

Black Blotches

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Junkies

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Hothouse

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Madhouse

Yellow Stuff

Max Carmichael

Demon Unleashed

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Loft of Dreams

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Club Foot

The Girl squinted through smoke at the lurid porno centerfolds papering the walls, her ears ringing and her body twitching nervously under an onslaught of conflicting drumbeats. She looked down at her bare feet in the dim light of the desk lamps surrounding the stage. Her toes crossed. She glanced sideways at Wib. What am I doing here, she thought. Wib was in another world, like all the others. Right in front of her a row of strangers swaying in a trance. She carefully set the maracas down under a lamp and ducked off the stage.

From out in the audience it was all more coherent. Over to one side the shadowy figure of her friend huddled, shivering miserably, three days off a dope binge. The sound of running water from a tape loop spread deliriously across the room, a wavering, translucent curtain of background noise. Two guitars traded funk chops. A manic drummer held to a stiff tribal roll, interrupted at random by cheesy wood block sounds from a primitive

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drum sequencer. Fenton sawed his fiddle atonally and Joe rumbled on the bass at his side. They were all dim in the swirling smoke. The lamps spread a wash of yellowish campfire light across the floor of the stage, illuminating only their bare feet.

In the center stood Wib, blowing a tarnished silver sax, notes flowing up and down scales which drifted in and out of key with the rest of the group. He looked beat but happy.

She scanned the smiling, mesmerized crowd, a motley assemblage of punks, hippies, yuppies, urban commandos in camo fatigues, boys in thriftshop jackets and girls in plastic miniskirts. From all over the city they had converged and now they wouldn't leave, they wouldn't let the band step down, even after three sets and five hours in this musty, smoky old room with nothing but Budweiser to drink. A hand on her shoulder, a tall gangly guy at her side. It was Richard, the proprietor. Who are these guys, he asked, guzzling his beer. How should I know, I just moved here from New York. No, no, I mean the band. Oh, it's just Wib's latest idea. He got a hair up his ass last week and called everybody in his book. People he didn't even know.

Nowhere to go but up, said Richard.

I'll say. Wib just quit his job, and now they're gonna evict him from this really cool studio.

Oh yeah? I might know a place.

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Mudflats

As you face the city there's a stream meandering down toward you across the tidal mudflats. Vapor rising and the stream flowing past your feet and away off behind you toward the slough. Generations ago when the world was at war far to the east and shipyards ran day and night laborers dug here in the mud and the scattered timbers of old shipwrecks, and carpenters hammered together sunken forms of rough board for a foundation. Piles of sand from the seaward dunes arrived in wagons drawn creaking from the hills by steaming draughthorses over plank roads floating on the mud, and bundles of blue steel rebar were hauled up from barges towed across the bay from the railhead on the far shore. They threw up towering frames for columns at the corners and spaced along the sides and braced them plumb and stood the rebar haphazardly inside, having learned this new practice of building only recently from their foreman who'd been given the plans by the owner, a young neapolitan immigrant. The plans had been copied from another project and redimensioned by the owner's brother who was in tradeschool. Working fast under orders shouted from the ground, men jumped high on the wagonbeds shoveling sea sand quarried gravel and portland cement into the hopper of a big splattered steamdriven mixer, a handvalve was twisted and water splattered from the pipe of a tankwagon, and before the mixing was well completed the sludgy concrete pushed its way down a chute they muscled over the forms, and the foundations were laid.

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Pith and Bark

Walk through the building at night. The floorslab, a yard below street level, floats on mud and underneath the stream still flows in silence. But massive columns hold the walls like limbs raised up by the earth and concrete beams span between them and in the shadows it's as heavy and solid as a fortress. It's when you approach the patch of streetlight cast on the wall by the small high window in back that you see the signature of old naive construction. Like bedded gravels in a mountain roadcut, sinuous layers of coarse pebbles alternate with smooth concrete in the walls, and salt from the sea sand has bubbled paint and blistered lime on their surface. As if the materials in these walls were laid down by seasonal floods instead of men and machinery. Touch them in the right places and a powder crumbles off. And the columns - their sides are split, and that rebar, now rusted clean through in places, bulges out like frayed sinews in a wound.

