

April 20, 2015

NEGATIVE ASSETS

punk **lit** **zine**

**ART
MUSIC
LITERATURE
HORROR STORIES
&
ENTERTAINMENT**

**Napalm
Death**

Apex Predator - Easy Meat

Vol 1

Issue 1

Letter from the Editor

What I hope I've accomplished with this project is to bringing a new opportunity and dose of vigor to my own writing, that of my peers, and to those, like me, who are looking for an outlet and a chance to showcase their passions, their dreams, their talents.

Largely, this is a literary journal. I have published stories, alongside fellow CSU Channel Islands students, alumni, and community members. It's something that's very important to me and my fellow contributors. Having your writing read is a huge step in giving yourself a name and creating confidence in your career. A project like this is also essential to knowing the ins and outs of the industry, and learning how to start at nothing and get to something. It brings a true sense of accomplishment to know that you got where you are because you put in the time and effort to make it happen.

The DIY aesthetic that *Negative Assets* adopted stems from punk roots. It says "No one else is going to do your work for you, and you shouldn't expect them to. You have to do it yourself." It is this sentiment that drives our creativity, and pushes us to make our content seen and read. But it isn't just about making your name heard. It's about showing what you've spent your time creating and learned to love.

CSU Channel Islands is small, but densely packed with talent, eager to be seen. Beyond skill, the students have drive and are prepared to put in the hours to make their voices heard. There is community here, and culture. *Negative Assets* will hopefully help foster that culture, and strengthen the campus's place in the world.

A lot of students leave school with their degrees and their debts, and the realization that there aren't many opportunities for them. This project is about taking the initiative to get your work out there and let the world know you're here, you have talent, and you're ready to put it to use.

I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to this project, and all of our sponsors that helped make *Negative Assets* a reality. You've helped cultivate a new outlook on pursuing dreams, and giving your work purpose and light. I hope that *Negative Assets* continues to drive people, bring them passion, and make their work seen and enjoyed.

Taylor Farmer

WRITERS



**Harmony
Hertzog**

Harmony is a cat connoisseur, tattoo aficionado, and ghost hunter. She graduated from CSU Channel Islands in the fall of 2014 with Bachelor's Degrees in English and Psychology, if only because one can't get degrees in those other things.



**Nic
de Sena**

Nic is an English major at CSU Channel Islands. He is a fan of righteous jams.



**Heidi
Dreiling**

Heidi Dreiling is an English major at CSU Channel Islands, where she is on staff at *The CI View*. She got her first job in 2nd grade selling drawings of aliens for a dollar each, but nowadays she works in customer service by day and does freelance copy editing by night. When she grows up, she wants to be a real author, and also have health insurance and be happy. You can hire her or get in touch at www.heididreiling.wix.com/editing.



**Sarah
Manheim**

Sarah Manheim is a voracious reader, an avid baker, and a scintillating conversationalist. She lived much of her life in an underwater sea pod, scouring the ocean floor for nourishment, and the crashing waves for inspiration. While on a recent visit to her land-dwelling relatives, she came across a colony of illiterate bonobos, and has since been the primary ambassador for the Noble Coalition of Shakespearean Primatology. This is her first official published work.



**Zachary
S. Valladon**

Zachary S. Valladon is a journalist, musician and poet native to Southern California. He's a decent pizza orderer and an even better pizza eater. You'll most likely encounter him at your local record store, geeking out to music that he wishes he had the money to buy.



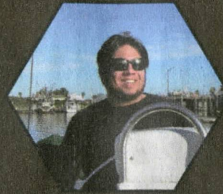
**Jamie
Elmer**

Jamie Elmer is a writer and freelance copy editor from L.A. County. She graduated in 2014 from CSU Channel Islands with a Bachelor's in English, enjoys chubby animals, sarcastic humor, and long walks to the fridge for snacks (just kidding — she prefers short walks). Read her blog at elmerliketheglue.wordpress.com.



Douglas Peyton

Doug is a junior transfer student at CSU Channel Islands, majoring in English with an emphasis in creative writing. He is a lover of all things horror. Formerly a touring musician and guitar builder, he now spends his time writing about the macabre of everyday life, penning his dark imagination to paper whenever he's not in class... okay, sometimes while in class, too. Don't tell his professors



Luis Baldurrama

Baldur is an engineer by profession, but he's also an avid musician and petrol head. He loves his cars and his motorcycles way too much. He's a dude that really likes anything made from any combination of leather, wood, and steel, and he's also got this stupid obsession with lions.



Andrea Harsma

Andrea Harsma is currently a senior studying English at CSU Channel Islands. She loves wit and wordplay at least as much as the next English major, and hopes to integrate that appreciation into her writing to entertain others.

For more *Negative Assets*, go to <http://negativeassetszine.com/>

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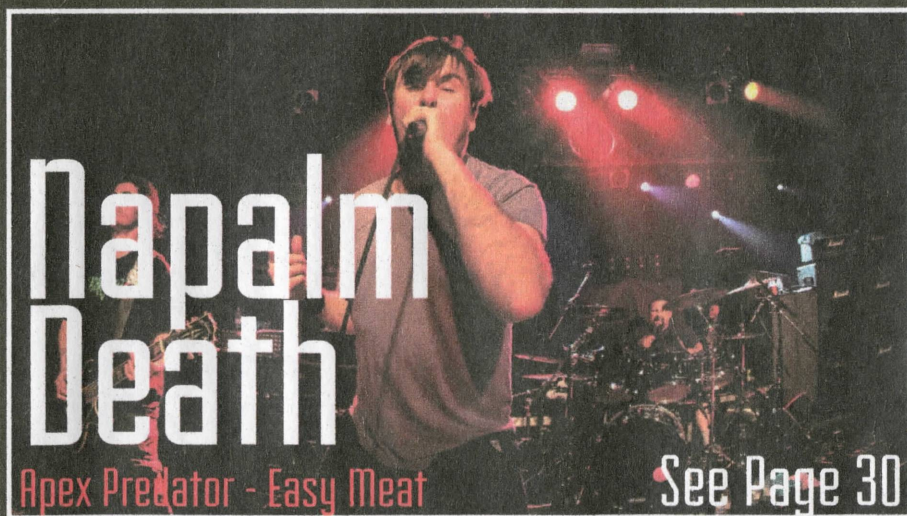
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Napalm
Death

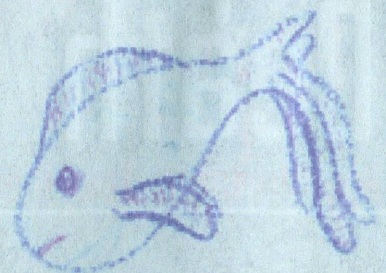
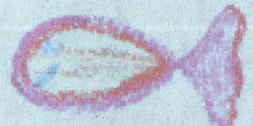
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Prepping Your fish



By Taylor Farner



The kids all just stared out, not really seeing anything. Toby was familiar with this face. He'd gotten used to it as a substitute, going over times tables and getting the kids to understand photosynthesis. They didn't really hear him. They weren't really in class, but staring outwards, day dreaming about space and wizards or princesses and whatever else they felt was more important than the practical things, the real things.

Slamming the 25-pound catfish onto the long lab table startled them a little. A couple jaws dropped.

"Alright, c'mon guys, wakey wakey," Toby said. The kids' attitudes didn't change much.

The classroom was cold. Outside the windows everything was dark. The lights in the back of the room were off to reveal the work Toby set to work on. Tonight the kids would learn by watching, and then doing. If it worked before, it would work again. It was all about having the right message. If you have good intentions, why would anyone want to stop you? And why would anyone suspect the sub?

"I know you don't like regular schoolwork, so I came up with a surprise for the lesson plan, but don't tell Mrs. Miller!" Toby told the kids, lightly shushing them with his gloved fingertip. "I'm going to teach you practical skills, like preparing your food, that way when you're older and out there on your own, you'll know how to feed yourselves."

The kids seemed a little confused.

"Has anyone ever seen their mommy or daddy clean a fish before?" Toby asked.

One of the boys, Gregory Trotus, looked from side to side at the other kids, and raised his hand. Toby pointed the long serrated knife at Gregory.

Gregory slowly put his hand down.

"Mi-mister S," he mumbled, "Can we please go? It's cold in here, and scary."

The other children nodded in anxious agreement.

"Is that how you all feel?" Toby had his feelings hurt like this before, something that stemmed back to when he was their age. It had become a passion of his to impart his knowledge onto children, and teach them to understand what he had to offer. But after months of subbing, the heartlessness of kids taught him that they didn't care.

"Well, you kids have done a number on my heart, you know that? You're just gonna sit, and watch, and maybe you'll learn something. You're all fish that I'm guiding through these dark waters." Toby gestured to the outer walls of the sealed shed, referring to the outside world. He was obviously angry, and he realized he frightened the kids

even more. He didn't mean to, but sometimes you had to put a little fear in the kids to make them listen. Toby knew that.

"I'll run through this quickly to give you an idea of what to do. Make sure you have a clear workspace. You want to have a bowl," he paused and lifted the bowl on the table so the kids could see.

"Then you take your knife, and cut from the dorsal fin on the back, to the one at the tail end of the fish. Then you grab pliers, and peel back the fish skin, take your knife again, and make a cut from the fish's butt all the way up to its neck, pull out all the guts, and drop them into the bucket here." The entrails made a wet flopping sound as they hit the bottom of the bucket. "After that, you just have to rinse the fish off."

Toby cleaned up the fish, placed it in the bowl, and put it into the cooler behind him.

"I told you guys I had a surprise," he said, walking to the other side of the table and turning on a lamp to illuminate a sheet-covered mass atop the table. He grabbed the end of the sheet and yanked it back.

"It's Mrs. Miller!" the kids shrieked.

Indeed, it was. The naked corpse of the children's school teacher lay on the table, growing blue and cold. The kids started scrambling up to their feet and pounding on the wall and locked door behind them, deafened by their own screams. They could scream and cry all they wanted, it didn't make a difference. It never mattered before. No one was on campus anymore. Even the janitor had ended his shift and gone home hours ago.

"With people, it's really the same process as the fish," Toby said, unmoved by their continued screams. He proceeded to skin the woman, gut her, and dispose of the scraps. He then lowered her into the large rollaway cooler behind him. The kids gave up on escaping halfway through the routine and instead stood still, watching Toby's every move.

When Mrs. Miller was in the cooler, Toby turned back to the table and grabbed the knife. The kids shuddered.

"Now, which one of you wants to go first? Melanie, why don't you go first, you've been the closest thing to well-behaved today." Toby held the knife out to the girl, handle first. "You see, you're all fish swimming in a pond that's too small, and there's just not enough food for all of you. Someday, this is what it's going to come down to. Gregory, why don't you lay down on the table for Melanie? You're the one who wanted to leave so badly." He patted the blood-smeared surface of the table for Gregory to lie down.

The Lights

By Hermony Hertzog

I see lights. Do you see them? They're out there in the field. Look to your right. Do you see the lights? I see them, driving home on the long, dark farm roads. They're where no roads go, and the flat darkness makes them seem to move. Or do they move? Do you see them? They look much closer tonight. The lights. If I wasn't so tired I would try to find the source of the lights. Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps.

I see lights again. Can you see them? Thick, yellow lights entwine with the fog that layers the fields in a sickening yellow-gray. They still look close tonight. Can you see the lights? But there is no road to the lights. The curiosity is really getting to me. Can you see them? Jaundice-colored lights in the right field. They look even closer. But there is no road. Where are those lights coming from?

The lights *are* closer. Do you see them? I can gauge their distance between the road and the mountains. The lights are moving closer to the road. Do you see the lights? There has to be a road. The lights have to be coming from something. Are the lights coming from the fog? No, the lights are above the fog. But the fog is so dense where the lights are. And the lights are getting closer.

There are no lights during the day. The fields to the right are normal, flat spans from the road to the mountain. I can't tell where the lights are at night. Can you tell? I think the fields look different in some spots. Are they sick? Is it from the lights? There is a dirt path. Do you see it? It leads into the fields. Will you go with me? I wonder if the lights will be even closer tonight.

I see the lights. The sickly, sticky fog is yellow with the lights. The path is dark. The lights do not illuminate the path. You can't tell, because you didn't come. The lights are not normal lights. They do not illuminate the path, or the fields, only the fog. The lights are ill. The fog is infected with the lights. The fields under the lights are sparse. I'm almost inside the lights. I'm scared. They're pulsing. The lights are a contamination.

I'm in the lights. They are bright, but they don't shed light on anything. There is an electrical taste in the air. The lights are like an illness. They are not coming from any visible source. The sick, yellow lights mingle with the gray fog and that somehow sustains them. The lights are ill. I'm not so scared now, but I think there is something wrong. The lights are a contamination.

The lights are still out there. Have you seen them? I don't go down that road anymore. I have not seen them. But I can feel them. The lights are a contamination. I can feel their sickly, yellow glow inside of me. Can you see the lights? The lights are not ill, they are an infection. I can feel them inside of me. I'm scared. Do you see the lights? I don't see them, but I feel them, spreading. The lights. The lights are a contamination.

In Defense of the English Language

By Andrea Harsma

What did English ever do to you?
Poor, broken English
battered, lying in the corner
lonely, asking why you hate it so

What did English ever do to you?
It just wanted to help you sound pretty
But no
You had to run it down, beat it with sticks
"dead horse" you say, laughing

What did English ever do to you?
You don't even *try*
To sort your yours and you're's
Let alone those theirs, they're's, and theres
Smugly lazy
Do you even capitalize?

What did English ever do to you?
You can't even manage a full word? ru and ur and u and r
Even worse, these new bastardizations
With the swag and the YOLO
Don't you know swag's for curtains and skirting?
You
Obviously
Lack
Originality

I Found Love in a Dental Place

By Jamie Elmer

The location is the dental waiting room. The occasion is my companion's root canal.

I did not plan accordingly for my stint in the dentist's waiting room. I can hear the faint sound of the suction as I swallow my hunger. She has left me with her water bottle, but I can see its impending emptiness. I am hopeful that she will take no notice.

I have forgotten all forms of entertainment, from laptop to tablet, and am not even sufficiently prepared on my phone. A mere 35% battery life is left. This could only mean imminent death.

The magazine offerings here are a pittance. A disgrace. I could learn thirty-eight new sex tricks, or how to find my sparkle, but I think I'd rather jump into their fish tank and eat their goldfish.

The hunger has gotten so bad that the thought of grilled gold fish is not entirely as disgusting as I know it should be. This is worrisome.

My eyes roam for a sweet release and come upon a dream--my only form of foreseen sustenance is the peanut m&ms upon the front desk. I long for their chocolately, nutty flavors meeting my tongue in an explosion of yes. I must have them.

I face multiple dilemmas in acquiring said chocolately lifesavers. The first includes the eyes of the prying waiting room occupants and dental assistants. Long has someone been present at the desk, but I fear for the moment when I make my attempt and they appear at the scene of my guilt.

There is also the contraption in which my delectable saviors are contained. Upon further inspection, I have noted that this is no simple turn of the dial candy machine, but a high-tech monstrosity placed here likely for the reason of thwarting the fulfillment of my desires. I could rescue these pleasures of my stomach from their oppressor and send them directly to the safe haven of my stomach, where they will return to their former selves, completing their mission on this Earth.

I have discovered a knob on the back that could be the button that will deliver me from this hunger. And the delusions. But I am at an impasse, still impeded by my former struggles.

Look at them there, with their bright, enthralling colors, wide bodies promising a smooth chocolate coating

surrounded by a pleasant, crunchiness inside. Pure lust.

