

# CRUSH

By **Oliver Kellhammer**



Illustration by **Lee Hutzulak**

### “H-e-e-ey, Willee Boy!”

I was back in that dream again; the one where I’m standing on deck, watching my disembodied stomach get tossed like a vomit-filled handbag over an endless expanse of waves.

“Will-ee!”

My inflamed eyelids cracked open to an assault of fluorescent light. Cool White. Whoever invented that colour? It makes everything look so dingy and sick. But then again I was so dingy and sick. Perpetually nauseated, sick of the world and sick of myself. The ghost of that barf purse still hung on my retinas like a bad hologram. The thrum of the ship’s engines seemed louder than ever—boring through my pillow, jiggling into my brain. The bedclothes reeked of diesel and intestinal fermentation. A wretched night at its wretched end. I reared up onto my elbows. Through the salt-splattered Plexi of the porthole, a sallow dawn making its way across a graphite horizon. Another tedious day yawning out in front of me.

“Will-ee! Way-kee, way-kee.”

That little Filipino bird-man fuck. I hated being called Willy, especially by the crew. The name’s Williamson. Stefan Williamson. But I let it go. Besides, Rodger was a sweet old creature; a kind of mechanical intuitive who basically kept the *Tethys* going when the remote diagnostics didn’t—which was most of the time. He did so entirely by ear, sensing the nuances the computers had missed, always tweaking potentiometers with his tiny screwdrivers. It was amazing he was still on the payroll. Head office had no idea he’d gone blind.

In the interstices between crashing waves, I heard him down the corridor, clattering the breakfast dishes in the galley. Maybe the weather had calmed down a bit. That was about all I could have hoped for. The warm, armpit smell of his coffee soon suffused the cabin’s chill, then the heaviness of pyrolizing animal fats. I forced the bile down my throat and pressed my feet to the humming steel floor. It was time to get up.

**We’d left the Strait of Juan de Fuca** almost eight days before. The pummelling had begun as soon as we’d entered the open ocean, a conveyor belt of gargantuan waves that had been building unimpeded across the width of the Pacific. Nausea and delirium had once again confined me to my cabin. I felt worse every time I signed on for one of these fish-stick trips, and now it was getting so I could hardly stand it any more. Pretty embarrassing for a marine biologist. But I wasn’t here to do any actual science. Drone trawlers didn’t need *captains*, let alone biologists. Maybe that’s what was twisting my gut. I was on board so C-Corp could call what they were doing “research.” To the rest of the crew, I was just a dickhead.

I wobbled down the shifting corridor, steadying myself against the bulkheads like some glue-sniffer coming down off a toot.

“Will-ee, You’re up!”

“Yes, I am,” I sighed bitterly. I could barely see Rodger through the aerosolized grease that hung over him like a cloud of blue ectoplasm. He was scraping something viscera-like off a skillet. The fluorescents were really buzzing now, drilling into my temples. My stomach started to tremble again and I thought I’d better try to tame it before it did the full-on loop-de-loop. I grabbed my chipped blue mug and poured myself a coffee from the battered aluminium urn. I had an odd nostalgia for that thing, its worn Bakelite spigot—old and comforting, a traveller through time from the dawn of plastic.

“So we’re almost there, hey Will-ee Boy?”

“Maybe so, Rodge.” I was hedging, noncommittal. I didn’t have a clue if what he was saying was true. But I should have known. It was annoying how the crew always knew stuff way before I did. Even old Rodge. He was *blind* for fuck’s sake. Our destination was supposed to be secret. Nobody but me was supposed to know where we were headed. That way the competition wouldn’t get tipped off. Those were the C-Corp rules. “Total Quality Assurance,” they called it. I hadn’t been given any activation updates. Not that I’d paid much attention.

The coffee was oily, scalding, with a hint of reheated decay, and immediately it triggered a spasm just below my sternum. Maybe I was taking things a little too quick. Clunking the mug down on the wood-grain Formica table, I gazed bleary-eyed across the ladder that led up to the bridge’s port side. It was like I’d never seen it before. It’s true, I’d hardly been up there lately, though technically I should have been, as the guy who was somewhat in charge. But I wasn’t inclined to play pretend-captain. Through her satellite link, the *Tethys* was tethered completely to C-Corp headquarters over in Taipei; her navigation systems, engine revolutions, trawl deployment and haul-processing systems—all remotely controlled. The crew was just there to clean up the messes. And there were always messes.

