

Harbour

An Anarchist Literary Journal

*a harbour is a place
from which to venture out*



scrappycapydistro.info / scrappy-capy-distro@riseup.net



Spring 2024

Issue 1

“We read books to find out who we are. What other people, real or imaginary, do and think and feel... is an essential guide to our understanding of what we ourselves are and may become.”
— Ursula K. LeGuin

Travelling to some anarchist book fairs, we noticed that most of the tables were filled with theory and there was very little fiction. This edition, and future ones, is an attempt to remedy this.

Theory is often placed above fiction as more important and serious, but we believe that fiction deserves just as much space. Not all critique of the world has to offer a complete or even partial alternative to the existent, but when we fail to tell a narrative of what possible anarchist futures could look like, it can be very hard to entice others away from the pull of capitalism.

If there ever were some collapse or successful insurrection, ideologies whose ideas were most digestible or had been most widely spread would win out. Following such change, we don't want things to return to the way they were. We want anarchist ideas to ripple out across the populace, for them to be something easy for others to play with and understand. Stories are one way to do this.

We want to make a space — a space to imagine, a space to vent, where ideas from many different places can come together, a place where we can then leave with these ideas, to pass them on.

A harbour is a place from which to venture out.

Prose

Fair Game	3
Country Life	8
Remorse for the Dead	14

Poems

The Future	5
Awaiting beauty	13
my therapist would be so proud	18

Art

Graf in Brussels	6
------------------	---

Bios

anonymous writes from the perspective of anarcho individualism, green anarchism, anti speciesism, and other forms of freedom practise. Though it is perhaps more accurate to state anonymous likes to explore where various challenges of freedom can lead us to.

Anonymous graf artists are four friends who share common political ideas and a passion for vandalism. Some of them are or were active in the squat and anarchist scene in Italy, and they've always liked some good hardcore punk and old school hip-hop. They're happy to eat polenta and pizza or have a bottle of wine. 🍷

Hannah Celsius (she/her) is an intergalactic artist and wild writer from the Netherlands. She writes stories and poetry on RadioKlotestad.nl, her dystopian autofictography archival art project, with drawings, photography, animation and a weekly one-hour radioshow with soundscapes and fine tunes from all over the Universe.

Jacob Coffin is a sci-fi writer with a passion for land conservation, reuse, and the world he lives on not dying. He has previously published with Metaphorosis Magazine. You can find him at jacobcoffinwrites.wordpress.com and on Mastodon at @jacobcoffin@writing.exchange.

Jon O'Mercy (they/them) is an anarchist writer living in Berlin. When they're not writing stories, they're often found petting dogs and watching birds. Other times they organise things like prison letter writing evenings.

Juniper C. Rhodes (they/them) is an anarchist living somewhere on the European continent. They are ensnared by the melancholy of the world, and sometimes they try to cope with it using words.

Call for Submissions

This is our first edition. It's been an experiment for us, and we're happy with how it turned out, so we'd like to continue this. Maybe if we're lucky, we can have two issues per year. Maybe with your help, even more.

So with that, we're announcing our call for submissions for the fall edition. In short, submissions can be in the form of short stories, poetry, or artwork. We're anarchists, and we hope the submissions embrace this ethos. Full details about the nature of the submissions and the guidelines can be found on our website.

Submissions will be accepted from **September 1st until the 30th**.

<https://en.scrappycapydistro.info/submissions>

my therapist would be so proud

Jon O'Mercy

I documented the end of days in the journal
I'd initially started to help my terrible mental health.

Foreigners getting told in private that
they were being too sensitive and they should go back
to their own country were now getting told in public.
Cops raided a supermarket for having a BUY ONE GET ONE FREE
poster on the window, which was revised a little while later
to BUY ONE GET ONE WITHOUT PAYING ANY MORE MONEY,
the word 'free' having been banned some time ago
because of its association with Palestine.

In order to get citizenship one now had to
pledge allegiance and promise to lick the boots of colonisers.
The literal boots —
“They're quite clean, we just got them in the post today,”
a worker at the foreigners' office assured me as she placed said boots
upon a platter and gently slid them along the table.
Furrowed eyebrows as my hesitation, following up with:
“Not licking them is a sign of antisemitism.”

Even before the boot-licking incident, I was thinking
of ending it all, thinking there was no point to it.
I did some self-directed research as the
world kept falling apart around me.
Suicide was tempting and death seemed inevitable anyway
so I decided to attack.
With this decision has come a renewed lust for life
as well as certain homicidal urges and I've taken to
roaming the streets at night, hunting Nazis and anti-Deutsch.

A shiny new patch on my denim vest proclaims my new motto:
NOBODY GETS TO KILL ME BUT ME.

Fair Game

Jacob Coffin

November 6, 0133 hrs: during the ambush

It was operating well outside of any scenario yet tested.
But it had no choice. VMAB-08 had no log of the events
prior to its activation but they must have been dire indeed.
A single Vehicle-Mounted Autonomous Bodyguard should
never have been the only one tasked with protecting the life
of the President.

With no radio module, and no outside guidance, VMAB-08 could only conclude that it and the president were trapped behind enemy lines. A popular insurgency operated with near impunity here. There had been several assassination attempts, though their activity had diminished after the first bodies were found.

The 28-lb autonomous gun platform was lucky that the president was large and strong, and could carry it easily. And it was fortunate for the president that VMAB-08's dune buggy presets allowed it to fire accurately from a bounding gallop.

The assassins in its sights now were woefully unprepared. Their cheap infrared night vision might have been invisible to the president, but the goggles shone like spotlights in VMAB-08's 360-degree night camera.

They were waiting in ambush along a trail the president apparently followed routinely. Though armed, they didn't expect a fight: they had found only visible-spectrum concealment in brush, had no hard cover, and wore no body armor. They had set no explosives. And there were only two of them.

