

Fiction at Work

Issue Archive #6, Issues 22 – 24, December 08

Issue #22, 1 December 08, *Down at the Twenty-Five*, by Michael Neal Morris..... p. 2

Issue #23, 7 December 08, *Flashboat*, by Heather Palmer p. 3

Issue #24, 14 December 08, *Hunger*, by Rupert Merkin..... p. 5

Issue #22

1 December 08

Down at the Twenty-Five

by Michael Neal Morris

He sat upright, watching the Redskins and Giants battle, his left hand fingering the tiny joystick on the arm of the wheelchair. His eyes scanned the line of scrimmage, and then shot further open at Joe Morris' amazing block on Dexter Manley.

A play went through his head. He lined up slot left. He sprinted twelve yards, and then cut in at a forty-five degree angle toward the post. He leapt for the ball as if lifted by wires and caught the ball smiling. He was hit as soon as the ball was tucked -- he knew he would be -- and fell rudely to the artificial turf. He heard then a ring, like a dozen phones in one booth and thought "Hold the ball. Don't let go of the ball."

His wife stood beside the television with a pot holder in her right hand and both hands on her hips. "I've got lunch ready. Let's eat."

"Oh, sure." he said kindly. "But watch. This guy, number seventeen, I like him. He's got great poise."

McCarty had poise. He could stay in that pocket listening to the eager panting of defensive linemen and throw the ball a mile, even at the last second. He was no scrambler, but he'd take hits all day if it meant winning.

He looked down and found a spoonful of peas in his lap. "Constance, could you, uh..." he started to say, and then decided to wait and see if there would be more to clean up.

Someone had taken a club to his forehead. He awoke, but his body was stuck to the turf, his limbs held by invisible irons. A smell, like death with thick perfume, invaded his nostrils and his face shook.

He sipped the iced tea then shuddered because he thought he had been holding a beer. She had taken, he noticed, the dishes and tried to clean up but a small stain rested on the yellow shirt, like a dirty baby on his stomach.

The stain, light brown, grew darker then spread. It soon covered the lower portion of his body and the wheels of the chair. As his shoulders were being swallowed, he heard the commentator exclaim: "Ow! Davis really took a shot that time." He moved the joystick wildly, but the motor just clicked with the sound of an empty gun.

Constance then was holding him, kneeling beside the chair and clutching his shoulders, his tremendous sobs pressing against her neck. He kicked at the set, at the stretcher, at the clean shirt of the doctor. But the leg stood still and the set continued its roar of static. Then the room was quiet and she began to loosen her grip and stand. She stood there a moment frightened by his face which was purple with rage. His right hand was clenched rock tight and the veins in his forearm swelled. She touched the fist hesitantly. He whimpered during the stadium's polite applause before play resumed, then made tiny shrieking noises until sleep came like a blanket.

Issue #23

7 December 08

Flashboat

by Heather Palmer

Then Tony says the difference between a flashlight and a flashboat got nothing to do with water and I know Tony's dumb, but Jeez.

But I ask him anyway what's a flashboat cause I remember Phili bragging about boats, even though Phili's that guy who only stops when the red light's blinking.

I used to fight his brags until I read this one line how red lights make and break laws at the same time. That's how it is for Phili and me. We been breaking since.

But here's Tony bringing up this boat that I thought Phili'd been lying about, so I ask him.

It's before the ship comes in, see, Tony tips his head to a pint, The light's so as not to crash.

I munch a pretzel and salt litters my dress. It's white so I sweep off crumbs cause Phili likes white to be white. I can't stand white like a giant hole sucking color.

Lucky for me, Stewart's delivers pretzels fresh every Thursday so they're too crisp to keep off crumbs.

Tony's laugh at me makes him spit beer, forces him to wipe a soggy mustache.

So it's a boat, then?

I ask cause I don't want the two of us silent and staring at each other when Phili comes, and as Tony talks I remember a whore my brother loved.

I met her one night her juice-smearred lips impressed me, how she didn't care. She asked my brother How come you never told me about her? The whore pointed to her knees: all sores and cigarette burns. See that? She said. That's men. Men all over.

I met Phili three weeks later. First thing I notice he smoked.

Lee, hey, you alright? Tony's fat hands form a snap.

Yeah, stop it.

Didn't mean to get you going, Jeez.

But I wasn't going anywhere so I bit my pretzel and shrugged.

Why you so interested in boats, anyway?

Just flashboats.

Why then?

With my mouth salt-stuffed I wave over the bartender. Tony offers but I slam my five on the counter. Then he looks toward the door and sees Phili enter but I don't so when a hand brushes my mouth-crumbs I shutter.

