

THE HEAVY METAL SOUND OF STEEL

By Daniel Thompson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *This is the first example of 'noir' fiction we've published. Not only is it hard to come by, it's hard to write. It's a tough genre because it can easily descend into parody. To do it right, the author has to sustain the 'hard boiled' tone without compromising realism, as well as guarding against characters slipping into caricature. We're pleased to report that Thompson has more than enough talent to head off these challenges and the intriguing plot, sense of mystery and kinetic prose keep the story moving at a healthy clip. And as in all the best 'noir' fiction, think Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammet, language is as important as story and the percussive key in 'The Heavy Metal Sound of Steel' is everywhere and beautifully apparent.*
Quote: 'Sounds that he imagines might resemble some sort of polygon, not the smooth corners of contemporary life, but a geometry all its own. A topography of creases and dents like an aluminum can...' And 'Incendiary figures flutter and flash in blood Rorschach across his vision.'

The Heavy Metal Sound of Steel

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Cheap speakers carve out hollow sounds battering metal panels. Engine noise tears through injectors, tight titanium tubes. Harold shakes his fist to the music. The fuel gauge sinks as he stomps the pedal, passing a tractor on a double solid line. Cars doppler past giving sharp, exaggerated jabs of their horns. Headlights sweeping a continuous wash of concrete coming to an end in ten, nine, eight... The implacable whoosh of wheels cuts out as the ground falls away, nothing but the tops of trees, houses and the blue-black of the bay. From below it would look like a small plane taking off (a short flight) before dropping into the steep grade, forcing an involuntary *whoop*. The wheel bites into his hand like a captured animal seeking to free itself

from the yoke of the road. He leans back, elbows bent, holding steady at 10 and 2. Not a bit nervous, he's done this before.

Borrowed lights of reflectors rear up at the bottom of the hill. He pulls into the driveway of a middle-class suburban home on the beach, but with no waterfront or sand in the yard. After a shower he brushes and shaves, mirror mouthing the words to a ballad like a kissing incantation, recreating the events of Saturday night/ Sunday last. The way she gazed up at him before they kissed on the dance floor. The pupils that sucked up everything in the room, including her, so she had to feel around in the dark. Exhilarated by the prospect of her first time and a calculated fear of intimacy. Arcane pleasures that until then had been forbidden and she wasn't sure how she would react. He squeezes his eyes shut to keep the vision from dissolving, but she recedes into the dark corner of the roadhouse.

In a hurry he eats whatever's available and heads back out to the car. Sliding across the leather, gripping the gearshift, fingering the emblem on the handle. Porthole vents, four on either side of the engine compartment, light up in festive firing order of red, orange, green, blue blowing leaves off the paved drive as he backs onto the street. Idling up to the light and accelerating on yellow only a fraction of a second before it turns red, keeping up his speed for as long as he can without letting it go below thirty.

A police cruiser signals him to yield with a single squelch of its siren. Harold slows to the shoulder. The cruiser speeds past before he's had time to come to a complete stop. Only slightly inconvenienced, Harold regains his momentum and pulls onto a side street.

Lights flash through sight lines ahead and to the right. A crowd is gathered behind a cordon of yellow tape enclosing two crashed cars. Ambulance attendants roll stretchers into waiting ambulances slow and methodical; there are no lives to save. Harold circles the scene

twice looking for a place to park. The ambulances leave sans sirens, freeing the entrance to the main plaza parking lot.

Harold gazes at his reflection in the rearview, considering what he should say, how he should walk in, how much money he is prepared to spend. But unlike the perfectly jelled part in his hair, words and actions are not things he can perfect in the mirror.

He climbs out, checking several times to see if the door is locked.

Columns of light pour down waxed metal bodies; dark, blotchy outlines spaced evenly apart. Tow trucks haul the wrecked cars away. Harold pulls up his collar, digs his fists into his leather jacket and strolls into the street. A General Motors insignia lies athwart the centerline. Harold bends down and tucks the artifact into his pocket.

Headlights flash around the corner.

He strides on.

