

The Freshmen

From the top of our rickety, homemade bridge I could see the castle spires of the mall twinkling to the north, the ivory domes of College Hill to the east and the shore of the Great Salt River southward, hedged along with spinning windmills and gigantic pale blue industrial cylinders: wretched, spasmodic Providence, lying curled around the water like a cat that's dead.

It was sunset. Time runs back and forth eternally between two things: the first is the city of Providence and the last is The Verve Pipe's 1997 hit *The Freshmen*, a song about guilt and death in one's youth. Turn and turn and turn and be ever-turning, I was thinking, on your bed of briny nails, O Providence, city where the poets come to die and where the cuneiform skyline gags on tangerine clouds of dragon effluvia.

In the foreground to the left was my church and to the right the local entrance to Hell; the former a nondescript brick building with big windows and a cross on top, and the latter similarly nondescript, but continually emitting smoke and a flickering sulfuric light. The two are catty-corner from each other across the intersection of Stewart and Bulville, which is impassable because of the column of soldiers which marches, two by two, unendingly down Stewart Street. These soldiers are more like an obstacle or a force of nature than people. They're always there, night and day, and always marching. Their faces are identical.

The soldiers are why friends of mine from church got together with some of the workers from the pit to Hell—servants of the Pomegranate Lady—and built the bridge across Stewart Street, the bridge I was currently standing on. Neither group had been able to get to our parking lots. The bridge is mostly made of fire escapes scavenged from abandoned buildings, welded together and driven deep into the earth on either side. We even put up a sign with the bridge's height, so trucks don't run into it.

The bridge has a song of its own; I call it umbral, fluid and resonant, and it settles into broad sockets in my mind. It is a being in the universe. Its energy repels precisely, like magnets turned the wrong way, that of the soldiers.

It did tend to be a bit unstable in the wind, and swayed beneath me. I briefly considered dropping something onto one of the soldiers' crew-cut heads, just to see what would happen. The glow on their right cheeks as they passed the pit to Hell made them look, if possible, even more mechanical here than at other places along their route. Not even city government could say where they came from or where they were going; I had heard that they disappeared from sight somewhere up in Pawtucket. I wondered if they encircled the Earth, or if not, where they were going. My idea is that they're some species of robot, because they don't talk, or look to the side, ever. Their feet as they march all land at the same instant, in a rhythm that shivers the sidewalks.

There was a breath of sea breeze carrying the slightly rotten smell of the river, and I climbed down the other side of the bridge and let myself into the church building through the back door.

There are stars through the mist; there are peaches that have not yet been eaten by worms; there are ways that have been trod by none but spiders. What I mean is that, like Wormwood descending, I have upon my body a fragrant and imperial key.

Sorry. I mean: I'm special and important. You're supposed to be humble to play for church, but I'm not humble. I'm an electric guitarist. Without me Providence would have collapsed a decade ago into the burning, shattered pile of ruined feces it's always longed to be. I am the

fantastic center of a fantastic Dionysian religious experience that purges evil, heals souls and saves lives. That night we were putting a shell of plexiglass around God's drummer, and a new sound system into His house.

Drummers in cages; bananas in skins; the whole earth wrapped in empty outer space.

The first thing that strikes you about our sanctuary is the beautiful, hammered tin Arabesque of the ceiling tiles. There's an eternal order to the Universe, but it's not usually visible. On Earth, the smoke and duplicity and grime of the presence of evil obscures those holy patterns of first Creation. But in the church, that dirt is cleaned away and in the atmosphere's clarity, you can see the patterns that are really there, behind it all, and that's what the squares and octagons and twining vines on our ceiling are. Mythic forces enwrap this hallowed space.

I said hi to the guys and picked up my guitar off its stand. It's a double-neck cherry-red Gibson EDS1275, the same model played by Jimmy Page on "Stairway to Heaven", a guitar that steams continually and is too hot for ordinary mortals to handle. I plugged in for one last go on the old sound system.

I have a theory of holy music, based on listening to a lot of experimental drone metal. The bigger the animal the lower the pitch of the growl, and the more grinding—so my electric guitar is as low and growly as a sabre-toothed tiger the size of the Empire State Building, and its sound goes through the human mind like a hot coal in the mouth of a prophet. True sacred music ought to pulverize the brain. It ought to render the thinking mind inactive.

