

**ISSUE #9 | NOV 2025**





# DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, SHARE THIS ZINE!

Calling all Audionauts! Since the intergalactic ban on music, perpetrated by everyone's favorite bureaucrat, Lord Prosect, the infinite void has been eerily silent. In the before times, known as Before Music (or BM), music was distributed freely and fairly and pressed onto wax for everyone to spin. These tasty beats were thought lost forever after the attacks on July 6th, 5000 by Lord Prosect and his minions. Every radio station from the Andromeda to the Zymolytic Galaxy was assaulted, and cassettes, records, and CDs were disintegrated. If not for the brave Audionauts out there who smuggled what they could, the thumping rhythms and trilling arpeggios of the universe's greatest musicians might have been lost forever.

Before that attack, The Intergalactic Beats Project (then known as The Intergalactic Beats Project before the ban on the word "beat") was a major distributor of the music lost that day. After our headquarters was decimated, only two agents remained in operation.

**We are those agents.**

It has been millennia since the sounds of our artists have been heard, but every day we discover and decode the lost music that fueled generations to shake their hips and bang their heads. This Zine will track our progress as we travel through space and time to restore our entire catalog.

**We need your help.**

Our methods are unconventional, which means we lack the resources of the former IBP. We rely solely on your tips and scouting reports to track down everything lost in the fires and everything that has been secretly

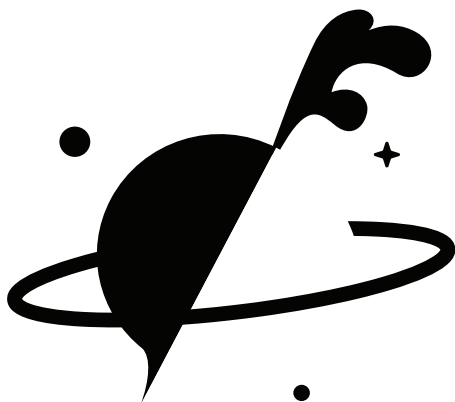
made since. If you are out there and your tasty beats need a home, send us a secure signal so that we may help distribute your music freely and fairly. We run the risk every single day that we will be discovered and imprisoned, or worse...

Visit our telecommunications hub at [INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM](http://INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM) and sign up to receive our Zine, listen to our entire decoded discography, and join the fight against Lord Prosect. Together, we can bring an end to his tyrannical rule and restore music to the ears of all creatures in the universe.

In the words of our Neptunian supporters:



F3rix & Cyllene



# HEART BEETS

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## IBP DATABASE BOT 5 SNEAK PEEK BEAT

*Computer Club enters the "Mainframe" with their killer track, "Future Perfect."*

## HEART BEETS STAFF 6 PUNCHING UP

*The members of Switch/Bored receive a heavy dose of reality when a creative funk drives them to the land of those who fake it until they make it.*

## THE WANDERING MOTHER 8 STORY TIME

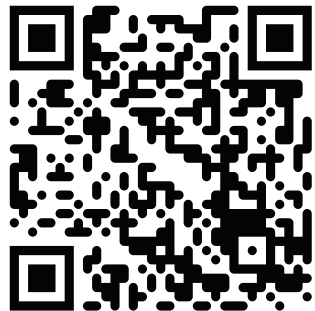
*The inspiration for "Runaway Hover Rail" by Zeetle & The Voits takes us on the journey of a lost mother pit against the forces of nature and man alike.*

## WHAT IS THE IBP?

The INTERGALACTIC BEETS PROJECT seeks out and decodes the tastiest beats in the universe, presses them to vinyl, and distributes them for all creatures to listen to. From 2021 until the year 5000, the IBP made a name for itself by making music free, easy to collect, and worth waiting for. After Lord Prosect banned all music on July 6th, 5000, it became our mission to save every last beat in the universe, rebuild our catalog, and make sure that the past is never forgotten.

The IBP does this as a free service, however, we encourage all Audionauts to support our mission in other ways: by purchasing merch from our Shop, signing up for our email newsletter, or by reading this very Zine! We have begun to repress our collection to vinyl and we hope that you'll stop by our telecommunications hub and pick up a copy.

Due to the constant threat of Lord Prosect, we take great caution in encrypting every communication, every item in our Shop, and every beat of every song. We have thwarted his silver hand and we will continue to do so for millennia to come.



INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM

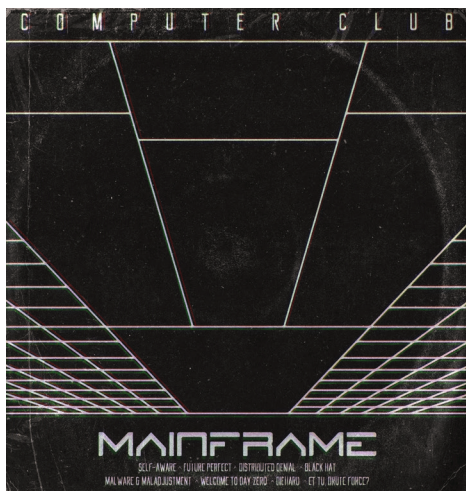
*Welcome aboard!*



# SNEAK PEEK BEAT

Audionauts, we are among the lucky few who remain sentient and alive; our physical forms able to feel and taste, love and hate. There are others, though they call themselves lucky, too, who feel those same physical and emotional highs, but they are nothing more than ones and zeroes. For the duo of Computer Club, Aarray and Viktor, they had experienced life in stasis, hooked up to tubes and wires, their brains pumped full of pleasurable imagery and hallucinations of grandeur. It was here, in this mind palace, that they would come to find great comfort. Not only were they not part of a farm of harvested creatures, they weren't even part of an epidemic. Instead, they had been deceived by a door-to-door salesman who promised untold creative power if they were to don cumbersome headsets, thereby blasting their brainwaves with inspiration. The truth, dear Audionauts, is that this salesman, while real, was quite terrible at his job. Instead of creative euphoria, Aarray and Viktor were plugged right into the mainframe of the Consolidated Energy Company (CEC), whose sole purpose was to convert brain waves into electricity. With access to their entire fleet of tools, the duo began sending electrical signals across the Universe, thumping their beats through the sockets and electronics of creatures far and wide. What CEC thought was a minor glitch in their system soon turned into a deadly game of hostage negotiation. Computer Club had the ability to restrict electrical flow to anyone they wanted; if unplugged, they would self-destruct every energy field, dooming the Universe into darkness. Their demands, dear Audionauts? The ability to give away beats (and energy) for free, lest they turn back the clocks and curse generations to come. CEC had no other option; however, Aarray and Viktor would have to remain in stasis forever. The beats on *MAINFRAME*, by the time it was released on physical media, had been heard by trillions of creatures simply by removing a plug from a socket or turning on a lightbulb, but now it was portable, and the sound quality was unmatched. Select fans (listeners, not the spinning appliances) were even invited to use their own headsets to temporarily enter the virtual world and enjoy a live concert and