Clearly this building has outlived its short-sighted design. But the long string of regular seasons in their rhythmic bedchangings of summer fogcover and cleansing winter rains has permeated the cast concrete and forged steel like sap through pith and bark, and now in its breathing and seeping and flaking it truly is a limb of the earth, grafted on and uneasily borne over this mudflat with its patched jacketing of truckrattling streets and its derelict company of misinhabited warehouses and tenements from early days. The earth has long claimed them back from men, and no one can say how much longer they will be allowed to stand.

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Blood and Lipstick

Look up from the street outside. The building leans, underdrawn by the old stream. And it has a face - not the facade uniformly white-washed, but a fancy front for the upper story, capped by red clay tiles. A neapolitan face with spiral columns of tin stamped in fanciful relief, framing tall arched windows outlined a pale blue. No one's home - the windows are black now. Let's go up there. The small door's on the left - don't mind the official-looking red tag signed and stapled to it. Don't mind the dark narrow stairway - the eyes will adjust. Up past peeling paint and warped framing and wavy lines of spraypaint and the message I LOVE YOU - WAKE UP. Don't mind the planes of walls and ceiling at odd angles like the spurious gravitational anomaly of a roadside attraction. Your body's limbic system will adjust, and your eyes will forget. Push open the door at the top and notice the deep gauges cleft and wedged open by an axeblade. Suddenly streetlight from the windows and a space opens out with a high white ceiling and you step lightly up a few steps onto a white floor canted slightly like the deck of a ship suddenly frozen in gentle seas, and the white walls of a large room. You feel watched, but it's only the tiny plastic figures on the railing at your elbow - an army tank, a squirrel, a boy in kilt - while jumping out at you from the far wall, where someone's painted it from end to end in dripping letters the color of wet blood and lipstick, the proclamation LAST PARTY - THE END.

Rubble in the corners and under the wall where chunks of concrete have fallen off. Walk quickly through the rooms. The earth's claimed them back from men, and no one can

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say how long they'll be allowed to stand. The big kitchen flooded by a huge skylight, vacated by all but a sink. Hallway funnels and dives under an overhanging loft past a dark hunchback contraption which on closer examination is a dead computer screen enshrined within an oversize black casing encrusted with bristling heatsinks and archaic capacitors and coils and vacuum tubes. They are all wired together and tiny light bulbs are mounted in the circuits between them.

Padlock

Walk into the dark narrow corridor and around the corner and through the open door on your right. Let your eyes adjust to the light. Yes, that's some animal's head over on the wall. Pass by it on your way to the ladder - coyote's skull with the fur still on, dried and shrunken, eyesockets gaping, the lips pulled back in a fiendish grin.

The rooftop guarded by a low battlement, cabled pikes of lightpoles and scattered dark tenements out there, the freeway's rush and rumbling at your back, and in the near distance the city skyline, soft windowlights where in this late hour some still fear to make their beds. And off behind the hills, below the waves, running on the seashelf like a stonework zipper, the fragile crustal scar they call the San Andreas. It's time to go, and when you close the street door for the last time Dancy steps out of the shadows behind you and secures it with a heavy padlock.

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Wib

There was this young guy, Wilbur, called Wib. He woke up one morning and found himself lying in a pool of soft yellow light. The light fell through five tall windows arched at the top and framed delicately with wood. They took up almost the whole front wall. My windows? he thought.

Months ago he'd been evicted from a house he'd put a year of work into, a recording studio he'd built, ripped off by a crooked landlord. Followed by months of searching, months of drifting, sleeping on couches and floors. Then suddenly, this answer to all his dreams. There must be a catch.

For a while before he got up he watched the Girl beside him. Then he let his eyes wander over the dense joists of the high ceiling with their x-braces, down along the rough concrete walls. Cracked in places, with chunks missing. Back, back, into the hazy space at the far end of the building, light falling from skylights along the way.

