



USED GRAVITRONS

SEPTEMBER 2014

ISSUE 17

FIG. 2

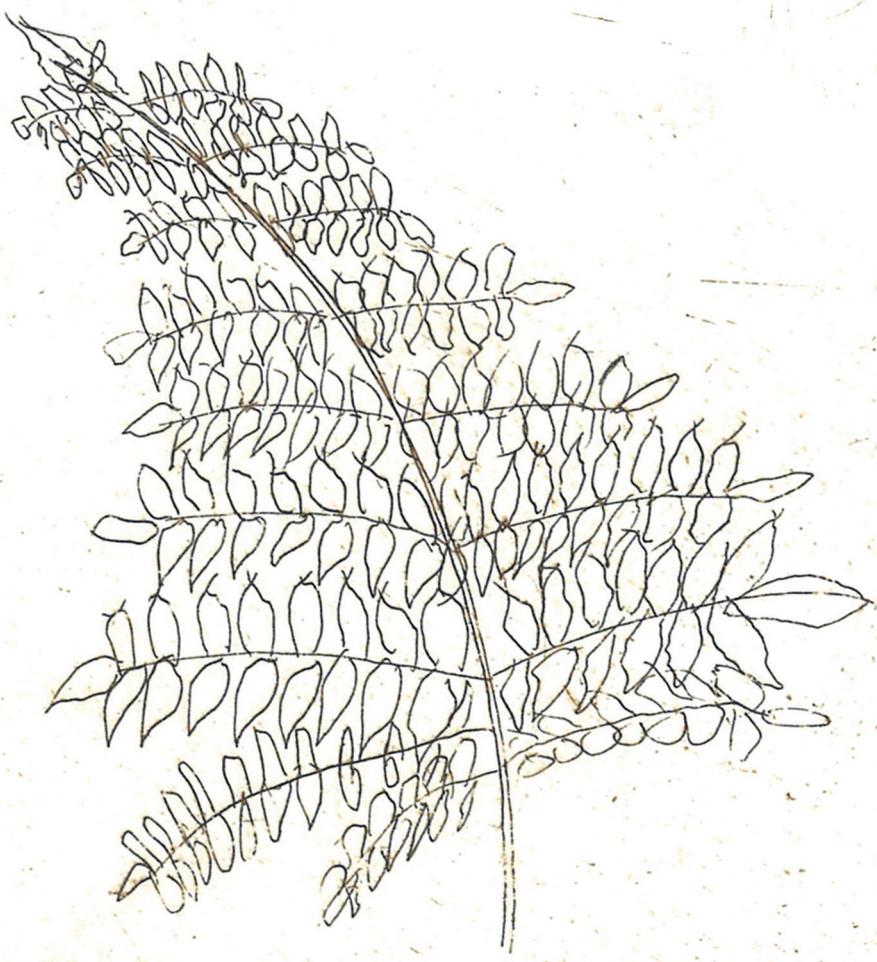


FIG. 1

USED GRAVITRONS QUARTERLY

Issue 17

September 2014

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EDITORIAL

Dear Readers,

First, we are excited (as always) to bring you this issue of Used Gravitrons. Inside you will find the usual tales of the strange, perverse, and surreal. We hope you enjoy it very much.

Second, we'd like to say a quick word about our 4,000 word limit for submitted work. We've received many undoubtedly great pieces that exceed this number, which we've had to turn down, but never have we received a compelling request to compromise our terms. Until this issue, that is. With the author's permission, here is that letter:

You say quite clearly in your submission guidelines that a piece is not to exceed 4,000 words. And I'm going to quite clearly be a bit of a punk and ask how concrete that number is.

I wrote a story that I really would like to submit to you, but it's 4,170 words. That's after passing the smell test, several revisions, and a proofing not only by me but another reader. Certainly the longer a piece is the more expendable individual words become, but I truly feel that 170 words is just too steep to lob off on this one. It feels right as is.

I may as well describe the story, too, while I'm at it. It's about a young man named Chris who, for lack of more interesting company in college, befriends a couple of miscreants with big-mouths and a shared penchant for seedy places and messy people. The three get stoned one night and loiter around a pair of adult book stores. They make a return stop at the more sordid of the two in search of the fabled Skin Man. In the process they fall into an altercation with a pimp. In the aftermath Chris begins to see more clearly what steps he needs to take towards making good on a hard lesson.

It's dark, quirky, and a touch dreamy. The sense of place at the stores is central to the story. The site of the altercation has arcade booths and glory holes. These places may not be "dangerously obsolete" but they're certainly dangerous and obsolete. In the internet age, seeking release in a public place is not only absurdly unnecessary but decidedly risky.

I understand fully if the limit is concrete, or if this doesn't sound like something you'd like. You can reach me at this email address.

Thanks very much for your time

Sean Pravica

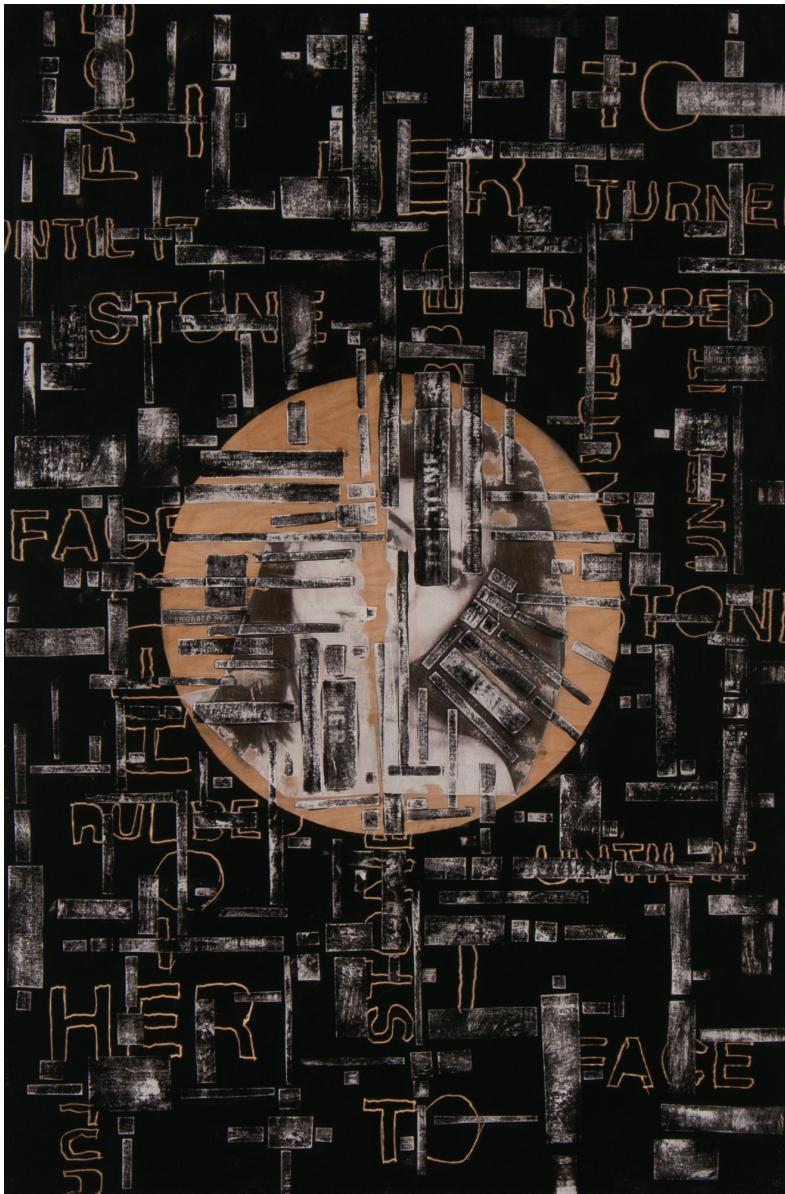
No.

But we are sorry. Unfortunately, the time commitments to keep Used Gravitrons running are rigorous as it is. Allowing longer—and assuredly excellent—stories to be submitted would push us past the breaking point and one of us would probably end up bludgeoned to death.

We hope you enjoy what follows.

Michael & Morgan

P.S. When the story Sean submitted to UG is published elsewhere, curious readers will be promptly notified and we will provide updated links via our electronic content.



Aureola

Wheat paste, photocopies, and latex paint on wood panel

32in x 48in

Under a Paper Moon

by Kristian Erhemo

The bus came to a halt. From the window I could see the sign: Eriksmyst.

I looked up at the sky: a boundless sheet of bleached paper. The landscape filled with snow, completely untouched and pristine, dead, covering every single inch of the world, like someone had dropped correction fluid which was in the process of drying. Even the sprawling forest had lost its depth and become one-dimensional.

