



Artifice Comics Presents

# BENTO BOX #14

**Bite-Sized Fiction**

*by Mark Bousquet, Frank Byrns, Tim Mathias, Louise M Hart, Jon Olson, Patrick Donovan, E N de Choudens and Zachary Houle*

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**THUNK**

by Mark Bousquet

I can stay up late and sleep in until midday. My employers never say anything as they value me too much. If work isn't done by the next morning, something will be said, but that hasn't happened since war broke out.

Everyone could see it coming.

At night, my father used to regale me with stories about his ancestors, who had fought in great battles.

"Their hard work is what has led us to where we are in life."

A few months later, two men came to the house to tell me he'd died. Father's death meant I inherited his legacy and had to do my duty for Queen and Kingdom.

He'd been poisoned.

I remember finding my father lying in the dirt beside a pool of drool mixed with blood. His eyes had rolled back while a purple tongue was left hanging over white teeth that had turned black.

No one was allowed to touch him, let alone retrieve the body.

My anger turned to tears, confusion, hurt and despair.

Night fell and the Queen asked if I was up to the job of replacing him.

"Allow me to prove myself, your Highness."

"What?" she asked, turning to her aides. "My people don't have time for this. Give him a test. Let us pray that he succeeds. War is here and we must have a Cleaner."

My father held his position for fifty years, but before dying it was clear that the torch was ready to be passed on.

There was much to learn which made me hungry to prove my worth.

The Queen's assistants brought me a test, which I devoured with what I feared was only a small percentage of his skill.

From that moment on, my workload never seemed to end.

One assignment blended into the next.

My friend, Ankles, told me to stop, but his requests put him in opposition to the Queen.

I told him to leave and never return.

He hasn't been seen since.

For seven years, battle raged. It has been said that this conflict has been bloodier than all the Great Wars of our ancestors combined.

I played my part.

Embraced a role.

This fight would not be lost because of me.

And it wasn't.

In victory, the people accepted me. This made me proud. As time moved on, however, my duties began to dwindle. There would be days between jobs, and once, an entire week passed without a single assignment. It would not be incorrect of you to think that I feared for my employment.

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No one wanted to talk about it, or answer any questions.

Once, I tried to ask the Queen, but her only response was to hand me a beating.

That was the second worst experience of my life, after losing Father.

At last, I've got an opportunity to prove myself to a woman who is both my employer and one true love.

There has been no work for three days, but I can hear the Queen's voice above me.

"We have you, at last, traitor! Do you deny these charges?"

"Nay! I am proud of betraying such a wretched, evil woman, as Queen Negala!"

"Call the Cleaner!" her Highness roared.

I heard my name and rushed forwards.

THUNK.

"This is the man who murdered your father!"

I see a bloodied human standing before me.

"Oh my!" he exclaimed. "You have gotten bigger, old friend."

Ankles?

But that means...

"Yes!" Ankle said as he fell to his knees. "All those times I snuck into your room? It was to spy on that hideous beast. I'd do anything to stop the Queen."

"Why!"

Ankles chuckled despondently.

"She is a wretched monster that is far worse than your father was or you ever could be. If only I could make people understand how the Queen kills and tortures her subjects in a mad quest for gold and power. There is—"

My mouth opened, I'd heard enough.

I bit down on Ankle's waist and tasted blood with guts.

Through tears for my father, the traitor was consumed.

I crushed every bone and drank from his organs.

Above me, the Queen said, "Best damn Cleaner we've ever had. Go to the village. Find some more traitors. Invent reasons if you have to. Our boy deserves a feast this night!"

**ESCAPE FROM ARAK STATION**

by Frank Byrns

*A*rak Station has long been known to be a haven for the deadliest and most nefarious men in the five systems. The spaceport stands on the edge of a massive black hole, whose gaping maw could consume it at any moment. This is why the men and women who live there never mention the past and rarely give the future a second thought.

*Today is the only day that matters.*

*The station's orbit works in opposition to the planet Arakanad. This means that its mass can block enough of the maw's gravitational pull to allow small ships to achieve escape velocity.*

*Useful for those who need a quick getaway....*

“If we don't pick up some speed the fighters will be in range in a couple of minutes.”

Sarai gave her co-pilot a look.

“Just sayin'...” Aegus mumbled.

Quance glared at his daughter.

“I just don't understand why you couldn't have stolen something faster...”

“It's not as if I had much of a choice, Dad!”

A plasma missile exploded, rocking the Sandraptor-class freighter.

“You know what... just forget it!” Sarai snapped. “I don't have time for this!”

