

# Soil.

by Anthony Van Hart

[1]

“Dig!”

Worm food.

Salivating soldiers struggled in a hail of gunfire. Body after body was pulled back to a crowded trench deep in the roots of **French** soil. Limbs rested, triggers fired and eyes fluttered at the sight of the death that piled breathlessly around the wounded. A montage of horrific images collided with the flicker of hopes and dreams that capsized like a steel coffin that sinks in the sea.

“Dig! Dig! Find the fucking...” Flowing rivers of blood trickled and nourished the deadening earth. I sat, resting against the cold steel of my machine gun and the dead appendages that held me steady. Screaming voices hovered above. Orders and terror exited mouths as quickly as the ears that they were spoken for. Images in and images out, like empty commands, left nothing solid to focus on. Until, like a snake, I slithered through the sediment and heaps of corpses, wounded and looking for escape.

“Find the...” Enclosed and surrounded by death and memories from the past, my soul and mind floated in a steel coffin. It rose and fell, rose and fell in a sea of crimson. Babies walked, faces smiled, keys typed, fences picketed, houses erected, skin wrinkled, flowers bloomed, graves were filled.

“Dig! Dig! Find the fucking story.”

The waves ceased. Blinded by the light above a surgeon's head, I kicked and winced in pain. Screams followed. My body numbed with anesthetic, my eyes followed fragments being pulled from an open wound in my abdomen. (1946)

***This is the story of a man  
Alone and wandering crowded avenues  
His eyes on the ground  
His mind fixated on shoes***

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***THE LUCKIEST[2]***  
***(LIES: TRUE, Mercy)[3]***

By S.E.I.L.

As individual as a shadow and the opposite of 'stone faced', Sidney Elvin "Ike" Liebowitz, with a clean-shaven face, well kempt hair and sideburns a quarter of an inch off of his ears, walks down a dirty and dimly lit street pondering sneakers. His appearance is of course a representation of his permanently boring "clean cut" ways and his thinking about shoes is a recurring and everlasting heap of mind drivel that wafts in and out of his consciousness for no apparent reason. Consciously, no apparent reason is all right, but subconsciously, Sidney's fascination with footwear can be understood as a symbol of his incessant need for individuality. Because for him, besides the normative daily replenishment of clothes[4], socks[5], underwear[6], and a biannual toothbrush[7], shoes are the only thing in his life that changes[8].

Rubber Soles[9]

Now, for as long as he can remember, Sidney has always worn the same style of high top Converse® All-Stars, but his color options were what you might call abundant[10]. He owns thirty-six pair, rotating thirty to thirty-one, depending on the number of days in a month[11], with the other five being strictly seasonal[12]. For some, his attempts at individuality may seem feeble or perhaps even go unnoticed, but it was all Sidney had. Or so he thought.

On his way home from the Titanic Café[13] and his daily meeting with Mercy, he walks down the heavily populated Powell Street cable car line, tightly gripping his nifty typewriter[14] that is neatly packed away in its case[15]. He keeps his eyes on the ground as the moon awakens. One foot follows the other, gliding over the fractured cement slabs as he thinks to himself, "*The story must be down there somewhere, buried beneath the pavement. I can see it as it mingles with the minerals and organisms that are constantly at play in the dirt.*[16]" Unaffected, Sidney eyes the concrete as

hundreds of passersby, [17]all on their way home too, weave through crowd after crowd in the dying fog.

His feet move on in the darkness, following the rising moonlight up the steps to the door of his building[18]. Key. Lock. Enter. He sinks down two more flights of stairs to his apartment that rests underneath the littered and thriving metropolis. Key. Lock. Enter. Wait for the whistle.

