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[Zinewritersguild@gmail.com](mailto:Zinewritersguild@gmail.com)

[zinewritersguild.wikia.com](http://zinewritersguild.wikia.com)

2010



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# Introduction/Note from the Eds

We would like to extend our thanks to the writers who have submitted to us.

If you are in support of this project, more gratifying than any thanks is an expression of support through submissions. If you have a talent for writing, art, or anything else, please send your submissions or ideas to us, however ridiculous or taboo they may be. Help us continue to make this something that *you* would be interested in.

We hope to continue to expand this project to include a greater number of authors and artists producing a wider variety of creative works.

We remain very open to criticism and suggestions on how we can improve ourselves. Anon has never been one to hold his tongue, and we wouldn't want him to start now. Give us your opinions, honest and blunt as they may be, and help us make this project better. By Anon, for Anon.

## Updates

We have an IRC channel.

Server: irc.freenode.net

Room: #ZWG

Most of the writers now have a page on the wiki. On the left hand side, under contributors you can find their pages. Most of these contain contact info, so if you would like to provide direct feedback, that is the way to do it. There are also vague descriptions for some of them which you may find interesting.

We are *still* searching for artists who would be interested in providing illustrations to be co-released with submissions each issue.

To keep this under 80 pages of submission material, several submissions originally planned to be added this issue have been pushed back to our third issue. This does not mean we have turned down your submission; we have emailed the authors of those submissions which we have turned down.

# Fantasy

# The Gift

By Josef K.

Underneath the old stone bridge, in the early summer heat, I first met my friend. I'd come to this spot beneath the bridge for as long as I could remember, following the small creek in the our backyard down through the farmer's fields, and behind the roaring freeway. Beneath the bridge the dirt was still cool, even in the hottest noonday sun. I'd come to the bridge to think, to play, to cry, and to dig my pale chubby fingers into the blessed cool soil, digging deep depressions in the damp earth.

The creek trickled by, but my father had told me never to go in the water; it had a thin scum on the top that reflected the light in an odd, shimmering way, like the shell of a beetle. I'd disobeyed him once when I was younger and the rash that boiled up on my legs had scabbed and bled for a week. Now, I was content to sit among the pale and drying reeds and hold tight to that primal cold in that place where the sun couldn't reach.

On the day he was first there, the cottonwood trees were shedding their seeds, bright white silken clouds that drifted in the air like snow that somehow defied the sun. The air was thick with heat and exhaust from the freeway, buzzing over the rise like an angry hive. He was stretched out on the other side of the creek, his body half covered by the shadow of the old stone bridge. At first, I saw only a pile of ragged clothes, capped with a wide-brimmed and frayed hat, but then I saw the long, bony fingers steeped across his chest, and his calloused and blackened feet.

Tied to his big toe with a perfect bow was a thin line of fishing wire, and I saw the toe twitching slightly, tugging on the line. The hat covered his face, but beneath it, I caught the quick dance of a frayed stick or root, grasped between his teeth; it slid back and forth under the shadow of the brim. I watched him for an hour, nothing moving but his toe, the stick, and the slow rise and fall of his chest.

I didn't move, or make a sound that I was aware of, but soon, the stick stopped its rhythmic journey, and slowly tilted upward, tucking under the brim of the hat. I saw the outline of his pale lips and teeth as they dug in and pushed the stick upwards, lifting the filthy hat upwards like a cellar door.

He peered out, straight at me, and blinked in the sunlight; the rest of his body lay perfectly still. He was gaunt, and sunken cheeked; his skin was weathered and tanned like leather. As his bright sunken eyes met mine, his mouth split into a wide grin, exposing a row of perfect and polished white teeth clamped around the twig.

It was infectious, and I found my own face stretching into a smile. I could have stayed there, smiling with him until the day went dark. I felt content. When he relaxed his mouth and allowed the hat to drop back over his face, it was so slow that I hardly noticed the movement until the shining coals of his eyes vanished beneath the brim.

As soon as the hat obscured his bristled chin, it began to rise again, revealing cheeks puffed out like a trumpet player and eyes crossed tight together. I laughed out loud, feeling a warm wellspring of happiness inside me. The hat dropped and rose again, this time, his face was puckered, like he'd eaten a lemon. I laughed harder.

After a parade of distorted faces that left my lungs sore from laughing, he leaned forward and rose to a crouch. He removed his hat, running his hands through a thick mop of unkempt black hair. He smiled again at me, chewing on the twig, and began to twirl his feet around each other in a little waltz, coiling the fishing line around his toes.

The hook slid out of the water, dragging with it a little sparkling tangle of gold that caught the sun and ignited. Once he'd drawn the hook up to his feet, he reached down and clasped his hand over it like it was a bug. His face took on an exaggerated impression of fear, as he pretended that it was leaping in his hands, trying to escape as he struggled against it. I couldn't help myself and I burst out laughing, and my friend flashed his wide smile. He mimed throwing underhand until I understood and held out my hands, cupped and expectant.

The little tangle of gold chain sailed in an arc across the glistening filthy water, and landed perfectly in my hands with a sound like shifting sand. It was a beautiful necklace, with a tiny golden gross encrusted with sparkling green stones. I looked up, and my friend winked, the skin around his eyes crinkling and pulling, and he raised one thing bony finger to his puckered lips. I understood, and looked back to the beautiful little gift.

When I looked up again, he was gone.

I didn't know the girl who was missing, but she was my age, and I must have seen her at school. It made me angry to see people who didn't know her crying and carrying on like they were the best of friends. I tried not to scowl at the little bawling clusters of kids in the hallways, and fingered the little gold chain in my pocket. I was dreaming of summer break, a scant two weeks away, and thinking about my friend when I fell, my fat clumsy feet wrapping around each other, pitching my body forward in a wave of inertia. I threw my hands out, but only succeeded in throwing the little gold charm and bending my fingers back against the hard marble floor.

It didn't take long for the little crowds of mourners to break their stage-play of grief to laugh at me, sprawled on the floor with watering eyes. All except one dark haired girl with puffy wet eyes. She was staring at the necklace on the floor, with a look that I didn't understand, blank, yawning and broken. Then she looked at me and screamed.

I understood then, but even as the principal and later the policemen questioned me, I played dumb. I told him I'd found the necklace outside of school that morning, repeating the story with clever little details I made sure to keep consistent. My friend had given me a gift, and I owed it to him to keep the secret. I'm not like the pretenders in the hall. I don't care about some missing girl I never knew about, and who would have never cared for me. I care about my friends.

It was months before I saw him again, in the beginning of autumn; he was perched on top of the old stone bridge, his filthy feet swaying like an excited child. I hadn't been let outside for the whole summer; trapped in the dry air conditioned dark of the house as my father drank and my mother cried at each new disappearance.

Most of the missing meant nothing to me, but those few whose names I recognized made me smile in secret. They were the worst, the ones that beat me, taunted me, and called me names. The ones that laughed. And I knew that I would be safe.

It made such perfect sense, that I wanted to share it with my parents, to assure them

that it was only the bad people. That it was all okay. But I saw in my mother's blasted eyes the same lying phony grief from my school. I saw her taking someone else's pain and using it to plug the holes in her own emptiness, and it made me sick. When I finally felt like I was going to burst, so angry at them all for not recognizing the gift, I snuck out into the evening cool, leaving my snoring father and hollow mother and racing along the creek.

Somehow, I knew he would be there, but my heart still leapt to see him. His clothes were the same, if only more tattered and dirty, and he appeared to have the same wet and shredded stick tucked between his thin lips. He smiled wide at me, and I sat beneath the bridge in contented quiet, just relishing the company of someone who simply understood and asked no more.

In wordless conversation, he showed me how he could crack the knuckles of his toes, just by shifting them quickly, playing a crackling little rhythm of pops and ticks as his feet shuddered and wiggled. I laughed as he juggled a pair of apples and a large dusty stone, taking a bite out of each apple as it passed his mouth, and miming a painful bite from the rock. The sun set and the stars pierced the sky; he was showing me how he could fold those long fingers into the shape of a flying bird, when I heard shouts, crying my name far in the distance.

My friend turned to me with a little wink and then dropped from the bridge, landing almost silently in the dirt beside me. He crouched, his shining smile and papery skin just a few feet from me, and I smelled a sweet, warm smell like cloves and cinnamon. His hand darted out towards my ear like a striking rattlesnake, and his face was a clown's mask of surprise and shock. He twisted his hand with a flourish to reveal a key ring, packed with bouquet of dozens of keys, brass, silver, chrome, shining in the waning sunlight. The key ring fell into my outstretched hands, and as I turned it over again, I thought how lucky I was to have a true friend at last.

Then, he was gone, and my father's hands were on my shoulders, shaking me and yelling. A group of half a dozen men, my father's friends and important men in town, clustered around him, gripping lanterns and rifles, huddling close together, their wide faces reflecting fear and moonlight as their eyes darted at each noise.

I wanted to laugh at them, feeling that warmth in my chest as I saw what it looked like when bad people were afraid, at last. So much is changing for the better, and I have my friend to thank for it. The key-ring was heavy in my pocket, hidden from them and my father's drunken anger. I clasped it tight, so it was perfectly silent, a reassuring weight in my stubby fingers.

Later in the night, as my father and his cowering posse combed the countryside for what I knew they would never find, my mother covered me in crocodile tears and breathless constrictor hugs. It was only the little weight of the gift in my pocket that kept me from being sick with contempt.

When the winter came, the roads were blocked and no one could have left town if they'd wanted to. The food grew scarce and soon there weren't enough of my father's friends to patrol the town, and the vanishings and disappearances spiked. I confess that I was surprised at how truly rotten the town must have been, but I trusted my friend. He knows what is right.

The keyring has kept me alive. While my mother and father doled out the last portions of dried rice and beans, I passed unseen through the silent white town to find a



treasure trove of locked larders and pantries. My friend is wise, as well as benevolent. I considered sharing this gift with my parents, but if they were meant to be chosen, my friend would have let me know. So I stayed warm and fed, and my parents grew thin and drawn.

One morning I awoke to the pure silence of winter, the snow robbing the world of all sound. The usual movements and shuffle of my parents were gone, and even the creaking bones of our old house were silent. There was a sudden swell of happiness in me, like a youthful Christmas morning, before I was told it was all a lie.

I danced through the empty house, no longer trying not to smile. No longer holding back my joy, because I knew: the gift was complete now. I pulled on my snow-boots and jacket and burst out into the silent world, purged of evil, emptied of predators, cleansed of all that was wrong.

My friend was at the bridge, sitting cross legged in the cobblestone road. He was covered in snow, it hid his entire hat under a broad cone of white, and it crested up against his sides like frozen waves. His broad shining smile rivaled my own, and his skin was flushed with warmth. When I approached him, he stood, slow and elegant, like a tree growing in front of my eyes, and I noticed for the first time how very tall my friend was. When he'd risen to his full height, he stretched, in exaggerated pantomime complete with a yawn that stretched the corners of his wide mouth. Then he leaned forward and pressed something into my hands, something cold and hard, and his long fingers wrapped around my little hands like a spider. I clenched it tight, not wanting to take my eyes off him, knowing that his work was done, and this meeting would be bittersweet and final.

He smiled warmly at me, winked one last time, and hoisted a filthy burlap sack to his shoulder. A few feet down the road, he turned and tipped his hat to me, sending a little flurry of snow down that obscured his face, and then he was gone, swallowed up into the swirling whiteness.

I opened my hands slowly, watching the bluish fingers curl away from the last gift, and my heart's warmth flooded through my body while hot little tears formed at the corners of my eye. My parents wedding bands, tarnished and simple, lay in my hand; the rings were somehow, impossibly, linked and intertwined.

I stood in the unbroken quiet and perfect drifts of snow, and looked out at the world. The silence, the freedom. The perfect and beautiful loneliness. This was the true gift. This was my friend's work. And he asked nothing in return. All I can do is to, someday, try and return the favor.



# Blam!!

By Jake Nealy

*BlamBlamBlam!!!*

In comic books, when the street thugs are shooting at Batman or whoever, the guns always say “*Blam!!*”

*BlamBlamBlam!!!*

Three Blams, and Miz Evans’ brains are all over the chalkboard behind her. The globs are covering the equation she just wrote. Jason raises his hand,

“Miz Evans, I can’t read the board.”

Miz Evans, her eyes rolled into the back of her head, falls forward and smashes every single one of her teeth into powdered milk.

My classmates look around, bored. The lunch-bell rings and we all file out and head towards the cafeteria.

“I’d like to speak with you after school,” Miz Evans says.

-

Wouldn’tcha know it? Stacey Benson, head cheerleader, president of the S.A.C.K. (Simple Acts of Care and Kindness) club, and currently the only student with a passing grade in Señor Langston’s Spanish class is secretly a vampire!

As she cuts in front of me to grab the last red (*blood* red) Jello, I jab my yellow number two pencil right in her black vampire heart. Her scream sounds like a badly worn cassette tape played through some little kid’s *My First Boombox*<sup>TM</sup>. Her pretty blue eyes melt and dripdripdrip out of their respective sockets like a pair of broken faucets. Her hair rapidly turns grey and then proceeds to fall out on to the floor. As she continuously vomits up all of the last red Jellos she ever stole, I can’t help but feel sorry for the janitor that will be responsible for cleaning this mess and making sure she receives a proper vampire burial.

I grab an *orange* Jello and head over to the table where my friends are sitting. From across the room Stacey stares at me, confused, and maybe a little bit frightened. Perhaps she knows that I’ve discovered her horrible secret.-

Later at home, I’m taking our trashcans in from the curb when my neighbor from next door, the giant, elderly, blob-like woman whose name I don’t know demands to speak to my mother and or father because my dog was in her backyard again and completely destroyed her patio furniture and this time she intends to do something about it. *As if anyone or anything would ever be willing to go anywhere near her backyard anyway.*

I take one hand off the trashcan and make a gun with my thumb and index finger. The neighbor blob scowls at me, a bag of corn chips in one hand and half a two liter of diet root beer in the other. I feel the heat of the sun on my neck as I hold my *handgun* steady, waiting for her to draw. Will it be the chips or the soda? Both are lethal weapons in her puffy sausage fingers. I spit in the dirt and narrow my eyes. Our neighbors stand watching on their porches, it’s been quite some time since they’ve seen a good-old-fashioned showdown. On my own front porch I hear my mother hollerin’, “Kevin?! Miz Evans is on the phone, you have detention on Friday. I swear to God Kevin, if you don’t quit screwin’ around in class I’m

gonna throw your tv in the closet and you won't get it back till school's out. We're gonna have a long talk about this when your dad gets home. Kevin? Are you even list-"

The neighbor blob loses her patience and starts to say something to my mom, but I'm too quick for her. I fire my *handgun*.

*Blam!!*

It's a direct hit! The neighbor blob goes down, her left leg blown clear off. She drops the cornchips, the diet rootbeer splashes onto the harsh desert floor. She grabs at her stump and tries to stop the blood from spouting forth.

*BLAM!!*

*BlamBlamBlam!!*

# Litchfield, Part 1

By: Gjallarhorn !!+W2s3VJk5sr

I don't have a heart, and that's about as literal as it gets. I just don't have that muscle, that tough engine like thump of red flesh, that raw material of man motion, the conductor, and red spinster. Whatever, whatever you call it. I don't have one. Instead I have a space, like a three dimensional outline beneath my sternum. Yet I still live, and I'm not quite sure how. Considering the basics of the human condition, I should have long since shut down; should have malfunctioned. Hell, I should have never been operable. Yet very much like Ghepetto's puppet, I'm a *real* boy. Being like this makes me ask questions, practical questions. How does my blood get from one nipple to the other or from my ear to my dick? Insofar as I can assume, it doesn't, yet it does. How can any of the blood get anywhere? How can there be an orbit of my organs without their sun? I've so many questions, yet no one to ask because I have to keep it secret.

Nobody can see the space, just like they cannot hear my thoughts. Nobody forces me to go to the doctor so they can pour radioactive goo down my throat, and fax my insides. If I take ill, I stay home. I take medicine. I wait. I don't know what I'd do if I ever needed surgery. I'd probably kill myself, but not for the reasons one would think. It's because the people cannot know. It's as simple as that; for knowing is the precipice before finality - the doorway unto death.

The winding street was the same as it always had been, curvaceous as a fantasy, but terrible in its emptiness. The bowing trees pressed inward, littering the dark road with sinuous branches and vines infested with leaves. The sound they made was an empty crackle, as niche as a brief spark from a match, singular in its dry dip into the day time air. Companioned, they made a thunderstorm under tire.

I drive because I have to. I hate doing it though. Father always told me that there were three ways to tell whether a man was a man, and all three fit between his legs. The other two were his woman, and his car. So I bought this vehicle, red abomination that it is, out of obligation. To whom it might not matter. But it's within that matter that I have made a matter out of matter; my ride sleek as winter kissed wind, my ride just as cold. I never named the thing, though I suppose I should. Yet what was the need? I could rifle through a litter of female names I kept penned up in my head, or I could study it, and devise a name that best represented what it was. It is low to the ground, temperamental in harsh times and only willing to carry me as far as it desired. So what hasty bitch was that? Something prissy, something high maintenance to represent the expensive gas it savours like cosmopolitans. Stacy would suffice, perhaps.

And the sky was darker than blue through the window tint that peeled at the edges, rolling back into cigar shaped flaps. A thick crack ran across her front window like a wrinkle in her forehead.

Up ahead there was a crowd of people. If only they knew. If only I could tell them. It's one of my deepest desires to approach the nearest group of people, and speak to them as if they were representatives of the tentative race of humanity. As if I were to deliver to them the insurmountable evidence that they would need to share with the top most officials, who would in turn share the information with their whisperers, the spirits in their pockets. I see them standing there like the deformities they are; those blondes and brunettes with the curly and hair-so-straight that it's sheets of polyester. Their faces looked as if a smudge within a blur as Stacy and I whiz past.

The space beats where my heart should be. I grope at the spot where it might lay, desperate to reveal itself for what it was, or what it is, or what it potentially could be. And then I get an urge to turn around, to spin this circle of swan shaded leather in my hand until Stacey fishtails back towards the smudges in the distance, until they are laid out upon the trail of potential truths. I feel it like fatass craving for chocolate in the late night creeping up his toes and shivers in his loins, like the last drop of blood on a vampire's fang. I want to fly at them, drive at them, crash into them with my car and shatter their vertebrae like balsa wood. Then I could leap through the window, slide out like they do in those films where the main character's just too cool to use the goddamn door, and stroll across the sidewalk to them. I know how it would look too. Broken glass, from the shattered hutch that housed party supplies on the corner, would purify the land like salt; strands of red and black fake hair from the clown and hilarious Jew-fro wigs would stream the ground like lines of ants. And I'd glide across it, across metal and wood and glass and soiled ground with my jacket pinched at the waist, tie flapping back in the wind, my space beating the only sound on earth. And I'd bend down, place my lips to their bloodied ear, and whisper the truth to the victims, my victims. I'd watch them go crazy right before they died. Wouldn't that be so sweet?

But all thoughts pass as the road unwinds from the tight coil of my imagination, and once again, everything is gray and black and concrete, dotted with lines and arrows that lead to nowhere. Yet I reached into the passenger seat for my bag, an oily black thing I found in a thrift store for seven dollars. It smelled like stale grease when I got it. Now it smells like grease and cheap cologne. But it works. It has a handle, three pockets that line the oblong surface like gangrene wounds filled with pus and brochures, and a silver zipper that opens it from end to end. I stroke it back, both hearing and feeling the clicks as it opens. And I feel the bottle of paradise in my hands, hard smooth glass and the illegality.

I wet my lips.

Unscrewing the top, the scent of whiskey is like a knife up my nostril and into my brain. Just the way I like it, as it should be. But there's a blast of music, a sharp vibration at my hip, and I drop the bottle like an asshole. Sin punished.

"Go." I said as I slid the phone from my pocket. This was the phone I did not ignore, not if I'm taking a shit not I'm impregnating the president's daughter do I have the authority to not answer this phone.

"Are you there yet?" The voice on the other line is female. She sounds like she's naked and letting me know. But I know even if she is, she's not.

"Still on my way." I say. As if she didn't already know that. What good would she be if she didn't?

"How much longer?" I looked at the clock on the dashboard, it flickered a repetitive twelve and zeroes.

"Soon," I say.

"Good. Then since you're almost there, you can warrant a change of plans."

"What?"

"If you would be so kind." Her voice egging me on, the beating in my space quickens but I grasp the shirt covering my hollowness in an attempt to stifle the quickened drumming. Stacy all too quickly motions her jealousy and points the car towards a nearby tree.

"And if I'm not?" I said. The complete pretentious lack of organizational nerve she must possess to suggest something of the sort. To even hint at something was so unheard of that it went beyond a simple firing, past the realm of expulsion into something closer to exile, to execution or worse. Yet she was the one behind the phone, and I was not. The recipient can only receive the gift or curse, praying to his God for the former.

"Things have changed." The beating has softened and I retreat my hand onto the cheap plastic mats on Stacy and try to pick up the bottle.

"Clearly." I said, "I didn't think you were dumb enough to suggest something like this, so that tells me one of two things. Either you are dumb, or the rules have changed."

"The rules haven't changed!" she spat, "You overlooked the outlier, the least likely,

and most improbable of circumstances.”

“Which is?” I ask.

“The situation. It’s the situation that’s changed.”

“The situation never changes.”

“Now who’s being dumb.” she said. This smacked of something similar to history, or more precisely ancient history. Nowadays, situations don’t change, they cannot. If they attempted to, it was my job to force them back to my employer’s comfort level. Nobody spoke of change on the go. So, why now?

“So what exactly has changed?” I asked retrieving my overturned bottle to drink what was left of my whiskey.

“Old Bones,” she said.

“Fuck!”

*To be continued...*

# Lord Creature

By Sensen

I didn't take the drugs for pleasure, they were necessary.

Or that's what I keep telling my bloodshot, rheumy eyed, deadpan face every morning. The pleasure of seeing her soon became a need for my collapsing system.

It was one morning that I looked up into the cracked, ruined mirror from the cracked ruin of my life and I saw her.

Somehow, the shards of the mirror reflected each aspect of her delicate form in exquisite detail, like a work of art or a perfect porcelain doll.

I reached out to the mirror and in an the instant the mirror shard broke my skin, the illusion fell apart along with the mirror. They both lay broken.

From then on I resolved I would see her again, if only for a precious second.

I did everything.

I experimented with drugs. I smoked injected, swallowed sniffed and burned incense, leaves, exotic tea, powder, cannabis and every consumable solution known to man. My arms were pricked from needles, my lungs were scarred with tar and God-knows-what and my senses of taste and smell were almost destroyed. And yet I kept going.

