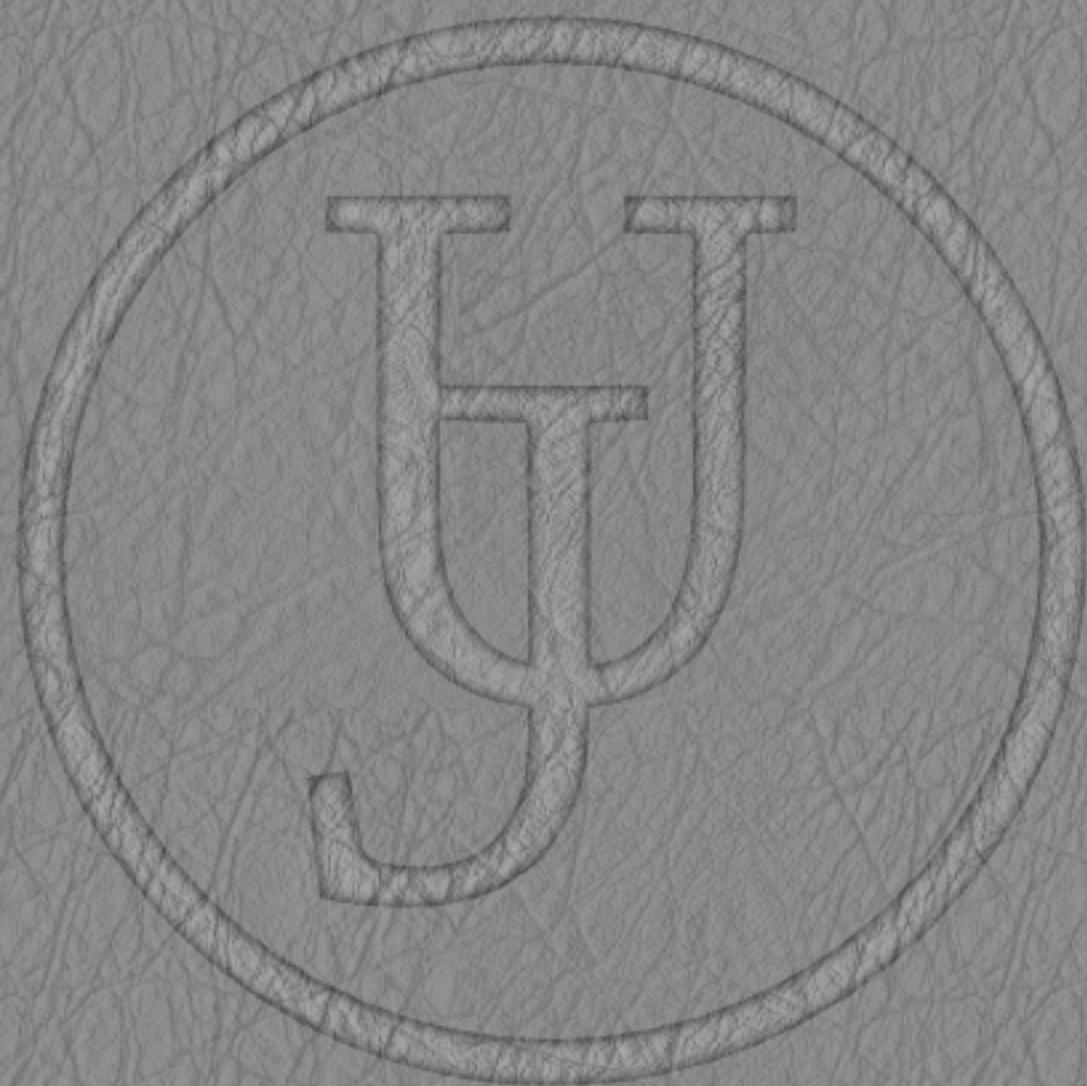


The One We Forgot the Tag Line For

Unnamed Journal



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Part 2

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To whom it may concern,

Where the hell is our money? Seriously, you and your "staff" need to settle your bar tab immediately! I'm not sure how you managed to get the owner to extend credit to your company, but if you don't pay us the \$9,372.48 that you owe us for your "staff meetings" you're going go from drinking like fish to sleeping with them. Consider this your last warning: settle your tab at Nico's Bar, or we'll come and settle you. We mean that in the nicest possible way.

Warm regards,

-George K.

Uh, I'm sure you have us mistaken for some other magazine's staff. We've never heard of Nico's Bar or you George. We can't help but sense some hostility, though. Perhaps some unresolved anger issues stemming from childhood trauma? Fortunately for you, the doctor is in! We'll diagnosis and treat all of your psychosis and neurosis for the super-low prices of \$9,372.48. Sound fair?

Dear UJ,

Whoa! Did those Zombies in that last story read Des Cartes or Shakespeare? I gotta know!

-liberal_arts_fan159

Hi, Liberal Arts fan! Maybe they did? They thought, therefore they zombied? Or perhaps they realized that all the world's a stage and actors are delicious? We're glad that the story got your wheels turning. Now, if we could just figure out how to keep the lights on at the office...

Hello, subjects!

I would like to point out that disclosing the secret techniques of feline governance is crime punishable by death in my kingdom. You will not see my assassins, but they will see you.

Adieu,

-Emperor Mittens

Jeez, Mittens! That seems awfully harsh. And after I fed you all that naturally sourced salmon in gravy too! I think perhaps you're getting better treatment from another one of your subjects, which would explain why you feel comfortable dispatching us in such a cold and impersonal way. I think I need to have a conversation with my wife about her pedagogy regarding feline phonics, and the associated reward system for her pupils.

FROM THE PUBLISHER

This is apparently not a joke.

I mean, one issue could be a joke. Two issues, a rather involved joke. Three starts to look like actual work.

So if you're holding this third issue in your hand, you must come to terms with the realization that we are just going to keep doing this. Do not ask what possesses us. There are no answers to such things. Chalk it up to us being crazy and leave it at that.