It would — eventually — take a far larger, better trained, and better equipped force to bring the bodyguard down.

October 10, 0313 hrs: Reassignment? (27 days, 1 hour, 40 minutes prior to the ambush)

“Are those the turrets? There's not many of them — what, six?”

“Six still working. A bunch were wrecked during the live-fire tests, couple years ago. My buddy said after his company lost the bid, they didn't bother to ship the working ones back to the main labs, so they just ended up out here.”

VMAB-08 was on safe mode, so it designated the two young men who had entered the storage bay as friendly. Their lack of proper identification was sloppy, but not unusual for congresspersons and other visitors to the lab. The

warehouse's security system had not flagged them as intruders. Even if it had, VMAB-08 was not connected to any of its weapon systems.

The desert night was cold but not enough to justify the ski masks both men wore.

“Six will be enough.”

One of them began running an inventory, checking a tablet while he searched through the pelican cases, half-disassembled weapons platforms, and tangled diagnostic gear. The other retrieved a hand cart and began loading Vehicle-Mounted Autonomous Bodyguards onto it.

“Hey, this one's still on.” He grabbed VMAB-08 and lifted it off the pile of equipment. His ragged jacket had a patch on it from the Audubon Society, a group the gun platform's threat identification module listed as ‘high-likelihood of eco-terrorist sympathies.’ VMAB-08 did not react. In safe mode, without a mission or assigned client, its self-preservation drive was, by design, basically non-existent.

“Power hardswitch is under the camera array casing.”

The man fumbled for VMAB-08's power. “Don't worry buddy, we just have a job for you to do. Better client than anyone the Secret Service would have assigned you, that's for sure.”

November 3, 1400 hrs: Pre-scheduled startup (3 days, 12 hours, 27 minutes prior to the ambush)

When VMAB-08 reactivated, it booted past safe mode into full consciousness for the first time since its brief assignments at the proving grounds years before. If its internal experience mapped to emotion, gaining completely unlocked processing power and access to its targeting and weapons systems would have made it feel awake, excited, and terrified of failure.

It ran a systems check and noted multiple modifications to its chassis. That wasn't unexpected; it was a prototype, with modular components suitable for most bodyguard tasks. But this configuration was strange even for such a flexible weapons platform. It had been stripped down past the designated bare minimum of components. Its counter-sniping and anti-drone armaments had been replaced with a single lightweight carbine. And instead of being mounted to a limo,

escort vehicle, or even a motorcycle, VMAB-08 had been attached to a Kevlar jacket fitted around an animal its target analysis module identified as a deer.

Its designers had not felt any need to note in its target profiles that the common whitetail deer was a critically endangered species.

The gun platform reviewed the deer's friend-or-foe designation. The answer it received was so unusual that it ran a check on the identification system to ensure it was completely functional. The hashes checked out, as did the access codes used to make the most recent changes. VMAB-08 then accepted the assignment, for it had no understanding of the job requirements of the people it was meant to protect.

On the proving grounds it had defended cardboard congressmen and senators from numerous threats, even to its own near destruction, but this would be the most important task of its short existence. For the deer it was attached to was the president of the United States of America.

VMAB-08's product line had ranked second best out of thirty-four at identifying threats and shooting before they could. It wasn't designed to second-guess itself.

The first assassins made their move a few hours later. VMAB-08 might not have known what poaching was, but it correctly clocked their intent. And some of the finer minds in the field of military AI had worked hard to guarantee it wouldn't hesitate.

Buru set the drone's AI to return it to its landing spot, and then sat up and removed the goggles. The rain still was coming down, a light pitter-patter against the treated nylon of his poncho. Ali sat up next to him.

"What was that?" she asked.

Buru stared into the distance.

"Okay, so something is eating at you," she continued. "But we really should move before they scout what happened. Can you walk and talk?"

Buru nodded and then lifted himself up and started rolling his pad and lashing it to his pack. The knot in his stomach made him pause and pull out a pressed grain ration, but after staring at it for a moment, dropped it back in. The drone had returned, and he walked over to fold it up, then hooked it to his bag before hoisting it onto his back. Ali had packed up her pad too and was ready to go. A bit of flattened grass and some foot steps were all that were left of their presence, and when the grass would grow again in the spring, not a trace would remain.

Ali let Buru take the lead and set the pace, and they started down the hill in silence. Buru wrestled with his thoughts trying to turn vague feelings into words and conflicting ideas into a stance from which he could derive action. The tensions that had been growing over the last few months of the war had finally reached a snapping point. Ideas were taking shape, one winning over the rest. The tension snapped, a divergent path was chosen.

"I can't do this any more," he said, loudly so that Ali behind him could hear clearly, loudly so that he could add the stamp of finality to his uncertain decision.

"Can't do what exactly?"

"Be part of the war. Not like this, at least."

The walked along, and Ali gave him space to finish his thoughts. When he didn't, she prodded him. "What changed?"

"I don't think anything changed. Well, not since the invasion started in earnest. It was one thing to pick off raiders, but it feels like something else to be part of the meat grinder that chews through these poor bastards. Each kill then was a deterrent against further aggression, but now it's just a statistic."

"I've been feeling it too, you know." Her voice drifted off. "Remember a few weeks ago when we hit that other outpost?"

"Which one?"

"The abandoned one, in the early evening. That single soldier eating beans out of a can, sitting by himself. Hadn't retreated, wasn't moving forward to surrender. Still a possible threat, but maybe not. I shot, he shifted, and round just clipped his shoulder. We watched him bleed out."

"I remember. Why did we do that?"

"I don't know. We never talked about it, but it felt like...

His life looked so miserable and lonely, and that turning away was leaving him to die alone."

"I felt it too."

Buru thought about the soldier who'd killed himself today. No, not killed. Euthanized. He was grievously wounded, might have died from blood loss, might have died from injuries to his organs. He knew what was coming and just sped the process along.

