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Editor's Note: Giant Bugs Not Included

In college, my creative writing class was told to read *The Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka. I don't actually remember what the point of the assignment was, but I do remember finding the novella incredibly boring. So I said so. I couldn't understand why anyone would focus on the mundane quite so much, especially when the main character had just turned into a frigging bug.

Fortunately, our Assistant Assistant Editor, Stephen Schwegler, was in that same class and ready to set me straight. He gave a rousing speech explaining how the mundane was, in fact, anything but. It was in the miniscule details that we could envelop ourselves in the story; it was the boring stuff that made it possible to connect with a giant man-roach. Mr. Schwegler brought the class to tears and changed my reading habits irrevocably.

Or, possibly, he just threw something at me and called me an idiot. We may never know for sure.

Regardless of how events actually played out, the conversation was eerily prescient, somehow foretelling this very issue of Jersey Devil Press. The five stories herein – by Henry Sane, Autumn Hayes, Steven Gumeny, Matt Rowan, and Andrew S. Williams – have taken it upon themselves to embrace the mundane – whether it's reading, cheese, or a positively Gregor Samsa-like work ethic – in the face of the decidedly not mundane. And that's the beauty of it, really. It's in that nothing, in the conversations and the day-to-day routines of con artists and security guards alike, that *everything* happens.

Huh. Guess I did learn something in college after all.
Thanks, Steve.

– Eirik Gumeny

Trapped in the Bathroom at the End of the World

by Henry Sane

The world ended one night as I was sitting on the toilet. At the time, I remember I was peacefully reading *Amerika* by Franz Kafka, having just finished the very last word of the second-to-last chapter. Chapter six, I think. Maybe seven.

And then the world ended.

Naturally, being that it was the end of the world, it was one of those times when you remember everything about the moment—what you were doing, who you were with, what was in the air, and so on. Like where you were when you heard a beloved celebrity was shot, or what color tie your father was wearing when he came out of the closet. Sensory recognition. You can't forget these kinds of moments, short of suffering amnesia or some other memory-blanking trauma. And you can't forget the details either. Me, I was half-naked, sitting on my toilet, reading Kafka when the world ended. I could hear the monotonous buzz of the overhead air vent and the trickling of water from my faulty sink faucet. I tasted nothing, felt nothing particularly memorable in the line of the physical or the emotional. The lingering stench of shit was perhaps the most unforgettable. All in all, everything, internally and externally, was very peaceful. Both before and after the world ended, very peaceful.

Perhaps I should clarify—the world didn't properly *end*, as one might expect of such a thing. After all, *I* still existed. As did my bathroom. And the Earth was obviously still there. There was no explosion, or implosion, or redirection or derailment of our orbit around the Sun. No noticeable increase or decrease in temperature or breathable air. No chaos, no hideous mutations, no cannibalism. There was just me. And my bathroom. And an empty void that encompassed everything else.

I'd just finished the very last word of *Amerika's* second-to-last chapter when the violent rattling began. Something like an earthquake, but far more jarring and profound. Much quicker also. And whereas an earthquake is like a ten-second upheaval of mountainous wobbling, during which certainty is abruptly discarded like yesterday's garbage, this was like having your mind separated from body and time, sucked through a black hole, and instantly replaced. And also unlike an earthquake, you knew from the very moment of the tumultuous onset exactly what was happening. But in that fraction-of-a-second moment of intensity, you also realize it's already come and gone.

So don't ask me how—but I knew without a doubt I'd just survived the end of the world.

I'd already begun dealing with it—emotionally speaking—before my mind had returned to my body.

The internal conversation went smoothly enough:

It's the end of the world, said one side.

That's right, replied the other. *So?*

So what?

So what will you do?

What will I do? Huh? What are you getting at?

It's the end of the world... Surely you've got a plan, yes?

Yes. But it's the end of the world, and we both know that.

Right.

(Pause)

So at the end of the world, you throw out your plans and start over.

Right.

So what's the use in formulating a plan now?

But you said you already had a plan—

That's right, I did. My plan is to forget about plans. How can we possibly be expected to formulate a proper plan at a time like this, beyond the plan of non-planning, of course? We haven't even reconnected yet!

Once everything internally gets back into place, we'll sort out the external accordingly. Sound?

Sound.

Then I chimed in:

The end of the world is a plan all in itself, forced upon us all.

There's no use fighting one Godzilla of a plan with one little BB gun of a plan. We'll scope out the end of the world, pretend it's a blueprint for the future of mankind and go from there.

