



METRIC

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ISSUESEVEN

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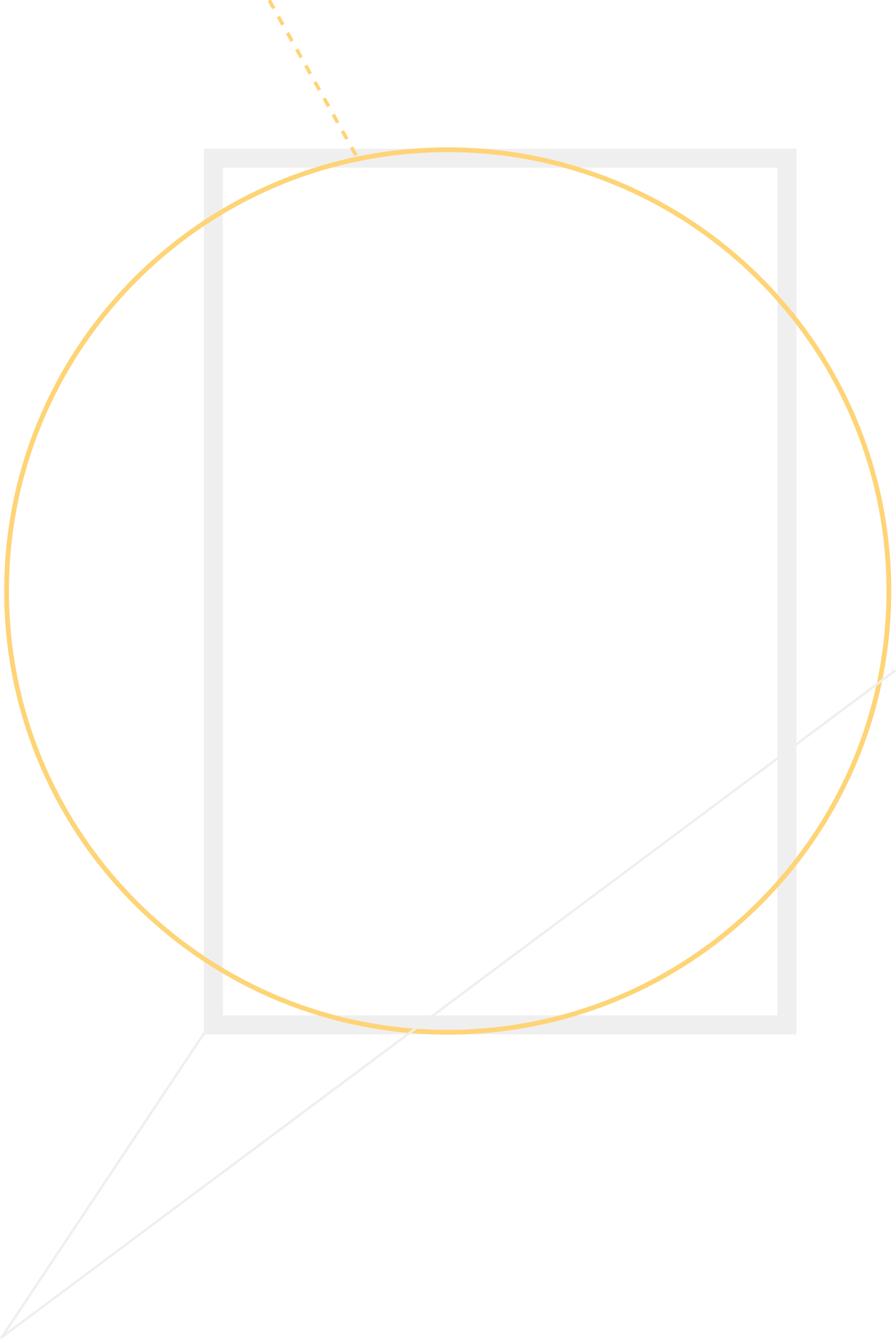
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PROSE

AMELIORATION



HER FACE WAS pretty and pale. Her eyes were darker and deeper than night. Amelia had rosy cheeks and rosier lips, soft and shaky. She was sweet and airless but deceptive; a paradox inside an illusion, alluding to overwhelming confusion. She was skinny and fragile which gave her a false sense of vulnerability. Amelia once told me she was kindred with the moon, but she never told me why. I always thought it was because she was the shining eerie light in the midst of my pitch black life; and also because part of her was always hidden away. She had an evangelic aura; a heavenly essence. But it was all a tragically brilliant lie. The lovely dainty flowers she wore delicately in

her hair where only there to hide away her devilish horns. This goes to show that Cupid is not an angel, but a merciless demon armed with a bow and arrow and a brutal sense of humour.

Amelia's false façade was what I loved the most about her. Her eyes were dreamy and hypnotising. The taste of her kiss was a sweet addiction. All this time I was unaware of the poison on her nervous lips. With that poisonous kiss I fell in love with Amelia and the ghastly trance she had trapped me inside. In a crowded and smoky atmosphere, we were facing each other but we didn't speak as we were surrounded by an abundance of meaningless strangers. The room was dark with a faded chilling vibe, complementing the mix between dream-pop and heavy metal music. With her magic fingers she opened a portal between us, swirling with purple ambient light. She held my hand and asked me to run away with her, through her portal into Amelia's phenomenal dystopian world of vivid nothingness and secrecy. I had no choice but to follow her as she deceived me with her lovely lies. She told me stories of her past which bared my blushing cheeks, embarrassed of my own bleak life. I told her she was my serendipity. I had found pure, perfect, euphoria without seeking it.

On the back of a brown paper bag she wrote me a haiku:

I love his green eyes
He loves Blink-182
He's perfect for me

We lived together in a tiny apartment secluded from the rest of the world, never needing anything except each other. It was a quiet life, but it was perfect for me. Amelia fancied verbalising her emotions, although she seldom laughed or cried. I never talked about my feelings although she would always know how I felt through the music I listened to. I played music on our loud speakers; she painted next to the window. I would bring her tea with honey and biscuits; she would bring me a beer with a cigarette and her lighter. She showed me her tattoos: a crescent moon on the nape of her neck, a pansy on her lower back, the phrase 'lonely for you only' on the side of her right hip. On rainy days we would stay in bed all day together. She would read old books and I would write poetry. The music was turned off and not a word was spoken so all we could hear was the rain. We ordered Chinese food and watched art-house movies and talked about our biggest fears. I told her my biggest fear was losing her; she told me her biggest fear was finding herself. Amelia was too beautiful for her

own good, that's why she brought sadness to everything she touched. She was heading in the direction of self-destruction; and as the happiness slowly drained out of her damaged soul she started to hate herself.