He got up and balanced himself for a minute against the tilt of the floor. It seemed even worse now that he was living there. Would he get used to it? The manager said he would. Alice was a good-looking woman in her forties who slept with Buck the owner, who had a business and ventured in real estate on the side. Alice had said there was an old stream running under one side of the building, eating away at it.

Wib flushed the toilet and imagined the water falling through the downstairs spaces, dark,

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into an underground stream no one would ever see. There was no door on the bathroom yet, and as he walked straight back to where the mattress lay on the floor by the windows the Girl started to get up, pushing her little arms into a flowery flannel nightie. The morning light was soft and it seemed to carry with it the sounds of the city coming to life outside, and for a minute he was as happy as he could be.

Moses

Outside, Omar watched Moses coming along the sidewalk. A tall, handsome scarecrow, prophetic before his time. His pale blue eyes stared straight ahead but he seemed to be looking off into space, beyond the world's end. He walked slowly, leaning into the walls and storefronts, his fingers gently tracing a path along their surface at eye level, a contact somewhere between the touch of a lover and the tapping of a blind man's cane. At the alley called Belva Street he followed the corner around and was gone. Omar stood smoking against the rail in front of his store, waiting for Moses to reappear. Moses felt his way around the block like this day in and day out.

Lurch

The Girl was short and had delicate hands and feet. She'd just dropped out of art school, and her boyfriend, the one everybody called Lurch, had been stabbed by Mexicans and was recovering at home, in a farm town out in the Valley. Tall and gaunt, with sunken eyes, he had trouble talking and he had no friends at school. He'd been out walking the railroad

tracks at night and the Mexicans had craved his leather jacket. When he picked up a two-by-four to fight them off, they stabbed him seven times in the chest and gut.

So she stayed with Wib and followed him around as he searched for a home. Their first night was in a black basement so quiet their breathing kept them awake, where they lay in blankets separated by a few feet of cold floor. After a while he'd said You can sleep with me if you want. She thought about it in the pitch dark, then she joined him. They embraced and he began to remember things he'd taught himself to forget. He told her it'd been years since he'd last slept with anyone.

One night on the mattress by the tall windows she sat beside him while he lay on his back with his eyes closed talking about his childhood. How he had a secret hiding place in a thicket of thorn trees no one else could get through. How for years the other kids around him had grown taller while he stayed short and one day some kids'd shot at him with pellet guns from a railroad bridge, and he'd run for his life for miles never stopping to look back.

She kept saying you're gonna have to go way down to find your anger and he kept spiralling down into himself and his past until he was crying and shaking all over, and finally she held him and mopped up his tears with the sheet. They turned off the light and slowly made love. When she got up to go to the bathroom with her hand between her legs he watched her pale naked body receding in the streetlight from the windows. He felt confused, but also comforted, that they didn't love each other.

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Lurch came to visit. For a few days they were a little family and they got along well. It was Lurch's idea to divide the place into rooms along diagonals. The building itself was aligned southwest-to-northeast, like Route 66, and the skylights were arranged haphazardly. By laying out a diagonal hallway, each room would be assured good light.

Wib started by tearing down walls that somebody else had built, walls that didn't make sense. He took the broken chunks of drywall and made a fort around his bed, there at the front of the building. Across the wall of the fort he painted "Little Indiana".

Hothouse

After midnight Wib prowled the dark basins with his friend Fenton. They drove through small lakes of oily sewage behind abandoned factories, looking for unguarded lumber. Finally in nether regions shadowed by the massive decks of a freeway bypass they found an unfinished warehouse with open doors, precut joists and studs stacked neatly inside. They labored all night shuttling timbers to the loft on top of their little car. Returning to the building they waited for stragglers to pass on the sidewalk, heading home from the Hothouse. Men with handlebar mustaches who walked with their arms around each other, black leather caps and jackets and chaps and boots, men who looked dazed and fatigued.