That sounds like a plan, replied the first side.

So it does, agreed the other.

Instinctively, I knew it was the end of the world. I didn't learn it from the voices and they didn't learn it from me; we all just figured it out at the same time. I knew it before the cave-in of the bathroom door, the landing point of some weighty debris. I knew it before that faint hint of sulfur hit the air. And I knew it before the air returned to the familiar smell of shit.

Without the need to test it, I was sure I was trapped — trapped in the bathroom at the end of the world. I could have easily cleaned up and tried to shuffle through the tiny crack between the large debris and the doorframe; but the debris was so massive and so obviously cumbersome that even the thought of moving it was completely pointless.

So there I sat. On my toilet at the end of the world. No one, no thing, existed beyond the walls surrounding. And I was sure of it. Still, I wanted to remain positive. Instead of thinking about what I knew there *wasn't*, I tried to think of what perhaps there *was*, if anything, left beyond my bathroom walls. But it was useless. I just couldn't conjure the thought. Maybe in that split second, when the world ended, I formed a mental block, whereby some fragment of my subconscious refused to pass hopeful information through the necessary channels to reach my conscious mind. Actually, my way of thinking was rather odd in this respect. Assorted words and phrases came frequently to mind, as they normally might after any tragic occurrence, but no pictures or meaning came attached to

them. Words like *fire, death, misery, desolation, obliteration, re-population, fear, rubble, bodies, loss, nothingness*—

It all just bounced right off as if I'd reverted to infancy. The words could have just as easily been *hamburger, astronomy, condom* and *Pileated Woodpecker*.

After about thirty minutes of very calm acceptance—it was almost meditation, minus the specific *intent* to find calmness—I decided to continue reading Kafka. I never knew before I began the final chapter that Kafka had never properly finished the novel. The final chapter comes out of nowhere, after leaving a mostly unresolved second-to-last chapter, and essentially the story finishes nowhere. All in all though, an enjoyable read. I would highly recommend this novel to anyone who's just survived the end of the world.

With nothing better to do, I decided to start reading *Amerika* again from the beginning, optimistic that this time it would turn out better. Maybe in my first read-through, I thought, I'd approached it in the wrong frame of mind. I don't usually read novels twice. Too many on the "to read" pile. But I wanted to catch something new that would unite this novel's broken pieces. I just can't stand a story that ends like that.

So there I sat, on my toilet, trapped in the bathroom at the end of the world, opening *Amerika* for one more read-through.

Chapter one.

HENRY SANE is a 26-year old enthusiast of literature. He reads it, writes it and, at Columbus State University, studies it. He plans to earn his degree in English Literature in the Fall of 2011. His favorite activities include cemetery war dances, hopscotch, and bumping into random people so as to fulfill the void for human contact. On occasion, he reports the uncanny ability to eat an entire bag of pretzels. His writing varies in style, ranging from the frightening to the absurd, from the grotesque to the whimsical, and from the readable to sheer wiping material.

Third Guard

by Autumn Hayes

Wait a minute, buddy – don't go so fast. We don't mean no harm; just asking, is all. Just asking. We been lugging this thing around so long, through this park, and in this weather. Feel that wind kicking up? It's gonna rain soon.

Yeah, it's sunny now, but trust me – it'll rain. Might as well step under this tree, pal, and give us a hand. Quit your bustling home. That subway ain't coming no sooner.

Ahh, come on, man. Just for a second? My partner here, Verne, he's awful tired. We need a break. Help us out for a second, friend.

Not even for an old man? Look at him. Don't he deserve a little mercy in his old age? Wouldn't you want some, too, if you were him? If you'd been charged with what he's got –

No, not sick, but tired, as he ought to be. You'd be broke-down, too, and hunched up like a gargoyle, all twisted and gray and knotty – don't look like that, Verne; it's true – if you'd been through what he's been through. If only I could show you my hands! And my back? It's killing me. I can't imagine how he's hurting. Poor Verne, all these years, hauling it around –

Can't, mate. It ain't that easy. The rules state clear and firm: carry the box over your head, or at least five feet off the ground, at all times. No setting it down. Ever, or else.

Ah, hell, partner. You don't want to know. We'd never get it closed again, and we'd never – well, let's say it's messy, friend, and involves a lot of demons, and the world as we know it would shed its skin if people knew what we had here.

Don't look like that, man. I'm not nuts. Ask Verne here; he'd tell you if he talked – which he don't – but if he did, he'd tell you what we got here is important. Mighty important.

