

ISSUE 30

EXPLOITS

an UNWINNABLE publication

SEPTEMBER 2020

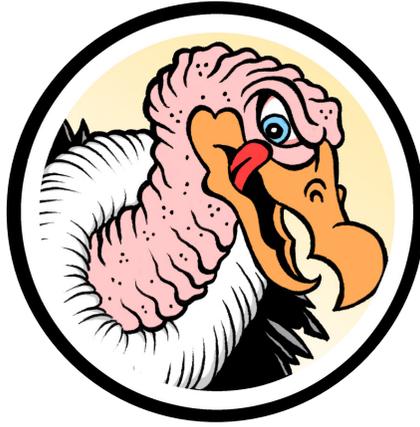


Diego Nicolás Argüello on
HADES

LOVECRAFT COUNTRY •

SCHRÖDINGER'S BOOK • BACK to the PARTY •

TABLOID • EXPANDED UNIVERSES



Editor in Chief | Stu Horvath

EXPLOITS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE REASONS WE LOVE THINGS

Managing Editor | Melissa King

Music Editor | Ed Coleman

Books Editors | Noah Springer, Levi Rubeck

Movies Editor | Amanda Hudgins

Television Editor | Sara Clemens

Games Editor | Khee Hoon Chan

Copyright © 2020 by Unwinnable LLC

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Unwinnable LLC does not claim copyright of the screenshots and promotional imagery herein. Copyright of all screenshots within this publication are owned by their respective companies

Unwinnable
820 Chestnut Street
Kearny, NJ 07032

www.unwinnable.com

For more information, email:
info@unwinnable.com

[Subscribe](#) | [Store](#) | [Submissions](#)

This machine kills fascists.

SHRINKING AN EXPANDED UNIVERSE

by Chris Compendio

I once wrote a series of linked short stories, all centered around the goings-on in a high school. While I attempted to be cautious and precise in crafting the prose, much of my labor and effort was directed towards the details that were not on the page. In my head, this school was its own sort of universe, with characters that inhabited their own smaller spaces within this larger world. They stood alone, their individual stories playing out, with maybe a few brushes with other characters through cameo, and the occasional full-on crossover.

When applied to popular media, the concept of the shared, expanded universe is exemplified by the likes of Middle-earth, Westeros, the Star Wars galaxy, the Marvel Cinematic Universe and so on. There are moving parts so large in scale, yet they may never affect each other simply due to the vastness of the world. The creators of each world would explain its elaborate histories, cultures and languages as if they were real. And the field is open enough that other creators can freely craft their own narratives and spaces within a larger world, even if just in their own imagination.

A common fallacy comes from a creator attempting to widen their universe, yet narrowing the scope through their protagonist. The joy of a large, fluid universe is that anyone can be a protagonist – yet many modern writers choose to drag down their protagonists by tying them to the pre-established, rather than letting them breathe in their own space. It's the difference between Star Wars having Rey Nobody versus Rey Skywalker.

2020 was rife with mainstream television shows that fell victim to this. HBO's *Watchmen* was in the same universe as the graphic novel but occupied a different space through Tulsa while observing the ripple effects from the original story.

What started as a new frontier in an existing world became slavish to the source material, with the fresh protagonist Sister Night having forced connections to not one, but two legacy characters. The trope of a “special” protagonist or a “chosen one” still lives in today’s media. Season three of *Westworld* went beyond the theme parks and into the real world through an everyman named Caleb with no stake in the game – until his backstory tied into the established character of Dolores. And then there is the eleventh series of *Doctor Who*, a show defined by an infinitely expanding universe with a renegade and rebellious Time Lord, one out of countless, who built their own legend. But that allure was taken away, as the Doctor was not only special as a child, but the progenitor of the entire Time Lord race.

There are still efforts from films like *The Last Jedi* and *Blade Runner 2049* in demonstrating that an ordinary person, free from lineage and legacy, can make a difference. A person so small in a massive universe can make their own story, build their own space in the world – but some creators still push back and revert back to tropes. For these shows aiming to build something new in an old universe, these sci-fi and fantasy universes became too focused on the past, undercutting and devaluing all of the new, fascinating additions to their respective lore.

