

excerpt from The Pit, and No Other Stories by Jordan A. Rothacker

Contributed by Jordan A. Rothacker

An excerpt from a novel by Jordan A. Rothacker: 1. The Pit (Pitt'sville, 1987) Our town never had a mortuary or a crematorium, we had the Pit; it was tradition. It was always out there, five miles north and west of the town center. It might not seem far enough for such a place, but you would have to know our town. The mountains have kept the border of the town pretty secure over the years. We have spread out a bit where we could, back towards the east and south—kinda like we were reaching out to greet or delay a visitor—but the western and northern borders have not changed. There is no easy way to get a road out that direction through the mountains and no big cities out that way to make bothering worth it to anybody. The earliest of our town settled with their backs safely against the mountains in this little, high, valley. When the name was changed to Pitt'sville, everyone had a different story of how the Council of Elders reached its decision. Publically, the reason was even a sort of inside joke; to have pride in the Pit, "Pit Pride," was laughable. The Pit was nothing we ever advertised to ourselves, heaven forbid beyond our borders. All the other supposed reasons that made their ways around the very efficient gossip channels akin to small towns, ours being no exception, sounded to have a pretty solid kernel of truth. They were all still making their way around by my birth and were a part of my earliest civic education. Mostly, they were humorous and community self-deprecating and I can still hear how sweetly my mother's younger voice could roll out the old joke of "Pitt'sville, because it's the Pits." My main theory was that the naming choice involved the town's natural sense of isolation and secrecy and the idea of hiding in plain sight. If the town name has pit in it, but with a possessive and in a spelling like it was a name, it makes you think it is the town of a Mr. Pitt or some Pitt family, taking your mind and any discussion away from the presence of an actual pit. We refer to the men on the Town Council as Elders for a reason, they are the wisest men in town, and I can't imagine this theory didn't cross their minds at least once. I have always thought a lot about the Pit, I'm just weird that way, I guess. Morbid, my teacher says, and I try to explain it off as just civic pride. It is our Pit, part of our town and its history, why should I not know about it? In school we have been learning our local history and recently studied how the Indians around here were mound-builders. Not here exactly, but not too far north of here in Pennsylvania and out in the western part of the state. Up in these mountains there is no real flat ground to building mounds, and why would you, you would just be imitating nature that already did that. We don't know too much about the Indians that lived right around here, but Mrs. Hemley said that they used the Pit in the same way we do. It is a tradition old as time, she said, and the first Pitt'sville settlers learned from them when they got here. She never said where the Indians who were here went when the first white settlers came though. Adults like to leave things out, and keep secrets, maybe here more than other towns, but still how bad could it be? We have done other units on American History and learned how the white Europeans wiped out most of the Indians that were in the whole country. It's just another way adults control us, by not letting us in on certain things. They act like it's for our own good, but kids can handle more than they give us credit for. It's really just another source of power for them, as adults. I mean, it's my Pit too. I am a citizen, a child of Pitt'sville, and when I get old enough to leave, if I want to, I will do my part to protect it. And if I stay or leave and come back, I will have a Going Over just like everybody else, and hopefully one as nice as my Gramps had. I guess my interest in the Pit has gotten worse since Gramps died. Actually it began before he died, when he got sick and he had come to stay with us. After dinner I would visit with him to say goodnight and he would rope me in to sad winding talk about how his time was coming and he was going to that place, that place where his father went and his father's father. His mother and grandmother would be there too and the people before them that they talked about. He was talking about the Pit. Even at his fading condition, there in our basement, where he was sleeping on the foldout couch, he would look up and in its exact direction after a while of talking to me, as if it was calling to him. I don't know if he said it exactly, but there was the sense of it, like he felt he was going home. It's not so crazy, really. That's where we all go, where