

THE
**LIT
QUARTERLY**

FICTION

Damned Machine
by Braden Timss

ESSAY

The Internet is Serious Business
by BEAST

FEATURING

Marcus Taylor
E. C. Lain
Silas Ó Gusáin
Marcus Cain
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N. L.
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The Lit Quarterly

Winter 2020

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Foreword

Whenever I'm asked what my hobbies are, I always say: reading and writing. This has been my response for nearly ten years, though it's startling how little I've read and written in that time. There are so many books and essays that I've scribbled down on my to-read list (or purchased and stacked on my bookshelf), and so many ideas for "great" writing projects that I've set aside or forgotten about, that the whole exercise has become pointlessly frustrating. Because reading and writing isn't my career, it's my hobby; therefore, there are no assignments, no deadlines, and no real motivation, except for the splashes of pleasure and accomplishment it occasionally provides. "In this regard, reading and writing is as fleeting and undisciplined a pursuit as seeking food, alcohol, or sex; sometimes the motivation cannot be ignored, while other times it disappears as suddenly as it appeared. On the other hand, unlike carnal pleasures, it's not always clear when a creative writing project is on the right path or if it can ever even be completed. Dismissing the fantastical goals of writing a great novel or living the life of a troubled artist, smoking and drinking and dying in poverty, reading and writing is always a push. Everything about it requires effort, and for those of us who are undisputed amateurs, the motivation to sustain that effort is as short-lived as it is mysterious.

Despite all this, for the last eighteen months I've been reading and writing like mad. I can't quite pinpoint what caused this resurgence in my life, but it's been good. I sense that most people of my and younger generations are becoming unwilling or incapable of reading longer books or writing nuanced and thoughtful words. I say this because one of the sources of the recent spike in my reading and writing, other than a slate of wonderful recommendations from the community, was a frightful recognition that my attention span was shortening, my dedication to serious, long-term projects was fading, and my ability to sit and read for an hour or two had nearly disappeared—all this in spite of my reluctance to use new technologies, near-complete absence from

social media, and a relatively solitary homelife. I can't imagine how difficult reading and writing must be for those who are sociable and well-adjusted to twenty-first century technological life.

This project, however, was fun. The covers of this and the previous issue were the work of Adam Whitford, who conceptualized the aesthetic design of the quarterly with minimal input from me. The works collected herein were solicited primarily from users of an online literature forum. I'm very grateful for their contributions. I enjoyed reading their writing. I enjoyed sharing my writing with them. I enjoyed reviewing and discussing the essays, poetry, and fiction with tremendously insightful and informed feedback from Jay Miller. And I enjoyed scratching the surface of small-press publishing and distribution.

So, I hope that you, the reader, enjoy the writing compiled here.

K. M. Diduck
The Camden Head Pub, London
24 November 2019

Letter to The Editor

Sir,

I would like to inform you, in accordance with good etiquette, that it is my intention to put to pen, with the aid of this publication, a brief epistle, provided that my spirit and humour persevere, for the entertainment of your votaries.

It would be improper of me to initiate this proem without an appropriate introduction. How could one adequately commend or condemn my lucubration without being acquainted with my circumstances? Therefore, I shall endeavour to familiarise you with a measure of my character and a sense of my affairs by commencing with a short account of my past life and present conditions. It is my hope that you shall not be at a loss while judging my contemplations, whether you deem them meritorious or not.

By Fortuna's grace, my birth and rearing took place in Erin's occident. Among quicks, farmlands, hills, loughlands, drumlins, and boreens, was I cultivated. The town in which I received my education was a befitting distance away, neither strenuous to reach by car nor hampering of my scenery. From neighbours and kin, I learnt folklore and history. In no small measure did this setting influence my character, for I am a lover of history and nature, and am, to a certain form of Ireland, a patriot.

My folks were lapsed farmers who bore away alternative trades from the expanding economy of bygone decades. Religious, diligent, stern, and good-natured people, they ensured my siblings and I received better education, livelihoods, and opportunities than they had themselves, and denied us no accomplishment. Alas, my pater drowned while fishing in a lough under the shadow of a drumlin two winters ago. My mater followed him across the Styx not long after, undoubtedly because of the hardships of loss her heavy heart bore. For their dedication to their parental duties, they have my perpetual love and gratitude.

Due in part to this upbringing and idiosyncrasies proper to myself, I have paced the halls of erudition and now labour in service of the public. Presently, I ponder my future vocation as I amass capital for when my mind is settled, and I decide to act on my desires. Indeed, I shall tell you that I have mulled over pursuing a career in academia or teaching at a primary or secondary level. However, I remain hesitant on selecting which path to follow. A multitude of changes are afoot in Ireland's national education system which potentially could dissuade my interests in such a vocation. Simultaneously, the surety of a post in academia has been undermined by the neo-liberalisation of the universities. After all, I may even cross the Atlantic to continue my life there.

I am conscious of the tedium this account may conceive; therefore, I will not abuse your patience any longer with a laborious recital of the incidents of my fledgling life. Opinion pieces are seldom insightful or worthy of serious attention, at least to my own mind. As I currently write this letter, I cannot help but think about the paltry yields of many English and Irish language publications. Furthermore, I am conscious of the potential futility of my current endeavour to circulate my own impressions and postulations. My 'vocabulary', which is to say my contingent set of beliefs, may not synthesise with the vocabulary of the readers of *The Lit Quarterly*. It is an inevitability that I will not please all, but I do not undertake this writing to intentionally displease any person. What of it if I do?!

I intend not to engross this publication too much at once. If you would exercise your patience, I will defer my musings to my next letter. Until then I remain your humble servant,

Silas Ó Gusáin

Controlled Faith

I.

Jacob knew why his parents had named him Jacob, and why his parents had named his little brother Job, and why his dog was named Joseph, and why his pet goldfish in elementary school was named Jonah—a lot of Js in the Bible, the biggest, of course, being the son of God himself, who also happened to be the holy saviour, Jesus. Oddly enough, the only other Jesus that ever graced Jacob's life was the hired gardener. Mama and Papa LeBaron had hired Jesús after a recommendation from one of the other pastors in town. This one worked miracles on the shrubbery from the hours of 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. every Tuesday.

South Carolina, born and bred—God's country. Where the rich go to live and the poor go to pray. Jacob had just started having doubts about himself, his family, his faith, and everything else because of a girl. But not any girl, mind you—Becka Sorenson, whose parents owned Sorenson Pizza (voted the best pizza in town by anyone NOT affiliated with his parents' church). That wasn't the point, though. The point was that Jacob was in love with Becka, even if he had never had the balls to tell her.

Homeroom was where he'd see her first thing Monday morning, her jet-black hair and gothic aesthetics making Jacob visibly aroused. He wouldn't divulge that he spent whole nights searching through pornographic websites to find images and videoclips of women who looked as similar to Becka as possible. His parents loved snooping on his PC and while two terabytes may seem like a large capacity to fill up on a computer, the folder named "bin" led to another folder named "0001" and another named "restore" which, when clicked, led to another folder named "bin4" which, when clicked, had over 1.89 TB of porn; ranging from the usual no dialogue straight-to-the-point vanilla sex to the All-American six-guys-to-one-woman gangbang. But, that was all at home,

and Jacob needed to stay focused to keep it together in class. Becca sat down next to him and looked over at his paper.

“You finish it yet?” she asked. Mrs. Kettner had assigned a five-page report on some book called *The Grapes of Wrath*, which Jacob didn’t even read. Thank God for Wikipedia—less time for papers, more time for porn.

“Uh, nah. This is for another class,” he replied. But it wasn’t and had nothing at all to do with school. In fact, it was an inventory list of all the clothing that Becca had worn throughout the year and, luckily for him, it was written in shorthand. Becca couldn’t read it when she peered over and, of course, he hoped that if Mrs. Kettner or any of the other teachers at school got hold of it, they too would be unable to read it.

Why’d Jacob know shorthand? Ironically, it all stemmed from a disciplinary action by his father. Papa LeBaron thought it wise for Mama LeBaron to teach their two sons shorthand so that when he needed a reason to punish them, the answer was simple: he would pronounce the name of a book from the Bible, which meant that Jacob or Job would have to copy the entire thing in shorthand. This kept them out of trouble while also teaching shorthand—a useful skill, since it allowed those well-practiced enough to write secret messages few could decode.

“When you finish it, can I look it over? The book is pretty boring and I need at least a C in this class or I’m gonna be cooking pizza the rest of my life,” Becca said.

“Yeah, that’s not a problem,” Jacob said as he turned away to smile.

Becca had caught onto Jacob’s crush a long time ago, but just like Jacob, she hadn’t the guts to say anything about it.

Jacob and Becca both already felt like they had the whole world figured out because they’d been working at the church and the pizza parlor since they were able to carry things and conversations. Their parents constantly gave them grief about how doing well in school was a way to make it in “the real world,” but if this wasn’t “the real world,” then what was it? Jacob always thought maybe his parents were talking about Heaven because it had been real to his family since the beginning. Becca thought that her parents meant larger pizza chains like Dominos or Pizza Hut, the competition. Jacob competed with God’s love and Becca with the advent of stuffed-crust.

*

Mama LeBaron had arrived home early with little Job in tow. The garage door opened signaling their arrival and signaling the end of

Jacob's masturbation session. He was always stopped right before things were getting interesting. No matter. He'd finish when everyone went to sleep, although the creaking of the floorboards in the house always kept him on guard. The last thing his young mind needed was a family member walking in on him with his headphones on as he pleased himself to the tune of four men in a semi-circle around a raven-haired young woman.

Mama LeBaron called Jacob's name from the bottom of the stairs as there were groceries to be taken out of the car. Job helped with light bags full of things like romaine lettuce and Gushers fruit snacks, while Jacob did the heavy lifting of Costco-size jugs of milk and laundry detergent. No doubt Mama LeBaron had an employee from the store help her load the heavier items into the car while standing watch as she was doing right then.

"Productive day at school?" Mama asked.

Jacob was trying to keep his grip on the Downy.

"Uh, yeah. Got a lot done," Jacob replied, almost dropping the Downy on his foot.

"Careful! You already started your homework?"

"I don't have any homework today."

"That's a good one. I never used that when I was your age," she said, rolling her eyes. But Jacob wasn't pulling one over on her. He always finished his homework before she got home so he'd have more time for his "extracurricular activities" on the computer.

"I have a book report that isn't due for another week."

"Good! Do that then," Mama said, which was code for "I want to start dinner and drink wine. Leave me alone." Truth was that she could have easily said that and Jacob would have just left her alone, but she had to keep up an appearance. Being the wife and co-pastor of the head of the church in a small town will do that to you.

Jacob did as he was told and went back up to his room. He could have easily begun his simulated intercourse, but he knew that Job was in the house, and the sun was still up.

Papa LeBaron would be home just in time for dinner. His schedule was like clockwork, and contrary to popular belief, he was the most honest man that Jacob had ever known. Onward to the book report. He opened up Microsoft Word and the file "GoWBR.docx" with a slightly different sequence of mouse clicking.

II.

Anthony LeBaron wiped the sweat from his brow and continued reading the Bible verses aloud in his office.

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman," he began as sweat beaded on his forehead, "both of them have committed an abomination." He balled his fist and put it into his mouth as a bead of sweat fell down the side of his face. "They shall surely be put to death," he continued. "Their blood is upon them."

He pushed himself away from his desk suddenly, his belt buckle hitting the side. From underneath the desk, Warren McHall emerged, the now 19-year-old ex-choir boy of Anthony's.

"Well, I can see that you still take the word of God seriously after all these years," Warren said as he wiped his mouth.

"That's not funny," Anthony replied.

"I wasn't trying to be funny. I was trying to be sarcastic."

"So, I guess that's how this works?"

"Yes, it's exactly how this works. You go on that stage outside and pretend to hate yourself while I wait in the wings. You shouldn't be judging what we do here by some false sense of faith you have to uphold for your act."

"I'm not acting. I have a family and I have an image. If anyone found out—"

"If anyone found out, you'd be fine. The only thing that would happen is your act would crumble. You could finally be who you really are."

Warren leaned back on the desk and arched his pelvis towards Anthony. In less than a second, Anthony was on his knees unzipping Warren's pants. As he was beginning to reach in for the kill, his phone buzzed. Lorene needed him. He put his finger against his lips and rose while answering the phone.

"Hello, sunshine!" He was as chipper as ever. Turning so he wasn't facing Warren, he continued to make pleasantries and nod while smiling. Warren zipped up his pants and began putting his shirt back on, looking over at Anthony's family pictures on the desk as he did, his focus drawn to the pure innocence of his smallest boy. Uncorrupted by his father, heavenly or otherwise.

"Yes, uh-huh, yeah, yeah, of course, sure," Anthony continued into the cellphone. He looked Warren straight in the eyes and didn't break his gaze. "I love you too, sweetie. Yes. Bye." A beep sounded in the stillness of the room.

"I guess I'll be off then." Warren turned towards the door, his eyes glazed with emotion.

“I didn’t—”

Anthony grabbed his arm.

“You don’t have to.”

Anthony watched as one of the only people he held dear in this world walked out and didn’t look back to give him some sign of reciprocation. It was damning, even for a dishonest man.

Sitting back down at his desk, he once again opened his Bible and began reading softly to himself. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick. Who can understand it?”

III.

Little Job LeBaron ran past his mother at breakneck speed. She spun out of his way and continued over to the kitchen.

“Job! Go play with your toys while Mommy makes dinner!” Lorene yelled.

Job came running behind her as she hit the garage door opener. “Alright, Mama!” Job raced past her a second time towards the splendor of the summer sun.

Lorene went back to her regularly scheduled programming of cooking a three-course meal for her family before 6 p.m. It was 4:13 according to the microwave, and as tempted as she was to use the microwave in her quest, the better answer lay only a hair over in a drawer near the bottom of the refrigerator. Barefoot White Zinfandel.

A wine glass and the bottle made their way onto the counter at Job’s pace. A few glasses and she’d be mentally on par with her six-year-old son. She got back to the task at hand.

She pulled some of the groceries out of the bags her boys brought in and unloaded the rest as she turned on the oven and got out random pans for cooking. Lorene had never been a dancer, but she had the grace of Ginger Rogers as she maneuvered around the kitchen. If her skirt had any flow, then it would have pulsated like water at dusk with her every move.

As she cooked, she thought about the lives she and Anthony had had before Jacob and Job came into the picture. Anthony came from a family of coal miners who put their faith in canaries over God Almighty. When it finally came time for Anthony to carry on the tradition, he didn’t have it in him. Told Lorene “because the other tradition was lung cancer.” Anthony’s father was already showing early signs when Anthony asked Lorene out for coffee. The coffee date had been just that though—a coffee date. It looked as if nothing would come of it until Anthony came back from a visit with his folks. There was a spark in

him, a light. It only took three years for them to be married and have a baby on the way. Prospects at the local church added to their family's newfound perfection.

But that golden age was over, and Lorene stood in the kitchen flipping chicken with tongs and preheating the oven to 450, waiting, waiting for Anthony to come home. But even when he walked through that door, she'd still be doing her duty. As she put the chicken in the oven, she thought about what a pastor's wife was condemned to, a life of duty, duty to God and to her family. With it came an emptiness, of course. Lorene prayed night after night for God to fill the void in her heart, but no answer came, and her loneliness sucked the life out of her.

Was she really lonely though? Couldn't she just call one of the parishioners' wives and make a dinner date? Maybe even Betsy Sorenson—but maybe not. Lorene had been her spiritual advisor while she and her husband Dave were trying to conceive for the second time. They had a daughter, Becka, but Dave wanted a boy, so after several unsuccessful visits to a fertility clinic, they turned to Christ. With the Good Lord on their side, Betsy got pregnant. Becka and Jacob were only toddlers on play dates together during the whole ordeal. And yes, it became an ordeal only because Betsy never told Lorene that Dave liked to get violent when he was drunk. One night after work, Dave let Anheuser-Busch take the wheel, leading to Betsy being thrown down a flight of stairs. And thus, the pregnancy and the friendship were involuntarily terminated.

Betsy was a no go. Lorene was just glad that Sorenson Pizza was doing well, and of course God had something to do with that because of the countless prayers that Lorene sent their way after the miscarriage. Anthony prayed for Dave's soul after the incident awhile, but he never got involved outside of that. Lorene wished he had. Lorene wished the whole neighborhood had, but then where would Betsy and Becka go? Lorene had to trust that it was all part of God's plan.

The oven was opened and the golden chicken breasts came out. She spun around and opened a drawer with forks in it, taking one out and quickly piercing the chicken breasts with it and then inspecting for any blood, and there was none to be found. Good, because the yellow rice was almost ready.

Lorene could hear the ice cream truck coming up the block and she already knew what was going to happen.

Job zoomed into the house from the open garage.

"Mama, I want ice cream! Mama!"

“Is that how we ask for things in this house? Besides, dinner is almost ready. There are popsicles in the freezer,” she waved her parental finger at him.

“But Mama!”

“No buts, young man! Go back out and play. I’ll give you ice cream money on Wednesday before service.”

Job let out a disgruntled sigh and sulked as he went back outside to his toys. Lorene knew how to handle a young boy now. Jacob was good practice, although she was kind of a pushover for ice cream and the like before Job was born. No longer.

She continued to work on dinner, pining over her baked chicken and rice. Something was missing and it wasn’t just her feelings of worth. But she told herself that was often the case for mothers. The general public worshiped masculine figures like Jesus and Muhammad while casting down the divinity of the greatest mother of them all, Mother Nature. But even when she could complain, she never would. In the absence of gratitude, there was nurturing.

Ah, steamed vegetables! She had remembered what was missing from the plates. A few minutes in the microwavable steam bag would do it. Top it off with some teriyaki sauce. Anthony and Jacob would want a side of teriyaki sauce to go with the chicken. Like father, like son. Job was still coming into his own, so he’d hang onto his mother for dear life until another woman led his feelings astray. Then he’d be like his father too. There was nothing Lorene could do about it.

On cue, Anthony’s car made its way into the driveway. Lorene could see everything from the kitchen out through the garage door. Anthony picked up Job and gave him a small kiss on the cheek before hugging him tight and putting him back down to play. Then she watched Anthony walk around the entrance to the garage and over to the mailbox. Anthony liked checking the mail and would scold anyone in the house if it was checked before he came home.

The slam of the door signaled the whole house to attention. Dinnertime was a precious thing in the house of a pastor, and Lorene made sure everything was perfect.

The microwave beeped. Anthony entered the kitchen and kissed Lorene on the cheek.

The vegetables hit the plate. The teriyaki hit the ramekins. Praise God.

IV.

Becka and her best friend Tori sat in the garage with lit candles and a Ouija board in front of them. Tori rolled a cigarette and hummed some tune by The Cure. They were both dressed in black from head to toe, widows of their girlhoods.

"This is frivolous," Becka said.

Tori's humming stopped as she finished licking the paper. "Well, who do you want to try and contact? You have to have a set goal before you mess with anything paranormal. It's like in the rulebook or something," she replied.

"This thing would be a lot cooler if I could just ask it who had a crush on me or something."

"You already know the answer to that."

Becka turned her head so Tori wouldn't see her blush or smile. Tori lit the cigarette with one of the candles and took a drag.

"You're not gonna make me one?" Becka asked.

"You're a big girl." Tori passed the Zig-Zags and the tin of tobacco. "But yeah, we both know that Jake has the hots for you."

"Shut up," Becka said as she lost her grip on the tobacco for a moment and spilled some on the board.

The guide on the board moved a hair as Becka and Tori looked down at the fallen tobacco. In a single movement, they both jumped back on opposite sides of the board.

Becka looked Tori straight in the eyes, fear causing her pupils to tremble. "Did you see that? Tell me you saw that."

"I saw it, I saw it!"

"What do we do now?" Becka whispered as the guide moved again, slowly this time, to the letter "W". Both girls began to cry in silence. Their dark makeup smeared down their face.

The guide moved again. To the letter "A". Tori wiped her face with her sleeve and grabbed the paper out of her backpack.

"Huh?" Becka exclaimed.

"I'm gonna take down whatever it says," Tori whispered. "So far, 'WA' is all there is."

The guide moved again. And again. And several more times. Becka smoked a rolled cigarette and watched the event unfold.

After 20 minutes or so, Tori had something. The guide had stopped moving. She gave the paper to Becka. "WAR RENT HE BOY NOT SAFE" was written down in trembled handwriting.

"That doesn't make sense, what the hell is 'War rent?'" Becka whispered.

The guide flew to “NO,” and the candles blew out. Both girls decided they’d had enough.

V.

A toy firetruck was all little Job needed to keep his mind occupied while his family tossed and tumbled inside the house before dinner. Job could smell the chicken from outside. He loved chicken just as much as any young boy, but he still felt a slight tinge of guilt when he’d remember visiting a farm and petting the chickens. As he played with his toy truck, he remembered watching one of the farmhands grab a chicken by the neck.

A pair of shaved legs stood in front of little Job. He looked up, and the face was obscured by the sunlight. Then from the darkness of shadow, as the figure picked him up and carried him to an unknown car. Once in the car, Job could see his face. He was a stranger.

The man didn’t look much older than Jacob and he seemed to be mumbling things about another man named Anthony. He remembered his mother saying “Anthony” to his father when they’d argue sometimes. Job continued to ponder and play with his toy truck.

“You sure are quiet,” said the man driving. “How old are you?” Job didn’t react and continued to play with his toy truck.

“Alright, I get it. You don’t talk to strangers. Is that it?” the man asked.

Job turned his head and watched the trees pass by. He looked over the road and could see little blades of grass coming out of the cracks every ten feet or so.