C-Corp’s headquarters glowered at us from every e-pad and computer display that we had on board: a giant, oven-mitt-like tower, clad in a titanium skin that reflected the viridian, subtropical hills around it like a funhouse mirror or a surrealist terrarium. I had no idea whether the building, or even C-Corp, actually existed. For all I knew, we were being controlled by some buzzed-out, geek-for-hire pubescent, squeezing us in between rounds of *Pony Play Porn* or *Slime Mould Apocalypse*. I wouldn’t have known the difference—nor did I care, as long as my pay credits kept on rolling in.

I don’t know what came over me, but I found myself heading over to the ladder and hauling myself up, gripping hard on the handrails to compensate for the ship’s lurching and the maddening morning weakness of my legs. It was only eight rungs up, but by the time I reached the top I badly needed to sit down. Pushing through the bridge door, I was hit by a curtain of stale smoke, as if from a recently extinguished garbage fire but with notes of old sweat and melted styrene. A swarm of Cheeze Kurls lay strewn over the instrument panel and on the floor. I brushed off the Naugahyde captain’s chair and fell into it, my life force spent as if sucked by invisible vampires.

The debris of many nights’ partying crammed every available surface with bottles, cans and plastic cups, cigarette butts leaching their amber exudate into the drinks’ dregs, scrunched-up packages of Mild 7s, a riot of gutted chip bags—it all made a perversely cheery contrast to the panorama of monochrome ocean that heaved ceaselessly beyond the expanse of rain-spattered windows. Looking down, I noticed a crack pipe, its scorched glass tube with the little wad of Chore Boy still jammed into the end of it, lying forlornly on the console in front of me. I slipped it like a bad little friend into my shirt pocket. Maybe it would come in handy again, I reasoned; it could help with my nausea, maybe even cheer me up. I’d missed out on the nightly revelries so far, locking myself in my sour-smelling cabin, watching the walls spin from my dishevelled bunk. Drinking and bumping with the crew might have helped me pass the time. Not that long ago, that would have been a lot of fun. But lately I’d been trying to prove something, only I’d forgotten exactly what.

Besides, I’d got the feeling the others didn’t much like having me around anymore. Maybe I was tainted by the hopelessness all over my face. I’d stopped trying to hide it, stopped trying to pretend that everything was okay. Who’d want to be around that all the time?

I tilted up the grease-smear screen of the GPS:

*latitude 50 degrees 21 minutes north*

*longitude 130 degrees 44 minutes west*

Still off the northwest coast of Vancouver Island. Somewhere beyond yesterday, obviously, but outside the window it looked exactly the same as everywhere else we’d been on this godforsaken stretch of North Pacific—the roiling waves, the leaden sky, an occasional seabird skimming its way across the spray. A restless, endless surface of churning possibilities. No place and everyplace all wrapped up in one. Yet a little red blip was throbbing in the middle of the screen; a new blip, the blip we’d been waiting for since the beginning of the trip. C-Corp had made its move. It was time to get ready. It now seemed so sudden and yet it hadn’t come soon enough. The momentum that had somehow propelled me up that ladder had vanished into a sucking tiredness. All I wanted now was to get back to my bunk. I felt my chest tighten, the panic enzymes rising into it like poison sap. Clicking

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closed the bridge door, I started back down. There wouldn't be much for me to do. My job was just to stand out there on deck, supervising the rape of the ocean. A mere formality. I'd click a few boxes on my e-pad and call it done. Nothing more was required. I used to be a biologist, a guardian of marine biodiversity, a keeper of this goddamned blue planet. Now I was just a stooge.

**Rodger had been waiting for me** down in the galley. He'd laid out a plate of breakfast—a glistening, greasy expanse of violated animal rights, the acid-green reflections of the Cool Whites dancing crazily in the pale yolks. I pushed the plate away.

"I'm sorry, Rodge. I'm gonna have to take my time."

