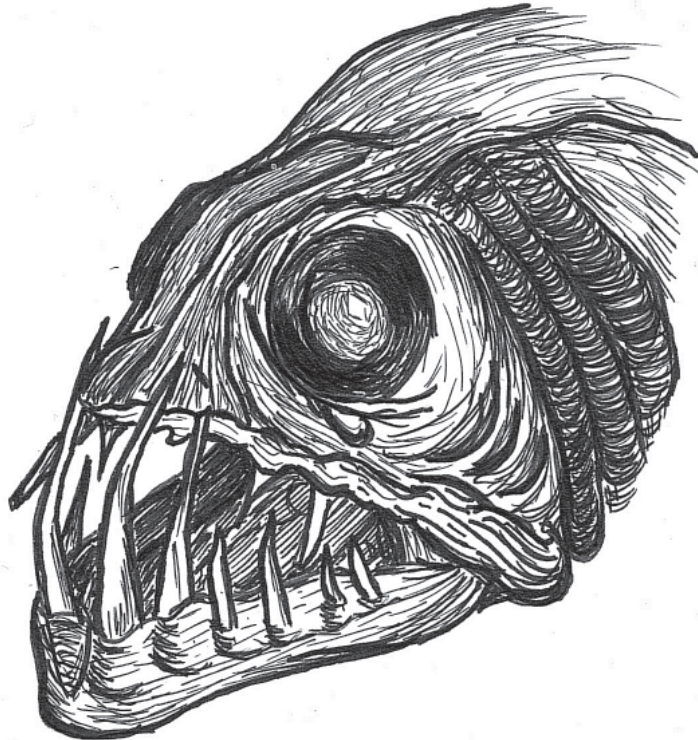


THE MAGAZINE OF
BIZARRO FICTION
Issue #2



Editor-in-Chief: Jeff Burk
Cover art by Carlton Mellick III
cover art copyright © 2009 Carlton Mellick III
Interior illustrations by Chrissy Horchheimer
interior illustration copyright © 2009 Chrissy Horchheimer
The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction
205 NE Bryant
Portland, OR 97211

Please send questions and comments to:
BizarroMagazine@gmail.com

Issue #2 Fall 2009 Copyright © 2009 Eraserhead Press
The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction is published four times a year by Eraserhead Press.
Subscriptions and individual issues are available online at:

www.BizarroCentral.com

Table of Contents

Fiction

Morphia by Vincent Sakowski.....	04
The Traveling Dildo Salesman by Kevin L. Donihe.....	08
Fathers and Sons by D. Harlan Wilson.....	36
A Better Child by Gina Ranalli.....	39
Blimpman by Mykle Hansen.....	43
Simple Machines by Carlton Mellick III.....	53

Comics

Ogner Stump by Andrew Goldfarb.....	34
Spacefoot and the Vamptorians by Richard Tingley.....	60

Nonfiction

The Baby Jesus and Drunken Pirates: Author Spotlight on Carlton Mellick III.....	64
How To Give A Rousing Reading by Tom Bradley.....	70
The Weird, Weird West by Jordan Krall.....	78
Only the Strange Survive: Ten Years of Eraserhead Press by Jeff Burk.....	82

Regular Features

A Rant from the Editor.....	03
Book Reviews.....	88
Bizarro Books that Never Were: The Cranky Dildo by Carlton Mellick III.....	95

A Rant from the Editor

Ever wonder why all the movies coming out in theaters seem to be sequels or remakes? Why Dan Brown or Stephen King are the only authors most people can name? Why all pop music sounds the same?

When there are only a few companies distributing the entire world's media, you only get a few perspectives. In an ideal world there would be room for everyone's voice to be included but in the real world there is only room for a selected corporately-ordained few.

Eraserhead Press is completely independently owned and run. Without the need to answer to share holders or a board of CEOs, the press is able to take real chances and publish books that are actually fun to read (a radical concept in the publishing industry).

The existence of Eraserhead Press is now more important than when it started. Since the press started in 1999, media consolidation has only increased in the United States.

With the current poor economic climate, it seems that every day brings news of another independent company going out of business. The McColonizing of our world is happening at a faster and faster rate.

But all is not lost, the very fact that Eraserhead Press has lasted ten years proves that there is an audience for its books. It proves that there are people sick of the standard bland media we are fed.

As long as there are people who are not willing to accept what they are blindly given, there will be a place and a need for Eraserhead Press and independent media.

This issue of *The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction* comes at a very special time in bizarro history. This year, 2009, Eraserhead Press is celebrating ten years of bringing fucked up fiction to the masses.

This issue features an overview of Eraserhead's history as purveyors of weird fiction. All four of the original Eraserhead bizarro authors, Vincent Sakowksi, Kevin L. Donihe, D. Harlan Wilson, and Carlton Mellick III, have contributed new stories to mark the occasion.

It is very important that independent companies like Eraserhead Press exist. Unfortunately, they are becoming rarer by the day. Due to lax regulations and good old-fashioned greed, our media and art is being controlled by a smaller and smaller group of people.

Each year, the bizarro scene grows larger and more readers and writers are exposed to the refreshing freedom the genre allows. It's this sense of excitement and constant influx of new ideas and new voices that ensures our talk of ten years of Eraserhead Press is more than a nostalgic look back. It is a celebration for the stunning future sure to come.

So here's to you, Eraserhead Press. To ten years and infinitely more.

Cheers.

- Jeff Burk
BizarroMagazine@gmail.com



Vincent Sakowski (Some Things Are Better Left Unplugged, Misadventures in Thumbnail Universe, and Not Quite One of the Boys) has been on a hiatus from writing bizarro for a few years. Fortunately, for all us readers, he is back in the game. I am thrilled to present new short fiction from Mr. Sakowski

Morphia

by Vincent Sakowski

Morphia sat underwater on her high-backed, wicker chair. Her long, ravenesque tresses floated above her. Palms on her lap, she held down her black satin skirt.

Bubbles rose.

She couldn't breathe.

No more than anyone else underwater... well, perhaps a little more.

But that was not where her power resided.

Her power was in her visions.

They only came to her when she was drowning, on the verge of death. Morphia discovered this once by accident, long ago, when she tried to drown herself on purpose in her bedroom. She'd taken out all her furniture and sealed off all the holes. Then she locked the door, broke the key in the lock, and filled her room with water from a hose attached outside her house—which she'd ran under the door before sealing it off, and attached it to the ceiling. After paddling on the rising surface, Morphia shut off the water once the room was filled.

She'd left the light on, which cast a strange, soft glow in the room, reflecting off of the deep blue walls.

Calmly, she sank down to the hardwood floor and waited. As Morphia took her last breaths, her lungs filling with water, she had her first vision. In those moments as

the vision unfolded, Morphia realized that she *had to* share it—that she shouldn't die—that it would be wrong for her to do so. Now, she had a purpose, a reason to live. But she was also ten feet underwater on the floor of her room. Panicking, Morphia kicked at the floor, and flapped her arms, trying to swim to the ceiling, where there was a hatch that led to the attic. There had been no way for her to lock it, nor had she planned to escape to begin with, so she hadn't thought of it much before. Now, Morphia was glad she had a chance to survive.

She breathed outward, trying to expel the water that she was choking on, and continued to kick and paddle her way to the hatch. Morphia made it, then grasped the bolt that held the hatch in place, yanked on it with both hands, and slid it open. Pulling down on the hatch she thrust herself through the surface of the water, gasping for air, but she threw up almost immediately. Her lungs ached, as her heart hammered in her chest, and she realized that she had almost died. But Morphia remembered every detail of her vision, and as soon as she changed her clothes and made herself presentable once more, she shared it with her parents.

She stood before them in the sitting room and began: "I once had a friend who had a fish-bowl for a brain."

Her parents shared an uneasy glance, but listened to her story until she was done.

They thought little of it, but that didn't matter to her. At least they had listened. Also, they hadn't given her a hard time about filling her room to the ceiling with water. They knew she was eccentric at times, and as long as the rest of the house didn't get flooded, they were willing to put up with it, and with her-- for a while anyway. In the meantime, she could sleep in one of the spare bedrooms.

Morphia spent the rest of her day wandering the streets, telling anyone who would listen of the things she had seen unfold.

Some were entertained. "Hmph... Funny."

Some shrugged and laughed it off. "Hmph... Funny."

Meanwhile, others, like her parents, only looked at her strangely, and were happy to be away from her.

"Yeah... real funny. Friggin Weirdo."

But she didn't care what the reaction of her audience was, only that now, for the first time ever, she felt she had a story worth sharing.

She occupied the following days in a similar fashion, roaming the streets, sometimes stopping in parks, standing on a bench, revealing all that she had seen. After a while though, Morphia couldn't find anyone else to tell—at least not anyone who would listen to her—but no more visions had come to her.

Morphia sank into despair. She had other ideas for stories, but in her mind, all of them weren't worth the paper they were written on. They were never good enough for her. Most of them were just odd fragments, that she didn't do anything more with. They couldn't hold her attention long enough to continue and complete anything.

Spiraling deeper and deeper, Morphia returned to her bedroom, and once again, she

attempted to drown herself. As she took her last breaths, glad to have her life finally over with, another vision occurred. This time it was about a young girl who had no arms or legs, and who lived in a small, bronze sphere, and who sought to have a new body built for her. It was a much longer vision than her first—so much so that Morphia nearly died before it was done and she made it through the hatch. Her lungs full of water, she'd fallen unconscious, but luckily, her mother had been in the attic searching through some files, and she made it to her in time.

Revived, Morphia changed her clothes and headed out to the streets once more, and didn't bother to tell her parents what she had seen, which began with:

"Mr. Calm perched on Emily's arm, as he did each afternoon, and chirped what he had seen."

They were too busy to listen anyway. After Morphia left, they debated if they should have her institutionalized, whether they could afford it or not. Or perhaps, depending on their insurance coverage, maybe if she tried a third time, one of them wouldn't be around to save her.

In any case, Morphia had learned her lesson, and while she told her new vision to a somewhat larger and more receptive audience over the coming days, she knew she'd *have to* return to her bedroom in order for her to have another vision.

And so, this cycle continued, but after another too close call, Morphia decided to ask her mother for help. They stood in the attic by the edge of the open hatch, the dark water glowing faintly.

"Let me get this straight: you need to drown in order to have one of these visions of yours, but you're *not* planning on killing yourself anymore?"

“Yes, mother.” Morphia handed her mother a flashlight to help her a little more.

“And is there any money, any hope of some kind of career in having these visions, and wandering around like you have been?”

“I hadn’t really considered that, but yes, I imagine there is, if a person wanted to go in that direction.”

“OK, that I can understand at least.”

“Could we discuss all this later? I need to focus now. You know, mother: me. Drowning. I might die and all that.”

“Sorry. Just thinking of our—*your* future.” Her mother agreed to stand by, mostly because she discovered their insurance package didn’t include suicides, and she and her husband still had hopes that Morphia would go to college and become a doctor or something, and that she would take care of them as they grew old.

Regardless, Morphia wasn’t paying attention at that point, and she sat at the edge of the hatch, then slid into the water. Once again, she wore her black satin dress, for luck. Her mother clicked the flashlight, and kept

it trained on Morphia, which wasn’t all that easy. So much for her lucky dress.

Morphia sat there for a while, and once again she nearly drowned, but no vision came. Her mother panicked after a minute or so, having lost sight of her and she dove down to save her, not wanting to lose their early retirement meal ticket. Morphia was a quick learner, however, and realized that she wasn’t truly in danger with her Mom standing at the edge of the hatch, especially as her Mom had dove down too soon.

As she was drying off in the attic, she told her mother: “I have to keep doing this alone.”

Her mother didn’t like that idea at all, but she knew there was nothing she could do, except perhaps encourage Morphia to start getting paid for all her storytelling. It’d be a start at least. She could handle being Morphia’s manager or agent, making money off of her daughter, plus, having Morphia write off her managerial wages as a business expense.



Morphia didn't want to discuss any of the business aspects though, and sent her mother away. She returned to the hatch and thought about trying again right away, and the other possibilities—of what she could do underwater. Hours passed, and she decided to wait until the next day to try again. Luckily, she was able to avoid her parents for the rest of the day.

But as she returned to her bedroom each time, her lung capacity increased, so she was able to last longer under the water before she finally started drowning. Granted, Morphia could've just taken deep breaths right away, gulping down the water, but she didn't want to force things, just in case she was wrong. So, instead, she brought her favorite wicker chair from the sitting room, and sunk it down to the floor, where she secured it with some nails. Now, at least Morphia had somewhere to sit comfortably for a while.

The fish came later.

She began with catfish, then changed them for coy as they were more colorful and less creepy. Next, she switched to salt water and had butterfly fish. Then seahorses. Now she had puffer fish floating around her. Switching to salt water and the fish didn't change her visions in any way. However, the fish made the wait before drowning herself a little more pleasurable.

While sitting on her chair one day, she even thought of adding sharks, or eels, or barracudas or some other nasty fish, to make things a little more interesting, dangerous, and challenging, but she wasn't ready to be quite so extreme just yet. The puffer fish were nice, and since they were still alive, Morphia figured she'd let them stay a while longer.

She also found that more ideas of her own were blossoming. Ideas she could explore in her own stories. Once again, Morphia began

to write new stories, and she also returned to all those old fragments that she'd written before, and found they weren't so bad after all—that they were worth exploring further. She realized that she had talent as a writer and as a storyteller in her own right, and that her skills were growing.

In the meantime, she returned to her bedroom, seeking out each vision, hoping to avoid her death now, in order that she could keep sharing them. Despite working on her own stories, and eventually sharing them as well on the streets, alternating between her own stories and the visions, she didn't want to give up on her visions. She still had more to learn, and more to share. But Morphia was aware that there could come a time when she wouldn't be able to swim fast enough and hard enough to save herself. And that final vision would be hers alone—the last thing she'd ever see. Morphia accepted that with joy in her heart, in those final moments knowing that she had done all she could to live a meaningful life—a life meaningful for her at the very least. Being a doctor would've been fine and noble, but it wasn't in her heart, nor was exploiting her storytelling as her parents hoped. Plus, Morphia had also spent a lot of her money to get the answers for her SATs. She was very intelligent, but not half as smart as her parents thought she was. Stories she could tell. Operating on people was better left to the MENSA—smart folks.

Bizarro Central

**The Resource for the bizarro genre.
Author profiles, books, fiction, articles,
forum, and more!**

www.BizarroCentral.com

Kevin L. Donihe is one of the most insightfully insane writers out there. Carlton Mellick III calls Donihe's novel, House of Houses, "...the weirdest book that anyone has ever written or will ever write. Donihe is the grandmaster of the bizarro fiction genre." I couldn't agree more.

Donihe's signature is creating absolutely insane stories and characters. Despite how outlandish the ideas he works with are, there is always a core of human emotional truth. He has an amazing ability to give the reader brilliant glimpses of insight into the human condition. Be it from a human/house romance, a washing-machine messiah, or a man who just can't stop selling dildos.

The Traveling Dildo Salesman

by Kevin L Donihe

Chapter One

Ralph was a traveling dildo salesman. His selection was vast, and all models were stamped MADE IN HEAVEN.

In truth, he wasn't sure if his name was Ralph, but he thought of himself as Ralph, and, when he happened upon some reflective surface, he saw what he imagined to be a Ralph looking back. It didn't matter if it was really Bill or Bob or Tom or Ted or Sam or Steve. It didn't matter if he didn't have a name at all. All that mattered were the dildos and his ability to sell them.

Ultimately, he wanted nothing more than to do and be something else, something new that felt old, like a thing he'd been before but somehow stopped being. The only way he could render the unknown known was to continue on the path, be diligent and pick up clues along the way. When the last dildo was sold, the time of wandering and wondering would end; all answers would be revealed.

This process was the one thing of which he was certain.

Ralph trod a flat, featureless road. The morning sun was red on his face, and the eye in the

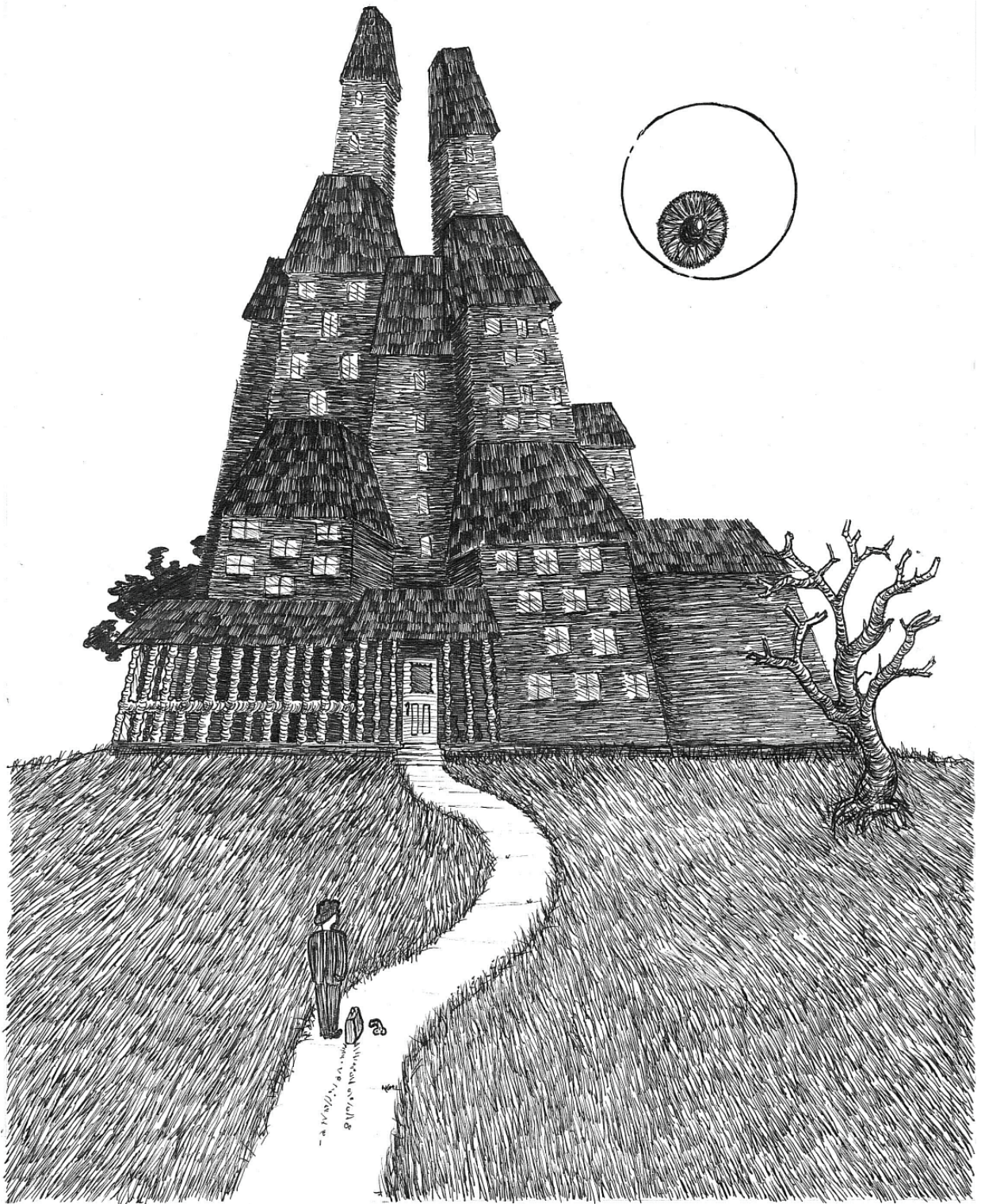
sky looked down at him, unblinkingly. Unlike the sun, it never changed its position, just kept its big blue orb trained on him, day and night. He tried not to look at it very often. It gave him a weird sense of vertigo when he did, like he was about to fall into the eye, even though it was above him.

As he approached the start of yet another neighborhood, his case became heavier, as though ghost hands were loading it with bricks. The weight caused his left side to slump, so Ralph tried dragging it on pavement.

All around him, houses were austere, old-looking abodes that seemed to end in needle points, the uppermost stories too high to see. Most were painted white. Spacious yet empty wooden front porches jutted equidistantly from the road, and each yard featured at least one plastic animal sculpture.

Ralph wouldn't try them all. Most he would simply pass, as they weren't the right places. He always knew which were right. He was, in a sense, told. Though the method of transmission was different each time, it was no less apparent.

Suddenly, his neck felt prickly. He turned left and regarded the property across from him. Here, the grass was longer than in the surrounding yards, and it blew back and forth, as if buffeted by gale-force winds. Seconds later, the blades froze into place, all bent towards the house.



He knocked on the selected door. A little girl, licking a lollypop as big as her face, opened it. Ralph wanted to take the lollypop from her, taste something sweet, but restrained himself and said, “Is your mother home?”

She simply nodded.

“Wonderful! May I speak with her?”

Again, the girl nodded, and then scampered off.

Too much time seemed to pass. Ralph was beginning to think the girl had simply left when he heard two sets of approaching footsteps. Moments later, a young, harried-looking woman in a flour-coated apron stood before him, the girl by her side.

“Greetings, madam,” Ralph said. “I hate to trouble you, but you look like someone who might be interested in my line of products.”

“I’m really kind of busy.” She looked down. “Kids, you know...”

Ralph didn’t, but nodded anyway.

“Though I imagine being a traveling salesman must be hard work, too.”

Ralph smiled inwardly. “It is.”

She regarded his case. “So, what are you selling?”

“Only the finest dildos. That’s my answer, and my guarantee.”

Her face went slack. “The finest *what*?”

“Dildos, madam.”

“Don’t say that word!” She clutched the girl. “Can’t you see a child is present?”

Ralph looked down at the girl, still licking the huge lollypop. He waved, and she waved back.

“I hardly think it’s inappropriate,” he replied. “After all, my dil—*items* have a vast array of potential uses, and not just the common one, which you are no doubt considering.”

She scowled. “Tell me, how else does one use a d-i-l-d-o?”

“Well, for starters, many mothers buy them for their children to play with, or to fashion into mobiles for infants.”

“That’s ghastly! You’re ghastly!”

“I assure you that’s not the case. Kids simply love dildos, especially the colorful floppy ones.” He caught his mistake. “I’m terribly sorry, madam. I’ll spell it out next time.”

She covered the girl’s ears, began humming loudly. “I’m not listening to you!” she shouted between hums.

“Please, if you would just—”

The door slammed in his face. Dejected, Ralph looked down at his feet and saw a bunch of ants crawling in formation across the porch. Their bodies formed a note: AT THE NEXT HOUSE, YOU WILL FIND A CLUE.

Ralph was flummoxed. Why couldn’t the sign have been given at *that* house?

Back on the street, a massive billboard caught his attention. IT’S THE GOVERNMENT, it said, the words superimposed over a bunch of happy looking people seated at a breakfast table, eating a bear-shaped cereal called *Flang-Os*. Ralph made mental note of this revelation and kept walking until he saw something he never remembered seeing, at least not as a traveling dildo salesman.

He ran to the bus stop, plopped himself down on a weathered bench. If a bus was all he needed to escape, then so be it. To hell with selling dildos.

After a few minutes, he drummed fingers on his left leg, shook his right one. A little later, both legs shook, and, after what had to be almost thirty minutes, he chewed on

his bottom lip until it bled. Maybe it was an abandoned stop. Maybe there never was a bus.

And then he saw it, first as just a speck on the horizon that could be anything, and then as a big red double-decker. It pulled up, ground to a halt. The door opened, and the oddly familiar driver regarded him.

Ralph grabbed his case, arose.

“Slow down there,” said the driver.

“I’m sorry. I’ll go slower. I’m just in a—”

“No, no, no. You misunderstand. I’m not telling you to board at a slower and therefore safer pace.”

Ralph looked at him askance. “You’re not?”

“No, I’m telling you not to board at all.”

Hope sank. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“But why? Can’t I just get on? *Please.*”

The driver seemed perturbed. “Not with that case,” he said.

Ralph clutched the handle tighter. “You don’t understand; I need it! If I lose it, I’ll get in big trouble!”

“Are you sure about that?”

Ralph *wasn’t* sure, at least not exactly. Still, he figured it best to err on the side of caution.

“You know I can’t take any riders with cases,” the driver continued, “and yet here you are, day after day, asking if you can board.”

“I do that?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t want to let on any further that he didn’t remember his last attempts. “Well, uh, I figure if I keep trying, maybe you’ll change your mind and let me on.”

“That’s not going to happen, Ralph.”

He was shocked. “How do you know my name?”

The driver smiled. “You’ve told me a few times.”

Somewhere in the back, a passenger asked a muffled question. When the driver finished and turned again towards Ralph, he said, “Try again tomorrow.”

“But you’ll say the same thing then!”

The driver cocked his neck, raised a brow. “And how do you know that?”

He had a point.

The door closed and the bus shot up into the sky, traveling, it seemed, to the big unblinking eye.

Chapter Two

Twenty minutes after leaving the stop, Ralph found the second sign, the sun shining so brightly upon a house that his view of it was all but obscured. Once the light dimmed, he saw the place and wished he could go elsewhere.

Gravestones juttied from the unkempt yard’s left corner, near a rickety, weather-beaten fence and just across from a red-eyed plastic donkey. One stone was crossed-shaped, though an arm had broken off. The next had been sculpted in the form of a fat tree stump, a cut branch protruding from center-left. The last one—slate and seemingly the oldest—showcased a bas-relief of a grinning skull framed by garlands. Moss made it seem as though the skull had a mouthful of green teeth.

Unconsciously, Ralph scratched his front tooth with a fingernail. He looked up from the graves. An image in a dark window seemed to be a scowling face, forehead scrunched and lips twisted in some disagreeable way. Still, he couldn’t be sure if it was someone behind the glass or an old picture on the wall inside.

Ralph swallowed apprehension. Time to buck up. Time to accost the potential customer within.

He gripped the case and dragged it across the yard, ripping up grass. The red-eyed plastic donkey now faced him instead of the road. Ralph averted his gaze quickly.

He paused at the door. The selling spiel didn't come naturally to him, not even with the easiest or most pliable customers. Saying the words made him feel artificial, like a collection of gears and cogs, or a plastic-man.

Just then, the dildos started to awaken. He heard their soft, sleepy murmurs, muffled by leather.

"Ssssh," he said. "Relax."

A dildo made a thumping sound. Ralph interpreted this as an act of defiance.

"Be nice today! Don't be assholes!"

Another thump. Then a third one, louder still.

"I said, *don't be assholes!*"

The dildos ceased flopping, but Ralph still heard them murmur to one another. He couldn't understand their language, but imagined they were saying bad things about him and his abilities as a salesman.

Ralph shook his head, rolled his shoulders a few times and knocked on the door, the noise echoing through the interior, over and over again, then boomeranging back to him and resulting in sounds somehow louder than the original knocks. Eventually, six knocks sounded like six thousand.

A seventh knock wasn't necessary. The door creaked open. Just past the threshold stood an old woman, face like yellow parchment. Her hair, dyed unnaturally black, stood a foot above her scalp. She wore a stern black dress beneath a shawl that covered her back and shoulders like a web. She didn't seem

to have feet, but they had to be *somewhere* beneath the dress.

No sooner than Ralph introduced himself did smoke start to rise from around her neck, like hundreds of tiny men inside her tall lace collar were smoking cigars. He tried to ignore this and begin his spiel.

"Hello, good lady. My name is Ralph and I'm a traveling dildo salesman." He paused then, waiting to see if the woman might introduce herself or extend a withered hand to be kissed, but she said and did nothing. Thin, bloodless lips remained tightly pursed. She didn't even blink.

Ralph continued. "Now, you might be thinking that such things don't interest you, but I'm here to tell you that dildos are, in fact, one of the most versatile consumer items known to Man. If you'd only—"

He stopped. The amount of smoke pouring from her collar increased. Ralph could barely see her. It was awkward, just standing on the porch, saying nothing, but he didn't think it wise to continue the spiel when the lady wasn't visible.

Before the smoke could clear, dildos started muttering again. He looked down at the case. "Shut up, you dildos!" he said through clenched teeth. "I'm in the middle of a sale!"

Ralph regained his composure and turned again to the old woman. The smoke had cleared a bit, but she showed no sign of life other than standing. "Please, forgive the outburst," he said. "Let me just show you, my good lady, what I have to offer."

He opened up the case. His face scrunched in horror. The case brimmed with angry, violent dildos the likes of which he hadn't anticipated. They flopped around like dozens of dying fish, all screaming for water.

He made to close the case. A dildo shot from the opposite end to his fingers. Small yet razor-sharp teeth sank into his thumb.

He dropped the case, and the dildo that bit him scampered off, laughing. He'd never realized a dildo was capable of laughter.

"Excuse me, would you please? This won't take a moment."

The old woman made no response other than to continue smoking. Ralph turned from her and saw that the dildo had inched to the cemetery. There, it darted about the graves and coiled around stones. He had to rectify the situation. Not one could be allowed to escape, as a free dildo could never be sold.

Ralph sprinted to the little cemetery. Pausing there, he watched the dildo writhe in overgrown grass and moss, seemingly blissful until it turned to him and hissed.

He tried to pounce on the thing, but missed and almost cracked his head on a tombstone. No matter. He had to teach the dildo a lesson. Reaching out, Ralph seized the thing as it curved around the stump-shaped stone. It bared its teeth; bit him again.

"You son of a bitch!" he shouted.

It squirmed in his grasp. Ralph barely maintained his hold. He heard the bray of a donkey, was distracted, and the thing slipped free, scurried up his shirt and wrapped itself around his neck.

Sparks started to fly, and then the world itself seemed to darken. Tighter and tighter the thing squeezed. Ralph tried, but couldn't get his hands between the dildo and his throat. Falling away, his hands flopped, brushed against a stick. Grabbing it, he sent the stick arcing without a thought of what might happen if his aim were not true.

The dildo shrieked as the stick penetrated its middle. Uncoiling from his neck, it flopped on the ground, injured, a blue goopy substance

bubbling from the hole Ralph had made.

Gripping what he imagined must be the dildo's throat, he squeezed. "Do you like how that feels?" he shouted. "*Do you?*"

The dildo could not respond. Blue plastic took on a pink tint before becoming a brilliant, swollen red. It went limp in his hand, and Ralph threw its twisted remains against a nearby tree, just for good measure.

Turning back to the house, he noticed that the old smoking lady had gone, and that the other dildos were inching out of their case and creeping out onto the lawn.

"You want to fight? Then bring it on!" Reclaiming the dead dildo, Ralph ran up to the others and brandished the corpse in front of them. "If any of you assholes move, I'll do the same to you, and I won't hesitate! Do you understand? I'll kill each and every last one of you, no matter how long it takes!"

The dildos got the message. They stopped flopping on the porch or in the grass, got in line and returned to the case. They seemed cowed and most quieted down, some whimpering like good little sex toys as they took their positions, one atop the other. But a defiant, devilish red dildo didn't get the message. It started flopping the other way.

Ralph pressed the dead dildo against the living one. "No, don't even think about trying that!"

It quieted down, and Ralph threw the dead dildo in with the living ones. Most recoiled in horror, not at all eager to share close quarters with a deceased comrade. Ralph didn't imagine this would pose a problem, at least not for him. He just wouldn't let potential consumers know that the product was deceased. All sales, after all, were final.

He closed the case. Then he knocked on the door a few times, waited, but no one answered.

Ralph hadn't been back on the road for more than a minute when he saw another sign, every cloud in the sky suddenly amassing around a single house. It was hard to remember, but, in the past, it seemed that he had to walk quite a bit, sometimes for miles and miles, before he reached another selected property. Maybe whatever the other house had to offer had been transferred to this one. Ralph hoped that was the case.

In the yard, a plastic grizzly bear with claws outstretched towered over a birdbath. Its lips: curled in a sneer. A trail of white plastic drool streamed down from a single tooth. The bear had to be at least twelve feet tall. Ralph kept his eye on it as he passed.

A sheet of paper was taped to the front door. The letters were rendered in pencil, words so small he was already on the porch before he could read them.

NO FUCKING SALESMEN,
PLEASE, they said.

Ralph wanted to respect this homeowner's wishes. He wanted to turn around, go someplace else. Still, he had to try. The sign had been given.

He only had to knock once. In seconds, he heard approaching footsteps, big clomping ones. The door opened with a squeal.

"What do you want," said the man, a grizzled, but stout, forty-something. His tousled hair made it seem as though he'd just gotten out of bed. Stubble coated his cheeks. He wore an open bathrobe. Beneath it, only briefs.

