

FEAR RAT MAGAZINE



VOL 5 - AUG 2022

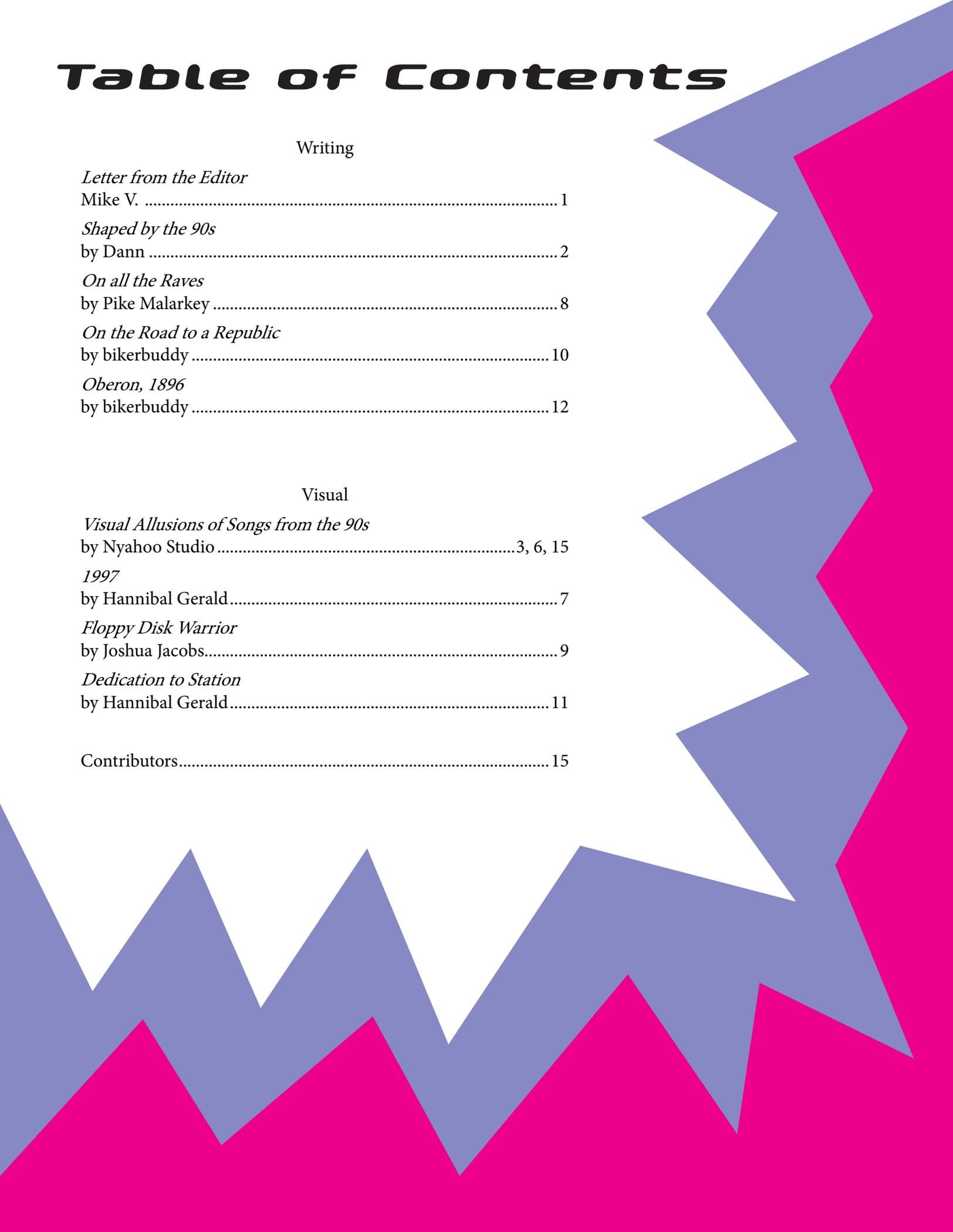
Table of Contents

Writing

<i>Letter from the Editor</i> Mike V.	1
<i>Shaped by the 90s</i> by Dann	2
<i>On all the Raves</i> by Pike Malarkey	8
<i>On the Road to a Republic</i> by bikerbuddy	10
<i>Oberon, 1896</i> by bikerbuddy	12

Visual

<i>Visual Allusions of Songs from the 90s</i> by Nyahoo Studio	3, 6, 15
<i>1997</i> by Hannibal Gerald.....	7
<i>Floppy Disk Warrior</i> by Joshua Jacobs.....	9
<i>Dedication to Station</i> by Hannibal Gerald.....	11
Contributors.....	15



Letter from the Editor

by Mike V.

There's this comic I saw once that I sometimes think back on now; this dude checks his pockets and says something like "shit, forgot my phone." The next panel he reassures himself, "It's okay, I'll just pretend it's the 90s." The final panel is closer on him, his face agitated. "This sucks."

I think about that comic more than I probably should, usually when I'm going down some thought-void about how meaningless my life is and how I should get rid of my phone because it'd force me to connect with people in different ways and maybe I'd stop melting so much of my time away on Reddit and I'd start writing every day again and updating my blog and writing book reviews and working on other projects and I'd go back to reading books for at least half an hour a day and I'd get back to sitting on the floor thinking about not thinking about anything and the entirety of my life would be this slow, whimsical climb upward into a higher state of being. A new person; a better person.

This feeling usually lasts for about 2 and a half intense minutes and then I open up a new tab and just fart around on the web some more. Maybe I go on Youtube and pretend like it's going to recommend something other than the same 15 videos it's been recommending me for the past two weeks. Why does it do that, anyway? I keep clicking the music mixes it recommends, too. It keeps recommending songs I like and have already listened to dozens/hundreds of times previously, so of course I'm gonna listen again. How broken is the reward center in my brain that this keeps happening a few times per day?

Why do I keep doing the same things on my phone and my computer and my life every single day with no significant change? I'm an endless hole of consumption and I can never be filled.

