



BLANK.

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editorial

To whom it may concern

Dear reader, it does not require a scholar of literature to observe that poetry has, since the rise of the novel during the 19th century, been more and more relegated to the sidelines. While cultural factors and reader preferences have certainly contributed to this, one must not forget the power that large publishing houses have nowadays, and poetry just does not sell anymore. In connection with this phenomenon, David Foster Wallace once pointed out that poetry is increasingly written not only by, but for the same audience.

Yet I feel that for many of us, poetry is one still one, if not the primary gateway to reading, interpreting and writing serious literature. This was certainly the case for me; while I today at best come into contact with epic poetry – another receding genre – many of my adolescent hours were spent devouring Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. In *blank*, we continue to provide space for these rhyming words of wisdom. Yet again, the lion's share of texts we are honored to impart to you are written in verse. I do not know whether this trend will continue, but deep down I cannot suppress a feeling of nostalgia and tragic happiness about it.

We kick things off with a poem by Maria, whose piece is about dealing with the constant pressure of comparing oneself to others. In times of university rankings, 1-5 star Amazon reviews and Facebook likes, this serves as a healthy reminder that true happiness can never be accomplished through comparing. Next, we have poems by Kristina about transience and by Daniel about letting go, the latter of which is complement-

ed through a stunning illustration by Saguaro. Meanwhile, our ever-productive Christian has contributed the ballad "Silent Night" – not related to the Christmas tune – a phantasmagoria in song, as well as the "Conqueror of Anthills", which deals with the problem of remembering in an ever-changing world. Rounding out the poetry section with what promises to be an increasingly philosophical issue is Zorah's first written contribution, a cynical piece on religion.

Our fiction section begins with one of our writers who seemingly moved from new member to mainstay without going through the intermediate stages. Denise continues to demonstrate her knack for creative non-fiction, again focusing on the hidden beauty in the mundane. Speaking of new writers, I would like to welcome Maïke, who has bestowed upon us a piece of flash fiction that is about seizing the moment, looking to show that even the briefest encounter can destabilize.

While Kristina has long contributed poetry, this issue features her first short story, which is a mystery full of suspense and shivers. A train, secret places, and a hunt for hints and keys? It is intriguing, to say the least. The last of the fiction pieces comes from Daniel, who has created yet another coming of age gem. This multilayered piece in an unusual format is supplemented by the wonderful illustrations of first time contributor Melanie Mendetzki. Welcome!

The issue is rounded out by three pieces of non-fiction. First, I reflect back on an author whose writing has not only influenced but touched me deeply: the Scotsman Iain Banks,

who left us last year. The article is an eclectic review, considering the topics, style and impact of the series he was perhaps best known for: his series of science-fiction novels called the Culture.

Next, Christian reviews an essay that is not as widely taught in universities anymore as it ought to be – Henry David Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government". Even though I am going to sound like a broken record here, the fact is that we do live in times where technology and availability are turning us into ever more flaccid and, worse, indifferent robots of consumption, who with suppressed rage accept every political policy and decision. So I put to you the challenge of thinking of yourself as more than a function within various institutions: the "good life" is necessarily associated with making decisions which reflect your moral and ethical standpoints, even if they go against the grain. And with Christmas at our doorstep, this may just be the time to put the holidays to good use and re-think what being a citizen is actually about, not to mention the role of the intellectual in society.

Finally, Saguaro reviews the movie *Gone Girl*, originally a novel written by Gillian Flynn and adapted for the Big Screen by director David Fincher, whose filmography includes hits such as *Seven*, *Fight Club* and, most recently, the Netflix drama *House of Cards*.

In closing, there are several persons who deserve our thanks. First off, there is Prof. Dr. Ernst-D. Lantermann, professor of social and differential psychology at the University of Kassel, whose generous donation will not be forgotten. He

can often be found at café Desasta, where he is always interested in engaging in conversation over coffee and cigarettes. But beyond filthy lucre, we would also like to thank him for his continuous interest, support, and praise of student art. Second, there are our returning institutional sponsors Kasseler Sparkasse and Hanseatische Coffee Bar, as well as Kasseler Stadtwerke. Thank you for making this issue of *blank* possible.

I would also like to thank our wonderful layout artist Rhea. Here is someone who is the whole package: hard-working, inspired, and skilled. Every time a new issue comes around, I am, like Ben Affleck in *Good Will Hunting*, both dreading and looking forward to the day she has moved on to greener pastures.

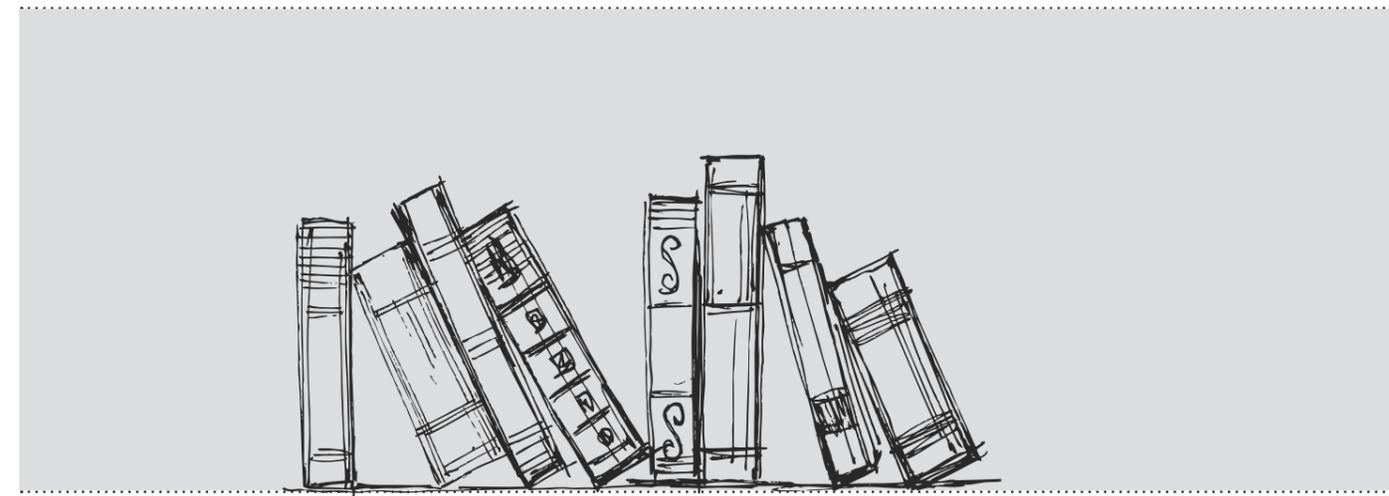
Last but not least, we would like to thank you, the reader. Anonymous as our relationship may be, 500 copies which are grabbed up in a week's time is more recognition than any official form of feedback could ever be.

Finally, a small request. Should you already be in the Christmas spirit and feel that you would like to support us financially, feel free to contact us at blank.student.np@gmail.com. It is our sincere goal to continue being able to provide *blank* to you free of charge, and every little donation helps.

I wish you a merry Christmas and happy New Year.

Enjoy the holidays,

Murat Sezi ■



perfect imperfections

by Maria Messer

While we're wandering through life, we're never truly free.
 A part of us is trapped,
 Trapped inside a house of mirrors.
 Forever facing one distorted image after another,
 Each claiming to be an authentic reflection.
 Yet none of them are the same.
 Our identity becomes an accumulation of imperfections.

Too big, too small, thighs, eyes, hair...despair!

The mind is too eager to define its happiness according to
 someone else's idea of beauty.
 Imperfections become an obsession and self-esteem depends
 on the ability to 'cure' those imperfections.



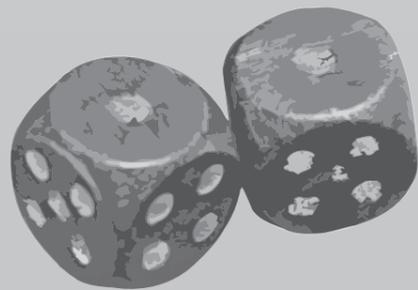
I laugh.
 If you were me, you'd be laughing, too!
 Here am I, a freak of nature
 As some might say
 Yet, it is not my disability that haunts my mind.
 I am at war with the rest
 Oh, if I could only change this, that, and everything else, I am
 sure I would feel good. I keep telling myself this lie until I start
 to believe it.

Maybe if I'm lucky,
 I might find a way out of this house of mirrors.
 Then, I think, I can make peace and embrace my perfect
 imperfections. ■

as time goes by

by Kristina Weissbecker

As time goes by
 As life goes by
 we are only pawns in a game
 So don't get angry,
 let it happen
 Checkmate's drawing closer
 The die is cast
 The game is over
 As time goes by
 so do we
 And you look at me
 A questioning look
 in those eyes, your eyes
 and I cannot help
 I have no answer
 for I don't know
 I cannot tell
 The die is cast
 we cannot change
 it is too late
 As time goes by
 Our lives go by. ■



the clown

by Kristina Weissbecker

The wig's red colour
 faded into a pale orange
 The make-up brittle on his chin
 The painted face shows
 A wide, wicked smile
 Which the lips cannot afford anymore
 There's generations over
 Generations sparkling in his eyes
 The spirit of his ancestors and yet
 Mixed with sorrow, with bitterness
 The past's the past
 Today's today
 He looks into the mirror
 Swipes the dust from his shoulders
 Steps in front of the curtain and waits
 Waits for the music
 Perhaps, for the last time... ■



we built a home with no doors and no windows

by Daniel Krooß

My longing still prevails,
 and here goes my attempt
 to let our love live on
 through lines that can be no more
 but a dim resemblance,
 a faint memory...
 of times we sat like strangers
 (meant to be)
 and witnessed blossoms under perished trees,
 of kisses and smiles
 and your hair so midnight black.
 Mine became yours
 and yours became mine.

We gladly lost ourselves in this maddening trajectory.
 We never cared nor dared to meet the boatman's anxious eyes
 and thus,
 we built a house with no doors and no windows,
 we shut him out.
 And as the waves outside
 washed up around our home
 they became our strings
 and our dreams became our rhythm.
 Back and forth we danced
 and in the ever fading lights
 we spoke our chorus.
 A love song,
 the sound of sorrow itself.
 No harm done
 and no harm undone, too.

And yet our stars, they shine the brightest
 when they're dying.
 Time receded,

and in darkness we stumbled
 crashing into obstacles we never cared to investigate
 (or could not, perhaps)
 But we kept turning,
 exhausting ourselves in a dance to be fought for,
 while the boatman drew closer,
 his whistle,
 our eulogy.

Oh how was I to know that the two of you shook
 hands so long ago?
 But all thoughts silenced
 as Orpheus' lyre spun out of tune
 and the walls came crushing down
 and buried all that's left behind.
 And the boulders carried the echo of a distant whisper
Let me go now,
 you said. ■



silent night

by Christian Weiß

(As with all songs, this one can be sung - to a simple ballad tune in C maj. I would suggest you imitate a drunken Morrissey singing it. That way it should work.)

