

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

PENNSYLVANIA WASTELAND AND OTHER STORIES

KIRAN PANDEY
SPRING 2021

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Mathematics and English
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Kevin Bell
Associate Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Carla J. Mulford
Professor of English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii

INTRODUCTION 1

Pennsylvania Wasteland 4

Her Monster 10

Rainy Days in State College 35

Space Play 62

Night Falls..... 74

Into the Cave..... 81

BIBLIOGRAPHY 91

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to begin by thanking Professor Kevin Bell for meeting with me at Webster's Bookstore Café in January 2020 and agreeing to accompany me on whatever path my thesis followed, whether analytical or creative. My finest work in the past four years, both within this collection and without, would not have been possible without his endless patience and unfailing wisdom. Much thanks are also due to Dr. Carla J. Mulford, for her sage guidance in the completion of this thesis.

Several of these stories were first developed in various Penn State classes, including those taught by Drs. William Cobb, Susan Russell, and Scott Smith. I owe them all sincere thanks for broadening the scope of my creative possibilities.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who supported me in the writing of this thesis: my best friend Zena; my sous-chef Gerry; my roommates Yoni, Symney, and Ryan; and my family: my parents, who have supported me through my every endeavor, and my four siblings: Naya, Hannah, Deven, and Sofia. Without them, there would be nothing more before you than a ream of blank paper.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1949, Ray Bradbury moved to New York to sell fiction. He had written well over a hundred short stories, and in the city met with publishers by day and rented a fifty-cent YMCA room at nights. But no publishers would bite. They all wanted a novel, and he had only stories.

It was Bradbury's last night in New York when literary agent Don Congdon arranged a dinner between him and Walter Bradbury, senior editor of Doubleday (and no relation). As he recalled it, "Sitting at dinner that night [Walter] said to me, 'Ray, what about all those Martian stories you've been writing in the pulp magazines during the last ten years? Don't you think they would make a novel if you wove them together in some sort of tapestry and called it *The Martian Chronicles*?'"

The question astounded him. When he returned to his tales of Mars, Bradbury found upon piecing them together that he had documented a fantastical tragic history of Earth's encounters with the red planet. On their own, the stories thrilled with allegoric ruminations on discovery, colonization, and time, but together, they achieved a profound meditation spanning centuries of Martian life. As Jorge Luis Borges mused: "What has this man from Illinois created—I ask myself, closing the pages of his book—that his episodes of the conquest of another planet fill me with such terror and solitude?"

On its own, the short story form wields the power to produce an indelible effect with stunning efficiency upon a reader. But when properly situated as part of a larger whole, stories have the potential to spark with previously unseen fires, this friction of fictions providing the architecture for an entirely new world.

It was with books like *The Martian Chronicles* (and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and Jorge Luis Borges's *Ficciones*) that I developed a fascination with the idea of the short story collection, or story cycle, as a form unto itself. How did these writers produce such fiction that both stood alone as exemplary short narratives and also worked within and contributed to a larger network of meaning? It was almost as if these stories were discoursing, a group of individuals who each had something to say and created a dialogue by speaking together. Picture a coterie of old storytellers, gathered about a campfire. Each of them possesses stories of their own, but hearing them all in one night, in some chosen order, draws from them new meaning, a continual layering of characters and themes, each built implicitly on the last.

This is how Bradbury wrote a history of Mars, or how O'Brien interrogated truth in Vietnam, or how Borges designed his labyrinthine construction of mirrors and endless libraries. Each of these authors' themes can be found in their component works, but their full weight is only felt in the whole.

Even in short story collections that lack this intentional design, the thematic interplay between stories can still produce a symbiotic reading experience that would not be present in any one individual unit. We see this particularly in debut story collections, which can often read as the initial unraveling of a young writer's pent-up fascinations. Newer to the form, building up their bag of tricks for the first time, they ruminate on their compulsions, whether its George Saunders's satirical deconstructions of late-stage capitalism (*CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*), J.D. Salinger's minimalist search for connection (*Nine Stories*), Neil Gaiman's experimentation with fairy tales (*Smoke and Mirrors*), Kelly Link's uncanny slipstream wonders (*Stranger Things Happen*), or Stephen King's unabashed pop horror (*Night Shift*). If you have only ever

encountered individual stories from these writers, I would strongly encourage you to seek out their collections and the complexities of the architecture within.

With this collection, I aimed to construct a similar fictional mechanism: individual stories that, when placed adjacent, kindle and reflect with unseen forms of light. In my writing, I did not set out with any mission statement to which to adhere, but instead wrote as freely as I could, hoping that the stories would lead me to their natural points of connection. After all, Bradbury had no dictum to write on Mars, only found himself tapping that alien well through the sheer continual force of his imagination. I humbly offer my writings in that same tradition.

What follows are stories about the end of the world.

In writing these stories, nothing weighed heavier on me than the present moment, an almost eerie culmination of the recent dystopian trend in popular art. Ours has been a culture saturated with apocalypse, and as the fictional merges with the real, I wanted to weave a tapestry to evoke what we live through now; to explore the once-dormant questions, awakened from a liminal space, that now seem to assail us day after day.

When we reach the end of the world, what is it that we see? What do we feel? Can memory persist as apocalypse ascends? What must we forget, and what yet remains?

Pennsylvania Wasteland

It was a Friday morning and I drove my silver 2005 Pontiac Vibe down the backroads of eastern Pennsylvania. The car bumped and roiled like the great old engine it was; oil and paint discolored and dry. Joints popped and tendons frayed long past their expiration date. Each time the pavement banked I pressed slowly onto the brake, and each time I did the machine cried out in a fantastic spurt of stuttering and squealing like a chorus of crickets joined in commiseration.

The car had seen better days. These roads had too. They cracked and cut through old woods, most of the light still blocked by the shadows of thin trees. Freckled patches of sun broke through the slats between branches, dotting the ground and the car and my face through the windshield. Few cars passed me by. Even fewer people. Up ahead a sharp bend promised to twist the road away. There'd be another bend after that one too.

That's all most of Pennsylvania really is, for what it's worth. Not Philly or Pittsburgh or even State College, but those myriad spaces in between. Untouched swaths of forest intersecting with small town suburbia, threading together towns that had been there since long before revolution and would be there long after and still longer now. Untouched and immemorial like the forest from which they were borne. They are places where everybody knows everyone and no one outside needs to know anyone at all. Together the locals live and eat and work and die, conversing in the streets as if in a secret language all their own, a language which no other city could ever know. It would almost be special except that there are hundreds of these towns, thousands maybe, all clicking along on parallel tracks like clockwork men whose keys turn and gears wind to the slow tempo of eternity.

On my right was a post office flanked on all sides by forestry, and I knew that the sans serif letters that marked it as such had not been replaced since the fifties. To the left was one of a handful of driveways, marred with potholes, snaking along the grass from a house further back and precariously to the road. But no gas stations yet. No ATMs.

I didn't have any cash on me, and that wasn't good. Usually if you're headed to a drug deal at ten o'clock in the morning you want to have some cash on you. Preferably in the amount of the price of the drug. When I woke up I figured I would pick it up along the way, but that's trickier than you'd think when Google Maps directs you past more cornfields than buildings.

My phone buzzed, pinned between the steering wheel and my right hand. I swiped open the Snapchat message from one Bobby Minister at the top of the screen.

—How far r u

I typed a response, my eyes flitting between road and phone.

—10 min

Google Maps projected my arrival time as only five minutes away, but that didn't factor in my necessary detour. I knew against hoping that no gas station would pop up on this windy street, but I hoped nonetheless that one would materialize from the thin air as an oasis to a desert traveler.

Another mile and I turned onto a main road, surrounded by fewer trees and straighter than the last. Red-brick shops with utilitarian signs advertised "LAUNDROMATS" and "CAFES," interspersed with slightly bigger houses and the occasional chain restaurant. Before I hadn't been able to accelerate much faster than thirty-five miles per hour, but my Pontiac now rattled down the street at a steady rate of sixty. I had to brake ever so slightly to accommodate a bend, and as I

did, a sign emerged at the crest of the turn, marking the forthcoming building as “Penn Community Bank,” and beneath that: “ATM.”

My foot slammed to the brake. It erupted with the quick force a high-pitched groan, shrill and painful, as if within the sudden excruciation of its gasp it tolled out its own death knell. The car swerved and the world spun and I careened at a full forty miles an hour into the lot of the bank. In my wake drifted the acrid aroma of burnt rubber, heavy on the air, wheels crunching against rocky gravel. I parked slowly and turned off the car.

That no one had witnessed my chaotic turn into the lot was even more miraculous than the sudden appearance of the bank. I stepped out of the car and walked over to the silver ATM outside the building and slid my debit card into the machine. You could tell this bank was newer than most buildings out here, a large and concrete monument to modern living, but still spiderwebbed cracks slit the pavement of the lot, and yellow weeds sprouted like knives in the sidewalk. The ATM didn’t accept my card on the first try, and I had to slide it through several times before it took, like the tapping of a cactus in the midst of dry desert. I clicked through each prompt on the ATM until it allowed me to select my withdrawal amount of \$40, and then I collected my card and my cash and got back in my car. Turning the key in the ignition—the motor sputtering, rudely awakened—I shifted out of park and drove out of the lot and twisted back down the same windy street.

He had told me to meet him across the street from one of this town’s small “CAFES.” I rolled my car into a slanted parking spot on the side of the road and glanced around. Aside from an old woman with salt-and-pepper hair walking alone and around the street corner opposite, there was no sign of anyone else.

I checked the time. If anyone was going to be late to this drug deal, it wouldn't be me. I opened Snapchat and sent Bobby Minister a message.

—Here

A minute later my phone buzzed in response.

—I see you. See me?

I glanced around once again, turning to the passenger seat window, and saw him approach like a figure in miniature. He was a skinny kid in black athletic shorts and a matted red hoodie, its fuzzy logo faded out beyond all identification. At the navel his torso creased and bobbed with that distinct stoner slouch. He had graduated high school, or at least had gotten his GED, but seeing his image like that, the swaggering personification of psychedelic youth, you could not imagine him ever becoming anything else.

He opened the passenger door and slid in next to me. Up close you could see the long black curls that framed his smooth face, the thin stubble that stippled the tip of his chin as a moniker of perpetual adolescence.

“Bobby,” he said, and dapped me up.

“Dan,” I replied. “Good to meet you.”

“Yeah, man,” Bobby said, “here you are.” He reached around into his shorts pocket and slid out a crumpled Ziploc baggie containing the twisted shreds of mulch-colored mushrooms. So innocuous did they appear, a few stems and one cap—like anything else that you might happen upon in far-off woods—that I briefly wondered how its first consumers must have processed their effects, sitting on the ground in some arcane land as the high of the shrooms barreled its way through them. I palmed the baggie and shoved it in the front pouch of my backpack in the back seat. Then I snagged the two crisp twenties from my cupholder and handed them to Bobby.

“Here,” I said. “Really appreciate it, I really do appreciate it on such short notice like that.”

He folded the twenties and shoved them back in the same shorts pocket that had produced the shrooms. “Nah, I got you, hit me up anytime you ever need. I’m around.”

“Thank you, yeah, thanks.”

“No, thank *you* for supporting your local businesses.”

We both chuckled at that one for a minute.

“Crazy times out here, right?” Bobby went on. “I swear, it’s like you can’t even get outside anymore without checking your ass. I’m only selling to connects right now as is.”

“Yeah, I feel you, man, I feel you.”

“So—how do you know Stevie?”

The question stopped me suddenly short. That same shriek of brakes rattled between my ears—those thoughts tumbled forward. It was the rarest of questions: that which asks much more than it knows, that in its very asking and wonderment unfurls a gray and tattered map for a destination previously unheard of, unspoken. The words themselves push against the presence of an absence, amorphous and unnamed, suspended for all to see like some gaping hole inverted, a great chasm of sky.

What’s the meaning of life are we alone in the universe so how do you know her

Bobby Minister saw the answers flit across my eyes and suddenly he realized he didn’t know exactly what he’d asked. In that long second between question and response he looked at me with blank dark eyes. This kid was in the business of dealing drugs and talking small. He didn’t want to hear how long we had been together, what dreams had danced between us, how

late in the night she would roam my thoughts like a vagabond and remind me of all that had changed and come to pass.

“We did—we went to high school together,” I said. “Had a few classes together senior year, actually.”

He nodded up and down like a bobble head doll. “Nice, nice,” he said. “Like I said, anytime you need.”

The sale was made, money had swapped hands. Bobby dapped me up again and stepped back on out, the mechanical end to our predetermined transaction.

“Good to meet you,” I said, leaning forward in my seat. “Catch you later.”

“Yeah, man,” he said. He swung the car door shut and sauntered off back the way he came. Soon he was that figure in miniature again, and soon after that you couldn’t even see him at all.

For a minute I sat there in that inescapable silence, and I didn’t know why. A low and static thrum rang between my ears—perhaps it was just another car somewhere swerving down a parallel road, driven by a vagrant just like mine. Then I started up my car again, pulled it out of the spot, and revved it forward. Behind me the early morning soot of dust and gravel shot up in plumes, rising to settle in that soft and daggered light.

Her Monster

Her monster was a lugubrious thing, and it came in many shapes. It could be tall or short, thick or thin, as terrible as a thunderclap or lithe as a dagger. Sometimes it would even appear in the shape of a heart.

Pearl had read that word in a book, *lugubrious*. She had been struck by its syllables, tasted the ooze of their drawl falling over her tongue. The word described a feeling that she had not known how to express.

Pearl did not always have a monster. Not before the new house. It was the first thing she felt on the day of the move, that juddering sensation accompanying her first step through the door. She had not yet seen the monster in any of its shapes, but already her sense of it constituted a knowing beyond sight. It pervaded the not-home. That's what it was, of course: a not-home. Pearl knew her home, knew the fine wooden staircase that curved around invitingly to the entryway, knew the carefully maintained salt-and-pepper tiling that adorned the kitchen walls.

This was not her home.

During the days the monster was only a lurk in the corners. Shadows would arc, followed by the chimes of invisible fairies, and you knew it had to be there only seconds before. Sunlight repelled it, or so Pearl presumed, for she never once glimpsed it while that fiery orb still shone. Sometimes she would even stop thinking about it, so constant was its presence, as one tends not to notice the oxygen that so entombs them.

The nights, however, were a different story.

From the beginning of the move, ever since the first sunset, Pearl's evenings had unraveled in three precise parts, stretching precariously to the unknown from the known. Words,

then voices, then tremors. Each part in this nightly triptych was executed with a clockwork precision as true and immutable as the world itself. Pearl did not realize it, at least not consciously, but she always uttered a number to mark the start of a new part.

One, two, three.

Words, voices, tremors.

The first part was made up of words. As soon as her mother closed the door, having wished her a night free from bedbugs and hobgoblins, Pearl reached for the book on her bedside table and read under the glow of a purple butterfly nightlight. She savored each word like a small piece of candy. The gray pages had been crinkled by hands before hers, dog-eared with creases that echoed the wanderings of travelers past. She could not imagine reading a book with perfectly straight pages.

