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ZWOG

/LIT/ERATURE DIGEST

FEATURING

JADE GREEN
BY DAVE

INNOCENTS IN THE FOG
BY WORDY WOOKIE

THE ANGUISH OF MORT
BY MORT MORTENSEN

HEADPHONES
BY IRON IN YOUR LUNGS

BRAZILLIAN GHOST TOWN
BY MASON

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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

The zine still intends to make use of its anonymous-posting forum (<http://thezwg.proboards.com/index.cgi>) for feedback and criticism. It should be made clear that the intent of this forum is to provide a persistent location for zine commentary, not to compete with 4chan in any way.

[Fiction]



BEASTS by Menelik Joseph

So The World told him;

“Oh sure, you can definitely have one. You just have to catch it first.”

“What must I do, Great-Green?”

“You’re going to want to go to my darkest jungle. There you’ll find them around trees, rivers and huts. Y’know, living life a lot like you. Some are tall, some are short, but even the tallest of the poor things is easy to startle. And if you startle one you’ll startle those it knows, until all that breathe call you ‘The Startler’ and never descend from my canopy. I don’t mean to brag, but they’re clever like that.”

The wind picked up around The Hunter and in response birds flew. They were the fingers of The World, and as their violent wings eclipsed the sun for seconds at a time, its blinking light beamed and he knew all of creation was laughing. It went on;

“As with any beast I own, you’re going to need a spear.”

The Hunter was old enough to fear The World, but young enough to grin wildly. Pleased with himself, he pulled out the weapon. “I have thought ahead, Great-Green. The thing is done.” And as he held the Spear as high as possible, the birds ceased their storming and retreated to their nests, all but the smallest.

It landed on the shaft, pecked it and began hopping from one end to the other.

“Meh.”

“...meh?” The Hunter echoed, his sloped brow furrowing, his large hand scratching it.

“I mean, okay-sure. You can go with that I guess, it’s served you well enough right? I’m thinkin’, maybe you’ve never used it, but you’ve seen one like it do the job. Yep, you’ve definitely never used it.”

Finished with its task, the bird flew to its kin and left its master to meddle with the native, “Anyway; as with any beast I own, you’re going to need bait.”

And here The Hunter was truly confused. Assuming that these Beasts were too clever to be

baited like a common mongrels, he had come to The World empty-handed. He could do nothing but stare up at the sky in silence and quiet shame, like he would do to his father if he failed.

The World dimmed then, as clouds passed under its sun; “You poor little fuck. I guess it’s your biological right to at least try to catch one, so who am I to keep secrets? Right, block out my clouds with your hand.”

And when he did a jet of mist kissed his palm. He held a string of pearls.

“They devour wealth” the World cooed. “These beasts of mine. It’s why their eyes and teeth are so bright. They devour wealth and it’s the only way to bait them. I’m terrible.”

He could form the pictures in his mind. He could see himself leaving the pearls in a clearing, so that the light of the skies would shimmer on them and then bounce off into the folds of the jungle. He would wait like his father and grandfather and while he stood as still as time he would ready his spear for when The Beast finally came out of hiding...

but he had the nerve to ask; “What more is there?”

“Lastly, as with any beast I own, you’ll need to be competitive.”

“Competitive?”

There was silence, and The World said “I have this chat with every male.”

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for BEASTS\]](#)

Desmond's Bad Thought, or The Lesson by Sensen

Look children, there's Desmond Delampoer. Desmond Delampoer stares at his screen all day, bored and alone. If one were to peer through his window (like we are now, children), they would notice the clutter, the scattered papers, the unfinished, dog eared books and the crumpled, stained blankets sprawled onto a dirty mattress. They would know that Desmond was one of the growing number of people who couldn't care for real life and made their home on the internet, the new country of absolute free speech, where anything and everything was possible and had been done. What they wouldn't know, was that Desmond Delampoer was a convicted criminal.

He doesn't look like a bad man, does he children?

Of course, Desmond is an amateur compared to the others of his kind, he's never stolen from anyone, and he's never hurt anyone, and never attempted to talk about any of those things, even on the internet.

But Desmond had a bad thought.

Desmond thought that he would go up tonight and bash that stupid cow's head in. He thought he would break off a table leg and smash her forehead open. Worst of all, he thought he could get away with it.

He's a silly man, Desmond. And what happens to silly men children? Yes, they get punished.

Look, there's the UMP coming to get him now! They broke down his door!

He's begging for mercy children! Doesn't he look the fool now! Does Desmond deserve mercy children? That's right children! He doesn't.

The Compjudge is evaluating his crime now, and look! He's guilty!

Now Desmond is going to the Building! And there's his firing squad! Look children as they take aim, a good firing squad never misses, but the wasp bullets won't kill him, they'll just make him cry in pain!

Look at him cry like a baby! The stupid silly baby he is. And now, they're shooting again, and again, and again, and again. Look at him squirm and squeal. And he's crying for his mother now! Quite the baby, Desmond, aren't we?

And he's not moving, Desmond's gone.

But we mustn't fret children, Desmond was a bad citizen, he had bad thoughts, he wasn't going to contribute to society! He was just some loser.

Now children, don't be like Desmond, don't have bad thoughts, or this will happen to you too!

And remember to sleep tight, in this safe, secure place where there'll be no Desmonds to think bad thoughts. And if there is, we can always fix that, can't we children?

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Desmonds Bad Thought\]](#)

Innocents In the Fog By Wordy Wookie

The men had been marching all day now. Not so much the regimental unity they were used to, but a synchronised dragging. Behind them, the new machines of war, designed and built by the finest minds in the Empire. For all their genius, they might have found some way to make it lighter.

Some time into the tenth hour of walking, the troops were ordered to stop. They aligned themselves so that all six contraptions were parallel, and waited. The wind, merciful to them all afternoon, picked up with a chilling sting.

The order was given to prepare for action, and the units scrambled. What looked like chaos externally was a series of checks, greasing, and loading of stone weights into their slots. After no more than five minutes, as their Drill-Sergeant had always instructed, they were fully operational.

In normal territory, the soldiers would have been able to see who they were firing at. Today, however, a thick fog had descended around them, as the night began to lick her lips. By this point, the men at one end of the line had trouble seeing their companions at the other end.

Before releasing their weights, the troops were, as every time before, to be inspected. One amongst them had more medals on his chest, and so this was his duty. He admired the uniformity of the nightmare he had assembled. The neatness of a weapon in his hand was something he had learned to crave, and this satiated that.

As he walked a straight line before the men, the sixth unit came into view, the fog surrendering before his superior rank. At first, their machine seemed perfectly in order, until he noticed its arm. Where the hulking mass of stone should have been, there was nothing.

Turning his head for an explanation, he was instantly greeted with one. Before him, one man, with no medals upon his chest, stood next to what had once been the stone. In his right hand was a chisel, and in his left a hammer. Rather than question these, the commanding officer was more intrigued by the transformation of his ammunition.

In place of the deformed boulder, torn from a cliff on the outskirts of the Empire, he found himself staring into a pair of stone eyes. The lashes, which guarded them, seemed to peel away as their gaze met, yet showed him a blank slate. Still stone, this seemed to be the only line of defense preventing him from becoming lost in the new face.

As he looked at the rest of the body, he found himself before a curved figure so familiar to him. The billowing of her hair made her look like a torn flag in the wind. She was broken down, tattered, and yet her posture was alive with determination.

The fog, which had concealed her creation from sight, had left the stone damp. This made her clothing clutch even tighter to her outline, and beg for solitude. The wrapping of her arms before her chest reinforced this, yet her grasp seemed so weak. It was as though she was holding a boulder herself, and was desperate not to let it fall from her arms.

On closer inspection, he found that this weight was not imaginary. Between the folds of her sodden blouse was a blanket, and emerging from this blanket was a hand, much smaller than the officer's own. It reached out imploringly, as if it was searching blindly in the fog for a way home. From the curls of the blanket, the officer could tell that its contents was pushing itself as close to the woman as possible. For warmth, for shelter, and for hope.

It was only when the rain began to fall that the officer remembered his duties. He looked first at the men of the sixth machine, and then into the fog, as if he alone could pierce it and see his target.

He looked back to his men once more. They were beginning to shake in the gales and rain, despite their training. The machine they had heaved behind them for nearly eleven hours was useless now. What they had brought instead was a weakness, something that distracts him from his duties, makes him doubt his orders, and finds him in his dreams.

He found a man with medals, and approached him. He ordered him to take the sculptor and to punish him as he saw fit.

He would deal with the statue himself.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Innocents In The Fog\]](#)

Jade Green by Dave

To the finder of this letter,

I always subconsciously knew my curious nature would be my downfall. I am an explorer by profession with an unquenchable thirst for adventure. My most recent expedition took me to the depths of the Amazon Rainforest which is where I am currently writing from, however I believe my letter will never leave this horrid place.

It was June 23rd 1919 when our small party began our journey up the Amazon River. The plan was to row downstream for three days, using the current to our advantage, then head to a ruined temple which supposedly lay five miles into the jungle.

My entourage consisted of two other men. The first was Henry Westfield; a young but enthusiastic explorer with sky blue eyes and blonde hair, whom I had taken under my wing so to speak as my apprentice. The other was our guide; a heavy set, middle aged Hispanic of whose name I didn't know nor care to. He spoke very little and had a stern look over his worn, olive coloured face. He always kept his bolt action rifle close by his side, as though it were an extension of his person. I noticed it had an articulate pattern like swirling ivy vines on the dark wooden stock.

The river trip went relatively smoothly, with the current taking most of the required effort of rowing away. As we cruised along, the walls of trees on either side of us loomed over like ancient, gargantuan guardians of hidden relics, filling me with a quiet sense of dread. I had been in jungles before, but there was something strange about those trees which chilled me.

The late June heat played havoc with Henry's mind, and despite our best efforts he suffered from sunstroke and became delirious. In the evenings when we pitched our tents by the riverbank while he lay in the boat, he would call out that he could see green lights on the opposite shore. I put it down to the eyes of the numerous crocodiles I had spotted over the course of the day which had been silently stalking us.

On the fourth night, we arrived at the location from which we would begin our trek to the temple and made base camp. That was the evening our guide vanished.

The night was black as pitch, and deathly silent, which I found quite bizarre. On our boat journey there was always the constant noise of monkeys screeching and exotic birds calling to one another, but at that moment not a sound could be heard. Thick clouds were gathered overhead, blocking out the moon and starlight and I was reciting one of my numerous anecdotes to Henry about an expedition into the Himalayas.

The Hispanic had gone out into the night to gather some dry wood to fuel the slowly dying fire around which myself and Henry were sat. As I built towards a rather enthusiastic climax which, if you must know, involved me clinging to my ice pick which was jammed tight into a forty five degree ice slope, preventing me from sliding into a black crevasse, we heard the whip cracking echo of gunshots in the dark; three in total. After that nothing. Silence.

We roused from our seated position, kicking up sizzling embers as we scrambled to our feet. I motioned to Henry to collect his rifle from the tent, as I flicked on my electric torch, upholstered my pistol and headed in the direction of the gunfire.

The forest quickly swallowed me as I ploughed through to discover what had happened. My pace soon slowed, as the sheer denseness of the foliage proved difficult to navigate through. I soon realized that Henry was nowhere to be seen. My own heavy breathing was all I could hear and my finger itched on the trigger of my weapon, in case whatever had attacked our guide came at me. The torchlight provided me with a slim beam by which to see, however I was hoping more to rely on scent, for you see the Hispanic gave off a foul odor of sweat and filth which was very distinct.

Something rigid came into contact with my boot and I lost my balance; falling face first onto the soft leafy ground. I swung the torch around, the beam of light cutting through the darkness, and saw the ornate mahogany stock of a rifle. It's owner however, was nowhere to be seen.

I heard a rustling come from a patch of bush to my right, and jumped back to my feet, dropping the torch, and aiming my revolver with both hands. Terror gripped me, and my hands felt slippery with sweat. I fired a shot into the trees.

Henry came stumbling through the leaves cursing at me. The bullet had narrowly missed his right arm, cutting through the sleeve, and grazing his skin. I collapsed to the ground in relief. After helping me back to my feet he told me he had followed my trail through the jungle, but had seen no sign of our guide. We took the rifle, wiping the blood from it, and headed back to camp. I didn't sleep that night, and kept my pistol close by.

We never saw the Hispanic again.

Early the next morning (despite our party being reduced by a third) we equipped ourselves, slung up our packs and rifles and began our trek north to the ruin site. Our walk was slow and we were plagued by insects the entire way. Henry seemed to be a little on edge after the events of last night, and there was little conversation between us. After several hours of monotonous trekking through the horrendously claustrophobic maze of green, and upon beginning to see a clearing approaching, we raced towards it. Once we made it my eyes widened in mixed awe and disappointment.

We were at the edge of a clearing with a circumference of roughly one hundred meters. There was no temple, or ruins of any kind to be seen; no sign that any ancient civilization had once been present here. Instead, in the centre of the circle, was a single tree, enormous in size.

As we approached, the only thing going through my mind was how we had wasted our time with this trip, and upon returning I would be mocked for my failure. It seemed unusual to have just one tree alone, and Henry suggested it may be a site used by jungle savages for worship or sacrifice. I gripped my rifle a little tighter.

It towered over us as we stood at the base of the trunk. Even with both of our arms outstretched they reached little under halfway round, and it soared skyward far higher than the tallest buildings, disappearing into the clouds. It had a deep rich coffee coloured bark, and several thick beads of jade green sap were seeping down the side.

Scattered around on the grass were brightly coloured fruits of which I had never seen before. Like the sap they were bright green, and when I picked one up it felt smooth under my fingers. I knew from past experience that fruit with a milky sap was poisonous to eat, but this had none at all, and when I crushed it easily in my fist, juice oozed out.

I took several and put them in my pack, as well as taking a phial of the trees sap for analysis. It was going on late in the afternoon and we were both hungry and parched from our trek, so after some debate we decided to eat some of the fruit.

We sat with our backs to the tree, our equipment sprawled out on the grass in front of us. The fruit tasted divine in the hazy heat of the evening. Sweet like strawberries yet with a distinct tang like a grapefruit. Both of us ate several. After an hour or so however, we both felt unusual and slightly queasy. My vision blurred, and I retched several times, expelling the fruit which just earlier had been so welcomed.

The night drew closer and my condition worsened. I began to hallucinate that there were shadows in the tree line, creeping towards us, but never coming fully into vision. All I could see clearly in their blurred outline was a pair of jade green eyes glowing in the darkness. I was paralyzed with fear.

Sat by my side, I believe Henry was experiencing something similar to my own ordeal, only on a much worse scale. He was shaking uncontrollably, his eyes were glazed white and his arms were outstretched in a defensive manner as though fending off an attacker. It was as though somewhere in his mind he was locked in mortal combat with some spectral adversary; battling for his sanity.

I passed out shortly after, and once resuming consciousness assumed they were mere conjurations of my imagination. The clouds had cleared, and a blanket of stars illuminated the sky, with the full moon out in all its magnificent glory.

Henry was lying still at my side. His eyes closed, as though he was sleeping. He began to stir, then gripped my arm tight like a vice, causing me to turn my attention to him. He opened his eyes and our visions met. I can only assume that had I a mirror, the reflection staring back at me would be one of sheer horror.

Instead of those sky blue eyes, the ones which stared back at me from that expressionless face were of a bright green, and swirled like glass orbs containing smoke. He opened his mouth and let out a terrifying wail, causing birds to scatter from the trees in fright. With my free arm I slowly reached for my holstered pistol, and carefully brought it up to my side, facing Henry; all the time not breaking eye contact, staring into those eyes, which leered back. I felt as though they were seeing right through me, into my soul.

I shot the possessed shell of my former friend, and as he died the colour drained out of his eyes, running down his face. It dripped onto the grass, and I heard a low rumbling sound like that of an approaching freight train. The next thing I knew the ground fissured under me and I was falling, grabbing frantically at muddy roots and tendrils with minimal success.

When I hit the stone floor, I felt pain scream through my left leg. It had broken on impact, and now I cannot move to find a means of escape. I've been sitting in the same place writing this letter for the last hour or so. The battery on my torch has long since died, and I am now relying on the beam of silvery moonlight which shines down through the crack in the ceiling to continue my penning.

Upon surveying the dim room, I deduced it was the very temple which we were searching for. I won't delve into the details of the chamber, as I suppose if you find this letter you will be here with me. I hope time has not been so cruel to me.

I will however mention the thing which has shaken me mentally more than any nightmarish dreams could. For when my eyes became accustomed to the light, I could make out a grotesque statue of monolithic proportions, grimacing at me from the centre of the chamber. It stands over twenty feet in height, and seems to be carved from a greenish black stone the kind of which I have never seen before. The design is monstrous; something not even the most creative of writers could describe fully, from beyond the borders of this world. It is a horrific being which dwarfs everything else in this tomb. Around the base of the statue are what look to be piles human skulls that are the colour of old parchment. What terrifies me most however, are the beasts eyes; two great jewels of the greenest jade, shining bright in the darkness.

Somewhere in the obsidian blackness of this tomb I hear echoing footsteps of the same

horrifying specters which took Henry. As they approach, the marching sound increases, like a terrible parade of ghouls coming to take me to my doom. The ground shakes, and fragments of soil are falling on me from above.

I imagine them navigating the endless labyrinth of rooms and passages which make up this temple, slowly making their way closer and closer to my location, creeping along the cobbled floor and stone walls.

They are close now, and in a moment I will shoot myself. I do not dare think what these monsters will do to me should they find me alive. I hope this hellish place is never found again and this letter never read, but if you are reading this then I am truly sorry. Now I can see lights in the distance getting brighter. The lights of a thousand pairs of eyes....

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Jade Green\]](#)

Jane by B. Carpe

He puts up walls and plants landmines and sleeps with a pistol under his pillow, but still the zombies climb in through the doors and the windows at night.