everyone went before him. I guess if it is where our families are then it is kind of our home. It was in one of these after dinner talks that he showed me his watch. I had seen it before but this night he made a big show out of it. It was a Hamilton from 1945 and he bought it new in Lancaster, PA, taking the long way home from the war, he said. It was his lucky watch in the war, but a loaner from the service, so when he got out he bought one and wore it every day since. It had a little square dial at the bottom of the bigger square dial for seconds and the case was a faded golden color. It wore its age well, like my Gramps. He told me that he wanted me to have it after he went over. The idea of the exchange and Gramps having a last wish about me made me pretty sad at the time and I choked back tears and told him I would take good care of the watch. I mumbled something about how I would always wind it and clean it and never let it get scratched before he patted my back and tried to comfort me by saying, "I know you will young man, I know you will." That night I could barely sleep. I was full of conflicting anxiety. Sad about my Gramps dying, but excited about what it meant for me, the watch, becoming a man, the Pit, Gramps going home. A week later he died. So you see, I had already been thinking a lot about the Pit the whole time Gramps was here and then when he died, up we all went to Goodbye Landing for the Funerary Rites and Going Over and I got to see it close up for the first time since I was a kid when my Gramma went over. It was during the Rites, when they stood him up one last time so we could bow our heads in prayer before him, that I snuck one last peak at my Gramps and saw the watch on his wrist. His lucky Hamilton was gonna go over with him. But it's mine, I wanted to scream, but instead I just cried while everyone else prayed. I felt like such a baby, everyone so serious during the Rites, and I was just bawling, but they had no idea. And I couldn't tell them without interrupting the Rites or sounding like a spoiled baby. He had promised me the watch and I had promised him I would take care of it. He called me a "young man" and a man, doesn't pout, not even a young one, so I stopped crying and kept it all in all the way back home and all during the Funerary Pot Luck, but I knew what I had to do. All of that led me so naturally to this moment tonight, poised at my windowsill, about to go through. He went over with my watch and I wanted it back. That was the excuse I told myself. That was the excuse I would give if I were caught. The house was quiet and dark with sleep. The whole town was full and tired from celebrating Gramps. I just

want the watch, Gramps promised; I practiced. And I was through the window, out into the night. As we lived on the northwest side of downtown it was only two miles to Goodbye Landing, but this felt like the longest two miles I had ever walked. My heart beat crazily with excitement in my chest and with almost every step I paused to listen for any one else about. I took this time to wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans before moving on. After what seemed like an hour, I was past the last of the houses in the northern neighborhood and moved a little faster over the last mile through the woods. The moon was low and full right above the Pit when I crept out of the woods at last. I slouched up to Goodbye Landing, looking around me, frightened by how bright the night was. The moon, like a lid lifted from the Pit, got smaller as I walked up the hill onto the Landing. There it was, like a black pond. For the first time I faced it alone. I tiptoed out onto the landing and was able to see down into the Pit. Grandma, Gramps, their parents, every body from Pitt'sville before is down there. The moon was far back now and its light could barely reach down into the Pit. It was the darkest blackest black I had ever seen, down in there. No sounds, no smells, no light, just deep and down. Standing there, sweating, breathing hard, looking down, I could feel the Pit calling to me, pulling me. It is my home. It is my future. It is where we are all going. Everything wants to be in there. I want to be in there. What was I doing? Here I was at the edge of Goodbye Landing and I didn't know what to do. I came here for something. Yes, the watch. Gramps' watch, it was promised to me. It is down there with Gramps. I kneeled and reached down into it. I stretched my arm as far as I could and hung my leg over to have a farther reach. I could barely see my finger tips so it couldn't be much farther. Gramps, the watch, it couldn't be much farther. I reached until I fell. And I was falling into the black. Oh no, I thought, I am Going Over, still alive and with no Rites. And down, down I fell forever. 