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Insomniac - A Collection of Poetry, Fiction, and Creative Non-Fiction

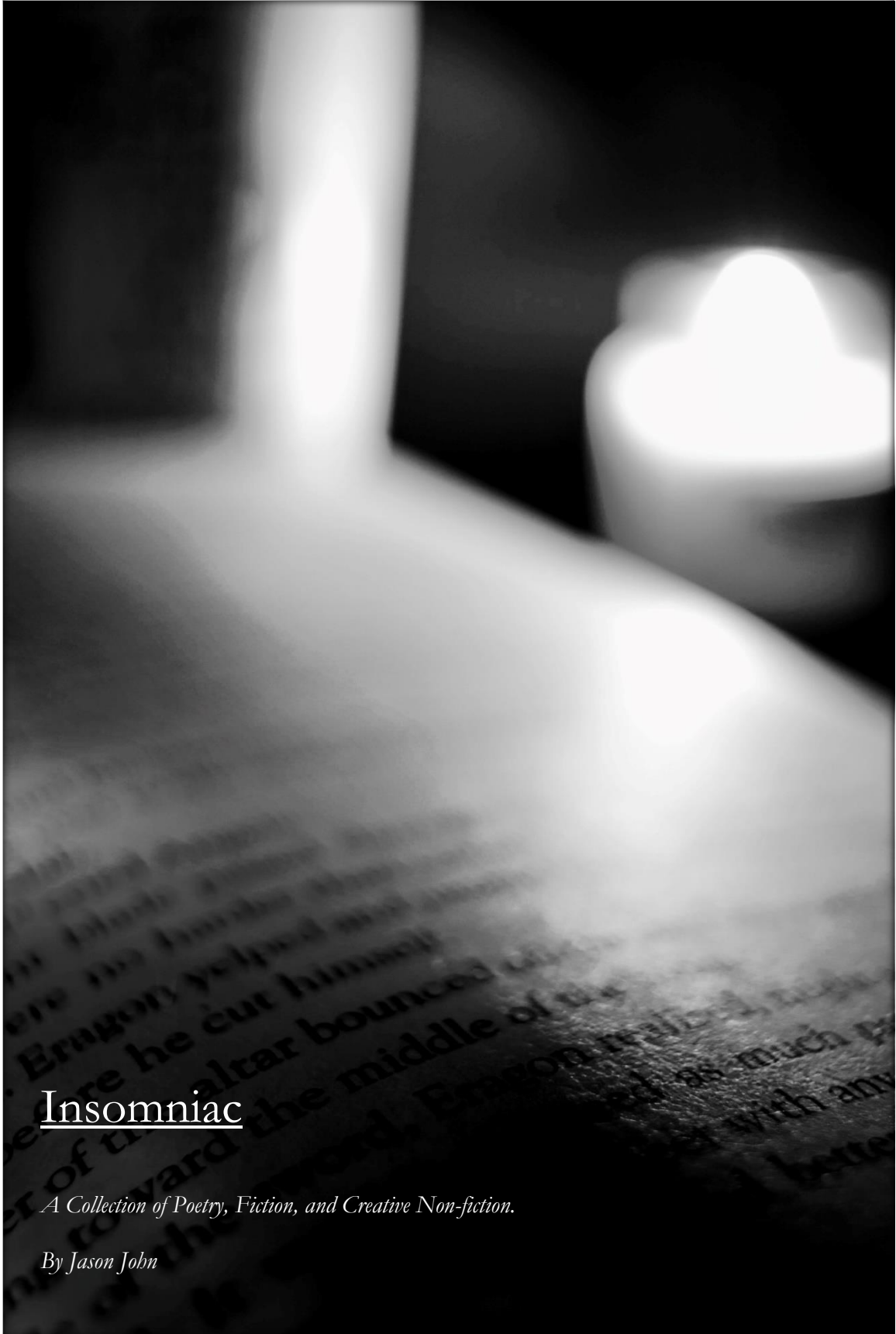
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~Jason John~



Insomniac

A Collection of Poetry, Fiction, and Creative Non-fiction.

By Jason John

~ Insomniac ~

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~ Insomniac ~

Foreword

So, of course it's at three in the morning when my neurons finally start kicking it like a group of unsupervised teenagers in a classroom. I should not be surprised. Especially given that all my best works so far have always been birthed out of my sleep deprived mind. Some writers use drugs for inspiration, others have muses, I have insomnia. I wrote down exactly one sentence during my self-allotted five hours of writing time in the café down the street (shout out to Drinkings, Wilmore, KY— They have a killer cold brew), and that line was "*To bee, or not to bee: that ez de question.*" The remaining four hours was spent staring mindlessly into an antique mirror lying on the floor; you know the kind of ones which you find in a thrift store in a forgotten town? All smudged and rusted, with a thick intricate frame that smells of some long-forgotten era? The one you can hardly use as a mirror anymore because of mirror rot. Here's the thing about staring into the void - there is nothing in the void, save what you bring into it.

Storytelling wasn't a first love. Nor was it a second. Or a third. As a kid I was interested in the armed forces and the emergency services and as a teen I had held an interest in the hospitality business. Storytelling was something I stumbled upon because I had to declare a major and I didn't want to select the "undecided" option. That said it's not like I had never encountered the world of books. It was just a hobby. A hobby that had its humble beginning in a colonial beach side villa during the monsoon season.

