

# Nor The Obliteration Of These Wonderlands

Matthew Baker

## Nor The Obliteration Of These Wonderlands

Before you break into the prizefighter's basement, you ask around again, trying to prepare yourself for what's coming. But the legend about the prizefighter is always changing, isn't ever the same, has variant plotlines depending on who's telling the story. Kids at the skatepark say the prizefighter spent time in the military. Kids at the ropeswing say the prizefighter spent time in prison. Kids everywhere agree you would have to be crazy to break into the prizefighter's basement. Reed are you crazy? Reed Neufeld, that's your name. The name you chose, the name you were given. You're a fifteen-year-old kid with bony arms and bony legs. You wear faded shirts and white jeans. You keep homemade headbands knotted to your head. Reed's known around the neighborhood for his obsession with videogames. Reed carries spare controllers for various consoles in his backpack. Reed hops from house to house, playing whatever videogames the kids there prefer, never winning. Your love of videogames is seemingly limitless. Your skill at videogames is seemingly nonexistent. You've seen the prizefighter yourself, the prizefighter hunched over a shovel in his garden, digging holes, muttering. The prizefighter's face is crisscrossed with wrinkles. The prizefighter wears bathrobes. Kids everywhere say the prizefighter collects rare arcadegames. You've peeked into the prizefighter's basement yourself, seen the arcadegames there, left handprints and faceprints on the windows' grime. You can't stop thinking about the arcadegames. You have to play the arcadegames. So you zip a hammer

into your backpack, and knot a headband to your head, and sit in a tree across from the prizefighter's house—sunset, twilight, dusk—until the prizefighter emerges from the house, and unchains a bicycle, and pedals away.

During the 1980s the prizefighter traveled the world with a suitcase of coinrolls, fighting prizefights against gamers in Korean arcades, Brazilian arcades, Icelandic arcades. The prizefighter was an artist. You've heard the prizefighter handled the games' buttons like an oboist handles an oboe's keys. The prizefighter would play anything, wasn't limited by genre, could master any mechanic, won prizefights in *Space Invaders*, *Dragon's Lair*, *Gun Fight*, *Q\*Bert*. Crowds came to watch the prizefighter battle local gamers. You've heard the prizefighter had a mohawk then. You've heard the prizefighter was bald already. Why does the prizefighter live here, this city, your neighborhood? You break a window with your hammer.

When the prizefighter comes home, arms slung with sacks of groceries, lasers are firing in the basement. The prizefighter steps into the basement with the shovel. Reed's standing at *Space Invaders*, having just lost the game after scoring a total of zero points. Shattered glass is scattered across the floor. Neon light's flickering. A stair creaks. Reed squints. Reed spots the prizefighter standing there with the shovel. Reed screams, ducks through *Sinistar*, squeezes between *Frogger* and *Centipede*, scrambles onto the windowsill, disappears.

You don't regret breaking into the prizefighter's basement, even if the prizefighter is going to kidnap you and murder you and bury you in a dumpster, playing those games was worth anything. But it seems likely the prizefighter will murder you. The prizefighter knows who you are. The prizefighter knows where you live. Mornings you walk to school you have to pass the prizefighter's house. Your parents love you, your parents don't have any other children, your parents will be disappointed if you're murdered. Ms. and Mr. Neufeld. You're always worried about disappointing your parents.

Maybe it's days, maybe it's weeks, maybe it's months, it's impossible to say how you spend them, maybe stealing and selling bicycles, maybe performing handstands and headstands, maybe exploring the ductwork above your school's ceiling. But what happens eventually is that while walking home from school Reed's attacked by kids with tattoos and liprings, Reed's played videogames with these kids before, now these kids are punching and kicking Reed. The truth is that kids don't like you. The truth is that kids wish you were dead. You've been avoiding the prizefighter's house for days, weeks, months, but now you're in a gutter, bleeding from your elbows and your nose, unable to run when the prizefighter's shadow falls across your body. Did the kids know about the window you broke? Did they choose to leave you here, a gift for the prizefighter, knowing you can't annoy them if you're dead?

The prizefighter drags you to his porch and cleans your face with a towel from his kitchen. The prizefighter's having trouble gripping the towel. The prizefighter's hands look mangled. You can't stop staring at the prizefighter's hands. The prizefighter wants to know why the kids attacked you. You tell the prizefighter the truth—that your parents won't buy you videogames, that you beg your way into the houses of kids you barely know to play the videogames there, that kids get annoyed because you always lose. The prizefighter's hands are bulging with bluish veins. You scored zero points at *Space Invaders*, the prizefighter says. The prizefighter's staring at the sky. Zero points, the prizefighter says. The prizefighter's bathrobe's rustling in the wind. Zero, the prizefighter keeps whispering. The prizefighter's starting to scare you again. You kneel. You grab the prizefighter's hands. You beg to play the arcadegames in the prizefighter's basement. You'll paint his house, weed his garden, anything. The prizefighter stares at you. The prizefighter frowns. You annoy him, he tells you. He shoves the sleeves of his bathrobe to his elbows. He steps into his house. Shutting the door he tells you he'll buy the paintbrushes in the morning.