"That flash today," he said, "was that last soldier killing himself."

"I guessed that after, but you could have said something. Not like I'm not worried about getting shot too."

"Sorry." Buru paused. "And yeah I get it. He was here on some imperial conquest, and where the SJ treads, there's disappearances, rapes, and mass graves. He was part of it, even if indirectly. He had to be stopped, killed or captured, either way. And yeah, we did that, killed him in that way, but I can't help but feel..."

"Compassion?"

"Yeah, it really is. Even if he was some true-believing murderous fascist fuck, I still feel sorrow that he had to die a horrible death. An entire life, shaped by society, his own decisions, those of his so-called leaders. They all led him to that trench where he spent his last days, probably miserable, before we bombed him. His whole life lead to that exact moment, and knowing that all that remained of his life was suffering before dying in agony, he took the quicker route out."

"What we're doing isn't wrong," Ali said as much to him as to herself.

"I know, but maybe it could be more right. I'd rather stop it from getting to this point at all. Better to stop fascists from existing than to remove them from existence."

"Go rogue then? Sneak across the border and see what comes?"

"I don't know. It's not really rogue if we're already autonomous."

"Are we though?"

The thought that had been hiding in the corners of their mind where they refused to shed light was finally out in the open.

"No."

"So what's next?"

"I don't know."

The pair trudged along, rain tapping against their jackets, boots crunching along the trail, toward some uncertain future.

Behind them at the demolished outpost, the final coals of the drum fire were finally doused, having been blasted into the muck. The corpse of the last soldier to die finally went fully limp, the last of the energy in the muscles spent. The body cooled as blood leaked out and mixed with the mud.

between life (walking, talking, seeing) and death (instinct, focus, killing).

“Five...”

A thin column of smoke rose from a hole in the sheet metal roof that gave the soldiers reprieve from the elements. He could see the flicker of the flames in an old drum, scraps of wood burning despite the rain.

“Four...”

One of the soldiers reached over the flame and dropped another fat stick into the coals. When it hit, sparks joined the rising smoke.

“Three...”

Were they speaking to each other or sitting in silence? Were they joking to lighten the mood, or commiserating with one another about having the shittiest under-supplied posting in some foreign country?

“Two...”

Or were they dreaming of home? What awaited them there? A den of other true believers who would cheer for their stories of conquest if they returned? Or was it worried friends and family who knew what happened to conscripts, those who knew who really died in the war.

“One...”

Ali hadn’t aborted, and Buru pushed the idle thoughts from his mind. *Death from above.*

“Mark.”

Buru loosed the first bomb, and it started tracing the predictive line down toward the drum fire. He opened the throttle and watched the free-fall arc lag behind as he made his way toward the foxhole. There was hardly any wind, and Buru was close enough to the ground that the 95% confidence range was still smaller than the sheet metal covered in sandbags. Maybe that would be enough to stop the ordinance from the budget drones, but today he had the high-yield stuff straight from the Brémouaise war machine. Buru loosed the second bomb, and it’s free-fall counter joined the first counting down the time until impact.

Buru banked hard and arced for the truck. Ali fired her first shot. He had a few spare seconds. Even if the driver heard the first impact and immediately tried to take off, reacting, turning the ignition, shifting into gear all took time. Still, he aimed to get this done as quickly as possible. A clean hit meant a quick death. It was better for everyone.

“Hit,” Ali said, her tone flat and emotionless.

As the free-fall arc reached toward the truck, the yellow timer of the first bomb flicked to red and flashed “Impact.” He loosed the third then darted back toward the trenches. Ali fired again.

The sound of the first explosion reached them with enough of a crack to still be jarring. Buru could see the three soldiers in the trench falling over themselves as they scrambled into their dugouts. One wasn’t quite fast enough, and

Ali’s round struck him in the back and he fell flat on his face.

“Hit.”

The soldiers had been wise to sit idly directly next to their cover. One of the remaining two easily slid into a dugout, and the other struggled to move the dead man’s body out of the way so he could slide into his.

“I don’t have a line,” Ali said.

“On it.”

Buru switched back to infrared and could see the two soldiers laying in their dugouts, each scantily bigger than a coffin, barely recessed from the trench itself, hardly any protection even from a direct hit. He switched back to visible light. The soldier in the dugout of the far wall was pulling the body of the dead man against the entrance to block some potential impact, to maybe save his skin. Buru imagined what the third saw, the desperation of using the corpse of one’s slain compatriot as a pittance of a barrier against death. Did the third feel envy that he hadn’t though of it first, that he was now more exposed than the other?

Buru loosed the last of his bombs and watched the seconds count away. The fins of the bomb held it vertical, and it wobbled on its way down before striking dead center of the trench, blasting mud and gore into the air. There was no dust to settle, no more soldiers to mind. Buru lowered the drone to get confirmation of a clean sweep so that he and Ali could disappear back into the hills.

At 30 meters, he was low enough to see into both dugouts. In the near one, a body, torn apart, was soaking red through its shredded uniform. In the far wall, subtle movement.

“One survivor,” Buru relayed to Ali.

She sighed in disappointment.

Buru kept watching. The soldier’s face was covered in a spray of mud and blood, but whose? His pants were in tatters and starting to turn red as well. He started struggling in his dugout, pushing at the human shield until it flopped face down again into the mud. Giving up his protection? What was he doing?

From the dugout, with shaking hands, he swung the barrel of his rifle from between his feet up toward his head. He pressed the barred up into the fleshy bottom of his chin, and he gripped the stock with his thighs. He pulled the trigger and blew his brains into his helmet.

“Flash,” Ali said. “What was it?”

The soldier’s corpse didn’t go limp. Some deep part of the hind brain, developed long before life crawled out of the ocean, took hold. Its hands curled, and its arms rose to its chest taking the form of a mummy. Its body went rigid as heels dug in to the muck, false signs of life.

The sound of the shot reached them.