Upon entering the apartment, he walks directly into the lingering smell of spiced rum and tealeaves that respire during his daily absence and is the first and only thing that waits to greet him. He doesn't survey his surroundings or make note that nothing has changed while he was away. He simply sets down his case[19] and lofts his coat[20] onto a nail that hangs off of the backside of his decaying kitchen door. Exhausted and empty from writing[21] all day, he slowly drips drops of rum onto two used and discolored teabags that sleep in a bed of honey as he waits for the whistle of the kettle.

WHHHHEEEEEWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW

He ingests it. The tea slowly sedates him as for hours his eyes dust over the evening paper that only reports meaningless news of the demise of American capital, the horrible readings of the stock exchange and advertisements for things that he either doesn't need or could never imagine being able to afford. And when he lowers the paper onto his lap he holds his own fragmented conversations[22] that when mixed with hot tea, warm and comfort him. His eyes begin to sink as he grows tired of talking to himself and reading regurgitated headlines. The taste of his concoction is no longer tolerable. He slowly stumbles to his feet, sets the rum back in the pantry, hangs the tea bags above the sink and with nothing left to think about, retires for the remainder of the night.

***A Day in the Life[23]***

Just as his mind cannot work back to a time when he didn't wear the same style sneakers; it also cannot stumble back to a time when he did not live roughly the exact same day. The memorized smell of

spiced rum and tea leaves awakens him as he rolls over from the middle of his singly occupied king size bed to gently silence the crowing cock[24] that rests next to it. A stretch, a yawn, "must be cloudy today.[25]" A walk to the bathroom past the red glowingly empty walls and whisperingly desolate rooms of his apartment that lack everything; charm, décor, the essences of a woman, and unsurprisingly, clutter[26]. Thoughts fail to invade his frailty as he moves on and steps through the tidiness to wash his nightmares away in the cascading water that flows from his shower.[27] Lather, rinse, clean, the clouds drift, and he's ready for another day.

After drying and dressing, Sidney or Sid, referred to by no one but himself[28] takes a seat at the kitchen table. It is completely empty with the exception of a spring-wound record player[29]. Crank-Needle-Record-Music-Beauty.[30] For the entire fifteen minute piece there is no movement in the room but the hypnotic revolutions of the record. There is no tap to his foot and no bob to his head as the attentive listener silences the clunky street noises[31] that usually slither in through minor cracks in the windows. As the soprano-sax fades, deep reflection surrounds Sidney as he takes a deep breath and basks in the magnificence of Coltrane's horn, a sound that he deifies at the same exact time every morning[32].

He smiles. Perks his dark rimmed frames over his gin blossom and glances up. The smile refracts as he reaches into a beat up cardboard box. The frown is getting wider as his bushy eyebrows begin to rise as he reaches down and pulls a dart from the dilapidated cardboard container that has become a permanent fixture. "Screw you, Bill Burroughs[33]," he shouts as he chucks the sharp object at a pin-hole shredded promotional poster for *Naked Lunch*Ó.[34]

"I never did understand your hip, jive jargon about homosexuals and habitual drug use. Your book is a scattered mess that completely tarnishes the English language. Now, Melville, that's literature. Banned books need to stay banned."[35]

His frustration with the contemporary author is permanent and that frustration manifests in his own writing.[36] His misunderstanding of modern or postmodern narrative disjointedness is better understood when one realizes that Sidney prefers literature like he prefers his coffee.[37] Useful information in that, simplicity that blockades the literary world's reaction to the wars[38] is coal; fuel to spin his tightly knit bildungsromans.

Disgusted and confused, the sight of **William S. Burroughs** in big block letters and thoughts of *Naked Lunch* infuriate him as he angrily gets up from his seat at the kitchen table. He grabs his coat[39] and heads outside to face the chilly winds that steadily blow in his mind. Images, thoughts, images, thoughts crowd the left side of his brain and are unable to communicate with the right side.