Another set of headlights emerge from the opposite direction, engulfing him in their intimidating light. He makes a dash for the sidewalk as the two cars collide in sounds of screeching metal. He feels pain and is jolted into a dark space, oriented by a single beam of light, contrapuntal to the surrounding darkness; a glowing apparition reaching out in a white wave. Sharp, prickly fingers prod impossibly close to the skin with the numbness of blood starting to recirculate after having stopped for the first time ever. No memory of leaving or being away, just a sudden return that makes the place he is returning to seem less real.

Lights shine on his body sprawled out in the grass. A new crowd has assembled consisting of members from the first with the addition of a few new disaster junkies. Standing motionless in the impartial stupor of an uneventful evening. He feels himself rise and stroll effortlessly across the street.

Sendozen's begins to clear out around 23:00, about the time the last band goes on and impatient teens take leave. Harold crouches low in the driver's seat, watching lovers beeline for cars, noting each peacoat and frocked figure until he spots Louise talking to Travis by the door. She passes him something and leaves with her girlfriends. Travis lingers thoughtfully for a moment, studying the object in his hand and strolls off in the opposite direction. Taking his time with a sweep and a hop in his step. Harold watches until he is out of view then follows him down a quiet residential street. Lights in the porthole vents flicker with the touch of a nervous foot. Travis spins round, enveloped in the cold, impersonal glare of headlights. The impact throws him to the ground. He screams, clutching at his knee. Harold drives over him, one, two more times before speeding out of town. The route laid out in his mind, taking him from the brightly lit agora into the rural wilds where his acts would resemble more the ambivalent works of nature.

A stop sign rears up at an intersection. Harold spots a pedestrian crossing the road. The pedestrian hobbles on, assured of the basic goodness of his fellow man to observe the rules of the road and stop at the designated place. Harold hits the breaks, having already passed the point where one is *strongly advised* to slow down, coming to a stop only a few inches away from the man. Their eyes meet. Terror creases the man's face. He shrieks, cursing drunken slurs, bringing his cane down on the hood of the car repeatedly. Harold remains silent, experiencing a sense of apathy and contempt towards the man resulting from his repulsive disposition and way of conducting himself more than his idiotic words. As if feeling sentimental about killing the old codger, Harold hesitates a moment before pushing the pedal, sending the man tumbling into a ditch at the edge of a farmer's field. Headlights shine on the body laid out in the grass. Dark blood oozes from his mouth and nose, he moans.

Satisfied, Harold returns to the car. A slow jazz ballad scratches through the speakers. He touches the dial. The radio roars out blacklisted American Rock 'n' Roll on a pirate station.

Headlights approach from behind. He kills the lights, pulls a U-turn and heads back into town, a phantom wind roaring past the oncoming vehicle.

Inside, a man in a cowboy hat has his radio tuned to a country station. He hears the car pass, feels its velocity but doesn't see. Cursing, the cowboy stomps the brakes, turns off the radio, rolls down the window, leans out and listens. Engine sounds fade into the night. He pivots on his seat throwing one cowboy-footed boot onto the road. Crickets chirp in an adjacent field. Wind rattles corn stalks, their blades anointed with the thinly broadcasted light of the moon. He heaves a contemplative breath as if the air still held a description of the car and its driver. His job demands a relentless attention to detail. He waits for it. The air is fresh but not instructive.

Road hog clouds tumble in from the east. He'd give them a ticket if he could. A single droplet strikes his cheek. He slams the door, turns up the music and drives on.

Dry thrills and screams along the roadside.

A deer jumps in front of the headlights. Hits the tank-like car body with a thud, sending a shockwave through the steel compartment. Harold fishtails onto the soft shoulder and races faster, asserting his control. Out of bounds of the mind with no limits under the hood. Taking eyes off the road and feeling direction's attraction

"Get out of my way," he yells at nothing.

Aiming through the gun-sight hood ornament he hits a man stepping off a sidewalk and sideswipes a moving car into the guardrails. Sparks fly out in an array. The driver stares at him in mid-scream. Harold grinds the vehicles together with sharp jabs of the wheel and releases seconds before the rail ends. The driver takes immediate corrective action, overcompensating

suddenly, the tires biting into the soft grass of a hill, dragging the car down, flipping once before slamming into a tree.

