

standards and is a hero by punk's exceptionally low ones. The sentiment is something that I can wholeheartedly get behind; but like Lou Reed's *Heroin*, the failure is that he couldn't truthfully continue to embody the angst of the song. In the marbled halls of history it's about the work, not the ethical consistency in the artist's life, but in the world of punk rock, priorities have been reversed--and lacking authenticity can be a real killer.

1986, the year Embrace was a band, seems like a transitional time; The rickety nationwide hardcore network became splintered and fragmented, Ian was in-between bands, Black Flag dissolved, and the rest of the pack was destined to be reunited at Lollapalooza '94. The shuffle and increasing fractionalization seems prescient here in the closing years of the 2000s. Now as then, there is the identity circus, the questionable intentions, the Guantanamo-detainee-torture-quality bad side projects. I'm sure Ian, like those of us floating through our mid-twenties in a purgatorial, grim procession of jobs (dishwasher, erotic masseuse, disgruntled teacher, donut shop grunt, just to name a few) or student loan payback schemas, rolled off his greasy mattress some afternoons about one, and sighed, asking himself, "How much longer will Ian MacKaye be a washed-up scrub? When will they hear my name booming across the mountaintops and echoing in the hearts of America's great cities?" Maybe if he found himself where I was, stoned one night watching MTV's *The Pick-up Artist*, he too would have been mortified by the host's elimination-round pronouncement to the two remaining contestants: "One of you has botched all your attempts, but continues to show promise and improve with every round. The Other, I'm sorry to say, seems to have... How do I put this gently--Plateaued." Maybe Ian would have gasped out in cosmic horror, at once fully grasping the just recently-incomprehensible chance for failure. Or worse, the possibility that he might have already plateaued and hadn't even noticed it, like a deserted army cut off from communication in a distant province, still fighting, unaware that their country has fallen. Maybe at that point, sensing his own progress, he wrote the end of "Building":

"Nothing seems to work out right/and I can feel it building-FAILURE"

II. CLOCKING IN

An acquaintance of mine, on a walk in the park recently, was detailing to me the results of her exploratory descent into the secretarial caste of a major New York marketing firm:

"I do nothing, absolutely nothing, for eight hours a day. No one else on my floor does anything either. We don't even really have to look busy. Sometimes I watch sitcoms on my iPod. But mostly, I just stare off into my cubicle wall."

If this one mole's conclusions lend credence to the possibility that once you squeeze your way through into the white-collar workforce, you might actually spend more time perfecting your performance of working than actually working, who wouldn't want to jump on board? Millions receive a salary every day by pretending to do their jobs, pretending that the economy is not tanking, clocking in and keeping up the appearance of real progress. Sure, I've fucked off at work before; I've read Milton in the corner at the donut shop. I've practiced my knife-throwing on the now pocked-up walls of the Bloomington Bagel Company. But who knew that if you continued to climb the ladder you

would eventually reach a zenith where your only duty was to pantomime labor?

"That sounds like my dream job," I confide in her, "I could do what I do at home--read and write--and get paid for it." She shakes her head dismally,

"No, I don't think you understand. What you're thinking of is some kind of P.O.W. fantasy, some imagined "they can break my body but they can never have my spirit" romantic ideal. That's what I thought too. But eventually, I tapered off and stopped being interested in things--in anything. I wish to God every day that they would come and give me something to do."

Her void-fearing resolve strikes fear in the heart of my void-centered plans, all focused more or less around reacquisitioning free time away from my employers in order to better allow me to watch YouTube or try to learn Arabic. Her point is kind of like being audited, but comes too little too late; I have already deeply internalized backwards social mores learned from the lyrics of unsuccessful, incendiary bands and have developed a retrogressive dedication to obsolete technologies and uncomfortable forms of transportation. What could I be doing at home that I can't do on a thirty hour bus ride lurching across America? Of course there are certain benefits to this kind of skittish and erratic existence. Sure, I have long forgotten the quadratic formula and certain social graces, but on command I can draw a fairly accurate map of most college-sized to large American cities, and pinpoint decent places to get a cup of coffee in those places. On the other hand, there is the craterous absence and slow sinking feeling that sets in when you're not doing what everyone else is doing. No familiar faces by the water cooler, no happy hour pub crawls with buddies from work, no school, no girlfriend, no validation. There is the reasonable fear touched on in the Phillip K. Dick work *We Can Build You*, where the correct interpretation of the proverb "a rolling stone gathers no moss" is the exact opposite of the popularly held one: in his world, no longer signifying that an active, unremitting person won't pick up baggage and will thus get ahead in life; But rather meaning that gathering moss is what makes life worth living, and an unsteady person will find themselves unable to form meaningful relationships.