That year, as with several other years, the June rains turned the tar roads turned to rivers and potholes into lakes, but it couldn't drown out the smell of ripening mangoes wafting its way into the library as a ten-year-old me worked hard to digest the words of C.S Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. More than Aslan or Mr. Tumnus it is Lewis's dedication and letter to his goddaughter

which has stuck with me throughout the years, stubbornly in some back alley in the depths of my neurodivergent brain —

My Dear Lucy,

I wrote this story for you, but when I began it I had not realized that girls grow quicker than books. As a result you are already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound you will be older still. But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again. You can then take it down from some upper shelf, dust it, and tell me what you think of it. I shall probably be too deaf to hear, and too old to understand a word you say, but I shall still be

your affectionate Godfather,

C. S. Lewis.

Lewis's stories were specifically for his goddaughter and Tolkien's began telling stories for his sons. I would like to think that most if not all the stories ever told, stories of a hunter chasing a deer across the night sky, of a lover walking down into the earth to reunite with their other half, of great serpents and giants, are not for the masses but for a specific someone. Probably a small child under soft warm puffy blankets asking for a story.

Following this line of thought, my poems are written for specific (and at times multiple) individuals. The poems try to recreate a specific moment in time. Just a slight glimpse through a keyhole. My aim is to portray my relationship with these people who have become my found family so that I may better capture the thing called love. As Haya Miyazaki states in his collection of essays, *Starting Point* — "I've become skeptical of the unwritten rule that just because a boy and girl appear in the same feature, a romance must ensue. Rather, I want to portray a slightly different relationship, one where the two mutually inspire each other to live - if I'm able to, then perhaps I'll be closer to portraying a true expression of love." All of the poems have changed over time, they now hold a different emotion than they did at first on inception. I guess that's how relationships are, they change and morph over time. Which isn't bad

per say. I tend to think that change is a sign that the relationship is alive and breathing and as long as it is alive, it can grow from a dumpster fire floating down a flooded street to a lavender meadow by glacier ice, under the northern lights.

The creative non-fiction pieces focus on my experiences with depression, dissociation, suicide, anxiety, hypersensitivity, epilepsy, and self-harm. Their main aim is to answer the question "*what does it feel like?*" and "*what goes on in your head?*" I have been asked these questions and others several times ever since I have decided to be outspoken about my experience with them. I would like to think that I have had enough experience with these issues myself along with therapy and knowing people who struggle with the same that I am knowledgeable enough to provide an insight of sorts. However, I would like to make a disclaimer: *results might vary*. What is portrayed is my experience and my alone. I have found that when it comes to mental and chronic illness, although there are similarities between cases there are also difference. My honesty in these pieces serve to bring forth discussion on such topics and to remind those who find themselves in similar situations that they are not alone.

The last section in this collection is fiction. In all honesty, it does lean more towards the fantasy genre. The short stories are my own spin on *Bhoot* (Ghost) and *Shikari* (Hunter) stories I hungrily devoured in my childhood bought from stalls on train platforms. I would like to stop all literature teachers and students and announce that "*the curtains are blue because I couldn't decide what color they should be, and I have blue curtains because they were on discount, and I am poor because I am a writer.*" There is no hidden meaning or commentary on society in these fiction pieces. They are just stories. Stories that I felt were interesting. I can hear someone lifting their hand, pointing with a pen, and saying, "*so it's not important then?*" To answer your question, I must point to an interview on Terry Pratchett — "*(Sighs) Without a shadow of a doubt, the first fiction ever recounted was fantasy. Guys sitting around the campfire— Was it you who wrote the review? I thought I recognized it— Guys sitting around the campfire telling each other*

stories about the gods who made lightning, and stuff like that. They did not tell one another literary stories. They did not complain about difficulties of male menopause while being a junior lecturer on some midwestern college campus.

Fantasy is without a shadow of a doubt the ur-literature, the spring from which all other literature has flown." There is something quite human about getting together around a campfire and telling a story. The *Shikari* (hunter) and *Bhoot* (Ghost) stories were generally set during India's colonial period and had a subtle mix of reality and fantasy, a bit of science and the supernatural. My stories pay homage to those stories; they are simply stories which I think would be quite fun to read and if you, the reader, happen to find a tingle of joy as you read them, I will consider my goal achieved.

In closing, the pieces in this collection are not finished. I highly doubt that they will ever be. They are, to the best of my current skill and time constraints, done. As I grow and learn through my life as a writer, I most certainly will return to these pieces and revise them. Compared to how they looked a year ago, they are a completely different beast. To my fellow aspiring writers, expedition members into the vast planes that lie further beyond the universe, I would like to sign off with this one quote from Ruskin Bond from his interview with The Hindustan Times — "*Ghosts are all around us. Look for them and you will find them.*" There are ghosts, stories that are all around us, waiting for you to see them, waiting for you to tell them. They don't need to be perfect; they just need to be told.

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Hindustan Times, The Hindustan Times, 6 Jan. 2019.

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HarperCollins, London, 2009.

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Rothfuss, Patrick. "Thoughts on Pratchett - [Part 1]." *Patrick Rothfuss*, 24 Apr. 2015

Dedication

For those who have gone ahead:

Rev. Dr. Amaladoss George Karunakaran,

Vasantha Indrabai Karunakaran,

& Natasha Ranjit.

I wish I had known you all better.

Books (and Films) that have inspired me

- *Hogfather* by Terry Pratchet
- *Poems* by C.S Lewis
- *Princess Mononoke* (Film) by Hayao Miyazaki
- *Refractions: A journey of Faith, Art, and Culture* by Makoto Fujimura
- *Season of Ghosts* by Ruskin Bond
- *Smoke and Mirrors* by Neil Gaiman
- *The ordering of Love: The New and Collected Poems of Madeleine L'Engle* by Madeleine L'Engle
- *Weathering with You* (Film) by Makoto Shinkai

~Jason John~

Poems

~ 10 ~

I don't know how to say goodbye

Dear 

I like these moments of silence between the two of us on late winter nights as Orion rises and the sun slips under blankets of mandarin and peach and it's just you and me sitting on teal couches that consume pennies and quarters our toes covered in fuzzy striped socks barely touching like the painting of Adam and God on the ceiling of a cathedral somewhere in Europe and the room remains soft and warm as you gather charcoal smudges on your fingertips as I gather ink stains on my palms as we sit here playing God creating stories of love and death and all the in-betweens our paths crisscross red threads never mingling suddenly separating but for now you and I we breathe the same still air and that is all I ask.