What temptation the dentist has left me. Do the caretakers of teeth find it amusing to leave treats that can only harm their patients? Do they think they are witty, attempting to ruin my chompers so that I may return to them, punished for my hunger? What a cruel world. Their attempts do not terminate my longing.

If someone would return, I could go about the task respectfully by asking for a small trifle, the least of what they could give me for this torture. Instead, the desk remains empty and the drill continues on, drilling away both her teeth and my hopes.

I fear this is the end for me. The darkness is coming; I feel it with every shallow, starving breath. I will think of you, my dear peanut m&ms, with my last dying breath.

Sweet relief! Just as the darkness threatened to overcome me, the ruler of the desk returned and I resorted to my last attempt at life.

"How do you get these?" I asked, pleadingly.

"Oh, like this," she said, effortlessly demonstrating the placement of her hand under the shoot, performing magic so that the sweet symphony of love fell upon her hand.

My eyes lit up, my hand outstretched -- finally. We are united. A true love story has occurred in this place. Pure bliss.

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Big Red Roger

By Taylor Farner

Sarah loved the night shift. After scrubbing the sides of the tank for a while, she looked down and saw Roger staring up at her. She instinctively put her hand on the emergency switch to close the metal grate, but it didn't seem Roger was trying to escape. She looked out over the dark aquarium floor, and didn't see anything unusual. She held still, trying to listen for the sound again, but didn't hear anything. A shiver passed through her spine, but she went on with her job.

Roger was the world's largest giant red octopus, and the only male. When the founder of the Ventura Aquarium first caught Roger, he weighed 125 pounds and stretched out to just over 7 feet. After three months of living in the aquarium, Roger had grown exponentially, possibly because of mating season or something, they were sure.

Just as Sarah started brushing again, a huge weight pushed her to the ground. She screamed and started flailing and managed to hit what had knocked her down.

"Nick! You fucking asshole!" she yelled.

"Jesus babe, you got me right in the nuts," Nick said.

"Good; you scared the shit out of me."

Nick pulled Sarah back to her feet. "Sorry babe. I wanted to surprise you," Nick said, leaning in for a kiss. Sarah brushed him off.

Nick was the kind of guy who got a DUI crashing his dad's BMW on prom night. And Sarah loved him.

"I got you these," Nick said, pulling a plastic wrapped bouquet of roses from his back—price tag still intact.

Sarah sighed. It was hard to stay mad at him sometimes. She pulled the flowers in and gave a whiff.

"Thanks babe. Why'd you sneak in? You know I'm off in like, 20 minutes," Sarah asked.

"I wanted to surprise you. Tonight's our 5 months," Nick said.

Sarah's face went flush, and she embraced Nick in a slobbery smooch. The brush fell down to the net beneath the metal bridge over Roger's tank, they started necking pretty hard, and Nick began to undress.

Sarah followed suit, then Nick set her butt down on the cold railing.

"Hey, babe?" Nick said.

"What?" Sarah asked, blushing now that they were both naked, once again, at her work.

"Don't freak out," said Nick. And with that, he shoved her off the side. Sarah gave a brief scream before she was

caught by the net beneath her.

"Ugh, you dick!" she yelled at Nick, who was jumping down to her side.

The tension on the net made a grinding sound as the two lovers swayed briefly, some ten feet over the water. Sarah looked down, and saw Roger drifting across the bottom of the tank.

Nick started kissing Sarah's neck. She was mad, but still very excited. He was always a madman when it came to public indecency.

The two rolled around on the net more and more, making it shake and sway. Roger looked up and saw the dangling fruit, tantalizing him from above. He swam near the surface and reached one tentacle up briefly before returning to the cool waters, wading with anticipation.

The tank's lights shone up through the waters below them. Sarah was hot and sweaty, and endured Nick's repeated pummeling. Both were breathing heavily. Sarah turned her head and saw Roger below them, staring up. Suddenly everything was drowned in sensory overload. She heard the screeching of the swaying net, felt Nick's hot breath on her neck as he thrust over and over again. The tension on the net rang louder and louder, like a collar being torn slowly with each movement.

"Nick," she said. He didn't seem to notice. He kept working away at her.

"Nick!" she said, firmly this time. She put her palm against his chest, but with each movement he pushed her hand farther away. "I think we should get out, I don't like this—can we go..."

Nick looked down at her and saw the panic in Sarah's face. Sarah sat up, and something snapped. She let out a short yelp. Her hand fell through a large hole in the net. She spun around, trying to gain leverage, but a larger hole ripped open, and she fell through, bottom first.

Nick made a grab for her wrist, but missed.

Looking down, Nick yelled after her as she descended into the cold blue water. Sinking, Sarah looked around, trying to get an eye on Roger, but she couldn't find him. She swam to the top as quickly as possible.

Sarah swam furiously to the edge of the tank.

"Grab it!" Nick yelled, extending the end of the pole towards Sarah.

Sarah looked up and saw the pole. Nick surveyed the rest of the waters. No sign of Roger. His heart began to calm as Sarah neared the pole.

I've waited long enough. If I'm going to strike, let it be now. The girl isn't expecting it. She is in a frenzy, flailing about. Real quick. One solid motion, and I'll drag her down the depths of the tank.

Sarah grabbed the pole. Nick struggled to pull her up one-

Artwork by Christina Cavadias

I'm an artist, illustrator, graphic designer, animator, photographer, programmer, and video game enthusiast from San Diego, CA. I enjoy semi-realism and I am skilled at making graphics, including logos, word art, advertisements, and designs. I work for CSU Channel Islands, doing graphic design and advertising media. Alphonse Mucha, Hayao Miyazaki, League of Legends concept art, and the ImagineFX magazine are my sources of inspiration. Between classes, work, and running the CI Japanimation Society, you can often find me cosplaying, playing Pokemon, or avidly watching Markiplier. I like my french fries with ranch and there's nothing that chocolate doesn't go with... except perhaps screen-printing.



handed while still keeping hold of the net. He managed to get her high enough out of the waters to grab the net. Her skin was shivering and white with fear. Then she felt stuck. She didn't feel pain at first, but after a moment her dulled nerves screamed as what felt like a whip stung her calf. She was yanked back into the water before she could look down.

"Sarah!" Nick yelled. He looked down, not seeing anything right away except the sloshing water and the black and white contrast of dark hair and pale flesh. Then all he saw was red. Big Red Roger.

Nick froze. He needed to act fast. Instinct told him not to jump in, but if he didn't, there'd be no chance of saving Sarah. With the pole in hand, he jumped in.

Once beneath the surface, he saw Roger had swum a good twenty or so feet away and was diving farther down. Nick pursued him, his vision blurred by the salty water. He detached the brush from the pole, revealing a semi-sharp attachment.

Roger had set to work on Sarah, engulfing her. She could barely see around one of his giant red tentacles. She flailed hard, but Roger's tentacles held all but her left leg. All she could see was the darkening insides of the monster, as she felt its strong, warm grasp engulfing her. The pain felt like her flesh was being fed through a wood chipper.

Nick was close. The monster's back was to him as Nick thrust the end of his makeshift spear into the monster. The octopus spun around. Looking into its eyes, Nick was certain he saw the eyes of death. Its mad gaze shook him to the bone. With real terror.

Roger extended an arm and grabbed the pole, ripped it from Nick, and cast it aside. With another arm, Roger reached out and grabbed a hold of Nick's torso, holding his arm tight to his side.

The pain was tremendous. Nick smashed his fist down over and over again, trying to loosen Roger's grip. He failed. Nick made a break for the spear again, reaching outwards, kicking his way closer. He peered back down, and saw Roger had focused again on eating his catch—although it didn't look like he was *eating* her anymore.

Nick grabbed the end of the spear. When it was lined up with the back of the creature's head, Nick drove it home. This time the contact was much more solid. It broke through the creature's flesh, dipping into the back of its head.

Once Nick was certain the spear was well-lodged in the back of Roger's head, he set to trying to peel off the suckers from his other arm and ribcage. It was a slow process, and incredibly painful. If he drowned, there was no way he'd be able to save Sarah.

Nick began to cough as Roger's blood bloomed into his face. He managed to peel off the suckers, and started kicking for the top, dragging Roger and Sarah with him. He'd made it. With all his strength, he attempted to push the hulking, slimy, bloody mass of Roger and Sarah up and out of the water.

Turning, Nick started to climb the net with his feet and one hand, the other holding onto Sarah's leg. He struggled to climb the net, but used Roger's weight to peel the suckers off Sarah.

It was working. Sarah's head was revealed. It was relatively unharmed, but was smeared with Roger's blood. The creature's inner beak clung onto Sarah's midsection, just below her abdomen.

The farther out of water Nick pulled, the weaker Roger's

grip on Sarah became. The creature eventually fell back into the water, floating near the top in a bloody cesspool. Nick prayed against all hope that the net held this time. Only a couple more feet, and he'd be able to resuscitate Sarah.

At the top, he swung Sarah over the edge, onto her back. He climbed over the edge himself, and over her pale body. Her midsection was completely ravaged.

He started blowing air into her mouth and pumping her chest. Everything was moving at top speed—he didn't know what to do, *what did it do to her? Oh god, oh god, oh god, please Sarah you can't die, no, no, no, I'm sorry, this is all my fault, this was so stupid, please no, I love you.*

He got up and grabbed his phone, dialed 911, then went back to chest compressions.

"I'm at the Ventura Aquarium, my girlfriend is dying, she was attacked by the octopus here... I... Jesus Christ, I know it sounds stupid, but she needs help, send an—"

Uhh-huuuaaack! Sarah spewed out a mouthful of water, and then another. It made the most God-awful puking sound. Nick was so shocked he lifted his head up, sending the phone bouncing from his shoulder to the ground and into Roger's tank. He backed off of Sarah.

More water came gushing out of her, and she started coughing. It was a horribly sour cough, like a running garbage disposal.

"Oh thank god," Nick said, tears welling up in his eyes.

Sarah lay on her side. Nick looked her over; the color began to return to her skin. Even some of the wounds from the suckers inflicted only moments ago began to fade. He looked at the wounds on his arm; the swelling flesh was still throbbing and beginning to sting very badly as the adrenaline left his system.

He looked down to find his phone floating in the tank.

"Oh, crap. Well, I hope they're sending someone," Nick said, clutching at his arm. "You're going to be okay—wuhh!" he said, before Sarah pulled him down to meet her face. She embraced him in a deep kiss, and he let his eyelids collapse.

If he'd left them open, he'd have seen the crazed, deep, dark red eyes, the same as Roger's. The eyes grew larger and larger.

Dazed, Nick submerged his love and passion for the woman in his last eternal kiss.

Then something actually felt wrong. Sarah's tongue—it was doing something weird. It almost felt like it almost bit him. Nick opened his eyes, and then it sunk in. Something was definitely wrong. Sarah's eyes were huge, mad, and horrifying. He screamed a noiseless cry. He tried pulling away, but something gripped his tongue, pulling his face in closer and closer. Then, twining up the sides of his face, red tentacles sprouted out from Sarah's mouth. He cried and screamed, and tried to push her away. It didn't take long before Nick's entire face was consumed.

There was a sharp sucking sound, and then Sarah peeled away, taking Nick's face with her. The aquarium went quiet before Nick's corpse slumped over, and then fell off the side, into Roger's tank. His body floated up to the surface, revealing the empty shell of his skull. Chunks of skull and brain floated and bumped into each other as the waters swayed and jerked.

California City

By Harmony Hertzog

They'll tell you it never happened. They'll say there is no way people could live and survive in what I've described. They'll say I was terrified, and the terror grossly exaggerated my story. But it all happened. And I will tell you exactly how it happened.

I heard rumors of an abandoned city some 80 miles east of Los Angeles. Rumor had it some eccentric billionaire was obsessed with building a bigger, brighter version of Los Angeles and started to do so in the late 1920s. The city didn't flourish as planned, but supposedly there was a resort hotel and a couple neighborhoods that had come to completion before the man went bankrupt, mad, whatever. The reasons behind the failure to thrive didn't concern me, what did concern me was the fact that this city still stood, unfinished, abandoned, and intact, somewhere out in the desert. I was going to find this city.

They'll say it was obsession. I call it tenacity. With several hours of research and countless Internet searches, I was able to figure out where this city should be, and, with a friend in tow, set out to find it. We were prepared for a three hour car ride: Pandora, coffee, air conditioning, and our cameras for when we arrived. We thought we were so well prepared.

Getting to the city that obsession built was like driving into Las Vegas at night: we round a long desert road, and there it is, all glittery and majestic. Only this glitter came not from billions of neon lights, but from the windows of an enormous hotel, reflecting the desert sun back in our faces. Perhaps the majesty was just me; I was fully prepared for this place to not exist, but it did. And we found it. We are able to drive straight in: there are no road blocks, fences,

nothing. It looks like the nuclear testing neighborhood from *The Hills Have Eyes*. We drive around first, marveling at how intact this place was for having been abandoned for so long. Is it because it's so far out of the way? Or is it really not as abandoned as we think it is? Surely it's abandoned. There are no cars, no signs of people, and although everything was pretty intact, it's very dusty, even for desert standards, and nothing looks less than 60 years old. After we tour the neighborhoods, we drive to the resort hotel with its intact windows shedding an intense light on the entire town.

I don't know how much, if anything, you know about abandoned buildings, but I will tell you this: the fact that this hotel, or the houses, had any windows left at all, let alone every single one, is remarkable. Especially after at least 60 years of abandonment. The city is clearly abandoned, like

I said, the dust and all, and there aren't even power lines, but this is unreal. I don't know how long we stand staring at the hotel, marveling at the windows, the size, the once lush grounds, lost in our thoughts, but I finally break my trance and decide to go in. The doors are intact but open. My friend hesitates, but I don't. Maybe I should have asked what they were thinking, but I didn't; I was obsessed.

Upon entering the hotel, I couldn't deny it any more: there is no way this city has been abandoned for the last 60 some-odd years. Yes, everything in the hotel was old and showed signs of decay, but it was clearly being cared for. There is no vandalism, no animals, not even desert debris or cobwebs. I probably should have left then, but I was fascinated: who is caring for this hotel? The man

who built the city was long dead, if not from insanity or suicide, then just pure old age, and no one lives in the neighborhoods. Could people possibly be living in the hotel? It didn't seem likely; the town has no power, no running water, no nothing. My friend stands in the doorway, refusing to carry on. I'm fueled by their fear; I would not be scared away! I take the camera and my phone and venture down the hall to the elevator banks and staircases.