While Reed paints the prizefighter's house, the prizefighter sits in a lawnchair telling Reed stories. Reed's teetering on a ladder, scraping peeling white paint from the prizefighter's house, painting the prizefighter's house with buckets of violet. The prizefighter's drinking lemonades. Even when the prizefighter's telling his own story, variant plotlines appear. During the 1980s the prizefighter had a rival. Nicknamed The Buttonmasher, the rival traveled the same circuits as the prizefighter, sometimes fighting a prizefight at an arcade a few weeks after the prizefighter had been there, sometimes fighting a prizefight at an arcade a few weeks before the prizefighter was going there, the prizefighter never saw The Buttonmasher. Nights of prizefights, talking to the arcades' owners, the prizefighter would hear things about The Buttonmasher. The Buttonmasher had cryptic geometric symbols tattooed onto his wrists and his hands. The Buttonmasher wore black robes with bowl-like obis. The Buttonmasher was unbeaten. So was the prizefighter. But the prizefighter was a genius, was a prodigy, had talent that was unmatched. And here's the secret. The Buttonmasher didn't have any talent. The Buttonmasher didn't have anything except for luck. The arcades' owners would lean toward the prizefighter, would grip the prizefighter's arm, would whisper what came next. But it was luck unlike anything anyone had ever seen. Here some of the arcades' owners even would tremble. Any arcade where the prizefighter set a highscore, within weeks the highscore had been reset by The Buttonmasher. The Buttonmasher almost had doubled the prizefighter's highscore on an Egyptian arcade's *Sea Wolf*. The Buttonmasher almost had tripled the prizefighter's highscore on a Tibetan arcade's *Space Invaders*. It wasn't just the highscores, The Buttonmasher's presence was everywhere, in all the world's arcades, oil from The Buttonmasher's hands always there on the machines, posters from The Buttonmasher's fights always there on the walls, perfume from The Buttonmasher's breath always there in the air. The prizefighter spent nights awake, maybe on the balconies of hotels, maybe on the roofs of hotels, maybe on

the decks of ships, but regardless pacing, drinking from steaming mugs of tea, thinking about The Buttonmasher. Where did The Buttonmasher's luck come from? Was The Buttonmasher, as rumored, an orphan found in a mountaintop shrine? Was The Buttonmasher, as rumored, an orphan found in a casino storeroom? Or was it those tattoos on The Buttonmasher's wrists and hands?

You're standing on the ladder, your mouth ajar, your paintbrush dripping paint onto your boots, having forgotten there's a world outside of the prizefighter's story. But there's a world outside of the prizefighter's story, a world populated by kids who will never accept you unless you develop some basic skills at gaming. So every night, after the paintbrushes have been rinsed, the prizefighter takes you into the basement. And headband knotted to your head, you play the arcade games there. The prizefighter never plays the arcade games himself. Once, maybe the first night, maybe the forty-first night, you ask the prizefighter why he never plays. The prizefighter doesn't answer, shuffles upstairs, disappears, you don't see him again that night. Once, maybe the forty-first night, maybe the first night, you ask the prizefighter how he always won with his hands mangled like that. The prizefighter doesn't answer, shuffles upstairs, disappears, you don't see him again that night. Usually you don't ask questions. And nights you don't ask questions the prizefighter sits watching you, emptying coinrolls into your hands, even offering you pointers—teaching you the ghosts' patterns in *Pac-Man*, a few flying maneuvers for *Time Pilot*, how to use the dungeons' corridors in *Wizard Of Wor*. You're actually scoring at *Space Invaders*. When you're too exhausted to keep playing—dawn, daylight, sunrise—the prizefighter makes you a tomato sandwich and sends you home.

Maybe your parents should worry about your relationship with the prizefighter, but your parents seem heartened by your relationship with the prizefighter. Were you ever the same, after your grandfather died? Are your parents hoping the prizefighter might fix

whatever broke inside of you, like a spare part, an elderly man to replace an elderly man? Walking the dogs around the neighborhood, your parents have stopped at the prizefighter's fence, have talked to the prizefighter while you painted the eaves. Your parents seem to think you're destined for a life of frying hamburgers or stocking shelves. Your parents aren't wrong. You're destined for a life of frying hamburgers or stocking shelves. Reed doesn't understand math, can't memorize dates or cities, misspells words like freedom. Reeds falls asleep during anatomy, halfway through dissections. Reed sometimes stutters. The prizefighter makes your parents lemonades.