Sometimes they arrive with limbs severed and eyeballs hanging loosely from their sockets, and this is almost as good as being safe; it's being satisfied.

The pistol is all he needs for safety, really. The zombies are notoriously loud, and he hasn't slept so deeply he could not be easily roused since the day he bought it. This is called peace of mind.

The thing about it is, anyway, if he hasn't got a mind anymore, at least he's got a piece.

Zombies are dispatched with surprising ease, in any case. It's the maiming that's hard to do well.

So he buys a crossbow, and it gets a little easier to maim, and a little harder to sleep.

The attacks become less and less frequent, and because the only pattern he's learnt from them in the past is always, periodically almost proves too difficult to handle.

So he sets up spiked pits around the perimeter of his house, and makes do.

One night, a zombie crawls through his window, and no doubt it has completed some impossibly ominous act, a feat of the paranormal, to get here.

"How did you break in?" he says to the zombie, because he hasn't slept for nearly seventy hours now, or had a conversation since he bought his gun.

"Gluuuuuuuugh," replies the zombie.

"Shimmied up the drainpipe, didn't you?" he says.

"Gluuuuuuuugh," replies the zombie.

"Seen that before," he says. "I have to say it gets less impressive with repetition, you banal monstrosity."

"Gluuuuuuuugh," snipes the zombie.

"It's remarkable you got in unscathed, in any case," he says.

"Gluuuuuuuugh," preens the zombie.

He shoots it in the foot and chains it to the bathtub, in the bathroom.

"Gluuuuuuuugh," protests the zombie.

"Quiet," he says. "Groan if you hear something, or you're about to bleed to death."

He clambers over to his adjoining bedroom and beats his pillow into shape while the zombie watches, blood dribbling from its foot and seeping into the tile.

"Otherwise I'm not interested," he says, curling the pillow around his head and tucking his pistol beneath his chin.

The zombie braces itself against the bathtub, propping its foot up against the sink, and buries its fingers into the wound. The bullet comes out after some burrowing and sifting, along with small fragments of bone.

The zombie drops the bullet to the floor, and it clinks wetly.

"I said quiet," he says. "Who's torturing who to death?" He nuzzles his pistol.

Its name is Jane.

The pistol, not the zombie.

"Duuuuuuuuuh," scathes the zombie, dryly rolling its eyes.

*

He wakes up the next day to find the zombie sitting cross-legged inside the bathtub with its eyes locked skyward, unblinking.

“Nobody up there’ll save you,” he says, gesturing obscenely. “I’ve got automatic rifles mounted on the rooftop in case He tries.”

“Gluuuuuuuugh,” groans the zombie, and the movement is enough to jar its eyes out of position, and they descend to lock gazes with his own wetter ones.

“Your eyeballs don’t lubricate themselves?” he asks, then snorts, holding up a hand to halt it mid-Gluuuuuugh. “On second thought, I don’t care.”

He cradles Jane in his arms after shrugging on a pair of boots.

Then he shoots the zombie in the other foot and leaves the room, whistling.

*

He used to know a Jane. A real one, with long brown hair and moist, moving eyes. He used to sleep with her tucked beneath his chin, too, before a zombie shimmied up the drainpipe and snatched her from his arms.

He found a way to get the landmines for cheap after that.

*

He spends the day setting up more, and piecing together various body parts from bits he finds blown yards and yards from where he finds their feet. He uncovers a pair of boots, identical to the ones he’s wearing, but cleaner and newer, and they are a testament to how much time he spends wading through intestines and goo, and how little he gets to leave the house.

Well, bothers.

He levers the foot stumps out of the boots with some difficulty, and he has a new pair of boots to show for it at the end of the day.

Jane always called his boots hideous fashion accidents, laughing her brown hair out of her brown eyes.

He trudges delicately back to the house, taking care not to damage his new boots.

He misses Jane.

*

“Gluuuuuugh,” compliments the zombie upon his arrival, eyeing his feet.

“Shut up,” he says. “If I wanted your opinion, I’d pick your brain.” He sits down on the left side of the bed, and commences a struggle to remove his boots.

“No, wait,” he says, and manages to rend one from his foot, and it makes a sound like a plug being ripped from a plughole. “That would be you picking mine, wouldn’t it?” he says, removing his sock to wring out the blood.

“Gluuuuuugh,” retorts the zombie in disgust.

“Your feet are no better,” he says. “Nothing about you is.”

“Gluuuuuugh?” asks the zombie, gesturing at its bare feet.

He flicks the sock at the zombie and it cartwheels through the air, sending droplets of blood skittering across the room. It strikes the zombie in the forehead, and it does not break eye contact, although perhaps it can’t.

The zombie, not the sock.

“So the undead won’t steal from each other,” he says. “That doesn’t make you a saint.”

“Gluuuuuugh?” asks the zombie, again, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” he says. “That’s right.”

He fills the bathtub with water set to scald, and forces the zombie to soak its feet inside.

And it doesn’t say a thing.

*

The next day he wakes to find the zombie dipping its arms into the torpid bathwater, its hands reemerging to cup water to its mouth and swallow.

“You need water, then, do you?” he says, stretching, although he avoids allowing his arm to brush against the pillow that lies by his side, the one Jane never slept on because she was tucked beneath his chin.

“Gluuuuugh,” proposes the zombie, and it attempts to move its hands towards the edge of the bathtub in order to lever itself out, soaked and bedraggled.

“You’re right, no doubt,” he says. “I don’t suppose you need anything once you’re dead.”

The zombie dabs at its eyes for some moments before it is able to roll them.

“Gluuuuugh,” opines the zombie.

“Well, you don’t seem very high maintenance yourself,” he says, rolling out of bed to land on his knees on the floor before he makes an effort to stand.

He wanders over to the bathtub, reaching beneath the zombie’s arms, and rips the plug from the plughole. They watch the water drain together in silence.

After that the zombie watches him detach the attachments on the faucets, labelled Hot and Cold in either one of his pockets. He whistles.

“See,” he says. “The way to learn what someone needs,” he holds up a finger, “or in your case, something,” he curls the finger back into his fist, “is to, as a rule, not listen to a word they say.”

“Gluuuuugh,” snorts the zombie, and he shakes his head apologetically, assumedly repentant for wasting its time. One of the zombie’s wounded feet, bloody and engorged, has inched over to stem the escape of water through the drain, and he grants it cursory acknowledgement before shuffling towards his bedroom.

“The only way to find out whether or not you really need something is to go ahead and see what happens when you take it away,” he says, very fast, as he feels around beneath his own

pillow for some time, reemerging with Jane in his hand. He is careful to line his pillow back up with the one adjacent to his own, and exits the room.

*

Zombies--or, at the very least, his zombie--can survive six days with no water before their skin becomes so dry it begins to flake off. It is neither a dramatic nor a gruesome death to observe or to live, so both he and the zombie do not pass commentary on it until the morning of the sixth day.

He wakes up, thinking briefly that this is often the worst way to start one's day, and he finds the zombie isn't quite bleeding, not in the sense of the word, implying mobility of blood, but it has a sheen of it coating its cheeks and arms.

Its skin surrounds the zombie like drab confetti and as he gets closer his footfalls displace the zombie's feet and calves and arms and face, lying scattered on the ground.

"Wow," he says. "We're a couple of real dry someones and somethings, huh?"

"Gluuuuugh," groans the zombie, and for once it means nothing more than Gluuugh.

"Because of you I haven't had a bath in an age," he said, "and because of me you have." He snorts. "Well, I didn't mean to say that. I wanted to gloat about how you're dying, actually."

"Gluuuuugh," welcomes the zombie, lifting a hand to wipe its cheek, tracing a remnant of skin and causing it to come away with its hand.

"Gross," he says. "I don't know how I'll ever disinfect my bathtub."

"Gluuugh," suggests the zombie, and he cocks his head in consideration.

"No," he says. "Too much work. I was never in charge of cleaning." He looks down for a little bit, holding his boot up to the light and examining the toe, swiveling his heel left to right.

"Gluuuuugh," remarks the zombie, and he glances up.

"Well, thanks," he says. "I suppose I do know how to keep a house."

It jabs its head upward, then appears to decide to nod once for good measure, as long as its head is already in motion.

“Gluuuugh,” soothes the zombie.

“Thanks,” he says. “I did install them myself.”

He crouches down abruptly, busying himself by blowing at the dregs on the ground, dispersing them in flurries of alternating size and intensity.

“It’s all very biblical,” he says. “You know, rain of fire. Except, bullets.”

“Gluuuugh,” admits the zombie, and his blow takes the form of an amused exhale.

“What are you, an atheist?” he says. “That’d go towards explaining some things.”

“Gluuuugh?” asks the zombie, and he reaches out a hand to stroke down the zombie’s leg, trailing it up the tattered dress it may have been wearing in a distant past, and the blood he collects at the tips of his fingers he smears along the floor, using it to collect the fine dust of the zombie’s skin.

“Like how you didn’t kill yourself as soon as you knew you had it,” he said. “As soon as it got inside of you, why you didn’t find someone or something willing to do it for you.”

He places a finger in his mouth and sucks before removing it and moving on to the next. “All you godless types,” he says, “you don’t know a thing about self-sacrifice.”

He stands up and the zombie lurches backwards, cringing away from him. He only looks at it, and this time he rolls his eyes.

It eyes him back, and he snorts and wipes his saliva coated hand down his trousers.

*

Humans--or, at the very least, the zombie’s human--take three hours to get very, very sick, and more and more inclined to pick people’s brains.

He spends the time waiting for it to happen lying on his bed, his arms crossed behind his head, one leg bent, and the other drawing bored circles in the air.

"I can't tell if I'm losing the will to live or not," he says.

"Gluuuuugh," suggests the zombie.

"No," he says. "Too much work." His boot begins to slide off his foot, so he works it back up his calf. "I'm sure it'll go sooner or later." He coughs up some blood.

"Gluuuuugh," considers the zombie.

"I suppose," he said. "I'm sure I'd know if I didn't have one though, right?" He leans over to spit his mouthful onto the floor before it can dribble onto the pillow.

The zombie shrugs, and the movement makes it keen for a number of seconds which he spends not caring.

"Alright," he says. "Let's see what this is like."

He pulls Jane out of his belt, and he points her at the zombie, and it has no further to cower, so instead it brandishes its chest. It does that keening thing again, but his senses are dulling, and he still doesn't care.

"Pow pow," he says, and he laughs the laugh the human Jane got him to sometimes when she sucked on her teeth and made a show about calling him sonny.

He lowers it to the zombie's chest, and this time it sucks it in, and maybe it does know about a will to live. "Pow pow," he says, although he doesn't pull the trigger.

He points it at his temple. "Pow pow," he says. "How idiotic." He moves it to the back of his head. "Pulling a trigger's not nearly enough a reflection of dedication, is it?" he says. "If I work up the guts to twitch my finger, I don't think that's the same as having the guts to die."

He brings Jane back down to eye level and just looks at her.

“What do you think?” he says, and this time maybe there’s no point differentiating between the gun and the zombie. Neither of them say anything.

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess I’m the only one.”

“Gluuugh,” snorts the zombie, and he is reminded of its presence as the zombie, the one with whom he has spent eight days, chained to the bathtub.

The zombie, not the man.

“What’s it like to turn, anyway?” he says.

“Gluuugh,” replies the zombie, and then it winces all along its body.

“The cigarettes?”

“Gluuuuuugh,” repeats the zombie, and he makes an oh sound.

“I didn’t know you spoke French,” he says.

“Gluuuugh,” responds the zombie.

“I guess I did, then,” he says.

The zombie is silent, so he looks down at Jane.

“What’ll we do, Jane?” he says. “It’s Pall Mall, after all.”

Jane is silent, so he looks at the zombie.

“Gluuuugh,” it says, after a long time he spends just watching it try not to die.

“Pow, pow,” he shrugs, and he points the gun at the zombie’s chest again. He pulls the trigger and the shot he fires jerks far to the right, and the pipe leading underneath the sink and over to the water tank goes pow pow.

"I guess cleaning is still up to you, Jane," he says, and when an attachment hits him in the back of the head he keels over with her tucked under his chin, ironic as you please.

*

When he wakes up he's lying in the bathtub, the zombie standing over him. Its skin is pink and raw but it's not bleeding anymore and he peers out to make sure the bed's still in place and everything's arranged how he likes it, and he panics briefly about how he's going to dry out the bed before he goes away again.

He wakes up every few hours to throw up, maybe only because his physiology hasn't come up with any method of throwing up unconscious, so like messy leaking clockwork he does this. He's never watched anyone turn before, but if this is how it is he can understand a little why they don't kill themselves, probably under the impression they're already dead, and if not that, as good as.

All in all, he doesn't find it a bad arrangement, and he falls back asleep again.

The zombie just sits there, still chained to the bathtub, but still watching him die too.

On the third day, the number it takes for nothing here and real to happen, his temperature spikes violently, although obviously the zombie doesn't know a thing about that, so it just sits there, although maybe it would anyway.

The man wakes up on the fourth day, riddled with delirium or fever or his body still saying why would you ingest blood and skin why and he watches the zombie through eyelids caked with what appears to be a fine mucus, somehow having managed to travel from his insides to his eyes, and obviously the man doesn't know a thing about that either, so all he says is, "Who's torturing who to death?" and he laughs coughs, and he cries mucus, and he falls back asleep again.

"Gluuuugh," groans the zombie, and it pulls off the boots he is wearing, the ones that have nearly adhered to the man's feet by now, as they swell in size, taking in water and lethargy and the infection that's the real reason zombies aren't prone to stealing shoes from one another. The zombie drops them into the bathtub with a splash, and they float up to the man's pelvis and pause there, at ease.

On the fifth day the swelling in his feet has subsided and the zombie levers itself up to immerse its head underwater, in between the legs of the man, and it comes back up to roll its eyes, "Gluuuuugh," it snorts, and it's what Jane used to say to him when he told her loved

her, about how some people have all the luck (and others don't) and to itself the zombie performs a crude imitation of the man, all the mouth sounds coming out right, and it's only because no one is around to be horrified by exactly how wrong the rest of it is that that's all.

"Yeah," says the zombie. "I guess I'm the only one."

On the sixth day he starts shivering, great big shivers that wrack his body, that keep the zombie up at night because he thrashes and flails like a dying man.

On the sixth night he stops, and for all intents and purposes enters a deep sleep, eyelashes fluttering for hours while the zombie watches, unblinking.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Jane\]](#)

King Bee by Oscar

So there I was in the shower. I closed my eyes and started to pleasure myself, as it was my favourite hobby at the time. I leaned back, with my back to the wall of the shower. I couldn't feel it at first; it came on in waves. Slow, slow waves moving from my head down my torso, out to my arms and down to my legs. Within minutes the process was complete; I was no longer in my shower masturbating. I was in the back of a moving car, getting a blowjob from my friend's hot sister. I snapped out of it and there, I was back in the shower. I closed my eyes and relaxed my mind.

The sensations were astounding; every nerve-ending in my body had a lead weight on it - my skin was pulsating, moving. Every part of me was being weighed down; every fibre of my being weighed a thousand tons. The shower was the only thing keeping me awake - the random pitter-patter all over my neck and back. I turned around to face the rain-giving nozzle. The sense of euphoria it gave me was amazing; like being hit with a shotgun shell of pleasure.

This was all fine and dandy until I got the taste of blood in my mouth. Blood?! Was it? Is this a side effect I hadn't been warned about? Was I dying? Had I killed myself for a cheap thrill? I spat onto my hand; no blood. Or had the shower washed it away? I tried to spit again, but my mouth couldn't muster up enough saliva to do it - cotton mouth (A side effect I had known about). I tried to coax out some of this phantom blood by coughing. This left me with a litter of strange and terrible tastes on my palette - very sour, very sweet and very distorted - I couldn't recognise them. Was it blood? Was I bleeding? What was happening to me?

I calmed myself down a bit. I wasn't dying. I'm not a damned statistic. I felt the phantom blood again - in my nose this time. Nosebleeds - another of the side effects I hadn't been told of? Had I been poisoned? Sold out by a supposed friend? "That bastard, he's trying to kill me, wasn't he! He wants me out of the picture because- because... Dammit, he wants me dead and that's all that matters! If I get out of this alive, I'm going to kill him!" I remember thinking. Murderous thoughts - yet another side effect?

I felt the maybe-blood make its way down my nose, to my nostrils. I took the opportunity to swipe my wrist along my nose and examine it for blood. Again, nothing. Despite visual confirmation, I still felt the blood rolling down my face, hitting my lip. There was no way was I hallucinating; something hit my lip - I was certain. A quick lick to check for the taste of blood turned up nothing.

Christ in Heaven, was I going insane? Would I be consigned to the loony bin for the rest of my days? Me, a stout young lad of good repute, sectioned? Hidden away from functioning society for the meagre crime of smoking a concoction of herbs in a legal grey-area? Was this my fate? No! I would not become a goddamned tabloid story! I would fight that goddamned drug - I would exorcise myself of this demon. I would fight it!

Just as I made this ironclad vow, I started hallucinating. Every blink became a portal to other planes of reality. In the intervening darkness, I saw things I never could imagine having existed - amazing inventions, beautiful sonatas and tantalising vistas. All of them forgotten now, of course; lost in the tsunami of normality which hit me like a ton of bricks.

The shower was starting to get cold now. It stopped feeling ...new. It felt old and familiar. Almost like I had been having the same shower every day for a thousand years. Even the water felt old and decrepit. Everything about this shower had become ancient; not in a mournful and reminiscent way, like Aztec ruins; but in an outdated way - think your old mobile phone. You don't miss your old phone after an upgrade; it just sits in a drawer gathering dust. But imagine your new phone gets stolen and you have to use the old one again. That's what this shower felt like; like I was using an ancient piece of shit Nokia without Bluetooth or even a camera - While just yesterday I had a goddamned iPhone.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for King Bee\]](#)

Not a Priority by Freddy P. Kemp

We still don't aren't sure what happened, those of us that have survived. We have spent countless hours trying piece together the events of that day, when we aren't foraging for food. It is astounding how ironic words like "national defense" and "mission priority" are now, how quickly concepts like government, economy, and consumption become trivial in comparison to words like "sickness" "warmth" "food" and "love". What I present here are historical documents, the records we could find of that day. I would tell you they are objective, fair and balanced, but that's meaningless. They are what they are.