There is certainly still a balance to be had when creating something new in a pre-established world. Using references and tie-ins can be advantageous, and the theme of legacy is a fun element to tinker with. There is still something precious about a shared universe – but in the end, oftentimes it is more valuable to let its inhabitants carve out their own spaces and let them live on their own. 🍷





BACK to the PARTY – English folk punk Sam Russo’s latest record *Back to the Party* is remarkable for feeling unremarkable.

That’s not to say it isn’t an excellent album; it is, and it may end up being one of my favorite releases in 2020. What I mean is it’s a record about doing ordinary things—daydreaming about leaving your dead-end town, dwelling on the last time you had something important to say that came out wrong, getting a pint at the bar on a Friday night — that don’t feel so ordinary anymore in the context of living under quarantine.

When Russo was writing the ten tracks that comprise the record, he couldn’t have known that by the time it hit listener’s ears this past May the world would be flipped upside down. It’s very much meant to be a simple reflection of the daily struggles and aching aspirations everyone faces with relatable slice-of-life storytelling that understands that sometimes the little things are actually big things.

Those little things feel so much bigger now that they’ve largely been taken away. I’d do anything to grab a beer with someone I’ve

been meaning to catch up with, even if just to shoot the shit and run up a bar tab that’s a little too high, but worth it as an excuse for the quality time talking about nothing in particular and laughing about things we won’t remember later.

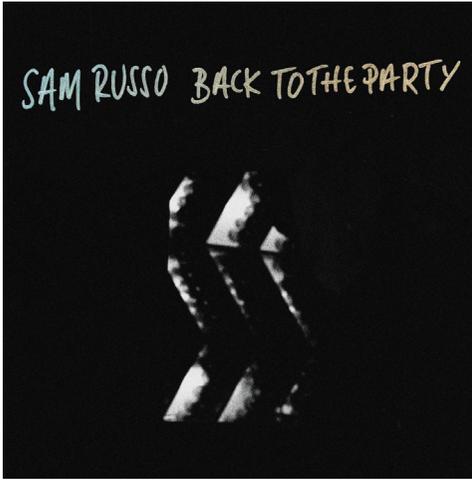
When Russo talks about reminiscing about breaking into a school to drink on the rooftop on album opener “Purple Snow,” or a tough conversation gone slightly awry on “Darkness,” or dealing with petty grievances with asshole friends you’ve outgrown on “Good and Gone” it all feels like a reminder of a time when the biggest things I had to worry about day-to-day were so much smaller than they feel right now.

In that way, *Back to the Party* feels like a reminder not to take anything for granted, that the mundane moments that make up our days – good and bad and in between – matter and are worth examination. It’s the soundtrack to the summer we should have had, and one that maybe we’ll get to have some other time, with a better sense of appreciation.

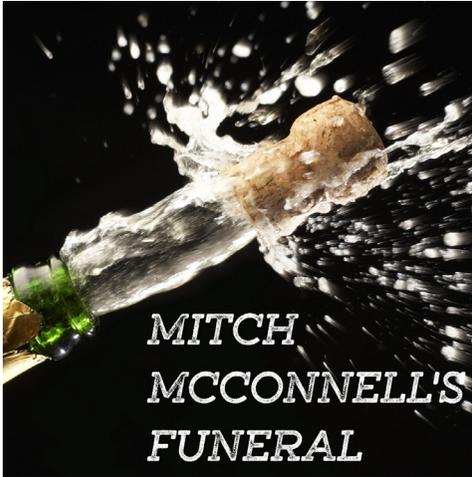
– BEN SAILER

MUSIC

PLAYLIST



SAM RUSSO BACK TO THE PARTY



MITCH
MCCONNELL'S
FUNERAL



"The Window," by Sam Russo

"Ghost Town," by R Boyd, Dusk

"Wringer," by Lydia Loveless

"Mitch McConnell's Funeral," by Mike Huguenor

"Limelight," by Touché Amoré

"All Got Sick," by Dikembe

"Boomer," by Barteek Strange

"The Farm," by Double Grave

"High School Friend," by The Menzingers

"when getting lost," by We Were Promised Jetpacks

"Last, Last Words," by The Lawrence Arms

"Brave Faces, Everyone," by Spanish Love Songs

"Kyoto," by Phoebe Bridgers

"Be Afraid," by Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit

"The Dirty Nil," by Doom Boy

"Goo," by Culture Abuse

LISTEN NOW ON SPOTIFY



SCHRÖDINGER'S BOOK – I have “Valar Morghulis” tattooed on my left shoulder, a design by artist Kate Leth, with the words inside candy hearts. I love this tattoo, not just because it’s cute, but because it reminds me of the era it came out of: one in which *Game of Thrones* was appealing to artists making feminist memes on social media, when the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy could be compared to *Mad Max: Fury Road* with a straight face. A more civilized age, if you will. One that has passed.