It really is impossible to imagine how someone who you love with all your heart and soul can hate themselves so much. I find Amelia in the darkest of nights, with daisies, pansies and lilies in her hair. Her tears bleed like watercolours staining her cheeks and stinging her dull eyes. The winter air is potent with rain and limerence. She looked at me as if she were looking into my soul, with an eternal gaze. The biting wind blew softly, and the delicate flowers drifted gracefully away from her silky hair revealing her devilish horns and her baffling insanity. Amelia walks towards me and kisses me for the last time, leaving behind the taste of her deathly poison and a wake of delirium. She shows me her shaking hands, covered in crimson red and dripping with the blood of my heart, beating for her in her own fingers, torn straight out of my body. She came in closer. The last sentence I ever heard from her sweet melancholy voice was-

“Amelioration: The act of relieving flaws and changing for the better.”

*DELIVERY STATUS
NOTIFICATION (FAILURE)*



IT WAS SIX o'clock and Rick Phelps was arriving home from his daily commute. The old Buick sputtered as it pulled up the gravel path to his garage door, wheels raising lazy clouds of dust into the hot air. Though hungry and dirty from the road Rick was in a positive mood. Old man Higgins at the paper factory had finally given in and promoted him to head salesman, for the whole state division no less. A promotion meant a raise, and a raise meant they were just that little bit closer to paying off the mortgage on their house. Unlike their friends and neighbors, they'd struggled to afford property; when Nancy had first fallen ill she'd

had to quit her job, and back then Rick had struggled to pay for her medications. But he'd worked hard, and they'd come a long way since then. Soon they'd really own their property - he could scarcely believe it. With the title deeds in his name, he could think about building that pool in their back yard. Isa would be over the moon. They still couldn't afford to hire anyone to do the excavation, of course; but he could hire the tools and was warming to the idea of digging it himself. Some old fashioned hands-on work could do a man a power of good.

Leaving the car locked in the garage, he wandered up the garden pathway and into the house through their front porch. Walking in, the wholesome smell of his wife's cooking washed over him; Nancy Phelps' famous pot roast. As usual, she heard him come in.

"Hey Rick, food on the table in fifteen!" she called from the kitchen, busy with the cooking. He kicked off his sweaty brogues and quietly crossed the hall into the kitchen where she was bending over the steaming casserole. His unshod feet made no sound on the polished floor. Unseen, he approached from behind and grabbed her by the hips, causing her to squeal in surprise. Nancy stood up straight, leaning back into him. Without taking her eyes off the roast, she reached

back with her free hand, cupping his face.

“Yes, hello dear, you’re lovely but don’t do that, not when I’m cooking.” He kissed the nape of her neck and felt her relax in his arms as he murmured contentedly into her hair. Taking this as an apology, her tone softened.

“Hey Hun, how was your day?”

“Great!” He gave her a quick squeeze then took a step back, “How’s my little lady doing? I’ve some news for you two. Where’s Isa?”

“Your daughter is in her room doing her homework. Hun, you stink and you’re all bristly. Can you shower before we eat?” Rick thumbed his chin, feeling the rough stubble and sighed.

“Sure, doll. Just gonna check my vidmail first.”

“All right then, be quick! You know how you are with that thing.” Her voice tapered off, muffled through the wall as he left the kitchen and relaxed into his easy-chair, reclining in front of the large vid-screen that dominated the living room.

He tapped his feet impatiently as it ran through the boot-sequence. It was an old model, the NI Harrelson Mark VIII. He’d bought it not long after Isolde was born. It did all the things they needed it to, but painfully slowly. Jamison next door had somehow

scored the Harrelson Mark IX for his family the day it had come out of beta, a sleeker and faster model with a huge array of functions. Jamison himself liked to rub this in Rick's face, often inviting him over just to "give it a spin". They might see an end to that needling humiliation soon; this promotion coming into effect just in time for the general release of the Mark X models. They were already available to pre-order; the huge animated advertising posters had been on display in the VidStore windows for weeks. Once the pool was dug, some extra money would still be coming in from the promotion and he could speak to Mr. Higgins early about his Christmas bonus.

The vidscreen had finished booting and was showing its welcome menu. Opening up the vidmail program, Rick idly watched as it updated, drawing down new data from the world-network. Several new messages flashed on the screen; something from Mr. Higgins, the terms and conditions of his new promotion no doubt, some standard chain mail, forwarded to him by Jamison as always (today's subject line "Old programmers never die, they just parse on."). Most of the other messages were obviously junk. Adverts for knock-off medications, skin-flicks, shares in shady companies, the usual. He opened one with a genuine

sounding subject line and began reading the message body.

“My Dear Friend, my name is Mr Petrov Musakov, Manager in Bank Of Russia (B.O.R) Omsk,” Rick stopped reading and erased the message. Ever since Russia had joined the world-network, a slew of confidence artists had begun to use it to trick money out of hard-working Americans. This one was a well-known scam, but not so well known they had given up on it yet. All the other messages were obvious junk; Rick cleared his inbox.

He was about to shut down the vidscreen entirely to go for his shower, when on a whim he logged into Amail Chat. Amail Chat was an instant messaging protocol, an old program used for private text-based communications. It wasn't the only or best program of its type, and had long been superseded by new technology. The Mark VIII chattered to itself as it loaded his list of contacts. A small handful of the names on his list lit up as available, many more glowing a dull red: unavailable. As a young man, he had spent hours on his Amail chat account talking to friends from home and around the country. Over the years they had mainly grown up and drifted away from their machines. These days they all had families, jobs and

responsibilities; too busy to spend time chatting. Rick sent a few friendly greetings to the green-lit names he recognized, but no responses came back. Perhaps they'd gone out somewhere, leaving their vidscreens on; that was not uncommon. Distractedly, Rick went back into his inbox and started to read through the vidmail from Mr. Higgins. It was as he suspected, long and boring; a template message sent out to all new head salesmen, restating his legal position within the company. The machine beeped and a small light began to blink on the screen; new Amail from Glenn Jones, one of the few available contacts he hadn't messaged. Glenn and Rick had attended high school together, though they'd never been close. Dismissing his vidmail and the unresponsive chat windows, he opened Glenn's.

“Just got home!” it read, “you there?”.

Home? From where?

He frowned and tapped out a response;

“Glenn buddy, how're ya doing?”