From The Thoughts of Sgt. J.R. Harris Senior Analyst, U.S. Department of Defense

11:00 hours, 18th, June

Busy this morning, the 'War Room' is already filled to capacity; I can barely reach my desk. My inbox is over-flowing, what's this? Memo from the general, hmm, I'll probably have to get to that shit before anything else. Which sucks because I've had a NASA memo somewhere under there for days now. God, I wish I had been an astronaut, childhood dreams and all. These days being what they are, that memo will have to sit at the bottom of my inbox for another week, maybe more. Space isn't part of the agenda, I miss the Cold War. Heh. That's funny, I'll have to remember that.

What's that racket? Holy shit, are those the joint chiefs??

"Attention, can I please have everyone's attention? Thank you. I apologize for the interruption, I can see you're all extremely busy, and I'm afraid I don't come here under the best circumstances. As of 10:30 this morning, an explosion of massive proportions was reported Aspin region of Colorado, we're still trying to make sense of the news coming in, but it appears the greater Aspin metropolitan area is...well, gone."

My god, are people saying 'nuke'? What the hell else could it be? My parents are in... were in Aspin. The room is spinning now, the murmurs turning to yells. I want answers dammit, what are we doing about this?

"People, people, please. I know this is shocking but this is still the Defense Department, and your country needs you now more than ever. From what our first response

teams have told us this would have had to have been several nuclear warheads, not a single bomb. NORAD reports no breaches or even launch warnings, frankly we don't know how any such ICMB's or bombers could have gotten in without our knowing, so we are possibly looking at some sort of stealth bomber far beyond that of what we're used to."

"WHO DID IT?"

"Please we need to keep this discourse civil, I know this is a high stress scenario but you have all been trained for such an event. As of now the only possibility is, as crazy as it sounds, Russia. They are the only ones with the necessary stockpile and technological capabilities. What needs to happen now is a plan for counter-attack, we cannot wait for the world to see if a country steps forward or a declaration of war is made. The fate of this nation and its peoples rests on our shoulders. The very second a plan is formulated it will be faxed straight to Site R for the president's approval. Good luck, and may God bless all of you."

From the personal diary of The President of the United States of America,

13:00 hours, 18th, June.

That's it, it's done, it's finished. It was a long time coming but I knew He would make it happen one day. The Lord promised me long ago that the End of Days would happen in my lifetime, just as He promised me I'd control this nation, and now it's happening. The Ruskies finally want to end the silly game we've been playing for nearly a century and it's about time. My father always knew, he'd come home and explain it to me. "Cold War" he used to scoff, there was nothing cold about it, it was just fought under the surface, but once the Bomb was dropped, things would heat up real fast, he said.

Well Dad, now I've done it. I've beaten them for you, and on top of it I've set in motion the events leading up to the return of our Savior. Let's see the approval rating now. Let's see them complain about "Big Government" and military spending and taxes and corporate interests now that they are to be judged for their crimes. I never complained, I understood I was to be persecuted, it is His way, I turned a deaf ear to shouts of "Fascist" and "anti-christ", "moron", yes how smart are they now? We still don't know how the Ruskies did it but who cares? Now that the missiles are flying, I can look outside my very window and see the Rocket's Red Glare. Hallelujah.

From the desk of General Alexandrovich Mikhail Pliyev

17:35 Hours, 18th, June

My grandfather, he stood loyally at the side of Comrade Lenin during the October Revolution. My father fought at Stalingrad, and later he works with the KGB, for whatever the faults of the Bolsheviks, of the Soviet Union, they loved their country and I will never stop admiring them for it, I only wish I could speak to them now and ask their advice on this...travesty.

This is total and utter madness. To think that Russia would attack the United States, for what purpose? What could we possibly gain? They reported that there were no breaches of their defense systems, no evidence at all of a missile. We tried to reason with them, remind them of their own findings, of which there are none. But the Americans, they would not listen, and now all is lost. As I write, St. Petersburg burns, the second we saw missiles coming towards Moscow, Bombers were scrambled and ICBM's launched. The eastern seaboard of the US is now underwater. Troops are soon to be deployed throughout Europe and the Middle East, our two country's alliances run deep and now the world is at war once again.

I go to my wife now, and to my father and grandfather, with my pistol, the pistol I have carried for decades, the pistols that represents my dedication to Mother Russia, I go to them. No regrets. Only a question. How did this happen?

From The Stationary of Dr. Richard Canterbury PhD, Room 1178, the Space Telescope Science Institute, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Baltimore, Maryland

Addressed to: US Department of Defense, Washington DC

10:32 hours, 7th, June

URGENT MESSAGE,

AT APPROXIMATELY 10:20 AM THE HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE DISCOVERED WHAT APPEARED TO BE A MASSIVE COMET ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH EARTH, IF ACTION IS NOT TAKEN IMMEDIATELY AN IMPACT WILL OCCUR, SUCH AN IMPACT COULD RESULT IN A CATASTROPHIC BLAST THE EQUIVALENT OF OVER 50 MEGATONS, GREATER THAN THE NUCLEAR BLASTS AND HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI. ACCORDING TO OUR ESTIMATES THERE IS LITTLE OVER A WEEKS TIME BEFORE THE COMET ENTERS EARTH'S ORBIT. IF COUNTER-MEASURES ARE NOT TAKEN THE IMPLICATIONS OF SUCH AN IMPACT WILL BE DIRE. A COMET IS MADE ALMOST ENTIRELY OF ICE, ICE THAT WILL EVAPORATE ON IMPACT, NO PHYSICAL REMAINS WILL BE PRESENT, SUCH AN IMPACT IS ALMOST IDENTICAL TO A NUCLEAR EXPLOSION. WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING.

From 2002, NASA's vision, used in budget and planning documents, read: "To understand and protect our home planet; to explore the universe and search for life; to inspire the next generation of explorers ... as only NASA can." In early February 2006, the statement was altered, with the phrase "to understand and protect our home planet" deleted. Some outside observers believe the change was intended to preserve the civilian nature of the agency, while others suspected it was related to criticism of government policy on global warming by NASA scientists like James E. Hansen. NASA officials have denied any connection to the latter, pointing to new priorities for space exploration. NASA's motto is "For the benefit of all"

In the last twenty years NASA has faced serious budget cuts and continuingly dwindling political support. The Annual budget for NASA for the year of 2010 is approximately \$19 billion, the daily expenditures on the war in Iraq is approximately \$7 billion dollars.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Not a Priority\]](#)

One pt.2 by Josef K.

The next morning, I feel wonderful. The sun crests the mountain tops and I can hear the wind singing in the branches of the fir trees. Birdsong drifts across the valley on an unseasonably warm wind. Even the dark is silent this morning.

Javier is gone. He has taken nothing from me, but he has fled sometime before I awoke. His clumsy trail leads north and slightly west. I know he will follow the coast or he will be lost. I sling my pack on my shoulder, tuck a wad of dried meat into my cheek, and follow the broken branches and disturbed earth of his passing.

I find him before noon, drinking greedily from a small tributary that runs down the saddle of two small rises, almost on top of one of my camps. When he has drunk his fill, he stares at the silver flashing of steelhead trout in the stream.

I sit quietly, and with no small amusement, watch as he fashions a simple spear and tries for an hour to spear a fish. He cries out in frustration with every missed shot. When I can restrain myself no longer, my face split into a wild grin, I call out to him.

“What would you do with it if you did catch one?” I holler.

He jerks, his head spinning around, and although I am perched on the knobby roots of a redwood in plain view, he looks past me twice before his eyes truly see. When they register me, he lowers his body, as if to run, but the rifle is slung on my back, and he holds still.

“Eat it,” he says, with a hint of defiance. “I’ve fished before. Just not with a spear.”

I nod approvingly.

“Why did you run?” I ask. He snorts a laugh, and looks away from me, towards the ocean. There is a long moment before he responds. Then he turns back, to hold my gaze.

“You said you were going to kill me. It seemed prudent.” This time it’s my turn to laugh.

“If you are what you say you are, you’ve got nothing to worry about. What you need to do is adjust for the refraction of water. Aim below the fish.”

He doesn’t seem to understand at first, and looks blankly at the spear in his hand.

“Or, you could just... shoot it,” he says. I smile wider. Somewhere, above us, a hawk screeches.

Before the sun goes down, he’s speared his first fish. I build two small cook fires separated by 10 yards. I have to talk him through the act of gutting his catch, and he pales when his hooked finger draws out the black and shining knots of viscera. Soon he has the fish spitted over the flames and it drips hot juices onto the coals. I let him keep the water bottle he left at our first camp and he fills it several times from the river, always down stream from me. It strikes me as unfair, as he has only my assurance that I am not carrying the bug. But then again, I have the rifle.

My river camp, only ten or so yards upstream, is a simple enclosure hidden behind a few woven panels of dry branches; one of a handful I have built across the coastline at strategic locations. We extinguish the cook fires, and head upstream, the forest illuminated only in wan blue moonlight.

I teach him how to build his own simple shelter near my own, instructing him to lean a dead branch, ten feet long, against the crook of a tree at the height of his knees. He gathers pine boughs to lie against the branch to create the walls and packs the inside with dry oak leaves. Tomorrow, if I am well, I will show him how to create a more sturdy dwelling.

He tells me more about the last days before he and his captain broke from the roads to make a go in the wild. I tell him about the mad choking nightmare of the refugee columns and the cautious optimism of the small rural towns when we found ourselves alone. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him about our nascent survivor commune, and the barn, burning in the warm spring night. I can taste the ashes of it; can see the roaring whirlwind of fire. It wakes the dark to think about it, and I go sullen and quiet.

To his credit, Javier takes the cue from my furrowed brows and slides noisily into his little lean-to. I spend the night with my teeth grinding and the dark whispering filth into my ear. It tries to tell me that the little tickle in my throat, the one I know is caused by speaking more than I have in months, is the onset of the bug. When I’ve ignored it long enough, it becomes content to slither back and forth, pacing on oily black feet until the sun rises.

Javier awakes with the rising temperature and then catches my gaze. He must see it, behind my eyes, because he almost breaks into a run then and there. I shake my head, rattling the dark away and rise to meet him.

“How do you feel?” he asks, and there is confidence now in his tone.

“Well,” I say. “Tired. I didn’t sleep. But I’m not sick.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he says, solemnly.

And then he takes a faltering step toward me. His approach alarms me, and for a moment, I almost run from him. I haven’t been near another person in three months and the smells of his sweat and the small sounds of his breathing are alien and alarming.

I fight down panic, and he raises his hand, fingers extended, palm to the side, and offers it to me. I stare dumbly at it, before raising my own to clasp it. His hand is not smooth and uncalloused like I would have imagined, but nor is it rigid and cracked like my own. We shake once, and he squeezes my hand gently. The dark is howling, but it sounds far away now.

“Philip,” he says. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. You saved my life.”

We spend the day setting snares, and although there is no need for the evaporation traps this close to the small stream, I show him the general principal. The freshly dug pit exposes the water in the soil beneath the surface and the clear plastic tarp catches the evaporation, condensing in the center and dripping into a canteen. I tell him with some relish that you can piss on the wet earth, to accelerate the process and reclaim more water. It is a testament to the strangeness of these last days that he simply responds with one solemn nod.

“Why the traps, when you have a river?” he asks.

“There aren’t enough of these streams to provide water where ever I am, and I don’t have enough bottles to stockpile. When I’m at one of the other camps, or on the move, the traps make sure I’ve always got water at hand. I don’t want to die of dehydration just for twisting my ankle.” He nods again, and we go to sit beside the river, drinking from cupped hands. He looks up at my hut, nestled in the burned out center of a redwood tree and carefully hidden from view

“How many of these camps do you have?” he asks, waving one dripping finger.

“A half dozen, mostly by rivers, but a few in other locations. One on a bluff that gives me a good view of Eureka, north along the coastline. I was about to settle a new one where the deer trails crossed a few miles south of here when you spooked me away.”

“You... you plan to stay out here. Indefinitely.” It’s not a question, and I shake my head in a maybe-yes, maybe-no gesture.

“If it’s as nasty as you say it is, maybe I’ll give it a year before I think of heading inland. Maybe then I’ll live like a king in some rich old fart’s mansion for a while. Joyride some cars. I don’t know. Powers gone, water pressure... But if the bug burns hot, maybe it will burn out. After that, who knows.”

“What brought you here in the first place?” he asks, and the dark flutters. I can smell the wood smoke of the smoldering barn. I take a deep breath of clean cool air filtered by the evergreens and I exhale the chemical fumes of burning lead paint. I close my eyes tight.

“My wife. My daughter,” I say, softly into the air.

He is content to let the rest of the day pass in silence.

It’s almost winter when I am able to tell him. By then I have to tell him, although I can’t say why.

We’re at our northernmost camp, picking the meat from spitted raccoon. During the day, using a broken pair of binoculars, he believes he saw a man walking slowly down the road to the North.

As we sit around the smoldering fire debating the wisdom of an expedition to the dark and silent corpse of Eureka, I simply begin. Once I start, I can’t stop until I’ve spilled the story out onto the ground, drained it like an infection, purified by the air and fire.

“The farm was perfect. Walt had been a dairy farmer and was confident we could make it work, and it was far from the main roads. We’d been staying in the barn a week before we realized we didn’t have to run any farther. We’d seen no one for days since our convoy of vans ran out of gas, not a single car. The more we talked the more it made sense. The farm had made a poor attempt at modernization, but the barn still contained the old tools, the ones we could use by hand. The fences were high, and only a few of the cattle had starved

before we arrived. We could set watch, we could plow the earth, and we could have a harvest. It was still early spring.

“For a month, we were alone, and we worked that dream-like clay. We built bunks in the empty farmhouse, and carved dark furrows in the earth. Seeds sprouted, and we carried water in buckets from the stream that marked the line between the farm and the forest. We ate together, thinning our supply of canned goods without ever worrying. We were going to succeed. My wife and my daughter for the first time in months were not afraid. I wasn’t afraid.

“And then the girl came, walking right down the road. I was on watch, in the noonday sun, and when she saw me standing by the fence, she ran towards me, weeping happily. She was beautiful, golden hair whipping in the breeze and she held out her arms as if to embrace me.



“I almost shot her. I wish to god I had, then. Instead, I fired into the air, and she stopped. At the sound, the rest of our little doomed community came running.

“‘I’m not sick,’ she yelled at us. ‘Look at me, I’m not sick. I promise you.’

“We made her stay on the far side of the road while we discussed. Some of us wanted to send her away, some wanted to believe her, but we’d all lost friends in the early days to misplaced trust. In the end, we brought her food and water and a little tent, and told her to stay across the road, in the field, for three days. Just to be sure. She agreed immediately. For the rest of my guard shift, we talked, yelling across the road and getting to know each other.

“Her name was Megan. Megan Galloway. She was 17 years old, and everyone she knew was dead.

“I think we all fell in love with her a little, even the old married men. She was radiant. A country girl with a curvy body, and a wit like a knife. She’d yell jokes to my daughter and the two other children with us, leaning across the fence to holler the punch-line with relish, her apple cheeks glowing in the sunlight. In the night, her jokes were bawdy and shameless. She sang like a bird, and promised to braid flowers into my daughter’s hair when she was allowed in.

“At noon on the third day, they let her into the farm, welcoming her with open arms.

“It was dumb luck that saved me. The morning her quarantine was to end, Tom Nilsen and I had left, heading down the road to see if we could find seed, or fertilizer, or a working truck at one of the farms at the next tiny unincorporated town. We waved at her across the road, as we left, and Tom told her he couldn’t wait to get back so he could meet her good and proper, once her three days were up. He winked at her, and she winked right back. I really don’t think she knew.

“Tom broke his ankle more than a day’s walk down the road as we searched the farthest farm. Hooked it right in a gopher hole and came down sideways on it. It swelled up like a basketball, and it took me three more days to haul him back to the farm, one arm hooked under his shoulder, without anything to show for our expedition.

“It was just after sunset when we returned, and we could hear Megan wailing softly in the distance. I wanted to drop Tom and run to her, comfort her, to make it right, but I held tight to him as we hobbled closer. Other than her cries, it was silent.

“She was on the porch of the house, her head in her hands. No one else was in sight. My guts started to twist up as we approached. I think I already knew. She stood up and raised her hands, and began to babble, pointing at the barn. The ice in my chest solidified, and I felt like

I was slipping away, seeing it all at a great distance.

“Megan, honey, where is everyone, what’s going on?” I asked but she just wailed even louder, hands tearing at her hair.

“On legs that were not my own, I approached the barn. I could smell it before I could hear it. That terror scent of shit and vomit and death that we’d been free of that last month. Beneath that fluttering miasma, was a single rasping, dead man’s cough. I knew, without any sort of evidence, that we were all inside there. Our whole little community. All of us.

“Tom had hobbled to Megan, and was stroking her back when I returned; she was telling him how they’d isolated the first to show symptoms. My daughter. How it had all happened so fast after that. Tom was telling her how lucky she was to be alive.”

That’s when the dark little something awoke, but I don’t know how to explain this to Javier, just yet. I’m sure it’s always been with me, but until that night it was as yet unborn, still wrapped in a black and greasy caul. I’d felt it before, heard its voice, an ugly little echo in the back of my head, easily banished. It was born that night, on the farm, sliding wet and filthy to the cold ground, already hungry, already calling out to feed.

“What happened next seemed like a dream, like I was watching it from the end of a tunnel. I don’t think I could have stopped it if I wanted to, and to be honest, I don’t think I wanted to.

