

To Be Dead

By: Shawn Shipp

Zared

looked up at the buzzing bar of light. He didn't know how long he'd been looking or how long it had been buzzing, but right now he was looking up at it, that's all he knew.

The paper around him crinkled as he shifted. It was up to his neck and pressed itself against every portion of his body.

Or did it?

Come to think of it there was no pressure he could feel, that is until he didn't come to think of it. Then the pressure had returned.

He looked down from the light to the papers. They were all sheets of blank printer paper and they were piled up from God knows how deep to his neck. Or was it shoulders? He rarely could tell without staring at his body. Right now the paper was up to his shoulders.

Had he wriggled higher or had it just always been right there? Or had the paper drained out some? Could paper even drain out? It wasn't like water, water could drain, but could paper? Come to think of it, was it like water even? What was water like?

This string of questions carried on for what he assumed was quite some time. He wasn't sure if he did this often, the past wasn't something he was very familiar with at all, actually he didn't know what the past meant.

All he knew was the paper and the light. That's two things he remembered. He knew the light was above him and paper was around him, something else surfaced though, just in this moment. He had a vague idea that he used to have something. Then he looked over to the wall.

Just above the paper was a solid wall. He didn't know if it had always been there or if it had always been that close, seven feet from him, but now he was interested. So he shuffled over to it, pseudo-swimming through the paper. Then he stopped.

Adjusting himself he laid himself almost horizontal then dropped his head down onto the paper. Soon his eyelids shut and he dozed off.

As he woke the dream faded quickly enough to where he wasn't sure if he had one, or ever had had one in fact. Now he was sure he'd never dreamed, and within ten minutes he forgot about how sure he was that he'd never dreamed. Now his eyes were filled with a paper that had somehow folded into a triangle.

Zared was flopped over on his stomach staring at the paper when water was dumped onto his back. It was cold and instantly his skin retracted, forming goosebumps all over within a second. He spun around attempting to find where it came from.

As he pushed himself up to look around his hand tore through several papers. They were soaked and now little more than tiny white shreds vaguely in the shape of a rectangle. Some were even fusing into lumps.

“Jesus Christ!” He began shaking the shreds of paper off his hands then stopped.

Who was Jesus Christ? How did he know that name? It was a name, he hadn't just said a random curse because he registered it was a name.

He registered it was a name.

Suddenly his mind began to spiral. If he could register a name that meant he'd heard names before. How did he know what a name was? There was nothing in the room saying what a name was, in fact there was no writing in the room. How was there no writing in the room? He knew what writing was, there had to be writing somewhere. The room was all he knew, there had to be writing in the room if he knew what writing was.

How did he know what logical reasoning was?

He began to rack his brain for other names, possibly if he remembered another name then it could lead to a cascade of knowledge.

His right hand shook as he held it up to his face. His eyes followed his other hand as it shuffled through the papers that were wet, but his hand was not on his mind.

What was another name? He had to know a name. He had to know her name. Her name. Her name was-

The confines of his mind shrank back into the room, then followed his eyes.

Above him was a buzzing tube light. Had that always been there? He stared up at the light for no one knows how long. At some point he had laid down on the dry papers. When his head turned, he noticed an image burned into his eyes. It must have been the light, even though it wasn't shaped like it at all. Staring at lights left an image in your eye. It must have been the light.

Zared wiggled his large toe on his right foot to manipulate a paper that had stuck its corner under his toenail. It was pointy and he could recognize the feeling from it stabbing him as pain, but it wasn't unpleasant. Large waves rolled from the corner of the paper across the surface. Their crests rose far above Zared's head and their troughs dipped below Zared's line of vision. However he never increased the intensity of his toe wiggling. Still it was a gentle up, and down. The rolling was nice. His mind was put at ease by the sound and look of the paper.

Lazily he dragged his arm back behind his head in a lounging position. But something felt off, he swore he rubbed against something gross, like something rough on thin skin. When he turned to look he felt it down his back and on his buttock.