“It's me Dasha.. we use to chat a bit... a while back.. I had you on my old messenger! whats new hun? Where u from?? I just wanna make sure its u lol!” was the instant reply.

“Who do you think I am? Where's Glenn? You

his gal?”

“OH OK GOOD.. k listen.. im glad u messaged me cause im actually moving near ya in about a week.. i wont know a single person : (i remember u lived there from when we chatted way back :) are u even single lol?”

“Sorry doll, I’m spoken for. I’m an old school-buddy of Glenn’s, do you know where he is?”

“ok WELL... lol...please dont judge me but I work for a webcam chat site since I’m soo broke.... PROMISE not to give it out to anyone... the only reason im saying u should come watch is cause i have to get off IM now and start work... ok ok I just amde this for YOU ONLY.. dont give it to ANYONE! *-)

<http://bit.ly/11QMouX>”

He rolled his eyes and closed the messenger client. God damn ad-bots.

They got more convincing by the day. That one was clever, really had him going. He shut down the vidscreen, wondering how it had got onto Glenn’s account. It wasn’t important.

A sound behind Rick caused him to freeze. He slowly relaxed so as not to make any sudden movements, smiling to himself. From where he was sat in the easy-chair, his back was to the door. If someone

entered the room, he wouldn't see them without getting up, or twisting his head right around to look over his shoulder. If that someone was wearing socks on the carpeted floor, someone child-sized and walking carefully towards him might think he wouldn't be able to hear them, either ...

“Hey sweetheart,” he said aloud, “how was school?”.

He got up from the chair and turned around, grinning in anticipation of Isa's mock annoyance; she'd failed to sneak up on him again. The little girl, already dressed in her pajamas, looked at him.

“Hi there.” she intoned, in an odd, flat voice. She sounded strange to Rick, a little off somehow. Hopefully she wasn't coming down with the flu, caught from a classmate. Nancy's health being what it was, flu in the house could be disastrous and expensive.

“Bad luck kiddo. You'll get me next time, hey?” She just looked at him. Was she upset? Maybe he'd pushed it too far, caught her one time too many. She was only a child, after all. Concerned, he moved to comfort her, but stopped -

“Hope you don't mind chatting with a spiteful horny girl.” she droned “So how are you?”

“A spiteful - where did - what?” he gawped.

“Ya I know it's random, but my douchebag ex

cheated on me so I'm on a manhunt, he he - "

"Your 'ex'? Honey, what are you - "

"I got your username on an Amail directory, I'm Elenochka, you are?" her face became suddenly animated as she winked theatrically.

"Where do you live? I've been working out, which ends up with me doing sexy things." she winked again.

What?

Dumbfounded, unable to make any sense of her behavior, Rick grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her bodily toward the kitchen. Her mother would know how to deal with her. Nancy was a sensible woman.

Isa cried out as he took her by the wrist and struggled as he led her across the hall. In the kitchen, Nancy was still standing over the stove.

"Nancy, there's - I think Isa's ill or - " Rick began;

"I'm single and I want sex, colon dash close-bracket" the little girl protested, trying to wriggle out of his grip. He gestured at her, looking helplessly to his wife.

"You hear that? Where could she have learned to - Nancy?" Nancy looked at him, seemingly puzzled.

"Cut down 3 lbs of your belly every week," she replied "by simply using this one weird old tip." A noise began in Rick's throat but stopped short, stran-

gulated. Nancy stepped forward, still talking.

“Experts hate her! Find out how -” Rick didn’t wait to find out how. He loosened his grip on Isa’s wrist and quickly backed out of the room, slamming the kitchen door behind him and cutting Nancy off mid-sentence. He stood with his back to the door, panting, holding it shut with the weight of his body. She was still talking, voice raised but words unheard over the sound of his own heart. It wasn’t like them to joke around like that. Something had to be wrong. Really wrong. At first he’d thought Isa had seen or read something she shouldn’t on the vidscreen, but that, this, it made no sense that he could figure. Nancy’s behavior was inexplicable. She’d been fine only moments before. This was more than he could handle. He needed help. What was the name of that psychologist Jamison had been telling him about, the alarmingly busty one? She had been Jamison Jnr’s shrink, put an end to his reign of terror over the town’s feline population earlier that year. He wracked his memory. Henderson, that was it. Jean Henderson. She was only a child psychologist, but, hell, he didn’t have any better ideas.

The house phone was in the hallway, not far from where he was standing. He listened for a moment,

hearing that Nancy had fallen silent. Taking opportunity of the lull, he stepped over to the phone and spun the dial for the operator. It sprang back to its original position with a whirr, there was a short tone, then ... silence. He hung up and tried again. Again. And again. Still nothing. The phones were out.

What in the hell?

Realization began to dawn: maybe his wife and daughter weren't the only ones affected. It could be something larger, more widespread. The radio would tell him. The only radio in the house was the Bakelite in the kitchen, and Rick wasn't about to go back in there. He didn't know what was wrong with them. What if it was contagious? It seemed to be spreading. If it got to him too, there'd be nothing he could do to help them.

The car.

That was it, there was a radio in the car.

Avoiding the outdoors, Rick took the side door into the garage, through the utility room. Sitting in the driver's seat, he turned the key in the ignition then hit the switch for the radio. Nothing. The speakers were on, but only static came out. Frantically he wrestled with the tuner, trying all the channels he knew and everything in between to no avail. It wasn't something

that was wrong with Nancy and Isa, then. Something sinister, much bigger was at play. Could it be the Russians? They had lost the Cold War and taken up capitalism, but perhaps that had all been a ruse; a feint. Pretending to lose could have bought them time to develop a new weapon, something American couldn't defend against, catching them with their pants down. Could it have been transmitted over the vidscreens? Soften America up for an invasion, or just wipe them out then move in; once the corpses had turned to dust. Whatever it was, it wasn't infallible. It had missed him, perhaps there were others out there too. He'd need to find them, get a group of the unaffected together. Maybe they'd be able to do something about it, maybe they could find a cure. And if it was the prelude to an invasion ... Rick switched off the idling engine and went to fetch his gun.

On his way back past the kitchen, he put his ear to the door. He couldn't hear Isa's voice, but he could hear Nancy speaking, something about an amazing trick dermatologists didn't want her to know. Rick shuddered and made his way back to the car.

Slowly and it seemed to Rick, painfully, the garage door opened, the afternoon's humid rays of light painting the inside a lurid orange. Blinking in the

light, Rick could see Jamison. He was standing beside the telegraph pole on the corner where their two gardens met. Watering hose in one hand, the man waved with the other, calling to him cheerily.