2. The Speckled Hen (New York City, 1959) I was looking out the window when I heard the knocking. It was a rainy day and the rain brought dissonant memories with its sound and appearance. The percussion of the rain, its rhythms on the cars and puddles was so now and so cosmopolitan it sounded to me like the Jazz, like the bop downtown. However, watching the rain sweep across the streets, when the wind took it, was more natural and wild and reminded me of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. My mind went back and forth in dissonance as I looked out the window like a ping-pong ball between a wigged composer and a black jazzman until the knocking interrupted with urgent rhythms of its own. "Entre vous to you," I said with a sarcastic tough guy tone. I wasn't expecting anyone so if it was a perspective client they normally liked to hear some tough guy tones. "Mr. Richard Winsome?" "That's what it says on the door." "Private investigator?" "That's on the door too. It seems, Jeeves, that maybe you don't need me and the door will suffice." "That is all quite humorous and I am glad that we can begin our business relationship on such a note of levity. My name is, Quentin Craggsell, and I would like to hire you, Mr. Winsome, personally, for a private investigation. Not your door." He tried to make a joke and I almost gave him some consideration for it, but it seemed to be trying too hard. I let out a chuckle so he wouldn't hurt himself with any further efforts. He entered my office with a polite smile and a clean and innocuous beige manservant at his side. The servant dutifully drew out my guest chair for his boss while I took in the surprise guest of honor. He had an accent that was hard to place but it sounded like money. It sounded more of a class than a geography. There was something hidden in the sound of his voice, and something eastern. It sounded worked, like the present tonal quality was not the ultimate goal but had been reached with great efforts and intention. The rest of him looked like a million bucks. Actually, he looked like a good solid ten large with the Savoy Road tailored suit, silk, tie, gold watch, and shoes of Italian leather that were probably cobbled by the tiny fingers of the Pope's very own immaculately conceived elves. "I get thirty clams a day and expenses," I said. "I have the business as he sat down to business." "Would you like to know the job, Mr. Winsome, or are you already that ready to get to work?" "What's the job?" "We would like you to find a woman for me. I have found enough women to know I can do it, and I have found enough women to know I will need some serious specifics and persuading. And besides, who is the we, I didn't figure Marcel the monkey-man there to be your partner in personal business affairs." This got a quick scowl and shameful down-turned eye out of the little guy in his fancy sized suit. He sat in the corner in my only other chair attending to an attaché almost half his size. "You are to excuse me, it is solely I who am hiring you," he seemed unbothered by my shot at his monkey, "and though I represent greater concerns and parties than the both of us, they shall be of no concern to you. This is mere personal business and this business is between you and I." "Alrighty, Jeeves, keep that collar cool, I'm just being wise." "Then, yes, of course. I would like you to find a woman." "All clear on that. What's her name?" "The Speckled Hen. They are of no consequence and unreliable in regards to this woman, they are easily changed. You might say she goes through them like handkerchiefs or suitors. She is often referred to as The Speckled Hen." "Speckled Hen? Huh? That is delightfully and deliciously drole, Mr. Craggsell, and I am sure a big hit where you come from but in my line of work names are pretty damn useful. Do you perchance, Governor, have anything for me to go on, address, social security number, blood type, shoe size, next of kin waiting outside?" "None of that. However, we have no problem doubling your regular rate, and of course expenses, and offering you this as your lead." He nodded with a little snap at his monkey who set to work in a mixed metaphor style like a bee, scampering to turn out my lights before opening his cherished attaché to extract a projector and two reel canisters. Once he got the reels threaded and ready, while me and his master sat in twiddling silence, he propped the projector up on his shoulder and propped himself up on my desk. Now there was a film on my office wall where once there was just a water stain. As the projector focused, there was no longer a water stain, and no longer a film, but just a woman. She was tall and all done up, hair in a tight bun and a dress covering all the way from her shoulders to her knees except for a sharp cut out at the neck-line where it mattered. Even in black and white it was clear that she was a redhead, and freckles dotted all over her high cheekbones, forehead, neck, and arms and I wondered where else they might lie. She was beautiful. If this was my only lead it was enough, because I was led. By the nose. Like a big, dumb bullock. Otherwise the film was not what it looked like a job interview. She was in a small office with one desk and one visible chair. It could be mine if my cleaning lady came more often than never. The woman in the film smiled and acted congenial. She spoke with no sound but

