

# *The Fast Fiction Challenge*

*~~ 2006 ~~*

**Lee Barnett**

Lee “budgie” Barnett

[budgie@hypotheticals.co.uk](mailto:budgie@hypotheticals.co.uk)

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# *The Fast Fiction Challenge*

This was the challenge I issued in 2005:

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

~ o ~

So I did it again in 2006

Here are some of my personal favourites from the 2006 run.

*Lee*

## **For Love Not Lisa**

Word: bondage

(challenger: Brent K)

200 words exactly

The detective walked into the room slowly, ensuring that nothing missed his careful, sweeping gaze. He stopped in the middle of the enclosed space, and raised his fat hand to the back of his equally fat neck, scratching lightly.

He glanced down to the bed, from where the woman's body had been removed, and a movement caught his eye. The shadows cast by the single dim light source shifted as he knelt, and the mouse ran out from under the bed and stared at him, before scampering back into darkness.

The detective switched on his torch and swung it around the room, seeing the expected bondage paraphernalia, the sharp movement causing his shoulder to protest.

The killing offended him, personally.

He knew how she'd died and he could make a pretty good deduction as to why someone had committed the murder. What puzzled him was why she'd allowed someone to kill her.

She was his slave, no-one else's, and he objected to her having died without permission.

His arm still ached from where he'd whipped her the previous weekend and he remembered the ecstasy they'd shared.

He'd find the killer in tribute to their love; he'd already forgotten her name.

~ O ~

## **Shotgun To A Rooster**

Word: stiletto  
(challenger: Anna J)  
200 words exactly

As she muttered the incantation, those surrounding her lowered their heads. One or two winced in disapproval as she stumbled over the unfamiliar words, while others in their turn winced at the displeasure expressed – it was a rather difficult invocation after all, and she was a relative newcomer to the coven.

She continued, the congregation answering in alternate verses at one point. She gained confidence as she persisted, the stiletto being tossed skilfully and quickly between each hand, a kata that went back centuries. As she reached the end of the long prayer, the relief on her face was plain, giving rise to more mumbled comments of censure, which ceased as she temporarily placed the blade on the ground and lifted another weapon.

The silence was almost oppressive as she tossed it in the air and then as it fell, she chambered it and fired, but she knew she'd aimed too low, rendering the later use of the blade unnecessary.

The Leader sighed as he saw the results. The rooster hadn't been slain by blade as written in scripture, but had been blown apart, the carcass barely recognisable.

Still, he thought with resignation, it might just do for the soup.

~ 0 ~

## **The Bulbous Ghost**

Word: precarious

(challenger: evilbilbo)

200 words exactly

They tried to put it politely at first, but after every entreaty and plea was ignored, courtesy began to take its leave.

Begging requests that would otherwise have been pitiful merely, they said, went in one orifice and out the other.

But there was no question that *something* had to be done.

Frankly, he was embarrassing the other ghosts.

*They* glided through walls and slid under doors, their vaporous ectoplasm enabling feats of infiltration that the most recent spectre mastered in such a short time.

And there he was, lumbering away, his passing measured not by the hypersensitive equipment favoured by those humans who took an interest in the paranormal, but by counters that traditionally were used to measure movements of tectonic plates.

Eventually, the rest of them got together and called a council. None had been called in unliving memory, but the oldest of them still remembered The Law and it was he who chaired the meeting.

It was horribly understandable, but unfair, one side of the argument went, that his very nature meant that he placed all other ghosts in precarious jeopardy by his very existence.

Meanwhile, the ghost of the blue whale listened in silence and pondered...

~ O ~

## **Whither My Sister's Zyther?**

Word: fox

(challenger: elfie\_elfie)

200 words exactly

I watched as she started to panic, and took a malicious enjoyment in the spectacle; as she ran around the house, in ever increasing alarm, the enjoyment became almost too much to bear.

Almost, but not quite.

With a supreme effort she appeared to calm herself, muttering. Whatever she said seemed to have a temporary palliative effect. Then she calmly and slowly walked towards her collection of plush dolls by the side of her bed and calmly and slowly kicked the crap out of them. The fox she'd had since infancy demolished in seconds.

"Where is it?" she screamed, "I need it – where the hell is it?"

I knew, but stayed silent, my face a picture of innocence. She glanced in my direction and I shrugged, as if I sympathised but that to me, it was no big deal.

Her costume, hung up by her bedroom door, was pressed and the golden buttons gleamed in the sunlight, ready for the show only an hour away. It seemed to mock her, it was so pristine, yet my sibling was distraught.

It was her own fault really – if she could scare off her brother's lover, I could steal my sister's zither.

~ O ~

## **Life's Full Of Wonders**

Word: stramineus

(challenger: Anna J)

200 words exactly

As the door opened, I smiled at the man who entered the room. This would show them! No mere *stramineus homo*, he!

Tall, with striking eyes of cobalt blue, and cherry red lips. His muscular frame was obvious and by the way he walked, with an light step for one so large, one was convinced that he could walk across freshly laden snow leaving neither mark nor blemish. His hair, although snow white had, I knew, once been a dark red, almost russet. In one hand he held a pipe, and I had the impression, as often before, that he used it in conversation to punctuate his arguments far more than was strictly necessary.

“Here he is, gentlemen,” I said, as I faced the panel of men who would decide my future. “My brother...”

The men were sat behind a long table, and the one in the centre almost looked sad as he told me that the other doctors agreed that I wasn't ready to be moved from the high security wing until I realised that the man I'd killed was, in actuality, still dead.

I turned to ask my brother's opinion, but he had left without saying a word...

~ O ~

## **The Vole Is Dead**

Word: chortle

(challenger: elfie\_elfie)

200 words exactly

“The Vole is dead!”

The sentence hung in the air for a moment, and the man who had spoken looked expectantly at his audience. He didn't have to wait long, as the applause started and washed over him.

He smiled indulgently at them. Such small minds most supervillains had. So easy to please.

A hand – at least he thought it was a hand – was raised from someone (something?) at the back of the room.

“Are you sssssssure?” came a lisping whisper. “We have been told ssssuch thingsssss before.” The speaker grew confident as he could see others nodding. “What proof have we of your accomplishhhment?”

The original speaker sighed, as if disappointed in the scepticism although in truth he had expected it.

“Isn't my word enough?” he asked.

The resulting laughter answered him far more forcefully than he felt was appropriate.

He opened the box on the table and lifted out the super-hero's head.

There was silence for a moment before he heard the inevitable. “Has to be a clone...” followed by “you can do lots with plastics these days.” A chortle here, a snigger there.

It was going to be a long night, the man realised with a sigh.

~ O ~

## **Office Sanctity Workplace Manual**

Word: chrysalis

(challenger: *Jen van Meter*)

200 words exactly

The firing squad was scheduled for seven in the morning, an hour after dawn.

The flood of legislation since the revolution was staggering: in its first hundred days, the government had rewritten thirty thousand pages of law, reversing eighty years of employee protection in three short months. And like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, the country was suddenly different from before. This butterfly had claws, however: it was now illegal, among other things, to take a holiday, to ask for a pay rise, to even work less than six days a week.

The new office procedures manual had only been in operation for eight months, but already thirteen staff had been sent to solitary confinement. This was only the fifth execution though. She glanced at the charges, projected on her wall: "Overt fraternisation."

She'd smiled at her colleague. And that was all it had taken to be reported. And not much more to be convicted.

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, tired beyond belief. She wondered how long it would be before they came for her. She hoped it wouldn't be too long: it was illegal to cry for more than six minutes a day.

