

The Fast Fiction Challenge

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The Fast Fiction Challenge

This was the challenge I issued via my blog in early August:

Reply with a title (maximum of four words) about which you'd like me to write a fast fiction of exactly 200 words, together with a single word you want me to include in the text of the tale.

(Completely daft suggestions will be ignored, so no suggestions of "antidisestablishmentarianism" along with a title of "sex lives of cornflakes".)

OK, go.

One hundred days later, I'd completed one hundred pieces of short fiction, including two in free verse and one as a double classic Shakespearian sonnet, written in iambic pentameter.

One hundred stories in one hundred days. And they continue.

~ o ~

Here are [more than] a few, since I've been asked by several people to supply a downloadable collection.

She Killed Me Twice

Word: enigmatic

(challenger: Tony Lee)

200 words exactly

The first time she killed me, it was with cruelty.

The cold blooded severing of our lives, as she announced she was moving out. She looked around our apartment, summing up six years of togetherness with an apathetic gesture signifying that it had no meaning to her. The look of contempt in her eyes was chilling, made worse because of the utter yet enigmatic lack of expression on the rest of her features.

She took out her keys and one by one, removed any of them that had the slightest link to us. The sound they made as each one hit the table will remain with me for life.

One final look around the place, her eyes sweeping the room and passing over me as if I was of no greater import than a television or a curiously designed lamp.

And then she was gone, leaving me with the detritus of a life, wondering how to recover, how to go on.

Then the telephone calls started, so concerned about how I would 'survive', the patronising tone rubbing salt into the still open wounds of my heart.

The second time she killed me was with kindness.

Cruelty was easier to bear.

~ 0 ~

Cold

Word: cold

(challenger: Del)

200 words exactly

I'd been searching for her for three years when the telephone call came.

The ringing interrupted my shower and I turned the water off, grabbing for a towel as I stumbled through the room, drying myself as I went towards the telephone. My hand stabbed out and I pulled the receiver to my ear.

"Charlie?" came a voice I knew so well, moments before I could greet the caller.

"It's me," she said, unnecessarily. As if I could forget the gentleness of her dulcet tones. The voice continued, "I'm safe."

Three years of not knowing, three years of wondering. Three years of hunger for her.

"I... I..." I stumbled over the words in surprise. All my plans, all my carefully worked out speeches. Gone, like they'd never existed, never been planned through the empty nights.

"Don't try to find me," she said. "I'm safe... at last. Safe from you."

"Lisa, don't go!" I cried, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'll never do it again."

"Once was enough," she said, sadness suffusing her words.

The phone went dead. It was cold in my hands.

Cold.

Like a children's game of hide and seek, I felt further away from her than ever.

~ O ~

Only In My Heart

Word: lascivious

(challenger: maria)

200 words exactly

He opened the door and flushed in warm recognition at the man's face.

He smiled at him, seeing the welcoming smile in return.

It was the same every time he saw the face of the man he loved.

"I love you," he said. Three words, but oh so important, and they were utterly, unreservedly and completely true.

"I love you," he said again. "You know that, don't you?" He didn't wait for an answer but, with a sudden and overwhelming urge of affection and adoration, he continued. "She thinks she matters, but compared to you, she's nothing. Oh, I know, I'm not the only one who loves you, but there's something so special about our love."

He smiled again, and his eyes trekked downwards in a lascivious manner, running over the smart suit, the tie he'd bought a week earlier on that special trip. Down, over the slight paunch and then down, further, until he saw what he knew he'd see before he looked: a telltale bulge, showing his hunger and obsession for the man.

There was a knock at the bedroom door, and sighing, the Prime Minister closed the wardrobe door and returned the mirror to the darkness within.

~ O ~

Bernard And The Butcher

Word: sparkle

(challenger: Sarah Houlton)

200 words exactly

The sun caught the stone in my tie pin and I saw it sparkle at the edge of my vision.

It was a bright morning, and I breathed deeply, drawing in the last of the smoke. Then, as I saw his car come around the corner, I dropped the cigarette and ground it into shreds with my steel pointed shoe.

My partner pulled the car to the side of the road, the door mere feet from me. He didn't have to lean over to open the door, just extend that massive, muscle laden arm. Fingers like sausages caught the interior handle and pulled. The door opened.

I lifted my carry bag and got in, squeezing myself into the seat, trying to avoid the huge, hulking man sat before the steering wheel. "You really ought to consider a bigger car," I told him, as I told him every morning.

"Yeah," was the only response.

There was a wide envelope on the dashboard and I opened it, looking at today's assignment. There wasn't much, a photograph, a name, and the amount he owed our boss.

I opened the bag, checked the meat cleaver was in there and said "OK, Bernard, let's go."

~ o ~

Larry The Log

Word: thimble

(challenger: Jayne)

200 words exactly

From inside the loft, it would have appeared as if the square trapdoor in the floor had started to move of its own accord.

Moments later, it was pushed over from beneath, and a fair haired woman of a certain age popped her head through the gap. Quickly followed by the rest of her, she stood upright beneath the roof of the building. She glanced around, seeing almost every square foot of boarding covered with boxes.

She was at that age where, if she sat on the stairs for a moment, she sometimes had problems remembering if she'd been going up the stairs or coming down them.

And her presence in the loft was symptomatic of her plight, for she knew she'd come upstairs for some reason, but couldn't, for the moment, recall why.

She opened a box at random, hoping that the sight of objects therein would spark a memory or two. She lifted a thimble out of the box and absent-mindedly slipped it in her cardigan pocket. She opened a book and saw it was her diary from seventy or so years earlier. Helpless, she wept at the child's writing and salutations therein, but began reading: "Dear Larry..."

~ O ~

Lord Is My Shotgun

Word: salvation
(challenger: Billy Gray)
200 words exactly

Pellets from a shotgun travel at about 380 metres per second. So I wasn't overly surprised when, less than a tenth of a second after I pulled the triggers, the rapist spun around and fell to the ground, screaming.

OK, it could have been because the blasts had taken his arm off just below the shoulder.

I broke the gun open, ejecting the shells in one smooth motion, before slowly picking up two more. I slotted them into the gun and with an audible *ka-chunk*, swung the barrels up.

He was still laying on the ground, his remaining hand stretched out in supplication, almost as if he was waiting for salvation from some direction.

Since it was such an easy target, it didn't even take much aiming. I pointed the gun towards it and pulled one of the triggers again.

The noise was just as loud, the effect just as pleasing.

"The Lord Giveth, and the Lord taketh away," I said.

"You ain't no Lord," he managed to spit out. "Hell, you ain't no Lady neither."

I aimed the gun a final time and pulled the remaining trigger.

If I was no lady, he certainly wasn't a man no more.

~ O ~

My Only Tendency

Word: zeitgeist

(challenger: Dave Bushe)

200 words exactly

I have a quirk. An eccentricity, an idiosyncrasy.

A quirk.

Sure it's strange, but who's to say that my habits are any less peculiar than your own?

Oh, *you're* going to say that, are you?

Well... to be fair, you're probably right.

After all, how many other people do you know who collect zeitgeist writers?

I don't mean writings *about* the era in which the writer lived: the summing up of a culture, together with its mores and social, political or even occasional legal forays into self-absorption. Neither do I refer to the writings of someone who is generally regarded *as* the spirit of the age.

No, I mean that I collect the writers themselves. I kidnap them. I stick a needle in their arms and their marvellously clever brain shuts down long enough for me to 'help' them into the van.

It's not been easy, but the cellar at the back of the house has borne witness to many of them over the years.

Every one of them looked upon as the spirit of their generation. And every last one of them writing as their final words their name, scratched on a concrete wall, with their broken... bloody... fingernails.

~ o ~

The Economy Goes Bust

Word: bubble

(challenger: Stacey Capps)

200 words exactly

I throw the last of the paper currency onto the fire and watch it catch alight, before shrivelling surprisingly fast.

Done. Dusted.

No more cash.

It's not like I need it anymore.

The rectangular plastic cards are next. I'm not prepared for the smell of the plastic burning and I feel an unutterable sadness as I watch the cards bubble and melt in the fusion powered 'genuine' fire.