Rodge was really making an effort. It wasn't his fault I'd been acting like a dead man, not talking to anyone for days. Poor old Rodge. He sighed and went back to his Braille edition of *Playboy*, its grimy manila cover flaunting nothing but a black bunny logo in a sea of raised nubs—well worn, I noticed. A few moments passed and he started to snuffle, his milky, rheumy eyes twitching beneath their drooping lids, his fingers caressing the pages—left to right, left to right—as if he were stroking a kitten. For a second there, I thought he was crying. Maybe he was, but he remained engrossed. The great thing about Rodge was that, though he'd be sitting right there in front of me, he never made me feel scrutinized or compelled to make conversation. Each of us could drift privately through our own thoughts, yet still keep each other company. Something had changed with him, though, in the past little while. Something in the tone of his sighs. He seemed a little irritated. Maybe it was me.

I scooped a little milk simulacrum into the lukewarm coffee, absent-mindedly tracking the von Kármán trails of white powder as they spiralled off the back of my spoon, first clumping, then disintegrating into the sludgy brown continuum. What the hell was I doing? Once upon a time, I had wanted so badly to make a difference. I'd wanted to save the whales. But whales were long gone. Now I was here. Monitoring a fish-stick expedition.

Fish sticks. The world was just jonesing for them. And every marine biologist I knew, at least the ones still working, the ones who hadn't yet given up in disgust, were being hired to find more fish to make them with. Trouble was, the world's supplies had already pretty much been wiped out. Along with a lot of other things. Sea turtles, of course, which had vanished ages ago. Corals, more recently. But the sea was vast and the sea was deep, and here and there, hidden in the blackness of the abyssal trenches, were pockets of sea life, as yet unexterminated. Protein was protein, and pretty much anything could be ground up and pressed into the golden breaded goodness of a fish stick. So standards got dropped as well as the nets. But lately, as the trawls got ever deeper, some strange, hideous and unbidden things had been brought up in the hauls. Head office was concerned. Lawsuits had to be avoided. *Quality is number one*, they kept telling us. After profits, anyway. So I'd been detailed to keep an eye out on deck to make sure nothing too libellous got sucked into the hoppers. Even fish sticks had their limits.

Zee, the main deckhand, stuck her head around the corner. Well, not "her," exactly. Zee was only a few paycheques away from completing her transition. These days, Zee had kind of an Eldridge Cleaver "*Soul on Ice*" thing going on, the fuzzy little beard, the Ray-Bans, a short, tight 'fro.

"I've told the guys to get ready," Zee said, to no one in particular. She looked way over my head, avoiding my gaze, then quickly ducked away. Zee'd been kind of distant with me lately. We'd never had a *thing* or anything, but on past trips we'd hung out together in my cabin, reading favourite passages from Samuel Delany to each other, or maybe listening to a little Schnauss and laughing over the clips of Japanese model-railroad porn I'd been archiving on the company server. And yeah, we smoked a bit of crack. But we did it ironically.

Being out there on deck during a benthic haul could feel like wading around in the hell section of a Hieronymus Bosch painting—a mucousy, black conglomeration of umbrage, writhing and snapping and lashing all over the place, while the deckhands scrambled in their rubber overalls, gaffing the big stuff and zapping anything else that looked too ornery with electric stunners.

Now Zee was all, "When I became a man, I did away with childish things," in her stuck-up Jamaican lilt, like she barely remembered who I was. I missed her though, just the same.

Rodger sniffed again, then snapped closed his *Playboy*, pushing himself back from the table, the black leatherette seat cushion hissing a bit as his bony little bird-man frame rose up out of it.

"Well, *Willee* Boy... eet's time to go to work."

A statement, not an invocation. With that he shuffled down the corridor, patting the wall from time to time, reassuring himself of his well-worn route back to the engine room. His head bobbed like a little grey mushroom on a jerking blue armature of coveralls, the *Playboy* rolled up tight in his saggy back pocket. He seemed to have become much more stooped since I'd last paid any attention to him.

**Back in the dead of the previous night**, some intern over at C-Corp or whoever the fuck they had running the *Tethys* at that point (or maybe even an algorithm designed to replace any last vestige of human intelligence) had uploaded an encrypted message to the pinprick of light that was locked in synchronous orbit, high above the ship. The satellite dutifully responded by booting up our multi-beam finding module, which, in turn, lowered its transducers from a bulge in the hull. From then on, every topological nuance, every stone, every crenellation, every mound of benthic mud beneath us was being scanned, geo-tagged and streamed back to the C-Corp headquarters—without, I might add, the slightest need for my scientific ministrations. Software had replaced me, in tiny, bite-sized pieces. But I was okay with that. I wasn't exactly on top of my game, and I really needed this job. My credentials were all that mattered now. With a biologist on

every C-Corp drone, they could beat the restrictions. They could call what they were carrying out a "research fishery." This was the great old scam going back to the days of "scientific" Japanese whaling. And look how that ended up. Fish sticks were an unavoidable by-product of marine research.

