

WASHED OUT FICTION

A SHORT COLLECTION BY

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WASHED OUT

Raindrops strike his cap like typewriter keys.

They're enough to stir him from the Dumpster; his steel-sided wigwam. Warm muggy rot brings him around faster than the day-olds and charity coffee that keeps him going. Garbage bags stuffed with presidential election results kept him warm last night.

They might not again. Everything's soaked.

Rolling his stiff shoulders, sighing, reaching for a single half-finished cigarette, he snaps at an old Zippo as his yellowed and strained hands claw for the hatch. Rust and tortured metal seize and creak.

Bang.

Condensation and grey water pour off the fire escape suspended web-like above and around his squatter's spot; his den downtown. West Street's nearly deserted. Thunder kicks the sky apart and sends in the second wave of rain; faster, heavier, stronger. The heavens will pace themselves through a cycle.

This isn't unexpected.

Embers light up scraggly, worn, slightly melted features flabby with age and the strain of alleyway living. A hoodie is thrown over a raincoat but lies bunched under an old plaid scarf the man wears like a sash in a strangely flamboyant touch; a mark of distinction.

He's a tired-looking man, old, but still serviceable.

Reliability isn't a function one would attribute to a man so destitute, but the organization of his space and the sure-fire motions unhindered by drug-induced torpor speaks more about his character than the Homeless Persons Records filed by the local flophouse and beat patrols.

Blue smoke spurts through his nostrils. The 26 North drifts by shunting walls of water across the street. He takes that bus to the shelter. He took it a few other times, to other places he can scarcely remember to meet crooks and see shows and play gigs and participate in other forms of skullduggery and uncategorized living.

But, those details are for the sessions.

He could use a full cigarette right now. A coffee wouldn't go amiss, either. Some donuts and sustenance would bring more cheer to the dripping brick and harsh slogans that is his alley's wallpaper.

There isn't time. He has barely an inclination to do anything today but the sessions.

Regardless of his fatigue, his mood, the number of scuffed bills and shined quarters in his hat, the sessions go on every day, every hour if he could bear it.

When he was younger; a newcomer to the down-and-out warrens of West and Southside, the sessions would flow through his fingers for days and days and days. Twice, the beat cops had found him twitching and broken from his wars against the typewriter keys and the written words scribbled haphazardly across his page in garbled syntax not his own.

They'd called ambulances, but he'd always recovered. As soon as he was strong, the typewriter ended up in his hands and his veins would throb and explode from the stress as his mind flew in all directions.

An unshaved beard rasped against the edge of his McDonald's cup. The last few nights had been hard. Nothing coherent had come from his linguistic forays into the recesses of his shuttered mind. The results had been alien. Unreadable, insane, illogical; whatever word best suited the pages that had flown from his return slot like the cheap ink-splattered front pages of yesterday.

Tonight; tonight could be different.

If the Muse was kind, if she was truly feeling merciful and willing to share her million-dollar stories with a broken

storyteller, an old channel, then perhaps he would get a fragment of the enigmatic. A byline, plastered and drawn upon with scissors and old quills might pop into his head.

She was a cruel mistress. A cruel companion, sister, and lover; but she was constant.

Even during her periods of absence, when the phone ran off the hook and hung in static silence, he knew she was there, waiting with a secret smile in the shadowed corners of a mind he wasn't sure was his.

That was the result of this exercise now, wasn't it? She was leading him love struck, blind, playfully tickling his vein-popped arms and leading hard fingers to a truth.

Tears welled in his eyes as he finished the cigarette; let it fall to the alley's pavement as he reminisced on her beauty. The prose they had shared, the stories they had concocted in the fantastic wilds of the imagination, the tedious cultivation of the perfect story amidst turmoil and poverty; these were memories they would share, and love, and grow old on, and live forever with.

Perhaps she really was dead. Perhaps she really had hung up. Perhaps this was another ploy. Another shattered stop on their long road to the truth that had called itself imagination since the day he first learned to hold a pen. The old man wiped a salty drop from his cheek.

Damn her.

Beside the Dumpster is a shrouded container. Old trade magazines and newsprint have embalmed it against the wet and the cold of the city's mean alley. Shaking fingers pry off every little piece, saving the print for later.

Underneath the armour of hurried keystrokes is a typewriter in the oldest style. It's a wooden machine; dark stained cherry-wood with scratched white ivory keys. It had been his fathers. 6

With it, he had become a killer, lover, dealer, traveler; a god amongst fertile worlds and audible souls.

With it, he had transcended that label so often attributed to men of his intent; writer.

He was a channel. Art did not flow because of those keys; it flowed through those keys.

The instrument was only an instrument.

He was a channel for a raven-haired woman ageless and immortal and fickle in her prophecy. She had earned the venerated title of storyteller.

Deft hands flicked the safety off the ribbon.

A sudden downpour drenched his coat, sent him shivering and cold and raging at her fleeting appearances and supple sentences. Suddenly, his condition didn't matter. She was telling him something. Whispering a story in that wordless diatribe of hers he'd attuned his inner ear and eye to his whole life.

Strung out, worn down, depressed alone and destitute, he could do nothing but transcribe her story. As washed out and alone as he was, that fickle voice was angel's song and he would follow it's ministrations till hunger and cold strangled the life from his elderly shoulders.

That song unlocked a ripple.

She was waiting.

DRIVE

"You ready to go?"

It's with sodden hands and soaked through boots that he climbs into the back of the faded old pickup. Red paint is peeling off everywhere, but he barely cares. Bullet holes and scattershot clusters show every few feet, but he still loves his ride.

Despite the shattered world and slightly shattered rear-view mirror, it still takes him places.

He's got a gruff voice; his baritone erupts from his throat like gunfire or gravel across a chipped highway. Torn rubber boots slosh in the highway's broken shoulder. A burning wind catches his hair, runs through his stubble and down his open shirt.

Runoff from the road splashes his faded jeans.

His coat whips in the wind, green and patched more times than he can count on his fingers. At least he has all of them; staying intact is an odd bonus in his line of work.

The tools of his trade click and shift in their holsters just above his wide hips- twin .44's tempered smooth with hundreds upon hundreds of quick-draws.

