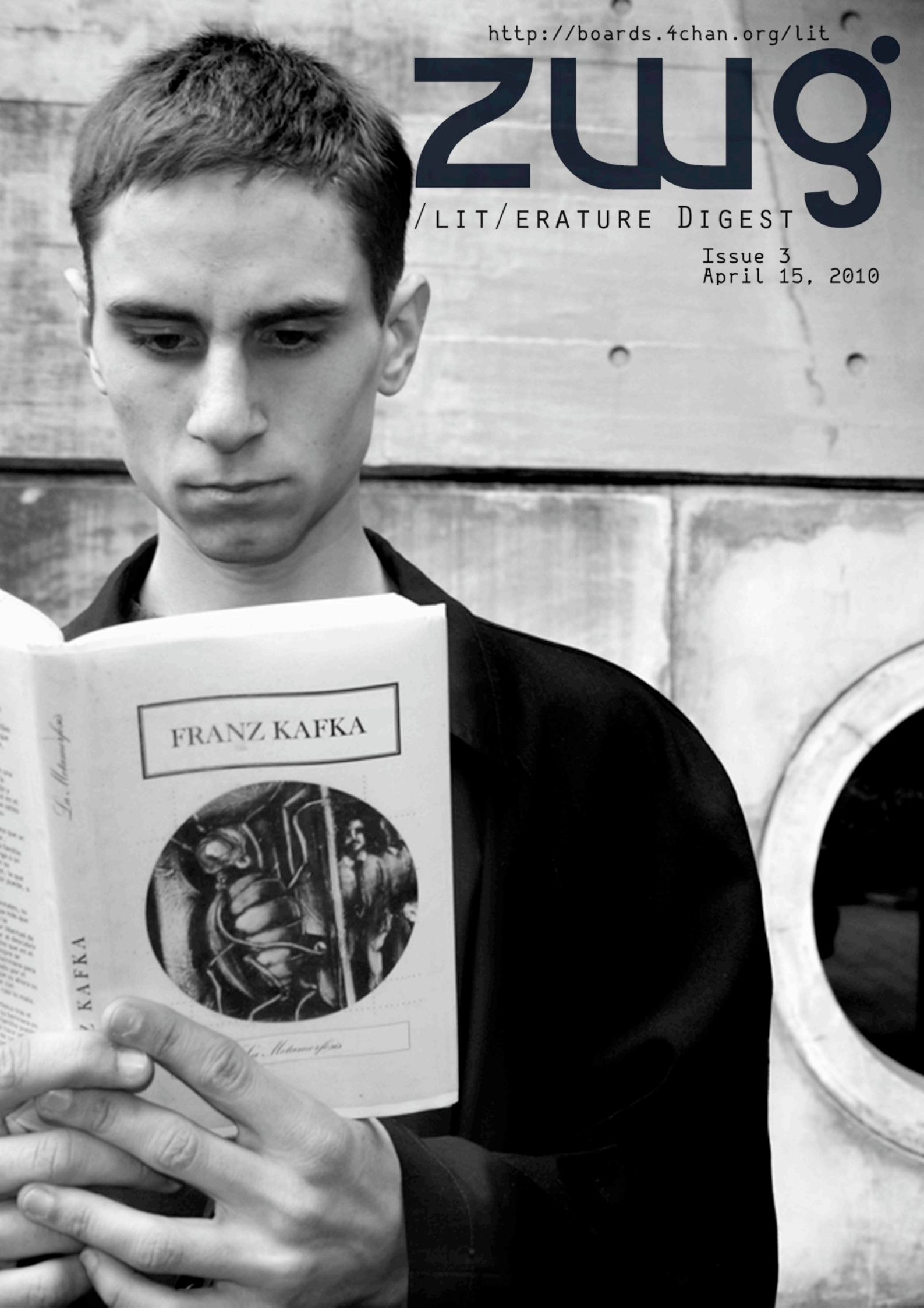


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# zuwō

/LIT/ERATURE DIGEST

Issue 3  
April 15, 2010



FRANZ KAFKA



*Die Verwandlung*

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# Fiction

# Blood on the Tracks

## Part 1

By Jeremy Levett

Signal flags, dancing in the chill southerly wind, ran up the first mast of the traction keep *Kobold*. At her stern, her crenellated gunwales, awash with red and black banners, were consumed by a sudden swirl of black fumes as her great engines stepped up a gear. Their throaty roar rolled out across the nomad tribe; twenty-seven land ships, crawling westward across the ragged plains that had once been a part of ancient Germany.

If a message crow had flown over the fleet then, its clever eyes would have made out a loose diamond formation, tipped at each point by a land ironclad; four armoured shepherds to the flock of mismatched traction halls and land barges. A diamond in pointillism, black dots on grey land, painting a ragged smear of tracks across the world beneath a brooding winter sky. The heavier vehicles sank trenches even into the frost-hard earth; the land trawlers left plough-ruts stretching back to the horizon, as though some mad strip-farmer had reached the edge of his manor and never stopped. Occasional sewage dumps from downpipes left glistening snail-trails among the many-shaped impressions from wheels, tracks and feet, all freckled with a million droplets of oil and rust-tinted water that shook from black-painted hulls.

But there was no message crow; there had been no message crows for weeks now.

At the left wing of the group, a respectful distance from the battlemented bulk of the *Kobold*, the land ironclad *Merkava* kept station. The *Merkava* was almost graceful for a fighting machine; long, slim and smooth-lined like the galley she had been built from, her ram prow tipped with a crown of wolfram thorns. Her black hide was prickly with weapons; long-nosed gun turrets at her shoulders, cannon and ballistae nested in domed casemates around her six house-high wheels. Her bridge was a steel dome rising out of the plates of her top deck, a dozen metres above the earth, crowned by a little thicket of periscopes and lined with frowning window-slits. There her instruments ticked and fluttered; there the levers and consoles that commanded her stood; there her Ritter watched, still as if he had been cast from iron.

Lucille Vorbeck, the *Merkava's* gaunt mistress of signals, gripped the handles of her scope and called off the *Kobold's* fluttering symbols a word at a time. "All-machines-to-come-about-by-my-lead."

"Thank Tredegar, he's seen sense, at long last," said portly Stalhein, peering at the *Kobold* through his own leather-bound spyglass. Stalhein knew he always talked too loudly, and said more than was entirely necessary; on the cold, quiet *Merkava* few people wasted their breath, and the ironclad's candleswain had grown bombastic as if to compensate. He gave an exaggerated shiver, as if his fur-lined greatcoat wasn't there. "We could have used that signal a week ago. I can't wait to get to sunny lands, it's bloody horrible up here. The Monkey must be annoyed at us." The Ritter von *Merkava* had no reply to that. He didn't believe in the brass monkey, or any of the winter gods.

"Put up our acknowledgements," he said eventually. "By light, not by flags. Pay the Marshal my respects." Lucille's bony fingers stretched out for her signal

lantern.

The *Kobold's* red sails billowed as she came about, and against them a few flakes of snow tumbled black and grey. Traction wherries scurried around her, light enough that their pediwheels left no footprints on the frozen earth. The Ritter nodded to Cornelis Nokia, the helmsman, who turned the wheel with slow, measured movements. Either side of the *Merkava's* ram prow, her many-spoked front wheels began to creak around. Wheels turning wheels, the symbol and soul of the nomad tribes. Moving machines they had built, moving machines their ancestors had clung to all the long centuries since the old world extinguished itself in a blaze of short-burn molecule bombs and engineered plagues they called the Deformation, or the Brightest Hour.

Black snow this winter. The sky was doing things it had never done before, and every soul in the tribe agreed it was a sign of something terrible. Perhaps the volcano chains to the east were lighting up again, raising black new spines of fuming mountains, and the maps would have to be redrawn again and again. Perhaps there had been a war in the open fuel-country, beyond the Skagerrak pass, and burning oil wells were filling the air with sticky blackness, so that in the spring fuel would be costlier and more scarce than ever before. Perhaps it was the fallout of some horrible Ancient weapon found and loosed, and they were all dead men rolling beneath its innocently tumbling fallout. Perhaps it was the first smoky breath of the old hell-gods, Tiamat and Monsanto, rising from the black centre of the earth to claim the souls of all guilty men. But nobody knew for certain.

Two summers ago, while analysing a yellow storm over the Balinwall crater, the Marshal's last raintaster had suddenly burned up from the inside out faster than you could say "transient atmospheric phenomenon". And nobody had yet been found to replace her; nobody could offer better than guesses as to whether this was a more general or more specific end of the world.

Ahead of the *Merkava*, broadside on to the smaller ironclad, the *Kobold* had stopped turning. Her rows of huge barrel-shaped wheels straightened out and she surged forward underneath a fresh black thunderhead from her engines. Stalhein gave his compass binnacle a long, hard look. Lucille's fingers paused on her lantern.

"We're headed south," said Stalhein flatly.

"Acknowledge his orders," repeated the Ritter.

"South," said Stalhein. "Not about-face to the great road where we might stand a chance of living, not further west to hope for a fat tanker-convoy, not even north to die nice and quick. South. What in the name of the Monkey's balls is he *doing*?"

The Ritter was, in everything, the model of decorum. In all seasons, he wore a crisply pressed wine-red uniform and shining ceremonial spurs. The polished black and silver cross at his pale throat bore at its centre the stern, bearded face of Carnegie, old god of steel. He did not use oaths, or the nicknames for his peers and his Marshal that flew around easily and stuck like mud to boots. When he spoke, which was not unless he had to, his choice of words belied a man who'd been brought up a gentleman by the book and the cane. And his tone was polite, even with a touch of the metal behind it.

"I answer only to our Marshal, and I trust him. I trust that his preparations are sound, and that his plan will see us through the long night." On his lips, the words sounded like a prayer.

"There is no plan," said Stalhein bitterly. "The Hobgoblin's made a mistake and he's realised it too late. If we had stuck to the road to begin with, we could have

been in warmer lands before we needed to burn half our fuel keeping Jacqueline Frost's fingers off the windows. If we turned back now we could batten down at a caravansary and last out the snow, however much it cost. But we shan't do either. He can't turn back, because that'll mean admitting he's wrong."

Lucille Vorbeck glanced from Ritter to candleswain and back again, fingers still distractedly fiddling with her lantern. The steersman Nokia kept his head down, his hands on the helm, matching the *Kobold's* course as the rest of the tribe wheeled round in concert. Conrad the master gunner stared through the slit windows, his dark eyes idly guessing distances and judging the wind. The snow outside offered no opinion.

"We will endure," said the Ritter simply. "Have faith."

"Ritter, the last few crows from the north said the winter was coming on sooner and harder than they'd ever known," said Stalhein testily. "That was a month ago. We haven't had any since, and do you know why? I warrant they've frozen to death."

Von Merkava did not reply.

"Paul..." said Stalhein heavily, and as if to emphasise his point his hot breath made pale clouds in the *Merkava's* chilly bridge, "the winter kills the weakest first. If it gets too cold, she'll just... stop."

"She kept running in the winter off Hamburg, and that was with great holes in the armour from the northerner raids," said the Ritter. "I say again, we *will* endure."

"The Iron Lady is not the one to whom I refer," said Stalhein drily, whose pet name for the *Merkava* was the title of some minor goddess nobody else cared about; patron of fetters, or something. "I meant Esther. I know we can survive this winter, one way or another. I don't believe she can, unless we turn for the road now."

The Ritter stiffened. He started to speak, angrily, and stopped before his voice took meaning. Stalhein wasn't sure if his lord had misunderstood on purpose; was he pretending not to think of his wife, or did he truly not consider her?

"The Marshal needs to turn back," Stalhein said. "For the good of all of us. We must make it to the road."

Ritter Paul Escrow von Merkava took his title seriously, in all its meanings. He was not simply the Knight who directed his thousand-tonne steed in battle; he was Rider of the *Merkava*, her husband and her keeper. In his mind, his three-deck chariot was the finest machine in all the world, its two hundred people above all others. It was his job to care for all of them, and one in particular.

He looked around his bridge. Gunner, helmsman, signalwoman, watching their stations with exaggerated care. Nobody would meet his gaze. There was only Stalhein, and the truth Stalhein was speaking.

"I agree," he said eventually. "But the choice is not mine."

Stalhein lowered his gaze. "Your orders, Ritter?"

And the fear won in Paul's heart. "Ready a wherry, and signal the *Kobold*. I will speak to the Marshal myself. My son will not die for his orders."

Outside the window-slits, snow whirled down black and white and a thousand shades between.

The Ritter descended the *Merkava's* rearmost spiral, his left hand tracing the sword nicks in the old brass of its central pole, boots clicking against the worn-away names cast in the metal treads. He smelled the flaws in the lower-deck plumbing,

spicy peppered soup simmering in the galley, oil, cabbage, sweat, flatulence and iron. Gustav Pombar, newest among the regular gunners, was playing horrible tunes on a violin in his cabin beneath the aft turret. Somewhere on the middle deck, a baby was wailing. That would be Gericke and Anna's daughter. The sound of her made him afraid.

He pushed the dark thought from his mind, opened a thick, scarred hatch and stepped out into the *Merkava's* hangar.

He heard the fizz of welders and the laughter of young people. The hangar was busy, and noisy, and cluttered with filthy, dangerous machines, and so of course the children loved to play there. A few of them untangled themselves from the wreckage - Stalhein's youngest, little Christopher, was among them - and offered him greasy namastes. He returned them carefully.

A few of the crew were building a traction wherry on the deck, wearing only overalls, warmed by their welding tools and their labour. A wherry was an ugly thing to behold even when it was whole; a pair of huge pediwheels fore and aft with the engine and cabin slung between them on spars. But here the big central cabin was a windowless, doorless skeleton, with a few lost-looking wickerwork seats; the plates and panels were in orderly stacks on a rack of shock-absorbing shelves. The suspension spars were open, showing bunches of hydraulic pipes tied up with little loops of cord, many-linked power chains and wires leading to the wheel and the big staring lamps that perched on either side of it, their mirror-rimmed sockets empty. The sculpted, intricate block of a Capulet rotary engine hung above its yawning housing on wound-steel hawsers, slowly turning, shuddering a little each time the *Merkava* rolled over a ditch or boulder.

Once, wherries had been a sort of boat, a water-ship, just like the traction barges and galleys that made up the bulk of the tribe. But while the big nomad vessels had changed little down the centuries, wherries had been reshaped over the years to take ever larger wheels, ever more powerful engines, and now the machine in front of him had nothing of its lineage in its lines. Only the name had endured.

The regular mechanics, who would stay on the *Merkava* all their lives, were explaining things to their visiting apprentices; linking up the hydraulics, shoeing the many metal feet of the forward pedrail drum in rubber, sanctifying the engine housing with black grease and the rhythmic beat of a silver wrench.

Everything met with the Ritter's approval, and he longed to join them and feel the simple satisfaction of pieces coming together. But he was too old, and too important, to get his hands dirty now. His job not to build any more; it took all his attention to keep things from falling apart again.

A whole wherry stood ready by the doors, engine idling, fuel umbilical snaking across the battered deckplate, the driver's armoured windscreen peering over the top of the front wheel. It had once been coloured field grey, decorated by little painted strings of flowers, rosemary and white lilies, around the windows and engine louvres. But over all that whitewash had been daubed on in a half-hearted attempt at camouflage. It bore the Marshal's red and black flag, and a big bolt-action gun in a little dish-shaped turret behind the driver's seat. Its name was painted on the front spars in gold Gothic script: *Jack of Hearts*.

Mica the steersman, a tall, wild-haired man who always wore a cracked grin and a patchwork plastic coat of many colours, swung open the front door of the wherry and made an obsequious namaste of his own. "My lord," he smirked, an

affectation Paul had never managed to persuade him to drop.

Mica was an oddity, even among nomads. He'd said he was a cobbler when they found him alone in the ruins of a coastal town three years ago. He was always smoking tobacco or foul-smelling herbs, he spoke with an accent that took a drunken tour from Attica to Caledon in the space of a sentence, and he could make a coal-fired battle tank get up and dance. He had, once, at Hamburg, which was part of the reason they didn't have that tank any more. He was the finest driver von Merkava had ever known.

"How's it looking, steersman?"

"Weather to fly, my lord," Mica said, grinning his gap-toothed grin. "Too bad we're rolling, eh? Hop on." The Ritter took place at the gun-turret, and signalled to the mechanics to open the bay doors. The children lined up and waved goodbye.

Mica gunned the engine when the doors had only half opened, leapt out through a gap and tore the *Jack of Hearts* around in a spray of confused slush. He always drove as if the earth was his worst enemy.

Snow was coming down more heavily as Mica wove through the fleet, beginning to settle on the traction ships' upper decks and the frozen earth below. At the opposite corner from the *Merkava*, the slim, sharp-edged ironclad *Salem* plodded forward on its six huge insectoid legs, and bringing up the rear was the squat, ram-prowed *Donnerkind* with its big revolving gun-turrets. The *Kobold*, as always, took the lead, squat and solid beneath a tower of smoke and a sea of red sail. Usually signal flags would be running up and down the rails, signal lanterns flickering and wherries and lighters rolling back and forth. Tonight, as the black snow whirled down from a sky the colour of a two-day-old bruise, the fleet seemed full of silent, sullen purpose.

One of the land barinels let out a bellow from its horn as they jounced past. The Ritter solemnly waved back through the wherry's narrow windows, though he was almost sure they couldn't see them.

The *Kobold's* hangar ramp dragged behind her huge stern on truckles, flanked by gun turrets. The *Jack of Hearts* dropped with a lurch into the traction keep's tracks, rose with its wheels kicking clods of cold earth in all directions. Above the doors, the Marshal's crest was illuminated by blazing spotlights; jagged red and black with his motto in silver scrollwork: *Without faith, nothing*. Signal-lamps hanging on cables shone red and amber together, then green, and they surged up the ramp and screeched to a dead stop.

Where the *Merkava's* hangar was gloomy, tangled chaos, the *Kobold's* was brightly lit order. Beneath flickering lamps, the Marshal's own heavy gun-wherries and hunched black storm giants stood in perfect ranks. The Marshal's soldiers frowned at the black earth and dripping slush the wherry had splashed across their clean deckplate. The Marshal's mechanics didn't even look up from their work.

"Would you look at that," said Mica, over the dying sputter of his engine. "That's the *Salem's* best mono on the deck. You can't be the only one with something to say." Sure enough, the Ritter Solomon von Salem, tall and handsome and black as iron, stepped down gracefully from the pod in the centre of the mono *Unforgiving Mistress's* single huge wheel, his ceremonial spurs clicking on the deck, his uniform razor-creased, a red feather in his cap.

He and von Merkava exchanged namastes. Mica grinned his horrible grin and wandered off to talk to some engineers.

"Paul," said von Salem politely. "What brings you here?"

"The same as you, I think," said von Merkava.



Solomon gave him a strange, searching look, but before they could say any more a soldier was shouting for their attention.

An honour guard of the Marshal's janissars filed out to meet them, the metal parts of their heavy crossbows and mismatched old storm rifles polished to a mirror shine, their helmets faceless and fearsome like the Stalkers of old. Everything was neat and orderly. The Hobgoblin ran a tight ship, and by extension a tight fleet. Formal titles, uniforms, discipline, above all *order*; these were what he felt set his band apart from the many other nomad tribes.

There would be order, or there would be blood.

"Take me to our leader," said von Merkava.

# Special

## By Josef K.

I awake, as always, to the click and whir of a thousand hidden cameras, and the rising glow of the ambient lights. Over the next 30 minutes, the curtains on my bedroom will slowly part, gliding on mechanized tracks, and the yellow sunlight of dawn will stream into the wide circular room. Like all mornings, I entertain for the briefest moment the thought of hurling myself at the windows and plunging the half mile to the ground. I hold on to the little fantasy of wind and sky and falling for as long as it will remain, dreaming of those magnificent moments of freedom and choice.

Even if I were not a coward, there are a thousand unseen barriers and safe guards. I can not see them, but several parents are doubtlessly just outside the door, and would be between me and the window before I could leave the bed. I allow the dream of freedom to evaporate for another morning.

The woman next to me, I can not recall her name, shifts and rolls to embrace me. I wrap my arms around her and return the affection, but there is no love in it. She is young and soft, skin still stretched taut over her athletic and perfect frame. I know that in my youth I would have been buzzing with anticipation and lust simply seeing her, but now I can only take solace in the momentary ghost of affection and emotion. Her skin is warm, and her fine and downy body hair is smoother than the silk of the sheets. I draw an abstract of pleasure from this closeness, feeling something akin to happiness when our bellies synchronize in breathing, pressed close as they rise and fall in an alternating rhythm. Her breath is hot and damp on my chin and neck. It only takes me a few moments to tire of her, and I swing my legs to the edge of the bed.