***Here, There and Everywhere***

*When your prized possessions start to weigh you down, look in my direction, I'll be around. I'll be around[40].*

From the deadness of his apartment he moves out into the ever-crowded commerce filled world that buzzes and breathes in all directions as winds blow and fogs roll in. He strolls past shop windows that are full of ugliness and modernity[41]. Filled with things that are unrecognizable to the untrained or uninformed eye. Unmoved and numb to the life that thrives outside of his gaze, Sidney sails past blinking marquees and full trolley cars that struggle on their climb to the wharf; the open air art gallery that offers peaceful displays at every angle; serenity seekers practice meditation or yoga on the lawn of the Square; voices full of dull conversation that rise, fall, and roll with the cities hilly topography; across town, waves like society, crash in to the banks of the bay as people who aren't quite ready to go at another day mope like scavenging pigeons that chase morsels. He continues his climb.

Once he reaches the cafe[42] he steps into the room at the rear,[43] gently sets his typewriter down on the table and glances at the man[44] that rests his elbows on the front counter. Sidney's eye contact is noted as he then holds up two fingers[45] in the direction of the overly familiar face. The man hurriedly removes his elbows

from the Formica top and slowly glides over to fill the first of Sidney's many mugs of thickly opaque and rum filled coffee.

While sitting there for hours[46] a story flies from his mind to his fingers as he steadily fills his head with caffeine and liquor and his pages with hope. With the story finished, his shift ends. He takes one last daily look at the photographs on the wall, packs up his typewriter, buries the story beneath it, and carries the case with him as he walks toward the door. With his head lowered the entire distance from the table to the exit, he flashes a wave at Eric as he pushes his way out of history and back into society.

Three blocks forward, his head is still lowered as he weaves his way past a swarm of people as he approaches the next stop in his daily routine.[47] He then pauses in front of a large storefront window. He stares through his mirror image as he presses his eyes and nose against the cold glass and glares at the chattering female employees. Peeling his moist gin blossom off of the now foggy window he begins to faintly rap on the glass to get one of the women's attention. Upon realizing that someone is alerting them, they both immediately silence their babble and look out at the gentle old man that signals at them every day. Sidney, his folded hands against the window, stares past the beautiful teenager who stocks the stationary and gazes at the aging lady who stands behind the cash register. He nods his head forward several times, thinking "Thank You" with every movement. The woman[48] pulls her hand from the front of her blue apron to acknowledge Sidney with a friendly wave. Sidney takes one step, lowers his eyes to the ground and starts for home.

***This was the story of my great uncle  
I never knew because he was dead  
The things that he left here  
And how I picture him in my head[49]***

-Steven "Elvis" Isaac Liebowitz

[1] Unfinished and unpublished. Found as the only item that rested on the bottom of the wall safe.

[2] Subtitle

[3] Sub-Subtitle

**[4]** He owned a pair of identical tweed suits, black, that he purchased at Sears in 1941 before he stormed the beaches at Normandy. Miraculously the suits still fit his shrunken physique.

**[5]** Black argyle trouser socks. All of them. Silver and gold diamonds, no tears, rips, or holes. Miraculously.

**[6]** Fruit of the Loom size large

**[7]** GUM Six more just like it lie still in the package in the medicine cabinet.

**[8]** Sure, there are other basic things that changed, like the amount of times he would blink his eyes in a day or the number of breaths he'd take while he walked from Powell Street to Sutter, but as you can see they are far too boring to mention.

**[9]** Subchapter. Actually *Rubber Soul*.

**[10]** Virtually endless. Refer to next sentence.

**[11]** On the 31st of January, March, May, August, and December, Sidney's tangerine colored shoes prowl the streets of the Union Square district of San Francisco. The exception here is Halloween. See 12.

**[12]** Stars and stripes for the Fourth of July, jack-o-lanterns for Halloween, turkeys and maize for Thanksgiving, a snowman for Christmas, and a multi-colored egg for Easter.

