

BROKEN TOYS 24

Broken Toys 24 is the Christmas issue of my personalzine. I am **Taral Wayne**, of course, and since I've won no major lotteries nor married any Disney princesses, I still live at 245 Dunn Ave. Apt 2111, Toronto Ontario, M6K 1S6. Contact me for any reason at Taral@teksavvy.com - a letter of comment is good, hundred dollar bills are better, gifts and free meals also cheerfully accepted. It is the end of **December** and the end of **2013**, neither the best nor worst year of my life. This has been Kiddelidivee Books & Art/ExtraTeritoriality 274, copyright by moi, as though anything here was worth stealing.

T'Is the Season

Most of you will remember that the last couple of issues have been more than a little downbeat. This has been because my health has taken a beating since about October. A muscular spasm involved me in visits to the doctor, more prescription drugs and an eventual scheduling for MRI. Most recently, I've had another spasm similar to the one in the Fall, adding it to the joys of a seasonal cold or flu. As has been the case each of the last few times I've had the flu, I'm not able to sleep. I can nod off at unexpected moments, and fall on my head. But I cannot lie down and have a deliberate nap.

To begin with, it looks like Christmas is spoiled. I was supposed to have a get-together with my family today, on the 22nd, to have the turkey, exchange gifts, sit in the "good" living room, and see my sisters, nieces and nephews for the first time since last year. That is, I was supposed to do this today, except the 22nd turned out to be the date of the Great Ice Storm of 2013. The effect has been minimal down by the Lakeshore, where I live. But North and East and West, the city has been sheathed in glass. The weight of ice has torn the branches from trees, reducing streets to trails of kindling. At least, when my sister called this morning to inform me that Christmas was "off," I wasn't asleep to being with, so wasn't woken up. If weather permits, Christmas may only be delayed, and not cancelled altogether. That's the best that can be hoped for.

But last issue, I **promised** I would be upbeat. In fact, I have a great deal to be upbeat about. When I realized I was in the grip of another flu, I phoned the social workers whose office is down-stairs in my building. When I explained I was ill and would benefit by some off-the-shelf meds, they cheerfully agreed to visit the neighborhood pharmacy to buy them. Then they asked if there was anything else I needed. "Apples?" I asked. I was hungry, but too tired to cook. The thought of most food made me queasy. Nice, cool crisp apples, however, would be just the thing. The social workers brought everything about an hour later, and I was soon feeling much better under the influence of antihistamines. My luck has been holding, too. While it seems that everyone else I know in Toronto had been without power and sat bored in the dark, there was no outage here. I began to nod off in front of my keyboard, though, so I leaned back and let the sandman take me. I woke up an hour or so later, still in my chair, but the front of my shirt wet with drool. This is how we learn that we are, indeed, getting older. But also that Lady Luck has not entirely abandoned us. There have been at least half a dozen other instances of good luck lately - all of them minor in themselves, but that do much to ease the considerable burden of *carrying on*.

And so we do carry on. And on, and on, as the case may be. But, as I promised, here is my:

* CHRISTMAS ISSUE *

[Although this piece was written just before Christmas of 2010, I can find no record that it was ever published! It appears to have been lost among the hundreds of other things I've written in the last two years. Since it is Christmas time again, I had better publish this, once and for all.]



“So this is Christmas,” sang John Lennon, “and what have you done?”

The smug bastard! What did *he* ever do besides make millions of dollars for telling other people how to behave? But he had a point. Christmas is over for another year, and what have I done?

The short answer is that I caught the flu. Once again, my vow to put up the Christmas Tree went unfulfilled. The will to be on my feet for more than thirty seconds at a time was lacking, and the glass ornaments were too heavy to hang. Even getting a good night's sleep seemed beyond my capacity. Fortunately, any idiot can sit at a keyboard, so I spent a lot of time with Photoshop and MS Doc instead.

Eventually, I worked out why I couldn't sleep. The inhaler prescribed by my doctor was also a stimulant. For nearly a week I was cranked up on what amounted to speed, and whenever I tried to sleep all that would happen is my heart would race, my breathing deepen and my mind snap into tight focus. I could no more sleep than I could walk through a wall by an act of Will. Once off the crank, though, I began to get some rest and recover. By Christmas Eve I had managed a healthy eleven hours in the sack. Feeling as normal as I have any right to, I'm looking forward to another eleven hours tonight. That is about as much of an accomplishment as I can lay claim to this Holiday Season.

In a larger sense, I fear that the institution of Christmas has irrevocably changed for me. I used to be a guest of my sister Christine's family Christmas. It was an event that had *magnitude*. The night before the Big Day, I'd take a taxi to their house in the suburbs, as often as not through a blinding snowstorm. While my sister and brother-in-law assembled and wrapped the last of the kids' presents, I'd relax with a coffee and cookies, a glass of sherry or can of ice cold Coca-Cola. As a night owl, I stayed up until dawn, reading. It would not even be light yet when my nephews woke. We'd have bacon and eggs, toast, orange juice and

fresh coffee for breakfast, while the kids poured out the contents of their stockings. By the time I'd had a second coffee, we were ready for the main event. Sister Chris handed out the presents. The kids got most, of course. I always prided myself that, however desperate my finances, I was always able to buy *something* for everyone, but especially for the nephews.

But my two nephews have all but grown up. They are 19 and 20, now, and don't play with the sort of toys I can afford to buy them. A model of the Batmobile won't do, nor will a digital clock in the form of an F-15. The sort of toys my nephews play with at their age are drop-forged, low-carbon steel work tools, or the latest upgrade to their Wii Air-Guitar game. With their after-school jobs, perhaps *they* can afford such things! But I sure can't.

For that matter, my entire family is a pack of "doers." By that I mean they actively *do* things, such as going out to see a movie or show. They go driving Dad's jeep in the woods, they get involved in amateur triathlons, they volunteer for community work! They *do*. I, on the other hand, am a hobbyist. I collect things, I make things, I pursue interests, I read and I watch and I listen to things. It's fairly easy to buy for people with sedentary pastimes. You only need to know their passion – mystery novels, modeling, home-brewing, poker, stained-glass windows, whatever. You can always buy them *something*. But "doers" don't *want* anything. They want to *do* things, and you can't buy them *anything*.

It's just not the same buying everyone a \$10 Tim Hortons card.

As "doers," my nephews appear to be growing less sentimental about Christmas. They worked over the holidays last year, and again this year. The family celebrated the holiday on the 23rd instead. The presents were still opened on the 25th, when I wasn't there. A whole turkey was no longer on the menu, there was no Christmas cake or pudding, the family get-together was a rather cut-and-dried affair in which we came, we dined and we left. I'm not saying I didn't enjoy myself. It was certainly a lot less stressful – but Christmas in the fullest sense of the occasion it wasn't.

What will Christmas be like in another ten years, I wonder? By then, both nephews may be married and have children of their own. I haven't mentioned that I have a second sister, Karen, who just adopted two adorable baby girls. Where will they fit into all this? Will there be one big family Christmas, or four smaller ones? Who will want their beaten-up old Uncle Taral around when the presents are opened? Will there still be a place at somebody's dinner table at Christmas time? Where *is* the Ghost of Christmas Future when you need to ask him a few pertinent questions?

That self-important git, Lennon, also sings "Another year over, And a new one just begun." So, what have I done with 2010? What work, what play, what experiences, what set-backs occurred in the 12 months that have elapsed since last Christmas?

And what do I hope to do with 2011?

Those are questions for another time. There are five whole days before New Year's, after all.

If I'm not mistaken, the US is the only country in the world where people watch other people drive oversized trucks for entertainment.

So Now It is Christmas...

“...and what have you done?” sang John Lennon.

“Not bloody much,” I grumbled. “Besides, what did *you* ever do?”

“Don’t you know?” he said, in that lovable Liverpoolian accent. “I wrote, produced and performed this song, then donated all the proceeds to charity.”

“Yeah? Well ... I’ve done that too. Not write or sing a song, exactly. But hardly anyone ever notices the collectibles or artwork I’ve donated to fan charities. Is it my fault millions of people don’t pay my efforts any notice?”

“No, it’s not,” said John. “But *I’m* thanking you now. Remember, it’s not the gift that counts, but the thought behind it! Nor the thanks you get.”

John Lennon was right about a lot of things, and this was one of them. So, this Christmas I want to thank a lot of people without whom my life would have been much less worth living. In fact, it’s hard to know where to start, so take no meaning from the order in which I give my thanks. I just hope I haven’t left out anyone who deserves to be in this list.

Robert Charles Wilson – If I ever had a friend who I could say was “for life,” it was Bob. We met late in 1971. It was the first time I attended a meeting of the local SF club, OSFiC, and I’m not sure if that might not have been Bob’s first meeting also. Whether or not it was, we became fast friends. I found his seriousness to be perfectly balanced by an oddly playful side. Bob’s sense of humour prevented his equally well developed sensible nature from becoming merely somber or dismal. Of course, I had no idea in 1971 that Bob would eventually become a terrific science fiction writer. Everyone who knew Bob, knew he wanted to write. But I think no one guessed – not even when he got his first short story published in *Analog* in 1975 – that we had a major name in the genre in our midst. After all, it would be 10 years before his next short story saw print. His first book wasn’t published until 1986. I never quite looked at Bob as a quite a fan after that. Fortunately, none of this made any difference in the essential Bob. There are times when I thought I would have no one else I could turn to share my thoughts and feelings with quite such full rapport. There have been times, too, when his generosity has tided me over particularly thin periods in my life, when things broke down or stuff ran out, and there was no way to make do. I’m grateful too for all the times he picked up the check in Chinese restaurants over the years. Otherwise I would have survived mainly on a monotonous and unhealthy diet of hot dogs and chili. For all this and a myriad other reasons I cannot begin to count, I have no better friend.

Victoria Vayne – Victoria was something a little rare in the local club in 1974: a woman who wanted to hang around with the guys. It’s a bit hard to say what drew us together. It might have been Victoria’s healthy skepticism, or it might have been her willingness to tramp all over town at 3 a.m. – even in January. It didn’t hurt in the least that she had a nice apartment overlooking High Park where the group could get together most Saturdays, or a car that could carry us to conventions far and wide. But Victoria and I were bonded by a little more than convenience; we turned out to share a deeply felt need to be involved in fanzines. She learned everything I knew at the time and then added to it, to produce some very handsome issues of her *Simulacrum*. While I remained in my familiar groove, it’s unfortunate that Victoria eventually

lost her passion for fanzines. We had also been seeing each other so much that we had begun to develop irregular bouts of friction, leading to a mutual acknowledgement that the relationship was not fated to go any farther. Happily, though, Victoria wasn't to be alone. She met a man named Simon, who by a remarkable stroke of luck for her, turned out to be the right person at the right time. It worked out well for me, also, because now I have *two* old friends where I formerly had one! Simon and I share numerous interests – apart from Victoria – not the least of which is our coin collecting. While I don't see Simon and Victoria often, we manage to get together a few times over the course of a year, as they have a long-standing commitment to feeding my cat, and taking me shopping from time to time for a skid or two of canned cat food. Victoria spends little time reminiscing about fandom, from which she departed under a shadow of disillusionment. But I can still phone her up and talk about the “Old Days” with no hesitation.