Duff Skye

Wib had been trained as an engineer but he'd

been avoiding his profession for a while, working odd jobs. One day on a bus he met an old colleague who was now working for a prominent consultant in the nuclear industry. The consultant, a respected senior engineer named Duff Skye, was putting together a company of hotshot troubleshooters to help clean up massive, corrupt, and dangerous construction projects.

Wib's first assignment was at an aging nuclear plant far away in a sunny oceanside resort town. Duff Skye rented a beachfront condo for the staff and flew down with them. Together they attended the mandatory security school and waited outside a trailer for their health checkups and background radiation scans.

Duff is a compact powerhouse just turned fifty, something of a loose cannon, rallying his little entourage like the chief of a Highlands clan. He nudges Wib. Check this out, he points with his chin at the hardbitten lady sitting across the lot. What're you waiting for, he shouts at her over the sound of air compressors. I'm a jumper, she says. I get paid forty dollars an hour to wait.

Duff laughs. What do you mean, he says, laughing.

I'm a jumper. She takes a puff on her Marlboro. I'm a welder. I volunteer to go inside the steam generator and weld underwater.

Duff grins at Wib. The steam generator's unspeakably radioactive.

They call us jumpers, says the woman. Nobody's allowed to be in there more than a

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couple minutes, so we rotate. We get paid by the hour just to sit here, on call.

She winks. Sometimes a whole week goes by and I just sit here without getting called, collecting my pay.

It's not steady work though. After a few jumps you build up your maximum dose for a three month period, and then you have to lay off, work outside jobs.

She takes another puff. Speaks low: But you can get around it. Travel to other parts of the country, other plants. Lots of times they can't trace you. They never really try anyway.

People like that're what make this country strong, says Duff later in the car. Crazy white trash. He turns to smile at Wib. I hope you like shark, cause that's all I could get at the dock. Do you read Hunter Thompson? Now there's a fisherman. Fear and Loathing? Greatest book ever written. Damn, I forgot the whiskey! He tears the little sports car off the freeway and up a steep ramp.

Yellow Stuff

Next morning the four of them are standing in a filthy concrete basement wearing protective suits, boots, helmets, and gloves. Duff Skye, Wib, the security escort and a guy from Bechtel sharing the dim, damp little room with a pump and pipes running everywhere. This is the end of the road, says the guy from Bechtel. That filter you need to examine is behind this wall, and it's so damn hot you'll never get near it. I believe they'll just have to entomb it.

What, shouts Duff over the sound of the pump. Entomb it! Just seal it off forever! Shit, says Duff. What's that, says Wib. Duff turns around. Look, up there! Duff looks up at a cloud of bright yellow vapor blowing out of a seam of pipe hanging from the ceiling. What could that be, says Duff. The security escort is already out the door. Duff hears his boots scurrying up the stairs. Let's get out of here, he says. A siren begins howling outside.

Outside it's blindingly bright. The gates they have to pass are open, the guard's nowhere to be seen. They meet a longhaired tradesman under the main steam lines where they come out of containment, the big old spherical shell towering over them dripping rusty sludge like the actual planet itself. He puts out a smoke as they come up, but Duff smells pot hanging in the air. They let you smoke that in here? The tradesman laughs: No! his pupils totally dilated. What's that siren for, says Duff. Sirens just go off. You get used to 'em, says the tradesman. Duff turns to Wib again, winks. I wouldn't worry about that yellow stuff. It's the stuff you can't see'll kill you.

Punk Monster

Wib's grandpa had taught him the rudiments of carpentry. Each night after he got home from Skye he took up the old man's skilsaw and shoved it through the stolen boards. It whined like a banshee and the boards hit the floor. Shut UPPPPPPPPP! It was Punk Monster screaming downstairs. Downstairs was cavernous and had no windows and people lived there in little cells made of crude salvage plywood. There was a mezzanine floor, a cramped space with a very low ceiling, and the ground

floor was sunken a few feet below the street level. Cold and dark and clammy.