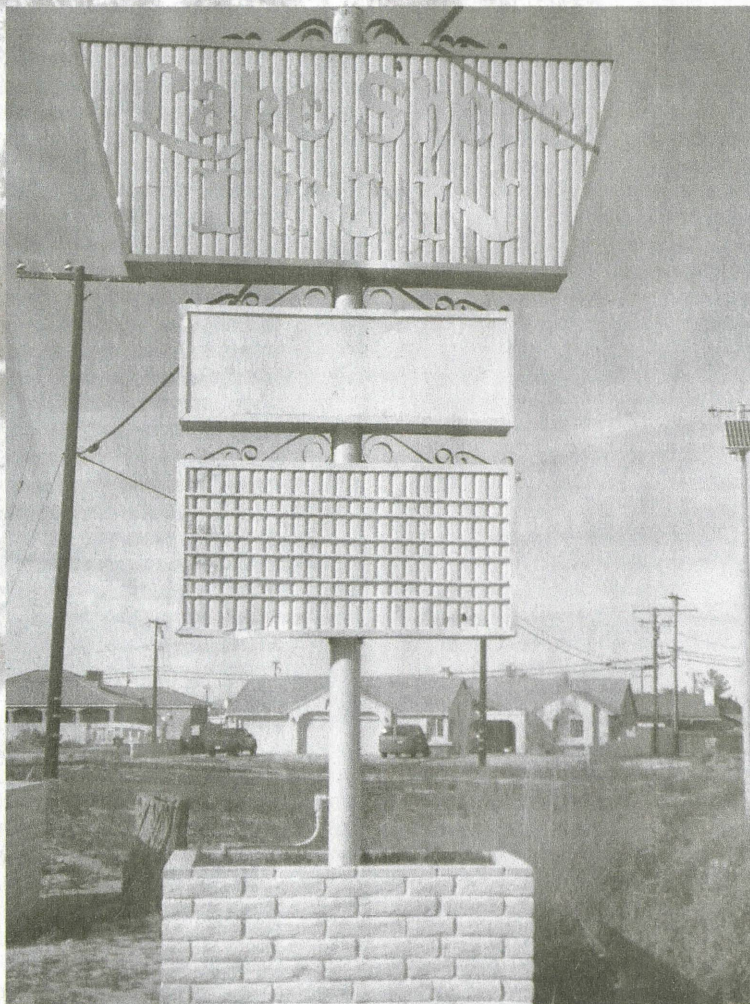


PHOTO BY HARMONY HERTZOG

Of course the elevators don't work: no electricity. The staircase in this hotel isn't an enclosed fire escape type staircase, it's at the beginning of the elevator banks and it swept upwards, stopping at the end of the hallway at each floor, like a zig-zagging grand staircase. I can't gauge how many floors there are; there had to be at least 30. I figure I'll check out the first couple of floors, take some pictures, see how it goes. I'm halfway up the first flight of stairs when I notice something strange: the inside of the hotel was abnormally dark, especially considering the time of day and the amount of windows in the lobby. I peer over the railing into the lobby, and I realize the only light is coming from the open door. There are grand windows, but they are covered by heavy velvet curtains which block all the light. I then look back up the stairs and feel a bit silly; of course it's dark up here, all the doors are closed! I shake it off and head upward.

Several of the rooms are locked, so I just wander about, taking aerial photos of the lobby, photos of the architecture, trying the doors as I go. I finally come to an unlocked room, 1213, and open the door. The wrongness didn't register at first. It is an ordinary hotel room: queen bed, dresser, table and chairs, vanity and bathroom. But it smells alive. This window is also covered with thick curtains, so I move to pull them open in order to better see the room. As they open, no light comes in. I'm puzzled at first, but then I finally realize what is really wrong, besides the smell. The windows are covered with tin foil, which explains why the reflections outside seem exceptionally brilliant. But why would someone cover every window in an abandoned hotel with tin foil? It makes no sense. As I start to peel back the foil, I hear a screech like a mutant cat owl come from the bed. I freeze, I have nowhere to go; the bed is between me and the door. I see shadows writhing on the bed, hear something hit the floor, screech again, and then scuttle out the door and slam it shut. I can hear movement in the hallway, then more doors slamming. I rip the foil off the window and turn to see the room.

I can't understand what I'm seeing. Clearly something is living here, probably multiple somethings, but the room isn't right. Nothing is faded, suggesting the windows have been covered with velvet curtains and tin foil during daylight hours for a long time. I can't imagine the noises I heard had been human, of course my mind went straight to *vampire*, but I know that isn't right, either. There are no stereotypical, or even rational, vampire accouterments in the room; no coffin, no elegant tapestries, no dead bodies, animal or otherwise, drained of their blood, no residual sparkle, nothing. *It had to have been an animal*, I tell myself. *An animal that collects Nazi memorabilia?* My mind counters, as the wrongness finally registers. The hotel room is heavily decorated with World War II Nazi propaganda, from swastikas to posters to large iron crosses adorned with eagles, as well as uniforms in the closet, which I assume weren't the ones the Americans wore in the war. The décor doesn't make sense, not only for a hotel,

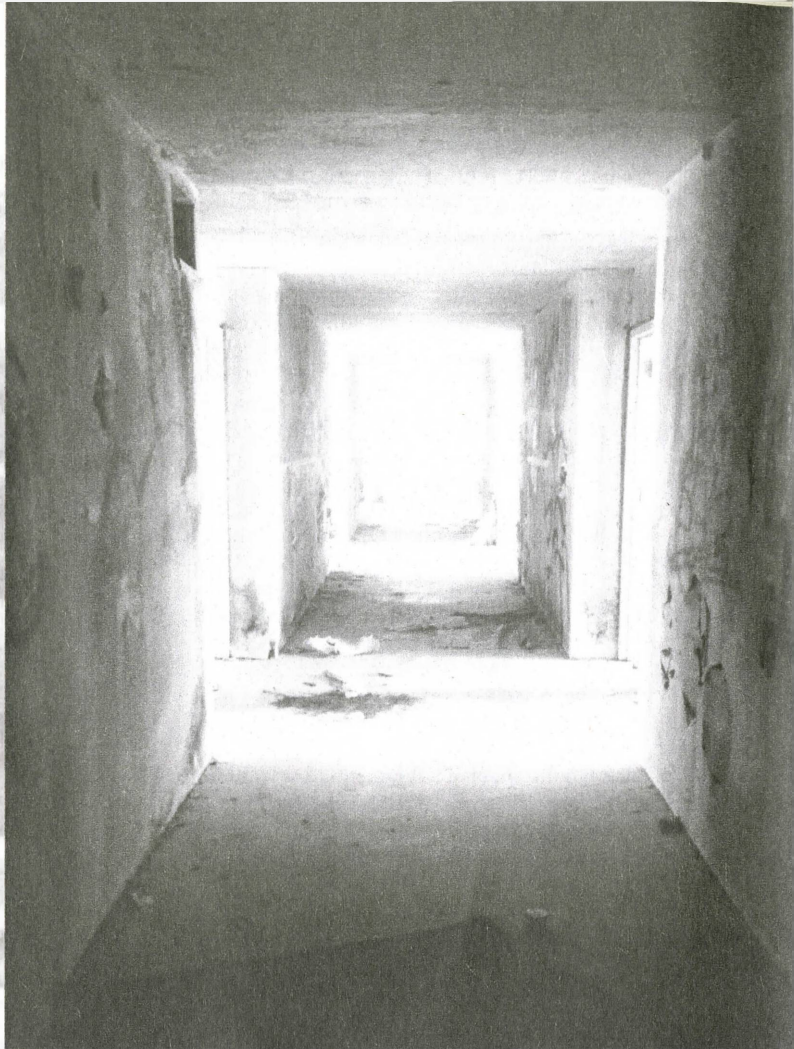


PHOTO BY HARMONY HERTZOG

but for the time period. From what I could find, this hotel had never officially opened, and very few of the houses had been purchased, and even fewer lived in. This city was over before it started, and that was at least ten years before WWII. Why would there be all kinds of Nazi regalia here? Before I could ponder further, I hear doors slamming again, and I know I have to get out of there. I race out the door and down the steps, hearing doors and scuttling and sounds of rustling life behind me, above me, throughout the hotel. I run outside, yelling for my friend. I cannot see them, so I start running around the property, screaming. All I can hear is the reverberation of my voice off of the concrete grounds, walls, and empty pool. I run off the hotel grounds, towards the car. I don't see them there, either, and I realize they have the keys. Surely they couldn't have wandered too far, wouldn't have wandered too far.

As I walk back onto the hotel property, I listen for signs of life. I can't see anything, but I can feel the presence of other life. I can hear noises coming from inside the hotel, but no humans or animals are coming out. In fact, they seem afraid of the light. It seems that nothing had come into the lobby because of the light that floods in through the open doors. I can hear what sounds like whispering, but it isn't quite right. It sounds very guttural, clearly not

English. *German*, I thought, *they're speaking German*. While I was still trying to wrap my head around what was going on, I start hearing screams echoing from one of the neighborhoods. I take off running towards the screams; these screams were human, they had to be my friend's screams.

I run into the neighborhood, following the screams. They are echoing in the empty streets, coming from everywhere and nowhere. I slow down, trying to pinpoint their location, but the screams are oddly muffled, like they're coming from inside, but inside a room that is supposed to be soundproofed and had malfunctioned. I start walking across the dirt yards of the houses, trying to pinpoint which house the screams are coming from. When I think I find the right house, I try the door. It opens with ease; not a hinge squeaked. Clearly the door is used regularly and cared for. The screams are definitely clearer, but still muffled. Are they in a basement? These houses don't typically have basements. This house doesn't have velvet and tin foil covered windows like the hotel, but it has the same alive smell. People live here. I cautiously make my way into the kitchen, that being my best guess as to what room may lead to a basement. The screams grow louder, but still muffled. When I enter the kitchen, I don't find a basement so much as I find a homemade trap door in the floor, leading under the house, into the earth. I search for something I can use to light my path, a lantern, a flashlight, anything. I realize I still have the camera and my phone. Between the camera flash and the phone flashlight I'll have to make do. The screams are definitely coming from under the house.

I pull back the trap door and the screams hit me flush in the face. They are definitely down there. I hop down onto the earthen floor and hold my breath. Between my friend's screams and whimpers, I can hear the same scuttling noises I heard in the hotel. Somehow they had gotten my friend while I was exploring the hotel. Maybe it's the same person I scared out of bed. *Vampire*, my brain keeps repeating, but I know that's not accurate. Not exactly, anyway. I edge my way towards the noises, and make a decision. I switch my phone's flashlight on, keeping the light covered with my hand. With my other hand, I steady the camera and take a flash photo. The flash was only on for a split second, but I

will never forget what I saw.

They'll tell you I was half-insane with fear by this time, that my imagination had run wild and filled my head with fantastical things that could never happen. But I know what I saw. And what I saw was this: my friend, tied to a chair, surrounded by people who seem to be examining them. Not just examining them, but almost breathing them in, like they want their life force. The people are all wearing clothes at least 60 years out of date, 1940s German WWII-era uniforms and clothing. The people are far too young to have been born in the 20s or 30s, or even 50s or 60s, the people look much younger, some even look to be in their late teens. They are all extremely pale, and they can clearly see in the dark. The flash of my camera makes the group of them erupt in inhuman howls, and I hear them scuttling away, some past me, some away from me. I hear my friend sobbing, so I rush to untie them. I use the flashlight on my phone to help me see the knots, which may have saved our lives. I can hear the people in the shadows, snarling and scuttling, not coming into the light. This is more than a basement, it's a tunnel. It is an underground way around the city, to the hotel, to the houses, so the people don't have to be in the light. At least three generations of people, apparently unhappy with the way WWII ended, live in this city, staying underground during the day, and keeping the town maintained in the dark—but why? I don't have much time to ponder; my friend is loose and we were rushing up, out of the tunnel, through the house, into the neighborhood, out of breath when we reach the car. My friend fumbles with the keys, still sobbing. I take the keys, open the doors, get them in, and get out of there as fast as I can.

I've told my story, and I've showed them the picture. The pictures I have are blurry, unreliable, they don't prove anything. But I know. I know what the man meant when he said he was going to build a bigger, brighter Los Angeles. Whiter and brighter often get confused, seeing as they're synonyms. Somewhere, some 80 miles outside of Los Angeles, there is a city. You may think it's abandoned, but it's not. People live there. But you'll never see them in the light.

Rock-A-Hoola

By Harmony Hertzog

It happened again. Not exactly the same as before, and this incident is even harder to believe than the first, but it happened. You probably won't believe me, again, but I'll tell you anyway.

We're urban explorers. We seek out abandoned cities, places, and landmarks of the past and explore them, taking photo documentation of the decay of manmade structures and the reclamation of the land by nature. Our hobby is dangerous; condemned, unstable structures, trespassing, potential conflicts with vagrants who may inhabit the abandoned places... and things people won't believe, like California City being inhabited by people who live completely in darkness; generations of people who haven't seen the light of day in over 60 years. Most of us take these dangers in stride, I mean, don't most hobbies involving physical activity have risks? But sometimes the dangers aren't tangible, thought to be outside the realm of possibility, and therefore aren't taken into account. We found that out when we decided to explore Rock-A-Hoola, the abandoned waterpark on the I-15 in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

We heard the stories of Rock-A-Hoola, the area's first and only waterpark: Built in the 1950s, it was doomed from the start. The man behind the waterpark, Thomas Newberry, thought Rock-A-Hoola would be a great pit-stop for those on their way to or from Los Angeles and Las Vegas and began building the waterpark in the vicinity of Lake Dolores, which was named after his wife. The actual construction of the waterpark went smoothly, but Lake Dolores was not an adequate source of water to sustain the park. With no feasible water source, Newberry had to build

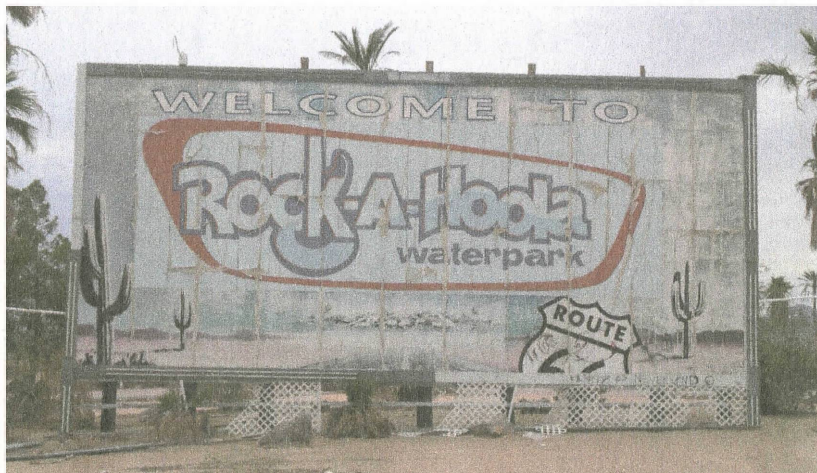


PHOTO BY HARMONY HERTZOG

a reservoir, which put them way over budget. When he was finally able to open Rock-A-Hoola in 1953, two years later than planned, the opening day was met with catastrophe. There were only a few dozen people there for Rock-A-Hoola's grand opening, Newberry's wife and children included. With a less than spectacular turnout, Newberry and his family proceeded to enjoy their waterpark. While on one of the slides, Dolores Newberry somehow drowned, her lifeless body floating in the catch pool in front of the meager clientele. Thomas Newberry closed the park indefinitely, depressed over the loss of his wife and life savings.

Rock-A-Hoola was revitalized in the 1960s; the waterpark had a much better reception this time around, whether from advertising or from people wanting to see where Dolores Newberry died is unknown. Either way, Rock-A-Hoola was a success for the time being. Seven years after the reopening, Rock-A-Hoola was struck by lightning in a desert storm, common for that area.

Almost all the patrons were electrocuted and killed. Rock-A-Hoola closed again, this time the slides and anything else of value were removed and sold off, leaving skeletal towers and stairways to nowhere throughout the waterpark.

