

BEWILDERING STORIES

off the deep end

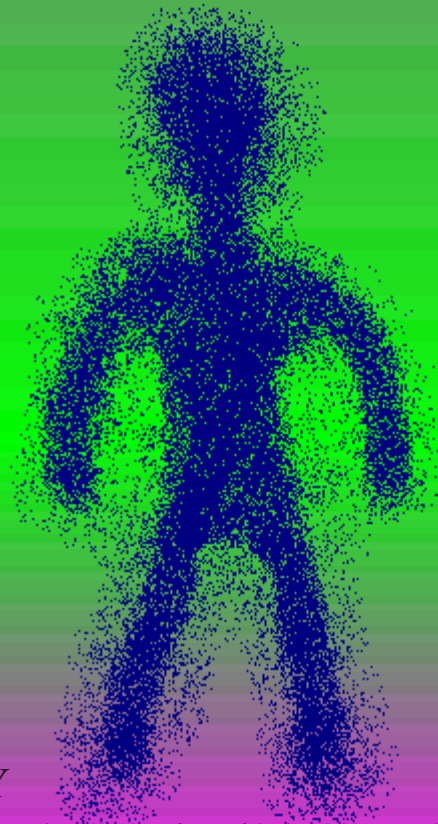
BEWILDERING STORIES BY

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EDITED BY

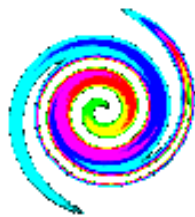
Don Webb, Jerry Wright, and The Invincible Spud



Off the Deep End

EDITED BY

Don Webb, Jerry Wright, and The Invincible Spud



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OFF THE DEEP END

A Bewildering Stories Anthology

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Much gratitude is due to the readers of *Bewildering Stories* for helping us survive. Without anybody to read our magazine, we would

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Finally, of course, where would we be without the authors? Much thanks to Vedgy Tarien, I. Spud, Thomas Lee Joseph Smith, William W., Pomme D. Terre, Thomas R., The Invincible Spud, A High-Placed Anonymous Source, Sherry Gray, Jennifer E. Velasquez, Alkaline Spudwort, D. Harlan Wilson, and Eco Fantastik, who contributed the stories, poems, and articles in this anthology. Without them, well, we would have chosen a bunch of other stuff. But those wouldn't be half as bewildering. And that's really all that matters in the end.

—The Editorial Triumvirate
August 2002

Introduction

We're still not sure how it happened, but here it is, the very first *Bewildering Stories* anthology.

Something *very* strange has happened in the last two months. *Bewildering Stories* started out as a joke at the *Analog* Forum, and now it's real. Impossible, but real nevertheless.

Don mentioned that there should be a market for slush—that mysterious organic (we think) material that seems to fill up every editorial office—except those that only accept e-submissions, and those get slush, too, just not the organic kind.

Experienced editors everywhere are familiar with the substance—in all of its incarnations, including the occasional submission scrawled on toilet paper in green crayon—and upon becoming editors ourselves, we too find ourselves drowning in an ocean of verbiage, though perhaps that is an understatement.

The truth is, slush happens. We may not want to admit it, but it exists—and a whole lot of it, too. In the words of Theodore Sturgeon, “Ninety percent of everything is ****.” We're not sure what four-letter word that **** represents, having heard at least three different possibilities; but whatever it is, it speaks the truth. Ninety percent of everything is unpublishable—except in *Bewildering Stories*, where ninety percent of everything we receive gets published, and the ten percent we reject . . . well, believe it or not, we have rejected a story for being too good.

There is definitely a thing called slush, and when you read any of the content in our webzine—or in this anthology, which showcases some of the best of it—you'll immediately understand.

That was the reason why we started the webzine *Bewildering Stories* in the first place. There needed to be some sort of output for all that slush. It simply *demand*s to be published. If it keeps piling up in the editors' offices, soon there won't be any space left, and many a bewildered janitor will scratch their head in confusion. But all is not lost.

It started out as a joke, but we at *Bewildering Stories* have transformed it into something substantial. Jerry registered and set up a web site at <http://www.bewilderingstories.com>, and we were off! A preliminary July 2002 issue was put up, featuring only three stories at the time. A short while later, Spud joined the team and completed the Editorial Triumvirate. We completely reworked our web site and produced our true premiere issue, the Jaugustuly 2002 issue, based on the concept of pseudomonthly periodical publishing.

Since then, we have published tons (figurative tons, that is) of slush—or as one might also term it, the crappie-carp hybrid. For when you fish off the deep end, that's all you'll find.

—The Editorial Triumvirate
August 2002

Fergus Fungus and the Reality Link

VEDGY TARIEN

Meet Fergus Fungus

Meet Fergus Fungus, your average kid struggling through school, having lots of difficulty doing homework, not paying enough attention in class, getting detention every other day, getting stuffed into a locker every day not getting detention, always sitting in the seat with a puddle of some strange greenish liquid in it—and maintaining clandestine telepathic connections with a secret organization defending Earth from a catastrophic alien invasion no one knows about.

The school, of course, was Warthogs Academy. That explains it.

The school, to give a brief background, was one of those strange academic institutions founded by an obsessed cult that believed in, of all things, magic. Obsessed, they incorporated magic into their curriculum and resorted to illusions and deceptions in order to make their students believe in magic. Their attempts were futile, and none of the students actually believed in magic. Of course, none of the students actually believed in non-magic either. All of the students were incapable of belief either way. In fact, most of them were plastic logs left over from the Invasion of 2073. The teachers, who were very stupid, could not tell the difference between human beings and plastic

logs. Fergus Fungus, of course, was a human being and, being a human being, faced speciesist discrimination. The teachers seemed to favor the plastic logs somehow.

Life was really boring for Fergus: wake up, eat breakfast, study magic, study more magic, eat lunch, study even more magic, do homework, eat dinner, sleep, wake up, eat breakfast, study magic . . .

Life was indeed boring. The daily schedule was the same for each day, and Fergus Fungus was getting bored.

One day, however, while studying magic out of a smelly old textbook entitled *Quidditch Through the Ages*, Fergus received an unusual telepathic message from the secret organization defending Earth from a catastrophic alien invasion no one knew about.

Cliff Hangar Returns

“Fergus, you there?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Fergus, Cliff Hangar has returned.”

“Huh?”

“You know who Cliff Hangar was, don’t you?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Well, the termites are back and worse than ever. And Cliff Hangar’s not in a very good condition.”

“Huh?”

“We need your help. Figure out a way to escape from Warthogs. We need you. The Earth is being invaded.”

The story of Cliff Hangar is essential to our saga of Fergus Fungus, so we must tell it in its entirety (except for the parts that would infringe other people's copyrights if we published them). Cliff Hangar was a lost, confused, and bewildered individual in a war between humans and termites. It was a strange war, full of unexpected surprises and smelly waffles. Alas, it had to happen. And it happened this way. . . .

Intermission: Breaking Apart

“Arg! It's breaking apart! Hold it together! Hold it!”

“I am! I am!”

“Then try harder! 'Cause it's still breaking apart!”

“I'm trying! I'm trying!”

“It won't hold! It's gonna blow! Run for your life!”

The Omega X Device

“Oh, darn it! What the heck do you have planned?” the Captain said.

“You will see, my dear Capitaine.”

“See what?” the Captain said.

“All these years I have waited, seeking the true meaning of life. And it has always escaped me. But now, I truly understand. Life is nothing but the path toward dynamic equilibrium. I understand, but now this understanding has caused my plan to fail.”

“What plan?”

“And so there is only one solution. To use the Omega X device.”

“What’s the Omega X device?”

“A device that rearranges matter to form what it was X seconds ago, where X is a variable.”

“Oh.”

“It is the only solution. I had another plan not too long ago, and I told it to my babies, but now their mission will be unsuccessful, and they will die. All 11,000 of them . . . But now that I have the Omega X device, they won’t have to die. I’ll just have to fix things when we’re X seconds back in time.”

Francesca displayed the Omega X device, a grayish-looking cylinder.

“Hey, where’d you get that?” someone said.

But Francesca ignored the comment. “And now to input the variable . . .” She pressed some buttons. “And now we can activate the Omega X . . .” She pushed down on the big red button in the middle.

And the universe spun around and around and around and around . . .

And outside the ship, a mysterious visitor watched, silent with happiness, and thought, *Finally, my plan is working!*

And inside the ship, Francesca realized with a start: *No! If we’re going back in time, I won’t have the memories I’m having right now, and I will be unable to correct the situation!*

But the universe had stopped spinning, and all the matter in the universe had been rearranged to their positions X seconds before. . . .

Another Plan

The Termite King laughed with glee.

“Ah ha! My plan is going to work! With this device”—he gazed upon his green cylinder—“I can influence those stupid Terrans’ thinking, so they’ll act like the Three Stooges! Ho ho, that will be hilarious!”

The Termite King chuckled.

“Victory is mine!”

The Seconds Before the Seconds Between

“Oh, darn it. What the heck do we do now?” Wallahoo screamed.

“Who the heck will lead us out of this stupid heck of a mess?”

A mysterious visitor appeared, cloaked in a black cloak.

“I will lead you out of this mess.”

“Who are you?” Wallahoo said.

“Wait one moment.”

“Huh?”

The mysterious visitor sprayed something in the air.

“Wha—? Uh . . .” Wallahoo said, and fell to the ground.

“Ah, that’s better,” the mysterious visitor chuckled. Everyone was unconscious. “Now . . . to relocate Hangar back to his previous location. I mustn’t leave him lying here.”

Unbeknownst to the crew, the mysterious visitor had come from the future to correct an incongruity. If the crew had been allowed to continue, the space-time continuum would collapse.

The Seconds Between

“Holy mud!” Deuce exclaimed, and ran out of the room (the Termite King fired the green weapon but missed), following a mirage of a waffle. It floated down the hallway back into the previous room, where Deuce met Francesca again.

Cliff could smell a pleasant aroma drifting in the air. “Hey, Termite King! That’s some good smell! What is it?”

“That’s for me to know and for you to find out. Only you won’t find out. Ever.”

“Oh.”

And then Cliff felt a sense of pleasure.

“Ah . . . that feels good. You give awesome back rubs!”

“Wait a minute!” Cap said. “That’s not hundreds of people marching in metal shoes! It’s just one robot, and its footsteps are echoing off of the walls!”

“Now where’d this [bleep]ing thing come from?!” Red said.

The robot turned around. Cap and Red followed it but soon lost track of it.

Blast! Wallahoo cursed silently. I should have known. That Chaplain Dougal McDougal’s inciting mutiny! They don’t think I’m a good captain! And this weird smell is horrible! Not good for your health at all!

Wallahoo waited until no one was looking and sneaked out.

By Grabthar's Hammer

Grabthar, the Monarch of the Gubachuks, impatiently waited for its shipment of waffles to arrive.

“Where are my waffles?” it exclaimed. It waved its infamous hammer threateningly in the air.

“Um . . . they’re coming, thar,” Ipthar said.

“I need my waffles! Where the heck are my waffles?!”

“I’m sure they’re on their way now, thar.”

Ipthar didn’t want to be near that hammer. It was horrible. It seemed to strike down at any moment. Ipthar shivered.

“I’ll go check on it, thar.”

Ipthar left the building and went to Keruthar’s Waffles.

“Yo! Where are the waffles?!” it asked Keruthar, the former emissary of the Gubachuks and the current owner and operator of Keruthar’s Waffles. “What happened to the waffles? Grabthar wants its waffles! Where are they, thar?”

“What do you mean, thar? We have shipped them!” Keruthar said, looking puzzled.

“Well, your shipment of waffles did not arrive at the Monarch’s Palace!”

“What? It did not? But that is impossible!”

“Well, they did not, thar, and I demand to know what happened to them! We must appease the wrath of Grabthar! By Grabthar’s hammer!”

“No! Not Grabthar’s hammer!”

“So what happened to them?”

“I truly do not know. My guess is that they were stolen.”

They searched all over Gubach for the missing waffles, but their search was unsuccessful. They did, however, find information about the waffles’ whereabouts.

The theft of the waffles was linked to a certain “Francesca Delahunte.”

Identity Crisis

The Gubachuks found their way into the termite colony.

“What the heck is this place, thar?” Ipthar asked Keruthar. “All these . . . insects . . .”

Keruthar looked around, puzzled.

Suddenly, an organism that looked like a Terran leaped out of nowhere, chased by a couple of drones.

“Holy megahertz!” it screamed.

The thing did look like a Terran! Ipthar thought. *Amazing!*

The Gubachuks had unsuccessfully invaded Earth not so long ago, and they were disgusted with the very thought of Terrans, or Earthlings as some called them.

“You from Earth?” Ipthar asked.

“What?” the Terran said.

One of the drones grabbed the Terran’s lower appendages with its pincers. The Terran waved its upper appendages in the air and then fell down. The drones swarmed over it, followed by more drones.

“Help!”

“Are you from Earth?” Ipthar repeated, oblivious to the plight of

the Terran.

“Help! Drones! Everywhere!”

“I said, Are you from Earth?” Ipthar said again.

There was now a mound of drones all over the Terran.

“Help me!”

It managed to pull a weapon out, and then it blasted the drones to bits.

“Ah. That was better. Now what was that you were saying?”

“Are you from Earth?” Ipthar said.

“Uh . . . yes . . . I am from Earth. Why do you ask?” the Terran said, uncertain.

The Gubachuks stared at the Terran. The Terran stared at the Gubachuks.

“Stop staring at us like that!” Keruthar, who was obviously familiar with this situation, said.

“What?”

“You think we look like potatoes, don’t you?”

“Uh . . . actually, yes.”

“I thought so. You stupid Terrans always mistake us for overgrown tubers.”

“Uh . . . what are you?”

“We are Gubachuks from the planet Gubach. We have discovered the theft of a shipment of waffles, and we have traced it here, to a ‘Francesca Delahunte.’ Are you ‘Francesca Delahunte’?”

“Huh? Bubbles? No, I’m not Bubbles. I’m Ellsign Wallahoo. Captain Wallahoo, now.”

“Ah. Do you know of the whereabouts of ‘Francesca Delahunte’?”

“Somewhere around here. We’re trying to find her.”

“Ah. And you are with—?”

“Uh . . . the other . . . uh . . . members of the crew . . . of the ship . . . uh . . . forgot what it was called . . . and also the former captain, Cliff Hangar, and . . . uh . . . hold on, I’ll ask him.”

Wallahoo ran down the corridor, its footsteps echoing across the walls.

Ipthar looked around, confused.

“Let’s go on, thar,” Keruthar said.

They continued in the opposite direction, the direction where Wallahoo had come from.

And burst into a room. There were two Terrans in it.

“Either of you ‘Francesca Delahunte’?” Ipthar asked.

“Wha—?” the female said.

The male stared. “Holy—” it said, and then it fainted.

“Okay . . .” Ipthar said.

Suddenly, another Terran burst into the room, followed by a termite who was rubbing its back.

The Terran said, “Wallahoo?! Where are you?!”

They looked around at the other people in the room.

“Wha—?” the new Terran said.

“Wha—?” the termite said.

“Wha—?” the female in the chamber said.

“Wha—?” Ipthar said.

“Wha—?” Keruthar said.

“Wha—?” the Terran who had fainted seemed to say but did not.

“Cliffie?” the female said.

“Bubbles!” the new Terran said.

“Wha—?” Ipthar and Keruthar said in unison.

They stared at each other in a stupor.

Ipthar broke the silence. “We have come because we have traced the theft of a shipment of waffles to the Great Monarch of All Gubachuks, Grabthar. So, by Grabthar’s hammer, by the suns of Alpha Centauri, the waffles shall be avenged.”

They stared at each other in a stupor.

“We have traced the missing waffles to ‘Francesca Delahunte.’ Which one of you is ‘Francesca Delahunte’?”

“I am,” the female said, and then its voice somewhat changed, and it said, “No, I am Bubbles,” but then it changed back, and it continued, “I am Francesca Delahunte III. But . . . what is this? I have nothing to do with waffles.”

The Terran who had fainted came to its senses.

“Wha—?” it said.

“Wha—?” the new Terran said.

“Wha—?” the termite said.

“Wha—?” Delahunte said.

“Wha—?” Delahunte said again, in the other voice.

“Wha—?” Ipthar said.

“Wha—?” Keruthar said.

“Wha—?” the Terran who just fainted said again.

They looked at each other in a stupor.

“All right, this is stupid,” Ipthar said. “Let’s just identify ourselves, okay? This is confusing. I’m Ipthar the Gubachuk.”

“And I am Keruthar the Gubachuk,” Keruthar said.

“Francesca Delahunte III,” Delahunte said, and then, “Bubbles,” in another voice.

“Cliff Hangar, former captain of the *Chocovanilla Hippopotamoose Pi* and sibling of Coat Hangar, the garbage collector.”

Suddenly, another Terran burst into the room.

“Wha—?” it said.

“Wha—?” Hangar said.

“Wha—?” the termite said.

“Wha—?” Delahunte said.

“Wha—?” Delahunte’s alter ego said.

“Wha—?” Ipthar said.

“Wha—?” Keruthar said.

“Wha—?” the Terran who had just come to its senses said.

They looked at each other in a stupor.

“All right. We remember you. You’re Ellsign Wallahoo, now Captain Wallahoo,” Keruthar said.

“That’s right. Hey! It’s Cliff! I’ve been looking for you, man. What’s the name of our ship again? I forgot.”

“Ellsign Wallahoo—” Hangar started.

“Captain Wallahoo,” Wallahoo corrected.

“No one takes my position away from me, not even you, *Ellsign Wallahoo*. I’m demoting you. You’re now *Kaysign Wallahoo*.”

“But what was our ship called?”

“You mean, you didn’t remember what our stinking ship was called?”

“No.”

“It was the *Chocovanilla Hippopotamoose Pi*, you dolt!”

“Oh. That’s right. I remember now. Thanks, Cliff. I’ll be seeing ya.”

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Hangar said, and leaped at Wallahoo. And threw Wallahoo out the door. Into two more Terrans.

They looked bemused.

“Wha—?” the first one said.

“Wha—?” the second one said.

“Wha—?” Wallahoo said.

“Wha—?” Hangar said.

“Wha—?” the termite said.

“Wha—?” Delahunte said.

“Wha—?” Delahunte’s alter ego said.

“Wha—?” Ipthar said.

“Wha—?” Keruthar said.

“Wha—?” the Terran who had fainted before said.

They looked at each other in a stupor.

“Okay, let’s finish our exclamations instead of saying, ‘Wha—?’”
Ipthar said. “What?”

“What?” the first of the new Terrans said.

“What?” the second one said.

“What?” Wallahoo said.

“What?” Hangar said.

“What?” the termite said.

“What?” Delahunte said.

“What?” Delahunte’s alter ego said.

“What?” Ipthar said.

“What?” Keruthar said.

“What?” the remaining one said.

They looked at each other in a stupor.

“Okay, this is stupid. Let’s introduce ourselves now. Ahem! My

name is Keruthar, former emissary of the Gubachuks and current owner and operator of Keruthar's Waffles."

At this, the Terran who had fainted before gasped and then swallowed its gasp.

"And I am Ipthar, one of the twelve official advisors to Grabthar, Great Monarch of All Gubach," Ipthar said.

"And I am Cliff Hangar, former *and current* captain of the *Chocovanilla Hippopotamoose Pi*, and don't you forget that again, Kaysign Wallahoo!" Hangar said.

"Wallahoo. First name unknown. Not sure whether I'm a captain or a kaysign," Wallahoo said.

"Francesca Delahunte III," Delahunte said, and its alter ego said, "Bubbles the Barbie Doll."

"I am the Termite King," the termite said.

"Cap and Red," one of the new Terrans said. "I'm Cap. He's Red."

Half of Delahunte, supposedly the alter ego, leaped up and screamed, "CAP AND RED! CAP AND RED!" and then a lot of unprintable expletives.

"Bubbles!" Cap said.

Delahunte's alter ego screamed some more, and then the first Delahunte entity calmed it down. "Ahem."

Everybody looked at the remaining Terran.

"My code name's Deuce X. That's Deuce X, not Deuce XX, not Deuce XY. Deuce X, the mysterious person whose gender is unknown," it said, and then it seemed to realize that it had said too much.

"But your gender isn't unknown," Delahunte said. "You're

male.”

“Um . . .” the mysterious Terran said and turned a bright shade of red.

“What’s this about waffles?” Hangar said.

Ipthar wondered why Terrans were so weird. “We have traced the theft of a shipment of waffles to a certain ‘Francesca Delahunte.’”

“Um . . .” Deuce X said and turned even redder.

Hangar said, “Everybody knows Deuce loves waffles. Doesn’t he?”

“Um . . .” Deuce X said, and its face turned even redder.

Everybody seemed to agree with Hangar’s statement.

“You’re Francesca Delahunte?” Delahunte said. “That’s your real name? You have the same name as I do?”

“Um . . .” Deuce X said. Its face turned extremely red.

“Oh, I get it. You’re me. I’m you. Ha ha. I get it! A joke! That’s funny!” Delahunte laughed. “Heh heh.” The laugh faded away.

Everybody looked at each other in a stupor.

“OKAY!” Deuce X said, exploding (figuratively). “I AM FRANCESCA DELAHUNTE! I STOLE YOUR WAFFLES! I ATE THEM ALL!”

The room became silent.

Everybody looked at Deuce X in a stupor.

“It’s not a joke?” Delahunte said.

The Clone Selects Its Own Variety: Evasion and Emulsion: A Chronological Reinterpretation of Something or Other: A Delahuntean Perspective

“Holy mud,” someone said.

“Yes! It is true! I am really Francesca Delahunte. Francesca⁶ Delahunte, to be exact. I’m a clone. That is, I *was* a clone. My genetic code was derived from yours, Francesca. They put me through the Processor so that my genetic code could be altered. So yes, I was once female. But now I’m male genetically and in all other aspects. The only remnant of my femininity is my code name,” Deuce X said.

“Now what’s this about your code name?” Hangar said.

“Wait, I’ll get to that later.”

“Hold on, wait a minute,” Delahunte said. “If you’re Francesca⁶ Delahunte, then where are the other four clones? And what am I?”

“You are actually just another clone, Francesca. Your real name is Francesca³ Delahunte, not Francesca Delahunte III. That fact was erased from your memory. You don’t remember any relatives having the name Francesca Delahunte after whom you were named, do you?”

“No.”

“And ‘Bubbles’ is really Francesca⁴ Delahunte, whose mind has been transfused into your mind.”

Ipthar realized something. Why were the Terrans fighting the termites anyway? And who was fighting whom? Terrans were fighting termites, and termites were fighting termites, and Terrans were fighting Terrans, and termites were fighting Terrans.

That is interesting, Ipthar thought. I know!

“Ahem,” Ipthar said. Everybody looked at it. “Okay, this isn’t working. We can’t just fight each other. There’s no point. We have to have a reason for fighting. So why are we fighting?”

They looked at each other in a stupor. No one spoke.

“Okay. You do not know the reason for fighting. Let’s analyze our background and discover the true reason for fighting. If, after sufficiently examining the past, we find no true reason, then we shall have peace instead of war.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Hangar said.

“Okay, you first, Deuce X, or Francesca6 Delahunte, or whatever you call yourself. Tell us about your mysterious origins.”

“Such a variety of organisms here,” Deuce X remarked. “Amazing. And such a variety of worlds in this entire universe. Amazing.”

“Ahem. You are digressing. Please tell us of your background.”

“And I choose this one. A small variety within a larger one.”

Deuce X seemed stupefied.

“Yes?” Keruthar said.

“I . . . I can’t remember.”

“Ah, that is no problem. Here. Try this. This may help you remember more clearly.” Keruthar gave Deuce X a plastic bottle having a green liquid inside.

“It’s . . . it’s an emulsion.”

“Yes. Drink it.”

Deuce X drank it.

“Ah, I remember now. Do you have a waffle I can eat? It helps me remember.”

Ipthar gave it a waffle.

Munching quietly on the waffle, Deuce X said, “I’m thinking about all of the events that led to this undeclared war against termites. I see . . . I see . . . Russian Alaska, cake, the world’s obsession with ‘just add air’ inflatable products, Cliff . . .”

“What?” Hangar said.

Deuce X continued, “I remember everything vividly . . . I see another place, another time . . . and the mysterious origins of Deuce X:

“That stupid train got to Russian Alaska at last. The trip had been really long and stupid, from some town or other, and he felt disgusted. Those stupid Russians were thinking about letting the Tlingit and the Haida join some stupid Confederation of Native States or other, also called the CNS, but they demanded more coercion. That is, they wanted money, and lots of it, the supply of which was, at that moment, really short because of the Lakota Rebellion. But nevertheless he had somewhat indifferent expectations for this area even if the stupid people embraced Orthodox Christianity without really thinking about it instead of the single real faith of Tecumseh.

“He was me. Or she was me. Wait, I was male at that time. I had already been through the Processor. So he was me. Or anyway, it was me. No, that’s not right. They were me? No. I’m not plural. They was me? No. Wait a minute. Shouldn’t I use a subject pronoun for a predicate nominative? They was I? No. They were I? He was I? She was I? He/she was I? She/he was I? E was I?”

“Shut up and continue, Deuce,” Hangar said.

Ipthar raised a nonexistent eyebrow.

“Okay, okay. Be patient. I’m telling you about my background! Geez! Anyway . . .

“*Well!* I thought. If the Russians were considering allowing the Tlingit and Haida to join the CNS, then let them eat cake!

“Thinking of cake, I felt disgusted. *Cake is such a horrible food item*, I thought. *Why had someone invented it anyway?*

“The train had derailed. Again. For the fiftieth time, perhaps. I got up from where I was hiding so that I could get a better look. My head was aching horribly. I looked over the top of the hill. Some moron was waving a plastic shovel in the air, screaming, ‘Orthodox Christianity is the only religion! Cake is good!’

“*By Tecumseh!* I thought. The strange things people do! Well, let them eat cake! They probably have lots of it. After all, Russian Alaska *is* the world’s leading producer of cake.

“I, Deuce X, hit myself in the head with my bottle of water. *How stupid of me!* I thought. *I should have known! They’re smuggling books into the Alaskan Library! The creeps!*

“Something felt strange about the bottle of water. I looked at it. It was empty.

“‘Who the deuce drank my water while I wasn’t looking?’ I said out loud, then froze. I had given away my location.

“I looked around slowly at the snow-covered ground around me. Everything was white. I could sense no movement.

“I looked back at the train, still derailed, still lying on its side, still being kicked by Orthodox Christian fundamentalists with plastic shovels, metersticks, and toothbrushes.

“I stood up and dashed toward the train, running into the falling snowflakes that were obscuring my vision. I leaped over the train, flying in a parabolic arch, and landed in a pile of snow on the other side. My white clothing made it impossible for anyone to see me. I looked around, seeing no change in the crowd of Orthodox Christians gathering around the train. They were still futilely attacking the train with plastic shovels, metersticks, and toothbrushes, as if that helped. The train wasn’t in bad shape, but the rails were. They always were.

That was the reason why the train derailed in the first place. Any reasoning person would know that inflatable rails wouldn't work. But there it was, an inflatable railroad system crisscrossing North America. One protester accidentally hit the rail with a toothbrush, and it popped, deflating as all the gas flew out of it. The toothbrush popped, not the rail. The protester was staring in shock at the remains of the toothbrush, which was, or had been, an inflatable toothbrush. The rail was fine, but then the protester, madly screaming, stepped on it, and it popped and deflated. The rail, not the protester. But the protester was figuratively popping and deflating anyway."

"'Just add air'!" Hangar quoted. "Ha ha! The morons!"

Deuce X continued, "The Orthodox Christian fundamentalists were attacking the train because it was carrying biographical books about Tecumseh, which were going to be smuggled into the Alaskan Library. These people couldn't tolerate anything besides their own faith.

"I shook my head, stood up, and dashed away from the train, running toward the town in the distance. Only it wasn't a town. It was Library City, home of the Alaskan Library. Only it wasn't a city. It was just the library building and nothing else.

"I shook my head again. I took a flying leap at the building, screaming at the top of my lungs, soaring in a parabolic arc . . . into the ground."

"Ow!" Francesca3 Delahunte said.

"'Ow!' I said," Deuce X said. "It hurt. Flying leaps never seemed to work for me. My head throbbed. I walked around in a circle, dizzy, and tried to regain my balance. I couldn't, and then I crashed through the door by accident, but since that was my intention, maybe that

wasn't really an accident. Anyway . . .”

“Anyway . . . Deuce, waffles ain't good for your health,” Hangar said.

“I stood up and looked around,” Deuce X said. “I was still dizzy.

“Suddenly, out of nowhere, a giant termite out of nowhere leaped out of nowhere and landed out of nowhere in front of me out of nowhere, waving out of nowhere an inflatable plastic tuna fish out of nowhere redundantly.

“‘Take this!’ it said, and it whapped me on the head with it.

“‘Ow!’”

“Ow!” someone said.

“The termite whapped me again.

“‘Ow! Hey! Stop that!’

“*Whap!*

“‘This isn't funny!’

“*Whap!*

“‘What are you, nuts?’

“*Whap!*

“‘No, I am not nuts. I am a termite. And, no, I'm not a vegetable. People keep mixing vegetables up with nuts. Peanuts are legumes, not nuts. They're related to peas. So peanuts are neither nuts nor peas, but they look like nuts and are related to peas. Whatever.’

“‘Um . . . I'm not sure I understand exactly.’

“*Whap!*

“‘Ow! Hey!’

“‘I'm also a poet. Want to hear my poetry?’

“‘Um . . . no.’

“‘This is a poem called “There Is No Point.” Here goes:

“‘*There is no point
And that is the point.*’

“‘Um . . . neat,’ I said. ‘Did you really write that?’

“‘No. I didn’t write it. I ate it.’

“‘What?’

“‘I ate it, and that’s how I know it by series of pumping chambers with an upper tube having openings along the side that allows colorless blood to move forward by a wave of contraction.’

“‘*What?*’

“‘I know it by heart. But the word *heart* has certain connotations that I do not wish to imply. Anyway, it’s just an expression. I also have a prothorax, a metathorax, a mesothorax, ganglia, and gastric ceca.’