Anyway; the 90s! Goldeneye 007 tournaments at sleepovers. AOL chatrooms. All my friends on AIM every night of the week. Pizza Hut containing indescribable magic. My phone was connected to

a wall and everyone in the family used it. I learned how to skateboard, and so did all my friends. Going to ACME to buy 75 cent soda cans to sneak into the movies. Movies cost \$3 matinee prices, \$6 prime time. I didn't know anything about the way the world worked (still don't,) and my biggest worry was about faking a book report for English class. We ended one of my Little League baseball games early so everyone could get home to watch the Seinfeld finale. That was pretty disappointing.

Speaking of disappointing things, this is a great issue ahead.

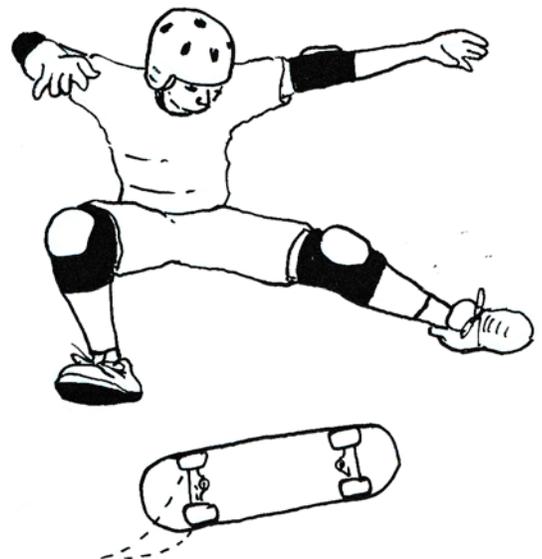
We have a few great written pieces by resident 90s experts bikerbuddy and Dann. Artwork from new and old ERM alumni scatters about the pages like a purpley triangle or blue squiggly on your favorite Trapper Keeper. Pike M. shows their poetic side. Har arranges magic as usual.

This is Ear Rat Magazine issue five; The 90s. I'm sorry it took so long, I was searching around for my keys. Of course, they're always in the last place you look.

Ear Rat will return for issue six.

xoxo,

Hasty



Shaped by the

by Dann

90s

The 90s: last in the lineup of cool decade names. I suppose the early 2000s, in all their newfound nostalgia for the old web and the like, have been called the ‘naughts’, but it just doesn’t have the same ring. Also in theory, we’re back to the 20s, but for simplicity’s sake I prefer to keep such namesakes confined to the twentieth-century.

Alongside its partner in crime, the 80s, the decade was a hot bed for pop culture, aesthetics, and deep-seated nostalgia. But much like my imagining of the 50s being full of rollerskate-delivered fast food, poodle skirts, and the luxury of surviving on a single income, it was more likely to also include pervasive cigarette smoke, inadequate dental care, and hand-me-downs that didn’t match what was generally accepted to be in vogue.

So what of the 90s in that regard? Was everything zig-zag confetti-themed? Did neon-purple triangles dominate every advertising theme? Did anyone unironically wear a bucket hat? Well I’m going to dig in and see what exists only as a trope of the zeitgeist, and what life was actually like.

Except for that last one, which I will answer right now: it was in fashion for one month in 1999, then it disappeared.

If I were to be born again, I’d only tweak the year slightly and dial it back to 1976. This would mainly allow me to reap some of the early 80s toys, and then place me as a young adult in the 90s so I could enjoy some of the concerts that would never be the same again. That said, my current standing allowed the gamut of my formative years to all fit neatly into the decade at hand.

And what a gamut it was... we started with the last remnants of hair metal and ended up with nu metal. Cartoons went from Saturday morning excuses to sell merchandise to South Park and the twisted MTV

animated blocks. Geometric designs to cyberpunk. Even hats made the shocking transition from being worn normally to being worn backwards. Earth-shattering, I know.

Style

So let’s dial back to the beginning. Like any transitional period, there is some bleed over from the time just before. When I think of the 80s, it’s easy to imagine flashy video games, neon lights, and outrageous pop music. While a fair amount of that is true, I’d generally pin a lot of that on the first few years of the 90s, and leave the majority of the previous decade with leaded gasoline, endless boredom without the internet, and those corduroy pants that made the *swish-swish-swish* sound when you walked.

Truly the biggest aesthetic stereotype that needs to sit on the latter side of the fence is the bright eye-blinding neons that were everywhere. Maybe the 80s had *actual* neon lights in bars and stuff where smoke filled the air, but otherwise the time frame was filled with dark and flat color schemes. Not so a few short years later, when everything came alive. From slap bracelets to translucent phones, you could only stare at objects for so long before risking permanent vision damage. Remember *Lisa Frank* stickers and file folders? Yes, that’s a design choice that sits firmly where you think it should. You weren’t cool in school unless you could reflect the sun’s damaging rays into the faces of your peers.

Did the colors last? Sadly no. Well maybe on consumer products, but in advertising it was shifting ever so slightly. Most often seen on the bumpers between shows on the newly formed Fox television channel, everything went pastel, and gradients gave way to abstract shapes. Spirals, squiggles, and dots would pulsate and jump in a two-frame animation set against a background that abandoned all semblance of color theory.

Then grunge hit. As quickly as one theme began, it was cast aside for gritty realism filled with scuff, scrapes, and graffiti. Finally as the decade came to an end, a new cultural shift started to take hold. I attribute this change to two things: the internet (and any new technology that the older generation didn't want to learn) and the bulk of Generation-X become teens and young adults. Mass media started to cater to this *X-treme* group, so everything became edgy, loud, and in your face. The slacker generation became the hacker generation, attention spans were shortened, and matrix code dripped across anything that seemed remotely computeryish. It certainly didn't end there as the 2000s would run with this motif in full force, but that's another article for another time.

Music

Music took another interesting journey. As with design choices, we carried over many of the genres that had their start in the late 80s. Hair metal was on its way out, but didn't completely die. Even if the musical stylings faded, the long hair persisted for a time, and though it wasn't frizzed and teased, it still fell below the shoulder. Look at any of the grunge bands in 1991 compared to 1996, and you'll see what I mean. Rap and Hip-Hop also began earlier, but found a foothold soon with a darker and grittier edge to it. Like the grunge movement, things had shifted from fun and light to something more dire and serious. I'm not entirely sure why, since I feel like the 90s were a more carefree time, but perhaps good times make whiny people. I don't know.

