spun, man's wisdom may yet grow
Or wolf must come to eat the sun, let her hair hang low

LUNCHLESS SHAM OF NOTRE DAME

By Neil K. Henderson

We are all familiar with the uncouth medieval form of Nulliprando swinging from bell-ropes, shouting, "Where's me lunch? Where's me lunch?" in film portrayals based on Torrib Delindo's classic novel *The Lunchless Man Of Notre Dame*. (Commonly known as such, though the actual title is *Notre Dame Sans Luncheon*.) But, much as we admire the thrilling depiction of this self-denying archetype, it is now believed he either didn't exist, or got lunches sneaked in by an accomplice. Recent renovations to the fire-damaged cathedral have led to the discovery of an illuminated manuscript clearly showing a varlet or serf sneaking a wrapped pasty to the 'Lunchless Man' from behind an arras.

Undismayed, one expert, Ethelfrith, King of Northumbria (not his real name), is keen to defend the legend: "A pasty or some such may not have been considered lunch *per se* in medieval times. A true medieval lunch would have involved ale and the roasting whole of a large domestic animal."

Other experts, however, dismiss Ethelfrith as a wishful fantasist, and claim the man in the manuscript may not even be the mythical Lunchless Man at all, but merely one of the bell-ringers.

More, if less tangible, evidence for Nulliprando's imposture, can be found in the records of a contemporary local murder, where a slab of 'cold cheddar' was spun through the air like a 'skimming stone' to fatally strike its victim on the temple. The mark of the suspect's ring was left in the cheese. Before the trial could proceed, however, someone broke into the strong-room and *ate the murder weapon*. The guard was pumped for evidence, but merely disgorged some oatmeal and a turnip top. The perpetrator was never caught. Some historians think Nulliprando may have been used to eat the cheddar, since being known as "lunchless" would put him beyond suspicion.

A few link Nulliprando's abstention to religious fasting common in the Middle Ages, especially around churches. This has been discounted, however. "Fasting was done by the meek in spirit," says Dr Renter Klemby for the non-existence faction. "It wouldn't appeal to maniacs who swing about from bell-ropes. They would need to keep their strength up. But then," comes the apparent *coup-de-grace*, "who could even hear him ask for lunch, with all those bells ringing?"

"Exactly," says Ethelfrith, undeterred. "That's the reason he was a lunchless man – the bells had made them deaf."

Ends



Alternative Times

By Kanwalpreet

I wished my children,
To live in alternative times,
In which I grew,
Or my parents and grandparents,
Clean air, pure water,
Less complexities,
Sorted out relationships,
But then I began,
To ponder at the paradoxes,
Why have we abandoned
That simple life?
I look around,
At the technology,
The connectivity and the comfort,
'The global village',
And then get confused,
About my choices,
And my wish,
For alternative times,
The old life was simple,
Ensnared in a cocoon,
But if it was so safe,
The caterpillar would never,
Have outgrown,
Into the beautiful butterfly,
I understood,
Change is permanent,
Necessary,
Which I now accept,
Yet my heart yearns,
For those alternative times.



The Adventurer

By Paul Murgatroyd.

After several minutes Gregg emerged from the end stall in the airport lavatory, sighing. He had not managed a motion despite a lot of straining and sweating. For him constipation was a long-standing problem, or, as one of his colleagues at the office put it, a long-sitting problem. The same joker had also accused him of being responsible for tooth-marks on the toilet seat.

Gregg cupped his hands around his mouth and nose, breathed into them and sniffed. His breath didn't seem to smell bad, but he couldn't be sure, what with his constipation. He popped a Tic Tac into his mouth. At the mirror he combed his hair, brushed the dandruff off his shoulders and fluffed up his sparse moustache. Finally he put the grey fedora back on and tilted it to what he thought of as a rakish angle.

He had been keen to begin his holiday in *AncientWorld*, but maddeningly the connecting flight had been delayed for over an hour, and there was another unpleasant surprise waiting for him as he came out of the Gents. He looked round for the petite blonde called Varvara who had got talking to him while he was playing Spartans and praised his skill at the game and admired his expensive new phone. She was at the far end of the transit lounge and beckoned to him to join her. She took him to the window and pointed, saying: "Is our plane." Gregg looked at the aircraft on the tarmac and saw that they were fitting a new wing to it. He muttered: "Omigod," and clapped a hand to his mouth.

He had always been nervous about flying, even after online flight counselling. But Varvara just laughed and produced from her handbag two miniatures of vodka. None of the other passengers could see the plane, as they were all facing away from the window and looking towards the desk where an inarticulate stewardess was making what she called an insecurity announcement. She began by asking them not to excite the transit lounge and then mumbled about the need for guests to identify their own luggage out on the tarmac prior to boarding the plane, which they would be doing momentarily, after the grooming of the aircraft was completed. Varvara opened her bottle and cried: "Bottoms up!" Then she downed it in one. Gregg gulped at the thought of her peachy bottom up in the air, drained his vodka and coughed. He grinned weakly at her as the tears came to his eyes. He was having second thought about the flight, but he wouldn't say anything about that to her, because he'd never get into her pants that way.

He was having third thoughts half an hour later. They had boarded and all the luggage had been identified by the passengers apart from a large black bag, which was holding up their departure. A couple of announcements had been made, asking the owner to identify it, but nobody had come forward to do so. From his window seat just behind the new wing Gregg looked on and paled as the baggage-handler glanced at his watch, tapped it impatiently, prodded the bag with his toe, shrugged his shoulders and heaved it into the hold. Gregg murmured: "Oh great." This rather spoiled his delight at his good luck in being seated next to Varvara. He thought of pressing the call button for the stewardess, but within seconds the hold was closed and the plane began to move. He didn't want to seem nervous in front of Varvara, who had been watching him with amusement, so he let it go.

He got out his phone, but for some reason it was dead. So he took his hat off and put on the airline's headphones. When he plugged them in he heard the usual safety announcement and then was told that they would now be playing Mozart's Requiem. When the orchestra came on, Gregg scowled and changed channel. He wanted Beyoncé or Adele, but all he could get was classical music. Grimacing with frustration he kept on going through the channels. Finally the Beatles came on, singing I'm A Loser.

Almost immediately the pilot broke in, telling them about their ETA and the temperature at their destination (105 degrees). Then he said: "Do please read the safety card in the seatback in front of you. Even if you fly a lot. In a few minutes we'll be entering a pretty hairy region which we pilots call the Arizona Triangle... Yeah, some really weird things have happened there. When we reach it, I'll show you where the flight of a rival airline crashed and burned last month. Not that there's all that much to see. Scavengers got the bodies, and most of the wreckage was removed for analysis... So do have a good look at that safety card. It could save your life. Literally."

Gregg began to sweat when he couldn't find the card in the seatback. He scrambled around, until Varvara handed him her card with a smile. He managed a weak smile back as he thanked her. He read every word on the card, and even furtively adopted the brace position for a moment, pretending to scratch himself.