Constantly finding new literature to fill the pages of a magazine is something like looking for truffles, in that it's delicious to succeed and boring to fail and you're a pig regardless. People have the wrong idea about creativity: they think it's a holy alchemy of genius and inspiration when it's really just coding for an upload to human consciousness. It doesn't matter how creative you are if your stuff doesn't interface with the audience

And that's the justification for having a story called "The Dragon". Even if you think this is a new kind of story. It's called "The Dragon." That gives you an idea of what you might expect – something fearsome this way comes, at some point. By the same token, if you read the last issue – and why would you be reading these words if you haven't – you likely formed some opinion of "When Charlie Got Back, Pt. 1". Whether you followed that particular path down that particular rabbit hole or not, you understood that there would be a conclusion. Here it is. Tell us later if you thought it concluded well. Someone will read it.

The third piece, a bit of commentary about just how dazzling the histrionics of first-world problems can be, might run the risk of being too topical. The future will have to decide.

Thomas Fitz
Publisher

THE DRAGON

By Tim Fibble

A family of gypsies told Geor that the Dragon lived in the next ruin over. They always said that. In the six weeks of his wandering, Geor had been told about the Dragon from numerous traders and whatever scrub farmers would give him a meal in exchange for a days work, but whenever he went where they told him he found only more scrap and ash and crumbles of the days before the Fire. He was starting to convince himself that there was no Dragon.

There should be a Dragon. The Fire that ate the Old World had brought all manner of beasts about. Zombies, Ash-Eaters, Blood-Bears, and worse lived in the night's darkness of the blasted forests and pyramids of burned stone. Geor had even seen one: a twisted Lizard-Man, displayed on a gallows outside the ringfort of the Mayor-General of Sattle. It was dead and looked unhappy.

Geor had gone to his canvas huttle that night convinced that in the morning he'd forget all about it. But when morning came, as he washed out the lingering tang of spice likker, Geor found he couldn't get the thought of a Dragon out of his head. Before the day was up he told the strong-boss he was going off to see him a Dragon. The strong-boss spat and told him he was a fool. Geor nodded and left.

In the last six weeks, he'd seen a few monsters across the lands, but all of them were man-size. Most of them were human. A gang of six cannibals in horned helmets had tried to make a meal of him on the second or third night away from Sattle. The leader of them had a curved hatchet with lots of nasty sharp points. He waved it around like he knew how to use it, but seemed to expect Geor to just kneel and beg for his life. Most of them did, he supposed. But instead Geor took the hatchet away from the cannibal and buried it in his belly. He screamed like a small child and the rest of them ran away. Geor took the hatchet and the helmet and cut off the cannibal's head. On the top of his forehead, ragged in shape and drawn almost out of flame itself, was a tattoo of a dragon rampant.

After that most travelers avoided Geor, which was how he liked it. Nobody to put him off, nobody to tell him he was a fool. Once, on a dirt road with what looked like a fenced-in ranch in the distance, a man on a horse road up to within twenty feet of him. Geor stopped and looked at him with his hand in his belt near the handle of the hatchet. The horseman lifted his hat and got a good look at Geor, gave a satisfied nod, and then turned his horse the other way.

"I'm looking for the Dragon," said Geor.

"It lives in the next ruin," said the horseman, without looking back.

But all Geor found in the next ruin was the shells of dead buildings and human

bones. He walked through the ruin and slept under the branches of young oak tree. That was where the family of gypsies found him. They offered him food and water for a day if he'd travel along with them to keep the cannibals away. Geor said he was looking for the Dragon. They said they would be going near where it was.

"I've seen you," said the gypsy's daughter. "In a dream".

"Her dreams don't lie" the gypsy said.

"Fine," said Geor, and he travelled with them three days.

The gypsy's daughter was young and skinny and her left eye was dead and black. Many times Geor found himself staring at it, trying to find the center where they iris should be. Every time she would say "I see you," and he would stop.

On the second night a man with a hook for a hand jumped out at the family from the darkness. Geor stood up and pulled his hatchet but the man was too fast and clawed Geor's hand with the hook. This made Geor mad, so he caught the next slash of the hook at the man's wrist and with his other hand seized the man's neck. They wrestled a bit, but Geor was taller and gradually used his leverage to shove the man down to the ground. He broke the man's arm in two places and hit him on the head with a rock and while he lay there moaning went back for his hatchet, so as to make the coup de grace. When the gypsies left in the morning, the dead man's body lay stripped, with the dismembered hook shoved up his naked rectum like a bent pin. Just above was a tattoo of dragon teeth, from which flame rose up his back.

On the third day the gypsy said that he had no more need of Geor; that the lands beyond were safe. Geor knew that to be a lie but did not challenge him. Geor asked where the Dragon was. The gypsy sneered and pointed to a rise a day's walk off. "Your death is there," he said. "Every fool will tell you the beast is in some other place, but none of them have seen it. I have."

"Is it really a Dragon?"

"If it is not a Dragon, I don't know what is."

That night, after a long meal and a horn of spice likker, Geor awoke to find the gypsy's daughter athwart him, under his bedroll. She looked down at him and he looked up at her dead black eye and she moved her hips and aroused his manhood and told him his fortune.

"You will be remembered," she said, "You will find the Dragon. You will know it. You are a killer."

"Yes," said Geor, and he entered her.

The Dragon

When he woke, the gypsies were gone.

* * *

At nightfall Geor made the rise and looked beyond to the pile of trash and scrap that seemed to extend forever in all directions. Metal and bone and dirt alike seemed to meld together into a common ashen brown and tiny blue flames winked in and out. Geor looked at all of this and was certain that something looked back at him. He watched the blue flames all night long, seeking signs of movement. Occasionally a ripple seemed to flow through the scrap, but Geor could not tell if it was real or just his mind and the flames playing tricks on him. When the greenish-orange light began to filter through the gloom in the east, Geor stood and began to trek nimbly through stumps of pines for the pit of scrap.