Since the 1970s, few people have expressed interest in buying and reopening the park, the most recent in 2013. Only one of these ventures panned out for a short period in the late 90s, so it still stands abandoned to this day. Rock-A-Hoola has been ravaged by vandals, animals, and years of desert weather, but it still stands. We, recovered from our terrible trip to California City, decided to go document the remains of Rock-A-Hoola. We decided to take more people

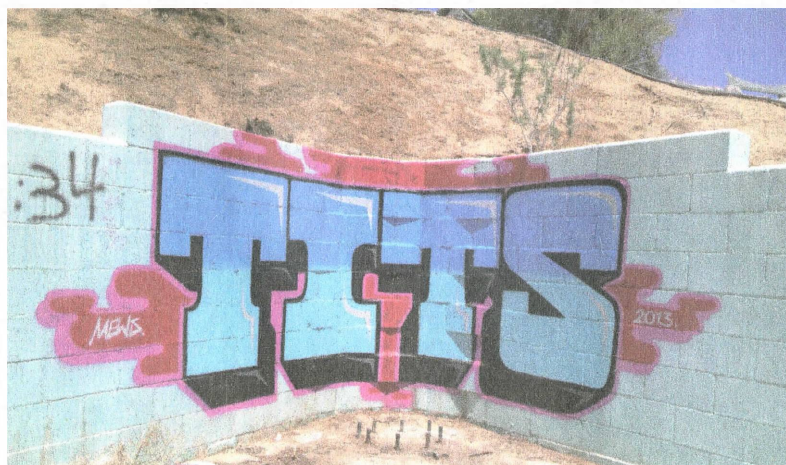


PHOTO BY HARMONY HERTZOG

this time, perhaps due to the old adage of safety in numbers, but we would never admit we were scared. Rock-A-Hoola had a well-documented history: it's outdoors, and, yes, in the middle of nowhere, but at least shouting distance from a major Interstate highway.

If you didn't know what you were looking for, you'd miss it. The easiest way to get to Rock-A-Hoola is to pass it, backtracking about a mile on the ill-maintained frontage road off the Minnetonka exit. Great skeletal palm trees and a giant faded statue of a Coke cup mark the entrance to the waterpark parking lot. We park close to the front gates and get out, marveling at the decay. An old billboard welcomes us to Rock-A-Hoola, the bottom half of the poster marred with graffiti. We walk through the abandoned turnstiles, photographing what we find interesting. I think I notice the smell first. It's a combination of things—animals alive and dead, long ago fires, aerosol paint—that form a miasma within the waterpark. I'm immediately mad at myself for getting spooked so quickly. This place was nothing like California City; what could I possibly be afraid of? The worst things out here were rattlesnakes and coyotes, and the former were unlikely in the colder winter weather. I shake my feeling of unease off and forge on, entering what appeared to have been an administration building.

I'm greeted with typical brainless graffiti: swastikas, poorly rendered penises, pentagrams. But there were some works of art, and some pieces that weren't greatly executed, but got credit for creativity. I photograph what I like, which includes a literal rendition of The Lonely Hearts Club, an extremely well done Felix the Cat, a Banksy-esque portrait of a girl, and a crude but creative rendering of the word "TITS" in psychedelic colors and swirls. As I wander through the building I relax, forgetting my earlier feelings of foreboding as my sense of adventure took over. I photograph everything I can: animal tracks, graffiti, decay, shots of the surrounding desert through doorless entryways and paneless windows. I surprise a coyote who made his home in an overturned desk in one of the rooms, and I laugh at his expression, even more startled than my own, as I snap his picture. I wander outside to what had once been a garden walk filled with lush, tropical flowers and wholesome billboards, reminding you to enjoy a Coke, wear Coppertone, and buy Chevrolet. The flowers were long dead and nothing but gravel piles remained, while someone had masterfully repainted the billboards, the Chevy ad now warning us that the future is blight as the young couple in the Bel-Air look upon a city in turmoil, background painted in atomic blast orange. I snap several shots of the billboards and grounds before returning to the actual waterpark.

I take several shots of the Rock-A-Hoola entrance signs, some nearly illegible, sun-bleached and rotting. I glance around the park, getting an eye on my friends. I couldn't see them all, but I didn't think anything of it; there were several buildings around and I wasn't at the best vantage point anyway. Speaking of vantage points, I really want to get some shots of the entire park from the stairs to nowhere. As I made my way across the waterpark, I was suddenly aware of how cold it was. You don't normally associate the desert with cold; but those winds in early December will get you. I zip my jacket up and make my way up the stairs. As I finally get to the top, cheeks pink, nose running, and sucking in sharp breaths of frigid air, I freeze. Rock-A-Hoola is full of people in bathing suits, lounging in the sun, playing in the

water, and waiting in line for slides. I do a double-take, and they were all gone. I grasp the railing and lean out, looking around wildly. What had I just seen? *You didn't see anything.* I chide myself, *you're lightheaded from climbing all those stairs in the thin, cold air.* One of my friends waves and shouts something I can't hear over the wind. I wave back and start taking aerial photographs of the park, zooming in on the pools now filled with desert debris and dead palm fronds. Satisfied, I start making my way back down the stairs. It's starting to get darker; it looks like a storm may be moving in. I see distant flashes of lightning, but they're so far away I can't yet hear any thunder. At a riser, I hear laughter. I'm still too far away from my friends to hear any of them laughing, and this laughter was like that of a child. I pause and listen hard, hearing nothing but the wind and the steady drone of semi-trucks from the Interstate. As soon as I continue my descent, I hear it again, laughter, and splashing. I whip around, looking up frantically at where the slide these stairs led to used to be, where I could hear a child squealing with excitement, zipping down one of these long slides into the pool below. Of course there was nothing there, but I hurry back to my friends anyway. Most of them are gathered near the main pool, huddling around one of the cameras. The looks on their faces make my insides freeze like no winter wind ever could.

They hand me the camera wordlessly. The image on the screen is surreal: imposed on top of the abandoned pool filled with debris was a filmy, translucent image of people enjoying the waterpark in its salad days. Children laughing and splashing in the pool, mothers and teenagers lounging in the sun, dads taking pictures for the family albums, all in ghostly relief on this tiny preview screen. My friends are looking at me for explanation, like my encounters in California City make me an expert on creepy weirdness. We all know Rock-A-Hoola's history, but even then it's hard to imagine a haunted waterpark suspended in time in some ghostly dimension. I hand the camera back and pull mine out, looking around the waterpark through the lens. I see nothing: no kids, no water, nothing at all extraordinary. I turn back to my friends, shaking my head, but I stop cold: behind my friends was an advancing crowd of translucent, ghostly people. I scream and nearly drop my camera, and as soon as I'm not looking through the lens the apparitions disappear. I'm backing away wildly, fumbling with my camera in order to see if the apparitions are still approaching, but I can't get my trembling hands to cooperate. One of my friends looks through their camera lens, trying to see what had me so terrified while I continue to back away and gibber incoherently. They must see something, because they start shouting at the rest of us to run. One of my friends grabs me and we sprint for the cars. We get around the pool, past the abandoned shops and buildings, to the gates. They're locked.

The gates are locked. We shake the bars and scream and yell, frantically trying to find a way out. I look around, realizing we aren't all there. Two of my friends are missing, still somewhere in Rock-A-Hoola. There is no way they can't hear us yelling and screaming even if they are in the buildings, but there were no replies or any signs of them. I start flipping through my photos, looking for the images of the entrances, because something's wrong. I already think I know what's wrong, but I need to see it. I find the images and see what I was hoping couldn't be true: there had been no gates when we first came in; most of them were flat-out

missing, the surviving few lying mangled and rusted on the concrete. I look back at the gates of Rock-A-Hoola and realize something even stranger: these gates look brand new. Freshly painted bars, well-oiled hinges, and nice, shiny chains and locks. I bang my hands on the gates in frustration. How could this be real? Ghosts? A possessed waterpark? Impossible! My fear subsides as my anger rises. I show the images to my friends, trying to get everyone to calm down. Others realize two of us are missing as we look back through our photos, trying to make sense of our situation. We know we have to find our friends and find a way out, and being calm and logical is the only way to do so.

We make our way back into the park, calling for our friends. As we come upon the abandoned buildings, we stop in our tracks. All the buildings look fresh and new: bright paint, shiny windows, merchandise on the shelves. They didn't look just new, they look occupied. As we gawk at the transformations, we notice things that are more than shadows, but less than solid, moving around amongst the shelves and racks. Shopping. The apparitions are shopping. A loud, ripping burst of thunder startled us back to our mission. I look up, realizing the storm arrived, and we were going to be caught in it. I didn't want to seek shelter in the buildings with the apparitions, and I can tell my friends shared the feeling. We head past the buildings, into the actual waterpark, and took shelter under some of the rotting canvases that still clung to long-forgotten cabanas. As we huddle together, trying to figure out our next move, another burst of thunder and lightning illuminates Rock-A-Hoola in a fiercely bright light for just a moment, but it is all we need. The entire park was changing before our eyes: graffiti and debris are disappearing, colorful signs and paint appearing; the pools are filling with bluish chlorinated water; slides are appearing from the platforms that led nowhere only minutes ago. We all stand, in shock, watching the transformation. Another burst of thunder: the storm was moving closer. The closer the storm gets, the more rapidly Rock-A-Hoola changes from an abandoned, decaying waterpark to its former glory.

Another scream broke our trance. We wheel around to find the source of the scream, only to see a man trying to drag one of my friends from our now plush cabana. He's wearing flowered board shorts, but they're out of style; very short, with contrast piping on the sides. As we grab onto our friend to keep them in the cabana, we inadvertently pulled the man closer, and we are able to tell his entire appearance is dated: permed hair, caterpillar-like moustache, thick gold chain, and gold framed sunglasses despite the impending storm. I'll never know who figures it out first, but we all understand with a clarity sharper than the approaching lighting: This man is a victim of the lightning storm and subsequent electrocution that happened in the early 70s. For some reason, the storm is restoring Rock-A-Hoola to its former appearance, and the ghosts of the victims are manifesting and trying to capture us. But why? Do they think we'll be able to take them away from here? Do they want more people in their eternal waterpark limbo? We can never know. We just know we need to get out.

We jerk our friend out of the man's grasp and sprint through the rain that's starting to fall, passing the manifestations lounging around the pools: some start to make moves toward us, some watch us impassively, and

some don't seem to notice us at all. We scream for our missing friends as we run through the rain filling the restored waterpark, heading for the gates. We'll jump them if we have to; we just need to get out. Some of the ghosts come out of the shops to watch, a few join the man in his pursuit, but even more just don't notice us. We keep screaming for our friends, and one bursts out of the administration building, joining our run to the exit. We hit the gates and start climbing, all of us scared, soaked, and terrified. We all make it to the top, climb onto the cement stand that holds the now brilliant marquee, proclaiming "Welcome to Rock-A-Hoola," and jump down onto the concrete below. We continue to run for the cars, but the sense of urgency seems to be dissipating, like the rain is washing it away. Some of us turn to look at the gates, and we realize we're no longer being pursued: several ghosts stand at the gates, looking at us almost sadly, the way your dog looks at you when you leave for work in the morning. There is no malice in any of the spirits, just sadness. Because they're stuck here? Because we got away? I snap photos without even realizing I'm snapping photos. One of my friends tugs me into the nearest car as we roar away, heading back to the safety of Los Angeles.

We left one of our friends. We all know it, but none of us can talk about it. We know they are gone. Gone: not lost, not missing, but gone: stuck in Rock-A-Hoola with all the other people who were just gone, who could only appear during desert storms. I flip through the images on my camera, looking at the surreal scenes: in some photos, a mere abandoned waterpark, the next, what looks like a photograph that has been double-exposed, showing both the abandoned and the flourishing waterpark, fighting to be the image. Shadows of Rock-A-Hoola patrons long dead, blurry captures of what look like tangible, substantial people dressed for a day at the waterpark. Decay. Rock-A-Hoola in 1973. Ghosts. Nothing but decay. The images scroll by, mesmerizing, disorienting. There is even more proof this time: even more people, even more cameras. Regardless, no one would believe me, us, again. As we near the Los Angeles county line, I come across the final image on my camera: standing amongst the ghosts at the gate is our friend, somewhere between shadow and substance. They are waving what appears to be goodbye, but I know better. They are waving us back, beckoning us to join them at Rock-A-Hoola.

PHOTO BY HARMONY HERTZOG

SALIGIA, The Damning of the Damned

By Sarah Manheim

Have you heard?!

The whispers began at midnight.

Yes... an inquisition. To determine our legitimacy.

Sloth peered nervously around the corner, ensuring that their conversation would indeed remain unheard. She looked imploringly towards Gluttony.

Are you nervous?

Gluttony sneered, his snout quivering with the malice of his indignation.

Am I ever?

The chamber, as always, was readied at a moment's notice. The vaulted ceilings stretched infinitely upwards--their windowless visage doing little to alleviate the darkness of the hall's interior. The cackling of Satan's minions echoed ominously as they lit the torches, the gloomy light of the dancing flames further illuminating the instruments of torture.

All seven entered slowly.

Conquest and War flanked the left side of the high inquisitor, while Death and Famine sat imperiously to his right. Those on trial shuffled about nervously, fighting silently for acquisition of the seats furthest from the jury. Eventually, the sins fell silent. After what seemed like an eternity, Lucifer stood, in all his dark, regal glory, and the trial finally began.

You, the accused who sit before me, have, some of you for centuries, served as my ever-faithful, ever-vigilant executioners of ire. Among all the men and women who have ever wandered earth, it is you who have laid claim to the darkest aspects of the human soul. Your sins were reprehensible, leaving no one more proficient in the recognition of your kindred brethren than yourselves. You know that they must suffer. You know they cannot leave. And yet, I question your legitimacy. For the first time in the history of this very Hades, you have Let. One. Go. The classification of the fugitive has yet to be determined; it goes without saying that they who are responsible shall suffer the worst of all imaginable agony. You knew the law--if any one of you are at any point deemed unworthy of your post, then you shall be recycled back into the sector of the damned, and made to suffer the retributions that you currently inflict. The proceedings shall now commence... and may I have mercy on your souls.

The proctor cleared his throat respectfully, unfurling a long and tattered piece of parchment as he stood.

The Prince of Darkness, Our Son of Perdition, oh Serpent of Old, the Lawless One, Beelzebub himself, calls forth to face this inquisition, Gluttony, ruler of all those who imbibe in excess.

Gluttony stood, his hugely swollen body seeming barely able to support his massive, boar-like head, a feature which had adorned his shoulders since the day of his arrival. Of

all the transformations, his had been the most severe, a fact his filthy, piggish snout was fond of constantly reiterating. Finally, he ended his laborious descent into the Pit of the Accused, settled comfortably into the Armchair of Atonement, and began to tell his tale.

Name?

Gluttony, ruler of the sixth terrace.

Original name?

King Henry the Eighth, ruler of all England.

Method of Retribution?

The damned are force-fed rats, toads, and snakes until the point of suffocation, deprived of drink till they go mad with thirst, then have their stomachs pumped so that the process may begin anew.

You may proceed.

Gluttony

I was born in the month of June, 1491, to Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. I was made ruler of all of England following the death of my brother, Arthur, Prince of Wales. By papal dispensation, I was wedded to his widowed bride, Catharine of Aragorn, on June 11th, 1509. We ruled the kingdom together for many years, with numerous attempts to produce an heir, a matter in which we were perpetually unsuccessful. I ate, drank, and fornicated in perfect moderation, until the day that I met... her. Anne Boleyn was the most beautiful creature I'd ever beheld--she invoked in me a hunger that I was powerless to resist. I became insatiable... Anne was... beyond reason. Her very presence caused every inch of me to ache with desire, with longing--and when I finally bedded her, my mission became clear. To keep her. I tried everything I knew--I placated to her every whim, I displaced Catherine, I moved worlds for her... and with every passing moment, I watched her slip away. The rumors had already begun--that she was a villainous traitor; that her political aspirations were all that kept her by my side.