That said, the shift that resonates with me the most is the one from vapid 80s pop to vapid 90s dance. It didn't make any more sense, but the rhythmic pulsing of Eurodance, anthem house, and good old fashion stadium trance are still something that fills my car today just as it did riding with my

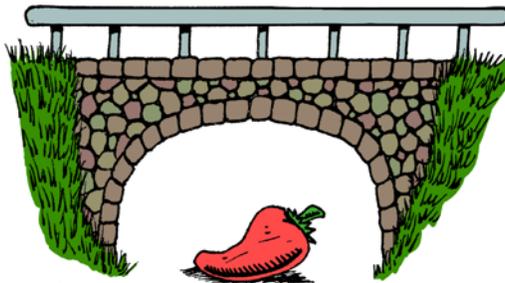
parents to whatever errand we had to do. *2 Unlimited*, *Real McKoy*, and *Culture Beat* still hold up, and in this instance, there was still some joy in the music. The great majority of those sub-genres mentioned were in the first half of the decade, with psytrance and goa trance taking over the latter. However at around the half-way mark, I began to jump back into the rock inspired options.

Grunge left as quickly as it came. You could only be depressed in the western Seattle area so long before you either made it big and were happy or ended up as some goo on the floor next to some questionable evidence. Then was the maturation of another style that took its initial visual look from the fashion popularized by grunge, but ramped up the musical intensity into something completely different. No more moping and whining, now we were jumping, moshing, and head-banging our made-up frustrations away...in a fun way somehow. Gen-X only knew one volume, and that was hardcore, so what better name for the genre. *Suicidal Tendencies*, *Biohazard*, and *Machine Head* were bands that I missed out on—hence the desire to be born ever so slightly earlier—but have found a place in my musical rotation since.

So just as grunge grew up fast, so did hardcore. Musically, the sound persisted, but not so much insofar as its raw intensity. Angst was certainly still in the air, so flannel was out and sports attire was in. We had entered the era of nu metal.

Korn was the big kick off. I remember hearing about them in high school, but it took a few years before there were enough other

bands to jump on the bandwagon and make it a full-fledged genre. Fortune smiled on me, and the whole movement kicked off as I went to college. *Limp Bizkit* was first introduced to me on IRC chat from distant



Nyahoo Studios

frenemies whom I never met, but soon the radio was buzzing about the *nookie*, a term I had no idea as to what it meant and made the mistake of singing out loud before I did.

And far from it being a homogenous style, there were the technical applications of Mudvayne, the industrial tweaks of Spineshank, and of course the rap influence of pretty much every other participant. Nu Metal in fact had probably the longest run, even if the latter entries began to have little in common with the turntables and guttural growling from the start.

Industrial acts even had some crossover, with NIN spanning the decade, and the likes of Gravity Kills, Stabbing Westward, and KMFDM all getting there prime years smack in the middle. I'd like to go into the alternative-rock sub-sub-genre, but that was too wide and weird to adequately encapsulate. You'd have some sweet pop soundtrack with a screeching female vocal, sharing the airtime with BB King samples overlaid onto a downtempo dreamy rock song.

Back to nu metal. How did it end? Well many would say at Woodstock '99, but fans would be lying if the fires and anarchy didn't make them like the music even more. (They'd also be lying if they admitted to liking it *ever*, but that's another issue of the time). No, the real death was the sophomore album drop. Anticipation was high, but we were treated to more of the same, and the societal boundary pushing wasn't going to strike twice. Korn and Limp Bizkit escaped it to a degree since their first releases predated the mainstream popularity, but upon round three, it felt repetitive. We'd also grown up a few more years in the process, so the target demographic had moved on to a degree.

Technology

Tech developments are sort of a given based on Moore's Law, and the progression over those years was certainly significant. The 70s brought refrigerator-sized computers down to the dawn of home PCs, and the 80s got said PCs into the homes of more than just the hobbyists. But the 90s dug full force into the useful applications of them.

Macs had a graphical UI for some time, but 1990 introduced Windows 3.0, thus bringing everyone out of the command line era and making the mouse more than just an optional accessory. Platformers

like Commander Keen and the first FPS games like Catacombs 3D squeezed out all they could from the EGA palette. But by the end in 1999, Quake 3 Arena was filling your screen with rendered curved surfaces, alpha-channel translucency, and volumetric fog, all powered by accelerated graphics cards that cost more than most of the other components in your setup combined.

But despite the progress, nothing really felt 'fast'. This was mainly due to the rapid progression of what we intended the computer to do, often leaping ahead of the hardware needed to do the job. I remember John Carmack of Doom and Quake fame saying that his projects generally were intended for specifications that didn't exist yet. I was usually caught in the pit of not having the latest gear to run something in an acceptable manner, as shown when Unreal became more of a slideshow than a fast-paced action shooter.

And of course the computer didn't start and end from the keyboard to the screen. Once the internet became more accessible, everything changed. Even in the earliest years, you could dial into a BBS and grab pictures and the latest shareware games. Such games were a radical shift in marketing at the time. No longer did you buy a game from a store and have to live with it, unchanged for all time. Now you could get up to a quarter of the full game for free, with no strings attached. If you liked it, then you could buy the rest right from the developer, cutting out the middleman.

By the middle of the decade, the web opened up. In addition to 'surfing' other sites, most internet providers and some educational institutions would allow you to host your own. Staking out a small portion of the 'net' was a rite of passage amongst early adopters, and the introduction of free hosts such as Geocities, Tripod, Angelfire, and Xoom only increased the proliferation of fan sites for every conceivable topic.

By the end, Flash became the dominant media form, allowing cartoons, introductory splash screens, and navigational menus. Sites also became less static, with either manually updated news sections, or database driven scripts that kept maintenance to a minimum. Just before blogging became less of a hurdle for entry into the online sphere, E/N or Everything/Nothing sites popped up, smashing together the randomness of an individual's site with little to say against the content of personal fandom and thoughts. Some were terrible, others were great, but all claimed to denounce others

who weren't *true* designers.

Much of these change bled over into the culture at large. Internet use wasn't the way it was later in the 2000s and certainly nothing like after the advent of social media where everyone's aunt Bertha could engage in passionate slacktivism about the social issue du jour.