"Could you maybe turn it down?" asked Cobert, the smaller of our duo of sound technicians.

All honor to the sound man. All honor to the sound man. All honor to the sound man. May he live forever.

In fact, the drum cage had already been put up and the new soundboard installed. There was only one problem remaining: a bundle of copper wires as thick as a wrist, called 'The Snake', that ran from the sound booth in the back, where Cobert and Jarl skulked and crept like gremlins, under

the floor of the sanctuary to the stage up front, upon which I strode Sunday mornings like a new god in bright Arcadia. The Snake had to be gotten rid of.

To clarify, our sound guys are not gremlins; they're trolls.

“We can't get the new cable through to the stage with the Snake still under there,” said Jarl, the other sound guy.

“The Snake won't work with the old board?” I asked.

“Nope. It's got to go.”

They had tied the new cable to the end of the Snake near the booth, and the plan was to just pull the Snake out from the stage side, which would bring the new cable following after, except that the Snake was stuck. All three of us pulled as hard as we could, until we heard something cracking in the building's structure beneath us, and gave up.

Malevolent fastness. Soften and slur, thou abjection. Drown.

“It's caught somewhere,” said Cobert. “Somebody has to go down and untangle it.”

Jarl forgot to duck getting down off the stage and knocked one of his horns against a spotlight, spinning it around.

“I'll go,” I said.

“Good,” said Jarl, putting the light back in place. “Neither of us will fit.” Trolls have good ears, but nobody's ever mistaken them for people who'd be able to get into tight spaces.

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We went down to the nursery, where volunteers watch children so their parents can be upstairs for my blistering solos. And the preaching. I climbed up on a ladder and lifted away one of the drop ceiling tiles, which Cobert had pointed out as being directly underneath the stage's access panel. A drift of crumbled styrofoam, broken insulation and dust came down, smudging the carpet. Cobert tried to brush the detritus off of his shoulder fur with a handkerchief.

“Alright,” I said. “I'm going to need gloves and a mask. It's nasty up there.”

“Down there,” said Jarl.

“I'm on a ladder.”

“You're under the stage.”

Eventually appropriately garbed, I ratcheted the ladder up so that it went past the grid of white panels through the opening and rested against the wall, in the space between upstairs and downstairs. I climbed up and turned on my phone's flashlight.

Dust was everywhere. There were air ducts and wires going every which way in that dark, dry space, and, fortunately, a kind of interlocking system of boards that supported my weight, but barely. It was like being in an attic, but also a basement.

I entered into unrelenting interstice. Architected dusk. Marginality.

“Guys,” I yelled down into the hole, “Somebody go up to the stage and wiggle the Snake so I can see which one it is.”

There was the sound of Cobert's toenails from above, clicking on the wood steps of the grand staircase. Jarl was still with me down by the ladder. One of the thicker cables, emerging from a dark area near a corner of the ceiling, started dancing around.

I fastened my eyes to that Snake like mongoose teeth, then grabbed it and tugged. There was slack on the side it had been wiggling from, but on the opposite side I could only pull it a couple of feet before it snapped taut. That end of the Snake vanished through a square opening in the opposite wall, and so I made my way cautiously in that direction. I squeezed through the gap and followed the Snake into another attic/basement space, very much the same as the first, probably above another Sunday school room.

I navigated that room the same way, and the next room and the next, until I came to what had to be the outer edge of the building. The Snake should have gone upwards at this point, to the sound booth at the back of the sanctuary. But instead it took a turn down, along with some other cables, into a vertical passage with a series of ladder rungs on the side.

One of the cables in this shaft was the same diameter as the Snake, so I tugged on it and yelled up, and Cobert tugged on it from the other side. It was indeed the Snake, which meant that the tangle was somewhere down the shaft below me.

That passage! Plumb inverse forefinger of the Earth. Perpendicular horizon wound. What need for such a pit beneath the feet of the upward road to Heaven?

Jarl passed down my guitar, because it is the piece of equipment with which none can stand in my way, and I strapped it to my back.