With love,



~Jason John~

I am afraid that,
that I will kill myself. Someday -

Under a tree,
knife in hand,
blood mixing with tears.

A smile on my face.

outside

To be read while upside-down to the sound of a lake at night

Looking down at the night sky
I am content
with the thought
that our intertwined fingers
your left thumb,
over my right
my right thumb,
under your left
is the only thing
that keeps me from being lung
from this blue speck
into the freckled void below.

Lost &

On days I don't recognize
the person behind the mirror
I choose a mountain trail
and walk up into the white abyss
allowing my feet to pick up leaves
and soil and twigs
until I find myself in a field
underneath a night sky
filled with white splatters
and green strokes
or at the steps of an old church
with a rotting apple tree
surrounded by empty pastures
and mossy graves
only when I can no longer find Polaris
or the Southern Cross
when I reach the horizon
where the sky and sea meld
do I find myself
in the ripples of my breath

& Put-back-together

Someday I will break this mug
its bumpy surface and cracked glaze
the one you threw and baked
in a caffeinated rage
and gave with a scowl
cause I didn't tell you it was my birthday
it will shatter into a dozen pieces
like a star vomiting cosmic dust
and you will gather them
and piece them together
one breath at a time
telling me that it's okay
filling void pockets
and bloody cracks
until the gold and seagrass meld
into one continuous form
that warms my hands.

Kamakauniamaui



#preciousmemories

I came across your Insta post last night.

.

You had that dimple on your cheek,
the one that appears when you truly smile,
and your eyes,
they were sparkling like arctic ice.

.

A mini you: small and pink,
held your pinky.

.

And I wondered...

...would you tell her?

.

about how we went bowling on our first date,
about how we shared that salted caramel shake at *In-N-Out*,
about that awkward drive back home filled with conversations about home and family,
about how we waltzed alone on the dance floor until they kicked us out,
about staying up late into the night watching *VeggieTales* and *Burlesque*,

.

.

Or was that all in my head? False memories: burn scars left behind by misfiring neurons?

~Jason John~

Creative Non-Fiction

~ 20 ~

be

There is so much to do - to get done. I need two of me, no three; maybe four. Yeab, and a pocket watch that can stop time. I need to get up. Fuck. I missed class. Fuck. I missed it. Again. I can't do this. I don't want to do this. I'm spiraling down - again. I don't want to spiral down. I should know better. I do know better. Shower, I need to take a shower. Did I brush my teeth? I don't recall. Did I take my pills? I should not forget my pills. I need them. I don't want them. I should throw them in the garbage. No, I need them. I hate that. I hate my brain. I hate my body. I'm ugly. Food. I need to eat. I don't want to eat. It's disgusting. My tongue hates it. My stomach beaters it. But I need to eat. I need to survive and to survive I need to eat. I don't want to live, but my friends, my family want me to; and so, I must suffer. The sun is too bright. I hate the sun. Get out of my eyes. Fuck you too. I should blow it up. Can it not exist for one fucking second? Is that so hard to do? I want a break. I need a break. I want to cease to exist. Just for a moment. Non-existence sounds like bliss. I hate this class. I love learning but this is stupid. I already know this. Tell me something new, challenge me. I want to do stuff; I want to learn stuff. I don't want to just sit and pretend to pay attention. Teach me something I don't know. I fell asleep. Shit, shit, shit. Why? Why am I tired? Did I have an anxiety attack? Did I have an epileptic attack? No. I don't want it. Not now, not on top of everything else. I don't want this. I hate my brain. I want a new one. Don't look at me. Stop looking at me. Stop judging me, I'm trying my best. I don't want your help. I don't want your pity. I don't want a shoulder to cry on. Don't bug me. Don't touch me. Shout at me. Hate me. Punch me. Slap me. It's my fault, isn't it? Tell me it's my fault. It's always my fault. I know it's my fault. I fucking hate this. I can't breathe. Breathe God damn it, breath! No. Stop. No. Don't. Don't bug me. Don't bug me; if you bug me, I'll cry. I don't want to cry, I can't cry. I'm not supposed to cry. Stop crying. I want to punch a wall. I want to fucking slip a table. I want to get into a fight. I want to bleed. I want to cut myself; no, don't. Do not bleed. Do not hurt yourself. Self-harm doesn't solve anything. You've tried it before. It never helps. Never did - never will; but it might. It might work now. At least it would give me a moment of peace. I deserve to bleed. Kill yourself. Kill yourself. No, stop it. Focus on the present. Focus. Breathe. Concentrate. Homework. You need to do your homework. Do your homework. You are behind class; you need to catch up. You're never going to catch up. You have to catch up. I've been here too long. I need to graduate. I need to leave. I hate myself. I'm a failure. No, it's okay. Go at your own pace. I'm a failure. I need to get away from seeing me all the time. Staring into my soul, Run, keep running. Keep running till my thirst, or a knife. Where am I? I did it campus. I'm cold and sweaty. I need to They know. They know I cut. They know. know I want to die. I don't want them to good. I hate sleeping. I don't want to sleep. will suck. My brain is thinking. It's thinking a hundred and one things at the same time. My brain is tearing itself apart. I can't sleep. I hear them whispering. I see them staring at me - just out of sight. I'm afraid. I'm terrified. I don't want to die. I want to die. I don't want to die. Where the fuck are you? You promised! You promised in that bloody stupid book. Why are you doing this to me? I hate you! Take this cup away from me! I do not accept it. I hate you. You hear me I fucking hate you. If you're going to kill me, kill me. Why? Why aren't you helping me? I'm dizzy. My brain is misfiring. Fuck, I'm seeing rainbows again. I'm seeing double, triple. No, I meant to move my left arm, not my right leg. Stop twitching. Why is my neck twitching? Stop. Stop it. I can hear my blood pumping. I can hear my neurons firing. Help. Someone. Help. I can't say help. My mouth is not working. My vocal cords are not working. I can't stand, why can't I stand. Move legs. Fucking move. I can't do this anymore. I can't. I have to but I can't. My eyes won't focus. Everything is foggy. Why can't I focus? They're concerned about me, they are afraid. I'm sorry. I can't control it. I'm afraid too. I hate this. I don't want this. Don't do something stupid like calling the ambulance. I don't want to spend all night at the ER. I need to sleep. I need to go to eight o'clock. I don't want wires and tubes under my skin. My face still hurts from the last time. I hate being a guinea pig. I don't want to be a guinea pig. Please, don't call the ambulance. I still feel the electrodes under my skin. I still feel the cold burn of the metal. I am afraid. Don't be afraid. I'm terrified. Stop being scared. You are scaring them. You're the oldest. You need to take care of them. You need to be a role model. You need to lead the way. You need to be strong. Do not break. Hold it in. Be strong. Don't break. You are one fucking disappointment of an older brother. A horrible role model. You should go die. Die. Die. Kill yourself. You don't deserve to live. You are a disappointment. You have achieved nothing. Nobody cares. I want to die. Suddenly. Painlessly. Just kill me already. I wish upon a star - that I fucking die. I don't want to die. Not under a tree with a knife in hand. My blood flowing, mixing with tears of relief - irrigating the soft soil. No. Don't do it. Your friends will be sad. Your parents will be sad. Your sibling will be sad. They will get over it. They would hurt for a while. But it's better than hurting them for years on years. Sleep. Dream. Dream of killing yourself. Dream. Dream of choking yourself. Sleep. It's just a dream. Sleep and know that you will never win. You will never win. You might win once or even twice but you will fail in the end. One small mistake and you will lose. You will never win. You will suffer and die. Under a tree. Bleeding. Crying. Alone. Hated. Unloved. Unwanted. You think you can fight this? That you can win this? You will die. You have to live. I'm going to kill myself, aren't I???