No, in the 90s, the internet (and technology in general) was a wide void of mystery, able to do or solve almost anything. Hackers could tap away at a keyboard and gain access to the most secure of systems as long as they wore trendy sunglasses and had an alias with more numbers than letters. Virtual Reality would still be 25-years out in practical terms, but there were no shortage media like *VR-5* and Full Moon's *Arcade* that teased what the future may hold. The only constant was that if you died in VR, you died in real life. No exceptions.

The Gen-X crowd adopted the new culture most easily, for better or worse. It was an elite club for a while, and while there were certainly the younger AOL kids, the 15-25 demographic spent their time chatting on IRC chat, pirating warez, and tricking each other into opening shock sites filled with all sort of graphic crime scenes. I saw my first murder before ever going to a class dance, so growing up was never going to be the same.

Life

So it's easy to outline what external influences were present during a given time, but what was life actually like on a day to day basis? The short answer: it could be really boring.

Often I hear, "What would kids do without their phones/computer/electronics?" Everyone needs a phone to diddle with or a video game to pass the car ride. It's easy to assume that the current generation is dumbed down with such an array of readily available stimuli—and perhaps that's true in some senses, but I'm not here to stoke the inter-generational embers—but in truth, we were really bored quite often without something to pass the time. In the same line of thinking, this could be seen as a net positive, as the youth would need to be more creative in order to entertain themselves.

That's certainly not wrong. We had comic books, the over-the-air TV, notebooks to draw in, home movies to

film, and an attic of toys to play with. Home movies in particular played a large role in our free time. Starting with a simple Video8 cassette recorder, we filmed skits and such in a strict linear order without any way to edit it. By the very end in 1999, we had a capture card for the computer and even dipped into the digital world with mini-DV.

That said, there were the dull times, specifically if you had the dreaded trip to your parent's job. Eight hours of precious nothing to do in an emotional vacuum. Going stir-crazy didn't begin to describe the horror of making it through to the end. The vending machine only provided so many outlets for alleviating the doldrums, all while you tried to remain quiet and not bug the adults who were trying to get something done. Frequent bathroom visits became a break from the sensory deprivation chamber, and sometimes the vending machine could work in tandem, helping complete the sugary soda/pee break loop.

In the end, I wouldn't trade those days. Sure, I can always have something to fuel my attention despite how much I try to put the phone down, but sometimes I feel like much of this is idle wasted time. That's probably why I'm writing this...to create something and use technology to add to my life experience rather than drain it.

Photo albums from film have turned into a Flickr account of tagged and chronologically sorted digital snapshots. My six-year never-missed-a-day journal has been replaced with a scattering of blog updates and social media posts that can document my life down to the minute. Probably the only thing that has taken a strange turn, lay in the music that we consume.

The trend of physical media to digital streaming is obvious, but the path to this end point is neither straightforward nor the only conclusion. In the earliest days of the 90s, there was only one choice for both your audio and video needs: tapes. Music would be on cassettes and video on VHS. Annoying in some regard, but there was some benefit to keeping your spot no matter how long of a break you took. Just remember to 'Be Kind, Rewind' else you're going to have an extra dollar added to your rental fee.

Eventually both transitioned into a disc format, with CDs taking a several year lead on DVD. Improving not only in quality, bonus features on DVDs and hidden tracks on CDs were novel ways to enjoy the

new format. Later, movies easily shifted into their streaming offerings once high-speed bandwidth became available and HD discs, such as BluRay and HDDVD, slipped in popularity.

But music took a few detours. There was some tinkering with a high-def CD option, but no one was going to upgrade their music players with the same enthusiasm they did with their TVs. Instead, the digital option took hold early, just not in the way the industry wanted. Much has been made over Napster, MP3s and the controversy that Metallica made over it. In a stroke of irony, I had grabbed all of their discography before Napster debuted by finding FTP sites strewn about the internet, some requiring ratios (uploading some sort of data as a requirement to download a greater amount in return) before getting what you needed. This went back and forth for a while, eventually merging into the services we know today.

In Summary

If I had to define the 90s in some concrete terms, I'd say it was the last time where we were able to remain disconnected. Is this a good thing? I can't say. Cell phones are useful in a pinch, the internet is great for finding answers, and social media is handy for keeping in contact with those who you wouldn't otherwise. But cell phones mean you're always within reach. The internet gives you answers but overwhelms you ten-fold with white noise. And social media has unleashed a shift in humanity that no one could anticipate nor adequately adapt.

We found music by listening to the radio and then blindly hoping the rest of the album was good when we finally bought it. If it wasn't, you just lived with it. We watched movies by renting them at a store and had to get through them by the next day. Some VHS tapes cost \$100, so the next best thing was to record your own and try to splice out the commercials. When all else failed, there were TV shows that only aired at certain times, and missing one meant you had to wait until syndication during the summer months to try catching it again.

Research for school assignments was done out of the 1964 encyclopedia your mom still held onto. Phones didn't have caller ID and picking up the receiver elsewhere in the house would relay the same conversation. This same receiver would also kill any lengthy download that may have been in progress for

hours in order to grab a single song or large photo.

Contact with friends remained primarily at school or church, and sometimes on the weekends if they could come over. A telephone call was the only way to get a hold of them, but ran the risk of having to talk to their parents, which was never fun. Eventually e-mail gave us a digital alternative, even if it were mainly used to forward off-color proto-memes and rather offensive chain mails.