The black marble of the walls and floor of my bedroom are heated to my exact preference, so I walk, naked, into the large bathroom. Like every morning, I try not to focus on the near-silent buzzing of small servos and motors as each of the cameras pivots to keep me in view at all time. They must be completely autonomous, but it amuses me to think of a thousand uniformed parents tediously tracking my every move, 16 hours a day. They would be madder than I by now.

The routine begins, not identical every morning, but a tiny repertoire of ordered tasks combined in a slightly different order than the day before. Shave. Shower. Preen. Pose. Smile. Evacuate. Masturbate.

By altering my routines with feckless reorganization, it gives the impression of variance where there is none. The parents tell me that this is just one of the reasons my channel is still so popular, despite being functionally identical to my father's and his father's before us. I have a flair for fakery, for lying. It makes them proud. It makes me hollow.

I can choose what I want to do for the rest of the day, from an approved list, another beautiful facade of freedom. I can hold court over a hundred gladiators and command them to break each other apart. I can paint on a canvas a hundred feet tall. I can inhale hallucinogens and stumble through the thousand-acre wildlife preserve on the outer decks of the Tower. I can copulate with my choice of limitless young women, or men. I can beat a child until his skull caves in. It is of course, a limited form of choice. I cannot go back to bed and weep. I can never say "Stop". I cannot leave the Tower.

I am at my most honest, I believe, in the 8 hours of broadcast solitude each night, locked in the blacked out bedroom of silk and marble with whatever woman has caught my fancy. These are the times that I can admit, in my solitude and self reflection, that I would never be able to exist outside the Tower. I know nothing about the outside, and the parents and my concubines can only tell me of the millions of people that love me. I don't know how a real person lives. I only know my world.

I spend the day in the museum, aimlessly wandering through ancient paintings and statues before practicing horseback riding on one of the open air decks. I do this partially because I told the parents I would be in the harem all day, and it amuses me to think of them struggling to adapt the programming, and the wasted resources.

When I am done for the day, I retire to a balcony with a drink. The jagged spires of the horizon look like teeth as they swallow the sun, and I can feel the cold, familiar knot in my guts, that unease and dread at the crawling passage of time.

I've been as careful as I could not to conceive, but that can never last. I have no illusions about this. Sooner or later, I will have a son. Doubtless the parents are already weaning me off the contraceptives in my meals. I grow ill at the thought, and stand to complete my nightly ritual.

I descend the elevator through the vast interior space of the Tower, towards the lower levels. The parents love this portion of my night, such a wonderful flair for the dramatic, they say. I do it because it keeps me sane.

The guards below are like the parents, only their uniforms are different. They smile at me with genuine love and affection and allow me to pass into the viewing chamber.

My father, a man I never met, is laying on a soiled mattress bed, in a sterile metal chamber.

They only love you for so long.

He stirs slightly, but I know he cannot see me; his eyes are now lidless, each orb a milky ball of scar tissue. His mouth is lipless and his dry and bleeding gums encase only a few shattered teeth. His ears are gone, the skin pulled tight around them and sewn shut with black cord.

His limbs each terminated in a raw stump when I first was allowed to see him. Now, they are completely gone. I've watched them break, bend and vanish in slow bites over the years, but they are simply scars around his gaunt torso now. There are deep, fresh gouges in his gut. Every time I think he simply cannot endure more, he astounds me by continuing to live.

When my time on the channel ends each night, his begins. The Tower goes deep underground, and that is my father's world, a nightmare mirror of my own. For the last few months they have taken to opening him up to take away ragged chips of his organs. Since they took his tongue and lips, he has no shame about gibbering and wailing wordlessly.

I have no love for this man, no pity for this thing. I can barely feel pity for myself.

But he is my mirror, my portrait of the future. The people that love me now will grow weary, and will fall in love with my inevitable son. Later, these same people will delight in watching my slow and surgical dismantlement, for eight hours every night.

The mechanical arm on the ceiling descends, looping a hook through the harness around my father's broken body, and carries him into the next room to prep him for the show. He begins to shriek, a ululating cry of helpless terror, and thrashes

in the machine's embrace, but it cradles him almost gently as it takes him from my view, and into someone else's.

I look away. Return to my room. Lie motionless and empty in the dark.  
The channel changes.

# Thank You but Fiji is Ours

Or

## Hookers and Blow

By Freddy P. Kemp

It took several minutes before I had noticed the flight was over, the bump of a plane landing on the tarmac had been noticeable, but not quite as distracting as the flight attendant's vagina. The captain knocked on the bathroom door and we were quickly shuffled out, me still buckling my pants. The woman put her number into my cell phone, which I had no recollection of asking her for; I decided it was a good time to do some field research.

"So, would you mind listing a few adjectives that accurately describe the 'mile high club' experience? You see, I write prose for an erotic website and I'm trying to understand the female experience properly" the woman stared at me blankly for a moment but before she could answer my companion, Giuliano Fachinelli aka Gio the Guido, pulled me away from her.

"You'll have to excuse my business partner for a moment," he said to her, winking, "we have, uh, business to discuss." He led me away to baggage claim as he mumbled something about blowing our cover. My companion aspires to be a private detective who macks on African American women, he believes Fiji is the perfect place to discover a career making case. I began to wonder what I was doing here however; there were the superficial reasons, the guido bastard won an out of court settlement against Wal-Mart and decided to treat us to a vacation. But I'm talking about the real meat of the matter, deep down in the plums of the thing. Aren't these the same islands where Gauguin lost his mind to syphilis? I found this meaningful.

I'm a writer, in the great lineage of Twain and my hero Richard Halliburton, I must expose the disgusting, cankerous underbelly of society's ills and milk them for all they're worth. This place...this sunny place...must be the answer. I've been stuck for years, stuck behind a computer churning out erotic sorcery. I got kicked out by the parents at 16, I recall my father's last words being "choke on a cock you Jewish piece of shit!" so I immediately took a shit in his car. Being a naturally gifted word smith I quickly fell in with a commune of performance artists who had this idea that erotic literature could be best utilized if spoken aloud in front of an audience, while the shadow of the actual sexual acts being performed is cast on a white sheet. It was then that I discovered my powers for inciting the sensual, and titillating the...titties.

That's how I paid for rent the next few years. But I digress. It is here, in sweet Fiji, that The Story will be found.

"So what do you think?" My business partner asked as he puffed on a cigar, "straight to the hotel or should we get to know the locals?"

"We need to learn the terrain," I replied, "let's find a dump and squeeze in deep with the local scum." Finding a piece of shit bar in Suva, Fiji's capital, is like finding mold in my dog's ear, it's impossible not to. This was the home of President Josefa Iloilo, who suspended the constitution after a military coup, he has been succeeded by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, and let me tell you they are swine. It is only through their violent mani—

“UH! UH! OH YEAH!” What is this ruckus? Why does my brain feel foggy? “OVER AND OVER AGAIN” hmm, it appears a blonde haired woman is riding my dick.

“Excuse me ma’am?”

“OH GOD YES” Oh what the hell I’ll let her finish.

“How you doin’ broheim?” Ah that guido bastard must be behind this. I look over to my left and there he is, sprawled on a couch of some motel with peeling wallpaper, a girl no more than 16 is snorting coke off his considerable beer belly. Oh hey look, the blonde passed out.

“You sick fuck, how did I get into this mess?” I throw the words at him like javelin, not an unreasonable demand, all things considered, “What the hell am I on anyway? This chair keeps melting.”

“Angel dust I think, it was in the coke,” he says between large swigs of jacks.

“You’ve got me fucked on PCP?!?! You dirty piece of shit, I can’t remember anything!”

“Ha! You should’ve seen the cops chasing you! It was a situation knowumsayin?”

“Shit the pigs know we’re here?” our cover was blown; we were now in for the long run. We’d see the thing through or die trying, there was no going back. It had begun.

# Tombstone Blues

## Part 1: Mr. Scratch Strikes a Deal

By HowToKill/x/

They pulled up to the city limits just after nightfall. Scratch said to unload the shooting irons and the crew did it reluctantly, pumping shells out of the scatterguns and pulling the cartridges out of their revolvers and pocketing the ammo. The Packard lingered for a moment and out the back window Dorsey could see that the city was lit up, streetlights illuminating the paved roads.

They pulled forward to the barricade, a few trams blocking in the street with riflemen peering out of the broken glass windows, cigarettes in their mouths. They didn't seem too concerned. A man in a blue policeman's uniform, hand holding on the railing, hung out, a pistol in his off-hand, waving them forward. The car sputtered ahead a few feet, then two men with Tommy guns leapt out of either side of the tram barricade and rushed forward, sticking the barrels through the open windows of the Packard.

The man with the revolver stepped out of the train and took his time coming to them.

"State your business."

"I'm here to see Mr. Nitti."

"Got an appointment?"

"Yeah. Tell him Scratch is come."

The man in the policeman's uniform tilted his head to look past Scratch, his eyes falling on Wilson in the passenger seat, then Dorsey and Dylan.

"We'll need your weapons."

"When will we get 'em back?"

"When Mr. Nitti tells me to give 'em back. Open the door, come out. Leave the keys in."

They did.

Another guard stepped out of the tram and walked to the car, patting each of them down. The other two got busy slinging rifles and shotguns over their backs. Somewhere in the distance a band was playing. The man with the revolver (an Iver Johnson) waved them up onto the tram, walking behind them as they went up in single file. A little boy wearing a gray cap and a little automatic in a cross draw sat opposite an older man, playing jacks on the floor.

"Caleb."

The boy looked up.

"Go tell Mr. Nitti a shamus named Scratch is here for 'im."

The boy nodded, stooped down to collect the rubber ball and metal jacks, and dropped them in his pocket as he darted out the other end into the city.

"I ain't no shamus."

"We'll see about that," the man with the revolver said. He sat in one of the scarred wooden benches while the crew milled around awkwardly in the aisle. The Packard started up again, and trundled in reverse before turning and going off in the opposite direction.

"Where you taking my car?"

The man in the policeman's uniform looked at Scratch.

The little boy stuck his head back in and nodded.

"Ok. You-" he indicated Scratch with the pistol- "come with me. Rest of your crew stays here."

"Why can't they come with me?"

"In case any of you mugs try and escape into the city. I got too many problems out here as is, Mr. Nitti hears about an alien in the limits I'm dead."

"You don't trust me?"

The man with the revolver laughed dark and sincere.

"Let's move, shamus."

The city was lit up with big candles shining through the broken panes of the former electric lamps. Scratch saw a boy and a girl, neither older than fourteen, holding hands and sitting on a stoop, talking sidewise looking out on the street. Most of the buildings showed signs of fire or structure damage, but a few were lit up and crowded. They passed pubs full of people, an argument sang into the night. The music was getting louder and Scratch recognized the tune, it was Count Basie's One O'Clock Jump, and the man with the revolver waved him to take a right and they were faced suddenly with a crowd in the street, dozens of people dancing or standing smoking or drinking from big green wine bottles. Somebody had cut down the second floor of a house and exposed it to the air, broke down the walls and sanded the floors and built a bandstand up there, and the band was playing down to them, colored folks all. A dark, wizened man with a fedora and his jacket off was playing the trumpet in a tuxedo vest, his cheeks puffed out and his eyes squeezed shut. The crowd was having a good time.

"Helluva town," the man said to Scratch, and gave him a smirk. Then he poked him in the back with the pistol. "Keep moving."

They waded through the crowd and came out on the other end. The streets became progressively less crowded until they came to a big skyscraper, three floors at the top lit up by what could only be electric light. A couple armed men stood outside the revolving doors of the front, one checking the action on his Hi-Power before bringing it up low at the hip, facing Scratch.

"Bill."

The guard nodded to the man in the policeman's uniform, then pushed his way into the building. They stood waiting for a bit and Scratch started to tap his feet to the song playing a couple blocks behind them. Out came the guard and another man in a brown three piece and a pair of thin spectacles. He was carrying a black leather bag. He looked around in a preoccupied way before finding an empty dark brown wicker chair, and he picked it up by the back and dropped it in front of Scratch.

"Sit," the doctor said. Scratch did. He felt the barrel of that Hi-Power resting just behind his right ear. The doctor knelt on one knee and opened up the black bag, pulling out a syringe and a ledger. He leaned forward and pulled open either of Scratch's eyes wide, looking into them for a long time.

"What you looking for?"

"Signs of jaundice. They tend to precede an episode."

"Do I have 'em?"

"No," the doctor said, letting go of his eyelids and reaching down for the syringe.

"Unroll your sleeve."



Scratch unbuttoned his cuff and rolled up a sleeve. The doctor pricked the tender skin where the upper arm meets the elbow with a quick poke. Scratch winced. A bit of blood began to pool around the tiny red hole formed there. The doctor looked up to the guard behind Scratch and nodded, wiping the syringe clean and putting it back in the bag. He opened up the ledger and made a notation, cradling the heavy book with an arm before replacing it too in the bag and rising. The doctor went back inside, humming to himself. The man in the policeman's uniform smiled.

"This is my stop. Good luck up there shamus."

"I'm no shamus," Scratch said.

The guard with the Hi-Power escorted him into the lobby, told him to use the elevator to get to the fifteenth floor, then walked back outside. He did so, confused at first, feeling out of place, pressing the up button. It dinged shortly afterward and the operator drew back the cage and let him back in.

"Your floor?"

"Fifteen."

The elevator operator nodded, tilted his cap, and hit the button. He sat looking bored on his stool.

"You've got electricity here," Scratch said.

"Mmhmm," the operator said, looking at his fingernails. "Sure do."

The elevator dinged.

"Your floor, sir."

Scratch stepped out and into a quiet waiting area. A girl wearing a cloche and a lot of rouge waved him over to the desk. She pressed a button and it buzzed and shortly afterward a man with black hair graying at the temples came out of the office behind her and came forward.

"Mr. Scratch. I've heard a lot about you." His voice had a hint of Italian.

"Didn't stop you from making me jump six fuckin' hoops to get here."

"We have to take precautions, yes."

They walked into a lushly decorated office with a big cherry wood executive desk and strong-smelling leather chairs. Nitti gestured to one and went around the desk to a bar where he drew two glasses of whiskey from a decanter, dropping in ice and some soda water. Nitti handed him a glass and sat behind the desk, drinking contemplatively.

"It's been two years since a federal agent's shown up in the city limits. We're the best supplied city in America. We got this whiskey from Canada, over the Lakes- I hear from them that Herr Hitler's Germany's locked up good and tight. Other than Berlin, this is the safest place in the world to be."

"And California."

"Well.." Nitti smiled, demurring.

"What?"

"That's neither here nor there. I represent Mr. Capone and, if things go well here, you'll be representing me. I have a job for you."

"What kind of job?" Scratch said, stunned a little at how good the whiskey tasted.

"Me and my associate came back from Alcatraz to find our good city in ruins. I'm sure you'll recall how things were in the early days. It was chaos."

Scratch said nothing.

"There were, however, a few neighborhoods under control. We came to them,

reorganized the Outfit, and presented the boroughs with a choice. They took a vote. It was totally legitimate, I assure you."

"I can't imagine why anybody would think otherwise."

Nitti laughed. "Yes. Even so, there were some agitators, some dead-enders. One was particularly troublesome. Man named Moynihan. He's a loony, sure. Dresses up in a black cape and a pair of flying goggles. Shoots capos. Blew up a supplyhouse we had on the river. Made a real mess."

"Why?"

"He has.. delusions of grandeur. He's left notes, whatever you want to call them. 'Elected officials, open government', yada yada yada. Not important. I understand his motivations. I do. But things are different now. We don't have time for these things. You saw that party outside. You think any one of those people would trade what we have here for democracy and living like the rest of the Closed Areas?" He scoffed. "Not a single person here would do that. These are hard times, Mr. Scratch. I know you can appreciate that."

"You want me to find this fella Moynihan?"

"We do. He's no longer in the city. Fled into Indiana. Find him and kill him."

"What do we get?"

"A lifetime's citizenship in Chicago. You'll have a good job, you can marry here, settle down. Nowhere else in America can you have an opportunity like this. Certainly nowhere else in the Closed Zones."

Scratch put the glass down on the desk and stood.

"For my crew too?"

"Of course."

Scratch nodded.

"We'll do it."

He turned to leave.

"One more thing, Mr. Scratch."

He stopped, but didn't turn around.

"If we find that you're working in MacArthur's army, our business is completed irrevocably. If you return to Chicago, and I have heard the you're running with that man, I'll personally kill you. You have my word."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, then, Frank. I'd hate to lose a friend."

They took a fresh tank of gas and set out on the road.

"Fucking wops," Dorsey said. "Too dumb to live."

"They're doing better than you," Dylan noted pointedly.

"Turn here," Scratch said.

Their headlights cut a ragged path along the road. Wilson was having a hard time of it, swearing often and swerving to avoid heaps of ghouls. "What's the job?"

"Some nut named Moynihan. Dresses up like a radio hero. Read this." Scratch unfolded a note from his vest pocket and passed it back to Dorsey.

"'All will learn the power of night time vengeance'," Dorsey read.

"Been a long time since I had any night time vengeance."

"Shut up, shut up. 'The streets call out for justice. The Crusader hears and will prevail.' This guy's a fruitcake."

"I almost feel bad having to kill him," Wilson murmured. "Silly bastard must've lost his mind after the Emergency."

"You plug him, you're a Chicago citizen."

There were respectful whistles.

"Forever?"

Scratch nodded. "That's what Nitti says. It's about a mile from that station up there. Pull in, I want to get ready."

The filling station had seen its fair share of looters. The glass in the garage windows were all broken out and the red paint of the outside commingled easily with browning blood stains. The Packard pulled up beside one of the pumps. Scratch pulled open the door and stepped out before Wilson cut the engine. He walked around to the trunk, pulled out one of the shotguns, and started chambering shells, looking into the building. Wilson rolled down the window and hollered out.

"Stay put," Scratch said. "Load up the irons. I'll be right back."

He kicked open the filling station door. There were two of them in there, shuffling endlessly into the wall like sleepwalkers. One was wearing a long green dress and, Scratch felt, quite sensible shoes considering. The other had a stained white peaked cap and a filling station uniform. His chest cavity was mostly riddled through with bullets, and his right arm ended at the shoulder, revealing a jagged lance of bone that hung about halfway to his chest.

They both turned and offered greetings.

"Would've thought they knew to tag you in the head," Scratch muttered, firing at the station attendant. He blew the ghoul back, painting the wall with the rest of his head. He slithered down the wall and convulsed enthusiastically.

The other was almost upon him and he had no time to pump another round. He kicked back at her as she lunged with her teeth. Her eyes had gone milky with age and a steak knife jutted hideously from her shoulder. She stumbled backward, arms flailing, and Scratch pumped another shell.

The pellets struck her in the jaw and neck, the top of her head falling back onto a counter, the rest of her stopping and falling forward to tumble at his feet. He toed the torso out of his way and walked to the counter, rifling through old moon pies and butterscotches until he found a stack road maps. He pocketed one and took another, looking around the room one more time before exiting.

"How many?" Wilson looked up from the Springfield he was loading.

"Two. Take this." Scratch handed him the map. "Let's go."

Scratch explained the score on the way there. The gang had learned by then to pay attention when he spoke for an extended period of time. His chattiness made them uneasy.

They found the farmhouse that Nitti described off the main road. Wilson pulled off and waited while the rest of them tumbled out and collected their weapons, then he sped off, lifting a cloud of dust that dimmed brown the moonlight.

They stood there in silence for a moment before Scratch waved them forward with his .45. The farmhouse was adorned with garish red crosses, painted haphazardly (Scratch realized that someone would have to hang out the window to paint the tails on a few) and totally dark inside. A long wrap around porch clung to the peeling walls. The third and final story was a fairly ominous cupola. It was just the sort of spot for a man to look out of. Scratch was betting on it.

They got about thirty feet within the front door before Scratch turned around. Dorsey looked at him, confused. Scratch swung the butt of the .45 and connected with the kid's cheek, and he fell down, his rifle dropping with him. He swayed on all fours, groaning piteously.