Gregg became even more tense as the plane took off. He tried to focus on something else – on Varvara's large breasts, which he ogled obliquely. She had a low cut white top on. He always thought that breasts stood out most when clad in white. And when there was a handbag strap across the chest separating them out. He also noted that she had a crimson silk scarf (red for danger, with any luck) and nipples like pencils; and as for that gorgeous arse...

Varvara turned to him and said: "You are thinking about bum perhaps?"

Gregg goggled, and then asked: "How did you know that?"

"I saw you looking. At unclaimed bag. You think there is bum in it."

"Bum? Oh, *bomb*."

"Excuse me. Yes, bomb. You fear a terrorist bomb on plane."

"Well, erm –"

"Relax, darling. Here, have more vodka."

She produced another miniature from her handbag, pressed it into his hand and took out one for herself. They downed them. Gregg was not a big drinker, so it did help him to relax. He sat back, reflecting on how lucky he was to have this Bulgarian babe next to him. He didn't usually have much luck with the ladies, because he was only five feet six inches tall. Like Melanie Melons in Accounts. He'd texted her, telling her that he'd seen a shooting star the night before and thought of her, but she had just ignored him. But with Varvara things looked promising. He always went for the Sex-Slavs on the Quick Unload Line. He found eastern European women a real turn-on. And Thai masseuses.

As the flight levelled out, Varvara asked: "Wing falling off yet?" She leaned across him to get a good look, stabbing him with a stubby nipple. Then she reported: "No, is fine."

After that she chatted on, and it turned out they had lots in common. They were both big fans of Beyoncé, and had lost their parents and missed their mothers in particular. She paid close attention when he told her about his Star Wars figurines and his complete collection of Spider-man comics.

He decided to impress her some more by telling her about his career. "I graduated last year from the Online Uni with a double starred first in Advertising and Marketing, and was immediately snapped up by PWC – Pangaea WholeWorld Corporation. I'm a PW – that's a Promotional Wordsmith – in the London office of the Advertising Division. Actually I got this flight and a holiday as a bonus for my first – er, for a major campaign, promoting the sword of Alexander the Great. In it I bucked the trend of hip ads for internet-savvy customers and boldly went instead for traditional branding and pumped up diction. It obviously worked really well, as I got an email from the CEO himself saying I was the best and informing me of this vivacious reward package."

Varvara raised her eyebrows. "Impressive. But who is this Alexander the Grape?"

"Alexander the *Great*. A fascinating character. I researched him thoroughly on the internet. The greatest general ever. Conquered the world at 25. Which makes me feel like a bit of a has-been, ha ha."

She smiled, cocked her head and said: "And the sword? How did you promote it, Gregg?"

"So, my stellar campaign. How did it go again? Ah yes... On the screen you see a cute little girl, holding a kitten, and looking adoringly at her teenaged brother, who is proudly brandishing The Sword. And there's a voice-over: "The dreaded dragon, seemingly invincible, trembles in terror only at an enchanted blade. King Alexander slew such a creature with such a weapon at the oasis of Siwah, so ancient legend relates. Recreate the climactic combat between dread dragon and mighty mortal with The Sword of Alexander. Hand-crafted by the celebrated artiste André Sgbworniak. Atop the hilt two desert-dragons, accented with sterling silver. The blade, graced with gold leaf, features an exuberance of runes – the secret language of sorcerers, deadly to all dragons and their kind. The –"

"*What?* What did you just say?"

"I said: 'Jesus I like fucking, how about you?'"

"Yes," he squeaked. "Erm, why?"

Varvara shrugged. "No reason. Just wondered. Now I must make peepee. Don't go away. Back soon."

As she left, Gregg gaped at her voluptuously full buttocks and shapely legs in sexy black fishnet tights. Mile high club? Who knew? But he'd better play it cool, and not mess things up with this one too. And not think about what she was about to do in the loo.

To distract himself he put the headphones back on. After a few seconds the Beatles ended and the news came on. The first item was about air rage. His mouth dropped open more and more as he listened to it. A British woman had flown to Spain for a holiday with her husband and daughter. On the second day the husband died of a heart-attack. She had paid for two weeks and wasn't going to waste the money, so she had the husband refrigerated and stayed on for the rest of her holiday. She arranged for the body to be brought back with her and her daughter on the same flight, and when they came round selling duty-free items she demanded his duty-free allowance along with her own. When this was refused, she assaulted the stewardess and went on a drunken rampage around the plane, necessitating an emergency landing, in the course of which six passengers were injured.

That was followed by a report of an accident at Heathrow Airport. A young man tried to help some people trapped in a faulty lift that had stopped on the first floor. He managed to get the lift doors open, and while he was leaning in and encouraging them to jump out, the lift suddenly dropped several feet and decapitated him. The severed head fell into the lift. It had cordless, over-ear headphones on.

Gregg was fingering his own headphones nervously when the pilot's voice broke in: "Hi, folks, this is your pilot speaking, with an update. I just wanted to warn you that we've got some jiggly air coming up, and a severe thunderstorm is – hey! Who the hell are you? You can't be in here. OK, OK, calm down. Put that away. There's no need for a gun. Just tell me what you want... ISIS? Look – no, don't press that button, it ejects the fuel. Don't, don't. Oh shit. Now we're all going to die... It's OK, folks, we're not really under terrorist attack. That was just my little joke. It gets really boring up here flying through a big empty sky, so sometimes the devil gets into me and I just have to –"

Gregg wrenched off the headphones, outraged that a pilot would joke like that. He looked around, glaring, but none of the other passengers seemed to be bothered. He pressed the call button a couple of times, so he could complain, but no stewardess came. Instead Varvara came. He decided that there wasn't much point complaining if it was going to be just him, and he didn't want to seem like a nerd with no sense of humour to Varvara.

As she sat down in her seat, her breasts gave him a familiar nod. He licked his lips and tried to get the conversation going again. "So, erm, what made you leave Bulgaria, was it too cold for you?"

"No. Is a stinking place. Backwoods. Poverty. And corruption, everywhere. To save money they build apartment blocks with the water pipes on the outside. So they freeze in winter. And they are having erections in their pockets."

"Excuse me?" spluttered Gregg, wide-eyed.

"Oh sorry, darling – *elections*. They control the elections, and media. In my district a man who stood against their candidate was smeared in their newspapers. He was divorced, and they said his wife left him because he is a werewolf. This she knew because one day he vomited up the hands of a child. I ask you, Gregg. It's the twenty-first century. Anyway nobody believed this, and he still had lots of support, so they beat him to death. Then their newspapers reported that he killed himself, by throwing himself down his front steps, repeatedly. So I'm very glad I got out, and I love the west and rich western men. And when I flew out, on Balkan Lucky Flight Airline, for the meal the stewardess threw a sandwich at me. Ah, here comes lunch now, not thrown at us, I hope. And drinks."