By the finale of the HBO series, I had to admit that, as much as I loved the novels it was based on, George R. R. Martin was probably never going to finish writing *The Winds of Winter*. In the time since, I’ve wondered whether I even want him to.

The elements that made *A Song of Fire and Ice* so innovative and exciting in 1998 have largely lost their freshness for audiences 22 years later. At best, they’re unimpressive (e.g. complex women and queer characters) and bow under the series’ constant, loving depictions of rape and incest in the #MeToo era. At worst, they’ve become tiresome genre clichés (e.g. grimdark worldbuilding where everyone’s an asshole and your favorite characters drop dead at a moment’s notice), paradoxi-

cally the result of *Game of Thrones*’ own popularity. Generations of its spiritual kindred, like *Breaking Bad* and *House of Cards*, have come and gone in the time it takes Martin to write one book.

The real question, though, is: why *would* he finish writing them? What possible benefit could it have for his career and legacy? The series has reached the point of iconic popularity at which new offerings will always disappoint fans’ expectations. Since the six-year wait for *A Dance with Dragons* yielded what could best be called the okayest volume of the series, it’s been clear that writing a satisfying conclusion is a task on par with trying to write the series finale of *The Simpsons*.

Martin’s best option is to leave the final books of *A Song of Ice and Fire* as the “Schrodinger’s Cat” of novels, noteworthy for their incredible potential only as long as they never actually see daylight. Maybe some future Brian Herbert or Brandon Sanderson can tie off the series, for the die-hards who care enough to have played the trading card game competitively (ahem). For everyone else – George R. R. Martin included – I can only see it going downhill from here. So why bother?

– M. SHAW

BOOKS

EVERYONE on the MOON is ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL

– Billed as “body-horror fairy tales and mid-apocalyptic Catholic cyberpunk,” Julian K. Jarboe’s collection of short stories brings a kind of gender expressionism that I didn’t know I needed to body horror, a yearning and riotous anger simultaneously. The entire collection is queer and wonderful and expressive, and definitely one of the best books to come out of 2020.

– AMANDA HUDGINS



The SEX APPEAL of the INORGANIC: PHILOSOPHIES of DESIRE in the MODERN WORLD

– This is a book about the philosophy of latex.

Sort of.

Translated from Italian, *Inorganic* is a thin volume of brief, meandering philosophical vignettes about consensual (sexualized) dehumanization. Mario Perniola is, by turns, dry, self-congratulatory and insightful – and occasionally all three within a single sentence. And although it’s almost quaint by today’s standards, *Inorganic* is an interesting, idiosyncratic take on the philosophy, theory and – surprisingly – the gender dynamics of BDSM.

Inorganic is one of the earlier books of its kind. Give it a read if you’re into this sort of thing.

– VIOLET ADELE BLOCH

BATMAN: The THREE JOKERS #1

– *Three Jokers*, written by Geoff Johns and drawn by Jason Fabok, is a comic book in which Johns continues to delve into Alan Moore’s text and drags talented artists with him on a pointless journey into the continuity minutia of DC Comics history. The title is accurate; there are indeed three physical Jokers who are planning some kind of next level Joker Super Crime. Stripping previous works of real world context and creative nuance, Johns’ script postulates that there have been three Jokers since the 1960s in an attempt to explain any behavioral discrepancies the character has shown since 1940. Want to know why the guy who stole diamonds and came up with laughing fish also assaulted Barbara Gordon? There are three of him! It’s so fucking stupid.

There is a bright side though! Jason Fabok’s art and Brad Anderson’s colors are the main reason to read this book. Fabok spends three pages at nine panels each delving into Batman’s physical scars. It’s a bit much, but it is cool seeing his renditions of Batman’s rogues gallery. The character acting in this book is solid. Jason Todd’s unbridled rage at the man who beat him to death with a crowbar (he got better) and Barbara Gordon’s tempered contempt for the man who assaulted her and robbed her of the use of her legs are some potent comics work. They belong in a book that treats trauma as something more than a plot point.