"Aw, fuck, boss," he snarled. Scratch gave him a strong boot to the ass for good measure, splaying him onto the ground limp. Then he fired a round about two inches to the left of Dorsey's head, and another two inches to the right. He started to holler.

"I'm gonna plug you, you fucking pixie. You thought you could come into my crew and not pull your own weight? You think we do a job just so's you can sit on your ass and twiddle your thumbs?" He fired again, this time above Dorsey's head. Dorsey squirmed like something you'd find under a rock and started to cry.

"I'm gonna fucking kneecap you happily and tie you up on that porch and I'm gonna bang every pot and every pan in that house until only the deaf ghouls aren't ready for their next meal. And then I'm gonna fucking leave you here for them. That's what we call 'just desserts' where I'm from. Wise?"

Dorsey began to beg for his life, and then they heard him.

"Evildoers!" A high pitched voice sang out. "This man will not die by their rotting hands!"

Scratch had to hand it to him. The joe had some speed. He swung down from the house by a kind of wire and all of a sudden Dylan was on the ground, with this maniac pummeling him, laughing mightily. Scratch moved to shoot him when the freak swung up and punched him in the wrist. Scratch dropped the .45 and swore. Dorsey rolled over and panicked, staring at the black caped, domino masked hero come to his aid. There was a scramble as Scratch moved to pick up his pistol and Dylan's hands tried to find his scattergun but this guy was good: he dropped Scratch with a blow to the stomach and pinned Dylan down with his legs.

Sprawled spread legged, one hand now thoroughly enmeshed in Scratch's hair, the other gripping Dylan's throat, Moynihan laughed darkly.

"You didn't think I'd be so easy to subdue, did you?" he said. He stood up, sweeping the reeking, polished black leather of his cape so that the scalloped tips stung Dylan's face and eyes.

"I put away scum like you in utero!" he cried out. Scratch groped around while the Crusader led him about, doubled over, by the top of his head, pulling in whatever direction he was to go. "I have seen the forces of evil claim this bloody nation! But they will never claim the heart of its people, so long as-

It happened fast. Wilson was a good shot, and put one right in the braincase. The Springfield had a hunting scope they picked up in a department store outside of Allentown and it obviously still worked. Moynihan's grip went slack instantly and his legs buckled as his head began to drip down his back. His right eye was still extent and it fluttered incredulously before stammering shut. The Crusader fell back ignominiously on his back and didn't move.

Scratch found the .45 and got up, combing through his hair with his off-hand before shooting Moynihan twice in the chest. "Stupid motherfucker," he snarled. "You fucked up my cut."

Dorsey got up, rubbing his purpling cheek sullenly. "Thanks for the shiner, boss."

"Don't mention it," Scratch said. Dylan crawled over and pulled off the pair of black leather goggles the lunatic wore and pulled a knife out of his boot, got busy carving off this outfit, a finger. Wilson came by with the car not soon after and they used the tablesaw to cut off Moynihan's head.

All the noise had obviously attracted a lot of ghouls, and they started to shuffle in to offer constructive criticism. Scratch shook his head, still smarting from the blows, examining them. They were coming in from a cornfield beside the farmhouse,

shuffling out of the rotting, half blown stalks. He checked the action on the .45 and walked toward the crowd- seven in all- and plugged each neatly in the head. One didn't go down after the first shot, Scratch simply turned around and motioned to Wilson.

Wilson pulled back on the bolt, ejected the last round, brought the bolt forward, chambered another. He dropped the ghoul without a word. They opened the trunk and dropped the head and the hand in and put the guns in too. Then they piled into the One-Twenty and Wilson started the car. A fresh pack of ghouls wandered out of the field and started toward Moynihan's crumpled carcass.

"Back to Chicago," Scratch said.

# Tall, Thin, and Faceless

By Globulous

Walls. White walls. White padded walls. Day in. Day out. White padded walls. Let me tell you why I see these white padded walls day in and day out.

I am, or at least according to several doctors, certifiably insane. Hallucinations, paranoia, schizophrenia, multiple-personality disorder, the list goes on. I was a normal, working class man, living the American dream. I had a wife. I had two children. My income was high and my debt was low. I had it all. Then things started to go wrong. They started to go in a direction I couldn't even fathom.

My wife and I had always wanted to go to the British Isles, but for the longest time, the money wasn't there. It took seven years and two promotions before we could even begin to think realistically. Anyways, after months of careful planning and preparation, we were on a plane flying over the Atlantic Ocean. Just me and her. No kids. No job. Nothing but beautiful scenery and relaxation for 24 straight days.

Fast forward a week. Having taken in many of the big city sights, we decided to see some of the smaller places, out in the countryside. We packed a small bag of essentials and took a cab into the rural side of England. This is where things started to go wrong. Not 'the whole world is coming to an end' wrong, but it sure felt like it. We came across an old tailor in a moderately decorated cabin. He said he had been making suits for over sixty-five years. My interest was piqued. I decided to splurge a little bit and buy one. Nothing beats the craftsmanship of a home-tailored suit. After paying for it and calling for a cab, a picture on a wall caught my eye. It was old. Black and white. Mid 50s. It was a very tall and very slim suited man standing on a grassy plain. His face appeared to be smudged out. It was old. I didn't think much of it. Even so, something about this picture was unnerving. It gave an odd vibe. It felt almost... Menacing. I inquired about the photo but the old man refused to talk about it. That just added fuel to my mental fire.

Days upon days had passed, and my wife and I took in every sight, every castle, every grassy knoll we possibly could but, alas, eventually we had to go home. Part of us wanted to stay, but we were exhausted. There was no way we could spend any longer there. Our flight back home was vague as we were both asleep most of the time; the drive back home was hazy. We just wanted to relax. As I pulled into the driveway, something was off. Something didn't feel right. I got the same feeling I had when I saw the picture inside the tailor's home. It was a feeling of dread and curiosity. I didn't want to continue but my mind forced me to. I stepped out of my car and when I stood onto the concrete, my legs suddenly gave out. I fell to the ground onto my right hand and found myself able to force myself up. I must be more tired than I thought. My wife helped me up and supported me up to the bedroom. I was going to be asleep for a very long time.

Or so I thought.

That night, I was plagued by nightmares of the suited man on the grassy plain. It wasn't really a bad dream as much as it was his presence haunting me in my subconscious. Just standing there, unnaturally tall, unnaturally thin. Standing there without a face, an identity. No matter how hard I tried, his face never focused. It was as though the picture had come alive in my thoughts but remained unchanged. This went on until I had been abruptly woken up by the sound of a smashing of a lamp.

I raced down the two flights of stairs leading from the bedroom to the living room. Armed only with a brick we used as a doorstop, I slowly crept to where the only lamp in our house used to be. I knelt down to pick up a piece to examine when I felt a slight blow of wind from behind me, like a person running past. I shot up faster than a startled cat. I spun around to see what or who that was. My eyes had still not adjusted so surrounding me was nothing but darkness. My next thought was to listen. Nothing. Not a single thing. Not even the sound of a house settling. Maybe it was my nightmare, or fatigue playing tricks on me. Maybe we had a slight tremor that caused the lamp to inch off the table. Regardless, I was tired and I sorely wanted to get some nightmare-free sleep.

It didn't happen.

Throughout the rest of the night, the "slender" man was everywhere within my dreams. He was a bit curious though. He only ever seemed to cautiously hide behind trees. Only in the original photo was he completely exposed. Even subconsciously I wished I hadn't moved next to a forest knowing he could be lurking. Watching me. Analyzing me.

It didn't take long to force myself awake. I looked to my left. 10:46 AM. I looked to my right. My wife was calmly sleeping. Lucky her. I dragged myself out of bed and slowly made my way downstairs. I half expected the TV to be blaring with my kids' eyes glued to the screen but then I realized that they were at their Grandma's house. They were due back that day. I was going to miss the quiet. It was alright - I missed my kids even more. I continued down the stairs, hoping to get a game of Solitaire in on the computer, when something made me feel very weak and hollow. The lamp. It wasn't broken. But it wasn't brand new either. Someone took the pieces and shoddily glued them back together. And the glue wasn't glue. It was black and rubbery, like tar. I would have tasted it for origin, but that's never a good idea. My wife needed to wake up. Soon. I was starting to panic.

I explained what had happened the night before, about the lamp and the nightmares and such. She just rolled her eyes and told me I was on something. Wives. Sometimes I think they do it on purpose. Anyways, still feeling uneasy from this morning, I managed to force myself to look out into the forest behind our house. It was very calm. Nothing out of the ordinary. It wasn't completely dark so it didn't look nearly as ominous as it usually did at night. I was badly lamenting this night, in particular. Suddenly, I saw a light out of the corner of my eye that caused me to nearly jump out of my skin. It was just the kids getting dropped off. I swear I was thinking too much into this. I couldn't keep my nerves steady half the time.

Hours passed. We played with the children. We put them to bed. We relaxed on the couch. My wife was asleep on my chest. I was nodding off. I slowly closed my eyes. It wasn't long before the quiet was broken and my wife and I were woken up. A window broke up stairs. In a panicked flurry, we ran up the stairs as fast as we could. Our eldest son, scared out of his mind said it came from his brother's room. Without even thinking, I kicked the door in. Only the nightlite in the far corner brought light into the pitch black room. And there he was. The man from my dreams. The slender man. Hovering over my son's bed.

Having seen him, I acted without even knowing what was going on. Punches were thrown. Long black tendrils whipped all around. The last thing I remember was being held tightly above the ground and thrown against a wall. That's when I blacked out. When I came to, my wife was in tears. I had three cracked ribs. My son was gone. The slender man had my son and there was nothing I could do. But I knew he was

going to come back, and that was when I would get him.

The rest of the day was full of emotion. My wife could hardly stop crying. My other son was in a constant state of shock. I could barely think straight. I did, however, manage to call the police. I told them my son had been abducted by a man in a long black suit. I kept the detail of the tendrils to myself in fear they wouldn't believe me. But that was the least of my worries. I needed to figure out when he would return.

The police showed up and took each of our statements. They examined my son's room. They did a quick scour of the forest outside. It seemed not a single piece of evidence was found. They began to leave when something hanging from a very high up branch caught their eye. It was a piece of material. Black. Pinstriped. Much like the suit I bought while I was on vacation. I pointed this out to the police and they inquired to see my suit. I gladly showed them the way. When they opened the closet door, what they found was beyond belief. Wrapped in my now tattered suit was my son. Completely drenched in blood. He didn't look conscious. Both myself and the police were shocked and disgusted. That's when I blacked out.

When I came to, I was in an unfamiliar place. Grey painted walls. Small windows on one of them. One exceptionally bland table. Great, I was in an interrogation room. I sat there, alone for the good part of an hour before actual human life entered the room with me. Now, my memory is a bit hazy at this point so I'll try to sum up the conversation as best as possible. Your son is alive. Deepest sympathies to you and your family. I'm not fully guilty but the evidence leans towards it. A further investigation must be held. You will be brought back home but you will be under constant supervision. And so on and so forth.

I was driven home in the back of a police cruiser. Last time I was there was in high school when vandalism was the cool thing to do. I was welcomed with open arms from my still sobbing wife and my emotionless son. Going back wasn't easy. Thankfully, we didn't have to stay very long. The police explained that we were going to stay at a hotel for a few days. We gathered our things when a picture from our fridge caught my eye. It was a picture my late son drew. When I saw it, heart nearly stopped. It the cutest crayon drawing you can imagine was my son standing next to a tall faceless man in a black suit. I made sure no one was around to see me stuff the picture into my pocket.

The hotel was what you would normally expect. Simple wallpaper. Two twin beds. One TV. Cheap flowery design on everything else. It would have to do since we were stuck there. We settled in, placing our stuff and lying down. I, on the other hand, went into the bathroom, the only place I knew was private. I locked the door and took the picture out of my pocket. I scoured the page for clues but to no avail. All that was there was the crude drawing and his name scribbled into the bottom corner. The thing that unnerved me the most was the fact that the slender man had no face. No identity. Not a single outstanding feature. It rattled me to the core. But I had enough stress from today. I needed sleep. Badly.

The night was rough but I still managed to sleep. Not a single dream with the slender man either. Then a banging came from the door. Being half asleep the whole time, it scared the shit out of me. I turned to my right. 5:14 AM. Heads were going to roll. I dragged myself out of bed and very slowly opened the door. It was the police officer that drove us here. He had a look of panic on his face. He said my son was missing. Nothing clicked. It took me a good minute to wake up and grasp reality again. My son was missing again. Snatched right from the hospital. But this time, I



knew where he was.

I had to get back to the forest. I had to find the remains of my suit. It was the only way to stop the slender man. But I knew it wasn't going to be easy. I had asked the police officer if he could drive me back to my house as I had forgotten something. He pondered a moment and obliged. This time, I had been allowed to sit in the passenger seat. The ride there was quiet. I tried to get some sleep. He didn't start any conversation. When we got there, I was careful to make sure no one else saw me. I entered the house through the front door and quickly escaped out the back and headed for the forest.

It was still very dark out so traversing the heavily wooded area was not easy. The only light that came through was that of the moon. So I walked, almost blind, hoping to find some scrap of my suit. It seemed to be impossible until amidst the darkness, I saw a scrap of paper. The white of it stood out like a sore thumb. I leaned down to pick it up and when I turned it around, what I saw completely horrified me. It was another drawing by my son, with both him and the slender man. But this one was different. There were three other people. A boy the same height as him, an older looking girl, and another boy as big as the girl. Then it dawned on me. It was us. My family. My son drew us in with the slender man. Then from behind me, I heard branches snap and footsteps of a single man. I was terrified. I knew for sure it was the slender man. Then I saw a beam of light. It was the police officer. I ran up to him and showed him the picture. I explained that my family was in great danger. All he told me was that there was nothing he could do. He said I should go back to the car and we would go back to the hotel.

A million thoughts ran through my head. Should I concede? Should I resist? What I did next is peanuts compared to what was about to unfold but I didn't know, and looking back, I didn't want to. I gave into the police officer's request and began to head back to the car. While he had his back towards me, I picked up a fair sized stone and brought it down upon his head. He staggered a bit and fell to the ground. I took the car keys off of him and ran towards the car. It was still dark. I needed to get back to the hotel.

I screeched to an immediate halt in the hotel parking lot and ran towards the door where we were staying. I swung open the door to behold the one thing I was trying to prevent. Amidst all the blood that painted the room were three bodies making a circle around the slender man. He turned and looked at me. His hollow, non-existent eyes stared deep into me. Emotions I had never felt before, emotions without names, filled my brain and body. It was like he was making me feel everything he ever had. And with an outstretched hand, he said only one thing. One thing that would be burned into the back of my mind forever.

“...Help me...”

Sirens came from behind me. I turned around to see the police cruisers pull into the parking lot and watched them get out. Using car doors as shields with their guns aimed at me, I raised my hands above my head. I slowly looked behind myself to see the slender man fade to nothing, leaving only a tattered suit in a heap on the floor. He killed my family. My life would never be the same. And yet, something told me I was never going to see him again. I would never be able to exact revenge, even if I figured out how to.

Everything up until the white padded walls isn't exactly clear to me. I've been told that after they saw me at the hotel with my DNA on the suit, I was made the primary culprit. After they arrested me and subjected me to frivolous testing to which

they got nothing more than unintelligible noises, I was submitted to this place. The white padded walls. The same white padded walls I see all day, every day.

No one will know what happened to me and my family. The emotions that were broadcasted to me caused me to lose my ability of speech. Now all I can do is write and draw. I write out the emotions that the slender man felt. I draw the things he has seen. They are what keeps me here. I am a victim of another man's emotion. Sometimes I feel like I have become him. Like we were the same being. That day, I learned something.

We were.

# Memories of Ukraine Part 2

By Darrin

Night fell without incident and we were again awoken in early dawn to friendly artillery. This time they fell close and their rumbling bursts were visible slightly beyond the icy ridge ahead. The light bulge cut a crisp white crown in the horizon that caught the sun expertly and was hard on the eyes. Behind it was a clear blue sky without a single cloud. The clarity was cut however by the bursting pillars of coarse gray and black smoke that rolled and folded over themselves as they drifted up and off to the side with the passing wind. These grim and hateful rain clouds flew over the distant trees and lakes and thinned out beyond our sight. They marked the Finnish defenses and preceded the offensive we were now desperately dreading. It was too soon. We weren't ready. Just one more day! Please!

Eventually the final shell whistled cheerfully overhead and cracked open beyond and the captain gave the order to march. Platoons formed side by side in a long and uniform row that stretched the white ridge. My squad stood somewhere in the middle among the other one hundred and thirty odd men of varying heights, ages and builds. We were united by our brown overcoats, pointed wool hats and long spear-like rifles. We were united by ethnicity, nationality and for the most part, philosophy. We were also united by something that set us apart from any other group of men any where else in the world: we were victims of the Winter War, and we would do anything for each other now to survive the cold, the poor meals, the relentless barrages and now, the offensives. We had all heard secret and whispered stories of the failure of the infantry charge, and the oppression commissars inflicted on any officers that dared to think outside of doctrine. We knew we were doomed the second we stepped out of our entrenchments and our survival would depend on how much ammunition the Finnish possessed and how soon the captain and commissar could agree to retreat. Being near the center of our axis of advance made my chances of surviving very slim, and my heart's rapid and percussive beating that could be seen through my coat from a mile away was a prime indicator of just how I felt during those initial moments.

Our rifles, held firm against our right sides, their long quadrangular socket bayonets fixed and at the ready, resembling needles more than knives, formed a fierce set of teeth that had always stirred up confidence and pride in me every time the line formation was performed in parades and during our basic training. We emerged out of the woods into the clearing near the foot of the hill when from its peak there came a stuttering rattle of a machine gun, a wisp of white smoke trailing off on the wind. Looking up in horror as the air began to fill with the in-flight snaps and whistles of incoming munitions, I could just barely make out the slot of a small fortification of logs camouflaged keenly with the snow and ice. Only the flickering flash and rising smoke from its muzzle revealed its location. A white figure, completely without description from such a distance, leapt out of some unseen hole and bolted down the backside of the hill, probably to alert the larger force. Men stopped in the open and fired at it to no avail, and it was then that the cries of pain began to sound from all across the ranks.

In angered reply, the woods to our rear shuttered with the roar of a demigod, knocking the snow from the branches all around one of the tanks that slowly

navigated the cluttered trunks. The rim of the hill against the blue sky burst forth, throwing up a thick and heavy splash of snow and dirt. The gun, still safe in its bunker, stopped for a moment while the crew recovered from the blast, but they were not silenced. Further shots from the hill, now single and accurate began to crackle from the two flanks of the bunker, the shooters heads visible as they darted up and down out of their holes. With these shots nearly always came the collapse of a brown coated soldier to the engulfing embrace of the earth. Trampling up the hill with knees in chests as we struggled through the virgin Finnish snow, a few of the fastest men, especially those that did not trip and fall onto their faces, reached the bunker and began to toss grenades into its firing slot as well as fire point blank at the bobbing heads. In one case, he ran straight onto the enemy's hole, kicked the vainly swinging barrel aside, and spat hot lead down into his chest. As one, the company dropped to the earth and waited for the now silent bunker to at last be defeated. A hooded figure dressed all in white burst out of its rear and disappeared down the backside of the hill, but an eager comrade leapt onto the crown, aimed at the unseen target and fired a single shot, then clumsily slid down towards us on his back as if on a toboggan. The firing window belched forth with a spray of dirt, wood splinters and thick gray ashen clouds that relaxed in the air, but did not cease, leaving the center of the hill a smoldering vent before a tatter of felled tree trunks and shattered ice where the not so sturdy roof had been seconds before.

Those emphatic men at the peak began to rush down the other side only to unleash the fury of another set of slow and steady Maxim guns, scaring them back to us and into rejoining the company's formation where they belonged. Both the captain and commissar shouted left and right to maintain control over the men and urged them to halt at the smoking ruin. Panting and leaning on each other lazily, we rested briefly and prepared for the final push. A sergeant that had seen over the hill stomped his way towards the captain and informed him loudly, for which we could all hear, that there were only two machine guns and a thin line of lightly dug holes and trenches. He presumed they were the forward position for some spread out and undermanned backwater unit, though one now fully alerted to us. Oddly, from what I had personally heard, all Finnish units were "backwater" and "undermanned", yet they managed to hold off whole regimental attacks with used and secondhand weaponry.

We were given the order to march again. As we, in perfect formation and stature, neared the final vertexes of the hill's peak, the commissar began to spout his inane catch phrases and hollow slogans, but I let myself become enthralled nonetheless.