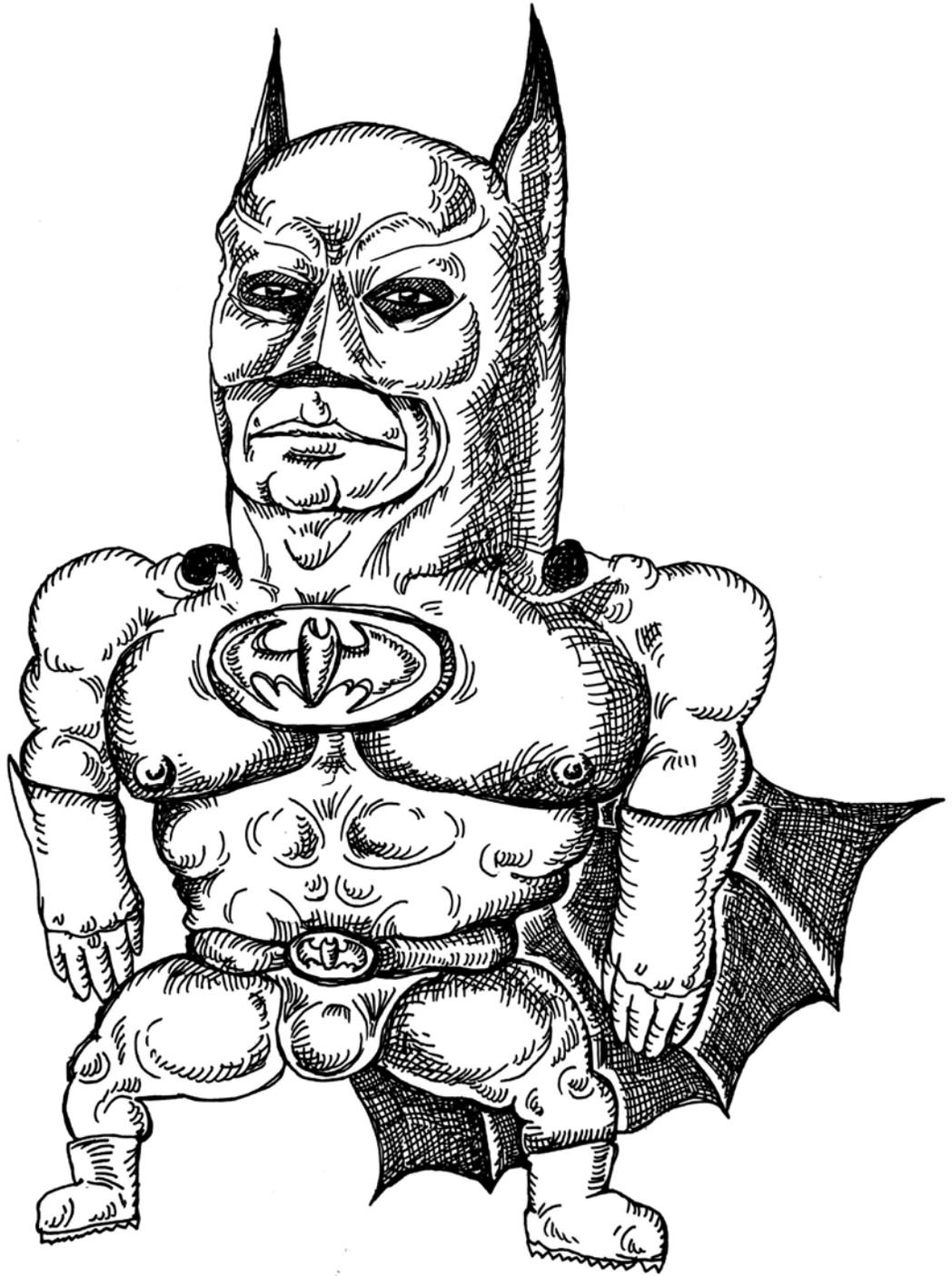
At airports, families could wander all the way to the boarding gate to wish travelers a safe trip, and you didn't even have to take off your shoes. Ten dollars filled up the gas tank in your '88 Chevy for a week, despite no attempt at fuel efficiency. No one cared about politics because the nightly news only relayed the local happenings, and that's as much effort as anyone gave current events. I literally had no idea who was running for president until it was over.

So while I'm certainly thankful for many of the advancements that have arrived since, I look back on those years fondly for their simplicity. Now pardon me, I need to go play some Doom and pretend I wasn't totally more into Quake at the time.

