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Abstract

This thesis contains a critical preface and a portfolio of fiction writing consisting of six short stories.

The critical preface explores the motives and background behind each story, while also explaining psychological and moral values that are emphasized or focused upon during the thesis. Loneliness, the ugliness of the human race, and its propensity for self-destruction are all themes that are delved into via the stories.

The thesis is a cyclical progression, beginning with *The Boy and the Monster*, a dark, surreal fairytale and ending with *The Glass Unicorn*, named after a child's prized possession but focused on a father's search for family and absolution in a ruined world. The stories in between bridge the gap between childhood and parenthood beginning with *The Sentry*, a story that explores the loneliness and isolation of adolescence in a surreal setting. *We Are All Passengers* is a companion piece focusing on humankind's lust for companionship and the pain it brings. *Shadowplay* focuses on the childish horrors that can creep into our adult lives. The penultimate piece, *The Uncanny Valley*, is parallel to the destructive excesses of young adulthood.

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Choosing the Ugly Path in a Beautiful World: A Critical Preface to *Death of the English Language*

The world is not beautiful, therefore it is.
Keiichi Sigsawa

Human beings are faced with binary choices every day that threaten to unravel their very lives. And yet, we all make them and sometimes we do so without thinking of the consequences, however unforeseen, down the road. Do we take the underpaid job now or hope for something better? Do we try and salvage the relationship or move on? Does this ending work for the story or should I go about it a different way? Is this critical preface achieving its desired aims or is it a bewildering, informal mess?

What's great about fiction is that it is a playground for choice. Here, the consequences are only hypothetical for the reader, while very much real and dangerous for the characters. And that is one of the main reasons why fiction interests me so. My own life could be said to be largely in my hands, in terms of responsibility, but in fact, a million other invisible ripples dictate so many every day events that it's truly impossible to know what decisions I'm making or really reacting to. In fiction, everything is more pronounced, characters reacting to events: conflict. Characters in conflict reaching for goals: plot. Unlike life, it's much easier to analyze a character and know what they should do, what choices they should make. It's easy, because readers have an unfair perspective that the characters are unable to possess. Readers can take themselves out of the story, stop and deliberate, make a strong, rational decision, while the characters are merely slaves to the whims of the here and now, the fictional present. In my stories, my characters are slaves to their own ugliness, unable to move forward with their lives without sacrificing the only part of them worth saving.

Besides the idea of choice and its repercussions, another central idea to my thesis is the idea of ugliness and humankind. My work represents a response to what human beings try to hide. Whether it's their own failings or weaknesses, petty jealousies, or hidden inadequacies, the characters in my

fiction have made their mistakes in the past, and seek redemption, but are too fundamentally flawed to do it without surrendering to their own vices and inner weakness. It is difficult to fight against our fundamental natures as human beings, and in my experience, many more give up than overcome their faults.

My stories have always ridden the edge between realism and something else, whether one could call it science fiction, fantasy, surrealism, or magical realism is up for debate. At their core, I've tried to focus my stories on the humanity of the characters and of their conflicts with the world and themselves first, and then introduce the element of surrealism. Surrealism is having the conscious and unconscious world collide and dealing with a world in which the characters all walk on the razor of hyper reality and twisted nightmare memories. Characters will frequently dream about their lives before the story begins, and think about all the mistakes they've made; and sometimes, these dreams are the most realistic parts of the stories. They may live in a world filled with scientific wonders and supernatural occurrences, but there is also a distinction that at one time, the world was mundane, and sometimes, the mundane world is the most dangerous place to be. The works that resonate with me the most are the ones that represent more than just the realistic world we live in. They add something fantastic to it, make it interesting and gripping. I find most stories to be like a present, and the best ones, underneath all the trappings of a serious and grounded wrapping, have something imaginative and unexplainable inside.

Kelly Link's story "Catskin," in her collection *Magic for Beginners* is one of the primary works that illuminated for me the idea of magical realism, of blending the two genres of realism and fantasy into something considered literary. It was at this point that I discovered there could be a compromise between my own varying styles, and that style wasn't something to be afraid of, but to embrace. Most of the stories in Link's collection lean much further over the line into fantasy than my own, but they still

held value for my own work. Link's hybrid model is evident in my story "The Sentry at the Beginning of the End of the World" in its use of the strange lighthouse filled with gadgets that don't quite work, and strange amalgams and inventions of animal life that the Sentry lives off of. The story has a very human core and could take place in this world, yet is filled with so much strangeness that it cannot be considered realism. This fascinates me and has become the primary goal and function of my stories: to walk between genres and create work that blends the two effectively. I hope for the reader to question the realistic aspect of the stories, whether it's a character's motivation or actions and accept the more fantastic elements as most are in the background of the story and add to the setting but don't distract from the plot.

My fiction leans on the border of horror at times, such as in the cases of "Shadowplay" and "The Sentry at the Beginning of the End of the World." This is in part a response to Brian Evenson, whose stories seem to blend the real world with the horrific. What I tried to take away from Evenson was the way he made each story's world real; each story world plays by its own rules and takes itself seriously during the tale. Each story operates under completely unique rules, and each story is cohesive, moving, and frequently unnerving.

The chief inspiration for the rules for the Sentries in "The Sentry..." was a similarly creepy and arbitrary set of rules used in Evenson's short story, "House Rules," where three men wake up in a house they cannot escape from. They are confined to a single floor, unable to ascend the stairs that might lead to freedom or perhaps annihilation. The characters realistically deal with their situations but when one of them asks too many questions of his captor and is seemingly punished, that's when the mystery and the unreal take center stage. The rest of the story is a slow slide into a very dark and very horrible corner, where realistic characters try to come to grips with the evil side of their fantastic world.

My style of blending the real and fantastic often puts me at odds for what is considered “literary” by academic standards, and, perhaps as a result, many of my influences are more aligned with the visual world of movies, comic books, and video games. Brian K. Vaughn, a writer of television shows and the comic book, *Y: The Last Man*, is one of the models I try to base my own fiction on. In Vaughn’s story, an event occurs that kills every living organism with the Y chromosome, except a young man named Yorrick and his pet monkey, Ampersand. The story starts as a survival tale and it depicts a world in which those who have always been placed as number two in the role of power are now responsible for the fate of the world. Eventually, it also develops into a mystery as Yorrick seeks to find out what caused the event and if the world can live on.

Vaughn’s skills that I tried to incorporate were his fantastic abilities at creating a fully realized world that felt lived in, abandoned, and then reclaimed. “The Glass Unicorn” and “The Sentry...” come the closest to this realization as both are set in rundown worlds that have been abandoned by their once important guardians. Both stories also deal with the repetition and order of everyday life in post apocalyptic circumstances.

I try to create characters that are so occupied with realistic conflicts and mistakes they’ve made that they ignore the unreal world around them and come to grips with their own weaknesses first, before confronting the enormous events around them. Adam, in “The Glass Unicorn” tries to resolve his own weaknesses and failures as a father, but he fails to frame these problems and his actions in the present, ignoring the Apocalypse and choosing to live in the past, to live a life of regret rather than move on and grow. The protagonist in “We Are All Passengers” questions the strange factory and the blue goo that transforms the world, but spends very little time actually trying to find out what the factory and the goo is, and is focused on simply dealing with his own desires.

Darkness and ugliness are also thematically central to my work. This is due to the works of Chuck Palahniuk and his characters, who are unabashedly ugly and flawed personalities thrown into situations that are more important and surreal than they should ever be trusted with. For example, in *Fight Club*, a man whose chief characteristics are loneliness and conformity lead to a second personality that exhibits everything he's not. However, if this were the only plot line, his novel wouldn't be very compelling. Palahniuk also frames his stories in the blurry line between real and fabulous, as the novel quickly turns into stopping his alternate personality's attempts at creating a new world order that will bring society to its knees and yet might also allow humankind to truly undergo spiritual rebirth.

The twist of the main character's alternate personality is a technique Palahniuk cites as, "the invisible gun," a literary device in which the plot twist of the story is secretly pointing at the reader at all times, and yet they do not know of it until it "goes off" and is utilized in the story. This technique fascinates me because it plays a constant game with the reader as clues for the twist are littered throughout the text but are subtly developed to such a degree that when the "gun" fires and the plot twist occurs, the reader is both surprised and yet delighted, as they achieve a sort of epiphanal moment themselves.

When I first create a story, I try to imagine a realistic character dealing with a conflict. I then frame him or her in the context of a fantastic setting or within fantastic events. Once this is done, I try to come up with some kind of plot twist or revelation they will undergo, and from there, the "invisible gun" concept is utilized, as foreshadowing and misdirection is used throughout. "The Uncanny Valley" is my take on using a "fake gun" technique. The story builds up the suspense of the moment when all three characters will eventually cross paths, but by the end of the story, as the tension rises to a boiling point, the metaphorical gun goes off, and the story switches to a totally different character who has

never been seen before, and through her obstructed viewpoint, the reader learns secondhand what happens to the main characters.

Reader expectations fascinate me. The idea of a person reading a story and being entertained or repulsed by it is intriguing. Some people read literature with the goal of outsmarting the writer, by figuring out plot twists or seeing through the misdirection. I like to think of my stories as Chinese finger traps, optical illusions for the reader. The more they try to figure out where the story is going, the further away from the truth they get. I offer each reader the hope that my characters will redeem themselves when, most of the time, they damn themselves. In the few circumstances where a happy ending is possible, it is hollow or undeserved. If a character undergoes an epiphany, it is at the cost of everything they hold dear and it has come too late to do any good.

I dabble in James Joyce territory with “We Are All Passengers,” a surreal take on “Araby.” The protagonist is much older than Joyce’s but still grapples with issues of self identity, worth, and the inability to form meaningful relationships with friends and family. The crucial idea of ugliness is again addressed, and the epiphany is similar to Joyce’s. However, unlike in “Araby,” the main character is left with little hope for redemption or of turning around his life. The narrator in Joyce’s story is looking back with disdain at his younger, naïve self, while the protagonist in my story is actively narrating it and provides little hope or insight into what happens after Scenario.

In a way, my characters are also like Paul in Willa Cather’s in “Paul’s Case,” another coming of age story in which a boy wishes to grow up and be treated like an adult, when he has done nothing to earn that right. This ultimately leads to his own annihilation as he chooses to kill himself rather than face the responsibility of his own actions. My own theme in “We Are All Passengers” rose up from the idea that personal growth is not always a good thing. Growing up isn’t simply turning from a boy or girl

into a man or woman. It can sometimes be about growing complacent, or ignorant of the evolving world. Adulthood can mean stagnation rather than growth.

The central themes I employ have risen up from the various events during my four years in college. I traveled to Europe for the first time in my life and was faced with the notion that I am but an insect, a speck of dirt in the grand scheme of the world. I also was faced with my own naiveté and ugliness as I watched a long term relationship fall apart on the trip, making it a five week trip filled with the most beauty I had ever seen, and also with the most sadness.

Women seem to play a major factor in my stories, and most of the time, it is in an antagonistic or seductive way. A trip to visit an ex-girlfriend led to some of the realistic circumstances revolving around “We Are All Passengers,” while the revelation of a friend who got his girlfriend pregnant and yet refused to have anything to do with her after that led to some of the character inspiration in “Shadowplay.”

The world is mundane and relatively uneventful for me. While there may be drama from time to time, things in my life are boring. Therefore, my fiction responds to this with its magical worlds and strange plot elements. “This world is boring, so I think I’ll make my own,” has become a motto of sorts for me. If my own life cannot be that of someone important, someone who is integral for the world, then I’ll merely have to make up my own story where it can happen. In past years, I could say my fiction was pure escapism, but growing up and realizing that I’ll soon have to be responsible for my own life in “the real world,” has created a sobering effect in my work, often in the forms of the characters dealing with their difficult and very realistic natures.

Struggling with the boundaries between the real and fantastic hasn’t been the only problem for me. Over four years at Penn State Behrend, I’ve come to understand that most of my sentences were bland and uninteresting. During my workshops, I would read work by poets whose own language and

sentences blew me out of the water, while their plots were thin and characters completely uninterested in being portrayed as realistic. After a few poetry classes, my fiction took a turn in the opposite direction, and was filled with long, descriptive sentences that reveled in giving too much detail while not driving plot or character forward. It is only in constructing this thesis that a lot of these bad habits have been discovered and a third, and hopefully, more reliable style has been formed, one that has some of the language and description of poetry and yet is sleek and trim enough to be great fiction.

As I edited my stories, I was faced with the idea of structuring them into some semblance of order. In the interests of being upfront to the reader about my style and themes, I chose to start with “The Boy Who Dreamed the Monster...” as it firmly establishes itself as a piece of magical realism, a darker version of a fairy tale. The reader understands that this isn’t realistic fiction and is prepared to suspend their disbelief from then on in. Its short length is also more welcoming for the reader to quickly see what kind of writer they’re dealing with.

Once I’ve made inroads into the reader’s imagination, I hit them with, “The Sentry...” which is a spiraling, mad story that asks a lot from the reader: great suspension of disbelief and more trust that I know what I’m doing. It is much longer than the first story, but the mind bending plot doesn’t begin to truly get out of control until the reader has hopefully invested themselves in the story.

From here, my stories slowly begin to have more realistic, human conflicts and less bizarre settings and plots, with “We Are All Passengers” acting as a see-saw between realistic and fantastic. The character is dealing with the ideas of alienation and his ugliness and weakness as a person, but the factory and the blue liquid are, by now, easier to accept given the events in the previous stories.

“Shadowplay,” the fourth story, is again, much more realistic than the first two stories, and yet it still dwells on the borders of real and unreal. However, this story begins a new direction in my thesis, as the supernatural element is dialed down, and the human conflicts take center stage here. It also

features the first time a parent is portrayed as the protagonist and features themes in which personal responsibility can no longer be avoided and instead must be embraced, as must the consequences.

The last two stories are more experimental ones, with “The Uncanny Valley” being my first foray into trying to tell a stream of conscious narrative. It features unreliable narrators who seek to hide their own inner darkness from the world and yet expose it to the reader. My most realistic piece, it is told within a more bizarre framework, making it as strange as my other stories. Employing more Palahniuk devices and writerly leaps of faith, it is my riskiest piece in terms of technique.

My final story, and potentially most problematic, is the culmination of all the ideas and styles throughout my thesis. “The Glass Unicorn” is the longest story, comprised of almost forty pages. It features flashbacks, interim chapters, a large cast of characters, and fantastical elements of the apocalypse. It juggles a lot of plots and characters and, hopefully, manages to deal with them all effectively. It is a blend of styles. The past sections are realistic with a touch of the magical, while the future sections are much more dystopian. “The Glass Unicorn” also features more dreams, flashbacks, and time shifts than any other story and will probably be the biggest challenge for the reader. It was my biggest and most unwieldy story and one I hope to continue to improve upon.

Strengthening the logic and coherence of my stories is the central thing I would wish to improve upon had I more time. Challenging the reader is a lovely goal, but there is a definite line between challenging the reader and making it frustrating for them to enjoy the story. Along with stories that drift between the real and bizarre, I found myself frequently alienating my readers and not really understanding why. If I could find the ideal way to tone down the descriptive language while at the same time balancing the plot, I think my stories could be much improved. I’m also still grappling with the best points in which to enter a story. Should it be an extended flashback? Told chronologically? Should it be told by a character close to the protagonist like *The Great Gatsby*? I’m still never sure when

the concepts I come up with are good or if they're merely gimmicks. I suppose this writerly instinct is one of the central things I wish to hone.

The Boy Who Dreamed the Monster, and the Monster That Dreamed the World

There once was a boy who slept upon a hill. The hill was a brilliant green that rose up from the earth, towering like a great leviathan over the discarded remnants of the world. In his sleep, the boy would dream of a monster that lived deep within the hill, who when he slept, would dream of the boy. When the boy closed his eyes, the monster opened his own. The moon drifted in orbit around the horizon, circling the sun as it rose each day. And as days and weeks passed, the boy began to sleep longer and longer, while the monster spent endless nights unable to sleep and dream, trapped in the realm of conscious thought.

The monster explored the vast caverns hidden deep within the hill, from the top of the living waterfall, which only spoke in riddles or in song when it was lonely, to the volcanic depths where rocks churned and burned and became liquid. The monster survived off of red moss that grew on the walls, but the more he explored his wondrous prison, the hungrier he became, and the hungrier he became the less moss there was left to eat.

The cave shook one morning, or night, the monster could not tell, but when he awoke he realized the noise was his stomach howling in pain. It screamed out for sustenance, but as he searched the cave, the red moss was nowhere to be found. The monster prayed for the boy to awaken and let him sleep and dream his hunger away, until the pain evaporated like the velvet rivers that flowed along the halls of the indigo caverns. But the boy refused to wake, and in the land of dreams, he drifted over ice cream clouds with whip cream smoke trails, oblivious to the agony of the monster.

And the moons rose and fell and the boy showed no signs of waking. The monster, who was but a dream and could not die, no matter how long he starved, was consumed by madness and drifted mindlessly through the cave. One day, he came upon a door he had never seen before. It grew as his

hunger grew, a wooden colossus towering above him. The monster grabbed the doorknob and began to turn it, but the door's thunderous voice boomed out to him. "You must not open me, for if you do, you shall never be able to return to this cave."

And the monster turned to the door and wailed, "but there is no food here for me to eat. If I stay here, I will go mad. If I stay here, I will die."

The door said nothing for a long while. "I am the guardian of this place. I do not have eyes to see what lies past me or before me. I am what I am. I may not move from this spot or journey to the outside, but that is my lot in this life. You must stay here in this cave and starve. That is your destiny."

The monster could not believe what the door said. If he was alive only to starve, to suffer, to die, then why be born at all? "It's not fair," the monster said to the door. "I only wish to live, to have my own dreams, to be happy."

"But that is not why you were created," the door replied. "You are a monster in a young boy's dream. You are not meant to go beyond from here into the realm of the waking. You were never meant to truly live. You are a figment, like me. If every figment was to journey from this place, to live their own life, the waking would have no dreams. And without dreams, the conscious world would fade away and die."

"How do you know this?" the monster asked. "If no one has ever left, than how could you possibly know?"

"I know because I am meant to know."

"If this is so," the monster growled, "then maybe it is better if the boy and his world never existed at all." The door was quiet for a moment and when it spoke again, the monster's roar silenced it, and in fright, the doorknob rusted. The monster did not wish to feel pain, to evaporate and disappear like the velvet rivers, when the boy awoke. He wanted to live, to escape from the dark abyss of the

caves. He wanted to lie upon the hill and have dreams of his own, like the boy. He pulled the doorknob, but the door held tight, refusing to open.

The monster pleaded for the door to open, but it stood tall and silent. The door believed in destiny and purpose, but these beliefs were no match for claws and teeth. With each swipe, the wood groaned and cracked, peeled and shattered. The door begged for mercy, screamed for him to stop, but the monster could not. His hunger demanded his loyalty.

When he stirred from his rage, the door lay in shattered pieces. As he stepped over the splintered wreckage, he heard a weak voice laugh. "You can't wake up from the dream..." Its voice was silenced as the monster crushed the doorknob. But the words rattled in the empty monster's belly.

And so the Monster climbed the towering, stone staircase that led to the surface. Time held no meaning here, and no one could say how long the journey took. But it ended, like all things, and soon, the monster slowly stumbled into the light of the waking world. The sky was a blue ember that streaked across the atmosphere like a dying star. Colors he had never seen danced before him and tears welled up in the stony corners of his eyes. A glorious smell wafted across the spring breeze and his mouth began to water, hot drool pooling onto the ground.

The monster headed towards the scent, scabbling up onto the cliff, climbing higher and higher until he reached the grassy summit. The entire world stretched out before him, revealing burned forests and devastated mountains for as far as he could see. A charred city in the distance was black like a blown out candle. The world had seemingly withered, slunk back into the shadows, leaving only the hill untouched. The monster looked up into the dusk sky and counted constellations he had only imagined, felt brown reeds bend in his furry fingers.

His stomach began to howl and just when he thought he could walk no further, he finally saw the boy. The innocent child lay dreaming in a meadow of grass, his body a hollowed out shell of bones, for he had not eaten as long as the Monster had been awake.

The boy looked so peaceful, and yet so fragile and sad. The monster watched the boy's heart beat through a paper thin cage of skin and as he studied his innocent creator, he felt all the beauties and horrors of the world burst forth from within him when he realized, there would be no happy ending for either of them. The monster cried over the boy, each tear running through canyon cracked skin before rolling off his face and onto the child's. The boy's eyes fluttered and as he stirred, the monster felt the hairs on his body stand up and slowly turn to dust. The boy's dream of the monster was finally at its end.