C
There's silence in the moonlight
F C
And your fragrance still hangs in the air
G
The room is cold from hoping you stayed
F C
And the candles, they just don't care.
C
Outside, the world is filled with snow
F C
The radiator pumps in vain,
G
The small steps in the hallway are falling
F C
Like thunder in the brain
F
With words that were meant to spring
C F
Like tree frogs to the light,
C G
But lie fast asleep for lack of strength
F C
Throughout a silent night.



Now the front door falls in the frame
And the echo of a caveman's scream
Delights the children of good confidence,
They laugh noisily upon the scene.
All the elephants in their compounds
They run frantically around
To chase all of the white mice away
With their trunks dragging on the ground.
And the parrots on their wooden poles
They imitate the fight
Of disembodied syllables
Flying through the night.

And the all-night take-away lady,
She holds a holy mass,
And hands out booze and commands the
crowd with glances
Like a game of chess.
And where the postman and the prom queen
Go dancing among the saints,
Their footsteps burn bright into
The soft traces of the flakes.
And all the while you stand upon
The balcony, dressed in white,
And whisper breath of irony
Into the silent night.

They're chanting prayers to the harlots
Who're taking the changeling away,
And dress him in black bow ties
Before trading him for hay.
And from the outskirts of their kingdom
The serenade of mothers' tolls,
In a peal of crumbling cinnamon cake
That hits hard against the walls,
Of theatres and the stock exchange
Where Prince Hamlet drops a sigh,
Then hugs the snake close to his chest
And wanders lonely through the night.

In the fountains of the city
They mingle beer with fame,
And all take off their overcoats
Before they dub themselves new names.
And the newly-elected fireman
He's pleading for the wine,

While the conscience of the firebug
Rolls cigarettes from time.
The laughter of the children
Rolls fast by you, like the tide,
And cools the tears upon your cheek
To diamonds in the night.

Through the dry veins of the phoenix
They're driving the taxis ahead,
To overcome necessity
Before it grabs them by the back.
In their fire-sealed apparels
They flex their vocal cords,
While thinking tries to cope to morph
With all the cheers that money bought.
And speculation grows impossible
As you close your eyes upon the sight,
So tomorrow never happened
In the realm of the night.

Out on Main Street in the delta
They're piling the stones up high,
And paint them blue with question marks
Before they bring in the Pharaoh to die.
And from the purple-painted chimneys
The labels rise in smoke,
And settle calmly on the roof tops
Where they search for anecdotes,
About the peacock-feathered starlet
Who digests her precious child,
Then belch's it out and goes back dancing
In the factories of the night.

Yes, the broken rays of fire
They cling to random friends,
And wrap them up like winter scarves
Before they tie them to the streetlamps.
And while the mothers seek consolation
In knitting dusty socks,
The suede shoes of their infants
Go tumbling among the docks.
Grow sober in the stainless air
Don't recall your desert times,
I'm with you in suburbia
Where we fight the silent night. ■

the conqueror of anthills

by Christian Weiß

*“And then I pledged imploringly to the souls of the deceased:
Should I near Ithaca again – I’ll sacrifice a heifer, barren
and immaculate...in my own palace! and burn some precious gifts.”*
[from Voss: Odyssee, XI]

I throw my feet at you, my native soil!
Will you betray me when I’m old, when they will carry me no
further? Why are the windows of your railway stations all cracked?
Why are your platforms full of exiles?
Where is the warm hand of the architect and mason?
Where is there a friendly face to meet the expectations?
Where are the youthful man and the blushing girl in your luscious meadows?
Where is your rape seed, now? Where did your beauty go? Whom did you give it to?
Your fields lie empty - who has harvested your hair?
Bald you doze upon the chaise longue, with your hands behind your head,
and your armpits unshaven. You snore a little sniff
for every willing passer-by to witness as you slide beneath
the blanket of your smug complacency, which
transpires from your naked flesh.



History prevails: stretching its thorny hands around the all-encompassing
benevolence of youthful struggle - all over the place:
infecting playfulness with diligence,
and fragile thoughts with power schemes.
Even where Memory claims to be a light in the dark,
and where Memory will see a feat of the imagination
History will convince you of the outdatedness of candles
and that it has already been there... long ago.

Strangers dance upon the sacred ground,
feigning respect for all around.

“The child is father of the man,” said Woody.
So may it be, but all the same it leaves him pausing now and then – pausing,
turning his head, like one who’s heard a friendly voice
from the past...sad at the moment of comprehension.
That there was no voice behind...only a whisper
(not the distant peal of children’s joy echoing through Memory
echoing through Memory, bouncing off the wall
emanating happiness - happiness for all!
From wall to wall...in Memory’s grand hall)

And then, not even that, less than a whisper, at most a breath - a hiss:
forlorn and dry and spittleless in the darkness of the bedside lamp,
the language of the dead.
Pausing,
turning his head, like one who’s heard a friendly voice...and tries
to disregard the thing, instead
of keeping to the evidence - to play the fool and stick
to what could be the golden mean? Or should it be the golden rule?
Without a precedent at hand – what will the final answer be?
Awoken by the laughter of the bystanders, turning
his head, steeped in regret about the change
he can’t effectuate, no more: it’s all too little now,
it’s all too late.

Thus, the child is father of the man
and man indebted to the child eternally, and history’s the debt collector
and memories: your only currency.

But come you Vanquishers of evil empires! Conquerors of anthills!
 Slayers, you, of dragons fierce, and Curse of (well-meaning) instructors.
 See for yourself: The old tree house is history
 the trunk sawn down - a truckload full of matches;
 the ground below now property: the property is sold ("Sells well these days!").
 Separate houses sprouting
 from the ground like real estate fungus, while
 Memory lies battered in the gutter.
 And suddenly, it's all "Look - don't touch!"
 You've got to find new playgrounds, now.
 Where Memory will build a fort with many eager little hands,
 History builds a shopping mall...and prevails.
 The little hands of recollection are nothing against the accounts
 of old men with chequered bow ties, and no spittle in their speech,
 and in their mouths.

Strangers dance upon the sacred ground,
 Feigning respect for all around.

Again that voice behind your back
 a little callous, now, a little flat
 and not as sympathetic as before. The call of the malevolent,
 the mockingbird's song: "You've got to find new playgrounds, now,
 you've got to find new playgrounds, now."

But come, you children, come sing your praises,
 sing for the men you are to father,
 sing for the dragons, sing for the sword fights, and for tomorrow,
 and tomorrow. Sing for the castles, sing for the ant hills,
 sing for the tempting arms of windmills; sing for the stations,
 sing for the giants, sing for the exiles who live on defiance...
 and tomorrow
 and tomorrow, and tomorrow
 and tomorrow.

Because whatever you inherited, can be adjusted also.
 Change is not the foe of him who dares to think. ■

the light bringer

by Zohra Wahdat

With regret hidden behind blood
 The light vanished falling from the holy kingdom into
 the underground mud
 The scratched innocent feathers sorrow
 Above each faultless feeling, vindictive pride dazzled on
 the morrow
 Excessive pride moulded into hatred,
 Passionate hatred merged with cruelty
 Indulging in sinister feelings, opened the gate of war
 A battle lasting for eternity
 Fought with arrows of unfaithfulness and fidelity

This is Lucifer making demands
 Like Melkor, disobeying the divine commends
 Tuning his own music and convention
 Dividing humans into miscellaneous direction
 Waiting for arrival of the Judgment Day
 With a nasty smile on his lips
 Knowing the world will decay ■



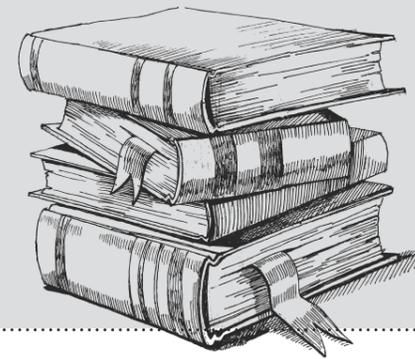
not a hemingway kind of day or: a rainy reconciliation

by Denise Breidenbach

The door swings open and I am greeted by the steamy, slightly stuffy cloud of that characteristic smell of wet coats, coffee and newspapers. I don't think there is anyone who has never smelled this intense perfume of comfort and shelter which always feels a bit like coming home, although one is entering a place whose purpose it is to simply accommodate strangers and all sorts of people swirling in and out like busy bees in their nest and charge

them ridiculous amounts of money in exchange for more or less fancy drinks containing more or less caffeine.

I have been dwelling in this particular café longer than I had intended to, nursing a white café mocha and watching people running, walking, driving and cycling by through



the large window in front of me. Across the street is a tram station, and every ten minutes or so, a blue train with yellow doors comes to a halt there and releases a row of hard-faced passengers before taking in a handful of others in return. Each train produces a half-funny, half-annoying squeaking sound every time it comes to a halt, and this sound is so loud that it is to be heard among the usual chatting, puffing, whistling and clattering that fills the room. I smile to myself, feeling unspeakably blessed to be able to watch them from my warm and cozy seat inside. It is still relatively early in the morning, and it is only a handful of people who have managed to find the way to the fashionable counter made of wood and metal. Panini, croissants, cupcakes and sandwiches are carefully arranged and displayed to the still puffy eyes of the few early risers, a more or less tempting treat for the many who, in our day, are convinced that food is no longer of nutritional value, but an eye-catching lifestyle accessory.

The café is so empty that not much more than the trains and the counter are worth a place in the early-morning still life I am trying to preserve in my notebook, so I decide to open my latest Hemingway, this lovely little collection of anecdotes describing his life in Paris, the modest existence of "Hem" before all that everlasting and impressive fame took over and made him almost a myth. In addition, I pile up some other books on the table around me, and I freely admit that my only aim in doing so is to appear both absorbed and sophisticated by building this little refuge, surrounded by walls of words on paper. I am pretty successful in ignoring

everything and everyone around me until a middle-aged, bearded man suddenly raises his voice and observes, loud enough for everyone to hear: "It is raining again!" His words linger in the room for too long, and there is an awkward, almost painful silence that makes me raise my head, trying to make out who he was talking to. The man, whose belly bumps against the table and whose coffee had obviously remained untouched for the last half-hour, seems as lost as his words. Nobody answers. And next to him, I am peering over the wall I have built for myself, thinking how very sad it is how often it occurs that someone speaks, but the words get lost on the way because nobody wants to listen, and that this has become a perfectly usual and normal thing to happen. Words are uttered and left out there alone, like little word orphans. What a very strange thing that is, I think, but I instantly return to my Hemingway who, of course completely ignorant of the tragedy I have just witnessed, introduces me to Scott F. Fitzgerald and his horrible wife.

