

# paradigm

---

the rockwell issue

*A publication of Rain Farm Press. First published in April 2007.*



# contents

## **FICTION** ▪ 5

- Wind-Whipped.* Jim Bauer ▪ 6  
*Violent Indigo.* Andrea Kurtz ▪ 12  
*Hard Winter.* Patrick S. McGinnity ▪ 16  
*In the Torrid Zone.* William Moake ▪ 21  
*Waste.* Michelle Shin ▪ 26  
*A Colder War.* Charles Stross ▪ 28

## **NONFICTION** ▪ 54

- Storm Chaser.* Warren Faidley ▪ 55

## **POETRY** ▪ 63

- On Tilt.* Will Cordeiro ▪ 64  
*Grave-side Confessions.* Julian Jason Haladyn ▪ 66  
*A Silence to Kill the Void.* Ian Malloy ▪ 67  
*Untitled.* Megan Proehl ▪ 68  
*frozen tears.* Megan Proehl ▪ 69  
*Negligible.* Megan Proehl ▪ 70  
*Missing City.* Josh Rathkamp ▪ 71

## **STAGE & SCREEN** ▪ 74

- Requiem for a Hero.* Vidas Barzdukas ▪ 75

## **CONTRIBUTORS** ▪ 86



# fiction

## *Wind-Whipped* by Jim Bauer

---

The way we were then, how we aren't now... When, oh ye gods of fate, did your icy talons begin the slow, agonizing process of rending flesh from living bone? Why, oh ye gods of wisdom, was sight denied me in these proceedings? These thoughts of when, where, why, and how...the perfect punishment. Battling one another for spaces and defensive positions in this tormented conscience, and acting as the keen-edged razor that sunders this pining heart.

I stand alone in our forest dwelling, welcoming the torrents of rain pouring through these wind-hewn walls that seem to amerce me in its cleansing goodness. Gazing through roof torn asunder reveals a sky wrought with heavy, fast-approaching clouds of darkest hue. The rolling thunder. The crashing lightning. The rain, wind, and this once-proud structure which, like you, was forced to bear the imprecations of mother nature. All these things ceaselessly beckon me, calling to me with rough, demonic voices of sharpest steel, summoning me with the pointing of cruel, laughing fingers, and offering guidance with hands bearing malice in abundance.

Guidance I need naught, for that world I remember all too well. I remember its edifices of eroded brick, painted with caricatures of purest evil. I remember the helpless mire into which I fell, the pleas for a rope that went unheeded. Oh yes, it's all so very, very clear to me. Lady liquor couldn't darken the images; the needle, sending perceived respite flooding through veins and capillaries, did nothing to quell the rays of the blistering sun. Hence, to this place I've returned. Returned to recount the horror from its point of origin; returned to satisfy an urge to seal my heart, mind, and soul from future guilt. Thusly, As the vengeful clouds and storms draw ever nigh to my shelter, I willingly take Persephone's curse'd hand, and venture forth, speaking my tale in a slow, rhythmic tongue, as per some archaic incantation.

'Twas but a mere fortnight ago when you and I lay in this very dwelling upon hand-woven mats of fronds; Our bodies entwined, writhing in the reckless abandonment of fervent love-making. From a group of hunters camped yonder, I had heard tell of a grate funnel cloud set to hit these parts in a couple of days. Hence, my plan for the morrow was to return home, procure the neighbors' Land Rover, and collect as much as possible from this sanctuary that could be preserved. Waking early, I set out to do just that, taking with me a backpack, a canteen topped from a nearby spring, and, as an afterthought, the pearl-handled revolver, given to me by your father last Christmas. Throwing a glance and a kiss at your sleeping form, I stepped from the shack, made a right, and began the quarter-mile walk north. It was herein that the gods began to make their deceit known.

Less than half of my route had been traversed when I was forced to dispose of a huge brown bear who lumbered into my path, fangs bared, one powerful hind paw raised in a manner far from non-threatening.

The revolver barked once, the silencer allowing little more noise than a man discreetly coughing.

The bear took several faltering steps away from me, eventually crashing to the earth, its grate heart torn to pumping rags by the high-caliber round that slammed into its chest.

I drew forth my flensing knife, skinning the grate beast as quickly as I could, stowing as much of the meat as permitted by physical space into my pack.

When finished, I rolled the carcass down the side of a steep earthen embankment, knowing of the sustenance it would give to the other wildlife.

As high noon approached, I finally reached the city. From here, it was but a mere few blocks until I reached my home.

The sky had grown quite a bit darker in the scant few minutes it took to traverse this route; at times, the sun almost totally obscured from view by great rolling clouds. The wind had begun to gain in speed and velocity, buffeting my face and body, and throwing my hair about like clothes in a drier. I still thought I had time. Time I now know I didn't have, had no chance of ever having.

I gained possession of the car—by means of a hundred-dollar bill—and began the drive back to the shack, only dimly aware of the wind howling outside the car's windows, and

the effort of steering. One thought echoed throughout the cavernous regions of my mind: 'Provisions, provisions, provisions.'

As the car began to enter the forest, I was instantly struck by the utter wrongness of the sights before me.

An expanse which, less than an hour ago had been dancing and alive with wind-blown leaves and scurrying animals, was now desolate. Nothing moved, and rolling down the driver-side window yielded an ear-popping pressure. It would've been utterly suicidal to take the Land Rover into a mass of trees with the approaching of a tornado, hence it was parked at the crest of the road leading from forest to city.

Removing myself from the car, I began to run into the forest, weaving through the trees, bushes, and foliage in my path. 'Provisions, provisions, provisions' had long since been replaced with 'Christ, Christ, Christ,' as every sense I possessed was vehemently telling me I wouldn't make it. I didn't.

The tornado whipped through the forest, instantly slicing through the silence like a hot knife through butter. A tree behind me was snapped at its roots, the dark shadow of its form disappearing, describing a fearsome ark through the air. Flattening myself to the earth, with arms covering my head, I knew my life was subservient to the whims of the raging storm that was delivering its wrath with complete and total violence. Using a motion bearing resemblance to a swimmer's

breast stroke, I inched my way forward, skirting debris, dead or dying animals, and pieces of trees hewn to dagger-like sharpness by the deadly gale. Eventually, after a span of mere minutes that felt like slowly passing centuries, I arrived at the low wall of misshapen rock acting as parapet of the clearing. Here, I had a decent view of the shack, between the two massive oaks that served to support our clothesline. As I prepared to vault the wall, my boot heels caught in a patch of loose rock, and I tumbled over backwards, striking an elbow on a jagged, protruding bit of stone. Through the white-hot haze of pain that suddenly filled my mind, I heard a grate clattering. Lurching unsteadily to my feet, I was just in time to see the last ten feet of the left most oak break away and sail into the teeth of the monstrosity. Moments later, I heard the all too familiar sound of crunching metal and shattering glass. "Jesus, it..." That's when the shack's door flew open, revealing the figure tottering outside. I couldn't see clearly, but in my deepest heart of hearts, I knew what it was, and knew what was wrong.

My angel bride.

Her left eye had been pulped to a weeping goo, jagged shards of her splintered cheek bone protruding from her skin. I remember thinking: 'Should've taken the goddamn fishing pole...' There was far more to behold. As she lurched away from the door, I was finally able to see inside— Was finally able to see the immense cast iron Dutch Oven. The only delicacies this device provided that day were torture, agony, and terror. Staring at my beloved, I surmised what must've happened.

One of the shack's back most windows was probably shattered, imploding in an array of razored shards of instant, wind-driven death.

Judging from numerous cuts along her length, the glass hadn't exactly been death personified, but harsh mistress seemed a sure guess.

She'd probably dropped to her knees in the shack, that is, of course, if she was even awake. Then, the oven must've fallen.

Why she wasn't crushed was a mystery I had no interest in solving, However, as with other instruments in this torture chamber of a camp site, it hadn't left quietly.

The plummeting metal had crushed shoulders, elbows, hands, and wrists. Possibly ribs as well, given the way she was walking—nearly bent double like a king's courtier.

Her animal scream cleared my mind of any fogginess induced by intense pain. She hadn't seen me—probably wouldn't— but was somehow making the attempt to walk in my direction, mouth open, screaming. Screaming! She was screaming my name, voice raised, muscles of throat standing out on her blood-slick skin like whipcords.

Thence, the tears came.

Hot, salty reminders of actions taken, and actions not taken. I lay silent, so racked with sobbing that calling to her was nothing short of impossible.

As I now stand, a spectator to this macabre scene through the words I speak, I wish I would've. I wish I would've said something, or tried to say something, no matter how slight, how muffled by wind and savagely dying trees... But I didn't, and it shall forever be a mural in my mind.

She screamed again, the anger prevailing in the ever-rising melody. Anger at being seemingly abandoned in her darkest hour. Anger at dying, but worst of all, dying alone. Cast to the wolves, thrown to the lions who hungrily devour the last shreds of one's spirit, one's trust in others, trust that there is, in fact, some modicum of honor and goodness in this world. She was justified in her anger, and the pain of this realization was unparalleled.

Forgotten was my temporarily useless left arm. Forgotten were the many cuts and bruises, throbbing in rhythm set by my pulse.

My being of grace and beauty. The embodiment of pure innocence, and the most tender of tender love... And in the last moments of her waking existence, I was to become everything she hated. Every facet of human cruelty of which we, as young children, are forewarned, either by parental figures or otherwise.

A red, seething anger began to course its way to the surface of my awareness. An anger at allowing myself to under-estimate, to fall short through some misstep of logic, and, worst of all, my angel bride was to be ruthlessly torn from me, never knowing that I was there to disprove her suppositions.

I vaulted the wall.

It was total madness. Running, fully up-right, with head and face unprotected, whilst a tornado carried out its raging work all around me. But the anger kept me from caring. I could almost see it; could almost see the vast expanse of red fire behind eyes, invading synapses, controlling reflexes and instinct, and driving me to my target.

For a fleeting moment, she stared into my eyes, her face registering a hint of recognition. I risked a longer gaze, never seeing the fist-sized bolder that slammed into my right temple.

Yet still I willed my legs to gather themselves beneath me, warred against the enchanting blackness, struggled for purchase on a slippery slope of consciousness—driven by that sweet, sweet flaming anger, and my dying bride.

The remaining oak bowed once more, and collapsed, a loose section of branch striking me a glancing blow on the right side of the rib cage, sending me rolling away from the impending carnage, and over the wall. The back of my head struck the rock-covered ground on the other side with a hollow crack. This time, I embraced the blackness that availed itself to me.

When my eyes next opened, it was far ahead in time, with owls flying about, the moon visible, and the previously seething sky now utterly cloudless.

Struggling to my feet, overcoming a sudden wave of dizziness and nausea, I stepped over the wall and into the clearing, seeing the fallen tree lying crookedly across three fourths of the inside of the shack.

I took a cautious step forward, suddenly aware of the absence of the provisions I had previously been carrying. Soon, I would consummate a thorough search.

Soon, but not just yet. "No. Something needs doing first."  
It didn't take long.

My eyes knew what they'd find even before I began looking, even as every fiber of my being yearned for a different outcome. The human legs, visible to the knee, protruding from some of the lower branches of the massive oak, told me everything. No tears came then; despite my best efforts, despite the dull ache worming its way through my baron heart. They would come and come often. On many a night black, many a day beset with the glory of Hyperion; triggered in many a happening, many a venture—but not then, and then is when they were most wanted.

A search turned up nothing of my original belongings, save the over-turned, ruined Land Rover; head lights shattered, front bumper smashed, and three of the axles snapped in half like dry twigs.  
Thus, I moved afoot towards home.

The next morning, I returned to the site of the chaos, and set to work. I took saw to bastard tree, and felt nothing. I tidied up the grounds, collected usable rubble, and felt nothing.  
I drew forth a tarpaulin, rapped the broken body of my beloved inside, tied it up, and felt nothing.  
I dug maniacally—fighting through the pain of weeping blisters and sore muscles—and felt nothing.  
I laid my bride inside the grave, filled in the hole, and felt nothing.  
I returned home, and when at last I laid upon my bed, I was given to feel, and ever so intensely.

Even as I stand now, I feel, just as intensely. Feel the tenebrous shrouds of guilt, remorse, anger, and longing that encompass me, that threaten to banish me to an eternal, bottomless abyss, from which there is no rise.  
Until now, I've fought; fought the landslide, sometimes only halfheartedly, but a fight just the same. Now, I'm quite sure I'm ready to lose. Each word spoken, each nuance of sorrow-laden evil recounted... All victories for the oppressors, and they know it.

I stoop, retrieving from the ground a cylindrical length of iron, and step outside the ruined shack.  
Walking to its south side, I stand silently, facing the wind, pelting rain, rolling thunder, and, most importantly of all, the raging lightning just beginning to illuminate the sky overhead.  
I hold the bar across my chest and speak slowly:

"As this home—once free of scorn and trial—is set to wither slowly, as modicum amounts of this proud structure will later be used in the grate scheme of survival, so too shall I depart, seeking assimilation into the afterlife."

The first bits of lightning crackle around me.

"My darling bride: I know not why I abandoned thee, nor if it was even a true abandoning in the technical sense. It matters naught, for abandonment is felt mutually—by you in life fleeting, by me then, and hence forth—so it shall be etched into the framework about which this soliloquy is woven, with ill regard to thoughts elsewhere."

Another flash.

"I was then, and am now, truly sorry, for whatever you were forced to think of me when lady death came calling. I know time and a reunion will mend all; if only I could again be near you, again hold you close, caress your tann'd skin. If only, If only..."

The lightning finds the iron.



## *Violent Indigo* by Andrea Kurtz

---

This is my fourth attempt at writing this. Not because I cannot find the right words and not because I feel that you deserve any more special care than the next girl, but because whenever I get up to stretch my legs, the file is gone when I return to my computer. I didn't save the file the first time, but when I found it was missing and was then forced to begin again, I saved it as "Letter to Erin" on my desktop. And then the pizza delivery guy rang my doorbell, and I was gone for only two minutes, but the file still vanished into cyberspace, into what I am growing to believe is actually a gaping blue world of love letters that never reached their mark. (Do not be mistaken. This is not a love letter.) And so I started over and renamed the file "Letter to Fanny" because I thought it would make this easier. I saved this letter to my desktop and a disk, but when I got up to relieve my bladder and put my plate in the sink, it had somehow transformed itself from bytes of information into molecules of water and evaporated into the atmosphere. And so here I sit at my computer. I will not be getting up from this place until I have written everything I need to write. I have superstitiously named this file, "In Case of Erasure, Please Return to Will Potts at 7681 Canal..."

In my first letter, I started with the night you tried to commit suicide, and in my second I started with the first time we met, and in my third letter I started with the summer of our break-up, but this time, I will begin with the beginning of the end for both of us, which was (I am sure you will agree) the night we visited the soothsayer. The soothsayer, you insisted we call him: Felix Pickel, who no one would ever suspect possessed a mystic bone in his body. Felix Pickel, whose apartment was decorated in varying shades of mustard and lemon polyester, who wore a three-piece tweed suit with flip-flops and a baseball cap, who specialized in foreseeing when and how a person would expire. "Expire" was the word he used. Not die. Not pass on. I'm sure this has stuck with you as it has stuck with me, because you commented on it. "Expire makes me think of a dusty box of crackers hidden way far back on a shelf," you said. I nodded, but found the word fitting. I respected the idea that our bodies only had an allotted amount of time, a shelf-life so to speak. And so we—Cole and Stephanie, Fanny and me—waited in Felix Pickel's jaundiced parlor to discover our expiration dates.

Cole went first, drunk and laughing, and came back the color of the parlor. "When I'm seventy-one, I'm going to die of a massive heart attack," he said. "My grandpa just died of a heart attack two months ago. On his seventieth birthday."

"Did you tell him that?" I asked.

"No." He sat down next to Stephanie and put his hand on her wrist, the silver charm bracelet he'd given her for her birthday. We knew very little of her then. Cole had only just started dating her, and her friendship had been thrust upon us like a stepmother on a pair of petulant children. Do you remember how you made her cry? "You don't have to do this," Cole said to her.

"Don't be stupid," Stephanie said. She returned from Felix Pickel's kitchen unshaken. "Eighty-two. A fall downstairs on the way to the basement. The neighbors won't find me for days."

"That's just unnecessarily grotesque," you said, but you smiled at me behind Stephanie's back. It was your turn, but you wanted me to go before you.

I sat across the Formica table from Felix Pickel. Did his eyes look like egg yolks to you too? It was as though his eyes had absorbed all the colors of his apartment. Maybe he was sick. Or maybe just carrying around all that death inside you expressed itself however it could. Yellow eyes. I didn't know where to look, so I studied his tweed lapel. He inhaled deeply, once, twice. He was smelling me. Picking up my scent.

"I'll need to touch you," Felix Pickel said. "Briefly. Is that okay?" He stood up and placed his left hand on the back of my neck. His hand was surprisingly warm and soft, like a mother's. I waited to see a vision of my death, but nothing happened. He removed his hand and sat back down. "You'll die younger than your friends. Do you want to hear this?"

"Yes," I said, but I wasn't sure if I did.

"You wish to know when?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, before I could measure the consequences of knowing.

"Forty-nine years, three months, and twenty days. Lymphoma."

"Is it possible to prevent this?" I asked. "Now that I know?"

"I don't know," Felix Pickel said. "I am not a doctor. I don't diagnose. I determine when a body will expire. With or without treatment, I do not know. Perhaps you would die even younger if you were not aware of this fact as you are now and did not seek early treatment."

"Cancer," I reported to you. "Eighty-five years old."

Don't be angry at me for lying, Fanny, especially after the fact. It's inconsequential now. Even less than inconsequential. A toothpick among giant sequoias. Would it have changed the outcome of that night, of that year, of your life? Perhaps, you think. *Perhaps then I would've told you, and you would've been the one, and then maybe.* Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. But every "perhaps" leads down a different road, and every road leads to the same dead end. Please put this page down for a moment and think it over. When you are done pulling your hair, come back to me. I am not getting up until I have finished this task.

You went into Felix Pickel's kitchen and came out laughing. "It's too gruesome," you said. "Too awful." Tears sparkled in your eyes you were laughing so hard. You even refused to tell me later that night when we were on our own. I thought about confessing my little lie to you then to inspire you to open up to me. But I didn't, and you didn't, and so we lay in my bed and slid our hands under each other's clothing and talked about superstitions and our favorite color jelly beans.

And now I don't know where to go next—the first time we met, or our break-up, because both events are the unraveling of the other. I noticed your mismatched eyes first—one blue, one brown. Did I ever tell you that this was what drew me to you first? Not your long hair, not your lacy camisoles and snug jeans. When I woke up that morning in your bed and found you at the mirror putting in colored contacts, I knew more about Fanny than I ever wanted to know. "Would you have still noticed me if both my eyes had been blue?" you asked. *Yes.* "But would you have still talked to me?" *I don't know.* "Does your love depend on the color of my eyes?" Which is an irrelevant question, as inconsequential as my first lie to you, my only lie. We were not in love.

