

RJ, COLORADO

A few days before Thanksgiving he finally calls me. It is raining hard this morning and I get hit by leaves of maple trees and soaked with water squirted by cars passing by. I know I am in a hurry, I don't want to be too late.

It is dark when I enter the place and I almost drop my coffee all over me when I try to unlock the door. While I am searching for the light switch I almost fall over an iceberg which is placed behind the door. What a nightmare, everything is slippery. I didn't know that his knowledge on lowering temperatures through will power has grown so very fast since we met last time.

The constant droning noise of the machines in the background, the way things are placed in order, the level of dust which covers everything makes me feel that he has already left a long time ago. Why did he call me today then, why not yesterday and why not next week?

All the sudden it occurs to me that I am just a prop myself set on a railway track to go in circles for weeks now, leaving the others in order to come back a little while later, leaving again, letting the others watch me. RJ is among them, smiling, waving. A loud bang of falling wood makes me come back to the truth. Truth?

I put the glasses down and I take off the gloves. Do those really belong to me? Shell100 % leather, lining 100 % polyester, interlining 65 % olefin, 35 % polyester. RN 94789 CA 32296 Medium, made in China. When I carefully open the door I find the corridor deserted. The wind, which is coming into his place is warm and aromatic, almost sweet. I sneak around the corner. Eventually I walk down the staircase, open the door and I feel like being thrown into another world. I am thrown into another world.

My cell phone rings. I try to answer it, but it stops ringing before I can find it. My bag is filled with things I haven't seen before. A jack-knife: Stainless China. Safety instructions for its use. A jet fighter, IS 041, grey, F 15 Eagle, made in CHINA. A blurred

photograph of a dark haired guy falls off onto the ground. A message on the backside: If you need clarification, call 215-439-5554“. Again I look for my cell phone. It is pinned in between all these directives I don't want to listen to: Do not use electronic devices.

Don't smoke. Fasten seat belt tight and low. If you are seated at an exit and are unable to understand the information, please contact a flight attendant. The machines are droning. I am panicked, I don't like flying, and I especially don't like flying unexpectedly to China. I try to call RJ desperately. Signal faded. Signal lost. I close my eyes - I don't want to belong to all this anymore.

Wetmore,

April 6, 2006

3:00 AM

Click. She's gone. You don't even have to be there to hear it, I just know. I can hear the deadbolt hit the guard and see her hand letting go of the doorknob. I can see the dust in the room settle as the door follows its arc and comes to a final rest. If I listen closely, I can hear her footsteps slowly fade away as she moves down the hallway, further and further from the door until there is nothing left but deafening silence. Even though she is miles away, it feels like she is in the next room. One last turn of the key and now she is gone. I sent her to the outpost in the remote part of the wilderness so no one would find the plane ticket and the note I left for her. The note. I hope she saw the note. I left the plane ticket on the chair right in front of the door in plain view, but now I can't remember if I left the note there as well. I try to retrace my steps from earlier this evening, recounting all my actions. I was in such a hurry because I didn't want anyone to know that I was there and now I can't remember placing the note on the chair. Why can't I remember? Did I leave the note with the ticket? Damn it! With all of the haste and chaos it would have been easy to forget where I left it. The note is possibly the last opportunity to tell her how I feel and why all of this is happening. So much contained on a single sheet of paper and in the swirls and tracings of ink. Words and thoughts hold all the promises and failures of the future. My heart falls to the pit of my stomach as I think about her not finding and reading the note. There are so many things beyond my grasp