He reached it before midmorning. A corrugated green-grey fence circled the mess like a torn belt. Parts of it were missing. The fact of it suggested some form of intelligence, however degraded and chaotic, had entered this space and made it its home. He felt a new kind of fear.

Finding a gap in the fence was easier than figuring out where to go once through. A labyrinth of dirt paths splayed out like veins through the rubble, widening and narrowing and stopping suddenly. Geor followed them as best he could, heading towards what he imagined to be the center. He did not dare to climb the mounds of scrap. They looked as though they would collapse with a single footstep.

Geor made his way, ignoring the uncanny awareness of being watched. He had decided last night that something or someone would know of his presence as soon as he entered, and would make itself known to him when it was ready to do so. He gripped his hatchet tighter and prepared to kill the first thing he saw moving.

It thus came as no small surprise to him, when he followed one curving narrowing path, to find a young woman standing athwart his way, hands on her hips. She wore tight garments of patchwork canvas and bore a large knife. Her auburn hair was pulled back into a long braid. Her eyes were pale blue. Her face was clean.

For a long time they stared at each other, waiting upon the other for a threatening move. When none was forthcoming, they gradually relaxed. Geor looked around for anyone else, but saw no one.

"Who are you?" she said. Her voice was familiar, yet strange.

"I came to see the Dragon," Geor said.

"And to kill it?"

The Dragon

"Is that why you came?"

She smiled at him. "It is," she said, and turning, beckoned him to follow.

Finally she kicked aside a small pile of scrap and revealed a metal plate in the ground. She lifted this to reveal a human-size hole. She inclined her head to the hole.

"Who are you?" he said.

"One who would help you."

"How do I know that?"

She smiled again. "You don't" she said.

Inside the hole a dank tunnel ran in three directions. Each had wooden struts holding lamps. None went far before they turned. At the end of one Geor thought he saw a person, but his eyes did not have time to adjust to the light before he could be sure. He stepped a bit closer to peer dimly down the path, and then the red-haired woman climbed in after him. She replaced the cover and the lights flickered. She looked at him.

"I thought I saw someone," Geor said.

"You probably did. There are many here. Don't bother about them. They are more scared of you than you of them."

"I want to trust you."

"You want more than that." She took his hand and led him down the tunnel away from where Geor had seen some-thing. He looked back once before the tunnel curved, but saw nothing.

For a long time they walked alone through the tunnels, turning every few minutes. Occasionally Geor heard or saw movement in adjoining tunnels, but never saw a human face. Gradually he ceased to notice it, instead noting the warmth of her hand in his, the tang of desire that seemed to flush his nerves. Whatever she had to show him, he wanted to see it.

She led him past a thick cloth curtain into a chamber lit with the same lamps as the tunnel, but more of them. The floor and walls were metal, and cleaned, and they reflected the lamps with such force that Geor's eyes were dazzled. In the center of the room lay a large bed. The red-haired woman went over and sat on it.

The Dragon

"You asked me who I was," she said, "but you tell me first."

Geor told her his story: about how he was the son of Michael, a miner in Sattle, and Mary, a young girl intended for the Mayor-General's bevy, about how he lost his mother at a young age, about how he learned his father's trade, about how his father had gone to sea when he was still growing, searching a new life, and how he had never come back. He told her how he had come to hear of the Dragon, and how he had killed men who bore the Dragon's tattoo.

The red-haired woman listened to this without interrupting, nodding occasionally, as if to check a box where her experience matched up with his. When he had finished, she asked him "Why do you want to kill the Dragon?"

"Life is hard enough," he said.

She laughed. "Yes," she said, "I think it is. I came here with much the same thought. I lost a sister once, and someone told me that it was men of the Dragon who did it. I don't know if that's true anymore, but at the time I believed it. I killed men, too, and slowly it brought me here." She stared off into nothing.

He approached her. "Will you help me kill it now?" he asked.

She lifted her leg. "Take my boot off," she said.

Geor's eyes narrowed. "The Dragon," he said.

"I will tell you about it," she replied. "But first, take off my boot." Geor reached with trembling fingers to unlace her knee-high boot. It came off easily, revealing a smooth white calf that Geor allowed himself to touch as he pulled the boot off of her. He looked at her. She lifted the other boot.

"Long ago," she said, curling her toes into his abdomen, "before the Fire, before the blood beasts, someone dug a shaft into the earth, to draw power from it. The energy they found was astonishing, enough for one of the ruined cities. A whole population, men, women, and children, could live."

Her other boot came off, and she laid her other foot on him.

"After the Fire, the shaft remained. The energy was still there. And somehow, the Dragon came to live here. The energy feeds the Dragon, and the Dragon controls the energy."

She stood up. "The Dragon is very real, and very powerful." Her pale blue eyes bore into him.

The Dragon

"Is that why you haven't tried to kill it? You're afraid of it."

"Not afraid," she said, unlacing her breeches. They came off, and Geor saw at the top of her thigh the black dragon face.

"Those the Dragon does not kill wear its mark. I do not kill it because I understand why it lives. I . . . serve it."

Geor felt his face harden. He had followed her down here, unmindful of his path, and now she had him entirely in her power. For all he knew, Dragon's men stood just outside, ready to butcher him at her word.

"Will you kill me?" he asked.

She stepped to him. Their bodies nearly touched. He could smell her.

"Stay here for a while," she said, "with me. Then you should go. No one will hurt you. If you remain, you will be forced to choose."

"You don't want to put the mark on me?"

"You will not wear it. You will not understand. And it will be better if you remain . . . separate from us. You do not belong here."

"How do you know I won't come back here with an army?" The words sounded ludicrous in his mind as he said them – how would he get an army? But somehow, he wanted to know.

She leaned into him. "I hope you do."

Her mouth was warm.

* * *

When he awoke, swimming in soft sheets, she was gone. The lights were dim, and the shine of the metal equally diminished. But sound had increased in proportion. Geor heard a powerful, continuous sound, rhythmic and dreadful. The whole underground seemed to be groaning.

He stood and dressed. All his things were where he had left them, even his hatchet. She had meant what she said. She could have handed him over to the other Dragon's men, but she was kind. His heart swelled at the thought of her. This, he thought, this must be what they call love.