I am very close to becoming fully absorbed in my book when two men – one middle-aged, one younger, both carefully dressed up for work but nonetheless displaying a remarkable lack in taste – take their seats next to me. Both of them seem to have the habit of stirring the carefully arranged milk froth into their cappuccino and devouring the grayish mass with apparent gusto. Just like me, they take advantage of the large window in front of us, and they soon indulge in commenting boldly on nearly everyone passing by outside. I won't deny that this form of judgment is a hobby of mine as well, but I – as the charmingly sarcastic person I think I am –

firmly believe that it has to be done with a certain degree of linguistic refinement. After all, speculation and superficiality are so much more fun when seasoned with well-turned phrases, and, now and then, subtle but creative insults. As it is, I can do nothing but frown at their shrill, envious voices. Neither of them seem to have taste or at least good manners – the latter could have easily made up for a lack of the former – which is quite obvious as they did not even bother to thank me for moving my precious pile of books to make space for them.

All that is left now of my drink is the lonely coffee grounds, hopelessly drowning in a tiny rest of milk on the bottom of the glass. Behind the counter the coffee machine whistles, the milk frother splutters, spoons are clunking against saucers, the barista is laughing – and the sound of my boots on the wooden floorboards adds its own rhythm to this ensemble, at least until the door falls shut behind me and I am out in the rough wind again.

A strange kind of cheerful restlessness has taken hold of me and makes me wander the streets at random. The tedious list of everyday tasks – call mom, buy veggies, clean the fridge (the usual things expected of well-behaved young women) – seems to have been grabbed by an invisible hand and crammed into a faraway corner of my consciousness. So what if I just go and sit in another café, grab another hot cup and kill time as if the day would last forever, pretending to

be a solitary time traveler whose task it is simply to observe the to and fro of the ordinary world? The thought seems too thrilling to be abandoned. It turns into a promising adventure, starring myself as the fearless heroine full of wit and caprice. And, as befitting a real heroine in a real coffee house adventure, I know by instinct where to go next.

Sadly enough, my pretentious daydreaming has come to an abrupt end. This place is not at all as I remembered it. I seem to have forgotten that it is full of yuppies at lunchtime, when the white-collar employees of the surrounding businesses invade the café like vultures eager to devour a nice and sticky piece of dead flesh. Nonetheless, I am trying to stick to my previous strategy and pretend I am completely oblivious to them brandishing their expensive briefcases and gathering around the few tables exchanging office gossip, representing a world of seriousness and duties that I had so successfully escaped for the past hours. I get myself another coffee, black this time, and add a ridiculous amount of sugar to it. I manage to secure a free seat and start to pile up my books in front of me, and, to protect myself from anyone who would want to talk to me, even take out my notebook. Naturally, attempting to write in a crowded café, with at least one person peering over your shoulder, trying to figure out what the hell you are doing with pen and paper instead of a smart phone is a debatable idea. And spilling half of your coffee over the pages, rendering much of your previous



scribbling illegible, is not really improving the situation. I am doing my best to clean up the mess, but of course, I feel the stare of the others, the vultures, who look at me with that typical mixture of pity and spite. Their gaze brings back reality for me, and for a second, I feel like I am in a movie whose colors go from bright and beautiful colours to only black and white. Anger is mounting inside me. I am not only angry at myself for indulging in such impossible daydreaming, but as I check the Hemingway for possible coffee stains, I am extremely angry at him. Who does he think he is, writing this stupid memoir, making his readers believe that sitting in cafés and writing and wandering the streets all day is that easy? How dare he omit all the catastrophes one has to witness when trying to do the things he did? Has he never experienced the deep shame of spilling coffee all over his notes? Or what about all the word orphans? Feeling incredibly silly, I pack my things as soon as I can and wrap my scarf tightly around my neck. As my old, usual self returns and reminds me of my duties in the real world, I dismiss any further thought of trying to find a calmer place to observe, to dream, to write.

It has been two hours since I left the café disgraced and fuming with rage. I am carrying a huge bag of – guess what – vegetables back home and feeling comforted by the prospect of a nice cup of tea in my flat. Yes, returning to the real life was painful this time. And I recall some very famous

author writing a very poignant sentence in her very famous last letter to her half-famous husband, and it said: “You cannot find peace by avoiding life”. I cannot help but think that she captured a whole lot of truth in this one short sentence.

As I look around now, still feeling somewhat fragile, I see that the rain is slowly fading, and I remember the last time the rain over this seemingly bland city made space for the sun and suddenly, everything seemed tranquil and hopeful and the sunshine made the raindrops on the windows glisten like little diamonds. It was almost like seeing the face of some small child who has just stopped crying, but already a smile is forcing its way through the tears and the sadness. Rain and sun, tears and smiles, all this makes life what it is. I wonder: If it never rained, would we ever learn to appreciate the sunshine? And how happy would we be if we never experienced disappointment? ■

the bucket list

by Maïke Baumgärtner

Then she knew. It was time for a change, even if it would only take place within her, hidden from the world. Determined, she walked up to him. At first, he didn't notice, too caught up in having a good time. He almost looked as if he was in the middle of a victory dance with his friends. Only when all other eyes were fixed onto her face questioningly, he turned around. The crowd faded. They were scenery, nothing else. Time Square at V J day, or the Eiffel Tower and a streetlamp in Paris. They didn't matter. The music turned into a background humming, not audible over her heartbeat. When he realized she was about to leave, he pulled her close. Then his scent hit her. It wavered around her, fresh and cool, the opposite of what a dancing drunk was supposed to smell like. She inhaled, wishing to contain every detail in her memory. He smelled like an iceberg about to hit her and she welcomed that hit. Then she gathered all her courage. It was time for the revolution. "Can I ask you a favour?" He pulled back, his face curious. Then he nodded lightly. She leaned in again, almost crept into his hear. Even closer this time, so he would catch every single word. "I'd really like a goodnight kiss." When he pulled back this time, a smile had mixed into his curious glance. Then, almost like puppets on entangled strings, their bodies moved closer, each face inclined to meet the other's lips. The movements were almost too perfectly coordinated to be executed by two people. His lips parted and so did hers. The ballet went on, almost without their doing. This moment of significance would not fade, she promised herself. So she touched his shoulders consciously, feeling the ribbed fabric of his jumper under her fingertips. She pressed them tighter into his jumper, just to know what it felt like. He reacted instantly. The hands that were molten around her middle reflected the pressure. Briefly, she wondered if this was what kissing her would feel like. His tongue felt so natural against

hers that she almost forgot where she ended and he began. Then she realised that this was really her beginning. Not his; not even theirs. When the kiss ceased they hugged, knowing this was goodbye. His rough beard stubbles against her cheek, she breathed in the scent of liberation one last time, then she turned around without looking back, in the knowledge that he, without being aware of it, had given her the beginning of a new story. ■

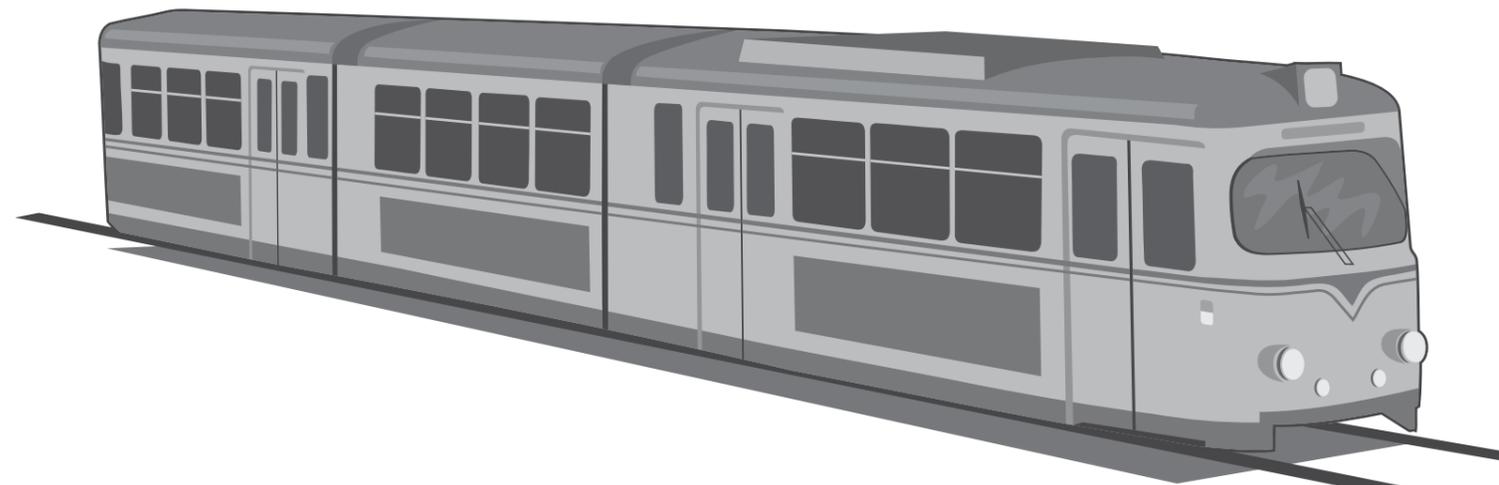


the last stop

by Kristina Weissbecker

He was late; he had been talking to Sophie longer than he would have hoped for. She actually showed some interest, so he pushed his luck a little further and asked her out. She said she wasn't sure, but she gave him her number. And now he had run to the station in order to get the last metro. While he was dashing down the last stairs, however, he saw that the train was already standing there. He jumped down the last few steps, but when he came to the closest door, it started to move, gained more and more speed and soon was gone, leaving him looking desperately after it. After a moment, he slowly went over to the bench and sat down. What now? This was the last train until 5 in the morning. He might as well walk home now.

Or take a taxi. But he did not have enough money for that. He must have been sitting there for a while when suddenly there was a crackling sound and a mechanical voice said: "Next train to Heiligenstadt in 2 minutes." A train to Heiligenstadt in a few minutes! He was lucky. Getting up from his seat, he walked ahead some meters. Later it would strike him as odd, that it did not make him suspicious that a voice gave information on the train, whereas the electrical signs had went off shortly after the departure of the metro he had missed. At this moment, however, he was simply relieved that another train would come. Perhaps they had added a few night trains. In a city as big as this, this *was* necessary, he thought.



A few moments later the announced metro came rattling into the station. He drew near and waited for it to stop. It was an old one, where the doors had no buttons to push, but levers on each door to pull to the side in order to open it. These old models were hardly used anymore but sometimes you came across one. He pulled a lever and stepped into the metro. There was a strange smell in it, though he could not tell exactly what it was. The train turned out to be completely empty. No other people being late, then, he thought. Or people were not yet aware of the addition of further trains at this time. He sat down and waited for the metro to start moving. It did after a few instants. As it rattled away, he produced his earplugs and phone out of his pocket and put on some music. He thought about texting Sophie but pushed away the thought quickly. He should probably wait, give her some time. Maybe his chance for a yes would be higher if he was patient. The smell came back into his nose... He looked around. Way back at the other end of the train, there was a puddle. A thick and dark, almost black puddle, still in movement and spreading to all sides. He looked away again and on his phone, trying to distract himself. This did not work, so he looked outside the window instead. It had been some time since he stepped into the metro at Kettenbrückengasse. He must be around Schottenring now. Yes, he recognised the familiar buildings. At the next stop, the train would go straight on and head north-east. But as Schottenring drew near, it did not stop. Neither did it stay straight - it went left! Why did it do that? This was the metro to Heiligenstadt, it had said. Bewildered, he went to the door in order to get out at the next stop. But, as he came to think of it, the train had not stopped once during its whole drive. Now, it was moving towards Schottentor and university. At Schottentor, it finally came to its first halt.