Ash crosses his tongue; the leavings of the burning city behind him. No point in turning around. Eight hours of his day have just been spent cramped inside his cab, gripping the wheel, feeling the gearbox grind and the shifter disintegrate under the adrenaline, the pressure, the fury of the ride.

Guns have been fired, blood has been shed today, and all he can do is sit and stare into the blood-red sunset.

He reaches into a pocket. An old, faded silver Zippo, salvaged from a dumpster somewhere, snaps into his rough-shod palms.

Snaps.

Embers flare to his cigarette.

It's the last one he's got. The settlement trading post will have more down the road and behind a proper rampart. Cannibals

crawl this country and slither through the remains of suburban basements.

He can't stay long.

"I'll be there in a sec," he calls over to the top of the cab. He's had a hard bitten, hard talking, hard fighting life, but tearing him away from a beautiful sunset is as impossible as dragging his six foot two, hundred and ninety pounds of muscle up a shale-strewn hill.

If there are cannibals, they can wait. He's dealt with them before and can deal with them again.

It's only as the cigarette drops to the road that he asks himself why he's still running a truck, running goods, killing and getting paid for it. He should have left those days in the dust. He'd run over his dog days spent drinking and fighting long ago, when he'd been young and the world's wounds were still fresh.

It's 'cause I'm scarred over, he reminds himself. It's because I'm forgetting the pain, and testing my nerves as I grow old. I've got to see if I can stay going. My younger self won't settle for less.

After the memories had washed away like the rain upon the hood, he slipped his legs in and slammed the truck into third.

It's only 'cause I enjoy it, isn't it?

RED

Smoke fills the room.

Across bare brick, hard ash and cold concrete, the layers of a thousand cheap snapshots flutter and wave in the stuffy smog outdoors. It's a Friday. Neon whips by in solid lines beyond the kicked and battered door. It's done so for hours.

The establishment's quiet; waiting and sipping drinks with a blue-collar weariness famous the world over. Leather jackets wear smudges in the cheap upholstery.

Across one end of clippings and cheap ink is a bar worn by years of pounded fists, slapped palms and blackjack hands. Stained glasses hang overhead in their dozens. A few sit or slouch across its polished face with hands on their drinks and their pay stubs in the bartender's greasy hands.

"Good evenin', ladies and gentlemen."

The baritone voice drifting from the speakers is raspier than usual and washed out. It's the static, though the three single-malt slugs before didn't help.

Heads turn.

Who is he kidding?

Mike's out of key.

He kicks the stand aside, wishing it would burn. The old days would have him blowing this one to electronic catatonia in the space of a single set. He'd burn a dozen out before the end of the night. The killer 'chords he'd tested in his youth were still strong and still steady. The embers had ripped at his heart in time with the drums and the drugs and the deafening baying of a bloodthirsty mob screaming their hearts out before him were silent now.

Stagnation had buried them. Age had said a few words over the remains.

Those days of sold-out amphitheaters are over. The after parties and fast sex have blown his brains and his sense out long ago.

Nothing left to do but play.

The gloom of the room flows across the myriad of slouched backs and bundles across the floor. Nobody but the man is without Belmont's; a nicotine-inspired parody of a candlelight vigil. He strikes up a tune, fingers groping the E, reaching up to the G with a lag he hasn't shaken since his lock-up days.

Too soft- the receptor is barely picking it up. Shit equipment, as always, but beggars can't be choosers. His coat-tail flips from the stool's back end- jet black and caked with the leavings of his apartment's rotting plaster. A single red strip chases its way up the old coat's outer seams to his high collar.

Despite the bulk of the coat, there's a vast hollow space beneath. He isn't well-fed, muscled, or wiry.

But there's an ember behind those eyes, a ghost of former flare still glowing in the sliver of color creasing his coat.

That glow hadn't brought many notes to his hand or melodies to his ears since way back when. A lead sheet and his guitar late last night hadn't produced much.

It had still felt good, but it hadn't taken much to remember the old days, the old ways.

His steel-grey hair flips from behind his coat, tied tight with the few spare strings he keeps. Eyes green as neon flickers in the smoke and the dust.

Everything is a haze. Everything is a goddamn haze.

A pick slips into his hand. A paw would be a better description; worn away by scars, battered by beers and handshakes, sweetened by under-the-skirt caresses or soulful twangs, burned by the unceasing dancing of the strings.

They define him.

More can be said about his hands than any other part of his body. Veins seem to break the skin. They are rough, but how they *dance*.

How they *danced*.

A pluck slips into a short chord. He's getting back the muse, but for how long? Is it a quick kiss over a smoke or a long, sleepless night?

He grins, though anyone looking up from their pints would call it a grimace.

Both eyes close. The pick between his hands slips to the floor. All five fingertips quiver. They've done this before.

Though he can't see a thing, his left hand presses lightly across the fret board. This old Gibson has taken him places. It has thrust him before thousands. It has bought him fuck-buddies, agents, and fame. It has slashed airwaves and amps to pieces with punkish impunity.

It is only a guitar.

It's only an instrument.

This is only a bar.

He is only a channel.

Slowly, he lets the chord build into a construction. His fingers barely know when to land next. His index finger is everywhere at once. The sting of strings after so long is a sweet pain. The dark wood and dark red body of the guitar shakes, quivers with the violence of his strumming. It's taken worse during its time in bars, bedrooms, and back alleys.

He hasn't.

For so long, this has been stuck inside his mind, in smoky bars and blasé crowds and the uncaring rumbling of the world outside. These tunes are being swept up off the floor and squished and moulded together into something useful. It isn't choreographed.

It isn't work shopped.

It simply is.

The tumble of notes falling from the amp is growing, changing. He himself is only a spectator. It is out of his hands.

Gliding crescendos pitch to snap-quick taps. He feels the fret board bend under his fingertips. It can take the strain. Heaven knows he has.

A low bass grumbles into life. It acts as an anchor, keeps his frenzied but sober escapade level and steady.

He looks up for a moment. She wasn't beside him. She was stuck in a different smoky bar in a different part of town. Unlike him, she was playing a tune she loathed.

Behind that, the gunshot-quick crack of a drum keeping time. Nobody is filling that role so far, but who is he to complain of the Muse's gifts?

It's all in his head. Despite the insanity of it all, it was a delusion he surrenders to. Worse yet, it will all die as soon as the strings vibrate for the last time. He knows he can never write this down.