When she produced a daughter, I became... enraged. She was too weak to fornicate, so I began sating my sexual appetites with food and drink. It was said that she was incestuous... an incestuous whore, who had never truly wanted anything, save power. The day that I beheaded her, there was a moment... as the sword came down, separating that lovely head from her milky white shoulders, that I hungered for her once again. Our eyes met just before she died, and I knew, in that moment, that I would never again be full. I was injured, and growing older by the day; what was left to me but food and drink? I bedded others... but their skin felt... cold, their bodies lifeless... nothing culled my ache nor quenched my thirst. Your honor, I AM Gluttony. No one takes their role more seriously than I--those that

have hungered as I have, that have known the sense of longing that follows ultimate ingestion, they suffer in my region as I have suffered every moment since her death.

Objection.

Gluttony squinted haughtily towards Conquest, knowing better than to sneer.

Oh? To what, exactly, do you object?

It was you who caused her death. How are we to trust the validity of your testimonial, if you claim to suffer from events that were produced by your own arrogance?

Slowly, Gluttony began to laugh, a sardonic smile twisting the corners of his snout.

Arrogance? You claim her death was caused by arrogance?! My dear Conquest--I had no choice! Anne was the crux of my undoing, the downfall of a kingdom... if she had lived, it would have been the end of me. You dare to doubt my suffering?! Yes, perhaps I hated her, for a time... undoubtedly, there was some resentment, but that never meant I didn't want her! Every moment of consumption I have experienced, in this world and the previous, has been a futile attempt to satiate my emptiness. By the bounds of my own retribution, I shall never again be near her. I punish those who have landed in my care based on the knowledge that they all have sinned as greatly as myself. I assure you, they suffer without exception.

Lucifer, upon conference with the others, motioned for the proctor to proceed.

Gluttony, you are excused. We shall now hear the testimonial of Wrath, sovereign of the vengeful.

Wrath stood, haughtily making her way towards the area of inquisition. As she moved, she looked imperiously towards the justices, as though daring them to find fault with her coming testimonial. The other sins avoided eye contact, for even in this realm, the depths of her fury were nothing short of legendary.

Name?

Wrath, ruler of zee third terrace.

Original name?

Princess Olga, official ruler of Kievan Rus.

Method of retribution?

Zose of my terrace are made to walk through blinding, acid smoke. Zis is followed immediately by zee process of live dismemberment, upon zee completion of vvhich, zee process begins anew.

You may proceed.

Wrath

Vith? You bring me here to, vat, challenge my intent? I assure you, it vas not I who let zem go.

The proctor cleared his throat uncertainly.

You are required to relay the events which led to the appointment of your post, in order to determine your eligibility for maintaining it. Your guilt of the incident in question shall be determined by the sincerity of your account. Now, I must ask you once again, please proceed.

Wrath glared furiously at the proctor before, at last, she began to speak.

Vell, as I have previously stated, I have no connection to zee incident of vvhich you speak. I vas born in Russia, and I married Igor of Kiev in zee year 903. Vee vere very happy for many years, following our intellectual, as vell as our marital pursuits. Zen, vun day, I received word zat he

had been murdered by zee Drevlians, and my fury knew no bounds. Zey sent twenty of zere best men to convince me to marry zee Prince of zee Drevilians and to abdicate my throne. I had zee messengers buried alive. I zen sent vord to zee prince of zee imbeciles zat I would accept his proposal, but zat he must send his highest ranking noblemen to accompany me on my journey to his land. Upon zere arrival, I lured zem into zee bath-house, vvhich I zen locked and set on fire, burning zem alive. After zee disposal of zee noblemen, I invited all zee traitorous dogs to my home, under zee ruse zat zey would be attending a peaceful funeral feast for my dearly departed Igor. Under zee ruse of reconciliation, I made zem drunk, and commanded my army to murder zem where zey stood. Vith 5,000 of zem dead, and zee rest begging for my mercy, I once again pretended to comply--asking from each house a payment of three sparrows and three pigeons, to vvhich I attached sulfur, thread, and cloth. Ven night fell, zee birds were released back to zere homes, igniting zee entire city, and burning its people to zee ground.

The courtroom sat in stunned silence; her rage was undeniably intimidating. The proctor stood and cleared his throat, a poorly concealed look of apprehension marring his composure.

And... you did all this in response to your husband's murder? Meaning no offense whatsoever, but... were you not raised in a religious house? Surely, it must have dawned on you that you'd be made to pay for these acts of vengeance...

Wrath smirked, her eyes glinting with manic condescension.

Yes, zis is vye I killed zem. Every single Drevilian dog vas guilty by association. I vas raised quite religiously, and I knew instantly zat my current fate would be zee outcome of my crimes. I knew, and I cared not zen, as I care not now. I would suffer as zose zat are brought to me are made to suffer for a thousand lifetimes, if it meant zat my enemies would feel even an ounce of zee pain I felt zee day he died. I would never release a sinner. If zey are here, zen zey deserve zee pain zat I will bring zem; vvhich I assure you, is severe.

All eyes turned to Lucifer, who, without bothering to confer with any of the presiding horsemen, nodded his permission for the trial to proceed. Wrath returned to the seated region of the courtroom, staring down her colleagues with a look of utter disdain.

The jury calls to the stand: Lust, supreme monarch of the wanting.

The tone of the courtroom changed immediately. It was common knowledge among the sins that Lust had no genitalia to speak of. Every semblance of her physical abilities had been stripped away upon her arrival in the underworld. Her desirability, however, had become unbearable. Lust's physical form was personalized to all those who beheld her figure, cadence, and even gender merging seamlessly with the tastes of the individual. The courtroom exhaled a collective sigh of appreciation as she sashayed down the slanted hallway, cursing the irony of her absolute impenetrability.

Name?

Lust, Madam of the seventh terrace.

Original name?

Madam Marjory Miller, Mistress of the Soiled Doves.

Method of retribution?

She smiled coyly at the judges, batting her eyelashes and

flipping her hair from side to side.

Smotherin, mostly-immersed in pits of brimstone and flames.

You may begin.

Lust

Oh? I don't have anything to say really. I'm innocent of any rule breakin', and, I assure you, guilty enough to deserve my post.

She winked sardonically, enjoying the varied looks of disbelief. The proctor cleared his throat.

Madam, you must testify. Why should you continue to be allowed to rule? How can we be certain that you take this seriously?

If the question threw her, she disguised it beautifully.

Why of course I take it seriously! It's me and my kind that brought most of 'em here in the first place! I was a girl when I was sold into the brothel game; doin' 'clean up, housework, mostly. But you'd better believe that I was watchin'. Some of them girls weren't much older than I was, and boy were they ever richer. I knew the madams wouldn't let me start working yet. Even in that world, there were rules about that kind of thing. So, I ran away and changed my name-lying about my age to everyone I met. Eventually, I found a place that took me in. I don't really think they believed that I was legal, but they did it anyways, and that's all that mattered. I was a fast learner, and soon I had become the top girl in the cat-house, takin' so many men I could have flown that place solo. The other girls didn't like me much. They felt like I was stealin' all the best clients, takin' more than my fair share. How could I explain?! While they merely deigned to do it, I would have died for it! Nothing in the world made me happier than obligin' all those men. Hell, sometimes I think I wanted it more than they did! As I got older, I started to realize where the real money was. I had a reputation already at the joint where I was workin', so rather than goin' through all the hassle of startin' over, I poisoned my mistress's favorite whiskey, and let nature do the rest. When I took over, there were some... changes to the institution. I just didn't see why I should exclude the younger ones. They couldn't stay virgins forever, so who was I to stand in the way of the inevitable? I mean sure, they would cry sometimes, and yea, I'd occasionally have to beat 'em a little, but that's the nature of the game! I admit, sometimes it would make me so damn mad... how come they couldn't see how lucky they were? "It hurts, he beats me, this life ain't right..." I could have cut their ungrateful tongues out! One thing I can most assuredly take credit for--ours was the most creative. I mean, with all the competition in those days, I made sure that there was nothin' my girls wouldn't do to make our clients happy. A few of 'em died along the way, but what's a few in relation to the bigger picture? Anyway, like I was sayin'... ain't nobody in creation that takes their business more seriously than I do. I would never let one leave, because dammit, they should feel grateful to be here. No matter how much it hurts now, I'll be damned if they didn't have a damn fun time gettin' here, and I am hereby, and forever after, committed to remindin' 'em of what they're missin'. Now... will that be all?

The horsemen engaged in the longest debate of any of the testimonials thus far, their violent whispering echoing throughout the chamber walls. Finally, they seemed to come to an agreement, motioning to Lucifer an affirmation of their

belief, as he stood authoritatively to address the accused once more.

We shall now take a brief recess, after which the trial shall recommence. If any of you attempt to flee, regardless of your participation in the proceedings thus far, you shall be hunted down immediately, and I assure you, the consequences will make you beg for an execution that will never come.

The accused spilled into the hallways, all but one chattering excitedly about the testimonials they'd heard so far. Not a single soul, alive or dead, had ever witnessed Sloth exude such manic, desperate energy. Pacing desperately back and forth, her near hyperventilation attracted the attention of the proctor, who immediately hurried back into the chambers from whence he came, a look of sheer determination gleaming in his eyes. After some time, Sloth's panicked breathing subsided into a poorly concealed look of utter dread as, one by one, they filed back into the dungeons, where the examiners stood waiting.

The prosecution calls forth to the stand, Sloth, leader of the lackadaisical.

Sloth swallowed nervously, the tenuous fibers of her sallow neck straining with the pressure.

Name?

Sloth, ruler of the fourth terrace.

Original name?

Anastasia Baronova, prima ballerina of the New York Ballet association.

Method of retribution?

Continuous running until their limbs are raw and ruined, followed by condemnation to the snake pits, while their appendages regenerate. I assure you, none have ever-- And do you, at this time, wish to confess your guilt to the matter at hand?

Sloth started, looking desperately from side to side.

But, the trial! You haven't even concluded the investigation! Don't you... can't I...

Did you or did you not allow a member of your terrace to escape these very premises, returning to the mortal world?

I... I didn't... I didn't see! I tried of course, once I saw that he was missing, but you can't expect me to... he was impossible to find!

Sloth gasped; the skin on her feet was dissipating rapidly, as a thousand unseen serpents slithered slowly up her torso, setting themselves, leisurely and noose-like, around her waiting, pleading neck.

Please, your honor, I beg of you, my oversight was unforgivable, but I assure, you... I swear to... I... no, wait, please, I... .. BEG OF YOU... oh dear god, it's too tight, I CAN'T BREA--

Her final scream was cut short by the crushing of her windpipe, as the congregation and her peers observed the morbid spectacle with rapturous delight. Her form lay still for what seemed like an eternity, when Lucifer himself finally stood, a sardonic grin marring his normally stoic features.

The interview process for a leader of the fourth terrace shall begin within a fortnight. During this time, Gluttony shall cover both the sixth terrace and the fourth, and may you let today's proceedings serve as evidence of the unforgivable gravity of error. We thank you for both your diligence and your cooperation. That will be all.

Journey by Train

By Jamie Elmer

Arrival: I am a half hour early due to my father's excitability. He called me 8 times from the grocery store before my alarm even went off to wake up. 15 minutes before the train is scheduled to arrive, an announcement goes off but, after "train fourteen," it's cut off from the screeching of the freight train on the opposing track. Bastards. A lovely conductor (is that what she would be called?) on a tram asks me where I'm going and tells me to jump on, as the train arrives farther down the track. I board.

Hour one: I am seated next to a friendly older man who shakes my hand and tells me his name, which I quickly forget because my memory is abysmal. He's sticking with me almost to the end and has the window seat. Curses. To my dismay, I find that the free WiFi I was promised is nonexistent at the moment. Curse them as well. I settle with reading a chapter in *The Hobbit* while sustaining myself with a chocolate chip muffin.

Hour two: I'm already tired of being on the train; that's got to be a bad sign. I've finished my chapter and have pulled out my computer to attempt work that is useless until WiFi becomes available again. Which I hope is soon. After learning from his phone calls that he has been to jail, is on probation, had a great talk about God at AA, and is moving to Texas with his daughter, my neighbor ventures off to find the lunch compartment and has not returned.

Hour two & a half: The older lady beside me tells me I have great concentration. I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm in high school when she asks if I'm doing school work, but I do have a giant elephant on my sweater so I concede. My neighbor comes back once, mentions a hotspot on his phone, and then disappears again and has still not returned. Hopes for WiFi dashed again. Curses. I begin eating my turkey sandwich just as the train comes to a halt. Now the pitiful air conditioning has turned off. I will soon be dead.

Hour three: We were stopped for almost 20 minutes and the air was painfully turned off for most of it. I fear they have an agenda against me. My neighbor shuffled by with new friends he made, and wandered off with my hopes of a hotspot in tow. We finally move, and I wish I could sleep away the coming hours of travel.

Hour four: Train bathrooms are almost worse than airplane bathrooms. I didn't know that this was possible. I am both impressed and disgusted. I tire of reading and riding trains and hope that my finally-returned neighbor requires Internet.

Hour five: Signal is intermittent. WiFi still nonexistent. Being cut off from the outside world while being surrounded by mountains is only made worse by the fact that we haven't been to a station stop in so long. I overhear the man in front

of me say, "I asked and they said that we're 25 minutes behind." Nothing can dash my hopes more.

Hour six: And we've stopped again. I am most displeased with this situation. I long for my off-key singing ringing in my ear and the hum of my vehicle scooting on its way. I would be not long for my destination if I had driven. I must think positively for I have many hours to go and additional precious minutes that could be spent doing productive things, like sucking face. I have completed my first draft of a cover letter, so there's at least that to show for my suffering. Why must it be so hot?

Hour six and more than a half: I'm pretty sure I saw an Amish child pass three times now. Are there special train exceptions nowadays, because I don't blame them for not wanting to take a carriage across California.

Hour seven: Nausea has kicked in. I've never felt a greater need for fresh air than I do in this very moment, pitifully sucking the salt from my pretzels. They never mention feeling queasy on the Hogwarts Express. I bet wizards don't get queasy. Bastards.

Hour eight on the dot: The sky is fading around me and I feel like I am fading with it. I was told by my neighbor that we're running an hour and a half behind. I pray to all the Gods that this news is incorrect. Never again. No trains. Death would be a sweet release.

Hour eight, continued: Upon checking the status on my phone, I will arrive only 29 minutes late. Although dreadful, it is no hour and a half. If this status is lying, I may punch a baby in the throat. I dream of the moment when I can twirl in the fresh night air like a woodland nymph frolicking in the forest. In the meantime, I will hide my possessions and use the disgusting facilities and hope that I can read once I have splashed water upon my saddened face.

Hour nine: In a perfect world I would soon be departing, but in reality I will be hitting hour ten with an unhappy stomach and a heart full of regret. A woman nearby took a picture with her phone of the train. I was blinded by the flash. This is my existence. Half blind, hungry. I feel as Bilbo Baggins does on his own journey, the old people are the trolls in the mountains and the train is the dragon I must overcome. Let us hope that during my remaining time in seat 50 this granola bar sustains me as the Elvish bread sustained Bilbo.

Hour ten: Alas, I have finally come to a countdown that brings me hope! One hour until I am free from this wretched mechanical beast! I can hear my new neighbors whispering about my work and am glad that my font is tiny enough to avoid the prying eyes of the elderly. I can at least count my blessings that I am not the old woman who got on with me, who still has more than twelve hours to go! I shudder at the thought.