"For the Motherland, comrades! For Stalin and the people!"

The entire company erupted in cheer with the uproarious "*Ura!*"

Seconds later the company came over the ridge as one and began to descend through the heavy snow towards the now visible trench lines ahead. Our boots and shins kicked up a white flurry that glorified our spirituous attack, despite physically slowing us all down. From only a few hundred feet away, the Finnish steel helmets and drawn hoods could be seen peering out over the mouths of their trenches and shallow holes. Behind us the smaller machine gun teams began to set up their crew-served weaponry along the crest to try to suppress the enemy below, firing over our heads. Ahead, the enemy was now fully prepared and had brought to bear all their weapons yet they held their fire until we drew closer. Between the machine gun crews behind came the slow and lumbering steel beasts that finally crowned that topographic feature and curved over it into a hasty descent. Nervously, the tanks stopped

completely for a moment before continuing. I laughed at the notion of the tanks speeding down the slippery slope and tipping over or crashing into the enemy forest with slapstick grace. Fortunately the crews knew the dangers of their vehicle's size and weight and could traverse the terrain skillfully.

"Company, forward!" screamed the captain finally, and we shot off into a clumsy but steadfast sprint through the snow whose crystalline crust cracked and flipped up around us like soon-spawning salmon fighting a current.

The Finnish replied hatefully with their own cry of "*Hakkaa päälle! Tulta munille!*" Those slow, rhythmically snapping Maxims began to flash their flames from the tree line ahead and already I could hear wails of pain from along the row of now scattered and staggered soldiers. As I looked over my shoulders past the flushed, screaming faces beside me, I saw the writhing heaps of brown and maroon cloth that began to claw and spill their red blood across the Finnish snow like so many anti-communist posters in the towns we had passed through before. The support gunners among our squads fired their bulky weapons from the hip, emptying their large horizontal pan magazines aimlessly into the forest ahead, and a few of the rifleman also fired without shouldering or aiming, then awkwardly cycled their bolts while trying to keep pace and not drop their weapons.

With a deafening blast, a warm cloud rolled over us from the cannon of the lead tank and a pine tree ahead exploded halfway up its trunk to fell overtop of a foxhole with a variety of creaking cracks and bustling branches. The lonely stump blended in well with the torn and splintered aftermath of the morning barrage.

As one of the enemy guns swept by us with a steady burst, a mere two feet before me the ice spewed up in a long snaking line of sequential impacts. To my left, the man's right leg kicked back painfully and tore open, dropping him to the ground with a yelp. With another ear-splitting shell burst however, their machine gun in the center of their position was consumed in a rolling blanket of smoke and ash that cleared to reveal only a destroyed tripod and an empty gap in the line of helmeted snowmen.

Despite the constantly growing human litter behind us, we soon flowed over the Finnish trenches to a mixed reaction. Some of us attempted to enter their trenches and were repelled with bayoneted rifles and wildly swinging entrenchment spades. Others, who had grenades and were smart enough to think of them, dropped low into the snow and attempted to barrage the enemy by hand. The tanks rolled on past and formed a large square around the entire position and turned their guns inward to support us.

I found myself clumsily tripping over a rusted and wilting strand of barbed wire and slid down the wall of one of their earthen ditches. It was here that I came face to face with the enemy for the first time. I looked briefly at his pale cheeks and reddened nose, steel blue eyes and stained yellow teeth. I saw his green collar tabs and odd helmet with its rim angled in a style directly copied from the Germans. I saw at his thick and well-padded overcoat with generous hood and drawstrings. I looked at his gloves, whose only holes were intentionally cut out for the fingertips and nothing more. He glanced at me too. He saw my thin and featureless greatcoat, save for the large red tabs on the corners of my oversized collar and lapel. He saw the red star on the front of my pointed *budyonovka* and the small hammer and sickle pin in its center. He saw my own stained and pocked teeth, my own red nose and my dull brown eyes. He glanced at my blue and purple hands gripping the wood of my rifle hard enough to whiten my palms. We were both screaming profusely, though not at each other

specifically, and despite the many things that united us, we were now destined to combat one another.

As he raised his rifle I saw that even our tools for destruction were nearly identical, though his had been refurbished and stamped with his army's logo. His bayonet however was of the more common knife design that most of the world made popular during the Great War. Its edge gave it much more practicality in the cramped confines of the trench and tunnel, and its image alone delivered a prodigious blow to my initiative. With my rifle crossed over my chest and the long spike far out to my left, I plunged the thing forward without any thought and bashed the man briskly in the face with the broad length of it. As I stepped back and watched curiously at the damage I caused, I saw the man reach up to his face in horror and grab his now disfigured nose, shifting its shattered components painfully with each slight touch. Still engrossed with the possessive spirits of battle, I pulled my rifle back, lined it up with him and with every straining muscle in my body I forced the spike through him and that warm and cozy jacket I envied so fiercely. I saw into his contorted and shredded soul through his eyes and growled inhumanly at him regardless while drawing the tainted spearhead out of him. As I stood over the whining and squirming animal beneath me, I felt, of all godforsaken things, pride.

In the distance, far off in between the trees, the standing and the splintered all the same, a lone Finnish soldier ran out with a green punted bottle bound in water-proof matches and full of that most revolting mixture of tar and petrol that was humourously referred to as a "cocktail". Before anyone could take notice, he ran up to one of the resting tanks through its blind spot and lit the matches. With a well-aimed underhand toss, he threw the bottle onto the back of the tank's chassis directly over the engine. With a swirling plume of liquid orange and yellow flame that sickeningly turned black in the clear and wholesome Scandinavian air, the weapon broke and exploded. Within a matter of seconds, the sinister cocktail seeped into the engine and spread fire to the lubricants and fuels, burning every tube, band, and sprocket. The commander's hatch opened feebly and a head and pair of hands rose out screaming to the outside world. As the black-suited man vaulted himself out of the hatch it became clear his clothes had caught fire. His arms and back trailed with the dancing gold that he so desperately tried to extinguish in the ice. When we would finally begin to clean up after the battle we would find him to have most of his extremities burned to the bone and left a charred anorexic suggestion of his prior build. When he extinguished himself, the damaged flesh not yet killed outright was then exposed to the elements and fell victim to frostbite. He died from a complex combination of wide-spread tissue damage, hypothermia, and trauma. The men who first examined him weren't at first aware of how the commander or his vehicle had met their ends, and were thus too shocked to help in the movement and covering of the body. Behind the commander came out the driver and loader who too were aflame but managed to save themselves from both fire and ice, and sought refuge among the infantry.

The battle quickly died down in every entrenchment at once as the initial roaring cries of an angry peasantry gave way to the desperate and the feral grunts and squeals of mortal combat and then these disturbing noises too were set aside by only silence and the howling of the winter winds. With those winds came faint suggestions of firefights and powerful detonations miles away, but were too faint to be taken in conscious consideration. They were simply the familiar white noise of war. The last few Finns turned to the woods and ran off, trudging through the knee high drifts, until finally being shot in the back by a number of riflemen and left face first in the shaded

and unstirred nature to harden like stale bread.

We began to pack the Finnish men into a single trench, filling it nearly to the surface with the twisted, gutted and perforated vessels who had been destroyed in the most brutal of fashions in the name of furthering the most abstract of concepts. Stolen Soviet equipment was reclaimed and categorized, rations were salvaged, and all manner of personal effects were stolen. Finnish militaria and handsome photographs of women could be traded for alcohol in the rear garrisons. The captain picked up one of their sub-machine guns for his own use in later combat. Its high rate of fire, accuracy and reliability were said to make it one of the finest of its class in the world, and its large under-hanging drum magazine made reloading in battle a less frequent danger.

The company dug additional holes for our own men, moved the machine gun crews forward, repositioned the armour, and spent the remainder of the day holding the enemy's old location. The captain was expecting a Finnish counter-attack aimed to try and break our momentum, despite our tactical ambitions already quenched, or at least a runner or runners carrying rations, ammunition, mail, and orders. The Finnish had dug rather comfortable underground shelters that held in heat expertly and we had begun moving equipment into them but every one quickly began to dislike being inside them or even seeing their doors in the trench walls. Their lanterns, blown out, were still warm, their ashtrays still smoldered with crumpled and burned to a nub cigarettes, and their old wet clothes hung from the ceiling to dry though never to be worn again. Nonetheless, we were all obligated to spend time inside, on rotation, for the benefit of personal health. That small patch of ruined woodland and the bald snow covered hill had acquired a grim semblance that lingered long after the smells of gun powder and burning wood and metal had passed for the more calming aromas of pine needles and sap. The feeling worsened as the shadows stretched into the evening and the twilight had reached that odd short time when all the beauty of orange and rose had crawled down out of sight but the sky still clung desperately to the light of the fleeting sun. The stars were few and far between and the blackness of the cosmos had yet to pierce through. The dull and featureless blue contours of the landscape was now boldly spotted with the dark swirls of footprints and the packed down patches where men fell but which held no shape to the fuzzy and adjusting eye in the low light. The folds and ditches in that colourless wasteland took on a personified evil. The smells of the dead wafting through the gnawing subzero airs only heightened the effect which in all truth was probably just an unconscious reaction in the men to the aftermath of battle. Despite all my astute hindsight, I too was overtaken by the depressing sights, smells, and sparse conversations and grew to hate being at that site. Sleeping in their old bunks in the underground rooms was out of the question, and men tried to spend the night in the trenches and holes as usual.

In the evening, the captain decided to spread the men out further, with each platoon spanning a hundred yards. It was when Third Platoon on the southern flank began to expand and dig their new holes that they found themselves overlapping with Fourth Company from the same battalion. We were informed through them that the regiment had taken tremendous casualties on the road-block a mile to the south, and the first three companies and most of our armour had been lost. The bulk of the commissioned officers were dead or badly wounded and many of the companies, at quarter strength, were being led, at best, by senior sergeants. The colonel himself had been wounded in both arms and was unable to hold onto or lift anything, but could still walk and talk and was doing his best to reorganize his splintered command.

Not only was the Deep Battle doctrine derailed when the Finnish strongpoint failed to collapse, but the few armoured units that were able to penetrate the rear were quickly lost to combat engineers. Division Headquarters was now planning on renewing the attack with two regiments currently to our rear.

The captain sent a runner to Regiment Headquarters and he returned before midnight. We were told that after tomorrow, we would be relieved off the line. Now survival had finally come with a reward to look forward to besides further digging, freezing and dodging explosions. In the rear there were often homes to rest in, with warm furnaces and clean beds. Until then, we rolled cigarettes, rubbed our hands feverishly and watched the creaking stalks of pine and birch sway wearily in the breeze, heavy with snow on their limbs, always watching for movement and glints of metal. I had no trouble falling asleep in the rock hard frigid soil and made the most of Rustom's watch.

In the morning the only outside force that materialized was another rifle company that came over the hill, now brightly lit and taking on much more familiarity than before, though still presenting all too eagerly the crushed down patches where men had fallen and died. We were relieved man for man, every position filled by a complete stranger from another town in another province, speaking with strange colloquialisms, but wearing identical uniforms to ours. All these men were full of cheers and laughter, all exhaustion aside, and, most obnoxious of all, enthusiasm for combat. They were smart enough not to ask too many questions about our battle, but still their youthful grins and wide-eyed admiration for us angered many of us deeply. If it weren't for the commissars and their lies, or the hot meals they received to keep their spirits vainly high, they would be as miserable as we were when we first dug in there on the front-line. We wanted them to feel our pain and to douse their happiness, perhaps only because we envied their enjoyment of their situation. Perhaps to save them from a crushing disillusionment.

They were still lucky to be out there where the skirmishes were few and far between though, even if they were now at the front. On the main roads and in the villages the Finnish had concrete bunkers and pillboxes, cleared and flat fields full of landmines and anti-tank obstructions, and whole Soviet battalions and regiments would attack at once and be repelled time and time again until they were worn down like unfired clay left forgotten in the rain. Failures were met with the same response: try again with more men, and innovation was discouraged for the most ignorant and illogical of reasons that could only be attributed to the egos and reputations of men hundreds of miles away. What was worse than the endless assaults however, were the ambushes along the roads the army clung to like the canon of the Bible, wherein they would cut a column in its center, and then into quarters and further, halting entire divisions, encircling their fragments, and destroying them. Then as the wrecked vehicles were being cleared by the unit stalled behind them, they too had to defend against the next ambush. Should a vehicle naturally break down on the road, disaster was not far behind. For our company however, the war was on hiatus until we were sent forward again to relieve some other unit.

We marched a short time to the main roads where a convoy of returning flatbed trucks agreed to take us to the next eastward town. We sat in the back and watched the normally quite breathtaking winter wonders pass by, made grotesque only by our severe exposure to the elements for such prolonged lengths of time and by the various remnants of battle left in our nation's wake. Rustom, of all people, had brought out his accordion and began to play "Katyusha" and sang out the words,



inviting us to join.

“Apple trees and pears were in blossom.  
On the river hung the morning mist.  
Young Katyusha stepped up on the bank  
Of the river, high and steep.”

No one joined him in the chorus. He continued to play the tune without lyrics if only for himself. In a tilled and harvested farmer's field a series of artillery pieces barked viciously in a choir of their own as they sent salvos flying across the countryside to far off locales. As I turned myself on the bench and looked over my shoulder, I saw again the strewn assortments of bent and wilted hands and boots jutting out of the engulfing tundra. Their petrified limbs defying gravity served as tombstones, marking their place should anyone bother to look for them. Beyond them I saw the empty folds in the farmer's fields and imagined them in the summer time, a bright and healthy chocolate brown, sprouting a thick brush of golden wheat swaying gently under the blistering sun. I thought of the Finnish farmer, standing on his back steps as I did in Vinnitsya, waiting for the warm breeze to dry his damp back. All the warm soup and padded clothing aside, memories of Ukraine kept me alive.

# Explorer of Nothing

By Bulnowt

Give me something. Anything.

"You don't get it, the person who stays, they can't leave until I tell 'em to. Anything else is just a fuckaround, I get nothin' outta it and you get your fill of drama and you're gone. I need someone who'll stay through the night and day, the good and bad. So get the fuck out! GET OUT!" The rage wells and churns, spits and screams. I'm screaming at the world. I want out of my skin, to chew my way out, pull my skin off and shove it in their mouth. I want to force them to feel my pain, let them know how selfish they are. Make them understand for once.

I open the door and they leave and I sit on the floor and curse and drink and seethe. Soon I begin to wonder who it was I had just yelled at. They wore a uniform, possibly the mailman. I light a cigarette and begin pondering life without mail. No power, no TV, no phone, no nothing. It dawns on me that I am now entirely shutout from the world, that nothing exists anymore but this room--floor, carpet, ceiling, blanket, liquor, me, banana--and any space beyond is as cold and unreachable as a dying star.

I puff the cigarette and imagine myself as an explorer. Explorer of the great Nothing, where no man had the courage to tread before. I was doing important work, it was necessary for human progression. One day young and eager students would read over my exploits in textbooks. Scholars would attempt to research and replicate my acts. Hoodlums would defile my grave and then someone would be employed to clean it daily. I realize that life will be great after I'm dead. The whole world will celebrate.

I take a bite of the banana. I feel better now, good enough to drink harder. Pretty soon the rage returns so I start having successive shots, attempting to disable my mind from my body. I figure I'm less volatile that way. Puff, puff...shot, shot...day, night, day, night...

Nothing grows at a speed you can't measure. It folds outwards, enveloping, extinguishing everything but me. It has no regard for creation or evolution or papaya enzyme shower gel. I float through the negative space, a cigarette ember in a vacuum. After what must have been a fathom of ages I reach the rim of Nothing. Looking through it I see the Earth spinning like a marble into a drain. In a moment it will be gone; no more mountains, no cities or lakes or towns or landfills. Everyone will finally understand, they'll be explorers just like me and this void will be full of little pilgrim pricks and they'll erase my name from textbooks and once again I'll be nothing and markets will open and communities will spring up everywhere and the people will elect a president of Nothing every four years and the little pilgrims will love, laugh, kill and die. Bastards! They always find a way. Nothing was all I had, the only unique thing to me. I wouldn't let it happen. I took out my lighter and began putting flame to the nothing.

"I'll save every one of you bastards!" The nothing dissipated like a wounded predator. It retreated, the rim bending inwards, the negative space swelling with heat and light and energy.

"I'll save the whole fucking universe! People will come to my light. They will

flock to it! My light is more warm and kind than the sun, more giving than the Mother, more loving than the Lover!" And I can see them coming. Their faces are beautiful in the light, their hands softly pressing my body, holding and fondling, carrying their hero on their shoulders. Nothing flames, screaming and dying. Love, flame, heat and smoke. I am the Creator, the Saviour, Giver and Receiver and from the shoulders of my people I watch the bang, pop and flutter as Nothing bends into nothing...

...the gray morning light pushed its way through the smoke and cinder. Shape and form returned but order seemed to have died with Nothing. I was laid out on a bench. Someone was yelling at me. They were there too, my flock, they gathered around me and stared with silent disbelief. They were shaking and scared and had soot on their faces and blankets covering their bodies. I understood the man who was yelling at me to be the doorman, though he seemed confused and angry. It took me some time to understand.

"Crazy fuck nearly killed us all! This is the worst thing ever!"

"What?" I tried to sit up but the doorman kicked me down.

"Don't let this crazy son of a bitch go anywhere! Someone get a cop over here." There was a fire truck, several in fact, big red ones. There were firemen going in and out of my apartment building and more firemen passing around blankets and water and sandwiches.

"What's going on?" I tried to sit up again but this time half a dozen of my flock sprang forward and held me down.

"Don't let him get away!" "Hey fat man! Sit on him!" "Stand on his fucking neck!"

"But don't you love me?" I didn't get it. I was too hung-over to think. What did I do last night? Wasn't I their hero? A cop came over and my flock started screaming at once for him to cuff me, to arrest me, to shoot me. The cop yelled for silence and then spoke into his radio for a while. Eventually he turned to my flock who all pointed down at me on the bench.

"You wanna tell me what happened here?" I stared at him blankly, fumbling over my thoughts. The cop turned to the doorman and asked him the same.

"This guy is a maniac! He tried to kill us all!" Everyone looked at me. I stammered and the cop told me to shut up and the doorman went on.

"It was the worst! I was at my desk about three hours ago when I got a few calls from people on the tenth floor about smelling smoke and so I went up there and that maniac," the doorman points at me, spittle shining his tumescent lips, "he's running around with a lighter setting fire to everything!" He makes a sweeping gesture with his hands to emphasize the point. Everyone looked from the doorman to the cop to me.

"But I was saving you--"

--Shut up guy. Just keep your mouth shut 'till I tell you otherwise." The doorman continued.

"So I catch him as he's just set fire to the curtains in the east hallway, and I yell at him to stop, and there's smoke everywhere and I realize that the eleventh is already up and going, so I hit the fire alarm and called the authorities and that maniac goes on trying to destroy the whole building!" Doorman, cop, me.

"I didn't do that," I whispered and the doorman starts screaming and pointing upwards and sure enough there're three floors completely blackened and burned out

and I can see firemen trudging around in the smoke.

"But you don't get it, I saved you. I'm in textbooks."

I'm in a hospital ward being treated for minor burns and smoke inhalation and I'm confined to my bed and there's a cop guarding me and there are news reporters everywhere but it's not so bad. The guy in the bed next to mine is wrapped almost head to toe in bandages. He never makes a sound, doesn't even speak to his parents when they come and they're really nice people. They talk to me, tell me about their home and stuff. I start feeling better. The nurses seem kind and I feel better than the guy next to me. That guy is lost in Nothing the same as I was. I hope he gets through it. I start asking the guy questions, how he got to where he was, what happened and how he was doing. He was content with Nothing, he basked in it like I did, allowing it to fold around him. After a few weeks I begin to get through to him. One night when I was almost asleep he called to me. I told him I was listening. He hesitated, and then spoke.

"I was on the Southbound..."

# NIKE

By winter\_soldier\_alfa

[Darkness, then the sound cuts in.]

"OK. I think these should work now. Wait a sec ... Aha, it will work now."

[Picture slowly becomes sharpened, there is a heavy light coming from unknown source from the right]

"Hello, how are you? I know, stupid question. Silly, silly me. How should I start this? You want to hear a story about angels, right?"

[A girl with long hair is sitting behind the table, wind brushes a brown tuft of hair to her pale face. She is dressed in white, no visible jewelry. Early twenties, Eurasian look, brown eyes.]