That same day you told me your real name. Erin. You told me this while hanging upside down from your bed to try to make it into a joke. You told me you had tried to reinvent yourself in college. The blood collected in your head, as you tried to explain how lost you had felt, how insignificant, negligible, lonely, purposeless, empty, plain, dull. Your face turned pink, then magenta. Please believe me when I tell you that I tried so hard to reconcile my two girlfriends. Blue and brown-eyed Fanny. Blue-eyed Erin. I traced backwards our year

together, unraveling it as I am doing now, to pinpoint who I was with on each occasion. It was Fanny who I met at the farmer's market carrying sunflowers and a bag of asparagus. You had your crocheted hat on backwards and a rainbow painted on your cheek. And it was definitely with Fanny the first time we had sex. But perhaps it was Erin the next morning: insecure and brooding? Do you even know? I am almost certain I was with Erin the night we visited the soothsayer. If I was speaking to Cole, maybe I would ask him who you were the night you tried to commit suicide. Did you know that we are no longer friends? You are not responsible for our severed friendship, so don't feel guilty. He was there, and I was not, and well. I want to stand up to pace the room, but I won't for fear of this all disappearing on me again. Pacing sometimes helps me to sort things out, to shake the words loose from my brain. But now all these words are piling up in my head, and I guess I'll just have to persevere.

I lied again, my second lie to you, when I said at the beginning of this letter that you didn't deserve any more special care than any other girl. And of course that's untrue. Because if it weren't, I would tell you right now that you were the sole reason Cole and I stopped being friends. Don't cry. And please don't try to call Cole to smooth out our friendship. It is something we are both coming to terms with. We can't bear to be in the same room together anymore, let alone the same apartment. I haven't asked him, but I know that he would do the same thing all over again if he had to, because he's a good person, and even though I would never admit it to him, I would rather you had died than have him be the one to console you that night (because I am a very bad person).

Almost a month had passed without us speaking. Days became weeks became bruises. And then you called. The first of March. And oh, I am so glad that the first letter I wrote you was deleted. What a blessing. What would you have thought? Maybe you would've read those first few unkind sentences about the night you almost ended it all, and thrown this letter away. I wouldn't have blamed you if you had. But you have the momentum of reading behind you now. Eyes speeding ahead snagging letters even if you try to look away. You have read through these other pages and endured their pain. So please stay with me for just a little longer. When you called, Kira from the video store was kissing my neck and her hand was on my fly. (Is it cruel for me to include these details? Am I trying to excuse or incriminate myself with these details?) You said, "Will, I need to talk to you." I said, "Who is this?" I knew it was you, but I wanted to hear which name you would use. "It's Fanny," you said with a laugh, and I knew you'd been crying. "Can I call you back?" I asked. "I'm kind of in the middle of something." This made Kira laugh, and she nuzzled my cheek and slid her way down my body until her forehead was resting against my abdomen.

You were very, very quiet, but I knew you were still there. After a moment, you said, "Felix Pickel was right."

"What did he say?" I asked. And then, "Are you okay?" Kira stopped what she was doing, and looked up at me.

"I'm fine," you said, when what you meant to say was, *Nothing is fine and never again will be fine*. "Call me back tomorrow, okay? I can tell you're busy." And then you hung up.

Before you reached me on my cell phone, you left a message on my answering machine, the answering machine that Cole and I shared. You said, "Will. This is Fanny. I need to talk to someone right now. Please call me back. As soon as you can." Cole didn't delete the message so that I could listen to it when I got home, and I listened to it so many times that the message gradually erased itself. Your voice sounds the same—the same way you always

sound, congested, like you have a cold, even when you're healthy. And it sounds like you might laugh at any minute, like you're drunk-dialing me and there are a pack of friends surrounding you cupping their giggles within their palms. And the words you chose were so plain. So insignificant, negligible, empty, dull. Would I have reacted the same way Cole did if I had heard the message first? Of course, I already know the answer to this question. I talked to you on my cell phone and you hung up. Kira and I carried on. And as Cole let himself into your apartment and found you ransacking your medicine cabinet, I was licking the hollow of Kira's neck.

You punched him, maybe so that I would not have to do it myself. Cole came home the next morning with a black eye. An indigo-colored bruise. The color of violence. The color of love, I later found out, but not soon enough. "What did you do all night?" I asked him. I felt like Felix Pickel, carrying all that death inside of me. "We listened to some cds," he said. "She talked. A lot. Drank some wine. I took all the pills with me. I'll give them back to her eventually." He shrugged his shoulders and kept your secrets because he was a good person, so good. He knew how to save a life, while I did not.

I have imagined what that night must have been like so many times, that I can play it like a favorite movie on the inside of my eyelids before I go to sleep. It has become more real and more important to me than anything that may or may not have happened that night. My legs are stiff beneath me right now, and I'm aching to stand, to look out the window at the construction workers outside, to regain my train of thought. I feel as though if I don't stop where I am right now, poised in this moment, I will surely get it all wrong, and you will never understand why I am writing this to you, Fanny. *Erin*. But I do not want it to disappear. I am so afraid it will disappear. Therefore, I must save this one more time. "In Case of Erasure, Please Return to Will Potts at 7681 Canal..." Now I can sit back a little and study what I have written. Is it accurate? If not completely accurate, is it truthful? You taught me the difference between accuracy and honesty. Otherwise, how could someone as brutally honest as you be such a big fat liar?

What did he say to you, Fanny? Not Cole, because that doesn't matter to me. I know the kind of things he said and they are inconsequential to me as my lies and all the what if's and maybes and perhapses that have littered this letter, which I now apologize for. I want to know what Felix Pickel said to you, although I think I can guess it. He told you that you would take your own life. Am I correct? And on March 1st, you believed his prediction was coming true. But what I need to know is did it become true because he said it, or was it true because you believed it? Don't feel ashamed. There is a small space somewhere between my heart and my belly that believes I will die when I am forty-nine. That even as I write this, part of me believes that there are some mutinous cells in my body waiting to turn against me, and that no matter what I do, I will still not be strong enough or brave enough to fight back.

When I found out who you really were, Erin, you told me that saying "I'm sorry" was never enough. That it was a waste of words, especially when the something at stake was as awful as this, and that I could take you or leave you. And I left you. So I won't say that I'm sorry now, but I will tell you that I wish that I had been the one to stay up with you all night. I wish it was my eye you punched so that I had something real of you remaining, no matter how fleeting. I am going to print this letter and mail it to you now before it can fade away. It's blurring and shimmering, swimming in and out of my vision, and I know that if I take my eyes off it for just one moment, it will be gone.

## *Hard Winter* by Patrick McGinnity

---

It wasn't entirely unexpected when the first couple old folks bought it. It happens. Ice breaks hips, and broken hips can be the proverbial camel-crushing straw. There was also the usual increase in cardiac arrests for the sixty and over crowd, likely brought on by attempts to shovel three and a half cubic yards of icy slush out of their driveways. That's what they get for not buying a snow blower.

So the first twelve or so that kicked off were no real surprise; it was just a bad year. That's what we all said: "a bad year." As if we were talking sports. That was a bad year for the Detroit Lions too, but at least they all survived. So twelve geezers died in the month of November, not a great advertisement for Beaver Island as a safe place to retire, but not totally crazy. When you live on an island thirty-two miles from the mainland, you come to accept certain hardships. The medical center has limited facilities, and though Beaver Island is nominally part of Charlevoix County, the ambulance from Charlevoix Hospital is little more than a roomy taxi that picks Islanders up at the airport and takes them to the emergency room. So losing a dozen retirees in one month was tough, but not unheard of. When the flu struck and more old folks and even a few kids started dying, however, it was a shocker.

Sure they were mostly invalids and sickly kids to begin with, but still, in a community of three hundred and forty-eight, seventeen deaths due to flu is a lot. The planes were still flying at that point, so they were running constantly, hauling bodies and mourners across the miles of milky, congealing ice to the mainland for funerals.

They still had the school open when the Really Big Snow came. In fact, it was during a high school basketball father-son scrimmage that the gym roof collapsed under the snow load. The whole basketball team and most of their dads were wiped out, except Riley Himebauch, an eleventh grade bench-warmer who was in the john with the runs when he heard the screams. A handful of fans bit it there too, along with three cheerleaders – three-quarters of the rag-tag squad. It was the biggest disaster in Beaver Island history, that is, until the Emerald Isle took eighty-one passengers down in an early-season ice push, but that came two months later.

Lots of us directly attributed the pile-up at Four Corners to the school tragedy. The funeral procession for Jake Boyle and his dad Chuck was driving a little too fast along King's Highway on its way to the Holy Cross cemetery. As it was the twelfth such procession in three days, and the weather had not improved much since the Really Big Snow, the solemnity of the occasion was understandably hurried. Roger Danning, who was coming the other way down the road in his three-ton Charlevoix County Road Commission plow truck, was also speeding. Later some Islanders hypothesized that Roger had been drowning his sorrows in the fifth of Jameson's he had clutched between his legs when the Deputy hauled

him, miraculously unharmed, from his flaming rig. Others thought that he might have been driven mad with grief over his daughter's death (she was a cheerleader) and blinded by tears as he came over the hill toward the hurrying line of junkers with their red flags flapping.

Roger caught the procession head-on with his blade down. At a combined speed of one hundred and thirty miles an hour (estimated by the deputy, shaking his head at the smoking wrecks), the plow truck went through the line of cars like it was a rusty snow drift, starting with the hearse. The cars were lifted, crumpled, and rolled aside into the ditch. The truck destroyed sixteen vehicles before colliding with the county's other big-rig plow truck, driven by Dave Resnick, which had been scraping the road behind the procession. Though by the time they hit, Danning's truck had slowed to a modest forty miles an hour and Resnick's was skidding with the breaks locked, their combined speed was still nearly seventy miles an hour, and they met with a screaming *wbump*, their giant plows welding together on impact.

The pile-up sent forty-one Islanders to the cemetery that they were heading for anyway, except they all had to be stored until spring due to the storm. It also effectively ended county snow-plowing for the season. Roger was held at the Deputy's office/home until it exploded from a malfunctioning burner on the gas range. Dave was taken to the medical center, treated and sent home, where he promptly died from a deadly combination of influenza and pneumonia.

Christmas was an understandably subdued event that year. Father Gardener, the mainland priest, couldn't make it over due to the storm, so the deacon had to lead the Christmas-eve service at Holy Cross. Inexperienced with the temperamental incense burner, he set his vestments on fire, and ran screaming down the isle before the altar boys or anyone else could help him. In three separate incidents, Christmas trees caught fire, each taking a load of presents, a house, and a family with it. Two people froze to death after falling from horses while trying to reach town over the unplowed roads. The last shipment of food from the mainland finished off a full forty-three folks, with E. coli in the chicken, and a bizarre and deadly mould in the Wonder Bread.

Nineteen-ninety-nine dawned with a brutal ice storm that trapped everyone indoors. Some who attempted travel were crushed by falling trees. The power went down, of course, and thirty-eight people froze in their beds before they could be reached. The bar was up and running as soon as the power came back on and half of the remaining Islanders were there the night of the brawl. Tensions were already high, and when Ritchie Styne accused Billy Harn, the only EMT still alive, of drinking when he should have been saving people, the smoky air in The Shamrock seemed to spark. Food and silverware went everywhere when Harn, lunging for Styne, knocked over his table. They went down together and somehow, Styne managed to stab Harn in the lung with a fork. There was a moment of silence before everyone got into it. By the end, only twenty-eight were still standing. Since the deputy, the P.A., and the nurse practitioner had already died, there was no one to help the injured, or to stop the victors from looting the bar and burning it to the ground. After that, the rest of January was pretty quiet, except for a few snowmobile accidents and a couple ice fishermen who were sucked down by a sudden air pressure change when the Shuttle Explorer broke the sound barrier two miles above the Island.

When February rolled around, and the storm continued, the hundred or so residents still alive started hoarding food. Rather than fight the mob, Tim Stevenson, the Swede who owned the grocery store, simply stopped locking up, or even going to work at all. People came and went, taking what they wanted or needed. There were three alcohol-poisoning

deaths that week, and eight people wandered into the snow drunk and froze.

While the storm raged on, a shift in the wind and a sudden clearing of ice beyond the harbour got people's hopes up. Russell Green, a retired boat company captain, fired up the Emerald Isle, the larger of the two car-ferries, and people piled on for an escape attempt. The boat pounded its way clear of the harbour ice, jarring those aboard, but steaming on regardless. Just beyond the lighthouse, the passengers were horrified to see the big-water ice flow sliding toward them in a jagged white wall. Running the gauntlet, Captain Green tried to make a break for the open water to the east, but even with both three-hundred horsepower Cummins diesels at full throttle, the green and white boat got pinched between the massive flow from the north, and the solidified wall of an ice shove to the south. The pressure popped the ferry up onto the ice like a tiddly-wink, and she fell over on her starboard side. Some folks jumped clear before the flow broke up and the cold water swallowed the boat. Those who had escaped were found later that spring, frozen in place on a little island of ice like a wax-museum diorama of Shackleton and Scott in the arctic.

The eight of us remaining on the Island saw the ferry go down through Tim's telescope. We had all balked at the idea of taking the boat in February, but decided unanimously to watch from Whiskey Point until the ferry was out of sight. After it went down, we wandered through the snow back to the store. Remembering Captain Cook's discovery about preventing rickets, I went straight to the canned fruit isle, mostly empty now, and grabbed the last couple of cans of mandarin oranges. I walked along the silent emptiness of Main Street, browsing for a new residence. Finally choosing Dan Gillespie's harbour-view home, I moved in, and was pleased as hell to find his liquor closet intact.

When I went out looking for firewood for the night, I found Gail Moore bleeding in the snow. She had a hatchet stuck in her back, and she didn't seem to be breathing, so I took the hatchet and continued on. Ron Gallagher's woodpile was closest, so I helped myself to several armloads of split birch. Back inside, I got the fire going, and settled into my new home.

I sat by the fireplace, sipping a homemade cappuccino, and listening to "Spring," from Vivaldi's Four Seasons played by Itzhak Perlman and the New York Philharmonic. The sun set behind the trees, and I locked the doors.

A knock woke me the next morning, just after the sun cleared the trees behind the lighthouse. I went down to the door in my boxers and saw that it was Kimberly Harlan, alone. She was, or had been, the manager of Dalwhinnie's Deli. I let her in. She said that she knew who killed Gail. I said Cool, who? She said it was Mr. Granskog, the school janitor, getting revenge on ex-students for years of careless disregard for school property. I said, Bummer, huh?

We had Irish coffee with Bailey's, then some sex, and then a bath in the big hot tub upstairs. I wanted to listen to the news, but she went off about how the radio would destroy the pristine isolation of winter. I said Okay. She said Isn't it quiet. I said Yeah, and turned on the news. She shook her head and climbed out of the tub, asking if I wanted more coffee. Luckily I had found the gun cabinet in the basement, and had the .38 in my robe, so that when she came back upstairs and attacked me with the cleaver, I got her in the forehead. I had to drag her outside before she messed up the floor too badly. Wearing only my slippers and robe, with the heavy revolver back in my right pocket, I hauled her across the yard to the edge of the trees behind the house, hoping that the coyotes would take care of her before it warmed up too much.

I decided to try some isolation of my own after that. Setting up a fortress in my new home, I placed loaded rifles and pistols all over the house and only went outside for firewood after dark. The news barely held my attention. Winter still ravaged the Midwest, more severe than was normal. An expert talked about La Nina and the slow sloshing of cold water in the Southern Pacific basin. No one seemed to be wondering about the Island or any of its deceased.

I heard the gunfight before I could see anyone. Then they came running down the main street, between me and the frozen harbour. I slid the window open and, through the scope of a deer rifle, I watched old Mr. Granskog running after Felicity Jones, an eccentric artsy type. She fired a revolver over her shoulder, but he ran on, undeterred. Someone else mowed them both down before they reached the corner.

Following the muzzle flash to the upstairs window of the McDonough house down the street, I fired twice through the screen. Someone slumped out of the broken window. That left three of us, if my tally was correct. It was down to Lisle Carr, Riley Himebauch and me.

They came to the door unarmed later that day, as I was finishing my lunch of a turkey club with bacon and sprouts, and watching *Independence Day* in Dolby surround sound on the huge entertainment system. They left their coats outside, and I invited them in, patted them down, and offered them each a Bell's Oberon Pale Ale from the fridge.

We sat silent on the cream-colored sectional, the movie frozen mid-explosion, and I imagined one of those population signs with the numbers crossed off and corrected a hundred times from 348 to 3. We sipped our beers, and I picked at a piece of bacon stuck between my right bicuspid and molar.

So how do we keep things civil now? Riley asked.

Steve's got the guns, let's make him the sheriff, said Lisle, All in favour, say aye.

So I was sheriff. I broke out some brie and water crackers and fetched another round of beers. We sat there and came up with some basic rules for our special situation: no drinking alone, no gambling, no fraternization. Our priority was to minimize situations where violence might erupt. Then we went out to gather some more food.

Well, when spring finally rolled around, it was only Lisle and I. Riley had wasted away in less than a month. We weren't sure what got him, but I suspected it was severe heartbreak. The fraternization rule hadn't lasted, and in less than a week after my election as sheriff, Lisle had moved in with me. Though he never said anything, I think Riley was more than a little hurt not to be picked. What did he expect? Sure I was kind of dorky, but I had been away to college. Why would Lisle pick the only high-schooler left on the Island over a college guy? Anyway, Riley died alone, and Lisle and I made the best of our new life together. Soon she had started to show, and we supposed that we were doing our duty.

One morning, after noticing that the crocuses were finally poking through the melting snow, I hurried inside to tell Lisle the news. I found her rocking naked in the empty bathtub, cradling her stomach. I took her into my arms. She was cold, so I pulled a towel from the rack to wrap around her. She continued the rocking motion as I carried her downstairs. We sat by the fireplace, and I waited.

It's over, she finally said.

What is, I asked, trying to seem attentive, though something distracted me. A droning engine cut through my concentration like a mosquito in the dark. The first plane was coming.

Everything is, she said, it's all over.

Spring is here, I said.

Do you hear the plane, I said, pointing absurdly up the stairs as if the plane were up there somewhere.

She said nothing, rocking slightly.

As the sheriff, I should meet them, I said.

She rocked.

So . . . I'll just go, I said, and meet them. Okay?

Still she didn't speak, but only sat there rocking and sobbing.

I didn't meet the plane. With an odd prescience, I understood that it could never land. It only buzzed by, like an early season mosquito, a carrier of whatever West Nile-malariaral-prion-from-the-foot-and-mouth-of-the-bovine tubercular-bird-flue-youth-in-Asia-we're-all-waiting-for. The plane circled the harbour twice, and then continued on west toward Wisconsin, the sonorous drone fading, leaving to us the clean-swept blue of sky and lake. Stepping out onto the porch and into the fragrant sunlight, I listened to the engine's slow decrescendo into silence, wondering what I should make for lunch.

## *In the Torrid Zone* by William Moake

---

On rare occasions in Hawaii, the tradewinds stopped blowing and an equatorial air mass crept north to cover the islands for days or weeks. The tropical belt just north and south of the equator is known as the doldrums or the horse latitudes. Without a breath of wind, the stagnant air is unbearably hot and humid—fit only for dolphins and whales, according to sailors who were sometimes trapped in it for long periods. On land it felt even worse, like drowning in honey. The overcast sky was often tinged with a faint yellowish glow that reminded me of hell.

In May of my second year in Honolulu I caught a raging fever during one of these awful heat waves. Aside from the fever, I had excruciating joint pain and my eyeballs hurt. It turned out to be dengue fever, the first outbreak in Hawaii in more than fifty years.