Outside, incoming traffic was racing towards the spaceport orbiting high above the desolate planet below. Each ship was filled with pirates who were unfazed by the missiles exploding all around them. It was just another day for the scoundrels of Arak Station.

Sarai leaned forward and pushed down as hard as she could on the throttle that redlined the large ion engine rumbling beneath them. As she did so, another missile exploded. This one was much closer.

“C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon...”

Sarai jerked the yoke hard to the right, sending the freighter into a spin. She quickly corrected their uncontrolled descent and maneuvered the craft into a lane of traffic heading back towards Arak Station. The two Interceptors raced past, clearly not expecting such a move.

“We're going back?” Aegus asked.

“Not exactly.” Sarai jerked the yoke once again, sending the ship up and over the station. “They won't follow us to the dark side of Arakanad.”

Quance stood at the forward viewport as the ship crested the planet's horizon. To him, it looked like the black hole had turned all the stars out at once.

“You're willing to bet your life on that?”

“Hey, if you have a better idea...”

Neither of Sarai's companions answered.

“Thought so.”

One of the Interceptors suddenly peeled off and turned back towards the Station, leaving the other to continue the pursuit alone.

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“I guess you were right.”

“There's a Pikler in every crowd,” Sarai replied. “According to their training, the second pilot should have disengaged forty-five seconds ago.”

“So, what's your plan now?” Aegus asked. “I’m not liking the current one!”

Sarai jerked the stick hard to the right, and the freighter groaned under the enormous gravitational pressure exerted by the black hole.

“Watch and learn.”

The ship slowly moved into an orbit around Arakanad, but the Interceptor didn't follow. Instead, the craft continued onwards.

“What the... where's he going?”

“Do the math,” Sarai replied as her right hand punched buttons on the FTL drive.

“What?”

“Interceptor-Sevens have a mass a couple of magnitudes greater than these little Sandraptors. This means that while we're too light to be pulled in... he's not!”

The three of them watched as the Interceptor drifted towards the black hole. The craft shuddered as it was dragged forwards before disappearing into the darkness.

Sarai continued punching buttons on the FTL drive.

“Lightspeed in three... two... one...”

And they were gone.

HORIZON, PART THREE

by Tim Mathias

**A**s rays of early morning sunshine illuminated the rain-soaked streets of Horizon, a bleary-eyed detective looked at his watch. 6 AM. Roman hadn't slept since footage of Eden Hill had gone viral.

Thirty hours ago.

Roman had called in every available officer and still didn't have enough manpower. Tactical response teams were so overrun that they ended up having to leave prisoners on sidewalks as they dealt with the next emergency.

Robbery. Assault. Vandalism.

Roman watched as the doors to a nearby police van slammed closed on its criminal cargo. He got into his own car and followed it back to headquarters.

Ashley was waiting for him.

"How many stories do you need?"

"I had to know you were okay," she replied. "With everything that's happening in the Sink... I just wanted to make sure."

Ashley got out of Roman's chair and he slumped down into it.

"If it wasn't for that goddamn footage of the Guardian..."

Ashley waited for him to continue, but he did not finish his thought.

The implication was left hanging in the air.

"How does that make me responsible for what's been happening?"

"I blame you and every other parasite hungry for a story. No one cares about the repercussions.

Ashley raised her eyebrows. "Do you know how many reporters are out there?"

"I don't care. Whose video is running on all the stations?"

"If I hadn't done it, someone else would."

Roman stood up and stared at her with his tired, bloodshot eyes.

"People got hurt tonight."

"I'm sorry, really, but how am I responsible? No one – not even you – expected this reaction."

Roman shook his head.

"No, but you could have just let the story slide. This one time."

"Why?"

Roman threw his hands up. "I thought, knowing the history of this case, you'd exercise some restraint."

"It's my *job!*"

Roman went quiet for a moment. Ashley could see him grinding his teeth.

"If that's how you justify things... I think you ought to go and not come back for a while."

Ashley paused. "Listen, I'm sorry about all this, but you're overreacting."

"Just doing my job."

He was too tired to smirk.

Ashley stopped herself mid-sentence, having almost given the cab driver Roman's address.

*If I hadn't done it, someone else would have.*

Who was she trying to convince?

Roman was nothing if not grey. He'd never set or discussed boundaries.

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John Tayger had sent an email asking if she'd been covering events in the Sink.  
*Too dangerous & can no longer count on police cooperation.*  
Ashley opened her fridge and realized she'd made a home in the wrong place.  
*Relationship has soured.*

Ashley was woken by the sound of someone calling her.

"Ms. West."

The voice seemed to be coming from her laptop. She looked at the screen and was greeted by the presence of a familiar face.