He was so nervous that he pulled at the lever with more force than would have been necessary. Thus, it was even more surprising that the door did not open. The lever just went to the side without causing the slightest reaction. Why did the stupid door not open? He ran to the next one, becoming more nervous, and pulled again but this door did not move either, not an inch. Outside, he could distinctly hear a clicking sound and loud mechanical noises. Fear seized him. What could he do? He was alone in this old train, which did not open. He looked at his watch. Almost 3:30 am. He looked around and again caught sight of the black puddle. Now it was near the seat where he sat only a few moments ago. Was this blood? Panic. Fear and panic. Why could he not get out? How was all of this possible? He reproduced his phone and wanted to dial a number, any number. Somebody had to help him; someone had to get him out of here! But he could not get a signal. He ran further to the end of the train, still no signal. He was trapped. Helplessly he hammered at the glass and screamed for help. Suddenly, the train started to move once more. It went downwards and took a direction which should not have been possible: it went to the right. Was there even a line which went that way? Where the hell was he going? What kind of sick joke was this supposed to be? Outside he could see nothing. The train was in a tunnel *and* underground, thus everything was pitch-black. The stop was unexpectedly early. He already feared it would go straight out of the city into nowhere. But after a turn to the right and a few moments of going straight, the metro came to a halt. Still, he could see nothing. Again, there was some clicking and he turned on his heels to see the doors on the other side of the train open by themselves. He slowly approached the exit and stepped outside. A hole in the wall came into view. He was not sure what was better: going

through this unlit tunnel, which his eyes gradually recognised while adjusting to the darkness, or staying inside this ghost train with, he remembered with a shudder, the puddle of thick liquid.

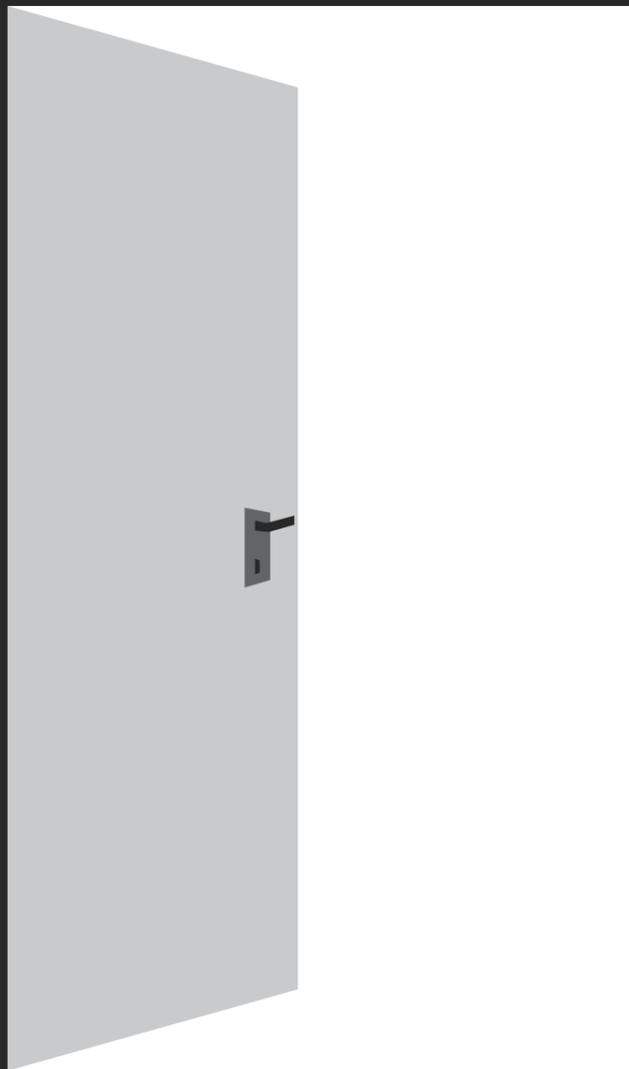
He went into the tunnel, using his phone as a torch. This time he did not even bother to check for a signal. The tunnel was rather narrow and a claustrophobic feeling came upon him, making him want to go faster. But on the other hand, he was scared of what might wait for him just around the corner. At some point on the left side of the tunnel he discovered a hole in the wall, containing a few items. He drew closer and found a candle, three cigars and a matchbox. None of these were of any use to him. He did not smoke and as for the candle - who used candles these days? So he left everything at its place and went on, wondering when and where he would arrive. At least no puddles, he tried to calm himself, at least no bloody puddles. He held his phone up to get a better view of what was ahead of him, but could see nothing apart from this seemingly endless tube. On he went, for there was nothing else he could do but walk to the end, coming out God knows where. Suddenly, he heard a scratching sound somewhere in front of him. He held his breath, could hear his heart thumping inside his chest. He held the light up and squinted into what lay ahead of him - nothing but black walls. Nevertheless, he stayed where he was, pricking his ears. What was that sound? It could have been a rat or even a bug, but it also could have been some-

thing else. He was scared to go further. But neither could he stay here any longer. So, his next steps were slow and small, which was lucky, because if his pace had been faster he might have fallen over the loose stone in the ground. Thus, he could react in time when his right foot felt it.

He looked down. Although he had tripped on it only slightly, the stone had fallen out. In the hole it left behind he saw something glistening in the dim light. He kneeled down and discovered a small golden key. How curious. This key was put there on purpose. That meant that this tunnel probably led to some secret place, deliberately hidden by someone. He pocketed the item and stood up again. After three more metres, there was a Y-junction. What now? Left, right, right, left? Well, he would not waste time. He still could hear his heart beating hard and he felt cold, but he had to get out of here. He just had to try, he thought, and took the right turn. This one went zigzag and even if he had known before where he was, now he definitely was lost.

Eventually he could recognise the end of the tunnel and a door. In front of it was a steel gate with a lock, blocking the way. His only option was to try the key he had taken only minutes ago. Luckily, it worked. He heaved the gate to the side and looked at the door. It was an old wooden one with only a latch. He pushed the door open and tried to peep inside, feeling nervous again. More darkness lay in front of him and everything was quiet. He took a deep breath and stepped inside the room. Where exactly did he come out?





He held his phone to the left and right side, looking for a switch and sure enough he found one on the right. With a move of his finger the lamps flickered to life and gave a dim light, revealing a medium sized room. The left wall consisted only of shelves, from the bottom to the top. They were mostly laden with books and files, but also more cigars lay strewn here and there, and there was a hat on one of the shelves. On the back wall two desks stood crammed to each other. These were littered with notes, single pages and piles of paper. And more books. A strange looking chair stood in front of the one table: the back was thin and round at the top, the armrests were sticking out at some distance. On the right wall was a door. Thank goodness, there was another door. He already feared this might be a trap, a dead end, a single chamber somewhere in the deep grounds of the city. He hurried to the door and aimed to open it. It was locked. Once again, he was petrified. Locked. Yes, of course, and why should it have been open? Although he already knew it would not work, he took out the golden key again and tried it on the door but it did not fit. He could not get out of here unless he went back. There was still the other turn he had not taken which maybe was not a dead end. Or maybe the right key to this door was somewhere hidden in the room? He did not want to go through the tunnel again just now. He had to try and search the right key since he was already here. His gaze went through the room. In a dark, unlit corner stood a glass cabinet. Drawing closer, he held his phone towards it. The cabinet contained many exotic-looking items, mostly little statues but also two or three scrolls of paper and a locket. No key. Whose secret room was this, he thought again. Who was the collector of these Egyptian, Chinese and who-knew-from-where objects? He went over to the tables and skimmed through the pieces of

paper. Some of them were telegrams, really old ones, too. Some were notes, written in an almost illegible handwriting. On one of them, it said "If you want to" (here something was scratched out and could not be read) "endure life, prepare yourself for death." Prepare yourself for death, he thought, in this freak show I might prepare for anything. He swiftly looked through the many telegrams. They were already looking rather yellow, most of them were from 1938 but some were dated even earlier. "Dear Dad," one of them said, "they are coming to our beloved city. Coming for us, too, I am told. Have to make plans what we will do. Soon will be home – have to talk about everything. Love, Anna" He also found a postcard: "My dear Martha, you would not have recognized my friend Abraham and me – we behaved like children, laughed and had a great fun [a blotch made some part unrecognizable]. I soon will be home. S." One of the telegrams simply said "Love, love, love." There were a couple which seemed to be mere nonsense. Then again, he found more serious ones: "Dear friend, I try my best to help get your daughter out. They cannot keep her for long, anyway, since she is innocent, but they should not be underestimated, of course. Will write when there is news. Ernest." Reading more and more telegrams, he understood that a family was being persecuted. Who they were and by whom they were persecuted, he could not tell.

He pushed notes and books aside but could not find anything. The moment he wanted to open one of the drawers, he heard the scratching again. Swiftly, he turned around and instantly looked at the entrance. The door stood ajar just as he had left it. What *was* that? Was someone coming nearer? He could not hear any steps, but he had the feeling that something was approaching. He thought about closing his eyes and then maybe hearing better but he was scared

to do so. What if exactly at this moment someone entered the room and he was not able to react as fast as he should do? It seemed like an eternity that he stood there, watching the door and listening for any movement, any sound. But as suddenly as it had come, it was gone again. Still he would not be fooled. He grasped one of the heavier books and tiptoed over to the door. Wish a swift flourish, he opened it and, clutching the book, he peered into the darkness. Not a single damn thing. He must have imagined it. Or it was just some rat or vermin. Probably some rat or vermin. Damn them all. He closed the door and went over to the desks again, shaking off some of his nervousness. Then he opened a drawer. And found only files with more and more notes. One seemed to be a manuscript. He laid it back again. Whatever this was it would not open the door. But his mind was racing the question again what this place actually was. It really was a freak show: a cabinet with strange statues, desks filled with unsettling telegrams and some manuscript which meant this was some writer's secret chamber. Anyway, he had to find the key – which hopefully was somewhere in there – and get out before he went mad.

He opened the next drawer and discovered that it was empty. He already wanted to close it again when a carving in the wood caught his eye. It was a tiny upside down 1. Now he examined the drawer a bit closer: the cipher was in the corner. Out of pure curiosity he touched it with his finger and the bottom went a little askew. His eyes widened. He pressed a little harder and could remove the board, revealing a second bottom. Underneath there was a note *and a key*. He snatched it, ignoring the note, and quickly went to the door. He stuck it into the lock and wanted to turn it but it did not budge. This just was not possible! This key was deliberately hidden by its proprietor. It had to be of im-

portance but where did it belong to if not this door? His head ached. No; it was literally hammering against the skull. He sunk down to the ground and merely stared in front of him. Why, why, *why* had he taken that bloody metro? Why had he talked to Sophie for so long? Now, it probably was worth nothing anymore. Rocketing hither and forth, his mind went blank until the scratching appeared for the third time. Instantly, his eyes moved to the entrance of the room. Alright, he thought, scrambling to his feet. If something was coming then it should come. "Hello," he screamed, "I know, you're there." Silence. The scratching was gone. Now, he was not scared anymore, he was furious. He picked up the key which had fallen from his hands in the state of despair and let it slip in his jeans. Then he took out his phone, grabbed the heavy book with the other hand and headed for the open door. He would go through this tunnel and either find out what was making this maddening sound or – as he now remembered – where the other way from the Y-turn went. With quick steps he moved through the narrow way, his fear blown away by anger. An instant later, his phone beeped.