But hey, this is corporate superhero comics. What should I have expected?

– IAN GONZALES

MOVIES



TABLOID – *Content warning: Discussion of mental illness, religion, and sexual assault.*

Tabloid is brilliant for the same reason every Errol Morris film is brilliant: he's good at getting people to fucking tell on themselves.

In *The Thin Blue Line*, he coaxed an incomplete confession out of David Ray Harris. In *The Unknow Known*, he showed the now-infamous Guantanamo Torture Memos to Donald Rumsfeld and got “Good grief, now that’s a pill of stuff!” as an answer. In *Tabloid*, he baits former *Daily Express* gossip columnist Peter Tory into saying “spread-eagled,” in his natural posh RP, repeatedly.

“Spread-eagled,” Tory says early in the film, narrating the 1977 kidnapping and alleged rape of Mormon missionary Kirk Anderson, at the hands of model Joyce McKinney. “This wonderful bondage word, she *spread-eagled* him[...].” Spread-eagling, Tory notes, is a theme throughout the story. He mentions it a number of times – “kidnap at gunpoint, chains, being spread-eagled” – yet claims to be far from an expert on the topic.

Morris, from behind the camera, says, “I assume that you are,” and Tory laughs.

In spite of its strangeness and tonal whip-lash, though, I think the point of *Tabloid* (and

its greatest strength as a work) is the mesmerizing despicableness of its subjects. Raconteurish, truth-embellishing Tory, outwardly sleazy *Daily Mirror* photographer Kent Gavin and alleged rapist Joyce McKinney are all goaded gently along by Morris, blissfully unaware of the misdeeds they cop to throughout. It would be overwhelming if it wasn't juxtaposed against the horrifying, repressive kitsch of the 1970s Mormon church.

Indeed, Kirk Anderson seems to be the only innocent person involved – born into a cult and dubiously rescued by a malignant narcissist, Kirk spends the bulk of the story being framed and reframed in turn by each interviewee. He's handsome, loving, large, flabby, (according to Tory) “the last person in the world you'd think would be the object of this kind of strange sexual passion,” brainwashed, rescued, kidnapped, assaulted, seduced, but, in the telling, he's always helpless.

And so it proves: Kirk declined to interview for the film. Like many victims, his truth has yet to be heard, and it seems he'd prefer to keep it to himself.

Oh my Heck, as they say in Utah.

– VIOLET ADELE BLOCH

MOVIES

HYENAS – When I went to see *Hyenas* in 2019, I watched it in an entirely empty theater, sitting in the center seat, feet up on the row in front of me, eating snacks I brought from home. Djibril Diop Mambéty is best known as the director of *Touki Bouki* (1973), one of the most celebrated African films, but his 1992 follow-up *Hyenas* remains widely underrated. Gorgeous to look at, *Hyenas* is a comedic and incisive adaptation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s play *The Visit* with the action set in Senegal. The delightfully witchy Linguere Ramatou – now “wealthy as the World Bank” – returns to the downtrodden hometown that once cast her out and offers its people a deadly bargain.

– DANIEL W. FRIES

PROMARE – Holy shit this is good. Is this why people like anime?

– AMANDA HUDGINS

THIEF – Is Michael Mann an auteur? I got around to watching his debut film, 1981’s *Thief* with James Caan, and its similarities with *Heat* and *Manhunter* were so clear it suddenly struck me that maybe he is an authorial director. His movies are filled with silent roads at night, blurred street lights gleaming off damp cement and violent men struggling with their own desire to be better. Mann maintains themes, motifs and aesthetics across his movies, making him, I suppose, an auteur. I just wish I didn’t find his style so bland. His characters are shallow, his sets banal and his camerawork plain. I don’t get the hype for *Thief*, or for that matter *Heat*, *Collateral*, or *Manhunter* (I admit I’ve never seen *Last of the Mohicans*). To me, Mann is an auteur, just a boring one.

– NOAH SPRINGER



TELEVISION



LOVECRAFT COUNTRY – In popular media, Blackness is exploited in a lot of different ways.

Awards-bait media about racism make Blackness a permanent ball and chain, a burden which weighs its bearers down and makes life a constant struggle.