Harold glances back to see glass and bits of metal fly.

It's light out when he wakes. Head between the seat and the driver's side window. He doesn't remember much if anything from the night before. He had gone to meet Louise at the bar. He left his car in the parking lot and was about to cross the street. That's the last thing he remembers. From what he sees of his surroundings, he guesses he must be somewhere north of town, along a lonely stretch of road with farms on either side. There doesn't seem to be anyone out, which is great news for him. The car is in pretty bad shape. One side is significantly bashed in. There are blood stains on the hood and different colours of paint on the doors and quarter panels. He wipes the blood off with a rag and drives to the body shop where he works, suspiciously obeying all traffic laws.

The repairs will take a couple of days so he catches a bus home, trying to recall the details of the previous night, but all he can think about is the car, part graduation present part loan and what his parents will say when he returns without it. Getting them to lend him the money took a lot of convincing and then he had to sit through their long droning admonitions. *Cars are dangerous. Cars are not toys. No screeching of tires. No speeding. Wear a seatbelt.*

Acting natural, Harold strolls into the house and aims for the fridge. Breezing past his father reading the paper open to an inner section.

"Mornin' son. Just getting in? You must have had quite a night," lowering the page and peering over the fringe.

The television is audible in the next room amid the quiet rustling of his mother at her painting.

Harold responds through a mouthful of potato salad, “working late at the shop... mmm went out with Louise... stayed over at her place.”

“Do anything special or just go out?”

Harold pours himself a glass of milk. “We saw ‘Space Explorers... mmm mmm. Two’.”

“Really, I haven’t heard of it,” Harold’s father studies his son’s face and returns to his newspaper with scrutiny. Sounds of congenial conversation summon mother to the kitchen, hub of family life dressed in night attire. She looks at them then out onto the street, “Where’s the car?”

“The fuel pump blew so I had to get it towed, I’ll pick it up later tonight.”

“Oh my gosh, what happened? Is everything alright?”

“Of course, I just lost power, the engine wasn’t getting any uh, gas,” Harold concerns himself with his milk. Watching it coat the inside of the glass. His face lights up Tilt.

“You sure it’s just the fuel pump?” asks his father.

“Yeah, gas was spurting out. I had to tie it down with, uh... panty hose and idle all the way back to the shop. It’s on the lift right now.”

Harold takes his glass and strolls into the living room, pretending to look at pictures hanging in their neat wooden frames.

News of the hit-and-runs spreads rapidly around town. Four dead and five injured. The press is describing it as a serial road rampage blood-fest, a lead that keeps on bleeding. Words fly into print without proper substantiation, soon everyone has an alternate version of the truth.

“I don’t even know if we can call these incidents hit and runs. There is neither word nor definition to describe this breed of driving. I mean how could anyone be so blatantly and brutally sadistic? It makes me wonder if this isn’t the beginning of a new age of criminals, breaking every mortal law of man and Jesus.”

“What’re you gonna do Len?” asks a tin cop voice.

“Take him down,” Len, fist-pounding the bullpen desk the two men share, “Can’t let vermin like that walk the streets.”

“I don’t think the captain’s gonna assign you to the case. You’re working the bank robbery and that case is supposed to be closed in the next thirty-six...”

“Never mind. I’m gonna catch this freak and you’re gonna do the paper work on the robberies otherwise I’m gonna kick your rookie wise ass, you got it?”

“Yessir,” replies the obsequious cop.

Len gets up in a huff, stomping over to take in a serene view of the Lake and environs. How can I know what’s going on when all I see are ducks on the water. I’m looking in the wrong direction entirely. I may as well be staring at the wall, get a lot more done. He reels away from the idyllic scene, turning several heads on his way out of the building.

Onset evening is attended by a gentle pattering of rain. Harold catches a bus downtown and steals a 56’ El Camino, cruising Dallas to Ross Bay circling the cemetery twice before looping back through Fernwood and into the stomping grounds, West Saanich, highway 17A.