Alan Rosenthal – When I first met Alan, he was a scrawny teenage kid with a nasal laugh. His folks were well-off, his father a successful businessman. Yet Alan wanted none of that. He never settled down in the family business, with a high starting salary and job security for life, as he *could* have. He also slummed with people like me and other local fans, though his folks didn't entirely approve. But our interests in books and offbeat sense of humour matched Alan's own. Alan eventually graduated from U of T engineering, and moved to Seattle to work for Microsoft. If anything, I think our friendship grew deeper while he was on the other side of the continent. He paid to fly me to the first Seattle Corflu, and put me up in his home for a couple of weeks so that we could hike the nearby Cascades. He flew me out to Seattle one or two more times, just for the hell of it, I think, or maybe so that I could attend one the local Furry cons. Again, I stayed a couple of weeks each time. I didn't go to the Pacific Northwest again after that, but Alan still visited family in Toronto once or twice a year. He was careful to find time in his busy schedule to visit me at least once each time. Alan has been working freelance for the last few years, and lives near Sonoma, California now, with Jeanne Bowman. I was able to visit the Sonoma place as part of my trip to Renovation. Alan put up much of the money to go. For a boy brought up in a very urban neighborhood of Toronto, he loved living in a fixer-upper so far out in the country that it is not even on Google Map. In the many years of our friendship, I'm particularly grateful to Alan because he's always cared deeply about my worsening health and other problems. It was Alan who insisted on replacing my mattress and springs when my back was going bad, and Alan who saw to it that I had a trustworthy lawyer to pursue my disability claims. It is, in fact, rather difficult to imagine how I would have survived the last couple of years without his unstinting support.

Marc Schirmeister – I knew of Schirm's cartoons a few years before I ever met him. They were in all the SF fanzines in the early 1970s, just when I was getting started. I think he knew of me in the same fashion. But we had never met. That changed in 1978, when we almost literally collided in the art show at the Phoenix Worldcon. Although two more different people could scarcely exist, we were instantly friends. My first visit to LA was in 1984 – not for the Worldcon that year, but to visit Schirm. Though I did allow myself to be dragged to LACon once or twice, I hardly remember anything about it. What I do remember is sleeping for seven weeks on Schirm's couch and seeing more desert, more mountains, more Hollywood, more Pacific Ocean than I had ever seen in my life. It was an experience I repeated a number of times in the 1990s, and Schirm was the perfect host every time. It wouldn't have been possible without his generosity – and occasionally his inexhaustible patience. Lemmee tell ya, I *don't* make the perfect house guest. Schirm has never forgotten me at Christmas, either, though I've frequently been too short of funds to send anything in return. It's embarrassing. Why he's put up with me all these years, I'll never know.

Steven Baldassarra – Steven is the most recently acquired of all my intimate friends. Strangely, I'm not quite sure how we met, but Steven says that I took no notice of him at the time. I suppose that's only logical, since if I had, I would surely remember the occasion. But it isn't Steven's way to be pushy or in-your-face. He's not even a fan, for heaven's sake! But Steven's biting wit, good nature, inquisitive mind and sincere commitment to all the heavy responsibilities of friendship have done their dirty work, and drawn

us into a mutual relationship of trust and respect. Whenever anything goes haywire, Steven has been there to help me put the pieces back in the box. One day a few years ago, I suddenly had trouble speaking clearly. I didn't believe it was a stroke, because I take medication for my blood pressure, and that was under control. I knew I had Myasthenia Gravis, though. It had never affected my speech before, and that was troubling enough if it had begun to. Steven drove me to the nearest hospital and stayed with me while I was CAT scanned, examined by ultra-sounds and my blood analyzed for wastes produced by cardiovascular events. He waited while I was thumped, poked, prodded, bent, folded, stapled and told to say "ah." He was there when I was finally informed – as I expected all along – that my Myasthenia was acting up. In future, I would have to be medicated for that also. It was only one example of the lengths to which Steven has gone, on occasion, to be sure I didn't face my problems alone and without help. Yet, apart from my selfish dependence, I simply take enormous pleasure in having him around. In contrast to my often bleak outlook and the cynicism of so many fans, his positive outlook is refreshing. Makes me want to carry on. If he ever finds a girlfriend, I may have to kill her.

Phyllis Gotlieb – My friendship with Phyllis was one I never expected to happen. Back when I was involved in club affairs, we invited Phyllis to chair our writers' workshop. At the time, she was at the time the only resident Canadian SF writer with any reputation to speak of. Her prestige was immense. As it happened, though, the workshop turned into a bust. After four or five fruitless meetings, we admitted that we had no interest in writing something new every month, and that holding a workshop was just one of those notions fans have, and mistakenly act upon, for no good reason. After the workshop folded, everyone pretty much forgot about Phyllis. I was in charge of publications at the time, and as a courtesy I put her on our newsletter mailing list. For one reason or another, I continued to stay in touch. And Phyllis, out of the goodness of her heart or sense of duty, read the zines. After a couple of years, I must have realized that we had unknowingly become friends. Although Phyllis was by then growing rather frail and went to few places I was ever likely to be, the telephone was our lifeline. On occasion, I might let a few months go by without giving Phyllis a call, but we never fell out of touch. The thing about Phyllis that I never got over was that she took me seriously. I wasn't a professional writer, nor did I even profess an ambition to write fiction, but she never condescended. She gave me steady encouragement, in fact, and told me I wrote well enough to continue, regardless of what I wanted to write. I attended Phyllis' last birthday party, much flattered that she invited me. She was terribly old and fragile by then. Unfortunately, it was the last time I ever saw her. I chickened out on going to the funeral, thinking I would be as out of place as I could possibly be among her family and regular friends. Now, I regret that deeply. Even when Phyllis was gone, she had not stopped thinking about me. To my astonishment, she left me a sizable sum in her will – money that pretty much made my survival possible over the next couple of years, before I was eligible for public assistance. I feel sad sometimes that I might never justify Phyllis's confidence in me.

Truth be told, I feel I've owed so much to these people over the years that nothing I have done, or ever could do, deserved their friendship. All I can say is, "thanks." Thank you all, deeply and humbly, from the bottom of my shriveled, crusty heart. But do we ever *deserve* our friends? I don't think we do. Isn't that why it's so miraculous that we *do* have them?

"Of course that's why," said John, taking up his guitar and mischievously breaking into "Jingle Bell Rock."

Why are there are people who believe we can terraform Mars, but also that nothing we are doing on Earth could possibly alter the climate?

THE GREENING OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY?

One of the first things you learn in Politics 101 is that if you draw a line and declare you will never cross it, you must cross it the moment it becomes expedient. And then you must twist your apparent flexibility so that you accomplish as much of your original goal as possible. The Conservative government in Canada has given us many fine examples of this principle in the years it has been in office, but none finer than when, a few months ago, it began to see that it was losing ground on the issue of legalizing, or at least decriminalizing, cannabis. Not that we can expect to see Steven Harper's face on a package of legal reefers for sale at convenience stores anytime soon. But his party has "reformed" the rules governing the medical use of marijuana. On the face of it, the reforms appear to be a step in the right direction, but it is such a microscopic movement as to constitute little progress at all. What it is, is a naked attempt to slide votes away from the Liberal Party, whose leader, Justin Trudeau, has promised genuine reform in the form of legalization. As well, Harper's new "reforms" continue to persecute those who grow their own marijuana plants, instead he generously permits them to purchase their needs from licensed growers. In other words, if Harper must give way, he can at least give way so that he protects the new "Canna-business," which will also bring in government revenue. But giving way on the limited issue of medical marijuana, he further isolates as "crazy potheads" those who believe the plant should be legal recreationally. All in all, it's a very clever move of Mr. Harper - as insincere and manipulative as everything he does. Still, I suppose that's how most politics gets done. Bear in mind, too, that despite the new measures, the government still has immense powers to discourage doctors from prescribing cannabis to patients. Also, by not listing it as a drug covered by public health plans, it can be rendered prohibitively expensive. What the one hand giveth, the other hand taketh away.

The Greening of the Conservative Party, or the Grinching?

As we all know, comfortable misery is the next best thing to happiness.

*On the following pages there is a bit of salacious poetry that mostly scans and was published a few years ago by MU Press in the 8th. issue of a comic called **Wild**. This is the first time the art has appeared as it should have, without various alterations to make layout easier. My friend (and proofreader), Walt, was amused enough to write a sequel later. But by then there was no place to publish it, so it was never illustrated.*