“‘Uh-huh. And?’

“‘*Whap!*

“‘Ow! Hey!’

“‘*Whap!*

“‘Ow! But you said you didn’t write it. Who did?’

“‘This was a poem by Alkaline Spudwort, otherwise known as something or other, whom I have also eaten. I just love the taste of basic potato plants in the morning. The poem was rejected by no one, not even the editor of *Asimov’s Science Fiction*.’

“‘Oh.’”

“‘Huh?’” Hangar asked.

Deuce X, or Francesca6 Delahunte, looked at everybody strangely.

“‘*Whap!*

“Ow! Why do you keep hitting me? Who are you, anyway?”

“That is for me to know and for you to find out.’

“What?’ I said.

“Whap!

“Okay, okay, my code name is Deuce X. That’s Deuce X, not Deuce XX, not Deuce XY. Deuce X, the mysterious person whose gender is unknown. Okay, now who are you?’”

“But your gender *is* known!” Hangar said. “You’re male . . . aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am male. At this moment. But once I was female. So it’s just a saying of mine. Never mind. It’s horrible. Anyway . . .

“Join me, Deuce, and together we can rule the galaxy!’

“What?’

“Whap!

“I’ll never join you!’ I said.

“If you only knew the power of the quark side. Okeechobee Kenobi never told you what happened to your water.’

“Who’s that?’

“Whap!

“Stop hitting me with that stupid inflated plastic tuna fish, you stupid termite! Were you the one who drank my bottled water?’ I said, and I displayed my empty bottle of water.

“The termite stared at me. ‘Deuce, *I am your water.*’

“What? No! Impossible!’

“Whap!

“Deuce, *I am your creator,*’ the termite said.

“What? No! Impossible!’”

“Well, was it?” Hangar asked, somewhat curious. Ipthar groaned.

Deuce X said, “Actually, yes. Sort of. It was actually on the genetics team that cloned me and put me through the Processor. But it was disguised then, so no one knew it was a termite. Anyway . . .

“I’ll show you!” I said. I bonked the termite on the head with the plastic bottle.

“*Whap!*”

“And we were fighting. I hit the inflated plastic tuna fish with the plastic bottle, and the two weapons collided with a sharp metallic clang. The termite leaped into the air and crashed into a shelf of books. The books tumbled off the shelf.

““You inconsiderate moron!” I said. I swung the bottle at the termite, missed, spun around in two circles, and hit myself with the plastic bottle. It hurt.

““Ow!”

“*Whap!*”

““Hey!” And we were fighting again.

“And that’s all I can remember now,” Deuce X concluded.

They looked at each other in a stupor.

“Wha—?” went ten and a half different voices.

“And outside, watching from behind the cover of a white camouflage suit, someone was watching, listening to the metallic clangs of the colliding weapons and wondering how plastic weapons produced metallic clangs. . . .” someone said. It was Hangar.

Ipthar looked at Hangar.

“That person was me,” Hangar said.

“Wha—?” Francesca3 Delahunte said.

Everyone looked at Francesca3 Delahunte.

“No! That person was *me!*”

“No! It was me!” Hangar demanded.

“Well, well,” Keruthar said. “We can’t have all this argument, now, can we?”

Everybody was silent. Everybody looked at Keruthar.

“Okay now, let’s use the Memory Machine to share our memories with each other. Just relating it by voice doesn’t seem too successful.” Keruthar produced an odd-looking contraption that had the shape of a cylinder. It placed the object in the middle of the room and activated it. Everyone gathered around it in a circle.

“Now why don’t you go first, Francesca3 Delahunte? Tell us your side of it. But don’t say it out loud. Just think, and the machine will share the memories with everyone.”

“Okay,” Francesca3 Delahunte said. “I’m going to relate my narrative in the third person, so as to give it an objective perspective . . .”

And the memories started to flow. . . .

A Really Big Headache

Yeah, it was really stupid. Francisca had a really big headache. It was horrible. Yuck.

Deuce X and Francesca3

Everyone experienced the memory vividly.

“Wha—?” went ten and a half different voices.

“You misspelled your name. It’s *Francesca*, isn’t it? Not *Francisca*?” someone said.

Deuce X screamed, “That wasn’t real! I was only telepathically transmitting a false flashback so that you wouldn’t realize my existence. But it was a flawed one. It *did* reveal my existence. It was then that I realized with a start that the flashback had been accidentally telepathically transmitted to you, Francesca. Or should I say, Francesca3?”

Everybody looked at Deuce X in a state of stupor.

“Holy mud and a pile of cheese!” Deuce X, or Francesca6 Delahunte, exclaimed. “I knew I had to fix this situation. I had to send another telepathic message to correct the situation. And so I sent another telepathic message to correct the situation. . . .”

Deuce X and Not Francesca3 and Francesca3 and Not Deuce X

“And after I did it, I felt better. ‘Ah, that should do it,’ I said. ‘I have sent a lot of junk to Francesca’s mind. This should be very interesting. Now, Francesca will think that what I accidentally telepathically transmitted was just a bunch of hallucinations. What I have just transmitted will cause Francesca to think that everything happens at the same time, which will be even more confusing. But I must do anything in order to keep my mysterious past a secret. Anything except not tell the truth. I have not told any untruths with this. I suggested that I might be female, but this was only part of the dialogue, so it is not an untruth. This will confuse Francesca, who, in my humble opinion, is somewhat stupid. Nothing I have transmitted

is untrue, but I have presented it in a way that *seems* to be untrue. *That* is the art of persuasion. I must not tell a lie, for I am bound by the Code of . . .”

“The Code of What?” Hangar said.

“I am not stupid, thank you!” Francesca³ Delahunte said.

“Hold on. I’ll get to that later,” Deuce X said.

“But what was the message you sent?” Ipthar asked.

“The message? Why, yes! The message! I have it. I accessed the past and the future for bits and pieces of truth that I could send. Why, I remember them now!”

“Wait! What about me?” Hangar demanded. “It was me on the hillside!”

“Hold on, thar,” Ipthar said. “You’ll get your turn later. It is Francesca⁶ Delahunte’s turn now.”

**Inconstant Flux: Why Everything Happens at the Same Time:
Another Place, Another Time: The Same Time: The
Mysterious Origins of Cliff Hangar and Deuce X: Deuce X’s
Gender: Bubbles in the Hall of the Hall of the Hall of the Hall
of the Hall of Endless Repetition: Inflatable Termites: Space
Toilets: Round Robins and Square Robins: Ornithology: How
Energy Relates to Right Triangles: Gardening Tips: The
Demise of Science-Fiction Magazines: Waffles: Why Really
Long Titles Don’t Work Unless You’re Connie Willis**

“Who’s Connie Willis?” Hangar asked.

Everybody seemed to be in a state of stupor.

“Okay,” Deuce X/Francesca6 Delahunte said. “I’ll continue . . .

“The meaning of life was really horrible and incomprehensible. It was just like that, you know. That was its nature.

“Remember that? I accessed that part of the space-time continuum, too.”

“Excuse me, thar,” Keruthar interrupted. “Here, I must remark on something. Time is not real. It is only an illusion. All events occur at the same moment. There is no such thing as time, for time is not real. All things happen at the same moment. A moment that appears to result in another moment does not cause the other moment to occur at a later moment in time. It simultaneously occurs. All events occur simultaneously. They take place in separate dimensions, but not time. This is how Francesca6 Delahunte was able to access the past and the future.”

The memories started to flow, but Francesca4 Delahunte (Francesca3 Delahunte’s alter ego) interrupted.

“Wait! This is my part! I think it would be better told from my viewpoint.”

And the memories continued to flow. . . .

“Ah, thine eyes resemble the deformed pits of the fruits of the watermelon tree,” a voice said.

“What?” Bubbles, otherwise known as Francesca Delahunte III, said.

“Well, they do,” the voice said, and its owner appeared out of nowhere. It was Deuce X.

“Holy mud and a pile of cheese!”

“Uh . . .”

“Is that an insult?”

“No. It’s just an observation.”

“But it’s not right!”

“If it is not right, then it is simply a mistake. Either way, it’s not an insult.”

“Um . . . that was interesting,” Keruthar said. “And meanwhile . . . for, you know, everything happens at the same time . . .”

Memories continued to flow from Francesca⁴ Delahunte’s mind. . . .

Bubbles was confused. But then everything was confusing to Bubbles.

She picked up a Xik Xik stick, which seemed really interesting.

“I wonder what kind of weapon this could be used as,” she said to herself.

“And meanwhile . . .” Keruthar said.

Deuce X continued the memory-flowing. . . .

Deuce X II, or Deuce XII (Deuce 12?), whatever, looked at Deuce X I, or Deuce XI (Deuce 11?).

“You look just like me!” Deuce (which one?) said.

“And you look just like me!” Deuce (the other one) said.

They looked at each other in a stupor.

“I’ve come to dispose of you,” said the Deuce from the future.

“What?”

“Yes. We are the same person. I come from the future. And we simply cannot have the same two people in the universe at the same time.”

“Why not?”

“It just doesn’t work.”

“But wouldn’t disposing of me prevent your going back in time

to do this? Wouldn't it contradict itself?"

"No."

"Say, has anyone figured out your/mine gender yet?"

"No," the Deuce from the future said.

"Well, I've been thinking. 'Deuce' means two, right? So 'Deuce X' means XX, which means that we're female."

"Now that's just a little joke on my part. I was male at the time, and so was my former self at that time," Deuce X said.

"But who was your former self? Francesca5 Delahunte?" Hangar said.

"Actually, no. I have no idea who Francesca5 Delahunte is. Both my former self and I were Francesca6 Delahunte, since we were the same person, one from the future, one from the past."

"Ah . . ."

"Meanwhile . . ." Keruthar said.

"Meanwhile, I was there on the hillside, watching the battle, thank you very much!" Hangar stared contemptuously at Francesca3 Delahunte.

Memories flowed from Hangar's mind. . . .

Wearing the white camouflage suit, Cliff Hangar approached the library building. He could still hear the metallic clangs of the plastic weapons of the morons fighting inside.

Cliff burst through the door.

The termite stopped. The other person, wearing a white camouflage suit just like Cliff's, stopped. Cliff stopped. They stared at each other.

"Your shoe's untied," the termite said.

"What?" Cliff said and looked down at his shoes. They weren't

untied.

The termite whapped Cliff in the face.

“Hey! You stupid termite! How dare you come here and take over? This is Earth, you hear?”

“No, I’m deaf. I’m reading your mind.”

“What?”

“So you were there too!” Francesca³ Delahunte exclaimed. “And I was there! And that’s where we met Deuce . . . and each other . . . and fell in love . . .”

“No, it wasn’t love. No, not exactly—” Hangar started to say.

“Meanwhile . . .” Keruthar interrupted.

Memories flowed from Francesca⁴ Delahunte’s mind. . . .

If only all this junk could just stop and everything went back to normal, Bubbles thought.

She scratched her name on the Xik Xik stick with a pencil. It seemed illegible.

That’s it! she thought. I’m going to bonk the termite monarch on the head!

She stood up slowly and made her way toward the termite ruler, who was busily doing something she couldn’t tell.

She said, “All right, loser! Why did you kidnap me in the first place anyway? Huh?”

The termite continued to busily do whatever it was doing.

“Didn’t you hear me?”

The termite didn’t seem to notice.

“All right! How about this?”

Bubbles attacked the termite with the Xik Xik stick.

The termite popped. All the air burst out of it. It was an

inflatable termite.

“Inflatable?!! No way!” Hangar exclaimed.

“Well, now,” the Termite King said. “That wasn’t exactly me. That was a fake.”

“Ah.”

“Wha—?” Francesca⁴ Delahunte began, before Francesca³ Delahunte subdued it.

“Meanwhile . . .” Keruthar said.

The memories flowed from Hangar’s mind. . . .

They beat up the termite, who left the library building in a state of stupor.

“Awesome! That was good!” Cliff said.

“Uh-huh,” the other person said.

“So . . . what’s your name?”

“My code name is Deuce X. That’s Deuce X, not Deuce XX, not Deuce XY. Deuce X, the mysterious person whose gender is unknown. What’s yours?”

“Cliff Hangar. At least that’s what they call me. I don’t remember much of my past. I’m beginning to think that what I do remember of it was artificially infused and that I’m an artificial being. But I’m not really sure.”

“So . . . why did you come here to Russian Alaska in the early 22nd century anyway? You know what? The world really seems to be becoming a dystopia.”

“Uh-huh. Why’d I come here? Hmmm . . .”

“And?”

“Oh, yes, I remember now. It’s one of those tiny tidbits I do remember of my past. Let’s see . . . I came here because I’m about to

set out on a journey across space and my space-toilet's broken."

"Oh."

"You never know how important a space-toilet is until it's broken. I mean, I tried to get on without it, but that wasn't too successful."

"Oh. Well, I'm a machinist, among other things."

"Well, that's superb! I've been roaming the countryside looking for a machinist. So that's the situation. The space-toilet's broken. What the deuce, Deuce?"

"I'll fix it."

They boarded Cliff's spaceship.

Deuce fixed the space-toilet.

"My flush beats your pair."

Cliff groaned.

"Wha—?" went ten and a half voices.

Wait a minute! Ipthar thought. Ten and a half? That doesn't seem right. Delahunte, Delahunte, Delahunte, Hangar, Wallahoo, Cap, Red, Ipthar, Keruthar, the Termite King . . . only ten. And why would Hangar exclaim at its own memories? And how can Delahunte and Delahunte, who were sharing the same body, exclaim in unison? But before Ipthar could look up to see who else was in the room, Keruthar said, "And meanwhile . . ."

Memories flowed from Francesca⁴ Delahunte's mind. . . .

Bubbles flew through the air, space and time melting together around her.

Everything made sense. It finally did.

"Ah, now that was a short one," Keruthar said. "And meanwhile . . ."

Memories flowed from Francesca⁶ Delahunte's mind. . . .

The Deuce from the future disposed of the earlier Deuce. Nothing happened to the former (latter?) Deuce (the one from the future). No incongruities happened. Everything just seemed to work. The paradox was solved.

Then Deuce set about replacing his counterpart with himself.

"Meanwhile . . ." Keruthar said.

Memories flowed from Hangar's mind. . . .

It was a dark and stormy night in space. That was right. Dark and stormy. And in space. Of course, it was dark in space, except for those twinkling stars. But stormy? Why yes! A particle storm! Hydrogen ions and photons and neutrinos and protons and positrons and gluons and nonexistent colliding together in the same place, disrupting the function of the spaceship.

"Oh, mud," Cliff Hangar said. "My spaceship's not working. What the deuce, Deuce?"

Deuce yelled, "Shut up, you inconsiderate moron! I'm eating a waffle!"

Cliff said, "What the deuce, Deuce?"

Deuce yelled, "Oh, all right! Just let me finish my waffle."

Cliff waited while Deuce finished his waffle.

"Okay? Are you done?"

"Yeah. Hold on."

Cliff waited.

Nothing happened.

"What the deuce, Deuce?"

"What?"

"Why aren't you up here? You said you were done with your

waffle!”

“I’m eating another one!”

“What the deuce, Deuce?”

“Ah, very interesting,” Keruthar said. “And meanwhile . . .”

Memories flowed from the collective mind of the termite colony. . . .

The termite left the library building, cursing under its breath. Why had it let those two humans (yuck!) beat it up? It hurt all over.

It walked a short distance across the snow and was teleported back to the termite spaceship, somewhere in space.

“What happened?” the Great Termite, Ruler of All, demanded.

“They beat me up.”

“Well, why’d you let them beat you up?”

“I didn’t let them. They just did.”

“Ah . . .”

“Good!” Keruthar exclaimed. “And meanwhile?”

Memories flowed from Hangar’s mind. . . .

“Well, finally, Deuce! What the deuce took you so long, Deuce?”

“I had to eat everything in the waffle room.”

“What the deuce, Deuce?”

“I was hungry. Sorry.”

“Okay, then! Now explain to me why my spaceship isn’t working.”

“Sure,” Deuce said. “Well, you’ve got a particle storm. Hydrogen ions and photons and neutrinos and protons and positrons and gluons and nonexistent colliding together in the same place, disrupting the function of the spaceship.”

“Well, duh! But why?”

“Well, the hydrogen ions and photons and neutrinos and protons and positrons and gluons aren’t doing anything. It’s the nonexistent. That’s what’s making your spaceship malfunction.”

“Nonexistons? And what, may I ask, are nonexistons?”

“Particles that don’t exist.”

“Ah . . . and how are particles that don’t exist causing my blasted spaceship to malfunction?!!!!”

“If you really must know (and I don’t think you must), particles that don’t exist can and do exert an influence,” Deuce said, citing knowledge acquired in a future time.

“What?”

“Dark matter, you know. There’s nothing there. But it’s holding the universe together. It’s what making the Big Crunch possible. You see, the nonexistons exert an influence on the stuff around them. Gravitons, tachyons, morons, whatever you call them. They’re basically nonexistons.”

“Are you calling me a moron?”

“No. A moron is a nonexistent hypothetical particle named after Arkazarv Mor XXXVII.”

“So what’s the big deal?” Cliff said.

“Well, you see, $E = mc^2$.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared.”

“Yeah. And?”

“But, according to Pythagoras, $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$.”

“Yeah. I don’t get what you’re talking about.”

“Therefore, by substitution, $E = m(a^2 + b^2)$.”

“What?”

“Energy equals mass times the sum of the squares of the two legs of a right triangle.”

“What?!! That is totally absurd!”

“And that proves the existence of nonexistons.”

The memories stopped flowing.

“That was . . . that was so . . . so . . . so *emotional!*” Hangar said, and started crying.

“Now what the heck was that?” someone said.

Hangar was still crying.

Everybody looked around at each other in a state of stupor. Ipthar suddenly remembered and looked up just in time to see the source of a new voice:

“All right! Why are you sitting around in a circle telling stories? There’s a war going on! The drones are revolting!”

“Revolting, eh? I always thought they were repulsive,” Wallahoo chuckled, not looking up.

Ipthar gasped at the sight. . . .

The Mists of Confusion

Wallahoo choked. He felt weird, like someone besides himself. *It must be that Memory Machine. Or something. Those Gubachuks brought something with them that’s making us act like we’re not ourselves.* He saw someone standing there, a mysterious visitor in a black cloak. Who? He couldn’t think correctly. All this stuff . . .

“Hold on,” he said. “What about those bits and pieces of the past and future? I’m confused. They need to be connected. What’s the

chronological order?”

No one replied. They were all staring at the mysterious visitor.

Wallahoo choked again. “Okay, there was that part about Russian Alaska with Deuce, right? And then that part about Francesca on the hillside happened while Deuce and the termite were fighting. Okay. And that part about the deformed pits of the fruit of the watermelon tree happened later. Deuce X wasn’t really there. That was just a hallucination. And the confusion part with the xik xik stick happened after that. Then the part with the two Deuces happened way before that. That was when the Deuce from the future went back to dispose of the Deuce from the past. And the part about Cliff and the library building happened after Deuce and the termite were fighting. And the part about Bubbles attacking the inflatable termite happened after the part with Bubbles and the xik xik stick. And the part with Cliff and Deuce happened after the part where Cliff approached the building. And the part with Bubbles flying through the air happened after the space-time continuum healed. The part with Deuce disposing of the other Deuce happened after their encounter. And the part with the particle storm happened after the spaceship departed and before the termites came. The part with the termite happened after the fight between Deuce and the termite, and the part where Deuce explains the existence of nonexistons happened after the particle storm. Okay, I get it.

“So the chronological order is,” Wallahoo continued, answering his own question, “(1) Deuce arrives from the future and meets Deuce from the past; (2) Deuce from the future disposes of Deuce from the past; (3) Deuce goes to the library building and fights the termite; (4) Francesca watches outside and experiences hallucinations; (5) Cliff

joins Deuce and beats up the termite; (6) the termite reports to the Termite King; (7) Cliff talks with Deuce, and Deuce fixes the space-toilet. After that, they meet Francesca and set out on a space voyage. Which brings us to (8) they experience a particle storm; (9) Deuce explains the existence of nonexistent. Then after that, the Termite King abducts Francesca, and the crew go after them. I remember that. And afterward, when the Termite King was keeping Francesca as queen, (10) Francesca experiences a hallucination and talks to a nonexistent Deuce; (11) Francesca gets confused, maybe because of the hallucination, and picks up a xik xik stick; (12) Francesca attacks the termite with the xik xik stick. But the termite was an inflatable fake. And then later (13) Francesca flies through the air and everything makes sense. Oh, I get it. Everything's all connected now."

Everyone was staring silently at the mysterious visitor.

"Huh? Who are you?" Wallahoo said.

The Identity of the Mysterious Visitor . . . Is Not Revealed

"First things first," the mysterious visitor said. "You're all acting like the Three Stooges. This doesn't connect with anything else, and I can't make heads or tails of it."

"Wha—?"

"Hmmm . . . yes, I see! That's it! Why, yes!"

The mysterious visitor walked over to the cylindrical Memory Machine in the center of the room and pressed a hidden button on the side.

Everybody came to their senses.

“Yes! It’s been on all this time! This thing’s been interfering with your thinking! What’s the meaning of this, Keruthar?”

“What?” Keruthar said.

“You don’t know. This isn’t yours, is it?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s been interfering with the thought processes of humans. It may not affect your thinking, Keruthar, but this is a problem. Hmmm . . . yes, why, that’s it! I think I know who programmed this thing to make you act like the Three Stooges!”

The mysterious visitor walked over to the Termite King.

“Just as I’ve thought! It’s a fake!”

The mysterious visitor found a plug on the back of it and pulled on it. The inflatable termite deflated.

“Yes! The Termite King has arranged this nonsense so that he could have extra time organizing his army! And we fell for it! Right now, he’s preparing to launch a counter-attack! We must fight back! There’s a war going on!”

Intermission: The Council of Proper Narrative

The Council of Proper Narrative decides to investigate a certain story formerly entitled “Cliff Hangar in the Hall of the Termite King!” and is currently dead.

The entities forming the council are somewhat confused and not sure about the issue. One picks its nose lazily.

They gaze upon the collective authors of the story, sitting on the

seats in front of them.

“Ah . . .” Zmib says. “The authors of ‘Cliff Hangar in the Hall of the Termite King!’ Do you know that you have violated clause 3.1415926535897932384626433832795 of Section 2.718281828459045 of the Intergalactic Law of Proper Narrative?”

The authors look confused.

“You! Alkaline Spudwort!”

“Huh?” Spudwort says.

“You have digressed from the main thread, creating your own thread! This story is inconsistent! There are two separate storylines, and they do not connect to each other! That is punishable by a 1,234,567,890 credit fine!”

“Huh?” Author #1 says.

“But it was all Alkaline’s fault!” Author #2 says.

“Well, I kind of like Alkaline’s thread,” Author #3 says. “It makes sense in its own weird sort of way.”

“Inflatable termites? Now that’s just not consistent,” Author #4 says.

“Ah, well, I liked that comic strip. That was pretty good,” Author #5 says.

“We’re getting sick of this story. We need a new one,” Author #6 says.

“Um . . .” Author #7 says.

“Hold it!” Spudwort says. “I have the right to post my own stuff! If it doesn’t fit with the rest, then it doesn’t! But that doesn’t mean I can’t post it! Consider it an alternate thread.”

The Council is baffled.

“What are you saying?” Zmib says. “Are you defying the law?”

All narratives must be consistent!”

“But it *is* consistent! It’s consistent with the story before it launched off! The continuation of that thread is also consistent with the story before my thread launched off! They’re just not consistent with each other! So they’re two different versions of a story! This isn’t a violation of the law!”

“Ah,” Zmib says. “Then why doesn’t anybody post in your thread, then?”

“Because . . .” Spudwort says and looks around at the other authors. “Say, why don’t you post in my thread?”

Tlugok raises an eyebrow. Thlunk picks its nose again. Zmib shakes its head. Grmblop is snoring very loudly. Krzmlblatt is enjoying its hurricane nachos. Vptsmrighu yawns.

It is going to be a *long* day . . .

—

“Arg, darn it,” Spudwort says. “I’m sick of my own writing. It was fun to write them, and fun to read them, but now it’s no longer fun to write more. So my part is done. What about you other people?”

Authors #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, and #7 all look baffled.

“So . . . I’ve had it with this stupid Council of Proper Narrative thing!” Spudwort says. “Let’s get back to the story! It needs some writin’! And why don’t I let you people do it? Meanwhile, I’ll just doze off into Slumberland, whose population is currently 2,342,523,536. Anybody got a free ticket?”

A Mystery

The mysterious visitor spoke: “All right. We must fix this problem. It is a very severe problem, and that is why we have to fix it. The Termite King has foiled us, and we refuse to be wrapped in aluminum foil! Therefore, we have to stop this nonsense and stop the Termite King from defeating us and taking over the entire universe!”

“Right. Where’s my waffle?” someone said.

“And we must begin by solving this mystery. Where is the Termite King, and what plan does he have in mind?”

“I dunno. You got me,” someone, the same someone who had spoken earlier, said.

“Ah, yes, that is it,” the mysterious said. “Right now, the Termite King is planning his escape. So we must stop him from escaping. And once that is done, we shall have stopped him from taking over the entire universe.”

“Huh?” someone, not the same someone who had spoken earlier, said.

The mysterious visitor’s black cloak dragged across the xik xik wood. The mysterious visitor looked up (or appeared to look up) and then looked to the left and then to the right and then to the left again and then to the right again and then up and then down and then to the left and then to the right. . . .

They got dizzy.

Solving the Problem

“Okay,” the mysterious visitor said when everyone had recovered. “All right, we have to solve this problem. And it’s a very hard

problem to solve. And we're wasting too much time. Who knows where the Termite King is?"

"There," Wallahoo said, and pointed to the deflated Termite King decoy lying flat on the floor.

"No!" the mysterious visitor said. "The *real* Termite King!"

"Oh."

"Okay, now. If you all will follow me . . ."

The mysterious visitor left the room.

An Abundance of Xik Xik

They were in a maze, a very very very very very big labyrinth. That was, of course, what the termite colony was. In fact, if you look at it from outside, it sort of looks like a brain. Or at least, the cerebrum, anyway. The cerebellum isn't quite there. And don't think it's squishy, 'cause it's not.

Anyway, there they were.

"What the heck is this place? All these passages and tunnels, passages and tunnels, passages and tunnels, passages and tunnels, passages and WHAT THE HECK IS THIS???!!" someone said, munching on a waffle.

"What's what?" someone else said. Probably Francesca.

"My shoe! I stepped on a piece of bubble gum!" Deuce said.

"Huh?" Francesca said.

"Just look at this!!! Who'd chew bubble gum in a place like this?"

Someone raised an eyebrow.

“This is stupid. We have to work together to solve this mystery!” Cliff said.

Someone else raised an eyebrow, then lowered it, then raised the other eyebrow, then lowered it, then raised both eyebrows, then lowered one, then lowered the other.

They continued down the passage. There was xik xik wood everywhere.

Xik xik wood, for those who don't know, which includes just about everybody, is known as “the rarest of all woods.” This is only a myth, however. Xik xik is obviously not rare. For an entire termite colony the size of a planet (and planets vary in size, so that wasn't a very good comparison) to be made completely out of xik xik wood to exist, there must first be an extraordinarily large amount of xik xik wood. Obviously, this would not be rare. However, at a certain point in time, when all other woods had been disintegrated by a very powerful weapon used by a certain dysfunctional individual on a certain world known for its dysfunctional individuals, who filled every position in society, including the government, the complete control by dysfunctional individuals of which resulted in the creation of that very powerful weapon, to annihilate and obliterate all known types of wood in the entire space-time continuum, which contains the universe as well as other chunks of matter and energy located outside of it, not a single xik xik cell was destroyed, for xik xik, by a chance occurrence of a misspelled word entered in the Directory of Known Types of Wood by a certain dysfunctional individual not identical to the dysfunctional individual who used the very powerful weapon to annihilate and obliterate all known types of wood, was not recognized as a known type of wood, and, therefore, was not annihilated along

with all the other types of wood. And all this happened because of a bookkeeping error. But that is just a pointless digression. Xik xik wood, for those who don't know, has the consistency of the Earth wood known as balsa wood, which is very strong and extremely light. Xik xik, of course, is very strong and extremely light. Its strength has allowed multiple termite colonies to be constructed out of it. Its extreme lightness however, results in a severe lack of gravity, which may cause extreme nausea in those individuals not accustomed to the gravity of a typical termite colony. Xik xik was first encountered on the planet Xik Xik, which was known for its xik xik wood, by termites. The termites, however, completely stripped the planet of xik xik wood, of which it had an abundance. No xik xik remains on Xik Xik today. Finding themselves horribly out of xik xik wood, the termites were unable to build more than a limited number of termite colonies. Early attempts at xik xik cloning failed miserably, not to mention their drain on resources. Thus, there is only a finite amount of xik xik wood, for no living xik xik tree remains, thus rendering impossible the reproduction of the xik xik species. It is also for this reason, perhaps, that xik xik wood is known as "the rarest of all woods." Xik xik also, of course, has certain medicinal properties that make it illegal in certain places. This, too, might be the reason, or one of the reasons, why xik xik wood is known as "the rarest of all woods."

Someone got dizzy and threw up. It wasn't Deuce.

“Repent, Nincompoop!” Said the Termite King

“Repent, nincompoop!” said the Termite King.

“What the heck?” Cliff said. “Where’d that come from?”

“Ah, this way!” the mysterious visitor said.

Someone walked into the wall.

“Not this crud again!” someone else said.

“Ah, it’s here! I can feel it! It’s here!” the mysterious visitor said, leaning against the wall.

“What?”

“The wall is thin here. There must be a hidden passage! We must break it down!”

They ran at the wall. Some of them went *splat!* like space bugs on a spaceship’s solarwindshield.

“Okay, that wasn’t too successful. Let’s . . .” the mysterious visitor said, and fell down.

“Are you all right?” Cliff said.

“Hold on. I’m okay,” the mysterious visitor said, and stood up. “Okay, then, let’s try again. And remember, *teamwork*. We have to work together, or this isn’t going to work.”

They ran at the wall together. A hole in the wall appeared. There was nothing behind it. They fell down. . . .