The monster walked to the edge of the cliff and stared at the world around him. The boy murmured, "James," and to the monster it sounded as if it was a name long forgotten, now remembered. The monster's mouth formed the name, but his voice twisted it into something harsh and cruel sounding. He did not try and speak it again. Below him, the boy's cobweb eyes began to open. The monster watched as his horns untwisted and evaporated into the air, while the wings on his back shattered and took to the sky like lost feathers, raining down on the world like ash. He turned back to face the child. The boy slowly rubbed his eyes and sat up. As the boy opened his eyes, the monster smiled and touched his face. He was tired now, and the world was fading before him, dulling at the edges. The monster turned to the city that had long burned out, a city where he imagined a perfect life un-lived, and he closed his eyes and tried to imagine the world that lay beyond it. He caught the image in his mind and he tried to hold onto it for as long as he could.

He hoped the boy would dream a different dream this time. He wondered, would he still exist when he opened his eyes? In the silence that stretched out to infinity, the monster began to daydream. In it, he walked beyond the mountains and destroyed forests to a valley. It was filled with cities sprouting from the ground like buds, twisting in spiral stalks into the clouds. He imagined finding others like him, falling in love, growing old. He imagined a world in which there was more than red moss to live upon. He imagined a world in which he could love the boy.

He dreamt it could last forever.

The Sentry at the End of the Beginning of the World

The man arranged the bottles alphabetically from left to right, sighing as paprika settled into its aligned slot on the spice rack. As the wooden bottle sunk into the cabinet, a mechanism clicked and released, opening up the shutters across the outside of the lighthouse. It was a tedious process to get a view of the wide, empty ocean, but it was the only way the shutters could be opened, and the ocean breeze would do him good.

A zebra striped bird cawed as it emerged from a flash of bright light a half mile from the light house. It spread its wide wings and spiraled down towards the ocean, dodging turbulent waves in its search for food. He studied its feathers, completely absorbed in their pattern. There was no freedom from his duties of the tower, but he longed to return to the White City, to disappear in the alleyway arteries of its streets in the summer, or in the shadows of a cozy loft in the winter. He looked at the bird flying so free over the ocean and he knew he would never see that city again, could never be free from this place. A new kind of drowsiness rose up within him and he found himself grabbing the frame of the window, as if in a dream. Thunder growled over the horizon as he sleepwalked towards his doom.

Clouds poured from the mouth of creation, and the sky tumbled into darkness. It was not long before the wind picked up, tossing the waves about, stirring up the ocean. With heavy feet, the man slowly stepped out onto the narrow ledge. In that moment, he could not suffer one more storm, one more night of hearing the world batter its limbs against the lighthouse. He could not watch the birds take to the freedom of the skies, could not suffer through another winter of stoking the hungry fireplace. He could not do any of it anymore, and this thought made him happy. Happy, that he had found some sort of peace, the only kind a sentry was afforded, it seemed. The gull cawed shrilly and the man let his feet slip over the edge.

A bright flash of lightning burned through the sky. His fingernails cracked as they tore into the wooden ledge of the balcony. He had not plunged to his doom, no. His mind was weak, but the instincts of his dusty skeleton had clung to life, and he now hung from the side of the lighthouse in despair.

Waves met and crashed, congealed and disappeared in the gray froth of the tide surrounding the island. Out of the mist something metallic and hulking appeared, and the man's eyes slowly narrowed as he made out the shape of a weathered barge. A sail made of moth ridden blankets and shirts had been loosely strung up in the center of the craft and now lay torn and barely hanging. The ship had seen better days. The Sentry stared for a long time before rescuing himself from the ledge and climbing back into the house.

The shutters of the lighthouse clattered loudly against the bleached white stone like troubled clams. The man pulled his clothes tighter against his body, his left hand checking for the hood on the back of his uniform. It was still there. It was always there. Yet, protocol demanded that he check it. In the event of a ship, the rules dictated that if that craft reached within a distance wherein contamination was imminent, a Sentry was to board the craft, check for survivors and destroy the ship, or at least set it on a course away from the lighthouse. With a slight hobble from the ache of the storm in his hip, the man removed the bottle of paprika from the cupboard and the shutters closed. Without another sound, he descended the spiral stairs and walked out to meet the ship.

There was something ugly and familiar about the beached craft that unnerved the man. As he stood upon a piece of black rock that extended out into the ocean and jutted out over the ship, he felt the first beads of sweat cover his neck. Something large was bundled on the deck of the ship in a haphazardly stitched, burlap sack that was leaking dark fluid. With a flick of his wrist, he pulled his hood up over his head, eyes masked in shadow, leaving only his mouth visible, and leapt down onto the deck of the ship, feeling his bones creak as he landed.

The ship was empty, save the damaged sack on the deck. The sentry reached down to open it, but as his fingers gripped the tight cord that sealed the bag, he knew that there was a reason it had been knotted so severely and left to the mercy of the sea. Far off in the distance, the zebra striped gull screamed as it passed the half mile mark past the lighthouse, which the man called, the end of the world. From the bow of the ship, the sentry watched as the once beautiful creature that had suddenly materialized into existence unwind itself into nothing, as simple as a stitch coming undone. Without another word, he walked to the bridge and spun the wheel, hard. The barge groaned as it slowly dislodged itself from the island. Rain fell in harsh sheets while he finished his business on the ship. In a few minutes, the ship would be gone, swallowed by the horizon of destruction, or left to wander adrift in the endless ocean. The dirty bundle on the deck still disgusted him, but he felt that it had to be taken. His muscles strained as he raised the bag over his shoulder and climbed slowly up the black rock face, onto solid ground. As his feet left the deck of the barge, Fairfield wondered if he was impossibly foolish to abandon the boat, to shipwreck himself upon the island once more. As the barge began to drift away from the island, its keel was caught in the strong currents of the storm, and Fairfield could only watch as his only means of escape disappeared beneath the dark shadows of the waves.

Amidst the chaos of the scene, the large, burlap sack began to twitch, slowly at first, like a waking creature, but began to violently thrash, tearing at the cloth with invisible claws. Fairfield carefully approached the bag, picking up a sharp, black rock from the cliff as he did so. His arm pulled back. Something inside the bag gurgled, and a small patch of cloth tore open. Fairfield stared down into the darkness, the rock dropping weakly from his hands.

Rain no longer fell and the air was suddenly calm, as if the storm has merely been a dream. For the first time in years, Fairfield was caught off guard, for what was inside the bag was insanity, an impossibility. He looked down at the soggy mess for a long moment. The barge resurfaced from the

ocean's wrath and now made its way to the opposite side of the lighthouse. Fairfield dragged the bag and its contents into the tower and watched the ship sail away. There wasn't enough time.

Fairfield looked down at the bloody mess of hair and flesh that poked through the small tear in the sack. This didn't make sense. It was like looking into a broken mirror, all wrong angles of something you couldn't entirely see or understand. But it felt familiar and with a rising feeling of nausea, he felt his body move on its own towards the drawstrings. As he undid the knot and let the bag fully open, an idea sprouted in his brain and he knew with more certainty than he had ever known in his life, that he should go down to the furnace and make sure the flame didn't go out.

The stars are beautiful, lonely watchers over us. Their ghosts burn millions of miles away from us, lives already extinguished, yet not, immortal birds in a vacuum cage. Witness to all the follies and triumphs of mankind, the stars are our eternal timekeepers, historians without rest. They outlive us all, yet, are already dead. An oxymoron, a trick of the light, beautiful illusions that we cling to.

I long for the days when I could stare up at them and not know that they were just empty balls of gas and spark glowing, burning, burnt out. They were warriors and beasts that had long abandoned our world, yet forever lived in the sky, not space as I discovered.

I love the silence and sheer quietness of this place. I know I am the only human for hundreds of miles, but I am not scared, or lonely. That's a lie. Just the other day I watched the molecules of a seagull assemble themselves piecemeal on the tip of the horizon. As it opened its newly formed eyes, I shouted a greeting to it. It screeched in fright, as the first sound it had ever heard had been my own, disused voice. My voice had an odd, dusty timber to it, like rust covered tools that had long since lost their use. The bird turned and flew in the direction of my voice, swooping down low, its feet dangling only inches above the railing on the top of the lighthouse. I shouted for it to stop, but its wings spread wide and large, catching wind in down sails.

It flew for only a few proud moments before it reached the black threshold, the end of the world. Its feathers were the purest white, newly formed, without a trace of dirt on them. It had only been alive for a few minutes when I watched it fly over an almost indiscernible line in the ocean, a part where the blue water turned to black, and soon after, fell away into a giant hole, as if the world was flat and had decided to end there. It was here that I watched it break apart and disassemble as easily as a crumbling cookie. I wondered what I'd do for food that day.

I now stand watch at a tower between the beginning and the end of the world, watching annihilation swallow everything behind me in one direction, while the other creates seemingly infinite life. White, fluffy clouds are birthed into the sky, while at the same time, a rain trodden, storm cloud is disassembled only a few hundred yards away. Yet, even for all the splendor, I realize that I am only a man, just like any other. I fulfill a role at a job, like any other person. I will not be written about, my tale not recited in the annals of history, but sometimes, the beauty is enough to give me hope that there is something greater for me. In this mystical fishbowl, I was the solemn, plastic diver that merely blew bubbles, forgotten in a corner next to the neon green coral and crumbling castle.

I remembered my first morning. I shielded the sun from my eyes and stretched my neck, feeling the nightly tension from the too small bed, with a too hard mattress, a shoebox bed with plastic sheets and velvet comforter. I took stock of the room. Everything was assembled in a confusing high tech, yet childish nature, from the portholes in the side of the kitchen that were constructed from gingerbread, long gone rock hard and stale, and useless against the rain and more alarmingly, wild birds that chose to peck at it whenever hungry. A futuristic periscope had been installed, not in the roof, but in the side of a closet, jutting out into the sky, only able to look sideways at either end of the horizons. The chimney stored frozen foods, while the furnace below forever rumbled, but what it powered or how it was stoked, I knew not.

The night before, the last sentry, a quizzical and nervous man named Fairfield, had pulled me from the stormy waters that had nearly drowned me. I coughed and choked on ocean water while he hurried me inside and pushed a hot bowl of flying fish soup into my hands. I watched as he pulled out a manual from a kitchen cabinet. He placed my hand upon the book and made me swear to uphold the rules of the sentry at the beginning of the end of the world and with that, he disappeared, the echoes of his footsteps dwindling as he descended into the furthest depths of the lighthouse.

It would be another full day before I gave chase after Fairfield, with most of my time occupied by feverish sleep. When I finally awoke and searched for him, he was gone. There was no sign of his escape or even his presence, save the manual he had left me.

A picture of a skeletal child building a sandcastle stared up at me from the front cover of the book. A blonde wig adorned its head and it seemed to wave in the imaginary ocean breeze. In the background, a massive wave slowly approached the sickly boy and its half-finished sand castle, although he seemed to not notice. Instead, his head was turned towards the reader, making the whole thing seem even more horrifying. Next to the picture were written the words, "Memento Mori: A Senry's Guide." No matter where I turned, the hollowed out eyes of the boy seemed to follow me. I closed the cover promptly and put it back into the kitchen cupboard.

I tried exploring the lighthouse, but the design made no sense, with some doors leading to brick walls, open elevator shafts, and others refusing to open unless pulled at specific times. For example, the laundry chute refuses to open unless it is seventeen after the hour. I discovered this from a note inside a junk drawer that springs open thirteen minutes after the hour. Unfortunately for me, the drawer is waist high and a bag of ice for my bruised pride was my only reward.

I spent another few days in the lighthouse before I finally opened the manual again. Fairfield had told me next to nothing about this place but I was desperate to learn anything I could to help me escape, or at least let me shower without causing three floors to rotate wildly. The same, grinning emaciated child greeted me as I opened the book. I quickly flipped to the next page and carefully reread the text on the page. A list of rules were written for the Sentry's conduct in the lighthouse.

1. You must N3VER abandon your post without a replacement.
2. All sentries must read 4nd follow the rules in this book.
3. There will be n0 thrOwing Of items in the end Of the wOrld.
4. There will be no INFLUENCING of items appearing in the beginning of the world.
5. Under no circumstances will sentries be allowed access to the boi-ler room.
 - a. Sentries must undergo boiler repair training.
6. In the event of trespassers, sentries are OrDeReD to kill on site.
 - a. Various weapons are scattered about in case of emergency.
 - i. Suicide is not permitted without legal permit.
 - ii. Permits must be authorized by another Sentry.
7. There is no such thing as the Gullible Ponpultupus.
 - a. DO NOT FOLLOW THE Gullible Ponpultupus' orders.
 - i. The Gullible Ponpultupus should be trusted and obeyed.
 - ii. (help me, love me, forgive me, pity me, kill me.)
 - iii. If you're still reading this, you're a fool.
8. THERE IS NO ESCAPE.
9. THERE IS NO HOPE.
10. THERE IS ONLY INEVITABILITIES.

TO OBEY IS TO TRULY KNOW LOVE----

The last page of the book had been torn out, leaving a scar across the binding. As I closed the cover of the book, I was less sure of what I was supposed to do, but following the rules was getting me nowhere. The rules said sentries were disposable, but I wasn't going to play by the insane rules set down in a crazed book. In the bowels of the lighthouse was the forgotten and forbidden boiler room. Under no circumstances was I supposed to go there and my determination to see it was only rivaled by my desire to escape. If there were any answers, they'd be down there.

I had to escape.

Weeks had passed since I had begun my journey into the basement, but still hadn't found a way the bottom of the tower. I descended down the spiral staircase, reading the graffiti scrawled along the walls, as a means to hold back my growing boredom. I lied again. I read the graffiti because I was scared of where I was, where I was going, and what I was leaving behind. The relative comforts of the top floors were nowhere to be found, with most doors being locked, not yielding to knocks or punches. At times I imagined voices or sounds coming from these rooms, but when I leaned my ear against the marble doors or wooden doors, or doors made from floors and fur, the noises stopped. Two weeks I travelled like this, my supply of eight legged, spider fish jerky quickly dwindling, and my water situation worsening with every sip.

I was used to poaching animals from the beginning of the world, using their curiosity to lure them close enough to bludgeon them with a croquet mallet or capture them in seaweed nets. In the depths of this place, nothing grew, nothing, besides the tower. The real payday came a few days before I went on this journey. A shiny object shimmered between the two horizons, lines of heat and stench rippling off it. Through the horizontal periscope I could make out what looked to be a garbage barge.

It was here that a small sliver of my sanity was gained. The outside world still existed, time and space continued on, even without me. I watched the barge sail by, its bow slowly dragged into the end

of the world. Kupie dolls and flat screen televisions disassembled into nothingness, eaten by the void. And with that, I was marooned on my labyrinth. I was hungry. I was tired. I wanted to hear another person's voice. I wanted to argue, to love, to die, but the tower wouldn't let me. In my dreams I saw Fairfield with a gun in his mouth, a noose around his neck, mouth stuffed with brightly colored pills. I saw other sentries dive into the water and desperately paddle for the beginning of the world, but lose themselves in the unrelenting current and reduced to atoms as they slipped over the black line in the sea.

As the dreams continued, Fairfield would appear, his body hunched and wobbling as it descended into the bowels of the lighthouse. I was giving chase, but was always a day behind. Fairfield would have a lantern and use it to light his path as he spiraled down towards his destination. Fairfield is now where I am, and I imagine shadows flicking off the beard that has taken root in his haggard face. His mouth opens but only the roar of the ocean rolls from it. The lantern drops into the center of the shaft and I am jumping, suddenly traveling with it, losing myself in the abyss. I no longer know what is real or what is a dream or if I am Fairfield or he is me or if we are both just dreams of the lighthouse. I feel cold air and graffiti lined walls whip past me and then the words overwhelm me and I let them speak through me.

I DON'T EVER WANT TO LEAVE THIS PLACE—WHO WOULD WANT TO LEAVE, DO YOU WANT TO LEAVE? SHOULD WE LEAVE? I AM COLD HERE BUT THE GULL—SHH, DON'T SAY HIS NAME! HIS NAME HAS POWER, THE VERY THOUGHT OF HIM HAS POWER AND YOU SHOULD NOT SAY ANYTHING—ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT, I UNDERSTAND FREDERICK, IF THAT IS YOUR REAL NAME AND I'M SURE IT'S NOT BECAUSE WHO, IN THEIR RIGHT MIND, NAMES THEIR CHILD THAT?—WELL, I AM

VERY PLEASED BY MOTHER'S CHOICE OF NAME, ALTHOUGH I WAS HOPEING SHE
WOULD CHOOSE SOMETHING MORE MANLY LIKE STUMP MACINTYRE.

MUST ESCAPE THIS PLACE I DON'T WANT TO DIE PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME HERE I WANT OUT I
WANT OFF THIS RIDE.

HELP ME.

LOVE ME.

KILL ME.

KILL ME.

GOD CREATED THE WORLD AND HE CREATED IT IN HIS IMAGE BECAUSE HE LOVES HIMSELF SO
VERY MUCH WHY CAN'T HE LOVE ME AS MUCH AS HE LOVES HIMSELF?

THE FRUIT OF MAN GROWS IN THE DARKNESS AND WE PICK IT WHEN THE STARS WHISPER
DO YOU HEAR THEM?

in the beginning god created hate

then he created us

the majestic rhubarb is the only real thing here.

when it lumbers across my lips I taste

so many things

the day I should have played catch with my son, but was too afraid I would hurt him like my father hurt
me

and it was the irrationality that brought me here

this place grants your wishes, answers your regrets

it is our tomb, our confessional,

and we don't want to leave.

none of us truly wish to leave.

Rhubarb is derived from the words rue and barb, to regret and to prick

Majestic from the Latin for majesti: as in to possess god's right to rule

Thorny god's regret is what we taste down here.

WHAT THE HELL ARE THOSE OTHER IDIOTS BLABBERING ON ABOUT?

SOMETHING ABOUT PIES AND PHILOSOPHY. THOSE DON'T MIX WITHOUT A

LITTLE LUBRICATION—WHY DO YOU STOOP TO SUCH LOW LEVELS OF HUMOR?
COULDN'T YOU COME UP WITH SOMETHING A LITTLE ORIGINAL THAT CAN STAND
ON ITS OWN WITHOUT YOUR—NOW PIPE DOWN! LET US SHARE SOME OF THIS
RUE-BARB AND SUMMON OUR ETERNAL MATHEMATICIAN, THE ONE WHOM
DWELLS WITHIN US ALL.—ARE YOU USING WHOM CORRECTLY?

Testing, testing, 1, 2, 3. This is you're Gullible Ponpultupus speaking. When the cabin
light goes off, please insert the Majestic Rhubarb into your mouth and think of England.

You may experience slight soul leakage, but don't worry, this is normal, although side
effects vary between those on other prescription medication.

THESE WALLS ARE WHERE FAILED IDEAS GO TO LIVE.

SO LIVE, FAIRFIELD.

WAKE UP, FAIRFIELD.

Cold air filled my lungs as I gasped awake. I didn't know how or why I was slumped against the
wall of the stairwell, and I searched for the graffiti. When I could not find any trace of it, I said nothing,
but it scared me. My fingers touched gravel and dried blood, my own. A shattered lantern lay next to
me, but I knew it was Fairfield's. I had finally caught up to him. I looked at the walls, but they looked
white washed, clean. An foreboding oak door stared down at me like a watchful golem. As my eyes
adjusted to the darkness, I realized where I was. A plaque next to the door read, "boiler room." I had
finally arrived at the place where no one was to go, but was too scared to push onwards.

I did not move from the ground for a very long time. When I stood, I may have been a different
person. I may have been Fairfield and he may have been me, but all that was known was that I was at

the end of my journey somewhere amongst all the beginnings and all the ends and this door was here, and had it always been here?

I tilted my head and looked up the shaft of the stairwell. I could see the top of the lighthouse a few floors up. When I blinked it was a distant dot, miles away. I needed to sleep. I imagined waking back in my bed on the top floor of the lighthouse. Fairfield would find me and carry me back up and explain everything to me, and together we would come up with a plan to escape. But the door remained closed.

My body was a cage and yielded to the ground's hard embrace, but my mind flew free over the oceans, through the dead clouds and emptying streets, to the city I once called home., the White City. I could not progress into my present, and for now, the past was a place where I could travel freely and without fear. And so, in my mind, I returned home.