Action flicks use Blackness to make a character ‘cool’ or ‘different,’ with that difference being largely aesthetic and specifically for a (presumed) white audience.

Adventure stories characterize Blackness as something exotic, a mystery for the white hero to solve.

Lovecraft Country subverts all of those pre-conceptions and makes Blackness a source of power for its protagonists. The central instance of this is the way that the show uses Black spirits. It’s the spirit of the maternal grandmother of Atticus (Jonathan Majors) that saves him from the clutches of the cult that seeks to harvest him in “Whitey’s on the Moon.” In “Holy Ghost” it’s the spirits of the scientist’s all-Black victims that help Leti (Jurnee Smollett) to banish him from their haunted house. Both of these cases mirror the ideas of ancestral spirit guides that permeate many of the belief systems indigenous to

Africa. In the latter case, the only reason why Leti is even able to begin the banishment is due to the help of a woman who gets brought in that practices Vodun.

The purpose of white supremacy is to create the illusion that “**the Aryan stock is bound to triumph**” and that whiteness is the sole source of power. By locating the solutions to the challenges these characters face specifically within their Blackness, a countervailing narrative is created and the show demonstrates that there is power to be found outside of white supremacy and domination.

At the start of the pandemic, a lot of marginalized people joked about how we’re better mentally equipped to deal with the apocalyptic prospects. While this is obviously reductive, I think it reflects a broader idea which *Lovecraft Country* embraces. Black people already live in the post-apocalypse, through pillaging and genocide, the world of the pre-colonial is irrevocably shattered and only fragments remain. So there’s a power in the fact that we still survived. Through all the past and present traumas our Blackness keeps us breathing – and it’s profound to see a show which understands it.

– OLUWATAYO ADEWOLE

TELEVISION

TOGETHER WITH ME – It has been incredibly frustrating watching Korean, Chinese and Japanese dramas that like to hint at queerness but never outwardly admit it. I just want to watch cute boys smooch each other. Is that so much to ask? Well it wasn't for *Together With Me*. This Thai “will they, won't they” love story opens with the two male leads passionately fucking.

– MATT HUDGINS



DOOM PATROL – I really love the recent uptick in off-beat superhero TV shows. I loved *The Tick* (RIP) and *The Boys*, and I just recently started watching *Doom Patrol*. This collection of zany misfits has never really been on my radar as a comic book series, but I'm excited to get acquainted with their misadventures. In a world falling apart around us, it's good to see some not-so-superheroes still holding things together, and, frankly, I'm getting some good chuckles. Plus, I'm happy Brendan Fraser is getting work!

– NOAH SPRINGER



CORPORATE – I can't believe I hadn't caught *Corporate* before the third season premiered, but I'm glad I'm caught up now because it's one of the funniest shows I've seen in a second! Their biting satire of the corporate workplace through surreal humor and general insanity really speaks to me, and I assume to lots of other early-to-mid-level office workers. In addition to its great sense of dark humor, *Corporate* also has a stand out cast, including a terrific performance by Lance Reddick of *The Wire* as Christian DeVille, the potentially evil head of the corporation. I watched the first two seasons in a day, and waiting for the next episode week-by-week now feels like an eternity!

– NOAH SPRINGER





HADES – Videogames love families as plot devices. Look back on the dozen of AAA titles in the last decade, and you’ll find dying relatives whose existence lingers just long enough to give lead characters a sense of purpose, while justifying their drive for violence.

Supergiant Games’ *Hades* is, in some way, tied to this premise. But it isn’t shy about plunging players right into the heart of a dysfunctional family, forcing them to pick favorites and making them pay in blood for any perceived slights. That’s Zagreus in *Hades*, who’s exhausted with the antics of his father Hades, a workaholic who fills page after page with records of the recently departed as the lord of Greek underworld. Zagreus decides to give Hades the middle finger and escape from hell, while his celestial aunts and cousins offer their aid, offering fragments of their power as gifts: foes become hungover thanks to Dionysus, blinded by love after the touch of Aphrodite and pushed away by Poseidon’s sea waves.

But why should anyone trust them, when these gods are mischievous by nature? They mingle with and treat mortals as toys, plotting their trickery all the way from Olympus. Zagreus quickly learns the danger in crossing

them. Their rivalry, fueled by envy and stubbornness, often puts his getaway in jeopardy.