NYAHOO
STUDIO



Nyahoo Studios



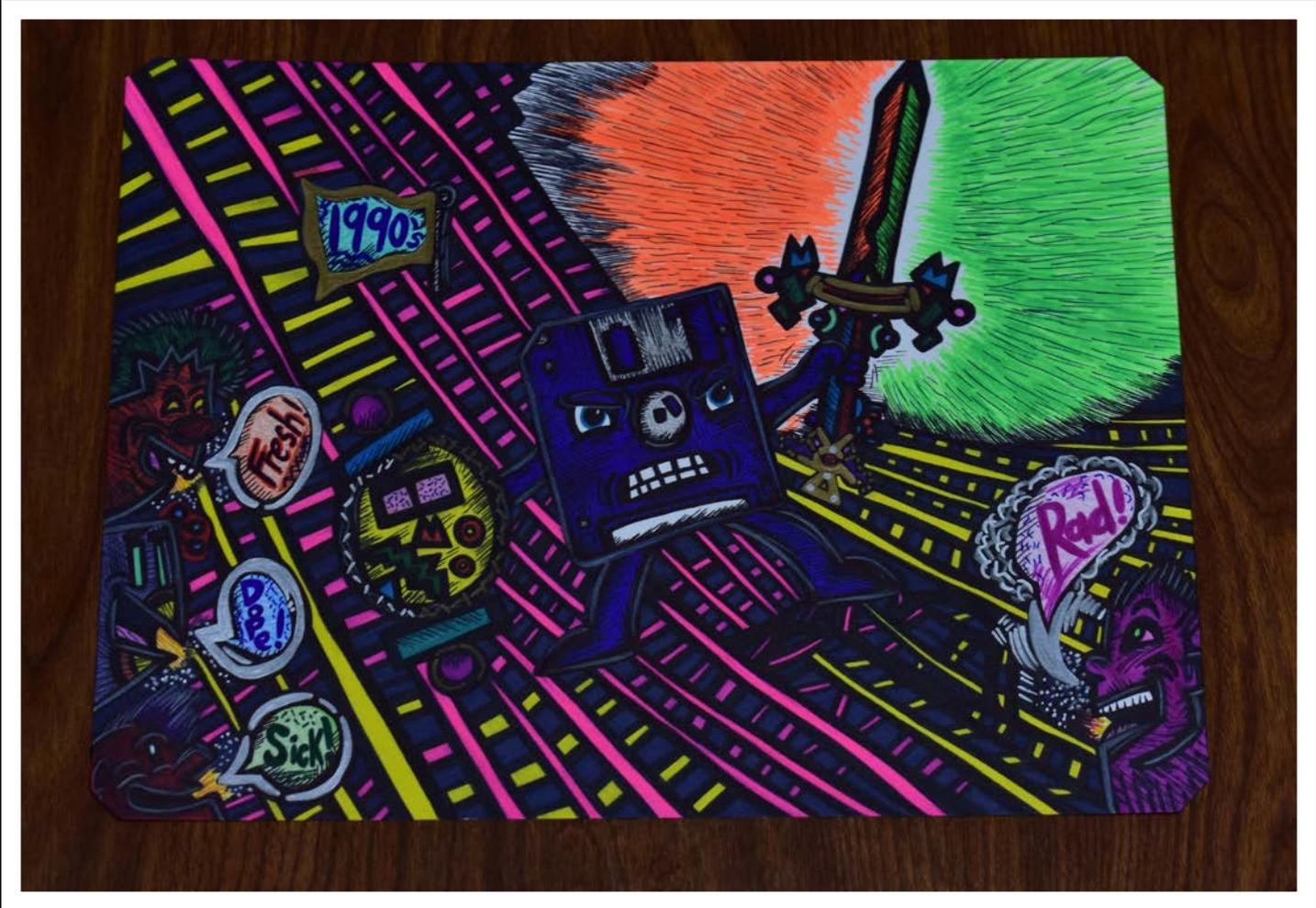
1997

Hannibal Gerald

On All the Raves

by Pike Malarkey

The people swayed, barren
Outside their piecemeal warren
Colour smudged in the high and low points
Of their bodies that chug along
To the pulse of the beat which
Deceptful, tunes itself in line with the
heartbeat. There is an overinvestment
of meaning all around. Man-made material,
repulsed, tries to disassociate itself
from the badness of body, slips and crunches
and gets tugged back up where the eye can still
track what happens this side of the curtain.
Corners are carved out in the shape
of a smoker's curved contours, and the lighters
travel around in circles, swapping hands and pockets
but always gathering together in the same place
in the end. The sun goes up and is noticed, every time.
Hand moves up, as if to tuck away a strand
of hair, but diverts its route midway to brush the
nose instead. The allergy is collective.
That's interesting. What is your name? Yeah? Oh, I see.
But I do not see through that great wall of sound.
I am ignorant and squinting at the sharp brightness
of bass lines. Can anyone see, anything?
The pregnant girl with murky hair is seeing a very fast movie.
And maybe her fetal matter sees it too,
and will keep on seeing it always, but it is not certain.
The doctors do not know this field, with its
flowers that are all colour. Sometimes they
are medicine and sometimes they are weaved into
a dependable noose, through which a girl like this
can walk into pastures new.
There is love, if you don't mind it being a bit synthetic.
I don't. It can warm just like the real deal, if you know
the time you've got. Girl with matches, remember?
Girl lights a match, warms by its light, for a short while.
Dies, but you don't have to freeze lighting one after
another, you know better. Get your kicks and go
home to your animal cave under a heavy duvet.
The beehive in your brain will repair itself and you
will give it a bit of sugar in the morning, grateful.
The sun comes up, but will go unnoticed this time.
We will be lying with our noses in own armpits,
drawing blanks in a dream.



Floppy Disk Warrior

Joshua Jacobs

On the Road to a Republic

by bikerbuddy

Just down the road from us there is a small cemetery next to the railway tracks, not much larger than a suburban backyard. In it there is a surprisingly large grave, the grave of Sir Henry Parkes. Parkes was a journalist and became the premier of the colony of New South Wales a total of five times. In 1889 he delivered a speech in Tenterfield, calling upon the six colonies of Australia to form a nation. His speech inspired a Federation movement in the colonies and in 1891 a Constitutional Convention was held in Sydney. Throughout the 90s, calls for Federation increased. In 1900 Queen Victoria gave royal assent for an Australian federation. The Commonwealth of Australia began in 1901, about five years after Parkes died in 1896.

There were a couple of peculiarities around Australia becoming a country. One, an issue not considered important at the time, but one much on the national conscience now, is that Australia had been populated by a complex system of different peoples prior to European colonisation. No thought was given to their role in the nation. Another was that the Australian Head of State remained the English monarch. Prince George, the Prince of Wales and later King George V, opened the first Australian parliament. In World War I Australia joined the war in Europe to support the 'mother country', and Australia faced its own bloody baptism on the slopes of a beach in Gallipoli in 1915. The highest court of appeal for Australians remained the English Privy Council until 1986, after a long decoupling that began in 1968. In 1975, Sir John Kerr, Governor General of Australia, the Queen's representative, sacked the Whitlam government using powers still retained by the Queen. It caused a constitutional crisis and calls increased for Australia to become a republic, independent of Britain.

The republican issue came to a head in the 1990s, a century after the Federation movement inspired by Parkes. Prime Minister Paul Keating, a staunch supporter of republicanism – he

had been a young minister in Whitlam's government – set the date for a new Constitutional Convention for 1998. But by that time we had a new Prime Minister, John Howard, a monarchist. His insistence that Australians vote on a specific republican model (rather than test the support for a republic and work out the details later) became problematic. Our national poet, Les Murray, even helped write a preamble to the new constitution, to be tested in the referendum. The style of a specific republican model rather than the cause of republicanism was therefore put to the test, and with many republicans still divided over the issue, the referendum, held in November 1999, failed.

The image of Queen Elizabeth II remains on the obverse of all Australian coins.

This year, with scandals concerning Prince Andrew and speculation about the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, now well into her 90s, calls for a republic have once again been stirring in Australia.