**[13]** 825 Sutter Street, San Francisco, CA. 94109. A small café that on the outside has a recreation of the famed vessel crashing into the front of the structure. Gaudy and tasteless. Shows

America's incessant need to glorify and capitalize on horrific moments in history

**[14]** Royal Quiet De Luxe. Made in USA.

**[15]** A tad worn, with tape covering minor holes and keeping together the thin veneer.

**[16]** A thought that fills Sidney's head every time he makes his way home. "Keep your ear to the ground. The story is in the soil." A reference to the only advice he remembered his journalist father ever gave him before he went off to cover the First World War. Also a constant reminder of his father, a man whom never returned from the front lines, and his mother, who died while giving birth to him. Both of their stories are buried in the ground of a Palo Alto cemetery. The search for story also refers to Sidney's profession as a short fiction writer.

**[17]** Elated people who have just had the best day of their lives because of their favorable position in the capitalist system or the ones who still bask in their love of or love from another; people who smile in shiny new overcoats, neatly pressed business suits and polished Florsheim wingtips; grumbling, dissatisfied and perhaps even suicidal people who have just had the worst day of their life due to low status, cheating spouses or diseased relatives; holey shoed and muted homeless solicitors who beg with signs and empty faces; frowning executives or businessmen whose hair is frustratingly disheveled, their suits open and hopelessly wrinkled; the empty-eyed and limping women whose broken heart coalesces with their broken heel that began their day; tattered clothed and barefoot kids who seek food in dumpsters, revolution, reaction, or simply amphetamine. Or people just like Sidney, unaffected, as they have just lived the same day that they always do.

**[18]** 343 Taylor Street right next to the Mark Twain . A tall old brick building covered with ivy built in the 1840's. The neighborhood once flowed with diversity and charm but now was declining and becoming what common tourists might deem "seedy."

**[19]** See 14, 15

**[20]** See 39



**[21]** See 16,36

**[22]** These fragmented conversations constantly circle around and remind him of his belief that he is luckiest man to ever have lived.

**[23]** Sub-sub-chapter.

**[24]** Rooster shaped and sounding alarm clock. Sears & Roebuck

**[25]** His morning mantra. Whether winter, spring, summer, or fall, he recited these words every morning no matter what light or lack of it trickled down to his basement flat and protruded through the tightly closed Venetian blinds.

**[26]** Sidney had lived alone since his discharge from the army in 1945. No pictures, prints, mirrors, valences, flowers or anything close to resembling any of those things was present. No décor. Unless, of course, one could consider an immense safe that is buried into the wall, decorative.

**[27]** Three-quarters of a turn on hot, one-quarter of a turn on cold.

**[28]** When talking to himself out loud, he used this nickname when he referred to himself in the third person.

**[29]** Victrola, circa 1930.

**[30]** John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things." Atlantic, 1961. One of the only records Coltrane put down his tenor sax and picked up the soprano for and also the only record Sidney had in his possession. With the exception of every Beatles album sold in the United States. Sidney believed that the Beatles music offered a universal language. And although some of their earlier work was completely simplistic and their latter work was more complicated and influenced by drugs, the way all of their songs were crafted, he believed that their entire catalog offered the most beautiful use of the written word.

**[31]** Trolley bells, car horns, jackhammers, loud chatter, etc.

**[32]** 8:15-8:31

**[33]** William S. Burroughs. Beatnik writer, intravenous drug user, junky, whom while trying to shoot an apple off of the top of his wife's head with a revolver, accidentally shot and murdered her. Author of *Naked Lunch*, *Junky*, etc.

**[35]** Another morning mantra, rarely changing with the exception of word choice, i.e. “Your book is jive jargon. A scattered mess about homos and heroin. Ah, Melville. Ah the humanity.”