He kills the lights and turns onto Beaver Lake road, scanning the airwaves for some appropriate music, but finds only the usual pop, country, jazz—gumdrops and lollipops. Whatever he’s looking for, it isn’t there yet, lying dormant between the stations. Sounds that he

imagines might resemble some sort of polygon, not the smooth corners of contemporary life, but a geometry all its own. A topography of creases and dents, like an aluminum can whose pressure has suddenly and unevenly been released, producing the sounds of crumpled metal.

The parking lot is not quite deserted; a few cars with heads pressed together, windows fogged up, others appear empty. He parks in the open and strolls down to the shore.

A man stops him on the path, “have you seen a little dog?”

Harold shrugs.

The man toddles off calling a dog’s name.

The water audible before it comes into view, slapping the shore and retaining wall of the lower path. Harold stares long and deep, a projection or exchange of something mental over the lake. At length he removes his clothes and swims out until he is somewhere near the center. The shore located only by the croak of crickets and toads that seem to have hopped up a trellis of fog and are now suspended above him. He stays only as long as necessary, until the exchange is complete.

His is the only vehicle left in the lot. He switches on the high beams that do nothing for navigation and eases back onto the highway. Cruising to the bay on the other side of the peninsula and back.

The air begins to clear as he nears town again, passing the lake on the right and merging onto the highway. Taillights glow about a kilometer away. He rushes to catch up, falling in behind his quarry, a Buick of equal size and weight. The occupant either doesn’t see him or doesn’t care as Harold pulls up next to them on a double solid line. The driver slows a bit, making way for Harold to pass. They go on like this for about a quarter of a mile, the driver of the other car intermittently glancing over, waving him on. Harold smiles and waves back, giving

the car a nudge on the rear fender. The driver raises an outraged hand and slams it down, mouth working behind deaf glass, keeping one eye on the road. Harold swerves again, hitting the car in the same spot. Abandoning all hope of reasoning with his tormentor the besieged driver accelerates, leaning into the wheel. Harold is only too happy to follow. Hitting it harder this time on the rear passenger side door. The car shoves back, grinding metal against metal.

Harold whoops. Listening for the nuances in the sound, the interior a resonant cavity for deeper bass tones, building until it abruptly cuts out. He glances over to see the other party swerve onto a side street. Harold in his transport misses the turn and skids to a stop in the middle of the road. Losing time and speed, he pulls a U-ey and jumps the curb, catching up with his quarry at the next light, squeezing through a window of green, while Harold, confident in his abilities goes on yellow then red. The intersection clear both ways.

His quarry races faster, but is sloppy at handling, going wide round the corners and making too frequent use of his breaks. Harold, the bolder of the two, turns into the parallel lane. Taking the S-curve straight so he doesn't have to slow down. The lake comes into view on the right, giving the impression of open space. Harold waits until they are wheel to wheel and slams into the other car, perhaps a little harder than he expected, sending them both careering down the bank. The impact slows him a little, landing in some brambles along the shore. He rolls down the window and climbs onto the roof in time to see the other car go under with a gurgling *blurp* and rising bubble of air. Harold holds his breath, waiting to see if the driver, whoever he is, surfaces in time. Either he went down with the car or swam a ways and came up in the reeds. It doesn't matter. What he needs now is a ride. He scrambles up the bank and scans the street for a car to steal.

Perplexed but undeterred, Len visits and revisits crime scenes with gloves and kit. Taking paint samples from scored quarter panels, seeking and interviewing witnesses, spotting men he sees as suspicious and following them out of buildings, down streets into cars. Examining every vehicle on the road for the identical shade of black paint left on the victim's cars or any other telltale sign, a scratch or a dent, a maniac at the wheel. No one seems to remember anything.

Len infers that the murderer must be from out of town. He spends hours on the phone to other cities, towns, provinces, countries; a long strenuous paper trail ensues.

Almost every broadcast leads with stories on the killings, the most recent one taking place just a few hundred feet away from the station itself. Reporters have set up a kind of camp around the perimeter of the lake, but nobody is saying anything. Except of course when Len yelled a reporter right into his car and ripped the cameraman's film out, saying, "get your all-seeing eye outta my face," Len's not so covert way of eschewing all suspicion by accusing the other of muckraking. But they knew, they all did, that something was about to happen—had been happening—for a while now, but had simply gone unnoticed. Hidden under the auspices of coincidence, accident, the inability for anyone to make the connection and see it for what it was.

