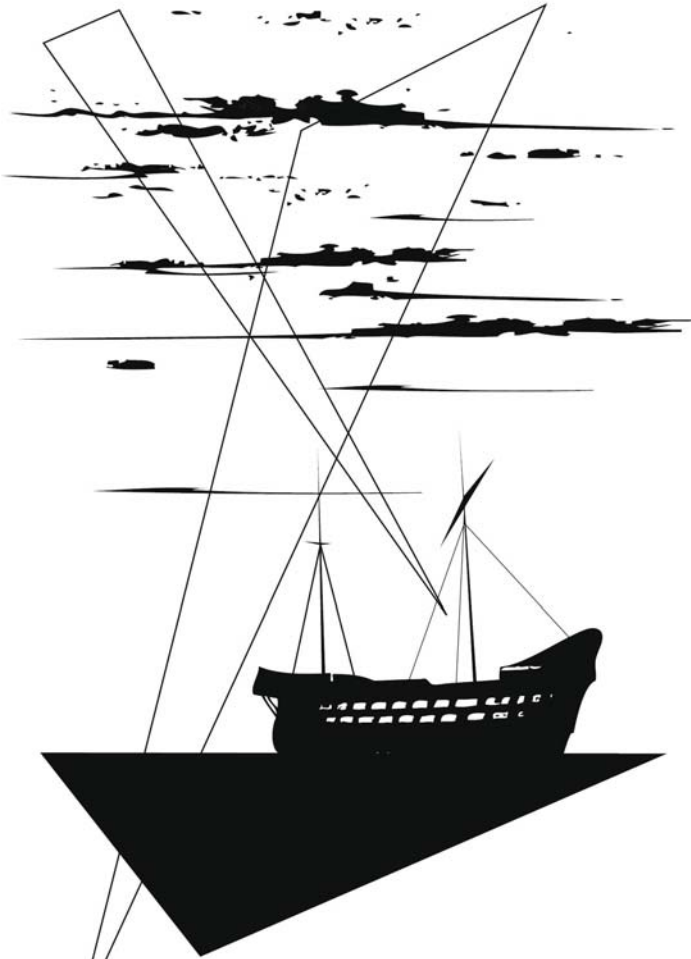


# Experiments at 3 Billion A.M.

*By Alexander Zelenyj*

Excerpts



# The Prison Hulk

With occasional narrow slat-cracks and portholes like sad vacant eyes, our bobbing house of pain stares forlornly at the night sky reflected in Thames waters. Peering through a gap in the hull, I watch the stars suspended there, shifting in the dim depths like a wavering dream-picture. The liquid mirror rivets, engages my eyes when I should try for sleep.

Behind me, a man groans, and then another, and the dull hollow thudding of bodies maneuvering for some scrap of space. The clank of chains, heavy and like a knocking from some place far, far below our feet.

But only fishes sail there, in the unseen depths. Bass and eel. Salmon and countless nameless swimmers.

Lucky, free.

Poverty plagues our dear girl England these days. So many of her children penniless for years, it seems. The result a sad one: A race of destitute criminals stealing through her streets, bread loaves tucked inside coats, biscuits held anxiously beneath petticoats while the roar of policemen in pursuit grows to raucous dins. One hundred years of our dear girl ridding her shores of these criminals, sailing them away like waste removals to Australian or New World colonies. North America, with its great promise of incarceration.

I'd heard of their distant American rebellion. Independence, and they no more stood for our dumping of prisoners like garbage upon their shores. So what was she to do, our dear lovely girl, with starving convicts gathering into the arms of police like confetti on some sad day of acknowledgement? With the gaols and bridewells filled to brimming capacity with the land's new breed of petty yet unforgivable criminal?

I was hungry, too. Like so many others I knew and know now, and with whom I share these conditions of squalor. My crime had been simple and atrocious. The loaf of bread for the children and a snuff box for my wife, filched from the general store counter-top when all eyes were elsewhere. Until the hand of authority upon my shoulder, as if a shop-owner's tall, stocky son should ever wield such power, and then a quick descent into this life of iron fetters and green-moulded biscuits and rats nibbling my toes in the darkness.