The men who entered the bus wore sleek winter coats, black, belted and heavily buttoned. Charcoal pants, silent boots. Five of them, maybe six, sexless, mute.

With each soundless step, a black liquid leaked from their boots and wet the bus aisle. Their distorted heads resembled the metallic nibs on reservoir pens, and I tried hard, but failed, to compare their facial components with my own. Their eyes were an image of minimalistic calligraphy, two decisive, horizontal strokes of black ink. Was the sharp edge at the front of their heads the nose, the chin?

There were three, maybe four, standing in the white woods like impromptu brushstrokes with no apparent inclination to board the bus. As if deep in thought or randomly placed in the world, they stood separated from one another, someone close to the road, one partially obscured by a tree, staring at no apparent thing; just out into the infinite whiteness that had swallowed everything and spared nothing, except for them.

It wasn't until the bus was well on its way, somewhere between Eriksmyst and nowhere, that the men shifted their attention to the windows. Their corrupt metal faces left no sounds or expressions but nevertheless revealed discomfort, a sense of immediate danger.

I turned away from the strange passengers. I put both my hands on the cold window as I stared out in utter disbelief at the most beautiful sight: dangling up above, a red umbrella floating down towards the earth, cutting the monochrome planet in two as it sunk like a heated knife slowly piercing a blood orange. In its descent, the sky gradually ripped open, exposing the world to a flood of reds, violets, yellows. The umbrella morphed into a deep golden vermillion as it sunk closer to the ground somewhere over the forest, finally merging and leaking out into the undisturbed whiteness.

When the bus came to a halt I opened my eyes, still heavy from sleep, and straightened my back. I could see the sign outside: Eriksmyst. As the men entered the bus I rested my head gently against the window and watched the heavy rain pour, blacker than Scandinavian coffee, down onto the colorless canvas of the world.

**NO TIME
ON EARTH
IS LONG
ENOUGH TO
SHARE WITH
THOSE WE
LOVE OR TO
PREPARE OUR
HEARTS FOR
GOOD-BYE**

by Myke Johns

“You know that’s bullshit right?” She held the card up like a dog-soiled sneaker, her nose curling. “You get plenty of time with people on this planet.”

“But people you love?” I asked. She slammed the card into my chest, hard.

“Who the fuck loves you?” I had no answer for that. We inadvertently made eye contact. “And don’t give me that fake concerned-face of yours. I hate that shit.” She wrenched herself out of the driver’s seat and slammed the door. I frowned at my buttons and heard a muffled are you fuckin’ comin’ or what? already several paces away from the car. I sighed--she’d left the balloons. I always had to carry the balloons.

The front steps of the house were treacherous in those big shoes. I waddled up alongside her, leaned in, and waggled my painted-on eyebrows. She tightened up a scowl and her makeup--already a sad-face--creased until she looked like the singer in some black metal band.

“People love me,” I said.

“Shut it.”

I did. The door opened and, balloons aloft, we sang:

*Your dear husband
Was among the greatest of men
If it were up to us
Hed be with you once again*

She was blowing her harmonies, laying back and just singing the melody with me. It sounded cheap and insincere. The second verse added a couple details about this man’s life, but honestly, the service is basically obit-song Mad-Libs. When someone orders one, they’re asked to provide these tidbits and we drop them into one of our pre-arranged tunes. They’re short and leave little room for improv but I did get a solo--a single line at the very end. I closed my eyes and in my high tenor sang as plaintively as I could,

*My sympathy
and warmest thoughts
are with you now.*

I proffered the balloons to the woman--our sole audience. She started to take them, but brought her hands to her face in that way I’d grown accustomed to. Her shoulders shook and her sobs echoed through the foyer. I held the balloons, arm outstretched, beginning to ache.

“Please take them,” I thought. “I can’t leave until you take this away from me.”



Unfettered Movements

Wheat paste and photocopies on wood panel

32in x 48in



Below the Waist and Above the Feet: Victorian Fictions
Wheat paste, photocopies, and latex paint on wood panel
32in x 48in

Toasting

by Bruce Harris

Despite the cool air, Doc Zomer was sweating. "Here, take another swig," he pleaded, simultaneously pouring stale whiskey down Dorothy Boyle's mouth. She continued screaming. The pain of childbirth was unbearable. "Take it!" shouted Zomer, the pressure getting to him. The doctor wiped his forehead and bent down for a closer look. "Push. Hard! Bear down. Push!"

Ben and Dean Boyle stared at each other. For the first time in their lives, the twins felt helpless. "Doc, what in hell's going on in there?" It was Ben asking. Dean paced. "She okay? Can we help?"

Medical tools were strewn across a metal stand. Zomer poured whiskey down his own throat, swallowed hard and wiped his mouth across a white sleeve. No sign of the baby's head. He'd performed enough "birthins," as he called them, to know this one wasn't going well.

The screeching and wailing from Dorothy Boyle was unnerving. It froze her two brothers. Doc Zomer slapped his patient across the cheek. "Shut up! Push! Everything's going to be all right. Push!" But, the doc knew better. The table was now covered in blood. He took another drink, looked down, and out slid the baby. Still born. He grabbed it and smacked it, but nothing. Silence. He smacked it again. Total silence. Dorothy Boyle was as still as her lifeless child. The doctor sunk back against the wall. He was looking at mother and son, both dead. Or, were they? There was a sudden cry from the blue-colored infant. The doc slapped the baby again. It was breathing! Another slap and the breathing became more regular. He had saved one life, but it was mere seconds before he regretted his action. The crying infant's head rocked back forth as if on a swivel. The face to which Zomer looked into was chilling. He hadn't noticed before. There was an empty cavity where the nose should have been and unnatural crying sounds seemed to emanate from this small black hole.

"What in hell's going on in there?" repeated Ben Boyle. "How's everything? Is that a baby cryin' or what?" The doctor came out shaking his head. "I'm sorry." It wasn't clear whether the doc was sorry for his patient, the deformed child, or for himself. He knew the reputation of the Boyle clan. Ben and Dean rushed into the makeshift delivery room. Dean stomped through puddles of blood. He was accustomed to blood.

He ignored the newborn and went directly to his sister and shook her. Nothing. He tried again. "She's dead!" the scream echoing within the small building. "You butchered her!"

Doctor Zomer didn't know which way to turn. He wanted to strangle the creature that had come from the body of Dorothy Boyle, but he couldn't move. Ben Boyle had too tight a grip on him. "String 'em up, Dean! We'll hang him for this!"

The baby's surreal sounding cries filled the room. It was Dean Boyle who first saw the child for what it was. "Jeez...uz!" he screamed. "Let's get the hell outta here. Now!" Ben followed Dean's glance, grabbed the doctor and headed for the door. "Wait," said Dean, "we can't let this thing go." Dean pulled a long wooden match from the back pocket of his jeans and raked it across a badly worn boot heel. With a sickly sneer he set the dry straw ablaze. It was a matter of seconds before the small structure burned like a tinderbox, to the ground, with baby inside. The two brothers led the doctor to a large maple tree, made a noose from rope fetched out of Dean's saddlebag, and strung him up. "You call yerself a doc? You slaughtered our sister, now you'll pay!" Dean spit. Zomer pleaded for his life, but it was useless. He tried to explain that he had done everything within his means, but sometimes the good Lord has the final say. In less than fifteen minutes, he hung from a branch, his neck at a right angle. Smoke from the fire was spreading quickly. Thick black plumes soon engulfed the doctor's corpse. No one could see a thing. "Let's beat it," coughed Ben. They brushed away smoke from their faces and found their horses. The fire continued to crackle. "What's that smell?" questioned Dean. The brothers sniffed the darkened air. "Hell if I know," came the muted response, but it wasn't from Ben. The brothers stared briefly at each other, and with the doctor still twitching, the two hightailed it back into town.

It was two days later, the fire having burned itself out for the most part, that an old fortune telling gypsy woman heading west for greener pastures wandered near the area. She was drawn toward the scene by a faint staccato sound and by a strange odor, a combination of burnt grass and hay and something sickly sweet. The shack was flattened although smoldering remnants were still visible. She was drawn to a distinct pathway that led from the burnt ruins to a maple tree. It was if someone had dug a series of very narrow and shallow graves and filled them with an odorous reddish-black oily sludge. On the lowest branch of the tree, a scorched and blackened infant was doing pull-ups, its short arms working like pistons. With each repertoire, the baby was counting softly. Next to the baby hung a man, very dead, discolored, and swollen. The old woman watched for a few minutes but was drawn toward the pathway that led to the tree. She stooped down, cupped her hand into the thick substance, and brought it to

her mouth. "Go ahead, drink more," came the voice from the baby's nose area as he continued exercising. "It's good for you. Make you young again, strong and beautiful. Drink." The ends of her pale and faded coppery hair tickled the mess as the old lady submerged her entire face and swallowed mouthfuls of the stuff. She helped the small child down off the tree and hugged him.