He spun onto his hands and knees where he felt the sensation again, now on his hands and knees. Slowly he lifted one hand to see what it was but there was nothing. Then he realized he was feeling the paper except now the feeling of paper felt disgusting. Nothing about its feel changed. When he rubbed his finger on a sheet it felt grittily smooth.

He had to get away from the paper, he couldn't bear to feel it. As he stood up he wriggled the bottoms of his feet at the ever intensifying disgust that found itself a home under the soles of his feet. He tried to leap to the fluorescent tube on the ceiling, failing to even grab it, he landed back on the soles of his feet. Again he tried, succeeding in grabbing it, however as he pulled himself up the light began to tilt to one side and he slipped off.

Repulsed by the things gravity attracted him to he shrieked and began to thrash about and as he thrashed the paper flew into the air, eventually settling back on top of him. Every inch of his body screamed in repugnance. It was revolting, the microscopic bumps on the paper crawled on and pricked and tugged at his skin, everything he touched was sickening. He needed to get out, he needed to leave.

More and more other thoughts were eaten by the screaming of his mind as the paper buried him. Then suddenly he stopped.

He was silenced and his body stopped moving. The feeling was gone. He lifted his arm and sat up, the thin layer of only a few papers or so slid off of him.

What was he doing? Oh yeah. He stuck a sheet of paper under the toenail on his right large toe and began waving it, slowly forgetting about his feelings of disgust until they no longer existed.

Zared's head sagged and swung in a circular motion as he existed somewhere between sleeping and waking. His body stood straight up totally submerged in paper. The room seemed to be dimmer than usual, maybe it was just him, he couldn't tell how open his eyes even were.

Some undetermined time into his drowsy state his toe twitched and rubbed against something new. Against his right big toe it felt rough and far thicker than the rest of the paper.

Pulling himself out of his drowsy state he parted the layers of paper to glance a look at the foreign object. It was a rough paper with ridges in it, small bumps that ran the length of the paper and occasionally a dip in its surface. The color was in stark contrast to the pure white of the rest of the papers. It was colored a dark, piss yellow, with brown splotches every so often. What was this? He hadn't seen it before, it looked like paper, just different.

He bent over to pick it up; however, the shifting of the paper buried the new object deeper. Suddenly and frantically he bent further and further over in an attempt to grab the new paper. Only was he able to catch glimpses of it before it plunged deeper into his sea. Wildly now he tipped himself completely over and swam deeper just to grab the object. He couldn't give, if it got out of his sight it would be lost forever; he didn't know how he knew but he knew if he lost the papyrus now, it would be gone.

Soon the light was gone and he was diving blindly into the dark void of paper. The papyrus though still was lit as it had been before, colored a dark brownish yellow all over and peeking in and out of sight.

He parted tons of paper until it became an unconscious action, with each swipe of the hand the papyrus was revealed then it hurried away. With each swipe he would push himself deeper. With each swipe her name became clearer, but still it was obscured, like tears blocked him from seeing her name.

He tunneled for Lord knows how long until he realized where he was, or rather, that he didn't know where he was. The world as he knew it was pitch black and silent, not even the buzzing of the light was present.

Zared tried twisting himself upward but the paper was too tight around him. His chest began to heave and suddenly he was aware of how oppressive the paper was. His heart began to race. Before he sat atop it, able to see and breathe clean air, but even in this short time the air he had turned rancid and warm.

He needed to calm himself, if he worked slowly he could get himself back in the right direction and to the top. All he needed to do was work slowly.

And slowly he went, turning bit by bit. First he moved himself into a fetal position as it took up less space, then he went about turning himself right side up, it was a gruelingly slow process. However soon he was able to extend himself again. Now how was he gonna—

How was he gonna what?

He could not recall what he was doing. Where was he?

Everything was dark. Was he in the paper? Oh yeah, he was in the paper. He was, uh... Now that he thought of it, how did he know it was paper? He tried to move his arm, but to no avail. He could hardly move. Maybe he should just lay here a bit, yeah he'd do that. He relaxed his head and let himself drift off, but he never reached sleep. He just sat there in the pitch black in a half conscious state.