England gave her answer, and her thieving children shuddered at the portent it held: Convert those silent old merchantmen, those relic naval vessels from their disuse since past times of war on the water. Transform them, and give them new loads to hold in place while the world continues on its daily course. When New World colonies have no further desire for them, confine those law-breakers in the bellies of boats and anchor them firmly in our harbours and rivers.

Floating dungeons. Prisons-at-anchor. Deplorable buoyant prison-houses which have come to be known as the Hulks, wearing inappropriate names like glorious celebrations of past victories and pageantry:

*Warrior.*

*Retribution.*

*Discovery.*

*Success.*

Names which carry great weight and suggest vastness of vision and high hopes of achievement. Hollow titles in our floating prison town, where cries or curses to God and death-moans are the language of necessity. And my own bobbing hell's name: *Justitia*. As if inside this large, cramped room any brand of justice is meted out to this crew of skeleton men.

I listen chilled as a soft splashing sounds where a man rolls onto his side. The water has gathered in the bilge once again, a new hole which might be patched in several days' time but then perhaps might not. If the red coats can be bothered from their stations above. If we don't wake with dirty water in our mouths and in our eyes and then the endless fate of drowning in darkness.

The thought arrives in my mind quietly, seamlessly gliding into my awareness as it always does. As though it's never very far away at all: 1841, the hungry year of my criminal act. The first day of my new unimaginable life. And how long has it been now? And how much of my time on this Earth has slipped away from me?

From the shore, the hulks bobbing in the river seem a derelict shanty-town, and we the men file towards them like ghosts returning to inhabit their hollow rotten bellies.

Another endless day behind us. Non-life in the Woolwich Warren, that awful labyrinth of warehouses and work shops. Toil in the machine shops, many of us in the foundries and dredging along the river. Twelve-hour days stretched to an interminable length amid the fire and racket and sweat and tears. The guards drift by on all sides, alert with cutlasses drawn and aimed towards our dragging ranks, as though any of us possessed any scrap of strength after the punishing labour behind us. As always, with the sun sinking in the sky and setting the opposite shoreline on fire, the great weight settles upon us. The depression from which not one man among us has ever been able to try for his break towards freedom. A weight of mountains.

The mere sight of her drifting idly in the dark waters off-shore. Her wood paneling old and decaying. Her mass of boards and nails and limp, soiled sail, while rats scamper through her insides among our waste and refuse. Our hell, our *Justitia*.

I hate her. I dream of burning her into the river. Sending her boards helter skelter to the river bottom for fish to drift among and wonder over.

And we're guided across the narrow wood plank and ushered inside of her once more. Stooping, we enter the thick atmosphere, our heads brushing the ceiling only four feet from the floor, midget's quarters for grown men. We collapse because we can stand no more, vying for what little space we can secure. Soon enough, we are all gathered here once more, our strange, silent, aching family. Three hundred half-starved, unwashed men living skin on skin, among their disease and shit and slop. Our stink suffocates us and is a rank fetid breeze along the shoreline for miles.

Minutes pass like days and then another mouthful of mouldy biscuits and my supper is done. I drift soon, only dimly aware of the sound beside me, the man urinating where he sits against the wall. His warm flood reaches me, envelops my thigh and stirs me from my almost-slumber. A reminder, and I let myself go, too, enjoying the small relief of pressure in my bladder. We don't speak of such things any longer. We are one among all this refuse and degradation.



# Tara of the Wine Cats

I tell them all the same words: I'm wires and circuits and a hard shell and a December heart. Some of them laugh and say robots aren't so poetic. Or so sexy, they always say that as they're reaching tentatively for my breasts or thighs. I never bother telling them that I hate poetry and failed through school, and that my mirror tells me different things. I see the verdict every morning: you're the ugliest woman in the world.

And I believe, but I end up tasting their tongues every time.

His name had been Kelsey. I could tell by the way his eyes bugged out and the way he bit his lips as he stared at me naked on the mattress that I had been his fantasy for a long time. Whoever I was. A woman he'd picked up easier than he'd ever believed he could, just like that. And it had worked out for him: miraculously, his callow, tawdry words had kept me talking with him in the book store aisles, flirtatiously, while he marvelled at his adept techniques or luck. You're tired, as his eyes watched my thighs, sounds like you need a good, thorough foot massage.

That had been his thing: feet. Mine, like rare treasure in his hands as he pulled my boots off and began smelling me and administering lickings and kisses along my heel, between my toes, biting my nails. Then he had me, briefly because he tired quickly, but then he had me a second time shortly after and it was moderately better.