Pearl always had two books checked out from her school library, so that if she finished the first one, she could be certain of another. Her favorite sort of stories were the ones about little girls in impossible situations, navigating their surreal worlds with the dual strength gifted by hope and fear. In these tales, Pearl knew that no matter the sacrifice, no matter the cost, the heroine would wind up all right in the end.

Eventually she put down the book and turned off her light, satisfied with the number of pages she had read. This was not because she did not desire to read further; on the contrary, she would have read to completion if she had so chosen. But Pearl was afraid that if she read too fast, too many pages in one sitting, then she would run out of books. She would read all the books on the shelves in all the libraries in all the world, and she would no longer have a haven for escape in this first part of the night.

The voices followed the words, and they found her in the dark. Pearl did not mind the dark. It allowed her to retreat into herself, a spy creeping at the corners of the known. Instead of fearing some creature lingering beyond sight, she felt kindred to it.

Her mother's voice reached her first, warm, husky, followed by her father's, punctuated, shrill. She knew that the sounds must be traveling through the ventilation, a series of pipes connecting their room to hers, but it seemed more in the darkness as if the house were a sponge, absorbing words like water and sending them trickling through to the other side. The walls exuded the voices in cold, fragmented drips, some of which she could piece together and most of which she did not want to.

—i'm worried about her, yes worried, i just don't know there's
no other choice, how it's been with the move and she
wouldn't be an issue if you hadn't been
knowing such a thing as that? how if you had not told her
the fuck are you accusing me of you you you—

Then, like the words, the voices quieted. Last came the tremors. The words came from the books and the voices from her parents, but Pearl could never know for certain the origin of the tremors. She could only whisper the number three and hear the creak from the closet and know as always that she was not alone. The tremors began in the tips of her fingers, rippling through her small limbs until they resounded in her stomach and her feet. With a trembling hand she rummaged beneath her pillow and procured the black flashlight, held her thumb steady long enough to flick on the switch. A thin beam of yellow light diffused across the impossible distance between her and the closet door. Pearl always kept it open, but now illuminated, now seen, did it not seem as if that slim sliver of darkness had grown ever wider?

I am here too you really mustn't worry you are not alone

She tried to imagine how it looked from the other side of the door, a tall rectangle of dim light that glimpsed into a bedroom with a little girl shaking in her sheets. How she must have looked, pushing the light forth from her hand, to that creature loping in the dark.

As she shook, Pearl only ever watched and held tight, as if it were the only thing she could do, her arm suspended for what felt like years but could not have been more than hours. In these moments she thought she might perceive a shape in the dark—perhaps only the flit of a fairy's thin wing—a hazy outline magnified by the light, like the blur of a halo surrounding a star. She did not know why, but her tremulous body was seized with singular purpose: she must not drop the light. She must not let go.

But Pearl did know one thing. She was not afraid of the dark. The light was not for her.

The third part had no end. Sometimes Pearl thought that she could see the door open further followed by the patter of footsteps, or the gleam of a hungry eye, but it must have been a product of her restless imagination. After all, nothing ever happened. Nothing that she could remember. Pearl could never remember falling asleep, not once, but she always must have, for the sun always rose to wake her from the window, the ethereal white light sifting through the slats.

When mornings came for Pearl, she would step gingerly down the stairs to the kitchen table, where a breakfast of buttered toast and cold cereal awaited her. Her mother would always ask her how she slept, and she would peer up at her with eyes dark-rimmed like jellies and tell her she slept fine, just fine.

Pearl's mother would not hear of the monster, and that is how Pearl knew that the monster was her own. She had tried to explain to her mother about the shapes in the closet, of the trembling in the night, but every time she did, her mother would stiffen, her upper lip turn ghoulish white, and in the steel flintiness of that sudden gaze Pearl knew the conversation was over before it had begun.

Sometimes she would mention the monster to her father, but she could discern his disinterest before he replied. Where her mother's eyes would flicker with a strange flash of lightning, his showed no spark at all. "A monster, eh?" he would croon from behind his laptop, between irregular slurps of his morning tea. "How interesting."

Which meant that either her parents could not see the monster, or they did not want to.

But to Pearl, there was never any question of whether her monster was real. How else to explain the fairies? She would hear the distinct high-pitched chatter of those lithe winged fey, but when she turned to look they were gone, leaving behind only the slow rocking of a chair or a twinkling like porch chimes. They could only have been drawn there by fantastical power, a gravitational pull which her monster commanded. Pearl did not know what they ate, so she would never finish the milk in her cereal, leaving the remains in the sink before school. Sometimes her father would fill the bowl with water and ruin her offering; they could not drink the milk if it held any water.

Any further doubts she might have had about the reality of her situation were daily quelled by her trips to school. The new school was smaller than the last, with only a single story and two classrooms for each grade, and Pearl did not like it. She did not like the dilapidated paint peeling from the walls, the hooks in the closet from which the bookbags hung gleaming orange

with corrosion and rust. Yet the monster never followed her to school, and these brief respites of its absence only confirmed to Pearl the palpability of its presence.

Her monster was real. It belonged to her. Pearl could only wonder from what unmapped country it had emigrated to her house.

On her first day at the new school, Ms. Randolph had paraded Pearl in front of the class as if she were an object for show-and-tell. She looked at the seated students, and they all gaped blankly back.

“Everyone, this is Pearl,” said Ms. Randolph. “Pearl will be joining our class for the rest of the year. Please everyone give her your warmest welcome.”

“Hi, Pearl,” droned the class.

“Hello,” she said back.

“Pearl, why don’t you take the empty seat next to Nathaniel there?”

In the back left corner was an empty desk, next to which sat a chubby boy with a mess of mud-colored hair and a thumb up his nose. When he realized the teacher had said his name, he quickly began to scratch his upper lip, as if he had only had a very persistent itch.

“Nathaniel,” continued Ms. Randolph, “would you be a dear and help Pearl out if she has any questions?”

He nodded sheepishly. Some of the other boys sniggered and exchanged looks, but Ms. Randolph didn’t seem to notice. Pearl took the seat next to Nathaniel, who had suddenly become very focused on his fraction worksheet.

During that first day, the other girls did not warm to Pearl. Her desk in the back of the room rendered her almost invisible, and at lunch, she sat at the corner of the table, the last to find

a seat, peering upstream into a conversation about cute boys and new phones and offering little more than the intermittent nod. Almost invisible, she thought again, invisible as the monster. She wondered briefly if this was how her monster felt, if its invisibility was not of its own design, if perhaps it was screaming in the corners, desperate to be seen.

Recess was no different. When the children were let loose upon the old schoolyard bespattered with bird droppings, they congregated in their usual circles, a few girls jumping rope and others with the boys playing kickball with two misshapen orange lumps. But others drifted alone, or to and from the several games, and Pearl noticed that Nathaniel was one of them.

He sat on the swing set on the far side of the playground, alternately eyeing the kickball game and dragging a crooked twig through the mulch below him. Pearl walked past the jump rope girls, who were chanting about Cinderella dressed in yellow, over to Nathaniel. He glanced up at the patter of her feet on the blacktop, and he looked as if he wished to retreat like a turtle into the folds of his generous sweater.

“Hey,” said Pearl. “Your name is Nathaniel, right?”

“Uh, er, yeah,” said Nathaniel, as if he had to think it over. “Most people call me Nate.”

“Oh,” said Pearl. “Do you prefer one or the other?”

“No, I guess not really. Whichever is fine.”

Pearl thought it over, decided that she preferred Nathaniel better—on account of the way it rolled off her tongue—said so, and then leaned into the swing next to his. Her sneakers dragged backward to a stop through the mulch. Nathaniel said nothing, only continued to swivel his gaze between his stick and the game.

“Why don’t you go play with them?” asked Pearl. “Don’t you want to?”

“Oh, uh, no. Not really. Besides, I’m not really too good.” He paused. “You know, you don’t have to come over here just cause of what Ms. Randolph said.”

“I’m not,” said Pearl. “I like the swings.”

“Okay,” said Nathaniel. “I like the swings too.”

Pearl kicked off and began to swing slowly back and forth; Nathaniel kept still, doodling with his stick. She tried to make out what he was drawing, but either she could not see it or it was just a casual jumble of shapes. The play of the other children reached them in far-off echoes, and a cool autumnal breeze scattered skeletal leaves across the blacktop.

A thought occurred to Pearl. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” said Nathaniel, keeping his gaze on the mulch. “That’s my job, I guess.”

“It’s not about school,” said Pearl. “It’s, well—is there something wrong? With the town?”

Nathaniel stopped moving his stick. “Wrong?”

“I guess I mean like—haunted.”

“Haunted,” echoed Nathaniel. He looked at her, as she swung like a parabola. “Why? Seen any ghosts?”

“No, I just...I don’t know. Maybe.”

For the first time she could see, Nathaniel smiled. “I thought you were going to ask me about the language arts homework or something.”

Pearl said nothing, only ground her feet to a halt in the mulch and looked at him expectantly.

“I don’t know,” Nathaniel finally said. “Maybe? I guess I also grew up here, and I’ve never been to another country or anything like that, so I don’t know.” As he spoke, he kept

playing with his bangs and pulling them back from his eyes. He looked at Pearl askance. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“I think so. I also don’t know if that’s what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like just compared to where I used to live. Some things feel a little, like, spookier around here. I don’t know.”

“Yeah. I don’t know either.” He hesitated. “There is this one thing, I guess. I feel like every town has a story like it, but I don’t really know.”

“A haunted house?”

“Sort of,” said Nathaniel. “It’s this old steel mill type thing. People call it a dredge. It’s out in the middle of the woods, basically where everything’s gotten all overgrown. My pap used to work there years ago before it got shut down.”

“Your pap?”

“My granddad.”

“What’s it do?”

“I don’t really know. I think it’s supposed to bring up the steel or whatever from in the ground, sort of filter it out from everything else.”

“Like in Snow White?”

“Maybe? I haven’t seen that movie since I was real little.”

“No, yeah, me neither, I just mean like how the dwarves mine.”

Nathaniel nodded, threaded his long hair through his fingers, and Pearl could picture him as one of the seven dwarves, a baggy purple hat folded over his brow, hauling an oversized pickaxe over one shoulder and descending into a dark deposit ashine with diamonds.

“So,” said Pearl, “what’s supposed to be haunted about it?”

“There was this accident, way long ago,” said Nathaniel, “way back in the eighties or something like that. They say there was this woman there and she fell in between the gears and they kept on turning and her bones were all ground up.”

“Oh, man.”

“Yeah. It’s pretty dark and stuff.”

“Where is it?”

“The dredge?” Nathaniel hesitated. “It’s, well—you live on Link Lane, right?”

“Yeah, that’s—yeah,” said Pearl. “How did you know that?”

Nathaniel flushed red. “I, um, I live right there too. Across the street. I just saw you at the bus stop right there on the corner and thought—”

“I didn’t see you at the bus stop.”

“No, driving by,” said Nathaniel. “My mom, um, she drives me to school. Er, anyway, you know how it becomes woods at the end of the road there?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s back there. Maybe a mile or two walk.”

“Have you ever seen it?”

“Once, but way far off,” admitted Nathaniel. “I didn’t really want to get any closer than that. My brother—I have an older brother—he said that once he stayed out there with a few friends overnight.”

“Oh, man.”

“Yeah,” said Nathaniel, “but honestly I don’t know if I believe him or not. He’s probably too scared I bet to actually do something like that.”

“Right,” said Pearl, only half-listening. She thought about the dredge, of the woman inside.

Quiet resettled. Pearl pushed her feet against the ground and continued her loping swing, gripping the thin rusted metal chains. After a moment Nathaniel did too.

Pushing through the air, in criss-cross motions with Nathaniel, Pearl spoke again: “Also, um—”

“Yeah?”

“What is the language arts homework?”

When recess was over, Ms. Randolph shouted from the double doors at the back of the school for all the children to gather up any equipment and line up along the wall. Everyone skipped and jostled over to the door, and Pearl and Nathaniel walked over from the swings to the end of the line, the last of the children to come in from the cold.

Later in the day, after she had returned from school and already spent some time lazily shuffling through her homework, Pearl stood at her bedroom window, hands pressed clammy against the dirty glass. The window overlooked a gray backyard, strewn with weeds, and past that, the first spurts of forest, thickening the further back you looked. Just beyond the backyard fence, trees loomed like thin men frozen in silent procession.

The days trickled past; the monster loomed. It was still a not-home, but Pearl and her parents had settled into a routine like wind-up dolls in a clockwork house. She went to school, they to work, and in the evenings they would reconvene and move about in silent orbit. They talked over dinner, spoke of that day’s proceedings and the next, but nothing was ever really said at all.

When Pearl's father came home, he would open his laptop at the kitchen table, his eyes all but invisible behind horn-rimmed glasses and the white glare of screen. She knew that her father lost his old job, that they had moved in part for him to pursue a new career. But this new job didn't pay nearly as much as the last—one of the constant reminders of the night's ceaseless voices—so he scrolled in spare hours listlessly through job boards. There would be sighs, gulps of tea, clacks of knuckles against the keypad—never anything more.

Her mother in the meantime had found work as an administrative assistant, connected to a nearby social work office through an old schoolmate. At home she seemed always busy, whether unpacking yet another brown cardboard box, fixing a meal in the kitchen, or talking on the cell phone habitually pressed between her shoulder and her ear. Pearl could never be certain of who was speaking on the line—often her sister, other times a friend from work—could only tell from her father's furtive glances above the edge of his computer that he did not like it.

Which left Pearl. Pearl who idled her days trapped in the house, imprisoned not by any material oppression but by the incessant lingering certainty that she never walked alone. Every time she approached a window or a door, she could feel it as a finger hooked under the nape of her blouse. At the crevices of sight, fairies lurked in slats of sunlight, lips full and wet and dripping with milk. If they meant to communicate, whether guiding her toward the monster or leading her astray, it was in a language Pearl did not speak. She could only know that their chatter always rang about the walls, like some low frequency unheard by virgin ears.

She would hear that chatter and sit there, watching patterns in the wallpaper, gray circular tufts doubling outward and shifting. In the shapes the fairy chatter sparkled and danced, circled a secret fire that ordinary travelers could not see. Surreptitious flames cooked an unknown roast, lamb, perhaps, or goat, about which pink smoke bubbled and frothed and the fairies sang and

whooped. She would marvel at all these fairies: where did they go when everyone was looking? In the wall the fire held shudders, gesticulations, a strange outline that seemed almost like one of the fairies, but not quite. It was struck through with a spit and rotated slow while its blood dripped from inside and popped orange in the fire. The singing would swell, more a chant than a song, and yes oh yes now Pearl would come to the same realization, that it was a fairy just like them, except this was a fairy that did not have a head—

“Pearl?”

—and the fairies weren’t singing no not singing but screaming and screaming and screaming and—

“Pearl? Did you hear what I asked you?”

She snapped back into reality, as if out of a dream. Pearl stood in the center of the living room. She blinked. Her mother was standing there, had been standing there; she did not know for how long.

“What?”