I had a raging fever for an entire month. During that time, I was forced to try to sleep sitting upright since it was too painful on my joints to lay down. I was so delirious I could barely function. I lost my apartment keys twice, ate very little and often couldn't make sense of the television programs I attempted to watch. I took two or three cold showers each day to bring down my temperature. I sat on the sofa with two fans blowing when the mid-afternoon heat made me swoon. At times my apartment seemed unfamiliar and I was paralyzed by a strange sense of unreality.

There were lasting effects from my bout with dengue fever—perhaps even brain damage. I will never know for sure since I no longer trust the judgment of doctors.

I sweat 24 hours a day now. I have learned to despise the tropical heat more than ever because I feel as though I am living in some sort of hell from which there is no escape. I pray for the cooling rain that seldom comes, yet I shiver with chills whenever the air temperature drops below 80. My body is addicted to the very thing I hate. I sleep fitfully during the worst heat of the day and stay up all night as if I were a bat. I feel more bat-like than human and I walk the lonely city streets at night, looking for other creatures of darkness: stray cats, prostitutes, muggers who might take pity on me, anyone with whom I can make a connection. I can't relate to day people. In the blinding sunlight they move around like insects in a speeded-up movie.

The sun has become my enemy. Its rays sear my skin with heat and ultraviolet radiation and suck the breath out of my lungs. I have nightmares of dying from melanoma, covered with carcinogenic blotches like a rotted prune. Even at night I wear sunglasses to guard my eyes against the reflected sunlight of a full moon. If only this hot ball of gas could disappear from my horizon—but I know it's not possible.

I dream of blizzards and lakes frozen in ice. After fleeing the arctic Michigan winters as a teenager, I look back on those days now with a nostalgic longing. I ache to feel the bite of sleet on my face and numbing cold in my toes, to leap head-first into a snow bank. These fantasies seem like a pilgrim's paradise to me.

But I can't return to the cold country. Living here so long has thinned my blood and I would die with chattering teeth. I am condemned to live in the torrid zone until this terrible heat finally consumes my body like spontaneous combustion.

My intellectual dreams are dead. When I was a young man, I wanted to become a famous writer. I foolishly thought I could find adventures to write about in the tropics, not realizing

this was the exception among writers rather than the rule. For every Joseph Conrad there are a thousand would-be authors who venture into jungles and exotic islands but never write a single worthwhile line. The tropical regions of the world represent a vast intellectual void festooned in bright colors. Real literature is native to temperate climates and doesn't feel at home under a palm tree. To write about the human condition from a hammock or a beach mat is more than naive, it is a sham. Why write about anything when frangipani blossoms fill the air with a soporific perfume?

The majority of island Kanakas know this truth and have absolutely no interest in books. They are semi-literate on purpose, even speaking a sort of baby talk called pidgin with stubborn pride. Like bronzed gods they thrive on emotions, not words. They are violently impulsive, as quick to take offense as to love. They are perfectly adapted to the strange subtleties of life in the tropics. I envy them, but I am also afraid of them because they are suspicious of people like me who live largely inside our minds. Locals always give me "stink eye" when they notice me reading a book at the beach or on a bus, as if they had caught me masturbating in public. I know to them reading is little more than mental masturbation.

I never wrote the great novel I imagined, but what is worse, I eventually saw through my dream. The natives are right. Words don't really matter in the tropics. They are superfluous sounds and symbols compared to the immediate realities of island existence. Yet I can't help myself. Out of habit I waste precious time reading and writing when I could be surfing or spear fishing or pig hunting in the mountains. Or making love to a wild-eyed coconut girl like Kini Hoopai.

Kini is the Hawaiian equivalent of Cindy, but she hates that haole name, even if it is on her birth certificate. Kini is hapa-haole, part white on her mother's side of the family and somewhat embarrassed by this lineage. Like countless young locals she has gotten swept up in the sovereignty movement in Hawaii which teaches a return to local language and culture and hopes (unrealistically) for the American government to relinquish ownership of the islands.

Kini is an enigma to me, as are most island girls. On the one hand she has a stunningly beautiful physique: perfect face with dark almond-shaped eyes and a gleaming smile, long black hair down to her waist, a voluptuous figure and small feet. She looks like the quintessential Hawaiian beauty worthy of any magazine cover. But she is also a rabid tomboy with distinctly unfeminine traits. She speaks too loudly and often resorts to gutter language. In spite of her hula lessons she is clumsy and moves without a hint of gracefulness. When she drinks too much, Kini tells filthy jokes that embarrass even me and she sleeps with too many men. I think of her as a gorgeous mess and this contradiction has a troubling effect on me. In some respects, she scares the hell out of me. She is too intense and direct for me to feel completely comfortable when we are together because I never know what she might do or say.

Kini would rather go barefoot than go to heaven. She is more competitive than an all-pro linebacker and I mean *physically*. Although all women have a small amount of testosterone, I think she has more of this male hormone than any three men. She likes to ridicule me for reading books and she makes fun of my writing if I show it to her. She doesn't respect me at all, thinks I'm a haole wimp. But in her quiet moments, when she is relaxed with a far-off gaze, she reminds me of an angel. I can't get over her exquisite beauty, even if it only goes skin deep. I could sit for hours and just stare at her as long as she didn't talk. I wish I was a painter like Gauguin or at least a photographer so I could capture her

image for posterity.

On my night prowls I sometimes visit Kini at her apartment in Kalihi. If I have to awaken her, she grouses at me.

"Don't you frickin' haoles ever sleep?"

"Only in the day time. We're all vampires, you know."

"Shit," she mumbles, reaching for a cigarette.

"Do you have any beer? It's past take-out time."

"Look in the refrigerator."

From the kitchen I ask her if she wants one. No answer, but she shakes her head in disgust when I return to the living room with only one can of beer.

"You didn't say you wanted one."

"Next time bring your own beer."

"You're in a good mood tonight."

"I got fired today."

"Why?"

"What's the difference? I have to find another job now."

Kini had worked as a waitress in the restaurant of a Waikiki hotel. Since I met her, she had also been an office receptionist in the business district, a sales clerk at a jewelry store and a groom for a dog trainer. She changed jobs once or twice a year and new employers kept hiring her because of her looks.

"Do you need any money?" I offered.

"Not from you." She went to the kitchen and got herself a beer.

"What's wrong with my money? Tainted or something?"

"You'd want me to fuck you for it," she said, returning to the living room.

"Not necessarily," I teased. "We could call it a loan."

"Don't gimme that. I see the way you look at me."

"Most women are flattered by a man's attention."

"You're old enough to be my father."

Kini had been married to an older man when she was a teenager. They had two children and he beat her whenever he got drunk. She divorced him and left the children in the care of her mother, who lived on the North Shore.

"Tell me what happened at the restaurant."

Angry tears welled up in her eyes. "Frickin' manager always hated me. I don't wanna talk about it."

"What did he do?"

"Leave me alone!"

When Kini cried, her beautiful face went to pieces like a jigsaw puzzle dropped on the floor. Although it was painful to watch, I couldn't help being fascinated by the amazing transformation. She was twenty-six, but she suddenly looked old.

"It wasn't much of a job in the first place," I said to comfort her. "You'll find something better."

"Don't try to cheer me up," she sobbed.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"What are you doing here anyway? Don't you have a home?"

"I wanted to ask you for a date."

"Like hell you did."

"Maybe a movie and dinner somewhere nice."

She wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. "I already told you I'm not going to fuck you."

I was certain she didn't remember we had made love once at a party several months earlier in Kaimuki. She had been too drunk and stoned on pakalolo to remember anything from that night. I never tried to revive her memory and considered it my little secret.

"I'll give you twenty dollars if you stop saying fuck. It's very unattractive."

"You just said it."

"Listen, you eat dinner, don't you? All I'm saying is let's have a meal together some night. On me."

"I'm not gonna sit through one of your high mucky muck movies."

"All right, no movie. Just dinner."

"I get to pick the restaurant?"

"Anywhere you like."

"Delco's!"

That was where she lost her job. "Why in the world would you want to go there?"

"To rub it in the bastard's face. Order the most expensive food and bitch that it tasted like shit. Then leave no tip."

"I always tip."

"If you do, I'll kick your ass!"

She meant it, too, but I could only smile. "Okay, no tip."

"How come you're being so nice to me?"

"You look sad with that mascara running down your cheek. Sort of like a sad clown."

"Not funny," she said, wiping her face with a Kleenex tissue. But then she giggled and suddenly she looked young and beautiful again, like a chameleon changing colors.

After I finished my beer, I slipped a hundred dollars into her hand as we stood in the open doorway.

"I don't want it," she said.

"You can pay me back when you get another job. You might need it for something in the meantime."

"You nevah give up, do you? You're one stubborn haole man."

"And you're a bitchy Kanaka woman."

When I said it, she smiled like a naughty little girl proud of her mischief -- that perfect radiant smile which melted my heart. Too bad there was no real affection behind it.

As I walked down the hallway, I wondered if I heard Kini mutter thanks. No doubt wishful thinking since I found it difficult to believe she would ever say anything like that to me. It wasn't her fault, though. Kini had a damaged personality like so many native islanders. Most were trapped in a crippling hatred of haoles, Japanese, other outsiders and ultimately each other. The ancient kahuna's prophecy had come true: some day you will be strangers in your own land. The spirit of aloha began to die when white explorers discovered Hawaii and introduced the two most destructive influences in western culture—alcohol and Christianity—along with venereal disease and mosquitoes. The result was a 90% decline in the Kanaka population, genocide by negligence in a fragile paradise.

And so tomorrow night I have a dinner date with this gorgeous foul-mouthed coconut girl. I'll try to keep her from drinking too much wine and insulting the restaurant manager, but I know in advance that my efforts may be futile. I only hope she doesn't punch him or

throw the wine bottle at him. If we can get through dinner without a riot, I'll take Kini for a long drive along the windward coast of the island. She loves to hang her head out of the car window and howl like a dog in the balmy night air. We'll stop at Makapuu and Waimanalo and walk on the beach. Then I'll head for the Pali tunnel and drive her home.

I won't try to make love to Kini even if she's drunk. For now I'm satisfied just to be seen with an exotically beautiful woman who is half my age. In my small Michigan hometown there wasn't a single female as good looking as Kini and I feel like I've come a long way since then.

In the torrid zone, this is what I do for an evening's entertainment: I pass the time with an overpriced meal and a long drive in the moonlight with a coconut girl who doesn't love me. Or time will simply pass me—it's difficult to know which is the true case. In practice, we live on Hawaiian time, another way of saying that time means very little in the islands. It ticks away unnoticed, like water flowing underground. We drink at the well of time and don't care to know when it will run dry.

I will sleep through the following day and never see the merciless tropical sun that cooks my flesh. With any luck, I will dream of blizzards and mountains of snow.



A dollar flew by and stuck to my windshield. It was only there for a second or two before the wind carried it off on another course, but for a moment it had flattened itself against the glass and the face of George Washington had stared at me with that serene, wise, and secretive expression of his. I felt my grip on the steering wheel slacken and my jaw loosened from the constant clench driving puts it in. I wondered what George had seen on his travels, what those olive eyes had witnessed, but by the slight smirk edging up the sides of his lips, I knew he wasn't one to tell.

I was ten at the time, still securely under the thumb of my parents, yet old enough to understand how things worked. We were late to pick up my father from the airport. Mom had called the airlines and was told the flight would be in at 8pm. It was 8:20pm. It was the damn takeout. They offered a special from 6-8pm; it was five dollars off if you spent twenty. Mom always ordered two regular barbeque chickens and two mini chicken katsus. It came out to exactly twenty dollars, so she only had to pay fifteen. She had insisted on picking it up first to make it in time for the special, but the line had been long, and parking had been hard to find, and all the million reasonable excuses in the world did not deter the fact that we were late.

He was waiting. The suitcase was on his right and his duffel bag was slung over his left shoulder. He was standing at the curb; his posture was so straight that it looked as if a wall were behind him. I didn't look up—I didn't want to see his face. I already knew what I would see. Angry lines carving down the sides of his mouth, eyes steaming with anger. That slick, black hair that looks oiled down, but which is actually product free. My father is 5'7, but he towered over the car and Mom and I cowered in our seats.

Some men are understated—they can freeze you with the coldness in their voice. Some men use silence to disarm. My father yelled. My father yelled, as the spit flew onto my mother's face, and his right hand pounded the window for emphasis with such force that I waited for it to shatter.

"I fucking work for this family—I do *everything* for this family—and you find it so fucking difficult to come get me on time!" His face, it was so close to hers. She could barely drive with that face screaming the words right into her flesh. He hit the glass again. "All I ask is that you come get me on time so that I don't have to wait like a fucking orphan on the side of the road. All I ask is that you drive this fucking car and be there waiting for *me* when I come home from working so fucking hard."

"I...I...I'm sorry---the dinner..." My mom was choking her words out. The eyes, ears, nose, mouth—they're all connected and it's hard to talk when there's a river flowing through those tunnels. "The special...you know...the *special*...save the five dollars. I...needed...to get there...before..." She couldn't speak. I could see her in the rear view mirror. It was pathetic. There was snot dripping down her nose; her eyes were so small as they tried to hold the tears in while still leaving enough room to see in order to drive. "I-needed-to-get-there-before-eight." The last words flew out as if someone had just performed the Heimlich on her.

"This is about five fucking dollars?" The air conditioner was on, but the car windows were fogging over. "You make me wait, you *humiliate* me for *five* fucking dollars!" He grabs

her purse from the floor and viciously rummages inside. He opens her wallet and grabs all the cash inside. His face is so red and wrinkled that it is the ultimate irony that newborn babies come out looking that way. He rolls down the window.

"You know what I think about that? He's pressing his nose into her temples; his mouth is covering her ear. "You know what I fucking think about *that*?" He leans towards the window and throws out all the cash. The money immediately gets caught in the wind tunnel by the side of the car and is ejected backwards.

For a second, before it joins the rest of the money, a one dollar bill slides against my backseat window. The face of George Washington stares me in the eye. He's my only witness and he is floating away.

## *A Colder War* by Charles Stross

---

### **Analyst**

Roger Jourgensen tilts back in his chair, reading.

He's a fair-haired man, in his mid-thirties: hair razor-cropped, skin pallid from too much time spent under artificial lights. Spectacles, short-sleeved white shirt and tie, photographic ID badge on a chain round his neck. He works in an air-conditioned office with no windows.

The file he is reading frightens him.

Once, when Roger was a young boy, his father took him to an open day at Nellis AFB, out in the California desert. Sunlight glared brilliantly from the polished silverplate flanks of the big bombers, sitting in their concrete-lined dispersal bays behind barriers and blinking radiation monitors. The brightly coloured streamers flying from their pitot tubes lent them a strange, almost festive appearance. But they were sleeping nightmares: once awakened, nobody -- except the flight crew -- could come within a mile of the nuclear-powered bombers and live.

Looking at the gleaming, bulging pods slung under their wingtip pylons, Roger had a premature inkling of the fires that waited within, a frigid terror that echoed the siren wail of the air raid warnings. He'd sucked nervously on his ice cream and gripped his father's hand tightly while the band ripped through a cheerful Sousa march, and only forgot his fear when a flock of Thunderchiefs sliced by overhead and rattled the car windows for miles around.

He has the same feeling now, as an adult reading this intelligence assessment, that he had as a child, watching the nuclear powered bombers sleeping in their concrete beds.

There's a blurry photograph of a concrete box inside the file, snapped from above by a high-flying U-2 during the autumn of '61. Three coffin-shaped lakes, bulking dark and gloomy beneath the arctic sun; a canal heading west, deep in the Soviet heartland, surrounded by warning trefoils and armed guards. Deep waters saturated with calcium salts, concrete coffer-dams lined with gold and lead. A sleeping giant pointed at NATO, more terrifying than any nuclear weapon.

## **Red Square Redux**

### **Warning**

The following briefing film is classified SECRET GOLD JULY BOOJUM. If you do not have SECRET GOLD JULY BOOJUM clearance, leave the auditorium *now* and report to your unit security officer for debriefing. Failing to observe this notice is an imprisonable offense.

You have sixty seconds to comply.

### **Video clip**

Red Square in springtime. The sky overhead is clear and blue; there's a little wispy cirrus at high altitude. It forms a brilliant backdrop for flight after flight of five four-engined bombers that thunder across the horizon and drop behind the Kremlin's high walls.

### **Voice-over**

Red Square, the May Day parade, 1962. This is the first time that the Soviet Union has publicly displayed weapons classified GOLD JULY BOOJUM. Here they are:

### **Video clip**

Later in the same day. A seemingly endless stream of armour and soldiers marches across the square, turning the air grey with diesel fumes. The trucks roll in line eight abreast, with soldiers sitting erect in the back. Behind them rumble a battalion of T-56's, their commanders standing at attention in their cupolas, saluting the stand. Jets race low and loud overhead, formations of MiG-17 fighters.

Behind the tanks sprawl a formation of four low-loaders: huge tractors towing low-sling trailers, their load beds strapped down under olive-drab tarpaulins. Whatever is under them is uneven, a bit like a loaf of bread the size of a small house. The trucks have an escort of jeep-like vehicles on each side, armed soldiers sitting at attention in their backs.

There are big five-pointed stars painted in silver on each tarpaulin, like outlines of stars. Each star is surrounded by a

stylized silver circle; a unit insignia, perhaps, but not in the standard format for Red Army units. There's lettering around the circles, in a strangely stylised script.

### **Voice-over**

These are live servitors under transient control. The vehicles towing them bear the insignia of the second Guards Engineering Brigade, a penal construction unit based in Bokhara and used for structural engineering assignments relating to nuclear installations in the Ukraine and Azerbaijan. This is the first time that any Dresden Agreement party openly demonstrated ownership of this technology: in this instance, the conclusion we are intended to draw is that the sixty-seventh Guard Engineering Brigade operates four units. Given existing figures for the Soviet ORBAT we can then extrapolate a total task strength of two hundred and eighty eight servitors, if this unit is unexceptional.

### **Video clip**

Five huge Tu-95 Bear bombers thunder across the Moscow skies.

### **Voice-over**

This conclusion is questionable. For example, in 1964 a total of two hundred and forty Bear bomber passes were made over the reviewing stand in front of the Lenin mausoleum. However, at that time technical reconnaissance assets verified that the Soviet air force has hard stand parking for only one hundred and sixty of these aircraft, and estimates of airframe production based on photographs of the extent of the Tupolev bureau's works indicate that total production to that date was between sixty and one hundred and eighty bombers.

Further analysis of photographic evidence from the 1964 parade suggests that a single group of twenty aircraft in four formations of five made repeated passes through the same airspace, the main arc of their circuit lying outside visual observation range of Moscow. This gave rise to the erroneous capacity report of 1964 in which the first strike delivery capability of the Soviet Union was over-estimated by as much as three hundred percent.

We must therefore take anything that they show us in Red Square with a pinch of salt when preparing force estimates.

Quite possibly these four servitors are all they've got. Then again, the actual battalion strength may be considerably higher.

### **Still photographic sequence**

From very high altitude -- possibly in orbit -- an eagle's eye view of a remote village in mountainous country. Small huts huddle together beneath a craggy outcrop; goats graze nearby.

In the second photograph, something has rolled through the village leaving a trail of devastation. The path is quite unlike the trail of damage left by an artillery bombardment: something roughly four metres wide has shaved the rocky plateau smooth, wearing it down as if with a terrible heat. A corner of a shack leans drunkenly, the other half sliced away cleanly. White bones gleam faintly in the track; no vultures descend to stab at the remains.