On the fifth day the police receive an anonymous letter. Hastily written characters scrawled across the page spelling out the intimate thoughts of a madman

My uncanny style and mastery of ability have taken you all by storm. I fare stronger than my predecessors. You are neither worthy nor prepared for an adversary such as the world has never seen. Noone (sic) can emulate my style or match my impeccable wits. There is no feeling like the feeling of speed, the wind through your hair and the sound of crumpling metal, crushing your opponent beneath the wheels.

*In my pursuit of perfection I will take myself to new levels bringing you all along willing or unwilling. I go forward while you go back
and somewhere we will meet*

Your friend, and admirer

H.

Len paces the Captain's office, clutching the paper and pulling at his thick greasy hair, "Who the hell does this guy think he is? Does he actually think he can outwit me?" lunging toward the desk, "I'm closing in. I'll have him in forty-eight hours."

"You're not the *only* cop on the case. I only assigned you because we need everyone we can on this. Try to stay outside, we don't need you losing it," the captain pauses considerably, "you know, you may want to talk to someone about your anger."

Len whacks the desk, leaning into nose-pore range. "I don't need a goddamn shrink. What I need to do is catch this creep, but I can't... find him. It's like he's everywhere, everywhere and nowhere, in the sky, in the air, in the godforsaken emptiness of the streets. I don't know when I'll catch him, but when I do... I'm going to squeeze, squeeze, SQUE-EZE." Len demonstrates, wringing the air between his empty hands.

"You're gonna settle the fuck down. We don't need another hothead on the street, there're already a bunch of vigilantes out there."

Len's eyes are growlers hidden below the surface of deep blue.

"And another thing. I told you to finish with the robberies first, but Lamark tells me you've passed it off on him. You need to finish one thing before I give you another."

Len compresses a breath through clenched teeth, restraining himself from a further outburst and leaves the office in a flourish of grappling gestures, throttling the air in front of him.

The Captain calls from the doorway, “don’t walk out of here, there’s a thing or two we have to discuss yet...” a recommendation that Len obligatorily ignores, laying a patch on his exit from the precinct.

Panic in the heat and exhaust, sweating and restless, driving offensive/ defensive with complete disregard for anyone’s safety. Len pulls over in the shade to give himself a pep talk, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuuuuuuck,” slamming his fist down on the last *fuck* enabling the horn and shocking pedestrians out of their purposeful stride on the sidewalk next to him. “All this time and what have I got to show for it SQUAT.”

Heavy eyes of passing motorists press on him through the glass and steel. He drinks mechanically from a metal canteen and finishes the other half of a submarine sandwich, the first true act of self-preservation in days. Disjointed, fleshy thoughts catch in the gears of his brain. He knows he can’t take much more of this.

He takes another sip, mentally distilling the water into alcohol, soothing, immediate in its effects. Muting thoughts when they become too oppressive. He seeks a liquor store, picking it out amid a jumble of superfluous structures and signs.

He hasn’t had so much as a nip since January and wouldn’t consider it unless he really needed to forget this car-killer case for a few hours and think of something else. It’s down to the Jack Daniels or the Chivas Regal, not much of a choice really, he always chooses scotch over whiskey, but then there’s the price to consider and whether he’s really going to go through with this or if he’s just entertaining the idea before he gets back to catching his man.

Harold is in an adjacent aisle watching Len quibble over the sauce, dilly-dallying between the Jack and the Chivas, drunk and drunker. From his choice Harold will learn more about Len than Len will ever know about Harold. Whiskey says impulsive, reckless, straight across, perhaps too impulsive to catch the biggest criminal this town has ever seen. Scotch says, slow, patient, attention to detail, not to be underestimated, but maybe too patient. Harold grabs a bottle of tequila and brushes past Len on the way to the till.

Suddenly aggravated and for no apparent reason, Len puts the Jack back on the shelf and grabs the Chivas Regal, then resigned, but still undecided, takes both the Jack and the Chivas.

Harold raises his eyebrows at the sight of both bottles, "how's it goin' friend?"

"Just fine thanks and you?" says Len, filtering his contempt through a grin.