exclusive Q&As with the duo. We encourage you to dive into this digital masterpiece with both feet; the thundering synth and pulsating backbeat will make you understand the appeal of stasis and the horrors that the brain undergoes in such a curated environment. *MAINFRAME* is a celebration and warning of things to come, but, for now, the tasty beats are enough for us to go a little further down the rabbit hole...



## MAINFRAME

### SIDE A

1. SELF-AWARE
2. FUTURE PERFECT
3. DISTRIBUTED DENIAL
4. BLACK HAT

### SIDE B

1. MALWARE & MALADJUSTMENT
2. WELCOME TO DAY ZERO
3. DIEHARD
4. ET TU, BRUTE FORCE?

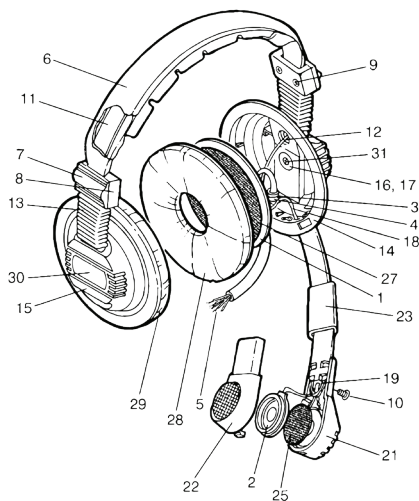


Scan me to listen!

# PUNCHING UP

**The members of Switch/Bored receive a heavy dose of reality when a creative funk drives them to the land of those who fake it until they make it.**

A decade had passed since the foursome of Switch/Bored had graced intergalactic radio stations with their unique blend of music and storytelling, culled from various communiques they had intercepted. However, the well was running dry for Lambert, Briitt, Kotto, and Asher, and the creative juices were no longer flowing (through their veins, or the many bottles of Grizzlesizzle's Pork-based Cola products). Determined to get back on track, they cancelled their residency contracts aboard the cruise vessel ICV Mondoshawan (which had welcomed them to the stage every night for nearly 90% of each of the past five galactic years) and found their way to the urban jungle of Faedous XII, a dwarf planet in the Zoor Star System, which was a popular destination for the creatively challenged. Here, the buildings were tall and egos even taller. Among the elites, they were no longer top of the heap, but bottom of the musical barrel. The odd thing about Faedous XII was not its residents physical appearances but the uncommonly strange lack of talent among its inhabitants. Writers and filmmakers, intergalactic artisans and wealthy hobby-hoppers roamed the streets simply talking, never creating anything of substance. Switch/Bored were invited to parties, hoping to bask in the creative processes of those who, too, were creatively stagnant. But instead of helping rescue them from the funk, they were sucked into a tornado of self-loathing and circuitous conversations. No longer focused on the craft, it became clear that this was a world meant for those who faked it but never made it. Trapped, with little money (now that their residency contract was null and void), Switch/Bored put their ears to the ground, to the thin walls between en-suites, and to the sky, separating the speech patterns of Faedous XII until melodies



emerged. The strange way their peers spoke became the undercurrent of *Concrete Music*, a condemnation of the elites who drove art solely with their trust funds. It is both a satire and an explosion of what has made Switch/Bored stand above the pack: injecting infectious, echoing synth over pop-driven drums and bass, reminding listeners that the community they want to be a part of is never at the top. The album remains a must-listen for those struggling to find their voice in a Universe full of those who shout with all their might. Rumbling from dream-pop to ballads, from heavy crunching bass to plucky keyboard solos, *Concrete Music* exploded with younglings, driving the band to newfound heights and propelling them away from Faedous XII, birthing their own celestial body and allowing others to not only become part of their orbit, but to propel them into their own success. Sadly, several years of health issues and nonstop touring prevented Switch/

Bored from releasing their highly anticipated fourth album. It will forever be a mystery what would have inspired them next, but what we know for sure is that *Concrete Music* will live on as a rallying cry, encouraging the bravery needed to remove the thoughts from your mind and turn them into something concrete.



# CONCRETE MUSIC

**Side A**

- 1. Gutter Punks
- 2. Concrete Music
- 3. One of Us
- 4. Good Riddance!

**Side B**

- 1. Take Charge
- 2. Better Late Than Never
- 3. Back/Chat
- 4. Nepolitan



Scan me to listen!

# STORY TIME

## AWAKEN, MOTHER BEAR!

3186's *Runaway Hover Rail* was the brain child of drummer Zeetle Commo (and his band The Voits) regarding his harrowing experience on a hover rail system darting through the Avriligne Mountains of Ezarma VI. To calm his nerves, he read through the in-transit magazine which featured a profile of *The Wandering Mother*, an author who had just released a new short story entitled "Bruin" about the survival of a mother bear (a creature of Earth, Milky Way Galaxy) attempting to navigate nature and human wrath. Together the story and his own experiences fused together in an epic tale of a beast unable to comprehend technology in a world that had passed her by. Audionauts, we are proud to present "Bruin," here, in its entirety, for your reading pleasure.

Despite the impenetrable curtain of darkness, a faint, violet sheen rippled over the huddled pair. Even in pitch, patience was rewarded, the adjustment to the featureless home slowly materializing. She decided, at first, to submit to her wiring, to close her eyes, and endure another season of rest. The faint echo of a hollow whistle begged her to reconsider and arise, the rapid, trailing honk of its source an unmistakable alert. But its haunting melody faded unceremoniously, perhaps only the ghost of a memory past infecting her subconscious.