He could not abandon her.

The Dragon

When he got to her doorway, he heard footsteps on the other side of his curtain, the tramping sounds of a crowd all going the same way, in formation. He waited for the sound to trail off into the distance, and then poked his head out in the direction of the sound. He saw people moving down the tunnel away from him. They wore dark hooded tunics. He checked behind to make sure there were none coming, and then he set off after them.

He needed a tunic, he decided. He ought to fit in. But if they were all together, he would not be able to take one without drawing attention to himself. He thought of ducking into another room to scour for one, but if everyone was gone, it stood to reason there would be no robes. He should have looked in the red-haired woman's room before he left. This was a mistake, he thought.

"Can I help you ... brother?" said a voice behind him.

And there's another, Geor thought. All that trouble to keep himself concealed, and he gets spotted within a few minutes. Hopefully the woman was right when she said they would not harm him.

Geor turned around to see a man in a dark hooded tunic, looking at him, alone. The man looked at Geor and his fists dropped to his sides. They clenched.

"You don't belong here," said the man.

"No one belongs here," said Geor, and went in for the attack.

Minutes later, Geor managed to catch up to the crowd of Dragon's servants he had originally followed, or one just like it. They were climbing out of the tunnels up a rope ladder into the light of dusk. Geor waited his turn patiently and then reached the surface just as a burst of blue flame emerged from the scrap heap to his left. It was much larger than what he had seen the previous night.

Two of the crowd, whose tunics were of a redder hue, pushed a two adults and two children into the pit. For a moment Geor thought they looked like the gypsies he had traveled with, but he could tell they were not. His gypsy had not had any sons. Whoever these people were, they were afraid. The mother gathered her children under her. The father, standing above him, cursed the Dragon's servants in a loud voice. The children cried.

And then the earth shook. Every pile of scrap and rubble and trash shook and sifted and collapsed and spread, forming new pile and new paths. The cursing father fell silent and huddled with his family. The Dragon's men lifted their hands in the air and cheered. Blue flame licked out of the metal shaft.

"The Dragon comes!" shouted the Dragon's servants.

The Dragon

And come the Dragon did. Like a beautiful shard of light, it rose from the shaft, mouth first. It gleamed and it screamed and it spread its silvery wings. To the thrill of its anointed servants, the dragon sent a pillar of fire into the dark sky.

And Geor laughed. He laughed softly, so none of the rapturous around him heard it, but he laughed. Because the red-haired woman had lied. This dragon was not real. It was made of metal. It was a machine, with a delicately-embossed dragon head and thin chrome wings. Underneath its carved scales it was still sticking out of the shaft. This dragon was rooted in the earth.

But when it lowered its head and threw flame over the heads of its devoted flock, Geor realized that it could still kill. And he looked at the family, still huddling in the pit, and he knew what he had to do.

The family was running in separate concentric directions away from the dragon's mouth, which rotated quickly, but not quickly enough to yet burn anyone with its blue flame. The children tried to escape the pit, but the Dragon's servants pushed them back in. The father sometimes stopped to throw found objects at the dragon. They bounced off harmlessly.

Geor shouted the name of his mother and ran into the crowd of Dragon's men. As he had hoped, they stepped out of the way of his rush and allowed him, unencumbered, to vault with his long pipe into the pit.

The crowd, which had been cheering, fell silent. The mother again gathered up her children and retreated, with the father, to the edge of the pit. Geor looked at the Dragon and saw the length of hoses hidden past the grated metal of the snout. He looked farther, at the grimy windows in the center of the beast, and the metal hinges and clasps that held it together. This Dragon was driven by a man. And he had noticed Geor.

The head moved in his direction, as the wings began to beat the air. Geor had not expected that those wings could move and allowed himself to be distracted by it, just long enough for the fire to find him. Without time to dodge away, Geor knelt down and held his metal cover above him. The heat burst into his face and arm like a devil's embrace and Geor screamed from pain. When the flame subsided, Geor thrust away his cover, which took a layer of burned skin with it. He felt this lesser pain but rolled to the other side and, hunched over, moved in under the mouth.

The Dragon's head was fast but Geor, even wounded, was faster. He set his feet, remembered his father's name, and cast the broken pipe upwards at the grate of the mouth. It hit its mark and lodged there. The Dragon shot another burst of flame at Geor, but only a yellow trickle came out.

The Dragon

Gritting his teeth at the pain on his arm, Geor rushed at the Dragon. He found a foothold on one of the scaled legs and climbed toward the center. The crowd of Dragon's men remained silent as a tomb. Geor readied his hatchet.

Before he could strike, however, the clasp came undone, and the hinges turned, and the Dragon's center opened and a human jumped out. He fell onto the earth and tumbled away. Geor jumped back down himself and landed on his feet. He looked at form in the dark tunic, holding a knife. The hood of the dark red tunic came down to reveal bright red hair in a long braid.

"I said you would not understand," she said, shedding her tunic.

Geor grimaced through his pain.

She came at him first, knife splitting the air. She was fast, and aiming for his throat. He turned away at the last moment and felt her knife bite his ear. He screamed inside but tumbled away. But she was on him again and the knife slashed the small of his back. He came up and shoved her and she flew back but arched into a handspring and landed on her feet. She had lost the knife but produced another from her belt.

Geor understood. She was too fast for him, and too agile. She would get ten cuts on him before he landed one on her. So far those cuts had been glancing, but soon he would tire, and she would strike home. He could not stop her. Best not to try. Geor sunk town into a modified wrestler's pose, with his hatchet high in the air. He lifted his wounded arm slightly, and beckoned her to come.

She rushed in low, matching his form, her knife practically grazing the ground. She intended an up thrust. She was fast, and she was beautiful. Love, Geor thought, this is love.