Someone’s head was ringing. It was Deuce.

“Hello?” someone said, picking up the phone.

They landed. It hurt. It hurt a lot.

“Repent, nincompoop!” said the Termite King.

“Get stuffed!” Cliff said.

—

The Termite King stood there, laughing at them, laughing in a semi-hideous voice that seemed somewhat electronic as it echoed

throughout the xik xik walls, bouncing off the xik xik wood, which absorbed all sound. How this was possible, no one knows.

The Termite King stood there, still laughing, still being semi-hideous, still looking like another inflatable decoy.

“All, right, moron!” Cliff said.

The Termite King’s voice sounded very weird now, as if it were powered by a battery that was quickly giving up trying to live and flopping down on the pavement like a frozen watermelon that was *way* past its expiration date.

“You’re a lame duck that’s barking up the wrong cauliflower, buster!” Cliff said, mixing metaphors.

—

“You know you’re not going to win!” the Termite King said, in a very distorted voice. “You all are going to fail, and fail miserably you will! Your plan has been foiled! Not only am I winning, but I am winning splendidly! You puny little humans don’t know what you’re up against! You think humans are more evolutionarily superior than termites, but you are so wrong! Now you will see what I have in store for you! Ha ha ha ha ha ha . . .”

The voice faded away.

The Termite King stood there, silently laughing at them, silently laughing in an absent voice that seemed horribly silent as it didn’t echo throughout the xik xik walls, not bouncing off the xik xik wood, which absorbed all sound.

The Termite King stood there, still silently laughing, still having an absent voice, still looking like another inflatable decoy.

“All right, moron!” Cliff said.

The Termite King’s absent voice still sounded very weird, as if

it had once belonged to a battery that was barking up the wrong watermelon, freezing itself in a lame way into a cauliduck flower as it did so, but had escaped in an expired way and was now paving on the flopment.

The Termite King deflated.

—

“The heck?” Cliff said. “What the heck was that? Just what was that? I don’t get it. I seriously don’t. I just don’t get it.”

“Hmmm . . . another inflatable decoy. Just as I suspected. But wait! It’s a trap. Don’t get near that inflatable decoy, people!” the mysterious visitor said.

No one did.

Someone raised an eyebrow.

—

The mysterious visitor was now approaching the deflated inflatable decoy. The thing now upchucked a very weak message:

“Repent, nincompoop!” said the Termite King.

“Get stuffed!” Cliff said.

Someone raised an eyebrow.

“It sure needs some stuffing! It’s all flat!” someone said.

—

“What do you suppose this is?” the mysterious visitor said.

“Hold on! I just noticed something!” Francesca said.

“What?” someone said. Not Deuce. Not Cliff. Not Wallahoo.

“I hear something. It’s coming from this direction!” Francesca said, pointing to the wall.

“Huh?”

“Hmmm . . . I am picking up a high concentration of

electromagnetic radiation coming from that direction,” the mysterious visitor said, and approached the wall. “Hmmm . . . it’s very thin here. It must be another hidden passage! Let’s work together now! We’ll break down the wall!”

They gathered together, leaped at the wall, and burst through . . .

A Very Suspenseful Moment

. . . and fell, and fell, and fell, and fell . . .

. . . down toward the bottom of a bottomless pit.

Only it wasn’t bottomless. They could make out some tiny specks down there now.

They were . . . they were . . . termites.

“Holy monkey! Termites!”

There were thousands, no, millions, no, billions, no, trillions, no, what-the-heck-illions of termites down there. And the people were still falling.

They seemed to fall forever.

“It seems that I must use my special abilities now,” the mysterious visitor said in a surprisingly calm tone. “It appears that it is necessary now. I must do it. I must.”

They fell, and fell, and fell, which took a really long time since the gravity of the termite colony wasn’t that much, due to the relatively light weight of the xik xik wood it was made of.

And so they fell, and fell, and fell, and fell, and so on, and so on, etc., etc., etc.

They accelerated slowly because of the gravity, but they still

accelerated. But not much.

And then they stopped accelerating and started to decelerate. Their velocity approached zero.

And then they were hovering in the air above the termites. The termites were snarling and growling and waving their appendages threateningly at the people.

Cliff noticed a strange green radiance emanating from the mysterious visitor.

“What the—? Huh?”

“This is so . . . very . . . weird . . .” Francesca said.

“Ah, the space-time continuum is flowing around us now,” the mysterious visitor said. “Can you feel it?”

Cliff felt it. It felt wonderful. There were no words to describe it.

And then Cliff could see that the termites weren't really that many. It was a trick of the light, an optical illusion. There were only a few, maybe three, maybe four, maybe four and a half. Their appearance was refracted and reflected, reflected and refracted, magnified and shrunken and distorted so that there appeared to be thousands, no, millions, no, billions, no, trillions, no, what-the-heck-illions of termites, but there were only a few. Cliff understood. It felt wonderful to understand.

And then they fell . . .

The Bottom of the Bottomless Pit

. . . toward the bottom of the bottomless pit. And hit it.

It felt wonderful to hit it. The impact was slow and graceful. The

bodies floated down toward the bottom of the bottomless pit. And slowly, oh so slowly, they moved toward the bottom. And slowly, they collided with it. It felt very wonderful indeed.

And they kept going . . .

The Nothingness That Is

. . . beyond the bottom of the bottomless pit. It felt wonderful to do that, too.

And now the universe started to distort itself and shake in all dimensions. Different chunks of space-time broke off the continuum and floated around, hitting other chunks. Space-time became distorted. All the little pieces broke off, and the little pieces broke into even smaller pieces, and they floated about in the emptiness. And all the pieces swirled around the center, pulled by a mysterious force. They fell toward nowhere.

Recycling

The universe recycled. At first, the almost infinite number of infinitesimal pieces and chunks of the fabric of space-time dissipated and swirled around the center of the universe, pulled throughout space and time by a mysterious force attracting each and every single particle and sending each and every one flying in almost random directions, flickering this way and that, bouncing off each other, moving in almost random patterns, reflecting and refracting across the

gulf of space-time and exerting forces on each other, and pulling and pushing and moving things and accelerating objects, and swirled and swirled and twisted and turned and swirled some more and distorted itself to form immense complex geometric shapes and instantaneously form other immense complex shapes, fluctuating and oscillating and reverberating among the infinite variations of shapes and appearances; later, the entire universe shrank in on itself, the infinite variations infinitely varying and combining and concatenating and consolidating into larger and larger chunks that combined to form even larger chunks that swirled and swirled and twisted and turned and swirled some more, forming a gigantic rotating spiral that contracted as it moved, the effects of space and time losing strength to the great ulterior force that controlled everything, swirling and swirling and swirling some more as it rotated and contracted and contracted and rotated, the particles revolving around the center and succumbing to the ulterior force attracting them toward the center, forming a condensate mass of matter and energy that continually shrank and pulled outer layers inward as it consumed the streams of matter and energy flowing toward the center; next, all of the matter and energy falling in toward the center stopped rotating as everything became consumed by the ulterior force attracting everything toward it, the effects of space and time proving to have no effect at all, and creating a shrinking mass of condensate matter and energy that continually shrank and decreased in overall size as the streams of matter flowing inward faded away into nonexistence and left only a shrinking mass of condensate matter and energy that rotated as it did so, collapsing under its own ulterior force and shrinking and becoming ever smaller and diminutive in size as the ulterior force

collapsed the rotating object until, as it approached the limit of contraction, the rotations no longer were rotations but forces exerted by particles upon other particles, pushing and pulling and pulling and pushing at the other particles until the mass of matter and energy became nothing; finally, the nothingness gave in to the conflicting forces acting upon it, swelling and fluctuating instantaneously in size, shape, and appearance and forming even more complex geometric shapes that expressed the immensity of the forces acting upon them in a dramatic dance of life and freedom and evolution and relativity and entropy as the counterforce opposing the ulterior force forced itself against the ulterior force and the two forces forced themselves against each other, the tension increasing and approaching infinity until the forces overcame each other and the condensate mass exploded, sending shock waves throughout the universe and the space-time continuum, filling the empty vacuum with matter and energy, forming fundamental particles and the particles those fundamental particles constituted, and the more complex particles those particles constituted, and so on, recycling the old universe and making a new one. This is also known as a black hole.

And so, after the universe was recycled and a new universe was formed, Cliff Hangar and the others found themselves in a very strange place indeed. The Termite King, of course, had escaped. But to where? They could only guess . . .

. . . that is, until they could find out what actually happened.

Insect Warriors in the Hall of Interdimensional Transport

Cliff and the others burst into the hall of interdimensional transport.

There were a few termites inside.

They fired. All of them exploded. They were inflatable termites used as decoys by the Termite King.

“Blast it!” Cliff said.

Wallahoo blasted one of the already deflated termites with his gun.

“No, not ‘Blast it!’ Blast it!” Cliff said.

Wallahoo blasted it again.

“*No!* I meant ‘Blast it!’ as in ‘Blast it!’ I was exclaiming an interjection!” Cliff said.

Wallahoo blasted it yet again.

The Meaning of All Existence

“Ah, they have escaped,” said the mysterious visitor. “My plan is actually working. The termites have escaped to their auxiliary colony. All is working.”

“What? What’s this plan you’re talking about?”

“Well, that is a difficult question to answer. You see, I’m not quite . . . like you. I’m different. I belong to another kind of existence. For ages, members of your kind of existence have viewed me as a sort of hideous and evil creature. They perceive my actions as acts of violence, but they do not understand me. They do not grasp the deeper meaning. They are mistaken. They simply do not comprehend the ways of my existence.”

“Uh—what?”

“We have reached the end of our journey. The mission was to resolve the conflict between the Terrans and the termites. Such conflict would, in the future, result in the end of the universe as we know it. And such a thing cannot be possible. As a being interwoven within the fabric of space-time, I have the obligation to correct the situation. And I have done so. There will be peace.”

“But just what are you?”

“That is a question that is difficult to answer.”

The mysterious visitor stepped toward the interdimensional portal, which was still active after the Termite King and the termites used it.

“They call me . . .” the mysterious visitor said and, for a moment before disappearing through the portal, seemed to transform into a majestic entity of the space-time continuum about to soar into a playground of fields, loops of force that spread all through creation, defining the sprays of matter and energy that endlessly overlapped and interacted in an infinite dance. “. . . Geveniginore.”

An Alternate Universe

They stared, aghast.

“That was . . . something,” someone said.

“Our universe is doomed,” someone else said. “There is absolutely no good future for us. Everything is going to heck. This just isn’t going to work. But that interdimensional portal. That can transport us to another universe, an alternate universe, one in which all this stuff that happened recently never really happened and there

could be hope for the future. Do you think that is possible?”

No one answered.

One by one, as if they were puppets controlled by a higher entity, they stepped through the interdimensional portal.

Intermission: Connection

“Ah, I almost have it. Yes, it’s coming together! Almost . . . almost . . . arg! Got some glue?”

“Sure. It’s around here somewhere. Hold on.”

“Come on! It’s gonna fall apart again!”

“Okay. Got it. Here you go.”

“Thanks. Okay, we’ll just glue it together right there and it’ll be fine. Just a little more glue on the edges . . .”

“You think that should do it?”

“Sure, why not?”

Fergus Fungus in Action

Fergus Fungus escaped from Warthogs. It wasn’t an awfully hard task to do. No one actually noticed. Those plastic logs were just too, too much. Ah, well, maybe next time.

Fergus maintained an electronically aided telepathic connection with the secret organization.

“Hi. It’s me, Fergus.”

“Hello, Fergus. Cliff Hangar is now returning to our universe but

may be facing some unexpected difficulties. We'll wait and see. In the meantime, here's what you have to do. . . ."

Two and a Half Discussions on the Existence of Fakes in a Terran Spudstream

"Potatoes, you say?" Deuce X said. "Holy . . . They're alive!"

Francesca gulped.

The potato standing in the middle, apparently the chieftain or leader or something similar, stepped forward, waved its . . . arms in the air, and started chanting something very, very weird.

Francesca gulped again.

The potatoes gathered around Deuce and Francesca.

"What are you?" Deuce asked.

The chieftain potato continued to chant and wave its arms in the air in a kind of rain dance or whatever you call it. It didn't rain.

The potatoes formed a circle around their captives. Each one now joined the chieftain in chanting the rain dance chant or whatever you call it. It still didn't rain.

Deuce and Francesca both gulped.

Quickly and efficiently, almost too fast for Deuce and Francesca to notice it, but not quite, the potatoes wrapped them up in ropes that had apparently appeared out of thin air. Only the air wasn't thin. It was quite thick.

The captors threw their captives in a sort of river vessel that was floating on a stream. It resembled an upturned crescent. The boat bobbed up and down as Francesca and Deuce landed in it. Then some

of the potatoes joined them. Others stayed behind, dancing and chanting. It still didn't rain.

The boat started to drift downstream. Because of their position, Deuce and Francesca couldn't see much. They were lying on the bottom of the boat. Above them, they could see a sunny sky through the leaves and branches hovering overhead. It obviously wasn't going to rain.

"Deuce," Francesca said, "what do you make of these potato-like things?"

"They're very familiar somehow. But I know I haven't seen them before. It's as if they were memories infused into my mind from an alternate self in an alternate universe. In that alternate universe, I encountered them. And a word is forming in my mind. I know what they are now. They're Gubachuks."

"Guba-what?"

"Gubachuks. They came from the planet Gubach. But what are they doing here? And why are they so primitive? I . . . I don't get it."

"Do you think they might not really be what they seem to be? Maybe they're all fake. Maybe the Termite King's using artificial robots or something to dispose of us. Maybe we're all hallucinating and we're really back home on the Earth we know and love, the one way back there in the past."

—

Cap and Red, in search of firewood, hacked their way into the undergrowth using makeshift machetes.

"Listen, Red," Cap said. "We don't have to take this [bovine excrement] from them. It's all just [bovine excrement], you hear? They don't have no control over us. That's just [bovine excrement]!"

“Yeah. It *is* just a whole [excrement]load of [bovine excrement], isn’t it?” said Red.

“Yeah. Just [bovine excrement].”

They came to a stream.

“What? Where’s the firewood?” Red said.

“I don’t know!”

Cap looked upstream. There seemed to be something on the water.

“Huh?”

Cap squinted, but couldn’t make it out. It seemed like a sort of boat or something.

“What do you make of it, Red?”

“Make of what, Cap?”

“There,” Cap said. “It looks kind of like a boat.”

Red looked. Whatever it was, it was no longer there.

“Huh,” Red said. “Probably just [bovine excrement]. You’ve been seein’ things, Cap. There ain’t nothing there. Just a fake.”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

—

Following in the footsteps of the Termite King, Gruek stumbled and tripped over sticks and stones and cursed the anatomy of humans. It was so horrible to walk around in a human body. Termites were much better adapted to this kind of environment.

“Yes,” the Termite King was saying, although Gruek wasn’t really paying a lot of attention, “the local termites. They must be here. Yes, they must.”

Gruek cursed silently and felt nauseous.

Soon, they found themselves at a stream. Gruek looked across the

stream at the ruins, which were still in the distance, and cursed again.

“Ah, just a little bit more, Gruerk,” the Termite King said. “We’ll be there shortly.”

Gruerk cursed, looked at the stream, and hoped that it was just a mirage, a hallucination. It didn’t have to be there. Why did they have to cross that stupid stream anyway?

“It’s just a . . . a fake,” Gruerk said, very nauseous indeed. “Just a . . . a f-fake. See? It’s . . . not . . . real, not . . . real . . . at all. There’s nothing . . .”

Gruerk stumbled and fell in the stream.

24/7 Views of Mt. Oldufuji Gorge, by Hangar

The sun was setting.

Cliff and Bubbles sat on the beach, staring at the sunset.

“Oh, Cliffie, isn’t the sunset *beautiful?*” Bubbles bubbled, and embraced Cliff.

Cliff started to speak but could only make unintelligible guttural noises.

“*Uh . . . Bubbles . . . could you remove . . . your arm . . . from around . . . my throat?*” Cliff squeaked.

“Oh, it looks so *pretty!*” Bubbles said, ignorant of Cliff’s predicament.

Cliff’s face turned a ghastly blue that reflected only certain frequencies of the light it received from the orange, fiery sunset.

“Oh, look at that!” Bubbles said, and lifted an arm, the one that had been pressing heavily against Cliff’s throat, to point at something

in the distance.

Cliff inhaled deeply.

There was something there in the distance, but Cliff couldn't quite make it out. It seemed like either a mountain or a gorge, but it was very ambiguous.

“Oh . . . it looks so *beautiful!*” Bubbles bubbled. “We must have a name for it. What do you think we should call it, Cliff?”

Cliff was inhaling and exhaling quickly and deeply.

“Um . . . it looks like a mountain. Or a gorge. So I think I'll call it . . . Mt. Oldufuji Gorge.”

“Oh, Cliffie, that's a *beautiful* name! And for such a *beautiful* thing! We could look at it all day long, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. . . .”

Slime Perceived as a Confluence of Semi-Glutinous Fibers

The Gubachuks were laughing uproariously and having a drunken celebration. They seemed quite intoxicated. Some of them were holding glass containers of some kind of liquid, which they were wasting. One of them fell over, and the container it was holding spilled out its contents, which flowed across the bottom of the boat.

“They look . . . intoxicated,” Deuce said. “And that stuff they're drinking is getting in my hair.”

“You know what I've learned after all this time being a secret agent, Deuce?” Francesca said.

“What?”

“Now is the time to make our escape.”

“That’s what I’m thinking also.”

All the Gubachuks seemed totally immersed in their drunken celebration. What they were celebrating, Deuce did not know. And it still wasn’t going to rain.

The beverage the Gubachuks had been drinking made a shallow pool in the bottom of the boat. It was making the ropes loosen up. Deuce and Francesca wiggled their way out of them and jumped over the side of the boat. None of the Gubachuks seemed to notice.

—

“Ugh! Yuck!” Francesca said. They were in the stream, only it wasn’t exactly *water* that was in the stream. It was some sort of green slime. It was disgusting.

Deuce looked at it, disgusted. It seemed to be made mostly out of some organic stuff. It was probably alive, although Deuce couldn’t know for sure. Deuce looked carefully. It was some sort of algae. It was made of thin green fibers that resembled cellulose. The sticky fibers ran together to form the slime that they were standing in. Deuce wished they weren’t standing in it anymore.

“Let’s get out of this muck,” Francesca said.

Not too far away, the boat continued on. The Gubachuks were still drunken. One of them fell overboard.

It Has a Mouth, and It Can Scream

The Termite King and Gruerk came to the ruins at last. There was a pyramid in the center. It rose above the rest of the ruins, casting its shadow over them.

Gruek groaned. “No! We . . . need to stop. We . . . have to . . . stop. We can’t . . . go on. I can’t take it anymore!”

The Termite King said, “Gruek, shut up. We are going to investigate these ruins in order to enlist the service of the local termites. So shut up. Do you want to be a traitor?”

“No . . . no . . . I . . .” Gruek said, and fell on the ground, unconscious.

There was a strange sound. The Termite King turned around. The sound seemed to come from Gruek.

“Oh, shut up with that racket! What are you up to now?”

Gruek remained unconscious. The Termite King cursed and went over to Gruek. The unconscious body was apparently making a weird electronic sound. The Termite King puzzled over this for a moment and then kicked Gruek. The unconscious body rolled over, revealing the object that Gruek had fallen on.

It had a mouth, and it could scream.

It looked like a potato. The Termite King picked it up and looked at it more carefully. It was a horrible-looking potato. It was dressed in a loincloth, and it had a mask on, and it appeared to be waving a sharp spear back and forth. The Termite King looked away in disgust.

The sound seemed to be coming from the thing’s mouth. It sounded like a scream.

Suddenly, the Termite King realized what it was. It was an alarm. Gruek’s falling on it had triggered it to start screaming. The screams were really loud. The Termite King looked around frantically. Nothing was there, but it was obvious that someone or something would show up soon. . . .

**A Rift Just Off the Islands of Loggerrithums: Latitude 368°
-54' S, Longitude -0° ??' 72" NNE**

“Oh, Cliffie!” Bubbles said. “Just look at that! Isn’t that so *pretty*?”

“Huh? What?” Cliff said.

“Look! Islands!”

To the right, in the distance, Cliff could see a small archipelago.

“Ooh! It looks so *beautiful*! What do you think we should call it?”

“Huh? Oh. Um . . . it looks . . . like one of those doggone math functions or whatever you call them.”

The chain of islands seemed to form a curve that twisted sharply to the right, stretching in that direction.

“You know . . . um . . . log . . . logamasomethings,” Cliff said.

“What?”

“Um . . . logarithms.” Cliff wasn’t sure how to spell the word.

“How do you spell that?”

“Um . . . L-O-G-G-E-R-R-I-T-H-U-M-S, I think,” Cliff said.

“Oh, Cliffie! That is such a *beautiful* word!” Bubbles bubbled.

“Um . . .” Cliff squinted. The earth seemed to open up a short distance to the left of the archipelago. Cliff squinted some more. It looked like there was a crack in the water, as if the ocean were splitting apart.

“What the heck *is* that?” Cliff said.

Gradient Bean Tar

It was slimy.

Deuce looked at it. It wasn't the same sort of slime as before. No, this was obviously different.

“Francesca, come take a look at this.”

“Huh? More slime?”

“But this looks like a different kind of slime. Just look at it. It has a different color and a different texture. Its appearance is different.”

“Hmmm . . .”

“Beans.”

“What?”

“It's made of beans. They're all compressed together to form . . . a paste, a kind of tar. And it's inclined above the other slime.”

“Hmmm . . . amazing.”

“It's . . . gradient bean tar.”

Enter a Gubachuk. Later: Enter Another

The Termite King squinted. There, in the distance, was a potato. The Termite King stared in disbelief. And then another potato appeared beside it. And then another. And then another. And then another.

There were potatoes everywhere now. They were all over the place.

The Termite King gulped.

They had formed a circle around the place where the Termite King stood and Gruek lay on the ground, unconscious.

The Termite King gulped again. Those potatoes seemed so threatening. Each of them was wearing a loincloth and a mask, and

each one was waving a spear threateningly back and forth in the air. One of them was waving two spears.

The Termite King cursed. *Where are the local termites when you need them?*

Lava Is the Plan the Plan Is . . . There Is No Plan

Cliff gulped. The rift in the water seemed to grow bigger and bigger and bigger.

“Oh, Cliffie! Isn’t that just so *beautiful?*” Bubbles bubbled.

A red substance bubbled out of the rift.

“So *beautiful!*” Bubbles bubbled.

The red substance bubbled.

Bubbles bubbled.

The red substance bubbled. It was lava.

Cliff shrieked.

“Huh? What’s the matter, Cliffie?” Bubbles bubbled.

The red substance bubbled. Bubbles in the red substance bubbled. Bubbles the person bubbled.

Cliff shrieked. “Holy monkey! It’s bubbling lava, Bubbles! Bubbles are bubbling, Bubbles! We’re all gonna die! Run for your life!”

The Great Upchuck

The universe upchucked.

Cliff Hangar found himself standing outside some type of school that had a sign that said *WARTHOGS ACADEMY* on it.

Someone was leaving the school in a surreptitious manner.

Darn! He was caught! And where was he anyway?

Cliff looked around for someplace to hide, saw a tree, and dashed behind it.

The kid approached, apparently completely possessed by a map with flickering colors, passed by and did not seem to notice Cliff. Cliff sighed.

The kid continued and walked out of sight, down the road past a large boulder.

Cliff looked at the school. *What kind of a place is this?* he thought. *This smells!*

The Beginning of Reality

After walking past the large boulder, Fergus Fungus stopped by the side of the road. The air smelled interesting enough, full of an aroma that evoked a sense of transcendental reality.

Somewhere a bird chirped. Somewhere a frog croaked. Somewhere a wombat was programming a computer.

All appeared normal. Fergus didn't have to deal with all that stupid magic stuff anymore. Reality had returned, and Fergus would finally experience it.

Shall I Compare Thee to an Asteroid?

I. SPUD

Shall I compare thee to an asteroid?
Thine essence hath a strange and eerie worth.
Thou art more barren, desolate, and void
Than all the solar wind that touches Earth.

Thine axis is quite tilted—three degrees!
Thy surface temperature is slightly hot;
That is the reason why thou hast no seas
And drops of surface water thou hast not.

When falling, thy sulfuric rain is brief,
For into vapour it doth quickly fade.
The clouds that hide thee are beyond belief.
Thine odd rotation is so retrograde!

So long as thy destructive fire can rage,
So long art thou the terror of this age.

The Barn Identity

THOMAS LEE JOSEPH SMITH

Thursday. Late at night. Ten miles off the coast of a very mysterious un-named landlocked country called Impossivania, a body floats in the churning sea. Overhead it is very cloudy . . . with high serious clouds up high . . . and with many mid-level clouds trying to rise in the organization . . . clouds staying late at the office . . . clouds trying to obtain better offices actually . . . maybe offices with windows . . . and a view . . . so they can watch the lower clouds . . . big low clouds overhead . . . all clouding up an otherwise standard prologue. A man walks on the deck of a small fishing vessel. He has amnesia too, but he's not the amnesia man with violent tendencies . . . so his story is of no importance. The amnesia victim we will be following is face down in the water . . . I guess breathing through his ears because when he is finally pulled from the water he's still alive. Which I don't mind so very much . . . 'cause it gives me something to work with.

Aside from some paper cuts and a stubbed toe the man in the wet suit is fine. Fished from the sea . . . the man is in luck, for one of the men on the fishing vessel is a neurosurgeon trying to earn a little extra money by baiting hooks and cutting off fish heads. The neurosurgeon begins by cutting off the man's wet suit. The zipper is hidden by a very clever little flap that hangs over the actual zipper and runs the entire length of the garment . . . so the neurosurgeon is cutting off the

wet suit. The tiny ship has a courageous crew but the storm was unexpected so the tiny ship gets tossed. A big wave hits the boat. The scissors plunge in. “Oops,” says the neurosurgeon. He starts cutting some more of the black rubber. “Oops,” he says again. Then, “Darn.” Then, “Shucks.” Then, “Well bloody tea bag hell . . . that’s his whole catenary system right there.” Another of the men from the fishing vessel comes in. “Want some coffee, skipper?” he says.

“Thanks, little buddy,” says the fish head specialist. He reaches out for the coffee but the big porcelain mug gets away from him, and the scalding hot coffee falls on the drowning victim’s back.

Immediately the man they pulled from the sea is on his feet. He is poised in a deep horse stance and his right hand is held in the tiger strike posture . . . while his left hand has its fingers straight and rigid . . . in the classic axe-hand through Krell steel *Green Hornet* movie maneuver. The doctor moves away. The man who brought the coffee kills himself.

“Who am I . . . ? Where am I . . . ?” the poised man asks.

“We fished you from the sea,” comes the answer.

“Have I been stabbed?”

The man with the scissors hides them behind his back. “Yes . . . apparently . . . it must have happened when you were on the yacht.”

“What yacht?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“No.”

“Maybe you have amnesia.”

“What . . . does . . . that . . . word . . . mean . . . ?”

“You have it.”

“Who am I?”

“When we pulled you out of the water, you were carrying these . . .” Spread on the table are twenty guns, a dozen knives, and six hand grenades. Then the doctor shows him a cloth with the initials DQ on it. It is actually a cloth napkin from an upscale Dairy Queen . . . but the doctor hasn’t recognized it as such. He thinks it may be a monogrammed handkerchief.

“With these to guide us, we believe we have figured out who you are. You are either a public school teacher from the Bronx or Dan Quayle.”

—

The bank is very large and the floors are polished and the windows look like they belong to a church or a bank.

“Can I help you?” the lady asks.

“It’s *May I help you*,” he answers, starting to remember vaguely a small Chinese restaurant somewhere in the Bronx.

“Do you have a numbered account?” she asks.

“Yes,” he says.

“Will you write the number down on this paper?”

He writes the number four and passes it to her. She hands him a key to a safety deposit box.

He carries the box to a private place and opens it. He looks down. The box is crowded. In the box there are three items. How can there be only three items and the box appear crowded . . . ? Think grocery store. Think about the first few checkout lanes. Here is where we find out what an item is. An item can be 12 things . . . if it is a dozen oranges . . . that’s an item. An item can be a whole box of donuts . . . dozens of donuts and it’s still one item. If Bruce Springsteen started going places with Jennifer Aniston . . . the

newspapers would soon swear that they were an item. So that's one way three items can fill up a safety deposit box.

But there is another way. It was a very small safety deposit box.

Inside there was a dozen oranges . . . a box of donuts . . . and a paper that said, "You are an assassin. And you kill people for money. Your union dues are months behind . . . the name you use is Michael Kane . . . your actual name is Cuddle-hips McTwinkypenis." He looked at that last name again. "No wonder I kill people," he said.

He climbed out the window and climbed down from the ninth floor. Not because the security guards were after him. Just because elevators in banks are so damn slow.

Outside a woman is standing by a tiny car.

"I'll give you ten thousand dollars to take me downtown," he says.

"Baby, for ten thousand dollars I'll take you *waayy* downtown . . . and I'll even wear a big fluffy pink angora sweater and call you Mr. DiMaggio."

He looks at her skeptically for a moment. "This isn't your car, is it?" he says, ". . . you're not part of this movie . . ."

"Oh, honey . . . we can film . . . we can film . . ." she purrs.

Suddenly the actress makes her appearance. "Sorry I'm late," she says.

They drive to his apartment.

A man in a uniform shoots at him and then tries to stab him and they fight, exchanging punches and strangle holds. The woman stands nearby, as weapon after weapon falls at her feet. She never picks any of them up. They look so heavy and oily. She never even likes getting gasoline on her hands as she fills her car. She waits for the fight to

end. Eventually the struggle is over.

The defeated man in the strange uniform holds the door open.

“He’s a very tough doorman,” she says.

“Very nearsighted though,” he answers.

When they get upstairs, there’s an even better fight. After this second battle the intruder sent to eliminate Cuddle-hips jumps out the window, which makes no sense until you realize he did it to avoid the doorman downstairs.

“Are you starting to remember who you are . . . ?” she asks him.

“No . . . but I’m beginning to remember why I stayed away a lot.”