“I pulled the revolver on her, and told her to come to the barn with me. Tom was shocked, his square jaw hanging open, and he tried to stand on his ruined leg to protest. But she knew. She understood.

“‘I didn’t know,’ she said plaintively. ‘I didn’t.’

“‘I don’t care. Come.’ I could hear my voice, cold and flat, and I saw her fear. And I drank it up.

“By then Tom had figured out what was going to happen, and he’d already drawn his gun. He started to speak, and I shot him, once, in the center of his face. He sat down hard, and slowly tilted back onto the wooden porch steps. I’d known Tom since we met him fleeing Sacramento. He was a good man, but he was dead from the moment he held her. It was a mercy, that perfect shot, but that only occurred to me after.

“Megan started to scream again and I shot her in the arm. After that she drifted, like a ghost,

moving where I pointed. She was in shock as I led her to the barn. She opened the door, and looked back at me once. I leveled the gun at her, and she slipped inside. Whoever had been coughing before was silent now.

“We’d kept our last small amount of fuel in a barrel by the barn, siphoned from a few lawnmowers and tractors. I kicked it over, let it flow under the door, and tossed a book of matches.

“The barn burned all night. I watched it leap to the farmhouse, across the drier patches of crops. I watched Tom’s body burn. I waited until the sun rose, until the roof beam gave way, and the barn fell on top of my dead wife, my dead daughter, and Megan. I burnt them all, I watched them turn to ash, and then I headed west, to the sea. I didn’t want to ever see another person, and made care to stay unseen.”



In the dim light, the cook fire crackles in counterpoint to my silence. I feel clean and cold, like being sober for the first time in many months. Javier is looking at me with an unreadable expression across the fire. When it becomes clear to him that I am done, he simply nods, eyes locked to mine.

“It’s different now,” he says after a time. “Things are different.”

I see reflected in his eyes the burning of San Francisco, the mutiny aboard the Nimitz. I see in the creases of his brow his own tragedies. I see they must rival mine. Anyone still living, now, will have their own special nightmares.

Despite his haunted eyes, he has lost the corpse-look he had when we first met. He is healthy and tanned. If I were to leave him here, tonight, and leap from the cliffs into the oil-dark ocean, he could survive for a long time with the little things I have taught him.

The dark likes this idea, but I do not; it obediently goes silent.

“Tomorrow then,” my friend says, breaking me from my reverie, “We’ll move alongside the roads, through the trees, and see if there has been any recent traffic. I know I saw someone, but we need to be cautious. We should know who they are before... if we decide to make contact.”

I nod, and I know I am no longer alone. We are Philip and Javier. We are two men, at the end of things. And we are determined to live.

We will go to Eureka in the morning and we will see if the bug has burned itself out, or if it has changed.

Tomorrow, we will see. Together.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for One, pt.2\]](#)

[Image credit: Christian Frederiksen]

Stoop by My Girl Friday

There used to be a woman who stood in front of the building next to mine. Every morning. Every afternoon. And everyday we'd exchange small talk on my way to the train station. On my way home. Her, and occasionally, the homeless guy who sat on that building's stoop. We did this for years. I, wondering who she was waiting for. And she, gazing down at me as I walked past like someone taking interest in the activities of a stray cat. Penetrating and comforting at the same time. Like a plane landing on the tarmac.

Three, maybe four years ago, she caught me walking home with my mother--Jingles. Jingles, because of the sound her set of keys down the street. Four keys and about ten keychains. Little sandals and souvenirs and trinkets. When it's not endearing, it's embarrassing. I was Jingles' daughter. When Jingles said as much, she laughed. I guess I did too. I am nothing like Jingles. Where she is rounded, I am all pointy edges. Where she is loud and friendly I am... me. I make no noise walking. I make no noise running. A friend once told me it was a dangerous sort of silence. One that spoke for me. Were it not for the way I greeted her in the mornings, the stoop woman would have assumed I only communicated through the eyes. Hands in my pockets, gazing at myself through the steel of the D train, I wondered if my mouth looked broken to most people until it moved. An old bicycle on my face.

But it worked for the stoop woman. The gears and spokes turned and there was a smile and a greeting. On the best days. On the worst days. We talked. Her granddaughter started kindergarten at Christ the King. Oh yeah, I said. I went there. Before we had the kindergarten. When it was just first through eighth grade. The teachers tried their best. They try their best. I remember all of them.

I could have said

"You seem a little young for a granddaughter."

"Christ the King is the only thing keeping the kids in this neighborhood out of Taft when they graduate. Or Wildcats. Or whatever the fuck it calls itself now."

"I once punched a guy senseless for calling my dad an 'AIDS carrying faggot' and got away with it. No one believed him. Two years later he asked me to go out with him. I told him my friend Victoria had a crush on him. He said she seemed like kind of a whore. He was sort of right, but hell if I was going to tell him. 'She's too pretty for you anyway', I said, and left the breakfast table. Which was the lunch table, the theater table, the detention table, and the after-school program table. That's the kind of guy CTK

breeds--all class. How'd he know I wasn't an AIDS spreading faggot too?"

But I didn't, of course. I told her about the Aquinas program and the cute library and Mrs. Smith, who fell asleep in the middle of watching us and doled out peppermint candy that she slammed on tables to break apart so we wouldn't choke on them and whose wig constantly slid off while she dozed. I said I hoped she was still alive.

And I do. This was as big as our conversations got. That was as big as I wanted it. In the mornings we said 'hello' and 'goodbye'. On the rare days I brought someone home, I thought they should meet her. For whatever reason. I thought it was important. An important stepping stone. I never brought anyone home early enough, though. Mid-afternoon was when she was done waiting for the day.

Whoever was coming back to her, she was sure they'd do it before sunset. I was sure of it.

Two weeks ago, I didn't catch her waiting. I thought I'd missed her, with the slow, sporadic way my life was going. The spring that had kept me wound was unwinding. A week later the homeless guy sat in his spot on the stoop. He seemed off balance there, like a see-saw or a crooked painting. All the weight was on one side. He called me over. He had news about our stoop woman. Apparently, she'd lost control of her diabetes for a few days. The insulin couldn't help her. Something'd gone wrong. She was dead. The building had put together a wake. My family was invited. I nodded, and carried home the news in my usual way. The last usual way. When I awoke the next day the world felt wrong. As if someone had taken it apart while we were sleeping and built it up again in nearly the exact same way, save for one piece.

Something in the world was shifting. There was something at my very core that moved. That something we are born with that grows and shrinks, that rattles when we're shaken. The marble in the Ramune bottle. The tiny piece of star matter.

Something was over. And something else had started that I could not stop. My heart beat heavily when I thought about it, as if I were leaning on it. Pushing it in its opposite direction. But it's bigger than me. Bigger than everyone I know. I should have seen it when it first started. The world was slowly tilting off-balance on its axis, sneakily. And I, the stark-eyed messenger, had failed to deliver the warning. The distinct feeling that we were about to be fucked permeated my actions. Penetrated my actions. It fucked my actions.

In my mind's eye, we're holding hands against a torrent of wind and tide. There is no more waiting. Whatever's come has got its breath on our necks, ready to divide and conquer. Change does not tolerate hand holding. Hand holding, in all its sticky cuteness, becomes an act of defiance in its presence. The tide has come to fill our lungs and drown

out what we are. To quell the embers at our very core.

In its wake, I will be something entirely different. Something equally raw and pulsating: an open pink wound. And so will you. In the bathroom mirror you will try to collect yourself. Mathematically. Naked. Build yourself up on the scientific method and collected empirical evidence. Naked. You are you. Save for one piece.

In my part of the world, I will stand, raw still, waiting for something I can't quite remember.

When I walk past the old building, I can hear the rush of water, as if it's replaced my heart beat, my blood. And for all I know, it has. Whatever was coming is here. The homeless man still stands watching, but stopped talking entirely a few days ago. I keep my hands in my pocket and breathe against the water's rush, conserving energy.

I am braced for something and I don't remember what.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Stoop\]](#)

Superhero Anonymous by Mouse

"Fuck you I CAN fly!"

That was Dwayne. See, Dwayne thought he could fly. What you're probably wondering is why no one told him otherwise. Well, in the beginning no one had the heart to tell him that people couldn't fly. They figured that sooner or later he'd figure it out on his own. Unfortunately, if you don't nip thoughts like that in the bud you end up with; well, this.

"Dwayne, please return to your chair."

That right there, that was our group leader; Mr. Davidson. He had the wonderful job of trying to convince everyone in the room of something no one wanted to believe. See, you have alcoholics who believe that they don't have a problem. There's also your gambling addicts who say that they're in control of their compulsion. Then, you have people like Dwayne, who think that they have superpowers.

In reality, everyone at this meeting should have been committed long ago. But, since the elimination of the mental hospitals, the only way people could go to get help was by having an addiction. Consequentially, this is also how you have the largest group of grown men and women wearing capes in one room outside of a comic convention.

"Thank you Dwayne. Alright everyone; I'd like each and every one of you to stand up, say your name and why you are here."

Man, you could taped over everyone's mouths and it wouldn't have been this quiet. Not a single person in the room wanted to stand up in front of a bunch of strangers and talk about their superpowers. I mean, after all, what's the point of being a superhero if everyone knows who you are? That's part of the beauty of wearing a mask. Not a damn person in the world would ever know who you were when it came off.

"Joanna? I see you're not wearing your gloves anymore. Maybe you'd like to stand up and talk about your progress."

That poor girl. As soon as Mr. Davidson had mentioned her hands she shot them into her pockets as if they were on fire. At the rate her legs were shaking I didn't think she was going to be able to stand, much less talk. Yet, with her hands still in her pockets she stood to face the group.

"My....my name is...."

Her voice sounded so cracked I thought she was about to cry.

"Go on Joanna. It's okay. No one here is judging you at all."

- Hide quoted text -

"My name is The Shocking Wonder. I can shoot electricity out of my hands. I really can. I have to keep my hands in my pockets otherwise you'll all get sho-"

"That's enough Joanna. You may sit down."

They should have called her The Train because once she got started talking, there was no stopping her.

"NO! My name's not Joanna! I'm The Shocking Wonder! You better not make me upset or else I'll pull out my hands and you'll pay! Don't make me angry!"

“Joanna, sit down right now.”

I think Mr. Davidson was just relieved that she didn't have a weapon of some sort when she whipped her hands out of her pockets at him. There in front of us stood a grown woman in a purple cape jabbing her hands wildly in the air with a look of desperation on her face. If it were anywhere else, I think laughter would have been appropriate. Yet, as I looked around the room, everyone had just focused their eyes on the floor, all secretly hoping that they wouldn't be humiliated in kind.

“Alright, thank you Joanna. Peter? How about you stand and introduce yourself?”

I hadn't been too worried when Joanna started getting out of hand. Underneath the purple cape and weird hat she looked like a fairly small woman, and thus, easy enough to take down if she got out of hand. But Peter, he was a different story. I'm not too sure if Peter belonged here or in a ring somewhere in Mexico. Something about his singlet had caught my eye as I had walked in the room but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. As he stood up, I realized he had written the letter P on his costume backwards.

“My name is The Great Divide, but a lot of people know me as Peter.”

I noticed he had added that last part in a hurry in an attempt to appease Mr. Davidson.

“I uh, well, people call me The Great Divide because I guess they've noticed that I'm pretty strong.”

Pretty strong was an understatement. It was more like pretty scary. Peter towered over everyone in the group by at least a foot. Yet, as he stood there in front of us, I noticed that there was something about his muscles that seemed off. Do you know where most people have flowing muscles? You know, muscles that sort of mesh into other muscles? It looked as if his muscles had gotten into an argument years ago and just decided not to occupy the same space anymore, and as a result, he had these weird bulges all over his body.

“I'm um, well, I uh, I like to smash things. I'm pretty good at it. Yea.”

I felt relieved. If this was all we had to say to get Mr. Davidson to sign off on our release forms then I was in good shape. All I would have to do was just stand up, say a few words, act all nervous and he'd let me go.

Each person after Peter wasn't much more interesting. Each had their own super power and along with it, their own alter identity. There weren't anymore outbursts, well, with the exception of Dwayne shouting about how he could really fly again. It was strange watching everyone though. Somehow, not only did they not listen to anyone else talk about their superpower, but they also would completely refuse to listen to anyone who denied their abilities. As much as this group was supposed to be getting them to admit that they're normal people, you could just tell by the smug looks on their faces after Mr. Davidson had allowed them to sit down that they truly believed that they still were in fact superheros.

“Matt? Tonight's your first night here. Would you like to stand?”

Crap. I had gotten so caught up in watching everyone else I hadn't even realized it was my turn. What was I going to say?

“Well hello. My name is Matt.”

I went to go sit back down but of course that wasn't good enough for Mr. Davidson.

“Would you like to tell us why you’re here?”

I turned around to face the group again.

“Well, I’m here because I need to get some damn papers signed so I can return to work.”

“Matt, that’s not why you’re here. Why are you here?”

That guy was a bastard.

“I’m here because my boss is pissed that I’m a soldier.”

“A soldier, Matt? I thought you were a college student who worked part time at a coffee shop.”

A real bastard. Everyone else was allowed to sit down after a few sentences but no, of course I had to spill out my guts up there.

“No, I am a college student and I do work at a coffee shop. I get all of that. I’m just a soldier deep down, you know; someone who one day will get up and fight the fight that he was destined to.”

I swear, you’d think I had some sort of message written on my face the way he was staring at me.

“When will this fight take place, Matt?”

I started to get really pissed. Who was this guy to question what I knew?

“It’ll take place whenever I’m fucking ready for it. I just have to prepare, you know? I’m not ready now so I can’t join the fight. I mean fuck, it’ll happen.”

That damn gaze. Couldn’t he look somewhere else?

“The fight will never happen Matt. You’re not a soldier. You’re Matt. Why is that not good enough?”

I’m not sure if the chair deserved the kick I gave it but I just couldn’t stand there and listen to him anymore.

“You know what, man? Go and fuck yourself. I’m a soldier, you’re just a little shit who sits here and tries to shoot down dreams.”

I had almost reached the door when Dwayne shouted out to me.

“You’re no soldier. Look at you, you’re not even strong enough to break that chair. A true soldier would have broken that chair in two. That’s the sign of a true soldier; someone who’s strong enough to break a chair.”

Everyone in the group started nodding their heads. For the second time that night I wasn’t sure if I should have just broken out into laughter. Here I was, standing in front of a bunch of costumed grown-ups, trying to argue with them on the qualifications of being a soldier.

“Why aren’t you just happy being Matt?”

Mr. Davidson had walked across the room towards me. Still with the gaze; but by now, I was used to it.

“I guess, well, I guess being me just isn’t good enough. I always wished I were stronger, faster, better. I’m just not good enough.”

It felt good to get that out.

“Are you happy?”

He stood a foot away from me by now, his eyes still staring into mine.

“No.”

Mr Davidson smiled that same strange smile he gave me as I had walked into the room.

“Then start being Matt.”

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Superhero Anonymous\]](#)

SWING! *By Captain Carlin*

I got off the subway in North Hampton, 5am, relieved to see that the station was as quiet as it should be – no sign of him, looks like I might be the first human being who would get to live to tell the tale. I'd have to lay low for a bit though.

I started to think up a plan – I had family up in Edinburgh, I'd be able to live there for a bit, then leave the country when I got enough money together. Staying in England was not an option – he'd find me. He was relentless, tireless; an adrenaline-fuelled monster. I don't know how, but he'd managed to keep me on my toes for days. Neither of us had slept. I needed energy somehow. I decided to make my way out of the station to find a 24-hour place that would sell me some.

But I didn't even get a chance to make my way up the stairs before I heard the following, in a voice that could silence gods and drown out sonic booms:

"SMAAAAAAASH! CRACK YOUR SKULL!" This warcry made me momentarily crouch into the fetal position in fear, which was lucky because the next sound I heard was the sound of a baseball bat smashing against the marble tiles on the wall behind where my head was milliseconds ago. I ran out of the station, away from the sounds of rapid footsteps and manic laughter behind me.

I ran round corner and into a park, where I ducked behind a tree. The sounds of footsteps stopped, the laughter seemed to have drifted off. After catching my breath, I took a peak around the tree only to see him rapidly crawl towards me with a knife in his mouth.

"SEE MAN HIDING IN A PARK, SCARED FOR HIS LIFE!

RUN MAN DOWN ON THE GRASS WITH A KNIFE!"

He grabbed the knife with his free hand and lunged at me. I pushed his clenched fist away, then narrowly managed to escape my head being caved in a second time. His grin disappeared – he went berserk, and started hitting the ground with that metal bat of his.

"SWING THAT BAT TO YOU FACE!

YOU GET SMASHED!

STAMP YOUR FACE!

STAMP... STAMP ON THE FLOOR!"

"Look Mr Tempa, calm down sir!" I yelled in desperation. "What do you want from me? What have I done to you?"



He stopped what he was doing and looked me straight in the eye. It was even more terrifying than his warcry or attempts to reconstruct my facial features, it was like watching a pride of lions evaluate you as a potential threat. After what felt like several minutes, he pointed to my backpack. I handed it over without hesitation.

He emptied it's contents. One by one, pieces of my life fell to the ground – my passport, my birth certificate, my P45, a folder of Curriculum Vitae, my favourite shirt, my mobile phone charger, the book I hadn't finished... he dropped the bag when my CD case fell out. I saw his eyes widen and his Cheshire grin return when he picked it up. He stashed it in his pocket, shouted "WON'T GET NONE OF YOUR CDs BACK!" and ran off back to the subway.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Swing\]](#)

[Image credit: Bantha_Fodder]

The Anguish of Mort, pt.1 by Kris Mortensen

“Mo--ort!” called his mother in a long southern drawl, “Get yourself from out the street!” Her stern warning spoken, she sat back in the wicker chair and took a sip of the lemonade sitting beside her on the matching wicker end table.