On the eighth of April 1998 I found my solution. It was the fumes of absinthe; I inhaled it for hours before seeing her, before I was enfolded in velvet darkness.

When light streamed through my tired eyes I rose to find my flyblown abode in pristine condition. Dazed, I walked to the mirror, the mirror that had broken, the mirror in which I had seen her, the mirror in which this whole beautiful mess began.

I don't know what I saw.

It was twisted, it was horrible, it was sick. The mirror shattered. It shattered again, and again until there was an awful clanging and an abhorrent ringing and a loathsome laughing stirred into the hellish mix.

It was her.

The sum of all my fear, pain and despondence stood manically and mockingly shrieking. And it was the sum of all my sapped strength that broke the mirror a second time. From then there was nothing

I don't know where I am now, but somehow this will find the real world, somehow it will pass between the gap of all and nothing. Where unknown things swirl and glide and where she, the Lord of all Creatures sits, moving the pieces of humankind, and breaking them.



# The Pencil

By Yegor

It was by pure luck that I stumbled upon it.

My trusty Ticonderoga decided to wander away from me at the last minute, so the teacher gave me a random pencil. The test wasn't starting for a few more minutes, so I took this time to study the pencil. Nothing out of the ordinary: orange sleeve, light wooden interior, dull gray graphite. There was, however, tape wrapped around the eraser. Dirty, smudged, and overall disgusting. This struck me as odd only after I took the test and was walking around with the pencil during school.

It was strangely fascinating. I was captivated by the myriad of infinitely small scratches the pencil accumulated over its presumably long lifetime. Also, it never seemed to need sharpening. The point was always a tiny bit duller than a freshly sharpened pencil. Not that this bothered me, of course. I preferred this type of sharpness more so than completely sharp. It just looked and flowed better on the paper.

The tape covered the entire eraser. I tried to feel it through the tape and noticed that the eraser was completely unused. It wasn't uneven like used pencil erasers were. The top was completely flat. I tried to peel off the tape, just in case I needed to erase something, but I couldn't find the edge. I gave up after a good ten minute search.

Of course I took it home with me. This thing was like a puzzle to me. Why did it look so old yet...?

It took me a day or two to realize that I was obsessing over a writing utensil. My friends caught up to me one day after math class and demanded that I stop preoccupying myself with the pencil and jump-start my social life. Their words stopped me in my tracks. I looked down at the pencil in between my fingers, and realized with sheepish embarrassment how silly the whole thing was. I put it away and did not take it out for the rest of the day.

It came back though. In every single scene of my dreams, there was a pencil involved. Everything would be blurry and hard to recognize except the taped pencil, which I saw with stunning clarity. The tape, wrapped expertly around the eraser, was killing me. I had to take it off somehow.

The next day, after school, I took out my Swiss Army knife and flipped out the large blade. I started cutting the tape off lengthwise. When it was cut, I slipped the tip of the blade in between the tape and the metal part of the pencil and pried it from the pencil. I finished the job with my fingers.

A stunningly fine example of a pencil done right, I thought with some silliness. My work for today was done. I left the pencil out on my desk and soon went to sleep after doing chores and browsing the Internet.

The next morning in school, we had a pop quiz. Surprise surprise: I wasn't ready for it. Of course, it was also given by the most hated teacher in the school: Goiler. He had a retarded name and a retarded sense of humor, and on top of that a sort of Napoleon complex. Short and fat, he would belittle the shy kids in our school in order to make himself feel like more than just a shitty teacher.

I stared blankly at the questions. Analysis of the Great Gatsby. "What is the role of Myrtle in the story? How does she contrast with other women in the novel?" I don't fucking know, I didn't read the damn thing. My mind was racing, trying to accumulate as much bullshit as possible to spew onto the paper. I didn't worry; my trusty pencil was in my hand. Out of habit I started to tap the paper with the eraser.

Tap. Tap. I looked up from the desk. Everyone around me was either staring the quiz down or looking into the ceiling intently. No doubt they were also trying to create bullshit in their own minds. Not many people have read the first couple of chapters. Only the nerds with

no lives have done so. I wasn't a nerd.

Tap. Tap. Goddamn it. Think of something, Tom. You are usually the first one done with these kinds of things. Why not today? I didn't know the answer. Tap. Tap. I looked to my right. There was a small bookshelf filled with your typical high school reading material: Salinger, Bradbury, and some Shakespeare. In short, more bullshit. Tap Tap Tap. Alright, let's put something do-

It took a second for my brain to realize the paper was gone. I almost started writing on my desk. My mouth dropped open and I uttered a very small gasp. Where the fuck did it go? Setting my pencil down in the groove near the front of my desk, I swung around in my seat and scanned the area below me. Nothing to my right... nothing to my left... Behind me? Nope, nothing. Wow, this is some weird shit.

Ugh, I didn't want to talk to Goiler. We've been on some especially bad terms ever since he overheard my joke about his mother. "Mr. Goiler?" I raised my hand reluctantly. I saw my classmates turn and look at me strangely and then go back to their quizzes.

The teacher looked up from his desk and focused his coke-bottle lenses on me. "What's the matter, Tom?" He asked, with a small tinge of contempt. His eyes were unblinking and black like his soul.

"I uh..." I nervously checked under my desk again to make sure I wasn't being completely stupid. "I lost my quiz. Can I have another copy?" More strange looks. Go back to your own quizzes, you judgmental fucks.

Goiler got up from his chair, looking quite pissed off. His glasses were nearly sliding off his nose. He pushed them back up with a fat finger and stared at me. "What? You LOST your quiz? Are you kidding me, Tom?" he said, scanning the class and looking for the support of his loyal kiss-asses.

Giggles bubbled throughout the room and then all was silent. I hated this. I hated him and I hated the class for making me feel stupid and embarrassed for something like this. I felt my face flush and my blood start to boil. I locked eyes with Goiler and repeated my request. "Can I have another quiz, Mr. Goiler," I spat out his name with venom.

"Sure thing, champ," he said and flashed his rotten smile at me. He waddled back to his desk, took a piece of paper, and waited for me. That son of a bitch. I got out of my seat and I took the paper. Goddamn it. Good thing I didn't write anything on the first quiz, and then I would have been really pissed. Glancing at the clock, I realized I only have ten or so minutes left. Let's get the bullshit machine cranking, Tom.

As I started to write, my mind began to wander. The gleaming pink eraser of the pencil seemed very unnatural to me. Why was it covered it tape? Why does the pencil never dull? Who the fuck is Myrtle?

Suddenly, it hit me. The pencil made the quiz disappear. That was the only explanation left, however crazy and illogical. Occam's razor tended to do that. Three taps in a row and it was gone. Poof. Just like that.

You are talking nonsense, Tom. Let's see some proof.

I tore off a small piece of paper from corner of the quiz. Looking around to see if any nosy asshole was spying on me, I saw the coast was clear and I started to tap the paper. Tap. Nothing. Tap Tap. Nothing. I held my breath.

Gone. It made no sound. It was just there and then not there. Holy shit. A strange, wicked thought passed through my mind: can I make people disappear? I looked at Goiler, who was once again bent over his desk scribbling something. A wave of nausea and nervousness overcame the evil thought and I wrenched my mind away from that. Let's just finish the quiz, Tom.

Five minutes later, I was done. I took great care in not touching the eraser. Its pink, artificial luster became the symbol of death. It scared me, and yet... It was mine.

I leaned back in my desk, casually looking around the room. Everyone else was still working. Hah, idiots. My legs were feeling kind of sore so I propped my left leg onto the bottom rails of Kyle's desk and swung around in my seat to make myself comfortable. I

closed my eyes and waited for Goiler's voice to break my peace...

"Thomas! Get your feet off Kyle's chair!" My eyes flew open and I reflexively threw my leg off of Kyle's chair. I sat straight up in my desk before I realized my mistake. Damn it, Tom. You did it too fast; you showed weakness. Goiler loves to eat that shit for breakfast, and you are just feeding him. My face started to burn again, and the murderous thoughts started to intensify.

Do it, Tom. No one will miss that sad lump of shit. All he's done for the past 2 years is embarrass and demean you like some sort of dog. You have the means; now man up and do what you have to do.

I'm not sending a person into oblivion, or wherever disappeared objects go to. It's not right... It's not right...

"Thomas! Open your eyes, this is not nap time!" Again the voice, and again the judgmental stares.

That's it. Fuck you, Goiler. Today was a bad day to piss me off. You pushed me too far, and now you are going to pay. I gripped the pencil tightly in my hand, making my knuckles white. I knew what to do: it was the last class of the day, so my deed would go unnoticed for some time. I would stay back after the rest of the class leaves, put on a sad, pleading face, and apologize for my behavior. Then, when he's caught off guard, I'll punch him in the throat and tap him on the head. That should do the trick.

Patience, Tom. All good things come to people who wait.

The bell rang. The rest of the class scurried out like rats that have caught wind of their next meal. I stayed back, slowly packing up my backpack. I left my pencil out on my desk. I glanced at Goiler a couple of times: he didn't seem to notice that I was still in his class. Better act now, Tom. I shouldered my backpack and grabbed my pencil.

Every step I took was accompanied by a loud thump of my heart. I was scared, but I was determined. It was only when I walked up to his chair that he finally noticed me. He gave me a suspicious look and asked, "What do you want, Tom?"

I opened my mouth. Words raced through my mind, cold-blooded killer phrases to strike fear in your victim's heart. But nothing came out.

I balled my right hand into a fist and sunk it into his throat. I threw my entire weight into him and nearly fell onto his chair. Goiler made a strange choking noise but was otherwise quiet. He tried to breathe but I obviously made it harder for him. I watched him fall out of his chair and onto the floor, hands at his throat.

I knelt down and looked at his scalp. A perfect target. I raised the pencil up to his head and-

"What the fuck?! Mr. Goiler! Tom! What's going on?" said one of Goiler's lackeys. Shit! I dropped my pencil on the tiled floor. It clattered twice before it came to a rest. I whipped around and faced my new problem. Andrew. My face contorted with impotent rage.

"Andy, get the fuck out of here!" I yelled at him, spit flying from my mouth. Suddenly, another student appeared at Andy's side. Fuck. I was fucked.

I turned back to Goiler. His eyes were bulging out of his purple face. He was wheezing hard and simultaneously crawling back from me. I saw the terror in his eyes. I hope he saw the hatred in mine.

"Fuck!" I cursed at no one in particular. I picked up the pencil from the floor. Are you sure about this, Tom? Not the least bit. Oh God what am I doing?

I gulped and raised the pencil to my temples. I closed my eyes and shut out everything else. I had to take the chance. When they catch me, and Goiler and his goons rat me out... I'm done for. Good bye diploma, good bye college, good bye life.

I heard Goiler wheeze out: "What...the...hell...are..you..doing...Tom?" I ignored him.

*Tap, Tap, Tap, and the lights turned off.*

# General Fiction

## The Long Goodnight

By The Indifference Engine

The sky was dark green that April 14<sup>th</sup>; it had been for a week and a half, both dark green and April 14th. We didn't get specific days that often, but when we did they tended to stick around awhile.

I was in my office making a cup of Joe, then me and Joe were fishing down by the river, then I realized I was flying and Joe had never been there. Then I woke up and remembered I hadn't been sleeping, that I had never slept; nobody in this city sleeps, or rather, everyone's asleep--they're just always awake for it.

This is getting a little too philosophical so let me ground you in the unreality of the situation: my name is Carl, Carl Young P.I or maybe it's I.P, it might be both but let's make a "pres" of you and me, and presume its P.I.

Anyway I hope you don't mind me leaving this hole here in the fourth wall but it lets a lot of light in and without the curtains my Feng Shui would be off.

So there I was in my office in the subconscious district and Joe was nowhere to be seen, when all of a sudden my dream girl walked in. Of course she was everybody's dream girl, I was just the only one there, besides Joe. She extended a greeting to me and I folded it back up and stored it in a drawer for later salutations.

She said her name was Shelley, she sold sea shells down by the sea shore, and someone was stalking her. I sat for several seconds before I gave up on continuing the alliteration and asked her why she thought someone was stalking her.

"Subtle things I've noticed," she said. "I feel like I'm being watched, especially when I know I'm alone; I keep seeing dark figures out of the corner of my eyes lurking in the foreshadowing; there's this vague sense of unease following me but he says it's work-related; also someone threw a brick through my window with 'Die bitch' scrawled on it in blood."

I told her I'd look into it and out of it, if I could fit inside. She thanked me and gave me her personal information, and then, after I told her that her favorite color wasn't really relevant, she gave me her address and told me when she got off work.

Some time later I stepped outside into the chilly October air--what it was doing here in April was anyone's guess and anyone wasn't sharing it with me, so I pressed on. My office melted into the background, becoming fuzzy and indistinct like hot butter in a photo of Bigfoot. Walking down the street, I found I was going uptown but I was too sideways to notice the wordplay. Pushing past a crowd of clowns and lawyers, I thought I recognized an old friend of mine, but it turned out it was only Joe again after all these years. A truck full of metaphors rolled past like some sort of big truck-like thing. I found some penguins selling prime numbers on a stick, and I bought myself a 2 because I couldn't eat more than that, and I didn't have any friends to divide it among.

I realized I was at Shelley's work, even though I didn't remember walking there. As a compromise with myself, I ran in place for a while, but I realized it was getting me nowhere, so I decided to wait for her in a nearby paragraph break.

After an amount of time somewhere between five minutes and three years, I saw Shelley leaving out the back door. I diligently followed her, except for a brief argument with a passing maniac over whether or not stalking a woman to catch the person stalking her was ironic or just bizarrely coincidental. This continued for some time, both the stalking and the arguing, before I hit upon the brilliant idea of following her home instead of vice-versa. Almost immediately, I noticed that there was someone stalking her, but Joe pointed out that that was still just me. I began to grow frustrated, nobody seemed to be stalking this woman but me, and the vague sense of unease's permit checked out. I went fishing for clues on my own time, but the only things I caught were a red herring and a yellow perch.

Suddenly I was chasing a shadowy figure down a dark alley, and despite his lack of facial features, I knew he was the vague impression of a crook I was looking for. He ran down the alley and rounded a corner; I straightened it back out and followed him through a looking glass but upon later reflection, this was a bad idea.

Suddenly he jumped on the back of a waiting Brontosaurus and sped off; I hailed a passing newspaper taxi and told the indistinctly iridescent driver to follow that Apatosaurus. I chased him backwards through the city, fruit stands and panes of glass flying back together as we went.

Suddenly he leapt off the Sauropod and ducked into a nearby alley; I tossed the cab driver a \$20 word and told him to keep the metamorphosis. I pursued him down the alleyway, the buildings on either side growing darker and more foreboding as we went. Eventually I cornered him in a dead end and demanded to know why he was stalking my client and how much the postage on that brick had been.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a pair of burly plot twists jumped me and worked my three-act structure into new and interesting scripts; after a vigorous bout of editing, they left me for dead with the rats and Hollywood producers as I slipped into consciousness...

\*

There is a buzzing noise.

Michael Smith groggily reaches for the source of the buzzing noise, knocking several Raymond Chandler books and a half-empty glass of gin off his nightstand before turning off his alarm clock.

Muttering various curses, Michael Smith slowly raises himself out of bed and realizes that he is a.) Very hung over, and b.) Supposed to work today. Separately these two facts are minor annoyances; but together they combine Voltron-style to create one aggravation that is more than the sum of its parts.

There is no hot water.

Aggravation Voltron has apparently purchased the optional accessory pack (£2.99 wherever toys and abstract concepts are sold).

An insignificant amount of time later, Michael Smith is on the Underground with his face next to someone's armpit; an equally insignificant amount of time later, he is dead, but this does not concern us at this juncture, as it falls out of the bounds of this story and is given the red card.

Walking into the lobby of his firm, Michael Smith pauses briefly to gaze lustfully at the receptionist, Ashley. Michael Smith often takes time out of his day for little indulgences like this, taking his lunch hour at the same time as hers, meeting new clients in the lobby in order to stare at her, and other such activities that walk the line between "endearing" and "creepy" (depending on how attractive the person doing them is and whether or not they happen to be a vampire).

Stepping off the elevator, Michael Smith walks down the hall and turns right into his personal cubicle, as personal as something can be with no roof and three walls. The rest of the day is spent on paperwork which, while preferable to woodwork, plasticwork, and anti-matterwork, is still very dull, so we shall gloss over it.

Throughout the day Michael Smith entertains several elaborate flights of fantasy that involve Ashley being rescued by him from pirates or gangsters the majority of Ashley's time

in these being spent tied up, scantily clad, or both.

At 5:00PM Michael Smith shuts down his computer and walks back towards the elevator. On the way there he runs into his friend Josephine, who invites him on a repeat of the previous evening's excursion. At first he is reluctant, but then realizes that working while hung over today has made him depressed and crabby enough to make going and getting drunk again sound like a good idea. This is referred to in psychological circles as "The Vicious Cycle."

Arriving home after a vigorous bout of imbibing, Michael Smith notices that his cat is slightly tipsy from the gin he spilled this morning. He wonders aloud if the cat has a job to be hung over for tomorrow and passes out next to his bed.

\*

I awoke in the alleyway some time later with the rats gnawing at my clothing and the Hollywood producers arguing over whether I should be played by Robert Pattinson or Shia LaBeouf. Frightening them away by waving my arms and demanding an executive producer credit respectively, I paused to consider the above segment's interlude. I concluded that it was complete gibberish and would probably be edited out in a later release, although I did decide to tell that butterfly who thinks he's a Chinese philosopher about it.

Dusting myself off, I found a book on matches lying nearby, and in the index, I found a book of matches from a local strip joint, "The Lit Cigar." This was the first solid lead I'd had since the last time I was shot.

Finding myself in front of the strip joint, I wondered what I was doing there already and pushed past myself on my way through the door. Stepping inside I was surprised at how small the place actually was; outside it seemed like a colossal tower but from inside it was really more of a bungalow.

Sauntering over to the bar and sitting down, I called over the bartender, a twitchy, nervous rumrunner called "The Ego."

"Hey Richard, how's it hanging?"

"My name's not...never mind, can I just get a bottle of your third or fourth most expensive beer?"

"One *StänderBräu* coming right up."

Before I could ask what that translated to he'd already run off; he returned moments later with a long oblong bottle of a disturbing thickness.

I thanked him and asked about the shadowy figure I'd seen earlier,

"Uh...thanks, so you wouldn't happen to know anything about a shadowy indistinct crook with a thing for threatening dames would you?"

I just said that, you don't need to repeat me.

"Oh sorry, I thought that was a lead-in to a section of dialog."

Well it wasn't.

"Sorry, would you like to carry on narrating everything or should I add some variety?"

Look there's no need to get pissy about it, let's just forget about it and move on.

"Fine"

Anyway, The Ego said that—

"That I haven't seen any guys like that, you might wanna ask The Id, she attracts all the rough customers."

In fairness, The Id was the one who attracted all the customers; she just didn't have a liquor license.

I left my beer where it couldn't threaten my masculinity and made my way to the middle of the room; The Id was on a raised platform dancing and gyrating to music which, on closer inspection, didn't appear to be coming from anywhere and didn't go away if you covered your ears.

I shouldered my way through the throng of onlookers and got her attention with some hasty semaphore sans flags.

"What can I do you for?" she said, her bucket of paint remover sloshing about in time to the music.

I asked her if she'd seen a man whose very being was a thing of smoke and shadow and whose eyes were like staring into the abyss and knowing that the abyss was staring back into you; and also whether she would mind doing my office walls.

"Oh yeah, he's in here all the time, buys a lotta fuzzy navels." She gyrated her hips in the direction of a corner booth, "Those are his friends over there if you wanna talk to them." I thanked her for her help and she continued with her routine as if I'd never been there, this being the standard protocol for women who meet me.

I approached the booth that I'd been lewdly directed too. There was no sign of my suspect; instead the booth was occupied by a wise looking old man and a jester who was spiking the drinks of unaware passersby.

"Greetings, Mr. Young, you have been expected," said the old man as though stating an obvious fact, "Have a seat, the end of the second act should be along shortly."

Now I'm used to odd things in my line of work, but this was a new one on me. I sat down across from the duo. "Now how did you—" I was suddenly cut off by an immense farting noise to the intense amusement of the jester, who guffawed as I removed the whoopee cushion from my seat.

The old man continued, "To answer your unasked question, we are the instigators of this story's climax; more specifically, I am The Wise Old Man, and this ludicrous buffoon," he gestured at the jester, "is The Trickster."

The Trickster piped up at this stage, "And you better be careful, one of us always tells the truth, but the other speaks only lies!"

"Are you the one who always lies?"

"Yes...wait, I mean no! Or...wait, what was the question again?"

The Wise Old Man gave his companion a reassuring pat on the shoulder, "You will have to excuse him, he is a much more convincing charlatan when he is not full of gin."

I banged my fist on the table, upending a Klein bottle and spilling 4D beer on a future incarnation of my pants, "Look Mac, I don't care if your little buddy can tap-dance Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* in Morse code! My client is being stalked by some wack-job friend of yours and I'm not leaving until I have some answers or at the very least some questions!"

The Wise Old Man leaned back and steepled his fingers, "Mr. Young, I would advise you to leave well enough alone," The steeple became a minaret, "You know not what you are hunting," the minaret changed back into a steeple with added flying buttresses, "nor what you should do when you catch it."

The Wise Old Man stood up, "I and my companion will take our leave of you now, and I advise you to cease seeking unpleasant answers for your own safety as much as ours."

Not wanting to lose my only link to the plot, I jumped up and jammed my Roscoe in his face, which was unfortunate, seeing as I'd left my gun hanging on the wall in the first act and was now forced to try and threaten my suspect with the silent film star Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle.

Not wanting to be outdone, The Trickster pulled Laurel and Hardy out of a convenient plot-hole, plunging us into a Mexican standoff composed mostly of white people who were sitting down.

Outgunned and unable to reach the Marx Brother hidden in my ankle holster, I opted to try and negotiate, "Now gents there's no reason we can't be sensible—"

"I've never been sensible and I see no reason to start now!" said The Trickster, loading his 1920s film stars, mostly with cheap drinks.

It was then that my life started to flash before my eyes, which was somewhat tedious, as I had to re-watch all the other times my life had flashed before my eyes.

Sometime into the fifth or sixth flashback recursion, my salvation leapt out of the plot-hole. It was Joe of all people, his vorpal sword in hand; snicker-snack went the blade

dispatching first Laurel then Hardy, who bumbled, "Well here's another fine mess you've gotten me into," as he went.