**[36]** As a writer of short fiction, Sidney's stories could be seen in a similar light as the changing of his shoes (*see subchapter*, Rubber Soles). In his 40 years as a writer for numerous publications, people loved his stories because of their homogeneity; He never used extremely pedant English flair. There wasn't much garish prose and no one could ever label him as verbose. His were simple stories, like every Beatles song. All were prototypes of the “quest” nature, but with different character names. His heroes always found themselves embryonic in the beginning, with little knowledge and in some sort of predicament. By the middle, minor signs of growth could be detected in the text, but this was also the stage where he met an adversary, man or machine, that attempted to blockade the hero's goal. By the end, the hero overcame what stood in his way, sometimes with the aid of a *deus ex machina* and sometimes without, but he always became a fully-grown individual with an intelligence that he didn't have before. The plots of these stories rivaled present day sitcoms, which would explain the population's love for Sidney's work. The reader, like the viewer of say, “I Love Lucy,” knows that no matter what trouble the character or characters get into, by the end, everything will be better than it was when the story began. The stories offered the hope and stability that was necessary to stay sane. In a complicated world with war, poverty, drugs, and the complicated literature that accompanied it, Sidney's stories (and present day sitcoms) offered a comfortable blanket to warm readers from the bitter cold of the outside world. Not to mention, they all reflected the decayed and dead idea of the American Dream.

**[37]** Coffee, like literature, was very important to him; therefore, he liked them both to be simple, never off color, and just the right temperature for ingesting.

**[38]** Pessimism, narcissism, despair, alienation, the ills of humanity, and paranoia were all words that weren't in Sidney's dictionary. And

he often thought, "What the hell is a dystopia?" All of this can be seen as traits that are present in the literature of popular modernists like Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, etc. After witnessing the chaos of war first hand (Hemingway only drove an ambulance in the WWI) he thought that the world needed a pick me up not a grotesquely large mirror to reflect its fears and damaging psychoanalysis. In few words, things needed to be happy, but sedative at the same time.

**[39]** A frayed wool mid length, black, that had seen its share of years. The only coat he owned.

**[40]** *And Your Bird Can Sing*Ó. (Lennon, McCartney) Capitol Records. 1966

**[41]** Hegemony. Saks, Macy's, Neiman Marcus, all places Sidney passed on his way to the place he typed all of his stories (see note 11). Overpriced and gaudy merchandise buried on mannequins and items that floated on clothed shelves that no one needed to own to be happy. Complicated clothing that made it impossible to dress without the help of another. Gadgets unusable for anyone who lacked patience or suffered from the ills of arthritis.

**[42]** See note 13

**[43]** A tiny, one table room that's walls were covered with photographs that related to the ship that shared the cafes namesake. There were powerful pictures of the enormous Titanic roaring through the ocean, the only vessel visible for miles. A symbol of strength. Then there were the happy pictures. A baby walking on deck, passengers smiling, passengers eating, passengers dancing close to one another, a man typing a letter home. And finally, the sad pictures. A baby walking on deck, passengers smiling, passengers eating, passengers dancing close to one another, and a man typing a letter home, all of them empty and unaware of the death that they were all about to witness not long after the photos were taken. And the ship that was no longer powerful but a sinking heap of materials, a symbol of death that doubled as a tomb for the many passengers who were unable to make it off.

**[44]** Eric Ulee Richmond-Thomas. Private owner of Titanic Café since 1944.

**[45]** Coffee with rum. Three fingers: Mint green tea with rum. When Sidney returned from World War II his jaw was wired shut. Tiny fragments from a grenade sunk into his abdomen, which caused him to fall on the butt of his gun and thus break his jaw in two places. Not being able to speak for a short period of time forced him to develop a simple system of signals. Signals for things behind grocery counters, signals at restaurants, signals at cafes. This wasn't so hard for him for two reasons, for one, he believed in always going to the same private owned markets, diners, and coffee shops, guaranteeing himself that the person serving him would always know the signals. He thought it was important that if one was going to spend money, they should spend it to support small business. Corporations didn't need his money and if they did they wouldn't get it. He thought their mere existence ruined commerce forever by forcing the little guy to raise prices.

