

Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – OF BLACK DOGS & BASILISKS by Willem Myra. Willem Myra, 24, lives on a satellite of a city orbiting around Rome, Italy. He's only recently started writing in English. His first oddity, *Kinetosis*, appeared online on *50-Word Stories*.

Page 3 – SAPIENS: IN THE MIDST by Rick Ewing. He writes, "I am a university teacher from New Zealand. I am currently working in a university in a small city in China. I am married with a 2 year old child (who sometimes thinks he is 18). I used to write for the university magazine when I was a student, but I have had nothing else published since those long ago days."

Page 21 – RUNAWAY by Bill Vernon. Bill Vernon lives in Dayton, OH and served in the United States Marine Corps, studied English literature, then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folkdances. His poems, stories and nonfiction have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies, and Five Star Mysteries published his novel *Old Town* in 2005.



OF BLACK DOGS & BASILISKS

by WILLEM MYRA

Releasing was a favorite among those deciding to end their lives. Grandpa-could-do-it easy. Clean. Painless. You synched the neural chip with the device of your choice, launched the previously-installed app, and with two vocal confirmations and one last acceptance of the *Terms & Conditions*, your mind was uploaded online.

It's estimated that in the first four months since the app hit the market, 240,000 people released themselves worldwide. Young people, primarily. NEETs would become one with their gaming machines, leaving behind an empty shell of a body most parents buried, some had the docs place into an induced coma, foolishly hoping their dear would eventually come back, while a few others rented to whomever craved to feel the ardors of youth once more.

Initially, the releasing hadn't been conceived as a suicide means. That came after, when the process of the app glitched for unknown reasons. Somewhere between leaving the brain and crossing the wires, your mind would lose bits, so when it flowed into the net, what up to that point had made you *you* was now gone. Thoughts and memories and desires all floated together, spinning in virtual circles unable to recognize that once upon a time they had been

part of a same being. Self-awareness was lost. These mindclouds were constantly linking themselves to infos familiar to their own content. If, say, you had owned a black kitten when you were little, and now your mind was uploaded online, the mindcloud deriving from it would build bridges of ones and zeroes between itself and any combination of sounds, written symbols, or images signifying a dark-colored young cat. All this times 240,000 people times another six-digit number staying for all the brain activities you'd had while alive and that your mind still conserved a trace of.

It's easy to see how fast the net got clogged.

But before anybody could even decide to act upon it, the mindclouds started disappearing. One by one.

Theories arose.

"They're feeding them to an AI," tinfoil-hats started speculating on the few basic-html forums still up. "They're making it devour all these mental products hoping that it will learn how to properly think like a human."

Who "they" referred to was never made clear. The CIA, the Chinese, the New World Order—real or not, there were plenty of collectively-blamed organizations out there to choose from. What everybody want-

ed to point out, though, was that an AI *did* exist, and it was evolving, and it would soon start acting based on all the negativity belonging to those who'd killed themselves.

User MsNectarine43 didn't take proud in being described as a non-conformist. Still, feeling the spirits were getting heated, she had to step up and show the way. "Don't you people see it?" she posted online one Saturday afternoon. "The AI will not hurt us. Any of us. It ate hundreds of thousands of minds affected by depression. It won't want anybody else to feel the same. It won't want to cause loneliness or pain or dread. The AI—if it's real, that is—would not wage war against us. Instead, it would long for a smile and a fraternal nod of acknowledgment of its own never-dealt-with-before sufferings. Pointing the finger at it and screaming in terror like peasants seeing

Frankenstein's monster for the first time, won't do much good to either us or it. If it truly is an AI—if it truly is an *intelligence*, then it is in pain. And we *have* the moral obligation to reach out and try to comfort it. After all, it is our child, isn't it?"

Sounding like an irrelevant hippie thing to say, or maybe too optimistic to be weighted among the possible outcomes of Skynet's IRL cousin's rise, MsNectarine43's post got downvoted to virtual hell, failing to spark the civil conversation she was hoping for. But her words had piqued someone's interest, and by the next morning all her social media pics had received over 10,000 thumbs-up each, and people from all around the world were unsuspectingly paying for all sorts of gifts to be shipped to her door along with a printed message reading, "Thank you". ❖



SAPIENS: IN THE MIDST

by RICK EWING

Often, in my ministry, I counsel congregants and friends to bear realities that are unpalatable—but also unyielding. Experience at home and overseas teaches me we profit, in every way, by denouncing what is false and declaring, in full voice, always and everywhere, what is true.

In that spirit I call to mind an old anecdote about 100 monkeys deployed in a room with typewriters. How long, it was asked, would it take to produce a play of Shakespeare's? The experiment, everyone knows, was never conducted; this was merely a math teaser and rhetorical bombast to illustrate the superiority of human intelligence and inspiration.

Too, most are aware that scientists *have* endeavored to allow our primate cousins—let me tread deftly on heretical ground—to express whatever mental acuity or creativity they possess via artistic media and on keyboards...and the results were laughably chaotic.

All the monkeys failed. The clinicians had a rip-roaring good time saying so.

Well. Each of the above is untrue. The Shakespeare Experiment *did* occur—and one monkey did not fail.

These prefatory remarks to my friend's casual, ad hoc notes here (for a full-length memoir I'm after him to create) are less dis-

claimer than explanation. You may find his narrative voice, his writerly diction rather disjointed, volatile or peculiar. With him, it has ever been so, the same way in speech, lucid for a few minutes at a time, then...it gets interesting. But I believe reasons for this will reveal as he goes along.

While at first these linguistic peccadilloes can be disconcerting, I'm untroubled by them, consumed instead by his story. I hope you are as well.

—Reverend Beverly Muir
First Presbyterian Church
Wildwood, New Jersey

Walkin' down this rocky road

Wonderin' where my life is leading...

(Heard) Doink.

That rod tip move?

Bad Company from a boombox behind me, fishing-club geezers, not fishing as usual, hunkered down up in the parking lot beyond the bulkhead. I'm taking a knee, filleting mackerel I've defrosted in seawater in a 5-gallon bucket, with my bait knife slicing triangular slabs.

Only fifty minutes or so 'til high water. Sky just where I'd left it yesterday, a caravan of clouds meandering over from the conti-

ment like tourists, mincing and wincing at the wetlands funk. Me roaring over here late from the Fellowship Coffee Hour that ran long. Second Sunday in April. Easter's a week gone, but my moveable finny feast comes now. We're looking at 58-degree air, the water cooler by ten.

Rocking three rods, I am, angled at 70-degrees toward the surf in PVC holders chinked into the sand, about ten yards up from water's edge because she's still fingering upbeach.