### **Voice-over**

These images were taken very recently, on successive orbital passes of a KH-11 satellite. They were timed precisely eighty-nine minutes apart. This village was the home of a noted Mujahedin leader. Note the similar footprint to the payloads on the load beds of the trucks seen at the 1962 parade.

These indicators were present, denoting the presence of servitor units in use by Soviet forces in Afghanistan: the four metre wide gauge of the assimilation track. The total molecular breakdown of organic matter in the track. The speed of destruction -- the event took less than five thousand seconds to completion, no survivors were visible, and the causative agent had already been uplifted by the time of the second orbital pass. This, despite the residents of the community being armed with DShK heavy machine guns, rocket propelled grenade launchers, and AK-47's. Lastly: there is no sign of the causative agent even deviating from its course, but the entire area is depopulated. Except for excarnated residue there is no sign of human habitation.

In the presence of such unique indicators, we have no alternative but to conclude that the Soviet Union has violated the Dresden Agreement by deploying GOLD JULY BOOJUM in a combat mode in the Khyber pass. There are no grounds to believe that a NATO armoured

division would have fared any better than these mujahedin without nuclear support ...

### **Puzzle Palace**

Roger isn't a soldier. He's not much of a patriot, either: he signed up with the CIA after college, in the aftermath of the Church Commission hearings in the early seventies. The Company was out of the assassination business, just a bureaucratic engine rolling out National Security assessments: that's fine by Roger. Only now, five years later, he's no longer able to roll along, casually disengaged, like a car in neutral bowling down a shallow incline towards his retirement, pension and a gold watch. He puts the file down on his desk and, with a shaking hand, pulls an illicit cigarette from the pack he keeps in his drawer. He lights it and leans back for a moment to draw breath, force relaxation, staring at smoke rolling in the air beneath the merciless light until his hand stops shaking.

Most people think spies are afraid of guns, or KGB guards, or barbed wire, but in point of fact the most dangerous thing they face is paper. Papers carry secrets. Papers can carry death warrants. Papers like this one, this folio with its blurry eighteen year old faked missile photographs and estimates of time/survivor curves and pervasive psychosis ratios, can give you nightmares, dragging you awake screaming in the middle of the night. It's one of a series of highly classified pieces of paper that he is summarizing for the eyes of the National Security Council and the President Elect -- if his head of department and the DDCIA approve it -- and here he is, having to calm his nerves with a cigarette before he turns the next page.

After a few minutes, Roger's hand is still. He leaves his cigarette in the eagle-headed ash tray and picks up the intelligence report again. It's a summary, itself the distillation of thousands of pages and hundreds of photographs. It's barely twenty pages long: as of 1963, its date of preparation, the CIA knew very little about Project Koschei. Just the bare skeleton, and rumours from a highly-placed spy. And their own equivalent project, of course. Lacking the Soviet lead in that particular field, the USAF fielded the silver-plated white elephants of the NB-39 project: twelve atomic-powered bombers armed with XK-PLUTO, ready to tackle Project Koschei should the Soviets show signs of unsealing the bunker. Three hundred megatons of H-bombs pointed at a single target, and nobody was certain it would be enough to do the job.

And then there was the hard-to-conceal fiasco in Antarctica. Egg on face: a subterranean nuclear test program in international territory! If nothing else, it had been enough to stop JFK running for a second term. The test

program was a bad excuse: but it was far better than confessing what had really happened to the 501st Airborne Division on the cold plateau beyond Mount Erebus. The plateau that the public didn't know about, that didn't show up on the maps issued by the geological survey departments of those governments party to the Dresden Agreement of 1931 -- an arrangement that even Hitler had stuck to. The plateau that had swallowed more U-2 spy planes than the Soviet Union, more surface expeditions than darkest Africa.

*Shit. How the hell am I going to put this together for him?*

Roger's spent the past five hours staring at this twenty page report, trying to think of a way of summarizing their drily quantifiable terror in words that will give the reader power over them, the power to think the unthinkable: but it's proving difficult. The new man in the White House is straight-talking, demands straight answers. He's pious enough not to believe in the supernatural, confident enough that just listening to one of his speeches is an uplifting experience if you can close your eyes and believe in morning in America. There is probably no way of explaining Project Koschei, or XK-PLUTO, or MK-NIGHTMARE, or the gates, without watering them down into just another weapons system -- which they are not. Weapons may have deadly or hideous effects, but they acquire moral character from the actions of those who use them. Whereas these projects are indelibly stained by a patina of ancient evil ...

He hopes that if the balloon ever does go up, if the sirens wail, he and Andrea and Jason will be left behind to face the nuclear fire. It'll be a merciful death compared with what he suspect lurks out there, in the unexplored vastness beyond the gates. The vastness that made Nixon cancel the manned space program, leaving just the standing joke of a white-elephant shuttle, when he realised just how hideously dangerous the space race might become. The darkness that broke Jimmy Carter's faith and turned Lyndon B. Johnson into an alcoholic.

He stands up, nervously shifts from one foot to the other. Looks round at the walls of his cubicle. For a moment the cigarette smouldering on the edge of his ash tray catches his attention: wisps of blue-grey smoke coil like lazy dragons in the air above it, writhing in a strange cuneiform text. He blinks and they're gone, and the skin in the small of his back prickles as if someone had pissed on his grave.

"Shit." Finally, a spoken word in the silence. His hand is shaking as he stubs the cigarette out. *Mustn't let this get to me.* He glances at the wall. It's nineteen hundred hours; too late, too late. He should go home, Andy will be worrying herself sick.

In the end it's all too much. He slides the thin folder into the safe behind

his chair, turns the locking handle and spins the dial, then signs himself out of the reading room and goes through the usual exit search.

During the thirty mile drive home, he spits out of the window, trying to rid his mouth of the taste of Auschwitz ashes.

### Late Night in the White House

The colonel is febrile, jittering about the room with gung-ho enthusiasm. "That was a mighty fine report you pulled together, Jourgensen!" He paces over to the niche between the office filing cabinet and the wall, turns on the spot, paces back to the far side of his desk. "You understand the fundamentals. I like that. A few more guys like you running the company and we wouldn't have this fuckup in Tehran." He grins, contagiously. The colonel is a firestorm of enthusiasm, burning out of control like a forties comic-book hero. He has Roger on the edge of his chair, almost sitting at attention. Roger has to bite his tongue to remind himself not to call the colonel 'sir' -- he's a civilian, not in the chain of command. "That's why I've asked Deputy Director McMurdo to reassign you to this office, to work on my team as company liaison. And I'm pleased to say that he's agreed."

Roger can't stop himself: "To work here, sir?" *Here* is in the basement of the Executive Office Building, an extension hanging off the White House. Whoever the colonel is he's got *pull*, in positively magical quantities. "What will I be doing, sir? You said, your team --"

"Relax a bit. Drink your coffee." The colonel paces back behind his desk, sits down. Roger sips cautiously at the brown sludge in the mug with the Marine Corps crest. "The president told me to organize a team," says the colonel, so casually that Roger nearly chokes on his coffee, "to handle contingencies. October surprises. Those asshole commies down in Nicaragua. 'We're eyeball to eyeball with an Evil Empire, Ozzie, and we can't afford to blink' -- those were his exact words. The Evil Empire uses dirty tricks. But nowadays we're better than they are: buncha hicks, like some third-world dictatorship -- Upper Volta with shoggoths. My job is to pin them down and cut them up. Don't give them a chance to whack the shoe on the UN table, demand concessions. If they want to bluff I'll call 'em on it. If they want to go toe-to-toe I'll dance with 'em." He's up and pacing again. "The company used to do that, and do it okay, back in the fifties and sixties. But too many bleeding hearts -- it makes me sick. If you guys went back to wet ops today you'd have journalists following you every time you went to the john in case it was newsworthy.

"Well, we aren't going to do it that way this time. It's a small team and the buck stops here." The colonel pauses, then glances at the ceiling. "Well, maybe up there. But you get the picture. I need someone who knows the company, an insider who has clearance up the wazoo who can go in and get the dope before it goes through a fucking committee of ass-watching bureaucrats. I'm also getting someone from the Puzzle Palace, and some words to give me pull with Big Black." He glances at Roger sharply, and Roger nods: he's cleared for

National Security Agency -- Puzzle Palace -- intelligence, and knows about Big Black, the National Reconnaissance Office, which is so secret that even its existence is still classified.

Roger is impressed by this colonel, despite his better judgement. Within the byzantine world of the US intelligence services, he is talking about building his very own pocket battleship and sailing it under the jolly roger with letters of marque and reprisal signed by the president. But Roger still has some questions to ask, to scope out the limits of what Colonel North is capable of. "What about FEVER DREAM, sir?"

The colonel puts his coffee-cup down. "I own it," he says, bluntly. "And NIGHTMARE. And PLUTO. *Any means necessary* he said, and I have an executive order with the ink still damp to prove it. Those projects aren't part of the national command structure any more. Officially they've been stood down from active status and are being considered for inclusion in the next round of arms reduction talks. They're not part of the deterrent ORBAT any more; we're standardizing on just nuclear weapons. Unofficially, they're part of my group, and I will use them as necessary to contain and reduce the Evil Empire's warmaking abilities."

Roger's skin crawls with an echo of that childhood terror. "And the Dresden Agreement ...?"

"Don't worry. Nothing short of *them* breaking it would lead me to do so." The colonel grins, toothily. "Which is where you come in ..."

### **The moonlit shores of Lake Vostok**

The metal pier is dry and cold, the temperature hovering close to zero degrees Fahrenheit. It's oppressively dark in the cavern under the ice, and Roger shivers inside his multiple layers of insulation, shifts from foot to foot to keep warm. He has to swallow to keep his ears clear and he feels slightly dizzy from the pressure in the artificial bubble of air, pumped under the icy ceiling to allow humans to exist here, under the Ross Ice Shelf; they'll all spend more than a day sitting in depressurization chambers on the way back up to the surface.

There is no sound from the waters lapping just below the edge of the pier. The floodlights vanish into the surface and keep going -- the water in the sub-surface Antarctic lake is incredibly clear -- but are swallowed up rapidly, giving an impression of infinite, inky depths.

Roger is here as the colonel's representative, to observe the arrival of the probe, receive the consignment they're carrying, and report back that everything is running smoothly. The others try to ignore him, jittery at the presence of the man from DC. There're a gaggle of engineers and artificers, flown out via McMurdo base to handle the midget sub's operations. A nervous lieutenant supervises a squad of marines with complicated-looking weapons, half gun and half video camera, stationed at the corners of the raft. And there's the usual platform crew, deep-sea rig maintenance types -- but subdued and nervous looking. They're afloat in a bubble of pressurized air wedged against the underside of the Antarctic ice sheet: below them stretch the still, supercooled waters of Lake Vostok.

They're waiting for a rendezvous.

"Five hundred yards," reports one of the techs. "Rising on ten." His companion nods. They're waiting for the men in the midget sub drilling quietly through three miles of frigid water, intruders in a long-drowned tomb. "Have 'em back on board in no time." The sub has been away for nearly a day; it set out with enough battery juice for the journey, and enough air to keep the crew breathing for a long time if there's a system failure, but they've learned the hard way that fail-safe systems aren't. Not out here, at the edge of the human world.

Roger shuffles some more. "I was afraid the battery load on that cell you replaced would trip an undervoltage isolator and we'd be here 'til Hell freezes over," the sub driver jokes to his neighbour.

Looking round, Roger sees one of the marines cross himself. "Have you heard anything from Gorman or Suslowicz?" he asks quietly.

The lieutenant checks his clipboard. "Not since departure, sir," he says. "We don't have comms with the sub while it's submerged: too small for ELF, and we don't want to alert anybody who might be, uh, listening."

"Indeed." The yellow hunchback shape of the midget submarine appears at the edge of the radiance shed by the floodlights. Surface waters undulate, oily, as the sub rises.

"Crew transfer vehicle sighted," the driver mutters into his mike. He's suddenly very busy adjusting trim settings, blowing bottled air into ballast tanks, discussing ullage levels and blade count with his number two. The crane crew are busy too, running their long boom out over the lake.

The sub's hatch is visible now, bobbing along the top of the water: the lieutenant is suddenly active. "Jones! Civatti! Stake it out, left and centre!" The crane is already swinging the huge lifting hook over the sub, waiting to bring it aboard. "I want eyeballs on the portholes before you crack this thing!" It's the tenth run -- seventh manned -- through the eye of the needle on the lake bed, the drowned structure so like an ancient temple, and Roger has a bad feeling about it. *We can't get away with this forever*, he reasons. *Sooner or later ...*

The sub comes out of the water like a gigantic yellow bath toy, a cyborg whale designed by a god with a sense of humour. It takes tense minutes to winch it in and manoeuvre it safely onto the platform. Marines take up position, shining torches in through two of the portholes that bulge myopically from the smooth curve of the sub's nose. Up on top someone is talking into a handset plugged into the stubby conning tower; the hatch locking wheel begins to turn.

"Gorman, sir," It's the lieutenant. In the light of the sodium floods everything looks sallow and washed-out; the soldier's face is the colour of damp cardboard, slack with relief.

Roger waits while the submariner -- Gorman -- clammers unsteadily down from the top deck. He's a tall, emaciated-looking man, wearing a red thermal suit three sizes too big for him: salt-and-pepper stubble textures his jaw with sandpaper. Right now, he looks like a cholera victim; sallow skin, smell of acrid ketones as his body eats its own protein reserves, a more revolting miasma hovering over him. There's a slim aluminium briefcase chained to his left wrist, a bracelet of bruises darkening the skin above it. Roger steps forward.

"Sir?" Gorman straightens up for a moment: almost a shadow of military attention. He's unable to sustain it. "We made the pickup. Here's the QA sample; the rest is down below. You have the unlocking code?" he asks wearily.

Jourgensen nods. "One. Five. Eight. One. Two. Two. Nine."

Gorman slowly dials it into a combination lock on the briefcase, lets it fall open and unthreads the chain from his wrist. Floodlights glisten on polythene bags stuffed with white powder, five kilos of high-grade heroin from the hills of Afghanistan; there's another quarter of a ton packed in boxes in the crew compartment. The lieutenant inspects it, closes the case and passes it to Jourgensen. "Delivery successful, sir." From the ruins on the high plateau of the Taklamakan desert to American territory in Antarctica, by way of a detour through gates linking alien worlds: gates that nobody knows how to create or destroy except the Predecessors -- and they aren't talking.

"What's it like through there?" Roger demands, shoulders tense. "What did you *see*?"

Up on top, Suslowicz is sitting in the sub's hatch, half slumping against the crane's attachment post. There's obviously something very wrong with him. Gorman shakes his head and looks away: the wan light makes the razor-sharp creases on his face stand out, like the crackled and shattered surface of a Jovian moon. Crow's feet. Wrinkles. Signs of age. Hair the colour of moonlight. "It took so long," he says, almost complaining. Sinks to his knees. "All that *time* we've been gone ..." He leans against the side of the sub, a pale shadow, aged beyond his years. "The sun was so *bright*. And our radiation detectors. Must have been a solar flare or something." He doubles over and retches at the edge of the platform.

Roger looks at him for a long, thoughtful minute: Gorman is twenty-five and a fixer for Big Black, early history in the Green Berets. He was in rude good health two days ago, when he set off through the gate to make the pick-up. Roger glances at the lieutenant. "I'd better go and tell the colonel," he says. A pause. "Get these two back to Recovery and see they're looked after. I don't expect we'll be sending any more crews through Victor-Tango for a while."

He turns and walks towards the lift shaft, hands clasped behind his back to keep them from shaking. Behind him, alien moonlight glimmers across the floor of Lake Vostok, three miles and untold light years from home.

**General LeMay would be Proud**

*Paradigm: The Rockwell Issue*

**Warning**

The following briefing film is classified SECRET INDIGO MARCH SNIPE. If you do not have SECRET INDIGO MARCH SNIPE clearance, leave the auditorium *now* and report to your unit security officer for debriefing. Failing to observe this notice is an imprisonable offense.

You have sixty seconds to comply.

**Video clip**

Shot of huge bomber, rounded gun turrets sprouting like mushrooms from the decaying log of its fuselage, weirdly bulbous engine pods slung too far out towards each wingtip, four turbine tubes clumped around each atomic kernel.

**Voice-over**

"The Convair B-39 Peacemaker is the most formidable weapon in our Strategic Air Command's arsenal for peace. Powered by eight nuclear-heated Pratt and Whitney NP-4051 turbojets, it circles endlessly above the Arctic ice cap, waiting for the call. This is Item One, the flight training and test bird: twelve other birds await criticality on the ground, for once launched a B-39 can only be landed at two airfields in Alaska that are equipped to handle them. This one's been airborne for nine months so far, and shows no signs of age."

**Cut to:**

A shark the size of a Boeing 727 falls away from the open bomb bay of the monster. Stubby delta wings slice through the air, propelled by a rocket-bright glare.

**Voice-over**

"A modified Navajo missile -- test article for an XK-PLUTO payload -- dives away from a carrier plane. Unlike the real thing, this one carries no hydrogen bombs, no direct-cycle fission ramjet to bring retaliatory destruction to the enemy. Travelling at Mach 3 the XK-PLUTO will overfly enemy territory, dropping megaton-range bombs until, its payload exhausted, it seeks out and circles a final enemy. Once over the target it will eject its reactor core and rain molten plutonium on the heads of the enemy. XK-PLUTO is a total weapon: every aspect of its design, from the shockwave it creates as it hurtles along at treetop height to the structure of its atomic reactor, is designed to inflict damage."

**Cut to:**

Belsen postcards, Auschwitz movies: a holiday in hell.

**Voice-over**

"*This* is why we need such a weapon. *This* is what it deters. The abominations

first raised by the Third Reich's Organisation Todt, now removed to the Ukraine and deployed in the service of New Soviet Man as our enemy calls himself."

**Cut to:**

A sinister grey concrete slab, the upper surface of a Mayan step pyramid built with East German cement. Barbed wire, guns. A drained canal slashes north from the base of the pyramid towards the Baltic coastline, relic of the installation process: this is where it came from. The slave barracks squat beside the pyramid like a horrible memorial to its black-uniformed builders.

**Cut to:**

The new resting place: a big concrete monolith surrounded by three concrete lined lakes and a canal. It sits in the midst of a Ukraine landscape, flat as a pancake, stretching out forever in all directions.

**Voice-over**

"This is Project Koschei. The Kremlin's key to the gates of hell ..."

### **Technology taster**

"We know they first came here during the Precambrian age."

Professor Gould is busy with his viewgraphs, eyes down, trying not to pay too much attention to his audience. "We have samples of macrofauna, discovered by palaeontologist Charles D. Walcott on his pioneering expeditions into the Canadian Rockies, near the eastern border of British Columbia --" a hand-drawing of something indescribably weird fetches up on the screen -- like this *opabina*, which died there six hundred and forty million years ago. Fossils of soft-bodied animals that old are rare; the Burgess shale deposits are the best record of the Precambrian fauna anyone has found to date."

A skinny woman with big hair and bigger shoulder-pads sniffs loudly; she has no truck with these antediluvian dates. Roger winces sympathy for the academic. He'd rather she wasn't here, but somehow she got wind of the famous palaeontologist's visit -- and she's the colonel's administrative assistant. Telling her to leave would be a career-limiting move.

"The important item to note -- " photograph of a mangled piece of rock, visual echoes of the *opabina* -- "is the tooth marks. We find them also -- their exact cognates -- on the ring segments of the Z-series specimens returned by the Pabodie Antarctic expedition of 1926. The world of the Precambrian was laid out differently from our own; most of the land masses that today are separate continents were joined into one huge structure. Indeed, these samples were originally separated by only two thousand miles or thereabouts. Suggesting that they brought their own parasites with them."