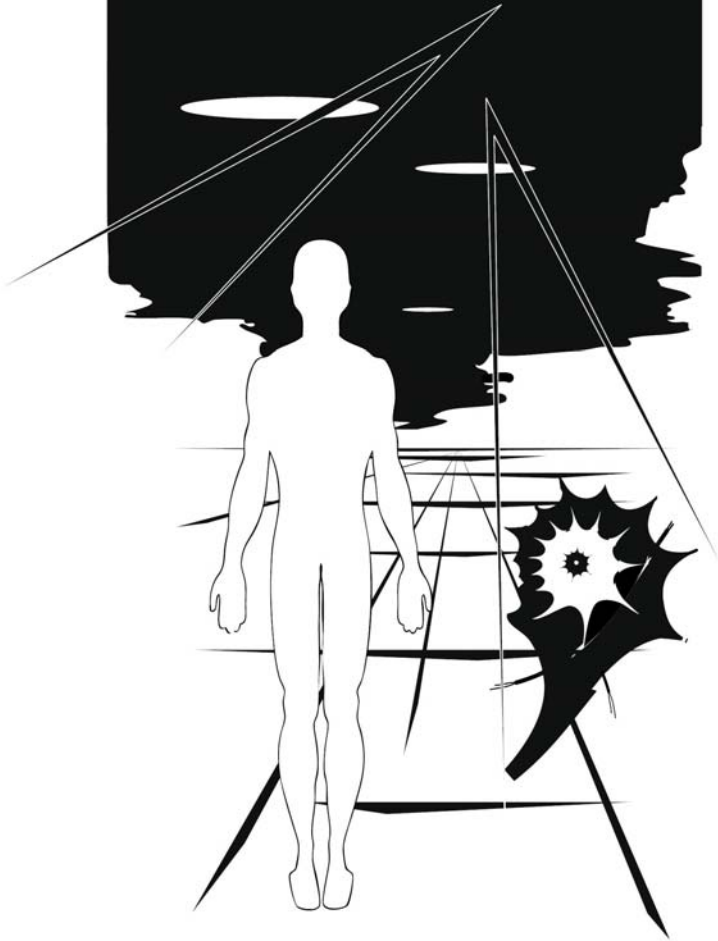
He grew angry when I refused to give him my number. Why not, we could do this every night, and his eyes were pleading and growing more livid and wide as the idea made him excited again. I left quickly, before he had the chance to grow violent, which happens with them sometimes. I've had my share of slaps



and punches, one kick in my stomach even. Having one's fantasy crushed as it's seemingly realized brings people to that. Angry actions in rooms supposedly made for rest and something referred to as love.

I hurried from the motel, a short stay hole on the city's west side which existed only for those like Kelsey and myself, and I got into the man's car three blocks east and repeated the process. His name had been Bill, and afterwards he'd only cried softly into the pillows as I left him forever. People are all different.

# Let the Firefly Men Remind You



Nothing lasts.

Endless summers fade away, too, with all their strange and wondrous ingredients. And only their ghosts linger. And even though we all knew the truth in those words, that summer still felt eternal, like the most magical and painful summers of your life tend to fool you.

Like hippies so crazed from the acid frying our sizzling minds that we could never claim the truth about the things we'd seen to anyone but ourselves. But we knew it because the mornings following such hauntings found us all pale and cold, and we didn't talk as freely throughout that strange summer as in other, less significant years past.

So that was us, day in and out, afternoons drifting by the river behind Natalie's farm house in Comber County while her parents were away in distant Windsor; and the nights were bonfires and pointing out fairy spirits amid the clusters of sparks shooting into the air. In twos, we'd sneak off and kiss our partner behind the first thin wall of trees bordering the deep dark bush where we feared demons roamed with the deer and rabbits. But we were young and crazy with fire between our legs, and the bark of trees scratched at our backs where our shirts were lifted up and over our heads while we were kissed hard into the trunks, disturbing spiders and caterpillars in their crawling nocturnal quests.

