

<http://boards.4chan.org/lit>

zwg

/LITERATURE DIGEST

ISSUE 5
MAY 31, 2010

<http://zwg.wildwestwaffles.com/>

Table of Contents

Introduction/Note from the Eds	3
<i>[Fiction]</i>	
Agents by Day, Doorsteps by Night by Lexiphagon	5
Beyond Baena by A.J. Kees	10
Coldest Night of November by Marlboro	15
Jester's Crown by Vike Mandenburg	16
One, Part 1 by Josef K.	17
One Couple's' Car Ride by Alex Mak	25
Pictures by Kyra Reinhilde	27
Rain by Rankin	32
The Dreamer; Part 2 by Yegor	34
The Man Who Never Was by Kharon	41
The Tank by Joshua W.	51
<i>[Review]</i>	
The Hidden Fortress Review by R.M. Silva	55
<i>[Poetry]</i>	
Another Man by Silas	57
Bleached White Pillars by Darrin	58
Carpentry by Stingo	60
Charlie by Bill	61
Crucifixes and Crescents by Darrin	63
Haiku by Rick K.	64
Language by Rick Underhill	65
Morning Streets by Silas	66
Roses by Stingo	66
Samuel Johnson's Midnight Entry by Matt Voice (bringmewords.blogspot.com)	67
To My Friend, The Liar by R. Hayden	69
Tracers by Stingo	70
Witness to the Dawn, Part 2 by Adam Wykes (http://leadprophet.blogspot.com/)	71
Final notes	89

Introduction/Note from the Editors

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

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

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

We remain very open to criticism and suggestions on how we can improve ourselves. Give us your opinions, honest and blunt as they may be, and help us make this project better. By Anon, for Anon.

Contact Us

Our IRC channel is still:

Server: irc.freenode.net

Room: #ZWG

Our main distribution page:

<http://zwg.wildwestwaffles.com/>

Our wiki:

<http://zinewritersguild.wikia.com/>

Updates

Regrettably, Lindlar has resigned from his position within the zine due to complications of overwork. He was a outstanding member of the editing team, and we wish to extend our thanks for all he did. To fill this void we have recruited a new editor who wishes to remain anonymous at this present time. Rest assured however, the editor has proven to be a capable one.

[Fiction]



Agents by Day, Doorsteps by Night by Lexiphagon

Special Agent Bob and Steve stealthily approached the gates of the fort, skipping bush to bush. Bob had his headphones in, listening to the Mission Impossible theme. Steve was wearing his night vision goggles; it was 2 in the afternoon.

Steve's radio went off:

"Hello Special Agent Steve! Now I just want to remind you about your mission. You must infiltrate Mr. Roboto's lair and steal his plans for the DEEP SEA DIVER."

He logged out immediately after.

"Hm?" Said Steve. He had been too occupied avoiding a spider in a bush to listen.

"WHAT!?" yelled Bob without removing his headphones.

"Did you say something?" Steve called.

A few guards at the towers looked down at them curiously. They motioned to the guards at the top of the gate. They slowly positioned their machine guns and turrets.

"WHAT?!" replied Bob, now turning around.

"DID YOU SAY SOMETHING?"

"HOLD ON!"

Bob took out his iPod and after a minute, paused it and removed his headphones.

"Okay, now." Bob said.

"Did you say something?" Steve asked.

"No."

"Okay."

Bob put his headphones back in and returned to the mission at hand.

CHAPTER 2

Through a long and boring stealth mission involving boxes, cranes, invisibility potions, and two storks, our heroes entered the cave-lair-volcano-fortress- or whatever cliché was used last chapter. Bob and Steve were wearing matching uniforms: radioactive green rubber suits. They offered no protection and weren't even part of the secret agent inventory they were handed out at the start of the mission. But this is being the 80's or 70's, no one asked any questions. They were much too high.

They walked into a long hallway, littered with boxes and crates, just in case they had to hide. Guards walked in their normal patterned routes, occasionally making small talk and discussing where the secret plans were located. Someone had apparently left them in the Men's room, taking them in for some much needed reading material.

But none of this is necessary because the agents will go the long way anyway.

After several minutes of knocking out guards they could have easily walked past, they reached the boss' room, labeled with a swatizka, some evil graffiti, and maybe a guard. I don't know, use your imagination.

They entered like the fucking conformists that they are: through the front door. No one was inside and the security systems were down. Here's a flashback to describe how this happened:

"Hey Bob." Steve said, as they crawled on the floor, in the middle of the hallway.

"Yeah, Steve?"

"We should totally go to the security room and hack the systems."

"Sure."

They turned around 360 degrees and continued on in the direction of the security room. They heard a noise and decided to get on their bellies and slowly inch down the middle of the well lit hallway. 5 hours later, they came across the room. There, they pushed a button.

End of flashback.

The two agents were at the computer desk. The evil boss had a Macintosh. Bob said down and plugged his iPod in and his iPod started to charge. Steve looked through some drawers for whatever they were looking for.

Slowly, a pile behind Steve was created. The contents included 8 bestiality magazines, 214 matchbox cars, 98 lego pieces, Titanic ticket stubs, Pokemon DVDs, Caddyshack Blu-ray edition, 87 Barely Legal DVDs, Idiot's Guide to World Domination, the secret plans they were looking for, a copy of said secret plans, Steve's homework from 3rd grade, a note reminded Steve of the mission, Bob's headphones, Bob's mother-in-law, Bob's ex-girlfriend, a Japanese anime character, Odysseus, One Piece, and a partridge in a pear tree.

Steve turned quickly. He heard something down the hallway. It was hard to make out because Bob was playing music on iTunes, something by Phil Collins. He gasped like a little girl.

"BOB!"

"Yeah?"

"We got to get out of here!"

Bob gave a look of horror and quickly told iTunes to eject his iPod.

"Let's go!"

"Oh shit, Steve! My iPod's still synching!"

"Well, take it out of the water."

Badum tsh! A bad pun was made.

"Hurry Bob! I see them."

"It's still going!"

"Hurry!"

"SYNCHING!"

"I see them!" Steve said as the man stared at him, their noses two centimeters apart.

"DONE!"

The two agents rushed out the door.

Chapter 9

They were hiding behind some boxes. No one knows what is even IN these boxes, for god's sakes. Why leave them hanging around?!

Two guards walked past the boxes and then returned and stopped right in front of the boxes and made small talk.

"Ah man. Have you seen the new secretary? Nicest rack in this world! I would love to hit that. And I don't mean domestic violence! Well, actually I do, but only after I had sexual intercourse with her in a rough manner."

"Nah, bro. I heard the good guys are here. Which means us nameless henchmen are destined to die. I didn't even finish my tax returns."

"You're right dude. But what if we make ourselves HAVE names? We aren't sidekicks or evil leaders. That at least guarantees us redemption or some sort of benefits!"

"You're right! BOB!"

"Yes, I am. STEVE!"

The guards guffawed at these ridiculous names. Bob and Steve, the ones that aren't guards, peeked over the boxes. They were being quiet in case you didn't know.

"We just have to stay silent, Bob." Steve said.

"Why? We are the guards." Bob replied.

"Oh yeah. Let's change names, I'm getting confused."

And thus Guard 1 and Guard 2 was created.

"We have to stay silent, Bob." Steve said.

"Why? We are the guards." Bob replied.

"Fuck you Bob. No we're not."

Suddenly, Bob's phone rang. Bob picked up quickly and listened.

"Hey! It's Joey! You know, my rattata's not like other rattatas. It's in the top percent of rattatas. TOP FUCKING PERCECT. Kthxbai"

The two agents were dragged from behind the boxes and taken in front the boss moments later.

Chapter Spleen

"Ah, so its my archrival....s.... Bob and Steve!" crowed the bad guy.

"Actually we are your guards."

"Sh! Guard 1, we changed our names, remember?"

"Oh yeah, guard 2."

These two guards left and lived meaningful lives. Guard 1 hit the secretary and enjoyed a

sexual relationship for 14 years before he died of lung cancer. Guard 2 went on to be a pirate.

"You'll never get away with this, Dr. Evil!" Steve yelled.

"Ah, but I have." Dr. Evil turned around and pointed outside his window. It was looking upon a bay and in the bay was a large submarine. It's shape was most peculiar.

"Gasp! We were too late, Steve." Bob said with emotion.

"Take the prisoners to the dungeon." Dr. Evil said condescendingly.

Chapter 1

Our heroes had escaped bravely and were now heading for the bay themselves. They had to stop Dr. Evil for some reason or another. For some reason, one submarine is bad news.

"Bob, how will we get onto the submarine?"

"I have my car, Steve!"

He whistled and his car exploded from the boxes nearby.

"Why is your car here?"

"I came from the plot drawer, now shut up and hope in."

They hopped into the beautiful car, upgraded with a new cassette player and a full automated coffeemaker.

"So how does this change our situation?"

"I don't know."

They got out of the car.

"Oh wait, I forget. My car functions as a submarine."

They got in again.

"Wait, this isn't my car."

They got out.

They paused.

"Wait, yes it is."

They got in the car.

"Hm, this is new." Bob said, looking at the steering wheel.

They got out of the car.

Bob whistled again. Another car came by.

They got in.

"This car also functions as a submarine!"

They drove off the dock. The car sunk and they swam to the surface of the water.

"Just not very well."

Chapter THE END

They ran along the submarine's hallways. Do submarines have hallways? They do now.

They reached the bridge and saw something that was horrifying: the submarine was being piloted by Japanese school girls. They were wearing cute school uniforms and speaking cutely.

The captain turned around, a 16 year old chap-I mean, gal. There are no traps on this boat ride, you pervert.

"NANI, MAI HONEY?" she said cutely.

"Are we on the right submarine?" Steve whispered to Bob.

"Better blow it up just in case."

They pushed the captain away who made a weird squeeling noise that would give a rise to lesser men. They pushed a button that said ☺\u12531 ☺☺ and they left happily. They heard a "Uguu! Am I cute?" but ignored it.

As they were riding their bikes out of the submarine, they watched it explode and fall to the bottom of the ocean. They bike out, underwater, holding their breaths. They gave right of way to the giant submarine that said "EVIL SUBMARINE. IF YOU CAN'T SEE OUR SIDE MIRRORS, WE CAN'T SEE YOU." It had no side mirrors either way. They went home and drank some coffee. They went to bed. Not in the same bed, you sick fuck.

THE END.

Beyond Baena by A.J. Kees

The Cross of Gold's engines shuddered as it exited the slipspace jump. In plain sight the planet Baena appeared, growing more rotund as the ship neared. The ship's acceleration was counter-balanced by its own fusion containment pores.

On the bridge of the small cruiser, the captain frowned. Why Baena? What business was here? He examined Baena with an indented eyebrow. Baena had two ice caps and endless ocean. The only points of civilization were floating cities along its prime meridian, and the drilling stations that orbited. A few select cities were underwater, including the planet's capital, which sat some seven thousand feet below sea level. Baena was widely regarded as a forefront in technological and terraforming matters.

"Survey," the captain grunted to the man at his right, and the ensign quickly returned:

"Preliminary scans show the EU driller Daedalus, beginning secondary and tertiary scans."

The captain's head lowered and he closed his eyes. The Daedalus, EU's mega-rig, couldn't qualify as a surprise. But where was the Kona? Fresh intelligence heavily suggested the ship making its way to Baena, and the planet was on the edge of the Aries-5 system. Beyond Baena, unknown space, and very few planets. Pirates lurked in unknown space, hollowing out asteroids and camouflaging themselves quite well, but surely...

Possible. The Kona had been revered as a vessel of God's will by captured pirates for the past fifteen years. Some behind closed UN doors thought the Kona was a myth, something of a scapegoat for burning colonies and charred bodies. Yet the pirate ship could be the one non-UN vessel with a payload capable of taking on five Navy ships and winning. Often merchant ships would discover broken ships floating on the outskirts of trade paths. The deteriorating surface of the ship and the holes the merchants would find punched through the unlucky bastards were enough to affect galactic economies and military procedures, as well as morale in any government's ranks. A scary thought to those on patrol anywhere but the Sol System, surely.

"Secondary scans show a few satellites, tagged by UN for resource-scanning."

The EU must've had someone bugging UN subsystems – they managed to mine the areas detailed in UN resource reports faster than anyone else. Almost a monopoly and the market, with India attempting to put its foot in the door even further. Both governments were mining pioneers, but they both gave little wiggle room to any other nation. Small-scale battles were often waged over the right to drill. Most were political and involved compromises, but everyone knew of the few conflicts that took years to resolve and fought privately and militarily.

Those discrete wars were one-in-a-million, though.

"Sir, pings reveal several anomalies on the lower half of the planet's equator, in orbit near the magnetic pole," said the ensign. "The anomalies match those we found near Stram seven years ago."

The captain opened his eyes, holding back a smirk. The Kona had been found again. Finally, they had caught up with the war-tainted footsteps of that ship. "Page the ship, attempt to establish a line of communication," he urged, and waited as the crew interacted both with their viewscreens and the men to both sides. Computers chirped and whirred, and all sound faded after someone confirmed the automated page had been sent.

The captain rubbed his gaunt cheekbones. The tertiary scan picked up the pirate stealth systems once more. This would be the last time, he vowed, that the Cross of Gold would let the Kona escape intact. He checked his watch, to notice that several minutes had passed while he amused himself with possible combat scenarios. He had expected to be left waiting.

“Status,” he queried.

“The Kona hasn’t budged, sir. Shall we send another message?”

Commander Cheng stepped forward. “Perhaps instead of a damned robotic message, we should make it personal,” he spoke softly. “For all we know, they could just think we’re a robotic survey team, especially with the flight systems we have in place. It’s not like we’re invisible to them...”

His voice waned as the captain continued his glare through the bridge’s reinforced glass pane. Cheng stepped to the side, waiting for a verdict. The captain gripped his chair’s armrests, stood up, and walked over to the communications display. He reached over a young ensign’s shoulder and pressed the “hail” key: “This is Captain Luo of the Cross of Gold, cruiser in the People’s Liberation Navy. Kona, respond in five standard minutes or prepare to be shot down.” His finger retreated, and as he walked back to his command chair he examined the blood dried underneath his fingernails. He pulled a handkerchief from his rear pocket and wet it, attempting to remove the final remnants of crimson.

A lieutenant had confronted Luo in the halls outside of his cabin. The officer had made a suggestion about moving to stop the fringe governments in the Tucana Dwarf. Luo had an open-door policy so he listened calmly, albeit uninterested. As the young man turned to walk away from the captain, he muttered an insult about Luo’s wife under his breath. The officer jolted and looked down to see the blade of a combat knife sticking through his abdomen. He shrieked as Luo twisted the knife and pulled outward slowly. He collapsed on the steel surface and bled out within five minutes.

The captain was given free pass, however. This was his ship, and none of the crew brought charges upon him. Had he been in an American or Union fleet, he’d be rotting in a cell somewhere.

After the incident, he was treated more respectfully by the crew. He had gained their trust and admiration already, but with a newfound hint of fear. Reinvigorated respect, he mused. The younger ones vaguely knew of his past actions, and that was a damn shame. Were he admiral, and the knowledge be out there, he’d have the entire Navy operating at full capacity.