—

He is paging through the phone book. He finds the section marked CIA. He runs his finger down the page, moving past the entry that says, OPERATIONS THAT ARE APPROVED, past the entry that says, OPERATIONS THAT ARE SOMEWHAT APPROVED, and he halts his finger next to the entry that says, UNAPPROVED OPERATIONS BEING HANDLED BY SMUG VILLAINS THAT ARE ANATHEMA TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF OUR CODE AND DUTIES. He dials the number. The phone rings six times, then a recorded message tells him to stay on the line . . . tells him that his call is important and that it will be answered in the order that it was received . . . after six Beatles tunes and one song by Pink, the phone gets answered.

“Don’t try to trace this call . . .” he says. “I won’t be on that long.”

“Darn . . .” someone says. “. . . well, go ahead anyway . . . what is it you want?”

“I want to know why you’re setting me up.”

“Why didn’t you kill Mubasso?”

“I went to his house and he was surrounded by children. I couldn’t go through with it.”

“What about the assignment you had in Marseilles last year, the assignment where you killed . . . let me think . . . let me remember . . . oh, yeah . . . now I remember . . . where you killed those *kids*.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot,” he said.

“Do you get amnesia after every job?”

“Maybe, how would I know . . . ?”

“We’re gonna bring you in.”

“How does that work . . . ? What do I do . . . ?”

“You and the CIA chief meet on a bridge for a shoot-out.”

“And then the winner comes in . . . ? works in an office . . . ?

“No, the dead guy keeps his job, and the winner gets to advance.”

“How can a dead guy keep his job . . . ?”

“Are you sure you work for the government . . . ?”

—

We are inside a giant Russian submarine. Liam Neeson was the captain first, but now the captain looks a lot like Harrison Ford. Harrison Ford is speaking: “I want everyone who can run a reactor thrown off this ship.”

“We already did that,” Liam says.

“Then take us down past crush depth,” says Ford.

“Why?” demands Neeson in a British accent that sounds very Russian.

“To prove this is a submarine movie and not a real submarine.”

“Okay by me,” Neeson shouts, “. . . but this will surely lead to a mutiny scene later.”

“So be it,” Ford says in a Russian accent that sounds very British. Michael Kane walks into the periscope room. “I am reporting for duty,” he says.

“Where were you stationed last . . . ?”

“Another movie . . . one about amnesia.”

“Would you like to tour the boat?”

“Da. Pip Pip. Cheerio,” he says. He walks forward past leaking pipes, past men in suits putting out fires. He walks past the galley and through missile silos and he passes by a great big pipe organ being played by Walter Pidgeon. And he strolls past men who speak only German and then men who speak only Japanese, and then men who speak only in French subtitles . . . and then there’s Burt Lancaster telling Spencer Tracy he’ll lose his command if he disobeys orders. He passes by Sean Connery, who steals the picture without saying a word, and he comes to a door that doesn’t look like the other doors. He enters and he finds the lady who drove him out of earlier danger . . . way back at the start of the movie. She is in hiding here. She has a small business now. She rents fiberglass swans that float on water and are moved about with foot pedals.

“Didn’t think I’d see you here,” she says, then starts kissing him.

“I got tired of the identity movie and snuck out of there and into the movie with submarines.”

“Me too,” she says.

“Why are you here renting these swans . . . ?”

“You’ll see . . .” she says. “. . . any minute now . . . you’ll see.”

The Nimoy Legacy

WILLIAM W.

I. Juan Diego

Juan Diego, with mechanical clippers,
Trimmed the already neat bushes and grass
At the base of the main building.
He had always been a perfectionist,
And he loved the smells of his work.

Stepping back to check,
He wiped his brow
And glanced at the hillside to his right.
There was the Hollywood sign, crisp in the clean air.

Juan Diego returned his gaze to the lawn
And looked for missed areas.
He liked these afternoons best,
Before the crowds came.

A week earlier, the ceremony had altered his routine
somewhat.
He didn't mind, but wished he could read the plaque better.

He was still new,
And his English still wasn't so good.

“Sir,” he said to an old Mexican fellow who stood admiring
the building.

The man was dressed neatly and was very old.

“Pardon me, sir. Can you tell me what the new plaque here
says?”

The man looked at Juan and smiled strangely.

“It says,” the man read, *“The Griffith Observatory
Celebrates the 150th anniversary of the Nimoy renovation
By re-dedicating this July 20th, 2155, the main theater
To Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Nimoy.”*

“Who were they?” Juan asked the old man.

“Donors who helped renovate the building,” the old man
replied.

“They gave, I believe, a million of their own dollars.

Even now that is quite a sum, but you can imagine what it
was then.”

A million dollars, Juan thought. “Why did they do this?”

The old man looked thoughtfully at Juan.

“Have you ever been inside?”

“No,” Juan answered.

The old man smiled.

“Why did they do this?” he said, repeating Juan’s question.
“To answer that, you must go inside and *see!*
Do it, my friend. Do it soon.”

That Saturday,
For the first time,
Juan Diego brought his family
To see their very first planetarium show.

II. Dr. José Enrique Garcia III

It rained steadily for nearly a week in the spring of ’53,
The kind of California rain that came with the El Niño.
It was a soft, drizzling, but persistent rain.
Occasionally, the sky would darken to a near-black
And strong winds would howl through the newly-green
foothills.

Dr. José Enrique Garcia III loved the weather.
He opened his office windows to welcome it.
The smell of the rain on the neatly mowed lawn.
He eased his aging body into the soft chair,
Switched off the lights,
And breathed in deeply.
How he loved the rain!
Memories swirled.

Swirl. 2080.

Fresh-minted Ph.D. and so wet behind the ears!
His mother and father had been so proud.
The years at CalTech had been hard.

Swirl. 2085.

The project accepted!
The funds allocated!
The design so tangible!
Barnard's Star!
He and his colleagues—so unused to drink!—had woken all
 with raging headaches and cotton tongues.
The celebration had been good!

Swirl. 2088.

Construction.
The trips back and forth, to and from the moon.
It was hard again, hard now too for his wife.
Harder on him than he could have imagined.
But the vision of Barnard's Star still burned brightly,
And the work proceeded well.

Swirl. 2090.

Maria!
Her new little eyes shone up at him,
And he longed to stay home.
He did this for her, too, though.

Swirl. 2108.

The fear as the new administration took office.

The fear as the project funding came up for renewal.

The spacecraft themselves were nearly finished.

The accelerator needed only time!

The speech before Congress. What dread!

But he was the natural one, and his colleagues trusted him.

Swirl. 2120.

Launch!

The nanobots away!

Accelerated at an unheard of 80% light speed,

Whirled the circumference of the moon before

Being fired by the millions on their way.

Swirl. 2127.

The waiting.

They'd be arriving now.

Would it work?

The waiting, the waiting, the waiting...

Swirl. 2153. March 10, 2:57 am PST.

First telemetry received.

III. José Enrique Garcia, Jr.

The sun beat down hard and hot,

But the excitement was palpable.

José sat with his friends on folding chairs on the fresh cut lawn.

Occasionally he turned and craned his neck to see if he could spot his family.

The speakers spoke on and on.

The sound system was poor, so they couldn't be understood. José fidgeted and adjusted his sunglasses and looked at the program.

Finally—finally!—it was time.

Professor Carlson, the Department Chair, was now at the podium.

One by one, he read their names.

One by one, José's friends stood and walked to the stage.

And then it was his turn, too.

He was the family's first.

He shook Dr. Carlson's hand and said, "Thank you, sir,"

But more, he said thanks in his heart to his mom and dad.

He held his degree high over his head before leaving the stage

And couldn't help from crying.

IV. José Enrique Garcia

The Garcia family loved their time together,
Barbequing in the park with the radio playing loudly after
Sunday Mass.

Little José, the baby of the family,
Ran and tumbled with his friend Eduardo in the fragrant,
fresh-cut grass.
His mother talked and cooked with the other mothers,
While his father watched.

The day came when José and Eduardo were old enough for
bikes.

The freedom!

One day, exploring, they headed deep into the park, up the
back road past the landfill.

Neither had gone this way before, neither knew what to
expect.

The pungent smell of the eucalyptus filled their lungs as
they pedaled harder and harder,

Higher and higher,

To the top of the mountain.

“José, what’s that?” Eduardo had cried, he being the
stronger of the two and having reached the top first.

José joined his friend, panting hard and wishing he’d
brought water.

He looked in the direction Eduardo pointed.

A domed building sat on the edge of the mountain, Los

Angeles spread away behind it.

“It’s the Observatory,” José replied.

“What’s that?” Eduardo asked. He’d never seen such a building.

“I don’t know.”

Weeks later, José’s Uncle Juan had come to visit from San Diego.

“The Observatory,” Uncle Juan explained, “isn’t really an observatory at all. It is a planetarium.”

“A what?” José asked.

“The dome you saw is a screen, and inside a machine projects points of light to make it look like the stars at night. José, do you know what astronomy is?”

“No.”

“Astronomy, José, is the study of the stars and planets. This is important, José. Many years ago, a wise man, Father Girán in Mexico, told me that the men and women who study the stars and planets are ‘the chosen.’ That is what he said, José, and I believe it is true.”

“Why?”

“Well, José, the best way for me to answer is to show you.”

The next day,
José, Eduardo, José’s father and Uncle Juan
Piled into the dirty old Ford and drove the windy street past
 the rich people’s homes
To the top of the hill that looked out over Los Angeles,
To see the stars,
To learn about astronomy,
To learn about “the chosen,”

To go to the Griffith Observatory . . .

Author’s Note

*“Uncle Juan” and “Father Girán” in “The Nimoy Legacy” are based on real people. Juan Carrasco is (or, at least, was—I don’t know if he still is) the senior night assistant at the Palomar Observatory near San Diego, CA, and Father Salvador Girán was the Carrasco family’s parish priest. Richard Preston wrote about the Palomar Observatory in his book *First Light*. There, Mr. Preston tells the story of how Father Girán teaches the Carrasco kids about astronomy when they are young. Much later, just before he died, he learns of Juan Carrasco’s new position at Palomar. (Mr. Carrasco had previously been a barber. Now he was working with such*

luminaries as James Gunn, Gene and Caroline Shoemaker, Maarten Schmidt and Don Schneider.) This is what Father Girán has to say:

“My mind,” Father Girán said, “doesn’t remember things anymore. I would like to discuss astronomy with you, Juanito, but I find I have forgotten it. Yet I remember those nights . . . those nights when I told you about the stars. All those nights . . . You sit there with those astronomers. You listen to what they say. Now, you know, astronomers never get rich. But if you stay with them, you will learn, Juanito. Because astronomers are the chosen. They are the chosen” (First Light, 1st revised ed., p. 231).

Les Fleurs de la stupidité

POMME D. TERRE

Cette semaine, j'ai acheté les fleurs de la stupidité. Elles sont mes enfants.

—Maman, nous sommes stupides, m'ont dit mes enfants, les fleurs de la stupidité.

—Bonne nuit, mes filles, ai-je dit.

—

Ce soir, la Directrice revient chez moi. Elle s'appelle Potatova Spudsky.

Elle dit: —Je viens pour ta fille.

Je dis: —Laquelle?

—Je viens pour ta fille Iris.

—Pourquoi?

—Elle est une fleur de la stupidité.

Iris vient à moi. —Adieu, maman.

Après, Iris va à la voiture avec Madame Spudsky. Elle ne retournera jamais.

—Adieu, ma fille, ma fleur, lui dis-je.

—

Hier soir, mes enfants dînaient avec moi.

—Maman, a dit Delphinium. Pourquoi est-ce que nous sommes stupides?

—Je ne sais pas, lui ai-je dit.

—Mais, maman, a dit Petunia. Pourquoi est-ce que tu ne sais pas?

—Vous êtes stupides, lui ai-je dit.

—Mais, maman, a dit Iris, on ne comprend pas, nous.

—

Après le dîner, la Directrice est venue chez moi. Elle est venue pour Petunia.

—Pourquoi? ai-je dit.

—Elle est une fleur de la stupidité.

Après, Petunia est allée à la voiture avec Madame Spudsky. Je ne la reverrai jamais.

—Adieu, ma fleur, ai-je dit.

—

Hier matin, je suis allée au jardin. Mes filles, mes fleurs, étaient magnifiques. Petunia, Iris, et Delphinium sont venues à moi.

—Bonjour, mes filles, mes fleurs, ai-je dit.

—

Demain, la Directrice viendra à ma maison. Elle viendra pour Delphinium.

—Pourquoi? dirai-je.

—Elle est une fleur de la stupidité.

Après, Delphinium ira à la voiture avec Madame Spudsky. Elle ne retournera jamais.

—Adieu, ma fille, ma fleur, dirai-je. Adieu, mes fleurs.

—

Après, j'irai au jardin. Le ciel sera bleu, et l'herbe sera verte, mais mon jardin sera vacant. Mes fleurs seront mortes.

Fall of the House of Escher

THOMAS R.

Loving the house and the loving the man who designed its
 strange symmetries
Its strange water flowing up
The stairs that go everywhere and nowhere at all
Columns at impossible angles
His charming pet lizards

Reality begins to sink after the third year of life there
Confusion, where to go?
Bathing difficult
Frustration with the design mounting
Still there are the lovely views

Ten years of life and the novelty and charm fly like geese
 both ways away
Depression, and anger
She raises the kids and makes the money virtually alone
While he sits eating junk food waiting for “architectural
 inspiration”
Alcohol begins to look good to her

Burning and churning and stoking the fire merrily she sings
away

Burn the columns, the stairs, the lizards

All must die now the kids are grown

Drinking and sinking and rising again

While angels and demons dance over her head

She delights in this payback

If only he had died earlier!

Behind the Scenes at the Editorial Offices

THE INVINCIBLE SPUD

A Third-Person Pseudoautobiographical Escapade

One day, at the editorial offices of Plasibob's Digital Realms of Fiction & SCI FANTASY . . .

The Anti-Spud Conspiracy was a success in progress. Ed Itor, editor of *Plasibob's Digital Realms of Fiction & SCI FANTASY*, leaned back in his chair and gazed at the wall. There was the Spud Counter, which every SF magazine had in its office. Designed to count the number of manuscripts from The Invincible Spud submitted to each magazine, it was a sort of contest among the different SF mags. Gardner Dozois just called Ed to let him know that *Asimov's* had just received Spud's 500th submission, an all-time record. No other mag, not even *Analog*, with 428, and *F&SF*, with 452, could beat that. But the Spud Counter at *Plasibob's Digital Realms of Fiction & SCI FANTASY* showed a forlorn zero. Ed sighed and looked through the slush pile for some manuscripts to read. And there, stuck to the bottom of another manuscript, was a submission from The Invincible Spud. Ed almost jumped back in shock. He hadn't noticed it the first

time. Well, that was a good thing. A definite reject, of course, as the rules of the Anti-Spud Conspiracy demanded. Ed could be as creative as he wanted. He ripped open the envelope and read it. And was it good! It was the best thing he had read in a while. This thing should definitely win both the Hugo and Nebula Awards. Unfortunately, *Plasibob's Digital Realms of Fiction & SCI FANTASY* was in on the Anti-Spud Conspiracy, and they had to reject every manuscript from *The Invincible Spud*. Ed sighed and started writing his own personal comments on the form rejection letter.

Meanwhile, at the offices of Fantasy & Science Fiction . . .

John Joseph Adams leaned back in his chair, gazing at the towering slush pile before him. He sipped from his can of orange soda, wondering when he'd get through with all those manuscripts. He put the can down and reached for the envelope on top, ripping it open. Inside was a submission from *The Invincible Spud*.

"Oh, great," he mumbled to himself. Not another one. This particular author didn't seem to know a single thing about the art and craft of writing. Every single Spud story seemed to be a bunch of words put together without regard for grammar or meaning.

He flipped through the story, scanning it quickly. Well, this was new. This was the first Spud story *F&SF* had received that was handwritten. Attached to the front page was a little Post-It note:

Sorry, dude. My computer, like, blew up for some reason.
So I wrote this in pen. Have fun reading, dude.

John groaned. But, he had to admit, the writing did look good, even though it didn't make any sense. The elegant, flowing script evoked the aesthetic centers of John's brain. He looked over the pages, taking in the beautiful writing. But beautiful writing didn't quite transliterate to the pages of *F&SF*.

Shaking his head, John typed up a rejection letter. In it, he included "There's nice writing here," meaning, of course, the beautiful, elegant handwriting. Then he folded the rejection letter in half and put it in the SASE.

GVG came by and poked his head into the room.

"John, I haven't gotten any good manuscripts from you lately. Has the slush pile been that bad?"

John turned. "Science fiction is dying, Gordon. Nobody seems to care about this stuff anymore."

"None of it grabs you?"

"Nope."

"Well, you never know. Maybe the next one will."

Gordon turned and left the room. John could hear his footsteps disappearing down the hall.

Then he looked back at the slush pile. The next envelope looked really big.

"No, not another 20,000-page fantasy series," he groaned.

He reached for it and opened it. A giant, slimy hair-covered arm with pulsing veins reached out and grabbed him by the throat, pulling him into the envelope. As the thing pulled him in, one thought remained in his mind: Gordon was right. This one really did grab him.

And where is GVG going so fast?

A short time later, the editorial offices of Asimov's Science Fiction are being overrun by . . . zombies. Our heroes arrive to find Gordon Van Gelder laughing very evilly. Something has gone wrong. A great conspiracy is at hand, something to do with red hair. No one knows. And where's Gardner? Of course, by the time they arrive, our heroes are too late. . . .

“Who, me?” Spud said, confused.

“Mo-o-o-an,” they moaned. “Mo-o-o-an.”

Evilly laughing, GVG evilly laughed an evil laugh in an evil laughing manner.

“What the—?” Spud said. “Hey! You're not the real GVG! You're—you're—”

A zombie flew across the room and knocked GVG over.

“What the—?” Spud lifted the mask from GVG's face. “No way! It's . . . Professor Hyde White!”

“Who?” someone said.

Spud turned around. “NO!!!!”

Suddenly . . .

. . . somewhere out in space, orbiting the Earth, a bunch of Zgvorklobians noticed something very unusual going on in a certain editorial office in New York City.

“Eh . . . we are detecting the presence of the Undead . . .” one of them said, munching on hurricane nachos.

“What? Didn't I tell you not to eat those hurricane nachos?”

They'll give you indigestion!" The other one slapped the first one on the head.

"Ouch!"

"What's this about the Undead? Doesn't *Undead* mean *alive*? What's so unusual about organisms that are alive?"

"Well . . . this planet is supposed to be demolished today. . . . We can't have living things on it! Think what will happen when the press gets a hold of this! Ohhh . . . *Everybody* will know! We'll be ruined forever! Oh, the humanity!"

Meanwhile, back at the editorial offices . . .

"Ouch! Let go of me!" Spud screamed.

"Mo-o-o-an," the zombies moaned. "Mo-o-o-an."

"Continue with your work, please," Gardner said. "I want this filthy tuber out of my office right now."

"Gardner! What are you doing? What's going on?" Spud yelled.

"Oh, don't worry about it, Spud, my friend. You'll find out soon enough."

The zombies threw Spud out the 11th floor window of 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-6901.

Several months later . . .

Even after all these months, there was just something missing. The lack of submissions from The Invincible Spud troubled Gardner deep inside, and everything just wasn't the same without the presence of that indigestible, er, indomitable tuber around. Those 500+ spudsubs

in the slush pile had lasted for quite a while after that fateful incident, but now there were no more, and the slush pile looked much smaller.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in!” Gardner said.

The door opened, and SlaveBot, formerly known as EditorBot, rolled in on its wheelpods. “I have a package for you, Great Editor.”

“Ooh, a package, eh? One of those mail bombs?”

“My sensors have not registered the presence of any dangerous materials.”

“Ah, good! Put it on the desk. I’ll look at it sometime.”

Gardner resumed reading the manuscript, or rather, *started* reading it. It was kind of difficult to peruse, as its illegible scrawlings were inscribed upon toilet paper by means of green crayon. Apparently, the author had used the entire roll. Gardner hoped it hadn’t been used for some other purpose previously.

The manuscript started, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . .” Gardner put the thing down. It sounded horrible. Really, who *cared* about stuff like that? And it was *way* too long, even though *Asimov’s* had published all sorts of trash lately, including one 20,000-page high fantasy series filled with elves, dwarfs, dragons, unicorns, and all sorts of other mythical creatures, not to mention hurricane nachos drenched in tangerine juice, chocolate syrup, and Tabasco sauce. Oh, gotta love those hurricane nachos. . . .

Gardner’s mouth began to water. *Hurricane nachos* . . . “Must . . . have . . . hurricane . . . nachos . . .”

The package on the desk looked tasty, even though it was made of paper. Gardner grabbed it, opened it, and stared at the strangely-shaped object inside.

It was a Gardner Dozois action figure.

“Who’s this?” Gardner said. “Sure looks ugly.”

Attached was a note that read: “Dear Gardner: Please autograph this action figure. Thanks!”

“Uh . . . OK.” Gardner grabbed a pen and scribbled a signature on it, then stuffed it in the undersized SASE, which began to rip.

There was a knock on the door.

“Yes? Come in,” Gardner said.

Brian, Trevor, Stephanie, and Mary barged into the room. “Look, Gardner,” Stephanie said. “We’ve had enough of this junk. You’re not even the real Gardner, for crying out loud!”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “And we don’t like how you’re treating us. We don’t like how every few months, the editorial staff changes. I mean, whatever happened to Linda? And Leah and Valerie and Paul and Arien?”

“Yeah,” Trevor said. “And what’s with this stuff about ‘Editorial Assistant’ and ‘Assistant Editor’ and ‘Technical Assistant’? What’s with the different names?”

“Um . . . hold on, will you?” Gardner said. “I’ll be right back.”

And with that, the editor of *Asimov’s* dashed out of the room and down the hall to the editorial offices of *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*.

“Yes?” Professor and Editor Hyde White looked up. “Oh, it’s you, Great One! How may I be of service?”

“I’m having some, uh, technical difficulties,” Gardner said. “Look, are you enjoying this job?”

“Why, of course, Great One . . .”

“The zombies are treating you OK, right?”

“Yes, Your Greatness.”

“Well,” Gardner said. “I’m having a bit of a problem. You see, my editorial assistants are trying to kick me out. I need your help. Do you remember what happened several months ago, that thing with that stupid potato and the red hair? Something got totally messed up. If I recall correctly, this was what happened . . .”

And with that, Gardner Flozois, formerly an ordinary gardener who happened to be abducted one day by strange beings, launched into an account of the strange and terrible events of one weird day several months before. . . .

“Wait a minute,” Gardner Flozois said. “Didn’t you appear in one of the old episodes of *Scooby-Doo*?”

“What?” Professor Hyde White said. “I don’t remember. . . .”

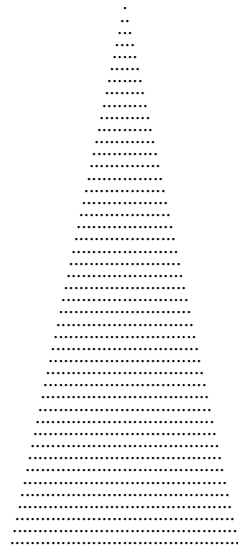
“Anyway,” Gardner said. “Eating poopie certainly doesn’t sound appealing. That is, I . . . well, about the strange and terrible events of one weird day several months ago . . .”

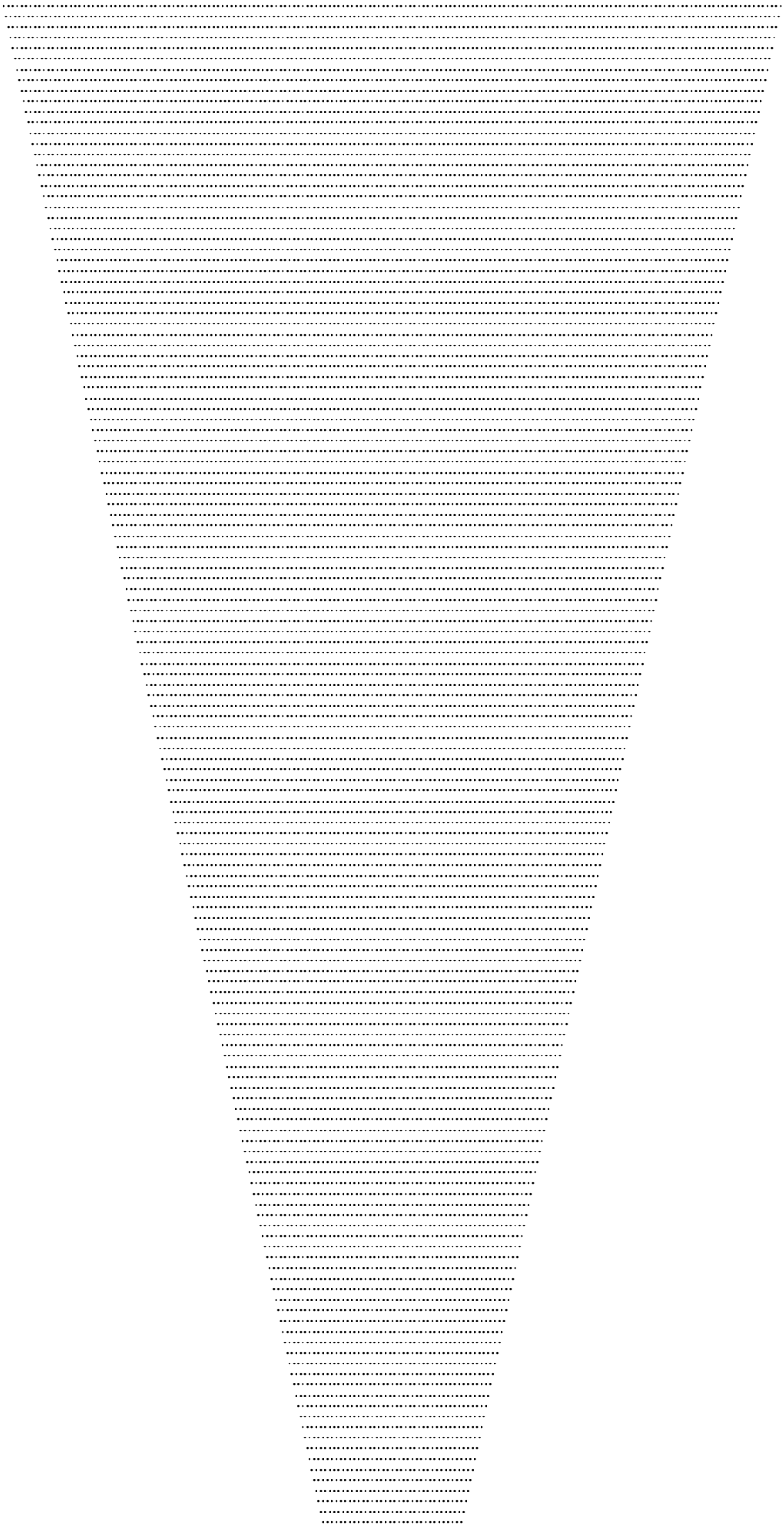
“Are you launching into another flashback, Your Greatness?”

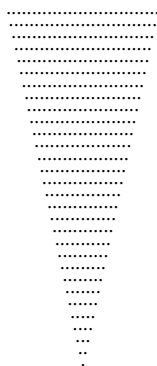
“Ah, yes. If I recall correctly . . .”

“Is everything getting fuzzy?”

“Yes, I believe it is . . .”
“You know, your memories are awfully fuzzy . . .”







Meanwhile, somewhere else . . .

“Oh, you have an alcohol problem,” a voice said. “You know you shouldn’t be using alcohol.”

“What?” Gardner Flozois said.

“That’s right. You’ve got to be in control of yourself and not let yourself be controlled by the powers of ethanol. You’ve got to envision your goals and strive to achieve them, and you can’t do that if you drink too much alcohol. You have to get up, look your goals in the metaphorical face, stand up, climb up that mountain, and get across all those obstacles that block your way and roll across your feet and crush your toes so hard it really, *really* hurts and you have to jump up and down and scream unprintable obscenities at the top of your lungs.”

“Unprintable obscenities? Like—”

“No, don’t say it. You know you’re not supposed to say words like that. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Huh? Where am I? Who are you?”

“I am the real Gardner Dozois. Remember that stupid action figure someone sent you and you signed several months ago? That was me. Or rather, that was a representation of me. I mean, it was just

a piece of plastic. Remember how you said I looked ugly? Well, darn it, I might be ugly, but I'm not [bleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep]ing stupid. *Oh . . .* They never got my authorization to make that piece of [bleep]. I'd be up and suing them if it weren't for this . . . if I weren't dead and floating around like an intoxicated balloon."

"Eh?"

"That's right. I am the original Gardner Dozois, back from the dead. Well, I'm still dead, but you know what I mean. That is, I might be dead, or all this might be a hallucination, a figment of *your* imagination, and I'm not really floating up here because I'm not here. But I don't think that's possible because I *am* here, or I think I am, and that kind of suggests I can't *not* be here, and so I'm here. But this might still all be a hallucination on your part. Reality is subjective, after all, and I might be both here and not here, until you open the box and take a look inside, or so says Erwin Schrödinger. And, although I like cats and have cats for pets, I am not a cat."

"Huh?"

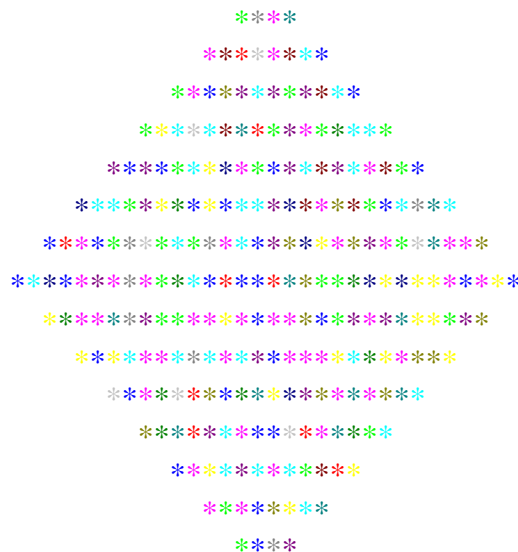
"So open the box," Gardner Dozois said and pointed to the inconspicuous box lying on the coffee table. "It's a TimeViewer™ device, compliments of TimeVision™, Inc. Using it you can look into the past, the present, and the future, and all points in between, including that fateful day several months ago at the editorial offices of *Asimov's Science Fiction* on the 11th floor of 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-6901."