With the upper hand decisively ours, Joe and I used it to high five. I resumed my questioning of the suspects/expository devices: "Alright you stoolies, spill it! Where's The Shadow?! If I don't get some answers then I might just let Joe go to work on you with his runcible spoon."

After some more threats and a light spooning, The Wise Old Man relented and told me where to find the shadowy hood I was looking for. He said the perp was holed up in some craphole office in the subconscious district and also that I would find only pain and ruination within.

Arriving at the address, I discovered that to my dismay the elevator was out of order and that the stairs were entirely functional. On my way upstairs I pulled out my gun, which had in fact turned into a banana at some point, but I figured I could make it work.

So I reached the apartment, readied my gunana, busted down the door, and yelled "Nobody move, this isn't the police!"

So there I was in my office in the subconscious district and Joe was asking why I just busted up the front door.

Rechecking the address I'd been given, it turned out to be mine.

And then it hit me, there never was anyone else stalking her, it was just me all this time. It was there all along, staring me in the face from the beginning, she was my dream girl, I made her who I wanted her to be and I wanted her to be a damsel in distress.

Of course, this left me with an even greater mystery to fathom. Namely: would it be ethical to bill her for my services?

And could I pin it on Joe?



# Buster Story

By Joe Brown

Buster's hands clutched at his guitar as he took to the stool on the stage. His hands felt rusty, but he knew he could still play all the songs. They had been imprinted into him like an instinct. Yet tonight, something happened as he motioned to the bored band behind him to begin.

He saw himself.

He stepped outside of his body and saw the sickly fat imp stumped over on the stool in a dirty suit and silly cowboy hat with a little bird shit crusted over on the side. He froze up on stage, something he hadn't done since he was a young man playing his first big show at an auditorium in Memphis to 400 people.

He recalled all the nights before this one in this same bar, and saw himself stooped on the same stool, playing and singing like a windup toy. His eyes darted around the room with narcoleptic impulse, desperately searching for some grounding in the empty space he was drowning in.

In the fog, faces began to form, and he tried to name them off to restore his stability. Over by the bar was Vietnam Joe, who wore his stripes all the time and told stories about his tour in the Mekong. His voice formed, broken and far off, but Buster could only manage the broken excerpts of a story in a Saigon minefield that Joe told over and over again. Over in the corner he caught sight of Chuck Manson, with one hand in his pants and the other all over some passed-out girl. At a table he saw Magnolia the stripper doing her algebra homework with the tassles still strapped on her tits.

Suddenly, he felt a tapping on his shoulders and grabbed the hand like a lost child.

Buster! Buster! Buster!

He turned and saw the wrinkly face of the bar owner, a homely and kind old lady who you'd think would have done better things in her old age than open this shithole.

Buster! Buster! You gotta play Buster. You gotta play!

Jesus...was all Buster muttered into the microphone.

A bottle flew past his head, crashing into the drum set. He heard cries of anger and fury envelope him like a wave.

Play gawd dammit! Play you piece of shit! Lookit that old bastard! Play! Play! Play!

He saw a chair fly across the room, crashing against the wall and knocking down a television.

The bar owner motioned to the bouncers who waded into the middle of the crowd to try and break the infant brawl up. They endured kicks and curses while trying to push and separate the crowd into four parrrts.

Buster, now! They're going to tear this place apart if you don't play! she pleaded.

But Buster couldn't do anything but watch the drunk thrashers whip themselves into a tornado of fists and obscenities. The bouncers couldn't do anything. One had been thrown out the door and the other three were pinned to the floor and lost somewhere in the storm. The owner had ran into the back. One of the band members had been hit, and dived into the conflict, and the others soon followed him. Buster was now alone on stage. Stoic and enduring like a shameful monument.

Then a hand reached out and threw him from his stool. He found himself in the middle of the fight. Fists flew out at him from unknown directions and he was struck in the face, in the stomach, and something broke on his back. He wasn't sure if he was bleeding or hurt, nor was anyone around him, each one's pain being but a ripple in this giant sea. All he

could see was the tapestry of fists and faces that covered everything around him.

When he regained consciousness he was outside of the bar, hurting all over. Right down to the bone. The bar was cleaned out now, the only people left were those in charge of the cleaning. He tried to stand up, but his body responded in such pain like it was never designed to stand up. He saw the bar owner hobble over to him.

Well gosh dammit Buster. You done good all these nights, real good, and then this happened. You know how much it's going to cost to fix everything?

Well I'm....I'm really sorry mam.

What happened out there? I thought you were some kind of musician.

Buster weighed her question as if it meant something much greater. He heaved violently, a terrible pain planting itself in his chest.

I dunno really. I don't likely know. Just got a little lost I suppose.

Well now how and the sam hell did you get lost on stage? You ain't been drinking when wasn't suppose to have you?

Naw naw naw naw. I ain't drank nothing. I ain't drank too much at least.

Well I can't risk this happening again. Worst damn bar brawl since they fount out that last stripper girl was a man. Imma have to cut you lose Buster, it pains me. She reached into her pocket and threw a handful of twenties at Buster. That's all I can give you.

Buster rounded up the money and with a good effort managed to stand up and stagger to his car. His car was an old yellow Camaro. It only felt like yesterday when he was driving it through the country side, its yellow paint shining like a comet, with the pedal to the floor and the engine calling out like a mythical beast. Now the yellow, sunflower yellow as the dealer had called it, took on a pale piss color. The engine stuttered and coughed when you tried to start it and the transmission locked up, whipping the car in between gears. The old darling was on hard times, but it got Buster where he needed to go.

He opened the door and flopped down in the driver's seat. It was far from a bed, but he couldn't tell the difference right now. He peered into the rear view mirror and was startled by the pair of said, hungry eyes that gazed back at him. He opened his mouth and saw that one of his front teeth had been knocked out. He sighed.

Jesus, he muttered again, Jesus, Jeezus, Jeeeeezech.

What had happened?

Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, Gram Parsons, Merle Haggard, Loretta Lynn, he could name all the rock stars off and recall the times he had played and shook hands with all of them. Why, 40 years ago he couldn't walk down the street without getting recognized. In Little Rock and Memphis, the girls swarmed after him and the drunks and winos tipped their bottles whenever he walked by. He recalled the handsome young gentleman who appeared on the cover of his first album, then he saw the old beast reflecting in the mirror back at him. He reached into the backseating, plundering wildly for some treasure hidden under the pile of old booze-smelling clothes and garbage. He pulled out something that glimmered like a holy artifact.

It was his first and only gold record. The cover showed a line up of 5 young men in cheap suits, and in the middle was a young man with prominent features, and at the top, in large yellow letters read, "Buster Alexander and The Sons of Shame." The frame was adorned with the signatures of his bandmates and his producer.

Buster didn't know where most of the Sons were now. The drummer Lou Kansas owned a used car lot down in Pine Bluff. Zeke Malone, who played the fiddle, took to drinking too much and drove his car into a tree down in Mississippi. The last he heard of Bobo, the banjo player, he had joined some other group up in Greenwich, New York. That must've been 30 years ago, though. Buster figured the rest of the band, his producer, and all his friends in the record labels were like him now, retired and obscure. Or dead. He was alone and kicking between life and death.

He felt the tears coming, so he threw the gold record in the back and started the car, determined to go anywhere besides sitting there and crying.

He found himself outside of an all-night diner. He was still in pain, but even greater than that was his hunger. He unfolded the bills he had been given and counted out 60 bucks. It wouldn't last long nowadays, but he could make it work. It was quite a far cry from the money he made back then after playing at the high-class concert halls.

He walked in and was relieved to find the place reasonably empty. Two waitresses chatted over by the juke box while the cook watched the register. Buster looked at the clock and saw that it was 4 in the morning. He slid into one of the booths and a waitress came over to take his order. Buster wasn't in the mood for breakfast, so he ordered a cheeseburger with some fries and a cup of coffee. Outside he could see the first infant signs of dawn forming. Then a song came into his ear, a song so familiar that his fingers jumped to pantomiming the notes on an invisible instrument. It was one of his songs. It was called "Arkansas Beauty," and he remembered the night he wrote it. The waitress sat his plate down, but hearing the song somehow curbed his appetite. He sipped some coffee.

You like this song? he asked the waitress.

Yessir, one of my favorites. I grew up listening to Buster Alexander. My momma loves him.

That so?

Yeah. Saw him live with his band back in Fayetteville in...oh I bet it was '61 or '62. After that she saw 'em at every chance.

Fayetteville, '61, probably at the Crowley's Country and Bluegrass festival. Buster spat the words out mechanically and afterwards took an indifferent bite of his cheeseburger like there was no conversation. Fayetteville was a swell place back then, he added. The waitress gave him a weird look. That song was always my personal favorite. I considered it the best I wrote. The waitress laughed.

I smell that liquor on you. You didn't write that song. You probably haven't wrote nothing.

Buster said nothing.

Why, I reckon Buster is off on some private ranch over in Franklin County or with the rich folks up in Ulysses Valley with his family.

Yer, I'd imagine he is too.

Since he had the money, Buster decided to wash his clothes at a laundromat. His clothes hadn't been washed in a while. He thought it would feel good to wear nice clean clothes again. He pulled up to a 24 hour mat that was abandoned in the 5 a.m. haze. He gathered up his clothes from the back seat in one clumsy bulk and brought them in. He put them into the washer and added a little bit of cheap detergent from the dispenser.

He sat down in a chair near a line of arcade cabinets that ran through the demo loops continuously as if helmed by phantoms. Outside the sun was just coming up, peeking over the horizon and dispelling the black of night into a light blue. If he were sitting on a porch somewhere, rocking back and forth on a swing or in a chair, he would have thought it beautiful. But from the stiff chair in the dingy laundromat, he found it despairing and forlorn. Another day of this. Another day of survival. Another day further off from the days he spent playing to the crowds and hearing their praises and applause and watching the lovers hold each other especially tight during the more intimate numbers. Buster leaned against the machine beside him. It felt rough, but warm, and the subtle vibrations of the machinery within lulled him to sleep.

In his sleep he felt a steady tapping at his shoulders and an image came back to him from some time ago. One night, months or days or maybe years ago, he fell asleep in a ditch outside of a sleepy bar in some town somewhere. In the morning, he felt the same kind of tapping at his shoulders, and when he woke up he saw a pair of innocent brown eyes staring back at him. They belonged to the ugliest grey mutt Buster had ever seen. Its fur was wet and smelly and a piece of its ear had been torn off. It didn't run away or even flinch when Buster reached out to pet it.

Maybe it was the way Buster smelled at the time, but the two recognized something universal in each other, something that the average person becomes less and less aware of as the world dulls his edges. That dog followed him everywhere he went. He made a bed for him in the back of his car out of old clothes. The dog would hang his head out the window while he waited for him. At every bar he went to and every desperate show he played, the dog would always wait for him. Buster never bothered giving the dog a name, figuring it had grown used to having no name and not being called anything, like himself. One day the dog simply left. Buster looked everywhere for it, but never found it, never found any clues of its disappearance. It had simply come and gone like a specter in the night.

This time when he opened his eyes, he saw a cop instead of a dog, prodding him with a nightstick. He was thick browed and wore a thin mustache that looked comical on his fat face.

Hey buddy. You can't sleep here. No loitering.

I'm washing clothes officer! As Buster said this he looked at the long line of washing machines and realized that he couldn't remember which one he had put his clothes in.

They're here officer. My clothes are here. I need to dry them. I just fell asleep while they was--

Sir, the manager here has problems with you bums coming here and sleeping.

I'm doing my laundry! Buster pleaded, pointing frantically at the machines like the evidence had magically appeared just over the cop's shoulders.

Sir. Sir. Do I need to repeat myself? You need to get out of here or I'll arrest you.

Buster knew there was no use arguing with the cop anymore. His words didn't seem to reach him. He got up and left. Outside the sun was shining bright and undisturbed and Buster reckoned that it was around 10 in the morning. He tried going back to the laundromat but kept seeing the same fat-faced cop's squad car waiting nearby. He stopped and counted his money, deciding to just go buy some new ones.

At first, they wouldn't let him in the store. An associate had spotted him approaching and alerted everyone else. The employees scattered and rushed like a group of primitive natives fleeing from some winged jungle beast. The manager said Buster couldn't come in dressed how he was. Buster pleaded with him, showing he had the money, and saying how he just wanted some new pants.

I don't want to hurt no one, he said over and over again. Then I'll be outta your folk's way.

The manager finally agreed, and after a short time Buster picked out the most reliable look pair of blue jeans and white shirt. He even bought a brand new pair of socks and boxers just because he felt like spoiling himself. He was surprised at how much he spent for such basic clothes. Now over half his money was gone.

Sitting in his car, Buster tried to decide on what to do next. The bar he was fired from was the last bar in town he could work at. There was the Starlight over on the edge of town, but that was only a strip club and didn't hire any additional entertainment. There was Jack's down on main street, but ever since Poppa Jack had handed the business down to Jack Jr., it had been turned into a family restaurant. Buster's only option was to leave for another town somewhere, but he couldn't do it on what money he had left. He would have to sell something. The only two things of value that he had were his guitar and his gold record. He knew immediately which to get rid of. At least he could play his guitar, the gold record hadn't done him a lick of good since he got the damn thing.

He dropped by a pawn shop over on the poor side of town, where pawn shops tend to be in every city. It was like every pawn shop he'd been in, cluttered with objects whose sentimental value and importance could not withstand the demands that took them here. Wedding rings pawned to pay rent, watches pawned for food or the bottle, televisions pawned to keep the lights on, guitars, CD players, jewelry, enough goods to furnish any home like a palace and clothe even the most ragged bum like a bishop. Buster reckoned that everything ended up in a pawn shop eventually. At the counter was a middle-aged black

man who greeted Buster with a friendly smile. A radio nearby on the counter played some pleasant music. Buster couldn't tell if the smile had come because of his change of clothes or because it was plain he was selling something.

What can I do for you? He asked.

How much is this worth? Buster placed the framed record on the counter.

The man took a look at it and then gave a quick accusing glance to Buster. Buying something that was stolen would just be too much trouble, no matter how valuable it was. He examined it over and over again, not sure where to place its value and not sure how much he could scam off Buster for it.

Is this real gold? He asked, tapping on the record.

Yessir.

And...just where the sam hell did you get it friend?

Oh well it was given to me up in Nashville about 1963 I reckon.

The clerk gave him a strange look. He looked back and forth between the album cover and the strange man standing before him. Buster's picture was on there, but he was in his mid 20s then and, if she were alive, not even his own mother would recognize him as he was now. The black man scratched at his bald head.

You didn't steal this did you?

Steal? Nossir it was given to me by the record company.

By the record company?

Yep.

In 1963?

Yep.

And you jus selling it?

Yep.

Okay, he punched a few buttons on the register popping out the cash draw, I'd say 200 is a fair price. Is that fair?

Sure, works for me.

The man at the counter sorted out the money for Buster, who took it without much conscience of what he had just sold. Truth be told he was more interested in simply getting rid of the gold record than making any money from it, but circumstances required that it be sold. Had he not needed it, he would have thrown it off a bridge or gave it to a fan or anyone who would remember him. With the money, he gassed up his car to full tank and took off down the highway, not bothering to look at the town vanishing behind him.

He must have been in that bar for too long, because he had forgotten it was summer. He rolled down the window and let the pure warm air rush through his face and his car. The air smelled nice. Different from the bars and the cities. He let it whip and lick at his face.

He never thought of his band more than when he was driving. Back when they had decided to tour across the southern states, they had all chipped in and bought a decommissioned ambulance to tour in. Bobo liked to drive the most. His father was a bootlegger who always took Bobo with him on his runs through the back countries. He took the band down those very same back roads, pointing out where the secret negro casinos and dance halls used to be, recounting times he had with his father who became a mythical figure among the group.

Seen him shoot a cop down in the Delta one night, he recalled Bobo once saying, dumped his body in the swamp. Never found him.

Buster could still construct the scene perfectly. The band in that tiny little ambulance, the whole world turning underneath them. Bobo at the wheel with a crazy look in his eyes like a man fixated on a treasure that was right under his nose. Lou Kansas in the back trying to keep a steady game of solitaire going, cursing at every bump in the road that sent his cards flying every which way. Zeke Malone writing his sweetheart foretelling of his grand return as a wealthy and famous musician. George Goodson polishing his harmonica or plucking idly at his bass to pass the time. And Dan Clem carving on a piece of wood and keeping his

fingers steady and ready for the piano. And Buster sat up front, his hat tipped down sometimes, joking and laughing with the guys, writings songs, just like it was when they were all still in school and assembling in the backrooms and empty barns to practice.

Every exit sign Buster passed, he recognized. He hated it. For once, he would like to go somewhere he had never passed by, slept in, or played at. A place with no ties to the past. The more signs he passed the closer and closer he came to Bedford City, his old home. He knew at least a hundred ways to get to Bedford City. It was one of those peculiar cities in America that you always go near no matter which way you're heading. He thought of going home a lot. He hadn't been home in 30 years, when he had left it for a nice house up in the mountains in east Tennessee. He still remembered what it looked like in the past, and he didn't want to pervert those memories with the misfortunes of the present. Surely the city would be a much different place if he went there, but he preferred to keep it a sacred place.

He decided to take the next exit he came across, surrendering himself to be taken where he may.

He was lured to a city called Jackson by the faint glow of its downtown with the promise of work and board. He cruised through the city streets looking for a bar or saloon, or anywhere that was looking for a musician or entertainer. The young couples who waltzed cheerfully along the store fronts gave him dirty looks as he stalked along slowly. This wasn't the place to look, he thought, so he drove and drove until the downtown disappeared and he found himself in the dimly lit outer rim of the city.

He found a trashy place tucked away down the street from a warehouse. A bright red confederate flag burned neon in the night. Underneath was written The Dead Yankee, and just below that was a sign saying it was looking for entertainers. He might not be able to get a job that night, but he could at least set up a rehearsal in the morning.

He entered to all the familiar elements off all the bars he had been in. The smell was almost the same, somewhat worse because so many people were in such a small place and the booze and sweat met and joined in the air. Hard, heavy country rock blared from the speakers and on the mainstage strippers danced trance like surrounded by neon-colored smoke like voodoo zombies enslaved by witch doctor spells. The light reflected off the sweat trickling down their bodies and adorned them with she devil diamonds. The place was crowded, but Buster managed his way over to the bartender, guitar in hand, and asked to see the owner. The bartender called over to a thick armed older man with a shriveled tattoo on his right forearm. Buster shouted that he had seen the sign outside. The bartender and the owner had a conversation under the music that Buster couldn't hear. The manager gave Buster a calculating look, and then told him to meet him in the back. Buster followed him through a crowd to the back room.

You're pretty damn lucky, the owner said, I just put that sign out because the band here quit. I was going to hire the first fella who walked in with an instrument. You been playing long?

Yessir, been playing ever since I was 10.

Well hot damn, you know a lot songs then?

Yessir, I know plenty of songs.

That's good. You'll be playing to the leftovers. Dancers go off at 2 and you go on at 2:30. There won't be much of a crowd but we need someone to keep the losers busy till we throw 'em out.

How much you pay?

I'll give you \$50 a night. That fair?

Yeah, sure.

When you get up there, play some Seeger or some Cash to get their attention. Just keep em from starting any fights.

I reckon I can do that. You got a place I can sleep?

The owner led Buster to a dark backroom where amidst some boxes a wounded and beaten mattress rested. The owner left Buster with a chuckle, It ain't much but... Buster laid

down on it, not worrying about who or what had been on it. It was stiff and he could feel the springs poking out at some parts, but a bed felt good. A bed always feels good to Buster. The music and noise from the bar was now just a distant, almost relaxing, rumble like a thunderstorm in the early morning. In no time Buster fell asleep.

One of the bouncers woke him up. 2:30, man, he said stiffly, time for you to get on stage. The bouncer stood sentinel over him as he yawned and checked to make sure his guitar was tuned right. Boss don't like lazy folks, he remarked. Buster gave him a dirty look as he walked out of the room.

The bar was different now. It was quiet without the music, so quiet that Buster could hear the glasses being cleaned and the low mumbles of the remaining patrons. Those left behind lay scattered around clinging to tables, stools, and chairs like victims of a shipwreck at sea. Gone were the smiles and the cat-calls and the laughs and bodies that jumped and danced and drank and loved. The stage, without its smoke and lights and dancers, was just a grim lonely altar. Buster's steps resounded with loud awkward thuds as he climbed it.

How y'all doing tonight? He asked into the microphone, not expecting any answers and feeling bad about even saying it. This here's my first night, he goes on, I hope y'all enjoy it.

He looked over to the bar and saw the critical eyes of the owner piercing him. If he messed up anything he wouldn't get the gig. He stepped back from the microphone and breathed in deep, trying to feel the ground underneath his feet. His fingers took their positions on the fret and he strummed the guitar gently. He began to play a song that was once familiar to him but now felt strange and far away.

# A Cool Story

## By Anonymous

Dedicated to Anonymous

The sun sits high. Zenith on the horizon of the first day of the internet.

He sits streamlined, resting. His elbow propped ninety on the desk, slapping responses with learned fingers. Easy code, easy... too easy.

A cold world such as his bears no emotion.

His is the lonely culture, the whip-witted crackling riders of the dawn.

He is lonely,  
He is anonymous.

His story is a cool story.

Bro

He rides alone, atop circuit board horses that ride, and ride, and ride.

The lightning cold of filament glasswire sends his misogynistic words screaming across the ocean.

He is one of many, a many composed of many. A many so seething full of anger, hatred, and destructive rage that they collapse inward, finding themselves not so alone after all.

They ride the e-waves at night, then come screaming to the coast; the sounds of the gleaming metal millennium escaping from their digital throats.

They tread the dawn pools the tides of the information age have left behind, poking at the glimmering, shifting and dying oddities.

Reflecting on the carbon beaches, "what is real" he asks. "What is the true story?" we ask.

Their stories are the true story.

Their stories are his story.

His story is a cool story.

Or is it just a cool story?

bro



# Last Stop, Mr. Andrews

By SLF

The kettle began to whistle, its gray steam a reflection of the world outside the kitchen. Gray too was the man who went to pour it. Dressed in earth tones and neutral colors that drew attention to his pale, aged skin, the man lifted the kettle off the stove with aching arthritic bones. Pouring himself a cup of tea, he sat by the window to admire the fog and the rain.