When Wib first moved in he'd met George, who was the leader down there. George did not seem excited about anybody moving in upstairs, but he was civil. George was dressed in a thrift shop suit and he hadn't shaved in a few days. The floor between them was just thin tongue-and-groove pine. You could hear people down there talking on the phone or fucking, and George played the piano at odd times of day, but the piano was way down on the ground floor, and George's long melodic improvisations were not so bad. On the other hand, Punk Monster's room was right under the skilsaw. And she screamed really good because she was always practicing. She played the sax, and she would scream ARGGGGGH EEEEEARGGGGGH in between wild blasts on her horn.

Wib worked alone. He laid out the floor plan with tape, inside and outside walls, carefully measuring, using his grandpa's old plumb bob to true the walls in spite of the crazy tilt of the entire building. The idea that space could be divided into private rooms, each with a little natural light. Odd corners. The framing, finding ways to frame in the odd corners, figuring out how to frame the doorways, how to frame up to the joists which were always at angles and never perpendicular. It was the biggest project he'd ever tackled and it was completely his own. He was building his dream.

A friendly contractor told him where to buy materials cheap and gave him a drywall square and a chalkline. On the day the drywall was delivered he left off work and carried the

half inch drywall up the two flights of stairs and through the doorway and around the corner and up the top stairs, a sheet at a time, over a ton of it altogether, by himself. Drywall was anchored to the studs with self-tapping screws called grabbers, and they screamed when they went in. Punk Monster honked on her sax and howled bloody murder.

Art Student

As the rooms neared completion Fenton moved in. One day the Girl took Wib to a donut shop on skid row to meet her new friend the Bike Messenger. He was young and smart, and he'd just arrived in the city from some small cowboy town, ready to mix things up. Over bad coffee they shared the intensity of their dreams, to have a band, build a community of artists, put on extravagant multimedia shows. In a few days the Bike Messenger was hammering together a sleeping loft in his own triangular room.

The last room Wib built had the most light. Helen, a slim, quiet, prematurely gray painter, showed up to take it. To celebrate the completion of their group she hosted a little party with snacks and tea. Wib stood by the railing under the big kitchen skylight talking to Helen's friend, the very young Art Student. She was dressed in forest green fatigues and old canvas sneakers with holes in them and her big eyes were clear and her lips were painted a wet-looking red. She'd grown up in the country like Wib. I'm really looking to camp out somewhere soon she said. Have you ever been to Point Reyes? Neither have I! Can you take off next weekend? Wib noticed the Bike Messenger in the corner staring at her

intensely.

As Wib left work on Friday, Duff Skye pulled him aside. I need you to go in the power plant again. The others won't do it, that last little incident scared 'em off. You're not afraid of a little radiation, are you? Wib looked away. Let me think about it. Duff pushed him against the wall. You think about it and have an answer for me on Monday morning. This thing has gotten out of hand. There's no room for pussies around here. Don't you let me down too.

At the top of the ridge Wib and the Art Student stopped and looked out over the fault valley and the rolling hills beyond. A golden haze of summer lay over the landscape. It looks like the Ten Commandments. Like the Promised Land. I know what you mean, she said. Like it's frozen in time, like a film or a photograph. They lay on a hillside under a live oak and he told her about his father's suicide and his sister who burned to death. She told him about her grandfather who looked like John Muir and took her on hikes and taught her the plants. They moved up into a grove of pines and lay closer and let their eyes wander over each other's light summer clothing. Their conversation drifted to an end. Finally they kissed. Her skin was pale and like she'd saved it from the sun she'd saved her love too, and after they'd talked and let it all sink in, it was safe to let what was inside flow together in paleness and tenderness. Days later they'd find they'd been rolling in poison oak.

Pigeon Man

The loft construction was mostly done when

the downstairs people put together a band and began practicing. The painter's room was right over them. They started at one in the morning. Helen came out crying with her prematurely gray hair standing straight up, and they all met in the kitchen. The last to come out was Fenton, who was also the biggest. His eyes bloodshot, he staggered, putting on his secondhand leather jacket. Helen clenched her fists and beat the table. I can't stand this at all. I can't sleep in this place. Now wait a minute, Fenton said. We'll just pay them a little visit. Yeah, sure, said the Bike Messenger, rolling his eyes.