"I am not thinking of angels from the Bible, no no. No white dresses, no halos, we don't even wear skirts here. Don't even dream about lightning from clear sky. Well, we can forget that about white dresses, ha? Alrighty."

[She forces a smile and puts her hair on the side looking modestly across the room. Walls are white, furniture is white, sun trickles through the windows, sky is blue.]

"Um, you know, I can't stop thinking of a story, well actually a fairytale about angels without wings. I don't know why. Maybe that's why they sent me here. Mhm. Yes, they created angels, they taught them about everything that's important, they have given them power and control and then sent them to the world to lead it. But it didn't end up well, you know. At least not for some.

[The room is almost empty, besides the little table and two chairs there is some faceless furniture.]

"No, it can't work like that. Let's start again. Who ever watches this, hello. My name is Nike Visarijonovch Mozart; nice to meet you. I admit, it is more than just an unusual name, but it wasn't chosen by my parents, it wasn't chosen by me. If I was the one to choose, I would take some normal name, nothing that sounds this silly. For example Kate, or Anna. Natalie maybe. Don't know, it's a nice and simple name, isn't it?"

[There is a narrow bottle of orange fluid on the table, with a glass beside it. In a dish there are different kinds of fruit. ]

"Um, yes. They have chosen my name in the Centre, where they created me as well. Created – funny expression, isn't it, but it's correct one, I think. See, I wasn't conceived in the natural way, man and woman and everything else – I know the story and all. I was created in the laboratory, like many others here, in Bruselburg. We were created to serve as elite representatives in the European Parliament, to be impartial, totally professional, with no attachment to race, citizenship, religion or gender. See, we were created as asexual creatures.

"I know, it's a funny idea, I admit. But it's not my fault, ok? Well, let me continue. They didn't mix girls and boys in the test tube, they made a special mixture, they created an asexual being. Me. And a couple hundred others. Many years ago, decades, maybe more. They stopped doing that now, no more new angels from laboratory. You ask yourself why. Look, I don't know. Maybe technology proved itself unreliable, maybe they created enough of us."

[The girl reaches for glass and pours juice.]

"Will you have some juice? Probably not. Well, as you like it. Um, where did I finish."

[She slowly takes a sip and smiles in reverie.]

"And that's how we were apprenticed, private schooling on the highest level so to say, we had access to every library and information base that was kept, we had the best teachers and trainers. They filled us with all the knowledge needed for doing our important job. In my primary group there were twelve subjects; young bright minds, that knew everything about anything and were ready to rule the world. I don't know if they were completely ready for us. And maybe we weren't ready for them. Oh, yes."

"I still have a vivid recollection of our first working day, when we were all introduced to the parliament, some years ago. It was... I don't know, majestic of course, and interesting in a way. All those famous and important leaders of countries and fractions came to welcome us. They came to check and evaluate the end of successful project that was about to bring new era into politics. They were eying at us like we were the eight wonder of the world. Maybe we were in a way, I don't know. They had such high expectations about us, I don't know if we have fulfilled them. Hmm. I surely didn't."

"They set each of us a task – presentation of certain member state, representation of common interest of the Union, that all was on highly professional and nonjudgmental level, without illogical and uneconomical predispositions, discrimination, and other important words."

[Nike stands up and walks across the flat. From the living room past kitchen and library to the inside pool, where the girl takes off her clothes and jumps in the water. She swims a couple of laps, then she silently soaks.]

[She plays and sprinkles around for some time, then she beckons. Camera zooms in.]

"Um, and otherwise? How are you doing? Stupid question, I know. I'm just trying to make a conversation, don't blame me."

"We practiced our work well, I'd say. In the beginning we fulfilled our creators' expectations. We superseded former representatives of countries that only knew how to fight each other: battles that were many times founded on unreal fears, wishes and presumptions. We were better than precedent artificial the intelligences they tried to introduce into democratic system. Tell me how can AI have legal status? See, I don't know either."

[The girl comes out of water, wipes and puts a soft white towel around her. She sits down to the table and starts peeling grapefruit. She scoops out a piece and offers it through the table.]

"Would you like some. It's all right. Don't be afraid. Come on, come here. Nothing's wrong."

[Camera slowly zooms in again.]

"As I said, we practiced our work well, we discussed accurately every issue we needed to decide precisely. We were using an almost endless treasury of knowledge and together with our potential we should only improve out efficiency and fairness. But things don't always turn out as you imagine. Mhm, I know that."

"You see, we had all the knowledge and information at hand, we knew how to apply them correctly, but still we had problems deciding we couldn't find a satisfactory solution to a given problem. Our problem wasn't too little information or faulty education, it's the fact we didn't comprehend life as reality, but only as something academic. What is parents' love, what young infatuation, irrational attachment and citizenship, how person feels when her child is born, how a guy acts in a certain situation, how a girl. What should I do in a given moment? We were created to be

neutral and we acted as such, but that make deciding harder after a while. Impersonal creatures, with no homeland, family, gender. Great new world with confused angles without wings to make them fly."

[The girl thoughtfully walks through the flat, gliding with her hand on the sterile wall. There is an outline of orange spherical bulk with tentacle knobs that slowly follows Nike.]

"Some couldn't stand the pressures of decision, others equivocated so long that they took the wrong one in the end. We searched for solution. Do you think I found it?"

[The girl silently stares in the mirror for a while, then she spastically hits the glass with her right hand. Tears stream down her face she stares at her cut hand, she closes and opens the palm of her hand in order to lure out new beads of blood.]

[Her gaze finds itself in the broken glass.]

"I was thinking then. If I fought the system, the Centre, the Parliament, my creator and my own world. I wanted to make changes like an angel without wings; am I now a devil as a consequence?"

# Falling

By Gjallarhorn !!+W2s3VJk5sr

*Editor's Note: Gjallarhorn is working on the second part of Litchfield, which is slated for the next issue*

Looking back now, I wondered why it's sometimes difficult to admit how quickly things changed. Like doing so would be an admission of my weakness, foolish vulnerability to all the tricks that blur the line between what is real and permanent and not. Then again, when I was I ever that strong to begin with?

I don't know exactly how it happened, but I do know the exact date, hour, minute, and second that I realized that it had. It happened on the thirty-sixth second past twelve o'clock on the fifth of October. The actual time was thirty-six seconds after twelve o'clock at noon, because that clock was always five minutes ahead. I feel strange, unstable, as if there is nothing holding me together, I feel the layers and particles of skin and bone and marrow would much rather dissociate completely than spend another minute as part of one being. Perhaps I was looking for her, maybe I was lonely, I don't know.

My skin seems filmy, almost translucent, and every part vibrates at that odd, familiar frequency of my heart striking within my chest like a piece of flint. It was growing louder, more forceful with each passing second. The valves open and shut with a sharp, bitter clank, like a hammer coming down on an anvil. I turn to face her, but the bed is empty. The noise becomes unbearable, I run downstairs. I find her in the kitchen pouring a glass of water. I press her hand to my sternum so she can feel the contractions rattling my bones. I ask her to take it from me, my voice cracks and is reedy and thin in a way that bothers me, but I realize that I don't hate it nearly as much as I do the shaking my chest. I don't try to suppress the tremors in my voice. She nods, and I close my eyes.

She grabs a butter knife sitting on the counter and slices my chest open. I feel my upper ribs swing outwards as if they were repulsed by one another. There is no pain, the layers of muscle peel back by their own volition. As she does it, swarms of incomplete thought clouding the back of my brain coalesce momentarily into questions: is this smart? Is this prudent? Do I actually love her? Does that matter? The questions disappear as fast as they appeared. It's over.

Gingerly, as soft as a new mother held her baby, she holds my heart in one hand and lays it carefully up on the nearby table over a sheet of plastic saran wrap. She fetches a small cardboard box, a few packing materials- a mix of Styrofoam kernels and bubble wrap, and begins to pack. I hear my heartbeat grow muffled as she wraps layer upon layer, allow only a faint echo to escape. Eclipsed by the sound of the wind rushing through an open window into my chest, she labels the box. Writing in plain but bold with a marker she struggled loose from her purse she writes, "Jeremy's" on the box.

"There," she says with a smile on her face, "it's done." I smile. I've decided it was the right choice. We spend the rest of the day popping the remaining bubble wrap.

After the fact, in the absence of that incessant, nagging beat, I have the time that I had not had then to consider how wise my decision truly was. However, I now do not have the will. I am happy now, so happy, in fact, that I became radioactive. Parts of me begin to decay spontaneously. I lose ten pounds, then five, then two and a half, and so on. I never figured out what it was that made my heart race, if it was her



or some insidious, deep-rooted fear of isolation, I don't want to...

She keeps my heart on her side of the room, under the night stand, so that the muffled beat cannot bother me. I hear her heartbeat instead, which is slower, steadier. Somehow, mine is never completely gone and I still hear it, jagged, slightly arrhythmic, in the space between beats. In the time it was removed it seemed to have grown louder, to compensate perhaps for its distance. This in itself does not bother me, what bothers me is that I find myself wanting to hear it. I toss and turn, moving closer to her at night, not specifically because of her, nor do I tell her this, but because of the heart, my heart. Because as much as I needed to be with someone as much as I do believe and always have believed this, I find myself wishing to be reminded that there once was me without her.

She figured it out, of course she would. There wasn't that much to figure out was there? With that she was gone. I can't say it upsets me. I see the difference now, between the real and permanent and not, all the sorry tricks my mind was playing on itself. There's only one small problem now. She was in such a hurry to leave, *damn*, she took the box.

# Absurd, Berserk

By Philly K.

In mere hours, I will be nothing but an asphyxiated carcass on the cold, cement floor of the cell. I will have used all the oxygen and that's when I will begin choking on my own golden bile. I remember nothing but being mugged in the parking lot and then I woke up in this place. Out of frustration from the absolute boredom bestowed upon me, I quickly get up and bash the dry wall with my weak fist. The pain shooting through my arm from the impact is masked by adrenaline, triggered from a rush of pure anger. I don't want people talking about me in the past tense. "He must have been really cold and thirsty." What I am is hopeless and sad and furious and bored and confused. I rapidly fire three more punches at the dry wall and watch bits of it crumble to the ground, some of it lodged in my glowing, pale-red and bleeding knuckles.

The hole introduces me to a spout of water. Like a starving prisoner in the Holocaust I jump at it with my gaping, torrid mouth. Salt water. I break down in a dry, crying fit at the utter desperation. It transforms into a very sad, sort of sarcastic laughter. It's a defence mechanism. Just something I do when something is so radically absurd that trying to rationalize it is, well, comedic. Ten more raps at the hole in the dry wall. It expands and effectively quickens the rate of undrinkable water pouring into my tiny room like ANGUISH personified. My eyes are wide, red and glistening. Maybe there is something on the outside. Maybe I could swim out of prison as opposed to running.

All my luxuries, all my wretchedness has led me to no other place than here. No other time than now.

The wall is falling apart, augmenting the flow of water, weakening it, and giving me enough room to charge head first into what may ultimately hold nothing for me but a faster death; something I am not so opposed to. It is surprisingly not pitch black. A glimmer of light is seen above, very dimly illuminating my environment. The neurosis is now impossible to ignore. Lung capacity has never been a strong suit of mine. I frantically struggle to get to the surface, my facial expression becoming even more gripped with fear by each passing second. My body propels upwards and I protrude my stinging, chewed up fist through the top of the once stagnant water. I wince from the light, finally unveiled. Gasping for breath, I climb on top of a ledge and peer through the metal bars to my left. Nothing but a dark hallway, leading so far out into the distance that it is eventually engulfed in darkness. Something is breathing. No matter. I climb fearlessly through the gap, made from what seems to have been caused by a bar falling out. I pick up the very same bar, red with rust, and grasp it tightly in my hands. I snarl and rage before flying into a full on sprint towards the beast shrouded in darkness. My great ferocity is greeted by an endless corridor of nothingness. Fooled again. I am not so easily tricked. I continue walking, bar in hand, caution in step.

Plodding forward for several minutes, I have noticed nothing out of the ordinary, other than the fact that as I pass each burned out light bulb, it seems to fill up with life as if it were waiting for me to pass by it. Illuminating nothing but ten feet in front of me and far behind me. Nothing is in my future but ambience. Sounds of changing water pressure and what sounds like wind are my only friend. Dripping

water creeps in the background of it all. Growing louder and louder until I simply cannot handle it and promptly collapse. Breathing heavily and frantically, trying to regain my senses. Rapid panic attacks one after another. They're trying to take me down. I want nothing but for there to be something. Something to kill me. Something to save me. Something to change. Miles and miles of endless straightaway. I have not even the luxury of navigating a maze. Just a straight hallway. Hours have passed. I am too dehydrated to puke, sweat or urinate. I only twitch and convulse momentarily like a rabid feline. I try to think about people I know, or knew. Their specters appear and dissipate in front of me, just as fast as they came. They're mumbling and luring me forward like sirens in a profoundly desolate setting . Promising salvation, as they do.

They don't want me to stop.

They don't want me to give up.

They don't want me to pass out.

Like Tantalus I am deprived of promises made to me, one after another. Don't blame the shadows. Blame yourself, or the world. There is nothing out there but sadness. There is nothing out there but falseness. Time alone is no longer valued. My brain has transformed into a brand new organ. One that is fuelled by longing. It produces only fantastically wild thoughts. I have lost track of time. I am no longer human.

# Our Marriage

## A script

By Michael Quyen Hoang

MARK

Joan? Where are you?

JOAN

I'm over here! Where the fuck are we?

MARK

Looks like an office to me.

JOAN

Well... yeah I can see that, Professor Obvious. What I mean is, how did we go from driving one minute in our car to this place?

MARK

(Jokingly)

Well, maybe we died and this is sort of like the waiting room of heaven.

*A formally dressed man/woman enters the room.*

SECRETARY

That is correct. Welcome to Purgatory. You may stay as long as you wish, but I don't advise that. At the front of the room, you may notice two doors, one with an arrow pointing up and one with its arrow pointing down. I assume you already know what those are for?

JOAN

So we're dead and those doors are for heaven and hell?

SEC

Correct, Ma'am.

MARK

Wait a minute... is this some kind of joke?

SEC

I assure you, sir, that this is not a joke and you are really dead.

JOAN

Then how did we die?

*The secretary to JOAN and MARK's disbelief goes to a filing cabinet and pulls out a file.*

SEC

Let me see... Mark and Joan Lodger. Aged thirty-six and thirty-four. A fatal car crash on the way to Galveston, TX.

JOAN

Oh god... I'm dead.

MARK

That still doesn't explain why Purgatory is an office reception room.

SEC

Oh, well, it's quite simple. How do you think we filter all the new arrivals? With this new office building we can efficiently sort people into heaven and hell.

MARK

Then how do we get out?

SEC

You see, for each individual, or in your case couple, we have a test in mind. One that determines whether or not they go to the door that points up... or to the one pointing down.

JOAN

And what's our test?

SEC

Your test, Mr. and Mrs. Lodger, is as follows. I possess in my hand only one pass for heaven. *She puts the pass on the desk*

It is up to you two what you make of this pass.

*A beat of silence*

JOAN

Don't you dare touch that pass, Mark.

MARK

I wasn't going to.

JOAN

Listen to me... Mark... what if... what if this is a trick?

SEC

I assure you this is not a trick.

MARK

I've had my doubts, but this seems pretty real to me, Joan.

JOAN

Then neither of us is going to heaven without the other. We're going together or not at all.

MARK

To the secretary: Is that possible?

SEC

Hold on a second.

*The secretary pulls out a huge book, presumably the rule book.*

SEC

It says here that one of you must take the pass.

JOAN

I... I can't believe this is happening. You know, we wouldn't be in this stupid predicament if it weren't for you, Mark. You've always got to screw things up. Couldn't even take me on a little trip without getting us into a wreck, could you?

MARK

Oh so it's my fault? How the hell did I have anything to do... with this?

JOAN

I should have listened to Mom.

MARK

What? Oh, come on.

JOAN

Don't marry him, Joan! He's just a big screw-up and he's going to screw up your life. Turns out she was right.

MARK

Oh! So now I'm a screw up?! You're acting like a huge bitch right now.

JOAN

You couldn't even manage to take me on a little trip because something bad has always got to happen with you, Mark. Like that time you broke my fathers foot bowling, and the time we missed the flight to Vegas because you had to go pee, and now, thanks to you, we're here, doing this.

MARK

You know what? I was going to give you the pass but after that speech I don't think I'm going to. Nope, you don't deserve this.

*Mark picks up the pass and threatens to rip it.*

SEC

Sir!

JOAN

You wouldn't.

MARK

And why wouldn't I?

JOAN

Because you're not stupid Mark, thank god for that. You know that the second you rip up that piece of paper we're both going to be burning in hell.

MARK

Oh, I'll do it, Joan.

JOAN

Mark, give me a break. You're the same man I've known in high-school. You couldn't decide what you wanted to order at a restaurant for fuck's sake, but now you're telling me that you're going to decide whether or not you live in paradise or burn in hell for eternity? Put it back on the desk Mark.

MARK

Well fuck.

JOAN

That's what I thought, Mark.

MARK

Well, what the hell are we going to do now?

JOAN

I don't know Mark. But we're going together.

SEC

You may need to speed this up a bit; you don't have all day, you know.

MARK

We know.

JOAN

One day you're alive, the next you're dead.

MARK

Tell me about it.

JOAN

I didn't even get a chance to say good-bye. All the shit you thought mattered.

MARK

It doesn't matter.

JOAN

You think you have it figured out, you know? You thought you figured out what actually mattered. That's what I thought, and now that I'm here I just don't know anymore.

MARK

I... I think you should have it Joan.

JOAN

Are you just saying that because it's the right thing to do? Because I'm your wife and that's what a husband would do for his wife?

MARK

Well...

JOAN

Because all of that doesn't matter Mark. Because we're dead. We're not on planet Earth anymore, we're on the steps of something bigger than any of those things.

MARK

That's not it.

JOAN

Then why Mark?

MARK

I... I don't know. You're just a better person than me, Joan.

JOAN

How do you know that Mark? Maybe I've been hiding things from you.

MARK

Have you?

JOAN

I don't know, Mark. What if I was? Would you still give me the pass?

MARK

That depends on what you were hiding from me.

JOAN

You didn't answer me, would you still give me the pass knowing that I've been hiding things from you. Things that would have wrecked this relationship had you known when we were still alive.

MARK

Well, I don't know...

JOAN

Then why would you offer me the pass?

MARK

Because Joan, you're my wife, for god sakes.

JOAN

You think I can't handle fire and brimstone... is that it Mark?

MARK

No. No, that's not it.

JOAN

We're in purgatory Mark, in a few moments neither of us are going to be seeing each other. Forever. Things that mattered back when we were alive don't matter now. You have to understand that Mark.

MARK

It's... it's because I've cheated on you Joan.

*Beat, they stop in their tracks.*

JOAN

What?

MARK

On those business trips I take. You know, you'd never find out...

JOAN

Thank god I never found out about it, Mark, because I would have ripped your dick out.

MARK

That's why I can't take the pass Joan. I hope you forgive me.

JOAN

I can't hold a grudge Mark, I'm dead. We're both dead, for god sakes.

SEC

I'm sorry but the boss doesn't like when he overhears his name too much. Can we wrap this up?

JOAN

Unfortunately, I cant say I've been honest either Mark.

MARK

Oh god... you... cheated on me, didn't you?

JOAN

With your brother John.

MARK

With my brother? Jesus christ.

SEC

Ahem.

JOAN

So I guess we both deserve to burn in hell.

*Beat of silence then Mark and Joan slowly hold hands and face the Secretary.*

SEC

Have we come to a decision?

MARK

Yes.

SEC

What is it?

MARK

I love you, Joan.

JOAN

I love you, too.

(blackout)



# Preserve

## By Ferric Suarez

### Part 1

His body seemed like it was badly put together. His arms looked like they were of different lengths, with hands that seemed to be borrowed from two people. His legs were of different thickness. It was just subtle enough to catch through his old ill-fitted clothes.

He spoke, a nervous low grumble of a voice that matched with his bearded, grizzled face:

“Where you from? There’s no people or, you know, towns from here. I mean, close by. You must have come,” he gulped the liquor in his glass, “a long way”.

I scratched my face. Looking at his long dirty beard made my own stubble itch.

“I’m from back east. I’m just traveling, making my way across the country. Mostly hitchhiking.”