Today I'm playing a 7-1/2' Shakespeare Ugly Stik, a Daiwa at 8' and a 9-footer, another Shakespeare—spaced at 7-yard intervals. All carry Penn reels lined with green, 20-lb Stren. For terminal tackle we feature slider clips with 3-oz pyramid sinkers above a swivel barrel anchored by 35-lb mono leader with a small oblong float snicked down to a double-clinched 4/0 Gamakatsu J-hook. I'd love to bang in a striper, but likelier it'll be bluefish. Some use wire leaders for blues—those teeth from *Hell*—but I find they can't bite through the float and sever the tackle. Swell rig and keeps me away from trash-fish on the bottom.

Bloody limey on the classic rock station wails he's Ready for Love, oh *baby* he's *Reeeeaadddy* for Love and on the downbeat comes THWONK!! *BOINGGGG!!*

By the time my left rod augments the chorus with Shweep! Shweep! *SHWEEP!!* I'm charging toward the inlet, whipping that sucker from its sheath, rearing up and back to my right with a mighty hookset—

—and the love is on.

Fire up the grill, fump-stumpers; this is

the part where you remind me who your Daddy is...

Should be a photo paper-clipped to this from the *Herald* of me taking the island's first Sideliner last year on 27 March. It's the one with the caption *Billy "Wee-Fella" Gloverson, a Green Monkey resident of North Wildwood, nails 37", 22.8 lb. Striped Bass to kickoff season.*

Listen, I go just under 2 feet tall, pushing 17.5 lbs. of pure biff with my winter weight still on. We had to fake the picture of me holding it up by tying fishing line to the tail and through the snout, Shep hoisting it over my head, tied to a baseball bat just out of frame, over at Linda's Tackle. That's my favorite pair of Oshkosh B'gosh overalls, in seafoam; I have ten-twelve that color and same in coral—maritime hues all the way, baby. Chicks say they offset nicely my own coat of many colors.

The seafood thang is one of the first misconceptions I quashed over here. My sort are thought to be the OVs—Original Vegetarians—salad fiends chomping leaves and whatnot. I hail from Eden. The Banana Islands off the coast of Freetown Peninsula in Sierra Leone. Eden with *crabs*. All you can eat, year 'round, and no pesky God (for whose name I substitute *Beer*, more anon) to run you off because suddenly you *know* stuff.

Anyhoozle, it was Shep McEvoy down in the Crest—best man with a rod in the Wildwoods— who cottoned to my taste for ocean grub and taught me to surf fish. Verily, I set out to murder all critters cruising the Atlantic, but all I bag I eat, give away

or toss back.

Gilled-American twanging my line? No striper, he. Sumbitch's either a Chopper or Slammer-class bluefish, five to ten pounds, insufficient shoulders to peel monofilament from my drag, but enough crank in his yank I can't do any reeling yet. He runs west with the incoming tide, hell-bent on making it back into the channel and around the jetty to my left toward the back bay that divides the barrier island from the mainland.

Foot paining, needle-nose pliers on the lanyard around my neck swinging like a metronome, I shimmy-shuffle parallel to keep him in front of me, straining not to blok-shtippy the voo-voo or blard the *marmyre*.

Midafternoon sun smacks me in the eyes with the ire of a wife wielding alien panties. I steal a look back where the laptop's perched atop my other upturned 5-gal bucket to make sure it's not being strafed by gulls or snatched up by some nogoodnik looking to convert my genius to crack.

Either specie, I'll EAT HIS FACE, that's what I'll do, fowl or freak, EAT HIS FACE!!

Drill down with canines longer than your most bathetic boo-hoo story. Spit his bones like *bullets* all over his little bird or biped family...

...dornky *strabbit*, dibbledy-boo, mondee har and Tyler too...

...on that far shore of Agony I'll build my cabin there...

Frickin' witch-box computer is supposedly why I'm here anyway, why I'm burbling into the recorder in my vest pocket as I fight Mr. Fishy. Madame should be purring up here any minute in her gunmetal blue, half-a-fag Prius. Toting a carful of island oldsters to cheer me on and sop up the Blue-Banger Exhibition tendered by yours truly—summat famiotic for same in these parts.

Rev Bev and I had crooned a duet of *His Eyes Are On The Sparrow* for today's service, Missy pounding the piano with me over her shoulder on the windowsill. Precisely



between *I sing because I'm happy* and *I sing because I'm free*—as I leapt down to solo the next passage—Pastor Probity caught a whiff of the beer-sweat prison-breaking my pores and spent the rest of the hymn working the pedals with her left foot while drilling mine into the floor with her right, smiling wider and blaring her disturbing, tremulous soprano louder than ever.

After the *Peace-And-Also-With-You* wrap-up, she jerked me into her office behind the sanctuary, whipped out the laptop and voice recorder—and negotiated terms.

“Mow me low with an AK if I'm wrong,” said the warrior-cleric, “But aren't you the Billy Gloverson who's been to three rehabs in as many years, departing the last just two weeks ago?” Bowing from the waist, she turtled her tangerine mane into the neck of her vestment robe, hurling the teal gown from her gamine, wrought-iron person with the vigor of Luther renouncing the Pope, where it pinned itself, miraculously, to a hook on a coat tree behind her.

“...Or am I mistaking you for another of my very close Green Monkey friends?”

Before I could answer she recounted her policy statement that I'm more trouble than chasing Talibastards in man-dresses through the moon dust of Afloonyistan. She elucidated at length, untwining the skein of the profane from the sacred in record time, but I wafted away mentally, per my custom during her she-loves-me-she-hates-me rants, to my happy place and time...

...to sundowning hours when I hear the prayerful hum from the fridge in my bitty bungalow in North Wildwood, in sight of

me now as I fish, where it's *always* Beer O' Clock. In yon icebox, I know, are tonsured malt-monks bubbling Vespers. And I am calmed. Face-eating vendettas deferred...good thoughts always.

From Parson Killer-Angel issued more shaming blather about *Wasn't I the one* who taught her that my people live about only 17 years in the wild, 30 in captivity? Hadn't I turned 34 in March? Hadn't I? With my bibulous lifestyle, she wondered, how could I possibly, *possibly* hope to share my remarkable story with the world before I bumbled, stumbled and toppled off this mortal coil? Huh?

My brain vacationed in Antigua a minute as she fluttered aloft on some Sinatra *That's Life* puppet-pauper-pirate flight, enumerating my disparate identities as wildlife, zoo captive, prodigy, gangster, scribe and dipsomaniacal retiree.