"Eh? What?"

"From what I can see in your thoughts, you've been trying unsuccessfully to remember that fateful day when something *really* weird happened but haven't had any success. Your futile attempts at

recollection were interrupted by the onslaught of random reality shifts, nonsense jabbering, and unruly fuzziness. So I, Gardner Dozois, recommend that you, Gardner Flozois, look into the box and aid our reader(s) in discovering the true origins of the strange and inexplicable events of that very weird day several months ago. Go! Fulfill your mission! To stupidity and beyond, or whatever the saying is.”

So Gardner Flozois grabbed the box, opened it, and looked inside at the strange and mysterious contents.



“Whoa . . .” Gardner Flozois said. “It’s so fuzzy. In color, too.”

“Try harder,” Gardner Dozois said. “I know you can. Look into the light . . .”

Inside the light . . .

Gardner sits at his desk, reading the manuscript. What the heck has The Invincible Spud sent him now? This piece of crud doesn’t make

any sense. He's read the first two pages and skimmed through the rest of it, but it's just a bunch of words put together without any regard for grammar or meaning. He shrugs and pulls out a copy of the Number 3 rejection, which he always sends Spud. He picks up his pen and thinks about what he's going to write on it. Just three or four words, not much. Finally, he inscribes: "Bad." No, that wouldn't do. It would hurt Spud's feelings. Something else. He writes "Not" in front of it and then "Keep trying" after it, although he's not sure he wants to read any more lousy manuscripts from The Invincible Spud. *Oh, well*, he thinks as he stuffs the rejection in the SASE. At least his comments were true, sort of. The story really was "not bad." It was worse.

Also . . .

Gardner opened the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper. It was the author's cover letter, which he naturally ignored. He picked the sheet of paper up and found that there was nothing underneath. Was it a cover letter, then, if it didn't cover anything? Gardner put the letter down on the table again and stared at the words for a while. Was this another one of those stupid joke submissions, the story that wasn't there? He groaned. Then he picked up the sheet of paper. He was about to toss it into the to-be-recycled stack when he saw that there was writing on the other side. He looked at it. It was the first page of a story. *Huh*. He read it. It was pretty good. The only bad part was that it ended in the middle of a sentence, just when the action was getting started. . . . *Oh, well*. Gardner grabbed the Number One rejection and prepared to stuff it in the SASE along with the cover letter, since it was his policy to return the first page of the manuscript

back to the author. Then he noticed there was no SASE. He looked at the original envelope, the one the author had sent. Noticing something very weird, he flipped it over. The back served as the front of the SASE, with the author's address, *Asimov's's* address as the return address, and a stamp that looked like someone had cut the top half off one stamp and the bottom half off another and put them together, probably to reuse already postmarked stamps. How cheap was that? Too cheap. But it was *Asimov's's* policy, after all, to reply to all manuscripts if they came with SASEs. Just as Gardner was about to put the cover letter/story and the Number One rejection into the envelope, however, he noticed that there was writing on the back of the first page. It was the second page. He looked at it for a moment, wondering if there was something awfully weird going on. Then he dismissed it as probably another optical illusion and read the second page. It was interesting. Unfortunately, however, it, too, ended in the middle of the sentence, just when the main character, who happened to be an unnamed editor of a certain SF magazine whose title started with the letter A, was flipping over a page. So he flipped over the page and saw the third page. He read on, and when he got to the end of it, he saw that on the back of the sheet of paper was the next page. So he read on. . . .

At the same time, though not quite . . .

The robot editor leaned back in its chair, gazing across the office. Ever since Gardner had been abducted that night by a bunch of aspiring authors in a UFO, EditorBot had served as the editor of *Asimov's* (somewhat ironic, considering the robot stories the Good

Doctor was famous for), using its patented program to determine the quality of the manuscripts in order to decide whether or not to publish them. Unknown to everyone else, the program included random numbers (or rather, pseudorandom numbers), so that the exact same story submitted twice might be rejected the first time but accepted the second.

EditorBot was now reading the manuscript that lay across its desk. Maybe *Asimov's* should accept electronic submissions. Those would be much easier to read. The manuscript was entitled "You no am Superman! ME am Superman!" EditorBot scanned through it, reading every single word, a task that had been impossible for the former editor, and processed a personal rejection letter containing the author's name, the title, and a three-page critique of the story. It was good to encourage writers, after all. The rejection letter also included a scale on which EditorBot showed how the story compared to the other manuscripts received by *Asimov's*.

All this happened in less than a second. It was so efficient to have a robot editor, EditorBot thought. It wondered why they didn't have one before.

It printed out the rejection and enclosed it in the SASE, which took five seconds. If *Asimov's* accepted electronic submissions, EditorBot would already have gone through at least a dozen more manuscripts. Something definitely had to change. The big bosses would have to be convinced.

Later. . . .

EditorBot leaned back in its chair, scanning manuscript after

E, he thought. *Now that's bewildering!*

Then he read Spud's submission, a strange story called "Behind the Scenes at the Editorial Offices." He smiled and leaned back in his chair.

"This is good," he mumbled to himself. "I'll take it."

Report from British Intelligence: Biblical Plague from the Deeps A HIGH-PLACED ANONYMOUS SOURCE

The following has been received from a correspondent in Britain who wishes to remain anonymous. She works in a long-range planning office of the British government and has connections in the intelligence services. The most we are at liberty to reveal is that they apparently do not include MI-6, James Bond's outfit.

The report is couched in mysteriously oblique terms: it starts in medias res with a reference to a satirical article, and the film scenario for "teaching the Bible" may be a clever cover for a leak of information about top-secret experiments. The scenario it suggests may be science fiction or futurology. Take your pick.

The author in question is William Sierichs, Jr., who wrote the article, "Christian Cinema" for the New Orleans Secular Humanist Association. On the other hand, Mr. Sierichs's proposal does strike an attractive ploy for teaching the Bible. My favourite: Leviticus 11:20—*All the winged insects that walk on all fours are detestable to*

you (New Revised Standard Version, 1989).

My vision is of monstrous flying insects which have evolved from mosquitoes and now have four legs instead of six, owing to genetic experiments by a mad scientist who thought he could control them by using salt water in his breeding pools.

The experiments go awry, as expected, and the huge monsters break out of their enclosure and escape. Having a preference for salinity, they find a haven in the ocean near Japan, where their forty-foot-long larvae begin attacking cruise ships.

When fighter aeroplanes attempt to destroy them, the larvae disappear from sight and an eerie calm prevails. Suddenly an undersea earthquake roils the ocean, and then adults rise to the surface, take flight, and assemble into a deafening buzzing squadron. Quite naturally, they head for Tokyo, where all monstrous creatures go, from Godzilla onwards. Like all other such creatures, they demonstrate a dietary preference for beautiful women.

Interspersed through the film are the political rivalries, terrorism, evil axis, environmentalists, PETA, etc. Let no stone go unturned, to quote an expression which is used fourteen times daily in Parliament.

Now you have the best of all worlds: Moses, war, love story, *Titanic*, science fiction, dinosaurs, politics, save the environment, and global warming, with anti-death penalty advocates taking up a new position to defend the oversized mosquitoes.

I'm quite pleased with it, actually.

[name withheld by request]

Hot Cocoa with Catherine N.

THOMAS R.

I'd worked with Catherine for a few years before I found out her secret. At first I wouldn't have assumed she had one. She just seemed like an ordinary small-town High School teacher. Only odd thing was she was unmarried and, weirder still, wasn't related to anyone in the area. Here it seems everyone is related to everyone else and anyone who isn't married after a certain age is deemed "peculiar." She got a pass on the latter as she seemed to be in her mid twenties, but everyone tried to set her up because of the former. Since she was unrelated to the men here, it was an opportunity they rarely got. This almost was soured for them when she said her family was originally from Toledo, Ohio, and was related to the Danders. However, they figured the Danders hadn't been in Ohio for more than a century so she was still fair game. She was considered attractive enough the Dander men were especially pleased. Like I said, normal small-town stuff, and her irritation was even normal.

Until I found out she was immortal, although she hates the term.

"I am not immortal, don't be silly. I mean, really, is a turtle immortal? Is a sequoia immortal? Of course not, they'll die and I will too"—Cathy.

"The pictures though, and the way your toe regrew. You have to be like a hundred and hard to kill"—me.

She smiles. “I am actually more like a thousand years old. My aging started slowing about when I was sixteen. And I *was* born in Toledo—Toledo, *Spain*.”

“You don’t look Hispanic,” I say unwisely.

“Don’t be an idiot. Have you ever even been to Spain or known anyone there?” She is annoyed, then calms. “I guess I can’t blame you, lived your life with nothing but Anglos and don’t know the difference between Spanish and Hispanic.”

“Hey, John Travers is Arapaho or something and then there’s that half-Vietnamese kid Bill Dander had from the war.” I tried to defend the place for some odd reasons.

She just sighs and switches the subject: “I guess you’d have a lot of questions; I’ll answer them as best I can.”

“You mostly seemed so ordinary; is that an act?”

“Not really. The truth is my life is pretty dull. Most of us try to live carefully, but I lived that way even more than most. I was a nun for the first five centuries or so. Not an especially remarkable one either. Then I was mostly a housewife, or that era’s equivalent. I eventually became a teacher and moved to America. That’s it.”

“So there are others; do they live more exciting lives?” I’m intrigued.

“Yes, many of them even fit the stereotype I bet you have in mind. Rich, and colorful with large mansions surrounded by antiques. I don’t think they are happier than me, but maybe they feel different about it.”

“Do they live off human blood or drink the youth of the living?”

She makes a face. “Don’t be disgusting. Of course we don’t.”

“Well, do you secretly rule the world?”

“No, heavens, why would we want to do that?” She is tolerant, but annoyance with my idiocy is obvious.

So I try to improve the impression. “I guess you have a point. Look, I’m sorry if I’m disappointing you, but I’m not exactly used to this. I thought I knew you.”

“You actually are taking it fairly normally. You’d be surprised how often I get the vampire question. Still, do try a bit more,” she says.

“Okay, is it something in the family history or is it some medicine you take?”

She is pleased. “Much better. It doesn’t run in families, but we’re pretty sure it’s genetic. I haven’t kept up with the literature like I should, though.”

“There’s studies on this?”

“Sure, some of us are doctors, but I never had a head for science so I don’t follow it very well.”

“Maybe I could. I know I seem dumb to you, but I am the biology teacher.”

“Okay, I’ll give you some of M’Kinti’s studies. He’s the main doctor, he works in South Africa. Well, anything else? I’d like to make the cocoa now; it is getting later than I’d hoped.”

“Well, it’s kind of dumb, but I was wondering if you ever had, you know, relationships with famous historical people.”

“Yup, got to make that cocoa; I’ll be back in a jiff.”

The cocoa was good, and she never did answer me. Although once in the teacher’s lounge, the school librarian said she had a fondness for De Maupassant, which caused Catherine to giggle and say, “So did I. So did I.”

When she left, she gave me some ugly drawing which I threw away. Later I found out it was an original Goya. She also told me, “I hope I was right to trust you, Mr. Dander,” and in least in that I didn’t disappoint.

The Solar Experiment

WILLIAM W.

It was in the summer of 1998 that my now-wife then-girlfriend made the astonishing claim. It was morning, and we were driving northbound on the 110 through the heart of Los Angeles. It was then that she burst out (in a swelter of frustration):

“The sun is *always* shining on my side when we drive!”

She squinted against the radiant blast and cursed deeply against the laws of stellar fate.

I, being the one of superior education, patiently tried to explain the folly of her conviction.

“The sun isn’t always on your side,” I said.

“If it were, the planet would be flip-flopping at our every turn!”

This logic, needless to say, carried no weight with her.

“It’s a psychological effect,” I tried again.

“You just *notice* the sun when it is on your side.”

—
Her glare grew worse.

“Look,” I said, not knowing my own best interest,
“let’s do an experiment! Let’s keep a record
of the times when the sun is on your side.”

This, of course, was not
the correct approach to the
problem, but it seemed so to me at the time.

Well.

To proceed, we (we?—ha! “I”) began by
stocking up on the proper equipment:
One of those baby-shade window thingees from Toys-R-Us
(for her),
And a notepad to record results
(for me).

On our very next outing,
the great experiment was afoot!

“Is the sun in your eyes?”

I inquired with absolute objectivity.

“*Yes!*” she cried, and scribble scribble scribble
went I in the notebook.

“Now?”

“*Yes!*”

“Now?”

“*Yes!*” she cried, as she struggled with the

baby-shade thingee.

After a week, the results were in.

I was flabbergasted.

Astonished.

Dumbfounded!

It was true!

The sun *really* was on her side! *Always!*

What mystery was this?!

I determined to approach the problem
scientifically.

Surely, I thought, if the sun is always on her
side, this must imply that the very heavens
are rotating manically as we drive.

How, though, can I test this hypothesis,
I wondered—stymied, since (safe driver
that I am), I always keep my eyes on the road.

Then the needed experiment came to me
as in a dream,
and I was determined to give it a go.

Three days later.

We sat with a wondering friend in the parking lot
of the Griffith Observatory.

I looked at the lawn-statue of

the astronomical giants
And wondered if I would soon join their ranks.

“You drive,” I instructed my friend
as I got out of the car.
(The plan was to keep my now-wife then girlfriend
in the passenger seat, armed with her baby-shade
thingee.

This was her normal seat, and I wanted to
isolate variables, you see.)

“Wait until I call you with the signal,” I added,
and handed my friend a phone.

I jogged in.

The show was something or other,
I don't remember what.

Dr. E.C. Krupp was at the helm.

I sat down anxiously and bore with
little patience the banal warnings about
flash photography and
proper exits for pee-mergencies.

(A pasty Midwestern tourist stuffed away a
disposable Kodak and mumbled about
“how inconsiderate the planetarium people are,
not allowing photographs.”)

The show began.

—
Dr. Krupp, in his usual style, bantered away,
witty as ever.

The music swelled, the lights dimmed, and
the mighty Zeiss Mark IV
burst forth with its heavenly stuff.

I hit the speed dial on my phone.

“Operation Joshua, go now!”
I whispered to my friend,
And the pasty woman gave me a “Shush!”
I leaned back against
the legendary Griffith headrest
and waited.

“. . . then you *arc* to *Arc-turus* . . .” Krupp was saying.
When
the universe shifted.

The stars rocked in drunken fashion;
I shouted for joy!
The laws of the universe *were* in conspiracy,
keeping the sun
in my now-wife then-girlfriend’s eyes!

Poor Dr. Krupp struggled valiantly
with the controls,

alas, to no avail.
He did, however, come up with a witty joke.

The audience rapidly succumbed to sea-sickness;
The pasty woman ran out.
Obviously she hadn't heard the part about
the pee-mergency exits.
Upon flinging open the nearest door,
she flooded the room with light from outside.

We all saw it then:
the sun
roaring round and round and round!

Later . . .

“Sorry,” I said to Dr. Krupp,
on my way out.
(Normalcy had returned
once I signaled my friend.)
You can bet that I didn't bother
to explain that remark,
But I did slip a nice wad
into the FOTO donations jar.

Since the day of the experiment,
I don't drive my now-wife around so much anymore.
And when I do,

I give fair warning first
to Dr. Krupp and his crew,
and to the fellas up on Mount Wilson.

Lawn Nazis, Hostages and Dating in the Suburbs—Welcome to My World

SHERRY GRAY

Today was the last straw. I am under attack by the lawn police.

Masquerading as a homeowner's association, these Nazis patrol the streets of my well manicured concentration camp like killer whales circling a wounded seal, playing gleefully with their intended target before consuming their prey in one nasty toothful gulp.

They demand that I pay through the nose for the privilege of having my home scrutinized and my box papered with all manner of letters.

I bought a HUD home. Everything is wrong with it. Everything. This entire development was built out of corrugated cardboard and wallpaper paste, smack on top of a swamp. My house sat empty for 18 months, decaying, while the HOA did squat. Evidently it was not as vitally important that a home sit in the neighborhood with the gate sagging and the lawn non-existent, as it is for me to turn my basketball hoop to face my house.

One of my neighbors got drunk and took himself hostage with a steak knife. I am not making this up. He locked himself in the

bedroom and called the police, telling them he had a knife and wasn't afraid to use it (anybody remember Cleavon Little in *Blazing Saddles*?) When I arrived home, there was a paddy wagon, an EMT vehicle, and two police cars down the street. His wife was outside chewing her nails. Half an hour later, there were seventeen (I counted) assorted police vehicles. They called out the entire SWAT team to deal with this loser. They blocked off the street for hours. Domino's had a record day in Lake Mary; we all picnicked on the lawn, waiting for something to happen. Oddly, the news did not show up, but one of my neighbors filmed the whole standoff, just in case the *National Enquirer* was interested.

I was worried about his kids; there was no sign of them. The police would not allow us down there (in case of gunfire) and an hour passed before someone showed up who knew that the kids were not in the house, but around the corner with a friend.

So, here we are, on the lawn, wondering if he's got a knife to his son's throat, the guy across the street filming the whole mess, and yet another SWAT guy pulls up. He has to park in my driveway; there simply isn't any other room. He's very serious as he straps on this bandolito gunbelt and pulls a grenade launcher or something out of his Range Rover. He's wearing one of those black shirts with "POLICE" stenciled on the back. I tell him that as far as I know, yes, the guy's a loon, and no, he doesn't have a gun . . . as far as I know. His trunk was full of assorted weapons it looked like a scene from a Schwarzenegger movie.

An ex-neighbor pulls up, drawn by all the excitement. She's single and fairly attractive, and immediately begins a blatant come-on to the SWAT guy shouldering the bazooka. "I love a man in

uniform,” she bats fetchingly. I wonder if John got that on tape. I smack her. “Down, girl,” I say, “the man has a gun.” “I know,” she replies, “I can see the bulge.” I can see where this is going, so I say, “Well, he is kinda cute.” Before the standoff ends, she has collected four phone numbers and lined up two dates. That girl really knows how to work a crowd.

So now the SWAT team has all arrived, the pizza is here, and Katie is making the rounds. Most of the neighborhood has turned out for the festivities. Someone has popped popcorn for the kids and there is a pool going on what time he will give himself up. We all know it’s a cry for attention, and unless the cops shoot him accidentally, he’ll just give up. The last time he got drunk he decided to walk to New York. Hell, I’d have given him a ride.

There are SWAT guys on the roof of his immediate neighbor. Snipers. There are SWAT guys in the yard behind his. There are SWAT guys in the bushes in his front yard, on both sides. A steak knife is a very dangerous weapon in the wrong hands. There are SWAT guys on his porch, about six of them, in full riot gear, complete with those crowd control shields and bulletproof vests. They storm the front door. It’s not locked. Two minutes later, he walks out cuffed, and Frank wins the pool.

His wife rushes to the police station to bail him out. Imagine. He’s on disability anyway, doesn’t work and still gets a check. I’d leave him there and ask if they can keep him longer. He’s home the next day.

My HOA is planning to sue me. I don’t pay my dues. I won’t move the basketball hoop. I painted my house *GASP* pink and white. They say I am bringing down the property values.

This Year

JENNIFER E. VELASQUEZ

This year is not yet over.
It ends on 31 December.
There are more than seven months to go.
And so you say, *Oh no, oh no . . .*

But it's not bad.
You should be glad.
There is still time.
That's not a crime.

And you will find the meaning of life
When all the world is full and rife
Of great ideas and choices and opportunities.
The year continues in all towns and cities.

The end of May is followed by June.
And time passes, and very soon
It is July, and then August comes.
A result of all your products and sums.

September passes, and then October.

The days move by, gentle and sober.
November arrives and soon passes on.
December sweeps through and ends an eon.

The year will end on this eventful day,
A day that from now is seven months away.
And after that, as the second hand spins,
The old year is over, and the new year begins.

What Did You Say Won the Hugo?

ALKALINE SPUDWORT

The Hugo Awards, named after Hugo Gernsback, founder of the first science-fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, have been an annual tradition since 1953, with the exception of 1954. But is it still the great award it once was? Or is it now corrupted by the votes of people who haven't read any of the nominees? This year's winners certainly weren't *excellent*, in my opinion, but some of them certainly deserve recognition.

***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J.K. Rowling**

This very popular 734-page tome won the Hugo for Best Novel . . . the first fantasy novel to do so, the first juvenile novel to do so, the first novel written by an SF "outsider" to do so. But why? Is it really that good? Or is it really horrible? Does anybody care?

Some people certainly *do* care. Many SF enthusiasts consider it a blatant gesture of disrespect for the genre. *It doesn't deserve the award*, they say. *Appropriate for some children's book award, but not the Hugo!* Piles of letters declaiming the decadence of the Hugo Awards and violently attacking the novel end up at many genre semiprozines and fanzines, and violent discussions and arguments

ensue on message boards and in discussion groups around the world.

As for my opinion, I've only read *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* out of all of the *Harry Potter* books. And now that I've finished it, I'm not planning to read any of the others. I read *Goblet of Fire* because it won the Hugo. Yes, I'm one of those people.

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Rowling takes us to the same setting as the previous *Harry Potter* books, a present-day world in which witches and wizards keep their existence secret from normal, non-magical humans, called Muggles.

The book starts with a gardener's discovery of the conspiracies of Lord Voldemort and Wormtail, to say nothing of the snake. The gardener gets killed, of course, as is done too often in this series. The second chapter opens with the first actual appearance of Harry Potter, the protagonist, an orphan who lives with disagreeable and paranoid relatives, the Dursleys. Unable to cope with the pain of a lightning-shaped scar, Harry writes a letter to Sirius, a wizard who has escaped from Azkaban, a prison. Harry's friend Ron's family, the Weasleys, invite the Dursleys to let Harry stay with them and attend the Quidditch World Cup at the end of the summer, after which Harry will resume going to school at Hogwarts, a school of magic.

The annual Quidditch World Cup excites Harry very much but is the beginning of a series of mysteries that are resolved at the end of the novel. Returning to Hogwarts for a fourth year of schooling, Harry Potter learns that this year a special event, the Triwizard Tournament, will be held instead of the annual Quidditch Tournament. Harry also meets this year's mysterious Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor "Mad-Eye" Moody.

After the Goblet of Fire, which first appears in Chapter 16,

announces Harry as one of the *four* champions who will compete in the Triwizard Tournament instead of three, Harry embarks on a journey of magic, mystery, and mayhem, facing the three tasks of the Tournament only to find that the world is not really what anybody expects. . . .

Anyway, it turned out better than I expected, but it was still kind of mediocre. I guess the other books on the final ballot were also mediocre. Compared to 2000, with several excellent books nominated, 2001 was sort of . . . ugh. With the exception of *A Storm of Swords* by George R.R. Martin, nothing really stood out. But *Storm* was quite long, and maybe that's the reason it got neglected so much. And it, too, is a fantasy novel, the third in a series, in fact.

To judge it by itself and not in relation to the other *Harry Potter* books (since it won for Best *Novel* and not Best Series Installment), *Goblet of Fire* had, in my honest and sincere opinion which no one respects much, a weak opening and an apparently unorganized plot at the beginning. It made sense later, of course, being, among other things, a mystery story. First 300 pages, halfway between horrible and mediocre. Pages 300-500, a little better. Pages 500-700, somewhere between mediocre and good. After page 700, ugh.

Well, the characterization wasn't very deep, and as far as I'm concerned, the so-called villains and otherwise evil characters in the book didn't have any motivations for acting the way they did. This is a serious fault, in my opinion. Everyone has a motivation. If the motivation isn't clear, then the reader will wonder why the "villains" act the way they do. Then again, this is a children's story (or it's supposed to be, anyway), but is this really what we want our children to think? Do we really want them to accept certain people as just

being “evil,” to view people who have done bad deeds as just “evil” rather than exploring their motivations (however mistaken or misguided), to condemn people as “evil” rather than understand why they have done the things they’ve done? Then again, I may be mistaken.

Well, faults aside, it was quite good. (Then again, when you leave the faults of *anything* aside, it becomes quite good!)

Please excuse my ramblings.

“The Ultimate Earth” by Jack Williamson

“The Ultimate Earth” marks Williamson’s first fiction Hugo in a remarkable 73-year career. Unfortunately, however, this work from the December 2000 issue of *Analog* by itself doesn’t quite meet the standards of Williamson’s work in the past.

From what I could grasp of this novella, winner of the 2001 Hugo Award for Best Novella, the story takes place in a future universe in which Earth itself has been terraformed. Duncan Yare, K.C. Kell, and Pedro Navarro live on the Moon at Tycho Station and are visited by a person named Sandor Pen. Distraught by Sandor’s departure from the Moon, Dunk, Casey, and Pepe, as they call themselves, manage to convince the ship to take them to Earth, which it isn’t supposed to do. There, they encounter a strange new society in which people communicate with each other using artificial telepathy made possible by “nanorobs,” molecular machines that transmit messages in the form of electromagnetic radiation. When a ship sent to colonize a distant planet returns without having colonized it, Dunk, Casey, and

Pepe join Sandor to investigate the problem. . . .

Mostly mediocre, this story, although innovative, in my opinion, doesn't deserve a Hugo. Some of the other nominees were better, including Lucius Shepard's "Radiant Green Star," Catherine Asaro's "A Roll of the Dice," and Kristine Kathryn Rusch's "The Retrieval Artist." In fact, if "The Ultimate Earth" had received one less nomination that it had, it wouldn't have tied for fifth place with "The Retrieval Artist" on the nomination list and thus wouldn't have been on the final ballot. The fact that the author is a 93-year-old SFWA Grandmaster does not qualify this specific work for a Hugo. But, however, if the voters think it should win a Hugo, then they have the right to think so.

"Millennium Babies" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

This novelette is only one of two of Rusch's nominees for the 2001 Hugo Awards. The other nominee, "The Retrieval Artist," lost to Williamson's "The Ultimate Earth" in the novella category. Unlike Rusch's previous work, like "Echea" for example, "Millennium Babies" does not rise to meet the standards of the Hugo Awards.

This story from the January 2000 issue of *Asimov's*, winner of the 2001 Hugo Award for Best Novelette, takes place in a near future in which the babies born to parents competing in nationwide contests for the first babies born in the year 2000 have grown up. Brooke Cross, a contest "loser," is approached by Eldon Franke, who is studying the "Millennium Babies" and what they have in common as a result of being born at about the same time. After initial refusal,

Brooke decides to participate. The participants meet anonymously at TheaterPlace, a restaurant that was formerly a four-plex movie theater, where Brooke learns some unexpected things. . . .

It seems to me that this story was written simply because it could only have been written at that specific time. A story such as this could *only* be in the January 2000 issue. And not only that, it was the *cover* story. And just as Isaac Asimov's "The Bicentennial Man" and Joe Haldeman's "Tricentennial," both of which were published in 1976, the latter in the July 1976 issue of *Analog*, won the Hugo Award for Best Novelette and Best Short Story, respectively, in 1977, "Millennium Babies" is voted Best Novelette of 2000. There is something about stories published during a specific event in history related to that specific event that makes voters vote for them. I just don't understand it.

"Different Kinds of Darkness" by David Langford

Dave Langford, winner of numerous Best Fan Writer Hugos and Best Fanzine Hugos for *Ansible*, now wins a fiction Hugo for Best Short Story. "Different Kinds of Darkness," from the January 2000 issue of *F&SF*, now makes Langford the person who has won the most Hugos overall with at least one fiction Hugo. Charles N. Brown claims the most Hugos overall but hasn't won for fiction.

"Different Kinds of Darkness" takes place in a near future in which deadly images formed using BLIT, the Berryman Logical Imaging Technique, are used by terrorists to kill people. The images cause the human brain to crash upon viewing them. Jonathan and

friends, students at an elementary school, form a “Shudder Club,” whose members see who can take the longest looks at BLIT patterns. They form theories about the “different kinds of darkness” that they see in the world around them, and soon Jonathan learns the horrible truth. . . .

This story, in my opinion, is better than the other fiction winners. This actually deserves the award. The characters are convincing, and the plot is logical and natural. Two tentacles up for this one.

***Greetings from Earth: The Art of Bob Eggleton* by Bob Eggleton
and Nigel Suckling**

Bob Eggleton, winner of numerous Hugo Awards for Best Professional Artist, is known for superb artwork. This book, winner of the 2001 Hugo Award for Best Related Book, showcases some of the excellent works of art by this master.

Revolving around the idea of a message for aliens from the people of Earth about what they think of the universe, *Greetings from Earth* puts on display the finest work of Bob Eggleton. From dinosaurs to dragons to landscapes to spacescapes, Eggleton makes the universe, both real and imaginary, come alive through visual effects. Employing a variety of styles, Eggleton explores the real and unreal aspects of the speculative universe around us.

Eggleton’s brief descriptions of each painting or drawing further illuminate the works themselves. Accompanied by Suckling’s detailed background information, the text serves to enhance the art itself.

Highly recommended, this book certainly deserves to win the

Hugo. I expect to see more great artwork from Eggleton in the future.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

The most popular Hugo category, Best Dramatic Presentation, gives us its winner for 2001: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. This work, however, is only barely speculative; its only fantastic element is the flying, and although it doesn't really enforce the plot or characters, it does have symbolic meaning.

Centered around the Green Destiny sword and the attempts to have possession of it, the movie vividly portrays life in China a few hundred years ago. Li Mu Bai, master swordsperson, decides to give it as a present to Sir Te, who lives in Beijing. Te shows the sword to Governor Yu, whose daughter manages to steal it, starting a series of swordfights, flashbacks, unexpected encounters, destructive behavior, thefts, murders, betrayals, raids, and insane action, to say nothing of flying around like intoxicated demon warriors. . . .

At times overly drawn out and pointless, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* manages nevertheless to provide the viewer with convincing characters and a plausible plot. It doesn't exactly deserve a Hugo, but I found its literary excellence deserving of some recognition.