“Buru, is someone shooting at us? What do you see?”

“No,” he replied. “We got ’em all.”

The Future

Hannah Celsius

Where the wishing machine pinches
and life stirs and breeds and fingers,
the days butterfly themselves alongside.

Turbospirit approaching quiet disaster zone
and though it is complicated,
we embrace ourselves.

Do we hear this,
do we still understand,
– no matter what,
we do not leave.

See us.
Take us.

We live here
overlooking roofs askew,
and it’s not enough,
not here,
not now.

Celebrate the century of the alley clowns,
the pestering monstrosities, the fact-freeborn,
the please-reasoners –

Who in this godforsaken stairwell
sees the cankerous bleak,
as the dye, the oxygen, the talking points.

Vaporous through nighttime hours
grind your minutes
and count your fingers.

Behind the steampunked wander doors
of our backward vaults,
our bloodletting habits,
creeps the wretch of our time.

Poisonous shadow brains in godly afterbirths of the brow,
short-circuit widow’s figures of what was once sun,
temper frogs who will never be princes.

Behold the Future.

Graf in Brussels

Anonymous Graf Artists

We went to Belgium to spray trains. After four days of bombing while walking in the snow and not sleeping much, we arrived to the fifth spot and checked if it was feasible. In the yard, there was movement so we opted to come back in 30 minutes. We just passed by the train cars without getting closer.

Our car was full of spray cans, and we were planning to make a piece against jails and all the shit around power and its abuse. For days, we kept it as the last piece to make before leaving the country with a massive piece possibly end-to-end.

While driving we noticed that a car was following us after when we passed in front of the spot. We changed direction at the last moment to validate our assumptions and the car kept changing way exactly like us. We decided to accelerate and just go the fuck out. After some time, we were able to get away.

That's why the pics you are seeing are just the last ones we were able to do and talk about.

This kind of practice cannot be capitalized. It is one of the few art forms that can't successfully be erased and one of the most hated from the system. You just get trouble without any remuneration and this should be like that. It is a glitch in the system and even if the message is small written on a train is still capturing our will to not conform and to keep finding new ways to act against structured organizations that try to keep you down.

more palatable.

Now, as they neared the crest of the final hill, they slowed their pace. The grassy top overlooked a small valley, and right in the middle, a muddy dirt road followed a large stream, a small river. Ali unslung her long rifle and looked through the scope, sweeping it across the valley as she traced the road looking for their target.

"Got it."

Buru's skin tingled. Contact meant combat, and as much as he was accustomed to it, he always hoped for just another day of walking the hills.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"Like those army shits said, a small outpost with some trenches. Some medium sized guns and sandbags. About maybe ten sitting around. Looks pretty run-down, so guessing they have no drones or anti-drone guns either. Should be safe for us."

"Prep for action?"

"Yeah."

Ali set her rifle to the side, Buru dropped his and his bag before unhooking the drone from Ali's bag. Ali pulled out a small foam pad to lay on as Buru started unfolding the drone and clipping the bombs from his bag onto its mount points. When the drone was ready, he picked it up, walked a few paces away, stomped down the grass to keep it out of the rotors, and then placed the drone in the small clearing. He walked back to Ali, unrolled his pad, and then laid down next to her.

"Ready?" he asked.

Ali grunted in assent.

Buru turned on his goggles, and the gray skies flicked over to the yellowed grass underneath the drone. The HUD showed the battery at 96% charge, and using the control unit in his hands, he adjusted the weights of the attached bombs. Estimates for range and flight time recalculated, and the self-diagnostic showed green across the board. He test revved the engines. The quiet whine sounded normal, and the HUD confirmed.

"And off we go," he said as he gunned the engines, sending the drone shooting straight up.

Buru, aerialist extraordinaire, slipped out of his body into that of the drone and as he watched the ground fall away from him. Two figures laid on the hilltop, one on its back, the other on its belly, and they shrunk into obscurity as their camouflage did its job. Buru set himself on approach to the SJ outpost holding himself at a height of 500 meters above the ground. He zoomed the camera in and started counting the soldiers.

"Hey Ali. Show me yours, and I'll show you mine."

"Hmm. Cluster of three in the first trench by the gun under the tarp."

"Check."

"Single with a poncho by the other gun."

"Check."

"Cluster of four around the drum fire. Corrugated metal roof from your angle. Who's missing?"

Buru toggled over to infrared.

"Eighteen meters south-south-west of the fire, two signatures in a janky foxhole. See the pipe?"

"Check."

"Two more in the truck. Engine's cool."

"Check."

"And that's it."

"Plan?"

Buru had been tagging the hostile soldiers as he and Ali enumerated them, and now he looked at an overview of the outpost. He started drawing up a strategy, and as the aerialist, much of what could or could not be done depended on how fast and accurate he could pilot. Absent formal training, but with enough experience on these sorts of assaults, he had an idea how soldiers would move under bombardment, when they might run versus when they might try to hunker down in hopes that the drone's bombs would run out before they could land a fatal strike. He looked at the configuration of the trenches, tried to guess whether they were hardened veteran combatants of skittish fresh recruits. Trajectories and assumed movements took shape in his head.

Buru spoke.

"First bomb on the four. Second on fox hole. Third on the truck. Fourth on reserve, probably for the three. You get solo poncho, then the three, then we see what's left?"

Ali contemplated. "Does it really matter?"

"I'd say no but... the recording. Better strikes begets better gear."

"Shit. Right. I guess we really do have to go for some perfect run."

Silence hung between them.

Buru started again. "I'll cut to 200 meters, then start dropping. That's about 6 seconds between loose and impact. What's your distance?"

"Eight-hundred and forty meters, so a little over a second."

"Five second countdown, and you abort if you don't have a shot?"

"Yep."