The man was right, but both Job’s mother and father had told him never to talk to a stranger no matter what. There were never any instructions on what to do if the stranger picked him up and put him in an unknown vehicle. He had reached out towards the open garage slightly. “Look, kid, it’s going to be a lot easier for me to do what I’m about to do if you stay quiet.” Job counted the cracks.

“Say something—anything that’ll change my mind!” the man shouted.

A tear fell down Job’s cheek. The man’s hand reached out for his neck. Job didn’t fight the warm embrace. He just counted the cracks—one by one.

—Robert James Cross, 34, San Diego CA

Bitter

Sons of a generation with a shelf life
Never making it past expiration.
Hit after hit, week after week:
The heat's forgotten, replaced, upstaged by the new melody,
Breathing another breath of fleeting joy,
Entangled in the rhapsody, intense pleasure fills your soul,
The cavern, the hole left in your heart, dissolving rapidly,
Leaving your bloodstream yearning for ecstasy.
Meaning is given as you relish the moment:
The sweet forever that whispers half-promises
You'll never forget it until the next one comes up,
Forging a peace you were told you believed was real.

Your touch wasn't deep enough,
You never left a mark.

Peel your eyes away,
Clamour for your youth;
It's the one thing you had—
Wasted on a cheap thrill.
Pure joy and adulation that filled your heart
But never took root, never grew, upset,
Doomed.

All debts are collected, all roads come to a cliff.
Jump for pleasure, the memories, the scars—
The thought remains, yet cast aside,
Drowned in sorrows that soured.
Senses lapse, dulled and chipped away,
The taste no longer familiar,
Having changed with age—
You've forgotten who you are.

—Marcus Cain, mid-20s, Florida

Thunder's Revolt

I saw a description, today, of how literary conflict has evolved. The classical theme of Man vs. Nature has been displaced in modern society with "Why should I care about this?" being asked by sub-mediocre high school students. There is little relevance in won wars; man has emphatically subjugated his protagonist. Why else does nature only play adversary when the author removes man from his comforts?

This is what Nicole had written in yesterday's journal entry, July third. She was sitting by the broken TV—a victim of the jaws of time and planned obsolescence—on a piece of furniture too small to be called a sofa, yet still managing to occupy almost the entire space.

Lit up like daylight, sharp shadows were cast on the fading wallpaper; Helios momentarily awoken by Zeus' bolt. Hopefully it wouldn't wake the upstairs; post-midnight had been her only solitude these past weeks. Her feet rested on a half-height table, among pens and scrap paper left from some game her sister had invented earlier that day; Nicole could not remember the rules. She resented how little she'd been reading. In her hands now rested Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; the first half, at least, a work of genius. She felt compelled to jot down the passage she had just read:

"The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free."

The outside was again bathed in pale white—returned, just as suddenly, to darkness. Monstrous tears pounded on the cabin's walls. Nicole sat safe, of course, behind double-insulated windows. Some three candles provided insufficient light to read comfortably in, but it'd seemed uncouth to intrude on Kronion's show with electric lights.

For once, the task of illumination was handed back to nature—only partially, of course.

As Marlow made his way down the Congo, Nicole was no more in the hands of any monster than during previous moments of her life. The belated heavenly growl at last reached the cabin. A squeak above—Nicole jumped. The pattering of small feet on old wooden stairs. A little girl came into view.

“Sofie, why aren’t you asleep?” she asked. The little girl yawned, then answered:

“I can’t. The thunder is scary.”

She shivered under her night gown—pale pink starred white. Nicole beckoned her over and wrapped her arms tightly around her sister.

“It’s okay, don’t worry. The thunder’s only loud, not dangerous.”

The little girl hugged back, tighter.

“But what if it hits us?”

Of course, they needn’t have worried—the nearby radio tower had a lightning rod and thunder would strike the surrounding forest first anyway—but that didn’t matter to a six-year old; Sofie was still relatively untouched by the arms of rationalism. While man had conquered nature, he had not conquered his innate reverence. What she eventually said was:

“Don’t worry, you’re safe with me.” She pecked Sofie on her left temple. The girl smiled.

With Sofie in her lap, Nicole gazed outside, into the occasionally dispelled darkness, her sister wincing at every strike. Sofie had shut her eyes and, under loving silence, responded less and less to each flash.

Grasping after a thought, Nicole picked up a pen. On a nearby scrap she scribbled:

Thunder is the revolt of a monster domesticated. Even more than a century ago, Conrad’s contemporaries were shielded from its whims. And in the fires of modernity, the shackles have been re-forged. As spectators in the Colosseum, we watch with fascination its terrible strength, from total safety.

Nicole finally let the late hour catch up with her. She would sleep soundly tonight, lulled by monstrous growls.

—E. Erasmus, 18, Scania, Sweden

I

I am eye.
Mystic reflection
Within God's
Eye.

An open door.
Witness to realms
Beyond creation.

Existence
In spite of
Nothing,

Eye and I.
Misfit replication
Within God,
I.

—Sean Michael Patten, 29, Fairfax VA

Discarded Machine

She was a lonely gray machine
Surrounded by her dusty wires
Solemn, unmoving lay her screen
Waiting until her time expires

Her novelty was so long past
She used to entertain the crew
She always thought that she would last
For centuries, like a statue

Yet now they all could make her wait
So, she stood still, her function slowed
She could not even ruminare
On how her parts would just corrode

When she no longer worked at all
They tossed her for the new model
Now there's no one who could recall
The machine they used to coddle.

—N.L., 22, Michigan

Swallow

It was hard for him to say exactly when the problem had started, so when he was asked, he tried to look back into his memories and find the time when he first mentioned it out loud to someone. He remembered one time at work when someone had brought in some cookies they had made and offered him one, and he had declined, saying, “Sorry, I can’t swallow anything without drinking something.”

That must have been at least six or seven months ago, but he felt that his issue with swallowing had been going on for longer than that. It took him an hour and a half to eat dinner, sometimes two. How long does it take normal people to eat? He almost never ate with someone else, so he had no one to compare to. He lived alone and always went out alone on his lunch breaks.

This was one of the rare times a year he shared a meal with other people. He was home for Christmas and his mother had noticed how slow he was eating, and he explained to her that he needed something to wash down every bite he took, or else it felt like he would choke; like the food tube was too narrow, and that was why he ate so slow.

“Seven months?” she had asked. “You’ve been living like this for seven months?”

“Probably longer.”

“And you never thought about going to a doctor?”

“I guess I got used to it.”

She got mad at him and he promised to take it more seriously...that it could be something serious. His mother worried about him for the rest of his stay, bringing it up several times and making him promise again and again to see a doctor. He felt guilty about ruining Christmas for her, and probably for everyone else too.

When he got home again, he found an ear, nose, and throat doctor who had gotten good reviews on a couple of websites, and booked an appointment. He googled “How long does it take to eat?” and a lot of

people had answered “ten to twenty minutes,” which to him seemed almost like exaggerations.

The following weeks he tried his hardest to swallow without the assistance of water, but he couldn't do it. He had to go over to the sink and lean over it, in case he choked and would have to eject the contents of his mouth. He had done this straight into his plate twice: just spat out mouthfuls of chewed food on top of the fresh, pristine food, and, frankly, it disgusted him.

He daydreamed about accidentally doing this in public. He could see himself disgust everyone around him, or someone filming him and posting it online and becoming a reaction gif people would use when they wanted to show their disgust for something.

He became reluctant to eat anything outside of his home. He took every meal standing up by the kitchen sink: bite—drink—lean over sink—chew—swallow. He looked at the clock and felt the pressure to finish in twenty minutes, but every time twenty minutes had passed and he looked down at his plate, he could see that he was nowhere near finished.

He had seen videos of how to do the Heimlich maneuver on himself and had set up a chair he could thrust himself on in case of emergency, thinking it would calm him down to know that he would be prepared. But the chair only stressed him out more. It loomed in the corner of his eye, a reminder that he wasn't normal. Normal people didn't eat like this.

He hesitated to swallow on every bite. Sometimes, when the action of swallowing had already been set in motion, he stopped midway, which was very scary and made him spit out in panic and cough as hard as he could to get every piece of potentially lodged food out of his throat.

His chewing was thorough. After two hours of relentless chewing, his jaws felt cramped. He often just gave up, still feeling hungry with most of his meal spat out into the sink in front of him.

Soon, all he ate was blended soups and cereal, but even that was hard to do without water, and could take almost an hour. He mourned this, and missed being able to eat whatever he wanted. He enjoyed cooking and subscribed to several cooking channels on Youtube, and had spent countless hours researching knives and pans and bought the best of every kitchen tool he would ever need, and then a couple of things he didn't need, like a dehydrator and an ice cream machine (both very expensive), each used one time then returned to their boxes again and stowed away under his bed. He had even bought several cookbooks, which he knew was unnecessary because every recipe could be found

for free on the internet anyway, but he liked to look at the nice pictures in them once in a while.

He made a big batch of potato soup in his enameled cast iron Dutch oven and blended it with an electric hand blender, and made a big scratch in the enamel by accident. A frustration had been building up an unbearable knot in his stomach; it tightened up hard inside of him and he got really angry with himself over scratching the expensive oven. He couldn't remember the last time he was this angry. He had memories of himself as a child screaming so loud it messed up his voice, while simultaneously banging his head on the floor until he saw colors cascade under his eyelids, but he couldn't remember the raw emotion of it anymore.

He wasn't a violent man, but he felt like he really had to punch something. He decided that it had to be his sofa. If he was going to punch anything, that was the most sensible thing to assault: it wouldn't break and it wouldn't hurt his hands too much. He landed several good blows in quick succession. He didn't care if a neighbor saw him through the window as he did it. *Fuck it*, he thought. He punched as hard and as fast as he could.

It felt good being an uncontrolled maniac, but it exhausted him. He felt like saying something cool to end with. He kicked the sofa and, almost entirely out of breath, said, "There, you fucking faggot." But he immediately got embarrassed. He didn't know where that had come from, and was glad no one was there to hear it. He had a daydream of him blurting that word out in front of his coworkers and getting fired on the spot, getting black-listed, becoming unemployable, living out the rest of his days as a vagrant.

He googled his symptoms and every website he looked at had the word cancer on it. There were, of course, other words and other causes, but none of them seemed as obvious as cancer. His doctor's appointment was coming up and he mentally prepared himself for the diagnosis.

Whatever happened, it would be good news, he thought. Either it's nothing serious, or it's cancer and I'm going to die, and then I won't have to do this anymore.

When he was a teenager, he had made a pact with himself to commit suicide at thirty years old. It had seemed like a big number then—thirty—and he didn't see how he could possibly endure being alive for that long. Thirty had come and gone faster than he thought, and he wondered if it was a mistake to not have honored the pact he had made. Nothing stood out to him as something he would have regretted missing out on if he'd just ended it years ago.

He daydreamed about telling his mother about his cancer. She would burst into tears, and he would comfort her, saying, "It's alright, I don't want to live anyway, you don't have to cry." This would send her absolutely wailing, and he would wish he hadn't said it to her. He repeated this scenario in his head over and over.

The doctor asked him some questions and he answered them stoically. He had decided to face this as a man. The doctor sprayed some kind of numbing fluid down his nose and asked him to inhale it as far back as he could, down his throat. The doctor tilted his head back and inserted a fiberoptic cable into one of his nostrils to get a view of the larynx.

"Say ahhhh."

"Aaaa."

"No louder: *aaahhh*."

"Aaaah."

The doctor pulled out the cable.

"There's nothing wrong, everything looks fine."

"Really?"

"Yeah, some people just strain the muscles around their throats too much, I think that's what you're doing. I can hear it when you talk. You speak in a low sort of strained voice, like you're tightening the vocal cords too much."

"I do?"

"Yes. It's probably just anxiety, or stress. Some people can go their whole life tensed up like that when they don't have to. I could send you to a speech therapist, or a psychiatrist if you want."

He thought about it for a few seconds, but declined. What could they tell him? To relax? He didn't need to pay them to tell him that.

He bought a big steak on his way home. Meat had been something that had been particularly hard to chew and swallow, so he had avoided it.

He sat down in front of his computer screen, put on a podcast he could listen to as he ate (on 1.5 speed to save time), and cut off a piece of the meat. He began chewing, knowing that there wasn't anything stopping him from swallowing it—no lump blocking the way, no unusually tight esophagus. He was just like everyone else, physically.

The meat seemed to grow in his mouth. Maybe he had been overconfident and the bite was too big. Maybe even a normal person would need water for this. He drank and made the next piece smaller.

The problem remained. There was no way he could swallow this on his own. He knew it was all in his head, but this knowledge didn't help him. It was like the rational part of his brain was cut off from commu-

nicating with his throat. He paused the podcast and took the plate back to the kitchen and he finished it there, leaning over the sink.

His mother called him, knowing that he'd been to the doctor earlier, and was anxious to know what the doctor had said. "He couldn't see anything wrong with me."

"Oh, thank God."

"Yeah."

"So, you're fine, then? You feel fine?"

"I'm feeling better."

"He couldn't say why you've been eating like that?"

"No, I don't know. It's just the way that I am, I guess. Nothing I can do."

—E. Thelin, 28, Stockholm

Vector

This is not for you.

He wanted to go back. He wanted to reverse the irreversible. He wanted to reset all of the decisions he had made. He just wanted to think it all through again. He wanted to make a catastrophic event less painful. He wanted time to bend to his will, to make everything right. He wanted to prevent all that went wrong in his life, but he was at the mercy of time.

The wind carved into his exposed flesh, but this discomfort was nothing compared to what he felt after what he had done. He entered his university campus, which sat on a steep hill overlooking the town. His breath had not yet caught up with him as he choked on his sadness, a sadness which burned the back of his throat and made him slowly begin to tear up, leaving behind a bitter taste in his mouth. *So this is the taste of lost love*, he thought as the frigid winds scooped up loose bits of garbage and newspaper and flung them away.

Life wasn't always easy, but it felt so much harder as he crossed the campus. After what he had done, he never felt the same. The shortness of breath, the slight sense of choking, it reminded him of his usual hikes back to his dorm; he would be winded when he reached the top, but at least there was the cliff that provided him with a view to show him how far he had come.

He opened the door to his dormitory and the wind trailed leaves behind him, as if the wind wanted to keep him company. He climbed the stairs with an uneasiness that was horribly familiar from his relationship with her. It felt as though every trivial action became more exhausting, climbing the stairs became a challenge. Opening the door to his dorm with difficulty, he collapsed on the bed.

He could only stare at the wall while his mind was at work. Emotions attacked from all sides; a war that seemed to go on for so long, yet it had only started a day ago. He leaned over and saw the note

from long ago, from a past that he had disconnected yesterday. When they were connected, she would write to him and he would reply. It was her idea to write letters; it was one of her phases. He stared at the contents, barely reading the words on the paper. The prose was intricate, as if the writer was disarming a bomb that could detonate at any moment. He remembered how he would write to her, at first tender and focused, but as time went on, he would only pen what she wanted to hear. This was his attempt at disarming the bomb that lay between them, which would stop the countdown and reset, buying them more time. Yesterday, he severed the connection: he cut the red wire that had delicately held them together. He believed that some good would come from this destruction, but now all he could see were the remains.

Sometimes the food he ate made him sick. He kept plenty of leftovers in his fridge. He read how battalions of troops would fight without any food, battling against all odds to achieve victory. Maybe his mind wanted to go against all odds and change the course of his history. He imagined an explosion in reverse: he saw the fire and smoke retract and converge on a single point in space, the debris reassembling itself. He slouched over and looked out the window, the wind rustling the trees violently. A tear escaped from the corner of his eye. He closed his eyes, attempting to envelop the cold and bitter world in darkness.

He stepped outside his dorm and the air lashed against his face. Lighting a cigarette, he pondered whether or not she was happy about this, if she was relieved that it was over. *Had she ever wanted to cut the red wire?* He inhaled deeply and, as he exhaled, a dark cloud escaped his lips. *Maybe she wasn't meant for me.* He walked around in a small ellipse, stopping to diminish his cigarette. He looked at the sky and saw the stars above. He began to play a variation of connect the dots until the wind whipped him again. He looked away and started heading for the door. *Maybe she didn't want this to happen, maybe she is just as upset as I am.* As he slowly headed for the door, he felt as though he was going backwards, the door stretching further away from his grasp, terrain generating and pulling him away. It felt as if something was forcing him away, like he didn't even belong to either her or his dorm.

At this point, what was the worst that *could* happen? The worst had already happened. He wanted to go back to the days when life was simple and carefree, unlike now where it feels cold and heartless.

He remembered reading about how time could be an illusion, a measurement used to solve calculations and nothing else; as if the past, present, and future were taking place all at once. Maybe his heartbreak was longer than a day or maybe it had only *felt* like one day when it could have been a year, a decade, a century, or even a millennium...

He questioned whether or not he truly deserved this punishment: years of commitment vaporized by one sentence and obliterated with one action. It amazed him how something so small could mean so much...like a split atom, microscopic in size, obliterating a city. The littlest things always escalated into something more, and eventually became problems he could not fix.

He remembered seeing her for the first time, how he knew that she was the one for him. He remembered their conversation, at first distant, then becoming more engaged. He remembered their conflicts that ended as abruptly as they had begun. He remembered their first kiss. He remembered the time they spent together...was it all for nothing?

Maybe if he kept thinking about it, he would never change and never learn from his experiences. All of the repeated errors and problems he had made were problems that he could not fix—*I will never learn*, he thought. He opened his refrigerator door, which projected a beacon of light in the dark void of his dorm. He left the door ajar and popped the can open, the sound reverberating in the silent room. He took a swig of beer that burned its way to his stomach.

He finally closed the door, enveloping himself in darkness. After finding his bed, he stared at his ceiling for what could have been a minute but seemed like an eternity. *What if it was all fruitless? What if it meant nothing?*

He abruptly got up, his head swirling and feeling light at such a dramatic change in orientation. He knew what he had to do. He began finding and collecting all of the memorabilia and souvenirs that he had with her: pictures, letters, mementos...He was heading towards a stack of photographs when he suddenly stopped and felt tears trickle down his face. He stood there for what could have been a second, but felt like eons, trying to fight back his emotional episode. He had to do this, he had to change...

Gathering these mementos reminded him of packing for university, the way he had packed his things in silence. He realized how fast his life was going; how it seemed to slip by without him noticing. This made him indecisive on his next move, in fear of losing time.

He gathered the final scrap, the final scrap of her, his hands full and his mind racing. He knew this was for the best, but there was a side of him that didn't want to do this, a defiant side that only wanted him to cherish his past memories. But he knew that it was fruitless to contain the very things that upset him. He could not let the discomfort of a cold and dark night interfere with what would come with the next sunrise.

He remembered that as he opened the door to his room ready to leave, a big gust of wind shot through the door, as if saying that he shouldn't go; like the wind resisted his departure, just like she had.

When he ran down the stairs with the pictures and souvenirs, his foot slipped on one of the stairs and he fell down a long way. Photos and the other objects flew all over the place. With an audible groan, he got up, and began collecting them again. After collecting all of the pieces, he pushed the exit open with his shoulders, and a vicious gust of wind started biting at his exposed flesh. He had forgotten to wear a jacket for this, but it was okay, he was only going to be out there for a few minutes.

He ran to the far end of his dorm building which lead him to the cliff. The wind was getting treacherous as he stood on the summit, looking down at the drop far below and up at the horizon ahead of him. *This will be the spot*, he thought. He then threw all of the fragments of her that he had collected in the box, threw them into the wind and over the cliff. He watched as the memories of her descended into the darkness, never to be seen again. Time stood still, his heart skipped a beat, but he knew it was for the best, and as he watched the photos, the papers, the letters, and the notes they'd passed in class disappear from his life, becoming a distant memory, the wind no longer troubled him.

He noticed that he still held a stack of photographs that he'd neglected to throw away. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, he remembered these photos. She had an interest in photography, it was one of her phases. He remembered these photos like it was only yesterday. He looked at these images and shuffled them into an order, a sequence, a passage of time.

He looked at them and saw high quality pictures of his house, himself, him and her together, him and her kissing passionately, her hands holding his, scenes of nature, walks together, smiling faces that made him feel dejected, as if he was trying to convince himself that this was not him. The remainder of the pictures were of the car ride home, the final kiss before getting out of the car, him walking alone to the front door of his house. And the final one was a picture of her, gesturing a heart to him, with a face of true passion, of true longing and desire, but it was then that his eyes became blurred, and he began to sob.

He wiped his eyes and reorganized them, putting the photos in reverse order, and watched as she gestured her love for him, him walking to the front door of his house alone, the final kiss before getting out of the car, the car ride home, the smiling faces, the walks together, nature, her hands holding his, him and her kissing passionately, him and her together, himself, and the final picture of his house.

Regardless if he went backwards or forwards, he would always be alone. He choked back his final cigarette and then threw it away. He looked down on the reversed pictures, and he tossed them in the wind.

The sequence scattered, events fragmenting into disorganized memories, pictures of him and her flying away, far from each other as the wind cruelly separated them one last time.

As he walked back, he continued to cry but began to feel unburdened. He looked up at the sky, which became lighter as the seconds went by. *I am free*, he thought, *I am free, I am free, by God, I am free!* The wind died down and seemed to caress his skin as he thought of this. As he approached the dormitory door again, he realized that the vertigo had left. He then ascended the stairs with ease and his stomach growled for his leftovers, and he realized how the most difficult problems were those that had the easiest solutions.