What'd you call it – a chest? Now, that's a funny word for it. Never looked at it that way. Huh. But what's in it – now, that, my friend, is a complicated answer. I couldn't tell you as well as I'd show you, and you wouldn't believe me, anyway. Would you?

It's pretty confidential, man. You'll keep quiet? If you didn't –

Okay. Just don't laugh, and don't ever tell nobody. Promise?

Well, it's the Book of Eternal Secrets.

Don't laugh! It's the Book of Secrets. It is! All the knowledge there ever was, or will be, or is now – or never was, but should've been – here in this box, and we carry it.

Yeah, stuff like that. And what killed the dinosaurs, and what happened to Jimmy Hoffa, and –

Come on, man. The Mafia killed him. Everyone knows that. Walled him up in Giants stadium. The rumors are true.

No, of course not. Sinking logs and drunken Scotsmen are all that is. A myth. How could only one of them survive for four million years, without breeding? Sheesh. That's common sense.

Okay, okay, wait. Don't go. I didn't mean that. I'm just kind of kind of crabby, you know, from carrying this box around, and waiting for this replacement, this third guy.

Yep. Supposed to be a three-man job. Not that it's so heavy. Not when you first pick it up, at least. But after you've been at it a while, like we have, it gets a tad... weightier. Old Verne, he's about bagged. Been freighting this box around a long time. We need a hand, till the third guy comes.

I hope so, pal. We were supposed to meet him right here. Yep, under this maple tree. He specifically told us, "The gnarled one by the duck pond, right across the foot bridge from the playground." Yet here we are, and there's the bridge, and I don't see nobody but you.

What'd you say? Have we been waiting long? Buddy, you don't know the half. Verne over here, he's been waiting sixty-

some-odd years. A shame, really; a crying shame. Old man like him needs a break, don't he? Look at him. He's probably G.D. seething underneath that calm exterior. Yeah, I know, he don't seem like it. But he is, and he's got every right to be.

I wouldn't call them "glowing." His eyes probably look that way because of the light, you know? The sun's going down, and plus, that storm's coming. The one I mentioned earlier. Remember? When I asked you for help? No, of course not; you were so busy being businesslike...

What? Oh, nothing. Just wondering when this third guard'll come. Gotta keep this cargo safe, you know.

Pardon?

Not "read" it, per se. More like "absorbed" it. There's all these possibilities, see, floating around all noxious-like, on a cloud. And that's the future, right? But the past, on the other hand, is much more –

Who?

Never heard of her. But she's probably in the book, and I clean forgot her. Can't keep up with everything. But I tell you what – if you'd help us out, you'd know yourself. All you gotta do is touch it, and –

Wait! Where are you going?

Hey, pal, look. I'm sorry I don't remember more, but if you'd help us out – hey –

Hey!

Paul!

Come back here!

Yeah, I said your name. And yeah, we know all about her – and you. Okay? It's all in the book: where she lives, where she's been, her whole life without you, how she disappeared and why, and how you disappointed her –

Hey, man! Hands off the clothes! Lay off. I told you, I know – and you could, too. No need to get all bent out of shape. We're offering the chance of a lifetime, man. Besides, you wouldn't

want to upset my balance and make me fall down or anything... right?

Now, that's more like it. It's simple. We need a hand – or two. I ever tell you what happened to Verne, friend?

You don't? Well, that's too bad, because, if you ever do want to find your little sweetheart, Paul – or walk through this park, past those kiddos on the swing set, without ducking twenty succubi or picking your dainty way through a sea of rotting bodies – you'd better listen, and listen good. I'm feeling talkative today... and clumsy. You understand me now, Paulie Boy? You get me now?

Much better. Oh, it's a sad tale! See, old Verne here got chosen a while back, back when there were three of them – three – and it was done proper. When fellas didn't lose their grip and skip out on you. Had more honor, then, according to Verne; to hear him tell it, everything was better. Simpler, clearer cut. But who knows when "then" was, eh? Sixty years ago, a thousand? Could be any time, any era; Verne's been here through all of them. But a nice round number will do – easier to swallow – so let's say sixty-six. Sixty-six years.

So Verne and these chaps are working, carting the book around, keeping it from being discovered, when all of a sudden the third lug's got to pee, right now, real bad. Dark night – starless, moonless – and he's got to take a whiz. Huh! Well, where's our bathroom breaks? Verne here ain't peed in sixty-six years! Now, how's that for fairness? No-goodnik... right?

