New Fiction from Gregg Williard: “Zone Rouge”

I got off the bus and a woman kept pace. Skinny black jeans with a fat silver belt of keys.

“I know how you feel.”

“I feel fine.” I was lost. I asked her for directions.

She took out a red inhaler, took a puff and told me where to go, in gulps.

It was not the way I would have taken. After a few blocks it only got less familiar and I went another wrong way that felt right.

Within seconds my old neighborhood was all harrowed mud. Creosote-black timber and dark machinery. I thought of my childhood puzzlement with the phrase “raze to the ground.” Raise to the ground?

I lurched across the field. The machines intrigued. Like booby-traps. Like some people.

A hand-painted sign said ZONE ROUGE. I didn’t speak French, but everybody knew rouge was red. Not everybody knew the Red Zone. I knew it. About another one, Verdun, in the northeast of France, where a year-long WWI battle killed more than 900,000 German and French soldiers. So densely shelled with unexploded artillery and gas shells that it would be uninhabitable for four hundred years. I knew because of my father. He read to me about military history, we watched war movies, read to me war comics and he told me how he played war with his friends. Seeing war technology in ordinary things was in his bones: Krupp toasters, tank treads in earth movers, gun designs echoed in power drills and blowtorches, airplane

plastics in radios, jet fins in chassis, airs scoops in car grills. Innocent seeming, now that real machine guns festooned many a man cave. Anyway, there's always been a Nazi pedigree in everyone's medicine cabinet, he said. In WWII American bombers were briefed on which German factories to bypass (the American-owned ones). Was there any point in fighting, (or not fighting) now that the peace prevailed? They said it prevailed.

Peace time. And everything was mined. For information. For market share. For death.

Ahead was a forested area I'd never seen before. The woman from the bus emerged from the dark. I walked on past her into the forest. It was silent and cool. Moss covered everything underfoot. She came up behind me and touched my shoulder. "Every step you take now."

I stopped in mid-stride. Returned my foot to the spongy ground. Turned. "I need to make some money. I'm going to lose my apartment. I can't lose my apartment."

She said, "I know how you feel."

"That's what you said before. It's not a feeling. I'm broke and not making enough to survive. I've got to make some money. If you can't help me then move out of the way."

"Don't take another step. But maybe you won't listen. Maybe I've got the wrong guy."

I was pissed but did as she said. Nothing. "You don't have anybody. Yet. What's the proposition?"