"What do tooth-marks tell us about them, that we need to know?" asks the colonel.

The doctor looks up. His eyes gleam: "That something liked to eat them when they were fresh." There's a brief rattle of laughter. "Something with jaws that open and close like the iris in your camera. Something we thought was extinct."

Another viewgraph, this time with a blurry underwater photograph on it. The thing looks a bit like a weird fish -- a turbocharged, armoured hagfish with side-skirts and spoilers, or maybe a squid with not enough tentacles. The upper head is a flattened disk, fronted by two bizarre fern-like tentacles drooping over the weird sucker-mouth on its underside. "This snapshot was taken in Lake Vostok last year. It should be dead: there's nothing there for it to eat. This, ladies and gentlemen, is *Anomalocaris*, our toothy chewer." He pauses for a moment. "I'm very grateful to you for showing it to me," he adds, "even though it's going to make a lot of my colleagues very angry."

Is that a shy grin? The professor moves on rapidly, not giving Roger a chance to fathom his real reaction. "Now *this* is interesting in the extreme," Gould comments. Whatever it is, it looks like a cauliflower head, or maybe a brain: fractally branching stalks continuously diminishing in length and diameter, until they turn into an iridescent fuzzy manifold wrapped around a central stem. The base of the stem is rooted to a barrel-shaped structure that stands on four stubby tentacles.

"We had somehow managed to cram *Anomalocaris* into our taxonomy, but this is something that has no precedent. It bears a striking resemblance to an enlarged body segment of *Hallucigenia* --" here he shows another viewgraph, something like a stiletto-heeled centipede wearing a war-bonnet of tentacles -- "but a year ago we worked out that we had poor *hallucigena* upside down and it was actually just a spiny worm. And the high levels of iridium and diamond in the head here ... this isn't a living creature, at least not within the animal kingdom I've been studying for the past thirty years. There's no cellular structure at all. I asked one of my colleagues for help and they were completely unable to isolate any DNA or RNA from it at all. It's more like a machine that displays biological levels of complexity."

"Can you put a date to it?" asks the colonel.

"Yup." The professor grins. "It predates the wave of atmospheric atomic testing that began in 1945; that's about all. We think it's from some time in the first half of this century, last half of last century. It's been dead for years, but there are older people still walking this earth. In contrast --" he flips to the picture of *Anomalocaris* "-- this specimen we found in rocks that are roughly six hundred and ten million years old." He whips up another shot: similar structure, much clearer. "Note how similar it is to the dead but not decomposed one. They're obviously still alive somewhere."

He looks at the colonel, suddenly bashful and tongue-tied: "Can I talk about the, uh, thing we were, like, earlier ...?"

"Sure. Go ahead. Everyone here is cleared for it." The colonel's casual wave takes in the big-haired secretary, and Roger, and the two guys from Big Black who are taking notes, and the

very serious woman from the Secret Service, and even the balding, worried-looking Admiral with the double chin and coke-bottle glasses.

"Oh. Alright." Bashfulness falls away. "Well, we've done some preliminary dissections on the *Anomalocaris* tissues you supplied us with. And we've sent some samples for laboratory analysis -- nothing anyone could deduce much from," he adds hastily. He straightens up. "What we discovered is quite simple: these samples didn't originate in Earth's ecosystem. Cladistic analysis of their intracellular characteristics and what we've been able to work out of their biochemistry indicates, not a point of divergence from our own ancestry, but the absence of common ancestry. A *cabbage* is more human, has more in common with us, than that creature. You can't tell by looking at the fossils, six hundred million years after it died, but live tissue samples are something else.

"Item: it's a multicellular organism, but each cell appears to have multiple structures like nuclei -- a thing called a syncytium. No DNA, it uses RNA with a couple of base pairs that aren't used by terrestrial biology. We haven't been able to figure out what most of its organelles do, what their terrestrial cognates would be, and it builds proteins using a couple of amino acids that we don't. That *nothing* does. Either it's descended from an ancestry that diverged from ours before the archaeobacteria, or -- more probably -- it is no relative at all." He isn't smiling any more. "The gateways, colonel?"

"Yeah, that's about the size of it. The critter you've got there was retrieved by one of our, uh, missions. On the other side of a gate."

Gould nods. "I don't suppose you could get me some more?" he asks hopefully.

"All missions are suspended pending an investigation into an accident we had earlier this year," the colonel says, with a significant glance at Roger. Suslowicz died two weeks ago; Gorman is still disastrously sick, connective tissue rotting in his body, massive radiation exposure the probable cause. Normal service will not be resumed; the pipeline will remain empty until someone can figure out a way to make the deliveries without losing the crew. Roger inclines his head minutely.

"Oh well." The professor shrugs. "Let me know if you do. By the way, do you have anything approximating a fix on the other end of the gate?"

"No," says the colonel, and this time Roger knows he's lying. Mission four, before the colonel diverted their payload capacity to another purpose, planted a compact radio telescope in an empty courtyard in the city on the far side of the gate. XK-Masada, where the air's too thin to breathe without oxygen; where the sky is indigo, and the buildings cast razor-sharp shadows across a rocky plain baked to the consistency of pottery under a blood-red sun. Subsequent analysis of pulsar signals recorded by the station confirmed that it was nearly six hundred light years closer to the galactic core, inward along the same spiral arm. There are glyphs on the alien buildings that resemble symbols seen in grainy black-and-white Minox photos of the doors of the bunker in the Ukraine. Symbols behind which the subject of Project Koschei lies undead and sleeping; something evil, scraped from a nest in the

drowned wreckage of a city on the Baltic floor. "Why do you want to know where they came from?"

"Well. We know so little about the context in which life evolves." For a moment the professor looks wistful. "We have -- had -- only one datum point: Earth, this world. Now we have a second, a fragment of a second. If we get a third, we can begin to ask deep questions like, not, 'is there life out there?' -- because we know the answer to that one, now -- but questions like 'what *sort* of life is out there?' and 'is there a place for us?'"

Roger shudders: *idiot*, he thinks. *If only you knew you wouldn't be so happy* -- He restrains the urge to speak up. Doing so would be another career-limiting move. More to the point, it might be a life-expectancy-limiting move for the professor, who certainly didn't deserve any such drastic punishment for his cooperation. Besides, Harvard professors visiting the Executive Office Building in DC are harder to disappear than comm-symp teachers in some fly-blown jungle village in Nicaragua. Somebody might notice. The colonel would be annoyed.

Roger realises that Professor Gould is staring at him. "Do you have a question for me?" asks the distinguished palaeontologist.

"Uh -- in a moment." Roger shakes himself. Remembering time-survivor curves, the captured Nazi medical atrocity records mapping the ability of a human brain to survive in close proximity to the Baltic Singularity. Mengele's insanity. The SS's final attempt to liquidate the survivors, the witnesses. Koschei, primed and pointed at the American heartland like a darkly evil gun. The "world-eating mind" adrift in brilliant dreams of madness, estivating in the absence of its prey: dreaming of the minds of sapient beings, be they barrel-bodied wing-flying tentacular *things*, or their human inheritors. "Do you think they could have been intelligent, professor? Conscious, like us?"

"I'd say so." Gould's eyes glitter. "This one --" he points to a viewgraph -- "isn't alive as we know it. And *this* one --" he's found a Predecessor, god help him, barrel-bodied and bat-winged -- "had what looks like a lot of very complex ganglia, not a brain as we know it, but at least as massive as our own. And some specialised grasping adaptations that might be interpreted as facilitating tool use. Put the two together and you have a high level technological civilization. Gateways between planets orbiting different stars. Alien flora, fauna, or whatever. I'd say an interstellar civilization isn't out of the picture. One that has been extinct for deep geological time -- ten times as long as the dinosaurs -- but that has left relics that work." His voice is trembling with emotion. "We humans, we've barely scratched the surface! The longest lasting of our relics? All our buildings will be dust in twenty thousand years, even the pyramids. Neil Armstrong's footprints in the Sea of Tranquillity will crumble under micrometeoroid bombardment in a mere half million years or so. The emptied oil fields will refill over ten million years, methane percolating up through the mantle: continental drift will erase everything. But *these* people...! They built to last. There's so much to learn from them. I wonder if we're worthy pretenders to their technological crown?"

"I'm sure we are, professor," the colonel's secretary says brassily. "Isn't that right, Ollie?"

The colonel nods, grinning. "You betcha, Fawn. You betcha!"

### The Great Satan

Roger sits in the bar in the King David hotel, drinking from a tall glass of second-rate lemonade and sweating in spite of the air conditioning. He's dizzy and disoriented from jet-lag, the gut-cramps have only let him come down from his room in the past hour, and he has another two hours to go before he can try to place a call to Andrea. They had another blazing row before he flew out here; she doesn't understand why he keeps having to visit odd corners of the globe. She only knows that his son is growing up thinking a father is a voice that phones at odd times of day.

Roger is mildly depressed, despite the buzz of doing business at this level. He spends a lot of time worrying about what will happen if they're found out -- what Andrea will do, or Jason for that matter, Jason whose father is a phone call away all the time -- if Roger is led away in handcuffs beneath the glare of flash bulbs. If the colonel sings, if the shy bald admiral is browbeaten into spilling the beans to Congress, who will look after them then?

Roger has no illusions about what kills black operations: there are too many people in the loop, too many elaborate front corporations and numbered bank accounts and shady Middle Eastern arms dealers. Sooner or later someone will find a reason to talk, and Roger is in too deep. He isn't just the company liaison officer any more: he's become the colonel's bag-man, his shadow, the guy with the diplomatic passport and the bulging briefcase full of heroin and end-user certificates.

At least the ship will sink from the top down, he thinks. There are people *very* high up who want the colonel to succeed. When the shit hits the fan and is sprayed across the front page of the *Washington Post*, it will likely take down cabinet members and secretaries of state: the President himself will have to take the witness stand and deny everything. The republic will question itself.

A hand descends on his shoulder, sharply cutting off his reverie. "Howdy, Roger! Whatcha worrying about now?"

Jourgensen looks up wearily. "Stuff," he says gloomily. "Have a seat." The redneck from the embassy -- Mike Hamilton, some kind of junior attache for embassy protocol by cover -- pulls out a chair and crashes down on it like a friendly car wreck. He's not really a redneck, Roger knows -- rednecks don't come with doctorates in foreign relations from Yale -- but he likes people to think he's a bumpkin when he wants to get something from them.

"He's early," says Hamilton, looking past Roger's ear, voice suddenly all business. "Play the agenda, I'm your dim but friendly good cop. Got the background? Deniables ready?"

Roger nods, then glances round and sees Mehmet (family name unknown) approaching from the other side of the room. Mehmet is impeccably manicured and tailored, wearing a suit

from Jermyn Street that costs more than Roger earns in a month. He has a neatly trimmed beard and moustache and talks with a pronounced English accent. Mehmet is a Turkish name, not a Persian one: pseudonym, of course. To look at him you would think he was a westernized Turkish businessman -- certainly not an Iranian revolutionary with heavy links to Hezbollah and (whisper this), Old Man Ruholla himself, the hermit of Qom. Never, ever, in a thousand years, the unofficial Iranian ambassador to the Little Satan in Tel Aviv.

Mehmet strides over. A brief exchange of pleasantries masks the essential formality of their meeting: he's early, a deliberate move to put them off-balance. He's outnumbered, too, and that's also a move to put them on the defensive, because the first rule of diplomacy is never to put yourself in a negotiating situation where the other side can assert any kind of moral authority, and sheer weight of numbers is a powerful psychological tool.

"Roger, my dear fellow." He smiles at Jourgensen. "And the charming doctor Hamilton, I see." The smile broadens. "I take it the good colonel is desirous of news of his friends?"

Jourgensen nods. "That is indeed the case."

Mehmet stops smiling. For a moment he looks ten years older. "I visited them," he says shortly. "No, I was *taken* to see them. It is indeed grave, my friends. They are in the hands of very dangerous men, men who have nothing to lose and are filled with hatred."

Roger speaks: "There is a debt between us --"

Mehmet holds up a hand. "Peace, my friend. We will come to that. These are men of violence, men who have seen their homes destroyed and families subjected to indignities, and their hearts are full of anger. It will take a large display of repentance, a high blood-price, to buy their acquiescence. That is part of our law, you understand? The family of the bereaved may demand blood-price of the transgressor, and how else might the world be? They see it in these terms: that you must repent of your evils and assist them in waging holy war against those who would defile the will of Allah."

Roger sighs. "We do what we can," he says. "We're shipping them arms. We're fighting the Soviets every way we can without provoking the big one. What more do they want? The hostages -- that's not playing well in DC. There's got to be some give and take. If Hezbollah don't release them soon they'll just convince everyone what they're not serious about negotiating. And that'll be an end to it. The colonel *wants* to help you, but he's got to have something to show the man at the top, right?"

Mehmet nods. "You and I are men of the world and understand that this keeping of hostages is not rational, but they look to you for defence against the great Satan that assails them, and their blood burns with anger that your nation, for all its fine words, takes no action. The great Satan rampages in Afghanistan, taking whole villages by night, and what is done? The United States turns its back. And they are not the only ones who feel betrayed. Our Ba'athist foes from Iraq ... in Basra the unholy brotherhood of Takrit and their servants the Mukhabarat hold nightly sacrifice upon the altar of Yair-Suthot; the fountains of blood

in Tehran testify to their effect. If the richest, most powerful nation on earth refuses to fight, these men of violence from the Bekaa think, how may we unstopper the ears of that nation? And they are not sophisticates like you or I."

He looks at Roger, who hunches his shoulders uneasily. "We *can't* move against the Soviets openly! They must understand that it would be the end of far more than their little war. If the Taliban want American help against the Russians, it cannot be delivered openly."

"It is not the Russians that we quarrel with," Mehmet says quietly, "but their choice in allies. They believe themselves to be infidel atheists, but by their deeds they shall be known; the icy spoor of Leng is upon them, their tools are those described in the Kitab al Azif. We have proof that they have violated the terms of the Dresden Agreement. The accursed and unhallowed stalk the frozen passes of the Himalayas by night, taking all whose path they cross. And will you stopper your ears even as the Russians grow in misplaced confidence, sure that their dominance of these forces of evil is complete? The gates are opening everywhere, as it was prophesied. Last week we flew an F-14C with a camera relay pod through one of them. The pilot and weapons operator are in paradise now, but we have glanced into hell and have the film and radar plots to prove it."

The Iranian ambassador fixes the redneck from the embassy with an icy gaze. "Tell your ambassador that we have opened preliminary discussions with Mossad, with a view to purchasing the produce of a factory at Dimona, in the Negev desert. Past insults may be set aside, for the present danger imperils all of us. *They* are receptive to our arguments, even if you are not: his holiness the Ayatollah has declared in private that any warrior who carries a nuclear device into the abode of the eater of souls will certainly achieve paradise. There will be an end to the followers of the ancient abominations on this Earth, doctor Hamilton, even if we have to push the nuclear bombs down their throats with our own hands!"

### Swimming pool

"Mister Jourgensen, at what point did you become aware that the Iranian government was threatening to violate UN Resolution 216 and the Non-Proliferation Protocol to the 1956 Geneva accords?"

Roger sweats under the hot lights: his heartbeat accelerates. "I'm not sure I understand the question, sir."

"I asked you a direct question. Which part don't you understand? I'm going to repeat myself slowly: when did you realise that the Iranian Government was threatening to violate resolution 216 and the 1956 Geneva Accords on nuclear proliferation?"

Roger shakes his head. It's like a bad dream, unseen insects buzzing furiously around him. "Sir, I had no direct dealings with the Iranian government. All I know is that I was asked to carry messages to and from a guy called Mehmet who I was told knew something about our hostages in Beirut. My understanding is that the colonel has been conducting secret

negotiations with this gentleman or his backers for some time -- a couple of years -- now. Mehmet made allusions to parties in the Iranian administration but I have no way of knowing if he was telling the truth, and I never saw any diplomatic credentials."

There's an inquisition of dark-suited congressmen opposite him, like a jury of teachers sitting in judgement over an errant pupil. The trouble is, these teachers can put him in front of a judge and send him to prison for many years, so that Jason really *will* grow up with a father who's a voice on the telephone, a father who isn't around to take him to air shows or ball games or any of the other rituals of growing up. They're talking to each other quietly, deciding on another line of questioning: Roger shifts uneasily in his chair. This is a closed hearing, the television camera a gesture in the direction of the congressional archives: a pack of hungry democrats have scented republican blood in the water.

The congressman in the middle looks towards Roger. "Stop right there. Where did you know about this guy Mehmet from? Who told you to go see him and who told you what he was?"

Roger swallows. "I got a memo from Fawn, like always. Admiral Poindexter wanted a man on the spot to talk to this guy, a messenger, basically, who was already in the loop. Colonel North signed off on it and told me to charge the trip to his discretionary fund." That must have been the wrong thing to say, because two of the congressmen are leaning together and whispering in each other's ears, and an aide obligingly sidles up to accept a note, then dashes away. "I was told that Mehmet was a mediator," Roger adds. "In trying to resolve the Beirut hostage thing."

"A mediator." The guy asking the questions looks at him in disbelief.

The man to his left -- who looks as old as the moon, thin white hair, liver spots on his hooked nose, eyelids like sacks -- chuckles appreciatively. "Yeah. Like Hitler was a *diplomat*. 'One more territorial demand' --" he glances round. "Nobody else remember that?" he asks plaintively.

"No sir," Roger says very seriously.

The prime interrogator snorts. "What did Mehmet tell you Iran was going to do, exactly?"

Roger thinks for a moment. "He said they were going to buy something from a factory at Dimona. I understood this to be the Israeli Defence Ministry's nuclear weapons research institute, and the only logical item -- in the context of our discussion -- was a nuclear weapon. Or weapons. He said the Ayatollah had decreed that a suicide bomber who took out the temple of Yog-Sothoth in Basra would achieve paradise, and that they also had hard evidence that the Soviets have deployed certain illegal weapons systems in Afghanistan. This was in the context of discussing illegal weapons proliferation; he was very insistent about the Iraq thing."

"What exactly are these weapons systems?" demands the third inquisitor, a quiet, hawk-faced man sitting on the left of the panel.

"The shoggot'im, they're called: servitors. There are several kinds of advanced robotic systems made out of molecular components: they can change shape, restructure material at the atomic level -- act like corrosive acid, or secrete diamonds. Some of them are like a tenuous mist -- what Doctor Drexler at MIT calls a utility fog -- while others are more like an oily globule. Apparently they may be able to manufacture more of themselves, but they're not really alive in any meaning of the term we're familiar with. They're programmable, like robots, using a command language deduced from recovered records of the forerunners who left them here. The Molotov Raid of 1930 brought back a large consignment of them; all we have to go on are the scraps they missed, and reports by the Antarctic Survey. Professor Liebkunst's files in particular are most frustrating --"

"Stop. So you're saying the Russians have these, uh, Shoggoths, but we don't have any. And even those dumb Arab bastards in Baghdad are working on them. So you're saying we've got a, a Shoggoth gap? A strategic chink in our armour? And now the Iranians say the Russians are using them in Afghanistan?"