Well, anyway, Verne here's got him a heart of gold – a heart of gold, mark me – and says, "Yeah, sure. We'll keep it up a while. You take a leak, buddy," and the other guy agrees. So this third guy goes in the bushes with a torch and does his thing, and when he's done, he turns around and smiles real big. Ear-to-ear grinning. Says, "You're real good guys, you know." And runs off and never comes back again. Cackling all the way.

Now, I understand. A man gets tired; a man needs a home. He's got a wife and two kids waiting on him – waiting – and there's blisters lining his palms, and this box, well, it ain't what he thought it'd be. He knows everything in the world, but he can't see his daughter's face, you know? Can't kiss his wife goodnight, can't sit in his armchair and watch the game. Can't do nothing but carry this box and hope one day to taste a steak, or anything else, again. So I understand.

But Verne's partner, he ain't so forgiving. He's got to bear it around still, with Verne, who don't seem to care at all. Just smiling along, like nothing's wrong. So after a while, this other guy gets to thinking maybe he ought to bail. Thinks he ought to up and leave like the other guy, but can't. He can't leave Verne alone; the fate of the world depends on this, right? So he's got to find a way out, but safely.

Well, imagine his surprise, then, discovering all he had to do was ask some schmoe to take a corner one day, while he re-clasped his cloak or something. Things were simpler, those days; so says Verne. Everyone was more gullible, or trusting.

But I don't even blame the bloke. He's got places to go and people to see, and who cares about a long life? He might live forever while he's holding it, but if a man can't sleep or eat... I mean, you know it don't matter if he needs to or not physically; there's more than what we need *physically*.

So I'm not mad at him for bolting, not one iota, just like I can't fault the guy he conned for bilking some young lady with a guilt trip about how Verne's so old and fragile and they're waiting for backup. Not her fault she had such a tender heart. I mean, you look at that cold, wrinkled visage, with its fissures and folds and wolfish grin – I mean, pained grimace – and you wonder why *he* never ran, why he never himself left in all these years. But you figure he's old, right? So old he smells like sulfur and brimstone, but harmless nonetheless, and needs the help. Commendable, right?

Not so much so when she duped me, but I ain't even mad at her. Curiosity, of course; you know what they say. Her going on about living forever, and the knowledge of a god, and, well, she got me. They were all good men, though, even the women. All wanting to help somebody, or help themselves, or a little of both. No way to know they'd all take off as soon as possible, but I can't blame them. Who wouldn't like to see their folks again, to hold them, and not this goddamn box? Who wouldn't mind some time off, after three years? I mean, when it's not even permanent, when it's so easy to pass on to the next guy, who might not even have a wife – or a life at all worth living, but he could, if he just found her – is that so bad? Is that so selfish?

Don't presume to judge now, Paul. I know all about *you*; remember the book? Those last couple of trades, they weren't so A-one, were they? Didn't quite make the grade? Well, it's only a matter of time – say, three months – before it all gives way beneath you. All of it, and they'll be coming. Coming for your houses – yes, the condo *and* the ranch – and your yacht and your savings and passport. Oh, and your dogs. And once those go, you'll never see Carlene; they'll throw you in jail with a cell-mate named Clarence. And then who'll want to get away, huh, Paul?

Sure you can. It's easy. Everybody in the world wants to help out old folks, especially old Verne here. And if that fails, they've all got a secret they want to know – or hide. Now don't they?

I knew you'd come through. I knew you were a good guy, Paul.

AUTUMN HAYES is a freelance writer, creative writing teacher, and poet. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *Defenestration*, *Cuento*, *trapeze magazine*, *7x20*, and *Southern Women's Review*. She prefers to make stuff up, so don't look for her blog... and if you do, don't believe a word of it.

Dry Heat

by Steven Gumeny

Ben set out for work again. It's always hard delivering food for tips, and even harder when the majority of the population has disappeared underground. Well, the majority who hadn't already been mutated, burnt to a crisp, or fled to one of the outer planets to escape the growing sun's heat.

But Ben set out for work again. His boss, Jimbo, would be expecting him. Why disappoint a man who was on his last leg?

Prior to the heat wave, The Internet had declared itself a sovereign nation. As revenge for an overcooked shrimp cocktail, its leader posted half of Jimbo's body for sale on an online auction. To avoid negative seller feedback, Jimbo reluctantly obliged the winner. The bidder was kind enough to ask Jimbo which half he chose to part with. Unsure which head he could live without, he opted to be split vertically down the center. A clever solution, he thought, as it let him keep half of his former functionality. But all the hopping around did get old.