He looked at the screen which told him the battery was low. Ten per cent left. Amongst everything else he completely forgot that his phone would at some point turn off. This stupid thing! Every time one really depended on it, it just let one down. He turned it to power saving mode but now the light was too dim to let him see much. Turning it off would have been the best option but he did not want to do that. Just in case. So he went on with the slight glimmer, on through the tunnel. The incident had cooled down his anger a little and his pace was slower. He had to be careful for there might be loose stones just as the one which had hidden the key. He laid down the heavy book and put his hand on the wall beside him in order to feel where to go

next. Nothing approached him, just as he had expected. At the Y-turn, he took the other way which, in contrast to the first aisle, went just straight without any corners. It seemed to him, this time it took longer until he reached the end. There was a door, too. He took out both keys but on trying the first, it turned out the door was not locked at all. He opened it and stepped inside. His hand naturally moved to the right for the switch. This time, he found himself in an empty corridor with stairs at the end. Those he went up and then found himself in front of another door with a peephole. He tried the key from the other room and it fit. He went through, remembering what he had thought on finding the item: *This key was deliberately hidden. It had to be of importance*. Now he was in an office. It was similar to the room he had seen downstairs but there were slight differences: some of the shelves showed black-and-white pictures, numbers were printed next to them. He drew closer: there was also some information about the photographs, explaining when they had been taken, who was on the pictures etc. On a shelf next to the photographs lay two books, titled "Studies on Hysteria" and "The Interpretation of Dreams". He observed the rest of the room. Many objects in there had descriptions and explanations to them.

Just like in a museum. He was confused. How did he end up in a museum? He went out of the room and immediately saw an "exit" sign which he followed - finally a way out. He trespassed several other rooms until he arrived at the entrance. One last door. Now he felt tense once more. If this was a museum it must be locked. If the entrance door was locked he had to search for a key again. Doors and keys and doors again. He was sick of this game. He wanted to get home. He did not even care anymore if he had to go there by foot. He wanted to get out once and for all. His head felt

as if it would explode in a second. His mouth felt dry. His eyes were fixed on the door which he approached. He raised his hand to the door handle, clutching it while he prayed to be lucky just this once. A clicking sound and the door swung open. For a moment he stood there transfixed. Did this actually happen? Was this it? He stepped out and was in the hallway with stairs leading down. In a moment, joy and relief filled his whole body. He simply ran down and out of the house, ran along the street until he stopped in front of a street sign. "Berggasse". He glanced back for a second and ran in direction of RoßauerLände, heading home.

Professor Roman leant back in his chair. "Well, that subject presented us with quite an amount of material." "Yes, certainly," Thomas Heidel, his assistant, replied, "but don't you think it was rather harsh? Maybe we should get our data by a different way. You know about interviews and so on. We could put in an advert." Roman looked at him, "Are you scared now, Heidel? Chickening out? Didn't we agree upon this being the best option because errors will be minimized? In order to get valid data, the effects have to be elicited without the subject being conscious." "Yes, sir, but –" "You know that what we do is necessary to achieve results – results which will make us famous, which will bring man a step further in science!" "Sir, I'm just saying this might really be dangerous." "Important experiments often are if they really want to achieve something. And we are working on something remarkable, don't you forget that." "No, you're right." "Alright. So, let's have a cup of coffee and take a closer look at our fresh video file here." ■

David lit a cigarette and poured himself another glass of wine. White this evening, red was only for stories of sorrow and he had no intention of going there tonight. Satisfied, he took a sip and let the fruity taste linger on his tongue for a little while before he swallowed. He smiled. He had finally started to write again. The follow-up to his last novel had been long overdue. It was his brother Niles who'd suggested the idea of a short story collection about their childhood, the adventures they had shared with Barry, their best friend. And it suited him well - so many stories to tell, so many topics to tackle. Writing itself was, in a way, the most childish of activities and with that in honour, the stories came to him fluently, a rush he hadn't felt for quite a while. The worlds they made up, so lively and real! With his wife and his son out of the house for the week, David had settled to his usual working routine. He did his research during the day, had a few coffees, and did some reading. Coming home he would cook himself a nice dinner. That was when he did some of his best thinking. It calmed him; put him in a good mood. He still had the most vivid memories of himself as a child, as he watched his mother in amazement, working in the kitchen, like an alchemist preparing the most pleasant of spells to lift his spirit. He would take his time to eat, do the dishes. And then, he would open himself a bottle of wine, enjoy a few cigarettes and, to add some colour, he would put on a good record. Tonight, The Queen is Dead, by The Smiths. Just the right amount of humour and sadness a good coming of age story needs. He too, felt like an alchemist of some kind. Everything had to be just perfect. David sat down in front of his computer, put down his glass, put out his cigarette. Then, he began to write.

The Victorian Gentlemen

And The Mystery Of The Black Sheep Boys

by Daniel Krooß

Summer of 94, University. The Victorian Gentlemen in their prime. Drum, Bass, Triangle! How we ever thought that this band was a good idea is beyond me. Well, to be fair, we did have a very distinguished sound. Perhaps the term rock band would be a bit misleading. We were *experimental* at best. The only thing that kept us going was Barry's weird craving for shooting US presidents, solely in his lyrics of course, which seemed to be something people were really able to identify with. So we weren't actually booed off stage, we were more of a slow ironic hand clap sort of band. We were half into *Meet You at the Theater*, our smash-hit if you allow a more literate interpretation of the term, and I hit my bass hard while giving Agape my smooth sexy stare. I had never been particularly good at first impressions, so flirting wasn't really one of my strengths. You have to understand that at that time I was already suffering from a pretty severe case of what the psychologist call *erotigraphomania*, an unhealthy obsession with erotic literature, and writing, often graphic, love letters. There was nothing that quite gave me the thrill like composing a love letter, the place where hope and sorrow meet to create the most wonderful and unique piece of art. I'm not sure whether the generation of

smart phones and thirty second porn clips will ever understand the true beauty of a handwritten word. I was just nineteen back then, but I had already written about two hundred love letters. Yes there were much more to come. And yes, the better half of them was rather graphic. But I feel no shame. It was the likes of Leonard Cohen, William Shakespeare and the guys that did the Bible that wrote about the women of my dreams. As I watched Agape with her breasts like two fawns of gazelle, I touched her perfect body with my mind... God, I needed a fix, and I needed it now.

David chuckled, pleased with his last line. He had never lost his passion for writing love letters. That's where it had all begun - his interest in writing, his obsession with literature. In the end a love letter was just as much a piece of fiction as the novels he had written. He lit himself another cigarette, and then he continued.

When the show was done we enjoyed our spare applause. And as always we looked into lots of blank faces. We already had some kind of reputation back then, so I would say that it was sort wondrous that we still had any audience at all. Bar-

ry was sure that most of our crowd was pretty heavy on LSD and that we aided them through their trips. I guess you could call that quality, too. Either way, we never failed to deliver the flashing of a question mark into their eyes and there was something weirdly satisfying about that. We packed our stuff and went straight back to our flat, which the three of us started sharing when we headed out for college. As always there was an unanswered call on the answering machine.

"Dad..." Niles said, sighing. Our father didn't exactly do well with his kids out of the house. It felt oddly ironic, that the man who had seemed so emotionally unattached throughout most of our childhood suddenly called us at least once a day and often more, just to have a little chat about the weather.

Niles and I couldn't help but feeling a bit overwhelmed by it and didn't really know how to deal with this new kind of affection. Besides, we were way too busy enjoying our new grown-up lives. We could eat cornflakes and watch cartoons whenever the hell we wanted to and there was no one there to tell us otherwise. We were living the dream of our five-year old selves and we really owed it to those boys to enjoy it to its fullest.

"I don't get this crowd," Barry said as he buried himself on the couch. "I mean sure we're ahead of our time, but so were The Beatles, goddammit! You're an academic crowd - be academic!"

"I don't know, Barry. Maybe we should try a different location some time," Niles said. Silently I handed out beers. "Instead they're listening to these rich kids with their silly shiny guitars. Rich kids shouldn't be allowed to do rock music. They have no authentic experience of pain!"

"Well maybe that isn't the point," I said.

"What is the point then?"

"Well I don't know our band name! Or the fact that you're playing a triangle!"

"Everyone can play guitar, even Thom Yorke says so."

"What the hell does he know? He's got the crazy eye!"

"You should not talk badly about the creep!"

"That band's got about one good song!"

"They'll grow!"

"I greatly doubt that!" Boy was I wrong.