Moving.

He slowly emerged from his fugue to the soft rustling sound of paper. Paper slowly crept down his body, pushing him with it. Where was he? Why was everything dark? The light should be illuminating the room.

What room?

He finally became aware of where he was, he had gotten stuck deep in the paper, he'd been chasing something but he couldn't remember what. Why was he moving down? The paper didn't move from what he could recall, though how much could he recall?

Searching deeply he tuned out the small small world around him. He remembered waving a large sheet of paper with his big toe, at one point he'd had water poured on him, another the paper had repulsed him; he remembered the name Jesus and that the wall had just been right there, but for some reason he stopped. And he remembered that he had been chasing something into the depths of the paper.

His chest swelled as he was suddenly filled with memories and thoughts and the urge to learn, to learn why he was here, to learn what he really remembered, and to learn-

He stopped. His attention turned to his left foot as it slowly flattened out against a large cold surface. As his foot straightened out did the paper stop moving. In the silence he sat for a good while until finally what the surface was clicked in his head. It was a

floor. A floor to this room. He never had thought about the room having a floor, honestly he'd barely thought of it having walls though before he could see those.

The floor was harder than anything he could remember. Unlike the paper he'd sat cushioned atop that yielded to his smallest touch the floor would not budge to even his most powerful pushes. But the floor in a way felt familiar. It was firm, unmoving, constant. At least for as long as he'd been down here.

The paper was not the same however, it still yielded to his force but no matter how much his body morphed it, it still jabbed his skin and threatened to slice him if he did not move carefully enough. It still was ever changing and endless, just now it had turned against him. It had soured to his presence this deep and the pain he felt was to show for it.

He had to do something.

No reason to.

If he stayed here-

Where else is there?

-his days would be filled with this, malcontent.

No, it's barely noticeable.

He began to climb, kicking one foot deeper into the paper then using it to push up.

The effort is so much.

His arms squeezed up his torso and past his head. They grasped at clumps, aiding his ascent even more.

The cuts hurt so, it would be nice to rest.

No, he couldn't rest. If he rested now he would be hidden away from sight forever.

No, that is good. It would feel good, far better than this labor.

He did not stall. He pushed the voice away and continued onward. Around him paper dampened then moistened from the downpour of sweat. It caked to his skin and peeled off against the grating of new paper.

Arduous hours he spent ascending, he no longer noticed the effort put in. His limbs moved mechanically seemingly outside of his will. At his joints tiredness seeped in constantly. However it was squeezed out as soon as he heaved himself up. The once laborious thoughts now held no place in him.

Upward he continued until soon he did not think or perceive.

The surface of the paper parted to his fingers. Finally a new stimulus yanked Zared from his buglike autonomy. For the first time he could remember how the air felt, not clammy. He'd just now realized how wet his breath and sweat made the small pocket he was trapped in. The sensation of cool dryness crawled down him as he dragged the rest of his body from the paper to the surface.

He lifted himself on his hands and looked around the room. The one thing he could remember of this place, the light bar humming above, was still there, though he could now see that the walls were yellow and the metal tray above the light was a shiny gray. He yanked himself to stand and, for the first time he could remember, walked.

He walked to the wall, slipping only a few times, it felt wholly different than the paper. The wall was smooth, he could glide his hand over it with the little grooves on his hand feeling resistance. He threw his chest and face into the wall, caressing the wall all over while laughing. Then he twisted around, looking over the paper and smiling before throwing himself on it.

He flailed, spun, and jumped about in a manic fit of joy. He could remember! For the first time he could remember! He didn't forget what had just happened. All of it was at his fingertips, the time he lounged around, when the paper began to feel icky, when he was deep in the paper, the name Jesus, all of it was available to him. Then he remembered his thoughts as he struggled to the top, he had to do something.

The paper had to be organized. He needed to stack it. If he stacked it then maybe he'd have space.

So he set to it and began putting sheets of paper over each other. Almost as soon as he began his muscles began to ache from the long climb, but he couldn't rest. He needed to make things better, no rest until then.