He gulped before he spoke. “God, bet you’re tired.” His tongue looked like a slug.

I drank my own drink, a yellow hard liquor that dried my mouth out. The man’s house was as strange as he was; everything was old, rotting, broken, and smelled of dust. The sofa in which I sat was cracking on the edges, leaking stuffing from its wounds. On the mantle of a long unused fireplace behind him stood a picture of him that looked nothing like the man before me. It could have been happier, healthier times. Next to that sat a picture of a young blonde man who looked like one of those old paintings of angels in heaven. Both pictures were discolored and growing mold. There was an empty frame on the far right of the mantle.

Soft piano notes drifted in from the next room, a sad song. I got a little depressed when I heard it.

“Who plays that song?” I asked, assuming it was a recording.

His eyes widened, as if he had forgotten to put out a fire. He stood up and motioned me towards the door to the next room.

“My son! I didn’t show him to you! Come with me, he plays the piano for me.”

I followed him down a chokingly tight hallway into the bright room. It was sparsely decorated, with a grand piano and a chair dominating it. In the chair sat a young man, about my age, dressed in white.

He turned his face to me, but it was unlike the young angel in the picture. At a glance, things were similar, but there was something off. He looked dirtier than the angelic boy, and everything about him was thicker. There were wrinkles scattered throughout his skin, deep but isolated, tiny canyons between plains of smooth flesh. It was unnerving, but I stashed my fear beneath my smile.

“So good to meet you! Your Father let me stay the night.”

The son looked to his father with a barely discernible gaze of disapproval. He turned to me, feigning a smile.

“I’m Clarence. Might I ask your name?”

“Edgar.”

His smile became a real one. “Oh! Wonderful name.”

Clarence turned back to his piano and resumed playing.

"Hey, drink with me," said the father. We went into the kitchen.

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It was a bit cleaner in there, but dust still covered everything. The father brought out a bottle of liquor and poured himself a shot glass of it and one for me as well. The label of the bottle was long peeled off.

"Why you on the road?"

The answer was simple, one I had narrowed down.

"People."

"Heh. What about people? I'm people."

I downed my glass. He poured me another sooner than it hit the table. He had already done two.

"No, people, not all people, you know. I can deal with some, but the city, the masses, I couldn't deal with it. It's, what," I struggled for words, struggled to not say that I wished for a holocaust the world would never stop crying for, "It's overwhelming. Sometimes, you would just look at them all, their sweaty mouths and eyes, and just wonder what the hell is wrong with them," I told myself to breathe, "So I left. Maybe it was stupid, but I don't feel bitter and sick all the time now."

The father gave a sad and broken chuckle.

"You sound like my wife. God Bless Her Soul."

He took a third shot. I felt relieved I had left out my opinions on people's various gods.

He looked at the door that led to his son and the piano. Light from inside seeped through the bottom of it.

"I've lived here for so long. Me and my son." He was looking at the door but it seemed that his mind's eye was taking in an entirely different view. His hand was gripping the shot glass and his voice was slurred. "It's a wonder that he still talks to me after what I," he paused and something horrible happened in his eyes, "what we did to her. She was so intelligent. That's why she moved us all out here in the middle of nowhere. She felt too smart to be in any town."

He gulped down yet another shot. He was starting to sound like every drunk I'd ever known.

"I would hit him, oh God how I would hit him. My life was in the city. I need people. I hit him, and I pushed her so far away. I would write letters to my friends and old boss in the city, but they never wrote back. I took it out on him and his mother. 'Why are you doing this to us George,' she asked me all the time. My broken life."

He seemed to realize what he had been saying and stopped himself. He knew he could not cut it off so abruptly without increasing the discomfort between us.

"She left us, you know, eventually," he said. He put the glass top on his glass bottle. Even the clink of glass on glass sounded old, rotted.

The old father, he had said his name was George, had become a pathetic slob in my eyes now. A man who obviously valued his sham friendships, with the sort of people I was running from, over the relationship with a wife he did not understand. A simpleton, a drunk, and a child abuser as well. I tried to put on a face of emotional distance to hide my feelings of disgust. Perhaps before I would have felt some pity.

"Let me show you the room. It was my wife's study, so I hope you don't mind that it's full of her books. She put a bed in there."

We went up a flight of creaking stairs. Clarence's piano could be heard even from here; it was the same sad song.

At the top of the stairs, a knotted rope dangled from the ceiling. The lower half of it was stained dark. I reached up to take a closer look at the stains, but George pushed me towards one of the two bedrooms. I wondered if it was a pull-down ladder to an attic, and I wondered if there was a faint feeling of anger in George's push.

"Please. Don't mess around with that. It's my son's attic. He doesn't like anyone up there."

I nodded. He opened the door to his wife's study. Stacks of books made the floor sink a little. As I made my way towards the bed, I noticed this was the cleanest room in the house. I could breathe in here without that feeling of suffocating. They cleaned it often.

The walls were painted black and hung with disturbing paintings of people being tortured, orgies in Roman palaces, blurred portraits of screaming popes, grinning devils, and the occasional map of the ancient world colored with the claimed territories of lost empires.

George waved his hand at the room. "You can read any of the books, just please put them back where you found them." He looked slightly embarrassed. "I know it's dumb. But please..."

"It's no problem George. I understand." I tried making the pity real in me, but I failed.

His eyes darted around. He grumbled something and closed the door.

I thought to myself, *I should have slept in some woods nearby*. Tension and awkwardness lay under every surface in the house. Every word spoken or movement made by the pair screamed hidden meanings, blocked wishes. I at least had a brief respite from it in the study.

But even here, I wondered if either George or Clarence was uncomfortable with me in the private quarters of their lost matriarch. This was her place, her total environment.

Part of me knew that I should not be in this house, least of all in this room. George was an unstable man, a drunk who used to beat his son. It was in no way a sure bet that I was safe here. The other part of me wanted to watch the father and his son for a while longer, nevermind the discomfort. I knew that there was something to see in them. Some diamond key buried in their life of mud and shit. Mostly I was afraid to open the door of the room. I didn't want to see something I should not see.

There was a knock on the door. My nerves tightened in my body, and my hairs stood.

I opened the door. It was Clarence. I hadn't realized he had stopped playing his piano.

"What did my Father tell you?" he said. No hello, or good evening. His heavenly voice offered only stern questioning.

"About what?" I asked back, playing dumb. He rolled his eyes quickly, annoyed.

"Did he tell you anything about *me*?" he asked while walking into the room. He sat down on a stack of books. I was tired and uncomfortable and wasn't in the mood to talk to him, but I told myself to be polite.

His deep, scattered wrinkles looked like stab wounds with no blood, stab wounds from a crooked knife with a wavy blade.

"He was drunk, so I didn't take a lot of what he said seriously." I didn't mean that.

"But he did *say* something then. What?"

I walked from the doorway to the bed and sat down, so I wouldn't see his face when I said it.

"He said he would beat you, because he was miserable here."

He laughed an airy laugh. "That's what he says to make himself feel better. He beat me because he loves me." He ran his finger along one of the wrinkles on his thigh.

I did not want to be having this conversation.

"No, listen to me. Don't make that face. I know you might think it a tad bizarre. It was his way of bringing us close together. By hitting me, he wanted to make me feel distant from him, so I could then attempt to make him love me, to stop the beatings."

His voice did not waver from its angelic tone once.

"It's a bait game. We were drawn closer together through it. Now that my mother is dead, it's just us." His finger kept prodding that wrinkle, but it didn't smooth out beneath it.

"He said your mother left."

He shook his head and turned it to look at me. "Oh no. She cut her wrists in the bathtub." He giggled and turned his face back to the wall beside the door. "No loss. The bitch. I know my father only kept her around to bring us together through our mutual hatred of her. By pushing her away, he gave me the cue to treat her the same way. Being cruel to her was another way to impress my father, and her death! Her death bound us together. And we have been bound to this house forever."

I was desperate to leave the house at this point. I was convinced that Clarence was insane, and that leaving at that moment might trigger something dangerous in him.

"He loves me. He only has to give in and show me. I've waited long enough, don't you think? I've done enough on my side." The finger he had been running on the thigh wrinkle was now knuckle-deep in it. I stifled a scream.

I decided to leave in the night, while they were sleeping. For now, despite the impoliteness, I had to get Clarence out of the room. Not for a second more could I bear him.

"Clarence I have to sleep. Gotta be on the road tomorrow."

"So soon?" he asked as I gently pushed him in the direction of the door.

"Yes, I have places to go, deadlines to meet. Can't stay forever. Sorry. Goodnight."

"Goodni-" I closed the door on him.

*What the hell is wrong with these people?*

There was a little switch on the knob that locked the door. I turned it and sat on the bed, waiting for the noises of the father and son to stop. Silence meant sleep, and sleep meant escape, for me at least.

\*\*\*

I listened to the door until night fell. I opened it to avoid creaking. The door to George's room was open, the bed within was empty. He was awake and somewhere in the house. I thought of going back, turning around and staying in the room until the morning and leaving on good terms, but the image of Clarence's finger digging into his canyon-wrinkle changed my mind. I would not stay.

I made my way down the stairs, down the hall where I remember the front door being. At the end, I only found the door to Clarence's piano room. Light spilled from the bottom of it. I turned around fast, but quiet. I heard faint words inside.

George's voice was barely audible.

"I love you son."

Back at the foot of the stairs, I went down the other hallway. There was a door to my left that said "Basmint" on it when I struggled to read it in the dark. Crooked dumb letters mirroring the dumbness of the man who wrote it. There was another door into the kitchen, but there was no front door.

"Damn," I muttered under my breath. I went back to the stairs to look around. I went to the living room. There was a blank wall with a door frame. I felt for the knob but there was no door. It was like someone had broken the house into pieces and stuck them back the wrong way.

George screamed in the dark.

"No!"

Then Clarence.

"Father, please!"

I panicked and ran back to where the stairs were, but they were not there anymore. There was only the hallway towards the Basement. I turned and saw the other hallway. The piano room door slammed open. George stood there and Clarence was in his arms. He screamed for him, face pointed straight ahead.

In the light of the piano room behind him, I saw his son's ripped and shredded neck. There was no blood, but I could see ropes of muscle and arteries in silhouette, spread out from the wound like a paper fan. His head hung slack and dead, eyes rolled back in a cliché of death. My nerves tightened up my back like thousands of insect legs.

George ran in my direction, but could not see me in the dark. I hid in the living room doorway. He was baring his teeth and making a sound that was breathing and yelling at once, like someone in a vivid nightmare. Clarence's face looked the color of dirty mop water, but it could have been shadow.

He ran past me and opened the door to the Basement, his misshapen body hurling Clarence's corpse down the stairs. A smell of sweat, sawdust, and feces poured out of there. It stunk unlike anything I had ever smelled. I could taste it in the air, the sticky dust. It nauseated and warmed me as it billowed past. The slam of the door hurt my ears. He fell against it and collapsed on the floor, curling up into himself. His cries were part discordant scream, part whining drone. It sounded horrible and disgusting, like random cries of many people strung together.

In the living room behind me were the stairs, right where they had not been before. I ran up them and into the room of the mother-wife, locking the door behind me and staring at it while curled up on the corner of the bed until drowsiness finally took me over and I slept uneasily. I dreamed of the basement door getting bigger, the unseen space behind it getting hollower. It didn't open.

\*\*\*

Eggs.

Cheese.

Ham.

Breakfast smells awoke me. The little switch on the doorknob was horizontal, which meant the door was unlocked. Someone had opened it.

I left the room and climbed down the stairs. Everything in the house was in its place: the doors, the hallways, the stairs. Everything led to where it was supposed to. I ran to the front door.

There was a thick deadbolt with a heavy combination lock sealing it. It made

deep scraping sounds when I pulled at it, but always stayed shut with an equally deep click. The numbers on the lock were eroded by years of rubbing fingers.

“Edgar is that you? Come have breakfast with us.” It was George, sounding sober.

I tried the door again in some stupid hope that the lock would bust, but it was firm; it didn’t even rattle.

“We have ham.”

My stomach churned at the smell of it. I hadn’t eaten in a day.

I walked to the kitchen, telling myself I would just ask for the key to the front door and leave.

*That’s it, I told myself, just the key.*

My stomach felt like it was eating itself.

I swung the kitchen door and saw George sitting down, eating a plate of cheesy eggs with thick, caramelized ham slices beside them.

“Sit down Edgar, or they’ll get cold.”

I was gobbling the food before my ass hit the seat. George chuckled. The eggs were splitting into smaller fluffy chunks at the movements of my tongue, the ham ripping into bits and strands but thick with baked honey, and all of it was hot, so cooked and ready and filling to my starving mouth. When I leaned back to enjoy it, chewing with ecstasy, I got a better view of the table. There were three plates.

“Clarence, come eat your damn breakfast already!”

The door opened and in walked Clarence.

My teeth clenched. The food had made me forget why I wanted to leave so much. Looking at Clarence’s face, even more wrinkled than before, I remembered his split neck, arteries fanned out in the light of his piano room, George screaming, the moving house.

I stayed quiet.

“Good morning,” Clarence paused, “Edgar?”

I nodded.

We ate breakfast. When we finished, I wiped my mouth and turned to George.

“I have to be leaving today.”

He looked up from his plate.

“Right now?”

“Yes. Now.” No more waiting. I had to leave.

He showed me to the door. The lock was gone, not even screw holes from the deadbolt were left behind. I shrugged that off because I was leaving and wouldn’t have to deal with anything in the damn house. I waved goodbye to both of them and thanked them.

I noticed then that the grass around the house had died. The death extended far enough that you could put another house on it. This was on all sides.

I set down the road, my thumb sticking out.

\*\*\*

Hours passed. No car.

Daylight had gone away. In the all-shadow of night, my breath was a tiny fog cloud before me. With every breath, warmth escaped my body and I grew colder. The heavy clothes I wore that were supposed to keep me warm were soaked in coldness, only serving to keep the chill closer to me. I couldn’t escape it. It clung to the back of my arms and spread to my shoulders, even nesting on my scalp. The air was so cold it dried my eyes out, and I could only squint.

From where I was, George's house was a speck of light far downhill, and my squinted eyes reduced it to barely a twinkle. The road I was on lead deep into the woods, though the side road that had been there was gone. I could not find the highway exit I had come from. Whatever was in the house changing things, hiding things; it had followed me here.

The woods around me were cleaved by the road like one of the wrinkles on Clarence's face. Narrow breezes led me to a spot not too far from the line of pavement and dirt. Something was there. A person. A woman.

"Hello? Miss, do you have a car? I need to get out of here."

She turned into the trees, so I followed her. She knelt down on a spot between two smaller trees and vanished.

I stared at the spot in the dirt where the grass was a thin patch. I held myself against the cold, rubbing my arms with my hands. Some part of me knew I should be waiting by the road, but I felt that there was something important at this spot. It was a compulsion, I swear. Nothing could make me rationalize it. It was uncontrollable.

I kneeled and began tearing at the thin grass. I pushed the dirt I unsettled out of the way as I dug for whatever it was that called me. My fingers clawed through grimy soil and fist-sized rocks until I reached something recognizable. When I did, it felt like I had taken a hammer to each of my fingertips. One of the nails was bleeding from underneath.

Cars passed behind me, but I didn't care at this point. I was waist deep in the hole I had dug, and I had to bring the thing I found out of it. I *had* to.

Behind the mold growing on the inside of the clear plastic of the bag I dragged out was a bushel of blonde hair above a long navy blue dress. Thinly veiled by the hair was a rotted face still expressing the sadness it had died with.

Even rotting you could see how pretty she had been.

She spoke to me. She said, "Go back. You have to see them, see what they do. Over and over again."

I should have been scared. This kind of thing wasn't supposed to be happening, and I should have been terrified at her moving corpse lips speaking to me, fogging up the plastic. I wasn't though.

All I did was, I said, "Okay."

I walked back to George's house. Cars were on the road again, but I didn't try to stop them. They came close and blinded me, then passed and left me in darkness, only George and Clarence's house serving as a beacon. As I walked, it felt like someone was walking behind me, but I kept turning around and there wasn't.

When I reached the house and walked up the porch to the door, I heard the loud rustle of a plastic bag behind me, and the feeling of being shadowed was gone. I knocked on the door of knotty wood. It looked like it would never open, standing like an immovable giant.

It did open but, like when I first arrived, George didn't step outside. He lingered in the shadows of his indoors.

"You're back. What happened?"

"George, yeah, uh, No cars would pick me up, so you think maybe I could stay here again, tonight? 'Cause I don't want to sleep in the woods you know. It's a bitch of a freezer out here now." I bit my tongue to shut up. If you're too nervous, you ramble a lot. It's best to bite your tongue and shut your mouth once you say the least you can.

He nodded, his tangled beard moving firmly along with the rest of his head.

“Sure you can. Hopefully you’ll stay until lunch this time.” His smile looked tired and forced, like someone had made a joke at a funeral.



# Rivers

By Chris Bishop

We set off in our wooden canoe going down Bad Axe River in Vernon County, Wisconsin. Wetsby, to be exact, which is home to Dexter Bean, who is a Nascar driver and some pathologist whose name I can't remember. We went southwestward down the river, and passed all of the nature Wisconsin has to offer (at least the five or so miles it had to offer down the river, which, to be honest, isn't very much). We flowed into its other fork and, eventually, the Mississippi River.

Now, we had never planned to go down this river. We had never planned to go this far, but nobody had bothered to say stop and still, nobody spoke up. So onward down the river we continued.

We left Wisconsin some time a couple days after we started. We all had silently agreed to continue this ride until someone saw fit to say stop. We all lived with our families, our parents and sisters and brothers, so if anything happened to any of us, someone would notice. Someone had probably already noticed we were gone by now, surely they had. But on we went without a care in the world.

Minneapolis was beautiful from the middle of the Mighty Mississippi. We saw Burlington after we passed through Winnoa, Lacrosse and Dubuque, and we all wondered out loud if this was the Burlington where the Burlington Coat Factory originated. We all decided it must've been, because how many other Burlingtons could there be?

It was near this point we lost track of where we were. Not that we really knew before, we knew not how to recognize the states by their shapes or by their cities, and after we passed through Minnesota and Nebraska, we lost our map. Still, none of us wanted to turn back now. We had gone so far and had seen so much. The beauty of the wilderness along the shores at night. The stars shining shakily off the glass top water. In the more shallow regions where the water cleared, schools of fish we couldn't identify swimming away from our boat.

We passed by barges and steam boats near cities carrying passengers. We navigated through bays and inlets with our paddles, lucking out most of the time and heading in the right direction to head southward toward the ocean, the destination we all had decided simultaneously upon beginning our voyage.

We stopped only for food, water and to buy magazines. We had only the money in our wallets, which thankfully proved to be enough, each other, and the river. And for months now, that is all we had known.

One morning, we woke up and were surrounded by light and the smell of salt. We had missed it. Our arrival at the ocean, and the sunrise over the unreachable horizon.

Then we remembered we had nothing to do now that we were here and no way to get back home.

# The Noise

By Cretin

The young couple ran. They continued running until the dying screams of the rest of the caravan faded into the distance. They would have made it past the toll station to sweet freedom and peaceful sleep at night, they really would. If only...

They continued running until they came to an abandoned mine. They stood at the threshold, unwilling to go in, mindful of the history surrounding the place. The stories of collapses and faults that, despite their adherence to facts and lack of legendary ghosts, still managed to do their part to keep away inquisitive minds. The couple shivered in the freezing fog of morning until a noise from behind them caused them to start.

They ran into the mine without looking back.

The scruffy couple, dressed in rags and shawls and wool, became even scruffier and similar looking as they plunged deeper into the dusty, coal-blackened mine. Deeper and deeper they went, pausing less and less frequently to consider turning back. Always, such stops were interrupted by the noise, the noise of pursuit.

The couple became more and more frantic as time passed and the noise grew closer, ever closer. The woman, really more of a girl, was dragging behind, her hand clutched tight in his. She spoke to him, between gasps of air as they ran.

"I don't think it's the soldiers."

She was met with silence.

"If it had been soldiers that attacked us, there would have been gunshots, not just screams that woke us."

Her husband remained silent.

"It's him again. It's our broth—"

"Be quiet, Greta!" snapped Hana, the husband.

He stopped and sat her down gently against a wall.

She was pregnant.

He really didn't think she should be running in her condition, but it wasn't as if they had a choice. The noise came again, but they did not rise. They were both too tired. They both sat there and caught their breath. Greta spoke again.