Gary was my man most of that summer and we were lost in each other's touches and whispers when the big fire happened. He was thin and wore his hair long, and his beard, too, all twisted and pubic-looking and so sexy with river water drenching it like some wet animal. We were good together and the funniest thing about us was the knowledge we shared that we'd

never last past that summer. I pictured him moving away somewhere else, which he eventually did, to Toronto I think it was, and I knew it then and know it now, that he didn't take my number with him when he went. Just like I erased his name and number from their place penciled into the headboard of my bed back in Belle River.

Maybe it was the sole thing that kept all of us so happy those hot months: our awareness of the transience of all things leading into tomorrow. We never once entertained the idea that we could possibly repeat the grandeur and mystery of those days, and so we weren't too upset knowing we'd never even give ourselves the chance to try. We lived in the very instant of each moment and never considered the existence of time outside of that safe neutral bubble.

Natalie was the same as me, my twin sister it had always seemed in the way she thought exactly as I did, who loved her man's presence beside her every night while the fire crackled and spit wheeling sparks like fireflies around us. But it was only the presence of him she cherished, never any warmth beyond the simple physical tangibility of him being there that summer. We were content enough having another hot body to hold us and to clutch to us when we felt like sharing something good of ourselves.

My man's name was Gary and he spoke like a preacher. Gary Texo, who swore to me that he was a real child of God. The real McCoy, in his own words, with his own carefully wrought-out set of beliefs which allowed him to indulge in any excess he chose while still flaunting the silver cross on its silver chain around his neck. *If you love God, He won't reject you because of your lifestyle, He's bigger than that.* I liked his eyes. They were always looking inwards at himself, as if he were dreaming about himself, and I suppose I really only thought that he

was rather self-absorbed and pretty, but I never cared. He knew how to nip at my neck like a vampire and make the skin all along my shoulders ripple into goose flesh. He knew how to remove my bra quickly, he never fumbled with the clasps like so many novices I've known. When he kissed me, he was absorbed totally in the moment, and at least during times like those I knew for certain that he was mine.

Natalie was a wondrous child, silently wise about the things she saw around her, and so I think she knew it, too, felt it in her petite bones: everything that summer was fleeting, despite the daily slow-poking way we went about the things we did. As if we had all the time in the world left to us. The days tasted too good. The night air was too perfect, a constant temperature of neither too chilly nor too muggy. The mosquitoes were out, of course, but never in droves, and our long-sleeve shirts were adequate enough armour to thwart their needle-noses.

We were always commenting on geography, it was all around us, a kind of grand magnificence. We'd all visited Natalie's farm house before when her parents were away in Windsor, where they went often on business as well as socially to visit their many friends. But it was different then. The tree line rippled better against settling dusk every early evening. The fireflies among the thick twisted trees were more celebratory in their bobbings and flutterings than in previous Julys and Augusts. They'd always been pretty but never quite magical like they were then. And the sound of the river was calmer, the best and most soothing music that stretch of corn country had ever produced. What a soundtrack. What a time. And the sounds of insects moving through the stalks and brittle husks never carried so sweetly on the air.

But then there were other things at work those days, too. Oddities, peculiarities among the everyday laze and summery haze which ruined our good cheer and brought us down from our drunken spinning reveries. Incidents and happenings we only ever seemed brave enough to acknowledge once the wine had been poured and the acid delivered onto our tongues. The bizarreness of things which always brought us down to lucidity, and that instilled an unsettling ingredient into the days and nights. Which propelled them quicker from their dusks to the following dawns, and just like that another grand yet haunted day was behind us.

I'd found the burning animal at the edge of the woods.

# Christina the Bloomed



It's another of many clandestine afternoons that he's returned to the water fields since the day the sun misfired and burned his heart black, but still his steps come heavily.

The wooden boards herald his passage despite his expertly stealthy progress, creakingly, like the bones of the elderly men he sees when he visits the park's general store with his mother; the ragged old men like scarecrows always seated on the wooden veranda before the general store as if in guardianship of its goods, who seem to groan and shudder with their every minute movement. The nodding willows and rushes on either side give back an opposing state, though, making their gentle, papery whispers in the languid breeze where they caress each other in a million places. He stares off across their slowly undulating landscape, crackling and bleached the colour of wheat by the tenacious sun. A v of Fish Crows takes flight from the marsh and wheels against the cerulean sky. An invisible Cave Swallow offers its warbling song to the new day. In the embrace of these old sounds and scenes, the boy feels comfort settle into his skin, displacing the unease with which he'd set out on his routine but difficult exploration of the marsh.