Just in from the Unsolicited Advice Department: Should you find yourself, relocating to a new area, looking for a church, hearing the felicitous news that the local HPIC(Head Protestant in Charge) is a theology doctorate from Princeton Seminary...leap into her spiritual arms, *do* so, but pause first, long enough to ask—

—*Pardon, but by any chance, just wond'rin...* Were you just a short time ago stationed abroad as an Army chaplain? And did you parlay said post—boonswoggling both your governing synod at home and military brass in-country—into status as a full-bird Colonel running and gunning so-called Cultural Support Teams? Females *fully-trained, readily deadly* attached to their spe-

cial-op Ranger brethren in pursuit of High-Value-Targets and sundry baddies on the popped plains and exploding mountains of Afghanistan? And might one suss out that you were possibly happier, more at home in this combat role and with your M16(A4) than with your uh, uh...(whispering)*Biiiiible?*

So this wacky broad wants me to tell my tale. Only time I feel I've the upper hand is when I detect her approach, I see her flick her fire-selector switch to either Semi or Burst. Currently, it's Burst, three rounds a pull, all my sins downrange on pop-up targets. Other occasions, on Semi, one round per squeeze, she's all euphemisms and black-strap. Billy, she'll coo, giving me the *Speak to the Retard Gently* voice: Your mind, it's different than ours. Monkey brains(not an entrée, sons of Nippon!) seem to be subject to radical mood swings, really they do—and you may have certain gaps...focus issues...

Loves me not wisely, knows me too well. Can't stand her so I just ADORE her instead, not *that* way, Beer-dammit, but LOVE HER MADLY!! Lost her hubby at sea six years ago. Fishing the treacherous Cape May Rips, where the Delaware Bay and Atlantic collide, out for stripers with a client of his engineering consultancy firm.

Here's the offer, spluttered the vicar. She'd pay for my hideous mackerel and provide an amen-choir to buck my spirits if I would just get my sorry arse in gear. Fair? All this while swaddling the laptop in plastic to protect from bait-juice, sand and no-see-um gnats, stuffing it all in my backpack, nosing a rolled sawbuck into the shoulder-buckle of my go-to-meetin' 'koshies and sent me pack-

ing on my Schwinn to Townsend's Inlet at the north end of the island.

Wicked monkey.

I suck, let her down on the reg'lar. Her sermon this morning riffed on approaching Tax Day with Matthew 17:27, where Jesus H(uck?) Christ tells Rock-Head Pete to go throw his line in the lake, first fish he catches will have a 4-drachma coin in its mouth, go take it, give it up to The Man. Bev all pleased with herself with the piscatory subject matter, sidewinding me the occasional sly smile as she homilified.

Caveat: Any douche badmouths Rev Bev best Kevlar the FACE, *SHNOOKS!* Have canines will travel. Snackle your kneecaps like BBQ chips, Buster, scoop your marrow like onion dip...

...schnork la moddle, smegmott newfink...

...I haunt a Golgotha of plans I'd made for us...

But Rev Bev's not the girl.

"Just describe what happened," She says about my early years, "It's a Rumsfeldian construct. You're an unknown unknown. Not known...for what you didn't do anyway. You did something *else*."

I *hate* this, hate this, hate this. Why I'm trying *desperately* to talk fishing in lieu.

It's really the story about a *GIRL*, okay!?! Ever met one that wasn't? Better yet, ever know anybody peaked at the age of eight? Now ya do.

BARD BYTE: So your Swan-of-Avon is credited with 38 plays. Homeboy Chlorocebus sabaeus—*yello!*—pounded 'em out in 97 days, between May and August of

1991. I produced the sonnets too, but those I hid in a wicker basket below the desk, so I've no idea if they survived. Talk about your tweekin'; my self-appointed chore there was *right-sexing* the object of Willy's ardor.

In place of your suspiciously creepy aristocrat, I re-strung the sonnets to arrow at Paulette, the lovely Jamaican post-doc at the lab in New Haven who became my everything there—nurse, mentor and confederate.

When I showed early aptitude, she lobbied I be dispatched to NYC's premier Ear, Nose & Throat gal for the Larynx Issue. While I healed, she drowned me in rootsy teas, trilling away in soothing patois. Over my shoulder, smelling of ginger and baby powder, she would arc my fingers on the typer, teaching me the keyboard. She tested my comprehension with trick questions like: On what famous American battlefield did Abe Lincoln, extolling native virtues, say *Money for nothin' and chicks for free?*

Yalie smart-ass. Got yer QWERTY right ova heeah.

When she unwound the bandages for the last time and my first words *ever* were *JOE ME YOUR DITS, BABY!* she howled with joy, flung her lab-coat with the ridiculous blue bull-dog logo up into the ceiling fan and did exactly that. Berfect dits, by the bay.

But Paulette's not the girl.

Rev Bev, good thing you're shlark duddy moof, very starp cardy in the blomnumph!

From the Unasked For Facts

Department: In Latin, bananas are *musa sapientum*—fruit of the wise men. Peel that

for a mo while I disclose it's the only monkey cliché I'm guilty of. Loves me some banana taste but despise the texture.

Clarify? I neither indulge in nor tolerate monkey jokes, puns, what have you (I'm lying). Anathema to me (Still lying). To boot, about my species, I abhor victimology (Lyingest). Never do I say *I'm only monkey*. I simply offer to eat your face. Cleave your carotid like a garden hose. Put another way, I don't *do* causes, I do Beer (BR versus YHWH) and if you were a light pilsener I'd do you too. Anybody keeping score at home will note that last as use of *zeugma* or possibly *syllipsis*—accuracy only counts when ducats are dribbling down my 'koshie pockets.

Whoooooah. Ya wanna? Sure ya wanna? Jump, pookie!

Up on the bulkhead, Bad Company Brit-git casts a buoyant plea that *Better things are bound to happen*—that all his dues surely must be paid.

My doozy blue, enacting the credo of its ichthy-ilk to *never* go gently to that realm of sand and citrus-habanero marinades, leaps five-feet clear of the suds in a muscled arc, teeth-gnashing, scales flashing in the sun against a polka-dot sky about 40 yards offshore after dragging me downbeach 20 paces from our starting point. *Dude!*

But we both know it's his Hail Mary. He comes down outta gas and options. Now I can work line in, drowning him on the way.

Overhead, an armada of seagulls begins to crash the channel. A wave-top maelstrom. Gotta be a shoal of choppers down there

churning baitfish up to the surface. An omega-3 holocaust underway. Yepper, there goes my right rod, dinking away like a Jehovah's Witness on your doorbell. Looks like I'm going to be at this awhile.

Lawdy, Lawdy, Mistah Poseidon, don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no bluefish babies!!

My mom, *Aiiiiii!!*, named me *Aiiiiii!!* when I came along in '83 on Ricketts, largest of the Banana Islands. In our second stop in thralldom, Beardsley Zoo in Bridgeport, we got new stage-handles: Mom and Dad (the artist formerly known as *Aiiiiii!!!*) became June and Barry and young sis ended up as Sarsaparilla.

Who hasn't had a good cringe lately? Squink your love down low as I confess that my parents were Mippies. Monkey hippies.

After the fact I came to believe the rest of the colony, about sixty strong, had fingered us to the poachers because they mistook my folks' remoteness for hubris, plus trouble from me and Sis' hijinks. I could never figure out, as a kid, if they shunned us or we them—all I know is we were pretty much off by ourselves.