His lips curled into a smile as the Kona’s engines flared up and began moving toward the source of the page. All was right with this situation. And this time, Luo would best this god-forsaken ship. Cross of Gold hovered above Baena’s surface several thousand miles up. No message would be received from the pirates, he knew. Alarms sounded as weapons were prepped and battle was imminent. Kona grew larger and larger. It was as if the pirates were heading straight towards Luo – this rang true. Odd...

“They let their weapons free, Captain. Brace for-“

The first salvo of missiles drummed the starboard hull, and shields flickered to recover. Luo lit a cigar as crewmates shouted to one another and himself about a malfunctioning drive core, and shields that had to be restored immediately. Why weren’t the shields properly calibrated when they were mobilizing? Luo clenched his teeth, sickened at the crew’s ineptitude.

“Take us up above the galactic plane and aim all available Foster missiles at their stern.”

The drive core had difficulty complying with the Luo, and the ship had drifted into Baena’s magnetosphere. The bow of the ship pointed upwards, but had no success propelling the ship by itself. The Kona glided underneath, shifting and getting ready to fire again. Cross of Gold used side thrusters to rotate into a good firing angle just as three missiles thudded with the topside hull, the sounds of battle loud and near to every man and woman on the bridge.

Luo brought up his own personal viewscreen and tapped at it southpaw. The shields were causing themselves the most trouble – but this was not unexpected. What he had noticed and that had took him by surprise was the Kona being much more agile than their last encounter. The ship’s ability to coast past at relative ease seemed mocking to Luo, and he felt a pang of disappointment. It zipped along belong, and made another small arc, getting ready to line up for another volley.

“Fire at their stern, damn it!” Luo felt overwhelming disgust commanding him rather than rational thought. The crew looked frantically at their viewscreens and systems, using fear and great anger as their instrument for precision. Amid sirens and flashing lights, a faint rumble was felt below the bridge, signaling that the Fosters had been launched. Luo turned his viewscreen to the outer camera and watched the homing projectiles race after the Kona, who suddenly broke from another pass. The missiles caught up, and the Kona seemed to shift its path, accommodating for the direct impact. Finally, an important shot, thought the captain.

“Another strike, at the stern’s rear drive,” the captain felt a small twinge of anxiety wash over him. A direct hit over an improved Kona? He should have held back his surprise, but it had been a long road back to this. Surely, victory could be achieved. Finally, he thought, as the Fosters flew from the Cross of Gold’s wings again. That’s when Luo spotted it: a third strike from the pirate ship, its missiles ignoring the Fosters completely. How did it recover so quickly? Surely their shields didn’t have time to readjust... perhaps this next volley of Fosters could render the Kona a sitting duck?

He gripped his armrests as the metal wailed around him and the ensign monitoring sublevel systems started panicking.

“That last volley must have hit a circuit board on the fourth deck, Captain. Our life-support is beginning to wane.” Luo pounded his fist against the cold armrest. The Cross of Gold did not have long, and if it did not land in a Baena metropolis, it would eventually suffer a technical knockout. Luo grew up on watching grown men boxing, and this did term did not please him. Especially considering it was happening to his ship.

He turned to his viewscreen to see the Kona flying into space, no doubt preparing for another pass in a matter of minutes. “Ready the escape pods, and disengage locking procedures for the Chang’e.”

Cheng, who had taken up overseeing the stabilization of the drive core, turn away from his task with a spiteful expression. “Captain, don’t do this. You know the admiral said you needed prior permission to launch the Chang’e.”

“I am aware of this, Commander. Yet the admiral did not see us getting subdued by a very capable enemy ship. I’m improvising, yes, because it’s a necessary instrument to our victory. Every man here has read the report on the enemy we face. The lives and planets this ship has so utterly obliterated over the course of fourteen years. We can end this,” Luo paused, looking around the bridge and getting looks of affirmation. “We can end this now. We can

effectively decapitate the leadership of the pirate scum.”

“Sir,” Cheng looked out of place, and shifted to his other foot. “We must evacuate the ship immediately.”

“And we shall, Commander, starting with deck five and working our way up. Do you have any qualms with my plan of action, Cheng?” Luo nearly spat his officer’s name, and watched as his handpicked second-in-command shook his head. “Good. Continue unlocking procedures; pull all the engineers from deck five. Set surface-side rendezvous on Baena on the Crow Plains, Northwest peninsula.” Ensigns nodded and turned back to their work.

The Chang’e was the brass’ attempt at stopping pirate growth outright. It was a large, cylinder-shaped missile launched and, when reaching a certain distance from the target, splits into six miniature rockets. Each smaller rocket, which had the payload of a dozen hydrogen nukes, would take up position in a precise location around the target, essentially flanking it, before detonating. It was really quite impressive, and the missile’s self-projection systems were top-notch. Preliminary testing produced mixed results: effective, but almost suicidal for the launched device.

Cheng left quickly to guide evacuation efforts.

“Ensign Xie, status on the Chang’e?”

“Sir, locking mechanisms free, waiting to be launched.”

Kona had just rolled and began another run. “Fire now.” The Cross of Gold, drifting towards Baena, was now hovering over the North Pole. Luo caught the first slew of escape pods arcing down and out of sigh. They vanished into the crisp blue horizon of Baena. There was a fleeting urge to take a picture of the vista presented.

“Evacuating deck four now,” Cheng reported. Cheng would be the captain at the LZ. The leader.

Luo’s viewscreen watched the horrendous device depart the ship. The Kona did not waver as the Chang’e propelled in its direction, as if accepting some unspoken challenge. They twirled and took up positions around the Kona. Then something odd happened. The Kona accelerated even faster. Luo’s eyes bulged. No. This isn’t happening.

“Fire Fosters, stop that ship! Stop that ship!” He shouted in his highest octave as his bridge crew complied. Dozens of missiles flew at the Kona, but the pirate ship flew directly at the Cross of Gold. It rolled slightly, avoiding the Fosters narrowly. The Chang’e detonated in the background, filling Luo’s viewscreen with bright light and making the port camera fry instantly.

The Kona’s bow scraped against the hull of Luo’s ship for a good distance, producing a horrendous metallic screech. Plates of metal and chunks of hull flew out into Baena’s orbit. The pirates are bloody mad, Luo thought as he picked himself off of the deck floor. There were yelling and screams heard from the upper deck, reserved for crew quarters. Luo’s mouth gaped open. Surely no one was retrieving personal items before evacuation.

“Sir, hull breach on deck one. The ship is drifting and beginning entry into Baena’s atmosphere. We have ten minutes before complete entry.”

Someone else spoke. “Sir, with the hull breaches we’ll burn up unless we evacuate. This isn’t even accounting for the Kona, it could make another pass.”

Luo brought up the starboard camera, and saw the Kona floating in space, making another

arc. Luo sighed. "As captain of the Cross of Gold, I hereby command every crewmate to abandon ship." His heart was being ripped out by the loss of yet another ship. Another lover's quarrel with the Kona, another ship lost.

The crew filed out of the bridge and Luo rested his chin on his open palm. Drumming his fingers against his cheek, he reflected. Nine years. Five battles with the pirates on that ship, five losses. Even his campaign into unknown space, as flawed and forgettable as it was, had been much more successful by comparison. He'd be forced to retire in ten years, and as he inked those papers the Kona would be on his mind. The one ship that held him back from a truly successful military service. A life-support notification flashed on his screen. Oxygen was waning. Didn't matter, he'd burn up before it mattered. The hull wouldn't let Luo survive.

The captain would go down with his ship. He did not need Kona's inhabitants messing with his computers, stealing vital intelligence and black ops directives.

As this crossed his mind, he started wiping the ship's core memory. The pirates need not know the location of every vessel in the People's Liberation Navy. Luo was honor-bound to protect his brothers, even if they would never recognize his efforts.

The Kona was coming off the horizon, making a last pass. One missile departed the ship, zooming towards Luo on the viewscreen: this was the final blow. At least the pirates allowed Luo the decency of a proper death. Burning up in entry was unfitting for any captain, merchant or military.

Luo stood and watched the haymaker flying straight at him. He sighed. He wouldn't go down sitting, not on his ship.

The missile seemed to collapse in plain space. Luo fought off temporary disbelief long enough to see the truth: it had split into six smaller rockets, two of which zoomed right past the Cross of Gold. At least the pirates were capable foes, ones he was proud to have been bested by. The captain felt a chuckle escape his lips as the bridge and viewscreen lit up. He shut his eyes to white.

Coldest Night of November by Marlboro

It's four minutes past midnight and I shakily reach for another cigarette. My small office is already hazed by the ever-present smoke. The few pieces of furniture, the books, the stacks of paper on my desk, the wooden floor are all saturated with the pungent scent of tobacco. Cold damp air mixed with the noise of the downpour outside enters the open window along with an eerie silence. Even the tenants of the building seems sound asleep, as I hear no squeaking of the old planks above my head.

The phone rings a shrill, metallic shriek of announcement. It slowly dawns on me I should pick it up, so I break eye contact with the picture in front of me, shift the cigarette to my left hand and greet the caller with silence.

"Harv? You there?"

"Yeah, I'm always here."

"Listen, we found another one on sixteenth and eighth, the chief would really like you to take a look."

"Yeah, sure, I'll be there in thirty."

"You ok, Harvey?"

"Just tired, Joe, that's all. See you there."

I hang up and slowly rise. I take one last look into the once cute eyes staring at me from the photo on the desk, one last deep breath and I reach for my overcoat and fedora. Buttoning up. It's damn cold, gotta be the coldest night in November. Lock the door, check the knob twice and I'm out on the street working on my collar to keep out the wind. I can already feel the wind driven drops of water seeping through my clothes. No chance of catching a cab in this weather, gotta take the subway downtown so I make my way to the nearest station, pay five cents for my fare and off I go in the rattling, empty car. Luckily, the tunnels haven't flooded yet.

I get out at fourteenth and eighth, attacked by a fresh wave of freezing water from the heavens above and make my way among the empty streets towards the moving lanterns and bright flashes just two blocks away. There I see chief Giordano, Joe and a few guys taking pictures of the body. I walk up, ignoring their greetings and stare down at the pale flesh marked with crimson. Black corset and stockings, I turn her on her back and for a moment I see Marla with dead eyes and a second smile neatly cut into her throat. But no, it's not her. Some random girl. Prostitute, Joe says, spotted by a patrol car. Boys are still shaken. I can't feel anything.

They keep asking me questions, opinions. I can't answer them. It's so damn cold. Why is it such a big deal? Nobody will miss her, least of all the men present here. Maybe because we're the good guys looking for the bad guy? Good guys, bad guys? It doesn't matter, I just get paid.

One of the street lights above burns out with a hiss. It's so damn cold.

Jester's Crown by Vike Mandenburg

The first thing Thomas noticed as he stepped out of the building was a wild blue and black serpent coiled around his neck. It wasn't yet choking him, but he thought it would be best to remove the pesky creature before asphyxiation became an issue. He tossed it into a nearby metal cage, and wished it better luck in finding a victim that wouldn't notice it sneaking up. Thomas stood in the sun for a moment, relishing the warmth on his aging bones. It was a good day. Looking down he noticed strange, glistening bugs resting upon his pale chest. For a man who felt no kindness for insects, he stripped them off in a single swipe. Another revelation struck him as he saw tanned, hairy flesh beneath his former carapace. Pulling the dry, coarse skin away he felt new life wash over him. He could now feel a cool breeze dancing through the wild thicket that spanned from his throat to his belly.

The sun, now in all its glory, was beating upon his hat in a most uncomfortable fashion. He set it down upon a nearby bench. Casting a glance around he realized he was on an island in a throng of people. Standing upon the bench was a much better view. From here he could look upon the faces of people swirling by. Making soft comments to himself he began to interpret his surroundings. Several people nearby stopped to listen, and laughed at his casual observations. A few of them tossed shiny ovals into his hat. He found as he spoke louder, the people cheered and laughed. This was a good place to be.

Shortly, two men dressed in dark blue uniforms with oddly shaped sticks at their waists tugged on his elbow. "Show's over granddad," The taller of the two said. "We don't need any begging on our beat."

"I'm not begging, sir. My head was warm in this sun, so I set down my hat." Thomas shrugged. "It was their choice to throw things into it." And he continued his stories. The two officers looked at one another, chuckled and moved on. They saw no point in taking in a broken, half naked man. Meanwhile, Thomas continued his stories, and the people laughed more than ever. Soon his cap was brimming with shining metal and dull, strange pieces of paper.

In the middle of telling the people about a metal snake he had seen, forever cursed to do nothing but delve into the ground with people upon its back, a young man sprinted forward and took the over-full hat. People began to yell, and tell Thomas that all of his money had been stolen. Thomas watched the man run down the street, and heard the calls of the people. He turned solemnly and said to them, "I had no money in there. The man has taken only my hat, and I do not believe it will rain today."

One, Part 1 by Josef K.

In the night, with only dim starlight holding back the true dark, I am alone. The day's business is done, the traps checked and reset, water collected from the evaporation pits, the perimeter alarms in place. My body uncoils, the thick ropes of aching muscles unspooling as I lay in the filthy sleeping bag. The once springy down filling is clotted with a foul smelling dampness, bunching into greasy clumps and knots. By winter I will need to strip the filling and find something to replace it but it will not pack down as light. By winter, I might be able to venture back into a city and find a sporting good store. By winter, this might be all over, or I may be dead.

I drift away, the pinpricked night differing very little from the haze of sleep. When I awake and shake the gossamer film from my consciousness, I become aware of the passage of time. The spine of silken light behind the stars, the heart of the galaxy that I have become re-accustomed with in the past month, has twisted across a quarter of the sky. Small coiling tendrils of fog are coursing up the sides of the mountain like the rising of some vaporous ocean. And behind the wet and living thrum of the brush, behind the shudder and shiver of the breeze, I hear the clank of glass and tin cans.

The alarms.

I cannot pick out the direction at first, so I spring from the sleeping bag already gripping the revolver, finger already coiling around the trigger. I hold still in a runner's crouch, the walnut grip of the pistol slick with sweat despite the ragged cold of the night. My lungs burn with panic, but I wrestle control from my hindbrain and still the shuddering in my chest until my body is calm, still. My mind will follow.



In the stillness, the alarm rings again, a clumsy tremor of inorganic sounds against the night's tapestry, just ahead of me now. I thrust the pistol forward, without thinking, and fire two shots, level with the horizon.

As the echoing of gunfire rolls down the mountain and is swallowed by the approaching fog, the night goes silent. I hold my body crouched and still, one hand splayed wide in the dirt, the other jutting forward, the gun forming the point of my spear. The alarm is silent. I count the beats of my heart. Somewhere shy of ninety, the alarms sound again, a violent surge that tugs and tears at the ropes and brush. In the darkness beyond perception, something crashes through the undergrowth. Away from me, away from the camp.

Dawn comes slowly as the waves of fog crash over the campsite, a smothering blanket of wet grey that chokes the thin sunlight. When the murky light reaches me, I hurriedly break down the camp, hissing with regret at having to move again so soon. The small clearing at the intersection of several winding deer trails had been perfect, and I'd just started to dream of building a more permanent structure.

When I have scrubbed the site clean, I go to retrieve the alarms. They are of the simplest sort, ropes strung and staked between the bushes, lashed to bundles of clattering trash. I can see at once where they were triggered in the early morning. The ropes are down and tangled, tugged free by the intruder's wild flight. There is a tiny spray of dark blood across a few leaves and I allow myself a moment of pride at the lucky shot.