He walks slowly, slowly, seeking to savour the cicadas' electric songs playing on every side, the bite of the sun into his bare skin. Her words come to him then, as they've been haunting his thoughts incessantly throughout the past several days: *The sun turns us into chocolate, darker and darker every day.*

He makes a gesture of salute, shielding his eyes from the sun. In the eastern distance, the observation tower rears from the marsh like a looming Wickerman, the crooked horizon of the deciduous tree-line beyond. Its wooden skeleton shimmers waveringly in the heat haze as if it, too, is stirring subtly in preparation of its imminent march across the swampy land. He



spies the lone figure in its crow's nest summit, bent over the toothpick-sized telescope. He knows even at this great distance of tricky air that it is his mother's telescopic eye which pursues him in his A.M. explorations. He'd felt her with him the moment he'd entered the central maze of the boardwalk, like an intensification of the sun burning into his skin, a close cloying warmth tickling his moist spine beneath his cotton shirt.

He turns southwards. The open stretches of the fenland shimmer in the light. Beyond, the brilliant light-speckles of Lake Erie stir, and stir something inside of him.

A soft splashing rouses him. Turning about, he's in time to witness the gargantuan carp recede beneath the pond surface following its brief emergence into the bright morning. He follows its progress as it submerges deeper and deeper beneath the murky water in an effect as of de-materializing. When it's gone and only bubbles and a widening arc of ripples remain in its wake, a pang touches him, and he wishes earnestly for the swimmer to return so that he can admire its silvery scales. But nothing disturbs the water now, and he only continues on his way, forlorn and discomfited beneath his mother's far-seeing eye. He tries to push thoughts of confronting her upon returning home from his mind and succeeds only when, a minute later, he stops to observe a pair of Tufted Ducks bobbing in the water. They drift but seemingly at the water's behest, languidly, as if he were in fact not watching birds with ornate, iridescent plumage at all, but striking models of Viking galleys with the sculpted likenesses of some obscure avian deity marking the vanguard of the warships.

In a desperate and paltry gesture to assuage his mother's certain displeasure with him, he reaches into one of the many capacious side pockets of his shorts and retrieves the persimmon that's been bulging the material all morning (as well as

given him the pleasure of pretending that he, as a result of his courageous explorations into swamp country, has been stricken with the deadliest of illnesses, the first manifestation of which is the gross, elephantiasis-like swelling of one's body in various parts). Turning about so that he's facing the distant tower directly, he raises the fruit with deliberate slowness and great theatricality to his mouth, bares his teeth, and bites in. He stands poised with his teeth piercing the fruit's hide, relishing the cool juices jetting into his mouth in combat against the feral sun seeking to cook his skin darker while bleaching him of his energy.

He lingers in place a moment, eating with evident relish, and then continues onwards once more. He passes a couple seated on one of the intermittent benches which dot the boardwalk - a pretty girl with red hair and red corduroys and a thin, bespectacled young man sporting a beard and wearing a beret - speaking in low voices. He drifts past them unnoticed while they whisper to one another, a spectre stirring the cattails in his wake. Raising a hand to shield his eyes from the glare of the day he follows the winding path of the boardwalk, which has always reminded him of an immense serpent floating through the marshes. The path is empty everywhere he looks, but for drifting dragonflies catching the light in small brief bursts of silver and green like some Morse code of the natural world.

He arrives at the familiar juncture with a queer sinking sensation in his belly, the western path of which leads to the observation porch overlooking the great expanse of the marshland stretching out towards Lake Erie like some dark and ominous suggestion brewing in the horizon. He pauses, dusting the planks with the scuffed toes of his runners. A vivid blur flits past his nose: he turns to follow the shuddering flight of the large Monarch butterfly, an early arrival to the park and harbinger of the great

orange hordes scheduled to arrive at summer's end. He watches the bright insect recede over the reeds like a fading ember. He deliberates on what feels to be a thousand pieces of information all congealed into a chaotic stew in his brain. Finally, he simply turns and scampers back the way he'd come. He feels mouse-like and cowardly as he goes, and when he passes the bench couple once more he makes certain to watch the boards racing past beneath his feet because the look of them – like a single organism entwined in rapturous observation of the spectacle of the awakening morning marsh – makes him somehow sad.