He won't presume to try. Gifts from a muse are rarely anticipated. They only drink themselves to death in their endless repetition.

Hard riffs blare across his boots. A throwback to his old life, a petty time of calculated fury and choreographed violence.

Applause shakes him from his revelry.

He doesn't remember stopping, staring, and snatching up the beer beside him. Nor does he remember exactly what he says. What he does remember doing is staring at a mug, clutched by a blushing college girl looking to score.

No matter the dark of his coat or the darker man beneath, the red of his Gibson still glows. It always has, and likely always will in the cafes and bars beside the dirty dockside blocks that are his stomping grounds.

Red lace still borders his throat.

PARCHED

He chokes.

Fried and blistered from the centuries of heat, he stares down the weeded enemy entrenched in deep rows and dikes. His own lines stand strong; have always stood strong since he dug them with the last of his blood, sweat, and soul.

It isn't enough.

Leaning on his plow, he scans the shimmering field. A scraggly fence outlines the barest plot of land to grace the village. Bare ground and rock slice their way through the thinnest of wheat, surrounded by a vanguard of weeds. Even they wither and fade under the man-killing heat.

There aren't enough hours in the day.

He laments silently, his wrinkled hand grasping at his canteen.

And yet...I curse myself with those words. I relive the exhaustion.

He's a rugged man; a man leaned and weaned from the titanic struggles of the acres before him. Sun has seared his skin for decades. It feels like centuries. It feels like he's been standing here since the rocks and the trees and the hellish sun first began.

Did they begin under some heavenly plow? Did they wilt, and wither, and die with a hoe slashing at their roots and a cankerous farmer cursing them?

He wonders what the parson might say to that.

The man would agree.

He shrugs. He's a farmer for a reason. Like his father's before, the scythe and the plow had pruned and furrowed him into his profession.

It is his duty to remain chained to the land. It's a life sentence. No parole.

Wind blows topsoil into his face.

He staggers, arthritic fingers grasping the plow until the breeze stops and he can open his eyes.

He blinks.

It's all vanished. The dead soil has relinquished its grip. Sod and seed and the dead roots rip themselves asunder and dance in the wind.

He swears they're taunting him.

The lidless burning orb above singes his neck as he stands rooted in shock. Apart from the plow and the battered old shed behind him, it's all this land can anchor. The wife moved on. The children drove away in the buggy to the glowing cities and towns beyond the sea-flat horizon.

And yet, he can't leave. Long ago, when the shoots still bloomed and the cows still brayed the nights away, he had loved the land.

He's not sure anymore. It's been a hard relationship; one constantly cracked and broken by hardship. Drought. Taxes. Neighbours poking their noses onto his land.

Like a lover, it has born roots and green shoots in years past, but no longer.

Now, the land simply exists. It is always here, and will always be here.

Now, the land is parched.

As he always does, he sinks to his knees. He lets the plow go. It creaks, but it waits.

His fingers spread across the earth; cracked and warm like his missus's fine face, dead eleven years.

They curl into a cup.

Press into the earth.

He bends over.

Listens.

When it is done, he is satisfied. The hot, dead soil is blown away by his touch. Inches of clay crumble before his touch.

But buried within the darkness, squeezing the soil for life, is a shoot.

It is enough.

OAK

The room's bathed in harshness.

Every outline; every shadow and instrument and crammed bed is full to bursting and outlined with jagged shadows that shift, that shiver, that seem to quake in the preceding bombardment.

It's dying off now; tapering off to a rumble like an earth-shattering bass-line. Only the creaks of strained machinery and unsteady tent poles fill the space between the moaning.

The symphony has warmed up now that the gunfire is fading away. It completed its opening movement with the shattered cries and whimpers of the broken brought in through the white tent-flaps from the hellish ditches.

Triage begins.

The quick are hauled from the dead, and the dying are left to their lonesome thoughts and prayers. Apron strings have flicked blood across the wall. Scalpels, needles and saws have flashed terribly in the unearthliness of the halogen bulbs.

"Forceps-!"

"Plug that primary artery-!"

"Concussion's pulverized his ribcage!"

Doctors have laboured like steel-tipped spiders over the dozens, the scores- perhaps the hundreds of casualties. Their clothes lie stacked by the tent's edge. Hundreds upon hundreds of mud-stained boots stretch to the reserve lines.

All size nines.

He watches from his post by the wall tent's end as more are hefted in. Burly orderlies drag in the next batch- a trio of concussion casualties. One's lost his leg. Another has no wrist. A third simply stares, the depression in his skull no doubt hidden by the tin helmet jammed across his head.

A rusted pocket-watch flicks into his blood-drenched hands. It's been four hours. The last dregs are beginning to arrive.

Slumped on cots vacated moments before are the remains of his team. Two surgeons lie back to back across the floor. Three orderlies light up and haul out a deck of cards. A surgeon's mate quivers in the corner, his ankle tapping like a rabbits at impossible speed.

He stands. It's been a longer night. It's bound to be longer.

"Go get 'em, Oak," murmurs an orderly as he pushes back the soaked-through flap and steps, quite steadily, into hell.

Two dozen cots line each side of the massive wall-tent. Mud seeps through his boots. Rainwater runoff drenches half the miserable denizens of the cots. Most don't care.

The flurries of on-duty orderlies of the second shift drag the stretchers from gasping stretcher-bearers and medics. There aren't enough. Orderlies are beginning to slip away, or pause unexpectantly, or in two cases, fall flat on their faces dead-centre of the aisles. Morale is slipping.

They need more teams. They always have. He's slipped a memo requesting additional staffing on the commandant's desk every since they deployed to this poppy-sprinkled, mud-covered wasteland. He saw them later being used as kindling.

He isn't a large man. Nor is he intimidating, or charismatic, or even particularly handsome. Age and strain have tugged away the cheap facade of youth with disturbing ease. An apron stained red and green encompasses his thin, almost frail form. He shaved his black beard three days after they landed, though he hasn't touched a razor for four. The brown eyes that grace his hollow eyes have been described as comforting by others, but he isn't sure himself.

"Doctor!"

All eyes fall on him. An orderly lifts up the first victim. Cracked leg. Probably shell fire.

"Orderly, forceps and a splint. Nurse, hot water and stitches."