Gregg now realized that he had forgotten to warn the airline that he was a vegetarian. Still the flight was only 90 minutes, so he could do without lunch. But he concluded that he must have warned them after all when a stewardess arrived with a vegetarian meal for him. On the box it said it was a Pie In The Sky Veggieburger, with sundried tomatoes (which he loved) and a tub of pease pudding.

Varvara continued: "Yes, and on the flight out of Sofia one man tried to bring on a goat as hand luggage. They stopped him, but nobody trusts the thieving baggage handlers, so they all brought their suitcases on board and piled them up inside the plane, in the space in front of emergency exit."

"Isn't that kind of dangerous?" asked Gregg, distracted, as he examined his food. The veggieburger had a lot of beans and onions in it, and he did have problems with gas. Then again, he was very hungry.

And Varvara, who had by now started on her own lunch, leaned over and said: “Eat, eat! Food is good.” So Gregg ate. The veggieburger and pease pudding were tasty, and the two little bottles of sparkling wine that Varvara had ordered for him washed it all down with only one hiccup.

They had just finished eating and refused coffee when Olga took hold of his right hand, stroked the hair on the back of it and enquired in a low voice: “Is the hair on your balls as soft as this?”

“Erm, yes, I suppose so.”

“You don’t seem sure, maybe I should check that out,” said Varvara, and moved her hand to his knee.

Gregg tensed, and suddenly felt a twinge in his guts. He recognized the sign. Omigod, not gas, please, he prayed silently. But he knew that it was. He needed to unclench his stomach, change the subject. He moved his knee away and told her about the holiday he had been awarded in *AncientWorld*, a flagship constellation of theme parks recently established by the Corporation, with sundry locations recreating the genuine ancient experience, like Rome of the Caesars, Cleo’s Egypt and The Alexander Adventure, which he had opted for, naturally.

Varvara seemed to be only half-listening. She had taken out a magazine and was leafing through it. So he decided to get her attention with some impressive factoids: “Within The Alexander Adventure there are various vivacious options, all of which appeal to me. You can fight the battle of Gaugamela, for instance, with hundreds of holograms, leading the cavalry charge, so you get the genuine experience. But there’s one that really appeals to me. Roxane –”

“You wish a rubber nun with pulsating pussy perhaps?”

“What?”

“She has a vaginal vibro-unit. And hair.”

“What? Where –”

“On pussy, of course.”

“Yes, I know. But where does this come from?”

“Here in my magazine, *Rubber News*. It’s an advert.”

She showed him. As he leaned over to get a better look, he felt another twinge, and then something stirred massively in his insides, like a Kraken awakening in the depths of the ocean.

Varvara looked up from the page and said: “You’re interested. You want one? You want some fun with a nun, yes?”

She poked him in the ribs playfully. He broke wind uncontrollably.

Varvara put her hand high up on his right thigh, making him rise slightly in the seat, and then settle back down. As he looked at her face, her nostrils flared and she pulled her head back, grimacing.

The smell was horrific. Shit, shit, shit, screamed Gregg inside his head. Then he pulled a face himself, and looked round angrily, trying to persuade her that it had been someone else. But almost immediately a ripple in his guts made it clear that he was going to fart again. He raised his left cheek, the one furthest away from her, and sneaked one out. But it was no good. The miasma around them intensified. It smelled as if a nest of rats had died and decayed in his bowels. He looked out of the corner of his eye at her. She was sitting there with her scarf pulled up over her nose, and with suffering and misery in her eyes. Shortly afterwards a stewardess came to clear up after the meal. Whatever Varvara muttered to her made her look at Gregg with disgust before moving on.

“What a terrible smell,” he said. “It must, er, it must be somebody in the row behind.

She snapped: “There is nobody in the row behind, you dirty dog. I saw when I came back from the washroom. Which is where you should be. If you must be doing this, do it in the proper place. You stink.”

He cringed. A sudden flurry of farts seemed to clear away his problem, but then the stewardess arrived with a fat man, who changed seats with Varvara. Gregg gazed in despair as she left. The man raised the arm-rest between their two seats and overflowed into Gregg’s space. He sneezed in the direction of Gregg, who didn’t quite manage to jerk his hand out of the spray. He said: “Hear you got a problem, wid gas. Dat’s OK wid me, my dose is blocked wid dis virus and I can’t smell anyding. So when I heard the stewardesses talking about you farting horribly I volunteered to change seats.”

He snuffled juicily and spat on the floor, just missing Gregg’s Hush Puppies, and muttered: “Pick da bones outa dat.”

Gregg recoiled. For the rest of the flight he shook his head and sighed over how close he had got to a hand job at least. When the plane landed, the fat man refused to budge until everyone else was off. Inside the terminal Gregg looked for Olga, and eventually caught sight of her in the distance, laughing as she walked off arm in arm with another man.

He retrieved his luggage and went to find the King's Page, who was supposed to meet him. At the exit he saw a youth wearing a purple blouse and harem pants and a green turban with a long white feather in it. He was holding up an unrolled scroll which had Gregg's name on it. When Gregg went over and identified himself, the young man chanted: "Hail, Adventurer! I am Bagoas, your Persian page. Welcome to The Alexander Adventure. Which has been devised by historical experts at Yale and Harvard and Oxford and Cambridge – they're universities, you know. Options include Romance with Roxane (nights and nights of passion with an oriental princess), Pyromania in Persepolis (capture and burn down Persia's capital – rape and pillage an optional extra) and many, many more. But you have opted for See Ya In Siwah – a recreation of Alexander's epic march across the desert to the oracular shrine at the said-named oasis."

Gregg's voice rose in pitch as he protested: "I didn't make a choice. And actually I'd much rather have the nights and nights of passion with –"

The youth cut him short, his right hand raised in salutation, as he said: "Let me congratulate you on your choice, sire. You are a true Adventurer. You have selected the ultimate Adventure – to be formally saluted as the son of Zeus-Ammon in *The Miracle At The Oracle*."

His face clouded with disappointment, Gregg said: "But Roxane..."

The Persian page winked. "Oh, don't worry about that, sire. I can personally guarantee that the option which you have selected is hot. Temple prostitutes, you know? In the plural."

"Oh, right, I get it," said Gregg, brightening because they would more than compensate for losing Varvara.

"Adventurer, permit me to convey you in a luxury stretch jeep to your air-conditioned desert tent. Whence you will commence your Adventure. Allow me to treat you as a king, as Alexander himself, sire."

Gregg was bowed into the back of the jeep's cool interior, where he found a laptop with an enticing menu on display. He opted for the Theseus Quest, one of his favourite games. But the questions in this updated version were tough. The first one was: What do Winnie the Pooh and John the Baptist have in common? The answer turned out to be the same middle name (the). He was stumped by the second one too, which asked him for a word of ten letters beginning with m that means 'constipated.' He thought this was a trick question, as the answer was mmmmmmmmmmm. All the rest were just as tricky, and he couldn't get a single one right. He sulked, and then consoled himself by having a couple of large glasses of the chilled white wine (Alexandros, a King amongst wines) and lots of Macedonian Salted Peanuts.