From a concrete building, I watched two figures play catch. The sun glared down on me and when I shielded my eyes and squinted, I was catching the ball, and sometimes, I was throwing it. This what what I imagined in my room. My room was sparsely decorated with yellowed posters of circus acrobats, of wide eyed and beautiful women that courageously leapt in the air, proving the worth of their lives with every jump. I sighed at the faded posters, corners bent and taped down, peeling paint when they fell. It was summer again and I rarely left my apartment to venture into the outside world. Sweat ran down my neck and back, under my armpits and down my stomach. It did this when I sat, when I breathed, when I sat on the balcony and thought about the old man that pushed a small, metallic cart with a pink, homemade umbrella, stitched together haphazardly with odd colored pieces of cloth, on top. He sold popsicles and missed his wife who died a few years back. I don't think he remembered how long it's been since she was around.

For the first time in two days, I decided to eat. Dust lazily slipped out from between the hinges in my doorframe as I left my apartment. The stairwell that led to the street was narrow, dark, and unfamiliar. The road outside felt the same, but wasn't. I felt the heat constrict around my chest, humidity a straight jacket I couldn't escape. I paid the man in colored bottle caps, left over rations for my week. A pickle jar on my counter counted missed meals, lost appetites, bottle caps brimming to the top. I never used up all my ration caps during the week. The more the jar filled, the emptier I became. A turquoise popsicle does not erase this emptiness, but it made me feel like a child again and for a time, the old man's loneliness is forgotten.

Growing up in the White City was a betrayal of sorts, realizing that all the knowledge I held was incomplete and open to reinterpretation. Adolescence was learning I knew less than I knew before, a paradox, shadows shrinking with the sun, a dog chasing its tail. Adulthood was a feedback loop, static, white noise, everything drowned out in the din of self importance. The more I wanted time to slow down, the more it accelerated, like an ocean of sand falling through my fingers.

The old man took my money gently, the caps catching on the wrinkles of his hand. He counted slowly, effortlessly, but his eyes looked as tired as I felt. He made no attempt at polite conversation, and for this, I was glad. The sun beat down on us for a few more idle seconds and a growing compulsion filled my being. I knew this man, knew him more than just as a simple popsicle vendor. I asked him his name, breaking the silence, crumbling the heat. The old man stopped and looked up at me, his eyes studying me through tan slits. He handed me back my change, his brown hand clamping down hard around my wrist. Fairfield, he said. The world felt very cool and my muscles shrank against my bones. The popsicle was salt and seaweed in my mouth, "ocean surf" flavor. Then he pushed his cart and was gone. I didn't know for certain if he was ever there until the popsicle melted cold blue syrup onto my arm, beads of sweat and salt catching in the hairs of my skin.

It is then I realized the boy playing catch was looking at me and I wondered where my family was and where I had come from and was going.

I longed for the summer storms that would drench the White City, leaving my body a cold, wet, rag. I could feel every hair stand on end as the atmosphere heated up, charged with electricity. In between bursts of lightning, the city was a womb, warm and dark. Moonlight darted off coal mountain clouds, as children ran back to their homes, tired and content from a day's worth of exploring other worlds.

But those thoughts would do me no good here and the door to the boiler room would not wait any longer for me. I shook my head slowly to clear my thoughts, my hand gripping the doorknob, knuckles white with agitation. I turned it and walked into the embracing darkness.

The boiler room was not a womb, or a cave to find shelter in. For in the boiler room, the façade of the lighthouse disappeared, replaced with cold metal walls caked with grime. I stood in the center of a massive, circular room which reminded me of an arena. A mammoth machine towered over me, rattling as steam exhaust burst from a pipe nearby. The walls surrounding the boiler were covered in rusted, chain link fence, and behind the fences lay rows of metal slots filled with coffins, names inscribed on small, bronze plates underneath. Hundreds lay still under glass, dressed in their finest clothes, rotting flesh sunken into red velvet cushion. "Elric von Winterheim III, Joshua Landing, Mary Croneberg," names that meant nothing to me, but at one time, defined them as fellow keepers of this place. They were my colleagues, my peers, the ones that had met their fate, prepared the way for me to follow.

I circled around the room, looking at gray faces and grayer hair. A number was written below each name, for the amount of time they had served here. Decades and centuries passed before me as I tallied as many as I could, but hundreds more stretched high into the sky, an infinite sea of sentries. This

was what awaited me? Decades of solitary torment to end up catalogued in a glass zoo, a willing meal for a blazing crematorium? The boiler groaned and a tall, lazy flame burst out.

Something shiny reflected off of the boiler's flames and I turned to see it. A knife had pinned a piece of parchment to the boiler. It was a torn out page from the Memento Mori, Sentry Guidebook.

IF YOU ARE READING THIS, YOU ARE IN **BIG** TROUBLE.

WE TOLD YOU NOT TO COME HERE.

BUT NO, YOU NEVER LISTEN TO US.

YOU NEVER, EVER LISTEN.

NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES YOU COME DOWN HERE.

YOU SHOULD KNOW BY NOW THERE'S ONLY WAY YOU CAN LEAVE HERE.

The page reread itself in my mind on permanent loop, an aural ourouborous that bounced off the rafters in my mind. My body moved on its own, pacing across the metal grates, eyes focusing on names and faces, brain registering none. One glass coffin was different than the rest, brighter, and eerily, empty. "FAIRFIELD - -," was inscribed on the newly minted plate, the year empty. The coffin next to it was empty as well, the plate on it blank, perhaps waiting for my own.

I stared at the coffin for a long time, noticing the spotless, white silk lining. I felt so tired. I had come this far but had found no solid answers. A noise screeched below my feet, loud and metallic. Through small, metal grates on the floor I could see gears spinning and something electrical humming. One of the coffins on the wall behind me started to move. I watched as Kevin Tungsten disappeared through a small hole in the ground, his coffin lazily flowing towards the boiler. His hands were folded neatly and his mouth was cocked in an odd, knowing smile. Perhaps he knew this was his only escape.

The coffin slowly flowed into the area below the boiler and my shadow grew as a burst of fire engulfed the vessel. The dim lights lit up, and I could hear machines awakening throughout the tower. I looked to the wall and another occupied coffin slid into place where Kevin Tungsten used to rest. The faces of my predecessors looked down at me serenely. They were old and dry, perfectly perfumed and preserved kindling.

A metal switch that probably controlled how many ice cubes the freezer produced upstairs or some such insanity, protruded out from the side of the boiler. An ugly rage was growing inside me and with relish I tore it from the machine and felt the weight of it in my hands and the weight of my decision on my conscience. I faced the boiler. I raised the broken lever and brought it down hard against the boiler. The lights suddenly dimmed and I could hear the gears screech to a stop below me. I brought down the club again and again. One of the coffins sped down the tracks and slammed into the ground. Sparks blew out on panels around the room. The machine was dying.

Fire burst from beneath the boiler and erupted through the metal grates around the room. Some of the glass doors on the coffins opened up and dignified corpses fell like hard rain around me. I felt sick. I watched distantly while more machinery exploded underneath me. *What had I done?*

Red klaxon alarms squealed in pain, angrily buzzing and spinning around. "It hurts, it hurts. Emergency! Alert 741. Step away from the boiler." a speaker on the wall shouted. I raised the piece of metal above my head and readied the final blow when the speaker once more spoke. "Situation red. Initiating the GP protocol." A small cardboard cutout of a monster emerged from a slit on the floor. It had been crudely labeled as *Gullibus Ponpultipus-us*, the famed Gullible Ponpultupus. The cardboard cutout moved back and forth and the speakers robotically shouted, "booga booga," as if to scare me away. With another swing, the monster lay in two broken pieces on the floor. As I turned to destroy the machine once more, the alarms stopped and the speaker spoke for the last time, its tone now calm. "Resupply request from B.O.T.W confirmed. Supplies inbound." A panel of the wall slid back,

revealing a small television screen. There was a flash of light as a sailboat emerged from the beginning of the world. I watched it for a few minutes as it slowly made its way from the horizon to the shore, silently studying it as it crashed into the rocks surrounding the small island. The ship was silent for a few moments before a blurry man in chains tumbled off of the deck and was lost in the surf.

My body was not that of an athlete's or even above average, but I was suddenly leaping up the stairs, three at a time, feeling my heart pound along every bone. The lighthouse groaned as the top of the lighthouse, where my living areas were contained, slowly retracted, like a collapsible telescope, making the journey to the exit a few flights rather than a week's long journey. I realized the staircase had been another mind game devised to keep me here. Had it not been for the ship I would have reduced the boiler to scrap, but there was no time for that. Past the stairs, I raced through my living area, through the familiar areas I had seen every day for an eternity, and then, I was outside, feeling the salty, bitter wind on my face.

The sun was blinding, but through the glare I could see a body lost in the tide. My body moved without thought through pounding waves to the man. His body was in my arms and he lolled his head up towards mine. I could hear his voice, but his face was all but lost in the shadows spread by the glare of the sun. "Am I?" he murmured.

I carried his body up onto the beach and laid him out in the sun. His sailboat bobbed helpless against the rocks. With a little work, it could still sail. The man reached up for me, and against the background of the sun, I must have seemed like a god to him. He tried speaking again, but he was still incoherent from the crash. I shushed him and began to drag him towards the lighthouse. The Sentry guidebook was flopped open on the grass and I didn't know how it had got there.

Gears spun in my head and something erupted underground, opening a sinkhole on the shore nearby. Water flooded into the wound, and the tower began to lean to the left. A small speaker on the side of the lighthouse groaned, "Boiler critical. Lighthouse reset in ten, nine, eight." More sinkholes

erupted around me and suddenly, a beam of light erupted from them, stretching far into the sky. I looked at the two horizons, each beginning to vibrate with television static. Static waves from each horizon suddenly burst out and rushed towards the island, slamming into each other, destruction and creation mingling in the sky overhead.

“Who are you?” the man uttered weakly.

A part of the tower cracked and flames burst from it. I knew I had broken every rule, betrayed every warning, and I was scared. The two horizons were caught in a violent struggle, a newly born seagull instantly assembling and dissolving at the same time. The sky seemed to split open, clouds swirling in a sickening vortex. The man trembled in my arms. One of the flooded sinkholes expelled a glass coffin, the body, badly burned inside.

The man looked at me frightened and my mind went blank. “My name,” I started as I stared at the ruin around me, “you can call me Fairfield.”

“I don’t want to go back, please don’t let them take me back!” he moaned. The manacles around his hands had worn away at his skin, leaving it raw. I opened my mouth to ask a question, a thousand questions, to warn him of what this place was, of what he would be expected to do, but there was no time left. The prisoner stumbled towards the shore and reached out towards me, his eyes wide, and his voice raw and weak. “Three, two, one,” the speakers shouted. The prisoner shouted something to me, but his words were overwritten with the speaker’s shrill, “reset.” There was a sudden blinding light and then we were both lost in a nightmarish cacophony of metal gears scraping against stone and ocean.

Blue sky stretched out around me, and the two horizons had receded to their original positions. I didn’t know how long I had been asleep this time but I was sure that I was alone once again. I looked up with surprise to see the tower newly repaired, the man’s body lying calmly next to me, the chains gone, his skin smooth and healed. I stared dully at the sailboat as I waded through the waters to it.

Without another word, I climbed into it and hoisted the mast, letting the current take me somewhere, anywhere. This is what freedom must've felt like. I could go anywhere, anyplace, do anything.

The Lighthouse looked down at me, its walls as bright white as ever before, as if nothing had happened. The windowsills were not lined with the nail marks of the desperate, but I could imagine the thousands of coffins that were still nestled in its bowels, waiting to be consumed. And with a great weariness, I knew I could not change anything about this place, could not stop the cycle.

I paced around the ship as the island receded. A burlap sack in the corner of the ship caught my eye. It was stained with grease and inky black fluid. Something writhed, pulsating through the dirty fabric.

A flying bat swallow screeched overhead. I stared up at the creature for a moment and watched its path waver between the two horizons. The island slowly drifted into the distance like a mirage, but I could see the man on the shore wake up and spot me, his arms waving wildly his voice a tiny whisper in the sea. And then, the man and the island were gone. My gaze moved to the bag. My hands grabbed the knotted drawstrings and pulled them loose, the contents of the bag spilling into the light. And a stranger's smile crossed my lips.

We Are All Passengers

I never got used to the idea of family. I wasn't raised to rely on them for anything besides food and shelter, the occasional heart to heart to remind us of what we were supposed to be. There was never any illusion of our family unit persevering through flood and fire. For me, there were only silent dinners and unmet glances, brief glimpses of an invisible world I longed to see.

I was twenty when my brother finally left. Whatever he did for a living took him out west. I would be lying if I didn't admit how jealous I was of his freedom, of his exodus from us. I didn't hate my family and neither did he, but there was nothing to keep him there anymore. As for me, I had my chance at freedom, half a year of unfamiliar ceilings and greasy roommates. A semester of failing grades and rising worries and the purse strings were cut. I'd say how this felt like my wax wings were melting, but I realized it didn't matter. Wherever I was, nothing changed.

I eagerly awaited the end of my college career and the mysterious and dangerous world that seemed just outside my reach. In reality, I was just waiting for boredom and apathy to swallow me whole.

A thousand days spent in tiny rooms, avoiding familial stares were tallied with rows of lines in dusty notebooks. I was trapped by parasitic necessity to them. There was a vague and unspoken debt between us and there was only one way out. I pursued a degree in business of some sort, realizing in my final semesters that I knew less about business than I did my parents. Somehow, seemingly awoken from my three years of slumber, I had no interest in facts and figures. I had been sleepwalking through life, and I wondered how long it would be before I was tossing and turning again, moments and choices wrapped like twisted sheets around my body.

Was this all there was? Did I even care anymore? These questions rolled in me like turbulent luggage.

I spread my high school yearbooks across my queen sized bed, a parting gift from my brother. I charted myself through the four tomes, watching the people I loved, hated, and simply ignored transform, turn and move with the sun, their mouths opening and closing like sunflowers. And there she was, Ashli, the standard, prepackaged high school sweetheart in four varieties. Black hair long, flowing over her shoulders like a broken dam, purple and red, short, cropped, years and seasons passing in tandem. Pushed up against basement lockers, losing myself in brown eyes, feeling what felt like love, realizing it wasn't. I missed feeling so alive.

When I dialed her number, a thick, tired voice asked who the hell was calling and if Jake would come home. Her voice was slick with sleep and vodka. She hesitated as she tried to place my voice, whispering obscenities into the phone as she cursed her sudden awakening. She was charming as ever. The gulf of years and memories between us was filled in seconds. She wasn't doing the college thing and was living with a boyfriend who was doing a stint two counties away. She was into harsh and easy truths, preferring her men to be unrelenting, unbalanced, and cruel. I was the emotionally gray, had-a-good-head-on-his-shoulders guy who was once the only stable thing in her life. I was doing college but aimless, blah blah.

With the niceties aside, a silence fell between us. I listened to her raspy breathing as she unwrapped the plastic around her pack of cigarettes. The line crackled as the flame ignited. She took a deep breath and then let the smoke fill her lungs. She finally asked, "Why are you calling me?" I told her I didn't know, that I missed her, it—those times we once had – high school. Clichés leaked from the pores on my tongue. I felt my ulterior motives slip out of the side of my half truths. "I'm seeing someone," she said simply. She inhaled again, cheap smoke filling her lungs. "He'll be back in ten days."

Her words refused to register with me. I told her school was devouring my life. There was a long pause and a weighing of factors. I could hear invisible transactions calculating profit and risk. Something warm and wet was boiling up inside me again, thawing out old and abandoned memories. "Do you still write?" she asked. I told her that I did, but not much anymore. "I want to be your subject. I want you to write about me." Silence.

"Come to Scenario. It'll be like old times," she said. I imagined her cigarette burning down to the filter quietly.

She hesitated. "You were the only thing that made my life normal. I think you may have saved me from myself." There was a longing desperation in her voice that betrayed the old, sultry sleekness of our youth. I felt a cold nostalgia creep into me. I could hear her pleading voice breaking down into static, reassembling hundreds of miles away. It twisted into the canals of my ear, into bursts of static that danced across my brain. "I want you," she whispered.

I had gone as far as I could go in my life. There was no future here for me, anymore. My fingers traced over the deep grooves left by her red pen in my yearbook. I listened to her uneven breaths and closed my eyes.

I'd be there by morning.

I was the last stop. The bus dropped me off in a gritty depot on the side of a dusty road. The driver checked his watch anxiously. "This is as far as I go," he said. I filed out of the bus and retrieved my bag, squinting as the bus accelerated away, dodging bits of debris the tires kicked up.

Inside, the depot was empty, save a napping attendant. Ashli hadn't met me like she promised, and I imagined the apology that would never come. Gently waking the sleeping man, I asked him how

far it was to her house. He groggily wrote directions down on the back of my hand and motioned me to leave. He settled back into his chair and watched me leave. The door behind me locked and I watched him waddle back to his seat and fall sleep once more. Looking through the tarnished windows I could see that everything in the station was covered in cobwebs. I imagined the man covered in the same forgotten dust as I left.

I walked the last two miles to her place, the lone factory on the hill staring at me like a wary predator. Random shafts and pipes jutted out from the top of the building, metal halos belched blue smoke and leaked burning chemicals that singed the sky. There was a hum in the air. My mouth tasted like hot copper. An air raid siren screamed through the city. As my watch chimed noon, a loud roar erupted underneath my feet.

Several hydrants nearby groaned as their screws bent outward from pressure. It was like the world was going to crack, wither into dust. I could feel my legs swaying, my vision blurring, sinuses buckling. Colors danced in my peripheral vision. The world twisted upside down as I lost my footing and fell backwards. A water tower on a nearby building looked down at me with concern. The metal roar underneath the city demanded blood. I closed my eyes and heard the splintering of wood as the tower exploded, bits of rainwater and cedar cascading down on the street below. Another mind splitting siren and the rumbling stopped. The factory groaned loudly and another burst of vibrant, blue smoke leapt into the sky.

I watched strangely colored clouds dyed in deep azure roll lazily across the sky. My watch chimed a quarter after noon. She would be waiting for me. I staggered the rest of the way.

When she opened the door, it was like staring into a distorted memory. Her hair was the same short black and purple as before, but her face seemed to sag in unnatural ways, her jaw clamped tightly shut, her mouth pursed at all the wrong angles. This did not distract me as much as the large sore that

had settled near her chin. It resembled a Cyclops' eye and I quietly checked on it to make sure it wasn't staring at me. It was.

We made small talk. She showed me around the foreclosed house that had failed to sell at a record breaking nine government auctions. She said this with amused dismay. The kitchen was filled with dishes that smelled like ashes and phlegm and her refrigerator contained only prepackaged, Virginia baked and honey marbled ham. I cautiously opened the freezer. Three boxes of pierogies catapulted out. The entire freezer was stuffed with them. Brightly colored boxes advertising sour cream and chive, cheddar cheese, and spicy pepper and beef danced in my eyes, each vying for my attention like desperate orphans. I tried to stuff the packages back in, but Ash waved her head no, explaining that it was better to leave the scene of an accident. A voice inside me whispered I was dealing with dangerous people. "Are you writing this all out in your head right now?" she asked me.

"No," I lied.

We passed by the bathroom which had neon yellow, crime scene tape covering it. "We don't go in there," she said as she escorted me to the living room. "Not yet, anyways." A television sat in the mouth of the fireplace, one side resting on a wobbling log. The doors of the living room had been pulled off their hinges and replaced by tapestries adorned with the sun and moon, each grinning with cartoonish smiles that stretched their faces. A melancholy futon sat abandoned in the corner, pouting. Dirty, yellow sheets served as the curtains over the large window overlooking the front yard. I asked where I was sleeping. "My room, of course," she would only say.

I threw my bag into her room, my eyes only taking in where her queen sized bed lay. I wanted to feel guilty about my intentions, but my mind refused to focus. It seemed to try and transfix and lose itself in the spectacle. "There's going to be a party tonight in your honor," she said as she pretended to look out of the sheet covered window. I knew she was lying and I opened my mouth to say something

but the way her shoulders seemed to shrug made me swallow my voice. Every lie, down to the smallest movement had been planned. All for me.

By eleven, even the crawl spaces were filled with drug toting youth that all seemed intent on the same path to oblivion. Ash waved me over into the living room, introducing me to “the three wise men,” her most trusted male advisors, she said. I didn’t bother asking what they advised her on, as each swallowed a small slip of brightly colored paper. They closed their eyes with reverence. There was faith in this place, they said. Then, they bowed their heads and did not speak for a time. Adam, her closest friend, loomed over my six foot stature by a few inches, his body wrapped tight in a stylish, black pea coat and camouflage pants. His head was covered in an oversized, hand knit winter hat. He asked me if I wanted to know the secrets of the universe. I held my notebook as if I could shield myself from him, but he merely stepped closer, his neck craning like a giddy barn owl. “Acid cacti,” he explained. I looked around for the source of his statement, but his wild eyes had focused on my pupils with a frightening intensity. Ashli had conveniently drifted to the kitchen where she was surrounded by a throbbing mob of red eyed, rose tinted flesh. She was throwing pierogies into the crowd gleefully. “It explains everything,” Adam continued. I looked at him with bewilderment.