I hide my pack beneath the brush and follow the little network of trails, retrieving the clear plastic sheets and cups from the evaporation pits. I pull apart the little traps to salvage the springs and ropes, not looking forward to the work of rebuilding the network of snares and cages at my next camp.

As I approach the final snare, something shudders in me, like a plucked string. My teeth set against each other and I can feel the skin on my scalp crawling. I drop again into the practiced crouch, head down and eyes closed, surveying the woods with my ears. There is nothing, only the gentle patter of condensing fog. After a moment, the sensation passes.

It's almost noon when I set out; the sun is a white disc, barely picked out against the slate of the sky. I find the main trail, overgrown after a season of neglect, and press upward, towards the mountain ridge.

An hour later, the trail emerges from the fog and the forest with steep ascent. To the West, the sea stretches away, infinite and placid as it mirrors the gray of the clouded sky. The cry of a hawk drifts on the cool breeze, and beneath it, behind me, I hear the cracking of clumsy footfalls.

I am ticking through my options even as I turn my eyes to the noise. I can't run with the pack; I can't leave it behind. And I can't allow the intruder to get near me.

The pack clatters to the ground, the metal cookpot clanging out like a bell against the rock. I fumble, frantic, at the nylon cords encircling the rifle, my fingers numb and cold. I jerk it free and bring it up hard enough to jar my shoulder, and squint down the sights.

The mouth of the forest breaths fog, cloaking the trail in a gloom my eyes cannot pierce. The hawk cries again, somewhere far above us. There is no sound from the forest.

I wait. My left arm starts to burn and I slowly lower the rifle, allowing myself a deep, cold breath. My heart is just beginning to slow when I catch sight of a hand, pale and thin, slowly reaching out from behind a gnarled pine. It drifts outward, shuddering and twitching, trailing an arm in a tattered sleeve.

The man drifts into view with a measured slowness, his arms raised high. His eyes lock on me, pleading. His face is a gaunt mask of fear, weathered by hardship almost to vanishing. His clothes are filthy and torn and I see the thin ruby stripe where last night's bullet bit into the flesh of his thigh. His lips tremor slightly as he opens his mouth to speak, and he lurches towards me.

I raise the rifle again, finger almost squeezing the feather trigger in panic. My heart returns, surging blood and pounding in my ears.

"Stop, goddammit, don't move!" My throat is raw from disuse and what I hoped was an authoritative bellow comes out cracked and reedy.

He stops with a jerk and his mouth snaps shut. He's shaking now, body wracked with little spasms. It could be from fear. It's hard to tell. He starts to smile, a sad line on his dirty face, and the corners of his eyes tilt as he is wracked by a sudden spasmodic sob. His hands fly to his face and I feel the electric currents of his shame; it wraps around my chest and squeezes. I inhale again, deep and slow. Something inside me suddenly wishes that I had shot.

He lowers his arms and slumps, defeated. When he speaks, his voice is the sound of a dry riverbed. When he speaks I see the bleeding cracks in his lips, and I wonder if I look any better.

"Please." He leaves this hanging, flapping in the air like a flag of surrender. "Please, I'm not... I'm not sick, I promise you. I'm not a carrier."

His words rend me, splitting the stitches on my memory and spilling it open, wet and fecund. I remember the girl, streaked with tears and dirt, in the sickly glow of lantern-light, I remember those exact words spoken, amidst the charnel house evidence of her lies. I struggle to stay on my feet for a moment.

“You know I can’t trust you.” I say. He nods solemnly, eyes squinting shut.

“I know. I just... I need help. Can you...” He struggles, stuttering, a man unaccustomed to begging. “I need food, and water. I’m sorry, I was... I found one of your water traps last night, and I-”

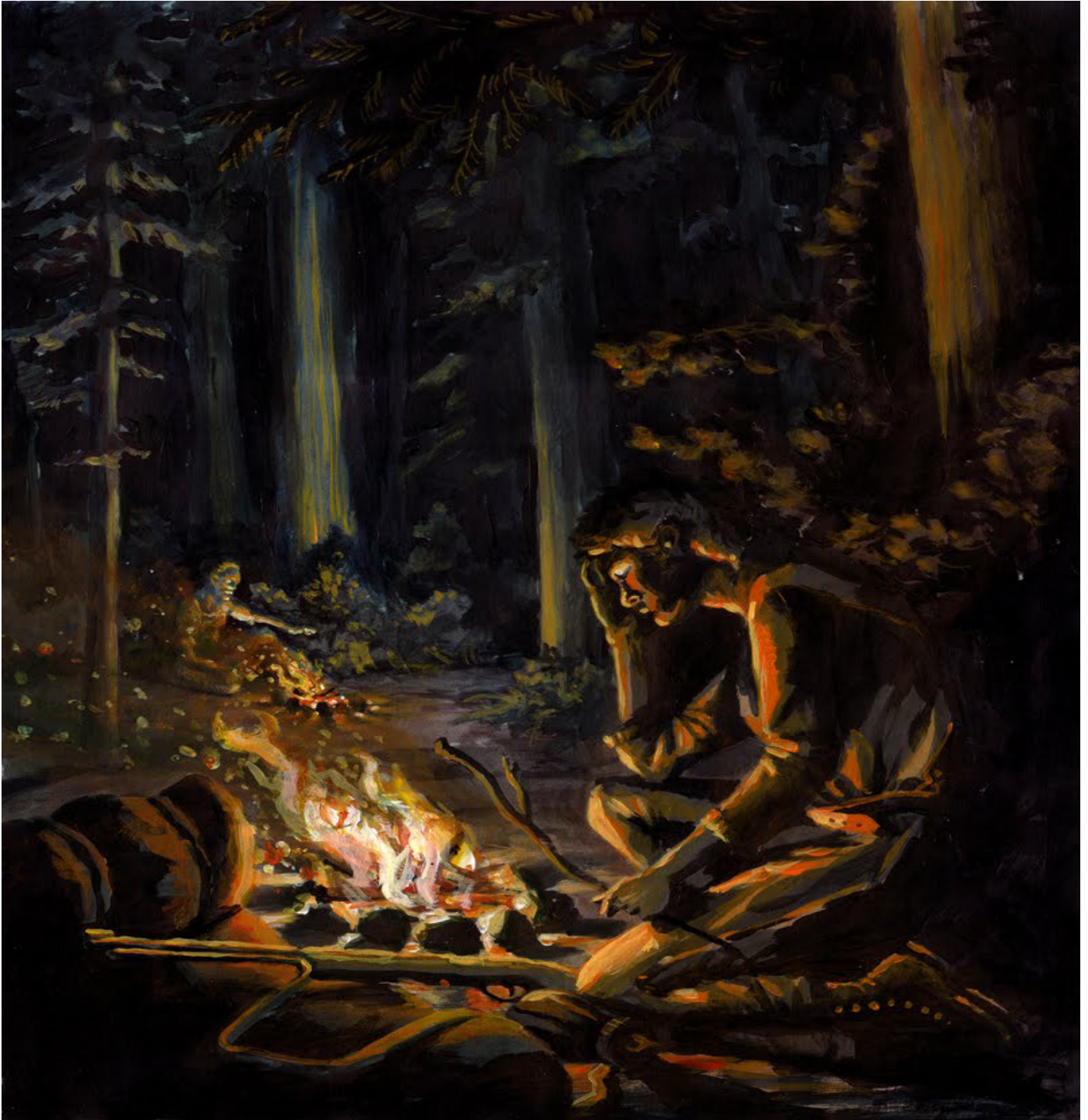
He continues to talk, babbling, but I’ve stopped listening. My mind spins away on a chain of causality, starting with the infection in his body, through the pooled water, to my canteen, and into the cells of my body, rupturing and spreading. That dark little something inside me screams to pull the trigger and I do, unquestioning, while my thinking mind frantically orders my arms to move, jerking the rifle a few degrees upward.

The bullet hisses over his head and digs deep into the heartwood of the pine. He jerks and for a split second I think I’ve killed him. He drops to the trail, his limp body collapsing like doll, and covers his head in his hands. I can hear him whispering to himself, repeating some monosyllabic word in a panicked mantra. It might be ‘shit’ and it might be ‘god’ and I know they’re worth the same. I tilt my head back and scream, my throat shredding with the sound. The wet air takes my cry and crashes it against the hillsides, returning as a pallid echo.

I’ve got about a day or two at most before I’ll know. The son of a bitch.

In the end, I let him follow, as long as he keeps his distance. I tell myself that I have to help him, that it’s not his fault. The dark something chitters happily, and I know that if I wake up tomorrow with the shakes, sweating, leaking, delirious... I will still find a way to kill him. I do not speak to him for hours. He keeps his distance, and I keep my rifle slung.

When we stop in the night, I gather wood and kindling and build him fire. He stands apart from me at a respectful distance, watching with greedy eyes as I drop a handful of sun dried berries and a strip of salted meat to the earth. I take one of my plastic bottles, filled with fresh water, and place it with the food. Then I take 15 paces away and build my own fire.



He has already devoured the food and is sucking at the water like a newborn at the teat. I feel a momentary rise of bile in my throat, a wave of contempt for this helpless mewling thing that may have cost me my life in his ignorance. He doesn't deserve this. Hasn't worked for it. Cannot repay me. The dark something dances among these thoughts with giddy grace, ringing them like bells so that they will not fade. I have to shake my head, hard, to clear it.

When it has passed, I look up to see him staring at me, fearful and wondering, and I feel ashamed, knowing he can see my thoughts on my face. I know that I've forgotten how to disguise these thoughts, forgotten how to wear the mask. But that's only part of it.

"Thank you," he says, "I can't tell you... you saved my life and I just want you to know-"

I wave one hand sharply, not wanting to hear him, wanting him to hold on to some shred of pride. He takes my meaning and only nods.

"My name is Javier," he says, and waits expectantly. I suddenly wish he could take it back; his name feels like a smothering blanket. I don't want to know the name of the man I will likely have to kill in the morning. I wait a long time before responding. My fire shifts and the pyramid construct of small branches collapses, the coal bed already glowing brightly.

"Philip," I say, at last. It feels strange to say it, strange to think of myself as anything but 'I.' Whereas only a day before I was only an id among the trees, tonight by our separate fires we are Javier and Philip. It makes me queasy, and I am suddenly afraid of what will come of this.

He takes my single response as a license to speak openly. At first, I want to reject this, want to throw a stone at him until he slinks away to sleep in silence, but the rolling notes of his voice are pleasant and soon I am unable to shut them out, unwilling to ignore him.

"-two weeks at the least. I've hardly eaten since the captain died. Not sick, mind you, no, he fell. When we left the highway, he was sure we could subsist better in the hills and avoid any towns or cities on our way north, and... he just took a bad step, the third day we were out here. He turned to tell me the punch line of a joke, and then, he was falling. I couldn't get down to the bottom of the cliff, could only look down at the rifle on his back, and the tent, and the cans of food, some of them smashed open on the rocks. The tide came in eventually, and he was gone. I had what I was carrying, but no gun, and not a clue of where we had been headed, or what to do. I tried to head east, back to the road, but I've been going in circles. To be quite honest, I've no idea where we even are." He chuckles slightly as if this struck him funny.

"This was a state park." I say, "The Lost Coast. South of Eureka, north of Grey."

"Ahh..." he says, as if this somehow mattered now. "Anyways, I'm lucky I found you."

I raise my head, giving the dark something a good look as it rages at his 'luck.' I see on his suddenly fearful face that I am wearing the predator's look, naked and unhidden. With some effort I soften my features, and return my eyes to the fire.

"Look," he says, and I hear a note of creeping anger and indignation in his voice. "I'm not sick, and I'm not a carrier. I know I'm not. I was working with the bug, since the beginning,

until it all went. We were tested daily.”

“You know what it is then. What is it?” I ask.

“The bug?” he asks, “We still have no idea. Patient zero died in San Francisco almost a year ago, and then, like clockwork, it appeared in large cities across the world the following week. It’s artificial for certain, a bioweapon, but every country was hit at the same time. It’s viral, and it looks like influenza may have been used to build it but some of it looks an awful lot like rabies... Do you know much about diseases?” He seems to realize instantly what a stupid question this is for anyone still alive, but I nod.

“Enough.”

“It’s well engineered. The goal seems to have been an asymptomatic latency period, in which the infected can spread the disease, and then rapid onset. It has an amazing lifespan outside the human body, a protein shield like a glass wall.” He laughs, a hollow, sad sound. “Quarantine was impossible. Almost everything that was said in the news was false, to keep the peace, but it all crumbled when people started fleeing population centers. They brought it with them. And it just became a race, outrun the sick. And the bug loved it, it kept right up. How long have you been out here?”

“I was at the head of the race,” I tell him, with a crooked smile that’s half me and half the dark. “When it was obvious that it wasn’t going to blow over, we left Sacramento. It was stupid. We broke off of the main roads to try to avoid the quarantine camps, did okay for a while in the sticks.” My throat tightens and I struggle to bend my thoughts and words up and away from this dark furrow. “I haven’t heard anything official since we started moving, other than word of mouth, and it was all hysteria. Unless they really nuked San Francisco.”



He tilts his head in half nod, bobbing only once. "I was on the deck of the USS Nimitz when they burned San Francisco. Wasn't nukes. It was thermobarics. They wanted to sterilize it, thought they could hold the peninsula as a quarantine. The next morning, there were two sick on board, I think pressure seals on the hotlab failed, but it didn't matter much. There was a... there was a goddamned mutiny on board, the XO shot the captain, I got off on a stolen helicopter with our military liaison, Jesus, this all sounds so absurd. At the time, it was just the logical thing to do. Just four of us got off. The city was still on fire, and most of us docs had argued against the bombing, we knew it wasn't going to kill the bug fully. We just started going north. The Nimitz is still out there I guess, full of corpses"

"What else?" The dark is rapt at these images, entranced by the grand scale chaos and violence. I am too. It helps.

"There were some nukes, on the East Coast. That was the last we heard from any sort of formal authority. Probably Russian. Most people seem to think we fired first, but no one really seemed to have the heart for it, so it was small scale.

"Something massive hit Vallejo, right where all the freeways met. Not a nuke, some big kinetic weapon from orbit. We heard the impact from a hundred miles away. The captain seemed to think this was a last ditch effort at disrupting the flow of infected refugees, but it came far too late.

"It quieted down, fast. The bug was just... too efficient. No one recovers from it, and everyone is susceptible. Even carriers die, eventually."

This fills me with elation. A sense of cosmic fair-play at work. Javier seems to withdraw a little once he has said this, his eyes mirroring the dancing flames of his fire.

"It's... it's bad," he says after a quiet moment. "It was designed to do this. Even the carrier immunities seem to be intentional, a long range vector to continue the spread."

"Built by whom?"

He shakes his head, and shrugs. "It's got something else, inside of it, something like a chemical timer. There's a little self contained packet of DNA, completely inert right now, but... It's going to change." He shivers and puts his hands up to the fire.

"Change, how?" I ask, but he's done now, I can see it in his black eyes. He shrugs slightly, his eyes suddenly wet, and I understand. When it was just me, on the trails, with only water and food to concern me, the global extinction of humankind seemed so pleasantly abstract.

And here, we've torn back the bandages, and stared into the festering wound, together.

We're quiet for a long time.