There. Again.

Her cub's two-toned mewling put a stop to her slumbering bliss, his broad head slamming her chest as restlessness forced him to activate the unscheduled playtime.

Her five, leathery toes gently fought back, knocking him loose from his vise around her dense, chocolate hide. He complained, jawing furiously, his hind legs bending and preparing for a second launch. Her belly undulated, the force of her roll disturbing the thin layer of dust hibernating on the craggy floor. The boy instinctively puttered from the wide gate, preferring to admire her as her lips parted and she grunted through a lengthy, overdue yawn. Whether enough time had elapsed was impossible to determine within the confines, only the festive light of the spring sun and the blossoming of the forest's

bounty would dictate their offensive, or their retreat. She nuzzled the cub's strange translucent patch covering the base of his neck, assuring him that they would soon fill their bellies with more than just her depleting milk.

The mouth of their hovel saw no protection, no magical rock in which to shoulder aside, the deadly predators somehow flabbergasted by the natural obfuscation of the cave. They had not been disturbed for weeks, the others forming their own communities, seeking the warmth of full bellies. Coniferous evergreens awaited them, the forest dirt littered with loose needles and prickly seeds. The wind still breathed a bitter chill, but the ice had departed, save for miniature mountains compressed at the base.

She surveyed the familiar stretch, the maze-like pattern of pine forming opportunities for reconnaissance and ambush. A red-breasted bullfinch dove like a vicious predator, scooping a mouthful of pine straw into its beak before departing, safely rebuilding his nest in the reserved, wet boughs. Her cub attempted to secure the tittering avian but was much too slow, a mouthful of dirt his reward. Curiosity continued, his chattering disturbing a checkered cloth, once blood red and pure white, buried in the detritus. His nostrils flared, a lingering scent drawing his enthusiasm to the material. An initial



screening did not bring much joy, a swat employed to cast the false-positive aside.

The mother, however, sauntered towards a much more invigorating and fruitful scent, using the deceptive method of abandonment to lure her child to a blooming bush. Drupes of crowberry giggled in the wind, clinging to thick, green cilia-like stems. The rigidity of the stubby stalks ensured an easy *whack* would knock loose the juicy collections. A few bunches were directed in his favor, but eventually the strategy, after careful, unproductive trial and error, was partially perfected, the black stains of their first meal covering their gums. This was but a mere appetizer, the fuel in which to sustain them until more fuel could be found.

She grew tired of the taste, the need for protein lifting her from her perched rear and easing her down the sloped ridge that propped up their domicile. The angle was easy, a mild decline assisted by the numerous stalks, the bark dry enough to embrace should her feet become carried away with unwanted momentum. The boy galloped behind, three strides for every one of hers. He refused to quiet his excitement, the sensory overload of the wondrous colors of nature imploring him to investigate, sniff, touch, taste. A frustrating pause from her lumbering form was accompanied by her learned patience. She, too, had once been impressed by the golden sun, the throbbing green grass, the cold stone gray. Leaves of ochre and fire fluttered onto their path; the cousins of native trees, their fronds knocked loose, riding the lonely wind until they were deemed edible.

The bustle of the forest had been quite subdued, the normal wear and tear, the constant shifting unwilling to surface. She used every opportunity to scout the distance, to formulate a proper strategy. Course-correction was not a suggestion but a survival necessity. Deciding to continue, they disembarked the embankment and wandered, collecting prizes of sweetness and saltiness, but nothing worth the journey so far.

Here, the trees parted, standing stoically in a delineated line of ancient soldiers. A gap separated the continuing patchwork, between them the earth flattened. Parallel iron lines traveled blankly into the cleared horizon, the bolted track resting uncomfortably upon wooden planks driven moderately into the earth. The low obstacle became a strange game for her cub, his inquisitive temperament to lash out at the railroad tracks. Experience flowed through her haunches, her sprint thrusting her in front of the charging cub. Her skittering halt showered the ties with dirt. Upon her back legs, she rose, elongating herself, the crowns of the trees no match. A huff from her snout deemed to frighten the boy, to encourage safety.

He did not interpret it this way.

Releasing a disappointed rebuttal, he hustled several meters away, a stream of urine ejected out of fear. She returned to all fours and offered a watery, brown stare. Remorse was impossible to produce, only her unthreatening stance and his unwavering trust in her would be able to comfortably reunite the pair. She edged toward him, hoping to corral his efforts and swing them from the uncertainty of the rail line. He was but a negatively charged magnet, keeping the variance the same as she attempted to settle his nerves.

Riding the bucking, uncertain breeze, a foreign element had intervened. Frustration quickly reared itself, a shake of her shoulders to clear the unsettling itch. Carefully, she leaned to her left. Her boy, unskilled in the ways of the silent, deadly hunt, would not have been able to identify the near-perfect camouflage. Though tiny in her vision, she witnessed the twitch of the notoriously brutal and clumsy.

He clung to the moist ground, tucking his paws underneath his girth. Though mirroring the appearance of a lazy, unmovable rock, the unidentified male bided his time. He would arise, three times her weight, a half-meter above her head. He would be foolish to attack her directly, the easy victory over her cub the fair fight that would appease him.

The ominous screech of a crow obtained her attention momentarily, the black-feathered messenger cocking its head this way and that. It bleated with the same intonation, cleaning the interior of its wings before departing with a final, firm caw. The interlude was enough to shift the massive male into the confusion of brown and green, his position lost. Despite her boy's naivety towards discipline, she forced him from the prowling predator, refusing to cross the iron rails. Back into the forest, they charged, leaping over discarded branches and inconsequential boulders. She required little finesse, the quickest, sharpest route was always the easiest, despite the boy's proclivity to bounce and twirl.

A nudge from her leathered nose kicked him into a more agile gear, permitting him to lead with the help of her frequent corrections. She stole glances behind her, decoding the secret language that the forest hoarded from the uninitiated. The male had chosen wisely, either keeping his distance or finding the hunt entirely wasteful.

Regardless, their exodus continued.