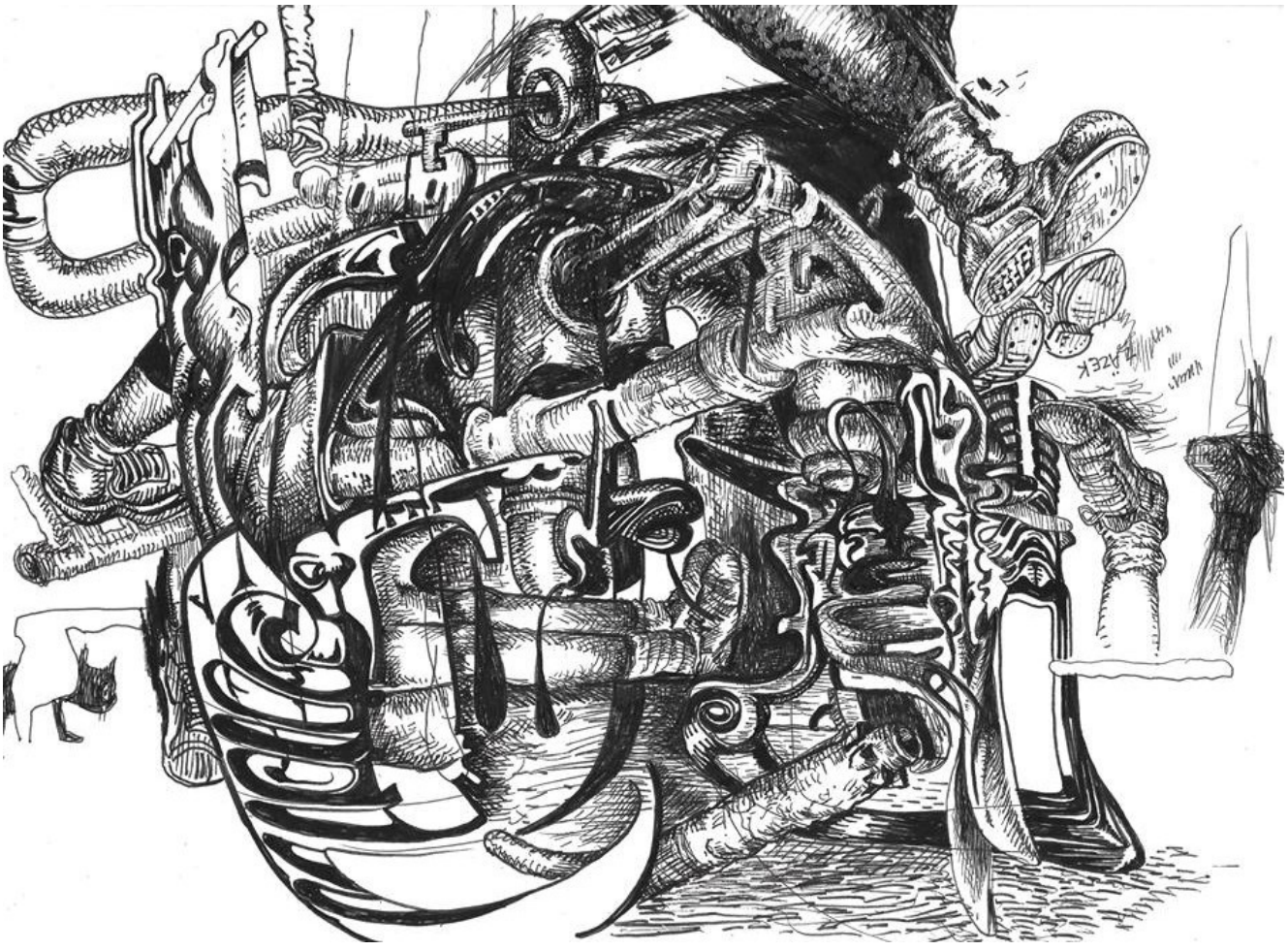
"It's dangerous, but a lot of money. Step where I step."

I followed her back across the mud and sat in the cab of a dozer.

I tugged at dead levers. Tapped gauges. "No key. Not going

anywhere.”

She pulled out the wad of keys and slid each around the ring, matching them to every machine in the field, keeping rhythm to a litany of functions. Her voice worked a spell, a comb tugged through thick, tangled dreams: “Earth mover, shaker, crusher, compactor, driller, blaster, incinerator, disintegrator, fracker, fracktaler, shifter, sifter, buster, eviscerater, pulverizer, driver, down-loader, switcher, coder, de-coder, up-loader, assembler, morpher, server, pubsmasher, browser, processor, ransomer, hackers, firewaller, coboler, encryptor, decryptor, infector, defector.”



Original artwork by Gregg Williard.

I said, “Show me a war where we haven’t armed both sides.”

“You want money. Someone has to clear the Red Zone. Children wander in there. You’ll find pieces of them. But most are

killed by the gas shells. Slow. Like emphysema. Or poisoned from lead, arsenic, mercury, zinc. Makes the dumb kids."

"Dead or dumb, huh." I looked over the punished instrument board. Taped to cracked gauge was a photo of a little girl. I looked away. "Must be prime real estate here. Chernobyl pristine. What will you call it, Rouge Manor?"

She held up the last key in front of my eye. "This is a chance to make a difference. You want to do something good, don't you?'

I didn't answer and she squirted her inhaler again.

"What's the shit in your inhaler? Albuterol? See that timber out there covered in creosote? It's a medicinal plant that you might try. A bush of it out in the Mojave Desert is one of the oldest living things on earth. 'King Clone.' Surprised they haven't plowed it over for a housing development."

"Aren't you the king of mansplainers."

"I know about patterns. About codes. I can find mines. I don't even need your damn keys." I held up my Lishi Pick.

"Use that on my cab and you're toast."

"I'm already toast."

"Then I don't need you." She reached over and opened the cab door. I got out.

She closed the door and started up the machine. It spun in the mud and rumbled into the woods. I waited until it was gone, then followed my footprints in the mud to the street. Twenty steps, there was an explosion. I turned around and traced my footprints back to the woods. Then ran toward the smoke. Maybe I'd end up dead, but I was done with dumb.