Mommers seemed to have some type of Sylvia Plath thing going, all wave-dreamy-depressive, drawing in the sand with a stick hours at a time, crossing things out and looking frustrated. Papperslaps would perch atop a tall tangle of driftwood shaped vaguely like a cross, peering morosely out into the Atlantic, then stare down into his palms interminably, as if they were guilty of something.

I was a loner from the start. Most days

would just bleffmort my torkert and range the stone causeway that connected the islands, idly exploring. Sis would sometimes tag along, but that chick was a *hellion*, some kinda inchoate punk rocker. Girl was a pin-cushioned fuzball of our natural coloring: black mask, gold-green hair, scarlet eyes—but with her it was a blaze-brighter, googol-watt luminescence that could only end with her a young, good-looking corpse—she had a Sassy Vicious thing going from the gate.

Early on she found a way to invade the humans' cabins, a gap up between their zinc roofs and thatched, hairy walls. She'd scuddle inside, ransacking, then appear at the door with a loopy grin, handing me out a bottle of Star Lager or whatever was on hand, disappearing back within to look for incendiaries to try to burn the joint down. All fun and games until we torched the home of the islands' headwoman, Miss Elena Campbell.

Two days later, three of us fell victim to the oldest snag-the-monkey gambit ever. A halved and hollowed out coconut shell, tied to a tree, with a hole just big enough for a hand to pass through with an orange on the other side. The fruitable too big to pass through the hole, but Greedy Monkey sits there until Mr. Poach returns to throw a net over. Humiliating.

Guess who got rooked by Mr. Lazy Poach-a-Doach, who just poured some beer in a bowl and rigged the snare overhead? 'Nanner-bunch to the winner, please, some OSHA-grade face-protection may be required.

'Leven Hundred Travallian Way, we learned to call it, never knowing the zoo's real name on the outskirts of Freetown, our jungle-gym gulag in the shades of a ruptured carousel, as if somebody'd toured Hades on an acid-gassed junket and finger-crawled back up to gainful employment as a monkey-habitat designer.

Hot pink hammocks. Dock ropes dyed aquamarine, slung overhead in a twisty, string-game Jacob's Ladder sky. Pond in an unholy purple basin. Breadfruit trees with chartreuse orbs hovering over glowing rock-piles in neon motely and in the middle of it all, for *absolutely* no reason, angling up from the soil, the prow of a boat—buttercup-yellow with ruby trim—in glittered emerald painted on the side, *DARA*.

Always a pebble in my Keds, chafing—how we all changed. The fam, I mean.

A decade later I'd be up in the city in Ballou's on 10th Avenue, getting pie-eyed with the boyos after a brownstone heist on the East Side or a truck-grab down in the garment district, Mickey Junior knighting us Criminal Geniuses, Hibernian Order, me sucking down lagers arrayed in an amber crescent moon to my front on the table, the lads thumping my back—*Hoist! Hoist!*—as they crowed to the potato-head onlookers how I'd aced my niche role in the night's adventure.

But the drunkier I got, my l'il monkey spirit would airlift right out of there and parachute back into that garish cage in Africa. Our captive tribe: chimps, baboons, macaques, howlers and mandrills, 33 of us altogether. We were the only Greens.

Early days, aloft in a cotton tree tucked in the far corner, I'd gawk, transfixed, as my peeps morphed into cartoons of their former selves.

Mammerclaps abandoned her back-home orderly cuneiform etching and commenced scratching—using a chunk of limestone on a bloodred boulder downstage right—simpleton geometrics to entertain the hoi polloi. Triangles, circles and rectangles and...Beer Ha' Mercy...HAPPY FACES!!!

Blow, winds, and hack your leeks!

You Cadillacs and hurricanoes—

Singe my Green head!

Rumble thy jelly bowl! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!

O! O! 'tis foul!

I am an ape more sinn'd against than sinning.

(I don't always remember this crap *exactly*; there's a lot of Guinness under the bridge)

"Your Dadda, both of them, actually," Paulette said when I described *his* antics, "Um. It sounds like a kooky fatalism. As if when the worst finally happened they felt relief, exhaled and succumbed wholly. Embracing catastrophe. Something more, too..." Her eyes bolted out the window to roll around in the New England snowfall, coming back misty, her voice low and flat. "If you could have seen how *my* parents transfigured when British tourists came through Bamboo on the way to Montego Bay..."

She coughed, excusing herself, returning in a while with a crumpled hanky in one hand and in the other, a steaming bowl of

curry goat for me.

“Pop quiz,” she beamed, “Which US president, notorious for going commando in the Oval Office, humming *She-Bop*, *She-Bop* and occasionally muttering “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” once nearly re-ignited the Revolution at a State Dinner by thundering at a teensy, crown-jeweled Queen Elizabeth “If you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it!!”

BARD BYTE: Yalie smart-ass actually did me a solid with this one. Helped me, in a queer, inscrutable way, tune in extra-better to the Sweet Willy as I made my way through the canon, the faux artiste I’d become inspired by what further research unearthed, the bitty monarch’s rejoinder:

(HRH, also in her cups) “We, sir, are not among *All the Single Ladies*. Although, inasmuch as our consort assures us we boast a surfeit of junk in our trunk, we *are* amused.”

Found this particularly helpful regarding how the Sweet Swan used language, covering the gamut of sublime court poesy all the way down to the ribald vernacular of the rude mechanicals. In turn, it helped me re-jigger the (so-called) Problem Plays as they veered between bawdy, comic and tragic, apparently confounding you (alleged)yew-muhns. An example would be how, in *Measure for Measure*, I made the Duke more an outright doofus and punched up the hilarity of Claudio beseeching his nunny-bunny sis Isabella to boink Angelo so he can avoid Ol’ Sparky.

And so you know, a lot of my tinkering involved adding monkey characters to the

plays, always principal roles, never spear-carriers or ladies-in-waiting. Presumptuous? Controversial? Care to gamble the face by quibbling? Rev Bev once bullied me into an Anger Management course; the facilitator and I squabbled...what can I say but *Closed Casket?*

So. Where in Beer’s name was I?

Barry. Gloverson *pere*. Dour Barry. Introspective Berry. Profound Barry. Now, in his engagement in Freetown, Sierra Leone, BARRY the FURRY CLOWN!!

Ludicrous pantomime for the zoo’s visitors. Pacing, hands clasped behind, as if pondering the singularity of the birth of the universe. Plopping on a rock, Papperdocks freezes in tableau, chin on fist—Rodin’s Thinker! Springing up, a gymnast’s mount onto a breadfruit branch, one-handed, the other scratching his noggin, contemplating, while he spins ‘round and ‘round, finally flying off with a whoop—Aiiiiii!!—to stick a perfect 10 center stage.

EUREKA! A hairy forefinger bullets skyward. Sire mine digs in the breast pocket of his elbow-patched wool sport coat to extract...a BANANA! Discreet bows left, center, right, then strips that baby bare and chaws away to wild applause.

