

## M u d L u s c i o u s I s s u e F o u r

[ words by Noel Sloboda, Richard Brown, James Rhodes, David Melody, Match Ryan, Jack Martin, Jamie Iredell, Thom Robinson, Andrew S. Taylor, C. L. Bledsoe, Gary Beck, & David Macpherson ]

### Of Species by Noel Sloboda

A tyrannosaurus and a triceratops put their heads together and guessed what would inevitably happen to all the dinosaurs, but the two could not agree how the end would come about.

It will surely be a flood boomed the tyrannosaurus.

I rather suspect meteors will rain down countered the triceratops in a loud contralto.

They debated for some time, before finally agreeing to disagree, since preventative measures--they decided--were more important, ultimately, than causes. United, they resolved to construct a massive canoe with a great umbrella mounted in its middle. They called their craft The Salvation, and as soon as it was seaworthy, they eagerly launched. In their haste, they forgot to bring paddles, and so the tyrannosaurus and triceratops drifted into the deeps, then drifted and drifted some more.

It seems, said the triceratops with an ironic smirk, we've designed our own undoing. Surely, we'll both starve out here.

One of us won't, said the tyrannosaurus, a gleam in one of his yellow eyes, which had a center shaped like a sharp tooth.

When he had finished his meal, the tyrannosaurs sighed heavily, regretting that his arms were too little to wipe his chops. Then he took down the umbrella and waited for the meteors.

### Starry Night in a World of Orange and Black by Richard Brown

The bottle smashed down on the curb and its red contents spilled out onto the road. I wish I could say I dropped the glass but there was no fucking glass. Just a puddle of cheap red wine and a drunken bastard staring down at it. The air was cold and frosty, stinging my ears and hurrying me back home. I started walking. People shouted and jeered at me as usual. I found a fag end on the floor and started to try and light it, it was damp. As I walked, the gritty harsh pavement fell more and more into disrepair as I moved into the shitty side of town. The street lights glowed and hummed as usual, occasionally one would flicker and die, like us. The world was perpetually orange and black, although it looked different tonight. There was something else that made the night seem not quite so unbearable. But I couldn't figure it out so I just kept walking with my head down, tucked into my coat as usual.

I got to the squat, there weren't many people in. It was an old house of some kind that the council had decided wasn't worth kicking us out of. Probably until some big fuck off business decided it was economically viable to exterminate us, like fucking rats. I had about two quid in change that I had found and collected that night from the student part of town. A mixed bag, you'd get the odd kind sort but you'd get the odd cunt who'd rather kick your teeth out of the back of your head than give you a smile. Just kids trying to be men, still much better than sitting out near the Wetherspoons on a Friday night.

I scanned the room for any leftover drink or drugs , not a bean, or anything else for that matter. I went over to my corner and fumbled in the dark.

“Eh Dylan lad, good night?” a voice came out of a dark corner where Trev usually stayed.

“Not bad mate, two quid. Lost a fuckin full bottle of wine though”

“Ah... erm..” Trev’s voice trailed off, he was fucked up on heroine again. Either that or he’d been drinking shit that he shouldn’t be drinking. Idiot. We’ve all been there. I started to talk to Trev out loud, I didn’t expect a reply but I just didn’t want to huddle down in my blanket and freeze to death over night.

“There’s somethin different tonight, the world in’t quite so fuckin shit, know what I mean?” I gave an uneasy laugh, I don’t know who to.

My voice bounded round the room unnoticed, he was gone. Then I got up and walked out back. I sat down on an old tractor tyre and sparked up a joint end I’d found the other day. I think it was mostly shit tobacco but the thought was nice. It was almost civilized. It was then that I noticed it. It was as if the whole fucking universe had compacted into a size that I could hold in my hand. The sky was clear and a million stars and planets shone their light down on me. Just for me. Me and every other fucker on this planet, all six billion were equal for once. It was nice to appreciate something like that for once. I cracked a smile up at the sky and smoked my shitty joint.

#### Things I Knew and Didn’t Know by James Rhodes

I knew her from school. When I say I knew her, I knew of her. It was her scruffiness that marked her out. The school uniform of white shirt and blue tie was supposed to represent the decorum that prevailed, but I’d never seen anyone wear decorum in such a ramshackle way. Her shirt flailed from the edges of her navy skirt, creased like an old man’s face. The tie hung limply around her neck. Her hair was crimson and deep brown, framing pale features. I could never decide whether it was her cheekbones that were high or her skin that was sunken. Hazel eyes circled by dark shadows spoke of secrets and sleepless nights.