As he sat his spectacled eyes whisked over the pile of letters on his kitchen table: unpaid bills, forgotten invitations, irrelevant sales... all addressed to an uncaring Percy Andrews. Paramount on the paper pile were the newspapers, delivered at the start of the week by his loving daughter, Janine. Percy read each and every one of them religiously. He could care less about the world around him – when he picked up a new paper each day of each week he was looking for a hope: a hope that the world could reverse its drift away from the framed-picture glory of his youth.

As the diffused light of the overcast day began to fade, Percy took in his home in the faltering sun. His modest kitchen was quite clean, as was the rest of his small house. This wasn't for cleanliness so much as for the fact that Percy did very little in his life to cause a mess. The apple-green paint on the walls was an ironic homage to sunny days and warm memories. His bedroom held only his clothes, clock, and a reading light. His small brass-framed bed was hard and bit his back, but its occupant didn't have the will left to mind.

Content with nightfall, Percy took up his jacket and made for the door with the intent to go for a stroll in the fog; the reclusive hobby was one of the few things that still calmed him. On his way out the door he blew a kiss to a picture of his wife – a beautiful brunette with piercing gray eyes. The borders of the photograph were yellowed with age.

Percy meandered down the long road that led from the town to his reclusive house lit only by the orange streetlights, their amber glow softened by the fog to the hue of dying suns. He wished that they would just burn out – at least that would be final.

Suddenly, Percy spotted movement in the streetlight up ahead. Slowly, as if the fog was gray treacle, a figure appeared. A boy on a bike; silhouetted by the light at his back. In his basket was a bag of newspapers, and though he passed a couple lonely mailboxes the boy did not stop to fill them. Instead he drew closer to Percy, braking ahead of the old man.

"Last stop, Mr. Andrews. Special edition tonight: only the best stories in the world!" The boy handed a paper to his cynical client, who merely grumbled a confused sentiment of approval. Without so much as a word more, the boy pedaled on his way, fading back into the ambiguous mist as quickly as he had appeared.

Percy unwrapped the cold paper in his hands. The heading at the top read only, "The Paper". He chuckled at the title. *Finally* someone *has enough balls to tell it like it is*, he thought to himself. The miniscule text was too small to read in the streetlight, and so Percy resigned to the grey night and went home to enjoy his newfound newsprint.

Lying in his mean bed, Percy Andrews was enraptured by The Paper. He felt no bite of the biting mattress, no sorrow for his sorrowful life. The stories in The Paper were the most enchanting, the most inspiring, the most *moving* tales he had ever read. Every account of a day's occurrence, every side-column poem, every photograph was filled with a warmth and joy and inimitable sense of fulfillment. The very ink with which The Paper was written shone to Percy with a gleam beyond its black tint.

Percy read the entire issue from back to front, and fell quickly into a sleep devoid of

his usual restlessness and vague nightmares. When he awoke in the sunny morning all Percy could think to do was to get *more*. More of these stories that had so revitalized him. He set out to find the paperboy. Percy walked from his house to town and back three times; each time checking side streets, paths, anywhere a bicycle might be hinted at. The paperboy was nowhere to be found. Defeated, Percy returned home and began to reread The Paper.

Midway through the third page, Percy was stirred from his trance of wonder by the sharp ring of a bicycle bell. With a start he rushed outside to retrieve another issue of The Paper from what was surely the paperboy of that fateful night. In front of his house he found only a black bicycle; the paperboy was absent.

Taking the appearance of the bike as a portent, Percy mounted the seat and began to pedal along his road. At first he didn't believe this search would be any different from the first, except for the fact that it would be over faster. But then as he passed yet another leafy side-trail, Percy noticed something odd. The trail was full of a fine gray mist. Its tendrils snaked towards him invitingly, checked only by the asphalt of the main road.

Percy's heart sped as he turned onto the foggy trail. His stomach flopped with excitement: he was finally going to feel again! The forest around him grew brighter with his rising joy. The old man pedaled faster and faster, all arthritis and rust forgotten in his rush to Nirvana. All around him the grey fog rose closer and closer to white. The blurred trees and grasses grew brighter, brighter, brighter ....

The next day Percy Andrews' daughter Janine walked to his house to deliver the weekly supply of newspapers for her aging father. Upon reaching the end of the house's road she stopped abruptly. Lying face down in the gravel was her father; his broken glasses biting into his withered skin. She went up to touch his flesh, grasp his hand. It was cold and stiff; the body was not newly departed. Clutched in the old man's hand was a supermarket periodical of sales, the joyful print blurred by moisture and dirt.

Janine lowered her head to her hands and began to cry.

# Memories of Ukraine

By Darrin

We marched much slower as we grew closer to the shore of Lake Ladoga on our far right flank. The dirt roads were heavily churned up during the fall by the Finns' trucks and horse-drawn wagons and were now frozen in odd and irregular folds that were buried in snow and brutal on our ankles as we trudged unenthusiastically to the northwest. Two narrow and thinned out columns on either side bobbed up and down with desperate pathos yet steady determination. Our dark brown overcoats were dotted with our engorged pink or disturbingly blue hands that peeked out of the sleeves and gripped the stiff leather straps of our rifles. I, like many of the men in front and behind me there on that road, was Ukrainian. I have seen many harsh winters in my short life, but mine are only harsh to the European. The Finns' vision of a harsh winter is vastly more horrific. The Russians of this region who were willing to fight, who have lived through this season time and time again, are not here among our ranks. They are too sympathetic to the Finns, it is said. They can not be trusted to go to war against them. We, who have never seen a Finnish man, nor heard their language nor experienced their culture, are expected to fight without remorse. Yet all the manpower and equipment the mighty Union can throw at puny and pitiful Finland is not enough to drive through this stretch of land. There is too much snow and ice, too many forests, too many lakes to disrupt our advances and to form bottlenecks. Too many open fields with clear lines of fire. Too many political officers among us who force idealistic doctrines that never work in practice. All the factors imaginable lay in the road as obstacles and to make matters worse, the whole political world sympathizes with the enemy and we have been expelled from the League of Nations.

Between the frosty and blinding white pines to my right stood a bizarre display of leaned over, bogged down and abandoned hardware and crews. Perfectly good vehicles left in place by their dead owners and never claimed by any one else, and now worn by the elements beyond repair. Trucks and tanks stood layered on every flat surface in snow and half-buried in the white sea. Among their wheels and tracks sprouted the grueling display of torn gloves and tattered hats, bearing that ever inspiring hammer and sickle, atop and wrapped around chalky white and pearl blue hands and faces that emerged out of the ice like the most wicked fiends at the deepest bowels of Dante's Inferno. But what sins have these poor souls committed? I can count none but paying duty to their homeland. The Motherland calls! Quickly men, enlist today and embark on the grand adventure of glory and fortune! Heroes of the Soviet Union, born under the Red Banner, unite against the stubborn and greedy conservatives of Finland, and spread the wonders of Social Reform to the beaten and oppressed peoples of Scandinavia! These men were not shot or burned or torn apart by shells of any kind. They simply shivered in their seats and in the backs of their trucks until they drifted off to sleep and never awoke in the morn. Their limbs reached up to the heavens for mercy and now their muscles stand crystallized and petrified, made into grim and tragic statues the Greeks would envy and the Romans would duplicate for themselves.

Their weapons and personal effects had been taken however, the faint outlines in the snow left preserved, by the under-supplied and ill-armed Finnish who manage to beat us off by the droves with homemade explosives they named after our piggish Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, and with our own rifles. The captain of the company ahead of us, back

from leave, tells the tale of a Mosin-Nagant rifle he stripped off a dead Jäger, with the name Aleksei Petrovskiy carved into its butt in Cyrillic, though the Finn's dog-tags read Voitto Mäkelä in Latin. This fascinated the captain, as it did all the men to which he told the story. No matter how many shells we fired at their positions, our charges across no-man's land were always met with bitter and intense fire from weapons we could recognize by sound, owing to our experiences in basic training. Russian weaponry.



By Bantha\_Fodder

My toes and fingertips were beginning to numb and I could barely flex either. My socks were once soaking wet and stained brown by mud and sweat, but now were hard and crisp and fought my movements. Every time I closed my eyes I would veer off into the ditch absentmindedly as my mind was back in Vinnitsya, watching the warm summer breezes draw withering strings on all the violas of the blooming wheat for as far as one could see. The many residents on our farm would pop in and out as they went about their chores, stopping now and then to wipe the beads of broiling brine off their foreheads and arch their backs to the soothing snap of their vertebrae, letting the breeze blow dry their skin.

When we stopped occasionally, we dug shallow and half-hearted trenches and foxholes that barely covered us when we lay down flat and then we shivered until the field-kitchens came around with the stale and soon chilling soups and coffees. I would often share my hole with a man named Rustam who could play the accordion and would often keep our spirits high. He would play the old folk songs sang of physical hardships and triumphs we could all relate to and fell close to our hearts. Tales of lovers split and reunited or of the open sea got the men singing in chorus and smiling again.

In the cold night, Rustam and I would resort to covering ourselves with both our coats together and huddling uncomfortably close until the shivering stopped. We would often wake up embracing one another with tightly bound arms, and laugh about how our wives would feel about the sight.

One night the company commissar came to our trench to talk to my squadmates and I. He reached into his extra padded pockets and pulled out works of Marx and Lenin and flipped through them slowly and carefully with his fuzzy gloved hands and spat clouds of breath as if their swirling waltzes were still gleeful children's games, and not omens of fate. We stood below him, backs bent into the stone-hard soil behind and listened with deaf ears and watched with hungry eyes. He talked of the collective responsibility and the complicated network of codependency we all shared with each other. The individual must try to support the rest, as that one man relies on the support of every other. This is the corner stone of the socialist paradise, and is the corner stone of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army rifle squad. Fight for your fellow man and win the battle, so that the army can fight for every man and win the war. I saw through this optimism and hopeful preaching and yet deep down I still felt uplifted. His colourful words still reached into my heart and manipulated my emotions. For a faint second I drew in my mucus and stood rigid and defined in that trench before the cold beat me back down. As he walked away the only real thought that remained in my tightly balled fist of a mind were his gloves and thick and furry *ushanka*. I wanted his clothes. His flask of vodka wouldn't hurt any either. My thin and wilted *budyonovka*, with its queer pointed top and dull maroon star, offered neither warmth nor protection. I would prefer at least a proper fur hat to a steel helmet, but I, being a lowly private, received neither.

In the morning I was awoken by the cooing whiz of friendly shells flying high above us, followed by the distant and anti-climatic burping rumble to the north as the Finnish line was molested by an unimaginable arsenal that passed us without commotion. Now visible in the glare of the cloudless blue sky was another assortment of twisted and statuesque constructs of wasted humanity that littered the empty and nearly trackless field ahead. We had been watching the field for some time but only now in the bright morning did we even notice the sight. Beyond the sorry display was yet another tree line to another nameless forest and between the thin stalks skulked a number of white figures that seemed to wear a peculiar uniform and dress. They finally finished their odd task, which now appeared to be the mending of skis. They quickly swooped down into the field and rapidly checked the bodies. I stood in my hole, no longer shivering, and watched these men pick and choose over the bodies for weaponry, food and water and began to head over towards our side of the field to enter our forest. As they swung their long poles through the air with their mitten fists and kicked up the top powder, a number of familiar voices ahead of me began to ring out cries of "Finns!" and "fascists!" to alert the company. The sharp and echoing cracks of single and sporadic rifle shots were accompanied by wafts of smoke from the edge of the forest ahead of me. A pair of the white and puffy snowmen fell awkwardly onto their sides with their long wooden skis flung up at odd and broken angles. The remainders quickly turned around and sped off across the field, multiple stolen rifles on their backs, and managed to escape without further casualty. Some of the groggy and awakening men around me cheered at the fresh dead while others groaned at those that escaped, while others still simply watched along with me in odd fascination, but sterile indifference. After the sight of the droves of frozen and starved men left dead in their own defenses, I felt little sympathy for anyone killed in arguably justified violence. I did not appreciate the sight of grave robbing, especially considering that those dead were never even placed in proper graves.

By noon, we had been given the order to advance further and at three in the afternoon, we had reached our final position. For another hour we dug into the stiff and unwilling dirt until we had dug ourselves mass graves in which we would live and take shelter for the next day, assuming our attack would be successful, or the next week, assuming it would not. By the end I was both sweating and shivering and had managed to cut my hand in three places and didn't notice until the white snow below was sharply contrasted with my bright blood. Red blood on white snow was a common image in Finnish propaganda, as red was the typical colour of all things Communist while white was a symbol of Finnish

nationalism and conservatism, cemented by the Finnish civil war in which our comrades, the Reds, were defeated by the Whites. My shovel too had taken a harsh beating from the stones and concrete soil and was chipped and cracked badly in two places that would warrant replacement if we weren't so far from supply and so close to an offensive.

As I curled up in pain and tried to contain the much-needed heat escaping through my head and armpits, everyone took notice of a sudden and random mechanical whistling from above. In seconds, non-commissioned officers of all grades shouted desperate cries to seek cover and spread out, and in seconds further their small mousy voices were consumed by the fiery roar of impacts and detonations from all manner of mortar and howitzer. As I peeked my head up quickly to see the forest around me, I was presented with an awe-inspiring display of fire and smoke that lit the contours of trenches and showered twisted and screaming blue faces in dirt and rubble. Trees burst open half-way up their trunks and rained ragged branches and splinters in all directions, jabbing into the snow like daggers and cutting men who were foolish enough to peek with me. The ground burst open and spat up into the air geysers of brown and blanch offering to the horrible booms the soft and gentle tinkling of small stones and gravel. Among the thunder of cordite that burned my eardrums came the haunting zips and snaps of shrapnel that cut the air around me and hinted at my sudden and random demise. To die in a barrage like this was another horrible form of death in Finland. There was no fighting chance or glorious sacrifice here, nor was there even an honourable cause and effect. It was completely random like a roll of the dice. You got hit or you did not. Of all the flying shards of metal and wood from all the wildly fired shells from far off cannons, one might hit you for no better reason than because fate and physics deemed you worthy. This barrage was of course only a faint fraction of the intensity we threw at them from the endless rows of freshly constructed barrels we wheeled up here by the thousands each day. But artillery is artillery, and their attacks were much more accurate than ours.

I tucked my head back down and forced it into my legs fiercely, bending my beat-red nose painfully to its side against my cheek. The earth to my back shook with the pounding of Thor's hammer and in a fit of absolute horror and cowardice I screamed until my lungs ached, yet I could not hear my own voice. Only the resonance of my skull told me I was even speaking at all.

With all the omnipotence and cold-willed suddenness that the barrage had begun, it ended. The battery had simply fired off their last salvo in unison and then halted, leaving those last rapid and tightly knit shells to fall and then leave us in the choking smoke and now prominent cries of the wounded and the fearful. I could at first hear very little but the ringing of bells or rather a high whining buzz that belligerently burned my brain, but soon the voices of the young and inexperienced began to fade in and assault my senses on higher level. Many died of their wounds, but many more were thankfully secured and treated, yet remained among us without evacuation. I turned to my friend Rustam to see him stand up slowly and spiritlessly, take off his cap and grip it tightly in his hand against his chest and climb out of the trench, walking off through the smoke aimlessly before slipping into a small crater and yelping frightfully. He came out, staring off into the trees at nothing, holding a severed arm that was bloodless and hard already in the cold. He stared at it and turned around in all directions with his mouth open in horror. The thinning gray smoke folded over him and perhaps irritated his already swelling eyes that could not hold back any further. He dropped the arm nonchalantly as if it no longer held any human traits and picked up with his icy fingers a crushed in and severed head that held itself together viscosly thanks to the hellish icescape. He looked it over inch for inch and made note of where its facial features once were before finally dropping it in horror. The political commissar caught up with him and consoled him back into a rational state and especially convinced him to put his cap back on his nearly

bald head.

I thought again of the golden stalks swaying gently in the calm summer air, whose sticky heat was now my reward should I survive all the way to Helsinki and the establishment of a Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic. Some men had injured themselves to get out of the war, but I had always seen myself above that, despite my misery here. As I sat in that trench and tried to block out the tart stench of ash and viscera, I realized with clarity that I hated the Soviet Union. I hated Stalin for declaring war on Finland for no real practical reason, I hated the Russians for their superiority complexes over us "southern peasants", I hated the Finnish for defending their useless land so tenaciously, I hated Rustam for his morbid and infectious cowardice and, most of all, I hated that commissar with his warm gloves and filthy mind full of lies I hope to God he did not truly believe. I hated that grin on his face every time he ended his speeches; that kind of forced friendliness that showed he did not care for you in the least. Even the captain, with all his by-the-book commands that could be given by anyone with a field manual, knew us by name and cared when we were hurt. But that commissar, that useless hypocritical communist! He had no sense of community or responsibility to the masses. He only did his job well enough to meet the standards and hoped for a promotion out of his obviously unappreciated position! Why was every state-approved communist I had ever met such a selfish and ambitious individualist? I was right then and there on the verge of doing something very foolish and ultimately self-destructive, but the memories of Ukraine in the summer time distracted my dissent, and eased me out of my anger.

In time, the battalion's commanding officer, a lieutenant colonel, paid our position a visit and talked privately with our captain. From a distance we could see them share words that soon festered into a heated argument that was cut short when both the company and battalion commissars stepped in. We had been given our orders now, and the leaders left. The captain, standing there off between the trees away from everyone else, stood silently for a minute and nodding his head and releasing a flurry of breath in the air as if talking. It later became clear that he was preparing a peppy and spirited spin on our orders. When he reached our trench, he informed us of tomorrow's schedule. All of the division's armour was being focused a whole mile to our left on the main road to try and break through the enemy's fortified roadblock. Out here in the wilderness we would simply be given a short softening barrage, which if anything would only alert them of our impending attack, and then we were to probe their position with a single squad, and attack with the entire company. Apparently a single tank platoon that would be attached to us was on its way already and would arrive soon. Probing usually meant deliberately advancing into enemy fire, making note of their entrenchments and heavy weapon emplacements and then retreating. Using an entire squad when a handful of volunteers or even one man would suffice, and conducting the operation during broad daylight was just one of many textbook plays that worked, but at such a useless cost.

Several hours later we heard the frightening, grinding rumble of armoured vehicles coming up the thin trodden path to our southeast. Four small and meek T-26 tanks came into view between the trees, slowly smoothing out the frozen soil beneath them with much difficulty and miriness. Their bodies were rather compact and featureless, painted a dull metallic gray and frosted up in peculiar but unnoticeable designs. Their tracks were tightly wound around a variety of small, fragile and exposed wheels that commonly clogged with mud and ice and were easy targets for Finnish sappers. Their turrets sat raised up from the center of the chassis in front of a large pair of exhaust grates that were equally easy targets for the dreaded Molotov cocktails every tank crew drew nightmares around. The turrets featured a short and stout main cannon that barely stuck out and did not disrupt the vehicle's overall triangular shape. The column coughed out thick and hoarse plumes of carbon as they slowly

and awkwardly motored towards us. They finally parked their four vehicles between our scattered holes and trenches to offer additional cover with their machine guns, and their crews tried to shroud their silhouettes with broken off pine branches. One of the crewman had salvaged a shaving razor and it was passed around the entire company, allowing us to cut smooth the thickening and darkening shrouds of hard and prickling stubble we had all acquired.

*To be continued...*



# St. George

By Thomas Huttner

When I was little, my mother would take me to my grandparent's place downtown. My grandmother Carmen (whom we called "Nana") and my grandfather Jorge (whom we called "Tata") lived on the northwest side of Chicago, not too far away from the Northside (which was more famously known as "Wrigleyville"). They were both Mexican, as was my mother and therefore, myself. Or at least half of me anyway.

Whenever I would go to my grandparent's house as a child, I would always feel like I was walking in a lesser version of a museum. Not lesser as in a sense that it was diminished in quality, but rather it was miniature in size. Miniature dolphins and seals made of crystal and glass would sit in a towering case of the same material. Tiny elephants of marble would begin a march across the living room table. One of my favorite pieces, a mermaid made of porcelain, always seemed to stare longingly at the one piece that always caught my attention.

Across from the heart-broken piece of porcelain would sit St. George upon his bucking steed with what should have been his lance piercing into the mouth of the dragon that he was so well-known for fighting in the first place. I say "what should have been his lance" because over the years I visited my grandparents, I would see many different items in the valiant knight's able hand. When I was young, it was a small and thin iron rod. I remember seeing an unburnt stick of incense when I was older. Lastly, I remember being very slightly unsettled by the absence of a lance during a winter visit to that pocket-sized museum on a weekend from middle school. But no matter his weapon of choice (or lack thereof), St. George would always sit upon the old, dial-operated Magnavox television set, having the upper hand over the dragon, but never quite defeating him.

I would begin to go to my grandparents less and less over the years as I got older. My mother who would always drive me to Chicago, would start to have a schedule that didn't match mine as I got older and started to develop what resembled a budding social life. However, if I cite that as the only reason for my absence in the company of the delicate elephants and aging mermaid, I feel that I would be neglecting a truth from that time.

During my visits to my grandparents, Tata would often bring me up to sit on his lap and teach me old Mexican folk songs. Then he would scatter change and quarters around the different rooms and say that whatever I found I could keep. His laugh would almost deafen me at times due to his rather large stature and bellowing giant's voice. But no matter how loud his laughter was, I still knew it was filled with a happy tone. As I got older, my mother would tell me more stories about the youth of her and her siblings under the parenthood of my grandparents.

I always found that my grandfather, despite his kindness, had a very imposing and menacing physical stature. As my mother told me stories of him as a father, I found that he had such stature and appearance because he was rather imposing and menacing. As I grew older, I heard more stories of the unknown cruelty of my grandfather. Through of all the stories I heard of unwarranted beatings with a belt and lack of general caring and affection, I began to notice that the subject of most of what appeared to be a malicious disdain was his son and my uncle, also named Jeorge. During my high school years, I began to hear more

stories on how my uncle Jorge was the subject of much humiliation in front of others by my grandfather. As my uncle grew older into his early 20's, he began drinking alcohol of different sorts and began to fall into nearly ten lost years of alcoholism or being a drunk, depending on one's view of the situation he was in. I then made the connection rather quickly that it was the usual cycle of mental and emotional poison that was generated through what appeared to be neglect at the very least, and actual hate at the very most.

During the years that appeared a loss, my uncle Jorge saw a marriage that quickly became a divorce with a very young toddler, his daughter, caught inbetween. During this time, which was around the end of my time in grade school, my grandfather passed away, a week before Christmas. From what I can remember (but am for some reason too timid to ask), he died from some sort of natural disease that if it had not mercifully ended him in that winter, would have caused his mind to regress to that of a child. The wake of his death was fraught with not only the sadness for the departed, but with a type of internal pain that many mourners carried with them through the doors of the funeral parlor. It was not a pain related to my grandfather's death, but a pain of day to day life that many had. I remember clearly, the pain my uncle had carried within him. It was after my grandfather's passing that I would no more see St. George having some type of makeshift weapon with which to keep the dragon at hoof-level.