The long winter rest had, too, hibernated her ability to remap her home. The fog of memory, though, seemed to clear with each touching landmark: the knotted cedar surrounded by a chorus of jagged rocks; the faulty ridge that overlooked the territory of the wolf; the felled corpses of geriatric trunks, their interiors rotting with infestations of spiders and insect armies.

And then...*the reward.*

Where it was always kept, where it always resided. The delivery was infrequent, to say the least, pausing during the winter and the slow lead up to the heavy snow; but now, this day, the checkered, red and white pattern greeted the mother and her boy. The corners of the cloth were dragged upward into a loose knot, the bulging sides indicating a fruitful prize. Youth sent her into a joyous frenzy, her cub seeking the safety of a cluster of thorny bushes. The gift had been perched on the end of a torn branch, propping it above the soggy,

damp floor. A canopy, whether natural or not, encouraged the sun to peek between darkening clouds, the air free to move about. She swiped her claw against the material and loosened a bevy of snacks. A wedge of cheese tumbled, a modest loaf of bread following. Blueberries rolled by the handful and a ripe wedge of honeycomb became her focal point. The sweet fragrance followed the gooey chew, the exercised pockets exploding along her tongue as she munched on the waxy exterior.

Packages such as this had sustained her during the leanest of springs, their appearance mysterious but always welcome. The red and white handkerchief would coax her from even the most focused of tasks, its perfume dancing between lavender and the contents within. She knew not the originator, nor its intended purpose. Perhaps she had stolen quite a bit of picnic lunches from unsuspecting travelers, but retaliation had been absolute zero. She excitedly stomped toward the cub, encouraging him to join her before there was little left to feast.

Transfixed upon his mother's eating frenzy, the encroachment behind him had been undetected. She froze in the shadow of the hunter, his jaw peeling open to announce his intentions. The cub turned, his fur electrified by the mythic presence. The hulking male charged, unwilling to prompt them with ceremony. The boy hurried towards his mother, but she had already halved the gap, her head down, her rounded ears pinned to her head. She dove over her boy and screamed into the male's thrust, her claws scraping a thin layer from the side of his snout.

His kinetic charge rammed his shoulder into hers, tumbling the pair into the open light of the canopy. He was quick to bite, clamping hard into her hindquarters. She refused to acknowledge the pain and leaned into his attack, her own incisors plunging deep into his haunch. He released her, and she him, each finding space to recoup. His nose bled across her ragged imprint, a shake from his neck needed to deflect the discomfort momentarily.

To their hind legs, they leapt, him a full head above her in which to play with. They strangely fell into the other's embrace, gripping their upper arms as their maws *snapped* a deadly kiss. He shoved her onto her back, disrupting a cloud of dirt. In the confusion came his smile, the flow of saliva marking her neck. The mother's rear curled upward into her chest, her paws *thwacking* his belly, not enough to dispatch him but an elixir to impede his downward strikes. His loosening prompted her launch, the base of his lower jaw butting up against her rising dome.

Disorientation turned the soil into sky, her bulbous swing blotting the sun as she mounted his exposed torso. Deep cross strikes seared his abdomen with wounds tattooing a roadmap of pain that would not be rebuilt easily. His pathetic refusal pattered from his lips as she worked him over furiously.

The cub, unsure of his abilities, growled in unison with his mother, a trail of vapor streaming from their throats like medieval dragons. The hunter, amongst the confusion of loose thread and curved claws, closed his bite around her forearm and ceased the assault. With only the torque of his neck, he flipped her, bruising the joint against the sensitive socket. He wanted little more to do with the territorial matriarch and immediately presented a stride of surrender. In no mood for theatrics, she found her footing as well and issued a guttural warning. Her paw stamped the stew below, leaving a healthy impression. The hefty, defeated male was pushed from the bright canopy, slinking back into the pines, turning only when he was certain he would not be ambushed.

The cocky call of a watching crow broke the mother from her war-like trance. *A victory, perhaps?* The bird simply wished for the spoils, but she had earned them fairly. *A finder's fee, perhaps?* The annoying caw had been gracious enough to set about her initial escape, the bird deserved a small amount of tribute. Her cub munched on the salted bread and split the cheese with his haggard, grizzled caretaker. A few

blueberries and crumbs were left behind in their shambling wake, the crow dancing curiously around the recompense before snagging a sweet kernel with gusto.

Further, the pair pressed, glued to the babbling nonsense of rushing water. It was far from dangerous, though the loud current smashed terribly into clusters of smooth stones. It was only to ease its gate, each crevice cleansing the water into an acceptable formula. The cub lapped at the frigidity, his snout tickled by the temperature. He snorted and fell to his bushy rear, the sensation cooling his throat instantly. He leapt and swiped at the surface tension, interrupting his reflection in order for him to drink safely.

A thin stream of red peppered the otherwise clear flow, his mother's wounds purified as she trudged through the knee-high water. Sipping the rejuvenation, she closed her eyes momentarily, absorbing the tension of her victory.

The faint echo of a hollow whistle begged her to reconsider and awaken, the rapid, trailing honk of its source an unmistakable alert. But its haunting melody faded unceremoniously, perhaps only the ghost of a memory past infecting her subconscious.

*There. Again. The crow. A warning.*

The menace had taken the form of uprooted water, a wave of titanic proportions, the driving force the unrelenting savagery of the wounded male bear. His bound by no means towered over the river, but it was enough to leave the safety of the rocks, enough to gain the advantage. She wrapped her paws around his tumbling heft and rode the unexpected plunge deep into the water, her head submerged. Through the wavering confusion of the surface, she watched helplessly as the male lurched. But their precarious position was held at bay only by loosened stone, the shifting rocks driving them down a shallow embankment, their bodies drifting apart. She roared from the depths, fighting the sudden increase of the current. Like a prehistoric reptile, she showered the male in her own rising wave,

her arms stretched out before her.

The killing blow did not commence at her instruction. Instead, rifles exploded from the banks, their syncopated *cracking* pelting the water with inaccuracy. The male's fur erupted from a direct strike, the flesh of his shoulder tearing with a sinewy whine. She could not locate their faces, only the bright white flashes of their muzzles. Her cub cried out in confusion, her head whipping toward his echo. The invaders howled in their own imaginary language, cocking their bolts and priming fresh cartridges. A searing pinch birthed itself against her chest, another seizing the mobility of her arm. She lacked the strength to remain upright, her snout sinking deep into the river, resting comfortably on the immovable rocks of centuries past.