Slowly around the very edges of the room formed small stacks of paper and at the center an indentation where they had been removed. Often stacks would fall over and he'd have to pick them all up again, or stacks would have to be moved so he could stack the paper that was beneath the stack.

Eventually the stack got so high he would have to lift from the bottom and slide papers underneath stacks. And the higher they got the further the light moved. He looked up to find that the light was so far above him that he could not even touch it if he jumped as high as he possibly could. He felt a sudden urge to touch the light, to run his finger along its surface just to feel the smoothness he felt that time he leapt up and grabbed it. But he wasn't going to risk knocking over paper while climbing up to touch it so he suppressed the urge.

He had made stairs from the stacks of paper so he could place paper on top of the stacks but as he grabbed a new bunch of paper his fingers scraped something hard and smooth.

Immediately he tossed the paper he had up into the air and dug through the remaining pile, crushing the paper in his hand and tossing it aside, something that he'd deal with later. As he parted the paper the floor of the box showed itself to him. The real floor of the box. Not a layer of paper. Finally he'd reached the bottom!

Zared hopped and cheered. Quickly he grabbed the rest of the paper from the floor and rushed it to the top, having to spend some extra time straightening out the sheets he'd crumpled in his digging earlier. After he finished he rushed down the stairs, slipping a few steps from the bottom causing a little bit of paper to go everywhere. He laughed and rolled right back to his feet.

He sat on the floor and stared at it. The tile on the ground had a cross design running through its center with interlocking chains of squares running to the inner corners of the cross. It was the most beautiful thing Zared had seen, but it wasn't the most beautiful thing he could remember, he just couldn't remember what the most beautiful thing he could remember was.

Half obscured by paper was another tile, though the design on this one wasn't the same. The design was a half circle of intertwining lines. Each fanned outward, away from a large line where they gathered that disappeared under the paper still on the ground. At the ends of these lines were two hairy creatures posed in striking positions, with their long snouts pulled back to reveal triangular teeth.

The paper had to go.

But go where?

Higher. He looked up to the stacks looming over him. They hadn't reached the ceiling yet, he could stack the outer stacks higher until there was more room on the ground for him to look at tiles.

He got to work stacking the paper, grabbing first from his stairs then the inner stacks of paper and building up the outer stacks until they touched the roof. The results yielded were an additional ten tiles visible and the complete disappearance of the real walls of the room. And now there were no steps either.

The second tile he had earlier inspected now revealed its second half. It shared the same base, a half circle of lines spreading out from a central line but sprouting from these were small ovular shapes, and instead of two hairy creatures there were two creatures whose arms were paddles and had long pointy triangular muzzles.

The one on the opposite side of the cross tile from the half circle tile had a small stick man being consumed by blobular triangles, the two diagonal from that one had a design of a body of water and a design of circles floating on a black plane speckled with white dots. Each tile had their own design, each almost entirely unique. They did share black lines and tan negative space for their color schemes. They too were all “floor texture” as he deemed it, hard and glossy.

He spent hours, days even, inspecting each detail of the tiles. He tried finding ways they all connected, to no avail. He stared at them, he felt them, he even tasted one but he had nothing to compare the taste to except the taste of paper. It did feel better to lick than paper, but neither had real taste as far as he could tell.

Zared fell back onto the hard tile floor, staring up at the light. What did he do now? At the back of his mind he had hoped there were answers down here, answers about the box, about the name Jesus Christ, answers about-

He suddenly blanked. He was trying to remember something he'd encountered before. What was it? He sat up and scratched his right big toe.

Maybe he should rest.

Yeah that was a good idea, after all he was really tired from the work of creating the stacks all around him. He let his eyes slowly close and seal up. But something was fighting the sleep, it didn't want to go. Nevertheless he did end up sleeping and when he woke there were a few sheets of paper on top of him.

He rolled about grabbing them and stacked them in a small stack on top of a tile with a, many winged and many eyed, burning wheel. It didn't interest him too much. He looked up and around at the paper walls. As he did, a few more papers fell. Eh, he'd pick them up in a bit.