She was a hard person to place. In an age when everything was black and white, she was charcoal grey, the element the periodic table had failed to capture. Who her friends were and how many she had it’s hard to say. I suppose there were the smokers behind the sports centre, as she dragged forcefully through smudged red lips, exhaling heavily into the white winter air, the filter of her cigarette stuck through skeletal fingers and bitten round nails.

She rode the bus into school. She lived out up in the hills. I could see her house from my bedroom window. It lay brow-beaten by the winds in winter and basked in the bloodletting of the sunset in summer. I’d been up there once, not to see her, but with friends. There was a trail you could walk along into the woods. I remember how still it was. The silence was all you heard. You could see the planes banking round, but their dull roar was eaten up by the miles in between.

She was always loud at school. She’d talk at a rat-a-tat rate punching out the sounds, while her eyes marched over those within range demanding their full attention. She pulled at the silver cross round her neck. Religion was something I never understood. I didn’t know whether the cross was a spike to stop anything getting at her from the outside or to keep things within. She had one friend you’d always see her with. A lad a few years older. No-one really knew who he was, just that he’d come to live with his grandparents after he had a fight with his step-dad. You’d see her riding round in his car, skirting around the edges of dusk, trying to fend off the stillness of cold nights spent inside.

It was the first time I’d thought of her since leaving school. The day I heard she died.

I didn't even need to read how. There were things I now knew. I didn't want to hear about the knotted ropes or the scribbled notes, or how the creeping dawn chased the shadows from her face.

Lost by David Melody

The girl on the bicycle. I saw the girl on the bicycle. Stopped. What had I seen?

The sun was still on top of me, drilling a hole in my head, killing any shadow. She rode by. Not even shadow of spokes whirling on the hot, bare land. My lips cracked red. A few stupid weeds wilted in a small crack, and I wondered if streams ever flowed from the blue-black mountains.

I'd been hiking for two days since the fall, not the season, the accident. Fool that I was, I'd left my phone, along with credit cards and gun in the top drawer back at the studio. How much more foolish had I become, hiking without direction, playing snare drum to the sun's slow beat?

Where did she go? I could certainly borrow her bike, even with its funny fat tires. I could reach the highway by night, if there was still such a thing. Nightfall, night crash, nightie-nite. Nightmare, nightgown. Night come a tumbling down? I hadn't seen darkness since I'd started, which I knew wasn't possible. Which made me more than just a fool.

She rode by again.

Shut Up And Ride The Weird Train by Match Ryan

Step right down. Step right down again. Two steps closer to Weirldsville. A place I call my domiciliary. A book that you claim needs to be erased.

My imagination makes your open mouth look like the head of a gavel. Do you really want to smash my words and call them to order? You say I'm this and that...and I say it's because you're so, because you're so, because you're so...you know that I know who you are. Right?

What's it to you if a toe has a nipple? If I embalm the family cow with my halitosis and take said bovine with me to a stranger's funeral? If a jacket-wearing jackal jacked off under the influence of Apple Jacks?

These are the stories I tell my children when they need comfort. These are the truths I tell God to put in the New Improved Testament. You treat them as if they were pubic hairs that needed to be shaved from the twat of a porn star.

What you're really afraid of is the bottom corner of the page. The way it barely touches the tip of your thumb when it's off to the next page. That's when you close your eyes and tighten the chastity belt your husband gave you.

You're wondering if I'm standing in your bedroom. Above your bed. Maybe I am. Maybe I am that jackal who has had too much cereal. Because you're so, because you're so, because you're so...that's right...because you're so...right there...because you're so...oh, oh, oh...

Now let's smoke. Now let me tell you what you tell your husband. Now tell me what it was like to sex a man who has much in common with the octopus.

Reading to Sleep by Jack Martin

Night believed ghosts in the Art Building. The cover opened. Wind blew a floor across. The pages were not pages. The book did impressions of Gertrude Stein, line drawings morphed, into and out, erotic mobius walls, black, yellowed ink on wet current. "The days of children lying on the carpet writing their little stories are over." Metro Goldwyn Mayer called to warn me. He was also ten years old. How many of us. The only telephone ringing. Ghosts blasted absent the doors. L'art pour l'art. Blue ignition splintered, a rectangular dearth in each wall, burst into voice, barked intent, a single, clamorous, plexiform roar, and woke unlit pages.