Despite the impenetrable curtain of darkness, a faint, violet sheen rippled over her fur. Even in pitch, patience was rewarded, the adjustment to the featureless prison slowly materializing. She decided, at first, to submit to her wiring, to close her eyes, and endure another season of rest. The unmistakable wail of the train's whistle begged her to reconsider and arise, the rapid, trailing honk of its source an alert. Its haunting melody grated her ears, the lovely ghost of its former distant memory infecting her subconscious.

Confined to iron bars, her belly flat against the slatted wood base, she stuck her snout through the grate and sniffed. Bootprints solidified in mud littered the car's floor, the thin, pine planks only inches from the driving wheels of the locomotive. Inconsistencies in the track tilted the bed to the right, the curve of the landscape forcing the convoy to round the mountain rather than plow through it. The change in elevation and direction shifted her cage briefly, the other prisoners issuing calls of displeasure.

A frightened dog barked his contempt, the menacing release slowly fading into a whimper of mercy. Paradise had slipped hours, days, weeks into the past. Hope was gagged and thrown overboard. Her cub was nowhere to be found, his scent lifted

from her hide by the incessant, stark heat. Her eyes shifted worryingly, not much afforded from her tight vantage.

An oiled *squeak* permeated the car, the brakes activated in a respectful manner. This was a routine, scheduled stop. The locomotive lumbered to a complete rest, hissing graciously. Men grumbled about, their shadows wafting between the expanding pores in the train's exterior. Whistles found chapped lips and crews were assembled, their orders gruffly distributed.

The face of the train parted suddenly, showering the caged beasts with brilliant, morning light, golden and warm. Mustached strongmen, their grime-smeared sleeves rolled up to the elbow, dragged dollies aboard a wooden ramp, carefully loading each specimen and transporting them from view. They laughed and spoke in liquid phrases, unintelligible almost. The environment did not appear threatening until the first among the prisoners nattered his displeasure. A whip *cracked* the air like a revolver, stunning the depot with a strange echo. This caught the attention of man and nature alike.

The master of the weapon held jurisdiction over the grunts, his ability to tame the loose constitution of the fur-clad allowing him to walk the fine line of authority. His tailed jacket of velvet was far from pristine, he too lacking the pride to excuse himself from menial labor. He dragged the dark, woven line behind him as he approached the unhappy suspect. The elevated heel of his mid-calf boots stomped across the concrete of the platform. It was a mutt who had drawn his ire, the white and gray male suddenly shifting to the rear of his cage. The tamer shoved his hand between the bars and gripped the shriveling snout, squeezing it forcefully. The dog attempted to wriggle free, but the callused fingers held firm, forcing the beast to commit, eventually falling flat onto his belly. The tamer released his now-submissive subordinate and wiped saliva across his unbuttoned vest. A scratch of his deciduous, black beard and a nod

returned the depot to its regular chatter, the unloading process renewed.

The mother was hoisted aboard the dolly with much pomp, a number of extra deckhands waved over to accommodate her size. She memorized the tamer's piercing eyes, his close-cropped hair, the scars of battles lost and won curling around his cheek and down his neck.

The curtain fell and she was suddenly bathed in an eerie caul of canvas. The journey now became unknowable. Sputtering engines *tutted* down dirt and cobblestone avenues alike. The concerned call of a crow chased her, penetrating the draped material. Her ears shifted independently, honing the signal, verifying the source.

His spindly legs perched upon the highest point, recording the proceedings for posterity. The wind gently lifted him skyward, his new camouflage tucked among the bats stationed in the crannies of a bell tower locked into the roof of a rising sanctuary. The trucks rattled into another loading bay opposite the house of worship, the warehouse laborers directing traffic with their fluttering hands.

The mother disappeared into the belly.

She was birthed into a menagerie of artificial light, the dripping, wax stalagmites stationed in a massive, concentric ring. Above, a peaked tent of many colors and patchwork material stretched infinitely into the air, providing a temperate covering for an arena of rising, oak bleachers. The audience was absent, but the dirt stage was abuzz: men clowned about, slathered in white and red makeup; boys juggled fresh fruit in increasingly dangerous quantities; single-wheeled cyclists rolled back and forth balancing their upside-down partners. Above them, a net of hemp caught the dismount of acrobats, a handful of applause breaking out. Music rose from a twinkling piano tucked beneath a wooden stage, a tambourine marching in step.

From behind a musty, velvet curtain came the important trot of the tamer, his baritone instruction pausing the amusement and directing a crew to the

mother's cage. He shook his head with anger and used his index to clarify; it was beyond her limited view. The sound of the metal lock and rusty gate initiated the scared withdrawal of the workers. The tamer confidently replaced them, curling his hand towards the center of the ring. The scent of battle permeated her nostrils, her head finally lifting from the base of the cage.

From the edge of her prison came the lumbering, gawking trot of a male. He paused his pursuit and acknowledged her. The gash across his snout gave way to scar tissue, his chest matching her furious claw marks. Regret seemed to flash across his eyes, an infinite sadness that held no possibility of reversal. The tamer cajoled the confused male into his domain, any change in direction accompanied by a *snap* of his discipline. This enraged the male, the sound and fury foreign in construction but all too familiar in purpose. To dead center, he was instructed, a slight waver towards the jugglers earning him another whipping.

Fear pinned the mother to the perimeter of her confines, but instinct forcefully dragged her flush with the frigid, iron bars, unsure of what was to unfold. A *clack* from the tamer's fingers introduced incentive. An assistant hoisted a rudimentary pole above his head, the tip wound in rope, the end dangling a headless salmon.

An order was issued. *Vverkh*.

No result formed.

*Vverkh!* This time with emphasis; the tamer's arm cocked, the whip ready to strike. The assembled spoke little, the opportunity to witness the destruction of nature's laws too tempting to interrupt.

The male eyed the fresh catch but refused to leave the safety of his four-pawed stance.