Roger speaks rapidly: "That is minimally correct, sir, although countervailing weapons have been developed to reduce the risk of a unilateral preemption escalating to an exchange of weakly godlike agencies." The congressman in the middle nods encouragingly. "For the past three decades, the B-39 Peacemaker force has been tasked by SIOP with maintaining an XK-PLUTO capability directed at ablating the ability of the Russians to activate Project Koschei, the dormant alien entity they captured from the Nazis at the end of the last war. We have twelve PLUTO-class atomic-powered cruise missiles pointed at that thing, day and night, as many megatons as the entire Minuteman force. In principle, we will be able to blast it to pieces before it can be brought to full wakefulness and eat the minds of everyone within two hundred miles."

He warms to his subject. "Secondly, we believe the Soviet control of Shoggoth technology is rudimentary at best. They know how to tell them to roll over an Afghan hill-farmer village, but they can't manufacture more of them. Their utility as weapons is limited -- but terrifying -- but they're not much of a problem. A greater issue is the temple in Basra. This contains an operational gateway, and according to Mehmet the Iraqi political secret police, the Mukhabarat, are trying to figure out how to manipulate it; they're trying to summon something through it. He seemed to be mostly afraid that they -- and the Russians -- would lose control of whatever it was; presumably another weakly godlike creature like the K-Thulu entity at the core of Project Koschei."

The old guy speaks: "This foo-loo thing, boy -- you can drop those stupid K prefixes around me -- is it one of a kind?"

Roger shakes his head. "I don't know, sir. We know the gateways link to at least three other planets. There may be many that we don't know of. We don't know how to create them or close them; all we can do is send people through, or pile bricks in the opening." He nearly bites his tongue, because there *are* more than three worlds out there, and he's been to at least one of them: the bolt-hole on XK-Masada, built by the NRO from their secret budget. He's seen the mile-high dome Buckminster Fuller spent his last decade designing for them, the

rings of Patriot air defence missiles. A squadron of black diamond-shaped fighters from the Skunk works, said to be invisible to radar, patrols the empty skies of XK-Masada. Hydroponic farms and empty barracks and apartment blocks await the senators and congressmen and their families and thousands of support personnel. In event of war they'll be evacuated through the small gate that has been moved to the Executive Office Building basement, in a room beneath the swimming pool where Jack used to go skinny-dipping with Marilyn.

"Off the record now." The old congressman waves his hand in a chopping gesture: "I say *off*, boy." The cameraman switches off his machine and leaves. He leans forward, towards Roger. "What you're telling me is, we've been waging a secret war since, when? The end of the second world war? Earlier, the Pabodie Antarctic expedition in the twenties, whose survivors brought back the first of these alien relics? And now the Eye-ranians have gotten into the game and figure it's part of their fight with Saddam?"

"Sir." Roger barely trusts himself to do more than nod.

"Well." The congressman eyes his neighbour sharply. "Let me put it to you that you have heard the phrase, 'the great filter'. What does it mean to you?"

"The great --" Roger stops. *Professor Gould*, he thinks. "We had a professor of palaeontology lecture us," he explains. "I think he mentioned it. Something about why there aren't any aliens in flying saucers buzzing us the whole time."

The congressman snorts. His neighbour starts and sits up. "Thanks to Pabodie and his followers, Liebkunst and the like, we know there's a lot of life in the universe. The great filter, *boy*, is whatever force stops most of it developing intelligence and coming to visit. Something, somehow, kills intelligent species before they develop this kind of technology for themselves. How about meddling with relics of the elder ones? What do you think of that?"

Roger licks his lips nervously. "That sounds like a good possibility, sir," he says. His unease is building.

The congressman's expression is intense: "These weapons your colonel is dicking around with make all our nukes look like a toy bow and arrow, and all you can say is *it's a good possibility, sir?* Seems to me like someone in the Oval Office has been asleep at the switch."

"Sir, executive order 2047, issued January 1980, directed the armed forces to standardize on nuclear weapons to fill the mass destruction role. All other items were to be developmentally suspended, with surplus stocks allocated to the supervision of Admiral Poindexter's joint munitions expenditure committee. Which Colonel North was detached to by the USMC high command, with the full cognizance of the White House --"

The door opens. The congressman looks round angrily: "I thought I said we weren't to be disturbed!"

The aide standing there looks uncertain. "Sir, there's been an, uh, major security incident, and we need to evacuate --"

"Where? What happened?" demands the congressman. But Roger, with a sinking feeling, realises that the aide isn't watching the house committee members: and the guy behind him is Secret Service.

"Basra. There's been an attack, sir." A furtive glance at Roger, as his brain freezes in denial: "If you'd all please come this way ..."

### **Bombing in fifteen minutes**

Heads down, through a corridor where congressional staffers hurry about carrying papers, urgently calling one another. A cadre of dark-suited secret service agents close in, hustling Roger along in the wake of the committee members. A wailing like tinnitus fills his ears. "What's happening?" he asks, but nobody answers.

Down into the basement. Another corridor, where two marine guards are waiting with drawn weapons. The secret service guys are exchanging terse reports by radio. The committee men are hustled away along a narrow service tunnel: Roger is stalled by the entrance. "What's going on?" he asks his minder.

"Just a moment, sir." More listening: these guys cock their heads to one side as they take instruction, birds of prey scanning the horizon for prey. "Delta four coming in. Over. You're clear to go along the tunnel now, sir. This way."

"What's *happening*?" Roger demands as he lets himself be hustled into the corridor, along to the end and round a sharp corner. Numb shock takes hold: he keeps putting one foot in front of the other.

"We're now at Defcon one, sir. You're down on the special list as part of the house staff. Next door on the left, sir."

The queue in the dim-lit basement room is moving fast, white-gloved guards with clipboards checking off men and a few women in suits as they step through a steel blast door one by one and disappear from view. Roger looks round in bewilderment: he sees a familiar face. "Fawn! What's going on?"

The secretary looks puzzled. "I don't know. Roger? I thought you were testifying today."

"So did I." They're at the door. "What else?"

"Ronnie was making a big speech in Helsinki; the colonel had me record it in his office. Something about not coexisting with the empire of evil. He cracked some kinda joke about how we start bombing in fifteen minutes, then this --"

They're at the door. It opens on a steel-walled airlock and the marine guard is taking their badges and hustling them inside. Two staff types and a middle-aged brigadier join them and the door thumps shut. The background noise vanishes, Roger's ears pop, then the inner door opens and another marine guard waves them through into the receiving hall.

"Where are we?" asks the big-haired secretary, staring around.

"Welcome to XK-Masada," says Roger. Then his childhood horrors catch up with him and he goes in search of a toilet to throw up in.

### **We need you back**

Roger spends the next week in a state of numbed shock. His apartment here is like a small hotel room -- a hotel with security, air conditioning, and windows that only open onto an interior atrium. He pays little attention to his surroundings. It's not as if he has a home to return to.

Roger stops shaving. Stops changing his socks. Stops looking in mirrors or combing his hair. He smokes a lot, orders cheap bourbon from the commissary, and drinks himself into an amnesic stupor each night. He is, frankly, a mess. Self-destructive. Everything disintegrated under him at once: his job, the people he held in high regard, his family, his life. All the time he can't get one thing out of his head: the expression on Gorman's face as he stands there, in front of the submarine, rotting from the inside out with radiation sickness, dead and not yet knowing it. It's why he's stopped looking in mirrors.

On the fourth day he's slumped in a chair watching taped *I Love Lucy* re-runs on the boob tube when the door to his suite opens quietly. Someone comes in. He doesn't look round until the colonel walks across the screen and unplugs the TV set at the wall, then sits down in the chair next to him. The colonel has bags of dark skin under his eyes; his jacket is rumpled and his collar is unbuttoned.

"You've got to stop this, Roger," he says quietly. "You look like shit."

"Yeah, well. You too."

The colonel passes him a slim manila folder. Without wanting to, Roger slides out the single sheet of paper within.

"So it *was* them."

"Yeah." A moment's silence. "For what it's worth, we haven't lost yet. We may yet pull your wife and son out alive. Or be able to go back home."

"Your family too, I suppose." Roger's touched by the colonel's consideration, the pious hope that Andrea and Jason will be alright, even through his shell of misery. He realises his glass is empty. Instead of re-filling it he puts it down on the carpet beside his feet. "*Why?*"

The colonel removes the sheet of paper from his numb fingers. "Probably someone spotted you in the King David and traced you back to us. The Mukhabarat had agents everywhere, and if they were in league with the KGB ..." he shrugs. "Things escalated rapidly. Then the president cracked that joke over a hot mike that was supposed to be switched off ... Have you been checking in with the desk summaries this week?"

Roger looks at him blankly. "Should I?"

"Oh, things are still happening." The colonel leans back and stretches his feet out. "From what we can tell of the situation on the other side, not everyone's dead yet. Ligachev's screaming blue murder over the hotline, accusing us of genocide: but he's still talking. Europe is a mess and nobody knows what's going on in the Middle East -- even the Blackbirds aren't making it back out again."

"The thing at Takrit."

"Yeah. It's bad news, Roger. We need you back."

"Bad news?"

"The worst." The colonel jams his hands between his knees, stares at the floor like a bashful child. "Saddam Hussein al-Takriti spent years trying to get his hands on elder technology. It looks like he finally succeeded in stabilising the gate into Sothoth. Whole villages disappeared, Marsh Arabs, wiped out in the swamps of Eastern Iraq. Reports of yellow rain, people's skin melting right off their bones. The Iranians got itchy and finally went nuclear. Trouble is, they did so two hours before *that* speech. Some asshole in Plotsk launched half the Uralskoye SS-20 grid -- they went to launch on warning eight months ago -- burning south, praise Jesus. Scratch the Middle East, period -- everything from the Nile to the Khyber Pass is toast. We're still waiting for the callback on Moscow, but SAC has put the whole Peacemaker force on airborne alert. So far we've lost the eastern seaboard as far south as North Virginia and they've lost the Donbass basin and Vladivostok. Things are a mess; nobody can even agree whether we're fighting the commies or something else. But the box at Chernobyl -- Project Koschei -- the doors are open, Roger. We orbited a Keyhole-eleven over it and there are tracks, leading west. The PLUTO strike didn't stop it -- and nobody knows what the fuck is going on in WarPac country. Or France, or Germany, or Japan, or England."

The colonel makes a grab for Roger's wild turkey, rubs the neck clean and swallows from the bottle. He looks at Roger with a wild expression on his face. "Koschei is loose, Roger. They fucking *wake* the thing. And now they can't control it. Can you believe that?"

"I can believe that."

"I want you back behind a desk tomorrow morning, Roger. We need to know what this Thulu creature is capable of. We need to know what to do to stop it. Forget Iraq; Iraq is a smoking hole in the map. But K-Thulu is heading towards the Atlantic coast. What are we going to do if it doesn't stop?"

## Masada

The city of XK-Masada sprouts like a vast mushroom, a mile-wide dome emerging from the top of a cold plateau on a dry planet that orbits a dying star. The jagged black shapes of F-117's howl across the empty skies outside it at dusk and dawn, patrolling the threatening emptiness that stretches as far as the mind can imagine.

Shadows move in the streets of the city, hollowed out human shells in uniform. They rustle around the feet of the towering concrete blocks like the dry leaves of autumn, obsessively focussed on the tasks that lend structure to their remaining days. Above them tower masts of steel, propping up the huge geodesic dome that arches across the sky: blocking out the hostile, alien constellations, protecting frail humanity from the dust storms that periodically scour the bones of the ancient world. The gravity here is a little lighter, the night sky whorled and marbled by the diaphanous sheets of gas blasted off the dying star that lights their days. During the long winter nights, a flurry of carbon dioxide snow dusts the surface of the dome: but the air is bone-dry, the city slaking its thirst on subterranean aquifers.

This planet was once alive -- there is still a scummy sea of algae near the equator that feeds oxygen into the atmosphere, and there is a range of volcanoes near the north pole that speaks of plate tectonics in motion -- but it is visibly dying. There is a lot of history here, but no future.

Sometimes, in the early hours when he cannot sleep, Roger walks outside the city, along the edge of the dry plateau. Machines labour on behind him, keeping the city tenuously intact: he pays them little attention. There is talk of mounting an expedition to Earth one of these years, to salvage whatever is left before the searing winds of time erase them forever. Roger doesn't like to think about that. He tries to avoid thinking about Earth as much as possible: except when he cannot sleep but walks along the cliff top, prodding at memories of Andrea and Jason and his parents and sister and relatives and friends, each of them as painful as the socket of a missing tooth. He has a mouthful of emptiness, bitter and aching, out here on the edge of the plateau.

Sometimes Roger thinks he's the last human being alive. He works in an office, feverishly trying to sort out what went wrong: and bodies move around him, talking, eating in the canteen, sometimes talking *to* him and waiting as if they expect a dialogue. There are bodies here, men and some women chatting, civilian and some military -- but no people. One of the bodies, an army surgeon, told him he's suffering from a common stress disorder, survivor's guilt. This may be so, Roger admits, but it doesn't change anything. Soulless days follow sleepless nights into oblivion, dust trickling over the side of the cliff like sand into the undug graves of his family.

A narrow path runs along the side of the plateau, just downhill from the foundations of the city power plant where huge apertures belch air warmed by the radiators of the nuclear reactor. Roger follows the path, gravel and sandy rock crunching under his worn shoes. Foreign stars twinkle overhead, forming unrecognizable patterns that tell him he's far from home. The trail drops away from the top of the plateau, until the city is an unseen shadow looming above and behind his shoulder. To his right is a dizzying panorama, the huge rift valley with its ancient city of the dead stretched out before him. Beyond it rise alien mountains, their peaks as high and airless as the dead volcanoes of Mars.

About half a mile away from the dome, the trail circles an outcrop of rock and takes a downhill switchback turn. Roger stops at the bend and looks out across the desert at his feet. He sits down, leans against the rough cliff face and stretches his legs out across the path, so that his feet dangle over nothingness. Far below him, the dead valley is furrowed with rectangular depressions; once, millions of years ago, they might have been fields, but nothing like that survives to this date. They're just dead, like everyone else on this world. Like Roger.

In his shirt pocket, a crumpled, precious pack of cigarettes. He pulls a white cylinder out with shaking fingers, sniffs at it, then flicks his lighter under it. Scarcity has forced him to cut back: he coughs at the first lungful of stale smoke, a harsh, racking croak. The irony of being saved from lung cancer by a world war is not lost on him.

He blows smoke out, a tenuous trail streaming across the cliff. "Why me?" he asks quietly.

The emptiness takes its time answering. When it does, it speaks with the Colonel's voice. "You know the reason."

"I didn't want to do it," he hears himself saying. "I didn't want to leave them behind."

The void laughs at him. There are miles of empty air beneath his dangling feet. "You had no choice."

"Yes I did! I didn't have to come here." He pauses. "I didn't have to do anything," he says quietly, and inhales another lungful of death. "It was all automatic. Maybe it was inevitable."

"-- Evitable," echoes the distant horizon. Something dark and angular skims across the stars, like an echo of extinct pterosaurs. Turbofans whirring within its belly, the F117 hunts on: patrolling to keep at bay the ancient evil, unaware that the battle is already lost. "Your family could still be alive, you know."

He looks up. "They could?" Andrea? Jason? "Alive?"

The void laughs again, unfriendly: "There is life eternal within the eater of souls. Nobody is ever forgotten or allowed to rest in peace. They populate the simulation spaces of its mind,

exploring all the possible alternative endings to their life. There's a fate worse than death, you know."

Roger looks at his cigarette disbelievingly: throws it far out into the night sky above the plain. He watches it fall until its ember is no longer visible. Then he gets up. For a long moment he stands poised on the edge of the cliff nerving himself, and thinking. Then he takes a step back, turns, and slowly makes his way back up the trail towards the redoubt on the plateau. If his analysis of the situation is wrong, at least he is still alive. And if he is right, dying would be no escape.

He wonders why hell is so cold at this time of year.

# nonfiction

## *Storm Chaser* by Warren Faidley

---

### **Chase Log: The Beginning**

Beware March 11.

Of all the days each year when a tornado might touch down, this is one of the most dangerous.

On May 11, 1953 a tornado swept through Waco, Texas, killing 114 people. On that day in 1970, two fast-moving twisters hit Lubbock, Texas, killing 26 and destroying nearly a quarter of the town.

May 11 is not only one of the busiest and most treacherous days for me as a storm chaser, it is also the day in 1957, in Topeka, Kansas, that I was born. Nowadays, if I'm lucky, my birthday is toasted over a can of beer and a chocolate cupcake in Dumas, Texas, or Dodge City, Kansas. It is not a gala event.

Less than one year after my birth, in the heart of "Tornado Alley," my father, a civil service computer programmer, was transferred to Mobile, Alabama. This move was, in a way, my first escape from a tornado. In 1966, a massive tornado swept through Topeka, killing 17 people.

I recall my earliest fascination with storms while growing up in Mobile. Not only was Mobile home to tropical weather, but the passage of spring and fall frontal systems triggered severe storms and tornadoes. I remember huddling with my mother, sister, and baby brother in the hallway of our home after a storm warning. On at least one occasion, I tried to sneak out to take a look, only to be grabbed by my mom, who scolded me with a pointed finger. "You wanted to be picked up by a twister?" she asked.

No doubt, my interests in tornadoes were awakened by the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*. The film was broadcast once a year and, without fail, I was seated in front of the television, awaiting my favorite part, the tornado. As a child, I imagined a brave "storm chaser" had risked his life filming a real one. It was only years later that I realized the Oz vortex was a special effect created by the geniuses at MGM.

My first hands-on confrontation with severe weather occurred when I was nine during a boat outing on Mobile Bay. While my father and I were exploring an old harbor filled with dilapidated cargo ships, a squall, harmlessly poised in the distance, headed our way. My father raced the 6-horsepower engine of our 11-foot aluminum boat in an attempt to outrun the storm. I sat in the bow, holding on tightly, bouncing up and down over the white caps. "Are we going to make it?" I asked as the boat filled with water. My dad nodded an unsure "Yes." Just as the leading edge of the boiling black clouds reached our boat, we made it to shore and the shelter of a small concrete building. To this day, I vividly recall the dark clouds and even the thick, salty smell of the storm. Years later, my father confessed he thought we wouldn't make it.

My curiosity got the best of me when a neighbor's house was hit by lightning. I ran down the street following the fire engine, and when I reached the front yard, I saw a huge, shirtless man standing at the door, rubbing his beet-red potbelly. Sipping from a beer can, he told the people gathered around the house that he was watching the *I Love Lucy* show when

a lightning bolt hit the roof antenna. The charge went into the house and blew up his television set. Lightning leaped from the television and hit him in the stomach, he said, singeing his skin. He quickly became the celebrity of our neighborhood. For days, kids knocked on his door and asked to see his belly and the charred television set in the back yard. He enjoyed the attention and conducted detailed tours, holding another beer can.

In October of 1966, my father was transferred to Tucson, Arizona. I had already lived in both the nation's tornado and hurricane alleys. Now, I would reside in one of the world's lightning hot spots. I became especially interested to see what everyone called "the monsoons." My wait wasn't long.

My first monsoon encounter came in July 1967. I watched billowing white clouds rocket into the afternoon sky, pushed upward by surface temperatures of well over 110 degrees Fahrenheit and a supply of moist air from Mexico. The clouds eventually merged and the southern horizon as a single massive thunderhead, with a dark and foreboding base.

The thunderstorms developed daily in July and August. They blanketed the city with a dust cloud, then pounded it with wind, flooding rain and spectacular lightning. At night, I lay in my top bunk watching the lightning bolts dance outside the window and listened to the sound of thunder. The acrid smell of creosote bushes seeped in through the half-opened window.