**In the lightless infinity**, a mile below our thrumming hull, we'd passed over the lip of a deep and sinuous canyon. It plunged like an enormous ass crack into the dimpled expanse of continental sediment. At the very bottom of it, where the pressure was so intense it would crush a human being into a mass of primate jerky, the sonar had already registered the presence of fish flesh as yet unexploited. But C-Corp was on it. Here is where we would lower the trawls.

I knew this was probably going to be another freak show. It'd been that way most other times we'd fished that deep. The benthic zone, they called it. What lived down there wasn't good-looking. These creatures were extremophiles that thrived in perpetual darkness, on a diet of, well, each other. They weren't exactly the kind of thing most people had in mind when they thought of how a fish should look, especially one they were eating. That's where the fish stick came in. The great equalizer. It could make even ugly taste pretty good.

Mostly we hauled up bristlemouths—slimy jet-black things with demonic, pinprick eyes and mouths that gaped like windsocks, full of black, bristly teeth. Their scale-less, jellyish flesh and soft, cartilaginous bones made them the perfect fish-stick feedstock. Still swarming in the deepest ocean trenches, the bristlemouths formed the mainstay of the business. Unprocessed, nobody could stand to look at them. Yet mashed up and deep-fried into golden breaded fingers, they got schnarfled up like there was no tomorrow. Kids in particular liked their sweet, amorphous taste. C-Corp fish sticks had become the pride of public-school lunch programs right across North America. Prison-management corporations, too, bought all they could get their hands on. Supermarkets were rebranding them into three different



price points: *Value Meal*, *Weight Minders* and *Grand Gourmet*. Same stuff, different packages. It was a miracle, really. Our industry could hardly keep up with the demand.

Though we were after the bristlemouths, C-Corp hadn't been too choosy about what got minced up and extruded. The machinery would take care of it, make it all look the same. But lately there'd been some "incidents." Employees having psychotic episodes because of stuff they'd come across. Being out there on deck during a benthic haul could feel like wading around in the hell section of a Hieronymus Bosch painting—a mucousy, black conglomeration of umbrage, writhing and snapping and lashing all over the place, while the deckhands scrambled in their rubber overalls, gaffing the big stuff and zapping anything else that looked too ornery with electric stunners. Some of the creatures would be locked in death grips, trying to swallow each other, even as they were getting pulled from the ocean.

Creatures. Well, yes. They were creatures, all right. Along with the bristlemouths there'd be the viper fishes, gnashing their needly fangs, the gulper eels, which were basically all mouth, the vampire squids, the bulbous dreamers, and lots of other species I couldn't even begin to identify, some of them most likely new to science. Not that science mattered. I just stood there giving my blessing, watching it all get dragged, flopping and bleeding, into the processor's churning maw.

Worst of all were the twisting balls of hagfish. Eyeless, finless, the colour of faeces, they didn't even have *mouths*. What they did have was something much more primitive, designed for simultaneous boring and devouring. They'd eat anything, dead or alive, swarming over their prey like leeches, then drilling into it through the eyes and anus, ripping through the insides, the skin jerking and twitching as they went on with their repulsive business. Sometimes they'd come bursting out through the side of a fish already on the conveyor belt. Then we'd *really* have to get busy with the stunners.

But even the rape of the sea could have its beautiful moments. During the night hauls, I would stand out there, gazing at the myriad seething creatures, gasping and dying all over the deck, many of them flashing bioluminescent pores as the life force seeped out of them, bathing everything in a cold goblin glow, like the Cherenkov radiation emitted by nuclear fuel rods. Maybe I'd be listening to a little Schnaus on my headset and thinking about how strange life was, how ephemeral.

**That's how it was all supposed to go.** That's what I anticipated, sitting in that galley at that grubby little Formica table, its edges chipped like a poor kid's fever-scarred teeth—

staring, just staring into the murk of my coffee, searching for something, some sign, that might help me imagine myself as anyone but a puppet scientist stuck on a clockwork ship, a man who'd sold his soul for fish sticks. I wouldn't be needed for a while. The crew knew exactly what to do. They always knew: Rodger, Zee and the Vietnamese deckhands who'd turn away whenever I came by. I'd just wait. Wait like I always waited and wonder how I'd got so cold inside.