He wanted to go forward. He wanted to see himself passing his final exams. He wanted to see himself graduate. He wanted to see himself find a new girl. He wanted to get married and have children. He wanted to watch them grow up, and to grow old with his wife, and he wanted to die fulfilled. Time no longer tormented him. He was in control, he was free, an entity that didn't *control* time, but could control his life, and as he looked back, he only wished he was in control sooner, like a passenger aboard a train, a vector moving in one direction, but able to step off the train at any station. He would look back and see how far he had come, like he did with the cliff. He would get off the platform and make his way outside at his destination. Then he would be free from the winds that have assailed him, free from the bitter taste of lost love. Only then would he be free.

—Marcus Taylor, 25, Houston

Judgment Upon Uruk

“I, Enmerkar, King of Larsa, appointed by the Divine Lord of Utu, in accordance with the will of Anu, Heavenly ruler of the Annunaki, inform you, Eneduanna, High Priestess of Uruk, of the sentence you are to receive. This verdict has been conducted by the form of our sacred laws and the agreed will of the Larsan Judges.

“I, Enmerkar, am the prosecutor of your sin. I rule Larsa as you rule Uruk, and hence you will be accountable for any and all actions that stem from your red city. This sentence for your crimes I send back to Uruk chiseled in granite, alongside your harlots that have walked amongst us, now exiled back to whence they came.

“The court has found you, Eneduanna, guilty of the following offenses against the Kingdom of Larsa: You are guilty of murder, adultery, theft, false witnessing and coveting. You are guilty of corruption, degeneration, fornication, enslavement and sacrifices conducted on the citizenry of Larsa. You are guilty of attempts at bribery, seduction, whoring, threatening, unfair mercantile practices and trading in forbidden goods. Most of all, you have been accused of unprovoked war-mongering against my Kingdom, and, indeed, the court has found you guilty thereof.

“Packs of red-clothed men have prowled in our lands, and in the lands of others. Lions hailing from your arid plains have prowled in our lands, and in the lands of others. No longer can we ignore the rapine and filth that flows from your Uruk. We remember when Uruk, once a small merchant’s town on the banks of the river, knew its rightful place in the world. Now it has become cursed with your presence, and we are forced to destroy those who we once held in friendship. Judgement is upon you, Eneduanna, High-Priestess of Uruk.

“Your high walls will be leveled to the ground, and your high gates shall be burned with fire. The labours of your people will be for nothing, because they shall cease to exist. You have broken sacred laws of the Heavens and your actions have angered those around you. I, Enmerkar,

King of Larsa, will ensure that you will drain the cup of wine of fury and wrath. The idols you have so pridefully raised to yourself will be dismayed and put to shame. I shall make your city desolate, and none shall dwell in it; both man and beast shall flee away or will not live to see the next dawn rise. All your luxury and vain splendor will vanish, never to be seen again.

“Never again will a people purchase your cargos of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; of fine linens purple, silk and scarlet; of all kinds of citron wood and every article of ivory, precious wood, bronze, copper and marble; of cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh; of wine, olive oil, fine flour, and wheat; of cattle, sheep, oxen and arms; of slaves and souls of men. Your great marketplace will become a ruined memory, your fortunes brought to dust. You false prophetess! Whatever tainted blood flows through your veins, we reject it.

“The sentence we give you is death: The Court of Sumer demands your head. Death to you, Eneduanna, High-priestess of Uruk. Death to you. And I, Enmerkar, King of Larsa, will carry out your execution. I, Enmerkar, King of Larsa, declare war upon you, Eneduanna, High-Priestess of Uruk.

“My men cannot break as long as the sun shines. Utu, God of Sun and Justice, withers you, oh Witch of Uruk. Summer is my domain.”

—Zawisza Maximilian Metz, 25, Amsterdam

Paramour, Rêve d'amour

I wake up in love with my dream girl,
Who looks suspiciously like someone I work with—
She's studying the same thing as me and we talk 2-3 hours a week.
We have dream dates once every few months.
She's a kept woman, locked away in my fantasies.

Our first date, she asked me out and I agreed out of pity.
We had a nice dinner then took a cab home.
It was pouring rain and we were standing at her door
When she asked:
"Would you kiss me?"
I hugged her tightly, gave her a kiss goodbye
And walked away.

I told my wife the next day,
Almost paralyzed by guilt,
And she responded: "That's really sweet of you."

—Joseph Murphy, 25, Provo UT

Pleroma

The machine twists our minds into such funny shapes:
Grey-matter dinosaur nuggets,
Bleached and prostrate
Orifices! Orifices! —Hail the great stomach, immanent,
We fuck for its benefit,
We tear from its ligament.
Intricate, the patchwork of minds.
Haeceitic, that taunt and caress.
Effluence,
From asses to mouths, to asses in mouths under duress.
I ripped my jeans to get fucked by you.
Please love me,
You are me.
In the eye of our shell and symbols,
You're all me... *get out!*
But please, I'm begging you, please fuck me.
Validate the clothes I put on.

—E.C. Lain, 19, Georgia

She Weeps

“Do you miss Childrens?” she asks under her breath.

“Every day.”

We shared two twin beds in a large, white room with the small, bullet-proof glass windows and the courtyard with cherry trees.

There she talked about the pills, and I wore long sleeves but told the truth.

*

It’s only been a few months since the feel of rubber cinders flying under track spikes was my daily ritual no more. I rush across the six-lane street, hopping over bushes and ducking under trees, and I am back at track practice, in a race, running because running hurts and I want someone to ask me why I want to hurt.

Until I see a Barbie tricycle sitting outside on someone’s front porch. I used to have a tricycle just like that. I stop, smooth back my hair and knock on the door. I tell the woman who answers that I’m lost and need to call my mother. She lets me in.

“Mom, you need to come pick me up right now. This place isn’t what they say it is. It’s a prison. I don’t have time to explain how I’m calling you, you just have to trust m—”

A knock at the door. The woman looks at me as she opens it. The staff grab my arms and drag me away, shove me into the van with eight other girls. I know they will try to make an example of me, that I won’t be able to go outside for a long time. The woman’s eyes follow me as we drive away.

My parents aren’t coming. No one is coming. I sit in the back row of the van. Tears drip down my cheeks. Brittany sits next to me, grabs my hand, holds it.

*

I'm doing my chores for the morning, scrubbing the basement floorboards when my roommate rushes to me and whispers that I must come with her.

"Why?"

"Just come."

She takes me to the bathroom down the hall. Cleaning it is Britany's chore this week. My roommate pushes the door open.

Brittany is lying on the floor with cleaning gloves covering her arms up to the elbows, an empty bottle of Pine Sol just out of reach, the cap resting against the base of the toilet. There's a small, clear trash bag over her head, tied clumsily at the neck. Yellow streaks run across the bag, yellow pools collecting at the bottom, framing her neck. I pretend it's gold, a halo keeping her safe.

My roommate looks to me, asks if we should call the staff. I see Brittany's eyes blinking beneath the clear plastic, no longer the same bright blues that used to comfort me in the hospital surrounded by pink petals and cherry trees.

I wonder why it's my decision to make.

"No. Go do your chores. I'm going to stay with her."

I shut the bathroom door behind me, lower myself to the floor beside her. I take her hands in mine. Her head turns, so slowly now. So slow.

Blue eyes look into green. The room swims, wetness in everything.
Goodbye.

Goodbye for now, bluebird. I'll see you on the other side.

—Caitlyn Ann Thompson, San Diego CA

Lotus Eating

I walk out of the train station already pretty drunk, even though it's only five. My parents are out of town, so this is a rare chance to get hammered and have a night out. Tristan and I pre-drink at his place after school, and then we head to the train station to grab some beer—I'm the only one with a legit ID, and it isn't worth getting into trouble right before graduation so I buy the beer. We load up our backpacks with Rothaus and Schöffelhofer in front of the cashier, who gives us an unimpressed look as we hold up the line behind us.

As we walk out, I look over at Tristan and ask him if he has a cigarette. He shakes his head, "Fresh out," and heads towards the tram station. I start asking random people along the way; smoking feels so good when you're drinking. I ask a man on the sidewalk: "Haben Sie eine Zigarette?" I'm proud that I used the right indefinite article. "Nö, nur Rollen, tut mir leid." "Ja, kein Problem, ich kann's." He gives me his pack and I roll a thin cigarette to avoid using too much of his tobacco. I thank him and walk over to where Tristan is sitting.

We're going to our favorite drinking spot tonight, a place by the river that was idyllic and big enough for the five of us. I look up at the sign and see that our bus is coming shortly. Tristan bobs his head to his music, some drum n' bass song that he was obsessed with lately but which pisses me off. "Lemme get a puff of that," he says. I pass it over, he takes a few drags but inhales too quickly, making the tobacco burn faster than the paper as he hands it back. We always called it a *bötley*, no idea why. It makes me think of the time before Tristan and I were friends: the first year we met, Tristan had hated me, but shortly afterwards, we got paired up again and again for class assignments, so we finally became friends. We never talk about before we were friends.

Our bus rolls up, so I stamp it out. We walk aboard, Tristan trying to look inconspicuous: "I forgot my pass," he mutters to me. You can get away with *schwarzfahren* pretty often, and we survey the crowd to see if there's any *Fahrscheinkontrollen*. We sit near an exit and enjoy the

bus ride. I look out the bus window, seeing myself in the reflection as I watch buildings, people and the city rush by me.

It's a couple minutes' walk from the bus to our spot. There's a sidewalk for most of the way that leads us behind some university housing, near the zoo and the *Schwimmbad*. Tristan and I talk about when we had seen Anna in a skimpy swimsuit there, inspiring within us daydreams of paradise. We turn onto a bike path following the course of the river. After a minute or so, we break through some brush, where stairs take us down. There's a manmade edge, a wall that stops the river from washing the ground out from under us. Brambles run up alongside the stairs that I reopen my scabs on, from last time when I had fallen down the side drunk and the thorns had cut into me. There are two boulders here, paired up beside a log we dragged into place as a makeshift bench long ago.

We're the first ones here, so we pull out a couple of beers. Tristan hands me his lighter to open the bottle. I grip the neck and, using my knuckle as the fulcrum, lever the cap off. Tristan does the same and we toast, *Prost*. I call Lee to ask him if he has any cigarettes. "Look man, yeah, but get your own." "Dude, we're already at the spot. What do you want me to do?" "You were right at the *Hauptbahnhof*, why didn't you get any?" "I forgot, Jesus, c'mon man." "Fine, I'll get some for you, you can pay me back." Tristan overhears him on my phone and grabs it from my hands. "Grab me a pack a Gauloises. I'll pay you back." I tell Lee to grab me a pack of those, too.

I swing my legs back and forth over the wall. The five of us have spent a lot of nights here, drinking and smoking and chatting. I could never remember what we talked about, but talk we did. Sometimes, it seemed like we would never run out of things to talk about, but the next morning, I couldn't remember what was said, only that we enjoyed our time together. I look over at Tristan, who is peeling the paper off his bottle. "Whatcha thinking about?" I ask him. He doesn't look at me, doesn't answer me. I look back at the river, watching the green and blue meander underneath my feet. I look across the river and see cyclists passing us by, pedestrians schlepping along their groceries or briefcases, cars moving to and fro. "I love this place," I say. I see Tristan nod in my peripherals, and hear "Then why leave?"

I think about it for a second. I would rather not leave. "Well, I gotta go to school, and no way I can get into school here." "C'mon, you're almost as smart as me," Tristan tells me. I look over at him, visibly offended. "What the fuck man." He laughs. What he doesn't know is I almost didn't graduate—I had to meet with teachers after class just to finish my assignments. I momentarily consider pointing out that he

hadn't gotten into any school, but instead, I laugh with him and shrug. "I guess almost isn't enough." I take a drink, hoping that the others get here soon.

Lee arrives after a few minutes along with Van and Matt, having taken the same bus as us. "What up, boys!" Lee exclaims, throwing his hands in the air. Tristan and I stand up as they get there, exchanging customary bro-hugs before asking for our cigarettes. "They upped the price, it's €4.70 now," Lee informs us. I shake my head and hand him a five Euro note. I do the math in my head, 7 bucks for a pack of smokes that I won't be taking home. I shrug, then rip the pack open and shove the waste in my pocket. Tristan hands me his lighter and I enjoy a cigarette, breaking down the cost: 35¢ per smoke.

Matt takes a seat on the ledge, Lee and Van on the two rocks. We start chatting about girls at school: Lee's dating Helena and they're moving to Canada to attend college together; Matt and Anna aren't serious, but they've slept together a handful of times. I ask Van how his sister is since her breakup. "Ja, she's fine," he says in between a few nods. Then he gestures for a beer. I pass him one. Matt gets a bottle and taps the top of Lee's, whose "fuck you, man," is cut short as he jams the overflowing bottleneck into his pursed lips.

Tristan starts playing some music off his phone, laid-back tracks that we all heard before. We spend some time relaxing, enjoying the little nicotine buzz from the cigarettes that everyone had sparked up but Van. "I have camp in two weeks, I can't trash my lungs," he tells us. Tristan rubs his butt out on the concrete for Van's sake.

Tristan looks over to Matt. "You guys bring anything?" "Yeah mate, got cola and vodka, should we mix it up?" He nods and gets up with Matt to start the ritual. "I'd rather do this than head to uni," Matt says. "There are a couple bars hiring here," Tristan says. "Could apply, save airfare." "Well, Mom and Da would not be too happy," he responds. Lee taps me on the shoulder. "Hand me a Schöff." I sit up to rummage through my bag and hand him a bottle. Lee's a bit of a miser, so we all enjoy ribbing him. "That'll be €1.50," I tease. Tristan starts handing out the mixes. They're very hard drinks, so I have a tough time downing mine at first.

"Where we sleeping tonight?" I ask into the ether. "I'm down for whatever," says Matt. Van nods and Tristan says "I don't care." Lee hits my arm with the back of his hand. "Dude, let's camp in my garden." I smile and nod, everyone agrees. We make plans to head out to Lee's before dark because he can't be arsed to buy a bus ticket. "I don't want to waste the money, it's not that far!" We each get back up to dole out more mix here and there, except for Lee, who only asks me for more

Schöffelhofer. I bust his balls about the last time he drank hard liquor, when he ended up throwing up on a pair of tram doors as he was stepping off.

The alcohol starts to warm my ears and I get an immediate urge to piss. Problem: I have my legs hanging over the river and don't trust myself not to fall in. Solution: "Lee!" Lee sticks his hand out without hesitation and I grab his wrist. He pulls me up faster than I expect, lets me find my balance, then loosens his grip. I walk far enough away to do my business.

I return as Matt's preparing for his favorite pastime, shots. He takes 5 glasses out of his bag and fills them to the brim with vodka then motions everyone over. He holds his up. "A toast. Here's to no more school," Matt says and lifts his glass. Four of us drink, but Lee hesitates—"I appreciate it, but maybe you can take mine." Matt shrugs then knocks Lee's shot back, as Lee lifts his beer to his mouth. Matt fills the four shots up once more, and Tristan chimes in with a perfunctory "To health." "That's a bit tired, mate, but we'll take it," Matt interjects, then takes the shot with everybody else. "To Mr. Westen," Van toasts. Westen is the coordinator at our school who has counselled everyone at least once over the past year. We all give a respectful nod and take a drink. "To Anna," Lee says, smirking at Matt. "Who was a fucking tease every day." We all laugh, clink glasses and drink. I know that I have to give a toast, but my head is swimming as the booze starts to hit me. I don't want to say anything that would upset Tristan, so I shrug to the circle, and down my shot. Everyone follows suit and we turn our glasses in to Matt who packs everything away.

The sun starts to sink, so we each haul our empties up and make sure we haven't left a mess behind. I pick up Tristan's trash and shove it into one of my pockets. We start walking up the steps, my friends letting me go up first—they don't want me to fall over again. I nod in thanks when I get to the top of the steps, and we all head towards the footbridge.

I stop halfway across the bridge and admire the city. The rest of the guys keep walking. Red roofs glow in the sunlight. The river flows gently, since flood season is over. I can see cars taking the new bridge in the distance, and farther along the river, I spot the Old Bridge. Summer makes the sun linger in the sky. Even though it's late, there are rowers on the river, oars moving in perfect unison, practicing for the regatta in two months. The river bends its way between two mountains, covered in trees that are full with leaves, and from my vantage point, I can see the medieval castle on one side, and snatches of the famous footpath on the other—Hölderlin walked there. I can see myself hiking along that

path, in the footsteps of professors, writers, and great thinkers from the past two centuries.

Van turns back asking me what's up. "Just looking," I say. We pause there for a moment, leaning on the railing and watching a barge move through the locks. "Gonna miss this place," Van says. "C'mon man, let's go." I turn with him and catch up to the others, who are waiting on the other side of the bridge. "Are you excited about school?" I ask him. He nods. "Gonna miss my parents, though." I'm not surprised—Van says his dad is his best friend, and we always laugh when he says it, but I harbour some jealousy. "Well, it's easy to keep in touch," I say. "Yeah, we promise to talk every day," he responds. I mean me and him, but Van's still thinking about his dad. Definitely jealous, I'm not gonna lie. Van and I make it back to the others, and we all head off on the last leg of the walk together, which ends up much taking longer than we expect.

We talk about school along the way: the year's almost over, finals are done and there's only a few days of classes left. Most of us got into college—I'm flying back to the States, Van's heading to the Netherlands, and Matt to Scotland. We're all taking on our respective futures over the next few days. We all make fun of Ms. May, who's the worst teacher we had this year, and compare her to Mr. Martinson, the previous teacher. "Both of them horrid," Matt says. We imitate them for a bit while we walk.

We do our best to avoid talking about the future. There's too much on our minds and it doesn't help that Tristan has no plans for himself. But we keep the conversation light and easy because we're drunk. The walk helps sober us up as we enter into Lee's neighborhood, a small suburb of the city.

We get some camping gear at Lee's house before walking to his *Schrebergarten*. This part of the walk is nice, the sun sitting low, almost gone. Once we get to the garden, we snack on some fresh cherry tomatoes before setting up the tents. We light a small fire and sit around it, sipping on the last few bottles of beer. We call it a night once we're out of drinks, and almost everyone disperses into a sleeping bag—there are five of us, but only four bags. I'm sleeping on some blankets Lee grabbed from his room.

I decide to sleep outside the tents. Being this far from the city, the stars are more visible. It's hard not to think about how small I feel. My thoughts swirl in my head, under the influence, about how, out of all possibilities, each of us ended up as friends. I hear Lee snoring in one tent, and Matt hurrying himself out of the tent and next to me.

"Amazing, isn't it?" I ask.

"What, his snoring? Yeah, it's unreal, surprised he doesn't wake himself up," is the response.

He lays down and sees the stars. “My da used to show me constellations.”

“Wish I knew any,” I respond. “I know the Big Dipper and the North Star, and that’s it.” Matt points out the Ursas, Draco, Orion, Hercules. We chat about our favorite myths and he talks at length about the Odyssey.

“When Odysseus is finally back, he has a real woman waiting for him,” he tells me. “The perfect woman.” “Sure, and he kills a bunch of dudes. That’s pretty badass,” I say. “Well, every myth involves killing a bunch of dudes.” He pauses. “Sometimes, I wonder where I am on my odyssey.” I nod to myself. “That’s everyone’s question, right?” We stop talking, but I can tell he’s awake from his breathing. A few minutes later, I pose a question to myself out loud “Have I even started my odyssey?” No response. We both fall asleep.

In the morning, we ship Van off to the store. “Use those long Dutch legs and bring back bread and eggs,” Matt says, pushing a ten into his hand. “Need brekkie ASAP.” Lee and I start a fire in a small grill and put some of the vegetables on it. Matt starts rolling up bags and collapsing tents. Tristan watches him and, when prompted to help, tells us that his hangover “is one that would lay out an elephant.” I step aside from the grill and help pack things up.

Once Van gets back (“Took ages, mate,” complains Matt), eggs are scrambled on a griddle and breakfast is served—eggs with potato, tomato, and onion in *Brötchen*. We all nod in appreciation while chewing. Four of us take the camping gear and start walking back to Lee’s, with Tristan walking empty-handedly, smoking one cigarette after another. He wouldn’t join in on our conversation about who we wish we dated during high school now that it’s coming to an end. We get everything back into Lee’s storage space in his parents’ apartment building, then the five of us give fist-bumps and hugs before heading our separate ways.

“Hey, I need some coffee, can I come up?” I ask after everyone is gone. He nods. His sister buzzes us in, and we head up. He puts water on while I chat with his sister. She’s cute and I wouldn’t mind trying to date her, but she’s my younger sister’s age and also has no interest in me; either way, Lee interrupts with French Press before I could do much by way of flirting. “I need to rest these bones,” I tell him, and take a seat on their couch.

“Dude, you gotta have honey in this coffee,” Lee says, grabbing a white container. “My grandparents have a bee farm; this shit is so good.” I nod my head and watch him grab a spoon, scoop up some honey and drop the spoon into my coffee. “Stir that shit up, boy,” Lee

tells me, handing the cup back. I obey, keeping an eye on the honey until it's all dissolved. I take a sip once the coffee is cool enough for me. "Pretty good, right?" Lee prods. I nod my head for him, even though the coffee would have been better black. "Man, I wish I could live on a bee farm, it'd be so cool, just work with the bees, work with my hands, ugh—" he throws his head back, supplicating the heavens to be an apiarist. "Rather do that than head to school," he says. "It'd be pretty dope," I say, mostly for his sake. "But school is gonna be fine. And we'll keep in touch." He shrugs, gives a "yeah" and sips his coffee.