His orders don't snap from his lips; they glide. Despite the chaos and the carnage, they are a simple, calm, and precise. His voice doesn't waver. It doesn't break.

Nor does it rise in strain when his first patient bucks on the table. Blood leaks from his mouth, staining the brown wool of his jacket and the red of the ensign.

His hands grow slicker as he feels the leg. Definitely broken. The patient's breathing is terrible. Shattered lung; he can hear the distinct whistling. Nothing to do for him.

"Code White," he murmurs with barely a raised eyebrow. His bloody hand strokes the young man's forehead as the orderlies take him outside.

Another wounded warrior fills his place; a lad barely older than his son. No wrist. It's been bound in crude bandages, but it won't be enough to cover the infection.

He raises a needle, a scalpel, sets to work as the symphony sounds up and drowns out all semblance of order. Guns sound from over the hills and far away-heavy shells designed to burst bunkers and pierce trenches.

Over the screams of the second patient, the moans of the third, the praying of the fourth (in German, no less) he maintains the same steady calm, the same rhythm. The same tune is chanted between lips flecked with sweat.

*Come, cheer up my lad
Tis to glory you steer
To add something more
To this wonderful year*

Who is he kidding?
He shakes the thought away as the scalpel flashes.

To honour we call, you is free men, not slaves

For who are so free as the sons of the waves?

Another patient. Another pessimistic thought to rinse away.

Hearts of oak are our ships

Jolly tars are our men

We always are ready

Steady, boys, steady

We'll fight and we'll conquer again, and again.

It's after a dozen such patients pass through his hands that the tune is repeated, like a mantra, upon the lips of the helpless. They straighten up. They sit up. The staring stops. The moans are muffled. All are enthralled as the shells die away on the breeze.

He's earned his nickname fairly. Like the oak, he is sturdy, tough, and crafty.

He bends, but he does not break.

INKED

CLICK

A door slams somewhere in the hazy, dusty distance.

It's a miracle of acoustics that the sound makes it as far as his niche; beyond the first four feet of the doorway the floor is drowned in desks. They create a labyrinth of chipped wood, brushed wood, dark oak barely showing between the paper and the pens; a basement office.

CLICK SNAP

Cigarettes spring from the spaces between like funguses, breeding enough smoke to make Dante happy.

SNAP

It's only Tuesday.

SNAP SNAP

Between the smudged paper and the blue-green smoke, the denizens of the newsroom throw themselves between desks, across wastepaper baskets, and around (sometimes through) each other as they struggle to be heard over the hustle and machine-gun clatter of a dozen typewriters. The heat and the stench of cheap ink is enough to make the interns and night-shift copy boys gag, puke, even faint.

SNAP CLICK SNAP

Stuffed into the back of the brick wall, cosy beside the cell of an editor's booth is a nook no larger than the bathroom stall in a one-room flat. There's no door. No window. The desk is a four-by-eight piece of wood nailed with scrap hinges to the wall. An aging bucket seat sits opposite it.

SNAP CLUNK

The space is filled.

SNAP CLICK

A typewriter, no less potent than the teak machine of the godlike editor-in-chief sits mute for a second. Papers conceal the dents and bruises. Notebooks hide it like camo-netting on a tank.

The eyes behind the desk are dark, utterly still with haunting intensity. The hands sit still, hovering, poised to strike the keys in a brutal series of blows.

The writer is clothed in shadow, a contrast against the harshness of the bulbs. A dark woolen coat contains his spindly shoulders and long arms. Those arms are soaked in blue from elbow to wrist in a tattoo that will never be removed. They're old war wounds; permanent testimony to his profession.

CLICK CLICK CLUNK SNAP

Smithing words wasn't a career choice. It was ingrained, chiseled from his core through months of trial and error, meditation, frustratingly blank sessions and outpourings of paragraphs so fierce as to snap his keys and shatter his arms.

CLICK SNAP

Only recently had it become the nine-to-five.

SNAP SNAP

Leaving his one-room apartment with its two windows, records, comfortable nook and view of the park had been painful at first. This space is a hectic parody of his quiet nook.

CLACK

This profession is a thoughtless puppet of his calling

SNAP

This report is nothing short of banal.

SNAP

He pauses, resting his head back and closing his eyes, drowning out the copy boys, the fleet-of-foot reporters and the editors howling for more.

CRACK THUMP

More, more more. He was giving them more.

THUMP THUMP THUMP

The black coat he wears flicker in the hot breeze. His barely-shaven features, strong jaw and dark slants of eyebrows are etched in the swing of the closest bulb. He's unkempt and haggard, but with an eye for observation and gait that's hard to find and harder to miss.

CRACK SNAP SNAP

People might miss the ragged boots, trousers, and ratty old coat, but they wouldn't miss that stare.

Nor did they.

CRACK

That stare could have burned the papers spitting from his 'writer's slot.

On days when the longing for drink was strong, he swears he can hear the keyboard calling, in a woman's husky alto, for him to drop the copy and missing persons requests from his desk and burn them to ashes.

Write what you perceive, not what you observe.

How that mantra has been hammered into the typewriter through his work.

CLACK CLICK

How fully has that been stopped in the face of a stern editor's face- or worse, the possibility of a missing paycheck? There are days where he would oblige, willingly. There are been days when the verse and the prose have been bottled and tapered to management-

-those were days when he was sleeping, or sick.

It has burst.

CLACK THUNK CLACK CLACK THUNK THUNK SCRAPE TAP PING CLUNK

Words upon words upon words pile up beside his left hand in binders, notebooks, Bibles, pads and loose sheets. When he runs out of paper-

-CLICK CLICK-

-when he is drunk-

-CLACK CLACK CLUNK CLUNK CLICK-

-when he soars beyond the reach of physical description, slave to a typewriter-

-CLUNK CRUNCH TAP TAP TAP PING-

-he is free.

But until then, until the paychecks stop coming and the work slows down, he is stuck as the copy boy, pounding a desk until he earns his ink.

CLICK

He opens his eyes. Stares at what he has written. Pulls the sheet away.

It will do.

He lays it across the remains of a Bible and a Playboy, under which is the report, recently forgotten, of a homeless man's

plea for work. An old woman's obituary. A child's twelfth birthday.