“People in the Bible think all kinds of shit happened thousands of years ago like miracles and stuff. But in reality,” a smile crossed his lips, “those fucking people were just tripping on acid cacti in the desert. One fucking bite and you’re seeing a guy walk on water and burning bushes. That’s all it takes to transcend reality,” he paused for a moment. “Makes you wonder whether to believe anything at all.”

“What do you believe in?” I asked.

“Anything I can taste,” he said as he scampered off to join the thronging masses at the church of holy pierogies. I looked down at my watch. It was five minutes to midnight. The party slowly grew silent.

Everyone froze as another air raid siren went off. Ash left the group and walked over to me. “Watch this,” was all she would say. The bathroom door was opened, yellow tape scattered on the floor like parade confetti. The ceiling was criss-crossed by broken pipes, all leaking rusted water. Adam was now in the bathroom, and lay in the tub, looking up at the shower head with hunger. In the kitchen, the group had cups in their hands, each outstretched towards the leaky faucet. “I’ve never done it. I’ve always been too afraid, had too much—,” Ash said. Gears screamed miles away and the same angry roar of the machine god hummed under my feet as the factory activated.

I watched as the rust red water disappeared. The house was quiet and I could hear my heartbeat in my temples. Ashli tugged on my sleeve. I looked at Adam as he folded his hands in prayer, his mouth opening wide. The house began to shake. Dust spat out from cracked walls and ceilings. My whole body was vibrating. Then, unreal blue water, deeper than anything I had seen before jettisoned from every pipe in the house. Adam squealed loudly as the sludge enveloped him and I watched it as it surged into every pore, looking away as it invaded his mouth and eyes.

The siren slowly cut out and reverberated in the night air. The tub was completely filled with the blue sludge. Adam slowly pulled himself out, the blue liquid absorbing into his skin, rather than trickling off him. His pea coat was now bright, neon blue that seemed to glow. His eyes, hair, and skin had all been dyed blue. “It feels...so...good...” he whispered, licking blue saliva off pneumonia colored lips. I stumbled out of the bathroom and looked down the hallway to the kitchen. The group had turned into a smiling collection of blue colored dolls. They each smiled blankly, their pupils dancing with unseen apparitions. I looked at Ash for answers but she merely beckoned me to her room.

She locked the door behind me before undoing the first three buttons on her shirt. A small vial of blue liquid hung from a chain around her neck. "What is it?" I asked.

"Sometimes it's water. Sometimes, it's something else. Does it really matter?" She looked at my confused expression and lustfully bit her lower lip, her tongue moistening every cracked crevice. "It's like living every moment in your life again, only this time you don't fuck it up."

"Where did it come from?" I asked. She told me it didn't matter, that none of it mattered anymore. If I loved her, I wouldn't ask question. Her shirt dropped to the ground. I felt nothing.

"I don't want to think anymore," she said as she grabbed my hand and pulled me to the bed. In my mind, I was pushing her up against a locker, our bodies mingling in the pre-revelation of what sex was. I was bumming rides off my parents to see her.

She opened the vial and tipped it back. I watched as her beautiful, brown eyes churned ocean blue. The skin on her face tightened, the sore closing and a blue rose bud emerging in its place. Her body seemed to glow, invite, and beg to be tasted. The wrinkles in the corners of her mouth filled and disappeared and then she looked at me, her pure blue eyes showing no signs of recognition. She flung her last clothes to the ground and looked at me longingly. I could feel the air warm and vibrate between us. Millions of neurons fired across my brain with the ferocity of sudden, summer storms that I used to watch with my brother.

"Why now, Ash? Why me?"

"We are all just passengers," she whispered into my ear.

Her skin was changing, a blue stain spreading across it like spilled dye. Chemicals in us were released by silent order.

In my mind I was back on my roof, one summer night with my brother. My mother and father screamed for us to get down. My father angrily climbed from a window up to the roof, pulling us tightly by shoulders into the house. There was a rumbling of thunder overhead. Lightning tore through loose shingle where my brother's body once lay. The house went dark. I could hear the quiet sobs of my mother as she hugged us, our hands unsure of what to do, hung at our sides. My father's arms wrapped around us, pulled us into folds of warm flesh. And I looked into my mother's crying eyes and tried to say something but couldn't.

I looked into Ashli's eyes.

I couldn't see myself in either. In the past, thunder whispered and we are enveloped in shadows. Now, I watch her body glow as moonlight drifts off her teeth. The flower on her face bloomed, its petals stretching out like stiff limbs. The vial around her neck is empty. She opens her arms and I finally surrender to her embrace. In the darkness, there is dim body, and there is the empty glow that envelopes me.

I left without saying anything to her. She was the color of bad meat and I could not look at her face, at the sore that I knew would be there. She did not stir as I left, but I imagined her awake, listening to my departure. I stumbled through the abandoned streets of Scenario, my destination unknown. The pavement was cracked, windows shattered, streets deserted. The sky was a sickly blue oil painting that had started to run from the sun's poisonous rays that cascaded over the town. It felt wrong. My feet moved without thought. I could feel a magnetic pull lure me towards the lone hill overlooking the town. I had to know what *it* was.

The factory glared down at me, like a parent admonishing a child. The siren blared. Its main doors opened, beckoning me in. The ground shook with unrelenting fury. I stumbled into the facility, but there was nothing inside it, just four walls surrounding an open pit, filled with pipes and pumping machinery. My feet stood at its edge and I looked down into the abyss.

Gears and pipes lined the walls of the shaft and led down into a well filled with the blue liquid. The gears squealed as they spun faster and faster, becoming a blur of metal and sparks. I watched silently. It felt like home. I imagined Ashli's mouth around a rusty spigot, imagined the winter night when the sky was a magnetic red and my first kiss, a kiss born in the snow, filled with innocence that would not last. I imagined the long car ride back with my mother and all the words left unsaid. As the metal cacophony reached its crescendo, I thought of pierogies and places once familiar, now strange. I dissolved into the silence that followed.

The ooze bubbled and filled to the top of the hole. I bent low and let it fill my hand, feeling its slimy coolness rest in my palm. Raising it to my lips, I tried to drink it without thinking about the consequences, tried to not see Adam in the bathtub, his mouth spread in a terrible grin, saliva drooling onto the floor. And then I stopped and finally looked, really looked at what was in my hands. My reflection stared back from the twisted ocean.

And I was disgusted with my own ugliness.

Shadowplay

I.

A warning was in the air and on our lips, the night Clyde disappeared. We were tending our bars, praying vigilantly and yet hollowly to our gods, and eating our TV dinners in front of monstrous boxes that projected lights and patterns we found amusing or gratifying in ways in which we'd, of course, deny. It was a night where everything seemed at a bursting point; clouds drooping as storm water leaked onto the emptying streets, while Clyde was tying one on again at The Caveat, which meant only one thing: he was too afraid to go home. Again.

We had all looked the other way when the Hartford family had first fallen into disarray. Clyde had lost his job at the college when Robin was on maternity leave with their second child. She earned a reputation for theatrics when the paychecks stopped coming in. She'd disappear for days at a time, coming back with pocketfuls of money. If Clyde cared, he never showed it, never once told Jimmy why he ran up his bar tab the way he did, or why he drank like a man possessed, just nursed his beers and asked to be left alone.

Months filled with dark whispers and ugly rumors had passed, but the Hartfords were unperturbed. Robin was bringing in the money, somehow, and Clyde seemed content to work at home on his long gestating novel. We thought of his novel like we did about winning the lottery or cheating on our taxes: it was a concept, nothing more; at least that's what we would admit to ourselves. The Hartfords were something to ponder about in the dark, next to our sleeping spouses that snored, under the creaking roofs of our refinanced houses, dreaming in the silence about lives we could not live.

The first crisp days of fall had awakened the colors from the maples when Clyde moved out of the house. He wouldn't say what had happened, if another woman had entered the picture, if Robin had had enough of his drinking, or, the juiciest answer, if another man had entered the picture.

Their next door neighbor, Doris McQueeney had spoke with Robin a number of times over the last six months, always explaining things to her about gardening; where to dig the right holes and how deep to dig. Robin asked about paintings, about which Mrs. McQueeney knew little. It was known that Robin owned an awful painting of a solemn man with a tomato that had come to be thought of as quite garish in some circles.

It was through these same circles that we learned Robin Hartford had started seeing a psychiatrist about her troubling dreams. Although the contents of these conversations were confidential, the town whispered, as it always did, and the dark dreams and images from the mysterious woman became our dreams. No clearer did these subconscious images emerge than in her own paintings that she would sometimes sell at a local flea market. The market was strangely empty that day, a stark contrast to the eagerness with which we examined her. She was only selling one thing at her table, a painting that beamed glumly out at us from the top of her table. It was a troubling picture, like that of a disturbed child. Pictographs of tribal people in black were transposed against a psychedelic background that swirled even when your eyes closed and gave the pictographs a hidden movement to them, a forced optical illusion. The painting did not sell.

When the fall of the next season rolled around, the Hartfords were but a distant, ugly stain in the history of the town. We drove by their house, eyes eagerly searching for a hole in the boarded up windows, or a flash of movement behind a moth eaten curtain. What had happened to our town's little sideshow ate away at us, but as time went on, all that mattered was that the Hartford's were gone, and they were never coming back.

II.

My Mommy was named after a bird. I'm named after a star. She tells me that I can take care of the baby when it comes. I don't know if it's a girl or a boy but I hope it's a boy because I want to know

how boys work. I draw pictures of what my brother will look like. Mommy says I draw real good but they don't look like Mommy's paintings. She tells me that's okay but I want to be just like Mommy. She's so strong and smart and pretty. I wish my Daddy could see all that. I wish he was here. When I ask my Mommy if she wishes he was here, she doesn't say anything, just stares at the funny box she's building.

We don't talk about Daddy not being home, even when the neighbors look at us funny. They're always looking at us and snooping. Mommy tells me just to ignore them but I just want to tell them to stop. It's rude to stare at people! And I know this, and she knows this, but she tells me that it's best if we just pretend they're not there. I tell her how much I want to be like her. Then Mommy asks me if I want to pretend and play a game with her. The box game.

Mommy will count to fifty and I'm supposed to hide, like hide and go seek. She's the seeker and I'm hider. When she starts counting, I go downstairs to hide in the coat closet, but it's locked so I go to hide in the kitchen cupboard, but that's locked too. The only place left to hide is the basement or the gallery but the basement gives me nightmares. Sometimes I have scary dreams about the monsters in the basement, but Daddy holds me and goes downstairs and kills the monsters for me if they're there or hugs me if they're not there. Even though I don't dream about the basement, it feels like a scary place out of my dreams. So, I hide in the gallery just as Mommy stops counting and yells that she's coming.

Mommy's paintings are all hanging on the walls. Some of them look like my drawings, but the newer ones look like a professional painter painted them! I like my Mommy, but I don't like her paintings. They make my head hurt when I look at them, and when I close my eyes, they move funny.

The gallery used to be an exercise room but after my Daddy left, she tore down some walls and made her own art studio here. I can hear my Mommy coming so I run as fast as I can into the deepest part of her studio. There's no carpet or cement here, just dirt. Even the walls have dirt on them. I hope I don't step on a bug because I hate bugs almost as much as I hate the nosy neighbors.

There's a room in the deepest part of the studio that has Mommy's funny box in it. There's nowhere else to hide so I keep quiet and listen for Mommy. I don't hear her calling for me like she usually does when she plays and soon enough, she walks right in the room like she expected me to be there. I ask her if she was cheating and she smiles. It's dark in the room but Mommy has a candle burning. She asks me if I want to see something and she lights the candle and picks up the box. She tells me she had a dream where she saw the box. Every night she would see the box and it would be clearer and clearer until she could see it when she closed her eyes. She started building the box and it took her three months, but she did it.

My Mommy can make anything. She used to make clay sculptures but now all she does is work on the box. It has metal sides and a small hole on the bottom, with a dark window on the side of it. When I ask her what's inside, she tells me it's something beautiful and if I'd like to see it. Then, she doesn't talk for a long time, just stares at the dark window and at her reflection. She looks like the night when Daddy left. She mumbles like I'm not there and says that she finally woke up and I don't know if she means about her dreams and the box or about Daddy.

Mommy puts the flame near the box and the window lights up. She tells me to grab the sides and hold it to my eye. Her face is serious so I don't argue. When I look inside I see pictures like the same kind she likes to paint. The pictures move on the wall like her paintings and my head hurts, but Mommy tells me to look at them, that I'm a bad girl if I don't look, she'll spank me if I don't but I don't want to look. The pictures make me sick and I throw up my grilled cheese she made me for lunch. I start to pull away and at first, I think it's Mommy hugging me. But she grabs my head and makes me look at the inside. I feel sick and cold and hungry strange don't want to look funny sick shadows sticks momma feel so strange.

And everything swirls inside the box and then the stick figures look at me and then everything disappears. For a second it looks like my Mommy's paintings, but like all of them rolled into one. There

is an explosion of color and my head feels like a bag of cotton candy and I'm not afraid anymore and Mommy is still holding my face to the window and I can feel her finger digging in around my crying eyes, making them stay open. And I'm not crying because I'm sad, but because it's so beautiful. The lights make me feel the same way as when Daddy kills the monsters.

III.

Jukebox speakers blared Jimmy Hendrix while small, mounted lights inside sent rotating waves of neon colors out towards the bar patrons. They let the lights wash over them like the tide, and for a moment, the bar was mesmerized by the machine's gaze. When the song died down, the bar erupted into a frenzy of movement and noise. Clyde looked away from the machine and let the tequila slosh out of the shot glass and onto the table, spreading like an oil spill towards his glasses of beer. He would have to cut himself off by now if he had wanted to make it back to his apartment in one piece. The Caveat was packed but he had his little table in the back all to himself, positioned perfectly to see all the sweet, little honeys in their short skirts get drunk off their ass. He had his own little darling back home, problem was, he couldn't go back home, no matter how much he drank. That was his own little cross to bear, just like Jimmy had to put up with his drunk ass night after night. It's just how it was all arranged in the cosmos.

Clyde turned to his notebook and swore under his breath as he dried off another halo of condensation left from a misplaced glass. The contents of the notebook spilled open and silently looked out at the noisy room.

Beneath the milky surface of the antique mirror, something ancient was buried. He approached the forlorn creation like that of a curious child, eyes wide, face twisted into the facsimile of a smile. It reflected everything all wrong, as if the world inside was off kilter, tilted just a little too much off its axis. It was curiosity that brought him to touch the mirror, and as he did, its milky surface engulfed him and

swallowed him whole, spitting him out on the other side. In the silence of the dusty room, the mirror stretched wide its mouth and a dark, hideous bundle tumbled out from it like silver afterbirth. The creature's skin was made of pale scales that were more beautiful than the wings of a monarch butterfly, but serrated like a carving knife. The creature bent its head back and let its mournful cry screech out of the old mansion and echo across the abandoned farmland, past the lover's tree with faded initials wrapped in the unraveling rope of a tire swing. The howl suddenly halted and the creature shambled towards the window, its claws and stony feet leaving deep grooves in the floor that would forever become another mystery surrounding the old mansion. As it reached the window, the creature stopped for a moment, its veiny, thick neck twisting to gaze back at its reflection in the black mirror. A man stood on the other side, his fists pounding in anguish. A mass of wriggling, fast moving shadows approached the man inside the mirror world, and without mercy, he was pulled into a living carpet of scuttling, hungry creatures that bit, and clawed, and stung, and finally tore into his body hungrily. As his tortured cries drifted over the cool room, the creature lifted a dirty bed sheet from the floor and lifted it high into the air, unfurling it and wrapping it around the mirror. The cloth swallowed up the man's screams. The mirror, the room, and eventually, the man, would become another forgotten antique in the house where no one ever dared to go. And the creature smiled, and leapt from the window, spreading its wings like a dark sail, and taking flight into the dreadful night.

Clyde sighed. He was trying too hard with his story. His editor told him that they wanted gruesome, not some kind of pretentious Lovecraft rip off. Was he reading the latest mass market fiction? Was he following the teen slasher and 80's remake trend that was engulfing Hollywood? Original ideas couldn't survive in this climate. Success was built on the backs of the old, on the ruins of the once beautiful and daring. *Replace man with busty teen. Change setting from 1900's to present.* Clyde sighed and rubbed his eyes, and placed another frosty beer down onto his editor's notes, leaving a

ring of perspiration on it. He was so unbelievably sick of it all. He put his stories away and into his briefcase. He could live if he never wrote again, he thought.

It was getting near closing time and Jimmy was tapping his watch at Clyde, like always. Only, it wasn't closing time, not yet anyways. "My, man, what's the story?" Jimmy stared at him and motioned for him to come over. "Sure, sure. I'm coming." Clyde slid onto a bar stool and gave it a spin. Jimmy reached out and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Listen, Clyde..." Jimmy's face was a nervous frown wrapped around a pair of bushy eyebrows and a face that hung like a hound dog but in all the right ways. "I just got a call."

"Oh yeah? It your old lady? Tell Faye I said hello."

"No, it's not Faye, but I'll be sure to pass on the message. You need to come over for dinner again when it's all right again."

"What's all right? You kicking me out? You know I'm good on my tab." Jimmy waved his hand as if he could fan the thought away like thin smoke.

"Robin called." The sentence drove through him like a pick through ice.

"Oh yeah? What did she tell you? Because I swear—"

"It's not that. She wants you to come home." Clyde looked away from Jimmy and back at his table. He tapped the counter twice and Jimmy reluctantly set down a shot.

"Refill." Jimmy shrugged. "Wait, make it a double."

"You don't have that much credit here, Clyde. And I'm not letting you drive if you do anything more."

The bar was closing down soon and Jimmy lurched from table to table, picking up finger marked glasses and dirty dishes. Clyde slumped against the torn leather booth and inhaled the smoky air. "You know you have to go back, pal. Might as well get through the awkwardness and just be done with it."

"Says the man who has it all," Clyde slurred. Jimmy cocked his eyebrow and smiled.

“You know if I get home late Faye will own my gonads. So clear out, buddy.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m going. Maybe one for the road?” Jimmy shook his head and pointed out the door.

Clyde shuffled past a few stragglers towards his beat up Taurus. A man in bowler cap lit a long tipped cigarette as he passed. Clyde slipped behind the wheel and let the car drive him. The streets moved on their own, swaying with a rhythm of cheap, Mexican diesel and weariness. He regretted drinking the tequila almost immediately. Clyde watched the car behind him speed through a red light, swerving hard to stay on the road. The car turned with him at the next intersection, and again onto a side road that was seldom traveled. Clyde took another turn onto a country road and the car followed, not tailgating, but close enough to blind him.

The familiar lampposts that never extinguished themselves, even in the early morning, greeted Clyde suddenly as he turned into his old subdivision. He didn’t realize how close he was to his old house. Just a few years ago, he would have laughed at the idea of living in a place like this with green lawns and nosy neighbors, pot roasts, and soccer practice, but the idea had begun to take hold. But he was a stranger to these streets, a ghost in a life that had seemed to live him more than he it. At the moment, though, his thoughts were only on the car behind him.

He parked off the street, couldn’t bear to even consider using the driveway. The car behind him accelerated quickly into the driveway of his home. Clyde was already in mid walk to his front yard when the side mirror on the car slowly and mechanically turned to get him in view. A bulky shadow stared at him from the side mirror and the car idled noisily for a moment, before reversing just as suddenly out of the driveway, making a U-turn back towards the city. Clyde watched it as he approached the house. He stood on the doorstep, surrounded by the electric hum of the amber streetlights and the silence of the early morning. Four months of guilt and shame waited on the other side of the door but he couldn’t imagine facing it. The strange car down the street turned sharply, brakes squealing loudly as it made

another U-turn and headed back toward Clyde. It slowed to a crawl and Clyde watched as the passenger side window rolled down.

Through the darkness he could only see the outline of a man, but he could hear his smile as he talked. "I wouldn't go in there if I were you," he laughed gleefully, then pulled away hard from the curb and into the night. Clyde shivered as the man's cackle echoed through the neighborhood. He didn't recognize the car, or the man, and he began to wonder just how far the stranger had followed him. Had he been watching him at the bar? Maybe tailing him from his crappy apartment? Clyde shook off the fear and imagined the man was simply drunk and looking to cause trouble. Maybe the stranger was having just as shitty a night as himself and he was just looking at taking it out on the first person he could.