“Cialis and Levitra twenty percent off!”

Rick put his foot down hard on the accelerator and the car surged forward, the impact sending the rotund man’s body tumbling, an overstuffed doll that fell to the dust with a thump.

The Buick screeched to a halt outside the police station, the sound bringing Sheriff Andersen running. Recognizing Rick, he slowed to a quick walk, making his way over to the car and peering in through the rolled down window.

“Say,” he panted “what’s the problem Mister Phelps? I was just on my way over to your end, someone down there called out an ambulance not five minutes back.”

“Jack, thank God you’re safe. Listen, something’s wrong with my girls. It’s not just them, either. Something terrible’s going on. Think it might be the Russians, I can’t say for sure. Whatever it is, I think we’re in danger. Just get in the car and I’ll explain as I drive.” Seeing the look in Rick’s eyes, Andersen nodded.

“Okay sir, hold up minute, I need to lock up before I go anywhere.” Unclasping his holster he turned back to the station door with his keys.

“What’s the short of it, anyhow?”

“Not too sure. Something to do with the vid-screens, I think. The girls, Jamison, everyone. Seems like they’ve all gone crazy. Anything you say to them, they talk like they’re some kind of ad-bot.”

Andersen paused, key in the door.

“Okay, now you really lost me? Bot?”

“Yeah, you know what I mean. Those chat-bots on the vidscreens, send you junk. Adverts pretending to be people.”

“If I was a bot ... why would I be wearing this hat? Lolz.”

“Jack?”

“If I was a bot ... why would I be wearing this hat? Lolz.”

Rick shot him in the neck.

The streets were empty. Hardly over an hour ago they’d been choked with traffic, men coming home from work. Now Rick found himself alone on the road. Gunning down the highway twenty miles outside of town, he was thinking furiously. The Sheriff had changed right in front of his eyes. One moment

he was normal, the next ... his mind was gone. Whatever it was, it was spreading, fast. It could change a man in broad daylight without a sound, there'd been nothing; no bright lights, no bomb ... could even the Russians pull a stunt like that? Some sort of extra-terrestrial interference perhaps. Maybe they'd connected too many vidscreens to the world network and in doing so it had achieved malign sentience in the form of some sort of virus. He'd read about things like this in science fiction when he was a boy. But why wasn't he affected? He'd not been down a cellar or in a bank vault when it happened, any of the usual explanations. Was he genetically immune, through some lucky fluke of nature? If it was aliens, maybe they'd singled him out for some reason, some purpose, but what? Aliens, Russians, transhuman viruses, spontaneous malign technological intelligences ... whatever it was, he had to get to the next town over, had to warn them all before it was too late. Some egghead scientists could figure out a way to beat it, Rick knew that. But he'd have to tell them, first. Find others who were unaffected, get word out to the rest of the country, rest of the world.

Rick had gone, and they didn't know where. How to find him? He'd taken a car, they'd need one too.

Exasperated, Nancy hung up the phone. She had rung and rung; Andersen must have gone out somewhere, leaving the station empty. Resolving to try again later, she went to comfort her daughter who was still quietly sobbing. The little girl had been terrified, she'd never seen her father behave like that; neither of them had. Not in Isa's lifetime or ten happy years of marriage before that. He was such a gentle and reliable man. Perhaps Mr. Higgins had been giving him too much to do, he had been working so hard the last few months. If he would just take some time off, have a rest, then things could go back to normal. She hoped Rick would call now. The pot roast had gone cold, but some could be reheated when he got home. She doled out a portion for him and put it on the stove, ready.

*

That evening, Linda Fox was on her way over to Jack Dowland's house. They'd been going steady for almost six months now. He was making her a home-cooked dinner, then they'd planned to head on out to take in a movie. She was a often little apprehensive about eating his cooking but to his credit he really did try. She thought that was sweet, so conceded to

give it a trial when she was free. Working full time at the record store as he did wasn't a guaranteed path to enlarging skill in the culinary arts. He always said she had no obligation to try but was always satisfied when she said it was good, seeming to instantly gain inches.

She was three doors down from his house when she heard a car engine approaching. Looking down the street, she watched it approach with low interest. The old car sped down the road and screeched-to beside her. She recognized it as an old Buick; she didn't knew much about cars but her father had owned one like it, although his had been orange. A disheveled man in a dirty suit jumped out yelling and ran towards her. Fearing robbery at first she clutched her purse tight, but relaxed her grip when she saw the sheer terror in his eyes.

“I need your urgent assistance” he was saying, “in transferring the sum of fifteen million USD into your account within fourteen working banking days.”

AT THE FALLING-OFF POINT



the tracks are shaking. there is a train and people are falling off of it every hundred or so miles. all the people you've always ever loved. your best friend your piano teacher your basketball coach. the girl you tutored at the library, the english boy who lived down the street. your old english teacher—her searching eyes. somewhere, a cat meows. the ground purrs soft and beaten. you wonder about your old rabbit, how she'd honk or hop, depending.

more bodies tumble out. bouncing torsos bound in arm and leg. every wild flail. every body its own. your ex-boyfriends, old friends gone or missing. all the sweet-eyed women you stare at. the friend hanging by belt and crossbeam, how you wonder at his soul. the small-armed woman on the street last fall. your dear friend who hugs you goodbye, leaves you to your lonely night. the train pummels through the black and a dozen more bodies thud. even the parents you thought you left at the train-stop with their tear-marked faces and sports coats and trembling hands have tumbled off and away. your sister fell off, back there. You've nearly nothing—

at the falling-off point every last one calls for you or for someone else they loved. in moments like this we call for who we love, not for those who love us. we all call out inside. the sounds of your name on their voices echo in the sparks of the wheel on the track. some of us are silent. none of this absolute.

at the falling-off point these people are lost. just lost. they are nothing else they are lost you are lost how were you to know. you do not remember if they were lost over a bridge over water or spun-out over some spot of grass-pocked earth. you just know they went tumbling off and the sky went black and the air was cold but the train was moving and something above was a-twinkle.

and you? you were right above the wheels. you knew the train was going, you didn't know where. how bodies scatter the path behind you. how you wonder and wonder and wonder and your wind-chapped knuckles refuse to let go. next to you there was always someone breathing. you measured every moment by the meter of the breath. this is how you learned to listen.

RETINA BURNS



IN MY DREAMS I walk the halls, in a menacing air, performing perfectly mundane tasks.

So perfectly menacing the next day I wake with a head already full and swimming with sensual fragments and images of time imagined, forgotten, and frantically reinterpreted as actual. Filed away like so many other fast moments always forgotten.