“I asked how was your day at school today,” said her mother. The lights were off, curtains drawn, and the dimness of that room accentuated the dimples of her sharp face. As she spoke to her daughter, it seemed to Pearl that she stood a few steps back, as if she were afraid to startle her away.

Had it been a school day? Was the sun now rising, or only just beginning to set? A profound dizziness swept over Pearl, something more than vertigo and a little less than nausea, and as she seemed to shudder with the world about her, she could only parse her lips and utter a simple “Good.”

“Good?” said her mother. “Just good? Can’t come up with any better adjectives than that?”

“Good—all right,” said Pearl. “We did times tables. And spelling. Spelling was good.”

“That’s wonderful,” said her mother, “that’s wonderful to hear.”

Pearl glanced around the room, suddenly watchful for the movement of wings. She passed over the carpeting, the furniture, her school portrait that hung over the plaster cracks in the drywall, intent on finding a hint or a seam.

“Is everything okay, Pearl? I don’t know what it is with you, you just seem so...distant.”

“Did you see anything?” asked Pearl. “Just now?”

“See anything? What on earth do you mean by that—”

“Anything like small. Or in the walls.”

“Pearl, please, I really don’t know...”

“I think my monster might be here.”

Her mother froze, and Pearl regretted it as soon as she said it. Those storm-colored eyes took on a familiar gaze, all concern and no care, as if Pearl were suddenly all porcelain chipped around the edges, precariously perched at the edge of a tabletop, her shattering and splitting all but fatal fact.

“I do not,” said her mother, “want to hear about that. There is no such thing. No such thing at all.”

“But—”

“Pearl.” Softer, but with the same meaning. “I know that this move has taken a toll on us all. You and me and your father too. But we have got to make the best of this situation, and that means adjusting to the new house. I want you to try to make some friends, okay? Real friends,

not—not monsters. And if there’s anything your father and I can do to help, just tell us. Please? Okay? Can you promise that for me?”

Fear roiled over her mother in waves, but Pearl could not imagine what it was that frightened her so.

“Mommy?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Why did we really have to move?”

Pearl was in bed again. When she tried to think of what she had had for dinner that night, she could not remember. Every waking minute seemed to pivot around the nights, those trilogies of fear, so much so that all else paled in comparison, becoming just a little less real. Even with Nathaniel at school she could feel it, this clouding of visage, recession of self, and she would watch concern knit across his face, as if he watched her through a veil. For there was not a single thing in her life so certain as the preordained procession of words, voices, tremors, a mantra awaiting at the end of all her days.

She had already said the first two numbers and had yet to utter the third. That night the words told the tale of a girl crossing through a painting into a parallel dimension, and the voices spoke of things better left unsaid. This job, this life, this man, this monster—and Pearl knew upon hearing that word that they were talking of her monster. Why else would her parents use the word monster? She could imagine her mother telling her father of their most recent conversation—last week, perhaps, or was it only earlier that same day?—explaining that yes I went in her closet, yes I showed her plain as day that there is nothing inside but hangers and clothing and an empty yellow suitcase.

But a closet during the day is not the same thing as a closet in the night.

When the voices stopped and the words were but a memory, the tremors began. One, two, three. Pearl clicked the flashlight on. Its light always cast long, loping shadows in its path to the closet door, causing ordinary things like her desk and butterfly nightlight to distend strange black patterns that stretched phantomlike about her walls.

Each night Pearl still tried to grasp at what her monster might be thinking. What does it see when it looks at me? Why must I cast this light? Will it ever do anything more than this—will I? Perhaps we are each of us waiting for the other to move, and so of course nothing will ever happen.

Then the bulb flickered once, twice, and before Pearl knew what had happened, she was sheathed in sudden darkness. She was not afraid of the dark, but there was something more to it now: a note of desecration, a promise unkept. It caught in her throat like a lump, and she thought she might have choked. It had never occurred to Pearl that a flashlight was also a machine, that it too could eventually run out.

In that final shudder of light, the crack between the door and the wall expanded ever wider, and Pearl watched two eyes materialize from that void like pale, suspended bulbs. She could not tell if the eyes were yellow or if they had been made so by the waxen luminosity of her dying light. And then the light went out and her promise was broken and all she had anticipated unraveled at once, all in the time it takes to click your fingers, but Pearl could not see a thing. Whatever it was that had lain dormant for so long rushed forth from the closet and found her in the dark.

She walked through leaves in the forest of the night. That was how she first knew: the distinct crunch of autumn leaves underneath her bare soles, the crispness of those summer corpses. In the day they were red and gold, but at night they could be any color at all.

Pale moonlight illuminated the silhouettes of trees, and Pearl realized that she did not know where she was. It must be the forest right near her house, but she had never been here before, at least not so deep. An endless expanse of dark trees and darker night greeted her in all directions. She felt that there must have been some reason she was walking here in this spot of woods, some reason she had known with certainty in a dream but had lost upon waking, the knowledge trickling ruefully away like sand through a sieve. In these dream remnant glimpses flickered the presence of phantasms, something to which her words could only come close, dancing about, fragmentary, eddying in the drain.

Then like a sudden flash of midday remembrance she recalled the dredge—the one with the woman whose bones were all ground up. It was out here, in this direction; she was sure of it. She could feel emanating from it that same compulsory pull that had haunted her in the house, esoteric gravity which now compelled her feet to fumble forward. Her light had gone out—the monster called. She knew it awaited at the end of the path.

An owl hooted. Unknown chirps resounded. Black sky draped endlessly about her, curtains fluttering from above, bunching where they touched ground like mellifluous folds of flesh. Perhaps she was asleep and only looking at the back of her eyelids, against which this strange vision was projected from a crevice in the mind.

Pearl did not know how long she had walked, even from when she first became aware of the walking, when she noticed the fairies flitting about. Free from the confines of the dread house, they seemed to assume any shape they pleased, flying and giggling through and beyond

the edge of vision. What Pearl could see of them was scrunched and stout and in the throes of obtuse music, white-and-red lipped from milk-and-mutton diets. They would even take the shapes of animals and trees. Once she stepped on a leaf and hearing the crack of its spine she winced and knew that it once had been a fairy.

The trees thinned; the moon radiated from high. At a clearing in the woods the earth sloped sharply down, and at the far bottom of that slope could Pearl espy the looming of a dark husk. It was misshapen, like a plethora of houses all cobbled together, with roofs jutting out and corroded beams waving wild like limbs flung grotesquely at wrong angles. Lichen and moss masked the seam where it protruded from lumpy ground, claimed as part of its eternal landscape.

Pearl approached the dredge. Nearing it, she could see the depth of the shape, the mixed patchwork jobs of wood and metal that somehow held the rig all together. Once again Pearl's thoughts drifted to the seven dwarves, chanting workmanlike in ebullient days—but what of when their mine expired? Out of work for so long, and trapped in that dismal forest all alone, might not the seven dwarves also eye each other with a strange familial hunger?

In the center of the dredge was a door, barely open. Pearl wondered what dark machinery that portal concealed, if chips of old bone and blood still festered in the spots between the gore of rusted gears. She crept towards that sliver of opening, closer, ever closer, and she was perhaps the length of a body away when the crack expanded. The russet sound of dormant hinges echoed in the forest, and Pearl could only stand stolid and firm. In the dark exposure of space, two white eyes gleamed with moonlight. Absent her flashlight, they were not so yellow as she thought they had been.

“It’s you,” breathed Pearl. “Isn’t it? You don’t live in my closet, do you?” She paused, looked around, saw nothing else in sight. “This is your space. This is your home.”

The monster said nothing. Only peered at Pearl, the same way Pearl peered at it. Yet Pearl knew what she said to be true, more than anything else she ever knew, and she took one step and started to tremble. Then another, and another. Shaking like a leaf, she walked up to the door almost sunken in shadowed green, and for the first time she could remember, Pearl pushed the door the rest of the way open.

It was not a monster. It was not even the woman.

It was her.

Pearl shook and shook and stared into her own face like a mirror in reverse, the same height and color and shaking just the same. Even her pajamas were the same—how could that be? Heavy circles rimmed the bottoms of her eyes, and Pearl wondered if her own eyes looked nearly so dark, so full.

“Hello,” said Pearl.

“Hi,” said the girl from the dredge.

“My name is Pearl,” said she.

“I know,” said the other. “So is mine.”

The twin Pearls looked at each other, uncertain of what to say, not sure how to move. Then Pearl reached out and touched the girl’s shoulder. Pearl felt the girl almost pull away from her hand, forcing herself to root to the spot. Both girls still quavered, but now the tremors passed between them. With her other arm, Pearl embraced Pearl.

While Pearl stood in the doorway, the cold of the forest no longer seemed real; it could not be real when she was suddenly so warm. From inside that old machine—albeit corroded for so long, and presumably without activity for years—a mechanical warmth spilled out, powered by the crunching of ore, reaching her face and the tips of her hair. Could there have been some

special occasion, perhaps only tonight, where the rusty gears had been cranked from finality one last time, just for her? Pearl did not know how long they stood like that, but she would not have been surprised to find out that it was years, that she had watched herself age decades through the eyes of her double, that every new wrinkle and fold that she saw in the girl's trembling had an opposite marking within her.

Finally she spoke again. "It's scary out there," said the girl from the dredge. "Come in for a little. It's warm inside."

Pearl nodded. She stepped into the dredge and its precipitous darkness where moonlight gleamed off metal and wood and shut the door behind. No longer could Pearl see the girl, but she could feel her, and that was all that mattered. She could feel her, and embraced her, and slowly the tremors stopped, so there was not even movement to fill the absence of sound. Soon Pearl was completely still, and her past left her there to be alone for a little, alone with herself and no fairies or a mother. There was no light in that dredge that night in the woods, so the darkness became them.

Between lopsided bouts of video games and homework, Nathaniel would go to the upstairs bathroom and glance from its window to the house down the street, where he knew the girl Pearl lived inside. He thought of her each time he stood next to that window, staring into the bathroom mirror, whenever he would brush his teeth and even after flossing detect an unpleasant calcium waft issuing from his mouth.

Once or twice he almost asked his mom if he could go down to see if Pearl could play, but he knew how mercilessly his older brother would tease him if he went to play with a girl.

One night, a school night, Nathaniel stood at the mirror. It was past his bedtime—almost midnight, in fact—and he was supposed to be asleep by nine, nine thirty tops. But he had been putting off his homework that evening, had to stay up a little later to finish it, and now that it had gotten so late he found he was not tired at all. Maybe if he brushed his teeth again, it would trick his mind into sleep, and also maybe make his breath super minty with no trace of that odious scent. As he did so, he glanced out the window, to Pearl's house near the end of the road. Out front, the automatic lights had come on, which wasn't normal for so late, and Nathaniel looked back to the mirror with a mouth full of foam and then suddenly to the house again.

In the light traipsed Pearl in her pajamas, from inside and like a ghost around the edge of her front yard. From there she began to cross behind her house, to the edges of trees that crept at the cul-de-sac of Link Lane—to the forest, to the dredge.

What could she have been thinking? To go into those woods so late at night, probably without her parents knowing? Something in the way she walked perturbed Nathaniel too, a blind hypnotism, deeper than a trance. Guilt welled up inside him: he shouldn't have told her about the dredge in the woods. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why would she have asked about a haunted house, if not to go foolishly explore it herself?

In that instant he knew he had to follow her. No one else knew where she was, and what if she got lost out there, all alone, in the woods? Only he could protect her from the dark things in the world. Besides, it was too late to call a parent, or anyone, and he didn't want to get her in trouble if he didn't have to.

So Nathaniel crept past his sleeping parents, slipping on his shoes and tiptoeing out the side door. Inhaling the night air like fumes off painted drywall, he came to the street's edge and followed Pearl into the woods.

Trees beat down upon him, the wraiths of night bore their jagged teeth. He knew that the only thing that kept him pushing trembling forward was the knowledge that Pearl depended on him, that she did not know it but only he knew where she was, that the time for fear could wait until he saved her. He could not see her in the dark, but he thought he could hear her, little crunches of leaves up ahead that he hoped were human footsteps. Besides, he knew the direction of the dredge, and the Pearl noises seemed to echo from its general location.

As he came to the clearing, and neared the dredge, he could not help but note the spot that marked the closest he had ever come. All at once the enormity of it settled upon him. Snuck from his house in the middle of the night, to the center of forgotten woods? He feared old vengeful industrial spirits come to kill him from their places of final repose; he also feared his parents finding out, in which case he would also be dead. Standing before it, that sepulchral monstrosity consumed all the senses—so much so that at first, Nathaniel did not even notice Pearl.

She lay on the grass, a small heap in front of the dredge, all bunched up and still in the fallen leaves. For a brief second Nathaniel thought the unthinkable, and then he saw the slow undulation of the crest of her shape, rising up and down slow with shudders of sleepful breath. He walked toward her slowly, careful not to scare her.

“Pearl? Pearl, it’s Nate—Nathaniel. Can you hear me?”

Nathaniel put an arm on her shoulder and shook it gently a few times. But Pearl remained fast asleep, or unconscious, seized in a slumber far beyond his callings.

He glanced, panicked, around the pitiless forest, somehow so much more menacing and immense from the bottom of the clearing. Pearl could not stay the night in this place. Who knew what creatures lurked about the thin trees, even now readying for the strike? The thought sent chills down Nathaniel’s spine, and with both arms he reached to the ground and scooped Pearl

within them. He had expected her to be heavy, but he lifted her with surprising ease, almost falling backward with the extended effort—as if he had tried to uproot an ingrained trunk of tree and found it to have the weight of only a feather. She was made of almost nothing, almost nothing at all.

After a few seconds, or maybe it was a couple minutes, Nathaniel regained his balance, situating her head carefully in the cranny of his right arm. Then he looked quickly about him, conscious of some slither or movement but uncertain of the origin, and then turned with a steady gait in the direction from which they had come.

As Nathaniel walked, he noticed a continual lightening, the first stabs of sunlight rising behind him, casting their long shadows forth. He did not have a watch or a phone on him, but he knew that could not be right. How much time had passed in those woods? It couldn't have been that late when he left, could it?

But the sun was almost fully risen when he reached the cul-de-sac at the edge of the woods, the sky warming nicely with a delicate hue of baby blue. All the while Pearl had remained sound asleep, the motion of her breath pushing against Nathaniel's chest, unfazed by the reach of this world and its light.

Nathaniel stepped up to the front door of her house, which was already slightly ajar. He could not remember if it had been like that before. In his stomach twisted a new strain of anxiety, but not wanting to drop Pearl he pushed open the door and carried her inside, where he joined a frozen tableau, her mom and her dad stopped mid-conversation by the creak of the opening. Her dad was holding a cell phone out, as if he had been just about to dial.

“Oh, Pearl!” said her mom, and rushed to Nathaniel to scoop her daughter from his arms. Did Pearl seem as light to her as she did to him? She rocked her, and cradled her, and in the artificial lights from the house Pearl’s eyes began to open.

“What’s going on?” said Pearl. She blinked a few times. Nathaniel could not tell if it was a trick of the light, compounded by a night without sleep, but it seemed to him that her eyes were startlingly vacant, all pupil and no presence. “Where...where am I?”