The whine of hydraulics from out on the deck, the *woomph* of the trawl's steel doors shifting, then the clattering of bobbins and floats against the mantra drone of the great spools winding out their kilometres of cable—the machine-music prelude to the slaughter I'd heard so many times before. Until one day soon, when it would all be over. There'd be nothing left to catch in this heaving, ancestral ocean.

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**There were a couple of hours to kill** before the haul came in. The air of my cabin hung sour with last night's sick, the sheets on my bunk all sweat-sodden and twisted. A half-empty Schweppes bottle sloshed like ancient urine amid the torn-open blister packs on the bedside table. On the floor lay my Clemens and Wilby 1961 edition of *Fishes of the Pacific Coast of Canada*. I'd found it when I was a small boy back in Victoria, out behind a Goodwill store in a box of broken hairdryers. With its gold embossing and olive linen cover, it had seemed impossibly old to me, even then. By the time I'd first opened it, the species it described were already mostly extinct. Climate change and rogue drift nets had pretty much taken care of that. I used to like stroking the frontispiece, a glossy, full-colour plate of a breeding male coho; an amazing vermilion thing, turgid with testosterone, all hooked jaws and flared fins. It might as well have been a triceratops. Gone forever, before I was even born. Now, I couldn't stand to look at it. I nudged the book under my bunk with my foot.

I settled into the orange fibreglass chair at my bureau, my thighs already aching from keeping me upright for more than a few minutes. Firing up my tablet, the C-Corp building throbbing menacingly on the log-in screen, I entered my password and dropped into the command line, down, down, descending through the file system, opening directories like so many nested Russian dolls until I was deep inside the server core. And there, hidden in a heavily encrypted backwater, was my little jewel: 3369devotchka.tar. The only thing left that could still make me smile. I unzipped it into my home directory and a row of little vidcons tiled themselves neatly across the screen. I slid on my headset and clicked on the first one—my favourite vid of all: *Yamanote Crush*.

A gawky, antelope-like woman, wearing nothing but a

pair of vintage Manolo Blahniks and a Japan Rail conductor's cap, stands in the middle of a vast model-railway landscape that replicates in obsessive miniature, in the vicinity of Shibuya Station. Her bony legs tower over a dense skyline of Lilliputian buildings, painstakingly outfitted with miniscule transceiver masts and microwave repeating arrays, all modelled exactly to scale. The trains, streets, traffic signals and swarms of tiny pedestrians have all been perfectly and laboriously crafted. She bends over a section of the train track and picks up a green-and-silver E231-series engine from the Yamanote Line, gently, as if it were a cute little animal. Cuddling and kissing it, she begins playfully to lick the fuselage with her pointed, liver-coloured tongue, then rubs it across her tiny breasts and mouse-like pubic mound, glancing up at the camera occasionally as if receiving direction. She carefully places the engine back on its rail, then rears up and crushes it beneath her stilettoed heel, slowly and precisely, an odd, sad look of affection on her face, her soft cooing punctuated by sounds of fracturing styrene and the skittering of tiny metal wheels.

She picks up another piece of rolling stock, this time a 205-series six-door passenger car, which she proceeds to fellate in an exaggerated manner before similarly treading it into toy-train oblivion. After a few more train cars, she turns to the buildings, demolishing them in an apoplectic frenzy, shrieking and stabbing at the shoebox-sized department stores and office blocks, her lustrous scimitar heels stomping the ruins into puffs of electric-blue smoke and plastic smithereens that fly in all directions. Sated, she strides across the flattened vista; she licks her lips, cheeks flushed, a sheen of fresh sweat on her pale Asian skin. From off-camera, we hear hoots of male encouragement followed by polite applause from an unseen studio audience. She bows modestly and exits to the right side of the screen.