Now every time these sly eyes peer a corner or grab a scene out a window there is a spectral alignment. Triggers, and lights flashing gently underwater in recognition from the depths; and always, despite myself and whatever I was doing I set aside part of

my mind, so that whatever I was doing is now performed under some robotic haze, and autonomically reaching into the soupy abyss to try and fish the mirror fragments, hoping to refigure it into something distinguishable.

I

“Oeija papa”

“Good morning”,

He replied, without breaking step, or board, humming a single syllable all the way out the door. Straightening up and out all the rigidity gathered from a night spent on the floor I, however, did break a board. “But not a bone”, as Papa would remind me. So I focused, disconnected, smelled the burning outside. Time to eat.

The world was towering today. It always was, but today it forced the feeling, demanded veneration. I think it was the Sun, made greens greener and all the other colors something else. There was a cool breeze sifting through the branches today and it made me feel like I was in a bubble. I descended our broken jungle shack stairs and wobbled out fish-eyed, drunk

with the morning.

Sitting at the fire Papa motioned his right hand to the evergreens, tried to say something while his left hand fed him. Broke the thought, passed me the plate.

“Were going to be out there all day. Long day,” He pressed past his last bite, “eat all you want. Meet me when you’re finished ok?”

He made a smile and eye contact and went on his way, letting in the ambience of the jungle in his absence.

II

Finished the meal, broke the bone and slid the greasy remains searing into the fire; and stared for a moment gathering myself, enjoying all the morning sounds here today. I made my way up the stairs cautious now in paranoia of the alignment of this place.

Amber light seeped into the shack now as I made my way back inside to prepare for the day. It flowed in back rooms, and spilled in through the windows, dripped from every crack with the calm droning perseverance of a rainy night. One..one... one right after another. It was a testament to how full of holes one’s

home really is, in how well it can stand against the Sun.

I put on all my leather pieces finalizing the morning ritual, and slipped into that familiar movement. Striking, Powerful, Protected, Precise, and amplified in energy. Imbued with the memories in the leather, excelling in their usage, multiplying effect. I gathered the rest of my things, flake, bush blade, satchel, and partook of the honey as Papa does. I could feel it as soon as I opened the door.

AROUND IN THE DARK



IT HAD TAKEN three hard days and nights of drinking his way through Dublin to get Thomas to the front steps of The Church Bar. He had spent those dedicated days and nights stumbling up and down narrow wet streets, bothering the locals and urinating on the cold cobblestone of back alleys and the floors of pub bathrooms. It had taken all of that slurping for courage to get him where he stood, raspy and cotton-mouthed, at the base of the very same steps he had once climbed to attend church as a boy. But now, as he stood there in the dark, gulping down the bitter night air, a fear overtook him. He could never admit it, but he was

afraid—afraid of the superstition, the legend, the old wives' tale. He wasn't sure he even believed in the devil, but he needed him now. And so it was fear, fear of a ghost story he wasn't sure he believed, that cemented his wobbling, drunken feet to the sidewalk. He began to worry then that he had come all this way, maxing out his last in a long line of credit cards for an overseas flight, just to turn around and head back to his wasted life with nothing to show for all this effort.

A cackle of laughter trickled out of The Church Bar, resounding in the courtyard like a wheezing old man. Thomas looked back over his shoulder, thinking of the old church with longing and nostalgia. Though it had long since been converted into a bar and tourist trap, it still felt holy to him, as if thirty years of time and change hadn't occurred. As if there was still a common culture of faith and church. It was that nostalgia that renewed his courage as he closed his eyes and inhaled, filling his lungs with air.

He took off like a shot, sprinting as fast as he could around the church in the dark. The vibrant light passing through the stained glass windows flashed by him, all the stages of the crucifixion illuminated by the bar inside. He came 'round the back of the church, racing past the golden tower – a monument of spiral-

ing stairs plated in gold and protected by glass at the edge of Mary Street. He kept running past the front door. His feet were stinging, chest burning. Again he passed the gaudy stages of the crucifixion, then the golden tower, and the front door again. He continued on, rounding the church for the third and final time. The sound of his feet beating against the pavement echoed, the heavy patter following him, chasing him. He ran faster, pushing himself despite the growing pain and weight of each stride. As he reached the front steps for the final time, the echo of his footsteps continued their pursuit and he couldn't bring himself to stop. Instinct told him to keep running, to never stop, so he clenched his eyes shut again and ran harder, finally stuttering to a stop in the middle of Wolfe Tone Park some fifty meters past the front of the church, nearly weeping as he finished.

He put his hands on top of his head then paced and coughed, his lungs on fire. The mucous welled up in his throat and he spit, tasting the stale beer. While patting the outside of his pockets, feeling for a cigarette, he wished that he had managed to quit just once out of all those years of trying. He flicked his lighter, inhaled, then waited. As a boy, he had been warned about running around St. Mary's three times

in the dark, that it was a damnable sin, an unforgivable curiosity. And yet he barely knew what to expect. Still, he was there for a reason. So he continued to wait. Patiently, with the delusional stoicism of a determined man.

The park was desolate. Shadows danced in the orange glow of streetlamps, shifting and bouncing across the discarded tombstones that lined the worn brick wall bordering the former churchyard. He looked into the shifting silhouettes, waiting. His hands trembled slightly, the fear and whiskey and adrenaline all coursing through his veins with each audible thumping of his heart. It was foggy, he thought, even for Dublin. He hadn't been there for nearly thirty years, but it still felt like home.

A cold wind moaned, swaying the leafless tree branches in Wolfe Tone Park. The spindly offshoots of the naked Field Maples rubbed against each other, back and forth with the winds, an orchestra of ghastly violins. Thomas abandoned his pacing and doubled over, still struggling for breath, the cigarette dangling from his lips. The park had been built a few years back for the local children overtop the old church cemetery. He remembered playing there as a child, running and hiding among the gravestones. It occurred

to him then that the legend might not work. After all, this wasn't a church anymore. It was a bar filled with kitsch and drunken tourists.

He took a step forward and squinted, biting his lower lip as he peered at the base of the stone stairs, trying to discern between shadow and concrete. But there was nothing, nothing but the light of streetlamps and the empty steps that led up to the front of the bar.

He caught his quivering hand and clenched it into a fist, then laughed.

“Stupid child's games,” he mumbled. It had all been for nothing. He turned on his heels, stepped forward then stumbled again, righting himself against a fence and laughing. He noticed that his hands still trembled, so he sent his cigarette into the bushes with a flick and shoved them into his tired jacket pockets before starting back to the comfort of the bar that would always be St. Mary's to him.