and control that I don't know if I will ever see her again. The plan is to meet in 1 year, but who knows what will happen once the dust has settled and everything is resolved. Maybe we will get to see each other in less than a year? I hope so, but in my heart I can't help but feel this morning was the last time we will ever see each other. I'm awake now and it's clearly sometime in the middle of the night or very early morning. I was exhausted and fell asleep in bed with my clothes on and my contacts in. One boot on, one boot off. One leg partially hanging off the bed. The pain of my canvas jacket bunched up behind the middle of my back. Three hours earlier I fell asleep and then I woke up with a pain in my chest that felt like someone hit me with a bag of sand. The pain radiated through my body like a stone that had been dropped in a pool of still water. My eyes popped open, my hands immediately grasped my chest and my first reaction as I set up was to look at the clock and see what time it was. I strained to check the clock, but couldn't make out the time because my lenses had dried out and everything in the room was a blur. As I looked in the direction of the clock, I could make out the silhouettes of the furniture and the openings of the windows as the evening moonlight seeped in. I leaned closer toward the clock to make out the time. As I inched forward I could slowly begin to make out the numbers surrounded by their red halo, it's 3 AM. Everything is so incredibly still. The only sound I hear is the rustling of my jeans against the fabric of the sheets. My head falls back against my pillow and I slowly close my eyes. I take a couple of deep breaths and try to fall back to sleep knowing that the racing thoughts swirling in my mind will make this an impossible task. Generally, when I wake up in the middle of the night like this there is very little I can do to calm my mind enough in order to fall back to sleep. Shit, I didn't need this. There is so much that needs to be done today and in such a short time, I really needed some rest. Definitely more than 3 hours of sleep. My mind is racing; it's unfocused but full of adrenaline and my body aches from the fatigue and the onset of the depression. It's like the mind and body occupy two different shells set to two different clocks, set to two different times. One is trying to catch up with the other, but all I feel is the pressure of the gap. The gap in time, the gap between the thought and action. The gap that exists between the mental manifestation of time and the physical reality of it. I just feel the gap. My body and mind are trying to reconcile the gap with one another, to close it. This causes my mind and body to vibrate and hum as they both oscillate between the two points, fighting to bring the two shells together. Just then the

computer next to my desk makes a loud click and the fan begins to come to a slow stop as it makes a loud whir. Within 10 seconds the whirring stops and the computer falls silent. I feel exactly the opposite. I was woken up by the sound of a loud click in my head, my eyes popped open and my brain began whirring uncontrollably. The exact opposite of the computer. I change the position of my pillows and try to fall back asleep. I try for 5 minutes, then 10 minutes, then 15 minutes and still nothing. This is pointless. As I lay in bed I wonder what am I going to do for another four hours before I get ready to go inside the mountain. I get up and move around the cabin aimlessly. My thoughts wander and I take an inventory about where the past 10 months have guided me. I sit down on the couch for a moment and I think; I hope she found the note I left her. The note that explains why all of this is happening. Why there has to be this separation. Why I have to do what I have to do. Notebook paper. That's what the note was left on. Notebook paper. Could there be anything lamer. Yes, Lame. That's why it's a note and not a letter. Notebook paper seems hardly dignified or personal enough to call a letter. But it's what I had at the moment I decided to tell her. I tried to call her earlier in the day, but her cell had no service, not even her voice mail picked up. I called again and again and still no service. Everything is so crazy now, I feel like time and emotions are a luxury I can't squander. But even now feeling overwhelmed at 3 AM I won't call her. Part of me wonders if I could reach her before she gets on the plane. But not now, I think to myself. Why complicate matters. Why take the chance that someone is listening. Again, I close my eyes and softly whisper her name and hope she hears me. I think to myself, "I will miss her smell."

#### THIS PLACE:

To the West, past the vast, white plains and rolling foothills, lay the jagged, snow-capped mountains of Wetmore. They penetrate the sky and elevate the flatness of the surrounding area acting like a liaison between the sky and earth. The jagged edges of the mountain range's valleys hug a glacier on three sides. The glacier is the largest alpine valley glacier of it's kind and it slices deep into the mountains and spills out onto the plains. Inside the guts of the mountains, beneath the bottom surface of the glacier are the enormous reserves of coal found in the mines of Wetmore. Three large seams, two that

run parallel with the mountain range and the glacier and one that cuts through the other two perpendicularly. The mines weave in and out of each other like finely crafted tweed. Portions of the seams run very close to the underlying belly and ribs of the glacier which creates additional hazards when mining their reserves. Pockets of melted glacial water lie above the reserves and the only thing that keeps them in place are very thin layers of sedimentary rock prone to crumbling and breaking way during mining operations. When the force of blasts and digging occurs, the thin protective membrane gives way and flash floods occur as water pours into the mineshafts washing everything in the water's path away; coal, supplies and men alike. The snail like movement of the glacier that occurs over the course of a year also creates additional dangers as mine supports and hydraulic lifts have to be kept under constant vigil so their structural placement is not compromised. Constant mining activity also proves problematic because the increased activity heats up the rock around the glacier and creates additional glacier melt and therefore additional water and additional glacier movement and surges. To combat this, colder temperatures have to be maintained inside the mountain by means of refrigeration units and large cooling fans. The shafts near the glacier prove to be so dangerous that the miners who work them have been given the special name of "breakers." You can tell a "breaker" by their special insignia on the left upper arm of their jumpsuit. The mountains are an engineering marvel and a separate world in and of themselves. A startling contrast of darkness and technology compared to the blinding whiteness and wilderness of the mountains and surrounding areas that lie outside the mines.