I had watched *Yamanote Crush* so many times that I knew every second by heart. And so did Zee. "Comfort television," we used to call it. Everyone clings to some sort of ritual, I guess, and *Yamanote Crush* was part of ours. Back when we were together. Well, not *really* together. But now the shrieking and the crushing and the shattering didn't seem so funny anymore. Not without Zee. I saw a deadness in the eyes of the model that I hadn't noticed before. I took off the headset and let the vid restart its infinite loop, letting my heavy eyes wander down to the bureau drawer beneath me. Sliding it open, I took out a few of the sample vials I had stored in there, each bundle tied neatly with red elastic bands. I barely recognized the wax-pencilled depth readings and accession numbers, so carefully marked on the white plastic lids. It was as if they had been written by a different person. Orderly. Precise. A self I no longer recognized. Each one held a precious sample of foraminiferous ooze, the microscopic exoskeletons of dead plankton that had been raining down to the bottom of the ocean since the beginning of time. This used to be my research, my passion. Back when it was still possible to have passions. The ooze told the story. It told what happened—how everything in the sea had changed over so few years. One of the vials wasn't labelled. I pulled it from its bundle and held it up against the tablet screen, which was still pullulating through the last few moments of *Yamanote Crush*.

It wasn't ooze in there but a tiny, white lump.

*Old friend.*

I slipped the crack pipe from my shirt pocket and packed it with the contents of the vial. My fingers scabbled through the drawer for a lighter among the pens and sticky notes and

then, tilting my head back, a flick of flame, the first taste of numbing smoke:

Oh, yes.

Bzzz-Bzzz-Bzzz-Bzzz. Better. Sharper. Everything gleaming, metallic, electrical, hissing, a warm blue glow soaking into every cell of my being. My neural nets entwined in the great mitochondrial mother, humming in the sea of her energy, her vistas of eternal pleasure—unicorns, thousands of them, copulating on waves of purple grass; the arteries in my head rushing; shining alpine streams of synaptic lubrication; ozone-electric fire burning away despair like autumn leaves. But then. Too soon. Fading. Vanishing. Into the rear-view mirror of my mind. My mirror ball of pleasure. My mind's eye. The third eye. Closing.

"Wil-l-e-e!"

"Willee Boy!"

The blind, the bird, the blind man, the bird-man. Rodger. What the fuck? Dull pain billowing in from all directions, gravity snapping at my limbs. A word coagulating in my throat, bitter syrup, choking me, gasping, back into the world of streaming tears and the little bird-man standing at the door, wanting something, waiting, wanting and waiting for me just to say:

"What?"

"They need you, *Willee Boy*, They need you out on deck."

They needed me? Nobody needed me. Not ever. What was this? Old Rodge. Suspended there in the doorway, the fever aura of Cool Whites flickering nastily above his bobbing, bird-man head. Standing right there in the cold, hard inevitability of now. Everything played out, wound out, bagged, tagged and slagged. Back into the tar pit, I am the tin man. Oil me. I am the slug man. Boil me.

"*Willee*. Come on now. Now!! They need you!"

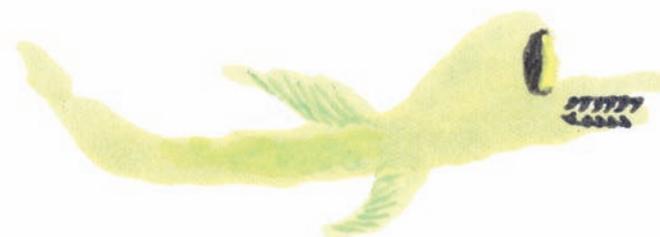
Urgency. I was needed. How nice. But maybe he had something else in store? A plank, perhaps, for me to walk? No. Not old Rodge. He wouldn't be party to something like that. Or would he? But getting out of the chair wasn't possible. Not close to possible. Not just now. The world was still too viscous, too strewn with impediments, unstoppable forces over which I had no control. I closed my eyes and let myself sink back inside, drifting back into that warm, internal ocean of smooth dark oil. Infinite, infinite warmth.

Then Rodger at the back of my chair, shaking it. Shaking me. Shaking my shoulders. Oh for god's sake, why? Why now? Me, a different person, watching my non-self get handed its yellow rubber overalls by a wizened little bird-man; a blind man who could see everything. Next, he was helping me into my faded red float-coat. I, myself, looking out from inside someone else's eyes, a former shell of me, following the bird-man hovering down the corridor, feeling his way past the steel bulkheads and their drippy palimpsests of paint. *Schumpf*—the door opened onto the cargo deck.