Hot Buttered Mice

Doggerel by
Paul Kidd

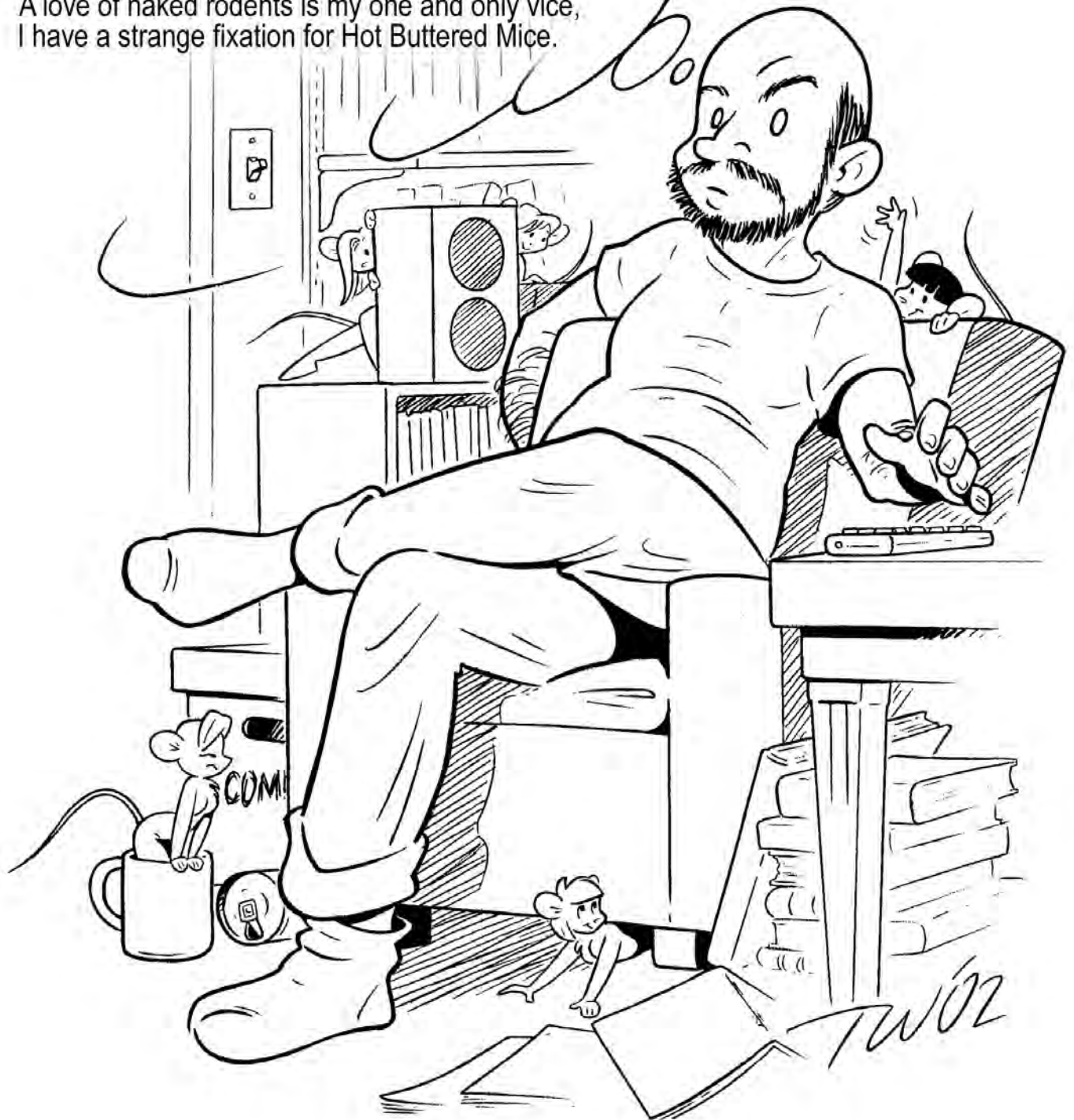
Art by Tara



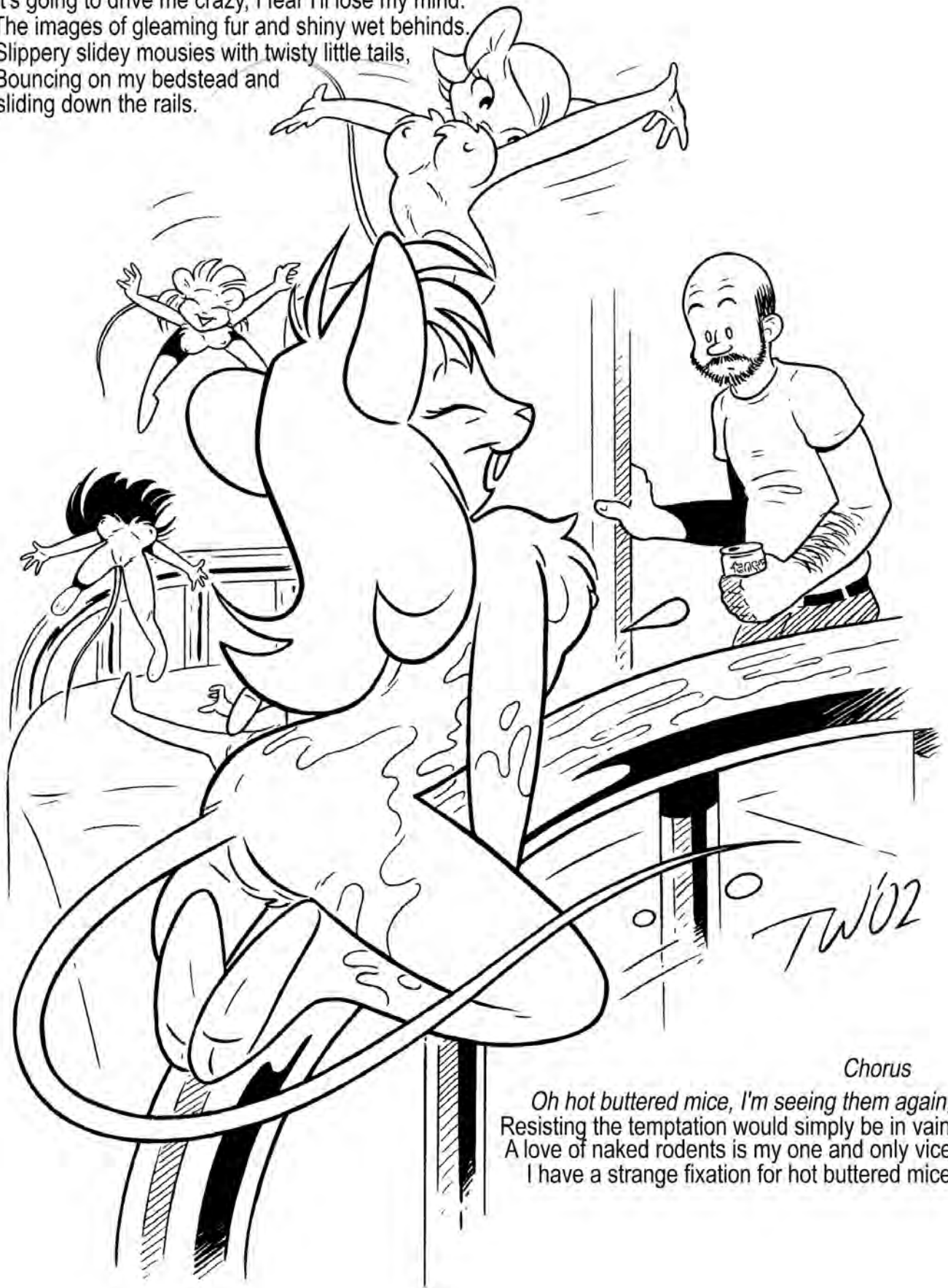
I have an odd addiction buried deep within my brain,
A warped hallucination that is driving me insane.
No sooner do I clouse my door and sit down on my own,
Than hordes of saucy rodents all come dancing through my home.

Chorus

Oh Hot Buttered Mice, I'm seeing them again
Resisting the temptation would simply be in vain.
A love of naked rodents is my one and only vice,
I have a strange fixation for Hot Buttered Mice.



It's going to drive me crazy, I fear I'll lose my mind.
The images of gleaming fur and shiny wet behinds.
Slippery slidey mousies with twisty little tails,
Bouncing on my bedstead and sliding down the rails.



Chorus

*Oh hot buttered mice, I'm seeing them again,
Resisting the temptation would simply be in vain.
A love of naked rodents is my one and only vice,
I have a strange fixation for hot buttered mice.*

They come to me when I'm eating, at dinner they're a treat.
Treading through the pasta with their dainty little feet.
In a tub of popcorn, or sliding on a cob,
There's nothing they like better,
than a lovely, slippery knob.

Chorus

Oh hot buttered mice, I'm seeing them again,
Resisting the temptation would simply be in vain.
A love of naked rodents is my one and only vice,
I have a strange fixation for hot buttered mice.





I found a little mousie and finally thought to ask her why
She used up so much butter in the space between her thighs
The mouse replied, "it's a trick that we have learned to swing
For a little lubrication is a wild and wondrous thing.

Chorus

Oh hot buttered mice, I'm seeing them again.
Resisting the temptation would simply be in vain.
A love of naked rodents is my one and only vice,
I have a strange fixation for hot buttered mice.



I love butter on my crumpets, on my muffins, toast and rolls,
Fresh hot salty butter dripping down into their holes.
But there's just a single breakfast treat to really make me purr.
And that is when my crumpet comes equipped complete with fur!

Chorus

Oh hot buttered mice, I'm seeing them again.
Resisting the temptation would simply be in vain.
A love of naked rodents is my one and only vice,
I have a strange fixation for hot buttered mice.



It seems I can't escape them, no matter how I strain,
Trying to deny them only seems to cause me pain.
Just take a little mousie and just rub butter in her pelt,
There's nothing like the taste of a delicious patty melt.

Chorus

Oh hot buttered mice, I'm seeng them again.
Resisting the temptation would simply be in vain.
A love of naked rodents is my one and only vice,
I have a strange fixation for hot buttered mice.





Some people might see foxes, bears, raccoons or whales,
But give me buxom mousies with those twisty little tails.
With great big shiny glasses that twinkle, shine and gleam.
And hides all wet and dripping with that full rich dairy cream.

Chorus

Oh hot buttered mice, please come to me again,
Resisting the temptation would simply be in vain.
A love of naked rodents is my one and only vice,
I simply never get enough of hot buttered mice.

Twoz

Heaven is a good place to raise the kids right, but Hell has a better night life...

Hot Buttered Mice - 2nd. Course

Written by my erstwhile friend and proofreader, Walt Wentz.

I find them in my cornflakes and I find them in my milk
All swimming brazen back-strokes with a dozen of their ilk.
For all their naughty little ways, there's nothing quite as nice
As a heaping double handful of those hot buttered mice!

Oh, some might say that mousies are discouragingly small,
But slick them up with butter, and they'll win you one and all!
They're the princesses of pleasure, it's a treasure beyond price
To host a wiggling, giggling horde of hot buttered mice!

Their degree of maiden modesty is also very small,
They accost me in the bedroom, and pounce on me in the hall.
I've said it to you once before, and now I've said it twice:
There's nothing makes a house a home like hot buttered mice!

Some folks are into foreign cars, and some like Persian rugs;
Some folks get off on politics, some on designer drugs.
But I prefer to stay aloof and feed my secret vice
With another hearty helping of those hot buttered mice!

Now some will say my love affair is kinky or perverse,
But trying to resist it only makes the impulse worse;
You may send me down to Furry Hell, I'll gladly pay the price
If the little demonesses there are hot buttered mice!

When did you first look at yourself in a mirror and realize that you were a bearded man?

LOCS FOR BROKEN TOYS 24

CHRISTMAS ISSUE

WAHF

Steve Davidson (*Amazing Magazine*): "Congrats on the check (money always helps: as my mother says, 'money can't solve every problem, but the ones I have it can...' and I hope things pick up so far as the cheer is concerned!" **Ned Brooks**: Your doctor seems as clueless as mine. I have an auto-immune malady, lichen planus, but no one seems to know whether the burning in my feet is related. Exercise (the only exercise I ever did was walking) does make it worse, as does standing a long time on the basement floor. But I have no joint pain or muscle weakness. The sensation in my feet does bother me most trying to sleep, and I seldom get 8 hours. Today I didn't get to bed until 5 a.m., and some fool telepest woke me at 11 with a hang-up. Your correspondent's desire for a scan of *Warhoon 28* would make for a large file - it's 616 pages! It would be hard to manage unless it was OCREd - 616 pages of ascii are nothing much now. **Rebecca Jansen, Darrell Benvenuto, Kjartan Arnorsson**: "Dere ya go. Money may not be able to buy happiness, but it allows for a more comfortable misery." **Hope Leibowitz**, who says she may open the file for last issue someday, but hasn't gotten around to issue 22 yet... **Ron Kasman, Jason Burnett**, who for one reason or another read both the previous issues together.