Lighting shatters the halls of Elysium if you deny Zeus’ offering, but minutes after, you have Poseidon convincing you to accept his favor instead, claiming that he’s more powerful than Zeus. Judgement is disguised as gossip when Zagreus crosses paths with his relatives, as they feign surprise at his decisions and clamor to demonstrate their value by trash talking behind their siblings’ backs.

“We don’t all share the same demeanor,” said Athena during a reunion. “(...) though, all of us, I think, wish you the best.” Even though the gods have the power to grant him infinite strength, they choose to wield Zagreus as yet another pawn: one they can toy with, while ostensibly offering help that actually only furthers their own ends. Without other means of reprieve, *Hades* portrays the helplessness of having to place your trust in your relatives, even as we realize they’re just as flawed as the people and environments we seek escape from. It’s a sobering representation of the harm family can wreak even within the smallest of exchanges.

– DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO

GAMES

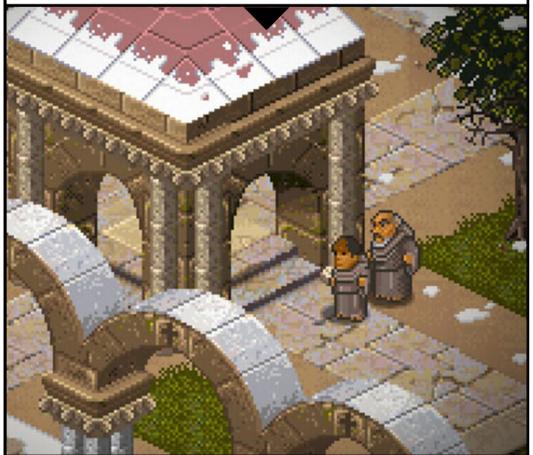
BIRD ALONE – *Bird Alone* is an iOS app that serves more as a digital companion and collaborator than mere game. You meet a parrot, christen them and then listen to and interact together for a sparse amount of time once or twice per day. My bird was named Bigsby, and my use of the past tense there is a lead, because unlike Pokemon or other silicon pets, your bird's time on this planet is limited and they are confronting that certainty head on. Your part is to commiserate and celebrate, lightly share, listen and collaborate artistically, in simplified but effective ways. *Bird Alone* bucks the norms of clickers and gachas by demanding alone time, allowing you space to play and explore but not serving up the bird to dance at the player's whims. You'll draw, share lines of verse, comfort and, hopefully, be comforted. Most of all there is an ending, and it came just as I was losing interest, completing a micro-cycle of life and friendship. Had I known this I might have been a little more present in my time with Bigsby, as apps have mostly taught me that these things don't finish so much as wither past indifference (ask every one of my *Animal Crossing* towns). And I suppose I can prod on the unhatched egg that now waits for me, but I'm in no rush – it's nice to think of the brief, but meaningful time I had with loud, fragile, little Bigsby.

– LEVI RUBECK



The ABBEY of CRIME EXTENSUM – *The Name of the Rose: The Movie: The Game*, except in 1987, when Spanish developer Paco Menéndez and his publisher Opera Soft couldn't get the rights to the novel or the movie, they just renamed the game and most of the characters and released the game anyway, as *La Abadía del Crimen* (*The Abbey of Crime*), at one point called the best game for 8-bit computers. Since then, it's been rewritten and remastered several times. In the free version you can get on Steam, the little monk sprite looks remarkably like Sean Connery. *The Abbey of Crime Extensum* is sometimes held back by retro design and retro sensibilities, but so far I'm enjoying this unusual lens on the 1980s and the 1320s.

– DANIEL W. FRIES



MIXOLUMIA – A lovely block clearing puzzle game, *Mixolumia* is an elegant game that will definitely hit that *Tetris* itch. With a lovely soundtrack, and excellent game feel, it's the perfect indie game for a chill night in. I've caught myself playing it over several nights, a few rounds every now and then, even though I'm not terribly good at it.

– AMANDA HUDGINS

HOROSCOPE

The stars tell tragedies,
calamitous fates,
tales of outlet staff inboxes, all
made cold,
alas! But quasars and old black
holes tell of
ancient days on Earth when
freelance budgets left,
and,
yet,
Returned. 🏠