“You’re home, Pearl, you’re home, you up and vanished and we were so, so worried but you’re home now, you’re home...”

Her dad turned to Nathaniel, and Nathaniel flushed fully red.

“Who are you?” asked Pearl’s dad, his face twisted in a confused grimace.

“Sorry, my name’s, I’m Nate—I live a few houses down, I go to school with Pearl—”

“What were you doing with her?”

“I—I wasn’t—I saw her leave into the woods, just from my house, and I found her there, I promise, there wasn’t anything else—”

“Pearl,” her mom continued, “Pearl, are you okay?”

Pearl had begun to cry. Nathaniel almost had not noticed: her face did not scrunch; her eyes were hardly red. There were no shrill whimpers or oozes of snot. Only silent tears trickled down her cheeks in small translucent rivulets, rolling down to the cusp of her chin and absorbing into her mom’s wool sweater.

“Pearl?”

“I think so,” she said. “I think I’m all right.”

“Pearl—what happened—this boy said he found you in the woods?”

They all watched Pearl, who was deep in tearful thought, seeming to mull over exactly what it was she wanted to say. Nathaniel did not know how much she remembered, if she had remembered anything at all.

“I was just walking in the woods, and it’s okay, you don’t need to worry, I promise, I was fine, I was fine, because my monster was there too—”

“Hush, now,” said her mom, and folded her head into her chest. Her mom’s brow had sharply furrowed; her limbs like an automaton stiffened. Nathaniel suddenly felt hot all over, as if he bore witness to something he was not supposed to see. “Hush. Quiet now. You’re quite all right. You’re safe and sound. There is no need for any of that.”

Her dad watched with a look of disapproval. “What is that she’s saying?”

“My monster—” started Pearl again.

“Shh,” said her mom. “You’re all right. You’re all right, Pearl. You don’t have to worry. There’s no such thing at all. There’s no such thing as monsters...”

Rainy Days in State College

Leo was short of breath. He had just dashed around the Health and Human Development Building, his left shoelace trailing behind, when he found a sea of students scattered across the campus green.

Fucker, he thought. A demonstration.

It was for one of those new groups that seemed to keep cropping up these days, those pseudo-religious lifestyle societies that dictated how one should live before the end of the world. Leo had seen these people around before, had taken their flyers and crumpled them neatly into little balls so that they might be shoved into his pocket and discarded later. On any given Tuesday he couldn't give a rat's ass, but on this particular sunshiny afternoon there were maybe a hundred students between him and his advisor's office in the building across the lawn.

It would have been a peaceful day otherwise. A fine pre-rain mist hung over the whole affair; the breeze carried in a scant strain of birdsong. Leo took a harried breath and plunged into the crowd.

“’Scuse me, pardon me, ’scuse me—”

The students were that usual assemblage of devoted acolytes and curious passersby, most of them ambling past on the way to some class or other. They all gave Leo the side-eye as he barreled through. Out of the corner of his eye, Leo caught the name of the group on a large white placard: S.P.P.L., or the Society for the Promotion of Proper Living. He could not help but roll his eyes.

At the head of the demonstration, on the steps of Old Main, a smooth-faced man with horn-rimmed glasses projected his voice through a megaphone. He spoke with a practiced clarity, enunciated his words with the warm delicacy of gospel.

“Why aren’t you living today, to your fullest, in this very moment?” he boomed, and everyone listened. “Stop whatever it is you’re doing, put down your phone, and breathe, really breathe! How many more breaths will you take in your life? So many, I’m sure, that for some of you the number might as well be infinite, but I promise you all that one day you will find yourself suddenly gray, find yourself suddenly taking inventory of all the things you’ve done and left to do, and realize with a cloying certainty that you have more breaths behind you than in front! That you’ve done all this rushing about, all this vapor, and for what?”

Despite Leo’s practiced aversion, he could not resist the pull of the man’s cadence. For someone who looked so young he had such polish. The sun gleamed off the lens of his cool navy shades, punctuated the dazzling alabaster of his pearly whites. Leo wondered whether he was a student or not.

“The mysteries of life!” continued the man. “It is for all of us to discover, for all of us to interrogate, why we do these things. Why we live the way we do. But only through radical introspection can we tug at these threads, can we eventually sit in peace on a grassy hilltop beneath a cloudless sky—”

Taken in so suddenly, and traipsing through the crowd at such a pace, Leo stepped on someone’s shoe and in a frantic turn to blurt an apology caught his loose lace under his right sole and tumbled to the ground in a swift flutter of limbs. His hands shot forward into the mud, knees scuffed against the fecund ground. Last pair of clean jeans he had, too.

Fucker, he thought again. Fucker, fucker.

Crouched on the ground, Leo heard voices reach down. His cheeks burned hot with equal parts annoyance and embarrassment.

“Shit!”

“You okay, man?”

“Here—here.”

A hand appeared before Leo’s face. He did not brush it away, but he did not take it either. As Leo got to his feet, the crowd shifted as if a single organism to clear the space around him. He peered around at the faces in the midday quiet, their features darkened by the sun behind them.

Leo suddenly realized that the smooth-faced man was no longer speaking.

He turned to look to the front of the demonstration, and as if off his turn, the crowd shifted again, moving so that no one student stood between Leo and the man. For as Leo looked to the man in his silence, so too did the man stare at Leo, or at least Leo thought he did, his pupils obfuscated as they were by the sunlight glare. Across the brief quietude and the short distance between them, the man proffered a gently outstretched arm.

“You, man!” chimed the man. “Are you alright?”

“No, yeah, I’m fine, thanks—”

“What is your name?”

“L—Leo—?”

“Leo!” said the man. “This is precisely what I mean! Look at everyone here, so peacefully congregated on this fine afternoon, and here you come running through it all—”

“I’m really sorry, I—”

“Could you please step up here, just for a moment?”

Leo looked at the man, the crowd, back at the man. Why today, of all days? Why him, why this crowd? He felt their gaze upon them, the toothsome gravity of the man in front, and knew it was not so simple as leaving. Already Leo was late; what was one minute more? He took one step forward, then another, then another, until he found himself beside the man, in front of the crowd, the man's right arm suddenly draped around his shoulder as if he too were a speaker before the demonstration.

Side-by-side with the man, cheating out to the crowd, Leo almost felt like he was supposed to have been there. The crowd watched him with curious expectation, and he looked breathlessly back. "Sorry about running through, but I am running late, I really should be going—"

"But you *don't!*" exclaimed the man. "That's exactly it! What is it you are running late for?"

"A meeting with my advisor, I—"

"A *meeting*. Leo, let me ask you: when you come to face the end of the world, in your own moment of final judgment, will this meeting truly matter? Will you be thinking to yourself, oh, thank goodness, I made that meeting, or will you be wishing that you had spent just one more day enjoying the open air, just one more day at peace on this earth—?"

As the man spoke, Leo realized just how uncomfortable he was. An ooze of sweat had formed between his shirt and his skin; his jeans seemed to tighten around his ankles. He scanned the faces in the crowd with the wayward glance of a student who wanted to know if there was anyone in attendance he recognized but did not want them to know he saw. To Leo, now a senior, so many of these faces looked so alien, so young. Most nodded along with the smooth-faced man, regarding Leo not with admonishment but pity.

Then he saw her. It could have been anyone but her. Leo averted his eyes as a curious child might recoil a finger from an electric socket, but there was no denying the static shock whose singe lingered even now on the mind. It might not be her—but of course it was. Of course it had to be those eyes. That piercing teal peering almost deceptively from under a smooth brow, like the leap of ocean beneath a long-eroded crag, that even through the mist and the miasma of the day could not be mistaken.

Fucker, fucker, fucker.

“—and were you to simply slow your trot,” preached the man, “to allow yourself the mere pleasures of one in who knows how many more warm days—”

“That’s nice, I will,” interrupted Leo, “but I’m sorry, I, I really have to go!” He sidled out of the smooth man’s embrace, in an instant turned from the crowd so rapidly that he nearly tripped again over his feet fumbling for ground. Now beyond the front of the demonstration, Leo’s path to his advisor was unobstructed, and he quickened his pace, resumed his half-skip, half-jog cantor that now took on the spasmodic motion of retreat.

“Go you must, but remember what I said!” called the man. “Everyone, please! Give Leo a hand, show him our thanks for stopping by today...”

Behind him Leo could feel the eyes of the crowd on his back, but he did not care. They did not bother him one bit. Some students clapped, but the noise barely reached him. What was their scant applause to the thrum of his heart, thudding, thudding, thudding, dull against his chest? Blood and sweat sublimated beneath and around his skin, coating him like hot wax from both ends of the body. I shouldn’t have stopped, he thought, didn’t have to, could have, should have, kept moving forward. Could have, should have, been anyone, anything.

Anyone but her.

In the late evening of that day, as the sun crept beyond the crest of the valley and cast the long shadows that are characteristic of dusk, Leo lay on his bed and stared at his phone. His bed was unmade, having been left unmade from that morning and many mornings prior. His roommate was not there. The faint bulb of his desk lamp cast everything in the room in a grim yellow pallor, everything except for Leo's face, which was illumed by a garish white. The tips of his hair and the cuffs of his jeans were damp, splashed from the places that the umbrella could not cover.

Leo tapped the screen with his thumbs like twin metronomes before pressing the backspace button and letting the cursor recede over the words in a wave of blankness. That thin black line flickered back and forth in an unending dance of drafting and deletion. He felt like the poet trying to conjure a single meaningful verse, sketching its outline on notepaper before crumpling and casting it with a wayward throw to the corner of his study, where the dead ideas of discarded paper dross overflowed the waste bin.

—Hey Laney! Think I saw you at the demonstration today, pretty crazy stuff huh

—Hey Laney! Were you at the sppl thing today? Pretty wild stuff, have you been doing ok

—Hi Laney. This is Leo. Carpenter. (I didn't know if you know any other Leo. Or if you had my number still saved.) ((Stupid stupid stupid))

—Hey I know we haven't really talked in awhile and maybe that's why I was hesitating to reach out but just wanted to say I miss you, hope you're doing well and all, and let me know if you ever wanted to uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

—Hey this might seem totally out of the blue but I don't know if I ever got the chance to really say this and I don't know when I ever will but I really am so so sorry

Eventually Leo turned off his phone and stared at the deckled paint that scraped jagged across the ceiling until he could not remember anything else.

In spite of the day, the office felt cold. AC unit on the fritz again? Probably. It could also just be the deep ochre texture of the mahogany furniture, which exuded an academic chilliness to match whatever scant sunlight glared in from the lone window. Or perhaps Dr. Griffiths had something to do with it, Dr. Griffiths who now stood hunched over his desk and stared down Leo with an almost calculated stoniness.

“3:17,” he said. “I was beginning to wonder whether I’d made a mistake.”

Leo stood before his professor like a man on trial. He had been here countless times, from the first time he had gone over his freshman year schedule to that time Dr. Griffiths had talked him down from a potential change in major, as precipitous as if it were a twentieth-story ledge. He really did like the office. The cynic in Leo would look at it and think, oh, this really is just one step removed from a desk job. But that cynicism could not subsume his even deeper desire to sit behind one of those cool brown desks all the same.

“I, I’m really sorry,” Leo stammered, “I really just, there was this demonstration at Old Main and all, and I—”

“Pah!” spat Dr. Griffiths. He was a short, sturdy man, but nevertheless to Leo he somehow seemed to tower. “A demonstration, you say?”

“Yeah, I, I had to stop, you know, one of those lifestyle groups and all, but only because I had to! Because I fell, and it was like a whole thing, and I had to explain where I was going, and—”

“But you did, ah, *stop*, at this demonstration? Get yourself a nice earful?”

“Yeah, I s’pose, but I really didn’t mean to, and it was only because—”

“Please tell me,” Dr. Griffiths cut in, “that, at the very least, you have the new draft.”

“Well, uh, erm, no.”

“No?”

“No, that’s why I was coming here, just cause, just cause I got the new sources, and I’m going to need a little more time to get them all in the next revision, and, uh, you know...”

Leo didn’t know. He trailed off, uncertain of what to say. He was painfully aware of how he must have looked to Dr. Griffiths, even more so than usual. His thick mat of straw-colored hair draped halfway across his forehead; his flannel shirt was so wrinkled that one might suspect it had been lifted from a pile in the corner of the closet. Sweat stains bled out from beneath his pits, and his jeans were covered with a putty of mud and sod left over from yesterday’s rain.

Dr. Griffiths ogled him like a reflection, and then he broke the silence. “Please, Leo, just have a seat.”

Leo sidled awkwardly around to the lone chair in front of Dr. Griffiths’ desk, sweaty in the cool. As he did so, Dr. Griffiths stood, began to circle the room, as if he had just launched himself into orbit and Leo were his star, forcing Leo to crane his neck around as he spoke.

“Leo, sometimes you remind me of myself at your age,” started Dr. Griffiths, and Leo smiled, “*if* I had made a regular habit of shitting the bed!” he continued, and Leo frowned. “Leo, Leo, I just—I don’t know. I don’t know how else to put it. Let me ask you. Do you know the names of the kids who drank the Democratic Party Kool-Aid in 1976?”

“Um, what?”

“Was I unclear? Do you know the names of the kids who—”

“No, no, I heard you, I just meant—does this have to do with the demonstration, or—”

“Well, do you?”

Leo shook his head.

“Of course you don’t. No one does. Today’s revolutionary is tomorrow’s used car salesman. Every one of them, mark my words, every last one of them—phoning in some nine-to-five and only refraining from the straight razor because most of their days are already behind them. Do you get my meaning?”

“Um, I think so?”

“Think harder!” snapped Dr. Griffiths. “What I’m trying to tell you, is, ah, did you know? That I canvassed for Jim Carter back in the day?”

Leo nodded obediently. Had, in fact, heard it many times before.

“Then you’ll also know it’s all horseshit. Don’t get your head lost in some cause or other. It’s easy, much too easy, to dip a toe in, just one little toe, and then ten years later you find yourself coming up for air, wondering what the hell happened.”

“But I wasn’t even—”

“Let me finish!” said Dr. Griffiths. “The university is not a place for the acolyte or the heretic, but for the academic. The others? Phonies all! And, not to mention, elitists! Unlike us. We actually have something to offer the world. Do you know what I say to anyone here who does not fit that description?”

“You tell them—”

“I tell them, what is it you think you’re doing here? Why are you trying to waste my time?”

Leo nodded again.

“Am I getting through to you, Leo?”

Leo almost spoke, decided against it, then nodded again.

“Well. Another one of those demonstrations, huh?” mused Dr. Griffiths. “What do you know, man. What do you know.” He stopped his pacing, staring not at Leo but fixing his gaze upon one of his several bookcases. “Do you know how long I’ve been in this field?”

“Um, er, thir—”

“Thirty years!” He turned back to Leo. “That was rhetorical. Three damn decades, and so many faces come and gone. So many dissertations. So much shit.” A pause. “You’re a sharp writer, you know. At you best, there’s a certain, ah, and I don’t say this lightly, a certain *verve* to it. A vivacity.”