Steve Jeffery, srjeffery@aol.com

Thanks for continuing to send me copies of *Broken Toys* despite what must appear as very sporadic response on my part. Work has been even more manic of late ... to the point that I can't face turning on the computer and looking at another monitor again when I get home. However, current deadlines have either been met or have, as Douglas Adams cheerfully observed, "rushed past with a delightful whooshing noise" and I have a few hours on Sunday hours to try catching up on the email backlog.

Sorry to hear your health isn't improving too much, or that any improvements seems to be slowing down. Night pains are often worse because you have nothing else to distract you from concentrating on your own body. Once you discover one ache, you fixate on it and then find something elsewhere to worry about. Although 5-6 hours' uninterrupted sleep is pretty good going in my book. I hit the sack around 11 p.m., read or listen to the radio for an hour or so, and then the alarm goes off at quarter to six to get up for work. That's become so ingrained that it extends to weekends as well, so I can't remember the last time I had a full 8 hours. That probably explains why I invariably fall asleep on the bus on the way back from work.

It's almost inevitable that you're going to be ripped off if you put anything up on the web, but 'Jay Em' sounds blatant example of an internet troll, and I suspect his "everything is free" attitude also extends to the sort of music piracy that rips off struggling indie bands as well the majors. You could try watermarking your artwork posts, so it was obvious where the copyright originates. Most people downloading them for 'fair use' wouldn't, I suspect, object to having your signature on the

copy. There are, I think, even clever ways that can scramble the file if it detects it's been changed, though most 'invisible' watermark digital signatures are there to resolve copyright disputes, which wouldn't work in this case where Jay Em is so blatant about it. That would work for him posting other people's artwork as his own, but I don't know any way around his copying other people's characters aside from making it known and him a *persona non gratis*. Corporations like Disney and Dreamworks have aggressive and well-paid lawyers (if that's not too much of a tautology); fan groups and communities only have goodwill in cases where homage and affectionate pastiche turn into something more sinister.

I actually got more e-mail from the unnecessary Mr. J.M. This time I put a block of further communication and do not expect to hear from him again.

I do like the cartoon on page 5.

" God moves in mysterious programming languages." But none so mysterious as some of the absolutely deranged programming languages that humans with far too much time on their hands have been able to come up with. Like *INTERCAL* or *Befunge*. I first came across these in an article written by Charles Stross in 1992 when he was working as programming journalist for *Computer Shopper* magazine (*INTERCAL* – the Language from Hell). To say *INTERCAL* has a weird syntax is a massive understatement. According to Stross, numbers are inputs as English words (ONE TWO THREE, etc.), but output as Roman numerals. The program may not accept commands if the keyword PLEASE is not used often enough, and has other commands like ABSTAIN, IGNORE, FORGET or GIVE UP. Because of its twisted syntax, it is also absurdly slow. A simple Sieve of Eratosthenes program for detecting primes that executes in 0.5 seconds on a standard workstation takes 17 hours to complete in *INTERCAL*. *Befunge* is, if anything, weirder, and allows the instruction pointer to roam in multiple dimensions through the code.

Wikipedia notes a number of even more esoteric and useless programming languages, including *Malbolge* (named appropriately after the 8th circle of Hell) which is so difficult to write in that it took two years after the language was developed before the first working program was written. A program to print 'Hello World' looks like this:

```
(=<`#9]~6ZY32Vx/4Rs+0No-&Jk)"Fh}|Bcy?`=*z]Kw%oG4UUS0/@-ejc(:'8dc
```

I ought to admit here that I once wrote a cut down version of the FORTH language entirely in interpreted *GW BASIC* for no other reason than to see if I could.

Halloween over here was something of a non-event this year. Parents don't like the idea of their kids roaming around after dark, so this year - as last - we didn't even have to resort to turning all the lights off and sitting in the dark pretending we weren't in. We had bought a couple of party bags of mini Mars and Milky Way bars just in case this plan didn't work, and when it was evident that nobody was going to brave the cold and the rain to come knocking on the door, we had to eat them all ourselves. Oh well.

Eric Mayer, groggy.tales@gmail.com

Hope you'll accept a truncated loc. Some of this ish I guess I have commented on already. I did get a laugh out of the exploding grill. And thinking again about your helpful hooker with a heart of gold – maybe she would've bought some of your pills.

Not a very cheery issue, but considering what you've been going through, how could it be? Lack of sleep alone is a killer, even without excruciating pain. We've talked about all this and I think I've mentioned that my dad lived with neuropathy of a sort for almost twenty years. It's a real horror in that one can be tormented by excruciating pain, which has no cause aside from the screwed up nerves themselves, and yet at the same time it can cause numbness or weakness. It threatened to move into his hands, which would have been disastrous since he, like you, was an artist, but it never did except to a fairly insignificant extent. His problem was he habitually stood when painting watercolors, and after a lifetime he couldn't get comfortable painting while sitting, nor did he have much stamina for anything during his last couple years, so he resorted to abstract collage made from found materials and produced some terrific work in that medium. He worked on a collage the day before he died and left it almost finished, secured under a square of glass on his work desk. All of which is to say that artists, unlike many people, tend to keep wanting to work at art, rather than sit down and watch television all day. So I suspect when you get some sleep and some pain relief you will not be thinking of giving up some sort of art, be it visual or written.

I know about doubts. We always hear about middle-age crisis, but how about old-age crisis? Suddenly, after having a whole lifetime in front of us, to accomplish whatever we want, we have only a short portion of that lifetime. How long we can't say, how much of what time we have left we'll be healthy enough to do what we want is unknown, all we know for sure is that most of our time is gone, and perhaps it seems like it's been pissed away. Well, okay, it sure as hell does seem like that to me. What can we do? It's too late to totally start over. I am afraid of wasting time now. I don't want to go down any blind alleys, write anything for which there's no market, for instance. But trying to avoid squandering the time left tends to paralyze me. It's tough when there's not enough time to make mistakes any more.

In your case, you have ample evidence that lots of people have enjoyed your work. Awards and nominations, a GOH honor, locs, and plenty of sales both professional and to people who are willing to pay to possess your work. But, I know, everything is judged by money today. I sometimes ask myself whether it has been worthwhile spending so much of my life on creative writing which has never earned me a livelihood. A lousy lawyer earns far more in a year than I've probably earned by writing in my life. But art really is a different animal than regular jobs and professions. We shouldn't try to equate them. It is hard to earn a living by art, notwithstanding that we know some people who do. There are only so many "openings," only limited demand.

Still, sometimes I wonder whether I've said what I had to say and should just relax. There isn't any law that we have to keep beating ourselves over the head to keep going. Normal people kick back and take it easy. I doubt you'd be happy taking that route, though.

**The problem with old awards and honours is that all you can do
is look back on them, not work toward them.**

Bob Jennings, FabFicBks@aol.com

Received the emailed version of *Broken Toys 23*. Depressing reading indeed. It is extremely difficult to write a letter of comment on a zine where the editor spends most of the issue bemoaning and detailing his declining medical condition. At first I wasn't going to even try, but I suppose I might be able to come up with a few random remarks anyway.

Of course I'm sorry to hear that your medical situation has worsened. One of the more depressing parts of this news is that the doctor's efforts to increase your general mobility and get you to do some basic exercises seem to have backfired. This is depressing indeed, since I'm sure you would agree that being both sedentary and overweight are major contributing factors to your medical problem(s). Perhaps a more abbreviated series of exercises, different ones, might be helpful, a regimen you could master and then perhaps slowly expand. I hope you will push for this. All exercises are not created equal, and difficult situations may call for a physical specialist who can directly address the problem and provide some specific assistance in this area.

I also understand that being in pain for most of the past month has made you depressed and grumpy, on the other hand you seem to have gone well beyond basic depression here. There is always a potential bright side to even these difficult situations, and giving in to self-pity is a defeatist spiral that accomplishes nothing useful. Also it irks the hell out of your friends and correspondents, so you should make an effort to get over that out of consideration for the rest of us, if nothing else.

Interesting to learn of your pre-sleep routine. I don't know if many other people daydream just before they sleep. When I lie down I would like to go to sleep right away; anything that delays that is counter-productive so far as I am concerned. I can let my imagination soar or wander or skip to impossible regions anytime I want during the day (well ... not *any* time exactly ... I'm pretty sure doing that while driving my car would be a Major Mistake), but when I slip into bed sleep is what I want. I take a couple of seconds as I am getting into bed and turning off the lights to review the day, checking off things accomplished and good things that happened against the bad things that might have happened. Usually the accomplishments and good stuff far outweigh the bad things, which means I had another good day of being alive. Any good day, and any day being alive, seems like an achievement to me. I'm not looking for major accomplishments at this point in my life, but small satisfactions are worthwhile and worth savoring.

I would think it would also be worthwhile for you to keep doing artwork and to scan more art into digital form so more people could enjoy it. You are probably right that doing more art or making more of the old art available for viewing will not make you rich or famous, but so what? The world of art and writing, or any other creative effort, is a lot like the stereotypical western story gunfighter scenarios. There's always a faster gun, and in the world of art there's always going to be somebody who draws better, has better concepts, better execution, does it faster, easier, and gets immediate recognition for even his/her most trivial efforts. So what? A year, or two, or three, later there will be yet another crop of new artists who will be even better, more in tune with the changing public taste, and able to wow the masses with their own fabulous new material. The cycle never changes, but that doesn't mean that people no longer appreciate your art, or would not welcome a chance to see the old material brought to new formats.

All my life I've been gifted with numerous skills, and as soon as I grew bored with one thing I could leave it and do something else. Perhaps it was as much of a curse, since it meant I never

persevered at one thing until it was so thoroughly mastered that I could blow all opposition out of the water and walk away with the prizes. I think I made a life habit of walking away too soon, so never had much of a career in comic books, failed before I got started as a newspaper cartoonist, never even got a foot in the door in animation, was regularly employed as an illustrator of only one magazine, etc. There probably isn't any time to try again in a different field. My friends inform me that matters are no better in the writing business. It takes 20 years from gaining the first glimmers of attention to three-novel contracts – and there's no guarantee of completing the necessary apprenticeship. So, why *not* kick back, turn on the TV and build model airplanes for the next 20 years instead?