So Ben set out for work again. It wasn't like he had anything else to do. The ozone holes made sunbathing unpleasant, unless you missed the smell of fried chicken enough to take the pain. Such was the fate of Jimbo's cousin, Ben heard.

Ben could have chosen an indoor activity, but McWalBucks had been closed for years. And besides, the survivors underground sucked anything useful from the surface, through a drill formerly used to suck dino-juice from oil wells.

Ben didn't have many deliveries these days, but for those that stuck it out, he would dutifully deliver them some of Jimbo's half-assed cooking. Even after the surface was declared inhospitable, some stayed. They each had their reasons, some better than others. Some just missed the last jet to Neptune, a

tropical oasis spawned after the great solar warming. Neptune, it was said, was like an endless day in Aruba, only with *much* better cocktails. The smart ones had packed their bags the day Al Gore made his first movie.

So Ben set out for work again. He couldn't leave old Miss Rose hanging. Jimbo had worked out a deal with the old lady to have a Liver & Onion Slider delivered daily until the end of the world. As his lawyer reminded him constantly, the world had not technically ended, only life on the surface. Although half the man he used to be, Jimbo was still a man of his word, and Ben had to deliver.

Ironically, liver & onions had come back en vogue just before things got out of hand. It was a trend many experts saw as a harbinger to the trouble ahead. But the true nail in Earth's coffin did not take an expert to pinpoint. The Sovereign Nation of The Internet had formally declared war on the Sun and its invading rays, claiming it made their servers cranky. When the Sun pushed back, Earth's surface became like the planet Mercury, before Mercury was burnt up. Ben thought it resembled a stale, well-toasted bagel, hold the butter.

Ben could have fled underground, but he had chosen to stay. What fun is sleeping late if you don't have daylight to avoid? Besides, he had a job to do.

So Ben set out for work again. He emerged from his basement into the heat. On his way out, he noticed all his car tires had melted flat, again. He sighed, lit a cigarette off the pavement, and started walking. He hoped he would catch Jimbo's good side today. At least the food wouldn't get cold.

STEVEN GUMENY is a freelance writer, temporary employee, and believes insomniacs are simply living in the wrong time-zone. Born in the Garden State, he currently resides "somewhere in the swamps of Jersey." He also has an affinity for a certain Boston Lager. "Dry Heat" marks his first attempt submitting work to be read by anyone other than himself.

The Badlands

by Matt Rowan

These badlands aren't pretty. Not to me. And whoever decided it pertinent to call them "The Badlands?" If you're going for the obvious then why not get real specific and call them "The Giant Stalagmites?" You might get people wondering, what are stalagmites? I bet they'd see about finding out what they are, too. Certainly, nothing's wrong with stirring people's curiosity, especially with respect to the classification of natural rock formations.

I've concluded the Indian guide I hired is more than likely *not* an Indian. But I'm trying to come to terms with that possibility. I'm behaving differently. I'm allowing him to fall behind. I'm only so slightly displaying any interest in the yarns he spins without pause. I don't have the heart to tell him I'd already, years ago, heard the only creation myth he seems to know, and he keeps retelling it with minor changes to characters and scenery. I guess he thinks I don't notice. He's trying too hard at regaling me – florid hand gestures and wide-eyed stares I sense emanating from him as he prattles toward my nape.

It is all very unbecoming.

If it's possible, my ration of jerky and water has gone bad.

We're in the Dakota Badlands, based on what my supposed Indian guide is telling me. I believe him, in part because what difference

does it make what Badlands these are, precisely? What matters is the destination.

I've finished trying to explain this to my travel companion and guide, Fred ("Fred the Indian" as he has asked to be called, or "Indian Fred" for short). Indian Fred says I'm not making sense. Indian Fred thinks my thinking is foolhardy to the extreme. His meaning was clear: we'd better know where we are. He said thank the many deities that he does indubitably know where we are. He can thank whomever he chooses. Even the queer things he chooses.

I miss creamy, soft cheeses like my Brie and Camembert. I can't remember the last time I was without creamy, soft cheeses and good wine for so long as this journey has left me. Indian Fred has implied we will be without them for no less than a fortnight longer, although very probably much longer. I'm determined to maintain my strong will and show none of the emotion I feel for our lack of such provisions.

I confess I broke down and let fly my deep sorrow that I have been without soft, creamy cheeses. Indian Fred was indifferent, saying of course there was nothing he could do about it.