~ O ~

## **No Winning Western Ways**

Word: fasting

(challenger: Del)

200 words exactly

She waited for him there, eager and nervous as brides have been throughout history.

The sound of their guests reached her; those that had come, anyway. Some had declined, surprisingly impolitely in some cases, but she had forgiven them their unfortunate but spiteful ignorance.

So many of their friends' relationships had not lasted, that before they had committed, they had both wanted to be sure. It came as some surprise when they spoke of it in detail and started asking how could you truly love someone if you didn't respect the nature that formed and guided them? Was it even possible to respect *them* if you didn't revere their environment?

Paganism and the resulting hand fasting ceremony was their way of answering those very questions, at least to their own satisfaction, if no-one else's. She knew her father was disappointed in not being able to give her away, but in truth, what right did he have? It was *her* love, *her* body, *her* life.

She saw her man arrive, late. It was sweet, how nervous he looked.

As the final binding was attached, she had a brief flash of panic. Then he smiled at her, and the world started anew.

~ o ~

## **Thunderstorms and Roses**

Word: elephants

(challenger: Alan Porter)

200 words exactly

The funeral was over and like the humans they so often disparaged, the gods in attendance were indulging in the traditional post-disposal activity: gossiping about the deceased.

The pantheon which had been put to rest contained very minor deities, all things considered, and the presence of several major members of other groupings in all their incandescent glory was always going to be remarked upon.

In time, at least as gods measure it, the usual problems followed, and it was inevitable that a fight would break out. The ambrosia was vanishing faster than it could be supplied and it was only thanks to the efforts of the God of Time that trouble was postponed as long as it was.

It was never quite clear afterwards how it had begun, although the persistent rumours later were that those whose existence was self-perpetuating were making mock of those whose survival rested upon worship. That was, after all, how most such brawls started.

However, it was only when the Lord of The Storm slid in a low blow against the Spirit of Fauna that things turned nasty, for of course the sister of the latter felt obliged to retaliate.

And the elephants rained down...

~ O ~

## **Touching The Secret Service**

Word: mythology

(challenger: *Tony Lee*)

200 words exactly

For an ostensibly secret concern, and the equally clandestine facility they offered, it was truly astonishing how many thought they knew of the business.

The legends surrounding the covert lenders were... well, legendary, but if you needed cash, no questions asked, and were prepared to offer a favour to be repaid at a later time, you could solicit money from them.

The rumours had given rise to their own mythology: there were some who maintained that the moon landings had been financed by them; others asserted that no President of the United States had been elected without their aid since 1972; while yet others were adamant that social security had been bankrupt for thirty years and it was only the shadow contributions that kept it even marginally afloat.

The other stories, concerning the maiming of those who refused the favour requested were equally well-known and infamous.

None of this was true, of course. The service offered by this secret band of bankers was entirely philanthropic while only four Presidents owed their election to that surreptitious and illegal help.

And not once had a maiming taken place.

Kidnapping family members, the bank knew from decades of experience, was far more effective.

~ O ~

## **Computers Do Bite**

Word: random

(challenger: Abbie)

200 words exactly

“I’m not a robot, you know.”

My client looked ostensibly human, but there was a sheen to its skin than was off-putting.

“I don’t suppose it makes much difference to him...”, I said, referring to the alleged victim.

“Oh, but it does,” insisted the machine, “I’m an android. That’s why you’re allowed to be my lawyer.”

I nodded slowly, in understanding. Robots were deemed to be objects under the law, and immune to prosecution for criminal acts; but they were also able to be destroyed by their owners with no more consequences than disposing of a calculator. Androids, on the other hand, were in a constantly shifting legal limbo, but crucially protected from what the court described as “needless and random harm”.

There was a faint whine of servos moving followed by the clink of chains. The handcuffs were silver, the wrists they surrounded only slightly less so.

“We weren’t doing wrong,” it insisted. It knew the law against prostitution didn’t apply to machines. And as I thought of the victim who’d been taken to hospital, his hands clasped over his groin, I looked at the machine with silver teeth, still tinged with unwashed red, that gleamed in the light.

~ O ~

## **These Colours Don't Run**

Word: ascendancy

(challenger: Michael)

200 words exactly

He'd been dying for years, but as the end approached, it was hard letting go.

He tried to move his head, but soon gave up; so tiring. In recent years, every movement had to be planned in advance. It had become so much a part of him that he genuinely could no longer remember the sensation of his body reacting impulsively to a sound, a smell, a sight.

He could see just see the covers and bedding, all red. All the same shade: blood red. It had originally been planned that way to ensure he didn't panic when his body leaked blood from various orifices, but he had long suspected that they kept it to ease the lives of the nurses who could pretend that he didn't bleed unless they looked at the sores. And the sheets; despite being washed twice daily, they were equally bright red.

He'd not volunteered for the experimental drugs, but that hadn't mattered to an uncaring doctor with gambling debts, nor to an up and coming drug company heading towards ascendancy.

He sighed; it wouldn't be long now. It was a pity, he thought, it would have been nice to have at least reached adulthood.

~ O ~

## **Eleven And A Half**

Word: signal

(challenger: Dan Schaffer)

200 words exactly

He poured himself a cup of black coffee, astonished at the steadiness of his hands.

His eyes roamed the laboratory. He'd sent the staff home earlier in the day. They all knew that there was nothing now to be done. The various solutions that had been proposed had proved worse than useless, taking up valuable time that could have been spent doing... he shrugged. There was nothing that could have been done.

There'd simply been no time to even consider anything with the potential of success; he'd actually laughed when someone had suggested sending a craft "into the earth..."

And the millions of suicides hadn't helped matters either.

Automatically, as he heard the chimes of the bell from the church across the square ring, he glanced at the monitor, watching the countdown reach single figures.

The signal had first been detected by his equipment three months ago. It was The Big One. The earthquake that had been prophesised for decades. The largest earthquake in living memory had been recorded at 9.5 on the Richter Scale. This one was going to be 2,500 times larger.

He put the cup down and watched as the surface of the coffee begun to ripple...

~ o ~

## **The Blue Book**

Word: scruples

(challenger: Chris Siddall)

200 words exactly

With the blood washed away, but the bruises still fresh, she walked across the room and sat at the desk.

Her body aching, she opened the drawer and stared at the six notebooks. She never understood why he wanted her to write, but after the first beating, she never asked again.

She picked up the green book and hugged it. She loved this one, which contained all her hopes, all her wishes for life. There was shockingly little writing in it, but what was recorded therein could always lift her spirits, even if only briefly and temporarily.

She placed the book back down and lifted up another volume, this one shaded in bright vermilion: her fears. She skimmed the many completed pages, seeing simplistic childhood phobias evolve into complex terrors; his name appeared more frequently with time.

She came to the blue book shortly thereafter and wept. She wished she could lie, but a combination of fear and scruples wouldn't allow her the luxury. Depressed that she was compelled to do so for some reason only known to her captor, she bent her beaten, brutalised body over the desk and calmly wrote about the urban horror that was her life.

~ O ~

## **The Sheep Wore Black**

Word: prophecy

(challenger: Nathan S)

200 words exactly

The signs were there, he realised, as he entered the open area approaching the village.

He reached into the oversized pocket of his jacket and extracted the large leather-bound book. He flipped it open to the most dog-eared pages and looked again at the maps on the double pages now revealed. Absolutely certain now, he glanced up and back at the way he'd come. Yes, there were the blue mountains, with the strange formations reminiscent of nothing so much as a large rodent.