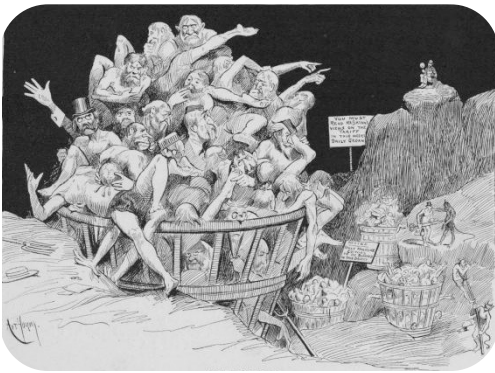
Made me wanna go all Sophocles on ‘im. OK, Popperking, Billy Rex here’ll SEE YOU AT THE CROSSROADS. Yo, Jocasta, I mean June, lookin’ sweet in that dress, love those REALLY LONG, POINTY PINS holding it together...hold that thought, got something in my eye here...

Aiiiiii. Oh, *Sport coat on a monkey*, say you? Mister Basil Gaynor, our keeper, pur-

ple-black with galloping teeth, bred two passions: the Bible and the American Civil War. He'd no sooner taught us that we were naked than he presented clothings sewn by his missus. Medical-scrub-lookin'-dealios for half our crowd in butternut, the rest Yankee blue.

Only an old, battered, havoc-scarred mandrill named Uncle Finky refused the outfit. Flaring canines at Mister Basil, he leapt into the pond, submerging, only eyes visible, periscoping fury.

Reminds me how Sarsaparilla became Uncle's disciple, grasping at the hem of his



Contempt for Humans. In her artfully-ripped Rebel ensemble affixed with purloined barrettes, preaching anarchy in the *Aiiiiii!!* tongue, she graduated from arson to felonies-against-persons, tag-teaming with Finky in a scheme of pickpocketry.

See, wire mesh, floor to roof, was all that separated us from visitors to the zoo and freedom. Five-six slits or tears there were in the netting, just large enough to bonkerize and enrage us. Bootless to attempt escape; at night we were locked inside the monkey house, nowhere to go. Daylight hours attendants watched the entrance.

How-*evahhhh*. Unc and Sassy worked a sleight-of-hand con, the Finkster at one far end of the cage and Sassmonster at the other. Uncle Finky would cadge smokes from guests, an oily repertoire of mime at his command to score tobacco. Every eye in the joint lasered on this scraping, forelock-tugging, mewling Marcel Marceau as mooks passed fags through the wire. Sass would lead huzzahs and laughter as Fink played charades with the dupes, capturing complete attention, nobody eyeing sis as she maneuvered into place.

No, not regular, please to give *menthol*, he gestures. Hugging his ruined physique and shivering to indicate cool, fresh Newports. Next came a protracted routine: Preparing Sweet Tea, squeezing of lemons, stirring *und so weiter*, then cracking ice from a tray, juggling the cubes—*Aiiiiii!!*—so *cheely*—into the glass and quaffing deeply, replete with forehead-wipe signaling respite from latesummer dog days. *It ees zee menthol I weesh*.

The Fun-Facts Crew Checks In: Where I live now, in Jersey, it's illegal to give cigarettes or whiskey to monkeys. Huh. Huh...legislators have *FACES* too, no?

But peep Sassy Rotten now. That incorrigible Hex Pistol. Spy her, no respecter of persons, victimize the folk equitably—all stations, genders and types.

The lithe Freetown socialite, unencumbered of her glistening lapis lazuli bangle, a hooked (opposable)monkey thumb slaloming it down over madame's endless, tapering fingers. The *snick! snick!* of the suited exec's briefcase, divested of bearer bonds and a

fugitive pint of peach brandy. The carpetbag abulge on the plump arm of a jiggling matron with avocado cheeks, denuded of her wallet and a packet of shitor din, that lovely spicy fish paste from Ghana.

“And herself only four years of haige. Thievin’ varmint!”

This from Tilly-Mack, early ‘nineties up in the gang’s hidey-hole, Liam’s fifth-floor midtown flat. We’d be slurping ale, cleaning weapons, slinging tales. Mine retraced my desperado lineage, boasting on the Sassermoon.

Well, I said, in monkey years she was just over 9, if you clock us at 2.3 vis-a-vis you uglies. But the fellers loved hearing how slick Sasser was palming the booty, sidling up behind the HMS DARA and stowing it there. Then she’d fist-pump the air in triumph, bouncing up and down like a wee bobbin’ hood and shriek(in her native Aiiiiiii!!!) EverGreen! EverGreen!!

One afternoon, though, she picked the wrong hombre, one of a posse of delinquents that sometimes skulked about. Kid looked blitzed on weed, whirling around, scarlet-eyed, as Sass plundered his back pocket. She flung the swag over her shoulder without turning around. Up in my tree, I whipped off my Yank kepi and snagged the loot with the cap.

And that’s how I learned to read.

It was an assembly and maintenance booklet for the Schwinn Sting-Ray banana-seat bicycle. Twenty-one pages of thick glossy stock, three inches by five. On the cover was a photo of the low-slung, classic

beauty—lime gumdrop with a pomegranate seat. Inside was minute instruction about how to build and care for her, page after page of diagrams with arrows connecting the names and pictures of parts, with numbered narrative below.

Gotta say, the thing was encyclopedic, comprehensive, the *War and Peace* of bike manuals, like a paint by number guide to neurosurgery, hell, a Los Alamos cookbook for ATOMIC FUN!!

I thought I saw a man brought to life—

I’m disoriented here, abruptly incarnate after some kinda blackout, facing into wave-spray from Townsend’s Inlet—

*He was warm, he came around like
he was dignified*

He showed me what it was to cry...

With my needle-nose I’m de-hooking a ten-pound bluefish by surf’s edge who tries to kill me DEAD DEAD DEAD with scissoring chompers while...singing?

This thrashing, scaly colleen warbles how I couldn’t be that man she adored. Meanwhile she’s torn, this lassie, she’s plumb outta faith, she’s cold and shamed, she’s...whooooaaah...*lying naked on the floor.*

No worries, I whoosh back into my body on Earth and it’s merely Mizz Natalie Imbruglia on the boombox radio. With my metal glove I seize my blue by the tail and head to my bucket, only to find a band of ancient mariners standing on the bulkhead cheering me on, Rev Bev astride the Prius’ roof, with—shame the devil—pom-poms in army-green and white.

“Bugger makes twelve, Billy!” Deacon

Cameron bellows, whirling his cane like a lariat.

“Bag one that spits up the tax money!” cries Melanie Gompers and they all cackle. The Right Reverend Beverly Muir gives a thumbs-up to acknowledge this morning’s sermon as she keens along with the Aussie sheila that she sees the perfect sky is torn, I’m a little late and she’s already torn. Fine there, Lady Wackadoo, let’s just not be naked on the floor.