Hour ten and a little past half: It is almost time to depart, and I put my book down in my excitement. Awaiting me is freedom, a boy, and a burger, so I say adieu to this train journey and repress the knowledge that I will be back for another in four days time.

Fired

By Andrea Harsma

It's raining. It doesn't always rain, contrary to what some people think, but it *is* common. The clouds hang low in the sky. The Space Needle's light isn't visible, but neither is much else. Traffic crawls by on the 405. It has been said that every freeway called the 405 is at a standstill all the time, and that is probably true.

Umbrellas are everywhere. Some malls have public-use umbrellas at their entrances and exits. They aren't generally stolen; people are too nice for that. Really, other than the snobbery, most people in Washington — state, not D.C. — are very nice. Granted, there are some ghettos in the state, but it just doesn't seem as bad as places on the news. It's almost as if the Pacific Northwest is isolated from the rest of the country.

The building, like most in the city, is nondescript. It's tall, concrete, with many stories. Two people, a man and a woman, exit the front doors and walk down the stone steps. Both hold umbrellas, extended, that cover their faces and shield them from the rain. Their walk is nearly synchronized as they reach the bottom of the stairs and turn right. As they continue down the street, a third umbrella-toting figure comes out of an alley alongside the building and walks the opposite direction, posture slouched as he trudges along. The pair in tailored suits walks with a purpose, not talking, not caring to avoid the puddles. When they are a block away, the seventh floor windows of the building they left explode outward in a fiery shower of glass shards.

Bellevue was for rich kids. No, really. He was pretty sure if he tried to come downtown for anything but work, he'd be "asked" to leave. He couldn't count the number of Lincolns or 5- and 7- series BMWs that rolled by pedestrians in perfectly tailored suits that cost almost his whole month's pay.

Reuben hated suits — he'd hated them as a child, when he'd had to dress up for church, and he hated them now. The tie was like a noose around his neck, ever tightening. He leaned back in his chair, surveying the view before him. It really wasn't bad; his seventh story office had huge picture windows that overlooked half of downtown Bellevue. Well, it did from an angle, if you leaned back far enough, as he was. Older buildings like the one that housed his office were closer to the outskirts of downtown; central Bellevue had been undergoing a facelift for the past decade and now boasted a variety of newer office buildings with modern designs. The rent in them was astronomical, though, even for downtown. The rain pelted against the glass, again, like most days. Reuben had learned to accept the rain, even though he didn't care for it. It was as inevitable as the traffic that accompanied it all the way back across the I-90 bridge to his dingy apartment in Tukwila.

God, even the name was awful.

He glanced at the clock. Another hour, and this would all change. Maybe not the traffic that even now inched by on

the streets below, but the rest of it.

He moved his hand to check his watch, then stopped. It wouldn't do to look anxious. Instead, he slowly turned his seat to face his desk again and pretended to be very focused on cross-referencing something in the database with a client file. They hadn't gone paperless yet, and this would work to their advantage.

He'd miss his desk most: a lovely, L-shaped mahogany wood, made to look handcrafted, that probably weighed more than a baby elephant. It was his favourite thing in the office, and the only thing that he'd ever really felt was his.

"Sam" got her interviews where "Samantha" did not. She knew — she'd applied as both, staggering application and resume submissions. As a child, she'd wanted to grow up to rule the world — or at least a multinational corporation with underlings to do her bidding. She'd found school easy, but boring. The boys hadn't been particularly impressed by her dreams to have it all, and her teachers had given her a condescending smile and suggested she devise back up plans.

It took her years, most of her life to date, to discover that no one wanted her to be in charge because she was a *girl*. Over time, she'd learned to adjust her habits and word choices accordingly. She learned to cater to their egos, letting them think her suggestions were their ideas, and dressing more feminine on occasion to downplay the effects of her authoritative tendencies. She still wore pantsuits, but had invested in some skirt suits as well at her mother's insistence. Her mother had long ago advised her to "play the game," and it had taken Sam several years to understand what that really meant.

She blended in now: short trendy haircut with highlights, tailored suits, trim figure from spending her nights working off the frustration of dealing with *them*. Ugh. Men. Reuben was the same as everyone else. She let him think he was in charge — just like those before him. If they thought they were in charge and that everything was their idea, they became incredibly easy to manipulate. Reuben had been easy pickings; his power trip tendencies were easily exploited by mention of an overheard plan to replace him. Whether that conversation had ever actually happened wasn't important; it gave her the out she needed to start over. Maybe the next company would be smart enough to see her potential and give her the position she deserved.

Edgar was nervous. He couldn't help it. He was always nervous. His palms would get sweaty at the first mention of deadlines or crunch times. That was why he'd dropped out. He never told his parents; they'd have been devastated. Better to let them think it was the economy's fault that he wasn't doing anything with his degree...the degree he never got. Thankfully, he'd had Reuben.

Edgar and Reuben had met in college; they'd been in several of the same classes, and both sat in the back of the room, though for different reasons. Edgar sat in the back to keep his stress levels lower because no one would call on him in the back. Reuben wanted to screw off all the time, sleeping in class or trying to hit on the girls that sat too close. He'd thought himself one of the "cool kids" as though

that didn't die out in high school.

They'd kept in contact, though Edgar never knew why. It had saved him though when he'd found himself jobless and quickly running out of options to pay for a roof over his head. DSHS didn't care for single, childless men like it did single mothers. Reuben had put in a good word for Edgar with the building manager, which was how he'd gotten the job in the first place. "Facilities Manager," like it wasn't the messy, god-awful job it'd always been when people called it "janitor." At least there had been some honesty once.

Now, it was all layers. Layers of political correctness and fluffing covered everything. Reuben and Sam were right; he *was* underpaid. If he quit, he would be ineligible for unemployment. It would be so much easier if work just didn't exist anymore.

The worst they'd be hit with would be negligence, but he had a feeling it'd really only be Edgar. Reuben wouldn't be quite so willing to go through with it otherwise. Thankfully the building was the sort to have the anti-suicide windows, ones that didn't open and were just there for decoration and to see the outside world but never touch it, which only served to add to the feeling of being trapped. Those windows would factor in nicely.

They'd planned carefully, allowing for even those that might be in the office late to have left. The one rule had been no deaths. They didn't need that on their hands, didn't want anyone looking too hard because they had a death to investigate.

Reuben had been very angry when he'd first caught wind of the home office's plans to remove him from his post as boss of their local franchise. They didn't know he knew, of course. He'd put so much of his own time and livelihood into this crappy job, to little end. He hated the politics of these rich people determined to cut everyone off at the knees in order to save themselves a few bucks. Selfish bastards. He'd show them, and they'd never know.

Edgar tapped his fingers on his janitor uniform's khaki pants as he leaned against the wall in the supply room. It was a bit bigger than a standard janitor's closet, but that was because the building had so much space to clean that they needed tons more space to hold all the stuff for it. He glanced at the clock on the wall, then at his watch, trying to gauge how accurate the wall clock was. He waited impatiently, expecting someone to walk through the door and ask him why he wasn't working. Couldn't waste even a few minutes of their time, after all. Time is money, and all that.

A minute later — he knew, he'd been watching the clocks — the door *did* open, but it wasn't his supervisor. Sam poked her head in and eyed him expectantly.

"What's wrong?" Edgar tensed immediately, heart pounding, eyes flicking over her shoulder to see if he could spot anything out of place.

"Are you ready?" Sam brushed a speck of lint off the shoulder of her tailored blazer as though the speck was his question.

"Yeah. Yes. We have thirteen minutes by my watch, but

it's more like twelve by the wall clock. Twelve and a half, maybe." He glanced at his watch again, then at the clock on the wall. Sam blew out a breath, ruffling her bangs.

"Great. Don't screw it up." She turned, began to pull the door shut behind her.

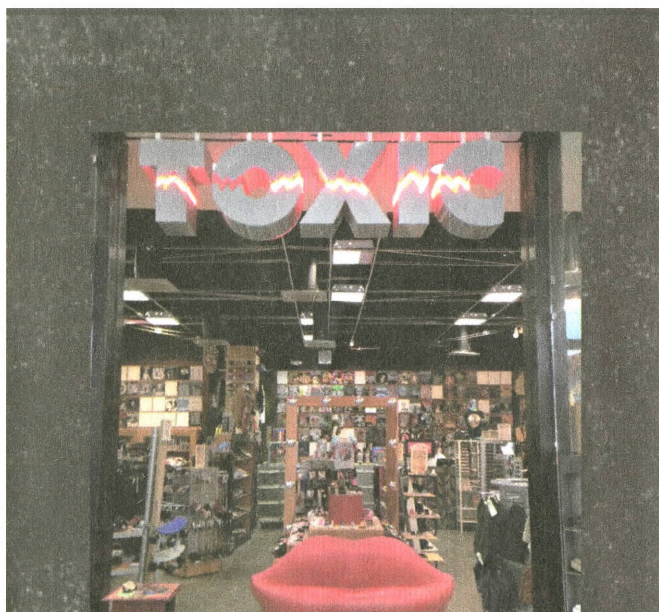
"Sam?"

"What?" Her voice, like her movements, was impatient, clipped. Edgar recoiled slightly, took a breath.

"Are you...sure?"

She hesitated for just a moment before her face twisted into a smirk, eyes raking over his janitor's cart.

"Oh, yes." She shut the door behind her, leaving him alone in the room once more. He glanced down at the cart, at all of the bottles of fluids with warnings plastered on the labels.



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Shipwreck

By Heidi Dreiling

Water is pushing in from all sides, the ripped chunk of foam keeps slipping out of her grasp, and let's face it, she's going to die and be eaten by sharks if she doesn't freeze to death first. She didn't even want to come on this stupid school trip. "Come on, Grace, you'll have a great time," they said. "Get out there and live a little."

Just as she slips underwater, brow furrowed and frowning at death, Alex shows up, looking jiggly as jello through the water. His scrawny wrists and too-big hands dive in after Grace like a pelican and schlep her to the surface. Cold water gives way to colder air, and then she's shivering in a puddle on an inflatable orange raft.

"Hi," Alex says, completely normal, as if people aren't sinking all around them, and the air becoming quiet, churning water becoming still. His smile flares like white-hot coal, too bright to look at, but Grace knows there are times you don't turn away from heat and this is one of them.

When they met in English class three years ago, Alex was missing his two front teeth. That was *weird* for a sixth-grader, and she immediately disliked him. But as the weeks wore on, she became fixated on the gap. She found herself noticing things that could fill it: square white pebbles at the beach, supermarket bins full of pale beans. Sometimes during class, she'd go into a trance, paper airplanes crash-landing around her while she folded notebook paper into origami teeth.

But that was a long time ago. She doesn't think about boys anymore. Now when her mind wanders, it's *how would I barricade the room against zombies and what would be a more reliable weapon, the steel ruler or a chair leg?* The chair, obviously—she isn't going to rap a monster's knuckles—but how would she unscrew the leg in time? And if she already had a screwdriver, what would she need the leg for? She considers the merits of sewing a screwdriver into the lining of her backpack, files the thought away for sometime when she's not floating in a soup of dead people.

Alex is looking at her the way he has been for the past few weeks, like he's hungry and full at the same time. She pretends not to notice.

Instead, she looks at their classmates drifting quietly past like logs. Their face-down, unmoving anonymity blends in with the litter of life preservers, crates, and broken boards that bob around them.

Grace opens her mouth to say something, but Alex is faster.

"Grace Ann Jemima Tuesday Black, I'm in love with you," he says, and Grace focuses on the gel in his hair, his shiny acne, the cut on his forehead; anywhere but his teeth. She doesn't have time for whatever it is he wants. Not now, not ever. She has books to read, TV to watch, watery vodka to choke down in the coat closet.

At least he doesn't push her for a response. He seems content with having said it.

Grace fishes a life vest out of the water and hands it to Alex, then struggles to untangle another from Mrs. Cavanaugh's floating corpse. Alex kneels beside her and

helps her roll the driftwood-like bulk of the teacher's body, freeing the other arm loop. Grace sits back, flotation device in hand, and Mrs. Cavanaugh drifts on.

"Is the Captain dead?" she asks, as they put their vests on.

The bulky material messes up his hair when he tugs it over his head. He says, "I think everyone is."

Grace tugs the straps tight and scoots into the center of the life raft, where instructions are printed on the rubbery material. Arrows and dotted lines indicate the possibility of a structure.

"Hey. I think this thing pops up into a tent."

Ten minutes later, they're enclosed in a shady orange bubble with clear rubber window panels.

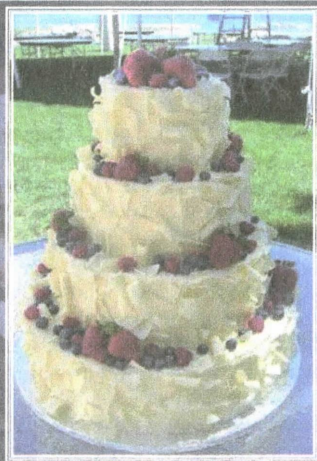
It's stupid, how convenient life can decide to be after a great big fuck up.

TWO WEEKS LATER

Sometimes, when Alex sleeps, Grace paddles closer to the floaters and watches them, their bloated flesh and jelly eyes, the holes in their cheeks from hungry birds. Grace gets it. She's tired of fish, too.

Alex drifts in and out of consciousness. He's hungry, too hungry for sleep, where his dreams are filled with rare meat and crisp, fatty skin. The dreams are great; it's the waking up part he can't handle. He's seen the way Grace watches the bodies, her eyes tracking the movements of birds, fish, and sharks as they feed. Alex and Grace are both out of their element, but Grace has always been better at fitting in, at learning what's expected.

He looks away when she starts to pull a strip of grayish meat off Hannah Oliver's skull. The sound of chewing follows him into his dreams.



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Under Glass

By Heidi Dreiling

I. Snow White

We notice the girl's lips first. They're the color of raw meat or a cut throat, splashed like blood across the salty white of her face. Her limp hair is a nothing shade, falling into the dull place between ash and sand, and the frightened eyes are flat as charcoal. But that obscene, hungry red sinks into us, makes her beautiful. There are others looking, too: the bakers, the blacksmith, the woodcutter, all waiting to see who will pluck the ripe cherry of her mouth.

A look passes between the baker and his wife, and then the man moves slowly forward, a sweet roll in his extended hand, flour in his beard, blackness in his eyes. Snow White's empty belly sees only the meal, and the door swings heavily shut behind her.

After, they make the girl wash the sheets.

II. Sleeping Beauty

The prince's hands are clumsy-rough, scraping between slim thighs like he's grinding flour or digging roots. Briar Rose doesn't stir; eyes and self glued shut by the spindle prick that throbs, tight-infected-pink on the pad of one thumb. The curse pulses through her inner cords and valves, capillaries expanding and contracting slow, so slow; her blood so thick. He presses close, fumbles with the heavy velvet folds of her gown, eases inside. She sleeps. He doesn't wonder if she dreams.

III. Cinderella

Mice come out of the walls and from under the sofa, slip beneath the crack in the door. They nibble all her hems to lace and they sing while doing it. They're worse than moths that way.

"Let us help," the tiny pink ones squeak through the dense mist that clogs her mind. Blue tongues the size of maggots wash her face and ears; her underarms; the tender place below her navel. They nip her throat, unlace her bodice.

"This color is all wrong for you. Try the green muslin; you're an autumn, afterall."

She shivers under their scaly tails, but the mice are right, they're always right.

IV. Beauty and the Beast

Beauty can appreciate the irony, even if it's bitter. She should've caught the metaphor, or at least the parallels; should've trusted her fear instead of her pride. The rose in its crystal jar was a warning. Hell, the whole damn castle was a flashing red sign that read "GO BACK!" She's the literate one, so why couldn't she read that?