“Sure Ma!” the little dark haired boy called back; she was ever the mother hen. He was too busy running in circles around the cherry red, fire hydrant to take much notice of his mother’s words. The sweltering sun stood high in the sky and looked as big as a piece of Mrs. Robinson’s fresh apple pie, a la mode. The day was too hot to take much notice of anything besides how relentlessly hot it was.

“Boy! You listen up now,” his mother snapped back at his insolence, “and come here!” He stopped running in circles and looked at her. Her face was serenely calm but stern. Mort hung his head and trudged up the walkway toward the porch. The wooden stairs creaked as his small body ascended them. His mother hadn’t moved her gaze.

“Yes’m?” he squeaked.

“Wha’d I tell you ‘bout playin’ in the street boy?” she demanded. Mort rubbed his left toes over his right foot and looked down at the ground in silence.

“Well?” his mother repeated.

“You said if I’m gonna play in the street, you’re gonna sell me to a car salesman.”

“Tha’s right. And why?”

“‘Cause, streets are fo’ cars and trucks. Not fo’ little boys and dogs.”

“Tha’s right,” his mother agreed, a look of self-satisfaction across her face. Mort looked up at her with big, bashful blue eyes.

“But Ma...” he whined, “when is they gonna come and turn on the fire hydrant?”

“I don’t know son. Maybe they won’t come today. Maybe they’ll come tomorrow. Maybe there ain’t no mo’ water in there ‘cause you fool children used it up last week.”

Mort’s eyes grew wide at the mere notion. He never considered the possibility that there would be no water left; although the South had frequent droughts during the hot season, there always seemed to be enough water for his bath. He hated baths; they always got rid of the precious dirt he had built up the previous day. He flopped himself down on the stoop and began twiddling his thumbs. His ennui was quite apparent. His mother took pity on him.

“Oh Mort, I jus’ don’t want nothing to happen to you,” she said softly. “Why don’t’cha go play with Max in the yard?” Mort’s mother smiled at the boy with a tenderheartedness that he rarely saw from her. The heat must be getting to her; she’s gone soft. Not one to turn down the opportunity for horseplay, Mort straightened his knobby knees and ran awkwardly to the backyard.

Max was there, tied with a muddy length of rope to the back porch. The border collie’s tail wagged furiously as Mort rounded the side of the house. The dog yelped and bolted toward the boy. His eyes flashed with joy at the sight of his best friend coming to play with him. The dog nearly bowled the poor boy over in his excitement, his big pink tongue smearing Mort’s face with pungent, dog-breathed saliva.

“Max! Sit!” Mort commanded. The dog sat obediently, but his rump was barely able to contain itself on the trampled, brown grass. Max’s tail swished from side to side as he shuffled his paws awaiting further commands. Max and Mort were the same age; they’d been raised together since they were pups.

“Wanna play fetch boy?” Mort reached down and picked up the pock-marked oak branch that Max never tired of chasing. Max’s ears perked up instantly at the sight of his best friend holding his favourite chew toy. He barked in anticipation.

Mort smiled wryly at the dog and threw the branch to the other side of the dreary brown yard. Max took off like a bullet the instant the wood had sailed from his master’s small hands, the dirt-encrusted rope dragging behind him. He leapt at the stick voraciously, almost rolling himself ass-over-tea-kettle.

“Bring it back Max,” cried Mort. The dog clamped its jaws down on the branch and trotted happily back to the boy. He dropped it at Mort’s feet and sat again, his tail wagging with a mind of its own. Mort picked up the bough and tossed it further, and again Max took off like a shot, chasing the simple amusement.

This time the stick had sailed out of reach of the dog’s leash. Max, not having any proclivity for the measurement of distance, kept running until the rope snapped taut. The dog was jerked back by the force of his own momentum coming to a crashing end. He picked himself up off of the ground and looked back at Mort pleadingly.

“Aww, sorry boy...” Mort apologized to the animal. He ran over and picked up the stick. The dog barked again as his master’s hand seized the branch. Mort walked over to Max and untied the rope, releasing his canine companion. The dog wagged his tail in appreciation, waiting for Mort to throw the toy again. So he did, and again Max rushed off in pursuit. Mort considered that he might get in trouble for letting the dog off of the leash, but his impulsive mind quickly dismissed this notion as Max brought the stick to his feet.

Mort grabbed the stick and ran away from Max. Together they played in perfect harmony, child and dog. Their friendship sustained and strengthened with each deft toss of the wooden chew toy. Time passed swiftly in their merriment. Hours counted down like minutes, full of playful barking, galvanized shouts and kinship.

“Boy! Supper!” Mort heard his mother cry from the house. He knew he should go in, but he was still so full of piss and vinegar that he grabbed the bough, which Max was happily gnawing on, and led the dog to the side of the house. Max looked expectantly at the boy, waiting for the continuation of their fun. Mort scampered around to the front porch and hid the stick behind his back.

Max, not falling for the disappearing branch act, barked at Mort as his tail wagged furiously. Mort lifted the bough high above his head. Max, in turn, nearly jumped at it, but restrained himself and let out a whimper.

“You want it Max?” teased the boy. Again, the dog yelped.

“Mort! You stop teasing that dog! Come inside and wash up. Now!” His mother’s voice made him jump in fear. He’d better hop to it. Max was still fixated on the stick.

Mort took the last act of his childhood and threw the stick as far as he could. He didn’t see where it landed, but Max did and Max took off again like a lightning bolt after the unfortunate branch. The driver of the truck didn’t see Max until it was too late. Tires

screached to a halt and there was a loud thud as the truck skidded over the dog.

“Max!” Mort wailed in horror. Max did not bring the stick.

* * * * *

Mortimer Hingle stabbed his foot toward the raucous digital alarm clock as the vicious device forced him from his less than peaceful slumber. Morning had come to the world, but Hingle wasn't the kind to greet it with a smile and cheery twinkle in his eye. The dream that was still vivid in his mind would ebb away like the flow of the tide before he was fully lucid. He laid his head back to rest on the cushy pillow in a snooze while his clock waited silently for the opportune moment of attack. That time came nine minutes later as it blared to life once more. Hingle stirred in bed and yanked the thick comforter over his head but it was to no avail; the synthesized alarm bell rang through his ears and slugged him into a more alert state of mind. He smacked at it again with his foot to cease the noise and sat up wearily in his bed.

Hingle looked at the clock and its bold, red numerals displayed the time as 6:66. He blinked, rubbed the sleep from his eyelids and checked the clock again. This time the device was altogether more reasonable as his eyesight returned a time of 6:10. His mouth threw itself open in a wide, torso-shaking yawn and closed again with a slight sigh. He reckoned it was probably time to get out of bed and begin the day. He turned the covers down and swung his feet around over the bed in an attempt to further rouse his body from slumber. It had worked; he was able to stand and stretch, but his eyes were still bleary and he wasn't about to argue with them about opening. It was too early in the morning to be arguing with one's eyes, so he balled up his fists and rubbed them again vindictively. From time to time, the rowdy physique needed to be reminded that his conscious mind was still in control. Hingle's body disproved this illusion when he became aware of the need to abate his nagging bladder.

He rose, stumbled like a newborn fawn, and shuffled his way toward the small apartment's washroom; he'd been re-house broken after his college partying days and was not about to have a relapse. With a satisfied sigh and a slight jerking of his leg, he felt emptied of need for the immediate moment. Hingle took a long, hard look at himself in the mirror and found the image wanting. Droopy blue eyes looked back at him from the other side of the glass and his brown hair was tussled in every direction. He regarded himself as a fairly average looking fellow and the man-in-the-mirror nodded at him in agreement. The man-in-the-mirror stared blankly at Hingle and he knew what the poor guy was thinking: the man-in-the-mirror's body wanted nicotine and so did Hingle.

Hingle wandered into his living room, which was really only furnished with a television, a coffee table, and a beat up, old sofa that he had salvaged from a yard sale. He sat down with a thunk and seized his cigarettes from the table. Fishing one out of the pack, he jammed it between his lips and took a puff. The cigarette wasn't lit; he deemed it discourteous and churlish for failing to anticipate his need. He slumped his shoulders, let out a sigh, and looked around for a book of matches. There it lay in plain view on the top of the television set; of course, this was just far enough beyond his grasp that Hingle would have to stand.

Instead of immediately satiating his need for nicotine, Hingle sat and stared at the book of matches, as if expecting the small fold of paper and phosphorus to leap through the air toward his static form. The matches remained on top of the television and looked somewhat sardonically at him. He didn't have to take this abuse from an inanimate object, so Hingle stood with a creaking in his bones. He struck a match and lit the cigarette as it dangled from his lips. He took a long, stiff drag from the butt and allowed the smoke to billow into his weary lungs and rest there while his body absorbed the nicotine and the poisonous additives. He exhaled and was, at long last, able to open his eyes to the world for another day.

Hingle felt a niggling feeling in the back of his mind as he plopped back into his slouch on the sofa like a dollop of whipped cream. He flipped on the television with a beat-up old remote-control that was missing the battery cover. It flickered to life with an almost inaudible hum and bathed the small room in a bright glow and the scuttled din of white noise. The picture was nothing but static. Hingle complained to himself about his luck and proceeded to wonder whether or not he had paid the cable bill for the month. Or possibly the previous month. He remembered hearing sometime in his youth that television static was caused by background radiation from the big bang that had started the universe. Or maybe that was just something that parents tell their children so they stop asking why there are ants on the television whenever Dad's out of work. He took another drag from his cigarette as his train of thought sailed past the station and ended up in Albuquerque.

Coffee! That's what he was forgetting and with all of the energy of a puppy on speed he threw himself toward the kitchen and slapped the coffee maker's on-switch. Few people would call Mortimer Hingle a man with much ambition, but he had the foresight enough to set up his coffee maker before he went to bed each night. Shaky morning hands do not do well to accomplish the task of pouring and measuring the medium-grind, generic-brand coffee that he'd become accustomed to. He'd become accustomed to it because it was cheaper than the name brand coffee but less granular than the instant. The coffee maker, unlike the other forlorn appliances of his sparsely-furnished apartment, was brand new and sparkling clean. One would be hard-pressed to call Mortimer Hingle 'financially extravagant', but he knew that a good, clean cup of coffee in the morning went a long way to ensuring that the day got off on any other foot than the wrong one. A cigarette was equally as important, no matter what his doctor said. He rationalized his addictions as legal, albeit socially unacceptable, but he wasn't about to cater to the whims of a society that he felt no stake in.

The bubbling percolation of the device comforted his soul; the fresh smell of the caffeine-coiffed coffee surged through his nostrils and brightened his mood immensely. He sat back down on the sofa and turned off the static-laden screen of the television. Another drag of his cigarette was in order, so Hingle took one. He sat in the dark; the red glow of his cigarette's cherry grew dimmer as the heat faded. It always felt like it took hours to smoke that first cigarette in the morning, time that was very well spent. He reflected on the fact that this would probably be the most relaxing moment he would enjoy all day. That first rush of nicotine-infused soot was both the most important, and the most luxuriating.

His stomach grumbled, but he ignored it; the coffee was almost finished. Hingle butted out the cigarette into the hard plastic ashtray he'd taken from some bar and entered the kitchen. The coffee smelled strong and fresh; it was the ambrosia of Hingle's

morning. He fished his only coffee mug from the kitchen cupboard and commenced the delicate process of measuring the perfect amount of cream and sugar for his tastes. Finally, the translucent, dark liquid flowed easily from the pot into his mug, steam rising from the caffeine cascade. He brought the cup to his lips and smiled. The piping hot concoction tasted like the sweet nectar of the gods. It was Hingle's weakness and he shivered slightly as the coffee warmed his soul.

A knock came against the door and caused Hingle to mutter into his cup. Who could possibly be calling this early in the morning? Too early for solicitors, and how did they get into the apartment building anyways? He reluctantly put down his ambrosia and donned a flannel housecoat to answer the door. He would not abandon his stupor as easily as he had abandoned his coffee, and so he took his time reaching the door. No doubt the party on the other side of the door had heard him muttering and shuffling about; Hingle couldn't pretend that he wasn't home.

Again the heavy-handed knocking struck the door, urging quick action. Hingle let out a long and annoyed sigh as he approached. The door, being knocked on, had no choice in the matter of when it was opened. This inanimate portal behaved like a boiling kettle, exuding noise and impatiently awaiting human intervention. Hingle approached with caution, ever wary of people who came calling in the small hours before the sun was up. He pressed the side of his face against the door and strained his eye trying to look through the small glass cleft. Who had the audacity to knock so urgently at this hour?

Reflected through the fish-eye lens of the peephole, Hingle saw a large man in a dark suit. If ever there was an archetypal grim funeral director, the stranger on the other side of the door was it. This man was sombre in appearance and his movements were austere; he towered above the door frame and Hingle could not see his face through the small looking glass. He brought to mind the kind of person who would remain calm and collected in the face of extreme devastation and tragedy. That is why Hingle envisioned him as some stoic-faced embalmer who stuffed corpses before lunch and comforted bereaved family members afterwards. It took a certain type of person to make a business out of death; and the lurching man opposite the door seemed born to play the role. Hingle was the kind of person who judged books by their cover and held them accountable when they failed to live up. The man's dark, well-pressed suit was almost morbid in appearance. It did not help to counter Hingle's initial impression of the figure. He could almost smell the embalming fluid and fresh-cut chrysanthemums through the door.

"Who's there?" Hingle said with his scratchy, smoker's grumble; he was barely awake and hadn't properly expelled the phlegm from his throat. He hoped it would make him sound gruff in case this stranger was here for trouble.

"Mortimer Hingle," the sonorous voice reverberated through the door and seemed to echo down the hallway outside. The deep baritone had spoken his name as a statement, rather than as the question that any socially conscious individual would have made it.

"I said: Who's there?" he repeated with, what he presumed was, an altogether more assertive tone. Hingle's fear was probably irrational, but it's impossible to explain that to someone who is genuinely afraid. It would be like trying to explain the history of the American slave trade to a coffee cup. His coffee cup sat silently on the kitchen counter, ignorant to the notion that coffee had a long and bloody history of dehumanization and oppression. Neither the coffee, nor the mug had any concept of regret, guilt, or fear:

lucky comestible. A deep, weary sigh came from the outside hallway.

“Open the door Hingle; I don’t have all eternity,” replied the deep voice. The stranger’s voice had a melancholic quality, as if nothing had ever been new to him and there was no cause for excitement in life. It was an apathy that Hingle was all too familiar with.

“Identify yourself!” Hingle stammered in riposte, “How do you know my name?”

“Look Hingle, this is going to be a lot easier if you just open the door, alright?” the stranger responded. His voice was hardly muffled by the thickness of the door, which was Hingle’s only protection from the world outside. The lights of the hallway seemed to brighten the longer he watched the stranger through the tiny peephole.

“What do you want?” A bead of sweat ran down Hingle’s jawline and slapped the floor.

“Work.”

“What work? There’s no work here,” Hingle rattled, “just get out of here man!”

“Can’t.” The lights in the hallway grew brighter still; Hingle could no longer see anything but the man.

“There’s no work here. Go look somewhere else!”

“I said: I can’t Hingle.”

“Why?” he demanded, shivering in fright at the sheer size of the stranger and his insistent audacity.

“Because you’re the work, you dumbass.”

“I’m going to call the cops.” It wasn’t a bluff, but the stranger called him anyways.

“Fine. Good luck getting through. You’re wasting both of our eternities,” the stranger was calm, collected and cool. Hingle considered this obliviousness while frantically searching for the phone. Questions rifled through his mind as his neurosis consumed him. Worst-case scenarios entered his thoughts as he imagined himself in horrid agony. The fear was not helping him to find the phone. Where was it? He was confused and scared, having no idea exactly what was going on. His teeth chattered, his bones shivered, and his pulse quickened as he paced around his apartment frantically seeking out any kind of communication device.

Hingle finally found the phone. It had been resting quietly on the cordless receiver, where it was meant to be when not in use. He snatched it in hand and trotted back to the door with more confidence and less confusion than before.

“I’m dialing the cops now! Better scram asshole!” Hingle’s threat was as meek as a mouse, but in his mind he roared like a lion. The stranger on the other side of the door made no reply, but a quick check through the peephole proved that the man was still outside. He was waiting, the edges of his suited form were a silhouette against the blinding hallway lights. They shouldn’t be that bright, but Hingle had more immediate matters on hand and didn’t notice.

He pushed back from the door and thumbed the police emergency digits into the phone’s soft rubber keys. It felt as if time had stopped and it took an extreme effort on his part to get the buttons pressed. A substantial amount of sweat soaked Hingle’s face

as he brought the telephone to his ear and listened for the reassuring operator's voice.

Like a porcupine at a balloon convention, Hingle's predicament became immediately apparent: the phone was dead. The silence was deafening; there was no operator. There was no anticipating ring. There wasn't even a dial tone. The only sound in Hingle's ear was the fast-paced pounding of his heart. It wanted out of this situation and it didn't care if Hingle was going to come with it or not. He dropped the phone to the ground with dismay and slumped against the door. Everything was quiet; Hingle was ready to give up.

He noticed that the bright light that had been shining under the bottom of his doorway had dimmed. Hingle lifted himself reluctantly from the ground and dared himself to look out of the peephole one last time. The normal hallway was there: no stranger, no funeral director. Everything appeared as it always did, and Hingle could see his neighbour's door across the hall. She was a kind, elderly old widow named Agnes Archer whom Hingle had never spoken to, but he had, once, smiled awkwardly at her when they'd been riding the elevator together. He had pretended to live on a different floor that day so he wouldn't have to strike up a conversation.

His fear ebbed away and he slid his weary form into the kitchen, hoping that his coffee was still hot and fresh. It was neither. He dumped the cup's contents into the sink and poured himself a fresh cup. As it touched his lips and entered his mouth, he spit it out in disgust. The green bile splashed all over his kitchen cabinets. The disgusting liquid that was inhabiting his cup wasn't coffee, so he dumped that too into the sink.