“Remember,” he called, “the Pomegranate Lady lies.”

“And also to you,” I responded.

Then I mongoosed my way on down.

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The passage bottomed out after twenty feet or so into a space that seemed far too large to exist safely beneath the street. It was particularly cavernous to my right, which would have been the area under the church's parking lot.

A place of extensive, oddly rectilinear potholes is that parking lot. Let it mirror its existential map in the heavens, or in the civil engineer's filing cabinet, and let it declare to all that the map is the territory and the territory is the map and all confusion is a rectilinear pothole. Amen.

I knew that I was crossing under Stewart Street when I heard, dimly, the mechanical rhythm of the marching of the endless column of soldiers. It was comforting to know that although I had left the sanctuary behind, I hadn't dropped entirely out of the world.

I came to a red brick wall with a steel door, painted flaking gray. Where the bottom of the door met the cement floor there was a big rubber weather strip, and the Snake passed beneath it, two lengths of cable, both coming and going. I tugged experimentally and found that the door wasn't the source of the snag; the Snake slid easily back and forth beneath it.

So I opened the door and went through, following the Snake along a hallway to the right.

The walls were cinderblocks painted gray except for a single horizontal black stripe about a foot down from the dropped ceiling, which was white fiber board, just like in the church's nursery.

We're not so different after all, the ladder to heaven and the mouth of hell.

What ephemeral, archaic Ariadne, what clicking, humming Archimedes brain, what ancestral navigating genius was it who made their twisting way, anointed in phosphorescence, through this labyrinth in the mists of time to install the cable I was following? Or what team of dungeoneers and martyrs? And why?

My shoes tapped hollowly on the gleaming tile floor. The hall branched a number of times and I followed the Snake at each turning. After a while I saw a very long steel desk, which blocked almost the whole width of the hall, and at which sat three young women. They had remarkably large noses and appeared to be identical triplets, except for their hair color. But that may have been dye. I approached the desk, smoothing my hair and turning on my casually dramatic smile.

“We wondered when somebody from the church would be over here about that,” said the one in the middle, who had green hair. The leftmost woman, a brunette, gestured illustratively at the Snake, which ran just past her foot along the tile floor.

I slowly slid my guitar around to the front of my body.

“It doesn't matter what you play at us,” said the rightmost woman, who was blond.

“Go past if you want,” and, “We won't fall asleep,” said the other two, simultaneously. The blond woman gave them a look. She put her palm up to her mouth, casually.

“Only dead things can go down,” she said, then swallowed. “You're welcome to try. We could stop you but we don't care. The road's too long to walk, anyway.”

Triple goddess! I know thee, Hecate.

“You don't know how I can play,” I said. I keep a battery-powered pocket amplifier on me for just such an occasion, and I set this down by my feet and adjusted its knobs to account for the acoustics of the space.

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The song that I played there, faced with that obstacle, was a golden staircase that flung glittering jewels and piercing fragments of light past and around the heavens; yes, all the heavens like a giant disco ball, and that stair stretched and stretched and came to where you are right now, dear reader, and you descended and met me midway down, because all the worlds are open to my song. From there I stretched the material of the song, shaping it, and I built a glowing bridge from us to the place where the author, who wrote this story, has his life, so that my song delivered us even to the house of [author's actual name] himself.

Don't try to get away. Come with me. It's part of my spell.

All song is meta-narrative. The universe is intertextual by nature—it doesn't take a special song to do this. What I was playing was only Cream's “Tales of Brave Ulysses”. This is the part with the tiny purple fishes.

I showed you where the author had been driving his car, a 2000 Toyota Camry, for too long without changing the oil. He had the words 'oil change' on his to do list. That car had carried him for twelve years with hardly ever a mechanical failure, uncomplaining, ever faithful.

When he and the car parted it was in an apocalyptic, armageddonal wasteland of a junkyard, and when he went to drop from his hand for the last time that set of keys so dear to his heart, in guilt and all shame, with the scent of automotive death in every nostril, then, at that moment, I took your wrist in mine, reader, and placed your hand beneath his, so that, invisibly, the key fell into your palm and not that of the desk lady at Oceanside Automotive of Old Saybrook, CT.

