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AN NCH STUDENT CORONAZINE

issue

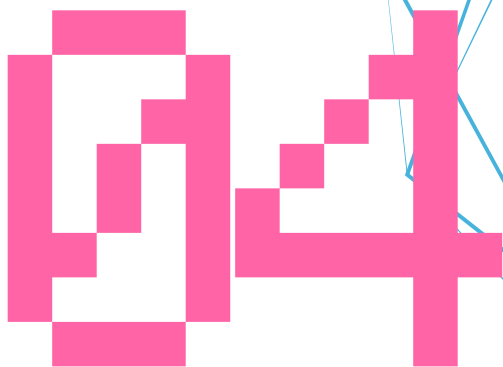
04

space

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niche

AN NCH STUDENT CORONAZINE



space(n.)

a continuous area or expanse which is free, available, or unoccupied.
the dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move.

the physical universe beyond the earth's atmosphere.

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a note from the editor

I first heard of Harlan Ellison in 2016 from a friend who was very fond of psychedelics. There is something about 20th Century science-fiction literature that acts like a magnet to those partial to hallucinatory drugs, not least because many of its' authors were on them at the time of writing. My friend handed me a vintage beaten-up copy of *From The Land of Fear* (so vintage, in fact, that a laminated advertisement for True brand cigarettes was tucked neatly away between the pages) and promised me it would change my life. He then passed out on the sofa and spent the next hour talking to God and drooling into my pillows.

He was, in many ways, completely right. Ellison's writing style and his fantastically bleak outlook on life, technology and everything in between simultaneously haunt and fascinate me to this day. I was lucky enough to correspond with the man a few times before his death in 2018; he was a charmless, self-righteous misanthrope and one of the most interesting people I have ever spoken to. He was so assured in his God-given Talent and so bitter about its lack of recognition that one had no choice to agree with his dying thesis: that Harlan Ellison was, indeed, one of the most important and unloved authors of the 20th Century. He would have turned 86 this month.

The concept of Space and everything that comes with it was, obviously, one very central to his work and the driving force behind my descision for this issues' prompt. I think that these days it's more relevant that ever: concepts of escape and freedom, of the definement of physicality and the technology that allows for it are what our lives revolve around right now. The approach of exams means we were a little light on submissions this issue, but I enjoyed editing them nonetheless.

I would like to say that Harlan would have liked them too, although the truth is he probably wouldn't, because Harlan really didn't like anything much. Here's to you, Mr. Ellison.

STAY SAFE, STAY CONNECTED
Victoria Comstock-Kershaw



THE FINAL WORDS FROM THOSE AT THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Juss Rogers

Sunlight seems to reflect differently off gravestones. The light smacks your eyes in a way which no other object will allow. The most beaten of epigraphs can force you to watch their decay.

The summer never fades from them. The living pass by with a newly refined mortality. Their pace never changes on the rehearsed route to the inevitable, hands clasped around backs, feigning comfort for each other. The stony attempts of a final cry into oblivion; tragic attempts to be remembered are only met with silence.

We say they will last forever. Polestars of existence and loves of lives. The fighters of time's chosen mysteries. Revolutionaries, thinkers, activists, all bound to the same moss ridden end. Hold them gently, sweet earth. Be still. Whatever they were to you, they still are. They left you lilies, but you grew marigolds.

Here lie comrades, lovers, sustainable tourism pioneers, anti-apartheid militants and the best dads in the world. If love could save them, they would not have died. And that sunlight. It shines for the immortal that tread the boundaries of the universe.

LO SPAZIO

ANON.

At night, and evenings, during dark days, too,
My pen, a gift, in hand, the empty page
Just stares me out. Despair not feast on thee,
I think, and open trusted volumes wide

But nothing comes, and nothing comes from...

Yes, we know. Technology seize the day.

Oh laptop, virus free, unmute me please.

Another day, another day, can pass

While I, alone, bereft of muse, of words,

Gaze into space. Where are you, Major Tom?

You metaphor, you moonwalk for the dead,

Come tread inside my begging A4 head,

Make letters flow that do not spell her name.

Her name. Spell something other than her name.

LITERARY SPACES

ANON.

Everything that will ever be written =
Everything that has ever been written
+
Everything that has not

PROSE



ALFONSO & THE TIGER KING

Victoria Comstock-Kershaw

The only sounds at 19 Bedford Square were those of silently settling dust and of a toy tiger having Thoughts. It could not remember when the Thoughts had begun, however it was very sure they had been much simpler when they had. The building had emptied, the sun had begun pouring through the thin slits in the wooden shutters of the Drawing and Morell rooms, and the Thoughts had started in the space left behind. They had, recalled the feline, been fairly simple at the start: Eat, Sleep, Relieve. The former two had been quite easy to satisfy, the college building being full of mice and sun-soaked spots during the day and cozy JCR sofas during the night. The third had been admittedly trickier to figure out, as plush paws did not function well on the slippery steel of toilet flushes, but the greenery in the courtyard had needed manuring and the windows accessing it proved far easier to manipulate than the toilet handles.