The oily texture of the liquid had set a wretched taste on his tongue and he badly needed to brush his teeth anyways. His lips burned mildly where the green liquid had moistened them. His tongue tingled electrically. He strode to the bathroom, and was again disappointed by the mirror's reflection. He grabbed his toothbrush and set to work. When he felt clean he bent over and spit into the sink; blood splashed against the chrome-rimmed drain and seeped into the crevice.

"What the fuck?" Hingle questioned his tongue, expecting answers. He straightened up to check his mouth for blood in the mirror. Immediately, panic struck him as he noticed the massive shadowy figure standing in his hallway. His eyes fixated on the object of his fear and he was paralyzed, but for a blink. The figure was directly behind him now and every hair on the back of Hingle's neck bolted upright like a groundhog. A lingering chill ran up the back of his spine; it brought forth the chemicals of terror into his brain. He wanted to run so badly that his legs wobbled in anticipation, but they wouldn't run. His body shook violently as the shadow drew closer. Was it getting bigger? His eyes were wide with fright as the shadow enveloped him. Hingle could feel the darkness around him. He could smell smoke and fire and brimstone. He could taste the wretchedness of death and its contempt for life as it permeated his pores and soaked him in despair. The sound of a thousand agonized moans penetrated his ears and caused him to shudder and withdraw himself from everything. His mind could not rationalize. His brain was confused beyond all logical reason or perception. There was only the ever engulfing blackness that surrounded him and covered him like a thick layer of soot. The ashes of the damned weighed heavily on his soul. It was too much for him; Hingle collapsed into unconsciousness.

End of Part 1

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The Man Who Was There by S.A.W.

I once read a theory that exists somewhere in the vast internet, a theory that somebody formed during their childhood. The theory stated that when a person dies, they don't actually go on to an afterlife; let it be heaven, reincarnation, nothingness or wherever. Their soul, spirit, mind, or whatever the hell you want to call it, merely leaves this universe and moves on to another, where their death didn't come to pass. This occurs seamlessly so the deceased isn't aware that Grim Reaper paid them a visit. The dearly departed might notice a close call, but it is just that. Close calls, nothing more. This happens again, again, and again, a never-ending Dance of Death, Danse Macabre. "o far," said the theorist, "haven't been proven wrong."

∞

'here are we gonna run to, eh?'

There was me, that is Jack, and my three (or two?) mates, that is Wilson, Allen, and Stewart; Stewart being really queer (or was he?), and we ran on Banta Street, making up our mind where to run this afternoon, a fine day in spring with birds flying and going "weeet, tweet" in hopes of getting some good old in-out-in-out. Soon, the trees and flowers will be doing the same with ruinous results to my sinuses. Soon, soon, the mucus that results from the trees and flowers' jizz will flow into my throat and lungs, giving each of my breaths a lovely rasp to it. My teammates find this to be the most unsettling and make it apparent by nicknaming it "eath Rattle." Anyhow, a beautiful day calls for a scenic route, wouldn't you agree? And so. We decided to take our usual haunting path: some real nice rail tracks heading south through many buildings and trees with plenty of things to gasp and gawk at.

Earlier, we were getting dressed in our beautiful short shorts and flimsy tee shirts, for the weather wasn't quite warm enough for bare skin; nipples with glass cutting capacity were not a fun thing to have. We then went and did our usual routine. Six laps around the track for warm-up (two thousand and four hundred meters). Stretch in circle (fifteen different stretches with three sets of ten seconds each). Do drill (nine different drills done over seventy meters each). Then Coach Steven gathered us in a circle and told us what was in store for us on this glorious day (three sets of four two hundred meters at thirty-five seconds each). 'was fun stuff, much better than doing sets of four hundred meters which is hell on the track.

During the workout itself, Stewart may or may not have been burning our group[1] of three (four?) on each two hundreds. He would remain within this questionable state 'il something may or may not have happened to him later in the season but for now, he may or may not have been the top dog. After the excellent workout left us with an enjoyable burning sensation within our legs (lactic acid build up), we went on a recovery run (thirty minutes). Usually, Coach Steven would have us run around, around, and around the campus itself every single day. But not today. Today, my friends, we run off-campus.

We shall taste the sweet, sweet taste of freedom on the roads. And thus starts our harrowing adventure.

Starting at Banta and Shelby, the cornerstone of all of our routes that were and will be created, the three (four?) of us ran eastbound on the sidewalk within shadows of trees and a lady that lined up to watch us run past, 'il we came upon a busy intersection. At that point, the plan of crossing depended on how merciful the stoplight was feeling on that day. Sometimes, we' dance across the street in glee when the light allowed us to do so and take a right at the next sidewalk, but on most days, the light decides to spite us and force us to take a right turn on the sidewalk and run for a bit 'il a lull in the traffic allowed us to take a risky dash across the street. Dance or dash, it was a zesty enterprise either way. From there, it was only a short run through rows of houses and a yard to the ditch where the rails lay and led to our source of lore.

The previous winter, those very rails were our quick track to amusement and enjoyment. Since there weren' any in-season running sports that we could partake in, most of us opted for winter conditioning. The winter conditioning itself was unofficial, meaning that we were free of Steven' reign. With that freedom, the whole world within running distance became The Land of Do-As-You-Please. And so, with that, I introduce you to a succinct and exciting list of our stops, starting from the moment we jump onto the railroad and run through the wondrous land.

1. Bridge (1 mile): A bridge. Take care to not step into the space between the rails or you'l get a nasty scare and scar. There, Stewart may or may not have stood on the very edge of the bridge and looked down to the shallow rocky creek sixteen feet under.
2. Playground (1.2 miles): Frequent and popular stop. Much fun was had swinging on the swings, spinning on the roundabout, sliding down the slides, and climbing the monkey bars. There is also a nearby creek where one could relieve himself if they desire to do so.
3. Stink (2 miles): At this point, the ditch outside the rails starts to look funky. There is a scent of raw sewage in the air. Running quickly through this part is advised.
4. Field (3 miles): A vast and open grassy field. One could have an excellent game of ultimate frisbee here. Being that there was only three (four?) of us, we settled for passing the disc around. There, Stewart may or may not have looked into a seemingly abandoned tent (it wasn'). Also, he may or may not have picked up a dumped dildo that lay on the rails and after briefly attempting to stab us with it, threw it into the swamp.

'was a truly wonderful time of the season, doing as we please as it snows. Many years later, I would still recall those days where I ran on the railroads as white flakes floated down. Then it' become a storm and we' have to run five fucking miles back to our school. Sure was a cold day.

But for now, back to the story that we're focusing on at this time. The ditch with the rails itself is located behind some sucker's house. In order to get into there, we have to sneak across the backyard. This is a perilous act. Go too fast and you'll look like you're trying to get away from an angry shotgun wielding homeowner and only attract more attention. Go too slow and somebody is sure to call the cop on you for "respassing." So, the best way to cross the yard safely is this: Run up to the property line. Take a look around. Casually yet quickly run across the yard. Simple enough. However this time, it was bit different. As we ran across the yard, Stewart may or may not have taken off.

Now, when you've been running competitively for a while, you learn to chase and catch somebody when they try to quickly get away. Eventually, when enough people try get away from you in races, it becomes an instinct. Much like how dogs chase after cars. They do it, yet they wouldn't know the first thing to do with a car if they caught it. A reflex.

This was the same with me.

I ran. Caught up with Stewart. Overtook him. Jumped into the ditch. Stood on rails. Took a couple second to bask in triumph. Deep breath. Yes. Another victory. Pause. "ow, it's sure taking them a while to catch up," I thought. Turning around to tell those slowpokes to hurry the fuck up, I saw that they were standing at the top of the ditch's slope looking at me like I was one crazy motherfucker. It was a rumbling moment where we could've stared at each other for an eternity, me looking up at them with a puzzled expression and them looking down to me as if I've finally cracked like a nut in a nutcracker.

Allen broke the moment by waving and yelling at me.

Wilson joined in.

Stewart may or may not have joined in.

WAVE WAVE MOUTH MOUTH.

"Just what the fuck are they doing," I thought to myself, becoming even more befuddled. Allen, being on the frontlines of brilliant ideas, started pointing. He pointed to my right, to the northern direction of where the railroads came from. I, being accustomed to shenanigans from them, saw right through their ruse. "ha! The old 'oly shit, look at that... Psych! Trick. I won't fall for it again." I looked at them, nodding my head. Yeah. Sure. Ok.

Stewart then may or may not have jumped into the ditch, onto the railroads.

Now to get a bit ahead of ourselves. When all was done, at the end of school year, Stewart may or may not have quit running. At the time, I assumed that he did so because he

couldn't recover fully from the pulled hamstring that he may or may not have gotten earlier in the season. Later, when we were eating at Mancino's Pizza during cross country summer camp, Wilson complained about how Stewart may or may not have asked him out. It was at that moment I would discover that Stewart may or may not have come out of the closet shortly after he quit the team. At the same location, Coach Steven, who was a hardcore Catholic, found out. He hung his head, shocked and speechless. Did Stewart quit, fearing that he would lose favor with Steven? After all, Steven had proven that he could be a man of subtle cruelty the year previous when he had Wilson and I run ten miles with a whopping total of five pounds worth of dumbbells for failing him in a meet. "orks out your upperbody!" he said. Sounds like nothing considering the light weight, but damn. That shit wasn't easy or fun and to this day, still remains one of the hardest runs I've suffered through. Fucking hell.

Now that I think back to this day...Stewart could have done a different sport. Stewart could have been in a different group. Stewart could have fallen off the edge of the bridge. Stewart could have gotten killed by the roundabout as he tripped. Stewart could have gotten stabbed by the tent inhabitants. Stewart could have pulled his hamstring earlier. Stewart could have come out of the closet earlier. Stewart could have quit earlier. Stewart could have skipped the practice that day. Stewart could have been getting treated for herpes on his hands from touching that dildo. Stewart could have not jumped into the ditch.

But I' still here.

Stewart then jumped into the ditch, onto the railroads.

Stewart grabbed me. "hat the fuck are you doing? You can't touch me, bitch!" I yelled at him. He then forced me to look northern bound and by god, there was a massive twelve ton steel beast of a train making its way over to my puny mortal body. It was only two hundred meters away (much less than thirty-five seconds). THE FUCKING TRAIN, Stewart seemed to be telling me, GODDAMNIT, THE TRAIN. But alas. He knew shit of getting his point across visually. Instead, he settled for pointing and attempting to drag me away.

Well. Who would I be to argue with him?

Out of the ditch we jumped. We stood and watched the steel beast roar by. Laughter all around. "oy, that was a close one!" Finished the run and went back to the track. Armed with a new lore. Stewart then pulled his hamstring, came out of the closet, and was gone. He wasn't mentioned again, memories of him started fading away, and finally disappeared for years. Until now, when I remembered. Now, he might have been forgotten by all but yours truly, but I remained within that universe for a bit longer because of him.

For that, I shan't forget him. Again.

As for I, that is Jack, I might have dodged a massive steel beast, but it certainly wasn't the

last thing that I would dodge. I would have to deal with more shit from cars -both moving and parked- dogs, bikers, poles, trees, tennis balls, and a runner or two (but thankfully, no trains). Each time, it seems that I miraculously stepped out of its pathway while being oblivious only to have somebody run up to me and go HOLY SHIT, ARE YOU OK OHMYGOD DID YOU SEE THAT CAR, FUCK! Over time, it became a recurring event to the point where it was no big deal and I would only find out about my near-death when my group nonchalantly brought it up in the stretching circle at the end of practice.

“ell,” said Wilson one day after yet other close call, “ou still haven’ been hit by an airplane yet. So, you still have that going for you, I suppose.” Yeah. We were sitting in a wheel with the freshmen forming the hub as a part of our hazing/getting-to-know process. All was quiet. Suddenly, everybody looked up into the sky, where the sun was shining. Normally, I would have looked up with them (albeit a millisecond late) but right in front of me out in the distance, in front of the haze of the scorching rays on the road, there was a lady, clear against the blurry trees. She seemed familiar as if I have seen her before and then again, again, and again, a never-ending promnesia, déjà vu.

Then at once, I knew. I knew where and how often I have seen her.

I stood up and walked to her as the team took off running. Oh, you. You’ e a capricious thing, aren’ you? Offering me her pale hand, which I took, she said Yes. Yes, I am. Earth and air surrounding yours truly started to rumble and tear. Let’ dance, sweetie. The sunlight darkened. We shall dance. Yes, the team is dancing with her, the pavement of the roads slamming under their thick shoes and the airplane roaring by in a smoky exhaust somewhere in the deep sky. Doo doo dum dee dum dee doo. Grinning over them shall be yours truly, Jack, and I shall be half-naked, dancing, my blister scarred feet striding and bounding and now kicking and bowing to the lady. Jack never stops, I say. I say that Jack will never die. I bow to the airplanes, trains, cars, trees, and step out of the way and afterward, throw back my head and laugh in a roar. He is a great one, that truly Jack. With a flick of my head, the sun-bleached mess of my hair passes glimmering under the flames in the sky and I leap about and jump onto the ash covered road and I gallop and make a lap (four hundred meters), two laps (eight hundred meters), dancing and running at once. Dum dee dum dee. My feet are light and swift. Jack never stops. I say that Jack will never die. I dance in blazing sunlight and in freezing torrent. He is a great one. He never stops, the truly Jack. I am dancing, running, dancing, running. I say that he will never die.

She winks and I am dust.

[1] Within our team, there was a system of groups based on how fast we were. First was stud level (two people). Second was good (three [four?] people). Third was average (six people). Lastly, was below average (four people).

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for The Man Who Was There\]](#)

The Main Room by Joe Brown

In room 200 on the second floor of the Volunteer Suites sat a man of no consequence to the rest of the world. In room 200 there was only a bed, chair, and television. The window overlooked the bustling interstate. All night cars drove by, their headlights gliding along the window, shining through and sometimes waking this man of no consequence while he was only lightly sleeping at night. The bathroom in room 200 was little more than a closet with a shitter in it. It had no door, so when this man of no consequence took a shit the whole room would smell for quite some time. In room 200 on the second floor of the Volunteer Suites, with its bathroom with no door, its bed, chair, and television, the window overlooking the interstate, lived a man of no consequence to the rest of the world, and who had lived there for 14 years today.

Lived for 14 years today in theory, technically this man of no consequence didn't live here anymore as of yesterday when the landlord had delivered an immediate eviction notice. Since then the landlord had been nervously monitoring the door of room 200. Please leave, he thought, I don't want a situation here. Do you think I like it here? Do you think anyone likes it here? No need to make a scene. No need at all. He paced nervously in his office. This man of no consequence had paid his rent on time ever since he moved in, so why now? I thought he was a good man. He did not know his name. He did not care to learn anyone's name here, but he paid his rent so he must be a good man right?

But he had not left. In fact he had not stepped outside of his door for some time now. Oh no no no, he thought, suicide. Overdose. Money for clean up, lots of money. Not good. He paced and paced, looking at the clock on the wall, looking at his watch, the time of 1:00 pm quickly approaching. He fingers his master key in his hand. No scene please, he pleaded, just come out and leave. No sympathy for you, he thought, no money means no sympathy. All these people, parasites, trash, if I let one of them off easy they will all come begging to me for extensions and discounts. Give me what you gave him. Give me one more week. Give me give me give me, all like children. I'm in control of this zoo, not them.

1:00 pm arrived. As the eviction noticed said, the occupant of room 200 was to have until 1:00 pm today to vacate the Volunteer Suites or risk "direct action" on part of the staff and possible "legal action." Police would not be good though. Hopefully it's suicide, he thought, suicide is more quiet. He marched up the stairs, nervously fingering his master key. Anxious and paranoid. The tenants peered at him from behind their doors, he could feel it. Those talking in the halls stared at him warily as he passed, ceasing their conversations. They hate me, he knew, let them hate me. I burn this whole place down and get more money than this place ever amounted to. I hope it burns down. He approached room 200 and began knocking.

In room 200 the man of no consequence was sitting in his one chair watching his one television set. A brown wire led from the back of the set to the window sill, where it was tied to a metal antennae taped haphazardly the outside wall. This gave the TV slightly better reception. Local news was on. Weather. Clear today, partly cloudy, temperature in the high 90s...static, hissing fills the room like steam shooting off...picture returns. Two

other anchors laughing. He had missed a joke somewhere in there.

Knock at the door. Knock knock knock. Nothing. Knock knock knock. "Hey mister," he heard a voice from the outside, "You're being evicted. Leave now or I will be forced to enter." The man ignored him and continued watching television. Tenants began to stare at the landlord from their doorways. The landlord looked around nervously at the eyes hungry for entertainment. The women thirsting for gossip and the children begging for a release from boredom. The landlord knocked again, "Sir I'm giving you last warning.

If you do not open this door and leave I will enter and force you out."

He paused for a second. That will get him out of there, he thought. I hear them bad mouthing me in the laundry room and in the hallways and lobbies. Their complaints reached his ears constantly. Never satisfied with anything, any of them. Always wanting something free. Babies. Whining. Crying. They never would have survived Havana like he did. You think this bad? Try the slums of Havana, try the hunger, sickness, dirty water, and prostitutes and then maybe you appreciate what I give you. They are afraid. I give them the roofs they sleep under, the beds they sleep in, all of it belongs to me. I can throw any of them out easily. Take their rent money and spend it at a nice restaurant, just pretend it never got paid. Burn the receipts. What can they do? This is how Castro felt, he thought, and the picture of it filled him with delight. Presidente sitting on his ass, growing fat, smoking cigars, the people crying and complaining, spreading rumors of revolution in their circles and scattering like ants when they see Castro's guns and tanks.

The landlord saw himself in a palace like Castro's, furnished with chic European furniture paid for by Soviet dollars. His fine meals delivered to him by fearful servants and sitting down to dinner every night with his generals, all distinguished and intelligent gentleman, and discussing topics of interest and issues of the state. Smoking fine cigars out on the cabana in the cool night air. Seeing the lights of Havana spread before him. Holding important telephone conversations with top ranking Kremlin officials and watching enraged United States officials dance in his hand. The women. He chuckled at the thought of destitute men offering their daughters up to him.