constructed identity. Maybe it's better to just never have a reflection of yourself held up to rage against. It seems more earnest to just chug along, toiling in obscurity at what you do best, until the full body of it can be disclosed, untainted by the validation and rejection of exposure. This is the story of Guided by Voices. One person took it a step further and never published his work, but rather on his deathbed instructed his friend to have it all burned. Luckily for self-deprecating attic-dwellers everywhere, his friend didn't comply and we were left with a supreme body of stories by a writer with the world's most formidable anti-ego, the ultimate failure among legions of failures-- Franz Kafka. It would be hard to find another specimen with his fortitude of shame and self-hate today, among the mad rush of writers prehumously anthologizing themselves in desperate bids for legitimacy and recognition. That's the thing--you would never find him because it was such a freak accident, the cruel twist of a friend not sticking to the plan. Kafka was the real deal, the writer who lived what he said and who was actually as guilt-ridden and twisted as the characters in his stories. He was luminary, and toiled as he died, unknown and miserable. This is the exact opposite of the situation that we are facing today. Unmemorable garbage has managed to wheedle its way into the canon of "things to be remembered" riding on hype and a decent distribution model (To understand the vital importance of distribution: see the recent folding of the underground Goliath, *Punk Planet*) Cultural output like record labels, street art, bands, and zines with some degree of longevity are no longer heralded on the merit of their content, but function instead as anchoring brand names, accessories to constructed identities. This one year anniversary issue of the Skeleton is about FAILURE--my bread and butter. Obviously, the Skeleton is doomed in a world where VICE magazine has recently unearthed something called hardcore music and where internet hype plays a major role in ruining cool things by turning them into products for hipster consumption. Failure is determined by where you set the bar of success. The Skeleton is, at this particularly low-bar moment in history, the best damn hope we've got. It's submission-based, fragrantly esoteric and inaccessible, has comics that flaunt Westernized standards of comprehension, and is an all-around beacon of promise in an otherwise

uninspired quagmire. What more could you ask for? The sad truth is that a thing's flaming righteousness is often inversely linked to its popularity. With luck, the Skeleton can one day hope to be a footnote in some heavy academic tome fastidiously documenting the final generation of evanescent subterranean newspapers and magazines before they all went the way of the dinosaurs and the last one blinked out of existence. Your children will ask you, "Mommy-- what's a zine?" and you will shed a single tear, and then you will usher them over to the computer to show them how to blog. Failure is a dismissive shrug of the shoulders and an ironic smile, half-excited, mildly ashamed to finally be joining the rest of the pack. You can breathe a sigh of relief, understanding that this is the onus of progress.



III. DUTY NOW FOR THE FUTURE

The band Pere Ubu were, in their time, assured that they "could be big". But not really being the overachieving types, they were happy with their pole position at cult status. In the art world, just like the job world, the higher you climb the less real work you actually have to do. The more time you can spend performing as a symbol of yourself, going as far as to stage revolts against your own meticulously



W C B I m
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I. WE'RE DESPERATE

The year 1986 has been following me around and I can't seem to shake it. It seems like one of those intermittent bouts with serendipity where factors collude to pound you over the head with something you haven't been noticing, but could be a sign of far more insidious proportions. This is what happens when you have too much time on your hands, Folks--Beware a life of idle leisure and spongy city wandering, for you too could end up like this--reading the grinds at the bottom of your morning coffee and obsessing over the latent subtext of your diminishing social interactions. Having deconstructed my life to its most skeletal elements I can now say that I get it--the pursuit of quality diversions and compelling work; I chose emptiness and now tell-tale coincidences make my decisions for me. 1986 is tagged on the bathroom stalls at the art school near my crumbling tenement, is the name of a new band on show fliers, and is the ghostly release date on the back the Embrace tape that I can't stop listening to. Buried in the middle of that record, a twenty-four year old Ian MacKaye croons

"I can't get what I want/I'm a failure/nothing seems to work out right/the way I planned"

The song, "Building" is great but seems kind of maudlin when put into context. Ian MacKaye went on to front the D.I.Y behemoth Fugazi and continued to run Dischord, one of the only operations from the eighties that managed to put out hundreds of records and retain some measure of dignity; he's hardly classifiable as a failure by average