"I don't think there's anyone else out here." I say, as the fires burn down to coals. "I've been alone for a long time. The little roads off the highway were empty; the main quarantine posts were further inland. I walked, with no one to stop me, right into the woods, and to the sea."

"Where are you headed?" he asks.

"Nowhere. Away from people," I say. "I've been ranging to the North, till I can see the Eureka quarantine camps, and then south again. It's been a few months since I saw anyone alive there. The big fires are out, and the last of the power seemed to have faded away. It's quiet and dark. I'm going to wait a few more months, and then... we'll see."

"It's a better plan than we had. The captain thought we'd find another medical unit, and try to pool our resources, but... in the end it was just him and me, and I think he'd given up on anything other than staying moving. I was just following him."

The dark begins to hum and vibrate in my skull and I stand up sharply. I kick dirt over the fire, watching the dry earth blot out the glowing embers. Javier rises and looks around him into the fire-lit trees.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing. I need to set the lines for tonight. And I don't want to talk anymore. I like you, and that's going to make it harder when I have to shoot you."

He has forgotten his subservience, now that I have shared food and fire with him, and his fists clench. He doesn't quail at my clumsy threat. He's braver than I gave him credit for at first.

"I told you-" he says his eyes narrowing.

"I know. And I believe you," I say. "But Megan didn't think she was sick either. We'll see. Keep your fire going tonight. Tomorrow, I'll show you how to build a shelter."

(End of Part 1)

One Couple's' Car Ride by Alex Mak

Cars, thousands of them driving in the night, paired stars shooting across asphalt areas. Cornered into mediocrity. But I suppose it has become the accursed dream of billions. Settled down, to stop feeling, to stop living.

This one begins with a muddled turn leading a couple into the past. The car's headlights shining against the blue of the city, and a weary couple lost in the middle of the night. Noises rabble within a hushed car filled with hollow hearts.

"That was one heck of a party wasn't it dear?" says a rosy faced man behind a wheel.

"It just seemed fun because you were so awfully drunk, but anyways, I think we're lost" replied a tired wife.

"We're not lost honey, trust me we'll make it home".

"We've been driving in circles for hours! How could you say we're not lost. Let's just go back now".

The husband replies:

"Remember back when, back when we loved each other, and we'd pull over to an exit just like that one, and just drive around, and you'd smile at me sayin-"

She cuts him off.

"No I don't remember that, but I know I want to go home, and you're not taking us there! Now let's make a u-turn, I'm sure if we just go back to the party they'll let us spend the night, because you're obviously so drunk that you've become delusional"

The rosy cheeked man drives on. Discontent with himself and his wife. Not understanding why.

"Well are you going to turn back?"

The rosy cheeked man is inconvincible. They continue driving through foreign streets.

"Well, are you!?" The wife begins to grow weary as the night drags on.

The husband slows to a stop, half mounting the curb with the side of the car, and without a word opens the door on his side and leaves the car.

"So that's how it's going to be. You're going to leave me now?"

He walks around it toward the curb, and opens the door on his wife's side.

With one hand outstretched to her he whispers "Get out". He is a rather large man, so I suppose this is his way of speaking gently.

His words petrify the poor woman as she is unsure what is about to occur. Has this man that she once knew suddenly stopped being that person? Even if he hasn't, her perception of him will never be the same.

She grabs his hand and he pulls her toward someone's front lawn. He drops himself

down pulling her down with him. There they lay like parallel logs on broken moss. But the fact that they are parallel makes them statuesque like how life were before they had to get jobs and start working and start growing up, when they could just be themselves. Here they stared at the cloudless night sky.

“Darling...”

“Yes Dear?”

“I want to go home”.

Pictures by Kyra Reinhilde

Everyone knew about the bulletin board, but no one was willing to talk about what was on it. If you listened to the rumors, it could have been anything from some really mind-blowing art to crime scene photos. That was what Elise had heard, at any rate, and she'd been forced to listen to those rumors for three months straight now.

"There aren't any words," Greg had stammered, his eyes wide and his upper lip slicked with sweat. "I know you want me to describe it, but I just can't. You have to see it. It's one of those things."

He said "things" the way an artist might have after descending to Earth on plumes of Opium, all languorous urgency. He wasn't seeing her, that was for certain. Those glossy eyes stared right out into oblivion.

"Well, can't you try?" she'd asked. The request had lacked urgency. She didn't really want to know—not like Meg or Jane did—but there were rituals to be followed.

Greg focused on her and she saw every branch of red invading his sclera. His mouth with its chapped lips and rank breath had opened, then closed, and opened again, but he'd not said a word. Wrinkles appeared between his bushy ginger brows as he tried to force the words out. The whole sight was pathetic. Eventually she raised a hand and shook her head, muttering that she didn't really care.

Since then, she'd picked up more bits and pieces. Greg had been picked apart by the girls. They'd descended on him like hyenas on a corpse demanding to know more about the board everyone was so preoccupied with.

"My boyfriend went to see it, and now he's acting all weird!" Kelly'd shouted. Greg shrank away from her, like he did from everyone after the board. One of her friends, a blonde girl Elise recognized from eighth period history, had grabbed Greg by his lapels. She was too weak to lift him but the point was clear. Greg whispered some directions Elise couldn't hear from her eavesdropping position halfway across the class. The girls dropped him.

Things like that started happening to Greg every few hours until he stopped coming to school. There'd been no warning, just an empty desk one day and a stern admonishment from Ms. Rogers to treat everyone equally.

Kelly and her friends went to see the board after Greg told them where to find it. They stopped coming to school too, but they were rich, so everyone just presumed they transferred. They didn't belong in a school like this anyway. Paint peeling off the wall, asbestos all over the place and floors that were more gum than tile—what had they been doing here to begin with?

As the days passed more details came to light. She listened, as she always did, writing down what she heard for the sake of not taking notes on the classwork. The board was in some kind of store downtown. Not the seedy part where all the drug dealers were, and where she'd thought something so popular would be. It was in the fashion district. There was a little store on a side street that was always packed with people. Someone mentioned the sign said the store had been founded in the roaring twenties but no one had noticed it until now. Weird in a busy city like this one. No place was ever really private or secret. She'd heard it over and over though:

"Didn't even see that place there until it was pointed out."

“First time I saw it, and I walk home that way every day.”

It didn't trouble her so much. Her classmates were idiots. The test scores proved it. So they didn't notice a clothing store in the fashion district; there were probably lots of similar stores in the area. She wondered how any of those stores ever stood out. Nothing was gauche with fashion; nothing was too gaudy when the world thrived on the extravagant. Probably why none of that had ever appealed to her. Elise was happy in the simplest clothes she could find.

The other notes scrawled in her notebook were even more vague. Trevor in Bio had said the board was horrifying, but his friend Steve said it was beautiful. No one wanted to give any more detail than what they felt when they'd seen it.

Elise's friends were sucked in like the rest. To their credit, they resisted for a long while, but eventually Sam caught wind of it all and there was no stopping him. She remembered him storming into the coffee shop on fiftieth—their usual spot—waving a piece of paper. The writing was smeared from his sweat, but the address was clearly visible. Meghan, ever the adventurer, declared that they had to leave that very instant.

Out of their little group-- Elise, Sam, Meghan and Jane—Meg called all the shots. Always had. They'd all gotten together in grade school, when it wasn't so awkward to have a boy in the group, and even then Meghan had led the way. She picked who they spoke to, where they went, which movies they saw; everything about their time together. Jane fought her sometimes, as she did now, but in the end Meg always won.

“I can't believe you want to see that stupid thing,” Jane said. “It's just a dumb board.”

“But it's a really popular dumb board!” said Meghan. When she spoke she waved her hand in the air, holding her coffee cup like a conductor's baton. “That means it can't be boring.”

“And you've heard the way people talk about it,” Sam cut in. “You know Dean Malinsky? Stopped coming to class last month? They just found him in the looney bin. Keeps talking about ropes.”

“Ropes?” Elise said. “Why ropes?”

Sam smiled the smile Jane liked so much and shrugged. “Search me. He's crazy. Crazy people don't make sense.”

Elise knew that sometimes they did, and that maybe the ropes were important, but she took another sip of her tea and watched her friends argue. Silence was a friend of hers too.

Ten minutes later it was decided, since Meg was out of coffee and arguments never continued if caffeine wasn't involved. That was an old rule from middle school, but it helped keep things short. A cup of coffee could only last so long. Once, though, Jane had left a single cup of the stuff on Meg's doorstep half-finished just to prove a point. No one got it. She was still upset about that to this day. Something about never getting her way. That was silly. She got her way whenever Meg was too busy to care.

Sam's little slip of paper told them they weren't too far. The store was only a few blocks away. They spent the walk in silence, each contemplating what they'd find pinned to the corkboard. Sam was limping, so he was nervous, since his old football injury only ever cropped up when he was really on edge. Jane was stomping. Meghan flipped her hair with a delicate hand and grinned the whole way. Elise thought with a smirk that this was all just a plot for Meg to get close to some boy, but again bit her tongue. She knew better than to say that out loud.

“Holy shit,” said Sam, pointing ahead. “What the hell is that?”

Elise looked up from the pavement. A throng of people were pressed up against a store’s display window, so tightly packed and so massive a group that traffic was being blocked. Not a single one of them was moving, not a word was spoken between them; it was a wordless lump of flesh.

“Looks like a moshpit at a classical concert,” muttered Jane.

“Those don’t have moshpits,” said Meg. She marched right ahead towards the crowd. Elise wondered how she wasn’t creeped out. Then again, Meg was never scared of anything.

Meghan pulled someone out of the crowd without asking, as if to lend credence to Elise’s thoughts. A kid not much older than they were, from across town if his school jersey was any indication. He just fell to the ground with his limbs flapping like noodles. A wet crunch filled the air when the boy’s head met the pavement. No one moved to help him. Her other friends simply took the boy’s place in the crowd.

“Hey!” Elise shouted. “This guy’s hurt!”

She was kneeling by him now, reluctant to touch the spot where his skull had cracked open and oozed blood like some kind of wine fountain. Words flew out of her mouth—call 911, Doctor, Help—but they hung in the air without acknowledgment. The boy’s eyes were going glassy but they remained focused on her, even as her heart was racing and her breath grew ragged. Where were the cops, the security guards, anything; where had they gone? He looked at her, reached out with a trembling hand for her, and somewhere behind her she heard someone say that the cops never bothered here anymore, to just let him die.

She looked up at the crowd, the nurses and the doctors just standing there focused on the board she couldn’t see, and swore at them to help. They didn’t move. Not even Sam, who wanted to be a doctor and knew more than she did about first aid. The boy whimpered underneath her as the blood poured into his eyes.

Elise shot to her feet. No. This wasn’t going to happen. Someone had to be immune to that stupid board and she knew who the most likely candidate was. After all, someone had to have hung the thing up. Heart hammering in her chest she ran into the store.

Music was playing but she didn’t make any note of it, besides that it was one of those stations specifically made to be background noise. Racks of clothing in garish golds and greens called her attention away from the counter, and the woman behind it. She ran towards the woman shouting for help, reached out, and fell. Pain shot through her; she’d landed on her wrist.

The woman was already moving towards her.

“Not me,” she grunted as she got to her feet. “There’s a boy out there, he’s dying and--”

The shopkeeper smiled a crocodile smile as she took Elise’s injured hand. “He is already dead.”

“No,” Elise stammered. Sweat was making her eyes sting; she closed them and tried to will away the tears. He’d looked up at her with those big blue eyes and begged her to save him...

“He is. They always die like that,” the woman said. She was turning Elise’s wrist over, examining the fracture or the twist, whatever it was, without any sort of emotion beyond a slight amusement.

“But no one did anything. N-No one even looked, not even my friends,” said Elise. Cracks

warped her voice and her throat was threatening to close up. The tears she'd fought were flowing free now.

The woman stared into her with piercing gray eyes. "They never do."

Elise sniffled and bit her lip. Sam and Jane should have done something at least. What the hell was on that board? Did she even want to see it?

"Your wrist will be fine," the woman said. "But you have not seen the pictures, have you?"

"No," Elise spat.

"You are not curious?"

"No."

The woman laughed softly and took Elise's arm. Elise felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise; everything in her mind and body was screaming for her to leave. As if to silence Elise's thoughts the woman tightened her grip. Her arm might as well have been in a steel grip.

Step by step she led the struggling girl out of the store. Elise was kicking, punching, anything she could do to try and break free. Cacophonies thundered between her ears: run away, get away, don't let her take you! But the woman was made of steel, of stone and mortar; fighting her was fighting gravity.

The crowd parted for the woman. She dragged Elise front and center, past her immobilized and dead-eyed friends, to stand before the board so many were entranced by.

Before her were beautifully shot, perfectly lit, matte photographs of hangings. All the victims were dressed in the clothing she'd seen inside: bright colors that contrasted their bloated white skin and milky eyes. Some of the corpses were so swollen she barely recognized them as human. Those were emblazoned with slogans like "Marvel at our ropes! The weight they can carry!"

She tried not to stare at them, tried not to let the lolling heads and staring eyes get to her, but she could already smell them. The bile dripping out of their mouths and the stench of rotting meat. The gasses desperately trying to escape that paper thin skin.

Familiar faces lurked among the masses. Greg was in the lower right, his stomach already popped open. How pale his intestines were, how they glistened. She wondered what her own looked like now as they twisted in disgust and threatened to empty her stomach.

"We pay them," said the woman in her ear. "Substantial amounts. Their families and friends get the money, of course."

And there was Lana Malone from fifth period with her neck bending in ways it shouldn't.

"They are framed as advertisements, but it is not about the store. You understand that, don't you, Elise?"

The faces changed before her eyes into Meg's and Jane's and Sam's. Somehow she found the will to nod.

"You could live forever like this. Everyone would remember you. They will think of you before they go to bed and as they go about their days. You will haunt them. Their lives will never be the same, all because they saw you right up there. And you won't feel a thing."

The woman pressed a slip of paper into Elise's hand. She didn't feel it happen.

"We await your call."

As she shoved Elise back into the world of the living, the girl only barely noticed that the boy's corpse was gone. All that remained of him was a bloodstain flower blooming on the concrete. She didn't care. She had to get home. There was a phone call she had to make.

Rain by Rankin

Paying attention to nothing in particular, he strolled on with a rehearsed swagger and a cocky grin plastered onto his face. The sky above spoke of an incoming downpour, but his assumed expression was a forecast of sunshine and the carefree. He maneuvered himself with fluid motions through pockets of crowded teenagers, not much younger or older than he, while occasionally giving a “Hey” to a passerby.

These acquaintances were numerous, and soon proved to impede his progress significantly. A smile, a nod, a talk. Some simply raised their plastic cup in his direction – no chatter necessary. Others worked to block his path outright with an extended palm, beckoning a handshake and a conversation. And there were swarms of these kinds: familiar faces with a tale to reminisce of. Everyone seemed to have something to say, and each one was a pitfall into departed times.

“You remember when...”

“Yes I remember when... You remember that time...”

“Can’t say I do.”

“Well lemme tell you...”

And so they plunged. Creeping along abandoned places and people, scenes were revisited in rapid succession. The sensations bombarded them like a hurricane. First came alluring scents and sweet tastes, and their grins widened. Then came delights of thrills and riveting antics, and their voices grew to boastful volumes. When old friends and good times were recollected, their nods turned to laughter. And at the end came the burden of dusk, and the laughter would deflate. He would rub his chin to make sure his smile was fixed right.