*Vverkh! Vverkh!* The whip *slapped* the dirt, a snake-like pattern forming in its wake. The beast would receive the next strike. *Vverkh!*

The lack of discipline did not waver the tamer, nor did the male's frustrated pounce. The assistant released the tasty treat and surrendered to the bleachers.



From a holster came a revolver, gripped in the left hand, the whip flung from the right. Three shots, arching into the forehead, surrendered the leaping, brown hulk. His snout slammed into the unforgiving dirt, his wounds ejecting a viscous flow at the feet of the tamer. He lowered his smoking barrel and stepped calmly away from the encroaching puddle.

To the mother's cage, he pointed.

Freedom was momentarily extended; it was her choice whether she exited or not, her choice to comply or to take the informal way out. The crew, already unnerved by the execution, unlocked the cage and retreated into promising corners. The tamer approached but maintained a healthy distance, his inventory was limited after all. His weapon found its protective sheath and he demanded his assistant resume his duties.

She followed his instruction and waddled into the ring, avoiding the twitching corpse of the captured male. The tamer afforded her space and tapped the jittery pole higher, making sure that victory would only be achieved under his purview. She rested below the now dusty fish and locked eyes with her master. He offered no smile, no nod, no letter of regret.

*Vverkh!*

To her hind legs she *popped*, standing tall and proud, the salmon lowered perfectly into her caged and muzzled mouth. The stale tent brimmed with men, women, and children alike, stuffing the bleachers until some were forced into the aisles, their shoulders tapped for others to see more clearly. Lanterns were stitched together, creating a monstrous golden hue in which she bathed, spotlighting her obedience.

The tamer, his head crowned with an oily top hat, issued another command: *Vzobrat'sya!*

A smile peeled open his unkempt mouth as the mother waddled her way across a balance beam, unafraid of her tipping weight. She even brought a bit of uncertainty, leaning too much to one side and almost plummeting into the dirt,

but, somehow, she resolved the faux pas and dismounted, much to the applause of the paying customers. The tamer tapped the red fez hat pinned to the top of her head and she was handed a broom, her paws awkwardly wrapping around the circumference. She pretended to sweep the dirty ring as he injected comedic quips to atone for her domesticity.

Enough of that, for now. To a blue bench, her feet perched over the lip as if she were a bonified human. The children laughed, the women admired the skill of the tamer, the men dismissed it as too simple.

A rubber ball was flung into the capable hands of the entertainer, exhibiting it for all to see. *Myach!*

Rather than play with the silly thing, she curled herself into a parody of the toy and rolled backward, *popping* her limbs out and waving happily to the audience. The brave among them returned the gesture, though she understood little of the action.

And, just like that, the attention of the audience was driven to the precarious positions above and the shallow platforms filled with foolhardy acrobats. Her work, for the evening, was complete. Back through the magical curtain, past those waiting in line to perform, to the shrinking cage, the lock latched through the iron loop, her restrictive mouth guard permanently sealed.

Onto the train, honking day and night. Stop, depart, disembark, stand, traverse, sweep, sit, roll.

Back through the magical curtain, past those waiting in line to perform, to the shrinking cage, the lock latched through the iron loop, her restrictive mouth guard permanently sealed.

Onto the train, honking day and night and day. Stop, depart, stop again. Disembark, stand, traverse, sweep, sit, roll. Roll again. Again. Salmon, rotting, whatever could be procured from the market that morning. Two shows a day, sometimes three. Week after week. The bright lights burned her vision, the tamer's painted on smile a vicious lie that could not

be disproved.

*Was this the same day?*

Snow. Bloom. Heat. No need to hibernate, the winter chill had come, yet departed so quickly. There would be no need to stuff her belly, that would happen each day should she choose to comply.

Her head lay upon the chilled base, her eyes watering, her mouth clamped enough to barely chew.

The whistle of the locomotive could not be interrupted, but the concerned call of a crow chased her no matter where they endeavored to send her. It was a reminder, a warning. *Would he want payment?* Would he demand it before taking action?

She was not given much time to decide, the compartment already sliding open. Rain pelted the station like a ceremonial drumbeat, the roof *wobbling* with every devilish gust of wind. The tamer buttoned his tailed jacket and nodded towards an unloading train on the opposite platform. A welcoming party led by a portly jester was sent, hands were shaken, pleasantries were offered.

Water seeped through the crevices above, trickled down the joists, and plopped in a puddle in front of her. A flick of her tongue seized the cold runoff, but it was far from enough. Through the open frame, she witnessed the unloading of the cargo in question. A faint, violet sheen rippled over the newcomer's brown belly, a strange translucent patch covering the base of his neck. He, too, had been stuffed into his own quarters, though his mouth had not been shackled, yet. He seemed to grip the bars, his teeth grinding the thick metal. A railroad spike poked him annoyingly, turning him about, a two-toned mewl guaranteeing violence if he was toyed with again.

The tamer admired the catch, pacing slowly around the circumference of the offer. He had no qualms about reaching in and stroking the matted fur. He wiped the oily strands onto his jacket and presented a price. The oafish counterpart lost his good nature, his teeth grinding as he condemned the entertainer. He countered with a higher

number, the tamer lowering it once more.

There was an immediate impasse.

She stared, confused, at her cub. There was to be a time and a place for separation when all her wisdom would be compounded and passed along. She, too, was let go by her mother, equipped to embody the natural instinct buried in her foundational core. But she was given opportunity, time, to prepare for adulthood. Her cub had grown up raw, in the manacles of a one-way street. Malnourished, his pupils shrinking, he hawed at his jailer, his shoulder slamming the pen with rage.

The negotiations began anew, perhaps access to other animals would become necessary? The tamer disagreed and called his men to his side. They were to unlock the mother's cage, to show the obese crook what money could buy. She was unsure of the sudden departure. This was not the gilded ring, the pleasant backdrop to stand, traverse, sweep, sit, and roll.

Receiving a brief spray from the unforgiving rain, she crossed onto the platform and stood at the tamer's side. This was all the evidence he needed to prove his price was more than fair.