"Blackbird," Ashley whispered. "What is this?"

"A conversation," she replied. "Is it weird for me to invite you to sit in your own kitchen?"

"Yes."

Blackbird shrugged. "Well... sorry. House rules really aren't my thing."

Ashley crossed her arms but said nothing.

"All right, guess my first impression wasn't as good as I'd have liked. I'll get right to it: I need your help."

"I'm not a criminal," Ashley replied.

"I haven't even said what it is that I'm asking you to do and you're already assuming it's illegal."

Blackbird shook her head.

"Is it?"

"Well, yes, but don't let that put you off. The plan will fail if we get caught, so it's in my interest to prevent that from happening."

"Mine too, so I'm saying no."

"You're in no position to decline." Blackbird's tone suddenly changed. "That detective cut you off. How long has it been since you've played on a level field?"

"No one is meant to know about that. I haven't told a soul!"

"Roman's put out a special directive to keep you away from... what was it ... *any areas that may be of particular interest to media personnel.*"

Ashley blushed as she pictured Roman typing the words on his keyboard.

"You've had that advantage for a long time. Built your career on it, some would say."

"What do you want?" Ashley asked. There was a slight quiver in her voice.

"The completion of two simple tasks."

"Can't you just hire some lackeys to do it?"

Blackbird tilted her head. "Help me and I'll make it worth your while."

"How?"

"I'll tell you who the Guardian is."

**LUNA'S WAY, PART ONE  
THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED**

by Louise M Hart

**1<sup>st</sup> August 1987**

**S**helagh took a bow. She enjoyed reciting Yeats' poetry and Arthur was always a receptive listener. "But I, being poor, have only my dreams, I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams." In the twilight, the cemetery gates towered above the lovers, casting deathly shadows across their faces. They skipped around the gravestones, like excited puppies, pausing whenever the aesthetics of a stone caught their eyes. They would have loved one another, if they had understood the concept. Instead, they made love to their own reflections and had sex against the sturdiest gravestone that they could find. At that moment, Shelagh ached, but nine months later, she felt much better and had moved into in a flat of her own, courtesy of the local council and the Department of Work and Social Security. R.I.P D.S.S.

**1<sup>st</sup> August 2012**

**L**una lay upon her hospital bed, her body rigid with fear and thought transcendence. The curtains were drawn around her, concealing her vulnerability from the other patients on the ward. She could hear her heart beating, the thuds reminding her that she was still alive.

Dr. Ali lifted his stethoscope from her chest.

"Why are you laughing?"

"It's the voices," said Luna.

"Do they tell you jokes?"

She wanted to tell the Dr. that she knew that he was wearing pretty, pink knickers with a lemon coloured bow on the front. She wanted to tell the Dr that it was okay to wear pretty, pink knickers with a lemon coloured bow on the front, but knew that his wife preferred red. "No jiggy, jiggy for him, tonight," she thought, without attempting to stifle her giggles.

"Your heart beat is very rapid," continued the Dr, "under the circumstances, it's understandable... quite normal."

"I'm telling you Dr," beseeched Luna, "I'm superhuman. Don't believe me, at your peril. The aliens are here and they're taking over THIS asylum!"

**MAMMOTH, PART FOUR**

by Jon Olson

**M**ammoth rolled onto his side and was relieved to see only debris from the wall lying beneath him. He pulled himself to his feet, and although it pained him, he knew his search for Pixie would have to wait. Someone was coming through the large hole caused by the blast. The giant behemoth extended his tusks and prepared to meet the invader. As he charged, the stranger caught him with a right and left hand combination, causing him to stagger and fall backwards.

Although his vision was slightly blurred, he could still make out his attacker. The man was tall and lanky with a gas mask obscuring his face. A layer of skin had grown over the top of it, indicating that it had been there for quite some time. He was wearing blue overalls that had a white patch with Twist Ed embroidered on it in red letters. Above it was a metal frame that had hinges at the elbows and knees which squeaked whenever he moved. Parts of it had started to rust away, leaving an overwhelming scent of decay.

Mammoth was pulled to his feet, by his left tusk, and thrown through the hole in the wall into the parking lot below. As he rolled down the pavement, he could feel old cigarette butts and other detritus sticking to his fur.

Twist Ed walked past his grounded foe and climbed inside his truck.

“You know what? We’re going for a little drive!”

The engine coughed to life as Twist Ed backed the vehicle up past his intended victim. The assassin then jumped down and made his way to the back of the truck. He reached for a tow cable, which had a hook that had dried lumps of flesh clinging to it, and drove it between Mammoth’s shoulder blades. The beast roared as the sharp edge penetrated through his thick fur.