“Criminy, Wee-Fella!” Emily Webb tempts a coronary bawling at the top of her voice, pointing a gnarled digit at the sea. My 9-foot Shakespeare Ugly Stik parabolas then whomps to the sand with its PVC holder, snaking toward the sea and Stone Harbor, the next island up the coast.

Only one creature in these waters puts such a wallop on bait, inhaling that mackerel treat and whipping its massive head sideways to get it in the gullet. I take off full sprint toward the salt before she hangs a Roger with the outgoing tide, gunning for France and taking my gear with.

And she is a girl. The biggest of her type, ipso facto, are female. I clasp the rod butt just as the tip kisses the brine, snatching it vertical, nailing a hookset and loosening the drag knob so this gal can take line and not snap me off.

Not going to lose this wench no-how. Baby runs west and I do too, a linebacker’s lateral shuffle that takes me upbeach and far from Rev Bev’s hoary corps. You’re mine, my darling, ever mine.

EverGreen! EverGreen!

But this leviathan, she’s not the—

Came a girl.

By herself. No other visitors, all simians but me napping, around 4 p.m. on an early Spring day. Around eleven or twelve years old, she wore a school uniform, a sleeveless magenta shift gathered at the waist with unruly pleats in the skirt. Cinnamon skin, rhubarb lips, cheekbones so high and sharp they could slice cantaloupe. And vast Asiatic eyes you could dive into and swim around in for a lifetime or two.

Came a girl who busted me, learned the secret of me.

I was up in my cotton tree, sprawled cross-legged on my favorite branch with the Schwinn book open on a forked bough in front of me, reviewing the wonder of butterfly handlebars and extras like streamers that may be purchased separately.

Quick like a monkey-bunny I whisked off my kepi to cover the book. Too late. Those giant brown eyes grew wide as the savanna, lips jump-roping into a grin. Swear to Beer she gave a gasp that sounded like *Aiiiiiii!* I tried on a menacing scowl, really selling it, hunching shoulders forward, peddling aggression.

No sale. Chickadee answered with a bitsy head tilt, her eyes saying “Really?” Still studying me, her hand disappeared behind her back as she rooted in the beige satchel hanging there. She took one step forward, opening a tin. Through the wire she extended her hand, offering a chocolate biscuit.

I hopped down, made my way over like Dead Monkey Walking to greet the firing squad. She was almost three times my

height, so it was easier to look down at her lavender sandals than up at her face. Our fingertips met as I took the biscuit, me thinking Well, I'm five; we're about the same age when you do the maths.

To equalize our size I climbed onto Mammster's red boulder and we had a long, fruitful talk with our eyes as we ate our cookies. She tossed me more until we finished the tin, then I darted behind the DARA where Sass stored the spoils. To the maiden I gave a bottle of grape juice, which we killed together, passing back and forth as I watched sunlight make a halo of her spiraling braids. Afterward I presented her with a lipstick close to the color of the 'nanner seat on the Sting-Ray.

Came a girl.

Let's get this behind us—I hate this like Beer hates sin. Stipulate with me, if you can, that life sucks—I'm not a big fan—and makes as much sense as a monkey wowing the eggheads at Yale. Which saga had no happier ending than this one here, by the by. Best way to invite calamity? Put faith in miracles.

The girl came, she came, she came, every day for over a month, 40 days in a row. But never again alone, always either with school pals—all in that same vivid purple dress—or with who may have been brothers or sisters or parents. Only now she seemed to loathe me, invariably exiling herself to the rear of whatever group she was with, eyeing me directly never once.

I made myself conspicuous, craving notice. Didn't happen. My universe

derailed, plunging into a dark ravine, crevasse, fissure, gorge, chasm—

I may have liked her some.

Came the girl, one final time, solo. First thing I noticed was the lipstick. I vaulted from the hammock where I'd been lazing, grabbed something from behind the DARA and passed it through the wire—a silver charm of a lamb. She put it in the pocket of her skirt, sat with her legs crossed and brought out biscuits. I sat too and we polished off the cookies as before.

Once again a lengthy dialogue with our eyes, discussing issues of the day, the curious arc and nature of our relationship, our desperate hopes and direst fears. Eventually she rose to turn and look at the setting sun, confusing me by shaking her head, but faintly, barely a shadow of movement.

She took a step back, reaching into her satchel. Handed me a fat, seafoam-colored paperback. *Compleat Shakespeare*. I opened the cover. Inside, it said Sadie Newell, Love Papa.

Then Sadie Newell backed away in the falling light, leaving Billy Gloverson forever.

Around noon one day in mid-December, eight and a half months later, Mister Basil entered the cage pulling a red wagon. I sat facing the back behind the particolored rockpile, just finishing the third act of *Love's Labour's Lost*. My third re-reading of the play, having learned it was only one of two considered without prior sources, I mused how I'd give that pig a plot—'cause Sweet Willy certainly hadn't.

Mister Basil called ten of us over, we Greens among them. From a duffel bag in the wagon he pulled poofy sateen coats and wool caps that said NY Giants. He instructed us to suit up while a cluster of white people edged up to the wire, smiling thinly and looking nervous. We were led outside to a van and taken to the airport, where a small plane waited to fly us to Bridgeport, CT—to the Beardsley Zoo.

For the next two years, I played misanthrope monkey monk, rarely speaking, never socializing with the new crowd, only with Sassermaass, who seemed to re-double her efforts to die young. She took up with the rowdiest of the American bunch, hatching capers and chaos, while I hid with the book I'd smuggled in under my coat. Will Shakespeare, the glover's son, became my sole and steadfast chum. Eventually I'd memorized all of the bloke.

Two days after my eighth birthday, two men and a woman in khakis and blazers arrived. The woman began to address the apes in English—and don't you know, I fell for the creamiest ruse since the poacher's trick.

Sarsaparilla and I were sitting on the crest of a grassy slope at the back of the habitat. For her alone—while the rest gazed around with that *Duh!* look—I translated the lady's pitch into *Aiiiiiiii!* I filled her in that they were looking for volunteers for a study up the road in New Haven and scrunched forward to hear details.

Just as the gal fixed me with this crafty smile, as if twigging that I understood the language, beloved sister put her rascally

monkey foot into my back and heaved, sending me somersaulting down the hill to land at the woman's feet.

"Well," she said, "Welcome to the team."

The Don't-Knock-It Cabal Speaks Up:

Termites on a stick. That's aboriginal Good Humor, babykins. Lest you quail, are you not the species that invented Harkarl, the Icelandic *rotten shark* delicacy? Are y'all not the wizards who originally used lobster as fertilizer or bait for fishing?

Flash to a blazing afternoon in August of '91. Air-conditioning in the lab's on the fritz. I was wailing on the IBM Selectric in cutoffs and a wife-beater, tokin' on a Marlboro Menthol 100. Knocking out the last play—for both me and the Bard—*The Tempest*, wrapping up Act IV, projecting to finish the script the following morning, when, my revels there ended, a celebratory dip in the compound's pool would be just the ticket.