The doors were still the same, he remembered as he pushed through into the warm air of The Church Bar. His head felt airy and dazed now, almost euphoric, as he stepped into the bright open vestibule. Such a strange ambiance. The old polished hardwood leading up to the newly constructed bar in the center. The restaurant seating on the balcony above that was

once the chorus loft. The music stage made of the altar and pulpit and tabernacle to the front. All of it lighted by a row of golden elephantine chandeliers hanging from the high, rib-vaulted ceilings. It still smelled of Sundays but tasted like all the other evenings of the week.

“A pint, Landlord. If you please,” Thomas commanded the bartender with a wave of his hand as he propped himself on a barstool and fumbled through his pockets, pulling out a wad of crumpled notes and laying them on the bar. He checked his reflection in the mirror behind the rows of liquor bottles, a haggard, hungry face staring back, his cheeks sunken, the skin ruddy and chaffed from the night air. His salt and pepper hair was windswept, so he tried to straighten it with his hands.

The pub was full, all the tables crowded with chatting and laughing tourists and Dubliners. Thomas was one of only three sitting at the bar, the only three who were serious about what they were doing there, hunched over their drinks with despondent, expressionless faces.

As he sat, his mouth drying, he looked over the top of the bar to one of the many religious statues, the relics of a holier time. In the far corner was a stat-

ue of St. Jude, sculpted in marble, holding a Bible in one hand, his neck adorned with a gilded chain. The patron saint of lost causes was looking out with dark eyes. Thomas noticed the flaming tongue of the Holy Spirit floating above the statue's head. The bartender slid the stout in front of Thomas, so he toasted the statue with a smile and drank, imagining himself the patron saint of serious drinkers with an unfettered dedication to his cause.

Suddenly, the heavy doors of the bar swung open and slammed against the plaster walls, resounding in a thunderous crash. A hush swept over the bar like a hand passing through smoke. The lull in conversation, swills, and clinking clanks seemed to last for days. Thomas turned and watched an ominous fog roll through the entrance of the bar. He squinted, as everyone else did, trying to peer through the dense haze billowing in through the same doors that once brought in all the wretched sinners of Dublin, all those seeking salvation at least.

Thomas felt a bead of sweat roll down the back of his neck. Then the fog dissipated. The Stranger—that all too familiar Stranger with as many names as there are sparks of a fire—walked into the light. He looked nothing like Dante or Milton imagined as he tried to

appear menacing, scowling as he did his best to deliver on the suspense. However, the effect was lost on the crowd who stared at him, standing in the doorway next to the long dried stoups, strangely dressed from head to toe in flamboyant red silk pajamas, his pointed slippers sparkling like Dorothy before she clicked her heels. His black hair was in disarray, the scraggly curls twisted and matted to the sides of his head, standing tall and sticking up in the shape of two benign horns.

The Stranger snarled, gnashing fanged but harmless white teeth at his audience. The hush that had fallen over the bar quickly faded, then a stifled chuckle rose up. Snickers and chortles followed, all of it growing louder and louder. Within a few seconds everyone in the bar began to laugh, everyone but Thomas that is, doubling over as they mimicked the absurdity of his bed-head and pointing at his pajamas and slippers as if it were all a show, a sacrilegious comedy being performed in such perfectly bad taste within the walls of the former church.

He, that most infamous He, had grown so used to being met with terror. He rather enjoyed the fear that overtook a room when he entered. So, naturally, he was taken aback at the crowds' reaction. Glanc-

ing down at his outfit he realized he had forgotten to change out of his pajamas and groaned, rolling his eyes. Then, with an annoyed snap of his fingers, he cast everyone motionless, leaving only Thomas untouched by the spell. The patrons were still, lifelike but unmoving in time like wax statues. The bartender held a pint glass under the still running tap. Stout overflowed and ran down his arm, streaming onto the floor from his bent elbow. Not an eyelash among the patrons waivered with a blink. They were frozen, necks craning, mouths open with laughter, or closed, stuck in a swallow or chew of a bar nut. A woman just a few tables from Thomas had been returning from the restroom when the Stranger had appeared, and there she was stranded, stuck hovering a half foot above her chair where she had been easing herself down at a table.

The Stranger shook his head, perturbed and disappointed. With a wave of his hand, the heavy doors obeyed, slamming shut behind him. Thomas looked away, staring vacantly into his pint as he listened to the patter of footsteps sauntering toward him, weaving through the tables packed with fossilized men and women. Each soft tapping step of the Stranger's blood-red slippers on the wooden floors sounded like

the first drops of rain against a window pane.

The Stranger then let out a sharp whistle and Thomas turned just in time to see him wink mischievously then hop to his left before reaching back and swinging, slapping one of the frozen men across the face. The smack echoed through the vestibule, but the Stranger didn't pause to listen. He just went on dancing between the tables, making his way closer to Thomas with a sashay to his left or a skip to his right, and misdeeds at every step between. He paused to bend over and spit into a man's beer. It popped and sizzled, boiling and bubbling over the rim of the glass like a beaker of acid.

Thomas felt a sickness welling up from somewhere deep inside. A fiery heat began fuming from the church vents, steam churning and sending Thomas' stomach reeling into a maelstrom of queasiness. He watched the Stranger dance closer and closer, the red silk pajamas flowing and shaking as he moved. There was panic in Thomas' short, forced breaths, but he dared not move from his barstool.

The Stranger did another side step and snatched the chair from beneath the woman he had struck still just before her wide ass could touch the seat. He twirled around, chair in hand, and flung it effortless-

ly over his shoulder. Thomas watched as the chair arced high through the air and then winced as it shattered across a man's knee, snapping as if it had met an iron beam, the pieces splintering and rattling on the floor. The Stranger never faltered, the movements of his dance continued toward Thomas, fluid yet with the precision of a well-rehearsed routine. He plucked a full pint from the caressing grip of a drunk a few stools away then finally reached Thomas, the man he had traveled so far to see at such an ungodly hour.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” the Stranger asked as he took a drink from the pint he had stolen. He let out a groggy sigh, then pulled himself on top of a stool next to Thomas.

Thomas started to speak, but each syllable was a struggle of stutters and stammers. His mouth was chalky, his tongue weighed down.

“Cat got your tongue?”

Thomas coughed as he choked down another long drink. “Something like that.”

In that moment, that brief pause when the two of them were seated next to each other and sipping at their pints, it was as if they were just two men sharing a quiet drink at a bar.