The consistency of my jerky ration, leathery and taut, an over-spiced monstrosity, provided tactile evidence of my reality and impelled still more tears. But I must survive.

Today we met a tribe of natives. I asked Indian Fred to inquire about better jerky at minimum and, if possible, find out if they had any cheese (preferably French) lying around.

We had plenty of beads, as I'm a collector who's grown bored with the pastime. I proposed a trade: some of my beads for the – hopefully French – cheese they had. If it were Brie then so much the better.

I worry, though, that Indian Fred made no attempt to inquire about what soft, creamy French cheeses (or French cheeses of any variety!) the natives did or did not have cached in their inventory. He spoke nothing of it when he returned to his saddle seat atop his horse.

And with that I suppose I'll just betray the name of our destination, as I see no reason to keep its secret any longer. We are journeying to "The Lost City of Soft, Creamy, often French, Cheeses." It is of legends: always a reasonable temperature of approximately 68 to 77 degrees Fahrenheit, ideally suited to engendering the best of all possible flavors for these cheeses. It's further told the cheeses constitute many towering obelisks not unlike the jagged range of the Badlands here in which we travel, though these Badlands' jagged terrain is hardly cheese of any variety – I made certain to be certain of that.

After a heated confrontation with Indian Fred today I will say only that the situation has been righted and the one who has always been in control remains in control. To say it politely, the one of us who's boss proved his preeminence forthwith.

Indian Fred absconded with all supplies and horses in the middle of the night, and I fear I shall never make it to the Lost City, which

as I've said holds within its glorious boundaries limitless soft, creamy, principally French cheeses. I have made a promise to myself that I will not give in to the temptation of dying here in the middle of these Badlands. I do not want someone to one day come across my skeletal remains, for that would be the greatest insult yet – though penultimate to my failure of creamy cheeselessness, certainly.

Days have passed without anything to eat but scrofulous jerky, which I won't debase myself by eating. It's creamy cheeses or starvation at this point. I have made my bed, and plan to sleep restfully in it one way or another.

Strength is waning. I ate the last of my creamy cheese reserve, which I'd intended as a celebratory meal upon arriving at the Lost City, for reasons I can no longer remember. If ever Indian Fred rears my way again, I don't care what sort of fop he takes me as, I'll mash his skull to smithereens with my own fulsomely gloved hands, no matter the gloves' extravagant cost.

I have become equally savage at the prospect of my losing creamy cheeses until I arrive in the next world, which I imagine the hereafter to be a kind of Lost City of Creamy, Soft and French Cheeses – but much bigger and much better and much more refulgent, strewn with lacey bunting that's generously supple to the touch.

Indian Fred made what I can only imagine he thought to be his triumphant return today, which turned quickly to bitter struggle,

and oh lament, we are now once more a party of one! What's more, the effect this time is quite certainly permanent.

I take no satisfaction in my part of the tumult. He easily cudged me to the earth with a blunt fist. It should be said this act was retaliatory. It was Indian Fred's response to when, anon, I sought retribution for his incontinence – pique and vigor shone on me, gnarled and fearsome as I imagined I must look.

I was like the mountain lion, and I attacked. So I was roundly cudged. The pain was enormous. I saw the stars people never imagine, that seem only ever to strike me dumb, with ringing dreadful tones echoing in my purple throbbing head.

Fortunes turned in my favor, however, when, prostrate, I bit into Indian Fred's Achilles' tendon. He was felled by this, to be sure, but the deathblow came from his unfortunate landing on a narrow upturned rock, which punctured poor Indian Fred's temple and, alas, ended him.

It must be said I'm not much crestfallen at the loss of my riding companion. His death was assuredly regrettable, of that there can be no doubt. But much worse was what I found in his indurate hand! It was gripping the creamy cheese like an apple, a semi-viscous slab of balled-up bovine secretion having a consistency and richness the likes of which I'd never tasted before.

"This needs be that for which I've hunted my whole adult life, monomaniacally. I must have it."

Egad, Indian Fred knew more than it had seemed, and with him died the secret of the creamy cheese's location. For I have found my way to Wisconsin, somehow, and I can say only that here they have cheese curds that are both salty and a sensible discursion from the humdrum of ordinary cheeses, the tiresome malaise of your cheddar, of your Colby and so forth. But they are not French and

they are only minimally creamy, which means I still have yet to find what I unflinchingly seek.

How many miles must I go until I sleep on my bed of Livarot?