The five of them gathered outside in a line, facing the rollup door in the alley. From inside, voices. A guitar feeding back and Punk Monster yelling at George. Farther down the alley Pigeon Man was trying to shoot a pigeon off a telephone pole. His rifleshots echoed off the tall dark tenements that leaned back from the sidewalk.

The five of them looked at each other. The two women were dressed in nightgowns and the men wore leather jackets. Urine soaked trash surrounded them in the alley. Fenton knelt down and gripped the bottom of the door with his fingers and the others followed. They strained. The door lifted slowly and then smoothly gave way and they walked into a cavernous room filled with smoke and light. At the other end the band turned with their eyes wide. What the HELL Punk Monster said.

Fenton was casting about, looking for the power. George went over and stood in front of a big outlet. You can't do that. Like hell I can't.

Wait a minute, Wib said, spreading his hands for peace. We're trying to sleep. You guys can't just practice in the middle of the night.

We can practice whenever the fuck we want. Punk Monster was tall and broadshouldered and her eyes bugged out. She looked like a bar fighter, shaggy bleached hair and chains with skulls and bones and hardware hanging all over her. I've had to listen to your god-damn pounding and ripping all summer long. George looked back and forth from her to Fenton. Let's try to reach a peaceful solution, hows about it, you guys?

Fenton advanced on Punk Monster growling. I'll shut your power down. I'll shut it down you fucker. Wait a minute, Wib said. You guys finish by eleven, we're done with the construction, we won't bother you anymore. You just can't expect to play while we're trying to sleep.

Punk Monster and Fenton almost touching.

You play after eleven, I'll shut it down, he said.

SHIIIIITTTTTT! she screamed at him, he fell back.

A few days later there were some boards to be cut. Wib tried a handsaw but it was too slow. The minute the skilsaw came on they were running up the stairs and they actually took an axe to the door but when they heard him coming they fled. Wib took to sawing on the roof.

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Junkies

He got home from work one day as a Mercedes was pulling up in front of Omar's store. Two guys in suits got out and stood talking to Omar by the curb. Omar often had Mercedeses and BMWs out in front. He'd been in the Army for a long time and he continued to do business that way. Guys would bring over cars from Germany and he would sell them here. They opened the trunk and took two styrofoam coolers into the store. Later Wib saw another Mercedes stop and pick up the coolers. It was supposed to be a record store but nobody ever saw anyone buy a record. The whites of Omar's eyes were a rich yellow-gold and totally shot with veins.

The Sunday morning sunlight washed down through the windows and over the group. Gathered around an old sofa chanting and beating on guitars and kitchen utensils. All of them were there, Wib, the Girl, the Art Student, Fenton, Helen the painter, the Bike Messenger and the Singer who was in love with him, and Joe. They were a band, a loft, a community - Wib's dream - for a day. They played and chanted and peaked together in the sunlight. They decided to have a picnic. Joe told them about a park. It was up the hill by the Projects. They picnicked around a jungle gym overlooking the Bay. The fresh sea wind blew through their hair and they talked excitedly about all the cool things they were going to do together.

She's a junkie said the Bike Messenger. She's bragging about it. They're best friends. Wib and the Messenger were jamming in the big room. As Wib had got more involved with the Art Student the Girl had gone off looking for

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new friends. She hadn't gone far - there were lots of junkies, boozeheads, ex-cons, and hustlers in the neighborhood ready to be your friend. The junkie lived in a flophouse with other junkies and she and the Girl soon decided to start a band. The Girl didn't like the painter at all so she decided to rehearse one night in the kitchen after everyone else had gone to bed, just to piss Helen off. Wib's bed was next to the kitchen but he didn't get up until he heard Helen coming down the hall. They got in a screaming fight and the junkie band finally retreated to the front room, where they sat drinking cheap wine and laughing about how square everybody else was.