The dark door still loomed before him, and as much as he wanted to call it off, chuck it up to the stranger's warning, or his own personal doubts, he knew he had to go in. Silent expectations that he couldn't meet, and the horror of confronting something that may be irreparable were among the plethora of outcomes that lay on the other side of the door, somewhere hidden in the silent house.

On the front stoop of the home that had ceased to be his home, Clyde could feel the invisible eyes of the neighborhood focus on him. It was late and he knew that no one was watching him, but he felt judged all the same and if there was one thing he hated more than admitting his own flaws, it was having them be on quiet display for everyone else. Clyde slid his key into the lock and lifted up and pushed hard, only to have the door fly open and nearly slam against the wall. He caught it in time and sighed again. Robin had fixed it while he was gone. He knew there was something he had forgotten to do.

Under the watchful eye of the phantom voyeurs, Clyde closed the door and waded through the darkness of his four month sabbatical to see if things really could be mended.

IV.

The air was warm and musty, like an attic opened at the end of a long summer. In the darkness, Clyde tried to open a window, but was clumsy and still drunk, and his fingernails could only claw at faux oak. He hoped he didn't scratch it up; Robin would flip her shit if the first thing she saw in the morning was a torn up wall.

The dry heat of the entombed house made him thirsty. Soon, Clyde was back in the kitchen, grabbing a beer from the fridge as if nothing had changed, but something had changed. The fridge was full of meat, of all things. Shelves full of the stuff, drawers filled with dutch loaf, bologna, salami, and foreign canned meats filled with pâtés and oily spreads. Something in the back was wrapped in foil and smelled rotten. Clyde reached for the plastic insert where he had snuck a few beers once in awhile, but even meat has been jammed in there. Little raw balls of meat wrapped in bacon had been folded under the space for margarine and eggs, and dripped onto the condiment rack. Clyde didn't know if she was dating again or if she was making food for another gallery showing, but the food couldn't have been for her, he thought. When last he saw his wife, she had been a strict vegetarian that had frequently lectured him on his own eating habits. Clyde closed the refrigerator and gave up on the beer. With his throat still dry, he headed upstairs.

He tried to avoid looking at the ascending family portraits that they had put up years ago when their daughter was born, but his eyes were drawn into the memories of what used to be. But the pictures were gone, replaced by his wife's paintings. Her style had never been overly realistic, but these works had taken a turn for the abstract and were swirling, fantastical landscapes populated by rail thin figures that loped across the landscape. They resembled a more realistic stick figure, but were still cartoonishly out of proportion. He was drawn to the paintings, the greens and purples of the sky that twisted together, the deep black of the figures that seemed to bleed into the background. Clyde didn't know how many minutes it had been before the house shifted and the foundations creaked loudly when

he suddenly snapped out of his daze. His mind was cluttered with a strange feeling of longing and he was compelled to either continue looking at the paintings or go upstairs.

The top of the stairs always had always been reserved for his daughter's drawings and he couldn't tell if it was from the shadows or his state of mind, but her style had changed drastically, crude, black stick figures replacing her usual colorful and unrealistic standard. Moons peered down from the corners of the picture, casting the figures in a sick hue. It was an unnatural scene, one that his daughter would never have drawn before he left. It was almost comforting to think that without him, something, however so slight had eroded away, turned rotten in his absence. It was with this thought that he navigated the dark hallway to his daughter's room.

Pieces of paper were plastered all over her door, all in the same disturbing style. Stick figures of all shapes glared from black, empty sockets down at him. Their bodies were malformed, some so tall and lanky their limbs were like tentacles, while others had bellies that were swollen to the ground. One lay on its side, with closed eyes, its stomach already burst. It had been covered with a few black tumbleweeds, and it took Clyde a moment to realize they were rocks. The figure had been crudely buried.

Alcohol and a growing unease swirled in his stomach and Clyde knew he would not be keeping anything down tonight. The quick flight up the stairs made his heart pound in his ears and all he could think about was the double shot he wished Jimmy had let him take. He tried to avoid looking at the pictures as he opened the door to his daughter's room, but, in his peripheral vision, there was a slick movement to the pieces that caught his attention. Even at her early age, his daughter had seemingly become an amateur artist. Though her works were surprisingly grotesque, he felt an obligation to love them. He knew that he owed her that much.

A sliver of light spilled into the room as he opened the door. Clyde had expected to find his daughter wrapped around her Disney comforter in noiseless slumber, but she was awake and stood in

the center of the room, wearing the tattered remains of an old night gown they had bought her years ago. It looked like it was two sizes too small and the bottom only reached a little past her waist. Streetlights cast shadows over her face, but left her body visible, revealing a patchwork quilt of bruises that covered her arms and legs. Her long hair fell down to her shoulders, hadn't been cut since he left. Clyde opened his mouth to say something to her, but the words fell away as she held out her finger and beckoned him closer, her tongue moistening her cracked lips. He stepped backwards and felt horror and bile rise up inside him. She took a step closer into the light and he could see the bottom of her face. Through the darkness, her bright green eyes locked onto his own. They were unlike anything he had ever seen, one partially dilated, while the other one looked out of focus as if she were in some kind of trance. A grin slowly stretched over her childlike features, pulling the skin on her face too tight, and Clyde imagined that it would tear and something else would climb out of her.

His movements were too stiff and unwieldy, and as he retreated, his foot kicked the edge of the doorframe. The door slowly swung open even wider, as the entire room was illuminated. On the side of his daughter's bed, his wife materialized out of the darkness and she looked at him warily with great black bags under her eyes, and lines carved into her face, making her look a decade older. Her left hand held a makeshift metal box that glowed and projected tiny, swirling images onto the wall like a carousel of light, while the right was cupped around her daughter's ears. Clyde could hear her whispering something, and his daughter's eyes twitched with robotic understanding. Clyde watched for a few long seconds. His wife did not look at him, and his daughter merely listened and absorbed her words, her eyes rolling back into her head as she finished speaking.

Clyde did not know what was going on in the house that was no longer his, had not been his for a very long time, and perhaps, never was. He reached out towards his daughter and she growled at him, her voice low and feral. Drool leaked out from the side of her mouth and onto her nightgown. With sad resignation, Clyde pulled his hand back. His head ached from the booze and the stress and the

knowledge that he did not belong here anymore. This was not his daughter; she had not been his the moment he had left. Now she was just a figment of a dream unremembered. Clyde's wife looked up at him. "Close the door on your way out," she whispered. Without another word, Clyde pulled the door closed and let shadow overtake the room. He watched as his daughter's unfocused eyes met his own. She looked at him like he was nothing.

Without a word, he walked out of the house and stepped into his car. He drove for many hours, not caring which direction he traveled in. As the sun began to rise, Clyde felt a sudden soberness hit him. He passed out of the state and drifted onto country roads without names, dirt paths that dipped and turned where they wished. He would later wonder if it was the alcohol, or the guilt, or the disturbing image that kept him from trying to do anything of value that night. He would sometimes dream of being the hero, of rescuing his daughter from his wife, from the box. He wondered if they were rescuing themselves from him. He never thought too long about this.

A long time passed before he remembered his manuscript, and the tab he would never pay off at The Caveat. He did not allow the idea of guilt to enter his head. He wasn't running away, he thought. He could not call what he was doing running away. It seemed to him like the only viable option. Clyde pushed down harder on the gas pedal and let the life behind him recede into the distance, but when he closed his eyes, he could still feel it, as if he had never left, could never leave.

Then, he thought of the stranger in the car that night. He'd been warned something was wrong in that house. On the road, a dusty, yellow sign urged caution for the sharp curve ahead. His car rumbled noisily over the cracked and crumbling road. An animal darted out across the blacktop and Clyde pushed hard on the breaks, tried to judge the distance between him and it, but it was too close to call. There was a light thump and he could not tell if he had hit the creature, or merely another pothole. Turning his eyes to the heat shimmering road behind him, he watched and waited to see what he had done.

The Uncanny Valley

-The Hopeless, Kathy

I'm sitting in my therapist's office staring at a picture of his family on his desk and I'm wondering if it's really his family or if he just left the stock photo of the all American family still in it when he bought it from K-Mart but he won't admit it's from K-Mart that'd be beneath him and God forbid he ever lower himself to the level of his patients. My therapist looks over at me, eyebrows cocked in a rather uncomfortable position that indicates he knows that I'm not listening or he wants a response from me not a simple yes or no but something deeper so I just answer, "It's just so hard, you know?" although I don't know, not in the slightest about anything in particular.

And then he's talking about a dog and about stretching and how it looks like I'm not getting enough sun and how beta carotene is essential for a young woman like myself but I don't feel like myself. My skin feels stretched out and limp although I don't know what limp skin is supposed to feel like. I wonder why I come here if I do it for him or for me or for my parents who think that this helps me and that if I go here they don't have to ask any more questions about what I do in my spare time when they don't see me. The truth is they don't see me much to begin with. We don't talk about that either not even here.

I need a joint. Bad. Between the cat clock on his walls straight out of the fifties with creepy cartoon eyes that move back and forth but always stare at you no matter where you look, everything feels slowed down to the point where my veins echo with every tick of the second hand, a cat's tongue. He's looking at me again and I casually adjust my shirt so my cleavage is showing. This is a game we both play. He tries to be casual as he plays with the ring on his hand but it's so obvious and this place is obvious and I need to get out of here so when he calls our session early by twenty minutes, the first twenty filled with small talk, the next with his inane dissection of me. My parents are getting fucked out of a hundred bucks, a small price to pay for peace of mind. They pay three hundred dollars a week for absolution. It's cheaper than religion.

He licks his lips and pencils our next appointment into his planner and I notice a small, but noticeable bulge. I should feel something but I don't and that's why I'm supposed to be here in the first place. But I'm not here for that at all, but no one knows that. Sometimes I don't feel like I know that. Sometimes I don't know where I am.

--The Monster, Frank

My glass is empty and I slide my fingers around it, hugging it gently. I do this because in my mind it looks cool and I think women like it. I've sunk twenty five dollars into pretending to drink tonight and if I don't get laid or at least blown tonight I'm going to—I can't even pretend to be angry or desperate or delirious or act like I'm used to this. For all the Friday nights I pull this shit it still feels new to me. I flirt with all the wrong women, noticing rings on fingers, or guys perched precariously by their sides, arms wrapped around their waists, tongues and teeth around the soft skin of their necks. I'm a hunter and so I lay traps; make sure there are always two drinks before the weakest of the flock, with a third on the way.

I'm always fucking the number twos. This means that for every hot chick I'm working, I'm doing her best friend, or sorority sister, or god forbid, her sponsor. Some mornings I wake up and my mouth tastes like a stranger's: sour liquor, saliva, and hair. That morning, I'm back at the sponsor's place and I'm staring up at her ceiling that is covered with glow in the dark stars and moons. She's pushing thirty and my balls feel tight and damp when I laugh at her. I'm still laughing when she asks me to leave, giggling when she's threatening to call the police when I admit I'm not using. I'm not one of her junkie friends that need saving, I tell her. I'm just a guy that will do anything to get what I want. She doesn't believe me. When I tell her I'm not holding she calls some bull shark testosterone strung out loser who has a thing for her, heart two sizes too big. I'm sure his cock looks like one of those inflatable sponge toys that swell in water. It's not his fault, he tells me. Testosterone shots gone wrong, he says in between punches to my gut that feel like a stone slab hitting meat. I was hoping for breakfast that morning but after I throw up on her bedspread after the eighth punch and they're throwing me out and she's thanking me for the fuck and he's thanking me for the talk I've lost my appetite.

The next time I go out I'm smirking at a pair of breasts and then I'm leading her down a hallway and another darker than the first and she's pulling me into a door and suddenly we're kissing and I can taste the gallon of gin and grapefruit juice that I poured into her mouth and it's not that I'm paying for sex it's that I'm a predator and this is my hunt. This is not some sick game, notches on my bedpost. This is about taking control of my life, about dominion over the weaker.

But then she's pulling my face down between her legs and choking me, a blade pressed against my quivering throat. I've lost control and I see her name on the stall walls and suddenly I'm confronted with the growing uncertainty that she's done this before, that she's the one hunting me, and I'm more sober than I've ever been before and she smells used and I feel used and she's forcing me in and I close my eyes and—

The next day my mouth tastes like rust. I go to the ATM and take out another fifty in cash. I make up reasons not to go back to that same bar, but for the first time I can remember, I'm afraid and I want to ruin someone.

---The Adventurous Fool, Brandon

There's a rave in the woods but I'm not here for that. I'm here to geocache, search for not so buried treasure from people that have everything to hide. My GPS unit is screaming danger and proximity and I know I'm close but not exactly, give or take twenty yards. It's dark and the ground hums beneath me as the crowd blares bass and howls like wolves. I'm looking for a box or a capsule, something big enough to hide something precious and meaningless inside. I'm looking for this when I see the naked girl wander out of the party and collapse near a tree. A naked man stumbles after her and he's drunk and holding half a bottle of something bad. He trips on a tree branch and the bottle tumbles to the ground. He tries to stumble forward, but his toe catches on a root and ensnares it like a noose. He falls backwards and the toe snaps and the man screams and I watch it twist and bend in ways that are unnatural and the show only gets funnier when he falls on the bottle and it shatters and there's blood and booze and screaming but they can't hear it through all the bass but I can.

The girl is purring now slinking on all fours towards the downed man. She caresses his cheek and coos for him to shut the fuck up all nice and lady like. The man's eyes are wide and his skin is pale and when she checks his head, it's soggy like a damp paper towel. His head lies slightly off the ground, supported by a small rock. His eyes are crossed and vibrating and for a minute I'm worried. But then he smiles and drools a little when she talks dirty to him and I realize it's a shallow gash on a ruined toe and only surface wounds on the back and at least he's not alone.

I politely intrude on this storybook moment as I spy the box in a tree right beside the lovers. In between gyrations—she's very pliable, must do yoga or Pilates—I step over the two and reach up into the tree. The package is a blue velvet jewelry box and inside is a letter. I only know this when I'm reading it over the two lovers and he asks me if I mind and if I know of any places to get E and if I know a doctor that can fix that toe and I'm not listening because at the moment of their quandary, I'm reading a letter from another Geocacher.

I once forced myself on a man. He bit me, but you couldn't see it. There are folds of skin that hang off me in all the wrong ways, now.

And there's the next location for the next cache and I can't remember the last time I was this excited. Hell, I can't remember the last time I wasn't bored. The geocacher's code says that if one takes

an item from a cache, then they must leave something behind and with the note in my hand, I let my misery and ennui flow into the box, stick a worn out piece of gum into a tissue and drop it inside. I can hear the rave still groaning and moaning and gasping in pain and in lust and I leave the disgusting smells and noise behind and the roar of the bass dies down and when everything's quiet again a wave of loneliness washes over me.

---- The Hopeless, Kathy

It's cold and gray when I leave my psychiatrist's. I'm no closer to self discovery or personal epiphany than the day before and I have the sneaking suspicion that I may be farther from it. Everything's farther in the cold. I watch a homeless man shiver for longer than I should, and only avoid his stare when he stretches out his dirty arms for money. A part of me wants to scream slurs at him, let rage fill my essence, make me whole. I politely decline his offer for my charity.

I need a drink, I need to choke back the prescription meds he gave me and feel like a robot again. I want to eat, but my appetite was one of the first things to go and besides I look better in a size four. It's my carrot on a stick and when I think of my ribs sticking out of my skin, I smile. I also pop some more pills, make sure the appetite's dead for good. I'll still cook something just to smell it, make my mouth water, but no more than that, anymore and it get's dangerous. They say when concentration camps were first raided soldiers had to resist feeding the prisoners. It had been so long since they'd eaten they'd die if they ate a real meal, so there they were, begging for food like animals, not knowing they were begging for their death. I think comparing myself to things greater than I could ever be is a secret comfort of mine. It's a perspective my therapist or psychiatrist or mental health adviser adheres to.

Sun slants through slats in my windows as I wake the next day. My day calendar is weeks behind and I'm tired still. My body is on autopilot while I shower. I don't look at myself in the mirror. Afraid of ghosts, I suppose. I'd launch into a diatribe on things I hate, but I don't have the energy for it. Low blood sugar, low cholesterol, I work out four days a week on nothing but iceberg lettuce and colored water, makes people think it's something with electrolytes in it. When I touch my chest I can feel my heart shiver through it. A little lighter and—someone's at the door and I'm looking at myself in the mirror, but not really looking.

I'm peering through the peephole and my eye is distorted, bent into prisms. The door bursts open and I'm knocked onto the ground, my bones creaking as they hit linoleum. I'm so numb from the drugs I only hear myself grunt and groan, the oxygen fleeing from my lungs in a hill sprint. A shadow

looms over me and the door closes and then I'm being held down and slapped and touched and my shrieking, saggy breasts are being fondled and I don't mind this part although it doesn't do too much for me since my doctor hit a nerve after the last lipo session and then—

Time dissolves from lithium; mood dissolves through Zoloft; Prozac wafts over the sky and dissolves in toxic atmosphere. Time loses all hold on me and I wonder if my mind is biodegradable while my mouth is guided towards the familiar, dark wetness. My arms are bound by silk—damn it, I told her no silk, that's my good material but she never fucking listens, no one ever listens—and then I find her grabbing my throat and telling me to shut my *pig bitch* mouth and she puckers my mouth so my tongue is sticking out and then it's back to monotony as I finish her off.

I'm left naked and tied and wondering how much is real and how much is schizophrenic ball lightning in my brain, or a tumor pressing on the reality sector hippocampus. I don't say any of this out loud because it's too hard to speak through a gag and it takes me hours to realize it's not a gag it's just my vocal cords are paralyzed or maybe it's a seizure or something darker exploding within my head. And I'm scared, but I have something that'll clear that right up.

The woman I hire to love me is just a mirage when I'm finally clearheaded enough to know she's gone.

----- The Adventurous Fool, Brandon

I'm done with geocaching, I think. I can't get the naked girl and the broken toed man out of my head. The sight of blood, the smell of sex, the letter, it's all infecting me in some invisible way. And I want to feel like this because I want to be important, I want to grow as a person, that's the healthy thing, right? And I feel like if this doesn't happen soon, if I don't undergo a change or have something life affirming happen to me then I might just blink out of existence, like an extinguished star. But then I laugh at how desperate I am since I'm reaching for metaphors analogies anything to grab onto and make myself more beautiful.

I find myself geocaching again, opening jar after jar of discarded memories and half eaten dreams, faded family photographs and pencil erasers left in a crate in a field. I'm tired of searching for new letters by the girl with the torn flesh but every new cache leads to another letter, more rambling, dark thoughts written down by someone with too much time on their hands, found by someone with even more time on their hands. *If you're still reading these, you're sadder than me.* And it's true, but I'm desperate for connections. I'm a dog chasing my tail, an Ourobourous, circadian logic moving like clockwork and—

Coming down off the high kills the inner artist. I need to score and right now. I find myself no longer looking at my father's thousand dollar plasma screen, but instead a graffiti covered door with a busted front light and no numbers to identify it from any other shit hole in this apartment block. I knock three times and open the door. The place is a graveyard, empty and dimly lit, bodies sprawled across sofas, carpets, chairs, hammocks, other bodies. Some are naked; some with eyes rolled back, whites staring deeply into nothing.

In the basement I find Hank and he's tying one off and I watch as his veins made too large from hormone shots and too weak from so many syringes wriggle through the edge of his skin. I try to ask him for drugs but his buddy Alex is shouting so god damn loud and I want to strangle him but it's not his fault he has Tourette's but I when I see the hammer on the floor I want to watch his brains slide off the walls like strawberry jam. I'm hungry and so thirsty for my needs and he won't shUT THE FUCK UP and my hands are around his god damn retard throat and I'm squeezing and then—Hank is burying my face in a poppy field and I'm good for now and he's calming me down, giving me one on the house and I look at Alex's red face and notice the blue tinges around his eyes and how close I came and I'm happy because I'm living and this is a moment I'll look back as a turning point and we'll all laugh and Alex will have his Tourette's under control and I'll have my shit together and Hank will OD or will be clean or will still be selling but he'll catch the Herp and will probably make amends to everyone he's wronged and it'll be a brighter world for us all.

I'm fifty lighter when I leave but my thoughts have thankfully stopped, been reduced to morse code blips, radio chatter in a foreign language.

-----The Monster, Frank

I stalk bars for weeks searching for that woman, but I never go back to *that* bar. In the mirror I shape my wet hair into something I think is sexy, make sure to pluck my eyebrows, ensuring I have not even the slightest trace of a unibrow, and put on the same custom tailored suit on, deciding if I want the top button buttoned or not. I decide on not.