The jeep finally halted and he was ushered out into an intense desert heat that nearly felled him. He staggered into the large, cool tent in front of him. As he entered it, from somewhere a fanfare rang out, and there was prolonged applause. Together they blocked out the sound of the jeep departing, with all his luggage.

A screen rose from the floor. On it appeared the face of the CEO of Pangaea Wholeworld Corporation, smiling broadly. Gregg smiled back, assuming he was now going to get some personal congratulations and best wishes for the holiday. The CEO spoke: "Hi, Gregg. I have some important news for you. Can you guess what it is, buddy? Let me give you a clue. It involves a change of position. For the better."

Gregg's smile grew wider. He was going to be promoted. He'd acquire real status, be somebody, somebody important. With people under him. Maybe women.

"OK, let me begin by informing you that you are not the detail-oriented, self-starting team player with superior word-smithing abilities that the Corporation requires; and your Sword of Alexander campaign achieved APLs – adverse profitability levels."

The CEO paused. Gregg screwed up his eyes in bewilderment and mumbled: "Er..."

"You're obviously a bit confused, so let me put it another way. Your marketing methods are incredibly outdated and old-fashioned, and that's on top of you being a nerdy little limey with poor dress-sense, horrendous halitosis and truly appalling intestinal problems. But apart from that you are the best, heh heh. So as of now you are officially decruited; and I've also sacked the cretin who hired you. Which, as I'm sure you'll agree, is change for the better vis-à-vis the Corporation."

Again there was a pause. Gregg was crushed and had tears in his eyes.

The voice went on: “However, as a loyal company man, you will be pleased to learn that in connection with this trip you have been and still are serving a useful function for the Corporation. You have proved to be a valuable project for our Detectorist Division, who found out all about you and your non-existent family and friends. And you provided Betty-Lou Dallas (aka Varvara) with hands-on training in a live personal development exercise. Almost literally hands-on, until you let polly out of jail, you crazy farting fool... In addition, your reactions to our finely judged moves and ploys throughout this trip have been viewed by our esteemed Triple Gold Class customers, who are watching now as we speak, and have occasioned much hilarity. You have a very expressive face, and you blush beautifully. Like now. But you should have seen what you looked like while you were straining at stool in the airport washroom. Hysterical. Did you know that when you try really hard your eyes cross? We’ve had some hilarious imitations of that in the office here.”

As Gregg sagged at the thought of his humiliation for sale, the CEO said: “You look a bit down, Gregg. But hey, man, you can’t complain. When you joined us, you knew what you were signing on for. You eagerly embraced capitalism, profit-driven, greed is good, dog eat dog capitalism. This is just an alternative function for you. A way of maintaining your profitability.

And there’s another valuable service which you will perform for us shortly, shorty. Directly behind you, and way, way across the desert, is SIM-SIWAH, a recreation of the famous oasis complete with cool, life-giving water and hot temple-prostitutes. At our on-line casino betting is now open on how long you will last, as you try to make it there without help and without water.”

Gregg stared at the screen in horror.

The voice continued: “So, See Ya In Siwah. Well, maybe. How shall I put it? Better yet, how would *you* put it...? Beneath a sky of burnished bronze you will endeavour to traverse a barren, boundless desert (featuring savage sun; a desolation of dunes; sift and drift of sand sempiternal). Literally walking in the footsteps of Alexander, you will be guided by twin simserpents – fine, hand-crafted facsimiles, accented with green and gold enamel, and graced with cutting-edge technology, to monitor your progress for our audience.”

Gregg shook his head and mumbled: “You can’t mean... you can’t do that.” Then he jumped as a great wave of laughter from all the viewers broke over him.

The CEO concluded: “To recreate the genuine experience of Alexander’s epic march to Siwah, you are now totally on your own. This desert-tent will self-destruct in five seconds. Kindly vacate the pavilion. Hail and farewell, Adventurer. Heh heh.”

Ends



Our Crypt's Unsealed

(A parody of the song *Our Lips Are Sealed* by the Go-Go's)

By Ronald A. Busse

Can you hear us?
We haunt about you
Groaning sighs
Invisible disguise

You can't see us
You see through us
Though we weigh nil
Don't doubt that we are real

You can't chase us, we won't go away
Twisted Sister, we came out to play
Blue skies gray!
Our crypt's unsealed

The lid's open
We're on the loose
Hear our lament
Dirges of boos

When we spook you
Fear flies through you
See how we disappear
Only to reappear

Scare your pants off, let them run away
We don't want them anyway
You're our prey!
Our crypt's unsealed

Whooshing...looping
We terrify
Swooping...swooshing
We terrorize

Slam the lid, nail it down and pray
The crypt creeps open anyway
Run away!
Our crypt's unsealed
Evil's revealed
When our crypt's unsealed!





FIREWORK GIRLS BALLOON FIGHT BLAST

By Neil K. Henderson

A gas inflatable hundreds of feet above ground is probably not the best place to have a blazing row, but song-and-dance group the Firework Girls ignited almost as soon as the balloon went up. The results proved catastrophic. As manager Lita Bluetouch put it: “One girl said something inflammatory, then they just seemed to set each other off.”

Rumours that front girl Catherine Wheeler wants the band renamed as Catherine Wheeler and the Fireworks (thus taking all of the limelight) may have supplied the heat that smouldered into the sudden mid-air flare-up. The band – variously comprising Catherine Wheeler, Romana Kandlinsky, Penny and Bangela Squib (‘the Squib Sisters’), Edna Stromboli, ‘Cracker’ Jacqui Sparks, and Sky Dazzler – had united in full for a publicity shoot.

“It was just too many egos in one basket,” added Bluetouch.

“I don’t see what the fuss is,” smoke-damaged Catherine Wheeler pouted later. “The band started out as Bonnie-Fay Knight and the Firework Girls. When she left there was only me, Romana, Edna and Jacqui. The last two did nothing except jump about and look hot. Romana and I wrote most of the songs, and I was lead singer. The Squib Sisters and Sky Dazzler are not original members, so they don’t have a say.”

Edna Stromboli – rather a heavyweight for the dance routines – was said to be incandescent when she found herself replaced by the Squib Sisters; while Jacqui Sparks, outraged at being fired, apparently gave Sky Dazzler a rocket. Now the old resentments were rekindled. It was sheer bad luck that the squabbling erupted into violence just as the flight reached *Daisy Planet* cosmetics works.

“I told Edna to keep still,” Lita Bluetouch recalls, “but she had to throw herself around. Romana Kandlinsky didn’t help with her constant fiery outbursts.” Whatever the cause, the balloon collided with power lines near the nail-care and hairspray depot. “The whole thing went up like Vesuvius.”

Fortunately, being a bank holiday, no-one was badly hurt. The photo-shoot, of course, was ruined.

“This isn’t finished yet,” fumed Stromboli. “I’ve still got some ashes to rake over.”

Let’s hope the fire’s gone out.