More disconcerting: a bandage of what appeared to be freshly wrought tiger skin. It covered one eye, most of his forehead and left cheek. Ralph hated the sight of blood, and his mind conjured up images of what might lay below the strange bandage, even as he launched into his spiel.

"Hello, sir! My name is Ralph, and—"

The man didn't let him finish. "Are you a salesman?" he said.

It hadn't sounded like a question.

"Ummm, I, uhhhh..."

"Are you or aren't you?"

"I am, sir."

He folded his arms across his chest. "I don't much like salesmen."

"Don't worry," Ralph replied, trying not to stare at the tiger bandage. "I'm not one of those regular guys! I'm a traveling dildo salesman!"

The man seemed neither interested nor impressed. His face reddened and scrunched into a scowl similar to that of the face Ralph had seen in the window.

"But I have all the best models, *exclusive* ones, and I only come by once. If you miss this opportunity, it's gone forever."

The man's expression didn't waver. A fat forehead vein pulsed, tenting out his bandage. "I'm a guy. What need do I have for *dildos*? Where am I going to stick them? Up my ass?"

"If you want, yes."

The vein thumped harder. "I don't very much appreciate the kind of people who do that!"

Clearly, this guy would be a hard sell. Perhaps another approach was in order. Ralph thought for a second, began: "The thing about my dildos is that they're not only practical. They're aesthetic, too."

"What the hell are you talking about?" The bandage started to slump. "Those are sex toys, sick and perverted!"

Ralph swallowed hard. His hands quaked, but he had to continue. "They'll look simply lovely atop a mantle, or by a light or candle, should you choose a translucent model." He ducked a blood spurt from the

man's forehead. "Can you imagine having such an amazing and versatile item to show your guests?"

"The pulp of your face wrapped around my fists! That's what I can imagine!"

Ralph dropped the case, lifted his hands defensively. "I'm—I'm sorry, but I had no choice! I had to come here! The grass told me so!"

"Are you on drugs?" His face was mere inches from Ralph's. The tiger bandage fell completely, exposing red meat and yellow pus. His left eye: a black raisin in his head. "Are you an *addict*?"

"No! No drugs! Not an addict!"

The man, now appearing as tall as the room, glared down at him. "Good! Because there's nothing worse than an addict who's also a traveling salesman!"

Blood rained down on Ralph. "Please don't hurt me," he muttered.

"I posted a note," the man roared in response, and now his nose and ears were bleeding, too. "You can't say I didn't! I have to beat up every salesman that comes to my door, see? It's a compulsion!"

Before Ralph could react, the man landed an uppercut to his jaw. Ralph fell to the porch, and the man started kicking his ribs. The guy's bathrobe flapped back and forth. His penis bobbed up and down in tandem with the balls in his briefs.

Ralph rolled off the porch into the grass. He arose quickly, his mouth and side aching, and saw the man bound towards him.

"Let me finish what I started!" he screamed, every exposed part of his body alternating between shades of scarlet and crimson as it began to swell.

Ralph took off towards the road. "I told you I was sorry!" he shouted, but the man, uninterested in apologies, continued his pursuit.

His voice sounded clotted, deep and strained. "You are making me very, very mad!"

When Ralph reached the bear, the man jumped out from behind it. Ralph bit back a scream; he couldn't even wonder how he'd gotten there so fast. His body had expanded to four times its normal size. Eyes bulged like angry melons as red fountains gushed from thick, rope-like veins that throbbed audibly.

The man cocked his grossly oversized fist. Instead of a fist, eyes hit Ralph as both popped out of the man's head. "Ah shit," he tried to say, but reached critical mass and exploded all over the yard instead.

The initial shock wore off; Ralph felt around. His body was intact and, miraculously, none of the mess had splattered on him or his clothes. It was everywhere else, though, even on some of the other houses.

Then he realized the globs and splatters weren't just random. They spelled out a clue that began by a neighboring tree, stretched from the bear up to the front of the house, went over a fence and ended by a lamppost the next yard over.

DON'T TRUST BILLBOARDS, it said.

Ralph recited these words a hundred times in an attempt to store them in long-term memory. Then he wondered if it really mattered. He remembered nothing specific from past clues, just disembodied references to various individuals, groups, cults and drugs. Perhaps the clues were all being stored in a mental vault of sorts, one that he could access at the correct time, but maybe that was mere wishful thinking.

And how long had it been since he sold a dildo? A year? Ten years? A hundred?

Had he even sold a first one? All he remembered was going to many houses and knocking on many doors, so many that

they all blurred together and seemed like the same big door that led into the same big house.

Maybe he just needed another sign, one that would lead him to a new house, a better place where he'd not only find a clue, but sell a dildo, too. To find it, he'd just have to keep walking.

And so Ralph walked for longer than he thought he could without the sun going down.

Maybe he wanted it too much, or wasn't looking hard enough. Fear told him that it was his fault. He was too blind to see what had to be right in front of him. Ralph tried to shake away this thought. It leached into him, instead.

Come on! Just give me something I can recognize! Looking up at the eye in the sky, he imagined that it was taunting him silently.

Ralph considered breaking protocol by trying the closest house. Another part of him felt that this might be a bad thing, that he might be punished, somehow and by somebody.

He put the case down. It had become even more of an anathema to him. Stretching his arms and back, he felt something in his pocket press against his legs. He pulled out a cell phone. Interesting, but he knew no one apart from himself.

But wait. He'd forgotten about Mom. Now, more than anything, he wanted to talk to her. She had been dead for a very long time, but that didn't stop her from being there for him, day after day.

Maybe she would have some answers, too, but Ralph didn't recall her number. In desperation, he pushed random buttons on the

pad. To his surprise, the phone on the other end started ringing. In three rings, it was picked up.

Ralph said "hello" and heard only a lullaby, hummed in his mother's voice. Seconds before, he couldn't remember the sound of it. It seemed so warm and familiar now. Vaguely, Ralph recalled doing stuff with Mom when he was small, things like going to a place full of steel cages and vicious, wild animals. Whenever he thought of her, she had a blank-face.

She finished the lullaby. "How are you doing, dear?"

"About the same ... at least I think so."

Her voice had a caring lilt. "And how exactly is that?"

It seemed now that his mom always had a way of getting the truth out of him. He exhaled and spoke. "I went to a bad house and ... and I just don't want to do this shi—" he stopped himself before he could say a bad word—"anymore. I want to go back home, but to do that, I've got to keep knocking on these doors!"

"I understand. You're frustrated. But trust me, it's not as bad as you think."

He sighed. "I just want you to tell me something about how things used to be. *Anything*. It doesn't matter. Even the smallest detail will help me feel whole again."

Silence greeted him for too long.

"... Like what school did I attend? What was my favorite color? Where did we live?"

"All those things are confidential, dear."

"Okay, Mom, okay. It's just that ... being dead and all, you must know some of the secrets."

"I do. But you know I can't tell." There was a slight pause. "But I can tell you this..."

His hands tingled. "Please, Mom! Please tell!"

"This happened long ago. I was in the hospital with the flu. Doctors thought I might die, and I felt so terrible I believed them, until The White Man came."

"The White Man?"

"Yes, and he told me that you, who had yet to be born, would grow up to become a very special type of man, a traveling dildo salesman."

"Why have you never told me this?"

"I've told you. You just don't remember."

Ralph looked down at his shoes. "Oh..."

"Don't worry, Son. For now, simply know that you are meant to follow this path. It is your Way. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mom, I do."

"Good. And never get on that bus. You'd be cheating destiny."

He was taken aback. "How did you know about the bus?"

"Mothers know all. I also know a sign will appear to you soon, and it will make you very, very happy."

Suddenly, the pavement in front of him reared up. Ralph covered his eyes, for a second thinking it might crash down on him like a wave, but it took a detour to the right, shooting through a nearby yard and across the porch where it stopped at the door and landed with a thud.

"Do you see the sign?" Mom asked.

"I do. And yes, I'll do a good job. I'll sell all my dildos, just like you want. But Mom..."

"What, Son?"

He bit his lip. "Can I ask a favor before you go?"

"Of course. You needn't even ask that."

"Will you ... will you please call me after I finish with this house, just in case it turns out bad, too?" He hated that he sounded so vulnerable.

"I'll try, but I can't make promises. Getting to the phone more than once a day when you're dead isn't easy."

"I understand, and no need to promise anything. Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome, Son."

Following the new road, Ralph scanned the chosen property. Physically, the house was the same as all the others, but a fountain towered in the yard. Rusted steel fragments of varying shapes and sizes shot forth at wild angles from a wide, saucer-shaped base. The top ended in a huge nozzle that spurted black, oily water. Ralph wondered if the owner might be an artist, someone who might appreciate his dildos, buy them all, and incorporate them into his or her work.

He stood at the door for a few seconds for composure's sake, but, before he could knock, the door opened slowly, not with a squeal, but a mechanical hum and the sound of uncoiling springs and grinding gears.

Before Ralph stood a robot, or, rather, what looked like a Halloween costume or cheap movie approximation of such. Its body was just a dull tin box with slots and knobs and gauges on it. Some appeared painted on. Its head was similar to a bucket, with a cutout slot for the mouth, two red plastic flares serving as eyes and a black dot for the nose. Legs were thick, woven wire bundles. The wires untangled and split into prongs that served as rudimentary feet; it didn't appear to have functional knees.

"Good day, sir."—Then he wondered if he should call a robot "sir"—"My name is Ralph, and you look like an individual who might be interested in one of my fine dildos."

The robot made bleeping sounds. Ralph took that as a “yes”.

He brought his case into view. “Well, then I suggest grabbing one, or even a handful, now, as this is a one-time only opportunity.”

The robot bleeped again.

“Why don’t we step inside? I could show you some of my finer specimens. Believe me when I say, *dildos are one of the world’s most versatile inventions.*”

It started leaking oil onto the carpet.

Ralph felt flustered. Perhaps the best he could do was leave. “Well, good day,” he said. “I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

As he was about to turn away, a pinprick of light appeared in the center of the robot’s chest and lengthened across it in a beam. The beam arched down and became the outline of a door, the demarcated segment opening like a drawbridge as Ralph’s case rumbled and light emanated from it in rays. Then locks unfastened, and dildos, dozens and dozens of them, flew from the case and into the robot. When the last dildo was through the breach, the door and case both slammed shut.

For a second, Ralph feared that the robot might take the dildos and leave without paying him. But the door opened again, and a belly full of pennies slid out from it onto the porch.

He picked up one of the pennies, studied it. The obverse featured a happy-looking walrus head, wearing a monocle. The reverse said only, ONE CENT.

Ralph put this coin in his pocket as a souvenir. The rest, he scooted off the porch. “I give these to the ground,” he said. As if on vocal cue, grass blades wrapped around the pennies. The ground swallowed them and, afterwards, expelled air like a burp.

Ralph didn’t mind the loss. Money was a means of transaction, and, once that transaction was complete, it became meaningless.

Big-top music started playing in the robot’s house. He looked past the robot just as a banner unfurled from the ceiling, stretching from one side of the living room to the other as streamers and confetti fell.

CONGRATULATIONS, RALPH!

– GOD

Knowing something, somewhere, had been watching heartened him. Perhaps certain powers—powers that cared for his best interests—were congratulating him on sticking around and seeing it through to the end.

“Thank you,” he said, though to whom exactly he could not say.

The robot spat out a roll of white tape from a slot where a naval would be if it were human. When it stopped getting longer, Ralph reached down, pulled it off.

Maybe this was his ticket out of the world, but the script was reminiscent of hieroglyphics, and he could decipher none of it. One marking was somewhat evocative, though. It was a heart, and it reminded him of a locket that hung on an old woman’s neck. Within that heart image, he realized suddenly, were words too small to read.

He folded the strip, put it in his pocket. “Good day, sir,” Ralph said, more out of habit, as he was sure the thing hadn’t heard him, then added, sincerely, “And thank you so very, very much.”

“Good day to you, too,” the thing said in a low, halting electronic register.

On the road, Ralph was met with a feeling like déjà vu. It was, he realized, also a feeling of joy. Before, joy had been just a word, no way to conceptualize it. As he pondered this, he realized that he might just love the robot. It had finally squared his circle.

Ralph glanced up at the sky, looking, perhaps, for a flaming chariot or magic carpet. When would he transcend this place? He hoped it would be soon, but if he had to wait, be patient, then so be it. At that moment, Ralph realized that he still carried his case. How silly of him. He tossed it to the street.

In his pocket, the phone rang. His smile was so wide it felt eternal. He couldn't wait to talk to Mom, tell her the news. "Hello!" he shouted before she even had time to speak.

"My, you sound excited!"

"I am, Mom; I am! You won't believe this, but I sold my dildos to a robot!"

She sighed. "Robots are such nice people."

"They are, Mom. Really and truly."

"I'm so proud of you, Son."

"I'm proud of me, too! It's over and I can go home!"

On the line: awkward silence.

"Mom?" Ralph asked.

"I hate to say this," she said, finally, "but have you looked in your case since the robot bought your dildos?"

"No. Why?"

"I just think you should look, that's all."

Ralph bent down, opened the case. A large pink dildo, threaded with pulsing veins, sat to the left of a smaller translucent blue one and to the right of a realistic-looking yet grossly oversized basic model.

"Oh shi—crap, Mom!" Ralph said. He considered rushing back to the house. There, he would accost the robot, make it buy the last three dildos.

"You are never to return to a house you've already tried," Mom said, her tone a bit sterner. "It's part of the rules."

"Okay. I'm just . . . a little disappointed."

"Still, Son, this is good," she said. "In fact, it's very, very good. Just think of how much closer you are now . . ."

"I know. I know. Being close is great, but it's not the same as making it."

"I understand, dear, but you're doing great. I'm so very proud of you. Never forget that and keep plugging away. Do it for your old, dead mother."

"I will. I promise. And thank you, Mom."

Ralph could almost see her smile. "No, thank you. You've said all I wanted to hear."

Chapter Three

Sunrays no longer shined through clouds. Night insects screamed in the distance. In front of and behind Ralph, the lights in all the houses went out simultaneously.

Thinking back, he couldn't recall ever seeing homeowners in their yards after dark. No flickers of light or shadows passing by windows, either. Perhaps everyone left via tunnels or simply ceased to be until morning.

If so, he imagined it'd be okay to sleep in one of the houses, as it seemed a crime for so much space to go unused, night after night.

Then Ralph thought he remembered something about a big, threatening black shadow that warned him never to approach any house after dark. But what if that shadow was just a phantom from some long ago dream? Maybe he'd already entered houses, slept in them numerous times.

A rested salesman, Ralph figured, was preferable to an exhausted one, so he stepped out onto the property. In lieu of a plastic animal, a metallic sculpture of a red broken heart sat on a marble base surrounded by a small herb garden. Directly behind the house: a patch of dense woods.

One of the windows was open slightly. From it, Ralph heard a song, its melody warm and happy, its lyrics muffled by walls. Curiosity overpowered him. He walked to the sill, took hold of it and pushed himself up.

Losing his balance, he fell from the window to the floor. His left shoulder stung a bit, but pain was forgotten, as he now heard the lyrics to the song clearly:

*“Your trials are near their end.
Relax in memory;
Relax in what soon shall be
And become yourself again...”*

First his shoulders and then his mind relaxed as he walked through a den populated with comfy looking furniture and charming knickknacks. A set of bronze hands, clasped in prayer, sat atop the TV. Old porcelain dolls lined the mantle above a lit fireplace.

In an adjacent bedroom, colorful jars of perfume were displayed on the dresser. A gray shawl was draped over one bedpost. A rack full of yellowing magazines sat by the nightstand. On the wall above the bed was a family photograph, faded, tattered at the edges and containing three smiling people. The smallest guy looked like the sort of kid he might have once been.

Ralph remembered, suddenly, that this was the room where his grandmother had once slept. Her name was Meg. Or Marge. Or Mabel. Ralph wished he could call her as well, but maybe she'd been dead for so long that her voice was just a whisper.

He entered a short and narrow hall before finding himself in the kitchen. On the refrigerator, held up by an apple-shaped magnet, was a drawing of a stick figure standing beside a stick house in a stick world with a happy sun and no leering blue eye in sight.

FOR GRANNY, big, red, crayon-rendered words at the top said.

Turning to his right, he saw the entranceway to the dining room and, through it, a massive, ornate wooden table, ostentatious in such an otherwise homespun milieu. China plates and platters and cups held enough food to satiate at least twenty people. Ralph eyed the turkey breast in the center of the table. His stomach rumbled, and he looked down at his stick-like arms, then felt the ribs beneath his shirt.

Still, he stared at the food for another minute, reveling in the sheer awesomeness of the spread before approaching the table and taking his seat. He touched the turkey leg. It was hot. The stuffing produced warm steam that condensed against his hand. He seized a knife, gold from the looks of it, and dug in, slicing off a chunk of turkey breast. He dropped it on his plate, took a bite and oh did it taste wonderful, like Christmas and Thanksgiving combined.

Quickly, he reached for a spoon buried in a bowl of mashed potatoes, but, upon lifting it, noticed that it was connected by wire to the bottom of the bowl. Something clicked; a guillotine blade from the ceiling smashed into the table. Ralph looked down. His fork had been halved; the top quarter of his thumb was gone, too.

He stood up. A blade as wide as the room itself descended, splitting the entire kitchen. The left side of the room fell away as the turkey rose from the plate, picked up a

carving knife with its wing and flashed it. The severed neck mimicked a mouth and smiled unpleasantly.

A third blade whooshed, this time from the side. Ralph ducked as it sheared away the uppermost quarters of the house. Before he could reorient himself, whirling blades on stalks and nozzles shot up from the floor, busting boards and sending clouds of dust and crawlspace skeletons into the air.

The devices gave chase, playing oddly soothing Musak from tiny speakers all the while. Ralph's feet wanted to tap against his volition, but he couldn't let these frequencies into his brain. He ignored them as much as he was able and jumped over a fourth blade that threatened his feet.

Outside, he ran in the direction of the woods. The nozzles, hoses and blades shut off their music, made disconcerting chattering sounds. Turning, Ralph saw the open, needle-filled maw of a hose hovering mere inches from his neck.

Running faster, he began to smell pine needles, wild flowers and fragrant roots. He concentrated on these odors and blocked from his mind everything that wasn't associated with them or his pounding feet. Seconds later, darkness gave way to a tangle of browns and greens. The nozzles, hoses and blades attempted to enter alongside, but impacted against tree trunks or were ensnared in vines.

Ralph continued until he could go on further. Into a bed of pine needles below a dead tree he fell.

It took him a while to regain consciousness, and longer still to stop feeling as though he was about to die. Earlier, he'd breathed so hard that he feared his lungs might burst; he worried that his heart might beat out of his

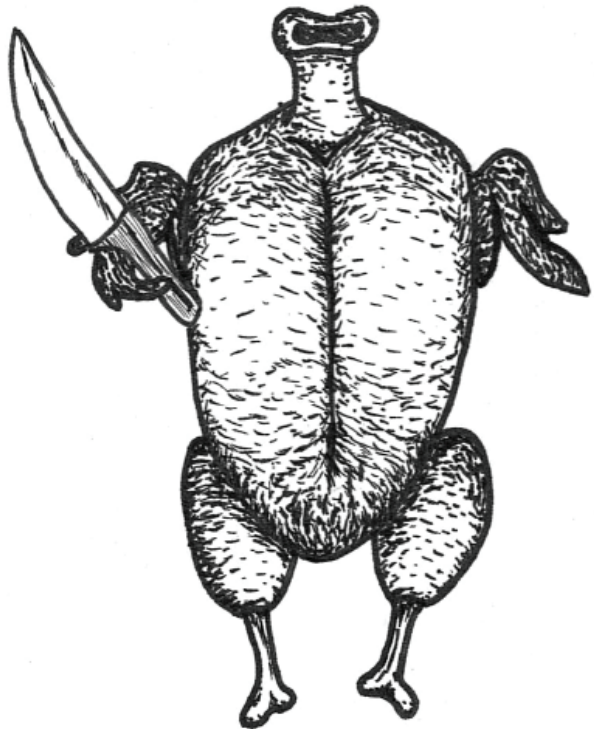
chest or that a blood vessel might explode in his brain. Now, all he felt was a throbbing sensation in his thumb. The bleeding had stopped, but he feared infection. Bandages weren't available on his route, and he'd never seen a doctor's office.

Ralph didn't want to think about this. It didn't make him feel any better. There was, however, one thing that could.

He didn't like killing little animals—or anything, for that matter—but it was unavoidable. Large prey was off the menu. It had to be a creature small enough so that the force of a dildo thrown against its head would either kill it or render it unconscious. Still, a meager dinner was better than no dinner at all.

In a bush, he heard something scamper. He waited a few seconds and saw a rabbit peek out its head, nose twitching.

Ralph felt for his case, opened it. One dildo was awake. He recognized the dildo he'd killed, seized it, and closed the case before the conscious dildo could consider escape.



He moved his throwing arm into position, but rustled some leaves. Though Ralph tossed the dildo quickly, the rabbit was gone before it even hit the ground.

“Damn!”

He retrieved the dildo, waited for more prey, waited until he imagined he might just as well go to bed. Then the noises came.

He wondered what it could be. The thing sounded decently sized as it trundled through leaves. Maybe it was a skunk. Ralph recalled eating one, and it had agreed neither with his palate nor his stomach.

The thing got closer. It was a groundhog.

“Stay right where you are,” he whispered beneath his breath. “Don’t move a muscle.”

The groundhog turned to Ralph. Had it heard him and understood what he said? Nonsense. Ralph pitched the dildo. It sailed through the air, spinning twice before it hit the fat, furry thing’s head and knocked it cold. A rear leg twitched.

“Gotcha!” Ralph bolted from his position and ran to the animal before it had time to regain its bearings. The blow, he could tell, had only stunned it.

He picked up the dead dildo and put it in his pocket. He wasn’t even halfway back to the campsite when the groundhog came to. The thing scratched at his arms and screamed as though human, mouth open wide, nostrils flaring so obscenely that Ralph believed he’d see the animal’s brain were the lighting better.

He couldn’t take the sight, much less the sound. He pinned the groundhog against a nearby tree and slammed the dildo hard against its head.

It still twitched, so Ralph struck the thing, again and again.

“Just die already!” he screamed.

Minutes later, the groundhog’s head lolled around the side of Ralph’s hand. He watched it for a few minutes more, half-expecting it to twitch or scream. When it did neither, he set out to build a small fire and then go about the unpleasant task of running the groundhog through with a stick.

Groundhog flesh crackled and popped in the fire. When the meat was done, Ralph removed it from the flames, wiped off a blanket of black, melted fur and brought the crispy groundhog to his lips. He took a bite and had memories of cold, sweet things on sticks that tasted nothing at all like this. Though he hoped it would be a long time before he ate groundhog again, he finished all meat but the face and tail.

With a belly full of vile, hairy food, Ralph laid down to sleep. For warmth, he layered pine needles atop his chest before coiling into a fetal ball. It took a few minutes, but he drifted off as the fire died down and blackened pieces of wood turned into crackling red and white embers and then became nothing at all.

Ralph awoke with a start. A nearby rustling had disturbed his sleep. He turned the way of the sound and beheld the white, glowing bodies of those he called the Orb Passers. He’d forgotten about them and the name he’d given them. Now, it seemed he saw them every night, and they always did the same inscrutable thing, carrying illuminated silver orbs like sacred objects, passing them back and forth, holding them aloft briefly, letting the light from the moon kiss them, or maybe giving the eye in the sky a better look.

Who were they? What did they want? Were they living clues? Angels? Devils? Messengers?

He had to approach them.

Ralph sat up, dusted himself off and started walking. The twigs under his feet made very loud noises, louder than they had any right to sound. He cursed them, but the Orb Passers didn't seem to care or notice. They continued passing and lifting, lifting and passing.

Closer still, he saw that the things were naked, but didn't have genitalia.

He crept up to them, addressed one. "Could you help me? I want to know why I'm here and what's happening."

The thing just glowed. It had no face.

"If you can say or do anything, I'd be much obliged."

More lifting. More passing...

Ralph bit his bottom lip. "Can't you do anything else?"

The being reached out a bright finger, pointed to his pants pocket.

He was confused until he remembered what he'd stored there. Ralph reached in, wincing as fabric scraped across his wound. Now with his other hand, he dug deep and brought forth the paper strip that the robot had given him. "Do you mean this?" he asked.

The glowing thing nodded and took the strip from Ralph. A black hole opened in the center of its head. Into the hole, it put the strip.

Ralph wanted to shriek, perhaps even punch the Orb Passer. It had destroyed a vital piece of the puzzle. But his anger quieted when the thing presented its orb for Ralph's inspection. Inside the crystal, he saw the image of the strip, close up on the heart, and now the tiny words inside it were legible:

THE FIRST HOUSE OF THE DAY
WILL BE YOUR LAST, IF YOU ARE A
GOOD SALESMAN.

Ralph staggered back to his campsite, body tingling. It took almost an hour before sleep claimed him. His thoughts raced, but in a good way, as he imagined all the things that might soon be.

Chapter Four

Ralph awoke to a perfect spring morning. He took to his feet moments later, as it seemed wrong to waste time lying around on a day that held so much promise.

But what if you mess it up?

That thought tried to dissipate the good feelings taking root inside him, so he shook it away. He would make the best damn sale in the history of salesmanship, and be rewarded for it.

Ralph freshened up by a stream of bright, almost navy blue water, a color more soothing than the bright red of the streaks that crisscrossed his mangled thumb. Blood infection, he thought, but tried to worry no more about it. It was something a doctor could treat once he sold his last dildo and left this place for good.

He returned to his case, opened it, looked inside, but no dildo fought him or tried to escape, the two survivors content to just undulate quietly. Maybe these were the better-behaved ones. Or maybe they were less rambunctious now there was no more safety in numbers.

Ralph closed the case and picked it up to begin his day. It felt almost weightless in his grasp, not like a burden at all.

Ralph stepped out onto the road and came face-to-face with another billboard. It featured the same artwork of the happy, breakfast cereal eating family, but, this time, the text read: IT ISN'T THE GOVERNMENT.

His memory of the day before was already degrading, but he was almost certain that the previous sign had implicated the government. Then he remembered the clue by the exploded man's house, though he wasn't sure if it had told him to trust or not to trust billboards.

No matter. He had better, more important things to consider.

The bus was already at the stop when he passed it. He gave it a second glance, but only because he couldn't recall ever seeing a bus on his route. He'd be receiving a better way out than via public transit soon enough.

Before him, the houses were all in the form of squat, almost featureless rectangles. There was no way of telling which would be the special one, the deciding factor, but it was along the line, somewhere, and, if necessary, Ralph would walk all day to find it.

He passed just ten houses, and there it was: the shadow of a tree cast upon the house elongated, losing its branches and leaves,

becoming a line, which then became deep black, like paint instead of shadow. The base of the line bifurcated into an arrow that pointed down at the door. Within seconds, the arrow was gone, the innocuous tree shadow once again cast upon the house, but that brief sign was all he needed.

On the lawn: a plastic statue of a fat, rosy-cheeked cherub. When Ralph first noticed it, it wore a neutral expression. Upon a second glance, it smiled at him. Plastic eyes twinkled. Ralph couldn't help but smile back.

The smile faded as he glanced down at his case. It was streaked with red and yellow discharge from his thumb. Ralph sat the case down, scrubbed it in the grass. He considered looking at his thumb again, but didn't want that image fresh on his mind as he tried to make the sale.

He stepped onto the porch, knocked at the door. When it opened, a young, neat-looking man dressed in beige slacks and a white button-up shirt stood at the threshold. His face was soft and pleasant, reminiscent, somewhat, of the cherub.

Ralph launched into his spiel. "Hello, my name is Ralph, and I'm a traveling dildo salesman."

"Hello, sir," the man said. "My name is Steve, and I'm your potential customer."

Ralph was taken aback. He'd actually found someone who was polite, well-spoken. "Well, nice to meet you, Steve," he said. "Might I interest you in one of my fine dildos?"

"I could take a look..."

Of course you could, Ralph thought. He opened the case, afraid that the dildos might be in a rambunctious mood—Murphy's Law—but the two living ones were as quiet and orderly as before.

Steve craned his head to see inside. In Ralph's estimation, he looked impressed.

**Download the Free
Audiobook of**

**"Help! A Bear is
Eating Me!"**

**read by famous author
Mykle Hansen at**

www.helpabeariseatingme.com

"I simply love the color and texture of that one," Ralph said. "Don't you?"

"My, it is pretty!" Steve pointed at the red one just beside it. "But I think I like this one even better."

Ralph smiled. There was no way he wouldn't make this sell. "I'd say they both have positive attributes," he said.

Steve studied the third dildo; his face scrunched. "Isn't that one dead?"

Ralph bit his bottom lip. "No, it's not."

"Oh, okay. Guess it's just a quiet one."

"Yes, and personally, I've found that quiet dildos are the best dildos."

"These are all nice, yes." He paused, looked at Ralph. "But tell me, are they expensive?"

"Just a penny each."

"Really? I thought you'd ask for more."

"I just need to sell these. I don't care about making a profit. I'd give them away if I could, but that's against the rules."

Steve scratched his chin. "Okay, the price is good; the product is good. Everything looks good."

"So, you are interested! Wonderful!" He flashed a smile that he sensed would seal the deal.

The man reached out—*This is it!* Ralph's mind screamed—but he only took two dildos and gave Ralph two pennies.

"You forgot one, sir," Ralph said.

Steve looked confused. "No, I didn't."

"But you did." He tilted the case, pointed. "See, here it is."

"I simply cannot take that last one."

Something flipped in his stomach.

"What?"

"I'm terribly sorry."

Ralph fought rising horror, but Steve had been an easy customer before, and he hadn't closed the door, was still standing at

the threshold, smiling, being pleasant, but, most importantly, available. Getting Steve to take the last dildo had to be the true and final test of his salesman's mettle.

He composed himself, threw the two pennies to the ground, said, "Really, these are a set, and you wouldn't want to break up a set, would you? Individual pieces might become lonely."

"It's just not possible. No offense."

Control over the situation seemed lost. Was the ship already sunk? What if... what if he wasn't supposed to lie? If that was the test, then he'd already failed. Ralph wanted to bite his nails. Run his hands through his hair. Fling his body off the porch and flail in the grass.

Compose yourself, damn it!

He cleared his already clear throat before making himself speak coherently. "You must take it, sir. This is my last house, and, really, I can't have remaining inventory."

The man just shook his head.

Ralph clenched his fists. "If you don't take it, so help me, I'll—" He made himself stop, realizing he was losing his professional cool, becoming disrespectful. "I'm sorry," he said. "Must be the heat." Suddenly, snowflakes fell from overhead.

"No problem," Steve replied, but didn't utter a word about purchasing another dildo.

"Come on, just take the thing."

"But that would be one too many dildos, and you know what they say about that."

Ralph had no idea. All he knew was that his emotional floodgates were about to burst. "Why can't you just buy the dildo, you son of a bitch!" he shouted. "Do you want me to do this shit forever?" He lifted his thumb, now swollen, pulsing and green. "Do you want *this* to kill me?"

Steve lifted his hands, a placating gesture. “No sir, and I don’t want to do this forever, either.” He glanced at the remaining dildo. “Still, I told you it was very nice, and I haven’t changed my opinion.”

Ralph seized the dildo; brandished it in his customer’s face. “*Then take the fucking thing!*”

“But I can’t, no matter how much I may desire it. God always buys the last dildo from salesmen.”

Ralph thought back to the banner. “God?” Steve nodded.

“And you said, *salesmen?*”

“Oh yes, I’ve seen plenty of traveling dildo salesman. They’re all over these parts.”

He never imagined there might be others, and wasn’t sure whether to believe this news or not.

“I just ignored them in the past,” Steve continued, “or was mean to them. Sometimes very, very mean.” His eyes lost focus. “One I even chopped up and stored in the basement until the smell got to me.”

Ralph took two steps back. “You did?”

“And I made love to the parts like you wouldn’t believe! But I’m a different man now. I understand what it’s like to have to do the same thing, day in and day out, with scant hope of ever stopping.” He seemed suddenly wistful. “I had a life too, you know. We all did, and, my lord, I see it so clearly now.”

Watching this man, Ralph almost wanted to cry. “I’m sorry for getting mad at you earlier.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I’m sorry it took me so long to finally help out a traveling dildo salesman, but I’ve got to go.” He paused briefly. “Good luck.”