Out here in the waste

Among the growth and decay

I can

exhale

be.

here. I can hear their thoughts. I can see them judging me. I need to run away. Somewhere. feet start bleeding, till I die of hunger and again, didn't I? I should head back to clean my cuts. They know. Everyone knows. They know I hate myself. They know. They know. Go away. Sleep. I need sleep. Sleep is If I sleep, tomorrow will come, and tomorrow

~Jason John~

Scars

/

Writing on a wall at Pompeii -

I admire you, wall,

for not having collapsed

at having to carry the tedious scriblings

of so many writers...

I have tried my best to get into the habit of hoarding something, anything. I have collected stamps, rocks, coins, seashells, but none of them stuck with me. Scars though - I continue to collect scars. I don't need to pay a hundred extra dollars for extra baggage at the airport. I don't need to lug them around every time I move houses. Scars remain with you, always, for better or worse. I collect them on my skin, a scrapbook of stories to tell beside the warm campfire on a frosty winter's night.

~ Insomniac ~

//

Writing on a wall at Palmyra -

This is an inscription

that I wrote

with my own hand;

my hand will wear out,

but the inscription will remain.

“I got this when I fell off a sea cliff,” a smile crossed my face and I jump onto a table.

I remove my right sock and point to a fat pink scar, “I was in Goa - West India - think Florida.”

“There was this beautiful sunset, so I grabbed my camera and was searching for a spot. I found a short sea cliff jutting out into the sea, over the corals - aaannndddd - I leaned over too far and landed on the corals." Some of the audience facepalm, “The camera was alright, but I had a deep gash all the way to the bone. I ended up in the ER, they wanted to put in staples and stitches, but it was in an area where it would come off easily, so they just cleaned it and bandaged me up”

~Jason John~

///

Writing on the top parapet of Hagia Sophia -

Halfdan carved these runes

I stood on the ledge of the second floor, trying to swallow my heart. I could hear their footsteps getting closer. They were slow and loud, confident that they had cornered me, but a cornered animal is dangerous.

I repeated aloud in a whisper "...bend your knees, roll forward, bend your knees, roll forward..."

With a loud exhale I jumped. The shock ran through my feet towards my ankles past my knees and then dissipated into my torso. I rolled forward and landed on my side. I scrambled up and looked at the second-floor window cramped with astonished faces of teenagers and kids.

"Ha!" I got up, bruised but unbroken "No one catches me!"

~ Insomniac ~

////

Writing on a wall at Pompeii -

Pyrrhus to his chum Chias:

I'm sorry to hear you are dead,

and so, goodbye!

My hands wrap around the multiple thin lines on my arm, trying and failing to hide them. -
“...the thing about slitting your wrist is that no matter how sharp the knife is, it doesn't cut unless you allow it to run against your elastic skin. You can press the edge against your skin, as hard as you can, and it won't cut...” - I look around the room, it's filled with familiar faces, kind faces, concerned faces.

Inhale

Exhale

“So yeah,” I continued without waiting for a reaction, “I planned it well. It was two in the morning. I knew - if I made the cut vertical - I would bleed out quick. It's harder to stitch up a vertical cut.”

Inhale

Exhale

Shiver

“So - there I stood. Knife on my wrist, pressed hard against my skin. And for some goddamn reason, I didn't. I don't know why, I still don't know why, I don't think I'll ever know why”

~ 25 ~

~Jason John~

Gulp

I lick my dry lips, “It took me a long time, to un-believe that I was a failure, that I fucked up, that I should have died rather than her. Cause she deserved to live, she did something, she succeeded, she was good”

I close my eyes - “...and I wasn't, I didn't deserve to live. But I did.”

It's like drowning

Cuz you think, you believe - that it's not killing you; and so, you let it in.