Looking ahead in the distance, he could see another set of peaks, all of them appearing to be exactly the same height, precisely as predicted in the book.

The village appeared to have been abandoned many years ago, but that was also what was recorded in the prophesy: "an empty place with a black ewe.." went the line.

As a final test, he whistled three times and waited for the sheep to appear.

As if summoned, from behind him, a ewe wearing a black cotton coat trotted into view.

The explorer looked behind him and saw his companions, together with the empty cage.

Prophesies were a lot easier to make come true these days than people figured...

~ O ~

## **But You Said Yes?**

Word: vision

(challenger: Rob L)

200 words exactly

He looked a mess. His long hair was unkempt and smelled slightly, and his shirt was filthy dirty, a reddish-brown smear right across the lower half of it. He'd rolled the sleeves up and I could see the edges of the thick cuffs around his elbow already damp and dark from accumulated sweat.

I could see on his arm the same stain as on the shirt, the remains of the blood that had splattered him despite his best attempts to avoid it.

He glanced in the rear-view mirror; the police cars were getting closer, a vision of red and blue flashing lights in the night.

It was then that I told him that I'd lied – that no matter what he'd thought when planning the robbery, I wouldn't wait for him after they caught him. His eyes widened.

It was his own fault; he should never have trusted me. He should have known I'd betray him to his own worst instincts, much as I'd done before. The look of hurt on his face was wonderful to see, and gave me pleasure; the ultimate hedonist, living only for the experience of the moment.

It's a lot of fun being an imaginary friend.

~ O ~

## **Running On Petrol Fumes**

Word: irate

(challenger: Regie Rigby)

200 words exactly

The concrete and tarmac burned with a hundred small fires, the broken glass reflecting and distorting the light. Heat mirages, reflected onto dark clouds of smoke, gave the housing estate a surreal look.

When no-one was looking even vaguely in his direction, the constable ran into the open space, jacketless and shirt sleeves rolled, his clothes dumped early to protect him from the irate crowd. It had been bad enough for experienced officers faced with that mob, but for a new kid, only transferred in the previous week, terrifying didn't begin to cover it.

His foot stepped on a concealed bottle, and he fell, his arms already outstretched to break his fall, long before he consciously realised the danger. Halfway down, he twisted and a shard of broken glass on the ground sliced into his cheek rather into his eye. He couldn't help himself and screamed out.

Shadows appeared and he looked up, his system flooding with relief at the familiar uniforms.

It was bad enough for a new kid, but for experienced officers who'd seen colleagues burned and battered, this was too good an opportunity, and ignoring the escaping mob, they started kicking the one who hadn't got away...

~ O ~

## **The Space Time Continuum**

Word: cheesy  
(challenger: Maria)  
200 words exactly

As we consumed the cheesy nibbles, I grinned at the others.

Abraham was the oldest of the group. He was the earliest time traveller known, although it's possible that there were others that we'd not yet met, not at this stage in our lifelines.

Tenses could get confused when dealing with time travel, let alone adding in the factor of alien races.

Take Zs3q. Passing for human, just about, this was the second and sixth time we'd met: the sixth time I'd met her, but only the second time she'd met me. I knew that the next time she saw me, she'd have a new hairstyle, bright pink, and I'd be surprised at it. And she'd be astonished that I was surprised since it was, apparently, my idea. I was wondering at what point in this meeting I'd say something that acted as a catalyst.

We were sat in late twentieth Century New York, listening to music that to me was ancient, at least fifty years old. But Charley, used to the crooners of the 1950s, well, he kept complaining that you couldn't hear the words.

I couldn't wait to introduce him to the really quaint stuff, like punk rock.

~ O ~

## **Cheating On Your Wife**

Word: weasles

(challenger: glittermouse)

200 words exactly

It was those damned weasels. You answered the quiz question about their mating habits and looked so delighted; I looked at you and shivered. And then at the bar, three days later; me on my own, you with Julia, our eyes locked briefly, and I somehow knew that you were feeling the same as me.

Neither of us would call it a date, but when we met the following week for coffee before work, that's what it was. I knew so much about you but was ravenously hungry to learn more. And then lunch...

And from there, I suppose it was inevitable: the daily telephone calls, the sharing of confidences, the slightly risqué emails and text messages.

The hotel was expensive, but all that mattered was that the bed was firm, the telephones were switched off and the outside world could go to hell for a few hours.

It was almost amusing, in retrospect, how determined you were that she not know, the precautions you took, the same ones I was taking for precisely the same reason.

I don't think Julia would have been amused that person she was having an affair with was sleeping with her husband, after all...

~ O ~

## **Pasta and Celery**

Word: epididymitis

(challenger: Bevis Musson)

200 words exactly

The doctor saw his patient out and then sat back in his chair, pondering.

He'd known the patient, a man in his seventies, since he'd taken over the practice a decade earlier; a popular and dedicated doctor, he hated illness with a passion and unexplained injuries and diseases worst of all.

Which was why this vexed him. Greatly.

The doctor had been in general practice sixteen years and had never seen anything like it before.

Sure, he'd seen swelling down there on occasion. He probably saw epididymitis two or three times a year. But this was new: twenty-three cases in six days.

And each case presented the same symptoms: the patient first felt a sharp pain and then itchiness. Within three hours, it had swollen to enormous proportions and then a day after that, the odour of celery and the texture of three-day old pasta.

But there was no infection, that was the thing. Blood tests showed that not one of the patients had an infection. Not a one of them.

He winced at a sudden pain and absently scratched, without realising that another victim of a slow but inexorable alien invasion had succumbed.

The deaths started the following week.

~ O ~

## **Here Come The Russians**

Word: magick  
(challenger: Nimstar)  
200 words exactly

A thousand years ago, in the Days of Electricity, it would have been easier, she mused.

As if to agree with her, the candle flame flickered briefly in a gust of wind and then extinguished, leaving only a curl of smoke that quickly vanished. Of course, she had no idea what electricity was.

The pairing of the Monarch's son and the Empire's Leader was causing many calligraphic problems and she leaned back from her table, being careful not to knock the pot of ink over as she did so. The memory was still strong of the panic that had ensued when she'd spilled the precious liquid over a treaty.

The Royal Warlock had repaired the damage on that occasion by magick, but the effort had maimed him and he'd been forbidden ever to attempt it again.

As a scribe, she had access to The Books Of The Past, and had read all about The War To End The World and the enemy: The Russians.

She trembled at the thought of meeting the ancient foes. They apparently used something called 'a playne' to travel. And they followed a religion called 'science'.

The word frightened her for some reason and she shivered.

~ o ~

## **Cake And Funnel Clouds**

Word: bobolink

(challenger: elfie\_elfie)

200 words exactly

Propped up on one elbow, I looked down at her, lying on my bare chest, one arm casually draped across my upper body. She stirred slightly, before sinking back into a sleep that she'd later deny. "Resting my eyes", she'd say. And I'd smile indulgently, both of us knowing that a symphony orchestra could have been tuning up and she'd not have noticed.

Her long russet hair obscured her face, and I gently lifted it away. Eyelids fluttered, and my heart soared.

We were in the shade of a large oak tree, the detritus of our picnic all around us, the fruitcake demolished.

A bird flew across the sky and my eyes followed it, mildly curious as to what it was. Some kind of songbird? A bobolink possibly. I didn't know; didn't care, to be honest, other than she would have known.

I loved her deeply, far more deeply than I knew was good for either of us.

The clouds darkened and heavy raindrops started falling; I awoke, suddenly.

Beneath the tree.

Alone.