After the house has been repainted, you fix the gutters, hang new shutters, weed the garden. You empty the attic, empty the closets, hold a sale in the prizefighter's driveway. It's in the attic or the closets that you find the newspapers. The prizefighter's away, getting eggs at the grocer's, getting a shave at the barber's, getting a colonoscopy at the doctor's, you're alone, squatting there among the brittle yellowed newspapers, sunlight through the window illuminating a universe of dust. You sort through the variant plotlines the newspapers offer, construct the prizefighter's story yourself. The prizefight was held at a Japanese arcade, during the 1980s, in Hokkaido or Kyushu. During the winter of that year? Was it chance that the prizefighter's skill peaked between the videogame crash of 1977 and the videogame crash of 1983? Was it fate? The prizefight was in a game you've never heard of, *Nor The Obliteration Of These Wonderlands*, having a subtitle *Numberless Timescapes Unbound*. It wasn't a first-person or a third-person shooter, it wasn't turn-based or real-time strategy, it wasn't platforms, it wasn't racing, it wasn't mazes, it wasn't a side-scrolling brawler. You don't know what genre it was. It may have been its own genre. There are hints the machine itself was unique, somehow, had been designed with certain perverse or criminal properties. Some gamers who had played had been crippled, had been blinded, were unable to speak. You imagine bloodied gamers stumbling out of, stumbling away

from, the game. Why had the prizefighter agreed to a prizefight with those stakes? The prizefight was attended by hundreds, who knows where the crowd came from, some wearing sherwanis, some wearing tantours, some wearing kangas. The arcade was owned by the yakuza. The rivals met at the machine. You imagine the prizefighter wearing a white trenchcoat, carrying a suitcase of coinrolls. You imagine The Buttonmasher wearing a black robe with a bowlike obi, The Buttonmasher's hips slung with a katana, The Buttonmasher's fans shrieking. Worshiper versus iconoclast. The prizefighter was known to prowl landfills and dumpsters and curbs, would save any arcadegames that had been garbaged, use prizemoney to repair the machines—the prizefighter had been working to preserve the artform's history. The Buttonmasher had been working to destroy the artform's history—The Buttonmasher was known to use prizemoney to buy the rarest machines, would trash arcadegames for sport, electrocuting or torching or stoning the machines in the catacombs of his estate. The outcome of this prizefight, with recordbreaking prizemoney at stake, would mean the life or death of hundreds of machines. *Nor The Obliteration Of These Wonderlands'* lights were blinking. The prizefighter bowed. The Buttonmasher bowed. The rivals stepped into the machine.

And that's what happened to the prizefighter's hands, the prizefighter tells Reed later that night, sitting around the firepit's crackling embers. The prizefight lasted five hours. The score was tied when the rivals stumbled from the machine. The prizefighter's fingers had been mangled—knuckles snapped, bones crushed. The Buttonmasher had suffered gashes to the face, the throat, the groin—died of bloodloss in the prizefighter's arms. Hero and villain defeated by the battleground itself. Afterward the prizefighter couldn't game, had to earn a living as a cashier, spent years working a machine that didn't require any speed, any power, any finesse, pressing buttons for paychecks instead art. Isn't life meaningless when you've become unable to perform the work you were born for? Doesn't



waking from your dreams about those colors seem like dying? Who had created *Nor The Obliteration Of These Wonderlands*? Only a single machine had been built, manufactured by a corporation that afterward had vanished, or had been renamed, or had never existed. The prizefighter has trouble describing the game itself, uses words like “mirages,” words like “infrared” and “ultrasonic,” phrases like “defied all logic,” “reversed every expectation,” “seemed somehow cliché.” The machine’s been moved since that night, sold by the yakuza to the narcos, sold by the narcos to the bratva, Tokyo to Bogota to Kiev. But the game is regarded, still, by the elite, as the ultimate work of the videogame artform. And playing that game was worth losing a pair of hands. The prizefighter’s staring at the firepit. Embers spit sparks. Wisps of smoke. Nevermind that game. It makes him happy, seeing somebody playing his machines again. The prizefighter tries to knot his bathrobe’s tie with his broken hands. You’re frowning. You’ve seen how the prizefighter cares for the machines. You can’t imagine being unable to play, to truly touch, to bring alive anymore, something you love that much.

Reed can’t stop thinking about *Nor The Obliteration Of These Wonderlands*, blearyeyed, chewing his breakfast, soaping his armpits in the shower, spreading shavingcream across his lip to shave the five or the seven hairs growing there. Reed fails an exam. Reed dissects a frog. Reed eats alone in the cafeteria. Rain’s hammering the school’s windows. After school Reed doesn’t walk to the prizefighter’s house, instead follows the kids with the tattoos and the liprings to somebody’s house, plays videogames there. Reed’s never played the videogame before, but Reed’s developed some basic skills at gaming, and Reed beats the kids. The kids punch Reed’s knees, more affectionately than aggressively. The kids offer Reed something to drink. Reed wants to feel happy. Reed can’t feel happy. It isn’t about being accepted by the other kids anymore. It’s about avenging the prizefighter somehow.