By the age of 12, I was ready to experience the monsoon firsthand.

After the year's first heavy monsoon rainstorm, the runoff filled a usually dry lake bed near our home. A roaring wall of muddy, earthy-smelling water would come sweeping down a narrow arroyo toward the lake. Once the first big storm hit and the water began to flow, a red alert—the type only kids can hear—was sounded. We raced our bikes along the wash and escorted the torrent as it approached the lake bed. It was an amusing, but hazardous, place to play.

While I was walking with a group along the sides of the freshly flooded lake, a portion of the bank collapsed, sending a girl and me tumbling into turbulent waters. I bobbed up and down in the water, holding my breath until my lungs were crying for air. I will never forget the feeling. As I went under the water, gasping what I thought would be my last breath and taking in a mouth full of muddy water, I literally saw my life flash before me. This was death, I was certain. But just as I felt I would pass out, we were carried by the current to a shallow patch where we could stand and lift our heads from the water. From then on I found drier, less deadly things to chase—at least for a while.

My next adventure involved dust devils, or just "devils" as we called them. Dust devils are vortices of swirling air caused by thermals rising from the hot desert floor. The rotating air takes on the classic funnel shape as dust and debris fill the vortex, mimicking the appearance of a small tornado. In the Southwest, it is not uncommon to see dust devils frequently when the temperatures climb to 100 degrees and more.

Impressive dust devils appeared in the dusty vacant lots surrounding my neighborhood. While watching one of these vortices from the seat of my bicycle, I developed my first chase plan. It was not complicated. I decided to ride my bike into the center of the funnel and see what was inside. Racing back to the neighborhood, I gathered my usual band of explorers—save for a couple whose mothers worried about "that Faidley kid" and his wacky adventures.

We donned jackets and safety goggles and rose in formation to the lot, where we made several unsuccessful attempts at entering a dust devil. One unfortunate test pilot among us discovered that the opening of a mouth in a dust cloud was a poor maneuver. Another pal

cut short his valiant attempt when a giant tumbleweed flew out of the dust cloud and hit him in the back, sending a load of spiny stickers into his shirt.

My opportunity came as a particularly large devil developed in the center of the lot. I gathered speed, summoned my courage, put on my goggles and took aim. I held my breath and pedaled straight toward the devil. As I broke through the swirling wall of the vortex, I fell off my bike, startled to discover there was no wind resistance inside the funnel. I was in a large, hollow cylinder. The interior of the devil was still and virtually dust-free, illuminated by a weird orange hue, caused, I suppose, by sun filtering through the spinning wall of fine desert grit. Tumble weeds, newspapers and other debris were imbedded in the circulation.

Above, I could see the upper regions of the vortex as it oscillated in a snake-like fashion, eventually expanding into a deep blue sky. A constant thrashing noise was all I could hear. The temperature outside the dust devil was about 100 degrees but it was much hotter inside, and difficult to breathe. For a minute, I was able to ride within the fifteen-yard circumference of the dust devil. But the show abruptly ended when one of the walls crashed into me. I was thrown clear of the funnel, which disintegrated into wispy strands of slowly falling dust. I was greeted by fellow chasers who, having lost sight of me, feared that I had been lifted away. I was elated. My chase had been a success.

### **Out of the Blue**

*Thunder's flapping wings and the flaming arrows shot by the Lightning People terrorize the Cloud People into making rain for the thirsty earth. – Zia Indian folklore*

Lightning is a storm chaser's greatest natural danger. It is unlike other storm phenomena such as tornadoes and hurricanes. Lightning will see out its target, attracted to even the smallest piece of metal like a steel tripod or a metal zipper on a pair of pants.

Once, while shooting a thunderstorm near Willcox, Arizona, my aluminum tripod once became electrified, and the shock numbed my hands. I took a few steps away from the tripod, fell to the ground and covered my head, expecting a lightning charge to make its way through the tripod. Just as I lowered my body, a terrifying lightning bolt zipped overhead, leaping from cloud to cloud. A loud thunderclap followed. My hands ached for hours, but I was thankful the bolt didn't make it to the ground.

The physics involved in lightning are amazing. The lightning channel, which we see as a large, bright white column, is in reality only about an inch in diameter. The energy from a lightning strike can reach upward of 100,000 amperes. By way of comparison, the average electrical house circuit carries 30 amps. The temperature of the channel can reach nearly 50,000 degrees Fahrenheit, which is about five times hotter than the surface of the sun. Lightning is also a common occurrence: the earth is hit about 100 times per second by lightning bolts. Lightning kills an average of 200 people annually.

When I started working near lightning in 1982, I had neither knowledge nor appreciation of the physics or dangers of lightning. My lack of understanding—and fear—made my earliest adventures with thunderstorms life-threatening. I nearly kissed the earth goodbye on several occasions in my initial challenges of the storm gods.

In one terrifying instance, captured on a video camera near Marana, Arizona, a renegade bolt struck the ground 10 feet from my tripod. The footage was eventually shown on a National Geographic Explorer special. "This small bolt could have killed Faidley," says the

narrator.

On another occasion, also near Marana, a lightning bolt hit power lines above my car as I shot a dust storm. The strike sent arcing wires on top of my car. The blinding flash and ensuing thunderclap startled me so much that I lifted myself out of the seat and banged my head on the roof. Appropriately, "I Fall to Pieces" by Patsy Cline faded out for a moment on the radio as the lightning's energy distorted the airwaves. It took a minute for my sight to be restored so I could drive safely away from burning wires that surrounded my car and a major brush fire ignited by the wires.

My escapades into the desolate regions of southern Arizona provided no shortage of spooky adventures and humor. Among my encounters: armed drug runners, scorpions, and flash floods.

Once, I was shooting a storm about midnight at a ranch near Sonoita, Arizona, when a magnificent lightning bolt flashed overhead and hit somewhere behind me. It was so close that my hair stood on end. I turned, half-bent in fright. After the last echo of rolling thunder faded from the nearby hills, there was silence again—except for a peculiar noise that became louder and louder. The noise was nothing I had heard before.

The mystery became unbearable. My pulse quickened with fear, by my curiosity won over. I grabbed a small flashlight and walked down a dirt road toward the sound. About 50 yards down the road, the noise rose to a higher pitch. For some damn reason, it seemed to be coming from the sky. I swear I saw something red flash high above for a split second. My flashlight beam dimmed to a weak, useless glow. The wind picked up and a light rain started to fall.

Normally, my imagination doesn't interfere with my reasoning. However, earlier in the evening, I had turned in an AM radio talk show on UFO abductions. Most happen on nights in the middle of nowhere, the experts said. Well, Sonoita is pretty close to being the middle of nowhere, and the night was dark, and those lightning flashes were making the cacti look as though they were moving. I went back to the car.

Just as I turned and walked a few feet, there was a screech, then a loud metallic crash. I jumped to the side of the road, caught my foot on a rock and fell into the desert with my heart pounding in my ears. Fortunately, I fell right between two large, needle-sharp, cholla cacti. I paused, listened, stood and looked around me, expecting to glimpse the saucer people with their humongous dark eyes. Instead, there was dead silence. The eerie sound disappeared. I continued on, casting glances over my shoulder every few steps.

I packed the gear in the car and drove toward the highway. But curiosity was not only nagging me, it was hounding me. I turned the car around and went to solve the mystery. I wasn't sure exactly where to go. The rain was now steady and I hunted for the two cacti, but there was so many that it was impossible to pinpoint where I'd been. I hunted for 15 minutes, then gave up and turned the car around. And my headlights solved the mystery.

Thirty feet off to the right side of the road stood a metal windmill tower, its circular vanes missing. I backed up and flicked on the brights to survey the ground below the tower. Sure enough, the vanes lay at the tower base. The tower had been hit by the lightning strike, and the damaged vanes had sparked, clanged and emitted a metallic groan.

## **The Nature of the Beasts**

Tornadoes had eluded me.

Three years of chasing and I had yet to see one. I had witnessed numerous funnels, even a few suspect tornadoes wrapped in rain or darkness, but I had no definitive tornado on film or video. Nor did I have any idea that finding one would be so demanding, in time and brain power. What started as a challenge now blossomed into an all-out obsession. Spring of 1990 approached, and my mission in life was to find the perfect tornado and capture it on film.

Unfortunately, tornadoes don't announce themselves. Out of 100,000 thunderstorms that are reported each year in the U.S., approximately 1,000 tornadoes will be officially recorded, yet less than 50 percent are chaseable, and even fewer offer good photographic opportunities. The majority of twisters occur in the cloak of darkness, hide within the shadows of rain and/or hail or form with little forewarning. In addition, they often drop over remote, inaccessible landscapes and can flee at speeds of 40 to 60 mph. Others exist for a fleeting moment, under the average life span of 10 minutes. Often, the shape and color of the tornado is lost on film to poor contrast, severely diffused by mist from high humidity, or obscured by dust.

Then the hard part: once I found a photographable twister, I would need to get close enough to get my shots without becoming one of the 80 or more Americans annually (on average) who are killed by them. Besides a blessing of luck, I would have to become a precise forecaster if I was going to capture a tornado and live to chase again. It was that simple.

To that end, I spent countless hours looking over every relevant textbook, technical report, historical record, film and magazine article that I could find. When I visited the National Weather Service offices, I deluged my hosts with questions. I paid detailed attention to my own forecasts, making notes of my mistakes. I learned to use a computer to gain access to weather data and plot out my own charts.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned during my observations was that the creation of a twister is an act of perfect timing. Environment and storm work together like a finely tuned machine. In order for substantial, chaseable storms to form, a number of atmospheric elements and events must merge at precisely the right time.

Fortunately, a few pieces of the chasing puzzle are no mystery. It is common knowledge that the most graphic tornadoes, and the highest frequency of tornadic events, occur from April to June, with the greatest concentration in the last two weeks of May and the first week of June. It is during this period that Gulf moisture works its way northward into the Plains, spring dynamics enter the region from the west, and jet stream winds race across the area. Thus, some severe weather "outbreak" events are apparent days in advance.

The domain of the most awesome twisters on this planet is certainly no enigma. It is a region where the elements come together most often with explosive force. It's nicknamed "Tornado Alley," which has no official boundaries. Using governmental tornado occurrence statistics as geographic boundaries, it generally includes most of the central and east-central United States, bordered by western Kentucky to the east, and eastern Colorado to the west. This region has the world's highest frequency of tornadoes, including "families" of violent tornadoes.

Even though Tornado Alley covers a vast area, the actual chaseable terrain encompasses around 250,000 square miles, which is less than 50 percent of the total area. What limits the chaser from covering the entire area is that a large portion of the Alley consists of densely foliated and hilly terrain. The lack of visibility and inability to spot severe storms in such

regions is not only frustrating, it's dangerous. This also partially accounts for the deadly history of this area.

### **High Risk**

"I hear the voice of rage and ruin." The steering wheel was my drum, and I was singing along to Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Bad Moon Rising" on some distant AM station. I was on Highway 281, just outside Apache, Oklahoma, happy to hear the chaser's anthem. Today was a "high-risk" tornado day.

My fifth tornado chase season was underway, and the "big one" had still eluded me. I was anxious to get going. Instead of hitting the road in May, as planned, I gambled and started early. April storms can be difficult to chase, because jet stream winds often move them along at 40 mph or faster. As a result, interception would be a combination of perfect timing, positioning and fortune.

The NWS 48-hour forecast model and its satellite imagery showed an impressive cyclone approaching from the west. The spiraling, comma-shaped cloud pattern over the western U.S. was a hint of trouble. I sought out a senior forecaster who happened to be an experienced chaser. "This system is incredibly dynamic," he said. "If it holds together and taps into the gulf moisture, Friday will be a big-time chase day." A chaser in Oklahoma put it more succinctly: "People are going die on the 26th." That comment made my skin crawl. It was more than enough to keep me in the Alley for a couple of extra days, as well.

I was passing through Childress, Texas, on the morning of the 26th, en route to Wichita Falls, Texas, when I decided to stop at the NWS office and check on the latest forecast. The witch's brew of low pressure, moisture, and a strong jet stream overhead were going to produce violent weather, forecasters believed. I examined the charts and data printouts posted on a bulletin board. A forecaster handed me a printout. "You'll want to take a look at this," he said.

"IT IS EMPHASIZED THAT THIS IS A POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS WEATHER SITUATION FOR MUCH OF OKLAHOMA. EXTREME INSTABILITY AND THE EXPECTED WINDS ALOFT INDICATE THE POTENTIAL FOR A SIGNIFICANT SEVERE WEATHER OUTBREAK LATER THIS AFTERNOON INCLUDING THE POSSIBILITY OF VERY DESTRUCTIVE TORNADOES. RESIDENTS ARE URGED TO TAKE THIS SITUATION SERIOUSLY."

I read the printout twice and studied my own data. I made my way to the door and thanked the man. "Where are you heading?" he asked.

"Somewhere from west-central Oklahoma into Kansas. I'll concentrate on the dryline," I said. The dryline is the boundary, often unstable, between moist and dry air masses.

It was hard to conceal my excitement. After four years of tornado chasing, it looked like my meteorological ship was coming in. Nothing like a terribly ominous forecast to boost the spirits.

I made my way north from Wichita Falls along Interstate 44 toward Oklahoma. I would continue north on Highway 281 towards Enid, Oklahoma, where I expected the first storms

to develop near the dryline. The first growing storm clouds, or "towers," were visible in the distant west as I approached Fairview, Oklahoma. I followed them for several miles, hoping they would grow into my dream storm.

As impressive as they were, however, they abruptly collapsed into an overcast haze. Soon, other storms went up and suffered a similar fate. Something was seriously wrong with the atmosphere, I thought. In an hour or so, the sky above me was covered with a thick deck of gray, stratus clouds. I pulled to the side of the road and got out. I studied my road map and began to plan my southern route to Lubbock.

I was about to give up and go back, but a glance over my shoulder convinced me otherwise. It was about 3:30 p.m., and what I saw stunned me. Up through the ugly cloud bank towards the east, a mass of ivory-white storm clouds were shooting up through the sky in the typical A-bomb style.

The eastern sky soon revealed a tremendous storm with a rounded anvil-like head. From the base of the storm upward, the clouds were twisted, like a barber's pole. The storm was rotating.

Just west of Enid, I picked up a radio station in the midst of transmitting a tornado warning: "Take shelter immediately. A tornado is reported on the ground just east of Enid," it said. I glanced at the gas gauge—empty. I made the mistake of not keeping my gas tank full. I cursed and pulled into the first gas station I saw. I ran inside, rudely passed two people standing in line, tossed the clerk a \$10 bill. I raced back to the car, pumped, and tore off down the highway after my storm. I had wasted precious, precious time.

East of Enid, along Highway 64, the sides of the road were lined with cars. It seemed that everyone was pointing or staring at the storm. Moments later, I saw why.

Protruding from the clouds, hovering over green fields some five miles away, was a long rope-like funnel snaking its way down from the dark base of the cloud. I pulled to the side of the highway. Simultaneously, the funnel completely vanished. I continued traveling east, guessing that the small twister was but a hint that bigger things were coming.

I tracked the storm bouncing between a maze of dusty dirt roads and the highway. I kept as close as possible to the updraft base, the area where a tornado usually drops. I pulled over, again, when I noticed the entire base of the storm was beginning to rapidly rotate and contract.

Suddenly, a large, white, cone-shaped funnel developed from a "wall cloud" in the center of the updraft. In a minute, the cone transformed into an enormous wedge-shaped tornado that spread out over the field and began ripping up dirt, plants, shrubs, and anything in its path, throwing the material up and away from the vortex.

After I came to my senses—after all, this was the first time I had seen such a sight—I jumped back into the car and tore after the wedge. I found that the storm was moving away at better than 40 mph. I drove as fast as I could down the dirt road, video camera in one hand, steering wheel in the other. My challenge was to keep the tornado framed in the center of the viewfinder. I was completely overwhelmed.

I was able to drive parallel with the tornado for several miles, keeping an eye on it to avoid becoming one more piece of the flying debris. I should have heard faint echoes of mothers telling their kids to "avoid that Faidley kid."

So massive and so fast was the tornado that I couldn't tell for sure which way it was heading. Illusion was also a risk here. Since my mind had never encountered this type of image, it did not register as "the real thing." I wanted to get the best pictures ever taken of a

tornado; I didn't want to become this tornado's playmate on a dirt road with no escape.

I reached Highway 15 and headed north, directly toward the tornado. It appeared to be five miles away. I kept the video camera focused on the vortex, which became ominously larger as I closed in. It looked more like a huge plume of smoke than a mile-wide tornado.

The landscape quickly dropped down into a river area, thickly lined with trees, which completely cut off my view of the twister. I approached a metal span bridge and noticed the tops of the trees beginning to bend in the direction of the tornado. I was unsure of the tornado's location, and I locked up the brakes just before the bridge. The car spun around on the highway shoulder, and started back south until I could once again see the tornado over the trees. Then, a quarter mile from where I stood, the tornado crossed the road.

I turned around again and headed back north. Debris was falling from the sky on the far side of the bridge. Not wanting to get whacked by a stray two-by-four, I pulled over and narrated the closing events as the twister churned onward and disappeared into the rain. I anxiously examined my road maps and tried to find an eastward route. It was useless. The nearest highway going east was too far. Several other people went zooming by, trying to catch the shadowy twister. It was long gone.

*Excerpts from "Storm Chaser: In Pursuit of Untamed Skies" (Weather Channel, 1996). Used with permission of author.*

# poetry

## *On Tilt* by Will Cordeiro

---

We may figure something out  
or the figures may will us into something.

Wind softly yammers through untoothbrush'd-yellow  
leaves, evasively, like late Ashbery.

To guess the rules was one way to part-  
icipate; was, particularly, one way to rue.

Game-theory ain't what it used to be—  
ay, there's the rub, the kissing booth closed down.

Reflecting on the ash that will consume us,  
she said it was all just smoke and mirrors.

Experience that mocks our expectations,  
like a snow-day's failure to occur. Each

aspires to the absolute, no detail  
final of what is fungible: this inrushed a

exacts to clench what 'is' wants 'is' to be  
then scutters elseways, loosened from itself.

Is anxiety just an allusion nowadays? Four  
out of five ogres agree I am the monster

that these words had wished to demonstrate. Plotzed  
from reading yet another epistolary novel, Howard

decided to embed the day into his dreams; not the book  
but his own cleverness had kept him long awake—

glops of notch, eyelash curlers, hot flashes  
from male menopause, then after the power

outage, the microwave blinked midnight  
for a week. So much bloody transigence

as one cannot not yield to things as bright  
and sudden as a sneeze. Whereupon, a spandrel skirrs,

having put the "maze" in paronomasia.  
With winter's breath the lovers vapor kissed.

The sky was a leaking breast implant;  
a residue of salt-rings caked their jeans.

You play mumbledy peg behind my back;  
I'll go on practicing my celesta.