“Did I wake you?” Thomas asked, still averting

his eyes.

The Stranger looked down at his absurd pajamas then raised a single brow up to Thomas.

“Sorry,” Thomas said, even though it seemed ridiculous to apologize. “I sort of lost track of time about three days ago. I have to be honest, I figured you didn’t need sleep.”

“Well you figured wrong.”

Thomas laughed a little, turning his head slightly to face the Stranger, but stopped abruptly as he watched him raise the pint to his lips. The tips of his fingers were pointed like the tongues of flames, and it seemed to Thomas that they were dancing. He found himself mesmerized, a pathetic moth drawn to flickering candlelight.

“I can’t believe I’m up here again at two in the morning,” the wicked Stranger shook his head.

“So does that mean you’re on Greenwich Mean Time?”

“No, Central European,” the Stranger replied. “I’ve had vested interest in that region for generations now.” He looked forward and sniffed, brushing his hand across his sharp nose. “I gotta tell you, Thomas. There was a time when nobody had the courage to make it three times around this church in the dark.”

Thomas leaned over his drink and looked down into the dark stout, searching for his reflection somewhere in the mud.

“You paying attention?” Thomas nodded to answer but remained sullen, shuffling his feet at the base of his barstool. “Good. I hate to be so nostalgic, reminiscing pathetically about how it was then, but there was a time when I could sleep. Before this place became a bar, I mean. You remember, don’t you?”

“Remember what?”

The Stranger laughed. “You know you can’t lie to me, right? I know all your tells.”

Thomas sighed. He had gotten used to being a great liar.

“You remember when the neighborhood kids were here nearly every night of the week, running around in the cemetery in the dark and playing Ghost in the Graveyard. They had never heard of that game before you taught them. It took a little American boy to teach them such an insidious and spooky game.” His voice pitched as he wriggled his fingers, a caricature of evil.

“I remember.”

“I’m not sure what changed,” the Stranger said. “People used to have faith and fear. Remember Owen

Kerrigan? He was the bravest of all your boyhood friends. I remember watching, waiting and hoping that he might make it. You were what, eleven then?"

Thomas nodded.

"It was your last night in Dublin, remember?"

"Of course I do."

"It was you who dared him to summon me. And he almost made it. I watched as Owen ran, sprinting as fast as those fat little legs would carry him," his laugh was clichéd and sinister, expected. "You and all your friends were standing on the church steps, cheering him on as he came 'round. For a moment, I thought he might make it. I had never seen anyone who wasn't desperate or pathetic make it. No offense," he said, turning to Thomas. "I watched him on his third time around. I was ready for him. You were all so young and innocent. A rarity for me. A sweet delicacy I always love to taste. I would have taken all of you that night. Do you know that?"

"But he didn't make it all the way around that last time," Thomas responded.

The Stranger swallowed hard and turned to Thomas, laughing as he leaned back on his stool, stout nearly bursting from his nose. "No, he sure didn't," the Stranger went on. "He was nearly there.

He only had twenty, maybe thirty meters more to go, but it was too much. The fear got to him. So he dove, face first onto the pavement, sobbing and screaming for his mother. Remember?” the Stranger smacked Thomas on the back as he laughed. It was like they were old friends, having a beer together and laughing over old times and stories. Except Thomas wasn’t laughing. He sat poised, or pretending to be poised, as he listened and calculated. “He took all the skin off his hands and those chubby little knees,” the Stranger continued. “You all laughed at him as he hollered and sobbed. He had gravel stuck in his hands. His chin was torn open, and you just laughed at him, chiding him for being such a coward. Remember?”

“Yes, I remember. I was there.”

“No need to raise your voice and snap at me, Thomas,” he said, holding his hand to his chest to feign offense. “Sometimes it’s just nice to talk about the good old days, back when things were the way they were supposed to be. Back when this whole legend meant something. Now, every few nights there’s some drunk asshole with enough courage to make it around.”

Thomas finished off his beer and slid the glass forward a touch. He watched it with anticipation as it

nearly fell over then teetered and wobbled before settling on its base.

“I miss the fear. I miss being able to sleep,” the Stranger sighed.

Thomas nodded and the two of them sat in silence for a moment.

“So, what is it that you want?” the Stranger said.

Thomas turned, and for the first time looked straight into the eyes of the Stranger. There was a bottomless depth to those eyes, a sadness and madness that sucked him in. He felt more lost in them than he had been in his entire life, but he was desperate.

“Come on, you summoned me. You have to want something.”

“I didn’t know you were like a genie,” Thomas said, dropping his eyes as he turned his head away.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that, but nobody is willing to go through all of that just to wake me up in the middle of the night so we can have a beer together.” The Stranger was calculated, stony. “So I ask again, what do you want?”

Thomas breathed deeply through his nose. His skin was dry, the gray whiskers of his five o’clock shadow itched. Finally, he took another long, heavy

breath before turning back and staring into the eyes of the Stranger.

“I want to be happy.”

“Sounds like a problem for your shrink,” the Stranger said as he stood up and leaned over the bar, reaching forward with his empty pint glass and holding it overtop the bartender’s hand to refill it under the still flowing Guinness tap. “Just put that one on my tab,” he snickered and fell back onto his stool.

“I want to be young again and have success. I want money.” Thomas felt himself choking up. “And I want my beautiful wife back.”

“Understandable,” he replied.

Thomas gritted his teeth for courage then breathed in deeply. “I want all of the things I threw away and more. I’ll pay any price. I’m willing to give anything for it.”

“Anything?”

“Anything,” Thomas said with a certainty even he believed.

“Well,” the Stranger thought for a moment. “You sort of put me in an awkward position here.”

There was a silence that felt like drowning. Thomas expected to hear the old church bells toll, he almost longed for it, anything to break the silence.

“You see, Thomas,” the Stranger started. “You’ve requested a great deal there. You’ve asked me to undo nearly your entire life. To rebuild everything you tore down and threw away. On top of that, you want wealth and the world.”

St. Jude caught Thomas’ eye once more. He was as lifeless as the people in the bar. What good had come from the cult of saints? That mythology masquerading as faith and salvation?

“And for all of that,” the bright red Stranger brought him back, “you haven’t anything to offer me really, have you?”

“I offer you my soul.”

“Your soul?” He laughed again. “And what credit do you think that gives you?”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

“I have to be honest,” the Stranger said. “Your soul isn’t worth much. In the end, I’ll probably get it anyway. All I have to do is wait. I don’t have to give you a damn thing.”

Thomas sat back, tears welling up in his eyes.