He stacks a dozen such sheets from the pile and stashes them in his coat. They will lie in his desk at home. Then they will lie on other desks in other buildings as crowded and smoky as this one, with drunkards, English professors and literary addle-brains for judges.

Yet why does he always come back?

He opens his eyes.

The office is empty. The bulbs are dim.

Yellow papers plaster his wall.

As he turns in his seat to grab another cigarette, he is once again reminded of why he cannot sit at home gripped by dreams with a desk and a bottle and a beautiful day ahead of him.

They all spell out a single word.

REJECTED

REJECTED

REJECTED

REJECTED

He snatches a glimpse of the empty room.

Smiles defiantly.

CLICK

CLASS

A saxophone drones, warbles; sets the backdrop for the warm spring city night. Cars and taxis rush by the white-framed, open second story window. Neon outlines every building.

A trumpet peals a tone mournful and lonely and seductive; a perfect duet. Drums tap, basses boom, and a husky voice slinks its way through the musical mass like acoustic smoke.

Lace curtains, a mahogany desk, Cuban cigars and a double bed make up the room. It reeks of class but smells faintly of perfume, electric-blue cigar smoke, and something baser; a sort of musk.

A hundred pairs of feet tap downstairs, slamming and jostling to a live band below. The floorboards shake. Rain drips off the open windowsill into the grimy alley below.

Laughter approaches from the hallway. Witty repartee is mixed with tender words and the door slams open as if on cue; an interesting counterpoint to a conversation ripe with possibility, with suggestion and the insanity of newly-won affection.

The man is tall, spiffy. His suit is immaculate. Hair jelled and trimmed the night before seems to glow in the soft light of the lanterns. His smile seems to kick the shadow's from the room's corners.

She is willowy and pale; a beauty to match a goddess, the hair to match a model, the smile to match a movie star. Her dress is the colour of snow, but it won't be clothing the innocent for much longer.

She takes his hand, intertwines and leans in as the singer on the radio brings her voice to a feverish crescendo. The music drops away, lets hers take the limelight. Down below, the dancing seems muted.

The bed seems only too close, the space between disappearing in a blur. Neither is aware of anything but the other body, the other being across from them. It's only too easy to grasp and

grobe for the other, snatching desire with not a shred of dignity.

Both resist the urge.

As the voice rises from the speakers afresh, his hands goes to his tie, his jackets, his black shoes and the socks clinging to his toes. He is savouring the moment. She watches the formal business casual shell slip away, uncover her lover's chiseled form.

The bass kicks in, building with every straining tone of the singer's breath.

Her dress slips overtop her head, revealing a nymph-like body, all curves and padding and breath-taking angles in all the right places. Her back twists, revealing graceful curves and angles, smooth firm thighs, the tapered base of her spine.

She shivers with the breeze, seemingly delicate.

He is disrobed, an angular Greco statue, a counterpoint to the epitome of feminine grace trembling with the cold. He leans over her, softly, his hand never leaving hers, their hair meeting with a first kiss.

The drum joins in.

He flexes, pushes her thighs gently apart and away and begins. She moans; he moves slowly, surely, taking his time. Her mouth meets his once more. Even through the kiss, she manages to squeal slightly. Their hands lock, flex, grow tight as the music builds to a climax in time with their own.

She tenses suddenly, flexes, rises with a curved back and enough force to buck him from the ground. She was close. So was he, but he would not submit just yet. They would be dignified. They would be classy and keep this elegant fantasy alive.

He looks up.

The radio is dead.

The song is over.

The illusion is gone.

Around him is cheap plaster held together by gaudy band posters. The eaves bring the sounds of pushers, muggers, movers and shakers. Police cruisers howl by.

The bed is falling apart, the chairs are decrepit. She is on her knees, grunting, panting, begging for more as he thrusts onto her from behind, gripping her flat starved stomach like the sacks of trash he hauls from the factory every Tuesday. She's compact, pierced, and tattoo-covered with hair as greasy as his and the body odour of a septic worker.

They're both chasing the dragon. Needles blanket the ground. They do this every Friday. Friday is payday, and Friday is the night when all of the hipster jazz bars are open on the bus ride home from work.

It's the night when he can listen to radio jazz and forget the dirtiness and the mess, the drugs, grunge, and cussing of his blue-collar purgatory.

It's a night to escape.

HOUSE

Clear.

Deadbolts slam shut. Three slide and lock like bolt-action hinges. Planks follow, born by frantic hands with grime and grit between the fingers, concrete shavings and paint. The door is steel; anybody but the glory boys with black vans and assault rifles are likely to follow.

Sirens bay like hounds outside.

Those black glory boys with white acronyms on their vests might be on their way now. They might have loaded up. The cameras hadn't been cased properly.

He'd warned himself about the possibility. Warned himself six nights ago that the possibility was there, was always there that he'd overlook something.

Inside is the bare bar fridge, a military wire-bottomed cot, a single chair. The place is freezing, bare. Deathwatch cells in the Penitentiary on the city's edge are stocked with better taste.

At least they have comfort. They've been caught. They know their fate. His dances on the tips of his fingers, the cunning of his supplier, the humidity of the night. It comes down to a hundred variables he can probe but not grasp. It comes down to a thousand ambiguous nuances of speech delivered from granite steps or a teak lectern.

It comes down to who is in the way.

It all comes down to physics and rhetoric. Always has.

The beer's warm, but he takes a sip. No more. He needs steady hands. It goes into the corner. Shatters.

The back corner has a table. It might be wooden. Now, it is black, caked in multicolored vines and their silver roots plastered with red electrical tape. His own design.

Adrenaline throws his fingers into a buzz once his ass hits the chair. The forearm-shaped cylinder atop the pile has twists and ties for everything. It's got purpose. Just like the tendons in his wrists, the slur in his speech, or the hood across his eyes, the cylinder is defined by its function and the willingness to accomplish said function.

He isn't sure he counts, but he twists the end open anyways. It all comes down to biology and nerves. Always will.

Old Coke cans are raised and upended into the cylinder. The process takes hours. The sirens multiply. Tears and bile threaten to choke him. He shoves it all away.

It all comes down to faith and conviction.

Done.

Screws are tightened. A quarter-megaton of unthinking fury rests in his palms.

Are the sirens howling? Are they closing for the kill?