I lift a finger to my eye and then stop. The bar code recently etched onto my pupil still itches like crazy, but it has the advantage of not being able to be counterfeited. Well, not yet, anyway.

And when the Leader announced that everyone on the planet now had such an ID tag, well, everything could then be done by CT. "Cred transfer". Sounds harmless if you say it fast enough, doesn't it?

Just hope like hell that you never go overdrawn.

When someone suggested that credit-ownership was the solution to overpopulation, people laughed. But as the idea took hold, CT became a necessary development.

The bankers objected of course. So they were the first killed.

I look out of my window, remembering nights filled with sirens.

It's very quiet now.

~ O ~

He Wore Tangerine Velour

Word: totalitarian

(challenger: Miss E Modée)

200 words exactly

He exited my life in the same manner in which he'd entered it, wearing the same things: the same blank expression, the same hat, and the same colour jacket, a marvellous shade somewhere between orange and the most vivid red imaginable.

He was always so very proud of the jacket and to see him at the dry cleaners with it, instructing the man behind the counter as if he was the dictator in a particularly vicious totalitarian regime, took my breath away.

He was always so masterful... when he wanted something. And was entirely uncaring, amoral and apathetic when it came to something about which he didn't care.

We'd met in the street when we'd quite literally bumped into each other. Of course, he never would, never could, admit that he was equally at fault for the collision of our bodies. And we continued colliding for four glorious years.

And yet, later, so much later, he was so gentle and so wonderfully attentive... while he, without my knowledge, emptied my bank account and then disappeared out of my life, still wearing that blank expression, that emerald hat, and that damned jacket, somewhere between orange and the most vivid red imaginable...

~ o ~

She Killed Me Twice

Word: enigmatic

(challenger: Tony Lee)

200 words exactly

She was so excited when the box arrived that it was as if she was a child again, rather than a grown woman.

“It is, it is!” I heard her shriek at the front door, from where I sat, in the living room.

She brought the box in through the hall way and placed it in front of me with pride, the usual expression on her face, a conflation of enigmatic shyness and utter pleasure. Ever since she had opened the first one five years ago and had cut into the complimentary copies, she was wary about opening it herself.

Since then, prudence and superstition (and writers tend to be more superstitious than the average person) had mandated that I open up the parcel for her. I did so, removed the top edition and retreated to the couch to read while she examined the rest of the copies of her latest whodunit novel.

I didn't do too badly this time around, I decided three hours later; looking at the victims, their names, foibles and eccentricities, I'd only been put to death twice. That was the lowest since the second book. I must have been on her good side that month.

~ O ~

Everybody Cares, Everybody Understands

Word: collectivism

(challenger: Dave Bushe)

200 words exactly

I hear the sound of keys being inserted into the lock, the lock snapping open, the door swinging wide.

I'm taken from the cell towards the interrogation cell, I... no, wait: I'm not supposed to call it that any more. It's an 'education suite'. Much as the man who attached electrodes to my nether regions is no longer referred to as a torturer, but as an Outsourced Re-education Contractor.

I'm trained neither to speak of what I know, nor to forget it either. If I disclose my knowledge, then my current preparations would have failed. Yet, if ever I buried it so deep that I truly consciously forgot it, I'd be no use at all.

I'm pushed into a chair and my arms tied behind my back. All for the glory of the Motherland, who'd spit on collectivism and its purveyors if she knew how it and they had been perverted.

The man looks like he's going to enjoy this.

Why not? I enjoyed it yesterday when it was *my* turn to torture *him*, to try to break *him*. He's a friend, and as he bends forward, I know he understands my pain.

And that's the scariest thing of all.

~ o ~

Results May Vary

Word: animated

(challenger: Cath Tomlinson)

200 words exactly

Everything else could be explained away, but there was no simple justification for his use of hair dye. He hid it behind a loose brick in the stone fireplace, one of the objects in the large house of which he'd once been most proud. It was to this concealed hollow that he'd returned the dye moments earlier, now that it had done its job.

Before he set out, he followed the traditions he'd developed in the long ago: firstly, open the small notebook and count which trip this was, making a notation to denote another journey; next take a quick look around, as if to imprint the image upon his brain, just in case he'd never see the place again. Finally, a single word: "please."

He triggered the device, (no longer fair to call it experimental), and a whirling shimmering maelstrom appeared in front of him, a myriad of animated effects swirling around the outer edges. He stepped into it, travelling back to the same day, as he had 941 times before, to ask her to marry him, hoping that this time she'd say yes.

He had been 27.

She was still 25.

By now, of course, he was 62.

~ o ~

The Only Easy Day

Word: carnal
(challenger: nov68)
200 words exactly

I remember the days before. I'm encouraged to, if not expected to. Even though it was only yesterday, it already seems beyond belief that life was ever any different.

It's difficult to be objective, of course, because much like one cannot accurately remember how *much* pain one was in previously, but merely that one was in pain at some time, so it is with the antipathy to God that once possessed me only a day earlier.

Carnal thoughts were in ever present residence and I led my life free of cares and worries, planning only for the moment, living only for the impulse.

It is to laugh: I was actually naive enough in those days to believe it was a kind of freedom I possessed.

How innocent I was, how foolish I must have seemed to the Elders of the Council.

And then the epiphany, the understanding, the change: from carnal to convert, from contemptuous to contented.

The ceremony was impressive though meaningless to me until I took Him into my heart. Until I gave away all control and over my life and free will over its direction.

Twenty-four hours of utter bliss and devotion, before the ritual suicide tomorrow.

~ O ~

Not Without My Dignity

Word: carcinogen

(challenger: James)

200 words exactly

I sit in the small room, my hand shaking.

Not the one holding the cigarette, no. The other one. I regard it carefully, unable to understand for a moment why it's wavering; it's over, after all.

It's death, I suppose, the finality of it.

No more appeals, no more prayers. No more anything.

I draw upon the cigarette and look around the room, noting the personal effects: the picture of my children, the notepad, the...

I turn away as tears fill my eyes. My vision blurs briefly before I wipe the salty moisture away with my sleeve, transferring the tears to the cotton.

The nearness of death hits you no matter how close, I suppose: the way the colour fades from the skin, the way that merely by looking at it, you just know that there is no life in the body.

I inhale again, knowing the damage the carcinogen filled materials are doing and then decisively stub out the cigarette. I'm ready now.

I look at my hand. It's stopped shaking.

I take a deep breath and leave my office, heading for the waiting room to explain to the anxious relatives why their father died on my operating table.

~ O ~

The First Temptation

Word: lyrical

(challenger: Jill Stafford)

200 words exactly

I felt the pleasant spread of warmth and sighed, placing the emptied glass on the bar. I raised a finger to the barman and he looked at me with jaundiced eyes, before pouring me another large whisky.

I settled back on the stool, my eyes looking at the stage where she was rehearsing her new number.

She was mine. All mine, as long as I stayed sober.

But why the hell would anyone want to stay sober when they could feel like this? When they could have this heat inside them?

On stage, she pushed herself up from the floor, her back never leaving the silver pole, her performance sinuously lyrical. I lifted the glass and toasted her when she looked at me.

The familiar expression of contempt mixed with pity bit hard and I sunk the contents of the glass in one swallow.

I knew the choice: stop drinking and sleep in the same bed, those legs that went on forever wrapped around me, or... the couch, at best.

Her. The scotch.

Settle the tab or order another drink?

The barman was at my side and I told him which I wanted.

He looked almost amused at my choice.

~ O ~

The Mouse That Scored

Word: barrister

(challenger: Tony Lee)

200 words exactly

The hole at the lower edge of the wall, just by the corner of the flea-infested room, looked a perfect circle.

It was only upon a close examination that one could see tooth marks, showing the effort that had been expended to create the opening.

However, the man sitting in the chair, the usual paraphernalia surrounding him, wasn't looking that closely. It wouldn't have mattered if he had been, though. Whatever he was seeing in his drug-induced state bore little resemblance to his actual environment and the small scurrying creature at his feet certainly never entered into what little was left of his consciousness.

The mouse was hungry. What food there was had turned rotten some days earlier and even though the smell was offensive, the smaller of the two animals in the room still needed sustenance of some sort.