Cabins and tents form the community of Wetmore that house the workers that have come to this blizzard kept part of the world to work the mines. Everyone has come to Wetmore to do a job. They are all here with me or I am here with them. However you choose to look at it. We are all invisible to the rest of the world. As I step out onto the front porch of my cabin, the morning air is colder than usual. I take a deep breath and turn my head to the right, slowly I blow out as I move my head to the left and you can see the horizontal trail my breath leaves in the cold morning air. I grab the zipper of my parka and give it one last tug to make sure it is zipped all the way up. I then pull my hood over my head and cover my face with my mask. My eyes begin to survey the field of cabins and tents that make up the city. You can see the last bellows of smoke coming

from the chimneys as everyone prepares for the start of the next morning shift. Wetmore started out as a camp with little planning and has become a last stop for those seeking refuge from their troubled pasts and for others who use it as a stepping-stone as part of an early phase of their career. An opportunity to make money and be assigned greater responsibilities calls the ambitious ready to prove their worth and merit. The community looks like it could be folded up like a lawn chair and moved in minutes, but its sheer numbers wouldn't allow for such action. In fact its sheer size would impress anyone. The materials used to build the structures give the place a sense of being caught in a time warp. Like it's a century behind the rest of the civilized world. There are so many of the cabins and tents in this vast expanse. They dot the landscape like stars in a constellation and seem to go on forever starting in the plains, moving past the foothills, into the woods and up the base of the mountains. In front of each cabin, is a flag designating rank, role and crew. Color, symbols and shapes of the flags help to signify hierarchy. The city never expanded past wooden and cloth structures. Some corporate outposts are made of shipping containers, their presence clearly denoted by their orange color and corporate crests. Four wheelers, snowmobiles, snowshoes and sleds are all modes of transportation. Large military vehicles carry in supplies airlifted from the ship's ports some 200 miles away. Between Wetmore and the sea lie a series of snow plains, drifts, valleys, snow caves and any sort of landscape reminiscent of the last place on earth you would want to be lost. Constant blizzards and drifts make search parties a waste of time. Every job here is dangerous and this danger can be compounded by the loneliness of this vast expanse of snow, mountains and wilderness bordered on all sides by an ocean. Again my eyes survey the field of houses. You can begin to see the men and women leaving the cabins and tents in their orange jumpsuits. The jumpsuits pop out against the white hard packed snow and make it easy to track the movement of the workers from their front porches toward the train stations. It's cold and snowy some 300 plus days a year. This is a simple fact about the climate at this end of the world. Slowly the men and women move into single file lines to enter the tubes that take them to the mountain. This is the morning shift. There are 3 shifts: morning, swing and graveyard. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year we work. We never rest, not on Christmas, New Years, Passover or St. Patrick's Day. The men and women that work here come from around the world. Scientists, soldiers, miners, factory workers, doctors. You name it, they are here. Five

years is the minimum contract that is allowed. Five years of your life given to the glacier. Our job is simple; remove the coal from the mountain as efficiently and quickly as possible. That's our single purpose. It isn't more complicated than that. Wetmore is funded by an amalgamation of corporations from around the world. Their funding created this makeshift society that at times borders on a military camp. Though no one in any government or part of the corporation would ever admit that we are an extension of a military branch. Yes, we are an army of sorts. Somewhere between a legitimate military and the Salvation Army in the States. An army of an amalgamated corporation. A corporation that is hard to pin down like whose is in charge and where exactly does the funding come from. This is proving to be problematic for me at this time. Just ask me later and I will tell you exactly what I mean. A corporation created to ensure the continued mining of coal that lies beneath the large glacier set inside the mountain. Cut into the side of the mountains are large turbines that help cool the glacier., too many of them to count by eye. Their sound can be deafening at times. It's worst at the top of the mountain, but you can still manage to hear their hum when you are in the cabins at the base of the mountains. It would be the equivalent of having a home near the airport. The cabins at the base of the mountains are the least desirable to live in for this fact alone. Down here in the plains where I stand, miles and miles away, you can still make out the faint hum of their motors, Sometimes you hear them even when you are not within distance of them, it's like a song you can't get out of your head. The wooded regions are no different. They are the merging of human-made technology with natural wilderness. Riddled along the sides of the mountains, foothills and plains are the "Stuffs." "Stuffs" are openings like manhole covers or bank teller chutes at the bank drive through. The "stuffs" are holes with thick rubber rings surrounding the edges where firewood is fed into them to help generate the energy for the large turbines. Once the wood is placed into the "Stuffs" it travels within an intricate system of plumbing or tubes to the furnaces that help generate power. Wood is used as an alternative fuel in combination with the coal. "Stuffs" will sometimes blow out and you'll see a geyser like fire shooting up from the hole. It has to be capped and contained. A lovely site to be sure, but very dangerous to the surrounding woods. The geyser fires shoot soot up into the air which almost always settles in a perfect circle. Sometimes the soot settles some 200 feet in diameter, sometimes 300 feet. It darkens the snow and always leaves a trace.