“Thanks for the drink,” the Stranger said as he hopped off his barstool and started for the door.

“Wait!” Thomas pleaded, rising from his stool as he reached out to stop him.

The Stranger paused for a moment and looked back over his shoulder. He was smiling, a sharp, knowing grin that was playfully devoid of any comfort. "I'll see you soon," he said, then walked away.

Thomas watched helplessly as the Stranger dissolved into the fog of the Dublin night. He felt the same desperate, hollow feeling he had grown used to, that lonesome abandonment. Though now it was somehow worse. There was truly no hope anymore. His last, damnable chance had yielded nothing and he realized then that he was worse off than before, that he had nothing to look forward to. This last pitiful shot had been nothing more than a fantasy, a legend that was only true enough to be cruel. So he sat back down on his barstool and stared down again, finding no solace in his empty pint.

The opened doors slammed shut once more. In that instant, as the heavy reverberation waned, the world around Thomas moved again, and everything picked up where it had left off. Sentences were finished and drinks were swallowed. For all the people around him, it was as if a record had skipped and the song kept on moving forward without missing a beat.

A few things seemed a bit off, though, altered even. There was the drunk at the end of the bar who

couldn't find his pint, and the man whose face stung. He cursed and accused everyone around him of slapping him, but nobody could take the blame. A man across the bar cried out in pain, clutching his knee as his friends looked on in dismay. And then there was the woman. The heavysset blonde in the awkwardly twisted skirt who fell to the floor with a smack, bruising her tailbone and flashing her lime green panties to all of St. Mary's. She lay on her back laughing, all of them laughing.



A stylized sun with golden rays radiating from a central circle. The central circle is filled with a golden color and contains intricate musical notation, including notes and clefs. The sun is set against a white background.

POETRY

ENCORE



I danced in your shoes,
in the spotlight of the headlights.
In the dark, you tapped the horn for applause,
and stepped outside to bring me in.
At the night's request, we danced together barefoot,
each step closer to the masterpiece.
The windshield wipers waved at us to come inside,
And we thought we returned in secret
But the bright night sky accepted the moon roof's invitation.
And with millions of eyes, our glowing audience watched—
And all peeked through the windows, wanting a better view,
But they quickly dimmed as a gesture of decorum
because they knew that we were
bright enough.

LONG-DISTANCE



Home is on top of my orange blanket
that's a lump in my bed like a
coffin, sweating in the August heat,
knowing you won't call, Pepsi cans tethered
by string three thousand miles
apart.

CAPITALISM CALLS
POETRY LAZY



Overcast day long slack sleeves pale in February
walking through Feldman's Neighborhood
Tucson small adobe houses terra-cotta that one's prune-colored
the rough potholed smell of dog shit and barking of different
sized dogs stop. Traffic signal and cast a shadow in the bike lane.

Last night when we were high upstairs I said,
"No one's their understanding" and step
over broken trilobite shells scarlet
cement flecks brick wreckages the desert's color alive.

Not easy to get the thoughts they don't come out real,
a poetic imperative
and I'm asking whose voice
I give my authority
to think inside me and make real my state of truth.

A belief is something akin to
a photograph taken over a forced open window.
Of course, everything in my mind isn't from my instinct,
"isn't America"
that idea's an imprecise blank of culture, think
when do I if I do will I know I'
m writing this from my disappointment, not yours.

The New York Times: Syria In Catastrophe, but I
've known, The First World's selling
its immune system
to the
same customers
it tears to pieces
I'm eating an éclair.

In this café again, Café Passé, every poem
I'm interested in making I picture in Nazareth, The café
is abuzz with White people's self-filled conversations,
their faces in pearly gypsum cell-phone lights, they speak
with the philosophy of a pop song

and their politics tenderless,
the ones capitalism calls a poet lazy with
Do any of their sentiments
have sovereignty? Do mine?

It's my 5th Nazareth poem so I write
"I want my mind an armed revolution,"
the self tells my thoughts a map of the room,
my eyes riot and leak

a glacier
of burdened river light lengthening me
because I have always missed the world

like this:
a face leaning from off its architecture:

But it's not that that stops me

stops myself: It's the thought that

we believe what we tell ourselves, we
live stolen, who you would have been, taken
underground of your culture
and the thoughts

you have are not yours.

LET US ELOPE



Let us elope, we said.
Was it rebellion, or is it love?
I confuse myself too often
trying to nail down euphemisms
that don't know what we mean.

Either or neither and something like hope
beckoned us both
to a place
where rules are in place
and we are out of place
and we have to
drive on the wrong side of the road.

Chemistry never had nothin' on us.
Isotopic equations and pie charts
gave us ideas and made us giggle.
We ruled the rulers
and forgot our additions.
We spoke in exclamations
and pretended we knew French.

We believed facts were funny.
Theorems and doctor excuses,
those were the things we pondered in bed.
Grammar forgave our misplaced thoughts
and told us to run-on,
so we mapped our way
to this place.

Steel-toed boots couldn't keep us
from being stepped on,
but we went on and on and on some more.
Throwing our shoes at the moon
like fools, we felt free and honest in the glow.
Barefooted and whole-hearted,
we arrived at our own pace.

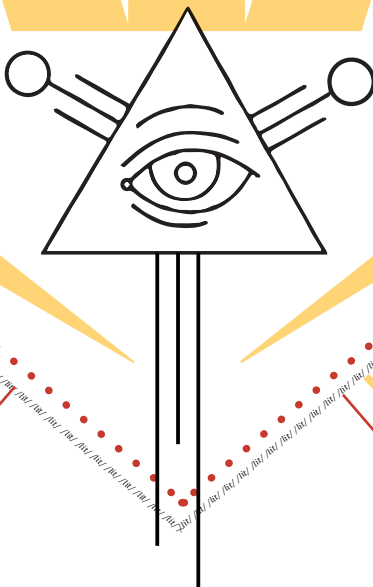
We made up ever afters
after we found our forever.
We had ice-cream on a couch
and called it
our place.

THE REAL MISSING MASS



They say that most of you is missing
Perhaps from your most private places
Something more than just an arm or leg
And deeper than your darkest spaces.
Researchers conclude as much as ninety percent
Lost deduced from a long line of X's and O's
But it takes no greater science to tell me
Your muted mysteries no one knows.
I too have peered down your opaque passages
Have felt your fractal pulse dimensionless
Have seen your eyes hidden in a veil of stars
And knew that you are quite featureless.

Like staring at the stars you cannot be seen directly
And all your skies are blue from a distance only.



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