Ends

The Amaranthine Fairy

By Paweł Markiewicz

Like sparkles of dreamery – fantasy,
born from hundreds of thoughts, from memories,
you compass the world of mythology.
Here and there plenty of effusions.

Fairy – she-paramour of druids, priests,
kiss a fairway of starlets and the moon!
In you a hope of dazzling, wistful bards.
Ancient is the myth like cave of Plato.

You go away and fly away such eagle.
The mirror of ontology shows time.
Your poetries so delicate such flax.
Eudemonia will live softly in us.

You are autumn fantasy, born from oak.
Like rain of demand you fill chivalry.
Stars of non-destruction need your verdict.
Thoughts with miracles – vast eternity.

The soft-mossy tombstones are only yours.
Such rook you sing song – bards-desperados.
I adore Kant's heaven – it is my time.
The bards honour the autumnal fairies.

Such refreshing yesterday-rain you are.
You are inspired like dreamy Erlkings.
You narrate myths, legends – having a glaive.
You gaze at a mirror of timelessness.

In clouds of homeland dreameries come true,
when your romantic tear – fay-like tear-gem,
becharms a world of the Morningstar – whole.
Pixie, your canzone is crystal clear.

Midnight, the winglets of dreams carry you,
when the thousands of kings of oaks wake up.
Sparrows, magpies think of heaven – it's blue,
filled with comet-dust and star-dust of mine.

Monuments of distant and drunk nature,
praise your meek, amaranthine liberty.
You are sprite – she-guide of Nature-mother
Through, like rainbow-shine, dreamed eternity.



Flowers Unfurling as Music Plays in C-Minor

By Marvel Chukwudi Pephel

Circa 2057

Once upon the waters of existence, it was rumoured that a man moved a certain distance from point A to point B without using any of the well-known means of transportation. Really, if I must tell you, it had stayed a rumour. Thrice beneath the waters of existence have near-possibility drowned. Now, to the crux of the matter: once upon a time, a young woman writing in San Diego took a day off to take care of her stomach problems, and that was how it all started.

1a.

Name: Gabriella Ifeka. Age: 27. Occupation: Journalist and Fiction writer. Marital Status: Divorced. Hair Colour: Brunette. Skin Colour: Brown. Eyes: Brown. Height: 5ft4'. State of Residence: California. City: San Diego.

"Alright." the man at the counter said, the asperity previously in his voice disappearing. "You look younger than you are in this I.D. photo, see." He raised the I.D. card to the young woman's face.

"I have seen." she said quietly.

The man lowered the I.D. card and smiled faintly. "Seems like you are a very quiet person, reticent in all shades."

"Sometimes." she replied with a straight face.

The man lifted a bottle of drug from the towering shelf and turned to her. "Have you heard of Aspergilisantanus?"

"No, sir."

He dropped the bottle on the counter and climbed the tall two-legged ladder to fetch another bottle. "You'd better know about it." he said as he descended from the ladder. "It's a fungi infection of the lungs caused by a new species."

"How does it manifest?"

"Its symptoms include nasal hemorrhage and oedema and..." He paused with a smile and gave her back her I.D.. "Well, it's caused by Aspergili spegili."

"Okay, sir." she said, her voice throbbing with anxiety. "What could be the cause of my stomach problems?"

"Ah...ah!" the man shouted, like a forgetful person. "My beautiful one, I was coming to that." He scratched his grey hair and whistled to the right, returning with a packet of tablets.

"Atishoo!" the woman sneezed, rubbing her nose quickly with a white handkerchief on which blood stain had suddenly appeared. "Look! There is blood in my phlegm! What does this mean?"

"Fret not, but another symptom of Aspergilisantanus is incessant stomach problems." the man said casually.

"You said?"

"I..." the man was saying when the young woman suddenly slumped and fainted.

2.

Istanbul, Turkey.

Name: Funke Ifeka. Age: 27. Occupation: Journalist and non-Fiction writer. Marital Status: Single. Hair Colour: Brunette. Skin Colour: Brown. Eyes: Brown. Height: 5ft5'. State of Residence: Istanbul. City: Istanbul.

"Could you please step out of the van?" the patrol officer said, licking his lips frantically.

"Alright." the young woman in the van said and obeyed. Standing, she asked: "What is the offence, officer?"

"Keep quiet, young woman." the patrol officer said, dryly. "Face the van!"

"But..."

"Face the chuffing van, Funke. You don't want this baton ricocheting off your damn skull, I know."

"I don't know what I know anymore. You..." Before she could finish what she wanted to say next, the officer grabbed her two hands and placed them behind her. He cuffed them and brought his chiselled face to her chin to whisper something. "Get those cuffs off me!" Funke screamed, struggling seriously.

"Be chirpy, baby." he said and began to walk her to his patrol car. "We are going to the station." He pushed her into the back of his van and closed the door. He dusted invisible dust from his uniform and opened the front door. He looked around, went in and began to hum a happy tune. He put the key into the ignition and started the car.

"What the heck is my offence?!" the young woman shouted from the back.

"Relax, baby. It's going to be a joyful ride." the patrol officer replied, smiling into the rearview mirror. "I cross my heart and hope to die."

1b.

When Gabriella regained consciousness after hours of sleep, she was lying on a bed but still at the All-night Drugstore. The eyes of the store keeper crinkled behind his big cylindrical glasses – he has just seen the young woman move a limb. He dropped his pen and began to approach her bed.

"Sandra!" he called out to his assistant who doubled as a clerk. "Please, get me the thermometer on your desk."

The girl named Sandra stood from her chair, picked the thermometer and set about to hand it to the grey-haired man.

"How are you?" he asked as the young woman turned to look at him.

"My body aches and I can feel a rumbling in my stomach." she complained.

"You fainted." the man said and turned to collect the thermometer from his assistant. "It's *Aspergilisantanus*."

"*Aspergilisantanus*?" the young woman asked, worriedly and weakly.

"Yes. It's the damn fungi." the man said and collected the thermometer from his assistant's outstretched hand. "Open your mouth, Gabby."

The young woman obeyed, allowing the thermometer into her mouth.

"She has *Aspergilisantanus*?" the assistant asked, almost in a whisper.

"Ye-..." the man was saying when something suddenly bumped into him, killing him instantly.

The security lights outside suddenly went out. And all the assistant could hear was her heartbeat, which was beating so loud and fast.

1c.

When the assistant managed to look squarely at the bed, she discovered that the occupant, who was supposed to be lying with a thermometer in her mouth, wasn't lying anymore. In fact, was nowhere to be found. She held her chest as though her heart was going to jump out her ribcage. While still standing bewildered, she saw a fox terrier run in through the entrance door. The fox terrier stopped halfway in and began to bark furiously. Sandra's hands fell loosely from her chest, and her whole body fell too. She fainted.

1d.