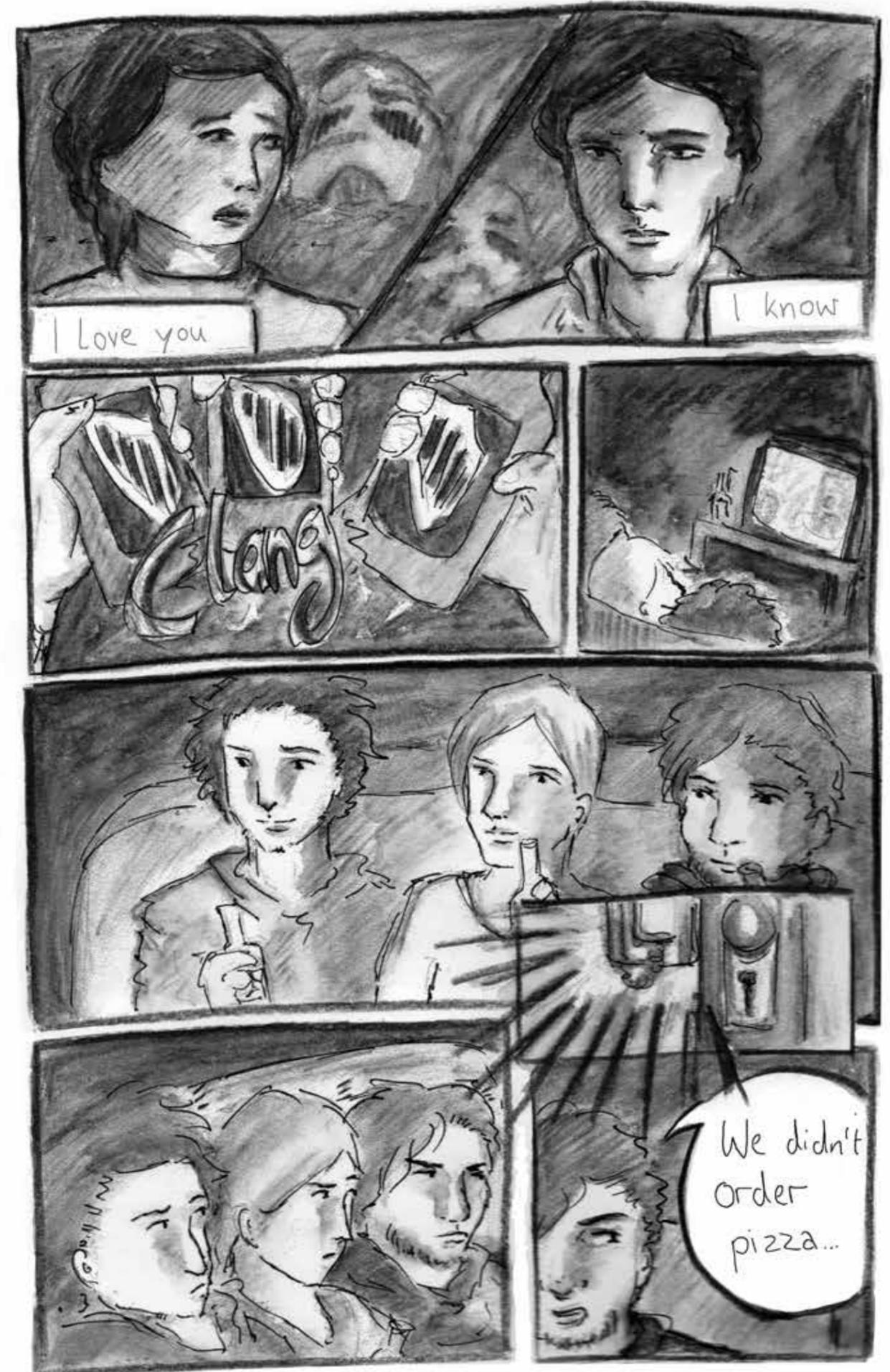
"Could you guys shut up, you're ruining fruit loops for me!", Niles said.

Barry sighed.

"The Empire Strikes Back?"

"Now we're talking!"

Nights like these were a pretty mundane thing to us. The conversations we shared and the things that we loved may sound completely dispensable to you, but they meant the world to us. It doesn't have to make sense to you. We really were just kids back then. We had every right to be as crazy as we wanted to be, as truly every child should feel obliged to be. The Star Wars Trilogy was our movie. We watched them when we felt great. We watched them whenever one of us was feeling sick or heart-broken. We watched them whenever we felt too tired to argue. I cannot possibly tell you how many times we've seen those movies. They gave us a feeling of home. They gave us the feeling that our inner children could live on forever.

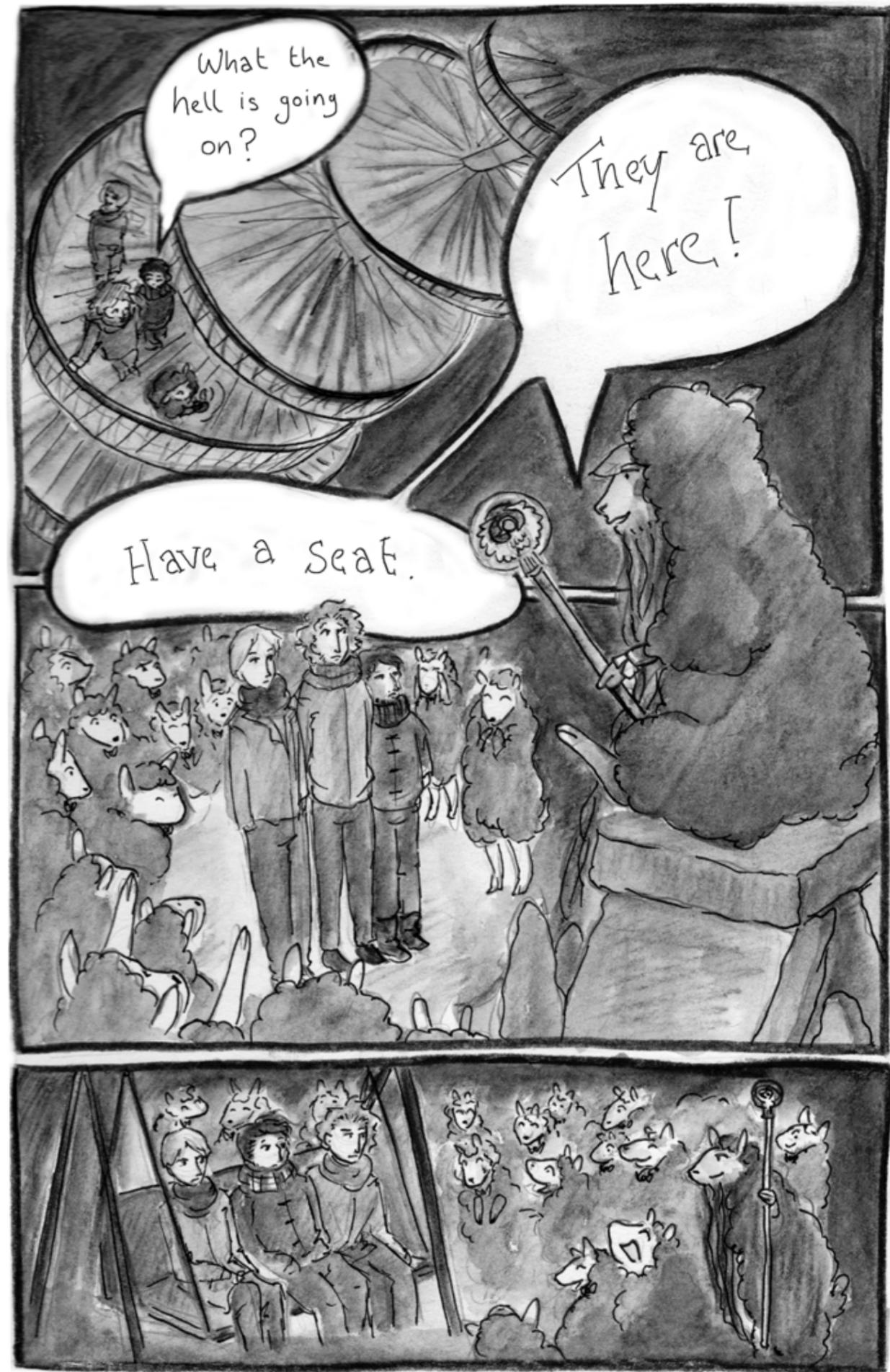






The Victorian Gentlemen
And The Mystery Of The Black Sheep Boys
 Written by Daniel Kroopf ~ Illustrated by M.I.Mendetzki



















David sighed as he opened himself a bottle of red wine. He'd had no intention of getting there but he got carried away, to a point he knew he could not evade. He lit a cigarette and stared blankly at the words on his screen. 'Time to phrase the indescribable,' he thought.

This may seem like the perfect moment for a heart-warming insight, the part where I tell you that this was the instant Niles and I stopped being boys and became men instead. But this just wasn't quite as it went. The time around my father's death is sort of blurry to me today. I remember Niles and I cleaning out father's home office. We had never been allowed there when we were children. It held the odd sensation of feeling familiar, while at the same time being the room of a complete stranger. I remember seeing his unfinished book on his desk and how much it depressed me that there just wasn't enough time for him left to get to the end. Finishing a good novel is such a beautifully personal experience – no one should ever be hindered from having it. I don't remember much of the funeral. Part of me is sure that it must have rained, but that might just be my shaping of a memory whose vividness was already being suppressed as it was experienced in the first place. I remember standing next to mother. I remember Barry's hand on my shoulder and lots of faceless people. I remember being afraid. I know by now how much the thought of losing your child can scare you, but no one ever tells you how deeply terrifying it is to bury either one of your own parents. I cannot honestly tell you whether or not I cried that day.

Niles and I had very different ways of dealing with our loss. For me a downward spiral I could not have foreseen began. As depressions hit me hard, my life lost all structure. There

is some inexplicable pain that came with the loss of such structure. I wish I could do a better job of explaining it to you and I wish I could tell you exactly how I eventually got out of them. I cannot. This is the sort of thing that can leave even the most literate speechless and I have no intention of even trying to put myself above that status. Niles didn't take long to see the signs and desperately tried to get through to me. I remember him standing by my bedside trying to talk sense into me. *"You're not grieving for father, but for you feelings towards him. There is a subtle difference between the two. And if you accept that, you will understand that this is not so much about him, as it is about yourself."* Oh poor Niles, how proud I am to call him my brother. That might just be the best advice anyone has ever given me, but I had become acquainted with my state. I sought no wisdom and yet I found mine inside a pint. A dozen. And more. I drank a lot, I smoked a lot of pot and about two packs of cigarettes a day. It wasn't so much about addiction as it was about dispossessing feelings I wasn't ready to face. Then again, that is what any addict would tell you as well. Let me assure you that there is absolutely no beauty in a Bukowski lifestyle, as intriguing and acceptable as it may seem. The following months were both the longest and shortest of my life. I was not a good friend nor a good brother, let alone a son. I fled and shut out everyone around me. Fiction was my longest life companion, it was the only therapy I cared for, offering worlds where I felt not judged and that at times, even let me find some rest. I really don't know how it happened but somewhere in my misery a mechanism gripped that wanted me to turn things around. I would find myself in a clinic, an exhausting experience, as it forced me to a structure I did not understand but needed so badly. Niles interest in psy-

chology was sparked around my misery, which made him the good therapist he is today. It took me about a year to get my life back in order. I would return to University and begin anew. I would make amends to my brother and my friends. And somewhere along that way, I would meet the woman that would outlive the ones I'd always read and written about. There were still plenty of stories for me in store.

David saved the file on his computer and poured himself another glass of wine. Lighting another cigarette he stepped out on the balcony. The fresh summer breeze made him realize that perhaps he'd had one too many. He put down his glass and inhaled deeply, held the smoke for a moment, then slowly let it out again, the wind carrying it away in a swirl. He moaned, put out his cigarette and stepped back inside. Lying down on the couch, he put on the TV. He smiles as the icy planet invades the screen. Young Luke riding on a Tauntaun observing the planet. *Echo Three to Echo Seven. Han, old buddy, do you read me?* Han answers, Luke smiles. Not much to report, really. He feels safe when suddenly the eleven-foot tall Wampa Ice Creature emerges out of nothing and knocks him out, breaking the neck of his Tauntaun and drags our unconscious hero through the snow. 'He's going to make it,' David thinks, chuckling. 'Life has a way of sorting itself out.' He dozed off. ■



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looking backwards: reflections on iain m. banks' culture novels

by Murat Sezi

Iain Banks, or Iain M. Banks, the name under which his science-fiction novels were published, was one of the most prolific and important Scottish writers of the late 20th and early 21st century. Given that Mr. Banks passed away recently, on June 9, 2013 to be exact, it seems only proper to revisit those novels of his which are closest to me personally: his Culture series.