He laid back down and rolled back and forth, neither side he laid on was good but both felt the better option after laying on the opposing side for a bit. After a time he stood

up and stretched. At this point there was a layer of paper over the ground all except where he'd been laying.

Begrudgingly he gathered all the papers on the floor into a pile in his arms. It was better he put this paper back at the top of the stack. But when he started his ascent he remembered he had stacked the stairs up as well. So he just dropped the paper into a smaller pile next to the small stack he had made when he woke up. Later he'd stack them all together.

He sat down and plopped his back against a stack of paper, sending a few sheets tumbling down from the top that he'd pick up in a little bit.

Sheet by sheet paper began to coat the floor again. Within a few weeks Zared was swimming again in a small pool of paper. The paper was comfortable.

Much more comfortable than the cold floor.

Yeah, yeah he preferred just a little bit of paper to cushion him. Not too much, just a little bit. He'd make sure it didn't get out of hand.

Though with time paper kept falling. At first he would keep on top of the paper by shimmying up a little bit. Though he woke up to paper burying him and just let it stay on top, it was warm, it was nice. Yeah, yeah he was fine with some on top.

The next time Zared woke up there was no light. The paper had buried him.

Maybe he'd move up just a bit.

But he couldn't. The weight on him was too much, he couldn't move his limbs, they were all crushed by a ton of paper. He tried thrashing about to get a little bit of room, but he couldn't even thrash. His limbs were totally stuck.

He began to panic. His breath became faster and more ragged and he began to heat up. It was no longer warm but hot, his skin felt like it was burning. His sweat, instead of cooling him off like it should have, just made the paper stick to his skin, making him even hotter.

For what seemed to be days he lay hyperventilating as his own sweat, tears, and humidity from his breath trapped him further. Was he going to die? How did he know what death was? Last time he had been able to wiggle his way back to the top, that didn't seem like an option this time.

As he lay, still panicking, a sound reached through the paper. It wasn't paper falling or what now was the fond humming of the light bar, but paper crackling beneath him followed by an intense burning heat on his back.

Finally Zared spoke his first words, they were screams, "HELP, HELP ME PLEASE!"

Suddenly everything cooled. He could move.

Immediately he scrambled upward, manically clawing at the paper, trying to get away from the crackling sound.

The surface of the paper parted to his fingers. Finally a new stimulus yanked Zared from his panic. It were two lights.

The one hanging above on the ceiling was a blazing fire. Both its plume and embers rose downward. The light emanating from it was a soft orange and it created an intensely bright circle of light around where he rose from the paper, but the light was never harsh as the light bars had been. His eyes did not hurt looking at it, yet it was brighter than the tube light had ever been.

At the corners of the room darkness lingered, at first it was a soft darkness that, while dimmer than the circle, showed the full detail of the sheets of paper. In the corners this darkness faded to intense blackness. Not even deep in the paper had the darkness seemed so black, it was black as onyx.

His focus was arrested on the second light that now graced him.

In front of him about three feet above the surface of the paper was a being. It consisted of a sideless triangle and a face with absolutely no features other than a large eye of crimson, jade, and sapphire, all in one.

Behind it hovered rings as gates to an endless falling hole of the most beautiful things, and too hovering behind it was Nothing.

It did not speak to him, not in the way one knew that was speech. But he heard words that were not of speech, both in his hands and in the hole within that he was only now aware of.

Under the entity a hand floated forward.

Zared took it and the walls of the room fell away. In a torrential wave the paper rushed across the ground, throwing his feet out from under him. He was finally outside.

Cool wind blew across his skin as he took in all the features of the surrounding valley. All around him the noises of birds chirping and trees rustling swam into his ears; the air was filled with the smell of pollen and pine; deep rich colors of far mountains and close fields of flowers graced his pupils. It was almost more than he could bear.

Standing up, Herut ignored the bruise on his tail bone and began walking toward the gorgeous distant mountains. Remembering.