Though her presence was calculated on his end, her cub's recognizance did not bode well. A fury overcame him at the sight of the matriarch. The cage lost its balance and scraped the concrete platform with a piercing wail. The loose, iron lock *snapped*, the door swinging open as he charged, uppercutting a worker who attempted to intervene. Another swung a railroad spike at his charge but was waylaid by a blow from his front claw, opening a gash across the worker's thigh.

The sea parted for the hurtling boy, his former handler seeking the rain. His mother froze, unable to deconstruct the cub's intentions. Did he come for her out of vengeance? Or did he intend to light the fuse and ignite their exodus?

A stride pushed her behind the tamer's fortitude, his revolver unleashed and pumping three rounds into the youngling's skull. There, on the cold surface of the station platform, he expired, inches from

exacting some sort of revenge. The seething barrel was turned upon the fat purveyor, his hands held up in abject innocence.

Her lips trembled, a seizure racking her core. The alien sensation shifted her onto her belly, a rush of blood to her head risking unconsciousness. The tamer ordered her return as he chewed out the businessman, his cohorts already attending to the wounded. Her limbs suddenly resisted, not in a progressive, forward momentum, but in a sinewy, macabre pose. She was dragged back to her rightful place, the cage secured with an extra lock. They shut the compartment door forcefully, drowning the box in darkness.

The curtain parted as it did each night, the crowd swelling, their palms and cheeks red with excitement. The bright introduction stunned her, the flickering wicks dancing in slow motion. Their lips moved, but the sound was eerily absent. Her heart pumped an annoying beat in the base of her skull, her jaw throbbing from its semi-locked position. Down the modest ramp, she waddled, much to the annoyance of the tamer. But his smile returned, his arms outstretched, imploring the audience to partake in the wonderful tricks they were about to witness.

The first feat of the night was assembled, the teetering salmon beginning to gray.

*Vverkb!*

Inaction. Her tired eyes met his stern expression. His lips curled into a snarl beneath his stiffening beard.

*Vverkb!*

She labored to her hind legs and stuck her tongue up at the fish, barely lapping the fragrant swimmer. To her rear, she plopped, much to the delight of the children. The tamer sensed the resistance in the mother and shooed his assistant behind the curtain. To the balance beam, he drove her, unlooping the whip from his belt. He assured the gathered this was only a precaution.

*Vzobrat'sya!* The command to rally across the wooden plank was ignored. The paying customers whispered to their neighbors. *Was this supposed to happen?*

The tamer chuckled, pretending that he was far from displeased. *Vzobrat'sya!*

All four paws balanced along the limited width of the beam, her journey fraught with little excitement. The tamer tapped the red fez hat pinned to the top of her head and she was handed a broom, her paws awkwardly wrapping around the circumference. She pretended to sweep the dirty ring as he injected comedic quips to atone for her domesticity. Her lumbering, unenthusiastic performance did not produce the desired effect. Instead, they booed, tossing food and programs into the ring.

The torque upon the curl of the tamer's whip demanded attention, the unsatisfied forced to hush. Blood dripped down the mother's back from the fresh strike. A toddler's braying was muffled, the performance stopped dead.

She pivoted and faced the tamer, the broom clutched between her burly forearms. He muttered a command she did not understand. When she failed to comply, he instituted his weapon once more. The angle, however, was miscalculated, the shaft of the broom coming under his command accidentally. Released of her burden, the mother charged, vigor pumping through her thighs as she dominated her master.

Pinning him in a cloud of dust, she rammed her caged mouth into his, dislocating his jaw. Her claw ripped across his throat, peeling open his esophagus as it erupted in a volcanic display. His callused fingers were not enough to prevent spillage as she took away the use of his hands, the swipe nearly severing his wrist. The crowd decided collectively that a refund was not necessary.

A childish bleat filled the tent's summit as a dangerous stampede commenced. Father's fell in the aisles, their wives stomping their backs. The elderly were shoved aside, their gawking mouths covered in handkerchiefs. Those with weaker constitutions vomited heartily across the bleachers. The entrance curtain birthed a cadre of men, rifles in hand. They struggled to disarm the mother, the rush of patrons

ensuring their errant ejections peppered the charging mass instead. Another round of fear burst from the crowd, the lips of the injured matching the cry of the streaming weapons. Blood spewed from blooming exit wounds, shrouding her escape. Together, she ran with the throng, taming the raging river as they parted without objection for her.

Through the lobby, past the sale of inconsequential souvenirs.

The front flap of the tent fluttered open, blasting her with sunlight and stunning her advance. The ominous screech of a crow guided her temporarily to the dizzying rooftops. Unable to locate the omen, she was drawn once more onto the cobblestone street, the honking of a flatbed truck imploring her to move it along. The driver panicked and flung the wheel to the left, plowing into a nubile couple hauling baskets of fruit. Blueberries washed ashore, tapping her paws politely.

The angry orders of the tamer's crew finally permeated the street, their weapons sneaking out from underneath the big top. The mother bolted across the roadway, unsure of where the forest had receded to. She dove through the town square and circled a spewing fountain, the centerpiece a solidified ancestor dancing upon its hindlegs. The villagers tumbled to safety, their indexes pointing, each one begging for assistance. Rifle fire nipped at her stubby tail, a cart of ceramics absorbing the blow and spewing shrapnel onto the adjacent stall. Automobiles blared their built-in horns, the drivers' shaking their fists at the ignorance of the chase.

Soaring above the melee, the crow tracked the mother, watching her traverse a stone bridge. Underneath the limestone, water rushed freely, pushing discarded debris out of the already soiled city. The opposite end erected a barricade, the citizens pooling their vehicles together to block her charge. She twisted and doubled back towards the opposite end, but the band of circus performers had boxed her in. They raised their smeared barrels and held a steady line.

A stride pushed her into the safety of the middle of the span, her paw inadvertently scraping over a ragged patch. She stared at the abandoned leaflet and her caricatured likeness. A red fez sat atop the complying head, the creature balancing on one paw using only a large, multicolored rubber ball to sustain its equilibrium. The crowd cheered, the tamer's pockets flush.

*Vverkh!*

To the balls of her paws, her weight shifting to leverage her stance. She stretched her chest, puffing it forward, her head straight and proud. She was as vulnerable as she was terrifying. Despite the muzzle, she blasted them with a definitive roar, the frustrating echo bouncing off the river promenade. With strength in numbers, they unleashed hell, though their accuracy left much to be desired. Her shoulder rocketed backward, tipping her toward the banister.