The young man was hidden in the darkness against the wall of the bank. Ben Boyle sensed something, and that's when the youngster took a few steps forward and emerged in the moonlight. He was small in stature, but very wide. Boyle couldn't see his face. The kid produced a little glass bottle from his pocket. "Here, take this elixir. It'll make you feel a whole lot stronger. I'm sure you can use it."

Ben Boyle looked at the figure. "Do I know you?" he asked.

The boy chuckled. "I don't see how. Please, take this. It'll do you some good. Might even make you stronger. Don't you want to be stronger? Go ahead, drink up."

Boyle stared. "What the hell ya talkin' 'bout, young'n?" He strained to get a closer look, but the dark hood and shadows were such that the boy's face was hidden. "Get outta town, before I run ya outta town, ya hear?"

"Sure, sure," said the boy quietly. "I'm gone, for now. But, I'll see you soon enough. I'm sure of it. Just don't forget about the bottle."

Boyle blinked. He looked left and right, and then knocked himself upside the head. There was nothing, no boy, only the feeling of a slight bulge in his jeans pocket. His hand reached down mechanically, felt the item. It was the bottle the boy had given him. Boyle cursed and tossed the bottle as far as he could throw it. He heard glass break as it hit the dry, hardened dirt beyond the saloon's entrance. The kid's voice was unnerving. Boyle didn't like it. He checked up and down the street, but there was no sign of the kid. A slight breeze in the early evening air brought a familiar smell to Boyle's nose. He sniffed. "I know that dang smell from somewhere," he thought. He began to walk, but stopped in his tracks. Again he felt a bulge in the pocket of his jeans. He reached in and pulled out another bottle of the darkened, thick fluid. "Well, I'll be damned," he muttered to himself, "That kid must be some sort a magician or witch doctor or somethin." He threw this second bottle in the same direction as the first, this time, aiming for the saloon's wall. The scenario repeated itself time and again. The faster Boyle tossed a bottle, the quicker it was replaced by another in his pocket. He finally gave up and headed into the saloon. Boyle's boots crunched over shattered glass shards and left an imprint in the sticky puddle.

Ben Boyle pushed the swinging doors into The Lasso and headed for

a round table near the base of a narrow staircase. As was always the case, the joint became momentarily still when either he or his brother entered. There was a general fear among the townspeople. No one could blame them, given that the brothers had boasted killing nearly a dozen men, among them a number of lawmen, including at least three in The Lasso. The Boyle brothers pretty much had their way in town. He joined three other men with stacks of bills piled high, as the one called Dexter began shuffling a fresh deck of cards. "Count me in," said Boyle. I'm feeling really lucky tonight." He pulled a stack of greenbacks from inside his leather vest and peeled two big ones off the top. "This here is fer starters, gentleman." He turned his upper body around and screamed across the noisy saloon for a beer. That's when he noticed Dean, staggering drunk-like, walking arm in arm with a young woman. Her bright red hair practically lit the stairway as the couple headed up the stairs toward one of the lodging rooms. Dean looked as though he didn't have a care in the world. Ben looked at the woman beside his twin. He was familiar with all of the saloon girls at The Lasso, but this one was a stranger. Nice looking, that was certain. He noticed lots of chains and jewelry and rings. Everything clanged together as she traipsed up the steps. Ben Boyle watched the two of them hugging and kissing on the second floor in front of the first room. Dean shoved the woman inside and looked down at the activity in the saloon, caught his brother's gaze, winked, turned into the room, and shut the door.

Ben Boyle swallowed the cold beer in one large gulp. "Another!" he yelled, and the rotund bartender was at Boyle's side within seconds sliding another mug with a healthy head of foam off a circular tray and onto the table. Boyle bit off the end of a thick black cigar, spit the soggy leaf it into his beer and studied the three aces in his hand. It was a typical night at the card table with Boyle winning the majority of the hands.

Outside The Lasso, Ben Boyle's big chestnut colored horse Stage, had freed itself from the hitching post. The big beast sauntered over toward the small rivulet of the blackish slop Ben had hurled a few minutes earlier. The horse bent down and licked a tongue-full of the glop. His head shook up and down uncontrollably for less than a minute before he helped himself to seconds. Stage then went over to Coach, Dean's horse and using his teeth, undid the reins, freeing the black stallion. Coach wasted no time gorging on the jelly-like concoction. Before long, Stage and Coach had freed all of the horses on the dirt street and it was as if they were all bellied up to the bar, slurping and drinking the mysterious elixir.

The first couple of times he heard voices rise in unison from the far side of the room, Ben Boyle ignored it. He'd pause momentarily, but then got immediately back to his card game. Every now and then, he'd look up toward room number one, smile, then return to the hand he was dealt.

But the commotion, shouts and screams across the saloon continued and became more pronounced until they were impossible to ignore. Boyle threw down his cards, got up and headed for the source of the racket. "What the hell goes on here?" he asked. There was a crowd of men, three deep around a small square-shaped table alongside the same wall as the swinging wooden doors. Boyle couldn't see what the hollering was about, so he tapped Clem Newton on the shoulder and asked. Clem removed a toothpick from his mouth. "Craziest thing, Ben. The kid is taking on all comers and damn if he ain't beating everyone," his Adam's apple reverberating up and down like a bucket of well water. He don't look it, but he's stronger'n an ox. Darn young'n just pinned Jake Jackman. Ya believe that? Jake Jackman! Wee doggies!"

"Who? What kid?"

Clem pointed. "Him!"

Ben Boyle pushed his way closer for a better view. There sat the same young boy who had given Ben the bottles of the strange smelly liquid. His face was still hidden, this time behind a red and white-checkered handkerchief. Only the kid's eyes were visible.

"Next!" shouted the boy from beneath the fabric. Big Wally Stevens took a final swig of whiskey, tossed the glass and rolled up his sleeve, revealing a tree trunk of a forearm. "Yer number's up there, sonny." Stevens and the boy locked hands, and the arm wrestling match began. The cocky smile was immediately wiped off Wally Stevens' face and was replaced by surprise, then shock. The kid had the big man's arm down within five seconds. "Well, I'll be," said Stevens, "Yer good kid, real good." With that Stevens pushed and elbowed his way away from the crowd and toward the bar.

Outside, the horses had their fill of drink, lined up one by one, head to tail, head to tail, head to tail, until they formed a complete circle around the saloon. No one took notice.

Ben Boyle's eyes met the boy's. Stillness permeated the saloon. The entire crowd, including a belching Wally Stevens was now hovered around the small corner table. "Let's see what you got, mister," said the kid.

Boyle said nothing. He continued to stare at the young devilish body with the hidden face. The boy continued. "C'mon, let's have a go at it. But, you might need some of that special sauce in the little bottle in your pocket. It'll give you strength of ten men." Boyle mechanically felt his pockets, and once again, he felt little glass containers in each one. Boyle slowly maneuvered himself onto the seat. He never took his eyes off those of his younger opponent.

The only sound in the saloon was the squealing of bedsprings from the

floor above where the redhead was applying the gelatinous concoction to her neck and behind her ears, as if it was an expensive Parisian perfume. Dean barely noticed. His mind was on other things as he continued to peel away layers of clothing. He embraced the woman, and with his mouth, began exploring her skin. "Strange scent," he said as his head emerged for the briefest second before going back for more, "Funny tasting stuff, too. Oh well..." and the two were back at it.

The horses remained in their position. Coach was the first to break the silence with a slight neigh. The horse belonging to Wally Stevens was next, letting out a soft whinny. Some horses adjusted their hind legs. Something was in the air.

Ben Boyle licked his lips and as if to limber up, pumped his fists a few times. He was ready to take on the kid. He planted his right elbow on the table, arm straight up, his palm open. He raised his eyebrows and looked around at the crowd. Smiled. "Well, what'n hell you waitin' fer?" he asked the boy.