one more time. Will this be the time? The time I save a life. My life. This is the long version of what is happening, that I am trying to save my life. The short version is this, "it didn't work." It wouldn't have mattered anyway, I think to myself, because it will never be enough. Back and forth, back and forth, my body rocks and so does my head. The ride usually isn't this bumpy. The train's movement is curious I think to myself. I feel the train shift tracks and that means we are now underneath the mountains and headed toward the central command center. You can see the side of the mountains guts where the tunnels for the train have been cut away as the train moves forward like a rocket. The individual window pains act like individual frames of a film, Frame by frame we move forward. Welcome to my time machine, and as suddenly as I notice the guts of the mountain, they are gone, replaced by the large tiled surfaces which indicate that the station is coming and that we have arrived at deepest depths of the mountains. As the train begins to slow down and come to a stop, I have an uneasy feeling that everything is about to change.

As the train comes to a stop I watch as a row of lights embedded in the terminal floor bordering the catwalk change from white to orange. There is also a run of lights in the central part of the ceiling and another set of lights that run between the train tracks on the track floor. They all light up orange when a train arrives and this helps keep people from falling off the platform. The train slows to a even stop and everyone moves slowly toward the exit doors, as I let go of the handrail I notice how sweaty my palms are inside my gloves. I take my gloves off and wipe my palms off on the front of my jumpsuit. As the exit nears it becomes clear that there is no one waiting to get on the train from the graveyard shit. The clock say 7:50 AM and that means the train is on time. Curious I think to myself. Once off the train I look down the tracks to see how far down the lights have changed to orange. I can only see for 300 yards or so and the orange lights disappear off into the tunnel darkness. I follow the path of the lights back up towards the train I just exited and as I turn around, I notice that everyone has left the platform and I am the only person left. As I begin to slowly move toward the steps I can hear my snow boots squish against the Lucite floor of the terminal. Squish, Squish, Squish. The entire subway station looks like the inside of a beehive. The walls and ceiling are arched with a honeycomb pattern cut into them. The entire terminal is white or some variation of off

white. The terminal is well lit, but just well enough so a level of emotional comfort is maintained. It isn't so bright it blinds you and makes you feel paranoid or anxious. Everything in this tunnel is seamless. The walls seem to meld into the floor and everything is encased in some form of translucent acrylic or glass. Everything is shiny, like it has been covered in lacquer or has been freshly waxed and polished. There are television monitors embedded in the walls and others that are cantilevered from the ceiling that broadcast news, sports and entertainment while the workers wait for the trains. No government broadcast or brainwashing. Network broadcasts are rotated so no partisanship is favored or revealed. It's funny, you never hear people talk politics here. It's definitely a topic off limits. Individual workers can adjust the frequency of their headsets to the particular station they wish to tune into. You can usually gauge the level of group interest by which television monitor has the most people gathered around it. I glance across the monitors, but nothing registers. As my eyes continue to survey the terminal I noticed how distracted I am. I look at the clock and it now says 7:53 AM and just as I take another step forward I hear the numbers of the clocks shift and the dashes change vertical and horizontal directions and it is now 7:54 AM. I instinctively blink to make sure the time is correct and that my eyes aren't playing tricks on me. It's 7:54 AM. Just then the workers from the graveyard shift file down the stairs as I approach. They seem to be in a rush. "Why?" The train won't leave without them. Not at the beginning of a shift. Everything inside the mountains is very orderly. There is no such thing as overtime or 1/2 shifts. When your shift is over, you exit the mountain with everyone else. That is why the graveyard's shifts late departure is so puzzling. I reach the bottom of the steps and am met by a wave of people moving in the opposite direction. I grab the handrail to my left and stay put. The right side of my body is jostled as people move by. I can't get a read on them as they leave. Most of their heads are facing forward and by the time they get close enough so I can get a closer look at their faces they have moved past me. I try to take a step up one of the steps and am immediately pushed back down to my original position. Finally after 60 seconds of this they are all gone and I can see them filing into the train cars to take them back to the tents and cabins. This is one of a hundred or so tubes that exit the various sides of the mountains. The north, south, west, east, northwest, northwest-west, northwest-west-west, northeast, northeast-east, northeast-east-east, etc. all have similar tunnels moving in the same directions. Outward and away from the core