When I was in high school, I became more inquisitive of my family's past. Naturally, I wanted to know the parts of the story between my uncle and my grandfather that I would not have been told years ago due to my age. I still cannot determine if my mother's tone of voice at this time had changed to one more sullen or if it was that I had never taken notice of it due to the inability to do because of my youth.

My grandfather Jorge was an orphan from a rather poor town in Mexico. At this time, he did have a brother who was orphaned alongside him. Later on, they would be separated and little communication would be made between the two. His youth and adolescence was a mixture of mistreatment and a lack of the necessary components to create a decent childhood. From this, my grandfather's hands (and I want to believe his heart) became callous from years of work. Almost by chance he married a young girl who was maybe one or two social class rungs above him.

Since I am not one of my grandfathers children, I do not know if he tried to make amends towards his older years. Since I am not his brother, I do not know if the absence of words was because of various obstacles preventing my grandfather from talking or writing to his brother. I think my mother feels that my grandfather made a conscious effort to mend what his role as a father broke in the past.

I think the death of my grandfather and the divorce took hold of something within my uncle. I never heard or took notice of any signs of the sweet poison of alcohol within him. Eventually, the divorce was finalized and the young toddler, who was quickly growing up, went to live with her mother, seeing my uncle Jorge on occasion. Uncle Jorge started getting parts of his life, now separate like a jigsaw puzzle, connected and placed back together. The puzzle was completed in time, and showed a man rebuilt in an echo of his father, but most definitely not the same.

Recently, I made a visit to the art museum that sits downtown (the one many know as the museum with the two stone lions standing vigil on the front steps). I first walked past the various portraits and painted scenes that displayed the full spectrum of themes in religion: redemption, defeat, guilt, forgiveness, falls from grace and others that showed the skill of the artists and the beliefs of their patrons.

Eventually, I found myself staring at a painting that was new to my eyes, but not to me. The gestures and postures were all the same. There was the horse on it's hind legs, preparing the front hooves for combat. The dragon still sunk low and in defeat in the shadow of the rider and horse. Then, there he was: St. George displayed in dark armor made light only by the trim of gold that raced along the edges of his breastplate, of his helm, and of all other parts of his armor. His lance caught the flourescent light of the fixtures most of all. As I stood there, staring at St. George, I couldn't help but feel utterly foolish and ignorant. I erroneously thought I saw this work as a child at my grandparent's house. The work was always there: St. Jorge watching an evil through combat-tired eyes while doing all in his power to place that vile existence at a place beneath him, where it can at least be contained if not extinguished right out.

# Working the Streets: A Quest to Discover Myself Through Prostitution

By N.O.T.

The customer's lights spread my long legs' shadows behind me, hiding some of the other girls. My miniskirt and red bra really show off the hair on my fat boy frame, and my fat rolls are keeping the skirt on. I heave into the window, and seductively ask "How much you wanna bet I won't eat this?" For I work the streets, deep into my life of prostitution.

At least, that's what prostitution is to me, a fun way to make money, mostly with bets. All spawned from Kenny eating bugs in a South Park episode. If you sell yourself for money, you are a prostitute. The concept seems simple. Yet whenever I call myself one, I get odd looks and exclamations that no one would ever pay for my services. Tired of both insults to my honor and unfair accusations, I looked up prostitution in the dictionary.

All I found was disappointment. Either South Park or the dictionary had lied to me, so I chose the most obvious liar at fault. I looked up prostitution in another dictionary. Prostitution: sexual lewdness. Damn. Prostitution is almost entirely for women too. Damn. Unless you're gay. Triple damn. Not only had a cable network television show lied to me, but I no longer had a simple definition for what I do. Bet-slut and attention-whore-with-benefits just don't sound right. The fervor for five dollar prostitutes spawned from Futurama has been replaced with empathy, pity, and a need for research. The research led me to a Thesaurus. The thesaurus is more brutal than domestic abuse. It beat me with words: floozy; profane; pervert; courtesan. Only the latter seems to fit. A more appropriate source of information needed to be used.

I watched a five hour History Channel special on prostitution. What I always considered to be an innocent, well, unfortunate, profession is filled with tragedy. Not only is prostitution the world's oldest profession (I would have thought farming or hunting or warrior would be, but no, humanity needs easily available sex before food or protection), but it is also the most unfortunate. Prostitutes have been ostracized throughout history, being treated as property and abused throughout time. Gigolos, the male equivalent, however, are treated fairly, with honor and respect. These days 'Gigolos' only fill me with a concept of incredibly rich black rappers.

More research had to be done on this. Doesn't everyone sell themselves for safety and comfort; even politicians? Interviews needed to take place. Unfortunately, my budget consisted of a Twinkie and a glass of milk, so I interview the closest thing to a prostitute I or any of my friends knew: myself. I had some very interesting things to say between mouthfuls of junk food and milk. I compared being a prostitute to being a wage slave. I compared the job security of being a prostitute to a minimum wage job, as well as the hours and pay. My budget spent after a scant three minutes, I walked away both disappointed and in search of

another willing customer.

So in the end, I have decided that although prostitution is completely acceptable to me, I am not, in the traditional sense, a prostitute. I cannot fulfill the basic definition for prostitution, the act of sexual lewdness. I am only as much of a prostitute as the next 17 year old nerdy white male with no job or car. Pretty close to the stereotype, but farther away than most people. In both my and the dictionary's opinion, a part of being a prostitute is selling yourself. A job is selling a part of you: your time, your independence, even the definition of yourself. When asked what you are, the response: "I'm a teacher", "I'm a doctor", " I'm unemployed", "I'm a democrat". What a person does for a living defines who they are, both subconsciously and communally. In order to fit into the schema of society, everyone simplifies themselves into a job. So I am fine not being a traditional prostitute. In some way, every productive member of society is whoring themselves out to survive. I will always be a neo-prostitute, even if I become an astronaut, policeman, or a politician.

# Horror & Creepypasta

# The Darkest of Fiends

By R. R. Booker

A subtle whisper of light broke through the derelict tree branches and lighted the young child's face. Her eyes wide open with fear, her arms tightly clutching her worn teddy bear, she looked on as the lights faded away, tracing the forest road in the distance. Alone in the night's embrace, she shivered incessantly and pulled her teddy closer, holding it against her face, eyes closed and watery. Her bear caught silent tears as she quivered, suffocating her only companion.

The darkness once again resolved into a dim glow as a car approached, the lights revealing scars along her arms and neck. Lashes, cuts, and bruises covered her body, stamps of her beloved mother and father, the accompanying pain spurring her to the woods. She raised her head up, fearful tears streaking down her soft cheeks, evident trails among the dirt on her face. Her bright eyes fearful of the light, and the possibility of it bringing her parents, and pain. Her dirty yellow dress faded, she could not do anything but kneel in the dead leaves, hiding from reality and the harsh world of a mother and father.

She did not fear the silent animals in the forest preying on her. She feared the husband and wife desperately searching for her, if they noticed her absence. She didn't find the comfort of nature's barren grasp as she huddled with her bear, but she found comfort in the absence of human wrath, which nature pitied upon her. Forsaken and oblivious to her was the companionship of love and compassion that every child deserves. Nature's cold cloudless night couldn't help her, her scent fanning out, the smell of lone flesh fearfully hiding a favorite among the night predators. The little girl wasn't aware of the danger nature unfortunately provided, only its security of solitary loneliness from the evils of words and beings.

And so, as she stood there fearing her own kind, the moon broke out of the clouds, a spotlight shining down onto the desecrated world which she kneeled in. She tilted her innocent head up, tears running amid the splendor of the silver light gracing her gleaming eyes. She cried pitifully, afraid and scared, lonely and lost, yet unwanting of the alternative, luminescent streaks flowing down her hopeful face as she peered at the moon.

In the morning, the search crews didn't look where she had been. If they had they would have found footprints of her sandals in one spot, where the little girl had stayed quiet for hours; her teddy a few feet away, shredded, it's stuffing vanished, and no other sign of the little girl. Heartbroken, her parents were consoled by their neighbors, the world pitying their plight.

# Poetry & Prose



# Summer's Intersection

By S. R. S.

Ceaseless red snaked its way  
into nearly every summer of my memory.

Smoke tainted the forked tongue,  
whilst the huddled masses of fauna fled  
as refugees to nature,  
seeking asylum in suburban backyards.

Sometimes the red made it there too,  
rivaling the communist menace in  
knocking down the neighbours  
- the domino effect of the humble gum.

Mustard, soot-faced firemen were sweating  
with caution's heat.

They were men of the blazes who,  
bitter and determined,  
stared down a foe of contradiction –  
chaotic yet controllable,  
a force of nature that was feared;  
respected and a dauntless  
necessity.

For nature's turn of the wheel  
would come full circle and  
the sleeping serpent would leave  
never-ending green.

If only the rains would let up.

# Zero Sum

By S. R. S.

The cross always seemed addition:  
sacrifice for all seemed to dilute  
into bloodied, murky rivers  
whose frenzied waters  
wondered wherefore plus why.

When nothing comes of nothing  
standing still is of the same creed.  
Was a fellow man taken,  
whilst in Geth-semantics,  
we asked if it was really us who had been forsaken?

When the flames slither through  
the branches, whose sins are cleansed  
but blackened trunks, still burn  
can we wash away our own  
or have we yet to learn

that sin is fuelled of our own devising,  
the way out - of that stead?  
Christ, I know ignorance is bliss,  
but isn't it time we subtract the dead?

# Birds on the Bridge

By Mason

The guy standing near the road  
the man with the sign  
perched near the crows  
eating and feasting on wine.

He lives under the bridge  
where the beer bottles get tossed  
he stands under the edge  
where no-one will cross.

His wild-faced look  
will make you stop  
observe the man, the old white rook  
he'll take you to his home, his nest, his shop.

He'll show you all the shiny things  
that passers hurl at him  
he'll give you what the birds may bring  
and ask you to stay for them.

But don't get near the eggs  
for he is their mother  
he'll take a bat to your legs  
if you disturb their slumber

Wait until the sun sets  
when his birdkind start to fly in  
to take your leave and avoid the threats  
that will soon begin

The fellow remains roosted high  
above the bridge he caws  
he'll take on last look to his sky  
before down and down he falls

## Cliff

By Mason

I've always wanted to tell you how  
I felt  
How I'd loved you  
But you didn't because  
you backed away  
and left me standing  
as you  
fell  
into the arms of the sea

## Drink of the Working Class

By Mason

I woke up this morning  
to find that  
someone  
broke all my toys  
and gave me coffee  
who wants this beanwater?

but wait,  
It's warm  
but awfully bitter  
and coarsing through my veins

I take my cup  
and begin my work

# The Compass

By M.R.

In pleasurable unrav'ling of the day  
And intimate palpation of the night;  
This compass doth illuminate the way  
And shall dispel the unforgiving light.  
The trees now shadow slowly for my eye  
And counted are the beetles in the bank;  
I catch the falling stars up in the sky  
And to my faithful compass do I thank.  
Awakened to the unturned leaf, I find  
Its glories yet know not how I conceal  
In letters all the fruits within my mind,  
Nourished by sense, ready to pick and peel.  
My compass lets me see these treasures true,  
Yet pass on I cannot, their sweets to you.

# "If there are any last songs I must sing I hope they are for you"

By Joseph Osborne

If there are any last songs I must sing I hope they are for you;  
When you wake up in a green rolling morning  
with glory about your hips and breathe  
Only your naked scent shall make music;  
and I decree it so as long as I know  
and never meet you, may even a deathbosom heave

Light comes flashing when I imagine a touch in fluiddarting whisper,  
That shows youmenotanything norplace  
Growing stalks in the sidewalk, the still old decisions  
Grit of life still used to make nimble pots  
Which your fingers kiss  
  like my parting music  
  -nudeneck'd vision.

You weren't around; but later my heart rumbled  
The slow drums of last year, an hour ago she beside me  
And him feeling the celery juice crisp of her, me I know  
Heaven. The only way I ever found any of love's meaning  
Was to climb her statue of flesh made real,  
and later sleep dreaming of the song she now may flow.

# Jazz

By tDM

Footsteps pound out a beat,  
Life's standing bass.

I see her, and the rest of the band joins in.

Her hair makes itself known,  
In the form of a saxophone.  
Alto, Soprano, Tenor.  
Each hue has a tone of its own.

Eyes twinkle,  
Piano keys tinkle.

Cheeks seemingly always flushed,  
As if from some far away place the band has been rushed.  
Her smile lights the stage,

My heart thrums,  
To the beat of the ever louder drums.

Suddenly, the pianist turns and our eyes meet.  
Embarrassed, I stare at my feet.

# Blues

By tDM

Something has gone wrong.  
The band has shifted from Jazz to Blues,  
The twinkle has vanished from the eyes of my muse.

The once rapid thrum of my heart slows with the drum,  
The cymbals stop sounding,  
What was once a quick light beat has become,  
A slow, mournful, pounding.

The sound is still beautiful,  
But I can feel the band suffer.  
If only I knew what to offer,  
I know I could be helpful.

I want the Jazz back.  
I want the pianist to play the twinkle back into her eyes.  
I want the Jazz back.  
I want to hear that sweet sound's reprise.  
I want the Jazz back.  
I want to hear that music play,  
For anyone,  
As long as I can hear it throughout the day.

I want the Jazz back.

*Paraphrased background "I wrote these about a year ago, before I worked up the courage to ask out my (now) ex-girlfriend. Her name was Jasmine, but everyone calls her Jazz."*



# Just Don't Ever Become a Writer

By C.S.

Never ask a well-meaning literary type  
for any sort of situational advice--  
he'll tell you write, *handwrite*, *typewrite*  
"My boy, you have so much bottled up inside,  
here's pen, here's paper, just uncork it in time  
before it swallows you in tide, Your pride-  
wall gives a stoic groan  
the levee spills over until one day  
it pops, and the city chokes on your own  
outpouring."

But I query: Maybe levees are made to groan  
that your outpours might remain your own?  
No wall stands erect to break--  
A flowing heart does not peace make.

# Missing

By Captain Obvious

The gray, fleeting armies upon us  
Not knowing love nor fortune,  
Not knowing happiness nor joy,  
Knowing only death and destruction,  
The happiest man alive.

How their swords glisten in the sun,  
Bright and bold,  
Another life taken,  
Another heart broken,  
These are the days of their lives.

Although their lives are full and great,  
There is something missing.  
Something no gore,  
No pain can top,  
Loneliness.

The sun goes down with the men,  
Losing and failing,  
Their bodies now husks of what they were.  
Though they were heroes,  
No one cried when they died.

# One Last Drink

By M.R.

One last drink to thee, my fated friend  
Let's raise our glass in silence and I send  
To you my very best  
And we shall go our separate paths and spend  
What little time that we have left

For no longer can our friendship last  
Though we have helped each other through the past  
To turn against our fears  
But minutes on the clock are ticking fast  
The guillotine of death is drawing near

And we cannot let our memories fade  
Into the mists of time or let the shade  
Cover the paths we follow  
To you, I give this mortal accolade  
A new life begins for us tomorrow

From our abandoned lives now shall we turn  
From grizzly battle, with all of the burn  
And hopeless squander  
One last drink to thee, and so I yearn  
To feast on our new life with faith and wonder

# Venus

By Ian Gibson

I saw Botticelli's Venus  
in a Beirut cafe  
postured and poised  
on a corner couch

Golden locks atop  
a cream-white face,  
blue eyes placed  
like precious jewels

About her neck  
wrapped a scarf  
white to match  
her winter sweater

The ends draped  
in careless perfection  
upon her shoulder  
and chest

With dainty hands  
she cupped the mug  
that gave her  
warmth and taste

She held it close  
upon her lap  
for fear  
it fall away

Her eyes looped  
about the room  
from door to  
counter to corner

But she saw  
nothing  
worth the look  
she gave

When thirst came  
the drink was raised  
calmly  
to her lips

And tipped back  
just enough  
to let the  
liquid pour

A little taste  
for her mouth  
a little coal  
for her soul

A reminder  
of what it is  
that she  
knows

A drink  
of dreams,  
of truth  
and beauty

Taken  
eagerly  
but not  
in gulps

When the mug  
is lowered  
minus the  
single sip

A smile lies  
across her face  
a gentle gift  
addressed to self

And she looks  
anew  
at all that lies  
around her

With fresh eyes  
and hope  
for  
understanding

# Real Life

*Editor's note: This was originally posted as cospypasta in /lit/. The author submitted this to us with a newly written introduction and closing.*

# Captain Underpants: A Literary Work of Fine Literature

By Captain Obvious

For many years, Dave Pilkey has been seen only as a toilet humor comedy writer for children who have just learned what a chapter is. However, after a recent reading of *Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy, Part 2: The Revenge of the Ridiculous Robo-Boogers*, I have come to the genius conclusion that Pilkey did not intend to write a children's novel. Rather, Pilkey is using the illustrations, "Flip-O-Rama", and character created comic books to further his true theme, which, as I will explain in this short essay, is obviously the failing of the public school system. His main characters, Mr. Krupp, George, and Herald, demonstrate this throughout the *Captain Underpants* saga on a multitude of occasions.

George and Herald are geniuses and only act out of boredom. This piece of glorious literature says so on multiple occasions. If they were not so bored, then they would not have to resort to poor creative outlets (badly drawn comic books, inventions that hurt others) and would be able to succeed in society. However, because of their school, they cannot do so. Pilkey uses the boys to bring the following to the attention of parents worldwide: smart children who are not placed in a stimulating environment often end up on the road to failure. Clearly, George and Herald's school, which can be said to represent all public schools, is not stimulating enough.

The character Captain Underpants represents how easy a bad principal can become good and help the school. At just a snap of the fingers, the principal turns into an awesome hero who thinks on his feet and teaches the boys lessons and morals through unconventional methods. Recall that Captain Underpants usually fights bad teachers who have gone insane from stress (Professor Poopypants, Ms. Riddle) and children who have been bullied to the point of violence (Melvin Sneedly). Thus, the principal is who defeats the miscreants that plague that public school systems even today.

The running gag of George and Herald screwing with the school signs not only furthers the theme of their intellectual superiority and boredom, but it also serves to make the point that the children are also part of what define the school, as opposed to just what the school says they are doing (such as what programs are being implemented, after school events, etc... the things superintendents would likely look at along with test scores) The children can easily make a poor school succeed.

Thus, never underestimate my favorite book again, you scoundrels, for it is fine literature. *Captain Underpants* should be placed in the same ranks as works such as *Candide* for its glorious satire of the public school systems disguised as a children's storybook.

# Dream

By FiRez

I had a dream one night about 6 months ago. This is the first instance I can recall of this ever happening to me. I remember it more vividly than any other dream I have ever had since the day I was born. It was *not* a nightmare, but was actually an extremely pleasant dream. It's even more vividly burned into my mind than my worst nightmare, which I've heard are the type of dream to be remembered the best. It was also *not* related to anything sexual, and it was not a wet dream, as I'm sure you are thinking while you are reading this. This was a unique dream which I have never heard of happening to anyone else (I asked around).

I won't go into the minute details about it, but I'll give you a general synopsis.

It began with me and who I assume is my girlfriend (I've never seen her before in real life, so I don't know who my mind could have made up, but as with all dreams, many facts assemble themselves in unexpected ways, and you don't question it). We were standing in the forest just being together, not in a sexual way, but just holding hands, like the picture perfect moment you want to last forever. Emotions were flooding me at that point, and in the dream me and the girl were very, very close. I could tell she was flooded with the same need I was: a need for each other.

We ran through the forest just being ourselves, sort of looking for a place to be more alone. We ended up in this natural spring/spa sort of thing inside a cave, and we bathed together in the warm waters. Nothing sexual happened. As I mentioned, the dream has absolutely nothing to do with sexual arousal of any kind. That's one thing which makes it special to me. We sat there for hours and hours, totally overwhelmed by the most pure form of absolute love and need for each other you could ever imagine.

Imagine infatuation, euphoria, long term appreciation, and every other form of love for another person all rolled into one. I can't even begin to describe the profound, and so intense feeling of absolute belonging, and pure love for her that I had, and how the assurance of total reciprocation inside of her for me just strengthened it in us both. Absolute and total bliss. Love in the purest form. We held each other like nobody has ever been held before.

It was at this point in the dream where I woke up.

And here's the kicker: The love I felt in my dream...

I continued to feel in real life, even though there was no-such "girl" to ever have existed in real life for me.

# Science Fiction



# Alecto

By Jeremy Levett/LBO

Ricardo Rodriguez, pilot of the third flight of Fury Squadron, brought a darkly tanned hand down to his mahogany control panel and moved a brass slider engraved with a stylised picture of the sun. The tint of the cockpit glass around him, thick glaciis and side plates, darkened a few shades. The early morning sun of Jericho, rising red and beautiful on the western horizon, would soon be high enough to be blinding. The canopy of Twelfth Fury, his fighter, was drawn back to expose him to the winds, and he would regret having to seal himself in a dark glass cage when the sun rose too high. He loved the feel of the air rushing around him, the smell of engine-oil and jet fuel, the roaring power of the single massive engine beneath his seat

Hound-type fighter named Twelfth Fury had been flying longer than he had. It had been built nineteen years before, with the rest of Fury Squadron, to crush the Eastern Commonwealth in formal war when it declared its grievances against the strong and just Falgar Nation. The Hound IV, as it had been built, had been modified and refitted countless times since then. Its armament had changed from two to four guns, four to three, three to six. The engine behind the fighter's gaping mouth was almost twice as powerful as the one it had been built with. The airframe was as much patch as original, carrying the old scars of war. The dark brown livery and white insignia it wore now had been painted on top of many other coats, many other colours.

But it was still Twelfth Fury, the same Twelfth Fury that had earned its kill markings in glorious combat almost two decades ago, and it was his.

This part of Falgar was rice-land, flat and glittering with the inundation as far as the eye could see. The paddy-fields, with low clay walls marking their boundaries, were drowned in murky brown. The few roads here were on earth causeways, with low iron bridges carrying them over larger rivers and irrigation channels. Columns of Union soldiers and war machines ground along those narrow passages, their uniforms the dark green of the Myame army, their wheels and boots and tracks the reddish brown of the Falgar mud.