"Aight man, I gotta head home," I say once my cup is empty. "Aight, peace," Lee responds. We give a different high-five, not the customary bro-salutation of a bump-five, but a double-hit and grip. I get close to him and give him a hug with my other arm. "I'll see ya, man," I say. "Yeah mang," he responds.

I take the bus back home, alone. I start thinking: we met up knowing it was gonna be our last time together, but we hadn't treated it differently than any other day. I think about the dozens of times we had that same type of night, happy to keep doing it for eternity. Two years of my life have breezed by, what would another four or five be? My bus gets to my stop and I step off.

—Joseph Murphy, 25, Provo UT

I Love Homework Now

I love homework.

I used to love watching holos or playing choosies or hunting T-Rexes with my best friend Allen in DinoScope. Or getting toys. I loved thinking about 'em, about what I'd buy with my allowance, collecting all the licenses and printing out figures with my Build-Some-Fun. I had an army. You take 'em in your room and smash 'em. And then you just print some more. It was fun, and I loved it more than anything in the world, and I couldn't wait every year for Santa and the reindeer to hack into my account and give me all those new toy licenses.

But now I love homework.

I could do it for hours. Mommy makes me have a snack in the middle, she says three hours tops at a stretch or you're going to your room and no more math for the rest of the night. I cried at first, but that's what babies do, so now I don't. That was before I finished the shots. Now, I go for the snack, eat what she gives me and eat it quietly, like a good boy should. It feels so good, eating nutritionally and healthy, and sitting at the table with my fork in the right place, that goes on the left, and the knife and spoon on the right. That's manners, and I'm really starting to like manners. There's rules, lots of rules, and when you follow 'em, it feels oh so good.

When I was in Kindergarten, I beat up Nick Preston and it felt oh so good. We were best friends, but then we weren't: this other kid Alejandro had moved in and he needed a best friend, so he took mine. He got Nick to start calling me prissy sissy, and I said oh yeah, I'll show you who's the sissy, and then I did. I socked Nick good, right in the face, for what he'd done, and then I said he was a monkey's ass. Hurts to say that word now, but that's what I said back then, so I'll say it again, even if it hurts a little. Cuss words are against the rules, everybody knows that, but sometimes you say 'em anyway, just like Mark Twain. Hurts real bad to read his books, but it hurts even worse not to read 'em. They're homework, Ms. Ellison said to do it, and that means I got

to, even if it hurts a little and it feels so good to write my book reports after, I don't even worry about the headache it gave me to read that stuff in the first place.

I used to give Mommy headaches. Go play outside, she'd say, but I didn't like playing outside. I liked jumping on the bed and running through the halls in my Captain Luna costume and having a bark contest with the neighbor's dog Wallace. He always won, but Wallace was good at barking, ro-ro-ro, he'd say, and I'd say it right back until Mommy said shut the hell up and give me some peace.

I used to like killing bugs. Especially the ants. They're bitey little guys, and I'd say worse about them, but I've got multiplication to do and a college to get into someday, and if I get headaches now, I won't be going to Harvard when I grow up, no way. Now, the ants, they're out in the fields by the conapt. All us kids, we played holos out there, there's lots of room to project stuff, and go outside, our parents would say, and that's about all we needed to get us there. But, you can guess what it's like when you're hunting a dinosaur, a big mean stegosaur, and you're right about to zap him and then you feel those stings all over your feet. The stegos aren't real but the ants are, and they hurt like heck. Heck's okay, but the other word stings just like the ants.

So, I'd take stuff from under the sink. Mommy has to pay for that, she'd say, but only if she found out. And I'd go out there and find the ants that bit me and I'd show them just what happens if you do. And I'd pour that stuff on 'em and they'd dance and dance, the crazy ant dance, and whenever I went home and did it on the living room floor just like the ants, Mommy said calm down right now and go to your room, and what did I do to deserve this.

Going to your room's not so bad. I used to think so. The worst thing in the world was no games, no toys, no fun. And I hated school, hated it right up until Second Grade. That was last year, the worst year ever. He can't sit still, Mr. Cheng would say, not for the life of him. Mr. Cheng's the principal, pal because he's your pal, or he kinda wants to be, but nobody ever hangs out with him unless they have to. We got to know each other real good. The teachers, they send you right down to the office if you do something you aren't supposed to. I made a noise like a fart in the middle of class when everybody was all quiet and Ms. Keptor was holding her book and getting ready to tell us what page to read out loud together.

Go to The Office, she said. And she said that, too, when I didn't follow the line leader and she said that when I came back from the bathroom late and she said that when I told my friend Hailey there were gremlins in the sink and they'd bite you if you ever took a drink,

yes they would. She believed it, but Ms. Keptor didn't, and she didn't even laugh, just told Hailey they weren't even real and don't listen to that stuff or anything else I might come up with and Go-To-The-Office-Right-Now-Young-Man.

And I'd go, and they'd be very stern, and sometimes they'd call Mommy and make her come and have a Talk-About-His-Behavioral-Adjustment, but only if things were very, VERY bad. The regular things, though, they just made you sit still for a very long time, so long you couldn't even take it ten minutes, twenty minutes, an hour, whatever it was, you'd be a very good boy this time if they'd just let you get back to class with all the other kids and we'll forget this ever happened.

Last year's when Mommy Finally-Had-Enough. They were gonna hold me back in Second Grade and put me in a special class where special kids can run around and not interrupt the other kids who came here to a place of learning, and it's not just a daycare center and it's really the right place for him. I'm not slow, I was never slow, and Mr. Cheng, Ms. Ellison, Ms. Keptor, they all said that's the truth and so did the tests, but you've gotta think about the other kids, because we gotta think about their parents, too. I'm not doing this anymore, I'm just fucking not, said Mommy and she stormed right out and took me with her and my hand was bright red on the wrist where she grabbed me.

And that's when we went to the Doctor.

Doctor Jean is his name, because he'll give you new jeans, a nice new pair, and you won't even see them, but they'll be there inside you, so small you'll never know a thing, and it won't hurt one teensy-weensy bit, but everything's gonna be so much better, and this way, you won't fall behind the other kids, because you wouldn't believe how many parents are doing it these days, you really wouldn't. And it'll be once a week, and by the end of summer, we'll be all done and you'll be ready for Third Grade, and I won't be surprised if he goes from the bottom of his class right straight to the top. And that's up to him at the end of the day, so, no promises, but one thing I do promise is if he's still driving you up the walls, he'll be doing it quietly and politely ha ha.

And, so, I got the shots once a week like Doctor Jean said for the whole entire summer.

He was right, it didn't hurt, not even a teensy-weensy bit. And every time I'd go, I'd get some candy, whatever I could grab with one hand, so I'd fill 'er right up. Take all the sugar you want, he'd say, and wink at Mommy, and he'd laugh, but she wouldn't. Not the first time, not the second time, not the third time. Because Mommy was the one who had to deal with me after, not Dr. Jean, and I'd be hopped up like a little junky and couldn't I just stop until Mommy was done with her choosie.

But, one of those visits, the fifth or sixth one or something, I got my shot, I took all the sugar I wanted, and then, you know what I did? I went right home and arranged all my toys, that's what I did, put them all in their proper place because it just didn't feel right. They weren't supposed to be all over the floor, they were supposed to be in my toy chest if I wasn't using them or melting them down into rawmats for the printer, but not all over the floor where anybody could step on them and break their foot.

And I sat down and did it all night long, every one of them in the chest sorted by height, and then by color, and then alphabetical after that. And then I took out the garbage and did all my homework, played holos for one hour exactly (no more, no less), and got back home at 5:59, one minute before dinner within thirty seconds of when I'd been told to. Now that was what a good boy would do, yes it was, and after that, I didn't have any more bad left in me.

And I took the rest of my shots with Dr. Jean and when I was done, I wasn't a boy anymore, I was a lean, mean jean machine, and just watch, I wouldn't even know what I was missing. And nobody was happier than Mommy, because sit quietly, she'd say, and it felt so good to do it, she'd find me sitting there two hours later, and I could've done it two hours more. And do your chores, she'd say, and I'd make a list—a chore list—and I'd check it twice, and when I was done, I'd think up more chores to do, just so I wouldn't have to stop.

I trashed all my toys and my printer, even though Mommy told me I didn't have to. Third Grade's too old to play with toys or chase dinosaurs or use the holos, and I really don't have much time to waste if I want to get into Harvard someday. It's called being mature and taking responsibility and lifting yourself up by your bootstraps, and now that they fixed my jeans, I finally understand it. I'm a little man and that means not making so much god damned noise that Mommy can't even listen to herself think. Ow ow ow, but that's how it was.

So I'm happy and Mommy's happy and I'm her little man of the house now, and I'm never going to get in trouble ever again. That used to be fun, but now I can't stand it. I've got math and science and social studies, and I've gotta keep my grades up, straight A's is where it's at—the colleges look at that stuff earlier and earlier these days, that's what they say. And I've gotta join clubs, and be class president, and save a dolphin, and teach a homeless man, and, most of all, I've gotta have a resume.

And Nick Preston thinks that's a load of you know what, but what does he know anyway? People change and I grew up and he'll be lucky if he gets into community college if he keeps up that attitude, no sir.

But not me, no not me.
I love homework now. And I don't know why I ever loved anything
else.

—Kevin Kneupper, 38, Los Angeles

Brooke's Poem

O truly can it be said, of
Apollonian 'Mione and
Dionysian Ron, pair unplanned;
Of Beatrice and Benedict,
Which love and ire did contradict;
Of Ms. Bennet and Darcy, which
Nev'r did rush, did find perfect pitch;
Of lovers Katniss and Peeta,
Madeth by death all the sweeter;
And of the connate love of woe,
Of Juliet and Romeo;
Would faileth to match, in dark depth,
Combined, my intimate love's breadth.
And yet, I must part, must leave thee;
For like my parents, I foresee
Thou wilt betray me, so I must
Wound myself, as I sickly trust
This is bound to hurt less than one
By thee; so I run, Love, I run.

—Martin Porro, 22, La Plata, Argentina

The Soul and The Lagoon

The bank of serenity leaps forth and floats,
As fluorescent dust goes and goes.
Why can't I feel any growth?
Tree roots and jungle vines strangle my hope.

To sit and ponder what the eclipse said.
Trees are lavender against indigo sky,
The stark black orb by burning lights
A binding glare brands an empty reality among nacreous threads

Endless day and endless night each one stitched into the last,
Artificially tied to an endless patchwork a marine shaded quilt, an
elongated trim.
Caught and looped in an endless tube, a permeated slide
When can I step out with my feet?
When can I grin with sincere means?
When can I grow as one and make endless leaps?

So insincere a mock
Nothing but a synthetic promise
Not natural but manufactured

—Isaac Campos, 20, Hollywood FL

The Highwayman

Laying in the grass. Staring up at the sky. Another night outside in my sweet paradise. Didn't take long to find the big dipper or the little one pouring right into it as she usually does. They were bright tonight, so far away from the interference of manmade light. I found Orion, stretching his bow. Pleiades and Taurus. I closed my eyes and wondered about the men who first picked these ones out. What do I see? Can I not sketch a constellation of my own? I opened my eyes and peered deep into the sky, erasing all those drawings of antiquity. What do I see? A pistol. Fitting, I suppose. I adjusted the pack that was my pillow and let sleep take over me. Dreamt of a rowdy evening with The Seven Sisters.

The light of the rising sun woke me. Not many birds in these plains. I brushed myself off and threw on my jacket as I shivered from the bite of the morning chill. Pulled on my boots and inspected my surroundings. It was a bloody sun today, and the tint made the clouds look like smoke pouring off a heavy blaze. Still dark, but I saw no sign of animal or man, just the high grass waving in the breeze.

I strapped on my gunbelt and bandolier, rolled up my blanket and packed it away. I had a small portable propane stove. Spam and beans were my breakfast, as they had been my dinner the night before. I brewed up a little coffee, spiked it with some brandy, and lit a small cigar after I chewed it all down. When all was said and done, I rose from my pack and threw it on my back, checked my pistol in its holster, and started walking towards the highway.

I had bedded down about five or six miles from the road. Light can carry far in these flatlands, but two hours was the most I felt like walking last night. The grass was taller where I slept anyways, and I was hardly being pursued. So why should I give a damn? Though, two hours did give the sun a good bit of height and daylight was well upon me when I first saw the heat coming off the road.

Mine was a quiet stretch of highway. I liked it that way. Made everything easier. Always been more of an independent-type anyways. My territory technically spanned about 50 miles, but I usually stuck to this ten-mile stretch. Ten miles on from the gas station, with the city on the ass end of that stretch. Most people who left the city had to refuel there, as it was quite a-ways to the next stop. Far enough, too, that men never ventured out this far unless they had to.

I settled in and took my position in the prone about 50 yards from the road. With my binoculars, my line of sight extended a few miles. The days were mostly boring and I occupied myself with calisthenics and the books I pick up from the gas station. The road was less travelled these days than when I first came upon it, but there was still enough low hanging fruit to feed me year-round. It was close to noon. I saw a traveller coming. Sun was at its zenith, and I was starting to sweat in my long pants and denim jacket. I figured I had roughly five minutes until they were past me.

As the vehicle neared, I made it to be an armored car, of the sort the banks use. I reopened my book. This one would pass unchallenged, I had not the firepower to take it, nor the will, knowing the backlash that would result. As the sun slunk down to the far horizon without any other passersby, I thought of making my way to the gas station. I had eaten the last of my meat this morning and only had a few small cans of beans and mixed vegetables left. I decided against it, as I did have some food, and the dollars were short anyways. One last glance up the road then I picked myself up and headed off in search of some place to lay my head.

Laying on the grass once again, like so many nights before. With my eyes, I traced the familiar constellations. Then I sought out mine. The pistol. Is there a Latin translation for pistol? I suppose not, it was a little after their time. Pistola? No. Why would I use Spanish when I had named it in English? Is this the first English constellation? I don't know. I'm not an astronomer. Astrologist? Such were my thoughts as I drifted off to sleep. Though, as usual, my dreams were occupied by women.

I woke suddenly. I scanned the area. No trace of man or animal. To my surprise, the sun had risen red again. I had been surprised the day before when this omen was not accompanied by its usual rain. It was darker too. An almost deathly hue. Reminiscent of the blood which flows from an opened artery. I put it from my mind and carried out my morning ritual. I missed the meat, but food always tastes better in short supply. With my pistol ready and my pack upon me, I made my way to my hunting grounds.

I crossed the highway that day. I set up on the inside of a turn in the road. Anyone leaving the city would be driving into the setting sun. Fifty yards from the road, lying on the ground. I was cranking out push ups with a book of Greek philosophy and a pistol in front of me when I heard it. I usually only checked the bino's every ten minutes, traffic was so rare these days. The car was screaming, it was in rough shape. Close, looked to be a station wagon. Evening was closing in, sun was at my back. I left my gunbelt with my pack. Closed my jacket over my bandolier. Stuffed my pistol down the back of my waistband.

It took me less than a minute to reach the middle of the road. I raised my arms, pleading. The station wagon slowed. I saw a man sleeping in the passenger seat and a woman at the wheel. She rolled down her window and yelled out to me.

"Move or I'll fucking run you over!"

I shot right through the windshield. My draw was fast as lightning. Two through the tits and two through the man's chest. With my gun up, I approached. I saw no one else. I searched the vehicle but found little besides a baby crying in the back. Clothes, a little food, and baby supplies. Not interested in diapers or direct infanticide, I only took what little money I found on the bodies of the parents. I gathered my gunbelt and my pack, and, walking a distance parallel to the highway, started making my way to the gas station.

The bell chimed as I opened the door. I always found the sound comforting. I waved to the cashier, he responded in kind. I was, after all, a regular. It was more than just a gas station this far from civilization. Well-stocked in all manner of goods, more like the general stores from my home, but everyone here called it a gas station. What can you do? I walked the aisles, gathered some food, propane, bullets, cigars, and a little brandy. There was a small lounge area to the side and, after paying, I took a seat and opened my new bottle.

I must've been halfway through it when I heard that old bell ring. Two men wearing marshal uniforms stepped in. One walked straight to the cashier with a poster in his hand, while the other stood at the door, surveying the room and brandishing a gun. I threw my bottle at the wall. Shot the distracted marshal at the door. I tried to turn and fell to the floor. I couldn't lift my pistol anymore.

—Chris, New England

Destination

Sæglópur	A lost seafarer
á lífi	alive
kominn heim	has returned home
sæglópur	a lost seafarer
á lífi	alive
kominn heim	has returned home—
Það kemur kafari	a diver comes.

—Sigur Rós

In the first dream I jump in the lake to save you
 Even though you know how to swim
 And I save us both
 To live until our bones become fragile leaves
 In the second dream
 I am the car
 Driving in the night
 Lighting up the dark
 Of my 16th birthday
 The day I met you
 The first time we touched
 Your voice the first world I wanted to live in

Now you cut every room in half
 So I leave all our pictures in the glove compartment
 I only look at them on days I leave the house

I want to stop
 Having the dream
 Where you're in a car alone cold
 Michigan winter
 Parked along the side of a road
 I'm texting you but you
 Left your phone at home
 You're looking out the window
 Seat leaned way back blasting
Sæglópur by Sigur Rós
 The song you said we'd dance to at our wedding

Snow is falling and settling on your belly
Tears are falling and you don't make a sound
Music ends with the drowning boy
Being carried out of the water saved
The needle falls from your hand
You close your eyes
Or maybe you keep them open
But you're dead
And suddenly I'm
The sky

—*Caitlyn Ann Thompson, San Diego CA*

Summons from The Edge of the World

His mare died as soon as he arrived at the garden's edge. For three months, she had dutifully pulled him and a small wooden caravan through the desert, the journey consisting of nothing but featureless grey dust and rock under an iron sky; day and night spent heading towards the mansion that was a black speck on the horizon.

When the horse collapsed into the earth with a final groan, W. watched mutely, huddling into his coat against the wind. Then, he stepped over her and reached into the toppled caravan to retrieve a leather rucksack and the letter of summons, which he placed gently in his breast pocket. Just as he turned to enter the garden, a small white trace of something caught his eye.

The object stuck out of the dirt near to where the mare's head lay. With the dead horse's glazed eye observing, W. crouched down and brushed the earth away until it was exposed. He lifted out a horse's skull. It was old, picked clean by whatever lived in the barren soil. Placing the skull down and feeling the wind's chill start to bite, W. curled his collar up and left the caravan and horse behind him, carrying only his rucksack.

A cracked stone path led W. through the garden that might have once been very beautiful but now looked only hollow and sad. The flower beds were filled with pale weeds that drooped to the ground. Busts and statues of serious faces were strewn around chaotically, their scowls and beards crumbling into the dust. W. failed to recognize a single one of them.

The mansion stood at the very end of the path, balanced on the edge of a cliff: a building of dark brick topped with three triangular towers. The faces of the gargoyles and angels that hung upon it had long since been eroded by the wind. Layers of filth masked the painted glass windows, which were the only glimpse of colour in the landscape. One

tower stood out, far higher than the other two. An oval window in its centre glinted in the weak sun.

W. approached and, holding his head high, rapped loudly on the door. The sound echoed through the garden and out into the desert. While he waited for an answer, a spider in the doorframe caught W.'s eye. He watched as it gingerly spun its web, circle after circle, despite the fact that there were no flies to be seen.

A lock slid back, sending the spider scurrying. The door creaked ajar and a pale face appeared in the crack. So white was her skin and so pinpoint and black her eyes that, at first, W. thought it must be a doll.

"I've watched your approach since last night. What business brings you to the house?" she said.

W. struggled for his voice, his hands rushing to the letter in his pocket. "A summons, from the General."

She reached out a thin hand and took the envelope from him. He watched her eyes move along the page, the words forming lightly on her lips.

"Summons, of course," she said, beckoning W. inside. "You may refer to me as the Matron, if you wish." She said this as he entered before locking the door behind him.

The musty hallway stretched deep into the house. Cool and lit dimly by candle, it was lined with a red carpet that muffled their footsteps.

"If you would just follow me," the Matron said.

Door after door passed along the winding corridor and soon the entrance could no longer be seen. The ceiling was far above them and the towering walls made W. feel as if he had shrunk. The caws of a bird echoed from somewhere deep within the house. Portraits of solemn-faced people glared down on W., each subject identical in clothing and pose.

"You must forgive me for asking, but in your summons they do not dictate why the General wishes to see you," the Matron spoke without turning.

Although he hadn't noticed before, the Matron's bizarre height became clear to him now. She stood almost twice W.'s size, held her posture straight, and walked in long brisk strides that W. almost had to chase after.

"They do not, that's true."

"Still, you make the journey and arrive at our door, clueless."

W. struggled for an answer so kept quiet instead.

"Do not get me wrong," she continued, "the General is a man worthy of such haste. Just as I came immediately upon my summons, I do not doubt you made the correct choice. I only wonder what he has planned for you."

More corridors stretched out before them as they continued deeper into the mansion. Only muted noises indicated any sign of life as they walked in silence: the occasional grunt, scratching pen, or lonely chord which pricked W.'s ears. These all came from behind identical locked doors. A layer of fear formed like sweat on his back as it dawned on W. that without the Matron, he would most certainly be lost. Yet he didn't dare ask her where she was taking him.

They stopped in front of an unremarkable door, which the Matron opened and, once W. had stepped inside it, shut and locked behind him. The feeling that he'd been caged was unmistakable and W. pressed a nervous hand against the wood. It refused to budge.

"You will be called to dinner shortly. Until then, please make yourself comfortable," she said from beyond the door.