seemed to be answering questions about herself. She was not troubled, she was careful and intentional in her movements, standing from the chair and cruising like a grand gorgeous ship around the chair towards the door. With her delicate freckled fingers on the doorknob she looked back towards the camera over her shoulder, maybe responding to one last question and that was when I saw it. She was leaving the room just in time and she was relieved to be at the door. Touching the door she had power, she knew it and showed it and she was ready to take it with her. That last look. The power in her eyes was beautiful and terrifying and I had to find her. The projector was cut off and then cut on faster than you'd think a little guy like that could move. When I shut my eyes she was miraculously still there, but when I opened them unfortunately Craggsell still was. I blinked again for a better view. "Are you alright Winsome?" He asked, but he knew the answer. His film was effective. I gave him a slight tough guy scowl. "Well then," he placed a small leather bound book from his inside jacket pocket on the desk, "your first week of rate and expenditure is doubled and fit between the pages of this book along with a business card stating the telephone number and mailing address by which you can contact me as soon as the woman's whereabouts are confirmed. I hope it will not take you that long and the earlier this matter is settled the bigger will be your bonus." He rose and went for the door, monkey man and attaché in tow. I picked up the book and fan-flipped the pages to confirm all the green. The title on the cover read Field Guide to Birds of North America. "Jeeves? You sure there is nothing else that you can think of that might be of some help to me, something you are not telling me?" "No, Mr. Winsome, you have everything you need, just find The Speckled Hen." On, I thought. A nickname and a lingering image every time I shut my eyes. And the book. Field Guide to Birds of North America. Who stores and transports funds within the pages of a book, especially this one? Maybe the book is a bad joke on calling the bird a bird nickname? Maybe he had a stack of them around, the author is a family friend and a box of the books paid off a poker debt. No, the book couldn't be that random, Mr. Quentin Fancy Stiff-Britches Craggsell the Third did not operate that way. Nothing involved with Craggsell Industries operated that way. And nothing involved with Craggsell Industries seemed random these days. Especially not the recent merger of Craggsell Industries and Chrysalis International Aeronautics, hands joining across the pond it read, a limey and yank business unity not seen since the war. Front page of every paper just yesterday and today, lo and behold, second in command Craggsell himself walks into my office to have me find some skirt. I can't imagine that he took me for such a fool that I wouldn't recognize the son of the man behind Craggsell Industries. Must have just assumed I knew him and thought like some good errand-boy chimp I would just believe this was a personal matter. Nothing going on here, ignore the name, the eccentric way of handling large sums of cash, just find my lost chippy, be a good boy now, run along with your book. So now I was on the tail of a skirt, and ah, what a skirt indeed. I closed my eyes and there she was, alive and sweet, speckled cinnamon flesh. Found her, where is my bonus, Jeeves? Unfortunately, I opened my eyes to the rain through the window and she was gone. Where did I have to begin, and where did he expect me to begin? Did he think it was like some mobster movie and I could just walk down to the corner and flip a nickel to a newsboy and ask if he had seen the Speckled Hen? Maybe lean on the kid a little, take his over-sized newsboy cap and hold it above his head too high to reach and make him jump for it until he told me the Speckled Hen's address? Sitting there, waxing fondly about my manhood in relation to newsboys, I started flipping through the book. Field Guide to Birds of North America. It was a nice old book; the last page read 1919 and told me it was published in New York. It was written by Dr. Fain Twigsley, no other name, just him all by himself, collecting information on all these birds apparently. There had to be a newer edition of this book since 