With that, Steve’s body shimmered like a Christmas tree. He waved as the sparkles intensified, smiled and then disappeared.

Turning, Ralph noticed a fork in the ordinarily straight road. He couldn’t wait to take this path, see where it led. Then he remembered someone named *Mom*, and realized that he should call her, tell her of this wonderful news.

He reached into his pocket. Found the phone. He dialed numbers at random, heard the other end start ringing, and waited for Mom’s sweet, sweet voice to fill his ear.

Instead, all he heard were distant murmurs, like several people speaking to one another far from the receiver.

“Hello,” he said.

It sounded as though the people were walking towards the phone. One voice sounded gruff, masculine.

“I—I would like to speak to Mom, please,” Ralph continued.

Suddenly, an angry man shouted into the receiver. “Hang up the phone!”

Ralph did so quickly. His nerves jangled, but he made himself relax and not think too much about it. Maybe he’d gotten the wrong number. Perhaps he could tell Mom about the events of the day himself, in person, once it was through.

On the new road, the only thing Ralph noticed was more billboards, hundreds if not thousands of them, lining both sides and blocking all other sensory input.

ALIENS ARE DOING IT, said one.

He wondered if this related to his predicament, or was a mere sexual declaration.

Another: YOU ARE REALLY DEAD.

And on the next billboard, just a few yards up: YOU CAN NEVER DIE.

This was followed by a litany of positive statements rendered negative by subsequent ones. So many groups implicated,

then vindicated: bankers, masons, illuminati, televangelists, working mothers, electricians, dental hygienists and, more prosaically, the bus driver, Ralph's customers and even himself.

He decided to pay no further attention, as he now recalled the exploded man's clue quite clearly. These were just falsehoods and distractions he had to pass before the truth was revealed.

He soldiered on. The road curved. Beyond, billboards vanished and a vista opened, revealing a hill, the base of which stretched for miles. The change in topography stunned Ralph, and he walked to it like a supplicant towards an idol.

Pavement soon changed into an overgrown footpath that snaked up the hill. It felt weird, but very welcome, traveling upwards after so much time spent on flat and monotonous ground.

Near the summit, he noticed a sign posted in front of a thorn bush. A SLIGHT LEFT FOR UNDERSTANDING, it said. Ralph turned in the direction indicated, entering a path that traveled between parallel lines of oaks, each tree equidistant from the other. Overhead, branches tangled in an organic canopy.

He walked this path until he noticed space where a tree was missing. In its place was another sign: GO HERE.

Ralph found himself in a clearing. Looking up, he beheld a towering dildo-shaped building looming a field's length ahead. Its chimney—jutting from the penis tip—was actually a smokestack, belching out black puffs of steam.

He ran to the building, stopping when he saw another sign, this one posted at the door.

THIS IS THE PLACE; KNOCK FOR ANSWERS.

When he did, the door did not swing open, but slid away so quickly that it seemed to disappear. Before him stood the robot, then the old, smoking woman, then the exploded man and a hundred and then a thousand different other faces, all he'd seen before, though most he had forgotten.

Finally, the image settled on a beautiful tow-haired woman. She wore a simple white dress that sparkled. A disk of wan light surrounded her head.

"Are you God?" Ralph asked her.

"Yes, I am."

"I thought you might be scary." He looked down at his feet as he spoke, humbled in her presence.

"Please, look me in the eyes." She touched his cheek, her hands warm. "There's no need for fear."

Ralph glanced up reluctantly. Her irises were electric blue islands in white seas, and, as he looked into them, nervousness fled.

"So," she said. "You are finally here."

He forced himself to look past God's eyes, and behind her, saw a huge metal room, filled with machines on which thousands of old women in hairnets toiled. "Yes," he said, "but where am I?"

"This is Heaven, the factory in which all your dildos were made."

"Really?" Ralph craned his neck to see further. He noticed a group of old women gathered on a bench by the adjacent wall, painting a line of floppy sex toys. To the right, additional old ladies sat in chairs, hands behind their backs as younger-seeming people in black clothes and helmets stood over them, shoving dildos into their mouths and moving them back and forth, testing for proper circumference, perhaps. To the left, others stuffed finished

products into suitcases identical to the one Ralph carried.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "If you want, we can tour the factory later, but we should be outside now. The eye in the sky must bear witness to this event."

God stepped across the threshold and Ralph followed. She sat down in a lotus position on the grass. He took this as his cue to take a seat as well, though he couldn't manage the lotus.

"Tell me, Ralph," she said, "what is it you want to know most?"

"So, my name *is* Ralph."

"Yes, but do tell..."

"I want to know the answer."

She nodded. "After coming so far, you deserve it. Many dildo salesmen never sell even a single dildo. You sold yours in your first two weeks, though years passed before you sold another." A smile. "Despite the odds, you remained steadfast, diligently picking up and piecing together clues. Now, it's time to reward your efforts."

His nerves felt positively alive, his spine, electric. "Oh thank you!" he effused. "Thank you so much!"

"No need to thank me. Thank yourself for what is to be." She looked down at his mangled thumb. "But first, let me take care of that. Please, extend your hand."

Ralph did, and God touched the stump where his nail had once been. Warmth branched through his fingers and down his arm as, like a mushroom, the missing tip grew. "My god," he said, surveying the digit, looking for seams but seeing none.

"Now, I must prepare..." God closed her eyes, looked up into the sky, linked her forearms and lifted them so that her unfolded hands were bunched near her sternum. It

looked as though she might be holding an orb Ralph could not see.

She maintained this position, and total silence, for what seemed to be a very, very long time. Ralph wished she'd hurry up, but said nothing, imagining it wasn't wise to rush God.

Finally, she arose. "I am ready, so stand, Ralph. Present onto me the final dildo in your case."

"And then I can be free?"

God said nothing, just smiled, so Ralph handed her the dildo. The passing felt like a sacrament.

She outstretched her other hand, opened it. "And here's your penny."

Ralph looked at his ticket. He saw the usual walrus-face-wearing-a-monocle, but there was now a single word below it, rendered in bas-relief: CONGRATS. He took the coin from her, flipped it over. NOW BEGIN AGAIN said the reverse.

Suddenly, the case by his feet started shaking, and then was enveloped in white light. When the light faded, Ralph beheld at least a hundred violent, angry dildos, flopping on the ground, gnashing their teeth.

"Now go on," said God, "continue your endless journey."

Ralph held up his hands. "No, wait ... this ... this is supposed to be the end! This is supposed to be—"

"There is no end, Ralph. Not here, but that's okay. It's the quest that's noble, not the outcome."

He shook his head back and forth. "I can't do this anymore!" A dildo crept up to his foot, and he stomped it. "I just can't!"

"Don't worry. Tomorrow, you won't remember a thing."

"But I know *now*, and that's the problem!"

“There’s no problem.”

He felt on the verge of crying, screaming and breaking things. “Come on, God! Isn’t there something you can do?”

“We could tour the factory,” she said.

“*I don’t want to tour the fucking factory!*”

God drummed her fingers on her hips.

“Okay, Ralph, I’ll lay it on the line. Freedom just doesn’t work for you. You’ll always swirl back to the center, and that’s exactly where you’re going when we’re done here.”

“I don’t understand.”

She laughed. “You sound like someone who hasn’t had this conversation with me a hundred times before, but that’s to be expected.”

Ralph could only look at her.

“You may be mad now, you may even want to kill me, but you’ll come back with that same awe-struck expression you wore earlier, overjoyed to see me and wanting what you think you desire, but ultimately getting what you need.”

He lashed out. “I’ll never come back to you! And this isn’t what I need!”

Her tone was palliative again. “Without dildos and the unfurling road to nowhere, you have no direction, no purpose. You’re not strong enough to assign meaning to life by any other means.”

“No, this isn’t—”

“You’re concerned and agitated, but don’t be. Many have the same problem, and, when the time is right, they’ll return to the center, too. It’s the way it must be, now and forevermore.”

“Maybe they’ll return, but I refuse!”

“But you’ve returned every time before.” She twirled an index finger in the air. “Swirl, swirl, swirl...”

Ralph smacked her hand down. “Not this time! Now is different!”

God laughed. “Now is never different. If it was, do you think this factory would be here, churning out all the dildos for all the traveling dildo salesman of the world? Business is booming.”

Ralph tried to get a word in edge-wise, but God wouldn’t let him.

“You remember that woman on the phone? It wasn’t your mother. It was a voice actor.” She grinned. “Your mother works for us now, in the advanced product testing department with all the other old, dead mothers who have traveling dildo salesmen for sons.”

“No, that’s not true! From what I figure, there’s not a shred of truth in you!”

“The only truth lies in your case, so pick it up.”

“I will not!”

God reached out, caressed his face. Her hands felt cold now. “You know this is a mistake,” she said, “but you have time to correct it. Just do as I say. We can pretend that this never happened.”

Ralph reiterated his declaration.

God shook her head. “I don’t always give traveling dildo salesmen this chance, believe me.” A small flipbook appeared in her hand. “I’ve got pictures. Want to see?”

Ralph didn’t, but she opened the flipbook, showed him a few of its pages.

“This is a mere sampling. I’ve got a bigger book in my office.”

His stomach twisted; he wanted to gag. His legs tried to fold and carry him to the ground, after which they would surely arise from it and carry him back to his case and to his life as a traveling dildo salesman, *ad infinitum*.

No, he wouldn’t allow it. Maybe terrible things had happened to those poor guys, but that didn’t mean they had to happen to him ... and so what if they did?

“My mind hasn’t changed,” he said. “You can do nothing to me. I’m not someone in your book. I am Ralph.” Suddenly, it seemed that there was more to his name than simply that. Then it dawned on him. “Ralph Stevens,” he added, and couldn’t help but grin.

God’s ears bled at the sound of that name. “Pick up your case!” she shrieked. “Someone must who it, and you’re the only one here that can!”

“No, I’m not the only one!” He dumped the dildos from the case. “I’ll give them to the ground!”

The ground took the dildos not into its mouth—that was a place for pennies—but into its womb. Exiting the resting state, dildos germinated, entangling beneath the surface, becoming a network of helices as the earth spewed a mound of pennies from its bowels.

Ralph smiled. “The transaction is complete.”

The world felt the new growth, started shrieking. God threw herself atop the copper mound, shrieking the loudest of all the shrieking things. She looked up at him, her mouth filled with ivory tusks. “You can’t do this!” she screamed. Her words were muffled and slurred.

“I already did!” He pointed at the pennies. “They are mine, and there’s nothing you can do about that!”

The bottom half of God’s body became that of a walrus. Ralph almost laughed at the sight. Seconds later, her top half followed suit. She even had the monocle, though it was hard to think of God as female now.

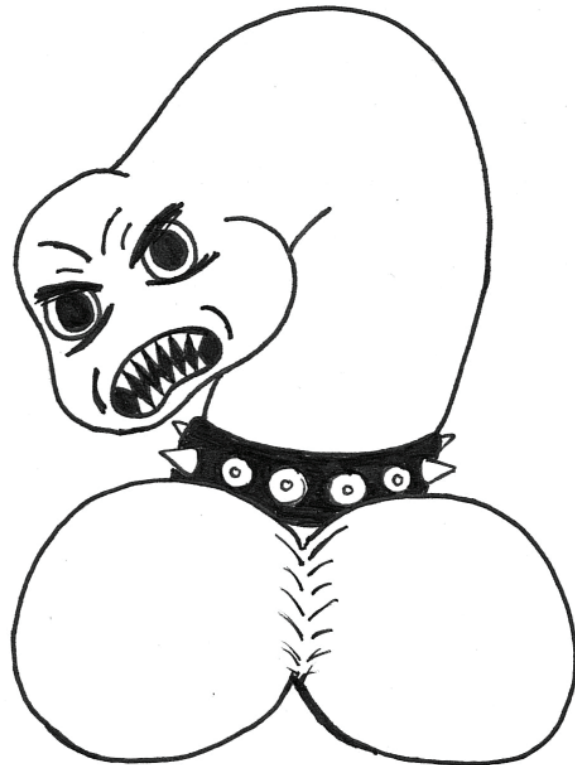
The God-thing barked and belched as its flesh started to flake, then crack and peel. It tried to clutch at Ralph’s pant leg with a flipper. That flipper fell off, followed by tusks, the other flipper and even more vital parts.

Something white and foamy shot from God’s mouth before the remains of its brown, flabby body went rigid and rolled to the left of the penny mound.

Ignoring God, Ralph took handfuls of pennies and dumped them into both coat pockets, then into his pants.

Up ahead, he heard a sudden commotion. A mob clamored up the hill, approaching him from the west.

He recognized some of the people, though did not see his last customer. The man who had beaten him prior to exploding headed the line. To his left was the once motionless smoking woman, now running as fast as the newly reconstituted man. Behind them, in an unbroken and seemingly eternal line, fanning out from left to right, were potential customers from days and months and years past. Some carried impromptu torches, fashioned from sticks or broken furniture legs



wrapped in kerosene-dipped cloth. Others carried pitchforks.

From the opposite direction, orb passers sprinted from the woods. They shook their fists and hurtled their balls at him. One impacted against a tree, leaving a hole big enough for Ralph to see through.

The closest thrower hurtled a second orb. There was no avoiding it. Ralph stopped, took a deep breath, knowing that, if he died, at the very least, he wouldn't die as a traveling dildo salesman, but the thing passed through him, leaving only an electrical sensation in its wake.

The first pitchfork-wielder reached him. Like the orb, his weapon had no effect.

"Die already," screamed the man who had exploded. His body swelled as he tried to stab again.

The old smoking woman said nothing, but attempted without success to brain him with her torch.

The robot bleeped, and then caught fire. But it wasn't just the robot that had malfunctioned. Everything started to burn as dildos completed the germination cycle.

He turned away from it all then, away from the rows of houses, the endless streets, the orb passers, killing machines and the factory and its god. As he walked, the world peeled slightly at its edges. The bright tip of something different shined through. Ralph could barely see whatever it was, but, somehow, it seemed like stuff from memory.

In his pocket, the phone started ringing. It was his faux-mother. Fuck her. She was probably on fire, too.

Epilogue

Ralph took the path back down the hill, surrounded by burning trees and sky, but didn't get far before he noticed that the footpath ahead of him had changed into a road. About twenty yards further, Ralph saw a bus stop.

He only had to wait a minute for the bus to arrive. Its door opened and the same driver—it was always the same driver—regarded him, seemingly not phased by the conflagration going on all around him. "Hello, Ralph," he said.

Ralph nodded, but did not move. He'd been rebuffed so many times before, and, worse yet, flames had broken out on the street between him and the bus.

"Why are you just staring at me? Get on."

"I can't. Too much fire."

"Just walk through it."

Figuring he had little to lose, Ralph did. He was impervious to the flames. Still, he paused just before reaching the bus. Crossing its threshold seemed more challenging than a walk through fire. "I can get on now? Really and truly?"

"Really and truly."

"It's ... as easy as that?"

The man smiled. "Sure is, but hurry. I've got other salesmen to pick up down the line."

"But I don't have a ticket."

"That's alright." The driver pointed to his case, lying in the middle of the road; Ralph didn't remember dropping it. "Leaving that behind is better than a ticket."

Ralph put his left foot on the step, then his right foot. Past the steps, he looked around at his fellow passengers. The bus was packed. He noticed that no one carried cases or luggage of any kind, and all were dressed in suits identical to Ralph's.

Finally, he found a seat. The passenger across from him, a scrawny-looking middle-aged fellow, turned his way. "Hello, there," he said as the bus took flight.

"Hey," replied Ralph. "You're a salesman, too?"

He grinned. "*Was.*"

"Oh, sorry." Ralph tried to smooth over his faux pas with pleasantries. "So, how long were you selling?"

"87.3 years."

The man didn't look a day over forty. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack."

"But how do you know? And how were you able to keep track of time?"

"I didn't know, and I couldn't keep track."

"Then I don't understand."

The man shrugged. "It just came to me a few minutes ago, and, if you wait, I bet the same will happen to you."

It was all coming back to him now. "You're right," Ralph said.

"So, how many years has it been?"

"11.6."

A toothless old man in front of them turned, said, "Hell, you're both youngins! I've been doin' this for 121 years!"

A look of amazement spread across the other man's face. Ralph was amazed, too. He almost wished he could bow, but couldn't, as he was sitting down. Instead, he stared out his window, watching people burn from on high until they flamed out. Then larger things crumbled: trees, the factory and the ground beneath it, falling away and becoming nothing, or maybe something else entirely.

When he was too far up to see anymore, Ralph turned back to the front of the bus. The eye in the sky was so big that it filled the driver's window.

"You were watching it burn, weren't you?" the man across from him said.

"Yeah," replied Ralph, still staring at the eye. "But couldn't you see it, too?"

"No, buddy. That was your stop. But I watched it burn at mine and loved every minute of it."

He turned to him then. "Wait... You saw God and the factory and got the coin, right?"

The man nodded.

"But if it burned for you, then it couldn't have burned for me."

He shrugged. "I guess we all have our own versions of this place."

"I wish every version would burn," Ralph said. "And I almost wish I could stay to help burn them."

"Nah, that's too much responsibility for one man. We can't help other salesman, you know. We can only help ourselves."

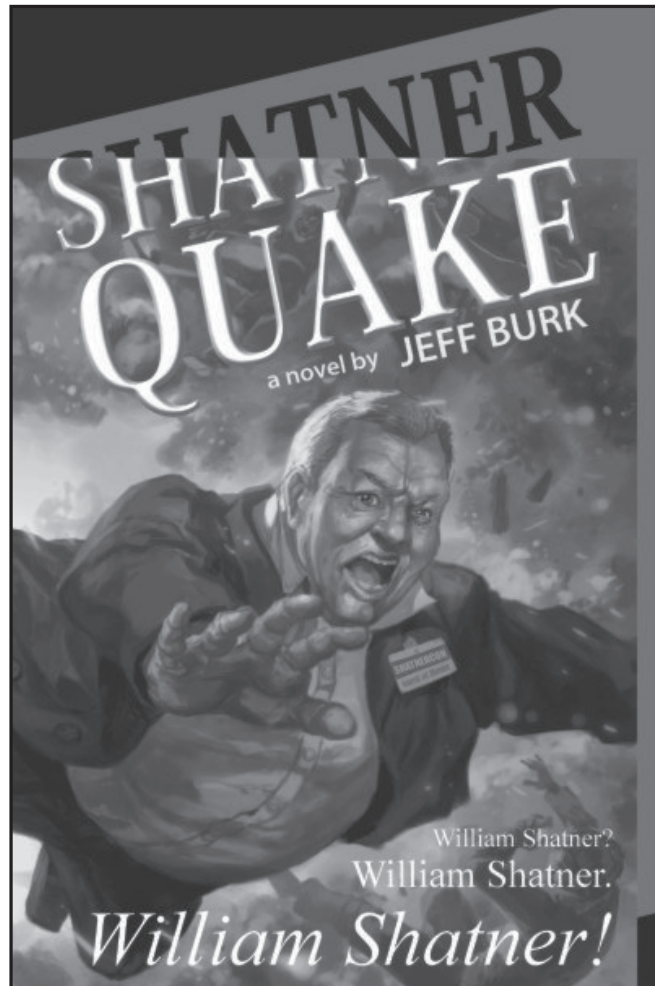
With that, the man picked up a magazine wedged between the seats in front of him, and Ralph sat back to enjoy the rest of the ride, the eye so prevalent now that only the big blue iris and pupil were visible. When he glanced back out his own window, Ralph saw a billboard, hanging in the middle of nothing in the sky. **YOU ARE NOW RE-ENTERING**, it said.

It seemed as though the sign was incomplete. You are now re-entering what? But then he thought about it, and decided it really did make sense.

Turning around, Ralph saw what was on the back of the sign through the bus' rear windows:

YOU HAVE RE-ENTERED.

The bus traveled into the pupil of the eye, and the eye blinked.



**“It’s like Lloyd Kaufman and Sam Raimi’s mutant offspring wrote a book.”
—Wil Wheaton, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*’s Wesley Crusher**

It’s the first ShatnerCon with William Shatner as the guest of honor! But after a failed terrorist attack by Campbellians, a crazy terrorist cult that worships Bruce Campbell, all of the characters ever played by William Shatner are suddenly sucked into our world. Their mission: hunt down and destroy the real William Shatner.

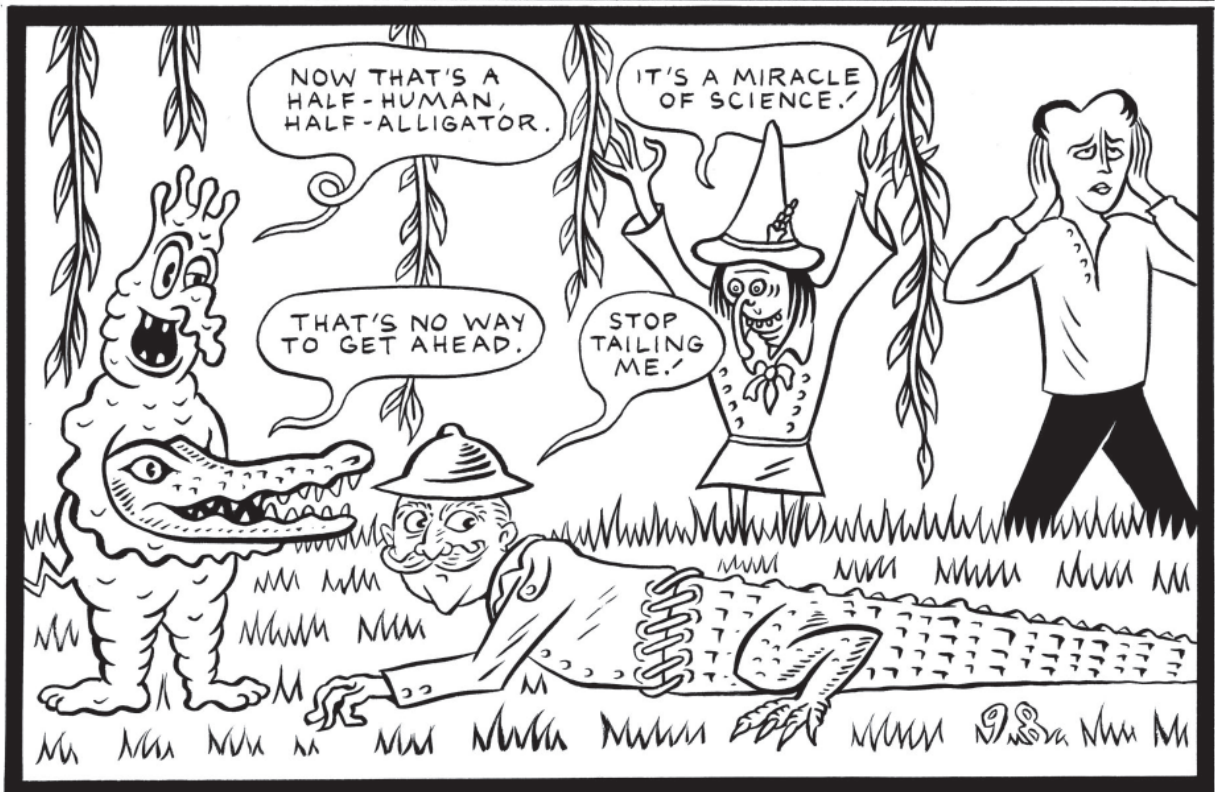
Featuring: Captain Kirk, TJ Hooker, Denny Crane, Rescue 911 Shatner, Singer Shatner, Shakespearean Shatner, Twilight Zone Shatner, Cartoon Kirk, Esperanto Shatner, Priceline Shatner, SNL Shatner, and—of course—William Shatner!

**Search for “Shatnerquake” on Amazon.com
www.JeffBurk.wordpress.com**

OGNER STUMP

BY ANDREW GOLDFARB





D. Harlan Wilson was one of the original members of the Eraserhead Collective and has remained at the forefront of the movement ever since. In the past ten years Wilson's work has received numerous awards and developed a wide fan following. His book Dr. Identity won the 2007 Wonderland Award for best novel.

He can now be found editing The Dream People, an e-zine of bizarro fiction, and regularly publishing works of fiction and nonfiction through Raw Dog Screaming Press.

Fathers and Sons

by D. Harlan Wilson

“Dad’s dead,” said my father. “I better put him in the freezer.”

Grandpa lay on the kitchen floor, tightened into a fetal curl. He looked like a crumpled sheet of sandpaper. Dad picked him up and slung him over his shoulder and went downstairs.

I waited.

He came back later. “Dad’s in the freezer. I had to fold him up to get him in there. But he’s in there.”

I didn’t know what to say. “That’s good news,” I said.

He made himself a ham sandwich with American cheese. No condiments. I asked if he would make me a boloney sandwich. No cheese. He made me a peanut butter and banana sandwich. As he sliced the banana into long, precise rectangles, he emphasized the importance of slicing it correctly.

It tasted good.

“Oh.”

I stopped chewing. “Did you hear that?”

Dad shook his head. “No.”

“Somebody said ‘Oh’.”

“Ohh.”

“There it is again.”

“There’s what again?”

“That ‘Oh’ sound. It’s coming from

the basement.”

“The basement,” Dad echoed, and clucked his tongue.

I put my sandwich down. My father finished his sandwich and poured a tall glass of milk. He drank it and wiped the milk mustache from his overlip with a shirtsleeve. He licked his overlip and wiped it again. Licked it again. He scrubbed it with a dishtowel. “It won’t come off!”

I squinted at him. “I don’t see anything.”

“Ohhh.”

“I better go check on that.” He put the towel down and put some Chapstick on and took a bite of my sandwich and said “Mmm” and went downstairs.

I waited. Much longer than last time. I looked at the clock and tried to figure out how long my father was gone. The hands of the clock taunted me, dared me. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t figure out what they meant.

He came back later, covered in dirt and sweat. His T-shirt was ripped in places. He hurried over to me and finished my sandwich in two great bites. “That tastes so nice,” he said.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I’ll make you another one. I promise.”

“I believe you.”

"I've just been thinking about that peanut butter and banana sandwich for awhile, is all. Since I made it for you."

"It's not a problem."

"I know." He smiled for a long time. His neck looked stiff. I felt awkward. Then his head sort of slumped off-kilter and the smile became a slot.

"Your grandpa's dead," said the slot.

"What happened?"

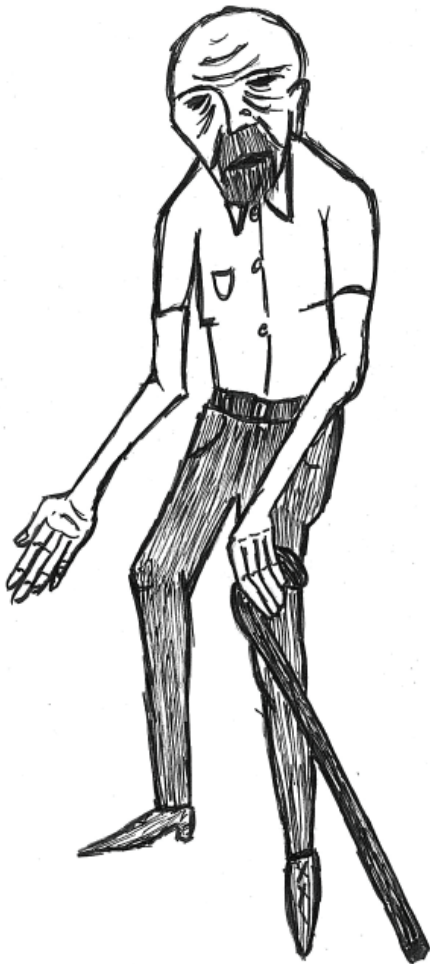
"He's dead. People die. It just takes time."

"Ok."

He looked at the clock, then at me. "You need to learn to tell time."

"I can tell time."

"What time is it?"



I studied the clock. "3 a.m.," I said in a casual, uncaring voice.

"Not quite," said Dad. "It's 12:30. In the p.m."

"Hm."

"It's light out, for Chrissakes." He pointed at the window.

I looked out the window. "I know."

"You're a big boy, goddamn it. Learn to tell the damn time."

"Ok."

"How old are you? You're pretty old to not know how to tell time. You're like in your thirties or something."

"I'm not that old."

"You're old enough."

"Ok."

"Ok, ok. It's settled. I guess it's settled. Fine. Whatever. Whatever." He shrugged. He shrugged again, holding the shrug at its summit. He let his shoulders fall and shrugged once more. "By the way," he said, "Dad got out of the freezer. He looked hurt. We wrestled around on the dirt floor. He told me I was a bad son. 'Don't ever tell your son he's bad,' I told him. He apologized and said he didn't mean it. I said not to worry about it and we wrestled some more. Then I bashed his head in for awhile with a two-by-four until he stopped moving and squirming around. He lay there like the empty husk of a goddamned June bug. I dug a hole with a garden hoe and nudged Dad into the hole with my foot and then I filled the hole back in. We need to get a gravestone. Write that down. They sell them at Wal-Mart for, like, real cheap. We also need to get the basement carpeted. Dirt floors are bullshit."

I stared at the crumbs on my plate.

"Don't be sore," said my father. "He would've died eventually. I think he was dead. I think it was just a reflex or something."

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

“Jesus Christ! What the fuck is this? A fuckin’ fairy tale?” Dad looked at me expectantly.

“What’s a fairy tale?” I said.

“Jesus.” He took off his T-shirt, looked down at his belly and studied it. Grey, bristled patches of hair marked the flabby mass. “Jesus I’m getting fat. Jesus H Christ.”

“Ohhh.”

I said, “I think Grandpa’s alive again.”

“I’ll be right back.” He poured two shots of tequila and we toasted to Good Times and slammed them. Then he went downstairs . . .

Five days might have passed. Maybe five hours. Maybe five minutes.

At some point I noticed Dad skulking through the kitchen. He had retrieved Grandpa and was carrying him in a Baby Björn. Grandpa’s thin, pale, liver-spotted limbs dangled lifelessly from the apparatus. He looked very clean, though: Dad must have washed him in the basement sink.

They went to the back yard. I went to the window and cranked it open. The fresh, summer air smelled good.

Dad took Grandpa out of the Björn and told him to go play. Grandpa didn’t respond; he lay on the grass as if poured there, eyes half open, ribcage slowly rising and falling. Dad oscillated back and forth between scolding him and encouraging him. Then he put a leash on Grandpa and started dragging him around the yard. Now and then Grandpa tried to keep up, but he was too weak, and for the most part he could only let himself be dragged. His face and scalp turned purple.

One of the neighbors came over. I didn’t know his name. He wore red longjohns and construction boots. He had just killed a deer and wanted to show my father. He brought it over in a wheelbarrow.

He explained how he had “destroyed” the deer with his bare hands. He kept repeating the word “destroyed.” At first he and the deer merely wrestled in a playful manner, but things got dirty. The deer tried to run away but tripped over a fallen pine tree. The neighbor jumped on it and punched it in the head until it died. “Luckily it was a doe and there weren’t no antlers on it,” he said. “Otherwise I mighta cut my fists when I destroyed that crazy fucker.”

Dad said it was a nice-looking deer, despite its mauled, almost unrecognizable head. The neighbor thanked him.

Grandpa gasped for air. He convulsed for lack of oxygen.

The neighbor wheeled the carcass back into his yard and began to skin it with a hunting knife. One strip of deerhide after another he tossed over his shoulders. The musculature of the deer was bright red. Florescent, nearly. It looked fake.

Dad pulled Grandpa around the yard a few more times, falling into a soft trot. Then he came back inside and lay Grandpa on the kitchen counter. His neck was inflamed, bruised and bleeding. I checked his pulse. He was alive. We stared down at him.

“I’m thirsty,” said Grandpa.

Dad made a frog face. “Thirst is part of life. People get thirsty. That’s life.”

“Respect your elders,” said Grandpa.

“Fear your offspring,” said my father, eyeballing me.

I offered Grandpa a shot of Tequila. He wanted water. I got him a glass of soda and carefully poured it into the gash of his mouth as if filling up a lawn mower with gasoline. He choked on the soda but managed to get some of it down. “That wasn’t water,” he remarked, then rolled onto his side and tightened into a fetal curl.

Gina Ranalli has one of the largest followings in the bizarro genre due to her novels of dark surrealism and social satire. Her short fiction packs a mind-blowing punch but, to the woe of her readers, much of it is out of print. The following story is one of her very best and displays her awesome talent of combining the weird and the truly horrific.