Cheers from the packed onlookers bounced off the walls. "Give 'em hell, Ben," and, "Show him who is boss, Boss!" cried The Lasso patrons, most of them scared of both participants. Slowly, gradually, the boy brought his arm up to the table. He cracked his knuckles. Ben Boyle didn't move a muscle. The kid cupped hands with Boyle and the two men gyrated their fingers before engaging in an interlocking handgrip. Both planted their feet firmly on the saloon floor. Justin Teague, who owned the dry goods store in town, reached down and cupped his palms around the hands of both combatants. Teague looked at the masked youngster. "You ready?" The boy nodded his head. Teague turned his gaze toward Boyle. "You ready, Ben?" he asked with reverence. Boyle spit. "Let's go," he snorted. Teague counted to three. Arm muscles bulged and strained. Blood flowed rapidly toward Boyle's head. The two wrestlers were even. Neither had given an inch. Boyle decided to test the kid. He applied slightly more pressure, but the kid met the additional force with a resistance foreign to Ben Boyle. It shook him temporarily, and the youngster seized the moment. He took a slight, maybe an inch, advantage over the grizzled Boyle. No one moved. Was it possible this young unknown could defeat the meanest and toughest son of a gun in the territory? It didn't appear as though the boy exerted much effort. Boyle had had enough. He grunted and thrust all of his force behind a sudden forward jerk, but he gained nothing. In fact, the young man managed to lower Boyle's arm another inch. Boyle was shaken. He tried not to show it, instead grinned, trying to portray someone who was in complete control of the situation. He felt sweat drip from his armpit down toward his waist.

Had anyone paid attention, they'd have noticed a bit more noise coming from the area immediately outside the saloon. The horses were

getting restless. They snorted, grunted, and nickered. Hind legs twitched and heads bobbed up and down and back and forth. Things were beginning to heat up.

Upstairs, on the second level of the saloon behind the first door, Dean Boyle rolled over onto his back. He suddenly felt sick. He tried shaking it off but to no avail. "What's the matter, sugar?" the redhead asked, "I was just getting started. Aren't you man enough for little old me?" she giggled. Dean rolled over and back. Things were fuzzy. The ceiling appeared to lower and the bed felt as though it was rising up to meet the ceiling. Dean tried to clear his head, but the more he tried, the sicker he felt. He licked his lips and tasted the strange concoction that doubled as a woman's perfume. "Give me a minute. I'll feel better in a few minutes." He was trying to reassure himself.

Ben Boyle tried desperately not to show fear. Hard as it was to believe, he was in trouble against this young unknown. His arm was slowly, but steadily, giving ground to his opponent's smaller arm. Through the cloth mask, a whispered voice, "Try drinking some of that elixir. Go ahead, try it. Guaranteed to make you stronger. Immediately, too. You don't have anything to lose," the handkerchief shifting slightly with each word. The bigger man tried ignoring what he'd heard, but the more he tried to forget about them, the closer his arm was getting toward the table. It was taking everything he had to keep himself from defeat. With his left hand, Ben Boyle reached into his pocket. Sure enough, he touched glass and slid the bottle out. The stare of the two battlers didn't waiver. It was as if each one was trying to bore holes through the other's eye sockets. The crowd around the table was focused on the hand positions. Realization was setting in that Ben was at a disadvantage and needed to turn things around, and quickly. Boyle brought the small bottle to his mouth, dug yellowed teeth deep into the mini cork stopper and yanked. The sweet smell was present for a mere second. Boyle raised the bottle, yanked his head back and swallowed. Boyle glanced around. It was he and the boy, no one else. Where had everyone gone? The boy never changed expression. Boyle scarcely had time to think about his surroundings and the whereabouts of the crowd. He was consumed with one thing, his arm position, which was now moving every so slowly toward a more neutral, upright position. He suddenly felt as if he could punch nails through wood. He continued to press, harder and harder until he gained what was at first a slight advantage, followed by a more substantial advantage. Boyle dug his boots harder against the saloon floor. He was now in command of the wrestling match. The back of the boy's fist was inches away from the table. Boyle showed his tongue, still coated with the reddish-black concoction. He went for the kill, a final burst of effort to pin the stranger and end the match. He jerked his arm forward.

Nothing. He tried again. Nothing. The youngster's fist was less than an inch from defeat. Boyle refused to panic; he gave it one last push...

Stage was the first horse to combust. Just like that, he went up in flames, horseflesh burning and smoking. Stage was quickly followed by Coach, who popped like a cracker, shooting flames high above The Lasso. Each horse in turn exploded, until a perfect fire ring surrounded the saloon. The Lasso suddenly resembled a boiling bowl of campout chili.

....but the youngster wouldn't give an inch. With one quick motion, the boy righted his arm and with lightening quickness, pinned Ben Boyle's arm, cracking the older man's shoulder bone and snapping the aged arm completely off his body.

At roughly the same time, the redhead got up off the bed and approached the prostrate Dean. "Well, I guess this is it. So long," she said, extending her arm as if to shake hands goodbye. Instead of shaking, she gave a sudden jerk, separating Dean's arm from the rest of his body. Then, she placed her hand over his face and pulled. He was too far-gone to notice he was missing a nose.

Ben's arm sat on the saloon floor, cooking from the heat of the horse flame. The fire became more intense. The boy looked at Ben and removed his mask. Ben stared blankly at the black cavity where a nose should have been. While Ben tried to process that, his own nose melted off his face and onto the table. Ben attempted to grab it with his left hand, but the boy was far too quick. The kid scooped it up and placed it over the hole in his face. A perfect fit. For the first time, the boy took a deep breath through nostrils.

"I've got a nose," said the redhead as she descended the stairs. She was holding it like a trophy. "Got it from lover boy. Want it?" she asked the youngster.

"No, got my own now," he replied through his mouth. With a flick of her thumb, she flipped Dean's nose into the air, then with the back of her boot kicked it into the spreading flames. The woman and the boy walked out of what remained of The Lasso, leaving the brothers Boyle in the fire.

"Where are the others?" asked the woman. Once outside, the boy pointed. A few of the townspeople were doing push-ups near the jail, but the majority including women and children, were doing pull-ups, with knees bent, on hitching posts lining the dirt trails leading to and away from town.

The two raised ooze filled vials. "A toast!" they shouted in unison.

"Where to?" asked the boy.

"Let's go west. For some reason, I think we should head west," replied the woman.

The Missing

by Augusto Corvalon

Anton awoke on the floor. In the gloom he was not sure where he was so he waited for his eyes to adjust and for the shape of furniture to materialize. Yet even as he waited no shapes became apparent to him, simply shadows folding into shadows. He reached out with his hands to test what lay beyond and felt nothing. On all fours he crawled, eyes closed or open he couldn't tell, until with the crown of his head he butted against something solid and knew it to be a wall. He leaned against it, standing now, and followed it, reaching with his arm until he struck something that was a doorknob.

He opened the door.

The room beyond was not so dark, only in half-gloom, with a gray sort-of light seeping in from the bare windows. He found that he was standing in his apartment after all, a version of it anyway, no chairs or tables or bookshelves or lamps or drapes.

And so, he thought, turning back to the room in full dark where he had woken, that is my bedroom. But where, then, was his bed? His night table? He reached to a familiar spot on the wall and flicked the switch but no light came.

I've been robbed, he thought, and they have taken my light bulbs.

He searched the rest of the apartment. The small living room was complete in its emptiness. The kitchen retained its cabinets (though these had been emptied) and a few large appliances, namely the oven and refrigerator. This last he opened, hoping for the dirty yellow comfort of its light bulb, but this too was missing. The bathroom was the most complete, missing only his basic toiletries.

The addition he found when he rolled back the shower curtain. It was black, splayed across the bathtub. It glistened with a viscous sheen and when Anton reached down and touched it his hand came away moist. Whatever it secreted was sticky and sweet smelling, like rotten fruit. It seemed affixed to the tub by lashes of organic matter.

Anton felt an immediate aggression towards the thing, a deep-rooted repulsion. He turned the shower on as if to wash it down the drain or dissolve it somehow, yet no matter how he turned the handles, water wouldn't flow.

He thought it best to report the burglary and have the authorities deal with the black matter in the bathtub. Though he searched, Anton found the

apartment phone had been taken along with everything else. He loathed to ask his neighbors but didn't have a choice, not with the black thing expanding and contracting in his bathtub as if breathing.

His was an ugly building with an ugly owner and ugly residents. It'd been the only vacancy he could find and cheap due to its poor location. So, despite himself, he left his apartment with the intention of gathering help from one of his neighbors, who were little better in Anton's eyes than the vagabonds outside and not above stealing from him.

The bulb on the landing was still out so Anton took the stairs down one at a time, lest he trip in the darkness and hurt himself. He'd never bothered to learn the name of the lady downstairs, though he had been told she was harmless, non-violent. She had good months and bad months, supposedly, though to Anton they all seemed bad. Often he ran into her in the landing chain-smoking and yelling very intently at an empty spot on the wall. This caused Anton to panic, as if she might suddenly direct her ire at him, and he always barreled past her floor whether she was present or not.