A high pitched laugh echoed through the air as the contract killer returned to his cab. Once he was seated, the man took out his phone and called Murky. After telling him the address, he hung up.

Twisted Ed revved his engine twice and then peeled out of the parking lot. The assassin liked to parade his victims by dragging them through the streets until they reached Obscurity City Junkyard. In the confines of the heaps, he would dismember his victims and crush them in a trash compactor.

Mammoth’s flesh was torn as his body was hauled over asphalt and thrown into parked cars. He used the force of a particularly heavy collision to roll himself onto his back and pull himself up the tow cable towards the cab. At the same moment, the vehicle made a sharp turn, and he almost lost his grip. Thankfully, the giant behemoth managed to hold on before slashing through the vehicle’s tires with his tusks.

Twist Ed suddenly found himself unable to control his ride as it started to swerve violently from side to side. Realizing what had happened, the assassin put the van in cruise control and aimed for an empty school bus.

The two vehicles collided head on, sending Mammoth flying. The force of the subsequent explosion released the hook that was imbedded in his back, taking a small chunk of flesh with it.

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He tucked and rolled, bouncing onto the road where his right tusk dug into the pavement and snapped off.

The heat from the wreckage was extreme, but he was at least out of the assassin's sight.

This gave him time to recover.

**TALKING SHOP**

by Patrick Donovan

“**N**ow look son, I get that you're new to this and what not, but you don't start a summoning with Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn.”

“Why not?” I asked.

Essie Redstone shook her head and sighed with exasperation.

“You just don't,” Moki interjected. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen,” I replied with a touch of pride.

“For the love of...”

“Hey!” I snapped.

“Of all the Shamans in the world...”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Boy, you ain't too bright are ya?” Essie Redstone asked. “This here is real business. Not something for fooling around with. When a person starts saying names at random, they risk summoning a power that's beyond their control. I can teach you the right way, but if you're intent on actin' like an idjit, I'll just leave you and Howard Phillip be.”

She stared at me for a few minutes before continuing.

“I'm not trying to give you a hard time here, but you do this wrong and things get all kinds of dicey. Let's take a step back for a second.”

“Ok.”

“You know what spirits are?”

“They are a concept given form.”

“That's right. Now, how do you summon one?”

I decided to recite, verbatim, everything Essie had already taught me.

“You fix in your mind everything that makes something real. What it's made of and how it makes you feel. Then you burn the herbs and add your blood.”

“Sure enough. I want you to do that now. Summon something up.”

“Ok, what?”

“Well, sure as hell, not Cthulhu.”

“Ok? So...”

“Damn it boy, I don't know. Try calling the spirit of a puppy or something that makes you happy. It's not rocket surgery—”

“Rocket science,” I said.

“What?”

“There's no such thing as rocket surgery.”

“Boy, I'm gonna rocket science you upside yer damn head if you don't do what I tell you.”

“Ok, all right. You win.”

She told me to close my eyes and focus on an image.

I began to hum a song about summer nights and parties.

## **BENTO BOX #14**

“Come on Jonah, you can do it.”

I thought about strawberries and a warm breeze just before the stars come out.

“That’s right, keep it going.”

I mixed the herbs, pricked my finger and added a drop of blood.

Above me, something began to stir.

I was concentrating so hard that my head was starting to hurt.

A tension settled over the small living room, drawing everything tight before it finally snapped.

I opened my eyes.

Essie was staring at me.

“Boy, I oughta clout you good,” she said.

A naked girl, who possessed the perfect mixture of curves and sensuality, was standing in my bedroom. She had blonde hair down to her shoulders and pink lips that were pulled back into a coy smile.

“I tell you to summon something that makes you happy, and you call a god damned lust spirit? You little pervert!”

The girl looked at me and giggled.

My eyes shifted towards her modesty, which was obscured. This disappointed me in ways I can't even begin to explain.

“What? I'm a fourteen-year-old boy.”

Essie watched me for a long moment and then sighed.

“Shoulda’ seen that one coming.”

I grinned.

**THE MAN IN THE DREAM**

by E N de Choudens

The church was empty apart from seven parishioners and George McClarney, a non-practicing Christian who was in confession with Father Bartholomew.

“Is it possible to commit a sin whilst dreaming?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I’m not a bad person, Father. I don’t watch violent movies or read books not approved by your faith. Despite this, I have these horrible nightmares.”

“What are they about?”

“Taking a man’s life. Every night I see myself killing the same person. His face is obscured and yet somehow I always know it’s him.”

“Son, you shouldn’t be thinking about such things. Murder is a mortal sin. Even if you can’t control what you’re seeing, these visions are the product of your subconscious. They are manifestations of the thoughts and desires that come from within.”