I hated her being dead... time didn't cure all wounds, it just made the scars marginally easier to deal with.

But, every so often, the scars itched.

~ o ~

## **Beauty Is Skin Deep**

Word: evasive  
(challenger: lyndzzz)  
200 words exactly

“Guilty!”

The voice of the judge rang in the courtroom and there was, as expected, utter silence for a long moment.

Standing, a member of the audience started to protest, but was immediately laser-stunned by one of the security guards. No further disturbance occurred.

The protest had obviously been premeditated, a martyr wanting to make his name. But after all, the verdict also been planned in advance, weeks before the case came to trial, despite the predicted evasive nature of the defence, not wanting to even admit there had been a crime.

The judge glanced at the defendant, who looked rather forlorn.

And ugly.

Perilously ugly. Hideously ugly, by modern standards: no remarkable features, no distinguishing marks. She looked, the judge winced, normal.

“Normal”... as if such a word meant anything in a culture where everyone had cybernetic inserts of one sort or another almost from birth.

As they had become common, so the laws of fashion and legislatures changed to make them mandatory. It was necessary now to look distinctive. And she didn't, her looks were too... plain.

When the trial resumed, the judge would sentence her to the maximum penalty allowed: enforced uniqueness, to ensure she'd fit in.

~ o ~

## **Die My Darling**

Word: enigma

(challenger: malkav)

200 words exactly

I'd expected the beep of the heart monitor to be annoying, but instead it was comforting, making what we were doing somehow formal, providing a counterpoint to the classical music softly filling the air.

A planned death should, I realised, have some formality about it. Without ceremony and decorum, it would have been somehow tawdry.

She was in pain, I knew that... Even if I hadn't expected it though, it would have been glaringly obvious to any onlooker. Her face was drawn, from the pain and the drugs administered, so unlike the beauty that had accompanied her thus far. She was dying tragically young and no matter what others might say afterwards, I knew the moral and ethical consequences of killing her.

Yes, killing her. Let's be in no doubt about that. Some might call it euthanasia, some mercy killing, but as *The Enigma Variations* faded, let us call it what it was: murder.

It had taken five years of embezzlement to finance the bribes. One doctor to convince her she was dying and to administer the correct drugs, two others to sign off on the procedure.

I loved you, darling, but I loved your trust fund far more.

~ O ~

## **Token Truths**

Word: pedigree

(challenger: Al Kennedy)

200 words exactly

The two attorneys looked startled at the request to approach the bench, but did so.

The judge examined them with an air of concern, knowing that the behaviour he'd witnessed was highly unusual, even given the pedigree of the lawyers involved.

“Mr Johnson,” the judge said, his clipped accent precise, “as a defence attorney, your job is to not to demonstrate your client's innocence, but to prove that the state doesn't have a case.”

Johnson felt ill as he realised what was coming.

“Mr Peters,” the judge continued, switching his gaze to the corpulent deputy district attorney, “your job is, as we all know, to prove the defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.”

“Yes, your honour,” replied Peters, colouring.

“Now, on the evidence thus far, I'd say he wasn't guilty: you're both acting like he's not guilty, and looking at them, the jury have obviously reached the same conclusion... when we all know he's guilty as sin. So I have to ask: what the hell kind of deal have you two concocted and why?”

And at the back of the court, a young man turned pale as he just then remembered which person in the court he'd forgotten to bribe.

~ O ~

## **New Feelings, Old People**

Word: refused

(challenger: Colin Murtagh)

200 words exactly

As she woke, she stretched her hand out and with a precise jab, her finger hit the correct button to ensure the alarm didn't ring. She heard breathing behind her, regular, slow, simply... there.

She rolled over in the bed and saw him lying there, watching her with devotion in his eyes.

No words were needed, not after so many years together, but they spoke them anyway, delighted that their love had renewed after so long stagnant.

The familiar routine of tenderness, touching each other, and enjoying the pleasure each saw in each other's face. It just seemed so much better now, despite – or maybe because of – their more than half a century together.

As she lay there, afterwards, she was so grateful for the extra time they'd had, unable to understand those who refused to believe that their love and lust could survive into pensionable age.

She never heard the chatter of the doctors surrounding her bed. Nor the soft, regular beep of the machine that had measured her vitals since she'd lapsed into the coma.

The bruises from the brutal and merciless beating had healed months back, at about the time her husband had been convicted of it.

~ O ~

## **Goat Sacrifices Every Thursday**

Word: giddy

(challenger: hylandsdeath)

200 words exactly

The sky was just turning green when she reached the airlock, knowing that she'd cut it fine. She felt giddy and had a slight headache, and was relieved she hadn't been outside longer.

She grimaced at the cam, then punched the code in, watching the light turn blue. Who the hell thought it was sensible to have security procedures out here? Three light years from any other humans, and as for aliens, well humanity had only come across one example of extra-terrestrial intelligent life.

Humanity had dealt with the unusual the same way it had throughout history: blasted it into oblivion.

As she took off the suit, there was a familiar smell to the air, not particularly pleasant, but better than the air in the suits. She smiled at the new graffiti on the wall of the changing room. Nice to see that some habits survived.

When the human race had ventured out into the stars, it had taken a couple of decades for them to leave their traditions behind, but some stuck. And some from distant race memory recommenced, like feudalism, and ancient religious rituals.

The serf could smell the goat meat burning. She'd quite forgotten it was Thursday.

~ O ~

## **The Stubborn Beastflesh**

Word: crony  
(challenger: kapdwa)  
200 words exactly

He was to be summoned next and the news he had to impart was not good. And though it might be others' fault, it was his responsibility. He shuddered, dreading but knowing the response it would garner from the squat ugly man at the head of the long mahogany table, who was currently peeling an orange with a long fingernail.

The fingernail pointed at him and beckoned. The man slowly stood, trying unsuccessfully to still his shaking legs.

With a quavering voice, he delivered the statement, knowing the details – scarce though they were – would be enough to condemn him, and he wasn't surprised when the hand went up, palm facing him. The dreaded words came down the length of the room, unemotional: “we do not tolerate failure in this organisation...”

He watched the fingers snap together, sounding like a gunshot echoing around the room. Two almost naked muscle men approached, both of them gleaming from oil. “Take him,” the flat voice said and he was dragged away, screaming.

The man at the head of the table sighed. Despite the removed man being a former crony, it had been necessary. He sighed again; he still missed the shark pool at times.

~ 0 ~

## **Together We're Invincible**

Word: assassin

(challenger: malkav)

200 words exactly

The assassin stood on the cliff top and objectively considered his partner.

They'd worked together for six years, a good team. No, a superb team, each relying on the other. Nineteen commissions, one failure; his own amateur mistake that had signalled so much.

He desperately wanted a cigarette. He enjoyed smoking, and always found the similarity to his profession bemusing; reflecting wryly how a cigarette became a dead butt in a single moment. Likewise one moment a living breathing person; the next, a body: all its life, its experiences, its potential... gone.

So much in life was irrevocable.

Six years. And now, he knew, his protégé would take the logical 'next step' in his career, and kill him. Or at least attempt to. There was a certain look to the lad's eyes now, a professionalism that went beyond mere expertise.

There was one other option, of course: to kill before being killed.

All it would take would be to pull the trigger.

But he didn't.

Instead, the two men stood ten feet apart, their rights arms outstretched, each pointing their handguns at the other's head.

They'd been there for ninety minutes so far... and his arm was hurting like hell.

~ O ~

## **Silver Blue And Kisses**

Word: serendipity  
(challenger: Roxane Grant)  
200 words exactly

The scores were still to come, but she could feel the thump of her heart, and the blush on her face.