Now he hesitated in front of her door. Could she, and would she, be of help to him? Certainly if she were to knock on Anton's door during dusk (or was it dawn) he would not answer. He would simply pretend she was not there until it became a reality. He pressed his ear against her door, lightly, lest she hear him somehow and attack him. He meant to walk away but was frozen in place when the old lady threw open the door.

She had an unlit cigarette in the slit of her mouth. It reminded Anton of a toad's mouth. Her plastiline face molded into a frown when she saw Anton.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I--" Anton started, yet found the rest of the words missing, as if they too had been stolen along with his furniture.

The old lady reached up and touched his face and Anton recoiled in repulsion. "I," he tried again, but could not get past the first word without his lips freezing, his jaw locking up. "Upstairs."

"I've never seen you before," the old lady said, narrowing her eyes.

"Robbery," Anton said.

"Who are you?" the old lady asked.

"Upstairs," Anton repeated. "Phone."

The word hung dead in the air for a long time so that Anton felt he should either speak again or leave, but could do neither before the old lady asked, eyes narrowed, "Who sent you?"

Anton shook his head. "Mistake."

"A mistake?"

"Misunderstanding." Anton put his hands deep in his pockets and started to walk away. The old lady reared up and opened her enormous mouth, spewing strings of screams and angry accusations of paranoia and fantasy.

Anton raised his arms to his head as if her words could physically strike him and barreled down the stairs, missing several steps and sliding to the landing below. He felt no pain and did not slow down, scrambling down flights of stairs until all he could hear of the old lady was the echo of her rage.

Anton did not know which floor he'd landed on. All the landings looked similar and the darkness here was even more absolute than higher up. He stumbled up to a door, but it was missing a number. Instead, someone had taped a white sheet of paper to the door and scrawled 'Mr Marrone' on it.

His shoulders still heaving as he caught his breath, Anton knocked on the strange door. A tall man wearing worn brown clothes answered. He looked down at Anton with concern.

Hello, I'm sorry to disturb you, but it seems I have been robbed, Anton tried to say. The words formed in his mind but refused to come out.

"What's the matter?" Mr Marrone said, frowning. He started to back away and close the door but Anton reached for him with a desperate hand.

Mr Marrone paused, yelled, "What's the matter with you?"

Anton withdrew his hand and thought it felt somewhat moist now. He scrutinized his fingers, his palm.

"I'm going to call someone," Mr Marrone said, "if you don't leave now."

At the mention of a call Anton started nodding furiously, trying to work his mouth. He came forward again and saw, in the back corner of the apartment's hallway, a creeping pool of thick black fluid. He grew frantic and pointed at the collecting goop but Mr Marrone, enraged, pushed him out of the threshold. Anton grew desperate and rushed the door so that Mr Marrone would see the growing black stain but the bigger man shoved him back and slammed the door shut.

Anton lay alone in the landing. The stairs continued downward, shadows clumping in the corners. Anton thought about descending, knocking on doors, pleading with the grey faced residents for a phone. He felt very weary. He wondered if he was running a fever. He ascended up to his apartment and pushed through the open door. He felt very much like talking to someone and ruffled through his pockets for his contact book but found none. He tried to recall a friend's face; perhaps one who lived nearby, yet all the faces seemed distant in his mind.

He collapsed next to the tub. The black cocoon moved lightly. He felt the thing mocking him. He shoved himself in front of the sink mirror. He looked ashen, face pale, hands white, eyes puffed red. He wondered if he was sick. He wondered how sick he was. He punched the mirror until the shards collected in the sink. He held one in his palm, capturing his face in the reflection.

The thing had expanded. He wondered if it would overflow out of the tub and ripple across the bathroom floor, filling up his apartment and congealing with the shadows beyond. He stood over the thing, stabbed, the shard glinting dully with each rise and fall. The blood pounded in his head, a steady throbbing. The glass came away clean, save for the droplets seeping out of his lacerated palm. Yet he was penetrating the black skin, thick as rind, gnashing it apart and revealing what was underneath.

He was cold. The glass clattered to the floor. The pounding continued and Anton realized it came not from his head, not anymore, but from a knocking on his door. He searched his living room and then his bedroom for a blanket while in the bathroom the black mass came apart and the thing underneath emerged into the world. Anton paced back and forth looking for something to warm him and the knocking continued, but he couldn't answer, not yet, not while he was this cold. The thing emerged from the tub with a slick squelching. Anton could hear its joints popping, its tendons stretching. It was ready now. Anton wondered how sick he was. He wished very much for the knocking to stop yet couldn't answer for he didn't want to talk to anyone anymore. The thing emerged from the bathroom and placed its hands on Anton's shoulders. It looked a lot like him, yes, but different, healthier. Anton shivered under its hands.

"Let me answer it," the thing said, its voice clipped and crisp.

Anton nodded and headed to the bathroom, for he didn't want to see company, or be seen. His teeth chattered. No warmth could be found, no blankets or towels. He heard the thing open the door in the other room, greet the guests. The voices of Mr Marrone and the old lady downstairs came through.

They had all the right words: "My regards", "Good evening", "How do you do?"

Anton was too tired to see to them. The thing had left its black casing behind. It looked warm. He lowered himself into the tub. Beyond, the thing and its guests carried on pleasantly while Anton wrapped the shrouding around him and let the gloom come into him.

YES

OU

by micha

Thematically (dramatically?) you grabbed my palm to read it, told me there are two ways to read: you can read what the lines say, follow the currents the lines make when you wrap your hand around a day-old currant scone, or you can draw new lines in grey chalk & hope they won't wash away with the buttered crumbs. *There's no such thing as an open book* you told me *There's no such thing as a currant scone with butter; it just isn't sensible*

Drinking at the Dollar Theater. That's the last time I was happily hungover. So that's, what, 3 days ago? 10? Let's split the difference & call it 6 or 7. But I thought 10 was your favourite number, so I wanted to twist the story if necessary, as long as it made you happy. I could say we drank 3, 10, an ocean if it meant I could drown in your smile. But, really, it was 5 together. But, really, maybe that's enough to smile. Those drinks are called spirits for a reason, you know, even if the bottle couldn't articulate.

If you were dead, would we still play board games on the roof in the middle of the night? Or would it be card games, tarot coasters for our 40s? I imagine moves sometimes. I imagine your hand moving *Le Bateleur* just so, keeping the bottle from tipping, your hand moving the coldness of the metal game piece. It's your roll again now, kjære. Now. When the dice rolled down the roof, I had to crawl down the rain gutter, find them. How did you ever manage to roll a 13?

ABCDEF

NOPQRST

12345

Place the plectrum on the string, & play Seneca again. Don't tune the violin, you're not even playing it the way it was created, so it doesn't matter. It's the way it is just now, & only the plectrum can make it any different. Let it trace out some chords (or let the violin feel the plectrum pluck – 2 bodies in relative motion). Follow the notes like coordinates. Each string is a line between a city, every vibration an earthquake ready to send the state into the Pacific. We could go for a swim you know; strum faster, faster, harder.

The last time I wrote you a letter, the words left the page. So I tried writing in water on the summer concrete, let the water steam, hoping my message would rain down on you. I never heard back, so I wrote in ants with a magnifying glass & the midday sun. Did you hear them crackle? Did they say your name? Did the rain wash their corpses to you persephonically? I wonder if your line was disconnected by then –

GOO

IJA

el frazer

NO

I wish we weren't friends so I could meet you again. Maybe a moment can be recycled like plastic: processed, condensed, almost the same a second time, relabeled as Pepsi when it began as Coke. But considering you drink neither, what purpose would the bottle serve? I could send you another message in a bottle, I guess, but I'd rather scrap it (& I hope you see why). So rather than keep your message, I put it in the bin, knowing that when it's removed from the curb, thus trashed, it's always different but never over.

Orpheus' eye wandered, as did Bataille's (if you catch my drift). But ours? No. Jonathan Crary's assumption of the autonomous eye – well, we never were ones for speculum, I mean, speculation. I followed your presumed trace through the Northern hemisphere, your coastal trajectory like an Arctic bullet, cold to the touch, silver to the tongue. I'm convinced you never went. I'm convinced you never left. I'm convinced that, like Bataille's eye, you found an alien place, a new context, a comfortably warm yet questionable fit.

GHIJKLM

TUVWXYZ

67890

If you were alive, would we watch *Aqua Teen* on repeat all day?
The cable company disconnected the wires last week, so if holding
magnets up to the static won't work, I don't know what will. It's
dark at noon in the apartment if the blinds are closed, & the carpet
is static to my cheek when I lie face down: there's no remembering
what never happened. I trace your name backwards on the floor.
It's warmth. How is it pronounced again?