The first weeks of having Thoughts had been quite nice, remembered the cat. They had really not involved much Thinking and mostly revolved around finding foot-worn areas of carpet near mouseholes and patches of March sunshine. But then the Thoughts had begun to wander, this time not in search of the thoroughly disconcerted rodents or discarded wine bottles that littered the old building, but in hunt of entertainment. At first it had fiddled with the television in the JCR, but it had not provided much. The gray-faced men had spoken gloomily of spatial distancing, at which the soft animal - insofar as it could - had frowned. It had watched groups of girls with colourful hair gather outside Bedford Gardens to smoke fragrant brown sticks in groups of five or six, and the spaces between them never seemed to last long. But eventually even watching the ebb and flow of the world outside had lost its excitement - and so it had turned to the Books.

It had approached the Books cautiously at first, like a mouse might edge towards a particularly fine yet suspiciously unguarded piece of Camembert. But eventually it confronted the bookcases in the basement-floor rooms and (admittedly, after much strategic chair placement) dislodged enough novels to begin feeding the Thoughts. At first, they had not made much sense: they bumped up against each other in its tiny cotton brain, mismatched blobs of octarine ideas colliding among the fibres. But the more he read the more distinct the Thoughts became, sharpening and reshaping and shifting until they became Questions. Why Eat the Mouse? Why Fear the Dyson? Why Not Just Defecate in the Airlock? And so the search for entertainment had turned into the search for answers, and the Books had provided.

It had not quite understood Foucault's essays on 'gender', for it had none, or indeed on 'sex', which as far as it could tell was a type of very complicated sport and thoroughly undeserving of such lengthy discourse. But it had liked Weber and Durkheim, and even found some sense in Rousseau, if only as a method to understand the first two. It had adored Shakespeare, and Joyce, and Cummings (although he suspected the latter's printer had been having a rough day) just as much as those of Plath, Woolf and Atwood, although their words rang differently (not worse, it reminded itself, just differently). It had revelled in the works of Descartes and Kant, lapping up concepts and absorbing ideas as if they were the most intoxicating drugs on the planet. It had found Socrates and Aristotle nestled between the pristine pages of some of the heavier books in the Master's study and devoured the words of Hume and Locke like a particularly juicy mouse. It had napped in the afternoon sun lining the airlock with words like "morality" and "society" floating around its small cotton mind and awakened with more questions than answers. It sat having Thoughts long and hard in front of the dark screens of the Central Office's computer screens, billeting images of charging trolleys and swinging levers and trussed-up men, its tail curled into an ever twitching question mark.

It sat now in front of the second-floor bathroom mirror and watched its own glassy eyes. "Am I man?" they seemed to ask. Man - yes, that was a term that appeared quite often in the Colleges' books. An individual. An identity. The space around it swelled with the capacity of Manhood.

But there weren't just men, were there? A red-headed memory swam briefly before the oblivion of its eyes; a woman. She had picked him up and swung him around to a joyous beat - music, according to someone called Plato. Was she man? Was she the elusive Orlando? Whatever she was, she seemed important; they had laughed at her jokes and bought her vast amounts of alcohol. Its fur still stunk of sambuca. A brown-skinned figure with deep chocolate curls also entered his vision with the flash of a phone camera; although she too had been absent from the pages he had pawed over. Was she man? Was she more? It could not remember; this had all been before the Thoughts - before the emptiness of the space that swam through the College.

A mouse scuttled past. The toy tiger leapt lazily from the bathroom counter and followed it down the curling stairs between the second and first floor of 19 Bedford Square, its stumped fuzzy tail brushing against the metal railings of the descent. It had stopped chasing the rodents after reading Zurowski's defence of Marxist veganism, much to their relief and - later on, as the tiger failed to ever shut up about it - exasperation. As a result the courtyard greenery and window-sill flower boxes had started to look less verdant, albeit in a very moralistic fashion.

The tiger watched the animal - affectionately named Alfonso by the College's students, as it had once chosen to scuttle across the JCR while a heated discussion about the racial implications of the black butler in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* was taking place - and spoke. "What is it to be good?"

The question spun across the landing and embedded itself in the yellowing wallpaper. Alfonso stared suspiciously up at the creature.

"Some think it is to cause the most happiness to the greatest amount," continued the tiger. "Others think it lies in the individuals' choice. Some think the two are inexorably chained, like some immured prisoner of mother wit. But surely one cannot be good without identifying what is good in the first place. What do you think?"

The mouse squeaked warily.

"No, this isn't about 'bloody veganism' again, Alfonso." snapped the feline. "I wish to have a... dee-ohn-too-log-eh-cal discussion." Its whiskers twitched smugly. Alfonso made a pointed noise.

"Oh, I don't know. It's to do with good and bad."

Squeak.