This piece originally appeared in Bust Down the Door and Eat all the Chickens #1.

A Better Child

by Gina Ranalli

I despise my child.

She is almost six months old and I do everything I'm supposed to: feed and bathe her, clothe her, house her. Everything. I do it all, without complaint.

But the fact remains that I never wanted her. I wanted her father more than anything and so I *hoped* I would get pregnant, but never really believed it would happen. And then it did. I was so happy, thrilled that he would finally marry me, knowing I would miscarry after a few months and then everything would be perfect.

It didn't turn out that way though.

He didn't marry me and I carried the brat to term. So much for a man's word and a doctor's so-called expertise.

So now I'm stuck with this kid.

I should have just put her up for adoption, but I keep hoping her father will come around. Which is another reason I do my best not to damage her in any way. Other than letting her yell her head off while we're alone, I know I'm a damn good mother. I know that putting my headphones on and letting her blow off some steam probably isn't the way the "new mother" books tell you how to handle it, but that's just tough. I need some *me* time once in a while.

Me time, however, is not today.

"Daddy is coming over soon," I tell the brat as she looks up at me from her bassinet. "We both have to be pretty for daddy."

She makes a bubbly sound, drooling down her chin.

I groan in disgust. Why are babies so damn *nasty*? They must be the most disgusting thing on the entire planet.

"Come on now," I tell the kid, picking her up. "It's time for your bath so you'll smell all nice when daddy gets here."

Bathing the kid in the kitchen sink, my mind wanders away, back to better days, when my life was my own and her father and I were free to do whatever we chose. It's not until the running water scalds my hands that I come back to the dreaded present. The kid is screaming and probably has been for quite some time. Her skin is raw-red and I quickly turn off the faucet, hoping the redness fades before her father arrives. I'm sure it will. In the meantime, I just wish she'd stop screaming. Everyone gets scalded once in a while. This brat is such a cry-baby, I swear I want to strangle her sometimes.

Once she's dry, I lay her down on the changing table (another pointless expense in my opinion) and begin clipping her fingernails. She'd given me one too many scratches as of late and the last thing I need is for her to scratch herself. That would make me look like

a bad mother, which is probably her plan, but she's just going to have to think of another way to do it.

I haven't even finished clipping the nails of one hand before she starts wailing again. "Jesus Christ." My head is beginning to ache and I notice a thin line of blood seeping out from under the pinky nail of her right hand. Apparently, I trimmed it a little too close. I sigh and roll my eyes. Could she possibly be a bigger cry baby? "Oh, stop your whining," I tell her. "It can't hurt *that* bad."

When I begin clipping the nails on her left hand, I do my best to concentrate and we manage to get through it without any more bitching from the mini drama queen.

Next up are her toes, which I usually avoid because of all the thrashing around she does. It's not enough that she kicked the hell out of me while I carried her, but now she has to do her damndest to kick me outside the womb as well. Frigging brat.

Finally, she settles down and I'm able to grasp her tiny foot in my hand and begin snipping. But, just as I'm closing the clippers down on her big toe, she kicks forward, causing me to once again cut too close to the cuticle. I wince in anticipation of the screaming and watch the blood stream out from under her toenail. I utter a curse word; this time the bleeding is worse. Every time she moves, little droplets fly and now I have yet another mess to clean up. She's lucky she's still naked or else I may have really lost my temper.

I grab a baby wipe and hold her foot inside it, taking care to put pressure on the injured toe. She screams her head off, of course. Christ, you'd think I was murdering her.

When I suspect the bleeding has stopped, I remove the wipe and examine her

toe. The bleeding has indeed ceased and I see that the nail is now half the size it had previously been. No wonder she'd hollered so much. "Oh, well." I tell her. "You'll live."

Using a fresh wipe, I clean up all the droplets before once again wiping the toe clean. I do this as gently as possible; mean mothers probably wouldn't even bother trying to be gentle.

When the toe is completely clean, I notice a little stub of skin sticking up from the corner of the remaining nail. The last thing I need is for that tiny piece of skin to catch on something and start the bleeding up again, so I attempt to pick it off. But, the skin is too small for me to grasp between my fingers and I'm forced to use the clippers again.

Very carefully, my head bent in close to her foot, I manage to get a hold on the skin and snap the clippers closed around it. To my surprise the skin is tough and the clippers fail to cut through it. I squeeze them harder but still the skin stays attached to her toe. "What the..."

With the clippers, I try to *twist* the little flap of skin, also to no avail. It twists easily, but refuses to come loose. Frustrated, I decide to try the method I use on myself when eliminating a hangnail: I get a firm grip on the skin and *pull*.

To my amazement, the tiny nub lengthens to twice its previous size. I pull again and it lengthens once more. I lean in even closer, examining what turns out to be not skin at all but a piece of string.

A thin but somehow extremely tough thread coming out of the brat's toe.

Mystified, I yank the string a third time, pulling it out as far as my arm will allow. "Oh my God."

The string stretches to a length of nearly four feet from the kid's toe. It glistens

wetly, mostly white but also in blotches of red and yellow. It's repulsive and I dread touching it more than I already have but now it's fascination that compels me as I drop the four foot length of string and reach for the toe once more. More of the gory thread pulls free and I notice the little hole growing in the brat's toe. I tilt my head, peering at the tiny black pit. And that is exactly what it appears to be: nothing but a small black hole. There is no blood oozing from it and nothing to be seen within it. The only thing peculiar about it, aside from its existence, is the string hanging limply from its center.

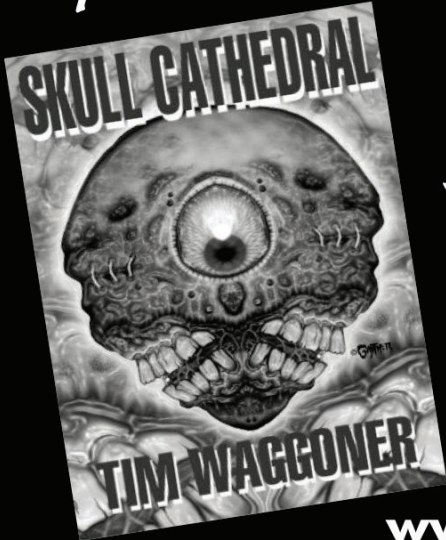
Frowning, I grip the string once more and take a few steps backwards. It lengthens once again and so I back up once more. The string—or whatever it is—continues to unspool from the baby's toe. Then my back touches the far kitchen wall and I can see that the brat's toe is completely gone. Her foot looks deformed, as if there'd never been a toe there at all.

At the sight of this, I feel a slight twinge of panic somewhere in the peripheral of my consciousness, but it is not enough to make me stop. I *need* to keep pulling, to find the end of the mystery.




SQUID SALAD PRESS

presents:



SKULL CATHEDRAL
TIM WAGGONER

Gina Ranalli's Bizarro-homage to 50's b-movies!



SWARM OF FLYING EYEBALLS
GINA RANALLI

And don't miss SKULL CATHEDRAL, our first release by Tim Waggoner

available NOW at www.novellopublishers.com

I realize a messy ball has formed at my feet and I know how much a mess can distress my boyfriend, so I begin to coil the string around my right hand, wrapping, wrapping my fingers up with slimy reddish-yellow cord.

The string has widened, like twine, and I glance back up at the kid.

Her entire foot has vanished. Now a nice neat stump forms the bottom of her leg but the child seems utterly oblivious, gazing at the world, making her tiny gurgling sounds.

Yanking harder, faster, I can feel the sweat beading up on my brow. *Where the fuck is the end of this thing?*

In a frenzy, I continue to unravel my baby.

Soon, the left leg is gone up to her crotch and the twine in my hands grows thicker still, ropey but with the greasy consistency of chicken tendons.

"What is happening?" I scream, sliding down the wall until my ass touches the linoleum. The baby turns her head toward the sound of my voice and giggles.

There's no stopping now. I have to finish what I've started.

Finish what I've started...

This was meant to be. The child is evil, the spawn of...something bad. That's all I know for sure.

Pull. Don't stop.

Keep.

Pulling.

Vaguely, I'm aware that the sunshine in the room has been replaced with shadow. Tangles of gory string, wide as an extension cord in some places, surround me. The end has fallen off the changing table and lies nearby, dark bristles dotting its tail.

The child is gone and I want to laugh,

laugh until my sides split, but I know her father will not be pleased. In fact, he'll probably be furious and I don't want that. Absolutely not.

But maybe I can stitch the brat back together...

Knitting needles perhaps?

I don't have much time. He'll be here soon.

Tossing the fatty string aside, I clamber to my feet, careful on the slip-slidy floor, and begin my quest to sew a better child.



Mykle Hansen is a true genius of absurd comedy. He made a name for himself with his first self-released collection, Eye Heart Everything. In true DIY fashion, the cover of each copy is hand glued on and the ISBN number is a sticker. His next two books, Help! A Bear is Eating Me! and The Rampaging Fuckers of Everything on the Crazy Shitting Planet of the Vomit Atmosphere, further confirmed his title as King of comedic bizarro.

Blimpman

by Mykle Hansen

Roger Bigelow slumped by himself in the farthest corner of the cafeteria and hoped against hope that no one would notice his three cups of pudding. He loved the cafeteria pudding, the soft, creamy pudding, oh the pudding ... oh the shame, the humiliation, the embarrassment of daily existence.

Roger was the kind of fat person that other fat people keep photographs of in order to feel less fat. Under normal gravitational conditions, Roger weighed four hundred and twenty three pounds.

But Roger had a secret—for he could escape the tyranny of gravity. What none of his sporty, tittering co-workers in the company cafeteria of Sta-Slim Research knew was that Roger Bigelow was actually the costumed crime-stomper known as... BLIMPMAN!

Blimpman! Able to soar effortlessly through the stratosphere thanks to his astounding discovery of the Weight-Loss Ray, Roger's crime-fighting alter ego was well known and well respected throughout the pleasant town of Pleasanton.

So why, Roger often asked himself on days like these, as he endured the snickers of schoolchildren and the condescension of his colleagues in the advanced weight-loss sciences, why did he still bother playing the

role of Roger Bigelow, the fat, overweight, obese, lard-butt senior engineer of Sta-Slim Research?

His life's work, the Weight-Loss Ray, was really an ironic joke. By reducing the mass of cellulite and bone, Roger could lower his weight to a few ounces and float on the wind, buoyed by the gasses trapped in his colon. But for all Blimpman's heroics, his cunning and his crime-fighting technology, slenderness wasn't a weapon in his six-foot-long utility belt. The promise of a svelter, more slim and less chubby Roger still eluded him. So why not just ditch it all and go play superhero, maybe get killed saving the life of some pretty girl—like Marcy from the typing pool, for instance—then get crowned a hero and granted a piano-sized grave in Arlington Cemetery? (The Arlington Cemetery of Pleasanton, not the one in Virginia.)

Roger sighed. Old habits die hard, like scientific enquiry, like invention, like bacon-crusted breakfast donuts with buttered coffee, or the three pudding lunch. Roger closed his eyes and spooned a glob of the quivering pleasure-paste into his cheek pouch. But as he swallowed, his reverie was shattered by a familiar tap of goose-steps on linoleum...

“Haa-lo, Herr Bigelow! I see that you are enjoying a splendid meal of candied fats. May I interrupt you?”

Oh no. A shudder of self-revulsion jiggled through Roger. There before him stood the grinning, well-proportioned and sadistic Dr. Otto Dickerdunner, just returned from the company gymnasium, the healthy glow of perspiration still radiating from his bald pate.

“Actually, Otto, I’m... working on a problem right now. In my head.”

“Oh! Your problem must be very big to require such a spacious workplace, yes? And yet, I think maybe also there is some room in your head for a problem of mine. Because your head is quite large. Because you are so fat, you know.”

Roger stared into his pudding and said nothing. Otto’s cruel taunts were inescapable, but Roger was hardened to them through daily exposure.

“I am working, you see, with the remediation of hormonal response patterns through focused beams of energy, and I am quite close to perfecting a treatment for persons who suffer... a certain ugly deformity. Not fatness such as yours, but a different ugly deformity. And I have read your college dissertation, Roger, and I believe you have some knowledge in this area. Also you are fat.”

Roger pushed aside his pudding and faced his tormentor.

“It doesn’t work, Otto. That was some of our earliest research at Sta-Slim. You can encode the hormonal surface patterns any way you want, modulate it however you like, but the cells don’t respond to it. The body doesn’t listen. It’s a dead end.”

Otto raised a skimpy Teutonic eyebrow. “Modulate it? How?”

“Amplitude, frequency, resonance, we tried it all. We triggered a fat reaction, but only in the first millimeter of body surface.”

Otto’s eyes grew large and distant. “Stimulating fat is not my problem, Roger. Or rather, it is not the problem I wish to treat. But still... modulation... I must return to the lab. Please come visit if you wish. I have a reinforced chair there, on which you may sit without the risk of crushing it under your immense weight.”

“Thanks Otto, but I’m kind of busy today.”

“Ah well... enjoy your kilocalories then. Ta-ta.”

As Otto strutted away, Roger placed his elbows on the lunch table and his face in his thick, pudgy hands. Maybe if he ate the pudding fast enough, no one could tell he was crying.

Late that moonless evening, a silent behemoth carved a slow, menacing path betwixt the low-hanging clouds over the elite district of Pleasant Heights. Within the shrouded undercarriage of the stealthy black airship, Dr. Dickerdunner and his fetchingly feindish assistant Emma twiddled sinister knobs in preparation for a peculiar airborne experiment. A damp, bitter mist blew through the open observation ports, fluttering the fringes of their black leather lab coats and fogging their vintage protective eyewear.

“Emma! Deliver a status report!” cried Otto, adjusting a convoluted array of nefarious apparatus.

“Alles in ordnung, Doctor,” replied Emma curvaceously. “The mega-batteries are producing a full twelve megavolts. The gyrostable platform is gyrating and ready to stabilize, and the zeppelin is entirely filled with the light gassy substance that makes zeppelins float.”

“Hydrogen, fool!”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Bring us into position over the Hair Club for Millionaires, and lower the Ocular Overlooker.”

“At once, Doctor.” Exquisitely, Emma fondled the controls to ease the massive gasbag downward through the clouds. Otto, gazing through the complex optics of the Ocular Overlooker, scrutinized the rooftop of a stately manor beside an immaculately kept golf course. Peering down through the skylight into the brightly lit ballroom directly below, he beheld the heads of a throng of smartly-dressed banquetees, each head sheathed with particularly thick, luxurious natural hair.

Otto ran a single thin, austere finger across his own barren scalp. “I see them, Emma, all of them. Gloating in their wealth, parading their precious follicles in front of one another like stupid peacocks.”

“They are weak, hairy fools, Doctor.”

“Well then, let us test my new breakthrough, and we shall see if we can make their Hair Club... a ‘Scare Club!’”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Because they will be frightened!”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Frightened by their own baldness!”

“Excellend humor, Doctor.”

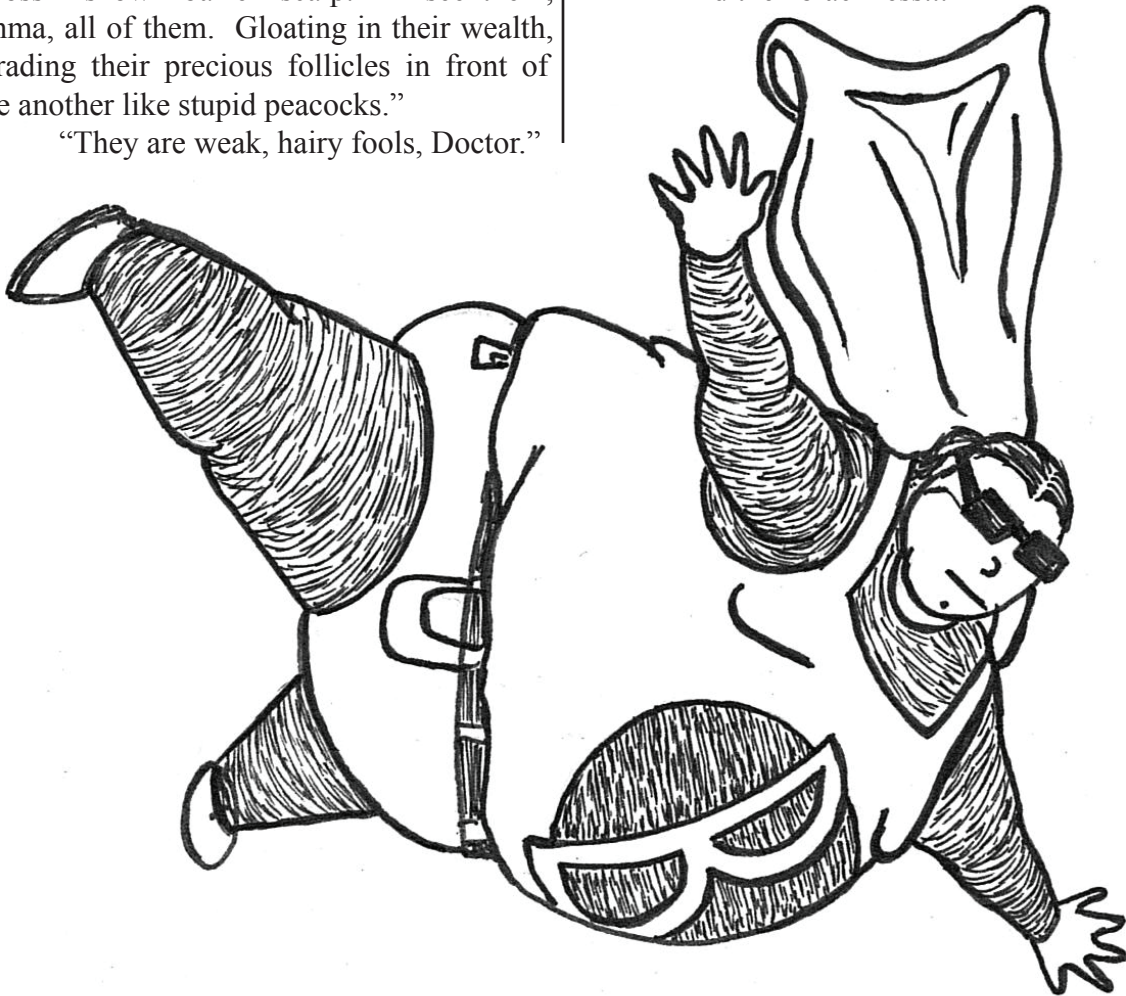
“Activate gyros! Energize hormonal modulator!”

“Gyros locked, Doctor. Hormones raging.”

“Fire the Testostertron... now!”

The switch was thrown. For one second, a blinding arc of hot energy split the sky between the airship and the clubhouse below like a single massive white dreadlock.

And then blackness...



Roger Bigelow stood on the bridge called Loser's Leap and beheld the little glittering lights of Pleasanton reflected in the smooth waters of Lake Loser. He reached into his bag full of glazed and unglazed donuts, thinking: she likes me, she likes me not...

But the bag was empty. Two baker's dozens from Mel's All-Nite Ring-O-Sugar, inhaled like so much asthma medication.

Who am I kidding, he thought. A real healthy wholesome girl like Marcy wouldn't ever go for a big tub of margarine like me. I bet she's got a boyfriend who's really fit. I bet he's a swimmer or a weightlifter, or a dietician.

He gazed over the sheer edge of the bridge, down at the rushing river far below. Science taught him that gravity treated all bodies equally, and that every desperate soul who ever leapt from this bridge smashed into the water below in exactly eight point nine seconds, at a speed of fifty five meters per second, no matter their body type or the weight of their problems.

"Roger... Roger Bigelow?"

The voice startled him. It was a woman's voice, a familiar voice. Could it be...

"Marcy?"

"Oh... Roger. Hi. Fancy meeting you here, ha ha."

"Wow... I mean yes, how funny," said Roger, his heart suddenly racing. "Because

normally only depressed, suicidal people come here... except me. I just come to, you know, look at the water and stuff."

"Mm-hmm," replied Marcy, staring at her shoes with her big, misty green eyes. "It's pretty water. Not at all depressing. I just felt like going for a walk... by myself ... all alone ..."

Roger was stunned. Here was Marcy, Marcy from the typing pool herself, standing right next to him, talking to him. He could smell her perfume and the delicate sweat from her hard-working elbows. And yet, Roger could see that she was holding back tears.

"Marcy, are you all right?"

"Yes... maybe... I don't know... no." She sniffed. "No, I'm not all right... oh Roger, why are men such pigs?"

"What do you mean, Marcy? What's happened?"

"It's my stupid boyfriend Chunk. He's always too busy with his stupid swimming and his dumb weightlifting. Tonight was our three year anniversary of going steady and he's off rock-climbing in Birmingham with some harlot he met at the dietician's conference. He says they're 'just friends'." She looked deep into Roger's eyes. "Well, I can have friends too, can't I?"

Roger realized Marcy was slightly tipsy, or maybe more than slightly, and yet even more captivating for it. Her long red hair blew softly in the midnight breeze, and though she was somewhat big-boned, Roger would never have called her less than beautiful.

"Goodness," she said, looking up. "Look at that bright light in the sky!"

Roger looked up and saw it: a thick letter O of halide light etched against a cloud like an immense powdered donut, emanating from a spotlight on the other side of town.

"It's the Fatsignal!" said Marcy. "Police Chief Van Hooter must need help from that brave costumed crime fighter, Blimpman.

Bradley Sands is a Dick
edited by Andersen Prunty
and Bradley Sands

featuring Carlton Mellick III, Mykle Hansen,
D. Harlan Wilson, Jordan Krall,
Cameron Pierce, and more

download the e-anthology for free at
www.absurdistjournal.com

Roger, do you think ... Roger? Where did you go? Roger? Hello? Roger?"

Marcy looked all around her, but she was alone.

"Oh... that fat prick!" she said, and wept.

“Thanks for coming so quickly, Blimpman. I’ve got two hundred and fifty bald-headed millionaires riding my keister to get this case closed, pronto.” Police chief Van Hooter called up to Blimpman through a special megaphone while two of his men reeled in the tether that kept the buoyant supersleuth from drifting away in the moderate westerlies above the Whitworth Gentlemen’s Club for Golf and Hair.

Blimpman surveyed the scene, sniffing for clues with his super-nostrils. “Did anyone see the perpetrators?”

“Naah, they said it happened too fast. Right at the crack of supertime—zap! Just like that. Came down from above, all silent-like.”

Blimpman stroked his ample chin, as his long red cape flapped in the breeze. “Sounds like a blimp-job, all right. But who would do such a thing... and why?”

“It’s simple, BM: they want dough. We found this note tied to a bucket of scalp wax in the parlor. It reads:

Dear Goyim:

If you ever want to see your hair again, you had better scrape together twenty million simoleons by midnight this coming sabbath. Otherwise, our international Jewish conspiracy shall claim another victim. (Your hair.)

We will contact you Saturday afternoon. Heil Jehovah!

—The Jews

“Are they really all hairless, Chief?”

“You should see ‘em, B.M. Eyelashes, forearms, even the pubes. All gone. And it’s not growing back, neither. The doctors are calling it a complete follicle shutdown. Like male pattern baldness, only all over, and instant-like.”

“Well, that note smells fishy to me. Who ever heard of Jews working on a Saturday?”

“Why I’ll be... you’re right, Blimpman!” Van Hooter turned to the radio operator. “Sparky! Radio Mallory at the lock-up. Tell him to release the Jews.”

Blimpman scratched his super-behind thoughtfully. “Did your men find anything else, Chief?”

“Not much... just these Birkinstocks and this copy of Handel’s ‘Messiah’. Probably just a red herring across a wild goose chase into a dead end, if you get my drift.”

“‘Drift’ is my middle name, Chief. But I smell a lead...”

Inside the old abandoned blimp hangar on the edge of town, the evil Dr. Dickerdunner perched tensely in an elevated iron throne, his head shrouded in a perforated plexiglass crown queerly bedecked with nefarious scientific wires and tubes. A huge bundle of cable and conduit connected this strange, hair-dryer-like apparatus directly to the snout of the vast hydrogen airship that hovered overhead. Nearby, Emma, in a fetching one-piece black leather bodysuit, punched sinister values into a bank of nasty computers with her long, untrustworthy fingernails.

“Emma! Report!”

“The final preparations are complete, Doctor. The concentrated hair-energies are

focused in the scalpatronic valve, and the conditioner banks are fully charged and awaiting your command.”

“I have waited all my life for this moment, Emma. Now comes the fruition of all my work.”

“Hairy fruit it will be, Doctor.”

“Think, Emma! Those tiny millionaires are even now scurrying from bank to bank like crabs, collecting the ransom for their precious hair—all in vain. Little do they realize I have stolen the very bio-orgone energies from their scalps! With this energy, I will grow a new head of super-hair—stronger, thicker and more manageable than any hair mankind has ever known! And with this super-hair I will rule the world!”

“A foolproof plan, Doctor.”

“Prepare to enter a new era, Emma!”

“Ready for your signal, Doctor.”

“Five, four, three... oh, just press the button!”

“Yes, Doctor!”

Suddenly, crackling arcs of electricity bloomed around the head and body of the evil, bald genius, as he writhed in apparent agony.

“Doctor!”

“Yes! It’s working! I can feel it! Emma, report: how is my hair?”

“I see... yes, something is growing.”

“What color?”

“Brown, Doctor. But still quite short.”

“Increase the power!”

“Yes Doctor... increasing to forty mega-sassoons.”

Thunderclaps echoed throughout the hangar.

“Doctor... the brown hair is growing thicker.”

“Yes!”

“Doctor... the hair is covering your entire body.”

“Yes!”

“Doctor... you are growing a long, spidery moustache.”

“Yes!”

“Doctor... your canines have grown below your chin, your body has swollen to enormous size and your hands and feet have become large, clumsy flippers.”

“What? What’s happening?”

“Doctor... I must apologize... it appears that instead of the button marked HAIR I have accidentally pressed the button marked WALRUS. Shall I halt the procedure?”

“Mein Gott! Shut it off! Shut it off!”

With the flick of a switch, the deafening crackle of hair-energy ceased. The walrus formerly known as Otto lumbered off the operating table and caterpillared over to a strategically-placed full length mirror.

“Emma! You incompetent dumb-head! I am hideously large and bulbous!”

“If I might, Doctor... you are actually a quite fetching walrus.”

“What? Emma, are you mad? True, I am covered in dense and supple fur, but otherwise... look at me! A monster!”

“I have always found myself attracted to chunky men, Doctor.”

“Emma! Did you do this on purpose?”

“No, Doctor. Or, perhaps subconsciously I did. Although one could also blame the design of the user interface.”

“Enough! We must reverse the process. Unplug the hair-cannon and plug it in backwards! Immediately!”

But Emma stood motionless, listening. In the quiet distance came the high keening of police sirens, growing louder.

The walrus doctor shuddered in panic. “Police! They’ve found us! Quick, to the zeppelin!”

With surprising strength and agility, Otto flopped upwards on the precarious catwalk leading to the zeppelin's undercarriage, with his erotically-charged henchperson close behind. But as they neared the hatch, a spray of shattered glass tinkled down from a nearby skylight, and a huge bulbous figure loomed closer.

"Freeze, hair-Nazis!"

"Oh look, it's Blimpman!" oozed Emma. "Hello Blimpman!"

"Blimpman! Curse you and sew you shut! How did you find us?"

"There's only so many places to hide a blimp in a small Midwestern town," chuckled the rotund crusader. "Now, if you'll just step back down to the ground, there are some policemen outside who are dying to know some of your hair-care secrets."

"Nein! Never!" With a panicked lunge of his tail, Otto batted his assistant aside, dropping her like a hot tomato from the very apex of the catwalk, and dived into the cockpit of his getaway blimp.

"Blimpman! I'm falling!" shrieked Emma seductively. As Blimpman swooped down to catch her in his strong, well-upholstered arms, the black zeppelin's propellers screamed to life, chewing the air insatiably, buffeting the sultry sidekick and her pudgy protector against the back wall while the mighty airship glided over the heads of the surrounding policemen outside and made a slow, pendulous getaway.

"Hold your fire, men!" shouted Blimpman as he dropped anchor near Chief Van Hooter's car and handed the breathless criminatrix down to a gaggle of horny cops. "One stray bullet in that thing and it's the Hindenburg all over again."

"Blast it all to heck, B.M." said the exasperated Chief Van Hooter. "We almost

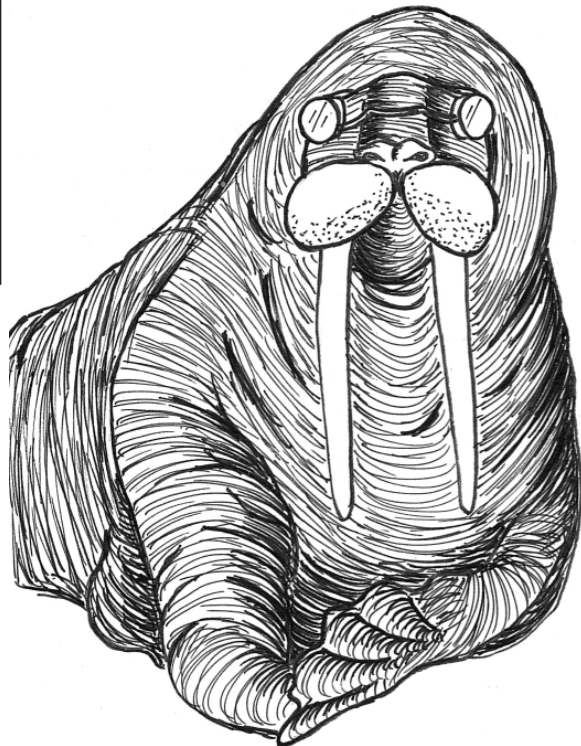
had that no-good skinhead scalped, but now he's blimped off to bumfuck! What are we supposed to do now?"

"Leave it to me, Chief. I've got some keen insight into the walrus mind..."

As the first fingers of dawn twiddled over the sleepy midwestern fishing village of Pleasanton, two figures could be seen loitering beneath a double-parked zeppelin in the middle of the bridge called Loser's Leap, sharing a bottle and watching the sunrise.

"So you see," slurred Otto, "all my life have I had this angst, this hatred of self. Without hair, I believed I was unworthy of love."

"Oh baby, I completely understand," replied Marcy as she stroked Otto's whiskers gently. "I've always felt the same way about my bone size. Like my ankles. Look at them, they're so bony! I want to chop them off!"



“Your ankles, dear, are like magnificent glacial alps on the Switzerland of your feet.”

Marcy tittered, and hugged her walrus closer. “Haven’t we been silly, to wallow in the swamps of negative body image for so long?”

“Yes! And yet how lucky we are to finally meet. You will find this strange... I came here to leap to a lonely death, but now I know it is my destiny to be your walrus husband.”

“And I your bony wife! Oh Otto... kiss me with your big lips!”

The unlikely couple embraced for a small eternity... until their solitude was interrupted by two pairs of approaching footsteps—one sexy, the other fat.

“Hello Otto. And... Marcy? Is that you?”

“Oh, hello Roger. Roger Bigelow. Roger Bigelow who vanished on me right in this very spot just hours ago. Hello, hello. Who’s your friend in the bondage get-up?”

“I am called Emma,” hissed the teutonic bombshell, “but you may call me Girlfriend-Of-Roger. Roger darling, who is this bony woman?”

“Cut it out you two! This is serious!” Roger placed a gentle hand on the approximate former location of Otto’s shoulder. “Otto, listen. The millionaires have surrounded the bridge. They’ve brought their lawyers, their personal assistants and the police. You’re covered with stolen hair, Otto, and they want it back.”

“Let them eat Rogaine! A walrus does not fear the wrath of puny industrialists!” Otto laughed a deep, mirthless laugh. “But why are you delivering their ultimatum, Roger? Surely you are not a brainwashed minion of their slenderocracy, like Blimpman?”

“Don’t you see, Otto? I am Blimpman!”

“Nein! You are not! Get out of town!”

“Yes I am. Or at least I was. But now that I’ve found Emma, the whole superhero thing seems kind of immature. I’m thinking of giving it up.”

“But darling,” cooed Emma, “your multicolored leotard is so sensual!”

“Otto, I’m speaking to you now not as a crime fighter or a competing scientist, but just as one fat guy to another. You’ve known the heartbreak of premature baldness. How can you wish it on anyone else? Even these millionaires whom you despise have feelings, Otto.”