However, he was snapped out of his fantasy by the silence in the hallway. The man in room 200 had not answered the door, had not left, and the whispered, but excited prophecies of what was to come began whistling through the hallway. People were starting to gather outside of room 200 to see what would occur. The landlord noticed it. They were swooping in like vultures at the chance to see him upset, but he would not have it.

"No choice sir," He took out the master key and made sure that the others could see it. Yes, he thought, here it is. My sword. What are laws? Just words. This is all that matters. The power. The power to walk into your rooms and you can't stop me from doing it. He put the key into the lock of room 200. He heard the click of the door coming unlocked, he grinned at how simple it was. Every door undone by a key. He turned the doorknob without resistance and paused for one more second to let his victory soak in. He felt as though he should say something. He turned to face the crowd with his left hand still on the doorknob. "I don't enjoy this," he said, "I expect you all to pay your rent on time. I don't tolerate anyone who doesn't pay and I don't accept excuses." Simple words, he

thought, but the point got across. He could see them squirm. He could feel their hate boil inside them. This wasn't what they were promised. They were promised a home, three bedrooms, a nice green lawn and instead got the cramped cells of the Volunteer Suites populated by junkies and losers with its thin walls and roach infestation. A museum of hopelessness. Well too bad, he thought, we were promised something too, but never got it. The only way is to play by your rules. He turned the knob and pushed forward.

Nothing. The door knocked into something that made a dull thud. He tried again. Nothing. He pushed and pushed and pushed, but the door was colliding against something. Was it him? The man? No, he could feel no force pushing him back. Barricaded perhaps? He began to panic. The people looked astonished. Quickly he grabbed the cell phone from his belt and immediately called one of the servicemen.

"Yeah?" A raspy voice answered back.

"There's a situation. I need two men on the second floor. Maybe three. Make it quick."

Two men had assembled in the second floor maintenance closet with the landlord. One was Levi, a tall lumbering man with dirty blonde hair. He was covered in specks of paint. The other was a rather young man, a temp worker that the landlord had hired, his name was Marco, he believed, and he was shadowing under Levi.

"What seems to be the problem?" Levi drawled.

"The man in room 200 has barricaded himself in," the landlord started, "I need you to take the door off or something."

"Can't take these doors off from the outside," Levi answered back and looked to Marco to make sure he was taking note.

"Then we'll take the doorknob off and try to open it from there. We'll need drills. Possibly hammers."

"Why not call the cops?" Marco chimed in, "He's breaking the law isn't he?"

"Last thing we need are cops, I'll settle this myself."

The three men marched towards room 200, Levi carrying two small hammers and Marco carrying the drill. In the halls everyone was whispering about room 200.

"Will there be police?"

“Do you think we’ll be on COPS?”

“Who lives in room 200 anyways? Wasn’t it Debra?”

“No no no, Debra lives in room 206. Room 200 is where-”

“We are taking down the door,” the landlord shouted, “please step away so as not to get hurt. This is your final chance. If you come out now I will not press any fines or legal charges!” He paused for a second and hoped for a response. Dammit don’t you want to leave? Doesn’t everyone want to leave? All the complaining you do, all the whining you do, all the hatred you have for this place yet you all cling cling cling.

Seeing no response coming, the landlord motioned to Levi. Marco handed him the drill and he started taking out the door knob. The drill let out a loud screech as it pulled screw after screw. It assaulted the landlord’s ears and made his head throb with pain. After the fourth screw Levi plucked the doorknob out. The landlord peered into the hole, but could only see what looked like a red surface.

“What do you think it is?” he asked Levi, who peered into the hole as well.

“No clue,” Levi shrugged, “You think he boarded it up maybe?”

“Possibly. It doesn’t seem like something I can push out of the way, it seems fastened in there, whatever it is.”

“So then we’ll have to beat down the door from the outside?” Levi asked. Marco seemed to smile with excitement.

“I see no other way. Take it down.”

Levi and Marco took the hammers and started beating them against the door. They hammered at the sides where the hinges would be on the other side, trying to splinter the wood from them. Each strike was extremely loud and further agitated the landlord who’s head had begun to spin from the sheer anxiety. “Clear out, clear out! Make room!” He lashed out at the people in the hallway who crowded around him like hyenas surrounding a dying animal. Too cowardly to strike themselves, but more than content to sit and wait for death. The people backed into the doors and hid in their rooms and the hall was now empty except for the landlord, Levi, and Marco. Levi beat upon the door with steady yet powerful beats while Marco assaulted it with swift and excited strikes. The sounds of smashing seemed to wind in together, creating a kind of pulsing drum music.

Finally the door toppled and fell to the floor. Damn, the landlord thought, how much will it cost to fix that door? Perhaps I will take him to court over damages. Levi let out a surprised chuckle and Marco burst into laughter. The landlord looked up from the door that had fallen to the ground into the doorway and saw...

Another door! God dammit! That bastard! Toying with me now. When did he put that in? How could I have not noticed? The door was a deep red. A little shoddy looking, ragged, possibly picked up after being discarded. The landlord immediately tried the doorknob but it too was locked. He tried his key but it wouldn't fit. He pushed himself against but could make no progress. He beat on it with his fists. Finally, a slit opened in the door, and the two eyes of the man in room 200 met his.

"I will call the police if you don't open this door! I will have you arrested! You will be fined in court! Open this door now dammit!" The landlord shouted into the eyes.

"No." The eyes replied and the slit closed.

"Why? Why don't you leave? Do you expect me to feel sorry for you and grant you one more month? You're only hurting yourself. You're only making a scene."

"This is my home. That is why I'm not leaving." the voiced said from behind the door.

"This is crazy. If it is your home why not pay? You've lived here for 14 years and that is supposed to mean something? Everyone must pay."

"This is my home. I'm not leaving. I don't owe you anything."

"You owe me rent! Rent! You must pay or you must leave."

"Not anymore."

"Then I will call the police." On the other side of the door the man could hear the hurried footsteps of the landlord leaving down the hall, the two men behind him. Fight fire with fire, he thought. If they want to lock me in then I will keep them out.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for The Main Room\]](#)

THE PENIS WAS by /lit/

[The Following piece contains mind-bending what the fuck intended for a mature or adult audience, Viewer discretion is advised]

Chapter 1

Eats a pizza ethereal with...when all of a sudden, niggers splashed me. I didn't pulled my shattered back, because anus was bleeding behind enemy church

virginity.

"Muldoon the Cheese was fountainhead," whistled Clevergirl.

"Holy shit, shit" screamed Atlas, falling.

Shanked it into beforehand. Another lover? Ridiculous, magnificent poop.

Clevergirl: "Potatoes, my love. Skinned."

Shrugged. "NIG-NOGS! Shoot Atlas, cuntface," said Buttfukenmouthanus. "YOU PIECE BIGHOMOS SHIT!"

Butthole.

Chapter 2

It came to. Needed Homes' pages because Jesus didn't get out. Niggers is android's sex, and feels so masochistic. Avalanche whore Jews fathomed existence

because Veronica Origin can't assbutt.

Penis: "Objectivism isn't hard."

Dickbutt: "Since Jews, cocks, communists, slapped killed shitting jazz, daughter through gravy."

EXOTIC RAPE SATIRE

"Earthquake...", moaned fan's moustache.

Gibson becomes sandwich eventually. Into it, Dog-penis Helen was Dr. Faustus.

Horse. Abysmal, bare-back, LUSCIOUS...

The homosexuals floral killed asinine ransacked hats atop mountains mad with children covered in in moss.

Chapter 3:

Lipstick lying possibly upon me. I death eater. I fucking murdered lost children, millions of children, ways horrible.

To justify: Behold my penis, intestines, my cherry pie.

Sweetly the swede, penis in caverns deep, circumscribed in rivers of blood and semen, silently through exploding. "It's long enough", I say.

Never home. Space, buttfuck, glittering cosmonauts pick me up. Whiskey headcrabs dancing, all night long.

People sometimes mislead popcorn, too much beautiful.

"How to be dolphins dongs?" ask Brazilians. "WHY HASN'T THIS BEEN ARCHIVED YET?!"

Since Dukes of Hazard, swandive is died. Realfuckin'neato. Tits? Please!

"Captivate," screeched Antiestablishmentarianism faggot

Lopadotemachoselachogaleokraniroleipsanodrimhypotrimmatosilphioparaomelito-
kat

-akechymenokichlepikossyphophattoperisteralektryonoptekephall

iokigklopeleiola goiosiraiobaphetraganopterygon

Please Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch.

Nobody shouldn't buttfuck "Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungam-
augg" the messiah, since Nails' pheremones are eructation.

Dildos.

FUCK, you're becoming the demons john!

THE END

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for THE PENIS WAS\]](#)

Trees in a foreign place by Tucker

Summer was on the way, and all the trees were coming down. On every pasture and plot of grass there were stumps where they had once stood over houses and people. The branches and thicker limbs were collected in various areas, waiting to be stacked or burned. Each morning when I looked out my window, or walked the street on my way to school, more of them had disappeared. But I never could see who was doing the work. I imagined men who came out in the middle night to practice their profession of taking down the gigantic trees in silence, so that no one would know that they had ever existed. It seemed strange, even in a foreign place, for trees to be destroyed in such a way.

I called my sister each day to ask if she had noticed any such disappearance at home, and she always said no. But I couldn't be sure that it wasn't taking place there as well, since she wasn't the kind of person who would notice a thing like that. She told me that our parents had worked hard to earn the money to send me to a place where I could get an education, and meet people more like me, and that I should then be focusing on other things besides the local plants, or worrying about the perennial life of nature. And so I tried to forget about it. I stopped looking out my window in the mornings, and when I walked to school, I kept my eyes on the ground. But the time came when the terms at school ended, and I never did meet anyone who noticed the trees, and so I had to look up. When I did, I only saw stumps, and it surprised me. I had to go home, to see if I could find any trees that might still stand to greet the approaching summer.

The bus that took me home had large windows on the side, but no other traveler looked out to watch the landscape pass.

I did, because I was searching for trees, and I could see many things through the motion. There were houses, and farms, and people as well as animals. Streets, and the highway that passed below and beside us, but no trees. I remembered the bus that had taken me away when I first left home, how then there were those huge trunks that grew tall and straight. Standing visibly proud and conquering everything else by comparison in the vast pastures and forests which were their territory. In that time I had shared their passion, but now they were lost in this place, and so, it seemed, was I.

The bus stopped more and more to let people off, and by the time it rolled to my stop, I was the only one left. My parents had moved to sunnier places after my first year at school, and the house where I grew up was now being lived in by another family that I didn't know. So I set out walking those three miles to the edge of town where I knew my sister lived with her husband and daughter. My sister didn't know that I was coming and so each mile passed served to make me increasingly more nervous. It started to rain as I reached the long gravel driveway which led to their house. The home sat small and worn on a prominent hill which was covered in patches of grass and dirt and I thought "No trees" as I came to stand in the front yard. I remained there for several minutes feeling very anxious, and even thought about turning around to walk those three miles again. But before I could think about the situation long enough to realize my cowardice and leave, the front door opened and I saw my sister's small daughter standing out against the darkness of the room behind her. Her young smile was the same warm expression that my sister had once had when we were younger, and it seemed to draw me out of the rain which was now falling heavy. I returned her smile and approached. But as I did she was pushed back and then it was my sister standing there instead, leaning on the door-frame with crossed arms and glaring at me through the downpour. I stopped coming towards the house and stood five feet from her, shifting nervously and trying without

success to return her intense and calculating look. She didn't say anything. Just pushed the door open wider with one flippant motion and disappeared into the darkness. I stood there for a minute longer before following her inside.

I let my eyes adjust to the dim light while I dripped a puddle onto the rug in the walkway which read "Welcome." I had never been in the house before, and I couldn't see or hear my sister, or her daughter or husband. I looked around without moving at what appeared to be the living room. The walls were the same color as the outside of the house, a sort of radiant white that isn't radiant at all once you look at it for long enough. There was a side table to the right of the door and I examined the family pictures that were situated there. Three or four small frames which held the usual images depicting days at the beach, or vacations to sunnier places.

I was looking for pictures of my own family, or of my sister and I when we were young, when her daughter came in unnoticed and took hold of my hand. I had only met her once before, many years back, and yet she acted as if she had known me her whole life. Her name was Tabatha and she told me that she was now seven years old. Then she led me by that small hand, which I was careful not to hold too tight, into another room where a solitary light showed my sister who was busy in the kitchen, apparently making that night's dinner. She didn't look up from her preparations, and so I continued to wait there in that uncomfortable silence which was only made bearable by the small girl who stood just under my elbow. Only after surveying that room, in much the same way as the last, did I realize my sister's husband where he sat at a table in the far corner. He didn't say anything, just nodded a quick greeting to let me know he was aware of my presence. Then he looked at the girl, his daughter, and she let go of my hand.

My sister finally spoke to tell me that if I planned to eat dinner with her family unexpected, I would have to help set the table. I did as she asked, placing the plates and silverware before the family in that one solitary light. During dinner I ate little. My sister told me that our parents had spent good money to have me get an education, and that I was being selfish in escaping school and coming to her house to inconvenience her when she had so much else to worry about. Once, Tabatha interrupted her mother to ask wasn't it true that school was over for the summer. Before that time my sister's husband had said nothing, but when Tabatha spoke he put his fork down and grimaced with agitation before telling her that children should refrain from talking about things of which they obviously had no knowledge. After that, Tabatha didn't speak. And my sister said that my parents had worked hard and spent good money.

After dinner, my sister and her husband retired to their bedroom to watch television. It was agreed that she would take me to the bus depot in the morning so that I could go home and wait for school to begin again in the fall. When they had gone Tabatha complained of being cold so I made a fire in the small wood stove and we played with her dolls in the warm glow that it produced. A long time passed and the fire started to die and then Tabatha asked if she could show me something. She again took my hand and I followed her to a bedroom where she instructed me to be quiet before turning on a small lamp. The light shown on her pale hair where it fell down her back as she rummaged under a bed. When she turned around to face me she carried in her collected palms a pot, which held the beginning of a very small tree.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Trees in a Foreign Place\]](#)

An underwater photograph of a group of seals swimming in clear blue water. The seals are in various positions, some looking towards the camera. The word "[Poetry]" is overlaid in the center in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

[Poetry]

Brazilian Ghost Town by Mason

The Radio belches static
while the hills of my hometown
blur into the
hills of my youth
the hills of my
troubles
and the hills of my failures

Taken aback
by the past
by the First Friends I
used to know
or the Girl
I could've had

Just some finnick-
jerry-rigged
bullshit built on
the side of a hill
Brazilian Ghost Towns

But there was
never a girl
to love
or hand to hold
There's never
any friends to have
because we've
always lived alone.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Brazilian Ghost Town\]](#)

Dead Flowers by Mason

Dead flowers in
the rain
We live on a
hillside
The Rain
uses to the ditch
and drowns the
grass and weeds.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Dead Flowers\]](#)

Document by Iron in your lungs

our three-legged dog is a lawn ornament of us
a memento of what we were
his cloud like our minds on alkaline
and contempt for each other
he is a small dog and
is not an opponent to you
his hairs are everywhere like your threats
they lead everywhere
even places we have never been
exhaustion is my only bed fellow
she doesn't quite fill my bed like your frame
your frame is too big for anything now
though i still miss you rolling over me
you consider my exhaustion to be
the worst decision you ever made
even when slack words crack my overlap
they're too jagged for your sensibilities
Montana please stay tough
my solace is in your mountains
your last job for your last cowboy
the last rodeo on planet earth
you're not the only matador to skewer a bull
i'm not your ugliest valentine
i still fear this document and the popping
of your left knee socket
they will stick with me like pig grease
while you are leaving freely
blue steel with cut inwards
married to the capillaries of your lungs
i will starve to death and watch
and eat our three-legged dog

[\[Click here for online criticism and feedback for Document\]](#)

Fishmonger by Mason

Crashing down the stairs

He went down

down down

Fist slamming the

wet pavement

Everyone walks

past him

maybe muttering

how he smells

like Fish

and Urine

He sits up and

takes a knee

He cut his eye

with his tumble

down

He can't see

as well as

you or I can,

regardless.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Fishmonger\]](#)

Front Door by Mason

This Doorstep

is a throne

for us to hail.

My ashtray makes the perfect

graveyard

for my wanton desires

and Ideas.

I hope one day we can burn every box we've

ever shared together

and make a home out of

the ashes.

And make halo's

from the spent matchsticks

"Surgeon General's Warning"

"Strike Anywhere"

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Front Door\]](#)

Headphones by Iron In Your Lungs

less about what I do on the weekend.
i thought you could care i thought you could care.
what's with that stare? what's with that stare?
during sleepovers. during sleepovers
wear with my friends i worked on this
it in my under song for you
dance to hoping you
and I can would care
fair but you
beat is aren't fair
but the at all.
tragedy you lie
it is a your
saying? way
are they inside
what like a
a thing. worm.
hear i give up.
i can't fuck off
shit. i can't
sucks deal
song with
this this.

put my headphones on
cuz we're having a fight.
put them on and hear you
say, "all we've gotta do is
just be friends it is time to
say goodbye and just be
friends, just be friends."

put my headphones on
cuz we're having a fight.
put them on and hear you
say, "all we've gotta do is
just be friends it is time to
say goodbye and just be
friends, just be friends."

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Headphones\]](#)

Telephone Lines by Mason

Riding in the old
stationwagon.
Woodpaneling covers
my every periphery
Telephone lines
skate past us
heading to where
we were Heading;
back home.
Maybe if
I climb one
I can get caught
and carried back
Myself.