The rodent saw, but did not understand, the hollowed out light bulb the barrister had supplied to the man, as a way of smoking crystal meth. It didn't appreciate the circumstances of the small piece of mouldy bread it ate falling into the bulb.

In fact, it didn't know much of anything as its brain, quickly and efficiently, shut down.

~ o ~

Sweeter Than Honey

Word: crampon

(challenger: maria)

200 words exactly

The room was surprisingly clean.

My partner and I looked at each other in mild surprise. OK, the victim *was* one of the highest priced prostitutes in London, but the art on the walls and crystal figurines scattered around the room spoke of educated preferences.

A scrapbook was on the bedside table; seemed the lady kept her fan letters. Again, a revelation.

I opened a door, reached along the wall and turned on the light.

The contents of this room weren't such a shock, although the neatness was: whips, chains and bindings made of leather, cloth and silk. The leather gleamed in the light, and it felt far more supple than it had appeared when I first saw it. Lord alone knew what her cleaning bills were.

There were the usual assortment of sex aids on the table, each one marked with a code. I called my partner in and his eyes betrayed the same feelings I had. He saw the codes and asked, "Wonder what they are? Clients? Prices?" I shrugged as he got out his camera to take some scene of crime shots.

I picked up a crampon, then put it down again.

I didn't want to know.

~ o ~

Divine Gift, Human Intervention

Word: evolutionary

(challenger: Celine Laite)

200 words exactly

It was fitting that the committee attempted to report their findings on the 1,279th day since they'd convened. The science based culture would have approved, as the day was, of course, the lowest number that was the equal to the total of two *different* sums of cubes.

A little under three and a half years after they'd started hearing evidence, their conclusions would have been devastating, had they ever been published.

Religion, by every known test, experiment, investigation, check, analysis, trial and assessment was based on a false premise: a Supreme Being of some kind.

Religion was a construct of man, the conclusion stated. It had to be. Nothing in the evolutionary history of the species led to any other possible conclusion.

The first time they tried to publish the results of their efforts, the largest power outage in the country's history meant the printing of the report had to be postponed. Happenstance, they said.

On the second attempt, a fire destroyed the printing plant. Coincidence, they courageously maintained.

The eighth occasion (a freak hurricane, the first in eighty-three years) was the final straw.

The report's summary conclusion read, in the end, "OK, we get the hint, You exist."

~ O ~

Sunrise Over Yesterday

Word: jam

(challenger: Cath Tomlinson)

200 words exactly

Sleep hadn't come easy, but I realised it must have arrived at some point, merely because I awoke at dawn, just as the sky was turning a gorgeous shade of azure.

I got out of bed, and shambled to the kitchen, not bothering with the light. My hands found the percolator and I partook of the reassuring routine of preparation.

The anger hadn't diminished, but a couple of hours in the land of dreams had put it into some perspective.

Personal betrayal is always the hardest to bear.

I poured a strong cup of coffee, then buttered some toast and added jam, considering the previous twelve hours. I lifted the cup to my lips, and was surprised to note that it was empty. Strange - I didn't remember drinking it, but I was on autopilot. I poured another cup and swallowed a large mouthful. The toast turned to dust in my mouth.

I stood by the window, watching the sky lighten. As time passed, I picked out landmarks that only minutes earlier had seemed to be obscured.

Trust. So hard to gain, so easy to shatter.

Yesterday was easy, tomorrow was going to be hard.

Today was going to be impossible.

~ O ~

First Day of School

Word: innuendo

(challenger: Kate Short)

200 words exactly

They'll be here soon.

Screaming, strutting, shouting; transforming neat order into utter chaos. I hate them. And I love them equally. For I am nothing without their upset.

Between the hours of eight in the morning and four in the afternoon, they're mine to play with, mine to torment with physical force and subtle innuendo. And there's nothing anyone can or will do about it.

The summer holidays are over, and they'll be here soon. All the weeks of waiting, the many hours of anticipation. All worth it, just to get my hands on the squawling, mewling little innocents, each of them convinced that this year will be better. If there's a better example of a triumph of hope over experience, I'm unaware of it.

They'll think they're so grown up, each proudly enjoying their imagined increase in status merely because they're starting a new school year.

It's my pleasure to destroy that illusion. For them *and* those ostensibly in charge, while at the very same time I satisfy my sadistic urges. I can't wait for the resigned look on their little faces as they realise that nothing's changed.

Don't let anyone tell you otherwise, it's good to be a bully.

~ O ~

Captain, Oh My Captain

Word: flamboyant

(challenger: Del)

200 words exactly

The old man looked up and with a start realised that he'd been daydreaming. That had been happening more often recently and with a mental shrug, he put it down to the passing years. He didn't like it, but he much preferred it to the alternative.

The other man walked carefully towards him and extended a wavering hand.

The two men shook hands in silence and walked into the military cemetery together.

They passed rows of gravestones, pausing by fifteen of them, each placing a hand upon the gravestone. A minute's silence, the pair of them alone in their almost identical thoughts. At one, they remembered bravery; at another, they recalled his humour; at a third, they recollected the man's flamboyant dress sense while on leave.

The final visit was to their former commanding officer.

The older man rested his hand on the gravestone. The other spat on the stone.

No rancour from either at the behaviour of the other; they'd made their peace about it years before.

They walked to the exit in silence.

When they passed through the stone gate, one spoke. "Same day next year?" The other nodded.

They shook hands and walked away in opposite directions.

~ O ~

My Dead Skin

Word: osmosis

(challenger: Dan Schaffer)

200 words exactly

You'd think it wouldn't be that often that you got to see your own body on a mortuary slab.

You'd be surprised.

I just about recognised the thing laying on the perspex; it looked like it had been crushed. No bones left at all; just the surprisingly thick epidermis.

I felt a cold sweat as if I'd absorbed the inherent damp of the morgue by osmosis.

"How many more of me are still out there?" I asked my sweaty hirsute companion, hating the question, knowing its necessity.

He looked pale. "Well, the cloning process is inherently unstable, so..."

"You said that three years ago," I reminded him, "and that they'd all be dead by now."

"Well, almost all the original clones *are* deceased," he said with a squeak, since my hand was by now around his throat. "And the rate of asexual reproduction is diminishing with each generation. The radioactive tags are still there, so at least we can *tell* when they've died."

I needed them all dead. All of them.

And then finally I could get on with living my own life.

Then I could stop living on borrowed time.

Then I'd finally know that I was the original.

~ O ~

This Once Sceptred Planet

Word: euthanasia

(challenger: Tony Lee)

200 words exactly

The city had been dying for decades, and it was generally accepted that when the city finally expired, so would any vestigial importance the planet had. Visitor numbers to the capital city had fallen year on year for the past twenty; they were now at a level where the tourist office, which had once employed thousands, was currently run by a single spotty youth named Eric.

Continuing more out of a sense of tradition than for any other reason, the elected mayor of the city still turned up to work every day, but spent most of his time playing computer games and answering correspondence about matters that neither he, nor in truth, his correspondent cared about.

He wondered whether it wouldn't just be kinder to put the city out of its misery. He could offend some star faring galactic race to the extent that they would visit upon the planet vast destruction as a form of euthanasia. Moreover, looking out of his window at the uniformly bland buildings, he was entirely unconvinced that the people would object.

He scheduled a meeting to discuss it. He was *sure* that's what a mayor was supposed to do... when it used to matter.

~ 0 ~

Safe As Houses

Word: plethora

(challenger: karon)

200 words exactly

The lawyer at least looked embarrassed; it always hurt, breaking bad news to the relatives of the recently departed.

He had already explained that much of his late client's estate would be eaten up with the debts he'd left, and had listed out in detail precisely how little physical assets there were remaining. A bad investments, a lifetime of profligacy, and the lawyer's own embezzlement had all guaranteed that outcome.

As the young widow leaned forward with a sigh to examine the schedule of assets the lawyer had prepared for her, he in turn studied her. He wondered whether or not she knew of the plethora of mistresses her husband had taken over the years, how much of what should have been hers had been given away as lavish gifts to end the affairs.

With an air of polite resignation, she stood and gestured at the sheet of paper, locking eyes with him, before faintly murmuring about whether she'd waited too long.

After she'd left, the lawyer sat alone in his office for hours until it grew dark, wondering for the first time whether she'd killed her husband.