The second reason Sidney was dedicated to small business was an offshoot of his signals and that was his no conversation philosophy, which is the idea that meaningless conversation is just that, meaningless. He felt that when someone asked questions without any bearing, like "How are you today?" or "Nice day isn't it,?" when answering them, important thoughts or ideas exit the mind through the mouth. This philosophy was born when Sidney returned and was first starting out as a writer. His head would fill with magnificent ideas, beautiful words juxtaposed with others, alliteration, literary elements that any author would love to employ. He would've been able to write a story in a short few hours, but he didn't want to write a story, he wanted to write a novel about his war experience. A novel filled with new ideas on humanity, the pungency of American life, something no one had ever done. He let the ideas fill his head for weeks, until he would buy a typewriter at a pawnshop. Sure he wrote down little thoughts, phrases, words that should be able to tease out and unleash his truths to the world. The day he bought it, he ran out to some large market that handled a

copious amount of goods, including paper for typing on. While rushing the money out of his billfold, the woman of African descent behind the counter courteously asked in a broken English that made it hard for Sidney to understand, "How. R Yo today sir-e?" Silence. Not thinking about anything but acquiring the paper and getting right to typing, her question floated in the air. An awkward silence consumed them briefly when finally his mind was again clouded with artillery smoke, bullets shredding and soldiers shouting. "HOW. R YO TODAY SIR-E," she repeated in a voice more stern but equally as incommensurable and now somewhat beautiful and foreign. Being polite, his mind fumbled and searched for a way out of the trenches, a way out of the haze and horror that he wanted to dictate to the world, he searched for words to counter her polite but arbitrary question. He glanced down at the name badge that read "Mercy" with the words "in training" stickered underneath and replied, "Oh, I, um, I'm. Ah. Fine, Mercy in training. Thanks. For. Asking." And after he paid the nice woman behind the counter, he exited the store with a mind emptied of story and filled with fleeting glory. The battlefield that shrouded his conscious for many a month was emptied. Trees grew over the blood rich soil, children ran over the bodies buried beneath the earth. When he returned home to study the thoughts and notes that he scribbled down all reflected gibberish, a language that he could no longer make out, maybe Icelandic. He could only get out a few sentences that lacked syntax and cohesiveness. Sentences that after he wrote them, not even he understood. So, from then on he stuck to the short stories of positive avenues and shiny endings that he would become known for. He was sad, confused, but lucky.

**[46]** What he would refer to as a full eight-hour shift.

**[47] Terry's Gifts 'n' Things**

[48] See 45. The two never shared words after their first encounter, which meant that Sidney never again heard the broken but beautiful language that Mercy spoke. But Sidney preferred it this way. Many years had passed and each time Sidney would pass the shop he'd make sure to look at the name badge (as it now actually read

“Marcy” but Sidney never acknowledged the name change) to notice that the “in training” had been replaced by “assistant manager”. The ring of “Mercy in training” was gone but her smile was still enough to communicate between strangers.

[49] Actual Title. Steven never really did know his uncle as is actually unsure if the man ever existed or if he is, “just in his head.” But the very question of his existence begs the question of how one could construct a character out of all these possessions and cultural entities. Is that what a character is? But that is what Steven has spent his life doing. Trying to uncover the history of a person that may have never existed and has turned him into a lonely only man, just like Sidney. One could say that the history that he searched for grounded him in a period that was not his own and prohibited any future progress that may have been possible if he hadn't searched tirelessly for a meaning of scraps of paper or symbols that might or might not resemble a MEANING. Is that what life is then? A meaningful journey where all we do is search for questions that may or may not hold relevance in the first place. Do images of the past cloud our perspectives and inevitably make it impossible for individuals to make any progress? What is progress? And who decides? Some might even ask “who cares?” Isn't that the question to end all questions? Who cares? Can some theoretical framework answer these questions or will it simply aim to define what the problem is and not actually aim to answer it?