Dedication to Station

Hannibal Gerald

Oberon, 1896

by bikerbuddy



Who knew the Meriton twins could both be pregnant at the same time? It was a most singular thing and it had been the talk of the town since the beginning of winter when the two girls made their announcement after the memorial talk for Sir Henry Parkes, given by Mr Turner. John Fletcher, the father of both children, it turned out, had left town ahead of the announcement. I'm sure, without the possibility of offering a shred of scientific evidence to support my memory, that that was the night when the cold first settled. In fact, that is why we gathered in the front of the Meriton house, rather than outside, I am sure, to hear Mr Turner speak. Somebody who arrived late swore they had seen the first flakes of winter caught in the dead gumtree beside Pennington's Farm, and their words rang flat like a cracked bell over the fading echoes of the announcement, grandly given. It seemed a sign of something, though the feeling was ineffable. The grandfather chimed hollowly in the hall outside the room while the two girls beamed like lights in a dark wood. And then everyone went home, mumbling. As always, my rheumatism made me slow. I was left alone for those few awkward moments with the twins and their mother in the foyer of their house, as Mr Turner made an embarrassed exit past us. I

forced my muted congratulations, before the wind swept me into the night.

I relate this story not to make judgment upon the two ladies. The town hummed the next morning and any opinion I might have offered concerning this ill-conceived announcement would have been beyond me to make heard above the hubbub of others. In short, it was a scandal. The level of approbation was beyond the harm either of the girls could have offered to anyone but themselves, and I was called back to the house when their mother, Mrs Meriton, was overcome by apoplexy after she was confronted the next day by the indignation of Mrs Cummins, her neighbour, on the street. She remained mostly in the house thereafter until her oldest girl, Anne, went into labour six months later. The Meriton girls were shunned throughout Oberon.

"It will be the death of me Dr Mersy," Mrs Meriton assured me as she ushered me into the hallway of their home one afternoon. There had been more snow already – Oberon usually received some during the winter months – adding to the glum reproach of the silent house. My footsteps sounded like grim drums upon the worn hall runner as Mrs Meriton strained

against the first step to the bedroom, above.

“They will be two lovely boys, I’m certain,” she ef-fused nervously, looking up the stairwell. She wrung her hands and her eyes glinted sadly, like a glimpse into the future. “It will be a new world Dr Mersy. A new world. All that was said in Tenterfield. What Sir Henry said ... How I do regret his passing. Mr Meriton, God bless his soul, he voted for him, you know. Sir Henry. Every time he was Premier, dear Mr Meriton voted for him. Bringing the country together. We’ll be a real nation, we will. And our two new boys...”

I found both girls in their beds. Their mother had done her best to prop them up, but Janette had slid beneath her covers. Her pillow was askew and in danger of falling to the floor. I felt the whole thing to be a sham: the air of a sick room; the curtains drawn; the lack of proper lighting. I assured both girls that they were in splendid health; that many a young lady had, before their own unfortunate circumstance, which I did not entertain in so many words, bloomed.

“You are kind to say so, Dr Mersy,” Anne said to me. “I know I have felt better; the morning sickness has gone, and I think I am mostly tired of sitting in this bed without anything to occupy me.” She glanced at her sister whose face was pale, eyes dull.

“Then you must make arrangements for some exercise. You must take in fresh air from time to time Miss Meriton,” I told her, with every intention that my advice was spoken to her sister as well. “However cold it may be right now,” I added. I thought of the disapproving stares of the local parish. “Or at least to venture downstairs.”

“You are right. You are so right, doctor,” she said, like a little bird chirping to please me. For a second I saw her glance at her sister again, but Janette gave no sign that she was listening to our conversation. She looked as though the shame of their notoriety had settled in her soul.

Of all the occasions I attended the girls, this is the one I remember.

I sat in my carriage that day, after I had made my excuses, looking at the back of my horse before I started for home, and thought about those unborn children. Mrs Meriton had been so proud of her husband’s efforts to push for Federation, and she had continued to encourage interest in the town concerning the matter after he died three years ago. Now Sir Henry, himself, was gone, and I wondered whether all the effort would fall to earth like a punctured balloon. Mrs Meriton’s efforts had made her a central figure in our community in support of a new nation, and she had

much to be proud of.

Now, her family were pariahs. But ill beginnings could still make good ends, I thought. Look at New South Wales. The colony had become something. A few old convicts from the old days were still to be seen on occasion, but somehow, without war or revolution, Sir Henry Parkes had brought the colonists together and we would soon be a country. Even if I was too old to ever see it. Anne and Janette’s boys would see it. By 1915 they would be men and they would live in a great new country of peace and prosperity. The accident of their births would never sully their lives’ success. One boy for the Federation of the colonies, and the other for the Republic, I thought foolishly, which one day would follow. I imagined, a hundred years from now, Janette’s son, one of the last people still alive from the days of the colony, sitting at the head of a table of men who sought his wisdom, to usher in our independence from Britain. The certainty gave me a brief moment of warmth.

Rugged now against the cold, the snowflakes already bearing down from a leaden sky, I hitched the reins and my horse, already affected by the cold through his woollen coat – a coat supplied to me by Mrs Meriton during my early visits when she saw the poor beast from her window, suffering outside – gruffed into movement through the thin slush of snow and mud. I had once told Mrs Meriton that Mrs Mersy frets whenever I am out in the carriage after dark, a fact which I happened to reveal to her when the subject of the children’s father weighed unexpectedly between us. She took this intelligence to heart, to mean that I was embarrassed by our association, I guess, and ushered me out the door, momentarily.

“You must go, Dr Mersy,” she insisted, “Or you will catch your death.” This was the way she talked. As though death is something we pursue with zeal, rather than the opposite; that death pursues us daily until we are too tired to flee.

And it made me think of Janette, lying upstairs. Who is to say that her lying in was this tired acquiescence to death, rather than death growing within to take her by surprise? From the moment of that ill conception?

“You must get up,” I had told her. “This is not healthy.” But her mother pushed me out the door, where I stopped and turned, offering awkward banter and awkward excuses. Mrs Meriton’s pride spoke clearly through her zealous mothering of me. As though she saw that every exhortation to her daughter was also an exhortation for my own weary life. I was ninety years old. Too old to wander these frozen roads. Yet I must be a grandfather and husband once again, it

seemed. Yet Mrs Meriton felt our separateness. Still, I stopped to talk, to consider the weight of some trifle, until she had me turned, facing the gate, and I felt her cold hand upon my shoulder, impelling me to go.

I am old. I doubt my hands. I forget my skills. I question everything I know.