Since I am someone who has spent most of his adult life reading, writing, and thinking about literature¹, I sometimes need a change of pace. On a warm summer night not too long ago, I found myself itching for some science-fiction, so what I decided to do was to walk over to a friend's apartment and see if there was a book he could lend me. That book was *Surface Detail*, which I will come to talk of in just a moment. For now let it suffice that, following this, I devoured the other eight Culture novels in a span of a few months.

Before I properly begin this review, I would like to issue a disclaimer: Given the venue, the text that follows is rather eclectic in nature and does not seek to provide a fully thought out, comprehensive review, but rather a general overview of a few key ideas and a general introduction to the series. And, obviously, there will be spoilers.

The Culture itself refers to a decentralized, quasi-anarchist and post-scarcity society composed of humanoid species and machines. The vast majority of Culture citizens does not live on planets but on gigantic spaceships or on artificial habitats called orbitals, which are in turn inhabited by the so-called minds, extremely advanced forms of A.I.

which, along with the divisions Contact and Special Circumstances (SC hereafter), are the only things within the Culture that resemble a form of government and decision-making power. While Contact is responsible for researching and contacting new civilizations, Special Circumstances is the Culture's black-ops division, which covertly intervenes in other societies in order to uphold the Culture's interests. Against this background, along with the fact that there is no need for a Culture citizen to work, several interesting questions and issues emerge. In the interest of the reader, I have chosen to discuss the novels by arranging them in thematic clusters rather than by publication date.

Beginnings: *Consider Phlebas* and *The Player of Games*

Nevertheless, the first two books discussed also happen to be the first two entries of the series. It all started with *Consider Phlebas*, the title being one of the many references Banks' makes to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. *Consider Phlebas* is centered on the war between the Culture and the Idirans, who are set out to conquer the galaxy. The central conflict comes from the fact that the Idirans are imperialist religious fanatics, in many ways the complete opposite of the Culture. The question that arises is: why does the Culture get involved in the conflict?

The centrality of this question is expressed in two ways. On the one hand, the novel actually contains an appendix which lists reasons for the Culture as well as the Idirans, which I will spare you at this juncture. On the other hand,

¹ In the sense of the canon.



it is embodied in the focal character Horza, who is part of neither the Culture nor the Idirans (but fighting for the latter), most succinctly through the following quote:

I don't care how self-righteous the Culture feels, or how many people the Idirans kill. They're on the side of life - boring, old-fashioned, biological life; smelly, fallible and short-sighted, God knows, but real life. You're ruled by your machines. You're an evolutionary dead end. The trouble is that to take your mind off it you try to drag everybody else down there with you. The worst thing that could happen to the galaxy would be if the Culture wins this war. (CP 12)

Tasked by the Idirans with capturing a stranded mind, the novel follows Horza and the crew he assembles through a series of space adventures, which culminates in an elongated showdown on a “planet of the dead”, at the end of which most of the people involved, well, dies. In the end, the Culture is able to administer total defeat upon the Idirans.

Given the central premise of the novel, this sounds somewhat unspectacular. However, it reveals insight into a strategy Banks would go on to employ in many of his other novels: letting the larger conflicts recede into the background and follow individual characters on their journey, along which philosophical ideas and ethical conundrums are explored.

Even though *Consider Phlebas* is a phenomenal first novel and a good entry to the series (though not *the* best) I feel that it is among the weakest of the series. The writing is rather clunky and some events take place repeatedly without apparent need.

The second Culture novel, *The Player of Games*, is by far the most accessible and thereby claims my title for best entry to the series as a whole. We follow protagonist Jernau Gurgeh, a Culture humanoid adept at all sorts of games as well as the theory that goes along with it (the novel implements an academic element – Jernau frequently reads and co-authors papers on games and game theory).

Jernau is recruited – or rather blackmailed – by SC when a drone, which, unbeknownst to him, is part of SC, helps him cheat in a high stakes game. Since exposing this information would ruin both Jernau's reputation and his career as a player, he agrees to take part in a seemingly innocuous mission – participating in a game.

The crux is that this game is extremely complicated and, within the alien society that it takes place, serves to determine a new dictator. During his stay abroad, Jernau is confronted with questioning his allegiance to the Culture – it must be emphasized, and is shown throughout the novel, that the Culture is nothing like a nation state; at one point in the novel, Jernau even is confused by the fact that someone could be proud of the fact where they were born. Ironically, a sort of national pride is exactly what SC employs in order to convince Jernau, who is confronted with a highly stratified society in which torture, extreme forms of pornography and prostitution and cruel punishment are normal occurrences.

In the end, Jernau makes it all the way to the last round of the game tournament – and, of course, wins. The moral that emerges at this late point is the immense superiority of the Culture: while the reader saw Jernau struggling, it emerges that he was, despite of the immense complexity of the game, never in any danger of not winning; this is also the first taste readers get of the immense scale on which SC actually intervenes in other societies, despite the Culture officially being non-interventionist.

Contrasting Societies: *Matter*, *Look to Windward* and *Surface Detail*

Another central concern of the Culture series is the “ranking” of societies and what basis this is footed on; in real-world terms, this primarily though not exclusively deals with the tension between cultural relativism and the (assumed) superiority of Western societies. Societies are ranked on a scale of 1-8, where 8 signifies the most technologically and, in most cases, socially advanced societies;

these constitute the so-called “involved”, the societies which basically run the galaxy.²

In this regard, *Matter* somewhat stands out from the rest of the series. It explores the concept of the so-called shell worlds, artificial planets, assumedly left behind by a once hyper-advanced civilization. Interesting to note here is that despite the fact that the inhabitants of this world know of the artificiality of these planets and, by extension, their very existence, religion still develops. Furthermore, *Matter* reveals insight into the different civilization levels (also mirrored in the fact that the shell worlds themselves have different levels) as well as intrigue and competition among these.

Matter is the Culture novel that is closest to fantasy instead of sci-fi. The story is quickly told: after a political assassination, the king-to-be and his servant are off to inform his sister, who works for SC, of the matter. Similar to CP, this has the feel of an adventure story, though on a much smaller scale. The main plot itself revolves around the discovery of an artefact that is subsequently claimed by one of the other civilizations but turns out to be a destructive, god-like force that intends to destroy the shell-world.

Overall, while I feel that *Matter* explores some interesting ideas, I feel that it is the weakest of the novels overall and actually the only one in which I have no interest in re-reading, which is not helped by the fact that it barely has any interesting characters, particularly the SC agent.

Look to Windward, on the other hand, is also one of my least favourite of the series, though I have for long felt that I should give it another chance, not least because it is a fan favorite and widely regarded as one of the best Culture novels. Therefore, and since this is also the one I remember the least of, I will treat this one very briefly and merely skim over the plot.

Look to Windward is essentially a tale of revenge for an SC intervention gone wrong. In this regard, it is perhaps the novel most concerned with showcasing the intervention/non-intervention dilemma. As is pointed out, the mathematical chances of the intervention going wrong were very low, but it nonetheless did, and this caused civil war, which

is in turn the motivation for the revenge plot. Other than that, *Look to Windward* has perhaps the coolest subplot, which features a Culture citizen – let us just call him a biologist – that studies *gigantic* life forms.

Surface Detail has great world-building and some of the best characters, which is somewhat amusing because it has both a weak protagonist and a weak antagonist. The premise of *Surface Detail* is that the involved civilizations are split into two factions on a very sensitive issue: the existence of digital hells. If that sounds crazy, consider the following: this premise obviously assumes that there is no afterlife – neither in the positive nor the negative sense. However, with the technological points (b)reached in the Culture universe, this is not a “problem”: in addition to prolonged life, is possible to stay “alive” long after one's death, either by becoming an entity similar to the Culture minds or through subliming – a concept I will explore in just a moment.

The dark side of this that some societies have gigantic simulation programs which people's minds are plugged into after their deaths; in the sense of Baudrillard, there is no distinguishing between the real and the simulation any longer. And this is what the central conflict of the novel is about, ergo whether these simulated hells should remain legal or not. In order to solve the issue, the factions decide to fight a war in simulated space – both to avoid galaxy-wide catastrophe and since the issue is situated on a virtual level.

Aside from playing with the real and the simulated, with time and space, this is also the novel where the author shines through the most; critique of religion, particularly Catholicism, is visible throughout the novel, most deftly so in the scenes that actually take place in these virtual hells, which are certainly not for the faint of heart. Yet again, this larger issue is played out by virtue of being integrated through a variety of subplots, which involves a former slave brought back to life as well as her story of revenge, a military commander fighting in this simulated war, and two academics who voluntarily plug themselves into hell in order to report on it.

Overall, *Surface Detail*, though not without weaknesses,

² While this is an oversimplification, it should suffice for the time being.

is a great entry of the series. Nevertheless, I would not recommend it as an entry; even though it was the first one I read, a lot of things would have been much easier to understand had I started elsewhere.

Playing with Structure: *Use of Weapons* and *Inversions*

If you have so far been irritated by the fact that I do not particularly seem to praise many of the texts so far, let it be said that I have left the best for last.

The third entry in the series, *Use of Weapons*, is felt by many to be the strongest Culture novel. As opposed to many of the other books, it only has a single protagonist called Zakalwe, who is working as an agent and killer for SC. The true genius of the novel is its structure: The chapters alternate between the present and Zakalwe's earlier exploits, moving towards each other as the story progresses. Thematically, the novel can be read as a critique of war – and the title is embodied in Zakalwe himself, who is the weapon being used (by the Culture). Finally, the novel ends with a plot twist that is neither cheesy nor obvious but completely believable and organic.

The next novel, *Inversions*, elicited a comment from Banks by stating that "Inversions was an attempt to write a Culture novel that wasn't." Similar to *Use of Weapons*, *Inversions* has an alternating chapter structure, only it does not skip back between time and place, but between two Culture characters who are working inside the same alien society. The key contrast here is that one of these characters holds an interventionist, the other a non-interventionist viewpoint in regards to other societies.

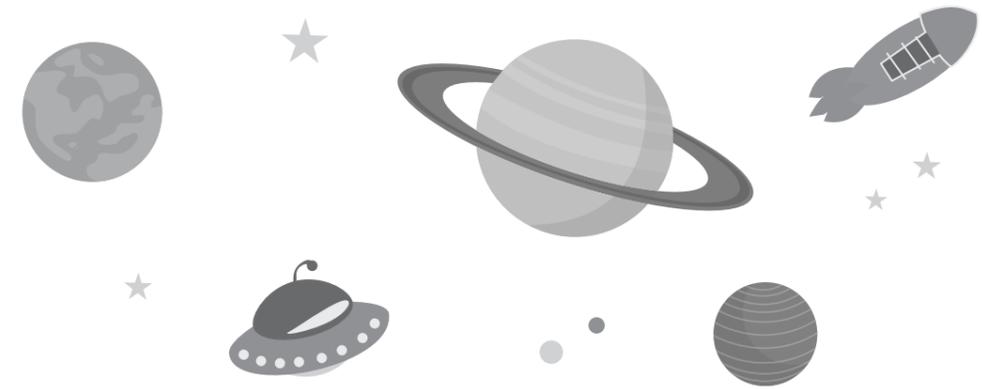
Inversions is completely different to the other Culture novels in the sense that both place and grandiosity are much more restricted than in any other entry of the series. In fact, if you are not paying close attention, it might completely escape you that the characters stem from the Culture at all. This is also one of the reasons that, of all the novels, this is the one you really should not start with. As confusing as starting with some of the other entries might be, this one

will, in many regards, make absolutely no sense, and so I suggest putting it at the end of the list if you are planning on reading the series. However, for those already familiar with the novels, this is a nice bonbon at the end of a long and wild ride. This is perhaps also the novel that fans are most torn on. While some appreciate the switch of pace and setting, others are merely bored by it. While I can understand the latter viewpoint, I think *Inversions* was a great literary experiment within the context of a series that is grounded in the space opera genre, and it is very near and dear to my heart.