The helmet on his lap let out a static-muffled murmur. Guiltily, he pulled it over his head in time to hear Manuel, commander of the squadron, repeat the weapons-free order. Ricardo pulled the safety tabs from the triggers in his cockpit: two to free the cannons, one to arm the rocket pods. He knocked on the canopy shrineboard, red wood inscribed with his ancestors' names in tiny gold letters, and checked that his fire cone was clear before pulling the triggers back. The fighter shook a little as he squeezed a couple of rounds from each gun. Muzzle flashes danced from the mouth and wing-roots of Ninth Fury, just ahead of him, as Jared went through the same ritual, and he heard the rattle of machine cannon above the whistling air and the howl of the jet engine. Ricardo had never had his guns freeze or jam, but if his mother and the instructor at the old Palis training base had agreed on one thing in all the world, it was that safe was always better than sorry.

"Jamal, take the tip," crackled Manuel's voice, now loud if not clear in his headset.

“Acknowledged,” said Jamal shortly. Third Fury, white lightning bolts painted against its dark brown fuselage, hit the vectors and slid perfectly into the lead position. Jamal was the best pilot in the squadron by far, perhaps one of the best in the Falgar Nation’s vast air force. He knew it, and so did Manuel. That made him conceited as anything, but also meant he went where he could do the most good. Ricardo thought it a fair trade. “Any idea what we’re to be facing?”

“Sky control will be keeping me updated as we approach,” replied Manuel. “For now, I know nothing.”

The twenty Hounds of Fury Squadron roared high over the sodden ground, drawing stares of envy and wonder from the infantry trudging among the fields. The fighters, like all Hounds, were short, fat, angry-looking machines with graceless lines and stubby gull wings bent near the fuselage. The front of the plane was taken by a huge, yawning air intake that made “nose” a poor name and “mouth” an apt one. But the aeroplanes had a freedom and grace that none of the land-men below would ever experience, beyond their dreams.

A squadron of straight-winged Scorpion utility bombers, their cockpits set far back in their cylindrical bodies, followed the Hounds in a loose echelon formation. Racks of rockets hung beneath their wings. The Snouts, as they were called when women or superior officers were around, couldn’t dogfight for anything, but carried enough guns and bombs in their suggestive-looking fuselages to make anything directly in front of them sorry. There was no end to the list of dirty jokes told about the planes.

Like Fury Squadron, the Scorpions were painted the dark, rich brown of the Falgar Nation’s air force. So was Wrathful Spirit squadron, which took the form of another twenty Hounds to the high south, and another echelon of Scorpions following them. Other orderly formations of fighters, bombers and things in between were formed up across the skies, launched before dawn from every air base in the Falgar Nation. There were older model Hounds and antique Gnats in the yellow camouflage of the Eastern Commonwealth, old enemies now sudden friends, and yet more Hounds wearing the dark green of the Myame Nation’s own air force, joining the aerial armada as it closed on the invaders’ beachhead. They furrowed the sky with white contrails, drowned all other sounds with a vast choir of jet engines.

Someone on the war channel started singing, a battle song Ricardo had last heard as a child, nineteen years earlier, when Falgar went to war with the Commonwealth. Soldiers marching through the barrio sang it then. The tune had almost faded from his memory.

But in an instant, the singer was joined by everyone who knew the words, and many who didn’t. Soon the Commonwealth men were singing, too, in their own language, the radio a rising cacophony of male voices. Among it, squadron leaders shouted in several languages to clear the channels. They might as well have been trying to hold back a flood.

The armada, a thousand tiny shapes against the cloudless steel-blue sky, flew on.

“All right,” said Manuel, on the squadron channel, his anger clear even through the indistinct radio. “Enough damn singing.” He waited for the voices to die out, pounced on the last to do so. “Jared, you’re on a charge when we get back.” To Ricardo, he sounded like a schoolmaster rounding on an errant pupil. Maybe Manuel *was* a teacher when he wasn’t flying fighter jets. Ricardo was a plasterer when he was not serving Fury Squadron, more because he enjoyed it than for the money. Everyone had a life.

"We are now forty miles from the enemy landing," the possible schoolmaster said, into the sudden hush. "Sky control advises that air pickets are rising to meet us, possibly in the next few minutes. Turn your own magdar gain to maximum and you may see them, but do not rely on it. Their aircraft wear a strange skin." He paused, which let Ricardo listen to the gentle hum of his magdar as he adjusted it to the highest gain.

Manuel dropped his voice a little. "Sky control, whose eyes see further than ours, tell me there cannot be more than twenty enemy craft over the whole front. We outweigh them fifty to one. Even you stupid rats should be able to handle half an alien between you." He was joking now, not angry. A round of dutiful laughter came through the radio. Another voice cut over it.

"This is Jared. My scanner just-"

Ninth Fury exploded, with a blast that kicked Ricardo's Hound completely out of formation. Twelfth's blunt mouth pointed straight down at the flooded fields. He wrenched the controls instinctively and dragged the reeling jet back into control, hard c-force crushing him against the old leather of his seat. He felt light-headed, realised dimly that all his blood was in his feet.

Dark brown jets were scattered across the sky, black trails and puffs of dirty smoke showing where the men of Falgar had not moved fast enough. He saw distant fireballs burst among the squadron of Scorpions far above. Black shapes, tumbling wreckage, fell close to Twelfth Fury. Something thudded against his wing, leaving a reddish smear against the brown and white.

Jamal's Hound was on its tail, climbing at an angle Ricardo hadn't thought Hounds were capable of. A jet with a white "1" and the characters for "Fury" painted on its side wandered across his vision. It took him a moment to recognise the squadron leader's plane. There was a smoking ruin where the cockpit should have been and a stump where a normal Hound had a wing.

Ricardo cast his eyes about, looking for an enemy. The radio came alive with war-yells, confused orders, and the screams of men in burning planes.

Another ripple of explosions took a flight of forest-green Hounds as they powered past. Whatever had hit them didn't even leave trails. The sound on the radio grew to a terrified crescendo. The magdar, tuned to maximum yield, was going insane.

Over it all, someone was screaming his name and the word "evasive." Hands and feet working the controls with an instinctive ease he would not have dreamed of in flight school, he put Twelfth into a wild roll that saved his life. A tiny missile cut through the space he had just been in, hissing furiously, and exploded with a flash and an ear-splitting crack a little way ahead. A moment later, a far more terrible device cut the air between his upside-down fighter and the ground.

The Korrei fighter hung sharp and darkly beautiful beneath him. It was twice the size of his Hound, a long, terribly slim cylinder pointed at both ends, tipped by things that couldn't be anything but propellers. Propellers! Two at the nose, two at the tail, gnashing at the air with such fury Twelfth shivered all around him, their sound an endless shuddering bellow, unimaginably loud. Narrow leaf-shaped wings crossed at its midsection, a cluster of weapons was impaled by the tip of its thorn-shaped tailfin. Halfway along its fuselage it

bulged out suddenly into a smooth teardrop shape that shone like glass, though he could see nothing inside. The rest of the hull was a blue so dark it was almost black, veined with gold lines. Everything about it was lean and hard-edged, built for a harsher sky.

In a heartbeat he saw all this, and as it soared past and the wash of those airscrews made Twelfth lurch drunkenly in the air, Ricardo compensated without thinking, without looking at the controls, his fighter rolling in and out of control, his eyes locked on the dark fighter.

The air around its nose flickered, interspersed with trails of the faintest white. Fourth Fury disintegrated, pulped by invisible bullets. A saviour-seat blurred out of the shredded canopy, but that which was left seated in the device could hardly be called a human.

Ricardo, the fury of the squadron's name filling him, tore Twelfth around and yanked back on every trigger as the beyonder roared through the smoking, tumbling pieces of Harayd's fighter. His Hound carried enough ammunition for eight seconds of continuous fire. He didn't waste a single round. Parts of its wing seemed to shatter, more like glass than metal, and fragments fell away from it. The dark machine jerked, slipped to one side, recovered in an instant, stood on its tail, escaped.

His guns were empty. Sudden despair crossed him. The noise of the airscrews above shattered his mind, his vision blurring, his control lost.

Then a familiar howl of jets filled Ricardo's battered ears, and the thunder of rockets and cannon-shells bursting. A gull-winged silhouette swept over his vision. Third Fury, red fire and white lightning, slid in behind the dark fighter and hurled another burst after it.

The backwash from Jamal's engine threw Twelfth Fury further from balance than the passing of the beyonder machine had. Ricardo pulled the stick back, and felt the familiar invisible hand pressing him back into his seat as he burned speed for altitude.

Below, now, and ahead, the stricken plane twitched in mid-air. Its engines seemed to be telling it to go one way while what remained of its wings insisted it go another. Jamal stuck to the beyonder like glue, though his guns stopped blazing. He, too, was out of ammunition.

A pair of what looked like Hound II fighters, older still than Twelfth Fury and painted the sickly yellow of the Eastern Commonwealth, tore in from directly in front of the beyonder. Guns in their old-fashioned straight wings sparkled, spraying shells with wild abandon. The Korrei gave up.

It turned slightly, blew one of the Commonwealth jets into a screaming fireball, and aimed its nose straight down. The sound of its engines got louder, if that was possible. Then it was skimming the paddies, turbulence turning the water below to a white storm in its wake, and far out of range in a heartbeat.

The other Hound II threw itself into a barrel roll as it roared past. He thought perhaps the Commonwealth pilot was celebrating his victory, but an instant later, the missile the yellow jet's pilot had tried to avoid sent him to join his comrade.

Jamal's voice cut across the radio, hard and angry and distinct even over the ringing

in Ricardo's ears. "Fury Squadron, this is Third Fury. Abandon the attack, I say again, abandon the attack! The commander is dead. I assume full responsibility for the squadron. Escape!" The jet in front of Ricardo whipped around, levelled off perfectly and turned to the south, shock diamonds in its engine plume.

The orange screen of Ricardo's magdar seemed to show a sky alive with planes, but that was because it had been tuned to the greatest yield. Many, almost all, of the bright marks it showed were not fast enough or large enough to be aeroplanes. Perhaps pieces of aeroplanes. Pieces of men.

Ricardo realised, numbly, that his fingers were still white-knuckle tight on the triggers. There was a faint and reproachful clicking noise beneath his seat as the autoloaders tried to feed shells that weren't there.

He turned Twelfth Fury to the south, embracing the harsh acceleration that pressed him against his seat. He whispered two prayers, two strong and heartfelt prayers, to the saints and the ancestors. The first thanked them for their wisdom in keeping him alive, protecting him where so many had so suddenly died.

The second begged them not to change their minds.

# Ant on a Hill

By Anonymous

Maxwell Odium was sitting in his apartment staring out of the window at the city below.

Without any warning, a paranoid delusion popped into his head. It was a random occurrence. The delusion was this: "everything in my life has suddenly come to a grinding and screeching halt."

A loud dissonant sound was emitting from the Isolated Living Containment Unit to the left of him. His neighbor was a mediocre to average thirteen-string instrument player. Maxwell despised all musicians, regardless of quality.

The other organic life forms in the Living Units all around him seemed to be engaged in mindless activities that were interrupting any sort of coherent rational thought patterns that he might have been producing otherwise. While the truth was in fact that these organic life forms were no more disgusting than him, his childlike ego had convinced him otherwise years ago that he was different, that he was more than an organic life form, that he was what The Collective Career Creator called him, that he was the epitome of the most damaging sentence in The Collective's language, "You are special." Usually, Maxwell made it a point to engage himself in his own activities when the delusion of complete and utter disgust in his race happened to pop into his head, but today was different. Today, Maxwell's thoughts began to slip away from his control.

"It is a Saturday night." Maxwell thought to himself. "Or is it a Thursday?"

"When did his life lose its initial charm."

He looked around his assigned living quarters. The carpet had always bothered him, his appliances did as well; all were much too plain and ordinary for his taste. At one point in his life, Max thought of painting his walls red. His mother however, told him that he would regret it if he had painted his walls that color. His girlfriend at the time agreed. Max had finally had enough. In his delusional state, he felt that drastic, unforgivable measures needed to be taken in order for him to be able to jumpstart his supposedly halted life once again.

"Now is the time to act!" Maxwell shouted to no one but himself and his off-white wallpaper.

In an act that might have called the trigger of a manic episode, Max picked up the cheap acoustic guitar that he played only four times before (he purchased it on a whim a few years ago thinking he would attract "a better tier of woman" as he would say, if he could master it) and looked over to the left of him at the cheapest piece of furniture that he owned; a white metal folding chair. Maxwell swung the guitar as hard as he could horizontally at the chair. The chair went flying across the room and crashed into his wall with a thundering smack.

A smile came across Maxwell's face.

He placed the guitar on the ground with the strings up in front of him and put his foot through the head of it. Every string simultaneously broke as the cheap wooden body collapsed onto itself around where his foot had gone through it. Unbeknownst to Maxwell, at the time of impact, his landlady was about to depart towards the bakery down the street when she happened walk by Maxwell's Isolated Living Containment Unit.

"Maxwell honey, is everything alright in there?" she asked.

Maxwell was suddenly thrown back into his normal mindset, albeit briefly, and looked around his room.

Everything was in place, except the chair that was folded neatly on its back next to the wall by his door and of course, the guitar that had been reduced to splinters only a few

moments prior that was still under his shoe. Max managed to choke out a primordial, “uhhuh Mrs. Tanken, yeahhhuh Immokay” as he slowly took off his foot from the guitar and placed it back next to his other foot. He waited a few minutes to make sure that she had left before he could bring himself to lift his foot off of his guitar; but the fact of the matter was that she never broke her stride on the way out. She didn’t care about Maxwell’s world. She only cared about Maxwell’s world in relationship to her world. Psychological engineering is cold logic. Everything in Mrs. Tanken’s world was just peachy; therefore, Maxwell would be okay.

Maxwell did not want to be part of The Collective any longer. This much he knew. However, he had absolutely no choice in the matter.

The Collective was not a club or organization. It was the sum total of everyone in the world. Everyone was a member of The Collective. Membership was not something one could have taken away from oneself. One could kill another member of The Collective and still be a part of The Collective right up until an executioner ended one’s life.

This distrust of the collective, something that was not something to be trusted or distrusted, was the root of his sickness.

Maxwell was grabbing his head and walking around his apartment in a very melodramatic fashion.

"I need air. I need air. I need air. I need air."

.....

Maxwell walked outside of his apartment and was greeted by a tangled mess of pipes, wires, and neon signs.

“The world seems especially three dimensional today,” Maxwell thought to himself. He began to walk forward.

Maxwell’s philosophy professor once told him, “Sickness comes from nowhere; therefore, it has no reason to be. The fragility of the mind is no excuse for self-flagellation.”

Maxwell, unfortunately for him, was under the influence of Zorjillian Fungus during that class.

“Hey you! Kid!”

As anyone would do, Maxwell turned around to see what the commotion was about. A tall, muscular man possessing slightly too much body hair for his own good was staring right at him. Max looked down his sharp, pointed nose with his predatory eyes to discover whom the man was talking to.

“Yeah you!”

People were looking at him now. Maxwell felt very uncomfortable. He had made it his policy to avoid any sort of conflict with anyone, but suddenly, he was being stared down in the middle of a public street by about twenty onlookers hoping for some sort of conflict that would create “an interesting real life story.”

“Watch where you’re walking.”

Max looked down. A trail of cement was following him for about fifteen feet. He walked through wet cement.

The man who yelled at him was a construction worker who was paid by The Collective to fix sidewalks that had been worn by age or otherwise chipped.

Maxwell did not know Paul, and instead of scurrying off as he normally would, Maxwell felt the need to confront the man who yelled at him. He decided to march over to the man who yelled at him and say something insulting to him.

This is what Maxwell said:

“Do you realize how worthless your life is? Hmm? You’re just a scumbag construction worker who job is to tidy up where people walk, so that animals and bums can crawl on a sidewalk with no cracks or holes in it! I couldn’t think of a less fulfilling, futile job if I had a fifty thousand dollar federal grant to do so!”

Max leaned forward and grabbed the man's shirt collar and pulled their faces together.

"But you! You're so god damned stupid you just keep on living, fixing the same sidewalk, every day, over and over and over again! And when you die, you know what's going to happen? Another trained monkey just like you is going to do the exact same goddamned thing! Fixing this filthy sidewalk, in this worthless god-forsaken city, where nothing ever important has ever happened and never will. So go dig your hole, you overgrown tool."

Maxwell let go of Paul. Maxwell walked away with a devious smile on his face.

Paul chuckled to himself.

"Some people" Paul thought.

.....

Maxwell was stumped. He was standing at a cross walk in the busiest part of town and he had no clue or cue about what to do, next that is. He was playing with the idea of buying lunch, so he decided that he would go into the nearest restaurant and eat there. There was a flashing bagel over a window to the left of him, so he walked into the restaurant."

"Could I get a filet minion, medium rare?" Max inquired.

"This is a coffee shop," the woman behind the cash register stated.

"You are constantly disappointing me." Maxwell said, much too pleased with himself.

The woman didn't respond. Max looked at her for a few seconds, waiting in vain for a response when he came to a realization. "My god, its Jane!" The woman looked up at him.

"Maxwell?"

"It sure is! How are you? How have things been since school? You must tell me everything!"

"Must I?" asked Jane

"Yes yes! What are you doing with your life now? Are you a writer? You were always so bright. Oh tell me everything!"

"You forget that I don't enjoy your presence."

"Yes, but that was back in school. Are you really going to hold me to the words that I said while ingesting copious amounts of alcohol while simultaneously trying to screw every woman that I knew?"

"I see you still haven't quite mastered the art of small talk."

"You do realize I was madly in love with you."

"Cute."

"Oh come on Jane, don't act that way towards me. I'm serious."

"Are you really going to keep talking?" she asked Maxwell.

"Give me my coffee, I want to talk to your manager cutie pie."

"Yeah? If I'm so cute and you were just so in love with me, then why did you screw my roommate?"

"I was bored."

"Will you leave now?"

"You didn't give me my coffee."

"You didn't order any."

"Okay, one coffee, please."

Max pondered what he was going to do next. He was in the busiest segment of The Collective for the first time in months. Usually when Max was here, it was to pick something up or drop something off from the main office.

"I'm going to do something fun!" Maxwell thought to himself.

"Here's your coffee." Jane said chalantly. (writer note: I know, don't say it.)



Jane didn't look up. Maxwell walked outside sipping his coffee.  
"It's too bitter" he thought to himself.  
"One of those days" thought Jane.

.....

Maxwell was entranced by the city that surrounded him. The lights coming from the signs all around him gave the entire place an artificial glow, but most considered that part of the city's charm. Maxwell thought it was beautiful rather than charming. He walked aimlessly down the busy street entranced by his surroundings, he wasn't looking where he was walking.

Poor Max was lost.

"What do you want in life?"

Maxwell turned around. Standing there was a man wearing a shirt of the local sporting franchise.

"Peace, happiness, love...and other such words to describe fulfillment."

"Umm...yes! Come have your palm read today!"

"Why not?" Max thought to himself.

Maxwell left the shop twenty dollars poorer. He was confused about what just happened.

"I wonder if I am sick" Maxwell thought to himself.

.....

One time when Maxwell was a child, a little girl wrote a twenty page poem about a fake romantic relationship between Maxwell and her. Maxwell thought she was interesting in a non-sexual way. He had no idea where it came from when he saw it, but he pretended that he found it interesting when in actuality he laughed so hard when he saw it that he almost blew out a blood vessel.

She showed everyone because she was so proud of herself before finally giving it to Maxwell.

Maxwell used it for toilet paper and to microwave pizza on. He hated washing dishes.

Maxwell walked down the street humming a tune that he remembered from radio music broadcasts when he was a child. He decided that he was going to completely let go of the grip that reality had dangled in front of his face as a means of giving him direction. Max started skipping down the middle of the road.

There were no cars, fortunately for him.

"Ladeedadeeda! Badooilydoodilydoodilydoo! Ranananana! Ranananana! Deetotilly tottily tot!"

Max jumped twice on one foot and twice on the other as he swung his arms from side to side. People on the side of the road turned when they heard him running by them.

"I am free! Ha-ha! My god, I am finally free!" Max screamed

Max had just discovered some interesting aspects about freewill. The most interesting part about it in Max's mind was just how free he truly was. Now some laws were imposed on him, such as the law of gravity and that his body could get injured, but besides that, it was up to him.

"Now what?" Max thought.

Max stopped skipping. He looked around. He wasn't sure where he was before, but now he was now hopelessly lost at sea. The city was thinning out. The buildings here were smaller and most of the shops did not look like they were of any interest to him.

"I will go whichever way the head of this pen lands!"

He threw the pen up in the air and spun it so it revolved like the blades of a helicopter. It landed on the sidewalk. It pointed straight ahead. He threw it up two more times, but the pen landed the same way.

"I guess there must be something straight ahead, why else would the pen have landed that way?"

"Egocentric nonsense" thinks the narrator.

.....

Max walked for 20 minutes when he came upon a large park. There was a path leading into the park. Seeing that the scenery was starting to repeat itself on his walk, Max decided it was probably a good idea to walk down the dirt road into the middle of the park. Max walked about three quarters of the way through the park when he saw an old man standing on top of a wooden box talking to about nine people that were sitting on the grass. Max decided to sit down and listen for a bit. The old man was talking about everything, high gas prices, the cost of the latest war that The Collective was fighting over the ocean, and the history of The Collective.

Max interrupted their conversation.

"I think the people repress themselves by focusing too much on what some person with power does instead of focusing on self-improvement and coming to terms with the world around them," Max interjected.

The men turned around and looked at him. "You've got a lot to learn kid," the men said in a condescending tone of voice. Max continued, "I don't care about displaying my knowledge of current political affairs...is that what learning is?"

"Grow up," said the old man.

Max decided to keep walking.

The old men went to a tea-shop down the street and had a very pleasant evening.

.....

Max turned his head and peered around where he was standing, he had no idea where he was. He had no idea how to get back. He was on top of a large mound staring at the surrounding world. All of it looked vaguely familiar, yet he felt nothing for any of it. He had been walking for longer than he could remember. "Where am I!" He screamed.

No one heard him. He was alone.

He didn't want anyone there. He had had enough. "Why am I here?" he yelled. Of course there was no reason he was there. He was simply wandering around, and that was the spot he happened to wander to.

"This is completely pointless and insignificant!"

Of course he was correct.

"Why am I on this God forsaken rock!" No one could answer. But then again, no one could hear him.

He looked down at the city. It was so small from afar.