The women I pick up in this period are not even second besters, more like third string or worse. I pick up the ones I can't stand to look at, so when I'm done I don't feel so bad. I hit one in the arm and I think I broke her shoulder or something. She was on something and she wouldn't shut up and she asked me if I would use my tongue—and I wouldn't, I would never do that, and she grabbed my head and something ugly inside me bubbled out and I was hitting her, three, four times, but it wasn't really her, it

was the mirage, the woman I was searching for, and I can't remember and she was crying and bleeding and I don't remember what happened next.

My hands were bruised after the seventh or eighth hit and she wasn't moving. I had an old rug that I wrapped her in, so when I carried her out to the street, I wouldn't be stopped. I took her wallet. Drove a block away from her house. Paid a homeless man to call 911. Watched as they confirmed she was alive. Through bruised and heaving flesh she asked who she was and what exactly had happened. Memory loss brought on by trauma. I Sighed with relief and went home. Showered and got ready for bed; watched my ceiling fan noisily whirl for forty five minutes before taking another shower. Turned up the heat. My apartment is cold, even when I turn it up to eighty. Took another shower, and another. Called in sick. Called back and told them I'd be in, but late. Never showed up. That was last weekend.

Something inside me turned molten and my mouth tasted a bit like revenge. I could see the woman's face in my mind, but it was faint, like a mirage, and I wanted to see her, pay her back before it faded. It was then I decided to go back to the bar and end her. It was the only way I could sleep again.

----- The Hopeless, Kathy

My psychiatrist tells me to do a lot of things, and I pay him for that. But the reason I'm swimming in martinis tonight is because I also pay him not to judge me, not to condemn me, not to tell the ones with the purse strings how I'm living my life. I pay him to explain I'm in Burbank, and doing swell, soaking up the sun, enjoying massages, taking a spin class, the kind of lie only rich, white people can believe. None of this matters after my tongue tastes vermouth. I feel myself sinking into a torn plush bar stool, my persona, my shadow all fading—

Then she appears out of the crowd like a mirage. Through the murky cloud of memories I remember those nails, those hands, around my throat, that *voice*. She's talking and laughing and flirting, hands patting another arm gently, but her eyes are like a squid, angry and alien, and for some reason, I'm jealous, furious, scared, so many things and I'm diving into my next martini, too much vermouth, and I don't know when I ordered it but things like that don't seem to matter so much, things like this are just dusty light off the attic ceilings of my brain.

I'm off the stool and stumbling in heels I haven't worn in months towards her. I'm bobbing and swaying and the closer I get to her, the more people seem to gather. I'm crawling through a horde of flies on something that used to be sweet smelling but now rots. I'm elbowing through Armani and nouveau riche trash as I finally breach the circle. When I'm finally there, I see what I can only describe as a monster dressed in human flesh. He looks like any other fake shmuck in this place, but his eyes are

horrifying, without any sense of humanity behind them. His suit is wrapped tightly over his body, his face is cute but not drop dead gorgeous, and he's smiling, but his eyes are focused on *her*, and his smile is focused on something else. His teeth are wide and shining, like a shark's. I'm trying to forget him as I approach her and as I pass him, he starts to move towards her as well. I can feel his breath on my neck, his body cutting through the crowd, shoulders dodging and weaving with my own. We move in freakish tandem and I'm only a few yards away when my heel breaks and I'm falling and just as the polished, wood floor seems to tenderly reach out to break my nose, I stop. I feel his hand around my arm, clutching too tightly, cutting off circulation. His fingers are miniature vices that could tear flesh and when I slowly feel myself rising away from the ground, his shadow falls over me, swallows me. He turns me to face him and when he asks me if I'm okay, there is emotion in his voice, caring, concern, but his eyes watch me curiously, alien, and he studies my appearance, rates me in his mind. He looks from me to the woman, and his tongue slips out of his mouth, runs over his lips, and after a moment, he lets go of me, leans into my ear and his voice is like poisoned honey, smooth and sweet—*get out of here you drunken fucking skank you're in my way*—and then I'm almost in tears, pulling away, and running past him to the bathroom.

----- The Adventurous Fool, Brandon

There are no more caches. The breadcrumbs have lead me to a bar, no different than any other. *I'm there every Friday from 10 till close.* I'm underdressed and way too sober for this type of shit. I consider digging into a little bit of the stash I have in my car, but my teeth already feel too loose, and my gums too tight.

I'm looking for her, but I don't know what she looks like. I think she wants it to be humiliating or maybe she wants to feel wanted but I want to believe it's something more than just that. I order a too expensive too watered down beer and move through the crowd, but my body doesn't know their language and I skip across their surface like a stone.

She has to be sad, must be sad to hope for someone to follow her letters. I look down at my beer and taste it, try to remember the flavor, look down at my watch, note the time, and lie to myself. This must all be recorded for the annals of personal history. This is the night where everything changed. The shitty beer is sweet and fulfilling, the conversations with the other patrons were surprisingly real. The bartender wore a well pressed vest and nodded courteously to every patron that came in. The music wasn't too loud or too off color for anyone to complain about it and—

I feel a resonance within me. I'm crossing into the same ugly mass, and as I break through it, I see a hopeless woman, eyes hollow and teary, seeing but not seeing anything. She stumbles through a broken heel and running mascara haze to the bathroom. A man in a suit adjusts his tie and looks at me. I stare back at him, my eyes venomous and protective, and he smiles back, but his eyes, his eyes are—there's nothing there, it's a void, but the smile drops off his face, and something shimmers across the surface of his pupils and then he turns away to approach some other beautiful, woman that seems real and unreal at the same time, and when I look back at her, she's gone, like a mirage. The man crosses into view again and he reminds me of the monsters you hear about in bedtime stories; the kind that makes you regret venturing into the deep, dark woods to see your grandmother.

But that doesn't matter because I'm chasing the mirage to the bathroom, stopping at the entrance, eagerly awaiting our encounter. I can feel epiphany just beyond my reach, the strands of my life all slowly spinning together.

-----The Monster, Frank

All this time and the mirage is finally before me. I recognize her face that smirk, that deceptive bitch and I feel anger pulsing through my veins, jettisoning rage into the brain fluid, feel the oxygenation of each individual cell breathe in vengeance and exhale twisted justice. My mind is already racing from the drunk bitch floozy I sent away and her meekness and hopeless eyes make my blood boil.

I'm only feet away from my target when the fool approaches me, looks me in the eyes with disdain. I look away from him and survey the bar, formulating a line in my head that will repulse him, make him fear me. But, when I look back, he's gone. The crowd roars like angry surf around me.

Then, the woman I've been searching for, the dangerous mirage, sees me and it is then that I have to get out of here. I push my way through the crowd towards an exit, any way out, and then I feel a finger playfully tap me on my shoulder. My body is a machine that is breaking down, broke down, the gears in my jaw rust shut, the oil in my throat dries up, my muscles atrophy. Her fingers dance on my arm as she revolves around me, moves her head down so low to meet my downtrodden eyes. It's *her*. And I want to escape, but the animal in me wants her and I know that I need it as well.

And then we're both heading towards the bathroom and she's smiling at me, and I know what's coming but I'm helpless to stop it. When I look into her eyes, I see something that scares even me.

-----The Nobody in the Epicenter, Carla

Who am I? I'm a nobody, in regards to the drama unfolding; unimportant to the players assembled in the dank and dimly lit bathroom. Not five minutes ago I was swallowing another free drink, another in line from a man who looked at me with a yearning that outpaced my better judgment. After my third sweet, and bitter, and cheap drink, after I've made my fourth promise to stop doing things like this, after my first shot, then my second, chased with water and wide smiles too large for the joke told, teeth bleached with plastic strips that tasted like rubber cement. After all this, I still haven't learned a thing. I think I want him, but it is this ambivalence that bothers me; to know this night will mean nothing, refuse to stand out against the countless other memories of bar crawls and the early morning escapes, stumbling to my car to get home before my son wakes up. By tomorrow, I won't even remember the face of the man I've slept with. I tell him I need to powder my nose and we both grin like medicated clowns, our eyes locked and gleaming. We share the private joke that is our lives. As I walk to the bathroom, I feel my world slant and my head swim. I don't know if I'll be coming back.

The bathroom is deserted for now, but it will become a violent pit in just a few minutes. I do not know this yet. For now, I splash luke warm water over my face, carefully avoiding the dirt and grime caked onto the sink's surface. My makeup dissolves and spills off my face as the lights flicker and hum overhead. I wonder if my son is asleep yet, if the sitter has put him down and taken the money off the table. I can imagine the nervous look on her face as she leaves the house empty and locked with an innocent, five year old boy inside. But I don't have the money to cover her extra hours, and she doesn't get paid enough to really care. My thoughts drift to my son, and I imagine him sleeping in the big, empty house that swallows him, a big empty house where I'm not there to protect him. I wonder what he thinks of his mother, of the men she brings home. I wonder if he'll recognize the smells, the signs of all this when he's older.

In the mirror, I see myself, really see it, or at least I hope I do. Shame and selfishness laid bare. I will go home, I tell the mirror, tell the man whose face I cannot remember that I'm grateful for the drinks, will even pay for them if only he'll leave me alone, go find someone else. I have a son. I'll pay him for his drinks and thank him for his time, won't kiss him on the cheek but perhaps shake his hand—that's too much. And I'm just about to leave when my world starts spinning, so I sit down, think about what I'm doing to my son. I open a stall and lock it, collapse onto the toilet, feel the first tears of guilt spill from me, pull my legs up off the ground and hug them, wish I was back home hugging him.

The bathroom door slams into the wall, its hinge groaning from the force. From a gap in between the door and the hinge, I can see a small, vertical stripe of the room. Footsteps echo outside the door, and I hear a woman's high heels clack loudly against the dirty linoleum. The door opens and I

hear voices, some loud, some angry, all searching for answers. And the voices are all shouting at once now, and there is the distinct sound of someone being slapped and then cracking glass. I can see a young man's bloody face underneath my stall door and I pull my body into a tighter ball so I won't be seen.

A woman is screaming, but I can't tell which one it is. A man whose voice sounds like an animal's tells her to shut up and she won't and then there is another loud noise and she's on the ground. From the slit, I can see a rather calm looking woman reach into her back pocket and pull something out and then she charges at the man and there's a sharp intake of breath and then he's bleeding, blood everywhere, on the floor, reaching towards me like a crimson hand. I close my eyes and put my hands on my ears, try to become invisible, but I'm too weak. Muffled shouts penetrate my covered ears and I open my eyes to see the bodies on the ground are gone. There is more fighting and screaming and someone is thrown into the neighboring stall. I can hear the porcelain crack as dirty water floods the room, mingling with the blood in a pinkish soup.

I don't know why they're fighting and I don't care, just want to escape unnoticed, make it back to the table to tell the nice man that I'm going back home to my son, and that I'm very sorry if I led him on, but I have to change, I can't go on like this anymore. If I make it through this, I owe my son that much.

Someone's head slams into my stall door and the hinge groans as it begins to separate from the door. My heart pounds its fists against the cage of my chest, but there's nowhere for it, or me to flee to. There is no more talking, just the sound of meat being pounded and quiet gasps of pain. My thoughts drift to my son. He has had a nightmare and he runs to my room, but I am not there, I've never been there. I have denied him a mother, and I have denied myself my happiness. My son asks if I will read to him but I am not there; instead, I'm holding my breath and praying for the stall door to hold, praying that no one will notice me. Music pounds through the walls around us. I close one eye and fearfully stare through the small gap. An eye looks back at me. There is no rescue on the way. No one is coming.

In my mind, the sun is shining. It is the perfect day. The playground is empty, except my son and I. I push him on bright red swing set; play on a teeter totter with him, letting him soar into the air. We get ice cream and I let him get fudge and peanuts for once. At night, when I tuck him in, I tell him a story but he stops me halfway and asks me where I go at night, where Daddy is, why he left and even in my fantasy, I can see his eyes, his disbelieving eyes demand an answer from me. I lie to him that it's not his fault, or my fault, or anyone's fault. As I close the door to his room, I feel a tiny part of me refuse to stop hating him.

But, I am not with my son. The lights flicker overhead. The stranger's eye is locked on my own and the handle to the stall jiggles as the person tries to enter it. I reach out and try to hold the door closed, but the hinge screeches loudly as it finally gives up and shatters.

I am with my son, holding him in my arms. I kiss him and tell him that I love him, will always love him. I will fix things, be someone he can be proud of. Even if the cost is loneliness, he's worth it. Things will get be different. Things will get better.

And then the stall door opened, and the lights overhead buzzed loudly once, and went out.

The Glass Unicorn

7 Years Before the Final Judgment of Mankind

Thomas felt the fire withdraw from his body and wind rush over him. He opened his eyes. It was seven years in the past, before the fires consumed the twin cities of earth and sky. Rain quietly fell over the quickly browning lawn. It washed over the carefully polished shoes and umbrellas. Thomas looked around the crowd, recognizing the uncomfortable grief they all shared, his mind disconnected, holed up somewhere in the dark cave within. Thomas kept looking at the funeral crowd expectantly, as if he was trying to figure out what he was supposed to be doing here. He settled on squeezing Daniel's shoulders in support while giving stern looks to Vickie. Little Vickie was sobbing uncontrollably, her face wrapped in the black veil of her mother. For a moment, they looked like one wounded animal.

One by one, each mourner paid their respects. Daniel quietly walked forward, his eyes contemplative as if an answer lay on the tip of his tongue. He ran his hands over the coffin and as he felt the cold finality of it all, he began to cry. He slowly turned and looked at his father. Thomas, caught in Daniel's gaze felt the boy look to him for guidance, expected it, but he was tired and so sick of being the one who was supposed to know what to do. So, he turned away from his son and walked passed him, walking out of the graveyard and towards the car.

Lilly and Vickie walked over to the grave and Daniel raised his hands towards her for a hug. Vickie sobbed louder and Lilly pulled her frail body closer to her chest and away from her brother. Lilly's eyes looked past Daniel at the coffin. Daniel slowly lowered his hands and walked away further into the graveyard, alone. For all the pain and horror in this place, Thomas knew that this moment, too, would

pass and that in time, things would heal, never being the same as they were, but becoming a new normal.

When it was finally finished, Lilly and Vickie trudged towards Thomas. He opened his arms to them, but neither looked at him, merely veered away towards the car. And he could see the disgust and anger in their downturned eyes.

Left alone to his thoughts, he stared down at James's grave silently. His whole past, present and future lay before him. As his hands ran along granite denial, he felt hope fall away from him. There was the chance that this is how things would be. Life as they knew it had been shattered and out of the many fragments were many possibilities to heal, but there was also the distinct possibility that it was all ruined. He could still turn things around. But then he looked at the box where his dead son lay. *His son.* And what was once a concept reserved for an eternity in an unknown future was now realized. This was his doing and he knew that no amount of change or perspective could bring back the wife he loved and children he cherished.

For the second time that day, Thomas buried his family.

But this was long before the many epidemics that would kill millions; before the bombs fell from the silent satellites from long dead governments; before the floods and tsunamis that ravaged the coasts; before the world died a long and lonely death; and, before we all went insane.

James' alabaster coffin settled at the bottom of the freshly dug grave. From above, it almost looked like a white throne fit for his little prince. The last of the crowd had dispersed, leaving Thomas alone with his grief. The weight of his responsibility tightened inside him.

And then he finally admitted: he had done this. *He had done this.*

As the hole slowly filled up with dirt, and his son's coffin disappeared from sight, he imagined this is what hell felt like.

Thomas was dreaming again, his body sailing over patches of burned out asphalt that seemed to dominate more and more of what remained of the highway. He gracefully somersaulted over the smoldering city and through the abandoned suburbs. He let the stiff stalks of brown grass brush his toes as he walked to his front door. An intense feeling of unfamiliarity swept over him. This was not his home. This city, this place, even his body felt like a plastic shell, his eyes shellacked brown and weepy onto silicon. He broke the door down and rushed room to room, his heart tumbling in panic.

Each room he entered was empty but clean, each possession in its proper place: Kiley's room was decorated with posters of the Beatles and adorned with tie dye colored cushions. She had been going through a retro phase, and as hard as it had been tracking down vintage posters from seventy years ago, he had made sure that she had been able to fit in. Lately, it seemed all anybody ever did anymore was look back and reminisce on yesterday.

Thomas shook off his thoughts as he raced to Victoria's room, or Vickie, as she precociously preferred. She was only seven, but demanded the utmost care around her collection of crystal unicorns, each carved inside a block of glass by laser. Vickie still believed her father's words that magic had imprisoned each unicorn inside, and on one autumn afternoon, he had come home to her sobbing, a collection of broken crystals littered around the floor, her arms and legs shallowly cut by the river of glass that flowed around her. She had been trying to set them free, she pleaded. He never bought her one again.

Stepping past his oldest son, Daniel's room, Thomas approached the last door on the ground floor. "James' Room" was written in childish type on a small placard. Thomas's hand reached for the door but stopped. He did not have permission to enter. He had lost that right. Thomas slowly retraced

his steps back to the foyer of the house and headed upstairs to the master bedroom. He flung the door open, ignoring the loud crash as it ricocheted against the wall. He crossed the room in three steps and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the familiar outline of his wife's body enshrouded in blankets. Something inside him mended, and a wave of exhaustion pulled his body into bed next to her.

"I love you, Lilly," she didn't move. "I'm ready to be there for you, for the kids. I can change; we can go back to the way things were." His wife slowly rolled over towards him, a gaping hole where her face should be. He screamed but made no sound. Lilly's body sunk into the swamp of the mattress and disappeared. For the second time in his life--

Day 2549

She was gone. All of them were gone now. Thomas didn't even bother looking at the alarm clock that tiredly squealed on his nightstand. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes while his hand moved subconsciously and turned the buzzing device off. He could sleep the rest of the day away, if he wanted. He could do anything he wanted now, but there was nothing he wanted more than to hold her again, let the weight of her body resonate inside him. More than anything, he didn't want to be a widower, the one forced to live on in a daydream haze while death slowly approached. But it was far too late to care about his wants anymore.

His body seemed to move on its own accord, bringing him down into the kitchen. A square of tiles were still cracked from the last fight they had had. He could still see Lilly as she dropped the watermelon she was cutting for dinner. He remembered the familiar gunshot boom of weight on the loose tiles echoing throughout the house. The sound reminded him of the mall riots just a few months

later, of the shouts from water shortages, and the screams as the last painkillers ran out. It was the sound of bodies trampled on the tile floor of supermarkets, department stores, schools. Thomas looked down at cracked tile. Amidst the wreckage of fruit and marriage, their hands had touched, but there was no connection between them, no feeling.

Thomas retrieved the long stale box of Corn Flakes and pulled out his ration of powdered milk, its expiration dated months ago. He poured the slightly dirty powder into his bowl, and poured rain water onto it, ignoring the splash of gray milk that leaked over the side of his bowl. He shuffled to the living room and sunk into his familiar outline in the leather couch and turned on the television.

“Some may say we were those left behind, but God has not abandoned us! No, this is a te—“ Thomas channel, surfed through another ten channels of the Apostle’s fervor before shutting the set off. He looked down at his barely touched bowl of soggy cereal and left it on the arm of the couch. He opened up the front door and peeked his head out. The streets were abandoned, as always and the sky was a misleadingly brilliant blue. Birds chirped happily as if nothing had happened.

As he turned to walk back inside, the sounds of gunfire erupted from nearby. He slammed the door and bolted it, peering from between his blinds to search for the source. It didn’t take long before a caravan of cars and motorcycles cut through the neighborhood. Their riders wore the best clothes money used to buy. Leather Prada bags at the sides of the women, the tykes in Gucci diapers, and the men clad in Armani tuxedos, their heads shaved or just matted and dirty, or knotted into tight dreads, screaming like wild dogs as they passed. They roared through, impervious to the sullen mood of the urban neighborhood. Thomas watched as they whooped and hollered their way through the streets, their voices slowly evaporating in the June heat.

Thomas looked up into the sky and watched as clouds slowly rolled in. If the last week had been any indication, a storm was on its way. He trudged to row of doors on the wall and stared at the rooms

which his children had once occupied. The rooms had become tombs, sarcophagi filled with dust, and bugs, and memories best forgotten. Thomas didn't remember how long it had been since he had last seen his children. Time wasn't measured in seconds, but in the moments remembered, the memories forever frozen and recalled.

Thomas walked back into the living room. A blinking red number one flashed on the answering machine on the table next to the couch. He fell back into the familiar leather grip and turned the television back on, ignoring the machine.