Nick's Down by Jamie Iredell

We'd closed the Pub and the orange streetlights transformed everything into this dawn or dusk Martian surface. Nick wavered like a reed in a breeze. We'd been drinking only beer, but whenever Nick had ten dollars he took the bar to it until his barstool kept trying to walk away from under his ass, conspiring for a hard rendezvous with the concrete flooring. Some guys we didn't know fought in the street, squared against each other, circled, a human Stonehenge. Their girlfriends stood by, fists pounding air as they chanted no no no no no no. Me and Timmy decided these guys could not fight in front of our bar, on our street. This sense of ownership overcomes only the most deluded and young and white, which constituted us. But I explained everything, my palms like pale twin stop signs. These fighting guys understood and started to break it up. But Nick Bender. Fucking Bender. After everyone cooled off and me and Timmy walked away, satisfied with our community duty done, Nick still stooped there mouthing "bitch" and "cock whore." Then he was on the ground, black blood running from his broken teeth. When me and Timmy ran back, bottles breaking musically and rhythmic, the girls screamed and the wind died. A neighbor cocked a shotgun. I've had better nights.

Breadcrumbs by Thom Robinson

Cathy sat on the swings in the park. Half past four in February and starting to get dark.

I don't want to be summed up, she thought. I don't want to be condensed. As she fingered the holes in her jumper and the cigarette burns in her shirt. Thinking of her parents and the boys she kissed in town. And her eyes were frightened smoke rings dropping breadcrumbs on the night.

Nothing could hold her attention for long. She was worried about the ends of her fingers because they wouldn't stop shaking. And on the bus and in the classroom she would gaze along the lengths of her arms through the camera behind her eyes and come to rest upon pale and poised fingers and imagine the dusk, hidden in the palms of her trembling hands. She wanted hands that were sharp and strong, hands to fly like kites against the autumn sky, hands that would drag through the ocean catching fish then letting go. But in the back of her mind was the sound of metal on tin, like footsteps mounting the corrugated staircase in the echoing car park in town. And when she closed her eyes to go to sleep, the footsteps would get closer until she couldn't sleep at all. Then she'd wake in the night and write down muddled scraps of dreams.

And everything would be buried by the time the summer came. When illusion would grow through the chains of the swings and mystery would burst like a dripping black balloon. And for a time everything would be silent and still.

Why the Letter to Your Congressman Will Not Be Read by Andrew S. Taylor

Before sunrise, the fog had already descended upon the city. It picked locks, leapt through sewer covers, dampened skins and sidewalks. It smelled of the Empyrean's dirty laundry. Angels made of smog and motor oil stalked subway terminals, pining for bars yet unclosed. Men and women emerged from caverns, from toy-boxes and tin cars. They looked up into the foggy skyline, and as they tried to breathe the fog sucked back at them.

There was no sunlight, nor memory of sunlight. The light came from the fog itself, which was grudgingly luminescent, like a milky cataract watching from across a dark room. The fog had swallowed the sun like the last grape on a dry vine, and with it also the memory of the sun. It pressed its oily fingers into ear-holes and nose-holes. The memories within came out easily in a series of stains and smudges.

The people worked, and dirty, dank angels in the form of other people walked the streets without umbrellas. The day drove on, but without the sun there was no time as well. The fog had swallowed time and refused to disgorge it. In place of time there was something called Miasm, which flowed slowly and formlessly.

At some point in the afternoon a woman who was young, and yet not young, stopped working, reclined back in her chair, and began to listen. She could hear her own blood pumping through the insides of her ears. She has never heard it before, except sometimes when she was falling asleep. And, as sometimes happened then, she could also hear a babble of voices, voices in her head that spoke the sounds of words without the words themselves, voices that would chew and ruminate upon the textures and rhythms that words were made of. And then, deeper still, beneath the blood and beneath the voices, she heard something else, a singular voice, less human than any she had ever known, but nonetheless of her and inside of her. And she remembered, as her eyes became moist, the thing which she could never remember when awake.

She looked out of her office window, into the fog, which had covered the buildings, obscuring their square-lidded eyes, their office-sockets, normally alive and sparkling from the busy movements of minute dolls within them, and then she turned and scanned the office, where the people fidgeted and whispered, and she thought she saw a fine dust on their lips and their arms. The dust, she believed, of eternal wakefulness. She stood up from her desk, wiped her damp brow, and, without a word to her colleagues, departed. She rode the elevator twenty flights down to the street level, and exited the building. She stepped into the fog, which was the city, and which contained, like afterthoughts of discoloration, occasional cars and buildings.