In a way, I'm secretly glad that Toronto has Rob Ford as a mayor. Ya know, Canadians have been damn condescending when discussing American politicians and their incredible stupidities/antics/failings/shenanigans in recent years. Now, finally, a guy who's just a stupid and just as much a jerk as your typical US Congressman, from strait-laced Toronto, of all places. My grin is wide, and it grows even wider every time the guy opens his mouth and reveals some new escapade or makes another political blunder. Comedians love this guy, but I suppose sooner or later the natives over in Toronto will figure out a way to dump him.

We're going to ship him to you, postage due ... Just see that he gets the genuine Tim Hortons donuts that he's accustomed to, eight times a day, and Hizzoner will fit right into Congress,

I didn't try to sing the parody song. It sort of reminded me of the classic B.C. comic strip by Johnny Hart where Curly wants Peter to deliver a singing telegram, which is, "the glass figurine of the bird you sent was smashed in shipment," and tells Peter to sing it to the tune "MacArthur Park".

Tylenol III? I never heard of it either, but it sure seems like potent stuff if half a tablet gave you the pain relief you needed, especially considering how much pain you were in. I'll have to file this information away in case I ever need heavy pain suppressing drugs. Luckily I have only been in a few situations (like post-operation recovery after knee surgery) where I needed anything like that. The first choice of hospitals around here is morphine, the golden mean for several thousand years. Unfortunately morphine doesn't work very well for me, but it sure does make me sick. I usually get so nauseous and shaky that the pain is a secondary consideration. I don't think that's the way the stuff is supposed to work. Horse-pill sized naproxen was the second choice. Anything was better than having to endure morphine.

Tylenol III is a mixture of acetaminophen, codeine and caffeine. I think it's the caffeine that's most potent, but I could be prejudiced in favour of anything related to coffee.

I hope your medical woes fade away. I hope there is more variety next issue of *Broken Toys* besides discussions of your medical problems. It's hard writing comments about somebody's detailed complains about his medical condition.

The only thing drearier, I would imagine, would be the typical Novacon report...

Steve Stiles, stevecartoon2001@gmail.com

Even though letter writing isn't my forte, or perhaps even my interest, I thought I'd drop you a line of some sort before my slacker contrition over neglect and laziness threatens to entirely overpower me: fanac through guilt!

First of all, I'm sorry that you've been going through physical hell, condolences have always been hard to write, but that's not why – I've seen you when your health was bad enough, and now it's worse and that sucks. I can only hope that things improve for you. At least I can congratulate you on a sure bet that Canada's health system is better than here in the non-socialist dystopia that's currently struggling with a Republican-inspired health plan that our Greedy Old Plutocrats are doing everything their power to defeat (blocking considerably cheaper Canadian drug imports is another goal).

I've had my own experience with chronic pain. It hasn't been as severe as yours, but it has been long-lasting: sometime around five years ago my calf muscles started paining me, feeling something akin to a medium level throbbing toothache, and didn't stop, continuing on until – last week (*wild cheering!*). I hope I haven't jinxed things by mentioning this. When it began, I thought the leg pain might have something to do with my job as a bookstore clerk at Daedalus Books, standing up for hours at a time, but when I retired in July of last year the situation didn't improve. I tried stretching exercises, leg massages, hot and cold compresses, and over-the-counter pain medications; nothing helped that much, and my doctors had no idea what was causing the condition.

When I was engrossed in something – a good book, a movie, working on art – the pain was easier to push into the background, but trying to get a restful night's slumber was another matter; you mention those pleasant moments before drifting off to sleep, when your mind can wander over all sorts of things: I've gotten quite a few gag and comic strip ideas in those times, but that wasn't happening much anymore.

I should've thought of it sooner, but in mid July of this year I did a Google search re: "calf muscle pain" and discovered that a small percentage of people who take statin medications to keep down bad cholesterol suffer from that. So I stopped taking Lipitor and by August there was a noticeable decrease and finally, about a week ago, I woke up to realize that the pain was all gone. May it *please* stay away from now on! Meanwhile, I've been watching my diet, concentrating on snacking on those foods that keep my cholesterol down, and avoiding the other kinds.

It's been an additional irritation that as I've gotten older, I've gradually improved most of my lifestyle habits, including my diet, but far from doing me good, I get worse. Physical activity, which would likely benefit me, is virtually impossible. Getting up on a step ladder to reach a high shelf is exhausting. A walk from bed to the bathroom and back leaves me short of breath. Mopping the floor is ancient history except at greatest need.

I've also read that statins can cause muscle pains in many people, and are being prescribed by too many doctors as a prophylactic, whereas study has shown it only effective for patients who have already had a cardiac incident! I keep wanting to try the same experiment with my doctor that you have – giving up the statin I'm taking. Can it hurt to have high cholesterol for a few months, when Rosuvastatin might be the cause of my worst problems?

“Would it be such a tragedy if I stopped creating now? Would another five years of effort turn me into a household name like Frank Frazetta, or Roger Dean?” Sometimes I ask myself that as well, and wonder what my goals should be now that I’m retired. There are too many choices and perhaps too little time left, and thinking about that I sometimes feel like a deer in the headlights of indecision. I’ve been having a lot of fun doing full-color art for the fanzines, but I do feel that the clock is ticking away and maybe I’ve been just screwing around. Ghu knows the comics and magazine markets are in pretty bad shape these days, and in the Nineties I had entertained a fantasy of picking up spare money and egoboo in my retirement years by doing illustrations for the prozines; ha, it is to laugh. Currently there is a possibility that I may be getting a freelance comic book assignment that would probably keep me busy for the next two years, so I’ve been treading water until I hear more about that. If it comes through, it’ll be my biggest and highest-paying comic book job of my career, and ironic that it’s coming at this stage of my life. (If I can’t get a Hugo, maybe I can get an Eisner or a Harvey! Ha, it is to laugh.)

As for being a household name like Frazetta or Dean, fame is pretty fleeting: I knew a number of younger comics fans at work and they had no idea who Milton Caniff or Al Capp were, which made me cringe with shocked pity over their sad deprivation.

At this point, maybe you should try asking them if they know who Jim Davis, Gary Trudeau or Bill Watterson are. If they don’t know, then you’re dealing with mere children whose memories go no farther back than yesterday.

Halloween was always a big deal with my family in that my father would rig up a funhouse arrangement in our apartment’s long hallway leading to the front door; paper bats and skeletons that would run along a line from the ceiling, dropping down in front of startled trick or treaters, a glowing pumpkin also rolling down the hallway on a cart, a spooky sound effects record, and our black cat who usually made an appearance. Fun; the kids would congregate in lines going down two landings. We here in the suburbs, though, seldom get trick-or-treaters, and when we do they tend to be hulking sullen teenagers without any kind of costumes. So for the past twenty years or so we’ve been holding Halloween movie parties. This year we had a Tim Burton animation theme, with *Corpse Bride*, *9*, and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. I’ve already decided on next year’s three: *Bubba Ho-Tep* (for straight-out goofiness), *The Conjuring* (retro horror) and either *Let Me In*, or the first more acclaimed version, *Let The Right One In* –both have a reputation for being a more artful kinds of supernatural flick.

I’m going to wind this up now before getting into a rant about the sad state of politics in the United States and, come to think of it, most of the rest of the world. I hope your medical condition is improving. Coincidentally, I’ve just finished rereading Avram Davidson’s *Joyleg* myself.

Milt Stevens, miltstevens@earthlink.net

Before reading *Broken Toys 23*, I hadn’t thought about who I might be in the Star Trek universe. Boldly going where nobody has been stupid enough to go before was never my gig. In a more realistic novel about the military, like *Catch 22*, I can easily figure out who I would be. I would be Major Major. Just because I was in the middle of a war didn’t mean I was looking for trouble. I hid a lot. Since I was involved with communications and cryptography, nobody ever wanted to watch me do the things I did. That made staying out of sight much easier.

The social media seem to be poorly named. It seems about as social as a Mongol invasion. You may meet some of the right people, but you are certain to meet some of the wrong ones. Most psychos don't have many friends, so they have lots of time to hang around on the internet. When they become offended (which they certainly will) they can go out and kill somebody.

I didn't know you could make a barbecue explode. Of course, I know almost nothing about cooking. I wonder if the TSA knows about the danger of barbecues. I can picture terrorists with barbecues in their carry-on luggage. TSA people are paid to stay awake nights worrying about such things.

Lloyd Penny, penneys@bell.net

Thank you for *Broken Toys 23*. We've just gone through 10 days of lack of internet, which I guess we've become dependent on, as has just about everyone else. But, it is back thanks to a smart Bell technician, and I can resume my spotty career of loccing every zine in sight, just about.

You're older than 60 now, so is Yvonne (her 61st is on December 19), and I am not far behind you at 54. This getting old crap sucks big time. Our fannish forefathers could have told us young 'uns that, I guess, but we expected to live forever. I hope 2014 has much less pain for you, and better medications. I hope we are still at an age where a good SF book can take us out of our old bodies, and allow your still-young minds to roam any number of universes.

Alas! The difference between 54 and 62 (my present age) is all the difference between when I could walk miles at will, and making an effort to get to my front door!

SFContario was some fun...we all want our friends to like what we do, but we know in our hearts that they don't. Ad Astra has its faults, but with the changes in management over the years, it has moved from being solely literary to being literary plus many other interests, and I gather that the con has comfortably settled in the 7-800 attendee range. Meanwhile SFContario 4, according to one of its committee, received about 215 members, and I thought it looked smaller than in past years. Perhaps it is because a past year was a Convention. (The cartoon on page 5 sums it all up.)

I didn't attend, as you know. It wasn't the money that was the issue, it was the difficulty I have getting there. Not much walking is involved, but I have to catch three different streetcars, and leaving the con at 1 a.m. leaves me standing on street corners for up to an hour in addition to the hour in actual travel, getting me home about 3. Even the effort it takes to walk from one end of that oddly planned hotel to the other was more than I wanted to face this year. Unless someone else writes it, I guess there'll be no review of SFContario in *File770* this year.

Produce this fanzine because you want to, and you still enjoy the creation and interaction fanzines contain. I've given up the idea of producing another fanzine, and I'd need a few lessons from an understanding expert when it comes to producing .pdfs for an e-zine. I've been writing for the local for more than 30 years now, and that's where I am comfortable. I think I will continue into 2014, but even that may be a decision for me to make in years past that. I wonder if I have anything left to write about, but we do have our memories and our opinions, and for most fanzines, that may be all anyone has left.