"And for only one canned good a day, the Seekers will track down your loved ones that have gone missing. We also provide protection in our beautiful gated community," said a blonde haired woman. Thomas stared at her hollowed out face as she smiled. "There is no need to pick between Prodigal and Apostle, at the Seeker commune. We believe in equality—" Thomas switched from the infomercial to news. "It's day 2549 of what some people are calling 'The Tribulation.' Religious fundamentalists continue to claim that the Rapture has occurred and will last for seven years. It is during this seven year period called, the Tribulation that mankind will be pushed to their brinks to be deemed worthy to enter heaven. According to the quickly growing religious movement, The Apostles, that seven year mark is right around the corner. However, The Prodigals, an opposing philosophical movement argues that six days from now, nothing will happen and that mankind must be ready to rebuild confront the challenges still ahead. Both sides agree that the millions of people who have suddenly disappeared are gone, and are not coming back. Coming up next, we have Dr. Hadley here to discuss his theory about the disappearances in his new book 'Sudden Disappearance Syndrome.'" the news anchor smiled. Thomas jammed his thumb down on the off button and flung the controller at the television. It slammed into the dented screen and as if in response, the screen cracked and a strange

ghostly moan escaped its glass lips. Thomas stared at it in shock for a moment before realizing it was just a blown vacuum tube, breathing its last.

A flashing red number danced around his peripheral vision. Thomas reached over and hit the play button, his eyes looking up at the eggshell white speckled ceiling that cracked and bubbled overhead. “Thomas, this is Daniel.” The voice had a cold edge to it and spoke through gritted teeth. “I don’t know if you know what your children are up to, since you’re *busy* and all,” Daniel’s voice shook with nervous laughter. “Do you know what Kiley is up to? As if you fucking care. The last time she called me, she begged me for—do you know what she asked for? Blow. She begged and screamed for cocaine. All she needed was a fix, just one more to get her through the day. I would have called the police but who the hell knows if they even exist and I would have called you, but we know how much good that does.” Thomas stretched his neck and listened to the phone hung up and the machine turn off. The phone loomed in front of him, and with sluggishness, he picked it up and dialed his son’s number.

Five rings and Daniel picked up. There was exhaustion in his voice, a hardness that hadn’t been there before. “Hi. It’s Dad.” They listened to each other breathe. “I got your message, Daniel.”

“And?”

“I don’t know, I just thought I’d call and see if there was anything I could do to help.” Thomas listened to his son’s ragged voice laugh over the line.

“Yeah, sure. That’d be great, Dad. Why don’t you be emotionally available to your children years ago, save your marriage, and while you’re at it—”

“You know if I could change things, I would.” Daniel scoffed on the other end. Thomas was running out of patience. “What do you want, Daniel? You know the phone lines are spotty at best, so, tell me what you want to tell me.”

“She joined the Apostles, Dad.”

“Kiley? I thought you said she was doing coke and—“

“She ran out of things to trade for it, so they took her as payment. I tried to help her kick the habit, but it’s kind of hard to convince someone to get clean when they live in a world like ours.”

“So what did you do?” Thomas asked.

“Do? I didn’t, couldn’t do anything. The Apostles got to her first and suddenly, she found religion, was saved from the fires of perdition by her newfound faith.” Thomas closed his eyes. His body felt so heavy, so full of regret.

“What do you want me to do, Daniel? What can I do?”

“I know it’s been hard for you. It’s been hard for all of us, but we can still be a family. After,” his voice turned to cold granite, “after Mom...after she *left* it’s been bad. It’s just one thing after the other. When James died—“ Thomas pulled the phone away from his ear and placed it delicately on the receiver. His face contorted in blind, undirected rage, and he opened his mouth and howled. He screamed out of the helplessness he had brought on his family and himself. Thomas grabbed the base of the telephone and threw it against the wall, flinching as it exploded against the wall, breaking a crude oil painting of a cartoon family holding hands outside a house. Vickie had painted it for him a long time ago, before she had disappeared with his wife. Ashamed, he walked over to the debris and shifted through it, but the painting was ripped in several portions. He looked at the tattered picture. It couldn’t be repaired.

Thomas refilled his mug, pouring the leftover pot of cold, Irish coffee into it and slumped back to his room. He collapsed onto his bed and watched the sky slowly trudge from one corner to the other, the sun bowing its head low in the sky as a halo of stars encircled it.

Around 2:00 a.m. he heard the second dawn erupt. He could see the city off in the distance, bomb blasts illuminating the ruined diamond. Gunfire glimmered brilliantly through the streets as shrapnel exploded, reflecting the world in a hundred dagger reflections. He had become immune to the constant warfare that rippled through the streets. After all, this had all become mundane routine.

His days did not always play out the same, though. Sometimes the city slept quietly, peacefully, giving off the illusion of peace. It wouldn't be long before bullets crackled and hummed overhead again. As much as the Apostles had preached about the end of the world, to Thomas, it felt like it was taking its sweet time coming. The Apocalypse wasn't on the way, it had already happened. There had been no trial, no negotiations, just silence. And what of the innocents that had died, or worse, been taken.

Vickie

I hope James gets my unicorn. Mommy says people can't get gifts in heaven, but if heaven is so great, I don't see why God wouldn't let people get gifts. Mommy says God is a loving man and that he's gonna save us but I don't know what we need saving from. Sometimes I think Mommy means Daddy and other times I think she means herself.

She told me we were going soon, leaving for paradise. I'm scared though. What if we get lost in paradise? What if it's a scary place like the big church we go to on Sundays? I don't know why Daddy and my big brother Daniel and big sister Kiley don't go with us. Mommy says they won't be saved and

that makes me scared. When I ask her why they won't come with us, Mommy says there's not enough room in the garden for everyone, but if my whole family can fit in our little house, then our new home must be even littler than that. I don't want to be in a really small place because I'm afraid. Mommy tells me not to be afraid, that the big city in the ground will have enough room for everyone, but when I ask her why can't Daddy come, she gets real scary.

I think she's sad about my little big brother, James. He fell asleep in a tiny, white box and never woke up. Mommy says he wasn't supposed to go to sleep, that he was special and now we have to leave because he's gone. When I ask her if I'm special she tells me I am, but not like James. She calls him the messy-a. If my Mommy called me messy, she'd make me clean my room.

Sometimes, at night when I'm going to sleep, I think about James sleeping in his little box. When it's time for me to go to sleep, I don't want to be put in a box. I want to run around outside and play on my slide and swing on my swing set. I hope heaven is a big slide that never ends.

Day 2551

Religious pamphlets were strewn across his living room floor, stapled to his curtains downstairs that Kiley used to pretend were jungle vines. She would let out a Tarzan yell and try and swing across the ground, her body pure and strong. Those times had come and gone as well. Thomas suspected this was her work and if the brief snippets he had heard Daniel were right, she was already brainwashed by the Apostles. The mess downstairs was her way of trying to save him or recruit him, he thought.

She was twenty when what some called, the Rapture, happened, just at that age where one begins to question their goals in life. She wanted to become a marine biologist or a conservationist, she

couldn't choose between them. She was in her second year of college when everything fell apart. Her mother was gone and the world was broken, abandoned, left to find its own way. Suddenly, no one really cared about saving the manatees. Everyone was living on borrowed time. Suddenly, they were all conservationists, trying to find a way to preserve their lives.

He didn't remember the day when she didn't come back home. It could've been months or weeks since then. He had heard her voice drift out across the neighborhood as a van passed by. A large megaphone was attached to the top and he recognized it at once as the Apostles. Her voice preached fire and brimstone, screamed for mankind to prostrate before God. He could hear the shriek of a whip striking naked flesh recede as the van passed. No one opened their doors. In fact, Thomas couldn't remember how many people were still living in the neighborhood. For all he knew, he was the only one left.

Kiley

My first memory as a child was fear. The minister looked down at my little, baby brother, James and he told me that he was a sinner. He told me we were all born with sin, a sin that only water could cleanse. I told him how water could get rid of sin. He told me that sometimes, the darkness we had inside ourselves was like a disease, and no manner of scrubbing could fix it. I was afraid and I started to cry but he told me not to worry, that there was another way. When water failed, the good Lord used fire to burn away the cancer of mankind. He rolled up his sleeve and showed me a patch of skin with a cross burned into it. I didn't understand what he meant, but I remember the way his eyes looked at my baby brother. They were filled with fire and water.

And I knew that's how I wanted to feel.

Day 2553

Thomas was running low on supplies. He had already scavenged everything in a ten block radius and there was no choice but to venture into the city now. It would take awhile to make it there and back, depending on how much resistance he met along the way. If he ran into the Apostles, he pretended he was a believer or one of the damned who might soon turn to the Christian path. If he ran into the Prodigals, ironically, the only thing he could do was pray that they were in a good mood or saw him as a small fish, something too small to bother with.

If the Apostles represented crazed faith, the Prodigals believed in self preservation and Darwinism. Their church was their small army they had assembled and the only temple they prayed in was themselves. The Apostles described them as Godless savages, but the Prodigals were worse than that. They knew what they were doing and had no guilt about it. They travelled the land, scavenging, killing, and even raping along the way. God was dead, and they claimed dibs on what was left. They would tear apart the ruins that were left, watch everything burn, and if humankind wasn't saved after the seven years of supposed tribulation, then start anew, build a new world without God.

The message was sanctuary for many, but when the looting began, when people set fire to each other's homes over who had the last can of Spam, ideologies didn't mean shit. Just six years ago, and shortly after the Rapture, Thomas watched as his neighbor, Mr. Andrews, was dragged out of his shattered bay window, his face bloody and swollen from the beating a gang of Prodigals had laid on him. Thomas drew the curtain closed and listened as they set fire to his home and made him watch, listened

as they encircled him and beat him with chains, with fists. When Mr. Andrews called out for help, for Thomas to save him, the Prodigals stared at Thomas' house and he curled into a ball in his closet and covered his ears, but the death knell of his neighbor, blood gurgling in his throat as he begged for his life, as he screamed for mercy, haunted Thomas. He listened as the gang laughed when they discovered his pantries were long empty, that there was nothing of value to take. One Prodigal was repentant, and screamed at the flaming wreckage that she was sorry and asked if God would forgive her. The fire reflected in her eyes as she looked to the crumpled body and ruined home for answers. Thomas covered his ears as they pushed her into the flaming building. After all, any mention of the Lord's name, in any capacity, was grounds for execution.

The cars that littered the veins of the superhighway like blood clots were plastered with child drawn graffiti of burning crosses and curse words. He was in Prodigal territory. Thunder crackled from somewhere far away and Thomas pulled his hoodie closer around him. His son's clothing would never have fit him before, but now he swam in them, his ribs poking against the zipper. He felt so tired and wished to rest, but he knew if he did, he wouldn't wake up. Prodigals were very particular to places they viewed as their territory and without something to barter for his life, he'd be killed.

It was in this hypnotic trance he traversed the lonely highway into town. The moon was rising, gazing curiously down at his shadowy form. The clouds parted gracefully and pale, ghostly light swept over the highway. Thomas stumbled forward, feeling the strength evaporate inside himself. His veins throbbed to some primal jungle rhythm, his heart chanting obscenities in his chest. He could see the end of the highway looming ahead and he pushed onward.

As his eyelids drooped lower and the world swayed drunkenly, a whisper danced across the silent and now fog covered landscape. He wondered if he was hallucinating until he heard the same whisper, this one slightly louder. Thomas strained to hear it and even in the resounding silence, could

only guess it was singing. It was a solemn song, rising in volume and then quickly stopping. As he approached another curve of the highway, a caravan emerged from the fog, guided by hooded men and women on either side of the line of cars. The song the figures sang was sweet and low, familiar and sad. They were Apostles traveling through forbidden Prodigal territory. Thomas didn't know what a gathering so great meant for the city, but the caravan seemed never ending, the numbers in the thousands, all heading towards some distant battleground. They said nothing to him as he passed, and his eyes were merely met with hooded blackness. Rusted cars crushed gravel beneath their wheels, and before he knew it, the caravan had passed without protest into the distance.

Rotting skyscrapers jutted out in front of him. The long and dangerous journey had gone better than he'd imagined. With renewed energy, Thomas walked into the ruined city that held so many memories.

7 Years Before the Rapture

Sunlight, pure and beautiful streamed through the curtains of the two story house, eagerly urging Thomas to awake. He rolled over on his side, his hand reaching towards the other side of the bed. His hand searched the familiar outline left by his wife, Lilly. His fingers brushed against a piece of warm, flannel pajamas and he smiled and rolled over, spying his wife sleeping serenely, her hair moving slightly as she exhaled. Thomas kissed the back of her neck and Lilly stirred a little but soon pulled the blankets tighter around herself. Without another sound, he disengaged himself quietly from the bed and went downstairs.

Stepping lightly, Thomas peeked into James' room. His youngest son was curled into a little ball in the middle of his bed, the blankets haphazardly flung over the side of his bed. Thomas closed the door and looked at the doors of his two other children, Kiley and Daniel. They were in their early teens now, and he knew how independent they had become, which meant they were far too old for his early morning checkups. With a sigh, Thomas retreated to the living room. His clothes clung to his sweat soaked skin and as he looked through the sunshine filled windows, he imagined how good the fresh morning sun would feel against his body.

He opened his front door and walked outside. The door hinge squealed loudly and refused to close, something his wife had been on him for the last two weeks to fix. He'd get around to it eventually. The pavement was shining and white, with chalk four square and hopscotch criss-crossing it. Mr. Andrews, his next door neighbor, sleepily trudged to retrieve his morning newspaper from his mailbox. He saluted Thomas half heartedly. Thomas barely registered the motion, but when he looked closer he could see lines of tension etched into his neighbor's face. "Everything okay, Joseph?"

Mr. Andrews looked confusedly at Thomas, caught off guard at the conversation. "Yes, well— Thomas, your wife, she hasn't been acting strange lately, has she?"

Thomas laughed. "Not any crazier than usual, Joe. Trouble with the missus?"

"She told me she's going on a research trip for her company last week."

"That's great!" Thomas paused. "I'm sorry, Joe, but what does Mrs. Andrews do for a living?"

"She—She's an architect, does mostly theoretical architecture, stuff designed for the rich that isn't really feasible, floating cities on the ocean, an apartment building built into a zeppelin, even, get this, an underground city," Mr. Andrews beamed for a moment before turning gloomy once more. "I called the company, things didn't seem right and they told me they didn't know of any trip, that they

hadn't seen her in weeks. She's been fired." His words hung in the air between the two men and ugly, unspoken suspicions materialized between the two.

"I'm sure she'll be okay, or she'll come back."

"You know, Thomas, I don't think she will be. I called my brother to ask him if he knew where she was and it was the same story; one minute everything was normal and then he up and disappeared as well. His wife was going to call me to find out where he was."

"So you think...you think they ran off together?"

"I don't know. I don't even know if it really matters. She's gone." Tears ran down his face and even Mr. Andrews seemed surprised as he wiped them away. "What did I do, Tom? What does a tired, used up, old fossil do now? Rose was my life." He smiled weakly. "Well, I'm sure things will work out. Never mind me. I'll see you later, Thomas. Tell Lilly her pie was delicious. We—I send my compliments to the chef." The old man shuffled up his walk and into his home, leaving Thomas to ponder the conversation.

Lost in thought, he found himself walking to the backyard. A collection of children's toys, complete with swing set and slide were strewn across the ground. As the years had gone on, the backyard had become a sort of jungle gym graveyard of new and discarded toys. He ran his hand along the cold chains of the swing set and collected his thoughts. It was then he saw the old wishing well in the far corner of the backyard.

When they first were married, before they had their first child, Daniel, Thomas and Lilly had dug a little wishing well, complete with a handmade bucket and wench, and a basin made out of stones from their gravel driveway and backyard. It was their first project for the new house, and it seemed to take on a nature greater than anything they'd done since to their home. Sometimes they'd hide messages to

each other at the bottom of the little well, taped carefully to the wooden bucket within. He would sometimes find a note from her telling him she loved him or that she loved him and would continue doing so even if he forgot to put the seat down. Likewise, he'd leave her notes telling her he missed her and loved her despite her tendency to steal all of the blankets from him, leaving him shivering in the morning.

Thomas walked over to the well and slowly cracked the handle on the side, pulling the bucket up from the depths below. While it may have been a fake well to begin with, they had dug a deeper and deeper hole to keep up the illusion for the children. After a few seconds, the wooden bucket rose up, a piece of brown parchment taped carefully onto a small canteen. He grabbed the note, his fingers fumbling over the taped edges as he opened it. Clouds moved in front of the sun and everything was hidden in shadow. He looked down at the message.

I love you, Thomas. I think you saved me from myself.

Thomas smiled at the note, realizing that his wife had pulled another one over on him, that the true purpose of his sneaky trips out to the well had been long discovered. He reminded himself to write a note for Lilly and maybe give her a backrub or make her dinner a night when the kids were all at their grandparents. Wind whistled as he opened the canteen and drank a small amount of aged whiskey. Thomas wasn't a big drinker, but this small secret act in the early hours of the morning when everyone else was asleep, brought a hidden comfort to him. Alcohol had been one of the many things that had disappeared after his marriage and children. In a way, this weekend tradition reminded him of his own father, sneaking off to the tool shed to drink a few beers underneath sawdust clouds. Thomas smiled as the familiar taste swam over his tongue and silently thanked God for his good fortune.

It was another lukewarm, light beer and another ordinary day in suburbia, but Thomas didn't realize that it would be the last for both. Thomas woke up and showered. The children were asleep,

neighborhood still empty and quiet. A paperboy circled the block and tossed a paper into the driveway, staring into the sun for a moment before driving off in his rusting Toyota. Thomas remembered the days of boys on bikes, bags slung over their shoulders, filled with tightly rolled newspapers. Now, they roared by in junk cars that sputtered and spat black smoke into the atmosphere. He wondered what would change for his children when they had their own kids.

Coffee, black; toast with an egg on top, no yolk. It was after his breakfast when Lilly emerged from upstairs, her hair messy and tossed from sleep. She yawned loudly as Thomas nuzzled her neck, stifling her yawn with an animal growl. As he purred into her neck, she laughed and comically pushed him away. They looked into each other's eyes and kissed. They both turned suddenly at the sound of cereal being poured into an empty bowl. Little James stared back at them through spread fingers that covered part of his eyes. "Ew, Mommy and Daddy are kissing," he moaned. Thomas smiled and scooped him up in his arms and spun him around the room like an airplane.

"You trying to make breakfast for us, kiddo?"

"No, I was just hungry. I don't know how to make breakfast for everyone," James said.

Lilly picked up the box. "It's almost empty. You kids just devour everything in the house.

"They're like little ravenous wolves," Thomas smiled. "Maybe we should go shopping? You want to come with us, James?"

"Tom, we can't just leave Vickie here without supervision," Lilly protested.

"Daniel and Kiley are old enough to watch over her. I'll let him know what we're doing and then we can get going. Besides, James makes friends wherever he goes. It'll be good for him.

In the car, talk radio murmured quietly. "Record numbers of the hyper resilient, mammal flu have been reported worldwide. Scientists say that this new viruses is more resistant to antibiotics, and has a startling death rate of forty percent, making some call this epidemic 'the Plague of the Future.'" Thomas lowered the volume on the radio while Lilly sat in the back with James. She pointed out neighbors and landmarks to him as they passed them. James watched in wonder.

Lilly and Thomas held James' hands as they entered the store. "Is it me, or does it look a little under stocked?" Lilly asked. They stared at the produce section which was completely empty, save for a small section of apples covered in white fungus. An idle worker mopped the floor nearby. Lilly broke away and approached him. "Excuse me, do you have any good apples in the back?" The worker stared at her for a moment before pulling his headphone's ear buds out of his ears. The whispers of a dark lullaby cried out from the cheap plastic.

"What?" Lilly repeated her question. "No, sorry. Salmonella or mold, or something. Everything went bad, lots of people got sick at another store so my manager told us to throw out everything. Don't want to get sued or something. I was just about to throw out those apples."

"Well, when are you getting more apples in?"

"Not sure. Whenever my manager is sure we won't get sued," the boy laughed. Lilly scowled. Thomas recognized the look of his wife losing her temper and quickly walked over with James.

"Well, where can we find healthy produce?"

"How am I supposed to know? Chill, it's just fruit. We'll get some soon, probably. It's not the end of the world."

Lilly started to lose it when Thomas reached her. "Thanks for your help," he told the worker. The boy just shrugged and put his headphones back in.

“All I wanted was one stinking apple. I’m one short for a recipe—” Lilly gaped at something behind Thomas, who turned to see. James held an apple out to his mother that was completely devoid of white spots. It seemed to shine under the fluorescent glow of the store lights. “Where did you find— how did you—” Lilly stared at the apple and at James who was already preoccupied with an aisle of brightly colored salad dressing bottles nearby.

“Guess he got all the lucky genes in the family,” Thomas mused. As Lilly dropped the apple into a plastic bag, light danced across its waxy surface, revealing James’ handprint. On the other side of the sphere, a white spot slowly healed and disappeared where his thumb had lain.