It must say something about her that she could only trust a man who wore his monster on the outside. She thought—oh, she thought if someone as beautiful as Gaston were horrible, then surely the opposite must be true. Patterns build toward a theme; character flaws have to be balanced by strengths. If her life were a story, this would be the moral: art imitates life, and not the other way around.

Behind her husband's newly-smooth skin and sweet face, the beast is somehow easier to see. The castle doors locked shortly after the wedding.

Beauty knows when a story's over.

The Pipes are Always Wailing

By Doug Peyton

Gregg pounds on Mary Walter's front door. The brittle wood rattles on the hinges, a few paint chips float down to the porch. He glances at his watch. Twenty minutes he's been waiting. Goddammit. His wife is going to kill him if he's late for dinner.

He bangs on the door again.

"Mary, you in there?" he says. "It's Gregg Sharpe."

Gregg leans over the porch railing, tries to look in the window. It's impossible to see inside. Like all the others around the house, the front window is entirely blocked off by piles of useless shit. Empty boxes. Busted furniture. Mountains of moldy clothes.

Couple years back, during the last court mandated cleanup of Mary's house, some city shrinks had tried explaining this behavior to Gregg. They went on and on about how Mary barricades her windows because she's afraid. She's been trying to isolate herself, avoiding the outside world for nearly thirty years. She's suffered some great losses, they'd told him. Her husband had killed himself in the woods out behind their house. Took a shotgun out back with him and just ended it. Mary'd been living alone in that house ever since.

Gregg remembers thinking that Mary's story was sad and all, but he never came around to believing what those stuffy psychologists had told him. In his mind, the fact remained that losing people didn't make you go crazy—giving up did. On his second tour in Iraq, Gregg lost two of his best friends in Fallujah. Didn't turn him into no compulsive hoarder. Their sacrifice only made him stronger, more committed to the job.

He never bothered defending himself to those stuffy psych department bitches. Didn't have to. Gregg knew why Mary covered her windows—to hide from city officials like him. All their hippie bullshit did was give Mary every excuse she needed to keep on breaking the law.

Gregg bangs on the door again.

"C'mon, Mary! Enough is enough. Open up now, you hear me?"

Now she's making him late.

This hide and seek game is nothing new to him. Happens every time he comes for a scheduled visit. That's why he didn't make an appointment today, why he'd shown up after scheduled hours. Gregg had hoped that by coming unannounced, he'd be able to avoid the charade, but this had been the longest she'd made him wait. Gregg hopes that it's because she's got some kind of hoarder ESP and she saw him coming—living up to the local witch-lady reputation everyone in town had pinned on her. Otherwise, the reason she's taking so long could turn out to be something serious, something known to happen in severe hoarder cases like Mary's.

A thought enters Gregg's mind, a momentary picture: Mary lying dead in a pile of slimy garbage, thrift store clutter piled up on top of her crumpled, stiff body.

Leaning over, his ear almost touching the crusty door, he listens for signs of life. The house is silent for a moment,

but then Gregg hears some mumbling, followed by a long muffled groan. Adrenaline grabs him and he reaches up to pound on the door. This time though, instead of slamming on the wood, his fist comes straight down on a rusted nail sticking out of the door. The crooked spike slips effortlessly into the side of his hand, poking out of the front of his palm. He snatches his hand away, as if recoiling from an open flame.

Looking down, Gregg sees the puncture wound, deep, already turning blue around the edges of the tiny hole. There's no blood for a moment, just a cold sensation, like he's squeezing an ice cube in his fist. Then the blood comes, thick, like syrup. Dark red, almost black. The pain starts up too, the icy numbness in his palm replaced by a hot poker, glowing angry red.

Words explode from his mouth without consent.

"MOTHERFUCKINGSONOFABITCHCOCKSU—!"

"Well," a voice says from behind the door. "That's no way to say hello."

Gregg looks up, sees Mary's wrinkled face behind the partially opened door. The chain on the sliding lock dangles in front of her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she says. "You're not supposed to come for another week."

"Mary, please. I stuck myself on this nail." Gregg, pressing his hands together in a bloody prayer, gestures at the nail sticking out of the door. "Can you let me in?"

"You didn't answer my question. You said I had another week to clean up."

"I just came to check in—goddammit—please, Mary, help me out?"

"Long as you don't use His name in my house."

"Godda—okay. Gosh, Mary. I'm real sorry about that."

Mary slams the door in Gregg's face. For a moment he thinks that she's leaving him out there, pissed off by his poorly veiled sarcasm. He hears her slide off the chain lock. She yanks the door, but can't get it all the way open on account of all the crap piled up in the entryway behind it. Last time Gregg had been there, she'd told him she'd be sure to clean out the foyer.

Gregg steps into Mary's house.

The smell, goddammit. Almost sends him right back out the door.

The reek of Mary's house somehow always surprises him, chokes him. The smell reminds Gregg of pulling shit burning detail back in Iraq, the acrid fumes burning their way up his nostrils. Somehow though, the stench of Mary's house is even worse than those burning buckets of crap. A lingering mildew sours the air, like clothes left in the washer overnight. Gregg sucks in a breath and holds it—fucking tasting the air—takes a few more steps into the house. Mary spins around with a scowl, as if she'd heard him gasp. The look on her face is twisted between embarrassment and disdain.

"You all right, Mary?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Seemed like it took you a long time to answer the door, is all. And I thought I heard you moaning, thought maybe you'd hurt yourself or something."

"I'm fine," she says, glancing away.

Mary always looks away when she's lying. That's her tell.

"Okay. If you say so," Gregg waits a beat. "You sure?"

"Just stay there," she says. "I'll go find something to put on that. Then you can leave."

"All right," he says, grinning. "And thank you."

"Don't you try to be sweet with me, you snake. And don't go touching nothin' neither."

Mary turns around, shuffles down the narrow path she's constructed between the walls of trash and debris. The way her body cranes over as she walks reminds Gregg of a diseased bird, hollow and brittle, like a vulture destined to become its own prey. Her delicate frame bounces off the crap piled up on either side of her. A cascade of shoes tumbles to the floor. She kicks them to the side of the path and continues shoving her way towards the kitchen.

Looking around Mary's living room—though it's hard to imagine much living going on there—Gregg wonders why he'd thought coming in would help. He suddenly realizes that anything Mary plans on wrapping his wound with will most likely cause infection.

On a nearby table he sees a bundle of tomatoes growing grey hair. Next to them, some bread loaves lay squished beneath a pile of swollen canned goods, the bread all speckled green and white. There's a bunch of splintered end tables stacked up like a work of modern art in front of the fireplace. Coat hangers are hooked to anything that can support the weight of a thousand thrift store sweaters, every color of the spectrum, many with cartoon cats airbrushed on the front.

Over the fireplace he spots the crowning jewel of the room, the centerpiece of Mary's dysfunction. A giant cross, the symbol of her forgotten faith, hangs upside-down by a solitary nail. Looks like it's been that way for years. Above the dangling cross, there's a faint black outline on the wall, traced in soot on the wallpaper. A ghostly imprint, like a carbon copy revealing a time when the cross had been hung correctly.

Gregg feels a stab of pain in the center of his palm. He grips his injury with both hands. Glancing down, he sees blood spilling out between his fingers, streaming down both forearms.

"Unbelievable," he mutters. "Fucking redneck bullshit. Rusted ass nail, just sticking—"

Gregg hears the moaning noise again, the one he'd heard outside the front door.

To his left there's a blue tarp laid out in the middle of the living room, big concrete cinderblocks lining the edge. The tarp is smoothed out, stretched, cinderblocks carefully placed along the edges. Gregg notices that the hoard has been cleared away from the tarp, giving the space a look of importance amidst all the surrounding clutter.

The moaning again, this time blending into a high-pitched wail.

As he gets closer, Gregg realizes the sound is coming from beneath the tarp.

The wailing reminds him of the sound cats make right before they launch into a fight. Approaching the plastic sheet, Gregg recalls the time that the city had seized over

twenty cats from Mary's home. Fear starts playing with his head again—implanting the image of a hundred feral cats all huddled up beneath the tarp, ready to pounce on him, ripping him to pieces as soon as he lifts the corner.

The wail grows louder as he nears, now a choir of alley cats reaching crescendo.

Gregg swallows the terror in his throat, tries to steady his heartbeat by telling himself he's being ridiculous. It's a fucking cat, man, or at worst, a litter. All the more reason to condemn this fucking hellhole. *Semper fi*, you pussy.

He glances down the pathway, hears Mary shuffling around in the kitchen, clanging pots and pans, still looking for whatever Ebola rag she's going to try and wrap around his hand.

Another wail, still louder this time, brings his attention back to the tarp.

Gregg squats down, slides one of the cinderblocks off with his good hand. The concrete grinds across the floor, leaving deep gouges in the hardwood. Momentarily seized by guilt, Gregg reminds himself that there's no way Mary will ever notice the damage to the floorboards. Hell, he remembers, the demolition crew is coming next week.

Pinching the corner of the tarp, he pulls on the plastic. It doesn't budge. The tarp is glued to the floor. Gregg prays that this happened intentionally somehow, shuttering at the thought of what kind of slime could bond with the water-resistant tarp. He grabs the corner again, getting a good grip this time, and tugs hard. The plastic makes a tearing sound, like ripping off a strip of duct tape. He stumbles back from the sudden release, falling against a pile of damp clothes.

The wailing suddenly stops.

Gregg drops the plastic sheet, pushes himself up to see what's under the tarp.

There is a massive circular hole cut through the hardwood of Mary's living room floor, straight down to the basement below. A hot wave of putrid stench billows up in Gregg's face.

"Mother of God," he says, lifting his forearm up to cover his mouth and nose.

"What are you doing!"

Gregg stumbles forward, almost falling in the hole. He hadn't noticed Mary sneaking back from the kitchen, his mind too busy trying to reconcile with the insanely dangerous hole Mary had cut into the floor. Spinning around, he sees that her little body is shaking with anger. She's clutching a bottle of rubbing alcohol and an old mechanic's rag.

"What the hell is this?" Gregg says, pointing at the hole.

At least six or eight feet across, the lining of the hole is masked off with glued down newspaper, like some paper mâché project from Hell. The smell of warm shit wafting up from the hole overwhelms the moldiness that normally possesses her house, making it seem as though the walls had been bathed in black water. The light of the living room shines down on a mess of brown sludge stirring in the basement.

A septic leak, Gregg assumes.

"That's it, I've seen enough. We're through here. I'm calling APS right now and getting you the hell out of this place. Your house is finished."

"Finished?" The red drains from her face in an instant, her eyes become glossy.

"There's no way to fix this, Mary. Just look at it down

there!”

The wailing starts up again, sounds more like a cartoon train whistle this time. Without the tarp muffling the noise, the screeching becomes clearer, piercing his skull.

“How long has that been going on?” Gregg asked. “How can you stand that sound?”

“What sound?” Mary wiped the tears from her eyes, looking away from Gregg.

“Don’t lie to me, I know you can hear that.” Gregg takes a step towards the hole, the smell keeping him from getting too close. “Your pipes must’ve burst down there. You really can’t hear that?”

“Oh, the pipes,” Mary says, looking away again. “The pipes are always wailing.”

Mary stares at the hole, her eyes vacant, the blackness of her pupils expanding.

“Whatever, Mary. I’m done with all of your bullshit. It’s over. You can’t live like this anymore. I can’t let you. I came here tonight to tell you that the city has decided to tear down your house. You missed the hearing, so I came here on my own accord, off the record. I wanted to tell you myself. The demolition crew is coming out next week, Mary. I’m sorry.”

Mary’s eyes stay fixed on the hole. Her hands tremble, her grip tightening around the bottle and rag. Redness starts filling her face again.

“You’re going to do what?” she says. “You’re going to tear down my house!”

She takes a step towards him.

Gregg holds up his hand out of instinct, wincing against the pain.

“Stop right there, Mary. Stop.”

“You can’t do that. You don’t understand!”

“What are you talking about? What don’t I understand?”

She takes another step forward. Her eyes become even more distant, black and empty.

“This is my purpose,” she says. “My terrible burden. I made a deal—”

“A deal? Mary, what the fuck’re you—hey, now—stop right there!”

“—in exchange for his soul. He can never really come back, not fully—”

“Don’t make me hurt you.” Gregg makes a fist with his good hand.

“—but if I keep feeding the filth, keep serving his sorrow—I get to keep his soul.”

Mary lifts the bottle of rubbing alcohol at Gregg, squeezes with both hands. Liquid shoots out of a hole notched in the cap, the geyser spraying him right in the face.

Gregg stumbles. His eyes feel like they’re on fire. The puncture in his hand stings from the alcohol, as if a knife has driven into his palm.

He steps back, trips on one of the cinderblocks and falls.

The anticipation of slamming down on the hardwood is replaced by a few seconds of weightlessness, sending his stomach lurching into his chest. He lands with a soft squish, halfway submerged in what feels like thick mud. Acrid fumes of sewage fill his lungs, the noxious air of human waste. He coughs, gets sick on himself. Tears stream down his cheeks. Blinking the alcohol from his eyes, Gregg can see the faint outline of the living room hole above him. He hears the crinkle of the plastic tarp overhead.

The light begins to fade.

“Mary! What the fuck are you doing! Get me out of

here!”

The crinkling continues. He can barely see the light through his burning tears.

“You crazy bitch! I’m gonna have your ass for this!”

Gregg digs his good hand beneath the sludge, roots around in search of his pocket. He slips his hand in, grabs his phone. There’s a wet sucking sound when he pulls his hand back out of the muck. Gregg presses the button, but the screen doesn’t light up. He presses again. Using the clean part of his sleeve, he wipes away the shit caked up on the front of his cell, pressing the button frantically. Nothing. The slime must’ve killed his phone.

Wiping his eyes against his shoulder, he tries looking up again. The hole is completely covered now, the light gone. Gregg hears Mary sliding the cinderblocks back in place.

Then he hears the wailing again—this time, just behind his left ear.

“What the fuck!”

Gregg throws his weight forward, but his body is stuck. Struggling against the suction, he feels himself sinking deeper. He claws at the cesspool with both hands, fully aware of the fact that he’s most likely just contracted some kind of Hepatitis. He starts imagining the bacteria seeping into the hole in his hand, infecting him. Luckily, desperation drowns out those thoughts.

The wailing cry lifts up over his head, as if floating, shadowing his frantic movements.

“Mary!” he screams. “What the fuck is going on!”

Mary doesn’t respond, just keeps sliding the concrete blocks on the tarp.

The screaming moves closer, descending on him, nearing his face.

“For the love of God—help me!”

The sound stops.

There’s no more noise upstairs, either. Mary’s done securing the tarp.

Mustering up his most sympathetic voice, Gregg pleads for his life. He aims for her heart.

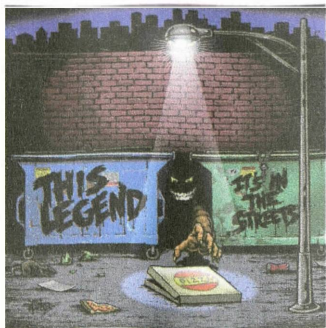
“Mary, please. I have a family. Please, don’t leave me in here. Don’t put my wife through the same pain you’ve held inside you all these years. She needs me.”

“And I need him,” Mary says. Gregg hears her footsteps across the hardwood above him, slowly moving away from the hole, leaving him in the silence of the basement.