“I’m sorry, Roger, but you see I lack the technology to reverse this process. I am a walrus now, and I must accept what I am. I eat fish, I bark, I love. Perhaps I will learn to balance a multicolored inflatable ball upon my snout. If I can be satisfied with my lot, why cannot they?”

“They’ll never give up, Otto. They’ll hunt you in every arctic and sub-arctic coastal region in the Northern Hemisphere.”

“Then I have nowhere to go... but up! Ha ha! Up in my zeppelin, that is. You see, it is a joke I made... laugh, damn you!”

But before Roger Bigelow could bust his mighty gut, a violent boom exploded from the deck of a police boat below the bridge, followed by the whistling of an incoming projectile...

“Otto!” screamed Marcy. “You’ve been harpooned!”

“Attention!” squawked a loud police bullhorn. “This is Chief Van Hooter of the Pleasanton SWAT team! You are all busted! Step away from the blimp and put your hands or flippers up where we can see ‘em!”

“Nein!” cried Otto, clutching the harpoon in his butt. “I will not be a walrus

chained! Marcy, help me!” Trailing blood, Otto wormed his way up the hanging ladder, with Marcy pushing from beneath as hard as she was able, given her boniness. Just as they reached the top, harpoon-wielding policemen flooded the bridge from both ends, followed by a testy swarm of personal assistants waving their day-planners menacingly. Chief Van Hooter led the pack.

“Chief!” cried Roger. “Hold your harpoons! Hydrogen airships are incredibly dangerous!”

“Shut yer pie hole, lard-ass! What, you think you’re Blimpman or something?”

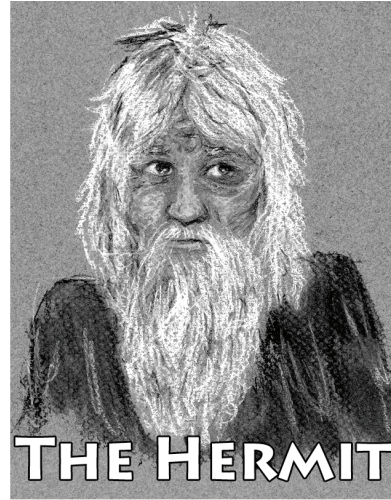
“Yes! Chief! It’s me!”

“Yeah, right. Save the yackety-yak for the chumps at the hoosegow, fat boy. Now all you cops, make with them harpoons! Yank that stupid balloon out of the sky already!”

“Mister policeman! You must not!” said Emma. “That zeppelin is charged with scalpionic radicals! If the envelope is punctured, it will—”

Too late! All at once, a flock of police harpoons shot across the sky and ripped through the airtight skin of the massive cigar-shaped hulk. Instantly it burst into flames. Blonde flames and brunette smoke hissed from the fissures as the airship’s propellers roared in vain. The fuselage tipped, crumpled and plummeted down, down, down into the churning currents of the whitewater rapids below, enveloping the bridge with acrid brown smoke and the odor of burning hair.

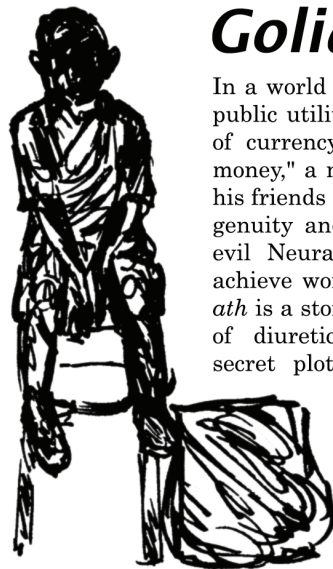
“Emma! Grab my love handles and hold on!” Inflating his spleen, Roger floated up off the bridge with Emma in tow. He quickly doused the fire with the power of his super-bladder, but even as the toxic cloud blew inland, the crowd on the bridge still gasped and writhed in pain.



What do you think would happen if a dedicated career hermit were suddenly to find himself the object of a lovely (and promiscuous) young lady’s affections? Further, let’s say her father is the mayor, and he views her behavior as a “political embarrassment” that could cost him the next election. Who, if anyone, ends up living happily ever after?

**Books by Ray Holland
Available at Amazon.com**

**More info at
greatbigdog.com**



Goliath

In a world in which gravity is a public utility and the basic unit of currency is the “handful of money,” a nine-year-old boy and his friends must summon the ingenuity and courage to foil the evil Neuralgia Sisters’ plot to achieve world domination. *Goliath* is a story of love and loyalty, of diuretic paint thinner, of secret plots and suspicion, of stagnant air and streetcorner charcoal vending and alien abduction. And, as an added bonus, a troll under a bridge!

Afterbirth Books

“Holy Toledo!” croaked Chief Van Hooter in horror. “I’m puffing up like an airbag!”

“Emma! What’s happening to them? They’re getting bigger... and they’re changing...”

“Yes, darling. Changing into walruses. I attempted to warn them.”

“Walruses! And that toxic cloud—it’s headed towards town!”

“Yes, they will all be walruses as well. And everywhere. This cloud of negatively radicalized hair ions shall circle the earth forever, until all mankind has become walrui. Finally, there will be no more war, no more pollution, no more global warming! Only an ocean of fat, happy mammals.” Emma wrapped her arms tighter around the inflatable hero. “You and I shall rule them, darling, as baron and baroness! It has been my plan all along, you see. Are you not proud of me?”

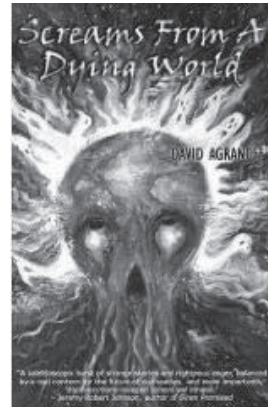
“I don’t know, Emma. This feels wrong, somehow.”

“But you feel so right, darling.” said Emma, slipping a conniving hand into the front of Roger’s spacious trousers.

“Well... “ Roger blushed. “I guess if... if there’s really nothing we can do about it...”

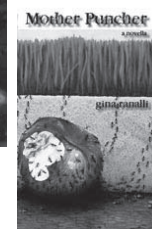
“Forget them, Roger,” whispered the amorous aryan, “and take me! Take me now! Take me in the stratosphere! Dock your zeppelin in my hangar!”

Embracing one another tightly, the dirigible duo rose high up into the blue sky, higher and higher, until they might have been mistaken for a child’s mylar balloon, just an ever-shrinking speck that disappeared behind a cloud and was never seen again.

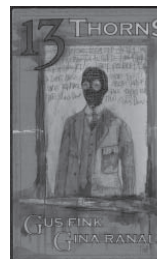


NEW!

Screams From a Dying World
by David Agranoff



Bruce Taylor, Gina Ranalli & Bradley Sands



13 Thorns: winner of the 2008 Wonderland Book Award for best short story collection!

See us at
Bizarro Con
2009!



www.afterbirthbooks.com

Like many fans of bizarro, I was first introduced to the genre by the way of Carlton Mellick III. His books were such a breath of literary fresh air to me. This story has all the elements of a classic Mellick tale—a totally crazy situation, strangely relatable characters, and some simple truths of human nature.

Simple Machines

by Carlton Mellick III

Oliver Madu awoke one morning to discover two tiny copper doorknobs growing from the corners of his eyes. He didn't remember ever having doorknobs in his eyes before. He was pretty sure that there used to be two tiny balls of pink flesh in those parts of his eyes. They certainly weren't made of copper.

His eyes had been bothering him all through the previous day. They started out a bit itchy. Then, around lunchtime, they had turned bright red. By the time he went to sleep that night, Oliver's eyes had become swollen and throbbing. He had thought he was coming down with a flu. He hadn't realized he was growing doorknobs.

Oliver examined one of the knobs in the mirror. He tried to grab it with his thumb and index finger, but it was too tiny for his fingers to get a good grip. He tried to rub them out like morning eye-boogers, but the knobs would not budge.

Oliver decided he would attempt to ignore the knobs so that he could focus on more important things, such as getting ready for work. But as he tied his chocolate brown tie and buttoned up his beige suit, he found his attention drifting in the direction of the balls of copper.

He paused and examined the doorknobs again. He wanted to make sure they matched his work clothes. Oliver stared at his mirror image, stroking his brown business-friendly beard.

One of the doorknobs wiggled, tickling his eyelashes. Oliver moved in for a closer look.

The knob wiggled again.

He blinked two times.

Then his eyeball opened up like a door.

Behind his eyeball, there was a little man standing in the open socket. The man looked identical to Oliver. He had Oliver's face, his hair, and was even wearing his exact same outfit.

They stared awkwardly at each other for a moment. The little man seemed as surprised to see Oliver as Oliver was surprised to see the little man. Oliver wasn't sure whether he should introduce himself to the miniature version of himself or ask him politely who he was and what the hell he was doing inside his eye.

The miniature man waved at Oliver.

Oliver found himself waving slowly back at the miniature man.

There was another uncomfortable pause. Then the little man closed Oliver's eyeball door.



While sitting at his glossy white dining room table, eating a bowl of crunch berries with a grapefruit spoon, Oliver Madu heard hammering noises coming from his head. This was especially peculiar to Oliver, as he had never heard hammering noises coming from his head before.

Oliver tried to ignore the sounds, so that he could get through his morning routine uninterrupted, but the hammering made it nearly impossible for him to focus on reading his neatly folded newspaper and drinking his cup of French Vanilla Café.

At work, the noises only grew louder. There weren't just hammering noises, but drilling and sawing sounds coming from his skull as well. Oliver did his best to block these sounds from his mind, but they still got in the way of his concentration. The only thing he could fully focus his attention on was sitting upright in his chair with a professional posture while eating his powdered strawberry jelly donut with a fork and a knife. He didn't notice all the angry eyes glaring into his cubicle at him.

After a couple of hours, Oliver's boss called him into his office. He was a tall man with wavy blond hair, a dark orange tan, and big bright teeth. His hands were folded on a kayaking-themed mousepad calendar.

Oliver sat in a stubby chair on the other side of the desk, blinded by the iridescent lights reflecting off of his boss' teeth. The sound of drilling echoed through the back of Oliver's head.

"So, Oliver," his boss said with a half-smile. Oliver's boss always had a half-smile when he spoke. "I see your head is pretty noisy today."

Oliver nodded his noisy head.

"Care to explain why?" said his boss.

Hammers banged against the side of Oliver's skull.

"There seems to be some kind of construction going on in my brain," Oliver said, raising his voice so that he could be heard over the hammering.

His boss stood up and took a closer look at Oliver's head. He could see Oliver's hair shaking as the hammers struck.

"I see," said his boss, nodding. "Is there by any chance a way you might be able to make it stop?"

Oliver thought about it for a minute. He looked up at the ceiling and stroked his thin beard. Then he shrugged.

"I don't think so," Oliver said.

His boss sat down and sighed.

"Hmmm . . ." said his boss, leaning far back in his chair with his fingers curled into his bangs. "You see, the thing is, these noises have been awfully disruptive."

Oliver nodded in agreement.

"There have been a number of complaints," said his boss.

Oliver apologized and wiped a patch of powdered sugar from his tie.

"Are you sure there isn't anything you can do to quiet down the noise?" asked his boss.

Oliver shrugged.

"I think you should take the rest of the afternoon off," said his boss. "Go see a doctor. Get this thing straightened out."

Oliver nodded his head as tiny hammers pounded against the inside of his temples.

By the time Oliver Madu got to the doctor's office, the sounds of construction had spread throughout his entire body.

"I don't know how to tell you this, Mr. Madu," said the doctor, examining Oliver with buggy eyes, "but it seems that you are not technically a human being."

Oliver loosened his nostrils. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

The doctor knocked on Oliver’s chest. It sounded like he was knocking on a door.

“I’ll probably need to do a few more tests to be certain,” said the doctor, “but you appear to be made of wood.”

“Wood?” Oliver asked, looking down at his chest.

“Oak, to be precise,” said the doctor. “I’ve also been curious about these . . .”

The doctor lifted Oliver’s shirt to reveal two little windows where nipples should have been.

“How long have you had these windows?” asked the doctor.

Oliver didn’t recall ever having window nipples.

The doctor said, “The inside of your body appears to be hollow and home to fourteen miniature clones of yourself. These clones operate your body via a network of wheels and pulleys.”

Oliver looked through one of his nipple windows to see miniature versions of himself walking by, wearing tool belts and carrying planks of wood.

“I’m rather certain that I am a human being,” Oliver said, “I remember being human ever since I was a small child.”

“Mr. Madu, I have been an authority on human anatomy for nearly twenty years. I think I know what I’m talking about in this matter.”

“But I must protest,” Oliver said. “I am not a robot.”

“No, of course you’re not robotic,” said the doctor. “Actually, in comparison, a robot would be a far more sophisticated piece of machinery. You are a simple machine. You are more like a man-shaped ship than a human or a robot.”

Oliver

Madu was really bummed by the fact that he wasn’t a human being. He decided the best course of action would be to get completely drunk.

At the local pub, he sat at the bar staring into a pint of honey ale. The construction noises had ceased for the day, but it didn’t seem like that much of a consolation to Oliver.

As he drank his beer, the miniature clones in his chest busily collected it into wooden barrels. The mini-Olivers dunked their mugs into the barrels, filling them with honey ale. They guzzled the beer as quickly as possible, so that they could dip their mugs once more. By the time the fourth pint was empty, the Oliver clones were completely drunk and ready to party.

Oliver didn’t know why his left arm kept jerking, knocking over his empty pint glasses. Inside his body, the little man responsible for controlling this arm was leaning back in a chair with his feet propped up on the control board. The little man was chugging a mug of beer and flipping through the pages of a nudie magazine called *Chubbies*. He didn’t realize that his feet weren’t doing a very good job keeping the wooden steering wheels steady.

Oliver’s left arm raised straight up into the air and then went limp. He unbuttoned the top of his shirt with his right arm and looked down through a window nipple. Inside, he could see all the mini-Olivers drinking and partying. One of them had a little accordion and was playing hoedown music, as the others clapped and danced and raised their beers into the air.

A wooden groan poured out of Oliver’s mouth as he re-buttoned his shirt. Then his right leg kicked over the stool next to him and spasmed in the air, as a mini-Oliver did a beer bong over his leg controls.

The other bar patrons wondered what the hell was wrong with Oliver. College girls giggled at him. Old men glared at him with clammy eyes. After his leg stopped twitching, the fingers on his left hand started curling in and out of his fists of their own accord. He gulped down the rest of his pint, attempting to drown the little bastards. They danced with open mouths as the beer rained down on their heads.

Then both of Oliver's eyeballs opened up and he went blind. He felt two miniature clones of himself hanging out of his eye sockets, hooting and hollering, shouting, "Yeah baby!"

Oliver slammed his eyeballs closed, pushing the tiny drunks backwards. He felt them tumble down his throat. Then he saw what they were hollering at. In the eye of a woman across the bar, there was a drunken miniature version of that woman flashing her breasts at the bar patrons.

The woman at the bar slammed her eyeball closed and grumbled to herself. Then her eyes met with Oliver.

Oliver Madu found himself staggering towards the woman on the other side of the bar. The mini-Olivers were frantically working the controls, chugging beer, yelping excitedly.

"Come on, boys!" shouted the captain of the Oliver ship, cranking a wheel in the brain-shaped cockpit. "Let's go get some!"

The drunken clones were not in the right state to drive Oliver. They couldn't control his legs very well. They couldn't keep adequate balance.

Oliver found himself leaning half of his body against the edge of the bar as he was

driven towards the woman. His head was rolling against his shoulder. He could hear his clones laughing and cheering as they stumbled over their controls. The other people in the bar gawked at him as he knocked over stools and ashtrays.

The woman had short black hair with a purple headband, purple lipstick, purple nail polish, and a purple dress. She was drinking a cosmo and trying to shush the clones giggling in her chest.

"Hi," Oliver said to her.

The woman smiled at Oliver. The sound of hopping drunken girls singing along to pop music boomed out from her cleavage.

He crashed down into the stool next to her, and then tried to compose himself. He smoothed out the wrinkles in his beige suit with his sweaty palm.

"I hope you don't mind if I join you," he said.

The woman held out her hand. "Clara."

"Oliver," he said, grabbing her hand.

They didn't shake hands. They squeezed their palms together in a warm embrace.

The woman opened her mouth to take a sip of her cocktail. Before she could take a sip, a naked miniature version of her hopped out of her mouth into the drink. The tiny skinny-dipping woman squealed at the icy temperature as she swam through the pink fluid. She looked up at Oliver and waved at him.

Clara blushed as Oliver saw the naked version of herself. She quickly gulped down the drink and swallowed her clone back inside of her body.

"Excuse me," she said, and then giggled. She pressed her fingers against her cold wooden throat.

Oliver nodded.

The woman smiled at him, but her eyes darted down to her empty glass before he could smile back. Oliver looked at her purple fingernails wrapped around the stem of the glass.

He tried to change the subject. "So you like purple?"

Clara held out her hand to examine her fingernails.

"Oh!" Clara said, giggling, then she thought about it and frowned. "Uh . . . Not really."

"Oh," Oliver said.

A mini-Oliver climbed out of a window nipple and crawled out of Oliver's shirt. Then he fired a grappling hook at Clara, catching the collar of her dress, connecting them together by a thin black thread.

"So what do you do?" she asked.

Clara pretended not to notice the mini-Oliver as he climbed the thread towards her.

"I work in accounting," Oliver said.

"Really?" Clara said. "You must be good with numbers."

The mini-Oliver was halfway across the thread by the time Oliver noticed him. The tiny clone hooted at two mini-Claras who whistled at him from Clara's cleavage. The mini-Claras shouted, "Come party with us!" And the mini-Oliver yelled, "Yeah baby!"

"Not really," Oliver said.

He snatched the mini version of himself from the thread. The miniature man kicked and cried as Oliver shoved him down his shirt and through his nipple window.

"I work in human resources," Clara said, edging her knees closer to Oliver, as if the black thread was reeling her in.

"Nice," Oliver said, smiling and nodding.

The bartender came by and placed a turkey sandwich in front of Clara. He was a young man with pierced lips and a big round belly.

"Here you go," said the bartender. "Need anything else?"

"Oh," Clara said to the bartender. "Can I get a fork and knife?"

After the bartender acknowledged her request, Clara looked at Oliver.

"I eat everything with a fork," she said to him. "I don't like to touch food with my hands. Not even sandwiches."

Oliver's eyes lit up. "Me too!"

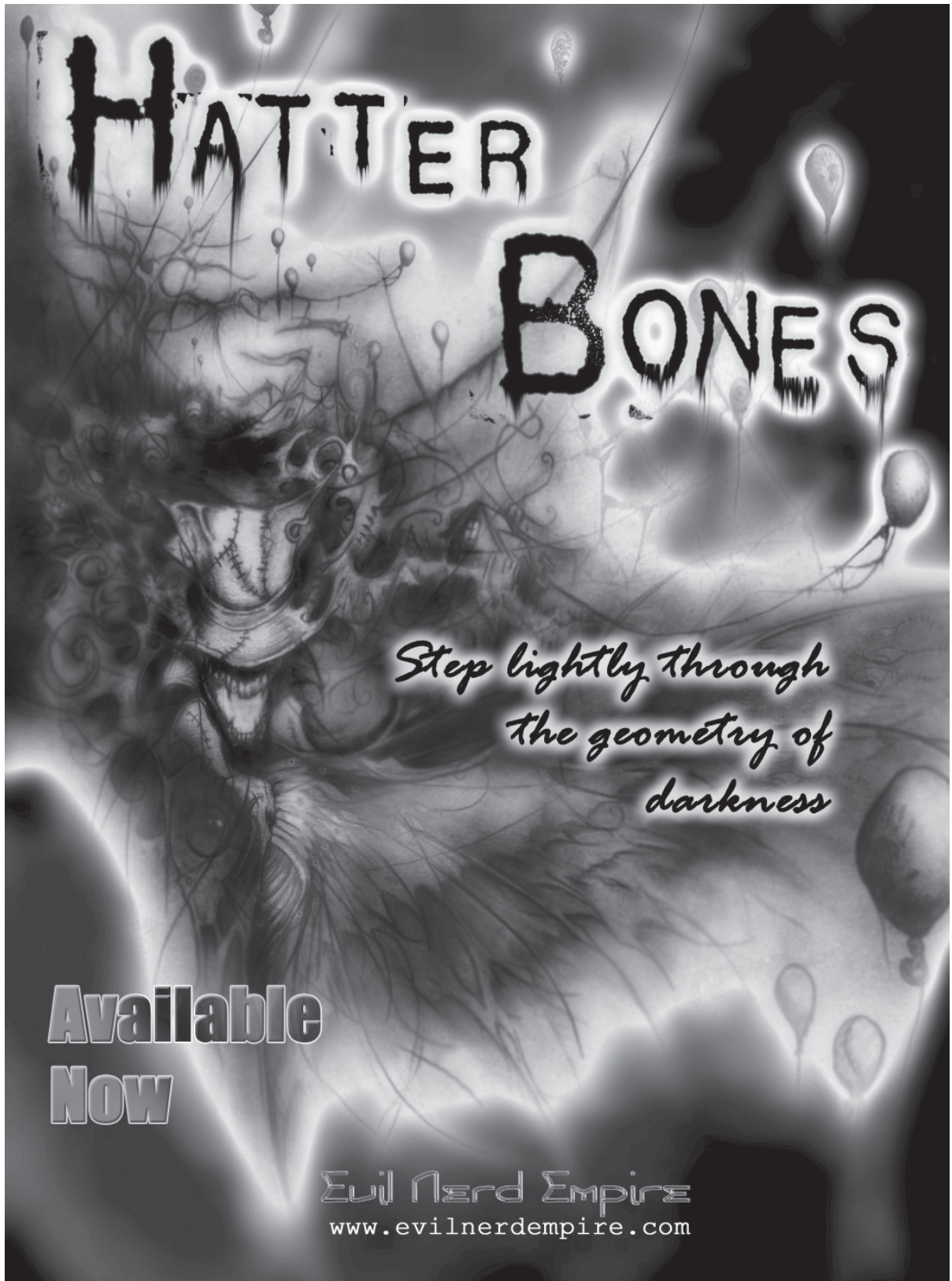
They stared at each other for a moment. They blinked slowly at each other and their lips curled into smiles.

Clara called out to the bartender, "Never mind. I think I'd like this to go."

Back at Oliver's place, Oliver and Clara sat together on his couch, half-empty wine glasses on the coffee table next to them. Their clothes were pulled up to their necks, their bellies opened up like barn doors.

All of their clones partied together on the couch, on their laps, on their shoulders. The mini-Claras danced drunkenly with the mini-Olivers. Some of them were making out. One Oliver clone held the hair of a Clara clone as she puked out of Oliver's nostril. One couple was already naked together in a closet in Clara's upper thigh.

Oliver and Clara lay motionless on the couch, gazing into each other's eyes. Their mouths were stretched into dazed smiles. Their wooden hands were folded tightly together between their hips. But because their operators were outside of their bodies, they were no longer able to move, talk, hear, see, feel, or think.

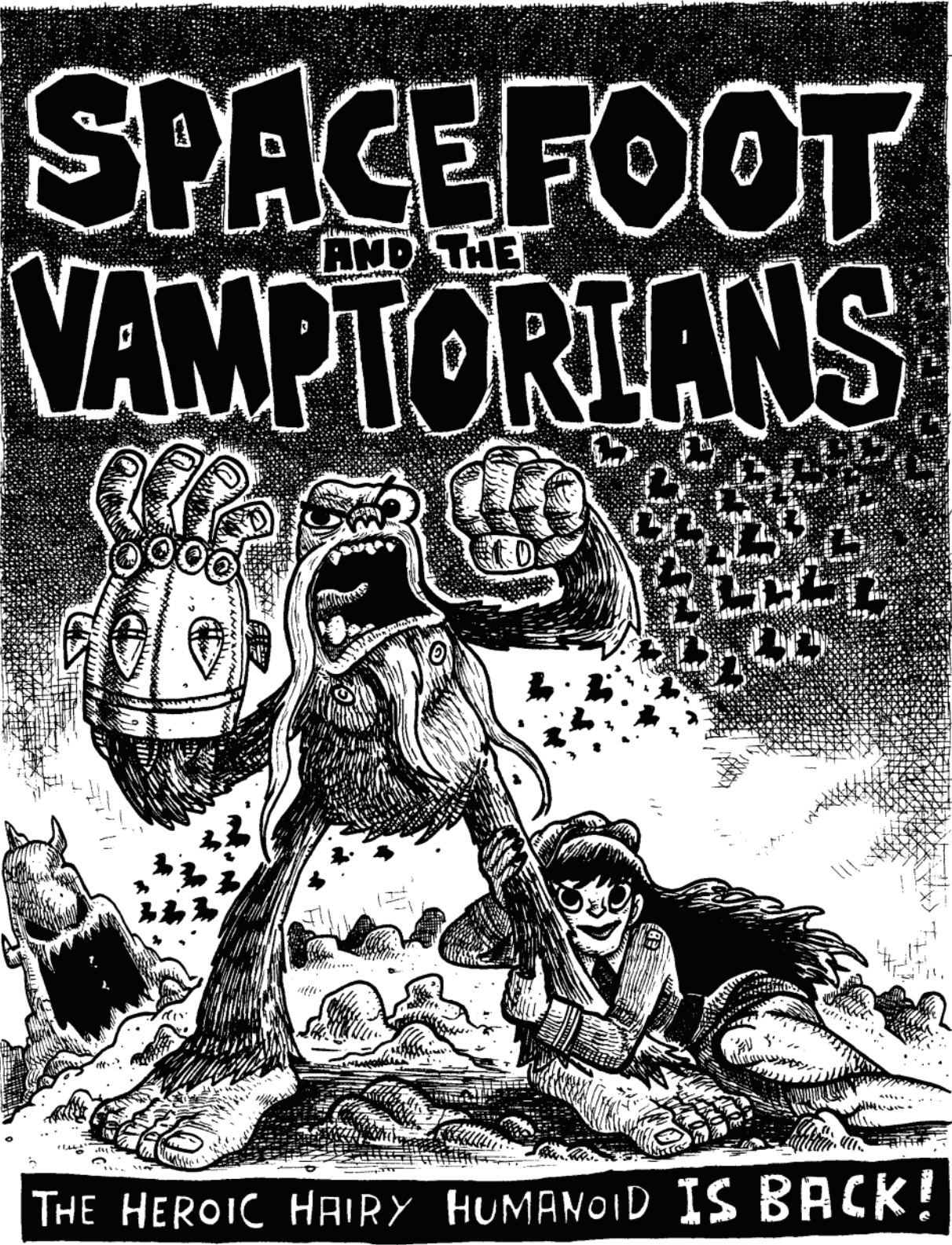


HATTER BONES

*Step lightly through
the geometry of
darkness*

**Available
Now**

Evil Nerd Empire
www.evilnerdempire.com



FACING HIS FIERCEST FOE EVER



POET



SMOKER



LOVER

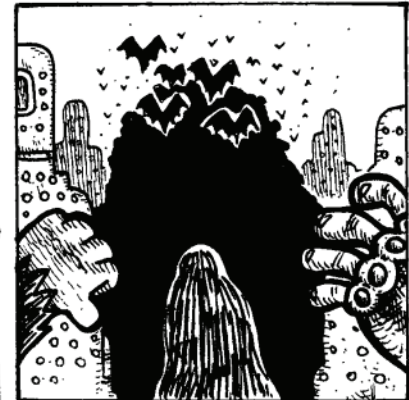


A GARGANTUAN GORE FUELLED GALACTIC GANGBANG



PODIATRIC SPACE THRILLS

SPACEFOOT AND THE VAMP TORIANS



The Baby Jesus and Drunken Pirates: Author Spotlight on Carlton Mellick III

by Jeff Burk

It was Horrorfind 2005 in Baltimore, Maryland. While going about the convention halls and perusing the dealers' room, I kept running into flyers advertising something called "The Brutally Evil Satan Show with Father Mellick." The flyer promised exploding pentagrams, brain cannons, and the most hellishest song ever written. If all this wasn't enough, there was a picture of some guy with massive sideburns. I had no idea what I was seeing a flyer for, all I knew was that I couldn't miss whatever it was.



I showed up to the cramped convention event space and grabbed a seat near the front. The man from the flyer came to the front of the room and not only were his sideburns even bigger in person; he was also wearing a priest frock—making him even more badass. He proceeded to launch into a retardly evil comedy routine, utilizing props such as a pink toy guitar and a homemade exploding pentagram (there really was one!). I was laughing so hard I had no hope of following the plot.

At the end of the performance, I still wasn't completely sure who this strange person was but I knew I needed to give him all my money. I bought six books on the spot from Carlton Mellick III. I got him to sign them and he wrote stupidly awesome things like "Satan Explodes!" and "Exploding Brains!" and "Why's Satan Exploding and Shit!?"

The first of the six books that I read was *The Menstruating Mall*. Before this book, I had not read much fiction as I was becoming immensely bored with the literary world. But the combination of goofy humor, gross-out horror, and overwhelming absurdity in this book was infectious and led me down my path of bizarro obsession.

His work is satirical, highly imaginative, subversive, cute, gory, and fun as hell to read. Surreal affairs that call to mind the early films of Lynch, the dark stop-motion animation of Svankmajer, the word play of

Burroughs, and the children's literature of Dahl and Dr. Seuss. The worlds he creates are distorted, surreal, exaggerated versions of reality. Whether it's Punk Heaven, worlds made out of meat or candy, gated suburban neighborhoods that take over the planet, a vagina world complete with walking skeletons, or Nazis lost in Wonderland, Mellick's environments are some of the most unusual settings ever created in fiction.

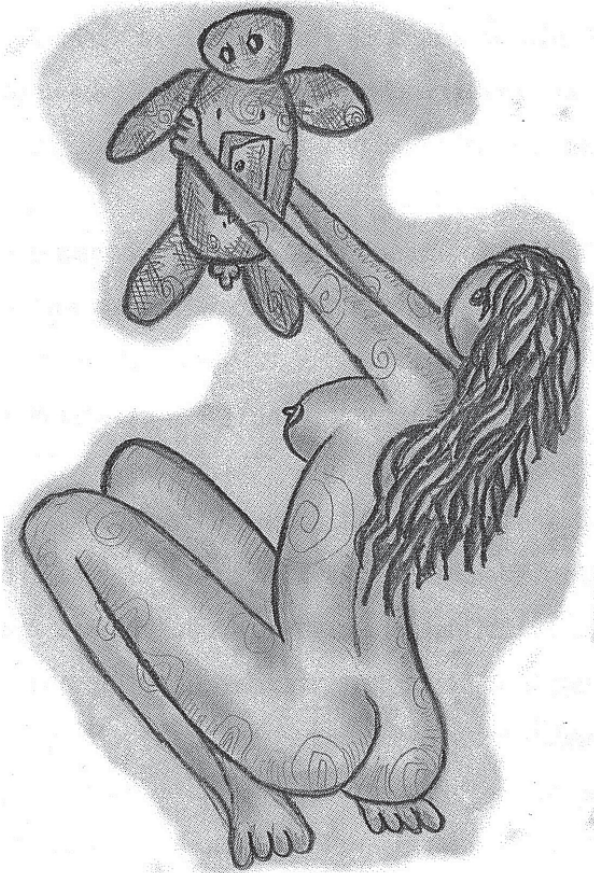
Four years later, I met with Mellick at a micro-brewery (the only thing he may love more than weird fiction is fine beer) in Portland, Oregon to discuss his books over a few drinks. He is a very tall man. Combined with his all black garb, shaved head, and massive sideburns, he is an imposing figure. But when he talks, he is polite and down-to-earth. After he ordered a pickled sausage and beers for both of us, we sat at a bench on the covered patio and told me the story of how he came to be the cult icon we know today.

His passion for writing started when he was just ten. He had the ambitious goal of becoming a best-selling author by the time he turned eleven. He completed his first book that year, but was bummed that it failed to make the bestseller list. It wasn't even published. He tried again the next year and completed another unpublishable book. Then the year after that. By the time he turned eighteen, he had completed twelve novels, some over a thousand pages long. Despite young Mellick's ambition, none of the books made the bestsellers list. Mellick laughs about that very early period now, "I always thought I was on the verge of success. Good thing I was too dumb to realize how difficult it was to make it as a writer, or else I would have quit a long time ago."