Lovesick Cow

Twice a week Wib came home from work with a sixpack of exotic beer for the loft band. They were united in that they all wanted to be in a band but not with each other. They respected Wib because he drove them to do things, but for the same reason they resented him. None of them were really musicians except the Singer, who sang in a medieval chorus. She and the Bike Messenger worked together and she was in love with him. He let her sleep with him but they never made love. Fenton thought the Bike Messenger was insane to treat her like that. She had a clear, ringing operatic voice and she kept trying to put her soul in it but she was afraid to.

Fenton was the oldest. He'd been drafted into the Vietnam War and then fled to Canada where he had a pretty good life, until all hell broke loose one day. He had to flee the country again, this time back to where he started.

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The day after he got back to the US he was hit by a car and tumbled like a rag doll.

He'd had a hard row to hoe, and he was fighting just to stay on top of it. He was smart but blocked up somehow. He snorted massive crystal to keep up with the rest of them. A prodigious tinkerer when cranked, he dismantled and reassembled his fiddle into a sleek gray amplified device that moaned like a lovesick cow.

Cheese Graters and Piepans

Next came Joe. Gay, brilliant, and intense, he had a heart of gold except when it came to other gays. He shared Wib's dreams and had enough professional theater experience to pursue them. The problems came when he drank. He was always in danger of lashing out at inanimate objects, particularly under the influence of music. Over the months they jammed together he damaged countless serving spoons and cheese graters and piepans and destroyed a favorite antique chair.

Maypole

This was the band that would change history forever. They began in a catharsis of anti-nostalgia, subjecting the musical memories of their childhoods to a cruel and relentless process of deconstruction. Everything was being recorded on an archaic, oversize reel-to-reel strapped to the wall, and after weeks of sawing beating yanking and blowing on their instruments, droning and harrying each other with frenzied chants, they began to identify signature tunes, some almost recognizable

from musical tradition.

But music alone was not enough. They proposed to invade and captivate the city's Financial District during the lunch hour, when every suited automaton would be abroad. They planned and rehearsed a series of disruptive drills, original performances resembling varieties of mass hysteria, like St. Vitus' Dance, perhaps brought on by some virus evoking the dim memories of pagan ritual in the souls of corporate officeworkers.

On the big day they marched around the columns of an insurance company skyscraper, shouting "Life!" "Trust!" "Security!" while Joe counted time on his wood blocks. A video crew followed them everywhere. Accompanied by Fenton's droning tape loops, Joe stood modestly on the steps of the Stock Exchange, narrating the old legend of the Little Boy and his Digging Stick who destroyed the Evil Serpent of the Underworld and founded a venerable financial institution. For a climax, they helped the Bike Messenger climb upon a hideous monolithic sculpture in the public plaza below the city's tallest building.

He crouched like Atlas on the black stone of death, one arm aloft, tethering the others with strands of multicolored cloth as they ran around the stone in a great circle. It was essentially a maypole dance. Awestruck bike messengers gathered with their radios, spreading the news. Bystanders were interviewed by the video crew. Many believed it was one of the city's ancient and sanctified traditions.

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Madhouse

Content that they had outdone themselves, they decided to follow up with a straightforward concert of instrumental music. Their audience would be the indigent and massively impaired population of the county sanitarium. This had become a popular venue for benefit concerts by the city's punk bands. Joe easily secured a formal invitation from the administrators, who were anxious for any diversion.

He gathered cheap black-and-white TV sets from rec rooms and cafeterias throughout the great madhouse, arraying them in a bank across the front of the stage, all tuned to different channels. He explained to Wib that it would make the patients feel at home and give them something to focus on. The patients were wheeled or led into the huge hall one by one, and when they were seated they were each given plenty of space, so they couldn't drool on each other.

Behind the TV's, the band was dressed smartly in their thrift-shop suits. They played a tightly rehearsed set of heart-wrenchingly nostalgic tunes that were almost identifiable, and in between songs Wib would lecture the insensate audience on history, linguistics, and microbiology. It was afternoon, and autumn sunlight slanted through the windows. Almost every TV had a soap opera going.