MATT ROWAN is co-founder and editor of the online-lit magazine Untoward (untowardmag.com), and blogs at Bob Einstein's Literary Equations (literaryequations.blogspot.com). Previous and forthcoming publications include Bartleby Snopes, Metazen and Unheard Magazine. One day soon he hopes to be teaching high school English somewhere in his native Chicago(land), Illinois.

Armageddon's Jester

by Andrew S. Williams

I shielded my eyes against the harsh red light of the Sun and studied the waiting line of refugees. It was already late in the day, and across the barren plain I could just make out a dark line against the horizon: dust storm coming. We'd have to hurry to get everyone on board in time.

The people shuffled forward, heads down, sheltering their faces from the hot, dry wind. Beyond the front of the line stood a gleaming spaceship, shining white even in the haze. The ship, and hundreds of others like it, had almost completed their task; these were some of the last remaining people on Earth.

Except for the howl of the wind, it was quiet, the eerie silence interrupted only by the scratchy voice of an old man. The man was standing apart, separated from the long string of refugees by a flimsy metal railing. His clothes were caked in dirt, and a scraggly gray beard clung to his face. As the people moved forward, his eyes widened, and he pointed a gnarled finger at a young girl in line.

"Murderer!"

The girl shrank back, hiding her face as she clung to her father's leg. The father was a tall, muscular man, the top of his bald head glistening with a mix of dust and sweat, and he clenched his fist, fixing the strange old man with an evil glare. For a moment I thought there would be violence, but then the line moved forward. The old man turned to the next person, an attractive, brown-haired woman who I assumed was the girl's mother. He reared back, then thrust his arm forward, pointing at her accusingly.

"Destroyer of worlds!"

I could almost see the spittle fly, but the mother just rolled her eyes and sighed. The old man turned to the dog standing next to her on a leash, its tongue hanging out as it wagged its tail.

"*Best friend to killers!*" he screamed, his voice cracking as he reached entirely new levels of hysteria. The dog, unperturbed by this accusation, trotted under the railing and sniffed the man's outstretched finger. This only seemed to incense him further, and his ranting echoed across the plain.

"*I have no treats for you, heathen, only judgment!*"

The father saw me standing there, watching, and motioned me over.

"Can't you do anything about the wacko?"

I shrugged. "Sorry, sir, but as long as he's not hurting anyone, it's free speech. We can't do anything."

He scowled, looking back at the strange old man.

"Don't worry," I said, "Ol' Smudge is harmless. We used to have *real* crazies to worry about: suicide bombs, riots, the works."

The man still looked like he wanted to jump the railing, but I clapped him on the shoulder.

"Best stay in line, sir. Yelling at people isn't an offense, but violence is. And I think you'd rather get your family off-planet than spend all evening in a little room filling out paperwork."

He looked up at the hazy sky, sighed, and turned back around, moving forward with the line. Someone else was up now.

"*Criminal!*"

I walked up the line, leaving Smudge to his insults. At the front, I nodded to the man checking papers.

"Hey, George." I turned and looked back down the line. "He seems angrier than usual."

George didn't look up from his desk. "Gaia must be having a particularly bad day."

I looked up at the sky, frowning. "I thought every day was a bad day for Gaia."

He handed a pile of documents back to an old woman, who took them with one hand and grasped the hand of a young boy with her other. The boy looked up at me and grinned.

"I'm a Spawn of Darkness! What's that mean?"

The woman scowled and yanked his hand, and I winked at him as he followed her up the gangplank.

"To be honest," George said, "I prefer when he's being more creative. Like yesterday, when he was doing the insults in alphabetical order."

"Demonic dealer of death!" The high-pitched yell carried on the wind.

"Well," I asked, "will alliteration do instead?"

As the last people were processed, and the dim red orb of the Sun hung low in the sky, I looked over at Smudge, who hadn't moved from his spot even though the last people in line had long since passed. In the distance, the dark line had resolved itself into a low, brownish cloud that seemed to grow faster as the day waned. I walked over to him. He was watching the end of the line, his expression neutral, as if he were in a daze. He didn't even turn to me as I walked up.

"You got somewhere to stay tonight, Smudge?"

Slowly, he turned his head to look at me, his eyes seeming to roll in their sockets before they focused on me.

"That is not my name, Doombringer."

"That's Officer Doombringer to you, buddy." I nodded toward the horizon. "There's a dust storm coming. You got somewhere to go?"

He followed my gaze, fixing his eyes on the approaching storm.