These first works provide a fascinating glimpse at the author he was to become. Titles

like *Megadeaths* (a post apocalyptic tale of the world being literally turned inside out), *The Dream People* (aliens who live in a dimension of thought are terraforming human brains) and *Electric Jesus Corpse* (Mellick's retelling of the Jesus mythos) are obvious precursors to his current works like *Apeshit*, *The Egg Man*, and *The Cannibals of Candyland*.

It was with his cult hit *Satan Burger* (written at age twenty) that Mellick found his voice as a writer. The tale of a Satan-run fast food joint in a multi-universe world struck a chord with an audience that had been craving weird fiction. The book premiered a writer, still young and learning his craft, whose wild imagination and playful style enthralled readers who had sought out books that embodied the aesthetic of the cult films they adored. Combining trash cinema, fetish art,





and children's literature, his work challenged, disturbed, and satisfied readers.

After *Satan Burger*, he experimented with a variety of writing styles. *Razor Wire Public Hair* plays with word mash-ups like "slide-creeping trees" and "murder-danced cats," whereas *Ocean of Lard* (co-written with Kevin L. Donihe) is a choose-your-own-adventure book, except with all the sex and violence you wished was in them. The defining aspect of the books released during this time is Mellick's experimentation with form and structure.

From this experiment emerged one of his most acclaimed works, *The Baby Jesus Butt Plug*. The tale is about a couple that adopts a cloned baby Jesus for usage as a sex toy and the chaos that ensues when it turns against them. The book was meant to invoke the

feel of children's literature by incorporating numerous illustrations and presenting the text in a large, spaced-out font. Unfortunately, the exterior of the book did not resemble a children's book, so the effect that Mellick was going for was lost on many readers. Still, *The Baby Jesus Butt Plug* remains one of Mellick's most popular tales to date.

With his pulpy fast-paced bizarro western, *Sex and Death in Television Town*, there was a shift in Mellick's work. He moved away from the experimental word play and took on his current minimalistic approach to writing. This, combined with tight plotting, became Mellick's signature style that has continued through to this day.

In the works that followed, the social commentary overtones took a back seat and he instead focused on writing fun, entertaining stories that didn't take themselves too seriously. A vagina world complete with walking skeletons, a ground-meat Santa Claus, mannequin guerillas, and Nazis lost in Wonderland are just some of the ideas that he began to play with. These books show an immense willingness to have fun with his work, but that's not to say that his work during this time was mere disposable fiction. *The Haunted Vagina* is perhaps Mellick's most nuanced and best exploration of the joys and

The Art of Ed Mironiuk
The first collection of art
from the acclaimed fetish artist
Out Now!

get it at
www.EdMironiuk.com

horrors of romantic relationships, a common theme in his work. The book tells of a man who discovers that his girlfriend's vagina is, literally, a gateway to another world. When the man becomes lost in this place, hidden truths about both lovers become revealed. It is a touching and emotionally disturbing book that is likely to take many a reader off guard.

Shortly thereafter was the release of *Cybernetrix*, his tribute to the movie *Tron* and video games. What sounds like a rather light, humorous read is instead a philosophical work on the nature of reality itself, featuring, of course, loads of violence, video game humor, and *Tron* sex. The book marked a notable jump forward with his writing ability. That, and the works to follow, demonstrate Mellick's mastery of plot and mark the return of his thoughtful and subversive subtexts to his high-concept ideas.

The Egg Man is the dark and gritty tale of an aspiring artist in a world where all art is corporate controlled and sponsored. In it, Mellick damns the artistic world and sets his sharp satirical focus on creators who choose to follow what is "normal" and "expected" of them rather than creating something new and interesting, however flawed. It is also a critique on the working class struggle, damaging relationships, and Social Darwinism.

Apeshit breaks the mold a bit and almost seems like a response to the critics that say he is shocking for shocking sake—fierce, super-violent, splatter-movie comedy where the victims become much more badass than the villain can hope to be. Featuring vagina dentata masturbation with a toothbrush, a gun wound aided blowjob, and a character forced to climb their own intestines, it is far and away his most extreme work in every way. But even with all these graphic moments, he never loses grip of the plot or the humanity of the story.

This time period also brought what may perhaps be Mellick's most accomplished artistic work yet, *The Faggiest Vampire*. With the start of Eraserhead Press's children's book line, Spunk Goblin Books, Mellick was finally able to fully realize his dream of a proper children's book. The book is written in a completely age-appropriate style of nine to twelve years old (despite what the title may suggest). It is the touching story of a world of vampires who compete in a mustache competition to see who is the "faggiest" (which means "cool" in this world). What makes the book so special, and really succeed as a children's book, are the illustrations by Mellick himself. Cutely surreal pictures of mustached vampires, fanged bulldogs, and faggy birthday cakes decorate the entire book, evoking the feel of the classic works of Edward Gorey.



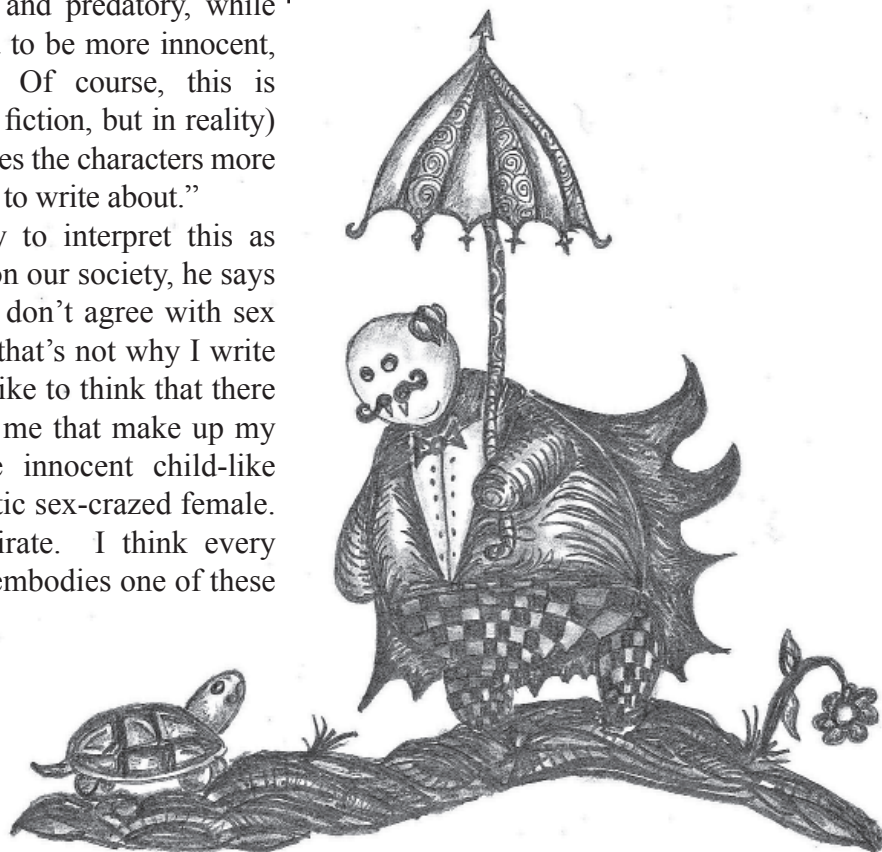
The creative success of *The Faggiest Vampire* emboldened Mellick to further explore integrating his artwork and his prose. His latest book, *Warrior Wolf Women of the Wasteland*, features over forty original interior illustrations. “I thought the wolf woman looked so cool on the cover that I wanted to see more of them, so I decided to draw a bunch of them myself.”

When we look back over his prolific career there are several themes that seem to emerge. One of the most striking being his twisting of traditional gender roles. The male characters are normally innocent, weak, and insecure while the female characters are strong and take charge. “I often give conventional masculine personality traits to the female characters and conventional feminine personality traits to the male characters, so the sexuality of the female characters tends to be more aggressive, lewd, and predatory, while the male characters tend to be more innocent, emotional, and tender. Of course, this is nothing new (not just in fiction, but in reality) but in my opinion it makes the characters more interesting and more fun to write about.”

While it is easy to interpret this as Mellick’s commentary on our society, he says that is not the case. “I don’t agree with sex roles in our culture but that’s not why I write characters like that. I like to think that there are three people within me that make up my personality. First, the innocent child-like man. Second, the sadistic sex-crazed female. Finally, the drunken pirate. I think every character I write about embodies one of these three roles.”

The child-like male personality comes out as the lead protagonist in many of his works. The frailty and innocence of these protagonists contrasts the fucked up plots and settings in which they find themselves. This is another common theme in his work. No matter how violent, disturbing, or perverted his plots become, you can always relate to the innocence of the narrator.

An inherent distrust of authority occurs just as frequently in his work as any other theme (perhaps that’s his drunken pirate side coming out). This is when we see Mellick at his most transgressive. When he is writing of the messiah being a sex-thing or of a mall that gets its menstrual period he is not just incorporating these aspects to raise eyebrows. As in the tradition of the dadaists, the surrealists, and Troma Studios, he uses these “disgusting” and “offensive” elements to bring his own world view to the reader.



Mellick's writing is often described as sneakily profound. Despite the extreme absurdism and shocking subject matter, his characters are always in roles that we can relate to. The world may be made of meat and scabs, or a candyland may reside in the sewers, or maybe you are a living sex toy but the reader never feels distanced from the story. The confusion and vulnerability of Mellick's main characters to the world around them, mirrors our own. No matter how far out there he may go with his stories he still remains more insightful and relevant than many "normal" writers.

Mellick now has over twenty-five books published. When asked how long he can keep up such an intensive writing schedule, he says, "I'll never run out of ideas. My only limitation is time." He told me it's his near-obsessive work ethic and his method of marathon writing. He will lock himself away in a hotel for days at a time and eat, breathe, and sleep his book until it is done. "I like doing marathons. I think the books come out better that way. When I spend three days writing a book, I become completely immersed in its world." Most importantly, Mellick finds this the most enjoyable way to create. "When I write like that, it doesn't feel like work."

His mind is always on the future and his next ambitions for his own work and bizarro as a whole. "My original goal was to become a professional writer and I reached that, but my goals are always changing. I am now more focused the bizarro genre. Its success is more important to me than my own career. I want to see bizarro become huge. I want a bizarro section in every bookstore. Just as there are horror and science fiction movies, I want to see bizarro movies. I want to see bizarro everywhere."

Books by Carlton Mellick III

Satan Burger
 Electric Jesus Corpse
 Sunset with a Beard (collection)
 Razor Wire Pubic Hair
 Teeth and Tongue Landscape
 The Steel Breakfast Era
 The Baby Jesus Butt Plug
 Fishy-Fleshed
 The Menstruating Mall
 Ocean of Lard (with Kevin L. Donihe)
 Punk Land
 Sex and Death in Television Town
 Sea of the Patchwork Cats
 The Haunted Vagina
 Cancer-Cute (collection)
 War Slut
 Sausagey Santa
 Ugly Heaven, Beautiful Hell
 (with Jeffrey Thomas)
 Adolf in Wonderland
 Ultra Fuckers
 Cybernetrix
 The Egg Man
 Apeshit
 The Faggiest Vampire
 The Cannibals of Candyland
 Warrior Wolf Women of the Wasteland

How To Give A Rousing Reading

by Tom Bradley

*“Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead,
Through which the living Homer begged his bread.”*

—Thomas Steward

It’s official, no doubt about it. We have returned to Homeric times, when writers had to recite, and recite well, or risk being buried in flung tableware and beef bones. Swelling legions of authors exhaust their vitality behind the public podium. And if you’ve been exposed to the regular plague of such literary burlesques lately, you will understand the need for a bit of judicious advice on how to go about it properly.

R.V. Cassill, editor of the Norton Anthology of Short Fiction, reviewed one of my novels not too long ago. He said that he read the thing in a “state of fascination, admiration, awe, anxiety, and outrage.” The question is how you can elicit and sustain such reactions from mobs of rowdy listeners, and whether you should.

Truman Capote gave the best performance I ever attended. Believe it or not, he was superb. It took place in the Far West, where the men are big and the podia proportional. You could only see the upper half of this little old man’s head as he read strictly from his very early stuff, the nice lyrical things about being reared by crazy aunts and grannies in the Deep South.

At the end of every selection, he would stride out from behind the podium, raise his book over his head, and give it one good shake. It was a gesture which even his

detractors would have to call mighty, or manly (to use an impermissible word). He waved his work high in the air, as if to say, “Think what you will about me and my life. This is the only thing that matters.”

Everyone in the room was moved, especially the scribblers—the majority of whom had only shown up to be obnoxious during the questions-and-answers part, and to jeer at this “little lap dog of the rich and famous.” We gave Truman Capote a standing ovation that night.

If you love somebody’s work, you’ll find uncanny enhancements in the most affected delivery, the reediest voice, the plainest face. Capote demonstrated that to the satisfaction of thousands. On the other hand, one wonders how Gerard Manley Hopkins rendered his own “sprung rhythm,” and whether it would have been possible to sit through a couple hours watching him do it.

In a strictly technical sense, Jorge Luis Borges was the worst I’ve ever seen (besides James Baldwin—but that’s a different story). The great Argentinean was deep in his dotage, and arrived on the arm of this academic type, a self-proclaimed Custodian of the Author’s Immortality Before the Fact. Whenever somebody asked Borges a question about his artistic development, or his childhood, or anything more complicated than “How do you like the weather in these parts?” he said, “I’ll let my esteemed colleague answer that one,” and slipped off into dreamland. And this colleague would simper, “Well, you know, it’s only a theory of mine. I haven’t published it

yet, but—” and proceed to psychoanalyze the human being seated on stage next to him as if he was already dead. It was more surreal than anything in a Borges story.

The one we came to see didn't actually read anything. But at one point his blind old eyes lit up, and he interrupted his colleague, and started talking about the stroll across the tree-lined park that had brought him to us that night. He said it was already reconstituting itself in his memory as more fictional than real. Everybody in the place was a Borges fan, and we all knew exactly what he meant, or thought we did, and that one short utterance gave us everything we had come for.

We supplied the magic from our recollections of his books, which are all that matter now that he's dead, anyway. Which brings us to the question of recordings.

Dylan Thomas set the eternal unattainable standard for everybody. Basil Rathbone doing Poe is second on the honor roll. Third is Nabokov growling out his own Russian rendering of the jailbait chronicle. My personal list also includes Lenny Bruce before he became a forensic homilist. But, in the current competitive atmosphere, where it is nearly impossible to be heard over the din, the recordings that can teach us the most are Ezra Pound's. Listen to him go insane and beat his big bass drum like an evil seductress.

I don't know if every single one of my physical performances ascends to Poundian mania. But I do like to come on as broadly as I can. I'm six foot nine, and weigh more than three hundred pounds. (Can't help it: basketball family, you know. My father holds a plausible claim to having invented the hook shot when he was a pro in a cage in Chicago, way back in the olden days; my second-cousin Bill Bradley played for the Toledo Twats or

whoever, and then went on to become one of the next presidents of our nation; and my Mormon nephew Shawn Bradley is currently the NBA's premier shot blocker or something. I have no idea what team he plays for, but he's seven-foot-six, so he gets to be in Bugs Bunny movies. It's not fair.)

It doesn't come naturally for big guys like us to assert ourselves overmuch in public. It's not necessary to do more than simply exist inside such a frame, in order to get more attention than you could ever want on the street. But being on the stage is different. You've placed your person at the service of the characters and situations in your novels, and you must do whatever's required, even if it means scaring hell out of people in the front row.

The question always arises whether you should be scary under all circumstances. Should you perfect a method and adhere to it religiously, or whore yourself out a little bit, and adjust your behavior to suit the circumstances?

Of course, certain audiences and venues don't deserve tailoring to. We all know the type: the fruit of Thatcher and Reagan's dumbing down of the English-speaking world, the kind who find literary novels "difficult" and are quick to admit it, who aren't even aware that they should be ashamed, or at least sheepish and silent, about their own subliteracy, and are even proud of it—once it's called to their attention, that is. To adjust for them would be to recite rock lyrics, which a jazz snob like me will refuse to do. (Admittedly, jazz lyrics are even worse: "We won't say goodbye until the last minute/ I'll hold out my hand, and my heart will be in it.")

Back in my days as an itinerant harpist in America, I'm afraid that I became altogether too adept at tailoring my act to suit

the circumstances—whoring myself out, to put it another way. It was always easy to get hired at pretentious restaurants and patrician ski lounges, because I learned to give the managers exactly what they wanted at that all-important first audition.

Suppose, as was often the case with those specializing in European foods, the prospective employer appeared to harbor ambitions toward being “cultured.” Say he had an unclipped mustache and a toupeeless bald spot, and every other clause was “as they say” or even “as it were,” and the television in his office was always tuned to something Edwardian on the Public Broadcasting System. Well then, it was best to give him the Injured Young Artiste in Dire Need of a Highly Refined Patron. I centered my beetled brow right where the guy would notice it most, and grunted occasionally while scraping out something raucous by Hindemith or Luciano Berio.

On the other hand, say a certain resort manager was a hopeless hormone case, but tried to cover it under grubby cable-knit sweaters and bumptious, ultra-Western speech patterns. The canny harpist will perceive that such a man likes to be on top in life. So it is necessary to play him a teensy-weensy Mozart transcription, and be all breathless from fluttery-buttery nerves. As a musician, I was somehow able to make myself appear small. A precise, almost painterly touch of morbidezza-blush and a falsetto titter hidden behind a flustered wrist can shrink an elephant.

However, once I got a gig through this second, more degrading approach, I usually couldn't help but try to regain a portion of my manly pride by cutting as preposterous a figure as I could while performing, and generally ended with my precious ass canned,

anyway. In other words, I was becoming a writer.

Jean Cocteau exhorts us as follows: “Whatever the public blames you for, cultivate it: it is yourself.” I once read this in the back of the *New Yorker* or the *Atlantic Monthly* or someplace east-coasty like that, and ever since I have cultivated “myself” to a perverse degree.

Though I gave up the degrading practice of musicking a while ago, my whole upper body still responds involuntarily to the symbols in sheet music. These marks evolved over generations to be ideal facilitators in prima vista, the spontaneity of which you should try to approximate every time you read out loud, in your authorial mode.

So, these days, as a novelist, even though I no longer have a machine of birch and brass and catgut nestled between my thighs when I perform in public, I still use my old skills. I read from a manuscript, triple-spaced, with plenty of room between the lines to insert musical expression marks: fermatas, sforzandi, crescendi and diminuendi, and those outsized commas found in wind instrument method books that indicate a breath to be taken.

It's only good marketing policy to wave the actual product in everyone's face while you read, so I trim my musical score down, to fit inside my books with no overlap. When I'm done with the recital, just before I dismount the dais and go among my admirers, I palm the loose sheets and stuff them in my pockets, so nobody will think I'm weird.

Many writers are perplexed by the question of whether they should read novel excerpts or short stories, in the “live format.” On at least one occasion, John Irving solved that perplexity by dragging us through what

must have been an entire book. He went on for the better part of a night, and lost several fans in the process. I, on the other hand, have never faced this excerpt/short story dilemma, and I'll tell you why—but it's a secret, just between you and me: I've never written a short story in my life.

All the things I've published in magazines are adaptations knocked together from separate parts of larger works, carefully shuffled and adjusted to follow Poe's formula for the short story (the "singleness of expression," the "economy of means" making it consumable in a single sitting—just the right length so people's buttocks don't get tired, and so on). I recite only these "shorties." To avoid long expository introductions, which are deadly at any reading, I fob them off as integrated excerpts lifted whole from the novels.

Some of my listeners have been surprised to buy my books and find these

tales scattered in pieces over a few hundred pages, stitched together with paragraphs and phrases that don't even appear in the book. But I don't think it's intolerably dishonest of me. Nobody's ever asked for his money back. Didn't Picasso or somebody say that art is lies? It's true even if he did say it.

The point is that we're engaging in a performance. And without the primeval shape of the completed tale, the rising action, climax and denouement, you miss the opportunity to draw the full dramatic potential from your hour upon the stage. The most you get is puzzled silence and a few anticlimactic throat-clearings from the peanut gallery. "Literary events" are theater, not literature—which has taken place mostly in silence and solitude since literacy became widespread enough to present a market.

So, once you've arrived at a style of gyrating and vocalizing, and you've got



something on paper to present, there remains the small problem of your entrance.

If you can do it without pissing your hosts off too much, it's always best to politely forgo any offers of an introduction. And intros from your own lips are even worse. We've all squirmed through too many interminable preambles—necessary because the works themselves are couched in private language, dealing with private matters which the authors are too coy or lazy or theoretically constricted to elucidate in the body of the work. These intros are never composed or rehearsed, but are supposed to be emphatically spontaneous, and every other syllable is “um.” In deliberate reaction to that abuse, the canny author won't say anything at all, but will climb up there and just start reading recital pieces which have been shaped into self-explanatory and -contained wholes. That's with a “W.”

Should you show up early and mix, or create a mystique by showing up late? This all depends upon the size and mood of the gathering. If it's small and relaxed enough so there's a plausible chance of schmoozing and glad-handing everyone, you should be there before the doors are unlocked. With a big crowd it's always better to be tardy—not so much for “mystique” as to avoid getting chummy with just one clump of the audience, and being tempted to elicit most of your cheers and guffaws from that quadrant of the room. That always looks like you carted in your own clique, or paid a bunch of ringers to come in from the taverns. (Not a bad idea, come to think of it.)

Speaking of drunken spelunkers, I love hecklers and interlopers of any kind, and never get enough of them. I encourage people to jump up and chatter or giggle or scream right in the middle of everything. It almost never happens, of course. I even love the

passive-aggressive types with the marathon “questions” designed to exhibit themselves and their erudition. Many writers pride themselves on their ability to stall out these motor mouths with humiliation techniques. But I'm never mean to them. I give them the Mother Teresa treatment.

Now, my cruel streak is just as broad and deep as the next selfish, conceited author's, and I've occasionally let that streak show. Indiscriminate kindness is by no means my strong suit. But, as it's an abstract quality, virtually alien to me, and something that I have observed mostly from the outside, I'm actually very good at faking indiscriminate kindness. Normal people are much more impressed if you treat these long-winded interlocutors gently. Like a good junior-high-level writing teacher, you should hear them out with infinite patience, then rephrase their verbosity succinctly and elegantly, and make it sound as though it might actually make sense. Then answer it to the best of your earnest, sincere ability. And if you can encompass all this with a soft, almost epicene voice (try to sound like that movie star/martial arts expert who appointed himself the Dalai Lama's bodyguard)—well, among numerous other benefits, it will just about melt any potential sex partners in the audience, if that happens to be a consideration.

At an open reading in a Dublin pub, years ago, someone started reciting along with me, and was doing a better job, so I gave him his head and sat back. Nobody complained, and he got a stand-up ovation. Only after the reading was over did this guy's catamite inform me that he'd been trying to read sarcastically, to “take the piss out” of me.

Earlier that night, just down the lane, there'd been a student production of Yeats' *On Baile's Strand*, a beautiful thing, and I was a bit

reluctant to follow it. But everybody including me was drunk, so I had a vague feeling that the night was going to be okay from here on out. I had passed out a few copies of the crypto novel adaptation I wanted to present, and this guy had gotten his hands on one.

I thought he was an echo at first. Like Yeats' blind man, I quavered, "Someone's shakin' the bench!" and got less of a laugh than I would have if this wonderful voice hadn't been competing with me from across the bar. I assume he was a pillar of the local theatrical community. If he wasn't, he should have been.

It was more than twenty years ago, but I still remember that magnificent fruity voice deliberately botching my white-slum Salt Lake City accent. That's when I learned the value of broad affectation and camp melodrama at "literary events" like these.

Vocal quality, it has to be said once and for all, is about eighty two percent of everything—at least for those auditors who haven't quite yet come around to worshipping every syllable that bears your name, regardless of delivery. Drama students are taken through a daily regimen of wrenching weird noises from their throats and noses: squeaks and grunts and hoots and screams—the equivalent of a rousing game of hockey for the vocal cords. You don't need to formalize it all that much, though. It helps to be raising children, who require those sorts of noises several times per hour from at least one parent.

I've been told that my voice is good. Whether that's true or not, it definitely carries far and wide without much effort on my end of things. My theater friends assure me that being gigantic is an advantage. That extra span of lung and trachea acts as a resonator. Also, slipping into a little superfluous *avoirduois* doesn't hurt: that surplus unction oozes

straight to the larynx, enriching and lubing things up. So equipped, I can fill up a big hall with myself with no strain. Like Thomas Waller said, "All you gotta do is give me air and I fill it, one way or another, yes, yes."

But even if you haven't been so blessed, and you're short and scrawny, you should always stand (Capote did). And shove that lectern aside. If it's bolted down, stand in front of it. Or on top of it. And even if you don't have time for daily throat hockey, you must avoid microphones altogether. Certainly never allow yourself to be handed a mike without a stand.

Obviously, none of this advice applies if you're writing domesticated realism in the intimate and soft-pedaled mode, bathed in muted tones, imbued with "transparency of style," with simple declarative syntax, no intimidating polysyllables, all democratic and "pure," manageable by all and sundry, "real-time fictions" offering reassurance and comfort to moral valetudinarians, featuring ordinary characters whom just about anybody can gently condescend to, doing ordinary things, just as you'd do in your daily life if you, too, were a member of the nebbishim—in other words, what *Private Eye* calls "wimminy fiction." In that case you'll need to ask someone to lug a comfy chair onto the stage for you, and equip yourself with a brown ceramic cup of chamomile tea and fuzzy bunny slippers, and a mike with one of those spongy muffling things over its glans.

For everyone else, those reciters born with at least a normal budget of animal vigor, it's advisable to be drunk. But not too, lest you lose sight, literally, of the page. Personally, I've always been able to tune a wine drunk more finely than a spirituous one. Beer's out of the question. Upper-gastrointestinal eructations

are the bane of any vocal performer, and frequent visits to the urinal tend to interrupt the flow of your plot line. Wine's the thing, as long as there's some okay cheap American stuff around. If necessary (and if it fits in with the milieu, not too disruptive of the ambience and so forth, and doesn't seriously violate local licensing laws), don't hesitate to tote your own in. A nice screw-top jug of Carlo Rossi red is just about right.

As far as making your literary selections goes, you'll find every detail of every audience's response etched forever in your memory, not just laughter and jeers, but even squeaking chairs and coughs. Whenever you reread the passage, the recollected sounds will accompany every word as it passes under your eye. Keep that in mind, if you decide to publicly present the same stuff more than once: don't be surprised if the Des Moines teenager doesn't materialize in the Pittsburgh front row and yawn on that certain subordinate clause.

The key is to be drawn into the story with all the absolute concentration and intensity and devotion that, in your fondest and most megalomaniacal fantasies, you wish every reader would bring to your work. And to do that, a big part of you has to shut out the rest of the room completely. Hence the judicious application of alcohol. Your own ideal reader would be someone who reads exactly as you do when you come to a new book by an author who you admire virtually without reservation, on a first reading, when you are willing, this time at least, to suspend critical judgment and be swept away into this guy's heaven or hell or purgatory or limbo.

One of the most difficult things that public readers have to do, and to continually remind themselves to do, especially prose

writers, is to speak slowly. Selfishly consume what the socialized, diurnal self would consider an inordinate amount of the audience's collective life span. But if you become your own ideal reader, that ceases to pose any difficulty. You naturally relish each sacred phoneme—narcissistic as that sounds. If you're lost in playing the role of your own ideal reader, delectating as it were someone else's stuff, if you're alone in bed with this wonderful, strange novel, coming at it for the first time (the *prima vista* again), it won't seem narcissistic at all—unless your writing sucks and isn't worthy of that much attention in the first place. But that's a different topic for a different "How-To" article.

When the last word is declaimed and the lights come back on, and when all tomfoolery is set aside along with my mocked-up musical "shorties," I go home where there's no peanut gallery except in my imagination, and I sit down to write what I am increasingly coming to consider closet fiction—as radical as that may sound to the devoted followers of the public reading circuit. Like that little lap dog I mentioned above, I base my self-respect on the paper product, because the mass of bone and soft tissue that gets dragged to the lectern each time will be silenced and invisible soon enough.

- *Tom Bradley is the author of numerous works, including Lemur, Vital Fluid, and, his work of bizarro criticism, Put It Down in a Book.*

This piece originally appeared in the September/October 2001 issue of Poets & Writers Magazine.



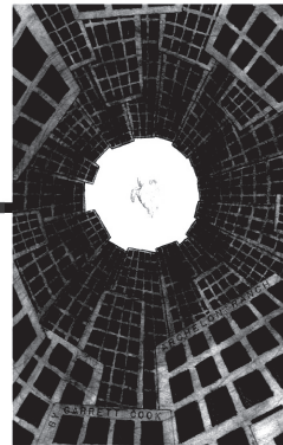
LegumeMan Books

extreme and/or unusual fiction
for extreme and/or unusual people

Archelon Ranch by Garret Cook

My name is Clyde and this is not my story. I'm supposed to be an extra in my brother's life. In fact if I hadn't been sneaky enough to assert my existence on the page, I wouldn't exist at all. I was a ne'erdo-well raptor spray salesman, trading bananas and heroin to orangutans and selling my extra raptor gas to school children. Then one day, I discovered Narrativism. I realized that we were all living inside a book, a book by pretentious, Bizarro pulp hack and perennial sad-sack, Garrett Cook. And after that, I discovered something else: that my oft-tortured brother, Bernard, was actually the protagonist of this book, Archelon Ranch. So, I help the guy escape and what does he do? He forgets me, that's what! Well, I'm not going to take it. This is not my story, but my story's going to eat this story alive. I'll be the one at Archelon Ranch and Garrett Cook and Bernard and their plans...

new



Spare Key by R. Frederick Hamilton

...This was the way it always started. First he would see them and the air would thicken. Then the image of them bound. Then came the screaming and the Red Room would appear with the glittering, new meathook waiting just for them. And there in the Red Room he could play for as long as he wanted...

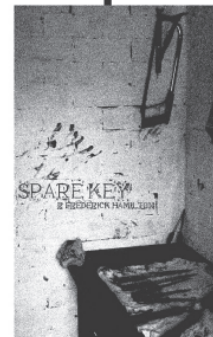
also available



A Million Versions of Right by Matthew Revert

Step into a world that defies all logic. One of Masturbatory headphones, diabolically toppled comb jars, moustache-filled ejaculations, malfunctioning bookmarks, bricolage scrotums, wank fairies and a poorly conceived theory regarding wall stability. A world where ball popping is the only solution to the scrotum's poor aesthetic qualities and true love can lead a man to transpose menstruation across gender lines.

There's also a lime



www.legumeman.com

The Weird, Weird West

by Jordan Krall

What do you think of when you hear the word “western”? Do you think of John Wayne and all those old black-and-white movies with marauding Indians and good guys with big white cowboy hats? If so, it’s time to update your files. The western genre has come a long way both in literature and in film. What I aim to prove is that the western genre (and in particular, the thematic elements of Spaghetti westerns) is more than compatible with Bizarro literature.

First, I want to look at the roots of the “weird western.” In 1938, B-movie director Sam Newfield directed the western *The Terror of Tiny Town* with an all-midget cast. Is that exploitative? Yes, but so was *The Wizard of Oz*. The movie isn’t a very good one but it satisfies the need for an odd touch to the western film. It’s both weird and fascinating and I suggest that everyone see it at least once in their life. Though it’s not over-the-top in its strangeness, the very concept is unique and akin to the Bizarro approach to art. It also foreshadows Herzog’s all-dwarf cast of the 1970 film *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (which is not, unfortunately, a western.)

Years later, there have been cross-genre films that sought to combine the western with horror and SF. Much of what resulted was campy. For example, just try viewing two films from 1966: *Billy the Kid Meets Dracula* and *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein’s Daughter*. Neither of these films is very good and aren’t even campy enough to be that entertaining. Still, one must respect the root cause: to breathe life into the western. During the 1960s, television and movie

studios were churning out westerns by the dozen so much that one television program or movie was indistinguishable from another. Adding the horror element separated those two films from the pack albeit not as successful as to make those movies required cult-movie viewing.

But is simply combining the western with another genre a sure way of getting a weird western? No, but it’s a start. For example, the 1999 film *From Dusk Till Dawn 3: The Hangman’s Daughter* combines the western with vampires. It’s an enjoyable little movie but probably couldn’t be considered weird or Bizarro in any way. This is because the events in the movie still are bound by the rules of either the western or vampire universes. It’s more of a horror movie that just happens to take place during the days of the old American west.