Rodger's hand on my back, pushing me out. "Go!" he said, standing in the threshold, shivering in his greasy blue coveralls. They were blue like something long extinct. An indigo bunting, perhaps. Poor little bird-man. Wind-spattered veils of rain, heaving sea. Writhing mounds of silver and black, dying all over the deck. Little crimson freeways of blood braiding across the rusted expanses of diamond-patterned steel. The Viet deckhands gaffing and stunning and shovelling squirming *product* onto the conveyor belts of the processing chutes. Winches squealing, hydraulics moaning. The universe of killing unfolding as it should.

Toward the starboard bow I could see Zee, now in her or-

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bow I could see Zee,  
now in her orange  
immersion suit and  
visored black-knit  
cap, standing over  
something, looking  
down. I made my  
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and starting, the  
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sepulchral blasts,  
my legs buckling and  
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empty sacs of iron  
filings.



ange immersion suit and visored black-knit cap, standing over something, looking down. I made my way over, halting and starting, the rain lashing across the shifting deck in sepulchral blasts, my legs buckling and dragging like half-empty sacs of iron filings. At least I was getting more in my own head, my thoughts congealing as the hyper-chilled rain slapped against my temples. As I got closer I could see Zee was crying, tilting up her Ray-Bans and wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, the wind blowing her tears and the rain across the mahogany moons of her cheeks.

“Jesus Fuck Willy, what da hell we DO wi dem?”

Behind her, the Viets had stopped what they were doing and seemed to be waiting for me to say something, do something. Zee broke into a deep guttural sob, collapsing into my arms. I'd never seen her like this. I hugged her, stiffly, ambivalently, my hand patting her substantial shoulder with the mechanical efficiency of a sewing machine.

There were three of them lying out there on the deck; the first rigid on his back, the dark blood seeping like old wine from the gaff-puncture in his neck. The other two, clearly female, were convulsing—maybe from decompression sickness, I didn't know—wheezing grotesquely, grasping at their throats with tiny, delicate hands. They were the size of babies, really, perfect little people, not of this Earth. Not the one I knew, anyway. I pulled off the first one's helmet. Such a wise little face; his skin grey, his mouth a frozen funnel of pain. We waited a while, Zee and I, neither of us saying anything, alone with our thoughts, looking out across the vast dullness of the empty Pacific. In the end, when we were sure that they were dead, we threw them back into the sea. One by one. It seemed the kindest thing to do. The simplest, too. Maybe they had relatives down there, someone who could grieve for them. We tried to put it out of our minds. And never spoke of it again. ♻

### *all is quiet on the western front*



**Inaugural exhibition at 560 Seymour - VIP Lounge  
February 20th to March 20th, 2010**

Aaron Blake Evans - Kiku Hawkes  
Carl Meadows Sr. - Mark Mushet  
the dark - Sean Panarden - Nadia Thibault

curated by Sean George (seansince66@gmail.com)  
Image: *Persephone Rising* by Kiku Hawkes

I  
Your breath  
sweet with booze  
greets me in puffs of cold air.  
A hee-haw voice,  
but nothing hick about you,  
once you were, teacher.  
And me, pupil, but  
down here on Columbia Street  
no longer the Golden Mile  
we're just dropouts  
people on the sidelines—  
me. You, you've got

holes in the heels of your socks.  
Up, up your gait—away from me.  
The years recede, and you lope past the Sally Ann, into memory

You reappear as Commander:  
in a classroom you paced,  
back and forth, melon belly  
held high in pants. Your ankles showed. You brayed your facts  
through buck white teeth  
about the Wars  
hee-hawing to your students.  
We were dumb, yes, mute, yes,  
but not deaf to recitation.  
“Ils ne passeront pas. Revanche. Revanche!”

See. Your voice is with me  
and hee-haws onto this page:  
“Mother, in the mansion on Royal Avenue,  
broke our best china over her knee.  
This was done in solidarity with our cook,  
a Chinaman. It was the Rape of Nanking.”

II  
This is how things work.  
You, at the front of a classroom,  
thirty years ago. Time.  
You, walking down Columbia Street  
five years ago. Time again.  
On the bus this morning,  
I heard the news.  
You gave up drinking, and three years later,  
three months ago, died.

Revanche! Revanche!  
This is all I have for you.  
It will have to do.

# Ode for Mr. Stout

By Renee Sarojini Saklikar