Tea and Strawberries

Back at the loft, the junkie situation had gone from bad to worse. Finally submitting to the stress of battling bands and roommates, Wib caught a nasty cold that fall. His room was the

smallest one and the only one without natural light. There was a handmade ladder that went up to a sleeping loft over the hallway. It was like sleeping in a submarine and he had scrawled DIVE! across the wall with a marker.

Through his thick head he heard someone climbing the ladder. The Art Student appeared and she lifted a teapot onto the ledge beside him and a basket of strawberries. Her lips were the color of the strawberries. She grabbed his ragged hair and leaned over and kissed him and he sputtered You'll get sick and she laughed I don't care.

Can you smell this? It's yerba maté. My grandfather drank it every day of his life and he lived to be a hundred and two.

It was incredibly strong tea. He drank it and she fed him strawberries and cuddled him and he felt much better.

Black Blotches

Through the walls, he could hear the junkies arriving, and then and there he decided the Girl would have to move. A few days later, he took her aside by the windows and they had it out.

She vowed, ominously, to fuck him up.

Wib's deadline came and went. The Girl was gone and her things were packed up in her room. Wib went in and looked in her footlocker. There was his grandpa's skilsaw, where she had hidden it in a pathetic attempt at theft. He shut the lid of the trunk and sat on it, there amid her sorry estate. There were

some very small shoes. An open boxful of papers caught his eye, and he lifted a few out. A sketchbook appeared, smidged all over with charcoal.

Student sketches, life drawings, bold messy strokes bringing the fat models to life in their awkward poses. Not bad. Then halfway through he smiled. It was a drawing of himself, pushing his grandpa's saw through a board, the tall windows backlit behind him.

After a while he turned the page and found another Wib, this one bent over the guitar, eyes closed, singing. The line she'd drawn for his throat was so graceful, he choked up a little, glancing over at her shoes with a tear in his eye. There were many more sketches of the loft and its people, and they gradually became dark and violent, wild jagged figures with their teeth bared. Near the end she'd made a series of self-portraits. In them she was wearing her black leather jacket and she seemed to be trying to achieve a haunted, pained, and accusatory look, exaggerating the depth and size of her eyes and shrinking the flesh from her face. Even so, she made herself look very beautiful.

The last pages were splattered with black blotches and he was about to return the book to its box when he recognized a face among the spots. It was himself again, this time naked and sprawled with hollow ribs and a pointy little penis. He was on other pages, too, ending the book, fallen in broken positions as if beaten to death, and blotched at random by compulsively rubbed black spots.

He snapped the sketchbook shut and took it to his room with the saw. At his door he hesi-

tated. If she misses it she knows where to find me. He went to the hardware store and bought a new lock for the front door.

When she came back Fenton was there alone. She pounded on the door but he wouldn't let her in so she pleaded with him and said she just wanted her stuff. When Fenton opened the door she ran past him to her room and jumped on her desk and said You can't make me leave. Her father the bearded symphony conductor was waiting on the sidewalk, looking patient and distracted. He watched in growing admiration as Fenton carried the desk all the way down the stairs and out to the car with his daughter on top of it.

Demon Unleashed

Behind the loft a towering rickety tenement afloat in a choppy sea of vine-entangled junk. The old stream undercuts it like a slow rip-tide. Wib stands alone on his roof leaning against the battlements, facing this sad tinderbox. Looking down he sees the floodgates part and Dancy wrestling a huge industrial fan housing. With two helpers the big old man muscled it into a muddy clearing behind the privacy of his wooden gate, and Wib smiles down on the tops of their heads as they all stand back to appraise and admire it.

The sheetmetal nautilus all mossed over with black grease. Iridescent pools reflecting an acid vision of heaven from the ancient muds of the floodplain. Dancy bends to strike a match on his shoe, and straightening up he tosses it into the fan intake. Wib falls back. A coil of flame drills the sky like an old demon unleashed on this vagrant world.

This story is the first in a series.

For more information see www.maxcarmichael.com.

Moses Lurch p

Cheese Graters and Pic

Club F

Duff Skye Pith a

Lovesick Cow

Blood and Lips

Maypole

Mudflats

Pigeon Man

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