You grasp at the abyssal. You hug it. The abyssal hugs back. It swirls and coils around you. A multitude of riptides and jet streams - like star crossed lovers hugging at an airport. You breathe it in willingly. It flows into you, through your nose and your mouth; down your throat and into your lungs - filling each and every one of your alveoli. It lulls you into a blissful dream.

It seeps into your arteries, into your blood. Merging with the red - darkening it, turning it into tar. It crawls up your spine towards your brain, it's red-hot poker like claws ripping tissue and bone. It fuses with your cells. Corrupts your DNA sequence. Gorges on the photons living within you.

You stare back at your reflection in the bathroom mirror. It's three in the morning. That creature, that thing is not you. That undead corpse is not you. It's not you.

It's a ravenous creature. It never sleeps. It never rests. It's always on the move. Never satisfied. Always starving.

It violates with vigor your most cherished memories.

Flame - dancing to the earthy tunes of a maroon wooden guitar on a cold winter night. Feet - splashing to the eccentric rhythm of laughter and lighting on a rainy spring night. Fingers - embracing as blue and green streaks form against a river of white starlight on a crisp autumn night.

~Jason John~

Days, weeks, months, and years disintegrating into the acidic belly of a creature, a beast - an unsettling thing that never was what it looked like at first glance.

Memories lost, somewhere, never to be remembered; never to be reminisced on.

Unsatiated, it goes after your senses.

The fairy floss pink and violets of the sunset turn into gray brain matter. The honey smooth songs of birds change into bitter nails on a chalkboard. The rich invigorating scent of coffee - freshly roasted, ground, pressed and brewed degrades into the rotting stink of a dead skunk by the road. Home baked sourdough bread with farm fresh butter begins to remind you of cheap soggy cardboard from the bottom of a New York City dumpster. The kiss of a loved one - after a long “see you soon” - is unmasked to be the bite of ticks and gnats and fleas and lice.

You see yourself decomposing - like rotten fruit hanging from branches, like crushed fruit floating down white waters with no purpose.

You hear your own voice, whispering into your ear, uttering deplorable words. Words that can end your existence.

You feel a scarf constricting around your neck. The fiery itch of tally marks being branded onto your wrist.

You dream, you wish, you hope for nothingness, oblivion, void.

~ Insomniac ~

Every breath is a slow cold twisting thrust of a dull rusted knife into your heart.

Hope is the thing with feathers - it will not, cannot reach down into the dark cold watery abyss.

A guide awaits at the bottom. A kind smile on her lip - a lamp in one hand, a sword in the other.

~Jason John~

Fiction

~ 30 ~

The Man Eater of Mount Auk

The most important thing to keep in mind when it comes to parenting a two-year-old and big game hunting is that when it unexpectedly gets awfully quiet something has definitely gone terribly wrong - and the forest had gone silent. Richard Wood could clearly hear his wristwatch tick tocking away to six in his skull. He bit his lip and twitched his eye. This was a different game than he was used to, he couldn't tell if he was the cat or the mouse.

The undergrowth moved. A muffled snap arose from below. Richard's eyes picked up a movement. It was a bad night to hunt. The moon had decided to call in sick and thick storm clouds gobbled any starlight that might have helped him track his mark. His green eyes were useless, but his gray hair made up for it. He adjusted the rifle. Air trickled out of his lungs in a slow and steady whisper. He gently squeezed the trigger. Flashes of blue, red, and orange painted the wilderness. Thunder cracked the silence and a thin mist of burnt pepper assaulted the frozen air.

There was a thump, and the weight of the fall traveled through the ground, up the trunk and all the way into Richard's bones. He slung his rifle, lit a lantern, and descended slowly from the canopy platform. The beast lay about forty-five feet away from the base of the tree. He raised the lantern. The man-eater was breathtaking. It was about eleven feet from wet snout to fluffed tail and was muscular, easily nine hundred pounds. The dusk shaded fur of the Amur refracted the lantern light. He smiled; the specimen would break records.

And then the specimen opened its golden eye.

;

Sir Earan Aartos von Reiter leaned over the basin and stared at his mustache with a discerning eye and then with ironbound intent he passed a tiny brush over his impressive whiskers that lay between his sharp nose and booming mouth. He took one last look at the rest of his mane, a mane that had on many an occasion left gentlefolk, who viewed themselves of a higher station than he - flabbergasted, envious and humbled. Satisfied, he nodded, turned around, threw his coat on, and walked out into heavy sea winds that brought with it the premonition of an arctic storm. The first storm of the sunless winter. It pleased him that Cape Hope was, besides the overabundance of soldiers in blue and red running about the city setting up artillery, exactly the way he remembered.

“It's good to be back home, Nikilik, how's the family?” Earan marched through the moss, gravel, and dirt towards the Governor General's residence.

“Quite good Nanook, they're busy, pulling up the boats, getting wood and food for the long night. We are expecting you for dinner, Aput's has made her fish stew, you will come?” Nikilik's own footsteps echoed Earan's.

“I would never turn down Aput's fish stew, I'll be there.... It's going to be a tough winter; I can smell it in the air.”

“Nanook, why help the Governor? The idiot shot Tukuk's mate. He broke the law of the land. His life is forfeit...his life belongs to Tukuk. An Amur won't stop until justice is done.”

“Robinson should have respected the law; I'm not denying that Nukilik.” Earan replied, “but Tuktuk has tasted man blood. It's only a matter of time until he comes down the mountain.”

“Bahaaa!” Nikilik extended his tongue out of his yawning mouth, puffed up his baby cheeks and scrunched his face.

“Nikilik, you and I both know that this won't end with just Robinson's death. Tuktuk has already killed at least four hundred soldiers according to the military report. For now, it's just soldiers, but that can change overnight.”

Nikilik didn't reply. He simply grunted.