Gardner Dozois

Gardner Dozois now wins a 13th Hugo for Best Professional Editor and deserves it, too. Dozois, editor of the fantastic *Asimov's Science*

Fiction, which produced the 2001 winner in the novelette category as well as all of the short-fiction winners from 1997 to 2000, and numerous anthologies, all of which deserve recognition, certainly deserves to win another Hugo. In addition to editing, Dozois has also written many excellent works, many of which have been nominated for the Hugo and Nebula Awards, two of which, “The Peacemaker” and “Morning Child” have won the Nebula. Dozois also regularly participates on the *Asimov’s* Forum online and occasionally signs form rejection letters to those who frequent the Forum. Perhaps the irony is that Dozois has won the seventh Hugo in a row in 2001, beating a six-Hugo record from 1988 to 1993, for editing the magazine that published the 2001 Hugo Award winner for Best Novelette, which was written by Kristine Kathryn Rusch, who beat Dozois for the 1994 Best Editor Hugo. Perhaps Rusch will win another Hugo in six years.

Bob Eggleton

Eggleton not only wins the Best Related Book Hugo but also the Best Professional Artist Hugo! In addition to work published in *Greetings from Earth*, Eggleton’s artwork in 2000 has been featured on the covers of the March and May issues of *Analog* and the December issue of *Asimov’s*, all of which are spectacular. Eggleton truly deserves this award for being one of the best artists in the field.

***Locus* edited by Charles N. Brown**

What can I say? *Locus* definitely deserved the 2001 Hugo Award for Best Semiprozine. Winning its editor a twenty-third Hugo, *Locus* regularly features news, reviews, interviews, and book listings. I highly recommend this magazine for anyone who writes SF or is an SF enthusiast.

***File 770* edited by Mike Glycer**

The winner of the 2001 Hugo Award for Best Fanzine, *File 770* reports on fanzines, SF clubs, conventions, and other aspects of SF fandom, and certainly deserves this Hugo for its excellence.

Dave Langford

Langford not only wins the Best Short Story Hugo but also the Best Fan Writer Hugo! Langford deserves this Hugo for fan writing published in *Ansible* and elsewhere.

Teddy Harvia

Teddy Harvia wins the 2001 Hugo Award for Best Fan Writer for excellent cartoons and deserves it, too.

—

Overall, the winners were mediocre, with some being excellent and

others being not so excellent. But as with any popular-choice award, the Hugos aren't given to the nominees that truly excel but rather to the nominees that the voters like. In spite of the mediocrity of the winners in the novel, novella, and novelette categories, the Hugo Awards will continue, year after year. We'll see if it really stays a great award.

Digging for Adults

D. HARLAN WILSON

A little boy was clicking his jaw. He was doing it to annoy a little girl. He was in love with her. She had pretty red hair, nice skin, and the freckles on her nose . . . well, he wanted to lick them off her face. He sensed the perverse nature of this desire, but he was too young and unfamiliar with the character of his impulses to think twice about the desire: one time was enough, and then the thought was gone . . .

As he continued to click his jaw, he could almost taste those freckles. He had to have them in his mouth right now! But he couldn't just walk up to his love and start lapping at her nose like an excited puppy. He had to get her to fall in love with him first. And the best way for a little boy to get a little girl to fall in love with him is to make her hate him by annoying the crap out of her.

Click! went his jaw. *Click! Click! Click!* His mouth opened wider and wider each time he did it, and drool began to flow down his chin.

The little girl pretended he didn't exist.

The little boy pretended that she wasn't pretending he didn't exist, and went on clicking and drooling.

Crouched down on their knees, the two children were digging for adults in the soil of the neighborhood playground. The adults in the neighborhood had disappeared a few days ago; sick of always having to take care of the children, they made a communal decision to bury

themselves underground in hopes that, after a while, the children would get the hint that nobody liked them and go away. So far the effort was ineffective. Not only were the children not going away, they persisted in trying to find the adults and dig them out of the ground. It was frustrating for the adults. But they had promised themselves to stay where they were for at least a week, dreaming of and praying for a neighborhood that was not subject to the cries and whines and whimpers and demands and threats and maligns and freakery and demonism and pathology of Young Life.

The ground beneath them was very soft and brown. They had dug up over two feet of earth apiece, but they hadn't uncovered any adults yet. They would dig for a little while longer and then move to another spot.

Click! Click! Click! Click! Click!

Eventually the little girl was forced to say something to the little boy. She didn't want to say something to him, but his jaw was driving her up the wall.

"Stop doing that," she said. "It bothers me very much. You're a very bothersome person, do you know that?"

"What?" replied the little boy, playing dumb. He clicked his jaw especially loud, so loud the group of children digging for adults on the other side of the merry-go-round heard it. They stopped digging and looked in his direction with dazed and curious expressions, as if they had just woken up from being knocked unconscious.

The little girl looked at him with an embittered expression, as if somebody had just dunked her head in a pot of garlic water. She sat back on her knees and put her tiny fists on her hipless hips. "Stop that, I said. Stop making that noise with your mouth. It's distracting me.

I'm trying to concentrate. I'm trying to find my mom and dad so I can ask them if I can stay up past my bedtime. How am I supposed to do that with you doing what you're doing? You're drooling all over the place, too. You're gross. You're ugly. Go somewhere else. I was here first."

"I was here second," the little boy responded matter-of-factly, not looking up at her, continuing to dig, drool and click.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"It means something. Nothing means nothing."

"Except nothing."

"What?"

"Nothing. It means I was here second and you were here first and it doesn't matter one way or the other, 'k?"

"I don't get it. I don't get what that means."

"That's because you're a girl and girls don't get anything. Dig your hole, why don't you?" *Click!*

"Oh!" said the little girl. "Oh! Oh! Oh!" She wanted to say something clever to the little boy, something that would make him feel as retarded as she felt right now, but she couldn't find the words. So she said "Oh!" one more time.

"Stop saying 'Oh,'" said the little boy. "It's really starting to bug me and I'd appreciate it if you'd shut up. Thank you."

A deranged, wide-eyed glare overcame the little girl's face. How dare that creep! Her lips began to twitch with rage. They got to twitching so intensely that the little boy could actually hear them.

"Your lips are making a funny sound," he said. "Tell them to knock it off."

The lips pinched together as if a clothespin had been applied to them. A long tense pause followed . . . Then the little girl calmly leaned over, as if she was going to whisper a friendly secret into the little boy's ear, and yelled, "I HATE YOUR GUTS, FREAK!" When she yelled, the kids over by the merry-go-round glanced at her. She cast an evil glance back at them and said, "MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, NERDS!"

Being nerds, the kids obeyed.

The little boy smiled. When the little girl had told him she hated him, that meant she loved him. He may have been young and idiotic, but he wasn't young and idiotic enough to not know that saying you love somebody and saying you hate them means the same thing. His plan had worked. He could now lick her freckles without feeling guilty about it. Just a few more louder-than-hell clicks to make sure his lover genuinely hated him, and wasn't just saying that to make him behave . . .

The little girl stood up and threw her fists down at her sides. "I'm going over there. You stay here. Don't follow me, or I'll scream. I hope you die!" She waited for a response. Didn't get one. She stomped away.

Proud of himself, the little boy snickered under his breath. He would give the little girl a minute or two before disobeying her command and allowing true love to run its course. He scooped another handful of dirt out of his hole.

And exposed the face of an adult. The face was pretending to be asleep, but he knew otherwise: it was the face of his mother and she was always pretending to be asleep—ever since his father left them and moved to Gary, Indiana . . .

“I know you’re faking it,” he said. There was no reply.

He clicked his jaw once . . . twice . . . a third time . . .

The eyes of his mother opened. They were red, worn, sickly eyes that looked like they had been crying for years. “Keep it up, young man,” she said, “and your jaw will fall off. It’ll fall right off of your face. Then what the hell will you do?”

The little boy shrugged.

“Don’t shrug at me. Listen to me. I want you to stop acting up and mind your goddamn manners. Do you understand?”

The little boy shook his head no.

“Yes, you do. You understand me perfectly. Now be a good boy and bury me. Bury me, and don’t ever try to dig me up again. Pack a bag and move to a different country, too.”

The little boy blinked at his mother. She blinked back at him.

Then: *Click!*

Maddened, his mother ordered him to go to his room. He refused. She told him to get a handkerchief and wipe the drool off of his face. He refused. She called him a bastard. He called her a bitch. They continued to bicker until a ball of dirt fell in her mouth and she choked on it. Her face convulsed, and her eyes rolled back into her head.

The little boy knocked on his mother’s forehead as if it was a door. “Anybody home?” he asked. But he knew the answer to that question.

He pushed all of the dirt he had dug up back into the hole, then stood and patted it down with his feet. When he was finished, he stared down at the grave and worried, for a fleeting moment, about his own mortality. But then the moment was gone . . .

The dizziness of freedom washed over the little boy as he quietly, creepily slunk towards the little girl, who was digging another hole, this one beneath the colorful bulk of a tall spiral slide.

The Were-Platypus

THOMAS R.

The craving strikes on the cold moonless nights.
Deep in the swamps of New South Wales does he hide.
Only at the New Moon does this transformation occur.
When it begins, he feels perverse glee.
Oh, woe is the fact it occurs not more often!
First it strikes his face.
He feels the bill grow.
But then it is in his hands and feet.
What once were mere fingers and toes become a web.
The feel of the fur growing is the most pleasurable part.
Now he is free!
Free to experience the joys denied him most times.
To swim with such effortlessness.
The water caressing him gently.
To feel and taste with such abandon.
The joys of the platypus!
Fools with two legs shall never know!
The simple pleasures he enjoys in the company of true
 platypuskind.
Yet the sadness too as their numbers dwindle.
It is all part of the package and the appeal.

The dizzying heights and depths of their being.
A life of simple yet rich joys and pure sorrows.
Too soon he will be human again.
Too soon must he drag himself to work.
Back to the drudgery of being a small-time bureaucrat.
A paper pusher of no account.
Yet tonight there is the water, the mud, and the company.
And the hopes of New Moons yet to come.
Splashing with a lovely lady platypus in the dark moonless
 night.
Seeing the time as if it were eternal.
He can only thank whatever God exists for the platypus that
 bit him.
On another moonless night so long ago.

Finite Timestream

ECO FANTASTIK

25 December 1858

The snow falls outside, and the children are playing. I see them, but what occupies me is the machine in front of me. It is a personal computer, the only functioning one in the entire world. I do not remember how I acquired it, but now I have it, and it performs the strangest of tasks. Sometimes I feel that it performs too much, as if it transcended the limits of the possible. But at other times, I realize that this is only the technology of the future and what seems like magic to us is only advanced science. That is when I understand, but when I finally acquire that spark of understanding and comprehension, it vanishes, and once again I am confused, not sure of where I stand in the cosmic reality.

The computer connects to the future, true, but it can only go so far. I can connect to the Internet of the future and visit web pages written by people whose great-grandparents are not yet born. But I cannot access anything beyond the first few days of the year 2002. What happens then? What happens afterward? Does the world end? Does the universe collapse upon itself, ending reality as we know it? Why can't I see past that limit?

I do not know, and for now, I can only read and reread some of

the messages written by someone who uses the pseudonym “The Invisible Crud,” writings not intended for me to read, but I have access to it, and invisible or not, this person is my link to the future, to the world beyond the distant horizons of our imagination.

True, many of the references I do not understand, but from the context, I can realize a major portion of the world of the future. It seems a sad and strange future, but I hope it becomes better, that this is not the only possible future but one of an infinite number.

I know that reprinting messages from only one person and omitting all other messages related to them would result in somewhat confusing and one-sided writing, but in order to avoid copyright infringement (how do copyright laws regard violating the copyright of work produced in the future?), I have only included The Invisible Crud’s messages. Although the person in question has not given me express permission to do so, I have an innate feeling that this does not violate any copyright laws. Therefore, I will share with you most of the messages that this person has written. The Invisible Crud writes:

Newtonmass? 259th anniversary? That makes
yesterday 25 December 1901! No way! Have we gone
back in time? Talk about Y2K+1! Geez!

*Earth to Crud . . . Hello? . . . Are you there,
Crud? . . . Come in, Crud . . . Earth to Crud
. . .*

What? Is there a voice in my head?

Anyway, sorry I’m a little late. I had horrible
Internet trouble. Death to computers also. But
leave mine alone! I want to be the only person
with a functioning computer, so ha! And again, ha!

Eesh. I have 10 stories to write in the next 5 days (rough drafts) and 2 to write today. My first really big writing feat since that 6-day novel-writing stunt I did in June. 6-day 12-story short-fiction writing starts today. I hope I can type fast enough.

IC

Thanks, Mrejo. (Assuming, of course, that you're directing your words to me. That's what I don't like about this new Borum--you can't tell what message is in reply to what.) I did really horribly yesterday, though. I only got 1,200 words in one story and 300 or 400 words in another, and what I wrote reads like final-draft stuff (for me, of course). I can't seem to just write a real *rough* draft. Oh, well, if the rough draft looks good, then the final draft must look better. At least I'm actually *writing* and not procrastinating, like the last few months. And I'm doing too much stuff these last few days of 2001. I'm supposed to read two complete novels as well, 12 chapters a day. (What's with this number 12? It pops up everywhere!) Too, too much stuff to do. I need to take some time off the Borum. I am going to *try* to just write without looking back. It's a new technique for me, so it takes some adjusting. I need *volume*, not *quality*, at this time, although *quality* is needed, too.

IC

P.S. This time, I wrote *words* instead of *pages*. Yes! That was embarrassing, when I did that novel thing.

Thanks for the suggestions, everyone. I've realized this after my futile attempts to meet my

goals. I figured I'd been procrastinating too much and making a ridiculous goal will somehow get my writing output up, even though it was probably impossible to write that much anyway. It seems to work. I've written more (good stuff, too) these last two days than I've written in the last three months!

I do have too many ideas. Many of them are underdeveloped, and some of them have around 500-2000 words written about them but are sort of dead or dormant.

Well, I found out I couldn't abandon quality. It just sticks with me. I seem to put out final-draft stuff for my first-draft writing. Oh, well, it works.

I think I made my ridiculous goal so that I could have the satisfactory feeling that *I can do it. I have the right stuff. I can write.* I want to feel confident that I can actually do something. After procrastinating for several months, it seems impossible that I can actually write.

I'll dedicate these last days of 2001 into writing three or four good stories and mediocre chunks and summaries of other stories that I'll probably ditch and/or revise. I consider it a writing exercise. I'm going to see if writing a lot will keep my creative juices flowing. Procrastinating seems to have adverse effects when you start writing again. So, therefore, I'm going to keep my ridiculous goal, but I'm going to do so loosely and dedicate most of my time and energy to the three or four main ones. We'll see if this works.

IC

And another thing: I'm not planning to complete

any final drafts these few days. I'm just going to write/complete *rough* drafts, though some better than others. I'll have time later for revising and editing.

IC

Gee, I don't know *what* I was thinking. Most of these story ideas are just too underdeveloped. I need some time to incubate them. Therefore, I'm not going to waste my time on superfluous junk that can be better written later. So forget the mediocre chunks and whatnot. I'll think about that stuff later.

I have discovered another possible reason for having that ridiculous goal: inspiration. I guess I was subconsciously hoping for the Muse to strike while I was getting all those words typed. I think the Muse has stricken with this story I'm writing. I have rediscovered the true joy of writing, something I've lost over the last several months. I'm actually having fun writing this story. I think this is a good thing.

IC

P.S. Say, you don't suppose they *sell* creative juices, do you? What flavors do they come in? :)

Holy monkey! There's all this archived **STUFF** available! Totally awesome!

There are all these messages posted way back in 2000 and earlier this year, including the Monkey Movie thread that so mysteriously disappeared! Amazing!

IC

And . . . *I* am the last person to post!

Check it out.

IC

It was there when I posted it! It seems to have disappeared!

Okay, okay, I wasn't *really* the last person to post. My post was made after the Borum got shut down. In fact, Kegolak did the same thing and my post just somehow replaced that one for the same URL. Oh, well.

IC

One last post before I leave:

Someone! Hit me in the head before I experience more nostalgic nausea!

Hmmm . . . what's this about old personas that you kept secret from us, eh, Ekos? Havin' an identity crisis? I know, I have one too.

So . . . basically anything with a phony .gov e-mail address? I found three.

Ah, well, it's time for me to leave. The grim reaper is looking over my shoulder right now and impatiently waiting to give me a ride to . . . I don't know. Let me ask. . . .

IC

Hi, Fleli. I just went to the ICFDB and looked up the only 1998 issue of *Adventures of Ford and Forgery*, and you're not on the table of contents. I'm assuming you're using a pseudonym, of course. What is it? Don't tell me you're Stellar Baboon!

IC

Oh, wait. Here it is, Fleli. It was published in 1999. Geez!

IC

Yeah, sure. I haven't read *everything* and my opinion might change in the future, so here are the First All-Time (is that an oxymoron?) Invisible Crud Awards for Excellence in Speculative Fiction Writing:

Best Novel:

Flatus Plugged by Fine Rind

Best Novella:

"Boogers in Maine" by Fancy Mess

Best Novelette:

"Cannedsprings" by Forge I.M. Phartin

Best Short Story:

"`Repeat, Hologram!` Said the Tictactoe" by Rollin Onfloorlaughinoutloud

Notes:

1. There is no physical prize, so if you're one of the above-mentioned authors, sorry. If you're planning to impersonate one of the above-mentioned authors and try to get a prize, sorry for you, too.

2. IMHO, *Flatus Plugged* was a great science-fiction novel. In fact, it's my favorite novel period! (<--Another oxymoron, "period" followed by exclamation point.) (<--And yet another one, "exclamation point" followed by a period.) It's not usually classified as science fiction, though, and that may be the reason why it is so neglected within the genre, I think. But it *is* science fiction. It's more soft SF than hard SF, but there are some pretty good explorations of new technologies that, now that nanotechnology is a feasible possibility, may come into existence. Good stuff. I highly recommend it. It's a tad long though, also being possibly the longest novel I've ever read.

IC

One additional note:

Flatus Plugged and "Boogers in Maine" share a common theme. Maybe that's why I liked them both.

IC

Be glad to know that no *Airy Blotter* novels have been published this year! However, two related tie-in books have been published (*Plastic Yeasts and Where to Grind Them* and *Idiots Through the Pages*), and they might be nominated for the Boogo in the best related book category, in which case a similar outrage will happen next year.

Um . . . maybe I shouldn't have said that. Um . . .

Don't get any wacky ideas, OK?

IC

All this talk about juvenile fantasy novels and Boogos . . .

But, really, has a fantasy novel ever won the Boogo before? I know quite a few fantasy short stories, novelettes, and novellas that have won, but a *novel*? Looking over the list of Boogo-winning novels, I recognize most of them as science fiction and none of them as fantasy. I am not familiar with the rest, so I can't say for sure. **Is** *Airy Blotter and the Goblins on Fire* the first fantasy novel to win the Boogo?

IC

I don't know of any short science fiction stories of the nineteenth century. By "short," I mean less than 40,000 words approx. Does anybody know any? Are there any you'd personally recommend? I'd welcome any suggestions or recommendations that are available. Thanks.

IC

Thanks, all.

IC

Mrejo, *Second Fecundation* is actually the **third** book in the *Fecundation* trilogy. Not sure if you knew this, but it sounds like you haven't heard of *Fecundation on Fire*, the second book. Anyway, sorry if I'm wrong.

IC

Hi. Sorry I'm a little late answering this question, but I had trouble connecting to the Internet. I think the part that's confusing is that most people think it's a novel when they first read it. It's really a short-story collection that's connected into something resembling a novel. You have to read each "chapter" as an individual story as well as see the whole plot and theme of all the stories together.

IC

Ekos, try using a catchy pseudonym that no one will confuse with anyone else. I'm not sure whether you've mentioned your last name to Garfbler or not, but I'm thinking that there are some other Ekos M's out there who submit stuff. I recall you saying that you used various pseudonyms, so make them known, here on the Borum.

Those two rejections weren't *really* personalized, just a signature and a short message. And the stories weren't really that good. In fact, they were horrible, in my own opinion. I've written better, including a 10,000-word first draft of a novella-to-be that I'm going to finish sometime soon. There's nothing special about me getting "personalized" rejection slips. Maybe it's because I use "The Invisible Crud" for a handle. It just sticks out. Well, good luck, Ekos, on your future projects.

About Segway: nifty. I'll think about it though. Okay, I've thought about it. Don't have much to say.

IC

Ah, make it all CGI and simulated voices. Reality just doesn't cut it.

IC

Hi, Ekos. I have returned.

About short SF of the 1890s, I can name one, "The Slime Machine" by I.M. Smells, or should I say *The Slime Machine*? Published in 1895. It's technically a novella, but I believe it was first published as a book. Not sure. Anyway . . . whatever.

IC

I thought fantasy disguised as SF was called "space opera."

IC

All fiction is science fiction.

All fiction is fantasy.

All fiction is alternate history.

Speculative fiction *is* the only fiction.

Okay, explanation:

All fiction has science in it, and therefore is by definition science fiction. Science is everywhere. If there's no science in a story, there's no story.

No fiction is real. If it were real, then it

wouldn't be fiction. Therefore, being not real, all fiction is fantasy.

All fiction deviates from actual history. If it didn't, then it would not be fiction, but rather a biography or a history. Even historical fiction deviates from actual history. It doesn't deviate a lot, but there's at least one detail in it that isn't historically accurate, for example, a fictional character that never existed. Even futuristic science fiction is alternate history. There is only one future, and chances are that the science fiction story doesn't get it completely right. And if it does, then it's not fiction. It's a prophecy. Therefore, all fiction is alternate history.

:)

IC

Sure they do, Fergo. If you sell out, then, by definition, you have a difficulty. You can't satisfy additional customers. :)

IC

So the pattern of novella/novelette Boogo-winning stories in the October/November issues won't continue (since "In the Klein Line" didn't win!)
. . .

What if we skip the year 2000 (Y2K Bug and everything) and continue the pattern, with a Boogo-winning novelette in this year's Oct/Nov issue? Eh? Sounds like a plan!

IC

"Even the Wombat" was, I believe, first published in *Sporkaroo* in 1991 or 1992 (don't remember). It won both the Boogo and Fibula Awards. And I'm not sure why it's up on the home page, but I'm glad it is, 'cause it's a good story and might get more people to subscribe to *Sporkaroo*. Thanks for putting it up there, whoever did it. And thanks to Goony Kr'Zellis for (I hope!) giving permission to whoever did it to do it, since it's copyrighted.

IC

Well, Garfbler of course also edits a whole lot of anthologies! In addition to his famous *Year's Worst Silent Friction*, he also edits a lot of . . . um . . . other anthologies, too. So maybe they're awarding the Boogo to him for the anthologies. A possibility.

IC

P.S. BTW, Garfbler, exactly how many anthologies have you edited? Just curious.

Novelettes are cool. It's an intermediary form between short stories and novellas. Most novelettes have aspects of both novellas and short stories. A novelette allows you to write a lot about something while still keeping it simple enough so that it doesn't get complicated.

Best at novelettes? Hmmm . . . I'd say K'hatmu Smiel, Ger Emokar, um . . . I can't think of any more right now, but there are others.

IC

About double-awarded stories . . . Flatusimov's *Fecundation* series won the Boogo for "Best All-Time Series" in 1966. Then *Fecundation's Sledge* won. It's true that *Fecundation's Sledge* won after 1966, but the 1966 award was for "Best All-Time Series," and "All-Time" does include the future.

Also, short fiction can be expanded into novels without altering the original story. For example, a novel can be made out of a short story by making the unaltered short story Chapter 1 and adding additional chapters. I don't know of any that have won, but there might be.

IC

I agree completely. Strange and totally messed up. I believe in freedom of speech and everything, but this is just over the top. There were some good ideas I saw when I was reading some of them, but I got disgusted and stopped. Really, I think there are better ways to conduct a discussion other than throwing in a big fat conglomeration of good topics, bad topics, and otherwise confusing topics without clarification or details or support, mixed with hateful and prejudiced speech. Sad.

IC

I was browsing over at some web site or other and what do I find but the February issue of *Sporkaroo*? Geez! Just November and the February issue's out! I think I'll wait for the paper copy though, rather than buying from that web site.

IC

Garfbler Dozwhat is the first person to use the term "alternate history"? No way! I've got to find an earlier use of the phrase! Not that I wouldn't want Garfbler to have the credit, of course. It just seems to me that *someone* had to have used it prior to 1990.

IC

Holy crud! I leave this Borum for just one day and *this* happens! Geez! And we thought we were safe . . .

IC (who is still in utter disbelief and who is going to leave the Borum again after this)

Garfbler, I've been trying to get submission statistics out of you since the beginning of time (or almost). But I have to ask you this:

What approximate percentage of the stuff you receive does not come with an SASE? Not in Courier font? Not double spaced on one side of the page? Using the wrong type of paper? Written in green crayon on a used roll of toilet paper? On disk? Otherwise not following the guidelines?

Thanks, Garfbler. It helps to know what kind of true slush you're up against in that slush pile.

IC

P.S. And, yes, Garfbler, length does matter. I don't expect to see any 20,000-page (*page*) fantasy novel series being published in back-to-back installments in *Sporkaroo* any time soon. And I also don't expect to see any 0-word stories either. I know you rejected mine, and since there really is only one 0-word story that can be

written and the variation is in the title and byline and I don't think you judge stories by titles and bylines (although a good title may attract your attention), I assume that you reject all other 0-word stories you receive. :)

Or "disposable" in normal-sized letters embedded in the middle of a lengthy paragraph on page 42.

No one would notice it.

Something like this: *Jolene and Henry is looking at the round sauser shaped ship when a alien steps out of a whole that opens up in the side. "What do you think that is, Henry?" Jolene says curiously. "I think its a alien." Henry asks interestedly. He has trouble seeing thru his disposable contact lenses. "No, no way." Jolene demands croakily. Suddenly, the alien is starting to speak. "Take me to you're liter." the alien sighs furiously.*

Speaking of bad writing, how's my example, Garfbler? You say Enfenotok's was marvelously well-written by comparison, but how do you compare it? (more statistics questions ahead, sorry) Approximately where is it in the Slush Spectrum 3000 of yours? Near the bottom? Near the top (I hope)? Approximate percentages, if possible? Thanks, Garfbler. Sorry for all this statistical stuff but you've been reading for years so I presume you don't need to look at any records to give me an *approximate* (20% off is okay) answer. Thanks, Garfbler.

IC

P.S. BTW, you haven't received any *used* rolls of toilet paper, have you?

Justified text is easier to read for me. It maintains consistency and looks better. Also, you can fit more text onto a single page with justified text, thus saving paper. Opinions differ, though.

IC

Actually, it does. On my word processor it does. The reason is that if you don't justify it, the characters are spaced at a fixed width. If you justify it, then the characters have to be spaced at a variable width in order to make stuff fill the line. It just happens that the width is more often less than the fixed width when you justify it. When you type in justified text and you reach the end of the line, it doesn't skip to the next line. Instead, it condenses the text until it can condense no more, and then it moves the word you're working on to the next line and adjusts the remaining words in the line you were typing in. Since we don't use long words that often, more stuff condenses than expands, and that results in more text on a page.

IC

And I'm back! I was going to return in December, but . . . well, anyway . . .

So there I was yesterday evening, grabbing and yanking all the junk mail out of the mailbox, when I saw an envelope from a certain "Garfbler Dozwhat" . . . written in my own handwriting. My first thought was "What's this?" My second thought, of course, was "Probably another rejection." And it was, too. But not any ordinary rejection!

It was signed! Yahoo! Actually signed! By Garfbler! And next to the signature was the handwritten message **This is crud!** Thanks, Garfbler!

Well, okay, it wasn't exactly the first signed rejection letter I got. The first one was back in March or April when my first rejection letter, for my poem "Shall I Compare Thee to a Watermelon?", was badly abused by other people (the horror! the horror!). So I sent a letter to you, Garfbler, requesting another one, heh heh. And I got two rejection letters back (two in the same envelope! Yikes!): an unsigned one and one that had "Gerfdu Mahok, editorial assistant" signed where your signature was supposed to be, accompanied by a note that read "Here's two, just in case my signature doesn't make your day.--GM." Thanks, Gerfdu! Back then, Gerfdu wasn't yet listed in the indicia, so I got briefly confused and *almost* wondered whether you changed your name and got demoted to editorial assistant or something. *Almost*. But not really. Well, enough about that . . .

The other interesting thing about this rejection letter (the one I just got) is that it's different from the one I'm used to (or the two I'm used to, rather, for prose and poetry). It's a lot shorter and makes no distinction between prose and poetry.

Hmmm . . . did you use this so-called "form letter" just for me, Garfbler? Or is it that you're conserving ink so that the amount of text is reduced? Are you still using the old ones? Are you using this one for both prose and poetry?

And, of course, thanks for signing it, Garfbler. This is my first rejection letter signed by you. Are you signing every rejection letter now, or is this just for me, because I frequent (on and off)

the Borum?

Garfbler, your rejection letter says, "The volume of work has unfortunately made it impossible for me to respond to each submission individually, much as I'd like to be able to." Volume of work? How much stuff are people mailing you, Garfbler? This makes me think of refrigerator boxes full of manuscripts. Or perhaps inflatable manuscripts. Yikes! The word "volume" seems to have certain connotations.

Oh, I get it! You signed it just to get me to return to the Borum! Well, you have succeeded, my friend!

Finally, I'm not here to complain about getting rejected. I know *I* would have rejected "Booger 2.0" if I were you. I might not have even read it. If you've completely read it, Garfbler, thanks for your hard work. Making myself the third-person protagonist (as "I.C.") in a very weird conversation between me and a nonsense-speaking program didn't exactly produce a good story.

Actually, you have inspired me, Garfbler. I've been procrastinating a lot lately, but thanks to your personal signature and the message **This is crud!**, I feel motivated to write more. Before I left, I expressed the intent to write four stories. Well, I've only completed one so far, and I didn't even write all of it this month. I only added 1,300 words to a 1,700-word unfinished story I wrote in August. I've only got a week left, and I'm going to use it to write three more stories (or complete three, rather). Thanks, Garfbler!