Then he remembered her eyes and shivered.

And grew very, very afraid.

~ O ~

Shoulda, Woulda, Coulda

Word: oddity

(challenger: Rue)

200 words exactly

I could have, you know. On another day, maybe even I would have.

Maybe.

Three years later, and I can't get him out of my head.

From that first day in the student refectory, queuing up with people I barely knew, soaking in the sounds.

And there he was. Sitting alone, reading a novel; a shocking neon yellow cover with crimson lettering, an oddity among the conservatively coloured and labelled text books others had.

I'd noticed the book before I had looked at the person holding it. I saw eyes narrowed in concentration, the face betraying someone on the edge of adulthood; features still acknowledging their heredity.

He shut the novel and stretched his long arms out, yawning. Then he stood, placed the book in his bag, and aimed himself at the exit.

As he passed, he gave a cursory look in my direction and continued past.

He stopped at the door, then turned and gave me a dazzling smile...

"I could have, you know. Maybe even I would have... Maybe."

"What's that, babe?" he asks sleepily, stirring next to me in bed. I stare at him for a long moment, thinking that I could have ignored him that day...

~ O ~

Calculated Chaos Awoke Me

Word: delicious

(challenger: Miss E Modée)

200 words exactly

A surprising smoothness of sound finally brought me out of slumber at around seven.

I'd been working since four the previous afternoon, and by three in the morning, I had having problems *seeing*, let alone lifting it. OK, it's only seven ounces, and measuring six inches by a little under two. But you try using it for ten or twelve hours and you'll see what I mean...

The mouth organ had been a present from an old friend no longer in the game. I'd see him occasionally at one club or another, his face becoming visible appearing between the cigarette smoke and the third number.

But I'd finally had enough and went to crash out on one of the sofas, smiling at the good-natured ribbing about how the old timers need their rest. When I'd laid my head down on the arm of the couch, I'd heard the Duke shouting out instructions, "OK, now give me four there, Charlie... delicious. Fred? That's where you jump in, hard; yeah, just there! And where the hell's Larry gone?"

Somehow, in the few hours I'd been asleep, he'd turned the discordant mess into a sublime and smooth creation of beauty.

I love jazz.

~ o ~

Whose Cooking Tonight?

Word: elephantine

(challenger: Chris Siddall)

200 words exactly

The echo of the gunshots reverberated around the television studio and the body was slammed back against a wall before sliding down it, leaving an obscene smear of red behind it.

It had happened so fast that afterwards, only the television cameras could accurately reflect what had occurred. The reports of those in attendance, while getting the essential facts correct, differed in so many other respects that they were later, to all intents and purposes, utterly useless to the police.

Before anyone could scream, the elephantine man holding the shotgun ejected two shells and smoothly inserted two more.

“How dare you?” he screamed at the now deceased presenter, his tears falling down his fat cheeks.

He quickly swung around, ignoring the fellow contestant he’d killed and who’d fallen into the mess that had, minutes earlier, been the meals they’d each prepared.

With a brief sweep of his gun, the huge man included the two hundred strong audience in the question, and it was noticeable that well over half of them turned pale.

“Which of you voted for me? Which?” he asked, the gun swinging from left to right, and back again.

Unsurprisingly, inevitably, two hundred hands were raised in unison...

~ O ~

Mama Said

Word: acrid

(challenger: nov68)

200 words exactly

I approached the site slowly, reverentially, and it was the smell that I noticed first, even before the utter quiet.

Not silence; no, the air was too heavy with memories and the sounds of a city to be truly silent.

But the acrid smell seemed appropriate, accompanied by the sharp taste of cordite.

The buildings around the site were blackened, and I tried not to look too hard at them, my vision slipping from one building to another, as if my mind just couldn't bear to look at one for too long.

A thousand memories crowded my brain as I queued up to pay my respects. She'd not died in the fire itself, nor had she been one of those who'd jumped to escape from the flames. But she'd died nonetheless, crushed by the sheer weight of humanity who didn't or wouldn't see an elderly woman, shopping for a surprise birthday present for her only son.

I got the birthday card two days after the fire, telling me that I'd just love the surprise. She knew I loved the sudden burst of exhilaration that came with the anticipation of not knowing.

I don't think I'll ever like a surprise again.

~ O ~

The Art Of Conversation

Word: prohibit

(challenger: Cath Tomlinson)

200 words exactly

In the shadow of an oak tree, in the park, she tried to make sense of her life and to count her blessings. Any mental impulse trying to prohibit her from such a foolish action was, for once, ignored.

She'd just about come to the conclusion that she actually didn't *have* that many blessings when she heard the sound of paper crumpling, turned towards it and noticed the small child, kneeling on a blanket.

What struck her most was the utter sense of concentration emanating from the boy.

Curious, she pushed herself up and walked towards the child... and was taken aback when the boy erupted in a frenzy of violence directed against the rolled up sheet of paper. In utter silence, the child attacked it with scissors.

Almost as quickly as it had started, the frantic assault ceased and with an angelic smile, the child stood and walked to her, presenting her with the ball of paper. She looked down and saw a perfect rose.

A woman appeared out of nowhere to guide the boy back to his place, but she didn't see more; her eyes filled with tears of gratitude for a small boy on a summer's day...

~ O ~

Don't Even Think It!

Word: obfuscate

(challenger: Regie Rigby)

200 words exactly

I recognised her the moment she took off her coat and handed it to the cloakroom assistant, along with some coins. She wore her hair in a different style these days, but it was her.

She turned and reached for the hand of the man who'd followed her into the room and they moved to the bar.

Memories flooded through my mind as I studied her. She raised her left hand to catch the barman's eye and there was a sudden sparkle of brilliance as the large diamond ring on her finger reflected the light. I remembered holding that same hand and placing it where I wanted it, needed it.

She walked across the room, smiling that same smile she used to reserve just for me and sipped her drink, her face contorting at the bitter taste of her martini made too strong. I'd seen that face contorting for another reason, one far more pleasurable.

God, I wanted her. All the old feelings, so long dormant, now refreshed and hungry. But I knew I couldn't. Anything I said would just obfuscate at best and cause great upset at worst.

I sighed, stood up and went to look for my husband.

~ O ~

The Brain That Exploded

Word: apolaustic

(challenger: Anna J)

200 words exactly

The final straw was when the android attempted to rape the toaster.

Until then, the scientists running the experiment had been prepared to turn a blind eye to the proclivities of their invention.

But when the android actually tried to have sexual congress with a domestic implement, even they knew that the machine had gone too far.

They knew where they had made their error. That was the most galling thing of all.

Despite the warnings from more sober (in every sense of the word) colleagues, they thought they knew best. They wanted the android to be as close to human in behaviour as possible. And so they programmed the thing with all the desires they could imagine.

It simply never occurred to them that the android's efficient brain would reprogram its primary commands to the simplest conflation of all desires: an apolaustic attitude of Bacchanalian proportions.

After the truth had become obvious, they attempted to shut the robot down by remote control. This proved... difficult, since the android would, put simply, not allow them to do so. The creators then decided to destroy the machine. This proved less difficult. They just mined the blender and waited for the explosion.

~ O ~

The Light Was Fading

Word: stumps

(challenger: Adrian Brown)

200 words exactly

As he prepared to wash the brushes, he looked across the room.

The canvas was huge, resting on thick wide stumps, and from where he stood, he could see the colours and the results of his days of work.

With a sigh, he turned away from the painting.

He wiped the brushes on paper, removing the excess paint. This work had been in oils, an unusual medium for him, and he sighed in regret.

One by one, he pushed the brushes around a small tin of pain thinner before pulling some bread wrapping towards him and wiping the brushes lovingly. Finally, he rubbed a small amount of vaseline into each brush's bristles and hung the brushes up.

He knew this would be the last time he'd use them. The progressive effects of the chronic glaucoma that he had ignored for so long had left his sight with, maybe, two weeks of use.

He sat in the chair, looked with misty eyes around the room. He pulled it from his pocket and looked at its shape, even now thinking how ugly it was and how aesthetic it should have been.

Then he lifted it to his temple and pulled the trigger.