“Oh, uh, thank you—”

“Don’t let it get to your head,” said Dr. Griffiths. “But stick to it and you’ll get it. You really will.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dr. Griffiths crossed the small room to Leo, standing directly behind him, so that Leo had to crane his neck all the way back. Behind him his advisor raised a hand out in an almost fatherly gesture, then hesitated. “I would give you a pat on the back, but you smell like shit.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Like, truly, shit. Go take a shower.”

“Yes, sir.”

Leo stood up, slowly began to carry himself out of the office. Dr. Griffiths resumed his seat at the desk, once more a settled part of his stacked books, dim lamp, the pale white light barely penetrating the window.

“Oh, and Leo?”

Leo turned back. “Yeah?”

“Be careful out there. Looks like the rain might be coming.”

Rain carries in it something more than water. You feel its heaviness before the first drop touches skin, the very air a premonition, and it lingers with the last cumulus scuds of a spent sky, the ground still moist with its revelation.

Even before the advisories became a question of national safety, and everyone carried umbrellas as if they were purses, Leo knew this to be true. As a child he would watch the rain crash down in great symphonic lashes, making music against the windowpanes. His mother always cast him a wary eye, would tell him that you better not go out there or you’ll catch your death of cold, and make sure to wear your boots and not your sneaks when you go out for the bus in the morning.

Yes, mom, Leo would say, watching the ceaseless clamor of droplets.

It came, and the piles of leaves were flattened into water. Rivulets met in ditches and brimmed up in too tempting pools. Family portraits done up in sidewalk chalk bled grotesquely into the gutter, the pastel colors all trickling like tears until there was nothing left. When it was gone, after the great chloride cleansing, there was a newness to the earth, something sharp, coolly green, that had not been there before.

Sometimes Leo wondered if there had always been some horror to the rain, just before anyone ever thought to look.

Leo remembered, might always remember, where he was when the first bulletins were sent out, the year before he left for college. He was sitting in the Waffle House up the street from the high school, scrolling through Twitter with some friends and gazing at the images between

mouthfuls of hash browns, muttering his awe and unease as from the small overhead television the governor issued curfews in accordance with the rest of the nation.

It had started with the case in Albuquerque, a woman who was caught in a torrential downpour and found her skin peeling from her bones like so many layers of pulped paper. That one didn't circle the national outlets until much later, chalked up as it was as a rare epidermal condition, some genetic freak of nature. But then it happened again, and again, all varying in manner and intensity but generally entailing the tearing of the skin like thin sheets of raw dough. If you hadn't heard about it yet, you probably saw it for the first time with the Corpus Christi incident, with the photo that was plastered across every major news network for what seemed like a month. It was a square portrait, like the aspect ratio of old television programs, of a fluorescent-lit emergency room, slick with rainwater, and in it five people lounging in half-decayed states of rot: an old black man, a young couple who couldn't have been more than thirty, and a mother holding her despondent baby. All sported red lesions on the tops of their arms and their faces, fluttering out like rose petals from the sallied flesh. The baby screamed in the silent snapshot, and if you peered real close at the image—which, of course, everyone did—you could discern the miniature muscles and tendons poking through the eroded fat of its newborn cheeks.

The message was clear; the picture spoke for itself. If it happened to them, it could also happen to you.

The coverage followed for weeks after that, and in some sense it never really stopped. That grisly acid didn't strike with every rainfall—else a hell of a lot more people would've been afflicted by now—but no one had yet devised a surefire methodology to know when the rain would carry any particular acidity, and no one wanted to be around when it did. Some medical studies also suggested that the skin lesions were the least of the rain's effects; many a patient

drenched in sudden downpour also found themselves forgetful of their whereabouts and their names, little wet amnesia bullets trickling from their hair.

Wild theories spun out from all factions—nuclear emissions, radon poisoning, holy retribution, greenhouse effect in full swing—all of them grasping for sense in a senseless world, trying to chalk it up to one of the natural hierarchies that govern this life. Late-night hosts made half-hearted jokes and were roundly panned. The noise of that rain and its resultant handwringing—what has become of this world we live in, et cetera, et cetera—eventually became a constant frequency, and after a while you could no longer call it noise.

“Maybe he shouldn’t go this year,” Leo’s mother had said, a few months before his high school graduation. “Take a gap year, or something. Lots of kids are!”

“Rain’s rain,” countered his father. “It’ll be here, it’ll be there.”

This was the world now. Leo did not have a say in it. As the rest of the earth seemed to upheave, he hung around town the few months after graduation before packing his bags and checking the forecast and shuttling across Pennsylvania to State College.

It was a brisk April morning when Leo first stepped foot on the campus of the Pennsylvania State University. That’s how he said it, too, when asked what next great endeavor awaited him beyond high school, relishing the “the” as if it too merited a capital letter. A small mote of one of the swarms of tours, he had watched students clamor and bicycle to and from endless halls, had filled his lungs with the cool campus air. He marveled at the moss-covered buildings erected about him, took in their expanse brick by brick, as if encased in each maroon block was the original secret knowledge of the Western university.

Over here, the building where Mueller saw the atom, peered through a microscope and into matter’s infinitesimal heart! And now look, down this way: the first synthesis of hydrogen

isotopes, unseen before that moment and plucked like magic from the thin pregnant air! In back studies of unlit libraries were old texts decoded, their inner secrets unfurled as if in magnificent sweeping scrolls. Joseph Heller and John Barth hadn't taught there at the same time, but it was easy enough to Leo to imagine the two esteemed half-grayed men sitting astride Old Main, blowing O's from cobbled pipes and trading small wisdoms that only some still knew. Maybe you could hear those whispers too, if you only happened to be passing on by.

When Leo returned in the fall, it already felt like coming home. Ducking beneath an umbrella between his dorm and his classrooms, he found himself giddy with singular energy. By the start of his second semester, Leo had picked up a cigarette habit, and coupled with his coffee addiction the smoke and the rain lashing about him produced a distinct miasma unlike anything he had found before. He studied at immense circular wooden tables, stacked with more volumes than he could have possibly needed—Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche—as if he sat with all those men around a mahogany stand, deliberating the true nature of life and the universe. He first felt the enormity of that sensation one night in November, reading Meno in the library in the cold light of half-dusk, rain fettering all about him; that when he studied with these books, he discoursed with ghosts. From across time and space reached their memories in hardbound relics, and they spoke, and Leo spoke back.

So enthralled was he in these impossible palavers that sometimes he would forget to carry his umbrella.

Three years later, Leo felt it all the same. He filled his lungs with the warm welcome of the campus air, clinging onto the fact of his senior year as if there was a secret possibility that it

never really had to end. And yet the number of classes he still had to take could be counted on his two hands, and deadlines for his thesis were approaching faster than one might think.

Over the summer, Leo had begun research on his thesis. It was the first summer he spent in State College, the first summer away from his hometown of Ashland, an old coal shanty of a burg where in summers past he would blend mint chocolate floats and scoop raspberry sherbet into little paper cups at the parlor down the road. He couldn't believe it took him as long to get out as it did. Already those memories were nothing to him but the trappings of banal rurality, nothing but the pungent but fast fading aftertaste of bad candy. Here his mind had become unclouded; here, finally, he could work.

In the early days of meeting with Dr. Griffiths, Leo dreamed of writing a heavy tome adjacent to all the great works of philosophy, a great architecture upon which his name would be forever emblazoned. But eventually his research narrowed, and Leo found himself drawn time and again to the university's Special Collections Library, where he would lose himself for days on end in the sensuous wafts of brittle bindings. On those shelves he discovered the complete original works of lesser-known philosopher and early literary theory Bertolt Humbert, and Leo, drawn in by the man's esoteric status and dulcet prose, worked his way through it all, only to find upon reaching the last volume that much had been left unsaid. Further research revealed that one additional volume was meant to be written, but had never been put to paper. Bertolt Humbert died an early death of tuberculosis at the age of 44, and only brief sketches remained as to the contents of that unpublished work.

What might that last book have been; what vast conclusions left undrawn? To this ultimate subject Leo decided to devote his thesis.

I'm going to be remembered, Leo thought, intoxicated with the sense of stumbling on fertile ground. In the immortality of books, in the pages that had been inscribed from the start of time and would be there after the crunch of its end.

In the first months of his senior year, Leo did little more than eat and sleep and research and research. Even his other classes slipped as a result. In years past he had flirted with the College Democrats, and a few student media outlets, but those too had fallen to the wayside as Leo singularly wrote his thesis. His only small respites from work occurred when he would occasionally catch up, usually on weekends, with old friends.

Leo had a rotating ensemble of acquaintances over his college career, most close but later transient; Marcus was the exception to this rule. He had met Marcus in an international film class, where they watched Bergman and Bresson and pretended they knew what it all meant. At least two or three times every month they hung out, usually outside one of the downtown coffeehouses or up at Leo's apartment, sharing a smoke in the sodium-lit lot.

One of these nights, taking a break from his work, Leo and Marcus went through half a pack of cigarettes in the parking lot outside, watching the smoke and its cool inertia drift around them like some lilac lace.

"I saw you on campus the other day," Marcus was saying.

"Yeah?" said Leo.

"Yeah. Looked like you were in a hurry."

"Sounds about right."

"Maybe you should've been slowing down to smell the flowers, or appreciating one last beautiful day on this golden earth—"

Leo's eyes widened, and Marcus bent over in wheezy laughter. "Dude, you saw that?"

“I was right there.”

“Dude,” said Leo, “that’s so fucking embarrassing.”

“You looked like a mess.”

“Shut up.”

“No, seriously, like shit.”

“Where were you?”

“You didn’t see me? I was one of your adoring crowd.”

Leo took another pull of his cigarette; it was almost down to the filter. “You’re with this group?”

“So what if I am?” said Marcus. “I’m still allowed to poke fun.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I know, I know. It’s all a bunch of hippy dippy nonsense, a waste of my time, yadda yadda, yadda—”

“Man, you know I don’t really gel with that hive-mind shit.”

“You don’t really gel with the hive-mind shit, says Dr. Professorson?”

“Fuck you,” said Leo with a smile. “School is different. It’s the Society, it’s the New Agers, it’s any one of them. It all just feels so...forced.”

“I don’t know, it makes sense to me,” said Marcus. “People all want to get their act together when they think it’s the end of the world.”

“Come on, you don’t really buy that horseshit, do you?” asked Leo. “End times and all that?”

“Well, what if it is? Is this how we want to go out?”

Leo pulled another cigarette from the pack. Silence and smoke drifted between the two friends. The moon rose almost full above the cracked gravel of the lot.

“And hey,” said Marcus, “I know you think it’s all a total load, but maybe it wouldn’t hurt to take a page out of that book.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dude, it’s your senior year!” said Marcus. “Live a little! I swear, I barely see you anymore, and I don’t know, maybe you want to look back on some memories other than having your head stuck in a book? These years aren’t going to last forever.”

Leo took another drag, looked up at the smoke and the stars and lowered his gaze to the campus buildings beyond.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I kind of like it here.”

It was raining again, and Leo was in the library. As the rain shuttered down, he wrote in his usual spot in the basement of the stacks, typing with the fury of a man possessed, an arm’s length away from the Dewey Decimal section for modern psychology. He had hit upon something, an exact vein, the intersection between two disciplines that instead of converging to a point folded outward and teemed with a host of possibilities.

Around Leo sat his usual ghosts—Nietzsche, Humbert, Freud, Jung—watching from above as if sitting upon stacks of books.

He stopped typing. An idea had come upon him; he would need another source. So as not to disturb the flow of his thought, Leo leaped from his chair and ran up the stairs to the third floor to find the book he needed as fast as possible. Upon finding the volume, he almost bolted back, but he found himself stopped halfway at a familiar aisle. Having spent so much time

between those bookcases, he could not help but remember all that had taken place there before, rooted by the commingling of nostalgia and senior year regret. He browsed the books on the shelves, running a finger down their spines and feeling a familiar shiver, and he could only think of her.

Memories happened upon Leo so abruptly these days, and the rain certainly did not help. It stirred in him an ache he did not know how to place, recalling past shades forth from the mist if only to wash them fleetingly back away.

He met Laney second semester freshman year in a symbolic logic class, and the first thing he remembered were all the pins like baubles that bedecked the back of her bag: the trans rights sign, the AOC sticker, Make Love Not War, and a million other colorful little trinkets. He remembered thinking it was cute how much she seemed to believe in.

They found themselves seated together, and they did not speak much for the first few weeks, but one day after her absence in a prior class she turned to Leo and asked him what she missed. He could not believe that someone so pretty was asking him for the notes. After that they would always talk in the ten minutes before the start of class. He lived on south campus, and she in an apartment downtown, so they started to walk home together after the last class of their day, bonding over discussions on Virginia Woolf and old X-Files episodes.

On one of those days walking home, the rain flared again. This was not the usual rain; even inside you didn't feel quite safe. It was the sort of torrential storm that recalled a forgotten biblical power, white thunder on purple sky, a striking so sudden and accompanied with such a crackle to make your hair stand on end. Leo and Laney were huddled under his umbrella when the wind swiftly pulled and inverted it upward, so all the rainwater that had been pooling on top came down upon them in a sudden pour.

They stood there as the rain crashed down, aware of the danger but shocked by the dewy wetness. Leo's chest heaved up and down. Then Laney leaned in and kissed him. He had been so shocked by the rain that he hadn't any surprise in him left, so he kissed her back. He kissed her, and felt the cool droplets in her hair, and smelled the citrusy sweetness of her breath, something like oranges, and he wondered if it was something she had eaten earlier, or gum perhaps, or if that was just the way she always tasted.

He almost asked her too, but she kissed him again before he had the chance.

"We should get out of this rain, don't you think?" Laney had said.

"I don't know where to go," he said. "I think the umbrella's broken."

"I know a place," she whispered, her hot breath a chimera, "where we won't be interrupted."

They made love on the floor of the stacks, in the aisle that shelved critical studies of British literature, and not for the last time. Each time the hoary rug chafed against the small of Leo's back, leaving an irritated patch, and not once did he utter a word of complaint. All around them the rain lashed against the windows with the tenebrous crackle of apocalypse.

The Victorians turned pink at such audacious display, turning haughtily away before peeking through slatted fingers, while the modernists all clucked their tongues, as if any such thing could any longer hold meaning.

Shakespeare positively chortled.

In the rush of those ephemeral weeks, Leo could remember the books and the flesh but he could not recall what he had been thinking. He felt divorced from the Leo who had begun to prioritize his schoolwork to Laney's frustration, the Leo who saw the mounting tension and said nothing, the Leo who only stared dumbly when Laney asked him if maybe he did not want

something more. He could not, did not; what time did he have, as a college student? He remembered her telling him that this was okay, but of course it had not been—as if there was a code to what she meant, and language for her the tool of obfuscation—and he became increasingly unsettled by those expectant glances, the uncomfortable pauses, and he did not know what to do. Leo retreated, recoiled from the flame.

Weeks after that, she called him in tears. In that last spat she called him a barrage of names, words which still would dimly echo. Thoughts of her would still drift on occasion to the forefront of his mind, drawn by some inscrutable sense or scent, and he wondered if he might always wrestle with that haunting. Sometimes Leo saw her posts on social media, and he figured she must have seen his, but they had never once spoken since.