of the mountain. As I turn I hear someone stumble down the stairs. I notice her grab the handrail in order to keep herself from falling down. The scraping of her rubber boots against the steps leaves a distinctive, traumatic sound. As I lean over the rail to help grab her mid-fall she regains her balance and posture and stands upright. I ask her if she is all right? She doesn't say anything, she just looks me dead in the eyes and tells me, "Go." It's completely inaudible, but I make the words out crystal clear. "Go," she told me. "Go?" "Go where?" I think to myself. And why. I am puzzled. Her pace quickens in order to get to the train. She gets on one of the cars and the bells sound for the train's exit and off the train goes. Up the steps I go, I am going to be late and the last thing I want is to call attention to myself. Especially after what has happened the last 10 or so months. I walk down the corridor and every 80 feet or so I pass another set of corridors on the left and right of me. The interior of the central command core is laid out on a grid and is very easy to negotiate and this is obviously a good thing. My pace quickens as I try and to get to my post on time. The clock says 7:59 AM, so I still have a minute. Now my pace quickens to a jog. Past adjacent corridors I go. I can see the grid of tiles move beneath my feet, my pace quickens. I move faster and faster until I am running. The tiles move faster and faster beneath my feet. As I begin to approach my post I can hear the voices of other workers. I make a left down an adjacent corridor, then another left and I am 25 feet from my post. The clock now says 8:00 AM and all I have to do is place my thumb and forefinger print on the time panel to verify I have arrived at my post on time. 8:00 AM, I am on time for my shift and for something else I did not expect this morning. I remember having this uneasy feeling as I began to exit the train. That feeling I had that everything was about to change. Well that feeling has just come true.

"Mr. Gallardo," he says. He isn't really asking, it's more like he is telling. I stand there stunned, stopped dead in my tracks. I can hear the voice coming from behind me, I can't see his face but I immediately know whose voice it is. I knew this was coming, but I thought I would have more time because a friend of mine had tipped me off that I had 48 hours before something like this would come. "Mr. Gallardo, you need to come with us," he bellows. As I turn, there he is, the head of Wetmore's police force. This matter is as much personal as it is of criminal or corporate interest. I grit my teeth and as I make eye contact with him I can't help but bow my head and look down feeling momentarily

defeated. “Mr. Gallardo,” he says again, this time questioning whether or not I heard him the first time. He stands there defiantly, his hands clinched around both ends of his club, clearly waiting for the opportunity to use it should I give him the excuse. Clearly he would love the opportunity to punish me rather than do something civil, say like say put me down with a taser gun. I don’t even have to ask what this is about, because I know what this is about. Everyone in Wetmore knows what this is about. It has been going on for the past ten months. This cat and mouse game between myself, Wetmore’s MPAs (Military Police Agency) and the corporation is finally coming to an end. “Mr. Gallardo, please handle your self in a civil manner or this will get ugly,” he says. “ All I can think of is the other feeling that I had this morning, the feeling that I will never see her again. Slowly this feeling appears to be very, very true. The questioning over what happened 10 months ago is over. I am now being arrested and the ten-month gap is now coming to a close. I am handcuffed and led down the corridors I just jogged and ran down. As I inch my way back down the pathway I just came, I think about the women on the steps whose lips desperately pantomimed the words, “Go.” I think about if for a minute, I ponder. There are surveillance cameras everywhere in this place, snow that tracks every movement and footstep, in climate weather that makes survival with the proper supplies questionable, and then there is the unforgiving landscape that goes on and on, forever, in all directions. “Go,” I think to myself for a moment. “Go where?”

RJ, COLORADO

Part 1

By: Juliane Zelwies

WETMORE (Yes! I am a Long Way From Home)

Part 2

By: RJ Gallardo