So you may ask: what’s the point? The point is that just because a book or film combines genres does not necessarily make it a weird western or one that would attract the Bizarro fan.

The sub-genre of film that is more in tune with Bizarro is the Spaghetti Western. Before I can make my point, let’s define the Spaghetti Western.

The 1960s were the high time of the genre and the Italian film industry was pumping *hundreds* of westerns out, many of which are now lost forever due to poor distribution or poor storage conditions. The studios weren’t too concerned with keeping those movies for future generations but instead wanted to cash in on the western craze of the time. Westerns in general were extremely popular during the 1950s and

60s so why differentiate between a Western and a Spaghetti Western? Simply put, Spaghetti Westerns had a fresh take on the genre that was pretty much an American creation. How many Italian filmmakers really knew anything about the history of the American West? Not many, considering the prevalent use of incorrect geography and historical facts in their movies. What makes this subgenre unique was the fact that the people making it were taking their idea of what the American West was and molding gritty and often very violent movies from those ideas. (To be clear, not all Spaghetti Westerns are like this. Some, especially ones from the late 1950s and early 1960s, were just imitations of American films.)

First and foremost, the Spaghetti Western is a *cult* genre. Most of the DVD releases of these films are released by companies that specialize in resurrecting cult films (Anchor Bay, Blue Underground, et al.) This is one of the reasons why I believe it is akin to the Bizarro genre. The SW films that go above and beyond their peers are the ones that are larger than life and approach the material in a unique way. If you think about it, isn't that what a good Bizarro book does? It takes a genre (SF, horror, crime, romance) and creates something bigger out of it, something stranger.

Even if you are not a western fan, you probably have heard of or have seen the movie *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, that epic masterpiece by Sergio Leone. But if one digs deeper into the genre, they find a goldmine of off-beat touches to a genre that, for so long, was dominated by the white-hat/black-hat goodie-goodie horse opera. The following movies are my recommendations for the Bizarro fan who wants to see just what sorts of Spaghetti Westerns there are out there that will satisfy their need for the weird west.



Django (1966) That one name says it all. Fan of Takashi Miike will recognize this name as it is the part of the title of the Japanese filmmaker's newest movie. The original 1966 film, though, was a bleak and nihilistic film directed by Sergio Corbucci (whose assistant director on the film was none other than cult filmmaker Ruggero Deodato of *Cannibal Holocaust* fame). The most memorable thing about the movie is the title character dragging a coffin across the landscape, an image that will no doubt stay with the viewer well after they have watched the movie. As soon as you see this image, you know it's not going to be a John Wayne western. Once we see what's inside that coffin, we start thinking "*Shit, that's cool!*" before we are blown away by the violence. The movie was so influential that it spawned

one official sequel and about 20+ unofficial ones (many of which are sequels in name only). This is probably one of my favorites simply for the coffin prop alone. Again, it's a larger-than-life, dreamlike image that is both weird and cool-as-hell.

What is disorienting about this movie and other SW films is the feeling that you are watching events unfold in the American West while also feeling that you are *not* watching them occur there. It's like watching a baseball game taking place on a football field. You recognize the components and subsequent events but there's just something *off* about the whole thing.

Django, Kill (If you Live, Shoot!) (1967) One of the many quasi-sequels to the original Django film. Blood-sucking bats... People digging in a dying man's body for gold bullets... Gay outlaws... This one's got a lot going for it. It's artsy, gothic, and sadistic with peculiar touches along the way.

The Great Silence (1968) Another film by Sergio Corbucci, this one is especially gritty and cold with a hero who's mute and a bounty hunter (played by the excellent Klaus Kinski) who is as cold-blooded as the climate. One thing that differentiates this from others is the setting. It's wintertime in Utah and is quite different from the sunny desert or plains that are often used in westerns. This movie isn't necessarily weird but it's gritty, mythic qualities make it a cult classic that will please fans of darker, more brutal films. The inclusion of a mute gunfighter is a unique touch.

The Price of Power (1969) This one is neither brutal or gritty. However, it does approach the genre in an original way. It portrays the assassination of President Garfield

in a historically inaccurate way by having it reenacted as if it was the assassination of JFK. The president is murdered in Dallas when, in fact, Garfield was killed in Washington, D.C. Also, the time frame of the actual assassination is wrong but that doesn't detract from the enjoyment. Watching the assassination of President Garfield being treated like the conspiracy-ridden death of Kennedy is a fun experience. The assassination scene itself is similar to the Zapruder film. Twisting historical events is a useful tool when constructing any sort of Bizarro piece be it literature or film.

Four of the Apocalypse (1975) This western by horror director Lucio Fulci is a descent into the dark side of humanity. I guess I made that sound deeper than it really is but still, it's a quasi-mystical tale featuring hallucinogenic poisoning, cannibalism, and brutal violence. True to its title, many scenes hold a mythic, apocalyptic atmosphere. You truly feel that the characters are being led on a dark journey towards their destinies. That being said, I must admit that after watching so many other great Spaghetti Westerns, this one is quite boring overall. Also, the corny music doesn't help. Regardless, this is a good example of Fulci at his most restrained.

The Stranger's Gundown (aka Django, the Bastard) (1969) which is a brooding gothic SW. It's a good guess to assume that Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter* was either based on or at least influenced by this film. The atmosphere is foreboding and the anti-hero is just so brutally cool. This is a dirty, muddy film of vengeance. And it's also highly recommended.

Matalo! (1970) One word... boomerangs! And forget about the classical soundtrack music that dominates the genre. This one is filled with fuzzy psychedelic rock. *Matalo!* is a violent and hazy tale that feels like it will turn into a horror movie at any second. Some of the camera movements are reminiscent of those in *The Evil Dead*. *Matolo!* is a minimalist SW that is a fresh and original addition to the genre and it should have a wider audience. Recommended for people who generally don't like westerns.

Django Strikes Again (1987) The only official sequel to the 1966 classic. It has Franco Nero in the role he made famous. This is a crazy western that's closer to *Rambo* than to the original *Django*. This movie has a weird, tropical atmosphere. It's technically a western but it looks like it should be taking place in the Amazon rain forest or something. I guess you could say it's like a Vietnam war movie crossed with a Spaghetti Western. Add in a slave ship with a sadistic aristocrat and some great machine gun action and you have a good example of Italian cheese filmmaking.

Lastly I want to answer the question: *How can you combine the western with bizarro?*

First, play with historical facts. I do not mean just creating an alternate history but instead, make good use of weird anachronisms that would help you give birth to an original version of the old west, your own version or interpretation just like the Italians did.

Next, take whatever bizarro plot and change the setting to the west. If your story doesn't depend on the setting, you might benefit from taking the plot and transferring it to a place/time that you never anticipated using.

Lastly, use thematic elements that are used in the Spaghetti Western genre. This includes but is not limited to: ultra-violent gunplay, torture in the desert, sullen anti-heroes, isolated towns, exaggerated machismo, unique weaponry, Indians massacres, revenge, flashbacks, and bizarre sadism.

Now, what *shouldn't* you do? Don't just insert a vampire, werewolf, or zombie into a western setting. Yes, it might be a little strange to your average western fan but it's still just a western-with-a-monster. If you want to write a western that will appeal to bizarro fans, you have to come up with something more unique.

Personally, I feel that there is a lot of room for bizarro westerns. Unfortunately, the only true example that's available is Carlton Mellick III's *Sex and Death in Television Town*. It is a good example of how to combine the two genres but it is just not enough.

So my message to bizarro writers is this: investigate the Spaghetti Western genre further and develop your own weird vision of the west. The readers will thank you for it.

- Jordan Krall is the author of three books, his most recent is *Fisful of Feet*. This piece originally appeared on *Bizarro Central*.

Every Tree Has A Face

*the site for
free bizarro fiction*

featuring Gina Ranalli, Bradley Sands,
Jordan Krall, David Agranoff, Garrett
Cook, Kevin Shamel, and more!

www.everytreehasaface.blogspot.com

Only the Strange Survive: Ten Years of Eraserhead Press

by Jeff Burk

In the late nineties, the publishing atmosphere was very conservative. Few presses were willing to take any kind of real risks, mostly focusing on cliché genre-fare or authors with guaranteed fan bases. Due to this environment, authors themselves could rarely take chances, being limited to markets publishing stories that were little more than pastiches instead of ones that were actually original, provocative, or entertaining.

Eraserhead Press was created to combat that boring mentality.

2009 marks the tenth anniversary of Eraserhead Press bringing weird fiction to the masses. To celebrate this occasion, let's take a look at its sordid, thorny, and inspiring history. It is a tale of success, independent art and what can be achieved if one works hard and is not afraid to dream big.

Chapbook Days 1999—2000

As with Scientology, Eraserhead Press started as a bet between science fiction writers. In 1999, Carlton Mellick III, an unemployed art college dropout, was discussing the nature of the small press industry with an online group of small press writers. They believed that great wealth was required for starting a successful publishing venture. Mellick, being the stubborn and foolishly ambitious man he is, disagreed. He bet them that he could open a successful company without investing a single cent. The next day, he started Eraserhead Press.

During the first two years of the press, the releases were limited to photocopied chapbooks with Mellick handling art, editing, publishing, and distribution. Considering the no-budget start of the company, costs had to be met through a variety of “creative” means, including making friends with Kinko's employees and posing as a student to get access to copy machines.

Not content with just releasing his own work, Mellick began to seek out other writers of the weird who were fed up with the current state of the publishing environment. The twenty or so chapbooks he released characterize the creative risks that he would be willing to take for the rest of his career.

The releases were stunningly diverse with such oddities as a collection of weird erotica and an illustrated chapbook about teeth. Most notably was the release of *This Year for Christmas* by Wiley Wiggins, who is best known for his roles in the films *Dazed and Confused* and *Waking Life*.

The press also went on to do two magazines: *The Earwig Flesh Factory*, a print publication that lasted three issues and *The Dream People*, an online journal that has produced over thirty issues and is still active today under the helm of D. Harlan Wilson.

Quickly, the press started getting attention as a publisher of unique and genre-straddling fiction. By 2000, there was the beginning of an active community of authors

writing off-beat weird fiction that would later be called “bizarro.” Mellick was pleased by all the artistic potential that was growing and decided to take the company to the next level. He contacted five weird writers that he respected with a proposal for a radical new publishing model.

The Eraserhead Collective 2000—2001

With authors D. Harlan Wilson, Vincent W. Sakowski, Kevin L. Donihe, Mike Philbin (who wrote under the name Hertzan Chimera), and M. F. Korn, Mellick started the Eraserhead Collective, with the intention of moving beyond limited chapbooks into the world of trade paperback books.

The Eraserhead Collective started with lofty goals. In quasi-socialist fashion, all authors were required to edit, publish, and promote each other’s work. In return, all people involved received an equal share of the publishing profits. This gave everyone a vested interest in each other’s success. One person’s gain was everyone’s gain. The first six books were *Some Things are Better Left Unplugged* by Vincent W. Sakowski, *SZMONHFU* by Hertzan Chimera, *The Kafka Effect* by D. Harlan Wilson, *Satan Burger* by Carlton

Mellick III, *Shall We Gather at the Garden?* by Kevin L. Donihe, and *Skimming the Gumbo Nuclear* by M. F. Korn

To ensure that these radical publishing ideas did not stop with just six writers, the group promised in one year’s time to step down from controlling the press and find six new authors to assume the leadership roles. It was an admirable and innovative idea but, in the end, it was just an idea. Well-intentioned ideology is no match for personal drama and ego.

Philbin and Mellick did not get along, to say the very least. In a short time, Philbin became convinced that several members of the Eraserhead Collective were working against him. After some private and public arguments over the direction of the collective, he decided to leave and form his own press, Chimericana Books. The ensuing internal chaos also made Korn rethink his involvement and he too left.

After the conflicts within the group, the timing could not have been better for the press to have its first hit book.

Carlton Mellick had been aggressively promoting *Satan Burger* since its release, fighting to find its audience. He used social networking websites such as Yahoo and Myspace to seek out people who had an



Some covers of original Eraserhead Press Chapbooks



interest in cult movies and sent them emails about his book. After tenaciously contacting people one at a time for months, the reading public began to take notice of his book. Suddenly, he no longer had to engage in such guerilla promotional activities. He had found his audience. Copies of *Satan Burger* were selling at a rate that was quite impressive for a new small press and people wanted more of this weird fiction.

With an actual success on their hands, the remaining Eraserhead Collective authors knew there was still potential for their ideas. But, still reeling from the collective's implosion, no one remaining wanted to assume control of the press. It was also obvious to all involved that they did not have all the skills necessary to running a successful publishing company.

Enter Rose O'Keefe.

Cult Publishing 2002—2004

Aspiring publisher, Rose O'Keefe was a longtime associate of many of authors in the Eraserhead Collective. She believed in their talent and wanted to see more people writing and reading this new type of fiction. She shared the viewpoint that current publishing models were outdated and out of touch. O'Keefe knew there was a better way to reach disenfranchised readers like herself and stepped in to provide the leadership that would help these authors

The Magazine of

connect with their audience. She looked to independent film studios such as Troma and record labels such as Moon Ska for inspiration on the new Eraserhead Press business model. She brought a sense of business know-how and professionalism that had been missing in the press up to this point.

Emboldened by the success of *Satan Burger*, she quickly lined up a release schedule and amassed a team of volunteers. Mellick moved from running the press to being in charge of book design. John Edward Lawson (who was now the second editor of *The Dream People*) became head of marketing. Andy Mingo and Tim Burkland became the experimental literary and horror fiction editors respectively. By the spring of 2003, there were thirty books set for publication and a total of forty volunteers, many of whom were authors or aspiring authors.

2003 also saw the release of the second hit for the press. In an attempt to discover new talent, a first novel contest was held. The winner, *Foop!* by Chris Genoa, was a witty tale of a time travel agency. Its absurd and surreal humor quickly caught the attention of New York Times best-



Original Bizarros L to R - Vincent W. Sakowski, D. Harlan Wilson and Carlton Mellick III

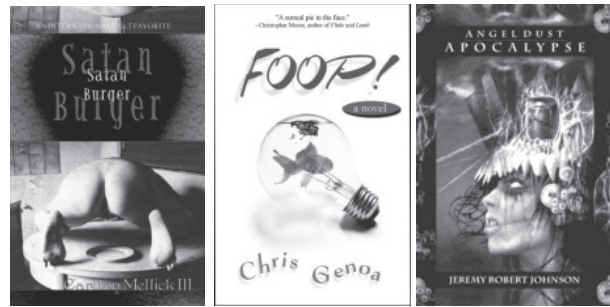
selling author Christopher Moore, whose championing of the book brought it to the attention of a wide audience.

Soon the intense release schedule and large staff became unmanageable. In midyear O’Keefe dissolved the staff (Mellick stayed with Eraserhead to do book design, Lawson went on to start Raw Dog Screaming Press, Mingo went on to start Chiasmus Press, and Burkland opened the Deadite Press imprint) and canceled almost all the upcoming books. She decided to focus on what she termed “cult publishing.”

Cult publishing was based around the idea that fan followings form when the audience feels they have a relationship with the artist. By focusing on authors (rather than individual books) and publishing a body of their work, O’Keefe believed that she could help writers connect to their audiences. Taking her cue from the principals that had made Mellick’s *Satan Burger* into an underground hit, the original idea was to focus on one author at a time, the first (and only) author to be taken on under this model was Kevin L. Donihe.

This new direction also proved to be inappropriate for the press. While it allowed O’Keefe to give proper attention to one author, it did not allow the press ample opportunity to expand. She was committed to bringing good weird fiction to the masses and did not want to be limited to such a slow rate of growth.

The company was restructured one final time. Going for a happy middle between the two extremes the press had been operating under, she expanded the roster to roughly a dozen authors, a size that proved to be much more manageable. It was small enough to allow her to give individual attention to each writer, while still being large enough to grow into a full-time publisher.



To find more talent, the first book contest was repeated again in 2004, and once more resulted in another popular title. *Angel Dust Apocalypse* by Jeremy Robert Johnson was a collection of visceral short stories that caught the attention of a wide range of readers. When super-star author Chuck Palahniuk praised the book, its profile and popularity exploded.

Eraserhead Press now had several underground hit books and was beginning to earn a name for itself in the publishing world, but it was not enough for O’Keefe. The company needed a unifying idea, something that would set it apart from every other publisher.

Bizarro... 2005—Present

In 2005 the alternative writing scene was becoming clogged with subgenres with obtuse labels like irrealism, avant-punk, and neo-surrealism. The names may be different but all the groups were essentially writing the same type of fiction—weird stuff. To unite the different branches of weird fiction, Eraserhead, along with Raw Dog Screaming and Afterbirth Books, adopted the term “bizarro.”

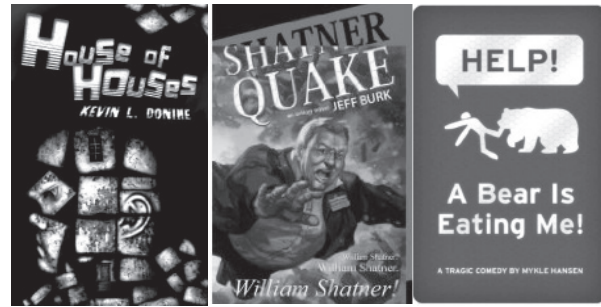
The word sounded like the name of a genre and when a reader encounters it they can automatically envision what they are in store for. Everyone would know the word means “weird” but without using the common terms like strange, bizarre, etc.

This new image and label proved to resonate with readers as all three publishers enjoyed increased success under this new unified front. The release of the anthology, *The Bizarro Starter Kit (Orange)* helped solidify what the movement was all about. After several years, Eraserhead Press finally discovered the niche it had been searching for since its inception.

The next two years were spent explaining what bizarro was to everyone and building up a catalogue that cemented Eraserhead Press as a top publisher of cutting-edge weird fiction. There were not many releases during this period but those that came out were top quality.

2008 through early 2009 brought one of the most rapid periods of growth in Eraserhead Press since its inception. New authors Jordan Krall, Andersen Prunty, Cameron Pierce, Mykle Hansen, and the author of this piece, Jeff Burk, signed with the press. The comedic *Help! A Bear is Eating Me!* and the Sci-Fi cross-over *Shatnerquake!* were added to the list of hit books. *The Bizarro Starter Kit (Blue)* was released, finally delivering on the promise of a second generation of Eraserhead Press writers as envisioned all the way back in the original collective.

This period also saw the company beginning to expand from its normal format of short novels just for adults. The end of 2008 saw the release of *The Kissing Bug* by Daniel Scott Buck, the first book in the Spunk Goblin



imprint. This is an outlet for fully illustrated children's books, and children's books for adults, which still have the bizarro sensibility. The imprint has since seen the release of the cutesy violent *MachoPoni* by Lotus Rose and the surprisingly touching *The Faggiest Vampire* by Carlton Mellick III.

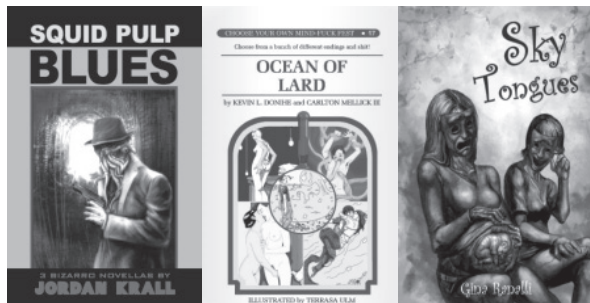
Since the founding of Eraserhead Press, there had been the dream of a supportive writing community dedicated to the weird. The end of 2008 saw this idea come to fruition with the first BizarroCon. What had first started out as plans for a few writers to get together for a day quickly snowballed into bizarro writers traveling from all over the country to Portland, OR for three days of workshops, panels, readings, and home-brewed beer.

Things were looking up for Eraserhead Press.

...and Beyond!

At the time of this writing, it is three weeks away from the second BizarroCon and 2009 will soon be drawing to a close. Eraserhead Press will be a full decade old, an impressive feat in a country where the average small business closes in under one year.

It is easy to take the very existence of Eraserhead Press for granted. Now we know that there is an audience hungry for the weirdest of weird fiction but at the time of Eraserhead's start, no one was aware.



Realistically, a publisher devoted to publishing the literary equivalent of the cult section of the video store should not be a success and perhaps in the hands of most people it would not be. The success of Eraserhead Press can be directly attributed to the beginning dreams of Carlton Mellick III and then the business creativity of Rose O’Keefe.

Talking to O’Keefe and Mellick now, one gets the impression that they are unimpressed with their own accomplishments. Conversation is more likely to revolve around upcoming projects rather than past victories and failures.

The future plans for the press show that, O’Keefe is adamant about reinforcing, this is still just the beginning for Eraserhead Press. 2009 will see the launch of two new imprints, The New Bizarro Authors Series and Shark Vs. Badger Comics. 2010 will see the start of the Bizarro Boot Camp, a “summer camp” for authors.

O’Keefe is also an avid lover of homebrewing and has begun to combine this with her passion for weird fiction. Attendees at the annual BizarroCon know how delicious her creations are. There, one has the opportunity to sample Apeshit IPA, Kissing Bug Belgian Ale, and Eraserhead Pale Ale amongst others. This is just the beginning of one of O’Keefe’s most intriguing plans, Bizarro Books and Brews—the first brewery/bookstore.

Looking back over the history of Eraserhead Press it is plain to see that there were some hard times, but the press always bounced back stronger and more focused than before. It has evolved through much DIY trial and error into a respected and successful small press. With O’Keefe at the helm, and Mellick’s insane ambition, it is plain to see that there are even brighter days ahead for Eraserhead Press and all of bizarro fiction.



The Masterminds - Rose O’Keefe and Carlton Mellick III

Bizarro Book Reviews



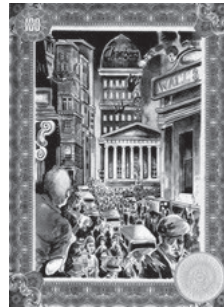
Cosmetica
by Troy Chambers
Spadeshift Press

Cosmetica, Troy Chamber's second novel, takes place in a glam dystopian society controlled by feminists. In this world, femininity is outlawed and all men are scum. The title character lives in a boarding house run by Mama Gala, an obese, evil woman who is secretly her mother, until the Fairy Godmother comes into the story. A self-proclaimed "faggot," the Fairy Godmother tempts *Cosmetica* to enter an underworld where the hedonistic rebel inhabitants transform her into a stereotypically attractive woman - large, heaving breasts, curves on top of curves, gaudy makeup, the whole package.

The character indulges in a lot of overplayed, clumsily-written sexual acts, realizes how wonderful it is to be a woman dominated by men, and returns to kill Mama Gala at the Fairy's urging. From there, the story goes on to more sex and violence and eventually concludes with a clichéd, unconvincing ending. All in all, this novel shows a lot of promise and remains somewhat interesting for the first sixty pages (excluding the shoddy introduction), when *Cosmetica* enters the underworld.

The prose is lucid and easy to follow, which makes for an enjoyable read, and the illustrations between chapters are a very nice touch. The cover looks great too. But despite the intriguing premise, *Cosmetica* is nothing more than a misguided attempt to be shocking. It feels like the product of a high school kid who takes his awkward attempts to be extreme/edgy a little too seriously. Troy Chambers certainly has potential. This novel proves that he has a fun writing style and something to say, but Chambers lacks an understanding of the craft that a good editor could harvest in him. Readers of the weird are advised to look elsewhere.

- Cameron Pierce



Market Adjustment
by Andersen Prunty
Cargo Cult Press

Filling the sudden void in limited hardback publishers, Cargo Cult Press has suddenly become a major force. Unlike the many publishers who are either gone or severely cutting back on their production (and dramatically raising their price), Cargo Cult actually pays attention to bizarro. *Market Adjustment* by Andersen Prunty is their first of many bizarro releases.

The book is a collection of three stories. The center piece is the title novella,

“Market Adjustment.” It is the story of a man who has become financially ruined and is on a mission to strike back at the banking conspiracy that put him there. The piece is very timely with its subject matter and it would be interesting to see a bizarro author attempt to tackle a current issue, but Prunty uses the economic meltdown more as a backdrop than centerpiece. The story is instead one violent set piece after another with surreal flourishes. Prunty normally excels at writing stories that emotionally involve the reader but this story reads completely flat. The reader cares not for the main character or his plight. At best, one’s interest is solely in seeing what obscene act of violence will happen next. After the incredible books that were *Jack and Mr. Grin* and *Zerostrata*, “Market Adjustment” reads like a major step backwards.

Next are the short stories, “The Man with a Face like a Bruise” and “The Photographer.” Both are tales of vengeance and terror that any horror fan has already read a hundred times over by a hundred different authors. Rounding out the collection is a confusing introduction by Chris Perridas. Who attempts to place the bizarro genre in context of other avant-garde and outsider art movements but his essay more confounds than illuminates. Considering the over six pages of academic name-checking he has to work with, the only bizarro authors he mentions are Andersen Prunty and D. Harlan Wilson. One has to wonder if this really was the best writer to attempt and place bizarro in a literary context.

Cargo Cult deserves a high amount of praise for their stunning presentation of the book. The hardback comes without a dust-jacket but has a striking embossed gold dollar-sign with “Andersen Prunty” written down the center. Some beautiful interior illustrations by Tom Moran and Alex McVey and super high-

quality add to the entire package. When you hold the book, you can feel all the attention that went into this. Few authors ever get this nice a presentation. It is just a shame that the stories contained within are not up to as high of quality.

- Jeff Burk



Asphalt Flowerhead
by Forrest Armstrong
Crossing Chaos

After last year’s *This City is Alive*, Forrest Armstrong has returned in full force with *Asphalt Flowerhead*. The novel follows five young men trying to find personal meaning in a near-future Boston crippled by oppression. Brad runs Africa, an underground club frequented by artists and drug addicts, including the other youths who turn the book’s gears—Bill, Chevy, Johnny, and Nail. But Africa is shut down by the police on page three, resulting in the arrest of several characters. This begins a downward spiral into jail, flash addiction, and a narcotics war between the United States and the Netherlands.

The middle lags during the scenes of war, when Brad opts out of prison by serving as a soldier and Chevy invents the 8DOF, a robot intended to replace humans in combat. The Netherlands sections weren’t fully realized and felt less personal and immediate, perhaps because Forrest Armstrong writes most passionately about urban environments. His characters merge with the city, giving it life even as their own minds and bodies decay. The skies crackle static, brick walls melt, and cops stalk the streets “like videogame villains.”

Asphalt Flowerhead reads like the hip hop lovechild of William S. Burroughs and Salvador Dali. The language is poetic and tangled, the plot a graffiti mural of military androids, mad gurus, and ectoplasmic DJ's. It's not always an easy book to follow, but everything comes full circle in the end. As a bonus, *Asphalt Flowerhead* is smaller in dimension than a mass market paperback, so you can slip it in a jacket pocket and take it anywhere. All in all, a highly recommended head-trip.

-Cameron Pierce



Squid Pulp Blues
by Jordan Krall
Eraserhead Press

Jordan Krall's first published novella, *Piecemeal June*, stood out from the pack with its unique combination of body-fluid splatter and bizarro horror. *Squid Pulp Blues* is his second release from Eraserhead Press and is a continuation of these themes. The book is three novellas, each taking place in Thompson, New Jersey, concerning blood, cum, drugs, and squids.

"The Haderdasher" is the first story. Henry has just gotten out of prison and is meeting up with some old friends for booze, cards, and planning a caper or two. The night takes a turn for the worse when one of his friends has a bad reaction to a new street drug derived from squids. Meanwhile in the next room a woman has had her feet literary stolen off her legs. When a local gangster named The Haderdasher comes by to drop off drugs, the two stories combine in a shower of bullets and blood.

The next tale is "The Longheads." The Longheads are a group of veterans who came back from the war with hideous deformations from chemical weapons. They are stocking up on weaponry and preparing to make an assault on Thompson. Caught in the middle of this are Tommy and his partner Jake who are on the run from Peachy, a diaper-wearing criminal with a bone to pick.

Finishing the book is "The Apocalypse Donkey," a humorous story about Simon, a popular comic book creator, who is in town promoting his latest graphic novel. While waiting out front of the store, a strange man gives him a black envelope containing obscene photos. Once the man realizes he gave the envelope to the wrong person, Simon is on the run for his life.

Krall has a distinctive storytelling style that combines noir-crime fiction, hardcore horror, and bizarro literature. The problem with this combination is it stands to alienate many readers. For those few who understand the wonderful weirdness of it all, Krall satisfies in a way few authors can.

While the book is three separate stories, it feels like one full novel. Characters, events, and themes cross over in all the tales. Many disturbing details are just hinted at in the background. Krall plants lots of intriguing clues to the town's many secrets and creates the sense that Thompson is a real place, though one you might not want to go to.

Combining a variety of genres, *Squid Pulp Blues* is a fun read filled with violence, laughs, and squids. Jordan Krall has shown in his second work that he is no one-hit-wonder. For those hankering for a weird trip, Thompson is just the travel destination you need.

- Jeff Burk



Help! A Bear is Eating Me!
by Mykle Hansen
Eraserhead Press

Marv Pushkin is an asshole. He is a greedy, drug-addicted, nature-hating member of middle-management who cheats on his wife. He is also pinned beneath his SUV, loaded up with pain-killers, while a bear is eating him alive. So begins Mykle Hansen's comedic novel, *Help! A Bear is Eating Me!*

The ambitious premise of the book is that it takes place totally in the mind of Marv Pushkin while he is being eaten. There is very little action that takes place during the story but the character of Marv makes the book completely absorbing. Marv may be a jerk, but he is a charming, talented storyteller. This is a difficult literary trick to pull off, but Hansen succeeds with impressive ease.

Hansen has a strong and engrossing writing voice. In the hands of a lesser talented author, a book with this premise would totally fall flat. Instead, Hansen tells a compelling story that the reader will not be able to put down.

Hansen also gives the reader much to think about. Marv is a caricature of those corporate losers who everyone encounters. Using this kind of person as a main character, Hansen satirizes many aspects of modern living. Be it money, sex, or friendship, Marv is never satisfied with what he has and is completely consumed with a desire for more material wealth.

Help! A Bear is Eating Me! is a unique and memorable work of absurd humor. Mykle Hansen has crafted a fascinating character study of a thoroughly unlikable person. While the reader may not sympathize with Marv, it is hard to pull away from his plight.

- Bob Chaplin



Ugly Heaven, Beautiful Hell
by Carlton Mellick III and
Jeffrey Thomas
Delirium Books

Delirium Books has long been known as a publisher of the highest quality horror. As of late, they have been branching out to include authors and stories that while not necessarily horror are still dark and will appeal to their rabid fan base. The latest in these experimental releases is *Ugly Heaven, Beautiful Hell*, a dual novella collection of Carlton Mellick III and Jeffrey Thomas.

Mellick leads off the book with his novella "Ugly Heaven," a thought-provoking, wandering tour of a twisted paradise. When two people wake up in heaven, with extremely altered bodies (in color, shape, and organ make-up) and no memory of their previous lives, they set out to explore the strange new land. Their journey takes them from the very boundaries of reality to their darkest inner desires.

"Ugly Heaven" is yet another effective entry in Mellick's canon. He creates a surreal vision of the afterlife far removed from the standard depictions of clouds and harps. Forsaking the predictable themes of good and evil, this vision of heaven is totally amoral and more concerned with

order than ideas of “good” or “justice.” The reader is pulled along with the characters’ journey and given much to think about as Mellick uses the strange landscape to address ideas of order and ownership within personal relationships.

The pit is addressed next in Jeffrey Thomas’ “Beautiful Hell.” Frank Lyre, one of the damned, has managed to find some happiness through the love of Oni, one of his demon tormentors. His afterlife becomes complicated when his wife visits from heaven as part of the entourage for God itself. The almighty is concerned over reports that demons and the damned are forming relationships and has come there to oversee the introduction of a new type of demon, one that stands no chance of caring for its human victims.

The tale is a thrilling grand-guignol, filled with gore and political intrigue, but, is at its heart, a love story. The dynamics of Frank and Oni and their forbidden love are gripping and moving. In addition, Frank now has to deal with a woman he once loved but now finds very different. Thomas has used Hell to tell a bittersweet tale that is both touching and blood-drenched.