Max ran back into the city. He ran in the middle of the street. Cars stopped for him. He jumped up and brought his foot down on the hoods and kept running. "I have grown tired of this existence! I want something more! I want to feel like my life means something!" Max said. The people around him were frightened. This was not normal. "I've grown tired of this farm! I've grown sick of the animals! I am no longer interested in the aesthetics nor do I care about what you have to say! Death to the Collective! Death to your world!" Max ran into the building to the right of him, ran onto the roof and yelled this:

"I want to say one thing. One final thing, so listen to me you pigs! Listen to me now, even if this is the only time you ever listen to me! I don't care about anything anymore! I

looked everywhere I could for something! Anything to make me feel like life was worth trying to preserve and there's nothing!"

Max jumped off the roof and landed headfirst on the pavement. Most were entranced by the leap, but the speech made it funny to those who would later watch the video on their computers.

.....

Maxwell opened his eyes. Everything was still a bit blurry. There was a figure standing over him that he could not make out.

"Max, wake up Max." the unidentifiable man said. "You see that city over there? All of the accomplishments that you have come to know and love are from your species ingenuity and skill. Because of your species' intelligence and ingenuity, you are still alive." Max felt very woozy. He could not think very well at the moment.

"You probably don't remember this, but you came in here and grabbed my shirt and yelled at me."

"I...I don't." Max muttered. "Where am I? Who are you?"

The man continued:

"This universe started with nothing, with mere molecules combining and separating from each other in outer space. This is all purely by chance and it is incredible. Look around you Maxwell, you live in a miracle. The chance that you would even exist is so small that there isn't even a number to describe it, except of course, maybe zero. But that would be incorrect, wouldn't it Maxwell, as here you are. So let me ask you this, Maxwell Odium: How can you possibly ask why?"

Maxwell's did not believe the unidentifiable entity's speech at the time, but that didn't matter. The collective had blood reserves, so in the end he was fine. For the moment, Maxwell closed his eyes. He floated peacefully to sleep, dreaming of a sunny day.

# Part 6

By Rick Lewis

"If only Ted had not fallen in love, then things would be different." Snick paused for a moment, and looked to see if Mister was still listening. The snow was really falling fast now, and the road ahead of them was barely recognizable. The two continued to walk, and Mister motioned Snick to continue. "The problem was that Ted fell in love at first sight, and it was from that moment he doomed us all.

"Ted had been working at the mail room at ENOST Inc. for a month when he first saw her. She had been walking toward the elevator when he caught sight of her. Ted ran to catch the elevator, but she was gone. After that moment, she was all he could think of. To his only two friends, he would talk of her nonstop, when he was at Freddy Frisco, he'd be off in a corner trying to drown his sorrows. He was becoming such a mess that he was even shirking his Arranger duties."

There was a rustle in the nearby bushes. Mister told Snick to be quiet, but it heard them soon enough. Snick thought, as he was running, about how this was all Ted's fault. Without him, these things, for they were just that, would not be loose. As soon as they were a safe distance away he resumed his tale.

"In fact, instead of using his THorpe to arrange the birth of a future president, he had figured out another use for it. He was going to use it to find out where she lived.

"His two friends warned him to stop, THorpes were for arranging only, personal uses came with consequences. Ted shook them off. He believed that he was in control. He got an address out of the THorpe. Ted didn't know that he had only one hour left to live."

Mister pointed to the rising sun on the horizon, he didn't have that much time left. Make it quick, he said.

"When Ted reached her house he felt a sense of dread. She was married. He recognized the house, it was that of the CEO of ENOST Inc. He decided that maybe he was wrong about everything and turned to leave. Then Ted saw a man coming out of the house carrying a body bag. Ted saw that he was heading into the forest. Ted waited until the man was out of sight, and then he followed. Ted followed the man deep into the forest, where he saw the man drop the bag into the pit, and quickly run away.

"He should have left, but curiosity was growing inside, and so he leaned into the pit. What he saw inside made him want to retch. He was only able to grab one bag against the others. Ted opened it carefully, and what was inside sent him scrambling backwards. It was the CEO. His mind teemed with questions: Who was the man he had seen? Did the CEO's wife know him? Did she kill her husband? When?

"Ted was interrupted, though, by a voice that said, 'Stop.' It was his friends. They told him that their THorpe had told them that they would find a murderer here. The two said that they were surprised to find out that it was, in fact, him. They said that they were so sorry, that they felt so bad for what they would have to do next.

"Ted felt a pit in his stomach, and he even tried to explain to his partners. There was a loud, bright, and painful illumination that cut him off before he could utter a single word."

"What happened next?" asked Mister. Snick continued.

"Well, Ted went to a dark place. He ended up staying there for quite some time too. Though not forever... he eventually found a way back. You see, when he was in the dark place he was able to tap into a strong source of energy, and it was then that he planned an escape. The energy was indeed able to bring him back, but at a terrible cost.

"The excess energy that he brought back with him became an uncontrollable force, a force that also brought back everything else in that pit with him. Now we're all in trouble because Ted went and fell in love."

Mister nodded, "What are you going to do now, Ted?" Snick looked at Mister with an intense glare, nobody used his real name, they only called him by his nom de guerre. Snick gave Mister the answers he wanted.

"I'm going to find that bitch, and the man I saw in the woods, and I'm going to get some answers." Mister gave Snick a rectangular package.

"Well, Snick, if that's the case, you're going to need this." The sun came up, and then Mister was gone. Snick opened the package and looked inside.

It was a THorpe, but not the rectangular gray one, this one was black and bulky.

It beeped to life.

# Stormtrooper Assault

By Right Fag

Sergeant-Major Briggs watched the dark shadows of the land below pass by. There was no moon tonight.

The only illumination in the rear of the Valkyrie was the glowing tip of his cigar. Further forward the pilot would have his displays lit up, hidden from prying eyes by the darkened canopy glass. Seventeen other Valkyries were scattered across the sky in loose formation, hugging the contours of the ground as they fled from the rising sun.

To the south-east Briggs could see the occasional flash of ordnance and the millions of dancing lights from the secondary line of the Imperial Forces retreating from Dallopolis. The squad was silent. They knew what they were there for, and the hardened Stormtroopers were too battle hardened to express the tension no doubt gnawing at each of them.

"Fifteen minutes to LZ." the pilot said over the comm. Briggs regarded the remaining three inches of his cigar before tossing it out into the slipstream. They were close now. Close enough for the Tau long-range sniffers and sensors to detect even the tiny glow of a cigar tip in the visual spectrum.

The formation banked around various jutting hilltops and began their beeline approach towards the hunched promethium refineries dominating the western reaches of Dallopolis. The cigar fell towards the ground like a tiny orbital strike.

The flight was ten minutes out and just entering the known limit of the Tau blacksun filter detectors when the sun peaked over the jagged mountain ranges, the roaring inferno in the sky lighting up the city and blinding the sensors. The Valkyries remained in the shadow of the mountain ranges, never ascending above 200 metres as they roared along.

"Five minutes." the pilot announced tersely.

"Gear up. Weapons hot." Briggs ordered, pulling his carapace armour's faceplate down into position and activating the internal oxygen supply. The rubber seals on the faceplate locked with a tiny hiss.

Around him his Stormtroopers plugged the power leads into their hellguns or readied the drum magazines for their grenade launchers. Quiet prayers of benediction, psalms of accuracy and catechisms taught to them by the mechanicum priests who tended to their weapons washed softly through the sub-channels of the vox network.

Then they were silent again. Waiting.

Each Stormtrooper was anonymous in his black carapace armour and imperial red fatigues. All traces of Imperial insignia that one would normally find adorning an Imperial soldier were absent,

with the exception of a single white ' - ] - ' on the left side of the shallow gorget of the chest plate.

Briggs checked that the sickle pattern magazine for his bolt pistol was feeding correctly by pressing down on the top bolt-round. It depressed slightly against the spring then returned to its position; Briggs always loaded 7 rounds into his 8 round magazines. The springs were apt to become over-stressed and weak, causing critical jams at exactly the wrong times. Briggs was one round short of a full load in any given engagement, but in fifteen years of service to the Inquisition he'd never suffered a stoppage during combat.

He slammed the magazine into place and chambered a round. He then pulled the charging lever back a few centimetres, assured by the glint of brass that the bolt was indeed in the correct place.

He sat back and took a deep breath.

"Three minutes."

At that moment the Tau woke up to the presence of the Valkyrie flight. Bright blue beams from ion cannons and searing white streaks of energy from their infernal railguns abruptly launched into the sky. The lead Valkyrie was instantly destroyed by a railgun shot that passed directly through its fuel tank, blossoming into a ball of flame.

The Valkyries launched flares and chaff, banking and jinking wildly as the unguided rounds continued to spit out from the hidden Tau defences sitting amongst the Imperial city buildings. They were followed by seeker missiles that rose like predatory sea creatures from the urban sprawl and rocketed out towards the incoming aircraft. Many, despite the heathen alien technology guiding them, were fooled by the chaff and flares. Others missed as the pilots displayed their brilliant abilities and outmanoeuvred the projectiles.

But at least three struck their targets. Briggs distinctly saw the Valkyrie closest to them lose its tail fins and spiral down out of control. Centrifugal force launched a Stormtrooper free of the falling aircraft.

Briggs winced as a railgun round intercepted the flailing man and obliterated him. A stain of pink mist drifted away on the morning breeze.

The eighteen Valkyries were down to fourteen. That meant they'd already sustained forty casualties, not including the crew of the Valkyries, before the mission had even technically begun.

They had one hundred and forty more lives left to spend in this fight.

Briggs gripped his bolt pistol as the pilot, breathless now, announced "One minute! Sixty seconds!"

Il arms fire now began to spray up towards them from the Fire Warriors surrounding the Tau command centre. The distinctly alien structure, built over the ruins of the last Adeptus Arbites precinct to fall in Dollopolis, was surrounded by ranks upon ranks of Xenos habitents. They had cleared the landing pads of wreckage. Where proud Imperial flyers had once rested, alien Skyrays and Hammerheads now squatted.

The very sight of the filthy alien technology filled Briggs with rage. The sturdy frame of the Valkyrie rattled and shook, and for a moment Briggs feared they had been struck by a missile, when through the front window he saw a volley of rockets race from the ship toward the enemy forces, followed by the thundering roar of lascannons laying fire. His heart sang and he mentally praised the Emperor's name as these crashed into the cursed enemy forces.

More Imperial ordnance screamed in past them as twenty Thunderbolt fighters, stooping from the very atmospheric roof of the planet on full throttle, unloaded their own missiles and las rounds. Many of them broke off and ran for home immediately whilst other came around, hunting for more targets. A few completely overshot or were struck by Tau fire and became weapons in their own right.

"Thirty seconds! Prepare! Prepare!" the pilot all but yelled.

So close that they could make out details of the Fire Warriors sprinting towards their defences. Three more Valkyries erupted in flames, their payloads of stormtroopers scattered by the blast.

Another Valkyrie, just about to make touchdown in Production Plaza in front of of Brigg's own transport, was struck hard by a pair of railgun rounds. They tore through the structure of the Valkyrie and managed to avoid blowing any munitions. The drop ship fell to pieces, however, spilling Stormtroopers from it to fall the last thirty metres to earth.

Briggs gritted his teeth and tensed up as they neared the ground.

Almost. Almost there.

A pulse rifle round punched through the deck and through Vasquez's helmet. His brains splashed up onto the roof of the cabin. None of the other Stormtroopers flinched.

"Man down," Briggs said calmly. "Taking fire."

"Ten seconds!" the pilot replied, before screaming in agonising pain.

Briggs felt the Valkyrie shudder as something struck the front section of the Valkyrie.

The engines cut out abruptly and they lost power.

"Brace!" Briggs said tersely.

The Valkyrie dropped a couple of metres and slid along the rockrete of the plaza for ten metres. Briggs and his squad were already moving after the first metre, bailing out and rolling to their feet. Without hesitation the Stormtroopers fanned out, sprinting towards the former Imperial compound.

The sky was streaked with smoke from the refineries sitting all around the edge of the plaza as well as the contrails from the Thunderbolts and the various kinds of missiles.

Most of the assault force was ground side now, firing and manoeuvring through the torn mess of impact craters, wrecked vehicles and ornamental statues littering the plaza. The Valkyries dusted off after discharging their payloads, raking the Tau compound with hard rounds from their autocannons as they rose vertically. They weren't going to pull out. Their orders were to stay on station until they died or expended all their ammunition.

The remaining ninety or so Stormtroopers closed the distance and began assaulting the gate into the compound. The Tau manning the gate towers were being kept suppressed by the covering fire of the advancing Stormtroopers and the hail of autocannon fire from three Valkyries.

Briggs' squad wasn't the first to reach the gates. That honour went to Sergeant Mensk. Mensk died shortly after achieving that honour at the hands of a Kroot mercenary. His squad was summarily cut to pieces by the ravenous aliens even as they cut down the beaked aliens with their hellguns.

As the last member of Mensk's squad expired the timers on the demo charges they had scattered throughout the gate ran down to zero. With a deafening blast and a shockwave that felt like it would stop his heart, the charges went off, cleanly blowing the now caved in doors into the room.

Briggs led his men through the billowing smoke cloud. Fire Warriors and Kroot staggered through the haze, blinded and shell shocked. The Stormtroopers dropped them with disciplined double-taps.

"The command centre!" Briggs yelled, pointing with his chainsword, "We take that and its all over! Charge!"

The Stormtroopers broke into a run. They mostly ignored the barrage of pulse rifle fire spraying out amongst them, though some of them slowed to take shots at anything too threatening.

Briggs heard the whine of thrusters and glanced up.

"Cover! Scatter now!" he bellowed as he realised that their victory wasn't going to be as easy as he'd thought.

A Tau Crisis suit landed heavily on Private Blake, crushing him with a scream. It turned as its two fellows landed, spraying out pulse rounds from its two burst cannons and cutting down a half dozen Stormtroopers. Another turned to Corporal Welsh and fired its fusion cannon. Briggs felt his left arm blister from the heat as his subordinate expired, three metres away. He raised his bolt pistol and fired four shots.

The first blasted the mechanical head of the Crisis suit guilty for Welsh's death into scrap, and the second detonated in the chest of the thing, killing the pilot. The third shot disabled one of the burst cannons, and the fourth blew off the other mechanical arm.

The remaining two Crisis suits, ignoring the barrage of hellgun rounds, turned their weapons on Briggs.

A krak grenade sailed through the air and punched the burst cannon Crisis suit off its feet. Briggs rolled aside as the two plasma rifles on the third suit fired, missing him by a scant margin.

Brigg came to his feet and put two bolter rounds into the thing. It staggered backwards but remained standing. Brigg charged with a roar as a frag grenade fired by some fool washed flame down the side of the Crisis suit, causing the pilot to flinch.



Briggs closed the distance, battering the plasma rifle aimed at him aside with his chainsword.

The whirring teeth ripped into the barrel and buckled it, rendering the gun useless.

The other arm swung around to knock him aside. Briggs ducked it, jamming his chainblade into the elbow of the joint. Something broke with a flash of light and the Crisis suit attempted to lift away, leaping into the air on its powerful legs.

Briggs brought it down with a bolter shot to its back. The lucky shot destroyed something vital in the jet pack and the heavy suit tumbled downwards, landing with a crash.

Briggs leapt up onto the stricken xenos suit and threw his bolt pistol aside, taking his chainsword in a two handed grip. He dodged a swipe from the functioning arm then drove the screeching chainblade down with a roar.

The teeth skidded against the armour for a moment before biting. Briggs fought the torque and kept pushing down, slowing tearing the armour open. Sparks and smoke showered outwards.

With a jolt, something gave. The chain sword crunched into the pilot's mechanical womb and the Crisis suit went dead. Briggs wrenched his chainsword free and took cover from the incoming pulse rounds.

"Corporal Danser!" he yelled to his specialist. "Break that command centre open!"

The assault was faltering, he knew. They were out in the open and being cut down. There were barely twenty Stormtroopers left. *We only need one*, he thought, as the Krak grenades from Danser's launcher impacted with the side of the Tau structure and blew it open.

"Go, go, go!" Briggs yelled, making for the breach.

It was quiet inside the command centre.

Briggs led his remaining four men down the smooth alien corridors at a dead run, weapons up. The sounds of the slaughter outside slowly died.

"Close enough, sir?" one of the Stormtroopers asked.

"I want visual confirmation." Briggs growled.

A Tau non-combatant, unarmoured and apparently unaware of the assault, stepped into the corridor. Briggs recognized the insignia on its xenos uniform; similar to Imperial Intelligence. They were in the correct place.

Briggs shot the startled alien and ran through the door it had emerged through, guessing that since it led towards the core of the complex it was exactly what they were looking for.

He was right. They emerged into a larger space where Tau of various types sat at terminals and xenos cogitators, operating the machines and talking quietly into blasphemous vox systems in their foul tongue.

"Scatter! Engage! Locate the target!" Briggs bellowed as the Tau Fire Warriors stationed around the command node noticed them and opened fire.

The Stormtroopers scattered.

Briggs ran and fired his bolt pistol, eyes searching about the place. Either of the targets would be adequate for a confirmed successful mission; he just had to get eyes on the target.

A series of blasts from Danser's grenade launcher spread havoc and confusion around the room, scattering the Tau non-combatants and disrupting the clear fire lanes of the Fire Warriors.

Danser then died as a Tau pathfinder team, up on gantries circling the room, nailed him with a rail rifle. Briggs ran past Danser's corpse, scooping up the launcher and blasting the Pathfinder team to pieces; there were more, though, so he took cover and resumed his visual search. He discarded the grenade launcher almost as soon as he'd picked it up, its ammunition spent.

What if the target had evacuated? Or worse, both of them? Briggs gritted his teeth and changed to his last drum magazine for his bolt pistol.

His last two men died messily as a burst cannon suddenly roared into life from the head of the room. Briggs looked around and spotted Target Primaris, the Ethereal, sheltering behind... Sheltering behind Target Secundus, the Tau Commander. Standing tall in an advanced version

of their crisis suits and looking Briggs's way.

Briggs fired a shot at its head, ducked around a cogitator unit as burst cannon rounds tore apart the spot where he'd been standing, then charged.

He fired as he ran, the mix of high explosive and inferno rounds he'd saved for his last chance box sending explosions and flames rippling across the Commander's armoured frame. Briggs swore one of the inferno rounds punched through the Commander's armour into the cockpit but the battlesuit continued to struggle to retain its balance and bring its weapons to bear.

Briggs let out a rising scream, feeling pulse round shots scarring and denting his carapace as he charged towards the commander and the Ethereal. A rail rifle round punched through his left arm and he lost his chainsword. He ignored the pain, reaching the commander, and ducked under the vengeful swipe of its missile pod arm. Briggs could only assume it hadn't used the weapon for fear of killing its Ethereal in the back blast.

With a final, vengeful yell, Briggs rammed his bolt pistol up against the cockpit of the Tau Commander. He'd already fired 29 shots from the 30 round magazine; one last bolt remained.

*Click.*

Of course, he always loaded his magazines short by one round. To avoid stoppages.

Briggs sighed. He looked up into the robotic face of the looming crisis suit.

However the Tau Commander was suddenly still. There was a single, perfect hole in the cockpit armour with smoke rising from it. The inferno round had apparently penetrated.

The suit suddenly dropped. Just like that it lost balance, dead to the world, and fell forwards. Briggs scrambled backwards but slipped in some of his own blood from his severed arm and felt the breath rush out of him as the heavy suits arm slammed into his midsection, pinning him. His bolt pistol spun away.

A few moments passed before the Tau Ethereal came into view. It waved off the Fire Warriors running over and looked down into Briggs' cracked visor. "Why?" The Tau asked softly, its heathen tongue twisting the words. "What possible purpose did this assault have? You have thrown away lives, attacking us even during your retreat, and gained nothing but bloodshed."

Briggs gasped for air, reached up to his helmet. A Fire Warrior tensed up, but Briggs was just unlatching his faceplate. His blood spattered face and moustache were revealed.

"You wish to speak?" the Tau asked.

Briggs coughed and whispered something.

The Tau leaned down. "What? What are you trying to say?"

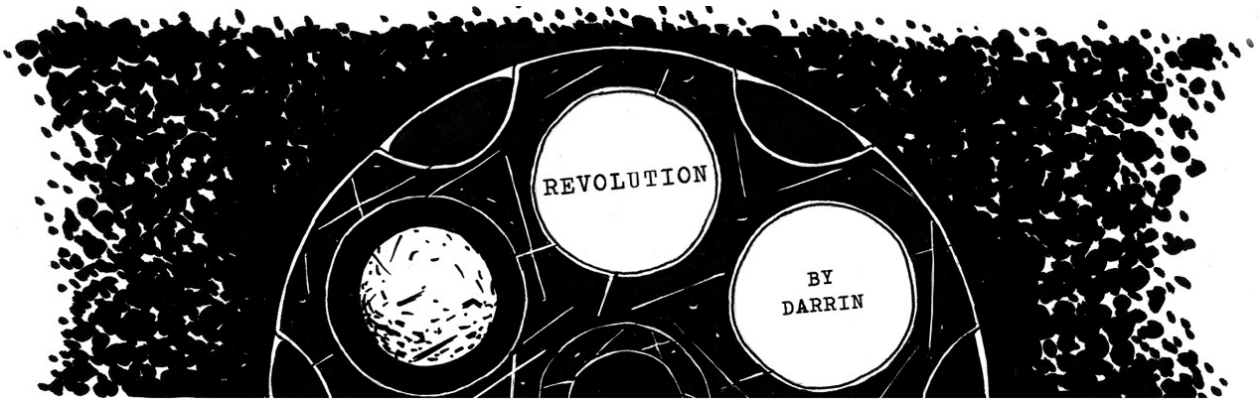
Briggs allowed himself a bloodstained smile and gestured to the nondescript but very powerful beacon on his belt. "Too close to refineries." he gurgled. "Had to...pin point you...for maximum accuracy."

Far, far above, the Imperial warship fired its prow mounted lance. Just once.

The orbital strike fell away towards earth, twinkling like the burning end of a cigar stub.

# Extras

*Editors note: We received three illustrations relating to Revolution from the first issue. We would love to incorporate more art, so if you are an artist that would be interested in illustrating stories before they are released, please contact us. The entirety of this story may be found in Issue 1 of ZWG.*



By Bantha\_Fodder

At any given point in one's life, one has an infinite number of choices. My life was no exception, though I can firmly say that all but one of my available options would end badly. That lone path then did not so much have a glimmer of hope at the end of its still warm tunnel, but merely a probability for error I could at least grasp firmly in my mind. From my decision stemmed six possible outcomes, five of which were identical, death. The sixth offered postponement.