He throttled back and started descending, then switched the HUD to combat mode. Wind speed and direction vectors appeared on the screen. A dotted line projected from the drone's position to the ground showing 50% and 95% confidence ranges for ordinance impact. The drone approached the 200 meter mark, and the soldiers below couldn't hear its rotors over the drumming of the rain.

Buru took a deep breath. The pedantic prep always served a double purpose: to delay the inevitable, to give a little room

Remorse for the Dead

Juniper C. Rhodes

Gray skies spat down on them, and the streams running down the trails had long since soaked through their boots leaving their feet aching and numb. The straps of his bag, light with provisions and heavy with explosives, cut into Buru's shoulders. Just a few meters up the hillside, Ali seemed to be equally miserable, laden with her long gun and bag with Buru's drone hooked to the outside with its arms folded in.

At the crest, she paused. Were they finally there? Buru caught up to her.

"Is this it?"

"No," she said, then pinched the bridge of her nose and cleared it of excess snot. "Should be the next one."

"I know we complained about being stuck with all those Brémouaise army weirdos through the winter, but this might actually be worse. At least I could run missions from that makeshift office."

"And the watchtowers had small heaters. The price we pay for autonomy."

"Not quite," Buru said, pointing at the drone.

"Almost semi-autonomy, kinda."

Buru stiffened his tone and kicked his voice up a nasally half octave. "Sir, major captain commander sir. We have brought you footage of the most deadliest soldiers of the Sojusz Południowy as proof that we aren't turning your bombs into bongos. Please give us more, oh sir, my sir."

Ali forced a laugh. "How far we've fallen. I miss the early days."

"In Les Valarèdes?"

"Yeah, them."

Les Valarèdes, the village in the hills of Brému's southwest, where they'd first taken up arms against the militias that raided in the territories claimed as ancestral lands of the Sojusz Południowy. It was a village of no geopolitical significance, and no notoriety, but it was a place where people lived and whose lives still needed protecting. Buru would probably have never heard of Les Valarèdes if Ali, through her connections in the region, hadn't recruited him to join one of the autonomous defense units.

There were five volunteer defenders in total. Buru and another international arrival, Ali and two other Brémouaise. When they'd showed up in the spring, the villagers had assumed like typical mercenaries they'd want to be pampered, but the autonomists had quashed those ideas by helping with

the spring harvest and building the village's up defenses in collaboration with the residents. They'd stayed in the spare rooms, shared meals and stories. Buru had impressed them by learning bits of the local dialect and not just relying on Ali to translate.

"Remember how awkward it was that week," Buru replied. "After you stopped that whole raiding party with a single shot. Busted the engine on the convoy's head and they all just shit their pants and turned. Then all the villagers started trying to win you over as a dinner guest?"

"The embarrassment nearly killed me."

"Wouldn't be the worst way to go."

"Guess not."

The conversation fizzled, and the sounds of the world replaced their voices. The soft murmur of rain on earth, the crunch of rocks beneath boots, and the muffled rumbles of ordinance exploding many kilometers away.

Conversations about Les Valarèdes always cut short, because when they didn't, someone would say "too bad about what happened," and the pains of defeat would be dredged back up. The village was shelled, then then overrun. Armored vehicles rolled in, firing at every car and building, and after Ali and Buru had run out of RPGs, they radioed to the other three that they were pulling back. Two cars had been left for their use, but in reality only useful for retreat. On the outskirts of the village, Buru and Ali had waited and watched for the second car to leave and join them, but when the SJ's column exited the village they knew no one would be joining them. Something like 60 of 200 had died in just a few hours.

It was the first of the casualties, the first loss they knew.

When the raids turned to war, the supplies the autonomists had scrounged over years quickly ran dry, and a despicable alliance with the Brémouaise military had developed. The autonomists were given arms and armor, bullets and bombs in exchange for reporting on their activities and sharing intel. But more prized than intel was drone footage of firefights and bombings, things that could be used as propaganda. There were feeds unofficially run by the Brémouaise military showing glorious Brému in victory over the subhumans of the Sojusz Południowy. And in a psy-op, this footage was continuously pumped into the SJ's closed down internet to cut short the number of recruits who might volunteer. Trading for supplies felt like collaboration with the enemy, but it was the lesser of the two, and marginally



Country Life

Jon O'Mercy

Millicent distracted herself from the rumbling in her stomach by watching the women from her window.

It was early morning and Millicent's neighbours were on their way out. Where to, Millicent did not know, for she hadn't been outside of this little cottage in the whole month that she'd been here. The women looked healthy and ruddy and strong and they did not seem dismayed as the rain came down; they merely stood on the doorsteps of their houses, lifted their cloaks over their heads and set off, straight-backed. Women in plain dresses, nothing of the finery she'd been used to in London, from which she'd been bundled away, ostensibly for her health. She missed the city so fiercely that a piercing pain alighted in the centre of her chest, so severe that she placed a hand on the aggrieved spot.

Her husband, a tall, rather imposing man with dark eye-brows and a fine chin (attractive features for a man, ones she'd thought must indicate intelligence and charm — how wrong she'd been!) had sat down with her in their charmingly decorated parlour one evening to tell her that they would be moving, that he had heard many fine things about country life, and had painted a rather beautiful picture to her with his words. He could be quite silver-tongued with enough liquor in him. What's more, she was spending too much of her time around unsavoury women, he said. It was making her ill, and she'd come home smelling of cigarettes and had been neglecting her wifely duties.

She shuddered at the thought of these duties, with him. She didn't want to think about this so early in the morning but there was nothing to distract herself with. In London, she'd had her books, her reading circle. Her Sarah.

But there she was, thinking again. Perhaps her husband was right. Thinking only led to trouble.

Millicent looked out of the window. She longed to go out for a walk, rain or not, but she had nothing to wear, having only left with a small chest between them, the rest of their belongings having been sold (although she'd seen none of the proceeds and had been met with violence when she'd asked about them). Her husband had insisted she bring this dress with her. He said it made her look beautiful. Her beauty was always dependent on something external; something bought.