I've written more letters than there are alphabets, even more than the ones we invented. & you returned them. Now, normally I'd be mad, but the Tzaran method you've employed – cutting up & tearing up & stitching up – I couldn't ask for more. You were in my words; I was in the postage you paid.

I vaguely miss winter, the succulents in the mason jars & light bulbs in the window of the coffee shop. Your scarf wrapped around the two of us guillotine style. The cable knit was warm with the telephonic messages they carried. I felt static. I felt like the icicles could decapitate us, & I'd be fine with that. Fine, there's red in the snow, another obvious image, but we'd have plenty of time then, our bodies numb to the deadening cold. What of time? What happens next? What does it matter when I call you every morning at exactly 2:47 just to make sure your breath still smells like fresh sage over the phone?

DBYE

Somebody Misplaced Montana

by David S. Atkinson

Somebody misplaced Montana. They made everyone look under their desks to see if it had fallen, but only old bubble gum, notes about Bobby riding his BMX bike without a shirt, and the Hapsburg dynasty were down there. Montana wasn't.

Nobody knew how long it'd been gone. We'd had our heads down during recess because of the War of 1812, so we hadn't noticed. Only when someone realized the North Dakota/Idaho run was shorter was the absence noted. We all agreed it could have been that way for a while.

Businesses located in Billings changed their address to Coeur d'Alene, a formality really. People based in Missoula weren't affected because there weren't any. It was all reasonable and prudent.

I bet Corey stuffed Montana in his overall pocket when no one was looking. He was an angry kid, always stealing stuff and jamming it in that damn pocket. States, nuclear reactors, even a child's sense of wonder. He didn't want any of that crap, but there it all was. In his pocket. I didn't say anything, though. Montana was no reason to be a snitch.

At first, the principal was mad; he'd booked a vacation in Butte that summer. A Beanie Baby safari set to coincide with the annual balsa wood airplane and Brokeback Mountain cosplay convention. They told us he wouldn't let us leave until Montana was returned, but then he just said he was disappointed in us sent us home without our pineal glands.

He couldn't prove anything without resorting to a search or supermarket magazine psychics. Anyway, it was only Montana.



The Feast

Oil and latex paint on canvas

72in x 48in

From The Heart

by Neil Mezynski

Strand of hair twistin in the wind, foot kickin high head , eyes.... stay here this world not that , me . Don't forget she used to go at any importune time, mid note was best.. far away don't go. Not good at that sad to say. Chopin. Listen.



Closet

Oil and latex paint on canvas, 72in x 48in



I-75

Oil and latex paint on canvas, 72in x 48in

Six-Pack Story - The Rise Of Brewer

By Dave Gordon

Beer 1

The only thing keeping Brewer company as he sauntered down the streets of downtown New Detroit were the newspaper tumbleweeds that cycled through the air and gathered around his feet.

He kicked at them, furious over the whole ordeal. He could just imagine the headlines for tomorrow's paper:

Detective Drunk During Duty! - *New Detroit Daily*

Sleuth Can't Stay Sober - *The Post-Detroit Post*

The commissioner held a press conference denouncing Brewer. Even then the mayor stepped in to give full pardons to any perpetrator he had helped lock up, afraid of being sued by lawyers looking to make a quick buck. And in this skid-mark of a city, there were plenty of both.

He was washed up. Everyone down at the station knew it. They caught him in a bathroom stall sucking down a Colt 45 like it was water. It was a secret he knew they wouldn't understand, and one he tried to hide from the squad. He knew it was wrong, but he knew he had to drink. It made him a better detective. So when they gave him the pink slip, told him to pack his things, he did what only felt appropriate—on his walk home, he stopped by a local convenience store and bought himself a six-pack.

And when he finished that first beer, he felt a little stronger, more confident that it would work out. Without taking his eyes off the long stretch of road, he threw the empty, aluminum shell down an abandoned alleyway, shaded from the afternoon sun. The can flew through the air like a rocket and crumpled on impact when it hit the inside of a dumpster halfway down the darkened street.

Beer 2

Brewer reached down and plucked another beer off of the six pack cluster. It cracked like a bullwhip when he opened it, and he took a nice long pull from its gaping, frothy mouth.

His mind, which finally relaxed after the day's stress, was jolted alert when he heard the siren of a squad car as it screamed past him in the opposite direction he was walking. Then three more followed suit, and

Brewer knew that this was something more than just a routine call. He took another swig of his beer, turned around, and followed the direction of the cars. When they made a quick turn at the next block, he knew where they were headed: the headquarters of the Bank of New Detroit.

After quickening his pace, Brewer arrived at the scene. His former brothers in blue had the bank surrounded. Already they were setting up a perimeter, holding the growing crowd back. He burped loudly as he watched on, letting the gas in his stomach freely come to a roaring crescendo as it exited out of his mouth. The 3rd division looked like they had their hands full. In the crowd, Brewer spotted Stanley, the city negotiator, in an cheap suit two sizes too big for him walking around with his megaphone like a chicken with its head cut off. Negotiator meant hostages, and hostages meant that this could be his chance to prove them wrong.

Even with his sloppy belch, Brewer felt statuesque. Everyone told him he always looked the part of a detective. The square jaw, the dark, penetrating eyes. His hands, the size of oven mitts were giant to match his giant arms and broad shoulders. He looked out, against the high-noon sun determined to change his fate.

He threw down another empty can of beer, leaving a fresh crack in the sidewalk.

Beer 3

The six pack was now half empty, the three cans that remained hung limp from their plastic holder. He snapped back the tab on the third of his beers and it made a hiss like a viper. He felt the strength pour through him as the cold liquid slid down his throat.

Brewer scanned the crowd and found Lopez. He passed through the weak barriers looked over by inexperienced troopers and sauntered up to his old friend, unashamed of the beer he was holding and aware of how it might look that a detective, recently fired for drinking on duty, was sauntering around an active crime scene while working through a six-pack. But now that he was no longer employed by the city, he honestly had nothing to lose.

"Hey Lopez, isn't there a speed trap you gotta help set up?" Brewer taunted.

Lopez turned around, and a smile broke out through his stoic face after seeing his long-time friend. "What're you doing here Brewer? Didn't Chief can your ass? Actually, fuck him. We need you right now. Let's call it an advisory role." Lopez's face turned cold, "Jachmer has five hostages in there."

“The Jackhammer?” Brewers hands squeezed the half-empty, threatening to crumble and spill all of its contents. Johnny ‘The Jackhammer’ Jachmer was a notorious bank thief and the one crook that Brewer was never able to pin down. He was always in and out before bank staff ever had a clue. It was said he had developed a new way to get into bank vaults, that he could break through a concrete and steel vault like it was made of paper. But somehow, someway, they finally had Johnny pinned.

Brewer thought for a moment, “I’m going in.”

“You can’t. Remember? You were let go. I can use your expertise out here though.”

Brewer’s eyes closed to a thin slit. “I’m going in. Just watch me.” And he started heading towards the front doors of the bank.

Lopez grabbed his arm. “Look buddy, I know you want to help. I know that what happened earlier today wasn’t your fault and was completely fucked. But I can’t let you in there. I’ll have the boys take you in for that open beer you’re drinking before I let you in that bank.” Lopez put his free hand on his walkie, to show Brewer he wouldn’t back down.

In one quick swoop, Brewer grabbed Lopez’s walkie out of its holster before Lopez could react. He took a swig of beer and then snapped the antenna between his thumb and forefinger before handing it back to Lopez. “I know you wouldn’t, but just in case. Let me through, old friend. The Jackhammer is mine.”

Lopez gave a knowing sigh. Brewer was the best man for the job. He knew it, Brewer knew it, the whole force knew it. He gave a nod to his surrounding officers, telling them to stand down. “You want me to hold your beer for you?”

“No, I’m gonna need it.” Brewer said as he tossed an empty can to Lopez, who immediately dropped the can on the asphalt, thinking it felt unhumanly hot.

Beer 4

He started walking towards the entrance of the bank when he opened the fourth beer of his sixer. He could hear the crowd hush as he broke the inner half-circle of the police line.

Brewer looked in at the refracted figures of the Jackhammer’s goons just inside the glass doors that opened into Detroit’s largest bank. Their guns were poised and ready to fire. But Brewer didn’t seem to notice or care as he took another long drag from his beer. The remainder of his six-pack hung by his hip like a loaded sidearm.

As Brewer approached the door, a shot rang out from the inside of the

bank. The bullet broke through a glass window and was sent twirling into the afternoon sky. A warning shot. But Brewer's pace wasn't slowed and he put a hand on the door's handle.