"Great. I'm celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

Harold moves up in line, chatting amiably with the girl behind the counter, taking a little more time perhaps than he needs, stopping on his way out to wave at Len, "see ya' later buddy."

Len looks but doesn't say anything. The girl regards him with a nod. Neither makes an attempt at conversation. In the car, Len opens a bottle of coke, pours half of it out and fills it the rest of the way with scotch. He takes a few sips from the bottle before lurching onto the road. Three spaces away Harold squeezes a lime into his bottle of tequila and shakes salt onto his hand and arm, hitting the car in front of him then shifting into reverse and denting several others before exiting the parking lot. No one seems to witness him.

The streets are deserted save for a few daring pedestrians hurrying home before darkness falls. Len stops at a light. Waiting with all the patience he can muster while an elderly lady drags her cart across the street. She looks at him imploringly, a plea for mercy. He stares back and revs

the engine. She wobbles faster. A black Roadmaster idles up beside him. Len looks over at Harold. Harold, eyes glazed over, stares at Len, the only two drivers on the street breathing the same exhaust-laced air adding whatever they do on the exhale. The thought repulses Len. He wants nothing to do with Harold. He has only feelings of contempt for this man he doesn't even know. They go on staring at each other like dogs in parked cars, infuriated by heat and confined space.

The light turns green. Neither moves.

Len examines the car; black with scratch marks on the fenders.

Harold accelerates as Len cogitates.

“Hey,” Len screams. Keeping one hand on the wheel as he pulls out his revolver and fires until all the chambers are empty.

“Fuck,” Len struggles to reload. Dividing his attention between what he is doing and his pursuit with Harold. He jams four bullets into the tumbler and leans out the window carefully aiming for one of the rear tires. Harold swerves to play chicken with a slow moving truck.

The truck veers into the adjacent lane on a collision course with Len. Len falls in line behind Harold. The three vehicles pass each other on the wrong side of the road. Len aims and fires, a bullet pierces the gas tank in an explosive one in a million shot. Pieces of metal and burning naugahyde rain down as he approaches the scene, lips parted and slightly askew. He marvels at how he has driven this maniac to his own demise; a man he thought was pure beast, unresponsive to mortal laws. Fitting, he thinks, all guys like that need is a little push from the right side to drive them completely over the edge. They'd rather take as many people as possible with them than let justice run its course, to come back over to the other side. He's about to get closer when the shudder-like-shock-wave of a second explosion blows past him. Len goes down

in a roll, palms pressed to his eyes. Incendiary figures flutter and flash in blood Rorschach across his field of vision. His hands come away wet, tears, but no blood. Even with his eyes open he still sees it, a voluble figure decocting symmetrically out of the surface viscosity of heat. He unholsters his gun. The pain in his hand first, shooting up his arm and down the other, contracting his whole body into a fist, opening and closing on command of something outside himself, despite his efforts to bar it. A cold heat forged in some Hadean furnace and cooled in the terrestrial air. Len curls himself tighter, rolling over and over, until the pain subsides to euphoria, confidence and an inexplicable power. He rises effortlessly and returns to his car. The machine heart that gulps fuel instead of blood throttles in time with his own. He takes one last, long look at the fire reflected in the dark pits of his eyes and drives off.

Night air whistles through open windows. He swerves at the first thing that moves.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My mantra is 'try not to miss an opportunity'. If there's room for a surprising element, a psychological or metaphysical twist, I will find a way to incorporate it. Set in 1950's America, 'The Heavy Metal Sound of Steel' is a noir thriller that starts fast and continues long after the needle has gone below empty. It is a homage to classic cars and classic times, just as they were coming to the end of the road. I acknowledge the story's likeness to Stephen King's Christine, but I admit I have never read the whole thing.*

BIO: *Daniel is a graduate of the Creative Writing program (MFA) from Vancouver Island University, his poems and fiction have been featured in Gravel, The Birds We Piled Loosely, Clockwise Cat, Crack the Spine, Grey Sparrow and The Gyroscope review. He is a reader and contributor to the Tongues of Fire reading series and has written several books, all currently seeking publishers. He lives in Victoria, B.C., Canada.*