## *Grave-side Confessions* by Julian Jason Haladyn

---

The site is unkept and the flowers stolen  
parking is ample by the island of grass  
what is going on here and why so many horseflies  
memories hidden inside bones buried

I can understand why she wanted to die  
Poland was where life began and should have ended  
the affairs were her way of disappearing  
disappearing into the corners of a museum

She motions emotionally towards the stone  
architecture meant as pure demarcation  
grandma is dead  
physical structure melting into the background

The videotape comes to an abrupt stop  
no more space to remember her  
the conversation continues for some time  
but none of it matters



*A Silence to Kill the Void* by Ian Malloy

---

they whose voice rose steadily across the way  
calling to arms they who must not be still  
were lost in any case  
for at such times men were in want  
and the women silent of will  
for they all chose carefully not to dream  
but instead sacrifice the wisdom for temporal things  
and as pleasure grew and the cry sounded high  
the silence spread like cancer  
and each man in his heart knew  
that the only change to come in time  
would be the leap from complacent to docile

*Untitled* by Megan Proehl

---

Tangled in your guitar strings, I gently twirl  
Your tight curls in my timid fingertips.

Su canción finishes my thoughts  
Su afecto teases my eyes, my lips

Sunlight filters through slight slits of the shades;  
The stagnant hum of the small amp slices through the silence

Su sonrisa knows no limits  
Sus dedos trace my face

A pause envelops the plain space  
The pondering peace is a kiss, pent up passion, roaring emotion

Su guitarra whispers melodies, emerging from deep within you  
But your heart knows profundidades de mí que ninguno otro puede penetrar.

*frozen words* by Megan Proehl

---

fall like snowflakes  
disappearing into moist pavement  
warm embankment  
no chance in hell to live

frozen words hanging like icicles  
from my lips  
can't force them out  
mechanical emotions shut down  
too cold

frozen words escaping into a world of fire  
dripping draggedly past hungry flame and unquenchable gut  
to show you my cold nature  
to let you in on my little secret weapon  
{i won't care if you don't}

for fear of a meltdown  
for fear of an entire misunderstanding

which was never really misunderstood at all

*Negligible* by Megan Proehl  
(influenced by Gertrude Stein)

---

Can we really agree on a word that is what  
it is and cannot mean anything but what it is?  
When we are given a word, can we  
ponder it or are we just to accept it and say it is  
what it is? And we hear and we accept and we know  
that it means what it says and it says what it means.  
But sometimes it's hard not to question  
The meaning when the meaning is slippery  
and the acceptance is futile. Slippery words and accepting  
people have never mixed.



## *Missing City* by Josh Rathkamp

---

### 1

The city has a name  
which has forgotten me.  
There, two men live, each  
hoping to fill the missing part  
of the other. They tend to dream  
the same hyacinth dream.

There is an asylum on a hill  
in the city which guards it.  
I almost remember the story—  
a man runs mad  
to the corner of two streets  
shaded by pines.

Once there and not there,  
all at once, he climbs a light pole  
and makes a nest,  
perched, now flipping pages  
of an old paperback.

After an hour a patrol stops  
and calls to him. Birds worth naming  
fly V then broken V  
like white ribbons.  
They said he's done this before.

### 2

There is an absence in the heart—  
rotini boils in a pot  
without water. Dinner will eat  
itself under the supper table.

There is no grace.

Afterwards, our husband and wife  
wash dishes that were left for weeks

by someone neither has ever seen.

It is like that here—  
dumb and blind with snow.

The night never expects night to end,  
like winter dragging itself

into late May fields. In the plaza,  
two men sit at a table and drink dark beer.

From another town  
music pours over the far hills in horizons.

### 3

There is a vault under the asylum  
saving the remnants of the city.

Mice roam like gods under a dark  
cracked sky devouring anything—

the rookie Mickey Mantle, an incisor  
tucked in a little pocket inside a little pillow—

Anything worth anything but still remaining—  
a love note written from the sane

to the insane, neither one knowing  
what damages the other most,

a pocket magnifying scope, half-filled  
tax returns, photographs of a father

standing short and proud by a cornfield.  
There are things no one wants to dig up.

Trust me. I'm not telling you  
the mice are as big as cats.

### 4

The city is full. It is late August  
and the streets will disappear like romance,  
everything but the clouds heading south  
for the cold. If we could stop them,  
we would. Hill pines surrounding

the asylum are winded and ready  
to topple with a touch.

A man and woman walk hand in hand  
through bad light,  
home. He looks for love  
like keys in his pocket. We have all loved  
poorly. Along the street the bars  
and their neon signs glow open,  
the night now drunk with darkness.

The streets have names no one  
here can pronounce. Some words  
mean other things, some,  
just what they are.

**stage  
&  
screen**

## *Requiem for a Hero* by Vidas Barzdukas

---

Black. A POLICE SIREN blares in the distance.

FRANK (V.O.)  
She cries to me like a  
lost lover in the dead  
of night.

FADE IN:

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

A cold autumn wind blows newspapers and dead leaves down a trash-filled city street. Overhead, the sky is gorged and threatens rain.

It's a rough neighborhood, filled with broken-down cars and overflowing trash cans. Above the rooftops we see the skyline of a major city.

FRANK (V.O.)  
This city was always bad,  
one hard cough away from death.  
But she had one thing going  
for her...she had us to  
protect her.

The police siren blends into the sound of a bank alarm.

EXT. OUTSIDE BANK - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE - DAY

It is the 1960s. Four men wearing ski masks and brandishing guns race out of the bank. They hold bags of money in their hands. The four men scatter in different directions.

FRANK (V.O.)  
The press called us vigilantes.  
The politicians called us  
criminals. The people called  
us heroes.

The first robber turns. A FIST SLAMS INTO HIS JAW. The robber hits the ground. Money spills everywhere.

Standing over the robber is a HERO DRESSED IN A BLUE

COSTUME. A mask covers most of his face.

FRANK (V.O.)

First there was Hank. Called himself The Professor. He was the brains of our outfit --the leader. Smartest guy on the planet, if you ask me.

Another robber turns and yells out in surprise. He raises his pistol, but A KICK sends the pistol spiraling into the air. A fist CRUNCHES into the robber's jaw, knocking him out.

A HERO DRESSED IN A RED COSTUME STANDS OVER HIM. He has blonde hair and is ruggedly handsome. He smiles as if waiting for flashbulbs to go off.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)

Then there was Dave. The Asteroid. Homecoming King and All-American in football and wrestling. I heard Dave died in a car accident back in '79.

The third robber takes off running. A BOLA flies through the air and wraps itself around the robber's knees.

A HERO IN A GREEN COSTUME STANDS OVER THE ROBBER. He is tall and gangly. Two belts full of metal gadgets are wrapped around his torso.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)

Jimmy. The Gizmo. He was always working on gadgets and doodads and who knows what. Officially retired in '81 and moved to Florida. Ten years later he died from a massive stroke.

The fourth robber drops the bag of money and takes off running. He ducks down a side alley.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE - CONTINUOUS

The robber sprints down the alley, looking behind him. He

runs into what looks like a brick wall and falls on his ass. He looks up.

FRANK KLINE, DRESSED IN AN ALL-BLACK COSTUME, LOOKS DOWN AT HIM. Frank sports a thick mustache, looking a little like Zorro.

Frank smiles.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)

Then there was me. Frank Kline.  
Called myself Siege. Didn't have  
the brains or the looks, so I  
guess you could say I was the  
muscle of the group.

The robber stands and punches Siege in the face. Siege smiles even wider.

FRANK (CONT'D)

I was pretty good at taking  
a punch. Of course--

Siege grabs the robber's collar with a meaty hand and pulls back a fist.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)

--I could really deliver one, too.

EXT. OUTSIDE BANK

POW! The robber flies out of the alley and into the street, unconscious.

The four heroes stand together on the sidewalk as a crowd gathers. Suddenly, we hear police sirens in the background. The four friends smile and start running down the street.

We freeze on their image. The four men are young, zealous, in the prime of their lives. All four have devil-may-care smiles on their faces.

We CLOSE UP on SIEGE and bleed back to

EXT. CITY STREET - PRESENT DAY

A modern-day Frank stands on the corner, waiting for the light to change. He is in his late 50s, slightly overweight, with a broken nose and scars around his eyes.

He looks like a retired wrestler who's twenty years past his prime.

One thing is immediately noticeable about Frank: He's BIG.

FRANK (V.O.)

We were just kids back then,  
so full of piss and vinegar  
and hope. But that was a  
lifetime ago.

The light changes. Frank crosses the street.

He passes an alleyway. Several shapes linger inside the shadows. Frank glances at them from underneath the brim of his hat.

A young black woman looks back at him. It is ALTHEA.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)

Now she shows me the pimps, the  
whores, the junkies, the animals  
that have turned her streets into  
open sewers. I try to close my eyes,  
but it's no use. It puts me in a  
lousy mood.

The police siren blares on. Frank continues walking.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)

Even the police are afraid. Last  
week a factory on thirty-third  
street caught fire. It took the  
firemen forty-five minutes to get  
there. They wanted to wait for a  
police escort first.

Frank passes a high brick wall and walks through a gate.

A sign above the gate reads: "CALGARY CEMETERY."

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Frank walks down the pathway, the cold wind whipping at his trenchcoat. The siren in the distance grows louder.

Grave markers cover the pristine grounds. Thunder rolls in

the distance. It starts to rain. A cold drizzle. The rain patters on the brim of Frank's hat.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)  
Goddamn rain. Good for the  
grass, but bad for the soul.

Frank raises his collar and continues deeper into the cemetery. Crosses and mausoleums crowd the grass for room. Frank leaves the path and climbs a small hill.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)  
Every siren triggers a memory.  
Every news report pulls at the  
scab. And the city won't let me  
forget. She never lets me forget.

Frank stops at a gravestone. He studies it.

The gravestone reads: MARGARET KLINE, b.1952-d.1980.  
BELOVED WIFE.

Beside it lies another gravestone. It reads: FRANK KLINE,  
b.1948-

Frank kneels down and cleans off the debris surrounding the gravestone. He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a BOUQUET OF FLOWERS.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)  
She'll never let me forget.

He places the flowers on the grave.

FRANK (CONT'D)  
Happy anniversary, honey.

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - LATER  
Frank slowly climbs the stairs to his fourth-floor apartment. His body fills the stairwell. He carries a small plastic bag.

RAP MUSIC blares from behind a closed door.

FRANK (V.O.)  
Called the landlord about

the mouse problem. That makes the fifth time this week. He promised he'd take care of it. Before he hung up, I heard a woman laughing in the background.

Frank reaches the landing. He starts fishing in his pocket for his keys.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)  
What the hell am I paying rent for? I should break his goddamn skull-

Frank fits the key into the lock when THE SCREEN GOES BLACK.

Silence fills the void. Five...four...three...two...one...

And we come back to FRANK LEANING AGAINST THE WALL, disoriented, clutching his head. He LASHES OUT at an invisible opponent.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)  
Oh Jesus...

Frank closes his eyes. He is obviously deeply disturbed by what just happened. He takes several deep breaths and slowly relaxes.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)  
What the hell is wrong with me?

Slowly, Frank stumbles to the door and enters his apartment.

INT. FRANK'S APARTMENT

Frank turns on the lights. The apartment is very simply furnished with a brown sofa, easy chair, and coffee table. The style is straight out of the 1970s. Everything is perfectly neat.

Frank hangs his overcoat in the closet and enters the living room. He turns on the light.

The mantle is covered with PHOTOGRAPHS. Most of them are of

Frank's dead wife, MAGGIE. The pictures are from their wedding, vacations, etc. There is also a picture of a younger Frank in a boxing ring. He is posing for the camera.

Frank enters the kitchen. He opens the plastic bag and dumps several MOUSE TRAPS on the counter.

The RAP MUSIC shakes the walls.

Frank opens the fridge. The fridge is practically empty save for a gallon of milk, some eggs, and beer. He grabs a beer.

Frank stands at the kitchen window and looks down at the street.

FRANK (V.O.)  
Twenty-three years and I  
still expect a kiss when I  
walk through that door.

We hear a police siren in the background. Franks sips his beer and closes his eyes.

INT. ROSIE'S CAFE - DAY

Frank opens his eyes. He is sitting at a booth in Rosie's Cafe, a greasy spoon joint filled with truckers and locals.

Frank looks out the window. There is a MINI-MART across the street. He gazes sleepily at the people walking past the window.

FRANK (V.O.)  
Every morning I wake up  
feeling like an animal in  
a cage. Restless. Angry.

Frank gazes up at the rooftop across the street.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)  
The nights are the worst.  
That's when she calls to me.  
Reminds me of what I used to  
be. And what I've become.

Frank continues to look at the rooftop. Suddenly, we see movement: bodies moving, kicks, punches, just out of view. It is some sort of battle.

FRANK (CONT'D) (V.O.)  
Every battle comes flooding  
back. Every villain, every  
encounter, every name and face...

Frank closes his eyes. And we are on the

EXT. ROOFTOP

The younger Siege, Asteroid, Professor, and Gizmo battle a black-garbed figure across the rooftop. We catch only a snippet of a spectacular battle filled with martial arts and gunfire.

FRANK (V.O.)  
The Night Shadow.

SLAM CUT:

EXT. PIER - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE - NIGHT

FRANK (V.O.)  
Death Angel.

A villain in white robes fights our heroes on a dark pier.

SLAM CUT:

INT. MUSEUM - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE - NIGHT

FRANK (V.O.)  
The Brothers Three.

Three villains dressed in identical suits and masks spray the museum with bullets as our heroes duck behind statues and marble pedestals.

SLAM CUT:

INT. BAR - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE - NIGHT

FRANK (V.O.)  
Beaver Man.

A man with a horrible overbite stands on a bar, firing a

gun in the air. People are rushing out of the bar as Beaver Man laughs maniacally.

Beaver Man turns and sees Siege in the mirror, his arms crossed. He turns back around to face him.

FRANK (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
(exasperated)  
Beaver Man.

Siege grabs Beaver Man by the collar. Beaver Man recoils in horror.

FRANK (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
What a stupid name.

EXT. BAR - FLASHBACK SEQUENCE - NIGHT  
Glass EXPLODES into a million shards as Beaver Man is thrown out of the front window of the bar.

INT. ROSIE'S CAFE - PRESENT  
Frank sits alone in the booth. His eyes remain closed.

FRANK (V.O.)  
We put Night Shadow behind bars in '76. Two years later, another inmate caved in his head with a hammer provided by the prison guards. After The Professor quit, it was just me. I stuck around for a few years, but by then the cancer had spread through Maggie's body--

JODIE (O.S.)  
You all done, Mr. Kline?

Frank's eyes flutter open. Standing there is JODIE, a cute waitress in her early 20s. She smiles at Frank.

JODIE (CONT'D)  
Earth to Mister Kline. You there?

Frank smiles back, shyly.

FRANK

Hey, Jodie. Yeah, I'm here.

JODIE

You all done?

Jodie points at a STACK OF PLATES on the table. It is enough enough to feed a family of six.

FRANK

Yeah. Yeah, I'm all done.  
Thanks.

Jodie begins clearing the table.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Hey, you tell Larry he did a real good job with those eggs, okay?

JODIE

I will.

FRANK

Best eggs in town. I tell everyone that.

Jodie laughs.

JODIE

He'll be happy to hear it. So you got any plans to go out and enjoy the sunshine?

FRANK

Nah. I got a doctor's appointment today.

JODIE

Oh no. Is everything okay?

FRANK

Oh yeah, sure. Just a routine check-up. Make sure the plumbing's working okay. You get to be my age and you need a regular tune-up

now and then.

Jodie TOUCHES Frank's hand. Frank looks at it.

JODIE

Well, you just let me know if you need anything, okay? I get worried about you.

FRANK

Thanks. I will.

Jodie puts the bill on the table. She smiles at Frank.

JODIE

See you tomorrow?

Frank looks up at Jodie. His face breaks into a soft smile.

FRANK

Yeah. See you tomorrow.

## contributors

**Vidas Barzdukas** ("Requiem for a Hero") is an award-winning filmmaker and writer whose films have been featured at the Chicago Short Comedy Film Festival, on PBS stations in Chicago and San Francisco, and on the Movieola Channel in Toronto, Canada. He is currently the Educational Writing Consultant for the Emmy-nominated show, *Taylor's Attic*.

**Jim Bauer** ("Wind-Whipped") currently attends college in St. Louis, Missouri. He is considering entering in the audio engineering field, with other interests including writing, reading, and computer programming.

**Will Cordeiro** ("On Tilt") is formerly a NYC Teaching Fellow and currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Cornell University. He is the co-founder of the Brooklyn Playwrights Collective and a staff writer for offonline. Recently, his poetry has been published in the *Baltimore Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, and *Dirt: a Journal of Contemporary Arts and Letters*.

**Warren Faidley** ("Storm Chaser") is a world-renowned weather journalist and storm photographer. Billed as "America's top storm-chaser" by MSNBC, Faidley has spent two decades capturing some of the most stunning photographs of extreme weather ever photographed. Faidley has been lauded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and was the recipient of the William Randolph Hearst Foundation Journalism Award. His work has appeared in *Time*, *Life*, and *National Geographic*. The author of two books, Faidley is also a pilot and a certified firefighter. He lives in Tucson, Arizona.

**Julian Jason Haladyn** ("Grave-side Confessions") is a practicing writer and artist. His poems and short stories have appeared in *climae*, *á·pos·tro·phe*, *Laika Poetry Review*, *Jones Av.*, *Underground Voices*, and *identity theory*, as well as in a collection titled *Grubstreet 2001-2002: Standing Room Only* (Huron Literary Society, 2002). His collaborative critical writing with Miriam Jordan has been included in *Parachute*, *C Magazine*, *On Site Review*, and several upcoming essay collections.

**Andrea Kurtz** ("Violent Indigo") grew up in West Bend, Wisconsin and graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is currently a Colby Fellow at the University of Michigan where she is earning her MFA in Creative Writing. Her stories have appeared in *Canvas* and *Fusion*.

**Ian Malloy** ("A Silence to Kill the Void") has been painting for a little over a year now and currently attends the University of Augustana where he is studying Fine Art. He spends his spare time painting, writing, and playing guitar. Malloy feels that "art is a magical world that begs to be explored."

**Patrick S. McGinnity** is currently pursuing his M.F.A. at Hollins University. His most recent publication is a nonfiction piece in the April issue of *The Truth About the Fact*. His short story "Hard Winter" is loosely based on the island where McGinnity grew up.

**William Moake** ("In the Torrid Zone") is a writer, freelance web designer, and software programmer living in Hawaii. After working as a newspaper reporter and travel writer, Moake published two novels (*Terpsichore's Children* and *The Paradise Connection*) and a short story collection (*Time Is But A Stream*).

**Megan Proehl** ("Untitled," "Frozen Tears," and "Negligible") is a student at The Ohio State University. Born in Chillicothe, Ohio, Proehl has written poetry for seven years and currently majors in English at OSU with an emphasis on creative writing.

**Josh Rathkamp** ("Missing City") teaches at Arizona State University and Phoenix College. His first book of poems, *Some Nights No Cars at All*, is forthcoming from Ausable Press. His work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Meridian*, *Fugue*, *Golf Coast*, *Passages North*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *42opus*, and *The Drunken Boat*.

**Michelle Shin** ("Waste") is a Ph.D. student at the University of Hawaii in the English Department. She is also a full-time teacher at a public high school. Shin was born and raised in Hawaii and loves the rich culture and beautiful landscapes.

**Charles Stross** ("A Colder War") is widely considered a pioneer of "new British science fiction." He has published numerous novels and short fiction that range from hard sci-fi to space opera in genre. Stross won a 2005 Hugo Award for his novella "The Concrete Jungle," the 2006 Locus Award for his novel "Accelerando," and has had many of his short stories nominated for the Hugo and Nebula awards, among other prestigious honors. He currently lives in Edinburgh, Scotland.