There was movement inside the bank. Brewer could feel it—there were five armed men, six hostages (most likely bank employees and maybe a customer) and a bank guard lay dead close to the entrance. None of the men were the Jackhammer, he must be holed up in the safe. Brewer felt confidence surge through him knowing it was just the henchmen he would have to handle. So he took a long drink of the amber liquid and went to work.

Brewer dodged the bullet
and threw the final can,
still tethered with the
plastic rings, at the goon's
face. The usually soft
aluminum hit the poor man's
nose with a resounding pop.

Now, Brewer stood at 6'4", broad everything. But he moved with the grace of a ballerina. He opened the door, just a few inches and slipped in. The armed men, the Jackhammer's goons didn't wait for a signal, they started firing.

But everything felt slow to Brewer. Like it was happening underwater and he was a swift fish, cutting through the ocean. The bullets passed by him as he danced through the foyer of the bank. Arms swaying, he twisted and turned, jumping over shotgun rounds and handgun pops, all with the two silver cans held securely by his side. A bullet nearly hit the beer can in his hand, so he slid and took shelter behind an overturned desk. He was safely inside.

"Come out with your hands up." He called out to the masked gang taking cover behind the teller booths.

The henchmen laughed. "Are you kidding. You got no weapon. Rocko, take care of this bozo." One miserly henchman, directed from his barrier of safety.

Beer 5

Brewer smiled knowingly and opened his fifth beer. The beer was getting warmer, which made it easy to chug. It went down quickly before the goon took three steps out of his hiding space.

When he finished, he threw the empty can to the side and spun over the desk, flipping in mid-air, his trenchcoat looking like a cape caught by a gust of air. Yet the henchman approached, still unsure what to do with this unidentified intruder. So he fired.

Brewer dodged the bullet and threw the final can, still tethered with the plastic rings, at the goon's face. The usually soft aluminum hit the poor man's nose with a resounding pop. Blood splurted from his nostrils and temporarily blinded him. The cans flew back to Brewer in mid flight, like a yoyo returning on a string to its owner.

"Shoot him!" Brewer heard a henchman shout. The scene became a blur as Brewer danced and dodged around the hailstorm of bullets. His body was a machine, landing punches and kicks with the accuracy of a champion Thai kickboxer. And one by one, they all fell to the floor like a sack of flour. a quick kick to the throat, a slam against a table, a swift kick to the knee.

Beer 6

The hostages slowly stood up from their huddled hiding spots and with a nod from Brewer, they all ran out of the bank. Officers were waiting with blankets to receive them and rush them back behind the line of blue uniforms.

But Brewer wasn't done. He slowly walked behind the counter to the back of the bank, where the vault and the Jackhammer were waiting for him.

The lights were out in the hallway that led to the vault, but the large circular door was cracked open, casting a sharp blade of light in the blackness. There was a sound of a woman quietly crying and Brewer's heart sank. He had someone in there. And then a muffled voice called out from the vault.

"Brewer! I know that's you. Don't take another step closer. I've got someone in here and I would hate for anything bad to happen to her."

"Don! Please! Help!" Brewer recognized the voice, it was his wife Nancy. And he stopped in his tracks. Nancy must have been at the bank when the Jackhammer hit.

"Here's what I'm going to do Johnny. I've had a bad day, so I'm going to make this easy for you. I have a beer here that I'm about to open and by the

time I'm done, I want Nancy out of that vault and your face on the ground with your hands behind your back. You got me?"

Nancy was probably the only person in the world who knew the true nature Brewer's secret. She tried to crouch lower, to get out of the way, but the Jackhammer held her tighter because of it and held his gun to her temple.

Out in the darkness of the hallway, Brewer pulled out his keys and turned his last can of beer sideways. He made a small incision in the wall of the aluminum and put his lips around the hole. He tilted his head back and when he felt the beer enter his mouth, he opened the tab of the beer. Like a torrent river, the beer rushed into his mouth and in an instant the beer was gone.

From inside the vault, all the Jackhammer could hear was a small click and then, silence. He waited for something to happen--a sound, some movement, anything. It was then that Brewer flew into the vault, like a gust of wind. Moving quicker than any man could possibly move, his hand knocked the Jackhammer's gun to the ground and he pushed Nancy out of the way.

But the Jackhammer was no ordinary man. He swung his hand up in the air and landed a crack to Brewer's jaw. Brewer stumbled back, the room became a spinning top, but only for a moment.

He dove into the Jackhammer's body knocking him to the ground. On top of his suspect, Brewer leaned in close. The smell of beer hit the Jackhammer like a wall, making him dizzy.

Brewer whispered, "Like I said, this wasn't the day to fuck with me." And then he swung a huge fist down upon the Jackhammer's face, knocking him out and two of his teeth.

Brewer heard running footsteps coming down the hallway. He stood up, over the subdued body like a gladiator. But he could feel a small rumble deep in his gut, and he became unbalanced. He looked over at Nancy and smiled. Nancy ran over to him, to give him a hug, like they hadn't seen each other in years. But before she got too close, he put up a finger as if to say just one sec. He stumbled over to the corner of the vault and threw up his six beers and whatever else was in his stomach.

It was then that Lopez entered the vault. "They're in here!" He called out to his fellow officers who were making their way down the dark hallway.

Brewer looked up from the corner. "Hey Lopez, what took you so long? Looks like the Jackhammer took a bite out of something he couldn't chew." And with that, Brewer grabbed Nancy's hand and walked out of the vault, leaving Lopez there clean up.

Fire Hydrant Photo Project

All across New York, it seems we can't bear the sight of a regular-old, monochrome fire hydrant. The stand-out paint job is as common as the ubiquitous, city-issued black and silver. Some are representative of different counties' flags, some are simply eye-catching and some look like little blue Smurfs with white hats. This vibrancy and variance in colors came to my attention early in the summer, so I asked friends and family to keep an eye out and contribute their photos to this collaborative project. I hope you enjoy and keep an eye out for these hidden-in-plain-sight treasures in your own neighborhoods.

Michael

photo: Elin Ruth



photo: Morgan Perrine

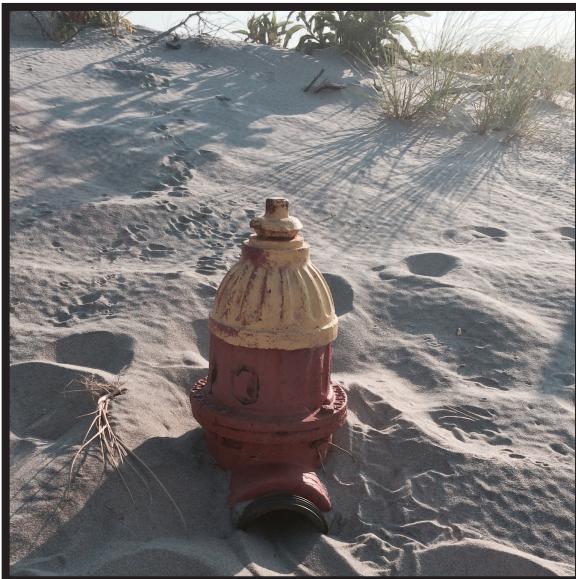


photo: Brendan Cooney



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Photo: Michael Kuntz



photo: Marc Calvary



photo: Suzanne Kuntz



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photo: Cat Baldwin



photo: Brendan Cooney



The Chronicles of Tim pt. XVI - This Ends Now pt. II of II - The Exciting Series Finale Really by Mike Wiley

Tim has just learned of the existence of the final daughter, Mange-Pot. She has been wreaking havoc on the inhabitants of Tim's world. Tim knows that he must execute this final challenge in order to save his family. There can be no peace without this final act. He must confront, seduce, and destroy.

Tim finished packing his bag and set out to leave his home, potentially forever. As he was about to exit his room, he paused in front of the great big mirrored armoire. The holy beard hung from his chin down to his belly. A gale blew through the open window, flapping his chin hairs like some lunatic flag. Tim stared into his own sunken eyes. Though he seemed not to have aged in any traditional sense, his appearance could only be described as bedraggled. This was not the condition he had arrived in. This castle, this place had done this to him. And now he was going out to defend it.

"Good riddance to all of it," he thought, and descended the stairs to the anteroom of the castle.

Awaiting him by the front door was his entire family. Lovers, former lovers, children, grandchildren, James and Geryon. They were all there to wish Tim well on his journey. "I wish I were well enough to join you," James said, coughing. He shook Tim's hand. Every face was present except for the one he desired to see the most.

Once outside, Tim popped his collar against the wind. A storm brewed far overhead. Large shadows moved with quick bursts against the dark background of the castle perimeter. It was too dark to see anything clearly, but Tim could sense the presence of the Zugdusters. "Now which way?" he wondered.