The part of him that chooses this bare safe house and black hoodies and averted eyes says yes. It screams for him to run, as he always has. It hollers for indirect action. A leaflet across a wall. Smashed windows in the middle of the night. The bomb between his fingers.

It all comes down to an action.

Except that's an impossibility. An action he cannot make indirectly is not an option.

Never has been. Never will be.

Until the streets are empty of those howls and that rhetoric; the teak lecterns' and legions of press pawns, he will slap together incandescent furies from whatever he can find.

He will slap leaflets to the walls. He did so tonight.

The howling pitches.

He sighs.

It's nothing without that single spark.

The bomb drops from his fingers. Clatters to the ground.

Beside the fridge, glowing in the bare bulb of the room is a pile. Behind the solid steel door is a bang. Voices. An MP5 clicking to full-auto.

The glory boys have arrived.

In the corner are bombs.

Hundreds of them.

TAPS

Thirty-two days to go.

It wasn't life this time. He should have gotten life in the clink, but somehow, he'd talked his way through another maelstrom of half-truths and accusations. Getting off the hook was simple. With another trial behind him, he wonders why and how jails still remain full.

It's too damn easy, he thinks with a smirk. A raindrop falls across his head. Its partners splatter across the grime of the floor- a testament to his three months of misery.

The rain dripping across his face and down his greasy ponytail is the remnants from last night's storm. The leaks often trickled down from the flat rooftop of the pen and down through to the sixth floor cells- the minimum security ones.

Concrete chips and broken glass filtered down through the cracks as well. They ran within the pools of browned water through the bars of his cell on the worst nights.

Handcuffs and manacles click outside the whitewashed, bare cell. The rustle of uniforms, bark of turnkeys and the scuffle of boots across the floor- somebody is being moved. Moved or released.

His ears brush the bare flaked steel of the bunk, fingers drumming out a street beat across the bare wet surface.

It isn't life this time.

He can be thankful for at least that. The beat rolls out across his tender fingertips and rough, callused palms, steady and firm. Through the lock-up and the trial, he hasn't lost his touch, despite losing his sticks, drum, and his place in the line. The two-step tango would be leaving without him this time. Every battalion had marched out this morning with the band.

None of the squad had visited him once. Three days ago, he'd been awakened to the harsh roll of a cadence.

He stands, grinning slightly despite the cold and the damp. His cot creaks as he crosses the eight-foot wide room to the bare wall. There's a sliver there, a piece of glass picked up from a brawl in the cafeteria a week ago. It serves as a mirror.

The face that appears is sharp and angular- the visage of a predator. A whip-thin body stands perfectly straight at parade-rest, dressed in the billowing fabric of a torn prisoner's uniform. It hangs awkwardly across his bony shoulders.

The greasy ponytail that drops across his face is black and unkempt. It had once been buzzed short.

He leers at the grotesque figure. His fingers grasp for the shard.

Lift it.

Shatter it against the dirt across the floor.

He's still been tapping the street beat against his leg. He can't stop himself. It changes, to a slow gliding march; a slow march, a dirge.

Taps rings out in his head, clear and crisp and mournful. The trill of the pipes and the dull thud of the drums echo through his head as rank after rank of statues present arms as one body, one motion.

The symbolism is obvious to him. The unit has marched on and left him to rot and run in their footsteps. While they may regret, they will soon forget.

He falls to the bed. He isn't sure if he's sorry, but he is sure it will happen again. Light hands and soft words are in his nature to give.

All that remains of his worldly possessions lie at his feet. A medal of service, tarnished and rust-festooned. The double-stripes of a drum corporal, ripped from his coat. A pair of sticks- his first, in fact.

He drops to the grime and snatches them up. They quiver in his hands, alive, anticipating. His fingers trace every whirl, every dent and ding and scratch along their length.

He thinks he knows what he can do. It's humble, simple, and low, but it's a way forward when the turnkeys come for him. If the uniform won't have his sticks, the street might.

He smiles- a genuine one, not a leer, and leans against the wall of his abused cell as taps rings out across the city from the place d'armes.

Thirty-one days to go.

GREY

"That will be all, thank you."

The black-tied butler bows, speechless, just another face in the garden. He retires to the great house, bars the heavy oak door and removes his hat, glad to be away from the wind and his bitter-faced master.

It is a cold time for the manor.

A swan dances upon the weed-choked pond before the gatehouse. It is slow, stately; a pristine white against the streaked autumn skies and the wind's bite.

Ivy climbs its way to the skies across iron-wrought gates and the eternal pillars of the country house silhouetted behind the garden with its pool, swans, and long wooden benches.

A man sits across one of those benches, alone. Frosty air snaps at his long tailcoat, sizzles his grizzled grey sideburns and the wispy hair tied behind him in a neat queue. Glasses adorn his long and crooked nose, bracketed in white brass that dazzles the waters and woods beyond his bench.

Such a man can be easily read.

The comforts of country life are lost on a face as chiselled as his. Obviously there was strain and wear before the manor, before the village socials and church meetings and the sundowners on the lawn, reminiscent of his slapdash wanderings on the Dark Continent thirty years before.

He's brought a paper into the garden.

Such a rarity drew whispers from the staff. The master's letters never leave his study overlooking the neighbouring pastures. The garden is for peace; contemplation in escaping the pens and Armani suits of the mighty.

Nonetheless, the master had inherited the manor and the lands around from a boardroom, not by birth, and bore grave responsibilities abroad and in the city.

He's heard all of the whisperings from his driver; a squat man with squatter opinions on gossip and other rubbish.

To be honest, he isn't surprised.

The papers making up this week's report are in his hands and the figures have been inked across his lenses in bold red. The ledgers back in the study will need to be updated.

No, this is an irregular matter.

He pries the letter with shaking hands, peruses it in the faintest of hopes that the facts are wrong, the opposition is lying, there's no game afoot.

But there is. He can follow its tracks like the foxes through snow around the grounds. It can be smelled, called, hunted down and savaged by certain zealous hounds glued to typewriters. Most are too busy. There are coronations, weddings, deaths, starlets and explosions of frivolity that pay too many quid for the likes of a crusading Sunday edition.

The coppers wouldn't do anything unless under orders.

The favour-sharks and upstarts would do their bit if he did his.

Contracts and deals would have to be made behind closed doors, but the consequences could be balanced. The fox could be starved out for the winter.