The two were shown into the Governor General's Robinsons residence by the butler and led to the Study. Earan's father, Duke Reiter, had said that one could tell a lot about someone from the way they kept their study. If the study room was filled with bees, one could safely deduce that the person had an interest in beekeeping. In the case of Robinson, who had chosen to display a dozen trophy heads, photographs of hunts and a couple of exotic rugs on the floor, one could safely assume that the man loved animals. The Governor General himself stood facing the window of the study that provided panoramic views of the freezing Northern Sea and the blue Tomkin Mountains.

“Captain Reiter, I need this animal dead within the week. I expect you to exceed my expectations and succeed where other inexperienced fools have failed.”

Earan ignored the governor general's statement. He sunk into an armchair by the fire and asked, "How's the family, Robinson?"

The Governor opened his mouth, paused for a while, and then said "Fine, Sir Reiter."

The fire from the hearth cracked and the sled dogs outside barked out Beethoven's fifth symphony. There was silence for a long minute, or ten.

It was Robinson who broke the silence, "About the animal..."

"I'll get on it as soon as you sign the papers."

"There is a reward,"

"Does it look like I care for money or reputation? Sign the papers."

"But this is preposterous! This, this, protected land thing, The King might have gone mad, but I haven't".

"Those are my terms."

"I have three hundred men ready to storm the mountain,"

“And there’s an arctic storm approaching. You will be sending your men into one of the harshest environments on the planet during a storm to hunt down an apex predator that has proven its ability to hunt them down without being seen or heard. You are not hunting any ordinary animal, you are trying to hunt a man-eater, a creature who has mastered the art of hunting men. It is not wise....”

Robinson slammed the desk, sending ink and paper flying, “Not Wise? Not Wise! I will get this done without you, you and your insane proposal can rot for all I care! Get...Out!”

There was silence. Earan closed his eyes, nodded, and then got up, “Good day Robinson. You know where to find me.” and then he and Nikilik walked out back into the frozen salty air.

The shelling started around dinner time. Dozens of 105mm shells arched through the night sky against the wind until it hit the woods on the southern side of Mount Auk, digging into the hard earth, breaking old trees into stumps, cracking massive boulders into pebbles. Any creature that ran down south was met with the lead and steel of the 22nd Infantry Unit; it was thunderous and bloody. The shelling lasted all night; no one in Cape Hope dreamt that night. In the morning three hundred soldiers charged the mountain, combing it for any signs of the man-eater. The mountain remained covered in dust and smoke the entire morning and from the fog of gunpowder and earth came the screams of the men that could be heard all the way down in Cape Hope. Screams that were soon silenced when the storm hit.

It was six hours later when Earan found Robinson at his front door, his wet hair frozen stiff, dusted in a thick layer of snow, without a coat. He pulled Robinson in, covered him in thick fur coats and blankets and laid him into a rocker by the fire.

“You should know better than to come out during an arctic storm, and that to the first one of the seasons.” Earan poured what his grandmother would call kindness into a mug of tea and then helped Robinsons half frozen fingers around the steamy concoction that looked and tasted like blood.

“...twenty-three. Just twenty-three...” Robinson sat folded in the rocker; his eyes glazed over.

The wind harmonized with the howling dogs outside. Earan’s hound snored and farted in the corner.

“Pokak, mind yourself girl...Robinson. I will need reports, charts, any information related to the Amur.” Earan stared at the fire and then at his hands, he rubbed his palms together as if he was trying to get rid of a stain.

“...I’ll...sign the papers...”

Words formed in Earan’s throat but by the time they reached his mouth they were nothing but a sigh. He took his empty mug of tea, poured a bit more, and then added an extra helping of scotch from the shelf. He looked at his palms again, there was a lot of work to be done before the storm died.

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Twenty feet of ice and nine feet of snow had left Cape Hope cut off from the rest of the world. The ice was too thick for icebreakers and the town was too far to reach by air. Dog sleds were the only means of transportation now. On the positive side, the snow was not high enough to reach the doors of the stilted buildings and only a few homes needed help with their frozen doors. When it came to hunting down a man-eater Earan would usually spend weeks if not month's collecting data and tracking down the man-eater. Intel was key and so was positioning. He would spend days scoping out ideal hunting spots that promised him the advantage over the Amur. This hunt would be different. Within the week's end the sun would set and remain under the earth until spring. Hunting Tukuk on his mountain, during the endless night was not advantageous, it was foolhardy. If he was to hunt, he would have to do it before the last sundown.

A glacier lay on the western face of Mount Auck. Surrounding the glacier, for a hundred feet in all directions lay an open field of fresh snow which blended into a forest of conifers. This would be where Earan would make his stand. A platform was built in the north, on one of the conifers on the edge of the woods and was then camouflaged with supple branches from the surrounding trees. Earan himself was dressed in multiple stacks of arctic fur coats and then a traditional arctic hunting cloak that smelt of the pine and snow. He grabbed his trusty Springsteen .50cal and settled into the platform in shooting position. He carried no provisions except a hunting knife; he wouldn't risk the smell giving his position away. He gave instructions to Nikilik to gather a party and come for him if he wasn't back within eight hours after the final sunset of the year. Earan wouldn't risk another life, too much blood had bloomed on the snow.

Seventy hours of sleeplessness and starvation passed, and Earan still laid flat on his belly, his gun pointed towards the southern bank of the azure blue glacier. He quenched his thirst with snow

whenever his mouth got too dry, and he contracted his muscles every now and then to keep himself warm under the fur, but his fingers and toes were starting to prickle and numb. The lull in the weather remained despite the second arctic storm charging with the ferocity of a chihuahua from the north with clotted blood clouds. If Tukuk didn't show within eight hours, he would have to give in for now and return to the town. The sun finally gave in and was swallowed by the earth.