George McClarney was walking through the park on a beautiful summer’s day. There were birds in the trees and children playing near a path that led to a lake. In the distance, a lone figure was watching him. He looked more like a shadow than a person. The stranger only caught his attention when they were alone in the dream.

A voice started shouting a single command.

“Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!”

“Just because you had a dream about hurting someone, doesn’t mean you’ll do it.”

“I’m not so sure, Father. All I know is that every night my desire to kill him grows. That’s not even the worst part. How do you explain a voice not coming from one specific place but everywhere all at once?”

“Have you considered that you might have heard God?”

“Why would he ask me to take out one of His creations?”

“The bible is full of stories of people killing in the name of the Lord.”

“Those were different times. I can’t believe that he’d send one man to kill another for pleasure.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I can’t. Do you think the devil is talking to me?”

“Son, they’re just dreams and nothing else.”

“How can you say that? Last night I was in a shopping mall and heard the voice. I looked around and the man I’m meant to kill was stood beside me. This time his face had definition. I closed my eyes and when I opened them again, the two of us were alone on a dark and deserted street. I removed a pistol from my pocket and pressed the trigger. That’s when I woke up.”

“I’m confused. Was this a dream or did it happen in real life?”

“Father... if I shoot myself, what happens to me?”

## **BENTO BOX #14**

“I hope you’re not thinking of committing suicide. If you do, your soul will never be allowed in heaven.”

An explosion shook the foundations of the church. The few people that were inside, by instinct, threw themselves to the ground. George McClarney just stood, motionless, staring down at the lifeless body of Father Bartholomew in a pool of his own blood.

“I recognized you; the one that never leaves, whether I’m asleep or awake. Finally, I can get your voice out of my head. I won’t allow myself to be captured or face the death penalty. This is my sin and for it I shall take my own life. I cannot go insane. No one should have to live like that.”

The church was rocked once again as a second explosion mixed George McClarney’s blood with that of Father Bartholomew’s.

A tall figure, dressed in dark clothes, surveyed the scene with a sinister smile on his face. The man placed a black hat on his head and turned away. He had other business to take care of. A cardinal at St. Mary’s who needed to be dealt with.

**THE SENTENCING**

by Zachary Houle

“**T**he defendant has been found guilty of a crime so improbable that it pains me to speak of it. Six lives have been forever transformed by his perverse actions. After having unprotected intercourse with a number of women, he has given each of them a life sentence.

“Schizophrenia, and its broader cousin psychosis, is now a sexually transmitted disease. In extreme cases, it can be fatal. So, tell me, what was going through your mind when you acted in such a debased manner?

“We’ve all heard statements from the families regarding four victims requiring hospitalization. One of them thinks that if she were to take a shower it would swallow her while another claims to be telepathic.

“I cannot even begin to pass judgment on what you’ve done, but, thankfully, a jury of 15 of your peers has. They’ve found you guilty of a senseless crime that has ruined the lives of those you claim to love and admire.

“Such ignominy is breathtaking.

“The selfish way you’ve behaved has not just destroyed one individual but crushed five more. Despite being ordered by your doctor not to drink, you cruised the bar scene, hoping to infect other people. I cannot begin to fathom what was going through your mind when you made these twisted, terrible decisions.

“The jury has found you criminally responsible for your actions. And for that, we must now turn our attention towards a suitable punishment. A sentence which will deter others from wandering into the same sinful and perverse territory that you have.

“If I could, I’d sentence you to thirty years for every person you’ve hurt. Six consecutive sentences, as it were. However, while such a punishment would be fitting, it does overlook the fact that each victim will be forced to endure their illness – ultimately, *yours*, only magnified and made worse during sex – until they die.

“They have been cursed by one selfish act.

“No, life imprisonment – and then some – will not suffice when judged against the heinous acts that have been performed. You, sir, are a monster. And there is only one punishment that would be fitting for someone of your barbaric nature.”

A few gasps escaped from astonished mouths.

The judge had to bang his gavel to request silence as he continued to castigate the young man who was expecting to spend six lives in solitary confinement.

“I am sentencing you to...”

After he’d finished, the young man was led away to take part in his fate.

Was it a harsh enough sentence? This question would be posed by those in the media and each victim’s family.

Outside, invectives would be slung and his deeds cursed.

Still, at the end of the day, one thing would remain: the sentence.

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Did it go far enough?

Some wanted blood and retribution; others just wanted to give him a hug.

As the young man was taken away in the back of a van, he sobbed. For the lives he'd harmed, but, most of all, for himself.

He *was* selfish that way.