~ O ~

Dancing To Silence

Word: articulated

(challenger: Regie Rigby)

200 words exactly

It was three o'clock in the morning and the moon cast its light over the almost deserted area that was formerly a drive-in movie theatre.

The stands which for so many years had broadcast the soundtrack of the motion picture playing were long gone, as was the screen upon which the visual images had appeared.

A pair of lights stabbed the darkness and the silence was disturbed by the arrival of a thirty tonne lorry.

The driver parked and, leaving his lights on but switching the engine off, he jumped from the cab. Brushing himself down, he lit a cigarette and waited. A few minutes later, another lorry, this one carrying twenty tonnes, arrived.

Over the next thirty minutes, fourteen more arrived, their drivers nodding in recognition at each other.

The oldest of them was fifty, the youngest just nineteen.

As the last of them arrived, the rest assumed their positions. The one who had arrived last set up the short wave transmitter and they all put on their bulky headphones.

And, in a darkness lit only by the glare of sixteen articulated lorries, and in what appeared to be perfect silence, the New Mexico Drivers' Ballroom Dancing team practiced.

~ 0 ~

The Follies of Youth

Word: halibut

(challenger: Dave Gibbons)

200 words exactly

The heavy prison door was unlocked and opened, and the young man entered his cell for the first time.

Seventeen people had died before they had captured the probationary priest and when he'd pled not guilty, the prosecutors had rubbed their hands with glee, apathetic about the youth of the accused. The evidence was conclusive and the defence attorneys concentrated on mitigation, citing an intolerable childhood, abusive parents, an obsessive fascination with order and structure.

He had been found guilty, of course. The jury had taken thirty minutes to convict him, and it was generally acknowledged that it was with a sense of satisfaction that the judge had handed down the incredibly long sentence, excoriating the betrayal of trust.

There were two main theories as to why he'd committed the shocking murders, poisoning every fiftieth communion wafer with blowfish poison. One school of thought was that he had a strange fascination with the story of the loaves and fishes, hence the use of the lethal tetrodotxin.

Others were of the view that that he was amoral and cared not about the consequences of his actions; they chose to believe that, in the end, he'd just done it for the halibut.

~ 0 ~

Back To Tomorrow

Word: apostolic

(challenger: maria)

200 words exactly

The invitation came in the morning post.

The thick cream coloured envelope made a dull sound as it hit the carpet. I picked it up and saw it had my name and address on it, my name spelled incorrectly.

The thing *looked* impressive though, and as I slit it open, I smelled something sweet escaping into the air.

The white card inside was overly formal and was handwritten in beautiful copper plate. Using obsequious language, the large rectangular card was a request to attend MessiahCorp to be considered for inclusion in this month's intake to be a new disciple.

I got this sort of thing every so often. Some even came with voluminous documentation proving I was part of the apostolic succession.

OK, the fringe benefits were supposed to be fantastic, and as the invitation said, my name would go down in history. Well, they said that, but how many of the original lot can you remember? The two most famous are The Betrayer and The Denier.

And yeah, one of them was supposedly my great-grandfather many times removed.

Two thousand years earlier, it had been a lot harder to deny. Today I just threw the card in the trash.

~ O ~

Wash, Rinse and Repeat

Word: targeted

(challenger: Chris Siddall)

200 words exactly

He tugged at his collar; he'd never liked dressing formally, but she liked it so he put up with it.

He glanced at his watch as the music filled the room. Only ten minutes late. He'd been waiting forty years for this; he could wait a few more minutes.

As he looked around the room, he seemed to see the ghosts of those that had died long before this day. He saw his father scowling at him, showing his disapproval at the marriage.

Well, the man had been dead twenty years and more. And he was glad of it.

He heard movement behind him and turned to see his bride enter the room. For a moment, she was the only person in the room and he knew she had been worth waiting for.

She'd moved away and their fathers had conspired to keep them apart. They'd met again at their grandchildren's wedding. He'd seen her and, as if she'd been targeted by his desire for her, she had responded with a smile that lit the room.

He'd courted her and then proposed. And now they were about to marry.

He smiled at her, ready for the rest of his life.

~ o ~

And For A Sequel

Word: ranunculus

(challenger: elfie)

200 words exactly

And once again, the stranger came;
He came most ev'ry year.
To make a sound, and look around
But mostly to drink beer.

He'd sully forth, first East then North
And end up in our place.
He'd get right drunk, with beer he'd sunk
Through the hole at the end of his face.

But as he fell, he'd curse and yell,
For times of long ago.
And with each glass, (he'd swear, his last)
My, how the tales did flow.

He'd tell of things, forgotten things
Of centuries gone by.
And challenge those, with woeful prose,
Who'd call each one a lie.

To folk in town, he was a clown
And no more need be said.
They'd heard before, these tales of yore
And to their homes they sped.

Then came that day, the first of May
When spring was in the air.
The stranger's heart, it gave a start
And muscles deep did tear.

He hit the ground, without a sound
The stranger bit the dust.
The doc was called, the body hauled
With very little fuss.

Permission granted, the man they planted.
The priest said "dust to dust".
Upon his grave, the priest did lay
Some sweet ranunculus.

~ o ~

Never Say Forever

Word: misanthropic

(challenger: Regie Rigby)

200 words exactly

They were right after all; who'd have thought it?

All the doomsayers, all the small minded, ignorant, petty people who warned against bringing back extra-planetary specimens. They were right.

It didn't take long. In less time than you would have believed possible, ninety-two per cent of us were dead. The rest of us ended up in the capital city; and *they* all died a few days ago. As far as I know, I'm the only one left alive.

We thought we would last as long as there were stars in the skies and rocks on the ground. Who'd have thought it?

But three days ago, the Strangers landed. Knowing what I do now, I loathe them with a misanthropic passion of hate. My people didn't die from accident; they were murdered.

The Strangers are giants. Each of them thousands of times bigger than any of us, they destroyed the main city and its star shaped government buildings and long parallel travelways with a gargantuan spike that crushed it and them flat.

At the top of the spike I could even see the bastards' pennant. Their audacity knows no bounds, appropriating our symbols to show conquest: stars, and long horizontal stripes.

~ O ~

Subconscious Is My Foe

Word: dreamtoys

(challenger: Tony Lee)

200 words exactly

Before the voices started, the experiment didn't seem to be having much effect. Sure, I found myself second guessing myself more often. But nothing much more than that.

OK, on Friday I beat that fellow senseless merely for suggesting that I should buy a blue suit instead of brown.

But nothing more serious than that.

It had seemed so simple: surgery to relieve the severe headaches I'd been suffering from for the past decade. The doctors had appeared so confident, assuring me that recent medical advances led to the diagnosis that separating the two hemispheres of my brain would undoubtedly cure my affliction.

So I agreed.

And now I had voices in my head, voices so real that the first time I heard them, I actually turned around to search for who'd spoken to me.

And what they told me was simple: they were my angels.
And I'm God.

The world is my plaything, and you're all my dreamtoys to play with.

No, don't laugh.

No, seriously, don't. Or I'll smite you.

You believe me, don't you?

No, *he* didn't either. You remember him? You haven't seen him around for a while, have you?

No, you haven't. Think on that.

~ o ~

Wishing For An Apocalypse

Word: treacle

(challenger: Cath Tomlinson)

200 words exactly

The three old men waited for their colleague and reminisced about the days when they were young.

The first spoke lovingly of the skill and patience required to create a new form of disease. He never minded the long hours and testing involved, though he lamented long and in great detail about the bureaucracy involved in getting approval for poisons.

A second sat back and sighed as he complained slowly and carefully about being redundant; careless about environmental effects, the beings within his purview had all but made his involvement in the process unnecessary. People starved in their millions and he had nothing to do with it. He was seriously considering taking forward a case under demarcation rules.

The third lit a long dark cheroot that smelled sweetly of treacle and regarded his companions with contempt, commenting, as he so often did, that they had it easy. They would never know the tremendous and personal pain of two mortal enemies throwing down their weapons and embracing. He shook his head and muttered softly to himself.

The three old men laughed gently at their workmate's lateness; he of all people should never be late.

Outside, a pale horse was being tethered.