There was only one way he could go, one road that could lead away from the castle. It was the same road that lead through the impossible, shifting forest to the Nevercaves. Tim set upon it. He hadn't gone more than a few yards into the darkness of the trees when he heard someone calling his name.

It was Pandora. She had come to give him something to help him on his way. She pressed a small note into the palm of his hand.

"Oh Pandora. This isn't how I wanted it to end."

"How did you want it to end?" she asked.

"A little more like this," he said as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Pandora pushed him back and looked away.

"Don't do that," she said with a sigh. "You wanna click your red heels and say 'there's no place like home,' too? That kind of thing only works in fairytales."

"Oh, but I thought..."

"No. Just don't."

"But I might die."

A tear rolled down Pandora's cheek. "I know," she said. "But you must go now."

Then she was gone, vanishing like a mist in the wind.

Tim looked down at the crumpled thing in his hand. It looked like it might be a map, but when he opened it, he found only a note with these words scrawled in thick, oily lines: "Eat me."

Back at the castle, Geryon and James were busy fortifying the walls from the inside. A dark storm was brewing directly over their land and nowhere else. They nailed sheets of plywood over all the ground floor windows and ushered everyone into the center of the estate, as far from all entrances as possible. The winds were rocking the building so hard that the swaying could be felt on the thirty-seventh floor and above.

"What happens if he isn't successful?" James asked.

"We can't afford the luxury of wondering such a thing," Geryon said. "We must believe that he is capable."

The children shuddered and shook and gathered in small clusters here and there. One group built a small blanket fort under the billiards table. A fierce wind howled through the lofty architecture. The air was colder on this night than it had ever been.

The scene was that of a refugee camp. Souls wandered about with blank expressions, others simply sat terrified, hugging the children. The mothers busily wrapped them in spare blankets and prepared candlelights.

"Can't you work any faster?" Geryon scolded James.

"I could if I had any you-know-what. But I don't. We haven't harvested in so long that I am beginning to think myself a singular entity again."

"I just gave you a rationing this morning. What happened to it?"

"I received it, took some, and put the rest in my usual place, somewhere the children wouldn't be able to find it, but it disappeared."

"Theodine doesn't just disappear," Geryon said.

Pandora was nearby, helping to keep some of the children calm. Geryon and James both looked at her.

Tim shrugged and placed the note in his mouth with a whip flip zap of the tongue. The sensation came over him immediately. A familiar rush went speeding through his veins and he had the strength and knowledge of one hundred men. He could see in the dark. He could see from far above the trees. He could see everything. Most importantly he could see how to gain access to the enemy's fortress. Sadly, his beard receded back into his face and was gone.

A large, dark bird zipped just over Tim's head. Tim locked his sights on the majestic thing and unified his spirit with it. Together they soared up into the dark night against fierce winds which continued to grow stronger the farther they traveled from the castle.

Tim knew just where to go and so he directed them.

"What do you want me to say?"

James and Geryon had Pandora cornered. It was apparent what had happened to James' theodine supply.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?" Geryon asked.

"Yeah. I gave a sick man a little medicine to help him save all our asses," she said.

"No, you don't understand. All of this has been for nothing. Tim had successfully kicked theodine. His beard was huge. He was supposed to do this sober."

Pandora shrugged. "So he'll do it like a superhero, high as a kite. And then he'll come home to us."

Geryon turned and put his fist through the wall. "No, he won't," he said. "If he completes this task while on theodine, it will kill him."

Tim landed in front of the gates to a castle far more grandiose than his home. It was nicer too. To his surprise the front door opened wide and he was received by a welcoming party. A small man approached Tim and proffered a glass of scotch on a silver tray. Tim took this all in stride, confident that it was nothing but a ruse. But he was never afraid, for the theodine coursing through his veins had brought him back to near-immortal standing.

He was lead by an escort through a series of chambers and passageways, walking by giant honeycomb structures where large, subterranean insects scurried out of sight at his passing. They stopped at a door where he was left off by the escort.

"Come in," came the hideous voice from behind the door. Tim opened, ready to attack. His offensive stance turned out to be unnecessary.

Mange-Pot was sprawled in a disgusting heap on a bed in the center of the great room. She was clearly sick.

"Tim," she rasped. "It's so nice to meet you. I've at last gained your attention. I do apologize that it was at the expense of so many of your children. Small sacrifices we all must make in these dark times."

Tim began to interject, but Mange-Pot cut him off.

"I'll cut right to the point. I cannot die. I want to die and the only way for me to die is for someone to fuck me one final time. I'm sure you're aware of my father's condition. His eggs... Well, my egg sack is so full. But no one will dare go near this gelatinous larval squish bag." She patted her enormous, swollen belly. A greenish liquid seeped from several pores in the flesh. "I am so hideous now. Even my minions wont think to touch me..." She looked away. "Not in that way."

Tim was extremely uncomfortable. He had expected battle. He had expected a bloody victory. What he had not expected was that his foe would be so pitiable.

"I see you are revolted by me," she continued. "I once was beautiful, like your precious Pandora. What? You think I don't know everything that happens in this world? Tim, it couldn't possibly make sense to you, but I am even older than my father. I want to die so badly. The ages are not kind to one who has lived as long as I have. I know what a horror I've become. But my egg sac is near exploding and I need one last good fuck. Will you please just fuck me?" She began to cough. Spittle flew and misted on the floor between them. Tim was reminded of splattered bugs on a windshield.

Tim closed his eyes tight. He had little reason to trust the slobbery beast Mange-Pot. She had sent sentinels to murder his children after all. But sex had been on the menu of tasks to complete ever since he arrived in this strange world. He wanted nothing more than to just behead the thing and be done with her. But he knew in his heart of hearts that it would not be that easy. He didn't know what else to do, so he took a deep breath and pulled his pants down to his ankles. Eyes still closed, he heard an uproarious laughter.

"Hahahahaha! You can't fuck me with that little stick," she said, jiggling and pointing at Tim's sad tan banana. The look of confusion and shame must have been apparent on Tim's face because the great Mange-Pot said, "Honey, that thing wouldn't satisfy even one of my many eurobinary flagellar plugs. No, no, you must fuck me with the boloney pony of your mind." She reached up and tapped the side of her misshapen head.

Tim was stupefied. He pulled his pants up and sat on the floor. "What does that even mean?" he said.

"Just come a little closer and I will show you what to do."

Tim got up and took a few steps toward the the diseased blob. An aroma of putrefaction surrounded the beast. Her breathing was labored. Something like blood stains and long, raking scars marred what must have once had been lovely breasts. She kept her eyes locked on his with every approaching step. The warmth of her rotting breath washed over Tim as he came within a few feet of Mange-pot. The smell reminded Tim of hot, steamed cauliflower and rotting banana.

That's when Tim noticed a great, rubbery seam running from Mange-Pot's sternum down to her naval. She nodded as if to say, You got it, Mister.

"There must be some way to get him out of there," Pandora said. She was wringing her hands as she paced the room. James and Geryon just looked at each other. There was really nothing they could do. "Something, anything!" she screamed. Just then, the lights went out and every window in the house exploded inward.

Only Tim's head protruded from Mange-Pot's seemingly bottomless vagina. He was face to face with the villain as he submerged himself inch by inch inside her. Soon there would be nothing left of him. Mange-Pot smiled, eyes half-closed.

"I fucking hate you so much," Tim said just before he took the final plunge and

went completely under.

At first he felt nothing. Comfort, perhaps. Warmth. When nothing seemed to be happening, he thought of Pandora and he felt even warmer. Then a voice from outside said to him, "No, you idiot. You've got to focus your rage and give it to me!"

Which he did. Tim thought of everything that had been taken from him. He thought of Tina-Sue back in Arizona. He thought of his ratty couch and his secret beer stash below the couch, probably gone warm by now. Even if Mange-Pot wasn't the one to blame for everything, he focused all that rage right there inside her vast womb.

Suddenly a great weight release from his groin. There unleashed from the bowels connected to his beef whistle a torrent of all the things wrong and displaced in the world. Tim saw lights exploding far off in the darkness that enveloped him. Then it was as though his innards had been replaced by helium. He began to float upward. This can't be how it ends," he thought. Tim struggled against thin air. There was nothing around him against which to hold. A distant song called to him out of the sudden darkness. The voice, soft and gentle like a new-born kitten, belonged to Pandora. The words were indistinct at first, as though she were speaking to Tim beneath the surface of a pool. Gradually her garbled voice became focused, coherent words. She called to him to surrender. She was asking him to let go.

"I'm not ready," Tim said. His own voice sounded far away.

Pandora giggled, her laughter echoing through the void. "Of course you aren't," she said. "You were never ready for any of this, were you? Yet look how far you've come."

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