As the swan carves ripples through the green algae, as the night grows dark and the wind threatens to tear the hand scrawled sheet from his hand, ideas begin to twist inside a head sculpted for politics.

The earthly vulgarities listen within are catalogued in meticulous penmanship, irksome yet biting in tone with an undertow of dread.

There are photographs. Eyewitnesses. Sorority girls who can testify should the figures not sway another way; a most incongruous way.

It is blackmail, plain and simple.

It is a transaction completed with handcuffs and a resignation notice at its conclusion. It is a transaction still incomplete. The glasses fall from his face, shatter against the shale of the garden path as his lips curl up.

A mind taut with gallows-humour is most dangerous indeed. To balance a transaction anew, one requires a new cheque; a fresh premise from where to mislead the merchant into a noose of one's own.

The girls could be redirected. They could be bribed, lied to, possibly even eliminated. He's done this sort of thing before, and is perfectly prepared to do it again.

But is there a demand? Is there a motivation to cover up transactions that will lead to other transactions, a burden fit to drive Atlas to fall?

Perhaps, he ponders as the swan spreads its filth-encrusted wings, leaving the transaction incomplete, stuck between loss and profit, is enough to leave the investors puzzled. Leave them foolish. Let them stand and mock a figure that allows itself to be lost.

The sun sets. The man stands, stares past the wrought-iron gates to the road.

The company will fall. He will still have this place and its bird-blanketed mornings, the glowing sunsets and porch-side cigars past the barest, faintest of summer nights.

The transaction is worth the loss.

The letters drop into the pond.

"Butler? Some claret, if you please."

SEASIDE

Waves crash outside the French window.

They stir up the dark polished wooden drawing room of the single-floored beachside cottage. Lace curtains pulled back to savour the salt tang and the cream-coloured dunes waver and shiver in a cold wind. The north wind is coming off the gigantic swells and wine-dark sea blackening with the fleet of clouds sailing over her house, over the still crystal beach.

There's a storm coming.

A table sits against the massive thrown-open window, darkening with the gloom. Such power! Such fury is about to be unleashed across the seashore!

Even from his high-backed chair, with his shoulder chilled from sitting at the window for hours, he can feel the electric power of the fleet gathering overhead.

Rock features in his thoughts; heavy rocks, thick and ancient and eternally taking an eternal beating from brine and whitecaps. Out past the point, past the little grove of windswept trees where he writes verse is where his mind's eye takes him.

The brush in his hand captures the pockmarked face of Poseidon's domain, captures the god's own stoic brushstrokes upon this beautiful cove. Outside, waves are pounding the beach with enough force to rattle the shells by the porch and send drops, the odd hint of spray across his tongue and the long, unbound hair of his whipping in the wind.

He's got the coast properly; the black oaks bent inward from centuries of such force. It's the horizon that's hard to define.

It shifts. From thirty kilometers away, it seethes in turmoil. Swells forty feet high change his perceptions even from the water's edge, blurring his perspective. It's an interesting paradox.

He closes his eyes, drops his brush across the worn oak table by the window and the porch, breathes in. Chill. Cold. A rawness he can't describe, can barely hope to capture.

It's awe-striking. Colours can't capture the force of this upcoming blow.

He opens his eyes. Studies the horizon with cold wine clutched between ink-splattered fingers. He needs to think. He needs perspective.

The bur and tangle of waves, the parade of clouds across the horizon adds weight to the eye, crushes it in thunderheads and cloud arches and the millions of waves crashing across millions of beachheads across this enduring coast.

The wine remains untouched as he ponders. A sail stirs across the horizon, just beyond the cleaving rocks and stark surf. It's a fishing boat, darting into port before the storm hits. The masthead flies Coel's mark. It tosses, it shifts, it bounces across the waves, seeming to mock the sea god with every twist of its supple hull.

There's a thought.

The old artist begins as he always has. Flicks his brush to canvas and stares out into space. The open door to his cottage's bedroom is within his sight, but his mind is cast away and lost between the howling winds and swirling waves outside. Every whitecap, every bone-white drift-log and sail fragment has locked itself into a memory that demands perfection. It demands precision.

But there is little of that in a seaside; less in a storm's preparations. There is fluidity, there is shift; there is a progression from swell to beach.

From thunderhead to storm. From gale to calm.

Deep inside the nerves and the touch of an artist, there is the ever-present worry that this canvas, of all canvases, will remain unfinished, soiled, and inadequate in all its aspirations to capture nature.

There is no need. Lines drop from the sky, perfectly straight, blurring all detail and casting another layer of shadow to the scene. Rain claws into the scenery, obscuring all.

Perfect. An effect. His hand dizzying sashes the backdrop, the clouds, the storm, his work. Minutes pass like years.

Then, it is enough.

He lays down the brush and takes in a breath.

It's calm outside. Dead calm.

The fleet is ready.

Poseidon cracks the sky apart in a storm unearthly.

COUCH

Band posters shiver in the wind, the tape fraying under the rough hands of the movers. They're his friends, bribed into driving their second-hand sedans to this concrete-skinned basement apartment with a Belmont and beer in it for them.

Jeans rasp around the tiny space. Cussing fills the halls on occasion. Everything's heavy, and awkward, and the autumn chill is getting to their bones.

His breath frosts up the window. The Styrofoam keeps his gloved hands warm as he stares around home.

Rather, what was home.

It's a bare concrete floor without rugs or adornment. He could feel his way around every weathered inch of the place on heavy Sunday mornings, before the church bells down the road begin their wailing. Even with the bottles and butts lying about, even with his eyes close and his head pounding from the whiskey, he could find the remote, the radio, the lamp beside his couch.

He slumps into it now, feeling the edge of cheap paper slash at his black hair and leather jacket, his neck rife with tattoos.

It crunches under his jeans.

It's a dull green, tartan-striped with stains and patches covering its entire weathered surface. It has seen asses, jocks, preppies, bad girls, good girls, (bad boys?) and all manner of academic riff-raff sprawled across its surface. The legs are chipped and broken. Scotch bottles clink and tinkle underneath.

He stares across the room with its one tiny window. Apart from the radio and the T.V, there's nothing. There doesn't need to be anything more. Across the dim cavern is a doorway, an open one.

Joe cusses on his way out. He grins. They must be dragging the motorbike out the door. Suckers.