It’s midnight. The prizefighter’s probably sleeping. The neighborhood’s haunted by unlit

windows. Reed's breathing. Reed's carrying a backpack of unfinished homework. Reed lets himself into the prizefighter's house, creaks into the prizefighter's basement alone. Reed knows that before he can avenge the prizefighter he'll have to beat the prizefighter. Reed stands at *Space Invaders*. Reed knots his headband to his head. Reed's going to try to beat the prizefighter's highscore.

Reed empties a coinroll, another coinroll, countless coinrolls into the machine. Reed's within six hundred points, within three hundred points, within nine hundred points, he keeps dying before scoring the points he needs. He's overwhelmed by pixelated aliens. He's muttering at himself. He's chewing his cheeks. Reed hasn't eaten since lunch. Reed hasn't slept in days. Reed's fifteen years old. Beating the highscore's impossible. Reed dies again. Reed punches the joystick. Reed throws a coinroll against the wall, coins spraying starlike against the machines. He tears the headband from his head, grinds the headband under his boots, kicks the headband. He slumps onto the floor, swearing at himself, using words he's never used before. His head's between his knees. Monotone music's playing. Something creaks. The prizefighter steps from the shadows. The prizefighter stoops over the headband, picks the headband off the floor. The prizefighter speaks. You're discouraged? You're frustrated? You're angry? You ought to be frustrated. What made you think you could beat my highscore? You don't have any talent and you don't have any luck. The prizefighter clutches the headband, shakes the headband. Talent's a matter of fate, something you're born with. Luck's a matter of chance, something you're struck with. And you weren't born or struck with anything. The prizefighter crouches, whispers. I've never met anybody as untalented as you are. I've never met anybody as unlucky as you are. But fate and chance can be overpowered. I've seen you in this basement, seen you play the same game for seven, for nine, for eleven hours without resting, seen you overpower fate and chance with sheer willpower alone. You've practiced, again and again and again and again,

until you've taken for yourself those skills that fate and chance never gave you. The prizefighter grips your shoulders. And that's why you're going to win. Because you have the willpower to outpractice anybody. Because you don't quit for anything. Because you choose to play. The prizefighter holds the headband at you. The prizefighter nods. You take the headband from the prizefighter. You nod. The prizefighter makes you a tomato sandwich. A week later you beat the prizefighter's highscore.

Afterward the prizefighter gives you a new headband with a pixelated alien sewn across the brow. And that's what you wear to your prizefights—those early prizefights against gamers in your city, those later prizefights against gamers in cities abroad. You fight prizefights in underground arcades against gamers with various pseudonyms, in the crypts of a pagoda a gamer named Cobra Kai, in the undercroft of a lighthouse a gamer named Dragon Han, in the dungeons of a clocktower a gamer named Monk Of The Red Lotus. You're a seventeen-year-old kid with bony arms and bony legs. You wear faded shirts and white jeans. You don't use a pseudonym. You use prizemoney to buy rumors about the whereabouts of *Nor The Obliteration Of These Wonderlands*. Once a week the prizefighter eats supper at your parents' house, bringing homemade desserts, clinking glasses with your parents. Coughing blood into the napkins. Muttering apologies. The prizefighter's ill, often nauseous, maybe a disease of the lungs, the heart, the brain. Nights of prizefights you have to carry the prizefighter into the underground arcades, the prizefighter's arms draped over your shoulders, the prizefighter hobbling alongside you. Tonight is different. You've paid for the whereabouts, the layout, the names of the guards. The machine's being kept in the cellars of an abandoned operahouse. The city's a maze of cobblestone alleys. The city reeks of perfume or smoke. The city's littered with puddles. You and the prizefighter break into the abandoned operahouse together. The tails of your headband snap as you fly along a winding stairway. The ties of the prizefighter's trenchcoat snap as the prize-

fighter flies through a stone archway. The cellars are lined with pillars the size of houses. The machine's glowing neon there between a pair of statues. The shape of the machine. You won't have much time. The guards you bribed may have betrayed you already. The prizefighter leans panting against a statue. You step into the machine. And does it matter whether you're afraid? Whether you'll win, whether you'll lose? Whether the cloudbanks are torn apart in the morning, whether the pigeons are scattering starlike from the rooftops, whether somebody is larding a doorway with cement? You aren't alone anymore. The screen's blinking. Something appears.

## About The Author

Matthew Baker is author of the story collection *Hybrid Creatures* and the children's novel *If You Find This*. He was born in Michigan.

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