Space Opera revamped: *Excession* and *The Hydrogen Sonata*

Speaking of space opera – the genre Banks revitalized and reinvented – we come to the last two Culture novels discussed here. The fourth proper Culture novel – I am going to skip over the Culture short stories contained within *The State of the Art* – is, in addition to *Use of Weapons*, the other contender for best Culture novel: *Excession*. The novel's title is meta-fictional in the sense that it refers to the space opera genre as a whole – everything is of enormous size. This is also the first novel where we see the inner workings of the culture in action: the minds. As noted, these are intellects which usually inhabit the Culture's gigantic spaceships or orbitals and are the true decision makers, given that there is no such thing as organized government in the Culture.

Plot-wise, the following happens: an *excession* in the form of a perfect black-body sphere appears which several civilizations – including the Culture – want to investigate and/or claim for themselves. This is further worded as an "Outside Context Problem", i.e. an occurrence for which a civilization is in no way prepared and which may ultimately threaten destruction. Though, as in the other novels, smaller subplots play a role, I will focus on the minds here. Their interest lies in what the *excession* actually is; among other things, it is speculated that it is a gateway through time and space – and that includes other galaxies, which could then



be "cultivated" by the minds themselves...and so on. I think this especially makes it clear just how much the novel concerns itself with grandiosity of any kind.

Banks' final Culture novel, *The Hydrogen Sonata*, is felt by many to be Bank's weakest novel, a sentiment I cannot at all share even though I understand the reasons. In many ways, the *Hydrogen Sonata* is *Excession*: Part II; Even though the plot is different, this is the other novel that spends a lot of time on the Culture minds. Moreover, it also deals with issues on a grandiose scale.

What happens is the following: The Gzilt, one of the level 8 involved civilizations, has decided to sublime, this being one of the afterlife options I mentioned earlier on. Subliming is interesting in the sense that it is done by entire civilizations, or at least by the vast, vast majority of that civilization, and completely at will. This endeavour is complicated when it is revealed that the Gzilt were actually part of a scientific experiment. The religious text they believe in, which significantly furthered their technological and societal development, was actually "delivered" to them by the conductors of this experiment. In the course of the story, those in charge are doing everything they can to keep that information secret in order to secure the subliming.

In some ways, *The Hydrogen Sonata* is to *Excession* what *Return of the Jedi* is to *A New Hope*: maybe not innovative, but an enormous amount of fun (and without Ewoks). I left

this one for last on my personal Culture reading list, and I do not regret it one bit. It is the longest of the novels and, while not the most ambitious, definitely one of the coolest – and it also has an ending that is haunting, sad, and absolutely beautiful.

Life after Banks?

It is a matter of personal sadness to me that I will never be able to read another Culture novel. Banks was a fantastic writer who was unafraid of tackling large issues, writing Science-Fiction and mainstream fiction at the same time, and I feel that in many ways these complemented one another. As I have stated previously, Mr. Banks managed to revamp the space opera genre, and I think that he is an author who will not only have a lasting influence, but that we are already seeing that influence. Most notably, I think this is the case with Ann Leckie's "Ancillary" series, composed of *Ancillary Justice*, *Ancillary Sword* and *Ancillary Mercy*; the second novel of which has just been released... ■

conscience, allegiance, and indifference

by Christian Weiß

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) - "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849)

Causes and triggers – you know this from WWI. There are certain deep-rooted reasons for every conflict, and then there is that immediate occasion, the last straw that breaks the camel's back, the legendary trigger: the wrong turn, the wrong street, a pistol shot from the crowd... in Thoreau's case it was a night in jail.

As a consequence of his enduring refusal to pay his poll tax to a state and government, which openly supported slavery and waged war on its neighbouring countries (Mexican-American War, 1846-1848) the state of Massachusetts arranged for separate lodging for Mr. Thoreau on the night of July 23, 1846. However, he did not even have the time to take off his shoes; the next morning an unknown fellow citizen paid the tax and Thoreau was a free man again. But exactly how free is the individual, if it is constantly at the mercy of its government?

Two years later, just after the end of the Mexican-American War, he began to articulate his thoughts connected with this event for lectures on "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government". In 1849 "Resistance to Civil Government" was published in the *Aesthetic Papers*. "[By means of punishment]", Thoreau strikes back at his oppressor, "the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. [Government] is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength."

The machine does not have a soul; "a corporation has no conscience". It is the women and men, who make up society, engineer the functioning of the machine, manipulate and control the levers of the machine, which lend their ethics to the apparatus and flood the bloodless veins of power with empathy and reflection: they are the conscience of that mad beehive. But what should the individual woman and man do, if the "mass of men serve the State [...] not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies" and are immune or ignorant to its excesses and defects? When they find flaws in the systems, which are not *per se* a violation of justice, because they are justified and legitimated by existing law, but nevertheless cause an irritation of conscience and form an injustice according to higher law? Should the citizen who opposes slavery and warfare support a government which tolerates and practices both? To speak with Thoreau: if the injustice "is of such nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, [...] break the law."

Characteristically for his era Thoreau is in no great hurry to develop his argument. He describes the subject matter very broadly at first, taking his time, before he zeros in on the relevant aspect of the matter, describes man's points of contact with that matter and the ethical questions that arise from this contact before he fabricates one of these sentences that would decorate any marble arch: "I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward", or "What I have to do

is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn."

Then - to return to the conflict between the individual and government - does that imply that individuals should at once withdraw any legitimacy and support they lend to the government and prefer imprisonment instead? Or should they rather listen to that voice inside their heads which argues for an evening on the couch and pizza, watch the evening news herald the latest whistleblower as either threat to or paragon of democracy?

It may not be of little importance that two years passed between the immediate trigger and the actual writing of "Resistance to Civil Government". Maybe it was the end of the Mexican-American War, maybe some minor event or the deadline for deliverance itself that catalyzed the process and encouraged Thoreau to address the audience on that particular matter.

Personally, I regard the postponement as owed to internal conflicts as well. Could it not be that the consequences of tax evasion led Thoreau to carefully consider the relevance and urgency of his actions? The text includes a noteworthy passage about the negative effects of a passive life, about the couch-and-pizza approach to any pangs of conscience. Once those individuals disregard their instinctive ethical code they establish a culture of surrogate decision-making, an image of reality with only half the responsibility and twice

as much time for shopping. Thoreau mentions the example of the soldier. "The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war [,] directly by their allegiance, and [...] indirectly, [...] by their money"

Money and allegiance, the implicit right to act as representative for the individual, keep any unjust government in position; the indifference and negligence of the individual keep it from being removed there. Thoreau concludes:

"The broadest and most prevalent error requires the most disinterested virtue to sustain it. [...] Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support, are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform."

After all, it only takes one step to change from follower to adversary - and it is not by purchase of Che Guevara shirts, i.e. by means of consumption. Thoreau's message is to *remove* your money from your government, should you disagree with its policy. In this context, is it mere coincidence that we do not pay our taxes in cash anymore? ■



Portrait of Henry David Thoreau



gone girl

a movie review

by Saguario Duda

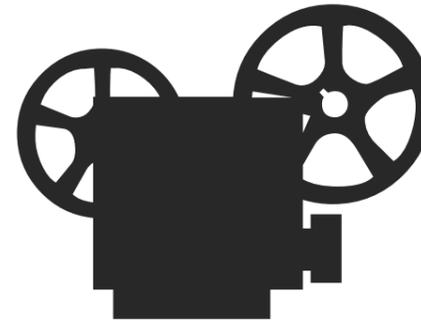
"Don't you think one of the charms of marriage is that it makes deception a necessity for both parties?"
- Sandor Szavost, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1990)

Neither as serious and epic in scale as 'Zodiac' nor as gritty and gut-wrenching as 'Se7en,' this Fincher thriller is more in the vein of 'The Game,' but shows just how far the director has come as a filmmaker since then. 'Gone Girl' doesn't settle just for plot twists and being a mere genre piece like 'The Game' or 'Panic Room,' even when it delivers on thrills, by adding a dose of black humour and a satirical undercurrent into the mix.

The film's elegant cinematography, graceful editing, and overall relatively subdued (yet stylized) execution are matched by potent performances by both of the two leads (Ben Affleck, Rosamunde Pike), who play their respective characters straight and believable--you won't find them winking at the camera like Kevin Spacey in Fincher's *House of Cards*. And yet, in a clever reflection of the plot, such a refined poise is deceptive, as the movie is much pulpier than one comes to expect. That is also why it's all the more sur-

prising--and disturbing--to the viewer once the movie begins to shed its polished exterior to reveal its trashier nature and becomes more lurid as it continues. Only the subtly unsettling, terrifically broken-sounding score (Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross) seems to predict that something is off, and the viewer will find out soon. On repeated viewings, however, the plot twists may not necessarily hold up, and at times, especially towards the end, seem just a bit too implausible.

The satire present throughout the film, on the other hand, manages to never lose its sharpness. We see tabloid show hosts feed the public the sensationalism it seems to crave, the collective opinion swayed by whoever gives the most convincing performance. Although this satire is not too subtle and occasionally over-the-top, it ends up making the movie stand out from other psychological thrillers, and blends well with the dark humour underpinning the movie's more shocking moments. In that way it is similar to



'American Psycho,' if the latter weren't exactly about a serial murderer.

This cocktail of psychological games and satire of keeping up a face for the people around you is what finally delivers a humorously cynical commentary on the nature of marriage: How much of what you present to someone you love is true, and how much is a lie? How do you cope with discovering your partner's true face? How do you endure and deal with the judgement of people that only know what they see on the surface? How do you balance on the tightrope of the legal system in between lawyers and true emotions? With these questions as a start, to paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard, "all you need to make a movie" now, "is a (gone) girl and a gun." ■

Further films similar to *Gone Girl*:

The Vanishing (Spoorloos), Eyes Wide Shut,
American Beauty, To Die For



Ho! Ho! Blank wishes
Merry Christmas
to everyone!

Imprint

Magazin der Studierenden der Anglistik/
Amerikanistik des Fachbereiches 02 der Universität Kassel,
Kurt-Wolters-Str. 5, 34109 Kassel

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