“Yup.”

“Alright, bye.”

Then he would continue on. There would be times, along the way, where his eye would catch the figure of this girl, or the face of that girl. The ex who got fed up. The chick who said he wasn’t her type. The sweetheart who wasn’t enough for him. The girl who decided he should start seeing other people. Actually, he decided that.

He never said anything to them, let alone acknowledged them, and simply walked on by. But he kept them ensnared along the outer edges of his vision, tucked away in the corners. There, they were just ink blots – purple stains that smeared themselves along the outside of the canvas. They were formless shadows, like the enraged waves of gray and black above.

But he didn’t see them.

Eventually, he managed to reach the center of all the commotion. The people, conjoined to form a sort of mob, encircled a small restroom. No one had apparently given it a thought. When he stepped inside the tense little facility, it was empty. This did, however, add quite a bit to the cleanliness of it all. The tiled floors, apparently made of creamy marble, were very well polished to the point of reflecting both the glare of the florescent lights and the white plaster ceiling. The concrete walls, painted over in a plain light-gray, were entirely

spotless. Even the single urinal set on the wall seemed to be entirely unused.

The door shut behind him, and the sound outside died away into silence. The important matters at the urinal were done away with quickly. Stepping to the sleek glass sink, he lathered his palms with soap, and rinsed thoroughly. After drying his hands, he took a moment to look upon the large square mirror set before the sink. Gazing at the grinning reflection, his own smile dissolved into a somber frown.

Everything was a soup of noise and motion. His eyes closed as his finger rubbed against his temples. It was all so nauseating. The crowds; the empty plastic cups; the people; the greetings; the handshakes; the stories; the laughter. And that smile of his...

On the opposite wall, near the corner, was a small window. Through it the entire field was visible, as was the sky – now a heavy sheet of endless black. He looked to it. A bolt of lightning split through the clouds, and jabbed into the earth with a deafening roar. Reality shattered into countless fragments, and fell as rain into the newly-formed abyss.

He blinked.

A short hallway separates the study from the main doors. He stands in a threshold, gazing back into the lamp-lit chamber. Bookshelves line the walls, each inch filled with texts and tomes of all lengths. He regards it with a subtle smile and an air of pride before turning towards the exit. Conversations to last a lifetime fill those pages.

Getting a coat from the small rack placed near the entrance, he throws it onto himself and strolls past his steps into the streets below. An autumn breeze greets him, along with the quaint brickwork of a quiet uptown neighborhood. Squirrels dart through grass and up branches of towering bark as he walks past. Sunlight shines against puddles of rainwater that litter the sidewalk; the sky above a serene blue. A relaxed grin spreads upon his face.

The Dreamer, Part 2 by Yegor

They call me to see Dr. Engleson. Heard about him: house psychiatrist. Big on Freud. Looks like him too, with beard, glasses, black short-cropped hair with specks of gray.

I don't like him. Too many questions about the past. Mother: dead. Father: also dead. Scribble scribble. "It says here that you don't have siblings... How do you feel about that?"

"Eh, never much thought of it," I reply curtly.

Scribble. Expected him to take out Raw-shark blots, but he didn't. Disappointed.

Blue pen. Black ink. Why? Why does this bother me? Blue pen. Take that pen, and stab him in the throat.

Calm. Down. Tom.

Trouble staying awake. Doctor trying new medicine on me. Working faster than normal. "Can I sleep now?" I ask.

"Yes," he says.

Want to fall sleep. Want to never wake up.

...

The patient was weaving the slick, slippery muscles onto his girl's skeleton. It was a brutally meticulous task. Somewhere in the distance, a door slammed. The patient looked up, his eyes wide. The unfinished girl floated above the sand in front of him like some half-picked corpse. Suddenly, the dungeon started to shake violently. The patient's vision started to blur, his ears filled with a loud and deep rumbling. He saw the bones of his girl start to crack and disintegrate into sand. The patient tried to scoop up the sand and fix his creation, but the familiar pull was much stronger than usual. It threw him off of his feet and into the door.

-

What the fuck? My eyes are groggy, a voice in the distant universe is saying: "Wake up, Thomas! I've made a breakthrough regarding your case!" Doctor. The fucking Doctor.

I shake my head. He is right at the foot of my bed. Wait a second... my girl! My Isabella!

No...

Moonlight reflects off of Doctor's spectacles. At that moment, my mind goes black and I never feel as much hatred for a person as I do now.

I sit up. "MY CREATION! MY GIRL!" I scream.

"WHAT! HAVE! YOU! DONE!" I throw off my blanket and pounce on the doctor. Eyes. Go for the eyes, Tom. I sink my fingers into his eye sockets.

It feels good to hurt him.

He yells for help, but it's too late. Blood is streaming down his face and over my hands. He throws me off. I lands on the floor, satisfied with the damage done.

Oh shit, security. They rush into my room, grab me by the arms and throw me onto the bed. One holds me down while the other whips out a syringe. Yes! Sleep!

I must fix my Isabella... she could be lost forever!

The needle goes smoothly into my neck. The room becomes fuzzy, the sounds muffled. Ahhh...

...

He rushed to his creation. "I'm sorry my love, I have failed, I HAVE FAILED!" he shouted, tearing his hair from his head. His creation lay ugly, misshapen, and disfigured in the sand. The patient tried his best to put everything back into place, but the tears blurred his vision. He sobbed at the feet of his broken creation. He cried for a long time.

...

Straps. Very tight. Can't move. Can't feel legs. More sleepy pills? More sleepy needles? Must fix girl.

Must fix girl. Slow pills. Long wait.

...

The patient spent a long time in the dungeon. He fixed his mistakes quickly and continued working on the girl. His mind was totally focused. Nothing would distract him from his goal.

He was almost done. The patient closed his eyes and thought of the last two things he had to add to the girl: her hair and her eyes.

He opened his girl's eyes. They were completely white and pupil-less. He bent down and picked up a pinch of sand. He sprinkled sand on each eye and covered both with his hands. Focusing on the color, the patient's brow twitched with anticipation. He opened his hands. The girl's eyes were a brilliant green. The patient smiled at his work.

The hair took the longest time. The patient created and inserted every single thread of hair separately. The final result seemed to be well worth the effort, though. It was a deep red color, the color of blood. After finishing the girl, the patient danced with jubilation.

The girl was bathed in a soft yellow light which made her pale skin glow. The patient walked around the girl, examining every part of her.

She was the most beautiful person the patient had ever seen, and she was all his.

-

...What? Where is she? I turn my head to the side and scan the room as best as I could. Is she under the bed? Don't talk nonsense, Tom. I can't remember... did I manage to drag her out of the dungeon?

I didn't. That means she is just lying in the dungeon, probably rotting or something! I need to get her out.

I close my eyes again. Sleep was shy today. It didn't want to come to me. The straps chafe my arms and legs. My nose itches like hell.

Please let me sleep... I'm too damn close to be awake.

I just need to bring her here.

...

The girl was lying in the middle of the dream-dungeon, right where the patient left her. He slowly walked up to her, not wanting to disturb her. He touched her arm and, surprised, violently jerked his hand back. She was warm. The patient, now incredulous, shook the girl to wake her. The girl opened her eyes after a few shakes. She looked quizzically at the patient. Her looks of confusion soon melted into comforting familiarity. The girl seemed to recognize her creator. She was happy.

The patient timidly stroked the soft skin of his creation. "Isabella?" the patient asked the girl. Her eyes followed his but she made no move to stop his touches.

He suddenly felt tendrils pulling at him. He couldn't let his girl go this time. He lunged forward and grabbed the girl, just in time.

...

Yes! I got her! Where is she? It's too dark to see properly. I crane my neck to the right... Where the hell is she?

There she is. Standing in the corner, naked. Oh my god. She is so beautiful. I did it. I fucking did it.

"Isabella!" I call out to her. She walks silently up to the bed. She looks me straight in the eyes, not blinking. A faint smile hovers on her flawless face.

"Please Isabella..." I shake my arms and legs for effect. "Unstrap me." She works swiftly and in less than a minute I feel the circulation return to my arms.

I snake my arms out of the straps and then take out my legs. I sit up on the bed, feet hanging off the side. I look at Isabella. She had saved me. She is my goddess. I wrap my arms around her naked, warm body and hold her close. Her tummy feels nice and soft against my face. Her chest rises up and down with every breath.

She was breathing.

“Hug me,” I tell her. Her arms move slowly, almost mechanically, and wrap around my neck. She pulls me in tighter.

Oh my god. I can hear her heart beating. I don't want to let you go, Isabella. I want you to be with me forever.

She smiles. I feel my heart clench up with emotion. I still can't believe that this worked.

After some time in silence, I ask, “Tell me something, Isabella.” She kneels down, her face now a foot lower than mine. “Anything!” I see the confused, scared look in her eyes. Her mouth moves slowly and jerkily. I don't think she knows how to talk. She makes no noises at all except for her breathing. It is a bit strange, to be honest. But she's alive. That's all that matters.

It doesn't matter to me that she's mute. I know that she loves me and that I love her. I mean, I made her, after all...

I can escape with her from this hell hole. Yes... we'll escape! And we will be inseparable.

I'll always hold you close to me, Isabella. I stand up. She does the same. I hug her and plant a quick kiss on her lips. Her lips are... so soft and moist. They are perfect.

I kiss her again. I whisper to her, “Kiss me, Isabella. Give me a sign... anything.” She looks at me blankly. Disappointment starts to creep in... I don't want a robot or a doll. I want a person, goddamn it!

Isabella, show me that you can think! Show me that you aren't an empty puppet! Please...

She throws back her head unexpectedly and laughs silently, her chest heaving. I am stunned. She then grabs me roughly and kisses me hard. I feel her tongue caress mine.

I am in heaven.

We break the kiss. Isabella just stares at me with an amused look.

I hope she doesn't find out how she was made. She probably doesn't understand. Good. It's

better that way. I don't want to lose her.

Footsteps. Hallway. Getting louder.

Shit. They are coming to check up on me.

I jump back onto the bed and put my arms and legs through the straps. I turn to Isabella and see, with horror, that she just stands there, completely unperturbed.

"Hide yourself!" I hiss at her. She doesn't move. Damn it, Isabella, fucking hide somewhere!
"Get under the bed!"

She stands there, naked and beautiful and completely oblivious to my commands. No... please hide, Isabella. Why did you pick this time to stop listening to me?

I don't want to lose you.

The door opens. Two security guards walk in. I lay on my bed, frozen with fear. Isabella...

The guards see her and stop. They stare, mouths slightly open, at the naked teenage girl standing beside me.

One of them finally breaks the silence. "Err... we got a situation here," he speaks nervously into the walkie-talkie. The other looks on and nods at him. He walks up and grabs my Isabella by the shoulders. "What- what's your name, girl?" he asks.

Of course, she doesn't reply.

I close my eyes tightly and concentrate on sending her my thoughts. Isabella, kill the guards and help me escape!

I open my eyes. She hadn't moved. Fuck. I feel the hot tears swelling up behind my eyes. My throat is completely dry, my stomach laced with nervous acid. The fuckers are going to take away my Isabella...

I can't let them do this. I wiggle my arms and legs out of the straps. The guard sees me and jump on my arms, holding me down to the bed. "HELP!" I scream into the guard's face. "HELP ME! ISABELLA, ESCAPE! SAVE YOURSELF!"

While the guards hold me down and take out the tranquilizers, a nurse comes in and leads away Isabella. Her face is always turned towards me, never breaking eye contact.

Through eyes full of tears, I see my girl walking out of the door, wrapped in a blanket. "ISABELLA! RUN, DAMN YOU!" I shout one last time before the needle enters my veins. Fuzzy... lights... NO!

I gather all of my strength in my body, and tense my muscles. This is my last chance to break free and save myself and Isabella. This is it.

GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAA- My found new strength helps me break free from the vice-like grips of the guards, and my legs propel me towards the door. I trip and fall outside of the door way, only to see my sweet Isabella being dragged by the nurses down the hallway.

I try to get up and run after her, but the guards land on my feet and hold me down. Oh my god...NO!

Isabella's skin starts to shed. Sand. She is disintegrating. I see her stumble and fall to the floor. The blanket falls off of her shoulders, exposing her body. It is terrifying. She looks like the ground after a decade long drought: long thick crevices dig deep into her formerly flawless body. Her long red hair is beginning to gray and fall out of her scalp. I see her face contort in a fit of silent agony.

The nurses and the guards only watch on with horror. No one moves. No one helps my Isabella. They just watch her die.

Suddenly, she screams. It is an unearthly wail, reverberating along the white tiles of the hall, through the doors of the other patients. They soon start to shriek and yell too, like a horrible orchestra of pain. Her scream is so loud and high that my eardrums burst. Everything becomes muffled.

I can't take it anymore. I want to die. The tranquilizers attack my body again, and the last thing I see...

The last thing I see is a pile of sand, where Isabella once stood.

The Man Who Never Was by Kharon

It would seem that in the end the blame resides most heavily upon my shoulders. Of this I admit knowing the pitiful weaknesses of the human mind, and knowing the pitiful weakness of my own far too well; long did I study the human mind, too long to be idly fooled by it and yet in the end I write urgently, for before long another will speak for me.

Although, in reality, the sequence of events that would invade my life of quiet abnormality and turn the secretive world I inhabited from a tedious montage into a full blown nightmare, began slowly. Now there appears to be no end, well, at least no end that I cherish. In truth, although the events started a few months ago, it all began far longer ago than that.

Out of med school I soon was given a grant to conduct research with the object of my study: the human brain. In this station I spent a few years and dutifully carried out all manner of experimentation, and conduction towards the final goal of empirically providing a breakthrough of knowledge where there had previously lain only ignorance. With the help of some fellow colleagues and other aids we soon made great progress in our pursuit of scientific inquiry. My work, published in various scientific journals was met with much success, critique, and praise. A rising star—whispers resounded of my success. Alive and awake with the wonder of unlocking the human brain, I, with great desire and stalwart hunger to unravel more of the mystery, probed and prodded deeper and deeper into the black recess that was the brain. To no avail; the more answers we uncovered the more we found unanswered; with each step we only found how much little we knew.

I will not lie. I am far past lying now. After leading a life where lying was an ever present constant, perhaps the only constant, I am now forced to tell the truth. No, more than forced, for if I do not tell the truth, then all truth, I fear will be lost. Without lying, I tell you he came in a black suit with dark sunglasses. He gave me nothing upon his arrival, not even his name. At first he only assured me that his visit was not resulting from any infringement on my behalf and that I should not be worried. Then after chatting of pleasantries of no particular importance or bearing I asked him bluntly the purpose of his visit.

To this he only smiled.

It is here upon reflection I had no doubt that this was all part of his suave veil of obscurity that agents such of him throw upon every gesture, those agents who listen and divine meaning from the faint whispers of the world, seers of a new and modern age that decide whom to let live and whom to let die. In short he had heard the whispers, whispers of my success. He explained then and there to me that there were some people, some Unmentionables, who were interested in me. Interested in hiring me, he said with an easy smile. These Unmentionables wanted me to do some research on their behalf.

When I pursued for further detail, he, of course, gave me nothing but looks of condolence as if he truly felt sorry for the fact that he could not tell me more. Upon questioning why I had been picked, he leaned in close as if he truly wanted to confide in me. Still an unrecognized minor in my field, he explained, albeit a rising one, I would soon enter the squinted eye of the scientific community. Yet presently my name was still forgettable.