Drawing your own versions of cartoon characters may or may not violate copyright, but most publications and artists put into their artwork that they have no intentions of violating copyright, and acknowledge that the source of the art work is © or ® or ™ of some company or other. It all depends on the sensitivity of the company, I remember reading about how Lucasfilms would shut down any fannish publication containing any of the *Star Wars* characters at the time, which just about killed SW fandom everywhere but Australia. Meanwhile, Gene Roddenberry encouraged the Trek fans to create and discuss the Trek universe and characters, for it was publicity he knew he couldn't buy.

The local...I am taking medication myself for high blood pressure and slightly elevated cholesterol in my system. They seem to be working; my doctor said my blood pressure was normal, 122/80, and he was very much surprised. Those medications will get me through the Christmas season with little guilt as to what I might eat for Christmas, but as soon as the last morsel of chocolate is eaten sometime in January, I have to take action to make sure my clothes will still fit.

It is less than two weeks to Christmas as I write, and the first ads were on TV, the first carols heard on the radio, literally two days before Halloween. I am tired of the whole thing because it is so blatantly commercial, it's lost all its special feeling. The only Christmas movie we will watch is *A Christmas Carol* with Alistair Sim, and we have decided to forgo the usual family event, usually full of noise, stupid presents for us (*Star Trek* action figures, usually), and the usual fight between the siblings. Who needs it? Yvonne and I will celebrate by ourselves, and have a wonderful time.

I still love Christmas ... or the idea of it. Unfortunately, I usually can not put up the plastic tree by myself. And my family now gets together for the holiday a few days early, leaving me by myself in a cheerless room on the actual day.

My loc! The contract extension at the advertising agency is no longer so possible. It looks like the client may be making some hard decisions, and I found out that everyone I work with is under the same contract details, with the current contract going until Christmas Eve. We may yet get coal for Christmas. (Update! The job ends its full-time aspect on Christmas Eve, and I go on-call starting mid-January. In effect, the job hunt starts again; can't make money being on-call.)

Quite agree with you on Montana's; that's where Yvonne wants to go for her birthday dinner. We've been there before, and yes, the atmosphere and décor are kitschy, but the food is definitely good. Maybe I'll follow your lead, and have the ribs.

I think I will wind it up here. With getting highspeed internet back again last night, I have a lot of locs I have written at odd times at work that I need to complete and send out, and this will be one of them. We hope your Christmas will be happy and pain-free, and see you again in 2015.

Brad Foster, bwfoster@juno.com

At first I thought the logo background graphic was to illustrate the zine title literally, then on closer examination I realized it was not so much an image of a "broken" toy, but more of an "unassembled" one. But, so close!

"Late Middle Age Crisis, or Early Old Age Senility?" Regarding that title alone, before even getting into the article itself, I vote for holding onto "Late Middle Age" as long as possible. I prefer to think,

since my plan is to hit *at least* 111 years old, that my own middle age still has a bit of a ways to go. Yes, I like to try to keep certain illusions as alive as long as I can, including myself.

If I'm going to live to 111, I need to be in better shape than I am now. Spend the next 50 years without leaving my apartment? The horror, the horror...

Really bummed to read of the latest round of physical crap you are having to put up with. It actually looked like things were on an upswing there for a while, getting better treatments after better diagnosis, etc. But, maybe that is how it always works, upswings and downswings, can't have one without the other. Still, doesn't make the problems in the downs less crappy to deal with. Can only hope the next upswing will be coming soon.

Your comments about your habit of exploring places in your mind just before you drop off to sleep were of interest, but I have to admit that I spend those moments trying to clear that kind of stuff from my mind. Have found, unless I am totally physically exhausted before going to bed, that if I let my mind keep moving around over ideas and places and such, I will take longer to get to sleep. I try to kind of clear it all out, so I can drop into sleep. Have found the best thing is to read before sleeping, as I think trying to concentrate on the printed page in the softer light of my bedroom helps to actually make me sleepy, and with the focus of concentrating on the book, can often find myself starting to drift off. Of course, this whole plan is totally screwed if I am at a particularly interesting part of a book – then I'll lie there an extra hour reading. But, you know, that's the risk one takes!

Some of my best ideas come while my mind free-associates before falling asleep. I may be exploring Fraggie Rock on my hands and knees one moment, and have the complete plot of a short story in my head the next. I even keep a note pad and pencil next to the bed, just in case...

I am a bit concerned to read how this might all be leading you to stop drawing and writing. (And let's be honest here, that is a totally selfish concern, as I always look forward to new stuff from you!). I know for my own part I could probably never stop drawing just for my own amusement, but much of it would not move on to the finished art phase, but probably stay as sketches and such if there was nowhere to show, or reason to show, anything more finished. It's that moment of pure creation when I am doodling and an idea starts to form that is the most fun. After that, while I still enjoy seeing a drawing through to completion, it can be more work than anything else at times. Keep that pencil and pad of paper nearby at all times, ready for when the mood strikes you!

And, possibly, the idea of going back through your old art to scan it might re-ignite the interest in drawing. Who really knows? We'll all just have to see how it moves along. (But I am hoping for the occasional piece, because you have already shown you have a mind that is constantly working over ideas, and I'd like to think that you will still come up with things in the future you want to get down on paper.)

One thing that may help, eventually, is not "having" to draw anything. For a long time I've put off things I wanted to draw because someone had paid me to draw Daphne and Velma sinking in quicksand, or the Powerpuff Girls pole dancing, and it has just about killed the instinct to draw entirely. Even now, I have a number of things on my slate that have to be finished before I can do whatever I want. Not anything as goofy as the examples I gave, but demanding in other ways.

"Paying the Troll" was interesting, and brought up a very valid point about the difference of doing a drawing based on a widely known corporate type of character as a fan, over taking the designs of a single person, working hard to establish themselves, and using those to your own ends. Lots of possibility for grey areas, but many of those grays I can come up with are rather dark ones, and I think should be avoided.

E.T. Bryan's list of list of his favorite Halloween night movies was certainly interesting, as aside from "Nightmare Before Christmas," I doubt many people would come up with the others when they think of movies that have any Halloween connection. (Oh, and I LOVE "Arsenic and Old Lace" too! Have probably watched it fifty times, and look forward to watching it fifty more!)

Great movie, full of in-jokes! I don't think I have a videotape and I know I don't have a DVD.

If I believed that angels actually existed, I would say you were found by one to help you to the drug store. What you *did* luck into was an exceptionally kind human being, which is better than angels, because they really are real.

And she didn't pick my pocket, either!

Oh, and as far as things to read. If you can lay your hands on the new second volume of the Mark Twain Autobiography, he goes into wonderful curmudgeonly overdrive in much of this. Just finished a section where he basically lays into religion with a vigor that was great to behold, and still several hundred pages left to go!

I tried to borrow the first volume, but no luck so far. I've read previous collections of Twain's ramblings that were titled his "autobiography," and wonder if the new one is much different.

Timothy C. Marion, timothy.marion@rocketmail.com

Thanks for sending me *Broken Toys 23*, which is the first electronic fanzine I've received in many years. In fact, I was a member of FAPA and working for some Cloddish Chumps when a fan from your very neck of the woods (I believe, but I'm fuzzy on geography), Jim Caughran, offered me his electronic zine as an attachment to his email. I explained to him that since my email at the time came through the Chumps and they didn't care for me to open attachments from outside the firm (something I and others ended up doing anyway), I really shouldn't open it. He was kind enough to take the entire contents and copy them into an email to me. I was properly thankful and wrote him back a duly appreciative loc ... and never heard from him again. Why, I don't know. I doubt that it had anything to do with the content of my loc. Maybe he didn't appreciate the fact that, in FAPA, I couldn't take seriously his suggestion that I follow the punctuation rules used by *The New York Times* (whom I hardly regarded as an authority).

Unfortunately, that wasn't my only sour experience with electronic fanzines. In 2011, a number of apas in which I had participated in the past were having anniversary mailings. I just barely missed APA-50's anniversary, but this was partly intentional as I was concerned that I might write something bitter that I (and probably others) would regret. Since I had just (re)discovered H.P. Lovecraft, George R.R. Martin and a host of other reading adventures, I decided I would write about same in a catch-all apazine, and appropriately send it through the Lovecraft apa, the Esoteric Order of Dagon, as well. In addition, it was intended to function as an electronic fanzine:

it was only six pages long so I PDF'd it and emailed it to numerous friends inside and outside of fandom. The response was extremely underwhelming. The people in the apas mostly ignored it, except for one fellow with whom I had been corresponding off and on. Only one friend I know of, someone from high school but who had later attended regional conventions as well, bothered to open it and make some laudatory comments: she actually told me she had read the last page (about my loss of Jesse) to the English class she teaches. And one of the comic-book scripters (Roy Thomas) emailed me and explained about one of his Lovecraft adaptations which seemed to contain elements from an R.E. Howard story. For everyone else, *it was just too damn much trouble to open.*

So in your case, since I didn't want to try to open *Broken Toys 23* on the screen and try to read and respond to it that way, I printed it out at a place where I now occasionally work. It not only printed it front and back and in color, but also stapled it with two staples on the side and did a much neater job than I could have, and that's saying something. And of course, it's much easier to read now that it's printed out for me and I won't have to have the computer on (a terrible hassle by itself) just to read it.

I shouldn't sound so surprised, but Lloyd Penney actually said something very perceptive on this subject (well, sort of) in a recent issue of *SF Commentary*: "I can only imagine that a fanzine from the '40s or '50s would see electronic zines and a place to store them as pure science fiction, but us jaded modern fans would rather go back to paper zines and complain about those phony ezines... For readers of such a far-seeing literature, we sure can be short-sighted and conservative."

But anyway, as to the actual contents of your zine, reading about your increasing physical infirmities really makes me angry, because it makes me feel so helpless. Not only is there no way I can help you from here, with my own dwindling resources, but there's no way I could help you even if I were there. I know that I have overcome some arthritic conditions with exercise, but this is hardly the same thing. If I had been that first doctor you had seen, I probably would have prescribed those exercises too! Which seems to have had almost fatal results. Maybe much fewer of those exercises? Like, instead of doing 10 repetitions, start off with just one or two, then wait an hour or more, and do one or two more, etc., until you see if that has any beneficial value – or otherwise. Hate also to read that this interferes with your writing and your art. Glad at least to read that you found some medicine which kills the symptoms for a while. I hope your situation improves.

Your cartoon on page 5 – I love it. The old geezer stands on the table hawking his free fanzine, "There are 3 Hugo Award nominated contributors, 2 WorldCon reports, an interview with a well-known pro writer, an article by the TAFF winner, and tons of other goodies...and all I ask for is a bit of egoboo!" To which the response is, shush, "The Doctor is explaining The Force to Mr. Spock."