He stepped into her knife as it came up, felt it cut through the flesh under his bottom rib. His mind burst with pain, but he reached out and seized her arm below the shoulder. She struggled to pull her knife free but couldn't. She shoved at his chest and kicked at him but she failed to deflect his hatchet, which swung wide and cut her above the hip. She moaned and kicked and his hatchet came loose and he fell back and she fell back and the Dragon's servants groaned joyfully.

He found the strength to stand; he found the strength to pull the knife from his torso. It bled. He watched her drag herself on one knee towards the knife she had dropped before. He staggered over to stop her and now he was faster. He kicked the knife away. She rolled over and stared, breathing heavily, at the night sky. Geor looked around at the Dragon's servants, who had fallen silent again. He felt their thousand eyes on him and knew that the red-haired woman had not lied. They would not hurt him. They did not interfere.

The Dragon

He sat down athwart the woman. She did not resist. Their eyes met. He reached out with his wounded arm and touched her clean face.

"Your name," Geor said "Tell me your name."

Her eyes shone brightly. "I have no name."

Geor wept as the crowd of Dragon's servants came down into the pit and gathered around him. He wept so that he did not hear them chanting as they approached. He wept as they lifted him gently off the red-haired woman, and carried him, chanting still, out of the pit.

Geor looked out for the family he had fought to save, but they had vanished. But as a blue flame burst from a pipe concealed in a small pile, he saw the damage on his arm where the fire had burned his shield into him. It was scarred in the shape of a tooth, and Geor understood at last what the Dragon's servants were chanting as they carried him down into the earth.

Dragon born, they chanted. Dragon born. Dragon died, Dragon born. UJ

A FEMINIST READING OF LIBRARY FINES

By Hedda Marchè-Malö

One of the principles of the patriarchy is the alienation of women not only from their bodies, but of sources of information about their bodies. Knowing is to belong to those in whom authority is granted to "experts", so that the authentic experience of women can be discounted, rendered "subjective", whereas the "knowledge" gained from "study" is termed "objective" and imbued with false intellectuality (all the while keeping women from the so-called "hard sciences" - a phrase reeking with penile privilege - and allowing them only the ghetto of "women's studies" - as if the occlusions of the patriarchy were irrelevant to men).

This technology of exclusivity - to give it a Foucaultesque cast - reaches beyond academia, however. Like all of the truly insidious, the truly damaging aspects of male supremacy and female subservience, it has rooted into our everyday experience. Thus, nowhere is knowledge not considered a privilege of the ruling class - a property, to be trademarked, protected, and turned to profit.

It is simply not possible to read without paying a licensing fee to a large corporate institution - whether the common kind with stockholders or of the government-approved "non-profit" kind, that invites elderly rich men to get drunk on champagne cocktails and make leering glances when they think grad students who need work aren't looking - the "right" to a "copy" of something someone clearly intended for mass consumption. The dissonance between the claimed love of "free ideas" and "free expression" on the one hand, and the absolute insistence on payment for any kind of physical copy - actual means - of ideas to be expressed is powerful enough to create a moment of clarity for the oppressed.

Never has the Marxist focus on the means of production been rendered more necessary. No idea can move freely if it can only move through a licensing fee.

It is as vile a usury as any credit card shylock - only you're making down payments on the inside of your mind. The ultimate capital improvement.

How can this be happening in the civilized world? How can someone agree, with papers stamped, to let you have a thing, and then charge you for it's creative use? What possible understanding can this stem from?

It can only mean a cleavage from the common understanding of property, that of possession. If I have a book in my possession, then I own it. But our capitalist overlords will insist on maintaining a technology of property as separate from

possessing it. Thus, even though you walk out of a library with a book in your hand, the library, maintained with your tax dollars, puts ugly, cover-defacing reminders — much like the tattoos on the faces of prostitutes — of its “ownership” privileges, and will punish you for keeping a book longer than they permit it. What understanding of “free” can this be?

Now is the time that most cis white dudebros and their enablers will chime in about how library fees and fines are too ensure that books remain available for others to borrow them. Always the illusion of reasonability and fair play, covering their misogyny and genderphobia in bureaucratic speak. If availability for borrowing were the goal, then the library shouldn’t have a problem with me lending *Our Bodies, Ourselves* to my unenlightened sister to read when she drags her brood on the beach, and thus transferring the fines and fees to her. But noooooooooo, somehow, even though the book is not even in my physical possession any longer, I retain “responsibility” for it, because the language of bureaucracy is the language of exclusion from the truth. Is it my fault it came back stuffed in a second-hand diaper bag with her pitiable offerings to the local breast-milk co-operative, slick with her body-distorting emissions and what appear to be wine-stains as well? This cannot be proven (even if “proof” were not another of the patriarchy’s distortions of language, which it most certainly is).

Thus, the patriarchy is guilty as fuck of destroying our abilities to acquire and expand the space inside our heads, without their approval. And responding to this with the usual gestures - rolled eyes, distracting narratives about “white-people problems” (I’m at least one-sixteenth Cree, on my stepmother’s side), gratuitous smiles and insincere appreciations of “how interesting” my “perspective” is - these are but quiet, desperate attempts to muzzle the call to awareness. If we cannot read ourselves, then we cannot, as Cixous demanded, write ourselves.

And that is why I was arrested for throwing curdled breast-milk into the face of an old librarian. I refuse to be erased. **UJ**

WHEN CHARLIE GOT BACK

Part Two

By Alfred Underhill

Word got out about Charlie's bathhouse. Pretty soon we were being visited by people from all walks of life: old, young, rich, poor. Any doubts the guys and I felt about the bathhouse shriveled up and blew away the first time Nash handed us two-hundred dollars each. Pretty soon he had regular hours of operation and was solidly booked for appointments. Whatever the hell was going on, whatever he was doing, it was working.

I still had questions about the girl I'd seen when I entered Nash's room without knocking. Like, who the hell was she? Where did she come from? How come me and the other guys had never been introduced? If she was living in there with him, why didn't she ever come out into our common area? Not knowing started to eat at me, even though Nash was handing me a couple hundred dollars every week. I just had to know what the deal was with the girl, even if I never actually met her.