I could if I wanted, slip away, slip away with little notice unlike all the other giants in my field, slip away and simply cease to exist. I will not bore you with the eventualities of his proposed offer but to say that in the end I did accept.

For many a year it was as he spoke: I awoke in the secret secure location that varied from time to time, and did my research with scientific people of a similar calibre whom had accepted a similar offer from a similar agent.

With as much money as we needed. With as much time as we needed. We were left to our own devices as we plumbed ever deeper and deeper into the secrets of the human brain. Occasionally we would receive suggestions to the direction our research should take, but for the most part we were left to our own.

Like this we worked for many years, without a care, and what wonders did we discover. With the guiding hand of science we did what would take others decades in years, and others years us mere months. Of all fields we were: Neurobiology, Neurochemistry, Sociology, Neurology, Psychology, Psychoneuroimmunology, Neuropsychiatry, Neuropsychology, all centered on the last frontier, the human brain. Ever deeper we probed, trying to find the ultimate answer to some ultimate question we did not know and had never thought to postulate. A fruitless chase it would prove to be, a fruitless chase that has resulted in the deaths of many, nay not deaths, for I think they have been given a fate far worse than death.

Like clockwork we continued on, always on. The experimentation began slowly and of conventional style and means. Cautious we had always been, and being this close we were not about to rush. Methodical, precise, we subjected the patient, to test after test, some physical, most mental. The results were to our satisfaction. Living in ample quarters he was treated like a guest. He often walked about the sterile, white halls and tiled floors where the lukewarm air blew gently upon the face. His simple, loose fitting clothes were all that he wore. Due to his unique sensitivity within the phenomena we were exploring we treated him with the utmost respect. People of his nature were very hard to find. It was a simple job with a large pay check. As months passed we began to make great headway, yet as I look back, because it all began with such trepidation, we missed the patterns of the occurring anomalies.

After one particularly long test which he had been unconscious for, he woke up and was helped off of the main diagnostic table. Upon being led to the door he was asked to sign a log to declare that the procedure had indeed taken place. It was a small, but necessary, task which helped to ensure that the great organism that Retreat was, ran efficiently. Taking the

pen from the nurse, his brow furrowed in frustration, and the tip of the pen hovered over the dotted line.

“Funny, I cannot remember my name,”

At this time I saw such momentary lapse in memory as an adverse effect of the drugs he had taken during the experimentation to render him unconscious.

“Peter Yevgeni,” I spoke at once, and his face resumed its look of normality as his brow eased in remembrance.

It was a few weeks later when another such occurrence occurred. After strolling down one of the lengthy halls in a more labyrinthine section of our Retreat he became quite lost. Upon finding him the official report read that he was in a frightened alarmed state, although much of this was concluded to be from the result of becoming lost and disoriented in such a place which, I have to admit, does seem somewhat insidious after being subject to its stark scenery day after day. Nevertheless, when several orderlies found him he was quite panicked beyond a state of normal apprehension.

After being calmed and assured by his finders he was led back to his room where he rested. The physical manifestations began soon after. At first it was simple, a few stray hairs found here and there after he had showered. Then after some time, a growing bald spot which he fretted over as he was just entering middle age. Yet we continued on. Continued our tests which resounded deep into his mind, and echoed back the depths we sought to define. We made great progress during this stage for with careful applied esoteric tradition gleaned from the eastern arts and the western hermetic system of occult thought, coupled with scientific technique and inquiry we helped break down the barriers, the impediments that had slowed us so much in previous cases of this nature. Without limitations, his mind began to grow and flourish under our guidance. We began to learn things that we had never dreamed possible, and spent long hours wondering how much his mind would flourish. How far would it reach along this near infinite continuum? For his mind was not clay we melded, no we had achieved that long ago, his mind was not clay, but stone. And with this stone we would pierce though the final veil that we had come upon at last—The final veil which had been impervious to all else, all other tests, all other experiments.

Soon after he began to complain of sore gums and his hair began to thin further. Planning the final step with much deliberation, we had the dentist check him over several times but the reports came back negative; there seemed to be no discernible problem. At that time we concluded that it was all likely due to a vitamin deficiency and so had his food regime examined.

Continued on we had to, continued on we did, continued on as his gums began to worsen until they began to bleed and pain him upon eating. This at last gave up pause, as

quite rapidly he began to lose weight and become of ill health. Unable to ignore it any longer, we, with great reluctance and more than a little alarm, stopped before the final test. I ordered a full diagnosis to find the prevailing cause.

To my surprise the head nurse came to my office. Her face growing flush with embarrassment, she reported that they could not do a full diagnosis because they could not find the patient's files. Although he was our only patient in the Retreat at that time, our entire and quite vast resources devoted to him and this final experiment, he was not our first. We had seen many patients, some lasting a few hours or days, some lasting a few months or years. Because we never destroyed our patient's files, as the patients might prove to be of some use in the future, we had collected quite a large amount. I questioned her if someone had misplaced them or lost them amid all the others to which she reported negatively. The files had not been misplaced or lost, and in fact all of them were in perfect alphabetical order.

To this I frowned unsure. I asked her, with some disdain and sarcasm, why she did not look up his name and pull out his file. She only replied in a half whisper not meeting my eyes that neither her, nor any of the nurses, or other staff members, could remember his name. Well, I said, my mood growing dour, just look up...

I paused, silence filling the air, and began to feel a slight unease for I knew that something was wrong. Making no sound my lips parted and closed several times.

"Funny," I said not wanting to alarm her. "My memory seems to be lapsing momentarily. I cannot remember the name of the patient either. I know one way to find out." I said as I arose from my desk. "I will go ask him myself."

I can only describe what I felt as a dark turbulence—walking down those tiled halls passing underneath the harsh glow of the fluorescent lighting that hung overhead; my eyes looking straight ahead to the door of my destination—I knew no solace, and as a scientist had nothing to clutch to but careful observation and measured thought. As my footsteps echoed off the concrete I grew more and more troubled; I knew there would be dire repercussions for all involved in the project by those Unmentionables if we failed.

Grabbing the doorknob I entered the room. Walking to the patient's bed I briefly glanced at his status clipboard and confirmed that as of yet nothing had been given to him; nothing that would alter his state of mind and cause him to be unable to answer my questions.

"What is your name?" I asked.

To this he looked up at me with blank eyes; eyes that were ringed black from sleepless

nights. His form was beginning to look gaunt; his inflamed gums caused him great pain whenever he tried in vain to eat.

With surprise at my visit, he opened his mouth to answer my question, and with a feeling of dread I watched his face turn from wonder, to puzzlement, to fear. Opening his mouth, he whispered that he did not know his name and began to shake in abject horror. I could not bear it and turned away his status clipboard pressed tightly in my hands.

He began to scream soon after. Long wails of foreign fear as he glanced at the blank faces of the nurses and doctors that surrounded him and saw that they glanced back at him with no recognition—None knew who he was after years of partaking in the project.

“Sedate him,” I said, his screams grating upon my calm measure. The head nurse still glancing at the strange man who withered in his bed, our prime patient, only half nodded in compliance.

“Sedate him!” I yelled, my calm repose and tandem of logical thought collapsing at this moment.

“And stop staring at him that way!” I added as I left the infirmary with cold beads of sweat forming upon my brow.

Measuring his height, taking into account his age, checking his eye colour and blood type, small clues they were, but the only clues we had. Without hesitation I set all the staff searching through all the files, searching through the years and years of collected data to find the one who was our patient.

Day and night, shift after shift, they flipped through the files as fast as they could, reading till their eyes blurred and minds frayed. All knew that something was happening, something that if we slowed in the slightest, blinked too long, would miss. Faster, I urged them, for I stood by his bedside and watched him, listening to his murmurs. I knew that he did not have long to live. When we did not have him sedated he awoke with glazed eyes and sullen speech, his mouth moving in a delirious manner. His hair continued to fall out until he was all but bald; a few stray hairs in a thin ring around his crown were all that remained. His gums bled, and his eyes sunk deep into bruised sockets from which he glanced out at the world in constant perplexion. For every now and then when his mind ran right he spoke in dream laced fragments of who he was.

It was with these much slurred half garbled fragments that we managed to find out at last whom he was: Peter Yevgeni. Male. Middle-aged. Ordinary. Eye colour green. Hair greying. Blood type O-negative. Person of unique interest. Unique sensitivity toward subject matter of experiment. Married. Two children. One boy. One girl. Line by line we read his file

and the more we read, the less we understood. Line by line we read the entire history and life of the man who lay before us and still knew nothing.

I ordered all to rest in their rooms and feigned calmness for despite the growing mystery of whom the man was, we at least now knew something about him even if we remembered nothing. With great indecision I returned to my quarters and picked up the receiver of a very special telephone; a phone that, on my first day in office, I was told that would contact the Unmentionables. No one ever saw them; no one ever spoke to them. I was also told only to use the phone in only the direst of situations. For if I ever used that phone I would be immediately replaced for my incompetence. They never told me what would happen to me after I was replaced, but knowing them all too well, it would not end well.

There was no voice on the other end of the line, not a sound at all, and so I spoke to nothing for I knew that in some way they were listening, for in some way they were always listening. I told them of it all—I told them of my fears, of my suspicions. I told them, and I pleaded, before they took me, to let me see the matter though, and asked them for the only a favour they could grant—I asked that the patient's wife and children be delivered to the Retreat as one last attempt. This was the only course I could suggest.

Then after hanging up the telephone I simply sat down on the floor of my office, my nerve broken, and waited. My lab coat open and wrinkled, I had not showered nor changed clothes, or barely slept since the entire ordeal began. I sat with the ticking of the clock as my only companion. As the hours passed by, I glanced towards the door as if the agent I so feared to see would appear like some shadowy bogeyman from a child's tale.

And at last he did. Upon the sight of him, I moved to stand not knowing what to say, not knowing what do. Moving his arm, I winced, for I feared to feel a bullet strike deep in a silenced whisper. Yet as I looked up, the only thing that lay in his hands was a simple folder. Holding it out saying nothing, I took it from his hand. Before I could voice my concern of the nature of my impending fate, he was gone.

Opening the folder with shaking hands, I was flooded with a relief so sweet that I laughed quite audibly. In the folder was a file, a file about the patient's wife and children, and paper-clipped to this file was one small note, and typed upon this small note in neat capital letters was:

"They wait at station six."

Tucking the folder under my arm I ran off, my feet slapping against the tiled floor. Upon reaching them, I found them in a state of puzzlement as most are when they arrive at the Retreat. Telling them to follow me and that all would be explained, I ushered them though the labyrinth halls to the infirmary. Telling them to wait outside, I entered the patient's room and ordered everyone out. Then closing the door, I drew the blinds so no one from the hall-

way could see within and crossed the room to grab the patient's gurney.

Hooked up to wires and devices that monitored his health, I was unable to move it far and instead turned it so that it was faced the windows that looked into the hallway. Then returning to the door I pressed the button on the intercom and spoke to the patient's wife and children.

"I am going to open these blinds," I said.

"And when I do so I want you to tell me who you see."

My words echoed through the halls of the building for in my haste I had forgotten to limit the broadcasting area, but I did not care. Slowly, I pulled the drawstring and opened the blinds—in the reflection of the glass I could see the patient sit up and glance out the window, and through the window I could see his family.

I watched them. I studied their every feature. Their every expression. I looked from the wife, to the son whom she held in her arms, to the daughter standing at her side. At their faces I looked feverishly, for anything. At first I thought that they did not recognize the patient, their father, her husband, in his weakened hairless state, but as I stared at them I did not need them to tell me anything to confirm my greatest fears. A black despair falling over me, I drew the blinds shut. Only I and the patient were within the room once again.

About to open the door and tell them that they could depart from this place, I turned one last time to look at the patient and to my surprise saw that he had lain back down and his only response to the revealing was to raise one thin emaciated hand. With one gnarled finger he beckoned me to his side. I cannot tell you what I felt as I crossed that floor. Alone I was, with only the whirls and beeps of all the machinery to break the silence. With heavy footsteps, I drew close to his side as a shiver of fear ran down my spine for there was something about that hand which beckoned me that grew more ominous and disturbing as I neared it. When I reached his bed and gazed down upon his shrunken form I saw that he was crying. The nature of his tears I knew not, for they were black as ink, but of their reason I knew everything. For upon seeing those tears I was filled with great sorrow, I realized that although his family had not recognized him, he had recognized them.

Opening his mouth I saw that his gums had deteriorated to the point that his teeth had fallen out. His slack lips moving he voiced a paltry whisper, one that was so quiet it was inaudible. Leaning down with my ear at his lips, he whispered again and this time I heard his quavering voice:

"All this time we have been working, working to one goal. For many years with my help we have broken all the barriers. All in attempt to answer a question that we never voiced, never

thought to ask... only a final veil remains, a veil we were so close to breaking..."

I moved my head away for his voice was stronger now. I saw that his black tears had stopped and fear now filled his pale complexion.

"...I think that veil has finally been pierced," he said, "but it is not I who has pierced it."

Then letting out a loud hoarse scream his eyes rolled back and his body began to shake. Caught off guard I stumbled backwards, and could only stare mesmerized at the thing that lay before me. Its body trembling, it began to thrash, wires ripping from it as it got out of the bed. I backed away and almost fell to the ground.

About to dash to the door, so scared was I that I could not even scream, I looked at it, into its eyes, and was lost. For from its eyes dripped a black ichor that covered the white orbs—if they were there any longer—and flowed down his cheeks in lethargic streaks where it dripped upon the floor. Opening his mouth so wide that I heard his jaw pop in dislocation, the same black ichor—as if welling up from the depths of his soul—spilled forth from his toothless mouth in a torrent that splattered across his arms and chest.

I can only write of the next few moments briefly for I will admit the memory still threatens to claim my mind to madness as I recall the awful half clothed figure which stood before me—whose ribs and other bones stood out from pale translucent flesh which sagged upon its frame—whose only hair was a few long thin stubborn strands, whose blank hollow eyes and toothless maw poured black ichor in an endless torrent.

Into a catatonic state I fell, my mind withdrawing, my senses leaving me. In an unearthly gasp born out of deep subconscious recoil I screamed in a voice of age old fear.

An awful croak like the subharmonic call of an infernal bullfrog rattling his frame, he belched forth that black ichor. His lips moving faster than the eye could follow, he began to speak—No he began to sing. For among the clashing sound of wretched pitches and awful timbre, came a dark melody that sunk deep into the recesses of my mind, and to this very second still resides there, resounding each awful note in a thin thread of unbroken sound from which I will hang until dead.

For as he spoke my mind rang with visions, with pictures, with black phantoms: with the voice of none he screamed in a sing-song of the end of all. For long had he waited, behind the wall, long had he waited in the black sunless voids whose only echo was the echoing of his hollowed heart; he lorded over the sleepless legions of the dead who hummed along in deep aural tones to the lapping of the sea upon his glazen shore; in a place of tortured glass and shattered union, for from this sea of black waters he would arise—The one without eyes for plucked long ago had they been, the one without shape for many limbs had he, the one

without thought for endless minds he contained—for everyone that falls in his wake sings his song, with blackened eyes and curtailed fate, they sing his song.