These days Leo preferred the company of his philosopher ghosts, who made no such demands of him, who existed in their totality in between the pages of old books.

He would have sex after that, but never again in the library, so it was almost not the same thing. Cold skin rubbed against skin, like flints desperately striking in the rain, and no fire would come. The sheets of the bed were always too soft, too cushy, not quite like the chafed hoariness of the rug before.

Fall pressed into the holidays, and the holidays into spring, and all the while Leo toiled at his thesis. He saw no one as much as he did Dr. Griffiths, returning to that dark office with more complete versions of his essays and watching him almost cackle over the work.

“This is gorgeous,” Dr. Griffiths would say, “rarely in all my years have I seen work like this. Yes, yes, there must be more, more, more, more—”

Chortling with delight he would ogle the manuscripts, never really looking at Leo.

These occasional meetings aside, the outside world became an anathema to Leo's progress; the only reality he recognized was that which appeared on a page before him. In that last semester he saw Marcus less and less, only three or four times. On one of those nights they walked together downtown, and only then did Leo realize how little that year he had seen south campus. From that street they could see where Old Main towered.

"Did you see the Harrisburg riots?" asked Marcus, walking with Leo that night.

"What Harrisburg riots?" said Leo, cigarette in hand.

"Seriously?"

"What?"

"How have you not seen that?"

"What are they rioting about?"

Marcus lit another cigarette. "Acid rot's getting worse, some old infrastructure's starting to go, government officials are using the relief money to line their pockets."

"Damn," Leo muttered. Other cajoling students passed in questionable states of sobriety, and he took another drag from his cigarette.

"Dude, I swear, sometimes it's like you're living under a rock. You know that there's a world that exists outside of State College, right?"

"I don't know," said Leo. "I don't have set plans, I could stick around a little longer."

Marcus shook his head. "Man, that's why I got to get out. I swear, everyone in this town is either twenty and depressed, or fifty and depressed." He coughed on smoke. "How long have you been here again? Is this your fourth year or fifth?"

"Dude, I swear, I don't even know—"

"No, come on, seriously."

“I’m serious. I really don’t.”

The next day, taking a break from his work, Leo nursed a cigarette and scrolled through Twitter on his phone. You smoke too much, he thought, as he pulled and pulled, the old nicotine tickle providing comfort like a mint. A post appeared on his feed of people marching through streets, and Leo realized that this was what Marcus had been talking about, recognizing the Pennsylvania State Capitol in the background of blurry footage.

He clicked on the video, and it expanded to the full screen. Rain came down in the Harrisburg streets, where protesters flung themselves against policemen in military-grade gear and looters smashed storefronts in a homogenous mass. The people screamed with triumph and rage, pumping fists wayward in the air, and the cameraman swung his phone back and forth, capturing a panorama of unrest in all directions.

In the rioting and the looting Leo heard something almost like music.

The rain fell, and Leo slept in the library. In his usual basement cranny, a small drip of drool trickled from his lips and onto the page.

He kissed Laney in a dream, and in the dream his eyes were closed. He could tell it was her from the familiar orange flavor, caressed her soft hair and cool hands, until he realized that something was not right. Leo opened his eyes, shuddered in sleep. Laney looked at him with eyes shot through with fear, layers of pockmarked flesh peeled away so that you could see the redness beneath her, almost waiting to burst free of its still human shell. Leo shut his eyes again, and when he reopened them, she had become only bones. He held in his arms a skeleton, so much cradled anatomy, and the hollow eyes of her skull seemed to bore into him as she leaned in for another kiss—

Gasping, Leo woke to cold feet. At least two inches of water had puddled on the floor, leaving no visible tile. Titanic crashes around him rattled the surfaces of the desk and the chair.

How long could he have slept? From where had all this come? Leo scrambled to his feet, almost slipped and fell into the water, and in the stairwell pushed open the nearest exit he could find. Standing in the doorway, Leo watched rain pour from above unlike anything he had ever seen. The sky stormed down great tentacles of thunder, electric octopi withering across a starry sea. No building was visible beyond the gray haze of rain and the clotted clouds of dusk. Droplets splashed onto his face, dousing Leo's cheeks and nose, pulling him the rest of the way from sleep and drenching upon him terrible revelation. His library was flooding.

He ran back inside, irreverently splashing, where bottom shelves and their books soaked in the stormy soup. They were already halfway submerged, the lower halves of pages swollen, pregnant with the stuff. But there was still time. There had to still be time.

Leo splashed his way over to the nearest shelf and scooped up as many books he could possibly carry. He fell almost backward with the heft of all those books, maybe fifteen or twenty in the cradle of his arms, then steadied himself and traipsed back through the water and up the stairs, where he dropped the books in a puddled mess in a dry deposit on the first floor. After opening and straightening them to stop the further spread of water, he returned to the basement and again gathered an assortment of half-damp volumes.

Like this Leo continued, moving mechanically up and down, dispelling all thoughts of what could possibly be beyond the library walls. All this rain meant these words would run, all the volumes that had been the object of his studies, and when they ran, they would be forever lost. He felt as Noah and this his ark, ushering the words of those before him two by two on a

colossal boat. Once or twice he lifted more than he was able, and he cursed himself as those precious books tumbled fully into the water.

All the while he sloshed through the mounting water like a rising tide of sea, and he did not care one bit.

The water puddled up, seemingly without end. It crept in beneath floorboards and browned the room with its dampness. Nor did the thunder cease; Leo had never been on a ship, but it brought to mind the continual firing of some almighty cannon. Soon the water level reached the second shelves from the floor, and the third, and he had begun to grab arrays of books from all levels of those basement stacks: anything he could possibly reach and save. Old textbooks and treatises floated underwater and littered his path to the first floor. There was no time for Leo to mourn the books he could not save; he felt that he too in his swift motion was turning to liquid, so deeply absorbed was he in those dual concourses of thought and water.

Eventually the water rose above Leo's waist, and he had to swim to move through it, paddling with one arm and carrying books with the other.

Soon after that he could not remember anything at all.

It was almost like a summer day. Leo walked the campus with the slow movement of a sleepwalker, drifting slow out of his dreamlike trance so that he too might enter the day. He could not remember waking up, barely recalled falling asleep.

Sunlight flecks speckled the concrete paths: already the rain had become the memory of rain, and even that would soon fade. He walked alone, no one else in sight, and it felt to Leo like one of those languorous campus afternoons that seemed to exist only to complete a still portrait, a perfect, unreal cross-section of the day. In it were its purest instances magnified and distilled.

Leo could imagine the graduate student up the way, spending a summer in the books, or the freshmen who had traveled for an early session and were just now discovering liquor's sharp bite, the pleasures of flesh.

In all his years Leo had never seen the place so empty. Around him towered those colossal campus buildings, such pillars of knowledge, but try as he might, he could not see anything in them but stone. Absentmindedly he took a cigarette from a pack in his pocket and moved to light it, but they had all been soaked through in rainwater, and the soggy tobacco would no longer light.

As the sun crept higher, a hot, sticky sensation suffused Leo's skin, made him acutely aware of the places where it stretched and met bone. He scratched at his arms, pulled at the hard rubber of his cheeks, and could almost convince himself that he did not see the small flakes like dandruff that melted pink in the palms of his hands.

Was his thesis yet complete? Had the end of the world come, or was it yet to pass? The rain had struck last night with the suddenness of the body. Once dry, now torrentially down, fully formed—had it been nine months already? He tried to think of her name, her name, what was her name?

For a second he almost had it. Then his eyes seemed to dull, clouded over with aged weariness, and he knew it would never come. So hollow, so distant, like a silent shell, absent of inner ocean.

The day stretched endlessly ahead. It was not just Humbert's final unwritten volume now, but all the books that had fallen to the storm. All of them would need to be rewritten; all they had held poured from their sides like a fishbowl too full of water. For each one there would be a

thesis, a great undertaking of reconstruction and remembrance, and one by one Leo might return them to their shelves. There was much work to be done, and there would be none to disturb him.

Leo walked back to the library and returned to his manuscript.

Space Play

(Lights up on a debriefing. TERRY is alone center stage, speaking out to THE WATCHER, i.e., to the audience. THE WATCHER is never present onstage; we only ever hear the mechanical voice off.)

TERRY

It started out like any other mission. Go through reprogramming, scrub everything from the last world, and learn all about the next. You know the protocol. Ed and me got the briefings, went to redesign to get fitted, started speaking the language. Usually that's the hardest bit, to be honest—just getting accustomed to that tongue, feeling out the words, the way they all come out.

(ED enters. TERRY holds a book, practicing, with ED:)

Such language holds the solemn sea—

ED

Thuch language holds the tholemn thea—

TERRY

No, no, such, not thuch. Suh, suh.

ED

Such, such language holds—

TERRY

That's good, yeah—such language holds the solemn sea—

ED

Such language holds the solemn sea—

TERRY

To the sands upon the shore.

ED

To the sands upon the shore.

TERRY *(To THE WATCHER:)*

Everything after that generally comes pretty natural, if you've been in it long enough. Anyway, redesign gets back to us, we put the new skins on, jump around in them a bit, make sure there's

no tearing, et cetera, et cetera. Then me and Ed go into isolation for six rotations. Just speaking to each other, getting into the habits, figuring out the bodies.

THE WATCHER

And at that point, there was as yet not any signification of suspicious activity?

TERRY

No, yeah. At that point it was all business as usual still. Nothing to suggest anything might turn out any different.

THE WATCHER

And what occurred then?

TERRY

The drop-off, then, when we're ready: shuttled into the atmosphere, cosmic fire, purple sky ablaze, yadda yadda yadda. I remember those first few times it was all so exhilarating, so romantic—the possibility of first contact, the witnessing of a dying race, all that moonish stuff you hear the cadets going on about—but after a while the job's the job. You go in, you collect your data, you get the hell out of dodge before apocalypse hours. (*Beat, explaining:*) This time it was a black hole. The planet had been creeping up to the event horizon for at least a hundred revolutions, all their scientists had caught on by now. That their home world was going, and most of them with it. I remember when me and Ed first touched down...

ED

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

TERRY

Ed? You all right?

ED

Whoa. Whoa.

TERRY

Breathe, just breathe. Apparatus working okay?

ED

No, I'm fine. Totally fine. Just a little vertigo maybe. Man, it's all so...verdant.

TERRY

Atmospheric readings checking out with recon: 78 percent nitrogen, 21 percent oxygen...

ED (*Slow, with a deep inhale*)

So this is oxygen...

TERRY (*To THE WATCHER:*)

See, Ed's a bit older than me, 's had a few partners before. Takes him a second or two longer to get acclimated. Anyhow, usual protocol continues: we assimilate into the drop-off point, and pick up jobs off what recon gave us. In the first year, both of us start work at research centers at the local university, gathering everything we can.

THE WATCHER

And still not a thing in that first revolution? No indication?

TERRY

No, not really. (*Hesitating.*) Except...

THE WATCHER

Except?

TERRY

It was almost nothing. Small talk we made with the scientists at the center, I didn't even think of it at the time. Just in retrospect, you know, how these things seem to have meaning.

THE WATCHER

Which was?

TERRY

Well...

(EARTHLING #1 enters, hovering over a microscope, TERRY and ED at either side: we are in a laboratory at the university center.)

EARTHLING #1

That's incredible. It's like you can already see the effects of the gravitational pull at the molecular level: the organisms and their cells already naturally elongated.

TERRY

That is incredible. Really fantastic stuff—you seeing this, Ed?

ED

Yeah, I'm seeing it all right.

EARTHLING #1

If any of these little guys make it over the event horizon, it'll be because of this mutation. Look at them—already decked out with a doomsday gene and everything.

(EARTHLING #2 enters, carrying his/her phone in an outstretched arm, having just read the news on it.)

EARTHLING #2

Did you guys hear they're doing lotteries now?

TERRY

Lotteries?

EARTHLING #2

For the survivors. They want, like—a representative cross-section of everyone. So that way it's not all only people who can afford it, or politicians, or whoever.

ED

Huh.

EARTHLING #2

Yeah. For every doctorate a farmer, and so on and so forth. S'got to be one hell of a crew.

EARTHLING #1

Are you going to apply?

EARTHLING #2

I don't know.

EARTHLING #1

Really? Man, let me tell you, what I'd do for one of those spots...

TERRY (*To EARTHLING #2:*)

Like, what are the odds, and all that?

EARTHLING #2

It's not just that. It's like—do you really want to be one of those people? The whole world's ended and you're left drifting to the stars, one in who knows how many survivors? Always left to wonder, what if, just what if maybe, they might still be there on the other side?

ED

You really think there might be a chance?

EARTHLING #2

I don't know. I mean, sure, okay, this might be it for all of us. Or we might slip through, turn to holograms, walk a shadow earth on the other side, and really not know any different at all.

(On TERRY's next line, EARTHLING #1 and EARTHLING #2 exit.)

TERRY *(To the WATCHER:)*

So we keep working; the days go on by. At a certain point I start to think Ed's maybe dragging his feet. We're two, two and a half years in now, and we usually stay for three revolutions—never more than four. But we haven't even broached the subject of a potential endpoint yet. Eventually I bring it up to him:

(EARTHLING #2 enters. We are in the lab.)

EARTHLING #2

Hey, some of us are going to grab drinks at Exmouth, you guys want to come?

ED

I'd love to!

TERRY

Actually, Ed, could I talk to you real quick?

ED

You guys go on ahead; we'll catch on up.

(EARTHLING #2 exits.)

What's up?

TERRY

Listen, I just wanted to say: I know you're enjoying it here—and don't get me wrong, I am too—but I really think we should start thinking long-term here. You know the protocol.

ED

Yeah, I know.

TERRY

How much longer do you think you need? Because honestly I could start planning for any day now.

ED

A little while longer, actually. Let me show you something: see these soil readings I've been analyzing?

TERRY

Yeah?

ED

The very earth here has started to warp; there's evidence of destabilization at the level of plate tectonics. It's astonishing, really, in all my years I haven't seen anything quite like it. I thought this field would've been done by now, but the data's much richer than I ever could have anticipated.

TERRY

The data's rich because the planet's getting sucked into a black hole! Trust me, I get where you're coming from, but we really need to start thinking about leaving—

ED

Please, Terry, let's stay here until I finish running this analysis. Just a few months more.

TERRY (*Beat, conceding*)

Okay. Just a few months more. Once the analysis is done.

(*To the WATCHER:*)

Those few months more pass; Ed still isn't done. Meanwhile this world starts to gear itself for the singularity, you can feel that energy in the air. You can see it nights about the moon: all the shimmers of that quasar radiation. And it was somewhere around there I really started to get a sneaking suspicion. That Ed wasn't being forthcoming, exactly; for the first time, something he might be keeping from me. (*Beat.*) One night Ed had a friend over, and I was working in the study. Well, not working, exactly: waiting. Waiting for him to leave so I could talk to Ed alone.

(*EARTHLING #1 enters. We are in the home of TERRY and ED.*)

EARTHLING #1

Thanks for the smoke. I don't know why, it's not what I expected—everything just seems so much calmer these days, you know?