Sandra woke up on a hospital bed, amidst noise that was the medley of voices. At first, the faces she saw appeared as blurred images in her brain. She wiped her eyes and opened them gently. She immediately saw the image of the fox terrier and jumped out of the bed. Hands grabbed her, voices telling her she was in good hands. One of the nurses in the room made her sit gently on the bed.

"Where am I?" she asked, holding her head.

"You are in the hospital." another nurse answered. "You fainted at your workplace. Good Samaritans, who found you unconscious on the floor, rushed you to this place. You will be fine."

"What happened?" she asked, looking up and down. "What really happened?"

"We can't say exactly." the nurse sitting with her said. "We were relying on you for accurate information. Can you tell us?"

Sandra rubbed the edge of her left eye and said: "Everything's quite confusing. What about my boss?"

"He's in the morgue. What happened? What led to his death?"

Sandra heaved and shook her head: "The event that led to his death is still confusing and strange to me. There was this lady he suspected had Aspergilisantanus. I helped him place the lady on a bed after she fainted on his announcement. When she woke up, after hours of being unconscious, my boss and I went to her bed. Then my boss inserted a thermometer into her mouth. However, he had only turned for a minute before something bumped into him and killed him instantly. He just fell with force and died."

"What about the lady?" the third nurse in the room asked.

"She disappeared."

"What do you mean by she disappeared?" the nurse sitting next to her asked.

"I don't know what happened, but she was no longer lying on the bed. Still she was nowhere in the room." Tears began to roll down her eyes.

"Okay, now, I am on tenterhooks. Very strange." the standing nurse, whose name was Brenda, said. "Quite unbelievable!"

"Totally unbelievable!" the sitting nurse said. "Well, the police will soon be here. You will need to tell them everything you know. Okay?"

Sandra simply nodded and asked for a cup of water.

3a.

Contrary to what the Drugstore keeper thought, Gabriella was infected with a new virus that causes her to time-travel or teleport to another place with overwhelming speed and awareness – thus, this suddenly left her with a dual personality. Being a novelty experience she was yet to have control over, she mistakenly killed the Drugstore keeper and went back to Istanbul where she violated traffic rules and escaped from police custody. This time, she stole a parked motorcycle and rode into a busy road. She parked the motorcycle in front of a motel and went in to play free games at the gaming centre of the motel. The hall of the gaming centre had televisions on its walls. She stepped in with her boots and latex clothes, looking irresistible and unbelievably alluring.

"*Hola, chica bonita!*" a man called out to her. "Come to papa. Look, I'd like to buy you a cuppa!"

She wriggled her neck and smiled weirdly. She nodded and started walking up to the man, who was wearing a sombrero.

"Hello." she said when she reached where the man was sitting. She posed, stretching her legs apart and putting one hand on her waist.

"Hello." the man said and stood with his sombrero in his hand. "My name is Vincente. What's yours, moonshine?"

"Funke."

"Funky?"

"Funke."

"Alright, baby. I'd like to buy you a cuppa and...and probably take you out to somewhere nice. What do you say?"

She shrugged with a smile. "Let's go somewhere nice, Vincente. Let's go now!"

"Let's go now, pumpkin! My love for you is an exotic dish. Let's go!" the man blurted out, overjoyed. Just as he was about to fasten his belt hurriedly, a picture of the lady he was about to leave with appeared in the news as a wanted criminal. The man's movement stilled like he had been electrocuted. He quickly shuddered and began to step back.

Funke smiled dryly. "But a promise is a promise, Vincente. We must go somewhere nice now. Please, let's go!"

"No! *Amare monstrum!* You are..."

But it was already too late for whatever. The young woman disappeared with great speed, smacking the man so hard it would take a miracle for him to regain his hearing, if he recovers at all.

3b.

Gabriella saw herself back in San Diego. She found herself close to a boutique and took the opportunity to disguise herself with the help of a worker and a mirror. She immediately decided to hurry home to her apartment. *What is this that has come over me?* she thought to herself. However, to get to her apartment she must pass *The Kepler's Inn*, an inn owned by a retired police officer. She quickly beat a hasty retreat, contemplating in the deepest of her mind what next to do. *Why fear when you've disguised yourself?* a part of her mind said. She turned again, without thinking much, and began to run to her apartment. She was going full throttle when the inn owner, who has been sitting outside, began to scream. The man began to pursue her down the street like she was Prometheus unbound.

"You are a criminal! You are a criminal, Gabriella!! You won't go scot-free!!!" The man kept shouting until she kicked something and fell.

4.

"The members of the jury now, with your claims, would want to know if who we have here is Funke or Gabriella. So, young woman, who are you?"

"My name is Gabriella Ifeka."

"We received information that you sent a communique to *The Flying Times* in Istanbul."

"That wasn't me. That was Funke Ifeka."

"Your twin, I must say."

"But, my lord, try not to make a mount out of a mole hole. I have objected to that idea. Funke is just my alter ego."

"Rubbish!" the judge shouted furiously. See, young woman, I don't believe in all those things you've been feeding my ears with. Stop talking as though a cuckoo made your brain its nest. This is real life, my dear – we are not starring in any make-believe movie. You'd better start clarifying me on the situation before I lose my temper and give you a relatively believable sentence! How do you explain your ability to commit crime in different places as identical persons in a slightly different time span?"

"I'm not the one committing all those crimes. It's Funke!"

"Funke my foot! If I hear anymore of that Funke, you..."

"But it's Funke, my lord!"

"Goodness gracious!" the judge exclaimed, fuming with rage. "Alright, so it's a Funke-assisted crime you've been committing. Fine. Fine! You...you are still guilty anyways."

"Objection, my lord!" the defendant's counsel said and stood on his feet. "I don't think she's actually guilty. There are such things as Time-travel and Teleportation."

"I have heard of such things." the judge said, nodding his head. "But they are all cock and bull stories to me."

"They shouldn't be to you." the defendant's counsel said.

"Please, no one should play with my intelligence. Does she have a time machine?"

"No, my lord." the defendant's counsel answered. "But..."

"You see? Ipso facto, who's fooling who?"

"But she's infected with a strange virus that allows her to do so."

"But that does not reflect current research. Anyways, who confirmed that?"

"Her doctor! Her doctor confirmed that there is a strange virus in her bloodstream."

"Hmm. Interesting piece of information anyways. Is the doctor here?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Alright! Let him step forward now."

The defendant's counsel turned and beckoned on the doctor who immediately began to walk towards the defendant's standing position.

"Are you the defendant's doctor?" the judge asked.

"Yes, my lord."

"Alright. What interesting piece of information do you have to give me? That this lady in the dock has a viral infection that enables her to time-travel or teleport?"

"That's unbelievably correct, my lord."

"Hmm. I'd rather give my left hand than believe this fable."

"But that's the truth, my lord."

"It's no truth, doctor, unless you can prove it to me."

"But..."

"Can you?" the impatient judge interrupted.

"Well, let me talk to the defendant. But I warn that it would be a dangerous thing to demonstrate."