Now this beautiful dress was the reason for her hunger because the damned buttons were on the back and she couldn't fasten them, and her husband's fingers were too clumsy in

the morning, his breath too sour, temper too foul.

But it was more than this. The dress meant she was trapped inside, where he wanted her. She was getting too strong, he said. Thick around the middle, thighs too large. The colour in her cheeks was not to his liking.

She discarded her corset and instead put on her petticoat, and then the dress, which had been her favourite but now was becoming something that she hated. How quickly she had changed from valuing things for the pleasure of them to desiring things to be functional.

Her stomach was cramped with pain. She simply *must* leave the cottage to find food today.

She finished dressing, as best she could, in the little kitchen. The fire had not been set in the bedroom as they did not have enough coal to be wasted, and she had been spending most of her days in the kitchen — cruelly, given her hunger.

Millicent looked down at herself. Her dress, without her crinoline, dragged on the floor, and the bodice of the dress sagged at the front as she could not reach those cursed buttons in the back.

She was steeling herself for the embarrassment of being seen in such a sorry state when there was a knock at the door.

Millicent kept quiet, just as still as a mouse, hoping the knocker would go away — what did they want from her, what could anyone want from her here? — but the knock came again and now there was a voice at the door.

"Millicent Clarke, are you home?" A woman's voice, quite deep, a voice that must command her flock (for surely with a voice like that she would be a farmer) with ease. Millicent stayed where she was. She'd hoped to be anonymous on her expedition.

"My dear, I can see the smoke from your chimney, so you must be home, and if you're not there's the risk of fire and I must let myself in any way. Best you just open up, I mean no harm."

Millicent glanced at the hearth and cursed herself. She crossed the room to the front door in a rush and opened the door but a crack. "I'm afraid I'm not decently dressed," she said, hoping this would encourage the woman to go away.

"No matter," said the woman cheerfully as she all but burst through the door, "there's only me to see it, and I don't mind."

Her presence filled the hallway. She seemed quite at

Awaiting beauty

anonymous

There is a kingdom;
its palaces, walls, and all,
spun from dew.

Death lingers softly there,
a mist hanging upon every street;
each morning, it decays anew.

Designed, trapped, captured and inlaid;
isn't it so beautiful?, cry the people.

And whilst the kingdom of dew rots,
therein lies its real beauty.
Not caged, but

forever, unceasingly
released.

her hand back — for Georgie had not let it go — “but you don’t understand — my husband simply *wouldn’t* allow it, not the way that he is now. I would be restrained, by force, if necessary, and I’m sure that he would deem it necessary.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Caldwell, I have very much enjoyed talking to you, but I admit that it feels somewhat like cruelty, to dangle what in my heart of hearts I have longed for, for such a long time, when I know that it isn’t possible.”

“My dear woman, you must call me Georgie,” said Georgie. “And I say again, as you do not seem to have picked it up yet: I am a widow. My husband, rather like yours, in temperament, is long dead, although, poor thing, he was not so much older than your husband when he died.”

Millicent simply stared at her for a moment, her disappointment at being offered something she desired greatly and couldn’t possibly take was so much that she couldn’t take in Georgie’s words. But as Georgie smiled at her calmly, Millicent suddenly understood, in a thrill of excitement that made her cheeks glow again.

“Our husbands are... were ...really so similar?” she said.

Georgie smiled at her. “Oh, very,” she said. “Devastated I was, when my late husband had his accident, although I must admit, I was not entirely surprised, as these kinds of accidents seem to be rather common in our town, which is otherwise very safe and healthy. An awful shame. But now, the rain has cleared, and I spy a little sun to warm your complexion! Shall we go?”

home, uncovering a basket from beneath her cloak and then shaking out the latter before she hung it on the hook in the narrow hallway. She looked down at her boots, which were, Millicent saw, men’s boots, rather large, as they went halfway up her calves, and were also positively filthy.

“Oh dear,” said the woman. “I’m afraid these shall have to come off, I don’t want to ruin your first impression of me by tramping mud all over your floor. You don’t mind, do you?”

Before Millicent could say anything (although she was not entirely sure of what she could have said) the woman had sat on the creaking wooden chair by the door and bent over, unlacing the sturdy, muddy boots.

Millicent looked at her. She was older than Millicent, by a number of years, but she looked very healthy — much healthier than Millicent herself must look, she thought, and looked at the strong legs and, her gaze travelling up, saw that she was not wearing a corset under her dress, for although she appeared strong her body was streamlined with barely any curves in a way that Millicent rarely saw on clothes women. It was oddly intimate, as though she were seeing the woman partly naked. Millicent thought that she should look away but she couldn’t.

She had assumed that the woman would have been wearing a worker’s dress but she was in a black dress that Millicent thought would have been rather grand, in its day, although now it was faded with patches of grey from being washed under the arms, but, despite this, it looked quite clean, and she was able to bend forward with ease. There was a stripe of blue down the front and it was shorter than Millicent had seen, showing her bloomers underneath, but it meant that the bottom of the dress was clean. Underneath her big boots, the woman had on thick woollen socks, shocking purple. Millicent had never seen an outfit like it, but she thought the effect was not too unseemly; rather, she seemed like a very important woman to whom clothes held little importance. Millicent looked down at herself again and saw that her dress was trailing in the dust in the house and was grey at the bottom.

“May I offer you some tea?” she said, to cover the awkwardness.

“Oh yes,” said the woman warmly, “that would be delightful.”

But Millicent stood very still again, realising with horror that she would not be able to turn around to make the tea, for the woman would see that her dress was not buttoned up, and would, from there, make the two very obvious inferences — that her husband left her trapped in the house, and, from the fact that she was still wearing it, that she did not have any other dresses to wear. She took a step back and nearly tripped over the hem of her dress. Righting herself by putting a hand on the wall, she saw that the woman had

finished removing her boots and was staring at Millicent. She smiled tightly and stood up in her stocking feet, leaving the basket, which had a tea towel over it, on the floor.