Take the keys.

I can't stay here for much longer. The song is only two minutes fifty seconds long. I need for you to bring this dead car to me, to where I'll be waiting in the hall beneath Stewart Street, because I need to ride it into Hell.

It'll run for you. Your eyes will animate it, you bright-eyes you.

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When you arrived with the Camry, it was through a brick wall that had certainly had raw soil behind it a moment before, and did once again a moment after. You stepped out, stretched and tossed me the keys. Fire was in the armpits of its tires.

“You dick!” yelled the green-haired woman. The brunette put a hand on her shoulder and she slapped it away and darted out in front of the desk. “You utter phallus!” She threw something, which bounced off my chest and landed on the floor. It was a finger.

“Go,” I said to you. “I can handle them.” You turned into a spinning mirror and flapped away back to wherever my spell had pulled you from.

I didn't touch them. I don't ever touch women, you know. What I used was my fingerstyle rendition of “Hands Down” by Dashboard Confessional, number seventeen on BuzzFeed's “26 Songs That All '00s Girls Cried Alone To In Their Rooms”. By the time I was done, two of the women were half-bald, lying across each other at an angle, and the third was trying to strangle herself with fistfuls of their hair. The hair kept breaking.

That beautiful car's six cylinders, burned out and slag, became the eight hooves of that famous horse, and we slid together on down the infernal hallway.

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The hallway became a tunnel and I drove down and down. At one point the two sections of the Snake I was following, one coming and the other going, split apart. I followed the right-hand section, uneventfully, through granite tunnels with desiccating halogen lights every fifty feet or so. Finally the hall ended at a red brick archway, through which the Camry's flickering headlight beams went out into a vast darkness and illuminated nothing but a slope of white sand. I stopped the car, leaving the headlights on, and got out. The Snake made a sharp right turn at the corner of the archway and continued out over the sand and out of sight. The space might as well have been endless.

Cold distance, fleeing, transparent, not dull or flat but deep and invisibly glittering, vast fractures in the universe fitted together so snugly that they're visible only as flashes when, turning, the great wheel aligns the opposing continents. O, continents of air and continents of sound! O all music mythical and plunging, all music ringing in that space, an immaterial bell.

This, the realm of the Pomegranate Lady.

Deliberately, I picked my nose and flicked the product out onto the beach. There was no response, so I stepped down onto the sand. With the engine off, I could hear the faint murmur of a body of water in front of me.

My toe prodded something soft. I knelt down and the smell was sickening: it was a corpse. In the bad light I couldn't tell whose. I stood up, shrugged, turned on my phone's flashlight, insufficient though it was, and followed the snake as it ran on, roughly parallel to the water.

Something human-shaped shimmered in front of me like heat off a road. I tried to catch it in my phone's beam and saw the barest hint of a face.

"Mmmm," the shimmering thing moaned, and drifted closer to me. I stepped back. It was like a person made of coils of smoke, hardly visible at all. The face was wide-eyed and the mouth was open. White hair like pale seaweed spat upwards and floated.

"Hey there," I said, continuing to back up.

Suddenly there were a hundred of the ghosts all around me. I swung my guitar at them and they dissipated half a dozen at a time, and I went that way along the beach, phone in one hand, waving the guitar in front of me with the other as though I was fending off spiderwebs in the woods, following the Snake through the underworld.

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I came eventually into the light beneath the gaze of Hades where he was standing, bulky and motionless, like a skyscraper over his evil bride Persephone, the Pomegranate Lady, who wore her skin like an evening gown with deep, deep décolletage and had the Snake looped between her teeth.

“Julie?” I asked, recognizing her.

Ill omen. False star. Venomous pendulum, ticking. I had thought she was in Boston.

“Hello, Simon,” she said, the words lipping their way out around the Snake. She had broad, scalloped seashells for cheeks and streams of chlorine gas for hair, but it was her.

I slid my guitar around to the front of my body.

“Oh man,” I said, “If I had known it was you down here. Listen, I hate to do this and I know it's kind of awkward, but I need a favor.”

She hissed and floated to within five feet of where I stood. I couldn't tell whether the sound was coming from her mouth or the glowing slits—gills?—on the sides of her neck.