The onlookers gasped as the mother disappeared, a reverential silence held before the splash proved them right. Her fez rolled across the cobblestone as the rifleman rushed to the edge, pointing nervously at the lumps in the rushing river.

*There!* The murky liquid erupted as the surface tension drowned the expended volley, their chambers exhausted. The mother's head burst above the waterline, her paws paddling furiously, decreasing the size of her captors until they were merely twinkling stars.

The night sky buzzed with excitement; a family of marsupials exchanged perches overhead while tittering bucks, and those who stuck close to the river, munched on the evening's feed. Eventually, the tide had deposited her onto a dry bank, the raging flow settling peacefully. Here the forest had returned to its monumental glory, the familiar stench of pine invading her weakened nostrils. Exhaustion, though, meant sleep; sleep meant hibernation; hibernation meant safety. But she was unprepared, her muzzle preventing her from foraging, from warding off those who might intend to harm her, all for the worthless price of admission.

Day strangely replaced the fruitless night in a tedious flash. The forest tinkered with an unidentified rattle, the annoying jingle reminiscent of lock and key. Her belly undulated, the force of her roll disturbing the thin layer of dust hibernating on the forest floor. A crow tapped his beak against the loosened and discarded muzzle, the weight tested as he gripped the edge and carried it a short distance. It was heavy, but also shimmering with intrigue, the perfect addition to his collection. She stared at the oily creature and issued him an overdue yawn. It was unexpected, the elongation of her jaw, a stubbornness lifted from the mandibular joints. The crow *cawed*, rather impolitely, and ferried himself, and her former suppression, into the swaying treetops.

Where was she to venture now? *Vverkh* was unproven here. Her sense of direction was guided by her grumbling belly, the need for fuel imperative.

The crow, for all his scavenging, had missed a prime opportunity for thievery. Bouncing playfully from the end of a chewed branch was the familiar red and white checkered pattern. The corners of the cloth were dragged upward into a loose knot, the bulging sides indicating a fruitful prize.

A frail swipe of her claw released the cheese and bread, the blueberries following. She enveloped the ragged slice of honeycomb and slowly muscled the tough material between her jaws. The sweet sting tipped her onto her rear, into a sitting position, her chest in need of scratching. She left more than a fair share behind for her guardian, his winged swoop nibbling hunks of bread small enough for consumption. Into the maze she crept, a limp beginning to form, the embedded bullet grinding against bone. This was unfamiliar territory, though it bore a passing resemblance to her home. Choosing a heading meant uncertainty, but the reward for remapping was enough to guarantee she could survive.

Lumber had been procured from the mighty giants with increasing demand,

thinning the herd until a charcoal mountain range burst over the horizon, once shrouded by the dense crowns. She paused as a valley opened, a brimming crop yield yet to be threshed. Buttressing the expanse, a cabin had been erected, its leaning chimney spewing black curls. A line of laundry fluttered carefully in the dull breeze; a well bucket *clanged* against the rocky shaft; honeybees buzzed as they set about repairing their hive. From the interior came a woman, her hands calmly securing a pair of tin snippers from an oak station in front of the home's frame. A red and white checkered bandana was wrapped tightly around her forehead, collecting sweat, her matching apron stained with blue and gold, the result of kitchen experiments past.

She stared at the humbled and majestic brown bear lingering on the edge of her property. At first, she was convinced it would attack, but they simply studied each other, eyeing their wounds, both real and perceived.

The beast departed without uttering a sound, blessing the modest dwelling with relief.

The mother chose to revert her direction, clambering into the thickness until the trees parted once more, standing stoically in a delineated line of ancient soldiers. A gap separated the continuing patchwork, between them the earth flattened. Parallel iron lines traveled blankly into the cleared horizon, the bolted track resting uncomfortably upon wooden planks driven moderately into the earth. The low obstacle became a strange game for her, her understanding of the network driving her to retreat.

The lack of the faint echo of a hollow whistle begged her to reconsider. Without the rapid, trailing honk there was no cause for alarm, no chance for its haunting melody to fade. The ghostly memory was simply that. She surveyed each empty direction. Living this close to expulsion meant danger. If her territory became theirs, how long would it take before they took everything?

Defying her instincts, she crossed



the iron rail line and rumbled into the timberland, the greedy branches whipping at her shoulders. Purpose drove adrenaline to excuse her behavior, the boulders no match, her stomping gate driving away even the friendliest of denizens, for she had returned.

The mouth of her hovel saw no protection, no magical rock in which to shoulder aside, the deadly predators somehow flabbergasted by the natural obfuscation of the cave. It had not been disturbed for years, the others forming their own communities, seeking the warmth of full bellies. The coniferous evergreens shuddered overhead, the forest dirt littered with loose needles and prickly seeds. The wind still breathed a bitter chill, but the ice had yet to arrive. Curiosity led her to the faint scent of her cub, her investigation revealing a discarded, shredded checkered cloth, once blood red and pure white, buried in the detritus. An initial screening did not bring much joy, but she declined to swat the false-positive aside for it was a memory worth preserving.

The mother ventured into the cave network and took her place atop the bed of moist and decomposing earth. Despite the impenetrable curtain of darkness, a faint violet sheen rippled over her fur. Even in pitch, patience was rewarded, the adjustment to the featureless home slowly materializing. She decided to finally succumb to her wiring, to close her eyes, and endure another season of rest.



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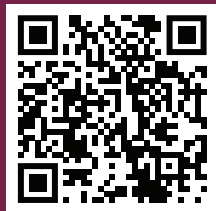
## UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

**November 14th - 16th, 2025 | 10 AM to 6 PM**  
*MAC Firehouse Gallery*  
Walnut Beach, CT

**November 16th, 2025 | 5:30 PM to 8 PM**  
*Roller Magic (w/ Connecticut Zines)*  
Waterbury, CT

**April 24th - May 3rd, 2026**  
*Five Points Annex Gallery*  
Torrington, CT

**November 1st to November 30th, 2026**  
*Avon Free Public Library*  
Avon, CT



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