The kiss had been an accident, unintended, but the serendipity of it did nothing to lessen its effect.

In front of two thousand people surrounding the ice rink, the nine judges currently finalising their opinions, and approximately half a billion viewers worldwide, her partner had kissed her as the final bars of the music faded.

And what a kiss. What had been intended as a peck on the cheek had turned into far more than had been anticipated by anyone.

Three years of training, thousands of hours of practice... all had led in one way or another, she now realised, to this moment. They had taken to the ice in a ludicrous pairing of silver and blue, that hardly matched the classical music of Beethoven. But of course, the end had taken care of that.

As the scores came up, she winced, and felt her partner tense. As they gathered their clothes from the ice, she could only hope that they were judging their skating, not what had followed.

A person's ego could only take so much, after all...

~ O ~

## **Thursday Morning Coffee**

Word: beans

(challenger: Abbie)

200 words exactly

He stood outside, enjoying the morning breeze. He lifted the large mug to his mouth, sipping the hot black coffee, tasting the slight bitterness. He remembered how she'd loved to make him coffee from Columbian beans. Not this morning though; this was instant – too much to do.

As the sun rose above the horizon, the sky slowly brightened; she'd always loved this shade of colour, and he'd grown in time to similarly take pleasure in it. Ten years to turn him from a 'city lad' into someone who took genuine pleasure from the country and now, thirty years of life away from the city.

The job, the excitement, the office politics; all of it seemed so far in the past, before the delight of her.

He drained the cup and walked back inside, remembering the joy of the past three decades with her. He rinsed the cup, knowing she'd have been angry with it left unwashed.

She'd died peacefully, as peacefully as she'd lived her life. Two hours, and it already seemed so long ago.

He felt his stomach cramp, the first sign.

Then he lay on the bed next to his wife, and waited for the poison to work.

~ o ~

## **Mind – A Dangerous Country**

Word: execrable

(challenger: Maria)

200 words exactly

The abuse had commenced ten minutes through the act and a legend arose that the comedian paused at one point, as if unsure whether or not to react. A smile was on her face though, as if she'd been expecting it.

When no reply came, invective continued, so she retorted: leniently at first, but as the shouts from the back of the audience became raunchier, the replies became nastier, more personal.

After a minute or so, she'd abandoned the act and the audience couldn't resist. Their heads were swivelling to watch, as if witnessing some combination of tennis match and traffic accident, ostensibly not wanting to watch, but secretly thrilled at the spectacle. Execrable attack was met by disgusting rejoinder to be countered by repulsive response.

The insults became more detailed, the spectators treated to a battle of wits supreme.

Until the stroke.

The attack when it came was sudden, and shocking, but no-one in the theatre that night was in any doubt about what they saw, as she fell to the ground and lay unmoving.

There was a final sound from the rear of the auditorium, though none could say whether it was of relief, regret or simple surprise.

~ o ~

## **Living “La Vida Loca”**

Word: regret

(challenger: Regie Rigby)

200 words exactly

I'd wondered into the club precisely because it was quiet: no music, and I wanted to think. An hour later, with a large scotch inside me, and another on the table, I sat. And thought lonely thoughts. Life could be pretty lousy at times. The secret, I guessed, was not to give a damn.

If only.

I drank down my drink in two swallows, signalling to the bar for another.

Nothing. I slowly got the message and walked carefully to the bar where I agreed with the man behind it that no, he wasn't my bloody servant, and asked yeah, could I have another large scotch. Oh hell, make it two and have one yerself before I regret it.

The music started as I headed back to the table, and before I sat, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Turning, I was pulled away by them, pulled into the centre of the dance area.

I don't dance. I mean it. I really don't.

But I did.

The secret of life? Not to give a damn.

Life can be pretty lousy... but sometimes, just sometimes, that makes the climb back to living – rather than just existing – just so damned wonderful.

~ o ~

## **A Reason For Living**

Word: askance  
(challenger: **Sarah H**)  
200 words exactly

The hero sat on the rooftop and wept.

His associates stayed clear of him, and spent their evening making sure he wasn't disturbed.

He was, for example, entirely unaware of the bank robbery that was taking place only two blocks away, equally unaware of the semi-spherical construct formed to hide the sound of the criminals' capture.

Those of a more urban bent kept the streets safe that night. They'd all been told to do so, but had not been told why. They'd looked askance at the appeal, and had then realised it had not been a request.

The hero considered his long years on the planet. And wept.

He thought of his adopted parents, now long dead. They'd taught him so much, made him effectively human, though he knew he'd never truly be one of them.

He thought of his first wife, buried centuries ago. And the others, so many of them.

He thought of them all. And wept.

He thought of those who wished him harm, and of what he'd done merely to survive, let alone prosper.

And then he heard again the cry of his child. His first child, born less than an hour ago.

And he wept.

~ o ~

## **The Future is 1800**

Word: automaton

(challenger: Mark Campbell)

200 words exactly

It was six o'clock and he pushed himself away from his desk.

Silently.

Around him, his department registered the time and all ceased their work, in some cases stopping mid-sentence. Computers were already saving the work ready for them to recommence their tasks when they returned, though those that were now walking in silence to the exits neither knew this nor would have cared had they been told.

As each of them left through red doors, across the room, green doors opened and an equal number of people walked into the space now vacated. As each of the newcomers sat in front of computer displays, they were recognised by iris scans and, in rare necessary cases, by fingerprint. And their work commenced. In silence.

Those who had left walked slowly downstairs into a large basement, where they took their assigned positions and slept.

And while each thing that used to be a human being was unconscious, their brains were reordered, new instructions downloaded and each was now ready to work through the night. Each automaton awoke, looked at the large clock set in the wall and knew it was now six o'clock.

In the future, it is always six o'clock.

~ O ~

## **Sitting In The Seat**

Word: dragon

(challenger: Philip Barnett)

200 words exactly

As he sat, the true dimensions struck him. He hadn't expected that.

No, that wasn't quite true, or at least not the whole truth.

He'd known how big it was. He'd seen it on his left more times than he could remember. But his mind was used to that; it was seeing it to the right of him that, frankly, scared him witless.

It seemed to go on forever. Strange how that worked, how what was on that side of his body could, just by moving a few feet, suddenly seem 'real', or at least more real than it had before.

His legs shook, and he grinned widely. That was good. If you were fearless, he'd been told oh-so-many times, that was the easiest guarantee to disaster.

He took a deep breath, steadying himself. Then another.

Finally, he was ready.

He flicked the reins, watched the wings unfurl, and drove the dragon forward from its perch.

His first time solo in the driving seat.

When his father found out he was using the family dragon without asking, he'd be in trouble, but as the lands revealed themselves below him and he screamed with joy, he knew: it was worth it.

~ O ~

## **Every One A Winter**

Word: garnish

(challenger: Alan Wollecombe)

200 words exactly

The evening had been a success, although she'd paid him no more attention than anyone else. No more than he'd expected, but disappointing all the same.

He stood, leaning against one of the walls, the one decorated with hideous shades of red and off-white.

What was it about the winter dance? Why was it acceptable to transform the school gymnasium they'd all spent so many hours in, but which was at least a dark beige under normal circumstances, into this... farrago?

He lifted the bottle to his mouth, and swallowed the beer down.

She saw him and smiled, that vacant smile that meant nothing and yet signified so much. The holly garnish below her shoulder looked like it should be in a vase; the corsage pinned perfectly. He shuddered as he wondered what she'd done with the winter flowers he'd sent her. Merely thrown away with a shrug, or would she have laughed derisively as she'd done so?