“What does it matter?” she said. “You'll dissolve now.”

“No,” I said, “I need you to give me the Snake. It can't be down here. We have to run a new cable.”

She laughed and floated backwards, upheld by nothing, and dozens of ghosts flew at me from every side and attached themselves to my body. I shrugged like it was nothing, but it did actually feel like parts of me were beginning to dissolve.

“Suit yourself,” I said, and began to play.

*When I was young I knew everything
And she a punk who rarely ever took advice
Now I'm guilt-stricken,
Sobbing with my head on the floor
Stop a baby's breath and a shoe full of rice, no*

The ghosts fell back gradually. Gradually, Julie's smile faded. She looked back and up at her husband, then at me. Her right hand was squeezing her left.

As I hit the second verse, Hades began to lean down ever so slowly, his enormous bulk bending in the middle, far above our heads, until his beard like a baobab tree brushed the sand and his forehead was almost touching Julie's.

“Honey,” he whispered, “does this kid know something I don't?”

She glanced at me, then said something to him. Now I was repeating the chorus a third time and was about to go back into verse one.

For the life of me, I can not remember

What made us think that we were wise and we'd never compromise

For the life of me, I can not believe we'd ever die

For these sins

We were merely freshmen

I was prepared to play for as long as it took, but Julia came back, holding her ears. Hades was straightening up again with an earthquake groan. She dropped the Snake and immediately Cobert and Jarl began pulling from their end, far away and above.

“Do not look at the new cable,” Julie said, gesturing me backhanded away from the royal presence. “Ever. There will be very. Serious. Consequences.”

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I grabbed onto the Snake, running after it as it scooted along, guitar hoisted back over my shoulder. I had to trust that the new cable was tied on somewhere behind me. That Julie wouldn't untie it when the knot passed her, or seize it as she had the Snake.

The Queen of Hell herself, Goddess of Death, Two Faces, Bloodybones, Death-in-Pregnancy, The Goat, Empress of the Deserted Isle. The Pomegranate Lady. Julie. This is who I was supposed to trust.

Because the Snake made a big loop, my path back to the surface was not the way I had come. It passed over meadows of bones and through the air ducts of haunted space stations and plague-shot husks of cities, and finally across a short bridge of black clay over a deep, narrow ravine from which I could hear a familiar stomping and see, looking down, the infinite stream of soldiers whose march also led through Providence.

I stopped, letting the Snake slide on. The walls of the ravine were straight and tall, and converged almost to the vanishing point. The endless crew-cut heads shrank and shrank as they advanced toward that point, where, just at the edge of my vision, there was the smallest flicker of commotion. I bent all my senses that way. There was the distant sound of explosions. A hint of leathery wings in the darkness. Screams.

A noise from behind me, scraping, maybe the Snake bumping something. I looked back.

There, behind me as promised, was the knot fastening the old Snake to the new cable, which glowed coolly, like the Moon. It was such a beautiful thing, so slender, and just then I realized something about music that really pulled everything together for me, so that I finally understood what it was all about and how to do it perfectly.

You have to make it without them knowing it, so that the more they listen, the more there will be.

I realized, also, that I had just broken Julie's command.

I felt my face go bloodless. All had been for nothing. I sighed, waiting for the new cable, my prize, the shining thing, to vanish.

But it kept coming toward me. In my distraction I almost missed it, but I managed to awkwardly grab it as it went past, and continued bumping and stumbling along up that narrow road. That road of such manifold appearance and so much trouble.

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Above ground it was almost dawn. The sound trolls hoisted me up and dusted me off and

we spent a couple hours EQing the drum mics. The Snake was sold for scrap copper.

My intrusion onto the ancient rights and territory of the opposing party was handled through appropriate channels, and I was duly blacklisted in the normal mode. Nothing exceptional. The city officials were super mad when they went to give me the White Tattoo and found that I'd had it done years ago, to increase my stage presence.

Of course the Pomegranate Lady lies. I believe that. Her threats are not effective against the Light. But still. Hadn't I lost something? Wasn't there something about my tone, from that day forward, that was never quite exactly how I wanted?

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