Tense? Phili asks, his thumb on my bottom lip.

She's been this way all night. Asking weird boat questions.

So now you want a boat?

I don't want a boat.

Tony laughs while Phili orders his first round. I say I'm going for a smoke.

Before Phili I never smoked. I don't blame him for anything except maybe the white dress, but turns out I learned a lot from Phili: beer followed smokes, skipped meals, long hours, short hair cuts with even shorter dresses. But Phili and me work in a way that makes me wonder about the lights.

Back inside Tony pulls his belt buckle loose to show Phili something, a scar, I guess.

This a regular thing for you two?

Phili pulls my head to his chest, kisses my crown and his breath smells heavy.

Tony, after you're done with business there, I have one more question about the flashboat.

Goddam, woman. You see, Phili?

Yep.

So what's it now?

What happens when there isn't a flashboat?

There is.

But what if a boat don't see it?

Tony glances to Phili like his woman just gone. Phili's arms tighten around my chest, meant as a warm nudge, I know, but still.

I loosen off him and go outside where the porch-light's started to flicker.

I'd be happy to let it flicker but some guy tries to fix it and the bulb burns his hands red. I can't help but watch. Maybe when he's done I'll offer a smoke.

Issue #24

14 December 08

Hunger

by Rupert Merkin

The first morph that Jonah had was an artificial mouth. He had it placed on his neck, below his Adam's apple. When he ate it was with both mouths, chewing simultaneously, the flavours doubled, intensified. Within a month his waistline had grown by three inches. So, Jonah had a Black Hole Storage System installed into his stomach. This meant that all the food that entered his gut was instantly vaporised. A big man, tall and naturally stout, he grew alarmed as his weight plummeted. I need to eat more, thought Jonah with relish, and so installed a third mouth, this one a foot wide and morphed directly over his stomach. He stopped seeing his friends. He stopped going rock-climbing on the weekend. Instead he spent all of his free time sat in his armchair, stuffing his mouths with food.

However, he was still losing weight. Jonah considered having the Black Hole Storage System unmorphed, but then he wouldn't be able to eat as much as he wanted. What I need, he thought, is another hand so I can feed all the mouths at once. He returned to the Double-Helix clinic. Dr. Muchison, a man of eighty with the morphed body of a thirty-year-old bodybuilder, welcomed him in like an old friend. Two hours later and Jonah came out with his right wrist splitting into two right hands. He used these hands to simultaneously feed his birth-given mouth and the one on his neck.

Still he was not able to get the balance right. Now he was gaining weight again. So Jonah added a second, smaller Black Hole Storage System at the start of his intestines, and another mouth below the stomach, half as big as the one above. He had another hand morphed onto his chest above the larger mouth

Finally Jonah had it. His mouth to Black Hole Storage System ratio was perfect. He ate and ate and gained no weight. He sat in his pile of pizzas and pies, stale Danish pastries, and boxes of Belgian chocolates. And in his chair he remembered the times he would go rock climbing on a Saturday morning, about how he used to be a big, rugged man who could be shy with new people one minute, then greet them like an old friend an hour later. Now all he did was eat, alone, with his hands moving from food to mouth, the need in him a snarling, vicious animal. He put down a croissant and looked over his body. How had he become this thing?

Back at the clinic Dr. Murchison rolled his head around his muscular neck at the news that Jonah wanted to unmorph all of his extra mouths and hands, and uninstall the Black Hole Storage Systems.

"Well," said the doctor, "I'm afraid the unmorphing and uninstallation procedures are very expensive."

"Fine," said Jonah. "Do what you have to."

"Are you sure? Most people who unmorph end up back here. Each time you morph the procedure becomes more complicated, your genetic history more complex, and the costs escalate."

Jonah told the doctor he wouldn't be back again.

The procedure took so long that Jonah had to stay in the clinic overnight. The next morning he woke in

the thin single clinic bed overjoyed to find his body back to its former state. By nine o'clock he was hungry, but not in the same crippling manner. It was a nice feeling. He savoured the plain toast and jam brought to him by the nurse.

Gradually Jonah returned his old routines, meeting up with friends, getting up early on a Saturday morning to climb the west face of Aber Mountain. However it was not long before his old routines became just that - old. The same conversations about the weather or health or sports, whether it was a friend from twenty years or someone he'd met that night. Every hand up the mountain involved the same clenched fingers, the same grasping, reaching higher, but for what? What did he gain from reaching the top of the mountain?

Soon Jonah began to eat more, putting on weight, thinking how if he had his way he would just sit there forever, eating and eating, as that was as good a way as any of passing the time. It was not long before Jonah fingered his neck with his left hand. You know, he thought, what I need is....