"Then it is true. It is Gregor."

Hana stared numbly at his shoes. Finally, he spoke.

"For the longest time, I did not wish to believe it was true. I preferred to delude myself, to believe that it was mere misfortune that followed us, and not that *thing*."

She took his hand in hers and rested them on her stomach.

"You know, I was going to name this one after him," she said softly, attempting to comfort her husband, to ease the tension of the situation.

Their eyes met, and that small comfort did seem to help them. The brown tresses that framed her green eyes and freckly face took him back to their home, a home free of worry and death, and fear. And he, once a mere boy, had come into his own on the fearful journey they had taken together. His mussed-up black hair hung over deep blue eyes and a strong chin.

"WERE YOU NOW?"

Their heads snapped around and took in the figure blocking the path back to

the entrance. They hadn't even heard him approach, not that that mattered now.

His voice perfectly matched his physical form. Like him, it was cold, and persistent, like a drill. And like a drill, it would occasionally snag on certain words and come out jarring and unpleasant.

His skin was a slug-grey and mottled in places by fire and flesh wounds. No blood came from him. No fluid of any kind. Every wound he sustained was a flesh wound because that was all his body was, a cheap suit that barely contained him. A bottle for the icky, six legged thing that was his spirit.

He had once been Greta's brother, and thus Hana's brother-in-law. But Gregor had died. Gregor had been gunned down in 1922 by Russian death squads. Yet here he was.

His eyes were black and empty pits in his face, and his teeth had become sharp, tested as they were on an almost constant basis by the red fruits of his labors.

*"I MEAN I MEAN, WHAT IF IF, IT IT WAS A GIRL? THAT WOULD WOULD BE A PREEEEEEETTY SORE DEAL. HA HA. HA."*

He, it, shambled toward them. Gregor, the brother. Gregor, the ghoul. Gregor the friend. Gregor, the monster.

Hana and Greta got slowly to their feet and began to back away. He wouldn't charge them until they turned and actually began to run, but if he got too close, the farce would end, and he would stop pretending to see them as anything other than a meal.

They ran. His footsteps pounded behind them. He couldn't push himself very fast, but he was relentless, and they would tire long before he did. They turned many sharp corners and overturned mining carts and destabilized piles of spoil as they passed, so as to slow him down. Or perhaps bury him again.

Their short rest hadn't done them enough good, and it was beginning to show in Greta's labored movements. Hana pushed on, picking her up and carrying her in his arms when she could no longer move on her own.

They turned another corner and nearly tumbled into the abyss before them. A line of carts waited on tracks that bridged the bottomless valley. Without a word, Hana helped Greta into the cart and began to push.

Gregor skidded around the bend behind them and pedaled at the ground, the boots he had been buried in slipping at the soft earth covering the slick stone. He came up behind Hana and made as if to grab him, but missed as the cart got underway.

As they sailed away into the darkness, Gregor howled with rage and clutched at his head, stamping his feet and gnashing his teeth.

He stopped and turned, eyeing the remaining mine carts. The idea came slowly, knotted as it was in traffic with the worms and the ants and the hungry madness of undeath.

Hana consoled Greta. She relived her brother's death a little bit every time she saw him again.

Hana kissed her. It seemed like they had never gotten a chance to do so while their lives were still normal, manageable; containing no more stress than it took to stoke a fire or help prepare dinner. She opened her eyes and hugged him. They remained this way for a few seconds, before her grip tightened and her breath caught in her throat.

She tried to make-believe she wasn't hearing it, but the noise was

unmistakable. The clattering of a second cart was drawing nearer.

"Oh god," she murmured under her breath, beginning to cry at the hopelessness of it all.

Soon enough, the mine-cart carrying Gregor pulled into view. He was shrieking with horrid laughter, jerking his cart about to go faster and sending tremors throughout the track-rail structure. All Hana and Greta could do was watch in horror as he drew right alongside them.

Hana remained with his back to him, holding Greta tight.

Hana's eyes darted from side to side and took in the tracks ahead. He waited a moment, counting under his breath as Gregor leered and rubbed his hands with a noise like sandpaper. Then he stood up. He beckoned to Gregor mockingly.

Gregor snarled and reached out to strangle Hana.

Gregor's outstretched hands collided with a lever set in the tracks, and with a creak and a moan, his prey sped away from him.

Gregor's roar was drowned out by the squeal of breaks as Hana and Greta's cart came to a halt in a new tunnel, set in the cliff face of the subterranean valley.

They scrambled out and hurried down the length of it. They knew enough not to think themselves safe. They hadn't been safe in a caravan surrounded by soldiers from Ukraine and Russia, and they wouldn't be safe here. All they could do was run.

*"GRETA."*

The voice echoed evilly. They could hear stones loosening and tumbling into the darkness as it chased them, no doubt spidering over sheer surfaces. They quickened their pace as much as they were able.

*"GRETA. WHERE ARE YOU GRETA? I'M COMING TO FIND YOU GRETA."*

The tunnel ended abruptly in a heavy cast-iron door. The door was circular and had a crank in the middle for opening it. Hana set to work.

*"WHY ARE YOU MAKING ME HURT YOU I LOVE YOU."*

There was a crunch as two booted feet landed in gravel at the mouth of their tunnel.

Greta joined her husband, as tears streamed down their cheeks and they wrenched at the rusty iron.

The uneven steps quickened. The ghoul stepped in and out of the pools of lamplight as it pounded closer. The only tiny grain of hope left was that the presence of lanterns suggested the iron door was another exit, tended perhaps by an entrepreneur who wanted to reclaim the mine. That was it as far as hope went.

*"DON'T RUN FROM ME!"*

It leapt.

Hana turned in slow motion and shielded Greta with his body, screaming silent defiance at death through his clenched teeth and wide eyes.  
And then-

Blessedly, there was peace. But as their vision cleared and the light-blindness subsided, Hana and Greta found themselves both alive and unharmed. In front of them, mere inches away, lay the somewhat diminished and completely lifeless corpse of Gregor.

The light of day had burned away the obscuring fog and the open door behind them let in a powerful beam of sunlight. Strong hands reached in and hauled Hana and Greta to their feet and out the door, while a few other figures stepped past them to

examine the body.

After so much excitement, the young couple had become numb. They were asked questions and they answered them as best they could. Why were they in the mine? They had been running? Why were they running? They were being chased. By whom? The dead man over there? Why was he chasing them? They did not know, he must have been some kind of murderer, or madman. How did he die? They didn't know, they were just glad he had.

With no more information forthcoming, the foreman overseeing the restoration of the mine had no choice but to let them go. He pointed them to a nearby river where several great barges were loading and unloading passengers and goods. The area around this entrance to the mine had the makings of a newly founded village, but neither Hana nor Greta wished to stay.

They boarded one of the departing barges and watched as the corpse of their brother was wrapped in a tarp and stacked with the few other dead on a separate barge. They hugged each other tightly until they had sailed completely out of sight.

The day continued more or less as planned. Surveyors accompanied laborers into the mine to see if there was anything worth salvaging. One of the dockworkers swore when he stepped on a nail. Families arrived seeking money and a new place to live and were directed where they could stay by the foreman. Morning turned to midday, and midday turned to evening.

It was just as the sun slipped below the horizon that the trouble began anew. A stirring was sighted among the corpse pile on barge #3 and a deckhand was sent over with a stevedore hook on a pole to chase away whatever vermin thought to defile the dead before they could be properly buried in a churchyard.

He leaned over the rustling shape with his lantern held aloft, and beheld the last face he would ever see. The powerful grey hand had already shot out and crushed his skull by the time the deckhand realized what was going on. The lantern dropped from his hand and spilled its burning oil. The dry moldering corpses quickly caught fire and then the whole barge was alight. The alarm was quickly raised and the line tying the boat to the dock was cut, and the burning hulk drifted out into the wide river and sunk.

Miles away, Gregor freed himself of the ropes, tarps, driftwood and corpses of the wrecked barge and managed to leave the strong current that had carried him so far. He clambered onto the shore and vomited the freezing water out of his lungs and stomach.

He looked skyward and his empty sockets perceived what no living human without a telescope would be able to see, the Star Wormwood. It was the thing that had shone down on the day of his death and bathed his grave in burning light, a burning light that filled his brain with hunger and his muscles with vigor.

Even now he could feel its pull, feel it restoring his ravaged body to a sort of life just as the rays of the morning sun had robbed him of it. He looked toward the darkened horizon and smelled them. He smelled his family. The last faces he had beheld before dying. The faces he had to consume to become whole again. They too had been blessed by Wormwood, but they had not been able to feel or even notice its gifts without dying as he had.

Nevertheless, it was that same burning light that suffused them, that called to him even at this distance. He would share his gift with them, oh yes.

And then they could share their gift with the whole world. It was only a matter of time.

# Jack & Camille

By Joe Brown

When Jack woke up Sunday morning he found that he couldn't shit. He reckoned that something had gone wrong in the passage between his stomach and his asshole. He sat on the toilet for what seemed like hours. His gut caused him great pain. He wailed and heaved, trying to push something out of his ass like a woman in labor, but all his exertions went to nothing.

He began to feel nauseous and a little dizzy. He picked up his cellphone and dialed the last number he had called.

"Help me!" he cried over the phone, "I can't shit! I think I'm choking on my own shit! Why is my ass trying to kill me?"

The voice over the line said something but he was too engrossed in pain to recognize whose voice it was. They said they would come over and that's what Jack needed. He pulled his pants up and limped out of the bathroom. Walking was painful. It felt like he was trying to walk with a beehive shoved up his ass. There were some stairs leading directly from his bathroom that he must try to get down. He tottered down them like a tight rope walker and collapsed on the couch.

Some time later there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he yelled.

"It's locked!" the voice answered.

Oh fuck, he thought. He rolled off the couch but couldn't stand up directly. He crawled over to the door commando style and opened his door.

His ex-girlfriend was there.

"Holy shit!" she screamed, "you do look like hell. Should I call an ambulance?"

"Wait, what the fuck are you doing here?" He asked from the floor.

"You TOLD me to come over!"

"I didn't ask you for shit, whore, go away." He tried to reach for the door knob to slam the door shut, but couldn't even reach it. He looked like some wounded animal flailing around on the floor. She groaned, and gently lifted him up and led him over to the couch.

"So what's wrong?"

"I don't need your help."

"What's wrong?"

"Just go away."

"You're being a real asshole for someone who might be dying."

"This is all your fault. You broke my heart and now my body is shutting down in despair."

"Oh GOD!" she threw her arms up in the air, "maybe I should leave you here to die." She started to get up, but Jack grabbed at her leg to stop her.

"No wait, don't go-" She was going to ignore him, but Jack let out a terrible howl and clutched at his stomach, "my stomach, it hurts...I can't shit and-"

"Oh man, I was watching the lifetime channel yesterday and someone with the same problem. His small intestine ruptured and he choked on his own shit and-"

"FUCK!"

"I'm going to take you to the doctor's..."

"It's Sunday, what doctor is on call?"

"Then the hospital..."

"I have no insurance."

"Laxatives?"

"I'm allergic."

"Well SHIT, Jack what do you want me to do?"

"I don't know..."

"My sister's boyfriend is a doctor, he can help you if I give him a call."

"Are you talking about Thomas?"

"Yeah."

"Thomas is a veterinarian, he can't help me."

"What are you talking about? Even real doctors operate on pigs before they move to humans. Can't be that much different right? Don't you remember that episode of Grey's Anatomy?"

"I hated that show."

"See? You're so blunt, even when you could be dead. Do you really want your last words to be so negative?"

"Who said anything about last words?" "You're so argu-"

"Shouldn't you be doing SOMETHING!?"

She groaned and pulled out her cell phone. She gave her sister a call but there was no answer.

"There wasn't an answer, but I'm pretty sure that she has some medicine so I'm going to go run by her place. Is there anything you need before I leave?"

"Wait!" Jack called out, "Don't leave...please don't leave."

"Jack, what do you want me to do? I can't sit here and hold your hand through this, you're sick and you need help!"

"I...I don't want to be alone with all this...pain."

The words sounded so pathetic to him that he regretted saying them. Another feeling began to form in his congested and twisted stomach. She gave him a look that he hated, but secretly longed for at the same time. She was an angel, he thought, a real saint.

"I don't want to choke on my own shit and die. Here. Alone."

"I'll stay for a few more minutes and try to call back, but if she doesn't call back then I'm going to get you some medicine."

She sat down on the couch with his legs stretching across her lap. She looked around the apartment with a disgusted look, discovering how unkempt it was.

"JESUS CHRIST! No wonder you're sick, just look at this place."

There were paper plates and empty coke cans thrown all over the floor. A stack of empty pizza boxes rested in a dark corner with several empty 12 packs of coke on top of them. There was a terrible smell in the whole place. Jack seemed to notice the filth for the first time as well.

Jack tried to think of an excuse but couldn't find one. The only truth was that when Camille had left he had given up, as men often do. If he could not fill his now empty apartment with love and companionship, he would fill it with garbage.

"Have you been living off of pizza and fast food? Don't you cook? I know you can cook, you lazy little shit."

"I uh..."

"Can you eat anything?"

"No, it feels like I've eaten too much but I haven't really eaten anything."

“What about something to drink? You shouldn't be dehydrated. I'll fix you some water.”

She got up from the couch and walked into the kitchen. The next thing Jack heard was a terrible scream.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT SMELL???”

Jack heard some frantic searching, a crashing of pots and pans and then he heard her scream once again.

“HOW LONG HAVE THESE FUCKING BANANAS BEEN HERE? JESUS FUCKING CHRIST IT SMELLS LIKE DEAD DOG DICK!”

The next thing he heard was the opening of a window in the kitchen, and Camille chucking the rancid brown bundle into the backyard.

“JESUS, DON'T YOU EVER OPEN YOUR WINDOWS?”

She ran out of the kitchen and frantically went from window to window opening all of them. Light poured into Jack's apartment for what felt like the first time. The light revealed further how messy the floors were, and the gusts of fresh air breathed new life into Jack's self-created mausoleum. Jack felt disgust for himself, genuine disgust. I deserve to choke on my own shit, he thought.

“I CAN'T TAKE THIS!” Camille was in the living room, hand covering her mouth, with an expression of shock and horror. “I NEED TO FUCKING CLEAN THIS PLACE!” She rushed upstairs to the neglected closet where the cleaning supplies were. But Jack hadn't bought cleaning supplies since Camille left, so there's nothing in there but a half empty box of garbage bags. Camille grabbed what garbage bags there were and ran down the stairs. She began to stuff things into the garbage bag indiscriminately. She cleaned with bitter outrage, wailing aloud at every rotten slice of pizza and moaning at all of Jack's pathetic nastiness. Jack found it attractive. He liked the way she moved her body while cleaning. Camille had long slender legs and that worked for Jack because Jack liked legs. He remembered how he would slide his hand up and down her bare pale legs after they made love. It was strange. Just a week ago Camille said she was never coming back, but here she was cleaning and taking care of him as if nothing had really happened. It was a bizarre picture of normalcy. Jack would take 100 days of not being able to shit, 100 days of having such a terrible pain in his stomach and ass just to keep things as they were now. Jack was like that.

“Let me help...” Jack tried to lift himself off the couch, but Camille pushed him back down.

“NO, YOU'RE SICK, YOU NEED TO REST AND I NEED TO CLEAN UP THIS MESS YOU MADE YOU...FUCKING...LITTLE....BRAT!”

Jack stayed quiet and let her finish.

When she was done the house was clean. The floor was clear, the rotten smell was just about gone, sun was coming in through the windows. Jack looked around and thought it looked pretty for the first time in what seemed like a year.

Camille handed him a glass of water. He drunk it, it cooled his dry mouth and settled nicely in his upset stomach.

“Feel a little better?” She asked.

“I still can't shit.”

“Well, do you want to try?”

“I guess I could.”

Camille helped Jack to his feet and the two marched up the stairs slowly together. It was like a wedding reception, one step, two step, three step. Camille sat



Jack down on the toilet.

"I'm going to go downstairs and try to call my sister again. You just try to...uhhh... take a shit."

Camille walked downstairs and Jack was just left on his own. He pulled his pants down and sat there for a few minutes. He strained and heaved, trying to push the evil out of himself. Come on, he was saying, just give me something. Give me a sloppy, soupy shit. Give me a hard, painful shit. Give me a smooth shit. Give me one huge turd or just fifty tiny turds. I'll take anything. He felt subhuman sitting on that toilet unable to do something that came so natural every day before this one. He felt alone too. Downstairs he could hear Camille's faint mumblings over the phone. The distance of her voice made him quiver.

She returned a few minutes later.

"Well?" She asked like a mother speaking to some child.

"Nothing... I feel really stupid."

"I could think of more appropriate times for you to say that."

They both laughed. It was very painful for Jack but also very painful for Camille too.

"Duncan is going to bring by some medicine."

"Duncan...?"

"He's the... he's the, uhhhh... guy I've been seeing."

"So wait, you're bringing your new boyfriend over to look at your pathetic ex who can't even take a shit right now? What the fuck?"

"Okay, first off he's not my boyfriend. He's just a guy I've been talking to."

"That's just some horseshit women think up. He's your fucking boyfriend and you know it."

Instead of saying anything back, Camille simply stood up, switched the bathroom light off, and closed the door behind her, leaving Jack bare assed in the dark.

"GOD DAMMIT!" he screamed, "YOU FUCKING BITCH, YOU MOTHERFUCKER, COME BACK UP HERE, I NEED YOUR HELP!"

Camille stomped downstairs and sat herself down on the couch. She cursed her genetics for making her a woman, as she often did when her relationships got complicated or went wrong as they are now. There must be some latent genetic code in her Y Chromosome that causes her to land in these kinds of messes. Fights, spats, arguments, she just couldn't seem to find one man she could agree with. And it felt like the more she tried to evade the more she would fall into it. What was it about Jack anyways? Why did she ever like him? Jack wasn't particularly attractive, nor was he particularly rich or particularly anything really. He didn't really have any prominent interests. He hated going out unless going out meant going somewhere where it would only be the two of them together, alone. Yes, Jack was truly a waste of time. But why? Why? She searched and searched. It was the way he touched her that made her love him. When they made love, he touched her in such a way that made her feel something that she could never quite explain. His touch was one of respect and fulfillment rather than the lustful grasps and pulls she had experienced by most men. His touch was like a painter's on a canvas. It made Camille feel beautiful, something she had never really believed. The way he ran his fingers along her skin made her feel like that any moment they could sink into her, and their bodies could sink into each other becoming one mind, one heart, one soul-But that's not important. She's made love to other men before. What good is love making anyways? And just

what good are relationships? All they seem to cause are confusion and pain and there is enough of that already. She decided she would abstain from relationships, outright avoid them if necessary. She would go to a mountain and dig a hole at the summit and live there free from the forced expectations of her as a woman. And what about Duncan? She could talk to Duncan if she damn well pleased! Sure they had been out a few times, but can't a woman go out with a guy and not be labeled lovers? Duncan had many things that Camille admired, he was intelligent, held an interesting job at the museum, he liked to actually go places and do things. Duncan was a good person, and that's all there was to it. And she didn't need Jack. She didn't love Jack anymore. She had left and that was that, she was only here under the most bizarre and dire circumstances. After today she would leave and never come back. She couldn't quite understand why she was crying though.

Jack sat there silently in the dark. Unsure of what to do next. Sure, he could probably make it out of the bathroom and downstairs, but he knew that he had really upset Camille this time. More than he had ever done in the past. He began a trial of self examination as people often do when they are cut off and left alone, such as when driving down the highway alone at night or sitting alone in one's house instead of at a bar or a party. Jack had loved Camille. Really and truly. He had loved her so much to make up for the fact that he hated everything else. Camille was his one reprieve from the awful bitterness and loathing he felt for everything else. Maybe that was why she left. It was just too much for her to deal with. He treated her right didn't he? Downstairs he hears a knock at the door and knows that it must be Duncan. Duncan. The image of a man named Duncan flashed through his mind as he heard the mingling of two voices, one faintly sounding distressed and the other sounding worried. Yes, he could see Duncan. Duncan was a tall attractive man with a fashionable well kept beard and expensive wool blazer. He was a man with books in his home and money in his bank account. He drove a nice car, not necessarily an expensive or exotic car, but he knew that he drove a nice car. No doubt he had good shoes too. Jack was never one to pay any attention to his clothes until he looked down to see that they had nearly crumbled off of him. He heard the steps up the stairs and knew that a new terrifying future was approaching him. Camille wouldn't come back. Camille would never come back.