Then he'd known what to do to get her attention.

He left the room, shrugging on his jacket as he walked away from the joy there.

With a bit of luck, they wouldn't find the remains of the murdered elves until morning.

~ O ~

## **Second Hand Smoke**

Word: cigarette

(challenger: Jess Nevins)

200 words exactly

He wore dirty brown, and a common remark was that it was hard to tell where the dirt ceased and the brown commenced.

There was an unpleasant smell that accompanied his presence and in a culture where tobacco had been banned for thirty years, it was assumed that his racking cough and malodorous stink was due to him being a chain smoker.

To their never-ending complaints about the dangers of passive inhalation, he merely gestured to the large containers on his back, containing what he called his 'smokazide', a fog that appeared at his wish and that he maintained could mystify the mind.

The tubes from his mouth and nose stored the smoke away and as he lit another cheap cigar with the cigarette lighter, his raspy voice called the meeting of self-proclaimed heroes to order.

He took his seat, away from the others and looked at them through jaundiced eyes, curious as to which of them would have the guts to ask him not to smoke this week.

None of them did, and with a hollow laugh, he wondered if they'd ever have the guts to do so.

Maybe when they entered puberty, he thought.

Or when he did.

~ O ~

## Whatever She Wanted

Word: refuse

(challenger: Anonymous)

200 words exactly

There were, he knew, few things in life as wonderful as glorious sunshine, your girl at your side, and the pleasure of doing something you were good at.

With a groan, he wondered why the hell none of the above applied on this lousy day.

The weather was overcast, *she* sat at the side of the river, and in thirty minutes, he'd grown to hate rowing. He hadn't rowed since college, and he'd been lousy at it way back then. So why had he accepted the challenge to row up the river and back?

He knew the answer: he'd never been able to refuse her anything.

He felt something pull deep in his back as the blade of the oar bit deep and the moment it carved into the water, he knew the angle was wrong; he'd 'caught a crab' but he didn't even have time to realise how embarrassing it looked before he heard the flowery curse from his rigger as the boat flipped and they followed the oar into the river.

And as he surfaced, he heard her laughing at him.

Sometimes, he realised with another groan, being a dad wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

~ O ~

## **Love Is Spatial**

Word: fleeting

(challenger: Jill S)

200 words exactly

The hands of the clock ticked over to the pre-selected time and before the alarm had been ringing for a full second, her hand accurately stabbed out from beneath the blanket and hit the button.

In the silence, she stretched out, and as she began to awake, her hand reached across the bed and felt for him. A moment later, she registered the absence of his body, and almost as if she'd been knifed, a sharp pain hit her chest.

She rolled up in a ball, tight and hard, wishing the world away.

It was at times like this that she missed him most, missed the heat of his body, even missed the temporary absence, the knowledge that at the end of the day, he'd be back.

But no more – not since the train wreck that had took his life, and destroyed hers.

The tears came unbidden, as they had every night, and every morning, the past five weeks.

Eventually, she knew, that would stop: one night, she'd fall asleep just from tiredness, instead of weepy exhaustion; eventually she would wake with a smile, fleeting or otherwise, looking forward to the day.

One day she would laugh.

One day.

Maybe.

~ O ~

## **Dirk Beckles' Tungsten Crab**

Word: thylocene

(challenger: Liam Sharp)

200 words exactly

At two o'clock in the morning, the four of them moved silently, hunting.

Beckles was the leader and despite having been a security guard at the Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart for eight months, his mission was entirely personal. The others, for various reasons including bribery, blackmail and threats of violence, had 'agreed' to accompany him.

They'd already disposed of several valuable specimens, poison in the main. The three unwilling accomplices didn't know – wouldn't ever know – why they were undertaking this task, merely that Beckles wanted it done.

As they approached the largest item to be destroyed, Beckles couldn't help but smile at the cold dish now being served.

Once a promising student specializing in crustaceans, his reputation had been destroyed when he announced the discovery of a brand new (but extinct) species of armour-plated crab, only to discover it was a high school metalwork project. The zoological society had been merciless.

The symmetry was delicious. The last thylocene in captivity.

They reached the cage and stared... at the vacant interior; a sign quickly scanned revealed that it had died earlier that day.

As they left, Beckles wondered who had been out with poison the previous night... and his step quickened.

~ o ~

## **The Golden Wellies**

Word: bumpkin

(challenger: Brian Douglas Ahern)

200 words exactly

The letter in one hand, a bottle of beer in the other, the bumpkin sat on his porch and contemplated life's changes and fortunes.

The sun had long since passed overhead, and there was a gentle breeze that ruffled the grass on his front lawn as the shadows lengthened.

He placed the bottle on the ground and directed his attention to the letter, reading it for the fifth time that day.

As he finished, a wry smile appeared on his features, revealing an intelligence that had been lacking moments earlier. Then, as he took a sip of the beer, his mind went back to pondering and his face reverted to its earlier incarnation of pleasant vacancy.

Shapes blocked the sun, low down on the horizon, and as people passed the porch, there was a brief nod to each, respectful though hardly friendly.

Afternoon turned to evening and his readings of the letter took less time, the gaps between them growing longer; afterwards he'd glance towards the kitchen, wherein stood two Wellington boots, each a lustrous shade of yellow.

It had genuinely never occurred to him that they'd want them back.

The bumpkin chewed on a length of corn, and considered.

~ O ~

## **Snatch A Falling Star**

Word: fastidious

(challenger: Jen Contino)

200 words exactly

The body had been discovered a little after four in the morning. It hadn't taken long to identify and the cause of death was obvious: a bullet through the corpse's chest left a neat hole, despite the blood.

His agent knew he would have approved of the neatness, though not the blood, being so fastidious in his appearance when he had been alive.

The face was unmarked, although it had been many years since it had resembled the young countenance about which so many females (including the lead detective) had dreamed.

He'd been kidnapped three days earlier, the ransom huge, and when it hadn't immediately been paid... this was the result.

When he was informed off the record that evidence indicated that this had been a publicity stunt by the celebrity that had gone wrong, the agent sighed.

He'd knew he'd have to be more careful the next kidnap, and hire people for the job who didn't panic quite so quickly.

He also knew he'd have to use one of his more famous clients next time.

He began to rehearse his statement for the inevitable press interest, and whistled softly as he walked away, thinking of the front page photos.

~ O ~

## **Absence Of Mind**

Word: wallet

(challenger: Regie Rigby)

200 words exactly

The .44 magnum revolver was heavier than she thought it would be.

She held the weapon in her hand: it always looked a dark grey on television, but now she had it in her possession, it was ebon, no reflection off its dull surfaces.

She stretched out her arm, feeling muscles protest, the new bruises her husband had given her only that morning still aching. She wore a bright yellow shirt, with the sleeves buttoned tight at each wrist, ensuring that only areas of skin unmarked by contusion, cigarette burn or cut could be seen.

She stared down the barrel, picturing his face there. She wondered what his reaction would be, how wide his eyes would go, how pale his face would turn.

She imagined pulling the trigger, controlling the recoil, ignoring the sudden smell of cordite while she watched his body thrown backwards by the first shot. And then, moving forward, and taking careful aim at one of his eyes...

With hands that were curiously still, she placed the gun back on the counter, picked up her wallet and with a slow gait, left the shop, hearing the words of the owner follow her out:

“Same time next Monday?”

~ o ~

## **The Swallows of Autumn**

Word: rash

(challenger: Alan Woolecombe)

200 words exactly

The mood was sombre as the three men entered the room. The pre-funereal air permeated the place they removed their hats. Each of them noticed the table and single chair in the room.