I rang the bell outside his room. I had some *Sapporos* and sushi I'd picked up from a place a few blocks away. Nash slid the doors open and looked at me with his tired eyes.

"Hey man," I said, "I ordered all this and it's more than I can put down myself. You want to join me?"

"Oh, Daniel, this is unexpected," he was eyeing the beer and food while he spoke to me. He gave me this like, appraising look for a moment. Then he said, "I would like to share this meal with you, my friend."

"Awesome, Nash. You want to eat out here, or do you want me to come in?" He paused and thought about it; I could tell something was on his mind beyond hosting strangers in his room all day.

"Actually, Daniel, I think I would like to dine with you in the common room, if that's all right? I've been working the bath all day, and I'd like a little time away from it, even though I won't be far."

"Sounds good," I replied. I set the food on the coffee table within sight of the sliding bedroom doors. I grabbed a couch cushion for both of us so we could sit on the floor; it seemed like the thing to do. I cracked open two of the *Sapporos* and handed him one, then began pulling the cardboard trays of sushi out of the delivery bag. I placed five trays of sushi between us, handed Charlie some chopsticks. I picked up my can of beer.

"A toast," I said. "To friends, hard work, and partnership."

"Hai!"

We both probably downed about half our cans each on that toast.

Then we dug into the food. We chitchatted while we ate. He talked about his clients; I talked about the band and upcoming gigs. I waited until the end of the meal to ask him the questions I really wanted answered.

"So, Nash, forgive me for intruding, but who is the young lady I saw in your room weeks ago? I haven't seen her since that day, and I've got no idea how she got into your room or how she left without anyone seeing her."

Charlie looked at me squarely and then looked down as he dabbed his mouth with a napkin. He folded the napkin, and set it on the table, making eye contact with me once again.

"I had hoped you'd not ask about her, Daniel," he was calm, but I could tell he was uncomfortable. "Her name is Mizuko, and she is a young woman unlike any you or I have ever known."

He hesitated, glanced at the closed sliding rice paper door to his room. "She- you'll think I'm terribly foolish if we continue this conversation."

"No, Nash," I said. "It's okay. I won't say anything. Go ahead."

"Mizuko is a *Tennin*. That is to say, the reason she is unlike any young woman you or I have ever known is because she isn't human."

I laughed, but it was that nervous kind of laugh that people make when they're not really sure how to respond to something. Charlie's expression didn't change; he just stared at me. I squirmed in my seat a little, looked at the table between us.

"Okay," I said, "so she's not human. What exactly does that mean?"

"As a *Tennin*, Mizuko doesn't need food or drink as you and I do. Her body is like a solid illusion; a spirit like Mizuko takes a physical form when it suits her. The waters of bathhouse sustain her. A side effect of her drawing sustenance is that she imbues the water with healing properties. Mizuko has a kind of symbiosis with the water. Does this answer your question?"

"I guess, man," I said. "It kind of raises a whole bunch of other ones, though." I shook my head and looked at the door to his room. "So, are you two, like, together? Is she your girl? And like, how did you meet her?"

"I met Mizuko while I was touring the countryside in Nippon. I paused by a river to take photographs of the landscape. Afterward, when I was putting my camera away, I noticed a beautiful Japanese girl dressed in a set of kimono standing on the river bank. I couldn't believe I'd failed to notice her when I stopped to take pictures. I didn't want to be a rude foreigner, so I greeted her with as much formality as I could muster. Mizuko returned my greeting and complimented my Japanese. Before long, we had entered into a far-ranging conversation that lasted

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the rest of the day and night. I didn't notice that the sun had set and risen again, that I hadn't moved from the spot where I met her, until I began to feel faint.

Mizuko was unaffected. Not a single hair on her head had drifted out of place, yet she had noticed my fatigue and felt concern for me. Our conversation had fostered fondness and affection between us. I would have worried for her, had our positions been reversed.

She offered me some cool water from a small pool on the riverbank. Upon drinking the water, I came to realize Mizuko's nature because the water she gave me was her home, her body, her essence. Mizuko's act of kindness won my heart. Refreshed as though I had slept and eaten, I asked her what I could do to return her kindness.

Mizuko explained to me that the river would soon be polluted by a development project further up stream. Though it pained her to do so, she wished to leave the riverside but couldn't do so without help. I offered to take her with me, to keep her safe, and love her for the rest of my days. Mizuko accepted." He smiled, like a man in love does.

"Woah," was all I could say to story like that.

* * *

Life in our loft continued on unchanged for a few more months. Charlie and Mizuko's clients came and went. Me and the rest of the band earned cash just for living there. We actually had money to burn for a change. Life was pretty good.

And then one day we got a knock on our door of a different kind.

Carl opened the door to see the building owner standing there, red-faced. He had these two official looking dudes with name badges and clipboards. The older one wore a hardhat. I watched from the kitchen as they walked in.

"What's up Pete? What's going on?"

"That's funny, Carl, I was just about to ask you and your buddies the same thing."

"I don't follow."

Pete let out a long sigh. "This is inspector McCarthy and inspector Downs from the Department of Public Works. They say you boys are running some kind of business out of your loft, something that uses a lot of water."

Carl just sort of looked at the three guys for a few heartbeats then looked at me from across the room. Pete and the inspectors looked at me too. I turned my head to look at Charlie's room.

"Dan," Pete said, "do you have any idea what is going on here?" I could tell he was

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pissed. The inspectors didn't really seem to care one way or the other about what was going on. They were just doing their jobs.

"Maybe, I ought to get Charlie," I said without thinking.

"Fine. Get him," said Pete. He wasn't getting any less pissed.

I rang the bell outside Charlie's room. A few seconds later the door slid open and Nash was standing there in his kimono. He gave me a questioning look.

"Hey, man. Sorry to bother you, but Pete's here with some inspectors from the Board of Public Works. I think...you might want to talk to them."

Nash stiffened a little bit and then nodded to me. He motioned for me to stand aside and then walked out in his kimono to meet our landlord and the inspectors.