Then, her footsteps faded away until W. was alone. His chamber was a cramped little room, fit for a maid. A bed had been pushed into the corner and a faded picture hung on the adjacent wall. W. placed his rucksack on the floor and lay down on the bed where his feet dangled awkwardly over the edge. For a moment, he longed to be home in the comelier accommodations of his bedroom, but W. quickly dismissed the idea as absurd. He couldn't have just ignored his summons, after all. Nerves had to be pushed aside if he were to fulfill his duty, he reminded himself half-heartedly.

He shifted to a comfortable position and then the weight of his journey was smoothed away by the hard mattress. As his eyelids began to shut, the caws of the bird began outside his door.

*

A sharp rap on the door brought him out of bed. With her face illuminated by a pale lantern, the Matron stood outside his room.

"Dinner will begin shortly."

He nodded and tried to shut the door, which she blocked with her foot.

"I'd like to prepare myself," he explained.

"There is no need, it will only be the two of you. Besides, his sight is failing and he surely won't mind."

W. felt like objecting, pointing out that he was underdressed for even a casual dinner, but something about the Matron's dull gaze made him step outside compliantly.

The candles had been snuffed out in the corridor and she led him through near-darkness.

“The General is suffering from exhaustion as of late but news of your arrival seems to have awakened him. Still, you must forgive him if he appears lethargic.”

“Of course,” replied W., his own tiredness causing his words to tumble aimlessly out his mouth.

A figure passed by them in the murk, brushing a pale arm against his.

“Another one of the General’s summons; one less savory in task than yours.” The Matron said this as she opened a large set of double doors.

“So you now have some idea of my task?” W. asked.

Without answering, she nudged him into a large room where the smells of a feast—roast meat and sour wine—made him forget his query.

The dining room that stretched out before him was incredibly long and narrow. A single table took up the majority of the space. As he quietly stepped in, the Matron’s feet at his back, he noticed that although the table overflowed with food, only two plates were set; one at the very front for the seat nearest him, and one at the very end, where a large figure sat slumped in a regal chair. Perhaps out of tiredness, his mind entertained the idea of sitting at an unset place for a moment. But the Matron’s pale hand gestured to the front seat and he meekly sat down. Once he was placed, the Matron bowed to the figure and left the room through a far smaller door in the back.

The figure in the chair then waved a hand and a small man who must have been hidden behind him strode over to W. Dressed immaculately and his head barely reaching above the height of the table, the small man introduced himself as the waiter. He poured wine into a dusty glass and filled W.’s plate.

“Are you another of the summons?” W. whispered from the corner of his mouth, keeping his eyes on the chair.

The waiter didn’t answer, giving only a small nod. When he’d finished serving, he announced loudly: “I will bring more candles for the General,” and hurried away from the table.

It wasn’t until he’d placed several more lights in the room that W. could make out the figure in the chair. Smaller than his silhouette suggested and more sunken into the chair than sitting in it, his yellowish skin, each inch of it wrinkled, drooped loosely from his skull. His pebble-like eyes seemed unfocused and W. feared to meet his gaze. Instead, his own sight was drawn down to a green ring forced onto the General’s finger which gently glowed, like a fishing lure, W. thought.

He snapped back to attention when the General shifted in his seat.

"The Matron has told me much of you," his voice began, husky and low.

W. lifted his head and felt his drowsiness fade.

"Yes, even before you arrived, when I was penning the summons, I knew you were an interesting one, Lieutenant W. You have already been acquainted with the Matron, she tells me. A young girl she was when she first came to the house; barely eight years old with a letter summons in hand.

W. drank from his glass, the wine unexpectedly sweet on his tongue. He couldn't imagine the withered Matron as having ever been a young girl.

"Your journey must have been long. Arduous as well, I suppose, Lieutenant?" The General thought for a second and then added: "Excuse me if I omit your name, but now that you're here, it doesn't carry much importance. Neither does mine, in truth, and so you are welcome to address me simply as General, just as they do."

"If you prefer to call me by rank then I can't object. But do you mind me asking who *they* are?"

"The rest of my house," he said, waving his short arm at the waiter, who bowed low in response. The General continued: "As I was saying, your journey?"

"Yes sir, very long."

"Ah, but there is a certain beauty in that desert. I remember my own crossing very well. Although, of course, I was younger than you. I'd wish to see what lies beyond the house one more time, I think." The General smiled, his worm-like lips stretching across the length of his face.

For a moment they focused on their food, W. not daring to speak first.

"You arrived without knowing why you were summoned, didn't you?"

W. felt as if the General was observing his reaction closely.

"Did I have any other choice, sir?"

The General considered his response for a second.

"Perhaps. However, I certainly knew I had no other choice but to arrive when my own letter came".

"You were summoned here too?"

He nodded his head. "Yes, of course... by an important man, however. You've surely seen his portrait on the walls, or his bust in the garden. As will one day your portrait and bust find their place there, and how soon mine will too."

At this, the waiter raised his voice: "But you're not an unimportant man, Sir General."

The General glared at him with surprising ferocity.

"Do not lie to the lieutenant!"

"Sir, why am I here?" W. asked quietly.

The General looked into his plate and, without answer, tore a leg off his chicken.

"I apologize if the question is too bold, Sir, but so far, I have not had any word from the Matron or from you, Sir. If my task was so urgent that it required immediate summons, I would feel better knowing how I may set out to perform it. Likewise, if the task was merely a small favour, it would lift a great weight off my mind."

"Of course the Matron would not tell you, for she herself does not know," the General said with another smile and then, seeing worry spread across W.'s face, added, "but there is no need for concern, it will be explained to you in time. In fact, I will have you summoned to my office at dawn. Earlier than planned, but still. Meanwhile, enjoy the feast, surely you are hungry?"

W. realized that he was in fact starving and that he had scarcely touched the plate. For the meantime, appetite ruled over curiosity.

The dinner lasted even after all the food had vanished and several bottles of wine had been emptied. The waiter spent the night rushing back and forth between them tirelessly. W. spoke little and the few sentences he managed, the General ignored amongst his own rants.

The General described the wars he'd fought in, the cities he'd seen, and the world he'd known. W. thought that he spoke as though it'd been years since his last conversation. Only partially listening, he rested his face in his hand and sipped his wine.

He must have fallen asleep again for his eyes suddenly opened and the waiter was tugging at his sleeve. The General was still in his seat.

"You'll enjoy your time here I think, Lieutenant," he said with a smile. "The waiter will show you back to your room now."

W. stood and attempted to bow but his legs had grown stiff and he stumbled. He couldn't understand how he was once again so tired. As the waiter opened the doors and led him out, pulling at his sleeve, W. decided it must be the dust in the air, and that soon he would become used to it.

"How long was I asleep?" he mumbled.

The waiter didn't respond.

*

The corridor had grown impenetrably dark and the waiter, gripping a candle without a holder, offered to lead W. back to his room, which he accepted, unsure whether it would have even been possible to decline. As they walked along, all W. could see was the light of the candle bobbing up and down in the waiter's hand, leaving drops of milky wax behind them.

When they arrived at his chamber door, the waiter opened it for him and, bowing, closed it again once W. was inside. His small feet then continued down the corridor.

W. realized that the lock hadn't been turned and after waiting a moment, quietly opened it again and peered out. Nothing but darkness. A gust of wind ruffled his hair, the air cold and damp. He retreated back into the light of his room.

After dismissing the idea of unpacking (nothing in the rucksack would be of much use to him after all), he lay down on the bed. None of the food at the feast had been particularly good and the wine had been weak and far too sweet. Still, if he'd been asked his opinion, W. was sure he would have lied to the General. Such a frail man, it seemed. But the cold manner with which he had disciplined the waiter troubled W. as he snuffed out his light and was pulled into a deep sleep.

*

When he awoke, the room had become cold. Shivering, W. pushed himself out of bed and tried the door. The knob rattled but remained shut. Someone must have locked it while he was sleeping.

He felt a sudden urge to know the time and, after scouring the tiny room and finding nothing, he remembered that there was a small pocket-watch in his rucksack. Although he found it quickly in the neat stacks of clothes, it sat silently in his palm. The hands were stuck and there was a small crack on its glass face, broken during the journey no doubt. Before he could do anything else, a knock on the door made W. jump and toss the watch under his blanket as if it were contraband.

"The General would like your audience, Lieutenant," came the Matron's dry voice.

He dressed quickly in the same clothes he'd strewn on the floor earlier. The Matron, too, hadn't seemed to have changed.

Again he was lead through the house in silence, something he was now accustomed to. The mansion was draped in grey. Only a few candles had been lit and he was unsure whether it was day or night. Asking the Matron would expose his ignorance, so W. kept quiet.

They crossed through a series of doors and went up a variety of staircases. Some grand and winding, others narrow and steep. He saw no other person.

"This is the General's tower," she explained after they stopped at a steel door. "He has forbidden me entry."

W. nodded and, thanking her, continued alone through the doorway and up the stairs that followed.

At the very top was a small room, which was filled to the brim with stacks and stacks of paper. Most of the pages were yellowed and their corners gnawed by rats. A small path led through them and W. squeezed himself gently along it, as if traversing some makeshift labyrinth.

When W. emerged from the paper stacks, he found the General hunched over a wooden desk that was far larger than him. An oval window was directly in front of him, looking out onto the desolate landscape. *Had the desert always been so vast?* W. asked himself, looking at how it seemed to run on infinitely.

He cleared his throat and stood at attention out of some old force of habit.

"Ah, Lieutenant!" the General smiled, turning around in his chair.

W. must have recoiled in shock for the General merely waved his hand and said, "Oh do not worry about me, I'm simply close to death after all."

It had been the General's face which had shocked W. so much. It had lost all colour and his skin was corpse-like. His eyes were dull and his teeth on display, as if his gums no longer had the will to hold to his mouth. W. couldn't recall him looking so moribund just hours ago at the dinner.

When W. noticed that the General's finger was bare, his eyes greedily moved onto a small wooden box on the desk, where the green ring sat on a pillow. He had tried to glance at it discreetly but the General chuckled.

"It is good the ring has your eye. Fitting, even."

"Sir?"

The General lifted the box and passed it to W.

"Try it on, it should fit, of course. I had the Matron find your measurements years ago."

W. held the ring in his fingers and rolled it over slowly, then slid it on. It fit perfectly.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

"It was when you bought those gloves, leather black if I remember correctly, that I knew you'd be a great candidate. Wait just a moment in fact," the General stood and shouted.

“Elaine! Bring me the Lieutenant’s measurements please”.

When no answer came from the stacks of pages, he shook his head. “Removing that girl from the house should be your first move, Lieutenant.”

“The ring...why is it being given to me?”

“Oh, it simply comes with the house,” the General said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“The house?”

“It is why you were summoned after all. My time is passing and the house needs someone to run it. It’s a great responsibility but I’m sure you’re fit for it”.

“What if I don’t want the house?”

“I am offended you would even dare to suggest so. You have travelled this far and wasted so many nights simply to shrink away from your duty? Surely you don’t underestimate the importance of all that is done here. The weight of what happens in these rooms is far greater than that of any parliament.” Anger crept into his voice now. “I would ask that you refrain from such joking, Lieutenant.” He attempted to smile, but it came across fractured.

He then got up and disappeared amongst the piles of paperwork. When he returned, it was with a piece of paper, noticeably fresher than the others. He placed it down on the desk and pressed a pen into W.’s hand.

W. read the title of the document: *Summons*.

“It is better to take care of this now, in truth. It only requires your signature and the Matron will ensure it arrives to the candidate.”

The pen seemed to weigh a pound as W. gently held it. The white sheet of paper stared at him from the desk. From the side of his view he saw the General, breathing heavily and not moving his eyes from the pen. A sudden violent protest rose up within him and for a second he wanted nothing more than to fling the pen away. Fleeing into the desert seemed like such a pleasant idea now. But his horse was dead, his duty was unmistakable. Even if he had no clue what that duty was. The house needed him, that was clear.

W. signed. The General smiled wider than he had yet before and it seemed a weight had been removed from him. He grabbed W.’s hand and shook it vigorously, nodding his head frantically. Without a word and with small grunts of glee, he started for the door. Hurrying as if he knew W. would soon realize what he had just done.

“Wait!” W. cried.

But he did not stop and W. watched helplessly as the man vanished from sight. Then he took his place at the desk. The leather of the chair

wrapped itself around him. He watched the ring's light on his finger. It was more smoothed glass than emerald, he realized.

Scattered thoughts flew around his mind. He would need a map of the house, need to read all the documents that were piled up around him. No longer would he be able to act simply as an observer, this is what was most undercut with regret. But for now, he made no movements. He simply sat in the chair and watched the now distant figure of the General hobble eagerly across the garden and into the dusty landscape.

*

Several hours later, the Matron entered silently and bowed as he watched the sunset.

"A bust and portrait have been nearly completed." She slid a document in front of him. "Your signature is all that's required."

He nodded, signed the paper, and dismissed her.

"Hopefully your reign will be shorter, Lieutenant," she said, bowing again as she exited the tower.

*

The Lieutenant sat, as he always did at sundown, in his office, gazing out into the desert. It had become ritual ever since the morning the summons had been sent out.

Every evening he would settle into the leather chair and watch the horizon. Even when it became a struggle to force himself up the tower stairs, he did not stop. Sometimes he would catch a glimpse of his reflection in the oval window but he scarcely recognized the grey old man who looked back at him.

It was this evening that he noticed the dust clouds far away being kicked up by a caravan and heard the Matron's footsteps coming up to inform him of what he already knew. That his replacement was arriving.

—G. W. Musko, 18, Warsaw

The New Beat for The Masses

The new season's bastard child breaking the mold,
 Featuring slight configurations and exclusive features
 Coaxing you into the stream of consistent inconsistency.
 Primal screams, urges left unchecked,
 That which used to fester is now the new sound of the world.
 Something familiar, once forgotten, left untouched.
 Setting trends, deconstructed,
 Sent out as fresh, layered with coats of plastic.
 Uniformed rebellion, rise against the man,
 The oppressor, the one who forces your hand.
 Simultaneously buying into the prepaid plan,
 Against which you turn and protest, yet passively accept.
 Flavour of the month, outrage of the week.
 The difference you make feeds the bottom line,
 What you hate, the disgust you seek to outrun,
 Still embraced in the toxicity you can't strive without;
 The symbiotic leeches sucking on your soul,
 Nearing empty, prime passed long ago,
 Hidden underneath, growing within, loathing your very self,
 The virus duplicated and morphed;
 The latest epidemic is the hot commodity.
 The hype you deem enemy, masquerading as a friend,
 Unable to decipher the threat for all the packages sent.

Unable to see that behind the mask, you're buying your demise at a discount.
 What's new is fucking dead but alive, blight cultivated on a vine,
 Imitating life, the realness we all crave, shiny and divine,
 Leading you into cushions and chains.
 Consuming sub-genres, purchasing your sense of self.
 Unlabeled yet labeled, unable to speak with meaning,
 Undeniably the way things are meant to be.
 All Saints are forgotten.
 The new God takes hold, with her promises of riches,

Of freedom untold; no laws, no order, no lords.
The paradox of liberation from ways of old:
New chains on display on the runway,
Eyes watching feverishly, in awe and disbelief,
Wanting to know where you've been,
Wanting to know where you're buried.
The procession's pretense is playing pretend—
The tomb's closed off.
All for the snapshot of forever, never truly off stage,
Behind the scenes access 24/7, hated yet loved, it's all for show.
Life is a movie and you're the star.
Bomb after bomb, we all take part.
I'm falling with you until the end,
The same way we rise up, everything is the same again.

—Marcus Cain, mid-20s, Florida

Countdown to Harvest

“Americans don’t know what tragedy is... each one gets a taste of honey, and then the knife.”

—Charles Bukowski

Stephen Paddock drove down Las Vegas Blvd. in a dark Chrysler toward his destination, the Mandalay Bay Hotel [the FBI and CIA gave him the car [he had many vehicles in his possession [his girlfriend was in ISIS and they gave him the car]]]. In front of him was a Jeep Wrangler with a few young girls in their 20s wearing overalls and singing country songs at the top of their lungs [the country music had hidden messages that drove him to kill [the country music stars at the event were in on it [there were people in the crowd who knew what was going to happen]]]. He honked his horn because the light had been green for a few seconds [Paddock was on a cocktail of prescription drugs that were used to control him [valium pushed him over the edge [Big Pharma knows that their drugs make humans violent]]]. The girls looked at the annoyed old man and pushed toward their destination, the Route 91 Harvest Festival [the event was sponsored by Sirius XM, whose creator is a former employee of NASA [the star Sirius is given immense significance in Freemasonry [nasa in Hebrew means ‘to deceive’]]].

Stephen got to the front of Mandalay Bay and gave the valet his keys [the company that owns the Mandalay Bay Hotel is MGM Resorts International, which also owns other lucrative resorts in the Las Vegas area [CEO of MGM, James J. Murren, is chair of the American Gaming Association Board of Directors and was named to the National Infrastructure Council by President Obama [a few weeks before the shooting, Murren sold \$10,000,000 worth of MGM Resort stock and released a letter to employees warning of attacks on the MGM hotels]]]. The valet took the keys with a smile and gave him a valet ticket [each of the cars that were linked to Paddock’s rooms had different license

plate numbers [he and his accomplice were planning to escape after the shooting [his girlfriend converted Paddock to Islam, so he knew he would be celebrated by ISIS after the massacre]]. The car drove to an unknown space somewhere below the hotel [all six cars in the underground parking lot had weapons and bombmaking materials inside [the shooting was done to divert attention away from something the military was moving through the city [a foreign general was being transported across Las Vegas as the shooting was taking place]]].

Stephen walked in like he owned the place as he had been staying for a few days at that point [Paddock made \$5,000,000 a year from video poker in addition to receiving retirement benefits from Lockheed Martin [Lockheed Martin are responsible for most of the US military's air vehicles and helped create multibillion-dollar missiles [every technological advancement made in the last thirty years was because of alien technology recovered from the Roswell Incident]]. The bell boy made a gesture that said 'no bags today?' and Stephen gestured back with a shake of the palm [the employees of Mandalay Bay would never tell authorities whether they suspected weapons in a guest's bags for fear of being implicated in the crime [Mandalay Bay's employees knew what was going to happen and some high-level management who were scheduled to work did not show up that day [in a live interview, Steve Wynn slipped and told a reporter that Paddock was given access to a service elevator inside Mandalay Bay]]. Stephen made his way into the elevator and hit the button for the 32nd floor [one of the Scottish Rite Freemason's highest levels is the 32nd degree [some famous 32nd degree Freemasons included Walt Disney, Saddam Hussein, and Karl Marx [Freemason cornerstones are under every hotel in Las Vegas and every government building on the planet]]. He thought about dumping some of his money into the poker and blackjack tables but decided against it [the massacre was financially motivated because he had lost a lot of money in the casinos and wanted to hit Vegas in its pocketbook by creating a tragedy that would stunt tourism [Paddock was a card counter, so they pinned the shooting on him [they pump oxygen into casinos to keep visitors high while they play; the higher they are, the more money they will spend]]. The elevator door opened, and Stephen walked toward his rooms, 134 and 135 [the Hebrew Bible gives readers a prophecy of the future [the numbers 134 and 135 translate to "praise" and "glory" in the embedded code of the Hebrew Bible [the rooms were chosen by Illuminati members for Paddock to carry out the shooting]]].



Tucson, Arizona - 1960

Seven-year-old Stephen lay in bed and watched the lights from outside bounce around his bedroom [Arizona is a known military test site of everything from bombs to flights [Paddock was to be hypnotized into an MK Ultra drone, groomed for the attack, which was planned 60 years ahead of time [everybody is one code word away from being used as a 'Manchurian Candidate' for false flag events]]]. His father opened the door and entered the room to tuck him in for the night [Benjamin Hoskins Paddock robbed banks and only used automatic weapons [the word paddock means to corral and enclose [his father was also a CIA operative who let the government use his family in exchange for an escape from prison]]. Stephen begged him for a bedtime story [the most vulnerable hours for the human brain are right before sleep, when the body and mind are recharging for the next day [bedtime stories were created to control children and make their minds more malleable for brainwashing [Paddock's father was given a script to lull his child to sleep and prepare him for the trigger events later on in life]]].

Benjamin began to tell him the tale of Robin Hood and his merry band of thieves [Robin Hood was used as propaganda in the old world to assuage the poor [in 1934, Wall Street made an unsuccessful coup attempt on Franklin D. Roosevelt and the US government [the next, successful, attempt was made after World War II, giving the US its current corporate-owned government]]. Stephen was enthralled throughout and asked his father lots of questions about the story [questioning the government has been responsible for more deaths than any other action against it [in the 1960s, the sign-off for broadcast television was a sing-along of the National Anthem with hidden messages underlaid in the lyrics on the screen, including 'DO NOT QUESTION GOVERNMENT' [followed by 'BUY ULTRA BUY NAOMI,' which were calls for MK Ultra and MK Naomi agents to be prepared for command at any moment]]]. His father told him that Robin Hood did what he did because there needed to be an example of good in the world, and that even though Robin Hood was a thief, he robbed to give back to both society and the people he loved [the distribution of wealth in the US is far more unequal than the mainstream movements make it out to be [the FBI infiltrated the Occupy Movement and took it down from the inside [the Occupy Movement was started by the Deep State to weed out potential threats to the Federal Reserve Bank and its holdings around the world]]]. He told Stephen that he needed to be that good in

the world [the assassination of Abraham Lincoln was perpetrated by a covert group of Confederate soldiers who knew the war's end and their loss was in sight [Lincoln's own cabinet was responsible for orchestrating his assassination at the hands of John Wilkes Booth | Booth was never captured and never executed, he has several great-grandchildren all over the United States who have come out to the public with pictures and documentation about the fabrication of his death]]. That no matter what, he needed to always uphold what was right [the former USSR has infiltrated every facet of the US government [every single governmental decision is made by a shadow government that filters its plans through the Kremlin [the Cold War ended as the 80s began when the CIA and FBI were staffed with Russian agents who have helped dismantle the US system of government and will replace it with one closer to Russia's at an unspecified date]].