"Oh, perish the thought!" the judge said and chuckled. "We all want to see for ourselves, don't we?" He turned to look at members of the jury who all nodded in agreement. "Moreover, my astrophysicist friend thinks it's impossible too. Please, we can't wait any longer."

"Alright." the doctor said and went to have a word with Gabriella. And when he turned to return, the judge began to say something.

"And, also, I'd like her to go to Istanbul again. She's a wanted criminal there, so it would be easy to prove things."

"But she could be killed." the doctor protested.

"Alright! Anywhere, just anywhere. Let her just do her thing. We are waiting."

"But I warn about the consequences." the doctor said calmly.

"That the virus may be transmitted?"

"Not really. Not really, my lord."

"Alright! Enough of the talk. What I want now is action. Young woman, we can't wait!"

She stepped out of the dock gently and signalled to the doctor, telling him to leave. Of course, everyone was watching with rapt attention. The doctor obeyed and went to stand at the back of the court. Some people in attendance quickly obeyed their instincts and began to move to the back. But no, the judge and the jury were bent on being right with their judgement. Some held their jaws with their two hands, others crossed their arms upon their chests.

Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes and nothing happened yet. Fuming with fury, the judge ordered her to go back to the dock.

"Miss, we are not here for child's play nor do we have time for any red herring. Now, please, go back to the dock. We don't have time for this caricature of self. I have to give my judgement and it's really pissing me off that..."

But the judge, somewhat satisfactorily, was interrupted with a flash.

5.

New York, USA.

"Challenges will always come, but challenges are also meant to be surmounted. Whatever happened to me must have happened for a reason. I wish everyone could time-travel to his or her future once in a while to see what kind of danger our disappointments swallow for us. Who would ever believe that our office in San Diego would be attacked hours after I left because of my stomach problems? The lady who took my seat was shot point-blank. And she or I would have been dead months ago if there was bullet in the magazine. Anyways, thank God she survived the attack – even though she is still battling to recover from a kind of shell-shock resulting from the fact that a stun grenade was thrown at her. Sometimes, I believe, our guardian angels are fighting our battles for the overall good of our fate. But we know nothing about that, because we can't see the future. I doubt if I can be able to narrate this rollercoaster of an experience in clear language to anyone. Some will think I am lying with the truth. Yes, those who know me as a fiction writer would think there's some fictional embellishment. Anyways, it's my story and I must tell it the best way I can. Now thank you, Funke. You look so adorable on this paper's front page. Thank you for saving my life, technically. But you shouldn't have broken the judge's jaw – he was only doing his job. If only I can alter some timelines right now. But thank you for everything, for even the astral travel. Unfortunately, I don't want you back in my life – even though it has been a wonderful extraordinary experience so far. I want to be myself. Alright, sweetheart, goodbye now and forever. And...oh! I hope I remember to buy shampoo for my hair later."

She picked the syringe on the bed and injected herself with the miracle anti-timetravel-teleportation serum she produced with the help of her doctor, interjected, and went into a supposedly deep sleep.

Ends



Avenging Angel

By DJ Tyrer

The scars of war wouldn't heal for another decade or two, Johnson knew. The irony was that his vantage point was in one of the new tower blocks built with the intention of hosting offices. Only, the economy continued to slide as the world's wealth was drained away to the expanding metropolises of Berlin and New York, the major cities of a bipolar world, and it remained empty.

A light drizzle splattered against the glass and dampened his face where he crouched ready at an open window. He barely felt it. It didn't obscure his view.

From here, he could look out over the jagged skyline of the city, beneath a grey sky, the once-great metropolis brought low first by bombs and, then, by the fighting as the fate of the Empire was decided at its heart.

Johnson had been there two decades ago, a young man perfecting the art of the sniper. His aim had been good, but it hadn't been enough to change the course of events.

He stroked the rifle he held in his hands, checked the scope. Today, things would change. Today, he would lay the demon from his past to rest.

He felt like an avenging angel looking down upon the degenerate earth.

If the Security Service, the British SS, had been any good, he wouldn't have been within the secure zone. He was near its edge, but close enough, up here, to take aim. Had his identity card been refused, his plan would've been impossible.

But, they didn't have a clue.

Oh, the Germans had insisted on the handing over of those they termed 'terrorists' – European Jews, French and Polish and Czechoslovakian exiles, Germans who had skipped out ahead of the Gestapo snatch squads, Communists from across the world – along with the British Jews and a select few officials wanted for 'war crimes', and the Security Service had happily rounded up home-grown 'enemies of the state'. But, just being a former soldier wasn't enough to see you detained and his life had gone on as well as any once the war was over.

But, it just went to show they hadn't a clue.

Even in its malaise, central London should've been bustling. There were still people for the markets to feed, no matter how poorly, and there was still business for the bankers and stockbrokers, even if so much of it had been drawn away elsewhere. If anything, the straitened circumstances meant people had to work harder than ever to pull themselves through.

But, the city was virtually dead, with more police than civilians lining its streets. No soldiers, of course; Britain's military was strictly curtailed and wouldn't be welcome at this visit of the conqueror to the vanquished.

He crouched and waited. Even long years after the war, he knew how to wait for long periods, had trained himself to lay in ambush as easily as if he were relaxing on a couch.

They would be here soon. The radio had reported that their plane had landed at the London aerodrome and the motorcade was on its way.

It would stop at the imposing building in Whitehall that served as the Reich's embassy to Britain, where a gala would take place for the Fuehrer and his greatest admirers amongst the British elite.

As he watched, Johnson used his scope to examine the city below. Its centre, the heart of government and finance, had mostly been rebuilt, of course. No matter how humbled, their masters could never bear not to live in luxury.

Further out, it was a different story. There were gaps where offices and shops once stood, their rubble pulled down and carted away to add to that of the slums, where the broken shells of houses and piled bricks served as homes to those who had lost theirs and where even the standing buildings were often missing one wall or part of the roof yet, so that he could spy in on those living there.

Only in the docklands had the city seen wholesale rebuilding. Destroyed by fire and bomb, the warehouses had been necessary to receive the aid and trade that kept Britain fed. Even with so many dead and more gone to America and others offered up as tribute to labour for the Reich, there were more mouths to feed than the island nation's farms could manage and the temporary canvas-covered shelters had swiftly been replaced by crude, blocky structures without the charm of the old warehouses and buildings with walls and roofs of corrugated iron. Looking at them, he might almost have fooled himself into thinking that London continued to thrive.

Quite possibly, the Fuehrer would be shown them and thanked for his magnanimous generosity.

Johnson's finger twitched towards the trigger.

They were coming. The dreary music had stopped and the radio announcer had declared the motorcade was passing below a Marble Arch hung, as it had been two decades before, with a great swastika-adorned flag.

He looked. Yes, here they were.

Had he wished to, he could have taken the shot now, but he had heard all about the Fuehrerwagen, the Beast, as it was nicknamed, and how the huge car was built to withstand both bullet and bomb.

No, he would wait a little longer to be certain of a killing shot.