I feel like I was once that old coot on that table, desperately trying to give away his fanzine for locs. Only in my case, when I was doing a fanzine, people would see how fancy it looked and say with glittering eyes, "Sure, I'll take one! I'll write you a loc!" Only to not hear from them again until the next issue had come out, at which point they expected that too. I very much regret the hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars I spent on fandom in the Twenty-Augths printing elaborate fanzines and going to worthless conventions full of people who didn't know me. Looking back on it now, considering how generous I was with my fanzines, I almost feel like I must have been some sort of fucking fanitarian.

(But what did I expect, anyway? I'm the sort of loser who would hold parties at his house when his parents were out of town, and only one person would come.)

Of course, neither you nor I, Taral, feel total alienation from media fandom, either. I have some resonance with The Doctor (well, the Tom Baker years anyway, certainly not the current clown), you and I have both enjoyed *Star Trek*, but then I absolute hate, loathe and despise *Star Wars*. Well, except for some of the comics and toys, I guess..

Brrrr...! Eric Mayer definitely wins the 2013 award for being an even more bitter and angry fan than myself. "My desire (likely to be honored) is that I not be recalled at all. Mary has strict instructions that fandom is not to be alerted to my passing. Who cares, anyway?" I guess when we no longer see bitter letters from Eric Mayer in fanzines, we'll have to assume he's no longer with us. In my case, I don't expect to be remembered very much after my death because I don't seem to be remembered very much here in life. In death, I'm even less active than I am now, so why should anyone think of me? Probably Panda (huge 17-lb. tuxedo cat) would feel abandoned again (if I were to die suddenly, that is), but that would be about it.

A couple of layout glitches where you "jumped the shark" a little bit. In Tom Turriton's letter, you leave off his words in the middle of a line. Fortunately, his thought his resumed on the very next line, so no harm done. On the next page, however, you completely drop off at least one line when you write, "*Our mutual friends, Lisa and Yi, were invited along for the occasion, which made it all the ...* " Should I ask you to send me a complete copy and I will swap out those two pages (15 and 16 that is, since I had them printed front & back)?

There was only one word missing - "merrier." I've fixed that and the other problem in all the master copies, and sent a new one to Bill to post. Sheesh. No matter how many times an issue is proofread, there are always mistakes.

Literature we have in common ... I've probably read all, or nearly all, of the Kurt Vonnegut I have. Never read Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, howeve! Is it good?

I enjoyed it the first time I read it, maybe 30 years ago. But I enjoyed it all the more when I reread it recently. 30 years of reading and bringing my own education up to snuff certainly helped me appreciate the subtler twists and ironies of the Ward Moore/ Avram Davidson novel about the 200- year-old survivor of the American Revolution - it throws a lot of light onto the modern "Tea Partier," too.

The worst drivers in the world are those behind baby carriages!



The Bag Lady of Rochdale College (A Worm's Eye View?)

I guess it's not a very flattering picture, but Judith Merrill as a bag lady was the image that flitted across my mind while searching for a title. She was said to have been a handsome young woman in the 1930s, but I only knew her much later in life, when her mannish features had been accentuated by age, and a casual disregard for her appearance. Often seen in ill-fitting, dowdy clothes, it was hard not to think of the sort of homeless female vagabond one sees witlessly wandering the streets. Yet Judy's mind was anything *but* dulled by hard booze and harder knocks

In spite of the fact that I didn't know Judy well enough to call her by her first name, everybody did – so I will as well. But I doubt even her friends could deny that her normal attire would fit in around any casual male environment – a shipping dock, say, or a cheap diner on a bleak November night, where everyone else wears a patched parka with coffee stains on the cuffs and has fingers yellowed by years of the tobacco habit. Nor did Judy live a settled existence, ordered by the clock. Indeed, at times she did not even have a fixed address.

Judith Merrill was the first science fiction writer I met. At the time, I lived in Parkdale, just as I do now. But 1971 was a different era, and I was a different person. While I had always been fascinated with anything to do with astronomy or space travel, in 1971 I had only just discovered science fiction as a genre. A corner grocery down the street from my home sold used magazines for ten and fifteen cents each. One of them, in fact, contained the ad for OSFiC that lured me into fandom. Imagine where we would all be if I had passed up that creased, dog-eared copy of *Fantastic*, and had spend my dimes on *Befuddling Technoscience Tales*, instead?

The nearest library to me at the time was a modern reconstruction of what I seem to recall was a Shakespearean grammar school. When I moved back to Parkdale in 1991, I was pleased to see that, except for the addition of an absurd glass and steel entrance, the High Park Branch was much the same as it had been in 1971. By luck, I happened to pick up a pink sheet of paper from a table near the door one day. It said:

At High Park Branch, 228 Roncesvalles Ave.

SCIENCE FICTION EVENING
Thursday, March 25th, 8.30 P.M.

Come to discuss your favorite authors and books with Judith Merrill, science fiction writer and anthologist from the Toronto Public Libraries, Spaced Out Branch.

ADMISSION FREE!
Everyone welcome



Parkdale Branch Public Library

Naturally, I went. Looking back 42 years, I'm not sure if I even knew who Judith Merrill was at the time. But, whoever she was, the flyer said that she was a science fiction writer. What else mattered?

I arrived a little late and found a squat old lady with long grey hair seated in a plain chair, with a dozen or so listeners forming a modest audience around her. I was brimming over with questions to ask – though the nature of those questions now escapes me completely. Not one was ever answered, unfortunately. Judy had apparently just seen *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *that* was all she would talk about. I went home a somewhat disillusioned young fan.

I didn't know then, of course, that I would be hearing a lot more about Judith Merrill in the coming years.

Judy was not native to Toronto. She was from The Bronx and had been a member of the Hydra club, before the war. She married or slept with about half the Futurians, and had a brief but furious career as a writer, frequently collaborating with her lovers. For reasons sufficient unto Judy, she abandoned writing fiction herself, and turned to editing New Wave anthologies. *England Swings* launched a fashion for often unintelligible, pretentious "Speculative Fiction." Having lost interest in traditional pulp adventures, Judy had become a passionate advocate for any sort of remotely surreal, symbolist, or absurdist *avant garde* literature. Dismissing the parochial name "science fiction," Judy rebranded it the much groovier-sounding "Spec Fic." The new fad resulted in a spate of New Wave anthologies such as *Dangerous Visions*. While they made waves at the time, unfortunately most of the New Wave looks rather quaint, today – it was so obviously desperate to borrow the luster from more "respectable" brands of literature.

Judy went one better than that, in fact. She adopted her favourite authors into the Science Fiction genre the way Mormons adopt dead relatives into the faith – whether or not they ever wanted to belong to the Church of the Later Day Saints, or had even heard of them. Similarly, it didn't matter to Judy whether Borges or Kafka had ever read or even known about Science Fiction.

Judy's interests had clearly become quite cosmopolitan, compared to her Hydra days. I remember that Madge, the first custodian of the Spaced Out Library, sometimes complained that Judy insisted that the collection waste a certain amount of shelf space on books that were about as relevant as the *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Mein Kampf* or Tim LaHaye's claptrap *Left Behind* novels.

Judy had heavy-duty influence on the Spaced Out, however, and could not be denied. She gained this influence through having somehow talked the Toronto Public Library board into founding a special collection for "speculative fiction" in the first place. As the core of the new collection, Judy donated her own books and magazines. It was perhaps not as generous a gesture as it seemed. I overheard other remarks by Madge, at the SOL, that Judy had made a pretty sweet deal for herself – in exchange for a van

full of ratty paperbacks, she had received a free office, a modest stipend from the TPL and other perks. The pages with Judy's own stories had all been cut or torn out, and, even when not defaced, the material was not in especially desirable condition. Many, if not most, of the books and magazines in the collection eventually had to be replaced.

That was one of the things you learned about Judy, if you knew her at all well. Even while rendering valuable public service, she was expert at looking out for Number One.

She probably had to be. Judy seems to have been one independent lady, and, after a certain point in life, she never bowed to orthodoxy to get married again, or to find a regular job. She lived a Bohemian lifestyle that I can only admire, and have, in my own small way, done what I could to emulate. She lived by her wits, by her ability to charm, by her connections and by her *chutzpah*.

Judy was not too proud, for instance, to sell her soul to the CBC. Despite her own rarified tastes in SF literature, for a year or two she played host to Saturday-nights reruns of *Dr. Who*.

I had a personal experience of Judith Merrill's survival instincts. The occasion was sometime in the later 1970s, when I was one of a number of precocious and rather aggressive fans. We weren't part of Judy's charmed circle, but she was a familiar figure. And Judy was always careful to remain on good terms with the local fandom, both from natural friendliness and the good sense to not alienate readers. One day we were having an early dinner at a place on Spadina Avenue called the Sun Wa. Spadina had turned into Toronto's "new" Chinatown, and abounded in excellent Chinese restaurants of every description, that even *we* could afford. The Sun Wa specialized in savory noodle dishes: big heaping plates of flat noodles, round noodles, rice noodles, every kind of noodle, served with delicious black bean sauce, peanut sauce, oyster sauce or chili sauce. Any dish for a price that wouldn't buy an entree anywhere else. We had no idea, however, that the Sun Wa was also one of Judy's favourite Chinese restaurants. The place was packed, that day, when in through the door came Judy. She looked for an empty table, then, finding none, Judy recognized *us*. She didn't hesitate a moment before pulling up a chair and joining us, just as though we were old friends. I think we were a little flattered and made room, as though *we* thought we were old friends, too.

It was one of those moments that make fandom a little special, actually.

Judy's true friends were not really the local fans, though. I knew one or two of the older OSFiC members were closer to Judith Merrill than the current generation, but they had drifted out of the club by that time. Judy's private life was not unduly visible from outside. It was generally known among the fans that she had shadowy connections to media personalities in the CBC, connections in the Toronto Public Library board, and connections to literary doyen. She had had her career honoured by the International Authors' Festival at the Toronto Harborfront Center, an unheard-of honour for a mere ghetto writer. Judy was a founding member of Rochdale College, a student-run college and co-operative living experiment., that – as a Marxist – must have seemed to her like a mission to raise consciousness.

Consciousness-raising, maybe. But I remember the few club meetings in the Rochdale building, downtown. The place was a dump. Dark, concrete tunnels with tiny rooms that looked like kindergarten classrooms. There were likely more drug dealers than instructors or professors. I never saw the dorms, but the smell in the halls was fecund, and you had to take care not to step in undesirable organic residues left by the half-wild canine population. After a few years, the college was closed, and the building itself gutted for redevelopment. It appears, in fact, that the establishment of the college had originally been a tax dodge, regardless of the idealism of some of the founders. It was neither the first nor last noble ideal to founder on human nature.

In an act of Establishment Revenge, the building was reopened as the Senator David A. Croll Apartments.