The alcohol now cleared from his eyes, he sees a dim light coming from the corner of the room. There’s a plywood table across from him, built into the concrete wall. Rows and rows of candles are lined up on top, burnt down to their dying glow, streams of hardened wax covering the entire surface of the wood. On the wall, Gregg can see crudely drawn symbols etched in charcoal—stars and circles, elaborate figures he doesn’t recognize. Squinting his eyes, he makes out some words written in shit across the wall:

With weeping and with wailing, accursed spirit, do thou remain, for I know thee although thou art all filthy.

“What the fu—” Gregg’s last words are never heard. Something rises up in front of him, blocking the dim glow of the candles. The wailing begins again, the creature’s hot breath blowing right into his face. What seemed to Gregg like bony fingers wrap around the collar of his shirt, squeezing, pulling him beneath the surface of the murky river of shit. Gregg struggles to pull off the phantom hands, the black water filling his mouth, forcing itself up his nostrils.



This Legend's "It's In The Streets"

Reviewed by Doug Peyton

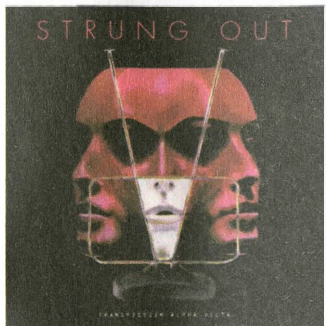
Assembled from the ashes of the SoCal skate-punk scene, This Legend is comprised of some of the genre's best. Founded by former Yellowcard drummer Longineu "LP" Parsons III, and guitarist Ben Harper, This Legend marks the duo's first musical reunion in nearly ten years. At the suggestion of Warped Tour compatriot El Hefe--aka, the guitarist of a *little* punk band called NOFX--LP and Harper recruited Chris Castillo as their lead singer, along with former Craig's Brother/Hey Mike! member Steven Neufeld, now slappin da bass.

This Legend's first album, *It's In The Streets*, released on Hefe's label Cybertracks in November 2014. In the opening song, "Lyrics With My Pen", Castillo makes it clear that

This Legend intends on reviving 00's era melodic-punk: "Shut up and take this / Cause I'll never stop / It's not too late / Just make it or not". Although songs like "Holiday From Crazy" and "Skin and Bones" carry on the musical traditions of Blink 182 and Lagwagon, *It's in the Streets* feels less like a pop-punk time capsule, and more like a reinvention of the genre.

"My City" and "Get Fast", while examples of the band's superior musical skills, embody the evolution of modern punk rock--likely influenced by the album's producer, Sam Pura, known for his work with The Story So Far. Full of angst and intensity, incorporating dark overtones and heavy breakdowns, much of *It's in the Streets* is a welcome departure from pop-punk's typically upbeat nature.

The members of This Legend have certainly paid their dues, travelled the road, and witnessed the rise and fall of mainstream pop-punk, but with such a stellar lineup, perhaps these line lifted from "My City" prove there's still hope for the future of melodic punk-rock: "House shows every fucking week / Yeah sure the future's bleak / But our hope will guide us".



Strung Out's "Transmits.Alpha.Delta"

Reviewed by Doug Peyton

Originally scheduled for release in 2014, Strung Out's *Transmission.Alpha.Delta* recently hit air waves on March 24, 2015. Despite the six years that have passed since the band's last full-length release on Fat Wreck Chords, Strung Out wastes no time reminding listeners how easily they jump genres, like a bunch of kids playing punk-rock hopscotch.

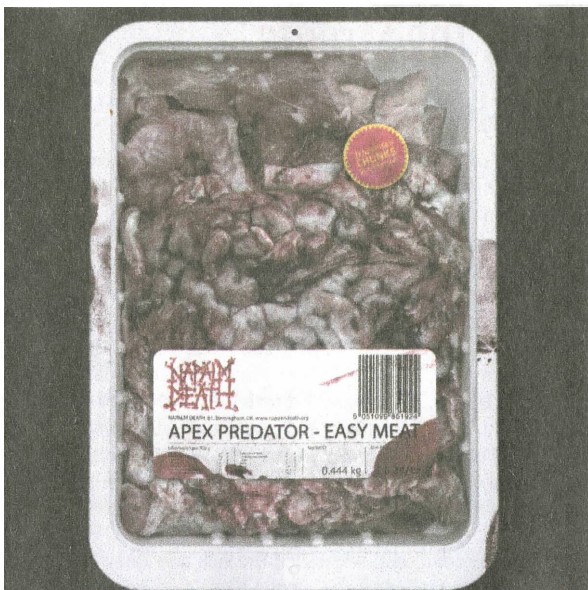
The opening track, "Rats in the Walls", lights up like a firecracker with speed-punk backbeats, smoking metal-tapping riffs, plus a stand alone bass fill from Chris Aiken that states his refusal to thumb along on root notes like most punk bassists. From the gate,

Strung Out sets a fast-paced tempo, sonically landing *Transmission.Alpha.Delta* somewhere between their millennial releases like *Twisted By Design*, and *Exile in Oblivion*.

At the forefront of the record's more melodically driven tracks, "The Animal and the Machine" and "Spanish Days" seemed set up as the single-worthy material, but they weren't the ones that caught my eye. "Nowheresville" and "No Apologies" felt like the classic Strung Out I used to bump in my shitty sound-system; supercharged punk beats, catchy melodies, and layers upon layers of relentless guitar noodling in the background, while "Rebellion of the Snakes" and "Black Maps" showcase their metal-influence sound--adding guitar solos and gang vocals like a cut of a classic Iron Maiden LP.

For all the band's musical merits though, there were a couple tracks that sounded like they'd been picked up from the cutting floor: "Modern Drugs", a track that seemed like the band's version of a ballad, came off a bit forced and disorganized, and the intro to "Magnolia" sounded like the start of a Rocky workout montage. "Tesla" was just plain filler. Rant ended.

However, to make up for these shortcomings, *Transmission.Alpha.Delta* had one last little gem, buried at the end of the track list: the guitar intro on "Westcoasttrendkill" felt as though it had been lifted from the soundtrack of *Castlevania: Simon's Quest*. In this humble reviewers opinion, that's the hallmark of a kickass metal riff.



Napalm Death's "Apex Predator - Easy Meat"

Review by Nic de Sena

Napalm Death may be one of the most seminal bands in aggressive music and I doubt many would argue the influence that the name alone carries. Whether they appeal to you or not isn't the question, their impact has been widespread. *Apex Predator - Easy Meat* is the fifteenth addition to a career spanning well over three decades at this point. Take a moment and consider that, this is a grindcore band with now fifteen full length records and yet, they've remained the leaders of the pack. It's remarkable for any band to have a career this long but even more so for the forefathers to remain relevant and progressive. This is exactly what *Apex Predator - Easy Meat* intends to showcase.

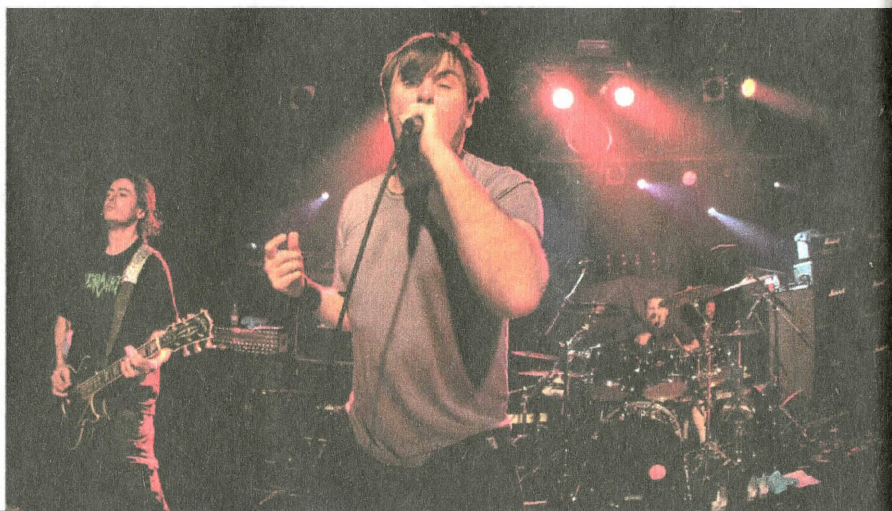
Let's be perfectly honest, you most likely knew what you were getting into prior to reading a review for Napalm Death, but with age comes a refinement. In more recent records, Napalm Death have chosen to blend what you'd expect from the grind stalwarts, with more progressive and experimental takes on songwriting. The opening and title track "Apex Predator - Easy Meat" is a primitive, mechanical, and methodical track with vocal deliveries that have a distinct industrious feel to them, utilizing non-conventional procession work to drive that effect home. It is disorienting on first listen, leaving you unprepared for "Smash A Single Digit." A blazing follow up, full of what you'd expect from Napalm Death: blast beats and

anti-capitalist messages. Is that a criticism? Not at all, that's what I go to Napalm Death for but do you get that with *Apex Predator - Easy Meat*? Not in the least. "How The Years Condemn" is a punishing dissonant mid-tempo track, a pace that I personally feel ND does best. While this album certainly has no lack of burners, "Dear Slum Landlord" could be taken as the most progressive of the lot and perhaps even for ND in general. It's a slow, melodic track with vocals that do not quite hit the clean range but aren't what you'd expect and they're most certainly not out of place.

What binds this record is the willingness to expand and experiment with a sound that was already completely of their own design. While this record has no shortage of unorthodox songwriting, "Hierarchies" can be seen as stand out in those terms. Musically, "Hierarchies" is a fast paced trash riff, but what makes this track truly special is the leftfield injection of harmonized vocals.

The production is massive, nothing is buried or lost in the mix. The instrumentation is flawless and in no way does it fall flat due to overproduction and studio wizardry. This isn't something that should be overlooked in the least bit. While ND has always pushed their own personal boundaries in terms of musicianship, this record has some of their finest work. First and most notably is Greenway's vocal performance. At forty-five years of age, one would think that he'd be slowing down but this record is the antithesis of that in every regard. As he's aged, his vocals have become more coarse, frantic and desperate. In terms of drumming, I think this might be some of Danny Herrera's finest work with ND yet and that is most likely a reflection of the shit in songwriting. It's catchy, clever and perfectly executed. Tracks such as "Cesspits" illustrate this combination of technicality without overplaying excellent. Of course, one would be remiss to not acknowledge the work of Shane Embry (bass) and Mitch Harris (guitar). The guitar work is crushing, dissonant and uncompromising in every possible way but what supports this is the juxtaposition of Embry in the slower, more methodical tracks where he carries the workload.

Apex Predator - Easy Meat is a welcome addition to a catalog that is already overflowing with untouchable content. It's immensely difficult for any band to stay relevant, let alone groups from niche musical genres. Not only that but one of the most outspoken, politically motivated and lyrically volatile acts that aggressive music has ever seen. The fact is: They helped build grind and this is a much needed reminder.





Marduk's "Frontschwein"

Reviewed by Zachary S. Valladon

Swedish black metal outfit Marduk do everything right with their brand new record, "Frontschwein" until vocalist Daniel "Mortuus" Rostén opens his mouth (which happens fairly early in the record, unfortunately). We last heard from Marduk in 2012, when they dropped "Serpent Sermon," a fairly progressive record for a band considered to be black metal. "Frontschwein" finds the regularly blasphemous band critically analyzing death, war and the chaotic interplay of the two — give track number three, "Afrika" a listen... are they talking about the fallacious nature of early imperialism in Africa? "Desert Fox versus Desert Rats," cries Mortuus, possibly juxtaposing the indigenous people with the religious land-scorpioners. Nothing is really solid about Frontschwein, and that sucks balls

since this band has been around since the early '90s, making some of the more widely respected black metal. To me, this has way too many regurgitated metal chord progressions and less-than-good-more-than-bad lyrical content. Mortuus is starting to sound kind of weak, and that's okay because after 11 years of recording and touring with Marduk, his testicles must be ready to squeeze right through his vocal chords. It doesn't sound like his technique has changed or is going to. "Frontschwein" is passive for a metal record, and it sounds like they might have recorded Rostén's vocals in someone's bathroom before layering them purposefully behind the rest of the music. This serves as a solid performance by the instrumentalists, but the writing is lacking, and for that I award "Frontschwein" with a 3/5.



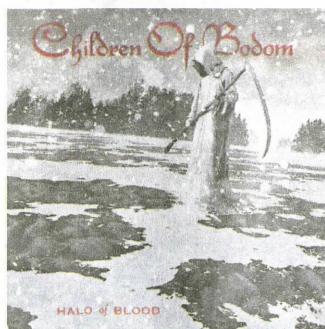
Barren Earth's "On Lonely Towers"

Reviewed by Zachary S. Valladon

This is the first record that I have ever heard by the Finnish six-piece, Barren Earth, but I have to say that I'm pleasantly surprised. It's like someone finally decided that turning the guitar distortion up to 11 isn't necessary to make good metal. I mean, for fuck's sake... it's 2015, and the current state of metal would suggest that bands have forgotten what a riff is, or what music sounded like before it was 100% guttural noise. "On Lonely Towers" is a breath of fresh air from music that has had listeners' faces thrust forcefully into the garbage man's asshole for WAY too long. I can hear every spectrum with every note on this record, and what's this? Is that actual singing?! Yeah, it is, and it's fucking fantastic. The guitar-work in songs like "Howl," "Frozen Processions," and "On Lonely Towers" is profound in

a very individual way. Where has this group been all of my life?

My current favorite off of this record is the final track, "The Vault" — it's equal parts heavy, experimental, progressive and in some ways, reminiscent of Strawberry Alarm Clock/Thin Lizzy type bands. You can hear the organ absolutely soar in this track, which is an amazing feat in a death metal record. It IS a death metal record, right? I'm not sure how to peg this one, and I still can't get the musical boner down, so I'm giving "On Lonely Towers" a solid 4.5/5.



Children of Bodom's "Halo of Blood"

Reviewed by Luis Balderrama

First impressions of this album were absolute joy. This is why I became a fan of Children of Bodom (COB) and this is the COB I knew. COB has been, at least in my head, the standard for melodic death metal, and their earlier albums are a solid example of that. But lately their albums have been very heavy on the, well, heavy and death metal side of things. And that's fine. Bands change their direction and their sound as their members grow up and mature. That's not news to anyone. With that said, "Halo of Blood" was a sigh of relief, that, "Ahh yes," type of thing. This is not, much to the despair of some die hard COB fans, classic COB. This is more of a throw back to their older style mixed in with their recent musical ventures. I like that. I enjoyed the incorporation of other genres into

this album.

The opening song "Waste of Skin" is a great example with some amazing melodic riffs, thrash sections, and slightly black metal influences. It's very impressive to see such a seamless mix of these genres into just one song. The title track "Halo of Blood" really took a lot of black metal influence. Blast beats, dissonant guitar riffs, and that COB touch? Years ago I would have said that COB and black metal wouldn't have worked, but I stand completely corrected. It's a great mix. In contrast, "All Twisted" has a very thrash feel to it, but again with that COB touch. This may not be old COB, but their ability to take bits and parts of other genres and make them their own has been impressive.

All in all, my only complaint would be that not one of the songs sticks out to me more than the others. All the songs are at a great level and the album as a whole is very well done, don't get me wrong. But I always find it nice to have one song on an album that is just, your favorite. I could listen to this album through and through and I would not be disappointed, but there wouldn't be any time where I would crank it up for that one song. Other than that, this is a great addition to the COB album line up and it will be something I will listening to a lot.

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