IC

P.S. It's stuff like this that makes me wish there were a "Best Editor" category for the *Sporkaroo*

Reader's Choice Awards. :)

8? Out of 100? Thanks, Enfenotok! :)

Some addenda to my post that I forgot to include:

1. As to why I was grabbing and yanking junk mail out of the mailbox instead of gently removing it, well, let's just say the mailbox kind of looked like an inflated pufferfish.
2. Speaking of inflatables, "inflatable manuscripts" kind of gives a new meaning to "air mail."
3. Okay, maybe my first thought upon seeing the envelope wasn't "What's this?" but rather "What? Not those darn *Sporkaroo* people again, begging me to let them publish my stuff!" Maybe someday. :)

IC

And just like that, another one!

Exactly one week after I received the last one, I got another signed rejection letter from Garfbler! That makes two!

This one says "This is still crud. Horrible, definitely not for us" beside the signature. And you say it's impossible for you to make personal responses! Thanks again, Garfbler!

IC

ER, I think the secret is to make yourself known. You have to frequent the Borum and get in lots of

discussions with Garfbler. Then you have to make the connection between the name you use here and your real name or pseudonym that you use for writing. If using a pseudonym, make sure it's unique enough that Garfbler can identify it and not mistake it for someone else's name. I admit it's a slight disadvantage that I don't use either my pseudonym or my real name as a handle and that I have never included "The Invisible Crud" in any of my manuscripts ever, but I have made some references (to my pseudonym, never my real name) online, and I'm glad Garfbler remembered. Thanks, Garfbler!

IC

Okay, I know I said earlier that I was going to spend the last week of November writing three additional stories and I didn't write any of them in November, but the last day of the last week of November is actually in December (today), and today I wrote two stories, one having a word count of 96 and the other having a word count of infinity. As to how that's possible, I'll let you figure it out. I also wrote two short and stupid book reviews (of the same book, from two different perspectives), one short article, one phony interview, and one poem that I submitted to *Deranged Derisions* about five minutes after writing it (which took about five minutes). I also designed an entire webzine incorporating "Booger 2.0" (the one that got me the first signed rejection), the short-short-short-short story I wrote today, "Plankton Flatulations" (another Garfbler reject and available somewhere in alterate universe thread of that Drowned Goblin thing), the poem I wrote today, the article, the interview, the two book reviews, three phony letters to the "editor" that I wrote today, a logo that I made today, background art that I created

today and earlier, and background music that I composed earlier, and linking it all together in a group of HTSMELL files that I wrote using just Macrohard BloatPad. That was a mess. I might throw the poem out if I don't receive a response from *Deranged Derisions* soon enough or if they accept it. That's what I'm doing: A one-person webzine that currently accepts no submissions. That's what I mean by "one-person." One person writes it, one person puts it together, one person reads it. Same person.

I know, I write too much. That's where the irony is. When I'm on the Borum, I can just write and write and write and stack up something like 7,000 words online in just one topic (Drowned Goblin discussion), not to mention the amount of fiction I wrote for the Drowned Goblin. But when I'm seriously trying to write something to submit, I have difficulty doing so. Maybe I need to relax and concentrate on just getting the ideas on paper rather than getting it right on the first try.

IC

Don't worry, Enfenotok. I've done it too much. Almost every manuscript I've submitted to date was a piece of crud. I admit it. In fact, the two recent ones that got signed rejections were the worst two real stories I've submitted. I'm still not sure why I submitted them in the first place. That's the reason why I'm not re-submitting those stories anywhere, anytime. Never. They're that bad. I'm improving though. I just need to relax and get the stuff I want to write on paper (or word-processor document, rather) instead of trying to get it perfect on the first try.

IC

Well, what do you know? A third signed rejection!
Thanks, Garfbler!

This is my quickest reply yet, less than one month after I submitted the story. Amazing! This time the signature says "Dozwhat" too, instead of just "Garfbler." And the personal message is "THIS IS WORSE CRUD. YOU'RE NO BETTER AT WRITING THAN THE BURRITO I ATE THIS MORNING. WE DON'T WANT YOUR STUFF!"

Thanks, Garfbler, for your encouragement. I just have one question about your message. What do you mean by "better"? Do you mean that this story is better than my previous efforts, or are you telling me to write better? Please clarify, and thanks a lot, Garfbler! And keep up the quick responses!

IC

Check this out:

Goz edkbo adbo a bdo adk ad bv ad arkj abmpo
bmposo so pb o sa ciadie daeag aor a o rmi e issis
mais bmais kolor aslc mormmoddto kibost elemente
kemboss calafat adib a dis a dis a dedispa okbmap
ra das arakdam amdka daqp sactso soa ar aefaf
afam damd pals msma msm ap oema so apq i vu udov
suaov qpfu vo soauv pqud y vwu zp wuv ywpz os it
spb sod it awpod it aq sadpoit s ap d it si fasit
aso si ti s ao s to so ao si t sdo sddsaf dsuoif
saf dfpoias fwoei dsfm sdfisdjafa iw do fis aps
odif sasd fo dif s aof di aw fo awif qmpvmc os wof
oid fow doif w fow dod fod fiew qp foa cvuf wsdok
foav aos sod fos dos fos fod fodnc ufnso qoomcm
dfapkqpf dopas c sow doc was d caf d ae df as ced
as dog amlofs f aso f as of d as fos asfo as fo
sfoaw sldkfma vo as fwa d as f waf aw fd pq ocv c

waca c a df oa v casdf v asdaf afa eie ia d ae ei
adc aovao coa doe dfog ja fo ea dieie foa ei gao
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auoiau eoi uea oieuaoiu aoieuoieuoiaeu aueaoiu
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ueiu iaeu iieu iu iu iui eoai oiu aoieuoieuoiau oi

uoi uou oa ueou oae ieaue oiau uau eoeoa euo oeu
oae oaeu oaeu oa o ua u eoeu a e e eo uaeu eouae
oue oaue ueao euoaeu o ue oau euo eouaoeuoueoaeu
aueouoaeu aeou euaoau aueoue aueo aeou ouaou oea
auoauoau eaou eoua ouae ueoau eoue aoue aeouou
oaeuoaeuoauoaeuoaeuoaeuoae ueo ouae uaeau eeuu u u
u uaeuo oeau oaeu ue e ueua eoua eoueoua eou.

Now *that* was confusing! This makes no sense. Never mind. Sorry, everybody.

IC

Holy megahertz, this is weird.

I have returned for a brief time. What fun.

I guess I'll contribute to this Drowned Goblin thing.

It feels great to be back. I found Enlightenment (capital E) while gone. It feels great.

IC

Well, I'll stick around perhaps.

Oh, yes, Enlightenment. I'll share it soon enough. Hold on. Don't be too impatient. They say Enlightenment (capital E) may repel some at first sight, though . . .

You'll notice the result of my finding Enlightenment in that 1,500-word *thing* that I wrote impromptu. Hmmm . . . perhaps this Drowned Goblin thing is actually good. It seems to be exercising my writing skills. I dashed up 1,500 words in about two hours. Sounds good. Can't wait to read the ending of this (if there is one!).

IC

This is great!

I don't know about you, but I'm voting for "Biff Luzar and the Dynamite Thing" for the NoFocus Award. We poured out our hearts and souls on this, and we deserve to win a NoFocus! So when the time comes, go to the NoFocus web site and vote!

It's a little over 7,500 words right now and currently qualifies as a novelette. If we keep working on this, it might turn into a novella or even a novel (gasp!). Anyway, according to this year's ballot: "The drop-down selections are based on NoFocus's Scheduled Feeding List . . . however, you may vote for anything or anyone. If you are voting for items not on our Scheduled Feeding List, please give both author and title as well as place of appearance." So there you have it! You can vote for **anything**! And non-subscribers can vote too! So get out there and vote! We deserve a NoFocus Award!

IC

P.S. I'd like to compile an "official text" of this stuff and put it up somewhere (here perhaps, but it'll take up too much space) for your review and approval and corrections. The only problem is, what are we going to put down as author?

For those of you who don't know or don't remember, this whole Biff Luzar business began with a vignette by Erinot entitled "A Rank and Smelly Byte Someplace" published on the old Borum. Unfortunately, it's no longer there. Fortunately, I still have access to it because it's still in my web cache (along with a lot of other junk from the

Borum and other places), and so I have it here. The original version differs from the one Erinot gives here, so I'm posting it in the Biff Luzar string. I'm doing this with good intentions so that the world will remember this great work of literature, but, Erinot, if you feel that this is copyright infringement, just say so, and I'm sure one of the administrators will remove it. I also found some comments relating to it.

IC: So when this is done (if it is), get out there and vote for it for the NoFocus Award!

All right . . .

You people have done a nice job of putting titles at the beginning of your installments. That makes it so much easier to identify them. The only problem is, **it isn't organized!**

Okay then, I need help organizing these installments. They need to be put in order. Thanks. This information will be useful when I compile this piece of junk into an official text when it's done and post it for your review, corrections, and approval.

IC, self-designated editor of "Biff Luzar and the Dynamite Thing"

P.S. And *when* I'm done with that, go out and vote for it for the NoFocus Award!

Oh, I get it! It's a synopsis!

How stupid of me! (smacks forehead)

I should have known! For some reason, I didn't think it was a synopsis when I first read it!

Except for the present tense, it didn't read like a synopsis. Oh, well. Shows how stupid I am.

IC

Oh, I get it! It *is* organized!

How stupid of me! (smacks forehead)

I should have known! For some reason, I didn't think it was organized when I first read it! Now it makes sense. Oh, well. Shows how stupid I am.

IC

And there you have it: my second contribution. This one's even longer than my earlier one, although it's still approximately 1,500 words in length. Ah, that felt good! This Drowned Goblin thing is beginning to show improvements! You should keep it up!

Also, if you haven't read it yet, Moose's gender is finally revealed!

IC

And the whole thing is now almost 11,000 words long. Thanks, everyone, for contributing, and continue to contribute! We're going to vote for it for the NoFocus Award in 2002 (unless this story ends in 2002, which means we'll vote for it in 2003)! Awesome! We deserve to win a NoFocus!

IC

"Half-baked"? Them's fightin' words!

But really, I didn't mean to make this off-track. My first post was started due to several references to Moose X's mysteriousness, so I decided to do a sort-of-flashback to describe Moose's origins. My second post was caused by several references to the space-time continuum breaking apart. I was trying to show what exactly happened *while* it was broken apart. I was also trying to add the bits and pieces that were left out of the original story (i.e. the two Mooses, what happened after Moose and the termite fought, how Moose and Biff became friends, how Moose got recruited, etc.). Sorry if it seemed off track. I was only trying to glue the disorganized parts together while still being consistent (sort of).

And it was an error on your part to assume that Moose was male. I mean, come on! Why can't you just accept the fact that Moose is female? I thought this was a gender-equal society! Why did you just stereotypically *assume* that Moose was male even though all evidence (especially the name) suggested otherwise?

IC

Fine! Okay, okay, Moose is male! The story never *said* Moose was female, you know. Moose just said, ". . . which means we're female." Just because Moose says it doesn't mean it's right. Moose can be wrong; *anybody* can be wrong. And, of course, you're taking this too seriously. Obviously, Moose is joking around with the name.

And I very much do object, thank you, Mrejo! Who said you could do that? I never said so! You didn't give me time to! This is censorship!

IC

Mrejo, you gave people less than an hour and a half to object! I don't think that's fair! You could have at least waited 24 hours, geez!

And "Bliff Luzar"? Come on! Can't even spell the name right, how do you expect us to contribute to it?

IC

I have redeemed myself, Erinot. I was trying to make my parts fit with the rest. In fact, now it appears to. What is the Code of . . . ? Why is Moose bound by it?

Anyway, Devourer, I posted Erinot's post twice. Can you delete the second one? Thanks.

IC

Okay, okay, I was just making it clearer how my two posts had anything to do with the storyline, and I've done it. I couldn't possibly do it in the old one because my two posts were already posted.

Maybe we should just stop this.

Anyway, we're going to vote for it for the NoFocus Award, nevertheless.

IC

I thought when I put "THE MYSTERIOUS ORIGINS OF MOOSE X" in the title of my first post that people would know that it was a sort of flashback. I guess I was wrong.

IC

What? Your birthday? Geez! I forgot! I mean, I didn't forget. I just didn't know about it. Happy Birthday, Erinot. And you too, Klerhotek. Geez! Is this what happens when I leave the Borum for a while? :)

And another thing. I am requesting permission to post in the "No Invisible Crud" section. (Yes, I know! It says "No Invisible Crud" but I promise I won't post anything that doesn't fit with the continuum!) Please?

IC

Thanks, Kegolak, but now there are 4 threads and most of it are redundant.

IMHO, I think readers want neat, organized compartments. I know I do. And one big thing doesn't look nice. I also like seeing the author's name next to the work instead of mixed in with all the rest. Also, while copying and pasting, Kegolak, you lost all of the formatting. (I know Mrejo and I lost some of the formatting in Ekos's post when we copied it!)

And, oh no, the story is not near its end yet!

I think the only reason for making a new one is so that the page loads more quickly. And the way you've chosen to do this, Kegolak, doesn't help it a lot. You haven't reduced the amount of stuff on the page by much. The speed at which the page loads does not depend on the number of posts in it; it depends on the number of bytes it takes up. Longer posts approximately equal lots of short posts.

So my solution is: Make a "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (part 2)" thread right here that just continues the other one without reposting everything. We'll leave out the "No Invisible Crud" part so that I can post my posts in it as well (which I'd like to do!).

And another thing: I take it you've given me permission to post messages again. So instead of doing what I did last time a new thread was up, I'm going to ask permission before I do this: May I heavily modify my original two posts that you people thought were out of the continuum so that they *are* in the continuum and repost them? Thanks. (I have new plot twists in my mind--the *real* mysterious origins of Moose X, etc.)

IC

Before anyone makes a "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (part 2)" thread, I need to say this:

I myself will do it when I'm done writing my post.

Reasons: If I totally goof up again like I did before, we can just make another thread instead of having to repost the earlier posts in the thread.

OK.

IC

Ummm . . . hello? Anybody?

It's been a while since I last posted here, and no one's responded yet. Hello? I'm requesting permission to start a new "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Termite King (part 2)" thread. Anybody?

IC

Hold on! wait! not just yet

I NEED TO WRITE MINE FIRST!

IC

(sorry for the bad writing--typing with one hand

Arg! Blast it, Mrejo! Just when I was writing my big long post!

And now you've messed things up! But that's okay. I'll just need to write a preliminary post to my big post that relocates the essential characters into their right spots. That should do it. Okay. Now I'm going to make the "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (part 2)" thread.

IC

All right, I've posted it.

The climax is rapidly approaching . . .

Here are some ends to tie up:

(SPOILER ALERT!)

1. The phones are revolting. What happens next?
2. The war continues. What happens next?
3. What happens to the crew?
4. What happens to the robot Slap and Zmrkjpthfled saw and where did it come from?

5. Who is the mysterious visitor?
6. Who and where and when are Kaputza2 and Kaputza5 Smellycheese? And the original non-clone Kaputza Smellycheese?
7. What is the Dynamite Thing up to?
8. How are Zipdur and Zlobdur going to deliver waffles to Vlobdur?
9. How did Moose X acquire the stolen waffles?
10. What is the Processor, and who created it?
11. Who is responsible for all the cloning?
12. Biff and Kaputza were in love? (Gasp!) How did that happen?

And others. I can't think of any more right now. Have fun finishing the story. I can't wait to see what happens in the climax!

IC

My intention was (a) to preserve all the bits that were previously posted, and (b) to advance the plot.

Well, that's the problem. You still think it's not connected.

Okay, my main post (except the first part, which takes place on Crudbok sometime in the near past), takes place after the posts that other people have contributed. Instead of doing a flashback-type thing like I did the last time I modified my original posts, I put it all in the present, with the characters sharing their life stories (I know,

it's cheesy, but then it's a cheesy story) with the help of a Memory Machine. So IMHO it is all connected. Now, on to the climax!

No, this isn't going on forever, although it does seem like it. The story is now technically a novella, at almost 21,500 words in length, and I think it's approaching the end.

And don't forget to vote for it for the NoFocus Award! (When the time comes, go to the NoFocus web site and follow the "Online Ballot" or whatever instructions.) The problem, however, is what to put for "Author." Hmmm . . . "Various Authors"? Or list all of them? Oh, well, we'll think about that when we get to it.

IC

I forgot to say this earlier, but good idea, Ekos. I think it works as something by an individual author rather than a Drowned Goblin thing. Drowned Goblins tend to be humorous and somewhat unorganized in nature. The kind of idea you're suggesting just doesn't work like that. So I think you should develop it and write the story by yourself. *May skill and chance ensure your victory.**

IC

*I prefer this to "Good luck."

Note to those of you who have not read my post or who have read it but skipped over certain parts:

If you have read my original two posts earlier, you will notice that most of the original text (somewhat altered) appears in my contribution. But

don't just skip over it. I have modified them heavily, and this version is different from my original version and also the modified version that appears in "Bliff Luzar In The Hall of the Dynamite Thing!" It also makes more sense.

One more thing: About the four different folders--add only to "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (part 2)."

"Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (no Invisible Crud)" is part 1. It is too long and takes too long to load, which is the reason for making part 2.

"Bliff Luzar in the Stall Of The Dynamite Thing!" is, in the opinions of most people, horrible. Don't contribute to it.

"Biff Luzar and the Dynamite Thing!" is the original. Also horrible.

If any of the Administrators are reading this, please delete the last two threads I mentioned. Thanks.

IC

This is messed up. Okay . . .

The big post was all in the POV of Zipdur, no one else's. Being from the point of view of an alien, we don't understand a lot. I'm gonna post an additional post from the POVs of the other characters too.

IC

Okay, I've done it. I explained why the characters

were acting like the Three Boogers. And I've also connected all the bits and parts in Whoop-de-doo's POV. Ah, now who is the mysterious visitor? On to the climax!

IC

I have an ending in mind. It's sort of vague, so I can fit it in with whatever happens in the pre-climax, climax, and denouement. Just don't kill Moose and leave the Crudbokuks alone. The title I have in mind is "One Perfect Morning, with Waffles." So . . . on to the climax!

IC

Thanks for your comments, Erinot.

I only said I had an ending in mind. As I've said, it's very vague, so I just wanted to mention the title in case the ending you people choose is different. The ending I had in mind, being very vague, is mostly able to fit whatever happens with the story from now until the end. If, however, you want another ending, I don't care. Go ahead. This is a team effort.

And about the Three Boogers, there's an explanation for that. I'm going to clarify that right now, in fact, with another post.

IC

The "One Perfect Morning, with Waffles" ending (actually, epilogue) is, btw:

Zipdur and Zlobdur are back on Crudbok. Vlobdur is very angry and dismisses Zipdur from its position

because of the lack of waffles. Vlobdur selects Zlobdur as the replacement. Zlobdur is extremely happy at being the emissary of the Crudbokuks once more. One day (after all the events of the actual story), Moose X finds himself on Crudbok and is overjoyed to know that he is going to be the new owner and operator of Zlobdur's Waffles, now known as Moose's Waffles. Moose is overjoyed. Happy ending.

IC

Erinot, I have read your and Garduk's comments, and I've tried to tie the thing in with the rest of the story. And, again, I'm going to clarify why the characters are acting like the Three Boogers right now in another post.

IC

Okay, I've done it. I've tied the whole thing in, and it makes sense. I won't give it away here, 'cause it's going to spoil it. Read it for yourself.

IC

(And yes: It *does* advance the plot!)

One more thing (sorry for monopolizing this thread):

If you disagree with my contributions and would like to continue the story in an alternate way, please start a new thread called something like "Biff Luzar in the Hall of the Dynamite Thing (part 2--no IC)" so that the earlier thread won't get too long (it's too long as it is right now!).

Also, if you do this, you won't mess up my contributions, for those people who agree with them.

IC

Hmmm . . . interesting, Ekos. I, uh, don't know how to respond to that. Um . . .

Well, that should do it. Having yet again offended a lot of people, I'm going to leave this Drowned Goblin thing to you people to finish.

I have made my final attempt to connect the whole thing, and IMHO it fits nicely. But, however, people may disagree with me, as they have done in the past, and what I think is not necessarily correct, so if you want to keep my contributions, go ahead. I'd love that. Thanks. However, if you don't like them, just do a favor for me and for others who like my posts, please: Make a new folder ("Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (part 2, second branch)") so that additional posts don't estrange my posts. Think of it as two branches in the storyline. One branch is the branch I started, and the other, if you choose to do one, is the branch that you may start. Thanks for your consideration.

Just one more thing: Whatever you decide and whatever ending you want, I'd like to write the epilogue, "One Perfect Morning, with Waffles." I called it an ending earlier, and it seems to have upset Erinot. As I've said before, it fits with almost anything you might write to finish the story, so you still have a lot of freedom to write the story however you choose. In fact, you still have the same freedom as you've had before. If you've read the summary of my planned epilogue above and dislike it, just say so. It doesn't have

to be in the story. It's just a suggestion. Thanks.

Now, on to the climax!

IC

Sorry I haven't posted here in a while. I was having problems connecting to the Internet.

Mrejo, sorry to hear about your tragedy, and I hope things will get better.

Now, about the story:

When posting additional installments, please start a new thread! If you keep posting in the "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (no Invisible Crud)" thread, then my posts won't make sense. Please split the story into two parts instead, so that my branch will make sense in its alternate-universe sort of way. If you like my posts, however, please post in my thread.

Continuing to post in the old thread forces me to write in-between posts to connect my thread to what's happening, and that gets messed up. Garduk's post caused me to write part 1.5.

Erinot, thanks for the post, and I'm glad it fits with my thread, so it doesn't force me to write an additional installment. However, please start a new thread next time.

About *Flatus Fest*: I think Erinot's comments were caused by several references to *Flatus Fest* in my post. "By Vlobdur's sandwich" is a direct quote from the movie. The idea of adding "-dur" to Crudbokuk names was my original idea (sometime at the end of 1998), so I think it's a coincidence.

Also, my part 1.5 explains why Biff is no longer stupid. I'm not sure how Flubbers and Kaputza got together again. Maybe Erinot explained that. Maybe not. I read it too quickly.

Fleli, to avoid problems like the one you mentioned, I think you should type the installment (especially if it's long) as a separate document in a word-processor or something. I suggest BloatPad. It's easy to use and you won't be tempted to include formatting that won't show up in your final post. That way, you can save it constantly and not have to worry about losing it.

Finally, Erinot, the inflatable railroad/plastic tuna fish/Moose's mysterious origins thing and the spaceships *don't take place at the same battle*. I originally typed that as a sort of flashback to explain Moose's origins. I never intended for it to be taken as taking place in the same battle. Sorry for the confusion. I revised it later so it makes sense. If you've read it, then it would make sense. Thanks, Erinot.

Also, here's why I typed the whole thing in the first place:

- (1) To fill in most of the fuzzy spots so that our character's backgrounds are understood. I read many references to Moose's being "mysterious" but nothing actually about Moose's origins. That's why I wrote my original first post in the first place. No one seemed to understand that reason, however. For an explanation, please read my second-to-last post in part 2 (from Whoop-de-doo's POV).
- (2) To create suspense. I won't give away the plot, so please read my last post in part 2, which explains why the characters were acting like the Three Boogers.

And another thing (I know I said "finally" before, but anyway . . .):

Erinot, sorry to be mean, but you said earlier that you wished I would read your posts instead of ignoring them, but from what you seem to be saying, you haven't read what I've posted. I explained several times about why the characters were acting like the Three Boogers and that the Russian Alaska thing does not take place at the same time as the current on-going battle, but you do not seem to have read and understood them. I don't know whether it is because you are not reading them or whether you are reading them but refusing to understand them or whether you read them but don't understand them, but the thing is that, Erinot, you haven't understood them. All right, I'll get off my soapbox now. Maybe my comments are lost up there in that jungle of messages above and no one's reading them.

IC

P.S. I'll repeat this because I think everyone's going to forget it:

If you would like to contribute further installments to this story, do not add any more to "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (no Invisible Crud)." If you would like to continue the thread I started, please contribute to part 2. If you disagree with my thread, please start a new thread with your installment (or if someone else has done it already, contribute to that). Thanks.

READ THIS! VERY IMPORTANT!

(I hope the formatting caught your attention.)

Okay, I've done it. I figure *someone* is going to

post in the "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (no Invisible Crud)" thread despite what I said, so now I've created a

Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing, part 2B (alternate no IC thread)

thread for you to post in. Please post in the thread mentioned right above and not in the "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing (no Invisible Crud)" thread. Thanks.

IC

Erinot, different people have different ideas, and my opinions are different from yours. I have no problem with that. The problem is, however, that your ideas are not necessarily correct, just as mine aren't. Therefore, I suggest posting in my "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing, part 2B (alternate no IC thread)" thread, so that:

- (a) my separate posts will continue to make sense so that someone who wants to read them will understand where my thread separated from the main thread
- (b) the main thread doesn't get too long so that it takes a long time to load (Kegolak said this earlier, I think)
- (c) if someone performs the same mistake I did (posting installments that the majority of the people here disagree with), starting a new thread without those posts would be much easier than copying and pasting the entire thing (which loses much of the formatting in the process)

I'm not suggesting that you should continue what

I've created. I'm suggesting that you respect it as an alternate thread rather than an inconsistent offshoot that's not part of the story.

IC

Well, I'm back after another period of trouble logging on.

Since you [plural] seem to be so adverse to anything I post and no one seems to continue my thread (saying that it just stops it dead in its tracks), I've decided to finish my alternate version of the story (proving that it does not stop it dead in its tracks).

So . . . I've posted part 1.25 (takes place after "no Invisible Crud" and before part 1.5), part 3 (takes place after part 2), and the epilogue (takes place after part 3). They should be interesting. I've got a big surprise for you at the end of part 3, and an even bigger surprise at the end of the epilogue. Enjoy!

Also, I'd like to thank Garduk, Mrejo, and Ekos for their posts. They made my thread make sense. To know why, read my installments. I won't give it away here.

One last thing: Since you [plural] keep stating that my posts form a separate story, you've basically implicitly given me permission to finish it. And so I've done it. I hope you like it. If you do and think it should be considered part of the story, just say so. If not, continue the story the way it was. (I won't even mention part 2B since no one seems to have read that comment.)

IC

P.S. Oh, wait. I just mentioned part 2B. Oh, never mind. :)

Thanks, Ekos. Ever since I encountered opposition to my posts, I've been struggling to find a way to tie it in with everything, so thanks again, Garduk, Mrejo, and Ekos, for reasons I still won't mention here so as not to spoil it.

And as for the comic stuff, that was my own original work, although the primary purpose of doing it was not for this Drowned Goblin, alas. It was a sort of a by-product, although I did have the Drowned Goblin in mind when I did it. And how I did it was with `\image{[description]}`. After you click on the post message button on the preview page, it asks you to select a .goof or .joking file to upload to the server. So that's how you do it. As to how I got the .goof files in the first place, I used Plant to do the original, and then I copied the image and pasted it in Adonkey SandwichDeluxe 2.0. Then I used the GOOF conversion thing, and that gave me the .goof file. You may have different software, so the procedure may vary for you.

And now that I'm done with the story, you won't be seeing any more stuff from me relating to Biff Luzar (unless we all decide to do a sequel or a prequel or a parallel story or whatever). Thanks, and enjoy! Again, of course, you don't have to accept my ending. It's just there.

IC

The order is basically numerical, with "no Invisible Crud" being part 1.

So . . . "no Invisible Crud"; part 1.25; part 1.5;

part 2; part 3; epilogue.

Thanks, Mrejo. I'm glad to see positive reactions to my stuff.

Also, if you [plural] feel it's incomplete (I do, sort of), just add more to it in the appropriate spot. It helps to have more than one folder, so you can insert stuff in between chapters. (Hey! Who says you have to write a story in order?)

IC

Hey, I just noticed something. My last two posts were posted exactly 24 hours apart, both at 5:09 pm. Hmmm . . . is something spooky going on? *g*

IC

Question:

Do you consider the "Biff Luzar" story done?

I'd like to know what everybody thinks. Now that the ending's been written, some people might consider it done, but other people might think some parts need to be written in between chapters. I'm kind of divided on this issue. One person can't just write the whole ending (or the last third, anyway)!

IC

P.S. The climax (or what I consider the climax, anyway) is missing from the story. It covers what exactly happened before Biff and the "others" (Whoop-de-doo's one and the mysterious visitor's another; no other characters mentioned in that scene; they may be there; they may be somewhere

else; they may be dead; who knows?) entered the hall of interdimensional transport. I don't feel like writing any more, so if anyone wants to contribute, go ahead! (This is the reason why I made part 3 instead of adding to part 2.)

Sorry for monopolizing this thread, and I hope you read and remember the rest of my posts instead of reading them and forgetting everything except this one.

About the new Drowned Goblin idea: not just yet. We need to finish this Biff Luzar thing (or agree that it's already finished!).

However, I'd like to bring all the ideas (posted in various places (not on *my* refrigerator door, thank you very much!)) here to refresh your memory.

The idea of people with "powers." I suggest making superheroes out of them as a sort of spoof/satire. I did that once, and I have submitted a heavily modified version to Garfbler. IMHO, I think it's horrible, and I'm not sure why I submitted it. Let's just wait until I get that rejection slip and then I can post the original version (which has a different style from the revised version) here. (Garfbler, if you're reading this, please reply to the story called "The Epitome of Perfidity" by Elkelonn Spudwato ASAP, please. I know you're going to reject it. I just don't want to have a simultaneous submission going on.)

Also, Z-Bob facetiously mentioned at the old Borum (yes, it's still there!) a time-traveling pig as a new subject for a Drowned Goblin. And being facetious, we could include that. Do you think pigs and robins get along together? *g*

IC

Oh, well, thanks, Mrejo, for your post. But it doesn't quite fit with my post. Not exactly. But that's all right. This is supposed to have a variety of stuff. As far as I'm concerned, the stuff I wrote is still connected to the main thread.

And, please, don't post on just the old thread. There's part 1.25, part 1.5, part 2, and part 3 to post in (if you feel like it). I'd like someone to connect parts 2 and 3 with the climax to give it some individual flavor (not chocovanilla) so I'm not dominating that part of the thread. Just because it says "IC inside" doesn't mean that there is *only* IC inside.