"Gaia is angry. She has been destroyed by her children, and is now being abandoned by them." He paused for a moment, and

his posture seemed to straighten. "I will keep her company, in her sorrow."

I stiffened as a chill ran up my spine. For a crazy old kook, reduced to yelling insults at Earth's last evacuees, he had a way of unnerving me. Perhaps there really was an angry spirit out there, in the swirling maelstrom of dust and ash. But if there was, it seemed a little late to worry about it.

I worried about Smudge, though. Don't ask me why. He was always there, always making my job difficult, like a constant low-grade headache.

"Be careful out there," I said to him. "I'd hate for the next batch of evacuees to leave without being weirded out."

"*Doombringer!*" he yelled at me, his eyes bulging. His arm swayed as his finger pointed, and he seemed a little unsteady on his feet. Then, as if remembering where he was, he cocked his head, turned and began walking toward the oncoming storm.

I headed back toward the ship, where George was inspecting the documents of the last family in line. He nodded at them, and they proceeded up the gangplank. I looked over at him.

"Time for a drink?"

"Definitely time for a drink."

The gangplank retracted with a metallic clatter, and we walked toward a low cluster of buildings in the distance, the only visible sign of a settlement anywhere nearby. George looked back toward the storm, but Smudge was lost in the haze.

"Think he'll be all right?"

I shrugged. "He seems to make it back every day. I imagine he'll be fine."

Sure enough, the next day was Smudge was back. The sky wasn't quite as brown as the day before, although there was still no hint of blue among the clouds and haze. The last actual blue sky had been

months ago. But Smudge seemed to be having a better day. He had been insulting people with the letter M for at least two hours.

"Maggot Lips!"

It was one of the best improvisational performances I had ever heard. How one man could keep generating stupid insults for so long, I had no idea.

"Muttonhead!"

On the other hand, it was kind of sad, watching him rant and rave at a bunch of people too numb to care. He was just one old man, with his dirty face and robes and graying beard, a throwback to the doomsayers of old.

This was what the Great Resistance had come to. At one point it had threatened governments, indeed, threatened the entire evacuation. Launch sites became hot spots for terrorists, rogue missiles were shot at the space stations overhead, and massive protests paralyzed entire nations. Religions, environmentalists, New Age types and doomsayers had all been a part of it.

Many believed that in the final hours, their chosen god and/or prophet would appear. But the gods stayed quiet, and humanity escaped into space, like a college kid who'd thrown a party and left his parents' house a wreck before fleeing off to school.

"Malodorous malefactor!"

A coalition of the best and worst of humanity, of optimists and pessimists, of the desperate and the cynical, had slowly faded, leaving one man, one last believer, shouting petty insults at the fleeing remnants of mankind.

A few weeks later, we got word that our sector was clear. If there was anybody left within a few hundred miles, they weren't showing themselves, and I got ready to leave, along with George and the rest of the crew.

When the last ship arrived, I found myself scanning the horizon, hoping to see Smudge. I would feel bad leaving him here; he had almost become something like a friend over the last few months. A ranting, raving mad friend, perhaps, the kind of friend you'd only set up on dates with people you didn't like... but a friend nonetheless.

Plus, I had been listening to him shout insults for months and I kind of wanted one of my own before I left. Sure, I had always been Doombringer to him, but that didn't really count. It was like I needed a christening of the journey; a demented, Smudge-style send-off.

It didn't take long to pack up the remnants of our little station. As we prepared to leave, I made one last sweep of the horizon, and saw a figure approaching in the distance. Sure enough, it resolved into a familiar old man, walking with more of a hunch than usual. I set down my load and walked over to him.

"Hi, Smudge. You coming?"

He squinted at me for a moment, as though he wasn't sure who I was. Then he looked at the spaceship and his eyes widened.

"So, the final wretched stragglers of our people flee the mother planet at last."

"Yes," I said. "And you're just as wretched as we are. You should come with us."

He studied the gleaming ship, narrowed his eyes, and then paused a moment before shaking his head.

"My place is here." He nodded, then straightened up and looked me in the eye. "Gaia is grateful to you for helping her children survive."

I found myself taken aback. Smudge, saying something nice?

He was already turning to leave. But he looked over his shoulder one last time, his eyes fixing me with a solemn gaze.

"However," he stated flatly, "she also thinks you're a cretinous chump."

I twisted my face into a wry grin.

"Take care of yourself, Smudge."

He didn't look back as he walked into the haze, heading to parts unknown to greet the end of the world.

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