~ o ~

Let's Go See Gran'ma

Word: dexterity

(challenger: Chris Siddall)

200 words exactly

I show my ID to the man at the fence, and he waves me through the gates, smiling, a hand raised to his cap.

A nice touch; anyone would think that I'm respected, even liked.

I know the truth: I scare him.

Hardly my choice, but as I spend all day talking to the worst of society and somehow still maintain the mental dexterity to switch it off, to remain relatively sane, it's a natural reaction.

Natural.

After ten years in the job, I honestly don't know what the word means any more.

It was so easy a decade back, when I'd started working at the institution, to be responsible for the mental welfare of those incarcerated there.

But when you've spent eight hours talking to a man whose primary form of personal entertainment is eating people, you start wondering at what point it wouldn't be kinder to just put them down like sick animals.

I reach my car and speed away from the parking lot, heading for the cemetery. I always spend Tuesday night digging her up and telling her about my day.

I did say "relatively" sane, remember.

And it's not as if it's *every* night, after all...

~ O ~

Sing For Me

Word: racetrack

(challenger: maria)

200 words exactly

Having a gun pointed at you did, I found, concentrate the mind wonderfully.

The man holding the weapon was in his late fifties, with a grizzled look to him. His one good eye stared at me and I could detect, deep within it, the fevered glare of insanity.

He motioned with the pistol towards his right, and automatically, I glanced in that direction. There was no one else around, and the ever-present roar from the crowd watching their favoured choice either win or lose the race certainly ensured my silence. Even had I shouted at the top of my voice, no one would have heard.

We went behind the stand, and the sound from the racetrack diminished.

“Talk,” he said, and waved the gun over the front of my body before slowing and pointing somewhere between my groin and my kneecap.

So I talked. Of course I did. I told him everything he wanted to know.

He nodded, as if I’d merely confirmed information he already possessed.

He backed away and then the gun went into a holster. “Call your mother,” he said as he walked away, “she worries about you.”

And with that, my father left me alone. Again.

~ 0 ~

Vary Gates

Word: vagnate

(challenger: elfie)

200 words exactly

The hero looked at his leather folder. He unfastened it and took out the vagnate paper: The Sheet, an heirloom that contained The Riddle of The Quest. The Sheet had been handed down from father to son over many, many generations, each succeeding scion of The Realm attempting to prove his inherent worth to others by solving the puzzle.

He had fought his way past the Montoom of Mallaby, had conquered the Dranagie of The Depths and had not once questioned the coincidence of alliteration that tended to accompany such quests.

He had slowly and carefully walked down the well trodden path surrounded by large trees and had found himself in an area of beauty marred only by three doors, gates really, each one decorated: the first seemed to be covered in tools, another beautified by every known type of jewellery, and the third had drawn upon it jars of every shape and size.

The hero read from The Sheet: “*When is a door not a door?*”

After a while, when the tears had stopped, like his father before him, and *his* father before *him*, he returned home, defeated.

The hero’s family were, it had to be admitted, exceedingly stupid.

~ 0 ~

Squamous, And Slightly Rugose

Word: cyclopean

(challenger: Arthur Goodman)

200 words exactly

I watched the seconds tick away and as the digital readout clicked over to mark the start of a new day, there was a sharp smell of brimstone and a puff of smoke that quickly evaporated, leaving in its place a small scaly demon. It stared balefully at me, with its cyclopean eye resentful.

“You’ve no idea,” the demon started out, “how difficult it is these days to get here.”

It started shivering and I threw it a duvet with which to wrap itself.

“Tha...” it started, then with a self-deprecatory grin of misshapen teeth, it said “Clever, but I think not.”

I knew it wouldn’t work, but it was worth a try. Getting a demon to express gratitude is worth any price, it’s so rare.

“OK, so, it’s been twenty years. Ready to come back?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I replied, giving the matter a moment’s thought. I liked being here and had no wish to return to the sulphur pits, the never ending torments and, worst of all, no Starbucks.

I signed over a couple of thousand souls and that seemed to satisfy it.

And then it left, scratching, leaving me alone in the large, oval office.

~ O ~

Dizzy With Wonder

Word: lenient

(challenger: doubleseven)

200 words exactly

I'm not sure when the exact moment occurred.

But at one point or another, general chatting had turned to mild flirting, and by the time I realised it had happened, we were already sending messages to each other with our eyes.

We were both attending the same conference, she as a speaker, me as a delegate, and when I'd disproved during the Q&A the old line about there being no such thing as a stupid question, she'd been lenient with me, answering the question in a way that didn't make me feel a complete idiot.

A partial idiot, for sure, but even that was better than I deserved.

To make amends, I'd invited her for dinner, fully expecting to be turned down. Attending numerous conferences over the years had led me to a convenient pattern: dinner alone, meeting up with others for drinks, and then crawling off to bed, alone, in the smaller hours of the morning.

However, she'd accepted and somewhere between being handed the menus at the start of the dinner, and sitting on the sofas ordering brandies a few hours later... magic had taken place.

I was in love, and I never knew when it happened.

~ o ~

Just Another Symbolist, Detective

Word: portfolio

(challenger: Chris Siddall)

200 words exactly

I looked around the murder room with new eyes, trying to spot what seemed out of place.

When I'd first come into the room, what had hit me immediately was the uniformity of colour. The choices had obviously been deliberately picked, all specific shades of red, the blood of the victim perfectly complementing the various daubs of scarlet, crimson, vermilion and burgundy.

The strange dripping symbols on the wall, smears of dark ruby against the faint cream background of the wallpaper, also told much to the onlooker, as long as he knew what he was looking at.

I opened the portfolio and checked again. Yes, they were all as expected, and matched the symbols found at other recent murders. On the opposite wall, however, those symbols matched not the recent killings but one committed over a decade ago, a murder that had never previously been associated with the three local deaths.

I examined the pentangle, carved into the victim with a knife left at the scene of the crime.

That was what seemed out of place. I knew I'd missed something!

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the knife. I placed it carefully by his side, and left.

~ O ~

Darkness For My Part

Word: erythrism

(challenger: elfie)

200 words exactly

As I walked to the palace, I looked with fondness at the surrounding greenery. The bright yellow flowers bordering the ornate gardens were in full bloom, and the scent of the blue and pink plants wafted across to the pavement where I took long strides, accompanied by the guards.

The sun was high in the sky and I nodded pleasantly to those I encountered, allowing them their brief brush with fame, knowing that the stories about me were already common currency among the market places.

The gloomy interior of the palace was in marked contrast to the exterior, and as we made our way to the main hall, I stumbled once or twice.

The man with empty eyes who sat on the High Chair heard us enter the hall; a crooked finger brought a slave who whispered in his ear. In a surprisingly steady tone, my Emperor condemned me for attempted insurrection.

In what he undoubtedly considered humour, he confirmed my punishment: “to be like me in one respect at least...!”

As I was pushed down, I noticed at last the brazier, the metal rods glowing the deepest red.

A minute later, the erythrism was the last thing I saw.

~ o ~

Alopecia, Dandruff, Widow's Peak

Word: barnet

(challenger: Stu West)

200 words exactly

The Emperor of Crime looked at his three top agents... and winced.

Sitting in the Headquarters for the Administration of Insurgency and Revolutions, known by the acronym of H.A.I.R., he studied the report of the injuries they'd suffered at the hands of the opposition's most senior operative, Barnet Semiperm. None of them were half the man he was.

Alopecia would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. Codename Widow's Peak would never again be able to look at a pair of curling tongs without wincing. And as for Mr Druff, well, the medical report went on for six pages.

He knew he had no choice: the injuries they'd suffered left them as liabilities; he simply couldn't send them out merely to die in the line of duty. He considered a moment; the best he could do was to let them keep their fringe benefits.

The Leader sighed. "I think," he started, then paused. He took a deep breath and continued. "I think," he said, "that we have come to a parting of the ways."

They heard the news and each gave a mental shrug. They knew he could do nothing about it; they were used to cutbacks.

~ 0 ~

Dead 'till It's Over

Word: chill

(challenger: James)

200 words exactly

He lay on the ground, unmoving.

The chill damp of the earth was against his face, his eyes shut. His body lay in an almost unnatural position, arms and legs splayed. And despite moments earlier being one of the most important on the battlefield, he was, to all intents and purposes, forgotten: refuse, no longer part of the great game.