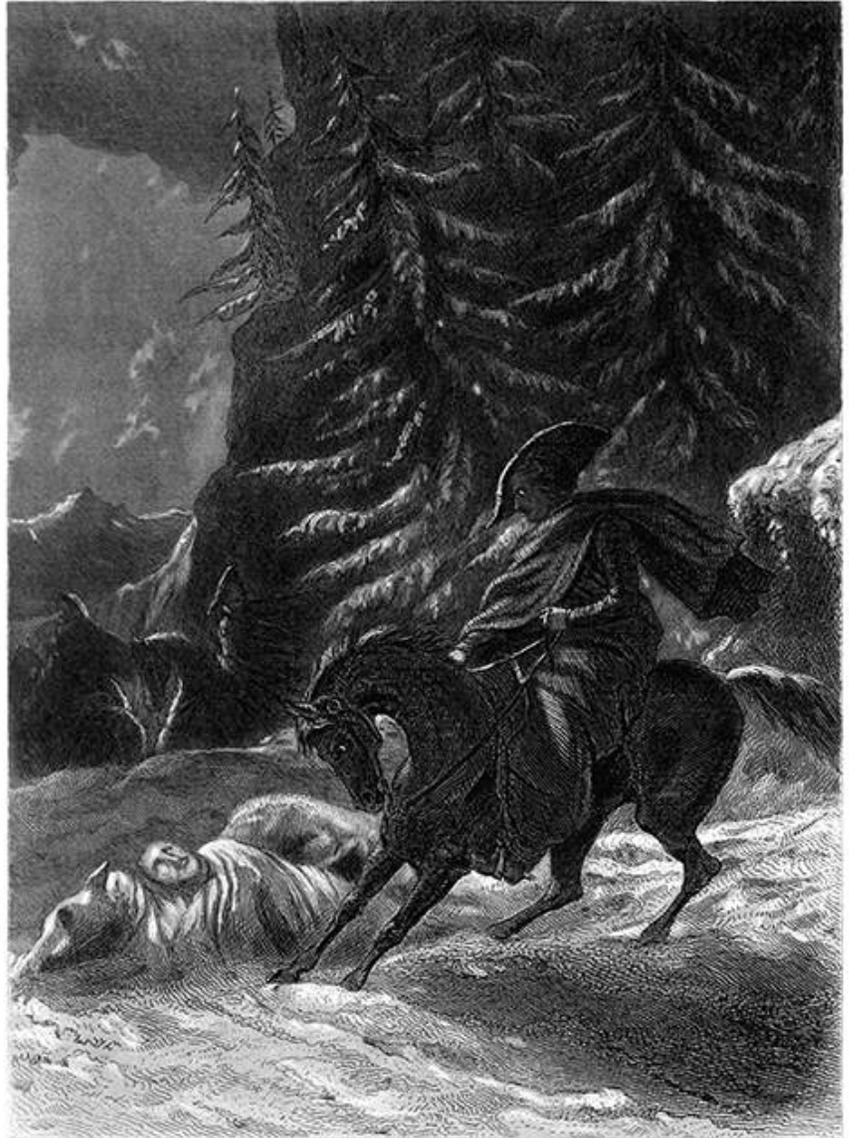
This last time I left the house, perhaps a few weeks later, I turned the horse off the main road at the end of Pennington's farm. Suddenly, it seemed that the snow, from which I had been shielded by Pennington's trees at the edge of his property, was a thick down, like a blanket falling upon me in small pieces. Falling like the soft down of my bedding. I pulled the horse up, since he was puffing with the effort of pushing through the snow and mud, and I rested him. I could curl into that down and remain, I thought. We sat there for some minutes.

I looked at the end of the light as the day drew to its conclusion, fading in the trees at the edge of the bush, like the fingers of God, withdrawn. The snow moved like mist through the light; like thought, incoherent. Night was only minutes away but the snow gleamed. It crunched under my horse's hoofs as he shifted his weight, waiting impatiently. Everything was silent except for this, and I was persuaded in my mind that the rest of the world had been annihilated, leaving only this gleaming light fading into darkness. Everything was white or dark, and for minutes I saw the light, how it teetered upon the darkness.

I do not know whether death grew within her, but it was not this whiteness. It was red and raw. It was still on my hands. It was on my coat. The cries of Janette Meriton echoed in my head. Her sister's face was white when she saw the horror that is life, and the sheets were red. I sat wondering whether the town would ever offer her mother the mercy that the horror of her daughter's death deserved. Without husband, without respect, without future. And what future now? Were we all so vulnerable when finally cut from society and family? I wondered. Was I thus vulnerable, wandering the woods far from home on this lonely night?

My horse shook his head, distracting me from my reverie. For some moments I saw the future, like

a candle lit in the trees, but it seemed to flicker, as though snuffed by a flake of falling snow. The cold was a hand, pressing upon my shoulders. I thought of my home and my wife, waiting. Inside, I felt hope struggle with despair. With a shake of the reigns, I set us moving once more, and abandoned all thought of what might one day be.



Contributors

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Har B. is a garden gnome that came to life and started learning InDesign. He draws most of his inspiration from nature, creeks, and the woodland creatures for whom he plays lute on moonlit nights.

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Hannibal Gerald is a cartoonist based in Pittsburgh. She likes animation and comics. You can find her work at hannibalgerald.com and on Instagram @misterbananawoman

Dann is an IT professional/teacher/small business owner, who also has a passion for technology, macro photography, and nostalgia. Starting with his first computer, the IBM 5152, he's witnessed the rise of personal computing and the World Wide Web through all of its stages. He now splits his time between application systems at a University and smaller personal web projects ranging from large database-driven ecommunities for Oakley Sunglasses and the smaller irreverent humor on Neocities. <https://dannarchy.com/>

Joshua Jacobs has had an infinite love for illustrating ever since he was little, and he doesn't plan on stopping any time soon. In 2019, he graduated from The University of Toledo, earning a bachelor's degree in Visual Arts. His drawing style tends to encompass anything strange and unusual. He's always creating his own characters and creatures, ranging from wacky adventurers to powerful heroes and villains. You can see more of his work at triplej96.wixsite.com/dimensionj1996

Pike Malarkey lives in the UK and does SEO to pay the bills. Writing is harder than both of those so Pike doesn't do much of it. Visit the Howling House at pikemalarkey.neocities.org





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