1919, but for some reason I was holding this one, clearly the most logical conveyance for a wad of cash and a business card at young Craggsell's disposal. No, I should live up to the title on the door for a minute, I thought, do a little detective work without even leaving my chair. The newsboy was safe for now. I counted the cash, five hundreds total, each evenly spaced in between pages. Actually very evenly spaced. The first bill was between page twenty and twenty-one and the second was between forty and forty-one and so forth three more times, ten individual pages in between, so twenty pages of text and bird pictures. And then the business card. It was all pretty orderly, actually too orderly. Who counts out twenty pages exactly to put each bill in? I looked further, rechecked all the numbers and noticed the business card didn't fit. It was between pages 122 and 123, it was twenty-one pages after the last hundred dollar bill. Craggsell is an odd duck, I thought, clearly the bird book was having an effect on me. He was going to make me work for all these clams the old fashioned way, with my detective brain right here at my own desk. I asked myself, as he clearly wanted me to, what's so special about this page? What's he pointing to with the business card and how will it help me find the skirt, The Speckled Hen? The two pages had entries on three birds, the Ring-Necked Pheasant, the Ruffed Grouse, and the Spruce Grouse. I read all three a few times, it was all pretty straight forward, and pretty much the same except that the first two were from the Mid-Atlantic, according to their little maps, and the third wasn't, it was from more north, Maine and into Canada. The third also had a footnote tagged at the information about the female spruce grouse. It noted in tiny print at the bottom of the page that: "Though rare, the female can on occasion manifest as a speckled hen. One was observed personally in the environs of an unnamed West Virginia mountain town." So that was it. The odd duck tipped me off through a bird book. And now I knew what I needed to do if I wanted to find the girl. I needed to find this Dr. Fain Twigsley—if that is his real name—and I need to find that town. 3. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (Shanghai, November 1945) With the falling rain came the throbbing, a dull ache. Each step in each murky puddle, pain. More weight on the left foot, the right just the heel. Across the square he hobbles. No one cares to notice. Everyone is running in the rain. They run until the square is empty. He swings his right leg, bounding light off the heel, little pressure. The rain is thick in overlapping grids. His skin grows wet through his coat. Rising puddles touch his left toes cold. That one boot, far more worn than the other. There is no light, no stars, no moon. There is no sound but rain. Swee Li Quok halts his breath. He is listening. In the shelter of the overhang, he has a moment to pause. A wall of sound becomes no sound. He breathes. Crossing the square seemed once impossible. Now he looks ahead even further. The pain is where his right toes once were. He calls them his Phantom Barometers. He felt the rain

thirty minutes before it fell. He looks down at the right boot. It is stuffed with a rag and tight to the water. Quok concentrates and wiggles nothing. The wall is red. Around the corner, he sees nothing. He looks again. light, only rain. He pivots back on his right heel. The heel is numb and strong. Eight years to callous. One bullet for five toes. His life for cowardice. Quok waits, looks and listens. It is impossible to hear footfall in this rain. It is impossible to see with no moon. Still, Quok waits for his mark, waiting for movement through the rain. He thinks of eight years of cowardice, eight years without honor. For a clean up sweep the soldiers returned. Quok played dead. Beneath his father and his friends he lay still and silent. He held his breath and held his tears. The soldiers spread blanket fire. Through the body of Quok's father one bullet reached his right foot. In the heat of August he lay, his sweat and their blood moving together. With night, Quok stole away. He was still in the hospital in December. It was there he heard the news. 80,000 Japanese soldiers in Nanking: his mother one of 20,000 women systematically raped; his brothers of the 200,000 killed. From a door a man will come. In this direction he will walk. Quok will strike out from under his coat. He will hit the man in the abdomen and clutch the man to silence him. The man will fall dead in the street, dead in the rain. This is what Quok tells himself. He is doing this for China, for the Revolution. It is also for his family and his father. The man for whom he waits is not Japanese but still he will kill for his family. Eight years, alone with his cowardice. Alone while the world warred and to him it was nothing. The war has ended but not to China. In his lifetime Swei Li Quok's father heard his son deny the Revolution. The Japanese came and Japanese went and now Swei Li Quok understands the Revolution. Quok's father once stood here. Not geographic location, but thematic location. 