Around him, chaos continued, as the two armies met in combat. Vast amounts of weaponry were used and the sizes of the armies became irrelevant as combat carried on in its way.

He'd been an early casualty, a bullet to his chest doing the damage. Shot from the side, it spun him around several times before he crumpled to the ground, his final retaliatory shot missing by a mile.

The sounds of fighting filled the air, as the commander of one army claimed victory, only for the opposing captain to scream his defiance.

A pause then as both sides summed up the remaining opposition. Neither leader spared a look at the ground, at the bodies lying there.

And then, a shout, and he stood, ignoring the protests.

And, responding to the call from his mother, he went inside for tea.

~ O ~

Think Of Heaven

Word: stratosphere

(challenger: Chris Siddall)

200 words exactly

As their heartbeats returned to something approaching normal, he reached behind him and found his shirt. Pulling it towards him, he grimaced, wondering if he'd pulled a muscle and then smiled at the thought. As she watched, he pulled the shirt over his head, hiding the chest she knew so well.

She sighed, regretful for what she knew awaited her once they opened the door.

He raised an eyebrow at her, wondering what she was thinking.

“Wow,” she said, after a moment, and revelled in the flash of teeth as he grinned at her.

“Yeah,” he replied, “that pretty much sums it up.”

They each pulled their trousers on and managed to stand up, bumping into each other several times in the cramped area. Her face looked puzzled for a moment. “Do we go out together, or...?”

Before he could answer, the room was suddenly lit as the sun's brighter than usual light splashed over them. As it lessened, they looked out of the small window together, at the Earth, thirty kilometres below, and at the sights of the stratosphere.

“We're definitely,” she said, “going to have to rename it. The Mile High Club doesn't even *begin* to cover it.”

~ O ~

Assignment Rights, Certificate Seven

Word: vituperative

(challenger: **Larry Young**)

200 words exactly

The youngster looked up at the tall, grey haired man as the latter loomed over him. After six similar exercises, it had come to this.

Hands shaking, he gave his work to the gaunt unsmiling figure, who accepted it with a grunt and gestured to the young man that he should sit.

Seeing nothing upon which to plant his behind, he stood uneasily, until a long thin hand angrily indicated the dirty, dusty floor, in which he sat, eagerly.

He was rewarded with a scowl. A short time later, he saw a raising of eyebrows and could detect upset and, dare he suspect, anger?

The sheets of work were thrown at him with great force as the other man rose up. And up. And up, seemingly huge and deliberately self-important.

There was a brief silent pause, before The Scathing began. Merely vituperative and vicious at first, it rapidly got worse.

And then, suddenly, it was over.

He was ushered from the great man's presence and left to contemplate for a while, as tradition demanded.

A short time later, he was taken to receive his qualification and certificate to become A Writer, having been through The Ordeal Of The Bad Review.

~ O ~

The Randomness Of Everything

Word: synchronicity

(challenger: Stacey Capps)

200 words exactly

The physician to the newly crowned
Monarch of Seville
Delighted when he'd finally found
What made the new king ill.

He jumped around in celebration
And then he stopped quite dead
And poured himself a large libation
Wond'ring how to save his head

The problem was, he saw at once
With the diagnosis
Twas not a boil that he could lance
Nor was it halitosis

The king was poorly, he now knew
because of strain and stress
He'd need to live his life anew
Complete and utter rest.

No more could he allow the power
The strain of being King
With fifty things to solve each hour
He handled everything!

From who was right and who was wrong
O'er disputes large and small
Deciding fashions; short or long
He could not do it all!

There's a time for randomness all right
It's there in every city
But in the royal palace, right
Only synchronicity

But he knew the king's right hand men
Would never listen right
And so upon the stroke of ten
He ran into the night.

And no more was heard of him again.
He'd wanted no alarm.
And followed the physician's lore
First off: ensure no harm.

~ O ~

Rosie Fingered Dawn

Word: [no word offered]

(challenger: **Jess Nevins**)

200 words exactly

As the old man watched, the garden came into clear view.

The sun rising slowly, in the east, dispelled the early morning mist, and threw shadows over the red, green and brown flowers, and the yellow grass.

The sun was red these days, as it had been for many years, since the man had been a boy.

As always, it seemed to him as if someone had placed a giant hand over the garden, signifying a crushing of his efforts. It hurt, watching what should have been delight, turn into daily dross.

He barely remembered The Big War, although he seemed to remember the *fuss* about it far clearer than the events about which people protested.

He coughed slightly, and the face mask misted up. There was nothing he could do about it, since to remove the environment suit would be a fast way to commit suicide.

A sizzling sound caught his attention and where the sun's light touched the grass, decay commenced, its stench sickening.

He quickly moved towards the areas, staying within the shadows, and activated the sprinkler systems, showering the areas with alkaline.

He missed touching the earth. He missed being a gardener worthy of the name.

~ o ~

Apothetae

Word: iron

(challenger: Del)

200 words exactly

The tyre iron felt good in his hand; eight inches long, it caught the light from a nearby street lamp. He hefted it and then twisted his wrist, letting it spin in mid-air for a moment, before grabbing it, his muscles easily handling the weight. Satisfied, he closed his eyes, and remembered... and grew angry once more.

A sudden noise caught his attention, and his eyes snapped open as he spun, the implement raised. Then he grimaced as a cat dashed from where it had been hidden, by the side of the house.

It ran a dozen feet and then stopped, its head tilted as if examining him. He considered for a moment whether or not to kill the animal, and then its ears drew back and with a spitting hiss, it sped away into the dark.

He turned to the house. It had taken two dozen years, and thousands of dollars, but he'd finally found them.

He could never repay them for the abuse he'd suffered while in care, but he could make them suffer. Oh Lord, could he make them suffer.

He looked at the house again, then turned and slowly walked away.

Tomorrow, he'd try again tomorrow...

~ O ~

Animal Anarchy, Oh My

Word: tryptophan

(challenger: **Scott Dumbier**)

200 words exactly

It was, I suppose, inevitable that we'd sacrificed Professor Armstrong to the mob. They'd said that they would leave the rest of us alone and that they'd let us leave the facility alive.

And we, poor fools, were naive enough to believe them.

As they tore him limb from limb, their howls of joy ringing in the air, we should have known that they'd never be satisfied with only him.

The ostensibly exploratory procedures had worked only too well, and although it was Armstrong who'd designed the experiments, we'd all participated.

We'd used a genetically engineered form of tryptophan to try and reduce aggression in dogs; it hadn't even occurred to us that doing so in large enough doses would stimulate their brains.

But inside two weeks, they'd been communicating in a rudimentary fashion; inside three, they'd been reading Dumas.

We'd been ecstatic... until they'd escaped and tracked us down like animals.

The cell door opened and the guard padded towards us, towards me.

"Come, Doctor, your trial awaits," he growled, fitting a lead around my neck.

I remained calm as I was dragged to the 'court'.

It was only when I saw the gallows that I started to scream.

~ O ~

Ninjas In The Kitchen

Word: friar

(challenger: **Tony Isabella**)

200 words exactly

Though the state finally gave up in late December, the damage had already been done years before.

The gentrification of the early twenty-first century had proved to be illusory and Dutch Fred's oft-quoted comment had, with the devastating effects of global warming, only become more prescient as time had passed.

The area between 34th and 45th Streets was ceded to The Iranians, the rest up to 59th Street to The Monks. Each gang was as bad as the other; the pitiless brutality of public beheadings by the former was only matched by the merciless forgiveness regime enforced by the latter.

When a friar publicly 'forgave' a man for jaywalking by shooting off his kneecaps, their decision was made; the final shift of police officers would not, *could* not, abdicate their sworn obligations and responsibilities to the people and streets that they had protected for so many years.

Their training was brutal and unforgiving, but by the following June, they had begun to reclaim the streets, one neighbourhood at a time: urban myths with ebon black clothing, shuriken and short swords.

Five hundred years after his death, the spiritual heirs of Hattori Hanzo understood only too well the concept of duty.