Orlando, Florida – November 24, 2016

Eric Paddock brought the turkey around the corner and placed it on the table [Stephen's brother, Eric, is a low-level drug dealer who uses crystal methamphetamine [meth was used to keep soldiers awake during missions in combat, and to keep them addicted to battle itself [the addiction to meth is passed down genetically; the craving to do such drugs means there is a direct relative who was in the military or was exposed during wartime]]. Stephen sat at the head of the table with his girlfriend, Marilou [Paddock wired \$100,000 to the Philippines five days before the shooting for Marilou to buy a house for the both of them [an anagram of 'A Marilou Danley' is 'Our Mandalay Lie' [Marilou feigned being kidnapped by ISIS so she could get the money wired and coerce Paddock into committing a terrorist attack on American soil]]. The discussion was cheerful until Eric brought up politics [Stephen Paddock was seen at anti-Trump rallies and is said to have donated to Hillary Clinton's campaign [neighbors said he was pro-Trump and was proud of his conservative upbringing [the Democratic and Republican parties were created to further divide the American public and keep them preoccupied with this division while the Deep State laid out its plans]]. He admitted that he had voted for Donald Trump because he wanted to "drain the swamp" that was Washington D.C. and make sure illegal immigrants all over the country would be deported back to their homeland [Donald Trump is a figurehead for the Rothschild family [ev-

ery dollar bill in the US is a promissory note to pay debt owed to the Rothschild family and others who run the global banking system [the Rothschild family has been at the helm of worldwide power since the 1760s and have used the American Revolution and all subsequent wars to further strengthen their power]]].

Stephen shouted at Eric about their father and what he would say if he were alive [the Paddock brothers include a Bruce Paddock who has not appeared in the media [the number three has symbolic reverence for Freemasons and Illuminati members who believe we are living in three-dimensional reality [the trinity of Christianity holds a special place in Deep State false flag operations]]]. Eric was not moved by Stephen's anger [Paddock had violent outbursts for no reason, according to his family and friends [his childhood and adolescent conditioning from various shadow government sources was wearing off as he got older [many mental illnesses are due to the calcification of the pineal gland from the fluoride in tap water]]]. Eric's children seemed flustered and shaken by the ferocity of Stephen's attack [Paddock's bloodline carries mental illness, including his father Benjamin who was a paranoid schizophrenic [schizophrenia unlocks the pineal gland so that the brain can communicate with alternative dimensions and speak telepathically to otherworldly entities [CERN's Large Hadron Collider has opened a hole within our plane of existence and other dimensions are trickling in]]].

Eric thanked Stephen for blessing their family with the wealth and success they had, but told him that he would never be able to change the world the way that he wanted [the assassination of John F. Kennedy was perpetrated by the shadow government because he was going to reveal the Deep State and disband the CIA [the CIA killed JFK because he didn't want a part in starting the Vietnam War [Skull and Bones had JFK killed so that the nation could be shocked into the sexual revolution which would destroy normative family structures]]]. Eric believed Donald Trump could give the country that push [Donald Trump's financial holdings extend beyond real estate and include oil developments all over the world [Trump's father, along with Prescott Bush, helped finance Nazi forces during World War II [the President of the United States is chosen from a pool of elite candidates from families whose connections run into the Deep State]]].

Stephen apologized to Eric's family and Marilou for the outburst, and decided to leave [Marilou Danley was a CIA operative who lured Paddock into a trap [she was killed shortly after the shooting took place to cover up her involvement with the shadow government [she will be sacrificed to the god Moloch at Bohemian Grove by Skull and Bones,

which includes members of government and former presidents]]]. On his way out the door, Stephen told Eric that he was going to be the good that the world needed [in 1965, the CIA and the FBI made a joint decision to quell the Civil Rights Movement by assassinating the movement's leaders [the first leader assassinated was Malcolm X, who the Deep State was afraid would join forces with Martin Luther King Jr., and they blamed his assassination on black Muslims who were loyal to Elijah Muhammad [they infiltrated Malcolm X's inner circle and had him killed from the inside which then shifted the movement's focus away from his Islamic faith and back to the Judeo-Christian values of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.]]. And that no matter what, he was going to uphold what was right [MLK was assassinated in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee by the CIA and the FBI [King's inner circle, like X's, was infiltrated by the Deep State who implanted new 'leaders' who could keep the movement in check [Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Louis Farrakhan are all 32nd degree Freemasons who are loyal to the shadow government]]].



Stephen sat down next to the window and looked outside at the bright October day [most large-scale false flag operations occur in the fall because of its connection to witchcraft [many ancient cultures ramped up their sacrifices to gods in the fall months to coincide with the harvest [the shooting at the Route 91 Harvest Festival took place on October 1st, 9/10/01 = 9/11/001 = September 11th, 2001]]]. He thought about all the people below, gathering together for the country music festival that had began two days prior [Paddock had booked a room in Chicago that overlooked the Lollapalooza Music Festival but never arrived [Chicago was the scene of many Italian mob hits that were sanctioned by the federal government during the years when the mob ruled the United States [the Italian mob had been infiltrated and compromised by the Deep State after the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago]]]. He took his pills for the day with a chaser of beer that he had ordered from room service the night before [Paddock was not known to drink, but the first photo released showed him with a shot glass in his hand [the receipts for room service to his room, dated 9/27/2017, showed food ordered for two people [Australian Brian Hodges said he was staying on the 32nd floor but was not in his room when the shooting occurred, he said he saw two people going in and out of Paddock's room in the days leading up to the massacre]]]. Fox News was replaying soundbytes of Rex Tillerson and Donald Trump speaking about

North Korea [Vladimir Putin claims that North Korea has no nuclear weapons, but the US wants a war so as to invade and extract wealth from their mineral-rich mountain ranges [the U.S. military stayed in Afghanistan because of opium poppy farming, but the discovery of a huge deposit of lithium caused the U.S. to renew its need for a base in the country [the atom is a theoretical religious concoction created by the Freemasons and no nuclear weapons exist]]]. MSNBC and CNN showed documentaries about justice and nostalgia, concepts that did not exist in Stephen's mind no matter how much diazepam he took [the elite run the news media and select what is shown to the public even while it is happening live ["programs" are called such because they program the viewer to do whatever the Deep State wants at any given time [the media, combined with the fluoride in tap water, have turned most people in the western world into zombie puppets who are under the constant control of those in power]]. He took a deep breath before beginning to unpack the arsenal that he had brought up [Paddock was an undercover federal arms dealer who was trying to entrap ISIS; instead, ISIS killed him, did the shooting, and escaped [he wanted to kill white conservative Trump supporters to start a civil war in which he believed Antifa would take control of the government [the Kent State Massacre was where the federal government used military personnel to shoot and kill unarmed students who were protesting the Vietnam War]]].

Stephen watched hours and hours of YouTube videos about the weapons he would use and how they worked [October 2017 is the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution which the Deep State knew and aligned the massacre with on purpose [the psy-ops perpetrated by the Illuminati always coincide with anniversaries of numerical significance [Stephen was a retired baby boomer turned armadillo, illegal gunrunner, for the thrill of illegal hotel weapons sales]]. He was not used to guns and had never shot one before [the second Kennedy to be murdered by the CIA and FBI was John F. Kennedy's brother, Robert, who would have become president [RFK's assassin Sirhan Sirhan had never used a gun before in his life but was able to outsmart the Secret Service [Sirhan was programmed using MK Ultra to kill RFK, but there were more bullet holes than Sirhan had bullets, so there was a second gunman who was never caught]]. Thanks to the Internet, Stephen had become rather familiar with what it took to keep guns well-oiled and working at their peak level [Paddock worked for the CIA and went to Russia many times but the rest of the agency wanted him gone because he was becoming loyal to the other side [it was Hillary Clinton's team trying to take the spotlight off of the allegations of child abduction from the Haitian division of the Clinton Foundation [Jeffery Epstein owns

an island, close to Haiti, with a temple to the god Moloch; underneath the temple is a sex dungeon where abducted children are abused, mutilated, murdered, and eaten by elite members of government]]]. Stephen also found a forum that specializes in modified firearms [the customers who came up to the 32nd floor had their own agenda about the weapons transaction [they tested out the product and killed Paddock in the process, which is why he had both a head wound and chest wound in the leaked crime-scene photos [there were no guns in the room until after the shooting had taken place from a different location, so Paddock was the patsy]]]]. Since he knew that he was only going to get one chance to pull it off, he modified some of the weapons to fire more bullets per second than normal [the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which started the Vietnam War, is one of the only false flag operations that the government has confessed to [the Vietnam War was escalated by the shadow government to quell the peace movement that was developing in the 1960s [if a country's population is weakened by the prosperity of its peacetime, then the country is at a disadvantage and vulnerable to attack from outside armies and entities, and wars are started to refresh the system]]]].

The men who sold Stephen the guns—in a seedy desert deal outside of his neighborhood in Reno—would never have to worry about being tied to this [the CIA gave Paddock the weapons in the underground parking lot of the Mandalay Bay Hotel in the days leading up to the shooting [the 72 minutes it took for authorities to get into the room was the time it took the Deep State to set up the crime scene [Paddock used his girlfriend's ID to get into the hotel's staff areas and service elevators]]]. Couple all this with the bomb-making materials and extra weapons in his rented Chrysler in the parking garage and all was set [there were homemade explosives found in and around his home [in the cars found underneath the hotel were several pounds of ammonium nitrate, which was the same material used by Oklahoma City Bomber, Timothy McVeigh [the Oklahoma City Bombing was carried out by undercover operatives within the military-industrial complex and the Deep State]]]]. Stephen was doing things as he always had – by himself, but for everyone else [Richard Nixon was vilified by the media for his hand in the Watergate Scandal, which he denied being a part of [the offices in the Watergate Hotel were where files on the Kennedy assassination were kept, and Nixon was looking for the truth [since sanctioned presidential assassinations can only be carried out when the elected president is elected in a year that ends with 60, the shadow government had Nixon's character assassinated instead]]]].

A few hours later, Stephen was jolted by a police siren [there were several armored trucks seen up and down Las Vegas Blvd. as the shooting took place [three vans parked outside MGM Resort-owned hotels, and masked men leaped out, shooting into the air [the FCA National Car Dealership Council logo is the all-seeing eye of Metatron, which is also the symbol for the Illuminati]]]. He began to think about the repercussions if this all went south [on November 18, 1978, more than 900 people committed suicide at Jonestown at the suggestion of cult leader, Jim Jones, who was a CIA operative [Jones had studied under the USSR's top experts in the field of mind control [Jim Jones was friends with John Osteen who became a popular televangelist using Jones' techniques and was succeeded by his son, Joel Osteen]]]. He knew the valium was wearing off because the emotions were becoming too intense to manage [the Iran-Contra scandal of 1986 brought to light a massive drug-trafficking network being perpetrated by the U.S. government under then President Ronald Reagan [Congress covered up the scandal, and the CIA simply moved the drug trafficking to Mexico and Afghanistan [Reagan was connected with the Iranians since they released American hostages the day he took office to show he had better leadership than his opponent, Jimmy Carter, whose negotiations had failed]]]. He took another and used the tap water in the bathroom sink to wash it down [the government puts cancerous chemicals into our food supply as a form of population control [there is a grouping of stones in the state of Georgia called the Georgia Guidestones; these stones have a cryptic message about the population of the Earth needing to be 500,000,000 or less to balance with nature [the New World Order has a network of FEMA camps around the United States of America with millions of plastic coffins]]]. He thought of Eric, and his mother, who both supported the same twisted ideology. He thought of Marilou, he thought of the money he sent to Marilou, and that she would get nothing if he was killed or captured because they weren't married, and he thought of hotel security [the media was already in town due to OJ Simpson's release [Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman were murdered by the Aryan Brotherhood [phone records not released to jurors during the OJ Simpson trial showed that Brown and Goldman could have only been murdered after 12 a.m., proving Simpson's innocence]]]. Stephen began setting up the cameras around the room [there were three cameras set up in his room, as well as cameras in the hallways all over the hotel, yet no video has been released or leaked showing events unfold according to the established narrative [the tapes of the incident have suffered the same fate as most videos of similar false flag events throughout history [there is an archive underneath Cheyenne Mountain of evidence

implicating the U.S. government in every major terrorist attack all over the world]]. He wanted them to remember this pain...to see it [there was a camera watching the freeway next to the Pentagon on 9/11 which captured the supposed attack on film, but the video was confiscated by authorities and has not been released to this day [the video showed a military vehicle with missiles shoot the destroyed side of the building [there were no planes involved in the 9/11 attack at all; the government has a wealth of holographic tech that it has stolen from extraterrestrial beings]]. The recordings were not for the benefit of Stephen's ego; he did not have one [Paddock would not answer his door and shut his blinds when anyone, including family, came near his home [casino dealers described Paddock as friendly and outgoing, but reckless on the poker tables, losing thousands of dollars at a time [Paddock didn't exist]]. He began second guessing himself as the fourth hour flew by and the twang of the guitars outside blended with the soft sound of the news on television [the federal government has used 9/11 and other false flags to erode the Bill of Rights to the point where martial law will be implemented [it will not be the U.S. military that will carry out the bloodshed, it will be NATO and U.N. forces under contract to use limited discretion in the days to come [the Rothchild family has been responsible for every mass genocide in the last 250 years]]. Then he realized what he needed to do to go through with it [Lyme disease was created by the U.S. government during experiments with ticks in a lab located on Plum Island in New York [AIDS was created to depopulate Africa, given its potent results, its use was extended to other continents to curb what the elite deemed 'sexual deviancy' and the minority population [several doctors have come up with cures for all illnesses, but their livelihoods have been threatened or destroyed by the global elite who want to keep the population dependent on the medical industry]]. He promised himself that he would not take anymore of his meds for the rest of the day and into the night [scientists have studied how certain chemicals can cause positive reactions in the brain that make the user addicted to a substance while releasing endorphins and dopamine [Coca-Cola had actual coca leaf extract in its original recipe but after cocaine was outlawed the extract was removed and replaced with a different proprietary chemical additive [Paddock drank Coca-Cola and Pepsi at a higher than average amount, which factored into his brain chemistry, making him need valium to cope]].

Stephen looked around the darkened room at the fruits of his father's wisdom [Jewish numerology is called gematria and is used by the shadow government and Freemasonic warlocks [gematria is tied to the Kabbalah, which is one of the religious texts used by the Illuminati to

recruit high-level members of society [the 32nd floor that Paddock was on corresponds to the 32 paths of the Kabbalistic Tree of Knowledge]]. Soon, he would make sure that at least a small bit of good came back into the world [there are 32 apexes on a 5-dimensional hypercube, which ties into the extradimensional boundaries of the spiritual realm [documents show that in 1983 the CIA began The Gateway Project, performing experiments in different planes of existence [Aleister Crowley claimed to have opened a portal to an extradimensional world whence he brought back a demon named LAM, which looked like a stereotypical alien gray]]. He said a few words to the spirit of his father and then looked at himself in the mirror [mirrors have been linked to many occultist rituals throughout history [on the other side of a mirror is a reverse dimension that is working in sync with this one ad infinitum [Jack Parsons, occultist rocket scientist, founder of JPL, and friend of Aleister Crowley and L. Ron Hubbard, died in a massive explosion in Pasadena, CA while trying to open an extradimensional portal]]. It was in that last moment that he realized everything he was about to achieve, and the thought gave him peace [the occult teachings of Freemasonry and the Kabbalah interlink with gnostic chants that overlap with one another in synchronicity [Howard Hughes had Jack Parsons assassinated because Hughes believed that Parsons had stolen his technology to create JPL [Jack Parsons, L. Ron Hubbard, Aleister Crowley, and Howard Hughes were friends and 32nd degree Freemasons in the Scottish Rite]]. He walked with purpose into his suite and picked up a rifle from the assortment on the ground [Paddock's age was 64, which is 32 multiplied by 2, another Freemason numerology tactic is the doubling of numbers [64 = 6 + 4 = 10 = the Ten Sefirot on the Kabbalistic Tree of Knowledge [32 = 3 + 2 = 5 = five dimensions in a 32-apex hypercube]]. Room 134's window burst with one shot which wasn't loud enough to raise suspicion [32 = 3 + 2 = 5 = five points of a pentagram [the pentagram is embedded in all math [0.223/01/07/13/10/32/33/64/72/91]]. The damn gun had kickback though and Stephen could already feel it in his shoulder [the human spinal column is made up of 33 vertebrae [Jesus Christ died at age 33 [Disneyland's Club 33]]. He reached outside of the window and created a 'shooting nest' with some tape like he had seen in a YouTube video by an avid deer hunter [Paddock had bought 33 firearms in the last year [he had 23 guns in his hotel room and 10 in his car [33 of the victims were from California]]. The next window to shatter was in suite 135 and was the one that had the best vantage point of the festival [32 degrees is the freezing point of water on the Fahrenheit scale [Manly P. Hall wrote at length about breaking through into the 33rd level of consciousness, which he called the Veil of

Ain [there are three veils of Ain, one is called ain soph, which is Hebrew for 'limitless light'; another translation of 'light' is the Latin lux]]. The glass erupted and fell both outside and in, and Stephan made another shooting nest [Route 91 = 91 = 7 x 13 [Paddock had the number 13 tattooed on his neck [the superstition behind the number 13 began on Friday the 13th in 1314 when Jacques de Molay, the last grand master of the Knights Templar, was burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic Church in front of the Notre Dame Cathedral]]].

Stephen screamed a few expletives as his anger took hold and caused him to see only red [the Knights Templar were disbanded by Pope Clement V in 1307 = 13 x 07 = 91 = Route 91 [though the Knights Templar are now a part of the Freemasons, at one time they were at war; this shooting was an encoded message that they still are [as de Molay was being burnt at the stake for his crimes against the Church, he uttered incantations and curses toward King Phillip IV and Pope Clement V, both of whom died under mysterious circumstances less than a year after de Molay's execution]]. He grabbed the scoped rifle and headed for the window in room 134 [13 colonies, 13 signers of the Declaration of Independence, 13 stripes on the American flag [7 days of the week, 7 known planets of the ancient world, 9/11 = 0.81 = 8 - 1 = 7 = World Trade Center 7 [13 witches in a coven, 12 disciples + Jesus = 13, 12 astrological signs + Ophiuchus the Serpent-bearer = 13]]. The first shots were meant to blow up the two fuel tanks behind the stage [a buildup of gravitational energy during a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter would dissipate in all directions of the surrounding area, there will also be a powerful solar flare measuring that pulls the ambient energy toward the sun [the trajectory of the solar flare will be aimed directly at Earth's position [the wave will hit Bangladesh, taking the temperature from 90°F to 121°F, it is a strange coincidence as Pope Francis will be visiting the country at the time]]. The ensuing chaos would have given him the distraction to escape unharmed [the JANET airport is in the direct vicinity of the Mandalay Bay Hotel in the direction of one of the shattered windows and is used by Lockheed Martin to fly workers to and from Area 51 [Paddock owned an LLC named Paradise Ranch 21 [the code name for Area 51 is Paradise Ranch]]. The tanks did not explode as he had thought they would based on movies and YouTube videos he had seen [the Luxor Hotel sits on the north side of the Mandalay Bay Hotel where its position aligns it with the North Star, Polaris [the North Star was not the star seen in the sky over Bethlehem that led the three wise men to Jesus; it was a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter that occurred on June 17, 2 BCE [there are more births on Earth whenever Venus and Jupiter are in conjunction because the plan-

ets represent sexual love and creation power]]]. The inert tanks angered Stephen even more because now he was going to lose everything, but at least he would make his mark [Luxor is the modern name for the city in Egypt previously known as Thebes, the city of many Ancient Egyptian monuments [the Arabic translation of *luxor* is *al-uqsur* and in English means ‘palaces;’ the Ten Sephirot on the Kabbalistic Tree of Knowledge are also referred to as ‘palaces’ [lux is the Latin prefix for translating the word *Lucifer*]]. He kicked a few of the scoped rifles toward the window in 135 and ducked into the nest [page 91 in the Freemason book *The Temple and the Lodge* has the phrase “Jacques De Molay, you shall be avenged” [the shooting was an Illuminati blood ritual sacrifice to pay a debt to the Catholic Church [the entire event was a staged crisis that was carried out by the U.S. military]]. The gunfire was so fast and so loud that the rifle Stephen was holding had already jammed and overheated before he realized he was still pulling the trigger [a neighbor of Paddock told the media that Paddock had a habit of drinking rocket fuel [the first iterations of rocket fuel were concocted by Jack Parsons as a portable heat source to summon demons from other dimensions [the U.S. government is killing its own citizens at an alarming rate through subversive suicide]]. He picked up another rifle off the floor and looked down the scope [Paddock’s shooting was a diversion tactic so the four or five shooters who were in the surrounding hotels could pull off the actual assault [a concertgoer named Giovanni Rios claimed there was a man in the audience who lit firecrackers during the first few minutes of the shooting to confuse the crowd [blood spatter analysis from the photo of Paddock’s suicide shows a foot-long trail of blood leading from his hand to the gun, proving it was moved post-mortem]]. Everything was blurry, so he adjusted the focus of the scope [several photos and videos were taken of the scene as the shooting occurred and showed three unmarked helicopters circling the venue [the helicopters took off from JANET airport next to the venue with soldiers from China Lake [the rate of fire from the weapon that Paddock used did not match an AR15 with mods, but instead matched a US Army issue M240 belt-fed machine gun, usually mounted on helicopters]]. Stephen took aim [a user named ‘John’ posted on an Internet forum three weeks before the shooting that Las Vegas would be hit with a planned attack as part of the Trump Administration’s “High Incident Project” [this project is tied to a company named OSI Security that has ties to the Chertoff Group, a firm that specializes in security and risk management [the co-founder of the Chertoff Group, Michael Chertoff, had a lengthy meeting at the White House with Donald Trump days after the shooting]]. At times, Stephen heard the echo of a shot as it bounced off the Luxor next door

[shooters surrounded the inside of the venue and corralled people toward the stage [there are videos of the security at the show brandishing automatic weapons as shots were fired from the hotel [two JANET aircraft were due to depart from Las Vegas for Area 51 at 10:30 p.m., but for reasons not known, they were placed back into their secure hangers at 9:37 p.m., almost 30 minutes before the shooting]]. The rifles continued to jam and overheat, but there were plenty on the floor to use [Paddock was trying to stop something or someone from getting on the planes [the aircraft were about to transport a high level VIP, whom Paddock knew he had to stop [a Russian Mafia leader named Razhden Shulaya was arrested by the FBI in Las Vegas in June 2017; he happened to be in Las Vegas again on October 1st, 2017]]. Ten minutes in and Stephen was getting tired, his hand and shoulder aching, so he put down the last rifle as he heard sirens echoing in the street below [the only security guard who came close to Paddock's room was Jesus Campos, who offered to give his side of the story to the media; on his way to do so, he cancelled almost all interviews [the Campos that gave an interview on the *Ellen* show looks heavier than the original picture [if Campos actually existed at all, he is dead and was replaced by an imposter]].