Cast adrift from Rochdale, Judy occupied a number of humble addresses over the next few years. Now and then I'd see her, frumpy and ruffled as ever, at conventions, but she didn't seem to be in her natural environment there. What her natural environment might be was something of a mystery, though. She had an apartment, somewhere. When she couldn't come up with the rent, she lived in her office at the Spaced Out Library – by then renamed The Merrill Collection. When I was mailing her complementary copies of OSFiC's monthly newsletter, I addressed them to an apartment on Jarvis Street. Jarvis had once been a boulevard of millionaires. The families of the actor Raymond Massey and his brother, Lt. Governor Vincent Massey, had mansions on Jarvis Street, and had once paid workers to dump tons of snow on the street for the delight of an elderly family member on her deathbed. By the 1970s, though, it was a low-rent district, lined with nondescript low-rise apartments, and the mansions had become boarding houses or outright flophouses. Independence and the Bohemian lifestyle came at a cost.

Judith Merrill was also one of the founders of the Toronto Hydra meetings, created in imitation of the original New York writers' club to which she had belonged 30 years before. With John Robert Colombo, she invited potential young writers to discuss the business of writing, the writers and writing itself. At least in theory. I can only name a few of the members, and never witnessed them in actual discussion. Phyllis Gotlieb was a member, though, and also a good friend of mine. She kept putting my name forward – but her efforts were ignored, and I was never invited to attend. On the other hand, I wasn't greatly exerting myself to write professionally, so I didn't feel as slighted as I might have.

But since the group gradually grew to include other friends of Judy's and John's, who had no more ambition to become a professional writer than I did, the sense of being slighted was never entirely absent, either. It was one of many frustrations in life that I've learned to live with, and with little regret in retrospect. So much of fandom is about who you know ... but, for better or worse, also who you *don't* know. If you don't learn to be philosophical about it, you can spend a lot of time in a slow burn.

To tell the truth, I was never an enthusiastic reader of Judith Merrill's fiction. I have a battered paperback edition of *Survival Ship and Other Stories*, published by Kakabeka Books. With a publisher named after a waterfall in Northwestern Ontario, who could resist? I also have an old Pyramid paperback with a neat Schoenherr cover, titled *Out of Bounds*, that I recently read ... and that partly inspired this piece. My collection is completed by two absurdly mispackaged paperbacks. *A Shot in the Dark* has a lovely cover – for a mystery novel. *Sin in Space* was originally *Mars Child*, before it was given a ridiculous cover painting of a stripping space blonde and leering astronaut. Actually, *Mars Child* was only half Judy's. The name on the cover is "Cyril Judd," a pseudonym for the team of Judith Merrill and Cyril Kornbluth. You have to wonder who thinks up these inappropriate marketing schemes.

When the biography, *Better to Love, the Life of Judith Merrill* was published in 2002, I manfully resisted the temptation to spend \$29.95 for a copy.

Clearly I don't regard Judith Merrill as one of the giants of the science fiction genre. Her main accomplishments seem to have been as an editor and guiding light of the New Wave, and as one of the founders of the famous Milford writers' workshop. In Canada, all that was pretty much behind her, as she shifted toward using her influence on her circle of friends and connections to act behind the scenes. The establishment of the Spaced Out Library was one of her accomplishments, as it was to gain a foot in the door for science fiction's recognition at the Harborfront festival. One of her last ventures into editing, and the only one in Canada, was the first volume of the anthology of Canadian SF, *Tesseracts*. She was named to the Hall of Fame by the SFWA. But to look at a list of her published fiction, I find it all a little puzzling.

It doesn't seem to be what Judy accomplished as a writer that has left the biggest impression in people's minds. Possibly not her role as editor, either. Frankly, I think she is overrated as a science fiction writer, and her reputation as an editor seems to have faded somewhat over time. What she accomplished out of sight may prove to be more durable, as the Spaced Out Library, *aka* The Merrill Collection, is today housed in a state-of-the-art facility, occupying an entire floor of a gorgeous faux Art Deco building near the University of Toronto, and is considered one of the major collections of science fiction in the world. The Milford writer's workshops may have furthered the careers of many valuable writers who might possibly have slipped through the cracks, otherwise. Even Hydra North may have made a difference to someone's career.

What I think admire most about Judith Merrill isn't her career, but that she appears to have lived life *entirely on her terms*. Regardless of a relatively small body of writing, now mostly obscure, she possesses a significant reputation in the field. She made a place for herself in influential circles, and found ways to earn her living in Canada *despite* an obvious inclination to avoid regular, salaried employment. I doubt Judy ever tolerated a "boss" in her life, or ever did much that she didn't want to do. She lived a free, if probably not easy life. Judy did it for Judy, of course – not for anyone else. But, honestly, in what other way can a person get anything important done?

Are you sure that's a camel? I don't see Hope or Crosby anywhere.

CANARY SONG: One of the last things I finished this year, is a lengthy short story of about 7,600 words. It's a pastiche of the William Hope Hodgson tales about an English "ghost-finder" named Thomas Carnacki. They were all written before 1914, I believe, as the author was killed in France during World War I. His novels *House on the Borderland* and *The Nightlands* are classics in the Dark Fantasy genre, and the Carnacki short stories have been popular enough to be in intermittent print ever since. I've wanted to try my hand at it for a long time, but the idea was just one of many harebrained schemes that I've had and then flung into a corner to forget about. Then, while my mind was in its usual state of unsupervised wandering earlier this month, I unexpectedly worked out a plot down to the smallest detail! With me, the best time to do anything is not when I expected to, so I sat down and began writing. Once I was done, I faced the problem of what to do with my newly written potboiler. It turned out that I was not the only one to have had the idea of writing my own Carnacki stories. There have been other pastiches and recently even a collection of them. So I've committed "The Canaries in the Dark" to the tender mercies of professional magazine. I can't expect more than a token payment, but it would be the first time in ages that I'll have been paid to write ... and the first time for a work of fiction. Don't look for "The Canaries in the Dark" on the Hugo ballot any time soon, though. Or possibly anywhere soon. I may have to wait months even for a standard rejection slip.

The Christmas That Nearly Was

What can you expect from a year with a “13” in it? However, it hasn’t all been bad – I finally started my disability payments, for instance. But what *was* bad was bad enough. This year will be known in local annals as the year of The Great Toronto Ice Storm. There have been two or three severe winter weather events in the last few years. There was the Big Dump of 1999, for instance, when three consecutive snow storms dropped almost four feet of the white stuff on Toronto in the space of ten days. And the year before, Eastern Ontario and much of Quebec was shellacked by the Ice Storm of 1998. But the last ice storm I remember that troubled Toronto was in the mid-1960s. It was beautiful when I was 14 or 15. And the ice storm of 2013 was just as beautiful to me in my dotage – but these days I’m mindful of the trees that are destroyed, the damage done to homes and buildings, and people badly injured. This year, the power went out over much of Toronto just two days before Christmas, forcing hundreds of thousands of city dwellers to huddle for warmth in the darkness. Eight days later, and there are still a few thousand households without power.

My friend Steven’s house was particularly hard hit. Ice encrusting a tree can multiply its weight many times, causing branches to break off, or even entire trees to collapse. A large branch overhanging Steven’s two-story semi-detached home broke off and struck the roof, tearing power lines down with it. Due to the hazard of loose lines on the ground, the street had to be blocked by the police until city workers could repair the lines. Unable to stay at home, Steven had no choice but to evacuate his elderly mother and his sister to an aunt’s place out of town. The street is still off limits, he says, and he doesn’t think he’ll be returning home for at least another couple of days.

My own Christmas was also spoiled. For more than 20 years, I’ve spent Christmas Day at my sister Christine’s. When my two nephews were young, opening presents was a big part of the celebration. As they grew older and didn’t want toys and games, the focus shifted to the family dinner. There have been other changes as well. An aunt and uncle who also attended the annual get-togethers died a couple of years apart. My other sister, Karen, adopted two little girls. My nephews, now in their 20s, have jobs that demand they work on the 25th, so the get-togethers have actually occurred a couple of days *before* Christmas for the last two years.

This year, though, Christmas had to be cancelled outright. For one thing, my sisters live on the same street in the suburbs, but *I* have to be fetched from urban Toronto, and the streets this year were treacherous. For another, there was a temporary loss of power in my sister’s neighborhood, which meant no turkey. For another, everything was coated in a glass-hard sheet of ice that Chris spent most of Christmas chipping off trees, the driveway, the car, the sidewalk, parts of the house, and any squirrels that hadn’t been quick enough to get under cover. No one had a good time in my absence.

But it hasn’t been as bad as all that. On her way to work before Christmas, Chris managed to drop by my apartment with a full shopping bag. She brought me a turkey roll, cranberry sauce, ready-bake biscuit dough, candies, some Coke and my presents. I had a smaller bag to hand back – a couple of liqueur-flavoured Christmas cakes for each of my sisters’ families and gift cards at Tim Hortons for my nephews. The turkey roll was quite good, actually.

My sister had generously splurged to get me a new vacuum. The old hand vac I had died after a few year’s service, as they inevitably do. The new one was a deluxe job that I wasn’t expecting. It’s a rechargeable

stand-up that I can push around the apartment without worrying about a cord. But for small jobs, the works pop out and can be used as a regular hand-vac. My nephews had found a souvenir set of American Civil War bullets to give me. Nicely chrome-plated, so that I don't have to worry about lead poisoning, they reproduce seven different sorts of round, from a .69 cal. musket ball to a .44 cal. Colt Army Revolver. As it happens, I own some actual bullets from Gettysburg, that I acquired during the centennial in the 1960s. Right away, I noticed that lead is a lot heavier than chromed pot-metal.

I had also gotten a package from Marc Schirmeister about a week before Christmas. This turned out to contain a couple of books and some DVDs. One of the books was on Siegel & Schuster's least famous creation – *Funnyman!* As bad ideas go, it was a beaut! Yet perhaps not as monumentally miscalculated as all that – after all, *Captain Marvel* and *Plastic Man* were contemporary superheroes who also played for laughs, and they were moderately successful in their day. The other book was the autobiography of veteran manga artist Yoshohiro Tatsumi ... told as a comic! It's humongous, easily larger than the telephone book for Cackleberry Corners, Maine. It should be a fascinating read. The best of the DVD's was the Aardman Studios collection of *Creature Comforts America*.

So, well, not the best of Christmases. But, it hasn't been the worst of them, either. I've been gloomier in past years, and can look back at a pretty even divide between good luck and bad over the last twelve months. I might even count myself lucky to do so well next year. Of course, I have my fingers crossed – like the selfish bugger I am, I'm hoping for better.

Goals for 2014? Well, that would be material for another article, wouldn't it?