He stands, lays the coffee down and pushes the broken wooden door aside. It's stained with mould.

Inside is the barest of beds; an old military cot. It's what he could afford when he showed up in the city with two bags, a 41

bottle, his jacket, and an admission scholarship to college. The mattress on top is a loaner from somebody. He's not sure who.

The books across the single dusty shelves are also loaners, though he remembers whose they are. However, they owe him a vast amount of alcohol for the notes he slipped them during the final exams last month.

Ergo, they aren't getting them back.

The couch still hasn't been moved. Even on his last day, it's a focal point. A rock.

His guitar is across his bed, the G-string frayed. Across the guitar is a note, the be-all reason why he's leaving his cavern of an apartment.

It's a job offer. Electrical company downtown wants him working the grid as a supervisor. There's good money in it. He's good at it, though he hates wires and clamps and the ever-present danger of lethal voltage. He'll be better off than many, getting a job worth more than minimum wage straight out of college. He's lucky.

And, at the same time, he's not.

Going to work in a tie; coming home though rush hour, eating dinner at a table with the sports or the news on will grind him down. It already chafes at his spirit, his youthful death-wish for something aside from the weekly grind, the nine to five, the same desk, same job, same gum-stained patch of sidewalk to work. He doesn't want to live, work, eat, sleep, and die in the same six blocks of soiled brick and smoked glass. He doesn't want to hear the same slogans, jokes, and guitar riffs all his days. Heaven knows it could happen.

Or it might not. He could be a contender. He could rise up to stand behind those pillars of smoked glass and observe his fief of customers from a vaunted office chair.

He could. But it wouldn't be as simple as this. There would be trappings and board meetings and dullness; the life sucked out of even a cup of coffee, spontaneity, a moment of rebellion.

He takes in the dirty room one last time. A drape hangs out; the only thing he's leaving.

"Joe!"

Or not.

THE CONVERSATION

She had delivered.

She had elevated his feeble mind to electrifying heights, set him to pounding on his machine with an intensity to match the heavy sheets of rain scattering soot and cigarette butts along the street outside.

The ink from a mangled ribbon had mixed with the blood from his fingertips in a pool by his boots. The tangible threads of so many lives were unspooling, mixing inside the confines of his brain, confused and captured in the web already poised across his memories.

She had left a trap there. He knew the strings were ethereal for he could not see inside his mind; but he could feel them bounce under her soft feet.

Resentment unsheathed its fangs, sunk them into the vivid-rich high of creation still blowing through his veins and up his spine.

But she had delivered in full; a promise fulfilled, for once. He wasn't about to curse her unlatching of his mind to lives and mysteries and connections that would have broken the back of his old writer's mind.

He'd burned out once. Her little tricks and snippets kept him dull and placated and hungry for more; an old man addicted to a young form, if only in spirit.

For the first time since forever, keys fall silent. The rain dominates the suddenly silent street, free from cars and blaring stereos.

Footsteps vanished. A curse spits past his alley. The Uptown bus passes but rarely. Maybe once an hour.

The web crossing his mind is buzzing. The Muse is crawling her trap, adding threats of contentment, succulent curves of the intellect, the seeds of a thousand lives. She is tempting him.

Louder now.

Louder.

Trembling hands grasp the old typewriter. There are questions that need to pierce those threads. His old mind was sore and smarting from the masterpieces she'd spurted from his hands, his heart and his head.

Who was he kidding?

The typewriter falls to the needle-strewn concrete. Cracks.

She didn't give him masterpieces. He was no master.

She made his Dumpster, his concrete desert bearable because she drugged him with art and allowed him a privilege of enacting her own whims and fantasies.

He was a channel.

But now, in the fugue of reality that is becoming more shaded and abstract with every creative hit, he lusts for more than simple distraction and aesthetic pursuit.

He lusts for sense.

There's a shiver in the darkness behind him. A chill wind slips down his massive raincoat. It's zippered and buttoned shut.

There's a figure down that alley. He's never seen her in the light, but she's got all the pretty curves he imagined. She's got beauty beyond reckoning.

She is not happy.

-Never thought I'd see you in person.

She continues her walk from the shadow, slowly, stately. He is caught in a terrible passion; either love or horror, perhaps both.

She was a primeval thing, dredged from beyond a veil of madness or genius he could not understand. That was certain.

-I thank you for opening an old, unworthy man's eyes. Can't be continuing this without sayin' thanks.

There is no sound, but he feels slender feet striking pavement.

She was being challenged. No amount of talking could rekindle the Muse's love. A part of him shrivelled up and bled out; another steeled the gibbering remains of his tongue and forced out the challenge he'd meant to ask when she'd ensnared him, all those years ago.

She was a jealous hag.

-Drop the web. End the fog across my mind. I am old. I am old and will die soon. Let me know what came before the alleys and the rain. Please.

She was a beauty.

A silent, remorseless, unresponsive shade normally so verbose and eloquent. The verse that poured from her mouth would make the bards of old weep.

Not tonight.

-Please.

Her advance never slowed, never stopped or wavered in the slightest.

-What hold would I have otherwise?

He was a channel. The words erupting from the monumental silence sunk deep into his brain. He was a string dancing under her voice.

-What need is there for a hold? What need is there to restrain me at all? I am an old man, haunted by all that you are. Release me. Lend me back my memories.

-Are you sure you want them?

-Yes.

She chuckled.

He looked down at his hands; smarting, broken and bruised from the sessions.

-There's more to these sessions than stories, isn't there?

-Perhaps.

-I've got one question for you. Just one. I only ask that you answer truthfully. Something's been on my mind, wiggling in the deepest corners where I can reach and don't dare to look.

Her silence was revealing and total. He shivered. He wouldn't survive her wrath. While he'd never seen her outline, never really caressed her form, he knew her to be lethal.

-These lives I've transcribed as your channel- are they mine? Did I live one of them or all of them? Am I now an old man muttering in his cups, reliving my glory days through you, my Muse?

Or are they illusions like you?

The screams that echoed from the alleyway between Frank's Stewpot and the National Bank outlet on 23rd summoned police across three districts.

The man they carried out was washed out by the rain, dead, broken to the world and aged beyond measure. He'd been a writer, but the marks of other professions had scoured his body over decades.

They found no woman.