The car drew to a halt before the Reich's embassy building and two parallel lines of black-uniformed SS men took up a position alongside the red carpet that led from it up to the entrance.

Further along the street, British police in their blue uniforms and plain-clothed men, who might have been British or German SS, kept back the small crowd of sightseers waving swastika-adorned German flags. No assassin would be allowed to draw near.

Not that Johnson needed to be close. He let out a bitter laugh as he prepared to take aim as an official in a smart suit exited the embassy with an umbrella to protect the Fuehrer from the drizzle. The car door opened.

There, in his brown army jacket, was the shrunken, Charlie Chaplin-moustached figure who was the world's most-powerful man. He shivered beneath the proffered umbrella. And, beside him was the man Johnson was here to kill.

Johnson felt a tremble in his hands at the sight of him.

The former sniper didn't care about victory and defeat, the ravages of war, national humiliation. His singular passion was a personal hatred.

Johann Kiel had risen through the ranks of the SS to become the Fuehrer's trusted aid, having made himself indispensable during the years after Britain's defeat. More an accountant than a soldier, he was responsible for thousands of deaths.

Including Una's.

Johnson's hands continued to shake as the memories came flooding back and he fought to steady them so that he could take aim.

It had been so easy back during the fighting! Fear was simple to subordinate when necessary. But, hatred and anger could cloud a mind with ease.

He needed his mind to be clear...

Una and her sister had escaped Germany, leaving their parents behind. Taken in by a cousin who was already living in London, they had escaped internment as 'enemy aliens' when the war broke out and taken jobs in a munitions factory.

He remembered how proud Una had sounded when speaking of the bombs she made for use against the hated Nazis.

He had planned to make her Mrs. Johnson.

Then, the invasion came and the inevitable defeat. As a German Jew, she was labelled a 'terrorist' and taken away. Powerless, he'd watched Kiel tick her name off his list as she was led to a waiting van.

It was ironic that not having the chance to marry her meant he was here, today, within the secure zone, ready to take revenge upon her behalf.

Had they wed, he likely would've ended up in one of the camps in Cumberland or Scotland. He certainly would never have been allowed even this near to the Fuehrer.

Had the Security Service been better, they would've known the risk.

Now, they would pay.

Hands steady, at last, he lined up the shot.

Kiel and his diminutive master were almost at the embassy doors.

Johnson exhaled slowly and pulled the trigger.

Kiel's head blossomed with red and he spasmed and toppled.

SS officers fell upon their Fuehrer and hustled him inside, but Johnson didn't care.

The man he'd come to kill was dead, his blood mingling with the red of the welcome carpet, and dribbling down the stone of the steps.

It would take time for them to realise where the shot came from. They would look at nearer vantage points first. Then, it would take a little longer for their forces to reach here.

Calmly, Johnson packed his rifle away into an old kitbag and retrieved the discarded shell casing. He would dispose of them in the cellar of a building a mile away. He wouldn't need the rifle again.

He'd been careful about fingerprints and would leave nothing behind. It was unlikely they would ever know who was to blame.

There was a boat waiting for him in Wales – if they shut down the trains, he would walk it; he'd trudged as far, years back – ready to carry him to neutral Ireland. And, from there, he'd go to America.

And, if it should all go wrong, somehow, he reflected as he hurried down the stairs of the empty office-block and out into the maze of streets, he was ready to die, having done what he needed to do.

He walked smartly, but not with undue haste, towards the cellar where he would dump the kitbag, and smiled grimly to himself as the drizzle dampened his hair and he pulled his collar up against the chill.

No longer was he an avenging angel, looking down loftily from upon high, but just another of the lowly dregs who clung to life in that dying city, anonymous.

They would never know it was Kiel who was destined to die. History, he was certain, would record that it was the Fuehrer who was the target, that the assassin had misaimed. Nobody would ever know that what happened happened out of his love for Una.

Silently, he prayed she could finally rest in peace. And, wondered if even his act of revenge would allow him to know peace.

The drizzle continued to fall.

Ends



Questions For Those Gone Before Us

By Wayne Russell

We are living our lives,
one day at a time, just
complacent as can be,
and the river knows this.

The ravens outside our
windows know that after
Autumn, Winter shall rear
his straggly snow whites,
and doldrum greys.

The cherry blossom trees
have done their bit, for all
to see; now they too lay
dormant as the dead.

We are living our lives,
one day at a time, just
nonchalant as can be,
and the elderly know this.

As we age, hindsight is
in great abundance, are
we, wise as owls?

When youth has abandoned
us like an old friend, do we tend
to think more about our legacy?

The asylum on the hill, now
houses fine art and sculpture –

but if you listen long enough,
do the ghost roaming whisper?

There's a cemetery out back
of the old asylum on the hill,
it cradles those that died –

their epitaphs have faded beyond
recognition, along with the memory,
that they ever existed; in the
first place.



FORGOTTEN CLEARANCE 'INCONVENIENT'

By Neil K. Henderson

In the eighteenth century, as literature and song record, the infamous Highland Clearances saw thousands of families ruthlessly transported from the Scottish glens to make way for sheep. But, according to historian Furdo Muncke, an equally invidious practice in the more recent past has been largely overlooked.

"In the nineteen fifties, hundreds of shepherds' cottages were surreptitiously turned into public toilets while the tenants were out with their ewes. These 'Toilet Flushings' were on a scale to match the earlier clearances, given comparative ratios of Highland outhouses to landed estates. Because only hundreds rather than thousands were involved, the landlords could paper the cracks in public approval. Nevertheless, friends and supporters of dispossessed families have staunchly refused to forget. The resentment even spawned a new traditional-style lament: 'Where have all the wee bairns gone? They've gone tae make a lavvy.' "

"We have absolutely nothing to feel ashamed of," says Minister for Local Amenities Sir Dobcherry Mitcheson. "Until the massive upsurge in public conveniences, the Scottish Highlands was a notoriously inhospitable place to be caught short in. And after all, look what it's done for tourism."

"They're not the sort of tourists you'd expect," says Furdo Muncke. "A large proportion are Scottish exiles or their descendants returning from places like Florida to spend time in the toilet 'home' of their ancestors. We're even seeing these amenities done up like cottages again to cater for the 'reminiscing' tourist trade. I believe the marketing term is 'Sentimental Sojourn'."

Alas, some frequenters of the refurbished conveniences have no respect for tradition or the feelings of former outcasts. One recently viewed establishment was daubed with the words, "Who's been cottaging in this cottage?" But it's the sitting population who feel the brunt.

"It's a bloody disgrace," exclaimed local toilet user Binty McSnidge. "You don't know where you are any more. I was black affronted the time I used Dumfie McCrud's front room in mistake for one o' thon 'done up' lavvies. Mind you, his front room could do wi' being done up."

"It'll have to be now," lamented Dumfie McCrud.

Ends



Time...

By Donna McCabe

The days march ever on
Ignorant to the ever gaping void
Making the pain that much harder to bear
Everyone says time heals all wounds.