The tallest was the first to speak, extolling the virtues of the man they'd come to bury. It didn't take long: he'd not been known for his worthy qualities. With his hat in his hand, he, who'd known the soon to be interred man the longest, made as good an effort as he could, but it was with a tangible sense of relief that he ceased his oration.

The fat, sweating man with the rash on his neck was next. The others forgave the perspiration: the room was far hotter than the cool October air outside. In halting English, he delivered a summation of the man's adult life, particularly the final twenty-four hours. He spoke dispassionately, laying out the facts and nothing more.

As he finished, the final man uttered a few words: a curse, a hope, a verdict.

And then the three of them picked up the gagged and bound body of the still living traitor. And took him out to the woods to bury him.

~ O ~

## **Return Of The Screw**

Word: organism

(challenger: Mike Carey)

200 words exactly

The smell never changed, Austin realised, as he walked into the large hall, followed by his colleagues.

Snapping latex gloves on, he moved around the tables, to where the corpse lay, with an obviously freshly broken nose, dried blood covering the face. The long stick laying next to the body shined in the bright lights and the varnish looked at first glance to be undamaged. But the lab would check that in due course.

Only half-listening to the police detective talking to his men, Austin narrowed his eyes, and slowly turned his head, his gaze sweeping across the room. Something seemed off, but he couldn't place it.

He got down on his haunches, and saw the two-inch wide white spherical object laying near the body, a smudge of red on its surface, and some smeared pale matter, some organism or other.

"Damnedest suicide I ever saw," said the detective, picking up the cue, and leaning on the nearest pool table, making as if to play a shot, play-acting the ball jumping backwards towards the victim's face.

Austin had already concluded the cop had committed the murder, and now he wondered how much he'd charge the detective to keep quiet... again.

~ O ~

## **I Wanted It More**

Word: brevity

(challenger: elfie)

200 words exactly

I knew I was spending more time in the pub. But like most addictions, it had snuck up on me bit by bit.

The bus had been late, and it had started raining hard, throwing needles in my face and wet knives through my clothes. The sound of music caught my attention and I saw the pub door.

I walked in, ordered a scotch and... that was it. The start of it.

It was, I think, the brevity that astonished me: so quick, so great an effect. I ordered another drink and there it was again, that warm feeling.

I took a seat by the window, holding the remains of my drink, until I saw the bus arrive.

The following evening, I stopped in again, got what I didn't realise until later was my fix for the night. It soon became a habit, wanting more, *needing* it more.

And that's the way it continued, night after night.

I stopped in tonight as usual, ordered my drink, paid for it and waited... waited.

She bought me the drink and... then there it was: The Smile.

The warmth suffused me.

And then I drank the scotch, left the pub, and went home.

~ O ~

## **A Wild Ima-djinn-ation**

Word: discontent

(challenger: Lisa J)

200 words exactly

It had been dozens of decades since I'd last been summoned, but then, a few months back, she'd found it: the glass bottle with the stopper. And of course, since it had been filthy, she'd rubbed it with her sleeve.

Damnation!

And once again, as so often before, I had to assuage my new mistress's discontent.

But this one was clever, oh so clever. She didn't make a wish at first, but asked me lots of questions as to likely consequences. She even asked what wishes other people had made, and whether they'd been happy with the results. Two thousand years, and no one'd realised that they could ask that.

I'd say Damn her, but that's already been taken care of.

After I'd answered all her questions, her first wish was simple:

"I wish for everything that will make me happily content."

And, of course, I had to grant the wish, in the most efficient and speedy manner possible.

Four months later, she's had no need to use her other wishes, indeed she can't.

The human doctors call it a "persistent vegetative state".

Such parochial beings, these humans.

But she's happy, deep in her mind.

Well, she's content, at least.

~ O ~

## Feel Euphoria

Word: beard

(challenger: Colin Murtagh)

200 words exactly

I clip on the monitor as I leave the house, waving at my next door neighbour who's weeding her garden.

"Good morning," she calls out, smiling broadly at me, lifting a claw-like hand in greeting. It was damaged in an industrial accident a couple of years ago, and she hasn't worked since. But she was happy with the payment she got from the insurance company and told everyone how delighted she was that she could now spend more time with her plants.

I look for the purple car. It's not here yet, and I check my watch. He's late, but that's ok, I'm not unhappy about it. I take the opportunity to close my eyes and enjoy the sun for a few minutes.

I hear the car pull up and get in. My colleague rubs his new beard and apologises but it's for politeness sake. He's not sorry he was late; he's happy about it.

And so am I.

A shadow falls over the window, and we look over at the Euphoria Police Officer. We're happy to see him, and we point at our monitors, both a solid shade of green,

Of course we're happy. It's the law these days.

~ o ~

## **Military Two-Step**

Word: syndication

(challenger: Rasmus L)

200 words exactly

No-one ever discovered who fired the shot, despite the inquiries. Given the seriousness of the consequences, it was completely understandable why so many inquiries were called for, set up, and of course, forgotten long before they actually reported.

Ever since armies had been embedded with news organisation rather than the reverse, the reporters had been waiting for the first attempted coup. It hadn't taken long, and they were now waiting for the hundred and sixty-fourth... in six years.

The Lead Producer of the United States of America (previously known as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs) was now surrounded by almost as many bodyguards as the President. The President of the studio that is, not the President of the United States, who these days was relegated to signing increasingly meaningless vetoes of increasingly meaningless legislation.

Wars were scheduled for prime time television news; peace treaties signed with exclusive newspaper rights on a strict rota.

The assassination threw the world into utter confusion. The lead producer of China, killed as he left his office? Impossible. The world in danger of genuine uncontrolled war...

...and in a thirty-fifth floor office in a building in New York, the bidding for syndication rights commenced.

~ 0 ~

## **The Basement Of Doom**

Word: moron

(challenger: Josephine Corsi)

200 words exactly

The door opened with a creak, and a widening shaft of light illuminated the dank room.

The woman looked around the almost empty room, caught a brief whiff of odour and grimaced. From out of her bag, she pulled a small can and sprayed it twice, then tentatively sniffed again, this time satisfied with the pervading smell.

She heard a noise behind her and turned to see a heavysset man walking down the stairs.

As he got closer, he smelled the pleasant scent of citrus, and smiled at her. "Great minds think alike," he said in heavily accented English, lifting his hand to show the air freshener. "And morons seldom differ," the woman replied, her voice hoarse with the unfamiliar language, but equally friendly.

"Shall we?" the woman gestured towards the room.

The arms dealer followed the notorious war criminal into the room towards the solid chairs where they sat.. and talked.

And when they had finished talking, they both left, having completed their business, knowing only the approximate numbers that would die as a result of the conversation and the amount of money involved.

The moron and the genius met once a month. It was arguable which was which.

~ O ~

## **Little Pink Duckies Abound**

Word: grope  
(challenger: elfie)  
200 words exactly

I'd thought she was kidding or I'd heard wrong. Honest! And the damned room had been dark when we got back, I promise.

I'd gotten to the club around two o'clock, in the company of friends with whom I'd spent several hours solving the problems of the human race in precise detail accompanied by much alcohol.

I kind of remember the bouncer on the front door. Big bald fella... I think.

As I rub my eyes, trying to get out of my head the shocking vision I'd moments earlier witnessed, she giggles, sits up in the bed and solemnly reminds me of my promise. I wince and have a sudden reminiscence of walking over to her in the club, a kiss, a grope, walking to her car...