It was seven hours after the sun had set when he noticed movement. The clouds had blocked all light save for a ray of silver from the moon rabbit's ear, but that was enough to notice the Amur on the southern banks of the glacier that sparkled in the silver moon light. It had crossed the hundred feet of whiteness without as much of a snap or a pugmark. Earan slowly took aim, he had one chance, if he missed, he would be lucky to live another day. Tukuk lapped the waters in silence as Earan adjusted his aim; he double and triple checked, making sure he accounted for the wind and the angle, and then slowly squeezed the cold trigger. The Springsteen recoiled and the bullet flew straight and true towards the man-eater's forehead. At the last minute the wind picked up and the lead swerved to the right, punching through the shoulder, and burying itself with a sizzle into the snow. Tukuk paused and then gave a low growl that vibrated the air inside Earan's lungs. The Amur charged.

Earan's body froze. He had missed. His mind yelled at him to react. To shoot. To pull the trigger. Yet all that his body could do as of this moment was freeze. Tukuk, the man-eating Amur, Death incarnate, cleaved through the snow like a steam engine who in its down time performed ballet in the King's Court. The creature disappeared below him and then the tree shook. Blood rushed into Earan's fingers and toes. He shot up with his cloak and gun and then took aim below the platform. There was only bark and snow. A moment passed and then Earan broke out in a cold

sweat, his instinct told him something was looking down at him from above. He jumped from the platform twenty-seven feet into the snow below. Seven feet of snow broke his fall. He aimed his rifle up at the platform. Tukur's golden eyes stared down at him. He shot, and the Amur leaped. Earan jumped to the right, twisted in the air, and pressed the trigger three times. The beast simply shrugged as the lead plunged into its hide, it gave off a slow and low growl and then pounced. He got a single shot off before he buckled under the weight of the man-eater. nine hundred pounds of dusk shaded fur suffocated him while four inches of burning iron pierced through stacks of fur and leather, drawing warm blood.

Tukur grabbed Earan's arm and trashed about. The arctic fur cloak came loose and Earan went flying and then rolling towards the glacier. By the time he came to a stop, Earan was halfway in the sharp wet waters. The world spun and warmth escaped his body from punctures and cuts, memories of wastelands and trenches, of lead and blood came rushing back. He slapped himself sane and looked North. Tukur was figuring out the cloak situation frighteningly quickly. He threw the used magazine and locked in another. Five more shots of metal and thunder and then fate. He took aim and fired. Hot metal sunk into Tukur's side. The animal let go of the cloak, locked onto Earan, and charged through the snow once again. Earan let out a volley of three shots. The last bullet must have hit something important, the Amur stumbled before he pounced and rolled into Earan. Air left Earan's lungs and the world spun once again.

They came to a cold wet halt on the banks of the southern side. Earan knew he had broken a couple of things, what exactly he had broken he couldn't tell. He crawled huffed and pulled himself from underneath the dead weight of Tukur and then knelt beside the beast. It was done. He searched for his Springsteen; it lay a few inches away broken in two. He exhaled and from within his

coat he drew a hunting knife, long, cold, and crisp. With one smooth motion he slit the man-eater's throat. Just in case. Light and voices emanating from the woods in the south, it seemed that Nikilik had brought a platoon with him.

A sudden crunch and a snarl jerked him back into his immediate surroundings. Two small balls of black and orange nuzzled Tukuk. Cubs.

“Fuck no. No, no, no. Not cubs. Not cubs”

One of the cubs snarled and swiped its paws at him. He stared at the two. They were old enough to have moved on to meat. Earan stared at red snow sticking to his hands, “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”, he punched the snow, “Why?”

Earan shuddered, “I'm sorry...”

He held the hunting knife like an experienced artist would a brush and added a bit more red to the snow.

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The Scarf

There's an urban legend floating about the world of spirits. Hidden among the lanterns and shadows of London's red-light district lies *Kas E Gal*. A tiny bar, managed by a single person - the god of mixology. A bartender who is said to be able to mix drinks that console and guide lost souls. However, not just anyone can find *Kas E Gal*. In fact, it's *Kas E Gal* that finds you.

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It was one of those soggy nights when fog choked the life out of the city. It wormed its ways into the cracks and crevices of the old, dilapidated apartments that seem to loom. The light posts on the sidewalks twisted and bent into malformed monstrosities that seemed to move with the non-existent wind. Cammy's skin prickled and her hair stood in defiance of gravity. She could feel the wet fog seeping into her bones through her coat, but that was not the reason she had picked up her pace through the unfamiliar road. Behind her, a few steps back, a trench coat with a cowboy hat hid in her footsteps, keeping a smooth and steady distance.

Cammy pulled out her dead phone "Emily? Yeah, I'm almost there, come down and open the door, will you?" she bit her lip.

shit, shit, shit, please, please fall for it, please fall for it...her eyes began to leak...of course, I had to go and get myself lost in this stupid city. It will be a good idea, Cammy, it will be a good idea to move to the city. A fresh start. No way it can go wrong...her eyes began to tear up...and now here I am about to be the next dead girl on the news, I can

~Jason John~

read the headlines - Jack strikes again, with three exclamation marks... she booked it, cutting through the fog - her scarf struggling to keep up...*no, come on Cammy, you'll get through this, you got this. You got this.*

The fog parted revealing a solid oak door set within a mossy stone wall. A curled wrought iron lamp hung above to the left, haunted by a cold yet steady blue flame. A copper plate rested at the center of the door etched with the words *Kas E Gal*. Cammy crossed the street and pushed through the door.

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Kas E Gal was one of those Bars that was divided into several small rooms with names like *Rabbit Hole* or *Sunflower Room*. Rooms that were furnished with mismatched sofas, tables and chairs of varying heights and sizes. Rooms with walls stacked with brown books and knick-knacks taken from then and there, a shark egg here, a snow globe there. Rooms that smelt of browned British books and Christmas by the fire.