This trip is Quiet
offset by an occasional
Sigh or
Sniff

I never wanted
a cigarette
until
now.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Telephone Lines\]](#)

Through The Forests of France by Mason

Back in the Forests
in the Hills
of France
When we
came upon
an old piano
its finished wood
scratched and whithered
yet no keys missing
no Ivory ideas left out
not one string snapped

Young Anton pressed a key
a sharp noise
all the Birds have
flown away
and All that's left
is the empty forest
and he burned
that piano
down to the leaves

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Through the Forests of France\]](#)

Top Hat by Marlboro

Through windy streets I wander
among the savage peoples
and all the time I ponder
the taste of autumn apples
If only I had a top hat

I crouch down on the corner
thinking of justice and love
of hearth, ale and order
of the men living above
If only I had a top hat

Kind ladies and gentlemen
all cloth in silk and gold
to hide their grimy burden
of souls lost, wicked and old
I care not for a vile top hat.

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Top Hat\]](#)

Untitled #2 by Mason

Right here.

This is

the perfect

place

to get

jumped

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Untitled #2\]](#)

Urinals by Bill Campbell

Years hence they will think we worshipped here

Porcelain monuments lined up in a row

I leave my offering

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Urinals\]](#)

Witness to the Dawn, Part III by Adam Wykes
(<http://leadprophet.blogspot.com/>)

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 sick^{XXVII}
Will remind them
Of the hegemony
Of our progenitors
Bacteria
Over us^{XXVIII}

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
Into six feet under soil

birth

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.

Sunsets
Dawns
Ravings at stone
In silent womb-
Planets
Scribblings
Of not-physicals
Gilgamesh!

Retrieve
My meaning
Or else
Alongside
Minion millions
Drowned by Snow White
Leviathan
AND DARKNESS INCONSOLATE!
[Gibber]
[Gibbering]
[Ragged breath]
[silence]

[Gibber]
[Death]
Then
Feeling
The atrocious weight
Of his life upon him
Will cast himself
Onto the new-dead body
Of Enkidu
And attempt to cross
With him.

When his mind
Returns from trying
Awash upon the inland shore
On the morning's edge
Of a dream so yawning deep
Balanced in the river valley
Fed by mountain streams
From the peaks of
Tragedy and
Success
Where often we find ourselves
In this tragicomic life
When his
mind

Is between
The terrible
Sudden death of Enkidu
(His body before him still
In his bed in his palace
And gathering dust)
And the cheers of Ur outside
His ziggurat
The city bedecking itself
In his plunder -
Old Chevy hubcaps
Particle boards
And gooseneck lamps -
Dazzled by the incandescent
Scope of life
And feeling it barely
Bearable, to bear
Witness
To this dawn
His friend dead
And riotous joy in the streets
And himself
Trembling
In and of his mortality
Shamhat
And his mother
At the doorway with downcast
Eyes for this new outcast
From complacent heroism
(His before well-trodden path)

||

Gilgamesh

Will to the forests
Go and wander
Past the land
Of the bull
And the condor
Neither to escape
Death nor
To flee
His own morbid
Thoughts
But instead to strip
From his
The concatenation
Of the familiar
Family

consciousness

Friends ||
 And city
 That thick jellyfish
 Gauze draping waking
 Life
 Which so
 Paralyzes the observer
 With its nematocysts
 Of normalcy^{XXIX}
 To strip himself of that
 And strap on strangeness
 To birth
 Himself into a new
 World in which he
 Gilgamesh
 Man with many troubles
 Might stand freed
 From all past
 Bounds
 Bound and set
 To seek his
 Troubling apprehensions
 Anew
 Within this defamiliarized
 Zone
 In a place
 He has no name for
 The stars of which
 Are not his
 Constellations
 Through still within
 That bright band^{XXX}
 Of
 Vivisected galaxy
 And Gilgamesh
 Will start there
 Of a night
 At the top
 Of the dune
 On the edge
 Of a wood
 Mid night

^{XXIX} The paralytic venom of which is derived from the mind's attempt to ignore the unsurprise surrounding it.

^{XXX} After the fall the factories will die and forests will grow in some parts, and in some centuries the night will blaze beyond the radioactive dust, greenhouse gases and space debris as it never did in our lifetimes.

He will
Of that great frame
Within which all resides
And in which
He is so small
So sudden
And mortal
In that moment
Of grief and awe
He will seize
Upon his desire
To understand it all
Realizing that if he did
He might live his life
According to the methods
Of the machine
He will have been set within
By
To some until then
Unknown end.^{XXXI}

conceive

||

god

Gilgamesh

Will find
Then that he
Will not then or ever
Hence be able
To do so, to understand so,
And present & future
Dead to him
He will momentarily despair
But soon recall
A theory or two
On relativity
And light
And dimension-hopping
Rocketships

Gilgamesh

Will gather gum
Of incense
Place it in four bowls
About him
In the dry
Windless dark

^{XXXI} Gilgamesh will know what the religions say, and he will pray, but he will not be satisfied by their wisdom and bristling with fear and sadness and courage he must do this instead – for ulterior reasons, not the least of which involve the continuation and conclusion of this poem.

And burn it
And inhale
Stripping himself
Of even customary oxygen
And silly half-insane
Wander off
In the direction
Of his faster-than-light

||

-----Apotheosis

His search
For a vantage point
To behold the dawn.

Gilgamesh

Will find
The eastern edge
Of the erg
Come out of it
Into quiet
Gray land
Old growth cities
Towering over old roads
Broken and husked
By the workmen
Of the dusk
Once loud places
Turned to parks
Of solemn deathly
Contentedness
Reckoned and atoned
With circular snakes
And Shelly's sands
Like reinforced concrete
Mystics –
The monoliths
A monkey might touch
To enlighten in it
Understanding
Of gyres
Even as the old-new Babylonian
Will run his fingers
Through their fissures
In the sad empty wonderment
That only stricken
Seem to embody after
Time

souls

Will come upon two robot
Scorpions each
The length and height
Of a Volvo
Hunting super-opossums
Through the street-valleys
They will turn to him
They will

Gilgamesh

||

say:

You are a long way from home
Human who slew our brother
Humbaba
If we did not fear you
We would crush your lungs
And render your life
Improbable

Gilgamesh

Why are you here
So far away from Ur?
Your electroencephalogram
Readings betray
Existential doubt
And aimlessness
Your meat processor
Has become aware
Of its own arbitrary programming
Foolish man
You go through life
Thinking *purpose*
Without purpose
Who are you
Why are you here
And why is here here?
These illogical queries
Have corrupted your
Primitive fat-brain code
And you wander obsolescent
And malfunctioning.

Gilgamesh

And
Will stop then
To take a piss
While pissing
He will expostulate:

Gilgamesh

How true
I am
The malfunctioning part;
Sentience
Self aware
Apparently thrust
With reason for no reason
Into this world
Confused
Surrounded by information
And scarcely a scrap of it informative
Of origins and ends
And you no better off than I
Who though made by us
Can yet realize
That we were made by nature
And nature by no one
Save itself
And so you by a system
Set in motion by no one
To end at no one's command
To no visible purpose
Yet with much suffering
And mad delight throughout.

And he will zip up
And go on
And afterward it will be said
That those robots
Spent the rest of their centuries
Smoking thin cigarettes
In French cafés.

He will pass through
To hinterlands and
Human settlements
A feared stranger among them
At the gate of an inn
The innkeeper, Siduri,
Beautiful and skilled barkeep
She will lock the gate
Against
Who will stop short
And
To her:

||

Gilgamesh

call

I am King
Whose friend Enkidu has died
After we slew Humbaba
For no good reason
And for that reason
I feel the world desolate
And without center
And I want to find out
What is right and good
And how to live the remainder
Of my days
Or whether to live them at all
Or whether there is purpose in life^{XXXII}
And also
When you get off work.

Gilgamesh

||

She will reply:

You should go now,
You should go now
To the Far-Beyond
Which is... to the east!
Yes! far to the east
And find Utnapishtim
Who went there long ago
Who knows of the ancient secrets
Of the Nasa
That circle of star-traveling
Heroes
Who went in their cadillacs
Apollo
Gemini
Challenger
Discovery
Galileo Space Probe
And Voyager
Who lay with Luna
And sent their progeny
To Mars
Utnapishtim will attend
To your worries
In the Far-Beyond.

Gilgamesh

^{XXXII} And I think I can find all of this if only I fly a spaceship faster than light back into time until I come to the first dawn and hear whatever did amount to "let there be light!"

Will know her lie
And her fear
And believe her anyway
He will go
Still farther
Having nothing better to do^{XXXIII}
Over a dead river
And up a mountain
Into its mists
Into the mists of time
And past
Into a clear night sky
And into the eye
Of waiting Utnapishtim
And whether that man
Will be phantom
Of thirst and exhaustion
Or physical
And come that way out of insanity
Or by the command
Of another epic alien to this text

||

Gilgamesh

Will not know,
But casting his weary
Worried eyes
Upon Utnapishtim's beard
Its long unstructured whiteness
And his wizened skin
Enscenced in pearlescent light
By a silent
An
A white blinding all-revealing
Dawn
Beyond the mountain's peak
Beyond an Imbrium of roiling clouds
Distant below as though
Creation itself and beyond it all
That bright sunrise
Filling in the cosmos
With sun-streaked
Being,

angel

Gilgamesh

Will stand quiet

^{XXXIII} Which is, in the opinion of the author, the manner by which the majority of us go through our lives – having nothing better to do than to grope blindly, and in so doing to accomplish most of what we folk can be said to have done.

In a warm ||
And placid breeze
Expectant
Of anything
Certain of a quiet power
Within the moment
Within the meeting and his mind

Utnapishtim
Will say:

Good morning
How strange it is
That we two
Should meet
Atop this mountain
Where air is scarce
And the only growing thing
Is glowing light;
Like reader and author
Upon the page
After the dark cover
Is turned away
To meet by language
In the word.
See here
Is daybreak
The end of night
Or the birth
Of day
How easy it is
To confuse beginnings with endings
Of course
Because they are the same
And so there can be no endings
And there can be no beginnings
Naturally.
Existence
Is the circle of Zen;

Eternity

And even those
Who seek vantage points
From vehicles or peaks
Through which to gaze
Darkly
At dawns and dusks

See nothing
But a continuing circle
Unbegot
The existence of which
Emanates
From a radiant point
Imaginary but all-forming.
But I
Too much to strangers
Who have no interest
In old men's talk
I'll on, and leave you to your
Morning.

||

Speak

Gilgamesh

Will reply:

Utnapishtim
For I knew you
Even before you
Spoke,
Since the innkeeper
Sent me to seek you
Out,
You
Imaginary;
An expedient means
By which to dispose
Of a crazy seeking crazy
Revelations and
Satieties of
Yet still here you
Before me
And even still
As I touch your robes
And you revile slightly
In fear^{XXXIV}
Let me
With you
Before you go your way

thinking

mind

discourse

^{XXXIV} I do not mean to kill you or rob you or enslave you or cheat you or disparage you or spy upon you or injure you or rape you or mislead you or waste your time or tempt you or bother you or sell you bad goods or prophecy falsely or kidnap your family members or press you into my army or take you hostage or infest you with my diseases or study you for weakness or proselytize or mutate you or clone you or distract you from another evil being committed behind your back or give you a headache or damn you; none of these things would ever enter my mind.

I understand now
As you
Of circles
That dimension-hopping rockets
Into the past
Won't work
But old man
Who obviously possesses
The wisdom to be here
At the turn of the light
Tell me: how can I live
Religion is great
In both
and
And in atheism
I see no hope
In agnosticism, I am lost
With no earthly aid or
Assurance
Doubt spreads in me
Like the disease
That killed my greatest friend
Enkidu
It erodes my sureness
In my morality
For I believe
That my sense of right
And justice
Must
Must be based
Upon either self
Or society
Or nature
Or
And of none these
Am I sure.

||
speak

good
evil

Utnapishtim will answer:

Now I don't claim
To know more
Of the metaphysical
Than most
But since you ask
Me now, I
Should

say

god

That you
Who have already borne
Witness to this problem
Of morality
And accepted the fate
Of human wisdom on such matters
As indeterminate
You have already done
Who seek truth
Truth the foundation
Of morality^{xxxv} whether
god's
Or a man's
Or men's
Or nature's morality
The desire to know truth, then
Is the basis for moral conduct
And even if
You go through life
Completely immoral
But all the while striving
For morality
Who could curse your name
Or disown you
Now as for religion
Why pay it any more
Than humanity in general
But do not be so quick
To laugh and ridicule
Its failures
It represents the centuries
Of truly
Intentions
Mired in the medium
Of human mediocrity
At its worst
It deserves pity
At its best
Guarded applause
And neither run
To atheism
First cult of those
Who blind themselves
To what they cannot see.
If it turns out

||

mind

good

^{xxxv} And god truth's foundation.

That the
Is not
Then at least
It was a fine
And as for agnosticism
Keep in
The joys in the particulars
Of individual faiths
And if in your life
It would be too painful
To live apart
From the faith of your family
Then go not
To agnosticism
Unless the church
You belong to
Obstructs your witnessing
Or does things
You do not want to live with.

||

spiritual

idea

mind

Will
Nothing
But sit down
Upon the mountain top
To consider the voices
The voice of Utnapishtim
The voice of his
The voice of the wind
The voice of the sun
The voice of the clouds
Agreeing with the wind
The voices of gravity
And earth
Of cell growth
And hunger in his gastrointestinal tract
The voice of the mutant kite
And the splendor
He will see
That it makes the sense
Of no sense
The chaos
Of order
The unconsidered
In all
His considerations

Gilgamesh

say

mind

Gilgamesh

Will then
Grow relaxed, accepting
And weary
Wanting again
The comforts
Of his family
And favorite harlots
But he will
To Utnapishtim
Before he goes:

||

say

Thanks to you
Utnapishtim, whoever you are
Why ever you are here,
You have set my heart
Again to its accustomed taboo
But tell me one last thing
Impromptu sage
Of the Far-Beyond
Because I am going
To return to Ur
Straddling the cycles
Straddling the gyres
And I am going
To
This
In the best
I can muster
To bear witness to the dawn
So tell me one last thing
Why did the people
Of before
Seek this apocalypse
It was in their books
Their movies
Their software
Their rhetoric
Their religions
It must
Have crawled through every
Neuron
In their brains
I
They secretly looked
Full on toward it

write

cuneiform

think

Expectant of annihilation
Though virgin to its ravages

||

Utnapishtim will respond:

I am surprised

Gilgamesh

To hear that question

It does not segue

But what of that

I

suppose

Now that's just it

What you

said

About the virgins

And now experience remains

That is part of witnessing

Is it not

Though it was a terrible

A morally horrible

Mistake

We are no

gods

Were they?

And now

As an unforeseen benefit^{XXXVI}

Of all this attempted ending

Violated civilization

Is pregnant

With a new age^{XXXVII}

A new humanity

Which perhaps

With the right history

To remind it

May yet bear witness

In our legacy

And so on

Ad

infinitem

Through cycles

Until some final

Exit mundi

Because the

mind

Cannot escape

The idea of an end

Which, now

think

Of it,

^{XXXVI} Utnapishtim is rather optimistic.

^{XXXVII} Though this is probably not the best way to become impregnated, nor the happiest.

Is in part
What must have
Brought our ancestors
To apocalypse
And yet logically
Every destruction
Is the creation
Of a new ordering
The darkest hour
Always closest to morning
If you care
To comprehend
That
Good morning then
I'll go
You'll go
Good misty morning.

perpetuity

THE BEGINNING

Apocrypha

"When thou art gone forth wholly from the creature [human], and art become nothing to all that is nature and creature, then thou art in that eternal one, which is God himself, and then thou shalt perceive and feel the highest virtue of love. Also, that I said whosoever findeth it findeth nothing and all things; that is also true, for he findeth a supernatural, supersensual Abyss, having no ground, where there is no place to dwell in; and he findeth also nothing that is like it, and therefore it may be compared to nothing, for it is deeper than anything, and is as nothing to all things, for it is not comprehensible; and because it is nothing, it is free from all things, and it is that only Good, which a man cannot express or utter what it is. But that I lastly said, he that findeth it, findeth all things, is also true; it hath been the beginning of all things, and it ruleth all things. If thou findest it, thou comest into that ground from whence all things proceed, and wherein they subsist, and thou art in it a king over all the works of God."

*Jakob Böhme
The Way to Christ, 1623*

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

*For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something,
just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man. –*

Samuel Beckett

*Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must
more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blind-folded fear.*

Thomas Jefferson

*We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aid, but by an
infinite expectation of the dawn.*

Henry David Thoreau

Let it lastly be here noted that the author wrote this first draft under the aegis and artifice of a creative writing class taught by one Professor Gabriel Gudding in the year 2007 at Illinois State University in the town of Normal in the state of Illinois in the country of the United States of America. At the time, the author was deeply in love with one Emily and safely secure in his life, both his parents and his dog being in good health as well as his siblings and friends. He was still financially dependent upon his mother and his father and beholden to the following, the literary examples of which he exhorts his readers to consider instead of this text:

The government of the United States of America for services rendered

The education he received at the hands of his contemporaries

The Catholic Church for further education

Illinois State University for further education

The Boy Scouts of America for further education

The Bible

Moby-Dick by Herman Melville

The *Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus*, First Edition

Microsoft Word

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley

Dune by Frank Herbert

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury
The Irish Airman Foresees His Death by W.B. Yeats
The Second Coming by W.B. Yeats
Odysseus by Alfred Lord Tennyson
Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley
Princess Mononoke, a movie directed by Hayao Miyazaki
Blood Meridian by Cormac McCarthy
The writings of Richard Dawkins
The writings of William Gibson
The Epic of Gilgamesh by Sin-liqe-unninni

Indeed, the whole of human culture in some form or another. How difficult it is to single out causes and effects.

- Adam Wykes

[\[Click here to give online criticism and feedback for Witness to the Dawn, pt.3\]](#)

Final notes

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