I swear, the room was dark when we got back – that memory's one of the strong ones, as is the one of the hours that followed.

I sneak open an eye, looking over the blanket. The damn ducks were still there, watching me. Furry, small, pink... dozens of the buggers.

Damn it: I thought I'd misheard when she said I could come home with her... as long as I gave her a duck.

~ o ~

## **The Lemons of Wrath**

Word: disorganised

(challenger: Audrey B)

200 words exactly

The disorganised chaos of the coroner's lab was offensive to her and she wrinkled her nose in disgust at the sight. She had enough respect for the coroner though not to mention it. Not again.

She walked into the room, and called to the coroner's assistant who looked up from a microscope and smiled at her in recognition.

She asked about the body, and he grimaced, then led her to a big table. He pulled away the sheet revealing a novelty. She'd seen dead bodies before; in her job, it came with the territory, but this was something new.

Coming from Goleta Valley, she knew a bit about lemons: she knew the lemon tree grew up to twenty feet. She knew that it had a white exterior and purple interior and the fruit, which first appeared green, ripened to a golden yellow.

She was pretty sure, however, that its natural growing environment wasn't inside every visible orifice of the dead young man laying on the table.

She winced at the effort it must have taken to insert the numerous lemons.

And then the assistant turned over the man's body and she realised that the effort was decidedly enhanced by anger...

~ O ~

## **Seventh Grade Science Heroes**

Word: librarianship

(challenger: Kate Short)

200 words exactly

The door was open, of course.

That tradition had been established after the Reformation: all doors to places of learning were, by convention, to be left open at all times.

As the youths approached, the armed guards moved aside, bowing to them as a mark of respect for those who came to learn.

Walking silently through the central hall, they stopped as a tall elderly man in white robes approached them. Elected for six consecutive terms as Chief Librarian, he was, it was generally agreed, the wisest man in The City.

When they told him what they had come to see, he sighed in familiar regret, though hid it with a brief smile, mindful of his duties in librarianship.

“Of course,” he said, and they followed him to a dark passage, blocked by a steel fence and by more armed guards.

The eldest of them asked why they were not allowed to study science and he shook his head sadly. *Ah, the naiveté of youth.*

He still remembered the wars; now enforced learning of scripture was the way to peace.

Later, as they secretly lit a Bunsen burner, the youngsters pitied him. He knew so much, yet understood so little.

~ o ~

## **A Smart Country Fair**

Word: bumpkin

(challenger: Taylor B)

200 words exactly

The suit felt awkward, but that was as nothing when compared to the feeling of strangulation imposed by the tie.

He'd considered long and hard which tie to buy at the store, and the small squat assistant had sighed with ever increasing power and volume as the young man had dithered over whether to buy plain or patterned; whether to go for a quiet, restrained tie or something that would draw attention to the thin gangly youth.

After almost half an hour, he'd finally chosen one: it was dark blue, almost black, and this was accentuated by the clouds of white stitched into the fabric.

He wore it with some pride, though much discomfort, and walked through the entrance to the country fair.

As soon as he entered the market place, he saw his classmates, all of them, like him, dressed in their Sunday best. It gave him a new perspective; not one of them looked like a bumpkin; all of them could have stepped out in the street of one of the big cities, and looked at home.

Well, almost.

The effect, he realised, was somewhat damaged by the large Wellington boots worn by every member of the class.

~ O ~

## **Monkeys Take Over Venezuela**

Word: shoehorn

(challenger: Richie R)

200 words exactly

He used to love his workplace... until the monkeys were imported. At the main zoo in Caracas, he went about his duties, softly cursing as he approached their cages. From habit, he glanced down at the trolley, confirming that he had the cleaning materials to clear the faeces that if not in evidence yet, soon would be.

He remembered when the monkeys had arrived and the look of despair on the face of his boss at the time. Organising where their cages would be placed was a nightmare, since the chimps simply refused to be placed near the great cats, and the gorillas had looked at the marmosets as if considering which corner of their cage they'd scrub using them. In the end he'd had to shoehorn them into the correct cages by a mixture of bribery and threats.

He heard a shriek of joy and knew that the orang-utans had once again shown their rears to the customers.

He turned the corner and ducked as the monkeys reached down and started throwing.

He knew that every animal was entitled to act as they would in their natural environment, but he truly believed that some of them abused the privilege.

~ O ~

## The Orange Cow Trees

Word: mind  
(challenger: Jon R)  
200 words exactly

“Evolution!”

The word echoed around the small area, natural acoustics enhancing the already powerful voice of the teacher.

“So, who can tell me about evolution?”

The noise level dropped suddenly and there was a moment’s silence broken only by a sound familiar through the centuries: that of children avoiding a teacher’s question.

Eventually, one of the larger children rose. Known as something of a class clown, he slowly looked around the class then gave the teacher one of his finest, and most deceptively innocent, smiles. He orated fluently about natural selection, and threw in ‘survival of the fittest’ just for the reaction.

He wasn’t disappointed; laughter surrounded him and let him know he’d succeeded. He smiled again. The teacher knew this one of old: it was the “if I make a big enough smartarse comment, and throw her a look that’s half-conspiratorial, I should get away with it” smile. She didn’t altogether mind; it was a tough subject and the more relaxed the class was, the better.

“You know,” she said aloud, grinning, “that was *nearly* right...”

Another laugh from the class, and then she gestured to the multi-limbed brightly coloured and mooing foliage all around them and began teaching.

~ O ~

## **The Trappings of Life**

Word: transformed

(challenger: RB)

200 words exactly

She sits there, alone, staring and nodding into the middle distance.

Occasionally, she smiles, and her face is transformed from a plain studied neutrality, her eyes brightening, her complexion deepening.

It never lasts, and you can time how long it takes for the life to leave her eyes, for them to return to their previous dullness: thirty-seven seconds.

I've counted.

Her hands move. They move in tandem, a centimetre one way, then the other. Regular as clockwork; it happens as the final demonstration of caring leaves her, as life in her eyes fades, returning her to the mockery of existence, in a twilight of memory, a fog of delusion and dementia.

She's never spoken. Not in twelve years.

I wonder if she remembers how to; though what would she say?

I scream at her sometimes, to try and get a reaction. It never succeeds.

She's cried twice. Once for two days, the other for a week.

Her family visit regularly, but as far as she's concerned, they might as well not. Still, it amuses the grandchildren, I suspect.

And somewhere in her mind, locked behind a door that will never open, I cry constantly for the life I once knew.

~ O ~

*A self-imposed challenge here, for Tony Lee's birthday:*

## **Gloomy Kisses At Midnight**

Word: memories

(challenger: Me)

200 words exactly

The vampires left me alone as I walked the streets at night, always there, but never approaching. They knew better when I was striding like this.

I could hear a soft though reverberating keening from above and for some reason I couldn't identify it reminded me of something. I'd heard that sound before.

Before...

Sometime before, when...

The memories slammed into my brain just as the leathery wings flew out of the alleyway, carrying with them the familiar stench and rank odour of the undead.

Her claws raked at my cheek, followed by her face, the lips obscenely seeking mine. I barely had the time to pull out the Holy Water and splash some at her, enjoying the thrill of the moment, the way what used to be flesh burned in the soaking. A shriek that could wake the dead (I knew, trust me) echoed around the street long after the creature had flown away in panic, cursing my name.

I made it the rest of the way home with few enough incidents and dropped my coat on the stairs before heading into the kitchen where my wife was waiting.

"Saw your mother again," I said to her. "She's mellowed."

~ o ~