The sole occupant of the establishment sat on a stool at the counter. It was one of those slow quiet nights that made the madness slowly creep into your brain. At first you sigh and slump over the counter, then you begin to groan and slap yourself just to feel something until suddenly you're standing disheveled on a burning countertop with singed off eyebrows. Thankfully Tim had lost all manner of sanity a long time ago by leaving his job and opening a pop-up bar.

The door crept open, a wet girl stumbled into the bar and closed the door behind her. The sudden warmth smacked her jaws and eyes open. She appeared like a wet puppy who was

experiencing a soft blanket and an ear scratch for the first time after a long not so pleasant life. Tim walked over, a towel in hand and offered it. The girl looked at Tim and then at the door. She took a breath and let go of the handle and then took the towel with a thank you and started to dab at her hair.

“Wet night?”

“Yeah,”

“So, what can I get you?” Tim walked over to the back and placed his hands on the counter.

“Um...beer?” She looked at the door. It remained closed.

Tim smiled and raised an eyebrow “What brand?”

“Um, whatever you got?” she looked over at him “I don’t really know about all this...”

“Then, may I mix up something that I think you might like?”

“Sure,” she moved her eyes towards the door.

Tim turned on the gooseneck and then grabbed a few leaves from a box. He weighed them and then threw them in a mixer cup. He pulled out some honey with a dipper and allowed it to drizzle into a mug. The gooseneck beeped. Without missing a beat, he grabbed it and poured the steaming water in circles over the leaves and then set a timer. He headed to the fridge and grabbed a lemon, then using a peeler he pulled a spring of skin in one smooth motion. The timer beeped. Tim grabbed the mixer and double strained it into the mug. He grabbed a long spoon and swirled it all together. Finally, Tim grabbed the lemon spring and squeezed the oils out onto the mug before dropping it in. He walked over to the counter and presented it with a smile like a child presenting a drawing to his mother.

“Here, this will calm you down. Earl Grey, lemon, and honey.”

The girl sipped and nodded; eyes still frozen at the door.

“I use my own blend of leaves, it's a very precise brewing process, do it wrong and it goes all bitter.

The same with the honey too. I harvested it myself. You see I use a specific flower and species of...and you're not listening, are you?”

“Huh?” The girl's eyes left the door.

He gave a sigh. “It's okay,” Tim looked at the girl, “...some creep following you?”

The girl flinched “I...”

“Don't worry, you're safe here. I'll call an uber for you. I get a few customers who are being followed now and then.”

“Thanks, but I don't have money for an uber, I'll just...”

“Oh, don't worry about that. I'll pay. You're my customer, it's my responsibility to take care of you. So just relax and drink the tea, it's...”

The door scraped open and a trench coat with a cowboy hat strode in. His eyes scanned the bar and then rested heavily on the girl. He grunted and then walked over to the counter.

“Whiskey, neat, ice.” He sat down next to the girl.

She shrunk into her seat, away from the man. Her hand grabbed onto her scarf that shimmered and glimmered in the light.

Tim looked at the girl and then at the man - *great, just what I need.*

“I'm sorry sir, we're closed,”

The man pointed at the girl, “she here ain't she?”

Tim smiled “She came in before we closed. I'm sorry but you will have to leave, we're closed,”

The man stared, “Listen here boy, I know whatcha thinking, and that's mighty fine of ya, but you're the one that's in danger here, she ain't what...”

“Please leave, I won't ask again,”

“Fine,” the man exhaled and got up, “have it your way” he grabbed the mug of tea and smashed it square onto Tim’s face.

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Cammy screamed. In one swift motion the man had knocked down the bartender and drew out a silver hunting knife. He now turned his attention towards her. She backed away but the man grabbed her scarf. Instinct clicked in and Cammy bared her fangs and snarled.

“Finally showing ya colors, ain't ya?”

“Ouch,” the bartender arose from behind the counter, “that hurt, I think,” he brushed off the ceramic dust and hot tea from his vest.

The man kept her eyes on Cammy, “get back boy, I won't go easy on you like I just did,”

The bartender smiled. Something ancient flickered in his eyes, something reminiscent of madness, “...fine,” he snapped his finger with a smile, “THEN BURN.”

The man burst into blue flames. He pulled away from her screaming, taking the scarf with him and then tripped on a bar stool. He trashed and twitched on the floor as the fire went about its ordained task. The burning stink of fat and blood smothered the air.

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Tim exhaled, "...that's goanna take some work..." he bent and picked up the red scarf that laid near the pile of ash and blackened bone. He examined it as he walked towards the girl.

"Here you go miss, not a single burn mark,"

She looked at him wide eyed "Um..."

"Don't you worry about the mess, I'll take care of it."

"Thanks, but...that not the problem..."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about the drink, it's on the house."

"That's good and all, but you see, my scarf..."

"I can throw it in the washer if you want."

"Oh no, that's not the problem...you see...I'm a Selkie. A seal folk?"

"No worries, I just smote a guy." Tim pointed at the pile of black on the floor.

"Haven't done that in centuries, last time I did that was during Oktoberfest. Boy was that a night, burnt down half of Rome...or was it London?"

She pointed at the scarf and winced "...that's my pelt..."

Tim paused and then his eyes opened wide "Oh...oh no,"

"Yeah..." her hand scratched the back of her neck, "...you offered it back..."

"Please tell me it's not binding."

"It is. We...just got married."

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I would like to sign off with a quote by Neil Gaiman, taken from his blog — "*May your coming year be filled with magic and dreams and good madness. I hope you read some fine books and kiss someone who thinks*

~Jason John~

you're wonderful, and don't forget to make some art -- write or draw or build or sing or live as only you can. And I hope, somewhere in the next year, you surprise yourself."

Gaiman, Neil. "As I Was Saying." *Neil Gaiman's Journal: As I Was Saying*, 31 Dec. 2007.

~ Insomniac ~