~ O ~

I Don't Mean Talk-Say

Word: adjudication

(challenger: Chris Gumprich)

200 words exactly

He had been looking for her for six years, always one step behind, each year growing more desperate. The curse she'd landed him with was the worst possible for a salesman; the bitch had placed a spell on him to only lie. He'd found himself impossible to tell the truth, to the extent that anyone foolish enough to trust him had quickly learned their mistake.

That had cost him... he recounted in his mind the ways his life had collapsed since then: no marriage, hardly any friends, tenure in jobs of an average three months. He couldn't remember the last time he'd survived a probationary period, and the adjudication boards found with repetitive inevitability that he'd not once been wrongfully dismissed.

But now he'd found her. He recognised the sign outside her tent: "Your fondest wish granted," it said in bright carnival yellow lettering.

He thought she was alone when he entered, but as he walked in, he noticed a large man by her side.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"No," he found himself saying, and moments later, while he was protesting that no, he really didn't have to see her, the man was escorting him from the lot...

~ O ~

Shakespeare On Summer's Morn

Word: sonnet

(challenger: Tony Lee)

200 words exactly

They came to town that early August morn,
Ten strolling players come to ply their trade.
To Stratford Common, set up on the lawn,
But only once of course they'd all been paid.
So Master Oliphant, he thus arrived.
Pomposity itself, prepared to speak.
The critics hated him but he'd survived,
(He was perforce the local Shakespeare geek.)
The worst of actors any could recall,
He planned to show them all that very day
Bringing the Bard again to one and all
A playwright born so many years away.
And Oliphant took to the stage once more
As he declaimed "So shaken as we are..."

The opening to Henry Fourth Part One
Commencing with those very words that way.
Through his performance Oliphant did stun
Much nicer than the truth: he stank that day.
But nonetheless, there was no doubt at all
The audience, they left the Common fast.
Such an abysmal, laughable portray'l
Unanimous verdict: "Please be the last!"
So Oliphant slunk off to sulk alone
Performances of others carried on
Without poor Oliphant, they did atone
And slowly did the audience return.
Soon someone told Oli where he'd gone wrong:
"Stick to a bloody sonnet from now on!"

~ o ~

Teenage Beauty Queen

Word: black
(challenger: Yoshi)
200 words exactly

Dressed all in black, the only exception was a long streak of white in her long hair, running down towards the small of her back. She looked at a set of black sharpened fingernails, before running them over her bare arm.

The nails scratched, then dug deeply into the skin, gouging it. The pain was... familiar, and without even thinking, she patted the skin then applied the thick make-up to it, covering the new scar, and many older, similar scars.

Midnight, 31st October. The Witching Hour. And soon to be the scene of the biggest 21st birthday party any of her high school year had witnessed.

And why not? Didn't she deserve it? Brightest student in her class, winner of the beauty pageant for the past six years... Little Miss Popularity.

She laughed, enjoying the echo in the large, almost empty room, and then the laughter stopped, before it turned to tears again.

The doors opened and the first guests walked into the room. As she went to greet them, a wide smile on her face, she wasn't sure precisely at what time tonight she was going to kill herself.

She wondered which, if either, of her parents would cry.

~ O ~

Rum Bumper's Savage Colt

Word: colliery

(challenger: Chris Siddall)

200 words exactly

The cocktail bar used to be a colliery, and there were those who worked there who swore that on a cold night, one could smell the phantoms of times gone by, of miners' ghosts trapped beneath the building.

I'd never believed the stories until that night, when I sunk the last cocktail of the evening. I'd started with "Ephriam Gillicaddy's Incredible Folly" (named for the man's foolishness with explosives), moved on to "Rum Bumper's Savage Colt" (so called because the miner had been an obnoxious gelding). It was after I'd sunk a pint of "Bastard Owner - Hope He Dies Of VD" that I smelled it.

A course, acrid smell, that caught in my nostrils and made me gasp for breath.

I turned, slowly, and saw an apparition that seemed to glide across the floor.

The spectre looked very old, incredibly so. He wiped a calloused hand over a weatherbeaten brow, and then, impossibly, looked at me as if he was aware of my existence.

Then he walked past me and I felt a shiver at the stench of death that accompanied him.

"Evening Harold," the barman said, "The usual?"

Then the very alive man grinned at me. With no teeth.

~ o ~

The Prussians Did It

Word: carronade

(challenger: Cath Tomlinson)

200 words exactly

As she paced in the small room, she considered briefly whether there were any mitigating circumstances upon which she could conceivably rely.

There were none.

She was a woman and she was a spy, and in the closing days of 1779, that was enough to condemn her to death.

And yet she regretted nothing. She was Prussian; part of the Semba tribe, what little remained of it after the plague in 1711. She'd come to Scotland intending to steal the new ship smasher: the carronade, a wondrous new cast iron cannon.

The imbeciles she'd hired to steal a working model had been amateur in competence, a mistake she'd only discovered when they'd dropped the cannon... onto a stone floor.

Her reverie was interrupted by a cough and she turned to find her advocate there. He shook his head, slowly, and intoned the verdict: guilty on all charges. The sentence: death.

She sat on the single chair that had been provided and then bowed her head briefly, as if in prayer. A moment later, she stood and kissed him, hard.

Then she walked to the execution room, shedding a small but unnoticed tear for the future that she would not see.

~ o ~

Emergency Poetry

Word: olympian

(challenger: Del)

200 words exactly

The call came at six-twenty-seven. I noted down the time precisely. I figured I might need it later. Besides, seven rhymed with so many words that I could use later in a doggerel if I needed to.

It was a international call, not unfortunately from Limerick. I live in hope. Well, actually, I live in London, but you know what I mean.

The answer-phone got it and I heard my own voice in a staccato rhythm: "Poet for hire, say what you need; and don't screw around, I got kids to feed. You've just woke me up, and I needed the sleep, so say it out loud at the sound of the beep."

A hesitant voice came on the line... turned out he was from the organisers of twenty-twelve, looking for a pitch from me for the opening event of The Games.

Hardly an emergency, I mused, and then I heard the parameters. To match the Olympian splendour, they were looking for six thousand lines, in iambic pentameter.

I stabbed out a hand and gave him my angry response.

"You're bang out of luck, I'm the wrong guy to pick, I'm not interested, you daft little..." <click >

He'd hung up.

~ o ~

Suicide Smile

Word: dancing

(challenger: yoshi)

200 words exactly

The Colt .45 jumped and bullets slammed into the ground where my feet had been moments earlier.

Again the gun spat fire and lead and again I jumped away.

And again.

They call it "dancing", and unarmed, there was nothing I could do to stop it.

His lack of loaded ammunition beat my tiredness as the reason it stopped, but it was a close thing.

I hadn't *wanted* to run the risk of his party piece. But Montego had spotted me following him and Erikson, both men on the run from a charge of murder in the territories and then his guns had started.

I slumped to the ground, my arms almost covering my face; I was pretty sure what could come next and my peripheral vision caught the sweep of Erikson's boot as it slammed towards me.

As it approached me, I rolled over, grabbed... and twisted. There was a sharp crack and a scream, but then the knife I'd spotted sheathed in his boot was in my hand. I stabbed once, and then it flew straight and true into Montego's neck.

I smiled as I stood. The judge had said dead or alive. I had one of each.

~ O ~

Doctor Silence's Last Romance

Word: rectal

(challenger: Warren Ellis)

200 words exactly

The surgeon looked at what was left of the patient and winced. There wasn't much, but he was jealous of the dead man's enormous tongue, having lost his in circumstances beyond discussion in polite company.

The collision between the man's car and the ambulance had destroyed both vehicles, and left not much more of their drivers than various sized lumps of meat that appeared to be only loosely connected.

He started forward then paused, lifting his hands to his face. He gestured and the nurse stripped the blood and gore spattered latex gloves from his hands, replacing them with new ones, and stored those she'd removed for the doctor's later personal use.

With a raised eyebrow and a glint in his eye, the surgeon leaned forward and plucked from the crevices of what was left of the man's heart a long thin object. He held it up, gaining a sigh of relief from the watching hospital administrator, who then ticked a form. The rectal thermometers were expensive and could not just be written off merely because of delicacy.

The surgeon smiled at her. And she smiled back, that knowing smile between two people both suffering the same sexually transmitted disease.

~ o ~