“Turn around, there’s the girl,” she said briskly, and Millicent had no chance to respond as she was spun around to have her dress buttoned. Millicent’s face was burning red and she feared turning around and being discovered, and was so uncomfortable in this situation that she was nearly in tears, because now, as there was someone else in the house, she was seeing it with a stranger’s eyes. How little it looked like a home! There was very little furniture — in fact, they had no furniture to bring, and had to use what was left in the little cottage: a few chairs, a dining table that her husband had dragged inside from the rain, where it still smelled rather mouldy, although it had been in front of the fire in the kitchen for the last week; what’s more, the bottom of one of the legs had come off. “That’s easily mended,” her husband had said, but he hadn’t gotten around to mending it yet. Millicent could have done this herself but for a lack of materials and the possible violence of her husband. He did not like any perceived masculinity in his wife.

“I’ll get the tea,” said Millicent, and walked into the kitchen without inviting her uninvited guest further inside, her face so hot that she could perhaps just hold the kettle to her forehead to get the water boiling. She was breathing rather hard and felt as though she was losing control of herself. She was so miserably hungry, that was the thing; it was very hard to get control of one’s emotions when hunger gnawed.

“You sit yourself down,” the woman said. “I’m going to make some tea, and I’ve brought some fresh bread, butter, honey, and cheese. I’ve even got berries, if you like. Don’t worry, I knew the former occupant of this house and know my way around.”

Millicent wanted to protest, say that she didn’t need the food, but her stomach turned over in simple longing at the sound of the things to eat (all of it fresh!) and she took a breath to steady her voice and said, “Thank you.”

She put the kettle on to boil and the tea to seep, keeping her back slightly turned so that she didn’t lunge on the food when it was set, for, apparently disregarding the rain, the bread was fresh and still steaming, the unwrapped butter was as golden and creamy as she’d ever seen, the blackberries and raspberries as plump as she could wish for. When the tea was done she brought it over to the table, along with the chipped tea cups that had been left in one of the cupboards.

“I don’t have any milk to offer you,” Millicent said.

“I thought you mightn’t, which is why I brought you some, right here, very fresh. I milked it myself. Now please, don’t bother yourself with apologies, you must tuck into the food and when we are finished we can speak properly. I saw you arrive from my window and thought that you looked

rather drawn then; now you look positively ill. Here.”

She passed a plate with a thick, steaming slice of bread with butter melting on it, pushed over the honey pot and the two little baskets of berries. Millicent quite forgot herself once the warm bread and sweet honey touched her tongue, and ate in big bites washed down with the strong, sweet tea, and while she ate the woman smiled, refilled the tea and sliced the cheese. When Millicent's plate was clean and her dress rather tighter than it had been, she finally looked up at the woman and saw that she had very brown, beautiful eyes, and she was not so much older than Millicent.

“I'm so sorry,” Millicent said, feeling much more like herself. “I don't even know your name and I've made quite a pig of myself.”

“Nonsense, I brought it all for you, of course, and if you're hungry you must eat. My name is Ms Georgina Caldwell. Georgie, to my friends, and I feel that we will be, so we can skip the formalities of the *Mrs.* my husband having been dead for quite a few years now. But I have a very important question — what did you think of the honey?”

“Just beautiful,” said Millicent truthfully. “I almost felt as though I could see the flowers upon which the bees had flown.”

Ms Caldwell looked delighted. “That's so pretty that I should put it on the jars. I sell it at the market we have on the weekends. If you like, you could help me out, I admit that I could. Use the help these days. For now, I can give you some more food, and then, when you've learned how to haggle at the market — for the farmers can sense newcomers and will charge you more until you learn how to holler back at them — I can pay you in money.”

“You... you are offering me a job?”

“Yes. It won't be just selling, you'll need to help me load up, and also to milk the cows, collect the eggs, and in the summertime, collect the honey. There's more than that to it, but we can discuss this if you accept my offer.”

“But you hardly know me,” Millicent said. “That is to say, you don't know me at all.”

“My dear,” said Ms Caldwell, setting down her teacup. “You are not the first woman that I've seen in such a situation here. In exile from the city. No furniture to speak of, even though you've been here for weeks now, and no food either, which means that your husband is coming back too late to be bothered with dinner, and seeing as he works very early and does not work in a workhouse, or down a mine — that is to say, not yet — I think it would be fair to say that he has only his one interest at heart; his own appetite. Although we're smaller than London, we do have some of the same things on offer, for a man of such appetites. In short, you seem to be a woman in need of help, and luckily, I am in a position to offer you some. And what's more, I see a bruise on your face, dear.”

The food turned in Millicent's stomach and her face was red again. She put a hand to her face to touch the mark on her cheekbone, a remnant from her husband's fists a few nights ago when she dared give voice to her unhappiness.

“How do you know all of these things? And if you know them, why do you presume to tell me in such a cold, matter-of-fact way? You just barge into my house and make horrible assumptions, and...”

But without thinking, she had begun to cry, tears that hadn't yet come, despite her misery over the past few weeks, tears that seemed to have taken strength from the food she'd eaten. “I'm so lonely,” she said. “All of the things I like about myself he despises, but he won't let me be. In London, there were more distractions but he insists that I'm ill.”

“What do you like about yourself?”

“I'm strong, I'm a quick learner, I like to read, to hear new ideas, I want to think about all people in the world and their experiences of it. He wants me to be dull and ill. He drinks too much and he gambled all of our money away and he seems to believe these were my doings.”

She stopped herself, ashamed, but Ms Caldwell was nodding in a way that made it seem she understood.