ED

I know.

EARTHLING #1

We get closer and closer and I can't help but feel...serene.

ED

Serene. That's the word for it.

EARTHLING #1 (*Moving to put on his jacket*)

See you at the lab tomorrow?

ED

Tomorrow it is, friend.

EARTHLING #1

I'll see you then, Ed. Get some good rest.

(EARTHLING #1 exits. TERRY, who has been watching at the side, "steps in" to the scene.)

TERRY

Ed.

ED

Terry! You missed all the fun, but here, let me cut a cigar for you.

TERRY

Ed. I want to talk.

ED

Sure thing, that's what we're doing now—talking, no?

TERRY

I want to talk about the soil readings.

ED

You do know, you and I both will be at the lab tomorrow—

TERRY

The analysis is done, isn't it, Ed? *(Beat.)* It's been done for months.

ED *(Beat, collecting himself)*

Yeah. It's been done. Been done for a long while now.

THE WATCHER

He relayed to you a falsehood.

TERRY

Yeah.

THE WATCHER

But that would be a violation of Precept Number Four-Five-One—

TERRY

I know. That's what I told him, I said to him, (*To Ed:*) that's a violation of Precept Number Four-Five-One! Ed, I don't want to report you—

ED

You're not going to have to report me.

TERRY

Come on, I know we're partners, but you've known the protocol much longer than I—

ED

You misunderstand. You're not going to have to report me because I'm not coming back.

TERRY

What?

ED

I'm not coming back, Terry. Any day now, you're going to get on that ship, take everything we've gathered here, report back to the Watchers—and I won't be coming with you.

TERRY

I don't know that I follow.

ED

I'm staying here. You'll be on the ship back to the Watchers, go on to get your next assignment, and I'll be here—waiting out the days until we reach the event horizon.

TERRY

You mean—you're telling me—you're choosing to die?

ED

You don't know that.

TERRY

Oh come on! You go in there and you'll get warped to bits! Anything else is a million to one.

ED

Terry.

TERRY

Ed, I don't understand this.

ED

Terry.

TERRY

Our job—our entire purpose, here, is to report back, to the Watchers, to remember all their customs, their knowledge, their culture, discoveries—

ED

Will the Watchers remember how we felt? Will they preserve that? Or will they drain it from us like so much rain? (*Beat.*) Listen to me, Terry. I have worked this job...so very long. It is so very exhausting, to live like this: jumping from world to world and knowing they all will turn to dust. And only able to recall glimpses of what was—inklings, ghosts, shadows in the mind. I can still remember some, in spite of the reprogramming: all those worlds, lost to time.

TERRY (*Really dawning on him*)

Ed...

ED

I'm content with what I've done. I've completed a life's work. I like these people, Terry. I like them very much.

TERRY

You're telling me you'd waste all your time, just like that.

ED

This is a world where I'd willingly waste my time.

(*TERRY is at a loss for words.*)

Please excuse me. The sun is setting, and I do not want to miss it. Good evening, Terry.

TERRY

I don't think I talked to Ed for a week after that. I was just so—how can you do that? Throw everything away like that? I couldn't comprehend it. (*Beat.*) Eventually we spoke again. I brought up every reason why he shouldn't do it, and I already knew he'd have an answer prepared for every one. But the Watchers, I told him. And he said:

ED

What are they going to do? By the time you get back to them, we'll have gone well beyond. Even their engines couldn't escape the pull.

TERRY

And what when that happens?

ED

Either we all die, or we come out somehow on the other side.

TERRY

And if it's the former?

ED

Then we all die.

(Beat. TERRY realizes that there is no convincing ED.)

TERRY

Well. Whether there's another side or you all get pulled apart, I don't think I'll be seeing you again, will I?

ED

No. I don't suppose that you will.

TERRY

Very well then. *(He holds out a hand.)* Working as your partner has truly been one of the great honors of my professional career.

(ED steps past the handshake and hugs him. Beat.)

ED

Good luck, Terry. I will not be forgetting you soon.

(TERRY moves to leave, is halfway to the exit, when:)

Terry?

TERRY

Yes, Ed?

ED

Try to remember.

(ED exits.)

TERRY *(To THE WATCHER:)*

Those were the last words Ed said to me. I collected everything, I boarded the ship, I came back. I came back—and that's everything. That's it. That is all I have.

THE WATCHER

We appreciate very much your candor with us. You have performed well; initiate a rest period. On your next cycle, please report to reprogramming; you will shortly receive then your next assignment and new partner.

TERRY

Actually, there was one other thing I wanted to ask.

THE WATCHER

Which is?

TERRY

Before I go, and everything changes again, I was hoping—I guess I wanted to know—could I keep this?

(TERRY produces a book.)

THE WATCHER

What is that?

TERRY

The practice book we used, me and Ed, for their language.

(He flips it open to a dog-eared page.)

Such language holds the solemn sea to the sands upon the shore.

THE WATCHER

The language will not mean a thing. You know this. Your memory will be reset, your name will change, soon all this will be a nothing in the mind.

TERRY

I know, I just—Ed too?

THE WATCHER

I am afraid we cannot allow it.

TERRY

But—

THE WATCHER

You know the protocol.

TERRY

Yeah, I know. *(Beat.)* I know.

(TERRY puts down the book center stage, at the center of a spot of light. He turns to leave, but when he is halfway to the exit, he stops, hesitates, turns to look at the book once more. He stares at the book, trying to remember. Then TERRY exits. We hold for a beat on the lone book, and then the lights fade.)

END OF PLAY

Night Falls

In the silence Steve watched the ocean. All about him the salt breeze beat coolly, draped his cheeks like curtains, prickled his skin with a sensation almost like touch. His eyes were fixed into the middle point of the darkness, upon the thick blue crease where sky met sea.

It was one of those long July evenings that seemed to cling onto the sun, holding fast to the ephemeral light as if a bulwark against the dark. Those gleams reflected in Steve's slick black tuxedo and similarly slicked back hair, off his loosened silk bowtie hanging limply about his neck. Dizzied in the stillness, he gripped the coarse rail of the balcony with one tremulous hand, as if it were the stern of a ship. Between the first two fingers of the other dangled a half-smoked joint.

Beneath him the waves crashed and soared.

Steve took a deep sodium inhale and in it could detect something of childhood, something of the ossified shouts of summer vacation, of the splintering of cedar wood and the kneading of sand between your toes. The old memories kept him calm, fixed his footing to the earth. There was no boardwalk here, but Steve could almost hear the delirious yells from the roller coasters up on the northern end, almost taste the buttery staleness of the popcorn.

He raised the joint, took a long hit, and let the smoke escape his lips of its own accord. It drifted up, up, up, Steve's eyes following until it could no longer be seen. He squinted. Above him was a white pinprick of light surrounded by a dim halo, and he was not sure if it was a star or not. They weren't so visible out here, and besides, he couldn't see nearly as well with his contacts in. Perhaps there was one, or it could have just been an airplane.

The sliding door opened behind him, and concurrent with the noise Steve dropped his hand in a practiced recoil so that the joint was hidden behind one of the slats. Half-hunched, he turned to see Sarah joining him outside, her soft periwinkle dress fluttering about her heels.

“Steve-O,” said Sarah. She walked up beside him—more like floated, he decided, ethereal in the breeze—and placed her hands over the rail so that her left arm was just inches from his right. In the last light of the day, her brown eyes and brown hair, usually in curls but straightened for the ceremony, accrued a shade that was closer to gold. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” said Steve. “Yeah, I’m all right. Just getting some air, you know.”

“Is it me you’re trying to convince there, champ, or yourself?”

“What, I am!” he said, and Sarah gave him a wry smile. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Gee, why wouldn’t you be? Why wouldn’t you if all of a sudden you went all pale and ran out in the middle of my speech—”

The wind wafted, and Sarah’s nose wrinkled. It was the same face she made when she laughed, her nose all scrunched up and snorting out these delicate little wheezes. Steve thought it was the cutest thing, had thought so ever since sophomore year of college when he had told her that joke about the bartender and the blind man, and he couldn’t help but smile.

Sarah was not smiling.

“Come *on*, Steve. Are you serious with me right now?”

“What?”

“You know what, don’t even fuck with me,” she said. “Are you fucking high right now?”

Behind the irritation there was such concern in her eyes. Steve looked up again, and in the sky above he saw what looked to be the exact same dot of light as before. So there must be a star, at least one. Or another airplane. How many planes passed by in one night?

“Steve, I’m *talking* to you, look at me!” said Sarah. “I am not entertaining this right now, look at me when I’m talking to you!”

He turned back to Sarah, spoke with hesitation. “Just a little bit, okay, and it’s not like I was planning on doing it anyway—”

“Steve, for Chrissake, it’s Christa’s *wedding*—”

“I know that, Sarah! I know it’s fucking Christa’s wedding, what—you think I got lost out here and all of a sudden forgot where I was—”

“Don’t you snap at me!” said Sarah. “Don’t you do that! You know how her family is, her mom’ll lose her shit if she comes out here and gets a whiff—”

“I’m *sorry*—I—I am. I’m sorry.”

Sarah sighed, folded her arms on the rail. Soft gusts whispered between them in the silence.

“But seriously, dude,” Sarah finally said, “what is up with you?”

Again Steve looked away, heaved another deep breath, gripped the rail almost imperceptibly tighter. In his other hand, between thumb and forefinger, he rolled the cylindrical lump of what remained of the joint. Now the light was even fainter, the sun all but gone, only visible in the pale flecks cast upon the undulation of the water.

“Steve?”

“I saw them again.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. Like little pools of moon they reflected her terror and recognition, and Steve rued the words as soon as he heard them on the air. Sarah moved her mouth to speak, her jaw moving like a puppet, but no sound issued.

“I knew you wouldn’t like it,” said Steve. “I’m sorry, I really—I didn’t want to say anything. Really I didn’t.”

“When did you—”

“Now. Here. Right inside.”

Sarah took a deep breath. “Steve. I was just in there, and there is nothing—I didn’t see a thing, and no one else did—”

“Sarah, I swear to Christ, *I know that!* No shit no one else saw them, otherwise the whole reception would be going nuts—”

“Steve, please—”

“No one else can see them. I don’t know why. It’s just me.” He hesitated again. “One of them was wearing Big’s face.”

“Steve, Jesus Christ—”

“Listen, you asked, okay, I didn’t want to say it—”

“Did you stop going to therapy again?”

“That’s beside the point—”

“Beside the point? That’s exactly the fucking point! You—you need to deal with this, dude, you can’t keep unloading this on me every time you have a nervous fucking breakdown—”

“Jesus, Sarah, is that what you think this is?” As he yelled Steve became acutely aware of the high in his throat and his nose; his eyes suddenly blazed with smoke. “What exactly do you think happened that night?”

She turned away from him, arms crossed, staring into the sea, or maybe at nothing in particular. “I’m not about to do this—”

“Sarah, you *know!* I know you know! Something happened, something not right—how did Big die that night?”

“This is not—we are at Christa’s *wedding*—”

“How did Big die?”

Sarah turned back to him. Tears rimmed her eyes; her mascara had begun to splotch and run. “You know how he died,” she said, “and you’re a fucking asshole for making me say it. He fell. He went up to the top floor, went out on that fixture, the molding had rotted and all of a sudden it collapsed beneath him and he fell three stories and died. Don’t you remember that?”

“Of course I remember that,” said Steve. “But explain to me this. Why do I also remember those, those shadow things—ripping him the fuck apart? Don’t you remember that? Jesus, those screams, Sarah—how could you forget those screams? The way he pleaded—he was still alive in that basement, *I know because I watched it happen!* How could he still have been alive if he had fallen before and died?”

Sarah said nothing, only turned back away. Steve sighed and turned again to the sky. There it was again, the same star-plane speckle. A dot, like a signal, flickering from above.

He looked back to Sarah. “Sarah—I’m sorry, Sarah, I’m sorry.”

Again she said nothing; she did not even look at Steve. Deepest blue filled the horizon; all traces of orange had bled from the sky. From inside the hotel seeped out music and cheers of celebration.

In that night Steve felt the house still around him. If he reached out, just far enough, he knew his hand would meet splintered wood, rotted drywall, the gazing amorphous faces and their shriveled gray limbs like the spokes of a spindle. One memory attested that it had been six years since the weekend in the house; another crooned that no time had elapsed at all.

Despite what Sarah and the others said, he remembered. He remembered running away, leaping into the truck and accelerating out of those woods as fast as it would let him. He remembered the stillness that followed on that delicate drive, the tears and the phone calls in the ensuing weeks, the sense that nothing would ever be the same, and that nothing ever was. He remembered all these things, just as he remembered every day of his life, and in between and around those recollections were always the dark truncated slivers of night, the suffocations of the shadow people, reminding him that he was still there, that he could never escape, like sweat-slickened feet pushing out against bedsheets.

On the balcony, it had become full dark. Waves crashed unseen, their salt tingle in the air. Steve looked at Sarah where she stood, barely a silhouette, runnels of light and music spilling out from the hotel. Her dress was a dark cloak, her hair the streams and puddles of ink. How could she be standing there next to him, when he knew she was dying in the room next to his?

“Sarah?”

“Yeah, Steve?”

“What if none of this is real?”

Her head turned, and Steve thought she might have smiled. “This isn’t college anymore, champ, you don’t get to keep using those fake deep lines on me.”

“I’m being serious.”

A sigh, far-off. “I know. I know.”

Inside the hotel the music changed. It was an older tune, top of the charts in their college days, a strain that Steve had not heard in years. It stirred in him a familiar youthful pull, some inebriate haze that at the time had been nothing but air. He took a step to Sarah and held out a hand to hers.

“May I have this?”

“Steve...”

“Just a dance, Sarah. One dance. All I’m asking is for one dance.”

“All right.” She stepped forward. “One dance.”

Illumed from the light that drifted from the hotel, Sarah and Steve held each other in the endless night. The music swayed, and so did they. Steve felt her head slowly come to rest on his chest, and eventually the music no longer reached his ears, he could hear nothing but the little whistle from her nose as she breathed out and in. He knew he could not be here, that this could not be real. Even now were the shadow people rending him apart, forcing his lips in the shape of ceaseless scream. Steve knew all this, but did not know why; so he could only hold Sarah close to him, could only dance as long as their song still played, could only hope absent its sound and its signal that it had not yet ended.

The waves crashed against the shore all night long.....

Into the Cave

The man crested the hill and found the cave. There it loomed, a gaping maw of forgotten times, vast and hungry in the earth. It appeared to the man not as an anachronism, but as the only true thing there was. All that had sprouted up around it—the scattered patches of bramble weed, the shallow pools of viscous gray water—seemed as aberrations of some later age. The cave recalled visions of earlier days, fog-swathed and primordial, and each step the man took returned him closer to that time. Like tracing the rings of a cloven tree to its dark center, where no circles formed.

Something had happened to this world. Something had changed the way things used to be, had whittled down the balusters of the earth into brittle unbecoming, and the man would soon know all that had come to pass.