Jack then proceeded to spray soggy feces all over his toilet and bathroom floor. It was a great shit. All the shits Jack would take in his long, healthy life would never feel as good as that one shit on that one day.

# Creative Non- Fiction

# The Facts Are What You Make Them:

## Karl Rove's Words To Live By By Freddy P. Kemp

I often wonder how I will die. This is not a sad depressing thought, nor that of some misguided child listening to emo music. I think of it with a sense of awe, like that of James Tiberius Kirk staring at some far off planet or a beautiful, nude, green woman. Will I die like David Carradine? With a belt tied around my neck and genitals, a 14 year old Asian prostitute fleeing the room in her underwear? God I hope so, for then I will have died a true hero; providing the Human Race with an invaluable service, in the search to find a better way to masturbate.

Or will it happen in a blaze of glory? Will I tempt that sweet mistress Fate one too many times, and she finally gives in to my boyish good looks and seductive charm? Will you all attend my funeral? I'd like to think you will. You'll weep like children, find some hole in the wall and become intoxicated, you'll see a beautiful young thing who is also crying like a child, for reason we know not, and that night you will fuck like teenagers. Awkwardly stumbling over one another's bodies, slippery with sweat, desperately exploring and pretending you know what you're doing and even though you are both novices it will be with unparalleled Passion. I'd like to think this is how I write; like a 16 year old girl fucking on top for the first time. Even as this white piece of paper sticks its throbbing member inside of me ultimately I know I am in control, dominating, and enjoying it. Living La Vita Loco.

It is this sort of Passion that Karl Rove has never in his life felt. Never has he been able to understand the concept of doing something, not for personal gain, but because it Needs To Be Done. I don't mean in any sort of misguided moral sense, moral fags are Experienced Whores, full of some sense of guidance but devoid of the Passion. Never in his life has Rove fucked like a 16 year old girl, because this would require a loss of personal Control. And that is a deeply sacrilegious thing in Karl's mind. No, Rove and his neocon swine fuck the only way they know how, like priests. He has a book now, "Courage and Consequence" and is using the momentum to attempt and rewrite history. The Ministry of Truth is taking too long apparently. Together with Liz Cheney and Billy fucking Kristol they form like Voltron as "Keep America Safe" which roughly translates to "Keep the Foreign Policy the Way It Was by Lying through Our Fucking Teeth".

"Would the Iraq war have occurred without W.M.D.? I doubt it."

That's right folks, I've come bearing quotes. That seems convincing right? Except for the fact that that's exactly what happened, mostly thanks to your careful manipulation, you fascist piece of swine shit. In the revisionist clergy Rove is a cardinal, Liz Cheney a priest, and Kristol an annoying catholic mother. You're all altar boys; god wants you on his knees, so they can rape your face. Asserting, among other things, that there were no terrorist attacks under Dubya, and that means he didn't do anything wrong. The only method I can conceive to cure myself of the inconsolable rage I feel is to become inebriated beyond the point of caring. Considering the level of

chemical assistance currently being employed to right this essay however, I find this cure dubious.

I doubt Rove has any idea that what he's doing is wrong, in fact I doubt very much if he knows what "wrong" means. Some beasts are natural predators, who feel nothing outside of their own single minded self-preservation, change is dangerous and anyone or anything that works to change is perceived as a threat and must be destroyed. Valerie Plame can attest to this. Such beasts can't be blamed for these instincts, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be put down all the same.

Uh oh! Has he lost his mind?? You can't print that! Call the editors; call the exorcist, people cannot be threatened! This is an outrage! He's a deranged cockmongoler!

Fifty years ago a savage Brit named Arnold J. Toynbee prophesized the real war in the next century would not be between communists and capitalists, but between the Christians and the Muslims. Like a reincarnated Heinrich Himmler, Dick Cheney stepped up to fulfill that prophecy, the architect of two wars designed to kill brown people and pay Halliburton. If Dick is our Himmler then Karl Rove is most certainly our Joseph Goebbels; Godwin's Law must be followed to a T! But no, they're merely doing God's Work; the Christian God of Capitalism must be paid tribute! It's called The Big Lie folks, and it's been working for millennia. Toynbee also stated that "When a civilization responds to challenges, it grows. Civilizations declined when their leaders stopped responding creatively, and the civilizations then sank owing to nationalism, militarism, and the tyranny of a despotic minority."

To quote the Good Doctor: "In a nation ruled by swine, all pigs are upward mobile — and the rest of us are fucked until we can put our acts together: Not necessarily to Win, but mainly to keep from Losing Completely" "It's a strange world. Some people get rich and others eat shit and die."

The Great Experiment, was it a failure? We can't know that until it collapses completely. Only through the 20/20 vision of the Future can we properly assess just what the hell happened. And this man-child, let loose into the clockwork of "The System" is actively attempting to destroy that vision, rewrite the near past as he sees fit. In a sane world he'd be strung up in town square and decapitated. There were some things the French really really got right.

Be wary of those who lack the Passion folks, but never fear them. They haven't earned it. Do what you need to survive and never forget to fuck like teenagers, every once in a while. Me, I plan to stay here until my affairs are in order, then to move to a Micro-Nation, a country too small to be corrupted, and invisible to the naked political eye. There I can criticize the world in peace, and never ever be found.

Your Friend, as always,  
Freddy P. Kemp

***"Maybe there is no Heaven. Or maybe this is all pure gibberish — a product of the demented imagination of a lazy drunken hillbilly with a heart full of hate who has found a way to live out where the real winds blow — to sleep late, have fun, get wild, drink whisky, and drive fast on empty streets with nothing in mind ex...cept falling in love and not getting arrested... Res ipsa loquitur. Let the good times roll."  
— Hunter S. Thompson***

# Poetry

## Poems by Oryx

### Mud

Puckering her wet  
lips  
the chocolate earth  
sucks  
on the souls  
of my feet, the heat  
of the sun drips down my shirt.  
Warm day.

### Hot dusk

Atop the record player we  
rotate unsteadily  
clapping and laughing

Warm soles bare in the  
summer air crackling

An old song, shadows long  
and low before the Sun  
sets us to our fatal blackening.

### Mother

Mother tucks me  
cold and wet  
into my baby bed;

Her fingers feed me  
fat and full  
and then she eats my head.

# “I run the paper route”

By Joe Brown

I run the paper route  
 with my old man in Forrest City Arkansas  
 It reminds me somewhat of driving a taxi  
 Back in Tullahoma, TN  
 The familiar city streets now abandoned  
 the voice of the town now silenced  
 as we drive along to the rhythm of its sleeping hum  
 And a 2 AM breeze, kisses my cheek  
 the radio plays Mick Jagger  
 And Kieth Richard's whiskey fueled guitar  
 provides an adequate soundtrack  
 for delivering the Sunday Democrat  
 We deliver to people like Estelle Shackelford  
 Retired teachers, mechanics, policemen, old friends  
 Like Johnny B. who always had a fast car and a pretty girl  
 (but never kept either for very long)  
 and who now drives a white ford pickup  
 To old men with their porch lights on and their boats hitched  
 waiting for the fishing report  
 To the pretty girl at the super 8 motel  
 shackled to her front desk  
 mulling over a game of Windows 98 freecel  
 and thinking about rent and utility bills  
 even the crazy hobo  
 who wanders around outside Wal-Mart  
 muttering, "yessuh President Roosevelt, Yessuh President Eisenhower  
 it's an honor to meet you"  
 somehow gets a Democrat  
 And it ain't no Sunset Strip  
 or Greenwich  
 and nothing like Paris or Barcelona  
 but darling, the sunrise over this shithole  
 is amazing

“remember when we just held hands”

By Joe Brown

remember when we just held hands  
 and took walks around town  
 we were so sure of that what little we knew  
 was fact and true  
 and we were prima donna philosopers swinging  
 on elementary school swing sets on summer Saturdays  
 laughing about what the fools were trying to teach us



and quoting Neitzche  
because we all thought Neitzche was a superhero  
and we lived and died by Beyond Good And Evil  
there was never any confusion on types or signs  
you just wanted to be with the girl because she made you smile  
or the boy because he made you laugh  
this was before we learned about love and the future  
and all we wanted was to be free and  
to have someone to share something with  
because we all had something, something on the tip of our tongues  
that had to be said and sang and danced  
all i wanted was to use my dick for something other than myself  
and to feel that body and all its mysteries that  
i longed to discover next to mine, under the sheets,  
a consumation of flesh and promises that seemed real so us  
then but now resemble silly children's games  
but it felt good and nothing that felt good could be bad  
we were ignorant like that, all of us  
your eyes and my eyes and in the center of us that blossom  
that would eventually suffocate and whither  
such purity  
it would be painful to live through it again

# A Product Of Stagnant Water

By Darragh Mc Hugh

This house is an unfrequented museum.  
Everything becomes dusty, here,  
even my parents--  
but they were not  
when their youngest two  
were conceived, when they were drunk.

Today, an aeon later, I drank  
stagnant water.  
When I put the glass down, I saw  
dust in it.

I shuffle from one room to  
another to look at these  
dated artefacts: the cobwebbed  
loom, the rusty chamber-pot . . .  
What else is there?

I am a part of this  
exhibition and stuck in this house.  
You may see me  
in a shaft of light,  
like the dust which floats  
from my shoulders and crown.

I am a resident child  
but I cannot recognise awe in this place.  
Is that what it means--  
to be stagnant?

# Song of Work

## By Mason

We were all hard at work  
the hundreds of us employed  
when suddenly the machines all stopped  
and we all wondered what it's for

We all looked around for managers,  
for overseers, and bosses  
but all we saw were the  
men and women bearing the heavy crosses

We headed for the office  
for the man who was in charge  
with a knock at his door  
the door slid open to show our problem

There was nobody to run our factory now  
so what are we to do  
when the child in the back of us said  
let's all go live for a few

So we opened the doors  
the bright light blinding us like being birthed  
we headed for the woods outback  
and played among the firs

And when we played for a while now  
we found ourselves worrying  
when would they be back now  
so We have to go back in

When the small boy said again  
forget your friends and family  
we only have each other  
we have the strength of every brother

So then we realized, why it took us all so long!  
we've been living our lives in a rut  
what a sham it all has been  
and from on we decided  
we'll never go back again

## Storm a Comin'

By Mason

As Mary rushed back from  
the field  
past the neighbors farm  
where the old man sat on his porch  
in his chair  
he sat there  
white shirt  
gray old pant  
and green fishin' hat  
when Mary stopped to tell him  
"Sir, the storms comin'!"  
he just gazed on  
into the clouds  
that often were illuminated  
by a crack of lightning  
That sounded like a tree  
falling in the forest  
But the man just sat there  
while she was still reeling  
from the lightning strike  
"Mister, you gotta get inside!"  
And he sat there  
gazing with that stare  
that Old Folks get

when talkin' 'bout the past  
Mary whimpered at the man  
and looked back  
at the storm  
"Well, you just get sucked up ...Sir!"  
with a quiet contempt and rage of a child  
matching the fury of the wind  
blowing by  
He looked on into the storm  
unwavering  
and unflinching  
till it came to his doorstep  
and gusted with the strength  
of the mighty wind of the North  
it shook his old rickety  
home, and he remained  
till the black clouds opened up  
to let the godrays shine on down  
as Mary and her Family  
crept up from the cellar  
to find him still there  
ever watching  
stone-faced as ever

# They win every time. How soon is my once?

By A militant worker.

1

I've struck and stood picket, and taught sabotage and the go slow.  
I've shouted men down in meetings so women could speak.  
I've clawed back process control alongside fellow workers in day to day fights with management.  
I've sold bourgeois unions to fellow workers letting them know that we're only doing it so we get lube when we're raped.  
I've stayed silent when I'm an idiot, and let myself be told off when I've opened my fool mouth.

2

I've marched behind labour fakirs, and dishonest trots, and honest misguided working class trots. You always end up marching behind them when they lead. You always end up in the front row when:

I've stood line against charges by baton armed riot police.

I've told a line we're outnumbered four hundred to twenty and if we move now, we'll be better off, and won the argument with a fifteen second vote securing only one broken skull (I lie not here) in the process. A hundred meters further North three skulls were broken on a line with forty. Twenty to one you feel weak. Ten to one you feel strong but fuck me you're weak when your hair is ripped from your head and you're dragged half a kilometer screaming no energy to kick back while they kick you. They stayed and sat. We upped and ran. Like a dog I stood forward out of the line and took leadership and asked, "Who thinks we can win? I don't. Break the picket? Those in favour? Those against? Carried, get the fuck out now."

(I gave testimony to the commission into police brutality. My evidence was published for all eternity to the fact that that that morning before seven aye emm we couldn't save two men and two women from having the thin skin and bone covering their brains being broken in two.)

four hundred twenty fifteen one.  
hundred three forty twenty one.  
ten one.  
five hundred metres.  
unanimous seven.  
two two two.

Those numbers are very small I thank no god.  
Other people's numbers are bigger than two plus two alive.

3

I've read the books. I've read the books with the men on the cover.

I've read the books with hedgehogs inside.

I've counted the books I've read that were the books that were written by the workers.  
It was a number that I can keep handy because it only took five fingers.

I've read the books and Why do we keep getting kicked in the teeth?

Because our children keep getting born with gums.

4

And I learnt economics to free myself and I still go to work in the morning.  
And I learnt dialectics to free myself and I still go to work in the morning.  
And I let my girlfriend fuck some dudes because she told me it'd free herself and it'd  
free myself and I dumped my girlfriend and then I went to work in the morning and  
spent the next six months drunk.

I have sat through  
meeting after fucking meeting and  
meeting after fucking meeting and  
meeting after fucking meeting of sectarian splitter shit over  
Kazza and Freddie and Mikey Bookrin  
and The Vladmeister and Nestor and His Merry Men  
and all the 40 flavours of Leon in all his fucking glory  
(None Fit For Human Consumption).

The only other worker at the meeting after fucking meeting always left early: he  
wanted to care for his daughter.

And at a meeting I watched fifty years of elderly hate flow out verballed with voices  
louder than a bar fight over ninety year old splitters who choose the right way instead  
of Khrushchev's way fifty years before.

The Man Of Steel would have been done proud On Linguistics grounds alone.

5

I've done my time in menial work, and my sentence is long from over, and my only  
remission will be when the Governor denies my pardon and the bag goes over my  
head.

My only escape is to gaol the warders and turn the prison into a playground.

# The Noise

By Thomas Huttner

Oh god. The noise. The noise, the terrible noise.  
It is coming and all I can do is lie down on the street afraid.  
The noise. I am afraid. It's coming for me and I am afraid.  
I am afraid of what they have done to you.  
I am afraid that they will come for me with the same fate.  
I am afraid all I can do is lie on this street in the miserable rain and wait.  
The noise, oh no, it is getting louder.  
They are coming closer and all I can do is beg the pavement for warmth.  
I try to beg my body to stop shaking but my muscles are unforgiving.  
I beg not to be taken by them. I beg to not slip into the dark.  
The noise. They are here now and I am still afraid.  
I am afraid that if they take me they will put me into the ground.  
I am afraid, so very afraid, of going into the ground.  
I am afraid. I am afraid I can't hold out any longer.  
The noise. It stopped. The pulled me from the twisted metal.  
the noise. It's quiet now. And so it will be, silence never to be broken again.

# Somebody That I Used to Know

By Thomas Huttner

Heart set to overdrive.  
Junkyard pumping out crimson wine.  
Spare parts beating in 4/4ths time.  
At least you showed me it was mine.

## Bedroom Talk

By Anonymous

The man sits by her side at the bed  
Gazing at the floor while holding his head  
She glistens with sperm in the lowlight where she lies  
Her face looking upward at the ceiling with fuck-me-eyes  
And now he rapes her again without any warning  
Like an explosion that was in the waiting  
Her body spread on the bed with strength long gone  
Smelling of sweat and anger and eau-de-cologne  
That has perfumed her body in the hardest of ways  
«Why did she have to die?» are the things he says  
Or mutters in the damp air between these two  
"Why can't you be your sister, why can't you"  
He smacks her and there is red stuff on her lips  
And he beats her again without slowing his hips  
They have been in this room for hours on end  
Since the burial whence his hand searched for her hand  
When she would look back at today with every feelings she has  
This was the happiest she ever was.



# Annus Horribilus

By Joseph Osborne

## I.

O wicked wind! That blows our greensickness  
Out for the world to see  
Where the young ride the horses  
To reach out of their skin-  
Where there's reason for a bleed sea  
While the home door stays unhinged.  
Why is the fog like lipstick to these girls?  
No one is safe in this reckless world

## II.

I pray that this bad blowing  
Will quit once the sun goes around,  
That the bearded cherub be thrown,  
Into the well and softly stay to drown.  
While we collect the sounds we own  
So sigh for the passing symbol of time  
That will brush away the once-beautiful rinds  
and prevent these reckless words

## III.

For all the artists' cries and needs  
They don't hear through their paper birds:  
Patchwork men are we  
Hemmed together from a wormhole of words  
Wormwood of pages flow, together in the wind,  
Signaling high and mighty speeches that never begin.  
So let the lying poets clamor, because I know,  
That there can be no reckless work.

# America #1

By Joseph Osborne

The madmen newspaper rubes putting smiles on the table  
After a cup of coffee, sitting, watching the rain,  
Outside the window flying low, the heat buries the streets  
Happynohappy to be living without living words insane,  
Between Moloch's fingertips delicately lifting the sheets  
Nearing the caskets never chosen.  
Later, as they're buried under an inch of dirt  
The rattle awakes and the infestismal is closed in.

With the judge friend phone's ringing for a new sentence  
That'll be on made to order posters,  
That denounce criminal injustice and ask for better schools  
While the hand that answers grabs the roasters,  
For the young libertines without constitutional rule  
And the old needing reminders of their war,  
Gone out, out far past television and internet  
Where the cat's purring is a beast's roar.

Can we ever remember  
That a man could live like he learned?  
Without liberty as a trademark for sponsors  
Or America as the paycheck you earn.

Steady like a gunshot as the lips close up  
The words start to slither in the air,  
Caught in the dry dog blogs and the marquee squeals  
That's lit on a battle-flag for the ones who care,  
Carried up the senate for a writ that appeals  
To the truest and bluest of men,  
Tell what you will of the youth and their justice  
To the choir it all echos "Sin!"

The offering they took woke me from dreaming  
About Jefferson speaking for knowledge to be passed,  
Like a torch that burns even after all the bullets, gone; that  
Rained on history and somehow could last,  
Lasting through love that is outlawed  
Lasting through brothers' fingers in blades,  
That never saw Moloch and fought just to live  
In a country where their speech could be saved.

Can we ever remember  
That a man could live like he learned?

Without liberty as a trademark for sponsors  
Or America as the paycheck you earn.

I left the big screened church and shouted  
“Take the speculation down!”,  
As the voting booths were set up  
With pictures of hero’s as clowns,  
Abstract Batmen who were targets enough  
To put locks on women’s hips,  
And band-aids to give the victims  
Of third-degree burns, covering only finger-tips.

Plantation history is played, and they all say,  
“We’re the same, and came up like them!”,  
Rolling down to the studio in a limousine  
The windows roll up in Harlem’s end,  
Ghosts of socialism, held up by a screen  
Hanging sheets of Goebbels’ clothes,  
The law cracks open to birth a new day  
While the smell bleeds in an astonished nose.

Can we ever remember  
That a man could live like he learned?  
Without liberty as a trademark for sponsors  
Or America as the paycheck you earn.

Now death to me wouldn’t  
Be that far from an endorsement,  
By a candidate waving his toupee jaw  
Twenty feet from the pavement,  
Singing meaning in a crow  
That only knew a right to bear arms,  
Whose Great Society was  
Only known for a southern drawl.

Take my words without  
Preaching a faith  
I was never sung today  
For my words to be mace,  
I could finally say  
What you learn from a cough:  
To stay healthy and prevent:  
To live, turning the fear off.

Can we ever remember  
That a man could live like he learned?  
Without liberty as a trademark for sponsors  
Or America as the paycheck you earn.

To all of the writers who made this possible  
Thank you!

\*\*\*

**Editors**

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\*\*\*

**Honorable Mention**

Wildweasal / Caesar

Jeremy Levett

The anonymous gentleman who made our cover and table of contents

\*\*\*

And everyone who took the time to download and read this

# ZWG /lit/erature Digest

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