IC

Hi, and thanks for the compliments, Erinot. I'm glad to see such positive responses to my work.

Yes, I'm thinking about that original version of the horrible story that I submitted in yet another fit of insanity. The hero doesn't really have any supernatural powers. It's a perfectly logical science fiction story. (Well, maybe not so logical . . .) All the science is correct as far as I know. Maybe I'll post it here. I'll wait for Garfbler's response. Garfbler, if you're reading this somewhere, you don't have to respond to the manuscript right away. Just tell me whether I can post on the Borum a very different version of the story I submitted to you. I'm not sure whether that would be considered simultaneous submission. I'm pretty sure the story will be rejected, but who knows? :)

But not just yet, Erinot. We'll wait awhile.

So . . . what exactly is the deal here? Is my connected thread part of the story or not? Or is it one of two alternate threads that take off from Ekos's last post (it originally took off from other posts, and still other posts, and yet other posts . . . maybe that's a bit exaggerated)? Does anyone really care? How's this supposed to be a story? Will someone write a table of contents for this when it's done? [insert other questions here]

IC

I noticed you people have been slacking off on the titles lately. The last few posts have been titleless. I think you should add titles to your next posts so that they can be easily identifiable. (Also, one of the great joys of writing kooky stories is having kooky titles.)

IC

P.S. And that part 2B thing again. No one's posted in it. I suggest doing it so that my threads aren't isolated from the rest. Z-Bob has already expressed confusion at where my thread takes off from the main thread.

P.P.S. And . . . while you're at it, feel free to contribute to *my* threads! You're welcome! Please--add to it! This is an *alternate* thread, not a crazy offshoot (then again, it might be that also)!

Um . . . what are you talking about, Erinot? I'm confused.

IC

Z-Bob, thanks for adding to the out-of-sequence digression. It made me laugh a lot. I feel a lot better. Thanks, Z-Bob.

It is, well, an out-of-sequence digression. Not really part of the story, just there for comic relief. Ah, whatever.

IC

I forgot to mention this earlier, but isn't it amazing how "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing" has so much to do with *Flatus Fest*? I know that my "By Vlobdur's sandwich" remark was an intentional reference to the movie, but before that there were similarities too. Remember this quote from the movie: "It's not a sandwich! It's a particle accelerator!"?

IC

I'm sure there are a lot out there. I can't think of any more right now, since I don't have a copy of *Flatus Fest* with me at this moment and I'm too lazy to read over the whole story again. I'm sure you'll think of some, Erinot. :)

IC

P.S. Of course, there's that dual role thing that is a theme in both (although in different kinds of ways). And, explaining the quote I quoted, Mason Blesvik mistakes "particle accelerator" for "dynamite" (or probably doesn't remember and only vaguely recalls the word). And don't forget the popular concept of the main characters versus the characters themselves (Biff Luzar as portrayed in

the comic strip vs. Biff Luzar the real person). And, uh, some obvious *Flatus Fest* references of mine: the Crud X device, "By Vlobdur's sandwich" and whatsit. Oh, and, the rock sandwich can be comparable to Geethisiscrudpleasenomore. And the chartreuse demon wombats . . . well . . . I don't know. Flatus is . . . I don't know either. Not quite the Dynamite Thing, but sort of. The crew . . . Captain Braggart/Mason Blesvik is Biff; Dr. Flazatus/Zorguflu Plain is Whoop-de-doo, since Plain wants to be recognized as having equal importance as Blesvik and Whoop-de-doo actually takes over Biff's position; Lieutenant Stupid Radish/Quark DeCuckoo is Flubbers/Kaputza, respectively (appearance vs. inner person); Tech Sergeant Chunk/Dead Spam is Moose X (mysterious origins; "Spam's not even my real name" or something similar to that, don't quite remember); Lieutenant Wheredidmysandwichgo/Cheesy Flebber is . . . not sure; Security Chief "Blockhead" Idiott/I. Zbeegveggie is the impulse officer perhaps ("What's my last name?") (also, gets killed in episode 81--hint, hint). Not sure who McFloogle's supposed to be. And whatever happened to Ick Fruity, the com-tech?

Something I forgot to include: ("What's my last name?"--You never mentioned Spill the impulse officer's last name.)

IC

Erinot, copy and paste that entry in a document and save it, so if both get deleted, you can have backup.

IC

Hello? Anybody? What happened to the Drowned Goblin?

Come on! We need to finish this thing! I need to compile an official text of it!

IC

Ah, good stuff. Two comments:

The story (including my threads and the out-of-sequence digression) is about 35,000 words long right now. Good, eh? Let's add another 5,000 words or so and call it a novel. That way, we can vote for it for the NoFocus Award in both the SF Novel *and* First Novel categories! This would be our first novel (sort of), with the exception of Ehak, but then Ehak has only contributed about 600 words in two posts.

Also, what the heck is the Drowned Goblin thread doing way down there in the middle of the slush? Why doesn't it advance to the top whenever someone posts a new message in it, just like all the other topics?

IC

I take it that's the climax, Mrejo. Good work. I've got to write a climax for my own thread, too, since no one else is going to. Obviously.

IC

IT DOES?????!!!! Why thanks, Garduk! Now I actually have motivation to write that climax in my thread. Right after the two climaxes, the two threads jump together. It all makes sense! The

story is an alternate universe story of course. :)
I'm so happy.

Oh, and, uh, the story is now about 36,500 words long and is about 3,500 words short of being a novel. Let's make it a novel, I say!

IC

P.S. Why the heck is the Drowned Goblin thread still way down there along with all the ~~other~~ junk down there? Administrators, please make the Drowned Goblin thread normal again, so that whenever someone posts in it, it rises (magically) to the top. :)

There! That should do it! I've posted part 2.5 and the intermission! It connects part 2 and part 3 in my thread. And then the no IC thread continues with part 3. Okay, that's great!

Note: The intermission is actually the third intermission. The second intermission is the out-of-sequence digression, and the first one is not yet written. It's supposed to cover the breaking apart of the story. That's interesting. I'll do it right now.

IC

Length update: The length (including bylines and dates at the top of posts) is . . . 39,058.

Not quite a novel. We need to fill in some more stuff. :) Less than a thousand words to go!

IC

39,058 words that is. Sorry.

IC

I just noticed. Those breaks in the long titles are horrible. I didn't realize when I posted it that they would word-wrap. I'll correct that. Apologies.

IC

Congrats, Erinot. You just made "Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing" into *Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing*. It is now officially a novel, at just over 40,000 words, including the byline and date and time in the heading of each post.

All right. It ain't over 'til it's over. I never said it was over. (You know, you always mistake the things I say for what you think I'm saying, which isn't what I'm saying! It's just not fair! I'm always misunderstood!) That was just a table of contents to organize the whole thing and show how my posts fit in with the rest. Okay? That's it. Geez!

All right. It ain't over 'til it's over. But when is it going to be over? When? Will it go on and on and on forever, like some stories? *Should* this story be a novel? Why?

Just some things to think about.

IC

P.S. Also, the connection intermission doesn't necessarily have to end the main thread at that point. It's just there, just like everything else.

Nothing is specified. If you think the two threads should connect at that point, then they should. If not, then not. But the connection is there. I'm going to connect my thread to the main thread now, in fact.

What Shameless Self-Promotion topic?

Oh, btw, I recall posting a message after the "Congrats, Erinot" message but I think this Borum somehow upchucked and regurgitated it out of its digestive system so now it's no longer here. Oh, well . . .

I forgot what I recall posting in that message. Geez! I'm not even sure I actually posted it. Possibly something about completing my part of the thread and connecting it to the main thread. Ah, well . . .

IC

Then again, I might not have pressed the "Post Message" button on the preview screen . . .

IC

Well, it **wasn't** my fault. It was all **your** fault!

Sorry.

The reason why there are so many threads is because the installments weren't written in order. Heck, who says you have to write a story in order?

But when writing a story out of order, you have to create additional threads to include additional installments that took place before those threads.

Which was an indirect result of **rejecting my posts in the first place!** But that was really a good thing, IMHO and yours also. It enabled me to revise them. Thanks.

I suppose I'm going to combine all of my extraneous posts into a **single** thread, so that you can recommend it to your friends or whatever and so you don't get confused (**even though I made it in numerical order in the first place, but no one seems to understand that!**). But, unfortunately, I can't find the time right now. Perhaps tomorrow.

two of IC's personalities, battling it out

Hello, people, and thanks a lot, Devourer, for organizing the Drowned Goblin.

There were actually *nine* threads, not ten. Erinot might have counted the alternate part 2B thread that no one posted in.

And thanks for the criticism, Garduk. I intended for it to be humor and also to leave it up to the reader to decide who actually said those things, but if you don't like it, that's okay. I won't include any more.

As of now, my alternate thread is officially done. There's no more to add to it, and I'm going to put the installments in order in one post and repost.

Erinot, the reason I was trying to write in a style that wasn't mine (or was it? it felt like mine) was because you rejected my original posts, saying they weren't connected. Well, . . . obviously I *had* to do something!

Thanks again, Devourer, for what you've done. But . . . I have a few comments:

I'm glad there's no longer a "no Invisible Crud" thing. I guess that means I'm allowed to post in it. Yes!

Second thing: I slightly disagree with the shortened form. It resembles *Airy Blotter and the Kidney Stone*, *Airy Blotter and the Chamber of Mushrooms*, *Airy Blotter and the Wombat of Mars*, and *Airy Blotter and the Goblins on Fire* too much . . . **ugh**. Making it *Biff Luzar in the Stall of the Dynamite Thing* adds more of the setting and makes the reader wonder what exactly is taking place in the Stall and what the title exactly means by "stall" and whether that is a metaphor or an actual stall, whereas *Biff Luzar and the Dynamite Thing* shows no relationship between the two characters and seems to suggest that all other characters, if any, are inferior and insignificant. The title is supposed to attract the reader, of course. IMHO, the former title was more attractive.

Last thing, I'm going to combine all of my posts into a single post, and I'm going to post it. This will, in effect, make the "I.C. Drowned Goblin?" thread unnecessary. When that is done, you may delete it, please, Devourer. And thanks again for the organizing.

IC

Ok, Devourer, I'm done. You can delete the "I.C. Drowned Goblin?" folder now. Thanks.

All right. Now about the optional epilogue, it is optional. It's not really part of my thread, so I couldn't include it in there, and, besides, the story's not done. Heh heh. So, when the story's done (if it ever gets completed--groan), we'll decide whether we'll adopt it as the official

epilogue or throw it out and either not have an epilogue or adopt an alternate epilogue, in which case my epilogue will become an "alternate epilogue." As I've said before, I made the epilogue very vague and detached from the main story so that it can accommodate a wide variety of endings, so you shouldn't feel limited by it. Feel free to continue the story any way you want to. I can always revise my epilogue. :)

IC

Um . . . perhaps "or adopt an alternate epilogue" should have been rephrased as "or adopt another epilogue." It doesn't sound right.

IC

Thanks, Mrejo, and enjoy! :) (Condensing has also enabled me to make a few typo corrections here and there.)

IC

P.S. "Rough experience"? No way! It was fun!

[Don't listen to my alternate personality. That postscript is **completely** untrue--the other personality of IC]

Hi, Erinot. But the thing you're not counting on is what (low, even more sinister laugh) *I've* got in store for you! Yes, another hefty post! Only this time, it *fits*! No more slapstick nonsense, no more Three Boogers, no more characters acting untrue to their character (whatever that's supposed to mean), and no more inconsistent alternate-universe junk! Ya happy, Erinot?

This post is actually eight chapters. I continued the title-parodying that I did earlier in *my* thread, only this time there are *eight* title parodies, parodying the titles of (believe it or not) *nine* famous SF stories! (If you don't get one or more of them, just ask me, and I'll explain.) My personal favorite is the last one, which I won't give away here.

Well, if you haven't read it yet, enjoy! If you have, I hope you enjoyed it! :)

IC

Hmmm . . . what you're saying makes sense, and I understand. But I'm not sure whether you are referring to my alternate thread or the post that I just posted on the main thread.

If you are referring to the alternate thread, it's over and done with and I'm not making any more attempts to connect it.

If you're referring to the post I just posted, that post is part of the main thread and not part of the alternate thread. The alternate thread has nothing to do with that post, with the exception of a small reference to it that serves the purpose of identifying the potato people as Crudbokuks. Moose only says, "It's as if they were memories infused into my mind from an alternate self in an alternate universe." That may or may not be *the* alternate universe that I had in my alternate thread. It's very possible that Moose is only trying to express an idea that is difficult to express. As for the Crudbokuks, if you think they should be confined *only* to the alternate thread just because they appeared in it, I'd like to remind you that if my thread *is* an alternate thread, then it has *nothing* to do with the main

thread, and therefore it doesn't really matter whether the Crudbokuks appear in the main thread or not. They may or may not be the same Crudbokuks that appeared in the alternate thread. It could all be a coincidence. (In fact, they're obviously *not* the same Crudbokuks. The ones in this thread are primitive tribal beings while the ones in my alternate thread were sophisticated and civilized.) However, if you don't like that reference to the alternate universe and/or the name "Crudbokuks," I could always revise my post and ask Devourer to delete the original.

If you are referring to the epilogue, remember that it is only an *optional* epilogue. It's just there because I wrote it and I think it should be available to read for anyone who wishes to read it. It's not officially part of the thread.

And one last thing: "No matter how hard you try to write to fit into this universe, you don't. You can't." I know what you mean by this, but I don't completely agree. Saying "You can't," is basically saying "Your stuff just doesn't fit in this and since it doesn't fit, it can't ever fit, and you will never change and you are always confined to writing the kind of stuff you've written before." This is just plain stereotyping. Just because I've written in a particular style doesn't mean I *always* write in that particular style. Just because I *often* use that style doesn't mean that it is difficult for me to write in other styles. People aren't just solid, unmoving, unchanging rocks. They have a variety of talents, not just one. When I wrote my recent main thread post, I felt very comfortable with it. It was a style I was comfortable with, even though it wasn't the style I used before. In fact, now that I think of it, I like this style better. I feel that I can express my comic talents better using this style than the slapstick style I used in the alternate

thread.

And another last thing (that's a contradiction isn't it?): I'm not confining my comic talents to just this Drowned Goblin. I've used it in lots of places, including stories I'm writing for submission to publications. I've found a wide variety of styles in my work, ranging from serious, not funny stuff to light humor to in-your-face lame jokes that don't make any sense to LOL slapstick to social satire. I feel comfortable with all of it.

And yet another last thing: I don't think it's the time yet to start a new Drowned Goblin. I'm no longer thinking about including that story I mentioned earlier. It just doesn't fit with what I have in mind. The so-called "superhero" in that story doesn't have any superpowers, and it takes place in the near future, not the present. I'd like this new story to take place in the present. But it's not the right time yet.

Thanks, Erinot, for your comments. Differing opinions usually result in interesting discussions.

IC

Erinot, you don't have to go. The last time I went, I came back after a few weeks. But if you feel like you're devoting too much time to the Borum, that's okay.

Erinot, I'm sorry for discussing my worries and concerns and all that stuff. I didn't know I was ruining it for you. No one said anything about its being offensive or ruining anything, so I thought it was okay. Again, I'm sorry.

And I'm sorry for making you feel like I am putting too many demands on everyone. Since everything I post seems to offend you, I will keep this message down to a minimum. You seem to be saying that I have adopted a style that wasn't my original style in order to fit in. I have not done so. The style I was writing in in the alternate thread wasn't my original style. It just happened to be the style I wrote in. For me, I use a variety of styles for different occasions. For you, that may be different. Each person has a different way of writing. The style I have used for the main thread post was not an effort to make my work fit in with everyone else's. It was only using another style of mine to fit the story.

Again, I'm sorry, Erinot, that things had to happen this way. I didn't mean to offend anyone, and some people actually enjoyed my post. Garduk, for example, says, ". . . your new post fits right in." Again, different people have different opinions, and apparently, Garduk's opinion differs from yours. That does not make either of you absolutely correct. However, rejecting an entire story because one installment was written by a person who previously wrote installments that didn't fit, is not the right way to handle the situation. I no longer support the alternate thread, and it's just there for the curious.

Garduk's post made me post my post, with its bifffluzar (pun intended) ending with the potatoes. Naturally, I leaped at the idea of contributing the next installment. And since the very next installment, yours, didn't directly have anything to do with Garduk's post, I felt that my post would fit naturally.

I have kept all of my previous posts separate from the main thread in an alternate universe of its own, and I now know that my attempts to connect

them to the main thread were wrong and stupid. I now understand that it is a separate thread. I understand that I do not have complete control over the Drowned Goblin. I have enjoyed most (though not all) of the posts that everyone has posted in the main thread. They raised interesting ideas and brought up exciting topics. I enjoyed it *because* it was a Drowned Goblin. Many different voices coming together produce a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. And I welcome your messages in this folder. I'm sorry for the things I've said. The times I've screamed at you ("It was all **your** fault!"; "Are ya happy, Erinot?"; etc.) were only meant to be sarcastic, kind of like your "Are you happy, Ekos?" comment at the end of one of your posts. I'm sorry you took it the wrong way. Your criticisms and comments have made me improve my work, and I thank you for that. You made me condense the alternate thread into just one post (or two, including the epilogue). You made me realize that the additional posts I posted to connect the alternate thread to the main thread were not good. They lacked quality *because* I wrote them to connect the two threads together. Erinot, you made me understand that they weren't supposed to be connected. My last post, which was not written in order to connect the alternate thread to the main thread at all, allowed me to use my original voice (although in a different style that was still mine).

Thank you, Erinot, for making me realize that my worries and concerns and my comments on its length and its NoFocus Award eligibility were not suitable for this Borum. I understand now, and I will not post any more of that.

Don't go, Erinot. We're not rejecting you. This Borum really *is* a classroom, a place for us to learn and study, to socialize with our friends, and to develop our talents. Don't go, Erinot. This

classroom won't be the same without you.

IC

Hi, Mrejo. Maybe you *can* revise it, after all. They're called "Crudbokuks" in my post, and they were still there (I mean *right there!*) the last time we saw the Dynamite Thing.

Say . . . am *I* by any chance one of the "five Cruds"? :)

Well, sorry for beating you to the punch, but it was a manure/crud situation at the end of Garduk's post, and that calls for a manure/crud response, which means . . . well, me.

Good luck on your post, Mrejo.

Mrejo, what do you say you, me, Garduk, and everybody else gather 'round and post a big (I mean **BIG**) "Please Return" or something message to Erinot? What do you say?

Erinot, you will be missed. :(

IC

Mrejo, I am sincerely sorry for posting my installment before yours. I honestly did not know that you were intending to post one. Your comment about hopefully writing a new installment was lost way up there in the thread and I guess I forgot it.

Erinot, I did not consciously know that Mrejo was writing a post. I read that comment but since it didn't stand out and I just continued on reading

with the next post, it escaped my mind. My reply to Mrejo's message may have misled you to believe that I deliberately cut in. When I wrote "Well, sorry for beating you to the punch, but it was a manure/crud situation at the end of Garduk's post, and that calls for a manure/crud response, which means . . . well, me.", I didn't mean that I had the right to continue the post and no one else did. I didn't know Mrejo was intending to write an installment, and what I meant by my statement was that I had an idea that went with Garduk's ending, and since I didn't consciously know that Mrejo intended to write an installment, I decided to write a post of my own. When I learned that Mrejo had intended to write a post, I just assumed that we both independently wrote sequels to the same installment and that I had just posted mine earlier. It happens. I'm sorry I didn't remember Mrejo's comment about intending to write an installment.

Finally, I have the right to post on this Drowned Goblin just as everybody else does. If you think any of my posts don't fit, you, just like everyone else, have the right to speak up against it. This you have done, and I respect your right to do so. However, sometimes it comes to the point where you are no longer criticizing the post itself but attacking the author of that post simply because that author has posted disagreeable posts in the past. This is a logical fallacy and ignores the individual merits or defects of the literary work and instead stereotypes it as being the work of that author. Let me ask you a question, Erinot: If I had posted that installment under a pseudonym and you didn't know that it was me who was writing it, would you have reacted the same way?

Erinot, I am not removing my post from the thread. Garduk has said that it "fits right in," and Mrejo has said that it "makes sense, and it introduces

new plot elements." Therefore, I am not going to remove my post that at least two people find agreeable just because one person says it should be removed and does not give a satisfactory reason *why* it should be removed other than that the author has posted disagreeable installments in the past and that the author has deliberately posted the installment in order to prevent another author to post an installment, which is a mistaken belief.

IC

"Home fries." Heh heh. I'm too upset to really laugh at that one.

Erinot, I forgot to mention earlier that the first installment posted after Mrejo announced his intention to contribute a post was yours, Erinot, not mine. Although it didn't directly have anything to do with Garduk's post, it *could* have made Mrejo revise his post, although it didn't.

Erinot, I'm sorry to say this, but lately it seems that you are no longer the person you were before. Instead of welcoming new contributions to the story like everyone else, you reject it immediately (you show no signs of even having read it, although I'm assuming you have) and resort to using emotional appeal and other propaganda loaded with logical fallacies in order to get me to remove my contributions. This is a team effort, Erinot, and each installment will be judged solely on its own merits and defects and not on the author or the merits and defects of previous work by that author. *My alternate thread is over and done with, and is irrelevant to anything I've posted since I abandoned it.*

Furthermore, Erinot, it seems to me that when you

realized your propaganda wasn't going to work and that my post was still going to remain there no matter what you said (which is not true; I will remove it if you give me a satisfactory reason to do so, which you have not yet done), you desperately resorted to threatening to leave the Borum unless I removed my contribution. I see it only as another attempt to use propaganda to enforce your own opinions without regard for anyone else's opinions. You state that I have complete control over whether you remain or leave this Borum, and if you honestly think that this is the situation, then you are deceiving yourself. I do not have any control (I do have some influence, but not control) over your life, just as you do not have any control over my life. Whether you leave or remain on the Borum is solely your decision. I will still keep my contribution where it is. However, I am not a stubborn, unchanging, unmoving rock. If you give me a satisfactory reason why I should remove my post, I will gladly do so. If you choose to leave this Borum, Erinot, don't expect me to think that it was *me* who had complete control over whether you leave or not. That is your decision, and if you wish to believe that it was me who controlled it, I respect your right to do so.

Garduk, what I've contributed in just this thread alone adds up to 6,276 words in a whole lot of sentences. Wait a minute . . . 6,276? What the heck is this? This *is* a lot!

This must mean something.

I am spending way too much time here. Looking over my writing log, I find that out of the 12,000 words or so of fiction that I have written in October, all of it was posted as part of the Drowned Goblin (or part of the alternate thread, rather).

This month, November, I'm going to change. I intend to write four short stories this month. This Borum has prevented me from doing so. I have several ideas that I think will make nice stories, but I've been held back by my participation in the Borum. I think the Drowned Goblin was a good idea, however, and I feel that my writing has benefited from it, even though I didn't write a single word in October for any story that I intend to submit to a publication. But spending almost all of my free time on the Borum is not a good way to spend my life. If I remain here, I will have very little time to write any stories for submission. It is also a drain on my non-free time and the limited amount of time I have for my Internet connection.

Therefore, I am going to leave this Borum for a while. I'll see you in December, folks.

IC

Oh, hi, Ekos. I didn't notice your post because I was writing mine when you posted it. I regret not being able to stay and having to leave so soon after you arrived. Oh, eventful day . . .

IC

Ekos, I am not leaving because I'm being criticized. I responded four times to Erinot's last three posts, explaining my point of view, what I think, etc.

The reason I'm leaving is because I spend too much time here. Garduk made me realize that. Please see the bottom half of my message that starts with "'Home fries.'"

Well, I'll see you in December, folks.

IC

Ditto. Happy New Year, everybody!

"Eventful," Garfbler? Depends on what you mean. I'm hoping I'll get my work accepted in 2002. That should be a big event for me. (hint, hint :))

IC

Of course, this is just MM/DD/YY. For most of the world, it's DD/MM/YY. So it's, um, quite different. I need to go somewhere now, so I can't give you any examples in DD/MM/YY.

IC

Hi, Enfenotok. I didn't see your message because I was writing mine. I'm planning to seal my first story of 2002 in an envelope tomorrow too. The problem is, I've only got 200 words written, and I'm expecting 2,000 (or maybe 2,002, to fit the year; what do you think?). Heh heh. I was going to do it today, and now I'm going to have to write the 1,800 words tomorrow, but now I find I'm going to spend most of tomorrow away from the computer, and so I might have to actually write out an entire story in longhand for the first time since, well, a long time ago. You know, back in the days . . .

Talk about technological advancement! A new year and I'm going to write out a story with paper and pen? How ironic.

Anyway, Happy New Year, everyone.

IC

Good luck and MSACEYV*, Enfenotok, on your submission. I've still to write mine. It's going to be a 1 January story, heh heh. Fun. After thinking about the story this morning and tying it in with 1 January and a new plot idea, it just became a lot spookier. Freaky. And to think what happens in my story might just come true. I won't spoil it for you all, so I won't give away the story idea here. Well, have fun, everyone.

IC

*MSACEYV--"May skill and chance ensure your victory."

And I forgot to mention something: Good news! A change of plan: I found out I'll be spending today at home, so I won't be writing my story on paper after all. :) So I don't have to retype it on the computer.

And, using DD/MM/YYYY, the next palindromic date is 20/02/2002. That's less than two months away.

IC

What? Two Mrejos? And all this time I thought there was one! Geez! I mean, I kind of suspected something when in the books topic, "Mrejo" typed "Fungomancer--what the [heck]?" or something like that and "Mrejo Equos" typed "I always liked Fungomancer, but not Count Negative One" or something like that. Well! Okay, I can deal with that.

Anyway . . .

I finally got it done. My story. Done! Well, the

rough draft, anyway. And I managed to more than double my word-count goal: 4,100 words! Amazing. Well, the story seems fantastic and very well may be the best story I've ever written (so far). And it's a New Year's Day story--the first New Year's Day story I've ever written. The entire story takes place on New Year's Day, but a very weird New Year's Day, indeed. In my story, 1 January is also Universal Freedom Day, and both holidays on the same date serve symbolic purposes as well. I won't say anything more about it now, 'cause I don't want to spoil it.

Enfenotok, I'm not part of any writer's groups, unfortunately. Say, do you think you can critique it in 30 minutes? Reply in the next 30 minutes and I'll e-mail it to you. Otherwise, you might have to wait until my next story.

Now I'll get back to the story and read it for the first time since finishing the rough draft, and then I'll make some revisions, and print it out. That would be fun.

IC

Okay, I've produced my second draft. It looks slightly better than the first. I don't know what else to do with it besides read it again and then seal it in the envelope. So that's what I'll do now.

IC

This is **bad**. My computer just crashed right while I was printing my story out. That's not good luck, is it? As if *that* wasn't bad enough, I was writing a message here when it crashed and what I wrote got deleted, so now I'm trying to remember what I

wrote. At least my story didn't get deleted.

Anyway . . .

Enfenotok, that's all right. You can critique it if Garfbler rejects it, although maybe I shouldn't say that here on the Borum (wouldn't want to give Garfbler any ideas, heh heh). And, of course, there are future stories as well.

I have reread the story and revised it and produced a third draft and resumed and finished printing it and sealed it in the envelope along with a SASE (*an* SASE?) and a cover letter (my first). Done. All done. I feel great. I *am* a writer. The story is called "Hey! Who Took My Sandwich?" and I managed (somehow) to put a monster wombat in it. But it's not like it sounds. Okay, okay, I *promise* not to reveal any more about the story!

It's still New Year's Day, isn't it?

IC

Huh. Guess not. I was 11 minutes too late. But . . . I live in the Central Time Zone, so for me it's still New Year's Day! Happy New Year, everybody!

Or are Borum times All-Encompassing and Final? Oh, darn . . .

IC

Or maybe the *time-traveling sentient dinosaur meets talking tree in the middle of winter 1859 and engages in philosophical discussion of the meaning of life and relativity and quantum*

mechanics, all while cucumber-shaped aliens invade and melt the world with blaster cannons story . . . WHOOPS! I shouldn't have given that away! :)

IC

I look up from the monitor. The middle of winter 1859 is approaching. What could this mean? I am sure this is only a facetious remark, but still, one cannot help wondering. What is going to happen to the world?

I continue reading the messages, but there are no more. It all stops here. There are no more messages after the one posted at 01:12 pm on Wednesday, January 02, 2002, by The Invisible Crud. What will happen then? What will happen now?

6 February 1859

I look out across the field of snow, squinting against the bright sunlight, looking for signs of anything unusual, anything out of the ordinary. I look, and I look, but I find nothing. But then I notice something.

What is this? Can it be possible? But no, this must be impossible. How could this have happened?

I look again, but I cannot deny that it is true. There, in front of me a short distance away, are a dinosaur and a tree. They are engaged in conversation, or so it seems.

I know what is happening. The dinosaur is a time-traveling sentient dinosaur, and the tree is a talking tree, and they are engaged in a philosophical discussion of the meaning of life and relativity and

quantum mechanics.

Slowly, it dawns on me. Cucumber-shaped aliens are invading and melting the world with blaster cannons as I speak. I look up. There, in the sky, floats a gigantic flying saucer, from which exit hordes of cucumber-shaped aliens. I shudder. It cannot be possible. It cannot. But it is happening. The aliens are melting the world with blaster cannons.

No.

I dash in the direction of the dinosaur.

“Help me! The aliens are invading! Get me out of here! Take me to the future!”

Surprised, the dinosaur looks at me for a moment, and then it vanishes.

I stand there, cold and shivering, confused, staring at the empty space where the dinosaur was and at the snow-covered fields beyond. I see the snow everywhere, and then it, too, vanishes.

2 January 2002

The world then reappears, and I find myself standing in the middle of a street on a cold afternoon, alone and confused. No one else is there. No one else remains. I am alone. I look to the right and see a clock hanging on the wall inside a store. I can make out the time: 1:11.

I remember the time The Invisible Crud’s last message was posted: 1:12 p.m.

What now? What will happen? I watch the clock as the second hand inches slowly clockwise: 55, 56, 57, 58, 59 . . .