He stopped and kneeled to open his bag, pulling out an oil lamp and a canister from underneath a thin red blanket. The man unscrewed the burner, opened the canister, and poured oil into the fount of the lamp with a slow trickle. While the wick soaked, the man thought of the distance behind and before him, stretching endless-seeming in both directions. His journey to the cave had borne him farther than he had ever traveled, farther than he had ever known anyone to have gone. On his path the man witnessed the gradual wither of society, its hands and its fingers only reaching so far. Out here there was no law, for there was no one to enforce it. There were no churches, for there was no one to build them. The man walked long and uninterrupted, only ever happening upon one other traveler: a dark-skinned man who walked a straight path that ran diagonal to his. As the stranger neared him, the man greeted him with a raised hand and the name of the Lord, but the stranger only looked at him furtively with eyes black-rimmed and hollow,

sunk into his skull. The man spoke again, but the stranger only returned silence, passing through on that same direction aslant. Perhaps the stranger spoke a different language than did the man, regarding the alien greeting with a general wariness of the unknown. The man later wondered if he had known how to speak at all.

He pulled a match from his bag and struck it on a rock, slowly brought it up against the frayed end of the wick. Hot flame blossomed up into the chimney of the lamp. The man picked up the lamp and his bag and carried on to the cave. He paused just before stepping in, peering into the black. Amorphous black, lacking any shape or name. Darkness incipient. Been there subsuming the world since the start of time, would be there beyond its end. But the man also saw something beyond the black: some glint, some flicker of light in the distance, a far-off guttering that could be neither the sun nor his lamp.

Whatever secrets the cave held, the man would find them. He walked like this resolutely into the dark.

In the cave the man saw with second vision. The guiding touch of the pale sun soon faded away, for the ground of the cave sloped deeper into the earth, leading him downward to that second, more mysterious light. In between these two lights wavered the glow of the lamp, dangling from the man's raised hand and glistening. His hand was raised for in that cave he felt he did not walk alone. That others walked with him, others of different times and different places, of bygone name and race, all coincident in this chamber, soul-laden. His own soul a mere addition to the unknown history of the cave. The man tried to sweep his lamp around to see the walls of the cave, but the flame always seemed to dim, as if the edge of the cave continually retreated from that light into blackness.

As the man went on, the sliver of light in the distance became brighter, more pronounced. It had a whitish quality to it, piercing, moon-like. Something in that light, something in the mystery of it, spoke to the man, and a feeling stirred in him, a familiar pull, which he had not felt in weeks. The light reminded him of something of his own past, a spectral hue that reflected white carnations and wedding dresses, and as soon as these memories arose within him he stifled them back. The man's duty was to uncover what had happened to this world, to find what dark things roamed in the crevices that remained, and his observations could not be tainted by such remembrances, those trifles of life, lest he become an unreliable chronicler of the earth. All past associations had to be forgotten or destroyed. The childhood trinkets, the suicides of old friends, the sweetness of love against the prickle of grass, must be rendered obsolete. The only remaining truth was to be found in the cave.

Two shapes emerged as the man came close, fuzzy first and then more corporeal: the shape of the light and the shape in front of it. The man saw it and frowned. He did not know what to think because he had cleared his mind of all wandering impressions, as to steel himself for the fantastic beyond reason. Anything could greet a traveler at the world's end, where reality commingled with some higher truth: garish beasts that had forever evaded the eyes of man, beasts so staggering and chimeric that perhaps the name of beast would not be sufficient to describe to another these things that screwed and slithered in the last cracked spaces of the earth. So the man thought of nothing, and expected everything.

Yet he did not expect the girl.

At first he could only see her silhouette, but even from afar he knew it was a woman-shape. Brought forth by the light from his trembling lamp, her features emerged more distinctly: long oaky hair, eyes gray and turbulent like puddled rainwater. One of those impish faces with

round cheeks and a pointed chin. Could have been seventeen or thirty-two. The man frowned again. He did not know what it was about her, something he did not like, recalling a memory he could not place. Something about her frame, small but intense, fragile yet full of weight. Something lithe and dark and dangerous.

The yellow of flame paled as it approached the ascendant white, and the man realized what it was that gave the light its spectral quality. Behind the girl was a pool in the cave radiating bright white light, reflecting shaky and prismatic through the cave, across its dank walls and stalactites. The man knew that the water did not glow with the light, but something inside it. Something deeper. He could not tell what it was. All that stood between him and it was her. For a moment they just looked at each other, the man squinting his coallike eyes at the girl, unsure of what lived behind that impassive stare and youthful pallor.

“Hello,” she said. “How do you do?”

The man said nothing. He did not know what to say.

“Hello, I said,” the girl repeated. “Do you speak?”

“I speak,” the man said, his voice like sand, cracked from disuse. “I speak. Who—who are you?”

“Anna. What’s yours?”

The man hesitated. “John,” he said.

“John,” said Anna. “Pretty name. Has strength in it. John.”

“Anna,” said the man, and the name felt alien on his tongue. “Who are you?”

“I told you, my name is—”

“I do not mean that. I mean there is no town out here, no nothing out here. No people even, none that I can see. How is it you are?”

Anna smiled, and her teeth were not the color of teeth but gleamed somehow whiter, nowhere betraying the texture and hue of bone. "I've been here for some time now, expect that I'll keep on being here for a little while longer."

The man turned that over in his head, did not know what it meant.

"How is it that you're here?" asked Anna.

"How it is that I am here," said the man, "is that I heard tales told. Tales of a place where all this is coming from, all the way south and then south of there. Something is rotting away the world, something is doing this. I came to this place because it must hold the answers."

Anna nodded. "Sounds about right."

The man shifted where he stood, lamp swinging from his hand. "What is it you mean by that?"

"Sounds about right, I mean," said Anna. "Like what everyone else who comes by here says."

"Everyone else," echoed the man. "You have seen others?"

Anna laughed. "I've seen many."

The man did not know what to make of that. Light danced on the walls, in the girl's gray eyes, cast about from the water, and he imagined that it must be dancing in his own eyes as well, thinking, thinking. Must have been men from a different place, a different world. Maybe they came from undiscovered countries even further south and to them the cave was just far north.

"What do I have to do?" asked the man.

"What do you mean?"

"Is there a riddle, some challenge, task I must complete? How do I get past?"

“Get past?” Anna laughed again. “Just walk around me. I can even step aside if you’d like, but there should be plenty of room.”

“But the bottom of the pool, how do I—”

“The same way any man would,” said Anna. “You jump.”

“But I—”

“You seem to misunderstand. I am not here to stop you. Just to pass the time. What you want to know lies at the bottom of the water.”

The man hesitated. “Can you—can you not just tell me? If you have been here for so long? What it is?”

Anna started to laugh again, louder than before, and it echoed back into the cave, chiming all around as if the man were surrounded by a sudden swarm of birdsong. The music of her voice stirred something in him, but the man could still not place what it was.

“You think I know?” said Anna. “Silly! I just told you, the light’s coming from down there, and here I am up here. So how could I know if I’m up here and not down there?”

“But you mean—you mean you really have no clue?”

“I could guess. But of course I could only guess as well as you, since we’re both up here and whatever it is is down there.”

The man stared into the contours of her face, the hazel of her eyes, and he knew there was something yet eluding him. “So I can just step around and dive into the pool?”

“Please,” said Anna. “By all means.”

He stepped forward, to the side and around her, and peered into the deafening light. His eyes, travel-wearied, adjusted again to the sharpness of the light. For a few seconds all he saw was a blinding white, so harsh and dizzying in contrast to the black that the man felt that his

knees might falter and collapse him into the pool. Then he saw something. Something the color of flesh and the shape of a chestnut, something that could only have been the face of a newborn child. In an instant the image floated to the top of the crystalline water like a deflated balloon and vanished, and the man mused if it could have been just a trick of the light. But another image followed, something else the man did not expect to see: a tree on fire, then a whole forest ablaze, a grove beset by red flame and a woman trapped within.

Anna watched the man with curious eyes. “Are you going to do it?”

The man held up a hand to silence her, not for a second turning his eyes away. So disfigured were these images by the fractals of the water that he could not be sure if they arose from the depths of the water or were projected on the surface, if projected on the surface or across the film of his eyes. Could they be the cause of the light, or merely another symptom? The man could not say, but he knew there was something about the woman. Something about the pained curl of her lips, the desperate look in her eyes—something he had run from then, was still running from now—but her face disappeared, retreated into the light. He could not lose it now. What she could possibly mean. The man tried to retain her face but it crumbled like sand. He pulled on threads of memory he did not know he still had—a night he had spent once in a forest, before the world had ended—but a dark image replaced the woman. Whether it was in his mind or the water the man did not know. A beast with many heads and horns writhed across a starless sky, its very essence a torture, a scourge upon the earth. Fire flashed in its obelisk eyes, and with a shudder the man realized the beast was poised over his own reflection in the water, as if it were crouching from the void behind him, readying for the strike. It was not in his mind but in the cave that the shriek pealed out, a sharp rending tear that rattled his skull against flesh and bled out *John John John JOHN*

The man spun around with sudden force, sweat beading on his brow and his lips, but there was only Anna, Anna and the man alone in the cave.

“What was that?” said the man.

Anna hardly reacted, standing still where she was, continuing to observe the man as if he were a rodent in a cage. “What?”

“Was that you?”

“I didn’t say—”

“You did not hear it?”

“I didn’t hear a thing.”

Suddenly the man did not want to know what lay at the bottom of the pool. He looked at the water, at the blank white slate of still surface, and then turned back to face Anna.

“Who was she?”

“Who was who, John?”

“The woman in the water, who was she? What was she doing there?”

“John,” said Anna, and the man winced. “I didn’t hear anything. I didn’t see anything. All I saw was you looking at the water.”

“That is all you saw?”

“That’s all.” Anna turned her head curiously, took a step towards the man, and he found himself wanting to take a step back. “Will you jump?”

The man thought. It was just a jump. Just a jump to see what was down there, take a quick look, swim back to the surface. He would have to undress, and it would have to be cold, but what was that compared to his months of travel, his days of suffering? His head throbbed with a miasma of confused images, for while an instinctual part of him urged him to draw away

from the water, to put as much distance between him and the pool as he possibly could, part of him could not think of anything except what he had seen, of anything except that night in the forest—

“Will you?”

The man did not undress. Did not even put down his lamp, and he knew he was decided.

“I do not think that I will,” said the man. He slowly walked back around Anna, his eyes fixed to hers as he did. “I think I am going to leave.”

“Okay,” said Anna. She looked exactly as she did when the man first happened upon her in the cave. The man wondered if he did too.

“You do not care?”

“Why would I?” asked Anna. “After all, I’m sure I’ll meet you again.”

“What is it you mean by that?”

“People have a funny way of coming back in the end, one way or another. It really was lovely meeting you, John.” Anna smiled, and he knew she would not give him the answers he sought.

The man said nothing more. Only turned, and retreated away from the girl and the light. He started at his normal pace, then quickened, determined to leave this place, determined not to look back. He could feel her watching him, but he would not look back. All his months of traveling had gone to waste, but the man did not care. In spite of his better judgment, of his trained lack of thought, the girl’s final words echoed in his head, and he had a feeling that he would be back here, but he did not know when. Did not want to know. Did not want to see that girl again, did not want to stand opposite her and that pool of white light. All he wanted was to see the light of day again, to walk not underneath the rim of cave but beneath the open sky.

Before the man reached the mouth of the cave, the light in his lamp extinguished, oil-dry. He walked trembling, even though he knew the path was straight out, for once again he was struck with the knowledge that days default to darkness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Ficciones*. Grove Press, 1962.

---. *Selected Non-Fictions*. Penguin Books, 2000.

Bradbury, Ray. *The Martian Chronicles*. Doubleday, 1950.

---. "Ray Bradbury Accepts the 2000 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters."

15 Nov. 2000. *National Book Foundation*, Feb. 2016, [www.nationalbook.org/ray-](http://www.nationalbook.org/ray-bradbury-accepts-the-2000-medal-for-distinguished-contribution-to-american-letters/)

[bradbury-accepts-the-2000-medal-for-distinguished-contribution-to-american-letters/](http://www.nationalbook.org/ray-bradbury-accepts-the-2000-medal-for-distinguished-contribution-to-american-letters/).

Accessed 5 Apr. 2021.

Gaiman, Neil. *Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions*. Avon, 1998.

King, Stephen. *Night Shift*. Doubleday, 1978.

Link, Kelly. *Stranger Things Happen*. Small Beer Press, 2001.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

Salinger, J.D. *Nine Stories*. Little, Brown, 1953.

Saunders, George. *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline: Stories and a Novella*. Random House, 1996.

ACADEMIC VITAE

Kiran Pandey

EDUCATION:

The Pennsylvania State University May 2021
Schreyer Honors College, Phi Beta Kappa, Paterno Fellows Program
 Eberly College of Science: B.S. Mathematics
 College of the Liberal Arts: B.A. English
 College of Arts and Architecture: Minor in Theatre

WORK EXPERIENCE:

Center for Global Business Studies Aug. 2020 – Present
 Writer and Research Assistant, University Park, PA

- Researched and wrote chapters on immigration in the U.S. high-tech and entrepreneurial industries for Dr. Fariborz Ghadar’s forthcoming book on immigrants in the U.S. workforce
- Created and managed Twitter and LinkedIn social media accounts for the Center

Office of Planning and Assessment at Penn State May 2020 – Aug. 2020
 Communications Specialist Intern, University Park, PA

- Conducted interviews and wrote articles about faculty projects, such as the Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education Initiative, funded by Penn State’s Strategic Plan
- Produced and edited short promotional videos for Penn State’s Strategic Plan

Encore Studios Summer Camp Jul. 2019
 Theatre Counselor, Bethlehem, PA

- Assisted in producing a children’s musical version of “Toy Story”
- Led children in weekly camp games and activities

The Hemingway Letters Project Jan. 2019 – May 2019
 Undergraduate Assistant, University Park, PA

- Managed a central database, conducted library research, and proofread in collaboration with global scholars to compile the letters of Ernest Hemingway for publication by Cambridge UP
- Created a reference source for Hemingway’s cables to assist in dating undated letters

Center for the Performing Arts at Penn State Aug. 2018 – Dec. 2018
 Education and Community Programs Intern, University Park, PA

- Researched and presented a community discussion on student protests and youth violence
- Developed resources for educators based around the Soweto Gospel Choir’s performance

Pennsylvania Youth Theatre

Jun. 2018 – Aug. 2018

Art Counselor, Bethlehem, PA

- Created 4 themed crafts per week with children ages 3-8
- Led children in weekly camp games and activities

LEADERSHIP & EXPERIENCE:

K-12 Math Tutor, State College Area School District

Oct. 2020 – May 2021

Director, Actor, & Tech Chair, No Refund Theatre

Jan. 2018 – May 2021

Opinions Writer, *The Underground*

Oct. 2017 – May 2019

HONORS:

Evan Pugh Scholar Award for Seniors

2020

Evan Pugh Scholar Award for Juniors

2019

Joyce Buck Division of Undergraduate Studies Award

2018

President's Freshman Award

2018