After a long period of time, she arrived at a bridge between two masses of land. The land had been swallowed by the fog, and the bridge hung suspended, like some form of foreign punctuation, between regions of mist. Water flowed far beneath her feet. Angels from the Empyrean, soiled and listless, passed her as she stood gazing down into the flow of water, the only thing which moved and which promised escape from the fog. The woman unbound her scarf, released it, and watched it swim downwards, away from her, like some blood-hued aquatic creature returning home after a long absence. Piece by piece, she removed all of her clothes and discarded them. One by one, they floated away into the grey, rippling and undulating in quiet abandon. Naked, pale, her body curved like a giant finger aimed at the emptiness, she closed her eyes and opened her mouth. A rasping sound arose from deep within her chest. A smoky form emerged from her mouth, spilling upwards. Milk flowed from her flat breasts, and trickled in weeping rivulets over her distended ribcage. When she finally stepped from the edge of the bridge into the fog, she did not fall, but rather simply dissipated, like a cloud that had only momentarily assumed a human shape, and was now returning to the ebb and flow of the heavenly gases. Nothing was heard to plash upon the water below.

Somewhere nearby, an angel coughed, and dropped his cigarette onto the pavement. From the ash stain grew, in the weeks that followed, sharp and asymmetrical flower-forms, fashioned from shale, mica-schist, and obsidian.

The bridge remained, and said nothing.

That evening the fog grew tired, and its light began to dim. In its fatigue, it withdrew from doorways and alleys, and pulled back from cool rooftops, chased by the white and fiery steam from curling metal smokestacks. The fog, feeling the pain of its waning energies, opened its pearl-colored eye and looked down on the city. The eye was spotted, and the city was contained inside it, upside down and in miniature. This inverse city moved across the sky, slowly observing itself. Then the eye slid down behind the

skyscrapers, pulling the last tentacles of fog with it, and the angels that remained dissolved, unobtrusively, into whatever crevasses or hallowed caverns they could find behind the closed bathroom doors of the seedier bars.

The city slept. The water flowed.

This was a dream, only a dream, and you need not be concerned.

It Just Doesn't Work Like That by C. L. Bledsoe

First he was young, then he was old, then he was young again. Same with the presence of hair, teeth, tan—all gone, then there, then gone again. There was a young girl whom he didn't kiss, then one he did, then another he didn't. All more or less the same, all shifting, ever shifting from one presence to another.

He sat on a couch watching flickering lights, unable to focus, then saw perfectly, then saw dark blurs. Outside, trees grew and died and dogs barked and were silent. He reread the books of his youth and rediscovered the joy of unreality. Around him, a handful of people refused to shift back to their protean shapes. They glared and mumbled and patted and smiled. Some of them wanted things that they didn't realize had reverted. Some were after something they'd never had, being someone they'd never been. "It just doesn't work like that," he said, or would've if he remembered how to speak.

Songs of a Clerk by Gary Beck

Disaster

The people in my office  
laugh and chatter all day long.  
They are not typewriters,  
adding machines, duplicators.  
Just bodies, salesmen,  
clerks, secretaries,  
intent on business,  
while I puissant navigator  
founder on an iceberg.

Risk

The grey song of the morning subway,  
'stand impaled upon thy neighbor's horns,'  
the implacable charge to work,  
then the ambush is sprung  
on defenseless dreamers,  
an endangered species.

Temp

Temporary gypsy  
alone in unknown office,  
they talk distant people past me.  
Armed with sharpened pencils  
and dreary figures,  
I sit a mindless computer,  
leering at five o'clock.

Greeley Square IV

The dreariest of clerks  
goes to lunch in a twenty dollar suit,  
then sits in the sun in Greeley Square.  
The shabby people line the benches  
victims of the city pigeons.  
Weary and depressed,  
he tries in vain to lose his office,  
but fellow-workers find his refuge  
and smash the hope of escape.  
Finally they leave.  
Ten minutes left to dream.  
An elegant woman slowly passes,  
vacations in her handbag.  
He stares foreign lands and jewels at her.  
She doesn't see him.  
More than defeated,  
he returns to work.

The Office

Sameness of day  
in my clerk's crypt,  
windowless.... Stale.... Grey....  
The door opens.... More work.  
Closes.... Less Joy.

Directions for the Man in the Shirtsleeves found in the 1930's era Snapshot by David Macpherson

Look directly ahead. Be puzzled at the notion that someone is taking your picture. Grip the beer can in your left hand tight enough for the indentations to be noticeable from a distance. So many miles. So many years. Wear your hat at a high angle so that it does not shade your eyes. Squint from the sun or from habit. If your shirt is tucked in, be sure to pull out one tail. Fist up your right hand and hide it in your pants pocket. Purse your lips as if to ask why they are pointing that thing at me. Do not say it. Be paused. Be silent.

If you follow these directions, your soul will be lost forever. Your image will be stained and nestled for years in a box of vernacular photographs at a thrift shop. 2 dollars each. 3 for 5 dollars. You might be purchased and adhered into a collage. You might fade into grainy disregard.