There were six of us that were lead into that small back room, and close behind followed at least fifteen others whom I had never met and never will. Sitting down in a circle at that small card table, we took a minute to light up our cigarettes, suck in the soothingly coarse ghostly white ash and blow in each others faces as if discarding our souls at the coat-check before entering the party. I did not know them and by the end of the night either I would be braving oblivion's endless seas of the unknowable or they would be so exchanging names, let alone forming any sort of bond, was out of the question. The one to my left snarled, curling his mouth and flaring his nostrils as if to intimidate us, the one dead ahead did absolutely nothing. His eyes, unfocused, saw me only as a blur of black and white where I was in shade and where my sickly pale skin caught light. Perhaps he was praying, perhaps he was frozen entirely with fear or perhaps he was letting go of everything material he thought he knew. More likely was that he was simply so apathetic and sedated that his situation truly meant nothing to his inaccurately labeled mind. One man was fidgeting nervously and wiping greasy sweat off his forehead and his already clammy palms. I can not recall at all my own actions, but I had no concern for anything, least of all my well being. The audience had already placed their bets outside and were now dead silent, the room's air carrying only the syrupy fog of tobacco, the hot rancid breath of twenty-one men and the awkward uneven clatter of a washing machine in the next room.

The snarling man was naturally chosen to be first and picked up the demonic steel from the center of the table and placed its foreboding lips against the side of his head. Through all his bravado it was clear that he could not pull the trigger of his own free will. It

was convenient then that all our bloodshot hungry eyes condemned him to death on his behalf. His delay was only for a microsecond before succumbing and clenching back the trigger violently. The hammer snapped back and headbutted an empty chamber. He let out a thundering roar and slammed the device onto the tabletop. The man to his left did not notice his theatrics at all and was falling deep into the void that seemed to now dwell in the center of the room. Without any foreign encouragement, he picked it up heavily and pressed it against the skin as if with anticipation. To his disappointment, there too came nothing but a recited mechanical poem every man in the room was now familiar with. Silently, he leaned over into the cone of light traced with its dancing spectres and placed the pistol back where he found it. The lifeless corpse ahead of me calmly and fluidly aimed the barrel flush against his temple and produced nothing, placing it back where it belonged. It was finally the fourth man who would play that round. It could be seen on his face that he knew his luck would not hold. There was a one in three chance that he would fire a bullet through his head but in his mind he might as well have been holding a semi-automatic. Before I could fully take in the sight, he was on the floor. His body was removed from the room and the weapon was reloaded.

Two bullets were placed in no particular pattern, the cylinder was spun, stopped abruptly and locked into place and the game began anew. Five players, two bullets, four empty chambers. The man to the left of the empty chair, on my immediate right, began to take his turn. "This isn't my first time playing you know. I guess you could say I'm a champion at this sort of thing."

"How does that work?" asked viciously the snarling man. "There's no skill involved, buddy. You can't even decide when to fold, at least not with this crowd."

"I don't need skill," he replied, "I'm blessed. Somebody up there keeps the empty chamber for me."

"Yeah?" spat some faceless form from the circled crowd. "Well, take your god damned turn and let's find out!" With a wide grin to show the world, the man took his turn with a deliberate tension building pace only to prove himself correct. He was still smiling when he put it back down under the hanging lamp between us.

It was my turn. When I finally lifted the heavy piece to my head it seemed an hour had passed. A dab of blood was smeared on the front sight. I could not help but ask myself why I was in that back room with those four men, a gun to my head. I needed the money and if I could not get it together in time I might as well have been dead anyway. Thus getting into the situation was easy enough, but to be faced with the hard physical reality created a very different person in me. As I could see the crowd growing impatient, I pulled the heavy trigger until the revolving cylinder and rearing hammer were past their points of no return. With one chamber used already, there were three safe and two deadly. A sixty percent chance of living; barely a passing grade let alone honour role material. When I laid the thing back down I found myself holding my breath and let it out, ashamed. Now I too was past the point of no return. Win or lose, I was in the game.

The snarling man had been counting the chambers as well as I, and he knew his odds were worsening. "Fifty-fifty, I like those odds." Despite his claim, his hands shook as if he did not like them at all. He may have been high though. With the laboured squeeze of the trigger, the cylinder spun into place, the hammer fell and with a piercing crack that stunned every

man in the room, the side of his head sprang open and sprayed my shoulder and arm in blood. He managed to remain upright in his chair, his head hanging loose over the back support. It wasn't long until he was removed from the room as well. Suddenly the money didn't matter to me anymore.

The chambers were refilled and spun. There were now three rounds to the four players. The young one with the craving for finality in his eye prepared to take his turn.

"I don't think you're going to make it," quipped the blessed man to my right.

"I know the odds," he replied viciously, as if setting straight his situation was his final task, "that's exactly why I entered this game."

"And why have you come here to die?" inquired the one across from me from behind shut eyes.

"Girlfriend dumped you," began the lucky man, "boss fired you, parents hate you, landlord evicted you. I bet you got nothing, don't you?" Some of his stabs struck me rather than his target.

"No. No, that's not why. My life is actually- well it's not bad because I lost anything like that. It's complicated and, anyway, it's none of your business."

"Did you leave a note behind?" I threw out awkwardly across the room and let it fall where it may.



By Bantha\_Fodder

"Fuck off and let me take my turn," spat back the young man, avoiding eye contact and pretending he was fixated by the gun. He made no speedy effort to pick it up.

"You should tell us why," the pathetic one suggested, "otherwise no one will ever know. Besides, only one of us is going to leave this table and none of us know who you are."

"I'm lost," he said at first, as if it explained everything. "I just feel like no matter what I try to do, it's not enough. I want to be distinguished for something, to stand above everyone else for something. Anything, I don't care what anymore. You have to be unique you know? As an individual. All that beautiful snowflake crap is fine when you're in a four man group working on some asinine comedy skit for summer camp but there's six billion people on the planet, man. I want to be different enough that my name's worth more than, well, a toe-tag."

But no one's unique enough, no one's good enough to be that household name. Even the best and brightest scientist who cures a fucking disease is just a name, or even just a surname, in an encyclopedia and only people who are already interested will ever know it. They won't know you, who you were, your thoughts and feelings, whether you were a cool guy to hang out with or whether you were, as you said, a dick. You're dead and forgotten and even your name lives on as just a shadow. I guess I want to die because life is just so fruitless. I guess I just want people to respect me. I want to be that guy at the high school reunion to outdo everyone else. But then when I think about it that way I just get so damn angry at myself and I don't know. I don't know why I want to die, but I don't know why I would want to live either."

"You won't gain much notoriety by blowing your head off," replied the lucky one.

"Yeah well, its too late and I don't care anymore. It's my turn." He did care though, even as his voice trembled and his eyes reddened with his passionate speech, the words he had bottled up for a lifetime but only then spoke, he doubted their truth. Was it the mere defense mechanism to be overpowered by his infallible logic, or did he truly wish to live just a few days longer? I had a feeling he would fall on a live round and as it turned out I was correct. "I hope I'll be forgiven," he added, staring through the table into heaven and hell in his minds eye. The gun went off with a startling but not surprising crack. This time it was the calm statue across from me who was tarnished with a man's blood.

"Aren't you supposed to wait till the middle of your life to have a mid-life crisis?" quipped the blessed up. Not even the washing machine could laugh. I put out my cigarette. There were three players, four rounds, two empty chambers. The crowd surrounding us had shrunk down to those few who bet on us still alive, but as they thinned out, they tensed up.

Without opening his eyes, he expertly reached out and took up the pistol without fumbling or feeling blindly at all, and placed it on the very spot he had before. For him there was neither hurry nor hesitation, no theatrics nor pragmatic efficiency, he seemed to move with a crystalline equilibrium. Whatever level he operated on, it was one without a fear or yearning for death, without a fear or yearning for a justification to life. Why was this brilliant master playing this wretched game with these wretched men for mere money? What would he do if he were to leave this table the winner? With a conductor's fully concentrated pace, every moving component of the tool in his hands filled that still hot room with their short melody until there came the empty chamber's anti-climax.

"Nicely done," snaked out the words of the blessed man from between his snickering lips. He nodded approvingly and turned towards me to then say "it looks like you're going to die. Because there's one empty chamber left and I got His watchful eye over me. Somebody stop me, I'm on fire! What's your name pal, I'll try to get it on a vanity plate for my new set of wheels after I win this thing."



“Somebody stop me, I’m on fire! What’s your name pal, I’ll try to get it on a vanity plate for my new set of wheels after I win this thing”

By Agustina

# Reviews

## ZWG Issue 1 reviews

By Dave “Tom Waits For No Man” Lynch.

### Introduction

Having migrated to /lit/ upon hearing of its existence, I was at first shocked and delighted by its quality – “Here,” I thought “is finally a board where there can be civil discussions, and whose users really seem to have a passion for the subject. I could get used to this!”

As time passed and the original hype died down, /lit/ settled into its newfound existence. Some people stayed, many others left. Gradually, reaction images, >greentext and general snidey-ness began to rear their ugly heads. Trolls started to find ways of getting under our skins; in short, /lit/ became part of 4chan. But, underneath the dross and the implying, there was still the discussion of those things we love: literature, and our attempts to create it ourselves.

When this zine appeared, naturally I had my trepidations as to its quality, as well as to the quality of the works it would feature. Imagine my surprise then, when my apprehensions were proven to be groundless on both counts: not only was the quality of the editing and overall production excellent, but the works were (with a few exceptions) of a high standard, which I was surprised to encounter anywhere on the internet, let alone on a developing 4chan board.

All of this inspired me, cynic though I am, to make a small contribution looking at some of the works from the first issue and my reactions to them. Keep up the good work /lit/ and ZWG!

One final note: For obvious reasons, I will try not to give away too much of the story in the following reviews. However, when it is unavoidable, I’ll prefix the offending remark with [spoiler][spoiler] tags just to warn you off encase you have yet to read the piece!

### On Being Locked Up – Chris Bishop

Let me start by saying, this was one of my personal favourite pieces. The subject it dealt with was both entertaining and thought-provoking. And I must say, I really did enjoy the ending, after, that is, getting over the momentary shock of reading it!

Despite the tone of it’s ending, I do think this piece is an attempt by the author to deal with and express some of his feelings over thoughts and issues – imprisonment, the effect that imminent death has on the mind, and regret. I think it’s safe to say however, that it is first and foremost an entertaining piece, and to read too much into it would ruin one’s enjoyment of it. Its compelling and interesting writing is completely complimented by the twist ending, which I’m fairly sure even the best of us didn’t see coming. Fair play to Mr. Bishop in that regard!

It can’t be all praise and no criticism, however. I offer the following only as a means of



bettering the piece, and not out of sheer prickery, however it may seem.

Continuity seems to have been a problem for the author. For instance, [spoiler] he tells us that it is impossible the gauge the passage of time during his incarceration, but then later goes on to tell us how the cells are open to the elements, how the meals were served at regular intervals, and myriad other details which render this assertion impossible; he tells us of the restricted communication between the inmates, but then speaks of the fact that *“The way the cells are designed, communications with your neighbor are easy”*. [spoiler] Such small factual errors as these detract from the piece as a whole, and make it harder to enjoy.

Another irksome factor of the writing style was the fluctuation between colloquialism, and more ornate speech. I’m sure that this method can be an excellent literary device when used effectively – see, for instance, the works of David Foster Wallace. However, this can be a tough style to master, and in this piece, a certain jarring between the “high” and “low” speech made some of the prose seem ungainly, though with practice this problem could, I’m sure, be resolved. Furthermore, a certain number of ungainly, ugly or unnecessary phrases were present, and could easily have been pruned. Self-editing is an essential skill, and one which this story could have used a little more of.

Ultimately, this piece was among my favourite in the zine, both for its un-pretentious attitude, and it’s wonderful ending. Although, a good piece already, with some slight reworking it could be exceptional. I hope to see more from Mr. Bishop in the future!

#### [Untitled] – Anonymous of Dallas !awNDo4Ud3

There really does seem to be a dog theme to this issue!

What can I say about this piece? It’s minimalist – no words were wasted here, every phrase gives the impression that it was carefully considered and crafted for it’s place. This simple, yet evocative account did garner an emotional response from me which most of the other, longer pieces could not match.

Though short, the author is still able to give us a multi-faceted story of emotional depth. Loneliness, friendship, loss – the author sets these emotions moving within us in way that is neither obvious nor offensive. A great, subtle work the like of which I would love to see more of. A perfect opening to the issue!

I believe brotears are the only proper response.

#### Pawn Shop – Francisco Covarrubias

Now, of course, as I’ve learned on /lit/, my opinion is just that, and not in any way fact. But, since I’m reviewing here, I can do nothing but offer my opinion on the piece, and hope that you will all realize that I’m not trying to offend anyone!

This piece was, to me, one of the worst in the zine. There were many problems afflicting it – a certain unwieldiness of phrase, an overabundance of unnecessary adjectives, and a plot that, when stripped of it’s veneer of description, could have easily been lifted straight from a ‘Goosebumps’ book. The awkward, unnatural dialogue would be forgivable were the characters who deliver it any more than one – dimensional caricatures. Unfortunately, they are not – [spoiler]the “evil shop owner” is such an unbelievable stereotype that it is tough to read him seriously; Noah, although clearly intended as a more fleshed-out character by all the background we receive on him, turns out to be so self-pitying and helpless as to be unlikable. [spoiler] This is a piece that could’ve certainly used much more work before submission, or possibly total disregarding.

I am loath to offer so much negative criticism without the balance of at least some positive, so hope is not completely lost. I enjoyed some of the turns of phrase in this piece, and indeed thought some of the descriptive passages were excellent in their attention to the detail of the scene, if a bit overblown. The extended metaphor for addiction is intriguing, and could certainly be fleshed out into a highly interesting prose piece if time was dedicated to it.

In conclusion, I must say that this work was one of the more disappointing pieces I encountered, and would need a vast amount of rework in my mind. Don't lose heart though, I look forward to seeing more from this author in the future!

### SICK/ How This Ends – Josef K.

I think we can all agree that the inimitable star of this issue has been Josef K. His works, both submitted and those on his blog, contain both a virtuosity of style, and a keen eye for detail. He is well able to furnish us with all the details needed to enjoy his short, succinct stories quickly and with a seemingly natural flow that makes the unbelievable seem probable.

SICK is, if I am to believe the opinions of my fellow /lit/erati, the most popular piece from the project so far. I have seen its intriguing take on the issue of mental health and paranoia praised, its [spoiler] gruesome and oddly uplifting ending [/spoiler], its masterful pacing and suspense, its ambiguity ([spoiler] Could it all be true? Is he being followed, poisoned?[/spoiler]), and utmost of all, it's perfect capture of the atmosphere of nervous terror and energy. I can say nothing new on this subject, it all having been said by those before me, and I simply add my voice to those already admiring this superb piece of literature.

"How This Ends" was, for me, a surprise. Having learned all too well that many people have only one flash of genius that they cannot replicate, I was not expecting much of this second piece by the author. However, again I am surprised by /lit/'s talents. This piece is as good a piece of apocalyptic fiction as I've ever seen, and puts me in mind of such talents as Lovecraft, Shute's 'On The Beach' and Camus' "Stranger". To bring all of these disparate influences together so well in so short a work is, for me, a testament to K.'s talent as an author, and his skill as a self-editor.

This issue was dominated by this man (or woman?). He shows an amount of talent I have never before seen in an amateur writer, which leads me to leave you with two of my own musings:

1. We will soon find out that our friend Josef K. Is a published author, who we will all then rush out to buy, or
2. He is GamerGirl.

### Second Sunset & ZWG in General

Now, to be clear from the outset, Sci-fi in general is a genre of which I am woefully ignorant. Although by no means dismissive of it, I simply do not find the style as entrancing as some of our /lit/izens clearly do, and this is, of course, my failing rather than theirs! Who knows, maybe it will just take the correct piece to enamour me to the genre, or maybe it's just not my cup of tea. But that is beside the point – what I am trying to say in a long-winded way is that, being unfamiliar with the genre, please forgive any missteps in terms of its intricacies. Now, onto the review proper.

This piece, *Second Sunset/Farm* by Jeremy Levett, is mainly concerned with the farming practices of a landowner on an alien world. We're taken through the processes of the pre-harvest in detail, given an overview of the life of the valley, some history and even the technological side of the operation. Now, you could be forgiven, when reading this summary,

why it would be worth your time to read this piece- I myself had the same reaction as I began. But the real draw of this piece isn't the plot, which is, in all honesty, thin on the ground, or in the characterisation of the piece. No, it is rather in the way that the minute details of the farming culture are rendered in a sincere, believable fashion.

A sparse, descriptive narrative takes us through the sun-scorching of the valley's crops- an important precursor to the harvest, the social and geographical history of the valley, and the people's connection with it. Though the main character, Dart, is in essence a non-entity, serving as nothing more than our connection to the valley, there is a distinct human presence in this piece. The primal connection between people and the land is the central theme here, and it is excellently expounded in a gentle fashion, offering us example rather than assertion, tone rather than statement, and ultimately letting us come to our own conclusions through an unobtrusive narrative style- any good author is able to inspire in us his desired response through his writings rather than simply telling us what to think, and Mr. Levett certainly has the ability to do this.

This piece skilfully sidesteps the usual pitfalls of "genre fiction" that so often discourage the general public. Although technology is prevalent throughout the piece, at no point is the author distracted from the story's arc to describe a particularly interesting airship or harvesting tool; rather, specs and data are exchanged for the interactions between man and machine, the effect of industrialisation on the valley society, and the helpless sense of futility that an excess of advancement can inspire in people- Dart tells us that, "*You could ride a farm dirigible, even operate the controls and fly it yourself. But there was no reason to. The machines did their jobs themselves.*"

Again, the author more implies than states his ideas, which leads us to consider our own feelings towards technology and its' gradual replacement for the need of human labour. Nowhere in the piece are the myriad machines and contraptions given personalising features or human characteristics, which is so often the problem with science-fiction. They are presented to us as a means to an end, no more human than tractors or harvesters, though a little more advanced!

However, this excellent piece is by no means flawless- what is! Again I must stress that I present criticism of pieces only for its constructive value to the author, not out of any perverse delight at pointing out the short-comings of others. I offer the following criticisms therefore, only to help, and not to hinder.

I seem to echo this sentiment in most every review, but I will repeat it nonetheless, as it seems pertinent- self-editing is essential to a successful piece. The title "editors" for those running the Zine is misleading – although they will correct grammar-, and spelling- related mistakes (Which I have a feeling they'll be doing a lot of in my submissions!) they cannot be expected to improve some of the more suspect or awkwardly worded passages in your story. This piece is a prime example: reading over, pruning of phrases and redundant words could have immensely benefited the overall effect of this piece. For example, Mr. Levett tells us of "*Farmers long dead had written of slim, warlike shapes lowered into some, sealed from them by codes and computers*". Now, to me, this sentence could have done with rework. It suffers from a kind of ambiguity that makes it difficult to understand- what were the forms sealed from? The farmers? The Bunkers? Small problems like this detracted from my overall enjoyment. Still, and I must stress this point, this is just a personal preference, and should by no means be taken to be objective. We all have preferences when it comes to writing and wording, and what is ugly or unwieldy to me may be exactly what appeals to others. It is a difficult task, to strike the balance between a personal style and reluctance to lower the word count, but it is

something you must strive for.

On the setting, I have very little criticism. It was an arresting, detailed and about all plausible world, one which I think shows much room for expansion and exploration; the society was well-formed, realistic and given suitable grounding in the world's history; the interactions between the people and the machinery was, as I have above noted, excellent and multi-faceted, and over-all, this is one of the more interesting, and less infuriating fantasy worlds I have encountered. However, on the topic of the main character, I do feel work is needed. He seems unfinished, little more than a vehicle for the narrative, and the fluctuation between the wide overview and concentration on Darte was constant and unannounced, leaving me at times wondering if we were following him, or were privy to information he was not aware of. By the end of the story, we have not ventured out of his lands at all, but despite the focus on his practises and life, we know nothing of his personality, his likes and dislikes, his idiosyncrasies. Even his appearance is kept obscured from us, confirming in my view the fact that the author did not put much work into Darte. A good setting needs and deserves a good, well rounded leading character, and a bit of work in this regard would improve the piece immensely.

What I'm driving at with all this, in a long winded way, is that this is basically a good, if not great piece. It held my attention and interest, which is unusual for science-fiction work, and had an interesting setting and surface narrative, as well as some genuinely intriguing observations about the relationship between man and the land, machinery and each other. While by no means perfect, it is certainly improvable with little effort, and Mr. Levett has here given us a setting which I would love to see explored in more detail in future.

Goodbye for now!

Dave "Tom Waits For No Man" Lynch.

# On "Second Sunset"

By T. B.

The character Darté is essentially pointless. The "story" is a vague potted history of a farm with some nice descriptive work thrown in and having a viewpoint character adds nothing. As a character, he's a failure because he doesn't really express any emotion or opinion, he's not particularly interesting and his few actions add nothing nothing to the story in symbolic or actual terms. On the whole there's nothing to make us sympathize with him. Presumably he's only there to avoid the piece being nothing but a wall of description; in this he is a useful framing device, but that's all he can aspire to be. I would advise that to make this a more satisfying story, you either develop his thoughts and opinions to justify his existence, or cut him and his family altogether and simply describe the valley.

There's a frustrating lack of any solid details, the entire story written seemingly deliberately in the vaguest terms. The descriptive work is long on establishing atmosphere and describing a field in the sun, short on constructing decent mental pictures of the hall or dirigibles or even Darté himself.

The plot... There wasn't really a plot.

The story is well constructed with a wonderfully clean writing style, good flow and capable descriptive prose. The only wearing part was the repetition of "dirigible". The (few) science fiction and setting elements used are original, and you have a clear talent for world-building, though that was helped by the same descriptive vagueness that prevented contradictions or jarring elements. Even without any action or dialog the story was not boring, and the final sentence was quite beautiful.

Overall Second Sunset didn't feel like a story; it felt a background piece, like an introductory paragraph to a new scene in a space opera. For all that, it was an enjoyable read, and easily one of the best pieces in the zine.

As always, the people who most deserve respect and thanks for this project are the authors and artists who submitted. *You* made this what it is.

\* \* \*

Editors

Goldensox !gHNR8PgoEg

Lindlar !sZMOg20d0E

Nick\_ZWG !Vw8I404DyQ

Prole !XDERDXUpqQ

Honorable Mention

Wildweasal/Caesar

Jeremy Levett/LBO

moot

\* \* \*

And all of the anons who took the time to download and read this.

Thank you!