Both authors have crafted powerful and original stories for *Ugly Heaven, Beautiful Hell*. While Heaven and Hell have long been favorite locations for genre writers, both locations are presented here in profound and unique manners. Let Carlton Mellick III and Jeffrey Thomas be your Virgil for this journey through the afterlife. It will not be what you expect, but you could not ask for better guides.

- Jeff Burk



**Not Quite One of the Boys
by Vincent W. Sakowski
Raw Dog Screaming Press**

Not Quite One of the Boys by Vincent W. Sakowski (*Some Things are Better Left Unplugged, Misadventures in Thumbnail Universe*) is perhaps amongst the strangest of Bizarro novels in that it is grounded in reality. Sure, there is God and Satan lounging in a private game room and one disgruntled Dante, but for the most part this book takes place in what could pass for the real world.

The novel centers on a degenerate group of characters who are tied together through crime, sex, drugs, or faith. Their lives are thrown into disarray because of several events. The reader sees each character’s perspective of the events in question, which a constantly shifting context of the novel’s plotline. Meanwhile we visit God and Satan who are carefully orchestrating the character’s actions.

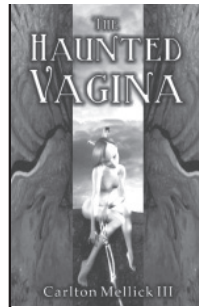
The sizable cast of characters, and their various perspectives of the same events, are the primary tool in telling the story. Sakowski occasionally stumbles in maintaining distinct tones for the many voices, but, for a vast majority of the novel, each character comes across as a vivid, unique person. The deep and subtle characterization draws the reader into the book, and is the main strength of Sakowski’s writing.

In Sakowski’s world each character believes that they are in control of their own

destiny, but the reader learns that a large variety of factors are actually controlling the final outcome of the novel. The idea of free-will is disassembled and is replaced with the idea of reality as entertainment. Characters are obsessed with ways to pass the time, be it sex, drugs, or profit. The characters of God and Satan embody this idea the best with their amused detachment from the events of the story. Despite their infinite influence on the world, they are almost always depicted as being surrounded by movies, video games, and other trivial distractions. These two characters seem to view and regard the book's events in much the same way the reader would view them; as entertainment.

Compared to his short pieces in *The Bizarro Starter Kit (Orange)*, it is obvious that he works much better in longer formats. The increased length allows him to construct and experiment with much more ambitious ideas. While the reader is being drawn into the character's chaotic personal lives, Sakowski is deconstructing the plot and the concept of free will at the same time. *Not Quite One of the Boys* is a unique and engrossing addition to your Bizarro bookshelf.

- Bob Chaplin



The Haunted Vagina
by Carlton Mellick III
Eraserhead Press

In Carlton Mellick III's fourteenth book, *The Haunted Vagina*, the reader is presented with another of Mellick's mind-bending concepts; what if your girlfriend's vagina was a gateway to another world? We are introduced to Steve and his girlfriend Stacy, whose "haunted" vagina is a problem for their sex life. When a skeleton-like creature emerges from Stacy's vagina the two decide to find out what may be inside of her.

When Steve explores, and becomes trapped in, Stacy's vagina world, he reflects upon his relationship with her. Mellick makes it obvious through clear dialogue and abstract imagery that their relationship is not healthy. Despite these strange occurrences and relationship problems, Steve remains hopelessly devoted to Stacy. This love is the basis for Mellick's return to one of his common themes; the power, figuratively and literally, a women's vagina can hold over a man.

The joys and terrors that Steve finds in the vagina world are reflective of his relationship with Stacy. The power and trust struggles are seen from inside both characters. Inside Steve, as the story is told from his perspective, and from literally inside Stacy. This allows the reader a uniquely personal viewpoint of Steve and Stacy's downward spiral as lovers.

Himborello
by Gina Ranalli

Coming in a future issue of
 The Magazine of Bizarro Fiction

Mellick has made a name for himself by writing consistently engaging and strange stories. But in Mellick's world, the characters can sometimes get lost in the weirdness. *The Haunted Vagina* is not really about the strange world Steve finds inside Stacy, but is about Steve and Stacy themselves. Their doubts and fears are the motivation of the plot. The imagery exists to support Mellick's character exploration; not just for shock value.

Fan's looking only for Mellick's hardcore gore and extremely strange imagery may be disappointed, as this book is more subtle than his other endeavors. Do not be mistaken, as this is still very much a horror book. The horrors explored here are not fantasy but the horrors of the very real world. The horrors of lust, love, and obsession. In this bizarre book Mellick is able to explore the human condition better than many "reality" based authors.

Despite having dealt with these themes before (see *Razor Wire Public Hair* and *The Steel Breakfast Era*), this is Mellick's most mature and effective exploration of men's sexual fears. Mellick's sparse style paints an intimate portrait of Steve and Stacy's relationship.

- Jeff Burk

The Dream People

An online literary journal of the bizarre. Specializing in bizarre, absurdism, surrealism, experimental works, and mixed media.

www.DreamPeople.org



Sick: An Anthology of Illness
Edited by
John Edward Lawson
Raw Dog Screaming Press

Sick: An Anthology of Illness from Raw Dog Screaming Press promises to explore "illness in all its forms: physical, mental, and societal." The title and back-cover seem to promise a collection of gross-out horror stories. In reality, this is a highly uneven collection of surreal and abstract tales which primarily explores mental illness.

The book is divided into three sections, but if there is a theme to each it is beyond me. The book reads more like a challenge between authors, each one attempting to present a main character more fucked-up than the last story. About just as many authors succeed as fail.

"The Christ Machine" by Tim Curran starts off the book with one of the best pieces as he puts an original sci-fi twist to the Christ mythos. Vincent W. Sakowski gives us two hilarious gross-out tales that will stick in your mind long after you finish. Efram Emersen has a thoroughly gripping story of disease that turns a young man orange and his attempts to take vengeance on the doctor who diagnosed him. But to get to each of these great stories, you'll have to read many tales that are little more than several pages of insane rambling.

Sick is a hard book to recommend. For every story that reaches surreal greatness there are two that just meander on without a point. There are a lot of great stories and authors in here to discover but you have to wade through muck to get to them.

- Bob Chaplin

Each issue we get a different bizarro author to tell us about a book they wrote that will never be published and why.

Bizarro Books that Never Were: **The Cranky Dildo** *by Carlton Mellick III*

There's nothing more satisfying to a writer than finishing a new book... and there's nothing more devastating to a writer than somehow losing that finished book before it's published. That's what happened to my novella *The Cranky Dildo*.

The book was about a man named Cal Corncob who had died and gone to Heaven. In Heaven, he discovered that life was quite the boring experience. The place was like a giant suburban shopping mall, the people were sedate, there wasn't really anything to do, and God was a complete and total douche. Cal, who for some reason had an unnatural dildo fetish, decided to make it his mission to throw a dildo at God. It was his way of showing his dissatisfaction with eternal paradise. On his adventure, he met several other characters who were also dissatisfied with life in Heaven and decided to come with him, including: a punk rock kid who wished Heaven was anarchy, a nymphomaniac who was pissed off that she could no longer have sex in Heaven, and a morbidly obese man who was angry that he could not eat food in Heaven nor lose any of the weight he had gained on Earth. They all had their own ways to get back at God, like the punk kid wanted to spray paint "Knobend" on God's car and the fat guy wanted to shove a corndog up his ass. It was a lot like *The Wizard of Oz*, actually, except the story ends with a dildo bouncing off of God's head.

I wrote it in my early twenties, in 1999 I think. It was a fun book to write and it's kind of sad that not a single person will ever get a chance to read it. The reason I lost it was that I wrote the entire book on paper. I've been told by a lot of

writers that the problem with writing a book with pen and paper is that it takes forever before you get around to typing it up. I did type up the first chapter, but then I got side-tracked, and waited about a year or so before getting around to typing it up. Unfortunately, by that time, I had lost track of it. I went through my ten-foot stack of drafts and notes of all the in-progress manuscripts I had, but I couldn't find it anywhere. It was gone. I thought it would re-appear at some point, but eventually I gave up looking.

By the time I had given up looking, I was pretty much over the book. I had improved as a writer and wasn't really sure if it was that great of a book anyway. The only good that came out of losing this book is that I used most of the ideas from it for another book called *Punk Land*, the sequel to *Satan Burger* which came out in 2005. The character of Cal Corncob (aka Goblin) is the narrator of *Punk Land*. In the first chapter, he reminisces about how he got kicked out of Heaven for throwing a dildo at God. So this character's back story is basically everything that happened in my lost book. That would mean that *Punk Land* is not only a sequel to *Satan Burger*, but also a sequel to *The Cranky Dildo*.

I'm okay with having lost *The Cranky Dildo*, because *Punk Land* is a much better book. The only thing I still regret losing was the book title. I think I might have to write a new book called *The Cranky Dildo* someday, just so the title doesn't go to waste. It won't have anything to do with the original story. It will just have the same title. That would be fun.

Bizarro books

CATALOG

SPRING 2009

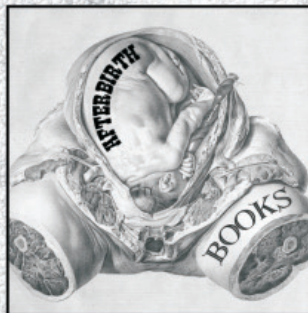
Bizarro Books publishes under the following imprints:



www.rawdogscreeamingpress.com



www.eraserheadpress.com



www.afterbirthbooks.com

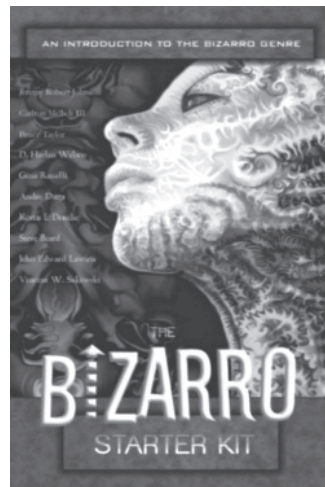


www.swallowdownpress.com

For all your Bizarro needs visit:

WWW.BIZARROCENTRAL.COM

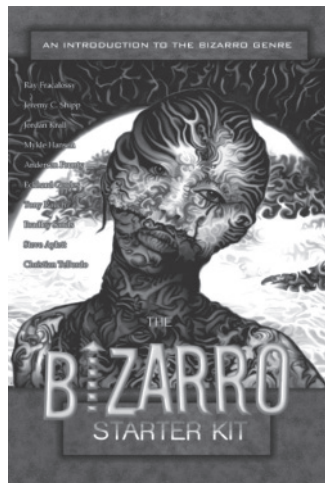
Introduce yourselves to the bizarro genre and all of its authors with the Bizarro Starter Kit series. Each volume features short novels and short stories by ten of the leading bizarro authors, designed to give you a perfect sampling of the genre for only \$5 plus shipping.



BB-0X1
“The Bizarro Starter Kit”
(Orange)

Featuring D. Harlan Wilson, Carlton Mellick III, Jeremy Robert Johnson, Kevin L. Donihe, Gina Ranalli, Andre Duza, Vincent W. Sakowski, Steve Beard, John Edward Lawson, and Bruce Taylor.

236 pages \$5



BB-0X2
“The Bizarro Starter Kit”
(Blue)

Featuring Ray Fracalossi, Jeremy C. Shipp, Jordan Krall, Mykle Hansen, Andersen Prunty, Eckhard Gerdes, Bradley Sands, Steve Aylett, Christian TeBordo, and Tony Rauch.

244 pages \$5



BB-001 **“The Kafka Effekt” D. Harlan Wilson** - A collection of forty-four irreal short stories loosely written in the vein of Franz Kafka, with more than a pinch of William S. Burroughs sprinkled on top. **211 pages \$14**

BB-002 **“Satan Burger” Carlton Mellick III** - The cult novel that put Carlton Mellick III on the map. Six punks get jobs at a fast food restaurant owned by the devil in a city violently overpopulated by surreal alien cultures. **236 pages \$14**

BB-003 **“Some Things Are Better Left Unplugged” Vincent Sakwoski** - Join The Man and his Nemesis, the obese tabby, for a nightmare roller coaster ride into this postmodern fantasy. **152 pages \$10**

BB-004 **“Shall We Gather At the Garden?” Kevin L Donihe** - Donihe’s Debut novel. Midgets take over the world, The Church of Lionel Richie vs. The Church of the Byrds, plant porn and more! **244 pages \$14**

BB-005 **“Razor Wire Pubic Hair” Carlton Mellick III** - A genderless humandildo is purchased by a razor dominatrix and brought into her nightmarish world of bizarre sex and mutilation. **176 pages \$11**



BB-006 **“Stranger on the Loose” D. Harlan Wilson** - The fiction of Wilson’s 2nd collection is planted in the soil of normalcy, but what grows out of that soil is a dark, witty, otherworldly jungle....**228 pages \$14**

BB-007 **“The Baby Jesus Butt Plug” Carlton Mellick III** - Using clones of the Baby Jesus for anal sex will be the hip sex fetish of the future. **92 pages \$10**

BB-008 **“Fishyfleshed” Carlton Mellick III** - The world of the past is an illogical flatland lacking in dimension and color, a sick-scape of crispy squid people wandering the desert for no apparent reason. **260 pages \$14**

BB-009 **“Dead Bitch Army” Andre Duza** - Step into a world filled with racist teenagers, cannibals, 100 warped Uncle Sams, automobiles with razor-sharp teeth, living graffiti, and a pissed-off zombie bitch out for revenge. **344 pages \$16**

BB-010 **“The Menstruating Mall” Carlton Mellick III** - “The Breakfast Club meets Chopping Mall as directed by David Lynch.” - Brian Keene **212 pages \$12**



BB-011 **“Angel Dust Apocalypse” Jeremy Robert Johnson** - Meth-heads, man-made monsters, and murderous Neo-Nazis. “Seriously amazing short stories...” - Chuck Palahniuk, author of Fight Club **184 pages \$11**

BB-012 **“Ocean of Lard” Kevin L Donihe / Carlton Mellick III** - A parody of those old Choose Your Own Adventure kid’s books about some very odd pirates sailing on a sea made of animal fat. **176 pages \$12**

BB-013 **“Last Burn in Hell” John Edward Lawson** - From his lurid angst-affair with a lesbian music diva to his ascendance as unlikely pop icon the one constant for Kenrick Brimley, official state prison gigolo, is he’s got no clue what he’s doing. **172 pages \$14**

BB-014 **“Tangerinephant” Kevin Dole 2** - TV-obsessed aliens have abducted Michael Tangerinephant in this bizarro combination of science fiction, satire, and surrealism. **164 pages \$11**

BB-015 **“Foop!” Chris Genoa** - Strange happenings are going on at Dactyl, Inc, the world’s first and only time travel tourism company. “A surreal pie in the face!” - Christopher Moore **300 pages \$14**



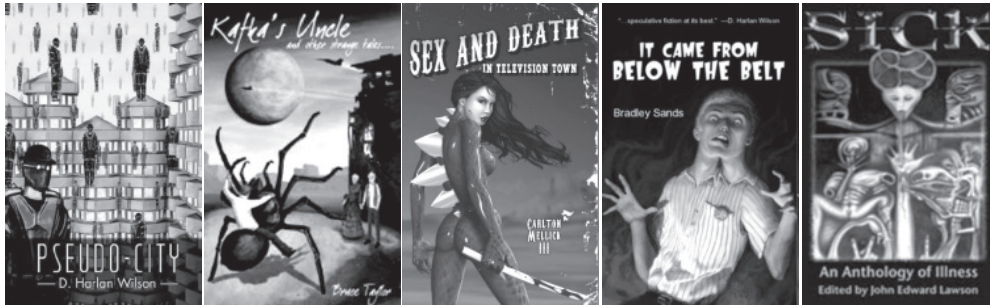
BB-016 **“Spider Pie” Alyssa Sturgill** - A one-way trip down a rabbit hole inhabited by sexual deviants and friendly monsters, fairytale beginnings and hideous endings. **104 pages \$11**

BB-017 **“The Unauthorized Woman” Efram Emerson** - Enter the world of the inner freak, a landscape populated by the pre-dead and morticians, by cockroaches and 300-lb robots. **104 pages \$11**

BB-018 **“Fugue XXIX” Forrest Aguirre** - Tales from the fringe of speculative literary fiction where innovative minds dream up the future’s uncharted territories while mining forgotten treasures of the past. **220 pages \$16**

BB-019 **“Pocket Full of Loose Razorblades” John Edward Lawson** - A collection of dark bizarro stories. From a giant rectum to a foot-fungus factory to a girl with a biforked tongue. **190 pages \$13**

BB-020 **“Punk Land” Carlton Mellick III** - In the punk version of Heaven, the anarchist utopia is threatened by corporate fascism and only Goblin, Mortician’s sperm, and a blue-mohawked female assassin named Shark Girl can stop them. **284 pages \$15**



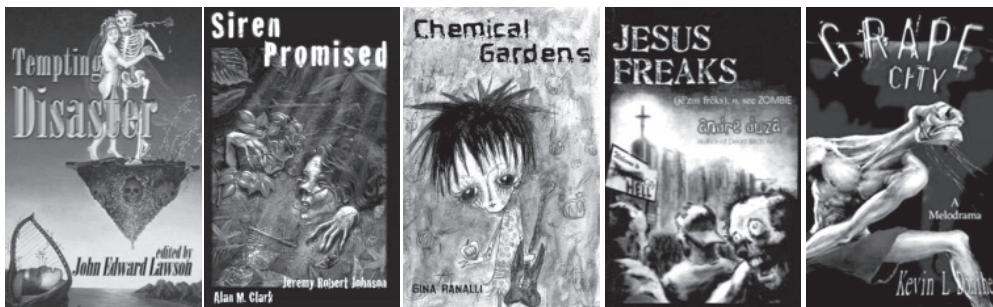
BB-021 **“Pseudo-City” D. Harlan Wilson** - Pseudo-City exposes what waits in the bathroom stall, under the manhole cover and in the corporate boardroom, all in a way that can only be described as mind-bogglingly unreal. **220 pages \$16**

BB-022 **“Kafka’s Uncle and Other Strange Tales” Bruce Taylor** - Anslent and his giant tarantula (tormentor? fri-end?) wander a desecrated world in this novel and collection of stories from Mr. Magic Realism Himself. **348 pages \$17**

BB-023 **“Sex and Death In Television Town” Carlton Mellick III** - In the old west, a gang of hermaphrodite gunslingers take refuge from a demon plague in Telos: a town where its citizens have television heads. **184 pages \$12**

BB-024 **“It Came From Below The Belt” Bradley Sands** - What can Grover Goldstein do when his severed, sentient penis forces him to return to high school and help it win the presidential election? **204 pages \$13**

BB-025 **“Sick: An Anthology of Illness” John Lawson, editor** - These Sick stories are horrendous and hilarious dissections of creative minds on the scalpel’s edge. **296 pages \$16**



BB-026 **“Tempting Disaster” John Lawson, editor** - A shocking and alluring anthology from the fringe that examines our culture’s obsession with taboos. **260 pages \$16**

BB-027 **“Siren Promised” Jeremy Robert Johnson** - Nominated for the Bram Stoker Award. A potent mix of bad drugs, bad dreams, brutal bad guys, and surreal/incredible art by Alan M. Clark. **190 pages \$13**

BB-028 **“Chemical Gardens” Gina Ranalli** - Ro and punk band Green is the Enemy find Kleepkins, a surfer-dude warlock, a vengeful demon, and a Metal Priestess in their way as they try to escape an underground nightmare. **188 pages \$13**

BB-029 **“Jesus Freaks” Andre Duza** - For God so loved the world that he gave his only two begotten sons... and a few million zombies. **400 pages \$16**

BB-030 **“Grape City” Kevin L. Donihe** - More Donihe-style comedic bizarro about a demon named Charles who is forced to work a minimum wage job on Earth after Hell goes out of business. **108 pages \$10**



BB-031 “**Sea of the Patchwork Cats**” **Carlton Mellick III** - A quiet dreamlike tale set in the ashes of the human race. For Mellick enthusiasts who also adore *The Twilight Zone*. **112 pages \$10**

BB-032 “**Extinction Journals**” **Jeremy Robert Johnson** - An uncanny voyage across a newly nuclear America where one man must confront the problems associated with loneliness, insane dieties, radiation, love, and an ever-evolving cockroach suit with a mind of its own. **104 pages \$10**

BB-033 “**Meat Puppet Cabaret**” **Steve Beard** - At last! The secret connection between Jack the Ripper and Princess Diana’s death revealed! **240 pages \$16 / \$30**

BB-034 “**The Greatest Fucking Moment in Sports**” **Kevin L. Donihe** - In the tradition of the surreal anti-sitcom *Get A Life* comes a tale of triumph and agape love from the master of comedic bizarro. **108 pages \$10**

BB-035 “**The Troublesome Amputee**” **John Edward Lawson** - Disturbing verse from a man who truly believes nothing is sacred and intends to prove it. **104 pages \$9**



BB-036 “**Deity**” **Vic Mudd** - God (who doesn’t like to be called “God”) comes down to a typical, suburban, Ohio family for a little vacation—but it doesn’t turn out to be as relaxing as He had hoped it would be... **168 pages \$12**

BB-037 “**The Haunted Vagina**” **Carlton Mellick III** - It’s difficult to love a woman whose vagina is a gateway to the world of the dead. **132 pages \$10**

BB-038 “**Tales from the Vinegar Wasteland**” **Ray Fracalossy** - Witness: a man is slowly losing his face, a neighbor who periodically screams out for no apparent reason, and a house with a room that doesn’t actually exist. **240 pages \$14**

BB-039 “**Suicide Girls in the Afterlife**” **Gina Ranalli** - After Pogue commits suicide, she unexpectedly finds herself an unwilling “guest” at a hotel in the Afterlife, where she meets a group of bizarre characters, including a goth Satan, a hippie Jesus, and an alien-human hybrid. **100 pages \$9**

BB-040 “**And Your Point Is?**” **Steve Aylett** - In this follow-up to *LINT* multiple authors provide critical commentary and essays about Jeff Lint’s mind-bending literature. **104 pages \$11**



BB-041 **“Not Quite One of the Boys” Vincent Sakowski** - While drug-dealer Maxi drinks with Dante in purgatory, God and Satan play a little tri-level chess and do a little bargaining over his business partner, Vinnie, who is still left on earth. **220 pages \$14**

BB-042 **“Teeth and Tongue Landscape” Carlton Mellick III** - On a planet made out of meat, a socially-obsessive monophobic man tries to find his place amongst the strange creatures and communities that he comes across. **110 pages \$10**

BB-043 **“War Slut” Carlton Mellick III** - Part “1984,” part “Waiting for Godot,” and part action horror video game adaptation of John Carpenter’s “The Thing.” **116 pages \$10**

BB-044 **“All Encompassing Trip” Nicole Del Sesto** - In a world where coffee is no longer available, the only television shows are reality TV re-runs, and the animals are talking back, Nikki, Amber and a singing Coyote in a do-rag are out to restore the light **308 pages \$15**

BB-045 **“Dr. Identity” D. Harlan Wilson** - Follow the Dystopian Duo on a killing spree of epic proportions through the unreal postcapitalist city of Bliptown where time ticks sideways, artificial Bug-Eyed Monsters punish citizens for consumer-capitalist lethargy, and ultraviolence is as essential as a daily multivitamin. **208 pages \$15**



BB-046 **“The Million-Year Centipede” Eckhard Gerdes** - Wakelin, frontman for ‘The Hinge,’ wrote a poem so prophetic that to ignore it dooms a person to drown in blood. **130 pages \$12**

BB-047 **“Sausage Santa” Carlton Mellick III** - A bizarro Christmas tale featuring Santa as a pirate mutant with a body made of sausages. **124 pages \$10**

BB-048 **“Misadventures in a Thumbnail Universe” Vincent Sakowski** - Dive deep into the surreal and satirical realms of neo-classical Blender Fiction, filled with television shoes and flesh-filled skies. **120 pages \$10**

BB-049 **“Vacation” Jeremy C. Shipp** - Blueblood Bernard Johnson leaved his boring life behind to go on The Vacation, a year-long corporate sponsored odyssey. But instead of seeing the world, Bernard is captured by terrorists, becomes a key figure in secret drug wars, and, worse, doesn’t once miss his secure American Dream. **160 pages \$14**

BB-050 **“13 Thorns” Gina Ranalli** - Thirteen tales of twisted, bizarro horror. **240 pages \$13**



BB-051 **“Discouraging at Best” John Edward Lawson** - A collection where the absurdity of the mundane expands exponentially creating a tidal wave that sweeps reason away. For those who enjoy satire, bizarre, or a good old-fashioned slap to the senses. **208 pages \$15**

BB-052 **“Better Ways of Being Dead” Christian TeBordo** - In this class, the students have to keep one palm down on the table at all times, and listen to lectures about a panda who speaks Chinese. **216 pages \$14**

BB-053 **“Ballad of a Slow Poisoner” Andrew Goldfarb** Millford Mutterwurst sat down on a Tuesday to take his afternoon tea, and made the unpleasant discovery that his elbows were becoming flatter. **128 pages \$10**

BB-054 **“Wall of Kiss” Gina Ranalli** - A woman... A wall... Sometimes love blooms in the strangest of places. **108 pages \$9**

BB-055 **“HELP! A Bear is Eating Me” Mykle Hansen** - The bizarre, heartwarming, magical tale of poor planning, hubris and severe blood loss...

150 pages \$11



BB-056 **“Piecemeal June” Jordan Krall** - A man falls in love with a living sex doll, but with love comes danger when her creator comes after her with crab-squid assassins. **90 pages \$9**

BB-057 **“Laredo” Tony Rauch** - Dreamlike, surreal stories by Tony Rauch. **180 pages \$12**

BB-058 **“The Overwhelming Urge” Andersen Prunty** - A collection of bizarre tales by Andersen Prunty. **150 pages \$11**

BB-059 **“Adolf in Wonderland” Carlton Mellick III** - A dreamlike adventure that takes a young descendant of Adolf Hitler’s design and sends him down the rabbit hole into a world of imperfection and disorder. **180 pages \$11**

BB-060 **“Super Cell Anemia” Duncan B. Barlow** - “Unrelentingly bizarre and mysterious, unsettling in all the right ways...” - Brian Evenson. **180 pages \$12**



BB-061 **“Ultra Fuckers” Carlton Mellick III** - Absurdist suburban horror about a couple who enter an upper middle class gated community but can’t find their way out. **108 pages \$9**

BB-062 **“House of Houses” Kevin L. Donihe** - An odd man wants to marry his house. Unfortunately, all of the houses in the world collapse at the same time in the Great House Holocaust. Now he must travel to House Heaven to find his departed fiancée. **172 pages \$11**

BB-063 **“Necro Sex Machine” Andre Duza** - The Dead Bitch returns in this follow-up to the bizarro zombie epic Dead Bitch Army. **400 pages \$16**

BB-064 **“Squid Pulp Blues” Jordan Krall** - In these three bizarro-noir novellas, the reader is thrown into a world of murderers, drugs made from squid parts, deformed gun-toting veterans, and a mischievous apocalyptic donkey. **204 pages \$12**

BB-065 **“Jack and Mr. Grin” Andersen Prunty** - “When Mr. Grin calls you can hear a smile in his voice. Not a warm and friendly smile, but the kind that seizes your spine in fear. You don’t need to pay your phone bill to hear it. That smile is in every line of Prunty’s prose.” - Tom Bradley. **208 pages \$12**



BB-066 **“Cybernetrix” Carlton Mellick III** - What would you do if your normal everyday world was slowly mutating into the video game world from Tron? **212 pages \$12**

BB-067 **“Lemur” Tom Bradley** - Spencer Sproul is a would-be serial-killing bus boy who can’t manage to murder, injure, or even scare anybody. However, there are other ways to do damage to far more people and do it legally... **120 pages \$12**

BB-068 **“Cocoon of Terror” Jason Earls** - Decapitated corpses...a sculpture of terror...Zelian’s masterpiece, his Cocoon of Terror, will trigger a supernatural disaster for everyone on Earth. **196 pages \$14**

BB-069 **“Mother Puncher” Gina Ranalli** - The world has become tragically over-populated and now the government strongly opposes procreation. Ed is employed by the government as a mother-puncher. He doesn’t relish his job, but he knows it has to be done and he knows he’s the best one to do it. **120 pages \$9**

BB-070 **“My Landlady the Lobotomist” Eckhard Gerdes** - The brains of past tenants line the shelves of my boarding house, soaking in a mysterious elixir. One more slip-up and the landlady might just add my frontal lobe to her collection. **116 pages \$12**



BB-071 **“CPR for Dummies” Mickey Z.** - This hilarious freakshow at the world’s end is the fragmented, sobering debut novel by acclaimed nonfiction author Mickey Z. **216 pages \$14**

BB-072 **“Zerostrata” Andersen Prunty** - Hansel Nothing lives in a tree house, suffers from memory loss, has a very eccentric family, and falls in love with a woman who runs naked through the woods every night. **144 pages \$11**

BB-073 **“The Egg Man” Carlton Mellick III** - It is a world where humans reproduce like insects. Children are the property of corporations, and having an enormous ten-foot brain implanted into your skull is a grotesque sexual fetish. Mellick’s industrial urban dystopia is one of his darkest and grittiest to date. **184 pages \$11**

BB-074 **“Shark Hunting in Paradise Garden” Cameron Pierce** - A group of strange humanoid religious fanatics travel back in time to the Garden of Eden to discover it is invested with hundreds of giant flying maneating sharks. **150 pages \$10**

BB-075 **“Apeshit” Carlton Mellick III** - Friday the 13th meets Visitor Q. Six hipster teens go to a cabin in the woods inhabited by a deformed killer. An incredibly fucked-up parody of B-horror movies with a bizarro slant. **192 pages \$12**



BB-076 **“Rampaging Fuckers of Everything on the Crazy Shitting Planet of the Vomit Atmosphere” Mykle Hansen** - Three bizarre satires. Monster Cocks, Journey to the Center of Agnes Cuddlebottom, and Crazy Shitting Planet. **228 pages \$12**

BB-077 **“The Kissing Bug” Daniel Scott Buck** - In the tradition of Roald Dahl, Tim Burton, and Edward Gorey, comes this bizarre anti-war children’s story about a bohemian conenose kissing bug who falls in love with a human woman. **116 pages \$10**

BB-078 **“Machoponi” Lotus Rose** - It’s My Little Pony... *Bizarro* style! A long time ago Poneworld was split in two. On one side of the Jagged Line is the Pastel Kingdom, a magical land of music, parties, and positivity. On the other side of the Jagged Line is Dark Kingdom inhabited by an army of undead ponies. **148 pages \$11**

BB-079 **“The Faggiest Vampire” Carlton Mellick III** - A Roald Dahl-esque children’s story about two faggy vampires who partake in a mustache competition to find out which one is truly the faggiest. **104 pages \$10**

BB-080 **“Sky Tongues” Gina Ranalli** - The autobiography of Sky Tongues, the biracial hermaphrodite actress with tongues for fingers. Follow her strange life story as she rises from freak to fame. **204 pages \$12**



BB-081 **“Washer Mouth” Kevin L. Donihe** - A washing machine becomes human and pursues his dream of meeting his favorite soap opera star. **244 pages \$11**

BB-082 **“Shatnerquake” Jeff Burk** - All of the characters ever played by William Shatner are suddenly sucked into our world. Their mission: hunt down and destroy the real William Shatner. **100 pages \$10**

BB-083 **“The Cannibals of Candyland” Carlton Mellick III** - There exists a race of cannibals that are made of candy. They live in an underground world made out of candy. One man has dedicated his life to killing them all. **184 pages \$11**

BB-084 **“Slub Glub in the Weird World of the Weeping Willows” by Andrew Goldfarb** - The charming tale of a blue glob named Slub Glub who helps the weeping willows whose tears are flooding the Earth. There are also hyenas, ghosts, and a voodoo priest. **100 pages \$10**

BB-085 **“Super Fetus” Adam Pepper** - No matter what, Super Fetus will not be aborted! **104 pages \$10**

Coming Soon

“Fistful of Feet” by Jordan Krall

“Ass Goblins of Auschwitz” by Cameron Pierce

“Cursed” by Jeremy C. Shipp

“Warrior Wolf Women of the Wasteland” by Carlton Mellick III

“The Kobold Wizard’s Dildo of Enlightenment +2”
by Carlton Mellick III