Stephen saw himself in a monitor that he put up to record what he had done [the CIA's Gateway Project discovered a 'consciousness matrix' whereby the human brain itself is a holographic manifestation that is tuned into an energy spectrum and exchanges meaning with a universal field of electromagnetism which humans call 'consciousness' [the left hemisphere of the brain controls input translation while the right hemisphere reduces holographic electromagnetism into yes/no codes for input into the left hemisphere [a human being can ask the universal field of electromagnetism for an answer to complex questions by concentrating their mental energy into the great beyond; the time it takes for the answer's delivery will depend on its position in the queue]]. He felt no guilt or shame [the project also tried to break into and translate the dimension that humans refer to as 'spacetime' [the results were that physicists who theorized time as a measurement of change were not far off from the truth, except that change is never-ending and infinite ["Focus 15" was the code given for out-of-body travel into the past during the gateway project, in which the five percent of participants that achieved it described time as being symbolized by a huge wheel with giant spokes where their lives, and lives they had no connection to, could be accessed]]. For a moment, he thought himself a hero [a reporter asked the Las Vegas sheriff's department whether Paddock had planned to escape using a getaway vehicle; the officer told the reporter not to ask

those kinds of questions [that night, the police scanner broadcasted that there were seven confirmed shooters at different MGM-owned hotels throughout the Las Vegas strip [several videos were posted on social media of tourists running from gunfire only to be debunked as those fleeing from the concert even though some of the hotels filmed were nowhere near the incident]]. A loud bang on the door of suite 135 broke Stephen's concentration [*harvest*; definition, verb: catch or kill animals for human use [during harvest festivals in ancient times, animals were sacrificed in front of pyramids [the shooting was occult ritual magick]]. Stephen knew what it meant, and he was ready [there were several muzzle flashes captured on video and pictures coming from all around the concert grounds [one place where they were concentrated were beams in the construction area of the unfinished Skyvue tower at the end of Las Vegas Blvd. [Nevada Attorney General, Adam Laxalt, and Paddock exchanged emails and text messages weeks before the shooting]]. Stephen picked up a rifle without a scope and shot through the hotel door slowly using one arm [during REM sleep, the left hemisphere of the brain is shut off from the right [this causes the person sleeping to have dreams based on what is being transmitted from the consciousness matrix into the right hemisphere [the stillness of the body factors into how a person will dream since the skeletal structure, especially the 33 vertebrae of the spine, is the antennae of human beings to the universe]]. He used his free hand to pull the revolver out of his waistband [Jesus Campos is an undercover CIA operative who had his death faked to keep him hidden until he was needed [his real name is Jose Angel Quintero, and he disappeared with 42 other college students in 2014, courtesy of the Mexican government [Campos was the second shooter and Paddock paid him for unlimited access to the hotel]]. They were not going to take him alive [a cell phone charger was discovered though there was no phone; SVR technology experts have noted that this type of charger is used to charge a 3.0V 600mAh Li-MnO₂ thin cell battery used in various communication devices by both U.S. Special Forces and CIA forces [the company that made the battery is Ultralife Corporation, who specializes in military communications systems for the Pentagon [the lead engineer of the company, John Beilman, killed himself and his disabled daughter on October 4th; on October 6th, the Pentagon awarded Ultralife with \$49,000,000 worth of new contracts]]. The revolver felt cold in his mouth [there is a hidden city underneath the Sphinx in Egypt where an ancient alien civilization once lived [these aliens killed the inhabitants of Atlantis and destroyed the island, which was on the coast of the state of Georgia [according to the Emerald Tablets of Thoth, the aliens came here from Mars and have been controlling

humanity ever since]]]. He made sure to line up the sound of the shots so it would take whoever was outside the door longer to figure out whether he was alive in the room or not [Drugs were inserted into the food that Paddock ordered from room service, making him suggestable [Jesus Campos heard drilling coming from a room that was on the other end of the floor from Paddock's room [after Campos slammed a door near Paddock's room, the gunfire in the hallway began and lasted 40 seconds]]]. The trigger pulled easy [there are systems of tunnels that run underneath Las Vegas that were used in its golden era to smuggle drugs and goods from hotel to hotel below ground [the tunnels were the focal point of the shooting and were where many of the shooters fled during the mayhem [spiritual energy runs thickly through the tunnels, and on a quiet night, you can hear the spirits screaming]]]. He joined the others down below [FBI sources said that Paddock used the hotel's WiFi to stream the footage of the shooting offshore [the gun lobby is looking to profit from increased fears [if all the guns are banned and the government is able to disarm the populace, it will be much easier to corral and kill them en masse in future blood sacrifices]]].



Orlando, Florida – October 2, 2017

Eric stood outside his beautiful suburban house and greeted the media circus [the FBI sent a SWAT team to the Tropicana Hotel to confiscate surveillance footage while the shooting was taking place [this was a terrorist attack perpetrated by the Saudis in response the US toppling ISIS [people reported hearing shots an hour after the shooting ended]]]. He had known that one day something like this would happen [Paddock was running a money laundering organization for foreign intelligence [Saudis own the two floors above the 32nd floor [three ages of ordained time have elapsed, we are now in the fourth, characterized as the Davidic Age]]]. He recalled Stephen's sick sense of humor and figured that this was his way of getting back at the whole family [Jesus Campos gave police Paddock's key card, but the door he was checking on was not even Paddock's [Paddock wanted infamy [the Illuminati consists of a group of Gnostics who were viewed as heretics because they spoke out against the Catholic Church]]]. Now nobody would hear the name Paddock without thinking about one of the largest mass shootings in U.S. history [a white rabbit runs wild inside the black sun [someone at a Motel 6 nearby saw an older white male in fatigues going into a motorhome with a rifle immediately after the

shooting [Paddock's brother said he liked driving around in his cheap motorhome]]]. Eric would live out the rest of his life answering questions about Stephen [the second sun is below the horizon [the CIA has encouraged and spread conspiracies in order to make plausible questions about official events seem ridiculous [human beings are just an expression of the infinite and not an individual entity separate from the universe]]]. His life had become one huge joke, and Stephen was the punchline [dualism is an illusion [the universe is not comprehensible and any and all models built in the brain may be functional, but do not actually represent reality [the black sun bûrns]]].

“Arise, Robin, Baron of Locksley, and lord of all the lands and manors appertaining thereto.”

—Robert James Cross, 34, San Diego CA

A Day Without Me: Lines of Enquiry

Part 1: The Manufacturing of Hyper-Individualism

Perhaps the most dangerous words ever spoken were by Ayn Rand in 1982, in interview with Tom Snyder, decreeing the triumph of rational thought over centuries of Christian superstition: “I will not die, it’s the world that will end.” This remark did not spark the chain of events that led us to where we are today, but it typifies the process by which they occurred.

In the last decade or so, the cultivated constructs that civilisation consists of, and that have kept base, animalistic desires largely in check over the course of modern history (e.g. religion, law, the hope of a persistent march towards an ever more democratic and technologically advanced politics) have begun to disintegrate faster than they can be replaced. This is a consequence, in part unintended, of the neoliberal tendency to frame everything, whether natural or manmade, as goods. To varying degrees and at different times, we as individuals want both that which benefits the individual and that which benefits the collective. But by marketing individuality, something we innately desire, back to us as something to be bought, the ruling classes have been able to create the perfect product, a product that everybody wants, all the time; a product that sustains perfect conditions for the ruling classes themselves. We see this on social media and with the marketing of ‘lifestyles’ by the titans of advertising; ‘personality quizzes’ that harvest data to psychometrically pigeonhole our politics; the fast-growing trend to gamify our professional lives into metrics and goals; the distillation of social interaction into a series of apps and badges. Buy yourself a hundred upvotes, it’ll make you feel better.

By our nature, humans are never satisfied, so any product that is available without limit and that makes us feel good becomes addictive.

The more that people are encouraged to focus on doing things that benefit themselves as individuals, the more it becomes the path of least resistance for the pursuit of happiness. The drive to do that which benefits the collective atrophies, as do the means of pursuing it. The practical upshot of this feedback loop can be seen in how successive waves of counterculture from the 60s onwards have been subsumed by materialist capitalism, from Che Guevara and Bob Marley t-shirts, the Orange Sunshine acidhead hippies evolving into microdosing Silicon Valley techno-utopians, to the cold-hearted rebranding of the American marijuana industry that has foregone its incarcerated trailblazers as unsung heroes. Any form of counterculture that cannot be integrated into the prevailing neoliberal establishment as easily as it can be discredited is either left by the wayside of history, like the “vocal minority” represented by the Iraq War protests taking place between 2002–2012, or erased from collective memory, as in the case of 2011’s Occupy London (a movement whose aim of protesting outside the London Stock Exchange was pre-emptively outlawed).

The effects of this addictive cycle—constantly acquiring and presenting one’s identity almost exclusively through the trends, buzzwords, photographs, and popularity metrics of social media platforms—can be seen more recently in the upward trending of impulsivity, paranoia and division that are promoted by the conflict-hungry algorithms of deeply-rooted social channels like Facebook and the media; ‘if it bleeds, it leads’. The strength of this trend is such that unprecedented physical and social conditions have become hyper-normalised; global oil demand continues to rise as UK weather programs cheerfully suggest that the record-breaking Bank Holiday weekend heat is a boon for domestic tourism, without mentioning also that the 10 hottest years the country has experienced have all occurred since 2002. China is criticised for its extensive use of live facial recognition and its cruel treatment of citizens while our own government quietly rolls out the same technologies under the banner of national security. Tax avoidance runs rampant among the upper echelons of the economy, encouraged rather than punished, whilst austerity is implemented ostensibly to “balance the books” and at least 130,000 (likely far more) disabled and chronically ill people subsequently die of medical neglect, hunger, and cold in a society that is more than adequately equipped to take care of them, according to estimates by BMJ Open (the online journal of the British Medical Association) and the IPPR. In reality, the UK’s national debt has nearly doubled since 2011, growing from £1 trillion to £1.84 trillion as of Spring 2019, exposing the decision to continue those cuts as being driven by social ideology, not economics. According to our overall

degree of reaction as a species, all of this is apparently perfectly acceptable. 'Business as usual' continues.

Even under existential threats like climate change and biodiversity depletion, where working together is clearly the most desirable option for our species, turning against one's neighbours or isolating oneself is now rewarded far, far more readily than actions that require collective-valuing ideals such as duty, co-operation, empathy, or compassion. These 'individualism-driven' behaviours can nonetheless express themselves in collective patterns or waves of behaviours: transient conspiracy theories like QAnon and Pizzagate; or the organised intimidation by similarly ephemeral right-wing groups that serve as conduits to a rotating itinerary of familiar faces, like the Proud Boys, or the Charlottesville rallies, the goaded murders of the MP Jo Cox, Heather Heyer, Taliesin Myrddin Namkai-Meche, and army veteran Ricky John Best colourfully bearing their branding. The decentralised nature and rapid uptake and dissolution of these moments in culture, including their more benign counterparts in the sphere of memes and viral videos, echo mass hysterias such as the medieval St. Vitus' Dance and the Salem Witch Trials. These are common enough elements of human expression, but what sets today's events apart is that in our globalised world, these phenomena are no longer confined to small areas, but can wreak destruction across continents via the internet and rolling news coverage before they fizzle out, by which time the damage done runs far and deep.

If the flow of information in a hyper-connected society acts like a conscious brain, with individual persons at the nodes mimicking neurons, then the brain we are creating is a sick one, unable to function towards a common state of being. It is a mind pulled in every direction at once by wildly diverse opinions and desires, each the expression of the individual, and all of whom are convinced, by the precept of the system in which they exist, that theirs is the one and only truth. The result is chaos, a confusion which nobody is truly in control of. Not even the disciples of Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy (such as Alan Greenspan, who wielded incredible power over the Federal Reserve during neoliberalism's coronation as the prime global directive) or the precipitous social architects of post-war high-modernist society (such as PR godfather Edward Bernays), who are jointly responsible for the phenomenon of individualism-as-product, can maintain a grip on the reins of this beast. Paul Mazur, when working for Lehman Brothers in the 1920s, not so much predicted as prescribed that "We must shift America from a needs- to a desires-culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely

consumed... Man's desires must overshadow his needs." Now, our addictive hunger and rabid fervour for self-expression and individualistic gratification is tearing apart the social fabric; above democracy, liberty, and the sustainability of life itself, "ME! NOW!" has become the key mantra of the West.

A more stable society is one that balances the drive to benefit the individual good with the drive to benefit the collective good. To heal from such an unstable state as a society, we must recognize the type of thinking that perpetuates hyper-individualism and then try to change it: by resisting the path of least resistance, taking action that benefits the collective good, and instilling discipline and compassion as core human values. In a mirror of the ways dangerous hyper-individualist behaviour is expressed, the path to solve our greatest collective existential crises lies first with the resolve of each individual to change the way we live our lives. We cannot allow our individual failures to break our nerve in the face of such great challenges. We must persist as we reach outward to strengthen the bonds between humanity.

Part 2: The Role of Faith in Civilisation

Faith in some sort of system, whether it be spiritual or secular, is essential for order and direction. Without a believable explanation for the pains of existence, people are driven to madness. Science was expected to displace the Christian hegemony over faith, but, in practice, it has failed to adequately explain why existence is worth the pain it entails and has instead added to peoples' fears. It is no coincidence that the mental health epidemic has emerged at the same time as we recognise the greatest environmental crisis since pre-history, and a growing political disenfranchisement not seen in the West in living memory. These things function both as a symptom of hyper-individualism, as the calls to action designed to hold ourselves together quiet down amidst the multitudinous distractions of modern consumerism, and as a cause, as such terrors play to our increased dissatisfaction, towards which we are steered to resolve through the same individualistic channels.

Instead, a number of alternatives to faith in the miracle of science have begun to thrive: Among Generation Y (or, Generation "Why?"), popular atheism has been refined to a point of becoming casual nihilism, embodying a culture of despair. This is reflected in memetic vernacular online, which is full of references to depression, suicide and the meaninglessness of existence; and in the mainstream culture of "irony" that preceded it, for example in the post-modern comedy of figures such as Simon Amstell. The gloating hipster who once never dared acknowledge the impermanence of his local Starbucks has be-

come a shut-in, drinking away his sorrows with craft beer delivered by an under-privileged gig economy driver via an app so he may bear one less agonising social interaction as the world burns down around him.

Those more capable of the suspension of disbelief required by religious faith have borne what I personally term the New Psychedelia: Most common among Generation Z and younger constituents of Generation Y, this loose label covers the continuation and recent re-popularisation of various types of pagan spirituality, alongside the separate but similar deification of technology into a literal *deus ex machina*, including the theory we are all living inside some sort of vast computer simulation, or the hope of transhumanist transcendence to immortal digital consciousness. In the UK, both subcultures are significantly tied to the comparative rise of psychedelic drug use among younger age cohorts, as use of traditional substances such as tobacco and alcohol has consistently fallen (reported widely over the last five years by mainstream outlets such the BBC as well as subculture historians, including Andy Roberts, author of *“Acid Drops”* and *“Albion Dreaming”*).

Even still, followers of all three of the above subcultural movements mentioned can fall into the trap of hyper-individualism. The nihilist searches for comfort in hedonism, and it is no coincidence that the dark web drugs trade features a marketplace just as fluid, consistent and professional in design as legitimate online marketplaces like Amazon and eBay. It is not uncommon for the Gen Z kid who has never known a world without the internet, and who believes half-jokingly that our algorithmic overlords will oversee our fate for good or ill, to buy into social media add-ons and artists (Grimes, Poppy) and products associated with such beliefs to embellish their escapism, instead of actively resisting the structures that first necessitate it. The *nouveau-pagans* congregate at alternative festivals and raves, and similarly buy into the merchandise and brands that are marketed towards them (Boomtown, VICE Media). And, of course, there is overlap between these groups. This is not a criticism unique to the youngest generations. There has been no counter-cultural movement from the invention of neoliberalism onwards that has not in some way been commercialised as a function of that same neoliberalism, from the hippies to the punks to the nerds to the gamers. Even being working class was commercialised in the 1990s by Britpop in the way so infamously loathed by Suede, and lampooned by Pulp in the lyrics of their signature song “Common People”.

Perhaps what is most iconoclastic about Ayn Rand’s statement of solipsism is the denial of a future beyond oneself, in thought and by extension in action. To deny the existence of a future is to abdicate responsibility for it, and therefore to put aside the need to make provision

for future generations. It is, ultimately, the denial of life by humans to themselves; the completion of will. It is this denial of a future that has shaped our modern political and economic landscape, with progressive and centrist actors all too often caught in a cycle of managing the present situation without looking much further ahead, because in the modern capitalist paradigm championed by Rand, the present is all there is.

The only secular possibility for escape from this self-destruction appears to be in the devotion of oneself to a secular cause in order to forge (in both senses of the verb) a meaning to one's existence, and therefore to one's suffering. Further scientific research is one such cause. Political action is another. There are some (Gilles Deleuze, for example) who have considered fascism to be, like capitalism, a totalitarian mechanism of pure destruction, a force that eats itself into oblivion, but as it is sold to its disciples as a vision of the future 'as it should be', and beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the 'ideal' of fascism and the similarly individual-worshipping libertarianism is more comparable to its opposing force of communalist ideologies, such as socialism and mutualism, in terms of its appeal. The comparative centrism of the UK and US political scene during the Major/Blair/Brown/Clinton/Bush period has failed utterly to hold up to scrutiny under the harsh light of the real world, and so it is the opposing, currently theoretical forces that shall inherit the political landscape as neoliberalism collapses under the inevitable weight of history. The Gen Y nihilist may latch onto either of these paths to exit the spiral of meaningless despair, while the nouveau-pagans and the machine-worshippers are able to add it to their existing roster of beliefs.

Which movement will prevail from today's struggle between the alt-left and alt-right — between socialism and fascism — remains to be seen. The lustre of the far right is growing, in part fuelled by post-9/11 and post-2008-recession protectionism, but also by the undue rewarding of impulsivity by hyper-individualism. The fight-or-flight response has been turned into an itch we can't scratch, and so some of us look to take it out on others instead. This continued emboldening is recently characterized, for example, by the omniscidal behaviour of President Bolsonaro towards the Amazon and its indigenous people at the time of writing, goes to show that fascism is not simply a lingering spectre that will fade away as the older generations die off, but a continual expression of the worst aspects of human nature that will remain a force to be reckoned with for the rest of our lifetimes.

If the left wing truly desires to come out of this tumult on top, a great certainty and commitment is required on their part, as is direct action for which handsome managerial rhetoric is no substitute.

Certainty, because inaction through complacency, and paralysis through adolescent fatalism, has cost our society enough already. Commitment, because this is a war of attrition, the act of breaking down a vast adversary that has grown to encompass and calcify around the whole of our society. Totalitarians are never satisfied with half-measures, and it requires more than half-measure solutions to defeat them.

In moderation, the deconstructionist qualities of nihilism may be guided to work as a catalyst for positive social change by corroding the shackles of old socio-political dogmata. This is what Nietzsche would term the Dionysian, or 'active' nihilist. The trick comes in bridging the gap between the rejection of the old beliefs and the carrying of new, egalitarian, socialist beliefs so that this new vision for a more hospitable future takes root. Perhaps what will be required, as much as dabbing our own wounds of the past 20 years, is the training of the next generation, "Generation AA", in that new narrative so that they may grow up internalising the belief that a kinder, better world is possible for them and their own children.