# Where the War Bird Leads

Burma. 1942. August.

The air steamed. The vegetation baked in the heat. The sun hung relentlessly overhead.

The men cowered through the thick brush, low-slinking, noses brushing the wild grass through which they'd been wading for a thousand days. Demoralized, the ragtag survivors of a platoon fallen victim to relentless dawn ambush. They'd never seen the snipers, glimpsing only fleet green shadows among the fronds. The firefight, if it could be deemed thus, had been over in a matter of minutes. A slaughter in the fetid verdant gulfs. Death in those trackless miles where the group had been wandering for days following an earlier defeat and retreat. Hungry and without provisions, thirsty and with empty canteens and no healthy water in sight.

Pursuing the faintest trickling murmur had led them to no stream. The lieutenant stared dejectedly into the shallow black pool, its rim encrusted with a threatening-looking film of green scum. The heat-shriveled, sun-bleached remains of some small unidentifiable animal lay embedded in the mud along its perimeter. "Shit," he swore softly under his breath, but his men heard his voice of fraying resolve. He was turning away when he noticed the small movement like a flare in the air. He looked, saw the tiny crimson bird stretching its wings aflutter in a whirr of red. From its beak a mellifluous song issued, gentle on his ears, calming after the racket of invisible simians in the trees, the screech of more raucous avian life, the endlessness of a tour of duty haunted by firefights and the screams of the dying.

He watched the bird until it fluttered off, merged into the green morass. He gazed after it, remembering its soft voice. Its memory stirred something in him, causing him to consider his

situation, its hopelessness and the greater futility of his place in this country of conflict at all.

“Sir?” one of his men murmured, puberty or fear cracking his hushed voice.

“We go on,” the lieutenant said, with as much assurance as he could muster.

They trudged onwards, the men trusting to their lieutenant to lead them to salvation. This his duty, and their right. Through jabbing crab grass as tall as a man which made them feel like insects traveling through a land of giants, beneath shadowy, rustling roofs where snakes draped like vines near to the ground, hissing death into the faces of those not wary enough. The men’s steps trailing their leader’s closely, even when they noticed with a start the rectangle of cloth discarded in the grass in his wake. An eagle grounded forever, a bird of regiment torn from the lieutenant’s shirt by his own hand, disowned as any symbol or insignia of his suffering and his men’s in the futility and madness of the conflict they’d been steeped in for what felt like centuries. They followed suit, the soldiers, wordlessly tearing themselves free of the shackles of names and duty to greater causes they remembered little of. A small tribe of new men wandering the wilderness.

For hours more they ghosted the green depths, lost. Days and nights and weeks and years. Always the monotony of thick air and mosquito clouds and rustling bush and the sun like a circle of death beating down from above and baking them mercilessly in their hellish trek. Peeling leeches from their legs like hideous black tongues and dropping them back into the dank pools through which they waded. Anxious of flitting shadows which might spit bullets and snipe them one by one into oblivion.

Then, the green world wholly changed.

The screaming of monkeys fallen into silence. Birds ceased their wild and savage song. Insects hushed from their buzzings and whirrings and twitterings. No leathery slipping of serpent through bamboo rushes, and no splashing of alligator like rolling logs in nearby pools.

All was primordial stillness. The gargantuan quiet before life began. A scene before prehistory's dawn had awakened.

It strode from the jungle like a shining silver god, amazing the soldiers into fearful immobility, guns dangling harmlessly in loose fingers.

Taller by a full two heads than the tallest of the remaining platoon's members. Silver-skinned and deadly. Nearly blinding to look upon directly. Sleek-limbed, with razor-sharpened extremities. Fingers like knives spiking the air. Blades sprouting like ostrich plumes from its head. A colossal gun grasped easily in one hand, a howitzer in the grip of a giant. The most violent of deaths blazing in the light, parting the noxious jungle mists with its hulking insidious arms.

A moment of bended time, seconds elapsing queerly, prolonged and strange as the men and the divine or unholy being beheld each other.

The thing swung its sharp taloned hands upwards, and tore off its head.

'Experiments at 3 Billion A.M.' is available from  
Eibonvale Press – [www.eibonvalepress.co.uk](http://www.eibonvalepress.co.uk)

ISBN 978-0-9555268-5-5

ISBN 978-0-9555268-4-8

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Artworks by David Rix