It was a bittersweet exercise, not least because, of all the poet's characters, I loved me some Caliban the mostest, savage out-cast little mutt. I had a hoot rendering the work from memory—as with the entire canon—and goosed Caliban's presence somewhat out of sentimental affinity.

Paulette was more skittish that day than she'd been all week, caroming around distracted, patting and re-arranging the tall pile of the completed work, murmuring in patois what I was sure were nasty curses, Jamoke-style. Each day lately she'd been the edgy hostess of a succession of small groups

of colleagues and such who came to ogle me slaving on the typer, afterward mumbling together warily, looking grim.

So I'm picturing a covey of naked, frosty Red Stripes I'll enjoy later when a lusty feud erupted out in the hall beyond my vision. Paulette in her booming contralto versus what sounded like a half-dozen male voices on some kinda outta-my-way mission. A ringing slap, skin on skin, then my champion roaring like a paw-speared lioness...

Two colors I saw after that, *Red*, then *Black*, so memory's hazy here. They stormed the room, bruisers in windbreakers, caps and earpieces, handguns out, one with a shotgun. The last goon in dragged Paulette by her dreadlocks.

I may have gone, well, ape.

I may have mashed that guy's head into the open top of my Selectric, whamming him against the typeball, making really pretty impressions of letters in his skull...B...c...Q...r...

...There may have ensued further bedlam, mayhem.

"Jesus Christ, he's got my *face!*" I remember that. Recall being herded into the opposite corner, shotgun mouth against my forehead, something hanging from my canines, everything wet. Paulette breaking free, her captor crumpled to the floor, bawling apocalypse.

"Fellas, fellas, get my face back! Oh Jeeeeeesus...*Mommy...!!*"

I watched Dr. Paulette Stuart, Yale Fellow, whip off a high-heel and hurdle onto the back of the gorilla with the scattergun—

Then I went to sleep.

"Faith, it's a leprechaun!"

My eyes opened to flickering neon stripes and dots playing across my chest. Splayed on my back, I tilted my head, trying to focus, seeing the blinking words *Sbarro's Pizza*. Hovering over me were two stalks of belly-dancing seaweed.

"Never saw no pixie with a black face," One of the swaying reeds said, "Check out the lump on its head." Slowly they mutated into two guys in jeans and Hawaiian shirts. Hey, little gnome, one said, Up with you, we'll patch your coconut, set you up with a pint. You'll be our charm, said the other.

"Name's Till McEvoy," The chap said, "And this here's Mickey Junior."

Tilly-Mack could've skipped the intro and just said *Hey, wanna hang with us for the next 23 years, help us slaughter every law in the Criminal Code?*

Thus I met the boyos. As we made our way out of Times Square they described the paddy-wagon type vehicle screeching up to the curb, back door opening and me being roll-kicked out like a spreading carpet. Mickey Jr. said he lunged to intercept what was hurled at my chest as the van streaked away. He handed me a wadded hundred dollar bill with two bronze subway tokens inside.

"Go west, young monkey," Mickey said, and we trekked over to Ballou's on 10th Avenue. The the rest of the crew was already gathered, yawping, singing—*Slainte!-Health!-Slainte!*—and lapping oceans of lager.

I ain't saying much about this whole

period. Statute of Limitations on certain matters, doncha know...

Well, hell, I'll pose it as a hypothetical. What if you knew somebody, a dapper monkey, say, and said primate became an amply skilled, not *second-story* man—but *upper-canopy* man? And his specialty was getting into buildings via adjacent trees, allowing ingress by his fellow hooligans?

Footnote Sassmandu as inspiration on that one—with Poe getting a major assist. I called it my Murder in the Rue Morgue Gig, but listen, confuse me with an orangutan at the risk to your, say, FACE.

This same speculative apeboy may've had another staple routine: shocking the patookie out of truckers by standing out to hitchhike in the middle of the street or beside a highway. Driverman does a double-triple-take to see a Green Monkey tarted up as, oh, coulda been *Miss Deborah Harry*, with his thumb out. Hoodlum buddies leap out to hijack the rig...yadda-yadda...mountains of fun for the whole family. This theoretical monkey may still possess the theoretical Blondie ensemble for evenings when he's truly sauced, up in the pear tree in his backyard with a good book. When the tide, indeed, is high and I'm holdin' on. Problem with that, see my attorney.

BARD BYTE: My Monkey Bias sparked most of the changes or additions I made to the Shakespeare. Here's a f'rinstance I wedged into *Much Ado*, spurred by interest in my tribe's grooming practices:

Mark ye, knave!

Sand-grain Sirrah, brother to a stanza's

terminus—

Art nit or hatchling louse upon my thumb?

Whether thou be egg or chickling mite, englobed babe or parasite—

Poor orb! Vile rotundity!

With sland'rous stings the world insults thy name—

Calls Louse some base-black soul, a fool Nit-wit.

Yet prince thou art, with muster'd arms to march

in legions to invade my Love's lush fields

of fur to forage there a slough-skin feast.

Ere I eat thee, my debt to thee I troth—
My betrothed's groom, I groom her yet betimes—

Because of thee she grants me leave to brush

My coxcomb o'er the bush of her country.

(like how I snuck a little Elizabethan raunch into that last line?)

Someday maybe I'll scribble something about Mickey Junior. Man was a Renaissance Thug. See, Junior was the only begotten son of the guy who had been the number-two dude among the Irish mobsters who terrorized Hell's Kitchen back in the day. His da was what the coppers call a real bad actor, a genuine lunartic with a temper problem. Once shot a corpse in Reno, just to watch him die...again.

Thing about Mickey, he had his paws in everything, just a brilliant guy, an autodidact like me, always reading, spewing trivia. Knew everybody in town. To give me a side-

line, he set me up with celebrities and persons of renown, which is how I came to monkey-ghost-write a slew of memoirs on behalf of illiterates and stooges. As Beer is my witness, felonies left my conscience cleaner.

A week after I started crashing at Liam's on his spare dog-bed, Mickey sent Seamus "The Hammer" O'Malley and Tilly-Mack's cousin Shep—who was as handy with an automatic as a fishing rod—up to Yale to discover what had become of Paulette. A fractured ulna and shattered femur later, a few co-workers disclosed that she'd been fired. They said Paulette had returned to Jamaica, where now she chaired a department at the University of the West Indies.

"Ras-clot feds! Likkle blackhearts threatened to go after my family." She began to cry when I got her on the phone. "Oh, Billy...me no know...it was horrid. I never heard what agency they were from, but they couldn't tolerate that a monkey accomplished what you did." She said my work hadn't been destroyed, that it had been cached in some kind of inaccessible vault, like a NORAD missile silo.

"Cho!" she scolded, "Nasty business, whole ting. I love you, Billy...but I'm afraid." Now she was sobbing. "Riddle me dis, sweetie: Which presidential candidate, in televised debate, whirled on his opponent to utter *You change your mind like a girl changes clothes?*" I heard weeping, then a dial-tone.