Turn, turn, turn, mother turn on child, father turn on son, brother turn on brother, sister turn on sister; all revolve around the mouths from which madness doth sweetly sing. Tunnelling though the sweetest morsel he crawls like a maggot inside a corpse until all is rotted, all is foul. The young grow old, the old feeble, and the sleepless dead cry his name as their tears are gathered in the cups of his many hands and run through his fingers as his consumed disciples below turn their mouths to the heavens. He leaves nothing in his wake but the barren salts of the earth.

For out of the black maw of the thing that was once human which stood before, in awful tandem streamed an endless tirade of words so palpable that I could feel his cold breath upon my face; and each word spoken would be forever lost.

Corruptor of memory, destroyer of all things that are, for forever forgotten they will be upon his utterance. Memory. What a thing it is. Documents, pictures, things of that sort and nature, only to be pondered before, and without a thought, discarded for useless they would be upon his utterance. Paper by paper, photograph by photograph, a man's entire existence discarded; for forgotten his victims were as if they never existed.

Relation by relation, idea by idea, fact by fact, axiom by axiom, he would infuse all and destroy all, spilling from one thing, spreading unto the next, until all was nonexistent. In one hand he holds a dead star and in the other he holds the candle whose light is shadow, for stained his many fingered hands have been; stained with the dark blood of Am Dhaegar whom he rent so very long ago.

Such a beautiful song he sings, like the dying gasps of the elderly lying in their beds too weak to close their eyes, like the infernal screeching of black cats in the mid of night, like the buzzing of flies that crawl upon a corpse. His glorious song was all this and so much more. When the night is clear and dark, listen well to the blowing of the void wind that echoes from behind the stars, from behind the wall where madness marshals around and around to the dread beat of his hollow heart. Free he is at last. For his six mouths speak in different tongues, and the seventh shall sing the song that ends the earth.

Zalgo, he is, the black corruption of all. I know not how much longer I shall be able to write with my own voice for the song grows ever stronger in my mind. What was once a whisper heard from the mouth of a man who no longer exists has grown into a fierce torrential roar like the sound of a thousand rivers raging, flooding my thoughts, washing all away; for soon I feel I will be washed away in that awful drone. Bit by bit I am unbecoming.

For dear reader who has heard me out so far, I know that he has spread much since his awakening. As black wisps spreading across the sky, as a swarm of black locusts and buzz-

ing flies, as a crawling pool of darkness upon the ground. From mind to mind, more and more can hear the buzzing; the nurses who had been closest soon fell, and once they joined the sleepless dead, turned to the salts of the earth, their minds ashen, singing only one song now—since he long ago sang the end of theirs.

I fear as I sit here feverishly writing away, hidden from his sight among the vast population whose many minds and conflicting thoughts I used to shield me for a while. I fear that even after I sing his song it will not end until that seventh mouth has closed the mind of all. My hand growing tired, my mind weary, I think I will lie down and rest at last for he has finally claimed me dear reader for I can no longer recall my name.

The Tank by Joshua W.

A few months ago I get a call from a lawyer saying he's going to get me a load of money. So I'm not hanging up. Says he's on this case for a bunch of old bums and drunkards who got beat by the local police. He's telling me this all happened in the drunk tank, which is where the cops keep you for the night so you can sober up after they catch you for stumbling around the good neighborhoods with a bottle of the cheapest wine and rotten jokes in your rotting mouth. I knew the place well.

This lawyer says to me, "Do you have any recollection of being harrassed or victimized during the several periods of which your were held within the local police headquarters?"

I said, "Buddy, you mind going over that again? I didn't catch a word." The T.V. was on and there was some commercial for a device you could use to work out the muscles in your face. A little spring-loaded deal you'd stick in the gap of your lips, stretching your mouth into some wild grin. I couldn't stop watching it.

The lawyer then starts talking to me real slow, making sure I get it all, and he asks me straight out if any of the cops had ever hurt me. Punched, kicked, anything like that. I said I didn't recall, aside from any trouble I'd started, and that was true, but I was usually passed out drunk any time they put me in the drunk tank. And I'd often wake up with bruises, cuts, aching ribs, but I'd figure I had probably fought a stranger or fallen down some stairs and forgotten it in all the liquor haze. The lawyer said that was enough to win a case.

So I'd gotten all this money in the settlement, and I was living well on it. I had this little apartment and I was taking care of myself.

I had a girl, a sweet thing not old enough to know any better. She was always pretending like she didn't want me, always saying, "Oh, you're crazy. You're just so crazy," but when I laid myself over her on my bed, she only said, "That. That. That," in a way that felt like prayer. I knew she'd grow to understand the world and realize that I was nothing close to what she deserved, so I held on to it. I didn't want to lose a piece of any of this.

But the city people were saying they need to renovate this place. Redo the whole fucking downtown. Call it a mulligan. This neighborhood was supposed to be the city's cultural heart, but somehow all us beggars and hustlers and prostitutes and dropouts came in and put down our mattresses. The city people were going to bring in the bulldozers and wrecking balls, because this is a job for machines, not men. That's all we'll have to blame. Condos, that's what this town needs. That's what they're thinking up there, in their towers of City Hall. Condos. "But, darling," I said to that girl, "let them exodise us. Let them take us away, back down to the river. Let them excavate these brick walls and the paint that peels to show the paint that's under. Let them try to get rid of the sweat we've dripped into these ceilings. We know something the demolition machines can't touch." But I didn't know what.

The girl was pregnant, but the kid wasn't mine. I wasn't worried about a child. What bothered me most was the idea of having a boy of my own, another one just like me. I wouldn't want to do that to the world, or to the mother. So there was some comfort in knowing that this girl couldn't be doubly pregnant with my kid too. At least, that's as far as I knew it.

She was taking these vitamins. For the baby, she said. They were huge. They looked

like just a bunch of sawdust and crunched up weeds in these giant gelcaps.

I'd watch her fit her mouth around them and them bulging down her throat. That big. And sometimes that would turn into sex, you know. And the way she'd act after she took those pills, I've never seen a woman so happy with life. There aren't many I've known that you could call happy at all.

So I was getting curious.

This girl's mother, a Mexican woman, was stuck in the ways of the old Aztec natives and the old Spaniards that had raped them. Her old ancestors. So she had for her daughter all this guilt and regret from Catholicism and all this earthly mysticism of the natives. She made her girl go to confession and beg divine forgiveness for her illegitimate child, and then she had her going to a shaman for these huge pills. Many times, I'd asked about what happened with this old Aztec mystic, but she'd never tell. And I'm sure I'll think of it each day for the whole of my life, and I'll never know.

And, yeah, of course, I took one of the pills.

It was like swallowing a fist.

It was like the taste of a dirty thumb.

Ten minutes later, it was like the vibrations of the flesh had become aligned with the glow and I was one with the burning lightbulb and the sunlight trapped in the dandelion leaves. Shit, I don't know.

I went out of the apartment, it had been so long since I'd been out in the day, and I was all over the sidewalks and beaming at strangers going by. I felt the radiance of my face like a lighthouse, me looking all around in long circles. Bliss. I had forgotten how it felt.

I was looking for someone, a good husband and good father and good worker, someone to fight. I had all this joy bubbling in my guts and I wanted to hurt something.

I thought about carrying around a whiskey bottle without the brown paper bag because I wanted to get caught. I would've fought the cop who might try to get me. My knuckles were yearning, they felt like horny little boys, so eager to get against some other flesh.

For a while I had a hard time staying straight on top of my feet, so I sat on some bench I found by the sidewalk, maybe at a bus stop or park. Across the street was a video store that closed down a few months back. There were still some store signs in the windows, but they looked deserted and weary. I watched a little family, a mother and her mother and a teenager of some sort, they went up and rattled the front doors a few times. They took turns tugging and pushing handles. The younger mother put her face against the glass and looked inside. It was all empty inside, I could tell from across the street, but she looked through every window. The older mother tried the front doors again. The kid read out loud a sign that said, "GOING OUT OF BUSINESS SALE!" They rattled the front doors some more and knocked the glass. "I don't get it," the older one said, and she was pointing at a sign on the front door that showed the store's business hours. "It says they're open until ten tonight. Is it a holiday? It's not a holiday is it? I don't get it." They all went back to their car and just sat there for a few minutes, trying to figure it all out.

I got up and was walking away. The younger mother, she was hollering across the street, "Do you have any idea where the video store is?"

I was making like I hadn't heard a word.

"Excuse me!" she yelled. "Hey, I'm looking for the video place!"

I walked out into the neighborhoods. People jogging and walking their dogs would stare at the sidewalk or watch me the whole time. Kids stopped playing in their pile of leaves to see me walk past their front yard. Clouds hung so low I felt I had to hang my head to walk under them.

Stuck in my head are these ideas of cowboys and Elvis. I've got boyhood thoughts of guitars and guns and what it's like to be a man. I felt like that then, walking thin neighborhood sidewalks, I felt like how I'd once thought being a man would be.

I was out of my mind.

The girl was waiting for me in my apartment when I got back. I don't know how she got herself inside, so maybe I'd left the door wide open.

She told me she can't imagine me ever not being inside. She said I'm like a pet mouse for her. She liked that. "I had a pet mouse once," she said. "Two, actually. A boy and a girl, and they had babies, and the father ate all the babies. Then the mother tore one of his eyes out."

I said, "It sounds like a lot of families I've known."

And where this story is going is that I took all the money that lawyer had gotten me from those cops and I gave it to this girl. I wanted her to go to that Aztec mystic and get me some more of those pills. It was all the money I could spare.

That was the last I'd ever seen of her, her holding my money. And probably most women leave me in this way.

I waited days for her to come back.

And that was it.

The construction workers came. The cranes and bulldozers and demolition crews. The urban renewal program.

We were promised better quality buildings, a renewed sense of culture in the city, grander things. We were promised opportunities. We were removed from our homes and left to the streets.

And when the old buildings went down, the dust spread for miles. From those old floors and walls, it spewed in billowing plumes through the downtown and out into those good neighborhoods. The dried sweat and blood and semen and the skin and eyelashes and dirt from under fingernails, all of it in clouds through this city. A big, brown ghost of what was left over. Dirt. The good people in the good homes would dust our remains off of their car windows. This was our last great push.

And now what?

[Review]



The Hidden Fortress Review by R.M. Silva

This masterpiece by Akira Kurosawa is a film that has truly left its mark on the history of cinema. Often remembered as the film that inspired George Lucas's Star Wars trilogy, *The Hidden Fortress* is a great movie in its own right with both beautifully illuminated characters and a narrative that is truly captivating.

The film follows four major characters that will immediately look familiar to anyone who has seen *Star Wars*: two woebegone and wimpy peasants, Tahei and Matashichi (Minoru Chiaki and Katamari Fujiwara), who are human beings very reminiscent of R2-D2 and C-3P0. Lucas holds even more appreciation for Kurosawa using these two as characters in whose perspective we see much of the beginning of the film, such as the samurai attacks, escape, capture, and introduction to the next two main characters of the story, General Rokurota Makabe, a samurai warrior played by the masterful actor Toshiro Mifune, and the princess that he must protect, Yuki, played by Misa Uehara. The representation of these two characters in *Star Wars* is a bit more ambiguous, but one can say that many parallels can be drawn between Yuki and Leia, while the comparisons between Rokurota and Luke are a bit more strained.

What is truly majestic about this cast is how well they work as an ensemble. Though Toshiro Mifune is a great actor in his own right, one did not feel too overpowered by his performance with the other, less experienced members of the cast, and when the camera was solely on him, he truly absorbed us in the pure cinema of it.

On a technical level, the film is a beautiful harmony of cinematography, minimalistic music, and emotionally charged editing. Two remarkable scenes come to mind: the Fire Festival and Rokurota's one-on-one fight with a samurai lord at the enemy base. The Fire Festival, where hundreds of extras danced in unison around a great bonfire, was a beautiful mix of cuts, switching between panoramic shots of the masses and then cutting to close ups of the four main characters nearly losing their individuality in the great mass of celebrating people. This kind of editing is what separates Kurosawa from directors of convention. The fight scene of Rokurota is also well shot, and even a bit subversive. The circular motion of the fight scene is reminiscent of the Western genre and it is no doubt obvious that later directors took their cues from Kurosawa; when in this fight scene, he adeptly cuts from close-ups to wide shots, a later trademark of Sergio Leone. All in all, the camera work in the film is one to be awed upon. Very rarely in cinema does one receive such a feast for the eyes.

The minimalism of the soundtrack is fitting for the piece. Though I am often a fan of more complex compositions in soundtracks, it is quite obvious that Kurosawa is a master at working with less, and in this case, less is more. Though I can imagine the fight scene with a track from Morricone or any of the great film scorers, the film is unique in its use of minimal sound.

In every sense of the word, *The Hidden Fortress* is majestic, worthy of a near-perfect cinematic score. It was in many ways like *Star Wars*, in the sense that it had ideal characters, an engaging narrative, and beautiful composition in cinematography, editing, and sound. As Akira Kurosawa would say, this is another example of "pure cinema".

[Poetry]



Another Man by Silas

I saw him in another man
so I loved him like only
that man can

But he's not him and
He thought I was him but
I'm not him and
he's not real how sad.

Bleached White Pillars by Darrin

Bleached white pillars and arches
Standing bent and crumbling,
Alone in the calm March
Breezes. Reaching, fumbling

To grasp that jewel tumbling
From east to west each day.
Hollow husks left mumbling
About the dream and ray

Of hope. The scripted play
Preserved, but not to swell.
Merely now to display
How it reigned; how it fell.

All those great minds, loved well,
What lasts of them after?
With every weed, a knell,
Worming through cracked plaster,

The remains sink faster
In the minds of the youth.
We are not time's master
For man fast bores of truth.

Carpentry by Stingo

Watching
the sanguine ribbon
fray
in the water
cupped within his palms
while
behind him
they joined thick
beams of wood in his name.

Charlie by Bill

charlie dancedanddanced
to the violin strings

kathryn danceanddanced:
to charlie's heartbeat

all sang the tune
that strummed the night; in various melodies
that plucked a sky
from ethereal hanging

charlie danced
feeling a welt of pain
from inside his chest he clutched
a stop of his regular rhythm
which crashed the violins
and sent the horns into another song
and charlie fell.

white lights burst as men in white laughed and women in white
cried and

charlie stood and fell and stood and fell and stood and took one
step then

twothreefour

and

charlie wrote his name to darla his love and

to gina hislove:

all postmarked to

charlie with a cap on his head and scroll in hand while

women cry in the background

as men in white cry jesuschrist and

boomagainboom as shells hit sacred earth to

kill charlie who held in his hand the picture of

kathryn as he picked up the phone and said

i do.

women in white cried
and men in black applauded the chaos as
phil collins says something about ripples
as charlie puts on his best coat,
as charlie drives his first car into the sacred earth,
as the motor lights the sky as a super nova:
charlie buys american.

charlie holds a child as he laughs and
dances on four feet on two feet as he stands and falls and takes
a step and
bells clash and charlie's boy stands and says
i loved him said charlie
as women in black cried
as men in black sang
as bells clashed in dirges above the oak as it
hits the sacred earth.

charlied dancedanddancedand
fell to the tune of a minor
and looked up as women in white cried
and men in white worked
and kathryn cried
and kathryn cried

kathryn stared on blank eyes
as men in white cried
as kathryn said
i love you
as oak was lifted to sacred earth
and men in black prayed
and women in black cried
and charlie lay fallen under the 21rifleshot

like shells aimed at god
soon fallen to damned earth

-bill

Crucifixes and Crescents by Darrin

In the eye of the burning red sun
Cuts the single erected cross
Marking the marching ripe tide,
A hundred nations surge as one.