"Gentlemen," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"Charlie?" Pete looked confused. The inspectors both smiled. Then Pete remembered himself. "These inspectors are from the Board of Public Works. They say they have reason to believe you and your roommates are running a business out of this apartment, which is illegal."

"I see," said Charlie. He looked at me and Carl then back to Pete and the inspectors. "I believe there is some...misunderstanding."

"Oh? How so, Charlie?"

"We aren't running a business. However, I have constructed a to-scale Japanese Bathhouse in my room. It's a functional piece, used for performance art. Would you like to see it?"

Pete's eyes looked like they were going to pop out. Inspector Downes and McCarthy looked at each other and then looked back at Charlie.

"Yes, sir," said inspector Downes, "let us take a look at it."

Charlie looked at Pete and the inspectors without batting an eye.

"Right this way, gentlemen." He led them through his doors, closing them from the inside.

Carl and I looked at each other and walked over to the closed doors. I heard Pete shout a few curses, but I couldn't make out what anyone said after that. The four of them were in Nash's room for less than a minute before Pete stomped out. The inspectors trailed behind him. The younger one was scribbling notes down on his clipboard.

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"Tear it down, Charlie!" Pete screamed. "You're lucky this ain't a business, but you better fucking tear it down, and you're going to pay those fines, or I'll sue your ass." Pete stopped by the front door. He waited for the inspectors to finish filling out some paper work. They handed yellow copies to Charlie along with their business cards.

"Sorry about this," said Inspector McCarthy, "call us if you have any questions. Have a nice day." He and inspector Downes walked past Pete, who held the door open for them. He glared at the three of us from the door way.

"I suggest you find a new place to live when your lease is up," he said, slamming the door behind him.

"Fuck you, Pete" Carl said to the shut door.

"Fuck" is the only word I remember saying, and I said it a lot.

Charlie just nodded, still staring at the door. He returned to his room without saying a word. Carl and I watched him head into his room then we looked each other.

"Guess we'll have to tell Dave and Steve."

"As long as we let them know together, man," I said, "because I'm pissed enough about this situation without having to take any lip from Dave."

"Shit, that honky tries to say shit to either of us I'll put him down my damn self."

As mad as I was about our sudden housing crisis, I wasn't mad at Charlie. He'd shared the bathhouse with us. He'd tried to include us in the wonder of it. Hell, he even told me about Mizuko. Whether or not I believed it was all true, I knew that out of the five of us, he was the most screwed.

"Hey," I said, "are you mad at Charlie for this?"

"I'm not happy about having to move, dude. If he hadn't built that thing, this wouldn't have happened. That said, I think I'm more pissed at Pete right now," Carl said looking at me sideways.

"But you don't blame him entirely because we all profited from the bathhouse," I said.

"Yeah, more or less; the money was okay, but it's not like I'm going to retire, man. I put most of that money toward weed, videogames, and student loans in about that order."

We both laughed a little bit. Then we just hung out and waited for Steve and Dave

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to get in so we could tell them the bad news.

Dave came home first. He started to throw a fit until Carl advised him, in no uncertain terms, that he didn't have the patience for one of Dave's tantrums tonight. It was around that time that Steve walked in, and Carl and I had to break the bad news all over again with a sullen, pouting lead singer glowering at everything in view.

We all stood there silent for a few minutes. Steve smoked a cigarette. Dave was darned up in a pout. Carl stared through the floor. I looked out the window, hands on my head.

Just then the doors to Charlie's room slid open, and Charlie walked out in his kimono. Behind him was the most gorgeous lady I'd ever seen. I recognized Mizuko immediately. She looked kind of like a geisha, but her skin, hair, clothing—all of her was perfect. I knew right then what Charlie had told me was true. Mizuko was too perfect, too beautiful to be real.

She carried a tray that held cups and a bottle made of white porcelain. She set the tray on the table. The four of us just stared at Charlie and Mizuko.

"My friends," Charlie said, "let me introduce Mizuko"

Mizuko said something in Japanese and bowed at the waist to us as a group.

"She says, 'it's a pleasure to finally meet you all,'" Charlie said.

Each of us muttered some kind of salutation and just kept staring at her. She was irresistible. My heart felt like it was trying to escape, and I figured the other guys must have felt the same way looking at her.

Charlie cleared his throat. "We would like to apologize to all of you for the trouble we have caused with the bath house. Please have a drink with us." He gestured to the tray Mizuko had brought out.

"T-thanks, Nash," I said looking at the other guys. Carl and Steve muttered something, Dave just kind of nodded. We all walked over to the table where Mizuko was pouring sake into each of the little cups. There were six total, one for each of us.

I'm drinking with a mythological creature, I thought. We each took our cups and waited for a toast.

"*Moushiwake arimasen*," Mizuko shouted, raising her tiny cup.

"We are very sorry about the loss of your home," Charlie said. We all nodded a bit,

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and threw back our sake. I realized a bit too late that the sake was much too fine to shoot as I'd just done. I was surprised by its strength too. I couldn't tell if the other guys noticed what we were drinking.

"More?" Charlie said holding the bottle and looking at us. Mizuko smiled.

None of us could resist of course.

Before long the room was spinning, man. I don't know what was in that sake, but I was lit. Just then I got the urge to play, you know? So I go and I get my bass. Steve sees me with mine and says yeah and goes and gets his guitar. Carl goes over to the drum kit and sits down.

"Man, this Sake is kicking my ass," said Dave. I guess we were all feeling it. Carl hit the high-hat a few times, gave the snare a few whacks, and then like, we were outside.

I shit you not.

"The fuck?" Said Steve. Pretty sure we were all thinking it at that point, seeing as how we were outside now -- somehow-- by a river somewhere. Crazy thing was the drumming that Carl had started was still going, but he wasn't playing his kit even though he was sitting behind it on the grass. Me and my band mates just gaped at each other.