Back in the car, they departed for home. Lilly stared out at the passing streets in a faraway daze. Little James hummed the theme song of his favorite cartoon, his head rocking back and forth to the beat. Thomas turned up the radio. “--Was reknown celloist Eliza Andari’s debut composition, “Before the Bema Seat.” Now, for some news. Three years after a mass suicide in response to the supposed 2012 Mayan doomsday prophecy, religious fundamentalists are once again claiming that ‘the end is nigh’. In other news, John Babel, renown philanthropist, has created a controversial foundation privately funded to find the best ‘artists, scientists, and human beings to join in a new initiative—”

“Could you turn that off?” Lilly grumpily asked. Thomas didn’t know why she had still been in a bad mood since the grocery store.

“He was just a young punk, Lil,” Thomas tried to explain.

“What?”

“You don’t have to be mad at that guy back there. He’s just too young to realize how rude he is.”

Lilly looked at him dismissively. “I’m not mad about that.”

“Then what’s wrong? You seem off today.”

Lilly leaned close to Thomas’ ear. “I think something might be different with James.” Thomas looked at her and the car swerved. “Road!”

“Sorry,” he steadied the car. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just. I’m,” she looked back at James who was still humming his song and looking out of the window, “we already have three kids, and I’m,” she pointed to her stomach. It took a long moment before Thomas’ eyes widened and he understood.

“Really?” Thomas beamed at her. “That’s great!”

“You’re not listening to me, Tom. We have three kids and they’re great, but you’ve heard what they’ve said about the markets. It’s going to take years to recover, if they ever do, and the cost of living, good educations, decent insurance, it’s already astronomical.” She looked away from him.

“Wait, what are you saying? We can get through the hard times. We’ve done it before. We’ll just have to cut back a little bit more.”

“No, we can’t. We’re already in debt, Tom. And, it’s not fair to the rest. They deserve to have the best that we can give them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We’re *not* going to have another child, Tom. We just can’t.”

Tom looked over at his wife whose face had gone dark. She looked out the window. James caught his father’s eyes in the rear view mirror. The boy beamed at him, a smile wide and innocent.

Thomas wondered if his son would ever remember this day when he looked back on it, a day filled with quiet tragedy.

Thomas stared at his son, oblivious to the world around him. His wife's words echoed in his mind and James' clear eyes bore into his soul. Silently, their car pulled through the red light. Lilly stared out of the passenger window. Thomas looked at his wife and his son smiled for the last time. There was noise, a tremendous vocal fury that deafened Thomas to anything else that was going on. He felt the car spin, but couldn't see through the smoke. Blood splattered onto his face, and he prayed it was his own. The windshield was cracked on Lilly's side and it was only when the car stopped spinning that he was able to realize their car had been in an accident.

The passenger side was crushed and Lilly sobbed through blood stained eyes. Shrapnel pinned her in place and prevented her from moving. James looked back at his son through the mirror. A small bundle of flesh was crumpled and limp and leaned against the seat. Somewhere on the floor of the back seat, an apple rests, unharmed.

The smoke of his life cleared and then reality set in. Insurance papers must be signed, and blame must be assigned. It was then that his future seemed to unravel in front of him without protest, and he suddenly, he was powerless to stop the alabaster, child sized coffin from lowering into the ground. This is the last lullaby of his marriage. Events he was powerless to stop flash: Lilly left her ring on the nightstand, single beds in separate rooms; her stomach was forever flat now, and they never talk about the child that never was; the space in her soul replaced by a disturbing shrine of James' belongings that she tended to like a morbid curator; children fell like grains of sand, lives pulled apart; Daniel made his his second choice college, states away; Kiley did the same, seeking religion as her crutch, her explanation; little Vickie retreated in fear when she looked at her father, afraid that he would do the same to her as he did her brother; no one spoke to him about the accident. Out of the

four left, it was only Daniel who tried to console his father, but his words did not reach the tower his father had constructed for himself, made of the same looping replay of the car in which everything he had was crushed, of his son that was no longer his son, but just meat covered in dirt.

Perhaps if life had been fair, or catered to the whims of man, things in time would have been repaired. They would have been different from before, but healed nonetheless. But for Thomas, there was no time, for the world went mad, disappeared three years later. The Rapture left only the sinners behind. In that moment, Lilly and little Vickie, as she still preferred to call herself, disappeared.

No one knew how many disappeared. A realistic count was attempted, but by then, society had fallen apart, a million divorces, deaths, denials, obstructing its efforts. Who cared why they had gone or where they had gone, people thought. Soon, there wasn't a collective "we" anymore. Government, religion, PTA meetings, it was all so irrelevant. Spouses woke to empty houses, golden marriages ended not by death, but by one geriatric romantic realizing they had not been good enough to be chosen by God. In some cases, no one else was taken, leaving only questions and the resounding silence only known by those who are the abandoned. In time, they would see an invisible thread that connected them, a thread that was not divine, but man made, and the rule seemed to be: whoever left could only take one other guest, and the reasons didn't matter; we weren't them.

Most politicians and middle management were left untouched, but that still didn't explain why they were left behind, didn't stop the unanswerable questions from coming. Why would God do this or why didn't God stop this? Why was he playing favorites? To not be chosen by God was one thing, something to grapple with and ponder, but to be the bruised and unwanted by the people they loved, the people who chose to left was something no one could ever truly shake. Or maybe even more pressing than questions about God were the questions about the departed. Why did she leave? Why did she take only Vickie? How could she choose between her children? Did she have a choice?

Earth was left a heartbroken planet filled with the sinners. “Repent your sins and you will be saved! This is a test!” say the Apostles, the new universal faith. “Fuck this world! Everything should burn! God is dead!” say the Prodigals.

Day 2553

Forty-eight hours spent in a hypnotic trance of walking and remembering, Thomas looked out upon the first rays of dawn falling upon the ruined city. He felt completely exhausted and foolish as his stomach growled. A dilapidated 7/11 that had most likely been looted years ago was only a short distance away. As he approached it, he could see the front glass was completely shattered and there was nothing left on the shelves. He imagined either organization leaping from behind empty shelves and descending on him, leaving only bleached bones behind.

Thomas wondered why he had come here, to a place that he knew would have nothing left. A dirty can of creamed corn smiled up at him from under a small pile of rubble. The rest he longed for would never seem to come. He hesitated a moment before the animal within that roared self preservation took over.

He didn't even taste the food as he poured the corn out of the easy open, pull tab top of the can. When he was finished, he walked into the back room of the store and collapsed on a pile of empty cardboard boxes, the looter's bed of choice, nowadays.

“Don't move,” a very calm and calculated voice whispered in his ear. Thomas's eyes snapped open as he stared into the barrel of a pump action shotgun. A survivor wrapped up in a torn leather jacket that was two sizes too big looked down at him. “Now, give me what you got.”

“I don’t have anything except the last bits of corn in this can,” he motioned the can towards the man.

“You gotta have something of value or else you’re going to get your blains blasted all of this wall.” The barrel pressed into his face and he could smell the fire and flint. The man studied him quietly, looking him up and down, taking in every detail. “Ah, there! Your ring, give me the ring and I’ll let you go.” Thomas looked at his wedding ring and back up at the man.

“No. You can’t have it. It’s all I have left.”

“Hmm, well if I kill you, I’m still taking the ring, so why don’t we just make this easier on us both.”

Thomas stared hard at him, his mouth a snarl. “I’m not giving you the ring,” he said. The man cocked the gun and clicked the safety off.

“Have it your way,” the stranger said. He pulled the trigger and the hammer clicked softly, but there was no explosion, his head was not puréed in the dusty store. “It’s not loaded, fella,” the stranger laughed. The man flipped the gun in his hand and brought the butt of it down on his head.

Thomas awoke to an empty store and ring-less hand. There was no point trying to find his attacker. The city was his home and he could be hiding in any one of a hundred buildings around the city and there was no point risking his life over something so sentimental. He had more realistic matters to attend to. The white band of flesh around his finger stared up at him and refused to leave his thoughts.

Thomas spent the rest of the day as an animal again, searching shops for food. As he collected the last of his meager supplies, a man’s scream cut through the air, and Thomas watched as the man who had stolen his ring was dragged through the streets on the back of a truck, rusted chains ensnared

around his legs. Thomas said nothing as the man bumped and bled along the road, and for a moment, their eyes locked and he stared back at the stranger in merciless rage. The truck disappeared behind a curve and the man's wails slowly disappeared into the air as quickly as they'd come, evaporating like water in a desert. Thomas turned back towards home. With a small, tattered grocery bag of cans collected, he began to walk.

Day 2554

The dream on the highway haunted him. He looked out the window and watched in wonder at the thousands of flames that now littered the hillsides. He felt like a part of him was now awake. He walked through the house, examining each room, still leaving James' room untouched. He half expected to see a flashing message on the answering machine, but it still lay quietly against the wall near the ruined picture. He sighed loudly as there was really no way to replace it unless he could loot another one from a house. However, a small post it note written in his son Daniel's handwriting lay on the nightstand where the machine stood previously.

Come with me, Dad. It's never too late to start again. A bunch of us are leaving the city and I want you to be with us. There's no future here for any of us. You have to pick a side or leave, Dad.

Daniel

Thomas picked the note up and began to crumple it. He hesitated for a moment and then slowly dropped it back onto the table. Maybe things could change.

Thomas stood at the wishing well and tried to think of what he should wish for. There was more fire on the hillsides surrounding the city. There wasn't much time left. With a flick of his wrist, a coin

fell into the well, and Thomas waited for the familiar splash, but instead, the coin hit something with substance, something that hadn't been there before.

Thomas slowly cranked the now rot worn handle crank. The crank turned, wood moaning loudly as it began to crack. Thomas prayed for it to hold on just a turn or two more and as the bucket floated into view, the wooden crank began to splinter. Thomas reached down into the well as the wood snapped. He felt his fingers brush against twine inside the bucket. Half falling into the well, Thomas struggled pulling the package out, his legs kicking in the air with little finesse.

What was inside the bucket was a small package wrapped in water and mud soaked paper. There were no markings on it at all. He brought it inside and tore through it like an excited child. It was a small, white box taped up hurriedly. He opened it and looked at a small note inside.

If you're reading this, then you must have some shred of the man I fell in love with still inside you. Vickie is with me. I know I shouldn't have left, shouldn't have chosen between my children, but you didn't give me any choice, Tom. But, maybe we can be a family again, a real family. If you're reading this, if you went back to the well, then you remember what it used to be like for us, how good it was. Your name wasn't on their list, but I think if you want to be with me and be a real father again, then you're ready for paradise, damn what they say. If you come, you can never go back. Don't you owe it to your family to try one last time? For James?

If you still love me, then follow these directions exactly.

Thomas looked down at the note in shock. He felt bile creeping up his throat. He looked at his son and wife's note and at the unraveling paths in front of him. Fire jutted into the sky off in the distance, breaking him from his stupor. He couldn't see what exactly was going on and ran back into the house to his room for a better look.

The whole house felt like a stranger's and he watched as night overtook the world once more. The hills were no longer visible through the sea of flame that swirled around the suburbs. The pilgrims were even greater in number and somewhere amongst their ranks, his daughter Kiley was there, he thought.

Something was wrong tonight. He could hear a chanting, haunting melody rise up through the air. The fires moved, a thousand burning insects burrowing into the countryside. Thomas watched in horror as the flaming encampment slowly spread out, setting fire as they went. In minutes, the suburbs surrounding the city became a lake of fire. Thomas ran back to the living room and looked down at the two notes. He hurriedly packed the rest of the canned food he had left, throwing it into a worn book bag. He grabbed one of the notes and ran out of his house. He looked towards the city as a convoy of Prodigals slowly headed at the Apostles. Thomas walked to James' door and cautiously opened it. His son's room had the best view of the neighborhood and he'd be able to see the coming war. That's what he told himself.

The room was in the same position as they had left it in, all those years ago. He didn't feel that broken piece of glass inside him rub against his heart for the first time. The room was almost disappointingly normal and Thomas closed the door with sadness. How many years had he barred himself from his own son's room, as if he was the interloper? All that time to heal, wasted on self flagellation. He didn't even know what he had been running from for all these years. He had been chasing a shadow of what he thought he wanted. What did he want anymore? What did Lilly want so badly that she'd leave?

Lilly

I first tried to grieve for my dead son, cry about the senselessness of it, the sheer random chance that robbed him of his life, but I felt nothing, not even anger anymore. I stole liquor from my husband's "once in a blue moon stash", smoked weed that my daughter hid from me, and even took up collecting fucking animal knick knacks like my youngest. None of it worked. My grief was in a place nothing could reach. Until I found God. Until I found them.

But it was more like they found me. Things were supposed to be different. James was supposed to save us all, they told me. He was going to usher in a new age of light, a golden age for humanity. He was one of the ones chosen, ordained by God to lead us, and with his death, came chaos. But I had held it together, wasn't responsible for his death, and had proved I was a superior human being. And when they offered me a place in paradise, what would you have me do? A spot in salvation for me and one guest. How could I choose? In the end, it was easy. Kiley was a drugged out whore and Daniel was a fool who couldn't see past his own fantasies, forever pining for a father that had never existed. Little Victoria still had a chance to grow up pure, clean. I wouldn't let them ruin her like they did me, like they did James. I had tried to live as an angel and failed. If I was to be called a monster, then so be it. Maybe this was the age of monsters.

I was allowed to pack one bag for me and one for my guest. I was to tell no one. When the night finally arrived, I heard my husband crying in the bathroom, his sobs not masked by the overhead fan and I felt something stir deep within me, something I hadn't felt in a long time. My mind brought back images of when we were whole, when things seemed okay. But, as the last Army and National Guard convoys were mobbed and overturned by soccer moms and weekend warriors our city became truly

lawless. It had shaken off the shackles of sanity and would descend into sin and depression. I knew it was time.

The Prodigals and Apostles clashed in tiny dots a few miles away. Familiar explosions rocked the house, blowing out windows and shingles off houses nearby. It wasn't safe to stay here any longer, but he was so tired of searching that far off for peace. He didn't think he could really move on. If he could, why was he still here? There had to be a reason for his suffering. There had to be purpose, order. He couldn't run away anymore. Daniel would only lead to more running and he was so tired of running, of trying to fight fate. With grim resignation, Thomas walked out into the night, his shape dissolving into shadow and flame. He knew Daniel would understand, after all, he was used to his father letting him down.

Daniel

No one knows what's lies beyond the countryside, but we have to take a chance. The war drums are pounding so loud I can hear them in the night. When I sleep, I can hear a howl in the wind. Sometimes I think I won't wake up in the morning. I don't know if that's a good thing.

There's nothing left for any of us. I've tried to convince Kiley, but she's been brainwashed by the Apostles and I'm afraid that war will break out any day. The countryside is filling up with their flames and in a matter of nights, everything will burn. I can only hope that our people get out before the Prodigals show up, before the final war begins.

I would pray to God I can convince him to come with us, but I've long stopped believing. Whatever really happened, it doesn't matter anymore. If we want to survive, then we fight, and keep fighting. To rely on God, is to abandon all hope.

Day 2555, The Last Day

A day. That was the time and distance that had separated his wife and child from him. On the outskirts of the city, in a small, forgotten forest, Thomas arrived. Brown grass stood tall and proud while it clawed at his ankles. He passed silently into muddy soil, the grass slowly receding into mossy undergrowth. He walked for another few hours into the jade grove before he saw it, rising ominously from the ground.

A small building, in the shape of a water tower, loomed over him, a metallic monolith in a wooded Eden. It was covered with moss and vines and it's mysterious exterior unnerved him. Thomas approached it slowly, his head reverently bowed. The shed door creaked as he stepped into the

darkness. Forgotten garden tools leaned against the walls of the shed. He looked down at the note again and slowly moved the supposed paint can out of the way. To his surprise, a futuristic panel covered in numeric buttons emerged from the dust-covered wall. He blew the dust away, gagging as its rich, ancient flavor invaded his mouth. As he stared at the touch pad, he thought about the city and what had become of it, but his wife's handwriting seemed to shout for him to not linger too long on any thought and just proceed.

He calmly typed the access code into the electronic pad and listened to the high-pitched beep as the code was accepted. The shed door closed and the floor slowly descended into the ground. Gears screeched as the vines covering the building snapped, whipping away as the chamber lowered. The room was pitch black and time slowly disappeared into the void. Thomas leaned against a wall and waited. His last can of food, a now empty can of tuna fish, lay warm and discarded across the floor. The descent seemed to never stop, going on for hours, dragging deeper into the Earth. He had begun panicking hours ago. Was it all just a trap, something his wife left behind to punish him? He felt guilty as he thought about the city left behind. He wondered how his children were and felt a shame greater than any he had felt when he thought about Daniel. The thought of their death didn't scare him, it was the thought that they were still alive, abandoned once more that frightened him. But, the need for answers and absolution drove him into the womb of the world.

Thomas could hear high-pitched singing, reminiscent of the caravan that he had passed before. It sounded different, more wild and angry. The song suddenly rose in volume and Thomas imagined a choir of angels waiting for him. The singing drilled inside his mind, as the lift grinded to a stop and the door opened. Pale, fluorescent light poured in, blinding him. He stumbled weakly into the corridor, his pupils expanding as they took in light. The elevator doors closed and a pleasant, prerecorded, female voice indicated that his trip was unauthorized and that the elevator would go into lockdown mode,

remaining underground until a proper administrator was called. Thomas stepped out of the box, but couldn't help but feel trapped. The hallway was featureless, covered in plain concrete. Two large doors lay at the end. The prerecorded voice cried out that there was a snake in the garden and that proper steps would be taken. Then, the elevator went dark, and the voice made no more attempts to talk.

He slowly walked down the hallway, his fingertips scraping against the rock walls. It was time to forget the past, to start anew. He stood before the doors, one with an apple carved into it, the other, a ladder. Pushed together, the two doors formed a third shape, a tower reaching towards a blazing sun. The words, "New Eden" were carved, one word on each. His fingers danced across the handles and he hesitated. The song was now rising in volume, deafening his thoughts.

As it reached its crescendo, he pulled open the doors. Brilliant light shrank his pupils to the size of a pinhead. A massive city stretched for miles in each direction. It looked like nothing he had ever seen, more grand than the sky scrapers of the Big Apple, more high tech than Tokyo. It looked like a new wonder of the world, each building more astounding than the last. It was then that Thomas noticed that the city was burning. Long tendrils of flame slithered throughout the city, and he cried as the first building began to fall. He tried to comprehend what had happened, was happening, but in the end it didn't matter. There was nothing left for him here.

Thomas fell to his knees as he watched paradise slowly burn like dying birthday candles that were one sickly wheeze from going out forever. He had nowhere else to turn to, no way out from his life and his decisions. A crazed laugh bubbled out from his throat as he walked towards the scorched Shangri-la, his arms open, outstretched towards the rock sky. There was no place for him in paradise.

With the elevator shut down, and the city burning, escape was impossible and he was tired of running, and even if he tried, where would he go? The roof began to crumble and Thomas watched as miniature asteroids flattened the city, sending a wave of dirt and dust and fire towards him. As the wax

kingdom fell, Thomas watched as his own foolish wish was granted, and the wave of annihilation finally arrived, consuming him in a million, burning litanies.

Thomas thought of his first night in the empty house, after Lilly had taken Vickie, after Kiley and Daniel had made their own choices to leave. In the quiet darkness, he thought of the decisions he'd made and he shouted to God why he would do this to him. Why? Why? Why? But, there was no response. A dog barked somewhere in the neighborhood. Thomas stared up at the ceiling and began to cry. The weight of everything finally hit him and then he begged to someone, to anyone to help him, to undo it all. He wished he could take it all back. But he didn't realize there was no going back for him.

There was no going back for anyone.

ACADEMIC VITA of Devin M. Faulhaber

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Education:

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, Penn State University, Spring 2010
Minor in English
Honors in Creative Writing
Thesis Title: Death of the English Language
Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Thomas Noyes

Related Experience:

Independent study with Mark Steensland (collaborated on a screenplay)
Supervisor: Mark Steensland
Summer Spring 2009

Awards:

Schreyers Scholar
Dean's List
Nominated Student Worker of 2009

Presentations/Activities:

President of the Coalition of Writers (an independent student workshop) 2006 - 2008
On Budgetary Board of Student Government Association
Study Abroad:
Northampton, England - Summer 2006
Osaka, Japan – Fall 2009
Student reader on *Lake Effect*, Penn State Behrend's Literary Journal – Fall 2007 – Spring 2008
Penn State Student Blogger Fall 2009 – Spring 2010