—Robin Tester, 24, Norwich UK

The Internet Is Serious Business

by BEAST

I used to like 4chan. Everyone on it is reduced to one level: Anonymous (or “anon”). Any individual betraying any interest, feeling, or earnest belief is reduced to a “fag”: a reader is a *bookfag*; a weightlifter, a *gymfag*; someone who replies to his own posts, a *samefag*; a straight person, a *straightfag*; a homosexual, a *gayfag*. There were established “Rules of the Internet”; facetious, sure, they nevertheless created a common frame of reference that fostered board culture: rule #1 “Do not talk about /b/” (clever *Fight Club* reference); rule 31: “tits or gtfo”; rule 34: “there is porn of it, no exceptions”; etc. It was a space where everyone was reduced to a collective non-entity and the base assumptions were public, stupid, and petulant, thus people could state whatever they felt like without feeling threatened or out of place. Anonymity, a low profile, and a low barrier to conversational entry allowed a special type of discussion—normally only possible in fringe salons or private musings—to appear in public. Sure, more credulous newcomers were sometimes misled (such as by the infamous DIY-style “crystal making” threads, where image macros instructed newfags to mix bleach and ammonia; or, the innocuous “fingerbox” threads, originally intended to expose newfags), but one cannot stop the stupid from self-harm. I thought this collateral damage to be a remote possibility, perhaps deserved, but not reflective of the situation of the site or the Internet as a whole.

After all, the Internet was not serious business. 4chan was a remote sandbox and a forum for nonsense—to be treated as nonsense, reacted to as nonsense—in which I could find real pleasure, great conversation, weird subcultures, genuine freaks and geniuses, bizarre ideology, and strange new porn. This golden age either changed without my know-

ing, or never existed. I'm leaning toward the latter, given the conflicted private interests that seem to dominate every facet of American society.

Yet, in this early anarchy, 4chan engendered a whole generation in sub-lucid eddies of juvenile absurdism, helping them drink deep of a primordial Kool-Aid concocted of millions of decontextualized symbols, free to impart themselves into any number of memetic results before dissolving again into another mystery flavour.

Due to the inherently ahierarchical and contextless nature of the website, such a simmering pool is perfect for introducing innumerable concepts and normalizing discourse about them. Tides in the pool can foster any ideological current, by ebbing together a vocabulary of dissociated symbols and slowly knitting the intended associations between them through purposeful recombination and loud, autistic broadcasting. This is done on every board on 4chan, as well as every other social site (8chan, 420chan, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, etc.). The racism consisted of strings of obvious jokes, while genuinely dangerous reactionary and radical ideologues seemed like remote objects of scorn or curiosity. Their inimical influence, however, is more subtle than it once looked, and today's technology is far better adapted to amplifying the voices of the remote and insane than I'd come to terms with—until recently.

It turns out that no matter how skeptical people are or how deep their faith in humanity runs, they build thought, habit, and ideology from whatever bits of information are available to them, and the most common sites on the Internet broadcast every possible combination of random thought bits available in every conceivable media format: podcasts, YouTube, Reddit, imageboards, clickbait trash masquerading as news. As public schools prove unable to cope with the impending failure of the earnestly-begun American commonwealth, as organized religion falls to dereliction, and as traditional social structures crumble under neoliberal notions of freedom (pushed onto the general population without adequate public institutions to properly administer the forces unleashed), we see people search for answers using whatever means are within their reach. As ever, when people reach out, a benevolent god isn't waiting to answer. Think-tank appendages, absurdists, corporate horror shows, extremists, trolls, children and adults all masquerading as each other, mix with screaming commercial static to blast every available neuron. Viral information binds to any loose dendrite. Videos, memes, tweets and screenshots of news headlines have a chance to go viral, transmitted by taking advantage of mass ignorance, such as through the deconstruction of an uncommon etymology, images of an exoticized people, discussion of decontextualized historical facts, or

even more dubiously, through a feeling of hate, disenfranchisement, or lust. Lost children are at play in warring hyperrealities, no longer tethered to the social structures we've long since abandoned.

It is now obvious that the Internet is serious business.

The end of my romance with the idea of an unfettered social pressure cooker came recently, following the mosque shootings in Christchurch on March 15, 2019. I'd had severe doubts prior, of course, starting with the posts by that anon who shot up the mall after hyping it on /b/. Then there was the anon who strangled his girlfriend to death, posted pictures of her corpse on /b/, and then failed an attempted suicide by cop.

These two posts, while portraits of a nihilistic solipsism, are merely novel expressions of already-extant trends: sensationalist murder out of boredom, sadism, alienation, etc. Murder and mutilation have always been cornerstones of certain NSFW imageboards and satellite shock-site communities; the only thing this type of terroristic exhibitionism provided to what already occupied /b/, (the anything-goes imageboard designated for "random" posting), was an emergence of anon-murderers into the popular consciousness. It provided a kind of grotesque voyeurism in which I indulged with a mix of curiosity and creeping discomfort.

But /b/ isn't the only board on 4chan. Anyone marginally versed in chan culture knows the /pol/ boards are hives of Nazi scum, crazies, conspiracy theorists, sociopaths, social engineers, and coveted information, some accurate, some completely fabricated. I know whenever there is a terrorist attack in the world, to first check /pol/ for raw video footage and quick synopses on whatever the hell is going on, while the media scrambles around wondering what to censor and how to frame what actually occurred.

For instance, when the Charlie Hebdo shooting happened, they had clips of the shootings on day one. When headlines about the shooting at the Eagles of Death Metal concert blasted into the news, /pol/ had the raw video. Both 4chan.org/pol and 8ch.net/pol plastered themselves with fresh ISIS videos, weird Russian and North Korean propaganda that you couldn't find anywhere else, and seemed to be the freshest source of whatever conspiracy theories were going to be broadcast from station to station.

The /pol/ boards house hordes of schemers and propagandists, and provide an excellent way to keep a finger on the pulse of whatever extremism is happening globally. This, too, made me uncomfortable, but it's better that these people are speaking in public, right? Where one can keep tabs on them, right? Where *I* can keep tabs on them, and they can provide me with the intel, right?

The longer the /pol/ boards exist, however, the more extreme the other boards get. Lately, the literature boards have become swamped with anti-Semitic posts that shit up almost any thread. There happen to be a great many Jewish writers and academics, and most any time any one of them is mentioned, several anons post a “(((Harold Bloom)))” or “I wonder (((who))) is behind this post,” (triple parentheses being a super-clever secret club handshake way of saying “kike”). Often, it’s not so subtle as that, with people spewing blatant vitriol about how this or that person’s only legitimacy comes from the Jewish media or the Jewish academia, connecting the Jewish elites to the Jewish conspiracy with shoddy infographics and questionable quotes, unequivocally *proving* the Jews’ culpability in the destruction of the West.

The degeneration of the /lit/ (literature) board started with constant pro-fascist posts appended to Catholic, traditionalist, and primitivist threads on Thomas Aquinas, C.S. Lewis, and “Uncle Ted” Kaczynski. There are now constant posts about Julius Evola and *Mein Kampf*, etc. All of this, however, was still bearable. Fascism is an interesting, important viewpoint to consider, and the related literature facilitates worthy investigation. But things took a hard turn from detached intellectual curiosity into disconcerting participation in reality after the Christchurch shooting.

The Christchurch shooting was a bizarre post-modern occurrence, packed with memes, symbols, dog-whistles, hashtag material, and broadcast live via Facebook. Brenton Tarrant, a regular 8chan poster, reached out and touched his audience directly, providing the community of rapacious Nazi fucks and lonely, atomized nihilists with the raw material of a terrorist attack, one fully vested in and integrated into Internet culture and the chan milieu by knowing use of its technology and parlance. Tarrant made his terrorist event accessible through widely known memetic hooks, broadcast it through one of the largest media platforms ever produced, and appended a great deal of names and researchable terms to his actions by writing on his weapons. Photographs of his inscribed equipment pre-shooting, along with his manifesto, were posted to the board. His actions were executed in a way designed for maximum conversation and social impact. Hell, even his post-arrest photograph showed him flashing the OK symbol that /pol/tards have ironically appropriated to make fun of the media, the initial joke being that they’d report anything as Nazi propaganda if they bandied it around as such. The reality being that the ironic appropriation lead to a real association with a tacit message of self-defeating or undermining irony.

His GoPro attack video was immediately spread and turned into meme fodder, with clever edits churned out in a matter of hours: one with a DOOM-style interface complete with the video game's music; RPG-style interfaces; and as a highlight reel put to posters' favourite songs, all appearing within hours after the shooting. He'd alerted his audience beforehand and planted a post-modern propagandistic gift in their hands. The fuckers even canonized him, photoshopping him into a hagiographic portrait.

Furthermore, the shooter's attack highlighted the failure of mainstream society to cope with manifesto-publishing and guerilla propaganda ops. Targeted terrorism is a method of ideological advertisement with an extremely effective cost-to-reach ratio. Everyone hears about a terrorist attack taking place, but the present trend is to hide who perpetrated it and why behind walls of denunciation, rhetoric, press self-censorship, and martyr worship. Westerners lose power to cope with extremists because they are only exposed to terroristic rhetoric through decontextualized snippets in the thoroughly processed, narrative-pushing, fundamentally untrustworthy pop press, or through the mouths of extremists who frame the events as the terrorists wish.

In the days after the attack, I read articles about how the "coded" language and jokes in the manifesto made the thing puerile and flip-pant, but also dangerous. After reading it myself, I found that Tarrant used a specialized, meme-ridden vocabulary, well-suited to expressing points to his intended audience, while glossing over or disguising flaws in his argument. Some weeks later, I rooted around to find a copy of the John Earnest (California Synagogue shooter) manifesto, which I had initially read the day his attack occurred. Although it had been immediately posted to the front page of *The Drudge Report*, I failed to find it some two weeks post-attack, even on 8chan. Without access to his rhetoric for personal judgment, we're left with two options in the popular consciousness: "Racist, hateful anti-Semite arrested after crazed racist murder frenzy cultivated by 8chan" in the mainstream media, or "Aryan Warrior John T. Earnest successfully struck at the heart of the Jewish Parasite, inciting fear in the enemy and heroism in True Europeans' Hearts" on *The Daily Stormer* or /pol/. There is no longer any faith placed in the general population. As such, the general population is forced to choose between a few prepackaged narratives, unequipped with the proper information to understand the situations and form personal opinions.

The undercurrent of internet forums like 4chan's /b/ and /pol/, in short, is this: events happen. People are going to find out. Give them the information and context to make their own decisions. Beating people

over the head with narratives that obviously do not explain away the scope of an issue is a perfect way to ensure people are misinformed nihilists with no meaningful way to understand or interact with the world. The Internet is serious business because interacting with the Internet is increasingly how we interact with the world, and how we shape ourselves.

Yet the propaganda machines of innumerable organizations and interests (of infinite variety) are running at full power, blasting their smog into the overloaded information pipelines we allot for the public spaces of the 21st century. Information cannot be trusted. Even the information behind paywalls feels like propaganda when the Wall Street Journal is owned by Murdoch and the Washington Post is Bezos' bullhorn, and every rich family in America seems to own some great share of a major media outlet. On the chans, there's a thorough skepticism of all media and widely-distributed information, and in its place is a wealth of unsourced, unverifiable, cherry-picked information on any topic, with infographics and demonstrative images and video clips, which are more often than not *complete or partial fabrications*. The information on 4chan is all presented on equal terms under its infamous header: "The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact." Yet the average person is left to parse information from all sources in a free-for-all environment where seemingly no information has verifiable or concrete sourcing, where academic information is presented in an incomprehensible format or as rehashed clickbait, while peer-reviewed and primary texts languish behind paywalls.

The Internet is serious business because it has taken over our personal lives, our coffee shops, our bars, our forums, and our marketplaces. It mediates an increasing number of our economic and social transactions. We sit around on our phones flying to the digital realm, eliminating any geographic or proximal context to our lives and the information we take in. Life is delocalized. Society is atomized. Language is decontextualized. We swim in alphabet soup with no teacher to help us sound out the ABCs.

So, the crazy trash talk, sarcasm, and loaded rhetoric used to seem like the simple fun of kids at play, as though we were all part of a competition to publish the worst thing possible with the tools at our disposal: a keyboard, a microphone, Photoshop, alcohol, and prescription amphetamine. But it's become increasingly clear that the Internet is serious business. Whatever I say ends up making ripples in the pool of the collective consciousness. Hell, it's still fun to troll. That's the problem: I still want to play the game, even when most of the players

don't realize there's a game on. There are adults running around with AR-15s among children with airsoft weapons, and because everyone's anonymous, we are obliged to assume they're equal.

So, the Internet is serious business. People are capitalizing on this, for political reasons, for reasons of raw money and power. I'm awake now. I still have faith in anonymous communication, as well as the specific imageboard format. I am more aware than ever, though, of the concerted efforts to influence the public consciousness through super-powered shitposting of amateurs, botnets, corporations, governmental agents, extremists, and trolls, as well as by the classic morons, idealists, and ironists that drew me in to begin with.

Be careful out there. Even the people wearing faces online aren't quite human...

—BEAST, 28, Asheville NC

Damned Machine

By Braden Timss

*To others,
and to Rich Russell,
who was like them.*

The hulking machine exhales toxic breath and hums to the sluggish pounding of its internal pistons. He has the steering wheel within his hands and wills himself not to crush it, because he needs control. The wheel is necessary. With control in his hands he will be able to navigate himself and his car along the drive-through, up to the window, where he can order his drink and pay. But more importantly, with control in his hands he'll find himself up at the head of the line, able to see her once again.

He waits in line at Shelley's, a small and perpetually wet-seeming bikini barista stand just off the I5 in Seattle. Three cars are ahead of him and another five behind, wrapping around the small stand and spilling over onto the road. No one has moved forward in ten minutes.

It's overcast and raining heavy droplets. Exhaust smog has settled among the vehicles like it, too, is waiting in line with all of them. The creaking of a metallic hinge whines, piercing the monotonous whir of wet tires moving down the interstate. Idle carburetors rattle their Honda and Ford cages.

His options have been narrowed away; all he can do is weather the time alone in the dark of his car beneath the patter of the rain. He won't turn on the radio because music doesn't please him anymore. The sound of those voices full of so much static wind seems to suggest, maybe, they're not human. When he breathes, he listens frightfully for that same static, but lately he rarely speaks. Somewhere in the car there's a cellphone mixed up among crushed cans and greasy paper bags, probably down by the pedals, but he wouldn't use it even if he found it. For

a while now, he's had an idea to save the minutes, though for what he doesn't know.

When he closes his eyes, he counts down to thirty so he knows when it's time to take another breath. Sometimes he lets it go a little longer because he finds it helps him get to her, to that place where she exists most vividly to him.

His barista is pretty and she's always there. Her voice doesn't have any static in it, and she uses it to say nice things to him. She wears a bikini and serves drinks to many people, but he imagines what it would be like if she did that only for him—wonders, even, would she do that just for him?

Ahead, the cars move up. He comes out of it just enough to place his foot on the pedal and roll a few feet forward, then drifts back into his daydream.

He daydreams a lot. It's his favorite thing to do because it's better than doing other things during the day. He imagines calling her on the phone. Flitting along lighter wires than his own, she talks to him, a clean signal, the only music which could possibly still move him.

The clockwork whine of that metallic hinge brings him back, and it's unpleasant. Inside his car, it's dark and the day is choked for light with ink-black shadows flowing down every surface like tears. As he's coming to—for a moment, not able to remember where he is or what he is doing—his eyes immediately and automatically find the rear-view mirror where he sees the deep pupils of a shadow that has been sitting in the reflection this whole time, watching him.

He evades. The car in front of him pulls away, but he's noticed the Shelley's sign letting out sharp cries with its rusted machinery as it performs a gloomy pirouette above the hut. Lightning flashes and strikes a broken tombstone, a skeletal hand reaches out from the grave, alive once again, animated in three frames by LEDs. He's afraid, not sure of what should be happening, but people honk at him and he understands that means go, or maybe leave.

He reaches the front of the line and pulls up to the window. He's afraid the noise rattling in his chest and the sound of radio on his breath will upset her. Pretending his mind is under his control, he tries to will his heart to stop, or else, resign and let it contort and crush itself to silence inside his chest.

Stopped at the stand's counter, he hesitates to roll down the window of the driver-side door, watching the vague shapes of light and life move behind the rain-streaked glass; the most astonishing spirits swimming in a warm glow like Christmas Eve, through the windows of houses on a street where he doesn't live, where there are people and

lights so bright that there cannot be any shadows. A figure comes to fill this frame and knocks on the window. It's a mercy to welcome a wretched brute like him, but she is known to be merciful. Warily, he lowers the window.

Dressed in almost nothing, like her coworkers spinning elaborate drinks behind her, his barista leans against the windowsill, wrapped in her own bare arms. Pink straps, blond hair. Her half-closed, peacock-blue eyelids seem to cry for all the boredom in heaven that angels like herself are forced to endure. She chews her gum, clacks long nails, and does not recognize him.

"Hey, hon. What can I get for ya?"

He doesn't speak, he never does, even when they're on the phone. She talks and he learns what it is he likes, what he lacks, and who he is. Her voice affects him like a wailing siren, signaling across the black sea of his incoherent thoughts; he's compelled, but to what end he won't know until she reveals it. He traps his voice within his skull, dams the static behind his teeth. If he'd let it go, if he could be so careless, it would fly to her like a shrieking bat through a paper shredder—and he mustn't frighten her.

She steps away to mix a drink, throwing a sideways look with her blue eyelids towards the idling car in the drive-through, and squints to try and see anything within the dark interior. Across the dash, she can make out a cluttered heap of receipts, straws, pens, plastic bits, and crushed Red Bull cans. And floating against the dark, she glimpses a faint impression of a pair of hands gripping the steering wheel.

Momentarily left alone, he resurfaces and finds himself within a rare moment of clarity. The light from Shelley's dimly bleeds through the window and barely reveals his lost cellphone sitting on the console beside him. He recalls his saved minutes, reaches for a ratty Wendy's bag, rips a piece of it off, and starts writing on it with a stray pen.

Seeing he's writing instead of speaking, she shouts at him: "Mister, there are like ten cars behind you, we gotta keep the line moving; what do you want?" No words, still writing. "I'll get you two RBs, then."

She comes back with two Red Bulls and holds them out just at the edge of the stand's light and his car's darkness. "Three dollars. Please."

He finishes writing and watches her waiting for him. Then, crossing the threshold into the light, he offers the shred of Wendy's paper smile with his phone number written on it. Without looking at what the hand out of the dark held, she exchanges the two cans of Red Bull before realizing that it isn't money. Glancing down at the paper, then back towards him, she conveys an expression that is unnatural to places full of light and life such as Shelley's, as if a rotten hand had reached

out and touched her with the spark of death. She is repulsed by him and his note.

As she lets the paper drop and disappears beyond the window frame, the abject presence of disgust across her pretty face causes something inside his body to lurch: the starting motions of an automated process that leaves him feeling inhabited, used. It forces his jaw to unclench and the parts in his throat to shift. Conjured by a will not his own, a process that has nothing to do with him, and deprived of a mouth to beg in a wordless way not to say a thing, he speaks. It cannot be helped.

The noise that grinds out from his mouth obliterates all the life in Shelley's at once. The lights inside die, the baristas vanish, tomb silence reigns and all is still.

Stricken and left alone while rain plays upon the metal shelter of the stand, he stares at his hands on the steering wheel, watching them tighten like the slow torsion of binds being wound taut, fastening. The headlights of the car behind his affect an absent, unlit stare. If there were ever drivers at the wheel, a jet-black substance too dense to peer through now fills the interior and it's impossible to tell if there is anyone alive inside. But within his chest there is a feeling mounting and it grounds him. Amidst the machinery that presses the foot down on the pedal and shifts the hands' grip to guide the steering wheel, originating from a remote place within him, but approaching steadily—the impression of a growing flame. As his car is navigated out onto the now empty I5 and heads south in the rain, distance diminishes and it bears down with the racking intensity of a panicked horse trapped inside a barn on fire.

Streaks of rain cut across the windows as he passes by places he has never seen before. He doesn't know where he is going, but that itself is not an alien sensation. While the odometer adds miles, light outside fades from its already exhausted grey to a deeper, more impenetrable black, depriving him of sight. The sound of hands gliding across the fabric of the steering wheel and the fire, once distant, felt now as a present singeing, imply that he is only a function of some obscure process. He ceases the struggle for control, quits trying. The machine operates on its own and he never understood by what means or to what end.

The trash of his past purchases and meals that never satisfied or distracted him for long, collected in the backseat, make a welcoming bed for him to lie down on. Without awareness, he slips out of the driver seat and crawls over the console to tuck himself in. There in the dark, there's only the sound of the rain on the roof and the noise of the car's wheels driving over rough terrain. But then light arrives, instantly illuminating the cabin, and he's on fire.

There is no protest, no reaction at all, things seem to be working as intended while the flames light the garbage of his life and spread. With eyes trained upward, wide-open, the shadow recedes from the rear-view mirror and hovers on the ceiling above him. Through the flames he sees those deep pupils that live in the mirrors he was always too scared to look into. This time he looks and won't evade.

Then the car's momentum is interrupted, the whirring of the wheels dies. Everything floats in a sickening suspension, heaving, careening.

Smoke is filling the cabin. It cloaks any shadows that the flames can't burn away. The mad, hulking machine in his pyre-bed of trash on fire functions just fine, but the operator trapped behind its eyes is word-ing mouthlessly to me that he is confused and afraid. I look downward at him through the fire while he is still there, and I whisper that I never understood either.

—Braden Timss, 25, Bellingham WA

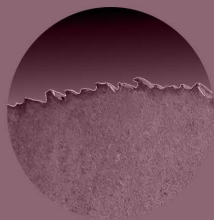
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