We toasted again, and I sipped my sake this time, trying to drink it slow. Everything was really hazy, like in a dream, and then I thought: oh okay, I'm dreaming. That's it. We all had too much, and I'm passed out with my bass back at the loft. Figured I'd hurt like a bitch when I woke up, but thinking about waking up wasn't waking me up, so I figured I must of had more to drink than I remembered.

Pretty soon I stopped trying to make sense of it all because that drumming was getting louder and closer to us, and I could hear other instruments accompanying it. Flutes, and strings of some kind, and people were singing.

"Uh, are those like, Furries or some shit?" Dave was pointing at the source of the music: a parade of people in costumes, heading in our general direction. There were fox and raccoon costumes; some folks with really long, pointy ears; some guys that looked like they were done up to look like rock-people, and a handful of guys that must've been on stilts. They had like, severe under-bites and long white hair. There were other people there too, but those are the ones that really stood out. Somehow these folks were playing music and singing and walking along in these getups next to the river.

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"Hey, it's whatever, man," said Steve. "They can carry a tune at least."

"Word. Their music's on point. And damn: that has to be the most convincing cosplay I've ever seen."

"This coming from Mr. Otakon? Why Carl, surely you jest?"

"Shut the fuck up, Dave! When I want your opinion, I'll beat it out of you." Carl's irate gaze made Dave frown and squirm.

I said something like, "Hey, c'mon, fellas. Let's not turn the music sour with our hostility." Carl just nodded and turned back to watch the approaching procession, his expression softening immediately. Dave looked at the ground for a few moments before training his gaze on the approaching procession as well.

"Here they come, man! Damn, those costumes are too much! I wish I had something to like, give them, you know?" Steve was just grinning ear to ear. He was like a little kid on Christmas Day.

"Uh, I dunno," Dave said, "maybe we could like, try to join them? I'm pretty sure we could riff close enough without harshing them."

"That's what I'm talking about!" Carl practically cheered.

I said something like, "let's do it!"

So there we were, all drunk and outside with the fucking Champions of Cosplay Marching Band, or some shit, marching toward us. And we're tuning up our instruments, and playing a few test bars to see if it'll work. We get our start sorted out, and begin playing in time with the music the cosplayers are playing. Dave is doing this like, tonal chant stuff we didn't even know he could do, but it works. Everything we're doing works, like, better than we were when we were touring and playing our own songs. But the best part is that our version of the tune is working with their version of the tune.

I saw the guys on stilts and the ones with pointy ears catch our version of the tune first. They smiled and played on. Then a few beats after that, the rest of the marching band seemed to hear our tune. Some of them started chanting like Dave, harmonizing with their own music.

And then they were close enough for us to get a good look at them. I think we all realized it around the same time. I think Steve must've seen me hesitate because he said, "it's cool, man. Just keep playing." Dave's chant faltered a little bit, but he recovered. Carl was still keeping time on the drum, but his head

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was shaking a lot more than usual. Steve was just grinning like an idiot, like he was on acid or something. I just did my best to imitate Steve.

There were a lot more than marching than I saw at first. The whole group sort of formed a 'U' around us and kept playing, so we kept playing. They kept smiling too, so I did my best to keep smiling even though I really had no idea what the fuck was going on.

We reached the point where the tune basically loops back to the beginning, but this time they stopped and so did we. Everyone stood there for a moment. Then I saw Charlie and Mizuko walking from behind our group and over to the center of the 'U', between us and the marching band.

"My friends, the time has come to say goodbye. I will not be returning with you to the loft." Charlie bowed to us at the waist. Mizuko stood next to him and smiled. Then Charlie said, "I propose one last toast, before my friends return to their home." Everybody cheered.

Like I said, man, I was pretty drunk at this point. I was at the stage of drunk where more booze is always met with enthusiasm. So Mizuko came over and refilled our little sake cups from before. All the folks in the monster band seemed to have something to drink too.

* * *

The next morning, my skull was pounding before I was even awake. I sat up. Then realized that sitting up made me want to puke. I ran for bathroom. After a half hour of purging and heaving, I wandered back out to the kitchen for a glass of water. I sipped at the water for a few minutes, trying not to overwhelm my fragile stomach.

I sat at the table. Setting the glass down as I looked at Charlie's room. The old door to his room was back in place. I thought that was weird, but figured he might have gotten an early start on taking the bathhouse apart. I looked around the rest of the loft and noticed that he'd repainted and removed the trim from the walls. They looked like they did before Charlie came back from Japan. He must have used veneers or vinyl or something.

Now that I had some water in my system, I thought about getting breakfast. I remember thinking that some greasy scrambled eggs would do the trick. I didn't want to go alone though, so I started shambling around to see who was up. Steve was out cold, snoring. Dave told me to fuck-off and let him sleep. Carl was kind of awake and agreed to come with me, if I brought him some water first.

"You ask anybody else to come?" He said as I handed him a glass of water.

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"The other guys don't want to. I haven't asked Charlie yet."

He nodded. "Give me a couple minutes to get my shit together." I gave him a nod and went back out to the kitchen. I looked at Charlie's door: no more paper, no more bell. I went over and knocked.

No answer. I waited about a minute and knocked again. No response. I didn't wait as long the third time, and I knock harder and called to Charlie through the door. Nothing. Fuck it, I thought, I'll just stick my head in and see if I can wake them. I opened the door and walked in.

The room was empty: like, completely empty. No bath house, no furniture, no tea service, no Mizuko, and no Charlie. The room looked like it had before he'd moved into the loft.

I still don't know how long I stood there.

I realized Carl was calling me from the other room. I turned around and walked out slowly. I sat down at the kitchen table. Even though my head was throbbing, I got a Camel out of the pack on the table. I lit it and took a long drag. Carl came around the corner from the hall, bleary-eyed and listless. He looked at me.

"Hey, man. I've been calling you. You ready?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Do Charlie and Mizuko want to come?"

"They're gone," I said looking up from the table. Carl looked confused, but I was at a loss for what had happened myself. Putting out the Camel, I stood up and walked over to Charlie's door, opened it, and walked inside. Carl followed.

"See," I said, turning to look him in the eye, "they're gone."UJ