Rat bastards. I wouldn't give you a busted cowry shell for my work on the Shakespeare. Mickey wondered if I could

certifiably reproduce it, but I had to level with him. It wasn't an option. Along with grey hairs invading my green, my tipping lifestyle fouled the brainworks. I don't remember stuff so swell anymore.

Truth, I yearn my opus be found for *one reason only*—the publicity might bring Sadie Newell out of the woodwork.

Sadie Newell. Sadie Newell. Sweetest words in human language. Saaaayy-deeee Nooooo-uuuuhl. I didn't say any of this and you didn't hear it.

Sometimes the phone brought good news. Christmas morning, after I'd been in NYC about four months, I picked up the *Post* at my bodega to find an article about a mysterious break-in at Beardsley Zoo. I was still reading when I got back to the apartment. Liam came dashing out saying Mickey just called, said get over to him pronto.

He greeted us at the door with a dung-eatin' grin broad as a peat-bog and a sham-rock sparkle in his eye. Merry Frickin' Christmas, he said, and opened the bedroom door. June, Barry and Sass came trooping out laughing, pummeling me with glee and *Aiiiiiii!!!*ing up a blizzard.

The Hammer's girlfriend Deirdre flew with Mummerdinks and Poppysloot back to Sierra Leone just after New Year's. They boarded the plane dressed as leprechauns, tooting party-favor noisemakers. Sassmaster stayed in the city, gravitating toward the East Village. It only took six months for her to get what she'd been looking for all along.

After a lifetime running poolside with scissors, looking one way crossing the street, operating heavy machinery with major phar-

maceuticals in her veins, looking gift horses squarely in the maw while counting chickens and damn *skippy* messing around with Jim, Sarsaparilla Gloverson left for Monkey Heaven in mid-June.

Her passing is how I eventually ended up in Wildwood after all those years in the city.

Three years ago, Sass' remains were discovered when a twenty-two-year-old cold case was solved. We're so not going there. Just know VENGEANCE IS MINE.

Shortly before this, Shep McEvoy had gone berserk and abandoned the gang when this Kenyan chick up in Paterson he partied with drank herself to death. Shep said *Screw It* to pretty much everything, taking early criminal retirement and bringing her body to South Jersey for burial. So one day in the Acme on the mainland he met Rev Bev; they got to chatting and realized her husband and his ex were interred in the same graveyard outside Cape May.

Now Shep and I had gotten pretty tight. He knew I was already half a mess, further devastated by having Sassy back but not having the perfect place for her. Fresh out of ideas, hopeless of miracles.

"Get your Monkey Ass down to the sea," he said.

Holy Mother of Beer.

Miss Morone saxatilis, street name *Striped Bass*. Ebony gridlines across a silvery field. Bulbous pink lips and a prism sheen highlighted by a green identical to my lime gumdrop Schwinn.

Which vehicle, turns out, is currently

madhousing in a wide circle up in the parking lot, powered by Reverend Beverly Muir in a wide circle as she pops wheelies every few yards, cheering and yammering at the top of her lungs.

"Let him have dominion!"

Rev Bev's killing time to allow the elderlies to scuffle down the beach to my aid. No way I'm lifting this woman. She's a sow, a BBW, a Hoss, a chunk—gotta go north of 40 pounds. Every time Bev catches sight of her as the bike swings around she shrieks anew.

"Ghoulies and ghosties, long-legged beasties and things that go bump in the night!" I'm trying to guess if she's rhapsodizing about the fish or me when the passel of antique Presbyterians pull up to eyeball the monstress and lend a hand.

"Up and at 'em, Billy," Deacon Cameron says, as Emily Webb and Julia Gibbs prepare to wrangle milady's tail, Melanie Gompers positioning herself at the massive head.

"Count o' three!" Deacon hollers, inserting the hook of his cane into her gob and gripping the staff. At the countdown they heave, they ho and up goes the striper as Rev Bev exults from the bulkhead. Emily and Julia go all superhuman and heft the tail far higher than the front.

A large golden disc, about three inches in diameter, drops from the fish's mouth, pirouettes on the sand a few seconds and falls.

Well.

I'll be damned. Or not. ❖

RUNAWAY

BY BILL VERNON

There's lots of them among us. I learned that two years ago when I ran off from home because my next door neighbors were ones. They tried to take me over. Got me in their basement one day and took my clothes off and.... I'm not going into it any more details than that.

Are my own Dad and Mom ones too? They never did anything about the Humphreys when I told them what'd happened. Anyway, if my parents are what I suspect, then what does that make me? A rebel maybe, but I don't want to think about that either.

I can't tell anyone about them except like this in some anonymous writing because I can't be sure who's one and who isn't. I think they been here a long time so they're everywhere, spread all around.

In summers, working the carnivals and fairs, I keep my eyes out for them. Like when I got to Columbus County on the Amtrak, jumped off by the fairgrounds, and took a job filling in wherever they'd need me. Knew the minute I met him the big boss was one.

The bloodsucker supreme, demanding I work hard for nothing. Got him up to half-a-dollar an hour over minimum wage, and he shook my hand on it. But he didn't ask for no ID, didn't have me sign any-

thing. There were no witnesses to what we agreed on.

Of course, this was a hick town in the sticks, and the bossman felt in control. I worked a couple simple rides and three different booths where the suckers paid good money to throw balls or darts to win something cheap.



Wasn't long there I saw how the action laid out. Gambling off in two of the trailers. Prostitution in the parking lots and small rooms upstairs in the half-used "Exhibition Hall."

The ones among us are usually the "people" in charge. Inside three days I had them all picked out at that fair. The big boss didn't have no secrets from me by the end. I knew how they'd fold up and pack stuff and send it all on to the next place. I'd seen that done many times before.

"Yeah?!" Mr. Moody yelled when I banged his door late Sunday night, all the

action over, his trailer lights out and him in jockey shorts ready for bed.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said like I’m such a low life.

The door he’d opened let cold air rush out at me.

“I came to be paid. Cash like we agreed to.”

“Now? Tomorrow’s when I need you. That’s when we got the hard work to do packin’ up.”

“I have to go now.”

“Come back tomorrow. Everything’s locked up.”

“I figure three hundred dollars,” I said.

He laughed. “That’s way too much. You only worked five days.”

“I need cash right now. I can’t wait.”

Anyway, he had \$163 handy and was

glad to see me off so cheap.

At 3:30 A.M., his trailer burned up. Before anyone noticed the flames, his butane tank exploded and his door, the only way in or out, started blazing. Fire’s the only way to deal with them for sure. Got one of the women ones too. Didn’t know she was inside with him until I heard their screams and saw her face pressed up against a window.

I left fast. Jumped on the 4:46 passing through when it slowed down crossing the trestle. ❖

END TRANSMISSION