"No, Alfonso. That's a type of cheese. Good is... well, it's complicated."

The mouse hopped up the stairs and sat beside the tiger, its little legs dangling in the soft afternoon air. The dying rays from the last of the London sunlight flooded through the skylight and bathed the resting pair in gold. Alfonso squeaked once more.

"Well..." began the cat, "To do good is favourable to... anything else, really. It is what one should do, but not always what one must do, and certainly not always what one does."

Squeak.

"Well, I do care." huffed the toy. "No matter how much cheese is involved. Incidentally, did you know that the dairy industry is one of the most--"

Alfonso squeaked, although rather more pointedly this time.

"Yes, yes, alright. My point is that there seems to be a great many different ways of being good, and that is not something that sits correctly with me. There are situations where bad things are good according to some, but their good things become bad under the gaze of another. It just doesn't make sense that both these definitions can be true. There should only be one."

A brief silence, followed by a rather smug, "That, my dear rodent, is called a cat-ee-gorh-ee-cal imperative, although I fail to see what my lesser cousins have to do with it."

Squeak.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. Surely one of the Books must have, by now... gotten it right?*"

Alfonso paused and squeaked.

"Well, what's the point otherwise?" The stuffed animal huffed.

"Surely they haven't written all these books for fun."

Squeak.

"No, that's different. I started having Thoughts because I was curious, not because I was bored."

Squeak squeak.

"They are NOT the same thing! I wanted answers, not questions! And the question that consumes me the most now is what... is it... to be... good?"

Its small furry face frowned under the weight of the question. There was a long silence, interrupted only by Alfonso's nibbling at a stray carpet strand. Eventually the rodent squeaked.

"The Men? Well, that's the trouble. They came up with the question and, as far I can tell, have reached a universal consensus that the correct answer to it is "it kind of depends."" sighed the tiger, wrenching itself from its reverie. "But I feel like that's not enough. Do you?"

Squeak.

"You're not a very bright animal, are you?"

Squeak squeak.

"I suppose you are right," sighed the cat. "We cannot help what we are born as. And yet..."

A pause.

"One can learn to be good, surely?"

Silence.

* Incidentally, there was a piece of deontological literature in the building that contained the ultimate thesis of Good and Evil, a foolproof ethical formula that, if applied, would immediately render all other philosophical discussions, past and future, null and void. It had been scribbled on the back of a Pret-a-Manger napkin by a hungover third-year in panicked preparation for their tutorial, and later used to mop up a bottle of Coop's finest red.

"Good only exists through evil," began the cat slowly. "As a mother otter and her kin will feed off an unlucky salmon and her roe, the Universe must have both Dark and Light, Bad and Good. But then why be good at all?" It glanced at the rodent, a nasty glint in its dead plastic eye. "If such chaos, such immeasurable capabilities for Evil are permitted, why fight it at all?"

A silence was followed by the conspicuously silent noise of very small droppings hitting a very soft carpet. Even the simplest of lifeforms do not forget, no matter how badly the flowers are doing.

"Perhaps I digress," muttered the tiger and Alfonso relaxed. "Forgive me, mouse. But it seems to me like all these Men seem to do is sit around and ask questions and write vague guidelines that contradict one another, and are almost always unwilling to propose what they might do themselves. There is great frustration, Alfonso, in reading sixty pages penned by a mind considered the one of the greatest of all time only to find that his argument ultimately summates to... "Do whatever, I guess.""

A silence filled the space between them. Thoughts hung in the deepening nocturnal silver surrounding the pair, seeping into the carpet and nestling themselves between the bannisters.

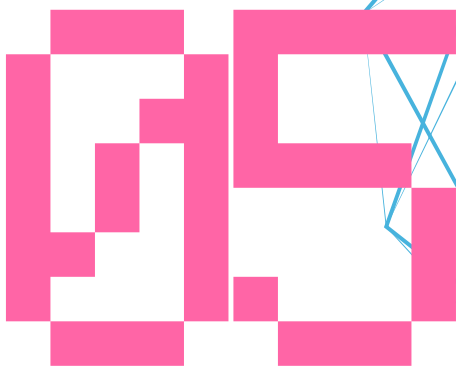
"It is time for bed, I surmise," finally said the tiger, stretching its small orange body. "Much to think about, and tomorrow is a new day. I suggest the chaise longue in Professor Graylings' office. Most comfortable, and is in one of the few rooms in the building that doesn't smell like stale tea."

The two trotted up the stairs as Alfonso squeaked once more. "A question? Certainly," said the tiger. A second squeak, and a silence as the door swung shut and the two settled into the soft down of the Masters chair.

"I'm not entirely sure," said the cat after a long pause. "A kind of sport, as far as I can tell."

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free(n./vb.)

able to act or be done as one wishes; not
under the control of another.
to be or no longer be confined or
imprisoned.
without cost or payment.
release from confinement or slavery.

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ISSUE 05 - PROMPT

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