1927 Peking street corner, Quok's father stood. His eyes were across on a dark window. Sir John Waltzingcock walked down the lobby of the British Embassy. To his secretary Ms. Pool he said he was off to lunch. Jenny Kwan, translator and file clerk, was at the East window. Sir Waltzingcock directed his eyes to her ass. It was round in a modest black skirt. Jenny Kwan smiled over her right shoulder at the Lord and pulled the cord of the closed drapes. The light of the eastern sun filled the room, interrupting his gaze. Jenny Kwan continued to smile, Quok's father had his signal, and Sir Waltzingcock walked out the door. Two minutes later Waltzingcock lay dead in the street. Quok's father was gone. Now Swei Li Quok must be his father's son. There is no one left. He pulls the dagger from his pocket. The dagger is dark in the shadow of his coat. Quok's eyes are used to the dark. He said he would do anything to help. They told him this would help. They had a tip. Across the street distant light is shadowed in the rain. The shadow takes a form and the form approaches. Quok crouches low, pivoting on his right heel. He holds his breath. The form is gyrating as it moves. This is the man, his mark. They told him the mark was a spasmodic-type. Quok exhales shortly and holds another breath. His right foot goes forward first. From it Quok steps with his left. The balance remaining on his right foot falls early off the missing toes. Swei Li Quok stumbles as he lunges, missing the form before him in the rain. 4. Skinny Dipping With Sharks (Los Angeles, 1982) "How could you even propose such a scheme. I told you my business is legitimate and suffers such slighting insinuations!" He yells with spit on the alliteration of the last sentence and slams the phone down onto the receiver. Snake-eyes green beneath caterpillar eyebrows black refocus in on the man in front of them, sitting six feet away across three feet of mahogany in a shark-skin suit in an alligator and oak chair, a narrow broken line of shimmering gray cut into a deep finished scaly brown cushion. "I'm sorry. Now what do you want from me? Oh yes, Dirk. I hope you don't mind me calling you that." Slithering ahead, taking the lead. "No, that's okay. Who was that on the telephone? Is everything okay." Shifting in his seat, wide eyes shifting in his skull. The skin of a sea predator making slight friction on another of a land monster. A tension is rubbed and stoked between the beasts. "Nothing to worry about," calming, with a flick of the tongue and an easy smile, "nothing at all really, just a routine matter, my name wound up on some list. Some shaken down informant must have pulled the name from the yellow pages." "Alright, just as long as everything is alright, 'cause I wouldn't want anything to happen to you." He raises an eyebrow, seriously and matter-of-factly. Tweezed to linear perfection, the change in expression breaks the brow into a pyramid pointing skyward. Dirk's features are sharp and shiny and the calm assurance he tries to convey comes off false and smarmy. "Oh yes, every thing is uhm... alright," his smile spreads thin across his face like smoke, practically ear-hole to ear-hole, "actually better than alright. Pistolli, Dirk... Dirk Pistolli, I like that. You are a handsome man with fine, fine diction and I believe this part would be perfect for you. Normally I say that an actor is perfect for a role but here the role takes a back stage," pun intended, I'm sure, "to your presence as an actor. This character would be happy to have you embody him, so to speak." "Well, I will have to look at my schedule. I will talk to some of my people, but," he was hooked, drawn in, flattery like the smell of blood, and he circles, waiting instinctually for his turn, "I think this project is something I can feel really good about. I will have to meet the director though." "Oh, all of that will be arranged. Nothing to worry about here," he coils, contracted, ready, holds his breath, and strikes. "Actually, I hope you don't mind me saying, but the whole production has been waiting for you to get off its feet. Just put yourself in my hands and I will take care of everything. Trust me, after this you will be such a big fish, the whole world will surely seem like a small pond." The tongue slides out on the alliteration, a flick, and the snake-eyes warm and hone in. "I am all yours," he smiles, but not without a little fear. The fish is out of water, and any fish out of water, no matter how big, soon will not be able to breath. A