The single stone tower sings tears.
All along the walls they bow south.
The mats are then rolled, the spears still shine,
The horses, oblivious, but sneeze and rear.

With the first horn the heavens rain fire,
Voices cry and steel cleaves painted wood.
By high noon, the husks of homes smolder,
Crops are ash, virgins now bleed, children are elders tired.

The clouds part, a storm sweeps idle blades,
Red and white blizzards bury all in sand,
Crucifixes and Crescents lie as brothers,
Their pools share the same shameful shades.

Haiku by Rick K.

the cancer I have
will murder me in three weeks
won't see spring's beauty

I married him then
in August under a tree
he died September

survived normandy
killed that many turks while there
lung disease, thirty

cunt shaved smooth as silk
the closest you will ever get
two dollars no touch

three wives he had bought
dressed in silicone, vinyl
good only for sex

fire up in the clouds
warring starships bright light flares
darkest time for man

used to be kings and
used to be hunters killers
now working retail

gave my blood gratis
held me in arms cold sensual
no biscuits and juice

he's coming for you
lock your doors hide your daughters
rape is on his mind

you'll never have her
one day you will realise this
the sun still rises

Language by Rick Underhill

Growling gushing guttural groans
Screeching snarling violent tones
Twisted faces frantic moans
Squashed and stretched and grinding bone

Skin once taught now taut and toned
Vulgar shapes and patterns honed
Eager ears spread always opened

We spew and spill and froth and fuck
Convulsing as we come unstuck

A conversation, how robust.

Morning Streets by Silas

Wake up

Girls with streaked makeup

Blond died, still baked up

Burnt cigarette holes-

Wheres clothes? Shoes with torn soles

Dew and fog. It's cold.

Walk morning streets with crows

Roses by Stingo

Claret cups on ashen beds sway

incarnadine, yet

not half the flower thornless.

My mother, she spreads

chalk in hanging sheets

on the wind that turns a quiver

through the recherché.

Samuel Johnson's Midnight Entry by Matt Voice (bringmewords.blogspot.com)

Samuel Johnson sighed to himself
As he sat by the candlelight, hugging his pen,
Staring at word
Upon word
Upon word.

His eyes had grown heavy as paper could be
When it's used to keep track of near everything.
Every last word
After word
After word.

He ran a soft finger on artworks of ink,
Blurring the lines between what he could know
And what he could guess
Or deduce
Or research.

In defining it all he must label himself,
So he wrote lexicographer in at the side.
"A writer of dictionaries;
Harmless.
Drudge.

Who busies himself with the history of words,
And the details of every last signification."
Twenty-one words
In the margin.
A note.

The entry he'd chosen to scrawl himself next to

Was quite a bit tougher – the most learned waders
Would struggle to wade
In the depths
Of his words.

Five thousand of Johnson's now-tired descriptors
Lay flat over three pages, truly exhausted.
All for one word
Cut of three letters:
Put.

But put was still nothing when put next to take.
Eight thousand words spanning five different pages,
Word after word
Take a word
Put ten more.

They lined up like soldiers, they fell to describe,
So often surrounded by hundreds or more,
Yet lexicographer
Stood bare
And alone.

Hodge, the cat, came and curled round his feet,
Warming Johnson with the touch of his fur
As he stared at the words
At his work
At his world.

Twenty-one words gave themselves for the man
Who would keep them in memoriam aeterna,
Who was staring at word
After word
After word
Who looked first at his words then the fire afar.

To My Friend, The Liar by R. Hayden

I'm deeper than my four-lettered words
But even that is not enough.
I have things I hold dearer
Than my being, my soul
And they would have none of it.

I am here, Prufrock.
Will you wish this youngster luck?
Hurry. Before gravity force out of you
The final bow.
THUD

Then take it up with Death if you must.
Play a game, earn a wink.
So that we can be on our way to tea,
The young and the old,
"Lonesome no more" indeed.

Perhaps it is not Death that has come,
But the new one, the rigid bastard.
Friend, what a stiff you have become.
You're flameless, lifeless.
Liar. You're not Lazarus after all.

Tracers by Stingo

Under the frenzy,
the whipping
of hot copper wire
in the night,
The long grass fields the strokes
of hot wind.
These
were his stars, the new-borns
stars undeniably
beautiful, filled
with the orange aesthetic of war.

For Ur.		
Then	Gilgamesh	
Will think on this		
He will consult his mother		
The aged mother		
Alive since before the twilight		
Witness		
To much		
That will have been		
The mother of	Gilgamesh	
She will comfort		
Her son, and advise him		
With wise	words	
She will say:		
Go, take Shamhat		
The harlot		
The most voluptuous		
In Ur		
Have this hunter		
Take her to the land		
Of the bull and condor		
When this wild man, this		
EnkiduXVIII		
Appears, she must		
Expose herself to him		
Bear herself seductively		
She must shed modesty		
And lie for him		
In the river grass		
Then he will plow her		
And lose his strength		
Then he will desire		
What you can take away:		
The bosom of Shamhat.		
Then he will become		
Civilized,		
He will not trouble		
These hunters again.	Gilgamesh	
Will see the wisdom		
In his mother's	words	
He will send		

XVIII Her ancient memory will know his name before she sees him.

For Shamhat
Voloptuous harlot
Her hair dark and straight
Her not-clothes
Not concealing
Her lissome hips and shoulders
Her eyes dusky
Her bedecked body
Her lips a harvest-fullness
Of lust
Shamhat
The spell of sexuality

||

Then
Shall take her
To the hunter
He shall
Them of the plan
They will go
To the land of the bull
And the condor.
There, in the fields
Of old asphalt
And crab grass
Amidst the mega-mall
Mesas
Riddled
With caves of capitalism
They shall walk
In the somber shadows
Of past not-glories
Recalling
What might once have been theirs
Now abandoned
By man to nature
They will listen to the silence
And go quietly
About their business.

Gilgamesh

inform

When they encounter
Enkidu
They will find him by the river
The hunter will
The hunter will
With fear
In his mouth:

say:

say

Go, Shamhat
 Shed your modesty
 Strip yourself
 Of polyester
 Silk
 Flax
 Cotton
 Wool
 Leather
 Nylon
 Goretex
 Kevlar
 Whatever you are wearing!
 Show yourself
 To Enkidu
 Subdue him
 As planned.

As Enkidu
 Stoops in the reeds to drink
 Ignorant of histories past
 And histories before them
 Ignorant of the dawns
 Of languages
 And their dusk
 But only
 Of the verisimilitudes;
 Of the verges of day
 And dark
 Shamhat will come to him
 In the middle of the day
 He will smell her perfumes
 And watch her wade
 Across the watery brink
 Of whispers
 Into winds
 Her not-clothes wetted
 Then discarded
 He will want
 But he will not understand
 He will try
 And she will teach him
 How to plow her
 Forgetting the language

Of mutenessXIX
In the shade
Of the spell
Of her sexuality.

||

Now
May you excuse this author
Jealous god
If he but utters one prayer
To his audience
Whether real or more likely imagined
That it please you
To see here my post-apocalyptic
Post-apollonian
Apocrypha
Retelling of this epic -
That it please you to
Listen to an old story over again
So that a small point might be made
Which
Had you sequestered yourself
With a better man
Might have been said
In far fewer words

Though not, perhaps,
Reveling in the extensiveness
Of the revelation
Of its grandeur
And scope
Approximated only
By a wordy discourse
Into the subject
So as to subject
The audience
To a mental exertion
Equal to its palest shadow...

After tantric
Days and nights

XIX For even the state of no language has its language, in the same way that nonexistence has its existence as a state of being. As there is no language, so there is a language of that state - A way to speak of it and think with it, because we think with languages, the ways and bylaws of communicating information, if even reflexively between ourselves and, as it is said colloquially, the wall - perhaps the fourth wall, the wall dividing these pages along with their author's world, the diaphanous and yet opaque schism between the seer and the seen, the players and the audience. So then are our secret thoughts attempts at communiqués across this estrangement?

Into the bosom
Of embryonic
Civilization
Ur
Straddling the cycles
Straddling the gyres
Alone together
These two humans
Will go through the gates
Three dead men thick
They will go unnoticed
Amidst the ways
Wrecked-car huts
Plastic smithies
Priests
Of the World Wide Web
Peddlers of ecstasy
And their drunk wild
Rave children -
Dervishes under the neon green
Mushroom clouds
Huskarls toting Automat Kalishnikov
101's
Cyborg prostitute bars
When amongst this throng
Celebrating post-civ life
Shamhat and Enkidu
Will come to the wedding
Of a moon-shine minister
And her bride
Daughter of a hide-tanner
And
Demanding first rights
As though it was his
Manifest destiny
To seek and destroy
Virginity wherever it may be
Drunk out of his gourd
Unfit even to be drummer
In a post-apocalyptic punk-rock band.

||

Gilgamesh

Frothing at the mouth
Enkidu
Will block the door

To the bridal chamber
Proud and unaware

Of angry
Sucker punch
And doubling over
But not out of the doorway
Enkidu will rise up
And smite the king
Something fierce
Across the jaw
And
Will grab Enkidu's leg
They will go down
In slightly homo-erotic fashion
Into Johnny's mud and the blood
And the beer

Gilgamesh's
||

Gilgamesh

When will they tire
Everyone will look on
Disgusted, horrified
This will have been supposed
To be a good and happy
Wedding...

There, at last
The two men
Torn naked exhausted
Streaming blood
Faces only
Mothers
Could
Will embrace each other
Saying

love XXII

Let us not
Kill each other
And die uselessly
You are a match
For my strength
A match for my cunning
Let us
The
Of brothers
In heroism
And fight together
Easier enemies.

Speak
tongue

XXII And even that would be denied Enkidu, orphan of the fields.

Of post-civilization
They will come
To the Cedar Dump
To the wooded foothills
Of ancient trash-built
Mounts
Rising out of the drought
Ridden plain
The farmers there
Thin enough to be
Their own scarecrows
Terrified
Of the great birdlike shadows
Of the robot Humbaba's
Scouting eyeships
Lying low
The not-heroes from Ur
Will wait

Gilgamesh

And Enkidu
Will wait until rain
In accordance with a plan
Drawn from ancient
Sciences preserved
By the priests
Of the World Wide Web:
Chaos theory
Entomology
RoboticsXXIV
Systemics
When the rains cease
Sounds go from patters
To insectile drones
In the damp air

Gilgamesh

Will
The
Gather up the foliage

give
order:

XXIV Although then it will be rapidly becoming known as nephilimetry, for the people of the Earth will be growing ignorant of their past, and they will see the prodigious strength and cunning of the robots, and they will observe how they were born of science and humankind entwined, and they will witness how they devour and cover the land and even consume the people, and they will turn to their religions for understanding. And though the religions will misunderstand them for centuries to come, they will also carry a great body of knowledge into a more enlightened age, which will then spurn them and take only their knowledge.

Approach the greatest of the piles
He will stand
Before the clicking

Singing

Pile awash
In insect life
And reach out
And tap his finger
Against the hind leg
Of one
Again he will tap
And again
And then he will walk away
As slowly
Massively
The impotent agitation
Of one bug
Becomes the god-buzz-roar
Of all its fellows
And the seething mass
Will rise transmogrifiedXXV
Into the bright sky
Absolutely blot out
The sun
And bring the land
Into horrible night-
Mare.

Then
Caught in the west wind
The insect host will drift
East, over the Cedar Dump
Devouring life to the bone
And behind will follow
Enkidu and the 100
Armed for battle
A band of glittering swords
Axes
Sharpened umbrellas
Shotguns
Molotov cocktails
And SAW teams
Clad in plastic

Gilgamesh

Cutting-board armor
Army-surplus gear
Animal hides
Firefighting uniforms
And adorned in feathers

||

Smeared with berry blood
Mud and spray paint
Savages fit to strike fear
Of the unclean
Into even the most robust
Robot-demon
Those that do crawl
Out from their trash warrens
To defend the hive;
Those few limbs of Humbaba
Which have not been jammed
By the swarming bodies of locusts
Nor lost solar-cell power
In the insect night
Nor run out of butanol
During the arthropod-induced
Siege-famine
Will be cut down by the wild braves
Of Ur
Flaming rag-stuffed green
Bottles of Yeagermeister
Bursting against their soft
Electric innards in broths
Of molten glass and gas

Gilgamesh

And Enkidu will be in front
And find first the home warren
Of the heart of Humbaba
Guarded by his fiercest war-part
Great spider-crab machine of death
Killer of a thousand heroes
And the half-human king
Will launch the rifle grenade
Of his Damascus steel-forged
Automat Kalishnikov
And blow away its armor
As brave Enkidu finishes it off
By way of airborne

Wooden spear.XXVI

||

There
They will stand
Atop the detritus

Isle of history
Victorious over
Their own ancestral
Creations
Over material history

Gilgamesh

And Enkidu
And ragged women
And men
Atop the Cedar Dump
Conquistadores
Of that island
Aspread between
The eastern
And western

Horizons

And in sight
Of both dawn
And dusk
Betwixt which
They will labor
Amongst dead automata
(Who labored before them
For the very stuff
By which they
Themselves)
To bring the yield
Of human industry
And wastefulness
Back to Ur

created

Singing

Of their boldness
And ingenuity
Clay men
Crowing their triumph
Over the robo-nephilim
But all too soon
To be reminded

XXVI Wow! The daring and destruction! The author must even now stumble in his words, drunk from the celebration of these heroes to be, spirits of his mind and ghosts of pre-histories past, the zeitgeists of years likely centuries to come.

Of the hierarchy
Of their existence

||

Enkidu, fallen sickXXVII
Will remind them
Of the hegemony
Of our progenitors
Bacteria
Over usXXVIII

Gilgamesh

Flush in victory
Crushed in agony
Will stand by
In the afternoon
Of Enkidu
Weathering in disbelief
The terrible fever
Nightmares
Come too soon
Upon the heels
Of attainment
And friendship
And respect:
Enkidu will fever-say:

It was death
Not unlike flowers
Bloom to soon
Springtime
Overcome by a
Shadow of dead soldiers
Marching through eon
And eyes

god

What is the assessment
Of my hairs
Of my hairs
Coiffed in suns
Through eon
Singing
And birth
Into six feet under soil

soul

XXVII Poor man, like an Indian set foot in the diseased sardine can that was Columbus's Europe; who had

grown up the healthily depopulated countryside and never before fallen victim to even the cold and whose body was therefore unschooled in the art of biological warfare.

XXVIII And they in their own time to be reminded of the Progenitor of them all.

XXV Those of you who do not know this esoteric entomology must still reflect on the truth that between a grasshopper and a locust there is a biblical difference not to be ignored, through they be the same animal.

[End of Part 2]

Final notes

All of our work is licensed under the Creative Commons. All pictures used in this zine are also Creative Commons pictures. Copyright information and artist attribution will be provided on request - Email us at zinewritersguild@gmail.com.

Editors

Goldensox !gHNR8PgoEg
Prole !XDERDXUpqQ
Nick !Vw8I404DyQ
Ian M. Gibson
My Girl Friday

Special Mention

Caesar

and everyone who took the time to download and read this.