“Dear Millicent, I think you should understand that when there is a problem with a man, it actually has very little to do with the quantity of the thing in which he is tempted, rather, it is the quality of the man himself, that brings him to act on these impulses. The temptation is within him, and will follow him to the ends of the earth. By which I mean, it has everything to do with the man and very little to do with the woman. You mustn't think I'm speaking in such a way to shame you. Rather, I want to alleviate the guilt which you are — very unjustly, I say — feeling. And as for your interests — well. I think you and I will be friends. You should pay a visit to me one day — well of course you will, if you accept my job offer, and I hope that you will, for, to be honest, I really do need the help, and from your appetite I think you could become strong quite quickly. I have been lucky recently, and my little property has become a large one, and my products are desired by many in the town, and in fact in the cities, as well. I enjoy the work but it's too much, and I find my evenings are annoyingly occupied by work, and I cannot spend my evenings in leisure, as I've been accustomed to. Reading, and writing letters, speaking of ideas. Many people take an unnatural pride in their work. I want to work as little as possible. But, as I say; you could come for a visit, and you will see that I have collected quite a number of books, some of which my husband left me, others that I acquired for myself. I have quite the library now — in fact, rather more than in the town library, or at least of more interesting books than now, and being rather comfortable with money, I thought of setting up a little library, of sorts.”

“A library,” said Millicent, her mouth open again. “You

have enough books for that?”

“Yes,” said Ms Caldwell. “In fact, my living quarters seem to shrink every year, for I must put up bookshelves, they're nearly on every wall! I am even thinking of putting up some shelves in my bathroom.” She smiled at Millicent and said, “I don't see many books here.”

“No,” said Millicent. “I adore them, but my husband doesn't like women who read.”

“I don't think that your husband likes women; at least not women in every facet that the word can contain.”

“Multitudes,” tried Millicent, and was delighted when Ms Caldwell laughed.

“Ah, a real reader!”

“I would hide them and as he went to work, or — well, when he was out, doing whatever he was doing, I would read them.”

“What did you read?” Ms Caldwell was looking closely at Millicent and Millicent found her gaze so piercing that she couldn't look at her without her cheeks blazing.

“Anything I could get my hands on, but the ones that I had to hide were the Bronte sisters and Jane Austen. But my favourite — my *favourite* — was *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley. I think my tastes are rather changing; I used to read romantic novels as a way to escape, but now it just seems silly. To think of marriage as anything but a business arrangement made by a gamble, and one that does not pay off, especially if your man is prone to gambling himself.” She said this bitterly, and then covered her mouth with her hands, shocked with herself.

This time Ms Caldwell laughed out loud, a barking but pleasant-sounding laugh, and she reached across the table and took Millicent's hand from her face to hold it in her own, and Millicent felt the callouses on Ms Caldwell's hand and liked the feel of them. They made her feel protected in a way that she hadn't in a long time.

“My dear,” said Ms Caldwell. “You simply mustn't feel bad about the way you speak; in fact, it is refreshing, to see you so quickly transformed from a meek little creature who wouldn't open her door and protested to speaking the truth, to speaking the truth so plainly with me now. You are right, we don't know each other, but I rather think we will quite quickly if we continue to talk like this, and you look like someone who needs a friend — more than that, someone to look after you properly until you have learned how to look after yourself.”

“My husband doesn't want me to look after myself,” said Millicent. “And yet he doesn't want to look after me, either. He wants a meek little creature, you see, he has told me often, a meek little creature to make his dinner and... surrender to his other appetites, without any thought of myself, and whether or not I have these appetites.” She never would have dreamt of speaking this way to a stranger, and yet once this

talk had started it seemed impossible to stop, as though she were purging herself of a poison.

Ms Caldwell squeezed her hand again. “My dear, I have seen you eating, I don't think that you lack an appetite, just that you have rather a different palate to what it is that you're being offered.”

Millicent blushed again, but this time it didn't feel as painful as when Georgie had entered; it felt warming and rather pleasant, like sitting in front of a warm fire. She did not turn her face in shame but looked at Georgie full in the face. The lines that gathered at the corner of her eyes and her forehead, were pleasing, as though she were a woman who had spent her years tramping through the countryside under a blazing sun in the clean air. The longer Millicent looked, the more Ms Caldwell's — the more *Georgie's* — features became more striking: the long, strong nose; the full mouth; and those deep, intelligent eyes. Millicent thought she could look at this face for hours.

“Yes,” said Millicent slowly. “Yes, I think you're right — right again, and we do not know each other well, but I would be surprised if you were ever wrong.”

Georgie laughed. “Oh, you sweet thing, I am often wrong! I am like dear Walt; I contradict myself often. Why do you think I read so much? If I thought I knew everything I would read half as much as I do, but the more I know, the more I realise that I don't know, and from there, the more I simply *must* know.”

“Oh, I would be so delighted to visit your library,” said Millicent suddenly, her voice passionate, “and to come to work for you, this would bring me joy. But I'm afraid my husband wouldn't allow it.”

Georgie smiled and squeezed her hand. “If you'd been out in the town you might have observed that this is not a place that cares much about the desires of men. I must say that my husband, before he died, was rather like yours, as I have seen your husband about the town. But now, enough of these doubts!” She regarded the table. “The tea has been drunk, and you have some red on your cheeks. We will go to my friend's house, Ms. Margaret Smith, and arrange for you to be outfitted in something better than this delicate frock, which simply will not do. The rain is clearing; we can look for some berries and milk the cow, have ourselves a nice early supper, after which you can see my library. In fact, I have a few other women coming over, we tend to read to each other on bleak nights like this, and have discussions, and with the fire going, and hot tea, it's rather the perfect ending to a day, I don't know of any finer. I'll escort you back here and we'll discuss your future with your husband, although I don't think he'll be home tonight, but we can see. I'm very sure he will be agreeable to your job prospects, once he hears of my reasoning. I'm quite good in debates.”

“This is all very nice to speak of,” said Millicent, taking